

# **Undertaking Social Media and Internet Checks within Fostering Assessments and Reviews**

## **SCOPE OF THIS CHAPTER**

This chapter details the procedures to be followed when undertaking social media and internet checks of prospective foster carer(s) and approved foster carer(s), including family and friends' carer(s). As well as to highlight some of the issues to be considered, alongside other policies for the department. Due to the fact that technology is constantly changing, it is impossible to cover all circumstances in this guidance.

This chapter is not intended to provide any legal advice, and legal advice must be sought as appropriate. Local Authorities and Courts may have local protocols in place on the use of social media/service of documents.

## **RELEVANT LEGISLATION AND GUIDANCE**

Fostering Service [England] Regulations 2011

National Minimum Standards 2011

Adams, P (2019) *Undertaking Checks and References in Fostering and Adoption Assessments.*, London, CORAM BAAF Adoption and Fostering Academy

### **1. Introduction**

This document outlines the policy for prospective foster carers, family and friends' carers, as well as approved foster carers. It includes information about why social media checks are completed. Alongside guidance for foster carers around the appropriate use of the internet/social media as a foster carer for Nottinghamshire County Council.

Nottinghamshire County Council has a responsibility to ensure that the children and young people in its care are protected from potential harm or abuse. All prospective foster carers, including family and friends' carers need to be suitable to work with

children and young people, whilst providing a high standard of care and acting as positive role models.

## **2. Undertaking of Social Media Checks**

The law does not require that social media and internet checks should be undertaken on prospective foster carer(s) or foster carers. However, Regulation (26(2c)) of the Fostering Service [England] Regulations 2011 [amended] permits the fostering service to obtain 'any information they consider relevant'. This is also linked to Standard 2 (Promoting a positive identity, potential and valuing diversity through individualised care), Standard 3 (Promoting positive behaviour and relationships) and Standard 4 (Protection from Abuse and Neglect) of the Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards 2011. We will ask for your consent to undertake social media checks but reserve the right to complete them without your consent, to ensure the welfare of any child/children placed.

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## **3. Pre-Approval**

As part of the assessment process, Nottinghamshire County Council will undertake social media and internet checks. The reasons for social media and internet checks will be discussed with prospective foster carer(s) by the assessing social worker. Prospective foster carer(s) will be asked to provide information as to whether they have accounts with social media services, as part of the completion of the registration of interest form. All checks will be undertaken when the signed registration of interest is returned. This follows an open approach, with the full understanding of the prospective foster carer(s).

Checks will be undertaken by the assessing supervising social worker and fostering support officer. The outcome of these checks will be recorded and made available within the fostering report for panel. The checks information should be recorded on the analysis of social media checks form and shared with the team manager. If as a result of these checks, any information of concern or in need of further discussion/clarity emerges, then this will be discussed with the prospective foster carer(s) to seek their

views before making any judgements about their suitability to foster. The only exemption to this will be in cases where safeguarding matters arise, in which case child protection procedures will be followed.

On all occasions social media checks undertaken by employees of Nottinghamshire County Council should follow guidance as outlined within [Use of Social Media Sites by Social Care and Safeguarding Staff](#).

#### **4. Post Approval**

Once approved foster carers are required to be reviewed annually as to their suitability to foster (see [Review and Termination of Approval of Foster Carers](#)). As part of the annual review process, checks will be made upon the foster carer's social media/internet. We will ask for your consent to undertake social media checks but reserve the right to complete them without your consent, to ensure the welfare of any child/children placed. It is the responsibility of the fostering service to ensure prospective and approved carers are suitable to work with children and young people and will be setting an example as good role models for the children and young people in their care. The checks information should be recorded on the analysis of social media checks form and shared with the team manager, fostering independent reviewing officer (FIRO) and if appropriate panel.

In terms of good practice, it is recommended that foster carers: -

1. Set maximum privacy settings to social media accounts. This is to limit access to posts; as other settings may open their content to a wider audience, leading to their privacy and that of your family, friends, children in your care to be potentially compromised.
2. Review their security and confidentiality settings regularly and reset them if necessary.
3. Should consider the consequences before posting anything on social networking sites and the impression it may give to those who access the information. Anything posted online could end up in the public domain to be read by birth parents, children / young people, or social care.

4. Should not share any information relating to their fostering role and daily routines for safety, or which can identify a child or former child in their care.
5. Information and photographs of children in their care must never be posted on social media sites without consent from the local authority, parents, and the children, if they are of an appropriate age. Once an image is on the internet it can be viewed and stored by other people within their friends' network and may reveal the location of the child / young person. Therefore, this could lead to implications for carers own safety and that of the children they are caring for. This will need to be reviewed annually within the safer caring document, alongside delegated authority.
6. Immediate family and friends, who are aware of their fostering role, should also be reminded of expectations around social media and the dangers of identifying a fostered child.
7. Can be linked to a foster child's/young person's social networks, if both parties feel comfortable with this, however, this will need to be reviewed if a child/young person transitions to a different placement. Adding a young person as a 'friend' means you can assess/monitor their contents, but it also means they can access yours. Before doing so, discuss this with your supervising social worker and the child / young person's social worker.
8. Should maintain appropriate professional boundaries and should not have family members of looked after children as 'friends'. Nor should employees of the fostering service and foster carers be 'friends' on social media websites. This will need to be discussed and reviewed with family and friends' carers, where the dynamics can be more complex.
9. Must inform their supervising social worker, the child social worker if they have any concerns of a safeguarding nature.

In addition to undertaking social media and internet checks, Nottinghamshire County Council will provide advice and information about the use of the internet to foster carers as part of preparation to foster training and post approval training. If the respective prospective foster carer(s) or foster carer(s) need any technical support around settings for their social media, they can approach their supervising social worker, who can assist or identify appropriate training.

If there is a cause for concern identified via social media checks or internet checks, then this will be discussed with the respective team manager by the supervising social worker. The team manager will then consider the concerns process, alongside other involved professionals, and actions from this (see [Investigating Concerns and Allegations Against Foster Carers Including Historical Issues](#) for further information).

At all times the welfare of the child(ren) in placement remains of paramount importance throughout any enquiries. Information revealed which is a cause for concern, will be discussed with the prospective foster carer(s) or foster carer(s) at the first available opportunity, if safe to do so. Causes for concern might include any inappropriate material whether in video, photo, or written form, including views and opinions, whether implicit or explicit, that are not conducive to the role of a foster carer. Any breaches of confidentiality or the publication of material that is a cause for concern, may affect a carer's approval status and placements.