



## YouthLink Scotland Response

# Growing Up in the Online World : A national consultation May 2026



# Introduction

YouthLink Scotland is the national agency for youth work and the collective voice of the sector. We champion and support high-quality youth work so that all young people can realise their full potential. Our membership spans voluntary and statutory youth work organisations across Scotland, including every local authority.

This response is informed by evidence gathered through:

- YouthLink Scotland’s “Youth Work and Online Lives” survey of youth workers across Scotland (May 2026)
- The No Knives, Better Lives (NKBL) [Youth Voices Survey 2026](#) involving almost 2,900 young people across Scotland
- YouthLink Scotland’s “[Youth Work and Cyber Resilience: What Young People Said](#)” research involving focus groups with young people across Scotland
- [The Lassies Are No Feart: Violence Between Girls in Scotland](#) research exploring girls and young women’s experiences of violence, misogyny and social media
- The extensive experience and practice knowledge of youth workers across Scotland delivering digital youth work, online safety education, cyber resilience programmes and relationship-based support through local youth work provision, national youth work networks, partnerships with youth organisations, dedicated focus groups and digital youth work conferences facilitated by YouthLink Scotland.

The response also draws on significant work by our member organisations and other partners, referenced as appropriate.

Together, these findings demonstrate significant and growing concern amongst both youth workers and young people about the impact of online harms, violent content, misogyny, exploitation, cyberbullying, addictive design and unsafe digital environments on children and young people’s wellbeing, relationships and safety.

# Youth Work and Online Lives

The Youth Work and Online Lives survey (105 respondents) demonstrated a particularly strong consensus around several core principles:

- 90% of respondents agreed that children and young people's rights and wellbeing must come first in decisions about the online world.
- 81% disagreed that current systems and legislation adequately protect young people's rights online.
- 98% agreed that regulators must take stronger action to ensure technology companies are transparent and accountable when harm occurs.
- 97% agreed that government action on social media access should prioritise health and wellbeing over commercial interests.
- 91% agreed that further legislation is required to make social media and phone use safer for young people.
- 93% agreed that youth work provides uniquely trusted spaces where young people can build digital literacy, critical thinking and healthy boundaries with technology.

The evidence also demonstrates that online harms are increasingly intertwined with wider experiences of violence, misogyny, bullying, exclusion and poor mental wellbeing.

The Lassies Are No Feart research found that social media now plays a “central role in causing, promoting and normalising physical violence amongst young women.” Young women described daily exposure to violent online content, cyberaggression, pressure within group chats, and the humiliation and trauma associated with videos of violence being shared online.

The report also found:

- Young women were both “viewers” and “producers” of harmful content online.
- Daily exposure to violent content had led to desensitisation.
- Large group chats were used as part of bullying and cyberaggression and could lead to in-person violence.
- Videos of violence had serious negative impacts on individuals, families and communities.

YouthLink Scotland supports evidence-led action to strengthen protections for children and young people online, including stronger age restrictions for mainstream commercial social media platforms, enhanced enforcement, restrictions on harmful platform design features, and greater accountability for technology companies.

At the same time, we caution against framing all types of online activity as inherently harmful. Young people derive important benefits from online creativity, connection, learning and participation. The challenge is not simply whether young people should be online, but what kinds of online environments they are entering, how those environments are designed, and whether they prioritise children’s wellbeing over commercial engagement.

# Q1. What are the benefits of social media use, and being online, for children?

Youth workers consistently recognised that digital participation and online spaces are now embedded in young people's everyday lives and can provide important educational, developmental and social opportunities when experienced in safe and supportive environments.

The strongest themes identified through YouthLink Scotland's "Youth Work and Online Lives" survey of 105 youth workers across Scotland were:

- Maintaining friendships and social connection
- Reducing isolation, particularly in rural communities
- Accessing peer support and communities of interest
- Creativity and self-expression
- Accessing information and learning opportunities
- Developing digital literacy and digital skills
- Supporting youth voice and activism
- Connecting marginalised young people with supportive communities

Respondents particularly highlighted the importance of online connection for young people experiencing isolation due to geography, disability, caring responsibilities or identity.

One youth worker stated:

"Social connection to some of the most isolated young people, creativity and learning, some very positive influencers, widening young people's perspectives of different cultures or identities."

Another respondent noted:

"Finding community, accessing information and seeking support, education, leisure and culture."

