

Online Safety Policy

1. Purpose

Joymount Presbyterian Church recognises that technology and online communication are valuable tools for worship, ministry, discipleship, communication and pastoral care. The congregation is committed to promoting the safe, responsible and positive use of digital technology in all areas of church life.

This policy outlines the safeguarding principles and procedures relating to online activity involving children, young people and adults at risk.

The policy aims:

- to protect children, young people and adults at risk from online harm
- to support staff and volunteers in safe online practice
- to ensure online safeguarding is central to congregational life
- to provide clear procedures for recognising, responding to and reporting concerns

This policy should be read alongside:

- the Congregational Safeguarding Policy
- the Social Media and Digital Communication Policy
- PCI safeguarding guidance and procedures

2. Scope

This policy applies to:

- ministers
- elders
- staff
- volunteers
- youth and children's leaders
- organisations operating under Kirk Session
- anyone authorised to work with children, young people or adults at risk on behalf of the congregation

This policy applies to all approved online activity connected with church ministry, including:

- websites
- social media

- livestreaming
- messaging platforms
- online meetings
- online gaming
- digital communication

3. Safeguarding Principles

Joymount Presbyterian Church believes:

- safeguarding responsibilities apply equally online and offline
- openness, accountability and transparency are essential
- all concerns raised online must be treated as seriously as face-to-face concerns
- technology should be used positively and safely in ministry

The congregation will:

- comply with safeguarding legislation and guidance
- complete risk assessments for online activities involving children and young people
- regularly review online safeguarding procedures
- provide safeguarding guidance and training where appropriate
- ensure all concerns are managed through normal safeguarding procedures

4. Legal and Guidance Framework

This policy is informed by:

- Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995
- *Co-operating to Safeguard Children and Young People in Northern Ireland* (Department of Health, October 2024)
- Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland guidance
- PCI safeguarding guidance

5. Risk Assessment

A safeguarding risk assessment must be completed before introducing online activities involving children, young people or adults at risk.

Risk assessments should consider:

- communication methods
- supervision arrangements
- privacy and confidentiality
- livestreaming or recording
- online behaviour expectations
- age appropriateness of platforms
- safeguarding concerns specific to the activity

6. Online Abuse

What is Online Abuse?

Online abuse is any form of abuse occurring through digital technology or internet-enabled devices.

This may include:

- cyberbullying
- emotional abuse
- coercion or exploitation
- sexual abuse
- grooming
- harassment or stalking
- pressure to share sexual images

Online abuse may:

- occur entirely online
- begin online and move offline
- accompany abuse taking place face to face

7. Recognising Concerns

Possible indicators of online abuse may include:

- changes in behaviour or mood
- withdrawal or isolation
- secrecy around devices

- increased anxiety
- inappropriate language for age
- changes in eating or sleeping habits
- spending excessive time online
- sudden references to new online friends

Some individuals may be more vulnerable to online abuse, including:

- children and young people
- adults at risk
- individuals experiencing loneliness or isolation
- those with disabilities or additional needs
- those with previous experiences of abuse

8. Responding to Concerns

If a child or adult is in immediate danger:

- contact emergency services immediately

If concerns arise:

- report immediately to the Designated Person or safeguarding representative
- follow normal safeguarding procedures
- seek advice where appropriate from PCI safeguarding personnel or statutory agencies

Where concerns involve online sexual abuse or abusive imagery:

- PSNI should be informed immediately
- abusive content should never be copied, stored or shared further

Leaders and volunteers should never:

- investigate safeguarding concerns independently
- save abusive material to personal devices
- delay reporting concerns

9. Reporting and Recording

All online safeguarding concerns, disclosures or incidents must be:

- taken seriously

- accurately recorded
- reported promptly through safeguarding procedures

Online disclosures must be managed in the same way as face-to-face disclosures.

10. Pastoral Support

Anyone reporting online abuse or concerning behaviour should:

- be listened to carefully
- be reassured appropriately
- be supported pastorally
- be kept informed, where appropriate, about actions being taken

Confidentiality will be respected while safeguarding responsibilities are fulfilled.

11. Children in Care, Adopted Children and Adults at Risk

Special care must be taken to protect the identity and location of:

- children in care
- adopted children
- families escaping domestic abuse
- adults at risk

No identifying information or images should be shared without explicit consent.

“No consent” must always be respected.

12. Expectations of Staff and Volunteers

Staff and volunteers must:

- maintain professional boundaries online
- complete safeguarding training as required
- work with openness and transparency
- report concerns immediately
- use only approved communication methods

Staff and volunteers must not:

- engage in inappropriate online communication
- communicate secretly with children or young people

- use personal accounts for ministry communication with children
- share inappropriate content

13. Expectations of Parents and Guardians

Parents and guardians are expected to:

- support the congregation's online safeguarding approach
- supervise their children appropriately online
- raise concerns promptly
- engage respectfully on church platforms

14. Monitoring and Review

This policy will be reviewed regularly by Kirk Session and updated in line with our Safeguarding policies at a minimum of every three years. We will consider:

- safeguarding guidance
- legislative changes
- technological developments
- ministry needs