

SOGs Regarding Abusive Social Media Posts Directed at Housing Staff

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Version: 1.1

Introduction:

Social media platform usage is growing in popularity. It allows individuals to connect, interact, communicate and provoke discussions between a wide geographical range of people. However, it can also be used to spread false or misleading information and bully, harass or intimidate individuals, leading to dire consequences. The use of abusive, threatening, offensive, indecent or obscene posts on social media platforms which specifically names or alludes to housing staff will not be tolerated by the Housing Department of Tipperary County Council.

Purpose:

Where abusive social media posts are uploaded and specifically reference or allude to Tipperary County Council housing staff in an abusive or threatening manner, the following steps and also including the procedures laid out in Appendix 3 of the Councils Customer Charter "*Policy on dealing with abusive, persistent or vexatious complaints*" will be followed: -

Notification of the Abuse:

- a) The incident will be reported to the relevant line manager by completing the appropriate organisational incident form ([LOCATION](#)) and entered on the incident register. Staff member to take a screen shot of the comment and of the individuals page who made the comment.
- b) The staff member to be spoken to and offered support if this is required by their line manager. The Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) is one support in place for the wellbeing of all staff. Please see Appendix 1 on how to navigate the EAP on Sharepoint.
- c) If the individual who erected the post is known to the Housing Department of Tipperary County Council, they will be asked by the relevant line manager (by phone and/or in writing) to remove the post and offer an apology on the same platform where the abuse took place to the individual in question & the consequences of not doing so outlined to

them. This will be noted on the incident report and a timeline given for same.

- d) If they refuse to remove the post, the line manager will report same to An Garda Síochána and also request IT to seek its removal, if possible. This will also be noted on the incident report. Consequences will then be considered as outlined below.
- e) Where the individual is unknown to Tipperary County Council or the comments have been uploaded under a false name, IT will be asked to remove same, if possible. An Garda Síochána will also be advised and appropriate action requested, including advising the line manager of the name if known.

Consequences:

- a) Where the individual has refused to remove the abusive social media post and offer an apology on the same platform where the abuse took place and is known to the housing staff, repercussions will match the individual circumstances (including due cognisance of the severity & on-going persistence of the social media user) and may result in the following:
 - (i) Advising that future engagement will be via written letter format only and that they will not be engaged with either by phone, email or face to face meetings for a stated period of time (3 - 6 months) or until such time as the abusive social media post is removed and an apology offered, whichever is the soonest and/or
 - (ii) Their housing assessment for support will be with-held for a stated period (3 - 6 months) until such time as the abusive social media post is removed and an apology offered, whichever is the soonest and/or
 - (iii) Deferral of the individuals name from the approved social housing list for a stated period (3 - 6 months) until such time as the abusive social media post is removed and an apology offered, whichever is the soonest, and/or
 - (iv) If post is still not removed, advise the individual they may have to reapply for social housing until such time as the abusive social media post is taken down and an apology offered, whichever is the soonest, and/or
 - (v) Repairs to their local authority house will be withheld for a stated period (3 - 6 months) until such time as the abusive social media post is removed and an apology offered, whichever is the soonest, and/or
 - (vi) 6 months will be deducted from their time on the housing waiting list where they are an applicant and/or
 - (vii) A pending allocation may be deferred as per Section 2.7 (d) of the Housing Allocation Scheme (Letting Priorities) 2021 until such time as the abusive social media post is removed and an apology offered.

- (viii) A tenancy warning letter (appendix 2) & full legal action will issue pertaining to their tenancy (if they are a tenant) seeking removal of the abusive social media post and an apology where the individual is an existing tenant. It will be considered to constitute "anti social behaviour" as per their Tenancy Agreement, and/or
 - (ix) The Housing department may also continue to extend such consequences in exceptional circumstances and will review such situations on a quarterly basis.

- b) If they are not seeking social housing support, engagement for any service in the Housing department will be limited to written letter format only until such time as the abusive social media post is removed and offer an apology on the same platform where the abuse took place or 6 months, whichever is the soonest (face to face meetings, emails or phone contact will not be facilitated) and/or
 - (i) Subject to agreement, banning the complainant from using any of Tipperary County Council's services e.g. libraries or leisure centres for a stated period of time (3 – 6 months) and/or
 - (ii) In exceptional circumstances, the Council may extend such consequences and keep under quarterly review.

