Practice Guidance for Social Media, Internet, Photographs and Mobile Phones

Standards and Regulations

The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011:
- Regulation 11 - Independent fostering agencies—duty to secure welfare.
- Regulation 12 - Arrangements for the protection of children.
- Regulation 14 - Duty to promote contact.
- Regulation 16 - Education, employment and leisure activities.

Fostering Services National Minimum Standards:
- Standard 4 - Safeguarding children.

Training, Support and Development Standards for Foster Care:
- Standard 4 – Know how to communicate effectively.
- Standard 6 – Keep children and young people safe from harm.

See also:
- Think U Know - Online safety information.
- Childnet - latest information on the sites and services that children and young people use, plus information about mobiles, gaming, downloading, social networking and much more.
- Child Safety Online.
- Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE).
- NSPCC - Parental Controls.
- NSPCC Report Remove Tool - The tool enables young people under the age of 18 to report a nude image or video of themselves which has appeared online.
  The Internet Watch Foundation will review these reports and work to remove any content which breaks the law.
- UK Council for Internet Safety (UKCIS) Digital Passport - a communication tool to support children and young people with care experience to talk with their carers about their online lives.
- Talking to Your Child About Online Sexual Harassment (Children's Commissioner).
- The Dark Web Explained (for Parents and Carers).
- Online Safety SEND Resources.

1. **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:

Pre-approval:

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Regulation 26(2)(c) of the Fostering Services 2011 (as amended) permits the fostering service provider to obtain 'any other information (they) consider relevant.

Post Approval:

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."

The way that we communicate is increasingly online, and the internet and social media are an integral part of both sharing and gathering information. Therefore, our checks on prospective carers include internet and social media checks, as we deem this information relevant.

This policy also provides guidance for Foster Carers and Supported Lodgings carers on managing the internet use and social media of any children and young people in their care as well as their role and responsibilities to maintain a child's confidentiality as an approved carer.

2. Pre-Approval Checks

As part of the checks we complete during the assessment, the foster carer(s) will complete and sign a consent form to social media checks. The assessing social worker will then conduct an internet and social media search.

Bradford Children's Families Trust 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. All checks should be carried out in a spirit of openness and with the understanding of the person being assessed.

The assessing social worker will input personal details such as the carers' name, and the names of others in their household, into a search engine (ie Google) and viewing any websites that link to this name. They should also conduct a search of the carers' social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram. Staff should not use their own personal social media accounts to check an applicant's details but should request to access the platforms with the applicant(s).

The assessing social worker will consider information gathered from these checks, about the carer(s) or other members of their household. If there is any concern about information gained as part of an internet/social media search, this will be discussed with the carer(s).

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:

a. Inappropriate photographs.
b. Membership of or sharing of posts from groups such as Britain First.

c. Content that is likely to cause offence to others based on race, religion, culture, disability, sexual orientation, and sexism.
d. Concerns about relationships.

The information might have been published by the applicant, or third party. The information and any discussion about it, will be considered in the context of the assessment, unless there is a safeguarding concern raised; if this is the case then child protection procedures will be adhered to.

3. Internet use – Considerations for Foster Carers about their Personal Use

Internet use is now a way of life from an early age. Social Media plays a growing part in most of our lives, and many people use sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. As a result of this, it is easier than ever for people to connect and share information with each other.

As a foster carer, you should consider what this could mean for you in the future. Some foster carers may have concerns about the accessibility of information and photographs on the internet and may have anxieties about being traced by the families of children they care for.

Foster carers may choose to participate in social networking in their personal lives, however, before you start to foster, we would encourage you to consider privacy settings and to be mindful about what you post. Information which is online (and therefore in the public domain) could potentially have an impact on your professional reputation so caution is required.

When it comes to what is posted online, the below needs to be considered by all members of the fostering household, including any other adults or children who use social media:

Photos – be mindful of who can see photos and what they show, considering how this information can be used. For example, does the first day of term picture for your child have their uniform clearly visible? Your profile picture can usually be seen by anyone who puts your name into a search engine.

Inappropriate content – all professionals can now be held accountable for information they post online. Posting details about certain lifestyle choices, writing about colleagues, or writing negative things about the local authority, may all have consequences.

Facebook marketplace – many people now use Facebook marketplace, or Facebook selling groups in their local area. Many of these have low or no privacy settings, so someone who was searching for you on Facebook, and could not access your profile, could see what you post in these groups.

Privacy settings – know how to manage your own privacy settings and have them at a level you are comfortable with. Doing this means you are better able to talk to children about their privacy settings.

4. Internet use – Considerations for Foster Carers of Fostered Children

Different ways of communicating with friends are important to a child/young people and are now a way of life from an early age. When a child is placed with you, find out their background and whether the internet, photographs and mobile phones contributed towards any abuse so that you can plan their use safely for all children but particularly those where it has been an issue. You should ask the child's social worker for advice and information.

