

GUIDANCE ON THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA FOR ALL THOSE WHO PROVIDE PASTORAL MINISTRY TO CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND ADULTS AT RISK

This document has been the subject of consultation.

1. Who is this guidance for?

- 1.1 This guidance specifically targets the following people with safeguarding responsibilities: Clergy, Religious, Parish Safeguarding Co-ordinators and all volunteers and staff who are actively involved in pastoral ministry with vulnerable people. The term '*Church Worker(s)*' has been used for ease of reference through this document.
- 1.2 These are the key people who will be involved in taking forward involvement in social media and they will need to work together to ensure the necessary safeguarding measures are in place and followed on a day to day basis.
- 1.3 Training material and checklist with issues to consider when engaging in social media can be found in Appendix 2.

2. The purpose of this guidance

- 2.1 This guidance is written from a safeguarding perspective: identifying best practice to prevent harm or abuse or minimise the likelihood of it happening and will be useful for those involved in Church ministry considering the use of social media in their ministry. It is important that the Church's safeguarding policies and procedures '*Awareness and Safety in our Catholic Communities*' address online safety issues.
- 2.2 The guidance has been produced to provide information and advice on social networking services and other interactive services to:
 - ***recognise that this medium provides exciting opportunities to effectively engage with a wide range of individuals;***
 - ***understand the potential challenges when using social media;***
 - ***understand the potential safeguarding risks when using social media;***
 - ***provide good practice guidelines for the safe use of social media.***

3. New ways of communicating

- 3.1 The use of social networking sites such as Facebook, Bebo and MySpace is rapidly becoming the primary form of communication between friends and family. In addition there are many other sites which allow people to publish their own pictures, text and videos such as You Tube and blogging sites. See **Appendix 1** for more information on these types of social media.
- 3.2 The ability to communicate in real time with others and to access networks across the world offers great opportunities for the Church community to share our '*Good News*' and have interactive conversations with people with whom we might not otherwise connect. The Church welcomes the use of electronic communications technology as it is an essential and valuable communications tool for those providing services for the Church. Difficulties arise when representatives of the Church use these sites and do not have the knowledge and skills required to address some of the pitfalls.
- 3.3 It is not reasonable to expect or instruct Church personnel not to use these sites outside working hours but we have to recognise electronic media takes us into new territory where we have to think differently and more carefully about what we say; unlike the printed matter, it is interactive, conversational and open ended and it always happens in a public space.

4. The Challenges

4.1 *Boundaries*

- 4.1.1 Most of the challenges are about maintaining professional boundaries between private and working life.
- 4.1.2 It is naïve to believe that use of electronic communication/social media sites provides a completely private platform for personal communications; the distinction between working and private lives can easily become blurred. Whether you like it or not as a person of the Church anything you say or do in the public domain will be interpreted by the public as representing the Church even if you feel you are speaking in a personal capacity rather than an official one. Be aware that any controversial or sensitive comments you make may attract attention of the media. If in doubt always seek advice but remember you are responsible for your online activity. In the case of employees, you should be aware there may also be disciplinary implications which could result in an outcome up to and including dismissal depending on the circumstances.

4.2 *Vulnerability*

- 4.2.1 Church workers can be vulnerable to unintended misuses of electronic communication.
- 4.2.2 Even when utilised sensibly and with caution representatives of the Church are vulnerable to their personal details being exposed to a wider audience than they might have otherwise intended. One example of this is when photographs and comments are published by others without the Church Official's consent or knowledge which may portray the person in a manner which is not conducive to their role in the Church.
- 4.2.3 E-mail, texting and social media encourage casual dialogue; very innocent actions can be misconstrued or manipulated.
- 4.2.4 Electronic messages are not anonymous and can continue to develop a life of their own long after the original message has disappeared. Social media sites can archive content even when deleted from online profiles. In effect, once information is placed online you relinquish control of it.

- 4.2.5 Social media can disarm inhibitions; it brings a new dimension and 'feel' to a relationship. It is particularly important to be mindful of this whenever a Church worker offering services to people of the Church considers becoming friends in an online environment. A Church worker should never share information with individuals that they are providing pastoral ministry to in any environment that they would not willingly or appropriately share in a parish or parish related setting or in the community.
- 4.2.6 We all need to be alert to the risk that actions which may seem quite innocent can be misunderstood and misconstrued by others.

4.3 Legal Issues

- 4.3.1 Sharing your thoughts and reflections using social media or e-mail might feel private and personal but if more than one person can access what you have written it is likely that the Law would class it as '*published*' and, therefore, messages which are defamatory, libellous or obscene could quite easily appear on your profile before you have a chance to remove it. This may result in significant personal distress, risk to reputation of the individual, the parish/agency and require intervention of the Church authorities and possibly the Police. In the case of employees, you should be aware there may also be disciplinary implications which could result in an outcome up to and including dismissal depending on the circumstances.
- 4.3.2 Online behaviour should, therefore, be treated with caution.

