

Social Media: The Basics for Youth Work

This guide will look at what you need to know when it comes to social media platforms and using them in your youth work practice. The guide will:

- encourage you to think about where social media fits within your work
- look at some specific examples and case studies
- provide you with an exercise to help you think about your organisational social media policy
- provide you with questions to ask if you encounter a new platform

Did you know...

- On average, people have 5.54 social media accounts?¹
- In January 2019, there were 3,297 billion active social media users?
- Six new profiles are added to Facebook every second?

What is a social media network?

A social media network is an online platform that people use to build social networks with other people based on common interests and/or real life connections. Networks are normally based on communication in different formats and sharing a type of media, for example posts, photographs, videos, blogs and more.

Popular social media networks include Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat and Whatsapp. However, new social media platforms pop up all of the time and so it's important we can think critically about if and how we use these new platforms.

Is digital youth work different to youth work?

In short, no! Digital youth work should still take the same approach to youth work in a physical setting. It is about taking what you do offline and moving it into an online context, this might mean doing things differently but fundamentally, it is still youth work.

It also doesn't mean that youth workers need to be digital or technical experts, but it's important they know the basics. This guide will help get you started with thinking about how you can use social media platforms in your practice.

¹ Brandwatch (2019) 123 Amazing Social Media Statistics & Facts, <https://www.brandwatch.com/blog/amazing-social-media-statistics-and-facts/>



What are the main platforms?

As of 2019, these are the main social media platforms in the UK²:

Icon	Platform	Information
	Facebook	A social sharing network with over 35 million users in the UK. You can share posts, videos, photographs and time limited story content.
	YouTube	A social network dedicated to video sharing and viewing with over 23 million UK users
	WhatsApp	An instant messaging platform with voice and video calls as well as group messaging functionality.
	Instagram	A photograph and (short) video sharing social media platform, with a story-telling feature, which allows time limited content to be uploaded. Instagram has 14 million UK users.
	Twitter	A micro-blogging platform that allows users to share short snippets of information in a post (up to 280 characters) with 13 million users.
	Snapchat	A platform where users can send images and videos only available to view for a short lifespan with 16 million UK users.

² Social Media (2019) Most Popular Social Networks in the UK, <https://social-media.co.uk/list-popular-social-networking-websites>



How can youth workers use social media platforms?

There is a variety of ways that youth workers can use social media in their practice. As time goes on, things change and so this list will continue to grow. Here are some ways you could consider using social media:

Communicate with young people

Social media provides the ability to communicate with young people enabling conversations to happen outside of face-to-face meetings, as well as opportunities for relationship building and, where others are involved, a sense of community. There are different ways you can use social media to communicate with young people:

- **Broadcasting or marketing communication** - through an organisational account like a Facebook page or Twitter account to tell people interested in the work you're doing. For example, this could be used to:
 - Let young people know about new opportunities they could get involved in;
 - Provide updates about your project;
 - Showcase work created by the group or young people you support.
- **Group communication** - through a group set up on a social media platform – for example a WhatsApp or Facebook group. This is a good way to build up a peer support network and keep the group of young people you're working with informed about what's going on, new opportunities and other updates – a way to share information and keep connected outwith face-to-face contact. See Online Communities below too.
- **One-to-one messaging** – for example in a private WhatsApp message or through direct message on an account such as Twitter or Facebook. This type of communication should be thought about carefully and the necessary precautions should be put in place, for example how will these communications be recorded? Think about how this type of interaction would happen in an offline setting and mirror best practice online. Remember that things can be interpreted differently online where you don't have tone and body language to assist in getting your message across.

Case study: School Social Workers use Social Media

In Finland, a project called Somessa aims to expand the work done by school social workers in to new online platforms used by young people. It enables social workers to be reachable by a range of apps outside of face-to-face contact.

[Watch the video to find out more.](#)





Be Aware!

If you are using a social media account that is not part of your organisation (for example, a page or business account) to communicate with a young person, consider creating a work social media account if not prohibited by that platform. It is important not to blur the boundary between your private and work life, keeping them separate is important. If it is not possible to create a work profile, this is an important question to discuss with staff – what is acceptable to your organisation?

Build an online community

To create a peer-support network and to keep in touch with young people outwith your sessions you might want to consider setting up a private online community. A safe space where young people and youth workers can share information, ask questions and engage with each other and your organisation.

