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Where is

Youth Work?

Policy Invisibility and the Case for Recognition

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TL;DR

Digital youth work — the practice of using digital tools, platforms and spaces to support young people's participation, wellbeing and citizenship — is largely invisible in UK policy. We reviewed 800+ government bodies, analysed 26 policies, and ran workshops with practitioners across the UK. What we found: young people are consistently named as a digital inclusion priority, but the infrastructure most likely to reach them — youth clubs, community organisations, trained youth workers — is almost never mentioned. This has consequences: no policy recognition means no dedicated funding, no workforce development mandate, and a growing gap between what digital youth work delivers and what policy thinks is delivering it.

Executive Summary

This report examines where digital youth work sits—or doesn't sit—in the UK's digital inclusion policy landscape. We carried out this study because practitioners kept telling us the same thing: policy makers talk about getting young people online, about digital skills for employment, about future-ready workforces. What they rarely talk about is young people's right to participate as citizens in digital society, or the youth clubs and community organisations where young people actually learn to use digital tools for voice, for organising, for democratic engagement—not just for CVs.

What we found suggests what many in the sector already suspected. Whilst young people feature prominently as a priority group in digital inclusion strategies, the infrastructure that could most effectively support them—digital youth work and non-formal education spaces—appears to remain largely invisible. Even within youth work policy itself, digital practice seems to receive insufficient attention as a distinct area requiring specific competencies, resources and support.

Three critical patterns emerge from our analysis:

- digital inequalities appear to affect the entire youth work sector—young people, practitioners, and organisations alike.
- when digital inclusion policies mention delivery mechanisms, they tend to point primarily to schools and formal education, potentially overlooking significant gaps in provision.
- policy invisibility appears to have material consequences that may perpetuate existing inequalities.

01

Digital inequalities affect the entire youth work sector — young people, practitioners, and organisations alike.

02

When digital inclusion policies mention delivery mechanisms, they point primarily to schools and formal education — potentially overlooking significant gaps in provision.

03

Policy invisibility appears to have material consequences that may perpetuate existing inequalities.

We propose thinking about digital youth work as critical infrastructure for democratic participation in digital society. Not infrastructure in the technical sense—not cables and servers—but social infrastructure. The relationships, the safe spaces, the trained workforce, the organisational commitment, the sustained funding, the critical pedagogy that enables young people not just to access technology or develop employable skills, but to participate as citizens.

We've developed an eight-element infrastructure framework that examines what appears to be needed: (1) physical and technical infrastructure, (2) relational and social infrastructure, (3) trained and supported workforce, (4) organisational infrastructure and strategic commitment, (5) policy recognition and sustained

funding, (6) pedagogical infrastructure grounded in democratic citizenship practice, (7) gap-filling infrastructure for excluded groups, and (8) evaluation and knowledge infrastructure that recognises citizenship outcomes.

This infrastructure lens has implications. It suggests digital youth work may need sustained investment, not short-term project funding tied to employment metrics. It suggests workforce development that treats digital competencies as essential, not optional extras. It suggests policy recognition that goes beyond coded mentions of 'community partners' to explicit naming of digital youth work as a delivery mechanism for digital inclusion goals.

Introduction

1.1 Why This Study Matters

Digital exclusion isn't a fringe issue. According to the Digital Youth Index, 14 per cent of young people—around 2 million individuals—don't have access to a suitable learning device like a laptop or desktop computer. Another 15 per cent have no home broadband. Nearly 570,000 young people face both barriers simultaneously.

These aren't just statistics. They're young people in your youth club, your community centre, your detached work sessions. And the patterns are predictable: 23 per cent of young people on free school meals lack home broadband, compared to 15 per cent of their peers. Rural areas have broadband speeds 26 per cent slower than urban areas. Care-experienced young people, young people with disabilities, young carers—digital exclusion tracks existing disadvantage.

But here's what policy conversations often miss: access to devices and connectivity is only part of the story. And when policy does address digital skills, it tends to frame them narrowly—as preparation for employment, as economic assets, as tools for individual advancement in the labour market. An estimated 8.5 million adults in the UK lack foundational digital skills, and young people aren't immune. Only 57 per cent of 18–24 year olds report feeling confident performing essential work-related digital tasks. Over half (51 per cent) say they've taught themselves digital skills—which tells us something about gaps in formal provision and something about young people's resourcefulness.

young people without access to a suitable learning device

Digital Youth Index 2023

use mobile data as their only way to get online

Ofcom 2025

young people have neither a device nor home broadband

Digital Youth Index 2023

of 18–24 year olds feel confident with essential work-related digital tasks

Good Things Foundation

of young people without laptops cite expense as the primary reason

Digital Youth Index 2023

more paid for goods & services by digitally excluded individuals

Essex University ISER

Young people on Free School Meals	**23%**
All young people (avg)	**15%**

Rural areas (speed deficit vs urban)	**26%**
Using mobile data as primary access	**16%**
A quarter rely on out-of-home Wi-Fi (libraries, cafes, youth clubs)	**25%**
Unaware of local digital support	**30%**

One in six young people uses mobile data as their primary way of getting online. Think about what that means practically: trying to complete online coursework on a phone screen, hitting data caps mid-month, missing live sessions because you've run out of data. A quarter of young people rely on out-of-home internet connections, using public Wi-Fi in libraries, cafes or youth clubs.

But digital skills for what? Policy often answers: for employment, for economic productivity, for 'future-ready workforces'. That's important, certainly—young people need to earn a living. But youth work asks a different question: digital skills for what kind of life, what kind of society, what kind of citizenship?

1.2 What We Mean by Digital Youth Work

When we talk about digital youth work in this report, we're using the definition developed by the INCLUDE+ Digital Youth Work Research Hub: the intentional use of digital technologies and online spaces in youth work practice, underpinned by youth work values and principles.

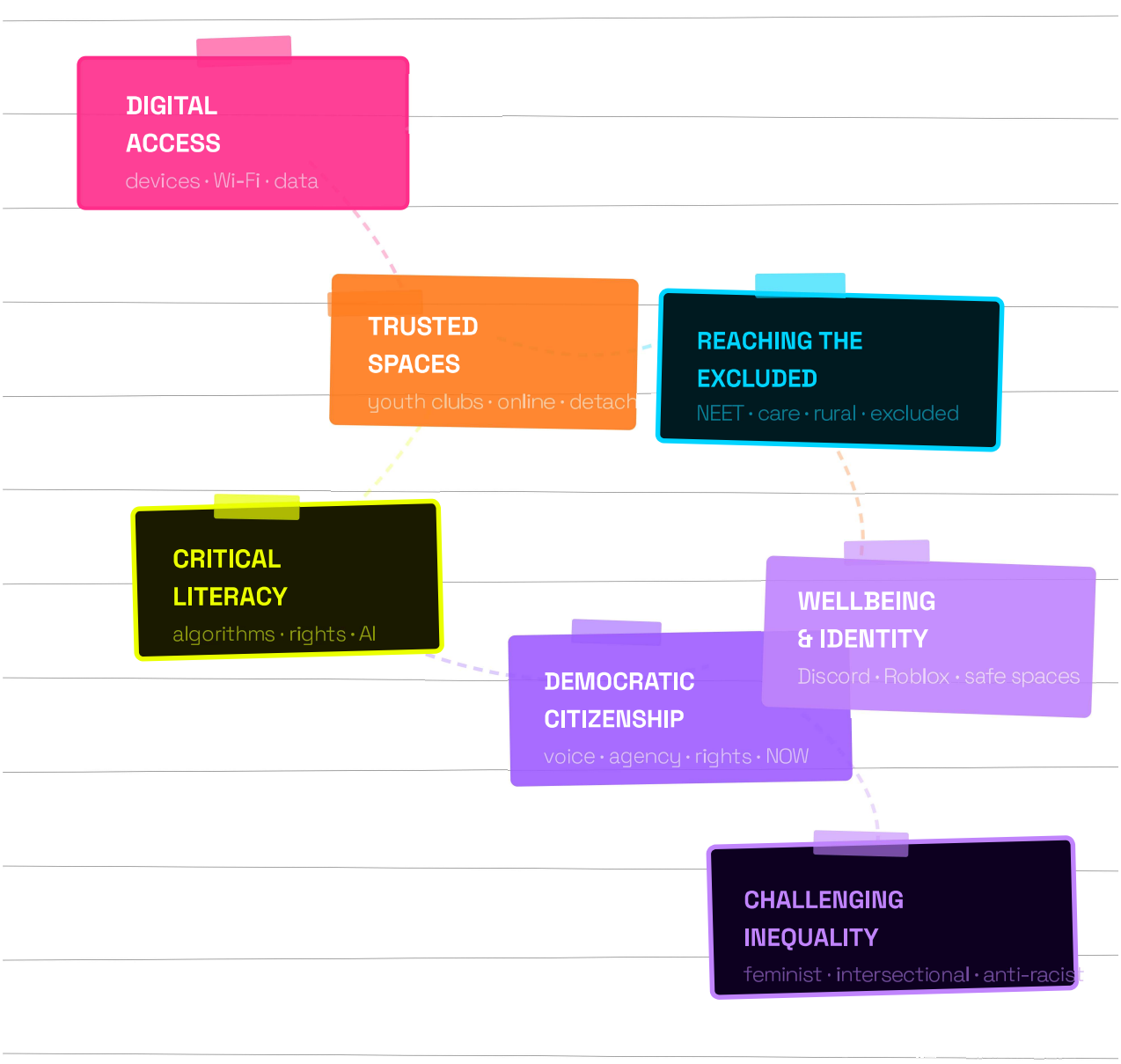
WHAT IS DIGITAL YOUTH WORK?

