## Social Care Guidance: Communication Tools and/or Mechanisms of Data transfer

### Purpose: To provide local guidance in relation to the professional responsibilities of social work practitioners in Children and Adult Services (including social work students); regarding the use of communication tools and/or mechanisms of data transfer (for example: WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook etc.) to communicate with service users.

### This is for guidance purposes only and therefore not enforceable in the event of misconduct.

### In accordance with best practice, this guidance will be reviewed and updated annually (from January 2023) and will contain useful links which will enable access to further guidance and practice examples across social care.

### Context: Communication Tools and/or Mechanisms of Data transfer present social work practitioners with both opportunities and challenges in relation to how they engage with service users. Whilst such tools can enhance communication and be used for positive purposes in social work, practitioners must maintain appropriate professional and personal boundaries and take responsibility for recognising the ethical dilemmas presented by the use of such tools.

The virtual world provides social workers with many real-life issues and there will be many professional dilemmas that arise, regardless of their area of practice. For example, it may be that a Looked After Child is using social media to contact their birth family in defiance of a Contact Order. This guidance recognises that new technology changes power relations and places a responsibility on professionals to consider the implications for their practice, their services and for the interests of service users. Social workers need to be aware of and knowledgeable about technological developments and understand the impact, use and advantages as well as possible ethical concerns and risks in relation to themselves, the people they are working with and the local authority.

### Communication Tools and/or Mechanisms of Data transfer help social workers keep up to date with developments in wider policy, social work and related professions. This is contributing to the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) of social workers.

Social workers are increasingly likely to participate in on-line communities of people, including service users, who have a common interest in policy and practice issues. This can help individuals and organisations to better understand, engage with and respond to people. It can contribute to making services more transparent and accountable. The use of such tools enables people to collaborate, build relationships and share information and resources.

Proactive engagement in, and the safe usage of these tools can provide a facilitative platform for achieving social work’s main objectives of greater equity and enhanced social justice and an opportunity for challenging power imbalances and exclusion imposed by structural hierarchies. It can reclaim power through creation of new spaces for dialogue and a more dynamic social interaction and therefore has the capacity to bring about a radical shift in care services.

### Notwithstanding the wealth of opportunities communication tools provide, there are also risks associated. Social workers need to take these risks into account, along with risks that can lead to harm and abuse when using such tools when assessing risk and working with children, families and adults. Where there are safeguarding concerns over vulnerable children or adults, it is both lawful and best practice to review information, gather information and record information.

### Social workers should be aware that when they use communication tools, they are still representing the profession, and the agency, and should be aware of how they could be viewed by society/service users/ colleagues/other agencies/the media/ governing bodies. They should maintain appropriate personal and professional boundaries in their relationships with service users and colleagues, recognising that not to do so could be detrimental to themselves, their careers, service users, other individuals and employers.

In this regard, social workers must consider/adhere to the following:

* They should apply the same principles, expectations and standards for interacting and communicating with people online as in other areas of practice.
* Waltham Forest staff are not permitted to use their personal accounts on communication tools for work or work-related purposes.
* Age-appropriate usage: for practitioners who work with children there needs to be consideration of the minimum ages required to have an account on; for example, Instagram/ Facebook etc. Social workers should not engage with service users who do not meet the legal age thresholds outlined by the company or organisation associated with that communication application/tool.
* Any child under the legally required age whose risk assessment indicates a communication application/tool is required to communicate with them will either have parental consent (section 20) or consent from the Team Manager as corporate parent as part of the risk assessment.
* Communications apps/tools should not be used to communicate with service users under the age of 16 directly.  Communications should be sent to parents or legal guardians.  Where a safeguarding concern arises for service users younger than 16, and that user has contacted an officer using such communication tool, then the service will consider how to apply the appropriate safeguarding procedures and practices.
* To ensure compliance with the Data Protection Act, personal information should not be posted or shared through such communication channels.
* Contacting service users through these communication tools is ‘consent based’ and to this effect, the practitioner will need to be able to evidence this has been obtained at the onset, in instances whereby such communication tools have been used. For example, adding a short case note on the Case Management System (CMS) is recommended until a dedicated consent script and process has been developed to enable the effective transfer of data from the communication tool directly onto the Case Management System (Mosaic).
* It is important to remember that online conversations may be referred to as ‘chat’, but they are written documents. Communication history should be retained on the practitioner’s work-allocated mobile device as long as they work with the service user.
* Communication tools should only be used to communicate with the service user during the practitioner’s normal working hours.
* Status sharing functionalities associated with such communication tools are prohibited.
* Communication tools should be used as a method to ‘keep in touch’ only and not for in-depth assessment or review purposes. For example: to confirm that the person will be attending a social care related appointment or as an introduction to the service user.
* Steps should be taken to ensure that personal communication and work-related communication are kept separate.
* Social workers have a duty to act in the best interests of service users and consider people’s right to respect, privacy and confidentiality whilst also managing and assessing risk within a legal framework.
* Communication tools will not be used to discuss any case sensitive data or to conduct interviews.
* Any inappropriate message or attachment received by the practitioner is reported to their line manager in the first instance.

**Specific guidelines relating to the use of WhatsApp**

WhatsApp can only be used by social care staff for keeping in touch’ conversations and not assessment style conversations. ‘Current information governance procedures stipulate that any messages or modes of communication exercised through social media platforms, and other similar mediums; should be subject to a ‘screen shot’ and be stored in Mosaic under the relevant case file.”

Social care staff must obtain consent in the first outbound WhatsApp message: the following text is advised-

"Please note that we will be communicating with you using WhatsApp. The platform is owned by Meta, who are a global company and therefore your data may be transferred to another country (including the USA). We require your consent to continue to communicate with you using WhatsApp. You can withdraw this consent at any time, without any impact on the services we provide to you. We will never send you any chat, which contains your sensitive or special category data. If you agree to use using WhatsApp please respond to this chat with "YES"."

**Further guidance and useful links:**

BASW: Social Media Policy:

<https://www.basw.co.uk/system/files/resources/Social%20Media%20Policy.pdf>

Data Protection Act:

<https://www.gov.uk/data-protection>

SWE: Professional Standards Guidance:

<https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/standards/professional-standards-guidance/>