



**'Joined Up' solutions to tackling digital inequality for young people and the youth sector**

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# Executive Summary

## Background

Youth organisations across the UK face mounting digital inequality that limits their ability to support young people effectively.

Commissioned by Osborne Clarke and delivered by UK Youth, this research (2024–2025) explored how the youth sector’s digital infrastructure needs can be better supported.

Focusing on the digital infrastructure needs of the youth sector, the barriers practitioners face in accessing digital tools, the challenges experienced by the tech sector in working with youth organisations, and the role of digital in strengthening cross-sector collaboration and the role of youth workers in online safety.

This research highlights that digital technology is now essential to young people’s lives and to effective youth provision, yet many youth organisations in the UK lack the devices, skills and infrastructure needed to meet young people’s digital needs, particularly as financial pressures, reduced volunteering, and fragmented support systems hinder progress.



## Research objectives

- 01** Identify the digital infrastructure gaps, needs and preferences of organisations working to support young people.
- 02** Identify the barriers and opportunities for youth sector professionals accessing digital infrastructure support.
- 03** Identify the barriers the digital and tech sector experience engaging with youth sector professionals.
- 04** Understand the role that digital can play to improve collaboration between professionals supporting young people.
- 05** Explore the role of youth organisations in facilitating young people’s online safety.

To address these objectives the research adopted a mixed-methods largely qualitative approach involving three phases:

- 01** rapid evidence review;
- 02** stakeholder interviews with youth organisations, digital businesses and other key experts in the field; and
- 03** co-creation lab workshop to consult on joined solutions.

The research activities were undertaken between May 2024 and October 2025. Building on insights from the Osborne Clark Digital Inclusion Fund and aligning with UK Youth’s Joined Up Institute, this research responds to persistent gaps in digital capacity across the sector and seeks to inform sustainable, joined-up solutions that strengthen digital access, resilience and positive outcomes for young people.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Summary



Youth organisations **lack basic digital infrastructure** from up to date devices to stable internet and essential tools like CRM, safeguarding systems and secure data storage.



Digital **skills and confidence are low** across the youth workforce, with many practitioners unprepared for emerging technologies and lacking training in digital delivery, safeguarding, and data use.



Funding **structures rarely support digital infrastructure**, leaving organisations unable to invest in devices, connectivity, software, or ongoing maintenance - especially smaller charities.



Internal capacity **constraints and organisational culture hinder digital adoption**, including resistance to change, fear of digital replacing relational work, and a lack of digital leadership.



Youth sector **support offers are often generic or inaccessible**, with limited tailored and real time technical help, and resources that are difficult to navigate.



There is a major **misalignment between youth sector needs and tech sector offers**, driven by differing values, commercial priorities, and a lack of co design, leading to tools that don't fit youth work.



Youth organisations **struggle to integrate digital tools** due to limited technical capacity, outdated equipment, and products not designed for voluntary or relational youth work settings.



Digital has huge **potential to improve cross sector collaboration**, enabling better communication, shared data, streamlined referrals, and coordinated support for young people.



This **potential is not realised** due to fragmented systems, inconsistent platform use, lack of standardisation, and concerns about data privacy and security.



Youth workers also play a **crucial, distinct role** in providing safe, youth-led spaces for digital learning and safeguarding, but require better tools, training and cross-sector coordination to do so effectively.



## Key findings and conclusions

### Digital infrastructure gaps, needs and preferences

The research reveals that youth organisations face significant and interrelated challenges in developing their digital infrastructure, primarily due to basic digital requirements, limited resources, capacity, and digital skills. Youth organisations urgently need reliable digital infrastructure to function effectively and support young people. This includes access to up-to-date devices, affordable and stable internet connectivity, and core digital tools such as CRM systems, secure data storage, and safeguarding platforms. These are often out of reach especially for smaller organisations. There is also a strong need for digital literacy and skills development among youth workers, covering basic digital literacy and understanding, developing skills in digital service delivery, use of software, tools and platforms, data protection and safeguarding and emerging technologies. The research points to the importance of sustainable funding models to meet these needs, ensuring organisations can plan, scale, and maintain digital systems rather than relying on sporadic, short-term investments.

The youth sector faces significant gaps in infrastructure, capacity and resources. A number of youth organisations lack even basic hardware and software, suffer from poor connectivity, and have limited access to digital tools. Skills gaps among staff exacerbate these challenges, with low confidence in using technology and limited training opportunities. Strategic gaps also exist, as few organisations have comprehensive digital strategies, and investment in infrastructure is often deprioritised due to financial

strain and competing demands. These gaps hinder the ability of youth organisations to deliver inclusive, high-quality services and risk deepening digital exclusion among disadvantaged young people.

Youth organisations prefer digital solutions that are affordable, sustainable, and easy to use. They value tools that support relational youth work, hybrid delivery, enable safe and youth-friendly communication, and foster creativity and collaboration. The sector also prefers inclusive and accessible tools tailored to diverse abilities, languages, and cultural contexts. They prefer digital and tech packages which include ongoing support, troubleshooting services, and clear guidance on digital safeguarding and risk management to ensure safe and effective digital engagement.

## Key findings and conclusions

### Barriers and opportunities the youth sector experience

#### Barriers and Opportunities



Youth sector professionals face a complex set of barriers in accessing digital infrastructure support, ranging from affordability and capacity constraints to regional disparities and misaligned offers from tech providers. The lack of consistent funding, especially for devices, connection and hardware and ongoing digital maintenance, is compounded by limited access to personalised technical support and knowledge gaps around digital tools. Organisational culture and leadership also play a pivotal role, with resistance to change and fear of digital replacing traditional youth work often stalling progress. These challenges are further exacerbated by the pressure to present positive digital narratives, which can obscure genuine struggles and prevent open learning.

Despite these barriers, there are promising opportunities to strengthen digital inclusion and collaboration across the youth sector. Innovative funding models that include wraparound support and specific funding for digital can help organisations invest in

essential infrastructure. Clear, searchable resources and AI-powered support tools could streamline access to guidance, while peer learning networks and dedicated technical support can reduce the burden on individual practitioners. Learning from international practices, particularly those that prioritise process over impact metrics, offers a more sustainable and values-aligned approach to digital youth work.

Ultimately, the sector must embrace realistic digital journeys and foster environments where youth professionals can share both successes and setbacks. This shift would enable more authentic collaboration, better-informed digital strategies, and a stronger foundation for youth organisations to support young people effectively. By aligning funding, leadership, and support structures with the lived realities of youth work professionals, digital can become a powerful enabler of inclusive, responsive, and impactful youth work.

## Key findings and conclusions

### Barriers the digital and tech sector experience

The tech sector experiences persistent barriers when engaging with youth organisations, primarily due to cultural misalignment and structural disconnects. Tech companies often operate with commercial priorities, scalability, and hierarchical product designs, which clash with youth work's ethos of trust, safeguarding, and equitable participation. This divergence creates scepticism among youth professionals and results in tools that fail to reflect the relational and voluntary nature of youth engagement. Additionally, collaborations are typically short-term and fragmented, with limited legacy planning, while funding models prioritise innovation over sustainability.

Practical challenges compound these issues. Many youth organisations lack technical capacity and infrastructure, making integration of digital tools resource-intensive, even when offered at low cost. Tech companies often group youth organisations with general charities, overlooking their unique needs and engagement models, which leads to product misalignment and underuse.

Furthermore, the absence of co-design processes means solutions rarely resonate with youth workers or young people. Co-designing tools with youth workers and young people, adapting products to fit youth work environments, and ensuring equitable access are essential steps. Moreover, intermediaries that understand both sectors can play a vital role in bridging gaps, translating resources, and facilitating sustained dialogue. This will not only improve uptake and impact but also ensure that digital transformation in the youth sector is ethical, sustainable, and rooted in the lived realities of young people.

⊗ Disconnect between digital/tech sector and youth sector values and goals

⊗ Limited understanding of youth work

⊗ Lack of ongoing communications and dialogue with youth sector

⊗ Sector funding structures and models differ

⊗ Misunderstanding of the youth sector's technical capacity

⊗ Available products and services are misaligned with youth sector requirements

⊗ Misaligned engagement approaches between sectors

## Key findings and conclusions

### Using digital to improve collaboration

Digital technology has a vital role to play in improving collaboration between professionals supporting young people, particularly across sectors such as education, health, justice, housing, and social care. It enables more effective communication, facilitates knowledge sharing, and supports coordinated action through tools like shared directories, case management systems, and referral platforms. When used well, digital solutions can streamline processes, enhance understanding of local contexts, and foster more responsive and joined-up support for young people. However, the full potential of digital is not being realised due to inconsistent platform use, lack of standardisation, and concerns around data sharing and security.

Crucially, digital must be seen not just as a technical fix but as a strategic enabler and one that strengthens relationships, improves outcomes, and empowers professionals to work together more effectively in service of young people's needs.

### Role of youth organisations in facilitating young people's online safety

Youth organisations play a critical role in fostering digital resilience and providing child-centred support. Additionally, their work goes beyond the nuclear family and formal education, engaging communities to create safe environments and equipping young people with skills to navigate online spaces responsibly. Youth workers' personalised approach helps young people build confidence, understand risks, and develop coping strategies. Specifically their role includes educating young people on online safety, offering safe spaces for informal learning/education, supporting young people's personal development and offering personalised and tailored support.

Youth work provides flexibility and responsiveness, enabling practitioners to address emerging risks such as misinformation, grooming, and cyberbullying while promoting positive engagement online. These efforts are complemented by cross-sector collaboration, ensuring that youth workers remain connected to evolving technologies and best practices. To maximise impact, the sector must prioritise capacity building, skills development and leveraging national resources. By doing so, youth organisations can strengthen digital resilience and empower young people to navigate online spaces safely and responsibly.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: RECOMMENDATIONS

We've identified seven key recommendations for government, tech providers, independent funders, youth sector infrastructure bodies and youth work organisations. Coordinated cross-sector action in these areas will address digital inequality in the youth sector and beyond, enabling youth organisations to improve their support to young people. Recommendations 1 and 2 are foundational first steps whereas recommendations 3, 4 and 5 are dependent on the outcomes of 1 and 2. Recommendations 6 and 7 can be taken forward independently of the other recommendations and are vital for youth sector organisations to operate effectively in the digital world.

| Recommendation                                                                                                                                                | Description                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Lead Stakeholder                                                                                                                    |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>01</b> Commission the development of a Minimum Digital Standard for youth organisations                                                                    | The Government should commission the development of Minimum Digital Standard for the youth sector. The standard will work as a benchmark, developed to include precise core digital infrastructure requirements for youth organisations and set priorities for investment.                                                                                                                                                                            | Government and policy makers – Department for Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) and the Department for Science, Innovation & Technology |
| <b>02</b> Commit to providing devices, connectivity, maintenance, and social tariffs for youth organisations.                                                 | To address the digital divide and meet the youth sector's immediate need for better internet connectivity and hardware, tech sector organisations (as part of their CSR policies) should make commitments to invest in devices and internet connectivity.                                                                                                                                                                                             | Tech sector                                                                                                                         |
| <b>03</b> Develop a digital strategy toolkit for youth organisations, including templates, training, and implementation guidance.                             | Youth sector infrastructure bodies should work collaboratively to develop a toolkit to support youth organisations to develop and implement organisational digital strategies. This toolkit should be tested with a small cohort of youth organisations and should include easy-to-use training, resources and templates.                                                                                                                             | Youth sector infrastructure bodies (UK Youth, National Youth Agency and Regional Youth Work Units)                                  |
| <b>04</b> Work with the youth sector to co-create regional technical support hubs, AI enabled help tools, and peer networks.                                  | Tech companies should explore how they, in partnership with youth sector infrastructure organisations such as UK Youth, NYA and Regional Youth Work Units, can establish regional technical support and peer networks for the youth sector.                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Tech sector                                                                                                                         |
| <b>05</b> Host a national digital infrastructure summit to align agendas, showcase tools, and shape a roadmap for digital transformation of the youth sector. | The digital and tech sector should host a national digital and tech infrastructure summit or conference, in collaboration with youth sector infrastructure bodies.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | Tech sector and Youth sector infrastructure bodies (UK Youth, NYA, RYWAs)                                                           |
| <b>06</b> Develop a prototype centralised digital platform for referrals, case management, and data sharing.                                                  | The Government should commission the development and testing of a local authority level conceptual and prototype standardised and centralised digital platform. This platform would aim to improve local and regional coordination between local authorities, youth organisations and other organisations working with young people. It would support case management, referrals and data sharing, to facilitate better collaboration across sectors. | Government – DCMS & Minister of Housing, Communities and Local Government and policy makers                                         |
| <b>07</b> Embed digital safeguarding, cyber security, and digital citizenship into CPD pathways.                                                              | Youth sector infrastructure bodies (UK Youth, National Youth Agency, Regional Youth Work Units) should endorse regular professional development on current and emerging online risks linked to safeguarding and cybersecurity within youth organisations.                                                                                                                                                                                             | Youth sector infrastructure bodies (UK Youth, National Youth Agency and Regional Youth Work Units)                                  |

# Introduction

[Osborne Clarke](#), an international legal practice, commissioned [UK Youth](#), the UK's largest youth work charity, to conduct a research study on how the youth sector's digital infrastructure needs can be better supported. The objectives of this research were to identify joined-up solutions to address digital inequality in the youth sector, explore how digital tools can enable youth services to connect and collaborate more effectively across education, health, youth, and social services, and examine the barriers faced by tech and digital companies in supporting youth organisations and young people.

In 2022, Osborne Clarke committed half a million pounds over three years to help UK Youth build youth organisations' digital capabilities, alongside pro bono legal support. This research builds on insights from this 'Digital Inclusion Fund' and links closely with UK Youth's wider ambitions to enable better youth sector and cross-sector collaboration. For example, [UK Youth's Joined Up Institute](#) seeks to foster cross-sector collaborative practice amongst emerging leaders in the sectors that support young people. The research ran from April 2024 to October 2025.

