Youth Work and Social Networking

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# Youth Work and Social Networking

# Final Research Report

**How can Youth Work best support young people to navigate the risks and make the most of the opportunities of online social networking?**

September 2008

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**Funded by**

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This report builds upon the Interim Report available from: http://blogs.nya.org.uk/ywsn/

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# Executive Summary

**Introduction**

This one page document summarises a 2007/8 research study into the role of youth work in supporting young people in their online social networking.

**Findings**

Social Networking Sites (SNS) plays an increasingly important role in the lives of many young people and presents them with both opportunities and risks. Many of the reasons young people may encounter risks through SNS have roots outside of the technology, in issues of young people's personal and social development. Young people need support to develop the appropriate skills and resilience to navigate online social networking risks and opportunities. Peer groups need chances to negotiate and develop shared understandings of safe and reasonable online behaviour patterns.

Youth Work can play a key role in supporting young people to navigate the risks and exploit the opportunities of online social networking. Youth work can provide space for young people to reflect upon their online activity, and to develop their 'media literacy'. Proactive youth work engagement with SNS offers an alternative to information campaigns (which have limited demonstrable behaviour change impact); and to blanket blocking of SNS sites (which can risk burying potential problems).

Both as professionals and as approachable adults who young people can talk to, youth workers can offer:

- Individual interventions to address risk behaviours, or to encourage the take up of opportunities, based upon existing youth work relationships;
- Group work to support the development of a shared understandings and practices in groups and to support young people in supporting their peers.
- Reflective learning opportunities for young people to develop media literacy;
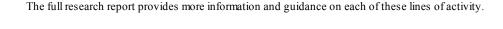
Online social networking tools can be used to complement existing youth work activities, as core tools for youth workers, to explore new models of youth work and to promote youth services to young people;

However, the access to technology, and the skills and knowledge base that will allow youth work to perform this important informal education role is not yet widespread.

**Recommendations**

Most youth services are not yet playing the key role that they could in supporting young people's safe and effective use of online social networking nor are they realising the many opportunities that online social networking provides for youth work. However, the foundations of effective engagement do exist in most services and could be developed through four lines of activity:

1. **Survey** – identify current access to SNS, engagement with online social networking and skills and resources to draw upon within the service.
2. **Safety** – consider the safety implications of online social networking for young people and for staff, and examine options for policy and action in supporting young people in navigating risk, both individually and as groups.
3. **Skills** – take active steps to develop the online social networking knowledge and skills of staff.
4. **Strategy** – explore opportunities to use online social networking as a youth work tool, and to support and encourage young people to take up the positive opportunities it provides.

The full research report provides more information and guidance on each of these lines of activity.

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## Section 1: **Research Summary**

**In this section you will find:**

- Details of the research carried out as part of the Youth Work and Social Networking project;

- Headline findings from the research;

## Methodology

The Youth Work and Social Networking project has sought to answer the question: "How can youth work best support young people to navigate the risks and make the most of the opportunities of online social networking."

The project has taken place in two phases, and four parts. A detailed methodology is found in Annexe 1.

Phase 1:

1. **A literature review** – exploring how young people, and youth work, are currently engaged with online social networking and evaluation the evidence base concerning opportunities and risks for young people online.

2. **A national online survey** – of youth workers, administrators and managers to assess current levels of uses of online social networking and to identify youth work attitudes towards social network sites and young people's online social networking behaviours.

3. **Focus groups** – exploring in depth with three youth services the attitudes of youth workers towards online social networking, and seeking to identify training and development needs.

Phase 1 of the project is written up in the Interim Report, which includes the full literature review and a detailed presentation of evidence from the survey and focus groups.

Phase 2

4. **Action research projects** – working with three youth services to explore: ways of training youth workers about online social networking; uses of online social networking in youth participation; and using online social networks to promote youth work activities.

This final report brings together the evidence from Phase 1, with the insights and learning from Phase 2 to offer both a theoretical, and a practical, account of how youth work can, and should, engage with online social networking.

This report seeks to balance the needs of academic, management and practitioner audiences. For more details on the evidence base from the survey, literature review and focus groups, please refer to the Interim Report. For more details on the practical learning from Phase 2, please refer to the project blog, and in particular the posts mentioned in Appendix 1.

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## Findings

**Online social networking plays an increasingly important role in the lives of many young people.**

Over 60% of 13 – 17 year olds have profiles on social networking sites (SNS)[i]. Many young people are spending upwards of two hours a night on online social networking activities[ii].

Social Network Sites (SNS) like Bebo, Facebook and MySpace have driven a massive growth in young people's online social networking since the emergence of MySpace in 2003, and Facebook and Bebo in 2005 (alongside a range of other niche Social Network Sites that have developed over the period)[iii]. However, these sites, which can be accessed both by computer and mobile phone, are in all likelihood only the beginning of online social networking trends which will continue to reshape much of young people's local and global communication with significant real-world consequences both positive and negative.

Whilst not *all* young people are actively using SNS (and those from disadvantaged background are less likely to have frequent or regular access to them) their impact is widespread. Lack of access to online social networking opportunities may impact upon young people's social exclusion – as many of the social conversations and co-ordination between young people moves into SNS spaces.

**Online social networking presents both opportunities and risks to young people.**

Online social networking presents many opportunities to young people by making it easier for them to, amongst other things: publish creative works to local and global audiences; stay in touch and communicate with peers; find and interact with people with shared interests; organise and co-ordinate political engagement and action; for virtual volunteering; and to engage in self expression.

*Only 18% of young people have not yet tried using a social network site*

(MSN/MTV, 2007)

However, online social networking can also expose young people to new risks. Risks from: inappropriate content; commercialism and unsuitable advertising; inappropriate or offensive conduct on SNS; criminal activities such as identity theft; and inappropriate contact (online and offline) from strangers – which may include grooming and in the most serious cases, sexual abuse.

*40% of young people with social network profiles have the information on them set as public – visible to anyone.*

(Ofcom, 2008)

For many young people, online social networking is not a distinct activity, but is part of day-to-day life, communication and interaction with peers. This can lead to some 'risks' crossing over into, and potentially being amplified by, SNS. Both young people and youth workers identify bullying on SNS as one of the most significant negative issues linked to online social networking[iv].

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**Youth Work has a key role to play in supporting young people to navigate the risks of online social networking.**

Education and information campaigns promoting internet safety messages have had limited success in changing young people's online behaviours[1]. Providing space for young people to reflect upon their online activity, and to develop their 'media literacy' in this space is one of the most promising strategies for promoting safety and the up take of opportunities. Youth work skills are well suited to offering:

- Individual interventions to address risk behaviours, or to encourage the take up of opportunities, based upon existing youth work relationships;

- Group work to support the development and spread of positive on line social networking behaviours ;

- Group work to support young people to become peer-mentors and peer-trainers – supporting each other in their learning about, and safe use of, SNS;

- Reflective learning opportunities to develop media literacy;

Youth workers can also make themselves available as approachable adults who young people can talk to about any concerns they may have about their online experiences.

The online social networking skills base and knowledge base to allow youth work to perform this important informal education role is not yet widespread – but this report suggests a number of approaches to build capacity in the youth workforce to provide effective interventions related to online social networking.

**Online social networking tools can be used to complement existing youth work activities, as core tools for youth workers, and to explore new models of youth work;**

The group and communication tools on social networking sites can provide ways to keep young people in touch with services and with each other, to build bridges between different groups, and to promote ongoing collaboration on projects between face-to-face sessions. Social network sites can provide a platform for sharing young people's creative efforts, or for enabling young people to have a public voice on issues that affect them. Online social networking also offers the potential for new forms of online outreach work or for working with groups with shared interests from across a wide geographical area (e.g. online work with socially excluded young people, young people from rural areas, or LGBT young people).

> I use Facebook to talk to young people about youth groups, and re-arrange dates or organise trips. I use it to see if they are ok if I've not seen them in a while, and also to share photos of previous events we have run.
> Survey respondent, January 2008

1 Livingstone et al. in Ofcom (2008) find that even though young people are widely aware of the risks of certain online activities

and 'risk behaviours' the link between this awareness and action to avoid risks is weak.

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**Online social networking tools present a range of opportunities to promote youth services to young people;**

Positive activities based on long term relationships with trusted adults and intentional age-appropriate inputs designed to support young people's development such as those provided by good quality youth work have a stronger impact on positive outcomes for young people than short-term or one-off activities[v]. It is important that youth work providers can effectively promote their services in an increasingly diverse environment of provision for young people – and online social networking tools provide a wide range of ways to promote youth services, to inform young people of opportunities, and for services to keep in touch with young people.

Blackbird Leys Youth Centre Bebo profile

**There are a range of capacity building needs for youth services wanting to engage effectively with online social networking.**

At the time of writing this report in Summer 2008, most youth services are not yet (a) playing the key role that they could in supporting young people's safe and effective use of online social networking, and (b) realising the many opportunities that online social networking provides for improving and developing youth work activities[vi]. However, the foundations of effective engagement with online social networking are available in most services. Section 3 (Practice) of this report is structured to step through the key stages of moving from where services are right now, to where they could (and we suggest, should) be in the near future.

We suggest that services should work through a checklist covering the following.

1. **Survey** –identify current access to SNS, engagement with online social networking and skills and resources to draw upon within the service.

2. **Safety** –consider the safety implications of online social networking for young people and for staff, and examine options for policy and action in supporting young people in navigating risk, both individually and as groups.

3. **Skills** –take active steps to develop the online social networking knowledge and skills of staff.

4. **Strategy** –explore opportunities to use online social networking as a youth work tool, and to support and encourage young people to take up the positive opportunities it provides.

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## Section 2: **Theory**

Exploring the literature on online social networking and laying foundations for practical responses to online social networking set out in Section 3.

A range of literature about youth work, the internet
and young people's online social networking

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## 2.1: **The context of young people's online social networking**

**In this section you will find:**

- An overview of what online social networking is and why it matters;

- Details of how young people are using online social networking;

- Different perspectives for making sense of online social networking;

**Understanding online social networking;**

We can talk of online social networking in at least two senses: (a) as an activity or set of activities people engage in; and (b) as the use of a series of specific online tools and platforms.

Online social networking activities

An individual's social network consists of all those people with whom they have a connection (e.g. family members, friends, teachers, school colleagues, youth workers etc.). Social *networking* involves creating new connections (for example, through finding people with shared interests, attending events, meeting the friends of friends and chance meetings) and keeping in touch with the people who one already has a connection with. When these activities of creating and maintaining connections with other people take place through the internet then we can talk of it as online social networking.

However, whilst it has long been possible to use tools like e-mail and instant messaging to keep in touch with friends, family and other contacts, 'online social networking' refers in particular to using internet tools with specific features for creating and communicating with a network of contacts (friends). It is these specific features and the ways in which they work which leads to some of the most interesting implications of the online social networking boom that has taken place since 2005[2].

Online social networking tools and platforms

Two of the most important feature of modern social networking platforms, often referred to as Social Network Sites (SNS), are (1) public (or semi-public) profiles, and (2) the friends list.

The diagram below shows an annotated mock-up of a Facebook profile – pointing a number of the different features, alongside the profile and friends list, which exist on many social network sites.

2 Whilst knowing exactly how the different features of particular SNS work is not critical to understanding how it may impact on young people – awareness of the key features, and attention paid to their continued development, change and evolution is important for constructing a responsive account of youth work and social networking which has a chance of adapting in light of

continual new developments.

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A public profile:

- allows users of a SNS allows individuals to publish and share details about themselves and their interests
- displays a summary of that users 'activity' elsewhere on the particular SNS (and, increasingly, on other services and websites that interact with the SNS).
- Can usually be set to allow anyone on the internet to access to view them can be restricted in various ways by the profile owner.

The friends list:

- allows users of a SNS to link to other profiles on the site which belong to their friends or to people (and sometimes organisations or brands) with whom they wish to display a connection.
- makes it possible (privacy settings permitting) to browse a social network site from person

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> to person exploring the connections between them.

- Is used **by the site** to allow a user to see a list of recent updates just from their friends.

  (E.g.,when a user of Facebook uploads new photos to the site then Facebook will notify all the people on the photo owners friends about the new photo – including a link to it.)

- can be used to control privacy settings – so a user can restrict areas of their profile, or media that they upload to only be visible to their friends.

Social Network Sites are continually developing sophisticated new features, including: photo and video sharing tools; messaging and instant messaging tools; discussion groups; event organising tools and third-parties 'applications' which draw upon the profile and friends list data of SNS users to provide add-on functions, games and tools.

Whilst the findings of the Youth Work and Social Networking report should have applications for dealing with any forms of online social networking – our primary focus has been on that which takes place through social network sites.

### What are young people doing on online social networks?

Over 60% of young people have SNS profiles[vii], and research by MSN/MTV suggests that only 18% of young people have yet to explore SNS[viii]. The Institute of Public Policy Research have found many young people spending upwards of two hours a night on SNS[ix]. So what are young people spending all their time doing on sites like Facebook, Bebo and MySpace?

Young people are:

- **Keeping in touch.** Young people today are part of a 'constantly connected' generation[x] – where conversations can start at school or in a youth club, move to mobile phones, and then move onto social networking sites[xi]. Whilst tools like Instant Messenger and TXT are used to organise activities, MSN/MTV[xii] found that *"[social network] sites are forums to share and relive experiences."* Young people leave messages for each other on their profiles and comment on shared media such as photos and videos. Often the content of these messages is very repetitive – and in many cases the fact of 'being in contact' is what matters – rather than the content of the communication[xiii]. The public (message wall) and private messaging features on social network sites are also increasingly replacing e-mail as a communication tool for many young people.

- **Developing new contacts**. Young people can find new contacts on SNS through exploring the friends lists of their existing contacts, searching for people and groups with particular shared interests, or by browsing the site. Young people may also search for someone who they have met once or twice (for example, at a youth club or a friends party) and add them as a friend on a SNS in order to keep in contact and as part of developing friendships. The box below[xiv] shows how adding someone as a friend on an SNS may take place for multiple reasons.

- **Sharing content and engaging in self-expression.** *"53% of social network users have shared some kind of artistic work online, compared to 22% of those who do not use a social network"[xv]* . SNS provide a space for young people to create and share media – ranging from written blog posts, photos and videos, through to edited works

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and collaborative creations. Much of this creative content is what might be seen as traditional teenage self-expression moved online. As Green and Hannon[xvi] put it *"There is nothing new about young people being creative and expressive – you certainly do not need a computer to decorate your bedroom, form a band or decide what clothes to wear. The difference is that by digitising their creative efforts this generation of young people can share the fruits of their labour with a worldwide audience"*.

**Friends?**
In an extended blog essay boyd (2006) offers nine reasons why an individual may add someone to their friends list.

1. Because they are actual friends
2. To be nice to people that you barely know (like the folks in your class)
3. To keep face with people that they know but don't care for
4. As a way of acknowledging someone you think is interesting
5. To look cool because that link has status
6. (MySpace) To keep up with someone's blog posts, bulletins or other such bits
7. (MySpace) To circumnavigate the "private" problem that you were forced to use cuz [sic] of your parents
8. As a substitute for bookmarking or favoriting
9. Cuz [sic] it's easier to say yes than no if you're not sure.

- **Exploring identity.** SNS provide a space for young people to explore and develop their identity – both through reflecting on how they should represent themselves on their own profiles and pages on the site[3] and through inviting and receiving feedback from peers through comments and other contributions to the sites[xvii]. It is important to note that whilst 'identity play' may take place – young people's main profiles are rarely intentionally deceptive and there is a strong norm of authenticity on most sites[xviii].

- **Hanging out and consuming content.** Most SNS are commercial, media-rich spaces and some of the time young people spend on these sites may be seen as time spent just 'hanging out' and being consumers of the information, music, videos, photos and games hosted within them[xix].

- **Accessing information and informal learning.** Through browsing social network profiles young people can access a wide range of information. A number of local and national information providers and support services are creating a presence on social network sites or are targeting advertising and information campaigns at online social networking spaces. There is also significant interest in the potential of online social networks as spaces for young people's informal learning outside school.

### Vibrant, cultural, dynamic and democratic *or* commercialised, toxic and time-wasting?

There are many differing perspectives on online social networking – ranging from those that take online social networking to be a key part of, and a reflection of, "youth culture" (the youth perspective) through to those that view online social networking as spaces of surveillance (the surveillance perspective), sexual playgrounds for shallow self-expression (the body and sex perspective) and places of significant danger to young people (the paedophile and predator perspective).[4] Green and Hannon[xx] characterise the debate about technology in

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3 Stern, 2008, talks of how whilst the construction of self-identity that profiles and homepages allow "is not unique to *online* self-presentation, the deliberate nature of the construction magnifies the experience"
4 Larsen, 2007. Larsen's article provides a very useful quick survey of different ways practitioners and policy makers may be

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general as polarised, into '*moral panic'* and *'digital faith'*, noting that the introduction of every new media technology is usually accompanied by a similar range of moral panic responses.

Below you will find a 12 of the 35 perspectives on social networking put forward by Dutch researcher Malene Larsen. During our research we presented these perspectives to youth workers and invited them to choose the perspectives which best represented their own understanding of online social networking. Each perspective was chosen at least once – illustrating the breadth of ways in which youth workers may initially approach SNS.

It is important to recognise that each of these perspectives provides some insight into the impact of online social networking, but no single one provides a complete story. In the next section we will suggest a particular youth work perspective on online social networking, and will start to sketch relevant youth work responses to safety and opportunity on SNS.

**12 perspectives on online social networking**
(Taken from 35 perspectives on online social networking by Malene Larsen, 2007₅)

**The consumer perspective**
Social networking sites are money-making machines creating a need for added value among young people causing them to spend all their pocket money on extra features such as VIP profiles, widgets, gifts for friends and so on.

**The friendship perspective**
Social networking sites are places where young people can maintain and nurse their existing (offline) friendships and create new (online) friendships.

**The body and sex perspective**
Social networking sites are sexual playgrounds for young people where they portray themselves in a provocative or soft porn-style manner. It is all about appearance and body making the youngsters superficial and shallow.

**The space and place perspective**
Social networking sites are spaces that allow young people to create their own place(s). And those places are as real and important as the offline places where they meet.

**The network perspective**
Social networking sites are places where young people learn the crucial importance of being able to network which they can benefit from in their future professional life.

**The democratic perspective**
Social networking sites are places that allow young people to have a voice in society. Here, they can be heard and express their opinions.

**The public perspective**
Social networking sites are "open diaries" of young people, but they do not think about the fact that the whole world can read their text and see their pictures online.

**The surveillance perspective**
Social networking sites are surveillance. Everything young people write online are saved and can be used (against them) by marketing people, future employers and so on.

**The group work perspective**
Social networking sites reinforce group work mechanism and young people often work together on profiles and are often willing to help each other.

**The anti-social perspective**
Social networking sites make young people anti-social and incapable of communication with others face to face. They loose important social competences.

**The social perspective**
Social networking sites make young people more social and help them communicate with others. Especially, the sites help youngsters cope with shyness or loneliness.

**The communication tool perspective**
Social networking sites are merely a communication tool for young people and they use the sites similar to how they use their mobile phones.

Consider: *Which perspective(s) do you associate most with?*

talking about online social networking – and can be a useful map for navigating the many different viewpoints that may be brought into a discussion. Larsen's article is available at: http://tinyurl.com/6e6n8f

5 The full article is available here: http://tinyurl.com/6e6n8f

## 2.2: A youth work response to online social networking

**In this section you will find:**

- An summary of the risks and opportunities young people face through online social networks;

- An exploration of the unique youth work contribution to supporting young people in navigating risks and making the most of opportunities of online social networking;

- A suggested 'youth work perspective' on online social networking – which informs the practical guidance in Part 3.

### A space of risk and opportunity

Much as going to a music festival would expose a young person to both opportunities[6] and to possible risks[7] – so too are social network sites (SNS) places of opportunity and risk. In looking out for both young people's safety, and their positive development, a youth work response to online social networking needs to be aware of the particular opportunities and risks young people may encounter.

Opportunities

SNS present significant opportunities for developing and maintaining friendships: for young people to extend their social networks by meeting and 'friending' new people or by joining interest based networks. It can be useful to look at the positive impacts of online social networking on young people's developing social capital resources, in particular, on bridging social capital[xxi]. Using online social networks can have a real-world impact on young people's horizons and successful integration and participation in different communities. For example, social network sites can be used for an individual leaving home to go to university both to network with other first-years before even arriving at the University, and can enable them to keep in touch with friends 'back home' – or they can be used by young people who have been on an international exchange to keep in touch or get back in touch many years after the exchange took place.

The top 5 opportunities of online social networking
As identified by respondents to our survey

1. Helping young people keep in contact with peers
2. Allowing young people to develop new contacts and friendships with peers
3. Sharing information and media with peers
4. Finding an audience for creative works
5. Providing access to information

SNS can also play a role in young people's identity formation. There are risks associated with the use of SNS in exploring identity (e.g. the long-term record of identity 'experiments' and exposure to peer pressures and negative norms). However, the use of SNS can have significant positive impacts[xxii], as a canvas for reflecting upon identity development and progress for young people, and as a way for young people "to engage with their culture and to practice ways of being within it"[xxiii].

SNS not only offer young people a platform for communicating with friends, but they offer a world-wide publishing platform for text and multimedia. This

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6 E.g. for entertainment, meeting new friends, gaining new experiences and ideas etc.
7 E.g. loosing money, getting involved in unsuitable activities, contact with abusive adults etc.

creates new opportunities for young people to have a 'public voice', to engage in self expression and share their creative works, an opportunity particularly taken up by young bands sharing their music and building their 'fan bases' on MySpace. Learning how to use SNS, and accessing the content available through them, can encourage young people's informal learning – both in terms of technical skills[8], and informal learning about the people and ideas that they encounter whilst browsing and engaging with content online.

Within the online social networking space there are opportunities for young people to access information, advice and guidance either from trusted sources who have 'set up shop' within particular SNSs, or informal advice and guidance from peers. Being networked with advisors and professionals can open up new forms of communication and support for young people. SNS also provide tools and spaces which can encourage and enable young people's civic and political participation[9] – by providing ways for young people to show their political preferences[10] (e.g. by joining 'petition' groups) and offering tools to help young people organise. By way of illustration, a school walk out of over 50,000 US teenagers in 2006 in protest at immigration policies was predominantly co-ordinated through social network sites. Last but not least in terms of opportunities, SNS are places where young people can spend leisure time and have fun.

Risks

Many of the features of online social networking can expose young people to risks.

The way in which SNS allow for young people to be in 'constant contact' with peers, the possibility of setting up and using anonymous profiles, and the nature of text-based communication all mean that SNS can be used for forms of bullying which Tanya Byron[xxiv] argues are "potentially more damaging" than 'offline' bullying. Online bullying features as both youth workers[11] and young people's[12] biggest concern about SNS.

SNS encourage their users to share personal details and information. In a study of SNS profiles belonging to US teenagers, the Pew Internet Study[xxv] found that 49% included details of the school that profile owner attended. There are risks that the personal information young people publish on SNS may be abused, lead to identity theft, or makes it easier for predatory adults to contact, groom or abuse young people. The sharing of media and

The top 5 risks of online social networking
As identified by respondents to our survey

1. Bullying
2. Young people disclosing personally identifying information
3. Abuse and exploitation of young people
4. Too much time spend on the computer / internet addiction
5. Risks from sexual predators

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8 See Green and Hannon, 2007 for a list of digital skills acquired through informal learning with technology. They also argue that *"[i]t is this type of [informal] learning which often provides children with the confidence of success in formal contexts."*.

9 Rheingold, 2008; Levine, 2008; Loader et. al,2007; Byron, 2008 §3.92; Howland and Bethel, 2002, amongst others, have explored the internet, or SNS, and young people's political participation. It is an area which gains considerable interest in the literature.

10 Both 'small p' political in terms of causes and campaigns, and, to a lesser extent, Party Political.

11 53% of respondents to our survey of Youth Workers, Managers and Administrators identified bullying as a risk of online social networking (the top response)

12 87% of the young people consulted at Kongomana festival in Devon in July 2008 selected 'No bullying' as one of the rules they wanted for any youth work supported online social networking (again, the top response of all the options).

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photos may also impact upon young people's futures – with potential employers, educational institutions or peers able to access photos , videos and information about young people in the future which they may not wish those people to see. Whilst SNS usually incorporate privacy controls to allow users to restrict who can see their information, these are often confusing or ignored by profile owners.

The majority of SNS are commercially owned – and so in using them young people are exposed to a large quantity of targeted advertising and, on occasions, age-inappropriate advertising[13]. Often this advertising is hard to distinguish from non-advertising content on the SNS. As with general access to the internet, it is possible for those using SNS to discover and access offensive, inappropriate, violent or harmful content. However, unlike other online spaces, SNS also makes it easier for this content to be shared within peer networks, and provides a way in which young people could create and share harmful and offensive content (for example, video clips of violent acts).

### Youth work responses to online social networking

Professional youth work has a specific and unique contribution to make to ensuring young people can navigate the risks and make the most of the opportunities of online social networking. This builds upon the core skill set and values of youth work.

The importance of the youth work contribution is underlined by the effectiveness of youth work approaches in engaging and working with socially excluded young people and young people with complex needs. These young people are more likely to lack access to technology and online social networking opportunities[xxvi], and are more likely to encounter serious risks when they are engaged with online social networking[14].

90% of respondents to our survey agreed that 'Youth Work has a crucial role in supporting young people to navigate the risks of online social networking', with 85% believing youth work to have a similarly crucial role supporting young people's uptake of online social networking opportunities. 53% of respondents said supporting young people to navigate SNS risks was a priority for them[xxvii].

Many respondents to our survey, along with participants in our focus groups and action research projects were also keen to explore how online social networking can be used as a positive tool in youth work – both to promote existing activities, and to develop new online and offline youth work opportunities and forms of youth work.

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13 In particular, MySpace.com does not take adequate action to ensure young users to do not see sexualised or other innapropriate advertising.

14 Social exclusion and wider complex needs were found to be key risk indicators in the Second Youth Internet Safety Survey of American teenagers (Wolak et. al 2008). Young people without positive role models, without trusted adults to turn to, or with little experience of the online environment may also be more at risk.

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The following tables outlines the implications of the core youth work skill and values for a unique youth work response to young people's online social networking.

| A youth work perspective on online social networking | |
| --- | --- |
| **Youth work principles**[15] | **Implications for a youth work perspective** |
| Young people's engagement with youth work is on a voluntary basis | Some perspectives suggest SNS are 'young people only' spaces where the presence of adults is an illegitimate interference in young people's private lives. However, drawing on the voluntary principle, youth workers can interact with young people within SNS spaces and can legitimately address issues of online social networking with young people – providing **participation is negotiated and not imposed.** |
| Youth work 'starts from where young people are at...' | Pure information campaigns to inform young people about the risks of SNS are limited in their success at changing behaviour[16]. Instead, youth work interventions need to work with young people to explore their current use of SNS, to identify risks and to identify ways to support young people in navigating those risks. This involves being responsive to young people, and **addressing the risks of SNS at the point in time at which they are an issue** – rather than solely on the basis of a set curriculum that prescribes a set time and method for exploration of online social networking risk and opportunity. It also involves supporting young people to address the risks of SNS that concern them, such as bullying, alongside the risks that get the most national attention, such as grooming and abuse of young people. |
| '..and seeks to encourage young people to go beyond where they started' | Whilst young people are making widespread use of SNS, they rarely understand the full potential and wide range of positive uses. Youth workers can build upon young people's existing use of SNS to (amongst other things): encourage engagement with creative arts; develop political participation; support learning around digital media literacy (particularly skills in identifying advertising and being able to critically assess information found online); help young people develop their technical skills; encourage young people to develop their social networks and communicate with young people from different backgrounds; and encourage young people to participate in particular pro-social social networks.<br><br>If young people are engaging with online social networking in negative ways then **there is a role for youth workers to provide the challenge and support that builds on this engagement, and helps young people to discover, and refocus their energies onto, positive uses of SNS**. |

15 The majority of these characteristics of youth work are drawn from Bernard Davies' Youth Work: a manifesto for our times, 2005

16 Livingstone et al. in the Ofcom (2008) research summary and submission to Byron's review found that "young people may be aware of the risks, especially regarding social networking sites, but this awareness of these issues and problems is not always translated into action."

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| | |
|---|---|
| Youth work is holistic and seeks to build young people's resourcefulness, resiliency and resolve. | Use of SNS does not, by itself, put young people at significant risk of harm[xxviii]. However, certain behaviours on SNS can amplify the risks to young people – for example, engaging in conversations of a sexual nature through the sites with strangers[xxix]. **Youth work should be able to identify when a concern or issue is linked to technology** (e.g. ignorance of privacy settings / lack of understanding of appropriate norms for public communication online) **or when the concern is better addressed through other non-technology linked interventions** such as, for example, group work sessions on sex and sexuality, or supporting an individual young person to deal with specific issues around self-esteem, peer pressure or social isolation. |
| Youth work is associational – working with young people within their peer networks | SNS support young people in keeping in touch with peers. Responses to our survey highlighted in particular the value of SNS in maintaining networks between young people from different backgrounds, countries and cultures after youth residential and exchanges[17]. Online social networking has an impact on the formation, evolution and connection between young people's peer networks. |
| | However, SNS can also encourage negative peer norms (such as posting provocative profile photos) or 'branding' profiles with commercial content. Youth work supported group discussions/group work can **encourage young people to agree and adopt positive shared standards behaviour for participation and interaction on SNS within their peer networks**[18] and can support young people to understand and make positive choices in their online social networking. |
| Youth work addresses young people as young people, not through adult imposed categories and labels. | Notions of privacy and appropriate conduct are not fixed from generation to generation, but are constantly developing (compare any Sunday newspaper's interviews with a politician from 1970 and 2008 to see this in practice). **Youth workers can look to understand young people's participation in online social networking as both belonging to a particular generation** (and in this case, a generation for whom the technology has nearly always been present), **and as belonging to a particular developmental stage of life** with it's own particular concerns of friendship, relationships and identity formation amongst others. |
| Youth work draws upon a relationship of mutual trust between young person and adult. | There are some risks on online social networking sites which cannot be prevented by prior work with young people. The presence of trusted adults with an established professional relationship with young people – able to identify and address particular risks to specific young people in the online social networking space - can contribute to making online social networking safer. |
| Youth work is open to new approaches and ways of engaging with young people | Online social networking provides a range of new opportunities to complement existing youth work practices (e.g. adding an online element such as publishing creative works online, or holding an area-wide discussion) and to build new models of work with young people (such as area wide online youth work for specific groups such as LGBT young people, or young people in rural areas). |

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17 Responses to our survey highlighted the role of SNS in keeping groups from a foreign exchange in touch in particular.

18 Kosse (2007) considers the social norms (shared standards of behaviour) that have emerged on social network sites, such as posting provocative pictures on one's profile – and notes that "social norms play a role in a person's decision making process". Group work can help a small community of young people to examine their norms and explore whether the norms that have emerged are appropriate and true representations of individual's preferences, or whether those norms need to be challenged.

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### A youth work perspective on online social networking

Drawing on features of the youth work response listed above, and upon an understanding of the opportunities and risks of online social networking – we can attempt to sketch out a coherent summary of a youth work perspective on online social networking.

**A youth work perspective on online social networking**

Social Network Sites (SNS) present young people with a wide range of opportunities and risks. Opportunities and risks go hand in hand. The opportunities and risks of most concern to young people (keeping in touch with friends and bullying respectively) are different from those most frequently highlighted in the mainstream media.

Young people need support to develop the appropriate resources and resilience to navigate risk and to make the most of opportunities on SNS, and peer groups need opportunities to negotiate and develop positive norms for their interaction on SNS.

Many of the reasons young people may encounter risks through SNS have roots outside of the technology, in issues of young people's personal and social development. The appropriate response to SNS risk may not involve technology.

Social networking sites can be made safer when youth workers, as professional and trusted adults, actively engage with them.

Youth work can engage with SNS as one or more of:

- an environment in which young people need support and guidance;

- a marketing tool for promoting youth work opportunities and activities;

- a communications tool for interacting with young people and groups of young people;

- a youth work tool for promoting young peoples creative expression, political engagement and wider personal and social development;

- a starting point to work from in helping young people develop their skills, interests and capacities across a range of issues and areas;

- a platform for new forms of online youth work;

Youth work methods have a particular contribution to make in encouraging and supporting young people to adopt safe and positive online behaviours.

In the following section we will explore how this youth work perspective can inform a practical process of building youth work capacity to engage with online social networking.

However, we also believe this youth work perspective should be promoted to those making wider policy decisions about supporting young people in navigating risks and making the most of opportunities online – to highlight the unique and important role that youth work, and informal education professionals, can play.

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## Section 3: **Practice**

In this section we present data and shared learning about current youth work engagement with online social networking and set out practical steps that services can take to build their capacity for engaging with online social networking. This is built from our experience of exploring online social networking with a variety of youth services.

Talking about SNS with young people
at Devon's Kongomana youth festival

## 3.1: **Steps towards youth work engagement with online social networking**

**In this section you will find:**

- A checklist of stages for any service developing their engagement with online social networking to work through;

- Practical resources outlining: key questions to as when surveying your youth service to identify current online social networking skills and practice; a list of considerations for promoting online safety messages to young people; a table of issues to consider when developing an online social networking policy; a series of capacity building and training models; and suggestions for practical approaches for youth work engagement with online social networking at a range of levels;

- Links to further resources on the web from Phase 2 of the youth work and social networking research project

### Components of a youth work response: a four stage checklist

For a full youth work response to online social networking to be effective there is a need for action at both the local and national level.

As part of the second phase of our research we worked with three different youth services and projects to explore how they can engage with online social networking. In this section you can find an overview of key issues for youth services along with issues that need to be considered in a national context. We have divided this into four sub-sections:

- **Survey** –identify current access to SNS, engagement with online social networking and skills and resources to draw upon within the service.

- **Safety** –consider the safety implications of online social networking for young people and for staff, and examine options for policy and action in supporting young people in navigating risk, both individually and as groups.

- **Skills** –take active steps to develop the online social networking knowledge and skills of staff.

- **Strategy** –explore opportunities to use online social networking as a youth work tool, and to support and encourage young people to take up the positive opportunities it provides.

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### Survey

In working with three different youth services during this research, and hearing from many more we have seen that there are many different issues to be addressed in building youth work capacity to engage with online social networking. Each service has it's own starting point – and it is important for capacity building to identify where a service is starting from.

This will involve carrying out a survey or evaluation of:

**Access to technology and access to online social networking sites**

**Key Questions: access**

Do staff have access to computers and to online social networking sites from their office base?

Do young people have access to online social networking sites through youth service IT provision?

In our survey of over 100 youth workers, managers and administrators, we found that only 29% of respondents have access to social network sites (SNS) in the spaces where they work with young people, and access to SNS is blocked in over 45% of office settings. Access to SNS is crucial for staff to develop their understanding of these environments.

If internet access to your service is filtered, then you should also identify where control of the filtering set-up rests, and what flexibility exists for the filtering set-up for local provision[19]. You may also want to think about the physical set up of any IT provision. Supervising internet access sessions is the most trusted strategy for promoting safety (blocking and filtering least trusted[20]) but is most effective when a supervising worker can see all the screens in an ICT room.

**Skills and experience**

**Key Questions: skills**

Are there staff members with an existing understanding of online social networking?

How many staff have encountered or actively using SNS?

Are any staff trained to deliver online safety sessions?

Are there any staff with specific technology skills? Are there young people with specific skills and experience who could advise and support the service?

Do staff and manager share a sense of the importance of engaging with online social networking?

64% of the respondents to our survey had used SNS in the past, with 49% of respondents having set up their own social network site profiles. The focus groups and action research workshops we held (where the number of people who had used SNS ranged from 50% to

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19 For details of our learning about updating filters to provide access to social network sites take a look at:
   http://blogs.nya.org.uk/ywsn/2008/06/facebook-filters-and-taking-th.html
20 See §3 of the Interim Report.

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just 1 in 10) suggest these figures may overstate general levels of use across the youth service as a whole.

In the skills section we will outline a model for building upon existing skills in your service to develop capacity for responding to online social networking.

Alongside mapping skills and experience, it will also be helpful to map out support from staff and management in your service for engagement with online social networking.

**Existing use**

**Key Questions: use**

Is your service already making use of online social networking?

What different uses are being made of SNS?

Are there demands to make use of online social networking which have not yet been met?

Which SNS are used by the young people the service works with?

In our survey only 34% of the 64% who identified they were using social network sites said that they were using them in a work context. Where SNS were being used in a work context, the main uses were:

- **Promotion and recruitment** – letting young people know about activities and events;

- **Engagement** – seeking views from young people;

- **Keeping in contact** – sending messages to young people;

- **Sharing media** – including photos from events or music from young people's bands.

Whilst some areas are developing official bespoke social networking features for their own local youth websites, most engagement with the main SNS where young people are already active (MySpace, Facebook, Bebo etc.) was taking place 'under the radar' and a number of survey responses specifically highlighted that their uses of SNS were not officially sanctioned.

**Policies and guidance**

**Key Questions: policy**

Do you have a policy or guidance for staff on online social networking?

Does your internet use policy mention online social networking?

Do you have other policies that apply to use of the internet or which can be easily adapted to apply to use of the internet and online social networking by both young people and staff?

The safety section below includes guidance on key elements that need to be covered in policies on online social networking.

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### Safety

Any engagement with online social networking does need to be build on a safe and sound foundation which involves:

- Providing relevant and timely safety guidance and support to young people;

- Rigorous child protection procedures that apply online as well as offline;

- Policies and guidance in place to protect both young people and staff;

Approaches to safety guidance and support[21]

We can divide ways of providing safety guidance and support to young people into reactive and proactive. Services will need a mix of reactive and proactive measures in place.

Reactive

At present the most widely used social networking safety measure in youth services is to block access to SNS from youth service computers. The majority of youth workers do not believe this is an effective measure. Supervising young people's internet access sessions is seen as far more likely to be effective in promoting safety[22].

It is also important that youth workers are equipped to identify and address issues relating to online social networking. This can require workers to be familiar with the basic terminology and operation of online social networking sites, and to be able to respond appropriately to potential risks.

For example, a youth worker hearing that a young person is planning to go to London to meet a friend from Bebo should be able to identify that, in this context, the 'friend' could be a stranger, and they should be equipped (where there is an established youth work relationship) to have a conversation with the young person about whether or not to go to the meeting, and what safety precautions to take if going, such as going with parents or friends and staying in public spaces only.

Proactive

A number of pre-prepared training programmes addressing online safety issues already exist, such as the Think U Know programme from the Centre for Child Exploitation and Online Protection[xxx]. These address specific dimensions of online safety (such as the risk of grooming or sexual abuse), but do not cover all the issues relating

Example of a handout that links online social networking with other youth work activities (a group discussion on street crime in this case) showing how proactive engagement with online social networking can promote safety messages and encourage young people to make positive use of SNS.

21 The Interim Report includes a full evaluation of the evidence for different approaches to safety.
22 See §3 of the Interim Report.

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to safe use of online social networking sites.

Youth services may design their own sessions or curriculum specifically to address safety on online social networks, or messages about safety may be included in other activities.

The factors that put young people at risk of harm through online social networks are often extrinsic to the SNS themselves – and so services may also think proactively about how their wider curriculum and activities contribute intentionally to developing young people's resilience, cognitive and emotional competencies, critical skills and self-esteem for online interactions. Young people generally do not perceive the internet and online social networking as something special or distinct from other areas of life, so including aspects of online safety into other themes in a youth work curriculum offers wider opportunities to promote safe social networking.

Getting the safety messages right

It is not within the scope of this research to recommend the definitive safety messages that should be promoted to young people[23], however, we can briefly discuss a number of issues that arise when considering safety messages. The messages given to young people need to be:

- **Relevant** – it is important to start any inputs around safety from young people's own experience. This may mean talking about sharing photos or information on SNS in terms of its potential impact on bullying in the first instance, before discussing other risks such as those of grooming or abuse and exploitation. Starting from the relatively 'low impact, high incidence' risks may prove more productive, than starting from 'high impact, low incidence' risks.

- **Realistic** – asking young people aged 15 or 16 not to use their names or to put any photos at all on a social network site is unlikely to be a realistic request. Instead, safety messages should focus on thinking critically about which photos to share and which not to. And what information to share and what not to.

- **Positive** – messages based on fear can have unintended consequences and negative impacts upon young people's positive use of SNS[24]. It is important that safety messages and interventions are delivered in a balanced way which supports young people to think also about the positive aspects of online social networking. Often a focus on the positive aspects of SNS will provide an opportunity to talk about safety and sensible conduct.

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23 And it should be noted that this research argues that the messages are only part of the story – building young people's general resiliency and capacities is equally as important as messaging.

24 We have heard anecdotal evidence during our research about young people who have stopped using SNS, or have been banned from using SNS, because of 'scare stories'. This does not support young people to develop their resiliency in an increasingly important environment.

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Policy checklist

As part of our action research in Devon we explored the key issues that a policy on youth work engagement in online social networking would need to address. We consulted with over 60 young people at the 2008 Kongomana festival to identify their views on such a policy – particularly a policy for youth workers creating participation opportunities on sites like Bebo, Facebook and MySpace. The views shared by these young people[25], along with evidence from the literature review, and discussions in the UK Youth Online Community[26] are expored in the table below. The left-hand column indicates a key issue that a policy for youth work engagement with SNS should consider, and the right-hand includes guidance and notes for considering that requirement of a policy.

| Key issue | Draft guidance/notes/issues |
| --- | --- |
| (a) What guidance is provided for staff to manage their **personal SNS profiles**? | Staff should be free to have their own **personal** SNS profiles. However:<br>(a) They should not accept friend requests from young people against these profiles;<br>(b) They should not post any content on their profiles which it would be professionally inappropriate for young people to know or see *or* they should use the privacy settings of a site to ensure this content is not accessible to young people;<br>(c) They should lead by example, and abide by all the relevant safety messages and guidance provided to young people.<br>(d) The youth service should provide clear guidance to staff on what they should and shouldn't post on their personal online spaces. This should not prevent staff from using their online spaces for reflective learning and knowledge sharing. |
| (b) **Who is allowed to use SNS as part of their work?** And in what ways are they allowed to use SNS. | There are different youth work uses of SNS and any guidance or policy should specify who can use SNS *and* **how** they can use SNS. For example, a policy may build upon these three distinctions:<br>● Individual youth workers may use a work SNS profile to contact the young people with whom they have a direct professional relationship – and only with the permission of that young person;<br>● A centre or project manager may use a public SNS profile or group to market a project. They may accept friends list requests from young people who have attended or would be interested in attending the project subject to the notes in (e).<br>● A specially trained youth worker (e.g. a 'detached youth worker for the web') may use SNS to interact with young people who may not already be known to the service and to carry out online outreach and issue based work.<br>A workers use of SNS should always be agreed with the relevant line manager. |
| (c) **How should youth workers manage their work SNS profiles?** | Workers should maintain separate personal and work profiles wherever possible[27]. Where possible, the ability to browse the friends list on the profile should be switched off.<br><br>Where a work profile is being used to contact young people known to the worker |

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25 See the consultation report at http://blogs.nya.org.uk/ywsn/2008/08/using-social-network-sites-for.html
26 See the discussion here: http://tinyurl.com/5wpgqe (Accessed 18/08/2008)
27 As of 18/08/2008 having two profiles is officially against the Facebook Terms of Use, as is having an organisational profile. It is, however, possible to 'segment' a Facebook profile, and to have different privacy settings for different groups of people. Managing this properly takes care – and staff and services should be confident in dealing with the Facebook settings before going down this route.

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it is important that the message box on the profile is checked regularly. Where a profile or group may receive friend/membership requests from individuals not already known to the worker – the profiles of the individuals making the request should be checked before they are accepted.

Groups or profiles should include a clear message stating who the profile owner is, their affiliation, how to confirm their identity, and who to contact in the case of any concerns about their conduct.

(d) What **recording of contact** should take place?

Contact with young people through SNS should be recorded alongside any other communication and work with young people. A process for recording contact and communication may be based on a detached youth work policy.

Services should decide how to record and report 'contact time' with young people that occurs through SNS.

(e) What guidelines should exist for workers and young people about **conduct** in online SNS spaces?

Our consultation with young people suggested the following (non exhaustive) list of guidelines should be explored:
- Youth workers should make sure young people are aware that adding them as a friend will make hidden information from the young person's profile visible to the worker.
- If a youth worker is concerned about the content of a young persons profile (e.g. unsuitable profile picture) they should send them a polite private message.
- Workers should actively check any discussions they host, and should make sure these online spaces are kept free of bullying.

Services should consider consulting young people on a local code of conduct for particular uses of SNS and posting this on their official websites.

(f) How should workers deal with **concerns** about young people's safety or conduct?

Youth workers should know how to record and report any concerns about young people's safety to their line managers, or, where relevant, how to escalate any child protection concerns to the relevant authorities.

Relevant codes of conduct, negotiated with young people should be used to set the youth worker response to concerns about young peoples conduct in online SNS and community spaces.

The national picture

In depth research is needed into the most effective safety messages, and delivery mechanisms for safety messages, in terms of their impact on young people's behaviour. This should test the hypothesis that safety messages delivered in a youth work context, and delivered through group work are more likely to have a positive impact on behaviour than those delivered in the classroom context.

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### Skills

It is important for all youth workers to be aware of online social networking and to have the understanding and skills to respond appropriately to any issues linked to online social networking that young people may raise. Services should also develop their capacity to make wider use of online social networking as a youth work tool.

Our research

As part of our survey and focus groups we sought to identify the existing skills base for engagement with SNS within the youth work workforce. Through this we identified a clear need for a basic training programme introducing online social networking in theory and practice. We then worked with Rotherham Youth Service to develop and pilot a series of training sessions. This section will draw upon the training needs model developed for the Interim Report, and our experiences in Rotherham to explore options for developing workforce skills.

Skill development models

There are different levels at which individual staff can engage with online social networking, and consequently there are different skill development needs. These can be broadly divided into three – from a universal skills base, through to a widespread skill set, and a specialist skill set.

- **Universal: Youth workers are equipped to *respond* to young people's online social networking -** All workers have experience of what SNS are & understand the basic safety and opportunity issues associated with them. They are able to apply good youth work practices and responses to online social networking related issues.

- **Widespread: Youth workers are equipped to *use* online social networking as a youth work tool -** Some workers are confident in using SNS as a tool in their work with young people for individual communication, closed group work or promoting youth work activities and opportunities.

- **Specialist: Youth workers are equipped as an online social networking (and social media) *specialists* -** A small number of workers are equipped to run dedicated projects using SNS and to support other staff members making use of SNS. They may also be equipped to operate as online outreach workers.

In the interim report we identified two dimensions that would help determine an individual workers training needs. Firstly (and on the horizontal axis in the diagram below) there is the level of experience of digital technology a worker has. Our action research confirmed that a significant number of youth workers have very low levels of experience or literacy with digital

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technologies and the internet. Secondly (and on the vertical axis) there is the level of youth work skills and experience that a worker has.

In any service, there are likely to be workers at each of the points on the diagram above (and the points in between). The table below explores in more depth these different profiles and the learning needs of staff.

| Profile (In order of approximate size of group – largest first) | Strategic Implications | Development needs |
|---|---|---|
| A*:* **Experienced youth workers, on the new media margins** recognise the importance of engaging with SNS and new technologies but lack the experience, knowledge and confidence to understand how their youth work skills could relate to SNS, or how to address SNS issues.<br><br>*"I think it's quite scary – but I find computers scary anyway. But, I also think we need to be moving with the times. I would need a 24 hour hotline – but we could make this work – as long as we had the support there."* | Probably the largest group.<br><br>While this group may learn how to engage and discuss SNS issues with young people, few are likely to become active users or champions because of the time needed to learn new tricks concerning SNS, especially as the general IT skills of this group are often very limited | May have had limited opportunities or encouragement to engage with technology before. These are needed.<br><br>This group is mostly willing to engage with SNS, but needs awareness raising training, and a guarantee that technical support and back-up is available. The need to know the service supports workers engaging with SNS. They may benefit from contact with more media-active staff. |

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B: **Experienced youth workers - cautious converts** are secure about their own skills, have experience of adapting to new situations and made an effort to keep in touch with new technology – often through a relationship with a child or family member.

*(Commenting on young people sharing embarrassing photos of friend on Facebook) "It's unfortunate and bad behaviour on behalf of her friends – but she shouldn't have got herself in that situation – she should learn her lesson."*

D: **Emerging youth workers, active experimenters and progressive converts** are among the most open, maybe active users of online social networking sites themselves and already experimenting with SNS as important spaces in which to support and engage with young people.

*"The ability to use social networking is great for consultation and promotion"*

*"A campaign ..by young people to save [a] skatepark utilised social networking [and] events and official petitions to great success."*

E: **Emerging youth workers, uncritical networkers** are experienced users of online tools, including SNS, and enthusiastic about using them in youth work

*"Some people have unsuitable photos on their profiles — their profile pictures can look 'slightly dodgy'. I'm not really sure what to do about it."*

Knowledge gaps amongst this group can lead to over- or under-cautious responses to SNS issues.

Members of this group have the potential to champion online work within a service, but are likely to need a partnership with media-active youth workers

This group represent the most important training group since they are moving into a position where they are likely to assume increased responsibility and are interested in trying out new ways of working.

They are potentially a key training resource – able to share their practical skills with others, whilst benefiting from the youth work skills and insights of their more experienced youth work peers.

The enthusiasm and experience of this group in using online social networks is a key asset for youth services.

However, this group also need support to ensure they don't miss identifying both risks and opportunities.

This group are aware of the need to learn how to adapt to the way young people operate online and able to state their own training needs.

They will benefit from hands-on training and connections with others in similar situations, as well as those who are experimenting with new online ideas.

This group would benefit from training the trainers programmes, to enable them to play a lead, specialist, or champion role in local projects and services – sharing their SNS knowledge and skills.

This group will benefit from making connections into youth work and other networks of interested professionals for peer support and knowledge sharing.

This group may need training and support (possibly through mentoring or supervision) in identifying youth work concerns, applying youth work practice and working within the boundaries of professional youth work in online social networking spaces.

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C: **Experienced youth workers, ready responders** are often used to operating relatively independently, are early adopters of new technology and ahead of mainstream trends. Their understanding of technology can help them identify both technological and social solutions to challenges and to identify/enable new opportunities created by online social networking.

*"I think much more needs to be done towards the use of social media to create change ...particularly ..... beyond the very personal way they are used by the majority of people".*

Our sample suggests there is a relatively small number of youth workers, from all levels, who are both secure in their own practice as professionals and experienced users of online tools, including SNS

This group are a valuable resource for learning and training – helping to map out possible youth work responses to SNS scenarios and strategic planning

This group would benefit from a training trainers programmes to enable them to play a lead, specialist and/or champion role

They would benefit from connections into youth work and other networks of interested professionals for peer support

Facilitating the right opportunities for conversations and shared learning inside a service is as important as accessing external training and support to start a capacity building process.

However, it is important to recognise that even those workers with significant online experience and who are active users of online social networks may not be equipped to identify appropriate youth work responses to online social networking, or to use SNS in a youth work context.

The skill development needs for workers towards the left of the diagram above (low technology experience) are often very basic, and a fear of technology can limit the extent to which these staff members are able to independently manage their own learning about online social networking. A key goal of any training and capacity building must be to build confidence as well as skills and knowledge.

Social Network Site Jigsaw Puzzles. Used as a training resource during Phase 2 of the project.

Youth Work and Social Networking

Approaches to training and capacity building

We delivered two styles of training during our action research projects.

> In the first we focussed on **the theory of online social networking**, using a paper-based model of an SNS to look at the features which make it up – and using group discussions to identify the different ways in which SNS are used by young people. We used a quiz exercise to explore the facts about online social networking and the risks and opportunities available to young people and youth services, and we used discussions of a range of scenarios to identify possible youth work responses to young people's safe or unsafe use of SNS. At the end of this first training session there was an opportunity to look at Bebo.com and Myspace.com – but we did not encourage training participants to log-in or do anything more than simply browse the sites[28].

> In the second training session we started with a **practical exercise** – working in a computer room with unfiltered internet access. We asked training participants to sign up to Bebo.com and to explore what happened when they added each other as 'friends'. We then held a group discussion on what the group had discovered, and looked at issues that SNS may raise for young people or youth work. This training session ended with an activity exploring proactive youth work responses of SNS, and invited training participants to draft short project plans.

The second method, focussing on direct experience of SNS was far more effective in building the confidence and understanding of SNS amongst the workers present – and at giving a strong grounding to discussions of possible youth work responses to SNS. We also found there was a significant benefit in splitting training over at least two sessions, and in creating extensive space for reflective learning within the training group.

We would suggest that any approach to capacity building, aiming to establish a service wide basis of understanding of SNS, needs to go through the four stages of:

- **Experiencing online social networking** by accessing, registering with and using (even if for just ½ hour) a particular social networking site.

- **Understanding how young people use SNS** and the implications, risks and opportunities that gives rise to.

- **Identifying appropriate reactive and proactive youth work responses to online social networking**. This may involve learning about youth service policy and programmes, as well as providing an opportunity for workers to reflect on how they would respond to particular scenarios.

- **Youth work uses of online social networking**. It is important for those staff members already engaging with and using SNS that any training identifies appropriate and inappropriate uses of SNS and points staff to any relevant policies and

28 Partly this was due to issues with the filtering system in the computer room we were using.

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procedures. An exploration of potential youth work uses of SNS should provide a foundation for further training on specific uses of SNS in youth work.

These four stages are presented in the diagram above as a cumulative/linear process to show how each stage builds upon the previous. However, the process of gaining concrete experience of SNS, observing and understanding young people's use of SNS, identifying through theory and practical scenarios the appropriate youth work responses to SNS, and experimenting with new approaches to youth work through SNS should also be seen as part of an ongoing experiential learning cycle[29].

Key training topics

In our focus groups and survey we invited staff to share their training priorities. Their suggestions illustrate the range of issues that hands-on and reflective learning opportunities need to address. Respondents asked for:

- Knowledge and learning activities that "remove the fear" of online social networking (which is often due more to the fact that it involves IT than the nature of the social networking platform itself)

- Practical ways of working, including how to offer professional advice in the online context and, "how social networking can be used in a safe manner to aid creativity in informing, supporting, and working with young people.". These should include, "good practise guidelines to encourage those in the different sectors to feel safe when interacting in this new culture."

- Information and examples about the opportunities and risks for youth work to enable people to "feel more balanced about the risks and opportunities", including information on site security (from hacking and identity theft); whether personal information is retained after a site is closed; how to identify spoof identities; and emerging trends.

- Support to identify "Where Youth Workers draw the line in social networking interaction with young people professionally? Where is the line drawn between interaction and advice and meddling in private lives? What are the protocols that young people would like Youth Workers to follow? For example, how would they like us to interact with them on social networking projects?"

- Ideas and guidance on "How can online social networking be constructive in working with young people who lack confidence as opposed to face to face advice and support?"

Respondents also wanted to be equipped to offer young people input, interventions and capacity building that covers:

- How to "Assess risks in online behaviour", and recognise dangers, such as grooming patterns;

- What to do about dangers (who to contact, how to record activity);

- How to operate safely (such as using privacy settings and adopting appropriate

29      Drawing on the theory of Kolb's learning cycle. Kolb, 'Experiential Learning: Experience As The Source Of Learning And Development', 1984.

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behaviour),

- How to "compare and choose which (network) is a safer online service for them to use?"

- How to exploit opportunities of online social networking for extending networks, creative expression, accessing information and becoming more politically engaged.

Next steps

The National Youth Agency will be developing a programme of training and awareness raising to help support the emergence of champions for online social networking engagement in local authorities, whilst local youth services are encouraged to create opportunities for learning about online social networking within their teams.

Training guides used during Phase 2 of the project.

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### Strategy: a menu of youth work applications for SNS

Key issues

It is important that any approach to build a youth service capacity to engage with online social networking respects existing practice and innovation, and respects the emergent and constantly developing nature of online social networks themselves.

Whilst each service will need to develop its own strategic approach to online social networking there are some key elements we have identified during our research:

Devon County Council are piloting an online participation project using SNS. The project is supported both within the youth service and the local authority communications team.

- **Support social networking champions** – Empower an individual or group to champion youth service engagement with online social networking, and to act as a knowledge-sharing hub to keep track of projects and practice in the service.

- **Support experimentation, pilot projects and new ideas** – Online social networking is still in its infancy. It is important to encourage staff to try out new approaches and to attempt pilot projects in order to learn about effective ways to engage with online social networking, and to updated existing methods as online social networking evolves (for example, the next generation of online social networking may well take place predominantly through mobile phones and be based on location-aware social networking, which will raise a new set of issues for a service to engage with).

  By providing clear guidance to staff, and a framework for safe engagement with online social networking – without being prescriptive about the exact ways to engage you can encourage innovative and effective practice.

- **Network nationally** – Networks like http://www.ukyouthonline.org provide a space to share ideas, resources and questions from your service with others and to draw upon shared learning from across the country.

Levels of strategic engagement

Youth work can engage with online social networking in three key ways:

- **Using Youth Work to support young people to navigate the risks and make the most of the opportunities of online social networking** – youth workers need the skills and experience to understand social networking, but access to technology is not essential for this level of engagement. Discussions, group work and individual interventions are possible approaches.

- **Promoting conventional Youth Work activities by using online social networking** - online social networking is a key space to promote and advertise the work of youth services and youth activities. Services can develop their online presence and communication channels with young people through online social networking sites.

- **Using online social networking and social network sites as Youth Work tools** – youth workers need regular access to SNS to use online social networking for

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communication with young people, to complement existing youth work, and to develop new models of youth work.

The table below outlines different youth work approaches and activities that may fit within these various levels of engagement.

**A matrix of youth work engagement with online social networking.**

| Using Youth Work to support young people to navigate the risks and make the most of the opportunities of online social networking | | Promoting conventional Youth Work activities by using online social networking | Using online social networking and social network sites as Youth Work tools. | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **(1) Promote safe social networking messages and skills.** | **(2) Promote the uptake of positive social networking opportunities.** | **(3) Use social network sites to advertise and promote Youth Work activities available to young people[30].** | **(4) One-to-one communication between workers and young people[31].** | **(5) Complementing existing sessions through online social networking.** | **(6) Creating participation opportunities through online social networking[32].** | **(7) Online-only youth work & 'detached youth work 2.0'.** |
| -Run group-work sessions and training on safer social networking; <br><br> -Build safer online social networking messages and skill-building into other youth work activities[33]; <br><br> -Identify and address concerns about risky behaviour; | -Signpost young people to positive online social networking spaces and sites and uses of SNS. <br><br> -Run group-work sessions and training on positive uses of social networking sites; | -Creating profiles; <br><br> -Using micro-blogging and social networking tools; | -Communicating with known young people by SNS message services; <br><br> -Using status updates and friends list information with known young people; <br><br> -One-to-one contact from unknown young people (e.g. IAG work online) | -Running an online component for a group or for group-work sessions; <br><br> -Sharing photos and media from youth work activities through online social networking; | -Hosting discussion spaces in online social networks; <br><br> -Providing a platform for young people's voice and influence; | -Running online only activities; <br><br> -Detached youth work online; <br><br> -Running a project across a wide geographic area (possibly rural), or with a specific group (e.g. LGBT young people). |

A strategic approach

A strategic approach to youth work and youth service engagement with online social networking will look to explore all these areas and opportunities – applying learning from small scale experiments and pilot projects to the right-hand side of the table (#3, 4, 5, 6 & 7) to both develop stronger youth work uses of online social networking and to provide a stronger knowledge and experience base for delivering sessions and inputs for young people on safe and effective uses of online social networking (#1 & 2)

30 See http://tinyurl.com/5rrbgo for an account of how Blackbird Leys Youth Centre have started to use Bebo and Facebook to promote their activities.
31 See the case study from the Gateshead Young Women's Outreach Project at http://tinyurl.com/5bom4c for details of how social network sites can act as a one-to-one communication tool in a youth work setting.
32 See the consultation report at http://tinyurl.com/5mvsm2 for ideas around using social networking in participation.
33 See the suggestions at http://tinyurl.com/552xbn for ideas on how to build safer social networking ideas into other youth work sessions.

## Postscript: **exciting opportunities and manageable challenges**

Online social networking is a disruptive technology. It has grown from nowhere to widespread use in under five years, and will continue to have a significant impact on the way in which young people interact with each other, and with their wider world – both now as young people, and as adults in the future.

Online social networking (as part of the wider web) has the potential to bridge divides, open up new horizons for young people, encourage creativity and create massive opportunities for learning, collaboration and innovation. It also creates new spaces where young people may be at risk and need both to be protected, and need to be equipped to respond to and navigate risk.

The impact of new technologies is not simply due to the way they are designed. The ways in which they are adopted and used are far more important in determining whether their overall impact is positive or negative . . We have argued in this report that youth work has a unique role. It can offer support and guidance to young people as they learn to navigate the risks of online social networking. Equally importantly, it can support them to find positive patterns of use and exploit the opportunities opened up by online social networking – and in doing so, to remake SNS spaces as the sorts of environments we, and they, want them to be.

We have also suggested that online social networking opens up new opportunities for youth work – and we would encourage others to explore these more deeply. There are clear benefits in understanding more about how to use social network sites as youth work tools. More profoundly, SNS as a disruptive technology creates an opportunity space for a new exploration of historic youth work values concerning voluntary participation, altering the balance of power between young people and adults, and focussing on the importance of working with young people understood as part of peer groups, networks and communities when supporting their personal, social and moral development.

Youth work is, however, not there yet. Many youth workers (may) still see online media like SNS as about computers, and computers, they feel, are boring grey boxes that get in the way of human contact. At the same time there are big gaps in access to technology in many youth work settings. Building youth work understanding of, enthusiasm for, access to and skills for engaging in online social networking, is an enormous challenge. We believe it is a manageable one – and we hope this report is of practical help for those taking on that challenge.

Youth work can engage with online social networking, and we believe that in this age of social technology – where technology is about connections between people, not between grey boxes – it has a lot to gain from doing so.

### In closing

This report contains a summary of our learning from this project. To have included all the material we have uncovered would have turned the report into a book and, as we suggest above, there is scope for a great deal more research.. We are also well aware that there is a wealth of experimentation, good practice and learning taking place in local areas across the country which we were not able to draw upon. For these reasons, amongst others, we are keen to foster continued opportunities for all those interested in youth work and social networking through the online network at http://www.ukyouthonline.org and by offering this paper as a discussion starter and a foundation for future action and learning.

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August 2008, Oxford.

Youth Work and Social Networking

## Annex 1: **Methodology**

*"How can youth work best support young people to navigate the risks and make the most of online social networking?"*

The Youth Work and Social Networking project consisted of four key elements:

- **A literature review**

- **An online survey of youth workers and youth work managers**

- **A series of focus groups**

- **Three action research projects**

The focus of the research was on uncovering key messages from and for youth work practitioners. The literature review, online survey and focus groups formed Phase 1 of the research from December 2007 to April 2008. From April 2008 to August 2008 we applied to learning from Phase 1 into the Phase 2 action research projects.

Ongoing details of the project were reported and resources shared via a blog at http://blogs.nya.org.uk/ywsn/ and issues relating to the project were discussed in an open online forum at http://www.ukyouthonline.org.

Details of each of the components of the project are given below.

### Literature Review

We carried out an in depth literature review to identify existing research concerning:

- young people's engagement with online social networking;

- the opportunities and risks of online social networking;

- appropriate responses to concerns about the risks of online social networking;

- existing youth work engagement with online social networking;

The result of this literature review form §2 and §5 of the Interim Report from the project, with a more detailed outline of the evidence concerning the opportunities and risks of online social networking provided in Annex 1 of the Interim Report.

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### Survey

We carried out an online survey between December 2007 and January 2008 to explore awareness levels around social networking amongst youth workers, and to ascertain youth work attitudes towards online social networking.

We invited responses to questions covering respondents:

- Demographics and working contexts;

- Access to and use of online technology in home and work settings;

- Perceptions of young people's access to and use of online technologies;

- Use of different media for information and entertainment;

- Current use of online social networking tools in personal and work contexts;

- Current online safety mechanisms in use, and belief in their efficacy;

- Responses to the risk levels in a series of online social networking scenarios;

- Attitudes towards online social networking and perceived opportunities and risks it presents to young people;

- Attitudes towards a youth work role linked to online social networking;

The survey used a mixture of closed questions and open responses. Some free text responses were coded to allow for trends to be identified.

**Demographics:**

We received survey responses from over 120 youth workers, youth support workers, youth work managers and youth work administrators.

54% of responses were from women, with 46% of responses from men.

77% of responses came from the statutory sector, 17% from the voluntary sector, 3% from the faith sector and 1% from the private sector.

33% of respondents identified as 'youth work managers', with 29% 'professional youth workers', 7% 'youth support workers', 6% 'volunteer youth workers', 5% 'administrators' or 'other qualified youth workers' and 15% providing some other definition of their role.

Asked about the different tasks their jobs involved, 63% of respondents identified they 'organised and managed provision' for young people, with 56% involved in 'participation and youth empowerment', 46% 'delivering specific courses and programmes' and providing 'one-to-one support with young people', 32% 'running general youth club evenings', 30% 'running drop-in sessions', and 21% involved in 'detached work'.

Given the survey was conducted online, and was clearly labelled as concerning 'Youth Work and Social Networking', there is likely to be some selection bias in terms of those who completed the survey - although we believe the survey as a whole does represent a wide range of youth work views.

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### Focus Groups

Through a series of focus groups we sought to explore in more depth questions around:
- Current levels of access to, awareness of, and experience with online social networking in youth work;
- Attitudes within youth work towards online social networking; and
- What recommendations and proposals for action were coming from youth work with respect to online social networking;

We held three focus groups with youth workers in:
- Rotherham
- Oxfordshire
- Wiltshire

Across these three locations, 27 people took part in our focus groups, including a range of youth work managers, professional youth workers, youth support workers, trainee youth workers, administrators and young people on work experience placement. Centre based, project based, school based and detached youth work were all represented with the focus group sample. Focus group participants' ages ranged from 15 to 52, with an average age of 36. 7 of the participants were male, 20 participants were female. Of those who provided an answer, 4 participants work part time, and 20 participants work full time.

In each focus group we held a general discussion around the questions 'What is online social networking?' and 'How are young people using online social networking?'. This was followed be a short presentation on the key features of a Social Network Site, designed to make sure everyone was working from a similar understanding of online social networking in the following sections of the focus group.

We then described a number of scenarios to the group, and asked individuals to position themselves along a spectrum to indicate whether they thought the scenario was risky or safe (for the young people involved). This led to further whole group discussion.

The same scenarios then formed the basis of small group discussions about possible youth work responses to such a scenario. Small group discussions were also used to explore possible ways in which online social networking presented an opportunity for youth work.

Finally, we held a whole group discussion to look at where participants thought youth work should be moving with respect to online social networking, and the key resources and changes they felt would be needed to support progress in those directions.

A detailed report of results from the Focus group is included in the Interim Report §4.

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### Action Research

We worked with three youth services to develop short pilot projects in response to learning from the first phase of our research. These projects took place in:

- **Rotherham** – where we worked to develop a programme of **training** for youth workers.

- **Oxford** – where we worked to explore the use of social network sites in a youth center setting, and the use of social network sites in the **promotion** of youth service provision.

- **Devon** – where we worked to explore the use of social network sites to support young people's **participation** in decision making.

In each case the youth service had access to a set number of consultancy days from our researchers to enable them to develop these projects. Throughout the process we sought to capture insights and learning from the project participants.

The learning generated from these projects is captured in the 'applications and implications' sheets and case studies in this report.

Resources generated during these projects can be found on the project blog at http://blogs.nya.org.uk/ywsn/. In particular you can find blog posts on:

- **Weaving safe social networking messages into other sessions** – ideas from a meeting in Rotherham about how to talk about safe social networking without just talking about social networking. http://is.gd/1K4R

- **Using SNS for participation: consultation report from Devon** – a four page summary of young people's views on how Devon county council should use sites like Bebo and MySpace to invite young people's views on issues that affect them. http://is.gd/1K4Y

- **Sign-posting young people to positive social networking spaces** – a potential activity to promote opportunities on social network sites to young people, whilst also sharing safety messages. http://is.gd/1K52

- **Introductions to MySpace and Bebo** – responding to requests from workers for very basic details of these sites, and how to explore them. http://is.gd/1K5k and http://is.gd/1K5h

- **Dealing with blocking and filtering** – notes on our experiences of trying to gain access to MySpace, Bebo and Facebook to run a training session with youth workers. http://is.gd/1K5t

Discussions that have contributed to the action research phase of the Youth Work and Social Networking project have also taken place on the UK Youth Online network at http://www.ukyouthonline.org and we have drawn upon a case study of the Gateshead Young Women's Outreach Project which you can find here: http://is.gd/1K5c

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The following bibliography includes works used both in this final report, and in the Interim Report, which contains a literature review on youth work and young people's online social networking.

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The National Youth Agency
works in partnership with young people and with
organisations and services to ensure better outcomes
for young people. It is an independent, development
organisation located between government and funding
bodies on the one hand and service providers and their
users on the other.

We strive to ensure that the work of services and
organisations is:
• relevant to the lives of young people;
• responsive to policy;
• effective and of a high standard;
• efficient and provides good value; and
• successful in securing the best outcomes for young people.

Our five strategic aims are:
• Participation: promoting young people's influence, voice
and place in society.
• Professional practice: improving youth work practice,
programmes and other services for young people.
• Policy development: influencing and shaping the youth
policy of central and local government and the policies of
those who plan, commission and provide services for young
people.
• Partnership: creating, supporting and developing
partnerships between organisations to improve services and
outcomes for young people.
• Performance: striving for excellence in The Agency's
internal workings.

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