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Social Media, Digital and Electronic Communication Policy

1. Purpose and Scope

The aim of this policy is to set out a Code of Practice to provide guidance to Moulton Parish Councillors, parish council staff and others who interact with the parish council using all forms of electronic communication.

The use of digital platforms, social media and electronic communication enables the parish council to interact in a way that improves communication both within the council and between the council and the people, businesses, and agencies it works with and serves.

The council has a website, social media accounts, and uses email to communicate. The council will always try to use the most effective channel for its communications. Over time the council may add to the channels of communication that it uses as it seeks to improve and expand the services it delivers. When these changes occur, this policy will be updated to reflect the new arrangements.

In the main, Parish Councillors and parish council staff have the same legal duties online as anyone else, but failure to comply with the law may have more serious consequences.

This policy covers all forms of social media and social networking sites which include (but are not limited to):

- Facebook, LinkedIn and other social networking sites.
- X (formally Twitter) and other micro blogging sites.
- YouTube and other video clip and podcast sites.
- Blogs and discussion forums.

Social media does not replace existing forms of communication. The current Code of Conduct applies to social media activity in the same way it does to other written or verbal communication. Individual Councillors and council staff are responsible for what they post in a parish council capacity. Social media may be used to:

- Distribute parish council agendas, post minutes and dates of meetings.
- Advertise parish council events and activities.
- Announce new information from the parish council.
- Advertise parish council vacancies.
- Re-tweet or share information from partner agencies such as principal authorities, police, library, health etc.
- Post or share information from other parish council related community groups such as schools, sports clubs, community groups and charities.
- Refer resident queries to the Executive Officer.

Email is regularly used for the management and administration of the business of Moulton Parish Council.

This Policy applies to:

- employees
- elected members (councillors)
- members of the public
- other people, companies, and organisations in contact with Moulton Parish Council.

Moulton Parish Council encourages the effective use of communication. Such use must always be lawful and must not compromise the Council's information and computer system.

All users must ensure that their use of communication will not adversely affect the Council or its business and not damage the Council's or its employees' reputations or otherwise violate any of the Council's policies.

2. Legal Responsibility & Policy Support

[Data Protection Act \(1998\) \(legislation.gov.uk\)](http://legislation.gov.uk)

[Malicious Communications Act 1988 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](http://legislation.gov.uk)

[Communications Act 2003 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](http://legislation.gov.uk)

[UK General Data Protection Regulation](#)

[The Local Government Audit and Accountability Act 2014](#)

[Obscene Publications Acts \(1959 & 1964\)](#)

This policy sits alongside relevant existing policies and procedures which need to be taken into consideration.

- Dignity at Work Policy
- Code of Conduct
- Disciplinary Procedure

3. General Guidance

Code of Practice

When using digital communications councillors and employees must be mindful of the information they post in a Parish Council capacity and keep the tone of any comments respectful and informative.

Councillors' views posted on social media in any capacity in advance of matters to be debated by the Parish Council at a Council or committee meeting may constitute Pre-disposition, Pre-determination or Bias and may require the individual to declare an interest at Council meetings.

Anyone with concerns regarding content placed on social media that denigrates Parish Councillors, Parish Council staff or residents should report them to the Executive Officer of the Parish Council. Online content should be accurate, objective, balanced and informative.

Communications from the Council will meet the following criteria:

- Be civil, tasteful and relevant.
- Not contain content that is knowingly unlawful, libellous, harassing, defamatory, abusive, threatening, harmful, obscene, profane, sexually oriented, or racially offensive.
- Not contain content knowingly copied from elsewhere, for which we do not own the copyright.

- Not contain any personal information.
- If it is an official council communication, it will be moderated by either the Executive Officer and/or the Chair of the Council
- Social media will not be used for the dissemination of any political advertising.

All Employees and Councillors are expected to abide by the Civility and Respect Policy, Code of Conduct, and the Data Protection Act in all their work on behalf of the council.

Employees and Councillors are expected to maintain an awareness of the confidentiality of information that they have access to and not to share confidential information with anyone. Failure to properly observe confidentiality may be seen as a breach of the Council's Code of Conduct and will be dealt with through its prescribed procedures.

4. Email

Admin staff employed by the council have their own council email addresses. An 'out of office' message should be used when appropriate.

Individual Councillors are at liberty to communicate directly with residents in relation to their own personal views, if appropriate, copy to the Executive Officer. NB any emails copied to the Executive Officer become official and will be subject to The Freedom of Information Act.

These procedures will ensure that a complete and proper record of all correspondence is kept.

