

Social media policy

Overview

This policy applies to all Cafcass staff and contractors when using social media, both in a personal capacity and as part of their work. It sets out the standards relating to the personal use of social media, how practitioners should assess social media information within court proceedings, and how Cafcass will support staff when issues arise relating to social media. Social media can be a positive platform for exchanging ideas and knowledge and promoting the profession and Cafcass. The aim of this policy is to assist staff members to understand their professional responsibilities when using social media.

In this policy 'social media' is defined as online communities in which users share information, ideas, personal messages and other content. Cafcass expects its staff to have, at a minimum, a base competence in using/understanding the use of social media. The Cafcass [Social Media and Online Communication](#) eLearning provides further information on the use of social media.

Why this is important for children

Children and families have a right to know what to expect from Cafcass. If we are using social media to communicate with families or looking at their social media presence where this is ordered by the court, we have a duty to do this ethically and responsibly.

1.0 Personal use of social media

- 1.1 All Cafcass staff, regardless of role, should use social media appropriately and responsibly and should not post, share, like or follow content which is likely to be incompatible with their employment, or to bring Cafcass into disrepute. This includes not posting information relating to court proceedings or the families we work with, not sharing internal documents on social media, and ensuring that your behaviour does not damage the public's confidence in Cafcass.
- 1.2 If staff use social media, they are responsible for understanding how to use it, checking personal security settings and the implications of social media being a public and permanent record. Guidance on how to use social media securely is available in the CafcassLearning module 'Social media and online communication'. There is also a knowledge bite on social workers and social media, which summarises sector guidance relating to ethics and appropriate online behaviour.
- 1.3 If a complaint is made about a staff member's personal use of social media – for example if a family member has accessed a staff member's social media account and has made allegations about its content – this will be considered within our usual complaints process.
- 1.4 Social work staff, as registrants of Social Work England (SWE), must abide by the [standards](#) set by SWE and, if they choose to use social media and networking sites, will not do so 'unlawfully, unethically, or in a way that brings the profession into

disrepute'.¹ This applies to other professional staff groups who have their own professional standards.

2.0 Use of social media in social work practice

- 2.1 Cafcass staff must not use their own personal social media account(s) to actively monitor, seek out or access the information of families or their associates such as friends or relatives, or to make public contact with parties or other relevant individuals.
- 2.2 However, during the course of proceedings practitioners may be made aware of content posted online that may have a bearing on the matter before the court and the work that Cafcass has been asked to carry out. Sections 2.3 - 2.7 outlines what action Cafcass staff can undertake in this instance.

Comments or posts about court proceedings

- 2.3 There are restrictions on publicly posting information about family court proceedings. If staff have concerns about a post on social media that relates to court proceedings - for example something relating to open proceedings or that could identify a child – they should:
- Consider if it is appropriate to inform the court, and consider informing the parties that this has been done;
 - If the author of the post is a party to the court proceedings, consider asking the party to remove the post, though this is a matter of professional judgement.
- 2.4 Cafcass Legal can provide further advice if necessary.

Comments or posts about a member of Cafcass staff

- 2.5 Cafcass supports staff to deal with any concerns about social media relevant to their work or role. This extends to harassment related to their work with a family. If any member of staff believes they have been subject to harassment or a specific threat on a social media platform they should inform their line manager and their local HR business partner. Cafcass will not tolerate violent, abusive, or threatening behaviour towards a staff member or any other person carrying out work on behalf of Cafcass. Guidance is available on the management of unacceptable behaviour towards staff and includes a section on dealing with unacceptable behaviour online and how this should be reported within Cafcass.
- 2.6 Further information is contained within the guidance on [the management of unacceptable behaviour](#) (see 4.0 dealing with unacceptable behaviour online). This includes guidance on determining what is opinion or criticism, and what is harassment or threatening behaviour; and the steps for managers to follow when an incident is reported.

¹ Paragraph 5.6 of the [SWE professional standards](#)

- 2.7 Staff are encouraged to report any threatening material, or content, which is in breach of the host's standards, directly to the social media/website and inform their line manager and their [local HR business partner](#).

Comments or posts about Cafcass as an organisation

- 2.8 The Communications team may monitor open sites or groups on social media and record relevant posts, where there is a clear business need due to the impact on a staff member or on Cafcass' reputation.

Social media information as 'evidence' in court proceedings

- 2.9 Families may present the practitioner and/or the court with information taken from social media. This could include screenshots or printouts of posts or conversations. Such information may be presented to prove or disprove relationships, whereabouts, behaviours, actions, or knowledge. Or they may allege that such material exists online but not provide any physical 'evidence'.
- 2.10 Allegations based on information taken from social media are no different to any other allegation made within proceedings. Practitioners work with unverified information every day and should assess social media information as they would any other. Specific to social media, practitioners should be aware of the complexities around authenticating online information. Screenshots and printouts can be manipulated by editing the information, and practitioners should also question the trail of how and where the information was found.
- 2.11 Practitioners will assess whether the information is relevant to the matter in proceedings and/or the child's welfare. Where there is risk, the safeguarding policy must be followed.
- 2.12 If the practitioner considers the information relevant to the proceedings, the practitioner will narrow down the allegations in discussions with parties, so they can raise this with the court. As with any other allegations, practitioners should make clear to the court that this information is unverified, so that the court can consider any representations from the parties. The court may make a finding or may direct Cafcass to undertake further work, which could include accessing the information.