If you are looking to create an online community, you should think about how you take your offline best practice into an online space, for example:

- Having a minimum of two, ideally more, youth workers with the relevant qualification and safety checks in the group at a time.
- Define who will be part of the group. How will they know about the group and how will they join? Who manages this?
- How will you support those who aren't digitally confident to take part in the group? Can you provide training or a mini introduction session before you launch the community online?
- Create a set of community guidelines outlining what the group is for, what is acceptable and what is not. This might outline what inappropriate behaviour looks like and the actions that will be taken if it is seen or reported by another group member.
 - A great starting point for creating these guidelines is to run an exercise with the young people who will be using the group in a face-to-face setting. You can ask them to suggest community guidelines, involving them in the process and ensuring they understand them.
 - Make sure these guidelines are clear, for example do not just say 'Rude or derogatory comments are not allowed'. Explain what you mean by this – 'any comments that degrade a person's race, religion, gender, age, or abilities are not allowed. These comments will be moderated and could be deleted.'
 - Once you've created your guidelines, make sure they are located in an easily accessible space in the group (for example pinned to the top of the page).
- Create a moderation policy. What happens if someone is going against your community guidelines? What action will you take? Make sure this is laid out from the offset.
- Consider the roles you might be able to give young people within the online community space, as the community becomes more established you could consider giving people roles, such as a Conversation Creator where a young person that is asked to write a post each week to



encourage engagement – ask the young people to come up with role titles!

Case study: How the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland use online communities

Social media has been a useful platform for the Children and Young People's Commissioner in Scotland when young people have been reluctant to use email. The Commissioner's office have set up closed Facebook groups using Facebook profiles which aren't linked to any private or personal information. Why do the Commissioner's office think it works as an effective communication tool with young people?

- Young people tend to use Facebook to talk to older people rather than their peers, so using it for communicating with the organisation isn't too different from how they would normally interact with the platform.
- They're familiar with how to use the platform and largely know what to do.

But there are drawbacks. the Commissioner's office found that young people have often deferred to staff for answers and not felt as empowered to create the online community they were hoping to facilitate.

Basecamp as an alternative solution

The Commissioner's office have also used Basecamp to create online communities. There are slightly higher barriers to entry as it is a new platform for many young people and so additional support and training is often required to ensure young people can make the most of the platform. However, the organisation has found that once that hurdle has been navigated young people feel more empowered in this environment.

Top Tip! One thing the Commissioner's office has learnt from creating online communities is that young people are often unsure of how formal or informal they should be when communicating with adults. If you are thinking about setting up an online community, think about how you can support young people to feel confident communicating with you.



Social media in youth work

There are lots of great examples of how social media can be used as a youth work activity, engaging young people in something they're interested in and encouraging positive engagement, community building and knowledge sharing. Take a look at these great examples from across Europe.

Case study: YouTube Barcamp

A barcamp is a conference that focuses around technology and user generated content (such as photographs, videos or blogs). In Nuremberg, Germany, young people with an interest in YouTube took part in a YouTube Barcamp. Creating a community of young YouTubers who shared their knowledge, ideas and experiences with other young people.

[Watch the video to find out more.](#)



Case study: InstaWalks

The Instagram community across the World is getting bigger every day. In Vienna, an organisation called wienXtra-medienzentrum worked with the Instagram community to run Instawalks for young people. Instawalks last between three and four hours, have a specific theme and see a group of people walk a semi-planned route to take photographs that are then shared on Instagram with a pre-agreed hashtag.

[Watch the video to find out more.](#)



How could you engage young people you work with or in your local community by using social media as a building block?



Marketing & showcasing young people's work

You can use social media to shout about your youth work organisation to your existing audience and try to engage new people.

There are a range of platforms that you could use, but don't feel under pressure to have a presence on each one! The most important questions to ask yourself when selecting the platform are:

- Are the people we are hoping to talk to on the platform?
 - The best way to find this out is to ask them! Whether it is other young people, parents or the local community, some quick research will help give you the answer.
- Do we have the right skills to manage the platform?
 - Do you have staff that know how to operate the platform and understand its different functions?
- Do we have enough time and resource to put into making our presence on this platform a success?
 - Some platforms require more time to ensure your content is heard or seen, for example starting a page from scratch on Facebook can be difficult without having budget to pay for boosted posts. Do you have time or budget to put into the platform to ensure people are engaging with it?
- Do we have the right content to make a success of this platform?
 - For example, Instagram has high quality photographs. Will you be able to take enough photographs of this quality that are relevant to your audience to make the platform a success?

Answering these questions, will help you to decide which platform might be best for you to use. Don't be afraid to try a platform for a few months and decide it's not for you and then move on to something different!

Once you've chosen your platform, it's a good idea to do a persona exercise to help you understand who you're trying to talk to.