Email users are advised to be aware of the following:

- All users should also be careful only to cc essential recipients on emails i.e., to avoid use of the 'Reply to All' option, if at all possible, but of course copying in all who need to know and ensuring that email trails have been removed.
- Do not forward personal information on to other people or groups outside of the Council; this includes names, addresses, email, IP addresses, cookie identifiers and SMS (texting).
- All users must use email responsibly. Moulton Parish Council reserves the right to take disciplinary or legal action against any person who fails to comply with this policy.
- All users must accept that communications via the council's email system is not secure or encrypted and they should take particular care when sending potentially sensitive or confidential information.
- All users must accept and agree that communications both to and from the council via email may be monitored for the purpose of ensuring appropriate use of this methodology. Users should also be aware that deleted emails may still be accessible from back-up procedures.
- Messages sent to groups of people must be relevant to all concerned.
- Messages sent by this method are not necessarily seen by the recipient within the current week. If the message is urgent, an alternative method of contact should be used.
- Moulton Parish Council cannot be held responsible for damages, losses, expenses,

demands and/or claims that may be suffered by a user of this facility.

- The Executive Officer may, from time to time, choose to operate a filtering system in order to monitor offensive or clearly inappropriate material and may quarantine any messages in that category.
- Users are informed that email messages have the same status in law as written correspondence (letters and faxes) and are subject to the same legal implications, e.g. may be required to be disclosed in court.
- Users are required to apply the same high standards to emails as those applied to written correspondence.
- Email inboxes must be checked regularly by to ascertain all correspondence within that system.
- Discovery of an email which claims to contain a virus, or a solution to correct a previously transmitted virus, must be reported immediately to the Executive Officer.
- All users must comply with the relevant license terms and conditions when copying and/or downloading material.
- Users accept that there is no guarantee of delivery of emails unless acceptance of delivery is requested of the recipient.
- All users must comply with the General Data Protection Regulations 2017 when placing personal data in messages or attachments.

5. Inappropriate Use

Recipients of abusive or threatening emails related to the business of the council must immediately inform the Executive Officer or Chairman.

Parish Councillors and employees must not:

- Use email to abuse or inflame others or to harass or threaten anyone. Responding to abuse, harassment or threatening will not be accepted as an excuse for inappropriate language and/or behaviour.
- Send emails containing obscene, abusive, or profane language.
- Send, access, display, download, copy or circulate information containing stories, jokes or anecdotes that contain:
 - Pornography or sexually orientated images.
 - Gambling.
 - Gaming (playing computer games).
 - Promotion of unlawful discrimination of any kind.
 - Promotion of racial or religious hatred.
 - Threats including the promotion of violence.
 - Fraudulent or illegal material promotion of illegal and/or unlawful acts.
 - Information considered to be offensive, inappropriate, or disrespectful to others.
- Distribute unauthorised and copyrighted material including music.
- Hide their identity using false names or pseudonyms.
- Present personal opinions as that of the parish council
- Present themselves in a way that might cause embarrassment to the parish council
- Post content that is contrary to the democratic decisions of the parish council
- Post controversial or potentially inflammatory remarks

- Engage in personal attacks, online fights, and hostile communications
- Use an individual's name unless given written permission to do so
- Publish the email address of any other parish councillor without their written permission.
- Publish photographs or videos of minors without parental permission.
- Post any information that infringes the copyright of others.
- Post any information that may be deemed libellous.
- Post online activity that constitutes bullying or harassment.
- Bring the parish council into disrepute, including through content posted in a personal capacity.
- Post offensive language relating to race, sexuality, disability, gender, age, religion or belief.
- Conduct any online activity that violates laws, regulations or that constitutes a criminal offence.
- Publish untrue statements about a person which is damaging to their reputation as doing so is libellous and can result in a court action and a fine for damages.
- Post copyrighted images or text on social media as it is an offence to do so. Breach of copyright will result in an award of damages against you.
- Publish personal data of individuals without permission as this is a breach of Data Protection legislation and is an offence.
- Publish obscene material as it is a criminal offence and is subject to a custodial sentence.

Moulton Parish Council will report to the police all known incidents in which users intentionally send or receive emails containing the following:

- Images of child pornography or child abuse (i.e. images where children are or appear to be under the age of 16 and are involved in sexual activities or posed to be sexually provocative).
- Adult material/pornography that breaches the Obscene Publications Acts (1959 & 1964).
- Criminally racist material.
- Users must not send, receive, or disseminate proprietary data or any confidential information belonging to Moulton Parish Council to or from a third party unless authorised.

