<u>**Approved by Tusla Crisis Management Team – COVID-19**</u>

COVID-19: Use of Social Media and Electronic Devices for Children's Residential Centres

Introduction

Due to restrictions announced by decision of the Government on the 27th March 2020, arrangements for family access and contact, attendance at education and other activities has changed for children and young people in residential care. To continue to support children and young people in continuing to engage in their education, and maintain contact with their families and significant people in their lives, this document aims to provide staff in residential care with guidelines and best practice to ensure the safety and wellbeing of children and young people in using social media.

These new arrangements will apply from 27th April 2020 until 5th May 2020, and for as long thereafter that the "Stay at Home" requirements announced on 27th March 2020 remain in, should they be extended on 5th May 2020. Where the Government requirements of the public change, the guidance will be revised or amended as appropriate.

Residential care in the context of this document refers to;
- Mainstream residential care: private, statutory, voluntary
- Special Care

Social media, electronic devices, and smartphones, have been in use in residential care pre Covid-19, so the decision to allow young people have access to such devices has been made already in relation to many young people. Staff are familiar with monitoring the use and access of such devices and platforms.

There are however a small number of situations whereby some young people in residential care do not have access to smart phones or other electronic devices. This has now become a challenge for services to support young people to engage in education, and specialist services, and maintain access with their family and significant others. This document should be read in conjunction with the [Interim Measures with Regard to the Restricted use of WhatsApp.](#)

Consent for use of Social Media

Staff in residential care and allocated social workers must agree on what form of social media a young person can use for the period of the public health crisis, in order to maintain contact with their family and friends, and continue to engage in education. A record of this contact plan must be maintained on the child's case and care record.

Consent must be sought for the use of social media, (if not done already);

Care Orders: The allocated social worker must provide consent for use of social media as agreed in the contact plan referenced above. Best practice would also be to seek consent from parent/ legal guardian.

Voluntary consent for admission to care/ Interim Care Order: Consent for the use of social media as agreed in contact plan must be obtained by the allocated social worker from the young person's parent(s)/ legal guardians. Every reasonable effort should be made to obtain consent and a record of such efforts should be recorded on the case and care record. Given the current restrictions, written consent may be difficult to obtain, and so in the case of verbal consent a record of the conversation where consent was provided must be recorded on the case and care record.

Social Media

Social media and use of electronic devices can help young people stay connected with friends and family who are on their approved contact list. It also helps them get involved in their community, enhance their creativity by sharing ideas, music, and art, meet and interact with others who share similar interests and communicate with educators and fellow students. While this provides a lot of positives in terms of staying connected, it is also important to acknowledge the flipside of this. Social media can be a hub for cyberbullying, pornography, child abuse, dangerous advice, excessive violence, sexting, and illegal content. Without meaning to, young people can share, and be exposed to, more information online than they possibly should.

Many young people post photos of themselves online, use their real names on their profiles, reveal their birthdays and interests, or post their school name and the town where they live. This can make them easy targets for online predators and others who might cause them harm.

Research indicates that young people have reported in many instances:

- Being contacted online by someone they didn't know in a way that made them feel scared or uncomfortable
- Having received online advertising that was inappropriate for their age
- Having lied about their age to get access to websites

Guidelines for safeguarding young people when using electronic devices

It is important to be aware of what young people do online. The key is to stay involved in a way that makes young people understand that you respect their privacy but want to make sure they are safe. Young people will be made aware that social care staff may check their social media accounts. Any decision to check a young person's account must be made with the allocated social worker and/or with the consent of the parents/legal guardians, where appropriate.

It is important to educate young people on the use of social media and share key messages with them in relation to their behaviour while online. This may include, but is not limited to, the following:

- Complete a risk assessment in relation to the young person's access to social media. This should be reviewed as and when necessary, and age appropriate.
- Keep up to date with developments in internet technology.
- Make efforts to be familiar with the sites young people are accessing, what they do on these sites, why they access these sites, who they have contact with, how long they are on the internet, what their worries are while using the internet, and what supports are available for young people.
- Encourage young people to discuss any concerns or worries they have in relation to their use of social media.
- Become familiar with social media language; for example, LMIRL (let's meet in real life), ASL (age, sex, location), NIFOC (nude in front of computer). The UK Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) has identified a helpful guide to social media language.
- Keep communication channels open with young people. It can be helpful to discuss risky and safe behaviour (privacy settings, not using profile photos, not using own names, etc.), help to set up social networks, equip young people with coping skills and information on where to get help, discuss opinions on the benefits and limitations of the internet, and talk to children about their online reputation. This information should be recorded as part of the placement development plan.
- Set controls using security and filter software, supervise when required as per risk assessment the time and place of the use of the internet, limit the time of access, and regularly check user history.
- Create a healthy culture – agree basic usage rules together, e.g. time limits and places of use (adults need to model these rules). Make going online a daily event which allows adults to monitor and observe reactions.
- Keep computers in communal areas in the centre.
- If computers/devices are shared then each young person should have their own profile (i.e. their own login) on the device.
- Avoid laptops and smartphones in bedrooms (unless it is risk assessed to be safe to do so).

- Set some rules on the use of technology (such as no devices at the dinner table).

Tusla ICT is available to provide advice and guidance to staff on any technical aspects of the centre's online setup or to support the procurement of a broadband service.

