Mid Wharfedale Parish Council

Social Media Guidance

May 2025

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A Social Media Civility and Respect Guide and Policy Supplement produced by Breakthrough Communications, for and on behalf of the Civility and Respect Project.

MID WHARFEDALE PARISH COUNCIL

Civility & Respect

IN COLLABORATION WITH SLCC, NALC, OVW, COUNTY ASSOCIATIONS

BREAKTHROUGH COMMUNICATIONS

SPECIALISTS IN CONNECTING COUNCILS WITH THEIR COMMUNITIES

Social Media Advice for the council

Suggested first steps

It is important that your council takes a proactive approach to civility and respect issues.

Here are some ways you can get off on the right foot with social media.

Raise internal awareness

The first step your council should take is formally adopting the civility and respect pledge. Your council can do this by visiting either the NALC website or the SLCC website.

Regularly remind councillors and staff about civility and respect issues and the guidelines for respectful social media.

For example, once a quarter your council could send out a short email to all staff and councillors. This could be a wider, proactive message about civility and respect issues and include a link to the Supplement on your website.

You should also actively remind councillors and officers about the training that is available both in relation to social media and reinforcing positive behaviour

You could also direct councillors to the relevant section in this document.

The Council could also adopt some specific policies and procedures concerning social media. Please see the template Supplement at the end of this document.

Raise public awareness

Make the pledge wording available on your council's website, ideally in a prominent place. Try to place a link to this and other social media policies near any social media links if possible, as this will help raise public awareness.

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Include a link on your council's social media accounts. This could be a link in a pinned post, for example. Your council could also have a link in the 'description section' of any social media accounts, or as part of its 'bio' if relevant.

You could also place the Bullying and Harassment zero tolerance notice on your website parts of this document, as appropriate.

Share best practice and highlight bad practices

It is always important to highlight good practice with colleagues. It is equally important to remind people why good conduct on social media is important. Your council could consider sharing resources such as videos and articles.

Proactively encourage two-way civility and respect through the council's social media channels

When there is a positive news story relating to your council or area, try to encourage positive engagement. This can be on any aspect of the work of the council, from its day-to-day services, its people and teams, the projects it carries out, and so much more. It can also relate to awards and recognition.

For example, if the council does well in an 'In Bloom' competition, your council could take the following easy steps to proactively boost two-way civility and respect on its social media channels:

1. Take a picture or video of the beautiful flowers, or the team collecting the award
2. Create a positive post
3. Ask councillors and other members of staff to positively comment, react and share
4. Repeat the next time there is some good news

You could also promote events such as World Kindness Day. This event takes place worldwide every year on 13th November.

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General social media advice for councillors

What is social media?

Social media is applications or websites that encourage and enable users to network. Such applications and websites allow users to easily generate, post and share content.

Put simply - there are a huge amount of social media platforms and there are more every day. Some might use the following:

- Facebook
- Twitter
- Instagram
- YouTube
- WhatsApp

Tip: Different platforms will allow you to speak to different 'audiences' or parts of your community. Instagram is popular with younger people. Twitter is popular with organisations. Think carefully about who you want or need to speak to.

Why use social media as a councillor?

Social media is a simple, quick and effective way of communicating. It's also cheap and allows a user to reach whole communities at the click of a button.

More than that, social media is built for community engagement. Councils and councillors can have 2-way conversations rather than simply broadcasting information.

Tip: Some people aren't on social media at all. Not everyone on social media will be on the platform that you are using. Remember both of these things when seeking feedback or opinions from your community.

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New to social media as a councillor?

If you have never used social media as a councillor, start with small steps. Take advice, don't rush into things. Start off on one platform and master it before moving on to another.

Setting up a Facebook Page is a good place to start. It is easy to do and most people are familiar with it. Lots of people are still active Facebook users - despite it now being considered 'traditional' social media.

Once you have yourself set up, start with a simple 'Hello'. Try to post engaging content. Ask questions, take feedback and build a two-way conversation. Build a community by trying to grow the number of followers or subscribers you have.

Tip: Sharing content with local groups on social media is an easy way of growing the number of followers you have. But be careful not to share too much with groups and ensure the content is relevant to them.

How do I manage my social media security and safety?

It is really easy to share information about yourself. That is indeed the whole point of social media. So as a councillor you need to think carefully about what you put out there and how much of it.

Before you start posting it is worthwhile thinking about not only what is safe to post, but what you are comfortable with posting. As a general rule, don't share personal information, such as your personal phone number, date of birth, or home address.