## Background to the research

### The youth sector's digital necessities

Digital technologies form a fundamental component of young people's lives and, increasingly, youth service provision. Globally, young people (15-24) account for nearly 25% of internet users, despite only representing 16% of the global population ([ITU, 2019](#); [UN, 2019](#)). Around 7 out of 10 young people in the UK either agreed or strongly agreed that digital skills are essential for their future job/career ([Digital Youth Index, 2023](#)). However, 14% of all young people lack access to a learning device (a laptop or desktop computer). This equates to 2 million young people across the UK ([Digital Youth Index, 2023](#)). To deliver this important and timely work and equip young people with the skills or experiences they need to thrive,

youth organisations need to keep pace and continue to incorporate digital activities and digital youth work into their practice. Much of this work is ongoing. The pace of digital adoption accelerated during the pandemic as organisations began working online but this was uneven and reactionary, and organisations developed ad hoc ways of working. UK Youth surfaced some early insights when they issued our 'Guide to Delivering Digital Youth Work' (2020) to support youth organisation with this transition. Topics included:

- ✔ Setting up and ensuring fit-for-purpose systems and software
- ✔ Managing risks and safeguarding
- ✔ Consent process
- ✔ Delivering digital youth work – processes and procedures
- ✔ Supporting young people and staff
- ✔ Additional resources and support

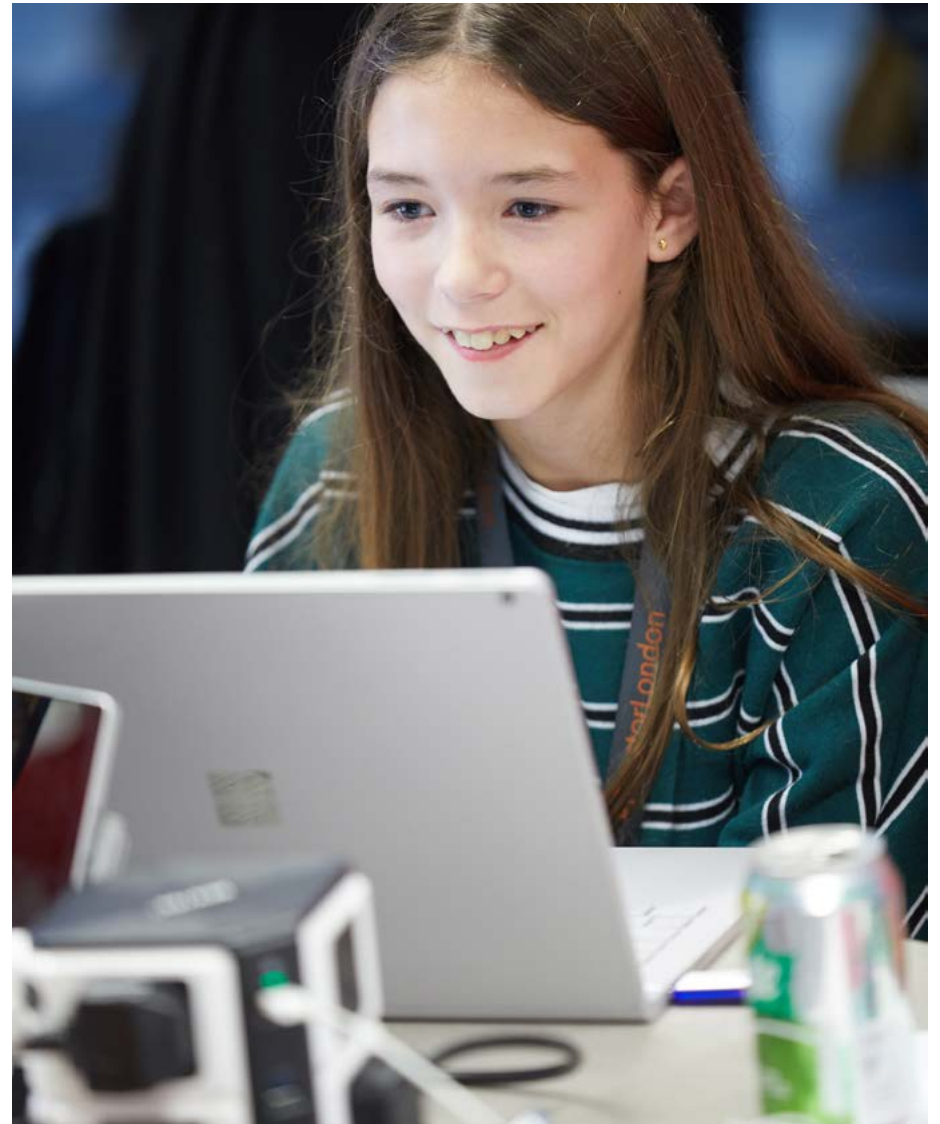
More broadly, research into the digital needs of the charity sector found that the cost-of-living crisis, and wider squeezes on income streams, has slowed the digital progress of many organisations.

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The charity sector has stated that there is simply less to spend on tools and upskilling ([Charity Digital Skills Report, 2024](#)). This report went on to highlight how these issues are particularly acute for smaller organisations, and those who are at the early stages of implementing their digital systems/offer. A number of the youth organisations in UK Youth's network fit this profile. This is in the context of the fundraising challenges facing smaller grassroots organisations, with research showing that 86% of organisations have seen their income negatively affected by the cost of living crisis ([easyfundraising, 2024](#)). Dwindling financial resources have been compounded by historically low rates in the numbers of people volunteering, a key resource for the youth sector ([Pro Bono Economics, 2024](#)).

### **The importance of collaboration between sectors**

Young people in the UK today face a complex set of challenges that demand an innovative, collaborative and sustained response. From managing mental health pressures to gaining meaningful employment, young people require multifaceted support. However, the current system of professionals who engage with young people - from teachers to social workers to health providers and other professionals - remains fragmented and siloed. This lack of coordination leads to missed opportunities, duplicated efforts, and ultimately poorer outcomes for young people. Whilst powerful solutions exist in better supporting young people, they are not becoming embedded on the frontline. The impact of investment into research and “what works” is being stalled because practitioners do not have effective learning spaces where they can be supported to understand and be inspired to contextualise the solutions for the young people they work with. Effective collaboration is seen as essential for embedding solutions, sharing learning, and strengthening the overall system that supports young people. These issues are greatly exacerbated by issues of digital inequality and a lack of digital infrastructure across the youth sector, to support better collaboration.



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### Youth work and online safety

Research into the role of youth organisations in facilitating young people's online safety shows that online harm and the safety of young children is an issue. Ofcom, the online safety regulator, found that young people in the UK encounter a wide range of online safety concerns. The report outlined that 99% of children spend some time online and most (nine in 10 children) own a mobile phone by the time they reach the age of 11. Three-quarters of social media users aged between eight and 17 have their own account or profile on at least one of the large platforms. This is despite age restrictions; six in 10 children aged 8 to 12 who use them are signed up with their own profile. Young people have encountered potential harms such as cyberbullying, grooming, exposure to violent and harmful material related to self-harm, sexual conduct or eating disorders (Ofcom, 2024). Young people need support to learn how to navigate the online world and understand where and what support is available to them (Molly Rose Foundation, 2004).

Youth organisations play a critical role in addressing these challenges, both in supporting young people and by working with other trusted adults to foster collaborative working and young person centred approaches. Youth workers are an essential part of the eco-system around young people and provide a unique role that differs from carers or teachers due to their position outside of formal education and their professional knowledge of youth-led, creative and engaging approaches to education. So, the precise role is the focus of the research here not whether youth workers have a role.

### Building on Osborne Clarke's support for the youth sector

In 2022, Osborne Clarke and national youth charity UK Youth came together to provide digital access to those that need it most via the Osborne Clarke Digital Inclusion Fund. Osborne Clarke invested in UK Youth's expertise, skills and network, to deliver grants to youth

organisations to support them in meeting young people's digital needs and improve their digital literacy. 20 grantees received support to address the needs specific to its community. The funding was used to buy new devices and software and to supply digital training and outreach. As a further sign of the firm's commitment to boosting digital skills, Osborne Clarke has also offered pro bono and mentoring support to all grantees.

The Digital Inclusion Fund evaluation found positive progress against digital inclusion outcomes and feedback from grantees has demonstrated the significant value of creating improved digital access for young people and their local communities. It highlighted the need for better digital infrastructure in the youth sector through improved digital access, collaboration with the tech sector and increased organisational efficiency of youth organisations. Meeting these needs could enhance youth engagement and learning opportunities and ultimately support employability, education engagement, social mobility, and poverty reduction. These initial results indicated a need to further explore and understand digital inequality amongst young people and across the youth sector landscape, whilst developing potential solutions to resolve these digital inequalities. This further research helps to fulfil Osborne Clarke's ambition of achieving value, legacy and impact through the Digital Inclusion Fund.

Understanding and meeting the youth sector's digital requirements is closely aligned with UK Youth's [Joined Up Institute](#) (JUI). The JUI aims to build a growing community of leaders with the capabilities, knowledge and relationships to drive high quality, preventative, cross-sector practice that improves outcomes for young people. It is a fully funded professional development programme bringing together individuals working and volunteering in the services that support young people. This is about pioneering and testing a new

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approach to cross-sector practice amongst youth-facing professions and better understanding the role of digital is critical to this. In this phase it is being piloted and tested in Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland.

Overall, there is a notable lack of research on the digital infrastructure requirements of youth organisations, which limits and impacts their ability to design effective support systems and interventions for young people. In addition, there is little evidence on their operational needs, sustainability challenges, and capacity-building priorities in relation to digital infrastructure. This gap in knowledge results in fragmented funding approaches, inadequate digital infrastructure and limited access to digital infrastructure.

Both young people and youth organisations stand to gain across all areas of their work by having better digital infrastructure in place. This research aims to address these issues and will help to build a lasting legacy for the Digital Inclusion Fund and the JUI.

## Research scope and objectives

With the above context in mind, this research aimed to address these key research objectives:

- 01** Identify the digital infrastructure gaps, needs and preferences of organisations working to support young people.
- 02** Identify the barriers and opportunities for youth sector professionals accessing digital infrastructure support.
- 03** Identify the barriers the digital and tech sector experience engaging with youth sector professionals.
- 04** Understand the role that digital can play to improve collaboration between professionals supporting young people.
- 05** Explore the role of youth organisations in facilitating young people's online safety.

The aim was to ensure that the evidence and insights generated from research led to a set of key actionable recommendations that will break down the barriers to digital access for the wider youth sector and cross-sector professionals working with young people. It also aimed to inspire further engagement and support from the wider business community and digital support providers, supporting improved collaboration between the youth sector and digital and tech firms.

# Methodology

To address these research objectives the research adopted a mixed-methods, largely qualitative approach involving three phases which are outlined in *Figure 1*. The table also presents an overview of the approach and associated research activities undertaken between May 2024 and October 2025.

Figure 1: Overview of research methodology

| Phase                                                    | Overview of Method                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | Research Objectives    |
|----------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|
| <b>01</b> Understanding the existing evidence            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rapid evidence review including a review of Digital Inclusion Fund evidence.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Objectives 1, 2 and 3. |
| <b>02</b> Stakeholder consultation                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 13 stakeholder interviews with youth organisations, digital businesses and other key experts with a range of experience in designing, funding, delivering, and evaluating digital inclusion projects.</li> <li>• 6 youth practitioner focus groups (with 31 practitioners) focussed on digital solutions for youth work, collaboration with other sectors and the role of digital in promoting young people's online safety.</li> <li>• Just One Question – snapshot survey – 350 responses on digital skills requirements.</li> </ul> | Objectives 1-5         |
| <b>03</b> Developing joined up solutions - consultations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Co-creation lab workshop 'The Power of Digital 'at the Joined Up Summit in November 2024 - Consultation with 50 key cross sector stakeholders.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | Objective 4            |

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### Understanding the existing evidence

A desk based rapid evidence review was conducted and included a review of published academic and grey literature alongside insights from the Digital Inclusion Fund evaluation. Digital infrastructure in the youth sector has not been well- researched, so a call for evidence to key stakeholder was also conducted. The search criteria applied excluded evidence dating back to before 2020, as the pandemic was seen as a crucial evolving point for digital expansion and progress.

The initial evidence review informed the approach for the rest of the research and focussed on existing evidence relating to: the digital infrastructure gaps, needs and preferences of youth organisations working to support young people; the barriers and opportunities youth sector professionals experience in accessing digital infrastructure support; and evidence on the role that digital can play to improve collaboration between professionals supporting young people.

The review found that there was little research into this specific area - on what youth organisations need, or how well-equipped youth organisations feel they are to meet the digital needs of young people, so sources were principally found in the grey literature. A top up rapid evidence review was conducted once the field work was completed to ensure that recently published research and insights from the Digital Inclusion Fund evaluation were included in the analysis. 21 sources were identified as relevant in total, and these were analysed as part of the review.

In summary, the evidence that was reviewed was somewhat patchy and it was mostly qualitative. Where quantitative evidence was available, this tended to rely on small samples of youth workers or organisations, so it is hard to say how representative it was of trends across the youth sector.

### Stakeholder consultation

The qualitative fieldwork included interviews with 13 stakeholders with youth organisations, digital businesses, and other key experts with a range of experience in designing, funding, delivering, and evaluating digital youth work and digital inclusion projects. These interviews sought to understand the digital infrastructure gaps, needs and preferences of youth organisations working to support young people; the barriers and opportunities youth sector professionals experience in accessing digital infrastructure support and evidence on the role that digital can play to improve collaboration between professionals supporting young people; the barriers the digital and tech sector experience in engaging with the youth sector; and the role of youth organisations in facilitating young people's online safety.

Alongside this, a secondary analysis was conducted of data collected through UK Youth and NCS's 'In Our Own Words' research. This included six focus groups with a diverse sample of thirty-one youth practitioners from across the UK. This analysis primarily informed objective 5: Exploring the role that youth organisations play in facilitating young people's online safety and objective 4: Understanding the role that digital can play to improve collaboration between professionals supporting young people. The focus groups covered: the digital approaches, tools and solutions used by practitioners to engage young people and enhance youth provision; how digital is used to promote young people's online safety; and the digital approaches, tools and solutions used to partner and collaborate with other organisations/sectors.

Finally, the research has drawn on youth sector network insights generated from UK Youth's annual Network Survey and Just One Question survey tool. Just One Question is an ongoing UK Youth initiative. Each month, youth practitioners are invited to respond to one, simple question through an online form. Their responses are

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quickly analysed, interpreted and shared publicly to inform policy, practice and infrastructure support in the youth sector. We posed a specific '[Just One Question](#)' to support this research: 'How confident do you feel in your ability to support young people on the following areas: accessing inappropriate content, sextortion, online grooming and misinformation; around staying safe online?' 360 youth practitioners responded, providing useful insight into practitioners' confidence levels in keeping young people safe from different online harms.

### **Developing 'Joined Up' solutions**

The evidence from phases 1 and 2 were consolidated to inform a co-creation lab workshop titled 'The Power of Digital' at UK Youth's Joined Up Summit in November 2024. The consultation workshop convened 50 cross-sector partners and young people to ask and explore 'how can we scale digital solutions to drive better cross sector collaboration and outcomes for young people?' The main focus of this co-creation lab workshop was to further explore the barriers and enablers to scaling digital solutions, based on existing evidence of what works. The lab aimed to surface examples of excellent practice that could strengthen crosssector collaboration and scale effective solutions for young people.

