The PCFSW Digital Research & Practice Development Project

PCFSW Best Practice Guide for
Digital Practice and Digital Professionalism/e-Professionalism
and Digital Capabilities

25 May 2020
Last updated: 10 September 2020

Purpose and objective:

This guidance has been developed by the Principal Children and Families Social Worker (PCFSW) network and the Social Work and Digital Practice network. It has been produced in consultation with practitioners and managers and the PCFSW reference group to support practitioners and managers to think about ethical and professional implications of the use of digital technologies and online digital connection and communication with children and families and adults who access services as well as colleagues and other professionals.

Audience:

This document is aimed at social work and social care practitioners and managers as well as qualifying social work students.

Content and use of this document

Important note: It is important to note that social workers should not search, access or otherwise view or use social media postings by service users in an unauthorised or unethical manner. Social workers should strictly follow current guidance and legislation and obtain the necessary information for their assessments and safeguarding of children and young people though appropriate ethical and authorised means and approaches only.

Below is a list of content with links to the different topics in this guide:

Understanding my regulator: Social Work England

Social Work England is the specialist regulator for social workers in England. Its role is to set professional standards and assure the public's confidence in social work. This guide is to support social workers in understanding the link between our professional standards and practice.

In response to Covid-19, you may need to adapt your practice and ways of working. In doing so, we encourage you to think carefully about the professional standards and how to maintain them against a rapidly changing context. This guide offers up practical advice from sector leaders to support you as you adapt.

It is important to reflect on changes to practice and to explore professional and ethical dilemmas with peers or managers. Social workers are doing this as they explore new and different ways of working. This can be an important source of learning to record as part of your continuing professional development, which is central to your registration as a social worker. Social workers are required to record learning in their online Social Work England account before the end of the registration year.

Some social workers have returned to the profession during the pandemic through temporary registration. There can be a lot to consider when returning to practice. We hope this guide will support you as you support local teams and services at a time of considerable pressure.

The Principal Social Workers network and the Social Work and Digital Practice network are committed to embedding the professional standards in practice and continue to work with collaboratively to make the link between standards and practice.

If you'd like to know more about Social Work England, you can find more at www.socialworkengland.org.uk.

As practitioners contact, connect and communicate with service users and other colleagues and professionals, they open up new digital channels of communication and in doing so, create multiple and multi-layered relationships. This can heighten the risk of breaches of privacy. This guidance aims to provide and promote better understanding of the implication of digital practice and some of the considerations relating to digital professionalism. It covers the following:

- Defining digital professionalism
- Digital identity and digital convergence
- Some of the differences between online and offline communication
- Maintaining professional relationships and boundaries online
- The digital knowledge, skills and capabilities for social workers

Professional standards

When using social media and digital technologies, practitioners should consider and apply the professional standards. Standards with a particular reference to online conduct include professional standard:

2.5. As a social worker, I will actively listen to understand people, using a range of appropriate communication methods to build relationships.

3.10. As a social worker, I will establish and maintain skills in information and communication technology and adapt my practice to new ways of working, as appropriate.

5.6. As a social worker, I will not use technology, social media or other forms of electronic communication unlawfully, unethically, or in a way that brings the profession into disrepute.

Thinking about social media and its significance

For the purposes of this guide, social media refers to any media that allows for social networking and/or can be used in a social way to connect people. It typically allows posting and sharing of user-generated content and interaction between its users.

Social technologies are 'social and public by default' which means they are designed with the purpose of sharing and dissemination and maximising accessibility and visibility of data and information hence, by default every datapoint is public and potentially visible to unlimited audiences. Therefore, it is the responsibility of social media users to adjust and monitor the privacy settings of their social media accounts and activities and to limit the audience and visibility of their online posting or information. This is in contrast to relationship-based practices such as social work which operate based on professional trust and an assumption of privacy and confidentiality of information and interaction with service users.

Therefore, maintaining awareness of the responsibilities for online privacy and upholding ethical and legal ways of working in light of social technologies is particularly important for those in relationship-based professions, such as social work. Social workers maintain professional trust and respect for privacy and confidentiality of information, particularly in interactions with people they support. It is important for social work practitioners to be aware of the tensions between modern ways of communicating and socialising and the ethics, risks and legality of working with personal information online. Social workers should ensure that they have the appropriate privacy setting for their own social media accounts and digital devices to avoid any unauthorised disclosure of their own or others' information, or infringement of their own or others' privacy or human rights.

