



YouthLink Scotland

AI: It's not just the future - it's NOW!

It's Saturday morning and two groups of young people are gathering to make their way to Sopra Steria's Edinburgh office. Typically, the technology company's office would be deserted at the weekend, but this is an opportunity for the young people to catch a flavour of a corporate office, share about Artificial Intelligence and take the next step on the journey to help other young people explore this important and fast-moving topic.

It's an early start for the young people and youth workers from Cromar Future Group who come from across Aberdeenshire and have several hours of coach journey south before the workshop begins. They are meeting up with young people from The Citadel, Leith, who just need to get the bus along from the other end of the city. Both groups of young people have chosen to take part in a project to carry out some youth-led research and contribute to creating new activities and resources.

Darren Links is one of the team at Sopra Steria who have all donated precious weekend time to support the project. He says, "We were so pleased to be able to help this enthusiastic group of young people to understand AI and how it can drive positive change in business and society. We're committed to making a real difference to our communities, which includes inspiring the next generation to use technology with confidence, creativity and purpose."

The trip to Sopra Steria is definitely a highlight of a project which included a series of workshops in different locations, with different inputs and opportunities for the young people to learn, share and for the two groups to get to know each other.

Cameron, a young person from The Citadel group said, "I think youth workers can do a lot. So long as it's fun, so long as it's simple, so long as it's easy, it will help younger people learn about AI, learn what to avoid and what to do. Simple activities with Play Doh, visiting other places, it's all a lot of fun and will make a difference."

Iain Robinson, Deputy CTO (Strategic Digital Solutions) at Sopra Steria says, "I spent the day today with a lot of young people in Edinburgh exploring how AI is being used, and I've found it really helpful to hear about their needs and to hear how the young people see this area developing. It's really inspiring and encouraging to see the next generation coming in and working with us, people with some experience of using Artificial Intelligence in the business world."

Les Ellis, youth worker with Cromar Future Group, Aberdeenshire said, "This was a wonderful experience of our young members. We all learned more about how to use AI

effectively, and they so enjoyed the visits and workshops, particularly to Sopra Steria as this gave them an overview of how a big company might use AI. A big thank you to all involved.”

Our Futures and AI: Reflections on the Journey

The use of AI in every walk of life is developing so rapidly. It is a massive challenge to keep pace and so important to support young people to explore this new iteration of powerful and easy access technology which is potentially so pervasive and disruptive.

As we reflect back on an interesting and demanding project, there is the sense that it was the right thing at the right time.

Young people explored Artificial Intelligence in a youth work setting

The project has enabled us to produce some starting-place resources which will be used in the youth work sector in Scotland, and beyond. When we launched the toolkit in February 2026, a conference delegate said, “This is exactly what we were looking for.”

At the **START** of the project (in our application) we said:

The aim of this project is to facilitate young people to contribute directly to research into aspects of AI that most directly impact on their education and potential routes to future life, including employment.

DURING the project:

Young people were at the heart of the work and the outputs from the project are available here: [Our Futures and AI](#). If you are interested in this work, please explore these outputs and let them speak for themselves. This paper doesn't repeat the contents of the toolkit or the youth-led research or other supporting documents but reflects on what we did and didn't achieve along the way; the wins and the challenges from a project which was both testing and inspiring.

YouthLink Scotland led the project, bringing together young researchers from Cromar Future Group and The Citadel, Leith with digital education specialists, Digital Skills Education and support from technology company Sopra Steria and the Scottish AI Alliance.

At the **END** we can reflect:

The young people learned about AI together with support from youth workers and the team from Digital Skills Education. The scale of the topic meant it was difficult to know where to start, how much knowledge to assume, how to pitch content, what to cover and what not to cover. However, there was a genuine sense of a co-creation project, with the young people leading the way around topics of interest with strong support from the adults on the team.

The breadth and diversity of learning, and the impact of the project on those directly involved can be illustrated by two specific outcomes, in terms of how the project influenced the participating groups...

Cromar Future Group is a coding club, enabling young people to develop technology skills that will be relevant for their future careers. One of the things they discovered is how AI is changing opportunities around coding: an AI tool can write the code, so the role of the human in the technology workplace is changing. This finding was significantly accelerated by the project and is influencing what Cromar Future Group is now focusing on as a group.

"I liked the challenge of the project. Everything is moving so fast. Even during the project browsers were introducing AI summaries at the very moment that we were exploring all of this. The project made us address the issue. This was particularly valuable for us as a coding club. It made us re-evaluate everything that we are doing. It has challenged our whole model. I don't think we would have addressed this otherwise - it would have taken us two years to make the switch." Les Ellis, Youth Worker, Cromar Future Group

The Citadel has continued to focus on AI following the project, with a second cohort of young people taking part in an AI programme, based on the resources they helped to develop.