### **Analysis, interpretation and reporting**

The insights, evidence and learning from phases 1-3 were synthesised using thematic analysis.

Thematic analysis involved systematically identifying, analysing, and reporting themes and meaning from the evidence and data generated. Both deductive and inductive coding were utilised; the deductive coding was guided by the research objectives, while inductive coding allowed original or new insights to emerge from the evidence. This ensured that the conclusions and recommendations for this research are grounded in the evidence and connected to the broader youth sector context.



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### Limitations

Three limitations in relation to the research approach and findings have been identified:

- ➔ Qualitative methods are not designed to measure the frequency or prevalence of an experience or association. Although, it does offer insight into a spectrum of experiences and perspectives in a way that quantitative methods cannot. Therefore, validation of some the findings and conclusions may be needed.
- ➔ There are also a number of limitations related to the findings from the qualitative research. Firstly, we used a purposive sampling approach to recruit and sample those participating in interviews, focus groups and the Joined Up Summit workshop. Steps were taken to ensure a diversity of stakeholders; however, self-selection bias (opting into the research) needs to be noted. The qualitative findings, therefore, may not necessarily reflect the views of the wider population; rather the strength of this research is to provide rich insights into the range and diversity of views and issues. The research was also hindered by the limited quantity and quality of academic evidence available on digital infrastructure in the youth sector. So, where possible, we have triangulated findings across different evidence sources to mitigate this.
- ➔ There is very little quantitative data available on the youth sector's digital infrastructure requirements. This research utilises data from a Charity Digital Skills study to loosely represent the issues the sector experiences. Note that youth organisations are represented in this study but do not exclusively make up the sample. These findings were further explored with stakeholders in the consultation phase to further to validate the findings.

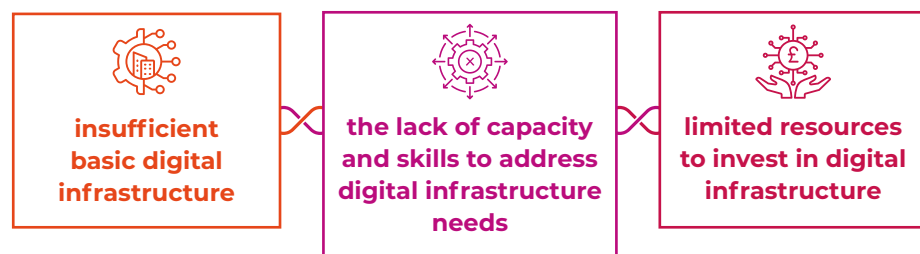
### Acknowledgements

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# Digital infrastructure gaps, needs and preferences

This chapter of the report presents findings relating to youth organisations' digital infrastructure gaps, needs and preferences. It primarily draws on the evidence generated from the evidence review, stakeholder consultations and findings from the Joined Up Summit workshop. **For the purposes of this research, 'digital infrastructure' in the youth sector refers to hardware and software, digital tools (e.g. platforms, apps, databases), data resources (e.g. funding, training, content), governance frameworks, and skilled people that enable youth organisations, funders, policymakers, and young people themselves to access, deliver, and improve services, opportunities, and outcomes (ONS 2024; NPC 2024).**

The evidence indicates that youth organisations are facing three interlocking issues: youth organisations have insufficient basic digital infrastructure in place; the lack of capacity and skills to address digital infrastructure needs and limited resources to invest in digital infrastructure.



## The youth sector requires sufficient digital infrastructure

The current evidence indicates that a significant number of youth organisations lack basic digital infrastructure. This limits their capacity to deliver and function. The research specifically found that youth organisations often have:

- ⊗ **Limited access to suitable** devices as they are often outdated, have limited functionality or are broken (Pawluczuk & Serban (2002); NPC, 2024).
- ⊗ **Limited access to devices for delivery staff and/or young people**; devices are frequently shared with others in the organisation, or an organisation may have one device for all staff and young people to use. (Pawluczuk & Serban (2002); NPC, 2024). The sector has access to second-hand device programmes but demand outstrips supply, and these devices often are outdated which further hampers effective digital engagement (Pawluczuk & Serban (2002); NPC, 2024).
- ⊗ **Poor or unreliable internet connectivity**, particularly for those located in rural or derived areas where there are often weak or instable connections. For some, it is difficult to stay connected as they rely on basic routers which are not designed for high usage (Includeplus, 2025). Research by The Good Things Foundation found that 61% of respondents felt that internet access should become recognised as an essential utility, just like electricity (The Good Things Foundation, 2020)

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- ⊗ **Difficulty in staying connected to the internet** – Access is not enough as not being able to afford the costs of staying connected is also a significant gap and need (Nathaniel-Ayodele & McGrath, 2023); [What is Data Poverty? \(nesta.org.uk\)](https://www.nesta.org.uk/what-is-data-poverty/).
- ⊗ **A lack of core digital tools and software**, such as CRM systems, case management systems, secure data storage, secure messaging systems, online safeguarding tools, monitoring and evaluation tools and up-to-date websites. This is particularly applicable to small charities (Charity Digital Skills Report, 2024).



**“No amount of digital, good digital practice or webinars is going to change the fact that I can’t afford a better laptop.”** (Youth Sector Stakeholder)



**“Need to have latest versions to get NHS app, or complete CV online, or for accessibility needs, not enough accessibility for people to get people online.”** (Youth Sector Stakeholder)

This lack of sufficient infrastructure not only impacts youth organisations’ delivery of youth provision and operational functioning, but youth organisations are also the means of access for young people who do not have access or connection to the internet at home. As the Nominet (2023) Digital Youth Index study highlighted, 14% of all young people lack access to a learning device (a laptop or desktop computer). This equates to approximately 2 million young people across the UK. Nearly 570,000 young people lack both a learning device and home internet connection. This has worrying implications for educational equality and social mobility. Access is now the lowest-scoring pillar in the Digital Youth Index, and a top priority for improvement, reinforced by the Digital Opportunity Trust’s research (Nominet, 2023; DOT, 2024). Young people want youth clubs to support them to access to technology: “Three quarters of those attending youth clubs wishing that their

club could provide access to digital technology” (Three, 2022). This research went on to find that high speed broadband was identified as the most useful tech that young people need, with almost 1 in 3 stating it was the most important over other devices.

Therefore, there is a need for youth clubs to invest in reliable and up-to-date devices (laptops, desktop computers and tablets) that can support remote working, online delivery, online access and data systems. With consistent, reliable and affordable connectivity to broadband. The need for investment into devices and broadband connectivity in youth organisations will enable more young people to have access to youth services or the internet. There is a need for fit-for-purpose core digital tools that support consistent platforms for communication, data collection and safeguarding within and across youth sector organisations.

### **The youth sector requires digital literacy, support and skills development**

The evidence review and stakeholder interviews uncovered several gaps, needs and preferences related to improving digital literacy, support and skills among youth workers, these are:

- ⊕ **Lack of confidence and understanding** - Confidence and understanding of hardware and software, digital tools, data resources and governance frameworks was identified as a gap and need. Some stakeholders argued that there is an expectation from allied sectors for youth workers to be digitally confident. This can be problematic, as many youth workers lack training or confidence in digital use and this is compounded by the rapid evolution of digital tools (Pawluczuk & Serban, 2002).
- ⊕ **Keeping up to date with emerging technologies and innovation** - The digital divide among youth workers themselves leaves some struggling to keep up with digital innovations, reinforcing inequalities in skill levels (Pawluczuk & Serban, 2002,

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NYA, 2025). Relying on volunteers to support delivery of youth activities deepens this issue, as training and retention challenges persist, making it difficult to sustain a workforce that is both skilled and confident in digital spaces. The Charity Digital Skills (2024) research highlighted that 65% are interested in emerging technologies like AI and ChatGPT. Despite this interest, only 22% of charities agree or strongly agree that they feel prepared to respond to AI opportunities and challenges (Zoe Amar Digital and Think Social Tech, 2024).

- ⊕ **Demand for digital skills development** - There is a growing demand for training in digital service delivery, data protection, digital safeguarding, online youth engagement, using CRMs, basic cyber security, designing accessible digital content, understanding social media and data management. In addition, Pawluczuk & Serban (2002) outline that youth worker training should also focus on defining which platforms should be used for compiling and making available all the training resources with an option for a curated, relational and effective retrieving system (Pawluczuk & Serban 2002, NYA 2005).
- ⊕ **Youth sector-specific strategic support** - As well as strategic support on the most appropriate digital tools for youth organisations, there is a need for support with the development of strategic approaches to digital transformation (Di Paolo, 2021; Zoe Amar Digital and Think Social Tech, 2024).
- ⊕ **Consistent digital support** – Several youth organisations have no dedicated staff for their digital work. Therefore, they need access to external support packages, IT experts, troubleshooting services and guidance on purchasing and maintaining digital products and tools. As well as guidance and frameworks on digital safeguarding, online delivery standards, selecting safe platforms, data management and digital risk management (including cyber security).

- ⊕ **Digital youth work training** – The National Youth Agency's 'Digital youth work: Skills, knowledge and delivery in the sector' research found only 24% of youth workers have received digital youth work training.

### Further investment in digital infrastructure

The pandemic accelerated youth organisations' use of digital solutions, as outlined in The Charity Landscape<sup>1</sup> report (2022), which found that the majority of charities invested in information technology and online solutions during the first year of the pandemic. This was particularly the case for larger charities with an income over £5m and less so for smaller charities (CAF & ACEVO, 2022). However, this was short lived due to the cost of living and several funding streams closing or withdrawn post Covid. This significantly hampered the digital progress of some charities; and was felt particularly acutely by smaller organisations and those at an early stage of their digital journey (Zoe Amar Digital and Think Social Tech, 2024).

Youth organisations recognise the importance of investing in digital infrastructure, both to support their operations and their direct work with young people. However, this has not always been translated into actual digital infrastructure development due to resource constraints (CAF & ACEVO, 2022). 60% of charities<sup>2</sup>, a significant increase on the previous year (49%) stated that they urgently need funds for devices, software and infrastructure. Further to this, small charities struggle most with accessing digital funding (Zoe Amar Digital and Think Social Tech, 2024); prioritizing investment in digital infrastructure can be difficult as they are often working with limited and short term budgets. Overall, the youth sector has seen tens of millions of pounds cut in the last Budget and increases in operating costs - such as employer National Insurance contributions (BYA, 2024) - have further added to the financial issues. NYA's consensus research shows that four in five (79%) organisations reported increased operating costs as a challenge over the previous year.

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Operating costs had increased for a large proportion of the youth sector, alongside a decline in operating budgets for many (NYA, 2024).

It is the needs and preferences of young people that will often dictate how a youth organisation spends their finite resources. In the recent evaluation of UK Youth's Cost-of-Living grant (supported by the Pears Foundation), there was a 17% increase from intended versus actual spend on necessities for young people – this includes food, hygiene and sanitary products (UK Youth 2024). So, when youth organisations are meeting young people's basic needs, it is unsurprising that they can invest less in digital infrastructure. The



National Youth Sector Census (2024) reinforces this point, indicating that financial strain was exacerbated by widespread increased demand for existing and new services in the previous year. This is coupled with gaps in staffing and resources; specifically, the lack of dedicated staff members and supporting resources needed to address their digital infrastructure requirements in any sort of systematic way is intensified (NYA, 2025; Zoe Amar Digital and Think Social Tech, 2024). This means that any work or investment is often sporadic and ad hoc. So, while 1 in 2 have a digital strategy in place, the action needed to deliver on those strategies is not being prioritised in terms of spend. Case in point, only a third (32%) of charities are prioritizing investing in infrastructure and systems, significantly less than the 45% in the previous year. There is a clear difference between large and small organisations here, with only a quarter (24%) of small charities investing in infrastructure/systems (Charity Digital Skills, 2024). Work or investment in digital infrastructure is often sporadic and ad hoc rather than seen as a clear strategic priority for much of the youth sector, despite widespread acknowledgement that it's a critical area for society and young people. Just 18% of youth organisations have a digital strategy, and over half (57%) of staff believe digital youth work is not prioritised in their organisation (NYA, 2025). This indicates that youth organisations need help with developing and implementing digital strategies, not just with investing in digital tools and hardware.

Therefore, investing in digital is often seen by youth organisations as a 'perceived as non-essential' rather than as core need to functioning effectively. The youth sector needs sustainable funding which includes grants or investment to cover not just devices, but also connectivity, licences and ongoing maintenance, licences and upgrades, as the youth sector needs long term funding models to ensure that youth organisations can plan and scale, train and develop, with support available to build digital strategies to enable them to do this.

### Limiting capacity to deliver

Without addressing these digital infrastructure gaps and needs, youth organisations risk digital exclusion amongst their own staff as well as the young people they serve, especially those for disadvantaged backgrounds. It limits their capacity to deliver relevant programmes for young people growing up in the digital world. Youth organisations are clear on their needs and preferences: devices, internet connectivity, hardware, software and digital solutions that are affordable and sustainable, simple and easy to use. They want tools or platforms that support the relational element of youth work, that are safe and youth friendly, support two-way communication, encourage participation and creativity and enable group work and collaboration. Since the pandemic, organisations prefer tools that support in person and online delivery, remote youth work and virtual learning. To support them to deliver this they need relevant digital training and support to build understanding of the most appropriate solutions and platforms and how to use them effectively. This includes the development of inclusive and accessible tools designed for young people with different abilities, first languages, experiences and cultural contexts (Includeplus, 2024).

### Conclusion

The research reveals that youth organisations face significant and interrelated challenges in developing their digital infrastructure, primarily due to basic digital requirements, limited resources, capacity, and digital skills. Youth organisations urgently need reliable digital infrastructure to function effectively and support young people. This includes access to up-to-date devices, affordable and stable internet connectivity, and core digital tools such as CRM systems, secure data storage, and safeguarding platforms. These are often out of reach especially for smaller organisations. There is also a strong need for digital literacy and skills development among youth workers, covering basic digital literacy and understanding, developing skills in digital service delivery, use of software, tools and platforms, data protection and safeguarding and emerging technologies. The research points to the importance of sustainable funding models to meet these needs, ensuring organisations can plan, scale, and maintain digital systems rather than relying on sporadic, short-term investments.

The youth sector faces significant gaps in infrastructure, capacity and resources. A number of youth organisations lack even basic hardware and software, suffer from poor connectivity, and have limited access to digital tools. Skills gaps among staff exacerbate these challenges, with low confidence in using technology and limited training opportunities. Strategic gaps also exist, as few organisations have comprehensive digital strategies, and investment in infrastructure is often deprioritised due to financial strain and competing demands. These gaps hinder the ability of youth organisations to deliver inclusive, high quality services and risk deepening digital exclusion among disadvantaged young people.

