LIFE ONLINE
What You Told Us

Discovery Report
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promo cymru

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In collaboration with:

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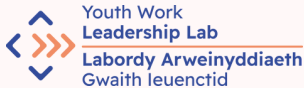
LIFE ONLINE Summary

This discovery project explored what life online is really like for young people across Dyfed Powys - the positives, the pressures, and what support would help.

We heard from around 200 young people and 30 professionals through surveys and focus groups.

Key Findings

- Social media dominates – more than 4 in 5 young people (82%) **use it daily**, with TikTok leading the way.
- Almost half (47%) have seen **harmful or upsetting content,** while many feel reporting it doesn't help.
- 1 in 3 (32%) experienced **mean comments or bullying,** and 1 in 4 (25%) received unwanted messages from strangers.
- Nearly half (45%) came across **extreme or hateful content;** 1 in 2 (48%) said something online had influenced how they think or act offline.
- Despite risks, almost half (47%) said being online makes them **feel mostly good,** valuing creativity, humour, and connection.
- 1 in 5 (20%) said online content had **changed their behaviour in a positive way** — learning new skills or healthier habits.
- 73% said **adults don't really understand** what it's like to be online for their generation.
- Professionals agreed - three-quarters (76%) said they need **more training** to understand platforms, algorithms, and trends.
- Both young people and professionals want **better, more practical digital education** - not one-off lessons, but creative, relatable sessions that build understanding and trust.

Recommendations

1. **Change the story –** recognise both the positives and the risks of online life.
2. **Co-design solutions –** bring together young people's lived experience with professional expertise.
3. **Build a digital youth work offer –** take youth work to the platforms young people already use, providing trusted support and safer online spaces.
4. **Make media literacy ongoing –** help young people and adults build critical thinking about social media, embedding it across education, youth work, and wellbeing plans.
5. **Support the adults too –** give parents, teachers, and youth workers the tools and confidence to have open, judgement-free conversations.
6. **Take the work forward –** move from Discovery to Define, Develop, and Deliver, co-designing and testing ideas to build confidence, resilience, and positive online experiences across Dyfed Powys.

Contents

Why We Did This Project

The Life Online Discovery Report explores what being online really means for young people today – the positives, the pressures, and everything in between.

From TikTok and gaming to learning new skills and chatting with friends, being online is a huge part of life for young people. But it also brings risks: harmful content, scams, bullying, and pressure to act a certain way.

This project was about listening first. We heard directly from young people across Ceredigion, Carmarthenshire, Pembrokeshire, and Powys about their online lives - the good, the bad, and what support would actually help. We also spoke with professionals - teachers, youth workers, and others who support them - to understand what they're seeing too.

Commissioned by **Ceredigion Council,** delivered and written by **ProMo Cymru** in collaboration with the **Youth Work Leadership Lab,** and funded through **Dyfed-Powys Police Serious Violence Duty,** this Discovery Report is the first step in the Service Design process - listening, learning, and building understanding before designing solutions. It recognises that what happens online can spill into real life, and aims to ensure young people get the right support early on.

How We Listened (Our Discovery Approach)

This project was a discovery phase project - the first of the 4Ds in Service Design. Discovery means exploring, asking questions, and learning directly from people's experiences. In this case, it was about listening to young people and understanding what matters to them.

The 4D's in Service Design explained super quickly:

Discover → Listen, explore, and gather insights.
**Define** → Make sense of what we've heard and decide what really matters.
Develop → Co-create ideas and solutions with the people who'll use or benefit from them.
Deliver → Put those ideas into practice.

We worked with Ceredigion Youth Council to test and shape some of our Discovery questions. They gave feedback on the language, so it actually reflected how they talk and what they care about.

Here's how we listened:
- **180 young people** completed our survey
- **20 young people** joined focus groups through local youth groups, where we delved deeper into the findings
- **30 professionals** took part**,** either in person or through detailed survey responses - mainly youth workers and teachers who work directly with young people
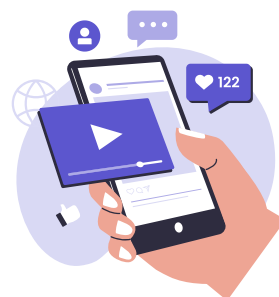
A Quick Note on Limitations

This is just a snapshot, not the full picture. We didn't hear from every young person in Dyfed-Powys, and we didn't cover every angle. But what we did hear was honest, powerful, and gave us a clear sense of:

- **what's happening online**
- **what's working**
- **what's there (or not there)**
- **and what needs to change**

Also - we've written this report in youth-friendly language. If this is about young people, it should be something they can read and recognise themselves in.

Most responses came from Ceredigion (60%), as they were leading the project. This means some views may reflect local context more strongly. That's useful for shaping services locally, but it also shows why we should test ideas with more young people across Carmarthenshire, Pembrokeshire, and Powys in the next phase.

Ethical Process

This study was conducted in line with the **BERA Guidelines for Educational Research (2024).** Additional safeguarding and ethical procedures were followed in accordance with each local authority's confidentiality and safeguarding protocols, including processes for informed consent. We also worked in line with the **Principles and Purposes of Youth Work in Wales** and the **Code of Professional Conduct and Practice** issued by the Education Workforce Council (EWC).

Participation was voluntary and anonymous, with the right to withdraw at any stage. All questions were optional, accessible language was used, and at the conclusion of surveys and sessions participants' were signposted to support services, including **Meic**, the national advocacy, information and advice helpline for children and young people in Wales.

What's Already Out There?

What the Research Says

Lots of studies show that being online brings both risks and positives.

Almost 9 out of 10 young people say they've seen **harmful content** - from bullying and fake accounts to violent or shocking videos (Alan Turing Institute, 2023).

The Youth Endowment Fund (2024) found that 7 in 10 children had **seen violence on social media,** often without even looking for it.

Some said it made them feel less safe, while others felt pressured to carry a weapon (YEF, 2024). Influencers also matter: some are inspiring, but others - like misogynistic or extremist figures - can shape how boys treat girls, even in schools (UK Safer Internet Centre, 2023).

An Ofcom and NatCen (2024) report on cyberbullying found that **comments and direct messages** are often the main places where **online harassment** happens.

In Wales, young people face the same risks as elsewhere but with extra challenges. Poverty, slow internet, and fewer digital literacy programmes in rural areas can make things harder (Welsh Government, 2024; Ofcom, 2024). Online spaces can be really positive - helping people connect, learn, and find support - but too much time online can also affect mental health, especially when young people feel under pressure to look perfect or compare their lives to others (Youth Futures Foundation, 2025).

While many face harm, only 17% report it, because they don't think platforms will act (Ofcom, 2024).

Governments are starting to respond. The UK has an Online Harms plan, and in Wales the Online Safety Action Plan (2024) means digital literacy lessons in schools and funding for local projects. But research says the best solutions come when young people are involved in designing them - and when adults listen, learn, and share responsibility. Trusted adults, creative spaces, and balanced approaches are key to making online life safer while keeping the positives that matter to young people.

Why Online Safety Matters

Being safe online matters because the internet is such a big part of life.

Young people living in poverty are at greater risk.
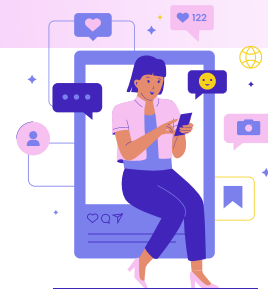
In places like Ceredigion (32.2%), Pembrokeshire (30.8%) and Carmarthenshire (29.5%), child poverty levels are higher than the Welsh average (29%).

This means some young people can't always afford to join youth clubs or go out with friends, so they spend more time online. **That isolation can make them more vulnerable to harmful content or people looking to exploit them.** This is why online safety isn't just about blocking risks - it's about giving young people safe spaces, trusted adults, and the confidence to enjoy the good things about being online too.

Digital Youth Work in Wales

Youth work isn't just about youth clubs and face-to-face sessions anymore — it needs to happen online too, because that's where young people spend a lot of their time.

A Welsh Government report (Time to Deliver for Young People in Wales, 2021) said there should be a national online youth work offer, so young people can get the right info, advice, and support wherever they live.

The latest draft guidance (Youth Work in Wales: Delivering for Young People, 2024) also makes it clear that youth work should include digital and hybrid spaces, not just in-person ones. This matters because almost every teenager in Wales now has access to a smartphone and uses it to go online (Hudd, 2018).

If youth work is about meeting young people where they are, then online spaces need to be part of the offer - safe, supportive, and designed with young people themselves.

Together, this research highlights why listening directly to young people matters. The next section shares what young people and professionals across Dyfed-Powys told us - our findings are grouped into eight key themes.

Insight 1:
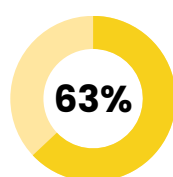# Where Young People Spend Time Online

Our research across Dyfed Powys makes it clear: **social media is the number one thing young people use the internet for.** When asked their top three online activities, the highest by far was scrolling and interacting on social media.
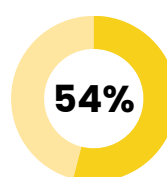
Top 3 online activities

82%
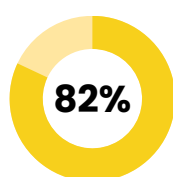
Scrolling & interacting on social media

63%

Chatting/ messaging with friends

54%

Gaming online

Young people are also spending a huge amount of time online: 67% say they spend more than three hours a day, and nearly half (43%) spend over five hours. Social media dominates that time, with 75% using it more than two hours a day, and 44% spending more than three hours every day just on socials.

