

# **WHITLAND TOWN COUNCIL**

## **Whatsapp Communication Policy**



### **1. Introduction**

Whitland Town Council recognises that WhatsApp is a commonly used communication platform which can be useful for quick and practical communication between councillors and the Clerk. However, WhatsApp is not a formal Council record-keeping system and its use can present challenges in relation to transparency, information governance, confidentiality and data protection.

This policy provides guidance on the appropriate use of WhatsApp in connection with Whitland Town Council, covering communication between councillors and the Clerk.

The purpose of this policy is to ensure that WhatsApp is used appropriately, professionally and responsibly, while ensuring that the Council continues to meet its obligations under UK data protection legislation, information governance requirements and local government legislation.

WhatsApp should therefore be used primarily for practical, logistical or time-sensitive communication where appropriate. It must not be used as a substitute for the Council's formal communication and decision-making processes. Official Council business, formal correspondence, decisions and records should continue to be dealt with through the appropriate channels, including Council email accounts, formal meetings, agendas and minutes, and other approved Council systems.

Where information shared through WhatsApp relates to official Council business and needs to form part of the Council's records, it should be transferred to the appropriate official record-keeping system where necessary.

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### **2. Purpose**

The purpose of this policy is to:

- Enable appropriate and effective use of WhatsApp for practical and timely communication between Whitland Town Council councillors and the Clerk where this is considered appropriate.
- Establish clear boundaries for the use of WhatsApp in relation to Council business, particularly regarding data protection, confidentiality and information governance.
- Ensure that all communication conducted through WhatsApp is lawful, professional, respectful and consistent with Whitland Town Council's policies and procedures.
- Protect personal and confidential information and ensure that it is handled responsibly.

- Safeguard the reputation and professionalism of Whitland Town Council and its councillors.
  - Ensure that WhatsApp does not replace the Council's formal communication, decision-making or record-keeping processes.
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### **3. Scope**

This policy applies to all Whitland Town Council councillors and the Clerk where WhatsApp is used in connection with Council business.

The policy applies to Council-managed WhatsApp groups and to individual WhatsApp communications where the communication relates to Council business.

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### **4. Principles**

WhatsApp may be utilised by Whitland Town Council for limited operational and administrative communication where it provides a practical and proportionate means of conveying information. Its use must, however, remain subject to the following principles:

- WhatsApp shall not be regarded as, or used as a substitute for, the Council's formal communication, reporting, decision-making or record-keeping processes.
  - WhatsApp shall not be used for the formal consideration, determination or debate of Council business, nor for the making of decisions on behalf of the Council.
  - Official Council records shall not be created, maintained or relied upon solely within WhatsApp. Where information exchanged through WhatsApp constitutes an official Council record, it should be transferred to the Council's appropriate record-keeping system.
  - All use of WhatsApp in connection with Council business shall comply with the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR), the Data Protection Act 2018 and all other applicable legislation and Council policies.
  - Personal, confidential or otherwise sensitive information shall not be shared through WhatsApp unless there is a clear and legitimate reason for doing so and the information can be handled lawfully and appropriately.
  - Councillors and the Clerk shall exercise appropriate care and professional judgement when using WhatsApp for Council-related communication and shall ensure that its use does not compromise the Council's obligations relating to transparency, accountability, confidentiality or data protection.
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### **5. Permitted Uses**

#### **5.1 Internal Use – Councillors and the Clerk**

WhatsApp may be utilised by Whitland Town Council for limited internal communication between councillors and the Clerk where its use is appropriate, proportionate and consistent with the Council's formal procedures and legal obligations.

Permitted uses shall be limited to matters such as:

- The communication of practical and logistical information relating to Council events, activities and operational arrangements.
- The dissemination of brief operational updates where communication is required in a timely manner.
- The coordination of arrangements relating to Council activities, events and approved projects.
- Communication concerning practical arrangements associated with volunteering or participation in Council activities.
- The communication of urgent operational or safety-related information where the use of WhatsApp is considered appropriate.

