

Template Twitter strategy for Government Departments

1 About this document

This document describes why and how we intend to establish and manage a corporate presence on the microblogging social network Twitter.com.

It covers:

- Objectives and metrics – why we are using Twitter, and how we will assess its value
- Risks and mitigation – how we will contain the risks to our corporate reputation
- Channel proposition and management – how we will populate and use the channel
- Promotional plan – how we will promote our presence on Twitter to maximise value

2 Twitter overview

Twitter is a 'microblogging' platform which allows users to post short text messages (up to 140 characters in length) and converse with other users via their phones or web browsers. Unlike email or text messaging on mobile phones, these conversations take place in the open.

The platform is experiencing a phenomenal adoption curve in the UK and being used increasingly by government departments, Members of Parliament, a number of our stakeholders as well as millions of businesses, non government organisations and individuals. It is free to use with a relatively low impact on resources and has the potential to deliver many benefits in support of our communications objectives.

For more about Twitter and why it's important that we join it, see Appendix A. For a glossary of terms see Appendix E.

3 Objectives and metrics

Objective	Measures
Extend reach of existing corporate messages online (e.g. news, speeches, web updates, YouTube videos) by building relationships with relevant audiences including intermediaries, stakeholders, and key influencers such as journalists and bloggers (see Appendix B)	<i>Number of followers; relevance and type of followers; number of web traffic referrals from Twitter to our website content</i>

Provide an informal, 'human' voice of the organisation to promote comprehension of and engagement with our corporate messages	<i>Feedback from followers (unsolicited and solicited)</i>
Provide thought leadership and credibility, increasing our visibility as the experts in our remit within the online space	<i>Feedback from followers (unsolicited and solicited); number of re-tweets (Twitter users repeating our updates); click-throughs from our tweets</i>
In line with Government policy (Digital Britain; Cabinet Office Digital Engagement policy and Power of Information) demonstrate commitment to and understanding of digital channels with exemplary use of this emerging channel	<i>Feedback from followers (unsolicited and solicited); +ve, -ve and neutral mentions elsewhere on blogosphere</i>
Provide an additional, low-barrier method for audiences to interact with the Department to provide feedback, seek help and suggest ideas	<i>Volume and quality of @reply and DM contact from followers; impact of this feedback on the Dept</i>
Provide ways for our audiences to subscribe to updates (by RSS, email and SMS)	<i>N/a. Achieved by having a presence on Twitter</i>
Monitor mentions on Twitter of our brand, our Ministers and flagship policy initiatives, engaging with our critics and key influencers to resolve problems/dissatisfaction and correct factual inaccuracies, and with satisfied customers to thank them for and amplify their positive comments	<i>Qualitative assessment of individual cases of turning negatives to positives and positives into brand advocates</i>
Provide live coverage of events (such as policy launches, summits or promotions) for those who cannot attend	<i>Number of events covered per year; positive feedback on that coverage</i>

We will gather evaluation data using a range of methods.

- Web analytics for [dept].gov.uk and clickthroughs from URLs in our tweets (using bit.ly) – to track referrals from Twitter to our web pages
- Twitter surveys – regular 'straw poll' surveys on Twitter to ask for feedback
- Twitter data – the follower/following data presented in our Twitter account
- Third party tools – analytics tools including measures based on re-tweeting (Retweet Radar; Twist); online reputation (Monitter, Twitter Grader); impact and influence (Twinfluence, Twittersheep); unfollowers (Qwitter)
- Alert services – tweetbeep.com and other methods for tracking mentions of our stuff
- Real time observation - <http://twitterfall.com/> and similar tools

- Analysis of our followers using <http://tweepler.com/> and similar tools

We will evaluate using all of the above methods every three months.

