

Garstang Town Council

Email and Teams Protocol for Councillors & Officers

Date of Review: October 2024

Version Number	Purpose/Change	Author	Date
V0.1	Draft protocol to be approved by Full Council	E. Parry, Town Clerk	21/01/2019
V1.0	Final version, incorporating email guidance note relating to compliance of the Information Commissioner's Office 135 (2018-19) Approved by Full Council	E. Parry, Town Clerk	21/01/2019
V1.1	Minor formatting amendments to meet Accessibility Criteria (WCAG 2.1 AA). Amended Council Contact Details	E. Parry, Town Clerk	07/12/2020
V1.2	Draft for Town Council Approval	E. Parry, Town Clerk	08/12/2020
V1.3	Approved by Full Council. Review date amended to 17/01/2022	E. Parry, Town Clerk	18/01/2021
V1.3	Updated in light of JPAG 2024 guidance. The update included that any emails received from a Councillors personal email account should not be responded to and be deleted.	E. Parry, Town Clerk	21/10/2024

Document Purpose

This document describes Garstang Town Council's policy for email etiquette. It is based on best practice and guidance and must be followed by all Garstang Town Councillors and the Clerk. Clerk and Councillors must always use the clerk@garstangtowncouncil.gov.uk email address when sending emails to the Town Clerk/RFO.

Email etiquette and guidance

1. When to use email

- 1.1. Councillors and council staff should only ever use their council email address for council business.
- 2.2. Email tends to be used for a variety of reasons and can be as informal as arranging refreshments for a meeting to communicating a formal business decision.
- 3.3. Email is not always the best way to communicate information as email messages can often be misunderstood and the volume of email messages people receive can be prohibitive to receiving a meaningful reply as a result of email overload. Wherever possible, Teams should be utilised for internal communication, whilst email should be used for external communication.
- 4.4. The Clerk and Councillors have the responsibility of deciding whether email is the most appropriate form of communication and should consider the following factors before sending an email:

1.4.1. The Subject

Some subjects are too sensitive to be sent via email, e.g. employee information. Careful consideration needs to be given as it is the responsibility of the sender to decide whether or not email is the most appropriate vehicle for communication in these circumstances.

1.4.2. Speed of Transmission

Where information is needed to be communicated urgently and the recipient is expecting it then this is fine, however, if an urgent message needs to be sent and the recipient(s) is/are not expecting anything, then it is probably better to use the phone or teams.

1.4.3. Speed of Response

There is no guarantee that an email will be read as soon as it is sent; if the email requires immediate action then this is probably not the best way to communicate. A read receipt may be used to help people who need a quick response, to note that the mail has been

read. As per the Town Council's approved Communication policy, the Town Council will initially acknowledge emails (which require a response) within 3 working days of receipt. Instant replies should not be expected from the Clerk; reasons for urgency should be stated. The Town will give a full response or a progress update within 10 working days of receipt.

1.4.4. Number of Recipients

Do not necessarily use reply all as not everyone in the previous communication necessarily needs to receive the email.

Town Councillors should always identify in the body text of an email when they are copying in external email addresses, as this may not always be clear when large numbers of emails are included.

2. **Writing emails**

- 2.1 Councillors must use their council email address (@garstangtowncouncil.gov.uk) when conducting council business.
- 2.2 The Town Clerk will only ever use Councillors council email addresses.
- 2.3 Councillors should only send emails to fellow councillors to their council email addresses and from their own council email address. Any emails received from a Councillors personal email account should not be responded to and be deleted.
- 2.4 When Councillors receive emails to their personal email addresses, from non Councillors, which relate to council business, they should transfer it (either by forwarding it or moving it across inboxes) to their council email address and reply from their council email address.
- 2.5 When writing an email, it is important to compose the message with the same care and clarity applied to drafting letters and memos, particularly as emails form part of the corporate record under the Data Protection and Freedom of Information Acts.
- 2.6 Information and documents sent to your @garstangtowncouncil.gov.uk in box if distributed further must be sent from the same email address.
- 2.7 Always ensure that when sending an email from your Town Council email address the following Information and disclaimer is included:

Your Name including the title Cllr.

Town Council Website Address

And the following disclaimer:

This email and any files transmitted with it are confidential and may be legally privileged and are intended solely for the use of the individual or entity to whom that they are addressed. If you are not the intended recipient, any use, disclosure, copying or forwarding of this email and/or its attachments is unauthorised.

So, for example Cllr Allan's emails will end

Cllr Alec Allan

Garstang Town Council

www.garstangtowncouncil.gov.uk

This email and any files transmitted with it are confidential and may be legally privileged and are intended solely for the use of the individual or entity to whom that they are addressed. If you are not the intended recipient, any use, disclosure, copying or forwarding of this email and/or its attachments is unauthorised.

- 2.8 Always ensure that your Recipient List is appropriate to avoid causing a nuisance to other colleagues.
- 2.9 Always complete the Subject Line with a clear description of what the email is about as recipients cannot always distinguish between what they need to look at immediately and what can wait. For example, full council minutes February 2018 for approval.
- 2.10 Ensure language is simple, unambiguous and to the point.
- 2.11 Avoid using abbreviations and emoticons - don't trade clarity for confusion. Be aware that other colleagues may not know the meaning of informal expressions, such as FWIW (for what it's worth).
- 2.12 Be polite. Terseness can be misinterpreted. Please and thank you go a long way.
- 2.13 Be patient. Not everyone can respond immediately or necessarily have the confidence to communicate using email.
- 2.14 Be careful when replying to an email message with many recipients. Do you really want everyone to see your reply?
- 2.15 Never reply in anger. Take a break or sleep on it before responding.
- 2.16 Never write your email in CAPITAL LETTERS. This implies shouting.
- 2.17 Don't conduct an argument on email - it is unprofessional.

- 2.18 Never 'flame' anyone. A flame is an electronic verbal attack. If a flame is received, then please do not respond in anger as this may be regretted later. Users should not engage in exchanging flames and create a 'flame- war'.
- 2.19 Always, always read email before sending it and consider the resultant reaction. Ensuring clarity in the message is time well spent.
- 2.20 Emails which include confidential information should have the corresponding sensitivity label applied. Where content is outlined as confidential (either with a sensitivity label or in the email content) by the sender, content and attachments should not be shared, forwarded or saved outside of the council's server, where sharing is not in accordance with the councils Code of Conduct, section 1, a, v: *You must not disclose confidential information unless: you have the consent of a person authorised to give it; you are required by law to do so; the disclosure is made to a third party for the purpose of obtaining professional advice, provided that the third part agrees not to disclose the information to any other person; or, there is a clear and overriding public interest in doing so and the disclosure is made in good faith and in compliance with the reasonable requirements of the council and that you have consulted the Mayor or Clerk prior to its release.*
- 2.21 When Councillors and officers are emailing either all councillors or councillors which are members of a specific committee should use the following email addresses:
- Full Council: fullcouncil@garstangtowncouncil.gov.uk
 - Finance Committee: finance@garstangtowncouncil.gov.uk
 - Personnel Committee: personnel@garstangtowncouncil.gov.uk
 - Planning Committee: planning@garstangtowncouncil.gov.uk

These email addresses can only be used by internal email addresses with the address '@garstangtowncouncil.gov.uk'. External email addresses which attempt to email the 4 email addresses above will receive a message failed receipt.

3. Out of Office Replies

Users are required to use this facility within the email system to inform senders of email of absence and expected return to work date. Including an alternative contact is helpful. Applying an out of office reply to your council email address will also display an out of office reply on your team's account.

Where a Councillor or Officer is incapacitated an out of office reply may be applied remotely to inform external users that the Councillor or Officer may not be attending to emails.

4. Leaving Office

- 4.1 Upon a Councillor leaving office as a Town Councillor information held in their council email address account will be retained in accordance with the

councils Data Retention and Disposal Policy, for Freedom of Information request purposes (See guidance note).

5. The Town Clerk will save message trace records periodically, only to be used for Freedom of Information purposes.

Utilising Teams

Councillors are encouraged to download teams onto their IT equipment, they can [download the app via the microsoft website](#) and then log in using their council email address. Where councillors are unable to do this, they should use the online version, ensuring to check Teams on a regular basis, just like emails.

The etiquette and guidance set out in 'Email etiquette and guidance' (points 1 to 4) is also applicable to teams.

1. Chat Function

- 1.1 Councillors should use the chat function for bilateral conversations.
- 1.2 The chat function should be utilised for sharing files bilaterally.
- 1.3 Councillors should use the Important function when conveying important/urgent information with reasons for urgency/importance stated. The 'Urgent' function should never be used, except by the Mayor or Clerk in exceptional circumstances.

2. Teams Function

- 2.1 A Team is a group of people who can be grouped together, this Team is then further broken down into channels. The 'General' channel includes all members of that Team. For example, The Personnel Committee Team will include all members of the Committee and the Clerk, all of these will be included in the 'General' channel. However, there may be further channels with less members, such as a smaller number of councillors to support the Town Crier.
- 2.2 Teams should be used for internal discussions and file sharing relating to the corresponding full council, committee or project.
- 2.3 Councillors will be automatically added to the Full Council Team, the general channel will be used for all Councillors and where full council documents are shared in the Files section for councillors' reference.
- 2.4 Councillors will be added to the relevant teams which correspond to the committees they are appointed to.
- 2.5 A Project Leader is encouraged to set up a Team for the project in order to share files and host project discussions, larger projects should have multiple channels. For example, the Town Council Awards may be broken down into a channel for the judging team (the 'general' channel) and a channel for the operational management of the awards.

- 2.6 When sharing information Teams should be considered as the first port of call rather than a last resort.
- 2.7 Councillors will not be notified when something is posted in a channel unless a '@' function is used. For example, when posting in Planning Committee General Channel to inform councillors of a new planning application, the Clerk would use @General, this would notify all Planning Committee Members in the general channel. However, if the Town Clerk only wanted to alert certain members then the clerk would just use @councillorsname1 and @councillorsname2, this still allows others to view the information however will not notify them.
- 2.8 Where the '@' function is not used, a response should not be expected and an acknowledgment or receipt should only be expected when requested.
- 2.9 Councillors should use the Important function when conveying important/urgent information with reasons for urgency/importance stated. The 'Urgent' function should never be used, except by the Mayor or Clerk in exceptional circumstances.
- 2.10 Councillor and Officers should file documents appropriately in channels.

Garstang Town Council Email Addresses – Guidance note

Parish and Town Councils are Local Authorities and need to abide with GDPR and Freedom of Information requests. The office of the Town Council needs to comply with a Freedom of Information request that requires the publication of email correspondence.

In 2017 the Information Commissioner's Office published a guidance document on the implications of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) on official information held in private email accounts (Freedom of Information Act, The Information Commissioner's Office, updated March 2017.

[official information held in private email accounts.pdf \(ico.org.uk\)](#)

The document makes clear that "information is held by a public authority if—

(a) it is held by the authority, otherwise than on behalf of another person, or (b) it is held by another person on behalf of the authority."

The document goes on to confirm that where information is held by another person on behalf of the public authority, the information is considered to be held by the authority for the purposes of FOIA, and that this applies to official business recorded in personal email accounts

Where records are to be recovered from private email addresses it can be difficult to confirm that all records have been searched for relevant data.

Furthermore, deleting or concealing information with the intention of preventing its disclosure following receipt of a FOI request is a criminal offence under section 77 of FOIA.

Demonstrating compliance when data is held in personal email accounts could be difficult. It is recognised that recovering email correspondence from personal email accounts following a FOI request is unlikely. However, such a request is only likely to arise in circumstances where a member of the public has grounds to suspect something suspicious has occurred. It is precisely in these circumstances that the Council would wish to be demonstrably compliant in its response.

Garstang Town Council should maintain GTC email addresses for its Councillors and make clear in a guidance document that all Council correspondence should be conducted using GTC email addresses.

All emails received and sent concerning the Town Council are formal council records. All emails used to conduct or support official Garstang Town Council business must be sent using a “@garstangtowncouncil.gov.uk” address and not a private email address. Non “@garstangtowncouncil.gov.uk” email accounts must not be used to conduct or support official Garstang Town Council business.

The Joint Panel on Accountability and Governance (JPAG) 2024

The importance of using .gov.uk domains for websites and emails

5.210. All Parish, Town and Community Councils are eligible to use, and are advised to use, a .gov.uk domain for their websites and email communications. Your community, suppliers and partners will now reasonably expect a local council to have a .gov.uk domain name. Note that Parish meetings are exempt from the requirement to have a website.

5.211. To assist with compliance with the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR), it is advised that clerks provide official .gov.uk email accounts to their councillors, which must only be used for official council business.

5.212. When choosing a domain name all councils must follow the rules set out by the Cabinet Office to choose a .gov.uk domain name, for example, ‘ourparishcouncil.gov.uk’ with email addresses linked to that domain.

5.213. Using a .gov.uk domain for your council website and email accounts gives Parish Councils the following advantages:

5.214. Increased professionalism and trust from members of your community, partners and suppliers because your email address and website domains are a trusted government brand.

5.215. Separation of your personal life from your professional life, ensuring members of your community, partners and suppliers understand what capacity you are emailing them in - whether a Councillor or Clerk.

5.216. Increased control for the Responsible Officer over email accounts and documentation when managing new joiners, leavers, sudden absences or Freedom of Information and Subject Access Requests.

5.217. Peace of mind that your .gov.uk Parish Council domain will never be sold to someone else if it is not renewed on time, which can happen with .co.uk, .org.uk and other commercial domains.

5.218. Additional security measures, as all .gov.uk domains are checked for any cyber vulnerabilities by the Cabinet Office and reported to the Responsible Owner, or your technical point of contact, so they can be fixed.

5.219. You can read more about the benefits of getting a .gov.uk domain on the GOV.UK website.