Youth organisations prefer digital solutions that are affordable, sustainable, and easy to use. They value tools that support relational youth work, hybrid delivery, enable safe and youth-friendly communication, and foster creativity and collaboration. The sector also prefers inclusive and accessible tools tailored to diverse abilities, languages, and cultural contexts. They prefer digital and tech packages which include ongoing support, troubleshooting services, and clear guidance on digital safeguarding and risk management to ensure safe and effective digital engagement.

# Barriers and opportunities the youth sector experience

The evidence presented in the previous section alluded to some of the barriers youth sector professionals experience in accessing digital infrastructure; attention now turns to discussing these barriers in detail. We also highlight opportunities to address and overcome these barriers. This chapter primarily draws on the evidence captured from the evidence review and stakeholder consultation interviews.

## The barriers experienced in accessing digital infrastructure support

Figure 2 summarises the barriers encountered by youth sector professionals in accessing digital infrastructure support.

Figure 2: Barriers encountered in accessing digital infrastructure support

| Barrier                                                                                   | Key findings                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Affordability is a key difficulty experienced                                             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Inadequate funding for youth practitioners to invest in digital infrastructure</li> <li>Existing funding structures often exclude digital infrastructure investment</li> <li>It is difficult for youth organisation with limited budgets to prioritise investment</li> </ul>           |
| Lack of youth sector-specific personalised and accessible support                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Support tends to be too basic or targeted to the charity sector generally, or too advanced</li> <li>There is a need for accessible resources and personalised, real-time technical assistance</li> </ul>                                                                               |
| Internal capacity constraints preventing access                                           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Youth organisations struggle to find the time to develop knowledge and/or secure support. 'Support' is mostly understood as funding</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                         |
| Organisational culture and leadership challenges                                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Organisational resistance and fear of change are significant obstacles, particularly when considering the 'relational' nature of youth work</li> <li>Leaders struggle to manage digital transition and change</li> </ul>                                                               |
| Ethical and philosophical concerns with digital integration                               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Concern about the perceived "corporate-led" digital push in the youth sector</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Regional disparities in the support available for the youth sector                        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Local Authorities sometimes focus digital investment on the 'number of new digital initiatives over an efficient, joined up digital strategy.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                               |
| Misalignment between the youth sector's digital support needs and the tech sector's offer | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There is a misalignment between the needs and requirements of the youth sector and the offer from tech companies.</li> <li>There is an assumption by tech companies that tools developed for other sectors working with young people are transferrable to the youth sector.</li> </ul> |
| Challenge around only the 'positive narratives' shared on organisations' digital journeys | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>"Good practice fatigue" creates pressure that can deter realistic discussions, understanding of genuine barriers and a 'problem-solution' approach</li> </ul>                                                                                                                          |

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### **Affordability is a key difficulty experienced**

As outlined in the previous chapter, financial constraints were identified by youth organisations as a core barrier to improving their digital infrastructure. The lack of adequate funding to secure essential hardware, software, internet connectivity, digital tools and data resources is a major challenge for youth practitioners. Affordability is also about how to meet the ongoing financial commitments of digital infrastructure in terms maintenance, updates and renewals. Despite the available guidance and best practices, without suitable devices, software and other digital platforms and tools, youth workers find it difficult to realise the potential of digital effectively (Pawluczuk, 2024).

Existing funding structures often exclude digital infrastructure where in reality it is an essential overhead which needs budgeting for as a direct delivery and support cost. As a result, youth organisations' digital needs may only be covered by broader resilience or capacity-building funds. Often funders and youth organisations de-prioritise digital infrastructure investment over other priorities such as improving fundraising capacity, delivery of core services, organisational and staff development, business development work, youth voice development or developing partnerships across organisations/sectors. This is even more pronounced for smaller youth organisations.



**“There is a disconnect between how funders and charities see digital funding. Funders see it as a cost; charities see it as an investment.”** (Tech Sector Stakeholder)



**“Money! Lots of orgs in networks are charities/enterprise, funded through range of grants or LA contracts, many in network struggle and funding for providing digital skills training and broader sense of digital inclusion support (e.g. of struggling person from DWP), ad hoc digital support, no easy funding for this. It’s always short term which makes it hard to maintain staff. Same issue of charity sector as whole.”** (Tech Sector Stakeholder)

### **Lack of youth sector-specific personalised and accessible support**

The evidence indicates that youth workers find it difficult to access the digital and tech support they need. Where support is available it is often generic, not applicable or fails to account for youth practitioners' starting point. General support (e.g. webinars, downloadable or viewable resources) can only go so far; the need for more personalised, real-time technical assistance was called for. Many youth workers find it challenging to identify suitable resources or technical help when issues arise. Others expressed they felt they lacked the proficiency or understanding of what is needed, which then impacted the support they could access. There is also a lack of consistent and accessible information on available resources. These resources vary by region and can be difficult to navigate, resulting in unequal access based on location.



**“Small organisations get sold proprietary tools that aren’t a good fit; we try to save these organisations money, push cloud migration, and avoid expensive printer contracts and similar traps.”** (Tech Sector Stakeholder)

### **Internal capacity constraints preventing access**

There is a lack of capacity to apply for and secure funding, particularly among smaller organisations. Frontline staff are skilled to deliver direct support but are less well placed to develop grant

## BARRIERS AND OPPORTUNITIES THE YOUTH SECTOR EXPERIENCE

applications and navigate their organisation's digital infrastructure needs. Time is often mentioned as a constraint, in terms of applying for funding, identifying their digital needs and prospective solutions and bringing these together within their organisation.

Youth organisations struggle with digital jargon and can lack understanding of the technology specifications they need to meet in their organisation. This complicates decision-making, leading to uncertainty about how to invest sensibly. For example, IVAR's evaluation of Comic Relief's 'Tech for Good: Build' programme had some useful insight. Comic Relief distributed grants of £70k to support 20 organisations through a 9-month programme to define, develop or repurpose digital tools, platforms and products that meet a social need and meaningfully improve service delivery (2022). When understanding the accessibility of the digital support offer as part of this programme (which included coaching calls with the Centre for Acceleration of Social Technology, online spaces with other funded partners, workshops and peer support meetups across a year) their evaluation found that 'experiences depended on internal resourcing and capacity, previous digital experience, and whether or not a digital partner was already on board' (Comic Relief, 2022).

### **Organisational culture and leadership challenges**

Organisational resistance and fear of change are significant obstacles. There is a widespread concern that digital approaches might replace a more traditional youth work approach, particularly the 'relational' element of youth work. This creates anxiety within leadership and amongst youth workers (NYA, 2025). Leadership and organisational culture heavily influence the integration of digital skills and investment in digital infrastructure, yet these factors often impede growth in digital capabilities (NYA, 2025). Further to this, the stakeholder interviews emphasised the importance of effective leadership in managing change management processes and being

proactive about addressing the digital needs within organisations. Having a digitally savvy leadership can be 'the' difference.

### **Ethical and philosophical concerns with digital integration**

Stakeholder consultation identified strongly that youth workers are often very person-centred in their approach and beliefs. There was concern about the perceived "corporate-led" digital push in the youth sector, with some organisations wary of large companies using youth work to address their workforce skill shortages. This creates some ethical discomfort around the commodification of digital skills. Fears around digital replacing human-centered approaches and a desire to preserve offline youth workspaces reflect a resistance to the "digital enthusiasm" agenda (Pawluczuk & Serban 2002).



**"There's all this narrative around, young people don't have enough digital skills, let's fix it with X coming into our community and purchasing our Youth Services."** (Youth Sector Stakeholder)

### **Regional disparities in support available for the youth sector**

The research found that there are regional variations in the support available to youth organisations for digital inclusion and infrastructure, with some areas benefiting from proactive local authority initiatives while others lack any digital inclusion strategies. This creates a "postcode lottery" for access. For instance, the West Midlands Combined Authority, Manchester Combined Authority and Leeds Local Authority all have digital strategies, make devices available to organisations in their area and put programmes in place (Good Things Foundation, 2024)

### Misalignment between the youth sector’s digital support needs and the tech sector’s offer

There appears to be a misalignment between the needs and requirements of the youth sector and those offered by the tech companies. There are some valuable and positive initiatives out there; the research identified CAST’s reuse of tech and open IP to reduce duplication and sharing of resources and Open Youth Infrastructure Initiative, which is a collaborative effort to create sustainable digital infrastructure for youth services. However, initiatives are sporadic and isolated offerings limited to access to the internet or software without hardware, software with no support, software with no training. Some software has been created with professionals in other youth-facing sectors in mind. For example, there is an assumption that software designed for the education sector is workable and appropriate for the youth sector. Pawluczuk and Şerban (2022) go further and suggest that tech solutions for the youth sector need to move beyond adapting commercial tools to building open-source platforms tailored to youth work’s unique value. Existing online platforms are intended for mass audiences, so youth workers should consider building their own digital tools, and creating or tweaking existing platforms, tools and media. This would tailor these solutions to youth work approaches and could ensure that they are fully safe, secure and aligned with youth work values. To achieve all this, smart and digital youth work should count on adequate funding and investment. (Pawluczuk and Şerban, 2022)

### Challenge around only the ‘positive narratives’ shared on organisations’ digital journey

The pressure to consistently promote positive digital outcomes can create “good practice fatigue,” where youth practitioners feel obligated to project digital success. This pressure can then deter realistic discussions and understanding of genuine barriers. This in turn prevents learning to be captured and realised in future digital solution development.



“There’s a continual need for positive stories and good practices - and there’s a fatigue of just pretending that we are all digitally empowered, you know? From kids to youth workers, everybody has to create this narrative of digital success” (Youth Sector Stakeholder)

### The potential opportunities for youth sector professionals in accessing digital infrastructure support

A number of opportunities have been identified to address and overcome the barriers outlined above. These are summarised in Figure 3, below, along with key findings from the research.

Figure 3: Potential opportunities for youth sector professionals in accessing support

| Opportunities                                                                    | Key findings                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Develop innovative funding and resource models specifically for the youth sector | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Youth and tech sector funders should adopt flexible grant models and explore minimum digital living standards to ensure equitable access to essential digital infrastructure for youth organisations.</li> </ul> |
| Improved resource visibility and streamlined access                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Creating clear, searchable repositories and AI-powered tools can help youth workers quickly find guidance and overcome barriers to digital support.</li> </ul>                                                   |
| Dedicated technical support and peer learning                                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Providing access to technical experts and peer networks can ease the burden on youth workers, promote standardised practices, and encourage collaborative problem-solving.</li> </ul>                            |
| Sharing realistic practice and digital journeys                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Openly sharing both successes and challenges in digital adoption helps youth practitioners learn practical strategies and build confidence in implementing technology.</li> </ul>                                |

### **Develop innovative funding and resource models specifically for the youth sector**

Stakeholders outlined that youth and tech sector funders should consider implementing greater flexibility in how digital inclusion and capital grants are used. This could significantly support youth organisations in need of essential digital infrastructure to ‘apply for what they need’. The UK Youth resilience fund model, for example, highlights a pathway whereby digital equipment and training are incorporated into broader organisational support (UK Youth, 2024).

An approach to consider is the development of minimum digital standard for the sector, it would potentially offer more consistent digital support across regions and more broadly in the sector. Using the framework of The Good Things Foundation the ‘Minimum digital living standards’ (MDLS). The MDLS act as a benchmark, developed with members of the public, for what households need to feel digitally included. They have a single MDLS, developed through a series of discussion groups with working age and pension-age households, and households with children, in urban and rural areas. Grounded in people’s lives, MDLS helps to focus on the holistic nature of digital inclusion and how this can achieve. There proposals of a minimum digital living standard includes having accessible internet, adequate equipment, and the skills and knowledge people need. It is about being able to communicate, connect, and engage with opportunities safely and with confidence (The Good Foundation, 2024). There is an opportunity to learn and build on this for the youth sector to develop minimal digital working standard.

### **Improved resource visibility and streamlined access**

Interviews with stakeholders outlined the need for clear, searchable resources, with the potentially for AI-powered support to help youth workers find answers to their digital queries. These resources would empower youth workers to self-solve or find help more quickly and efficiently. In turn this overcome barriers relating to ‘not knowing



where to go for help’ and give youth workers immediate access to guidance and support. Clear signposting to resources via a repository of guidance, tools and templates was also highlighted as an opportunity. If linked to regional digital support initiatives, this would make it easier to locate and access relevant support (CAST and NCS, 2025; Good Things Foundation, 2025).

Stakeholders mentioned Open Intellectual Property (Open IP), as a way to improve access and visibility in the youth sector. It involves making digital tools, resources, and knowledge freely available for reuse and adaptation. This approach relies on open licenses (such as Creative Commons licenses) and clear documentation, enabling organisations to build on existing work without legal or financial barriers. The wider adoption of Open IP principles would help youth organisations to reduce duplication and lower costs and would encourage sector-wide collaboration. Open IP also allows successful solutions to be scaled and adapted, supporting equity for smaller organisations that may lack the resources to invest in and embed custom technology.

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Interviews with stakeholders demonstrates how Open IP is applied through reusable technology projects and initiatives like Beats Bus and Warrington Youth Zone, which incorporate open licensing into AI and youth work tools. The Open Youth Infrastructure Initiative also promotes shared, open digital infrastructure to prevent fragmentation and support sustainable systems. While Open IP provides clear benefits, including cost efficiency, collaboration, and inclusivity, challenges remain. These include limited awareness, insufficient capacity for documentation, and the need for funder support to encourage open practices.

### **Dedicated technical support and peer learning**

Access to a pool of technical experts or peer support networks can provide essential, real-time help. This model could reduce the burden on individual youth workers to continuously upskill independently, offering relief from technical pressures. Peer support or collective learning in the youth sector would help to reduce duplication and naturally embed more standardised approaches (CAST and NCS, 2025). Peer support and knowledge sharing on specific issues (e.g. volunteer management and digital safety) helps bridge experience and skills gaps and offers a collaborative approach to common challenges (Good Things Foundation, 2025).

### **Sharing realistic practice and digital journeys**

For youth practitioners early on in their digital journey and/or those that lack confidence or knowledge of digital approaches, open sharing of their journey may help. Achieving digital success is not easy and youth practitioners identified through this research that spaces to share pitfalls, disappointments and learning as they embed digital solutions, as well as how these were resolved, would be more helpful than focussing on wholly positive narratives. Youth workers want to identify, share and learn from others on what is realistic when building digital infrastructure in their organisations.

