



How to...  
*get started with social  
media*



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# How to... get started with social media

1 Social media refers to websites and applications that enable users to create and share information and to network with other users online. This information can take a variety of forms – text, images, data, audio, video, web links – separately or in combination, and sites are intended to enable conversations to grow and for information to be shared quickly and widely.

The growth of social media during the last decade and its emergence as a mainstream online presence means that the opportunities for businesses to communicate with customers and to share information online have never been greater. Coupled with the growth in internet-enabled devices such as smartphones and tablets, it means that internet communication in housing organisations is no longer the preserve of a desk-bound communications officer or website editor. While the majority of housing providers make some use of social media, the style and frequency of its use varies widely within the industry.

## Social media platforms

You may already be familiar with the best-known social media platforms, but it's worth investigating others to see if they are suitable for your purposes, either alone or in conjunction:

- Facebook - for sharing news, information, photographs and video on an interactive timeline
- Twitter - for sharing information, images, video and web links in 140 characters or less
- Google+ - for creating and sharing content in communities sharing a common interest
- content-sharing platforms such as YouTube or Vine (for videos), Flickr or Photobucket (for images), or SoundCloud (for audio) – these are most often used in conjunction with other platforms
- blogging platforms such as Blogger or Wordpress which are built for longer text-dominated posts, and microblogging platforms such as Tumblr which are more suitable for shorter posts or a variety of media
- specialist interest platforms, such as LinkedIn (professional networking and career development) and DeviantArt (user-created artwork).

This is by no means a definitive or exhaustive list as new social media platforms are constantly being created, and established platforms grow and experience use at different rates. The current domination of Facebook ([1.23 billion monthly active users in December 2013](#)) and Twitter ([271 million monthly active users in June 2014](#)) means these platforms are a good place to start, with the possible addition of one or more content-sharing platforms to host audio, video, and photographs.

## Making the case for social media

Incorporating social media into your organisation should not be regarded as an end in itself. Instead, consider social media as another communication tool which can help you to achieve a variety of objectives. For example, these could include:

- communicating information and advice to tenants
- celebrating your achievements
- increasing interactions with customers
- building up relationships with other local organisations
- working more efficiently.

Used for these purposes, social media has many advantages over traditional forms of media and communication:

- it enables you to communicate information 'hot off the press'
- it's cheap (even video can be recorded on a conventional smartphone) and can save you money on design and printing costs

- used in conjunction with print media, it can help you reach a wider audience, especially harder-to-reach groups
- smartphone and tablet technology means updates can be posted by anyone from any location, not just by an desk-based communications officer. Similarly, messages are sent directly to recipients wherever they are
- posts can be reposted quickly and easily by recipients and therefore the potential reach of a message is not limited to your immediate audience
- messages and responses (replies, likes, favourites, retweets/reposts) can be seen in real time, with no delay
- it's quick and easy to update an original message if a situation changes
- recipients can customise how they receive or display communications according to their individual preferences or needs (differing platforms, larger text, spoken word, translations)
- your messages are not restricted to text and pictures, as with many forms of traditional media, but can also include video. It's also easier, compared to print media, to direct customers to further information on your website.

However social media should not be regarded as a complete replacement for printed media. You will still need to consider those tenants who do not have internet access or who simply prefer to receive information in other ways. It should therefore be woven into your organisation's communications strategy, alongside other forms of media.

### Communicating information and advice

Used alongside traditional media, social media offers an excellent way to provide up to date and timely information with your tenants and the wider community. So, for example, it could help you to promote a community event you are running, raise awareness of a new service you are introducing or explain important changes, like the introduction of universal credit, which customers need to be aware of.

## Learning from others

**New Charter Group** has a well-developed social media presence with 3,500 [Twitter](#) followers, 590 [Facebook](#) likes, and 12,800 YouTube views, which they use to provide regular updates to tenants. In particular, the organisation has made innovative use of YouTube – for example animated videos explain the changes tenants will face due to [welfare reform](#) and [universal credit](#), together with the types of support that are on offer, and the organisation's annual report has also been produced in video format. New Charter's universal credit video has been particularly successful, having been viewed over 500 times.

