Digital Voices

Progressing children's right to be heard through social and digital media

Research Commissioned by the Ombudsman for Children's Office

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Foreword

In recent years, we have been giving increasing attention here in the Ombudsman for Children's Office (OCO) to children's rights in relation to the digital environment. To date, the OCO's work on children's rights in relation to the digital environment has included a focus on children's safety and protection – a vitally important issue that we have been engaging with through our participation in the National Advisory Council for Online Safety and monitoring of developments regarding the General Scheme of the Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill.

Alongside this work, we have mobilised the digital environment ourselves to raise awareness of children's rights among children and young people, in particular through our It's Your Right website. Prevented by Covid-19 from working with children and young people face-to-face, we have also used digital technologies to deliver rights education workshops, to get their views through a number of social media campaigns and to hold our annual Child Talks event. Like so many other organisations, we have relied heavily on digital technologies since March 2020, including in our work with young people on our Youth Advisory Panel.

Digital Voices; progressing children's right to be heard through social and digital media represents another dimension to the OCO's interest in children's rights in relation to the digital environment. Anchored in our sustained commitment to advancing children's right to be heard and our awareness of the increasing significance of the digital environment and digital technologies in children's lives, we wanted to examine how digital and social media might be mobilised appropriately and effectively to progress children's right to be heard, especially in the context of public decision-making.

Many other organisations working at national, European and international levels have also been working on this important area of promoting and protecting the rights of children in a digital environment. In 2018, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe published a new recommendation to member States on Guidelines to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of the child in the digital environment. In 2019, the European Network of Ombudspersons for Children (ENOC), which the OCO is a member of, published a position statement on children's rights in the digital environment. Earlier this year, the European Commission adopted a new EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child. The digital and information society is one of this Strategy's six thematic areas and focuses on a number of measures directed towards an EU "where children can safely navigate the digital environment and harness its opportunities". In March 2021, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC Committee) published a new General Comment on children's rights in relation to the digital environment. To these significant developments, other legislative, policy, research and practice initiatives can of course be added.

As the CRC Committee notes in its new General Comment, the digital environment "affords new opportunities for the realization of children's rights, but also poses the risks of their violation or abuse". As in other countries, the impact of certain measures taken in response to Covid-19 in Ireland has heightened awareness of a digital divide among children as well as concerns about children's exposure to harmful material and behaviours online, including misinformation, cyberbullying, violence and hate speech, and grooming for sexual exploitation. At the same time, the pandemic has prompted innovations, which help to underscore the opportunities that the digital environment can present for children, including to pursue their education, to access supports, to maintain contact with family and friends, and for recreation.

Digital Voices documents research carried out by the Technological University Dublin, on behalf of the OCO, examining how social and digital media could be mobilised in an appropriate and effective way to progress children's right to be heard in decision-making.

Professor Brian O'Neill, Dr Thuy Dinh and Dr Kevin Lalor undertook a comprehensive literature review, as well as qualitative primary research to elicit the perspectives of a diverse cohort of children and young people aged 6 to 17. They also obtained the views of key professional stakeholders from relevant Government departments, public bodies, industry and civil society.

Among the overarching findings of this research are:

- Digital technologies offer scope to grow children's and young people's interest and engagement in civic participation.
- Social and digital media platforms have the potential to support children and young people's voices to be heard. However, the manner and context in which children's participation is facilitated needs to be both meaningful and rights-based.
- It may not be possible to replicate all aspects of existing participation practice successfully in the digital environment. Equally, it is important to consider that not every subject matter may be suitable to deliberation within digital spaces.
- Co-designing opportunities for digital consultation and participation processes with children and young people is important to securing their buy-in and ongoing support.
- A blended approach that combines established offline methods and digital methods may be the best way forward, particularly at this early stage of mobilising digital media to facilitate children and young people to exercise their right to be heard.

Viewed together, the research team's corresponding recommendations make for an innovative and challenging agenda for action. Clearly, taking this agenda forward will require leadership, collaboration and coordination. A first step for the OCO will be to examine carefully which of the recommendations we may be able to progress and what role we could best play in this regard.

I would like to thank Professor O'Neill, Dr Dinh and Dr Lalor for the expertise, energy and commitment they have brought to conducting this research. Through Digital Voices, they are presenting all of us who have a responsibility to advance the realisation of children's right to be heard with a stimulating opportunity to diversify how we fulfil this responsibility.

Dr Niall Muldoon
Ombudsman for Children

Glossary of Terms

This following glossary of terms provides a brief explanation of key words and phrases that are used throughout the report. The glossary is not a full definition but rather a clarification of the usage in the context of this report. More detailed explanation is provided in the relevant section where the terms are first introduced.

Key concepts	Working definition
Civic engagement, civic participation	Civic engagement and civic participation (often used interchangeably) refer to all the ways young people, whether individually or collectively, participate to improve the well-being of communities or society in general, and which provide opportunities for reflection (Brady et al., 2012).
Digital Citizenship	We use the Council of Europe definition of Digital Citizenship to refer to "The competent and positive engagement with digital technologies (creating, working, sharing, socializing, investigating, playing, communicating and learning); participating actively and responsibly (values, skills, attitudes, knowledge) in communities (local, national, global) at all levels (political, economic, social, cultural and intercultural); being involved in a double process of lifelong learning (in formal, informal and non-formal settings) and continuously defending human dignity" (Council of Europe, 2017)
Digital technologies	Digital technologies refer to all electronic tools, systems, devices and resources that generate, store or process data. The term is used to encompass information and communications technologies including well known examples such as social media, online games, multimedia and mobile phones.
Political participation	Political participation is any activity that shapes, affects, or involves the political sphere. Political participation can take the form of membership of a political party, campaigning for a political party, joining a social movement.
Public decision-making	Children and young people's participation in decision-making is defined as "the process by which children and young people have active involvement and real influence in decision-making on matters affecting their lives, both directly and indirectly" (DCYA, 2019). Two main mechanisms by which young people may be involved in public decision-making include consultation whereby their views are sought and listened to by public sector organisations, and participation, which provides a level of public responsibility, power and influence in the formation of decisions (Botchwey et al., 2019).

Key concepts	Working definition
Social media	Social media is a collective term for websites and applications which focus on communication, community-based input, interaction, content-sharing and collaboration. Different types of social media include social networking sites (e.g., Facebook), photo sharing sites (e.g., Instagram, Snapchat), video hosting and sharing (YouTube, TikTok, Vimeo), microblogging sites (e.g., Twitter, Tumblr) and discussion sites (e.g., Boards.ie, Reddit). Social media platforms are typically funded by advertising and data-driven marketing.
Social participation	Social Participation refers to the involvement in life situations offering interaction between an individual and the physical, social, and attitudinal environments. Social participation involves forming and maintaining social relationships in families and other social networks.

Executive Summary

Children's right to be heard is a fundamental right expressed in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Given the prominent role that digital technologies play in children's lives, Digital Voices: Progressing children's right to be heard through social and digital media asks whether social and digital media can support children's right to be heard in public decision-making.

This research, undertaken by Technological University Dublin, on behalf of the Ombudsman for Children's Office (OCO), investigates the opportunities that exist to mobilise social and digital media to ensure children are heard by public policy makers, decision-makers and service providers. It looks at the barriers to mobilising social and digital media and how the barriers can be overcome. It also highlights good practice of where social and digital media have been used effectively to allow children and young people to be heard by public bodies. Digital Voices: Progressing children's right to be heard through social and digital media makes recommendations on how to support children and young people to express their views and to be heard by public bodies in Ireland through social and digital media.

This research involved a literature review, a consultation with children on how their right to be heard might be advanced in and through the digital environment, and engagement with professional stakeholders working in the public, private and NGO sectors.

The research was conducted over the course of 2019 and 2020. While the majority took place before the global COVID-19 pandemic, the turn to digital media because of social distancing measures and stay-at-home orders has underlined just how central digital technologies are to the functioning of society. Digital platforms were essential to completing the fieldwork enabling young people to have their say and making the case for youth digital participation more urgent than ever (Kligler-Vilenchik & Literat, 2020).

A number of methods were used to carry out this research; a comprehensive survey of academic and policy literature; we spoke to a diverse group of children and young people aged 6 to 17 and we spoke to stakeholders from relevant government departments, public bodies, industry, and civil society.

Literature Review

- Research shows that children are immersed in the digital environment. This offers opportunities to harness this enthusiasm for further creative and civic activities.
- Only limited numbers of children are attaining higher levels of civic engagement activities using digital technologies.
- The range of attitudinal, systemic and technological barriers to participation that exist in offline participation need to be examined online as well.
- Existing participation mechanisms have made only limited use of social and digital media.
- All levels of the participatory space (informational, communication, deliberative) need to be incorporated into the digital domain.
- A comprehensive rights-based framework building on Article 12 of the UNCRC is needed to support children in the digital environment.
- Practice in the area of digital youth work and e-participation can provide useful guidance for harnessing digital technologies to support children and young people's involvement in public decision-making.
- Digital Citizenship offers particular potential to develop the skills, values,

attitudes and knowledge needed to support children's progression on the ladder of digital opportunities.

Consultations with Children

- Children expressed how they enjoy a wide range of benefits through social and digital media, and especially appreciate its "Communication" and "Information" functions.
- Children are confident about their ability to express themselves despite challenges and believe the internet is a good place for children and young people's voices to be heard.
- All children are particularly cognisant of the barriers and challenges in the digital environment. Cyberbullying and unwanted communications are identified as particular challenges and inhibitors to their ability to avail of more opportunities online.
- Children enjoy the functionality of being connected through digital technologies and extending their horizons for communication and learning.
- Children want to see a range of improvements to their digital experience, with more attention given to safety, respect for privacy, higher quality information, training and supports.
- Government leadership in this area is welcomed but more can be done to fulfil children's right to be heard through digital technologies.
- Children would like to see the establishment of a dedicated space where children and young people could express their views, safely and securely.

Professional Stakeholder Perspectives

- Professional stakeholders acknowledge that digital spaces are particularly important for children.
- It is important to listen to, discuss with and learn from children within the context of their lived experience.
- The ability to both engage and empower children and young people through social and digital media offers powerful potential for children's participation.
- Safety concerns are key in considering any form of digital implementation but this should not be an excuse for not examining the positive potential of social and digital media.
- It is important to balance risks and opportunities and to manage the many safety issues that may compromise the participation process.
- The particular affordances of digital technologies offer potential to enhance children's participation but require training and support.
- Social media platforms are a great way to reach and engage young people but their application to participation practice is limited.
- The State has a role in delineating and defending children's rights in the digital environment.
- To be effective, participation must be meaningful and therefore all dimensions of the participation model, connecting different rights, should be taken into account when building digital participation opportunities.

Conclusions

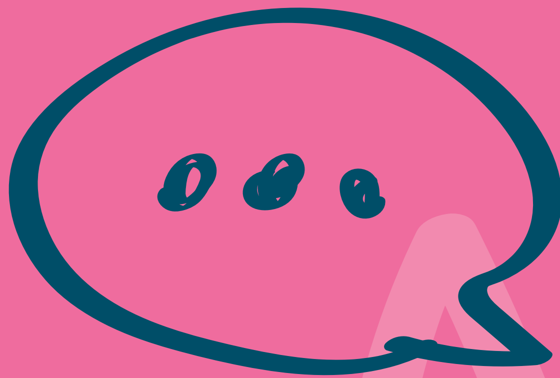
Digital Voices: Progressing children's right to be heard through social and digital media sets out principles for successful digital participation. It advocates the use of social and digital media to build children and young people's participation in public decision-making, and to develop approaches that can harness the potential of the technology. All dimensions of participation, fully informed by child rights principles, need to be addressed in the digital development and underpinned by the necessary training and support.

Digital Voices suggests a number of action points to mobilise social and digital media to progress the realisation of children's right to be heard in the context of public decision-making processes affecting them.

1. Convene a Digital Participation Expert Group drawing from relevant expertise across the public sector, academia, youth organisations and from industry to distil best practice and to develop new policies on how social and digital media may be used in public decision-making affecting children.
2. Develop a Charter for Children and Young People's Digital Participation to underpin the rights-based nature of children's participation in public decision-making on matters affecting them.
3. Develop a Digital Participation Toolkit to support take-up of best digital participation practice and the fostering of Digital Citizenship across a range of settings.
4. Establish a dedicated Digital Participation Space or platform that can be shared by relevant actors and public agencies for children and young people's digital participation in public decision-making.
5. Initiate a series of demonstrator projects to pilot new and innovative forms of children and young people's participation in decision-making processes.

Section 1

Children's Right to be Heard



1. Children's Right to be Heard

Children's right to be heard is a fundamental right expressed in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Children are supported in many ways to have their voice heard and to participate in decision-making on matters that affect them.

This is normally taken to mean participation through face-to-face interaction. However, digital technologies are transforming the ways in which we receive information, communicate and participate in society, for adults and children alike. Given the prominent role that digital technologies play in children's lives, particularly given the turn to digital technologies arising from the global pandemic, this report asks whether social and digital media can support children's right to be heard with reference to public decision-making. The terms 'children' and 'young people' are used throughout the report to refer to people under the age of 18 years.

This study arises in the context of an invitation to tender by the Ombudsman for Children's Office (OCO). Technological University Dublin (TU Dublin) was commissioned to undertake the research which was organised in three main phases:

- A desk-based review of the available literature and documented practices in the area of supporting children's digital participation, looking at both national and international evidence;
- A consultation with children to elicit their views on mobilising social and digital media to support their right to be heard;
- A consultation with key professional stakeholders such civil and public servants, academics and NGOs working in this sector.

With the aim of informing future practice, the study concludes with recommendations drawing on all three phases of the research and outlines action points to progress the topic.

1.1 Scope of the research

This research examines the potential to mobilise social and digital media to support children and young people's right to be heard. Put simply, given the fact that children are growing up in a world immersed in digital technologies, can this be used to support more opportunities for children's voices to be heard?

The right to be heard represents one of the key expressions of children's participation rights as set out in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). One of the four guiding principles of the Convention, Article 12, ascribes to children the right to be heard in all matters affecting them, to participate in all decision-making processes having a bearing on their lives and to exert influence over such decisions in accordance with their age and maturity.

Social and digital media technologies have had a profound and transformative effect on children's lives. Children account for an estimated one in three of all internet users around the world (Livingstone, Carr, & Byrne, 2016). Globally, 71 per cent of young people aged 15 to 24 years are online compared with 48 per cent of the total population (UNICEF, 2017). While responding to concerns about the increased exposure to risks arising from digital technology, policy makers have tried to balance risks with opportunities and looked to use its benefits in terms of learning as well as its potential to overcome marginalisation and disadvantage.

As set out in the brief for the project, the overall aim of the research is to examine how social and digital media might be mobilised appropriately and effectively to progress the realisation of children and young people's right to be heard and to have their views considered in the context of public decision-making processes affecting them.

Specifically, the research asks how the digital environment may serve children's right to be heard in the context of public decision-making, i.e., when policy makers and service providers develop, implement or review legislation or policies that impact on the individual and

collective lives of children and young people. The focus of the research is therefore on how social and digital media can be mobilised to advance the implementation of children's right to be heard by public bodies in Ireland.

The research has the following specific objectives:

a) **to identify the opportunities that exist to mobilise social and digital media** appropriately and effectively for the purposes of progressing the realisation of children's right to be heard by public policy makers, decision-makers and service providers;
b) **to identify the principal barriers to mobilising social and digital media** for these purposes and how the barriers can be overcome;
c) **to highlight good practice models/ examples of where social and digital media have been employed** effectively to facilitate children and young people to be heard by public bodies and identify the main characteristics that underpin the appropriateness and effectiveness of these models/examples;
d) **to identify and make recommendations** on how to provide for and support children and young people to express their views and to be heard by public bodies in Ireland through social and digital media.

The approach adopted is focused on solutions and real-world application while drawing on relevant research evidence of children's experiences, opinions and aspirations concerning the digital environment.

1.2 Policy context

There are a variety of factors that make this current investigation a timely one.

Firstly, there has been an evident **shift in the policy discourse away from protection and online safety as the sole focus of policy on children's digital engagement to one that is balanced by considerations of positive opportunities, online well-being,** and importantly a recognition that fundamental rights and freedoms that apply offline also have an equivalent application online.

This has been articulated most recently by the UNCRC's general comment on children's rights in relation to the digital environment " (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2021) which identifies the digital environment as an important dimension in which children's rights should be promoted and realised. It requires States parties to ensure that national policies relating to children's rights specifically address the digital environment, noting that "the use of digital technologies can help to realize children's participation at the local, national and international levels" (UNCRC, 2021, p.3).

The Council of Europe, for example, has called attention to how social and digital media can support participation in democratic culture and a respect for human rights (Council of Europe, 2016). Empowering citizenship participation is also proposed as a core skill of digital communication and collaboration in the European Commission's digital competence framework (Carretero et al., 2017). The UN Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression has also lent weight to harnessing digital opportunities as a means of enabling children's involvement in decision-making, citing access to the internet as an important vehicle for children to exercise their right to full participation in social, cultural and political life (UN Special Rapporteur, 2014).

A detailed elaboration of the implications for member states is contained in the Council of Europe's *Guidelines to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of the child in the digital environment*

(2018).[1] With reference to participation, the right to engage in play and right to assembly and association, the Guidelines have the following specific recommendation:

> 24. States should take measures to ensure that children are able ***to participate effectively in local, national and global public-policy and political debates and to support the development of online civic and social platforms to facilitate their participation*** and their enjoyment of the right to assembly and association, strengthening their capacity for democratic citizenship and political awareness. States should also ensure that children's participation in the digital environment is acted upon meaningfully, building on existing good practice for child participation and available tools for assessment. (Emphasis added)

In 2019, the European Network of Ombudspersons for Children (ENOC) adopted a position statement at its 23rd ENOC General Assembly which called upon "governments, the European Commission and the Council of Europe to undertake all appropriate actions to respect, protect and fulfil children's rights so that children and young people might be able to enjoy the benefits and opportunities which the digital environment offers".[2]

A key recommendation in this regard was to: *"Recognise and ensure that the digital environment offers an additional engagement platform for children to participate in social, community and civic roles"*.[3] Alongside recommendations to ensure equality of access and support for children's skills development, this places a very positive emphasis on the digital environment as one in which children's rights, including children's right to be heard, may be advanced.

A second relevant aspect of current policy debate is ***the increased emphasis on Digital Citizenship and active engagement in and through digital technologies.*** Recognising the many challenges that democratic societies face – the rise of populism, the undermining of tolerance and diversity, threats from violent terrorist extremism and information 'disorders' such as misinformation and disinformation as prominent examples – international organisations such as the Council of Europe have called on governments to do more to support democratic culture. The Council of Europe's *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture* (CDC) (Council of Europe, 2016) and its Recommendation on developing and promoting Digital Citizenship education[4] underline the importance of active Digital Citizenship as a contributory factor in reducing the democratic deficit and increasing empathy, tolerance and social cohesion. Importantly, such statements also provide a welcome emphasis on the skills, competencies and supports required if children are to be sufficiently prepared for active participation, democracy, social engagement and defence of human rights.

The third and more general policy context is that of a ***human-centred vision of technology and the digital environment.*** This is a perspective articulated most recently in the European Commission's communication "Shaping Europe's Future" and which underlines, in the words of the Commission, a 'technology that works for people' and one that plays a real and positive difference in people's lives[5]. Europe's priority, contra the US or a China oriented vision, is of digital transformation that enhances democratic values, respects fundamental rights and contributes positively towards an open, democratic society. Again, while the focus for children and young people is mostly on strengthening digital skills and digital literacy to empower young people in the digital environment,[6] the policy emphasis on strengthening e-democracy and the embedding

1 Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)7 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on Guidelines to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of the child in the digital environment. Available at: https://rm.coe.int/guidelines-to-respect-protect-and-fulfil-the-rights-of-the-child-in-th/16808d881a

2 European Network of Ombudspersons for Children (ENOC) Position Statement on "Children's Rights in the Digital Environment" Adopted by the 23rd ENOC General Assembly, 27th September 2019, Belfast

3 Ibid. Recommendation 3c, p.4

4 Recommendation CM/Rec(2019)10 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on developing and promoting Digital Citizenship education. Available at: https://library.parenthelp.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/CoE-digital-citizenship-education-recommendations-CM_Rec201910E.pdf

5 European Commission, COM(2020) 67, Shaping Europe's Digital Future. https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/communication-shaping-europes-digital-future-feb2020_en_3.pdf

6 As for example in the commitment to produce a Digital Education Action Plan and a reinforced Youth Guarantee with a focus on digital skills. COM(2020)67, p.7

of democratic practices through digital technologies across government and public services is a key context in which the current work is framed.

1.3 Contributions to knowledge

With the above as policy background, the current report looks to contribute to the following key areas:

a) ***Advancing knowledge of policy and practice related to children's 'right to be heard' (Article 12) within a digital context.*** While there is extensive literature on principles, programmes and practice related to children's participation, its realisation in a digital context is under-researched and little understood.

b) ***Children's voices about the opportunities available to them to express themselves online or on digital platforms have also been under-represented.*** Children have notably few opportunities to take part in policy development about the digital environment, even when this may directly affect them or the services they use. This study engages with children on these issues and provides them with the platform to articulate a future vision of how they might envisage active and positive participation, along the lines envisaged by the Web We Want project.[7]

c) ***A further area in which the study looks to contribute new insights is in terms of the various professional stakeholders who engage with children and young people in relation to the use of digital technologies.*** Professional stakeholders here include not only teachers and youth workers who have very direct experience of using digital tools in formal and informal learning settings but also policy makers, decision-makers and public servants with a focus on children and young people and for whom the deployment of digital technologies may provide enhanced opportunities to hear from and include the voices of children. Alongside this, the views of experts, including industry specialists, are consulted reflecting a range of perspectives on the advantages and disadvantages of digital technologies for enhancing children's participation. Professional stakeholder consultation here was key, not just to reflect the diverse and sometimes conflicting positions held, but also to evaluate the emergent ideas from the children's consultation.

d) ***Finally, the study also seeks to contribute to practice by making recommendations for practical implementation of ideas developed through the research.*** In addition, the study also looks to contribute suggestions that would enhance children's digital participation more widely and to offer suggestions that can be taken up by decision makers in the public service, in schools and among services catering to and supporting children. In this way, the study looks to fulfil the aim of being solutions-focused with a real-world application in an area that is undergoing rapid change.

1.4 Outline of the report

Chapter 1, Introduction, sets the context of the study, defining the aims and scope of the research.

Chapter 2, Methods, provides an outline of the methods used in the study across the three phases of the research. The research design and participatory methods used to engage with children are outlined and details of the groups of children and young people consulted are described.

Chapter 3, the Literature Review, provides a summary and overview of the main findings of the literature consulted. In addition to distinct topics within the academic literature, a large body of policy and programme-related materials were consulted ('grey literature'), including examples chosen from national studies and initiatives as well as prominent international studies.

7 https://www.webwise.ie/teachers/web-we-want-2/

Chapter 4, Children's Voices Regarding Digital Participation, presents the findings of research with children and young people. These included participatory consultation workshops with children based on a sampling methodology aimed at being representative of the general population. In addition, a series of focus groups with diverse groups of young people were held, including a number aimed at targeting seldom heard groups. Children's contributions are organised thematically to take account of the good features they perceive in their online use; the challenges, barriers and inhibitors to better online engagement; and their ideas on creating a more participatory digital future.

