



## **Communication Policy**

Little Waltham Parish Council (The Council) uses the following methods in communication –

Hard copy letters

Telephone

A website ([www.littlewaltham.org.uk](http://www.littlewaltham.org.uk) )

Emails

Text

WhatsApp

A Facebook Group

Facebook Messenger app

The Council will always try to use the most effective channel for its communications. Over time the Council may add to the channels of communication that it uses as it seeks to improve and expand the services it delivers. When these changes occur, this Policy will be updated to reflect the new arrangements.

This policy outlines the standards required when communicating generally using any of the above methods and the relevant sections cover all employees, volunteers and Councillors. It also sets out the manner of communication expected from third parties when communicating with the Council and how such communications will be dealt with.

### **1. Criteria for Council Communication**

The overarching criteria for all Council communication is that it will :

- 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;
- Not contain content knowingly copied from elsewhere, for which the Council does not own the copyright;
- Social media and website postings will not contain any personal information unless express consent of the individual has been obtained.
- Social media in particular will not be used for any political advertising.

## **2. Expectations of communications from those communicating with the Council.**

The Council expects all those communicating with it to do so in accordance with the following criteria:

- Be considerate and respectful. Vulgarities, threats or abusive language will not be tolerated. It is understood that a third party may have a strong opinion on an issue, but personal attacks, insults or threatening language towards anyone, including the Council members or staff is not acceptable.
- Communication should not be obscene, racist or defamatory towards employees, Councillors or the Parish Council as a whole.

Depending on the specific content of a particular communication the Council reserves the right to consider anyone who breaches the above criteria to be a vexatious complainant and will deal with that individual in accordance with the terms of the Council's vexatious complainant policy.

## **3. Obligations of all users and members of the Council's Facebook group**

In order to ensure that all discussions on the Council Facebook group are productive, respectful and consistent with the Council's aims and objectives, the Council requires all members of the Parish Council Facebook group to comply with the following criteria:

- Be considerate and respectful of others. Vulgarities, 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 members 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 Facebook group for commercial purposes or to advertise market or sell products.
- Not to use the group for political advertising

The group is not monitored 24/7 and the Council will not always be able to reply individually to all messages or comments received. However, we will endeavour to ensure that any emerging themes or helpful suggestions are passed to the relevant people or authorities. Please do not include personal/private information in your social media posts to us.

Sending a message/post via Facebook or Facebook messenger 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. Instead, please make direct contact with the council's Clerk and/or members of the council by email.

The Council retains the right at its complete discretion to remove comments or content that includes:

- Obscene or racist content
- Personal attacks, insults, or threatening language
- Potentially libellous statements.
- Plagiarised material; any material in violation of any laws, including copyright
- Private, personal information published without consent
- Information or links unrelated to the content of the forum
- Commercial promotions or spam
- Political advertising
- Alleges a breach of a Council's policy or the law

The Council's response to any communication received not meeting the above criteria will be to either ignore, inform the sender of our policy or send a brief response as appropriate. This will be at the Council's discretion based on the message received, given our limited resources available. Any information posted on the Facebook page not in line with the above criteria will be removed as quickly as practically possible. Repeat offenders will be blocked from the Facebook page. 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 Council's 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.

Where necessary, we may direct those contacting us to our website to see the required information, or the Council may forward their question to one of our Councillors for consideration and response. The Council is not obliged to respond to every comment received particularly if it is experiencing a heavy workload.

#### **4. Obligations regarding use of Social Media by Employees, Councillors and Volunteers**

The following obligations apply to all employees of the Council, Councillors and to those who volunteer on behalf of the Council.

##### **4.1 Posting on behalf of the Parish Council**

Material in the Council's name and posted on its behalf may only be posted on social media by the Clerk or a Councillor who is approved to do so. When such postings are made the criteria listed below should be complied with.

##### **4.2 Obligations regarding the use of social media by Councillors**

Social media postings should not bring the Parish Council into disrepute. A Councillor may be posting on social media in accordance with clause 4.1, or may be posting by identifying themselves as a Parish Councillor for this Council.

Thus, when posting in either of those capacities on social media, Councillors should comply with the criteria below:

- Do not post, upload, or forward anything that is abusive, obscene, discriminatory, harassing, derogatory or defamatory content and do not upload links to such content.
- Never disclose Parish Council information which is commercially sensitive, personal private or confidential. If you are unsure whether the information you wish to share falls within one of these categories, you should discuss this with the Clerk or the Chairman of the Parish Council.
- Be honest and open, but be mindful of the impact your contribution might make to people's perceptions of the council. You should not post anything that will bring the Council into disrepute
- You are personally responsible for content you publish into social media tools.
- Don't escalate heated discussions, try to be conciliatory, respectful and quote facts to lower the temperature and correct misrepresentations in relation to the Parish Council.
- Don't discuss Council employees without their prior approval.
- never publish anyone else's contact details without their express consent.

## **5. Employee Obligations**

A serious case of uploading, posting forwarding or posting a link to any of the following types of material on a social media website, whether in a professional or personal capacity, will probably amount to gross misconduct (this list is not exhaustive):

- a) pornographic material (that is, writing, pictures, films and video clips of a sexually explicit or arousing nature);
- b) a false and defamatory statement about any person or organisation;
- c) material which is offensive, obscene
- d) criminal, discriminatory, derogatory statements or material or statements or material which may undermine or cause embarrassment to the council, Councillors, or our employees;
- e) confidential information about the council or anyone else
- f) any other statement which is likely to create any liability (whether criminal or civil, and whether for you or the council); or
- g) material in breach of copyright or other intellectual property rights, or which invades the privacy of any person.

Any such action will be addressed under the Disciplinary procedure.

Where evidence of misuse is found the Council may undertake a more detailed investigation in accordance with the Disciplinary procedure involving the examination and disclosure of monitoring records to those nominated to undertake the investigation and any witnesses or managers involved in the investigation. If necessary, such information may be handed to the police in connection with a criminal investigation.

## **6. Parish Council email obligations**

The Clerk to the council has a council email address (clerk@littlewaltham.org.uk) The email account is monitored mainly during office hours, Monday to Friday, and the aim is to reply to all questions sent within a reasonable timescale. An 'out of office' message should be used when appropriate.

The Clerk is responsible for dealing with email received and passing on any relevant mail to Councillors or external agencies for information and/or action. All communications on behalf of the Council will usually come from the Clerk, and/or otherwise will always be copied to the Clerk.

Although individual Councillors may communicate directly with parishioners where the contents of an email refer to matters relating to Parish Council business they should be copied to the Clerk in view of Freedom of Information Act obligations. These procedures will ensure that a complete and proper record of all correspondence is kept.

Do not forward personal information on to other people or groups outside of the Council, this includes names, addresses, email, IP addresses and cookie identifiers.

## **7. SMS (texting) WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger obligations**

Councillors and employees may use SMS, WhatsApp and Messenger as a convenient way to communicate at times. All are reminded that this policy and the overarching communication obligations contained in clause one also applies to such messages.

## **8. Councillors' obligations**

Councillors are expected to abide by the Code of Conduct and the GDPR Data Protection obligations in all their work on behalf of the Council. As more and more information becomes available at the press of a button, it is vital that all information is treated sensitively and securely. Councillors are 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).

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

This policy was approved and adopted on 20 May 2019

The Policy was updated and approved on 4<sup>th</sup> May 2021

Date of policy review May 2023