

Sefton Social Media Policy for Foster Carers

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1. Introduction:

Social media and the internet have changed the way we communicate and offer children and young people positive opportunities and benefits such as developing friendships and maintaining social ties, education and developing a sense of identity and belonging.

However, it can also create potential privacy and safety/risk concerns for example the potential for sexual exploitation/grooming or contact with family members/strangers that might lead to them coming to harm. Such concerns will vary depending on a child's age and online activities and children who cared for after may be more vulnerable to these risks because of behavioural or emotional needs or the people they are in contact with.

Whilst it may be tempting to prevent children and young people from using social media, it is rarely realistic given that internet and mobile devices are widespread and accessible and forbidding any use will prevent them from benefitting from its advantages and may make it harder for children looked after to fit in with friends. Instead, there are a number of steps by open communication, monitoring, guidance and

boundaries that foster carers can take to ensure children and young people are safer online and minimise the level of risk.

Foster Carers and professionals may also wish to participate in social networking in their own personal lives, however, individuals are encouraged to consider very carefully the information they post and how it might be viewed when published in terms of the potential impact on their own reputation.

2. Role of the Placement Planning Meeting and Safer Caring Plan:

It is good practice to hold a placement planning meeting prior to a child/young person being placed and provides a good opportunity for Foster Carers to find out more about the child/young person who is going to be placed with them. Expectations in relation to the use of digital technology and mobile phone use should be addressed within this meeting; the agreed arrangements should be recorded in the Placement Plan. As far as possible, agreement should be made on any issue that is likely to arise so that the child's experience of care can be as normal as possible.

Key issues to consider include:

- What role the digital/internet technologies had in the child/young person's life to date. Is there any history of online harm or risk e.g., bullying, grooming, self-harm?
- What the child or young person can use the internet for e.g., schoolwork, socialising or gaming and what services will they have access to e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram.
- What equipment the child or young person will have that can access the internet e.g., family computer, tablet, games console, mobile phone.
- Contact, consideration of the role that digital and internet technologies should or could play in arrangements.
- Privacy and confidentiality; all members of the family household need to be mindful of what they can and cannot share online.

The arrangements for delegated authority should also be discussed in the placement planning meeting for example what authority you have been delegated to make decisions about photographs and where they can be displayed and when you need to refer to the Social Worker or

parent of the child/young person. Similarly, use of a mobile phone and the circumstances in which foster carers can restrict access.

These areas should be incorporated into your family Safer Caring Plan, any family rules around how to behave online apply not only to a foster child but Foster Carers and professionals' own children so they need to be understood by everyone in the family including the reasons behind the family rules.

Although it is likely that Foster Carers and professionals may need to start with close supervision, any agreement/rules will need to change over time as the child or young person grows and technologies develop. Digital issues should be revisited regularly in the child or young person's reviews and in the family safer caring plan.

Tasks agreed within the placement plan should have corresponding authority delegated.

It is important that decisions about allowing the child access to mobile phones and social networking sites are discussed and agreed in advance, with consideration of e-safety, and the child's history and presenting problems. Foster carers may need to limit a child's use of a mobile phone or access to social networking sites in order to implement house rules or due to safeguarding concerns.

3. Privacy and Confidentiality:

Be careful what you share; for example, you should not share on Facebook or other social media your role as a foster carer or share daily routines.

Carers must never identify a child or former child in their care on social media.

Information and photographs of children looked after including family photos must never be posted on social media sites without written consent from the Local Authority, parents and the children, if they are of an appropriate age. Once an image is on the internet it can be viewed and stored by other people within their friends' network.

Be aware that photos may reveal the child/young person's location. Think about the implications of this for your own safety and that of the children you are caring for.