"I work with lots of different groups of young people and I will be very interested to see how those different groups respond to the activities that we developed. I was also fascinated that the group of boys that volunteered to be part of this project identified body image as a key theme that they wanted to explore." Ryan McKay, Youth Worker, The Citadel

Young people met new ideas, new people and new places in a series of workshops

At the heart of the project was a series of workshops, bringing the young people from the two groups together in Dundee, Stonehaven and Edinburgh. The young people also met weekly in their own groups to explore various themes around AI and the work they did is reflected in the Our Futures and AI Toolkit. The youth workers worked with YouthLink Scotland and Digital Skills Education, planning content responsively to meet the young people's needs.

Every event was quite different and young people frequently commented on enjoying the experiences of travelling to different cities in Scotland. We met in an arts venue in Dundee, a school in Stonehaven, the corporate offices of Sopra Steria in central Edinburgh, and YouthLink's Edinburgh office.

The visit to Sopra Steria in September 2025 was a highlight for both groups. [Watch a short video](#) of people talking about the two-way exchange that was a key element of the experience.

“By hosting the young people at their Edinburgh office, Sopra Steria opened a window into the professional environment where AI is developed and deployed. Technologists and consultants engaged directly with young people, discussing projects that use AI for social good, such as tackling global illiteracy or revolutionising aerospace safety. This interaction helped to move the discussion beyond headlines to show the tangible societal impact, ethical considerations, and diverse career pathways within the technology sector, grounding the project’s learning in the reality of the future economy.” Miki Lua, freelance technologist and writer who supported the project.

Cromar Future Group is based in rural Aberdeenshire. The project funding enabled coach hire, making it possible for the group to travel. The Citadel group, based in Leith, Edinburgh, also enjoyed visiting different venues and train journeys to Dundee and Stonehaven, but commented that the long train journey meant they didn’t have time to explore the place, even although they did get to enjoy the Stonehaven’s famous fish and chips!

Digital Skills Education helped young people to expand their knowledge with sessions that included the impact of AI on artists and creativity, a session exploring energy use and “The Great British Bot Off” which explores how AI can influence political agendas and is included in the toolkit.

Youth-led research

From the start, an aim of the project was to support the young people to develop their own youth-led research.

At the **START** we said:

“By using a youth-led research methodology this project seeks to put young people’s voices at the centre of an exploration of how AI can be used by and for them in an ethical, responsible and rights respecting way.”

DURING the project:

- Young people from The Citadel were interested in the topic of AI and body image. The Cardboard Prototypes project in the Our Futures and AI Toolkit is an example of an activity which The Citadel developed to explore the topic.
- Cromar Future Group carried out a survey about AI with their peers, analysing and presenting the results. They explored how to develop a survey, the ethics around how to manage data and the tools to use to deliver and analyse. They also explored how to analyse the survey and compared two different AI tools to support.

Youth-led research at Cromar Future Group

Young people from Cromar Future Group carried out a survey with 82 of their peers. Headline findings include:

- 65% of participants were aware of AI usage in social media “often” or “all the time”
- ChatGPT was the most popular tool.
- 31% of females and 36% of males use AI either “almost every day” or “multiple times a week”.
- Young people had a wide range of concerns including what it is using data for, spreading misinformation and stealing info.
- 48% of females and 60% of males view AI as “somewhat” or “Extremely useful”
- Young people commented that AI should not replace humans in the workplace and expressed concern about the impact for writers, musicians and artists.
- The most common stance in relation to trusting AI input on politics was a neutral one.

You can find out more about the Cromar Future Group research here:

<https://www.youthlink.scot/wp-content/uploads/whatyoungpeoplethinkaboutAI.pdf>

Youth-led enquiry at The Citadel

Ryan McKay, Youth Worker at The Citadel writes:

“At the Citadel our young people explored artificial intelligence through youth-led discussions, surveys and creative activities focussed on how AI shapes everyday life, creativity, identity and wellbeing. Working with an all-boys group aged 13-15 years old, the project supported the young people to examine how AI operates within the digital platforms they use daily (particularly social media).

While initially framed as youth-led research, at The Citadel this took the form of youth-led enquiry using participatory and creative methodologies. The approach centred on young people’s lived experience and collective reflection rather than formal academic research.

Participatory mapping, creative elicitation and design prototyping activities helped make AI tangible and easier to discuss, while an arts-based linocut workshop enabled deeper ethical and emotional reflection. Our young people also contributed to the design of surveys capturing both professional and youth perspectives on AI and wellbeing. Survey findings were brought back to the group and the young people helped interpret the results through group discussion and reflection.”