Youth workers also highlighted the educational and developmental potential of digital participation:

"Social media can support young people to develop problem solving, critical thinking, digital literacy skills and can help young people to find likeminded peers."

One respondent stated:

"Being able to meet other young people online who share their interests and experiences. Children can develop interests and hobbies through being online – learning skills, engaging with social causes in the world."

In the Youth Voice Survey, 87% of young people shared that they used social media to connect with friends (2850 respondents). Overall, the evidence also reflects the increasing role of digital youth work across Scotland in creating positive, safe environments for young people to participate in digital activities in both online and physical spaces. Youth organisations are delivering gaming-based youth work, digital wellbeing projects, online youth work sessions, online safety, cyber resilience education and creative media activities which help young people develop healthy and critical relationships with technology. However, many respondents distinguished between healthy digital participation and the negatives of mainstream commercial social media platforms designed around maximising engagement, advertising and data collection.

## **Q2. What are the harms or risks of social media use, and being online, for children?**

Youth workers responding to the Youth Work and Online Lives survey identified significant and growing concerns about the impact of commercial social media platforms and online environments on children and young people's wellbeing, relationships, safety and development.

The survey showed youth workers were very frequently or frequently encountering:

- Online bullying and peer conflict
- Anxiety linked to constant connectivity
- Exposure to harmful or distressing content
- Pressure linked to image, status and validation
- Sleep disruption linked to phone use
- Misinformation and harmful influencers
- Online exploitation and coercion risks.

The No Knives, Better Lives Youth Voices Survey demonstrates the extent of online harms experienced by young people:

- 14% of young people reported seeing violent content online daily
- 23% reported seeing violent content weekly
- 27% reported experiencing violent threats online
- 26% of those who experienced violent threats online said these escalated into physical fights offline.

The Lassies Are No Feart research reinforces these findings. Young women described ways in which social media is deeply intertwined with violence, bullying and humiliation. The report found that:

- violent content was seen “all the time”
- fights were rapidly shared through school and community networks
- anonymous accounts actively promoted and distributed violent content
- group chats were used to organise and escalate conflict.

Young women described becoming desensitised to violence online:

“I’m so used to seeing like videos like all the time... it happens too often.”

Others described the humiliation and long-term mental health impact of filmed violence:

“Like if you get in a fight and there’s a video of it and it gets spread about the whole school, that could affect you mentally and it could make you depressed.”

The [Girlguiding Scotland 2026 Manifesto](#) shares that 78% of Scottish girls think that children can access too much harmful content online that shouldn’t be available online at all.

The qualitative responses to the Youth Work and Online Lives survey revealed a consistent picture of youth workers supporting young people experiencing:

- Compulsive or addictive phone and social media use
- Sleep deprivation and exhaustion
- Increased anxiety and poor mental wellbeing
- Exposure to misogyny and toxic masculinity
- Body image pressures and self-esteem issues
- Grooming and exploitation risks
- Radicalisation and harmful influencers
- Declining face-to-face social skills
- Constant pressure to remain connected online

One youth worker wrote:

“The dopamine response to social media is like a drug. We cannot allow our children to grow up hooked on it.”

Another stated:

“Young people are losing their personalities and creativity as their phones and TikTok have become their entire lives.”

Respondents repeatedly highlighted exposure to misogynistic and extremist content:

“Rise of incel culture, grooming, body image issues, porn, misinformation re politics and health.”

“Extreme right-wing content and radicalization. Sexist and misogynistic content which is bleeding into school and face-to-face spaces.”

The [Cyber Resilience research](#) highlighted the prevalence of cyberbullying, grooming, online exploitation, scams and pressure to remain visible and contactable online.

Young people described experiences of “doxing”, online rumours, abusive image sharing and bullying that continued outside school hours:

“If you’re getting bullied at school... then you go home it doesn’t stop because people have access to you.”

Respondents repeatedly highlighted the role of algorithms in pushing harmful material towards young people, including misogynistic influencers, extremist content and violent videos.

The evidence strongly suggests that current systems are not adequately protecting children and young people from harm online.

A particularly strong concern was the impact on younger children:

“All this is happening at upper primary and lower high school age and it is really important that primary children in particular are not given access to this.”

Youth workers consistently expressed concern that current commercial platform design incentivises prolonged engagement at the expense of children’s wellbeing.

### **Q3. Do you think the benefits of children using social media, and being online, outweigh the risks, or the other way around?**

YouthLink Scotland believes the evidence gathered through this consultation demonstrates that while being online does provide important benefits, the current design and regulation of mainstream commercial social media platforms means that, for many children and young people, the risks are now perceived to outweigh the benefits.

