



HATFIELD BROAD OAK PARISH COUNCIL

Adopted by Full Parish Council: 27.09.2023

Reviewed: 07.03.2024

Next Review Date: March 2025

Communications and Social Media Policy

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media is a term for websites based on user participation and user-generated content, including social media sites and other sites that are centred on user interaction.

This policy is intended to help Councillors and Council Staff make appropriate decisions about the use of social media, other communication, and to outline HBO's Parish Council's position on various aspects of its use, including the management of comments made by members of the public when using HBO Parish Council's social media sites.

The aim of the policy is to achieve the following:-

- Help the public understand communication process with the council
- Assist staff, councillors, and volunteers by giving them the information they need to do their jobs effectively;
- Encourage everyone to put forward their ideas for improvement;
- Provide guidelines on the acceptable methods of communicating with partners, clients, stakeholders, and other parties.
- Provide guidance about councillors and staff personal accounts.

2. METHODS AND STYLES OF COMMUNICATION COVERED

This policy covers all forms of electronic and written communications including social media and social networking sites. Including (but are not limited to):

- Email
- HBO Parish Council Website
- Facebook, Instagram, X, Myspace, and other social networking sites
- Messaging Services including SMS (text) Messages
- VIDEO AND AUDIO CONFERENCING E.G., WHATSAPP, TEAMS, ZOOM, ETC
- Media Releases
- Photographs
- Video
- Noticeboards
- Recordings of Parish Council Meetings



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3. COMMUNICATING WITH THE COUNCIL

HBOPC welcome and need communication from you. HBOPC thank you for taking the time to communicate with us.

Please make direct contact with the Council's Clerk and/or members of the council by emailing or by a traditional letter.

Sending a message via social media will not be considered as contacting the Council for official purposes.

Please be respectful of everyone you communicate with and about.

When you contact HBOPC you will be conveying your written consent for us to use your personal details in a manner to facilitate your enquiry. Your contact details and the email are subject to the council's privacy policy. The council aims to reply to your requests as soon as possible and the replies may be individually or may take the form of a public statement

Once you have communicated with the council that communication is for HBOPC to deal with as they see fit.

Please note all written or electronic communications with; councillors in their role as councillor, by staff and by the parish clerk are subject to the Freedom of Information Act.

HBOPC will not tolerate, rude, threatening or abusive communications sent to our staff and councillors; and it will take appropriate legal action where necessary. HBOPC will not tolerate slander or libelous communications.

4. PRINCIPLE OF REPRESENTATION – WHO CAN COMMUNICATE ON BEHALF OF THE COUNCIL

As a general principle no member of staff, councillor or volunteer shall give the impression that they are representing, giving opinions, or otherwise making statements on behalf of HBOPC unless appropriately authorised to do so.

The Media Working Group when constituted will have the authority to publish statements on behalf of the HBOPC, otherwise the parish clerk or in their absence the chair has that authority. This may be varied over time to include approved suitably experienced volunteers or professional sub-contractors. To repetition in this document, the Media Working Group



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when constituted otherwise the parish clerk or in their absence the chair, or authorised third party will be known throughout as the HBOPC Authorised Publisher.

Unless specifically authorised only the parish clerk or in their absence the chair can send emails on behalf of HBOPC

5. KEY RELEVANT LAWS OF LAND

All communications are subject to UK law. The laws applying to copyright, data protection, libel, sexual harassment, and other offences are applicable to all communication forms. In particular to disclosure may be required under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and retention and privacy requirements Data Protection Act 2018 where not superseded by other laws.

All written or electronic communications with; councillors in their role as councillor, by staff and by the parish clerk are subject to the Freedom of Information Act.

6. PRINCIPLES

Be kind!

People are generally much more rational if treated with kindness and compassion. It is important to be seen by those watching the discussion that you are putting your point of view across in a calm, patient and professional way.

Rule 1: Be responsible and respectful

- Be open and honest.
- Be civil and respectful.
- Do not post anonymously or use a false name.
- Debate is fine, so long as it is carried out in a civil and respectful way.

Rule 2: Engage in positive conversations

- Actively participate in positive discussions.
- Be open to different points of view and others opinions.
- Share good news and success from our area.
- Share posts or content from other local organisations, groups and individuals where it is appropriate to do so.



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Rule 3: Address poor conduct

- Do not spread false information or unsubstantiated accusations.
- Posts must not contain abuse, harassment, intimidation or threats of any form.
- Posts must not contain any form of discrimination – including racism, sexism, ageism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia or religious intolerance.
- No one should have to put up with abusive or threatening behaviour. I/we reserve the right to delete content, block individuals or report individuals to social media platforms when necessary.

