

# Local Government and Social Media: how to respond to negative comments

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As Facebook celebrates its 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary this month with its 2.3 billion users, we can see just how much social media has defined the way we communicate and engage with each other.

It is not surprising that local governments have jumped on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. At best these are a form of instant communication and positive engagement with the community.

However, these platforms are a double-edged sword. A single negative post can gain widespread attention, spread incorrect information and damage the reputation of the local government.

This article will set out some practical tips for responding to negative comments on social media.



## Avoid excessive censorship

There is a careful balance to be struck between freedom of speech and censorship. Excessive deletion of posts will reflect poorly upon the local government and can cause the community to disengage or become angered.

To avoid excessive moderation, local governments should have a policy which sets out which type of posts or comments should be removed, and apply it consistently.

## Respond quickly

Social media platforms are fast-paced networks with the ability to attract a lot of attention in a short amount of time. Responding to negative comments

“... local governments should adopt a proactive attitude towards their social media activity ...”

quickly and appropriately can defuse tension and maintain a local government’s credibility.

## Social media moderator

To ensure that negative comments are quickly identified and responded to in a consistent manner it is helpful to have an officer take on the role of a social media moderator who oversees all social media communications.

## Personalise the response

When responding to a comment online, an officer should offer the same level of care and consideration as would be expected in a face-to-face interaction. Where appropriate, responses should be personalised, for instance, by addressing a person by name. However, individual circumstances or sensitive topics should not be discussed in a public forum.

## Redirect the conversation offline

It is best to avoid entering into a thread of commentary or debate on social media. Instead, provide an alternative process for addressing the issue. For instance, provide your local government’s email address and phone number.

## Respond with respect

The standing of a local government is better maintained through polite and respectful responses to all online comments. A response to a specific comment is likely to be read by other members of the public. This can therefore be an opportunity to demonstrate the professionalism and ethics of the local government.

## Proof read

Like any other publications, social media comments and posts should be free of grammatical and spelling errors. Furthermore, the comment should be approved by the social media moderator. This, of course, is related to the formal process applied by individual local governments under their communications policies or action plans.

## Do not ignore legal issues

Threatening comments, defamation or any other potentially legally inappropriate posts should not be tolerated. Bear in mind that social media platforms are not that different in law from traditional platforms such as print and television. The label 'social media' does not give trolls and bullies any special legal rights to unlawfully hurt or damage other citizens. Ensure posts are archived as evidence and seek advice as appears appropriate.

### Key Points

- Avoid excessive censorship
- Respond quickly
- Identify a social media moderator
- Personalise the response
- Redirect the conversation offline
- Respond with respect
- Proof read
- Do not ignore legal issues

## Conclusion

To harness the benefits that social media platforms have to offer, whilst minimising the risks they present, local governments should adopt a proactive attitude towards their social media activity.

Local governments should formalise and implement suitable procedures and policies on how to deal with negative posts *before* the situation arises. This will help ensure that local government officers are not reactive but instead have the capacity to respond appropriately to negative comments from members of the community.

## Contact

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