Remember that you need to also consider the personal data of others around you. You might be comfortable living your life in the public glare, but you need to ask yourself: "Are my family, friends, neighbours and work colleagues?"

From a security point of view, think carefully before you post. Once something is on social media you lose nearly all control as to how it will be used.

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As with emails you will need to watch out for phishing scams, cons and malicious software.

Finally, there are trolls who post content that is designed to upset, elicit a response or to further their own goals.

A troll is often someone who posts just to get an emotional reaction or to manipulate others' perceptions. The posts can be offensive, off-topic, inflammatory, purposefully inaccurate or insincere. Trolls often do this for their own amusement or in aid of goals such as disrupting the democratic process.

It is important 'not to feed the trolls'. Stay focused on what's important and try not to respond to content that is purposefully offensive, off-topic, inflammatory, inaccurate or insincere

Tip: Every social media platform has a slightly different set of privacy options and controls. Do your research and set them correctly BEFORE you start to post content and not after.

What are my responsibilities as a councillor on social media?

Golden Rule - If you are unsure about posting something, stop and ask for advice first before doing anything else.

Social media almost always operates in the public domain. Once something is published it is often out there for everyone to see. Social media content can:

- Go 'viral' - meaning it can be seen by a large number of people
- Be altered or changed without your consent
- Be taken out of context
- Shared around the world

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Using social media as the elected (or co-opted) member of a council is very different from using it as someone who isn't a councillor. Councillors have additional responsibilities because of the position they are in.

Councillors are personally responsible for the social media content they create, publish and share. Being a councillor will not prevent someone else from pursuing legal action following the publication of an untrue statement. In such a situation you will likely be held personally liable.

Councillors should be mindful of the difference between fact and opinion. You also play a central role in preventing the spread of disinformation. Think twice before you press 'share' or 'retweet'!

On social media, councillors should also keep in mind their responsibility in relation to confidential information, copyright, data protection, the pre-election period and exempt reports.

Councillors are still subject to the Code of Conduct on social media. If you refer to your role as a councillor it is likely that you may be considered to be acting in an "official capacity".

When posting to social media you should remember:

- You are an elected representative of the council
- 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
- 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

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- You don’t have to respond or comment to everything on social media - sometimes it’s best not to

Tip: Think before you press ‘publish’! There is a simple test. If you would be reluctant to say something face-to-face to a group of strangers in the street, then you probably shouldn’t say it on social media.

Do I need to manage my social media profiles and pages?

You should consider having a separate social media page or profile for council use. This will help to avoid confusion, both for yourself and others. On Facebook, this can be done by setting up a Facebook Page.

Please keep in mind that even information posted to a private social media account can quickly find its way into the public domain. Regardless of the social media platform used, it can be useful to indicate the purpose of your profile or page. This will help to make clear that it is a public page or profile you are using in your capacity as a councillor.

It is your responsibility to manage whatever you set up on social media. It is likely over time that others will contribute and comment. There are some basic things you should consider, such as how you will handle abusive language or harassment.

Social media platforms provide administrators with lots of tools and settings to help with management and moderation. Make sure you know how they work and use them appropriately. This will save you time and stop problems from happening.

Civility and respect social media guide for councillors

When councillors use social media, the Code of Conduct may apply. Under the Localism Act 2011, the Code of Conduct will only likely apply when acting in the role of councillor and is unlikely to affect councillors using social media in a private capacity.

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Councillors who wish to use social media in their capacity as a councillor should consider having separate social media accounts. This will help to avoid confusion, both for yourself and others. For example, on Facebook, this can be done by setting up a public Facebook Page where you use the 'Councillor' label before your name.

Regardless of the platform councillors use, it can be useful to indicate what the purpose of your profile or page is. This will help to make clear that it is a public page or profile you are using in your capacity as a councillor.

It is the responsibility of councillors to manage their social media. Councillors should consider, for example, how you will handle the moderation of comments and messages.

The Council suggests that councillors consider the following guidance when using social media in their councillor role:

- Be as open, inclusive and professional as possible when using social media.
- Get and give support. Where you feel able, provide support to fellow councillors online, and reach out to colleagues and your council for support where needed.
- If you are unsure about posting something, stop and ask for advice from an appropriate source first, before doing anything else.
- Bear in mind that what you post can affect the reputation of the council
- The council is a corporate decision-making body. Councillors cannot independently make decisions for the council over social media.
- You should make clear you are expressing personal views and opinions, and not speaking on behalf of the council unless authorised by the council to do so.
- For some issues and communications, responses may need to come from the council's official social media, rather than individual councillors responding.
- Councillors should be mindful of the difference between fact and opinion.
- Elected members play a central role in preventing the spread of disinformation.
- Don't leave your social media to take care of itself. Social media doesn't stop - it keeps going all day every day.