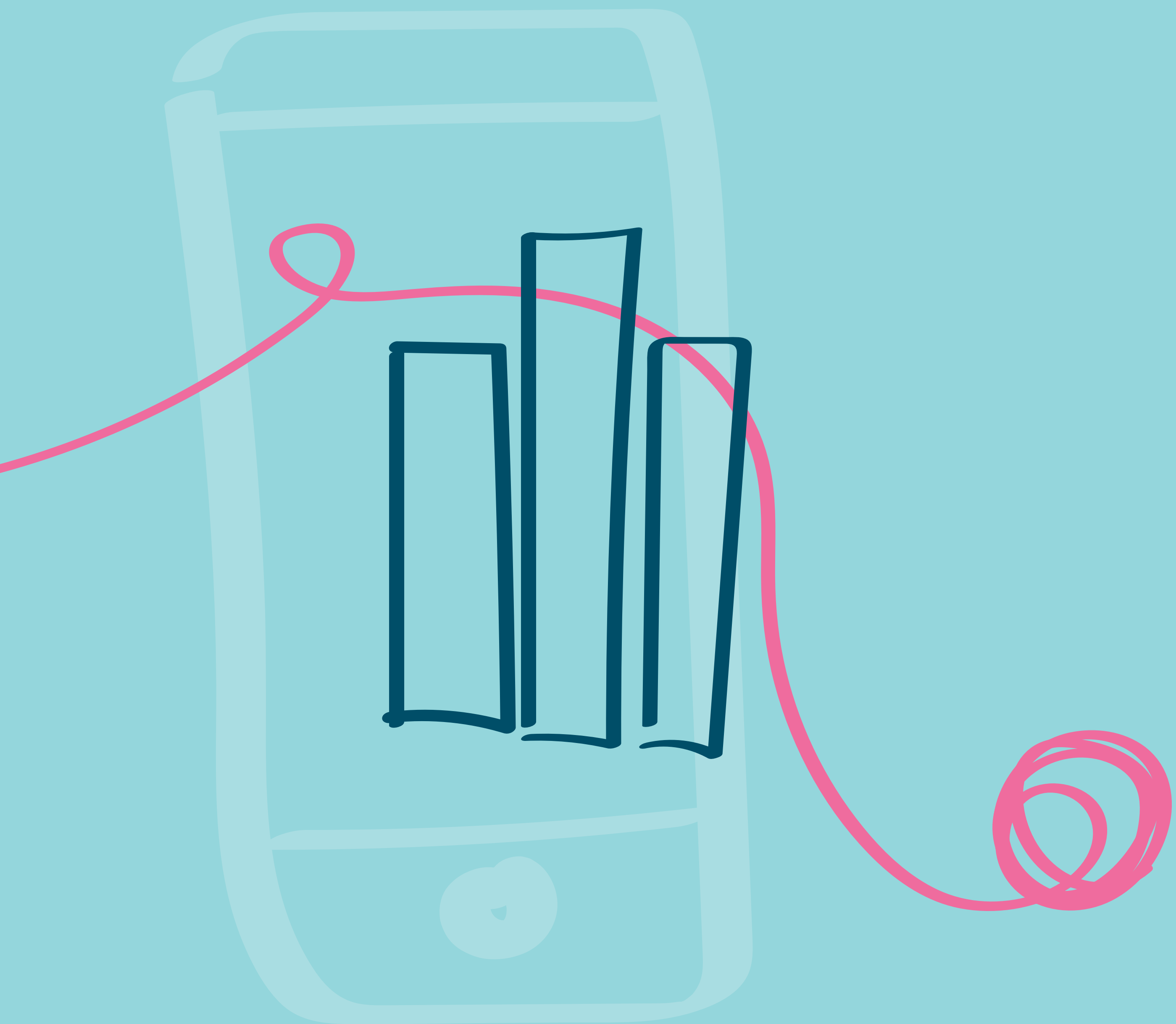
Chapter 5, Professional Stakeholder Views on the Right to be Heard reports on the consultation through interviews with key professional stakeholders in industry, in professional youth work, in academia, and in public service decision-making roles. The latter are of relevance to the current study given their unique perspective on current participation practice and children's involvement in decision-making.

Chapter 6, Conclusion and Recommendations presents a summary of the main findings and recommendations for practice addressed to the OCO in the first instance and then to wider public services and agencies working with children.

Appendices contain the relevant research protocols, interview guides and summary research design.

Section 2

Research Design and Methodology



2. Research Design and Methodology

The overall aim of the research was to examine how social and digital media can be mobilised appropriately and effectively to progress the realisation of children and young people's right to be heard and to have their views considered in the context of public decision-making affecting them. The three distinct phases of the research determined the methods used, a summary of which is given in this chapter.

Phase 1 comprised a desk-based review of relevant academic and scholarly literature. The review was international in scope and, in addition to the scholarly literature, included so-called grey literature documenting relevant policies and programmes.

Phase 2 involved primary research with children and young people to elicit the perspectives of diverse cohorts as to how social and digital media can be mobilised appropriately and effectively to have their views considered in the context of public decision-making and matters affecting them. The research was qualitative in nature and used a combination of participatory workshops, focus groups and interviews to elicit input from the target groups.

Phase 3 sought the views of professional stakeholders and decision makers on the same issues regarding the use of social and digital media. Qualitative, semi-structured interviews were held with a diverse group of professionals and sought to draw on their experience and perspectives with a particular focus on implementation.

2.1 The Literature Review

A comprehensive desk review was undertaken of the main scholarly literature as well as 'grey literature', including reports from relevant key international organisations and reports of relevant programmes and practice in the field. The review protocol followed a systemic approach (Cooper et al., 2009) and outlined the key research questions, search strategy, data sources, inclusion criteria and analytical approach. Relevant literature was classified into suitable categories guided by the **P**review, **Q**uestion, **R**ead and **S**ummarise (PQRS) system (Cronin et al., 2008).

A similar approach was adopted for a review of professional practice in the use of social and digital media to facilitate children's right to be heard. Here, there was far less documentation available with the result that we focused on the key attributes of models deemed most relevant to the research for inclusion in a database of good practices.

Evidence related to social and digital media within the context of children's right to be heard was reviewed with a particular focus on research published in English since 2010. Priority was also given to peer-reviewed journal articles, legal/policy instruments, documented practices and good practice guides.

Search strategy

The review focused on two main domains of scholarly and policy-related literature, the intersection of which constituted the work of most interest:

Literature relating to ***children's right to be heard*** and, more specifically, ***children's participation in public decision-making***; and

Literature relating to ***young people's participatory uses of social and digital media.***

While the available literature on children's use of social and digital media is extensive, the specific focus on children's participation in decision-making using digital technologies remains a new and emerging topic that is not well covered in the literature. Therefore, discretion had to be applied in choosing how wide or how narrow to frame the search in determining relevance. The literature also straddles a wide range of disciplines, including media and communication studies, information science, public affairs and

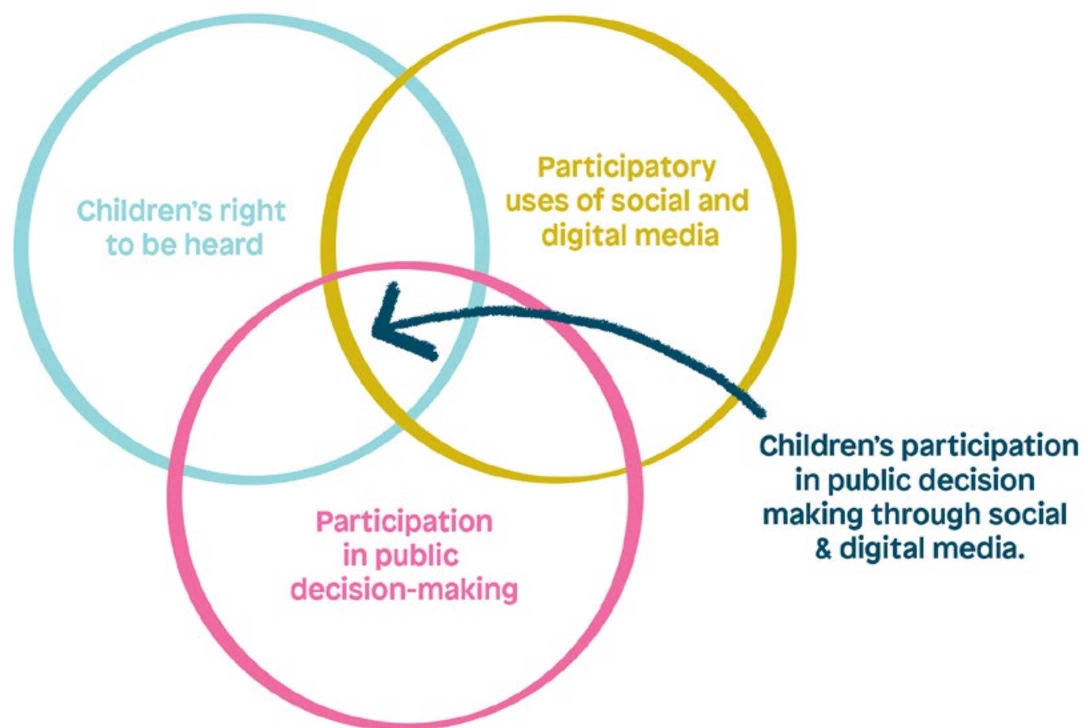


Figure 1 provides a summary of the search strategy:

public policy, social and behavioural sciences as well as literature relating to children and childhood studies. As such, contributions from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds were included alongside diverse selections from various reports and policy publications and reviews, principally from government agencies and civil society, that touched on some but not all relevant aspects of the research question.

The points of intersection represented those of most interest, especially that referencing children's participation through social and digital media (even if this produced the fewest returns). With no single agreed terminology to identify topics in either domain, experimentation was required to ensure the best combination of terms to search the selected electronic databases:

Electronic databases were searched for primary and secondary literature, and for theoretical and empirical evidence related to the main research question. The two main databases used for the search were Scopus and EBSCOhost Online Research Databases. EBSCOhost Online was used to simultaneously search relevant databases (Academic Search Complete, Communication and Mass Media Complete, PsycINFO, SocINDEX and ERIC). ACM Digital Library and IEEExplore Digital Library were also searched for technology-focussed literature. From the legal perspective, specialist databases (Westlaw, HEINONLINE) allowed the search of children's rights and medical law journals.

The Hub na nÓg database of national and international good practice, policy, legal and academic publications, reports and resources on children and young people's participation in decision-making was also consulted and a search conducted for relevant policy publications and studies arising from projects of interest.[8]

2.2 Consultation with Children

Phase 2 of the research involved qualitative research and consultation with a diverse cohort of children using the two primary methods of ***participatory consultation workshops*** and ***focus groups.***

The goal of this phase was to reach a geographically, social, and culturally mixed cohort. The research team was keen to avoid a convenience sample drawn from any one area (e.g., Dublin-centric) or a sampling approach that

8 https://www.hubnanog.ie/library/

might emphasise self-selected participants or an over-representation of more vocal, and already socially or politically engaged, elements of this age group.

While a sample of the global population of children and adolescents in Ireland, stratified by age, gender, ethnicity or socio-economic status was beyond the scope of this project, an approach was adopted that combined purposive (selective) sampling, and random selection.

Participatory Workshops

Four consultation workshops were held with participants (aged 13-17), carefully stratified and randomly selected to maximise the generalisability of the results (age, gender, education and geography). Using the sampling methodology described below, workshops were held in schools in the north, south, east, and west of the country. A total of 95 young people across the four workshops (41 boys, 54 girls) were involved with 20-25 in each consultation session. Workshops were overseen and coordinated by an experienced facilitator, Sandra Roe.[9]

Target geographical areas were selected by identifying those Local Electoral Areas (LEAs) with the highest numbers of young people aged 12-17 nationwide. This maximised the number and mix of young people in that Local Electoral Area. According to CSO data, the top Local Electoral Areas in terms of number of young people aged 12-17 are in the greater Dublin area and on the outskirts of Dublin and Cork. Accordingly, a workshop location was selected from each area. To introduce geographical and rural variation, further locations in the west and north of the country were selected going down in rank order of the LEAs with the highest numbers of young people aged 12-17.

Using a list of all secondary schools in each selected Local Electoral Area (excluding fee-paying schools to enhance the representativeness of the sample), individual schools were invited to participate in this youth consultation. To ensure an appropriate gender balance, if one of the schools was a single sex school, then the next school selected was chosen from the opposite gender.

9 Sandra Roe Research Consultancy, https://sandraroe.ie/

Workshop Methodology

Workshops were organised using best practice in facilitated, participation-based methodology (Ombudsman for Children, 2018). The key research questions were drafted in easy to understand, simple language concerning how young people might use social and digital media to have their say. The format of the workshop was designed to encourage young people's 'blue sky thinking' using creative and age-appropriate methods, starting with children's own experiences, not adult presumptions.

Workshops typically lasted 2.5 hours and were designed to be fun and engaging for the young people involved. The workshop participants were led through a series of activities, including icebreakers, to foster an atmosphere of open dialogue. Following an open space, brainstorming activity, participants engaged in a World Café/placemat exercise to deliberate on the topics identified. A voting exercise then took place to prioritise the most important themes to be taken forward. A brick wall of ideas on issues on which young people would like to have a say was also compiled during the workshop.

Workshops were run according to best practice guidelines on consent, assent, and child safeguarding. Children and young people were grouped according to their ages, e.g., 15-17 years. The introduction to a consultation event was carefully crafted to avoid giving young people unnecessary information that could limit thinking whilst encouraging them to think openly and creatively about their digital experiences. All workshop facilitators had National Vetting Bureau (NVB) approval and had experience in youth facilitation.

Focus Groups

In addition to the consultation workshops held in schools, focus groups were organised with specific groupings of children and young people to ensure more effective representation and to ensure a mix of ages. Ten focus groups in total were held, each comprising 5-6 participants. Focus groups included seldom heard children and young people as well as a diverse mix of younger children. Focus groups were held in a variety of settings, including primary schools and youth centres, and were facilitated by

members of the research team. Most of the focus groups were conducted in advance of the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Following this, sessions were transferred online using the Zoom platform for video conferencing.

Focus groups allowed us to probe the topics identified in workshops in more detail. As with the workshops, participants in the focus groups were led through a question path that began with:

a) ***their interests and positive experiences in using digital and online technologies***; through
b) a discussion of the aspects that ***frustrated and challenged them about the digital or online environmen***t; to
c) a discussion and pooling of ideas of ***how social and digital media might facilitate greater youth engagement***.

The research was contextualised in the same way by introducing the notion of 'having your say' in public decision-making and inviting children, appropriate to their age and level of experience, to reflect on what a more participatory and positive Internet might look like.

Focus groups offered an important additional form of consultation with children and young people in a small group setting. The focus groups were also intended to support inclusion of seldom heard voices that may have been under-represented in the workshops (Kelleher et al., 2014). Focus groups with younger children (8-9 years and 10-12 years) were also undertaken to balance the young people's views as represented in the consultation workshops drawn from secondary schools.

The purpose of the focus groups was to explore in more detail specific issues highlighted both in the literature review and the consultation workshops. Focus groups were grouped according to three ranges age (8-9; 10-12; and 13-17 years of age) and gender. Each typically consisted of 6 people (50% boys and 50% girls). The design, however, retained flexibility and it was necessary to vary the number and size of focus groups on occasion.

Separate question guidelines were prepared for the younger groups (8-9 years and 10-12 years) and for participants aged 13 and over. In addition, as highlighted in the literature review, the tailoring of participatory methods according to the specific issues and contexts of the target audience was emphasised. As such, it was important that the format for the focus groups was appropriately adapted to the age group, the subject matter, and the context in which the children participated.

The list of focus groups is summarised in Table 1:

Focus Group	Gender	Age range
FG1: Younger group	Mixed Gender	8-9 years
FG2: Pre-teen group	Mixed Gender	10-12 years
FG3: Children from ethnic minorities	Mixed Gender	10-12 years
FG4: LGBT young people	Mixed Gender	13-17 years
FG5: Early school leavers	Girls	15-17 years
FG6: Young refugees and asylum seekers	Mixed Gender	13-17 years
FG7: Young people with a physical or sensory difficulty	Mixed Gender	13-17 years
FG8: Young people currently in residential care	Boys	13-17 years
FG9: Young people from the Traveller community	Girls	13-17 years
FG10: Young people using online platforms in school	Mixed Gender	10-12 years

2.3 Professional Stakeholder Interviews

Phase 3 of the research consisted of interviews with key professional stakeholders from relevant government departments, public bodies, academia, industry, and civil society. Interviews were held to elicit expert and stakeholder perspectives on the main topics as well as on

findings and recommendations from Phases 1 and 2 of the research.

The interviews investigated the opportunities and barriers as perceived by professionals to advancing children's right to be heard through social and digital media. Potential benefits of participation through social and digital media, such as widening the range of young people involved in participation and public consultation, were discussed alongside downsides and challenges associated with children's use of digital technologies. Interviews examined digital platforms where young people are already active for their potential to offer further consultation opportunities. Examples of good practice as well as the identification of new opportunities were sought.

A total of 22 interviews with a diverse range of stakeholders were conducted over the course of the research. In addition to civil and public servants, other professionals included youth workers, NGO representatives with experience of supporting young people's participation, and industry specialists whose public policy and trust and safety teams play a key role in supporting the well-being of children and young people online. Interviews ranged from between 45 to 90 minutes in duration and were conducted by a member of the research team. Table 2 provides a summary by stakeholder group.

Table 2: Professional Stakeholder Interviews

Stakeholder Group	Number
Academic	3
Youth Organisations	4
NGOs	2
Civil and Public Servants	5
Industry	4
Education	2
International experts	2
Total	**22**

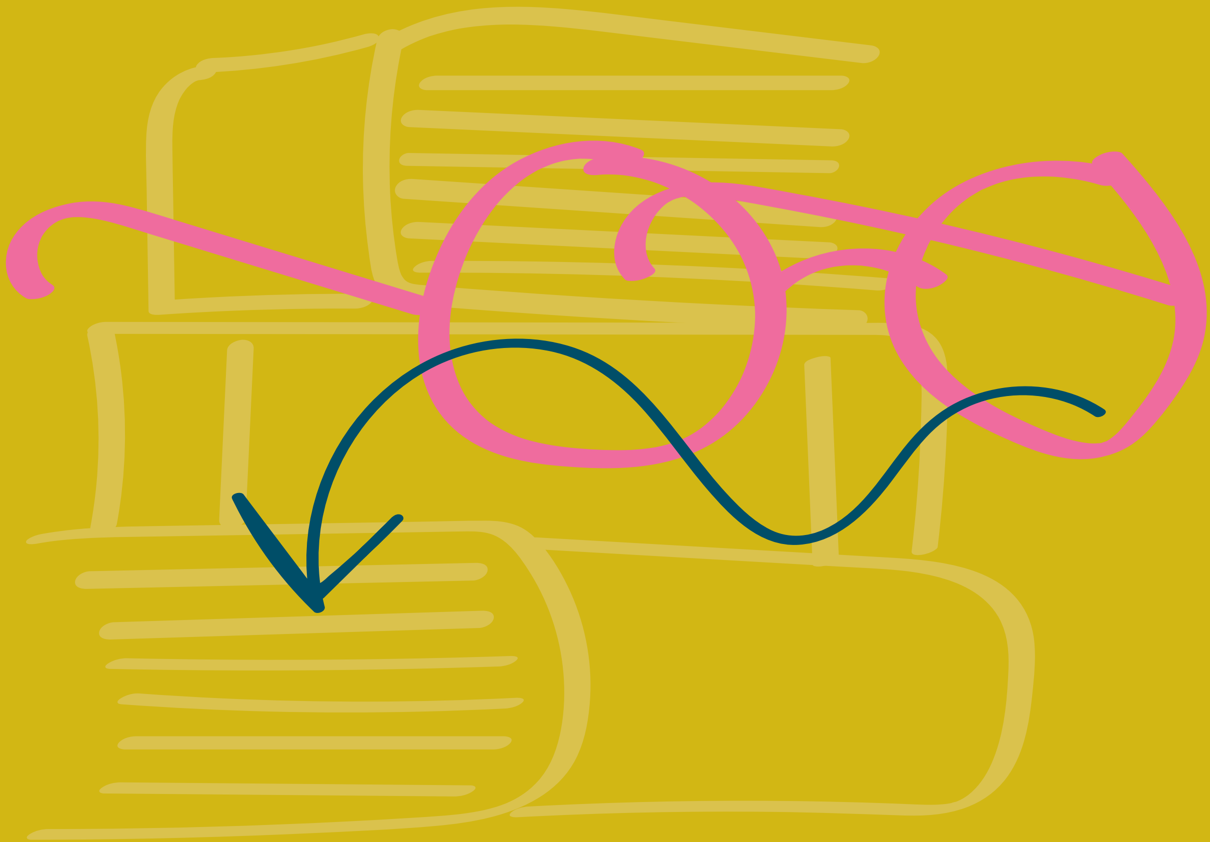
2.4 Research Ethics

Ethical approval for the research was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of Technological University Dublin where the research was based. An ethical review of the overall research design and methodology was undertaken, including details of the sample size and justification of the approach, how participants were to be recruited and consent/assent procedures. Copies of information packs, consent forms and the data management plan for the project were presented for review. Ethics approval for the research was granted in May 2019. In the case of children with special needs, a separate application and ethical review was undertaken by the host institution, and this was approved in January 2020.

All personal data collected over the course of the research was processed fairly, lawfully, and securely in accordance with data protection legislation and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). GDPR obligations on the University as data controller are set out in TU Dublin data protection policies. Participants in the research were given assurances of confidentiality. Attribution of views in the research report was agreed on the basis that no identifying information would be revealed. Accordingly, children and young people's views as presented in the report are cited only with reference to the relevant workshop or focus group and within the age range specified. Similarly, regarding professional stakeholders interviewed for the research, views are attributed only with reference to the stakeholder group concerned.

Section 3

Literature Review



3. Literature Review

Phase 1 of the research consisted of an extensive review of the literature, both academic literature as well as policy-related material, to identify existing knowledge in children's participation, focusing particularly on the use of social and digital media to progress children's right to be heard. Our objective in this literature search was to survey both the positive opportunities that had been identified in the literature as well as the barriers and challenges that had been documented. A further aim was to highlight areas of good practice and potential models that might be applied within the context set out for the study.

As detailed in Chapter 2, the range of literature surveyed was extensive and included disciplines ranging from children and childhood studies, media and communication, information science, public affairs and public policy and other relevant social and behavioural sciences. The focus was on the points of intersection between "children's right to be heard"; "participatory uses of social and digital media" and "participation in public decision-making".

This chapter summarises the key findings of the literature review, looking firstly at the key concepts and definitions used, followed by an outline of important insights related to engagement and social and digital media use as well as the opportunities and risks that they may present for participatory practice. Finally, a summary of best practice principles as identified in the literature is offered.

3.1 Key Concepts in Children's Participation

An initial task was to define key terms associated with children and young people's participation in public decision-making, itself the focus for considerable debate in the literature. This encompassed related notions of children's right to participation and the right to be heard; social and digital media use in participatory contexts; and relevant terminology associated with participation in public decision-making.

The 'right to be heard'

Underpinning the research question is the principle of children's right to be heard as informed by international legal standards, specifically the UNCRC (Article 12). Article 12 is one of the guiding principles of the UNCRC and ascribes to children "the right to be heard in all matters affecting them, to participate in all decision-making processes having a bearing on their lives and to exert influence over such decisions in accordance with their age and maturity".[10]

Children's participation rights also encompass other rights in the UNCRC, e.g., freedom of expression (Article 13), freedom of thought, conscience, and religion (Article 14), freedom of association (Article 15), privacy (Article 16), and access to information, including via the mass media (Article 17).

There is no minimum age regarding children's right to be heard and to have due weight given to their views on matters affecting them. According to the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the age and maturity of the child come in to play when determining how much influence such views should have on decisions that affect the child (CRC, 2009). Consideration should also be given to the views of children as a collective in all contexts that are relevant to children's lives. According to the UN Committee:

> *"The views expressed by children may add relevant perspectives and experience and should be considered in decision-making, policymaking and preparation of laws and/or measures as well as their evaluation (...) The concept of participation emphasizes that including children should not only be a momentary act, but the starting point for an intense exchange between children and adults on the development of policies, programmes and measures in all relevant contexts of children's lives"* (**CRC, 2009, p.7 at para. 12**).

10 https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/a1481d-united-nations-convention-on-the-rights-of-the-child/

The right to participate posits children as active agents in their communities at every level: in the family, in school and in the broader community. Children's unique perspectives should be sought as a matter of course and when brought to bear on issues of concern in a community or incorporated in policy and legislative matters, the resulting actions are likely to be more effective (Sandberg, 2014).

