

Responding to Fake Accounts Targeting Schools on Social Media

Over the years, the online safety advisors within the [Education Safeguarding Service](#) have received calls from schools regarding social media accounts being set up, sometimes using schools' names, and/or sharing inappropriate and sometimes derogatory and bullying videos relating to schools and/or individual learners or staff members. In November 2021, there was a significant increase in concerns reported across the country following a [national viral trend](#).

These accounts often share images of learners and/or staff, usually taken from the school's website or by learners when on site or, in some cases, have been taken from learners or staff members' personal social networking profiles. They may claim to be representing the school and use the school's logos, or they may be using titles such as school name 'Muggies/Muggy' or other similar 'baiting' headlines and invite people to contribute their own content or rumours. In many cases the videos/images shared by these accounts can be considered to be 'offensive', could be viewed as bullying or harassment, and in some cases are making potential allegations against staff or may be sharing criminal content. In most cases, these accounts can be traced back to learners as part of a 'prank' and are seeking to gain large numbers of views and followers. Whilst the intention for sharing this material often begins as a 'joke', it can have a considerable emotional impact on learners and staff and the school being targeted, as well as there being potential criminal or disciplinary consequences for those involved in the creation of the accounts.

We appreciate this can be a distressing issue for schools; Kent DSLs and headteachers can contact the [Education Safeguarding Service](#) directly for a consultation.

Support from the UK Safer Internet Centre [Professionals Online Safety Helpline](#) (POSH) can be found [here](#) and an in-depth article about reporting fake accounts online can also be found [here](#). Alternatively, the Professionals Online Safety Helpline has put together a [short video](#) which explains the most recent issue, how educators can report distressing content and how to contact POSH for further support.

Whilst aimed at supporting schools in responding to complaints on social media, additional guidance for senior leaders can be accessed via our "*Dealing with Complaints on Social Media*" guidance, which can be downloaded by staff in Kent and Medway schools registered with an account on the [Education People website](#). The resources can be found within a zip folder in the 'Membership Resources' section, as listed in your personalised 'My Products and Resources' area.

Dealing with Specific Concerns

There may be complicating factors which need to be considered and, in these situations, a telephone consultation with the [Education Safeguarding Service](#) or the relevant local authority and/or the UK Safer Internet Centre Professional Online Safety Helpline for schools and settings outside of Kent, is advised. However, in general, if this issue is brought to your school's attention, we suggest the following approach.

1. Gather Evidence

- Identify an appropriate member of the school senior leadership to collate evidence of the concerns; we suggest this is the DSL and/or headteacher due to the potentially sensitive nature of the content. This is also to ensure prompt action can be taken. For example, the DSL may need to take safeguarding action, and if allegations or low-level concerns about staff have been posted, the headteacher will need to seek advice or report concerns to the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO).
- Take screenshots/copies of the content and make notes of any usernames posted or interacting with the content, as well as times and dates content was posted etc. This will enable the school to build up a chronology and look for patterns of behaviour. Make a note of any accounts on any 'followers' and 'following' lists as well as any users who have posted comments etc. or reshared the content.
- Staff and pupils reporting concerns should be advised not to engage with content or become embroiled in any discussions as this can aggravate the situation – concerns should be passed to the DSL and/or headteacher immediately.

2. Undertake an Initial Investigation

- Due to data protection laws, social media companies are likely to [only release personal information about account owners to law enforcement in specific circumstances](#). Unless criminal offences have been committed, police action is unlikely, so schools may need to undertake their own initial internal investigation to try and identify the account owner. In most cases, these accounts are set up by someone within the school community, usually learners. However, staff and parents have also been identified to be behind fake accounts.
- Begin by analysing the information gathered and look for patterns within this. For example, are specific friendship groups or year groups involved, have any locations been shared or tagged etc. It can be helpful to cross-reference the 'followers' and 'following' lists - in many cases the person behind the account can be found on both lists as users will often follow their own personal accounts etc. to boost numbers and reshare content!

- Speak directly with any members of the school community known to have interacted with the account in any way; the concern and the seriousness of the issue should be discussed with them and their parents if appropriate, and learners should be given the opportunity to share any information they may have.
- If this isn't successful, the next step could be to talk about social media use more generally with the wider community. We recommend information is kept as general as possible to avoid generating additional attention. For example, not naming specific accounts as this can be counterproductive and could result in copycat accounts being set up. If it is felt to be appropriate, we suggest schools state that an account(s) which is posting harmful content online has been brought to the school's attention and this will be taken very seriously by the school, as with all forms of bullying and harassment.
- If the school speaks directly to learners, such as in tutor groups or assemblies, we suggest ensuring several members of staff are present to monitor children's reactions and provide safeguarding support as necessary.
- In some cases, schools opt to mention that if it is felt to be necessary, legal action may be taken, including the possibility of police being informed. This can be a risky approach as in some cases the police may not be able to provide assistance. However, some schools have found this results in a member of the community sharing information about the account owner, someone admitting they set it up, or the account being deleted.

