

Youth Work and Social Networking

Executive Summary

May 2008

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Introduction:

This is the interim report of the Youth Work and Social Networking research project funded by The National Youth Agency. Online social networking is the activity by which an individual communicates and extends their social network through internet tools. It is most commonly associated with Social Network sites like MySpace, Facebook and Bebo, is a growing and significant phenomena and part of many young people's lives. This report draws upon evidence from the literature, a survey of 120 youth work managers and practitioners, and a series of focus groups.

Findings:

- Young people are actively engaged with online social networking.
- Online social networking brings both opportunities and risks for young people.
- Youth workers see supporting young people's engagement with online social networking as a crucial part of their work.
- Youth workers do not yet feel confident to support young people's engagement with online social networking, and there are a number of significant hurdles to overcome, including the common default position where access to social network sites is blocked from computers in youth provision and a lack of in depth understanding of social network sites in many areas.
- Current safety strategies are not believed to be effective.
- Online social networking presents opportunities for youth work as well as for young people.

Recommendations:

In the second phase of this project we will be taking part in a number of action research projects to identify key practical learning about youth work responses. At this stage we can make two key recommendations:

Policy and practice responses to online social networking need to focus on 'capacity building first' rather than 'blocking first'.

Internet filtering (a 'blocking first' approach) hampers efforts to support young people. Strategies need to be developed to build young people's capacity to manage risk and exploit opportunities. This will need capacity building for staff also.

Training and capacity building needs of staff include:

- Knowledge about social network sites.
- Knowledge about actual opportunities and risks.
- Skills in applying youth work skills and policies to the social networking space.
- Opportunities to explore online social networking and become more confident.
- Awareness of upcoming trends to enable proactive responses.

Training needs vary between staff members, and many of the development and skill building needs a service may have could potentially be met from within.

Youth work responses have a key role to play in addressing wider concerns about opportunities and risks of online social networking.

Youth workers are working with some of the most at risk young people. Social network sites are key spaces for young people's personal and social development. Youth work methods of individual interventions based on relationship, and reflective group work should be explored by policy makers as key elements of a national response to concerns about online social networking and social network sites.