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- Don’t dismiss or ignore advice and guidance, particularly legal advice.
- Don’t assume that a disclaimer or excuses will prevent someone from taking legal action against you.
- Make sure that your social media accounts are safe and protected with strong passwords and multiple-factor authentication where possible.
- Understand privacy settings. There is a range of settings to help you manage who can see or comment on your posts.
- Consider personal mental health and well-being. Taking a break from social media from time to time can be beneficial.

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Suggested social media rules of engagement for individual councillors

Clear rules of engagement can help a councillor or council to set out what their aims are, how they will behave and how they expect users on their account to behave.

These rules of engagement have been created specifically with issues of civility and respect in mind. However, they are wider reaching.

These suggested rules of engagement could be used on either a councillor's social media account or a council's account. They could be posted to social media in the account description, a pinned post/tweet or a link to a page on a website.

Welcome!

Hello and welcome to my/our social media page. I/we want to create a safe space for everyone in our community to engage on (insert social media platform). These rules of engagement have been created to set out what you can expect from me/us. They also set out what I/we expect of you if you wish to join in the discussion.

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.

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- 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.

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 social media user 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.

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Guide to tackling online abuse for both councillors and officers

A brief introduction

Social media offers many opportunities for councillors and councils to constructively engage with their communities. Most of the time this is a positive experience. Social media helps to build a profile, explain complex issues in plain English and to develop a two-way conversation.

Unfortunately, in a small number of cases councillors and councils can experience online abuse. Social media can become a place where individuals resort to abusive behaviour, such as aggressive language, threats, trolling and bullying.

Types of abusive behaviour to watch out for

Trolls

Unfortunately, online abuse is an issue on every social media platform. Sometimes it will be random or short-lived. On other occasions, it can be more sustained and led by users who are often described as ‘trolls’.

A troll is often someone who posts just to get an emotional reaction or to manipulate others perceptions. The posts can be offensive, off-topic, inflammatory, purposefully inaccurate or insincere. Trolls often do this for their own amusement or in aid of goals such as disrupting the democratic process.

All too often trolls post things without thinking, without obvious logic and without a good reason. It is therefore important to remember that trolls often do not believe what they themselves are posting.

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‘Why can’t they just…?!’

Many issues that councils deal with are complex. From inside the council, this is clear. From the outside, it can appear like ‘nothing is happening’. Sometimes it can be difficult to explain in plain English why a simple solution will not work.

Some people in the community will have their own ‘simple’ or ‘common sense’ solution to a problem. This can lead to people making the ‘Why can’t they just…?!’ social media posts.

Residents sometimes consider councillors and councils to be ignoring them when their simple solution is not considered or implemented. The problem is compounded by the fact that some ‘Why can’t they just…?!’ posts are picked up by the local media.

Problems can also emerge when people are pressed for detail on how the ‘simple solution’ would work. Providing information that shows a ‘simple solution’ will not work can cause some people to become aggressive, incoherent and defensive.

Legitimate challenge and scrutiny

Challenge and scrutiny are a key part of our democracy and the decision-making process. It can for example help us to see where a decision might be having an unintended or negative impact. This feedback is critical.

Challenge and scrutiny should be constructive. It should not lead to offensive language and abusive behaviour. There is an important line that should not be crossed between legitimate challenge and online abuse.

Councillors and councils should not seek to stifle debate or censure views. However, they should not be put in a position where they are subject to offensive language and abusive behaviour.

Politics

Politics is similar to challenge and scrutiny. It has an important role to play in debate and forms an important part of the democratic process.

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Councillors and councils should not seek to suppress other people's political views. However, the political debate does not give people online a licence to abuse elected officials. Once again there is a clear line between healthy debate and online abuse.

Smear campaigns

A smear campaign is a deliberate attempt to negatively impact a person's or organisation's standing or damage their reputation. Smears are usually done through the spread of false information and discrediting tactics. They can be ‘one-off’ comments. Unfortunately, some are sustained and organised.

Smear campaigns can be one of the hardest forms of online abuse to deal with. In some cases it might require legal advice to be taken or for the Police to get involved. Remember to keep a record of the abuse and report the issue to the social media platform and authorities as appropriate.