3. Apply Internal Sanctions and Support for Account Creators

- While this content can be distressing to schools and their staff, in many cases they are likely to have been created as a 'joke' and without any consideration to the emotional impact it could have on individuals, or indeed the potential reputational damage it could have for schools.
- If the school is able to identify the account creator, action should be taken in line with existing school policies such as behaviour, anti-bullying, social media and acceptable use. This could include requesting the account is deleted as well as providing targeted education, support and/or sanctions.
- If there are any safeguarding or child protection concerns for any of the children or families involved, for example the children are vulnerable and/or known to services, additional action may be required, such as making a request for support or speaking with their social worker or equivalent.

4. Provide Support to Staff/Learners

- School leaders need to be mindful of their duty of care to those involved. Where this involves staff, there is a specific duty on employers to protect their staff from third party harassment. Appropriate support for staff members will depend on the nature of the concerns and the

reaction of the individual.

- If the member of learner/ member of staff is aware of the issues, headteachers/DSLs should explain to them how they intend to address the concern and offer support to them, for example via internal and external support such as counselling or for staff, well-being helplines e.g. [Education Support](#) etc. Leaders should encourage learners and staff to let them know if there is any further support that they feel they need.
- If the learner/member of staff is unaware of the comments, headteachers/DSLs should consider if it necessary to inform them, and if so, what would be the best approach to do so. Depending on the nature of the comments, this decision may require additional advice, for example if the comments involve staff, for the local authority, the LADO and/or any legal or personnel advice.
- Staff (and indeed headteachers) may wish to contact their professional union for additional support and guidance. School leaders may also take additional legal advice, for example via their union or personnel provider, especially if civil issues such as libel/slander are a concern.

5. Report

- If a specific issue has occurred schools may wish to communicate with, and make it clear to, staff, learners and parents that this behaviour is not acceptable, and any form of bullying and harassment will not be tolerated.
 - It is important schools be realistic about what they hope to achieve and ensure the focus is on safeguarding all members of the community and achieving the best outcomes for children and indeed staff.
 - Although sometimes difficult, it is essential schools ensure that their response is proportionate; incorrect information, overreactions or emotionally led responses are likely to inflame the situation or can undermine school's credibility and this can mean a successful positive outcome is less likely to occur for all involved.
- If the school believes that a criminal offence has or could be committed, for example the videos contain credible threats, hate crimes, malicious communication, persistent harassment, and/or sexual harassment (including 'upskirting' or other similar offences), the police should be informed, via 101, or 999 if there is an immediate risk. Schools can also seek advice from the police via their local Schools Officer.
- If a potential allegation has been made against a member of staff, or a low-level concern has been shared, this should be discussed with the LADO in line with local allegation and child protection policy and procedures. This should take place even if the school believe the claim to be malicious. For Kent schools, the following links provide contact information and guidance for the LADO service:
 - www.kelsi.org.uk/child-protection-and-safeguarding/managing-staff-allegations
 - www.kscmp.org.uk/procedures/local-authority-designated-officer-lado

- If a criminal offence has not been committed and the school is not able to identify the person behind the account, the remaining option is to report the content and accounts to the social media platform directly.
 - If staff have been specifically featured on fake accounts, they can file a privacy violation report, or alternatively the DSL/SLT can do this on their behalf – in most cases platforms do not require staff or schools to have a registered account.
 - If the content being shared is protected (e.g. contains trademarked or protected logos or content), many platforms offer options to report this under copyright violations etc.
- If the platform does not remove the account/content following a report and the account is having a significant impact on the school community and staff, additional advice and support may be accessed via the [Professional Online Safety Helpline](#) (POSH)
 - Please be aware social media platforms can sometimes take some time to respond to reports - we suggest allowing at least 72 hours for a response.
 - POSH has some useful information for schools regarding police action and fake accounts [here](#).
 - Individuals can also be advised to report concerns via [Report Harmful Content](#).

Preventative Action

Getting fake accounts taken down is a positive outcome and should send a clear message that this behaviour is not tolerated within our communities. However, if an account is removed, it does not always prevent the person behind it from creating additional ones or stop others within the community from setting up 'copycat' accounts. It's therefore important that all schools consider preventative action they can take as part of a long term, whole school approach.

- Review your school policies to ensure that online behaviour is specifically addressed and that clear and effective procedures for dealing with incidents are in place.
- Clarify expectations on learner behaviour and conduct with staff, parents and learners, including your expectations regarding the use of mobile technology on site and social media.
- Revisit your curriculum approaches and ensure online safety is viewed as part of your RSHE approaches. Consider if there is sufficient regular and embedded education taking place regarding appropriate online behaviour and use of social media; this should include healthy relationships, positive use and respect.
- Revisit your staff training and staff behaviour policy. Ensure all staff are aware of the process to follow if they are aware of a concern or become a victim of bullying and how they can access support. Remind all staff to ensure they have appropriate privacy settings on personal social media sites and are checking these settings regularly.