Children and the Internet

Written Submission to the House of Lords Select Committee on Communications

Submitted: 18th August 2016

1 About YouthLink Scotland

1.1 YouthLink Scotland is the national agency for youth work. We are a membership organisation, representing over 100 regional and national youth organisations from both the voluntary and statutory sectors. We champion the role and value of youth work and represent the interests and aspirations of both the voluntary and statutory sector.

1.2 Scotland's youth work sector is as rich and diverse as the nation itself. Our sector has a workforce in excess of 75,000 – including over 70,000 adult volunteers. We reach in excess of 380,000 young people in youth work opportunities each week. Youth Work has three essential and definitive features:

- Young people choose to participate
- Youth work must build from where young people are
- Youth work recognises the young person and the youth worker as partners in a learning process

1.3 YouthLink Scotland champions the role and value of youth work, challenging government at national and local levels to invest in the development of the sector for the benefit of our young people. Our vision is of a nation which values its young people and their contribution to society, where young people are supported to achieve their potential.

1.4 As the national agency for youth work, and in our role as an intermediary we have endeavoured to respond to this response in the best interests of the youth work sector, however the views contained within this response may not be held by each of our individual members.

1.5 YouthLink Scotland, as the National Agency for Youth Work in Scotland has been leading on developments in the field of digital technology and social media in relation to youth work. Our role spans both policy and practice, working closely with Education Scotland, Scottish Government and our members – statutory and national voluntary youth work organisations to implement the National Youth Work Strategy 2014-19 (Scotland). Alongside partner organisation Young Scot, we established the Digital Youth Network. This is a practitioner network for those working with young people in online spaces or using online tools.

1.6 YouthLink Scotland was the lead partner in developing the Digitally Agile National CLD principles alongside Scottish Community Development Centre and Learning Link Scotland. We are also a representative member on the European Commission Expert Group on Digitalisation and Youth.

1.7 It is critical that throughout this inquiry and the resulting actions that follow that influencers and decision makers prioritise the fundamental principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) whilst also maintaining an agile mind set. Online trends

fluctuate rapidly and as a result, detailed research, legislation or regulation on specific platforms or sites can become quickly outdated.

2 Risks and benefits

2.1 We are concerned that there is not sufficient research on the impact of increased internet usage alongside increased usage of digital devices on children and young people's development and mental health. We would welcome a longitudinal study of children and young people in the UK that examined the impacts on health and wellbeing.

2.2 The opportunities and benefits offered to children and young people from the internet are ever-expanding. Alongside these opportunities come risks. Broadly these can be grouped into:

2.2.1 Information and education
Children and young people are exposed to alternative media outlets and endless sources of information exponentially increasing the learning opportunities. However members were keen to point out that children and young people were often ill-equipped to contextualise information they come across or identify factual from fake information. Organisations such as Young Scot provide support for young people to access the information they need in an accessible format.
The way in which selected information is presented to children and young people through the use of algorithms is also a concern.

2.2.2 Play and creativity
The importance of play for people of all ages cannot be understated and the internet is a popular playground for children and young people. On the internet children and young people today have the unprecedented opportunity to be content producers, rather than purely consumers. This will contribute to the exploration and development of their identities and media literacy.
With regards to vulnerability to commercial pressures, online gambling and pay-to-play games are designed to attract and entrap younger players which could result in financial risks and concerns around misuse of personal data.

2.2.3 Communication and connectivity
Platforms and sites are being used innovatively to facilitate social interaction and communication for those on the autistic spectrum.
Increased communication can also carry the risk of exposure to age inappropriate content for example violence or pornography. Young people may be receiving this but also may be producing and sending to others.
Cyberbullying is often pointed to as one of the main internet problems facing young people online. Research in Scotland showed that 91% of those experiencing online bullying know the person bullying them.[1] This dispels the myth of the anonymous threat and reinforces the need for anti-bullying work in person with young people.

