

# Guidance for Registered Teachers

## About the Use of Social Media and Electronic Communication





## 1. Introduction

This document is aimed at providing guidance for teachers who use electronic communication and social media<sup>1</sup>, identifying potential dangers, offering advice about how to avoid them and providing a context for responsible, professional use of electronic communication and social media.

*Note for schools: This guidance may assist schools when developing a school's individual social media policy. However, it is important to note that this guidance should not replace or act as a social media policy for schools.*

This guidance document has been approved by the Teaching Council following consultation with relevant stakeholders. The context for this document was that the Investigating Committee noticed an increase in the number of Fitness to Teach complaints in relation to teachers' use of social media/electronic communication in the context of communications within and outside the course of their teaching profession.

Many teachers use social media and electronic communication to enhance their classroom practice, introducing their students to new tools and delivering the curriculum in innovative and engaging ways. Electronic communication and social media provide innovative ways for teachers to communicate with students, colleagues and the public. Closed professional networks are a useful way to share experiences, set up expert or learning groups, and get advice or help.

It is important to acknowledge the innovative work which many teachers have been leading in this space for some time.

Teachers have a right to privacy and freedom of expression. Teachers may be subject to a higher level of public scrutiny because of their work with children and vulnerable persons. In this context, it is advisable that teachers continue to follow best practice in the use of electronic communication and social media. Registered teachers and those who may be seeking registration in the future should be aware of challenges that can be associated with the use of electronic communication and/or social media.

This guidance should be read in conjunction with section 3 of the Teaching Council Code of Professional Conduct for Teachers which relates to communication. For the avoidance of doubt, the Code of Professional Conduct will be the benchmark for the Council in considering any complaints against registered teachers. This guidance seeks to support teachers in continuing to make the best use of electronic communication and social media tools.

In considering the range of experience across the profession, this guidance document may be a useful reminder for some, or generate awareness for others, regarding appropriate use of social media and electronic communication.

## 2. Electronic Communication and Social Media

Electronic communication and social media includes software applications (including those running on mobile devices), email and websites which enable users to interact, create and exchange information online. Examples include, but are not limited to, sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram. Also included is the use of SMS and messaging platforms such as Whatsapp, Facebook Messenger, Snapchat and Viber.



<sup>1</sup> The term social media is used to mean web-based applications that enable users to create and exchange content. It includes blogs and micro blogs, professional and personal forum sites for sharing images and videos, and networking sites.

### 3. Identifying risks and pitfalls for registered teachers using electronic communication and social media

Using electronic communication and social media may sometimes blur the boundary between your private and professional life. It is recommended to keep personal and professional use separate where possible. It is therefore important that you are cautious about the use of electronic communication and social media as follows:

- Be aware that others may try to view your online social media profiles, or even just Google your name, e.g. students, potential employers and parents;
- Social media communication encourages casual dialogue. Comments or posts can be misconstrued or manipulated.
- You can be vulnerable to misuses, for example, you can be mentioned or identified in inappropriate posts, sometimes without your knowledge or consent;
- Postings online are subject to the same laws of copyright and defamation as written/verbal communication. Websites and social media sites cannot guarantee confidentiality, whatever privacy settings are used. While settings on many platforms allow information to be shared only with a closed group of friends or family, this privacy cannot be guaranteed. It is therefore important to familiarise yourself with the privacy provisions of any social media site you use, and bear in mind the limitations of keeping information private online.
- Once information is published online, your control of it is lost. It can be difficult to remove it as other users may share or comment on it;
- Be aware that information uploaded anonymously can, in many cases, be traced back to its point of origin;
- The sum of published information online can be enough to identify a person.

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### 4. Minimising Risk when using Social Media and Electronic Communication

Acknowledging that there is a range of experience among teachers with regard to their use of electronic communication and social media, the following may be a useful reminder for some teachers, or generate awareness for others, as to how teachers may minimise risk when using social media and electronic communication:

- Before posting any content it may be useful to consider:
  - Who will see this post?
  - Am I confident that the posting, if accessed by others, would be considered reasonable and appropriate for a professional?
- Review your privacy settings on a regular basis to minimise risks, consider your settings on social media sites. You may wish to prohibit others from tagging you in any photograph or update without your permission; Be aware of photographs published online which include you, and where they may be posted.
- Use strong passwords and change them regularly. Never share passwords.
- Protect your mobile telephone, laptop or tablet. Know where they are and who has access to them;
- Familiarise yourself with the Teaching Council's document *Guidance for Registered Teachers about the Use of Social Media and Electronic Communication* and any school policies/ guidelines in relation to electronic communication and social media use; It may not be possible to avoid making your contact number available to pupils/students in relation to certain work situations, however it is recommended to be cautious in relation to releasing your personal information such as phone numbers, addresses, email addresses, personal photographs etc.
- It is advisable not to discuss students, parents, colleagues or your employer online;



## 5. If you are the subject of inappropriate use of social media and or electronic communication, you may wish to consider the following:

- If you feel it is safe to do so, you may wish to contact the person who posted the material and request that they delete the post.
- If there is no response, or you cannot identify the person responsible for posting the material, contact the website/app administrator or provider to report inappropriate use and request that the material be deleted.
- Check whether your school has a policy to manage inappropriate behaviour of its pupils/students towards teachers.
- Check whether your school has policies or procedures to manage inappropriate behaviour of employees. A teacher who is the subject of inappropriate use of electronic communication or social media by a school employee may wish to liaise with school management and/or their union representative in this regard.
- If you perceive that a person has acted in an illegal manner towards you, you may wish to take legal advice and/or contact An Garda Síochána.
- You may wish to refer to [Be Safe Online](#), a Government initiative, designed to highlight ways to stay safe online and includes a range of Online Safety resources.
- See also [www.webwise.ie](http://www.webwise.ie) for information and resources addressing a range of internet safety issues and concerns. [Webwise](#) offers support for young people, teachers and parents.
- 'Spectrum Life' is a free and confidential assistance and wellbeing service for teachers and their immediate family members. Through the Department of Education and Skills, 'Inspire Workplaces' currently provides teachers with access to confidential counselling (supportive and solution-focused) that may assist in coping with the effect of personal and work-related issues.
- T: 1800 411 057 W: [www.inspirewellbeing.org/workplaces](http://www.inspirewellbeing.org/workplaces)



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It is intended that this Guidance document be reviewed and updated periodically.

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