



ALSTON MOOR PARISH COUNCIL

Communication Policy

Email, Text and Social Media Communications

This document summarises the Alston Moor Parish Council policy for internal and external communications using all media. It's purpose is to develop effective engagement with the Alston Moor community through finding out their needs and communicating to the public and interested organisations what the Parish Council is doing to meet its legal obligations and wider community aspirations. The policy complies with all relevant legislation including the Data Protection Act 2018 (UK GDPR).

General Statement of Policy

- The Parish Council Website is the primary source of information on Council Business and Services provided.
- The Council Notice Boards located on Alston Front Street and Nenthead and Garrigill will publicise meeting agendas and Councillor details.
- The Council will use Social Media, such as Facebook to promote events and to provide news and updates to services.
- The Council will set aside time at every Council meeting for members of the public to speak to the Council, as laid out in the Public Participation document.
- The Council will appoint members to represent the Council on community organisations when requested.
- From time to time, the Council may seek volunteers to “sit” on working groups to enhance communication and engagement.
- The Clerk has delegated authority to determine the most appropriate form of communication method to ensure the timely dissemination of information whilst adhering to this and other Council Policies.

Statement of Policy

The purpose of this policy is to set out the procedure for managing all enquiries, and general communications with members of the public. The Parish Council welcomes the opportunity to talk to the media, residents and members of the public, and understands that it plays an important role in the democratic process. The media can be a useful conduit for promoting the Parish Council and ensuring that residents are aware of Parish Council initiatives. A good working relationship can be highly positive and should be regarded as a desirable outcome of Parish Council communications.

Email, text and social media platforms are also essential communications tools used to carry out the business of the Parish Council. All councillors and council employees communicating on behalf of the Parish Council, must ensure that their use of these tools is appropriate and lawful and will not damage the reputation of the Council or its employees, or otherwise infringe any of the Council's policies.

Parish Council Email Communication with Councillors

All councillors and employees of the council emailing or texting on behalf of the council must use email responsibly. This means:

- The point of contact for the Parish Council is the Clerk and it is to the Clerk that **ALL** correspondence should be addressed. The Clerk will forward appropriate and relevant emails to the councillors.
- Email correspondence should be undertaken in a professional and responsible manner respecting personal privacy and the requirements of data protection legislation. All councillors must use the authority-owned domain @alstonmorrparish.gov.uk to communicate on council business. Councillors are not to use personal emails for council business.
- Those writing or replying to emails should check to see that the email is only being copied to the person or persons intended; and that there is no sensitive information contained in any attached document or any accompanying email 'trail', that is, previous emails attached to the email being sent.
- Sensitive or confidential parish council information is not sent or copied to people outside the council; if you are unsure consult the Parish Clerk.
- Where emails are sent which contain personal details the personal details should be limited to that information which is required for the business of the council.
- If inappropriate material is sent accidentally this must be reported immediately to the Parish Clerk or Chair/Vice Chair.
- Emails must not contain inappropriate or unlawful material, which includes, but is not limited to; abusive, threatening, sexual, discriminatory, racial, obscene or hate text or images.

If you are unsure about anything above, please consult the Clerk who can advise on email etiquette.

Parish Council Communication with the Press and Public

- The Clerk is the nominated Press Officer and will clear all press notices or comments to the media with the Chair/Vice Chair or the relevant committee Chair.
- Press Reports from the Council, its Committees or working parties will come from the Clerk or via the reporter's own attendance at a meeting.
- Unless a Councillor has been authorised by the Council to speak to the media on a particular issue, councillors asked for comment by the press should make it clear that

they are not speaking for the council and any views expressed are their own unless they are relating an approved council policy or decision.

- It is not permitted to make any public statement on behalf of the Council which is not supported by a Council decision.

Parish Council News Items and Articles

The Clerk will seek all opportunities to promote the activities and decisions of the Parish Council through regular news items such as:

- Postings on the Parish Council Website and other social media outlets
- Preparation and issuing of press releases
- Preparation of articles, subject to council approval for issue to the media.