Contacting families using social media, or accessing social media content, when ordered by the court

- 2.13 Cafcass will not contact parties via social media unless it is ordered by the court.
- 2.14 On a small number of occasions the court has considered whether Cafcass or the local authority should use social media to locate a party or other relevant individual. If a court orders Cafcass to undertake such work, the order must be passed to the Legal team, who will discuss with the relevant Assistant Director. In public law cases, the view is generally that this is the responsibility of the local authority.
- 2.15 When a court has directed Cafcass to access social media content, the practitioner must first inform their line manager, and then use their work laptop or phone to access the information.

Using WhatsApp to communicate with children and families

- 2.16 The online messaging application, WhatsApp, is a popular way for people to communicate. It is a familiar and free to use application and therefore many children and adults wish to use it in their communications with professionals, in addition to their everyday use with friends and family.
- 2.17 The use of such online messaging applications in our work is the same as text messaging; it can be used for 'day to day' communication such as arranging meetings, but in general should not be used to have in-depth case discussions with a child or adult. The exceptions to this are in remote working with children and families, where WhatsApp video calling may be used to facilitate a meeting or interview or if accessibility requirements necessitate the use of extended WhatsApp messaging. If WhatsApp is the preferred method of communication for a child or adult, screenshots should be taken of the communication and uploaded to ChildFirst. Practitioners must not store case related information on WhatsApp or any other social media platform.
- 2.18 The minimum age of use, set by WhatsApp, is 16 years old. However, many children tell us that they wish to communicate with their practitioner via WhatsApp, either as part of their 'day to day' communication or as part of remote working (video call) for a scheduled meeting.
- 2.19 Practitioners must only communicate with a child under the age of 16 on WhatsApp where the child has explicitly asked to use this method over other options available. To support safe working practices when communicating with a child under the age of 16, the following applies:
- Cafcass will seek written consent from a parent/carer to use WhatsApp with children when this is their expressed preference;
 - Cafcass will not encourage or ask a child to download WhatsApp to communicate with us; and
 - Cafcass will only use WhatsApp to communicate with a child where they have expressed a preference for this method of communication.
- 2.20 Cafcass expects the same standards of professionalism for any online communication exchanges with families or professionals as for those used for face-to-face.

3.0 Corporate use of social media

- 3.1 Cafcass manages different social media channels as part of sharing information about the organisation to wider stakeholders and interested members of the public. Content may include information about:
- The organisation, including links to news and blogs.
 - Information and news relevant to the sector and Cafcass' stakeholders, including events or projects Cafcass is taking part in.
 - Recruitment.
- 3.2 In the main, social media channels are not avenues for families to seek or exchange information about proceedings (see 2.14 and 2.15 for the exception to this).

- 3.3 If information about court proceedings is posted on a Cafcass social media channel it will be removed by the Communications Team where possible (on Facebook and LinkedIn) and consideration will be given to any further appropriate action.
- 3.4 All corporate social media channels are monitored and moderated by the Communications Team during regular working hours. In exceptional cases, channels may be used outside of office hours such as during events.
- 3.5 [Social media community guidelines](#) are available to external audiences, setting out the terms of use for Cafcass' social media channels. Abusive or threatening content will not be engaged with unless there is a safeguarding concern. In these instances, Cafcass' health and safety and child protection policies will be followed.
- 3.6 Requests to assist in the promotion of third-party campaigns will be assessed by the Communications Team on a case-by-case basis.
- 3.7 Where possible, employees should use corporate communication channels such as their Cafcass email to conduct Cafcass business. Where this is not possible, and personal social media channels such as WhatsApp are used for Cafcass business, employees must frequently and routinely record information onto corporate channels as quickly as possible. Information held in personal communication channels may be subject to the Freedom of Information Act if it relates to Cafcass business.

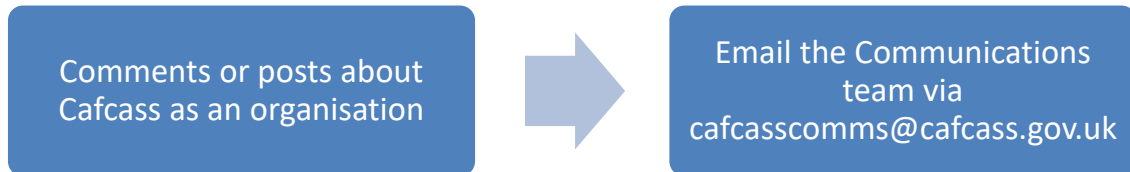
| | |
|--------------------------|--|
| Owned by | Assistant Director (Performance and Quality Assurance) |
| Approved by | Corporate Management Team |
| Approved on | 4 th October 2022 |
| This version implemented | January 2023 |
| Version | 2.1 |
| Amended | NG 09/08/23: Implementation date was missing so added this in. |
| Next review | October 2025 |

Appendix 1: a flowchart to show the process for flagging concerns re social media, and the role of comms, HR, H&S incident reporting, Legal etc

Process for reporting comments about a member of Cafcass staff on social media:



Process for reporting posts or comments on social media – corporate reputation:



Process for reporting posts or comments on social media – court proceedings:

