



Growing up Digital in Care

Submission to the DfE Fostering Stocktake 2017

NOVEMBER 2017

1. Growing Up Digital

In January 2017, the Children's Commissioner published Growing Up Digital which considered how well children are prepared to engage with the internet. The yearlong research project, accessible via the Commissioner's [website](#), concluded that there must be a step change in how this is currently addressed. It recommended three digital interventions in order to ensure that children have the resilience, information and power they need to thrive online:

- **Digital resilience:** The creation of a digital citizenship programme, to be compulsory in every school from 4-14 with a voluntary extension for older pupils.
- **Digital information:** The introduction of simplified terms and conditions for social media companies so children understand what they are signing up to, in clear, simple language when they are joining popular sites or downloading apps.
- **Digital power:** Introduction of a Children's Digital Ombudsman to mediate between under 18s and social media companies over the removal of online content.

2. Growing Up Digital in Care

While researching Growing Up Digital, it became clear that looked after children were neglected in the conversation about children's interaction with the digital world. While their experiences online do not entirely differ from that of their peers, there are issues that are unique to this group and warrant significant consideration.

The Children's Commissioner's Office initially identified the following challenges:

- **Lack of digital access** in children's homes and/or foster placements. This could be lack of an internet connection or lack of devices on which to access the internet in the same way as their peers i.e. through smartphones, tablets or laptops.
- **Lack of digital skills of, and support** from, foster parents, social workers and other key workers due to a lack of knowledge, digital confidence and awareness of internet trends, popular apps and broader online opportunities. The digital skills of children in care are therefore not appropriately supported or developed.
- **Lack of appropriate safeguarding** as a direct result of the responsible adults' lack of digital skills. A lack of understanding about the pervasiveness of social media in a young person's life, how safeguarding practices apply to digital activity, and of digital tracking can lead to significant problems for looked after children.

In order to explore this further, the Commissioner's office visited a number of children's homes, including one secure home, and spoke with a group of children in foster care to ascertain how the challenges above were currently reflected in the lives of looked after children.

3. Key findings from visits

NB: The findings described here have been generalised to guarantee anonymity.

In residential care homes

The Commissioner's Office visited three local authority-run children's homes and one secure children's home.

Digital access:

Access to internet or to digital technology did not appear to be a particular problem. Children in residential care homes were very likely to have smartphones and in some cases, tablets or laptops. A communal computer was often provided in children's homes but this was very rarely used and only in one case was it currently in working order. Smartphones were the most prevalent device.

Access to Wi-Fi however was not always consistent. In one case, Wi-Fi access was used as a sanction to punish a young person's behaviour but this subsequently affected everyone in the home. In this case it was turned off for 10 days. Wi-Fi was also a contentious issue where access – or signal reach – was limited because of the safeguarding concerns of one or more of the resident children. This did not seem an uncommon occurrence. While this might be understandable, for example where there are concerns about a child accessing Wi-Fi in their room, frustration tended to arise amongst children when a clear explanation was not given.

While Wi-Fi connectivity, reach and speed were all raised as issues during the visits, residential care homes often had a mechanism by which young people could challenge decisions or rules around internet access be that in house meetings or through Children in Care Councils.

For example, Durham's Children in Care Council¹ created a campaign about the lack of Wi-Fi in residential care homes across the county. As a direct result of engaging the local authority responsible, Wi-Fi was installed as standard across children's homes.

The same mechanism for discussion and instigating change does not necessarily exist in foster placements and this was reflected in the Commissioner's visits.

Digital skills and support:

Staff in residential homes seemed to have more confidence in their digital skills than foster parents. This was partly down to the personal development and specific digital training they had received. The majority of the staff asked expressed interest in receiving improved, more relevant training around social media and children's online lives.

Despite feeling as though they were up to date with online safety training, staff admitted to lacking confidence in having productive, measured conversations around children's personal online activity, preferring instead to discuss broad safety themes i.e. "don't talk to people you haven't met in person". As the only training they had

¹ <http://www.durhamcicc.co.uk/you-said—we-did.html>

received was often CEOP's², this led to an assumption that all internet-based activity – especially around social media – is likely to be troublesome or risky.

