Surrey County Council Fostering Service

Social Media and Internet Policy for Foster Carers

**Version FINAL v1 Approved by Jo Rabbitte and Siobhan Walsh**

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# About this document

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#### Intended Audience

This document has been issued to the following people for Review (R) Information (I) and Review and Sign off (S). The Child in Need procedure is mandatory and must be shared with all staff and partners working with Children in Need and their families.

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| **Name** | **Position** | **S/R/I** |
|  Jo Rabbitte and Siobhan Walsh |  Assistant Directors | S |
| All | Directors/Assistant Directors | R/I |
| Clark McAuley |  Service Manager | R/I |
| All staff |  | I |

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## Purpose

This policy outlines Surrey County Council’s guidelines around social media and internet use for prospective and approved Foster Carers and Supported Lodgings carers. This includes providing information about the checks we complete as part of the assessment process, why we complete these checks, and what we consider to be appropriate once approved as foster carer(s) by the Fostering Service.

It is the responsibility of the Fostering Service to ensure prospective foster carers are suitable people to work with, and be role models to, children. Whilst social media and internet checks being undertaken on prospective foster carers is not written into law, Regulation 26(2)(c) of the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 (as amended) permits the fostering service to obtain *“any other information they consider relevant”.* 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.

It 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.

## Pre-approval checks

As part of the checks we complete during the assessment, we conduct an internet and social media search. This is undertaken by your assessing social worker, who will input personal details such as your name, and the names of others in your household, into a search engine (ie Google) and viewing any websites that link to this name. We may also search social media platforms.Your signed application form permits us to undertake these checks, and you cannot withhold consent for these checks, as we will be accessing information which is in the public domain and so available to all.

Your assessing social worker will consider information they gather from these checks, about you or other members of your household. If there is any concern about information gained as part of an internet/social media search, this will be discussed with you. Causes for concern might include any inappropriate material whether in video /(vlogging), audio / blogging, photo or written form, including views and opinions, whether implicit or explicit, that are not conducive to the role of a foster carer approved by Surrey Fostering Service. 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.

## Internet use: pre-approval considerations

Internet use is now a way of life from an early age. Social Media plays a growing part in most of our lives. As a result of this, it is easier than ever for people to connect and share information with each other. As you look to foster, 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, as the foster carer is a professional, so information which is online (and therefore in the public domain) could potentially have an impact on your professional reputation.

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.

## Foster carers employment

We know that foster carers may have an internet presence due to their employment. This could include any of the following:

-LinkedIn Profile

-Social media platforms pages which are not set to private, and need to be public to assist with your business

-Limited company information accessible online via Companies House

-Website for a business which includes personal information

As a fostering service, we will advise you about potential risks linked to the information that is available online (and that we find on internet searches.) Everyone’s circumstances are different, and we may need you to help us understand your business and how it functions, so that we can best advise you around risk. There are some things that are not acceptable for anyone (for example posting pictures of looked after children online) but discussions about internet presence, particularly for those who are self-employed, will need individual discussions on a case by case basis.

## Safety Measures

The Online Safety Act 2023 introduced new criminal offences including:

* Sending a message with information the sender knows to be false with the intention of causing non-trivial psychological or physical harm to a likely audience without reasonable excuse;
* Sending a message with a threat of death, serious injury, rape or serious financial loss where the sender intends the recipient to fear that threat will be carried out (or is reckless as to whether the recipient has such fear);
* Sending or showing an electronic communication with flashing images with the intention to cause harm to a person with epilepsy;
* Communicating, publishing or showing material capable (and with the intention) of encouraging or assisting the serious self-harm of another, even if the sender cannot identify the recipients and even if the self-harm does not occur;
* Intentionally sending or giving images of any person’s genitals to another person with the intention to cause the recipient alarm, distress or humiliation, or for the purposes of sexual gratification whilst reckless as to whether the recipient will be caused alarm, distress or humiliation;
* Four offences in relation to intentional sharing or threatening to share intimate images without consent, which do not necessarily require proof that the sender intended to cause alarm, distress or humiliation. (This replaces the previous offences relating to so-called ‘revenge porn’ where there was a requirement for an intention to cause distress).

Privacy settings are just one safety measure to put in place. There are other things that foster carers can do with regards to the information on the internet about them.

When it comes to usernames on social media platforms some people find that using a pseudonym, or using their middle name in place of their first name makes them feel more comfortable. This may be something you want to consider, particularly if you have a name which is unique, or is easily found online.