Education through social media

Many schools are using social media platforms to continue to engage with their pupils in their education, for example, via Google Classroom or Zoom. It is important that children and young people in residential care stay engaged in their education and therefore can access such platforms for the period of the public health crisis. However it is critical that staff monitor their activity on such platforms by:

- Verifying with the school the method of education they are using during the period of the public health crisis, and establishing how communication will take place with the child/ young person.
- Social care staff should inform the allocated social worker and seek consent for young person as outlined above.
- For online classes, staff should check throughout the period of the class that the young person is participating. The young person's name should appear on the screen to verify they are registered in the online class.
- Staff should be familiar with the young person's work schedule and discuss it together regularly. This will provide staff with some oversight of communications between the school and young person, and can also support the young person with their work schedules.

Contact with Family and Friends

- Many young people in residential care have access to smart phones and other electronic devices which enables them to maintain contact with family and friends. However it is important that staff monitor the use of such contact and ensure, in so far as practicable, that their contact is with people identified on their contact lists.
- For young people who do not have electronic devices, staff must ensure that they can maintain contact with their family and friends in a manner that is safe and secure for the young person. Levels of supervision for such contact must be agreed with the allocated social worker and records of such contact maintained on the care records. It is important to note that if a Tusla device is being used in these interactions, staff must ensure that there is no personal data retained on such devices. It is ideal if communal devices can be used in these

instances, meaning devices that are used for recreational purposes, and not to store personal and sensitive data.

- An awareness of the benefits and dangers is essential for staff to ensure they are having conversations with young people about their social media use (Appendix 1).

Contact with Other Professionals

With restrictions on access to residential centres in line with public health guidance many young people may not have visits from their social workers, counsellors, psychologists etc. during this period.

If young people are making contact remotely with professionals involved in their lives they can;

1. If agreed with their social worker, allocate a time to receive a call on their smartphone, iPad or other electronic device, and take the call from the professional in the way agreed with the social worker and other professional.
2. If such contact requires a staff member to be present, staff must make arrangements for the young person to be able to be sequestered for privacy reasons elsewhere at the centre.
3. Staff must ensure that during any contacts the device being used is secure, and that no data on the device can be shared with an external person. Staff must also ensure that the young person while using the device has no access to personal information maintained on the device. Ideally a 'communal' device that is used by the centre for recreation should be used and not a device used for professional purposes.

Appendix 1

Risks and Dangers to be aware of:

- **Harmful online communities:** Sometimes people go on websites which promote eating disorders such as anorexia, bulimia or self-harm.

- **Ignoring age restrictions:** Some websites and games use age restrictions and checks to make sure that children do not see unsuitable content.

- **'Friending' or communicating with people they don't know:** Young people may 'chat' or become 'friends' with people on social networks or online games, even if they do not know them or have never met them in person.

- **Grooming and sexual abuse:** 'Groomers' can use social media sites, instant messaging apps (including teen dating apps), and online gaming platforms, to connect with a young person or child. They can spend time learning about a young person's interests from their online profiles and use this knowledge to help them build a relationship with the child or young person. It is easy for groomers to hide their identity online. For example, they may pretend to be a child and then chat and become 'friends' with children they are targeting.

- **Child sexual abuse online:** Young people may be persuaded or forced to send or post sexually explicit images of themselves, take part in sexual activities via a webcam or smartphone, or have sexual conversations by text or instant messaging. Abusers may threaten to send images, videos or copies of conversations to the young person's friends and family unless they take part in further sexual activity.

- **Sharing personal information:** Privacy controls can limit who can see a child's details, like their name, age and where they live. However, when a child connects to someone as a 'friend', that person will have access to the child's personal information.

- **Risks of cyberbullying:** Cyberbullying is defined as "an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly, over time, against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself" (*Cyberbullying in Schools: Guidance and Resources for Management*, Department of Education and Skills 2013).

- **'Sexting':** 'Sexting' involves sending sexually explicit images, videos or text messages via technology. Such 'sexts' are usually sent using mobile phones and/or chat apps such as Snapchat, Viber and WhatsApp. The 'sext' can constitute child pornography.

- **Self-esteem:** Spending too much time on social media can also make young people, maybe, feel bad about themselves - for example, seeing how many "friends" others have and the pictures of them having fun can make them feel bad about themselves or look like they don't measure up to their peers.

Messages for Young People

- **Think twice before hitting "enter:"** Remind young people that what they post can be used against them. They should also avoid posting specific locations of parties or events, as well as phone numbers. Also make it clear that you expect them to treat others with respect, and to never post hurtful or embarrassing messages. And ask them to always tell you about any harassing or bullying messages that others post.

- **Teach young people what is ok or not ok to share:** Teach them not to share anything on social media that they wouldn't want their parents, teachers, college admissions officers, future bosses to see.

- **Use privacy settings:** Privacy settings are important. Go through them together to make sure they understand each one. Also, explain that passwords are there to protect them against things like identity theft. They should never share them with anyone, even a boyfriend, girlfriend, or best friend.

- **Don't 'friend' strangers:** "If you don't know them, don't friend them." This is a plain, simple — and safe — rule of thumb.

- **Make a Contract:** Consider making a "social media agreement" with the young people as part of the risk assessment process- a real contract they can sign. In it, they agree to protect their own privacy, consider their reputation, and not give out personal information. They also promise not to use technology to hurt anyone else through bullying or gossip.