Youth workers continued to recognise the importance of being online for creativity, learning and connection in young people’s lives. YouthLink Scotland, University of Edinburgh and Northern Star conducted a study in 2020 with LGBT Youth Scotland exploring the [impact of digital youth work during lockdown](#). 22 young people shared their stories about how digital youth work reduced isolation, improved their wellbeing, provided opportunities for personal growth and increased resilience. As one young person shared:

“The most significant change for me has been that I have been able to meet so many new people from all over Scotland that I would not have met if it hadn’t been for the Discord server. Having the youth group on discord has helped because it gives me something to look forward too” (Young person, aged 17)

However, respondents repeatedly distinguished between:

- healthy online participation
- moderated educational or community spaces
- digital youth work environments

and

- commercial social media platforms designed around engagement, algorithms and monetisation.

The concern expressed by youth workers was not simply about technology itself, but about the design of platforms that:

- incentivise compulsive use
- promote harmful content through recommendation systems
- prioritise engagement over wellbeing
- expose children to inappropriate material
- collect extensive personal data
- amplify conflict, comparison and pressure.

Young people themselves also identified online violence, harmful influencers, misogyny and pressure linked to social media culture as affecting their wellbeing and behaviour.

The Lassies Are No Feart research found that violence online had become normalised amongst some young people and that young women often felt powerless to escape group conflict once drawn into it online.

One youth worker commented:

“Ultimately, the risks and harms of social media are that they take our young people out of the real world.”

Another stated:

“I rarely see a benefit. There are more negative than positives.”

YouthLink Scotland therefore believes stronger protections, restrictions and platform accountability are now required in order to rebalance children and young people’s online experiences towards wellbeing, safety and healthy participation.

## Q4 to 7. Minimum age requirements and impacts

Based on the Youth Voices Survey in 2026, young people's views appear to be mixed in relation to restrictions. Some supported a ban. One young person commented:

"Just ban all social media completely"

Others felt there should be more restrictions:

"Set up community restrictions like you have to have your account ID verified to make sure you're that age"

Other young people highlighted the benefits for young people of using social media, particularly young people from the LGBTQ+ community and with neurodiversity:

"I wouldn't ban it at all, though. I know there's a lot of discussion about it, but I think one of the worries is the internet's used for a lot of horrible stuff, but also for a lot of queer people, that is their escape because for people who are autistic, it's hard to find if you live in a small area or you have parents to accept, you can message people who are like you".

The evidence gathered through the recent youth worker survey demonstrates strong support amongst youth workers for increasing the minimum age of access to mainstream commercial social media platforms to 16.

Approximately 91% of respondents agreed that further legislation is required to make social media and phone use safer for young people, while approximately 97% agreed that government action on social media access should prioritise children's wellbeing over commercial interests.

The [Cyber Resilience research](#) also found that young people themselves believed online safety and cyber resilience education should begin from primary school age because many children already have smartphones and social media access before secondary school.

The [Youth Voices Survey](#) found that 78% of young people (n=2519) thought that social media platforms should do a lot or a little more to prevent people from seeing youth violence online 58% felt that what would make social media safer for young people would be better ways to report content/accounts. Interestingly, only 28% thought that more restrictions on use (e.g. from parents, teachers, youth workers, actual restrictions on apps) would help.

The Lassies Are No Feart research highlighted how young women felt trapped within cycles of online conflict and peer pressure through social media group chats and instant communication.

One respondent stated:

“Absolute addiction to checking phones.”

Another wrote:

“Young people are so exposed to violence, bullying, peer pressure. Mental health deteriorating due to being exposed to so much early on.”

However, in the Youth Voices Survey the majority of young people (86%) had never felt pressure from friends or online trends to share violent content (n=2583). These studies highlight the complexity in the views of young people.

YouthLink Scotland recognises concerns about unintended consequences of a ‘ban’, including:

- Young people moving to less regulated platforms
- Increased exclusion for some young people
- Reduced access to supportive online communities
- The need for digital participation and skills development

For this reason, any restrictions should be accompanied by:

- Strong digital literacy education
- Investment in youth work
- Parent and family support
- Clear public information
- Safer alternative digital spaces
- Stronger regulation of platform design and algorithms

Respondents also recognised that young people still require opportunities for safe digital participation and skills development. Any restrictions should therefore be proportionate and rights-based rather than focused solely on exclusion.