2.2.4 Political and civic participation
One of the most important benefits from our members' perspective is that young people have access to youth work online, often in the form of support and advice services.
Social media provides a platform for young people to express their opinions and be heard. It is narrowing the traditional generational gap of whose voices are heard in decision making. It is also changing the way in which young people engage politically through organising and taking part in social media campaigns and other 'clicktivism'. It is also important that young people's rights are realised in relation to the digital world. 5Rights have worked with young

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[1] Respect*me,* Bullying in Scotland 2014, p.3, http://www.respectme.org.uk/about-news.html

people to develop a framework and resources around children and young people's rights online.[2]

2.3 Concerns were also raised by members regarding the increasing amount of time young people spend online. Risks of excessive use can manifest as social isolation, sleep deprivation and dependency. There was also discussion on the time young people spend online compared with time outdoors. Rather than polarising this debate, our members found it more helpful to find ways to combine digital learning with outdoor environmental engagement. It is possible to use technology designed to enhance rather than distract from time spent outdoors and engage with technology collectively (with real people in real time) rather than singularly.

2.4 The popularity of platforms and sites online is fleeting and much time should not be spent listing these. Of more use is to be familiar with shared principles, common terminology and cross-cutting trends. This will allow decision makers to be agile and for legislation to be sustainable. Net Aware by NSPCC is a useful guide for parents and carers to popular social networks. It provides brief explanations and has a user input function for parents/carers to share their experiences.

2.5 Our members had strong feelings that introducing greater blanket controls on internet usage by children and young people was the wrong approach. Their preference was for improved guidance, education and support in order to help children and young people navigate their lives offline and online safely. Furthermore, excessive controls on children and young people's internet usage may contravene their rights.[3] Some members had suggestions around banning mobile devices in school classrooms. Members also raised the point that controls can often be bypassed by young people. An indicator of this in action is the age limit for most social media sites. The standard age limit is 13 years old but many young people under this age have active profiles. In this instance, although controls are in place, young people have found a way around them and as such should be adequately prepared to use the sites in a safe and responsible way.
Taking risks and pushing boundaries is how children and young people gain resilience and therefore decision makers should take a balanced approach to increasing online controls.

3 Education

3.1 Educating and supporting children and young people in relation to the internet also takes place outside of school within youth work settings. Digital youth work engages young people using conventional youth work models and supports young people in developing their offline/online agency. Internet usage amongst young people will not decrease therefore youth work has to also be online. It is crucial that informal education through youth work is recognised and included in further action.

3.2 One of the essential features of all youth work is that it builds from where young people are, taking their knowledge and skill level as a baseline. Young people today do not differentiate between their online/offline lives or relationships and have to navigate the same challenges in both realms. Using this approach youth work has been leading the way in harnessing digital spaces to engage with young people. Alongside key partners we are working towards a youth work sector in Scotland that is well equipped to support young people to navigate the online aspects of their lives as well as to capitalise on the opportunities that digital and online tools offer to enhance their practice. In order to do so effectively, the youth work sector needs continued funding to upskill workers.

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[2] http://5rightsframework.com/
[3] It is suggested that greater controls may contravene UN Convention on the Rights of the Child Articles 12, 13, 15, 16, 17.

3.3 A central benefit of digital youth work includes the accessibility for geographically or socially isolated young people. Digital youth work provides opportunities for young people to access support they otherwise would not feel comfortable accessing in person. LGBT Youth Scotland's online chat service run by youth workers provides support for young people around any issue, but in particular around identity and sexual orientation. It is a unique service and as a result young people from outside of Scotland also access it, proving the need for more similar services.

3.4 Some members have produced guidance on using the internet for young people involved in their organisation. GirlGuiding UK have different age appropriate web safe codes for Rainbows, Brownies and Guides.[4]

3.5 One member pointed out that the UK should expect to produce the next wave of digital tech innovators. In order for them to be responsible, sustainable and considerate, they need to understand e-safety, digital rights and the importance of being raised online through guidance. With the popular estimate that 65% of jobs young people will be employed in do not exist yet, digital literacy education at all levels needs to be flexible and dynamic. Digital literacy education should also include teaching children and young people to be critical consumers in order to understand how and why content is created. This increased transparency would likely correlate with increased understanding amongst children and young people of online risks.

