



‘Joined Up’ solutions to tackling digital inequality for young people and the youth sector

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 |
|---|---|---|
| 01 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 |
| 02 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 |
| 03 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) |
| 04 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 |
| 05 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) |
| 06 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 |
| 07 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) |

UK YOUTH

UK Youth London Office

Fivefields, 8-10 Grosvenor Gardens, London, SW1W 0DH
020 3137 3810

Avon Tyrrell Outdoor Centre

Braggers Lane, Bransgore, Hampshire, BH23 8EE
01425 672 347

Charity number: 1110590

www.ukyouth.org

Find us on:

