Responding to Online Reputational Issues and Harassment Directed at Schools and School Staff

Prepared by the Professionals Online Safety Helpline, January 2024

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Who is this guidance for?

This guidance is intended for schools in England only. This guidance is for school leaders, governors, federations, and trust leaders.

Why have we written this guidance?

The Professionals Online Safety Helpline has seen a growth of 'online reputation issues' reported to us. In 2023, almost 50% of call cases handled by the helpline were related to the school or teachers' online reputation. As a recommendation from our previous annual reports, we have created this guidance to help schools navigate these issues and better understand what resources they have to manage issues of online reputation.

Examples of online reputational issues can include:

▶ Fake/impersonation accounts purporting to be the school or school staff

▶ School community groups not managed by the school

▶ Reviews on dedicated sites or Google

▶ Negative discourse about the school online

▶ Local/national news outlets covering stories about the school and/or teachers

▶ Allegations of misconduct or abuse

It is not possible or right that schools should be able to remove or manage all content about them online. It should be understood that the school community (as internet users) and others have the right to express their opinions both off and online.

When, for example, schools make policy changes that impact the usual day-to-day activities of learners or parents, it is expected that there may be some discussion around this, which may take place online. Schools are subject to criticism, and it is not anyone's right to not be offended by online posts, about them or the establishment they work for, if criticism is done in an evidence based and respectful manner. Schools and teachers should display a level of resilience and be available to respond to legitimate criticisms professionally. Schools may like to use their online channels to respond to legitimate criticisms in a constructive and transparent manner.

Allegations of misconduct and especially abuse should be treated seriously and be addressed appropriately via the school's whistle-blowing policy, regardless of the fact it has been posted online rather than via official routes. Those using online channels to raise these concerns should be encouraged to use routes available to them, set out in school policies, if they wish to raise a legitimate concern.

However, there are some instances where online discussion or discourse can cross a boundary and violate the terms of service of the platform it is being posted on and/or be criminal in nature. These can include:

▶ Direct threats of violence

▶ Doxing

▶ Targeted abuse and harassment

▶ Libel*

Libel is the written form of defamation (slander is spoken) and is proven/disproven in a court of law. No online platform will facilitate a report of Libel without court/law enforcement documentation as they cannot act as the arbitrators of truth.

RESPONDING TO ONLINE POSTS THAT DO NOT MEET THE THRESHOLD FOR INTERVENTION FROM THE ONLINE PLATFORM OR LAW ENFORCEMENT

It can be tricky to effectively respond to online posts, and we recommend never responding to any posts directly online. Should the post stem from a legitimate concern, complaint or criticism, and the poster is identifiable/known to the school, then the school should seek to meet with the poster offline to discuss their grievances face to face. This could also be facilitated on the phone or online. Within these conversations, the school can assess the gravity of the problem and reassure the person of the steps the school are taking, or have taken, to address it. The school can also then politely request that any online posts are removed.

Reviews

It is often the case that reviews will not be removed by the host platform unless they are in breach of the terms of service, such as harassment and bullying. A good way to temper negative reviews and recover the school's overall rating is to invite positive parents, staff and other members of the school community to leave good reviews; this will push negative ones down the results and help provide a more balanced view for readers.

> **"**
> **Invite positive parents, staff and other members of the school community to leave good reviews.**

Groups

It may be that a group of parents have set up a group on a social media platform to share updates and communicate with each other about school. This is often harmless and helps to create a productive community. Where it can become a problem is if discussions are happening on these groups which heavily criticise the school or teachers. Often, these groups are closed, but the school may be approached by a parent with evidence of conversations taking place, looking for the school to respond. It is important to understand the motivations of this behaviour and what the parent reporting it to you is expecting to happen. If there are problems being discussed that can be addressed, consider tackling the issue offline and inviting the parent(s) posting to have a conversation with the school.

Another approach to have better oversight of online groups is to create and moderate them yourselves as a school. For example, you could create an official group on Facebook and invite parents; this way, parents have a forum to share updates and communicate, but should a problem or difficult discussion arise, the school will be aware and will be able to respond appropriately. These official channels do require managing and are supported by policy and process.

Images

Generally speaking, a school is a private place; therefore, images/videos taken from within a school without permission and posted online can often be reported to the platform as a privacy violation. However, it is important to understand that images already taken and posted by the school or other authorised persons (perhaps on the school's website or social media channels) are then considered public, so they cannot be reported in the same way and would not be a violation of the platform rules.

