

Social media policy

1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This policy applies to Cafcass staff and contractors when using social media, both in a personal capacity and as part of their casework. 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.
- 1.2 In this policy 'social media' is defined as online communities in which users share information, ideas, personal messages and other content. Social media is a dominant form of communication in today's society, with almost everyone – including many children - having access to a mobile phone and the internet. Cafcass expects its staff to have, at a minimum, a base competence in using/understanding the use of social media. An [eLearning module](#) provides further information on the use of social media.

2.0 PERSONAL USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

- 2.1 Practitioners, if they choose to use social media and networking sites, are expected to do so 'appropriately and responsibly', as a registrant of the Health & Care Professions Council (HCPC),¹ and adhere to the [standards set by the HCPC](#).² Non-practice staff should also use social media appropriately and responsibly; this includes not posting information relating to Cafcass cases or service users.
- 2.2 For further guidance on how to use social media securely staff should access the eLearning module on [MySkills](#) called 'Use of texts and social media and staying safe online'. There is also a [knowledge bite](#) on 'social workers and social media', which summarises sector guidance relating to ethics and appropriate online behaviour.

3.0 USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

- 3.1 Cafcass expects the same standards of professionalism for any online communication exchanges with service users or professionals as for those used for face-to-face. The following sets out Cafcass' position on the use of social media in practice. It is mostly applicable to private law proceedings, as the local authority is the lead agency in public law proceedings.

To inform reports to court

- 3.2 Staff will not actively seek out information that is posted on social media by service users, or by their associates such as friends or relatives (this is sometimes referred to as a 'fishing expedition'). However, during the course of proceedings practitioners may

¹ Paragraph 2.7 of the HCPC standards of conduct, performance and ethics (January 2016)

² Also see <http://www.hcpc-uk.org/registrants/socialmediaguidance/>

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.

Social media information

- 3.3 Service users may present the practitioner and/or the court with information taken from social media. This could include screenshots or printouts of Facebook pages or WhatsApp conversations. Such information may be presented to prove or disprove relationships, whereabouts, behaviours, actions or knowledge. Or service users may tell a practitioner that such material exists online, but not provide any physical 'evidence'.
- 3.4 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.

Case example

In the work to first hearing phone call in a private law case, a mother said that the child's father is a drug user and other adults visit his home to use drugs. She is seeking to stop the child's overnight stays with the father. After the call, the mother emailed me screenshots of the father's Facebook page, where drug use was mentioned.

In the phone call with the father, I asked about the alleged drug use. The father said he did not use drugs and neither did his friends, but some of them may have made jokes about drug use on social media.

I discussed the screenshots with a Practice Supervisor as I had no way of knowing if they were accurate. We decided the main thing was the allegation, which would be included in the safeguarding letter. I emailed the mother to let her know that I would include her concerns in the safeguarding letter, and that she may wish to raise the screenshots with the court at the first hearing.

- 3.5 Practitioners will assess whether the information is relevant to the matter in proceedings and/or child safety. Where there is risk, the Child Protection policy must be followed.
- 3.6 If the practitioner considers the information relevant to the proceedings, the practitioner will narrow down the allegations in discussions with parties, in order to raise this matter 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.

Accessing social media content

- 3.7 Practitioners must not use their own personal social media account(s) to access the information of service users.
- 3.8 When a court has directed Cafcass to access social media content online, the practitioner must inform their line manager and forward the request to the Communications team. The Communications team will check to see if the information is publicly accessible and, if so, will provide screenshots to the practitioner for assessment.

Contacting parties by social media

- 3.9 Practitioners must not use their own personal social media account(s) to make public contact with parties or other relevant individuals. Practitioners may wish to use an online messaging application, such as WhatsApp, where this is requested by the child or young person (subject to any age restrictions on that application – for example, WhatsApp can only be used by persons over 13 years of age) or adult. The use of online messaging applications is the same as text messaging; it can be used for ‘day to day’ communication such as arranging meetings, but should not be used to have case discussions with a child or adult. Guidance on downloading WhatsApp to a Cafcass mobile and the age restrictions for use with children are available [here](#).
- 3.10 In a small number of cases, 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 Communications team, who will discuss with the relevant Assistant Director and Cafcass Legal. In public law cases, the view is generally that this is the responsibility of the local authority.
- 3.11 Cafcass will only make contact with parties or other relevant individuals by social media when this is court ordered.

4.0 MONITORING AND REPORTING SOCIAL MEDIA CONTENT

- 4.1 Cafcass supports staff to deal with any concerns about social media relevant to their work. This also extends to harassment following involvement in a case.

Social media content about an open case

- 4.2 There are restrictions on publicly posting information about a family proceedings case. If staff have concerns about a post on social media that relates to a case they are working on - 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
 - Ask the author to remove the post, though this is a matter of professional judgement
- 4.3 Cafcass Legal and the Communications team can provide further advice if necessary.

Threatening or abusive posts about a member of staff

- 4.4 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
 - Their local HR business partner
- 4.5 Further information 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.

Monitoring content online

- 4.6 The Communications team will take steps to ensure that any threatening material, or content, which is in breach of the host's standards, is removed from social media/website. Cafcass also has a duty of care to its staff. 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 staff wellbeing, and when this has been agreed with the relevant Assistant Director and Cafcass Legal.

5.0 CORPORATE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

- 5.1 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
- 5.2 In the main, social media channels are not avenues for service users and Cafcass to seek or exchange information about cases (see 3.8 and 3.10 for the exception to this).
- 5.3 If case information is disclosed on a Cafcass social media channel it will be removed where possible (on Facebook and LinkedIn) and consideration will be given to any further appropriate action.
- 5.4 All social media channels are monitored and moderated by the Cafcass Communications Team during regular working hours. In exceptional cases, channels may be used outside of office hours such as during events.
- 5.5 [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.

5.6 Requests to assist in the promotion of third party campaigns will be assessed by the Communications Team on a case by case basis.

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