WhatsApp shall **not** be used for:

- The making of formal decisions on behalf of Whitland Town Council.
- The determination, development or amendment of Council policy.
- The substantive discussion or debate of Council business outside properly convened meetings.
- Seeking, establishing or recording a collective view or consensus of councillors on matters requiring formal consideration or determination by the Council.
- The circulation or discussion of information which is personal, sensitive, confidential or otherwise subject to restricted access, unless there is a lawful and clearly defined requirement for such information to be communicated and appropriate safeguards are in place.
- The replacement of the Council's formal communication, reporting, decision-making or record-keeping procedures, including official correspondence, reports, agendas, minutes and other formal Council records.

Councillors shall ensure that their use of WhatsApp does not result in Council business being collectively discussed, deliberated upon or determined outside the Council's established democratic and decision-making processes.

Any matter requiring formal consideration, discussion or determination by Whitland Town Council shall be referred through the appropriate Council procedure and, where applicable, considered at a properly convened meeting and recorded in the official Council minutes.

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## **6. Group Administrator Responsibilities**

Where a WhatsApp group is established for the purposes of Whitland Town Council, a designated group administrator shall be responsible for ensuring that the group is appropriately managed and used in accordance with this policy.

The group administrator shall:

- Clearly establish and communicate the purpose of the WhatsApp group and ensure that its intended use is understood by all members.
  - Provide members with clear guidance regarding the appropriate use of the group, including expected standards of conduct and the limitations of WhatsApp as a Council communication platform.
  - Where appropriate, provide and maintain a pinned introductory or guidance message setting out the purpose of the group, expected standards of behaviour and relevant usage restrictions.
  - Regularly review the membership of the group to ensure that access remains appropriate and is limited to individuals with a legitimate reason for participation.
  - Remove individuals from the group when they no longer have a legitimate role or requirement to remain a member, including where they cease to be a councillor, Clerk, employee or authorised volunteer, as applicable.
  - Take appropriate action where a member's use of the group is inconsistent with this policy, including requesting that inappropriate content or discussion ceases and, where necessary, removing the individual from the group.
  - Ensure that the group is not permitted to become a forum for formal decision-making, collective determination or substantive debate on matters of Council business.
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## **7. Conduct and Behaviour**

All councillors, the Clerk and any other authorised users of Whitland Town Council WhatsApp groups shall be expected to conduct themselves in a professional, respectful and appropriate manner at all times.

Users shall:

- Communicate courteously, professionally and respectfully, recognising that WhatsApp communications relating to Council business may form part of the wider Council record and may be subject to relevant legal or information governance requirements.
- Ensure that all communications remain relevant to the stated purpose of the WhatsApp group and do not become unnecessarily contentious, inappropriate or unrelated to Council business.
- Exercise reasonable consideration in relation to the timing of messages and avoid contacting other members outside reasonable hours unless the matter is urgent or requires immediate attention.
- Respect the privacy and confidentiality of other group members and shall not share, forward, copy or reproduce messages, images, documents or other content from a Council WhatsApp group outside the group without appropriate authorisation or a lawful basis for doing so.
- Refrain from using WhatsApp to make personal, derogatory, discriminatory, offensive or inappropriate comments about other councillors, Council staff, members of the public or any other individual.
- Ensure that their use of WhatsApp does not bring Whitland Town Council into disrepute or undermine public confidence in the Council.

Any concerns regarding inappropriate conduct or use of a Council WhatsApp group should be referred to the Clerk or, where appropriate, the Chair of Whitland Town Council for consideration in accordance with the Council's relevant policies and procedures.

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## **8. Political Content**

WhatsApp groups established, managed or administered on behalf of Whitland Town Council shall be used solely for appropriate Council-related communication and shall not be used for party-political purposes.

