GOVERNANCE & COMMUNICATIONS

WhatsApp Groups Policy

Halton SEND Parent Carers Forum (Halton SEND PCF)

Approved | Version 1.0 | 4 November 2026

This policy sets out how forum-related WhatsApp groups are created, used, moderated and closed. It applies to administrators, steering group members, volunteers and other people invited to an official forum group.

1. Policy statement

Halton SEND PCF uses WhatsApp where it offers a practical way to share updates, coordinate forum work and support appropriate peer communication. Participation must be voluntary, respectful and consistent with the forum's data protection, safeguarding and conduct arrangements. WhatsApp is not a substitute for formal decision-making records, urgent support or confidential casework.

2. Purpose and group membership

- Every group must have a clearly described purpose, intended members, named administrators and an agreed lifespan or review point.
- Groups may support steering group coordination, a defined project, event planning or information sharing with parent carers. Discussion must remain relevant to the stated purpose.
- Membership is by invitation. Administrators may decline or remove membership where eligibility ends or these rules are breached.
- Where only one-way announcements are needed, the forum should consider an alternative format that reduces unnecessary disclosure of telephone numbers and profiles.

3. Group administrators

At least one named forum representative must administer each official group; two administrators are preferable for continuity. Administrators will:

- Explain the purpose, membership, behaviour rules and visibility of names, telephone numbers and profile information before adding anyone.
- Ensure each person actively agrees to join and record that agreement, including the date and any subsequent withdrawal.
- Set group permissions so only administrators can add new members; use a description or pinned message to display the rules.
- Review membership regularly, promptly remove former members and take proportionate action on misconduct or disclosures.

- Keep an appropriate membership and incident record outside WhatsApp, using the forum's approved storage arrangements.
- Consider and document a data protection risk assessment or DPIA when the intended use may create higher privacy risks.

4. Joining, consent and leaving

Joining is optional. Before joining, members must understand that other participants can normally see their telephone number, profile name and any profile details allowed by their privacy settings, and may retain copies of messages. Participants may leave whenever they wish or ask an administrator to remove them. Leaving a group does not delete information that other members already received or saved.

The forum will identify and document an appropriate lawful basis for any personal-data processing it controls. Consent to participate in a group does not, by itself, resolve every UK GDPR obligation.

5. Group conduct and communication

Administrators should post these rules when a group opens and when a new member joins. All participants are expected to:

- Be courteous, inclusive and constructive; disagreement is acceptable, personal attacks are not.
- Keep messages relevant to forum business or to the purpose agreed for that specific group.
- Avoid repeated off-topic posts, advertising, chain messages or excessive forwarding.
- Never post abusive, discriminatory, harassing, threatening or offensive content.
- Do not identify children, families, professionals or other third parties or share their personal or sensitive information without an appropriate basis and permission.
- Avoid graphic accounts of trauma or abuse in group messages; seek an appropriate private or safeguarding route instead.
- Do not screenshot, forward or publish group discussions outside the group without permission and a valid reason.
- Ask before sending a direct message to another participant; private conversations are not overseen by the forum.
- Respect different communication needs, reasonable boundaries and the fact that administrators may not reply immediately.
- Raise concerns through the complaints route rather than arguing about individuals in the group.

6. Safety and urgent support

Official WhatsApp groups are not monitored continuously and must not be used to request urgent safeguarding, health or mental health assistance. If someone is at immediate risk, call 999. For urgent non-emergency NHS advice in England, use NHS 111; for emotional crisis support, text SHOUT to 85258. Any safeguarding concern received by an administrator should be passed through the forum's safeguarding arrangements without unnecessary group discussion.

7. Confidentiality and data protection

WhatsApp offers end-to-end encryption for message content, but this does not prevent recipients taking screenshots, forwarding messages or accessing messages on an unsecured device. Members should use a device lock, check their profile privacy settings and avoid shared or unattended devices.

Only information necessary for the group's purpose should be shared. Do not use the group to discuss individual children's circumstances, SEND assessments, medical information, addresses or identifiable complaints. Move sensitive matters to an appropriate approved channel.

WhatsApp content and related records may need to be considered when responding to a data protection request, complaint or legal obligation. Any request for personal data should be directed to the forum contact address rather than answered informally in the group. The forum's wider data protection and retention policies also apply.

8. Complaints, moderation and breaches

A participant who is concerned about content should avoid escalating a disagreement within the group and instead contact a group administrator or email info@haltonsendpcf.org.uk. Where an administrator is the subject of a complaint, the matter should be referred to another forum lead.

The forum will consider the circumstances, preserve relevant evidence securely when necessary, and take proportionate steps. These may include reminding members of the rules, speaking privately to those involved, restricting posting, removing a member or escalating a serious concern through safeguarding, complaints or data protection procedures. Decisions should be recorded appropriately and handled fairly.

9. Reviewing and closing groups

The administrator should review each group periodically and at the conclusion of a project or activity. When a group is no longer needed, members should be notified, relevant official information transferred to approved forum records where necessary, and the group closed. Members should be reminded that deleting or leaving a group does not erase copies already held by others.

10. Mobile data and accessibility

WhatsApp may use mobile data, especially for images and videos. Members can choose Wi-Fi and adjust media download settings. Important information should be made available in an alternative accessible format when needed, so parent carers are not excluded because they do not use WhatsApp.

11. Document control

Policy owner	Halton SEND Parent Carers Forum
Status	Approved
Version	1.0
Prepared	4 November 2026
Approval date	4 November 2026
Next review	4 November 2027
Related policies	Data Protection, Safeguarding, Complaints and Code of Conduct (insert current approved links when publishing)
Signed by / Authorised by	Clare Collins, Chairperson
Forum address	Office 2, 2 Linacre Lane, Widnes, Cheshire, WA8 9DN