LSCB expectations for agencies' social media policies concerning children and young people

Produced by the joint online safeguarding subgroup, May 2015

Background

Most LSCB partner agencies have a social media (SM) policy or similar that outlines acceptable practice for employees and stakeholders. Such policies also typically cover the potential for SM to engage with service users, to inform as well as to gather opinions and other feedback.

All agencies will already have in place strict guidelines as to what constitutes appropriate practice in working with children and young people. The continuing development of SM, bringing with it new ways of interacting and exchanging information, requires that such guidelines be reviewed regularly to ensure that an appropriate standard of safeguarding is maintained.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight potential safeguarding issues in regard to children and young people that agencies will also need to consider in relation to their own policies. It is presented as a bulleted list to assist the process of reviewing current policy.

1. Expectations for staff working directly with children and young people

- Do not behave on SM in a way that might be misinterpreted as trying to develop a personal relationship with a child or young person.
- Keep personal SM usage entirely separate from any professional use. Be particularly careful to check which account you are logged into before posting anything online.
- Assume that service users will look for you online. Therefore ensure that any personal SM accounts do not include anything that may reflect badly on your professional standing or the reputation of your employer.
- Online "conversations" may appear to be ephemeral, but as they are written material they should be treated as if they are a permanent record.
- Once you post something online it is usually out of your control. Assume all information you post online is public unless you are certain it is not.
- Do not use personal equipment to take images of children and young people for professional use. Only use equipment supplied by your organisation and then only in line with your organisation's policy on handling images of children. That policy should make clear the procedures for obtaining consent; secure storage; removal from equipment and eventual disposal, in line with your organisation's data retention policy.

2. Expectations for organisations exploiting SM to engage directly with children and young people

- Not all SM products are appropriate for children. If you rely on a particular product, check its minimum age requirement to ensure it is appropriate for the target group. Do not leave your organisation open to accusations of normalising or encouraging under-age use.
- Make sure your organisation makes available clear safety guidance for any children using SM to communicate with you, both at the point of signing up and through subsequent signposting.
- Be aware that some types of open online communication may require moderation. Have procedures in place for managing the posting of inappropriate material by a child or young person; bullying or harassing posts; or a child making a disclosure.
- Be clear about the procedure and timescales in responding to any questions, issues or concerns posted online so as to avoid unreasonable expectations on the part of the child or young person.

3. Expectations for organisations using SM to gather information on children and young people to inform their professional practice

- If SM systems are searched to collect information on specific children, there must be a justifiable concern. The activity must be authorised by a member of staff of appropriate seniority and the process and its outcomes logged.
- Any online searches must be done using open methods available legally to any member of the public. You must not attempt to guess passwords or apply any other subterfuge to gain access to information.
- In the interests of safeguarding children, it may sometimes be appropriate to check what they are posting publicly about themselves and their family or friends. However, such investigation must be logged and authorised by a member of staff of appropriate seniority.
- Children and young people communicate online using different social norms to adults. This may lead to misunderstandings or over-reaction. Be careful not to read something into an online exchange that is not there.
- Do not assume that any information you may gather is in the public domain: that may not have been the poster's intention.