

# Dealing with adverse comments and complaints against schools on social media



SURREY

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## Introduction

The increasing number of people using social media has had both a positive and adverse effect on the reputation of schools in local communities. Some schools have used it as an efficient tool, e.g. to forward information through Facebook and Twitter, and stakeholders have responded well to this dialogue. However, in some cases, individuals have bypassed the school's complaints procedures and taken to social media to criticise and, in some cases, make malicious comments about individual members of staff or decisions that have been taken by the headteacher.

In many ways the use of social media to express these opinions is an extension of how people can express their views on the internet. People use sites such as 'Trip Advisor' to review holiday accommodation and 'Amazon' to give assessments of particular products. However, remarks made about a school can be destabilising for a community and, in particular, for the professional status of staff members who have had allegations made against them. It can also lead to a 'whispering campaign' which can undermine the leadership of the headteacher and the governing body.

The key question is, 'how do schools respond to complaints made on social media?'

There is no single effective method of dealing with individuals who raise issues on social media. However, schools can take a proactive approach to minimise such incidents rather than having to be reactive and put together a quick response to stop the spread of rumours.

If the complaint is of a low level and if no staff member/school is named which links adverse comments to individuals or organisations then it may be best not to respond in order that the matter is not prolonged. It should be noted that people have a right to freedom of expression under the Human Rights Act 1998. This includes freedom to hold opinions, and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority.

This short guide gives a number of processes a headteacher can use to deal with problematic comments and it looks at ways to counter any repeat occurrences to ensure that individuals follow the traditional complaints procedures.

# 1. Gather evidence

When the school becomes aware of any information that is damaging towards an individual member of staff and/or the school community, it is important to gather evidence and establish what has been posted. This may have to be done through various methods as the information may have only been shared through the connections of specific people. However, it is important that verbal or written evidence be submitted so that the facts can be established.

In some cases, a group of parents may set up a site to criticise the school or individual members. This is usually done through a Facebook page which is then 'liked' by those with an account and discussions then take place through particular threads. In this case, it is important to find out who has set up the page, as usually this is the individual who has the grievance.

**It is also essential, at this stage, that members of staff (including non-teaching staff) do not become embroiled in any of the discussion threads as this sometimes can inflame the situation.**

# 2. Reassure staff

The appearance of comments on social media that make allegations about the school or individual members of staff can be very intimidating to the workforce. Sometimes the content of the posts can de-motivate staff and cause anxiety. It is vital that the headteacher reassures all staff and offers support through whole-staff meetings or individual discussions. It is also essential that staff have access to their local trade unions who may be able to offer additional support and further services to members.

In some cases there may be malicious allegations made about a member of staff that need to be investigated, for example, a suggestion that a child or young person has been manhandled by a staff member, and the Headteacher will have to use the school's safeguarding procedures to carry out a formal inquiry into the matter.

# 3. Meet with individuals

In many cases the reason why an individual has made comments about the school or staff members on social media has either been through ignorance about the implications of making such comments or that they are unaware of the school's complaints procedure. In the majority of incidents a meeting with the individual can resolve the matter and the headteacher can identify the particular grievance and ensure that a suitable solution is put into place, if necessary via the school's complaints procedure. At this meeting it is helpful if printouts of the allegations or comments are available to verify what has been posted. At this stage, it is important that the headteacher asks that any offending posts or pages are removed from the site.

In cases where malicious comments or allegations have been made and the meeting is not successful the Headteacher may need to take further action.

## 4. Further action

If the matter is not resolved at this meeting, then the school has a number of options to address the situation. While it does not want to escalate the matter, it is crucial that it tries to come to a sensible conclusion.

### **a. Arrange a further meeting and invite the chair of governors and/or the Area Schools Officer (ASO) (for those schools that buy back the service).**

To ensure that the individuals understand the seriousness of the matter, a further meeting can be arranged with the chair of governors and/or the ASO present to convey the damage that these comments are having on the school community. This gives a further opportunity for the individuals to share their grievances and for an action plan to be established which could include proceeding with a formal complaint.

### **b. Report offending material**

If the individuals do not agree to remove any offending content or pages they have set up, then the school can report offending material to the site administrators. Usually this raises a 'ticket' with those who monitor content on the site and they assess this in relation to whether any of the terms and conditions has been violated. Schools should be aware that there will be a time delay in the review of this content and that, if the content does not breach the terms and conditions, then the site administrators will not remove it.

Material can be reported through the following processes:

Facebook – [www.facebook.com/help/181495968648557/](http://www.facebook.com/help/181495968648557/)

Twitter – [www.support.twitter.com/groups/56-policies-violations/topics/238-report-a-violation/articles/15789-how-to-report-violations](http://www.support.twitter.com/groups/56-policies-violations/topics/238-report-a-violation/articles/15789-how-to-report-violations)

YouTube – [www.support.google.com/youtube/?hl=en-GB&topic=2676378#topic=2803138](http://www.support.google.com/youtube/?hl=en-GB&topic=2676378#topic=2803138)

### **c. Take legal advice**

In serious cases the school may wish to seek legal advice. In some cases this has resulted in a letter from a solicitor being sent out to the individuals warning them that malicious allegations could result in legal action.

Details for the Surrey County Council legal team are given at the end of this document.

### **d. Consult the police**

In the most serious cases the police may consider a prosecution under the Malicious Communications Act 1988.

