



BASW

The professional association for
social work and social workers

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www.basw.co.uk/policies

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Purpose

The purpose of this policy is to clarify what BASW considers to be the professional responsibilities of social workers and social work students, in relation to the increasing use of social media. As a professional body across the UK, BASW has developed a policy to support members to use social media appropriately and ensure practice is based on the BASW Code of Ethics.¹

BASW recognises the opportunities and challenges social media presents for social workers in their practice and the possible risks both for social workers and service users, particularly young people or other vulnerable people. The policy may need to be updated as the dynamic nature of social media evolves, but the particular principles of the Code of Ethics will remain the same and will be referenced in the policy by an accompanying number in brackets.

BASW encourages the positive uses of social media for networking, communication and developing inclusive practice.

Social media can enhance communication and be used as a positive tool in social work. BASW believes that good practice in social media is no different from that in any other form of communication. Social workers should ensure they maintain appropriate professional and personal boundaries and take responsibility for recognising ethical dilemmas presented by the use of different types of social media.

The virtual world provides social workers with many real-life issues and there will be many professional dilemmas that arise for social workers, regardless of their area of practice. For example, it may be that a looked after child in your care is using social media to contact their birth family - a contact order to the contrary, or that you find your picture, name and address has been posted on the internet by a hostile group or individual. Social workers may also never have used social media themselves but may still find themselves confronted by practice dilemmas due to other people's use of social media.

BASW recognises that new technology changes power relations and places a responsibility on professionals to consider its implications for their practice, their services and for the interests of service users. Social workers need to be aware of and knowledgeable about technological developments and understand the impact, use and advantages as well as possible ethical concerns and risks

in relation to themselves, the people they are working with and their employers.

The growing use of social media means that social workers need to reflect on the changing nature of communication and how this impacts on practice issues at the heart of social work, particularly the collection and use of information about and by individuals (3.5) and how to maintain the service users right to a relationship of mutual trust, privacy and confidentiality (3.10)

It is intended that the Social Media Policy should apply to social workers in all UK countries. The policy is primarily for social workers but is also important for employers as well as education and training providers. BASW strongly recommends that employers have a strategy, policy and code of practice for staff in relation to social media, which is proactive, supports professional development and greater e-professionalism for social workers and others working with children and adults. The BASW policy will be reviewed regularly and the BASW website will enable access to the latest advice, guidance and examples of practice.

Context

The evolution of social media has enabled social workers across the world to share knowledge and information, debate critical issues, provide support and connect with others who share interests. It helps social workers keep up-to-date with developments in policy, social work and related professions. This is contributing to the development of social workers professional identity as an international profession based on values of human rights and social justice.

Social workers are increasingly likely to participate in online communities of people, including service users, who have a common interest in policy and practice issues. Social media can help individuals and organisations to better understand, engage with and respond to people. It can contribute to making services more transparent and accountable. The use of social technology and social networking enables people to collaborate, build relationships and share information and resources. Proactive engagement in social media can provide a 'facilitative platform for achieving social work's main objectives of greater equity and enhanced social justice and an opportunity for challenging power imbalances and exclusion imposed by structural hierarchies. It can reclaim power through creation of new spaces for dialogue and a more dynamic social interaction'.

In the same way that online tools and social media have changed how people run their social lives and enjoy entertainment, technology has the capacity to bring about a radical shift in care services and change how families care for people alongside work, family, community and social lives. Social workers will need to be competent in using technology, for solving problems and using it creatively, for example, care packages can be coordinated between workers and family members using online 'apps' and reviewing and purchasing care or sharing records online.

E-professionalism is a term that is starting to be used, which goes beyond online communication. It involves the ability to understand and use social media and also how to develop and manage "the online persona of an individual based on the meaning of their online postings and interactions, including blogs, images, videos, tweets, and more."

While digital technology provides a wealth of opportunities, there are also online risks and sometimes these risks can lead to harm and abuse. Social workers need to take these risks into account when using social media and when assessing risk and working with children, families and adults (3.2).

Social media is being used in safeguarding investigations and social workers need to consider the ethical implications of obtaining information through these channels. Social media and future technological developments should be acknowledged and considered when planning future practice and legislation to protect and empower children.

While young people's 'offline' and 'online' worlds are often merging, the behaviours and safeguards of the 'real' world are not always applied in a 'virtual' world where friends can be added at the click of button and information shared in an instant.

