

Toft Newton Parish Council

E-mail: clerk@toftnewtonparishcouncil.gov.uk

Website: <https://toft-newton.parish.lincolnshire.gov.uk>

REPORT ON THE USE OF E-MAIL TO FULL COUNCIL

The report below links to agenda item number 2026-27/094.

Councillors are asked to note that the implications of this report will have the following implications, as explained in the report, below:		
Objectives:	Effective communication with residents. Compliance with Assertion 10.	
Resource Requirements:	Councillors, Employees and Volunteers Limited amount of time to set up	
Do we have the resource available?		Yes
Equalities & Human Rights	Are there equalities and / or human rights issues?	No
Equalities Impact Assessment	Is an impact assessment is required?	No
Crime and Disorder	Has crime and disorder have been considered?	Yes
Biodiversity	Are there any bio-diversity implications?	No
Financial	Are there financial implications at this stage?	No
	Will there be financial implications?	Yes
	Is there provision within the budget?	Yes
	Could there be additional expenditure?	Yes
	Is there potential for income generation?	No
Legal	Do we have power, to act?	Yes
Risk Management	Are there any risks?	No
	If so, how will these be mitigated?	
Risk Assessment	Is a risk assessment required?	No
Project Management	Is project management is required?	No
Person submitting this report: Consultant to the Council		
Date: 7 th July 2026		

Approved by Toft Newton Parish Council on:

23rd July 2026

Implementation due:

ASAP ideally by September 2026.

Review due:

Annual review from mid-2027 to ensure cost effectiveness.

REPORT ON THE USE OF E-MAIL TO FULL COUNCIL

Summary

In recent years most Parish Councils have relied on Councillors creating their own free e-mail address to allow for electronic communication, while this has been helpful in allowing Councils to share information more efficiently and cost effectively than by posting letters, it has its problems.

One thing to be aware of with regards to e-mail accounts that are used for Council business, is that should a Freedom of Information (FOI) request be received, e-mails sent and received by Councillors may have to be disclosed. Therefore, if Councillors have not created a separate e-mail address for Council business, the Councillor's personal e-mail address may very well become public knowledge. Additionally, there have been cases where private e-mails were required by the Courts in relation to FOI requests.

It is therefore not only good practice, but essential that all Councillors have separate e-mail address for Council business. Free e-mail accounts help with this.

However, using free e-mail systems has its pitfalls. These include e-mails frequently being marked as SPAM, e-mail accounts being unavailable because of global server outages, and e-mails therefore being queued for days while systems catch up with their backlogs, and the biggest risk is free e-mail accounts seem more prone to hacks than e-mail accounts that end in gov.uk.

It also comes across as unprofessional when the Clerk and Councillors use a range of e-mail addresses, which do not have a clear format, and use a range of service providers. This is one reason why the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government introduced the Smaller Authorities' Proper Practices Panel revised Annual Governance and Accountability Return (AGAR) requirements for the 2025-26 financial year.

These revised guidelines included a requirement (assertion 10) that all Councils move to having either a gov.uk e-mail address and website or alternatives such as org.uk. While alternatives were allowed, it was made very clear that a gov.uk e-mail address and website were the preferred option.

Attachments

There are no attachments to this report, however, I have included links to Parish Online.

- Parish Online: <https://www.parish-online.co.uk/>
- E-mail service: <https://www.parish-online.co.uk/services/email>

Background

Toft Newton Parish Council already had a gov.uk website, as Lincolnshire County Council provide free website hosting, with limited support for Town and Parish Councils within the County, using the Jadu platform which is also used by Lincolnshire County Council, West Lindsey District Council and the Greater Lincolnshire Combined County Authority.

Parish Online provides a free gov.uk e-mail address for the Clerk, and this is guaranteed to be free forever.

As the former Clerk, I made an executive decision to move over to the Parish Online service in September 2025, as I wanted to ensure Toft Newton Parish Council complied with the new assertion 10 by the deadline date of the 31st of March 2026.

The website address being: <https://toft-newton.parish.lincolnshire.gov.uk>.