Gathering the views of the community

- The Council encourages engagement with the community so that views can be heard and needs established.
- This will be achieved through both informal and formal means. Informal gathering can include Councillors' day to day contact with the Community and attendance at meetings with local organisations.
- More formal means of gathering views include holding formal public consultations where there is a legal obligation, for example, prior to approval of a Neighbourhood Plan. Public meetings may be held at other times, although public participation in regular Council Meetings and Sub-committee meetings are to follow Alston Moor Parish Council policy on Public Participation.
- From time to time the Council may undertake surveys either in paper form or via email and weblink to gather responses to structured questions. These will be carried out in compliance with data protection legislation, the Council's data protection policy and in accordance with the section of this policy regarding email.

Parish Council use of email

General standards:

- This policy operates in conjunction with the Council's Privacy Policy.
- All email correspondence should be dealt with in the same professional and diligent manner as written correspondence. Any email that is sent will be identifiable as coming from the Council, therefore, in particular, no message should be sent, either internally or externally, which contains junk mail, chain letters, cartoons, jokes, illegal, offensive, obscene, profane, sexually oriented, racist or abusive material (for example, pornography); libellous, defamatory, harassing, discriminatory material; knowingly unlawful, threatening, harmful material or content which may bring the Council into disrepute.
- Councillors and Council employees are expected to use this Parish Council email system effectively and responsibly only in the course of parish duties and in accordance with due regard to Assertion 10 requirements and approved operational and security standards.

- Councillors and employees equally have a responsibility to ensure that their use of email in the workplace does not impact adversely on the council and its business, compromise their contractual relationship with the council, or breach Council policy.
- Messages should not breach any copyright laws and respect the rights of others when sending emails. Email should not be used to harass or discriminate.
- Anyone aware of any abuses of this policy should report these to the Clerk.
- Anyone uncertain about any aspects of this policy and how it applies to them, please discuss with the Clerk.

Council email addresses

Assertion 10 is a new declaration that councils will need to make from the 2025/26 AGAR onwards. It brings together a series of expectations around digital, data and information governance. It focuses on the requirement for councils to have a generic email on an authority owned domain (not a personal or free service). Assertion 10 requires councils to confirm that they are complying with data protection legislation and the data protection principles.

- Alston Moor Parish Council councillors will use a generic email hosted on an authority-owned domain such as: @alstonmoorparish.gov.uk
- Councillors and employees should ensure that these Council email addresses cannot be accessed by unauthorised users and should be used for Council business only.
- **Private and personal email addresses cannot be used for Council business.**
- The sender is responsible for emails they send. Emails could be used as evidence in a tribunal or other court proceedings. If there is a Freedom of Information or Subject Access Request then all of your Council related emails will need to be read, including any forwarded to personal email accounts.
- Using a council email address to send inappropriate material, as detailed but not restricted to the above, is strictly prohibited and will amount to gross misconduct.
- Should you receive any offensive or inappropriate content via your council email address, you should inform the Clerk of this as soon as possible so that they can ensure that it is investigated if necessary. This content should be removed from the system on the instructions of the Clerk, once any investigation is completed.
- Email messages cannot be guaranteed to be private and secure and, ideally, all emails should only be seen by the intended recipient. Copying to and copying in recipients on an ad-hoc basis should not be standard practice. Ask yourself if all the recipients really need to see the email you are sending. The use of BCC copying should not be used unless it is absolutely necessary.
- Messages should also not contain any personal information, other than necessary basic contact details

- Wherever possible, confidential, sensitive or personal data should not be sent by email. If this sort of information needs to be sent in this manner then prior approval should be sought from the Clerk. Sending confidential information via email without proper authorisation may be treated as misconduct. Particular care should be taken when sending confidential information to ensure that the email has been correctly addressed, marked “Confidential” and not copied to those not authorised to see the information.
- Users are responsible for keeping virus software up-to-date to mitigate the risk to the Council Systems.