As a reflection of this, young people saw their tech skills as far superior to that of care home staff and so expressed reluctance at the idea that they might go to them with a problem that they might be having online.

Digital safeguarding:

There is an awareness among care home staff that the internet brings safeguarding concerns but this is coupled with a lack of confidence about how best this should be managed. We heard that this could lead to indiscriminate practices i.e. only Wi-Fi in communal areas or blocking it for all residents.

The most concerning and prevalent issue that arose from these visits was that children were often in contact with their birth family through social media and care home staff felt ill-equipped to handle this. Despite the prevalence of this problem, there was no evidence of any local authority policies in place to tackle this.

In foster placements

The Commissioner's Office spoke with a group of children in foster placements across the South West. This was arranged by an independent fostering service.

Digital access:

A wide spectrum of internet-management techniques were employed across foster placements and this was largely dependent on the adults' own views and digital skills.

It is much more challenging to ascertain what digital access looks like for children in foster placements as they are not as well represented on youth forums and children in care councils. They also lack the structure and space in which to raise their concerns in the same way that might be possible in residential care homes.

From the limited conversations had however, access to digital devices did not seem to be a problem as all children involved had their own smartphone. It was not possible to determine what internet/ Wi-Fi access was like across foster placements generally however.

Digital skills/support:

The lack of digital skills among foster parents was much more evident than among care home staff. The children interviewed often spoke about their frustration at foster parents not understanding why social media was important to them for keeping touch with their friends for example. This was a particular problem for children when rules changed between placements and they found that a site or an app they had access to in one placement, they did not have access to in the next.

While foster parents often had reasons for their decisions like any other household rule, these reasons were not often communicated clearly to young people leaving them feeling frustrated and seeking other ways to access the internet.

² <https://www.thinkuknow.co.uk/>

Foster parents don't always have the digital knowledge and skills to be able to have confident conversations about their children's online lives which often led to an alarmist, overly-cautious approach. Access to training was also noted as a barrier. While it might be easier to attract foster parents to training if they are managed in-house by a local authority, independent fostering agencies don't stipulate any form of digital training for their foster parents.

Similar to children in residential care homes, the children in foster care saw their tech skills as far superior to that of foster parents and so would be reluctant to go to them with a problem that they might be having online.

Digital safeguarding:

As there is a lack of guidance or mandatory training, a lot of uncertainty exists for foster parents around what their safeguarding responsibilities are with regard to allowing social media use, managing age restrictions, or monitoring all contact.

While this is the same for any parent who is concerned about a child's internet access, it is the statutory safeguarding role of a foster parent that exacerbates these issues. Without the appropriate support available, unnecessarily drastic measures seem to be taken – only allowing internet access on communal computers for example.

4. Key emerging issues:

1. WiFi access was very important to all the children we spoke to and where it wasn't provided, they would often seek it through other means, including:
 - Riding buses or trains all day to access free Wi-Fi
 - Sitting outside people's houses where they knew there was insecure Wi-Fi
 - Sitting in public places in order to access free Wi-Fi including McDonalds, shopping centres or cafes

There are clearly significant safeguarding concerns with vulnerable children seeking free Wi-Fi in public areas as many reported staying out very late when all of their friends were still on social media. It also makes it far harder for foster parents and care home staff to see how children are using the internet and social media.

2. Foster parents and care home staff all commented on the lack of training available to them. Few felt that they understood what children did online or how their safeguarding responsibilities applied to digital activity.
3. A concerning number of children were using social media to stay in contact with their birth families. This seemed to be having severe ramifications for relationships between foster parents and children and in multiple cases, this had directly caused the breakdown of a placement.

The internet and social media are critical elements of modern childhood and teenage life yet they are also facilitating unmediated access to birth families despite what contact orders might be in place. In one incident, a birth parent found a child in an emergency placement via the 'Find my iPhone' tracking service. This was not identified as a risk to the social work team responsible for placing the child and it was only upon the second move the reason for the parent knowing child's location was discovered.