Digital Professionalism or e-Professionalism

Social work values and principles are consistent, whether we operate online or offline. However, the application and implications of those values and principles are dependent on context and therefore, social workers should be mindful and ensure that they apply social work values, principles and professional standards both online and offline.

Digital professionalism takes place at the intersection of ethics, practice and society. It requires careful consideration and application of professional standards, as well as the roles, opportunities, risks and challenges of social media and digital technologies within a changing social, cultural and political landscape (see Figure 1).

Digital professionalism or "e-professionalism" requires practitioners to extend and apply social work values and principles in a meaningful and contextually relevant manner in digital context and in a way that meet the objectives of those values and standards.

Digital professionalism also requires social workers to understand and use social media and digital technologies in order to develop and manage their online persona in line with professional standards and in ways that support and enhance their practice and digital citizenship.

Digital professionalism also involves the ability to identity and effectively manage new risks and opportunities and to use the possibilities and capabilities offered by digital and social technologies to enhance practice and its outcomes.
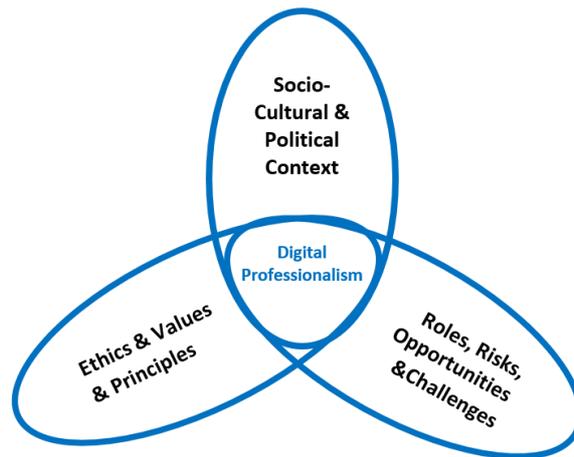
Figure 1: Components of Digital Professionalism

Identity Prism: Thinking about online identity and online postings

The Identity Prism is a tool that offers a helpful approach for thinking about the ethical and professional implications of online identities, activities and postings.

Narrative: Online postings and activities tell a story about ourselves and others; in other words, online content is self-expression and an extension of our self-narrative. What does your online content or interactions say about your identity and self-narrative and how do they affect your online persona and sense of who you are?

Performance: Thinking about online audiences, online postings and activities can be considered as "performance" or behaviour addressed to or before an audience (in this sense, we perform a given identity or persona in online setting and for a given audience). How are your online activities or behaviour and performance perceived or understood by your audience and others? (this may be intended or unintended audience and may result in intended or unintended meaning)

Relational: Online postings and activities can also be considered in the context of relationships or as interaction with others (as an expression of relationship and in relation to others). What do your
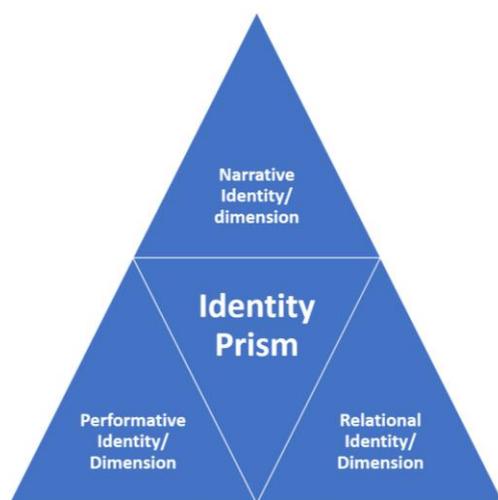
> **Being mindful of others' perspectives**
>
> From a professional perspective, it is important to reflect on how your online communication, interactions and postings may be perceived and understood by others and its narrative, performative and relational dimensions.
>
> For example, a social worker was referred to the HCPC and was cautioned due to texting a service user out of hours (during weekend) although the content of the text message was not inappropriate and in spite of the fact that her employer did not have a written policy regarding out of hour communication.

online postings and activities say about your relationships and how do they position you in relation to others?

Figure 1: Identity Prism

The Identity Prism tool offers a helpful lens to think about and reflect upon the multidimensional implications of online postings and activities. It helps us to consider how what we do online relates to our professional identity. This also offers a practical approach to support practitioners to develop their online identity in positive ways as well as think about online identities and activities of children and families and adults who access services.

