Social Media Prospective Applicants and Foster Carers Policy

Foster Carer Policies and Procedures · https://handbook.co.uk/docs/social-media-prospective-applicants-and-foster-carers-policy/

(Last reviewed 11/01/2025)

Legislation

The law does not require social-media and internet checks to be undertaken on prospective foster carers. However, Regulation 26(2)(c) of the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 (as amended) permits the fostering service to obtain “any other information considered relevant”. This links to Standard 2 (Promoting a positive identity, potential and valuing diversity through individualised care) and Standard 3 (Promoting positive behaviour and relationships) of the Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards (England) 2011.

Standards and Regulations

Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 (as amended)

Fostering Services National Minimum Standards (England) 2011:

1. Standard 4 – Safeguarding Children
2. Standard 6 – Promoting Good Health and Well-being
3. Standard 20 – Learning and Development of Foster Carers

Guidance for Training, Support and Development and Standards for Foster Carers (TSDS)

1. Standard 2 – Understand your role as a foster carer
2. Standard 4 – Know how to communicate effectively
3. Standard 6 – Keep children and young people safe from harm
4. Standard 7 – Develop yourself

This policy should also be read alongside the agency’s Safeguarding Child Sexual Exploitation Policy.

Aims

This policy explains to prospective and approved foster carers why the agency completes social-media checks during the assessment process and sets out expectations for appropriate use after approval. It also offers definitions, guidance on staying safe and practical advice about social media.

The agency recognises that technology and communication methods change quickly. The internet and social media are now central to how people gather and share information. To protect the safety and privacy of children and young people placed with our carers, these checks are essential.

The agency must be confident that prospective and approved foster carers are suitable to work with children and young people and will model positive online behaviour. We also need to be sure that carers' conduct in public spaces, including on the internet, aligns with the agency's high standards.

For Prospective Foster Carers

Fostering services increasingly use social-networking sites and internet search engines when completing checks. The following policy and guidance apply to social-media checks for prospective carers:

1. The agency will tell all prospective carers that giving consent for checks includes social media.
2. The agency will send every applicant a guide to social media and privacy settings with the application form.
3. The agency reserves the right to carry out searches through recognised search engines using the names of all household members.
4. The assessing social worker (SW) may review an applicant's social-media activity with them and offer advice about content and privacy settings.
5. The assessing SW will, as part of the assessment, explore the applicant's understanding of social media, confidentiality and the posting of identifying information or photographs of children in care.
6. Applicants can complete the agency's online-safety training.

Staying Safe

While the educational benefits of the internet and social media are vast, they can also pose risks. The agency believes that safe care and responsible online use are best learned together. The agency and fostering households therefore work in partnership to understand how to stay safe online.

Most children and young people see the internet as a core part of their lives for communication with friends, school and wider networks. A person may say or do things online that they would not say face-to-face, and harmful messages can reach someone at any time, including at home.

Children and young people who are looked after may face additional risks:

1. They might receive contact from friends or family members when this contact is not in their best interests.
2. Sharing their care status could expose them to grooming, online bullying or other inappropriate behaviour.

Carers and staff who work with children in care can also experience challenges:

1. Children may want to contact family and friends online.
2. They may share concerns or allegations online, sometimes influenced by previous experiences or home environments.
3. They may take part in bullying.
4. Information shared online could impact a foster carer's role.

Online Grooming

As children find new ways to connect on various devices and platforms, it is increasingly important to help them make informed and safe choices about who they speak with and what they share online.

The NSPCC defines grooming as a process where someone builds a relationship, trust and emotional connection with a child or young person in order to manipulate, exploit or abuse them. Children and young people who are groomed can be sexually abused, exploited or trafficked.

Anyone, regardless of age, gender or race, can be a groomer. Grooming can take place over weeks or years, and groomers may also build relationships with a young person's family or friends to appear trustworthy.

Signs of Online Grooming

It can be hard to recognise when a child or young person is being groomed. Older children might show behaviour that seems typical for their age, masking underlying issues. Possible signs include:

1. Being very secretive about how they spend their time, including online
2. Having an older boyfriend or girlfriend

3. Having money or new items such as clothes or a mobile phone they cannot explain
4. Under-age drinking or substance use
5. Spending significantly more or less time online or on devices
6. Appearing upset, withdrawn or distressed
7. Sexualised behaviour, language or knowledge that is not age-appropriate
8. Spending more time away from home or going missing

A child might not realise they have been groomed. They may feel worried or confused and be less likely to speak to a trusted adult.

Any concerns about the safety of a child or young person, or of carers and family members, must be raised with the supervising social worker, who will consider how best to respond and revisit the Safe Carer Policy.

Definition of Social Media

Social media is computer-based technology that enables people to share ideas, thoughts and information by creating virtual networks and communities. It is internet-based and allows quick electronic sharing of personal information, documents, videos and photos through computers, tablets or smartphones.

Definition of Social Networking

Social networking describes some of the ways people communicate online via computers or mobile phones. Common features include:

1. Membership of a website
2. Ability to create a personal profile that tells others about themselves
3. Option to add other people as online friends or contacts
4. Tools for members to communicate with one another
5. Messenger functions or standalone messaging apps

Types of Social Media

There are several types of social media:

1. Social networks: Connect with people
2. Media-sharing networks: Share photos, videos and other media

3. Discussion forums: Share news and ideas
4. Bookmarking and content-curation networks: Discover, save and share new content
5. Consumer-review networks: Find and review businesses
6. Blogging and publishing networks: Publish content online
7. Interest-based networks: Share interests and hobbies
8. Social-shopping networks: Shop online
9. Sharing-economy networks: Trade goods and services
10. Anonymous social networks: Communicate anonymously

Examples of Social-Media Platforms (sometimes referred to as social-media services)

1. Facebook
2. YouTube
3. WhatsApp
4. Facebook Messenger
5. Instagram
6. TikTok
7. QQ instant messaging
8. Douyin
9. Sina Weibo
10. LinkedIn

Facebook is currently the most widely used social-media site.

