Parish of St Mary's, Summerstown

St Mary's Safe Church Policy

Communicating with Children and Young People via Electronic and Social Media

Approved by PCC on 25th January 2022. To be reviewed annually

Latest review: *24th February 2026*

Detailed guidance is provided in A Safer Church, Section 4 Keeping Sage, pages 28 to 25. This covers use of communications, social media, mobile phones etc.

St Mary's church accepts that the use of mobile phones, email and social networking sites is the norm for many children and young people; and are quick, cheap and efficient methods of communication.

In order to protect both adult and child, all communication, by whatever method, should take place within clear and established boundaries. Youth Workers should ensure that all communications are transparent and open to scrutiny, in order to avoid any possible misinterpretation of motives or any behaviour which could be construed as grooming. The majority of communications should take place directly with leaders and parents, but in some exceptions there may be reason to communicate with the young people.

Consent
Primarily, all electronic communication (phone, email, text, social media) should be done with parents or carers of children, rather than with children or young people themselves. In some cases, for example older teenagers or those who attend without their parents some contact with young people is permitted. Any contact from St Mary's with under 18 years old must be done only by DBS checked Youth Workers and with prior consent of Parents / Carers.

If this contact may be required, a form will be supplied to parents asking them to give their consent for named Youth Workers to contact their children and to provide approved contact methods: Home Telephone / Mobile Telephone / email address. Permission will also be sought from parents/carers before a young person is given the phone number or email address for a youth worker. There is a St Mary's mobile phone that can be used for contact and emergencies during a youth activity, in many cases this would be preferable to a personal number being shared.

Children under the age of 13
Young children are more vulnerable and less likely to have access to electronic media. Therefore St Mary's restricts e-communication to:

- Home or parent/carer's mobile telephone, speaking first to a parent/carer and with parent/carer present with child. Spoken messages are preferable to text.
- Parental email account only
- Parental text messages only

Young People aged 13 - 18
It is always preferable for communication to be via the parent or carer, but St Mary's understands this may not always be possible for older teenagers.
Young People are still vulnerable but are more likely to prefer e-communication. St Mary's restricts e-communication to:
- Home telephone, spoken message
- Mobile telephone, spoken message or text
- Facebook / WhatsApp – only group messages/posts with at least two DBS adults included.
- Email account : parental or child's own

Guidelines for leaders in communicating electronically

- Maintain good and open relationships with parents and carers regarding communication with them and their children.
- If young people want you to have their mobile phone numbers, e-mail addresses or similar, and communicate with them in this way, make sure that their parents know and have agreed in writing.
- Only make contact with young people for reasons related to the work of the church and never just to engage in conversation.
- If a young person misinterprets such communication and tries to engage an adult in conversation, the adult must end the conversation or stop replying; suggest discussing the subject further at the next activity which should be in the presence of another adult and, if concerned about the young person's communication, discuss the matter with the PSO.
- Electronic communication should not be the default way of communicating. Face-to-face communication should be used wherever possible, normally at or around the time of a scheduled activity.
- Communication should take place only at reasonable times of the day and never late at night.
- Where possible communicate with a group not an individual.
- Establish a dedicated group with at least two authorised adult users.
- Use the highest appropriate level of security setting and restrict membership to the intended group.
- Where young people are on a rota or in another multi-contact scenario, distribution groups should be set up to ensure that individual contact details are not shared.
- Set personal profiles on any social networking site to the highest form of security to avoid access to personal information.
- Do not use a personal account to communicate.
- Ensure that the particular form of social media employed is age-appropriate.
- Only give personal contact details to young people that are within the public domain of the church, including your mobile telephone number.
- Where possible another adult should be copied into all communication with young people or adults who may be vulnerable. This should be an overt copy rather than a blind copy.
- Where possible use only equipment provided by the church to communicate with children (such as the vicarage or parish office phone, or a mobile phone purchased specifically for the work).