Persona exercises

A persona exercise involves creating fictional characters that represent the people you're trying to speak to. Organisations tend to have between four and six personas that are distinctly different and are made up of a range of characteristics. These might include:

- Name
- Age
- Location
- Role / Job / Education
- Behaviours (for example, hobbies, interests & daily routines)
- Challenges (what are the challenges that your organisation can help with?)
- Goals (what do they want to achieve by engaging with your organisation?)
- Where do they spend their time online? (what platforms, when are they there and how long do they spend there?)



- What content do they want to engage with? (for example, video, podcasts, blog?)
- One line summary (if one line summed up this individual what would it be?)

Once you have created your personas, this will help you think about what kind of content you can create that will engage your users. Start to create a content calendar with ideas of posts, photographs and videos you can share. It's a great way to keep you on track when you first start using a social media for marketing purposes.

Takeovers

If your organisation is already set up on social media, you could consider handing over your channels to young people for the day (or longer!). This is a great way to help young people feel empowered, have a say over what content is shared and have more youth focused content as part of your strategy.

Takeovers are a great way for young people to share information about things that are important to them. You might want to organise takeovers for National Awareness events, for example Mental Health Awareness Week or National Youth Work Week. Instagram Stories are a great medium for takeovers by young people, but you can also run takeovers on Facebook and Twitter too.

To prove it is not as scary as it sounds, take a look at the case studies below of YouthLink Scotland and High Life Highland, the latter set up social media channels entirely run by young people, for the Year of Young People 2018.

Case study: Instagram Takeovers at YouthLink Scotland

YouthLink Scotland wanted to give young people a voice as part of their social media strategy and so identified Instagram as a good platform to do this. Providing training at meetings with young people about online etiquette and behaviour and a space to storyboard content, set the foundations for the takeovers. This is supported by Instagram Takeover Guidance that provides advice, ideas and practical steps as a refresher closer to the takeover.

Once young people have done one takeover, YouthLink Scotland encourages young people to get involved in future takeovers, whether that is at events, for National Awareness Days or at conferences.

You can view some of the previous takeovers in the highlights of their [Instagram page](#).





Case study: Channels created for young people by young people

Young people in Highland were given access and control over social media accounts as part of the Year of Young People celebrations in Scotland. There was no censorship and no adult control, but there was support and training from John, a youth worker at High Life Highland.

This project went beyond using social media as a way to outwardly communicate with the public and other young people. Due to the geography of Highland, it was often difficult to meet up with the young people involved in the project and therefore social media was used as a communication tool between young people and youth workers. This communication was often done through groups and private messaging on Facebook as well as video.

Top Tip!: John and the team at High Life Highland believe that communicating with young people face to face and online should follow the same principles. They set up social media accounts using work email addresses that ensured there was separation between work and personal lives and that the profile created was accountable to the organisation.

The accounts have been a huge success, demonstrated by the fact that John was a finalist in this year's National Youth Work Awards for Digital Youth Work. Whether it is promoting local events or engaging with MSPs on Twitter, those involved have shown that giving young people a voice online has great outcomes. John advised: "I would love to take credit for everything but young people were instrumental in this."

Find out more by following the accounts on [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#) and Facebook.



Things to think about...

When you've decided how you're going to use social media in your youth work practice, remember to bear these things in mind:

It's an age thing...

For most social media networks, users need to be 13 or older (for Whatsapp users need to be 16 and on YouTube, while you don't need to be 13 to watch content, you do need to be 13 to set up an account³). This is because parental permission is required in order to collect personal information from users who are under this age (as per General Data Protection Regulation or GDPR).

At the time of writing this guidance, Basecamp is one of the only platforms that does not have an age restriction but does require an email account. To set up an email account on many platforms you do need to be 13, but platforms like Google for Families allow email addresses to be set up for under 13s as they are managed through a family platform.

Alternatively, organisations who have run digital communities with under 13's have invited parents into the space so that younger audiences aren't left out of key communications.

Consent

Remember to update your consent forms to include any details about how you might communicate with the young people you work with using online platforms. This does not need to be a brand new form, but can be additional information in your existing consent form. See photography consents below too.

Photographs

Remember that if you will be taking photographs of young people you will need to get consent from either the young person or their parent/carer depending on their age. Your consent form should outline how and where the photograph will be used, how long it is kept on file and what to do if the person would like their photograph removed.

Take a look at the [Digital 5Rights⁴](#) project for more information about the rights of children and young people online. The five rights include (1) right to remove, (2) right to know, (3) right to safety and support, (4) right to informed and conscious use and (5) right to digital literacy.