EU Kids Online is a multinational research network. It seeks to enhance knowledge of European children's online opportunities, risks and safety. It uses multiple methods to map children's and parents' experience of the internet, in dialogue with national and European policy stakeholders.²

The UK Council for Child Internet Safety (UKCCIS) is a group of more than 200 organisations drawn from across government, industry, law, academia and charity sectors that work in partnership to help keep children safe online.³

The Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) supports professionals to deliver education and raise awareness of online child exploitation and abuse.⁴

Social media and social networking sites (SNS) are now part of modern life and as such social workers need to understand how they work and manage potential risks to their personal security, their own families and those who they work with. Social media is a public domain and social workers should be aware that while online they are still representing the profession and the agency and should be aware of how they could be viewed by society/service users/colleagues/other agencies/the media/governing bodies (2.3.1).

The Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) has published updated **Social media guidance for social service workers**. The guidance provides advice for workers on using social media in a way that meets the SSSC Code of Practice, which sets out the expected behaviours and values of the workforce. It focuses on issues registrants and other stakeholders come across most frequently.⁵

Definition

The terms “social media” and “social networking” are often used interchangeably to refer to web-based tools and technologies that support online communication and information sharing. Social media is, in effect, a publishing and broadcasting medium and includes:

- **Blogs – writing a blog or commenting on people’s blogs**
- **Micro-blogs such as Twitter**
- **Social networking sites, such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Ning, and having a personal profile page on one of the social or business networking sites**
- **Content-sharing services, such as Flickr, YouTube, Vimeo**
- **Product or service reviews on retailer sites, or customer review sites**
- **Taking part in online votes and polls**
- **Taking part in conversations on public and private web forums (message boards)**
- **Wikis are websites developed collaboratively by a community of users, allowing any user to add and edit content**
- **Podcasts**
- **Social bookmarking, such as Delicious**
- **Location based services (e.g. Foursquare)**



Benefits and disadvantages

- 1** Social workers should understand the potential benefits and disadvantages of social media for their practice and for service users.
- 2** Social workers should use social media as a positive platform for exchanging ideas and knowledge and to promote the social work profession, being aware that they are acting as ambassadors for social work when they are online.

Professionally appropriate

- 3** Social workers should ensure that their online presence is professionally appropriate.

Social workers should apply the same principles, expectations and standards for interacting and communicating with people online as in other areas of practice (3.1).

- 4** Social workers should maintain appropriate personal and professional boundaries in their relationships with service users and colleagues, recognising that not to do so could be detrimental

to themselves, their careers, service users, other individuals and employers (2.3.3).

- 5** Social workers and students should ensure that personal communication and work communication are separate.
- 6** Social media can be used effectively to breakdown unhelpful communication barriers and encourage dialogue between professionals and people who use or have used services, their families and other citizens (e.g. in open Twitter chats on professional matters). However, it is not appropriate to “accept” service users and their carers as online ‘friends’ in a personal network, or in any other way to create an online personal relationship. It could also be used as evidence in conduct hearings.
- 7** For students, the same issues about boundaries and confidentiality are relevant and the same precautions should be taken with regard to placements. Discretion should be used in relation to using university networks to ensure there is a distinction between personal and professional communication.

Security and privacy

- 8** Social workers should be responsible for understanding how to use social media, checking personal security settings and the implications of social media being a public and permanent record. Good “e-professionalism” requires the use of private channels (for example, email, phone) for any interaction or information that can have privacy implications.
- 9** Social workers need to be vigilant to keep their own identity safe and that of friends and families in all social media usage. Social workers need to consider the implication and risks of putting personal information on sites they use in both personal and work capacities, such as work, contact details and photos of work colleagues and family members and should not do so if they think their privacy and safety will be compromised. Particular attention should be paid to avoiding unauthorized use of images or other identifiers of people who have used services or their families or carers. This could be a misconduct matter with an employer or the regulator as well as breaching the BASW Code of Ethics. Social workers may want to ask family and friends to bear this in

mind when posting information, as for example inappropriate pictures posted by others could open them up to criticism or pictures of their family online could create difficulties.

Responsibility, confidentiality and privacy

- 10** Social workers should share information appropriately (3.5) and be responsible for what is posted, using their professional judgment (2.3.4). When tweeting or blogging about a topic related to the profession or work, social workers should consider the effect of their comments on their reputation and that of their employer. Social workers should also think carefully about how their postings could affect service users and their own careers and not bring the profession into disrepute (2.3.1). It may be useful to consider adding a disclaimer that the views expressed are not necessarily the views of the employer and interact in such a way that what you say and do could stand public scrutiny.
- 11** Social workers need to respect the principles of confidentiality and the privacy and feelings of others (3.10) by not revealing privileged or confidential

details about work or individuals. IFSW policy, data protection legislation and guidance should be applied to social media. Any development in the social media field that social workers are involved in should be subject to comprehensive security and confidentiality requirements before it goes live.