> Digital youth work encompasses both the practical use and the critical analysis of digital tools, digital pedagogies, and digital culture within youth work settings.
>
> Digital youth work is the intentional use of digital tools in youth work—not as something separate, but something that can be embedded across non-formal settings like youth clubs, detached work, and information services.
>
> Digital youth work happens across online and offline spaces and sits within the same ethics and principles as traditional youth work.
>
> Digital youth work is not only about using digital technologies directly. It is equally about supporting young people to understand, question, and navigate the digital

society—about algorithms, data rights, online safety, AI, and the many ways that digital systems now shape participation in society and the transition to adulthood.

Digital youth work isn't just having Wi-Fi in your youth club (though that helps). It's not just running a coding workshop (though that might be part of it). It's the deliberate integration of digital tools and spaces into youth work practice, in ways that maintain youth work's distinctive values: voluntary participation, authentic relationships, empowerment, social justice orientation, and democratic citizenship practice.

WHAT IS DIGITAL YOUTH WORK & WHERE IS IT?


DIGITAL ACCESS
devices · Wi-Fi · data
TRUSTED SPACES
youth clubs · online · detach
REACHING THE EXCLUDED
NEET · care · rural · excluded
CRITICAL LITERACY
algorithms · rights · AI
WELLBEING & IDENTITY
Discord · Roblox · safe spaces
DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP
voice · agency · rights · NOW
CHALLENGING INEQUALITY
feminist · intersectional · anti-racis

tap a node on the map to explore each dimension of digital youth work

Youth work is, at its core, a democratic citizenship practice. It's about supporting young people to have voice and agency, to participate in decisions that affect them, to understand and challenge power structures, to be active citizens in their communities and in digital spaces.

Digital youth work looks different in different settings. It might be running a virtual youth club on Discord where young people co-create the rules and moderate their own community. It might be supporting young refugees to use smartphones to navigate services. It might be helping young women learn to code while exploring how algorithms encode bias. It might be creating podcasts about mental health, building apps to report local issues, or using gaming to develop teamwork and critical thinking.

1.3 The Spaces Where Digital Youth Work Happens

Libraries, youth clubs and community centres serve as critical hubs for digital inclusion. Around 3,000 library branches in England provide 25,000 free-to-use public PCs. Eight in ten library services offer digital skills support through drop-in sessions, workshops and one-to-one help from trained staff and volunteers. Many run device loaning schemes, letting young people borrow Chromebooks or Micro:bits to take home.

Youth clubs and community organisations add something libraries can't quite replicate: they're where young people already are, in spaces they trust, with adults they know. Research shows young people want more of these spaces. Around 70 per cent of youth work projects now use digital technologies to deliver activities. That ranges from setting up a PlayStation in the corner to running full digital curricula with accredited qualifications (like Cardiff Youth Service does) to creating virtual youth clubs on Roblox (like Essex Youth Service pioneered during Covid lockdowns).

National networks support this local work. The Good Things Foundation's National Digital Inclusion Network comprises over 7,000 Digital Inclusion Hubs—libraries and community centres providing free data, devices and skills training. Organisations like Code Club and CoderDojo have reached over 2 million young people through free, volunteer-run coding clubs in non-formal spaces.

But here's the thing: all this activity exists somewhat under the radar. When digital inclusion strategies get written, non-formal spaces might get a mention as 'community partners' or 'local delivery mechanisms'. But the specific practice of digital youth work—and the specific expertise it requires—rarely gets named.

1.4 What's Happening in Sector-Led Digital Youth Work Policy

There are bright spots. England's National Youth Agency (NYA) has developed comprehensive Digital Youth Work Standards (2025) that define what digital youth work is, why it matters, and how it's delivered. Similarly, CLD Standards Council's National Occupational Standards (2024) (supported by YouthLink Scotland) includes a specific competency for digital youth work: "CLD YW08: Engage with and empower young people to make use of digital media in community settings."

These examples show that parts of the sector have recognised digital youth work as practice requiring specific competencies, not just something to bolt on. But they're exceptions. Most youth work policy frameworks treat digital as an add-on or afterthought rather than a core dimension of contemporary practice.

Youth workers are telling us they need support. They're navigating platforms they didn't grow up with. They're managing safeguarding concerns in spaces that didn't exist five years ago. They're trying to build authentic relationships through screens, without adequate training, resources or guidance.

1.5 Research Questions

This study started with questions practitioners were already asking themselves:

Where is digital youth work in the policy landscape? When governments write digital inclusion strategies, do they recognise what youth work already does and could do more of with proper support?

When policies talk about reaching young people, especially those facing multiple disadvantages, why do they so often point to schools and formal education whilst overlooking youth clubs and community organisations?

What does policy invisibility mean for the sector? If you're not mentioned in strategies, you don't get funding. If you don't get funding, you can't develop. If you can't develop, you remain invisible. How do we break this cycle?

And ultimately: how might we help policy makers, funders and sector leaders see digital youth work differently—not as a nice-to-have addition, but as critical infrastructure for digital inclusion?

We found that whilst the UK has plenty of digital policy, and plenty of references to young people as a priority group, specific recognition of digital youth work is remarkably scarce. This invisibility isn't accidental. It reflects how youth work has historically been positioned in relation to formal education—as supplementary, as compensatory, as 'nice to have'.

1.6 Geographic Scope

This study covers the United Kingdom and the devolved nations: England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Each has distinct policy frameworks and governance structures. England's approach differs significantly from Scotland's, which has a stronger tradition of Community Learning and Development. Wales has recently developed a new Youth Work Strategy. Northern Ireland has its own youth provision structures.

We focused on policies from roughly the last five years that remain currently valid. That means we captured recent digital strategies, youth strategies and digital inclusion action plans, but not older documents that have been superseded.

1.7 How to Read This Report

Policy analysis can be dry. We've tried to write in a way that's accessible without being simplistic — including practitioner voices, data, and examples throughout. Here's the shape of the report:

YOUR MAP

§2

Methods

How we reviewed 800+ bodies, ran workshops with practitioners, and used AI-assisted scanning to build the picture.

DETECTIVE WORK

§3

UK Policy Landscape

What the policy ecosystem actually looks like — who gets named, who gets coded, and who stays invisible.

THE MAP

§4

Digital Inclusion Data

The scale of exclusion, the workforce divide, and what non-formal spaces already deliver — often unseen.

THE EVIDENCE

§5

Youth Work Policy

Where digital youth work sits within the sector's own policy — notable progress, persistent gaps, the implementation cliff.

THE SECTOR

§6

Analysis

Why invisibility isn't neutral. The neoliberal frame, the education bias, and what happens when youth work is coded out of policy.

THE ARGUMENT

§7

Critical Infrastructure

The 8-element framework. Why digital youth work is social infrastructure — not an add-on, not a nice-to-have.

THE FRAMEWORK

§8

Recommendations

Specific asks for five audiences: government, sector leaders, practitioners, funders, and researchers. Different levers, one direction.

THE ASK

IF YOU ONLY READ ONE SECTION —

Jump to **§7 Critical Infrastructure** for the framework, or **§8 Recommendations** for the asks. The executive summary has the headlines.

Section 2 explains our methods: how we used a systematic-like approach to review policies, what workshops we ran, how we analysed everything. Section 3 provides overview of the UK digital policy ecosystem and presents findings from our policy review—what we found and, crucially, what we didn't find. Section 4 examines digital inclusion statistics and what they tell us about young people's access barriers. Section 5 is zooming in to youth

policy and where digital youth work sits (or doesn't sit). Section 6 synthesises our analysis. Section 7 makes the case for seeing digital youth work as infrastructure. Section 8 offers recommendations for different stakeholders. We conclude in Section 9.

Throughout, we've tried to write in a way that's accessible without being simplistic. Policy analysis can be dry. We've included practitioner voices, anecdotes and examples to keep it grounded in what happens in youth clubs and community centres. Because ultimately, that's what this is about: supporting the work you're already doing and making the case for why it deserves recognition and resources.