### **Conclusion**

Youth sector professionals face a complex set of barriers in accessing digital infrastructure support, ranging from affordability and capacity constraints to regional disparities and misaligned offers from tech providers. The lack of consistent funding, especially for devices, connection, hardware and ongoing digital maintenance, is compounded by limited access to personalised technical support and knowledge gaps around digital tools. Organisational culture and leadership also play a pivotal role, with resistance to change and fear of digital replacing traditional youth work often stalling progress. These challenges are further exacerbated by the pressure to present positive digital narratives, which can obscure genuine struggles and prevent open learning.

Despite these barriers, there are promising opportunities to strengthen digital inclusion and collaboration across the youth sector. Innovative funding models that include wraparound support and specific funding for digital can help organisations invest in essential infrastructure. Clear, searchable resources and AI-powered support tools could streamline access to guidance, while peer learning networks and dedicated technical support can reduce the burden on individual practitioners. Learning from international practices, particularly those that prioritise process over impact metrics, offers a more sustainable and values-aligned approach to digital youth work.

Ultimately, the sector must embrace realistic digital journeys and foster environments where youth professionals can share both successes and setbacks. This shift would enable more authentic collaboration, better-informed digital strategies, and a stronger foundation for youth organisations to support young people effectively. By aligning funding, leadership, and support structures with the lived realities of youth work professionals, digital can become a powerful enabler of inclusive, responsive, and impactful youth work.

# Barriers the digital and tech sector experience

The relationship between the digital and tech sectors and youth sector professionals is marked by a series of structural, cultural, and practical barriers that hinder meaningful collaboration. While both sectors aim to support young people, their differing values, engagement models, and operational realities often result in a misalignment that inhibits collaborative working. This section explores the key challenges faced by the tech sector when engaging with youth organisations, including issues around investment decisions, communication, technical capacity and product design. It highlights the need for more tailored, sustained, and co-designed approaches. This section primarily draws on the evidence generated from the stakeholder consultation interviews with digital and tech sector experts.

## Disconnect between digital and tech and youth sector values and goals

A recurring theme is the cultural and values misalignment between the two sectors, as outlined from the youth sector perspective in the previous chapters. One of the most prominent challenges is the cultural disconnect between the ethos of youth work and the commercial priorities of digital and tech companies. Youth organisations often operate on principles of trust, relational engagement, creation of safe spaces and safeguarding, which interviewees felt can clash with the fast-paced, mass engagement, profit-driven nature of the tech sector. Stakeholder consultation interviews with digital and tech sector experts found that tech companies often operate with a scalable impact mindset, while youth organisations prioritise local, relational and long-term outcomes.



**“There are diverging values and ideas around what’s possible and what kind of impact can be expected and evidenced.”** (Youth Sector Stakeholder)

The stakeholders consulted felt this misalignment leads to scepticism among youth work professionals, who may question the motives behind digital and tech sector interventions. They feel that digital tools are not always designed with youth sector context or values in mind or fail to acknowledge the interests and needs of young people and the complex and varied nature of youth work provision. Stakeholders expressed that youth work professionals are one of least engaged charity sectors and that there is an opportunity to better align around a shared vision for young people and ethical requirements. As well as expressing that they need a better understanding of the youth sector structure and the way they function, to ensure relevance. For example, one stakeholder acknowledged how many tech platforms are designed with hierarchical structures that conflict with the flat, collaborative governance models preferred by youth organisations. They noted that pricing models for tech solutions often assume that the solution or platform will have a few users with full access and many with limited access. This becomes prohibitively expensive when organisations with relatively flat staffing structures want equitable access for all team members.

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**“Tech companies are looking for reach, reputation, and brand [...] they want to partner with organisations that have dominance in digital delivery and can scale.”** (Youth Sector Stakeholder)

### Limited understanding of youth work

Tech professionals often have limited understanding of the informal and relational nature of youth work. Unlike formal education, youth work relies on voluntary engagement and trust-building, which does not guarantee quick or large-scale impact. Tech companies accustomed to structured, measures-driven environments often struggle to appreciate this fluid approach. As a result, solutions proposed by tech firms may be overly rigid or fail to address the nuanced needs of youth work and young people.



**“Digital/Tech professionals tend to latch onto activities they recognise, but don’t always understand the relational practice that sits underneath.”** (Youth Sector Stakeholder)

### Lack of ongoing communications and dialogue with the youth sector

Linked to this is that youth work and tech sectors rarely encounter each other in daily operations, creating a natural disconnect. This lack of interaction fosters assumptions about each other’s capacities and limitations, often leading to misunderstandings about what the other sector can or cannot achieve. Without structured opportunities for collaboration, the sectors will remain siloed, limiting mutual understanding and potential scope for meaningful collaboration.



**“There’s always challenges with signing off on a project [...] quite a long lead-in time with lots of red tape, and then it becomes a rush to do the work.”** (Tech Sector Stakeholder)

Where collaborations are taking place or digital or tech solutions are available for youth organisations, the collaborations are often one off, with no sustained communication or legacy planning and fragmented and outcomes driven engagement. One stakeholder outlined that involving young people and practitioners early in the design of tech solutions fosters ownership, relevance and communication links among the tech and youth sectors. Some good examples identified include [Camden Giving](#)’s youth-led funding tool and [Promo Cymru’s model](#) of embedding young people in design teams project. There is an assumption that standardised digital tools and solutions developed for other sectors working with young people, such as education, are workable in the youth sector. This points further to a lack of understanding of youth work principles and practice, which could be addressed through better collaboration and deeper, more regular communication. One stakeholder noted that while their resources are widely used by parents and teachers, youth workers are often unaware of them or unsure how to adapt them. This points to a broader communication gap between tech providers and youth work professionals, where existing tools are not effectively translated or disseminated.

### Sector funding structures and models differ

Funding structures themselves present further obstacles for the tech and digital sector in engaging with youth work professionals. The tech sector is often interested in innovative solutions and concept testing with the view to attract and engage high numbers of young people or youth organisations once developed to recoup their costs and grow their customer base.

The other side of tech and digital companies’ contribution is supporting sectors such as the youth sector with digital infrastructure to resolve the digital divide. Often these initiatives rely on short-term, time limited grants or project-based funding models which lead to initiatives that are unsustainable beyond their initial phase. This results in a lack of legacy infrastructure, where

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promising and needed digital tools or platforms disappear once funding ends. The lack of sustainable funding and product design and infrastructure investment initiatives are driven by tech and digital companies lack understanding of the needs of youth sector.

“Private sector tech companies have to prioritise their commercial priorities [...] it’s only after they reach a certain stage of profitability that they turn attention to socially impactful things.” (Tech Sector Stakeholder)

One stakeholder cited the example of the [youth card initiative](#), which went through multiple iterations and partnerships—including with Be Inspired, Speakers for Schools, and CitizenCard—but ultimately lacked sustainability due to fragmented funding and organisational closures. Similarly, the stakeholder shared that, while their project produced innovative AI tools co-designed with youth organisations, scaling them post-funding has been difficult without continued investment and often the number of users they could reach is not deemed sufficient for the large digital and tech companies to invest in.

### Misunderstanding of the youth sector’s technical capacity

The stakeholders emphasised that youth organisations often lack the technical capacity or the basic infrastructure to implement or adapt digital tools, as outlined in previous chapters. Even when tech companies offer free or discounted services, the integration process is complex and can be resource intensive. They outlined that a lack of technical understanding and experience in tech and digital solutions means initial engagement and working together can be difficult, and can cause both parties to disengage.

“Most charities won’t necessarily have the in-house technical capability to do an integration [...] It’s quite a big ask for the private sector company to deploy their own resources to help.” (Youth Sector Stakeholder)

Engagement between the sectors is further complicated by a lack of understanding of youth work and digital needs. Digital and tech companies often group youth organisations with a wide range third sector organisations, overlooking the specific needs and nuances of youth work. The work that youth organisations do and how they do it is more important than their legal status. This generalisation leads to missed opportunities for meaningful engagement, tailored support and a misconception that services or products offered to the third sector more broadly are naturally fit for purpose for youth organisations. So, there is a perception among the digital and tech sector that proficient products, tools and service are available.



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Conversely, youth organisations may be unaware of available tech resources or unsure how to access them as communication is not directed at them. One stakeholder outlined that from their experience there is a clear need for intermediaries—organisations that understand both sectors and can broker effective partnerships. Bodies like CAST, Catalyst, and the Raspberry Pi Foundation have played this role in some contexts, but more youth sector-specific intermediaries are needed to facilitate collaboration at scale. This point was reinforced by another stakeholder who outlined that there is equipment, hardware, software, digital solutions and training available for third sector organisations.

Unlike schools or other formal education settings, youth organisations often lack the funding and staffing to support digital transformation. Even when digital tools are available, youth workers may not have the headspace or support to implement them effectively. One interviewee highlighted that, without backfilling staff time or providing ongoing support, digital projects risk losing momentum and failure. The voluntary nature of youth engagement also means that digital solutions must be flexible, responsive, and co-designed with young people to ensure relevance and uptake. This is something that tech companies struggle to accommodate without deeper collaboration and understanding of youth work principles.

### **Products and services available are misaligned with the youth sector's requirements**

Products and service are often misaligned with what the youth sector truly needs. Stakeholders mentioned that many digital tools such as Digital Matters' free online tool, AI literacy courses (Google) and a range of safeguarding, safety and mis- and disinformation training and learning offered by tech and digital companies are designed for corporate, charity or educational settings. They are not easily adaptable to youth work environments. Youth organisations

## BARRIERS THE DIGITAL AND TECH SECTOR EXPERIENCE

often lack the technical capacity to implement or customise these tools, and tech companies may not have the resources or incentives to provide the necessary support. This results in digital products being underused or abandoned. The barrier here is the misalignment of products and services but also that tech and digital companies have limited understanding of youth work requirements. One interviewee noted that youth workers often lack confidence in delivering digital experiences, and that tech partners had to adapt significantly to meet the varying capacities of youth organisations. They emphasised the importance of co-design and cited the success of tools like the AI-powered reflection app, which was developed with direct input from youth workers and young people.

### **Misaligned engagement approaches between sectors**

A key barrier to collaboration between the tech and youth sectors is the different approaches used for engagement. Tech companies often design for a captive audience, while youth organisations work with a voluntary audience. Youth work is built on trust, relationships, and consent, meaning young people choose to engage and can opt out at any time. This contrasts with tech platforms that assume more consistent user engagement and hierarchical control structures. One stakeholder noted that many tech tools are designed with tiered access and permissions, which clashes with youth organisations' values of equitable participation and shared ownership. This misalignment makes it difficult for youth organisations to adopt digital tools that reflect their ethos.

### **Conclusion**

The tech sector experiences persistent barriers when engaging with youth organisations, primarily due to cultural misalignment and structural disconnects. Tech companies often operate with commercial priorities, scalability, and hierarchical product designs, which clash with youth work's ethos of trust, safeguarding, and equitable participation. This divergence creates scepticism among youth professionals and results in tools that fail to reflect the relational and voluntary nature of youth engagement. Additionally, collaborations are typically short-term and fragmented, with limited legacy planning, while funding models prioritize innovation over sustainability.

Practical challenges compound these issues. Many youth organisations lack technical capacity and infrastructure, making integration of digital tools resource-intensive, even when offered at low cost. Tech companies often group youth organisations with general charities, overlooking their unique needs and engagement models, which leads to product misalignment and underuse. Furthermore, the absence of co-design processes means solutions rarely resonate with youth workers or young people. Co-designing tools with youth workers and young people, adapting products to fit youth work environments, and ensuring equitable access are essential steps. Moreover, intermediaries that understand both sectors can play a vital role in bridging gaps, translating resources, and facilitating sustained dialogue. This will not only improve uptake and impact but also ensure that digital transformation in the youth sector is ethical, sustainable, and rooted in the lived realities of young people.

# Using digital to improve collaboration

In trying to understand the role that digital can play to improve collaboration between professionals (from the education, justice, social care, health and housing sector) supporting young people, the focus was to draw out the features which enabled the collaboration to flourish. This chapter refers to existing examples and practices that were highlighted by the stakeholders we consulted with. However, these examples are not fully representative of these diverse sectors.

We start here from premise that, to be effective, youth work needs professional youth workers to collaborate with other sectors such as education, health, and social care. By interacting with other sectors, youth workers connect young people with suitable opportunities and services. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that integrated working between these services is too often absent from the everyday experience of youth workers. These issues are greatly exacerbated by issues of digital inequality, a lack of digital infrastructure across the youth sector and limited use of digital tools and platforms to foster improved collaboration between professionals supporting young people.

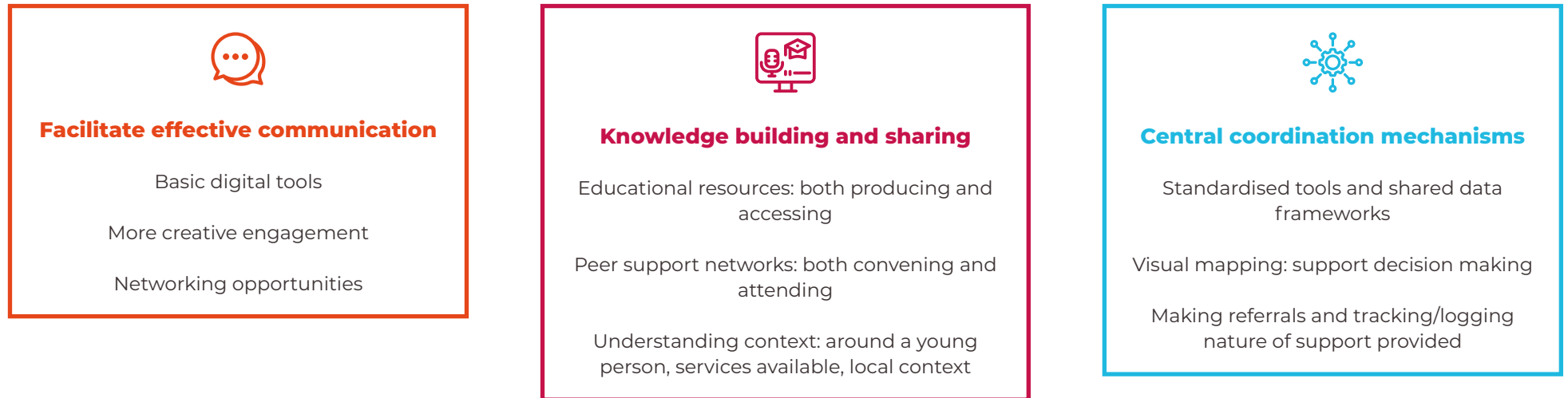
This section of the report draws on insights collated at UK Youth's [Joined Up Summit](#) held in November 2024. The inaugural Joined Up Summit welcomed more than 500 leaders and decision-makers from the worlds of employment, social care, criminal justice, health, education, business, the Government and youth work, alongside 16-25-year-olds. It aimed to build a brighter future for young people, by putting their needs first and divides across sectors and professions second. At the Joined Up Summit, evidence met action to unlock what works for young people and drive transformative change across sectors. By sharing effective examples of cross-sector

initiatives that are making a difference for young people, UK Youth aimed to forge new partnerships, and drive collective action.