Incoming Email

- Any Email received from an unknown source that contain attachments should not be opened as they may contain viruses.
- Council members may be emailed by members of the community. Councillors should reply briefly, making no comment other than saying that they will pass the email to the Clerk for action. Councillors must ensure that any/all communication with the public on council related matters is directed through the Clerk.
- Councillors and employees using Council email addresses should ensure that replies to any email correspondence are made within seven days.

Deleting old emails

- Emails should, as a general rule, be deleted after six months.
- Employee emails will be archived and a deletion period set by the Clerk.
- Emails between Councillors or those dealing with specific committees should be deleted or saved as the sender/recipient sees fit.
- Councillors will be asked annually to confirm in writing that they have deleted emails that they no longer need.

Email Lists

- Some activities will involve the creation of email lists of members of the community or other bodies that the Council wish to communicate with.
- The Clerk is responsible for the creation and maintenance of such lists and ensuring that any recipient can get themselves removed from the list. The Parish Council Data Protection Policy will be adhered to at all times.
- Only the Clerk or delegated person is empowered to send authorised Council communications to the prepared lists.
- Any lists used for notifying residents of businesses about Parish events or incidents will not be used more than once per week.

Disposal

Emails will be retained for a minimum of three months by AMPC. Where an email is of importance, for instance, an important email could form part of a complaint, project, planning matter, agreement or contract, then the email may be retained for longer than three months subject to AMPC's Retention and Disposal of Records and Documents Policy.

Monitoring

The Clerk will monitor email use by employees, councillors and members of the public emailing AMPC, and will report to the Parish Council if email is being used inappropriately. Where the Clerk advises that email is being used inappropriately AMPC reserves the right to take disciplinary action or refer the matter to the Westmorland and Furness Unity Monitoring Officer, and in the case of unlawful emails to refer the matter to the police. This includes emails sent by members of the public where such emails transgress the law. Where the Clerk suspects that email or text used has caused, or anticipates it will cause, a serious breach of security or confidentiality they may, after consultation with the Chairman, or the Vice Chairman in the absence of the Chairman, take action to restrict the distribution of sensitive or confidential emails.

If you receive an email or text that contains material contrary to this policy report the matter immediately to the Clerk or Chairman, or the Vice Chairman in the absence of the Chairman. They will investigate and may call in the Westmorland and Furness Monitoring Officer or police if necessary.

AMPC will use all reasonable efforts to ensure emails and texts used in connection with its business by councillors, employees and members of the public are within the law. It cannot be held responsible for damages resulting from the misuse of email in a way contrary to this policy.

Social Media

Policy Statement

- Social media has a growing role in enabling improved contact and engagement between the Parish Council and the people and organisations it serves.
- This Social Media Policy explains how the Parish Council will use social media to improve the way it communicates with local residents, local businesses and the local and central government bodies it deals with.
- This policy sets out what is acceptable and not acceptable. It should be read in conjunction with the Code of Conduct for Councillors.

Use of Social Media

The aim of this section of the policy is to set out a Code of Practice to provide guidance to parish councillors and employees of AMPC in the use of online communications, collectively referred to as social media. Social media is a collective term used to describe methods of publishing on the internet. The policy covers all forms of social media and social networking sites which include (but are not limited to):

- Parish Council website
- Facebook
- X (formerly known as Twitter)

- Tik Tok, Instagram or other social networking sites
- Blogs and other websites (for example EFFRA or media sites)
- Online chatrooms and forums
- YouTube and other video clips and podcast sites
- LinkedIn
- WhatsApp and other messaging groups

The Policy applies to parish councillors and its employees. It is also intended for guidance for others communicating with the Parish Council. The policy sits alongside relevant existing policies which need to be taken into consideration. The use of social media will not replace existing forms of communication. Notice boards, Chairman's Report and newsletters will continue to be a focus for AMPC communications with residents. The website and other forms of social media will be used to enhance communication.