Social-media platforms evolve quickly. Newly listed social networks (January 2021) include:

1. Triller
2. WT Social
3. Valence
4. Flip
5. Popbase
6. Elpha

7. Yubo
8. Peanut
9. HouseParty
10. Caffeine
11. Steemit
12. Goodreads
13. Twitch
14. CaringBridge
15. WattPad
16. Crunchyroll
17. SoundCloud
18. Mocospace
19. CouchSurfing
20. italki
21. Medium
22. Ello
23. Vimeo
24. Giphy
25. Tribe
26. Kuaishou
27. Imgur
28. Influenster
29. FilmAffinity
30. Open Diary
31. Bubbly

The agency and foster carers must keep up to date with these changes to keep children and young people safe online.

Definitions Used on Social Media

1. Profile: Your personal page containing photos, videos, a list of friends, recent activities and any other information you choose to share.
2. Post: A message or comment submitted by a user.
3. Wall: The space on your profile where you and your friends can write messages.
4. Timeline: A feature that arranges your content as a life story marking significant milestones.
5. News Feed: A continuous stream of updates about your friends' activities.
6. Poke: A casual gesture that means "I'm thinking of you". The recipient can choose to poke back.
7. Like: A feature that lets users show they enjoy content, such as a friend's status or a song.
8. Tag: Linking someone's name to a photo so it appears on their profile; users can untag themselves.
9. Status Update: A short comment placed on your profile to tell friends what you are doing or feeling.
10. Friend Request: An invitation to be online friends. You can accept or reject the request.
11. Block: Removing another user from your friends list so they cannot interact with you.
12. Instant Message: A conversation over the internet that may include text, voice or video and can involve multiple people.

Common-Sense Internet Rules

1. Date and place of birth: Never reveal full birth details as they can be used for identity theft.
2. Holiday plans: Posting future holiday details or saying you are out shopping can make your home a target for theft.
3. Home address: Sharing your address can invite unwanted visitors.
4. Speaking negatively about the local authority, colleagues, social workers or posting personal lifestyle details can have serious consequences.
5. Inappropriate content: Professionals can be held accountable for content on personal social-media accounts. Do not post anything inappropriate, offensive or controversial.
6. Risk-taking activities: Sharing dangerous behaviour online could affect insurance or other services.

Avoid Posting

1. Photos that show your home layout and valuables, which may attract thieves

2. Photos reflecting lifestyle choices that you may not want widely shared; once online they are difficult to remove
3. Personal details, including profile photos, that may appear in search engines unless privacy settings block them
4. Information about illegal activities
5. Phone numbers, which can lead to unwanted calls
6. Password clues, such as pet names or a mother’s maiden name

Confidentiality: Advice for Foster Carers Using Social Media

1. Set the highest privacy settings and limit access to your posts.
2. Review security and confidentiality settings regularly and adjust them when necessary.
3. Think carefully before posting and consider how it might be viewed by birth parents, children, young people or professionals.
4. Do not share information that could identify a child or former child in your care.
5. Never post images of children in care without written consent from the local authority, parents and, where appropriate, the child.
6. Remind immediate family and friends of expectations around social media and the importance of not identifying a fostered child.

Some Useful Guidelines for Foster Carers and the Children or Young People Placed with Them

1. Familiarise yourself with the internet and social media before a child is placed.
2. Keep up to date with the sites and tools the child or young person uses.
3. Complete the agency’s online-safety training.
4. Take part in a child’s internet use, for example through schoolwork.
5. Consider age recommendations for social-networking sites and discuss concerns with your supervising social worker.
6. Agree time limits on computers and devices with the child or young person.
   6a. Ensure appropriate internet security, such as parental controls, on all devices.
   6b. If you use monitoring tools, be open with the child about why they are in place.
7. Set clear ground rules for internet use with the child or young person’s input.

8. Keep internet-enabled devices in communal areas where use can be seen.
9. Do not allow a child to meet someone they met online without speaking to the child’s social worker.
10. Discuss the importance of strong passwords and keeping them safe.
11. Encourage the child to talk to you if they receive messages that are rude, threatening or uncomfortable.
12. Teach the child that people online may not be who they claim to be.
13. Read and discuss terms and conditions of websites, games and apps.
14. Understand game ratings and set controls for safe family use.
15. Help the child learn to decide who to trust online.
16. Ask the child to show you the sites they use and learn about safety tools together.
17. Show interest and keep communication open about any online concerns.
18. Avoid demonising technology; realistic guidance is more effective than bans.
19. Record concerns in the daily record and inform your supervising social worker.

Any concerns about the safety of a child or young person must be raised with the supervising social worker, who will consider how best to respond and revisit the Safe Carer Policy.

Professionalism

1. Foster carers and children or young people may connect on social networks if both feel comfortable and the child or young person agrees. This should be reviewed if the child or young person moves on, as expectations may change. Discuss this with your supervising social worker and the child’s social worker.
2. To maintain professional boundaries, foster carers should not have family members of children in care, agency employees or other foster carers as social-media friends.
3. Whenever you post online, consider how it reflects on the agency. Clearly state that your views are your own, not those of the agency.
4. Breaches of confidentiality or concerning material may affect an applicant’s assessment or a foster carer’s approval. Discuss any concerns with your supervising social worker promptly.