

Growing Up Connected

Youth work and young people in a digital Scotland

YouthLink Scotland



Introduction

The online world isn't somewhere young people visit. It's where much of life happens. It's where they learn, laugh, argue, organise, create and find their place in the world.

It's also where they encounter misinformation, online abuse, harmful content and new technologies that are changing faster than any generation has experienced before.

For youth work, this isn't about following the latest trend. It's about understanding the world that young people are growing up in.

The values of youth work haven't changed. It is still about building trusted relationships, creating safe spaces, listening to young people and helping them develop the confidence and skills to make informed choices. Those principles are just as important in a digital world as they are anywhere else.

That's what this publication is all about.

You'll read how young people are leading conversations about artificial intelligence, creating online safety resources for their peers, challenging misinformation and shaping violence prevention work. You'll hear why digital inclusion matters, why trusted relationships remain the strongest form of online safety, and why youth work has an important contribution to make as Scotland develops its approach to digital wellbeing.

You'll also see that none of these issues sits in isolation. Online safety links to mental health. Digital inclusion affects education, employment and participation. Artificial intelligence is changing how young people access information and create content . Misinformation shapes attitudes and relationships. These are no longer specialist topics. They are issues youth workers are encountering with young people every day.

Across all of these articles there is one consistent message. Technology will continue to change, but the importance of trusted adults will not. Young people need places where they can talk honestly about what they are seeing and experiencing, explore different perspectives and work out what they think for themselves. That is what good youth work has always offered.

This edition celebrates the creativity and commitment of young people and youth workers across Scotland. It shares new ideas, highlights emerging challenges and shows what is possible when young people are trusted to shape the conversation.

Digital youth work isn't about technology. It's about young people.

And it's about making sure every young person has the support, opportunities and trusted relationships they need to thrive in a digital Scotland.





A Digital Scotland Young People Can Thrive In

YouthLink Scotland sets out how skills, inclusion, young people's voices and trusted relationships can shape a wider approach to digital wellbeing.

Scotland has an opportunity to lead the way in how we support young people to grow up safely, confidently and creatively in a digital world.

The debate about online safety has intensified. The UK Government's planned social media ban for under-16s has raised important questions about how children and young people are protected online. But whatever happens next, one thing is clear: digital technology will remain a major part of young people's lives.

The challenge for Scotland is not simply how we restrict access to harm. It is how we build the skills, relationships and confidence young people need to thrive in this environment.

That means moving from a narrow focus on online safety towards a wider vision of **digital wellbeing**.

Youth work has a key role to play.

Every day, youth workers support young people to navigate misinformation, scams, online abuse, misogyny, harmful content, addictive design, exploitation, digital exclusion and rapidly evolving AI technologies. They do this not through one-off messages, but by building relationships over time, creating opportunities for honest discussion and intervening early when young people need support.

Emerging research on the digital determinants of mental health is adding urgency to this work. There is growing recognition that young people's mental health and wellbeing can be shaped by the digital environments they inhabit, from the content they are exposed to and the way platforms are designed, to their experiences of connection, exclusion and harm online. This strengthens the case for seeing digital wellbeing not simply as an issue of individual behaviour, but as one that requires a wider preventative and public health response.

Scotland already knows the value of this kind of approach. Through public health models such as No Knives, Better Lives, we have seen that lasting change comes from prevention, education, trusted adults, community action and young people themselves shaping the solution.

Our blueprint for digital wellbeing

YouthLink Scotland believes youth work should be a core pillar of Scotland's public health response to online harms.

Build a DIGITALLY CONFIDENT youth work workforce.

Youth workers need the training, tools and confidence to talk about AI, algorithms, misinformation, online misogyny, cyber resilience, digital exploitation, gaming and digital wellbeing.

Put YOUNG PEOPLE at the centre.

Young people should not simply receive messages about online safety or cyber resilience. They should design campaigns, lead peer education, shape resources and influence policy.

Build COMMUNITIES that support families.

Parents and carers are often worried, overwhelmed and unsure where to turn. Youth work can provide practical, local support that helps families have better conversations about digital life.

Invest in LOCAL youth work.

Local youth work gives young people somewhere to belong and people they can turn to. It creates the relationships and support that help them build confidence, make informed choices and navigate their lives online and offline.

PREPARE for what comes next.

AI, deepfakes, scams, synthetic media and new forms of online harm are evolving quickly. Scotland needs a youth work sector that can respond with agility, creativity and confidence.

This is not about choosing between protection and participation.

Young people need both.

They need stronger safeguards from technology companies and regulators. But they also need access, agency, skills, trusted relationships and opportunities to use digital technology positively.

The ultimate goal is not simply to reduce online harm.

It is to improve young people's wellbeing, participation and life chances in a world where digital technology is now part of everyday life.

Supporting young people in a digital Scotland means investing in the people and relationships that equip them to participate safely, confidently and positively online.

Youth work already does this every day. It should be at the heart of Scotland's digital future.



POLICY CONTEXT:

Why Digital Youth Work Matters More Than Ever

The debate keeps moving on...

Just a year ago, discussions about young people's online lives focused largely on whether governments should regulate social media platforms more effectively. Today, the conversation is very different.

Across the UK and the globe, governments are introducing increasingly interventionist approaches to protecting children online. The focus is currently on regulating technology companies to restricting young people's access to some social media platforms, introducing stronger age assurance, limiting high-risk platform features and, more recently, proposing default overnight curfews for older teenagers.

At the same time, Scotland is taking a complementary approach. The Scottish Government's Online Safety Taskforce Action Plan places a strong emphasis on prevention, digital resilience and supporting children, families and practitioners to respond confidently to online harms. It also recognises the growing importance of tackling online misogyny, misinformation and harmful online behaviours before they escalate.

Beyond regulation

One thing has become increasingly clear. Regulation matters. Technology companies have a responsibility to design safer platforms, verify ages appropriately and reduce harmful content.

However, legislation cannot teach judgement, critical thinking or resilience.

Young people still need trusted adults who can help them recognise misinformation, navigate healthy relationships, challenge online hate and understand how rapidly developing technologies such as artificial intelligence are shaping their lives.

Where youth work fits

Youth work brings something different to this challenge.

It has always helped young people navigate change, build confidence, question the world around them and develop healthy relationships. Today's world is increasingly digital, but the principles remain the same.

Whether exploring AI, tackling online misogyny, supporting digital wellbeing or helping young people recognise scams and misinformation, youth workers give young people opportunities to explore these issues openly, think critically about what they encounter online and reach their own informed conclusions.

From emerging practice to essential practice

The articles throughout this edition demonstrate that digital youth work is no longer an emerging specialism.

Across Scotland, practitioners are embedding digital conversations into everyday youth work, co-designing resources with young people, exploring AI, responding to online harms and helping young people develop the skills they need to thrive in an increasingly digital society.

As governments strengthen regulation, the need for trusted adults and relationship-based practice becomes even greater.

Digital youth work is no longer an optional extra.

It is becoming an essential part of how youth work responds to the realities of young people's lives.

Digital Youth Work supports young people....



How digital youth work supports online safety

Online safety challenges	Youth Work supports young people to...	Impact for young people
Exclusion, lack of skills, passive consumption	Create ↓ Digital Skills	**Increased knowledge and skills** With digital skills I can create, not just consume. I can manage my connectivity, become a content creator, meaning that my voice can be heard. and learn the digital technology skills that will enable me to thrive. I can use technology to have my voice heard and to
Bullying, abuse, hate and harmful content including misogyny and radicalisation	Play safe ↓ Online Safety	**Greater confidence to seek support and manage conflict** I can make positive choices about who I connect with online and how I act. I can develop the awareness I need to manage harmful content and influences.
Scams, phishing, fraud and privacy risks	Act secure ↓ Cyber Resilience	**Equipped for online safety and awareness online.** I can create strong passwords and recognise scams. I can respond and recover when things go wrong.
Misinformation, manipulation and AI-driven harms	Think first ↓ Digital Literacy	**Healthier attitudes, stronger critical thinking, decision-making and relationships** I can think carefully and critically. I can manage my digital footprint and think about the impact of AI and social media algorithms.
Mental health pressures, body image concerns and unhealthy digital habits	Stay well ↓ Health and wellbeing	**Improved health and wellbeing** I realise that my online activities can have an impact on my physical health and my mental wellbeing.
Digital poverty, inequality and exclusion. Youth work supports those who are most marginalised.	Include everyone ↓ Digital Inclusion	**Opportunities, participation and confidence.** I have access to the devices and connectivity I need for my life and the support to use them well.



Digital youth work offers all this and more, in an environment where fun is core and positive relationships underpin everything else.

It touches on all aspects of a young person's digital life, from skills to well-being and can be viewed through the lens of all the major approaches to digital technology which are commonly explored in relation to children and young people and indeed society in general.

~~No knives~~
Better lives

When Violence Goes Viral

A fight filmed and shared can follow a young person long after it ends. Young people's experiences show why violence prevention must address what happens online as well as offline.

For today's young people, violence doesn't always begin in the playground, on a street corner or outside the school gates. **Sometimes it starts with a notification.**

A video of a fight shared in a group chat. A humiliating comment that spreads around a school in minutes. A rumour that snowballs before anyone has the chance to challenge it. Violence is filmed, shared and replayed, often reaching hundreds or even thousands of people before the people involved have had time to process what has happened.

For some young people, the pressure isn't just to watch. It's to like it, comment on it or share it. In some online spaces, violence can become entertainment, a way to gain attention or even a badge of status.

Young people across Scotland have been telling us this through the Better Lives Survey, which engaged almost 3,000 young people. Their experiences show that online and offline violence can no longer be separated. Social media doesn't cause violence on its own, but it can fuel conflict, increase peer pressure and amplify the impact when incidents happen.

Young people also told us they want adults to understand these realities rather than simply tell them to stay off their phones.

This is where youth work comes into its own.

Youth workers don't just understand safeguarding guidance or online harms. They understand young people. They know the platforms they're using, the jokes they share, the language they use with each other and the pressures that come with being online. They know what grabs attention, what gets ignored and what actually starts a conversation.



That doesn't mean pretending to be young people or using the latest slang. It means understanding their world well enough to have honest conversations that feel relevant, not patronising.

It's why youth work can often reach young people in ways that campaigns and classroom lessons can't.

Rather than telling young people what to think, youth workers ask questions.

- Why do these videos get shared?
- Who benefits?
- How would you feel if it was you?
- What happens after everyone else has moved on?

Those conversations help young people stop, think and see the bigger picture.

One example is Quit Fighting for Likes, developed by the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit, YouthLink Scotland and Medics Against Violence. The resource tackles the growing trend of filming and sharing violence online. Instead of focusing on punishment, it helps young people understand why violent content spreads so quickly, how social media rewards shock and attention, and the lasting impact a single video can have on someone's life. Through practical activities and discussion, young people are encouraged to question what they're seeing rather than simply scrolling on or joining in.

A different approach is taken by The Lassies Are No Feart, developed through No Knives, Better Lives. Working with young women, the project explores confidence, safety, healthy relationships and the ways social media can shape attitudes towards violence and misogyny. It creates space for honest conversations about peer pressure, respect and personal safety, helping young women build confidence, support one another and challenge harmful behaviour before it escalates.

Although they take different approaches, both projects are built on the same principle: lasting change comes through relationships, not lectures.

Young people are far more likely to open up when they feel listened to rather than judged. They're more likely to question harmful content when someone helps them think it through instead of simply telling them it's wrong. And they're more likely to make different choices when those conversations happen in places where they feel safe, respected and understood.

That's the real strength of youth work.

In a world where online trends, apps and behaviours change almost overnight, young people need more than information. They need adults who understand the spaces they're spending time in, can talk about them with confidence and know how to turn everyday conversations into opportunities to learn.

Preventing violence today isn't only about what happens in our streets, schools and communities.

It's also about what happens on a screen.

And that's a conversation youth work is uniquely placed to lead.



Starting Conversations That Matter

Dumfries and Galloway

From discussion boards to a podcast led by young people, Dumfries and Galloway's youth workers are making digital issues part of everyday conversation.

The conversations young people need most rarely begin with the words "online safety."

They begin with a story about a group chat, a video, a gaming platform, an AI-generated image or something that happened on social media. For youth workers, these everyday conversations provide an opportunity to explore the opportunities and challenges of the digital world in a way that feels relevant and real. That's the approach being taken by Dumfries and Galloway Council, where digital resilience is being woven into everyday youth work rather than treated as a standalone topic.

Rather than delivering one-off online safety sessions, the Youth Work Service is creating regular opportunities for young people to explore digital issues through conversation. At youth clubs across the region, interactive discussion boards pose a different question or scenario each week. Topics have included artificial intelligence, social media, online relationships, digital wellbeing and the impact of violence in gaming.

These discussion boards do more than spark debate. They help youth workers understand the issues young people are experiencing, identify emerging trends and shape future projects around the needs and interests of the young people themselves. The approach has proved particularly effective in encouraging participation from young people who may not normally contribute to group discussions, ensuring every voice has the opportunity to be heard.

One project that reflects this youth-led approach is the Youth Enquiry Service (YES) Podcast. Produced with and by young people, the podcast gives them the opportunity to plan episodes, research topics, interview guests, film, record and edit each programme while developing confidence, communication and digital media skills. More importantly, it puts young people's voices at the centre of the conversation, allowing them to ask the questions that matter to them rather than simply receiving information from adults.