Another safety measure you can take is to have your name removed from 192.com. 192.com is the UK’s leading people finding website which gathers information from various publicly available sources and provides a tool for searching for people and businesses. The information is gathered from the Electoral Rolls both current and historical, the telephone directory (excluding ex directory numbers) and Companies House. If you would like your name to be removed from 192.com then this is easily done. Simply click this link and complete the online form: <https://www.192.com/c01/new-request/>

In addition, some people choose to subscribe to the “See Who’s Looking for You” service and 192.com will notify you every time someone searches for you even when your details have been removed. (There is an annual fee payable for this service which Surrey would not be in a position to cover the cost of.)

There is also a way that you can ask for information to be removed from any Google searches on you; information will only be removed in certain circumstances, and guidance from google is below.

Source: <https://support.google.com/websearch/troubleshooter/3111061?hl=en>

## Internet use: considerations for approved foster carers

As a foster carer there are various risks and additional areas to be aware of. When a child is placed with you, you should be provided with as much background information as possible about the child ,but it would also be helpful to use the Placement Planning meeting or Living Together meeting, if not before, to find out about their internet use and access to technology. It’s important you know if the internet, photographs and mobile phones contributed towards any abuse so that you can plan their use safely, in agreement and consultation with their social worker, their parents and the child if appropriate.

Before a child is placed into your care, try to familiarise yourself with the internet and social

media used by young people. It would be helpful to equip yourself as much as possible with the knowledge to deal with any potential issues. Speak to you Supervising Social Worker, buddy and/or fellow foster carers about any concerns you may have or areas you are unsure of.

When writing your family policy, it would be helpful to consider “family rules” around technology; time limits on computers/devices, games consoles, mobile phones, tablets etc.

During the placement planning meeting discuss your family policy and rules with those in the meeting. Jointly agree arrangements for the child around their use of the internet, social media, mobile telephones, so that everyone understands what the rules and expectations are. You may wish to discuss at the meeting, completing a “Digital Passport” for the child or young person (see appendix 2 for details.)

Appropriate internet security (e.g. parental controls) must be used on all computers, games consoles, tablets and mobile phones used by children in the house to limit access to inappropriate material. If you choose to use tools that monitor internet use, then be clear and open with the child so they are aware and understand that they are in place to keep them safe. Always be aware that parental control tools may not always work, so appropriate supervision and education about safe use is essential.

It is advisable that computers and internet enabled devices (games consoles, tablets etc.) should be used in areas of the house where adults can see what is being looked at rather than in a bedroom. Many mobile phones and devices provide internet access which means education about safe use is crucial for children of all ages as its recognised that their use, as children get older, cannot always be supervised . Speak to the child/ young person about where and when they can use it if they are accessing the internet, and how to keep themselves and others safe.

Discuss using strong passwords with the child/young person so they understand how they can protect their online accounts. It’s important they know they need to keep their passwords safe and not share them with anyone or use the same password for several accounts.

Encourage the child to speak to you about any messages that are rude, threatening, or makes them feel uncomfortable. If the child receives a message or sees something online that you are concerned about, keep a copy and make a note in your carers diary.

Teach children to be cautious online, help them to understand that people are not always who they say they are as this can help when they use the internet for research or start to use social networking sites.

You should always read any terms and conditions of websites, games, “apps” or tools the child uses. Once you’ve read them it’s important to explain and discuss them with the child as it's important you both understand them. This includes apps or websites that may include hidden charges/costs. As a Surrey Foster Carer it is your responsibility to seek advice and support in order to ensure that all reasonable and available precautions have been put in place to ensure children and young people are unable to incur high charges or fees through their internet or online gaming accounts. Surrey Childrens services will not cover any costs incurred where all possible precautions have not been put in place.

Make sure you understand the games rating for any games online either via games consoles, mobile phones, computers/laptops and tablet devices and ask the child/young person to teach you about the sites they use, show an interest in the games they choose to play on line and sites they visit.

Its important that you talk openly and regularly about the positives and negatives of the internet. Try not to demonise the technologies and the sites they use but be realistic about the risks and talk with the child about how to mitigate the risks. For example, discuss the risks of accepting friend requests from people they don’t know and how people they meet on line are not necessarily who they say they are.

There is additional training available to Surrey Foster Carers about internet safety via Surrey’s training offer and speak to the child’s Social Worker or your Supervising Social Worker if you have any concerns or worries about the child’s internet use and support you feel you might need in this area.

Social networking sites, when used safely, can be positive communication tools, however it’s important that carers understand how they work, the possible risks and the steps to take to keep children who wish to access these sites safe.