- Never 'friend' or 'follow' children or young people on social media.
- Communicate clearly, don't abbreviate or short-cut communications and obviously never use inappropriate language.
- Use an appropriate tone: friendly, but not over-familiar or personal.
- Be aware that boundaries of relationships can become blurred on social media.
- Be warm and friendly, but do not suggest or offer a special relationship.
- Be careful how you sign off: consider, for instance, how 'love' and 'XXX' might be perceived and misinterpreted by the young person and never sign off in this way. Use the name you would expect them to call you in person.
- Avoid the use of emojis or other symbols.
- Photographs and videos of young people must not be posted on social media without the consent of their parent, given in writing on a consent form (see A Safe Church, Section 10, Appendix 10). Encourage the parent to discuss this with their child first.
- Be clear and explicit about information that you need to share; do not abbreviate or shortcut your communications.
- Make sure that communication would not cause embarrassment if it were seen by the young person's parents or church officials.
- Do not share any personal information with a young person, or request or respond to any personal information from the young person, other than that which might be appropriate as part of your role.
- Be circumspect in your communications with young people to avoid any possible misinterpretation of your motives or any behaviour which could be construed as grooming.
- Respect the young person's confidentiality unless abuse is suspected or disclosed.
- Recognise that text messaging is rarely an appropriate response to a young person in a crisis situation or at risk of harm.
- Store e-mail, texts and other messages for as long as possible. If a message contains anything which causes concern, print it out and/or retain on file/hard drive.
- It is advisable to have an agreed supervisor of any group accounts. The young people should be made aware who this is. This should be documented and consider notifying the PSO so they can keep a record.

Facebook / WhatsApp – for 14-18 groups only

Overall Leaders are authorised to set up and moderate group pages that young people can apply to join. Information will be posted to the whole group, in this way communication between Youth Workers and young people will be transparent and restricted to a moderated and private forum.

Youth Workers must not 'befriend' children or young people under the age of 18 on Facebook on have direct contact with them on any other social networking sites. (The only acception is where a young person is a relative of the youth worker)

Likewise, adult members of the congregation must not 'befriend' children or young people on Facebook or have direct contact with them on any other social networking sites.

Inappropriate content

- Any inappropriate posts must be removed immediately by the supervisor or other adult, explaining the reasons why and informing anyone who may be affected as well as the parents/carers of any young people involved. However, for evidential reasons, before the posts are removed they should be printed out and retained on a file or hard drive and/or a screenshot taken.
- If young people and vulnerable adults notice inappropriate content they need to know to whom they should report this.
- Any disclosures of abuse on social media or content leading to concern that a young person or vulnerable adult is at risk of harm must be handled in the same way as a face-toface disclosure.

'Sexting' is when someone shares sexual, naked or semi-naked images or videos of themselves or others, or sends sexually explicit messages. This includes messages and images sent between people who have never met each other and have only had contact online but it also includes friends, boyfriends and girlfriends. Creating or sharing explicit images of a child or young person is illegal, even if the person doing it is a child and even if all parties consented.

If you become aware of an incident of sexting, do not view, share or ask to see the image yourself. Report the matter to the Parish Safeguarding Officer and record the situation and what action you took. The PSO will seek advice from the Diocese Safeguarding Team. Further advice is available at A Safe Church - Section 4 - page 33 and 34.

Zoom and Microsoft Teams

Where a group, e.g. Sunday Club, is unable to meet in person (e.g. covid pandemic), St Mary's permits the use of Zoom and/or Microsoft Teams for organized group activities. These should not be used for 1-1 contact with a child or young person. The following applies:

- At least 2 DBS leaders are required and should be on screen at all times for the duration of the group
- Parents must superevise their children at home and must remain with them while the online activity takes place
- If any appropriate activity takes place, the 'host' of the meeting should turn off the camera for the person and it should be reported immediately to the Parish Safeguarding Officer.

Chatrooms / WeChat / Facetime / Skype / Instagram / Snapchat / Videocams

St Mary's does not allow the use of these communication methods due to the perceived risks attached both for young people and Youth Workers.