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**Agenda Item:** Witney Town Council Facebook – META Terms of Service & Statement

**Meeting Date:** Monday, 17 February 2025

**Contact Officer:** Communications & Community Engagement Officer

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### Background

At the meeting of the Stronger Communities Committee held on 27 January 2025 it was resolved 'that, a report be prepared for the Council Meeting on 17 February by Officers on Meta Terms of Service & proposed LGBTQ+ Statement.'

This was in response to changes to the company's new terms which included sections on defining hateful conduct on its social media platforms.

### Current Situation

#### META Terms of Service

The Communications and Community Engagement officer has downloaded, reviewed and highlighted relevant paragraphs and sentences in the Hateful Conduct section of the Community Standards which form part of the new Meta Terms of Service document effective as of 1<sup>st</sup> January 2025.

These are the Terms of Service that appear on Facebook, but the Community Standards and Hateful Conduct section also appears in the policies for other Meta platforms such as Messenger, Instagram and Threads.

It has changed in a number of ways since the Feb 24 version. It states that:

***"We define hateful conduct as direct attacks against people – rather than concepts or institutions – on the basis of what we call protected characteristics (PCs): race, ethnicity, national origin, disability, religious affiliation, caste, sexual orientation, sex, gender identity and serious disease. Additionally, we consider age a protected characteristic when referenced along with another protected characteristic. We also protect refugees, migrants, immigrants and asylum seekers from the most severe attacks (Tier 1 below), though we do allow commentary on and criticism of immigration policies."***

But it now makes allowances for this kind of speech in the following ways:

***"People sometimes use sex- or gender-exclusive language when discussing access to spaces often limited by sex or gender, such as access to bathrooms, specific schools, specific military, law enforcement or teaching roles, and health or support groups. Other times, they***

***call for exclusion or use insulting language in the context of discussing political or religious topics, such as when discussing transgender rights, immigration or homosexuality. Finally, sometimes people curse at a gender in the context of a romantic break-up. Our policies are designed to allow room for these types of speech.”***

The TOS differentiates between Tier 1 and Tier 2 types of comments and references that should not be posted with Tier 2 being deemed less severe than Tier 1.

Tier 2 also contains various justifications for content such as calling for exclusion or alleging mental health or abnormality based on religious beliefs or sexual orientation and gender. Examples are highlighted in Appendix A.

In contrast the Town Council Facebook account (which has 5.5k followers) has an ‘About Us’ paragraph which states the following:

“Facebook is a public space, and we want everyone to be part of the conversation. All comments are automatically hidden until moderated to prevent us from displaying any containing inappropriate language, hate speech, offensive images and phishing links. These will be deleted. Please note comments are only moderated during office hours. Please bear this in mind when posting comments, you want us to share.

We not only have a diverse range of partners that both work directly with us, and follow us on social media, but we also have a very diverse and inclusive body of staff and councillors. We have policies in place that help us to promote equity and inclusion and we would not want any of them to be upset or offended by comments that we allowed to be posted on our pages.

Just last year, the Council reviewed its policy for removing comments containing hate speech and trialled closing comments off entirely for some posts.

This has worked well. With these changes to Meta’s TOS, Councillors might wish to refresh the message the Council is giving. With in excess of 6k followers on Facebook and Instagram combined and a good deal of engagement through these, it isn’t practical to close these off completely.

It is suggested instead that the Council strengthens its message of unity and support by adding the following sentences to the About section or to the Bio, though the Bio is limited to an additional 154 characters and this statement would exceed that.

***“Witney Town Council stands firmly against discrimination, and we fully support the LGBTQ+ Community.***

***Hate has no place here, and we are committed to fostering an inclusive and respectful environment for all.”***

## **Impact Assessments**

The Town Council has a duty to consider the effects of its decisions, functions and activities on equality, biodiversity, and crime & disorder. Consideration should also be given to effects on the environment, given the Council’s Climate Emergency declaration in 2019.

- a) Equality – As a Council and organisation, the TOS do not match the Council’s inclusive culture, nor tie in with UK equality legislation. By adding a statement in goes some way to show solidarity with all parts of the community and that it will continue to uphold their rights.
- b) Biodiversity – no direct implication.
- c) Crime & Disorder – no direct implication.
- d) Environment & Climate Emergency – no direct implication.

## **Risk**

In decision making Councillors should give consideration to any risks to the Council and any action it can take to limit or negate its liability.

The terms of service are provided internationally so do cover use of META platforms in this country however, equalities in the UK are regulated by the Equality Act 2010 along with various other legislation which afford all members of the community protection from discrimination.

## **Social Value**

Social value is the positive change the Council creates in the local community within which it operates.

By providing a statement on Facebook as presented above, it would show the Council’s support to any member of the community who consider themselves to be affected by the updated META terms of service.

## **Financial implications**

- There are no cost implications.

## **Recommendations**

Members are invited to note the report and,

1. Consider whether to strengthen its message about hate speech on Facebook and Instagram.