Context is key, and it may be that an adjoining caption does breach rules. The premise that some images are publicly available also extends to any image posted on social media profiles publicly; if using Facebook, this includes your profile and cover photo, even if your account is private. Do check your own personal social media profiles only show images you are happy to be 'public' and potentially re-shared elsewhere.

ONLINE REPUTATION ISSUES THAT CAN SUCCESSFULLY BE REPORTED TO THE ONLINE PLATFORM AND/OR LAW ENFORCEMENT

Trademark Violation

In the UK, it is understood that a school owns its trademark (school badge/logo and name), and to use it without consent is a violation of most online platform's community standards. Other organisations and businesses may have to purchase their trademark and supply platforms with evidence of this to prove that someone is using it without consent.

If your schools want to ensure the sole use of their trademark across multiple platforms, they can explore how to purchase this.

Fake profiles created to look like a school (e.g. using the school badge as a profile picture and the school's name or a variation of it) can typically be reported as a trademark violation to:

- ▶ Facebook
- ▶ Instagram
- ▶ TikTok
- ▶ Twitter

Impersonation

Impersonation accounts are a recurring issue. Clear impersonation is a violation of most online platforms; this would often include a profile using the image and name of someone else and using the account to clearly pretend to be them. This can be a real cause for concern if there is an online account purporting to be them, especially if the account is posting inappropriate or harmful content.

There are some exceptions to this. For example, on X (previously Twitter), they allow parody accounts. So long as the account makes it clear it is a parody, X will not act on a report of impersonation. Using a picture of someone else as a profile picture, or name, for an account alone cannot be considered an impersonation.

> **Clear impersonation is a violation of most online platforms.**

Other routes to resolution

Reporting and removing content online only addresses one aspect of a much wider issue and can only resolve the online fallout of a problem that often originates offline.
Consider exploring other ways to resolve the root of the problem as a further solution to also removing online content.

Mediation

If you are aware of who is posting about you/the school online, for example, a parent, this should be addressed face to face. Invite them for a meeting to discuss the posts and any underlying issue they have with a school policy/decision. This could be facilitated further by involving a mediatory partner such as a representative from the board of governors or trustees. If it is a student or child posting/creating the content, this should be addressed in much the same way, and the school can also use their behaviour or acceptable use policy to help inform the conversation. Having effective policies in place to preempt these issues will ensure they are dealt with in a consistent manner.

Education

Where it is unclear who is posting/creating content online, but it is obviously students at school, this can be addressed via education. Children may be unaware of the impact their behaviours online are having on the wellbeing of staff and others. Education should be factual and should not make legal threats which are not reflected in the nature of the behaviour.

" Having effective policies in place to preempt these issues will ensure they are dealt with in a consistent manner.

Resilience and Wellbeing

Some teachers and school staff spend a lot of time looking online to find content that may affect their, or their school's, online reputation. While it is important to be aware of what is being posted online, the searching and looking for content should be considered in line with wellbeing practices and only carried out by staff members who have the mental resilience to cope with negative commentary about their school, colleagues and potentially themselves. If staff are spending a lot of time trawling through this content, it should be recognised that this could impact their health and wellbeing and so they should be offered help to manage subsequent emotions. Education is an important part of every child's life with many invested stakeholders, it should therefore be understood that some aspects of education are subject to criticism, and this cannot and should not be censored online.

Organisation/website/guidance and what they do

SPECIALIST ORGANISATIONS	www.saferinternet.org.uk — Provides advice and support to children, young people, parents, carers and schools/colleges about staying safe online. They also provide the Professionals Online Safety Helpline and Report Harmful Content, to support the removal of legal but harmful content online.
	www.swgfl.org.uk — Includes a template for setting out online safety policies and guidance for teachers and professionals working with young people.
GUIDANCE	www.swgfl.org.uk/resources/how-to-respond-to-the-online-sexual-harassment-of-school/college-staff — Guidance for schools/colleges in England on how to respond to the online sexual harassment of staff.
	www.swgfl.org.uk/helplines/reporting-guidance — Information on reporting content too social media platforms.
	www.gov.uk/government/publications/mobile-phones-in-schools — Guidance for schools in England produced by the DfE around how schools can prohibit the use of mobile phones throughout the school day.
	hwb.gov.wales/support-centre/education-digital-standards/bring-your-own-device-guidance — Guidance for schools in Wales produced by the Welsh Government around the use of personal devices within schools.
	www.gov.uk/government/publications/safeguarding-practitioners-information-sharing-advice — Guidance on information sharing for people who provide safeguarding services to children, young people, parents and carers.

SWGfL Safe, Secure, Online

UK Safer Internet Centre

Professionals Online Safety Helpline

NOMINET