12 Social workers have a duty to act in the best interests of service users and consider people's right to respect, privacy and confidentiality (3.1) whilst also managing and assessing risk (3.2) within a legal framework.

13 Social workers should take into account when assessing and managing risk (3.2), and when they have a duty of care or are acting in "loco parentis", whether children and vulnerable people are at risk through their use of social media and manage this responsibly and appropriately, whilst recognising that social networking is part of modern life. For example, working with families and carers to protect service users from posting and viewing inappropriate or pornographic material or having harmful contacts which may put them at risk or subject them to bullying or abuse.

14 Social workers have a responsibility to consider the use of social media as part of safeguarding investigations but need to be mindful of the ethical implications. It is important to work with those professionals who are best placed to undertake the task of scrutinising social media and to ensure it is in the service user's best interest.

15 When appropriate social workers and social work organisations including BASW should engage with other relevant organisations to determine policies for data protection and precisely what kinds of data should be protected in order to prevent abuse and exploitation through the use of social media and to develop possible safeguards.

Support and advice

16 Social workers, in their practice, should support service users of all ages to use social networking with awareness of its potential and risks. Social workers and their organisations should be offering clear, prominent and accessible advice about internet safety to ensure people can safely get the most from the services on offer and when using the social networking sites.

- 17** BASW strongly urges employers to support and facilitate social workers, foster carers and other carers learning about social media, including provision of training, to enable them to provide effective advice.
- 18** Social workers should discuss and reflect on particular dilemmas related to the use of social media in specific situations as part of professional supervision. Decisions should be made on a case-by-case basis and take into account the best interests of those concerned (3.13; 2.3.4).
- 19** Social workers should know and understand what their employer's and regulator's policies allow with regard to using social media, as well as legal precedents. If the employer does not have a policy, this omission should be raised with the appropriate manager/supervisor.
- 20** Social workers should know what support and action will be taken by employers if they experience abuse, harassment or hate mail as a result of their work (3.15) and all employers should have a policy in place to deal with such circumstances.

Continuing Professional Development

- 21** Social workers should make use of the potential for continuing professional development (CPD) through social media, for example by accessing learning materials, through online discussions and information sharing. Within the current fast-evolving socio-economic and policy contexts, it is important that social workers keep abreast of relevant developments in social work and related professions. Social media can facilitate this process and raise practitioners' awareness. BASW provides a knowledge hub through which social workers can access a variety of learning opportunities and updates on social media.
- 22** Social workers need to be aware of the benefits and pitfalls of using social media for learning and ensure that time allocated to involvement in social media and web searches is managed and appropriate whilst at work (3.14). For example social workers need to be aware that social media is not peer reviewed so some information may be misleading or inaccurate.

23 Social workers should be competent in social media to enable them to navigate this fast-changing arena. Learning about social media should be an on-going process with sufficient time and training to become e-professionals and use it effectively in their everyday practice. Social media training and engagement should be a core component of the social work curriculum and continuing professional development to enable people to become “e-Professionals”.

References

- 1 BASW: The Code of Ethics for Social Work, www.basw.co.uk/about-basw/code-ethics
- 2 EU Kids Online, www.lse.ac.uk/media-and-communications/research/research-projects/eu-kids-online
- 3 UK Council for Child Internet Safety (UKCCIS), www.gov.uk/government/groups/uk-council-for-child-internet-safety-ukccis
- 4 The Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP), www.thinkuknow.co.uk/professionals
- 5 Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) www.sssc.uk.com/about-the-sssc/multimedia-library/publications/press-releases/updated-social-media-guidance-for-social-service-workers

Useful links

- The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) <http://ifsw.org>
- Guidance on Social Media, Health and Care Professions Council www.basw.co.uk/resources/guidance-social-media
- Social Workers and Information Technology, SCIE www.basw.co.uk/resources/social-workers-and-information-technology
- Children’s online activities, risks and safety: A literature review by the UKCCIS Evidence Group www.basw.co.uk/resources/children’s-online-activities-risks-and-safety-literature-review-ukccis-evidence-group

**The British Association
of Social Workers**

Wellesley House
37 Waterloo Street
Birmingham B2 5PP

 @BASW_UK

 @BASW.UK

 0121 622 3911

 www.basw.co.uk

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