Through this research, we ran a specific digital co-creation lab at the Joined Up Summit, convening approximately 50 cross-sector partners and young people to ask and explore – ‘How can we scale digital solutions to drive better cross sector collaboration and outcomes for young people?’ The outcomes, learning and insight from this session are included in this section along with analysis from stakeholder interviews and evidence review findings. Figure 4 summaries what we found: the ways in which digital can improve and facilitate better collaboration between professionals supporting young people and what enables this.

## USING DIGITAL TO IMPROVE COLLABORATION

Figure 4: Ways in which digital tools and platforms improves collaboration



### Support with facilitating effective communication

At a very basic level, youth practitioners use digital and technology to partner and collaborate with other organisations and sectors. This enables them to better engage young people and deliver high quality provision. This is often about being able to communicate, coordinate, share information and plan effectively on collective work and joint ventures. This can simply be about providing the right, joined-up support to individual young people. Digital is used to facilitate effective communication in the following ways:

- ✓ **Basic/everyday communication** - Digital platforms such as email, WhatsApp, and video conferencing tools (like Zoom) serve as fundamental communication channels that enable youth practitioners to connect, share updates, and coordinate efforts with other organisations (NCS, 2024, DCMS, 2025).
- ✓ **Creative engagement** - social media can be leveraged to tag partners, raise the profile of young people, showcase collaborative projects, and create engaging content that demonstrates the impact of joint efforts (NCS, 2024).
- ✓ **Networking opportunities** - Digital platforms can facilitate networking events and collaborative initiatives that bring together youth workers, tech professionals, and funders, fostering connections that might not occur organically.
- ✓ **Cross-sector collaboration** - Digital initiatives can connect youth organisations with tech companies and other sectors, enabling partnerships that leverage diverse skills and resources to support young people.

## USING DIGITAL TO IMPROVE COLLABORATION



“Digital platforms such as email, WhatsApp, and video conferencing tools serve as fundamental communication channels that enable youth practitioners to connect, share updates, and coordinate efforts with other organisations.” (Youth Sector Stakeholder)

However, there is some frustration that different agencies and sectors are not committed to using the same or compatible digital tools and platforms and that the full potential of technology is not being realised, due to some of the barriers and needs identified in the previous chapters (NCS, 2024, DCMS, 2025).



“Digital platforms can facilitate networking events and collaborative initiatives that bring together youth workers, tech professionals, and funders, fostering connections that might not occur organically.” (Youth Sector Stakeholder)

### Improve knowledge building and sharing between professionals

Digital tools and technology are used by youth practitioners in a range of ways to improve understanding of the context around young people and the role that youth work is playing in their lives. The following examples were mentioned by stakeholders:

- ✓ **Educational resources** - Digital platforms can provide resources and training that enhance understanding of youth work principles with the other sectors that support young people, fostering a shared vocabulary and common goals.
- ✓ **Peer support networks** - Digital communities can facilitate peer-to-peer learning among youth workers and other professionals, helping them share insights especially around what works for engaging and supporting different groups of young people and experiences that build mutual understanding and collaborative working (CAST & NCS, 2025).



“Often people find it really useful to hear from each other around a specific themed session, sharing soft knowledge through peer support mechanisms.” (Youth Sector Stakeholder)

- ✓ **Understanding of youth and local context** - Youth workers identified a need for information about the services local authorities offered as well as information on wider youth support services to be easily accessible to all in a single online site. Understanding what support services exist and how to access them ensures youth workers can signpost young people effectively. Creating a shared directory of services helps ensure that referrals are made efficiently but these can be resource intensive to maintain. This could be linked to local authority statutory duty to publicise information, as outlined in the statutory guidance for local authorities on services to improve young people’s well-being for the youth sector as well as linking with other sector relevant duties.
- ✓ **Game-changing technologies** - Digital innovations like AI-driven chatbots and centralised online directories can provide real-time support and information access for young people in crisis, while also enhancing collaboration among agencies.



“AI-powered tools could provide out-of-hours support and streamline processes, freeing up time for collaboration and direct youth engagement.” (Youth Sector Stakeholder)

### Central coordination mechanism to support effective collaborative support for young people

Youth practitioners and stakeholders consulted expressed that embedding centralised digital tools is one of the most important and helpful ways to improve collaboration between the professionals supporting young people. The centralised tools suggested broadly fell into six categories: standardised digital tools

## USING DIGITAL TO IMPROVE COLLABORATION

and shared data frameworks; visual mapping to support decision making; better tools for managing and tracking referrals, a tool for managing and logging incidents (NCS, 2024; DCMS, 2025; Open Youth Infrastructure, 2025). From a synthesis of the evidence, we elaborate further on each of these below.

- 01 Multi-agency online platforms** - Centralised digital tools can streamline communication and coordination among various organisations across sectors, making it easier to manage referrals, share information, and align efforts toward common goals to support young people.
- 02 Standardised case management tools** - Developing standardised platforms for the youth sector and other sectors (or at least develop ways to integrate them) for information sharing can reduce fragmentation, making it easier for all stakeholders to collaborate effectively. These platforms can also ensure better coordination and tracking of young people's progress.
- 03 Shared data frameworks** - Digital tools can facilitate the development of shared impact frameworks that help organisations to collect and analyse data. This enables data-informed decision-making and better strategic planning.
- 04 Visual mapping tools** - Utilising data visualisation tools (e.g. heatmaps) to share local demographic data can help identify areas of need, fostering discussions about resource allocation and collaborative interventions.
- 05 Automate data sharing agreements** - One of the issues identified in the research is the nervousness and reluctance of youth practitioners to share information on young people, at individual and collective levels. They are concerned about - and want clarity around - what can and cannot be shared with other partners. So, an online tool that automatically checks and

validates sharing agreements, would address the initial hurdle that prevents collaboration from taking place. This would ensure the security of information sharing.

- 06 Improve referral pathways** - Digital can be used to improve referral pathways and share information with other organisations and sectors. However, there is some frustration that different agencies and sectors are not committed to using the same digital tools and platforms for this and that the full potential of technology is not being realised (NCS, 2024; DCMS, 2025). The Plinth system was mentioned by one practitioner who highlighted that it enables more efficient referrals between sectors; stating professionals like social workers can refer using Plinth in their area (Islington) during the school holidays and that this was working relatively well.

 **“The biggest gamechangers identified to collaborate and partner with other organisations and sectors would be using digital innovations to ensure the security of information sharing; centralised online directories and centralised multi-agency platforms to improve coordination and communication.”** (Youth Sector Stakeholder)


 **“Making it easier to find and be found by other organisations through a central online directory would significantly improve collaboration.”** (Youth Sector Stakeholder)

Figure 5, presents some examples of digital tools and platforms that are being used to improve and facilitate better collaboration between professionals supporting young people. These tools and platforms illustrate how they are used to facilitate more effective communication, knowledge sharing and building and better coordination in collaborative work with allied sectors.

## USING DIGITAL TO IMPROVE COLLABORATION

Figure 5: Some of the examples identified, note this list is not exhaustive

### Children's University – mapping and database of youth provision

Children's University lists certified enrichment providers in local areas that schools can search through to identify providers for new partnerships. This removes a barrier that schools face in forming new enrichment partnerships, namely the capacity to identify local enrichment providers and assess their quality.

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### Brighton and Hove wellbeing centralised referral system

Children and young people who are socially isolated or at risk of social isolation are referred by either their GP, friends and family, school or CAMHS to YMCA Downlink in Brighton and Hove via an online portal. A YMCA Downlink Link Worker then uses the portal to 'triage' young people to the most appropriate service. These services include youth clubs, young carers clubs, Sussex Night Stop, counselling or English Language support. All referrals come through a centralised system which is found on the Brighton and Hove Wellbeing website.

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### Digital tool to support consistent essential skills development

The Skills Builder Partnership is dedicated to ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to develop essential skills. These skills include teamwork, leadership, problem-solving, creativity, listening, speaking, aiming high, and staying positive.

By focusing on these essential skills, the Skills Builder Partnership aims to improve individuals' employability, life satisfaction, and overall well-being. This framework is used by schools, colleges, universities, and businesses across the globe to support personal and professional development. The Skills Builder Partnership leverages digital tools to support skill development and learning. The Skills Builder Partnership has a vast network of over 900 leading organisations across education, employment, and the third sector.

### Online portal to support young people with mental health needs

BFB labs work closely with NHS, Local Authority and VCSE partners to meet the mental health needs of children and young people at a time of unprecedented demand. Their purpose is to collaboratively reduce wait times significantly, make therapeutic services more accessible, more equitable, and improve service user outcomes and experience, by providing an innovative digital route to support for children across communities.

Their VitaMind Hub is a digital platform designed for professionals working with young people's mental health. This secure online portal allows professionals to manage users, track progress, and provide tailored support to young people using BFB Labs' digital therapeutic interventions.

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### Data sharing digital platform

The Wales Violence Prevention Unit has launched a new tool to improve collaboration and data analysis among various agencies involved in violence prevention. This tool aims to enhance the understanding of violence trends and inform evidence-based interventions. By providing access to a wider range of data sources and improving data analysis capabilities, the tool will help to identify high-risk areas and target resources effectively. This initiative is expected to strengthen multi-agency collaboration and ultimately contribute to a reduction in violence in Wales.

The digital platform holds anonymised data on violence in Wales, and allows users to aggregate and present different data sources using a variety of mediums including graphs, charts, tables, reports, and interactive maps of local and national areas.

Currently the Portal brings together data from multiple sources, including hospital admissions and ambulance call-out data for Wales, and emergency department assault attendances and police-recorded crime data for South Wales.

### **Conclusion**

Digital technology has a vital role to play in improving collaboration between professionals supporting young people, particularly across sectors such as education, health, justice, housing, and social care. It enables more effective communication, facilitates knowledge sharing, and supports coordinated action through tools like shared directories, case management systems, and referral platforms. When used well, digital solutions can streamline processes, enhance understanding of local contexts, and foster more responsive and joined-up support for young people. However, the full potential of digital is not being realised due to inconsistent platform use, lack of standardisation, and concerns around data sharing and security.

Crucially, digital must be seen not just as a technical fix but as a strategic enabler and one that strengthens relationships, improves outcomes, and empowers professionals to work together more effectively in service of young people's needs.

# Role of youth organisations in facilitating young people's online safety











Attention now turns to a particular aspect of youth work: the role of youth organisations and youth workers in facilitating young people's online safety. We know that young people's lives are increasingly shaped by online environments, while these spaces offer opportunities for learning and social connection, they also expose young people to significant risks such as misinformation and disinformation; online grooming and sextortion; exposure to harmful or extremist content and cyberbullying and privacy breaches. Youth organisations play a critical and indispensable role in addressing these challenges. Youth workers are an essential part of the eco-system around young people and provide a unique role that differs from carers or teachers due to their position outside of formal systems and their professional knowledge of youth-led, creative and engaging approaches to informal education.


The exploration of the role of youth organisations in facilitating young people's online safety draws on findings generated from the evidence review and stakeholder consultation interviews.


## Educating young people on online safety

Youth practitioners and stakeholders outlined that they are helping young people to stay safe online by educating them on online safety. Many deliver sessions that enable young people to understand online risk, be better prepared to manage it and be safer consumers of digital. This, as outlined in the Digital Youth Work Standard, can include supporting young people to develop digital skills, to use technology responsibly, to look after their wellbeing and to stay safe and secure online (NYA,2025).

## The types of sessions identified included:

-  Digital or social media literacy
-  Mis/ disinformation awareness
-  Managing accounts safely - setting passwords and privacy controls, data protection
-  Navigating safely online
-  Self-protection from cyber bullying
-  Cyber resilience
-  Advice on how to approach viral content
-  How to be a good person online
-  Developing critical thinking skills - not being quick to accept online content as truth and to assess risk
-  Political education and developing young people's skills to assess risk


 **“Delivering media literacy sessions focusing on the importance and practicalities of setting passwords, navigating safely online and self-protection from cyber bullying.”** (Youth Sector Stakeholder)

 **“For some, this includes advice on how to approach viral content, how to be a good person online, critical thinking skills, not being quick to accept online content as truth, and political education.”** (Youth Sector Stakeholder)

 **“The internet can be a playground or a minefield—the difference lies in awareness.”** (Youth Sector Stakeholder)

### **Offering safe spaces for informal learning and education**

Youth workers are crucial in creating spaces where young people feel comfortable discussing online risks and sharing their concerns about exposure to harmful content. This kind of openness is often missing in formal education settings, where online safety programmes may be more restrictive and less personal. The formality of education setting may prevent open discussion about online content, any issues or concerns in relation to online activity (NCS, 2025). These, youth led spaces often encourage use of interactive methods such as games and peer-led sessions to avoid ‘boring’ approaches to learning on online safety.

 **“Youth workers, and specifically digital youth workers, are creating the space where young people can share the issues and risks, they are exposed to—spaces that are rare to find in school settings.”** (Youth Sector Stakeholder)

 **“Young people don’t need more apps—they need more guidance.”** (Youth Sector Stakeholder)

### **Supporting young people’s personal development**

Youth organisations also support young people develop their personal, social and emotional skills, expanding their horizons and equipping them to engage with challenging situations on and offline. For example, the development of citizenship skills is relevant to young people’s online safety as it provides transferable understanding and critical thought that is applicable to online and offline life. Online safety is increasingly viewed as an extension of broader citizenship skills and youth workers help young people apply principles of good digital citizenship, respecting others online and understanding the impacts of misinformation. These skills have real-world applications, from respectful community interactions to navigating workplace environments (NCS, 2025). An example of youth work-led approaches is the Be Internet Citizens programme funded by Google. It highlights the importance of digital citizenship education for young people and the need for programmes that promote critical thinking, online safety, and positive engagement to help young people navigate the complexities of the online world responsibly (UK Youth, 2020).

### **Offering personalised and tailored support**

The informal, young person-driven and optional nature of youth work allows for a more responsive and tailored approach to preventing and responding to safeguarding issues. Youth workers operate in informal settings, which allows them to build trust and create safe spaces for open conversations about online risks - something often missing in other settings such as schools. They provide opportunities for young people to employ their digital skills responsibly. These opportunities might include video or podcast production or social media takeovers. It is essential to take a personalised, young person centred approach to online safety, which is where youth workers’ skills are especially relevant (Hammond, Polizzi and Bartholomew, 2022).