Key Principles

- The rules which govern councillor behaviour apply equally to social media, however, the immediacy, ease and speed of dissemination amplify the need for content and comments to be carefully thought through.
- All communication is capable of misinterpretation. The immediacy and lack of face to face contact with a social media message can magnify this problem. Information and comments can be broadcast to large numbers of people very quickly.
- Although informal in style, all social media content is recorded and permanent so content must be accurate, informative and reflect policy decisions made by the Council.
- There is no requirement for a councillor to be a user of social media to communicate with the public.
- Councillors using social media should make it explicitly clear whether they are communicating in a private capacity or as a councillor.
- Councillors who have a personal social media account should make it clear in their profile details that; "all views are their own".

Responsibilities

- The Clerk or a designated Councillor is responsible for all formal communication between the council and members of the public and will be responsible for maintaining the Parish Council Website, and Facebook pages.
- Other platforms are not currently being used for Parish communication; however, the Clerk can introduce the use of other platforms such as Instagram, Linked In, or X (formerly Twitter) subject to Council approval.
- It is understood that individual councillors may be communicating on social media and it is their responsibility to comply with the usage guidelines outlined below. The overarching rule is that councillors should not make commitments on behalf of the Council, bring the Council into disrepute and should respect confidentiality.

Code of Conduct For Councillors and Employees

Individual Parish Councillors are responsible for what they post. Councillors are personally responsible for any online activity conducted via their social media accounts or through interaction with other online sites and forums.

When participating in any online communication on a council matter, councillors and employees should;

- Be responsible and respectful; be civil, relevant, direct, informative, brief and transparent.
- Always disclose your identity and affiliation to the Parish Council.
- Never make false or misleading statements.
- Not present themselves in a way that might cause embarrassment.
- Be mindful of the information they post on sites and make sure personal opinions are not published as being that of the Council or bring the Council into disrepute or is contrary to the Council's Code of Conduct or any other Policies.
- Keep the tone of your comments respectful and informative. Councillors should refrain from personal criticism in social media of other councillors and individuals or organisations with whom the Parish Council has dealings (in accordance with the Nolan principles of conduct in public life)
- Language that may be deemed as offensive relating to race, sexuality, disability, gender, age or religion or belief should not be published on any social media site.
- Avoid personal attacks, online fights and hostile communications.
- Permission to publish photographs or videos on social media sites should be sought from the persons or organisations in the video or photograph before being uploaded.
- Respect the privacy of other councillors, employees and residents.
- Do not post any information or conduct any online activity that may violate laws or regulations. Posts are not to contain content that is unlawful, libellous, harassing, defamatory, abusive, threatening, harmful, obscene, profane, sexually orientated or offensive.

Councillors and employees should be aware that:

- Posting copyright images or text on social media sites is an offence. Breach of copyright may result in an award of damages against you.
- Publishing personal data of individuals without permission is a breach of Data Protection legislation is an offence.
- Publication of obscene material is a criminal offence and is subject to a custodial sentence.

- Councillors views posted in any capacity in advance of matters to be debated by the council at a council meeting may constitute Pre-disposition, Predetermination or Bias and will require the individual to declare an interest at council meetings
- AMPC will use all reasonable efforts to ensure that use of social media in connection with its business by councillors, employees and members of the public are within the law. It cannot be held responsible for damages resulting from the misuse of social media in a way contrary to this policy.

Monitoring

The clerk will monitor social media accounts and sites controlled by AMPC, however the diverse nature of social media means that it is nearly impossible for one person to continually monitor and review activity by councillors on social media. Councillors are therefore responsible for their own use of the media and will be held accountable where breaches are brought to the attention of AMPC. In such instances they will be considered as any other breach of the Code of Conduct for Councillors would be.

The Alston Moor Parish Website

Purpose

- The Parish Website is the primary electronic means of providing information about the Parish and Parish Council matters with the primary purpose of promoting easier engagement with the community.
- The website will also provide a means of promoting the Parish to visitors.
- While assisting the Council to meet its obligations to be transparent, it will not be used as a substitute for meeting obligations to make information available to the public by other means, for example, posting meeting agendas on Parish Notice Boards and making available minutes of meetings and policy documents via the Parish Office.