4 Risks

Risk	Mitigation
Criticism arising from an inability to meet the demands of Twitter users to join conversations/answer enquiries, due to resource and clearance issues	<i>Reduce by managing expectations with clear, published Twitter policy; use holding replies where answer will need research; (only if swamped) respond to 'themes' not individual replies.</i>
Criticism arising from perceptions that our use of Twitter is out of keeping with the ethos of the platform (such as too formal/corporate, self-promoting or 'dry')	<i>Reduce by sourcing varied content (see 5.3 and 5.4 below). Accept that there will be some criticism regardless.</i>
Criticism of jumping on the bandwagon/waste of public money/lack of return on investment/pointless content	<i>Reduce by evaluating against objectives above and adhering to content principles below</i>
Inappropriate content being published in error, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • News releases under embargo • Information about Ministerial whereabouts that could risk security • Protectively marked, commercially or politically sensitive information 	<i>Establish 'light' but effective procedural controls and guidelines for Twitter users; require clearance of all tweets through nominated people in digital media team.</i>
Technical security of the Twitter account and potential for hacking and vandalism of content	<i>Change Twitter password frequently using strong passwords; only 2 members of digital media team to have access to pw; use cotweet.com to devolve access securely; avoid using unknown 3rd party tools that require the</i>

	<i>account password</i>
Lack of availability due to Twitter being over capacity	<i>Accept (affects all Twitter users, occurs rarely and is brief). Take backup using tweetake.com and upload to Matrix every month</i>
Changes to the Twitter platform (to add or change features, or to charge users for accessing the service)	<i>Review business case for continuing to use the service when any such changes are made</i>
Squatters/spoofers on Twitter	<i>Reduce by registering alternative names. Accept residual risk and monitor for this occurring. Report spoof accounts to Twitter for suspension.</i>

5 Channel proposition and management

5.1 Positioning and profile of our Twitter account

The avatar will be our logo. The profile text will read:

“Official Twitter channel of The Department. See our Twitter policy in full here: [www.\[dept\].gov.uk/twitter](http://www.[dept].gov.uk/twitter)”

A draft of the full Twitter policy is at Appendix D.

The background image for the The Department profile page will be a picture of The Department's HQ building with the following information in the boxed out left menu area:

Logo
Slogan
[www.\[dept\].gov.uk](http://www.[dept].gov.uk)

5.2 Tone of voice

Though the account will be anonymous (i.e. no named officials will be running it) it is helpful to define a hypothetical ‘voice’ so that tweets from multiple sources are presented in a consistent tone (including consistent use of pronouns).

The Department's Twitter ‘voice’ will be that of the Digital Media Team, positioning the

channel as an extension of the main The Department website – effectively an ‘outpost’ where new digital content is signposted throughout the day.

This will be implicit, unless directly asked about by our followers.

5.3 Resources

The resource impact of running a Twitter account is low relative to other channels. A study of comparable organisations with existing Twitter accounts confirms this (see Appendix C).

The Digital Media Team will be responsible for sourcing and publishing tweets, co-ordinating replies to incoming messages and monitoring the account. This activity is expected to take less than an hour a day. Evaluation will take longer: approximately one day every 3 months.

The provision of content will require some low level input from communications colleagues and private office. This will be an add-on to business as usual internal activity – for example a quick discussion of potential tweets at daily press cuttings meetings, or emails between digital media and private office/speechwriters/stakeholder relations teams to identify potential content for tweets.

5.4 Content principles

Content for our Twitter channel will be:

- **Varied:** see below for a list of proposed sources and types of ‘tweet’. The channel will cover a broad base of content types and sources to retain interest levels.
- **Human:** Twitter users can be hostile to the over-use of automation (such as generating Twitter content entirely from RSS feeds) and to re-gurgitation of press release headlines. While corporate in message, the tone of our Twitter channel must therefore be informal spoken English, human-edited and – for the most part - written/paraphrased for the channel. Some use of RSS to Twitter is acceptable so long as this does not dominate the whole stream.
- **Frequent:** a minimum 2 and maximum 10 tweets per working day, with a minimum gap of 30 minutes between tweets to avoid flooding our followers’ Twitter streams. (Not counting @replies to other Twitter users, or live coverage of a crisis/event).
- **Re-tweetable:** to make it easy for others to re-tweet our most important announcements, we will restrict those tweets to 132 characters. (Allowing sufficient space for “RT @[Dept]” to be included as a prefix).
- **Timely:** in keeping with the ‘zeitgeist’ feel of Twitter, our tweets will be about issues of relevance today or events/opportunities coming soon. For example it will not be appropriate to cycle campaign messages without a current ‘hook’.