## ROLE OF YOUTH ORGANISATIONS IN FACILITATING YOUNG PEOPLE'S ONLINE SAFETY

 **“A youth worker’s greatest tool is trust; everything else follows.”** (Youth Sector Stakeholder)

 **“Support isn’t one-size-fits-all—it starts with listening to what young people need.”** (Youth Sector Stakeholder)

 **“The best support adapts to the individual, not the other way around.”** (Youth Sector Stakeholder)

### **Youth work practices to manage safety concerns**

Youth organisations and youth workers must follow the safeguarding laws and principles that apply to anyone working with young people and the wider child protection legislation and statutory guidance relating to online safety. This includes preventing and responding to online harm and risks. Youth workers have a role and responsibility in responding to safeguarding risks as they arise, implementing privacy controls, monitoring content on youth-accessible platforms, and facilitating online safeguarding disclosures in a secure way. They also assess risks associated with digital activities and restrict certain online functions to maintain a safe environment for young people (NCS, 2025).


Youth organisations must ensure they have appropriate safeguarding processes, policies and practices in place for risks to be recognised and managed. This includes being able to handle digital disclosures and may include having an online platform for young people to make safeguarding disclosures if they prefer this over in-person disclosure. There are important considerations for youth organisations in how they: monitor online content; manage the membership and content on youth club WhatsApp groups or video call chats; and ensure privacy controls are in place and risk assess activities that have an online/digital component. (NCS, 2025; NYA, 2025)

 **“Digital safeguarding starts with trust, not technology.”** (Youth Sector Stakeholder)

 **“Youth work in the digital age means guiding—not controlling—young people’s online journeys.”** (Youth Sector Stakeholder)

### **Working across sectors to ensure the most appropriate support is available**


As outlined in the research conducted by DCMS ‘Youth Worker Interactions with Other Sectors: Better Understanding Multi-Agency Working to support Young People’, youth workers are connectors across sectors. They have the skills, motivations and experience to interact with other sectors to support young people. Their ability to build trusted relationships and navigate complex systems makes them indispensable in early intervention support. (SQW and UK Youth, 2025). In supporting young people’s online safety, they are working across sectors with other charities and businesses (including the tech sector) to keep up with developments and young people’s needs. Youth workers connect with tech companies and online safety bodies and charities by subscribing to newsletters; attending training; and using existing resources. This supports their understanding and knowledge of current and emerging online safety issues, better equipping them to educate young people and signpost them to high quality training offered by other organisations.

 **“Collaboration isn’t optional, it’s the only way to keep pace with a fast-changing digital world.”** (Tech Sector Stakeholder)

Youth organisations are central to building digital resilience and safeguarding young people online. Their informal, relational approach complements formal education and policy frameworks, making them key partners in creating a safer digital world. To maximise impact, investment in training, resources, and cross-sector collaboration is essential.

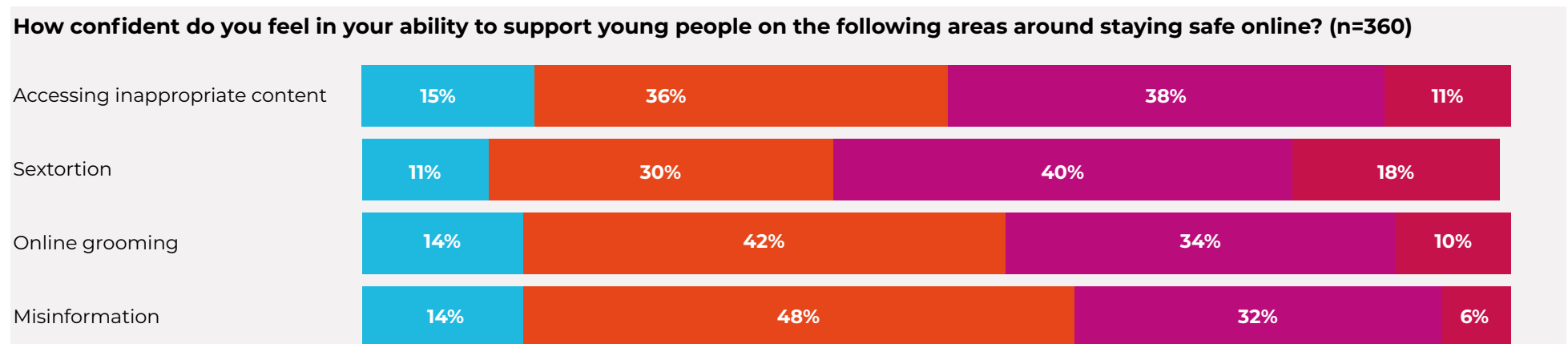
**Continuous professional development and learning for youth workers**

Youth workers recognise their responsibility in this area but face confidence and skills gaps. They acknowledge that they need continual training to stay updated on online safety issues, social media trends, and recent technologies in order to support young people. For example, in research conducted by the National Youth Agency, practitioners rated themselves highly on their understanding of online harms and digital safeguarding but felt their understanding of AI was lacking, highlighting the need for ongoing skills development in emerging digital areas (NYA, 2025).

 **“In a fast-changing world, youth workers don’t need to know everything—they need to stay curious.”** (Youth Sector Stakeholder)

In addition, the UK Youth ‘Just One Question’ on digital confidence found around half of youth workers don’t feel confident in their ability to support young people to deal with the impacts of a range of online risks/harms. This includes misinformation, online grooming, sextortion, or accessing inappropriate content, as illustrated in figure 6. They were most confident in supporting young people to deal with online misinformation; 62% of respondents were either confident or very confident in this area. However, the area that had the highest proportion of youth workers who are ‘very confident’ was around accessing inappropriate content (15% very confident, 36% confident). Youth workers indicated that they were least confident in their ability to support young people with online sextortion. Around 1 in 5 respondents felt ‘not at all confident’ in this area.

Figure 6: Confidence levels on online safety



Source: UK Youth ‘Just One Question’ (September, 2024)

## ROLE OF YOUTH ORGANISATIONS IN FACILITATING YOUNG PEOPLE'S ONLINE SAFETY

### Importance of using existing national resources

Youth workers use external resources and organisations for guidance on online safety protocols, training materials, and updated practices. Such resources help equip both youth workers and young people with relevant tools and advice, such as managing privacy settings and addressing online harassment (NCS 2025; SWGfL, 2024). Figure 7 lists the resources and programmes youth practitioners mentioned they used in building their understanding of how to support young people.

Figure 7: Resources and programmes mentioned

| Topic area                      | Organisation   | What is it?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|---------------------------------|----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| All                             | Childnet       | Childnet have pulled together lots of useful information and guidance around a really broad range of topics. These have information that is tailored to both practitioners and young people themselves. It's a really useful starting point. |
| All                             | NCSPCC         | Paid for CPD course (£30 per person) to gain the skills and confidence to keep children safe online and respond to any concern.                                                                                                              |
| General                         | Samaritans     | Online safety campaign with accompanying information for young people (co-created with young people). Key topics covered are digital citizenships, finding safe spaces online, and how to support other people online.                       |
| General + Misinformation        | NYA            | Free CPD course on Media Literacy and Digital Youth Work. More information about the modules contained within this course is available here.[?]                                                                                              |
| Accessing inappropriate content | Catch22        | Free posters on the best tools to control/monitor what content young people can access online. More targeted for parents/carers.                                                                                                             |
| Sextortion                      | Safer Internet | Advice, guidance and resource for parents and professionals on how to support young people experiencing sextortion.                                                                                                                          |

Source: UK Youth Just One Question (September, 2024)

### **Conclusion**

Youth organisations play a critical role in addressing these challenges by fostering digital resilience and providing child-centred support. Their work goes beyond the nuclear family and formal education, engaging communities to create safe environments and equipping young people with skills to navigate online spaces responsibly. Youth workers' personalised approach helps young people build confidence, understand risks, and develop coping strategies. Specifically, their role includes educating young people on online safety, offering safe spaces for informal learning/education, supporting young people's personal development and offering personalised and tailored support.

Youth work provides flexibility and responsiveness, enabling practitioners to address emerging risks such as misinformation, grooming, and cyberbullying while promoting positive engagement online. These efforts are complemented by cross-sector collaboration, ensuring that youth workers remain connected to evolving technologies and best practices. To maximise impact, the sector must prioritise capacity building, skills development and leveraging national resources. By doing so, youth organisations can strengthen digital resilience and empower young people to navigate online spaces safely and responsibly.

# Conclusions and recommendations

The conclusions and recommendations are presented under four core themes that emerged from the triangulation of evidence. These themes link closely to the five research objectives. The four themes are: Addressing the digital infrastructure gaps and barriers encountered by the digital and tech sector; prospective ways of improving collaboration through tech and digital solutions, Joined Up' solutions to tackling digital inequality and fostering the crucial role of youth workers in online safety.

## Conclusions

### Addressing the digital infrastructure gaps

This section presents the conclusions relating to research objective 1: Identifying the digital gaps, needs and preferences of youth organisations working to support young people and research objective 2: Identifying the barriers and opportunities for youth sector professionals accessing digital infrastructure support.

The findings highlight that youth organisations encounter significant and interrelated challenges in developing their digital infrastructure. Many lack even the most basic resources, such as reliable devices, connectivity, and core tools like CRM systems or secure data storage. These gaps severely limit their ability to deliver services and support young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds who rely on youth organisations for digital access. While the youth sector recognises the importance of digital investment, financial constraints and competing priorities such as meeting young people's immediate needs for food and hygiene, mean that digital development is often sporadic, reactive and ad hoc rather than strategic. Without coordinated leadership and collaboration, the youth organisations will struggle to adapt, innovate, and deliver the outcomes that young people deserve in a digital age and risk falling further behind as technology evolves.

Capacity and skills gaps compound these infrastructure issues. A large proportion of youth workers lack confidence and training in digital tools, and many feel unprepared for emerging technologies despite acknowledging their relevance. Leadership and organisational culture also influence outcomes; resistance to change and fears that digital approaches could undermine traditional relational youth work create further barriers to adoption.

### Core barriers and opportunities

The barriers youth sector professionals face in accessing digital infrastructure support are not just technical they are structural, cultural, and systemic. Without targeted interventions, these challenges will continue to limit the sector's ability to innovate, scale, and meet the evolving needs of young people. The disconnect between funders and practitioners, regional inequalities, and lack of tailored support mean that digital inclusion remains uneven and fragile. Addressing these issues is essential not just for operational efficiency, but for equity, access, and the long-term sustainability of youth services.

Funding structures and support models exacerbate these challenges. Existing grants and funding pots rarely cover digital infrastructure as a core expense and, where funding is available, it is often short-term and project-based, leading to unsustainable

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

initiatives. Misalignment between tech company offers and youth sector needs, such as tools designed for education or corporate settings, results in products that are difficult to implement and become underused.

Despite these barriers, there are clear opportunities to strengthen digital inclusion and collaboration. Innovative funding models that integrate digital infrastructure into broader organisational support, alongside clear resource repositories and AI-powered guidance tools, could significantly improve access. Peer learning networks and dedicated technical support would reduce the burden on individual practitioners. Embracing realistic digital journeys, where challenges and failures are openly discussed, can help build trust and inform better strategies and collaboration.

### **The barriers the digital and tech sector experience engaging with youth sector professionals**

The tech sector experiences persistent barriers when engaging with youth organisations, primarily due to cultural misalignment and structural disconnects. Tech companies often operate with commercial priorities, scalability, and hierarchical product designs, which clash with youth work's ethos of trust, safeguarding, and equitable participation. This divergence creates scepticism among youth professionals and results in tools that fail to reflect the relational and voluntary nature of youth engagement. Additionally, collaborations are typically short-term and fragmented, with limited legacy planning, while funding models prioritise innovation over sustainability.

Practical challenges compound these issues. Many youth organisations lack technical capacity and infrastructure, making integration of digital tools resource-intensive even when offered at low cost. Tech companies often see youth organisations as comparable with a broader spectrum of third sector organisations, overlooking their unique needs and engagement models. This leads to product misalignment and underuse. Furthermore, the

absence of co-design processes means that tech solutions can fail to resonate with youth workers or young people. Co-designing tools with youth workers and young people, adapting products to fit youth work environments, and ensuring equitable access are essential steps. Moreover, intermediaries that understand both sectors can play a vital role in bridging gaps, translating resources, and facilitating sustained dialogue. This will not only improve uptake and impact but also ensure that digital transformation in the youth sector is ethical and sustainable. Bridging these barriers requires intentional partnership-building, shared understanding, and investment in inclusive, adaptable digital infrastructure.

### **Prospective ways of improving collaboration via tech/digital solutions**

Digital technology has a vital role to play in improving collaboration between the professionals supporting young people, particularly across sectors such as education, health, justice, housing, and social care. It enables more effective communication, facilitates knowledge sharing, and supports coordinated action through tools like shared directories, case management systems, and referral platforms. When used well, digital solutions can streamline processes, enhance understanding of local contexts, and foster more responsive and joined-up support for young people. However, the full potential of digital is not being realised due to inconsistent platform use, fragmented systems, lack of shared standards, and concerns around data sharing and security are all holding back progress.

Without coordinated digital infrastructure and investment, the youth sector risks missing critical opportunities to deliver more joined-up, effective, and youth-centred support. Insights from a co-creation lab workshop at UK Youth's Joined Up Summit show that, when digital is used well, it can enhance communication, streamline referrals, and build shared understanding but this requires commitment, leadership, and investment across sectors. Crucially, digital must be seen not just as a technical fix but as a strategic

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

enabler - one that strengthens relationships, improves outcomes and empowers professionals to work together more effectively in service of young people's needs.

### **'Joined Up' solutions to tackling digital inequality**

Osborne Clarke's investment in this research, and the insights that have emerged, have supported UK Youth to embed digital into how we build the capacity and capabilities of organisations and practitioners supporting young people. Two UK Youth initiatives highlight this particularly prominently:

**01 Joined Up Institute:** Reflecting on insights of the role that digital can play in strengthening collaboration, the team behind UK Youth's Joined Up Institute have designed and built an online digital platform for cross-sector professionals engaged in the initiative. The platform is facilitating more effective networking and knowledge sharing between 'Fellows' taking part in the initiative. Approximately 150 users will be engaged through the platform.