- c) When the decision has been taken to apply this policy to a social media abuser, the Section Head will contact the abusive social media complainant in writing if known (and/or as appropriate) to explain:
 - (i) Why we have taken the decision
 - (ii) What action we are taking
 - (iii) The duration of that action
 - (iv) The review process of this policy and
 - (v) The right of the Social Media abuser to contact the Office of the Ombudsman about the fact that they have been treated as a vexatious/persistent social media abuser
 - (vi) The Section Head will enclose a copy of this policy in the letter to the social media abuser

- d) Where a Social Media abuser continues to behave in a way which is unacceptable and where the behaviour is so extreme or it threatens the immediate safety and welfare of staff, other options will be considered, for example reporting the matter to An Garda Síochána and/or taking legal action. In such cases, prior warning may not be given to the complainant of that action.

- e) Adequate records will be retained by the appropriate Section Head of the details of the case and the action that has been taken. The Section Head will retain a record of
 - (i) The name and address of the social media abuser
 - (ii) When the restrictions came into force and ends
 - (iii) What the restrictions are
 - (iv) When the customer and sections were advised

- (v) The Director of Services, Corporate Services will be provided with an annual report giving information about customers subjected to the above processes.

Change Required in Housing Policy Documents as a Consequence of this:

- 1) The Tipperary County Council Tenant Handbook & Housing Maintenance Policy (updated January 2019) – Under Housing Maintenance General Section, Paragraph 1 include *“The Council will defer addressing repairs and maintenance requests if you have threatened or physically abused any housing staff member including name referencing them or alluding to them in an abusive manner on social media platforms”*
- 2) Anti-Social Behaviour Strategy 2016 –Currently this strategy is being revised and it may include that *‘the use of abusive, threatening, offensive, indecent or obscene posts on social media channels which specifically names or alludes to staff members will not be tolerated by the Council, such incidents will be dealt with under the terms of the document SOGs Abusive Social Media Posts Directed at Housing Staff’.*
- 3) Housing Allocation Scheme (scheme of Letting Priorities) 2021 – Section 2.7 – to include reference to abusive social media posts.

Conclusion:

The use of social media should be carried out in a responsible manner by all individuals. Abusive social media posts directed at or alluding to housing staff of Tipperary County Council is not an acceptable practice and will not be tolerated. The various consequences of engaging in such behaviour are as outlined above. Line Managers need to support their staff when informed of abusive social media posts directed at them and ensure to make an informed evaluation on the severity of the incident in conjunction with the team member. Corrective actions should be noted in the relevant Risk Assessment. Please note other Housing policy documents will need to be amended so that they are consistent with these SOGs.

Appendix 1:

Please log onto Sharepoint and click on Employee Assistance Programme as outlined in red in screenshot below.

The screenshot shows the SharePoint interface for the Tipperary County Council Staff Intranet. The top navigation bar includes 'SharePoint' and 'Cunningham'. The main content area features a 'Home' section with a welcome message, a 'TCC Phonebook' search section, and a 'Quick Links' sidebar. In the 'Quick Links' sidebar, the 'Employee Assistance Programme' link is highlighted with a red circle. Other links include 'Core Portal', 'Report Security Incident', 'Agresso', 'Communications Strategy', 'Blended Working', 'Windows Upgrade Info', 'IT Helpdesk', 'Mail Meter', 'Property Portal', 'Business Systems & Apps', 'Order Mobile/Smartphones', 'Work schedule Covid 19', 'HIS', 'Local Government Jobs Site', 'Communications's Calendar', and 'Sharefile'.

Type in Tipperarycoco under company code as highlighted in red in screenshot below.

The screenshot shows the 'WORKPLACE OPTIONS' login page. The page is titled 'Welcome | 歓迎光臨 | ようこそ | Bienvenue | Welcome | Bienvenidos | Bem-vindo'. It provides information about the global Employee Assistance Program and the International Employee Advisory Program. Below the text, there is a form with a 'Company Code' field. The field is pre-filled with 'Tipperarycoco' and is circled in red. A 'LOG IN' button is located at the bottom of the form.

Click on service you require such as contacting a counsellor as highlighted by red arrow in screen shot below.

The screenshot displays the 'WORKPLACE OPTIONS' website interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with a language selector, a 'GO!' button, and a search field. Below this is a secondary navigation bar with the text 'Contacting Your Employee Support Programme'. The main header features the 'WORKPLACE OPTIONS' logo and the 'Comhairle Contae Thiobraid Árann Tipperary County Council' logo. A central menu lists various service areas: YOUR PROGRAMME BENEFITS, WORKING, LIVING, BALANCING, HEALTH, PARENTING, AGEING, INTERNATIONAL, and MANAGEMENT. The main content area includes a featured article titled 'Make Gratitude a Life-Changing Habit' with a handwritten note 'Today I am grateful'. Below this are four service categories: NEWS FOR YOU, ONLINE SEMINARS, TOOLS, and CENTRES. The 'CENTRES' category is highlighted with a red arrow and contains two links: 'Contact A Counsellor' and 'How the EAP Can Help'.