**Social Networking for Foster Carers**

We ask that all approved Surrey foster carers familiarise themselves with the following:

* Consider the consequences before posting anything on social networking sites and the impression it may give of you to those who access the information. Bear in mind that the birth family of the child in your care may look for you on social media.
* You should be mindful to make clear that any views posted are your own and not those of Surrey Children’s Services and make sure that any comments you make in either written or verbal format do not bring the service into ‘disrepute’.
* Matters relating to Surrey Children’s Services and children in your care should never be discussed or referred to on social media unless there has been discussion with and agreement of the service, ie to raise the profile of fostering, recruitment, specific approval once a child has been matched permanently etc. Its important we work together and openly with this issue and remember the wellbeing of the child is paramount. This includes any photos that contain children, or information about the children (for example writing a status that the child had a bad day.) Extended family and friends will also need to be made aware of this, particularly if children are attending parties, or other occasions where people are taking photos.
* If you or any member of your family, choose to use social media, you must not share/post or publish any information which can be used to identity the child in your care (unless agreement is in place). Or that could be found at a later date by the child themselves that may cause them any form of harm, upset , shame or embarrassment
* Children will look to you for guidance and to be a good role model; ensure your privacy settings are set to private (it is recognised that some carers use social media accounts of business and so this profile is public) and any content you share is appropriate and safe for the children in your care.
* Foster carers should carefully consider adding children and young people as friends on their social media profile and before doing so discuss with their supervising social worker. Adding a young person as a ‘friend’ means you can assess/monitor some of what they may post, but it also means they may access your information, which again could lead to difficulties such as a complaint if anyone posts anything inappropriate on your wall/page.
* In order to maintain appropriate professional boundaries social workers of Surrey Children’s Services should not be ‘friends’ with foster carers on social media websites, nor should foster carers have Looked After Children’s family members as ‘friends’. This also applies in the case of Short Breaks.
* Should it be considered by the service that a foster carer, or member of the fostering household, has acted in a way that goes against this guidance further steps may be considered. If it is deemed that the foster carers actions may have placed a child at risk, the Allegation against foster carers procedures will be followed.

**Social Networking for children**

When a child/young person in your care wishes to use social networking sites you should be aware and adhere to the age ratings set for the site. You may find [guidance from CEOP](https://www.thinkuknow.co.uk/) is a useful place to gain further information. You should speak to the child/young person to ensure that the child's profile and postings are private (friends only) and do not contain any information that might expose their identity or whereabouts.

Discuss the importance of only adding people as “friends” who are known and safe. If the child is wanting contact with a member of their birth family via social networking this must be discussed with the child’s social worker so it can be risk assessed. Children should also be encouraged to speak to you if they are contacted on social media by a member of their birth family so this can be risk assessed accordingly.

Ensure they (and you) know how to block unwanted contact from people not known to them or may be deemed a risk to them. Make sure you and the child understand how to report a problem - to the site and/or using the CEOP Report Abuse button. Ask you SSW for help if you need to.

* It is understandable that some carers may be worried about children and young people’s social media use however it is a natural source of socialising for children growing up today and so it’s important that risks are managed as much as possible. Some conversations that may be helpful to have with your child/young person are:
* Don’t use full names online, always use nicknames which cannot lead to anyone being identified.
* Never share contact details such as phone numbers, email, addresses etc online;
* Don’t share “unsafe” photos e.g. a photo showing their school uniform or location. Children should carefully select appropriate profile photos which don’t reveal too much information or present themselves inappropriately. Children should consider using an “avatar” (an online representation of themselves such as a cartoon or favourite animal)
* Disable the location function on mobile phones and individual apps. Be aware that if a child shares a photo on social media and they have their enable location switched on, people can see where that photo was taken.
* Explain to children that once they’ve posted a comment or picture etc. they can’t take it back, if someone else (even a friend) can see it, they can copy, save it and potentially use it or share it with someone else.

## Photographs and Videos

During the placement planning meeting or living together agreement meeting a conversation should be had around taking photos and videos and what they can be used for. It’s important that the child is willing to have their photo taken and do not have their photo taken against their will. The child should understand who will see the photo/video and what it will be used for.

If the child is in agreement, we ask that foster carers take regular photos of the children in their care in order to contribute to their Life Story Work. Some foster carers like to collate these photos in a photobook for the child’s safe keeping, others like to make books which include tickets, stories and mementos of the child’s time in their care. If the child does not want their photo taken for the sake of keeping memories please let your SSW and the child’s SW know.

As a foster carer, you should never post or upload a child’s photo onto a social media platform. You should also not share a child’s photo with anyone unless you have specific permission as mentioned above.