There are many positives for children and young people (and carers too) to getting online. These include:
- Staying in touch with their friends and family;
- Making new friends who share their interests;
- Being creative;
- Finding help when its needed;
- Learning and getting ahead in school;
- Getting and staying organised;
- Having fun;
- For children with special needs or disabilities, there's lots of technology to support and help.

The internet and other technology such as smart phones, tablets and games consoles are a great resource, but we need to be aware that the online world presents its own dangers. All children can be vulnerable online and need appropriate safeguards in place.

Your knowledge of different media will vary but it is important that foster carers develop their understanding of different electronic devices, the internet and social media, and that you learn how to safeguard children when using the internet and mobile devices. The sites at the top of this page contain useful links to guides that show you step-by-step how to use the latest apps and how to set safety settings on most devices that access the internet as well as guides that explain what to look out for and how young people can be supported and protected. Foster carers should also be aware of and alert to the signs of grooming behaviour. Grooming is when someone builds an emotional connection with a child to gain their trust for the purposes of sexual abuse or exploitation.

Your instinct maybe to confiscate your child's phone or games console or to use as many tools and filters as you can to 'protect' your child from nasty things they may find on the internet. This may be useful for very young children, and tools are important for all internet users – we would all do well to check our privacy settings more often – but when it comes to raising a digitally resilient child, it's vital that carers ensure children are allowed to explore the online world **in order to become digitally resilient**.

Digital resilience helps children and young people to recognise and manage the risks they come across as they socialise, explore or work online. They will achieve digital resilience mostly experience, rather than through learning and it is fostered by opportunities to confide in trusted others and later reflect upon online challenges.

The reality is, if you attempt to make parental controls your first line of defence, your child will do what children are programmed to do – they'll attempt to find a way around them and could end up in much less safe parts of the internet, such as the murkier parts of the dark web. More importantly, you won't be helping them to develop digital resilience.

With any discussion of risks, it's important to realise that the most horrendous crimes are also the least likely to happen. As with all aspects of life, the risk should be put into context. The most common risk is that a child will 'meet' people in chat rooms and on games who are

mean, unpleasant or rude. Another common 'risk' is that a child will spend a lot of time doing a lot of not very much other than watching annoying videos on YouTube!

If you are concerned that a child/young person is being bullied over the internet or phone, you should talk to them about it, record what is happening in the daily record and speak to the child's social worker as soon as possible.

The placement plan should identify any risks or issues associated with the use of a computer, mobile phone or gaming equipment particularly in relation to bullying, sexual exploitation, radicalisation or other risk-taking behaviours and where appropriate assess the risk and how safely to manage the child or young person's use. The use of social media/electronic communication as a way of maintaining contact with family and friends should be outlined in the child's Care Plan (see also Contact Between the Child, their Family and Others Procedure)

5. Encouraging Safe Use of the Internet

You should try and take part in a child's web browsing particularly for a new child in placement; school homework is an ideal opportunity for this. Explain the web's positive and negative sides and tell them that if they are not sure about a site they should talk to you. Children should not be permitted to use sites that are also used by adults unless risk assessment has been carried out, in consultation with the social worker. These arrangements must be outlined in the child's Placement Plan and must be reviewed regularly.

Some useful guidelines are:
- Time limits on computers should be agreed with the child/young person;
- Appropriate internet security should be used on the computers to avoid access to inappropriate material;
- You should set clear ground rules on the use of the internet;
- Computers should be in areas of the house where adults can see what is being looked at rather than in a bedroom;
- If a young person has a laptop then decide with them where and when they can use it if they are accessing the internet;
- You should show an interest in the internet and encourage young people to be open about any concerns or problems;
- Never allow a child to arrange a face-to-face meeting with someone they "meet" on the internet without first speaking to the child's social worker;
- The child should never respond to messages that are rude, threatening, or makes them feel uncomfortable. Encourage the child to talk to you about messages like this. If the child receives a message or sees something on-line that you are concerned about keep a copy and make a note in the daily record;
- Remember that people online may not be who they say they are.

Teaching the child to be cautious is important and can help when they start to use social networking sites like Facebook or Twitter.

When they do you should ensure the child's profile and postings contain nothing that might expose their identity or whereabouts.

You should go through the site's terms and conditions, explaining them to the child - it's important you both understand them.

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You should try to equip the child with the skills to decide who to trust, even when they have not met the person face-to-face and talk to the child/young person about what makes a real friend.

You should be aware and understand the risks that using the internet may pose for children, such as bullying, sexual exploitation and radicalisation. The Fostering Service should have well-developed strategies to support you in keeping children safe and to support and provide you with appropriate learning around internet safety.

