SCOTTISH EPISCOPAL CHURCH

ADVICE AND GUIDANCE FOR STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS
WORKING WITH CHILDREN AND VULNERABLE ADULTS

THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

1.   INTRODUCTION

The phrase 'social media' refers to the developing range of web-based and mobile telephone technologies and Internet-based applications that allow for the creation and exchange of user-generated content.   Enabled by widely available and accessible mobile electronic devices, social media has substantially changed the way organisations, communities, and individuals communicate.   Whilst it can be both an essential and valuable communications tool for those providing services for people in the Church, it also presents significant challenges if the user is to avoid what can be quite significant pit-falls in practice.

Most of these challenges revolve around maintaining the professional boundaries between work and private life with a view to protecting both the providers of services and those who use or receive them.   In being aware of this, it is vital to remember that some of the challenges relate to how the conduct of paid staff and volunteers in formal roles in the Church might be perceived as potentially harmful or inappropriate.

The perceptions of an individual or an organisation are governed by beliefs, values, attitudes, life and professional experience etc. Consequently what may look or sound OK to one person may be misunderstood or misconstrued by another and might well be considered harmful and inappropriate.   The following guidance is written from a safeguarding perspective and seeks to identify good practice with a view to preventing harm or abuse to children and adults at risk or minimising the likelihood of it happening.   The guidance supplements more detailed information about keeping young people, children, vulnerable adults and paid staff and volunteers in churches safe. It identifies a number of underpinning principles (things that are important or right to do) and

these have been used to generate a set of questions that workers and volunteers should ask themselves.

It is not possible to produce a definitive list of 'dos and don'ts. Consequently the questions are designed to be used as a checklist before any type of social media is used or to review its ongoing use. This checklist should be considered as a generic safeguard for using mobile phones, Facebook and other social networking sites, weblogs, mobile 'phone text messaging, the taking of digital photographs or recording video etc. and it should be a spur to staff and volunteers to make a judgement about keeping themselves (as workers) and those they are working with (children and vulnerable adults) safe. Ideally the checklist should be used in safeguarding training and this would enable it to be used with a variety of different scenarios involving the use of different types of social media.

The use of social media is open to different interpretations and perceptions of what is appropriate and what is not. It can involve the transmission of words, sounds, moving and still images, all of which have the potential to be harmful in a safeguarding sense, hence the importance about making joint decisions and seeking advice.

The following are examples of the use of social media and where it would be inappropriate of a church worker to use social media and it is intended to set the scene for the checklist in section 4:

- A 13 year old child discloses by text (her preferred method of communication) to a youth club helper's work mobile phone that a 34 year old youth leader had touched her inappropriately on a weekend youth camp – this would require an immediate and formal response and that should NOT be by means of text message.
- A young teenage boy and an older female, in a position of trust and authority in a church group, have sent 400 texts to one another last month mostly in the early hours of the morning.
- A summer play scheme leader posted five short video clips on the congregation's Facebook page without the consent of the parents – it was clear who was in the footage and where the group met. Anyone could

access the video. Once the issues were identified the video was moved to a Facbook group where only the children and their families could access them.

- A helper at a church group for people with dementia took photographs of the service users and put them on her Facebook page – some had names attached to the images.
- A young person confides via MSN Messenger that he has been self-harming.   Again, this would require a speedy and formal response on the part of the worker but not via a messaging service.
- A person in a position of leadership in a church posting photographs of herself in social situations in her private capacity that are open to misinterpretation.

2.   TYPES OF SOCIAL MEDIA

- Email and messenger services
- Facebook, Google + and other social networking sites
- YouTube
- Mobile 'phone text messaging
- Twitter and weblogs (commonly known as 'blogs')
- Digital photography (cameras, video, camera phones)
- Flickr, Instagram and similar photo sharing sites

3.   COMMON PRINCIPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE

- *Transparency/openness* – tell others what it is you want to communicate and why.
- *Keeping people safe*: the worker (paid and volunteer) and the child/'adults at risk' or service users
- *Consent*: get permission from all involved (or their guardians/representatives if they are under 16 years of age) if their

words or images are to be transmitted and made public or shared with a selected group of people

- *Privacy* – respect for individuals' personal information.
- *Separate the private (home) from the professional (paid or voluntary work):* explicitly maintain boundaries. Often the perceived problem is that of the 'suggestion' of or actual blurring of boundaries and the risk of actions being viewed as harmful rather than actual harmful conduct from a safeguarding point-of-view.
- *Christian principles* – respect, dignity, truthfulness etc

It is recognised that the separation of the private from the professional, particularly in the case of volunteers, is not always easy but everyone should be aware of the potential dangers of actions or statements being misinterpreted because of the method used to make them known.

4.   CHECKLIST BEFORE USING SOCIAL MEDIA

1. **PURPOSE: What** information do you want to capture, store, transmit, communicate or use?   **Who** is the target audience?   **Which** type of social media best suits this purpose?

2. **PRIVACY: What** privacy settings, safeguards and controls have you set for the media?   **Who** can see the information posted?   **Who** is identified (images/words/sounds) in the communication?

3. **CONSENT / CONFIDENTIALITY: Is** the information personal / confidential? **Whose** consent is required?   **How** will you get their consent? [N.B. not just under 16's]

4. **INTERPRETATION: How** may others interpret the information?   Can the information you want to share be easily misunderstood or misinterpreted?   Could your personal or professional standing be damaged?   If in doubt check with the person who supervises you and get a second opinion before using.

5. **REVIEW:** Re-read before sending/posting.

Whatever social media you are using in work, good practice is for you not to use a personal mobile 'phone, email address or Facebook account, or similar, to communicate.   Again, it is acknowledged that, particularly in the case of volunteers, they are unlikely to have the use of a Church 'phone or email address and the use of their own personal 'phone or email may be unavoidable.

5.   CONCLUSION

There may be exceptions to the advice contained in this guidance. If you have unanswered questions (or if in doubt) get advice from the person who supervises you and/or the church's safeguarding service.

Most importantly keep a dated and signed written record of any decisions made by you and the person who supervises you about the use of social media where there may be room for misunderstandings or misinterpretation. In short keep an audit trail of all communications, e.g. don't delete records of phone and email communication.

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July 2012

This guidance is based on work by Kerry-Ann Hay, Daphne Audsley, Donald Urquhart and Richard Crosse on 23 November 2011 and on existing written guidance on the subject issued by the Scottish Episcopal Church, the Church of Scotland Safeguarding Service, the Scottish Social Services Council and the General Teaching Council (all 2011)