1.8 Youth Work: What We're Talking About When We Say 'The Sector'

If you're reading this and you're a youth worker, you can skip this section—you know what youth work is. But since this report might land on policy makers' desks, it's worth being clear about what we mean.

The Council of Europe defines youth work as:

> A variety of activities of a social, cultural, educational, environmental and/or political nature by, with and for young people, in groups or individually. Youth work is delivered by paid and voluntary youth workers and is based on non-formal and informal learning processes and voluntary participation.

Youth work happens in youth clubs, community centres, faith settings, detached work on the streets, residential settings, schools (but delivered by youth workers, not teachers), online spaces. Anywhere young people are, youth work can happen.

As Pawluczuk and Șerban (2022) note in their critical analysis of technology and power dynamics in youth work, meaningful digital participation requires young people to have digital literacy skills and access to appropriate tools, but also the critical capacity to navigate and challenge digital environments. Youth work is uniquely positioned to support this because of its non-formal, non-coercive nature.

Methods

> *If you want to know whether digital youth work exists in policy, you can't just skim the titles. You have to read every document, search for the coded language, notice what's missing.*
>
> ***RESEARCH TEAM DISCUSSION***

This was detective work as much as policy analysis.

We weren't just looking for mentions of 'digital youth work'—though we looked for those too. We were looking for where policy talks about supporting young people's digital inclusion and skills, and whether it recognises youth work as a mechanism for doing so. We were looking for absences as much as presences.

2.1 Multi-Method Approach Overview

We used three main methods to understand digital youth work's place in the policy landscape. First, we reviewed policies across UK government departments and devolved nations, looking for where digital youth work appears—or doesn't. Second, we ran workshops with youth workers and sector organisations to understand how policy translates (or fails to translate) into practice. Third, we used AI-assisted policy scanning to complement our analysis.

This combination matters because policy documents only tell part of the story. They tell us what governments say they'll do. Workshops with practitioners tell us how that translates (or fails to translate) into the reality of delivering youth work in a digital age.

We focused on policies from approximately the last five years that remain currently valid. This timeframe captures recent digital strategies and responses to Covid-19, which accelerated digital practice across the sector.

2.2 Desk-Based Policy Review

The desk review involved five systematic steps. We started broad (over 800 government bodies) and narrowed down through screening to find policies that might relate to digital inclusion, youth work or digital youth work.

Step 1: We screened all public bodies listed on GOV.UK, Northern Ireland Executive, Scottish Government and Welsh Government websites. We used keyword searches ("digital" OR "tech" OR "online" AND "youth/young/teen" AND/OR "skill" OR "educat" OR "train"). We automatically included education, vocational skills, digital inclusion and youth work-related bodies due to obvious relevance. This produced 49 potentially relevant public bodies.

Step 2: On each public body's website, we searched for policy and strategy documents using the same keywords. We defined 'policies' broadly: documents indicating government position or planned action, including strategies, action plans and frameworks.

Step 3: We searched within the policy documents themselves for the same keywords. This full-text search narrowed our focus to 26 documents for detailed analysis.

Step 4: We extracted data from relevant policies: title, department, relevance categories (digital inclusion, youth work, digital youth work), validity dates, policy type, summary text and budget information where available.

Step 5: We used a traffic light coding system to assess the strength of links to digital inclusion, youth work and digital youth work. RED meant no link or exclusion criteria identified. YELLOW meant possible or incidental link (e.g. the policy affects digital youth work but doesn't identify itself as such). GREEN meant explicit link. Of the 26 policies reviewed at full-text level, 17 received yellow or green coding for at least one category.

More policies received YELLOW coding (possible or incidental link). These documents affected digital youth work without identifying themselves as doing so. They might mention community organisations without specifying youth work. They might discuss reaching young people without saying how. They might acknowledge non-formal education exists without integrating it into delivery plans.

Four policies fell into RED coding: no thematic link to our focus areas, or upon full review they turned out not to be policies at all. These were excluded from further analysis.

In addition to targeted document retrieval, the workflow prioritised sources explicitly addressing digital delivery models and online safeguarding expectations in youth services, such as the statutory guidance emphasis on maintaining safeguarding standards regardless of whether services are delivered online or in person.

Sources were screened for substantive relevance to digital youth work policy and implementation, including policy statements about digital delivery, digital inclusion, and online safety. For example, prioritised sources included those that explicitly discuss introducing “digital offers” to improve accessibility in youth services, those that frame online safety expectations for young people (including the Online Safety Act context), and those that identify emerging risks such as AI-related harms including deepfakes and sextortion.

The synthesis used a thematic approach, extracting and integrating material under consistent headings to support comparison across documents. In practice this meant:

> Duties and accountability
> — identifying how policy instruments define responsibilities, such as local authorities' requirement to have regard to statutory guidance when exercising their youth services duty.

> Technology-related risks and harms
> — collating how documents describe social media impacts on mental health, bullying pressures and emerging AI-related risks.

> Engagement approaches
> — summarising recommended methods such as requirements to consult young people on current provision using surveys, visits, feedback sessions and youth councils.

> Case examples and delivery models
> — capturing named examples including local case study areas in the Youth Evidence Base and digital youth provision described in NYA standards, such as online youth centres and virtual youth spaces.

This approach aimed for comprehensiveness, but we acknowledge limitations. Keyword searches may miss policies that address relevant issues using different terminology. Our focus on 'currently valid' policies means we may have missed historical documents that shaped the current landscape.

2.3 Online Workshop

Alongside the desk review, we ran workshops with youth workers and sector organisations across the UK. These workshops served multiple purposes: to share emerging findings from the policy review, to understand practitioners' experiences of the policy landscape, and to gather evidence about digital youth work practice that policy documents don't capture.

Workshop participants included youth workers from local authorities, national youth organisations, small community groups and specialist services working with marginalised young people. We asked about their digital youth work practice, the barriers they face, the support they need, and their experiences of trying to access funding and policy recognition for their work.

These conversations provided crucial context that policy documents alone cannot offer. They revealed the gap between what policies say should happen and what practitioners can deliver with available resources and support.

2.4 Return to National Youth Policy

After completing the broad policy review, and in reflection of some of the feedback we received in the workshops, we conducted deeper analysis of youth-specific policies. We examined England's Youth Matters National Youth Strategy, NYA's Digital Youth Work Standards, CLD Standards Council's National Occupational Standards, Wales's Youth Work Strategy, and Northern Ireland's youth provision documents.

This focused analysis asked different questions: How does the youth sector itself talk about digital practice? Where youth work standards mention digital competencies, what do they emphasise? Do sector-led frameworks adequately address the training and support needs practitioners are telling us about?

2.5 Elicit Pro Policy Scan

The final step of our data collection involved an AI generated policy scan carried out by Elicit. This analysis was guided by the research question: How do current digital youth work policies in the United Kingdom and devolved nations address the needs of young people?

The workflow used a multi-source discovery approach spanning:

> Government policy and guidance
> — including Statutory guidance for local authorities on youth provision and its linked guidance on services to improve young people's well-being.

> National strategy and evidence-base publications
> — including Youth Matters: Your National Youth Strategy and the related summary report.

> Research and evidence documents
> — including the National Youth Strategy Research Project and the young person-facing summary.

> Cross-cutting digital policy
> — including the Digital Resilience Framework and the Digital Inclusion Action Plan.

> Sector standards and practitioner guidance
> — including the National Youth Agency Digital Youth Work Standards.

AI-generated literature reviews and policy analyses have inherent limitations that we all need to consider. Large language models can misread nuanced policy language, miss contextual subtleties and produce confident-sounding analyses that are subtly wrong. We used Elicit's outputs as a complement to human analysis, not a replacement for it, and we checked AI-generated summaries against the source documents.

2.5 Analytical Approach

Our analysis looked for several things across all data sources. We tracked explicit mentions of digital youth work, youth work in digital contexts, or youth workers as digital inclusion delivery partners. We noted where these appear and, critically, where they don't.

We also analysed framing: when young people appear in digital policies, how are they positioned? As future workers needing skills? As 'digital natives' who already know how to use technology? As citizens with rights? As vulnerable people needing protection? These framings matter because they shape what policy thinks needs to happen.

Throughout the analysis, we were developing what we now call the 'infrastructure lens'. This emerged from noticing that whilst policies often mention access (devices, connectivity) and sometimes mention skills (digital literacy, coding), they rarely address the human and institutional infrastructure that enables young people to use digital tools meaningfully.

Digital Inclusion: UK Policy Landscape

The UK's digital policy ecosystem is extensive and fragmented. Across UK Government and the devolved nations, we identified policies relating to digital infrastructure, digital skills, digital inclusion, online safety, youth work, and community learning. These policies don't always talk to each other.