You should be aware of and alert to indicators of grooming behaviour and possible sexual exploitation.

Social networking sites are websites where you can create a profile all about yourself and contact other people. You can also upload photos, music and videos to share with other people, and on some sites, chat to other people on forums. Popular social networking websites include Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram and Twitter but there are others.

Social networking sites are often used by perpetrators as an easy way to access children and young people for sexual abuse. The Serious Crime Act (2015) introduced an offence of sexual communication with a child. This applies to an adult who communicates with a child and the communication is sexual or if it is intended to elicit from the child a communication which is sexual and the adult reasonably believes the child to be under 16 years of age. The Act also amended the Sex Offences Act 2003, it is an offence for an adult to arrange to meet with someone under 16 having communicated with them on just one occasion (previously it was on at least two occasions).

Radical and extremist groups may use social networking to attract children and young people into narrow ideologies that are intolerant of diversity: this is similar to the grooming process and exploits the same vulnerabilities. The groups concerned include those linked to extreme Islamist, or Far Right/Neo Nazi ideologies, extremist Animal Rights groups and others who justify political, religious, sexist or racist violence.

Children may be drawn to adopt a radical ideology through a failure to appreciate the bias in extremist material; in addition by repeated viewing of extreme content they may come to view it as normal.

'Internet Abuse' relates to four main areas of abuse to children:
- Abusive images of children (although these are not confined to the Internet);
- A child or young person being groomed for the purpose of Sexual Abuse;
- Exposure to pornographic or other offensive material via the Internet; and
- The use of the internet, and in particular social media, to engage children in extremist ideologies.

It should be noted that creating or sharing explicit images of a child is illegal, even if the person doing it is a child. A young person is breaking the law if they:
- Take an explicit photo or video of themselves or a friend;
- Share an explicit image or video of a child, even if it's shared between children of the same age;
- Possess, download or store an explicit image or video of a child, even if the child gave their permission for it to be created.

However, if a young person is found creating or sharing images, the police can choose to record that a crime has been committed but that taking formal action is not in the public interest.

With effect from 29 June 2021, section 69 Domestic Abuse Act 2021 expanded so-called 'revenge porn' to include **threats** to disclose private sexual photographs and films with intent to cause distress.

6. Photographs

If it is OK to take pictures or videos always ask the child's permission first and make sure they are clear on who will see them and why.

You should try and take photographs regularly of the child/young person to help record their life; it may also help when putting together their Life Story book. See [Keeping Memories](#).

You should be clear on who can give consent for the child to have their picture taken or be filmed for school etc.

7. Mobile Phones, Social Networking Sites and Apps

Mobile phones and some apps offer text messaging, taking pictures, sending, and receiving them, sending and receiving video clips and soundtracks as well as access to the internet which means a child can download pictures and videos.

With a camera phone a child/young person can also send pictures of themselves, friends and where they live, which can have security implications for some Children in Care.

It may be useful to encourage young people to share details of how they communicate with others and an agreement reached between the young person, social worker and foster carer about how safely to do this.

You need to be aware that most mainstream Social Networking sites impose a minimum age limit of 13 on their membership. This includes Facebook. It is therefore not appropriate for children under 13 years old to use social networking sites which are also used by adults.

- Age appropriate use of the phones – Can the child take their phone to school? Do they need to hand in their phone at the end of the evening before they go to bed?
- Safety – does the phone have internet access and if so have the carer, social worker and child all signed the contract to agree that the carer will periodically check the phone for appropriate and safe usage? If the agreement has been made that the phone will not be checked document why;
- Where there are concerns about the use of the phone, you should report them to the child's social worker and discuss appropriate sanctions – should the phone be removed?
- Where it is considered and evidence is available to suggest that the child's mobile phone is placing the child at risk, the phone can be removed as an immediate measure. If this situation occurs, reporting to the supervising social worker or support worker and discussions about who should inform the child's social worker should be done at the earliest opportunity and action to remedy this situation taken. This should be recorded within the contract;

Amended June 2024

- Contact with birth families can often be the source of distress and upset. If the use of a mobile phone affects contact negatively with family this should be reported and consideration given to what measures can be taken by the child's social worker to address this;
- How is the credit for the phone managed? It is the responsibly of the young person to maintain credit for their personal phone with your support. Consideration should be given to pocket money, activities and any part time working undertaken by the young person. Appropriate support to encourage ordinary 'teenage behaviour' in relation to current mobile phone communication should be considered carefully. It is imperative that children in care are not discriminated against simply because they are in the care system and they should still be given the same opportunities as their peer groups whilst being mindful of the safeguarding issues.

Mobile phone network providers operate a barring and filtering mechanism to prevent those under 18 years accessing 18 rated content. The service can be provided for both contract and pay as you go phones. You are advised to explore this with the network provider that a child/young person uses or see what other services they offer.