

South Petherwin Parish Council: WhatsApp Policy

Purpose:

This policy sets out how South Petherwin Parish Council will use WhatsApp as a tool to support internal communication between councillors and the Clerk.

This policy seeks to ensure that the use of WhatsApp is consistent with legal requirements, including data protection regulations, and aligns with the professional standards and community values of the Parish Council.

The policy covers all types of messages, including text, images, video, and voice notes.

Scope:

Applies to all councillors and staff who are members of a council WhatsApp group.

Covers both individual and group messaging related to council business.

Principles of Use:

WhatsApp should be used for informal communication regarding council matters, such as reminders, updates, urgent notices, but not for making decisions.

WhatsApp is not a substitute for the Clerk's formal communications, agendas or papers.

Administration:

The Clerk will be the group administrator.

Membership is limited to councillors and staff.

Members may leave the group at any time.

Conduct:

Posts must be professional, respectful, relevant, and concise.

No gossip, campaigning, or party-political material.

Discriminatory, harassing, or offensive language will not be tolerated.

No endorsements or advertising - commercial or political advertisements, or endorsements of any kind, are prohibited.

Confidential or sensitive information must not be shared.

Respect time zones - limit messaging to reasonable hours (e.g., 8 AM to 9 PM), except in emergencies. Posting excessively is also to be discouraged.

Disciplinary action may be taken for misuse.

No Liability for Opinions - the Parish Council does not take responsibility for personal views expressed by individuals within the group unless formally endorsed.

Record Keeping:

WhatsApp messages are not part of the official record of council business.

WhatsApp groups must not be used for formal decision-making. All important decisions, especially those involving parish funds or public resources, must be made during formal council meetings and documented in official minutes.

If a message is required for record-keeping (e.g. complaint, decision-related matter, FOI request), it must be forwarded to the Clerk.

Personal data must be handled according to the council's data protection policy.

For the sake of transparency, all key points discussed via WhatsApp that are relevant to council business must be noted down and recorded formally by the group admin or parish clerk.

Group members must understand that all communications within parish groups may be subject to Freedom of Information (FOI) requests. Therefore, content may be disclosed if necessary.

Data Protection & Security:

Members must use password-protected devices.

WhatsApp is a third-party platform; sensitive personal data must not be shared.

Group members must be aware that their phone numbers are shared with other members.

Information exchanged within the group must not be shared with external parties without prior consent. Consent to be added to groups and the sharing of data such as phone numbers must be explicit, and members must have the option to revoke consent at any time.

WhatsApp encryption should not be considered completely secure, and confidential or legally sensitive communications must be conducted through more secure channels (e.g., encrypted email or face-to-face meetings).

Legal Enforcement and Liability

Enforcement: The Parish Council reserves the right to remove individuals from the group who fail to comply with this policy. In serious cases, individuals may face legal action if their actions contravene data protection laws or other applicable regulations.

Liability: The Parish Council and its officers are not liable for any damages arising from individual misuse of WhatsApp or breach of this policy. Members are personally accountable for the content they share.

Disclaimers: WhatsApp is a third-party platform, and the Parish Council does not control its security features or guarantee confidentiality of the information shared within it.

Review and Amendments

This policy will be reviewed annually or as needed in response to changes in legal regulations or council needs.

Amendments to the policy may be proposed by council members and must be approved during a formal council meeting.

Adopted at the South Petherwin Parish Council meeting 14/10/26 Minute ref. 19

