



# Case Study

High Life Highland Social Media Project

Digital Youth Work and Cyber Resilience Research May 2023



year of young people  
bliadhna na h-òigridh  
2018



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## Highlife Highland Social Media Project

The Highland Year of Young People social media project gave youth ambassadors unprecedented access to a project's social media accounts. High Life Highland encouraged this to work safely by having conversations with ambassadors around what to post and when to seek help, and not making assumptions about young people's digital knowledge.

### Year of Young People 2018 social media project

Through the Year of Young People (YoYP) 2018 social media project, High Life Highland, an arm's length body of Highland Council, supported a group of youth ambassadors to develop a social media project aiming to connect young people across the area. YoYP aimed to be a year that would focus on young people across Scotland. As part of this, Young Scot trained YoYP ambassadors, whom local authorities were asked to work with. The 15 YoYP ambassadors in Highland used Facebook, Twitter and Instagram to support and promote the YoYP and to share stories of youth activities and trips they took part in.

From their first meeting, the youth ambassadors, who drove the project, decided they wanted to use social media to connect as a group and with other young people. A key reason for this was the rural Highland setting. Youth work in Highland can be challenging, even when working with young people from just a small part of the local authority area. For example, High Life Highland currently runs a STEM project, where young people from two high school catchment areas travel to one location to access a 3D printer and build and programme a robotic arm.

Transportation is difficult, especially once school busses stop running for the day, whilst weather and youth worker lone-working can also provide challenges. In the YoYP project, the ambassadors themselves were located across Highland, so it was difficult for them to meet in person. This was compounded by the weather in winter, with snow preventing some of them joining the initial meeting. The cost of public transport was also prohibitive, and young people were dependent on friends and family for lifts. The ambassadors also felt that it would be easier to reach other young people digitally rather than at face-to-face events, given that the geography of the area can make it difficult for communities to connect with each other.



The youth worker leading the project had to look at how the social media project the young people wanted could be put into practice. One issue young people were clear about was that they did not want content they created to be filtered by an organisation before they were allowed to post it. They wanted to use their words, their voice. High Life Highland looked at how this could work, including looking at permission settings for different social media sites and what access young people would need to be given to be able to post. For the Highland YoYP Facebook and Twitter permissions could be used, and for Instagram the password would have to be shared. Allowing young people this level of access was a completely new way of working for High Life Highland, and the youth worker had to convince the organisation that it was suitable.

Self-management developed amongst the ambassadors. Initially the young people were nervous using the social media accounts as they didn't want to get anything wrong. Young people would share posts with each other before publishing, so that they could edit each other's work. This was especially done in the early days of the project, as the ambassadors got used to thinking about what was appropriate to post.

The youth ambassadors benefitted from the project in a number of ways. Young people felt valued and heard, with the organisation and youth worker believing in them, supporting the ambassadors to create and run their own project. By tagging local politicians in Twitter posts, young people were able to start conversations with adults in positions of power. This felt important for the ambassadors, reaching the attention of those in public office who they might not have connected with otherwise, amplifying their voices and reaching a wider audience. A number of additional experiences for some of the ambassadors also grew out of the project. For example, two young people helping run a similar programme the year after before moving into related career or education choices, and a book chapter and podcast on YoYP have been coproduced by some of the ambassador and the youth worker.





## Learning from the project

Early in the project, High Life Highland had to help the ambassadors who felt fatigue with digital platforms. The young people initially felt that they had to look after the platforms 24/7 and respond immediately to group chats or social media messages. High Life Highland encouraged the young people to recognise that it was okay to switch phones off or allow posts to wait unanswered for a time, and set an auto-response for social media private messages, to improve the young people's resilience.

Sometimes tensions also arose between young people, when digital chat content was being interpreted differently by each ambassador. For the youth worker, it seemed important to try and bring young people back into a physical space together at these points, recognising that it can be challenging to sit for long periods behind a screen without interacting socially with peers. The ambassadors were able to meet four times and also had a residential trip. These face-to-face meetings allowed them to spend time together and talk about challenging aspects of the project, helping build understanding and learning.

The lead youth worker encountered some surprise around the project from other youth workers, for example, about allowing young people such open access to social media accounts. However, the youth worker found he could trust the young people, but that it was important to understand their wants and needs, and the way they work in the digital space.



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Overall, the project could be seen as traditional youth work practice, but relocated from the physical space into the digital space. The youth worker felt that the values and ethics of his youth work practice, such as keeping young people safe, would steer him in the right direction, but that learning around digital would be necessary to support young people in the different setting. The unprecedented access this project gave young people to organisation social media accounts made this difficult, with no one immediate to turn to for support, though the YouthLink Digital Youth Network and digital youth work in Finland were useful.