At the **END** we can reflect:

It was a challenge to introduce the concept and principles of youth-led research while the young people (and the youth workers) were much more focused on the idea of ‘finding out about AI’. There were also continual resourcing challenges to overcome in terms of getting people together, the right staff being available and other commitments, including exam pressures for the young people.

Despite these challenges, the young people from both groups were able to contribute their interests, explore the topic and create outputs that they were proud of. Their work, concerns, ideas, participation and enthusiasm were at the heart of the project.

As part of their project, Cromar Future Group explored how to use AI tools to analyse their research and this is discussed in their [Final Survey Report](#).

Developing the Toolkit

The Our Futures and AI toolkit contains resources that were developed, tested and delivered as part of the project. While we started the project with the idea that an output from the project would be 'guidance' for the sector, we did not have a clear idea of the format that this would take.

At the **START** we said:

“Our vision is to create a manifesto for responsible and relevant AI use, shaped by young people’s interests and the research that they carry out. For example, this might include how generative AI can be used responsibly in an educational setting, the issues around AI and creativity such as images, music, disinformation.”

At the **END** we can reflect:

As the project developed the ideas of focussing on some of the activities that were proving popular came to the fore and the 'toolkit' was born. Some high-level principles were included, slimmed down to become as relevant as possible to youth workers with limited capacity. and then activities that were tried and tested by the participating groups.

One youth worker commented that the elements in the project felt “complex” to get their head around and another that a clearer brief at the start of the project was needed and a stronger shared vision of what the outcomes might be, with more time spent on that at the start.

Impact on Young People

Young people were directly involved in exploring an important current topic and learned skills around AI, exploring those in a youth work context. The process helped them to develop

At the **START** of the project we said:

A framework of youth work outcomes and skills will form the basis for designing the project and ensuring that the skills that the young people are developing (for example confidence, decision making, communication) are noticed and valued.

DURING the project:

The Citadel: 12 young people aged (13–15) took part, with the final group being made up entirely of boys. One of the most striking aspects of the project was that the group chose to

focus on AI and body image, highlighting that concerns around appearance, self-image and online influences are important issues for young men too.

Cromar Future Group: Young people's ability to express their knowledge and views was evident in many ways during the project.

In a final workshop at YouthLink Scotland, young people presented about their findings and it was clear from their presentations that they had become knowledgeable about the subject and had also learned valuable skills around teamwork, confidence, communication, organisation and planning.

At the **End** of the project young people at The Citadel said:

"Before this project I always thought AI was Chat GPT and Gemini. I now know it's much more than this."

"You hear about AI everywhere nowadays. For me, when I think about AI, I think chatbots and robots."

"AI makes me worried at times about jobs. I love art and worry about how artists will work in the future."

"Social media and algorithms found online can make you feel rubbish at times. It's not nice how much it can make you compare yourself to others."

"Learning about AI, I now pick up on algorithms more. You see the same posts being pushed. I also click when certain content comes on my feed."

"Using the cardboard prototyping it was cool to play around with how social media filters can make people feel."

"AI can be complicated at times. Using art can help you work out your ideas!"

"It's ok to not know everything about AI. It really helps being able to talk about it though."

"People should know when AI is being used. It's not fair if they don't. Images and videos should come with a sign saying they are AI if they are."

"Being told to just ignore it is no good. It's better when adults understand that AI and algorithms are part of everyday life and give us space to talk about it."

"Even if you know something is AI and generated, it can still mess with your head."

Youth Workers said:

"This was a wonderful learning experience for our young members. We all learned more about how to use AI effectively, and they so enjoyed the visits and workshops, particularly to Sopra Steria as this gave them an overview of how a big company might use AI. A big "thank you" to all involved." Les Ellis, Cromar Future Group

"Working with our amazing young people throughout this project has reinforced for me that conversations around AI need to start from lived experience, not technical

expertise. What made this project meaningful, was not trying to turn young people into AI experts, but creating space for them to question, explore and reflect critically through accessible and creative methods. This toolkit captures that approach clearly. It offers youth workers practical ways to engage with AI, that are youth-centred, values-led and grounded in real practice. Importantly, it reflects the voices of young people who are already navigating these systems daily.” Ryan McKay, The Citadel

Widening Influence

Our ambition for this work was, and is, to enable young people’s voices to have influence around the fast-paced and important area of Artificial Intelligence.

At the **START** we said:

“Ultimately, the project will have been successful if young people’s voice, knowledge, expertise and understanding have influenced practices at a local and a national level. For example, young people have influenced in their youth groups and schools to explore AI and use it in a positive and relevant way.”

DURING the project:

- We benefited from the input of international technology company Sopra Steria, who provided valuable support during the project. There is an ongoing relationship between Sopra Steria and YouthLink, which this project helped to cement.
- We involved the Scottish AI Alliance, an important influence around understanding other key resources.
- We consulted the sector, running two open sessions about the developing guidance/toolkit, helping to set the direction.
- We acknowledged Luci Holland of Tinderbox as a team member because of insightful input to the toolkit. Her organisation is continuing to work on a resource - a gamified exploration of AI topics - which may be added to the resources.
- As part of the programme, Digital Skills Education ran training for Youth Workers, introducing them to resources from the toolkit.
- We launched the toolkit at the Digital Youth Work Conference in February 2026.
- Young people involved in the project presented at the Digital Youth Work conference in February 2026, with the clear message: “AI isn’t for the future, it’s now.” Their commitment and dedication made this project an exciting and relevant exploration, with a new toolkit that will help others in the sector to explore this fast-changing topic.

At the **END** we can reflect:

We can see the influence from this project spreading in a number of different ways...

- Locally, the groups involved have continued to explore AI.

- In Aberdeenshire, Cromar Future Group has shared resources with all the local high schools.
- YouthLink is presenting at national and wider European events, promoting the materials and sharing information about the tools.

Reflecting on the INCLUDE+ Principles

The INCLUDE+ Principles of meaningful digital inclusion, an holistic approach, diversity, collective care, responsiveness and sustainability sit comfortably with the youth work approach which emphasises the role of the young people, as individuals and as a group, in determining the content of the youth work project and therefore increasing the likelihood of real learning and transformation taking place.

The context of youth work - set in communities, led by and for young people, starting from where they are at - is naturally holistic, responsive, inclusive and diverse. Youth work is, by definition, a situation of collective care, where the aims are always to support, encourage, nurture and empower young people.

Our project took place in communities and involved co-creation by and with young people but also driven forward by the pioneering sense of both embracing the new and sustaining the best of traditional values and approaches.

The work of Cromar Future Group, in particular, focused on areas where changing employment opportunities (because of AI) mean that being involved in this project could potentially open new opportunities for the young people who are directly involved. One of our key concerns was not just to explore what might be helpful to young people facing the challenge of precarity created by AI, but to create an environment where they can explore the challenges for themselves. We think the resources that we have created will help others to do that too.

Young people's voices are often excluded from decision making about the future. This project sought to ensure that they are represented in the rapidly changing territory of AI, and how it directly affects their lives, education and future employment.

Luci Holland is a youth worker at Tinderbox and played a valuable role as a critical friend on the project, bringing her own insights as a knowledgeable youth worker with a wide range of experience around digital. She said:

“Artificial intelligence & machine learning are intricate, evolving subjects with increasingly widening impact on our livelihoods, including those of our young people. The complexities of AI & ML are also, often, challenging to understand and engage with but necessary in order to safeguard and strengthen our communities, make informed decisions, and advocate for responsible engagement with AI. The YouthLink Scotland toolkit is a needed, informative and cohesive resource and guide for those in the youth and community workspace, and an excellent contribution for supporting the sector.

About the participating organisations

YouthLink Scotland is the national agency for youth work and the collective voice of the sector. We champion and advocate for the youth work sector so that all young people can access high-quality youth work. Our membership of voluntary and statutory youth work organisations and intermediaries, including every local authority, spans all of Scotland, and changes lives for the better every day.

Cromar Future Group is a multi-award-winning STEM Charity based in Aberdeenshire, dedicated to providing STEM support within the local community. The group facilitates two Code Clubs, one online and one in-person. The in-person 'Everything Electronic' club extends into electronics and broader digital skills. Cromar also support local schools by delivering hands-on STEM activities upon request.

The Citadel is an established youth and community organisation based in Leith, Edinburgh, with a strong track record in innovative digital youth work. It supports youth in achieving STEM awards, co-designs intergenerational digital projects, embeds career guidance through creative digital partnerships, and shares its practices at international conferences.

Digital Skills Education is a technology education company. They teach people the knowledge and skills to get the most out of technology – at home, in the workplace, in informal education or at school. They think the best way to bridge the digital skills gap is by making learning digital skills an engaging, fun, and social experience.

Sopra Steria, a major Tech player in Europe with 51,000 employees in nearly 30 countries, is recognised for its consulting, digital services and solutions. The organisation places people at the heart of everything it does and is committed to putting digital to work for its clients in order to build a positive future for all.

Scottish AI Alliance delivered on Scotland's vision to be a leader in trustworthy, ethical and inclusive AI from 2021 - 2026.

Hilary Phillips
June 2026



digital
YOUTH WORK