When communicating for or about the council you should remember:

- You are an elected representative of the council or staff member
- What you post can affect the reputation of the council
- The council is a corporate decision-making body. You cannot independently make decisions for the council over social media or via any other communication.
- Some issues and communications are best left to the council's official social media accounts, which is usually managed by officers
- Having a single voice or message can be critical in some situations - for instance in the event of major flooding
- You don't have to respond or comment to everything - sometimes it's best not to

Parish councillors and council staff must not:

- Give out the personal data of others on social media, including home address and telephone numbers unless given written permission to do so.
- Use an individual's name in social media communications or post information about an individual unless given written permission to do so (publishing personal data of individuals without permission is a breach of Data Protection legislation)
- Present personal opinions as that of HBO Parish Council.
- Present themselves in a way that might cause embarrassment to the Council; they must protect the good reputation of the Council
- Make false or misleading statements
- Publish photographs or videos of minors without parental permission
- Post any information that may be deemed libel (publishing untrue statements about a person which is damaging to their reputation is libel and can result in a court action)
- Post obscene material (publication of some obscene material is a criminal offence and is subject to a custodial sentence)



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- Conduct any online activity that violates laws, regulations or that constitutes a criminal offence
- Bring the council into disrepute, including through content posted in a personal capacity

Councillors' are reminded views posted in any capacity in advance of matters to be debated by the council at a council or committee meeting may constitute Pre-disposition, Predetermination or Bias and may require the individual to declare an interest at council meetings

7. ACCESSIBILITY IN COMMUNICATIONS

HBOPC takes inclusion very seriously and asks councillors and staff to adopt some basic principles for accessibility of written communications.

Readability is improved on screen by using a non-serif typeface in 10pt or 12pt. This would include fonts like Arial, Calibri, or Verdana.

Be mindful of the use of coloured text and backgrounds as this can greatly impede readability. Avoid flashing text.

Try to write in plain English.

Always spell check.

8. EMAIL

The Parish Council official email is noted as parishclerk@hatfieldbroad oakpc.gov.uk

Emails to the previous versions of this address i.e., parishclerk@hbopc.co.uk are forwarded to parishclerk@hatfieldbroad oakpc.gov.uk to avoid loss of information and delays in response.

The email account to the clerk is monitored mainly during office hours, Monday to Friday, and we aim to reply to all questions sent, as soon as we can, subject to workload and policy. The role of clerk is a part time role and consequently response times cannot be guaranteed.

The Clerk is responsible for dealing with email received and passing on any relevant mail to members or external agencies for information and/or action. All communications on behalf



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of the Council will usually come from the Clerk, and/or otherwise will always be copied to the Clerk.

Councillors and the Parish Clerk should be aware that email messages may form legally binding contracts particularly if signed by means of certified digital signatures. Unless councillors are otherwise authorised only the Parish Clerk can sign legally binding communications.

Individual Councillors are at liberty to communicate directly with parishioners in relation to their own personal views, if appropriate, copy to the Clerk. Any emails copied to the Clerk become official and will be subject to The Freedom of Information Act.

You should not send confidential or sensitive personal information by email unless you use encryption or password protection.

HBOPC does not guarantee the confidentiality of emails and it is not safe to assume that email is either confidential or secure. For example, email intended for one person may sometimes be widely distributed because of the ease with which recipients can forward it to others or copied to social media.

There is no guarantee, that email received was in fact sent by the purported sender and an email that is forwarded may also be modified. You should check with the purported sender to validate authorship or authenticity, if there is any doubt.

8.5 COUNCIL MAILBOXES

You should not rely on email for record-keeping purposes. For example, in the absence of authentication systems, it is difficult to guarantee that email documents have not been altered, intentionally or inadvertently.

Do not release confidential information via a mailing list, social media, on-line discussion group or electronic notice board.

Disclosure of personal information via the Internet must comply with the Data Protection Act 2018.

Any file, which is downloaded from the Internet or attached to an email, should be scanned for viruses before it is run or accessed. If you are in doubt about the safety of opening an email attachment, delete the email without opening it. If you recognise the sender, contact him or her to ask for it to be re-sent with confirmation that it is a genuine attachment. If you do not recognise the sender, do not make any contact.



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Any email address or account associated with HBOPC must be used responsibly, that is, in compliance with United Kingdom laws, with this and other HBOPC policies and regulations (see policies), and with normal standards of professional and personal courtesy and conduct.