In focus groups, TikTok stood out as the most talked-about platform. When asked to "draw your feed," the majority sketched their TikTok feeds, filled with viral trends, creators, and memes. Instagram was also mentioned, and Snapchat too, but currently TikTok clearly drives the biggest share of attention and cultural influence.

Professionals said:

96% **reported that young people spend the most time on social media - scrolling, liking, and watching TikTok, Instagram reels, and YouTube Shorts.**

"Too much screen time is impacting mental health, sleep patterns, and general wellbeing."

Professionals also raised concerns about the sheer number of hours young people spend online - often several hours at a time. They linked long screen time to poor sleep, low mood, and difficulty concentrating, and pointed to short-form platforms like TikTok as especially time-consuming.

Insight 2:
Exposure to Harmful or Inappropriate Content
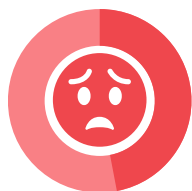
47% **Almost half of young people said they had come across something online that made them feel uncomfortable, unsafe, or upset.**

These included:

1 in **3**   had seen mean or nasty comments

1 in **4**   have come across violent or upsetting videos

1 in **5**   have seen harmful content about self-harm or eating disorders

1 in **6**   have seen posts that felt manipulative or hateful towards certain groups

1 in **7**   have encountered scams or fake accounts

1 in **8**   have come across inappropriate or sexual content

1 in **9**   had seen content that made them feel pressured to look or act a certain way

The focus groups gave us more of the "real life" detail behind those numbers. Young people described how harmful or shocking content often slipped through the cracks of platforms - even when those spaces were supposedly safe.

> **"YouTube for kids... I've noticed it often shows inappropriate stuff to primary-aged children"**

Others told us how algorithms took them from harmless videos to extreme or disturbing ones.

> **"I started watching car videos, and then suddenly I was getting car crash dash cam ones, or police car chases, and people running from police"**

They spoke about seeing fight clips, graphic animal cruelty, dead animals, and sometimes even violent political content. While some admitted finding fight or police chase videos "funny" or "exciting," many said they found these images distressing.

From these conversations, it was clear that repeated exposure to content like big fights, police chases, or riots can make extreme material feel normalised - even if young people don't always describe it as a big issue themselves.

Scams also came up in these conversations. One young person told us they had been scammed while buying something through TikTok, and others spoke about strange or inappropriate accounts popping up in their feeds.

> "Sometimes you report it and it comes back saying there's nothing wrong with it, even if it's really bad"

This frustration - that platforms don't deal with harmful content effectively - was echoed by others. Some even said they'd forgotten reporting was an option at all. (Reporting is when you flag content to the platform in the hope it gets removed or reviewed.)

Based on their practice, professionals we spoke to said:
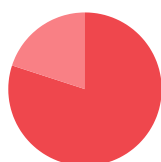
80%

thought that young people are exposed to harmful or inappropriate content online
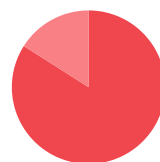
84%

highlighted violent content as a major issue

Several gave examples of children being distressed by sexual or violent material, watching porn at very young ages, or encountering extremist content.

> "Young people are watching unsuitable age-related content including violence and sexual content... algorithms will show unsuitable content based on something they've clicked, which can lead to exploitation and radicalisation."

> "Sometimes young people are sharing inappropriate images and videos of themselves, sharing inappropriate content with others. I worry about this"

Together, the surveys and focus groups paint a clear picture: harmful and inappropriate content is everywhere, and while young people are learning to navigate it, many feel unsupported when they try to deal with it.

Academic Insight

Only 17% [of young people] report harm, because they don't think platforms will act. (Ofcom, 2024)

The Alan Turing Institute (2023) found almost 9 in 10 young people have seen harmful content online, and the Youth Endowment Fund (2024) reported that 7 in 10 had seen violence on social media, often without even looking for it.

Insight 3:
Toxicity in Comments & Bullying
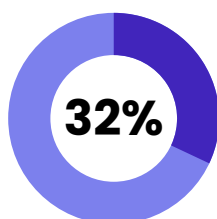
32% of young people said mean comments or bullying had made them feel uncomfortable online.

One in four also said they had received weird or unwanted messages from strangers.

