



Policy Document:
Social Networking Policy

As adopted by the Governors of North Ridge High School.

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Social networking sites are hugely popular at present. The research shows that social networking is very popular with younger users, but also reveals that some are by-passing age restrictions to set up profiles. For example, although the minimum age for most major social networking sites is typically 13 (14 on MySpace), 27 per cent of 8-11 year olds who are aware of social networking say that they have a profile on a site.

The issues and risks

Social networking sites can present some risks if not used in a safe and responsible way. As with most new technologies, key issues centre around content and contact risks. One of the key benefits of social networking sites are that they encourage young people to be creative users of the internet, publishing content rather than being passive consumers. They can express themselves with an online personality, use all the applications the site has to offer, chat and socialize with peers, and share multimedia content such as music, photos and video clips with others.

However, there are concerns that young people may upload content that is inappropriate, offensive or even illegal to their online spaces, posting material that could damage their reputations or the reputations of others. Equally they may post inappropriate comments to the profiles of others, which can result in the bullying, slander or humiliation of others. This is particularly a risk for pupils at North Ridge who are very vulnerable due to their learning needs placing themselves particularly at risk to exploitation

Another key area of concern is the permanency of content posted online - once published online a photo or video clip can be freely copied and circulated and will potentially exist forever.

Many young people maintain very detailed online profiles, including a large amount of personal information, photos and accounts of daily routines which could lead to them being identified or contacted in person. The contact risks of other forms of new technology are well documented, and those that seek to harm or exploit children and young people will use social networking sites as another way to contact and groom potential victims.

Most social networking sites do contain privacy settings, allowing a profile to be set to private and only viewed by approved contacts, but these are not always used. Indeed, one of the big attractions of social networking sites is the large numbers of 'virtual' friends that can be linked from a profile, but this can expose children and young people to the risks of unwelcome contact.

A further risk includes the amount of time that children and young people may spend on social networking sites to the detriment of relationships with family, friends and peers in the real world.

Ofcom - Social Networking: A quantitative and qualitative research report into attitudes, behaviours and use

The Ofcom research document above, published in April 2008, aims to 'provide evidence-based insights into the social networking phenomenon which can be used to inform current understanding of usage and behaviour in the UK, and to help identify some of the current and potential future issues around people's use of social networking sites'. It provides a useful overview of the technologies, insights into how people use and engage with social networking sites, and a summary of the key privacy and safety concerns.

Minimising risks to students at North Ridge

In school time social networking sites should not be accessed other than in ICT Lessons for teaching the safe use of such sites.

At North Ridge the Social Network sites such as Facebook, MSN and Bebo are blocked so that pupils cannot use them unsupervised. They are however still used in lessons where students can be properly supervised using them and can be taught how to use such sites safely.

It is likely that children and young people will access social networking sites from other locations. As such, we have a duty to educate them as to the safe and responsible behaviours to adopt when using social networking services and other forms of new technologies as part of their general ICT education.

Students are encouraged to talk about their online activity and staff are encouraged to educate them to the possible downsides - encouraging safe use and to encourage them to enjoy the benefits, while being aware of the impact of their actions online and the possible risks and dangers, both in the short and long term. For example staff might discuss with young people how photographs can be manipulated, how the content can attract the wrong sort of attention, and how the photo might be viewed in years to come.

If North Ridge staff are made aware that a student under 13 has a Facebook account or a student under 14 has a Myspace account then the provider will be contacted by the appropriate member of staff responsible.

Safe Social Networking in ICT lessons at North Ridge include:

- establishing with young people the sites they can sign up to
- establishing the minimum ages that sites will accept - generally over 14; 16 or 18+ - and abiding by these restrictions
- discussing the importance of privacy online and encouraging young people to make use of privacy settings.
- Teaching the principle that it is safer to only allow access to friends known in the 'real world'
- regularly reviewing young people's online profiles along with them
- maintaining an ongoing dialogue about the issues
- encouraging young people to seek help if they experience any problems online.
- School identifies pupils that maybe at risk of CSE or Violent Extremism and are provided with intensive group sessions to educate them about the dangers of such activity.

Parents and Social Networking.

North Ridge send out a downloadable leaflet for parents and carers of pupils who use social networking produced by Childnet International which outlines the key issues and suggests '5 Ps for

personal safety' when using social networking sites -a positive outlook, privacy settings, appropriate photos and postings, and the role of the police in supporting social networkers who experience problems online. It is North Ridge's policy to send out current advice to parents as necessary regards social networking.

Staff and Social Networking.

- In school time social networking sites should not be accessed by staff.
- Staff using such sites outside of school should not add current pupils as friends or contact current students via a social networking site. If staff do already have pupils as contacts staff must delete these students as contacts.
- Staff should, out of respect ask any other staff members at North Ridge for permission to put photographs of other staff on a social networking site.
- Staff are advised not to add personal details to social network sites for their own safety. It is essential that they keep the maximum level of security settings so that pupils cannot see their information.
- Staff should be very careful not to put other staff at risk by adding personal details of their colleagues to a social networking site.
- Staff should be aware of the personal information they place on the world wide web. They need to present an image that will not cause a concern to the school or impact on the school's reputation. If staff are aware of information available on the world wide web from their past that may cause concern they must make the head teacher aware of this.
- Staff must not befriend pupils current or ex through social networking

**Agreed with the Governors date: Dec 2009 Review Date:
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