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# Media, Communications and Email Policy

Reviewed by Finance & Governance      September 2024

Reviewed by Full Council:                      13 May 2025

Next Review due:                                  May 2026

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## 1. Introduction

1.1 Social media is the term for a collective of online communications channels dedicated to community-based input, interaction, content-sharing and collaboration. It enables users to interact with each other by sharing information, opinions, knowledge and interests.

1.2 For the purpose of the policy, the term 'social media' covers sites and applications including but not restricted to Facebook, X (formerly known as Twitter), Blue Sky, Threads, Instagram, LinkedIn, Google +, Blogs and any similar sites which develop after the creation of this policy. It also includes comments on online newspaper articles.

1.3 Traditional media – press, radio, TV, internet – are crucially important in conveying information to the community so the Council must maintain positive, constructive media relations and work with the media to increase public awareness of the services and facilities provided by the Council and when necessary to explain the reasons for particular policies and priorities.

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## 2. Benefits and risks

2.1 The following are potential benefits that have been identified with the use of social media;

- Ability to connect with various members of the community
- Real-time updates on emerging situations
- High level of interactivity with members of the public and other organisations
- Lower Cost in comparison with traditional forms of media
- Enhanced transparency
- Building a sense of community

2.2 The following risks have been identified with the use of social media:

- Virus or other malware (Malicious software) infection from infected sites
- Disclosure of confidential information
- Damage to the reputation of the Council
- Social engineering attacks or "phishing". This is the act of manipulating people into disclosing confidential material or carrying out certain actions. Social engineering is often conducted by individuals fraudulently claiming to be a business or client
- Bullying or witch-hunting
- Civil or criminal action relating to breach of legislation
- Breach of safeguarding through the use of images or personal details leading to the exploitation of vulnerable individuals

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### 3. Purpose of this policy and who it covers

3.1 The principles of the policy apply to Parish Councillors, the Clerk, the Responsible Financial Officer, all Parish staff and, where relevant in terms of social media use and communications, to members of the public

3.2 The purpose of this policy is to ensure that the Council is not exposed to legal and governance risks, that the reputation of the Council is not adversely affected and that our users are able to clearly distinguish where information provided via social networking is legitimately representative of the Council.

3.3 This policy should be considered in conjunction with the Council's Code of Conduct and other adopted council policies and procedures.

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### 4. Social Media usage

4.1 The Council manages or is considering social media accounts as listed below. The Council may adopt further social media accounts in the future and to do so would require an amendment to this policy.

- Chigwell Parish Council – Facebook Page
- @Chigwellparishcouncil – X (formerly known as Twitter) Account
- Blue Sky account
- Threads account
- Instagram Account
- You Tube account
- Tik Tok account
- WhatsApp account

Officers will endeavour to keep all existing social media sites active/semi active.

4.2 Where possible, social media accounts will be used to communicate and network with the local community on behalf of the Council.

This will include;

- Posting minutes and dates of meetings
- Advertising events and activities
- Publishing good news stories linked to the community or the Council
- Highlighting staff and Councillor vacancies
- Retweeting or 'sharing' information from partners and local community groups
- Announcing new information

4.3 The Council will always try to use the most effective channel for its communications.

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### 5. Guidelines for Use

5.1 Councillors must remember that they are personally responsible for the content they publish on any form of media. It is good practice for Councillors to clearly separate professional, personal or political aspects of their communication. Any verbal or written statement from the Clerk, staff or Councillors in their official capacity to the media should represent the corporate position and

views of the Council, not the individual or views of the Clerk, staff or Councillor. Councillors and staff must also ensure that they are familiar with the guidance that is set out within this policy and that their use of social or traditional media is not damaging to the reputation of the authority. Under no circumstances should Parish email addresses be used for any personal matters or correspondence. Staff should not be contacted via their personal phones or email for Council related business

5.2 When using email, WhatsApp, or text messages, the following risks must be kept in mind:

- Breach of data protection and GDPR 2018
- Summons for legal proceedings, including tribunals and courts
- Possible disclosure under a Freedom of Information (FOI) request
- Infringement of democratic processes by conducting business outside of public view
- Creating legal or financial liabilities for the Council

#### a. Email Correspondence

When corresponding via email with Councillors, staff, the Clerk, residents, or external organisations, the following guidelines apply:

- Confidentiality: Do not disclose confidential information, especially matters that have been designated as private.
- Representation: Do not enter into any formal agreements or make representations on behalf of the Council unless authorised.
- Language: Ensure that the language used in emails is respectful and non- discriminatory. Avoid offensive or inappropriate language.
- Third-party Access: There can be no expectation of privacy for staff or Councillors. Only send emails you would be comfortable with being viewed by a third party, such as in an FOI request.
- Liability: Avoid making statements that could create legal or reputational liability for the Council.

