



Internet and Digital Communications Policy

1.0 Policy Statement

Gloucestershire County Council (the council) accepts that digital communications and access to the internet are essential to enabling the council to meet its aims and objectives. It is a requirement that your use of the council's digital communications and internet is legal and appropriate for delivering the council's responsibilities and does not create unnecessary risk. The council will ensure that users have access to its digital communication and internet tools. **It is a requirement that all users read and accept this policy.**

The council's digital communication and internet tools are made available to users for council business purposes. Limited personal use is permitted, provided that such use is strictly in accordance with this policy which can be found at [Information Management and Security Policies](#).

Digital communication tools include, but are not limited to, email, instant messaging apps, video conferencing/calling, webinars, social media, text messaging and telephony.

2.0 Risk Management

The council recognises that there are risks associated with use of digital communication and internet tools.

This policy aims to ensure appropriate access to, and use of, the Council's digital communication and internet tools, which will help to mitigate the following risks:

- Harm to individuals
- Damage to the Council's reputation
- Potential legal action and/or fines against the Council or individual(s)
- Inappropriate use of council resources
- Viruses and other malicious software
- Service disruption

3.0 Scope

This policy applies to anyone who uses the council's digital communication and internet tools.

All users must comply with this policy at all times when using the council's digital communication and internet tools, whether accessed locally or remotely. Breach of this policy may be dealt with under the council's [Disciplinary and Dismissals Procedure](#) and in serious cases, may be treated as gross misconduct leading to summary dismissal.

4.0 Responsibilities

The Assistant Director: Digital & ICT has overall responsibility for the effective operation of this policy. Responsibility for monitoring and reviewing this policy and making any recommendations for change to minimise risks lies with the Senior Information Risk Owner.

If you do not understand the implications of this policy or how it may apply to you, you should seek support by raising a request via [Service Now](#).

All managers have a specific responsibility to operate within the boundaries of this policy, ensure that all users understand the standards of behaviour expected of them, and to act when behaviour falls below these requirements.

5.0 User Responsibility

Use of digital communication tools and the internet must be consistent with the council's [Code of Conduct for Employees](#). All users are responsible for using these tools appropriately and in accordance with the statements in this policy.

It is the user's responsibility to:

- Ensure they read, understand, and agree to this policy.
- Use council digital communication and internet tools in accordance with the terms of this policy.
- Use digital communications and the internet responsibly and in a way that will not harm the council's reputation.
- Recognise that council digital communication and internet tools are provided for business use and must be protected from unreasonable and excessive personal use.
- Report any misuse of council digital communication tools and/or the internet. Follow the [Information security incident or concern – what should you do?](#) link for more information.

6.0 Related policies

- [Code of Conduct for Employees](#)
- [ICT Equipment Policy](#)
- [Information Protection and Handling Standards](#)
- [Information/IT Access Policy](#)
- [Data Protection Policy](#)
- [Software Management Policy](#)
- [Social Media Policy](#)
- [Password Policy](#)
- [Generative Artificial Intelligence \(Gen AI\) Usage Policy](#)

The above policies are available on Staffnet and the [Information Management and Security Policies](#) pages.

7.0 Things You Must Do

When using council digital communication and internet tools, you **must**:

a. Security controls and use of your account details:

- ✓ Ensure that you are complying with the council's Password Policy.
- ✓ Keep personal use to a minimum.
- ✓ Assess the reliability of any information communicated (e.g., that it is from a reliable source, accurate, complete, and current).
- ✓ Raise an incident in [ServiceNow](#) within 24 hours following any unusual occurrence (e.g., error messages or pop-ups).
- ✓ Report any misuse of the Council's ICT equipment by following the council's security breach reporting procedure.

b. Content:

- ✓ Take care to ensure that communications (messages) are sent only to those who should receive them. Re-read messages before sending, check for correct addressing (particularly where they include [personal or special category information](#)) and clarity, and ensure that the content will not embarrass or subject the council to legal proceedings or a fine.
- ✓ Take care to ensure that any calls you make or receive cannot be overheard, particularly when you're on the move.
- ✓ Be fully aware of your environment at all times and avoid making calls that refer to [personal or special category information](#) in public places, or when using loudspeaker or hands-free devices.
- ✓ Try to ensure that the recipient of your call takes these same considerations into account.

- ✓ Use the corporate encryption tool to secure your communications (messages) when they include [personal or special category information](#) and are being sent outside the council's secure network. Email addresses that do not require encryption can be found on StaffNet page [Email Security](#).
- ✓ Put arrangements in place to ensure that incoming messages are dealt with during periods of planned absence.
- ✓ Manage the content of digital communication accounts and retain messages which constitute an official record in accordance with the council's [Records retention and disposal schedule](#)
- ✓ Work with your manager to ensure that the business content of your account is available to those who need it before you change role or leave the council.
- ✓ Exercise caution when opening emails and messages from an unknown external source or where, for any reason, they appear suspicious.
- ✓ Inform your line manager if you feel you have been harassed or bullied, or you are offended by material received via digital communications or the internet. Information and advice on the council's Whistleblowing policy and procedure can be found on the [Speak up if it's not right](#) Staffnet pages.
- ✓ Comply with legal protections to data, images, and video provided by copyright and licenses.

8.0 Things You Must Not Do

In using the council's digital communication and internet tools, you must **NOT**:

a. Security controls and use of your account details:

- ✗ Attempt to disable, defeat, or circumvent any council security mechanism.
- ✗ Send messages from another user's account or under an assumed name unless specifically authorised.
- ✗ Respond to messages requesting personal information such as credit card details, usernames or passwords or containing links to internet sites where such information is requested.
- ✗ Transmit any message or file attachments you know or suspect to be infected with a virus.
- ✗ Subscribe to mailing lists for personal purposes using your council credentials, such as your email address, except if required when using the Gloucestershire Portal [GCC Staff Discounts](#).

b. Personal, special category and sensitive information:

- ✗ Process personal, special category or sensitive information using non-contracted tools, unless otherwise authorised.
- ✗ Send personal, special category or sensitive information by non-secure means, unless otherwise authorised, for example where a service user is

aware of the risks and has requested communication by a non-secure method.

- ✘ Forward [personal, special category or sensitive information](#) to an external location (including your personal home email address) or to another person who may not be authorised to see the information.
- ✘ Process **any** council information on a non-GCC device unless using an approved GCC system via BYOD.

c. Access:

- ✘ Access emails intended for others that are clearly marked 'personal' or addressee only (for example when providing cover for periods of absence).
- ✘ Allow other authorised users/third parties access to information and systems they are not entitled to view e.g., when viewing webinars, using screen-sharing capabilities (plus remote control of your device).
- ✘ Allow third parties, contractors, or suppliers, to remotely access/take over your device (a supplier or contractor can instigate this by asking you to accept a connection or click on a link on their website). For advice, raise a request in [ServiceNow](#).

d. Content:

- ✘ Create, download, upload, display or knowingly access sites that contain, or might be deemed to be:
 - Pornographic
 - Illegal
 - Obscene or offensive (racially, sexually, religious, disability or otherwise discriminatory, or of an extreme political nature)
 - Subversive or violent.
- ✘ Send messages or create or send content that violate the privacy of, or unfairly criticise others or that may damage the council's reputation, unreasonably waste staff resources, or disrupt the work of others.
- ✘ Send messages containing statements which are likely to create liability (whether criminal or civil, whether for you or the Council).
- ✘ Send commercial or advertising material, chain letters, or junk mail (otherwise known as spam) of any kind.
- ✘ Click on links or attachments within emails or messages from unknown or suspicious external sources.

e. Subscriptions and contract terms:

- ✘ Subscribe to, enter, or use online gaming or betting sites.
- ✘ Subscribe to or enter 'money making' sites or enter or use 'money making' programs.

- ✘ Agree to terms, contractual commitments or make representations unless appropriate authority has been obtained.

f. Private use:

- ✘ Use the council's digital communication tools and/or the internet to order/purchase goods and services for personal use except via the Gloucestershire portal at GCC Staff Discounts, purchases via the portal must not be delivered to Council premises;
- ✘ Personally subscribe to or use instant messaging, or social networking sites such as Facebook or Twitter with your council credentials. This excludes authorised use required to deliver council services (e.g., online digital support and social media engagement)
- ✘ Undertake any private buying, selling or monetary transactions e.g., online trading using sites such as eBay, or personal bank account transactions using council tools.
- ✘ Use council tools to run a private business or charity.
- ✘ Use the councils internet to access gaming or streaming services or access any other website that could trigger or pose as a security risk.

Use of the council's digital communication tools and/or the internet for any of the above purposes (this list is not exhaustive) will amount to gross misconduct. Any such action will be treated very seriously and is likely to result in summary dismissal.

9.0 Personal Use of the Council's digital communication tools and/or the internet

At the discretion of the users' line manager, and provided it does not interfere with their work, the council permits personal use of its digital communication tools and/or the internet in the users' own time, provided that any use is in accordance with this policy and subject to the conditions set out below. Personal use is a privilege and not a right. It must be neither abused nor overused and the council reserves the right to withdraw its permission at any time.

The following conditions must be met for personal use to continue:

- Use must be minimal and take place outside of normal working hours (i.e., during lunch hours, before or after recorded working hours).
- Use must not interfere with business or office commitments.
- Use must comply with the council's information security policies which can be found at [Information Management and Security Policies](#).

Personal messages should be identified by users by inserting the word '*personal*' in the subject heading. Every effort will be made to protect the confidentiality of

'personal' messages during cover for periods of absence; however, you must be aware that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

Technologies such as cookies, tags or web beacons may be employed when visiting websites. If the website is of a kind described in the [content](#) section above, such a marker could be a source of embarrassment to the council and may in-turn result in disciplinary action and in certain circumstances, amount to a criminal offence.

If users are in any doubt about how they may make personal use of the council's tools they should consult their line manager.

10.0 Privacy information for GCC Mobile Wi-Fi

Gloucestershire County Council is the data controller for personal data collected as part of providing the Mobile Wi-Fi service. The personal data collected is.

- The device name,
- The MAC address of the device connecting to the Wi-Fi, and
- The IP address of the device connecting to the Wi-Fi.

This data is collected and used in order to.

- monitor use of the Wi-Fi facility, including web sites visited. This is part of the council's responsibility as a provider of an Internet service.
- help the council to understand how our Wi-Fi is used by providing analytical data. For example, it can tell us how many people are connected and for how long. This information is very important to us as it enables us to plan how we can improve the service.

Personal data is retained for a maximum of 14 months, although anonymised data may be retained for longer. All personal data will be held within the EEA.

For further information, and how to use your data protection rights, please read the council's [Privacy Notice](#).

11.0 Monitoring

Users should be aware that all use of the council's systems can be monitored, and where breaches of this policy are found, action may be taken under the council's [Disciplinary and Dismissals Procedure](#).

While all activity may be recorded; monitoring is only carried out to the extent permitted or as required by law, and as necessary and justifiable for the council's business purposes. The specific content of any correspondence will not be monitored unless there is suspicion of improper use. Managers should liaise with HR in the first instance to discuss an appropriate course of action.

Any council device used, and any data processed by users remains the property of the council and may be accessed at any time by the council to ensure compliance with its statutory, regulatory, and internal policy requirements.

