

CPG on Children and Young People

Wednesday 25 June 2025

13:00 – 14:30pm

Digital Safety

Chair: Meghan Gallagher MSP

Minutes

Present Member MSPs

Meghan Gallagher MSP
Siobhan Brown MSP
Fulton Macgregor MSP

Present non-member MSPs

Siobhan Brown MSP

Invited guests

Dr Elizabeth Loose, Research & Engagement Manager at John Smith Centre
Staci Henderson, Advocate at Girlguiding UK
Dr Trevor Lakey, Health Improvement & Equalities Manager at NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde
Dr Louise Hill and Gregory Metcalfe, Children's Parliament
Catriona, Member of Scottish Youth Parliament

Non-MSP Group Members

Patrick Goldie, Blue Triangle
Beth Davidson, Feeling Strong
Fatoumata Drammeh, UNICEF
Ewan Carmichael, Quarriers
Joan Mowat, University of Strathclyde
Una McFadyen, NHS Forth Valley
Lara Balkwill, Rock Trust
Sarah Weir, Social Worker
Rhona McMillan, Alliance Scotland

Rachel Shanks, University of Aberdeen
Katherine Anderson, CELCIS
Felicity Mehendale, Centre for Global Health Research
Lily Humphreys, Children 1st
Florence Burke, BBC
Emma Murphey, Magic Breakfast
Emily Arrowsmith, Girlguiding Scotland
Kirsty Gemmell, CLD Standards Scotland
Keiran Reape, YMCA Scotland
Leah Dobbs, Columba 1400
Ranim Asfahani, Children's Parliament
Henry Mathias, Inspiring Scotland
Parisa Shirazi, Children in Scotland
Abbey Stone, Children in Scotland
Hilary Phillips, Youthlink Scotland
Sarah Paterson, Youthlink Scotland
Paulina Met, Youthlink Scotland

Introduction from chair – Meghan Gallagher MSP

Meghan welcomed members to the meeting of the CPG on Children and Young People.

Chosen Topic

Digital Safety

Megan noted that the chosen topic for the meeting was digital safety and how the impact of social media on children and young people's lives was a significant issue. Meghan then explained:

1. The UK Online Safety Act, passed in October 2023 aims to make the internet a safer place for children and young people, by imposing new duties on online service providers. Ofcom is the agency responsible for enforcing the new legislation.
2. In January 2025 the Scottish Government announced the formation of a new task force to explore measures to combat online harms affecting children, following a parliamentary debate on school violence.
3. Recently two Edinburgh schools, Portobello High School and Queensferry High School became the first schools in Scotland to introduce a zero-phone policy.
4. In Australia legislation will restrict access to social media for young people under the age of 16.
5. The rapid pace of change, particularly around generative AI, adds urgency and complexity to the topic.

Housekeeping

As always, Meghan conducted some quick housekeeping and reminded everyone:

- When speaking, to press the 'speak' button on the microphone so that those joining on Zoom could hear.
- Highlighted the fire exits in the event of a fire.
- For those on Teams, to mute themselves when others were speaking.
- To use the hands-up function on Teams if they wished to speak in the main group.
- To avoid jargon where possible, as there was a goal to make these meetings as accessible as possible for everyone.

Meghan then moved on to the AGM business and passed over to the co-secretariat, Parisa Shirazi from Children in Scotland.

CPG Business 13:05 – 13:10

a. Previous Minutes

Parisa asked the CPG to confirm that they were happy to take the minutes as read. These were shared with the secretariat ahead of the meeting.