6. Accidental Access to inappropriate Material

If inappropriate material is accessed accidentally, users must report this immediately to the Executive Officer or Chairman. It can then be considered as part of the council's monitoring procedure.

7. Social Media

In order to ensure that all discussions on the councils' social media are productive, respectful and consistent with the council's aims and objectives, we ask you to follow these guidelines:

- Be considerate and respectful of others. Vulgarity, threats, or abuse of language will not be tolerated.
- Differing opinions and discussion of diverse ideas are encouraged, but personal attacks on anyone, including the council members or staff, will not be permitted.
- Share freely and be generous with official council posts but be aware of copyright laws; be accurate and give credit where credit is due.
- Stay on topic.

Please do not include personal/private information in your social media posts to us.

Sending a message/post via social media accounts will not be considered as contacting the council for official purposes and we will not be obliged to monitor or respond to requests for information through these channels. Instead, please make direct contact with the council's Executive Officer and/or members of the council team by emailing. Please see our website for contact details: <https://www.moultonnorthants-pc.gov.uk/our-staff.html>

We retain the right to remove comments or content that includes:

- Obscene or racist content.
- Personal attacks, insults, or threatening language.
- Potentially libellous statements.
- Plagiarised material; any material in violation of any laws, including copyright.
- Private, personal information published without consent.
- Information or links unrelated to the content of the forum.
- Commercial promotions or spam.
- Alleges a breach of a council's policy or the law.

The council's response to any communication received not meeting the above criteria will be to either ignore, inform the sender of our policy, or send a brief response as appropriate. Any information posted on social media not in line with the above criteria will be removed as quickly as practically possible. Repeat offenders will be blocked from commenting. The council may post a statement that 'A post breaching the council's Social Media, Digital and Electronic Communication Policy has been removed'. If the post alleges a breach of a council's policy or the law the person who posted it will be asked to submit a formal complaint to the council or report the matter to the police as soon as possible to allow due process.

8. Parish Council Website.

Where necessary, we may direct those contacting us to our website to see the required information, or we may forward their question to one of our Councillors for consideration and response.

9. SMS/ What's App

Members and the Officers may use SMS as a convenient way to communicate at times. All are reminded that this policy also applies to such messages.

10. Video Conferencing e.g. Skype/Teams.

If this medium is used to communicate, please note that this policy also applies to the use of video conferencing. Internal communication and access to information within the council.

11. Electronic Recordings

It should be noted that the ability of the public to film, record and distribute parish council meetings is now law. The right of the parish council to exclude the press and public from parts of parish council meetings for contractual and staff confidentiality reasons remain unaffected. Members of the public are permitted to film or record parish council meetings, to which they are permitted access, in a non-disruptive manner. The Chairman of the meeting has the authority to stop a meeting and take appropriate action if any person contravenes these principles or is deemed to be recording in a disruptive manner.

The use of digital and social media recording tools, for example X (formally Twitter), blogging or audio recording is allowed if it is carried out in a non-disruptive way and only to the extent that it does not interfere with any person's ability, including where he or she has a disability, to follow the debate. While those attending meetings are deemed to have consented to the filming, recording or broadcasting of meetings, those exercising the rights to film, record and broadcast must respect the rights of other people attending. This will include the rights of

any children or vulnerable adults attending the meeting.

Any person or organisation choosing to film, record or broadcast a meeting of the parish council is responsible for any claims or other liability from them so doing. The parish council asks those recording proceedings to not to edit the film or recording in a way that could lead to misinterpretation of the proceedings or infringe the core values of the parish council. This includes refraining from editing an image or views expressed in a way that may ridicule or show lack of respect towards those being filmed or recorded.

The parish council will display requirements as to filming, recording, and broadcasting at its meeting venues and those undertaking these activities will be deemed to have accepted them whether they have read them or not. The parish council may itself photograph, film, record or broadcast at its meetings and can retain, use or dispose of such material in accordance with its retention and disposal policies.

12. Monitoring

Serious breaches of this policy by a council employee will amount to gross misconduct and may result in dismissal.

Serious breaches of this policy by councillors, members of the public or members of any other organisation or company will result in legal or police action.

13. Responsible Officer

The Executive Officer will be responsible for the administration of this policy on behalf of Moulton Parish Council and will report breaches to the Chairman of the Council for advice about further action.

14. Continuous Improvement

The council is continually looking at ways to improve its working and the use of social media and electronic communications is a major factor in delivering improvement.

This policy is reviewed annually by the Executive Officer and submitted to the full council for approval.

Last Reviewed: January 2024
Review Due: January 2025