High Life Highland has gone on to use digital in a number of youth work projects, taking forward learning from the YOYP. The project meant youth workers already had relationships with staff working around the council's digital infrastructure when Covid-19 restrictions began, making it easier to explain to departments why, for example, they should have access to the Education Department's digital platforms to carry on youth work online. The YOYP project also helped boost youth worker confidence in working in digital spaces. For example, today HLH uses messenger services to talk to young people, which there were concerns about before. One youth worker highlights that these conversations may be seen as having an additional safety measure in place by being recorded. The project also led to High Life Highland being more willing to look at what platforms young people are using, and consider if young people will invite youth workers in to that space or if youth workers need to make a similar space on a platform. Similarly, whilst pre-YOYP it could feel like a project had to be either digital or physical, now the line between the online and offline spaces young people and youth workers use is more blurred. For example, conversations can start digitally and continue in a physical space. The YOYP project has also meant staff are now more skilled in how they approach digital projects with regards to cyber resilience and safeguarding, though learning in this area is ongoing. For example, not all activities, such as pumpkin carving where young people will be using knives, should be replicated online or might require supervision from where young people are dialing in from.

In 2019, High Life Highland ran a similar social media journalism project to YOYP. However, it found that this was more challenging than the initial 2018 YOYP project, possibly due to young people participating being less motivated and youth workers not being able to offer the same support. High Life Highland have questioned if running a similar social media project in a single location, for example, in a Highland school hostel, with a youth worker physically located closer to young people to offer support, would be more successful, but this is not something it has been able to try.

Today, in terms of digital youth work, High Life Highland youth workers are involved in a STEM project for young people, discussed above, and use messenger services to communicate with young people. However, overall, it believes young people may be less keen on digital youth work projects post-lockdown.

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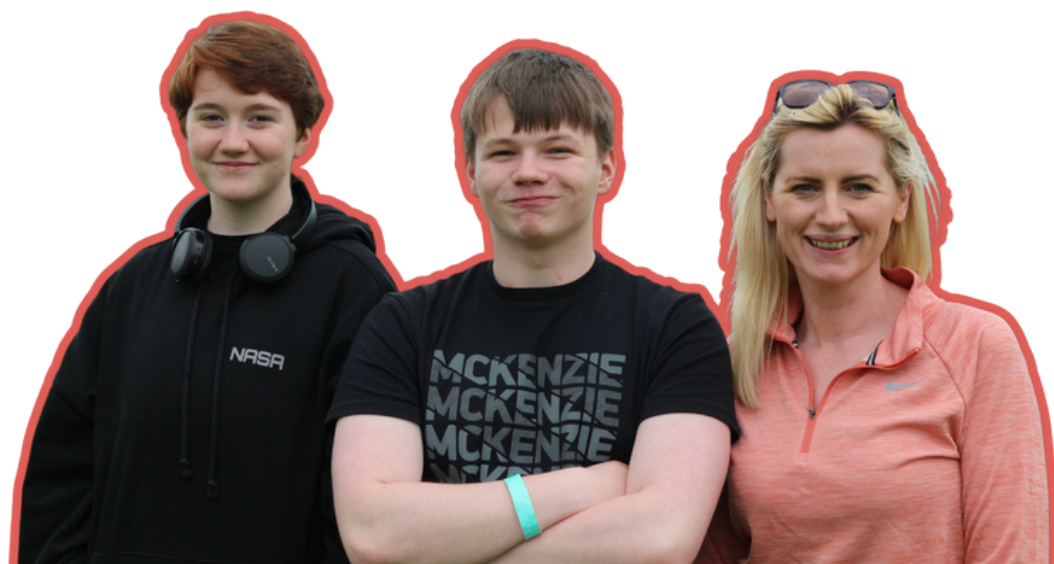
## Cyber Resilience and Staying Safe Online

Whilst young people are popularly seen as “digital natives”, High Life Highland found it was important to not make assumptions around ambassador’s knowledge. The youth worker needed to check young people’s digital literacy and awareness for staying safe online. For example, from initial discussions, some of the young people’s needs became clear, such as wanting to know what to do if they received personal messages. The age range of those taking part in the project, ranging from ten to twenty three, made this especially complex for the youth worker, with older ambassadors generally having greater digital skills. However, even for the adult ambassadors, the youth worker still needed to see what measures might be needed to keep ambassadors and High Life Highland safe. Likewise, sense-checking young people’s knowledge was important to see if they felt secure and confident about what they could say in a public space and composing posts, given they would be reaching a wide social media audience.

Some protection was provided by the social media accounts masking who was posting. The public would only see that the social media posts were from a Year of Young People-branded account, not who exactly was producing and sending content; the young people posting were anonymous.

Staying safe discussions between the youth worker and ambassadors took place, with the youth worker trying to frame safeguarding and protection issues in ways young people would understand. Conversation topics included: the ambassador’s information, whether they gave it up, and if so, who they would do that with; the posts they would write; and sense-checking each other’s work.

The youth worker also talked to young people about circumstances in which they should come and tell him about issues they were encountering. The ambassadors approached the practitioner a number of times when the social media accounts received private messages the young people were not sure how to react to. The group would then come together with the youth worker and discuss how to respond, looking at staying safe and the right approach to take depending on what the messages were.



A level of protection around the social media use was also built in by having three or four young people allocated to each account, and a few others moving between accounts. This meant no young person was left to deal with an account alone.



By helping young people with tensions, fatigue and safety issues that emerged from digital working, High Life Highland supported youth ambassadors to directly use the Highland social media accounts for the Year of Young People 2018. The project let young people feel heard, reach those in positions of power, and, for some, led to further experiences.



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