All members agreed to take the minutes as read.

b. New members of the group

Parisa explained that they also had a number of organisations and individuals keen to join the group as members, these were:

- Blue Triangle
- Sarah Weir
- Dr Rachel Shanks

Proposer: Sarah Paterson, Youthlink Scotland

Second: Dr Louise Hill, Children's Parliament

Impact of social media young people's voices – Panel Discussion

Dr Elizabeth Loose, Elizabeth is Research & Engagement Manager, John Smith Centre

Dr Loose explained that their recent UK youth research, was published 2 months ago and it involved over 2,500 participants aged 16–29 through surveys, interviews, and focus groups, explored the role of social media in

young people's lives. She highlighted that while social media offers benefits such as entertainment, emotional support, education, and opportunities for activism and connection, it also brings notable risks. These include impacts on mental health, such as anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem, particularly among young women due to body image pressures and comparison culture. Dr Loose noted concerns around exposure to harmful or manipulative content, echo chambers, misinformation, and the decline of real-world social skills. She also pointed out that social media use can lead to procrastination and reduce engagement in more meaningful activities. Finally, she observed that political engagement tends to increase with age, with 40% of 25–29-year-olds strongly agreeing with political statements, compared to only 17% of 16–17-year-olds.

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Staci Henderson, Advocate with Girlguiding UK

Staci provided an overview of Girlguiding, noting that it is an organisation dedicated entirely to girls and led by volunteers. She highlighted the annual Girls' Attitudes Survey, which gathers responses from over 2,500 girls to understand how they feel about their everyday lives. Stacy shared that being a girl today is felt much more intensely than it was a decade ago, and that the confidence gap continues to widen as girls grow older. Only 1 in 4 girls expressed positive feelings about their future. The survey also revealed that 4 in 5 girls feel unsafe online, though many view seeing female role models on social media as a positive influence. Girlguiding works to build girls' confidence and equip them with essential life skills. Stacy also mentioned the Peer Education Programme and the 2024 Camp CEO initiative, both of which are designed to empower and support young women in leadership and personal development.

Dr Trevor Lakey is Health Improvement & Inequalities Manager at NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde

Dr Trevor Lakey discussed the digital determinants of youth mental health. He emphasised that digital spaces are a critical determinant of health, with young people spending increasing amounts of time online. He explained that while digital platforms pose risks, such as sleep disruption, exposure to harmful content, and links to self-harm and suicidality, they also offer opportunities for connection and support.

Dr Lakey discussed the Aye Mind initiative which aims to promote positive digital use and equip professionals with the tools to support young people in online spaces. This includes bite sized resources, professional networks, and guidance for parents and carers on issues such as online misogyny. He also highlighted the importance of trusted adults in helping young people navigate their digital lives safely and confidently.

He explained that his team conducted a literature review exploring the impact of social media on mental health among those aged 12–25, identifying both benefits and harms. They stressed the importance of collective action, involving national and local partners, to address digital challenges through collaboration. Since Aye Mind's relaunch, the platform has seen over 111,000 interactions, with resources available online, including the Digital Wellbeing Wheel. Key implications include the need to assess online habits, promote healthy digital behaviours, support parents, and tailor interventions for vulnerable groups.

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Dr Louise Hill and Gregory Metcalfe, Children's Parliament

Dr Louise Hill opened the discussion by outlining the core mission of the Children's Parliament: to ensure that every child grows up in a society rooted in love, understanding, and happiness. She explained the organisation's commitment to using a children's rights-based approach to influence policy and practice, and to drive cultural change in line with the full implementation of the UNCRC. Dr Hill emphasised that the Children's Parliament works to demonstrate rights in practice, influence legislation, build capacity, and grow a national movement that places children's human rights at the centre.

Gregory Metcalfe provided an overview of their ongoing project exploring the intersection of children's rights and artificial intelligence. The project, run in partnership with the Scottish AI Alliance and the Alan Turing Institute, engaged children across four schools in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Stirling, and Shetland. Children participated as "Investigators" and produced a series of reports and videos, culminating in 12 Calls to Action. Key themes included fairness and bias, safety and security, and AI in education. Children expressed concern that adults were not doing enough to make AI safe or fair, and believed companies should not use children's data to train AI systems without their consent. They stressed that the focus should be on making online spaces safe for children, rather than restricting children's access.

Gregory noted the development of a teaching resource pack for P5–7 and e-learning modules for professionals, based on findings from the project. A national survey revealed significant gaps in teachers' confidence when it comes to discussing AI, further supporting the need for education and awareness-raising in this area. The resources aim to embed AI and children's rights into learning in a meaningful and accessible way.