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### Celebrating your achievements

All organisations want to promote and celebrate the good work that they do. In particular, social landlords often carry out lots of activities which go beyond their core purpose of providing decent and affordable housing – including for example, helping tenants to learn new skills (IT skills, personal budgeting, cookery) or to move into employment, supporting local community groups or social enterprises and creating jobs and apprenticeships that benefit local people. The range of positive work that many housing providers are involved in is often not widely understood and, combined with traditional forms of media, social media can be a useful tool which can help you to raise awareness of and celebrate your achievements.

## Learning from others

Twitter users were able to follow a day in the life of one of **New Charter Group**'s apprentices in January 2014. Tweeting via Foundations In Housing's account, apprentice Shannon Coy shared her day of [training with New Charter's building company](#), tweeting photographs from training on boiler diagnostics and time spent accompanying an engineer out on repairs.

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### Increasing interactions with customers

It's tempting to start using social media purely to broadcast information about your organisation, but the real benefit of social media comes when it's used interactively to communicate with individual tenants. This could include offering social media as an additional means for tenants to make an enquiry or to request a service, or to provide feedback on, or make a complaint about, a service they have already received - and there is also a great deal of potential to use social media as part of your approach to resident involvement and consultation.

## Learning from others

**Derwent Living** use their [Facebook](#) timeline to keep tenants informed of a wide range of issues related to their tenancies, homes, and communities. Recent posts have focused on electrical safety, alcohol awareness, job vacancies at Derwent Living, Children In Need, and Housing Day. However it is also a further means for customers to raise issues with them conveniently and to get a quick response.

Derwent Living respond to contacts made through social media within one working day (where appropriate, asking for contact details to be messaged privately so that a colleague can direct message, email or telephone them back), in line with their customer service standards.

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**Helena Partnerships'** foray into [Facebook](#) began with posts broadcasting news and photos from events, but they soon learned that they needed to give customers a reason to engage – "nobody wants to be friends with their social landlord just for fun", as Head of Communications and Engagement Caroline King summed up their initial approach. The turning point came when Facebook was used to run a campaign to promote hard-to-let properties. In the case of one estate of refurbished but previously hard-to-let flats, targeted Facebook posts aimed at young people in the area reached 5,888 people, receiving 495 active engagements (likes, comments, link clicks) and resulted in four new tenants for the estate, for a total cost of £13 for two adverts. The campaign also saw more users follow and interact with the organisation on Facebook more generally.

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### Building up relationships with others

Social media is also a good way to build up relationships with other local organisations, to encourage joint working and to help promote each other's work by sharing interesting and important information from each other's organisations. Customers may find it beneficial to see social media posts from other organisations such as:

- local authorities informing of changes to service provisions such as service entitlement or neighbourhood school closures

- police forces sharing information on crime prevention and community safety
- NHS and healthcare organisations sharing information on promoting healthcare and wellbeing
- charities providing support services in the locality
- faith-based organisations sharing information on community activities
- local media organisations posting news items of particular interest.

Reposting information directly can build up links with other local organisations as well as encouraging tenants to follow other social media accounts which may be of interest to them. Quoting or linking to another post allows you to add commentary while still attributing the original author.

This can also be a particular benefit of encouraging individual officers to set up their own accounts (in addition to any established corporate accounts) and to integrate social media into their day-to-day work, as it can really help them to create and maintain professional networks with key contacts at other organisations.

**Working more efficiently**

For some organisations embracing social media is part of a wider shift towards digital working, aimed at providing quicker and more efficient services for customers and efficiency savings for the organisation. For example Derwent Living’s social media work is part of a wider digital offer which also allows customers to ‘self serve’ and to access more of their services outside of office hours. This includes a mobile optimised website, a smartphone app and an online community forum, which allows tenants to pay rent and report repairs online and to participate in housing and community-related discussions. While Halton Housing Trust has begun distributing tablets to tenants to encourage them to access their services online and to contact them via social media.