Now approaching 40 episodes, the podcast has welcomed guests from organisations including NHS Dumfries and Galloway, Police Scotland, Rape Crisis, Educational Psychology, the Scottish Ambulance Service, Dumfries and Galloway Youth Council and local youth organisations. Together, the episodes have created a growing library of trusted information that young people, parents, carers and practitioners can return to whenever they need it.

This work is part of a wider commitment to youth work across Dumfries and Galloway. During 2024–25, the council delivered 3,471 youth work sessions, groups and events, while 2,601 young people took part in participation and engagement opportunities to influence decisions affecting their lives. The service also supported 2,433 children and young people through its Amazing Summer programme, delivering activities in 80 remote and rural communities across the region.

The council's approach has also been strengthened through national professional learning, including YouthLink Scotland's digital youth work and online safety programme, helping practitioners build their knowledge, confidence and practice around emerging digital issues.

For Dumfries and Galloway Council, digital resilience isn't about warning young people about the dangers of being online. It's about creating trusted spaces where they can ask questions, share experiences, challenge what they see and know there is an adult who will listen. Rather than telling young people what to think, these conversations help them develop the confidence and critical awareness to make sense of their digital lives for themselves.

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The Ferret



Misinformation — Truth Matters

False claims can travel fast and feel convincing. The Ferret's Head Fact Checker, **Alastair Brian** explores how youth workers can help young people question what they see and find their way through misinformation.

The impact of disinformation is a real concern for many of us who work regularly with young people.

Children and teenagers are bombarded with false information from an early age online. A survey by Ipsos UK found that 77% of 16 to 34-year-olds believe "fake news" is prevalent in online content from influencers, while a US study found that teenagers were more likely than adults to believe online conspiracy theories.

Disinformation and misinformation affect every area of online life. While media coverage often focuses on politics, misleading information is rife across content about fitness, health and wellbeing, LGBTQ+ issues and climate change.

Combine that with the rise of content specifically designed to provoke anger or fear, alongside influencers who build audiences by promoting increasingly narrow and extreme worldviews. Anyone who has watched Louis Theroux's recent documentary Inside the Manosphere will have seen just how successfully misogynistic influencers have attracted huge audiences of young men.

The rapid growth of artificial intelligence has only accelerated the production and spread of disinformation. AI-generated images, videos and audio are becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish from reality, making it harder than ever to separate fact from fiction online.

The consequences are significant. False information undermines trust, affects self-esteem, damages mental and physical health and can contribute to radicalisation.

You might think I'm painting quite a bleak picture. As a fact-checker and misinformation trainer working in Scotland, I've watched this landscape change dramatically over the past decade and seen disinformation gain an increasing foothold in public debate and decision-making.

But I've also seen how people are pushing back.

Fact-checkers across the world are exposing false claims and challenging the ways influencers, politicians and big business spread misleading information. Closer to home, I've seen the difference that teachers, librarians, youth workers and charities can make in helping young people question what they see online rather than simply accepting it.

That's why The Ferret is working with Young Scot and CILIPS, the professional body for librarians and information specialists, on a year-long National Lottery-funded project. Together we're developing and delivering training that helps young people recognise and challenge misinformation.

We've already held a series of sessions with young people to understand what they're seeing online, which topics concern them most and how much they trust the information appearing in their social media feeds.

Those conversations are shaping a programme of workshops for librarians and information professionals across Scotland, giving them the knowledge and confidence to deliver sessions with young people in their own communities.

Our project may be small in scale, but we hope it will make a lasting difference by giving this generation of young Scots the skills, confidence and curiosity they need to question what they see online and become champions for accuracy and responsible digital citizenship.

The Digital Divide Is Shaping Young Lives

Access to a device is only part of the story. Irene Mackintosh, Director of the Mhor Collective explores how cost, privacy, confidence and safety affect young people's ability to take part in digital life.



mhor collective

The Mhor Collective is a Scottish social enterprise that works with organisations across Scotland and beyond to design more inclusive digital services and tackle digital inequality through research, participation and innovation.)

Digital inequality isn't a side issue for young people; it's one of the defining forces shaping their safety, wellbeing, and opportunities. And despite the assumption that "all young people are digital natives" (yep, that old chestnut), the reality is far more uneven. Access, skills, confidence, privacy, and safety vary dramatically, and those gaps mirror wider inequalities around poverty, disability, care experience, migration, gender, and trauma.

For many young people, the barriers are layered. In our work and in our research, we see examples where unstable or shared devices mean no private space to learn, explore, or ask for help. We also see that many young people, for instance, those who are care-experienced, don't have the devices they need at all (and that access to devices is a postcode lottery). We see how patchy or expensive connectivity forces young people to ration data or rely on public Wi-Fi, limiting participation and exposing them to additional risks. How young adults, as they start living independently, struggle to manage the costs of connection, despite the fact that digital services can help maintain a tenancy. We see that digital understanding is variable, and dependent on life experience and support, making it harder for many to navigate misinformation, scams, or harmful content. And we know that despite the Online Safety Act, safety-by-default isn't universal; young people facing racism, misogyny, homophobia, or ableism offline often experience the same , or worse, online. These aren't individual failings. They're structural conditions that shape how safely and confidently a young person can participate.

This matters! Digital participation is now a prerequisite for education, employment, healthcare, relationships, and civic life. We're heading towards a digital front door for healthcare; to a digital ID to participate in our public services. When young people are excluded or unsafe online, the consequences ripple outward. They miss out on learning, creativity, and community that can help them engage in these key services. They become more vulnerable to exploitation, misinformation, and manipulation. They lose access to support networks that could buffer against harm. Their voices are less visible in public debate and decision-making.

Digital inequality doesn't just limit opportunity; it compounds every other form of inequality a young person is already navigating.

Why trusted people make the difference

The single most protective factor for young people online is not a filter, an app, or a policy but rather it's a trusted relationship. When young people have adults who listen without judgement, who understand the digital world and also the context of a young person's wider life, they have a safe space. A safe space can help young people make sense of risk, and means they are far more likely to disclose harm, seek help early, build critical digital understanding, and develop safer habits. Trusted adults act as a buffer, a translator, and a safety net. They don't need to be technical experts; they need to be present, curious, and consistent.

As we move towards the Social Media Ban in March 2027, we have to see this as an opportunity to avoid further deepening the very inequalities we claim to care about. That all young people receive the opportunities, and support, they need.

The social media ban has the potential to ignore the real causes of harm- misogyny, racism, poverty, algorithmic design- and instead may punish those the young people most affected by them. It could cut off vital peer support, especially for young people who are isolated, LGBTQ+, care-experienced, or living with trauma. It risks pushing activity underground, making it harder for trusted adults to spot early signs of harm.

Bans create the illusion of safety while stripping away the relationships and resources that actually keep young people safe.

If we want to reduce harm and widen opportunity, we need to invest in:

- **Digital inclusion as a core part of youth work and education**
- **Trauma-aware, participatory design of digital services**
- **Long-term support for trusted adults, not short-term projects**
- **Platforms that take responsibility for safer design, not just content moderation**
- **Young people's own expertise, recognising them as co-designers of solutions (and they've told us, time and again, that they need support, not exclusion)**

Digital inequality is not inevitable. But it will persist and get a whole lot worse if we only respond with blunt instruments instead of relational, evidence-driven approaches.

Young people need access, skills, safety, and people they can trust.

Esports – More Than a Game

At YMCA Wishaw, esports is bringing young people together to build friendships, teamwork and digital skills in a space where they feel they belong. Emma Williamson, Digital Development Lead, YMCA Wishaw takes us from concept to Academy.

My journey began seven years ago when I started an esports club for my own children and their friends. I was a gamer myself, so it just made sense. There was a lot of youth crime being highlighted in the press in our area a§nd I wanted to provide an alternative. We did a lot online during the pandemic to combat social isolation and got plenty of positive feedback from both young people and parents.

That's how **Brave Esports** was born – a group that has now grown into one of the most successful esports teams in Scotland, with an online Discord community managed by young volunteers.

Somewhere along the way we did some fundraising and rented a space at YMCA Wishaw.

The rest, as they say, is history.

Working with YMCA Wishaw, I set up the Wishaw YMCA Esports Academy, which has been an incredibly successful venture, enabling young people to develop their gaming skills in a positive, safe environment.

Getting together to game means making friendships, developing teamwork and building strong digital skills. Taken together, it's an experience that can transform young people's lives, helping them make safe choices about what they do online while developing skills that help them succeed in other aspects of their lives too.

Young people learn how to play as part of a team and take part in competitions. Think of it as the digital equivalent of traditional sport. The industry is massive and still growing, valued at **$4.3 billion in 2024** and expected to reach **$5.9 billion by 2029**. In the UK, **93% of young people aged 8–18 consider themselves gamers**, making it a hugely important point of connection.

Our clubs are heavily oversubscribed and many of the young people who come along don't engage in other clubs or extracurricular activities.

Creating safe spaces is one of the biggest reasons youth work should be involved in esports. Young people are often gaming in unregulated online spaces where there is no adult oversight. Parents don't always use parental controls and many feel pressured into allowing children to access games that are above the recommended age rating.

We work with parents and young people to highlight the risks associated with online gaming, helping young people recognise those risks and develop the skills to look after themselves and others online.

Creating a physical space to game together has a phenomenal impact. Young people can come into the academy, use our state-of-the-art equipment, make friends and learn new skills.

We also deliver an **SCQF-accredited** esports course, alongside an esports leadership qualification, with significant success among young people who have become disengaged from education. A shared interest in gaming helps bring them through the door, keeps them attending regularly, supports them to achieve recognised qualifications and, for some, provides a pathway into college.

Last year we worked with YMCA Europe and HP to deliver the **YEsports** project, bringing together five YMCAs in Scotland and one in Ireland for staff training, youth development, online qualifiers and a live final at the University of the West of Scotland's Paisley campus, attended by more than 100 people. Alongside the competition itself, young people, as part of the CIRCUIT project, designed and delivered both the online and live events, running production, commentary and camera work throughout. We're now planning the next phase of the programme and hope to see even more youth organisations get involved.

Many young people want opportunities to take part in esports. Providing those opportunities in a safe, moderated environment, where they can build friendships, develop skills and learn how to thrive in a competitive – and sometimes risky – online environment, just makes sense.



Project Real: Online Safety, Shaped by Young People

Police Scotland Youth Volunteers are working with researchers and youth workers to create resources on scams, misinformation and online harms. Project Real starts with their experiences and gives young people a real say in how others learn to navigate life online.

Police Scotland Youth Volunteers
Volunteering for our communities

When more than 100 Police Scotland Youth Volunteers gathered at the Police Scotland College for a Cyber Day earlier this year, they weren't there simply to learn about online safety.

Working alongside **Police Scotland**, the **University of Glasgow** and **YouthLink Scotland**, they were helping shape the next stage of **Project Real** – an innovative programme that puts young people at the centre of designing the resources, conversations and tools needed to tackle misinformation, online harms and cyber resilience.

The event built on a growing partnership that recognises a simple truth: if we want online safety education to work, we need to start by listening to young people themselves.

Dr Yvonne Skipper, who leads Project Real at the University of Glasgow, explains why that approach matters.

Project Real began with a simple but important question: How do we move beyond telling young people what not to do online and instead equip them with the skills to think, question, and act for themselves?

Co-created with young people, teachers, psychologists, and practitioners, Project Real develops practical, research-informed interventions to help young people spot misinformation and navigate online risks. Grounded in psychological science and participatory design, the project positions young people not as passive recipients of safeguarding messages but as active contributors to solutions.

Our resources, including lesson plans, interactive activities, videos and youth-designed comics, focus on real-world challenges: scams, online deception, cyberbullying, digital footprints, and misinformation. You can find them here: www.projectreal.co.uk

A Multi-Agency Model for Impact

A defining feature of Project Real is collaboration. In partnership with Police Scotland, we co-developed and delivered sessions addressing online harms and scam prevention. This includes interactive activities on digital footprints, such as a password guessing activity and a 'choose your own adventure' game to help young people think about who they are talking to online. The young people with also wanted to create a resource for their parents, so we worked with them to create a video entitled: 'What I wish my parents knew about my online life'. Working with Education Scotland, we co-created two comics 'Behind the Screen' and associated lesson plans to support teachers in embedding digital literacy and cybersecurity within classrooms.

An upcoming collaboration with Public Health Scotland will extend this work into public health, co-creating a social media campaign to help young people to recognise health misinformation online.

This cross-sector approach ensures our work is embedded within education, justice, and health systems.



Extending Impact Internationally

Project Real's model has also reached beyond the UK. Through our work in partnership with the Melissa Institute in Miami, we have shared our co-creation framework with international partners, contributing to global discussions about youth safety, misinformation, and digital citizenship. These conversations are opening pathways for adaptation of the model in new cultural contexts. Our resources have been used in at least 10 countries.

Measurable and Meaningful Change

Evaluation data show an:

- increase in young people's confidence in spotting misinformation
- improvement in knowledge of digital footprints and online safety
- changes in behaviours such as rethinking what to share and making more checks before sharing content by others

One young person reflected:

> *"I was aware of misinformation and false personalities and AI scams, but I wasn't aware of the extent they existed online until I started this project. Since then, I wouldn't say I've been seeing it everywhere, but I've been able to spot it more easily."*

A teacher noted:

> *"I genuinely think I could see lightbulb moments when we were chatting about things, and they were understanding it."*

Crucially, young people report feeling listened to, not lectured. "I liked meeting people who, like, specialize in stuff like this, because it's interesting to know more about what goes on, and that you guys are kind of helping us, and we're also helping you to create this for young people."

