Social Media and Electronic Communication Policy

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

The Council has a website, Facebook page 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.

The Council Facebook page intends to provide information and updates regarding activities and opportunities within our Parish/Town and promote our community positively.

Formal Collective Communications from the Council, speaking for the Council as a whole, will meet the following criteria. It will:

- 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 which we do not have permission to share;
- not contain any personal information, other than necessary basic contact details;
- be moderated by the Parish Clerk to the Council or either the Chair/Vice Chair of the Council;
- not be used for the dissemination of any political advertising.

Social Media

In order to ensure that all discussions on Social Media and Communications Platforms owned or licensed by, or managed by the Council are productive, respectful and consistent with the Council's aims and objectives, the following guidelines should be observed:

- 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 Councillors 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;
- refrain from using the Council's Facebook page for commercial purposes or to advertise market or sell products.

The website and other outlets are not monitored 24/7 and the Council will not always be able to reply individually to all messages or comments received. However, the Council will endeavour to ensure that any emerging themes or helpful suggestions are passed to the relevant people or authorities. Please do not include personal/private information in your social media posts to the Council.

Sending a message/post via Social Media Platforms will not be considered as contacting the Council for official purposes and the Council's staff will not be obliged to monitor or respond to requests for information through these channels. Instead, please make direct contact with the Parish Clerk and/or members of the Council by emailing:

parishclerk@milborneport-pc.gov.uk

The Council retains the right to remove comments or content that include:

- 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;
- alleged breaches of the 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 the Council's policy, or send a brief response as appropriate. This will be at the Council's discretion based on the message received, given the limited resources available. Any information posted on Social Media and Communications Platforms owned or licensed by or managed by the Council not in line with the above criteria will be removed as quickly as practically possible. Repeat offenders will be blocked from the page. The Council may post a statement that 'A post breaching the Council's Social Media 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.

The Parish Council's Website

Where necessary, the Council 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. We may not respond to every comment we receive, particularly if we are experiencing a heavy workload.

The following items may be included on the website:

- meeting dates;
- meeting agenda and minutes;
- financial information as required under the Transparency Code and the Practitioners' Guide;
- policies and procedures;
- member information;
- links to the Principal Council website – Somerset Council;
- news articles.

The following items will NOT be included:

- articles affiliated to, or promoting any political organisation;
- commercial advertisements;
- publicity for any non-charitable fund-raising event.

Parish Council Email's

The Parish Clerk has their own Council email address (parishclerk@milborneport-pc.gov.uk).

The email account is monitored mainly during office hours, (Tuesday to Thursday), and we aim to reply to all questions sent as soon as we can. An 'out of office' message will be used when appropriate.

The Parish Clerk is responsible for dealing with all email received and passing on any relevant mail to Councillors or external agencies for information and/or action. All communications on behalf of the Council will usually come from the Clerk, and/or otherwise will always be copied to the Clerk.

Individual Councillors are also provided with council-owned email addresses and are at liberty to communicate directly with residents in relation to their own personal views, if appropriate, copy to the Clerk. Please note that any emails sent to Councillors or the Clerk 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. Councillors and staff are reminded that personal information should not be forwarded on to other people or groups outside of the Council, this includes names, addresses, email, IP addresses and cookie identifiers.

Text Messages and WhatsApp

The Parish Clerk is provided with mobile telephone number. Councillors and the Parish Clerk may use SMS as a convenient way to communicate at times. All are reminded that this policy also applies to such messages.

Video Conferencing

If this medium is used to communicate, please note that this policy also applies to the use of video conferencing.

In England: The Council is not able to hold formal meetings via video conferencing, although hybrid meetings to enable the public to attend via video are permissible. Councillors, must, however, be in attendance in the meeting room.

Recording of Meetings Policy

The Council has a separate Recording of Meetings Policy.

Internal communication and access to information within the Council

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.

Councillors are expected to abide by the Code of Conduct and the Data Protection Act in all their work on behalf of the Council. As more and more information becomes available at the press of a button, it is vital that all information is treated sensitively and securely. 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 (at the extreme it may also involve a criminal investigation).

Councillors should also be careful only to 'cc' essential recipients on emails for instance 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.

Councillors who post on social media must observe the Code of Conduct. Councillors are personally responsible for the social media content they create, publish and share. Being a Councillor does not prevent a member of the public from pursuing legal action following the publication of an untrue statement and Councillors may be held personally liable.

Any Councillor posting, referring to themselves as a Councillor – even if it is in a personal capacity – may be considered as acting in an official capacity.

When posting to social media, it should be remembered that:

- the Councillor is an elected representative of the Council;
- any post can affect the reputation of the Council;
- it is the Council which is the corporate decision-making body – no Councillor can independently make decisions for the Council over social media;
- some issues and communications are best left to the Council's official social media accounts;
- having a single voice or message can be critical in some situations;
- the Council cannot be involved in party political issues;
- it is not necessary to respond or make comment on everything on social media – in fact sometimes it is better not to;
- posts must not contain any form of discrimination – including racism, sexism, ageism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia or religious intolerance.

Everyone should be reminded that a good general rule is that if there is uncertainty about something – stop, think and ask for advice before doing anything else.

This policy was adopted at the Full Council meeting in November 2025 and will be reviewed in four years or sooner should legislation dictate.