Bullying and harassment

Online bullying and harassment has unfortunately become more common in recent years. Whilst it often appears in the press in relation to teenagers and young people it is something that can affect anybody.

Online bullying and harassment is when someone bullies or harasses someone else online. It includes a wide range of behaviours such as threats, sexual remarks and hate speech. In some situations, it can form a sustained pattern of behaviour.

Use positive language and tone to shape engagement

Your digital ‘tone of voice’

Your tone of voice is as important on social media as it is in face-to-face conversation. On social media, with all its angry voices you can use your tone of voice to shape engagement. To create a more positive and constructive environment. Remain calm and positive to help defuse the situation and steer the conversation in a positive direction.

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Using language to shape the conversation

The language that councillors use on social media is critical for building on the tone of voice that we use. When you are being attacked it can be hard to avoid using aggressive language yourself.

Even when it seems to you like it's the only option - using aggressive language never improves the situation.

Councillors and officers should try to stick to positive and inclusive language. This helps to control the nature of the interaction and keep things as constructive as possible.

Social media language is often ‘chatty’ and it is important to make the language you use as accessible as possible. Avoid acronyms and ‘council speak’. It is common for councillors or officers to use acronyms for their own council or a committee (for example VFM rather than Value for Money Committee). Not many people in the community will understand what such acronyms mean.

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.

Finding common ground

Try to find some common ground that allows you to calm the debate and show those that are in the discussion that you share similar priorities or come from the same background as them.

Usually, councillors (and often officers) will live in the community they represent so that can be a great place to start disarming those who are being aggressive by making common cause with your community.

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Asking people ‘how’ rather than ‘why’

Asking people ‘how’ rather than ‘why’ is a good way of working through how things would work in practice. Talking about how this would play out rather than dwelling on why it is (or is not) a good idea helps to engage people constructively and can expose the complexity and flaws that make their simple-sounding suggestion difficult in reality. This forces them to reassess and prompts a more moderate attitude.

Techniques to handle online abuse

Engage with a variety of views

Building up your following on social media means that it is harder for a small number of angry voices to dominate. It also allows you as a councillor to hear from, and engage with, a wider variety of people from across your community.

It also ensures that more people will be able to see and share the arguments you are making in response to attacks. This builds further on your tone of voice and treating people with respect even if they are not affording you the same courtesy as a larger audience will see the way in which the debate is conducted.

Have a consistent narrative

Sharing a consistent story to fill gaps in people’s knowledge helps to dispel conspiracy theories and baseless rumours by presenting a clear and credible narrative.

Escalation of an issue

In some situations, you can escalate an issue. If there is a complaint about a council service it can be a legitimate course of action to ‘pass on’ the issue to a council officer. Depending on how the complaint was made you might need to consider data protection issues. Sometimes taking this course of action and being able to demonstrate that action is being taken can help to defuse the situation.

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The wider audience - who is looking?

In some situations, you might feel there is a need to reply. To get the truth out there or to set the record straight. It is important before replying that you consider the likelihood that you will succeed. It is important to ask yourself, who is the wider audience?

Making a balanced and reasoned argument has value when there is a wider audience watching the discussion. Most of those seeing the exchange will not actively engage. In this situation ‘winning’ means ensuring that those looking on are reassured and given accurate information.

Conversely, if you think no one is looking, you need to ask yourself the question, is it worth responding to?

If you respond you should avoid getting sucked into a lengthy debate over social media. Not only is this very time-consuming you are also very unlikely to get the last word in the debate.

Keep a record

When you receive online abuse you should make a record of it. This is important in case the matter develops further. Particularly if the police or other bodies become involved. It is also useful in demonstrating a pattern of behaviour.

Managing trolls

Trolls can be difficult to deal with. The best way to deal with a troll is ‘not to feed it’. By which we mean, don’t respond to a post which is designed to upset, elicit a response or to further a troll's own goals.

Your best response is to either:

- Ignore what they have posted, or
- If it’s on your own page or profile to delete or hide their comment. This will mean your other followers should not see it

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If that doesn't work, consider your next step. This could include blocking them or reporting them to the social media platform or in some cases the Police.

Deleting and moderating comments

Most social media platforms give you the ability to delete comments. If someone has made an abusive comment you might want to delete it. You should remember to take a 'screen grab' picture first.

Some social media will give you the ability to automatically moderate content. Some have a 'profanity filter'. Where this facility exists you should consider using it. It will save you time and reduce the impact of abusive comments and behaviour.