We reviewed 800+ government bodies, screened 49, examined 44 policies, analysed 26 at full-text level. Seventeen had some link to digital inclusion, youth or digital youth work. Most of those links were incidental rather than intentional. The Elicit Pro Policy Scan as described above supported the analysis and synthesis.

3.1 The Traffic Light Picture

Of the 26 policies reviewed at full-text level, only 13 received GREEN coding (explicit focus) for digital inclusion and youth. Just 13 policies explicitly addressed young people's digital inclusion. Even fewer (only 4 documents) received GREEN coding for focus on youth work specifically. And for digital youth work? The numbers were lower still.

Green — 13 polic **13**

Explicit focus on digital inclusion & young people. Young people named as a priority group with specific commitments.

Yellow — ~9 policie **9**

Possible or incidental link. Affects digital youth work without identifying itself as doing so — 'community partners' language.

Red — 4 policies **4**

No thematic link to focus areas, or upon full review turned out not to be policies at all. Excluded from analysis.

3.2 Digital Inclusion Takes Centre Stage

Digital inclusion has become a distinct policy priority across the UK. The UK Government's Digital Inclusion Action Plan: First Steps (2025) outlines the government's approach to tackling digital exclusion. Scotland's Digital Strategy (2025) includes 'Inclusive Access to Digital' as a core pillar. Wales's Digital Strategy for Wales (2021) and Forward Look towards a Digitally Confident Wales both commit to ensuring everyone benefits from digital opportunities.

These strategies share common features: recognition that significant populations lack digital access or skills; commitment to addressing barriers; focus on economic benefits of digital inclusion; and acknowledgment that some groups face greater challenges.

3.3 Young People as Priority Group

Young people appear consistently as a priority group for digital inclusion. The UK Government's Digital Inclusion Action Plan identifies young people alongside older adults, people with disabilities and those on low incomes as groups facing particular challenges.

However, when policies discuss reaching young people, the proposed mechanisms tend to point primarily to formal education. The UK Government's TechFirst programme aims to bring digital skills training to one million secondary school students. Wales's digital inclusion forward look discusses addressing digital exclusion in educational settings during Covid-19. Scotland's digital strategy couples 'Inclusive Access to Digital' with 'Digital Skills in Education'.

This school-centric approach may miss young people not in education, employment or training. When the primary site of engagement is schools, those who aren't in school regularly (or at all) can fall through the gaps.

> *I don't think I'm surprised to see the kind of fragmentation in the policy landscape. It's really striking how policies are not really touching on the full digital lives of young people much at all.*
>
> ***WORKSHOP PARTICIPANT***

3.4 The Skills and Employment Frame

When digital inclusion policies address 'why' young people need digital skills, employment features prominently. Scotland's digital strategy states that children and young people need digital skills "to be productive members of society and to participate in the economy." The UK's Modern Industrial Strategy positions digital skills as economic assets.

This employment-focused framing isn't universal. Some policies acknowledge broader citizenship dimensions. The UK's Digital Inclusion Action Plan mentions building confidence and motivation to get online, not just skills for work. But employment language tends to dominate.

Youth work's democratic citizenship practice sits somewhat uneasily with this framing. Youth work aims to support young people's participation and voice now, not just prepare them for future employment. When digital inclusion policy overlooks youth work, or when it only values youth work's contribution to 'skills development', it may push practice towards instrumental goals and away from the democratic citizenship work that makes youth work distinctive.

Many if not most youth workers had to become digital youth workers during COVID-19, whether they liked it or not.

This happened without proper training, resources, or even clear guidance about what they were supposed to be doing. There's significant confusion about what "digital youth work" actually means—where does digital safeguarding end and digital youth work begin? What's the difference between using Zoom for convenience and genuinely doing youth work online? These questions didn't get answered by policy. They got worked out by individual practitioners, often alone, often anxiously.

3.5 The Formal Education Bias

When policies propose delivery mechanisms for supporting young people's digital inclusion and skills, they point overwhelmingly to schools and formal education. The UK Government's TechFirst programme seems to primarily focus on formal institutional structures such as classrooms, colleges, and training partnerships targeting 7.5 million workers. Wales's digital inclusion forward look discusses young people primarily in educational settings. Scotland's digital strategy positions digital skills development within education policy.

This makes sense in some ways. Schools reach most young people. They have infrastructure, qualified staff, established curriculum. But this approach has limits. Some young people aren't in school regularly—because of exclusion, because of health, because of caring responsibilities, because they've disengaged. These young people often have the greatest digital inclusion needs. And they're often the young people youth workers are most likely to reach.

Libraries (which Martzoukou et al.'s study frames as "second online home" for young people) and community centres get mentions, usually as secondary or supplementary provision. Youth clubs appear occasionally. But the specific expertise of youth workers in building relationships and creating safe spaces—which is precisely what's needed for meaningful digital inclusion—barely features.

> **DIGITAL LITERACY FETISHISATION: BEYOND THE IDEA THAT DIGITAL SKILLS FIX EVERYTHING**
>
> Youth workers are frequently told that they need to "upskill" or "adapt" to keep up with digital trends, implying that the main issue is a lack of competency within the sector. However, this perspective ignores larger digital divides—both in terms of access to technology and infrastructure and the deeper socioeconomic, racial, and geographic inequalities that shape young people's ability to engage with digital tools.

Schools Can't Do This Alone

Evidence indicates that formal education as typically delivered reproduces rather than ameliorates digital inequalities, with remote learning inequalities increasing as digital education spreads due to a range of social, economic and technical factors. The digital inclusion policy emphasis on formal education is necessary, but framing schools as the sole route to equitable digital participation risks reproducing the very inequalities it aims to address.

Libraries (which Martzoukou et al.'s study frames as "second online home" for young people) and community centres get mentions, usually as secondary or supplementary provision. Youth clubs appear occasionally. But non-formal education spaces rarely feature as core infrastructure in the way schools do. The policy architecture appears to position them as helpful additions, not essential components.

3.6 Coded Language and Community Partners

Some policies gesture towards youth work without naming it explicitly. The UK's Digital Inclusion Action Plan references "trusted members of the community" providing informal help with digital services. Scotland's digital strategy mentions "community organisations" as delivery partners. Northern Ireland's AI and Digital Office talks about engaging "local delivery partners."

This coded language might include youth work. Community organisations, third sector partners, trusted local delivery could all encompass youth clubs and youth workers. But without explicit recognition, it's impossible to know whether youth work is included—and it's impossible for youth workers to use these policy commitments to argue for resources.

Invisibility isn't neutral. When youth work appears only through implication rather than explicit recognition, it suggests peripheral rather than core infrastructure. 'Community partners' sounds like an add-on. 'Critical infrastructure' sounds like something you invest in.

3.7 Where Digital Youth Work Appears

Digital youth work's clearest policy visibility comes from the youth sector itself, which we return to in more detail in Section 5. England's National Youth Agency has developed comprehensive Digital Youth Work Standards and guidance for delivering youth work in online settings. CLD Standards Council's National Occupational Standards include specific competencies for digital youth work. Similarly, CLD Standards Council's National Occupational Standards (2024) (supported by YouthLink Scotland) includes a specific competency for digital youth work: "CLD YW08: Engage with and empower young people to make use of digital media in their daily lives." This standard articulates what youth workers need to know and be able to do to support young people's online relationships and behaviour, critical media literacy, content creation, digital voice and rights. These are substantial, well-developed frameworks that define practice, outline competencies and provide practical guidance.

But these appear to be exceptions. Wales's Youth Work Strategy and Northern Ireland's youth provisions contain limited specific focus on digital youth work beyond general statements that youth work principles apply online as well as offline.

Outside youth sector policy, explicit mentions of digital youth work are scarce. Digital inclusion strategies discuss young people and occasionally mention community organisations, but rarely connect these to youth work specifically. Youth work organisations appear in some funding streams but not as explicitly named delivery partners for digital inclusion.

3.8 What's Missing: Resources, Recognition, Resilience (and Rest)

Perhaps most significant is what policies don't address. Few digital inclusion strategies discuss workforce development for digital youth work. Few youth work policies allocate specific resources for digital practice. Almost no policies address the wellbeing of youth workers who've been expected to transform their practice

overnight.

Where policies do mention resources, they tend toward short-term project funding rather than sustained infrastructure investment. Digital Inclusion Innovation Funds, pilot programmes, time-limited initiatives—these support innovation but don't build sustainable capacity.

The absence of recognition also matters. When policies don't name digital youth work, practitioners find it harder to make the case for resources. Organisations might struggle to demonstrate they're delivering against policy priorities when the policy doesn't mention what they do. This creates a vicious cycle: invisibility leads to under-resourcing, which makes it harder to demonstrate impact, which perpetuates invisibility.

