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**MERTHYR TUDFUL**  

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County Borough Council

# **Use of Social Media by foster carers**

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## **1. Introduction**

The purpose of this policy is to clarify the position of Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council in relation to foster carers and their use of social media in relation to themselves and the children in their care. The policy will briefly describe what social media platforms are before examining how we can help children who are looked after to use social media safely. For the purpose of this policy a child will be “*anyone who has not yet reached their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday*”.

The policy will then examine issues that may affect foster carers and their use of social media before looking at issues with regard to confidentiality in respect of social media.

Finally, the policy will describe the means by which a child’s use of social media can be agreed and reviewed.

## **2. Scope**

The regulatory framework for this policy is formulated under The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (Wales) Regulations 2015, The Local Authority Fostering Services (Wales) Regulations 2018 as amended and its associated Code of Practice issued in May 2019 where regulation 13 states:

“The local authority provider must ensure that foster parents give care and support to a child placed with them –

(a) In accordance with the child’s care and support plan,

And

(b) In a way which maintains, protects and promotes the safety and well-being of the child”

## **3. General overview**

The use of social media by families and children can be a fun way to stay in touch with family and friends. Used responsibly, social media and social networking sites can be an interesting and rewarding means by which people can connect with each other and share experiences. Children use social media to stay in touch with friends

and other family members and this can be a very important way for children who are looked after to maintain relationships which might otherwise be lost.

Unfortunately, difficulties can also arise with online bullying and the targeting of children who are vulnerable to all forms of exploitation (e.g. trafficking, sexual exploitation). Family members who do not support the local authority's plans can also use social media to contact children. This can lead to family members undermining the placement and encouraging the child to abscond or become challenging towards their carers.

If not supported effectively, children can also access sites where they may be vulnerable to viewing violence, pornography and be exposed to extreme views. Some children may become victims of abuse and/or exploitation by someone they have met on-line.

Some sites will encourage children to engage in self-harming or other destructive behaviors. Children can also be vulnerable to making, sending and/or receiving inappropriate images of other children. This could make them liable to criminal proceedings.

Children, also, report that the use of social media can be effective in supporting them to access sites, which offer appropriate guidance. Sites that are delivered by the health authorities and voluntary sector organizations can be a useful way for children to access support in a safe and confidential way.

Many children who question their sexuality or sexual identity report that on-line support groups can be very helpful and offer an anonymous means by which support, and advice can be given.

When children are placed with foster carers who have a social media profile, there is often a temptation to include the child in posts about their family. Many foster carers think they are helping children to feel included in their family in this way and, when appropriate, such posts can encourage a child to feel that they are integrated onto the foster family. Children who are looked after who do not appear on foster family's social media posts can feel excluded when the carers' own children do appear.

Unfortunately, children and carers can also inadvertently allow the child's wider family members and associates more information about a child than we would choose to share. This is especially the case when photographs are posted or details about the foster family are shared.

Children who are fostered can have access to more resources than others in their community and posting photographs of children enjoying activities such as expensive foreign holidays or shopping for new clothes can lead to resentment on the part of family members

Foster carers should be aware of these issues and be prepared to work in partnership with others involved in the child's care in order to ensure that their social media activities are safe and appropriate.

#### **4. What is Social Media?**

For purposes of this policy, "social media" is understood to be content created by individuals, using accessible, expandable, and upgradable publishing technologies, through and on the Internet. Examples of social media include Facebook, Instagram, blogs, RSS, YouTube, Twitter, LinkedIn Snapchat, TikTok (this is not an exhaustive list)., Content sharing services such as YouTube are also accessible to the public and should be considered as part of this policy.

Many children enjoy playing video games but playing games online can also allow interactions with strangers. The rules applying to platforms such as Facebook or Twitter should also apply to games played on-line.

On-line technologies can be subject to rapid changes and the platforms described above are likely to be subject to frequent changes.

#### **5. Children looked after and social media**

Many children use different types of social media and children looked after are no exception. Children access social media on computers, smartphones, tablets, games consoles (Xbox) . These devices could be their own or belong to others. Children may be placed in foster carer after they already have a social media presence such as a Facebook page.

Many foster carers do not use social media and have little understanding of how it works. Social workers from the fostering team as well as the child's own social workers and Independent Reviewing Officers will be willing and able to help if a carer has a question or is worried about a child's use of social media.

Using the guidance set out below can reduce the risks to children but not eliminate them entirely.

- **Appropriate age:** Ensure the child in your care is the right age to use social media sites. For Facebook, Instagram and Tik Tok it is 13.
- **Protect Information:** Make sure the child in your care is not sharing personal information such as addresses or phone numbers online. Show them how to set privacy settings and report offensive material they see online. Don't assume a child is more knowledgeable than you are.
- **Be a friend:** Make it a condition of social media use that you are one of their contacts so you can check what is happening on their page. You can also check who they are in contact with such as family members.
- **Limits and Openness:** Depending on the child's age and vulnerabilities, make sure your child spends limited time on social media and accesses sites in a room where supervision is possible, not in a bedroom. Where children are old enough to access social media in private it is even more important that foster carers feel confident that they can talk to a child about how to keep safe on-line.
- **Check** if your child is contacting strangers on-line when playing video games. You can help by ensuring children only play age-appropriate games.

If any of these conditions prove difficult to apply, then advice should be sought from the child's social worker or supervising social worker and discussed at the child's CLA (Child Looked After) review.

Not all children will respond well or comply with the safeguarding measures described above. Some children will access social media outside of the home on devices they do not own. It is important to keep communication going with the child in your care and to encourage them to keep themselves safe. An open and supportive relationship with the child in your care is the best safeguarding measure you can put in place.