3.6 It is often taken for granted that children and young people today are 'digital natives' and are equipped to use the internet and digital technology. This is not always the case. There is also the risk that young people who are not using the internet will be left behind when it comes to finding work and operating in an increasingly online world.
YouthLink Scotland believes that work needs to be done across the UK to increase availability of internet access, especially in rural areas. Investment in digital participation was included as an ask in our Youth Work Changes Lives manifesto, including widening access to free Wi-Fi in public and community spaces.

3.7 Our members thought there was a potential for youth workers to provide some form of e-safety education for parents because the majority of internet usage will be in the home. However it should not be an extra task for teachers or youth workers without additional resource allocation. In Scotland there is an opportunity for community learning and development (CLD)[5] to engage with parents to teach digital literacy and e-safety. Our members cautioned that appropriate funding and consideration is given to teaching e-safety to parents. We believe that more should be done by the UK Government to support this work, including funding for upskilling the CLD workforce, and improved community connectivity and accessibility.

3.8 Members also raised the issue of partnership working across communities to better facilitate the education, support, and where necessary prosecution, of children, young people and adults. Funding to facilitate multi-agency approaches to addressing this would be welcomed.

4 Governance

4.1 We encourage media companies, in particular social media companies, to work closely with informal educators in order to ensure the design of their site or platform enhances

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[4] GirlGuiding UK, *My Brownie Web Safe Code*, http://www.girlguiding.org.uk/brownies/websafe/
[5] Within the Scotland, community learning and development encompasses youth work, adult learning and community capacity building.

young people's safety and security. Current restrictions can cause difficulty for youth workers, for example creating separate youth worker profiles. It compromises youth workers' own safety and privacy as well as that of the young person. In order to maintain appropriate boundaries, it is crucial to have buy-in from platform and site developers.

5 Legislation and Regulation

5.1 Our members do not think current legislation and regulation alter the way children and young people use the internet. This is primarily due to a perceived lack of knowledge and education. A young person may come into contact with legislation when a site they are accessing is shut down but they do not understand their rights or responsibilities in relation to this. There should also be recognition that not only can children and young people be victims of online crime, they can also be perpetrators (e.g. hate crime, cyberbullying, hacking, illegal downloads etc). As perpetrators they may be vulnerable or victims themselves. There needs to be an examination of how legislation can work to protect them. YouthLink Scotland suggests that the UK Government should increase the transparency and awareness of relevant legislation for young people and those around them (parents/carers, teachers, youth workers).

5.2 As mentioned previously, young people do not distinguish between their online/offline lives and as such, we recommend that future legislation and regulation reflects this. An agile mind set is required in order to future proof legislation. Rather than referring to specific platforms or sites, legislation should focus on the common elements and principles.

5.3 YouthLink Scotland would urge that Child's Rights Impact Assessments are carried out on future legislation in order to ensure that children and young people will not be adversely affected. This is in line with the recent UN Convention on the Rights of the Child Concluding Observation 9a[6].

5.4 The General Data Protection Regulation closely mirrors the 5Rights framework[7] with regards to individual's data. YouthLink Scotland supports implementation of the rights from the General Data Protection Regulation with the addition of the Right to Digital Literacy and the Right to Safety and Support, as laid out in 5Rights framework. Our members had particular concerns about the way in which young people's personal information and digital habits can be used in sophisticated ways without the young person realising how or why it has happened. This concern would be somewhat alleviated by the GDPR Rights in relation to automated decision making and profiling.

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[6] UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Concluding observations [CRC/C/GBR/CO/5], http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/SessionDetails1.aspx?SessionID=987&Lang=en
[7] http://5rightsframework.com/