Understanding terms & conditions

Terms & conditions can be so full of legalese and jargon that they are often hard to understand. But it's important that you do understand them so you, and the young people you support, know how to use social media platforms safely, securely and that you know your own rights.

³ UK Safer Internet Centre (2018), Age Restrictions on Social Media Services, <https://www.saferinternet.org.uk/blog/age-restrictions-social-media-services>

⁴ Young Scot, Your 5Rights, <https://young.scot/5rights/articles/your-5rights/>



The Children's Commissioner in England and Wales has put together a [useful resource](#)⁵ that simplifies some of the most popular social media platforms' terms and conditions, ensuring that children and young people can understand what they're signing up for when they press agree.

Remember that social media networks can change their terms and conditions from time to time to reflect any changes to the services they offer users.

Setting boundaries

Boundaries are important so as not to blur the line between your personal and professional life and that you have time to switch off. Here are some things to consider:

- **Time** - think about what hours you will be available to communicate with young people online (for example, 9am – 5pm) and make this clear to the young people you support. If the platform has a feature for a short biography, add in the times you're available. For example in WhatsApp you can write this in the 'About' section (Settings > Profile > About), in Twitter you can write this in your biography (profile > Edit Profile). Try and stick to these times so that people don't come to expect to be able to communicate with you outside of those hours.
- **Personal accounts** – don't use your own personal account to communicate with young people. You could consider, where platform terms and conditions allow it, to set up a separate work profile / account.
- **Using personal devices** – are you happy for staff to use their own personal devices to communicate with young people? If so, what boundaries will you set around this?

Take a look at the Social Media in Youth Work Exercise (page 15) that will help you to answer important questions about your organisations boundaries when it comes to using social media in youth work.

Be an online role model

- Demonstrate good e-safety by making sure your privacy settings on your personal accounts are high and ensure you have a strong password that you don't share with others.
- Don't share personal information, for example your address or date or birth online or as part of a username.
- Report any online abuse or trolling you receive and don't engage in any trolling targeted at yourself or your organisation.
- You don't say anything that is offensive or discriminatory online.

Create a social media policy

Create a social media policy for your organisation or adapt your existing one to ensure it includes using social media in your youth work.

⁵ Children's Commissioner (2018), Simplified Social Media Terms and Conditions for Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube and WhatsApp, <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/publication/simplified-social-media-terms-and-conditions-for-facebook-instagram-snapchat-youtube-and-whatsapp/>



It's important that staff feel empowered to use social media, having a policy that encourages use and is clear about what is expected is important. Involving staff in creating this policy is key – use the Social Media in Youth Work Exercise that can be found on page 15 of this guide as a starting point.





Getting started

You have decided what platform you're going to use – so, what's next?

Account set up

When setting up an account, you'll normally need to set up a username and password in order to log in. Here are some top tips for setting up an account:

Username: a personal identifier that enables you to log in to your social network profile and ensures you can be identified by your contacts.

- Remember not to give away any personal information (like your date of birth, middle name, date of birth, address) in your username to ensure your privacy.
- When creating your username, think about the audience of the platform. If you are using it in a professional capacity make sure your username reflects this!
- Similarly, if you need to have a photograph as a profile picture be aware that on most platforms profile pictures are public so are discoverable whether someone is connected with you or not.
- Have a strong password that's securely stored and does not have your organisation name in it. Take a look at the [Safe, Secure and Empowered guidance](#) on creating strong passwords.

Safety, security & privacy

There are many benefits to young people having a presence on social media accounts; connecting with others, education, hobbies, online support and more. However, having an online presence also comes with risks such as cyber-bullying, trolling and hacking among others.

It's therefore important that youth workers are able to help young people understand safety and security settings of different platforms and that young people are aware of the mechanisms available to support them online.

Start by understanding what information on your profile is public and if you can make your profile private which typically means only people you agree to interact with are allowed to connect with you (however, remember that nothing is truly private online, as things can be screenshot and shared more widely).

Some things to check when you've set up an account:

- Is your contact information (e-mail address, phone number, date of birth or postal address) private?
- Is your location being shared when you add content online? Can you turn this on/off?
- Are there different settings for different posts? How can you review them?
 - For example, in Facebook you can visit Privacy Settings & Tools and review your timeline or 'Limit Past Posts' to limit the audience of all of your past content.
- Are you discoverable on the platform by people that you don't know? Is your profile discoverable on Google?



Reporting abuse, inappropriate messages & content

Social media platforms have reporting systems for abusive behaviour or behaviour that goes against community guidelines (guidelines that users are expected to abide by when using a platform). These guidelines will typically set out what good communication looks like, what you can and can't do online.