The Clerk's e-mail address being: clerk@toftnewtonparishcouncil.gov.uk.

The government made funding available to help Parish Councils move to paid services, unfortunately this was all used up by the time I became aware of it.

Toft Newton Parish Council paid for Lincolnshire Association of Local Councils (LALC) to support us with our website in 2024-25. While we have used some of the time we paid for, we still have 532 minutes (8 hours and 52 minutes) worth of support to be used – these minutes roll over until used up. The LALC service costs £18.00 per hour for support and development of the website – they will upload documents and edit information as required.

Prior to the Clerk moving to the gov.uk e-mail address, the Clerk's e-mails often were just not delivered, often bounced and because we used Outlook.com we had no way of getting in touch with a Support Team who could actually help to identify and correct issues with accounts that were incorrectly flagged as SPAM.

While we have had some teething troubles with e-mail addresses bouncing back, especially to Councillors who currently use Outlook.com and increasingly so, to Councillors who use btinternet.com, we have been able to reach out to a Support Team at Parish Online, who have assisted with whitelisting and therefore ensuring e-mails are delivered.

Other things to be aware of:

- In 2027 the AGAR will be required to be completed wholly online.
- At the same time, assertion 10, which by the end of 2025-26 required a gov.uk e-mail address for the Clerk, is to require gov.uk e-mail addresses for all Councillors.

Proposal

Following e-mail correspondence with Chris Mewse at Parish Online, they have provided an option that is essential for us to take them up on, it is this:

The Parish Online Premium Package which would provide 20 toftnewtonparishcouncil.gov.uk e-mail addresses including the Clerk's account, each e-mail address would have 5gb of Online Storage on Zoho Mail <https://www.zoho.com/mail/> and the Zoho WorkDrive <https://www.zoho.com/workdrive/>.

The Premium Package allows for internal "Distribution Lists" to be set up, which would mean, quick and easy sharing of e-mails and documents and an internal communications system for sharing of short messages, news, or events.

But most importantly they have offered the Premium Package for **FREE until April 2027**. That would mean there is no cost in this financial year.

We currently have £200 budgeted in this financial year for Website Support (Expenditure Code E/027) and zero budgeted for E-mail Provision (Expenditure Code E/029). It would have been similar figures for 2027-28 too.

In 2027-28, the cost would be **£160 for the Premium Package** because Parish Online have funding via the Government scheme to get Parish Councils to switch to gov.uk e-mail addresses.

In 2028-29 the cost will rise the full cost, **which is £260 per year**.

I would suggest that the Clerk's storage is increased from 5gb to 10gb per year at a cost of £24 per year.

Moving to gov.uk e-mail addresses, and using Zoho Mail, and Zoho WorkDrive, will make it much easier for the Clerk to share documents with Councillors electronically and Councillors would have

access to the documents, rather than it being hit and miss as it currently is, as the Clerk and Councillors would be using the same systems, via the same gov.uk host.

The Parish Online system allows for old e-mail accounts to be automatically imported, so that means there would not be any loss of important Council related e-mails.

While 20 e-mail addresses seem a lot when we only have seven Councillors, there are other users who could benefit, such as if we Co-opt Independent Persons to serve on the Personnel Committee or Playground Development Working Group, employees and volunteers should all be provided with toftnewtonparishcouncil.gov.uk e-mail addresses, so in theory we would need:

1 x Clerk
7 x Councillors
? x Independent Persons
1 x Playground Warden
1 x Consultant to the Council

Plus, it would be good to have some in reserve for if / when there is a change over of Councillors, to allow some overlap between old and new Councillors before old addresses are deactivated.

I would recommend that Councillors and Co-opted Independent Persons have e-mail addresses with their names in them, such as:

Councillor.initial.surname@toftnewtonparishcouncil.gov.uk or
Member.initial.surname@toftnewtonparishcouncil.gov.uk,

It might also be appropriate to have a limited number of title specific e-mail addresses for Councillors such as:

Chair@toftnewtonparishcouncil.gov.uk or
Vice-Chair@toftnewtonparishcouncil.gov.uk or even
PersonnelCommitteeChair@toftnewtonparishcouncil.gov.uk

Whereas employees and volunteers have title specific e-mail addresses such as:

Clerk@toftnewtonparishcouncil.gov.uk or
PlaygroundWarden@toftnewtonparishcouncil.gov.uk or
Counsultant@toftnewtonparishcouncil.gov.uk

Title specific e-mail addresses will make it easier for employees and volunteers to follow previous correspondence if / when there are changes in personnel.

Options Considered

In accordance with the Financial Regulations 2026 v002 which will have been adopted by the time this report is considered, no other providers have been considered as the value is below the amount of £500. However, as the order would exceed £250 in the second full year, an official order will need to be placed by e-mail using the template (on the Clerk's Zoho Mail account) from the Clerk to Parish Online.

Parish Online is a not-for-profit Community Interest Company who is highly regarded within the Town and Parish Council sector.

However, I have followed discussions on the LALC Clerk's e-mail forum, so it would be possible to go back through previous e-mails and find other providers that are being used across Lincolnshire, should Councillors decide they would like further options to be explored.

Financial Information

I would also suggest that the £200 in this year's budget for Website Support not be used especially as we have just under nine hours of LALC support available to us on our current Lincolnshire County Council website and the funding be reallocated to cover the increased costs in 2027-28 and 2028-29, but moved to the E-mail Provision budget heading instead.

The increased expenditure would be:

2026-27: £0.00

2027-28: £184.00

2028-29: £284.00

Presuming increases are kept to a minimum in the years ahead, I believe this does represent good value for money, however, if Lincolnshire County Council or their successor authority stop providing the website for free then this may need to be reviewed. Currently, Parish Online offers the Premium Package of 20 e-mails and additionally a website hosting service for just an extra £90.00, so that would definitely be something to consider in the future, if the need arises.

But bear in mind the 8 hours 52 minutes of LALC Support (currently valued at £18 per hour) would be lost if the website is moved to an alternative provider.

It is a requirement of the Financial Regulations adopted on the 3rd of March 2026, and the revised Financial Regulations 2026 v002 to be adopted on the 23rd of June 2026, as stated in Regulation 5.1 "Members and officers are responsible for obtaining value for money at all times", therefore, for now, it cannot be justified spending on website hosting when we are provided with a perfectly adequate system for free.

But we must consider the implications of Local Government Reorganisation and cannot assume that everything will be the same as it currently is after April 2028, when the new authorities go live.

Power to Act / Legal Implications

The Local Government Act 1972, section 142, as amended by the Communications Act 2003 chapter 21, sub-section 349(2) requires the provision of information and electronic communication, therefore, these would be the appropriate powers to act.

Not moving to gov.uk e-mail addresses for all Councillors would potentially mean that the Parish Council would be in breach of the year-end requirements in 2027.

The IT Policy, Communication Policy and Records Retention Policy would all need to be updated, but the changes would be minor.

The Clerk or Consultant to the Council will produce a step-by-step guide to assist Councillors in setting up the new accounts and installing software, once the new e-mail accounts have been created.

Conclusion / Recommendations

Therefore, as the Consultant to the Council, I recommend that Councillors take advantage of this offer to move to gov.uk e-mail addresses, which is FREE for the rest of this financial year, then reduced at the cost of £160 for the 2027-28 year and then at full cost of £260 in 2028-29.

Councillors are asked to resolve to accept the recommendation in this report.

Resolution 1:

Toft Newton Parish Council resolve to move to the Parish Online Premium Package as outlined in the report above, and that this move to Parish Online should be implemented as soon as possible.

And

Resolution 2:

Toft Newton Parish Council resolve that funding be allocated on an ongoing basis into the E-mail Provision budget heading / expenditure code E/029, and that the budget of £200 in Website Support E/027 for 2026-27 be reallocated to E/029 and split across the 2027-28 and 2028-29 financial years to go towards meeting the increased costs.