Most importantly, we need to recognise that youth workers should not be responsibilised to continue to upskill themselves and ensure that they've all the latest information about the latest digital trends, often at their own cost and in their own time. The sector needs systemic support, not individual heroism.

> *There are so many amazing youth workers, who are great at their jobs. But they have this fear of interacting with young people digitally or being in the digital spaces where they are.*
>
> ***WORKSHOP PARTICIPANT***

> *There's still this big gap between youth workers who grew up as digital natives and youth workers who don't have loads of experience with digital technology. There's a big need to have conversations about that.*
>
> ***WORKSHOP PARTICIPANT***

Digital Inclusion Landscape

4.1 The Scale of Exclusion: Young People

In 2023, around 2 million young people (14 per cent) lacked access to a suitable learning device like a laptop or desktop computer. Fifteen percent have no home broadband access. Nearly 570,000 young people faced both barriers simultaneously: no device and no home internet.

But numbers tell only part of the story. 2025 Ofcom statistics reveal that one in six young people (16 per cent) uses mobile data as their primary way of getting online. Think about what that means practically: trying to complete online coursework on a phone screen, hitting data caps mid-month, missing live sessions because you've run out of data. A quarter of young people rely on out-of-home internet connections, using public Wi-Fi in libraries, cafes or youth clubs.

The cost of devices and data represents a direct barrier. Nearly half (46 per cent) of young people without laptops cite expense as the primary reason. Over a third (35 per cent) report being unable to do everything they need online due to family data allowance limits. Digitally excluded individuals may pay up to 25 per cent more for essential goods and services than those who are online, deepening existing disadvantage.

Digital exclusion tracks existing patterns of inequality. Young people on free school meals: 23 per cent lack home broadband compared to 15 per cent of their peers. Rural areas: broadband speeds 26 per cent slower than urban areas, with persistent coverage 'not spots'. Care-experienced young people, young people with disabilities, young carers: digital exclusion compounds other disadvantages.

Geographic disparities extend beyond connectivity speed to provision of non-formal learning opportunities. London and other urban centres have significantly more digital making clubs (e.g., maker-spaces, hackathons) and tech-focused afterschool programmes than rural and post-industrial areas.

Young people with disabilities, mental health challenges or those in the care system often face compounded barriers requiring tailored support. Thirty percent of people are unaware of local access points where they can get help with devices or internet connections, highlighting gaps in signposting and community outreach.

> *Given the issues around depopulation across large swathes of the country, surely digital youth work could be a solution to provide social and cultural opportunities for young people. I don't really understand why this isn't being explored more.*
>
> ***WORKSHOP PARTICIPANT***

4.2 Youth Workers

The digital divide in youth work isn't just about access for young people. It's about the workforce itself. A 2025 National Youth Agency survey of 228 youth workers found that whilst 97 per cent are actively delivering digital youth work, only 24 per cent have received any training to do so. Just half agree they can integrate digital into existing sessions. Only 60 per cent feel confident delivering activities online. As one worker put it: "A lot of people feel really under-skilled when it comes to this work, particularly the online work."

This fear of not knowing enough is not new. Pre-pandemic research documented "evidence of scepticism, 'tech-fears' and insecurities among youth workers, who felt under pressure to present themselves as knowledgeable across all digital platforms." The pandemic accelerated digital practice without addressing these underlying anxieties.

The shift to digital work "was not accompanied by sufficient funding nor support," leading to "growing digital divides in European youth work" and "greater levels of anxiety, shame, and digital fatigue among youth workers." The 2025 UK data reveals the scale: 32 per cent believe digital youth work is complicated, 36 per cent think it's risky, with focus groups finding this stems from "perception of danger, exacerbated by lack of familiarity with tools." The organisational picture is bleaker still. Only 18 per cent of youth organisations have a digital strategy. Over half (57 per cent) of staff report digital youth work is not prioritised in their organisation.

97%
actively delivering digital youth work

24%
have received any training to deliver it

~50%
feel they can integrate digital into sessions

18%
of youth organisations have a digital strategy

Digital youth work not prioritised in org	**57%**
Leaders view digital as "less impactful"	**53%**
Find digital youth work risky	**36%**
Find digital youth work complicated	**32%**
Workers feel confident digitally	**34%**

> *I've seen organisations have very, very strict digital safety policies that stop staff members from having any interactions with young people digitally, whether it's like WhatsApp or other platforms. There is this fear of interacting with young people digitally or being in the digital spaces where they are.*
>
> ***WORKSHOP PARTICIPANT***

Without organisational commitment, individual workers must self-fund their own professional development—which explains why self-led training is so common despite being largely unavailable. Pawluczuk's earlier research found that the most commonly cited form of digital training was 'self-directed learning'—which means watching YouTube videos and experimenting alone, often at home in the worker's own time.

> 97 per cent of workers are delivering digital youth work whilst three-quarters have never received training, half don't feel they can integrate it properly, a third find it complicated and risky, and over half work in organisations that don't prioritise it.

The workforce digital divide should not be viewed as a skills gap, but a systematic failure to resource, train, and support the people on whom digital youth work delivery depends. While 43 per cent of public sector workers admit having no clear vision for digital transformation, 88 per cent of youth workers report rising mental health demand, 66 per cent online harm. Staff members are dedicating "half their time" to managing crises, all while lacking adequate support systems for neurodivergent young individuals.

4.3 Plugging Gaps in a Failing System: The Critical Role of Digital Youth Work

Non-formal education spaces provide critical infrastructure for digital inclusion, particularly for young people who can't access or don't thrive in formal education settings. Around 3,000 library branches in England provide 25,000 free-to-use public PCs. Eight in ten library services support people in learning basic digital skills through drop-in sessions, workshops and one-to-one help.

Youth clubs and community centres offer something libraries can't quite replicate: they're spaces where young people already are, with adults they already trust, embedded in relationships that go beyond technical support. According to Youthlink Scotland survey, around 70 per cent of youth work projects now use digital technologies. This ranges from setting up games consoles in youth centres to running full digital curricula with accredited qualifications (like Cardiff Youth Service) to creating virtual youth clubs on platforms like Roblox (pioneered by Essex Youth Service during Covid lockdowns).

National networks support this local work. The Good Things Foundation's National Digital Inclusion Network comprises over 7,000 Digital Inclusion Hubs (libraries and community centres) providing free data, devices and skills training. Organisations like Code Club and CoderDojo facilitate free, volunteer-run coding clubs in non-

formal spaces, having reached over 2 million young people in the past decade. UK Youth's Generation Code programme works to embed sustainable digital provision across the youth sector through training youth workers and providing resources.

Projects funded by the INCLUDE+ Network (of which the digital youth research hub is part of) have helped us understand where non-formal digital youth work spaces sit in relation to formal education, health care, and welfare systems. Two projects in particular illustrate the distinctive role of digital youth work:

The Kinlochbervie Emerging Technologies took place in rural Scotland. The project's goal was enabling young people to "access education and career pathways without relocating," directly countering rural depopulation through digital connectivity.

The Space Youth Service's project was designed as spaces distinct from school and home, where neurodivergent young people could unwind, create, and gain skills without the pressures of formal assessment.

We have learnt that non-formal digital youth work occupies a distinctive position because relationships and trust form the foundation. Young people consistently value youth workers' patience, soft skills focus, and willingness to meet them where they are. Yet sustaining this distinctive positioning of digital youth work is resource-intensive: it requires time for trust-building, flexibility to respond to diverse needs, and sustained funding.

Cystic Fibrosis Trust's Building Brighter Futures programme, funded by BBC Children in Need, runs free online workshops for young people aged 6-25 with cystic fibrosis who cannot meet in person due to cross-infection risks.

> *Research by YouthLink Scotland on the Pride & Pixels programme (delivered via Discord) found that young people experienced dramatically reduced isolation and improved wellbeing — demonstrating digital youth work's potential to be genuinely life-changing.*
>
> ***YOUTHLINK SCOTLAND — LGBT YOUTH SCOTLAND PRIDE & PIXELS***

> *77% of participants felt their wellbeing had improved. Overall, nine out of ten felt increased connection — crucial after studies suggested lockdown could trigger a mental health crisis for LGBTQ+ young people.*
>
> ***YOUTHLINK SCOTLAND — LGBT YOUTH SCOTLAND PRIDE & PIXELS***

These projects helped us at the INCLUDE+ Network appreciate the deeply relational nature of digital inclusion and digital youth work. When services are overstretched, decisions about who accesses support are made informally—which often means the most marginalised young people lose out.

What Does Feminism and Intersectionality Have to Do with Digital Youth Work?

Feminist digital youth work tackles the structural inequalities present in digital environments by creating educational spaces that explore power dynamics, challenge algorithmic discrimination, and support young people—particularly those from marginalised groups—to navigate and shape digital spaces critically and safely.

