

Youth work, but make it digital

With young people's lives increasingly being spent online, youth workers across the country are adapting their practice to better support the young people they work with. YouthLink Scotland's **Hilary Phillips** and **Sarah Robinson Galloway** tell us about bringing the best of youth work into the digital space

Interview: **Sophie Ward**

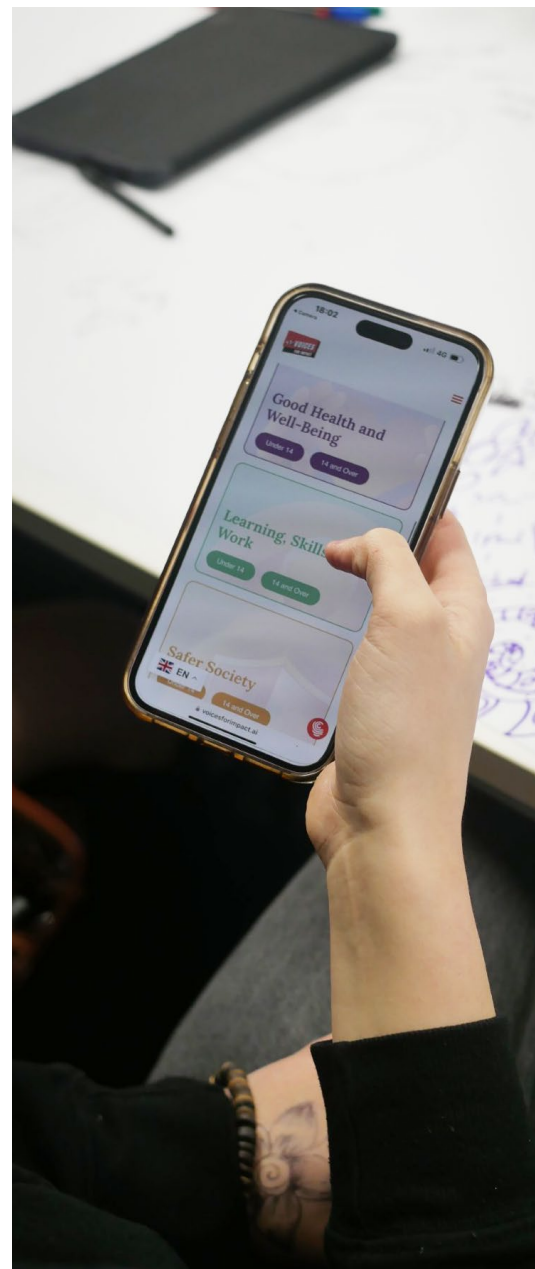
It's about so much more than the technology," says Hilary Phillips, Senior Development Officer at YouthLink Scotland. "Digital youth work is about finding points of connection and building relationships with young people."

The remit of digital youth work is broad, and includes helping young people build the resilience they need to be safe and secure online, as well as developing the skills they need to thrive – not just survive – in their online lives.

"There are some fantastic examples of youth work using gaming as a form of engagement," says Hilary. "If a young person is disengaged from school, gaming might be the common territory they can find with a youth worker. It can offer the first point of connection and a way of building a relationship that will help to influence their lives."

While an important part of any youth work is about offering safe spaces for young people, this does not always mean staying offline; instead, digital activity is being incorporated into both online and face-to-face sessions. "We want to help young people develop the knowledge and awareness they need to participate in the online world safely and well," says Hilary. "This means being aware of potential harms and being able to react and recover. Often this happens best when there's some kind of creative activity that young people are genuinely interested in. This could be making a video, designing a comic or building a digital game."

"We want to help young people develop the skills to thrive – not just survive – in their online lives"



Youth workers across Scotland are continually upskilling by attending training courses, such as those offered on YouthLink Scotland's Hub, and sharing their knowledge with one another. Inevitably, every youth worker brings a different level of experience. "There are youth workers who bring their enthusiasm for gaming or coding into the workplace, and there are others for whom that is not part of their experience," Hilary explains. "They can still start from there and begin exploring digital together with young people."

This two-way, collaborative approach between a youth worker and their youth group can provide the right setting for young people to share about their online lives. "You see young people sharing their knowledge and skills with youth workers," Hilary says. "In turn youth workers help them to question some of their own decision-making processes, and to think more critically, helping them to develop digital literacy."

With digital youth work helping to create opportunities for young people to have their voices heard online, what impact will a social media ban for under-16s have? "The proposed restrictions are intended to make young people's lives safer. My view is that there will continue to be an important role for youth work to support young people to think about their online lives, to develop their critical thinking and to have a voice in society." •



Voices for Impact

Voices for Impact is an innovative digital platform that hopes to support young people to create positive change by sharing their views online in an accessible and safe way.

Conceived by Bytes, a youth work charity based in Northern Ireland, the cross-jurisdictional digital project provides youth workers with the ability to capture the views of young people by inviting them to complete short online surveys through the Voices for Impact website.

Sarah Robinson Galloway, who is leading the Scottish part of the project, expresses her excitement at the potential to gather immediate evidence and influence decision-making.

Sarah explains: "There have always been ways of gathering youth voice. Different organisations do this in different ways. This is a way that individual youth groups can hear from their young people and compare their results with others. The difference is the results are visible immediately."

Six surveys have been created on the Voices for Impact website, the topics inspired by the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. Each survey is anonymous and takes two minutes to complete. Youth workers introduce topics and offer space for discussion, then each individual young person can complete an online survey sharing their own views on the topic.

Opposite: A young person engaging with the Voices for Impact surveys at The Citadel Youth Centre

Above: A member of the Youth Advisory Group records for upcoming promotional videos

“The data is quantitative to protect the anonymity of the young people,” Sarah says. “The evidence can be used at a national level, but individual youth groups can also use it to demonstrate need in their local area and, in time, demonstrate change as well.”

Established initially in Northern Ireland, YouthLink Scotland has spent the past year setting up the Scottish part of the project. Upholding children's rights was a key aspect of the project design, with young people meaningfully involved from the outset in developing questions, testing out surveys and creating video guides.

“Another important part of this project is the opportunity to connect young people across jurisdictions,” explains Sarah. “We’re used to thinking about Scottish young people, but this tool can offer a broader picture. If young people are interested in looking at the results, they can see what’s happening in Northern Ireland or Wales and compare that with Scotland. It’s connecting young people’s voices.”

“You couldn’t do it if it wasn’t digital, not in the same way,” Sarah adds “But anything that captures voices in a digital way needs to be safe and enshrined in their rights from the get-go.” ●



To find out more about Voices for Impact and how to get involved, visit voicesforimpact.ai

For more on YouthLink Scotland’s digital youth work, visit youthlink.scot

“This tool can offer a broader picture. It’s connecting young people’s voices”

What young people think

Members of the Voices for Impact youth advisory group share their thoughts

“I have really enjoyed being part of the advisory group with YouthLink Scotland. My favourite part was doing an Instagram takeover which allowed me to use my creative skills”

“As a youth worker and young person myself, I believe this tool will allow us to really see how these different topics affect children and young people’s lives and to see their opinions. Using these answers will then allow us to work more effectively with children and young people to tackle these issues they are passionate about”

“I really hope that people who work with children and young people will use this tool to build on their own work”

Member, Voices for Impact

“It’s special compared to other groups as it allows for younger people to actually have an input on how other young people can more easily advocate for themselves”

“It allows for a more accurate reflection of young people’s voices, which we can then let influence actions concerning young people and their needs”

Member, Voices for Impact



What could change if care and education saw the same picture?

Every day, care and education teams record information that could help protect a child, reveal an emerging concern or demonstrate meaningful progress.

But when case notes, child protection concerns, incidents, education records and outcomes sit across separate systems, how quickly can your organisation understand what is really happening in a child’s life?

And what could be missed while teams are waiting for that information to be brought together?

Has duplication become accepted as normal?

Information is often recorded in one place, copied somewhere else and rewritten for reports, reviews and meetings.

What impact does this have on your team’s time, the consistency of recording and their ability to focus on the children and young people they support?

Geco Connect allows teams to record information once and use it meaningfully across the child’s record, reporting and outcomes.

Could earlier visibility lead to earlier support?

Geco Connect brings care, education, safeguarding, incidents, restrictive practices, attendance, engagement and outcomes into one connected picture.

Authorised leaders can access important information in real time, identify patterns and ask better questions without waiting for reports to be manually compiled.

If a change in classroom engagement was connected to something happening in the child’s wider life, how quickly would your current systems reveal it?

And could seeing that connection sooner help your team respond before a concern became more serious?

Keeping the child’s voice visible

MyGeco gives children and young people an accessible way to share their views, experiences and progress.

Their voice can remain visible within outcomes, reviews and decisions about their care and education.

How confident are you that the child’s voice is not simply being recorded, but is genuinely influencing the decisions being made?

One connected picture

Developed in Scotland, Geco Connect aligns with GIRFEC, SHANARRI and The Promise. Its development is strengthened through a UK Research and Innovation Knowledge Transfer Partnership with the University of Strathclyde.

Geco Connect supports organisations ranging from a single residential home to large multi-service, education and secure care providers.

If your current systems show only part of the child’s story, would it be worth seeing what becomes possible when care, education and the child’s voice are genuinely connected?



See Geco Connect in action:

www.girfec.co.uk
hello@girfec.co.uk
 0141 488 1533



Scan the QR code to arrange a demonstration