4.4 Confidentiality

- 4.4.1 Be sensitive about confidentiality. Social media does not change our fundamental understanding about confidentiality across the life of the whole Church. When telling a story about a situation that involves someone else, always ask yourself – *is it my story to tell?* Would it cause distress, inconvenience, embarrassment to others if they found out you had shared in this way? If in any doubt do not share it online. Equally be very careful when copying others into an e-mail which has gone backwards and forwards a couple of times as there may be confidential information in the correspondence.

4.5 Consent

- 4.5.1 It is essential to get permission from all involved if words or images are to be transmitted and made public or shared with a selected group of people.

5. Specific Safeguarding Risks

- 5.1 Communicating with children/protected adults in the parish and former members of your groups for vulnerable people via social networking sites or via other non Church related mechanisms such as personal e-mails and text messaging can lead to Church workers being vulnerable to serious allegations concerning safeguarding children, young people and protected adults.
- 5.2 There are some cases when representatives of the Church deliberately use these settings to communicate with and/or form inappropriate relationships with children, young people and/or adults at risk.
- 5.3 The risks to vulnerable people are various: being exposed to inappropriate content; being groomed by someone who wants to abuse them (**see Appendix 3**); being bullied online via mobile technology; blackmailed; or having identity stolen; and of being the subject of fraud. Children/young people/adults at risk need to be protected from these risks and they need to be helped to develop the skills to keep themselves safe online.

5.4 Unacceptable Behaviours

- Inappropriate electronic communication with children/adults at risk, including SMS and instant messaging.
- Posting, sending sexually explicit pictures/images/cartoons of children/adults at risk.
- Grooming; whereby a representative of the Church uses electronic messages with a view to establishing an inappropriate relationship.
- Downloading, possessing, making, viewing or distributing indecent images.
- Using inappropriate 'You Tube' content in a Church setting.

6. Specific Safeguarding Guidance to Minimise the Risk when Using Electronic Communication and Social Networking

6.1 As a Church worker you should:

- always maintain a formal and courteous and professional tone in all your communication requests by ensuring that appropriate boundaries are maintained;
- only use official channels of communication e.g. parish e-mail address, telephone numbers, parish Facebook.
- use mobile phones provided by the Church to communicate with children/adults at risk, making sure that parents have given permission for this form of communication to be used;
- recognise that text messaging should only be used as part of an agreed protocol and when other forms of communication are not possible;
- not exchange private texts, telephone numbers, personal e-mail addresses or photos of a personal nature with children/adults at risk;
- firmly decline Facebook initiated friend requests and do not instigate any yourself;
- use your own discretion when dealing with friend requests from parents/carers. It is acceptable to decline these invitations and remind parents/family members of more formal channels through which they can discuss their child's/relation's arrangements;
- operate online in a way in which would not call into question your position in the Church;
- realise that some people will naturally be curious about your private life outside the Church and may try to find out more about you;
- ensure that personal social networking sites are set at private and that children/adults at risk are never listed as approved contacts. Manage your private settings and keep them under review. These are particularly important with regards to photographs. Remember that no privacy mechanism is 100% guaranteed;

- consider that online conversations may not be private;
- respect privacy and confidentiality at all times;
- when using mobile technology e.g. camera functions, always give serious thought when using photo and video facilities so that there is no chance of misinterpretation of intent.
- bring the matter to the attention of the Church authority using the proper procedures if you are the victim of cyber bullying or are uncomfortable about comments, photos or posts made by people about you;
- report the matter using the appropriate procedures (**see Section 5 - Recognising and Responding to Allegations/Concerns** of *'Awareness and Safety in our Catholic Communities'* manual); if you come across or are made aware of inappropriate use of electronic communication or social networking by a child/adult at risk or concerning a child/adult at risk;
- alert children/adults at risk to and encourage them to use appropriate responsible and safe online behaviour (**see Section 4 - Good Practice in working with Children and Young People** of *'Awareness and Safety in our Catholic Communities'* manual);
- be aware of and comply with rules and policy in regard to taking and sharing photos of children (**see Section 4 - 'Good Practice in working with Children and Young People'** of *'Awareness and Safety in our Catholic Communities'* manual).

7. Conclusion

- 7.1 There may be **exceptions** to the advice contained in this guidance. If you have unanswered questions or are in doubt seek advice from your Diocesan Safeguarding Advisor/Safeguarding Service.
- 7.2 Ideally, this guidance should be used during a training session to spur clergy, staff and volunteers to ask open ended questions and make sound judgements about keeping themselves and those they are working with safe.