To monitor whether use of the tools is in accordance with this policy, to assist in management investigations, to comply with any legal obligation, for capacity management and for security reasons the council reserves the right to:

- restrict or prevent access to certain tools or introduce routine monitoring if personal use is considered to be excessive.
- not to transmit any message and/or to block access to attachments for the purpose of efficient and effective use of the system and/or compliance with this policy.
- monitor use of digital communication tools for the following purposes (this list is not exhaustive):
 - To determine whether use of the internet is in accordance with this policy;
 - To assist in management and/or security investigations;
 - To comply with legal obligations;
 - For capacity management;

Web traffic filtering software is in place to block or limit access to unauthorised online communication tools from the council's data network. Blocked sites may be made available to individual internet users or groups of internet users where there are sound business reasons for doing so and following a risk assessment and approval by the appropriate line manager. To apply for access to a blocked site log a request in [ServiceNow](#).

A fully automated process is in place for checking incoming emails for viruses and spam/junk email. Most emails that are regarded as spam/junk email will be automatically quarantined. If you believe you have received an email which is spam/phishing please report it using the outlook report function.

If a manager or investigating officer believes that digital communication tools and/or the internet have been misused, spot checks and/or reports may be produced to support investigations. To obtain activity reports log a request in [ServiceNow](#).

12.0 Policy Compliance

Anyone with access to the council's digital communications tools has a responsibility to comply with this policy which can be found at [Information Management and Security Policies](#), and to promptly report any suspected or observed security breach; further details are provided on the Information security incident or concern - site.

Where there is a suspected breach of the law, or any council policy (including but not limited to the council's Information Management and Security Policies) users should

have no expectation of privacy regarding their use of digital communication tools and/or the internet.

Where evidence of misuse is found to have taken place a more detailed investigation may be undertaken in accordance with the [Information Security Incident Response and Escalation Procedure](#), involving the examination and disclosure of monitoring records to those nominated to undertake the investigation and any witnesses or manager(s) involved in this procedure.

Security breaches by a council employee, that result from a deliberate or negligent disregard of any security policy requirements may, in the council's absolute discretion, result in disciplinary action being taken against that employee. In the event that breaches arise from the deliberate or negligent disregard of the council's security policy requirements by a user who is not a direct employee of the council, the council shall take such punitive action against that user and/or their employer as the council in its absolute discretion deems appropriate.

The council may, in its absolute discretion refer the matter of any breach of the council's information security policy requirements to the police for investigation and (if appropriate) the instigation of criminal proceedings if in the reasonable opinion of the council such breach has or is likely to lead to the commissioning of a criminal offence.

13.0 References

This policy and other related information security policies, standards and procedures can be found at [Information Management and Security Policies](#)

14.0 Document Control

14.1 Document information

Owner:	Sherrill Holder, Assistant Director Digital & ICT
Author:	Peter Moore, Information Management Service Team Manager
Reviewer:	
Board(s) consulted:	
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14.2 Version History

Version	Version date	Summary of Changes
2.0	October 2018	
2.1	March 2019	Review of section 8 – ‘Things you must not do’
2.2	January 2020	Inclusion of privacy information for the GCC Mobile Wi-Fi service
2.3	April 2020	Added guidance on awareness of environment when making phone calls
2.4	December 2020	Reviewed and updated hyperlinks
2.5	October 2021	Minor changes for accessibility purposes including change of policy owner and review of hyperlinks.
3.0	June 2022	Full policy review. Approved by Information Board, 13 July 2022.
3.1	December 2022	Accessibility review and updates to formatting. Broken links fixed and renamed where appropriate.
3.2	March 2024	Broken links fixed
3.3	February 2026	Broken links fixed, timescale specified for reporting unusual occurrences

14.3 Review

This policy will be reviewed as it is deemed appropriate, but no less frequently than every 3 years.

14.4 Contact Us

Post: The Information Management Service
Gloucestershire County Council
Shire Hall
Westgate Street
Gloucester
GL1 2TG

Email: dpo@gloucestershire.gov.uk

Phone: 01452 324000