As one youth worker shared:

“Young people need to learn to navigate the digital world the same way as they navigate the physical world. Without any access to social media (whatever that means), young people run the risk of suddenly getting access at 16 and not knowing how to conduct themselves online. They would also lose the connection they have to the communities that are outside their direct reach.”

## Q8 to 11. Age of digital consent

YouthLink Scotland supports increasing the digital age of consent to 16 for services which rely heavily on behavioural profiling, targeted advertising, recommendation algorithms and extensive personal data collection.

The evidence gathered demonstrates significant concern about the relationship between platform business models and young people's wellbeing.

Respondents repeatedly highlighted concerns around:

- targeted advertising
- data harvesting
- manipulative algorithms
- recommendation systems
- AI-generated misinformation and deepfakes
- limited understanding amongst young people of how their data is used.

One respondent stated:

"Young people are struggling with disinformation and misinformation, the use of AI in falsifying events or deepfakes."

The [Cyber Resilience research](#) also found that many young people already have awareness of scams, phishing and digital security risks, but often lack the language, confidence or support to fully navigate these safely.

The evidence suggests many young people are engaging with highly sophisticated commercial systems designed to maximise engagement and gain their data without fully understanding the implications.

Any increase in the digital age of consent should therefore be accompanied by:

- stronger privacy protections
- transparent platform responsibilities
- improved public education
- clearer information for young people and families
- proportionate safeguards that do not restrict access to beneficial educational or support services.

## Q12 to 15. Restricting features and functionalities

YouthLink Scotland supports stronger restrictions on platform features and functionalities which create heightened safeguarding risks for children and young people.

The evidence gathered strongly supports tighter restrictions on high-risk social media functionalities and platform features, with young people's rights best protected by building in safety into design. Legislation must focus on compelling technology companies to act responsibly.

Youth workers repeatedly linked features such as:

- disappearing messages
- livestreaming
- anonymous messaging
- location sharing
- algorithmic recommendation systems
- direct messaging with strangers
- to increased safeguarding risks for children and young people.

Youth workers repeatedly linked these features to:

- Grooming
- Sextortion
- Exploitation
- Bullying
- Coercion
- Harassment

One respondent highlighted:

"Peer Pressure, Intimate Image Abuse, Filming of Fights, Cyberbullying, Catfishing and more."

Another wrote:

"Young people have been abused online (pressured into sharing indecent images) and this has spread over into real life bullying and shaming by peers."

The Cyber Resilience research further highlighted concerns about:

- Snapchat live location tracking
- Pressure to remain visible online
- Online grooming
- Doxing
- Sharing of addresses and personal data.

Young people described the dangers of location sharing:

“As soon as you open Snapchat they can see exactly where you are.”

This includes stronger restrictions on:

- infinite scrolling
- autoplay
- push notifications
- engagement metrics
- algorithmic recommendation systems.

These features are intentionally designed to maximise engagement and are contributing to compulsive patterns of use amongst children and young people.

## **Q16 to 20. Persuasive design, compulsive use and time limits**

The survey evidence demonstrates particularly strong concern amongst youth workers regarding persuasive and compulsive platform design and the importance of regulating technology companies including of them in social media.

Respondents repeatedly described young people experiencing:

- compulsive checking behaviours
- anxiety linked to notifications and visibility
- inability to switch off
- sleep disruption
- reduced concentration
- reduced physical activity
- increased emotional dysregulation
- dependency linked to algorithm-driven engagement.

Youth workers consistently highlighted the role of platform design features such as:

- infinite scrolling
- autoplay
- engagement metrics
- push notifications
- streaks and rewards
- algorithmic recommendation systems.

One respondent wrote:

“Young people cannot sit down for a meal and have a conversation without getting their phones out, they don’t know how to be bored and only their phones will satisfy their boredom... they are addicted to them.”

Another stated:

“Corporations motivated by money and not wellbeing of users, leading to exploitation of young people as they are the biggest users and easiest to attract.”

The Cyber Resilience research also identified concerns amongst young people themselves about addiction to online activity, gaming and social media use.

The Lassies Are No Feart report similarly found that social media had become deeply embedded in young people’s lives and conflicts, with constant notifications, instant communication and viral sharing contributing to heightened anxiety, pressure and conflict escalation.

Concerns about compulsive platform design were also reflected in the high proportion of youth workers reporting anxiety linked to constant connectivity and sleep disruption linked to phone use in their day-to-day practice.