National Recognition

Recently, Project Real was nominated by Police Scotland for the Digital Youth Work Award at the YouthLink Scotland National Youth Work Awards. Being recognised in this way, and nominated by a national policing body, reflects the strength of our partnership model and the credibility of youth-led digital resilience work. One of our participants stated:

> *"Being one of the voices to help in the project was amazing, as my thoughts and opinions were genuinely listened to and actively included in Project Real. Knowing I would make a positive impact throughout communities made me feel proud of the work that the PSYV team, Dr Skipper, and I have achieved together."*

Why This Matters

Online misinformation, scams, and digital harms are not fringe issues; they are everyday realities for young people. Project Real demonstrates that when we trust young people as co-creators, combine psychological research with creative practice, and work across sectors, we can move from reactive safeguarding to proactive empowerment. Project Real helps shift young people from passive consumers of online content to critical thinkers, ethical participants, and confident digital citizens.

For me, Project Real stands as proof that meaningful change happens when we create space for young voices, take partnership seriously, and treat digital literacy as a collective responsibility.

Planting the Seed:
How Youth Work is Helping Young People Navigate Their Online Lives

At a Glasgow secondary school, youth workers are helping S1 pupils talk openly about the challenges they face online. A new digital wellbeing pilot shows how honest conversations and trusted relationships can help young people make informed choices and know where to turn for support.

Growing up in a digital world brings opportunities previous generations could scarcely have imagined. Young people can connect, create, learn and find communities that matter to them. At the same time, they are navigating an online environment where bullying, misinformation, harmful content and relentless social pressures can have very real consequences offline.

When staff at St Thomas Aquinas High School recognised that these issues were becoming a bigger part of school life, they approached Glasgow Life's youth work team for support. Teachers wanted to have more meaningful conversations with young people about their online experiences but felt they needed additional expertise. Glasgow Life developed a new Digital Wellbeing pilot after taking part in YouthLink Scotland's digital youth work and online safety programmes, which provide training, resources, professional learning and opportunities to share practice across Scotland.

The result was a series of interactive workshops for every S1 pupil in the school. Delivered over seven sessions between April and June, the programme reached 146 young people through PSE classes. Topics included artificial intelligence, cyber security, misinformation, trusted sources, online bullying and how to respond when things go wrong online. Young people explored real-life scenarios, discussed difficult situations they might face and identified trusted adults they could turn to for support.

The workshops were built around conversation rather than presentations. Young people worked together to solve problems, explored different viewpoints and talked openly about the online spaces they use every day. The aim wasn't to frighten them about the internet but to help them think critically, make informed choices and know where to find help if they needed it.

The programme supported a number of National Youth Work Outcomes, including building health and wellbeing, developing positive relationships and helping young people participate safely and confidently in groups. Early feedback from the school showed that pupils had a better understanding of online safety, felt more confident about dealing with difficult situations and knew where they could go for advice and support.

Young people reflected on what they had learned:

> *"Learned about new apps, some positive and negative."*
>
> *"Looked at the dangers about social media."*
>
> *"Not to trust everything you see online."*

For Patricia Park, Youth Worker with Glasgow Life, the biggest success was creating opportunities for conversations that might not otherwise have happened.

> *"It's about relationships ultimately... having that other person you can talk to, exploring different scenarios and planting that seed."*

The value of that approach lies in the relationships youth workers build. Giving young people time to talk openly and explore difficult issues without fear of judgement creates opportunities for learning that might otherwise be missed

YouthLink Scotland has played an important role in supporting this work. Through national training, online safety programmes, resources, networking and partnerships with specialist organisations, YouthLink Scotland has helped build the confidence of youth workers to tackle digital issues with young people. Patricia Park highlighted the value of having access to trusted resources, current knowledge and opportunities to learn from colleagues across Scotland.

Following the success of the pilot, Glasgow Life plans to train around 20 youth workers to deliver the programme more widely, refine the materials using feedback from young people and extend the approach across schools and youth services in Glasgow.



Start With Curiosity



Games, music and creative technology give young people room to experiment together. Jed Milroy of Tinderbox Collective argues that engagement is the starting point for meaningful digital learning.

Creative digital youth work is sometimes described in terms of the skills young people gain: coding, game design, music production, media literacy or an understanding of AI. These skills matter, but they are rarely the best place to begin. As with community music, the starting point has to be engagement: creating a space where young people feel welcome, interested and able to take part on their own terms.

There is a useful parallel between community technology education and community music. A young person does not need to be an accomplished musician before joining a band, and they should not need to see themselves as "good with technology" before making a game. In both cases, the activity gives people something to gather around. They can try things, make mistakes, contribute different strengths and create something genuinely exciting and inspiring together.

Games design is particularly valuable because it combines many forms of learning without making them feel like separate lessons. Young people might develop a story, draw characters, compose music, record sound, write rules, solve technical problems and test the game with other people. Along the way, they practise communication, teamwork and critical thinking. They also begin to understand that digital media is designed by people, and that every design contains choices about who is represented, what is rewarded and how the player is treated.

This matters at a time when young people are surrounded by digital platforms and rapidly developing AI tools. Media literacy cannot only mean teaching young people how to spot false information or stay safe online, important though these are. It should also give them opportunities to look behind the screen, ask who made a tool, consider whose interests it serves and decide when it is—or is not—useful.

Our developing card game, What Kind of Brain?, takes a playful approach to conversations about AI. Rather than presenting technology as either a miracle or a threat, the game creates room for questions, disagreement and uncertainty. This can make a difficult subject easier to enter, particularly for people who may feel excluded by technical language.

None of this works automatically. Giving young people access to software does not in itself create meaningful engagement or improve wellbeing. Good community digital practice depends on trusted relationships, consistent support, suitable spaces and time. It also means listening carefully. Young people may use technology differently from adults, and their priorities will not always match the outcomes written into a project plan.

When engagement is genuine, however, creative technology can support confidence, connection and a sense of agency. A finished game, track or digital artwork is important, but so is the experience of being part of the process, solving a problem and making something that did not exist before. The aim is not simply to prepare young people for a digital economy. It is to help them understand and shape the digital world they already live in—and to strengthen their belief that their ideas, choices and voices matter within it.

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After the Ban: Lessons From Australia

Annabel Turner, Director of CyberSafe Scotland, looks at what has happened in Australia so far – and five lessons we should be thinking about now.

Australia became the first country in the world to introduce nationwide social media restrictions for under-16s, the experience is already raising some big questions.

Are age restrictions actually keeping young people off platforms? What happens when young people simply move elsewhere? And what can Scotland learn from Australia as the UK considers its own approach?

For youth workers, these aren't abstract policy questions. Any changes will affect the online spaces young people use, the conversations they have with trusted adults and potentially where they go for information, advice and support.

