

# Town of Arlington Public Communication Policy

*Town Departments, Boards, Committees, and Commissions*



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## Terminology

The term "Users" mean any person who communicates on behalf of the Town in a professional capacity, including staff and designated members of boards, committees, and commissions.

The term "Entity" refers to your department, board, committee, or commission.

The term "Communications Channel" or "Channel" refers to an Entity's information channel in which to delivery content to the public such as a website, email list, social media presence, or similar delivery mechanism.

## Purpose

The Town of Arlington (the "Town") actively utilizes several Communication Channels to inform and engage its residents, businesses, elected officials, local media, and visitors. As the proliferation of these Channels improve and demand for information increases, it is vital that Town staff and members of Arlington boards and committees who engage in communications on behalf of the Town work in concert to promote the interests and goals of the Town and within relevant legal obligations. The Arlington Communication Policy establishes guidelines for the creation and use by the Town, its departments, divisions, and/or employees of available communication channels, including print (Town mailings), online (website and email lists), and other channels as they develop (social media). Traditional media outlets (print, broadcast, and online) and other independently managed channels that communicate to the public and public records laws necessitate that the Town coordinate its communication efforts.

As a public Entity, the Town and its Users should abide by certain standards in the way they communicate to each other that serves all its constituents in a civil and unbiased manner.

The intended purpose behind establishing and maintaining the Arlington Communication Policy is to disseminate information from the Town to its residents to:

- Provide accurate, helpful, and timely information about the Town of Arlington for the general public;
- Promote the interests of the Town in concert with Arlington's goals;
- Encourage participation in Town government; and
- Provide ongoing education aimed at increasing understanding about how the Town operates.

## General Policy

The Town has an overriding interest and expectation in deciding what is "spoken" on behalf of the Town.

- A. The assignment of any User is subject to approval.
  - a. Town Staff Users of the Town website are assigned by their respective Department head.
  - b. Town Social Media and Email List Entities – Subject to the approval of the Town Manager.

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- c. Board, Committee, or Commission Social Media Entities – Subject to the approval of the Board Chair and the Department head of that board, committee, or commission.
- B. Each Channel shall be administered and monitored by the individual Entity User(s). The Entity should communicate the level of response (post a disclaimer) and if they will allow comments. Entities should read the discussion provided by the National League of Cities “Public comment on the government’s official social media” to understand the risks/rewards associated with allowing comments and if they can reasonably manage this feature. Please request a copy from the Town’s PIO.
- C. For all Town Entities (Departments, Boards, Commissions, and Committees), the Town shall maintain administrative rights on all Channels (website section, social media presence, email lists, etc.).
- D. The Town’s website, arlingtonma.gov, will remain the Town’s primary and predominant public communication presence. Always reference arlingtonma.gov (or associated shortcut, example: arlingtonma.gov/police) in all press releases (never use town.arlington.ma.us). Social media sites should link back to the respective home page(s) on the Town’s website where documents, forms, online services, and other information necessary to conduct business with the Town are available.
- E. Each new User will confirm via email with their Department Head or Board/Commission/Committee Chair that they have read and understand this policy. It is the responsibility of each Department Head or Board Chair/Commission/Committee Chair to provide a copy of this policy to their respective users.
- F. Entities should make clear that they are maintained by the Town of Arlington, MA, or Board/Commission/Committee of the Town of Arlington, MA and that they follow the Arlington Communication Policy.
- G. The Town’s Public Information Officer (PIO) will occasionally monitor content on all Town Communication Channels to ensure adherence to this policy and the interests and goals of the Town are being served, however, content oversight is the responsibility of their respective Entity.
- H. All Town Communication Channels shall adhere to applicable federal, state, and local laws, rules, regulations, and policies.
- I. All Town Communication Channels are subject to Massachusetts public records and record retention laws, rules, regulations, and policies. Any content maintained in an online format (Social Media/Website) that is related to Town business, including posted communication and communication submitted for posting, may be subject to public disclosure. The department/division administrator will maintain records in accordance with Massachusetts public records and record retention laws, rules, regulations, and policies.
- J. The Town reserves the right to restrict or remove any content that is deemed in violation of this policy or any applicable laws, rules, regulations, or policies and any content/comments on topics or issues not related to Town business. Any content removed based on this policy must be retained by the site administrator who removed it in adherence to public records retention laws. Included with this record should be the date, time, and identity of the poster, when available.
- K. Users representing the Town via its various Communication Channels shall conduct themselves at all times as a representative of the Town in accordance with all Town rules, regulations, and policies.