To what extent can we engage with the critical landscape of digital inequalities, or at the very least, avoid perpetuating it? What actions can we take, given existing constraints, to critically examine our own practice and the structural forces shaping it?

As DYWR.HUB, our goal is to employ feminist digital youth work as a critical lens for our research, drawing inspiration from the essential contributions of projects such as the ones below.

The Young Women's Movement Scotland demonstrates this through their Young Women Code project addressing gender disparity in Scotland's tech sector (women represent only 23 per cent of the workforce) through intersectional analysis, and their Young Women Demand programme advocating to "address online violence against young women and girls through robust regulation of digital technologies."

The Mayor of London's Countering Violent Extremism programme funds the BRAVE Project, delivering awareness-raising workshops in schools and Pupil Referral Units led by facilitators with lived experience.

Chelsea FC's project uses football facilities to deliver assemblies and online workshops on racism, hate, critical thinking, and media prejudice. For disability inclusion, the Cystic Fibrosis Trust's Building Brighter Futures programme, funded by BBC Children in Need, runs free online workshops for young people aged 6-25 with cystic fibrosis who cannot meet in person due to cross-infection risks.

In Scotland, LGBT Youth Scotland's Pride & Pixels programme, delivered via Discord, demonstrates digital youth work's life-saving potential for marginalised young people. Research by YouthLink Scotland found that 86 per cent of young people experienced reduced feelings of isolation, whilst 77 per cent felt their wellbeing had improved.

According to NYA's recent report, only 18 per cent of youth organisations have implemented a digital strategy, and 57 per cent of staff members indicate that digital youth work is not a priority within their organisations.

> *Digital youth work has not been the primary focus of most of the professional lives of the people leading our organisations right now. You can see it in their skills and background. This might be a reason why digital youth work is not really being prioritised. But there are also other big issues to deal with in our sector, like basic financial precarity.*
>
> ***WORKSHOP PARTICIPANT***

> *A lot of the youth sector feels quite scared of digital and doesn't feel like it's that front and centre. I think that's important for us to recognise. It's not just policymakers systematically shutting out digital youth work. The sector itself isn't prioritising these topics.*
>
> ***WORKSHOP PARTICIPANT***

Furthermore, senior leaders frequently lack a solid understanding of digital strategies or favor traditional youth work approaches. The NYA's research indicates that only 34 per cent of workers feel confident in their digital capabilities. There exists a notable divide in attitudes, with 53 per cent of leaders considering digital as "less impactful" and 36 per cent viewing it as risky.

Research into digital transformation across the UK public sector found that middle management (36 per cent) and executive leadership (34 per cent) are seen as key barriers to digital adoption. When workers are already stretched managing immediate crises, taking risks on digital innovation becomes difficult.

When contracts mandate face-to-face contact hours and performance metrics do not account for digital engagement, workers find themselves unable to experiment with digital delivery. Funding criteria typically require evidence of impact using measures that digital youth work doesn't fit well: number of young people seen face-to-face, hours of contact time, immediate behaviour change.

Where Does Digital Youth Work Sit Within Youth Work Policy?

5.1 The National Youth Strategy: Youth Matters

England's Youth Matters National Youth Strategy (2025) represents the government's ten-year plan to support young people. Co-produced with over 14,000 young people, it includes over £500 million of investment in youth services. It promises more safe spaces, meaningful activities and access to trusted adults. It establishes programmes like Better Youth Spaces to renovate youth facilities and commits to creating 50 Young Futures Hubs.

According to NYA's recent report, only 18 per cent of youth organisations have implemented a digital strategy, and 57 per cent of staff members indicate that digital youth work is not a priority within their organisations. This trend highlights a tendency among leaders to underestimate the strategic significance of digital initiatives. The National Youth Agency's (NYA) 2025 research reveals that youth workers feel that "an aversion to risk prevents some youth sector organizations from exploring new digital delivery options, particularly within local authorities." This is largely because leaders tend to prioritise compliance over innovation, driven by strict safeguarding Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and fears of liability.

This is substantial investment and welcome recognition of youth work's importance. But when we look for digital youth work specifically, references appear limited. The strategy acknowledges that young people's lives are partly digital. But it doesn't systematically address what that means for how youth work needs to be resourced, trained and delivered.

The Better Youth Spaces programme will renovate physical infrastructure: youth club buildings, community facilities. This matters enormously. But digital infrastructure gets less attention. Will renovated youth clubs have adequate Wi-Fi? Will they have devices young people can use? Will the youth workers in those clubs have training to deliver digital youth work? The strategy is less clear on these questions.

5.2 Sector-Led Policy: Notable Progress and Persistent Gaps

England's National Youth Agency stands out for its work on digital youth work. The NYA's Digital Youth Work Standards (2025) define what digital youth work is, why it matters, who delivers it and how. The accompanying guidance on Digital Youth Work in an Online Setting provides practical support for delivering youth work on platforms like Zoom, Roblox and Discord. These documents represent sector leadership on digital youth work.

CLD Standards Council's National Occupational Standards (2019) include specific competency for digital youth work. Under "CLD YW08: Engage with and empower young people to make use of digital media in community settings," it outlines what youth workers need to know and be able to do in digital contexts. This is significant because NOS shape training programmes, qualifications and workforce development.

These are significant achievements. They demonstrate that parts of the sector recognise digital youth work as practice with its own specificity, requiring particular competencies and approaches. But they're sector-led standards, not government policy. They don't come with funding. They don't mandate training. And they don't appear in the digital inclusion strategies that shape government investment.

5.3 From Principles to Practice: The Implementation Gap

Many youth work policies state that youth work principles and values apply equally in online and offline spaces. This is important and correct. Voluntary participation, authentic relationships, empowerment, social justice orientation—these values don't stop applying when young people and youth workers move online.

But stating that principles apply online is different from saying how they apply. How do you build authentic relationships on Discord? What does voluntary participation mean when young people can just leave a Zoom call? How do you ensure safeguarding in online gaming communities? How do you support young people's agency in spaces shaped by algorithmic systems designed to maximise engagement?

The gap between principle and practice shows in implementation. Even where policies acknowledge digital youth work exists, they rarely provide for what would make it sustainable: workforce development, digital infrastructure, evaluation frameworks that recognise citizenship outcomes, and the sustained funding that enables organisations to develop expertise over time rather than scrambling to respond to each new platform.

5.4 What This Means for the Sector

When youth work policy doesn't fully recognise digital youth work as distinct practice, several things happen. First, it becomes harder to make the case for specific resources. If digital youth work is just 'youth work that happens to use technology', it doesn't need specific investment—and any investment that does happen can be spread thinly across the sector without ensuring anyone actually has the expertise to deliver quality digital youth work.

The pioneering work of NYA and YouthLink Scotland demonstrates what's possible when digital youth work gets explicit attention. These standards and frameworks provide foundation for arguing that digital youth work requires specific investment. They make it possible to say: here's what quality looks like, here's what's needed to achieve it, here's why it's worth funding.

Youth work is about the inclusion of young people, including digitally. The sector-led policies we reviewed address many themes central to digital inclusion: safeguarding, wellbeing, soft skills like resilience and communication, the importance of trusted adult relationships, the value of non-formal learning. What they don't always do is connect these themes explicitly to digital contexts in ways that translate into workforce development, digital infrastructure and sustained funding.

Analysis: What We Have Learnt

6.1 The Neoliberal Frame: Young People as Future Workers, Not Current Citizens

When digital inclusion policies address young people, they often seem to portray them in particular roles: perhaps as the "future workforce," as "digital natives needing upskilling," or possibly as vulnerable victims of online harms needing protection. These framings aren't wrong, exactly. But they're incomplete—and the gaps matter.

Youth work offers a different framing. Not because employment doesn't matter (of course it does) but because reducing young people to their economic potential risks erasing their present existence as citizens with rights, voice and agency. Young people are not future citizens. They are citizens now. They have rights now. They need to participate in democratic life now.

Our concern is that when digital inclusion policy overlooks youth work, or when it only values youth work's contribution to 'skills development', it may push practice towards instrumental goals and away from the democratic citizenship work that makes youth work distinctive. Youth work that's only valued for its contribution to employability isn't really youth work—it's pre-employment training with a relationship attached.

6.2 Policy Invisibility Has Consequences

Invisibility within policy goes beyond mere symbolism; it has tangible effects on resources, training, sector development, and ultimately, the access that young people have to meaningful digital support.

This invisibility can create a cycle. Digital youth work doesn't appear in policy, so it doesn't get dedicated funding. Without dedicated funding, organisations can't develop capacity systematically. Without systematic capacity development, it's harder to demonstrate the impact that would justify policy recognition. So digital youth work remains invisible—and the cycle continues.