Blocking abusive social media users

On almost all social media platforms you can block individuals who are persistently abusive. If individuals are consistently aggressive it can be both sensible and reasonable to block them from further engaging with you.

It is important to remember that as a councillor or officer you do not have to accept abusive behaviour. You have as much right as anyone to be treated with dignity and respect. You can include "rules of engagement" on your profile to make it clear to others that you will not tolerate such behaviour.

Blocking those who are abusive is important for both you and also for other people who follow you who may feel intimidated by aggressive behaviour. They also have a right to express their views.

Reporting online abuse and legal matters

Reporting an issue to the social media platform

Most social media platforms have 'rules' or 'terms of use' that prohibit abusive behaviour. Each has different wording, but most forbid behaviours that are abusive, bullying, harassing or intimidating behaviour.

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If you feel someone has broken a social media platforms ‘rules’ you can report the user to the platform in question. It will then be up to the platform to take further action.

Reporting an issue to the Police

In certain circumstances, you might need to report a matter to the Police. Threats of violence, racist language, hate speech and pornographic material are the sort of things you might need to report. If you do report the matter you should follow the advice given to you by the Police and their requests for information.

Reporting a breach of the Code of Conduct

Should you receive online abuse from a councillor that might be a Code of Conduct issue. If you believe that there has been a breach of the Code of Conduct you should report it to the relevant monitoring officer.

Taking legal action

In some situations, you might feel that taking legal action is a legitimate course of action. In such a situation you should seek legal advice and carefully consider the risks as well as the likelihood of success. There is also often a financial cost involved with this approach.

Valuing your mental health and well-being - when is it time to get off social media?

If abuse is persistent and harming your mental health or severely damaging the reputation of the organisation it may well be time to leave social media. This can mean deleting accounts entirely or just taking a break from it for a while.

Some social media platforms allow users to temporarily ‘unpublish’ or ‘deactivate’ accounts. Some people find that trying a new platform can be useful. For instance, trying out Instagram instead of Facebook.

There are well-documented mental health benefits to coming off social media for either a fixed period of time or permanently.

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Please find below a template Social Media Policy Supplement (Civility & Respect). It is intended to outline a council's rules of engagement with external parties and members of the public when engaging via social media. The supplement is designed to supplement any existing council social media policy and should be edited and adapted for your council's specific needs and requirements. We recommend that you then publish the finalised policy supplement on your website.

Appendix 1: Template Social Media Policy Supplement - Civility and Respect

1. Engaging with the council on social media

1.2 The council encourages members of the public, local organisations and community groups, members of the press, local councillors and others in our wider community to follow and engage with the council through social media accounts.

1.3 We also encourage everyone in our community to share content from our corporate social media accounts with their own social media networks. This is especially important, for example, during emergency situations or where sharing timely information is essential.

1.4 Councillors may choose to engage with the community on their own 'councillor' social media accounts.

1.4 Individuals and organisations are responsible for the content that they choose to post to their social media accounts. This includes content created by others that individuals or organisations choose to repost, retweet or share.

2. Conduct on social media

2.1 The Council will treat everyone with courtesy and respect on its social media channels, and we therefore ask for the same in return from those who choose to engage with us.

2.2 We ask that council staff and councillors are treated courteously. Council staff and councillors should never be subjected to bullying or other forms of abuse or harassment.

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2.3 Council staff and councillors have the right to carry out their civic duties and work without fear of being attacked or abused. Any behaviour whether that be verbal, physical or in writing, which causes either councillors or council staff to feel uncomfortable, embarrassed, or threatened, is unacceptable.

3. Reporting a civility and respect-related issue

3.1 Council staff and others operating the Council's social media accounts will at all times be mindful of the council's relevant policies, procedures and processes, including the Code of Conduct.

3.2 The council will record and report abuse directed at the Council. The Council may, for example, create screenshots of comments and keep a record of abusive or threatening communications, and may take further action as appropriate.

3.3 Council staff and councillors should not have to put up with abusive or threatening behaviour. When subjected to such behaviour. The council reserves the right to enact its relevant social media policies and may, for example, delete content, block individuals or report individuals to social media platforms when appropriate to do so.

3.4 The Council may need to report issues of poor conduct directly to social media platforms. For instance, if someone has created a 'fake account' or if someone is persistently abusive to the Council.

3.5 The Council reserves the right to report criminal matters it notices on social media to the Police. For instance, hate crime/speech or threats of violence.

3.6 Please get in touch with the Council if you feel that a councillor, member of staff or a user of our social media Clerk of the Council by emailing clerk@midwharfedaleparish.gov.uk

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