A right to participate through social and digital media

The Convention on the Rights of the Child was written before the era of social and digital media. However, it does anticipate the importance of media and communications to children's rights. For example, Article 13 ('Freedom of Expression') states: "*This right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.*" With Articles 12, 13 and 17, a spotlight is placed on the role of the media and mass communications for children, underpinning the need for high-quality content, ethical representation of children and for children's voices to be heard in such fora (Feilitzen, Carlsson, & Bucht, 2011; Livingstone, 2007; Tobin, 2004).

Scholarly attention has more recently focused on the digital environment as a key context in which all children's rights may be elaborated but which also offers opportunities to advance children's rights to participate (Lievens, Livingstone, McLaughlin, O'Neill, & Verdoodt, 2018; Livingstone & O'Neill, 2014). Areas of attention include the right to access content and services; rights within online and networked spaces; and the role those digital platforms may have in framing Digital Citizenship (Livingstone & Third, 2017).

Recognition that children's rights apply in the digital environment has been highlighted by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in General Comment 25 in which the Committee explains:

> *how States parties should implement the Convention in relation to the digital environment and provides guidance on relevant legislative, policy and other measures to ensure full compliance with their obligations under the Convention and the Optional Protocols thereto in the light of the opportunities, risks and challenges in promoting, respecting, protecting and fulfilling all children's rights in the digital environment.* **(UN Committee of the Rights of the Child, 2021, p.2).**

Commentators note that, to date, a risk agenda – focusing on the potential dangers of social and digital media to children and young people – has tended to predominate in legal and policy discourse (Lievens et al., 2018; Livingstone, 2014). For example, General Comment No.20 (2016) on the implementation of the rights of the child during adolescence includes 18 references to the challenges posed in the digital environment. However, as scholars argue, an approach solely focused on protection rights fails to realise the developmental opportunities of social and digital media, in particular the child's right to be heard (Third, Collin, Walsh, & Black, 2019).

Participation in public decision-making

Children's participation in public decision-making does not occur in isolation and is interconnected with a host of factors such as those factors impacting personal decision-making as well as the wider macro political framework. Public decision-making may be defined as the process of developing policies and services that lie at the very heart of relationships between citizens and public sector organisations including governments, local authorities, and other public bodies (Burton, 2009; Lister, 2007). To best reflect and meet their needs and interests, the wider public, including children, may be provided with opportunities to contribute to public decision-making.

Two such processes are often cited: ***consultation*** whereby the public's views are sought and listened to by public sector organisations, and ***participation***, which provides some level of public responsibility, power, and influence in the formation of decisions (Botchwey et al., 2019; Partridge, 2005). The scope of decisions can range from the strategic

and national levels to the programmatic and community levels, and can involve decisions related to constitutional matters, policy matters, application of policies to specific cases and the provision of services (Austin, 2010; Burton, 2009). This varying scope influences the forms of engagement that take place; in particular, ***who participates,*** for what purposes, and using ***what mechanisms?***

Participation in public-decision-making is a two-way process involving significant levels of responsibility, influence in decision-making and some level of power-sharing (Partridge, 2005). In relation to public bodies, it typically involves administrators/officials/leaders from Government departments, local authorities or community agencies who are responsible for decision-making, policymaking or service provision in diverse realms of public life such as education, health, transportation, and environmental/urban planning (Bryson et al., 2013). In terms of the wider public, Burton (2009) highlights two factors which can influence engagement, that of ***selection*** and ***choice***. ***Who is selected*** to engage with public bodies may be determined by specific inclusion and exclusion criteria which may be numerical, spatial and/or demographic in nature. ***Who then chooses*** to engage within these selected criteria may be influenced by personal factors such as interest in or relevance of the issue to people's lives and perceived capacity to contribute.

A range of mechanisms for conducting public decision-making prevail. Public consultations constitute one of the most common mechanisms for involvement. For example, community bodies or councils may consult with the public on local initiatives, strategies, or policies through various means, including public hearings, community meetings, focus groups or attitude surveys (International Association for Public Participation, 2014). At governmental level, consultations may take place in the form of deliberative polling, citizen juries, or citizen assemblies (Papadopoulos & Warin, 2007) as, for example, in the case of Ireland's Citizens' Assembly, consisting of randomly selected, representative members of the public who discuss and provide recommendations to Government on a range of public policy issues (The Citizens' Assembly, 2016).

Other mechanisms which facilitate public decision-making include the involvement of public representatives on community, advisory and/or planning committees/boards. Arnstein's foundational 'Ladder of Citizen Participation' (Arnstein, 1989) postulates that the highest levels of public power are achieved through measures which allow delegated authority for individual decisions or full governance of an organisation or policy. Mechanisms such as this include community-controlled councils/organisations and the use of referenda to guide decision-making. While referenda can incorporate a much greater level of public involvement, such engagement is typically not available to children and young people under the age of 16-18 years.

So, for what purposes do public bodies elect and the wider public ***choose*** to engage in public decision-making? Several reasons have been put forward in the literature:

- Public decision-making ***can facilitate information exchange between various stakeholders,*** increasing efficiency and maximising the planning and management of resources (Burton, 2009; Marzuki & Rahman, 2015).
- Public decision-making ***can assist in the identification of public needs and areas of interest*** and can lead to improved service delivery (Head, 2011; Hinton, Elsley, Tisdall, & Gallagher, 2008; Manaf, Mohamed, & Lawton, 2016; Partridge, 2005a).
- Public bodies may also support public decision-making processes for **legitimisation purposes.** By involving the wider public in the development of policies, greater transparency and perceptions of equality can be achieved, thus promoting political legitimacy (Burton, 2009; Lukensmeyer et al., 2011; Manaf et al., 2016).
- Involvement in public decision-making also provides the public with an opportunity to ***express their voice and engage in civic actions.*** This can contribute to feeling valued in society, thus fostering social

cohesion and a sense of identity and belonging (Burton, 2009; Calvert et al., 2015).

- It may also ***promote further interest in politics and active citizenship*** practices among members of the public (Brodie, Cowling, Nissen, Paine, & Warburton, 2009; Ferreira, Azevedo, & Menezes, 2012; Head, 2011; Martin & Forde, 2016).
- Public decision-making also has ***developmental benefits such as communication and leadership skills,*** along with the enhancement of attributes such as confidence and self-esteem (Brodie et al., 2009; Burton, 2009; Forde et al., 2017; Partridge, 2005). The degree to which such benefits are experienced, however, may depend on the public-decision-making mechanism employed.

All these reasons apply to children just as much as to adults, though key features such as improving services for children, promoting citizenship at an early stage and supporting their social and personal development are advanced as reasons for specifically involving children (Partridge, 2005).

Models of children's participation

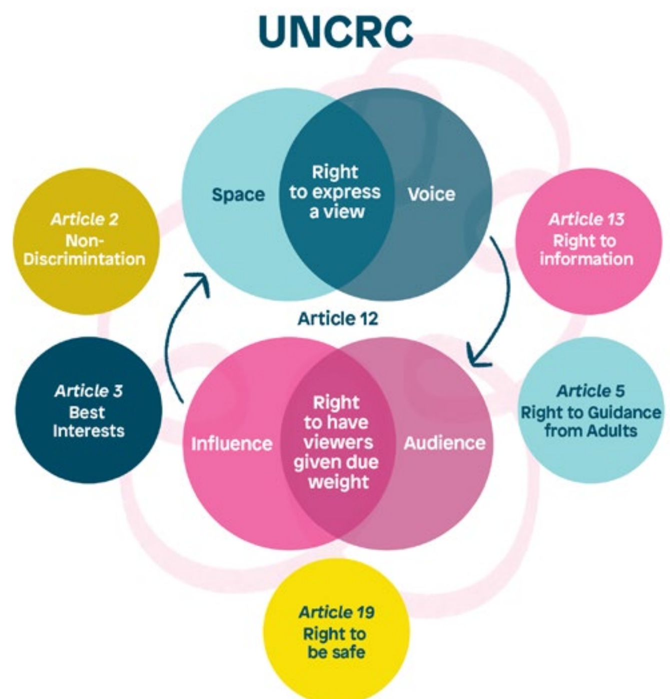
Several theoretical models have been developed to conceptualise and support the participation of children and young people in public decision-making processes. Hart's eight rung hierarchal ladder of participation (1992), building on Arnstein (1989), proposes that only mechanisms which facilitate shared or child-initiated decision-making can be considered truly participatory in nature. Shier's alternative model (2001) also focuses on the increasing levels of complexity and commitment entailed, distinguishing between the following five levels:

1. Children are listened to.
2. Children are supported in expressing their views.
3. Children's views are taken into account.
4. Children are involved in decision-making processes.
5. Children share power and responsibility for decision-making (Shier, 2001).

Models developed by Treseder (1997) and Kirby, Lanyon, Cronin and Sinclair (2003) further acknowledge that contextual factors can impact on the most appropriate form of participation for children and young people.

One of the most comprehensive models developed is that by Lundy (2007) which highlights the various conditions that aid effective participation of children and young people in decision-making processes. In particular, the model draws attention to four integrated elements related to Article 12 of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) - those of ***space, voice, audience***, and ***influence*** (see Figure 2) - and proposes these elements as chronological stages in the development of an effective model of child participation.

Figure 2: The Lundy Model of Child Participation (Lundy, 2007)



Lundy's first element, ***space,*** refers to the provision of opportunities for children to express their views. These opportunities should be safe, inclusive, and voluntary. In addition to the decision to take part, children should also be allowed to choose what matters they wish to discuss and what methods of participation they would like to use.

Following on from this, the second element, ***voice,*** highlights that children and young people should be able to express their views. Once children can form a view, they are entitled to communicate it. In line with Article 5 of the UNCRC, Lundy (2007) emphasises that parental assistance can be called upon to help formulate views if required.

Further to this, the third element, ***audience,*** focuses on the importance of children's views being listened to by decision-makers. Finally, the fourth element, ***influence,*** states that children's views should be appropriately acted upon. The level of competence children possess for decision-making should be viewed according to their evolving capacities and within a child-empowering perspective (Lundy, 2007).

All four elements are grounded within other key rights of the UNCRC, including non-discrimination (Article 2), the best interests of the child (Article 3), freedom of expression (Article 13) and freedom from all forms of violence (Article 19).

The principles of Lundy's (2007) model underpin Ireland's *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making 2015-2020*, one of the first strategies globally to focus on children's participation in public decision-making. In addition to being informed by the model, the strategy includes a specific checklist developed by Lundy to ensure effective participation in decision-making and outlines actions and infrastructural supports required to facilitate the involvement of children and young people in public decision-making in Ireland (DCYA, 2015d).

Participation mechanisms

While a wide range of methods to engage children and young people in public decision-making processes exist (Fleming, 2012; Sinclair, 2004; Timmerman, 2009; Vromen, 2008), the two most common mechanisms that prevail involve ***youth consultations*** and ***youth councils*** (Crowley, 2015; Faulkner, 2009; Horgan, 2017; Martin & Forde, 2016; McGinley & Grieve, 2010).

Youth consultations typically involve adult decision-makers obtaining the views of children and young people on issues which may be used to inform the development of policies and services. Such consultative processes are generally adult initiated and managed, and while children and young people may have input into informing decisions, they have no control over outcomes (Collins et al., 2016; Gerison Lansdown, 2001).

Over the last 15 years, the Irish Government has initiated consultations with children and young people on a range of topics including mental health, crime, misuse of alcohol and age of consent for sexual activity, along with the development of strategies such as the *Youth Justice Strategy in 2007, The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People, 2014-2020* in 2011, and the *LGBTI+ National Youth Strategy 2018-2020* (2018).

Identified strengths of these consultation processes included their speed, the diverse range of participants consulted, the use of child-friendly methods, the quality of information gathered and the connection with policymakers (Horgan, 2017). Such consultations have informed the development of the *Action Plan on School Age Childcare* (DCYA & Department of Education and Skills, 2017) and the *Healthy Weight for Ireland: Obesity Policy and Action Plan 2016–2025* (Department of Health, 2016). However, while recommendations made by children are reflected in the resulting action plans, research has found that there was a lack of clarity regarding how they were prioritised. Also, issues identified as important by children, such as homework and mental health, did not feature prominently in the respective action plans. The lack of feedback provided to the children and young people was also identified as a limitation of the consultation approach (Horgan, 2017).

Youth councils are also adult-initiated mechanisms for engaging children and young people in public decision-making. Youth councils are more formal bodies, however, and involve a greater level of access and collaboration between young people and policymakers/decision-makers as well as opportunities to influence decision-making outcomes (Collins et al., 2016; Gerison Lansdown, 2001; Shanetta Martin et al., 2007). Those operating at regional level tend to focus on localised issues, policies, and services. They consist of young people recruited from schools and

other youth networks/organisations and representatives from local public bodies and authorities. National youth councils (frequently referred to as youth parliaments) are made up of elected representatives from the local youth councils along with national public bodies and government officials. Their focus is on national issues and policies.

In Ireland, both local youth councils (known as Comhairle na nÓg) and a national youth parliament (known as Dáil na nÓg) operate. Established in 2002, Comhairle na nÓg exists in 31 local authorities across Ireland (Comhairle na nÓg, 2017). Over 1,300 young people, aged 12-17 years, participate over a cycle of two years (Comhairle na nÓg, 2014). Over 1,300 young people, aged 12-17 years, participate over a cycle of two years (Comhairle na nÓg, 2014). A number of activities, including presentations to local authorities, conferences, political speed dating, along with submissions to local strategic or environmental plans, are engaged in to address and influence local services and issues such as social inclusion, mental health and substance use (Martin, Forde, Galvin, & O'Connell, 2015). On a biennial basis, a selected youth representative from each Comhairle na nÓg attends a Dáil na nÓg meeting. Each representative then works on recommendations that arise from Dáil na nÓg by engaging in a Comhairle na nÓg Executive Council which meets monthly. With the support of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, and youth organisations Foróige and Youth Work Ireland, access is facilitated to Government ministers and committees, policymakers, and other decision-makers (Comhairle na nÓg, 2017).

Evaluation studies have identified benefits at the individual, local and societal level of participation in Comhairle na nÓg (Horgan et al., 2015; Martin et al., 2015). On an individual level, developmental benefits such as increased confidence and self-esteem, as well as the development of social skills and leadership skills, were reported (Martin et al., 2015). This is in line with international research (Austin, 2010; Lansdown, 2001; McGinley & Grieve, 2010; Partridge, 2005a), Calvert (2015) and Checkoway (2011)), which highlights that youth councils can positively impact young people's civic and political awareness and activity.

Some reservations have also been expressed about this model. Faulkner (2009) notes that youth councils often require young people to act in an adult like manner, something which may serve to distance them from the very people they are tasked to represent (Lansdown, 2001). Many young people are selected to participate because they are articulate, high achievers (Collins et al., 2016; McGinley & Grieve, 2010; Roe & McEvoy, 2011), characteristics that can lead to the "overscheduling" of these young people (Collins et al., 2016, p.145). Multiple commitments and time pressures can burden such young people (Bessell, 2009; Tisdall, 2015) and may contribute to a high turnover of young people. Both the temporal and financial pressures of involvement were reported by the participants of Comhairle na NÓg and a high turnover was particularly noted among seldom heard young people (Martin et al., 2015). While successful efforts to recruit young people from seldom heard groups were evident, maintaining such individuals was reported to be dependent on continuous support from other agencies. Kelleher, Seymour & Halpenny (2014) also highlight how practical issues relating to transport and personal assistance can create additional access barriers for young parents, carers and individuals with a disability.

At the community level, youth councils have been reported to impact positively on local services, public transport, well-being, and mental health (Martin, 2015; Collins et al., 2016). Less research is available on the youth councils influencing decision-making at the institutional or societal level either nationally (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015b) or internationally (Austin, 2010; Crowley, 2015). Indeed, a key theme in the extant literature concerns the lack of supporting evidence on the impact of youth councils on public decision-making processes (Martin et al., 2015; Perry-Hazan, 2016; Shier, Méndez, Centeno, Arróliga, & González, 2014; Taft & Gordon, 2013).

Several reasons have been identified for this lack of influence. Firstly, numerous research studies show that participation may be tokenistic as children and young people do not always feel listened to or that they are taken seriously by officials associated with decision-making (Adu-Gyamfi, 2013; Calvert et al., 2015; Hickey

& Pauli-Myler, 2017; Martin et al., 2015; Perry-Hazan, 2016). There may be too much adult control of youth councils (Fleming, 2012) and policymakers may not view children as capable decision-makers (Lansdown, 2010). Bessell (2009) suggests that a sense of 'adultism' can prevail in an attempt to protect children, maintain authority or resist institutional change. Even where adults do wish to involve and act on children's views, there is often an absence of suitable training (Partridge, 2005; Martin et al., 2015) and/or institutional and hierarchal structures which prevent it (Bessell, 2009).

The second main drawback relates to the lack of feedback provided to those involved in youth councils regarding their input to decision-making (Fleming, 2009; Martin et al., 2015; Tisdall, 2015). While the removal of some of these barriers undoubtedly requires changes in societal attitudes and the introduction of improved legislative requirements regarding the role of children and young people in public decision-making (Bessell, 2009; Lansdown, 2010; Martin et al., 2015), this may be an area where digital technologies could address some of the current challenges relating to the diversity of children and young people, time/financial pressures of participation and the provision of feedback.

3.2 Children's use of social and digital media

Social and digital media have been notably absent from much of the scholarly and policy literature on children's participation or appear in a peripheral way as a communications aid or awareness raising tool. To assess potential points of contribution, the key areas of access and use of social and digital media are considered with particular emphasis on the intersection with topics of civic engagement, Digital Citizenship, and participation in public decision-making.

Digital tools and technologies encompass a host of socio-technological products and services that have transformed how we produce, store and disseminate information. Building on internet connectivity, the vast interconnected infrastructure that supports the world wide web (Green, 2010), digital technologies enable users to access information and use communication devices to communicate and share information and content with others.

Social media refer to the application of digital technologies to enable users to create and share content. Boyd and Ellison (2007) define social media or social networking services as web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system that they then share with a list of users, and which allows them in turn to view and traverse their list of connections. Uniquely, social media allow users to make their social networks visible, enabling connections between individuals that would not otherwise have been made (Obar & Wildman, 2015).

Social and digital media technologies are acknowledged to have had a profound impact on childhood. While the internet was not developed with children in mind (Livingstone, 2013), it is a place where young people are very much active (UNICEF, 2017) and in which they have been to the fore as early adopters of new technologies and services (Rice and Haythornthwaite, 2010). Worldwide, 71 per cent of young people, aged 15 to 24 years, are online compared with 48 per cent of the total population (UNICEF, 2017); children under 18 account for an estimated one in three of all internet users around the world (Livingstone, Carr & Byrne, 2016). Against this background, policy makers have sought to balance children's digital and online safety while seeking to leverage the potential that digital technologies offer for education and overcoming marginalisation and disadvantage. Only more recently has consideration been given to how the digital sphere can impact on young people's citizenship, particularly in terms of giving greater effect to their participation in public life and in decision-making (Council of Europe, 2018; UNESCO, 2015).

Use of social media is the fastest growing online activity among young people and dominates young people's digital activities. By integrating chat, messaging, contacts, photo albums and blogging functions, social media platforms integrate online opportunities and risks more seamlessly than previously (Lenhart et al., 2011; Staksrud et al., 2012) and have attracted significant public and policy attention. On the one hand, policy makers seek to capitalise on the benefits of social networking

by developing educational, participatory, creative, and other resources linked to online platforms (Beavis, 2013; Livingstone, 2012). On the other hand, public policy concerns centre on the uneasy relation between the design of social media platforms and emerging conventions of use in terms of social capital, 'friendship' and the management of privacy (Antheunis, Schouten, & Krahmer, 2014; Livingstone, Mascheroni, & Staksrud, 2017).

The social media environment is a fast changing one with significant shifts in user trends among younger users. The first pan-European survey of children's internet use (EU Kids Online) in 2011 found that 59% of children aged 9-16 reported having their own social media profile with use steadily rising by age (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Ólafsson, 2011). In the most recent EU Kids Online survey, the number of children aged 9–16 who report visiting social networking sites daily or more often ranges from between 38% (Spain) and 73% (Serbia). Altogether, more than half the children and young people surveyed use social network sites at least every week (Smahel et al., 2020).

In Ireland, the 2014 *Net Children Go Mobile* survey found that 54% of children, 9-16 years of age, had at least one profile on a social networking site (O'Neill & Dinh, 2015). Facebook was found at that time to be the most popular platform though this trend has diversified according to more recent research (Farrugia et al., 2017). Fewer 'underage' children were found to be active on social media compared to other European countries (e.g., 39% of 11-12 year-olds compared to 81% in Denmark). However, high numbers of teenage users report regularly using social media (83% of 13-14 year-olds and 91% of 15-16 year-olds). According to *Net Children Go Mobile*, over half of teens in Ireland report having at least one profile or account on a media sharing platform: 42% of children report having an account on Instagram; 35% have an account on YouTube and a further 25% report using other media sharing services. Overall, 70% of children use social media to communicate with their friends daily or almost daily. Sharing photos, videos and other content is one of the most popular online activities; social media is the most common way to connect with friends with one in three children contacting friends several times a day through social media. (O'Neill & Dinh, 2015).

While the overall availability of research regarding younger children's digital technology use is uneven, a survey in 2018 of some 244 primary schools involving 35,000 children found that more than 60% of primary school children regularly use tablets, computers, and games consoles to access the internet (Everri & Park, 2018). YouTube, Snapchat and Minecraft were found to be the most popular applications. Research from CyberSafeIreland in 2019 also found that among 8-13 year olds most children in the age group (92%) own a smart device and 60% actively use social media and messaging apps not designed for their age (CyberSafeIreland, 2019).

KiDiCoTi, a European Commission-supported research study on children's digital lives during the COVID-19 lock-down, has highlighted how the pandemic has accelerated digital use and amplified the risk of a digital divide. Findings show that half of Irish households (53%) reported acquiring at least one additional device since the first lockdown in March 2020 with the overall average of digital devices in the home rising from 11 to 13 (KiDiCoTi, 2020). 71% of children (aged 10 to 18) who use smartphones (56% of the entire sample) said they used smartphones during the lockdown more often than before. 66% of children who use gaming consoles (49% of the entire sample) said they used gaming consoles more often than before; 72% of children who use social media (53% of the entire sample) said they used social media more often than before the lockdown; and 65% of children who use direct/instant messaging like WhatsApp or Telegram (48% of the entire sample), said they used direct/instant messaging more often than before the lockdown.

Digital opportunities and active participation

Research on children's experiences of social and digital media has tended to focus on negative effects such as exposure to harmful content, overuse, and problematic online behaviours. Positive effects and prosocial online behaviour, by comparison, have received less attention and yet are central to the integrative approach that

balances risks and opportunities (de Leeuw & Buijzen, 2016).

Positive online opportunities for children, of which digital participation is one, may be classified into four main categories (Livingstone & Haddon, 2009):

- education, learning and digital literacy,
- participation and civic engagement,
- creativity and self-expression, and
- identity and social connection.

Positive outcomes include enhanced self-esteem, relationship formation, friendship quality, and identity self-exploration (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). Importantly, each set of opportunities develops and draws on the user's digital skills or competence, is dependent on the availability of suitable resources to support the taking up of opportunities, and progressively develops children's social capital as they navigate the online environment and forge relationships among their peers and the wider community.

Several factors come into play in terms of who takes up which digital opportunities and who benefits most. The digital divide has long been a topic of research and a concern for policy makers to ensure that opportunities and benefits do not mirror socio-economic inequalities (van Dijk, 2006; Warschauer & Matuchniak, 2010). Research points to a complex relationship between offline and digital exclusion, with access, skills, and attitudinal or motivational aspects playing an important role (Helsper, 2012). Livingstone and Helsper (2010) found that while older and middle class teenagers continue to benefit more from the internet, online skills act as a mediating factor and make a positive contribution to online opportunities. Parental and other forms of mediation are likewise crucial in determining outcomes for children, with restrictive forms of mediation – designed to protect the child and lessen risk – also associated with fewer opportunities and lower levels of digital skill (Livingstone, Ólafsson, et al., 2017; Livingstone & Helsper, 2008).