For young people, particularly those already marginalised, this matters significantly. They may need digital support that schools aren't set up to provide. They may need spaces to develop critical digital literacy that goes beyond technical skills. They may need trusted adults who understand both digital environments and their specific circumstances. When digital youth work lacks policy recognition and resources, these young people are more likely to fall through gaps in provision.

6.3 The Formal Education Bias and Its Limitations

The policy focus on formal education as the primary route to digital inclusion is understandable—schools reach most young people and possess established infrastructure and curricula. Investment in schools' digitalisation over 2016-2026 totals several billion pounds through DfE grants, device schemes, connectivity upgrades, and EdTech contracts, accelerating tenfold post-Covid. However, this has been fragmented across competing initiatives, unevenly distributed, and has prioritised connectivity and devices over sustained workforce development.

Young people not in education, employment, or training (NEETs) face particular exclusion. NEET rates are highest where disadvantages stack: low qualifications, SEND, disability, poverty, care experience. These are precisely the young people most likely to need the kind of trusted, non-coercive support that youth work provides—and least likely to be reached by school-based digital inclusion initiatives.

Digital Youth Work as Critical Infrastructure: Beyond Cables and Servers

This isn't primarily infrastructure for employment readiness, though it might support that incidentally. This could be understood as infrastructure for democratic citizenship. For young people to engage with digital tools not just as consumers or workers-in-training, but as citizens with voice, agency and rights. For young people to understand how digital technologies shape society and how they might shape them back. For marginalised young people in particular to have spaces where they can develop digital capabilities on their own terms, not solely on the market's terms.

When we talk about infrastructure, we usually mean technical systems: broadband networks, mobile masts, data centres. That's important. But social infrastructure matters just as much, perhaps more so. Social infrastructure consists of the relationships, spaces and practices that enable people to participate in collective life. Libraries are social infrastructure. Community centres are social infrastructure. Youth clubs are social infrastructure.

When we refer to infrastructure, we often think of technical systems such as broadband networks, mobile towers, and data centres. While these elements are crucial, social infrastructure holds equal, if not greater, importance for digital inclusion.

Digital youth work can be understood as critical infrastructure for young people's digital citizenship. It may provide what technical infrastructure alone cannot: trusted relationships where young people can safely explore digital spaces, mentorship from adults who understand both youth work and digital contexts, safe spaces for experimentation and critical thinking about technology, and non-formal learning environments where young people develop digital agency alongside technical skills.

7.1 The Full Infrastructure Framework

Social infrastructure is not a given; it demands investment, upkeep, and growth. The table below sets out each of the eight elements, what they mean in practice, and why each one matters for digital equity in the UK.

INFRASTRUCTURE ELEMENT	DEFINITION & WHAT THIS MEANS IN PRACTICE	WHY THIS MATTERS FOR DIGITAL EQUITY IN THE UK
Physical & Technical Infrastructure Material resources, connectivity, and digital tools for young people to access and participate in digital spaces.	**IN PRACTICE** Youth clubs with reliable Wi-Fi; sufficient devices (laptops, tablets); access to suitable platforms (Discord, Roblox, creative software); device loaning schemes without deposits or credit checks; free or subsidised data; accessible technology for diverse needs.	**WHY IT MATTERS** Without technical infrastructure in youth spaces, digital exclusion reproduces existing class, geographic, and socio-economic inequalities. If youth clubs—often a young person's only access point outside school—lack adequate Wi-Fi and devices, we create a two-tier system. This is structural inequality embedded in infrastructure investment decisions.

Relational & Social Infrastructure Trusted relationships, safe spaces, and voluntary participation environments enabling young people to develop digital capabilities through connection.	**IN PRACTICE** Youth workers building authentic relationships over time; "second online homes" where young people feel safe; voluntary participation (can leave, aren't assessed); spaces where young people already are with adults they trust; peer learning; time for relationship-building before skills development.	**WHY IT MATTERS** Relational infrastructure makes digital inclusion meaningful rather than tokenistic, particularly for young people who've experienced institutional harm. In the UK, where trust in institutions is stratified by class and race, youth work's voluntary, relationship-based approach creates conditions where marginalised young people might actually engage. Without relational infrastructure, technical access becomes another service imposed on young people who've learned that "participation" often means extraction.
Trained & Supported Workforce Youth workers with specific digital competencies, ongoing professional development, supervision, and organisational support — not expectation to "just know" or self-fund learning.	**IN PRACTICE** Initial training in digital youth work; ongoing CPD; dedicated supervision; peer learning networks; dedicated time (not added to full workload); organisational budgets for training; permission to not know; right to disconnect and rest; acknowledgement of emotional toll.	**WHY IT MATTERS** The workforce digital divide directly translates to young people's digital divide along class and geographic lines. Well-resourced organisations in affluent areas can fund training; under-resourced organisations serving marginalised communities cannot. In a UK austerity context where youth services lost 70% of funding since 2010, expecting workers to individually solve systemic under-investment perpetuates inequity. Digital equity requires workers serving excluded young people receive MORE support, not heroic self-sacrifice.
Organisational Infrastructure & Strategic Commitment Organisations prioritising digital youth work through strategy, resource allocation, appropriate metrics, and leadership commitment.	**IN PRACTICE** Digital strategy implemented; leadership champions it; digital engagement counts in metrics (not just face-to-face hours); contracts allow flexibility; safeguarding adapted for online; workers don't use personal devices; resources allocated for devices, software, connectivity and training; time built into workloads.	**WHY IT MATTERS** Organisational ambivalence means equity depends on individual worker initiative rather than systematic provision. In a UK context of fragmented commissioning, this creates a postcode lottery where young people's access to quality digital support depends on which organisation happens to serve their area. Only 18% of youth organisations have a digital strategy. Precarity reproduces inequality — resourced organisations innovate whilst under-funded ones managing crises cannot experiment.

Policy Recognition & Sustained Funding Explicit recognition in digital inclusion strategies, clear standards, multi-year infrastructure funding (not just projects), cross-departmental coordination.	**IN PRACTICE** Digital youth work explicitly named — not coded as "community partners"; national standards and frameworks; 3–5 year infrastructure grants, not 12-month cycles; funding covers workforce development; cross-departmental coordination (youth + digital + education policy); evaluation values citizenship outcomes, not just employment.	**WHY IT MATTERS** Policy invisibility has material consequences. When digital inclusion strategies don't name youth work, commissioning favours schools — missing the 750,000+ NEETs, care-experienced young people, and those excluded from school. Short-term project funding flows to organisations with bid-writing capacity, rarely the small community organisations serving the most marginalised. Sustained infrastructure funding could break inequality cycles; project-based funding perpetuates them.
Pedagogical Infrastructure: Democratic Citizenship Practice Frameworks positioning digital youth work as education for democratic participation — not just employment — embedding empowerment, participation, social justice, and critical thinking.	**IN PRACTICE** Supporting understanding of internet governance, data sovereignty, corporate power; spaces for identity exploration, voice, agency; critical digital literacy — analysing how platforms shape behaviour and extract data; using digital for organising, advocacy, cultural production; recognising young people as rights-bearing citizens now; resistance to surveillance and extraction.	**WHY IT MATTERS** Without critical digital pedagogy, digital inclusion efforts risk reproducing inequalities through platform dependency and uncritical consumption. Working-class young people and those from marginalised communities already experience digital technologies as surveillance. If digital inclusion only teaches platform use without critical understanding of power, we train young people to be exploited consumers rather than empowered citizens. Digital equity requires spaces where young people develop political literacy about digital power.
Gap-Filling Infrastructure for Excluded Groups Intentional provision addressing specific gaps for young people facing place-based, socio-economic, neurodiversity, care-experience, and other structural barriers.	**IN PRACTICE** For care-experienced: trauma-informed spaces, positioned as consultants not service users. For neurodivergent: spaces without assessment or surveillance. For rural: tools enabling access without relocating. For those not in school: non-formal support. For mental health: wellbeing through relationships they won't access via CAMHS (10-month average wait, up to 2 years).	**WHY IT MATTERS** UK digital exclusion compounds existing inequalities. 80,000+ care-experienced young people in England alone need trauma-informed approaches commercial platforms don't provide. An estimated 15–20% of young people are neurodivergent. 9.7 million people in rural England face digital "not-spots". 750,000+ NEETs need support outside school-based systems. Without intentional gap-filling, one-size-fits-all digital inclusion deepens exclusion for those whose needs don't fit the model.

