



## 20 feature Social media

In May of this year, Anne Lochrie, who worked in Glasgow, was banned from practising after a conduct committee heard she had breached professional boundaries on several counts, including befriending the mother of a service user on Facebook.

The Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) subsequently issued guidance warning against ‘blurring the lines between your personal voice and your professional life as a registered social service worker’, adding that befriending service users online can leave workers and service users open to allegations about the content they may post. Set against such uncertainty, clear, confident and practical guidance is certainly needed to positively harness a medium that has the potential to enhance practice and improve service provision.

### Service users

The impact of social media for social work does not begin and end with practitioners, it is also increasingly shaping the behaviour of service users. The issue was raised at BASW’s 2011 Conference and Annual General Meeting in Birmingham in May. MA research students from Keele University presented insights into the use of Facebook among service users, revealing in the process a lack of understanding among practitioners regarding its impact in adoption work. Their findings revealed that many adopted children use social networks to track down their birth families “rather than wait until they are 18 and going through the correct legal channels”, and professionals are unclear about how to manage this.

The associated risks of using social networks in this way are clear, however, young people are using social media to build their own positive support networks, which may exist outside of the practice structures we are accustomed to – this is not something we can prevent, it is something we must adapt to. The Care Leavers Association has established an online forum, Careleaversreunited ([www.careleavers.com/clreunited](http://www.careleavers.com/clreunited)), where care leavers can reconnect with those they may have known from when they were in care in the past, as well as social workers who worked with them – a great example of responsive thinking.

The web has revolutionised the way we use and share information, but despite the growing awareness of the value of social networking there has not been widespread adoption in the social work profession. There are multiple factors underlying this reluctance: how do we break down the cultural and technological barriers that prevent the use of social media in the care



# The social media we need not fear

Against a backdrop of increasing confusion surrounding the use of social media, **Shirley Ayres** discusses the benefits of engagement and the need for clear guidance from employers.

sector? and how do we integrate and improve our practice in the light of the challenges and fears posed by social networking?

Throughout the sector, staff have to be given the skills and knowledge to enable them to support and understand how young people are using social media, despite the fact this can be challenging. Social workers need to be clear about the boundaries between their professional and personal online identities and the implications if the boundaries are confused.

Fundamentally, the facility to comment and

feedback on the standard of care services is essential if we are to improve the quality of community and residential care services. User feedback, recommendations and ratings are an established part of leading e-marketplaces such as Amazon and eBay. A more personalised approach to social care, based on giving service users and carers a direct say over service quality and improvement, could be facilitated through the use of social networking.

The potential for innovation and rethinking service delivery through social networking is





## Further reading

- [www.scie.org.uk/topic/developingskillsservices](http://www.scie.org.uk/topic/developingskillsservices)
- <http://aspireknowledge.com/2010/09/ted-inspirational-ideas-worth-spreading/>.
- <http://comment.iriss.org.uk/content/digital-engagement>
- [www.iriss.org.uk/resources/social-media-social-services](http://www.iriss.org.uk/resources/social-media-social-services)

exciting but the reality is that outdated approaches to technology in local authorities does not inspire creativity. Understanding and using social media may initially seem daunting but social work has always had an important role in listening, engaging, connecting and supporting citizens at times of crisis, and it is exactly these qualities such media can help to further emphasise.

As a starting point social workers could check out whether their organisation has an online presence on Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and YouTube. It is something of a paradox that many local authorities with a social media presence have blocked their own staff from accessing social networking sites, including some of the names listed above. This mindset is the biggest barrier to progression. Outdated IT policies, a fear of social networking and the wish to control the flow of information are preventing more efficient and effective ways of working in social work.

It is unfortunate since people are increasingly comfortable using social media tools and more people now have access to a mobile phone than a computer. Mobile technology is an effective way of keeping in contact with young people, as evidenced by those local authorities that already use text messaging to remind young people of upcoming appointments. An increasing number of charities, too, understand the benefits of social media and with Facebook having over 750 million active users this is hardly surprising. For example, the Mental Health Foundation has been using a Facebook page to raise awareness of self-directed support for people with dementia through videos on YouTube.

Keeping children and adults safe is complex and requires a number of statutory and non-government agencies to work together. Protecting children at risk of physical or mental abuse against a backdrop of high-profile deaths, unfilled vacancies and the requirement to monitor and communicate highly acute and sensitive data has led social workers to feel overburdened by systems,

reducing their available time with families. Using social media can be viewed as an additional burden rather than a potential solution, which is what it should be in reality.

The Mental Health Care website ([www.mentalhealthcare.org.uk](http://www.mentalhealthcare.org.uk)) contains information for family members and friends of people who have psychosis. Developed and supported by The Institute of Psychiatry, South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust, Rethink and the Wellcome Trust, an excellent and interesting feature of this site is the ability to “Ask a social worker” and other professionals questions and receive answers online.

### Monsters

The Fighting Monsters AMHP [approved mental health practitioner] blog – the life and thoughts of a British social worker – is written anonymously by a frontline social worker who shares their day-to-day experiences of practising social work and the impact of government policies and actions. The author, @monstertalk, is concerned that the care sector does not have the knowledge and capacity to make good use of social media and digital engagement strategies. “The new forms of communication allow the voices of frontline social workers to be heard directly which is something that would have been much rarer even five years ago.

‘As a social worker I have so many more opportunities to build my own networks and my own resources by using both communication and information. This is improving my own practice and enabling me to reach out and gain insights into those who use the services which I provide. The increased use of interactive sites such as blogs, forums (open and closed) and micro-blogging sites such as Twitter provide ways to share expertise and knowledge nationally and internationally and allow the “power” and “knowledge” to be transferred away from organisations and directly to professionals.’

Many people approach Twitter with some scepticism. For those who are not familiar with Twitter, it is a micro blogging website

where you can post and read messages, or tweets, of up to 140 characters. It is used to share news, events and discussions across the world. Twitter is estimated to have 190 million users who generate 65 million tweets a day. Health care staff are running a very successful weekly Twitter chat to get the NHS talking about social media and how it can benefit patients – <http://twitter.com/#!/nhssm>. Sadly there is currently no equivalent forum for social work or social care.

Good practice in social networking is no different to good practice in other forms of communication such as writing letters, emails, making phone calls or representing an organisation at meetings and conferences. IRISS has provided a useful sample policy in 2010 for using social media in a report, Social Media in the Social Services (see panel for weblink).

Social media provides the opportunity to create a better understanding of social work but it also requires a mind shift because organisations can no longer control the messages or the information. Social networking is a two way process and it is about connecting, having conversations and engaging with people in different mediums. Social media is empowering people using care services to understand how the systems work and the roles played in service provision by the people they contact.

Guidelines, practice examples and procedures for social workers using social networks and online communication need to be developed by the care councils, the British Association of Social Workers and the College of Social Work in consultation with social workers and service users. All councils need to develop a social networking policy in consultation with their staff and the communities they serve. Access to social networking tools should be the norm in social work.

However, it is important to understand how and why individuals and organisations are using social media and how it will be evaluated. My message for social work is not to be afraid of social media and instead to understand the potential for connecting and communicating with people in a different way.

New approaches will be assisted by employers and professional bodies providing the guidance, training, support and leadership required.

PSW

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