In terms of children's digital use, Livingstone and Helsper (2007) and Livingstone et al. (2019) have observed a ladder of opportunities, a continuum of online activities which they argue is akin to "a staged process with systematic difference between those who take up more and those who take up fewer opportunities" (2007, p. 683). This ladder of opportunities comprises five main steps (see Figure 3 below) with increasing levels of interactivity, creativity, and engagement (Livingstone, Haddon, Gorzig, & Ólafsson, 2011).

According to the EU Kids Online survey, while most children manage the first three stages (75% of 9-16 year-olds in 25 European countries use the internet interactively), less than a quarter go on to activities that are more advanced, creative or involve civic engagement (Livingstone et al., 2011, p.14).

The gradation of activity implied by the ladder of opportunities is confirmed by other research such as Ofcom's ongoing *Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes* survey, which found that while 90% of 9-15 year olds regularly use YouTube, and 74% have a social media profile, only 37% say they actively look for news and just 26% engage in online civic participation (signing petitions, sharing news stories on social media, or writing comments or talking online about the news) (Ofcom, 2017).

Figure 3: Ladder of Opportunities, 25 European Countries (9-16 years old)

Source: adapted from EU Kids Online (2011)

Civic engagement and Digital Citizenship

The literature on youth civic engagement constitutes another quite distinct and separate body of work that is relevant to the research question. Intersecting only in part with studies on children's online activities, the youth civic engagement literature has been framed around the question of the extent to which contemporary youth is either *engaged* or *disengaged* (McCormack & Doran, 2014). The debate in large part stems from Putnam's famous account in *Bowling Alone* (2000) documenting the decline of social capital and civic engagement, such as participation in local communities as well as political participation (Putnam, 2000). This has given rise to numerous studies putting forward claims and counterclaims regarding the extent to which young people are more or less likely to practice active citizenship through forms of civic engagement (Flanagan & Levine, 2010). Civic engagement encompasses a broad and diverse set of participatory activities. Jochum et al. (2005) put forward a spectrum of active citizenship comprising both public and social engagement, based on individual and/or collective actions. They also distinguish between *civic* participation relating to participation in state affairs, including political processes, and *civil* participation, referring more generally to community participation (in Brodie et al., 2009; see also, Jochum, Pratten, & Wilding, 2005).

Research findings across Europe on levels of participation by young people are mixed. A Eurobarometer study in 2013 found that just 35% of young people (aged 15 to 30) took part in local sports clubs (the most popular civic activity) and just one in five (22%) participated in a youth or leisure club or any local youth organisation. The survey also found wide dissatisfaction with political institutions with over a third saying they are unlikely to vote in future elections, and 64% claiming their vote would not change anything (Eurobarometer, 2013). However, a wide-ranging study of young people's interest in politics, undertaken for the European Commission in 2015, found no evidence of democratic participation amongst young people lacking across Europe. Neither was disenchantment with political issues on the part of young people especially evident. Instead, the authors pointed towards growing dissatisfaction with politicians and with the way politics is conducted (Cammaerts et al., 2013). The 'cultural displacement' perspective similarly argues that *"young people are not necessarily any less interested in politics than previous generations, but rather that traditional political activity no longer appears appropriate to address the concerns associated with contemporary youth culture"* (Loader, 2007, pp. 1-2) and that alternative forms of participation may have taken over or displaced traditional models.

Given the increasing importance of digital skills as a basis for the full realisation of citizenship (European Commission, 2011), frameworks for the development of a comprehensive approach to digital literacy have received much attention (Carretero et al., 2017; Hoechsmann & DeWaard, 2015). The European Digital Competence Framework for Citizens (or DigComp) outlines a set of proficiency levels to support educational development of digital literacy skills, each level representing a step up in citizens' acquisition of technical competence, the most advanced of which relate to using digital tools to create solutions to solve complex problems and to propose new ideas (Carretero et al., 2017).The many examples of creative activity practiced by young people, produced and disseminated via digital platforms, is further illustration of the potential offered by digital technologies to advance children's expressive capabilities and provide a platform for young voices to be heard. Whether in terms of using digital tools to enhance traditional artistic forms of storytelling and expression (Ohler, 2007) or by harnessing technology skills to explore new creative platforms (Sefton-Green, 1999), the incorporation of creative expression within a multidimensional notion of digital literacy (Erstad, 2008; Erstad et al., 2009) embeds children's right be to be heard within an educational and developmental context. The limitations of an overly-instrumentalist approach towards skills development have been noted, for example in the frequent policy attention given to 'coding' skills (e.g. Moreno-León & Robles, 2015). However, even within the ICT-based skills framework that dominates much educational thinking, the potential for creative expression using digital tools and

technologies is recognised as an important foundation to fostering creative and innovative capacities of young people (Cachia et al., 2010). Similarly, the advance of a 'maker culture' in education, supporting 'learning by making' where participants use a variety of digital tools to support innovation production and do-it-yourself work, is one that offers considerable potential to enhance young people's problem-solving skills and engagement with real-world issues (Quinlan, 2015; Schön, Ebner and Kumar, 2014).

The notion of ***Digital Citizenship*** is central to the mobilisation of digital literacy and skills towards more effective youth civic engagement and participation in democratic culture (Council of Europe, 2016; UNESCO, 2015). Social media are recognised to have radically changed the way information is disseminated, necessitating a reconceptualization of the ways in which people participate in society (Moffa et al., 2016), re-shaping notions of ethical behaviour (Ess & Thorseth, 2011) and the nature of civic culture (Couldry et al., 2014; Dahlgren, 2003). In response to the claims that young people are politically apathetic or failing to either engage or participate in political affairs, an increasing number of academics point to the alternative modes of citizenship and participation practiced by young people, such as joining social movements, rallies, protests and other causes, the organisation of which is frequently based around and coordinated on social media platforms (Loader, Vromen, & Xenos, 2014).

Third and Collin argue that Digital Citizenship as a concept is *"brimming with promise for rethinking citizenship through the digital"* (Third & Collin, 2016, p.42, emphasis in original). However, they argue that it has remained too rooted in the risk and safety paradigm that dominates discussion of youth engagement with digital technologies, thereby missing a crucial opportunity to focus on how digital media can promote better citizen engagement and governance.

Building on claims that young people's engagement activity has migrated online, there has been much research on the topic of whether social and digital media can foster greater civic engagement. The evidence for the relationship between social media use and civic engagement is mixed. Some studies have shown that social networking on platforms including Facebook is consistent with greater levels of offline civic engagement (Boulianne, 2015; Chen, 2017); can foster critical media literacy as an essential pre-condition for engagement (Kim & Yang, 2016); and can develop the skills necessary to participate in the future (Lenzi et al., 2015). However, other studies report that prior civic engagement activity is more likely to be a predictor of Facebook use, rather than the other way round, and that Facebook use is in fact more likely to be entertainment-oriented participation (Theocharis & Quintelier, 2016).

Furthermore, the extent to which social and digital media use, including activities that are participatory and engagement-oriented, can qualify as a new form of Digital Citizenship is much debated. While it is clearly the case that digital media play a significant role in new politics outside traditional models of participation (Dahlgren, 2013), the claim that this constitutes citizenship in the sense of participating and effecting change through a political process, needs to be critically scrutinised in terms of the actual practices involved (Couldry et al., 2014; Dahlgren, 2011). The integration of social and digital media use among young activists is now very much apparent with digital platforms acting as 'everyday' spaces for participatory activity (Vromen et al., 2016). Politically active social media users, as such, participate actively, both online and offline, and do not view social networking sites as a separate realm of political activity (Smith, 2013).

e-Participation

There has also been much policy interest in so-called e-government strategies to bridge the gap between citizens and governments and through the digital transformation of government to improve public services (OECD, 2003). e-Participation, or ICT-supported methodologies to involve citizens in government and governance, has the objective of enhancing participatory processes by enabling citizens to connect with one another and with their elected representatives (Macintosh, 2007). The European Commission's *eGovernment Action Plan 2016-2020* identifies digitalisation as a key priority

and aims to modernise public administration, achieve success in the digital economy and engage citizens and business with high quality services. Ireland's *eGovernment Strategy* similarly sets out a plan for Ireland to be a leader in the provision of digital government services and includes among its goals better citizen engagement, increased transparency, openness and ensuring integrity in public life (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2017).

E-participation has been characterised as a turn towards governance rather than government *per se*. However, digital technology in this context is a key enabler in widening access and bringing a variety of non-governmental actors such as social interest groups and local community groups into the policy making process (Komito, 2007). Digital technology has been used to aid community building, for example, through the roll-out of broadband and the development of digitally connected neighbourhoods (Hampton, 2007; Hampton & Wellman, 2003); the development of communities of interest (Capece & Costa, 2013) and enhancing public involvement in the policy process.

Enhancing citizen participation in policymaking is similarly an important goal for e-government and e-participation domains alike (Macintosh, 2004) and includes disseminating policy planning information through online platforms and inviting citizen input, variously referred to as e-consultation, online public engagement and web-based citizen input (Phang & Kankanhalli, 2008).

Considerable investment at European Union level has resulted in several innovations in technology tools and e-participation platforms (Smith, 2009; Tambouris, 2008) with varying degrees of success and sustainability (Panopoulou, Tambouris, & Tarabanis, 2010). However, there is a recognition of the need to move beyond a purely technological perspective and, if e-participation is to be truly participatory, to shift the focus from government alone towards citizens and other stakeholders (Medaglia, 2012). In the context of youth e-citizenship, Coleman similarly refers to the tension between managed and autonomous conceptions, the former characterised as government-initiated attempts to establish connections between young people and institutions that have power over them, and the latter focused more on forming networks of young people as independent political agents, with less interest in connecting with institutions (Coleman, 2008).

Governments and policy makers have long sought to harness digital technologies as tools for enhancing citizen engagement in public policymaking (OECD, 2001). However, as a survey of practices in online citizen engagement in OECD member states found, technology is an *enabler* for better citizen engagement, not a *solution* on its own. As such, social and digital media require integration with traditional offline methods for information, consultation, and public participation (OECD, 2003). Furthermore, barriers to greater online citizen engagement in policymaking are likely to be cultural, organisational and constitutional, not technological. Overcoming these challenges, it is argued, will require greater efforts to raise awareness and capacity both within governments and among citizens (2003, p. 8).

3.3 Barriers to Participation

Barriers to participation, both contextual and systemic, have also been an important theme in the literature. Such barriers may include attitudinal, systemic, and technological aspects, each of which need to be considered when designing approaches to apply social and digital media to the area of children's participation.

Attitudinal barriers to participation

Barriers to participation have been identified by Gal (2017) (after Bronfenbrenner, 1986) as falling under four distinct headings. Firstly, at the *individual* level, children's ability to participate is the subject of personal traits and characteristics as influenced by the child's immediate environment. Secondly, at the meso-level, *professional attitudes and resources* play a role in shaping children's ability to participate. Thirdly, an *enabling regulatory regime* at the macro level is required. Finally, the need for a supportive *socio-political landscape* is also noted (Tali Gal, 2017).

At each level, attitudinal considerations have a key role to play. Attitudes towards participation, whether among families, teachers etc. are crucial, just as at the macro level professional

stakeholders function as gatekeepers. Positive attitudes towards participation are therefore crucial in fostering a culture of respectful dialogue and meaningful participation. Bessell (2009) states that *"wherever analyses of children's participation occur, a similar theme emerges: adults' attitudes are the greatest barrier to effective participation in decision-making processes by children"* (2009, pp. 299-300). Previous research has shown that adult decision-makers can view children as subordinates who are less capable than adults. This can result in them seeking and exerting power and control over children's participation in decision-making processes (Bessell, 2009; Lansdown, 2010; Perry-Hazan, 2016). The presence of such adultism, therefore, may result in further resistance to progressing children's right to be heard using social and digital media among decision-makers, particularly if children and young people, who tend to be at the forefront of new digital developments, display higher levels of confidence and digital literacy than their adult counterparts (Xenos & Foot, 2008).

Children and young people's own attitudes toward the use of social and digital media for public decision-making purposes may also present further barriers. Research studies have revealed that young people may possess negative attitudes in relation to online governmental or political initiatives when they perceive them as irrelevant and/or inauthentic (Brandtzaeg et al., 2016; Collin, 2008). A sense of over-control, feelings of powerlessness and a lack of trust in authority organisations are also linked with negative attitudes among young people toward online government engagement. More positive attitudes are generally expressed by young people in relation to non-governmental online initiatives (due to the perception that they are more relevant, inclusive, and responsive) (Collin, 2008). However, Gerodimos (2012) reports that young people can have negative perceptions toward these organisations if they use complex or technical language and/or exert too many demands.

Systemic challenges

Even though children's right to be heard has received policy recognition in many countries, persistent systemic challenges or barriers have also been identified. Tisdall (2015) highlights the following areas of concern:

- ***Tokenism:*** children may be consulted but with little discernible impact on decisions or outcomes (see also Arnstein, 1969; Partridge, 2005a; Sinclair, 2004);
- ***Lack of Feedback:*** children are given insufficient information on what happens to their contributions (see also Gerison Lansdown, 2016; Lister, 2007);
- ***Who is included or excluded:*** the over-consultation of some children and not enough representation from seldom heard or hard to reach groups (see also Kelleher et al., 2014; Kirby et al., 2003);
- ***Consultation but not dialogue:*** children and young people are frequently consulted in one-off activities but are not involved over time in on-going, respectful dialogue (see also Collin, 2008);
- ***Adult processes and structures exclude children and young people:*** a lack of integration of children's participation into formal established policy making processes, in effect making children's participation a specialisation and risking that it will be side-lined (see also Cockburn, 2005; Kilkelly et al., 2007);
- ***Lack of sustainability:*** with inadequate long-term support, participation initiatives risk being one-off and short term in nature and will not become embedded in the policy process (see also Asthana, 2006; Jochum et al., 2005).

Technological barriers

The use of social and digital media for participatory purposes, including e-participation solutions, has also been hampered by lack of awareness, platforms rapidly going out of date in a fast-moving technology environment, or simply being inadequately designed or ill-suited to the deliberative process (Ahmed, 2006; Smith, 2009). A lack of perceived impact or influence arising from the participation is also frequently cited as a failure of e-participation

(Tomkova, 2011), and partly responsible for the low take-up and/or effectiveness of e-participation solutions (European Parliament, 2016).

More specifically, drawing on focus groups with young people on barriers to the use of social media for participation purposes, Brandtzæg et al. (2015) highlight the following issues:

- ***Language and content barriers:*** civic engagement mediated by digital technologies, without direct face-to-face interaction, can lead to difficulties in presentation of content. The tendency for text-heavy content was found to be particularly off-putting for young people. Where complex concepts or difficult language is used, it lacks relevance and is harder to make a connection. Young people, it was found, want to be emotionally aroused and make an emotional connection, and to be able to express themselves online using their own terms and expressions.
- ***Barriers to information:*** while easy access to information is a fundamental goal for e-participation in general (OECD, 2003), young people expressed feeling frustrated by the way information was presented to them in online form, frequently proving difficult to access, particularly behind paywalls to online news. They are used to quick access and presentation of information and do not wish to spend time trying to access complicated applications or searching for information (Brandtzaeg et al., 2015).
- ***Slow feedback as a barrier:*** compared to the fast pace of social media where immediacy and interaction are key features, consultation from official sources can appear slow and unless expectations are managed about the process and associated timelines, it can be difficult for young people to sustain interest.
- ***Privacy as a barrier:*** young people expressed that they do not like sharing information online where it can be seen by a wider audience and where a trace of it remains. For this reason, they said they would not engage by "liking" or commenting on organizations' Facebook pages where it could be visible to others in their network, preferring to use more private channels of communication such as Snapchat (Brandtzæg et al., 2015).

Contrary to claims that social and digital media may overcome structural inequalities and give voice to more marginalised groups (Brandtzæg, 2017), many participation initiatives using social and digital media have also fallen victim to digital divides in terms of socio-economic status and levels of education of those represented (Collin, 2008; Vromen, 2007). Rather than targeting new people and developing new political/civic engagement interests, the risk for online participation initiatives is that they reproduce a digital divide and support those who had already developed such interests or engaged in offline participation activity (Goldfinch et al., 2009; Medaglia, 2012).

From an institutional perspective, some organisations struggle to provide the resources or have the expertise to meet young people's real-time communication expectations, thereby negating the potential benefits of social media. There is evidence indeed of civil society organisations stepping back from using online tools for engagement due to difficulties experienced in being able to provide the appropriate level of monitoring of online contributions or having sufficient resources to analyse usage data or access more powerful analytics (Chapman et al., 2012).

3.4 Advancing Digital Participation

Given the range of attitudinal, systemic, and technological challenges that have been identified, what is the scope for social and digital media to enhance participatory opportunities and which principles should underpin its design?

In this context, Vromen (2008) distinguishes between three main uses of the internet as a space for political participation. These are:

a) use of the internet as an ***information source*** where websites provide information about existing campaigns and issues;

b) use as a ***communication medium*** which can include one-to-one dialogue, one-to-many dialogue, as well as largescale group conversations;
c) use as a ***virtual public sphere*** and providing a platform for debate (Vromen, 2008, p. 81).

In similar terms, the OECD has advised member states that democratic participation must involve "*the means to be informed, the mechanisms to take part in the decision-making and the ability to contribute and influence the policy agenda*" (OECD, 2001, p. 23). Accordingly, a framework for design of effective online participation must address the *informational*, *consultative* and the *participatory* needs of citizens (OECD, 2003; see also, Komito, 2007; Macintosh, 2004). The potential for social and digital media to enhance each of these functions was also queried in the literature.

Informational level

At its most basic level, governments and public agencies use digital technologies to support the information flow to citizens through webpages, online bulletins, email, and social media feeds (Montgomery et al., 2004; Vromen, 2008). This can be seen as one-way information provision operating in a similar fashion to a broadcasting or media platform in which the government as publisher chooses which information to make available.

Macintosh and Whyte (2006) note that engaging with a wider audience and eliciting better informed opinion are frequently stated aims of participatory initiatives using digital technologies. As such, policy makers need to plan carefully how to make high quality information available in accessible forms, for all ability levels. Evaluation should subsequently analyse the use of this information to assess how relevant it has been.

Participants in Coleman and Rowe's (2005) study for the Carnegie UK Trust – where young people reviewed a range of government websites aimed at youth – were particularly critical of the dull and serious character of most government or political websites as being too boring and text-heavy. However, striking the right balance in setting the tone for a youth-friendly style of communication is always challenging (Coleman & Rowe, 2005, p. 12). Edelman et al. (2009) found that involving users at an early stage was central to the development of successful e-participation initiatives so that users' specific characteristics (age, skills), needs and interests can be included appropriately. This is equally the case in developing a marketing strategy which can reach them (Edelmann et al., 2009).

Consultative Level

Consultation is a further step in interactivity and involves a two-way consultation relationship whereby citizens are given the opportunity to give feedback on issues and policies. The process of consultation is managed by the appropriate public authority which provides the information and defines the issues for consultation to which citizens respond with comments and input (Ergazakis et al., 2011). Here, digital technologies provide tools such as e-voting, e-petitions and online consultation, facilitating opportunities for citizens to provide feedback to pre-defined questions and topics.

Grönlund & Åström (2009) found that integrating consultation at the analysis/decision-making stage of the policy cycle, mixing online and offline methods and active strategic recruiting, were key factors in the success of consultation exercises (in terms of numbers participating). The underlying democratic intent of the consultation was also a key factor.

Participatory level

Finally, active participation may be defined as a relationship based on partnership where citizens are actively engaged in the policy-making process and have a role in defining the issues, structuring the consultation process, and having an impact on the policy outcomes (OECD, 2003). Here, social and digital media provide a range of supporting technologies including communication tools for individual and group messaging, discussion forums and chat fora. However, rather than just online discussion, participation in this context is a deliberative process which offers citizens the opportunity to be involved at an important level, actively involved in the decision-making process and its outcome. The hallmark of an e-democracy is that it "*creates a new framework for decision-*

making and legislation formation", based on wide-ranging public participation (Ergazakis et al., 2011, p. 5).

The youth participants in Coleman and Rowe's study (2005) were critical of websites that simply provide information and do not provide opportunities for interaction and engagement. Coleman (2008) advances the argument that for governments wishing to promote democratic youth e-citizenship, such initiatives themselves must be democratic in character. As such, horizontal channels of communication between young people need to be provided within which young people need to be allowed to set the terms of their own political debate, without any external censorship. To avoid being more than a top-down exercise in bureaucratic management, he argues, the terms of engagement should "be determined in partnership between official policy makers and young people themselves, using wikis and other forms of collaborative decision-making software" (Coleman, 2008, p. 204). Openness and transparency in how conversations are initiated and structured, or how topics are prioritised, is also essential. A lack of transparency not only undermines trust and engagement, it also provides new opportunities for private interests to influence public conversations (Luna-Reyes, 2017).

Applying social and digital media in participatory practice

Macintosh and Whyte (2006) summarise the key benefits that derive from the application of digital technologies to participation activity as follows:

- ***Enhanced reach:*** social and digital media offer the potential to reach and connect with wider audiences (Macintosh & Whyte, 2006), though those seldom-heard, hard to reach populations, including those with lower technical skills, require particular attention.
- ***Expanding and diversifying opportunities for engagement:*** bypassing traditional intermediaries and expanded opportunities through online technologies can similarly assist in extending the reach of consultation (Peixoto et al., 2016).
- ***Obtaining better informed opinion:*** making information available in accessible formats to enable meaningful participation creates opportunities for high quality responses and constructive input into the policy process.
- ***Enabling more in-depth consultation*** than would be possible without technology supports. Deliberative processes and decision-making can be enhanced using technology tools that have the capacity for large volumes of data and managing large cohorts (Ergazakis et al., 2011; Karamanou et al., 2017).
- ***Better insights:*** digital technology provides enhanced analytic capacity through digitally enabled data collection and analysis. Machine learning tools and technologies can be used to monitor social media data for policy-relevant insights (Burkhardt et al., 2015; Vogiatzi et al., 2017).
- ***Enhanced feedback*** to participants with greater capacity for openness and transparency. The ability to support real-time communication and timely feedback addresses an ongoing concern raised by young people and is key to better engagement for all participants (Porwol et al., 2014; Taylor-Smith et al., 2012).
- ***More effective monitoring and evaluation:*** the ability to monitor and evaluate more effectively through digital technologies. Using digital tools as part of the monitoring and evaluation process can also introduce savings with lower overall costs for comprehensive monitoring (Rexhepi & Filiposka, 2016).

However, the incorporation of digital media, and specifically existing social media platforms, in participatory processes has been more controversial. Positively, researchers have looked to social media to "solve some of the problems of engaging their users that e-Participation services often struggle with" (Sæbø, Rose, & Nyvang, 2009. p. 46). Social media, it is argued, already sustains a great deal of interaction, content-generation and

supports the development of loosely formed communities. Social media is typically used to promote consultation and participation, to assist in recruitment and reach more people in the target group to encourage them to get involved, as well as keeping participants interested, through regular updates and the connectivity with the initiative (Taylor-Smith & Lindner, 2009).

However, as observed by Taylor-Smith & Lindner (2009), there are also several challenges, including ethical considerations, associated with using social media platforms as part of a participation project. Their commercial basis notwithstanding, the age limits for social media services make their use unsuitable for children under 13. The coming into effect of the GDPR and the setting of age 16 as the digital age of consent in many countries (including Ireland) makes social media even less suited to research contexts with children. Despite their popularity with adolescents for communication and social capital, their use with children and young people in institutional contexts requires careful consideration (Antheunis et al., 2014). In terms of privacy concerns, social media platforms tend to blur the distinction between public and private, friends and contacts, leading to privacy concerns for participants (Marwick & Boyd, 2014), with many teenagers expressing discomfort with unintended audiences seeing their personal information (Agosto & Abbas, 2017). Concerns for safety are also paramount. Coleman & Rowe (2005) recommend all interactive spaces must include resources for online moderation and be able to respond effectively to users (Coleman & Rowe, 2005, p. 4). Social media platforms are not normally moderated and rely upon users complying with community rules or terms of service to moderate their own behaviour, thereby limiting their primary benefit to promotional and informational values.