All emails should have appropriate footers explaining that unless otherwise stated the content is the individual's opinion and not necessarily that of HBOPC.

HBOPC shall only permit the inspection, monitoring, or disclosure of email without the consent of the holder of such email

- (a) when there is reason to believe that a violation of law or of a HBOPC policy has taken place;
- (b) when there are compelling circumstances; or
- (c) under time-dependent, critical operational circumstances.

When you leave HBOPC, permanently or for periods of leave, you should ensure continuity of HBOPC business. This may include the handing over, or forwarding, of relevant HBOPC email records or messages to an appropriate member of the council or directing regular contacts to address future messages to another member of the council or volunteer.

The email accounts of persons no longer associated with HBOPC will be cancelled and no personal forwarding services will be provided. The emails will be kept in accordance with the HBOPC's data protection and GDPR policies.

9. WEBSITE

The Council has its own official website: www.hatfieldbroadoakpc.gov.uk

Every effort will be made to ensure that the website complies with the accessibility laws.

The website makes the current and previous agendas and minutes available for members of the public to read. Information can be found on the website about how to contact the Parish Clerk and also individual councillors. Current Parish Council policies can be viewed and downloaded from the website.

It is the responsibility of the members of staff or councillors who are authorised to update the website to keep any passwords completely secure.



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It is the responsibility of members of staff or councillors who spot an error or inconsistency to report to those authorised to update the website.

All information must be maintained so that it is up-to-date, and any time-bound items removed from the website as soon as the 'do-by' date has been reached.

Any and all: councillors, staff and the parish clerk have a responsibility to report inaccuracies and errors immediately to the parish clerk and others responsible for maintaining the website.

10. MESSAGING SERVICES (E.G., WHATSAPP, MESSENGER, ETC.) AND SMS (TEXTING)

Councillors and staff may use Messaging Services and/or SMS as a convenient way to communicate at times. All are reminded that this policy also applies to such messages.

11. VIDEO AND AUDIO CONFERENCING E.G., WHATSAPP, TEAMS, ZOOM, FACETIME ETC

Councillors and staff may use video and/or audio conferencing to communicate,

If you intend to record the conversation, you should inform the other participant(s) and abide by appropriate UK laws.

12. MEDIA/PRESS RELEASES

Media releases require approval by the HBOPC Authorised Publisher. Any staff member, councillor or volunteer may suggest topics that can be covered by a media release, but they may not issue any public statement or media release personally.

13. SOCIAL MEDIA

The parish council will actively engage with the parish community through whichever means it chooses.

The purpose of these guidelines is to ensure HBOPC's legal and effective use of social media.



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A breach of these guidelines may constitute a breach of an employee's terms and conditions of employment and/or misconduct.

HBOPC social media platforms may be varied over time. Any social media platforms are managed by the HBOPC Authorised Publisher. The social media platforms will be linked to HBOPC's website as appropriate.

HBOPC recognises that its social media platforms are a vital link to its residents and other councils.

The platforms can be used to:

- Share news, information, agendas, minutes, events, changes, opportunities and more, from HBOPC and the wider voluntary and community sector.
- Actively engage with residents and other councils.

14. NOTICE BOARDS

Content on public display boards shall be approved by the HBOPC Authorised Publisher. Exception agendas and minutes which are the responsibility of the parish clerk.

All information must be maintained so that it is up-to-date, and any time-bound items removed from the notice board as soon as the 'do-by' date has been reached.

15. RECORDING OF THE PARISH COUNCIL MEETING

The audio and/or video recording of the Parish Council Meeting can be stored on the Parish Council Website and/or Social Media site(s). The minutes of a council meeting remain the statutory and legally binding formal record of council decisions. For further details see the council's Recording Policy.

16. CONCERNS

Anyone with concerns regarding content in communications that denigrate Parish Councillors, Council staff or residents should report them to the Parish Clerk for referral to the moderator(s) and/or the Council as required.

If any staff member or volunteer has any doubts about the acceptability of information for publishing, they should contact the Parish Clerk who will make the final decision on whether or not to publish, in consultation with the Chair of the parish Council if necessary.



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17. VIOLATIONS OF THIS POLICY

Violations of this policy may result in disciplinary action being taken, or access to HBOPC facilities being withdrawn, or a criminal prosecution.

18. MONITORING OF THIS POLICY

This policy will be reviewed regularly by the council at least every 3 years and will be updated and amended in the light of emerging legislation, guidance, and best practice.