Group chats and comment sections were mentioned as hotspots for this behaviour. A recent study backs this up, finding that most online harassment happens in the same places young people told us about - the comments and DMs (Ofcom and NatCen (2024)).

In focus groups, young people told us how easy it is for bullying to spread through group chats, with some describing fights in comment sections or people getting targeted on certain posts. The negativity around LGBTQ+ content was especially strong. One young person admitted they'd stopped using Facebook altogether because "the comments are just toxic." Others said they ignore it, but some admitted to getting dragged into arguments themselves.

> **"The comment sections are just toxic"**

A particular concern was the rise of misogynistic language. Several young people spoke about boys copying influencers like Andrew Tate and using sexist slurs.

> **"I hear loads of younger boys using language like Andrew Tate. They're calling female teachers 'bitches' - even in primary school."**

Young people (even younger age groups) did however show strong awareness about online safety. Even younger groups said they're cautious of fake profiles and online strangers - a reminder that young people already use their own strategies to protect themselves.

One young person's advice to adults was simple:

> **"My advice would be to spend more time on social media, follow current trends... it's easy to learn how someone might be bullied or tricked online with certain methods."**

Professionals thought the same:
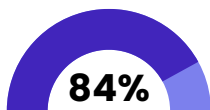
84% **highlighted cyberbullying as a key issue.**

Several gave examples of harmful group chats, hate comments, and children sharing inappropriate images. One explained how young people's moods and behaviour are often affected by the toxic side of online conversations.

> **"Sometimes, friendship groups online can be a little toxic and this impacts them emotionally."**

> **"Comments sections and group chats are where a lot of harm starts - young people get drawn in or targeted without realising how quickly it escalates."**

> **"Bullying and group chat fallouts are a daily part of their online world. It's relentless, and they can't escape it. These arguments often spill into real life in school / youth settings."**

Together, this shows how online interactions - whether in comments, chats, or DMs - can quickly tip into harmful territory, impacting them emotionally and spilling into their offline life.

Academic Insight - Adolescent Development

Research on adolescent development shows why these findings matter: during teenage years, the brain is wired to seek peer approval, so group chats and comment sections can have an especially strong influence (Steinberg, 2014; Chein et al., 2011).

Adolescence is when young people's brains and values are still developing. It's a stage of testing new behaviours, ideas, and beliefs. Research shows they're more likely to take risks when friends are around, as the brain reacts strongly to rewards and peer approval. (Chein et al., 2011; Steinberg, 2008). This means that the part of the brain that looks for excitement develops faster than the part that controls impulses (Casey, Jones & Somerville, 2011; Steinberg, 2014).

At the same time, moral development theory (Kohlberg, 1984) tells us that many teenagers make decisions based on what their friends or wider groups think is right. This is why the online world has such a significant impact during adolescence: it's where trends, challenges, and comments can really shape behaviour and values.

Insight 4:
Algorithms & Influence

45%
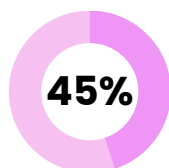
of young people had come across content pushing extreme or negative ideas towards certain groups.

39%
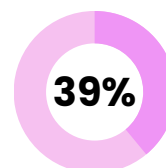
wanted to understand more about how algorithms work and influence what they see online.

In some focus groups, young people showed real awareness of how algorithms shape their feeds, especially older age groups (aged 16 plus). They described how clicking on one video led to a flood of similar or more extreme content.

> **"As soon as you see something on social media like watch it or click on something, it's all you see"**

Others noticed how radical opinions or clickbait get boosted because they make money for creators.

> **"The more shocking you are, the more views you get - that's how people make money on TikTok. The more extreme your opinion is, even if it's just clickbait, the more money and views you get from it."**

This awareness sometimes came with frustration - young people said their feeds felt **overwhelming** or **stressful,** full of **political or negative clips**. Some fought back by blocking accounts, reporting, or hitting "not interested," but not all felt confident or in control.

In comparison, at a focus group with younger ages (13–14 years old), none of the group had heard of the word "algorithm." However, they intuitively avoided harmful content by being careful about what they searched for. This showed a level of awareness, even without knowing the technical term.

> **"My advice would be don't search stuff that's bad otherwise you'll probably keep seeing it"**

Young people were also clear that what they see online doesn't just shape their feeds - it can also shape their behaviour. This is powerful for understanding how both algorithms and online content shape young people's lives.

In our survey, we asked young people if they had ever seen something online that made them change the way they acted or thought.

48%
SAID YES

18%
SAID IT MIGHT HAVE

Around 7 in 10 young people said online content has influenced how they think or act - or thought it might have. This shows that young people themselves recognise that what they see online can affect their behaviour, and that they actually feel the effects in their offline lives too.