YouthLink Scotland therefore supports:

- stronger regulation of persuasive design features
- mandatory protections for under 16s
- default overnight restrictions
- greater transparency around recommendation systems
- independent scrutiny of platform algorithms
- stronger protections against manipulative engagement practices.

At the same time, these measures should recognise the continued importance of digital participation and ensure that young people can still access safe, positive and supportive online spaces.

# The Role of Youth Work

The findings across all four pieces of evidence demonstrate the uniquely important role youth work plays in supporting young people to navigate online life safely and critically.

Youth work is an essential element in delivering digital literacy education and has a vital role to play as part of an overall public health approach.

Approximately 93% of respondents to the Youth Work and Online Lives Survey agreed that youth work provides uniquely trusted spaces where young people can build digital literacy, critical thinking and healthy boundaries with technology.

Young people themselves repeatedly identified trusted relationships and safe spaces as essential supports in helping them navigate harmful online experiences.

The Cyber Resilience research found that young people often felt more comfortable discussing online harms with youth workers than with other adults.

The Lassies Are No Feart research similarly highlighted the importance of trusted adults, safe spaces and relationship-based support, particularly for young women experiencing bullying, exclusion and violence.

One young person stated:

"I think a lot of young people if they spend time with youth workers and stuff like that, they might feel more comfortable speaking to like a youth worker rather than like an adult maybe at home."

Young people also emphasised the importance of discussion-based learning, peer education and real-life experiences:

"We can teach other people."

Youth work provides:

- Trusted relational connections
- Support when things go wrong
- Critical digital literacy education
- Safe spaces for discussion and reflection
- Peer support environments
- Opportunities for positive digital creativity
- Support for vulnerable and marginalised young people

Barnardos youth engagement project with NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde identified that 17% of young people wouldn't share with anyone at all if something went wrong online, highlighting the need for safe, non-judgemental ways to seek support. This figure would likely increase if it happened in a space that they were 'banned' from, but had managed to access.

Youth workers recognise the importance of supporting parents, who have a vital role in influencing young people's practice. Police Scotland Young Volunteers working with Project Real co-created materials with young people to support conversations between parents and young people. Youth workers regularly identify the importance of working with and influencing parents to help them support young people around online harms.

Scottish Youth Parliament's Digital Safety Ambassador programme and participatory workshops show that youth-led online safety initiatives are powerful and scalable, and that young people want these conversations in trusted youth spaces.

Investment in youth work must therefore form part of any national response to online safety, cyber resilience and digital wellbeing and a public health campaign, with youth work as a central pillar is a key recommendation.

# Conclusion

YouthLink Scotland believes the evidence gathered from youth workers and young people demonstrates a clear need for stronger action to protect children and young people online.

Young people and youth workers overwhelmingly support:

- Stronger regulation of social media platforms
- Increased accountability for technology companies
- Greater protections for children and young people
- Stronger age assurance and enforcement
- Restrictions on harmful platform features and persuasive design
- Greater support for parents and carers
- Investment in digital literacy and youth work

The evidence also demonstrates that online harms are now deeply interconnected with young people's everyday lives, relationships, wellbeing and experiences of safety.

Young people described online violence as normalised, constant and difficult to escape. Girls and young women highlighted how social media amplifies bullying, humiliation, misogyny and violence, while youth workers described increasing concern about addictive platform design, harmful influencers, exploitation and declining wellbeing.

At the same time, the sector recognises the importance of ensuring children and young people can continue to benefit from:

- Creativity
- Learning
- Social connection
- Community participation
- Digital skills development

The challenge is therefore not whether young people should be online, but how we create safer, healthier and rights-respecting digital environments that prioritise children's wellbeing over commercial engagement.

YouthLink Scotland welcomes the opportunity to continue engaging with the UK Government on the development of effective, evidence-led online safety policy. We support education to go hand in hand with legislation and a co-ordinated, cross sectorial public health approach as an essential next step, with youth work as a central pillar.

Young people's safety and wellbeing will always be our first concern.



YouthLink Scotland, Caledonian Exchange, 19A Canning St. Edinburgh, EH3 8EG  
T: 0131 202 8050 E: [info@youthlink.scot](mailto:info@youthlink.scot) W: [www.youthlink.scot](http://www.youthlink.scot)  
YouthLink Scotland is a Company Limited by Guarantee.  
Registered in Scotland No: 164547. Charity Ref: SC003923