5. Examples of best practice

While digital access, support and safeguarding is not always prioritised by social workers, foster parents and care home staff, it is widely acknowledged to be a critical complicating factor in providing the best care for children. There have therefore been a number of successful initiatives.

Five Rivers Fostering Agency

In recognition of the frustration that children felt about their foster parents not understanding what was important to them about social media and how they used it, Five Rivers created a 'social media' section in their safer care plan. This agreement template³ is filled in by the child or young person and allows them to detail what sites they use as well as to collaborate with their foster carer to develop an agreement about their internet and mobile phone use.

Durham Children in Care Council

Durham CiCC campaigned for Wi-Fi to be installed in all residential children's homes. They also worked together to create an online safety and digital skills training programme to be delivered by children in care to social work teams and other local authority staff.

Netopian

Netopian⁴ is an internet filtering service designed specifically for foster parents and residential children's homes. It allows children to have their own individual profiles that are set up in collaboration between care home staff and the young person. Privacy is maintained but individual profiles are set up to flag content that might be considered a concern depending on the young person's unique circumstance or safeguarding concerns.

For example, if there is a history of a birth parent contacting a child then their profile can be set up in such a way that the key worker is made aware that contact has taken place and will only be able to see this content. This then allows for an informed, safeguarding conversation to take place.

Guardian Saints

Guardian Saints⁵ provides fostering agencies with online safety training tailored to the specific needs of children in care. Their 2017 survey of over 300 foster parents found that many lacked confidence in their abilities to manage their children's internet access and felt worried about their children's activities.

³ See Appendix 1

⁴ <http://netopian.co.uk/local-authority/netopian>

⁵ <https://www.guardiansaints.com/>

6. Suggested policy recommendations

Based on the findings from this series of visits, we have identified a number of policy improvements that might be considered in context of the wider fostering stocktake:

- The advice and guidance provided to local authorities regarding digital access, skills and support needs to be improved. The 2015 Guide to Children’s Home Regulations only states that:

“Children should have access to a computer and the internet to support their education and learning, unless there are specific safeguarding reasons why this would be inappropriate. In such cases, the home should consider whether and how it can support the child to access a computer and the internet safely.”

This ought to be updated to clarify that all children should have access to a secure Wi-Fi connection in their home setting. Access to this should be should not be used as a sanction.

- Ofsted should update their inspection framework for residential children’s homes. It currently only requires staff to provide access to the internet for study and that all staff should have an awareness of internet dangers. There should be a requirement for Ofsted inspectors to check that the WiFi functions as expected and that staff are able to demonstrate a much more nuanced understanding of the online lives of those in their care.
- Foster parents, social workers and care home staff should be required to undergo mandatory training that develops their digital skills and improves knowledge of how young people use the internet and social media. Children and young people could be involved in developing or delivering this training. Ideally this would be amended periodically to reflect recent developments and current trends. This would significantly build confidence which would lead to improved and more nuanced discussions and rules around internet use.

In addition, contracts between local authorities and independent fostering agencies should include a stipulation that foster parents attend regular digital skills training.

7. Conclusion

Children in care must not experience social isolation or lack the opportunity to develop their digital skills because of poor digital access or because their foster parents or key staff lack digital awareness. It is therefore necessary that there is a significant change in the way that this is considered in all looked after settings. In support of this, care home staff, social workers and foster parents require up-to-date training that goes beyond internet safety and is designed to educate them about the ways in which children use social media and the internet, why it is important for them, and how it contributes to their skill development. This must be underpinned by improved and evidenced guidance from local authorities and therefore the DfE.

It is also clear however that digital access is creating new challenges for the current social care model that we employ in England. Contact orders are repeatedly defied by parents and children whose direct relationship can easily be facilitated through social media. This is not currently recognised in existing guidance but should be urgently considered.

The Children's Commissioner's Office will contribute by building on this paper in 2018 to consider how social media is challenging the current social care model including in the case of closed adoptions.



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