Online relationships and boundaries

Professional relationships require empathic listening and understanding combined with effective use of self and the effective use of self requires a dynamic and continued recognition and management of boundaries. Indeed, thinking from a family systemic perspective we can say that the quality of relationships is defined by boundaries.

Boundaries are the emotional barriers that protect and enhance the integrity of individuals as well as the systems and subsystems with which they interact. Given this definition, perception of professional boundaries is influenced by the context as well as the practitioner's and service users' emotions and mood. Therefore, appropriateness of professional boundaries depends on the way our emotions, mood, communication and behaviour are understood by others and the way these influence others' perception of the relationship and its boundaries. Therefore, practitioners should consider how their communication and choice of language as well as their actions, emotions and behaviour are understood by people who access services.

Understanding the context and the factors influencing perception of boundaries is essential for ethical and effective practice and professional relationships. For example, it is easy to relate to and appreciate the reassuring gesture of a social worker hugging a scared young child who reaches out for a hug and who is spending his/her first night away from home at a temporary accommodation. However, the same social worker would be expected to find a different way of expressing empathy and reassurance if he was supporting an adolescent who had experienced sexual abuse and was scared spending her first night in a similar temporary accommodation.

Social media and digital technologies can influence perception of proximity (closeness) with others and interacting with others online can have a disinhibiting effect. These factors can affect and alter perception and understanding of boundaries and influence people's behaviours.

Online disinhibition effect

Research indicates that most people experience varying degrees of disinhibition online. This can influence people's online postings and behaviour and might make them say or do things that they would not say or do in their face-to-face interactions offline.

Online disinhibition may be benign and may make us feel at ease and result in greater self-disclosure; for example, practitioners may find more open engagement with young people and some parents or adults who access services. However, such disinhibition and self-disclosure can also be a source of vulnerability as information, communication or interactions can be manipulated or misused by others. Furthermore, excessive online disinhibition can lead to inappropriate, aggressive or abusive communication and behaviour; this is referred to as toxic disinhibition and may be shown in various forms ranging from abrupt reactions or quick escalation of online arguments to digital assault, cyberbullying, grooming, exploitation and other forms of online abuse.

The effect of online disinhibition can be exacerbated by the ability to withhold one's identity and create anonymous identities and postings online. Practitioners should be aware of the effect of online disinhibition on themselves and others and should adhere to Professional Standards and social work values regardless of whether they use a named or anonymous social media account. It is important to note that many anonymous online messages or images may be traceable to the original person who made that posting.

The perception and effect of online proximity

Online connection and interaction can generate a sense of proximity that can affect people's perception of closeness to others. On the one hand this can facilitate relationship-building and people can form quicker friendships, on the

Dual Relationships
Dual relationship is any relationship between a social worker/practitioner and a current or previous service user that is in addition to or outside of the professional relationship between the two; for example, having a personal or business relationship in addition to professional relationship with a service user.

Dual relationships are inappropriate and may be in breach of professional standards and boundaries. Therefore, as much as possible, Practitioners should avoid dual relationships and when this is not possible then practitioners should ensure that they minimise any overlaps and maintain appropriate professional boundaries. However, it is important to note that in certain circumstances practitioners may not be able to avoid a dual relationship. For example, a social worker living and working in a small remote village that has a single grocery store may end up supporting the family of the grocery store owner due to safeguarding concerns or support needs while still shopping at the same grocery store. This creates an unavoidable dual relationship; and although such unavoidable dual relationships might not breach of professional boundaries, they represent add a layer of ethical complexity to management of boundaries and professional relationships.

Using personal social media accounts for professional purposes is an example of inappropriate dual relationship.

other, this sense of closeness can result in increased or implied expectations and lead to frustration and relationship breakdown. Practitioners may find greater ease and openness on the part of children and families to connect, engage and communicate online. However, online proximity can affect practitioners' and others' perception of boundaries and generate a sense of closeness that may potentially infringe professional boundaries. Practitioners should be aware and alert of the impact of online proximity and ensure that they

maintain clear and appropriate professional boundaries at all times.

Separating personal and professional social media accounts and postings

Some practitioners maintain separate personal and professional social media accounts on the same platform. However, whether a social worker uses one or two social media accounts (one personal and one professional) depends on how they want to use that account, including the people they want to connect with and the type of content and information they wish to share. For example, if social workers wish to connect with family or close friends and share personal or private information then it is better to separate that information from other online engagements. If social workers decide to share or discuss personal activities, events and information via a closed social media group, it is important that all members of that group respect the privacy of the group and its members and do not share the group's discussions or postings more widely. However, regardless of privacy settings and the purpose of the social media account, social workers must ensure that online and offline actions and communications can stand professional scrutiny.