A related area and possible alternative to the deployment of commercial social media platforms is the application of games, including online games, to support young people's civic engagement and participation (Themistokleous & Avraamidou, 2016). Online games are highly engaging platforms, highly collaborative spaces and offer pedagogical opportunities for active learning. The online virtual environments that gaming offers also allow young people to engage in real-life situations and simulations, adopting problem-solving and critical thinking skills (Rexhepi & Filiposka, 2016). While most emphasis has been placed on its pedagogical advantages, the potential for civic engagement is an area of emergent interest. The development of decision-making games allows users the chance to interact with each other in a game-based environment, using well-known applications such as SimCity or Minecraft, to develop scenarios based around real-world issues (Ergazakis et al., 2011; Ringland et al., 2017).

A further opportunity is provided by the deployment of dedicated online platforms for the purposes of consultation and e-participation. Several European countries have introduced national e-platforms to facilitate youth participation, either by public authorities or as joint projects between them and civil society organisations. In the main, these comprise websites that offer opportunities to discuss ideas, participate in online consultations, and sometimes interact directly with policymakers (Porwol et al., 2016).

Surveys of professional youth workers supporting civic participation, including digital participation, contribute to a number of emergent principles to underpin good practice, which can lend further guidance in the application of social and digital media to public decision-making (Burkhardt et al., 2015; IJAB, 2014; The Baltic Institute of Finland, 2012). A summary produced by the International Youth Service of the Federal Republic of Germany (IJAB, 2014) highlights the following as key factors:

- ***Alignment with young people's realities:*** consideration of content, time management, technical and design implementation that will interest, stimulate and motivate young people to participate;
- ***Resources:*** consideration of sufficient resources including availability of expertise, time, funding and technology, and appropriately trained staff to achieve objectives. Compliance with all legal requirements needs to be verified;

- ***Effectiveness and direct influence:*** as highlighted in the literature, the structural link to decision-making is essential and the activity must produce an outcome. Participation processes should be linked to policy frameworks;
- ***Transparency:*** as also widely cited in the literature, transparency of process, of the tools and technologies used, and the overall framing of the initiative is key to securing trust and engagement. There should be a consensus on how decisions are made and about the opportunities and limitations of the participation process to avoid raising false expectations;
- ***End-to-end involvement of young people:*** Young people should be involved in all stages of designing the process and should participate directly in all decisions. Feedback loops, for which social and digital media are well-suited, are similarly important in building engagement (IJAB, 2014, p. 5).

Useful as these principles are as lessons learned, they primarily relate to older teenagers (aged 16-18) and young adults. There remains a dearth of literature dealing with younger teenagers and children under 12, echoing the overall gap in research regarding social and digital media experiences of younger children (Chaudron, 2015; Ólafsson et al., 2014). This is an area that requires much further research and analysis. In this context, play technologies and gaming may provide an opportunity for assessment of the suitability of social and digital media for younger children's participation, particularly in those studies that have focused on its pedagogical and educational benefits (Moe, 2008; Suggs et al., 2017; Themistokleous & Avraamidou, 2016).

3.5 Phase 1 Summary

The literature on children and young people's use of social and digital media highlights the significant role it plays in their everyday lives, with social media use now central to young people's patterns of socialising and entertainment. Research shows that children struggle to gain all the benefits of online opportunities and that a range of digital divides persist. High levels of social media use among young people point towards a complex picture in relation to its potential for civic engagement and active participation. Participatory activities in and through social and digital media exist at the more advanced, sophisticated end of the spectrum of digital opportunities and require reinforcement of digital literacy skills to be effective. Similarly, the literature on Digital Citizenship and civic engagement, while showing promise in terms of new opportunities for participation in public decision-making, is still at an emergent stage with insufficient models of successful practice. e-Participation initiatives that to date have received considerable public investment and which support technology solutions towards enhancing participation also require appropriate education and support in participatory skills.

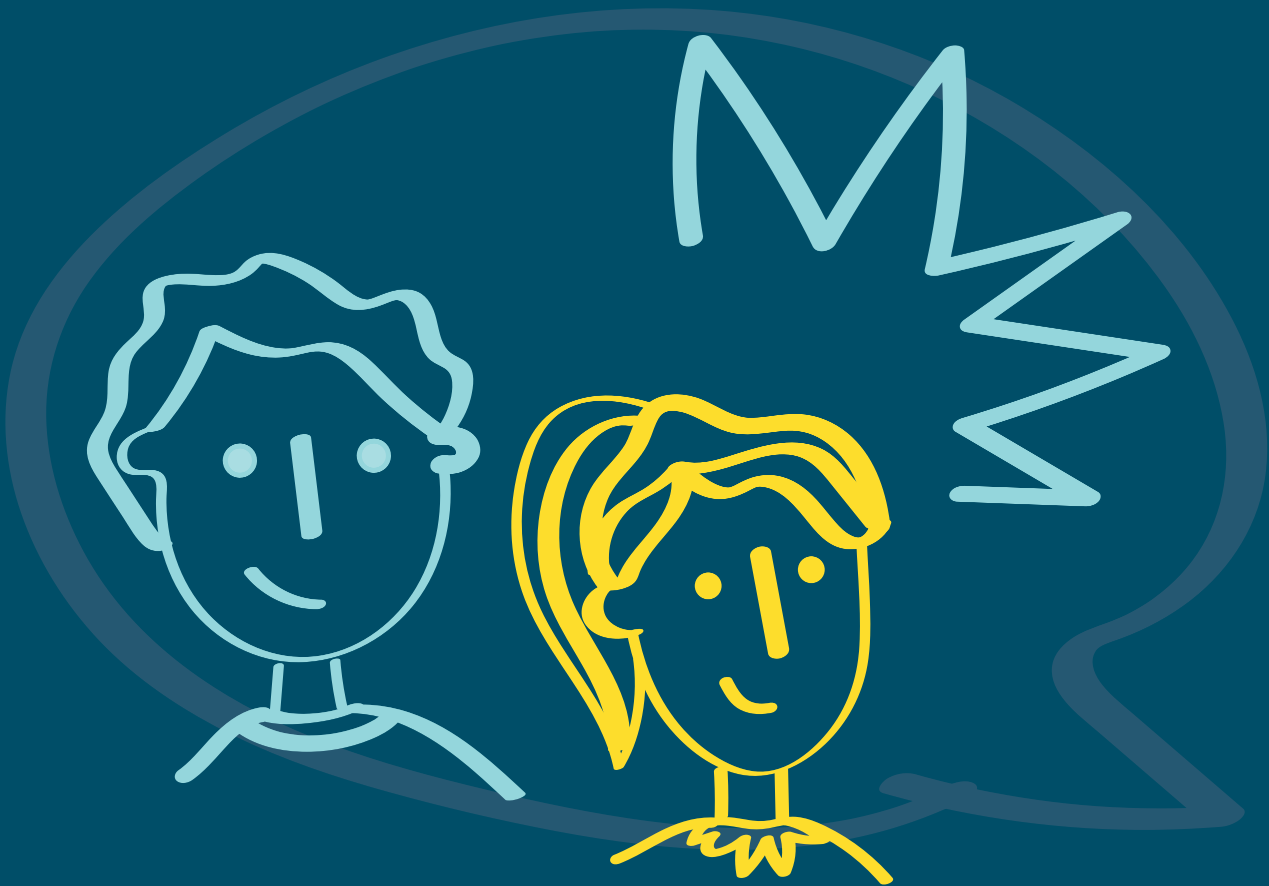
In assessing how findings from the literature contribute to the research question *"how can social and digital media be mobilised appropriately and effectively to progress the realisation of children and young people's right to be heard and to have their views taken into account in the context of public decision-making processes affecting them"*, Table 3 summarises key findings under the headings of Opportunities, Challenges, Technology and Rights implications.

Table 3: Phase 1 Literature Review - Summary Findings

Opportunities	Research shows that children are immersed in the digital environment. This offers a particular opportunity to examine their digital experiences and identify opportunities so that youthful enthusiasm can be harnessed to engage in further creative and civic activities.
	Digital Citizenship offers potential to develop the skills, values, attitudes, and knowledge needed to support children's progression on the ladder of digital opportunities.
	Related areas of digital youth practice provide valuable guidance for implementation.
Challenges	Only limited numbers are attaining higher levels of civic engagement activities using digital technologies, requiring a range of interventions to support digital literacy.
	The range of attitudinal, systemic, and technological challenges needs to be addressed in a proposed framework for children and young people's digital participation.
Technologies	Existing participation mechanisms have made only limited use of social and digital media. There is scope to examine how digital technologies can enhance such models to support children and young people's participation in public decision-making.
	All levels of the participatory space (informational, communication, deliberative) need to be incorporated into the digital domain.
Rights	A comprehensive rights-based framework to support children in the digital environment is needed.

Section 4

Voices of Children and Young People



4. Voices of Children and Young People

For children to respond positively to initiatives to make their voices heard, the right to be heard must be a lived experience, one that they can have confidence is being recognised and supported (Bosisio, 2012). In our research, we wanted to engage with children about making their voices heard through digital means, not in an abstract way but as something that might be regarded as normal and routine. While children and young people – as we discovered – have much to say about the digital environment and about their own use of social media, engaging them on topics about the language of rights or about participation in the public decision-making process is something that is more removed from their everyday experience. Engaging children and young people on the subject therefore needed careful planning. Our approach, as outlined below, was to begin with children's own experiences and to move from there to explore with them their perspectives, experiences, and attitudes about participating in the digital environment.

Across the diverse contexts in which we met with children and young people, we started conversations with them about their positive experiences of digital spaces, their concerns about its negative aspects and their hopes for better alternatives. A similar trajectory was followed both in the focus groups, typically involving between 6-8 children, and in the participatory workshops which consisted of roughly 30 young people per workshop. In this way, we looked to build on the familiar ground of digital media technologies for children, moving towards a wider space of civic engagement to a discussion of their feelings, individual and collective, of how they could become more involved in public decision-making through social and digital media.

4.1 What are the good things about social and digital media?

All our engagements with children began by explaining the context of the research: that the Ombudsman for Children's Office wished to hear from them about how social and digital media might facilitate young people's voices to be heard. We wanted to emphasise at the outset that this was a positive opportunity and something children and young people were well positioned to address. Across all the contexts in which we met with children, we opened our conversations with asking participants about their use of social and digital and what they enjoyed most. This proved to be an effective way of getting children involved in the discussion, eliciting enthusiastic responses about what they liked and enjoyed. It also helped set the tone that our emphasis in this research discussion was on finding positive solutions to help children's voices being heard.

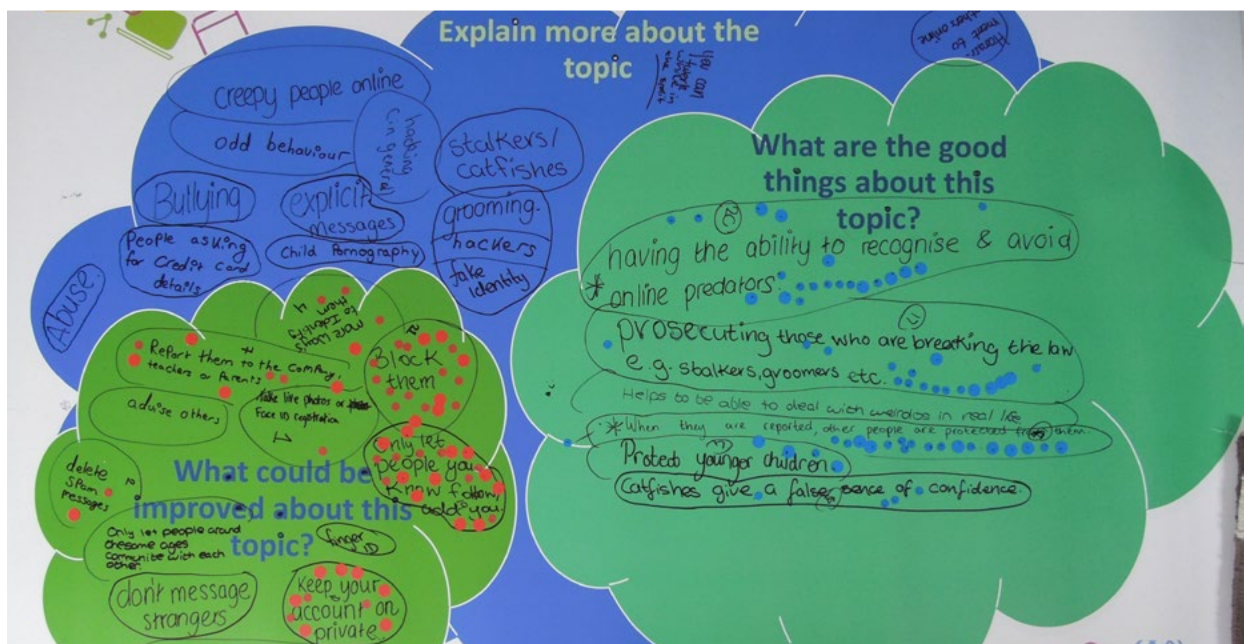
Workshops and focus groups produced a variety of talking points on the informational, communication and participatory aspects of digital technology use. Each of the participatory workshops began with a brainstorming exercise with children writing their ideas about all the good things they enjoy about online use on coloured post-its. These were posted on the wall or whiteboard for all children to see (Figure 4). A smaller group of volunteers then sifted through the findings to organise these into themes. Two main themes emerged from among the topics raised, that of "Communication and being in touch" and "The Internet as an Information Space" and formed the basis for further discussion.

Figure 4: Workshop Post-It Exercises

Communication and being in touch

Communication was an obvious starting point for the children and young people involved. Participants responded instinctively and positively to *communication* as a core feature of their social and digital media use. All four workshops responded in a remarkably similar fashion. As demonstrated throughout the workshops and focus groups, children were eager to give their point of view. They also described how keeping in close touch with their family and friends as one of the key features of their digital use. When it came to grouping the diverse topics discussed in our World Café-style roundtable discussion, each of the four workshops independently selected Communication as one of their key themes. This exercise was achieved by asking the children during these roundtable discussions to write their thoughts on the placemats at each table (Figure 5). Following the multiple rounds of discussion and brainstorming, children would later vote using sticky dots for the topics they felt were most important and relevant to the overall workshop theme.

Figure 5: Workshop Placemat Exercise with Sticky Dot Voting



To delve a little further into the theme of Communication as discussed by children during the workshops, a word cloud (Figure 6) is used to summarise the comments made about this topic on their placemats. Word clouds are a form of data visualisation which presents a collection, or cluster, of words depicted in varied sizes. Word clouds work on the basis that the more a specific word appears (in this case drawn from the transcripts or lists produced by the workshop participants), the bigger and bolder it appears in the word cloud. While not a replacement for qualitative data analysis, word clouds can be a useful way to summarise recurrent ideas in a discussion as well as being a useful prompt to stimulate further discussion and debate in a workshop setting.

Figure 6: Communication Theme in Participatory Workshops

"Being able to talk to people at any time" was voted by one workshop (Workshop 1) as one of the best things about this topic. Another group said this was about *"Keeping in touch"* (Workshop 2). Children commented that they could not imagine living without the ease of communication offered by social and digital media and that its accessible and free nature was important to them. For teenagers, it was clear that digital modes of communication were central to maintaining their ongoing social interactions and deeply embedded in their everyday lives. Teenagers often commented about how planning to meet and organising events was made so much easier through digital technologies.

"Keeping in touch with family" was also highlighted as an important dimension in workshops and focus groups. Workshop 3 commented on the reassurance this provided of being able to call or text home when needed. Globalisation also featured prominently here as many children and young people, including migrant children, spoke about staying connected with family and friends far away and maintaining family ties separated by distance.

Communicating with others in these discussions did not just mean peer group social interaction. Meeting new friends was also an important aspect of the Communication theme. Children commented that social and digital media *"allows you to make friends with people on the other side of the world* (Workshop 1) or helped you to *"meet new friends and get to know people better"* (Workshop 2). Interestingly, participants also noted that it was easier *"to connect with someone in a professional environment"* (Workshop 2) and to talk about hard conversation topics (Workshop 1).

Following the World Café roundtable discussions, participants had the opportunity to vote on the topics they regarded as most important (Figure 5 above). Here, communication themes – *"People are willing to listen", "Contacting people who are far away"* and *"Easy to talk to people about hard conversation topics"* – were voted by participants in Workshop 1 as their key topics. Similarly, Workshop 2 cited *"Keeping in touch with people, for example people that live in other countries"* as their top topic.

Focus groups allowed for a further probing of the theme of Communication. The participants, all of whom were teenagers, gave further insights into their use of social media for communication, highlighting just how important routine daily communication was in this context:

I use social media every day and I think it's part of my routine and I feel weird if I don't do it because like I'm always on it so it feels weird ***(FG5, 13-17 years).***

One participant described how online communication has helped them to make friends and deepen relationships:

I was going alone originally but there was a Facebook group and I'm among this group, I'm among this group of friends now. Like I used to be so anti-social and I met, I met people through, like I made a group chat so everyone could like talk and get to know each other, because many people were going alone to the concert. So, we all met and went for dinner like a week before the concert and we all made friends and now I'm still friends with them ***(FG5, 13-17 years).***

Participants spoke about the vital role social media plays in supporting their social lives, characterising it as something of a *"new age of social communications since not everyone goes out anymore"* (FG5). Conversations start effortlessly online, they explained, enabling young people to extend their networks, learn new things and seek out new contacts:

My friend texted me the other day and we were discussing the courses we want to do in College and she told me that she actually has a friend who is in the course that I want to do and so I was talking to him for about three days and he gave me amazing advice for portfolio stuff and for that I think that social media is really handy. Like you can learn a lot from people that you don't even know ***(FG4, 13-17 years).***

Younger children (8-12 years) also spoke enthusiastically about their use of digital devices such as smartphones, tablets and games consoles for communicating and staying connected. It was clear from their descriptions of everyday use that their approach was digital first, including for schoolwork:

Well, it's much faster than having to write it all down on a sheet of paper. And you can save it, instead of a piece of paper, you might lose it. And you don't get a sore hand. If your friends are far away, then you can... still communicate ***(FG1, 8-9 years).***

I'd normally use my console so it's easier and also, you're more likely to get them because they're like my friends, I'm more likely to find them on the Xbox **(FG1, 8-9 years).**

Oh, sometimes entertainment but a good bit of time it's for research. Like I'd be bored at home and I'd start getting a few questions and go up on Google search up things or, a lot of times I use apps to kind of like for drawing or coding and stuff, those kind of things ***(FG1, 8-9 years).***

I play games and text my friends as well ***(FG2, 10-12 years).***

What was also noticeable, however, was the extent to which this was closely matched with free play activities such as gaming, creating content and coding activities:

I do a lot of stop motion animation and I try to learn, every day I would try and do a different kind of. Not every day but when I do get a chance, I try different kind of things and coding sites and apps and stuff and you know, basic kind of coding and sometimes for drawing app purposes or writing down stories or whatever and then printing them out ***(FG1, 8-9 years).***

In many instances, the children's schools had integrated digital technologies into the classroom, fostering collaborative methods of working and communicating with each other, both inside and outside the classroom:

Well, when we're doing projects on Google Drive, we usually do it in pairs or in threes. So, then we share it with our other... we share it with our partners in the group ***(FG2, 10-12 years).***

Communication was thus deeply embedded among the diverse cohorts and age groups consulted. Seldom-heard groups shared similar

online interests. Young refugees and asylum seekers, for instance, love to go on YouTube and social media platforms to follow their interests. Their top online activities included communicating with their families and friends, as well as using the internet for schoolwork and learning new things, including English. Young people with a physical or sensory difficulty likewise highlighted communicating on social media platforms as an important outlet and expression of their independence. Restrictions on movements during Covid-19 times, only heightened the importance to young people of staying connected. Talking to friends and staying connected online has thus become a key feature of young people's well-being, relieving the boredom as well as relieving the anxiety brought about the global pandemic.

Social networks of family and friends are supported by using multiple digital devices and social media platforms, linking home, school and wider social connections. In this way, children and young people practiced and developed their digital literacy skills, displaying confidence in their ability to use digital technologies to stay connected.

The Internet as an Information Space

> *Because the internet is like the library. Like you get unlimited information there* ***(FG4, 13-17 years)****.*

> *I think it's more if you go on Google like it gets really straight to the point. So, it's like, so you're not reading and then like you're taking all this information that's really un-needed and unnecessary. So, I think if you, say from Google it really gets to the point and it simplifies it* ***(FG5, 13-17 years)****.*

> *We've learned quicker than our parents. We know more because of the internet* ***(FG1, 8-9 years)****.*

While Communication featured prominently in all the participatory workshops with children, so too the notion of the internet as an Information Space was something that all children commented on. Just as children used social and digital media as always-on communication devices, so too the ready availability of unlimited information is something that children have incorporated into their patterns of learning and discovery.

> *Me, usually I would use my devices for typing ... stories because I really love writing stories so usually I would just kind of use it for stories but or if I don't have a dictionary, I usually go online and look up the meaning of the word so usually I use my technology for homework* ***(FG1, 8-9 years)****.*

Given that all workshops were held in schools, it is not surprising that accessing information online was an important talking point. The post-it exercise at the beginning of each workshop where children had a brainstorming session about what was good online made *Information* a close second to the topic of Communication and therefore this was used as one of the topics children discussed further in their World Café placemat sessions.

Again, a word cloud is used to capture the various aspects raised by children in these discussions:

Figure 7: Information Theme in Participatory Workshops

The appeal of easy access to information for children was notable. Children noted that they could have access to any information they wanted and that this was something that all young people around the world shared, transforming the way they engaged with each other about facts and knowledge. Such online access to information was taken for granted by young people and put forward as the main way they became aware of current affairs and topical issues such as international conflicts and issues related to climate change and the environment.

Children's use of the internet as an Information Space is not only associated with being in school especially where digital technologies for learning were actively promoted. While children often referred to the use of the internet, search engines and online learning resources for schoolwork and doing homework, they were also quick to point out that one of the remarkable things about access to information online meant *"learning can be taken out of just the school environment"*. They associated it with discovery, personal learning as well as doing homework. Here, family support was noteworthy with children referring how they had been encouraged at home to go further in their learning and pursuit of personal interests.

Learning was described as fun with platforms such as *YouTube, Google, Wikipedia* and *Duolingo* described as enjoyable and great ways to learn about places, topics and people. It was also notable that young people could follow their own individual interests and pursue topics that were of particular interest to them while also exploring and discovering new hobbies and interests. This connected closely with the topic of sharing information with others and finding communities of interest online where young people could also be teachers themselves of topics about which they were knowledgeable.

However, the same opportunities were not equally distributed. As one participant put it during one of the focus groups:

> **P:** *But Instagram and Snapchat is just a way to pass away your time, you know. Not everyone has access to resources*

> **Moderator:** *Researching a project, yeah. And do you have like a school iPad or something like this?*

> **P:** *No. School is too poor for that* ***(FG9, 13-17 years).***

In discussing their increasing reliance on online sources for information, young people were not naïve about problems about the quality of information online. The importance of checking sources of information and being vigilant against fake news or misinformation were frequently raised. In pointing to areas needing improvement, participants put forward the idea that there should be better controls on quality of information and removal of false information online. According to one group of workshop participants *"Young people and even adults should be taught more about certain sources of information and what can be is considered as reliable"* (Workshop 1). The need for more *"Truthful information"* was highlighted in another workshop as one of the top 3 issues that should be improved (Workshop 3).

4.2 What are the inhibitors and barriers?

Notwithstanding the many positive features that children highlighted, children also had much to say about the challenges they encountered online and the issues that got in the way of their ability to communicate and learn new things. In the workshops, following an initial "Open Space" brainstorming session to identify the good things about online life, children were also asked to create lists of all the negative features they experienced. Again, post-its were used to collate the various issues and challenges. In the same way, focus groups were also asked to comment on the problems they came across in using social and digital media.