**Practical considerations**

The best approach to using social media is just to take the plunge! However, we’ve set out some common questions to help you get started.

<p><b>How can we support staff who are using social media to get it right?</b></p> <p>Many staff will already be familiar with social media via their own personal use. It’s a good idea to encourage these people to champion social media within the organisation and to support their co-workers to develop their skills, for example by providing informal training.</p> <p>Conversations move quickly on social media and tenants will expect a swift response to their enquiries, so you should avoid creating onerous approval procedures and instead empower individual officers to use their own judgement. You might want to avoid creating a detailed set of policies and procedures to govern this but some simple guidance to make sure that everyone understands what is expected of them is likely to be helpful.</p>
<p><b>Should we allow individual officers to have their own social media accounts?</b></p> <p>While most organisations begin with corporate accounts, there is also a benefit to enabling and encouraging individual members of staff and/or teams to create their own accounts and to post updates about their work.</p> <p>Many organisations are initially nervous of this because of fears that a poorly judged post by an individual officer could affect the organisation’s reputation or that allowing staff to access social media sites could lead to ‘time wasting’. However by providing a basic level of support and guidance and by trusting your officers to act responsibly, it is possible to use social media to make them more visible and more accessible to tenants, as well as reducing the onus on your communications team to produce all of your original content.</p>
<p><b>How can we make sure that content is always appropriate?</b></p> <p>It’s important to remember that a social media account is an organisation’s public voice and that anything posted on it will usually be visible to everyone. This includes any individuals’ social media accounts which identify them as part of the organisation, so it’s important to make sure that</p>



everyone is clear about what is acceptable - above all, if you wouldn't say something face-to-face with a customer, don't say it on social media.

Keep language professional – use correct grammar and avoid casual shorthand expressions (such as 'gr8' for 'great'). Think before using abbreviations or acronyms – what's familiar to you may mystify people outside your organisation or area.

As with all online activity, you should also take care to make sure your logins and passwords are secure and protected.

#### **How should we respond to negative or inappropriate responses?**

Many organisations shy away from using social media because they are concerned that it will open them up to criticism. However it is important to bear in mind that anyone who wants to criticise you on social media can do so whether you have a presence or not.

Where comments are offensive or inappropriate, some social media platforms will allow you to delete them yourself, while others will allow you to report them to a moderator. Where appropriate, it's a good idea to include some information on your account's profile page or description outlining the circumstances in which you will delete a post. This would be likely to include, for example, any post that includes hate speech or discriminatory language.

Where comments are simply critical of your organisation, it is best not to delete them but to treat them in a similar way to other complaints. It is worth bearing in mind though that just because a complaint was initiated via social media, that doesn't necessarily mean that it also has to be resolved publically. It is reasonable to ask a tenant to contact you directly – or to supply their details via a private message – if you need to discuss their complaint in private and at more length than might be possible online.

#### **Will our social media activity be confined to working hours?**

Although most social media activity can reasonably be confined to working hours, it may be necessary at times to monitor activity outside traditional office hours. Tools like Hootsuite can enable you to prepare posts in advance and to schedule them for publication at any time. However if you are going to schedule posts to go live outside traditional office hours, it is a good idea to make sure that someone is able to look out for and reply to any responses, or reschedule posts if necessary.

## How will we know if we're getting it right?

Social media platforms enable account holders to see basic account statistics at-a-glance, such as numbers of followers and total posts, while levels of active engagement can also be easily monitored via the following:

- direct responses – replies, reposts, or retweets
- number of views of linked webpages
- number of downloads of linked documents
- including social media as an information source when asking for feedback on services.

