

WITHYHAM PARISH COUNCIL
SOCIAL MEDIA, INTERNET AND ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS POLICY

Responsibility Finance & Administration/Full Council

Review Cycle: 3 yearly or earlier in the event of legislative changes or changes to the Withyham Parish Council channels of communication

Date of Adoption/Renewal	Date for review
October 2023	October 2026

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The council recognises that email, internet and social media are important information and communication systems which are used during the course of council business. This policy provides guidelines and procedures to protect users and the council.
- 1.2 This policy applies to all staff members and councillors who have access to the internet, social media and email facilities via council computers.
- 1.3 The email policy also applies to all staff members and councillors in all their email correspondence using WPC email addresses.
- 1.4 The policy also applies to the use of social media by councillors when communicating on behalf of the Council or as a Councillor.
- 1.5 The policy applies to the interactions between members of the public and Councillors or staff at Withyham Parish Council on social media, as well as posts relating to Withyham Parish Council or matters in the remit of Withyham Parish Council.
- 1.6 The Council has a website, Facebook page and uses email to communicate. The Council will always try to use the most effective channel for its communications.
- 1.7 The Council website and Facebook page are administered by staff only.
- 1.8 Data Protection principles as set out in the Data Protection Act 2018 (the Act) applies to all communication methods, and must be followed at all times. This applies to staff, Councillors and any persons when operating as a representative of, with, or on behalf of the Parish Council.
- 1.9 The Code of Conduct applies to any communication methods and must be followed at all times.
- 1.10 The Council is continually looking at ways to improve its working, and the use of social media and electronic communications is a major factor in delivering improvement.

2. Internet usage

- 2.1 Staff members are encouraged to use the internet responsibly as part of their official and professional activities.
- 2.2 Information obtained via the internet and published in the name of the council must be relevant and professional. A disclaimer must be stated where personal views are expressed.
- 2.3 The use of the internet to access and/or distribute any kind of offensive material will not be tolerated and staff may be subject to disciplinary action.
- 2.4 Guests (ie NOT Withyham Parish Council Staff or Councillors) are to access the internet via the 'WPC Guest' wifi connection.
- 2.5 The council reserves the right to monitor internet traffic and monitor and access data that is composed, sent or received through its online connections.

3. Unacceptable use of the internet

- 3.1 Unacceptable use of the internet by staff members includes, but is not limited to:
 - sending or posting discriminatory, harassing or threatening messages or images
 - using computers to perpetrate any form of fraud, and/or software, film or music piracy
 - obtaining, using or disclosing another staff member's password without authorisation
 - sharing confidential material or proprietary information outside of the council
 - hacking into unauthorised websites
 - sending or posting information that is defamatory to the council, its services, councillors and/or members of the public
 - introducing malicious software onto council computers and/or jeopardising the security of the council's electronic communication systems
 - sending or posting chain letters, solicitations or advertisements not related to council business or activities
 - passing off personal views as those representing the council
 - accessing inappropriate internet sites, web pages or chat rooms
- 3.2 If a staff member is unsure about what constitutes acceptable internet usage, then he/she should ask his/her line manager for further guidance and clarification

4. Email

- 4.1 Use of email is encouraged as it provides an efficient system of communication.
- 4.2 All emails sent relating to WPC business should be sent and received using the WPC email address.

- 4.3 Email should be regarded as written paper documents for the purposes of production, use, retention and disclosure and can be called upon under the Freedom of Information Act 2000. Personal information should be kept in accordance with the principles established in the Data Protection Act 2018.
- 4.4 The council reserves the right to open any email file stored on the council's computer or email system or servers.
- 4.5 The following guidelines for email use should be observed by all staff members and councillors:
- use appropriate language to avoid unintentional misunderstandings
 - respect the confidentiality of information contained within emails, even if encountered inadvertently
 - check with the sender if there is any doubt regarding the authenticity of a message
 - do not open any attachment unless certain of the authenticity of the sender
 - only copy emails to others where appropriate and necessary
 - personal and identifying details must be removed from email communication when no explicit permission to share these details outside of Withyham Parish Council has been given. Staff may also use discretion in redacting personal information when sharing with Councillors.
 - emails which create obligations or give instructions on behalf of the council must be sent by paid office staff only. Councillors do not have authority in this way.
 - emails must comply with common codes of courtesy, decency and privacy
- 4.6 If a councillor receives an email from a staff member which they believe is contrary to the guidance provided in this policy, it should be reported to the Clerk who will consider use of the council's formal disciplinary procedure, or refer the matter to the Staff Committee depending on the severity of the event.
- 4.7 If a staff member receives an email from another staff member which they believe is contrary to the guidance provided in this policy, it should be reported to the Clerk who will consider use of the council's formal disciplinary procedure, or refer the matter to the Chair depending on the severity of the event.
- 4.8 If a staff member receives an email from a councillor which they believe is contrary to the guidance provided in this policy, the staff member is entitled to consider use of the council's grievance policy and/or report the issue through the procedures outlined in the Member's Code of Conduct.
- 4.9 Council email addresses remain the property of the Parish Council at all times and can be accessed by the Proper Officer for the Council at any time to investigate adherence to this policy without notice.
- 4.10 Upon a Councillor leaving their post the contents of their Parish Council email inbox will be archived.

5. Website

- 5.1 The Council allows, at its discretion, local groups/individuals to advertise their upcoming events on the Withyham Parish Council's "What's On" webpage. Withyham Parish Council's decision is final.
- 5.2 The local group/individual is responsible for submitting the content and ensuring both its accuracy, and that it meets the Council's communication standards as set out in this policy.
- 5.3 The Council reserves the right to refuse submissions that are not appropriate to the Withyham Parish Council website, whether due to the nature of the event or due to not meet the standards required for publication as set out in this policy.
- 5.4 Withyham Parish Council does not accept any responsibility for the events advertised.

6. Social Media

- 6.1 Staff members are to use social media to broaden the scope of communication with the people, businesses and agencies it works with and serves, to promote the activities of the Council, and to highlight activities of external and partner organisations relevant to the residents of and that falls within the scope of Withyham Parish Council.
- 6.2 Individual Councillors are not to use personal social media accounts to speak as a Councillor or on behalf of the Council.
- 6.3 Only communication received directly by staff and through officially monitored channels, being email, letter, telephone and in person at the Parish Office will constitute as formal communications and be acted upon as such.
- 6.4 Messages received directly via Messenger on Facebook will be replied to, but do not constitute a formal communication with Withyham Parish Council. Facebook is monitored as appropriate within staff workloads.
- 6.5 Comments on the Withyham Parish Council Facebook page do not constitute a formal communication with Withyham Parish Council.
- 6.6 Social media pages, such as community group pages or the pages of local clubs and societies do not constitute direct communication with Withyham Parish Council.
- 6.7 Withyham Parish Council may reply to comments posted onto the Withyham Parish Council Facebook page at the discretion of the staff. Facebook is monitored as appropriate within staff workloads.
- 6.8 Withyham Parish Council may share or like posts from other organisations / individuals which are relevant to residents and / or in keeping with the Council's stated aims.

- 6.9 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;
 - Not contain content knowingly copied from elsewhere, for which we do not own the copyright;
 - Not contain any personal information.
 - Social media will not be used for the dissemination of any political advertising.
- 6.10 In order to ensure that all discussions on the Council page productive, respectful and consistent with the Council's aims and objectives, we ask members of the public to follow these guidelines:
- 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 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.
 - Content must be politically neutral.
 - Refrain from using the Council's Facebook page for commercial purposes or to advertise market or sell products.
- 6.11 Withyham Parish Council will not tolerate 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
 - • Alleges a breach of a Council's policy or the law
- 6.12 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.
- 6.13 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.

7. Additional Channels of Communication

- 7.1 Withyham Parish Council Councillors, Staff, Committees, Groups and Representatives such as volunteer leads may use additional channels of communication such as “Teams” and “Whatsapp” when necessary.
- 7.2 These channels must have been agreed for use in each instance by Withyham Parish Council staff or full Council as appropriate before they are implemented.
- 7.3 These channels must be utilised for a specified purpose and within the agreed terms of use.
- 7.4 These channels do not constitute formal communication with the Council, and will not be monitored 24/7.
- 7.5 All users of these channels must have agreed to communication via these channels.
- 7.6 GDPR applies and must be followed.

8. Video Conferencing e.g. Zoom

- 8.1 The tenets of this policy also apply to the use of video conferencing.
- 8.2 Withyham Parish Council video conferencing application of choice is Zoom

9. Security

- 9.1 Only software purchased by the council or authorised by the Clerk shall be installed on the council’s computer system. Software licences shall be retained.
- 9.2 It is the responsibility of staff and Councillors to keep devices and products updated to ensure security of information.