Using social media to connect or communicate with service users?

Some organisations provide online support and services and to deliver such services their practitioners connect and communicate with service users through social media apps; examples are support groups on a variety of apps ranging from Facebook to Skype, WhatsApp and son on. However, before the Covid-19 pandemic, many local authorities and other organisations did not allow the use of social media platforms for online connection and communication between their practitioners and service users. Therefore, as a general rule:

- Check your organisational policy and guidance regarding use of social media and digital technologies and online connection and communication with service users;
- Make sure you have a clear understanding of your organisational policy and are able to apply that policy in practice and discuss and clarify any questions or doubts with your manager;
- Discuss and agree your strategy and use of social media for work purposes with your manager and adopt a consistent approach to online connection and communication relating to your work;

Duty of Care

In order to use communication and social media apps people have sign up to and install those apps.

Many people who access services may be considered vulnerable and practitioners and their employers have a duty of care to ensure their safety and well-being. Therefore, when practitioner carry out an online home visit or invite service users to an online meeting using an app that the service user does not use then the practitioner and their employer are in effect asking their service user to sign up to or subscribe to or install an app that they don't use and are not necessarily familiar with. This may expose the service user to a host of potential risks and therefore, the practitioner and their employer have an ethical responsibility to ensure that invitee has the necessary training, preparation and support to be able to use the app safely. To assess potential risks in relation to a given app or social media platform practitioners should consult the Best Practice Guide for Assessing Online Risks, Harm and Resilience and Safeguarding of Children and Young People Online.

It is important to note that in such cases, practitioners and their employers have a duty of care for the safety and well-being of the service user. In the same manner that a teacher and his/her school have a duty of care for their pupils when organising a school trip to a park or a museum, practitioners and their employers have a duty of care for asking service users to use an online platform for connection and communication with services. However, whereas the risks associated with a school trip end at the end of the trip, the risks associated with the use of an online platform are continue beyond the online home visit or the online meeting. Hence, such arrangements require careful consideration and may need informed consent from parents, guardian or carers of those involved.

- Ensure your actions and approach are in line with your organisational policy as well as social work values and Professional Standards;
- Make sure you avoid dual relationships and respect your own and others rights and privacy and maintain confidentiality of information;
- Set clear boundaries for interaction and communication with others, especially if you are working with children and families or adults who access services, and ensure those interacting with you are aware of those boundaries;
- Do not use personal social media accounts for professional purposes as this gives rise to a number of ethical challenges and creates a dual relationship that can breach professional standards.

Managing online boundaries and connecting with children and families or adults who access services

During the pandemic many practitioners have used platforms such as WhatsApp, Skype, Facetime, MS Teams, Zoom and others to keep in touch, connect with and support children and families and adults who access services. Many of learning and practices from this period can be used to complement and enhance relationship-based practice post-pandemic. However, notwithstanding the importance and benefits of digital practice, there are a number of ethical, practical and professional considerations that require attention and careful reflection by practitioners and their employers in order to maintain appropriate professional boundaries.

Employers should ensure that they have a clear and consistent organisational policy and digital and social media guidance that include and address questions in relation to online and digital connection and communication with people who access services.

Having a conversation or establishing a channel of communication is different from establishing a connection and does not necessarily require connecting with others. For example, some platforms such as MS Teams or Zoom allow practitioners to invite people outside their organisation to a meeting using a "one time link". This enables the invitee to join the meeting for that single instance without establishing a connection between the practitioner and the invitee and often without requiring the invitee to subscribe to the platform being used. This limits the ethical and professional implications of such a conversation.

> **Installing and using social media apps/platforms on your computer**
>
> Installing apps such as WhatsApp on your computer will often mean that you will automatically be logged into the app when you login to your computer and hence will be online. In such a case and depending on your notification setting, you may continue to receive notifications and messages on your desktop screen. Therefore, practitioners and their employers should carefully consider their responsibility and the professional liability associated with receiving and seeing such content, messages, interactions or notifications.

However, some practitioners have used social media accounts such as WhatsApp or FaceTime to communicate with people who access services. In such cases, practitioners and their employers should consider a number of ethical, professional and practical points including confidentiality and disclosure of personal information.