- Carer's immediate family and friends, who are aware of their fostering role, should also be reminded of expectations around social media and the dangers of identifying a foster child.
- Need to uphold your reputation; Foster Carers should consider the consequences before posting anything on social networking sites and the impression it may give of you to those who access the information. Remember that anything posted online could end up in the public domain to be read by birth parents, children/young people or your Supervising Social Worker.
- Set maximum privacy settings; understand settings and reporting features for each network used, so children in your care can limit who can find them, what they can see and how they can communicate.
- Privacy settings should be set to 'only friends', settings such as 'friends of friends' and 'networks and friends' open you content to a wider audience. Your privacy and that of your family, friends and children in your care could be compromised.
- Privacy settings should be reviewed on a regular basis.
- Conduct an internet search every so often, search on a child/young person's name/address and see what information/tagged photos are publicly available.
- Make use of parental control tools for example on your home computer and any device your foster child will use.
- With shared devices, make sure you log out of websites or apps after using them.
- Foster Carers and children/young people can be friends on social networks if both parties feel comfortable with this, however, this will need to be reviewed if a child/young person moves on as the type/nature of acceptable communication is likely to change. Guidance should be sought from the child's Social worker and the Supervising Social Worker.
- Adding a young person as a 'friend' means you can assess/monitor their contents, but it also means they can access yours, which can lead to difficulties if anyone posts anything inappropriate on your wall/page.
- In order to maintain appropriate professional boundaries, Foster Carers should not have family members of children looked after as

'friends' nor should employees of the Fostering Service and Foster Carers be 'friends' on social media websites.

4. Establishing Trust and Giving Advice:

- Involve children/young people with the development of the safer caring plan.
- When communicating online, children can become less wary and talk about things far more openly than they might when communicating face to face. Children should be supported to understand that when they use digital technology, they should not give out personal information, particularly their name, address or school or mobile phone number to anyone they do not know or trust. If they have been asked for such information, they should always check with their carer other before providing such details. It is also important that they understand why they must take carer or trusted adult with them if they meet someone face to face whom they have only previously met on-line.
- Children and young people should be advised to 'think before you post' and be encouraged to keep personal information private by never giving out personal details which could identify them or their location.
- Explain the need to be careful; that not everyone is who they say they are. Remind children/young people that meeting someone they have been in touch with online can be dangerous. Online friends are still strangers even if they have been talking to them for a long time.
- Monitor use; know what type of social media children/young people are using. Consider asking children/young people for passwords and permission for a trusted adult to 'friend' them. However, try to balance monitoring with privacy considerations.
- The internet can facilitate contact from birth family where this is not appropriate. If needed explain why unmanaged online contact is not appropriate, consult other professionals and be aware of blocking tools.
- Maintain an open dialogue; children/young people should be encouraged to talk about how they use social media and to tell a trusted adult if someone or something makes them feel uncomfortable or worried.

□ Discuss cyberbullying, encourage them to be kind online and not to send, forward or respond to mean or embarrassing messages or pictures.

5 Guidance on Mobile Phones for Cared For children:

Children and young people now see mobile phones as an accepted - and necessary part of their daily lives. Responsible parents are, however, keen to ensure that they only provide a mobile to their child, if they are satisfied that this is an appropriate thing to do. As Corporate Parents, carers and professionals, we are keen to ensure that the children we care for are offered the same rights and protection that any parent would wish to offer their child. It is also acknowledged that mobile devices and the Internet is revolutionising what is understood as the maintenance of relationships and 'family time'. Mobile devices are often used to 'stay in touch' via use of text, WhatsApp, video calling, sending/posting pictures etc.

The guiding principle is that cared for children are supported to achieve positive outcomes and it is recognised that there will always be situations which require a flexible, child centred response, unique to that child/young person.

There are advantages and disadvantages to a young person having their own mobile phone. The positives might include; if the young person needs urgent help, whilst out and about, or to advise carers they are running late, and being able to maintain contact with family and friends. Many young people are clear that having a mobile adds to their sense of security and that they feel safer, because of having a mobile with them.

Conversely, having a mobile can place a young person at risk of theft / robbery', bullying by text / cyberbullying, sexting and grooming by older people or others who pose a risk.

Consideration should be given during placement planning as to whether a child will be allowed a mobile phone, and ground rules for its safe use agreed. Foster carers will want to establish a relationship with the young person, which promotes discussion on a range of topics. It is not something which should be agreed based on a request by a birth relative, to support their need for contact. Rather, 'family time' is one of the areas the young person will need to be discussed, in deciding if it is appropriate for a young person to have a mobile phone.