Smartphones enable children and young people to send and share pictures and videos of themselves or others so safe use must be discussed and considered carefully. The ability to send photos from a phone can have security implications for some children and so the points covered above regarding keeping safe, not sharing photos in school uniform etc should be discussed with children.

For many teenagers, sharing explicit pictures of themselves (sexting) has become a means of expressing themselves sexually, though sadly some are also coerced into sending explicit photos. Most children doing this do so with no knowledge of what might happen to that image. In the UK, under the Protection of Children Act 1978 and the Criminal Justice Act 1988, it is an offence to take, possess or distribute an indecent photograph of anyone under the age of 18, even if they consented to the picture being taken or took the picture themselves.

It is vital that children are aware that whilst courts usually deal with those under 18 taking, possessing or sharing these images more leniently than adults, it is still illegal and any conviction as a result is likely to have a significant impact on their future.

Foster carers should have conversations with the children/young people in their care about the possible consequences of either taking or sharing photos of themselves and the risk this could place them at, in addition to the legal consequences of sharing such images whether intentionally or accidentally. If this is an area of particular concern, carers should speak to the child’s social worker/PA and ask for further support in working with the child/young person on this issue.

If you are aware that a child in your care has shared an explicit image of themselves or others you must bring this to the attention of the child’s Social worker and your supervision social worker immediately. Please see appendix 2 for information on the childline service which assists children in removing explicit images.

Some families chose to have video monitors in and around their homes for security reasons. If a foster home has such devices it is vital that everyone entering the home is made aware and told the purpose of the video and where the footage will be saved. Video monitors recording daily life within a foster home is not appropriate. However, if the foster carer believes they have good reasons for having any such equipment this must be discussed with the supervising social worker. In order to enable a child to feel at ease and settled within the home no video equipment should be used in the child’s bedroom or areas of the home that the child uses.

If a video baby monitor is to be used for safety reasons, for babies, children with disabilities or with complex health care needs, or it has been agreed by the professional network that this will provide the child with reassurance, this should be shared and agreed with the child, their social worker and parent where appropriate, and a written record kept on the child’s individual risk assessment held by the fostering service.

Foster carers should not record children during a period of distress or dysregulation as this could, at a later date, cause the child further harm, upset , shame or embarrassment. Rather, carers should report their experiences to the supervising social worker and child’s social worker and keep clear written records to describe the behaviour exhibited in order to gain support from the network.

## Mobile Phones

Mobile phones are no longer simply a way to stay in touch with friends and family and many children come into foster homes either with a phone already or requesting access to one.

It is important that discussion and boundaries are agreed at the placement planning meeting about access to and use of mobile phones, at what age the child should receive one (if appropriate), who can be contacted and how telephone contact should be managed.

The guidance for accessing social media, the internet and photos above should be referred to in relation to the use of mobile phones. As a carer, make sure you know how the child’s phone works (e.g. does it have Bluetooth, Internet access etc.). As advised above, agree family rules that everyone in the home is expected to abide by; acceptable safe, healthy use, such as switching off the phone at mealtimes and bedtime, leaving the phone downstairs at night.

It’s important to discuss and agree the type of content that you would be happy for them to download, knowingly receive or send on to others. Ensure they are aware that once a picture, video or message is sent, then it is impossible to delete it and they can’t take it back, if someone else (even a friend) can see it, they can copy, save it and potentially use it or share it with someone else.

Many Smart Phones allow children to download “apps” which allow them to play games and communicate quickly and freely using the internet. You should ensure that you are aware what “apps” are being accessed and understand how they work, and the safe use of apps should be discussed so that children/young people understand how to behave online.

Its vital that you set up the maximum parental controls on any phones, tablets and games consoles that children use where they could make in game purchases or access inappropriate material. Information should be available online and from the phone, tablet or console provider. For example, Apple offers “Family Sharing” and “Ask to Buy” tools – which mean carers get an alert if a child asks to make a purchase. Turn on “Screen Time” in settings to disable in-app purchases. To set up family settings on an Xbox you will need to open a child account and link it to the parent’s Microsoft account. They will then have features to control purchases (Ask a Parent), screen time limits and content filters.

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. Visit the phone provider’s website for advice for parents/carers e.g. how to block adult content online and how to report abusive or unwanted contact.

Surrey Fostering Service advise that your do not take out a monthly contract for the child in your care, even if matched permanently to save complications if/when the child moves on. Surrey Children’s Services will take no responsibility for meeting costs of mobile phone contracts that have been broken.

