

Mepal Parish Council

Policy 10 – Media & Digital Communications



1. The use of digital and social media and electronic communication enables the Mepal 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.
2. Mepal Parish 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.
3. The Mepal Parish Council Facebook page intends to provide information and updates regarding activities and opportunities within our Parish and promote our community positively.
4. Digital Communications from the Council will meet the following criteria:
 - a. Be made only through the official Mepal Parish Council communication options listed in point 2;
 - b. Be civil, tasteful and relevant;
 - c. Not contain content that is knowingly unlawful, libellous, harassing, defamatory, abusive, threatening, harmful, obscene, profane, sexually oriented or racially offensive;
 - d. Not contain content knowingly copied from elsewhere, for which we do not own the copyright;
 - e. Not contain any personal information.
 - f. If it is official Council business, it will be moderated by either the Chair/Vice Chair of the Council or the Clerk to the Council;
 - g. Social media will not be used for the dissemination of any political advertising;
5. In order to ensure that all discussions on the Council page are productive, respectful and consistent with the Council's aims and objectives, we ask you to follow these guidelines:
 - a. Be considerate and respectful of others. Vulgarity, threats or abuse of language will not be tolerated.
 - b. Differing opinions and discussion of diverse ideas are encouraged, but personal attacks on anyone, including the Council members or staff, will not be permitted.
 - c. Share freely and be generous with official Council posts but be aware of copyright laws; be accurate and give credit where credit is due.
 - d. Stay on topic.
 - e. Refrain from using the Council's Facebook page for commercial purposes or to advertise market or sell products.
6. The site is not monitored 24/7 and we will not always be able to reply individually to all messages or comments received. However, we 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 us.
7. Sending a message/post via Facebook 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 Clerk and/or members of the council by emailing.

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8. We retain the right to remove comments or content that includes:
 - a. Obscene or racist content
 - b. Personal attacks, insults, or threatening language
 - c. Potentially libellous statements.
 - d. Plagiarised material; any material in violation of any laws, including copyright
 - e. Private, personal information published without consent
 - f. Information or links unrelated to the content of the forum
 - g. Commercial promotions or spam
 - h. Alleges a breach of a Council's policy or the law
9. 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. This will be at the Council's discretion based on the message received, given our limited resources available. Any information posted on the Facebook page not in line with the above criteria will be removed as quickly as practically possible. Repeat offenders will be blocked from the Facebook 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.
10. It is understood that Parish Councillors may have interests in activities and topics that they wish to comment on personally using social media channels that are not managed by the Parish Council. As a Parish Councillor you are still expected to follow the guidelines in clause 5, even if you make it known that you are commenting as an individual and not as a Parish Councillor. Stating that comments are personal comments does not absolve a councillor of compliance with this policy. Where possible you should always include a standard disclaimer such as "Statements and opinions here are my own and don't necessarily represent the Council's policies or opinions".
11. Parish Councillor's will not make personal comments or observations in public that mention the Parish Council or discusses any Parish Council document, as to do so will give the impression that you are commenting on behalf of the Parish Council, regardless of any disclaimer made. Show respect to all. You should be respectful of the authority and employees. Derogatory comments are always wrong.
12. Weigh whether a particular posting puts your effectiveness at Mepal Parish Council at risk
13. Do not use commentary deemed to be defamatory, obscene, proprietary, or libellous. Exercise caution with regards to exaggeration, colourful language, guesswork, obscenity, copyrighted materials, legal conclusions, and derogatory remarks or characterizations
14. Parish/Town 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. We may not respond to every comment we receive particularly if we are experiencing a heavy workload.

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15. The Council may, at its discretion, allow and enable approved local groups to have and maintain a presence on its website for the purpose of presenting information about the group's activities. The local group would be responsible for providing the content and ensuring that it meets the Council's 'rules and expectation' for the web site. The Council reserves the right to remove any or all of a local group's information from the web site if it feels that the content does not meet the Council's 'rules and expectation' for its website. Where content on the website is maintained by a local group it should be clearly marked that such content is not the direct responsibility of the Council.
16. Parish/Town Council email: the Clerk to the council has their own council email address mepalparishcouncil@msn.com. The email account is monitored mainly during office hours, Monday to Friday, and we aim to reply to all questions sent as soon as we can. An 'out of office' message will be used when appropriate.
17. The Clerk is responsible for dealing with email received and passing on any relevant mail to members 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.
18. At no time should Councillors make any promises to the public about any matter raised with them other than to say they will investigate the matter. All manner of issues may be raised, many of which may not be relevant to Mepal Parish Council. Depending on the issue, it may be appropriate to deal with the matter in the following ways:
 - a. refer the matter to the Parish Clerk who will then deal with it as appropriate
 - b. request an item on a relevant agenda
 - c. investigate the matter personally, having sought the guidance of the Parish Clerk.
19. Councillors must ensure that all communication with the public on council related matters reflects the decisions and policies of Mepal Parish Council, regardless of the councillor's individual views on any subject. Mepal Parish Council will agree its statements for release to the press and social media
20. All councillors should use a separate council email address which is to be used solely for the purpose of conducting council business.
21. When writing any communication always assume that it may have to be disclosed. Keep the communications relevant and concise. Always write emails as if they are permanent because even when they have been deleted, they can often still be retrieved and may be disclosable to a court or the Information Commissioner. Internal emails, even if marked private or confidential, might eventually need to be disclosed when it is lawful to do so.
22. Councillors should be aware that information in communications may not be confidential but may be sensitive information that needs to be respected.
23. Do not forward personal information on to other people or groups outside of the Council, this includes names, addresses, email, IP addresses and cookie identifiers.

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24. SMS (texting). Members and the Clerk may use SMS as a convenient way to communicate at times. All are reminded that this policy also applies to such messages.
25. 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 improvements.
26. Councillors are expected to abide by the Code of Conduct and the Data Protection Act in all their work on behalf of the Council.
27. As more and more information will become 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).
28. Members 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.

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