Evaluation & Knowledge Infrastructure Frameworks recognising citizenship outcomes, platforms for sharing practice, research partnerships centring practitioner and young people's knowledge.	**IN PRACTICE** Evaluation measuring voice, participation, critical thinking, and agency — not just employment. Documentation and sharing platforms. Practitioner-led action research. Research partnerships positioning youth workers and young people as knowledge producers. Case studies on democratic participation. Evidence supporting policy recognition.	**WHY IT MATTERS** Evaluation frameworks determine what counts as "success" and what gets funded. In UK commissioning culture dominated by payment-by-results, if evaluation only captures employment outcomes, youth work's contribution to democratic empowerment becomes invisible. Middle-class young people develop political voice through family and private education; marginalised young people need intentional spaces. When citizenship outcomes aren't measured, they lose funding — and young people lose provision.

Recommendations

These recommendations emerge from our policy review, workshops with practitioners and analysis of what would enable digital youth work to function as critical infrastructure for young people's digital citizenship. They are addressed to different audiences because different audiences have different levers to pull.

We want to be clear about what these recommendations are and aren't. They are not a wishlist for a perfect world. They are grounded in what practitioners told us they actually need, in what the policy analysis shows is missing, and in what would make a concrete difference to the sector's ability to deliver digital youth work effectively. Some are asks for new action. Some are asks for recognition — for existing work to be named and funded rather than overlooked.

We also want to name something directly: the sector cannot fix this alone. Youth workers and organisations are already delivering digital youth work, often without adequate resources, training or policy support. The recommendations that follow are not about telling the sector to try harder. They are about asking policy makers, funders and sector leaders to finally catch up with what practitioners are already doing.

ON 8

ommendations

iences. One ask: make digital youth work visible.

JK & Devolved Governments

01 **Name it explicitly.**

Explicitly name digital youth work in digital inclusion strategies. Don't rely on coded language like 'community partners' or 'local delivery'. State clearly that youth work organisations and youth workers are essential infrastructure for young people's digital citizenship.

02 **Dedicate funding streams.**

Allocate dedicated funding streams for digital youth work infrastructure. This means sustained funding (not short-term projects), covering workforce development, digital infrastructure in youth spaces, and ongoing quality improvement.

03 **Better Youth Spaces must include digital.**

Ensure Better Youth Spaces investment and similar capital programmes include digital infrastructure: adequate connectivity, devices, suitable platforms, not just physical building renovations.

04 **Connect the departments.**

Establish cross-departmental coordination on young people's digital citizenship. Digital inclusion shouldn't sit solely in technology departments. Youth policy, education policy, skills policy and digital policy need to coordinate, recognising youth work's role across all these domains.

05 **Commission the right research.**

Commission research on digital youth work's impact using evaluation frameworks suited to citizenship outcomes, not just employment and education metrics.

Youth Sector Leadership Organisations

01 **Extend NYA & YouthLink Scotland's work.**

Extend the pioneering work of NYA and YouthLink Scotland across all UK nations. Every nation needs clear standards, competency frameworks and practical guidance for digital youth work.

02 **Advocate consistently.**

Advocate consistently for digital youth work's recognition in policy. Use evidence from practice, make the citizenship case, challenge instrumental framings that reduce youth work to skills development.

03 **Build sector-wide workforce programmes.**

Develop sector-wide workforce development programmes. This includes initial training in digital youth work competencies, ongoing professional development, supervision frameworks, and peer learning networks.

04

04 **Create and share resources.**

Create and share resources: good practice examples, safeguarding guidance for specific platforms, approaches to evaluation, case studies demonstrating impact.

05 **Build coalitions.**

Build coalitions with other sectors. Libraries, community centres, and other non-formal education spaces face similar challenges. Collective advocacy may be more effective than isolated sector voices.

Youth Work Orgs & Practitioners

01 **Document and share your practice.**

Document and share your digital youth work practice. Make visible what you're doing, why it matters, what impact it has. Build the evidence base that supports policy recognition.

02 **Use citizenship language.**

Use democratic citizenship language when describing your work. Resist pressure to frame everything through employment outcomes. Young people's voice, agency, critical thinking and participation are legitimate outcomes worth naming and valuing.

03 **Invest in your workforce.**

Invest in workforce development even when resources are tight. Prioritise training, peer learning, supervision focused on digital practice. Skilled, supported practitioners deliver better outcomes.

04 **Engage with policy processes.**

Engage with policy processes. Respond to consultations, contribute to strategy development, make your expertise visible to policy makers. They often don't hear from youth workers; change that.

05 **Build partnerships.**

Build partnerships with schools, libraries and other organisations delivering digital inclusion support. Collaborative approaches may be more sustainable and reach more young people than isolated provision.

Funders & Philanthropic Organisations

01 **Sustained, flexible funding.**

Provide sustained, flexible funding that enables organisations to develop digital youth work capacity over time, not just deliver short-term projects.

02 **Include workforce development costs.**

Include workforce development costs in funding. Training, supervision and peer learning shouldn't be extras organisations squeeze in; they should be budgeted as essential infrastructure.

03 **Value citizenship outcomes.**

Use evaluation frameworks that recognise citizenship outcomes. Don't only measure employment or educational attainment. Value confidence, critical thinking, participation, voice and agency.

04 **Fund sector infrastructure.**

Consider funding sector infrastructure, not just individual organisations. Workforce development programmes, resource platforms, peer learning networks benefit the whole sector.

05 **Fund innovation and evaluation together.**

Fund innovation and evaluation together. Support organisations to try new approaches and document what works, building the evidence base for digital youth work.

Researchers & Evaluators

01 **Develop the right evaluation tools.**

Develop evaluation approaches suited to digital youth work's democratic citizenship aims. What does success look like when the goal is participation, not just skills acquisition?

02 **Research what works.**

Research what works in digital youth work practice. Document approaches, identify effective strategies, understand what enables quality. Build evidence that supports practitioner development and policy recognition.

03 **Investigate intersections.**

Investigate intersections between digital exclusion and other forms of disadvantage. How do poverty, care experience, disability, geographic location and other factors interact to shape young people's digital citizenship?

04 **Centre young people's voices.**

Ensure young people's voices feature centrally in research. They're experts in their own digital lives and should help shape research questions, methods and interpretation.

Conclusion

This report began with a question practitioners kept asking: where is digital youth work in the policy landscape? After systematic policy review, workshops with practitioners and analysis of how young people's digital lives appear in UK policy, we found a clear answer: largely absent.

This invisibility isn't neutral. It affects resources, training, workforce development and sector sustainability. It makes it harder for organisations to access funding, harder for practitioners to make the case for support, harder for young people to access the quality digital support they need.

We've argued for understanding digital youth work as critical infrastructure for young people's democratic participation in digital society. Not infrastructure in the technical sense of cables and servers, but social infrastructure: the human systems, relationships and institutional capacity that enable young people to participate meaningfully in digital society.

This infrastructure lens has implications. Infrastructure requires sustained investment, not short-term project funding. It requires workforce with specific competencies, ongoing training and adequate support. It requires policy recognition that doesn't just gesture towards 'community partners' but explicitly names and resources the work.

Throughout this report, we've emphasised democratic citizenship over instrumental skills development. This isn't because employment doesn't matter. Young people need to earn a living, and digital skills genuinely matter for economic participation. But young people are citizens now, not just future workers. Digital youth work supports their participation in digital society as it currently exists, not just as it might exist when they enter the labour market.

We've seen encouraging developments. England's National Youth Agency and YouthLink Scotland have developed substantial frameworks for digital youth work. Some digital inclusion strategies acknowledge the role of community organisations. Youth work's democratic citizenship mission is increasingly recognised in sector-led policy.

But we need more. We need digital youth work explicitly recognised in digital inclusion strategies across all UK nations. We need youth work featured in discussions about reaching marginalised young people with digital inclusion support. We need funding that builds sustained capacity, not just short-term projects. We need workforce development that treats digital competencies as essential, not optional extras.

For policy makers reading this: digital youth work already delivers what your strategies say you want to achieve. Youth workers reach young people in trusted spaces, support development of critical digital literacy, build the skills and confidence that enable participation—not just employment. Recognise that. Name it. Fund it accordingly.

For funders reading this: digital youth work needs sustained investment in infrastructure, not just programmes. Fund workforce development. Use evaluation frameworks that recognise citizenship outcomes. Consider sector infrastructure, not just individual organisations.

For sector leaders reading this: build on the excellent work NYA and YouthLink Scotland have pioneered. Extend it. Advocate for it. Make digital youth work visible in every policy conversation about young people, digital inclusion and democratic participation.

For practitioners reading this: you're already doing vital work. Document it. Share it. Use democratic citizenship language when describing what you do. Resist pressure to frame everything through employment outcomes. Young people's voice, agency, critical thinking and participation are legitimate outcomes worth measuring and arguing for.

Digital technologies increasingly shape how we live, work, organise, participate and exercise power. Young people have the right to participate meaningfully in digital society—not just as consumers or employees, but as citizens. They need trusted, skilled adults who understand both youth work and digital contexts to support them. That's what digital youth workers do. That's what this report is about.

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