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Catriona, Member of the Scottish Youth Parliament

Catriona presented on two key youth-led initiatives focused on improving online safety for children and young people in Scotland. She explained that SYP is the democratically elected voice of Scotland's young people, advocating for their views to be heard and acted upon in all areas that affect them.

Catriona introduced the Mind Yer Time project, a national digital wellbeing resource that offers positive tips, stories, quizzes, and blog content to encourage healthy, balanced use of screen time and social media. It serves as an accessible platform for young people to reflect on their online habits and learn about responsible digital behaviour.

She then detailed the Amplifying Child Safety Online project, run in partnership with the NSPCC. This initiative brings together a group of ten Digital Safety Ambassadors to represent the voices of young people across Scotland. So far, the team has held regional events and gathered insight through a spring workshop. The findings showed that while many young people felt confident discussing AI regulation and online advertising, topics like cyberbullying, privacy, and consent were less well understood. The right to privacy (Article 16), protection from harm (Article 19), and access to information (Articles 13 and 17) emerged as the most relevant UNCRC rights linked to online safety.

Key online risks identified included inappropriate content, cyberbullying, scams, misinformation (particularly involving AI), and issues around body image, consent, and online abuse. Young people highlighted that the solution should not be to restrict their access, but to educate, support, and protect them through adult responsibility and inclusive policy.

Looking ahead, Catriona shared plans for co-design workshops to develop four practical toolkits covering cyberbullying, self-image and social media, misinformation and AI, and sexual content and consent. These will include videos, posters, session plans, an AI bot, and other creative resources. Upcoming milestones include a panel at the Festival of Politics in August, a stakeholder showcase in November 2025, and new content on misinformation to be published by December 2025.

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Open Discussion 14:00 – 14:25

Meghan explained that would now open up the discussion to the wider group to reflect on what they had heard. She said that while we may not have time to hear from everyone, that the secretariat will be collecting additional views through a survey that would be shared at the end of the meeting.

Hilary Phillips, Youthlink Scotland, reflected on the importance of building young women's confidence online and emphasised that both the education and youth work sectors have vital roles in supporting young people in this space. She noted the value of collaboration, particularly in relation to violence reduction efforts.

Henry Mathias, Inspire Scotland, highlighted that findings across multiple surveys consistently point to the urgent need for adults to take more responsibility in protecting young people online. He stressed the growing demand for immediate action.

Joan Mowat, University of Strathclyde, pointed out the importance of adult education, stating that adults themselves need to be better informed about the digital landscape to effectively support young people.

Dr Louise Hill, Children's Parliament, emphasised the need to reflect on how adult perspectives often dominate conversations about children's use of social media. She stressed that protecting children does not mean making decisions for them in isolation. Instead, children and young people must be actively involved in shaping the discussions and decisions that affect them.

Gregory Metcalfe, Children's Parliament, added that it's important to recognise the design of social media platforms, they are built to capture and retain attention. He referenced Australia as an example, noting that even with progressive legislation, implementation remains a challenge.

Lily Humphreys, Children 1st, strongly agreed with Dr Hill, stating that during engagement sessions, adults consistently learn from young people. She emphasised the pace at which the online environment evolves and the importance of including both adult and child perspectives in these discussions.

Euan Carmichael, Quarriers, shared experiences from engaging directly with children and young people, including through a Scottish Government working group. He noted the impact social media is having on school attendance, with some young people feeling stigmatised or vilified online, which can contribute to school avoidance.

Joan Mowatt, University of Strathclyde, expressed sympathy for families who have experienced loss linked to harmful social media use. She cautioned against outright bans, arguing that doing so may prevent young people from learning to navigate social media safely and responsibly. She called for a more nuanced and balanced approach.

Hilary Phillips, Youthlink Scotland reiterated that the responsibility for online safety should not rest solely with children and young people. Adults must be

equally accountable and proactive in creating safe and supportive online environments.

Agree actions and close meeting

Meghan then asked the Secretariat to identify any immediate actions following the meeting and to confirm the date of the next meeting.

Parisa stated that members would be informed as soon as a date was set for the next meeting.

Meghan then expressed her gratitude to all attendees for coming to the session, thanking them for their participation and insights.

End of meeting