Australia's social media "ban" came into effect on 10 December 2025, restricting all users under 16 from holding accounts on major platforms including Tiktok, Snapchat, YouTube, Reddit, Instagram, Facebook, Kick, Twitch, Threads and X.

8 months on, what can we learn so far – particularly looking ahead to the similar proposed changes in Scotland and across the UK.

The story so far

By way of background, it's important to note the world-leading work that was being done in Australia by the E Safety Commissioner and team for many, many years before the ban. Working on everything from public information to industry codes they have been global leaders in the online safety space for more than a decade - not only for their highly proactive approach but also for the level of engagement they had generated with industry.

Of note, Australia also implemented the Enhancing Online Safety Act 2015 and the Online Safety Act 2021 to attempt to regulate platforms. While different to the UK Online Safety Act (e.g. relying heavily on take down orders - "you can't delete your way out of this problem") it is important to understand these measures for context - other approaches had been tried for a number of years.

Then last year, what appeared to be a relatively sudden position emerged when the Australian Government announced their plans to move forward with a ban. A groundswell of public opinion seems to have underpinned this change.

While those in favour of the ban tried to articulate that something had to be done urgently about the level of harm children were experiencing on some platforms and that they were banning platforms from having access to children and not children from having access to the platforms, there were also strong opponents to the move – including the Australian National Children's Commissioner and the Human Rights Commissioner Australian parents and kids deserve better.

Very similar differences in opinion emerged here in the UK last year – and if interested you can read the summary of the CyberSafe Scotland position on the proposed UK ban here UK Government Online Safety Consultation – CyberSafe Scotland Response. - which is based on our experiences of working with children from areas of deprivation.

5 things we can learn

Whatever your position, here are some points we need to consider urgently if the ban comes into force:

1. **At present the ban in Australia is simply not effective at doing what it set out to do** (age gating children out of platforms). Early studies (including one from the Office of the e safety commissioner) indicate up to 80% of children under 16 still have access to the platforms named in the ban and the long process of the profound challenge of regulatory enforcement continues.

2. **There are indications that perpetrators of online abuse are attempting to use the ban to further manipulate children and young people** through control tactics and shame, and of wide misunderstandings amongst parents as to whether children should be continuing to use platforms.

3. **The ban does not include some of the platforms where most harm is currently occurring** (Roblox, Discord, WhatsApp) and many other emerging platforms. The position around AI chatbots is both slightly separate (access is to be restricted by a different legal provision) but equally challenging to enforce in practice – and so immediate effective enforcement is highly unlikely.

4. **Children were not widely directly consulted on the proposed ban in Australia or in the UK**. In addition to this being a significant potential infringement of their rights this creates real concerns about how they will understand the changes and the impact of potential restrictions on them accessing digital services (including advice services) – we need to address both of these challenges before March next year to prevent harm.

5. **At all times we need to focus on education and enfranchising children and young people**. Whatever the impact of these changes, children urgently need better platforms, and we must work to build these in Scotland.

Finally, it is important to note that the UK Online Safety Act was intended to be the most progressive piece of legislation re platform regulation globally. I would encourage readers to consider how they can engage with that Act – e.g. by making information on platform failures available to Ofcom to support the process of regulation. It is critically important that we continue to try to work with that legislative framework as powerfully as possible. Fundamental platform changes are absolutely vital, and attempting to age gate ten platforms cannot be a sufficient solution to address current harms.

CyberSafe Scotland

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Partnering with technology companies. Is it ever safe?

How can youth work organisations build meaningful relationships with technology companies? Are our worlds too far apart for robust, ethical ways of working together? And why does it matter anyway?



These are the sorts of questions we have been grappling with here at YouthLink Scotland over the last year as we have worked with both the youth work sector and the technology sector to create an approach that will lead to positive, ethical relationships.

We have heard from youth work organisations that have worked with technology companies in a wide range of different ways, benefiting from expertise, from equipment and devices, from volunteer time and financial support. We have heard from others who have chosen not to engage for reasons of reputational risk or to protect the data of the people they work with. We have discussed examples of times when there has been a valuable two-way knowledge exchange and times when the expertise offered has failed to meet the needs of the young people that it was intended to support.

A year down the road, we now have a set of tools that are designed to help organisations to decide who to work with, explore what kind of relationship would be of benefit, assess the risks and develop a meaningful and robust partnership agreement.

The Building Ethical Partnerships toolset has been designed with equity in mind. Because good partnerships most work in both directions. Youth work organisations start by exploring their "non-negotiables" which ensures that young people's privacy and rights are always in the frame.

The tools also encourage organisations to think about what they have to offer in a relationship, rather than simply asking for a handout.

While working on the project we have been very aware of the range of opinion about the technology sector, particularly when it comes to "big tech" and the way in which international organisations gather data from young people for their own marketing purposes, which can lead directly to online harms as young people become the victim of the algorithm. In her recently launched book, Users, Baroness Beeban Kidron, who has led on the Online Safety Act in the UK and influenced the regulation of the tech sector across the world says, "Beneath it all lies a deeper issue: the misalignment between the profit-maximising incentives of technology companies and the social conditions required for people to flourish."

She also points to the need for children and young people to have a voice in the conversation and the understanding that they bring. Speaking about the work of the 5Rights Foundation she explains how they gather views: "the process helped them articulate their own idea of what the relationship between them and the technology companies should be. For the record they cared passionately about their privacy, their safety and above all – fairness."

I believe it's essential that we recognise the scale of the issues we are dealing with here and step in to engage with them, rather than stepping out to leave the issues untackled.

The basis for our work is that there are important and meaningful ways for youth work and the tech sector to work together and that can look different for different organisations. A local community youth group might choose to approach a small local games developer for expertise to run a digital games session. A national youth work organisation might partner with a technology consultancy to provide volunteer expertise on cyber resilience. A computer manufacturer might donate laptops to provide connectivity in a makerspace. All of these scenarios could be beneficial for young people, but might also throw up issues to do with safeguarding, privacy or boundaries, to be explored in advance so that great youth work can take place.

Beyond that, I hold that it is also possible that the work that youth work and tech sector do together could lead to young people's rights being taken more seriously. I live in the real world and am not holding my breath – however, I think we have to take action with these big goals clearly in mind.

Alex Hutchison, Forr Data has worked closely with YouthLink Scotland to develop the new resources.

She says,

> *"The youth sector is not anti-tech. It is asking for partnership on equal terms. This is an opportunity to develop clear ways of working together, where partnerships are built around youth voice, ethics, and respect for the skill and expertise from both sectors.*
>
> *"Through building support guidelines, such as a Partnership Charter, a Partnership Agreement Checklist, and a Risk Assessment Tool, we aim to make tech partnerships feel less daunting. This project aims to create resources to allow for these kinds of partnership to feel transformative, especially for the young people we seek to support."*

So, we are looking forward with a fair dose of realism. We now have some meaningful methodology that will help us to assess the risks, explore them together with potential partners and create ways of working that are designed to create equity.