Again, there was a high degree of consistency between workshops in the topics that came up for discussion with many of the problems cited related to communication activities. The two main themes to emerge were *Cyberbullying,* which was by far the most common issue raised by children, followed by *Unwanted online contacts.*

The fact that cyberbullying was raised so often is not too surprising. Schools have taken the initiative in raising awareness about issues of bullying online and have organised specific school-based training workshops to combat bullying while developing skills to foster resilience. It was clear also from the workshop and focus group discussions that issues of cyberbullying were based on personal knowledge and reflected issues very much of concern to young people's peer groups. Given the overall theme of harnessing social and digital media to support young people's voices being heard, we examine in further detail below those

aspects that, as articulated by children and young people, adversely impact on their ability to freely communicate online.

Cyberbullying

> *It's actually pretty easy to bully online because like most of the reports, like the report systems on a lot of social media do not work. Yeah, like if you stand out of the norm, then most likely you're going to get attacked* ***(FG4, 13-17 years)****.*

> *I blocked them and it kept happening, it just kept happening, like people kept making different accounts to like follow me and you don't need to follow them to like post those nasty comments, so I kept getting comment after comment.* ***(FG5, 13-17 years)****.*

Cyberbullying was a topic highlighted in each of the workshops and nearly all focus group discussions as an almost inevitable consequence of young people's use of social and digital media. Cyberbullying was noted to be present on all platforms and was recognised by nearly all the young people as something they had either experienced themselves or witnessed among others.

The roundtable, World Café-style discussions with young people allowed the participants to discuss the topic in small groups and to record their thoughts about this issue, about what is being done to combat it and about what needed to be improved. A word cloud (Figure 8) summarises the key issues that came up in these discussions: the platforms on which it occurred; the behaviours that gave rise to cyberbullying and the consequences as experienced by diverse groups of young people.

The insidious nature of online bullying behaviour was keenly felt by young people. Bullying could occur on any platform and in any context where comments are posted, or photos are tagged. In this way, singling people out for attention seemed to occur all too easily. Young people noted how "*Your social media status – or who you follow – could often affect whether or not you are bullied*" (Workshop 1). They also recognised how trivial things can easily escalate into more serious online drama, causing friends to "*lash out for no reason*" or post comments that could be easily misunderstood (Workshop 1).

That such behaviour was rooted in peer group relationships was clear from many of the discussions which commented on how social exclusion could occur across all age groups and may relate to body image, peer pressure to behave certain ways, the spreading of rumours or discrimination against certain groups (Workshop 2). Participants highlighted the fact that pseudo-anonymity could be a contributory factor (Workshop 2), noting that perpetrators could hide behind a screen (Workshop 1). However, it was also the case that escalation happened much more easily online, and that people known to each other "*find it easier to say negative things about other people through screen instead of face-to-face*" (Workshop 1).

Figure 8: Cyberbullying Theme In Participatory Workshops

The pernicious nature of online bullying was, as illustrated above, something both familiar to young people and a matter of deep concern. Common experiences included being singled out, isolated, or made fun of in online group chats, as described by a focus group participant:

> *they actually started a group chat without me and they started sending screenshots of my private conversations with people, making fun of me, stuff like that, and I only found out about it like a year later from someone that was actually my friend and he just didn't want to tell me about the group chat because he didn't want me to be hurt* ***(FG4, 13-17 years).***

For some participants, online bullying was something so common that they had become desensitised to it and shrugged it off as something which just happened. One focus group participant described this as follows:

> **P:** *I never really like take it to heart when I'm like criticised or like bullied or name called or whatever it is that happens. I just throw it off to the side and like – oh, they are probably dealing with something and that's their way of dealing with that like. So, I just never really take it to heart anymore. So, it doesn't really bother me anymore when I get like, those nasty comments, I just say whatever, you know, it happens.*

> **Moderator:** *And are you able to discuss it with your parents at home?*

> **P:** *Yeah, I tell them all the time. Every time I get a nasty comment, you know, it happens, you know, again, she's like okay, just block them and report them and you'll be okay* ***(FG5, 13-17 years).***

Workshop participants had many observations about what was being done – and what was needed –to address cyberbullying. They called for much greater controls and filters for online comments where most bullying takes place. The example of Instagram's removal of counts of the number of likes for posts was singled out as a positive step (Workshop 2). Apparent lower levels of bullying on the platform were attributed to initiatives such as this (Workshop 1).

The fact that schools had addressed the issue head on was also appreciated. In fact, this was an issue on which participants acknowledged that *"People are willing to listen"* (Workshop 1). Talking about the problem in schools and holding workshops on how to deal with and combat bullying had increased awareness, encouraged victims to report or use blocking tools and overall had contributed to greater empathy. Some participants said there should be more of this, including training for teachers on how to deal with the phenomenon of online bullying. It was also repeatedly suggested there should be awareness raising workshops for younger users (Workshop 3).

When these issues were put to a vote, again a strong consensus was in evidence across the different workshops. *"Removing comments that are harmful"*, *"better security"* and that *"Gardaí should be able to act if someone is getting bullied"* were voted by workshops as among the top three aspects of the Internet that needed to be improved.

Figure 9: Workshop Post-It Exercise "What are the bad things about online use?"

Unwanted contacts

> *like Google and DuckDuck Go are just stalkers online … They try to get your details so it's like clickbait. So, like if you just click on it, you're just going to be like typing all of your information but that they have the chance to steal your bank account* ***(FG1, 8-9 years).***

The second major theme that appeared in the participatory workshops during the Open Space discussions was the topic of unwanted contacts online. While reported levels of 'stranger contact' among young people are relatively low, research has shown that this is an issue which does bother children (Livingstone, Kirwil, Ponte, & Staksrud, 2013). There was a general awareness of predatory behaviour online such as scams, attempts to look for bank details, credit card information and so on. However, what was noteworthy in discussions with young people was the more direct experience of receiving unwanted attempts at contact from what they described as *"weirdos"* and *"creepy people online"* during their online interactions. Figure 10 summarises comments made during these discussions.

Figure 10: Unwanted Contacts Theme in Participatory Workshops

Such unwanted contacts included numerous references to *"older people texting children"*, attempts to set up meetings (Workshop 3) and stalking. The phenomenon of "catfishing" – the creation of fake online identities to contact people – was frequently cited. *"Having the ability to recognise and avoid online predators"* (Workshop 2) and the knowledge of how to use blocking tools effectively (Workshop 3) were pointed to as essential skills. There was a general feeling as well that there should be *"more severe punishments for predators"* and a need to *"stop pedos"* (Workshop 3). Key messages that workshop participants put forward included *"Be aware that not everyone is who they say they are"* (Workshop 3) and *"Only let people you know follow or add you"* (Workshop 2).

Interestingly, in this context workshop participants, typically aged between 14 and 17, also expressed concern for younger users. In general, participants felt there should be age restrictions on social media use for younger users and that it was vital that *"Only people around the same age should communicate with each other"* (Workshop 2). The need to *"Inform younger children about the consequences of social media"* (Workshop 1), not giving younger children technology and the imposition of age restrictions (Workshop 2) were voted as among the top issues that needed to be improved online.

Focus groups highlighted other related aspects such as hacking and misuse of personal data. One participant described how easily one's personal data could be compromised on social media platforms:

> *Streaks. It's like you send this thing, like a photo to people and then let's say you do like every day, that turns into a streak and yeah, people just send it to each other. And like they don't want to lose the streak so let's say they don't have Wi-Fi or something because you need Wi-Fi to send streaks, they give their password to their friend that has Wi-Fi. And I said a lot of times that the friend, he changes their password and uses their account* ***(FG1, 8-9 years).***

Other younger users also described the common experience of suspicious online content when playing games and coming across links in everyday browsing:

> *Maybe like if you're playing a game or like something to search up, maybe like a website and then you press click and then you're not really sure if you really trust this website. So, then you get carried away and then you just press it and then like it's a virus and then people get in* ***(FG1, 8-9 years).***

However, all such downsides, while barriers to making the most of online opportunities, were recognised as challenges to be overcome, particularly in the context of the increasingly blurred lines between offline and online environments, heightening the need for responsible online behaviour:

> *The thing is nowadays the world is getting more digital. There's more use of technology and it's very hard to avoid it nowadays because it's very clear that very soon everything will be done digitally because the world is trying to evolve and the thing is, because of this everything you do, even in digital is now affecting you. And very soon what you do in the real world will affect you everywhere because of digital use and the thing is, when you're on the internet you have to be so conscious because everybody uses the internet. Everybody sees it. Once you upload something, once you put up something, once you even type up something everybody can see it* ***(FG1, 8-9 years)****.*

This, as one focus group participant put it, extends to learning to live with the rise of Artificial Intelligence and the implications this will have for personal responsibility and for decision-making:

> *Google is run by an AI and that AI is an algorithm, it's like a brain. It's like a kid. It learns from its mistakes and it learns from other things. It's building up. By the point when we get adults, when we become adults it will be one of the... smartest AIs in the world because of all of the information it's got and all of the things it's known* ***(FG1, 8-9 years)****.*

This was followed by a brief discussion on the societal impact digital technologies and, as observed by the young focus group participants, the need to embrace change:

> *China is evolving and other countries are as well and everybody should. We should learn that okay, so, yeah sure we don't like the fact that there's change, but we want change as well. And so, if it's changing the way we work we should try to adapt to everything. We should accept it* ***(FG1, 8-9 years)****.*

4.3 Having your say online

Findings from the workshops and focus groups posited "having your say online" as a good thing and something that young people valued and wished to see further expanded. Children and young people recognised that to be able to mobilise social and digital media effectively and appropriately for making their voices heard, it was also necessary to navigate the inherent challenges of the digital environment as highlighted during the workshops and focus groups. The workshop and focus group participants expressed confidence this could be achieved.

Is the Internet a good place for young people's voices to be heard?

At the beginning of each of our workshops, we organised a "Moving Debate". All the participants assembled in the middle of the room while we posed a series of questions to them about the online environment. The young people then signalled if they "agreed" or "disagreed" with the statement by walking to either side of the room.

By way of prompting debate, we asked them if they agreed with the following statements:

Question 1: "Social media is having a negative effect on young people in Ireland"

In each of the workshops, the majority disagreed with this statement. Overall, they were positive about their own experiences of using social media and thought it a good way to communicate with friends and family despite the concerns that had been raised. There were also mixed feelings on the issue.

In Workshop 1, for instance, half the participants were undecided, stating that not everything could be portrayed as simply good or bad; it depends, they argued, on how people use digital technologies. It was important to recognise, they argued, that social media could be both a positive and a negative force for young people. Workshop 3 was also strongly supportive of the opportunities for entertainment and communication that the online environment offered.

Workshops 2 and 4 were similarly mixed in their response. In Workshop 2, a quarter agreed with the statement while two thirds had

mixed feelings and cited mental health issues, time-wasting, and the fact that it could make people more distant from each other. While there was discussion of the need for better controls on what was said online, for example, removing negative comments, participants also recognised *"It's a matter of freedom of speech: you should be able to have the right to post or write whatever you want"* (Workshop 2).

Question 2: "The internet is a great place for young people's voices to be heard"

The second question was where we asked workshop participants directly if they felt the online space offered a positive opportunity for young people's voices to be heard.

Again, framed as a Moving Debate statement, the response was overwhelmingly in favour. Workshops 3 and 4 voted 100 per cent in favour of the statement; in Workshops 1 and 2, it was 90 per cent and 95 per cent, respectively.

Comments made during the exercise included: *"It's good place to reach to a larger audience and can be spread rapidly"* (Workshop 1); *"It's a good place to make changes as illustrated by the climate change movement online"* and *"There is more chance for young people's voice to be heard"* (Workshop 2); and *"It's good place for young people to voice their opinion"* (Workshop 4).

At the same time, observations on its limitations as a participatory space were also aired pointing to the fact that there were limited opportunities for "*young people to voice their opinions in the online space*"; that *"young people faced higher risks of receive abusive comments online"* (Workshop 2); and that *"Not everyone has access but also it's a question of equal access to the online space"* (Workshop 3).

Greta Thunberg – Role Model

> *I know only she's from Sweden, I don't know her name. She's like 13 years old and she doesn't go to school on Fridays!*
> ***(FG1, 8-9 years).***

In the case of the focus groups, prompts were used to stimulate discussion on having your say online. For example, a still image of the 16-year-old Greta Thunberg was used to prompt discussion of young people getting involved in topical issues. Greta Thunberg was named *Time* Person of the Year in 2019 for her work in inspiring a global youth movement demanding greater action on climate change (Reinikainen et al., 2020). The fact that the School Strike 4 Climate movement used social media as its primary organisational tool made it a fitting example for the workshop (Boulianne et al., 2020). Responses were positive with wide recognition of Greta Thunberg, particularly among teenagers, and admiration for what she had achieved as a young activist. Comments made in support included the following:

> *I think she's saying the right thing. She's making governments take notice of her, because she's so persistent with her ideas about environment* ***(FG2, 10-12 years).***

> *it's like it's because social media is what spread most of it. That's how like everybody I know found out about it was just through social media. So, it has clearly been very important in her whole movement*
> ***(FG4, 13-17 years).***

> **P1:** *She loves to cry about it on television because she got very sad and emotional that no one was listening to her. She was right though, no one is.*

> **P2:** *I listen to her* ***(FG9, 13-17 years).***

Participants were also asked how they themselves might respond to topics such as climate change. Issues related to sustainability and the environment were cited in most of

the workshops and focus groups as an issue participants felt strongly about. Participants wanted schools to do more to highlight the challenges involved and wanted further opportunities to make their own voices heard about the topic:

> *It would be good in schools if you got a chance to do that stuff. Because a lot of people would like to voice their opinions on climate change and the problems in the world* ***(FG2, 10-12 years).***

> *Well, I hope they do get something with the environment because I love all that kind of stuff and I love Greta Thunberg and I think that there should be electric cars, all electric cars and metal straws and paper straws* ***(FG10, 10-12 years).***

There was much discussion about the activism and whether this was the best way for young people to have their voice heard on such issues. While some had participated in the *FridaysForFuture* protests, it was recognised this was not the only way to be involved and that raising awareness through contributing their voice online could be just as effective. It was also agreed that schools had an important part to play in raising the issues and providing opportunities for young people to become more informed and to speak out.

> *I've been to a lot of the protests, yeah. And they're good. They have a lot of people up speaking at them that are like eight years old, like primary school kids get up and speak at them in Dublin which is really good* ***(FG4, 13-17 years).***

> *It takes a lot for someone to step out and start a movement. That basically takes a lot so I'm not going to take that responsibility. But if someone would, I'd be behind it. I think that could be a good idea* ***(FG4, 13-17 years).***

> *I think teachers should be talking about it and not just voicing their own opinions but actually like saying things in a more like, how do I phrase this, almost like playing like the devil's advocate, asking challenging questions, getting people to talk, voice their own opinions and actually educating people about what's going on because like a lot of people don't realise how important it is to be like vegetarian and in a few years I think everybody's going to have to do that and people are not getting used to that idea* ***(FG4, 13-17 years).***

Wall of Ideas

In each of the participatory workshops, we concluded the consultation exercise by getting all participants to mark up on a "Brick Wall of Ideas" all the things they would like to have say about. The topics varied widely in scope and specificity and ranged from largescale global challenges to more local topics. A summary is provided in Figure 11 and an example of the Brick Wall is given in Figure 12.

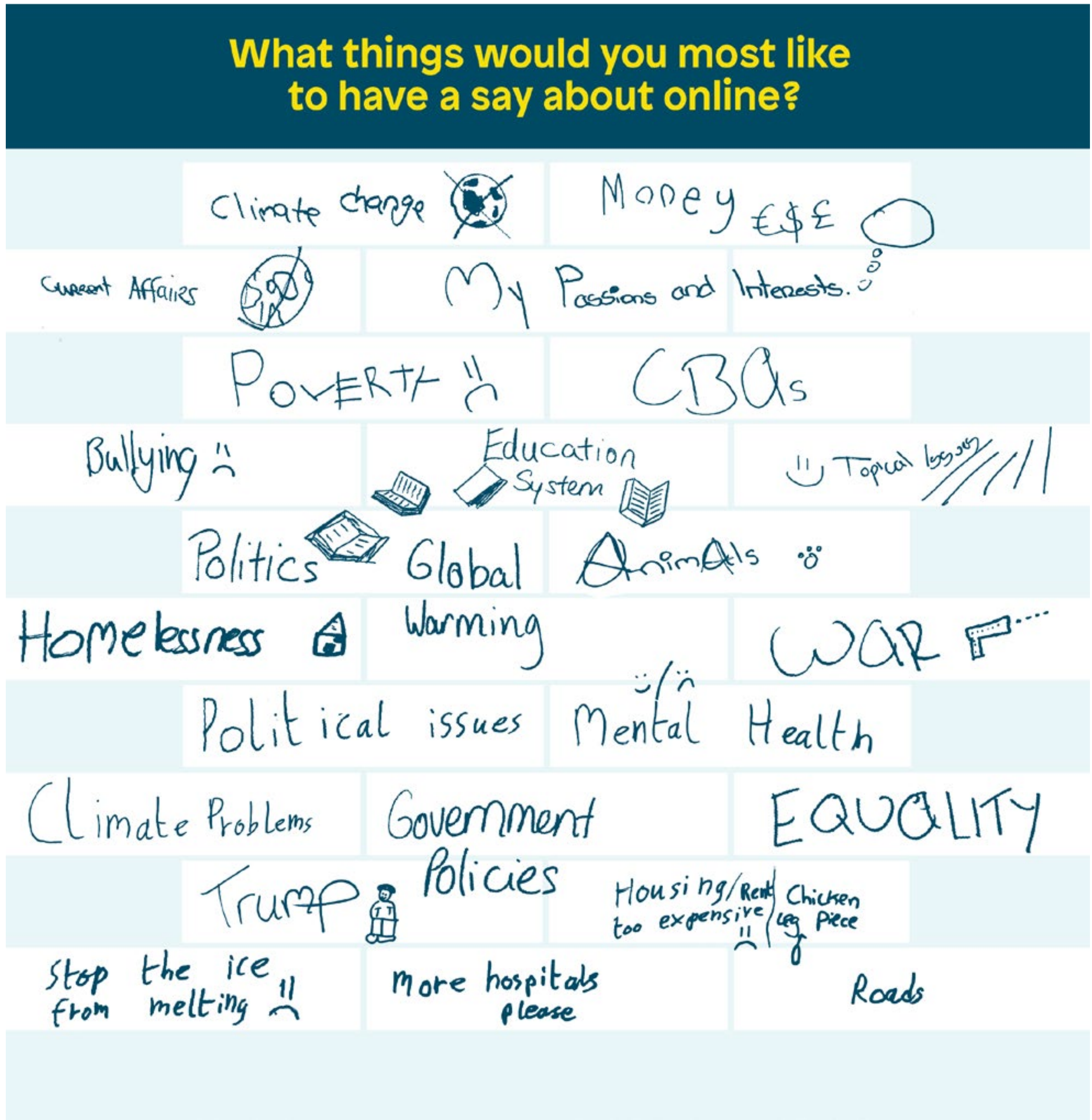
Figure 11: Topics in the Brick Wall of Ideas

Echoing subjects raised in discussion during the workshops, topical issues relating to climate change, environmentalism and sustainability were among the top suggestions posted on the Brick Wall of Ideas. There were calls for young people to have more of a say on political issues and politics more generally, including lowering the voting age to 16. They also cited international issues, such as the war in Syria, migration, US politics, Brexit and developments in the United Kingdom, as topics they would like to speak about.

In addition to the political domain, issues of importance to young people were also raised. Issues related to mental health reflecting a wider discussion about pressures on young people and the role that social and digital media play in this, featured among the most prominent.

Body-shaming, peer pressure, eating disorders, empathy and speaking up about bullying were some of the topics raised. Education matters also featured in the ideas posted to the Brick Wall with participants expressing a desire to have a say about issues related to exams and assessment, the introduction of the new Junior Cycle and sports facilities in schools.

Figure 12: The Brick Wall of Ideas



4.4 Creating a more participatory digital future

> *The internet is a good place, everyone is on social media. If you start, many people will follow. Young people can lead activities too* ***(FG6, 13-17 years)****.*

Not every teenager has the opportunity like us to speak our mind ***(FG6, 13-17 years)****.*

The proposal for a dedicated digital space in which young people could express their views and have their voices heard online came up on several occasions as an idea posted to the Brick Wall of Ideas. Workshop 1 participants stated that *"If you don't have a good reliable platform, people don't listen or respect what you have said or posted"* and recommended the creation of *"A platform to express our opinions"* (Workshop 1). Workshop 2 even suggested this could be something that the Ombudsman for Children's Office could lead on. They recommended the use of social media to engage with their age group and specifically a Snapchat account for the OCO, acting both as a way for the Ombudsman for Children to communicate with young people but also for young people to communicate with the Ombudsman's office.

The idea of a dedicated online participation space was also addressed in the focus group discussions. The participants in the focus group for younger children proposed the idea of a dedicated website that would inform, educate and enable young people's voices to be heard about topics of interest to them:

P: *For the website I would normally start off with basic things because the thing is, I know that not everybody is going to go onto a website and be like wow, it's like really crazy things like climate change. I know that everybody should know about it, but we should always get to the basic things. So, if I was to make the website I would make like a podcast and talk about, you know, the basic kind of things to know about and you know. Yeah, I would talk about the basic things like for example, factories, how they have pollution and stuff. I would really get to that point and then get higher and higher and higher.*

Moderator: *Okay.*

P: *Yeah, I'd use the website for like, kind of like a staircase to you know, the top floor. We would start with the small things and get to higher and higher and higher because I know the attention span won't be, sort of wait to the biggest thing, it'll be the smallest thing. It will get bigger and bigger* ***(FG1, 8-9 years)****.*

Two of the schools in which focus groups took place were members of the CLiC News network, a network of primary schools which subscribe to an online news website aimed at children and which provides a safe space for comments and interaction. This prompted participants to suggest similar features for the idea of a dedicated participation space: *I think it would be very child-safe, to make sure...Yeah, to make sure that nothing offensive or disturbing could get into that. Like, young children like us couldn't see anything that they don't need to see, or they don't need to know. It's just all facts and fun. It will teach us to do more, interactive, like CLiC News, the way you can comment on things* ***(FG2, 10-12 years)****.*

You can share your opinions about the stories, and you get to see what everyone else has written and that's what I really like. Sharing this ***(FG10, 10-12 years)****.*

Participants in workshops and focus groups valued the idea of a listening space, akin to a support service, in the form of safe and secure space to which young people could turn for advice and support as well as information, trustworthiness again being key:

P: *I think it would be like nice, you know, if you had like, you know, you need to have the "verified" sign where you could also have like someone saying if you are getting bullied or you're lonely or have no friends, it's just something like that. You can go to them and you can talk to them, you can get all your feelings and problems out and stuff like that and I think it would be good for mental health.*

Moderator: *That's good. So basically, it's a place, it's safe and you can share, and you can have somebody to speak to when you are feeling low?*

P: *Yeah* ***(FG5, 13-17 years)****.*

Participants in the LGBT focus group were particularly engaged in political discussion and recommended that schools should take the lead in supporting opportunities for young people to become more informed and more involved in making their views known about public issues. Building on the idea of a dedicated participation space, they argued that this was something that could, like the CLiC News initiative, work through schools:

> *I think it could be set up in schools. I think that is the easiest way to reach large groups of young people is through schools. There could be like just for the older years even, like a certain time each year, whatever where they can bring issues to the teachers and work together. And get their voices out that way because the government* ***(FG4, 13-17 years)****.*

One of the aims of such an initiative would be to poll opinion on a regular basis to ensure that young people's voices were canvassed and heard on selected topics, either formally in the form of a consultation or more indirectly in seeking views from young people as to what their key concerns may be:

> *There could be a short survey done, like every once in a while, where you can basically like voice your concerns to the government and say what's bothering you and what's going wrong in the country, basically, in your opinion. And I think it would be a really good idea if it was like a short survey because nobody likes long surveys and what if it crashes and then people don't want to get into like 90 question surveys that crash on the last page. No, no. So, I think if it was like a short five-to-ten-minute survey where you get to voice your concerns online and then you send it right in and you don't have to like mess around with postage or anything, it's there, it's online. So, I think that could work, to be honest* ***(FG4, 13-17 years)****.*

In this context, it was recognised that information was vital and for participation to be effective, young people had to be informed and provided with trustworthy information:

> *I think that the educated people are the ones that should be listened to. Like people on both sides of the argument who both have valid reasons for having the arguments and not just people spewing information that they heard from someone else. Like they have to have their reasons, they have to have facts and statistics and valid reasons for why they think that, why they have an opinion on the certain topic. Like yes, it's important for everybody to have a platform but it's also really annoying to find people who like genuinely don't know the facts about a situation and they're like talking about it, and then it goes viral and you're like why? Like why?* ***(FG4, 13-17 years)****.*

Last but least, the support needed to enable children of all ages and abilities to take part in digital participation must not be underestimated. Digital participation methods came into their own over the course of this research. Following the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic, all face-to-face meetings were suspended with the remaining focus groups taking place online. The added logistics of addressing technical issues such as online video conferencing alongside the normal arrangements needed for young people's participation in a consultation exercise highlighted the importance of such support. For groups of children with a physical or sensory difficulty, there were also considerations of the availability of appropriate digital technologies. To take all children's voices into account, therefore, there may be a need to create tailor-made platforms or devices to cater to different children's needs and for whom existing social media platforms or devices may be too difficult or unsuitable for them to access.

4.5 Phase 2 Summary

The wide range of views offered on the value of social and digital media as a way for young people's voice to be heard in public affairs and in public decision-making offered strong endorsement for greater online participatory opportunities. The discussions in each case were framed at a general level and sketched the principles of what a more participatory future digital environment might look like as well addressing the specific conditions and requirements that young people feel may fit appropriately within their own digital practices. While this provides a general endorsement, with limited examples to point to, it is not itself a prescription for a particular initiative. The recommendation for the Ombudsman for Children's Office to take a lead in digital participation aside, there remains an important task to bring such ideas to professional stakeholders for whom this may or may not offer additional scope to consider within the participation matrix.

As with findings from Phase 1 of the research, the following list summarises key points and insights from the consultations with children and young people that contribute to the overall research question ***of how can social and digital media be mobilised appropriately and effectively to progress the realisation of children and young people's right to be heard in the context of public decision-making processes affecting them?***

Table 4: Phase 2 Consultation with Children - Summary Findings

Opportunities	Children enjoy a wide range of benefits through their use of social and digital media. In particular, they highlight "Communication and being in touch" and "The Internet as an Information Space" as especially important.
	Children are confident about their ability to express themselves despite challenges and believe the internet is a good place for young people's voices to be heard.
Challenges	Children are cognisant of barriers and challenges in the digital environment. Cyberbullying and unwanted communications are barriers to their ability to avail of more opportunities online.
Technologies	Children want to see a range of improvements to their digital experience: more attention to safety, respect for privacy, higher quality information, training and supports.
Rights	Government leadership in this area is welcomed but more can be done to fulfil children's right to be heard.
	They would like to see a dedicated space where young people could express their views, safely and securely.

Section 5

Professional Stakeholder Perspectives

5. Professional Stakeholder Perspectives

Phase 3 of the research comprised primary research interviews to elicit the perspectives of key professional stakeholders from the public sector, academia, industry and civil society on the main findings and recommendations deriving from the desk-based research as well as the consultation with children and young people. In parallel with the children's workshops and focus groups, professional stakeholder interviews reviewed the potential benefits that social and digital media might afford children's right to be heard, assessed the barriers and challenges that may arise and explored options for creating new, positive opportunities for participation.

A range of professional stakeholder groups were targeted for inclusion. Youth organisations, educators, and NGOs with experience of harnessing digital tools and technologies were consulted to learn about their experiences and perspectives. Academic experts, both in Ireland and internationally, were also contacted to learn from their insights. Civil and public servants were consulted to elicit their views in terms of practical implementation. Finally, the technology sector was also consulted to include an industry perspective on the potential application of digital technology services in this context. In each instance, the context of the research was presented underlining the particular focus on advancing children's participation in public decision-making through social and digital media. Setting out the research questions in this way allowed for an open conversation that did not advocate in favour or against any individual solution. The topic was instead addressed in terms of weighing up advantages and disadvantages of different approaches towards the attainment of the common goal of enhancing opportunities for young people's voices to be heard. Interviews also supplied a further opportunity to gain experience from practitioners in the field of what, in their experience, had worked well, problems that had been encountered and what, from a policy point of view, was required to enhance digital participation.

5.1 Assessing opportunities and benefits of digital participation

Just as we asked children about "what was good for them online", interviews elicited professional stakeholders' views on the positive attributes and benefits that social and digital media might offer young people. Three main themes emerged from amongst the diverse perspectives represented and may be summarised as follows:

- ***The importance of addressing children wherever they were to be found, including in digital spaces;***
- ***The need to harness the specific attributes of digital communications*** that might extend opportunities for active participation; and
- ***The importance of empowering young people through supporting children's rights*** in the digital environment.

Discussion on these themes focused on learning lessons from practice as well as identification of areas where new initiatives may hold promise. Individual topics raised are summarised below.

Engaging with children and young people

a) Where young people are to be found: An often-cited reason put forward by professional stakeholders as to why social and digital media should be embraced more fully was that this is where young people are to be found and therefore every effort should be made to engage them in those places where they habitually congregate. Given that young people are so fully immersed in digital communications and social media prompted stakeholders to argue that to reach young people, it was essential to use the same technologies and communication methods. Stakeholders pointed to an inter-generational divide between adults and young people and argued that adults may not always appreciate the extent to which offline and online distinctions have blurred for younger generations.

Youth sector representatives claimed that youth work is one area that has tried to embed digital technologies as central to its approach to connecting and engaging with young people:

> *Young people don't see an offline and online world that perhaps adults might. It's just one world for young people so it's where young people are at and it's vital then for the youth sector and the youth workers to meet young people where they're at* **(Youth Organisation).**

Youth organisations, who were consulted as part of this research, offered interesting observations in this respect. One youth organisation with a strong online presence explained:

> *Our organisation is responsive to where young people are at, and their needs at a particular time. From our perspective, our goal, our primary goal is to empower young people with information. That's our jumping off point ... The attraction for young people to get involved is that, firstly we message that this is your space, you have ownership of it* **(Youth Organisation).**

Similarly, a student youth organisation commented that its engagement with its membership is almost entirely through digital channels:

> *In terms of our relationship with the students that are members, it has kind of been revolutionary in terms of a way to connect and cut out the middleman but also in terms of getting a representation nationally* **(Youth Organisation).**

From a practical point of view, for such organisations developing a digital communications presence as the primary mode of communication with young people makes sense. It allows them to reach target groups more effectively and to engage with them in a manner that is familiar to young people. Conversely, not to engage digitally means communicating in the wrong place and missing key opportunities to reach young people:

> *If Government wants to communicate a message to young people, they have to think about, okay, where are young people at, where can we get to them in numbers, and how do we message it in such a way that will resonate, firstly, but also that is appropriate to what we are?* **(Youth Organisation).**

b) Engaging children and young people more effectively: Professional stakeholders also suggested that social and digital media offered new opportunities for engaging young people, attracting their interest, eliciting a response and creating an opportunity for dialogue with decision makers. Again, youth organisations posited that digital platforms provided new points of entry, drawing new participants from outside of established networks and organisations.

> *We use different methodologies and one of them would be social and digital media. And targeting groups that maybe wouldn't come to the larger events that we send out information on. And the young people themselves will use social media on the day. Not only to encourage other young people to get involved but also to try and influence decision makers as well* **(Youth Organisation).**

In practice, as was clear through the examples of youth participation discussed with professional stakeholders, many youth organisations have readily adapted various digital platforms as the primary means of reaching and staying connected with members. Existing participation networks such as Comhairle na nÓg have similarly incorporated digital communications strategies.

Diverse methods including social media messaging, gaming platforms, text lines and interactive websites have been used alongside more conventional methods to engage young people for the purposes of civic engagement. An interesting example of this is the creation of Dublin City Council's Snapchat channel. This arose following an initiative led by the Dublin Comhairle na nÓg to create an opportunity for young people to become more aware and more involved in the city. A Comhairle na nÓg representative explained the two-way interactive process envisaged:

I would like to see the people utilising, learning how to use it and how to speak to an audience, large audience. I'd like to see it six months or a year down the road as a helpful resource for younger people to be able to tap into, to be able to understand what's going on in the city for them, to be able to understand that possibly the issues that they're dealing with are being dealt with by younger people around the city (Youth Council).

Engaging young people in this way also lends an opportunity to express solidarity between youth, both nationally and internationally, and to foster positive interaction around topics of common interest, learning from each other and finding a space to develop a collective voice. Notable examples in an Irish context have been the mobilisation of youth around social topics including *The Campaign to Repeal the Eighth Amendment*, *Fridays4Future* campaigns on climate action, and the *Vote at 16* campaign.

Industry stakeholders highlighted their work with youth representative groups and third-party partnerships to promote positive uses of their platforms. Articulating a commitment to 'serve the public conversation' companies such as TikTok, Facebook and Twitter regular host workshops with youth organisations and advocacy groups on how to get the maximum benefit from the platform and how to amplify positive messages to win support. Initiatives such as TikTok for good,[11] Google's AI for Social Good[12] and Facebook Social Impact[13] are examples of platforms promoting positive causes, raising awareness, and supporting organisations to using digital communications to achieve social impact. Twitter gave as an example the Office of the UN Secretary General's Envoy on Youth to highlight the challenges faced by young people today, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Its #YouthLead partnership with @UNYouthEnvoy, launched in August 2020, serves to promote an inclusive conversation on the platform about the work young people lead in local and global communities.[14]

Stakeholders in general did not necessarily claim that the digital space was inherently more engaging than offline spaces. Rather, they suggested that digital communications are a new opportunity for participation and that, just as in the offline world, there may be people who are more engaged and are more likely to actively take part in initiatives such as youth parliaments. Similarly, in the digital environment, there will be some more likely and some less likely to take up those opportunities. The advantage of a digital approach is its potential wider reach and multiple points of entry to get involved.

c) Empowering young people: Social and digital media offers new ways to empower young people and give them an opportunity to express themselves in ways that may not otherwise have been possible.

Empowerment through information was a feature commented on some professional stakeholders. Echoing young people's own observations about access to information online, professionals pointed to the importance of supplying trusted and authoritative information to young people as a key first step in supporting their social and civic engagement.

The ClicNews project,[15] for instance, which has a target audience of 6–12 year-olds in primary school, prompts children to discuss news and current affairs with their teacher in a classroom setting. Children are encouraged to express their response through the comments function, thereby interacting with others online. This, according to the organisers, has a range of benefits:

For those children who really want to express themselves about subjects that they wouldn't necessarily be asked their opinion of. And because it's a safe environment, they, with everybody on it of their own age, it means that there is little possibility of being pulled down or being contradicted to a point where they feel that they are no longer, they no longer wish to express an opinion (Educator).

Noteworthy here is the feature of the platform ***to facilitate equal and inclusive participation.*** Anonymity in this context means participants

11 https://www.tiktok.com/forgood
12 https://ai.google/social-good/
13 https://socialimpact.facebook.com/
14 https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/celebratingthepowerofyoungpeoplethroughyouthlead.html

15 https://clicnews.ie/

do not know the geography of where other comments on the site come from, or the relevant schools, or ages of other participants. In that sense, as expressed by the coordinators, *"everybody is equal on the site. And everybody has an opportunity to have equal input and equal opinion"*.

Empowering young people to use social media platforms safely and responsibly was a key theme in discussions with industry stakeholders. For most companies, this is a multifaceted approach based around the development of tools to empower young people to manage their own safety and the development of policies that strengthen the safety on the platform. Industry representatives also spoke of the importance of media and digital literacy as a means of empowering young people.

> *The open Internet has democratised access to information, allowing people to be more informed and more engaged. But with so much information available online, it is important to build the skills to decipher what is fact from what is fiction (Industry representative).*

Industry's own efforts to make educational resources available as well as partnering with external organisations were identified as key contributions with the Media Literacy Ireland initiative notably having the support from all the major digital platforms in the country.[16]

For youth organisations, empowerment means ***providing the skills and the opportunity to make their voice heard*** on matters of relevance to them. A feature of digital youth work is the harnessing of digital tools to develop this specific capacity:

> *It's really important that they help young people to support young people and facilitate young people to use their voice and empower young people to increase their agency and become changemakers. That's what good youth work is all about. And to support this agency in activism, youthwork needs to be engaged in digital and social … youthwork needs to be engaging young people in digital youthwork and social and digital media to support their participation **(Youth Organisation).***

Digital technologies lend themselves to a variety of ***creative forms of expression*** – image creation, sound, graphics and photography – which can be empowering for young people and can harness multimodal forms of literacy that give added scope towards expressing one's voice. Such forms of expression also lend themselves particularly well to supplying rich data and forms of personal testimony that can function as a powerful narrative to the realities of young people's lived experience.

An example highlighted by one youth organisation was that of a young person who spoke out on an online platform about how she felt let down by the traditional education system. The young person expressed a view that traditional schooling was too constricting and did not meet the needs of those whose style was more vocational. Bringing this individual voice into a wider forum enabled a debate that could not have taken place in the classroom:

> *In her classroom she doesn't have a voice, and she doesn't have power. But outside of the classroom on our platform, she had 30 teachers giving out to her on Twitter or something. But those are people that are listening to what she has to say, even though they vehemently disagreed with it. The power that is there is more balanced than… you could almost say it's gone the other way, almost. But it creates a level playing field for young people to have their voices heard in such a way **(Youth Organisation).***

In this way, in online spaces, as several professionals argued, young people can find added confidence and ability to voice their opinions and address policy makers in ways that would not otherwise have been available.

All professional stakeholders including industry representatives commented on the many examples of young people ***mobilising around causes and issues using digital platforms.*** This is something that companies were keen to support.

16 https://www.medialiteracyireland.ie/

*Through Twitter's open and conversational nature, we've seen countless examples on Twitter of young people leading impactful movements around the world on issues like climate change and social justice — empowering them to have a voice on issues that matter most to them **(Industry representative).***

In 2020, TikTok supported the campaign calling on governments to implement the 17 Sustainable Development Goals with a hashtag challenge (#GlobalGoals) which encouraged users to demand change. The hashtag has been viewed 37.1m times.

*Throughout Pride month, our creators talked about their #PrideIcon, garnering over 1.3 billion views on the platform. Our users also shared what or who they are coming out for set to Diana Ross's iconic track I'm Coming Out using the #ImComingOut hashtag, which garnered half a million videos and 1.7 billion views **(Industry representative).***

For stakeholders, young people's online activism confirmed that digital spaces are where young people are to be found and where they choose to express themselves about issues that matter to them. As illustrated by national and international political movements, social media is the underpinning platform by which young people's voices are heard, amplified, and brought to public attention despite the limitations and challenges highlighted by both adults and young people alike.

Technological Affordances

Social and digital media, according to many professional stakeholders, offers key affordances that can be harnessed to enhance participation. The extent to which such affordances have been appropriately mobilised may vary but attending to what the technology itself can do may lay the groundwork for future development in children and young people's civic participation.

a) Reaching a wider audience: One key attribute in this regard is, professionals claimed, the ability for social and digital media to *reach a much larger cohort of young people* than would be possible in face-to-face settings. As illustrated by initiatives that have piloted the use of digital platforms to extend their reach, the potential for widening the base for consultation and participation is significant.

The #PictureYourRights project in 2015, a joint initiative between UNICEF and the Children's Rights Alliance, successfully mobilised input from across Ireland to prepare and present a report by children and young people to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. Through this process, 500 young people contributed to a report highlighting their experiences of being young in Ireland. The report put forward various recommendations such as an end to direct provision (for asylum seekers), better community mental health services and the reform of religious education. All of this acquired greater weight through the sheer numbers involved, the geographic spread and the diversity of participating voices.

The consultation process undertaken as part of the development of the *LGBTI+ National Youth Strategy 2018-2020* is another example of where an online consultation method was used to bring about wider participation. The youth consultation process reached approximately 4,000 young people and involved an online survey as well as attendance at seven youth consultation events. The considerable number of young people who contributed to the online consultation process was described by government officials as "hugely beneficial":

*We'd never have got that reach, so the validity and the legitimacy of what was being proposed as the key issues to be addressed, is very much supported by that volume **(Government Department).***

Such processes, it is recognised, generate large volumes of data. This brings about other issues such as the need for careful and detailed analysis and representation of what young people are saying.

Such examples show the potential for more young people to provide input than would be feasible using existing face-to-face methods. According to one commentator, the inclusion of these added voices is significant:

I think there is a silent majority that needs to be heard more in terms of youth participation online and these are young people who won't put themselves forward to be involved or allow themselves even be involved. Some of them may not even be in school, you know, or struggling in school… and that's not good because there are many young people, not every young person is going to school, not every young person is in a Foróige group or a national Youth Council. Not every young person is active in the Scouts. Not every young person is even civically engaged ***(Academic).***

A key issue in widening access is the ***potential to facilitate access to hard-to-reach and seldom-heard groups.*** For a variety of reasons, various groups are under-represented when it comes to the existing structures for children and young people's consultation and participation. Children experiencing disadvantage, such as children with reduced sensory, mobility or other disabilities, children in various forms of institutional care etc. are identified as hard to reach and for whom digital tools *may* provide an alternative opportunity for involvement and input. Examples highlighted during interviews with professional stakeholders included reference to initiatives with groups in direct provision, engagement with children with varying levels of physical disability and young people struggling with mental health, for whom positive intervention through digital technologies had produced promising results. Participants expressed caution, however, in considering digital access as better access for marginalised groups. Vulnerable groups, it was argued, are also those likely to require the greatest level of in-person supports. A reliance on technology alone is unlikely to be satisfactory:

there is a very significant grouping of young people and probably those that we most, most, need to listen to and most attentively need to listen to who I think would be challenged to participate and, even if you did get them there, would be able to able to articulate and really understand what the process is about and how to engage in it ***(Civil and Public Servant).***

One further advantage to the perceived enhanced reach to children and young people is the ***ability of social and digital media to pick up issues*** that would be difficult to otherwise identify. Digital methods for consultation encourage children and young people to come forward with topics that they may be thinking about but are reluctant or afraid to raise. Even exploring which interests or concerns young people have, whether they declare them formally or not, can inform a policy process. One youth organisation uses surveys of its own user base as well as wider analytics to inform its programme on an annual basis:

We do look at our data, we do an annual survey of 1500 of our readers to get an understanding about their thoughts, but also the outcomes that they self-report. And we also look at the stuff that is, I guess, unknown to young people, in that, we look at what they're searching for on Google. And that's a huge part of what we do, because for us, to just look at our own statistics and all that sort of thing, misses a whole cohort of young people that we're not reaching ***(Youth Organisation).***

Industry members likewise highlighted their work on sensitive topics with young people including addressing issues of suicide prevention and mental health, abuse, dehumanisation, and race.

b) Exploiting technology: Social and digital media tools, professionals noted, can ***attract and retain users' interest.*** Digital media tools are particularly good at reaching out, making connections with diverse groups and are effective in building communities around shared interests and experiences. Even in face-to-face settings, digital tools can function as icebreakers, not least because it is familiar ground for young people:

We find the digital tools great, even just facilitation tools and engaging young people actually in the Young Voices events, for instance. You can use Mentimeter and I find it's a really good way of young people engaging at the very beginning of the day because maybe they're a bit more apprehensive around telling, so it's a

really good way of everyone seeing where everyone else is at before they maybe come out of their shell a bit ***(Youth Organisation).***

A variety of tools such as quizzes, instant polls, online surveys, gaming apps as well as the underlying analytics capability associated with digital technologies affords a range of opportunities to ***engage and attract input and involvement from participants.*** Relatedly, e-participation tools which include decision-making aids, are considered to have value for groups, once they are engaged and part of a formal process.

In face-to-face settings, digital tools can be ***a positive force for inclusivity,*** offering diverse ways for participants to be involved, online and offline. The ability to incorporate multiple literacies was highlighted through the multimedia capabilities of digital platforms. This was noted, for example, in relation to the ClicNews project which, it was argued, could do more to exploit distinct types of literacy:

There is a reliance within the project we have where it's about writing, it's about literacy. Whereas young people's voices need to be heard perhaps outside of that. And that might not necessarily require them to write, it could be for them to actually talk and, you know, and maybe if a platform was developed where, you know, that could be part of it as well, where there's an opportunity to talk to a camera or talk to a microphone, then you'd probably get a better all-round range of inputs into whatever, you know, whatever policies or whatever voice you're trying to hear ***(Educator).***

The Citizen's Assembly, as a unique project for deliberative democracy in Ireland (for over-18s), used digital strategies to ensure its deliberations extended beyond the immediate forum in which the face-to-face debates took place. Its website, the live streaming of meetings and the use of Twitter to promote proceedings of the Assembly all helped to enable the involvement of the wider public and to ensure the transparency of the process.

You could immerse yourself in the content in the same way that a member would and ... when the papers were made available, we made them available as quickly as possible online. As soon as a presentation was being made, ... we did live streaming and as soon as it was being made, we made it available online and we Tweeted, 'It's now available online'. So, we had this interactive thing going with our audience. We had a really well-developed Twitter strategy where we released content... that allowed a huge amount of audience interaction. And what you say, every single weekend the citizens assembly met, our hashtag was the top trending one across Ireland ***(Civil and Public Servant).***

A key attribute of digital technology that has been successfully deployed by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs[17] is its application for supporting ***an information channel or feedback loop.*** *WhatsApp* groups and similar channels - for example, as used by several Comhairle na nÓg groups - maintain a sense of community and communication to members between meetings but also to wider groups. The most important aspect here is one of feedback even when participation in a policy process is not delivering immediate results:

... that is another very value add dimension of social media, or of any kind of online tool, that the broader population of young people can hear back. because we're not always able to generate a change among the direct policy makers at that moment of time, because it mightn't be the policy opportunity, but it is very important and we ensure that they get access to cabinet committees, or to Oireachtas committees, that they get a big and substantial launch event at least with one Minister, if not two, for the outputs of what they are doing ***(Civil and Public Servant).***

While the ability of digital technology to attract and retain attention was regarded as having benefits, it was not always viewed as a positive. The marketing term of "stickiness", or the ability

17 Renamed as Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth in October 2020.

of websites or apps to hold and ensure repeated attention, was also regarded as a negative and exploitative dimension, leading to overuse of social media by young people with potential adverse effects on health and well-being.

Agency and Children's Rights

A third theme in the discussion of online opportunities and benefits was reference to the empowerment of young people, specifically in the context of ***children's rights in the digital environment.***

There was considerable awareness in interviews of the ***dominance of a risk agenda in public policy*** relating to the role of social and digital media in young people's lives. Different perspectives were in evidence as to how risks and opportunities should be balanced. For some, the focus on risks in the online environment and the overriding emphasis given to protection of minors appeared to be a disproportionate response, while acknowledging the fundamental importance of children's safety when going online. The predominance of a risk agenda was such that it could be seen to infringe on young people's rights to freely express themselves and to access platforms that are important for information and communication. Commentators pointed to the fact that consultations with children will often show that they do not feel as unsafe as adults may think and consequently there is a gap in understanding between adult and child perspectives regarding online vulnerability.

In the context of children's participation rights and having their voices heard, there is an acknowledgement that the State has a key role to play both in terms of ***defending children's rights to online participation as well as bringing about conditions in which safe online access is supported.*** Industry clearly has obligations in this regard though the shared responsibility of supporting a safer and better online environment was also noted during interviews. Such commitments, it was noted, should also be part of human-rights based business principles and corporate social responsibility.

Building on the theme of a rights-based approach to digital participation is the notion of supporting young people's ***agency.*** In deliberative processes, affording agency at the appropriate level and under the right conditions is a key concern to ensure successful involvement. Agency involves giving participants ownership of the process so that it is felt to be meaningful and that recommendations made through the process will have impact. Respecting children and young people's agency and the right to participate by enabling meaningful engagement was underlined as crucial. While there was disagreement as to how effective the digital environment could be, there was a recognition that children should be supported in seeking to fulfil their rights to be heard through digital platforms.