- **Credible:** while tweets may occasionally be ‘fun’, we should ensure we can defend their relation back to Our objectives. Where possible there should be an actual link to related content or a call to action, to make this credibility explicit.
- **Inclusive:** in keeping with the knowledge-sharing culture of social media, The Department should pursue opportunities to signpost relevant content elsewhere and re-tweet messages from stakeholders and other government departments. (See re-tweeting policy below). Exclusive use of Twitter for self-promotion can lead to criticism.
- **Corporate:** as an extension of the Department’s corporate website, the primary focus should be on policy development and consultation as distinct from business and citizen-facing guidance and services which are provided by Businesslink.gov.uk (@businesslinkgov) and Direct.gov.uk (@directgov) respectively.

5.5 Types and sources of content

Content for the channel will comprise a mixture of business as usual communications output re-purposed for Twitter, and content produced exclusively for Twitter.

5.5.1 Leveraging existing web content:

- **News releases, speeches and statements published on the web** - the headlines of news releases, speeches and statements. Depending on subject matter and length these may be paraphrased to fit within 140 characters and lighten/humanise the tone.

All press releases, speeches and statements will be mentioned on Twitter unless there is a reason not to. A procedure will be established to identify which of these are *not* for release on Twitter. If the digital media team paraphrases the headline, the paraphrased wording will be cleared with the originating press desk/speechwriter.

- **Marketing campaign messages** - information about events we are running or attending, campaign materials we want to disseminate online.
- **Videos on Youtube and photos on Flickr** – alerting our Twitter followers to new rich media content on our other digital outposts. Where possible, embedding photos into our tweets with twitpic.com or via our Flickr channel.
- **Blog posts** – any blogs run by the Department can be configured to automatically post an update and short URL on Twitter, announcing the new content.
- **Other website updates** - new or updated sections on [www.\[dept\].gov.uk](http://www.[dept].gov.uk), new publications, or website user surveys and online interactive consultations where we are inviting participation

- **Other communications teams** - invite contributions from embedded comms teams in the policy line, and in delivery partner organisations (agencies and NDPBs).

5.5.2 Adding value with exclusive content:

- **Updates on Ministers' movements** – for example business in Parliament (e.g. *Minister X is in the Commons reading the [xxx] Bill / Minister X is on the way to the House for oral questions*); Ministers' attendance at events or meetings with Stakeholders (e.g. *Minster Z has just started speaking at conference Y in Manchester – we'll have the transcript for you soon*).
- **Insights from Ministers** – thoughts and reflections of Ministers, for example immediately after their events or interesting meetings with stakeholders.
- **Announcement and coverage of events** – pre-announcement and promotion of forthcoming events that the Department has organised or trade shows where we have a stand, and live coverage of launch events where there is significant interest beyond the attendees. The events team and strategic marketing teams will be asked to alert digital media to tweetable content.
- **Thought leadership (or “link blogging”)** - highlighting relevant research, events, awards etc elsewhere on the web to position the Department as a thought leader and reliable filter of high quality content.
- **Asking and answering questions** – occasionally, we may be able to ask questions of our Twitter followers for immediate customer insight or to conduct a ‘straw poll’ on behalf of a specific policy area. More often, we will answer questions put to us via Twitter from our followers. These answers will be visible to all our followers, not just the person who asked them.
- **Crisis communications** – in the event of a major incident where the Department needs to provide up to the minute advice and guidance, Twitter would be used as a primary channel alongside our corporate website.

5.6 Clearance

News releases will be cleared by the originating press desk *only if paraphrased for Twitter*.

All other tweets will be cleared by staff at Information Officer grade and above in the digital media team, consulting relevant colleagues in comms and private offices as necessary.

5.7 Hashtags

It is a convention among Twitter users to distinguish content using semantic tags

(keywords), preceded by a # sign. This enables other users to search and filter based on those key terms, collaborate and share relevant information, and enables 'trending' (as displayed on the Twitter.com homepage).

The Department will use hashtags when:

- Providing live coverage of events (live-tweeting)
- Providing crisis communications. In this event it is likely that a common hashtag will already have been established and we would follow suit.

5.8 Link shortening

Unless they are already very short (e.g. www.[dept].gov.uk/stuff) URLs in tweets will be shortened using link compressing sites (like tinyurl.com). To avoid any implied endorsement of one such service we will vary our choice as much as possible – but preferring those which provide click tracking statistics. The top five providers are:

- is.gd
- bit.ly
- tinyurl.com
- sinpurl.com
- cli.gs

5.9 Re-tweeting

5.9.1 *Reactive re-tweeting*

We may occasionally be asked to re-tweet content from other Twitter users. We will consider these case by case but generally aim to honour such requests from:

- Other Government Departments
- Our stakeholders
- Third sector and non-profit organisations

In the interests of commercial propriety and competitiveness we will **not** honour requests from profit-making organisations, as we would not be able to do so fairly.