We are looking forward to trying out the tools! In a final phase of the project we are working with a small group of YouthLink Scotland member organisations, to pilot the tools and create some case studies that will help others to use them.

Our overall motivation for this piece of work centres around unlocking benefits for young people in Scotland. The work has been funded by the Include Plus Network, a network of academics dedicated to exploring and fostering social and digital environments where everyone can thrive.

Please try out the tools and tell us what you think.

Website: youthlink.scot/news/building-ethical-partnerships-with-the-tech-sector/

Email: Hilary Phillips hphillips@youthlink.scot

Online hate: **How Hate Finds Its Way Into the Feed**

Online hate can reach young people through rumours, recommendations and repeated exposure. Understanding how it spreads is a first step towards challenging it.

When we think of online hate it is often something we know exists but not something we all recognise or experience regularly, especially if we do not regularly experience prejudice or discrimination in our daily lives.

However, it is rife and young people across Scotland are experiencing, witnessing and sharing it every day. In 2025 the Mental Health Foundation found that 68% of young people had seen harmful content online, with 40% seeing bullying behaviours and 42% racist/discriminatory content.

How is hate content reaching young people though and why do they get pulled into viewing and sharing it?

In written evidence for the UK Parliament Dr. Sajjan M. Gohel, Eve Register and Hannah Hains outline the key stages of the 'Algorithm of Hate'. While the paper discusses the radicalisation of young boys and men in terms of misogyny and the dehumanisation of women, it can be considered in the realm of prejudice and hate of other parts of community.

Key Stages of the Algorithm of Hate

Stage	Description	Impact
1. **Emotional Hook**	Algorithms detect user attention to controversial content (e.g. 'Why modern women are undatable').	Use clicks driven by outrage curiosity, or insecurity.
2. **Content Escalation**	Recommendation engines suggest more extreme content ('She deserved it', 'Alpha men take what they want').	Viewer is rapidly desensitised and pulled into ideologically dangerous echo chambers.
3. **Community Validation**	Online forums, influencers, and memes reward hate speech, mock empathy, and vilify dissent.	Belonging is offered through shared contempt. Dehumanisation becomes cultural identity.
4. **Normalisation & Monetisation**	Misogynistic ideology is repackaged as 'lifestyle advice' or 'free speech' while platforms profit from ads, data, and subscriptions.	Harmful narratives become mainstreamed, influencers gain wealth, and platforms gain revenue.
5. **Radicalisation**	Some users escalate toward violent belief systems across the ideological gamut.	Offline violence, school attacks, domestic abuse, and hate crimes.

These steps clearly show how easy it can be to be sucked into viewing, sharing and then buying into the messages that are being shared as truthful and trustworthy. This is where other messaging and educating young people and adults to question sources of information, to compare and contrast the information they access in order to build a more balanced viewpoint is critical.

The results of this kind of algorithm of hate were clearly visible during the 2024 riots following the Southport attack. Misinformation fueled the violence experienced in communities. Misinformation about the identity of the attacker rapidly spread across social media, giving him an incorrect name and labelling him as a Muslim migrant new to the UK, when in reality he had been born in the UK with no links to Islam. Dundee International Women's Centre created a resource, 'Southport: From Rumours to Riots' which clearly demonstrates how each stage of the algorithm of hate was realised during this event.

But how does this impact young people. In our work consulting young people on the Hate Crime Strategy in 2022 we asked young people about the impacts of hate crime and incidents. They identified the impacts on a person causing harm and a person experiencing harm and many overlapped. They discussed the negative impact on education; the potential to go on to cause harm, either due to a rush from perpetrating it before or to prevent harm coming to themselves; feelings of isolation; and a negative impact on their mental health. They went on to describe feelings of isolation and making significant changes to their lives to avoid future hate, such as converting their faith or becoming homelessness due to being outed.

The 'Qualitative research into the impact of online hate' report by Ofcom in 2023, agrees with these emotional and psychological impacts, which they described as:



When discussing 'Anxiety and fear' their participants said 'their experiences left them feeling less safe in public spaces … (and) feeling less trusting towards people they interacted with offline.' This mirrors the feelings or isolation described by young people in our work and is summed up well by this quote from the Ofcom report:

> *'"Online hate is something you're endlessly exposed to, whether you challenge it or you don't, you feel hurt and exhausted; it drains your energy."*

Youth Work is well placed to support young people with this and there are a host of resources available on the Action on Prejudice website to help combat prejudice, discrimination and hate. This includes a guide from the Coalition on Racial Equality and Rights on Tackling Online Hate & Extremism which was updated in 2025 to reflect the more current experiences.

If you need any help or support in this area please feel free to contact us at Action on Prejudice and we can help guide you to the best resource or support for you.





Behind the Lens, Beyond the Screen

Youth Space Fife

In Fife, young people are using photography and filmmaking to tell their own stories. Along the way, they're opening up about identity, social media, online influence and what it means to be a young man today.

What does making a film have to do with online safety?

Quite a lot, as it turns out.

At Youth Space in Fife, filmmaking, photography, podcasting, animation and even zine-making are getting young people creating. But along the way, something else happens: conversations start.

Make a film and you might suddenly be talking about why you can't just lift your favourite song from the internet for the soundtrack. Take photographs and the conversation can move into how we present ourselves online, self-image and the pressure to look a certain way on social media. Start talking about what young men are watching online and you can quickly find yourself discussing influencers, misogyny and the manosphere.

For George Murray at CLD, Fife Council, that's increasingly what digital youth work looks like.

Youth Space originally had a much stronger focus on digital literacy and social media. Over time, that has developed into a broader approach where digital and creative activities are used to engage young people and, quite naturally, open up discussions about what's happening in their lives.

One photography project in Templehall shows how well that can work.

Young people used analogue photography to explore identity, their community and how they wanted to represent themselves. From there came discussions about online bullying, self-image, social media and mental health, and the pressure young people can feel around how they present themselves online.

And the change in the young people involved was striking. George described young people who had previously been "not engaging at all" but within just six weeks, going on to exhibit their photography publicly in a community centre.

But the project also began to uncover issues that needed more attention.

Through the conversations around photography, young people began talking about some of the content and influences they were seeing online, including the manosphere. That helped Youth Space recognise that there was a need to explore these issues more directly.

As George explained:

> *"Through those conversations we got talking about the manosphere... we realised that actually there's a need here to have that conversation at a local youth work level."*

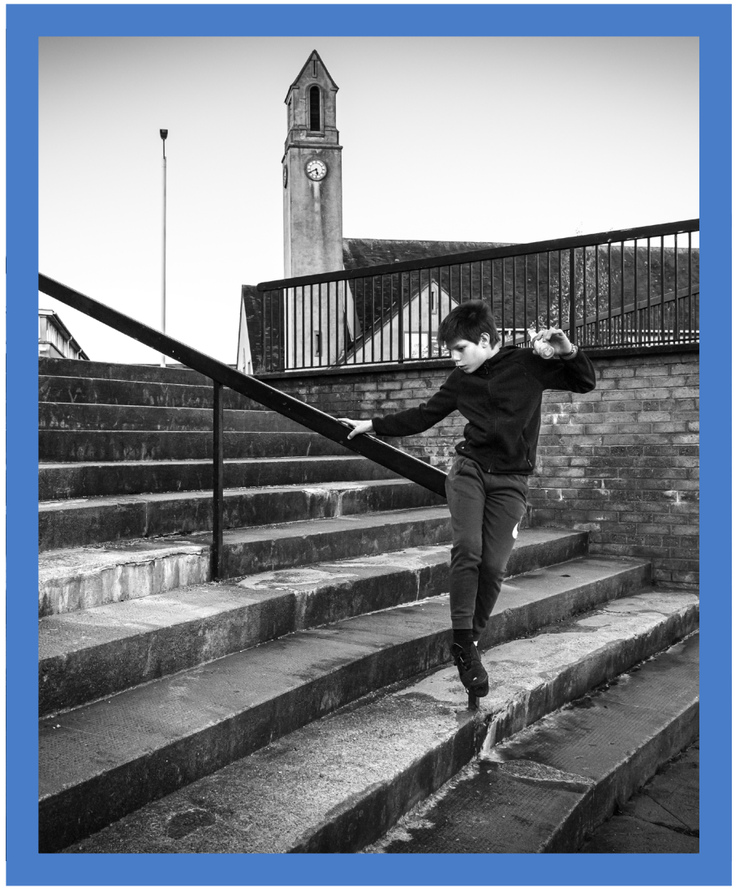
That led to Youth Space becoming heavily involved in engaging young people in **Many Good Men** led by **Civic Digits**.

The project explored positive masculinity alongside some of the influences boys and young men are exposed to online, including misogyny, social media and the manosphere. Young people weren't simply an audience for the work. They created online video diaries, sharing their own thoughts and reflections as the project developed.

That youth voice was an important part of the process, giving young people the opportunity to document their own experiences and perspectives rather than having adults speak for them.

And those conversations are continuing.

A follow-on project with young men in Kirkcaldy is planned, looking more closely at positive masculinity, media



literacy, social media influence and the harmful online influences that can affect boys and young men.

What's interesting about the Fife approach is that online safety isn't being treated as another subject youth workers have to squeeze into the programme.

Increasingly, it's simply part of the work.

George says digital issues now come into training on everything from mental health and wellbeing to child protection and substance use. He describes that shift as a "top systemic change", with online safety becoming embedded in practice rather than sitting on its own.

And perhaps that's the lesson from what's happening in Fife. A photography project can become a discussion about self-image. A filmmaking session can raise questions about copyright and responsible content creation. A conversation about masculinity can lead to what influencers are saying online and why those messages might appeal to young men.

You don't always need to begin by announcing that you're going to talk about online safety.

Sometimes you just need to start with something young people are interested in – and see where the conversation takes you.

AI: The Future Is Already Here

Young people from Aberdeenshire and Edinburgh are exploring artificial intelligence for themselves and helping create practical resources for youth workers across Scotland.

It's Saturday morning and two groups of young people are making their way to Sopra Steria's Edinburgh office. Normally, the technology company's offices would be deserted at the weekend, but today they're opening their doors to young people eager to learn more about artificial intelligence, explore how it's being used in the real world and help shape resources that will support other young people to understand this fast-moving technology.

It's an early start for the young people and youth workers from **Cromar Future Group**, who have travelled several hours by coach from Aberdeenshire. They're joined by young people from **The Citadel** in Leith, who have a much shorter journey across the city. Together, they have chosen to take part in a youth-led project exploring AI through research, discussion and practical activities, while helping create resources for youth workers across Scotland.



digital
YOUTH WORK

Darren Links from Sopra Steria gave up his weekend to support the project.

> *"We were so pleased to be able to help this enthusiastic group of young people understand AI and how it can drive positive change in business and society. We're committed to making a real difference to our communities, which includes inspiring the next generation to use technology with confidence, creativity and purpose."*

The visit to Sopra Steria was one of several workshops delivered throughout the project, giving young people the chance to learn from experts, share ideas and get to know one another. Led by YouthLink Scotland, with educational support from Digital Skills Education and funding from the Include Plus Network, the project placed young people at the centre of every stage of the learning process.

Cameron from The Citadel explained why the approach worked.

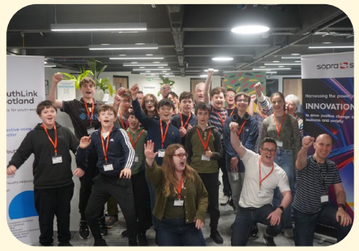
> *"I think youth workers can do a lot. So long as it's fun, so long as it's simple, so long as it's easy, it will help younger people learn about AI, learn what to avoid and what to do. Simple activities with Play Doh, visiting other places, it's all a lot of fun and will make a difference."*

Iain Robinson, CTO (Strategic Digital Solutions), said hearing directly from young people was equally valuable.

> *"I've found it really helpful to hear their needs and hear how young people see this area developing. It's inspiring and encouraging to see the next generation working alongside us and bringing their own experience of artificial intelligence."*

Les Ellis, youth worker with the Aberdeenshire group, added:

> *"This was a wonderful experience for our young members. We all learned more about using AI effectively and they particularly enjoyed the visit to Sopra Steria, which gave them an insight into how a major company uses AI in practice."*



Youth-led research into AI

The Cromar Future Group didn't just learn about AI – they carried out their own research. Working with 82 young people, they designed a survey, explored the ethics of collecting data, analysed the findings and presented the results themselves.

Their research found:

- **65%** of young people said they encounter AI on social media often or all the time.
- **ChatGPT** was the most commonly used AI tool.
- **31% of girls** and **36% of boys** said they use AI almost every day or several times a week.
- Young people were concerned about misinformation, how AI uses personal data and the theft of information.
- **48% of girls** and **60% of boys** viewed AI as somewhat or extremely useful.
- Many felt AI should support people rather than replace them, particularly in creative industries such as writing, music and the arts.

The young people presented their work at the **Digital Youth Work Conference 2026**, where they left delegates with one clear message:

> **"AI isn't for the future – it's now."**

Our Futures and AI

That message sits at the heart of the new Our Futures and AI toolkit. Rather than simply showing young people how to use AI, it encourages them to question it. Through practical, hands-on activities they explore how misinformation spreads, examine the responses AI gives to difficult questions, and investigate how image-generation tools can reinforce stereotypes and unrealistic expectations.

As one young person from The Citadel summed it up:

> *"Even if you know something is AI generated, it can still mess with your head."*

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