## 5. Assure parents

Allegations or malicious comments against members of staff or the school can have a negative impact on the school community.

If the comments appear to be one off or an isolated incident, the school may wish to make a low level response which avoids escalation. The Headteacher may put some wording in the school newsletter to remind parents/carers in general terms about appropriate use of social media and the correct procedures for raising concerns with the school. Here is some suggested wording:

“As a school we are working very hard to be approachable and to ensure that as parents you are an important part of your children’s education. If you feel that something has been mishandled then please do come in to see us about it. We promise that we will take your concerns seriously. Please could I ask that you come in and discuss any problems with the appropriate member of staff and not to use Facebook or other digital media to air a grievance. It really is hugely discouraging for staff, has a potentially massive audience and worst of all does not afford us with an opportunity to respond.”

If the comments are of a more serious or sustained nature the school could send a letter to parents/carers along the following lines:

Dear Parent/Carer,

As you will be fully aware, the internet has become a powerful tool to connect and to share ideas and opinions. In recent years, social media such as Facebook have grown in popularity and many people use them to communicate with family, friends and others.

The vast majority of people who use social networking show respect in their communication with others and this is something that we must encourage to show our children that we are positive ‘digital role models’. However, like other aspects of society, there are people who disregard the rules set and will use social media inappropriately.

As a school, we encourage parents to support us with the education and wellbeing of their children. If at any time parents feel that they have issues regarding their child’s education, they should make an appointment with me. As a community, we should discourage the use of social media to criticise and make unsubstantiated comments about the school or any members of staff.

(If appropriate) In light of this, I have updated the current ‘home-school agreement’ to include a section about the school’s complaints procedure and I would be grateful if you could read, sign it and return it to school.

(If appropriate) Also, I am arranging a parent’s session on eSafety to help us support our children in the online world. More details will follow shortly.

Thank you for your continued support.

Regards,

Headteacher and Chair of governors

## 6. Other action

### a. Home-school agreement

Schools have a contract with parents to ensure that children and young people are fully supported with their learning and welfare both inside and out of the classroom. Many of the

statements refer to parents reinforcing schools' policies on homework, behaviour and conduct. In order to counter discussion of sensitive issues about individual teachers or pupils on social networks, a number of schools have decided to include a statement on the home-school agreement to try and stop parents from making derogatory or malicious comments. While it is not practical to monitor parents' use of social media, it does show that the school takes this matter seriously and, the fact that parents have signed the agreement, means that they have a responsibility to act appropriately. Some example statements are as follows

'Parents/carers are reminded to use the school's complaints procedure when making a complaint about the school or a member of staff. They are advised not to discuss any matters on social media'.

'If at any time during your child's education at xxxx school, you wish to make a complaint, then you are advised to follow the school's complaints procedure which can be found on the school website [insert link]. We recommend that all parents and carers refrain from using social media to discuss sensitive issues about the school.'

'As a parent, I support school policies on ICT and I will ensure that I monitor my child's use of the internet (including social media) outside of school. I will act as a positive role model to my child, by ensuring that I use social media responsibly.'

## **b. Complaints policy**

Schools are required by law to have a complaints policy. The Surrey County Council guidance called *Responding to Concerns about Schools/Academies in Surrey* includes wording to discourage parents from using social media to discuss concerns.

# **7. Staff**

On the rare occasions where staff members make inappropriate or damaging comments about the school on social media, the general principles outlined in this document will apply, but in serious cases it may be necessary to take action through the school's disciplinary procedure.

## **Conclusion**

In the age of social media, all institutions need to be robust against criticisms. Complaints by parents are nothing new for schools as, in the past, many have gone to local media outlets such as newspapers to highlight decisions or issues made by the school. The problem today is that these complaints can easily be shared in the public domain and a post on Facebook can reach thousands of users instantly and give a misleading slant to any issue. Schools cannot monitor every comment put on social media, but they can be proactive in trying to ensure that parents and carers have a responsibility to act as a 'positive digital role model' to their children.

*With thanks to Yorkshire and Humber Grid for Learning*

## Useful Links:

YHGfL eSafeguarding

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/allegations-of-abuse-against-teachers-and-non-teaching-staff>

Cyberbullying - Supporting School Staff (DCSF)

<http://www.digizen.org/resources/school-staff.aspx>

NAHT - Working with the Media

<http://www.naht.org.uk/EasysiteWeb/getresource.axd?AssetID=25712&type=full&servicetype=Attachment>

NASUWT - Social networking - Guidelines for Members

[http://www.nasuwt.org.uk/InformationandAdvice/Professionalissues/SocialNetworking/NASUWT\\_007513](http://www.nasuwt.org.uk/InformationandAdvice/Professionalissues/SocialNetworking/NASUWT_007513)

NUT - Internet safety

<http://www.teachers.org.uk/node/10627>

ATL – Your safety net

<http://www.atl.org.uk/Images/Your%20safety%20net.pdf>

Using social media and technology in educational settings

<https://shareweb.kent.gov.uk/Documents/KELSI/Safeguarding/Using%20social%20media%20in%20educational%20settings.pdf>

## Other useful Surrey County Council documents:

E-Safety Toolkit for Schools, March 2012

Keeping Schools Safe, September 2012

Responding to Concerns about Surrey County Councils Schools/Academies, Autumn 2013

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