However while it's tempting to focus on measuring the 'reach' of your social media activity statistically, the true test of its success is the same as with more traditional forms of media – are more tenants engaging with your organisation and are they better informed as a result? By focusing on longer-term outcomes, such as levels of engagement and customer satisfaction, rather than on process-linked measurements like the number of posts or new followers, you will be able to better understand the impact of social media on your organisation. This may be less easy to measure directly but it will show how social media use is contributing to the organisation's wider objectives.

Ensure your organisation's social media use is known to staff across the organisation, and encourage them to consider how it can help their teams to achieve their own objectives, even if they do not use social media directly. This will enable social media to embed itself within the organisation in the same way as other forms of communication.

## Digital First Programme, Halton Housing Trust

As part of their Digital First programme, Halton Housing Trust has changed the way it communicates with customers. The Trust is the largest landlord in the Cheshire borough of Halton and manages over 6,400 homes in the towns of Runcorn and Widnes. It recognises that delivering services 24/7, 365 days of the year requires a radical re-engineering of the way it communicates with its customers.

Halton understands that one of the most effective means of communication is to create a channel for interaction which is easier to use, recognisable and familiar to customers. As a result the Trust has developed a communication strategy that embraces and fully integrates the use of social media.

Halton Housing Trust have found that whilst Twitter is a useful tool for communicating with other organisations, the development and adoption of the organisation's Facebook page as a means of communicating with customers, has proven to be very successful. Halton's Facebook page has over 700 likes and is used by a number of departments to update customers about local events, opportunities and to respond and answer customer enquiries, comments and complaints.

The Trust recognises that in order to provide the best possible service to customers, a variety of different departments need access to social media. On Facebook, the Customer Services team answer customer enquiries, whilst the Welfare Benefit and Money Advice team offer advice, support and information on how to manage debt and the impact of Welfare Reform changes. Most of the Trust's teams are represented on Twitter, so information comes directly from those who are best placed to offer insight into their department or role.

Social media also offers Halton customers the chance to engage and communicate with chief executive Nick Atkin. 'Ask Nick' is a monthly Facebook chat that is widely used by customers to ask Nick questions about the Trust's policies and procedures as well as providing an opportunity for them to simply raise day-to-day enquiries. The live chats are popular with customers who appreciate the opportunity to ask questions of their landlord's chief executive.

The Trust's research shows evidence that an increasing number of customers engage and access services through smartphones and tablets. As a result the Trust has adopted a number of social media tools to provide customers with, engaging, relevant and timely information. The Trust uses Buzzfeed to provide customers with bite sized information that is easily accessed on the go. The short sharp articles are used to signpost customers to further information and related sites. Featured topics have included tips for 'Back to School' and 'Staying Healthy'. The Trust also uses Vine to create short engaging visual content for customers and others in the housing sector. They will shortly be introducing Pinterest to provide customers with visual information on events and opportunities in their local area.

For Halton Housing Trust, social media is a vital part of its communications strategy and future plans include engagement opportunities via a Customer Forum Facebook group. Social media offers customers an easy, familiar and accessible means of communicating and requesting services. Halton Housing Trust is taking communication to their customers, not insisting that customers go to them and that's just one of the reasons Visceral Business currently ranks Halton as the Most Connected Housing Association.

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# Useful resources and information

## Twitter

[twitter.com/](https://twitter.com/)

## Facebook

[www.facebook.com/](https://www.facebook.com/)

## Google+

[google.co.uk](https://google.co.uk)

## YouTube

[www.youtube.com/](https://www.youtube.com/)

## Vine

[vine.co/](https://vine.co/)

## Flickr

[www.flickr.com/](https://www.flickr.com/)

## Soundcloud

[soundcloud.com/](https://soundcloud.com/)

## Wordpress

[wordpress.com/](https://wordpress.com/)

## Tumblr

[www.tumblr.com](https://www.tumblr.com)

## Hootsuite

[hootsuite.com/](https://hootsuite.com/)

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