Therefore, there is normally functionality to:

- Report content / a user that is showcasing harassment, violent threats, exposes private information, uses hate speech or spam posts.
 - This can usually be done whether the behaviour is directed at you, someone you know or someone else and the mechanism for doing this will change depending on the platform.
- Block a user that you don't want to interact with - they aren't normally notified that they have been blocked but will no longer be able to interact with you and might be displayed a message to this effect if they tried to contact you.

If you receive a message or engagement that you find offensive or rude, it's best not to engage with it but instead follow the steps above to report and/or block the user. If you're following the user, you might want to consider unfollowing them.



Frequently Asked Questions

From running a range of workshops on digital youth work, we know there are lots of questions out there! Here are some answers to some FAQs:

- **What's the best platform?** The best way to answer this is to ask the young people you're working with. Only they will know how they want to be communicated with. Before you ask the question, you might want to consider the options available (for example, staff skills and capacity) to manage expectations. You could consider Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram or other platforms such as Basecamp or Slack.
- **How do I protect myself and ensure young people communicate with me in a professional capacity?** Set clear boundaries from the offset and ensure that your private and professional online lives are separate. Think about the language you use when communicating with young people, try not to use text speak that comes across as more informal than writing things out.
- **What happens if a young person tells me something that requires me to take action about through a social media platform?** The process for reporting or dealing with this is unlikely to be that different to the way you would respond to a similar face-to-face situation. Thinking about how you might deal with this in advance, will help you feel more confidence should the situation arise.

Do you have another FAQ that you think would be useful to be added to this resource? Get in touch with the Senior Digital & Comms Officer at YouthLink Scotland: lpluss@youthlinkscotland.org.



What about new platforms?

The digital space is changing every day and with that new platforms pop up. So what do you need to think about when it comes to a new platform? These are some questions you might want to ask yourself when you come across a platform that you're not sure about:

- Who will own the content that I post online? How can others (including the platform) use the content that I post online? Am I happy with this?
- What personal information does the platform store? Where is it stored and who has access to it / is it sold to third parties?
- Can the platform read my personal or direct messages?
- What happens to my data if I decide to delete my profile or a piece of content?
- Does the platform track my movements online? If so, how? What's done with this information?

You might also want to consider whether you know the answers to these questions for the platforms you already use, some of the answers to these questions might surprise you.

Take a look at the Children's Commissioners Office in England & Wales for their [Simplified Social Media Terms and Conditions](#) for Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube and WhatsApp – to help you understand the terms and conditions and know the answers to the above questions for these platforms,



Exercise: Social Media in Youth Work

As with many things, there isn't a one size fits all policy. Take some time to gather your team and think about these questions, ask yourself what is acceptable? What isn't? What would you do in these situations?

Not only will this help you have a clearer picture of what the boundaries are within your own organisation, it will also help staff feel more confident as they know what they can and can't do and how to respond in a range of situations.

Questions

Discuss these questions with your team and come to an agreement that will work for your organisation.

- Should staff **follow** young people on Twitter? Instagram? Become friends on Facebook?
 - Why and how might it change depending on the platform?
 - How do you set those boundaries with the young people you work with?
- Should staff **engage** with young people on Twitter? Instagram? Facebook? For example, responding to tweets that aren't related to work matters.
 - Does this change if it's a communication via private message (for example, a direct message or in Facebook Messenger)?
 - What happens if the platforms allows this connection but you are discouraging staff from communicating in this way? For example, if you follow a young person on Twitter, they can then direct message you.
- If engaging with young people through social media, should staff set up separate social media profiles or accounts for work purposes (as opposed to their personal accounts)?
 - What happens if the platforms terms and conditions only allow one account per person (for example, Facebook), so creating a separate work profile would go against their terms and conditions?
 - What happens if the platform staff are using is largely used in a professional capacity, for example LinkedIn or Twitter?
- Should staff be asked to set their personal social media accounts to private so young people can't engage with their content / get in touch with staff after hours?
- When are staff available to talk to? How do we communicate this and manage young people's expectations in terms of contactable hours?

What would you do in these situations?

To help your staff team know how to react in different situations, think about the below scenarios and how you'd respond. The discussion may lead to other scenarios that your staff team are concerned about too.

- A young person has contacted you privately on Facebook and said they do not want to come to the group anymore because they feel other group members are bullying them.
- You're connected with a young person online and see something concerning on their profile when you're not working.



- A young person posts in your online community a post accusing another member of your staff team of being racist.

Use the answers to these questions and statements to help you create a strong social media strategy that will help staff to feel more confident when communicating with young people.



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