When sending emails, ensure the following etiquette is observed:

- Do not write in capital letters.
- Ensure proper spelling, grammar, and punctuation.
- Be polite, respectful, and courteous at all times.
- Copy the Clerk ([clerk@chigwellparishcouncil.gov.uk](mailto:clerk@chigwellparishcouncil.gov.uk)) into all email correspondence relating to Council business.

#### b. WhatsApp Use

WhatsApp is used primarily for informal, operational communication. Key uses of WhatsApp include:

- Monitoring and reporting on grounds maintenance, street furniture, and other public amenities.
- Sharing images or updates that can assist in delivering Council services more efficiently.

Important Notes on WhatsApp:

- Any decisions or discussions that require formal Council approval must be followed up by email and included in the agenda of a Council meeting.
- All WhatsApp groups established by the Parish Council must comply with GDPR 2018.
- Formal decisions cannot be made via WhatsApp and must be ratified through the proper channels.

To ensure proper use, the following etiquette should be maintained:

- Do not use offensive or inappropriate language.
- Avoid any behaviour that could be considered harassment or bullying.
- Respect confidentiality when discussing Council matters.

#### c. Text Messaging

Text messages are to be used sparingly and only when other methods of communication are unavailable. Guidelines include:

- Texts should not be used to discuss confidential matters or make decisions that require formal Council approval.
- Any decisions or Council-related matters discussed via text should be followed up through email or formal meetings.

#### d. Use of Social Media (WhatsApp Administration)

For those managing and administering WhatsApp groups for the Parish Council, the following criteria apply:

- Admins must have a strong understanding of how the app works and ensure compliance with the Council's social media policy.
- No Councillors may be blocked within WhatsApp groups, ensuring full transparency in communications.
- At least three administrators, including the Chair, must be assigned to manage WhatsApp groups at all times.

#### 4. Summary of Key Points:

- All forms of communication (email, WhatsApp, text) should adhere to GDPR and the democratic process.
- Sensitive or confidential matters should not be discussed via text or WhatsApp.
- Formal Council decisions must be documented through official channels such as meetings and emails.
- Courtesy, respect, and professionalism must be maintained at all times.

This policy ensures that Chigwell Parish Council maintains high standards of communication, transparency, and compliance with legal requirements in all forms of digital communication

#### 5.2 Communications from the Council will meet the following criteria:

- Be civil, tasteful and relevant;
- Not contain content that is knowingly unlawful, libellous, harassing, defamatory, abusive, threatening, harmful, obscene, profane, sexually oriented or racially offensive and will otherwise comply with the Council's Equality Policy;
- Not contain content knowingly copied from elsewhere, for which the Council does not own the copyright;
- Not contain any personal information;
- Social or traditional media will not be used for the dissemination of any political advertising.
- No view expressed shall misrepresent the corporate position of the council.

5.3 Councillors are expected to abide by the Council's Code of Conduct and the Data Protection Act in all their work on behalf of the Council, including when posting social media posts. Councillors are also expected to maintain an awareness of the confidentiality of information that they have access to and not to share confidential information with anyone. Failure to properly observe confidentiality may be seen as a breach of the Council's Code of Conduct and will be dealt with through its prescribed procedures (at the extreme it may also involve a criminal investigation).

5.4 Councillors should also be careful only to cc essential recipients on emails i.e. to avoid use of the 'Reply to All' option, if possible, but copying in all who need to know and ensuring that email trails have been removed.

5.5 To ensure that all discussions on the Council's page are productive, respectful and consistent with its aims and objectives, we ask members of the public to follow these guidelines when posting on the pages:

- Be considerate and respectful of others. Vulgarity, threats or abuse of language will not be tolerated.
- Differing opinions and discussion of diverse ideas are encouraged, but personal attacks on anyone, including the Council, Councillors or staff, will not be permitted.
- Share freely and be generous with official council posts - but be aware of copyright laws; be accurate and give credit where credit is due.
- Stay on topic.
- Refrain from using the Council's social media pages for commercial purposes or to advertise market or sell products.

5.6 The Council's response to any communication received not meeting the above criteria will be to either ignore it, inform the sender of this policy or send a brief response as appropriate. This will be at the Council's discretion based on the message received, given the limited resources available. Any information posted on our social media pages which is not in line with the above criteria will be removed as quickly as practically possible. Repeat offenders will be blocked from the pages. The Council may post a statement that 'A post breaching the Council's Social Media Policy has been removed'. If the post alleges a breach of a policy or the law the person who posted it will be asked to submit a formal complaint to the Council or report the matter to the Police as soon as possible to allow due process.

5.7 Officers using social media in a personal capacity must ensure that their use is strictly personal and not professional or political.

5.8 If an officer receives any threats, abuse or harassment from members of the public through their use of social media they must report such incidents to the Clerk.

5.9 Officers must not download any software or freeware, unless this has been approved and authorised by the Parish Clerk.

5.10 Media representatives should contact the Parish Clerk if it wishes to;

- i) Interview Councillors or staff about the Council's decisions or actions.
- ii) Request a written or verbal statement from the Council about its decisions or actions  
If the Clerk is unavailable the media should contact the Responsible Financial Officer, or the Chairman of the Council or relevant committee.

5.11 Prior written consent of the Council is required if any interview by the media with any member of staff (other than the Clerk) or publication of comments across any media about the Council's business, decisions and actions is to take place.

5.12 Prior notification to the Council is requested before any Councillor in their official capacity writes articles for publication on the Council's business, decisions and actions.

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## 6 General terms of use

6.1 When commenting online on any matter relating to the Parish Council, Councillors should identify themselves as a Councillor or the organisation on behalf of whom they are making comments and make clear whether or not they are representing the view of the council.

6.2 Councillors who fail to identify themselves as a Councillor are in breach of this obligation will be deemed to be acting in their official capacity for the purposes of the Code of Conduct and such failure will itself be a breach of the Code of Conduct for councillors.

6.3 Official council profiles or pages must not be used for the promotion of commercial ventures – except when a commercial venture has given sponsorship to a Council event or capital project – then its sponsorship will be acknowledged as the Parish Clerk sees fit.

6.4 All social media sites in use are to be checked and updated by nominated officers on a regular basis. Officers must ensure that they conduct a spell and grammar check of their intended posts before posting them and that any errors are corrected promptly.

6.5 Sending a message/post via social media will not be considered as contacting the Council for official purposes and we will not be obliged to monitor or respond to requests for information through these channels.

6.6 The nominated officer shall remove any negative posts which are judged to contain personal and inflammatory remarks, or libellous or defamatory information without further comment or notification.

6.7 Councillors or parishioners who have any concerns regarding content placed on social media sites should report them to the Clerk to the Council by email: [clerk@chigwellparishcouncil.gov.uk](mailto:clerk@chigwellparishcouncil.gov.uk) or telephone. Misuse of such sites in a manner that is contrary to this policy and other Council policies could result in action being taken by the person responsible for the post.

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## 7. Safety

7.1 Councillors and officers must be aware of their own safety when placing information on the internet and should not publish information which could give details which could leave them vulnerable.

7.2 Any Councillor or officer receiving threats, abuse or harassment via their use of social media should report it to the Clerk to the Council and to the police.

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## 8 Information protections

8.1 Councillors must not disclose information, make commitments or engage in any activity on behalf of the Council unless they are authorised by the Council or by the Clerk to do so.

8.2 Councillors must handle any personal or sensitive information in line with the Council's data protection policies.

8.3 Councillors must not publish or report on meetings which are private or internal or make public any exempt committee reports or private papers.

8.4 Copyright laws still apply online. Councillors must not use images to which they do not hold copyright. Information shared should attribute the source.

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## 9. Members of the public

9.1 The Council will provide wifi access to allow members of the public to have facilities to enable them to be able to film, take audio recordings, take photographs or use social media in Council meetings where to do so is in line with the Council's Standing Orders and the Openness of Local Government Bodies Regulations 2014

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## 10. Breaches of this policy

10.1 Failure by a member of staff to comply with this policy may result in disciplinary action; failure by a Councillor to comply with this policy may result in a formal complaint being made to the Monitoring Officer for breach of the Council's Code of Conduct.

10.2 Other violations of this policy, such as breaches of data protection law could lead to criminal or civil action being taken against the individual(s) involved.

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## 11. Review

11.1 This Media, Communications and Email policy should be reviewed annually.