5.9.2 *Proactive re-tweeting*

We should actively seek opportunities to re-tweet content that helps position the Department as a filter of business intelligence, and inclusive/supportive of stakeholders. As

such we may wish to consider re-tweeting interesting content that shows up in our own Twitter stream:

- Research findings and statistics
- Relevant industry / business networking events
- Relevant celebrations/commemorations e.g. awards, themed days (e.g. national no smoking day)

5.10 Following and followers

As part of the initial channel launch we will actively follow other **relevant organisations** and **professionals** (see Appendix B for a full list of potential users to follow).

We will **not initiate** contact by following individual, personal users as this may be interpreted as interfering / 'Big Brother'-like behaviour.

We will, however, **follow back anyone** who follows our account, using an automated service such as tweetlater.com. This is because:

- It's good Twitter etiquette to follow people back when they follow you
- Having an imbalance between 'following' and 'follower' figures can result in poor Twitter reputation and grading on third party Twitter sites like Twittergrader.com – and even account suspension by Twitter administrators in extreme cases
- Vetting followers and manually following them back is a time intensive and low value activity

We will make it clear in our Twitter policy (Appendix D) that following back is automatic and therefore does not imply any endorsement by [Department].

5.11 Campaign-specific accounts

While we should aim to avoid diluting the corporate Twitter channel, it may *occasionally* be more appropriate for a particular campaign or policy area to have its own Twitter account.

We should consider separate Twitter accounts when:

- The subject matter is niche or specialist (i.e. of limited interest to the bulk of our followers; or with a specific target audience such as young people/women/vulnerable workers)
- They are in support of a specific blog by a Department official, team or Minister

When additional accounts are used we will need to ensure they cross-refer to each other

and re-tweet any content of relevance to the different sets of followers.

5.12 Parliamentary recess / pre-election Purdah

The same approach will be taken to Twitter as other comms channels during recess and Purdah. We let our followers know the reason for reduced volume of content with a tweet to announce the start and end date.

5.13 Longer term

Longer term, depending on the development of the channel and the volume and quality of user engagement, it may be desirable to look at involving Ministerial Correspondence and Enquiry Unit colleagues in monitoring and responding to Twitter enquiries.

6 Promotion

At launch, the channel will be promoted by:

- A link from the our website homepage and news index page
- A link from the Department's other social media outlets (YouTube, Flickr, [others])
- Finding and following relevant Twitter users (see 5.10 above)
- Asking key influencers on Twitter to announce us to their own Twitter stream, including Follow Friday from other government Twitter users
- Adding the link to the email signatures of the digital media team and press office

Once the channel has become more established, we will further promote it by:

- An intranet story (and possibly an article in the staff magazine), including a request that all staff add it to their email signatures
- Adding the link to the 'notes to editors' section in all press releases
- An email to key stakeholders
- Presentations to teams within Comms

APPENDIX A

What is Twitter?

Twitter works like this:

- You create an account. Your account comprises your username and password, avatar image, optional background image to display behind your page
- You find interesting people to follow, and they can choose to follow you back. Other Twitter users may also initiate contact by following you. This will include your real-life friends and contacts, but it is also normal Twitter etiquette to follow/be followed by people who you do not know offline. In this way, unlike many social networks Twitter is a powerful way of building a network, making new introductions and accessing interesting and varied content. (Use by institutions is different - see corporate policy on following, above).
- You post updates of up to 140 characters in length. You can do this using a variety of applications over the web on your computer or mobile phone. Everyone who is following you can read your updates. People can also subscribe to your updates using the RSS feed (this means they can receive your updates via their preferred feed reader software or browser start page, without using Twitter), or see them in the Twitter public timeline.
- Twitter updates are usually in the form of an answer to the imaginary question: “What are you doing now” or “What holds your attention now”? This will often include links to other websites (using link shortening services such as tinyurl.com). Two useful terms often used to describe this activity are “microblogging” – blogging in miniature by posting short updates throughout the day about thoughts and findings of interest – and “hyper-connectedness” – the idea of being in constant contact with your network and aware of what holds their attention right now.
- Your Twitter stream (the information you see when you use Twitter) is made up of your own updates and those of all the Twitter users you are following. Other users will see their own streams, which display the updates of the users they are following. Therefore what you see is not the same as what other users will see.
- Users interact with each other in the following ways:
 - **@Reply.** You can reply to an update posted by another user in your Twitter stream by clicking the reply button or typing @ and then their username at the start of the message. Anyone following you will see this reply, irrespective of whether they are already following the recipient. (This is one of the ways in which users find new people to follow, as you are effectively introducing that person to your followers by showing his/her username and engaging them in conversation).