Apps that require the invitee to sign up for an account often create a connection between the practitioner sending the invite and the invitee. This has important implications that require careful consideration and these include:

Connecting with the invitee on apps such as WhatsApp means that both parties will see each other's mobile phone number and contacts; that is an important disclosure of information for both parties that requires careful consideration. It is important to note that on platforms such as Telegram, users have the option of sharing or hiding their phone number and this offers added privacy. Furthermore, some local authorities have

modified platforms such as WhatsApp to allow connection without sharing of phone numbers or contacts however, if this is not the case for your local authority then you need to think about its implications for privacy and boundaries.

Some apps show users' status and hence, when practitioners are online their status is shared with all their connections. This means that your connections know when you are online and will be able to contact you using the app/platform; also, in many messaging apps users can see whether and when their messages have been received, viewed and read by others. Furthermore, all your contacts will be able to see and respond to any group messages or information you post. Therefore, practitioners should think about the implications of connecting with their service users on such platforms/apps.

Practitioners will be able to see group messages and information posted by their connections or by people in the same online group. Also, most social media apps offer notification to inform users about messages and relevant online activities of their connections or people contacting or messaging them although, practitioners can adjust their notification settings and decide which notifications they wish to receive. However, practitioners cannot unsee what they have seen and what they see may entail professional responsibility. Therefore, practitioners should reflect and consider their responsibility and the professional liability associated with receiving and seeing such content, messages, interactions or notifications.

> **Thinking about Ethics of Digital Practice**
>
> Practitioners should be purposeful, transparent and proportionate in their online engagement and digital practice as well as all their actions and decisions. Therefore, while in many instances the use of technology can be facilitative and can complement and strengthen relationship-based practice, digital practice presents distinct risks and limitations and therefore, practitioners should be mindful of its ethical, practical and professional strengths, limitations and implications.
>
> Practitioners can use the 10 Cs as described in [Best Practice Guide for Assessing Online Risks, Harm and Resilience and Safeguarding of Children and Young People Online](#) to think about their online identity, connection and communications and their associated risks and ethical and professional implications.

Finally, if you use social media platforms that do not show whether you are online or offline (such as Twitter) and for professional purposes connect with people who access services on such a platform, or if you provide a service through a given platform, then there may be a reasonable expectation on the part of people who access services that you respond to questions and messages and requests for assistance. Such a social media account may also result in people referring or signposting or raising safeguarding concerns or emergencies by contacting you online with the assumption of action and timely response on your part. This gives rise to ethical and professional liabilities and therefore, in such cases it is essential to set clear boundaries and communicate this on your profile and to all concerned as to when your account is monitored and when and how you can be contacted and whether such safeguarding concerns or emergencies should be addressed to you or reported through a different channel and to a different service.

As a general rule, practitioners should be mindful and effectively manage public expectations and act with transparency, consistency and clear boundaries and ensure that the same is communicated to all concerned.

The digital knowledge, skills and capabilities for social workers

To develop and enhance good and effective digital practice, practitioners and their employers should consider the following Digital Capabilities for Social Workers and ensure that practitioners are able to:

- develop and maintain appropriate professional relationships and boundaries;
- identify, assess and manage online risks;
- develop and demonstrate digital literacy, knowledge and skills in using digital technology;

- make respectful, purposeful and meaningful choices and decisions online. (For example, choosing who to connect with or who to engage with online);
- distinguish and evaluate the reliability and credibility of information and online sources;
- trace and gather information across multiple media (for example, across different online sources, news websites, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.);
- mix media & content from different online sources and sites to produce meaningful information;
- navigate across diverse communities and different media online;
- use and engage in digital communication, digital participation and digital collaboration appropriately and as needs be;
- pool knowledge and experiences together to inform and/or enhance their thinking, knowledge, decision making and behaviour;
- assess different circumstances and to respond in an appropriate, ethical, proportionate and professional manner;
- multitask and be able to consider the context and shift their attention onto the most significant or important information or detail;
- coproduce and collaborate to achieve common goals and produce shared solutions and outcomes;
- use digital and social media ethically and yet creatively and/or innovatively in practice or academia or research.

We hope this is guide is helpful and value your comments and feedback. Please address all feedback, comments or suggestions to Dr. Peter Buzzi at: PSWresearch@esafeguarding.org

This guidance will be updated as needs be and in response to the changing circumstances. Therefore, please use the online document to ensure you have the most recent and up-to-date version.