**02 Capacity Building Grants:** As part of UK Youth's broader network development role in the youth sector, we have been designing a capacity building curriculum to sit alongside the grant funding support we provide youth organisations. This research has informed the development of two learning modules focused on digital transformation for youth work organisations. Through these modules, leaders of youth organisations will be supported in the following ways:

- ✔ Participants will strengthen their confidence in digital literacy to effectively navigate digital transformation
- ✔ Participants will reflect on their confidence and skillset in digital literacy to champion digital change

- ✔ Participants will understand the strategic value of digital transformation and identify opportunities to improve their current digital infrastructure in line with their mission.

Delivery of these modules will happen later in 2026 and will include master classes and action learning sets.

### **Fostering the crucial role of youth workers in online safety**

Youth organisations play a critical role in addressing these challenges by fostering digital resilience and providing child-centred support. Their work goes beyond the nuclear family, engaging communities to create safe environments and equipping young people with skills to navigate online spaces responsibly. Youth workers' personalised approach helps young people build confidence, understand risks, and develop coping strategies. This collaborative effort complements regulatory measures like the Online Safety Act, ensuring that interventions are not only policy-driven but also grounded in the lived experiences of young people.

## Recommendations

This research highlights seven key recommendations for government, tech providers, independent funders, youth sector infrastructure bodies and youth work organisations. Taking these forward, through coordinated cross-sector action will address digital inequality in and beyond the youth sector, enabling youth organisations to improve their support to young people. Recommendations 1 and 2 are foundational first steps whereas recommendations 3, 4 and 5 are dependent on the outcomes of 1 and 2. Finally, recommendations 6 and 7 can be taken forward independently of the other recommendations and are vital for youth sector organisations to operate effectively in the digital world.

Figure 8, outlines each recommendation, its core features and the lead stakeholder(s) proposed by this research to drive the recommendation forward through coordinated, cross-sector action.

Figure 8: Recommendations explained

| Recommendation                                                                                                  | Key Stakeholder                                                                                                                                    | Description                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>01 - Commission the development of a Minimum Digital Standard for youth organisations</b>                    | <i>Government and policy makers – Department for Culture, Media &amp; Sport (DCMS) and the Department for Science, Innovation &amp; Technology</i> | <p><b>The Government should commission the development of minimum digital standard for the youth sector. The standard will work as a benchmark, developed to include precise core digital infrastructure requirements for youth organisations and set priorities for investment.</b></p> <p>The development work will include a feasibility assessment to test viability. Followed by codesign phase with the youth and tech sector to determine the exact minimum digital infrastructure requirements for the standard. It is likely to include hard and software, internet connections, support and skills requirements. This study will draw on the Minimum Income Standard and minimum Digital Living Standard methodology (Davis et al, 2024).</p> <p>This could also enable the Government, tech sector and independent grant funders to understand exact requirements for investment decisions. To understand the extent of the barriers identified and the articulation of minimum digital requirements it is proposed that this research via existing infrastructure organisation surveys and then tested with youth organisations, youth and tech sector.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>02 - Commit to providing devices, connectivity, maintenance, and social tariffs for youth organisations.</b> | <i>Tech sector</i>                                                                                                                                 | <p><b>To address the digital divide and meet the youth sector’s immediate need for better internet connectivity and hardware, tech sector organisations (as part of their CSR policies) should make commitments to invest in devices and internet connectivity.</b></p> <p>The research has already identified a clear need for not only internet connectivity but also the need for usable devices and ongoing maintenance. The recommendation is for tech companies to commit to providing these essential devices and services free of charge and review ongoing social tariffs. Existing initiatives act as a blueprint for how collaborative initiatives can address the digital divide – for example, - UK Youth’s partnership with nexfibre in collaboration with Virgin Media O2 to supply free full-fibre broadband to 1000 youth organisations. Interviews with stakeholders from the tech sector identified that there are existing programmes to build on, but better awareness, communication and directing to the youth sector is needed.</p> <p>UK Youth have already started collating a Call for Support to make the case to tech sector and independent funders which includes a set of commitments:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To donate old hardware - laptops, desktops, tablets and mobile phones;</li> <li>• To provide internet connectivity alongside nexfibre and support UK Youth to offer full-fibre broadband to local youth organisations across the UK.</li> <li>• For the tech sector to showcase what is available to the youth sector.</li> </ul> <p>Collaborative approaches between the tech sector and youth sector infrastructure organisations can address the basic and core digital infrastructure gaps experienced by the youth sector.</p> |

| Recommendation                                                                                                                            | Key Stakeholder                                                                                                 | Description                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p><b>03 -Develop a digital strategy toolkit for youth organisations, including templates, training, and implementation guidance.</b></p> | <p><i>Youth sector infrastructure bodies (UK Youth, National Youth Agency and Regional Youth Work Units</i></p> | <p><b>Youth sector infrastructure bodies should work collaboratively to develop a toolkit to support youth organisations to develop and implement organisational digital strategies. This toolkit should be tested with a small cohort of youth organisations and should include easy-to-use training, resources and templates.</b></p> <p>The research identifies that many youth organisations do not have a comprehensive organisational digital strategy. Having digital strategies in place will enable youth organisations to articulate their digital priorities and identify the action they need to take within the resource they have.</p> <p>These strategies will also assist the tech sector and other funders to better understand the youth sector's requirements and where youth organisations are in their digital journey. This helps tech companies to ensure that products and services are appropriate and tailored for the youth sector.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| <p><b>04 - Work with the youth sector to co-create regional technical support hubs, AI enabled help tools, and peer networks.</b></p>     | <p><i>Tech sector</i></p>                                                                                       | <p>Tech companies should explore how they, in partnership with youth sector infrastructure organisations such as UK Youth, NYA and Regional Youth Work Units, can establish regional technical support and peer networks for the youth sector.</p> <p>This regional technical support should include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expert clinics on specific topics that can grow and build based on youth sector needs and insights</li> <li>• Real time tailored specialist support via apps or AI bots with tech and youth sector trainers to resolve immediate tech issues</li> <li>• Peer support spaces that enable youth organisations to share promising practice and solutions and to co-design digital tools and solution with other organisations.</li> <li>• Tailored training on the use of tech to increase confidence and digital literacy levels.</li> <li>• Specific session on digital safeguarding and/n/a/preventing online harm, cyber security and data protection.</li> </ul> <p>This combination of support will help to address the youth sector's digital literacy and training needs and improve links with the tech sector.</p> |

| Recommendation                                                                                                                                                  | Key Stakeholder                                                                                        | Description                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>05 - Host a national digital infrastructure summit to align agendas, showcase tools, and shape a roadmap for digital transformation of the youth sector.</b> | <i>Tech sector and Youth sector infrastructure bodies (UK Youth, NYA, RYWAs)</i>                       | <p><b>The digital and tech sector should host a national digital and tech infrastructure summit or conference, in collaboration with youth sector infrastructure bodies.</b></p> <p>The purpose of this event would be to strengthen youth work practice and awareness of digital solutions that the youth sector can access; create an inclusive, practical, connected space where real digital transformation can begin and build a road map for improving digital infrastructure in the youth sector. It would be an opportunity for the tech sector to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Showcase the digital support, tools, hardware and software available to the youth sector</li> <li>• Equip youth workers with practical and effective digital tools and approaches that they can use in their day-to-day work</li> <li>• Provide solution sprint sessions to address digital infrastructure requirements and challenges</li> <li>• Encourage peer learning and collaboration on the use of digital</li> <li>• Create connections between the tech sector and youth organisations to better coordinate targeted support in the future.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| <b>06 - Develop a prototype centralised digital platform for referrals, case management, and data sharing.</b>                                                  | <i>Government – DCMS &amp; Minister of Housing, Communities and Local Government and policy makers</i> | <p><b>The Government should commission the development and testing of a local authority level conceptual and prototype standardised and centralised digital platform. This platform would aim to improve local and regional coordination between local authorities, youth organisations and other organisations working with young people. It would support case management, referrals and data sharing, to facilitate better collaboration across sectors.</b></p> <p>The full potential of digital is not being realised due to inconsistent platform use, fragmented systems, a lack of shared data standards, and concerns around data sharing and security. Developing a prototype for local and regional collaboration will address the challenges and inefficiencies experienced by professionals across sectors. The prototype would aim to streamline processes, enhance understanding of local contexts, and foster more responsive and joined-up support for young people.</p> <p>The youth sector and local authorities across the country have a wealth of learning to build on here. For example, UK Youth's own digital platform development has sought to connect professionals across sectors and promote collaboration (including through the <a href="#">Joined Up Institute</a>). The tech sector is also a key stakeholder, supporting the adaptation of existing platforms for local and regional youth sector contexts. Finally, there are opportunities to leverage existing youth sector infrastructure initiatives already happening – for example, the DCMS-funded <a href="#">Local Youth Transformation Pilot</a> is initially supporting 12 'Pathfinder' local authorities to start to rebuild a high-quality offer for young people and transition back to local youth services leadership. As well as working with tech sector to refine existing software and platforms for the youth sector</p> |

| Recommendation                                                                                     | Key Stakeholder                                                                                           | Description                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>07 - Embed digital safeguarding, cyber security, and digital citizenship into CPD pathways.</b> | <i>Youth sector infrastructure bodies (UK Youth, National Youth Agency and Regional Youth Work Units)</i> | <p><b>Youth sector infrastructure bodies (UK Youth, National Youth Agency, Regional Youth Work Units) should endorse regular professional development on current and emerging online risks linked to safeguarding and cybersecurity within youth organisations.</b></p> <p>Endorsement of regular professional development can be leveraged by incorporating the training into existing national resources, training and qualification pathways including formal JNC and informal Continuous Professional Development programmes. This will equip both youth workers and young people with the practical and most up-to-date online safety practice. Youth Sector Infrastructure organisations/ bodies such as the National Youth Agency and UK Youth should work with the tech sector to ensure current and emerging risks linked to safeguarding and wellbeing of young people form part of the training content.</p> <p>Youth sector infrastructure bodies should work towards embedding digital citizenship into youth development programmes. There is an opportunity to more consistently apply youth work principles to young people's digital lives and build on pockets of good practice already being delivered by youth practitioners across the UK. Digital citizenship support can help young people to think critically online, be ethical digital citizens, navigate online risks and exercise their rights and responsibilities online with confidence.</p> |

# Glossary

**Allied Sectors** – Sectors that support specific aspects of a young person’s life. Examples include education, social care, health, youth justice, and housing.

**Digital youth work** - proactively using and/or addressing digital media and technology in youth work practice as a tool, an activity and/or as content. It includes a broad range of methods and approaches that can be employed in any youth work setting. It can happen in face-to-face situations as well as in online settings’ (YouthLink Scotland, 2020; EU Commission Group definition established 2017).

**Digital literacy** - was initially understood as “the ability to both understand and use digitized information” (Gilster 1997); but it is now thought of more broadly as; ‘the ability to use information and communication technologies to find, evaluate, create, and communicate information, requiring both cognitive and technical skills’ (American Library Association).

**Digital divide** - the gap between individuals, households, businesses, and geographic areas at different socio-economic levels with regard to both their opportunities to access information and communication technologies (ICTs) and to their use of the Internet for a wide variety of activities’ (OECD, 2002).

**Digital skills** - The UK Government’s essential digital skills framework sets out 5 categories of digital skills ‘needed to safely benefit from, participate in and contribute to the digital world of today and the future’: they are communicating, handling information and content, transacting, problem solving, and being safe and legal online’ (GOV, 2018).

**Digital inclusion** - a strategy to ensure all people have equal opportunities and appropriate skills to access and benefit from digital technologies (ITU, 2019).

**Digital infrastructure** - broadly refers to the fixed, physical assets needed to maintain broadband communications systems and allow the flow of communication data: specific assets include fibre-optic networks, coaxial and copper cables, and communication towers. Digital infrastructure can also be referred to as telecommunications infrastructure or network infrastructure.’ (ONS, 2024)

**Ethnicity** – A cultural, national, or linguistic identity shared by a group of people. It is more specific than the concept of race.

**Interactions** – instances where youth workers and allied professionals from other sectors work together and / or liaise for the purpose of supporting a young person or young people.

**Intervention** – Structured approaches or programmes designed to support young people and help them achieve positive outcomes.

## GLOSSARY

**Local Youth Offer** – Defined by DCMS as the full range of youth services available to young people in a specific local authority area.

**Open Access Provision** – Youth services available to all young people, regardless of need or background, typically without a referral. Also known as ‘universal provision’.

**Outcome** – The results or impact of an intervention on young people. Outcomes can be observed over different time periods with some being observed immediately and others taking longer. They may be directly or indirectly related to an intervention.

**Prevention / Preventative Approach** – A strategy within public services aimed at resolving issues before they become crises.

**Targeted Provision** – Specialist youth services that address specific needs or characteristics, such as ethnicity, special educational needs, or risk of offending.

**Uniformed Groups** – combine youth development with service to others, within a structured and uniformed environment. Organisations such as the Fire, Police, Army and Sea Cadets, Girlguiding, The Scout Association, and others that form part of the national youth work sector.

**Young people and children** – In the youth sector it includes all young people aged between 8 and 25

**Youth Provision** – A broad term for services and activities designed to meet the needs of young people, including youth centres, community events, and mobile services. These can be universal (open access) or targeted.

**Youth Sector** – Organisations primarily working with young people through youth work. Youth work is a practice that supports the personal, social, emotional and educational development of a young person to help them reach their full potential. It is informal, voluntary and centred on building relationships in safe and supportive environments.

**Youth Voice** – The perspectives, ideas, and participation of young people in shaping services, policies, or decisions that affect them.

**Youth work** - a practice that supports the personal, social, emotional and educational development of a young person to help them reach their full potential. It is informal, voluntary and centred on building relationships in safe and supportive environments.

**Youth Worker** – A professional or volunteer supporting young people through non-formal learning and development, helping them grow personally, socially, and professionally.

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# Annexe 1 - Stakeholders consulted

| Organisation              | Role                                                       |
|---------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|
| 01 NYA                    | Digital Youth Work Development Manager<br>Research Manager |
| 02 Quartet                | Philanthropy Officer                                       |
| 03 Good Things Foundation | Research and Evaluation Manager                            |
| 04 University of Leeds    | Academic (convenes Digital Youth Work Research Hub)        |
| 05 ZoeAmar                | Director                                                   |
| 06 Youth Link Scotland    | Senior Development Officer (Digital Youth Work)            |
| 07 Internet Matters       | Head of Research and Policy                                |
| 08 Catalyst               | Co-Executive Director                                      |
| 09 Zing                   | Founder                                                    |
| 10 We Are Cast            | Head of digital practice                                   |
| 11 Google & Mastery Hive  | Cofounder and CEO – Mastery Hive<br>Ex Google Deep Mind    |
| 12 Nexifbre               | Senior Manager – Finance and Sustainability                |

# UK YOUTH

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