It is expected that part of the Child Allowance Payment will go towards costs of mobile phones and usage, however it is acceptable to encourage the child to save some money to contribute if there is a specific, more costly phone they would like. This can also be encouraged for fixing damaged handsets.

Some carers like to keep a basic mobile phone to “lend” to children until they can either receive a phone of their own, or in the instance of their child’s phone being broken or damaged and waiting for repair.

Surrey Children’s Service strongly advise that carers take all necessary precautions to ensure children and young people are unable to incur high charges or fees through their mobile phone, in-app purchase and/or gaming usage by implementing all available restrictions provided by the phone/console providers. Carers are advised to seek advice from the provider if they are unsure what needs to be done and to have conversations with their Supervising Social Worker and child’s Social worker if there are specific difficulties in this area. It is important that carers speak to children about the potential risks around excessive hidden charges and children/young people are advised that restrictions have been put on the technology to avoid these costs. Surrey Children’s Services are unable to take any responsibility for meeting any costs/fines incurred in the instance of these precautions not being taken.

## Appendix 1: Foster Carer Self-Check

*This appendix is also included in the foster carer workbook.*

*This should be completed prior to panel.*

We would recommend you carry out the simple test of typing your name in the Google (or other search engines) to see whether any information on you or your family is easily accessible.

1. Did you find any information about yourselves/your children/close family /friends online?
2. If you are a member of social networking site(s), are your profile and photographs open to all to view?
3. What will you do to protect your identity and the identity of the children you look after online?
4. If an online presence is vital in terms of your employment/self employment, what considerations do you need to give to how this might impact when fostering?
5. What discussions do you need to have with any children or adults in the household about social medial and online information when fostering; might they need to make changes?

We recommend that you carry out this exercise regularly once approved. You may wish to do this annually at the point of your foster carer household review, or more frequently if you have particular reasons that this might be useful.

## Appendix 2: Wesbites and Useful Information

* [Think U Know](http://www.thinkuknow.co.uk/) - Online safety information (specific guidance for carers is available in the Parent/Carer section);
* [childnet.com](http://www.childnet.com/) - Advice for children and parents/carers about online safety;
* [The Parent Zone](https://parentzone.org.uk/) - Guidance and advice for parents and carers;
* [Internet Watch Foundation](https://www.iwf.org.uk/) - Report illegal material;
* [Information, Advice and Support to Keep Children Safe Online (internetmatters.org)](https://www.internetmatters.org/?gclid=EAIaIQobChMI1I--yIvR8gIVw7TtCh2UIgo_EAAYASAAEgIes_D_BwE) Advice for carers including the Digital Passport: a tool for carers and children in care to talk about their online lives [Digital Passport supporting care experienced children | Internet Matters](https://www.internetmatters.org/ukcis-vulnerable-working-group/ukcis-digital-passport/)
* [Child Safety Online](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/490001/Social_Media_Guidance_UKCCIS_Final_18122015.pdf.pdf) - A practical guide for parents and carers whose children are using social media;
* [**Online safety | NSPCC**](https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/online-safety/)
* [**Online Safety Act**](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/online-safety-act-explainer/online-safety-act-explainer)
* [Digital Parenting | Vodafone](https://www.vodafone.co.uk/mobile/digital-parenting) Regularly updated online magazine with useful articles for parents and carers
* [Digital Passport supporting care experienced children | Internet Matters](https://www.internetmatters.org/ukcis-vulnerable-working-group/ukcis-digital-passport/) - UKCIS Digital Passport; a resource for care experienced children and young people and their carers.
* For specific support with mobile phone handsets please speak to the phone/network provider.
* Childline has launched a useful service which will assist children remove explicit images and videos of themselves which have been published online or in cases where they think it is going to happen after they have shared the images with another person. <https://www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/bullying-abuse-safety/online-mobile-safety/remove-nude-image-shared-online/>

<https://youtu.be/zhKwpdv6vQQ>

CoramBAAF have published some books which can be useful, however bear in mind that some of them are written for the audience of adopters rather than foster carers. These are:

**Foster Care and Social Networking -**  how foster carers can help children make the most out of the internet, while minimising online risks to themselves and their family.

**Facing up to Facebook** – considers how adopters can help children satisfy their need to know about their birth families by minimising potential risks to their security and stability.

**Social Networking and You -** booklet with practical advice for adopted/long term fostered children on sharing information/ staying safe online. It considers the issues around getting in contact with, or being contacted by birth relatives.

These books may be available in the fostering library, ask your assessing social worker if you would like to borrow a copy. If you would prefer to purchase your own, you can order through BAAF’S website <https://corambaaf.org.uk/bookshop>