> **"Some videos I see make me want to try new things or think differently about people."**

Professionals noticed this too:

100% said online activity impacts young people's behaviour in mostly negative or mixed ways.

Many gave examples of how repeated exposure to negative content or influencers can amplify attitudes and actions in offline life.

> **"I've seen how algorithms work to provide information based on most watched, if this is negative, it reinforces messages of low self-worth, oppression etc that I see young people be affected by"**

> **"Behaviour and thought processes are amplified by spending too long on certain content — hate crime is one example, with the Tate brothers influencing groups of teenagers."**

Professionals admitted they struggle here. Many said (over half) that they needed **training to better understand how algorithms influence online experiences**. Without this, it's hard for adults to guide young people through something the young people themselves already understand better.

Insight 5:
The Positive Side of Being Online
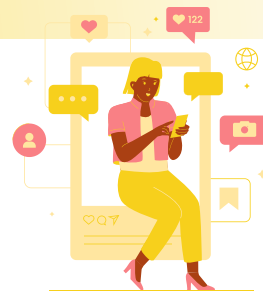
When we asked young people how spending time online makes them feel:

47%
Said mostly good

37%
Said a mix of bad and good

1%
Said mostly bad

The story isn't all negative. One in two young people said **spending time online makes them feel mostly positive.** They spoke about the joy, learning, and community they find online. Just 1% said it made them feel mostly bad.

Focus groups highlighted how **online spaces taught them things school didn't** - from relationship "red flags and green flags" to unspoken social rules. They enjoyed content that was funny, relatable, or calming. Some said **watching and hearing other people's stories helped them feel less alone.**

> "When people share their stories, it sometimes makes me feel better – like, 'Oh, actually my life or my parents aren't that bad.'"

> "My feed's actually really positive, full of beaches, sunsets, motivational quotes."

When asked, "Have you ever seen something online that made you change the way you acted or thought afterwards?"

1 in 5 young people (20%) said yes, it had in a positive way

It's not just about how being online makes them feel either - for some it actually shapes their behaviour in positive ways too, from learning healthier habits to picking up new skills or approaches.

For LGBTQ+ young people especially, online spaces were described as **life-changing** in terms of finding community and support. And hobbies thrived online too: football coaching tutorials, nature documentaries, gaming streams, farming, and music.

> **"I love watching tractor and farming videos - I'm really into that stuff, and it gives me loads of ideas."**

> **"I've learned loads about football coaching from videos online — that's what I want to do, so it's actually helped me get better."**

What did professionals think?

Professionals also recognised these positives, noting that online platforms can boost communication and confidence, and offer a sense of safety when young people can reach out to friends and family.

> **"Young people use online platforms to maintain friendships and social connections. It helps them stay in touch and build confidence."**

> **"Social media can be a safe space for young people to express themselves and reach out for support."**

However, while almost half of young people said being online makes them feel mostly good - not a single professional said the impact was 'mostly positive' on their wellbeing or behaviour.

Instead, professionals leaned heavily towards **concern**.

When asked 'How do you think young people's online activity impacts their wellbeing and behaviour?'

36%
rated the impact as mostly negative on wellbeing

24%
rated the impact as mostly negative on behaviour
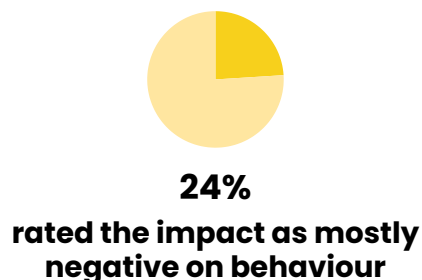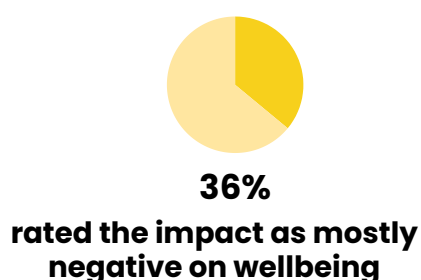
This matters because it points to a key recommendation: adults need to stop treating online life as all bad. For many young people, it's where they learn, grow, and connect.

Insight 6:
Adults 'not getting it'

Young people told us they're very capable online. When we asked how confident they felt using online platforms and social media:

95%
said confident

58%
said very confident

In groups, they described regularly teaching parents, teachers and their peers how things work - explaining algorithms, warning about scams, and flagging dodgy content.

> "We've grown up with technology, so our parents are more gullible."

> "I've got a friend who believes everything they see online – so I'm always trying to explain things to them."