In making a decision, the following should be explored:

- Will a mobile phone support the young person in being healthy? Health guidance recommends that children only use mobile phones for essential purposes and keep calls short as a precaution.
- Safety considerations (see above)
- The young person's wishes and feelings, age and their level of competence/maturity and understanding.
- Will the young person be able to ensure they switch the phone off at night (or allow the carers to take it, for re-charging, overnight), so they (and others!) have uninterrupted sleep?
- Does this young person accept they need to switch off their phone in lessons?
- Carers should discuss the following with young people:
 - 'If you received a random text, what would you do?'
 - 'What cyber bullying is, and how to get help'
 - 'Who would you want to give your number to?'
 - 'How would a mobile keep you safe?'
 - 'Who would you ring in an emergency?'
 - 'How would you keep yourself - and the mobile safe?'

Consequently, the process will involve discussions, which will cover a number of areas, and which should be discussed at the start of a placement be captured in the Placement Plan and the delegated authority and reviewed as the young person develops and/or issues arise.

The degree to which the local authority shares Parental Responsibility is also an important consideration.

The circumstances in which children of primary school age have their own mobile phone should be considered on a case-by-case basis considering the points above. It is not however, routinely recommended that children at Primary School are given a mobile phone. It would for instance, be appropriate for young people in year 6 who are developing their independence and in preparation for the transition to High School.

Sometimes there may be an issue of birth parents/ family ringing the young person, at times, or in ways, which are not helpful to that young person. An example might be if the adult is ringing for their comfort, to meet their own needs, or under the influence of substances. This can be a source of tension and carers need to consider if this could be a potential difficulty and how to address this, with the young person they are caring for. In some circumstances, it will be necessary to involve the child's social worker and the supervising social worker.

In some situations, advice may need to be obtained on restricting access to a mobile phone either, temporarily or permanently, if it is felt that the continuing use is harmful.

Again though, discussing issues at the start of a placement and involving parents in the discussion helps to set initial agreements and boundaries and which can then be reviewed.

Safety Measures:

Safe use of Social Networking Sites - Smartphones have a GPS (Global Positioning System) facility that shows their location. Some websites and apps like Facebook, can use this to publish the user's location. This means that when a young person posts a message or photo on a social network, their location may also be added. It is important to talk to children about location settings and what the risks might be. They can be switched off if necessary. Young people should not share information on social networking sites which identifies other looked after children or the location of a placement.

Taking and sending pictures - Sometimes children and young people use their smartphones and tablets for sexting – taking and sending explicit pictures of themselves. As soon as they send the image to another person, they lose control over where and how that image is shared. It is important to talk to young people about the dangers of talking and sharing explicit photos by mobile phone and online. This discussion should include the potential legal implications.

Setting up parental controls - Parental controls can be used on mobile phones and tablets to restrict access certain material online. Some providers offer different levels of control, that you can change based on your child's age. Some mobile phone operators provide free parental control services. For younger children in particular, controls are recommended on their devices to keep them safe.

Carers should talk to children about the sort of things which are suitable for them to see.

Parent protection apps - Installing parent protection apps on a child's smartphone or tablet can help carers keep track of what they're getting up to. Features vary from app to app, but they include things like:

- Alerting you if your child tries to access a blocked site.
- Keeping a record of text messages, they send and receive.

You can also set times when the mobile phone/ device can and can't be used – for example, you could block your child's smartphone or tablet during school hours and overnight. It is important to strike the right balance between keeping an eye on children and young people and giving them the independence and freedom to explore. Simply sheltering them from the online world might not help them in the long run. They need a chance to learn how to behave online and find out what's out there.

6. If something goes wrong:

- If you discover something inappropriate on a device, you may feel shocked or angry but by dealing with it calmly the child/young person will know they can turn to you again.
- Social media such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube have facilities for reporting abuse and inappropriate material.
- Save any available evidence, if necessary, for example by taking screen shots.
- Speak to your Supervising Social Worker and child's Social Worker; know where to report the incident e.g., Children's Services, school or the police and complete a significant event notification if applicable. Record the issues and concerns in your weekly recording sheets.

If there is a concern about access to or use of a mobile phone or social media, then the foster carer should raise this with the child's social worker and the supervising social worker. A meeting should then be held to consider the concerns and agree actions/parameters around usage. Parents should also be invited, particularly if there are concerns that their actions are undermining the placement plan.

For information and advice on keeping children safe online visit:

[Parents and carers | CEOP Education \(thinkuknow.co.uk\)](https://www.thinkuknow.co.uk)

[Child Safety Online: A practical guide for parents and carers whose children are using social media - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk)