

Badgeworth Parish Council

WhatsApp Policy

January 2025

1. Purpose

The purpose of this policy is to establish the rules and guidelines for the use of WhatsApp in Parish Council communications. 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.

2. Scope

This policy applies to all Parish Council members, employees, volunteers, and authorised community members who participate in WhatsApp groups or use WhatsApp to communicate for parish-related purposes. The policy covers all types of messages, including text, images, video, and voice notes exchanged within WhatsApp groups managed by the Parish Council.

3. Legal Basis and Compliance

This policy is constructed in accordance with:

- **Data Protection Act 2018** (for the UK) and **GDPR** regulations, ensuring that personal data is handled lawfully, fairly, and transparently.
- **Freedom of Information Act 2000**, regarding transparency in public body communications.
- **Public Service Regulations** applicable to local government bodies.

By joining and using any WhatsApp group managed by the Parish Council, members acknowledge their responsibility to comply with these laws and the terms outlined in this policy.

4. Acceptable Use

WhatsApp groups are intended solely for parish-related announcements. The following guidelines must be adhered to:

- **Professional Conduct:** All communications should be professional and respectful. Discriminatory, harassing, or offensive language will not be tolerated.
- **Relevant Content:** Discussions should be limited to Parish Council matters, including event planning, updates, and council decisions. Off-topic conversations are not allowed.
- **No Endorsements or Advertising:** Commercial or political advertisements, or endorsements of any kind, are prohibited.
- **No Confidential Discussions:** WhatsApp should not be used to discuss sensitive council matters such as personnel issues, legal concerns, or personal data of any individual.

Violations of this clause may result in disciplinary action or removal from the group.

In order to maintain standards and ensure consistency of use, only the Parish Clerk and Chairman may post on the Parish WhatsApp Channel.

5. Data Protection and Privacy

- **Lawful Basis for Processing:** Personal data shared in WhatsApp groups must be handled in accordance with the principles of data protection laws. Group members must be aware that their phone numbers are shared with other members.
- **Limited Sharing:** Information exchanged within the group must not be shared with external parties without prior consent. In cases where sensitive information is involved, such as complaints or disciplinary matters, formal channels should be used instead of WhatsApp.
- **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.
- **Security:** 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).

6. Etiquette and Conduct

To maintain a positive and constructive environment, all members must adhere to the following behavioural guidelines:

- **Respect Time Zones:** Limit messaging to reasonable hours (e.g., 8 AM to 9 PM), except in emergencies.
- **Polite Communication:** Be polite, avoid spamming or sending excessive messages, and ensure that content is relevant and necessary.
- **Disciplinary Language:** Any form of discriminatory language, personal attacks, or inflammatory behaviour may result in removal from the group.
- **No Liability for Opinions:** The Parish Council does not take responsibility for personal views expressed by individuals within the group unless formally endorsed.

7. Record Keeping and Auditing

- 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.
- 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.

8. Breaches of Policy

Any breach of this policy will be handled according to the following procedures:

- **Minor Offences:** Minor breaches, such as posting off-topic messages or sending messages at inappropriate times, will result in a warning by the group admin.
- **Major Offences:** Repeated or severe violations, such as sharing confidential information, discriminatory behaviour, or misuse of data, may result in removal from the group. Further disciplinary action may be taken by the Parish Council, including suspension or referral to legal authorities.

- **Dispute Resolution:** In case of disagreements about the interpretation of this policy or decisions made by the group admin, members can request a review by the Parish Council.

9. 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.

10. 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.