Day-to-Day Management

- The Website will be hosted by a 3rd party provider. The Council will have direct control of day-to-day editing and updating. The Clerk or designated councillor is accountable for making updates and is empowered by the Council to make routine updates without prior reference to the Council. A Third Party may be asked for support for making Website changes, provided associated costs are within the agreed budget and approved by the Council
- The Clerk will update the Full Council on substantial changes made to the Website via the Clerks Report.

Content

- Website content will be accessible in line with legal regulation.
- Every effort will be made to maintain up-to-date and accurate content but this cannot be guaranteed.
- The following Council Information will be uploaded to the website:
 - Details of Councillors
 - Information on Council services
 - Meeting agendas and minutes

- Policy documents
- Audit reports
- Reports or surveys commissioned by the Council
- The Website will also contain information and links which may be of use to residents. These will be updated from time to time; however, the Council cannot be held responsible for any inaccuracies in contact details or links.
- The Website may include links to other websites or sources of information to assist the community in accessing views on issues of interest. The inclusion of such links is subject to Full Council approval and it must be made clear that the Council does not endorse any opinions expressed on other sites.
- Councillors and other parties may submit material for inclusion in the website provided it is in line with the guidelines of this policy and is technically feasible.
- Any request to include information on the Website should be made via the Clerk.
- The Clerk is empowered to edit or refuse any material, generally guidance will be provided on the reasons. Ultimately the Clerk is accountable to the Council for any content decisions made.
- Website material that is considered as Archival Material should be preserved without change to the content but can be restructured and reorganised as required.

The Alston Moor Parish Council Social Media Pages

Purpose

- Dedicated Council social media pages such as Facebook, will primarily be used for promoting Parish events and communicating news of importance to the community.
- If a member of the community sends a message or posts on Facebook, it will not be considered as contacting the Council for official purposes. The Council is not obliged to monitor or respond to requests for information through these channels.
- The Council will remove any comments or content that is:
 - Obscene or racist
 - A personal attack, insulting or threatening
 - Potentially libellous
 - Material that may be illegal such a copyright infringement
 - Private or personal information without consent
 - Information or links unrelated to the content of the forum
 - Commercial promotions or spam
 - Incorrect factually and could be misleading to the public

Councillors Posting On Alston Moor Parish Council page

Councillors do not need permission from other councillors to post on the Council's social media platforms, but they are personally responsible for their posts and must adhere to the council's Code of Conduct and other relevant laws.

On social media, councillors should keep in mind their responsibility in relation to confidential information, copyright, data protection, the pre-election period and exempt

reports. Councillors should demonstrate good conduct at all times and so should act as though their public engagement on social media falls in scope of the Code of Conduct. When posting to social media you should remember that:

- you are an elected representative of your council
- what you post can affect the reputation of your council
- your council is a corporate decision-making body – you can't, independently, make decisions for the council on social media
- you don't have to respond to or comment on everything on social media – and sometimes it's best not to.

How to deal with negativity and abuse online

Unfortunately, on every social media platform, there can be users who are negative and abusive. Such people are often referred to as 'trolls'. Trolls are not easy to deal with and the best way is 'not to feed them'. It is recommended that councillors do not respond to what they post, which is designed to upset, elicit a response or to further their own goals. If it's on the councillors own page or profile, delete or hide their comment, so other followers do not see it.

Councillors who wish to have a social media page the Local Government Association (LGA) has produced [digital citizenship 'rules of engagement' infographics](#) for councillors, which can be added to a councillor's personal social media profile. These set out the social media code and how you expect your followers to behave. This account **MUST** be deleted when you leave office or resign.

Complaints

Any complaints about Parish Council Communication of any type including content or interactions on the Alston Moor Parish Council Website or Facebook should be made to the Clerk.

For further information, please contact the Clerk or the Chair/Vice Chair of the Policy Committee.

Date of policy: September 2025

Date of Council meeting:

Supersedes: Communications and Social Media Policy 2019

Press and Media Policy 2018

Policy effective from: October 2025

Date for next review: October 2027