Using WhatsApp for Member Communication: Guidance for AEP Local Reps

Introduction

WhatsApp is the most widely used messaging app in the UK, with over 30 million users. Many of our members already use it daily, making it a quick and familiar way to connect.

While it's best known for instant messaging, WhatsApp also allows:

- Audio and video calls
- Voice messages
- Sharing photos, documents, and links
- Group or community discussions with small or large numbers of people

Because it's mobile-based and linked to a phone number, messages are usually seen and responded to much more quickly than emails — around 90% are read within minutes. This makes it a potentially powerful tool for local AEP organisation, campaigning, and mutual support.

However, there are important privacy, safeguarding, and data protection considerations for local reps. This guidance will help you decide whether WhatsApp is right for your purpose, and how to use it safely and effectively.

Choosing the Right Format

WhatsApp offers three main ways to connect with AEP members:

1. WhatsApp Group
A shared space where all members can see and respond to each other's messages. Best for ongoing discussion within a defined group (e.g., your local area members).

2. WhatsApp Community
Brings several related groups under one umbrella. Admins can send announcements to all groups at once, while members can still talk in their own group. Useful for coordinating across several schools, local authorities, or working groups.

3. WhatsApp Broadcast List
Sends a message to many contacts individually. Members receive your message as if it were sent to them alone, and their replies come only to you. Best for updates and announcements without group discussion.

Deciding Which Format to Use
Ask yourself the following questions:

1. Is this for discussion (peer-to-peer) or announcements (one-to-many)?
2. How many members will be included?
3. How open should the group be? (Anyone with a link, or invite-only?)
4. How will you keep member contact details safe?

Checklist: Before You Set Up a Group or List

✓ **Be clear about the purpose** – Write it in the group description so everyone understands the aim.
✓ **Set positive ground rules** – Include respectful conduct expectations, no personal attacks, and a reminder that the AEP Code of Conduct applies.
✓ **Think about data protection** – Adding someone to a WhatsApp group reveals their phone number to all members. Always gain informed consent first.
✓ **Assign moderators** – At least one other rep or trusted member who can help manage posts, welcome new members, and remove inappropriate content if needed.
✓ **Consider safeguarding** – Avoid sharing sensitive personal details in the group. For casework or confidential matters, use secure one-to-one channels instead.

Creating a Positive Culture on WhatsApp

✓ Welcome new members and encourage introductions.
✓ Keep posts clear, relevant, and purposeful — avoid overwhelming members with too many messages.
✓ Encourage members to share useful resources, ideas, and updates from their workplaces.
✓ Use polls to gather views quickly.
✓ Move from online to offline action where possible — e.g., workplace meetings or coordinated activities — and report back on outcomes

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Risks - and How to Manage Them

Privacy: Only add members who have given permission. Explain that their number will be visible to others in the group.
Inappropriate content: Have clear guidelines and remove offensive material immediately.
Data breaches: Remember that union-related WhatsApp use counts as handling sensitive personal data. Keep a record of who has access and what the group is for.
External access: Assume that anything posted in an open group could be shared outside.

Communication Style for AEP WhatsApp Groups & Broadcasts

When communicating with members via WhatsApp, keep messages clear, relevant, and engaging while respecting the professional context of the AEP.

Content Checklist

- ✓ **Keep it concise** – Focus on the key point or question. If you have more detail, provide a short summary with a link or attachment for those who want to read further.
- ✓ **Encourage conversation** – Use open questions or prompts rather than long explanations.
- ✓ **Avoid unnecessary jargon** – Use plain language so that all members feel included and can respond easily.
- ✓ **Be personal** – Share a little about why an issue matters to you as a rep. Real experience can spark stronger engagement.
- ✓ **Be timely** – WhatsApp messages are usually read quickly. Share updates when they are relevant and time sensitive.
- ✓ **Include actions** – Suggest clear next steps (e.g. "Complete this survey by Friday" or "Join our lunchtime meeting today").

Tone

- **Human and approachable** – Messages should feel like they are from a colleague, not a press release.
- **Positive and encouraging** – Show appreciation for member contributions and efforts.
- **Clear and purposeful** – State what you need members to do and why it matters.
- **Direct (when needed)** – For example: "We need your input to strengthen our case at the meeting."

Format

- **Put the call to action first** – Make the main purpose of the message easy to see.
- **Use simple formatting** – Bold key points for emphasis.
- **Add visuals when helpful** – Images, short videos, or voice notes can make updates more engaging and personal.
- **Avoid message overload** – Keep to one or two main points per message.

WhatsApp Message Writing Guide for Local Reps

Find some examples of messages below:

1. **Reminders & Events**

Template text:

Reminder: Our [meeting/event] is on [date] at [time] in [location/online link].
We'll be discussing [main topic/issue] and your input will help us [goal].
Please try to join if you can. Here's the link/joining details: [link]

Tip: Keep it short and make it clear why their presence matters.

2. Updates

Template text:

Update: Following our [meeting/negotiation/campaign], here's what's happened:

[Key outcome 1]

[Key outcome 2]
Next steps: [action needed from members].
Thank you for your continued support.

Tip: Bullet points make updates easier to read on mobile.

3.Calls to Action

Template text:

We need your input on [topic/issue].
Please complete this short survey before [deadline]: [link]
Your feedback will help us [purpose/impact].

Tip: Put the action and link at the start so members see it quickly.

4. Encouraging Engagement

Template text:

We'd like to hear from you!
What's one change you'd like to see around [topic]?
Reply here or message me directly — your views will help shape our next steps.

Tip: Use open questions that make it easy for people to reply.

5. Appreciation Messages

Template text:

A big thank you to everyone who [action taken, e.g., attended the meeting, completed the survey, supported the campaign].
Your support makes a difference — and together we're making progress.

Tip: Recognition boosts morale and encourages ongoing participation.

For further information please, refer to the AEP Code of Conduct, the AEP GDPR Document and the AEP Data Protection Policy.

If you have any questions, you can contact the AEP's Data Protection Officer (Hardev Sohal).