

Social Media

Essential Guidance for Foster Parents

Social networking sites such as Facebook, X, Instagram and Snapchat are a popular way for adults and young people to communicate and stay in contact with family and friends. We understand that some of our foster parents use social networking sites and, as an agency, we have specific responsibilities to conduct checks and provide you with advice:

- We are responsible for checking that our foster parents are suitable to work with children and young people – both providing a high standard of care and also setting an example as a role model.
- We are responsible for providing you with advice and guidance about the potential risks associated with social networking, including reputational damage and breach of confidentiality.

Potential risks

- Information posted on the internet is accessible everywhere and privacy cannot be guaranteed.
- Social media sites provide opportunities for exploitation, harassment, manipulation, stalking and grooming. You may be targeted as a foster parent.
- Social media sites contain 'fake news' that can be both misleading and harmful.
- Information posted may breach confidentiality and/or identify a foster child. This may put a child at risk of harm.

Advice and guidance

1. Make yourself difficult to find

People will find you on social media by your name and profile picture. Some foster parents use a nickname, or their first and middle names but not their last name. Using a profile picture that doesn't easily identify you is also a good idea.

2. Ensure your profile is private

All social networking apps have some privacy options within the settings menu. Make sure that your accounts are only visible to those people you have accepted as friends/followers, and are not visible to the public.

Do not share any contact information publicly, and be very careful not to accept 'friend' or 'follow' requests from unknown people.

3. Friends and followers

By setting your accounts to 'private' you will be able to choose who becomes a 'friend' or 'follower' and can see your private posts.

You can add current or former foster children as 'friends' or 'followers', but it is good practice to get the agreement of the Local Authority first. Adding a young person as a 'friend' means that you can assess and monitor some of what they may post, but it also means that they may access your information. You will need to be especially careful what you post. On Facebook, you may need to employ additional controls to prevent friends from posting on your 'wall'.

In order to maintain professional boundaries, you should not add the following people as 'friends' or 'followers':

- Foster children who are not in your care;
- Foster children's parents;
- Foster children's social workers;
- ISP employees, unless agreed with your Registered Manager. Agreement may be made if you have pre-existing friendships with these people, or if the staff account is a professional one linked to their agency role.

4. Think before you post and share

Beware of 'fake news' on social networking sites, and posts from pages/groups that spread hate. Before sharing posts, we would advise you to check where they came from to protect your online reputation.

Consider the consequences before posting anything on social networking sites and the impression it may give of you to those who access the information.

If you identify yourself as being associated with the agency 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.

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.

5. Don't disclose confidential information about foster children

Information and photographs of a looked after child must never be posted on social media sites without the written consent of the placing Local Authority, birth parents and the child, if of an appropriate age. Once an image is on the internet it can be viewed and stored by

other people within your friendship network, as well as being maintained by the social media provider, even if you subsequently delete it.

Please also ask your family and friends to avoid posting anything which could identify a fostered child.

Social Media checks

We conduct internet and social media checks in relation to applicants and approved foster parents. For applicants, this will be done as part of the Form F assessment, and for approved foster parents it will be part of the annual review of approval. The assessing social worker will discuss this with you before they conduct the check, and share the results with you.

The check involves name and phone number checks on public search engines such as Google, and viewing any social media content that is within the public domain. The check does not require you to disclose the content of any private social media accounts.

If a check reveals any cause for concern, the assessing social worker will discuss this with you. A cause for concern might include views, opinions or images that are considered to be not conducive to the role of a foster parent, or you may receive guidance in relation to applying additional privacy settings and maintaining your own confidentiality.