> "When I see what my little cousins are looking at online, I have to explain to their parents how dodgy some of it is."

But that confidence sits alongside frustration.

73% said adults don't really understand what it's like to be online for their generation.

Young people felt dismissed or not taken seriously when they did speak up.

> "Hear us out and don't laugh at us when we tell them."

> "Just listen to our experiences and how it made us feel."

> "It would help if older adults weren't so dismissive of our problems."

As noted earlier, young people often view their online lives in a more balanced or positive way - but professionals remain far more cautious.

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They largely agreed young people are **'digital natives'** and that adults are playing catch-up, yet not a single professional described the impact of time online as mostly positive. This highlights the clear gap in perceptions: **young people highlight positive learning, hobbies, and connections, while adults focus on risks.**

Reflecting this,

3 in 4

professionals said they need more training on platforms, algorithms, and emerging digital behaviours

This underlines how much support adults feel they need to engage meaningfully. Young people's lived experience is a real asset - they're not just people to be "protected," they're co-design partners who can help shape guidance, content, and support.

Adults, on the other hand, need space, training, and tools - and above all, to listen without judgement. Recognising that young people have grown up in a digital age is key. For them, life online is simply part of life. The goal isn't to pull them out of digital spaces, but to help everyone - young people and adults alike - find the right balance and build the critical thinking skills needed to navigate an ever-changing online world.

Academic Insight - The Importance of Youth Work during Adolescence

Youth work plays a vital role in supporting young people through adolescence - a time of rapid change, identity formation, and vulnerability to peer influence and online risks. Access to safe spaces and trusted adults can protect young people, helping them reflect, navigate challenges, and build resilience (National Youth Agency, 2023).

This is especially important where poverty or rural isolation limits social opportunities, leaving young people more exposed to harmful or exploitative online environments (Youth Endowment Fund, 2024).

Youth workers combine informal education, relationships, and advocacy. Unlike teachers or parents, they often provide a neutral, voluntary space where young people can speak openly without fear of judgement (Jeffs & Smith, 2019). This helps them challenge harmful norms - such as misogyny, bullying, or extremist behaviour - while promoting the positives of digital life like learning, creativity, and community. Youth work helps young people build confidence, think critically, and make safe, informed choices online and offline.

Insight 7:
Managing Wellbeing Online

When harmful or upsetting content appears, young people don't all react the same way. In our survey, the most common responses to dealing with content like it were:

55% **Ignore it**

51% **Block the account**

24% **Report it**

24% **Speak to a friend or family member**
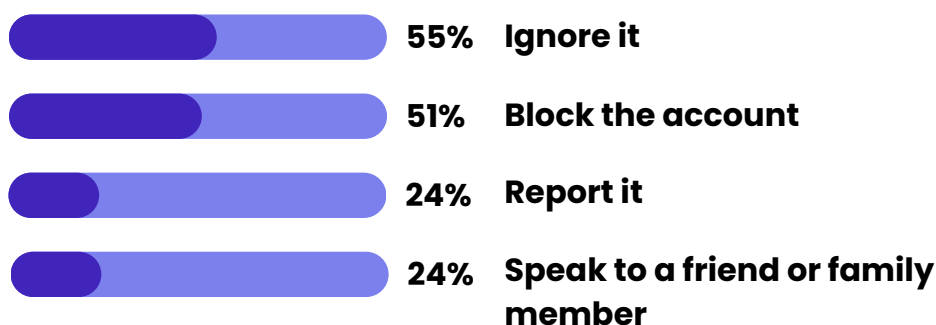
Focus groups also showed that for some, managing wellbeing meant using self-care strategies - even stepping away from whole platforms when they felt too toxic or draining. A few young people described quitting certain apps or preferring in-person conversations instead, to protect their mood and avoid misunderstandings.

> **"When I'm talking to people online, sometimes I worry, are they mad at me?"**

A few admitted to "fighting back" in comments, which they recognised wasn't always helpful.

Trends also had an effect on wellbeing. Repetitive posts and "perfect-looking" people were described as **draining and stressful.** Everyone else's life can seem perfect, and that pressure sticks.

> **"When you keep seeing girls who look perfect every time you go online , it just sticks in the front of my head and stays there all day. 'Just woke up like this' - it's really annoying."**

1 in 6 young people
said social media makes them compare their lives negatively to others

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Professionals thought the same:
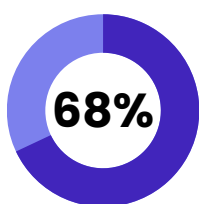
68% highlighted body image and appearance pressures as a key issue. Several also noted how viral content, influencers, and beauty filters can quickly affect mood, self-image, and confidence.

> **"They compare themselves to influencers and feel they don't measure up - it really impacts their self-worth and mental health. There's so much pressure to look a certain way."**

While ignoring or blocking content can protect them in the moment, professionals often saw the other side of this - when these coping strategies stop working, and young people get stuck in harmful situations. They said many young people **don't ask for help until things feel serious,** and that there's a need for safe, non-judgemental spaces where they can talk about what's happening online.

> **"Young people often don't tell anyone until things are really serious - there needs to be somewhere safe to talk earlier."**

Many professionals thought the tendency to ignore or brush things off can sometimes hide deeper stress or anxiety, especially when young people face repeated exposure to harmful content. They worried that what looks like coping from the outside can actually leave young people feeling isolated or unsupported over time.

> **"A lot of young people bottle things up until they reach breaking point."**

The key takeaway here is that while young people already use a mix of strategies to manage their wellbeing, they need more support to build confidence, resilience, and have trusted places to turn for help from people who understand - not be left to figure it out alone.

> **"It would be nice if there was somewhere you could just talk about stuff you see online without being judged."**

Insight 8:
What Young People & Professionals Want

In our survey we asked young people 'What would help you deal with harmful or pressuring content online?' The top answers were:

67%   Learning how to spot fake info and know what to trust

39%   Fun sessions on how social media and algorithms work

36%   Real examples of how online content affects people

35%   Knowing how to report harmful content properly

33%   Talking to someone around my age who understands

30%   More adults understanding what it's really like online

This matched what came through in focus groups: young people said they learn best when adults and peers share actual experiences, not just abstract warnings.

> **"Real stories make more sense - we remember them."**

> **"Just talk to me"**

> **"Don't just read off a PowerPoint, show us examples and talk to us like we get it. Don't just tell us not to do it."**

Young people also told us that when sessions were done well - creative, regular, and in spaces where they felt comfortable - they were useful. In fact,

1 in 2 young people

said the sessions they'd had on these topics already had been helpful to them (54%)

But one-off assemblies or tick-box lessons were seen as far less effective.

> **"Not trying to cram things into one session or lesson. It takes time to build a relationship and get young people to feel comfortable."**

Young people want practical skills, relatable stories, and support from both peers and adults. Above all, they value trust, relevance, and real connection over one-off lessons or generic warnings.

Professionals agreed more is needed.

They admitted that current systems - digital safety lessons, school policies, and parental engagement - only go so far.
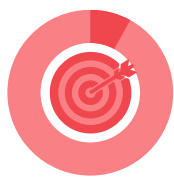
Just 8% thought they were "very effective" in their practice.

> **"We don't have enough time or confidence to deliver this well."**

> **"There's a real lack of updated training - everything moves faster than the guidance."**

Top challenges for professionals supporting young people online (ranked):

1 Encouraging young people to open up about their online experiences
2 Keeping up with new trends, platforms, and online behaviours
3 Finding up-to-date, relevant resources
4 Engaging parents and carers
5 Having enough time to focus on online issues
6 Feeling confident discussing sensitive topics like body image or self-harm

Support professionals need most when helping young people online (ranked):

Understanding algorithms, social media trends & influence

Practical digital safety and media literacy resources

Recognising and responding to online harm or exploitation

Supporting young people's digital mental health and wellbeing

Engaging parents and carers in online safety

Spotting early signs of radicalisation or extremist content

Building digital confidence for professionals themselves

Together, this shows real alignment: young people want practical, relatable sessions, and professionals want the tools and training to make that happen.

Both agree that learning about online life should be creative, ongoing, and co-designed - not a one-off or a tick-box exercise. The message is clear: young people and professionals want to move forward together. The next step is turning these shared insights into action.

So... What Needs to Change?

Recommendations & Next Steps

Young people don't just want warnings about the dangers of being online. They want adults to recognise the positives, take them seriously, and work with them to create better support.

Based on listening to young people voices across Dyfed-Powys, and the professionals who work with them, we've made six recommendations to take forward.

1. Change the Story About Being Online

2. Co-Design With Young People

3. Build the Digital Offer Where Young People Are

4. Make Media Literacy a Constant, Not a One-Off

5. Support the Adults Too

6. Take the Work Forward (Next Ds in Service Design)

1. Change the Story About Being Online

Why?

Almost half of young people (47%) said **being online makes them feel mostly good.** They talked about learning life skills, finding support, and enjoying hobbies and calming content. Adults, though, often only see the negatives — none of the professionals said the impact of time online was "mostly positive" on behaviour or wellbeing. These negative views can become **barriers to creating the right support.**

Next Step

Stop talking about the internet as if it's "all bad." Recognise the positives as well as the risks. Build on what young people enjoy and learn online, while still putting safeguards in place and educate how to navigate. The only solution isn't telling young people to spend less time online.

2. Co-Design With Young People

Why?

Young people are confident online (95% said so) and often explain scams, algorithms, and trends to adults and peers. At the same time, 73% said **adults don't really understand their online lives,** and some professionals admitted they **need training** and lack knowledge**.** Young people also know what their peers can relate to and what kind of support actually feels useful.

Next Step

Bring young people and adults together to co-design resources, sessions, and the Youth Service's digital offer. This makes content authentic and practical, combining lived experience with professional expertise.

3. Build the Digital Offer Where Young People Are

Why?

Social media dominates young people's lives - platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat are where they spend hours each day. But these are also spaces where they face harmful content, toxic comments, and pressure from trends. Many young people said they'd like simpler, more genuine spaces too. **For those living in poverty, limited access to affordable activities often means greater reliance on online spaces,** increasing vulnerability to harm or exploitation (Youth Endowment Fund, 2024). In Dyfed-Powys, where child poverty rates exceed the Welsh average, this need is especially pressing.

There are already strong examples of how youth work can respond, such as Cardiff Youth Service's digital offer, which uses platforms like Discord to create safe, engaging online spaces. This shows how youth work can be delivered effectively both online and face-to-face within local authorities, ensuring young people everywhere have access to a consistent and trusted digital offer.

Next Step

Take youth work to the platforms young people already use - TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, Discord, and beyond. Be present to provide support, information, and interventions online. A digital offer isn't just about content - it's about creating safer, kinder spaces where young people can engage positively. This means embedding social media knowledge and expertise into youth work, with some youth workers taking dedicated roles that combine social media, youth work, and safeguarding skills.

The offer should link to existing support - like Meic, the Welsh Government helpline (8am–midnight, every day) - so young people always know where to turn.

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4. Make Media Literacy a Constant, Not a One-Off

Why?

Young people **see *anything and everything* online**, and new issues like AI and deepfakes are already emerging. Cutting screen time isn't enough - **they need tools to think critically about what they see.** Survey results showed the top asks from young people were help with spotting fake info (67%), understanding algorithms (39%), and hearing real-life stories (36%). Our findings showed that many sessions they had already had been helpful. Professionals also said they need training in these areas.

Next Step

Make media literacy a constant part of support, not just a one-off session. Teachers, youth workers, and parents need these skills too, so they can support young people. Sessions should be co-designed, with young people playing a big part, and focus on building critical thinking skills to handle whatever comes next.

5. Support the Adults Too

Why?

Young people often said **adults don't fully understand their online lives** - 73% told us so - and focus groups described frustration at having to explain scams, algorithms, and dodgy content to parents or teachers. But this isn't because adults don't care. Many professionals said they're **struggling to keep up with fast-changing platforms and trends**, and 76% asked for more training. They want to support young people, but need the right tools and confidence to do it. At the moment, young people are carrying too much of this load, often helping siblings and even parents navigate online life.

Parents came up frequently in our research, but we didn't focus on them in this phase. Next, it's worth exploring their challenges and support needs in future.

Next Step

Provide parents, teachers, and youth workers with the tools and training they need on platforms, algorithms, and emerging trends. Just as important, encourage them to listen without judgement and have open conversations with young people.

There are already good resources out there — like Hwb, Internet Matters, Wise Kids and Parent Zone - which provide valuable guidance on digital safety. But awareness of these isn't always widespread, and they can feel more focused on schools and formal education. The next step is to spread awareness of what already exists and adapt it so it also works for youth workers and community settings, not just classrooms.

6. Take the Work Forward (Next Ds in Service Design)

Why?

Discovery gave us a snapshot of what young people experience online, where the gaps are, and what young people and professionals would like to see. But it's only the first stage of the process.

Next Step

Move into the next phases:

- **Define** what issues to focus on first, based on what young people and professionals said.
- **Develop** solutions together — like a digital offer, content, parent support, or youth worker training — and test them.
- **Deliver** the ideas that work best.

It's about keeping the conversation going, trying things out, and improving them with young people and adults side by side.

Thank You & What's Next

A massive thank you to all the young people and professionals who shared their time, voices, and experiences to form this Discovery Report.

This report is just the first step. Discovery means listening. The next stage is about taking what we've heard and moving into the next phases of defining priorities, developing ideas together, and testing what works.

The solution isn't to tell young people to stop using social media or see it as all negative. What really makes the difference is adults listening, understanding, and developing the same critical thinking skills with young people. That way, both young people and adults can navigate life online with more confidence — making it safer, kinder, and more positive for everyone.

Written & delivered by:

promo cymru

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