

Defra Group (NE)

Principles of Professional Communication

WORKING DRAFT V1.0

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OFFICIAL SENSITIVE

Introduction and scope

At Natural England, as a member of Defra Group, we are committed to creating a diverse and inclusive working environment where every individual has equality of opportunity to progress, has a sense of belonging, is able to bring their authentic self to work, and feels that they have a voice.

To achieve this, we must ensure that every aspect of our working environment is reflective of this commitment, including where we connect both in person and, or virtually.

This guidance sets out our framework for creating a thriving, innovative and collaborative hybrid workplace, in a respectful, professional and inclusive way.

This guidance applies to all formal and informal communication channels across Defra Group including, but not limited to, Yammer, Teams, WhatsApp, Intranet comments and Sli.do.

This guidance should be implemented alongside your organisations' Code of Conduct, Social Media Policies and Acceptable use policies.

Our underpinning Framework

All communications and workplace interactions must be in line with the following:

In line with the Civil Service Code which means acting with integrity, honesty, objectivity and impartiality at all times (for example, avoid posting anything that is political in nature) While not all agencies within the Defra Group are Civil Service organisations, our communication channels are blended, and therefore no discussion should undermine the obligations of others.

In line with our Behaviours

- **Ambitious:** achieving our goals, innovating and taking risks to get there
- **Collaborative:** Building and nurturing partnerships, listening and learning to continuously improve together
- **Integrity:** We act with integrity at all times, professionally and objectively.
- **Inclusive:** actively ensuring a place where everyone can thrive and be part of a community

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Our Principles for Professional Communication

We should apply the same principles and standards of behaviour we would in any other part of our working lives, regardless of whether we are in person, or collaborating virtually. We expect that everyone follows positive workplace behaviours and demonstrates behaviour, which is professional and respectful, ensuring everyone is treated in an inclusive way, at all times.

- **We are Professional** – Our platforms are an extension of the workplace, so it's important to be professional. Sometimes this might mean taking a step back and reflecting before posting a comment or statement, or even checking in with a colleague to test your view, particularly if you're responding to something you feel passionately about. Keep your comments temperate and polite.
- **We act with Integrity** – this means exercising judgement and discretion and holding ourselves to account for anything we post or engage with.
- **We show Respect** – this means ensuring your posts are courteous, inclusive, and considerate of the circumstances and views of others. Debate is welcome, but in a constructive way. Respecting others' views and beliefs is critical, avoiding stereotypes and "banter" that could be misinterpreted. This also means acting in a way that meets your organisations Code of Conduct and Respect at Work policy, which includes complying with diversity and equality policies and practices in your dealings and engagement with colleagues.
- **We are Innovative** – this is about raising your ideas or suggestions in a professional and respectful way and seeking and being open minded to others' challenges.
- **Be responsible** – we are all personally accountable for what we post, so it's important we exercise judgement and discretion. Assume good intentions when you read other colleagues' posts, even if you disagree, and be kind and respectful when posting. Be considerate of your colleagues' wellbeing. Respectful disagreement is both welcomed and expected.
- **Be clear and concise** – because virtual channels communicate in the written form, it's important your post is clear and concise. Consider if the tone of your message for example, sarcasm, satire and irony could be misinterpreted.
- **Protect yourself and others** – Workplace platforms and anything we post is not confidential, it can be seen by all colleagues in the organisation and end up in the public domain. Therefore, it's important to avoid posting anything that could harm the reputation of Defra Group, such as defamatory comments or giving details about a sensitive or personal situation of another colleague.
- **Freedom of Expression** Every person has a right to personal beliefs and opinions, including those that conflict with those of another group or individual. It is important to remember, however, that great care should be taken in expressing those conflicting views and with consideration of the potential audience, forum or medium, especially where there is uncertainty or where the topic is particularly sensitive, as to whether is it the best method of communication.

We all have a responsibility to treat others without discrimination, harassment, or victimisation, and to create an environment that is inclusive for all.

Following the above principles, it is therefore the case that:

- Personal attacks on an individual are never acceptable – this can include derogatory or abusive personal comments; deriding individual's protected characteristics; creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment for others because of their protected characteristics including religion or belief.
- We must approach differing beliefs and views, respectfully and constructively.
- Never post comments that are derogatory or defamatory. This includes spreading harmful rumours, re-posting inappropriate comments or defamatory statements about the department, its employees, customers, or suppliers
- Defra Group organisations will not tolerate Bullying, Harassment or Discrimination of any kind. Any incidents as such, or misuse of internal communication channels may be subject to disciplinary procedures.

Monitoring

Defra and agencies do not routinely monitor personal use of platforms. However, they do reserve the right to investigate an employee's usage and conduct where they have been made aware of a potential breach of policies or guidance via escalation. If a post is found to be objectively offensive, unreasonable or inappropriate and/or it opens disruptive debate which distracts colleagues from their duties, or discussion following escalates to a point of hostility or distress, or undermines our equality objectives then we reserve the right to remove the post and its associated comments following investigation.

Raising concerns

We all want to feel included in our workplace, and anyone using our communication channels is expected to do so in line with our principles.

If you see something that concerns you which does not support Defra Groups Behaviours or Values, it should be reported as soon as possible.

Please approach XXX to review it in the first instance – and for further information please see XXX guidance

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