



Adoption & Fostering Service Guidance for Staff Undertaking Social Media and Internet Checks

Introduction

Internet checks can reveal important information about a prospective adopter or foster carer's suitability to care for children. We therefore have a responsibility to undertake such checks routinely.

The law does not require that social media and internet checks are undertaken however it does state the following:

Fostering

The law does not require social media checks to be undertaken on fostering applicants. However, Regulation 26(2)(c) of the Fostering Services 2011 (as amended) permits the fostering service provider to obtain 'any other information (they) consider relevant.'

Adoption

The Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 (as amended) do not require social media and internet checks to be undertaken, but Regulations 25(5) and 30 (f) permit the adoption agency to include 'any other information which the agency considers to be relevant.'

Checks on Existing Foster Carers

The Regulation of the Fostering Services 2011 (as amended), Review and Terminations of Approval, Section 28 (3)(a)] states: "When undertaking a review, the fostering service provider must make such enquiries and obtain such information as they consider necessary in order to review whether the foster parent continues to be suitable to be a foster parent and the foster parent's household continues to be suitable."

Undertaking Checks

It is important to distinguish between information that is available in public areas of the internet (that is, the digital equivalent of someone speaking in a public place),



and private area that are password protected (the digital equivalent of a private letter or conversation).

While it would be wholly appropriate to consider the former, it would not be appropriate to deliberately seek information regarding the latter, unless there was specific information suggesting a need to do so. Therefore we would not normally require applicants to share passwords or access to personal areas of social networking or similar sites.

Staff should not use their own personal social media accounts to check an applicant's details but should go through the adoption and fostering specific Facebook account, (details of which will be shared with staff who will have specific responsibility for such checks).

Consideration of the Information Obtained

Staff undertaking such checks will need to consider the information obtained and whether this has come from the applicant or someone within their network.

Things to consider include:

1. Inappropriate photographs
2. Membership of or sharing of posts from groups such as Britain First
3. Content that is likely to cause offence to others based on race, religion, culture, disability, sexual orientation and sexism
4. Concerns about relationships

Thorough conversations with applicants are essential prior to any decision being made about their suitability.

For concerns regarding the safeguarding of children the child protection procedures should be followed.

Birmingham Children's Trust's Social Media & Internet Checks in Relation to the Adoption & Fostering Policy

Birmingham Children's Trust's Adoption and Fostering Service will undertake social media and internet checks as deemed reasonable, proportionate and lawful in respect of the assessment of applicants and during the review or registration of foster carers. This is necessary to comply with best practice around safeguarding.



Checks should be carried out in a spirit of openness and with the understanding of the person being assessed.

Permission is given in the Registration of Interests for the Adoption and Fostering Services which states that applicants agree to social media checks being carried out.

As part of the assessment process, Birmingham Children's Trust's Adoption & Fostering Service will routinely undertake social media checks that will initially consist of using search engines and social media platforms in order to enter the name of applicants or family members.

Checks may be expanded upon depending on the information that emerges from the initial checks or in relation to any other information that has become available in the course of the assessment.

Checks will only be undertaken in relation to information held in public spaces on the internet. Applicants will not normally be asked to provide passwords in order to allow access to their private spaces.

If information emerges from the check that is of concern, this will be discussed with the applicants in order to seek their views before making any judgements about their suitability to foster or adopt. The only exception to this is where a safeguarding matter arises. In these circumstances the child protection procedures should be followed.

The nature of checks undertaken and the outcome of those checks will be recorded and made available within the assessment report.

In addition to undertaking social media and internet checks, Birmingham Children's Trust's Adoption & Fostering Service will provide advice and information about the use of the internet to individuals as part of the preparations to assess their suitability to adopt or foster.

Guidance to staff staying safe online can be found in the [Think Before You Share Online Government Guidance](#).