

Chelmsford Garden Community Council Communication Policy

This policy seeks to ensure that there is effective communication both internally within the Council and with residents and third parties and sets out the expected standards or customer service to be expected from the Council

What Constitutes Communication

The use of digital and social media and electronic communication enables Chelmsford Garden Community Council (the Council) to interact in a way that improves the communications both within the Council and between the Council and the people, businesses and agencies it works with and serves.

The following are considered Communication –

- The Council website
- The Council Facebook page
- The Council's Twitter feed
- Emails and internal digital communication systems
- Telephone calls
- Hard copy letters

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 using the various forms of communication including social media and electronic communication and the relevant sections cover all employees, volunteers, Councillors and members of the Council's Facebook group.

Criteria for Council Communication

The overarching criteria for all Council communication of any nature including on its social media platforms and within the Council 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 postings relating to official Council business will be moderated by either the Chair/Vice Chair of the Council, an appointed Councillor or the Executive Officer to the Council;
- Communication including that on social media will not be used for the dissemination of any political advertising.
- Communication will aim to present factual information as opposed to general opinion

Obligations of users of the Council's social media and all members of the Council's Facebook page

In order to ensure that all discussions on the Council page are productive, respectful and consistent with the Council's aims and objectives, the Council will require all those who post on the Council's Facebook page or Twitter feed to comply with the following criteria:

- 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.
- Refrain from using the Council's Facebook page or Twitter site for commercial purposes or to advertise market or sell products.

The Facebook page and Twitter feed are not monitored 24/7 and the Council will not always be expected to reply individually to all messages or comments received. However, efforts will be made to ensure that any emerging themes or helpful suggestions are passed to the relevant people or authorities.

Sending a message/post via Facebook or Twitter will **not** be considered as contacting the Council for official purposes and the Council will not be obliged to monitor or respond to requests for information through these channels. Instead, direct contact should be made with the council's Executive Officer and/or members of the council by email or on the official contact form on the website.

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
- 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 the 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, the Council may direct those contacting it to the Council's 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.

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.

Posting on behalf of the Council

- Only the Executive Officer and those Councillors who are approved as administrators of the Council Facebook page and Twitter feed and the Chair are permitted to post material on a social media account in the council's name and on its behalf.
- The intention is that any posting on social media should be factual information as opposed to general opinion and if views and responses are required to a post residents should be encouraged to address the response via the Executive Officer rather than on Facebook, which as stated above is not considered to be an official means of communicating with the Council.
- In the event of contentious responses being received on Facebook, Councillors and officers may only clarify factual information and should refrain from entering further debate or argument.
- Any Councillor is permitted to share a post on the Facebook page into another Facebook group if it considers that the information is useful for those members. Any comments that the Councillor makes in connection with the shared post should comply with the obligations set out in this policy document.

- If a Councillor is posting on social media they should bear in mind whether it impacts upon their duty not to be predetermined upon an issue to be considered and debated by the Council.
- Councillors should be aware that once a decision has been made by Councillors it binds the Council as a corporate body and Councillors should not use social media to brief against the Council in relation to a decision with which they voted against or disagreed with once such an issue has been debated and decided upon.
- Before using social media on any matter which might affect the interests of the council you must:
 - a) have read and understood this policy and
 - b) employees and volunteers must have sought and gained prior written approval to do so from either the Executive Officer or the Chair of the Council.

Obligations regarding the use of social media generally

Whenever you are permitted to use social media in accordance with this policy, you must adhere to the following general rules:

- Do not upload, post or forward a link to any abusive, obscene, discriminatory, harassing, derogatory or defamatory content.
- Any employee, volunteer or Councillor who feels that they have been harassed or bullied, or are offended by material posted or uploaded by a colleague onto a social media website should inform the Executive Officer or the Chair of the Council.
- Never disclose commercially sensitive, personal private or confidential information. If you are unsure whether the information you wish to share falls within one of these categories, you should discuss this with the Executive Officer or the Chair of the Council.
- Before you include a link to a third-party website, check that any terms and conditions of that website permit you to link to it.
- When making use of any social media platform, you must read and comply with its terms of use.
- Be honest and open, but be mindful of the impact your contribution might make to people's perceptions of the council.
- 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.
- Don't discuss employees without their prior approval.
- Always consider others' privacy and avoid discussing topics that may be inflammatory e.g. politics and religion.
- Avoid publishing your contact details where they can be accessed and used widely by people you did not intend to see them, and never publish anyone else's contact details.

Obligations relating to Employees

- Employees should be aware that any use of social media websites (whether or not accessed for council purposes) may be monitored and, where breaches of this policy are found, action may be taken against employees under the Council's Disciplinary procedure.
- Misuse of social media websites can, in certain circumstances, constitute a criminal offence or otherwise give rise to legal liability against you and the Council.
- In particular 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 and for employees may result in summary dismissal.
- Where evidence of misuse is found we 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.
- If you notice any use of social media by other employees or volunteers in breach of this policy please report it to the Executive Officer or the Council Chair.

Council email obligations and responses to telephone calls and hard copy letters.

The Executive Officer is the proper officer of the Council and will often be the first point of contact with residents and third parties. The Executive Officer has an official Council email address and may also receive hard copy letters and telephone calls.

The email account and mobile telephone answer phone are monitored mainly during office hours, Monday to Friday, and the aim is to reply to all questions sent within a reasonable timescale and certainly no later than 5 days from the date of receipt. An 'out of office' message should be used for emails when appropriate so that those contacting the Council will be aware as to when the correspondence will be answered.

The Executive Officer is responsible for dealing with emails and letters 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 Executive Officer, and/or otherwise will always be copied to the Executive Officer.

Although individual Councillors may communicate directly with residents where the contents of an email or letter refer to matters relating to Council business they should be copied to the Executive Officer. It should be noted that emails relating to Council business are subject to the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act thus 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.

In the event of a residents or third party not being satisfied with the time and manner of communication and the customer service received a complaint may be raised using the Council's complaints policy.

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.

Councillors should be mindful of the capacity in which they are engaging in any communication and if there is likely to be any doubt to clarify if they are expressing the approved views of the Council or are communicating in a personal capacity.

This Policy was approved and adopted on behalf of the Council by the Communications Committee at its meeting held on 2nd August 2023

Date of review May 2025