Accordingly:

- Council-managed WhatsApp groups shall not be used for political campaigning or the promotion of any political party, candidate or political organisation.
- No content intended to promote, support or oppose a candidate, political party or political campaign shall be circulated through a Council-managed WhatsApp group.
- WhatsApp groups shall not be used for political lobbying, canvassing or campaigning in connection with elections, referendums or other political matters.
- Users shall not use their position within a Council-managed WhatsApp group to promote personal political views where doing so could reasonably be perceived as representing the position of Whitland Town Council.
- The use of Council resources, including Council-managed WhatsApp groups, for party-political purposes is not permitted.

Nothing within this section prevents the Council from sharing factual, impartial and relevant information concerning elections or referendums where there is a legitimate Council purpose for doing so and the information is communicated in an appropriate and politically neutral manner.

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## **9. Data Protection and Privacy (UK GDPR)**

Whitland Town Council is committed to ensuring that all personal data is processed lawfully, fairly and transparently and in accordance with the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR), the Data Protection Act 2018 and any other applicable data protection legislation.

### **9.1 Internal Use**

When WhatsApp is used for Council-related communication:

- Personal, sensitive or confidential information shall not be shared through WhatsApp unless there is a clear and lawful basis for doing so and appropriate safeguards are in place.
- Users shall exercise particular caution when communicating any information which identifies, or could reasonably be used to identify, an individual.

- Users should be aware that telephone numbers are visible to other members of a WhatsApp group. Individuals should therefore be informed of this before being added to a Council-managed WhatsApp group and their consent should be obtained where appropriate.
  - Individuals should not be added to a Council-managed WhatsApp group where there is no legitimate reason for their participation.
  - Members shall not copy, forward, screenshot or otherwise disclose personal information or communications from a Council WhatsApp group to individuals who are not authorised to receive that information.
  - Where personal data is shared inadvertently, or a potential data breach occurs through WhatsApp, the matter must be reported to the Clerk as soon as reasonably practicable so that the Council can assess and, where necessary, manage the incident in accordance with its data protection procedures.
  - WhatsApp shall not be regarded as an official Council record-keeping system, and personal data should not be retained within WhatsApp for longer than is necessary for the legitimate purpose for which it was communicated.
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## **10. Records and Freedom of Information**

WhatsApp shall not be used as the Council's primary means of maintaining official records.

Where a WhatsApp communication relates to substantive Council business and constitutes information that should be retained as part of the Council's official records, the relevant information shall be transferred to an appropriate Council system or record.

Councillors and the Clerk should be mindful that communications relating to Council business may be subject to requests for information under applicable legislation, including the Freedom of Information Act 2000, where relevant.

The use of WhatsApp must not be undertaken for the purpose of avoiding the creation, retention or disclosure of information that would otherwise form part of the Council's official records.

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## **11. Security**

All users shall take reasonable steps to protect access to their WhatsApp account and any Council-related information held on their device.

Users should ensure that:

- Their mobile device is protected by an appropriate password, PIN, biometric security or equivalent security measure.
- Their WhatsApp account is not accessible to unauthorised persons.
- Council-related information is not unnecessarily downloaded, copied or stored on personal devices.

- Lost or stolen devices which may provide access to Council-related WhatsApp communications are reported to the Clerk as soon as reasonably practicable.
  - Users do not knowingly introduce malicious, inappropriate or unauthorised content into Council-managed WhatsApp groups.
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## **12. Compliance and Review**

All councillors and the Clerk are expected to comply with this policy when using WhatsApp in connection with Whitland Town Council.

Failure to comply with this policy may result in the matter being referred to the Chair of the Council or dealt with under the Council's relevant policies, procedures or statutory obligations, as appropriate.

This policy shall be reviewed periodically by Whitland Town Council to ensure that it remains appropriate, effective and consistent with changes in legislation, guidance, technology and Council practice.

The Council reserves the right to amend, suspend or withdraw the use of WhatsApp for Council-related communication where it considers this necessary to protect the Council's interests, information or legal obligations.

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## **13. Policy Approval and Review**

**Policy adopted by:** Whitland Town Council

**Date adopted:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Minute reference:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Review date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Policy owner:** Clerk to Whitland Town Council