## **6. How Can Foster Carers Use Social Media**

Foster carers are able to use social media much in the same way as others are able to do. Social media provides opportunities to communicate with other foster carers through Facebook groups, instant messengers and fan pages for foster care associations or other foster care groups. Facebook groups, for example, can help you to share experiences and tips about your specific experiences and challenges. It can also help you develop professionally by engaging in sites that support care

workers' development. Care is needed however when discussing your role as a foster carer. Malicious criticism of social services staff or other carers is not acceptable, and a professional attitude is as important on-line as it is in the off-line world.

If you are on Facebook or a similar platform, then you can be 'friends' with the children in your care and can keep an eye on their on-line presence. If you are using the same social networking websites, then you will be in a better position to understand what it is the children in your care are doing. You can then advise them on who to be friends with and what to post. Once the child has left your care; there may be positives from remaining connected on social media. You should discuss with the children's social worker, young persons advisor (YPA) and supervising social worker to determine if this is suitable. It is understood that for some young people having this ongoing connection will be important.

It may be helpful for some children to feature on social media with their carers. This may be the case where a child is in a secure long-term placement where there are no risks associated with communication with family members for example. In such cases publishing photographs of shared holidays, outings and other events, can make a child feel accepted as part of their foster family. Children may be aware that their peers are posting photographs of similar events and including the child you look after may help them feel as if their lives are similar to their friends. This may be particularly useful where a child is too young to have their own social media page. Careful consideration should be given to posting such material however and agreement needs to be formalised during the review of the child's plan.

Also particular care should be taken to limit identifiable information i.e. school sports days or local fayres, which may inadvertently provide information in relation to placement location.

Permission to publish (posted on social media) **any** information about a looked after child must be sought via the child's social worker. Any person with parental responsibility for that child should also give permission. Permission will only be given if the social worker believes that publishing such information is in the child's best interests.

Foster carers also need to be careful about the contents of their own posts and how they behave on-line.

- You should not publicly identify yourself as being a foster carer to the wider public. On sites dedicated to supporting foster carers you should only create content that is consistent with professional standards and within the agency's policies.



- You should be mindful to make clear that any views posted are your own and not those of the agency and make sure that any comments you make do not bring the agency into disrepute.
- Consider the consequences before posting anything on social networking sites and the impression it may give of you to those who access the information.
- Social media sites should not be used to abuse or harass anyone or to post offensive or derogatory comments. Remember that you are personally responsible for any comments you post.
- Adding a child 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. Be mindful therefore about the content of your posts and who else you accept as a friend.
- Foster carers must not look up parents or birth family members. Any worries or concerns about the child looked after social media accounts should be discussed with the supervising social worker.
- At preapproval stage, social media will be discussed within Form F assessment and internet searches are completed by the assessing social worker identify if accounts are public or not. This will be considered at annual reviews if there have been issues.
- You should not add social workers or prospective adopters to your social media or make requests of this nature. This can cause issues and cause others to feel 'pressured' into accepting requests.

If there are any concerns regarding foster carers' behaviour on social media, these will be formally addressed with the carer/s by their supervising social worker during monthly supervision session, with consideration to be given, if the concerns are substantial, for a discussion at the carers' annual review.

## **7. Confidentiality**

The issue of confidentiality is also important when discussing fostering on-line.

As a foster carer you have a responsibility to protect the children in your care. Social networking sites also have the capacity to be accessed by people who you do not intend to communicate with. Some people who are a risk to children may seek to contact the child in your care. The child you look after may be at risk of being contacted by those who may upset or distress them. Others may want to find out who you are and where you live because of your role as a foster carer.

Some sites, also, allow viewers to identify and name those who appear in photographs, videos and notes. Other information such as addresses can also be identified by applications on some sites. Social networking sites often have privacy settings. Even with the most restrictive privacy settings it is very difficult to limit those who have access to material once it is published. Whilst we always recommend the use of the most stringent privacy settings by foster carers, we also understand that such settings have a limited capacity to protect children.

Unless specifically authorised to do so, foster carers should not:

- Upload any photographs of looked after children onto any social media website.
- Describe or discuss a looked after child or any aspects of their care including their behaviour, health, or educational needs.
- Refer to the names of any looked after children, or any of their family members on any such site.
- Knowingly communicate with anyone associated with a child looked after, including members of their family or friends.
- Describe any activities that they undertake with a child looked after.
- Describe any places where they visit with a child looked after.

Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council appreciates that such actions may have taken place prior to this guidance being agreed. If this is the case, then we recommend that the practice of any of the above are considered in cooperation with the child's social worker or through the review arrangements described below.

## **8. Monitoring and reviewing arrangements**

Permission to publish details of a child who is looked after can be obtained and reviewed at the Child's Looked After review. Here foster carers, parents, the child's social worker and the child's Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) can have a discussion about whether a child should appear on the foster carer's social media page and what other decisions a foster carer can make about a child's on-line activity. This authority can be discussed when deciding wider issues under the "delegated authority" to foster carers such as permission for school trips, haircuts, etc.

Concerns about a child making themselves vulnerable on-line should be discussed at CLA reviews and risk assessments and safe caring practices agreed, with the updating of the safer caring agreement. It might be helpful for a foster carer to be aware of a child's historic use of social media, whether they have acted responsibly or made themselves vulnerable in the past for example.

Training and advice regarding the use of social media and how to protect children can be obtained through the local authority training unit, the child's social worker and/or your supervising social worker from the fostering team who will also be happy to discuss any issues or concerns you may have. On the eLearning Fostering Hub there is a mandatory training course for Internet Safety and Cyber Bullying; there are also additional optional courses of social media And Young People Fostering and Social Media, Sexting And Selfies Fostering.

You can access further advice and guidance from the NSPCC at link <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/online-safety>

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