- **DM.** You can send Direct Messages to individual users, provided you are 'friends' (i.e., you are both following each other). These are private and can only be seen by the sender and recipient.
 - **Re-tweeting.** Because people have different networks of followers, it is common to repeat interesting tweets from your own stream for the benefit of all of your followers, preceding it with "Re-tweet:" or just "RT" for short. You do not need permission to do this – it is considered a compliment to the originator to repeat their content.
 - **Hashtags.** You can include keywords in your updates in order to associate those updates with a particular event, movement, current trend or issue by adding a hash sign (#) in front of a word. For example at events Twitter users will often agree a common tag to identify themselves to each other and form a Twitter 'back channel' for that event. Tagging tweets enables users to collaboratively document a cultural happening, and aggregate all tweets containing that tag on another medium – for example on a blog, projected on screen at the event, or displayed on a map as a visual representation of what is being said in different places about the same issue.
- The Twitter website itself is not the only (or even the main) way that users access or post updates to their Twitter accounts. The majority of Twitter access is via mobile devices (such as Twitter applications on the iPhone), third party desktop applications (such as TweetDeck or Thwirl), web browser plugins (such as Twitterfox) or widgets on personalised homepages (such as iGoogle, Pageflakes or Netvibes).
 - It is also possible (and popular) to include photos and videos in your messages using third party add-ons, such as TwitPic.
 - Your Twitter updates can also be integrated with your other social media profiles – for example you can use Twitter to edit your Facebook status updates and show your Twitter updates on your blog, if you have one.

Why is Twitter important?

- It's a place where news often breaks - e.g. Hudson river plane crash, Mexico earthquakes, Michael Jackson's death,
- It's establishing itself as the main source of live update information – e.g. safety and travel info during the Mumbai terror attacks in Nov 2008; school closures during the heavy UK snow in Feb 2009; spread and prevention of Swine Flu in the UK.
- Trending: As everything being discussed on Twitter is by its nature happening now, it is increasingly being used as a way of monitoring and reporting on trends. Top trends are shown on the right hand side of every Twitter user's stream, and tracked by other tools (examples include Retweetist, Twitturly and Twitvision). For example, during the government's Digital Britain Summit on 17 April 2009, #digitalbritain

appeared at position 5 in the top 10 trending list on Twitter itself – further raising the profile and discussion around the event.

- Search Engine Optimisation – because it is updated frequently, Twitter content ranks highly on Google, and is therefore an increasingly important way to generate traffic and disseminate messages online.

Stats on Twitter usage

Nielsen stats from Feb 2009 at <http://www.twistimage.com/blog/archives/the-rapid-growth-of-twitter-with-the-stats-to-prove-it/> include the following:

- 1,382% year-over-year growth. Total unique visitors grew from 475,000 in Feb 2008 to seven million in Feb 2009.
- Twitter is not just for kids: In February 2009, adults ages 35-49 had the largest representation on Twitter - almost 3 million unique visitors from this age group (almost 42% of the entire audience).
- 62% of the audience access Twitter from work only, while only 35% access it only from home. This could suggest a trend towards professional use.

Hitwise stats from http://weblogs.hitwise.com/robin-goad/2009/01/twitter_traffic_up_10-fold.html include the following:

- Twitter receives the largest amount of its traffic from the USA, but its penetration is greater in the UK market
- Twitter is becoming an important source of Internet traffic for many sites, and the amount of traffic it sends to other websites has increased 30-fold over the last 12 months. Almost 10% of Twitter's downstream traffic goes to News and Media websites, 17.6% to entertainment websites, 14.6% goes to social networks, 6.6% to blogs and 4.5% to online retailers.