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- L. The Arlington Communication Policy may be updated and amended from time-to-time at the discretion of the Town Manager.
- M. All online Communication Channels must link to this policy.
- N. The Town will approach the use of all its Communication Channels as consistently as possible, enterprise-wide.

### **Content Coordination For Town Entities**

- A. Users should coordinate content postings with their Entity head (Chair or Department Head) for their section postings, such as upcoming meetings (ex: Selectmen Meetings), audience specific communications (Senior Notices), and reminders to any previously disseminated content (Meeting or event reminder).

Content for dissemination for the home page of the Town's website, Town Notice, and/or an Arlington Alert should be coordinated with the Public Information Officer (PIO) **prior to its release to the media**, except in the event of an emergency where delay may jeopardize public safety. Example: The use of an Arlington Alert for a Community Safety call, such as a missing person, suspect on the loose, environmental hazard (gas leak). In such instances, the Commanding Officer should send a notification to the Town Manager at his/her earliest convenience. In the case of a Critical Incident/State of Emergency, the Town is to follow its Emergency Communications Protocols. All Entities should refrain from participating in Emergency Communications other than to direct users to the emergency dispatches from the Town directly.

For non-emergency Content to be posted on the Town's home page/Town Notice, or Arlington Alert, the following timelines are recommended to ensure the greatest effectiveness of your outreach:

- a. For one-time significant Town-wide impact, such as new trash regulations or new water/sewer rate changes, a 3-6 month notification to the PIO is recommended to develop a Communication Plan and develop messaging and produce any associated print or online materials (graphics, etc.).
- b. For large events or initiatives that don't necessarily require resident action, such as a social or dedication event, a 1-3 month notification to the PIO is recommended to schedule the dissemination of the event on the Town's main channels.
- c. For upcoming short-term projects with limited impacts (example: road paving), a 2 week prior notice to work start date is recommended to ensure at least one week prior notification to public.
- d. For unexpected events that need to be announced Town-wide, like a water main break, please contact the PIO to get this information out immediately. If the PIO is not available, contact the Town Manager's Office directly.

### **Communication Guidelines & Considerations**

- a. **Consider Your Content, Communicate and Publish Responsibly.** All Town communication is considered official government communications. Be mindful that what you publish will be public for a long time in accordance to public records retention laws. As informal as social media sites are meant to be, if they're on a government domain or a government entity, they're official government communications. Social media sites will be sought out by mainstream media and

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constituents – so a great deal of thought needs to go into how you will use the social media in a way that benefits both the Town and the public.

- b. Communicate Only to Contribute to your Entity's Mission.** When you communicate, provide worthwhile information and a perspective that contributes to the Town's mission of serving the public. What you publish will reflect on you, your Entity, and the Town. Communication Channels should be used in a way that contributes to the Town's mission by:
  - i. Helping you and your members perform their tasks better;
  - ii. Informing citizens about government services and how to access them;
  - iii. Making the operations of your Entity transparent and accessible to the public;
- c. Respect Copyright Law** Arlington Users must abide by laws governing copyright and fair use of copyrighted material owned by others. Never reprint whole articles or publications without first receiving written permission from the publication owner. Never quote more than a short excerpt of someone else's work and, if possible, provide a link to the original (greater detail can be found under (Meeting Relevant Legal Obligations/Third Party Rights).
- d. Protect Confidential Information.** Don't provide your Entity's confidential information. Never post legally protected personal information that you have obtained from your Entity. Ask permission to publish or report on conversations that occur within your Entity. Never post information about policies or plans that have not been finalized by your Entity, unless you have received explicit permission from the Town.
- e. Handling Messages.** Treat incoming messages via Facebook or email as public information. These messages are public record so respond accordingly and do not delete them.
- f. Provide Links.** When you make a reference to a law, regulation, policy, or other website, where possible provide a link or at a minimum, cite the source. Please refrain from "studies say..." without citation.
- g. Respect Your Audience and the Town.** Remember that our constituents reflect a diverse set of customs, values, and points of view. Be professional and respectful. This includes not only the obvious (no ethnic slurs, personal insults, obscenity, threats of violence, etc.) but also proper consideration of privacy and of topics that may be considered objectionable or inflammatory—such as party politics and religion. Do not use any of the Town's Communication Channels to air your differences with residents, Town policy, or employees. Show proper consideration for others' privacy and for topics that may be considered objectionable, insensitive, or inflammatory.
- h. Be Transparent, Admit to Your Mistakes.** Once something is posted on a communication channel, it should stay posted for the length of time it is relevant. Some Content will have a short life span (news or calendar item), some will be in perpetuity (Minutes). Only spelling errors or grammar fixes should be made without making the change evident to users on any Communication Channel. If you choose to modify an earlier posting with a substantive change, make it clear that you have done so. On social media, do not remove or delete the incorrect content; provide the correct information and apologize for the error. Ways to accomplish this include:
  - i. Strike through the error and correct
  - ii. Create a new post with the correct information, and link to it from the post you need to correct or clarify.

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Either method is acceptable. The goal is to achieve transparency, we cannot change Content that has already been published without making the changes clearly evident to users.

- i. **Use Your Best Judgment.** If you're about to publish something that makes you even the slightest bit uncomfortable, review the suggestions above and think about why that is. If you're still unsure, do not post it until you can discuss it with the head of your Entity or the Town's Public Information Officer.
- j. **Handling Media Inquiries.** Active communication and outreach may lead to increased inquiries from the media. If you are contacted directly by a reporter, you should refer media questions to the head of your Entity or the Town's Public Information Officer.
- k. If a channel has been compromised please contact your Department Head, the Town's PIO, and Legal Department immediately.

### Meeting Legal Obligations

- a. **Records Retention.** Communication channels such as the website, a social media site, or email will contain communications sent to or received by users and are therefore public records subject to the Records Retention law. These retention requirements apply regardless of the form of the record (digital text, photos, audio, or video, for example). Ensure that your Entity retains a copy of this content in accordance with the Records in Common Schedule. See the Town's Legal Handbook for details and schedules. You may also consult Town Counsel with specific questions about a record after referring to the Legal Handbook.
- b. **Open Meeting Law:** Users should be knowledgeable about Open Meeting Laws. The Open Meeting Law applies to meetings of governmental bodies in which a quorum of the body convenes to deliberate on any public business or policy within its jurisdiction. The terms meeting, governmental body, deliberation, and quorum are specifically defined in the Open Meetings Law. M.G.L.c. 30A, § 18. As a guiding principle, deliberations will have ensued when a "quorum knows what a quorum thinks," regardless of the forum of communications. For example, a series of individual postings on a Social Media site which, cumulatively convey the position of a quorum of the governmental body regarding a subject within its jurisdiction could constitute deliberations and in turn violate the requirements of the Open Meeting Law. Until the Attorney General's position on the appropriate use of Social Media within the confines of the Open Meeting requirements has been clarified, members of governmental bodies must take care to avoid violating the Open Meeting Law through posts to social media sites and email. See pp 8-9, 149-150 of Legal Handbook.
- c. **Consider Third Party Rights**
  - (1) Intellectual Property Rights. When the Entity posts media in any form to the public, the Entity must ensure that it has the right to post the content. In the case of copyrighted works (e.g. literary expression, photos, videos, etc.), the Entity needs to ensure that either (1) it has the copyright in the work; (2) it has permission to use to work; or (3) the use of the Entity's work is permissible under statute. For example, in the case of third party works, such as photos, before posting, the Entity should receive written authorization from the third party copyright holder
  - (2) Privacy. Under some circumstances, videos and images of individual(s) may only be used when a written release has been obtained by the individual or by the parent or guardian when the individual is a minor. Copies of these releases should be kept on file by the posting Entity. Agencies may alternatively alter the videos or images to effectively hide the identity of individuals where no permission has been granted.

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- d. Advertising, Endorsement Limitations.** Procurement and ethics laws largely prohibit Town employees or agencies from endorsing products, businesses, or vendors. In addition, Town resources, such as Town-sponsored Social Media entities should not be used for political purposes. For additional resources on advertising and endorsements, please contact Town Counsel.

- O. How to Request Access to Online Channels**

Department heads should make the request directly of the Public Information Officer (PIO) to provide access to Users of their respective department or division website section. For requesting social media channels, Boards, Committees, and Commissions should discuss this option with their respective department to discuss the need for an additional Channel (note all Boards/Committees/Commissions have a section on the Town's website). If the Department and Committee agree that an additional Channel is desired, the Department head should make a request to the Town's PIO on how best to coordinate implementation of the newly requested Channel, policies are received and understood, and administrative access provided in the event access is necessary by the Town to fulfill its legal obligations.

Documents used to compile this policy include: Town of Arlington's Website Policy, State of Massachusetts Social Media Legal Guidance Toolkit, and the National League of Cities (NLC) Building Local Government Social Media Policies.

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