One final consideration that arose during discussions was commentary on the unique opportunity for schools to function as role models and to lead on developing a rights-based approach to participation using social and digital media. Not alone are schools regarded as being well positioned to teach Digital Citizenship skills and human rights, they are ideally placed to function as exemplars through their own practices.

Reference was made to the "Our Voices, Our Schools"[18] initiative as an example of good practice in this regard. This initiative was an outcome of the Comhairle na nÓg National Executive 2016-17 decision to focus specifically on equality in the school setting and the proposal to develop a resource for children's active involvement. Through this resource, schools are encouraged to listen to and involve young people in decision making about matters that affect them in school. The resource is focused on a rights-based approach to involving children and young people in decision-making about their individual and collective everyday lives in school and is underpinned by Lundy's Model of Participation.

A student organisation likewise initiated a campaign to strengthen student involvement in school governance, including representation on Boards of Management:

18 https://www.ourvoicesourschools.ie/

> *Our vision is to see that Student Councils in school would be recognised and listened to as a stakeholder group and recognised in the same way as parents and teachers are in the community. Students should be recognised in that sense too and have as much of input into the policy that the school makes and the policies that they sign as well as all the other stakeholders. At the moment a lot of these things are written by the board of management and then like students are just signing them off, but they had no input into it in the first place. So, that's our main goal is that students' voices are heard and that they're recognised **(Youth Organisation)**.*

Confidence was expressed that those initiatives showed significant potential and that further development of a school-based activity in modelling effective participation structures supported or augmented through digital participation tools was timely and relevant.

5.2 Challenges to digital participation

While there was qualified support among professional stakeholders for the notion that digital technologies could play a positive role in children's social and civic participation, some reservations were expressed, addressing both practical and theoretical issues. These are summarised under the following headings:

- Concerns regarding the technology and its limitations
- Concerns about implementing digital participation practices
- An overall concern for a rights-based approach to children's participation

As with the theme of digital opportunities and benefits, a range of perspectives were offered. Individual topics and examples discussed are summarised below.

Concerns about the technology

a) Is social media appropriate for participatory practice? A key issue touched on during discussions with professional stakeholders was the suitability of social media as a platform for participation and representing children and young people's views in the context of public decision-making. Notwithstanding the fact that young people in vast numbers express themselves on social media, the question was raised as to whether such platforms were right for the topics or processes involved. The distinction was drawn between the digital technology and social media platforms. The former may offer useful functions and attributes including dedicated platforms designed for active participation and deliberation. The latter were viewed as commercialised spaces whose primary purpose was monetising users' data, not representing young people's voices. The use of social media platforms popular with young people therefore posed a dilemma for some professional stakeholders who both rely on digital platforms for communications purposes and value the apparent amplification of issues and youth voices that such platforms appear to foster:

> *In the wider environment the kinds of campaign issues which can spread through social media and social media has played a role within that. Is that valuable in any sense in terms of being able to draw on that for consultative purposes? Or does it somewhat disrupt the consultative process where you have a much more measured and controlled environment in which the consultation happens? Again, these are just some of the possible issues or problems about using wider social media platforms as opposed to a dedicated platform **(NGO)**.*

There was a sense among professionals that despite the clear enthusiasm of young people to actively engage on social media platforms, this ***could not be construed as active participation*** and was missing some of the central elements needed. A key ingredient in this respect is, ironically, the lack of an audience, or being listened to. Stakeholders felt that children's voices would get lost in the wider social media space, underlining again the observation that the internet was not designed with children in mind. In those instances, an argument was put forward in favour of dedicated platforms that were secure and safe and ensured the right target audience was available to listen. This was felt to be especially important for younger users:

> *That voice is going to get lost in any of … the social media environments that are there at the moment unless, you know, you come up with something very big and you find yourself outside the Dáil and somebody is interviewing you. So, for the most part, your voice is not going to be heard if you're young within the existing social media network platforms as they stand. I would think that a place is needed for them to feel that they are being heard. And then there's an opportunity for them to not just put their own opinions across but also to see the opinions of other children and young people their own age. So, as it stands, I'm not too sure if they would feel that their voice could be heard within the existing platforms so, therefore, perhaps something needs to be created to allow them to feel that there is something there **(Educator)**.*

It was acknowledged in such discussions that ***age is a key factor when considering the suitability of different technology platforms***. For younger users, the only practical solution is to deploy dedicated, safe environments that have restricted access, are appropriately moderated and are the subject of verifiable parental consent. Older age groups, on the other hand, will prefer a more open digital environment and the appeal of reaching out to wider audiences on mainstream social media platforms. Developing students' communication and literacy skills through publishing on public platforms is, for example, an established practice in media literacy programmes at secondary school level that shows potential for civic participation purposes.

For their part, industry representatives pointed to the self-organising communities that organically develop and use platforms for activism and to engage in policy debates. Whether or not they are promoted or amplified by service providers, social media platforms have at their core the building of communities of interest and thus are inherently participatory. Citing research conducted in the United States, Twitter highlighted that:

> *85% of young Twitter users say they want to make the world a better place; 75% of young Twitter users say they have engaged with a social or political cause on Twitter; 70% of young Twitter users say social media brings attention to social and political causes **(Industry Representative)***

A further question was raised, echoing the debate in the literature, as to how representative ***social media participation*** was of all young people and whether those voices that are heard online are any more representative than those who put themselves forward in conventional contexts. For that reason, in educational settings, keeping some form of registration is important:

> *There's no point in sort of doing that, what you would call the true social media piece because you just don't know whose voice you're actually getting. So therefore, do you have some sort of registration system and a variety of schools and next year to cover all different backgrounds and everything else? And that will probably be the way to make sure that your polling was done well **(Educator).***

b) Safety is key: Not surprisingly, one of the key issues put forward during interviews was the question of young people's safety online. Concerns were raised that applying digital technologies to participation processes could create safety risks for young people. For some commentators, the apparent ***lack of any safety standards on the most popular platforms used by young people*** reinforced their view that digital technologies had little to offer youth participation in the conventional sense. Indeed, the prevalence of risks such as trolling, cyber bullying and the widespread presence of harmful online content meant that expressing support for online participation could be considered as a breach of children's rights. In this context, the right of the child to protection and to a safe and secure environment was held to be paramount.

In the youth sector, many organisations reported that they would not use social media in the course of their work, whether setting up a social media pages or using messenger services,

due to safety concerns. ***Online safety and concerns about privacy,*** particularly so in the context of compliance with GDPR, were the two most often cited reasons for not deploying digital technologies even for purposes of communication.

> *So, in order for it to be in any way an active participation or a meaningful engagement, we need to make sure the space is safe and at the moment the space is not safe and I'm not talking about monitoring everything that they're doing, I'm talking about all these cookies being collected, all this data being collected, all this terms and conditions that are being put into the programmes that they're using. They're being targeted because they're the next generation. All their photographs that they're putting up. All their kind of, personal data is just being collected, collected, collected and nobody is stopping Facebook or WhatsApp or any of these companies from doing that and I think that's a Government responsibility if I'm honest and I think before we can even approach the subject of meaningful participation and active in decision to make sure the space is safe and at the moment it's not safe* **(Youth Organisation)**.

Interestingly, some stakeholders pointed out that young people themselves, especially older teenagers from 16 upwards, also articulate concerns over the safety and suitability of social media platforms for younger users. Yet, there was also concern that without the ability to learn from experience, users may lose out on building resilience:

> *There is a kind of a precaution there, which I think is really good, because it helps us keep our perspective balanced. But it is interesting that as they get slightly older, that they look back and they contemplate, well actually, do you know what, if I had been restricted – overly restricted, this is not to say that they had free rein – but if I had been overly policed perhaps, I wouldn't have learned some of the important lessons that there are to learn. ... you have to leave people make mistakes, otherwise they're never going to learn. And so, if we wrap children and young people in cotton wool until they're 16, you're actually probably placing them at higher risk, when they do enter into the space where other young people, either in this country or other countries, will have had... will be more developed in their approach to digital **(NGO)**.*

Industry representatives pointed to the ongoing efforts to improve safety and to involve young people themselves in the consultations leading to improved product safety:

> *Over the past number of years, we have been working hard to improve our policies and have opened our policy creation process to the public. We are conscious that we do not have a monopoly on good ideas, and opening this process to people of all ages, experiences, and cultures can help us improve our policy work. We have also made significant improvements in our tooling and investments in machine learning, which have seen 50% of all content actioned being flagged to human reviewers by machine learning **(Industry Representative)**.*

It was also argued that a degree of trust in young people's agency and ability to successfully manage risk was needed. As argued by one academic expert:

> can we maybe learn from what children and people already doing from social media to avoid maybe these harmful bits of it? And to go to places and forums of engagement where they get that more constructive conversation, where they are able to exercise their right to be heard. If you look at what is happening on social media ... what you see happening is that they are avoiding these really public spaces where there is a lot of negative discourse and they are sort of slipping away into the more ephemeral spaces, you know, like Messenger chats or Instagram comments or whatever and where they are less visible, but they are able to build these environments where they are able to exchange opinions without necessarily being judged by adults or being piled up on by trolls or whatever. So, it is really interesting to see how their – even though nobody is

> really, or very few people are assisting them, they are still able to carve out those spaces ***(Academic)***.

In this way, young people, it is claimed, are using the affordances of social media to carve out spaces where they can more freely express themselves. It also underscores the point that this is something young people want to exercise even if they require further support to achieve such aims. Not to do so is to diminish what young people can and have achieved in such spaces for the purposes of voicing their opinions, expressing their thoughts and forging their identities as civic actors.

c) The technology is insufficiently developed: Some further issues were raised regarding the state of the art of digital technologies for participation practice. As currently developed, it was argued, many were ***not suited to the needs of youth participation in public decision-making processes.*** While it was acknowledged to be as much an issue related to the need for greater investment in technology and expertise, it was held that the ***technology was not yet developed to the point*** that it could be made available on a more mainstream basis. By way of illustration, it was pointed out that there is a significant gap between the formal approaches adopted by governments or by European institutions when inviting young people to participate in online forms of consultation and young people's own experiences of social and digital use.

Where efforts have been made to demystify the policy making process and to create more accessible opportunities for young people, it was regarded that these are at an early stage of development as illustrated by the few examples that have been deployed. As such, much further development of the relevant technology and digital solutions is needed if the technology is to address and respond to the complexity of the policy making and decision-making process.

Concerns about implementation

Alongside the issues raised about the nature of the technology itself and its suitability for civic participation, a variety of concerns were raised about the implementation of consultative or participatory projects using digital technologies. These related to more practical concerns of recreating the conditions that apply offline as, for example, outlined in the Lundy Model of Participation (Lundy, 2007).

a) Representativeness is diminished: Concerns were expressed about the ***representativeness that online consultation and participation in the digital space*** would afford. Just as in the offline world, socio-economic differences privilege some groups over others in their ability to take part in such activities, so equivalent digital divides will skew those who may be able to participate and those who do not. Such divides replicate all the relevant social factors – gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status – that contribute to unequal forms of opportunity. As outlined by one academic expert:

> *Arguably, we could say in some countries it is women or younger people (who are disadvantaged). In other countries it is other minorities, ethnic minorities, social minorities or whatever it may be. Yes, they all technically have equal access and technically they are all on the same platform which professes freedom of speech. But in reality, their emotional experiences are very different. The cost of sharing an opinion, for a white man and an African American woman on Twitter in the US might be very different. The same goes for teenagers, depending on who you are and what you look like and what sorts of opinions you express and where. So, I think in democratic countries that is the predominant debate is how do we balance preserving freedom for everyone with making sure that people who are traditionally given less of a platform are actually given that platform* ***(Academic).***

Relatedly, the question was also raised as to whether participation using digital technologies ***would be any more representative than its analogue equivalent.*** In face-to-face participation processes, a targeted recruitment of participants applies which avoids problems of self-selection. While digital platforms may attract greater numbers, they may not be more representative or less subject to bias. As a result, recruitment of participants and representativeness in online settings were cited

as potentially problematic. While these could be overcome with sufficient preparation, these are issues that need to be considered when validating the approach:

> *Representativeness of it is always an issue or a question mark. You know, you can have, you know, let's say a strong poll on a particular topic, is that a valuable input? Well, again it's open to debate and it can be one input but on its own it often needs to be supplemented by other forms* ***(NGO)****.*

b) Loss of authenticity: A range of views were also put forward that expressed concern about the potential loss of authenticity in online environments for engaging with young people.

For example, the issue was raised by some professionals that certain ***features of the participation process could not be replicated online.*** Youth participation practice, alongside the detailed preparation and methodological aspects, involves a range of soft skills which moderators use to encourage and facilitate participation. Crucially, this is facilitation and not interpretation. To lend authenticity to the process, it is youth voices that must be prioritised and be given ownership of the process. This is something that could be potentially lost in the online setting where, it was felt, a ***further level of adult mediation was needed to oversee the process,*** thus diminishing the agency and authority given to young participants. So, for example, using established participatory processes such as consultation workshops – as reported in Chapter 4 – it is young people themselves who, with minimal adult involvement, generate the data and develop the analysis such as organising themes and key messages. This could be lost in an online replication of the exercise. The example of the consultation on the LGBTI+ National Youth Strategy was given as an illustration. To process the extensive online input received, adults had to be involved in collating and interpreting the material in a way that would not have happened in an offline setting:

> *The challenge when you go to the online platform, as an adult somebody has to do an awful lot more of the interpreting and grouping of what young people say. So, if you go to the methods we use, so we got 4,000 odd young people through an online platform partner and we were really satisfied with a lot of it. In this event it concurred an awful lot with what came everywhere else, so that became quite easy, but the challenge is an adult then has to do a lot of work in interpreting, grouping and analysing, which when we do our work with groupings of young people, we don't do any of that* ***(Civil and Public Servant)****.*

A concern was also expressed that the use of digital technologies might be exploited as an easy alternative to undertaking full scale youth consultation and that only minimal efforts would be made to include young people as a tick box exercise. Youth organisations and participation experts expressed concerns that the use of digital technologies might result in a ***very tokenistic representation of young people.*** The way in which digital communications approaches make access easier also runs the risk of being ***less thorough and less authentic,*** providing policy makers with an easy solution to what is known to be a complex and detailed process. Interestingly, this concern was expressed both by youth organisations and by public officials and pointed to the need to ensure that the degree of care and attention that goes into preparing face-to-face participatory methods needs to be replicated in the online environment. Detailed preparation cannot be replaced, it was argued, by anonymous online polls, instant surveys or mass gathering of input through digital platforms. They were viewed as fundamentally different in orientation. Concern was also expressed that the extensive efforts, as expressed in the National Youth Participation Strategy, to create ***a culture of youth consultation could be squandered*** if such methods were to be circumvented and replaced by poorly prepared digital solutions.

Professional stakeholders also pointed out that there is a crucial listening aspect to participation which, especially in the context of sensitive topics, might be absent in a technology-mediated process. By way of example, the "Listen to our voices" consultation (McEvoy & Smith, 2011) which involved voices of children and young people living in the care of the State,

was given as an example that could only be handled in the most sensitive way *in situ* with the young people involved.

A further barrier to the authenticity of the participation process was cited in relation to how the input from young people could be translated into influence. This is an area that does require adult mediation in that it requires decision-makers to be actively engaged in the process and committed to the implementation of outcomes. Again, concern was expressed that this could be lost when a digital-only process was involved:

> *So, working through the process to "audience" and "influence" does not just happen and it is really important that we don't allow the online space become a mechanism for tick boxing, high volume participation and actually nothing being done with it. So, I think that whoever is the guardians of it need to be very clear about their responsibilities, to do something meaningful with what the children and young people have to say, and to support them and enable them to have access to the platforms for decision-making and if they don't, I'm not really convinced that it is much more than a tick box exercise, and that to me is the real risk* ***(Civil and Public Servant).***

c) Providing the right level of support: Given the different circumstances that apply in the digital environment, the question was raised if the equivalent supports, including resourcing, training and follow up, could also be made available in the online space.

Groups with special needs were of particular concern. Processes to facilitate their involvement and participation in consultation exercises require specialised arrangements, facilities and support. The conditions applying to various groups of hard-to-reach cohorts vary in each context, e.g., representatives of the Traveller Community; various cohorts of children and young people in the care of the State; children with sensory disabilities, all of whom require specialised support. All professional stakeholders agreed that support in this context was vital:

> *how do you consult with children who are probably in care or you know might be in care for a short period of time or might be really young? Or, you know, where do you find these children, how do you ethically do this because you're going to be talking about something that's really personal and possibly involves abuse. It involves their family members, you know. The support is a big thing … it totally depends on the context but if they're (the child), you know, sitting alone somewhere scrolling you know doing something and there's also the question of age restriction and GDPR, does that mean you limit it to 16 or older or do you have to get parental consent. If it's around an LGBT issue for example, or an issue that a parent might not be involved in, the child might not want to get some sort of a consent. How do you do that?* ***(NGO).***

Added to this, when a fully representative process of consultation is sought, such arrangements must be mobilised across all groups. Experience to date with online consultation exercises has tended to be applied on an open basis for the entire population without reference to representativeness or to the participation of specific groups.

Support for the participation process does not refer only to those whose views are being sought. Decision-makers, as the sponsors of the process, also need support to be effective. Civil and public servant representatives noted that recruiting supportive public decision-makers was not always easy. It required dialogue and persuasion, as well as induction into the very particular kind of thinking underpinning children's participation in decision-making. Such training aims at adding a layer of understanding for managers, organisational leaders and decision-makers about children and children's lives.

> *We've done very extensive training processes with Sport Ireland, HIQA and currently with the Irish Inspectorate, the Education School Inspectorate, and it has been a really iterative process to arrive at the training objectives for those people, because in fact despite the fact that they*

> *are working for and on behalf and with children every day, this is a different piece for them. This is not core to what they do and thinking about it from a children's rights perspective and a children's right to be heard perspective is not core to their day-to-day business **(Civil and Public Servant)**.*

As such, there was a belief among professionals that participation in the online or digital environment was less structured and had not, at least to date, embraced the full range of supports that might apply within established processes.

Making Participation Meaningful

The third set of concerns about digitalisation in the context of children and young people's participation addressed its perceived shortcomings from a rights-based perspective, noting that these are concerns not unique to the digital environment.

A key issue for professional stakeholders was the fundamental requirement that children and young people's voices be listened to in the context of the policy process. It was not enough for consultations to be run. What was needed was to act on their findings and ensure the outputs were being acted upon. The challenge is to ensure that policy makers actively listen and incorporate findings in a way that is respectful of children's right to be heard. However, assumptions are often made about what young people have said, or where young people's views and experiences are not taken seriously on the basis that adults know better:

> *it's one thing to do the consultation exercise, but it's another thing for it to actually influence what is going on. And that's fundamentally why young people engage with us, because they know what they say will influence what we're going to do, and we'll tell them how it did. What I find sometimes with government departments is that it's not really necessarily about influencing, it's about either validating previously held opinions on what should be policy, or should be a strategy, or it's just to be able to say that you've done it – so it's a tick-box exercise **(NGO)**.*

Youth participants also need to feel they are being listened to. The ClicNews project reported that one of the challenges they experienced was giving participants sufficient feedback:

> *part of the feedback we got from the teachers was that when they didn't feel they had an audience, like they thought they were going to be doing You Tube and, you know, it's like their Facebook page or Instagram and everyone is going to like what they're wearing or like what, so they wanted the equivalent in people liking what they're writing. And when they weren't getting that then the enthusiasm and the positivity kind of disappeared **(Educator)**.*

Young people being over-consulted and the setting in of survey fatigue was also noted. The experience of frustration on being asked repeatedly for input without follow up or evidence of success or impact was commented on:

> *one young person in care said that, "I've been asked so many times you know, for my views on things and I've asked so many times would I get involved in this and I've got involved in five or six things and absolutely nothing, once they heard what I said they closed the book". So, being listened to is very good but being heard and acted on is a different thing and I think that's the biggest challenge actually in one way **(Academic)**.*

Having one's voice heard in the context of public decision making is about influencing the policy process. Noting just how difficult this can be was commented on in relation to the initiative to reform the Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) curriculum in primary and secondary schools. The Comhairle na nÓg National Executive first held consultations on the topic on the inadequacies of the current system ten years previously, supported by evidence of the experiences of young people in terms of RSE and SPHE. Yet, it took over ten years for the Oireachtas Education Committee to call on the government to reform the programme, something that has not evolved in over two decades.

Making the process meaningful may not always be about outcomes, influence, and change, it was argued. The process itself must be responsive to the needs of participants:

> *when you look at the kind of the engagement and then you look at the relationship between engagement and participation, there's a river that it gets lost on and then when you get to participation, I think linking up participation to better outcomes is not a good idea. I don't think that's always appropriate. For many young people it's actually about coping it's not about outcomes. It's the journey to outcomes. So, process is really, really important* ***(Academic)****.*

Finally, it was argued, there exists an overall challenge to bring about a coordinated response to the rights of children and young people not just in the attainment of children's rights in the digital environment but on a holistic basis. This entails a level of joined up thinking for policy makers and a coming together of the respective agencies, departments, and expertise to consolidate a national position as to how meaningful participation can be realised digitally, as well as in face-to-face, offline settings.

5.3 Phase 3 Summary

The professional stakeholder consultation phase provides both a parallel and a complementary commentary on the issues raised during the consultation with children and young people. Similar themes were identified in terms of positive opportunities that could be made available for online participation and which recognised the benefits enjoyed by young people currently in their use of social and digital media. Professional stakeholders commented on these positive opportunities as well as the challenges to harnessing digital technologies for the purposes of participation. For some, such barriers were significant while in other cases, it was a question of working towards appropriate solutions. In drawing on this material, the approach taken was to distil the underlying arguments which could be summarised as a set of principles to underpin successful digital participation.

As the foregoing discussion shows, professional stakeholders had mixed views regarding the use of social and digital media to support young people's right to be heard. A range of positions were offered on the advantages and disadvantages that digital participation might offer. While some stakeholders held positions that were more definitive that digitalisation should be positively embraced, many held reservations while acknowledging its potential benefits. Given that the stakeholders consulted came from different professional and disciplinary backgrounds, this is not surprising. With little established practice in the field to go on, it was difficult to point to exemplars and accordingly many were positive in principle though qualified in their support.

In summary, the following list brings together key points from the professional stakeholder consultation that contribute to the overall research question of *how can social and digital media be mobilised appropriately and effectively for the right of children to be heard in the context of public decision-making processes affecting them?*

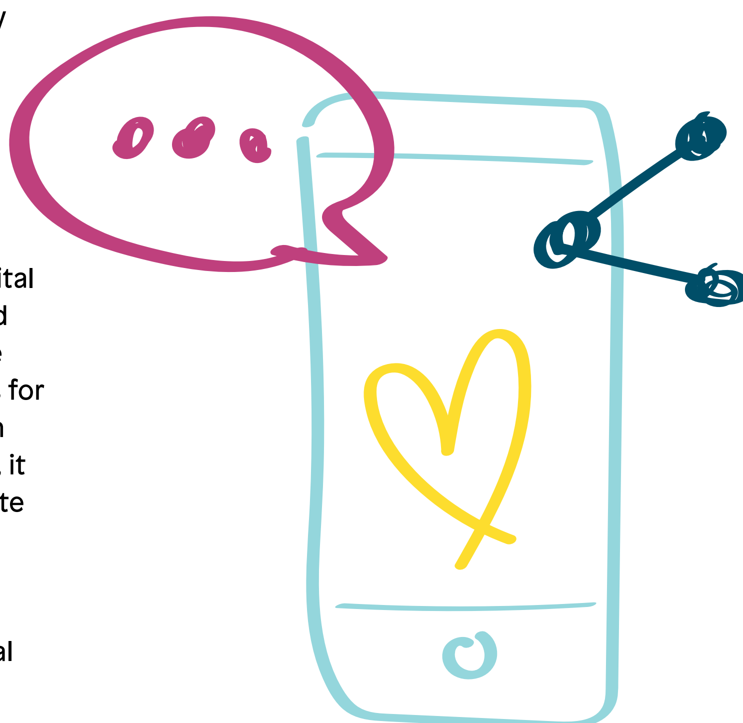
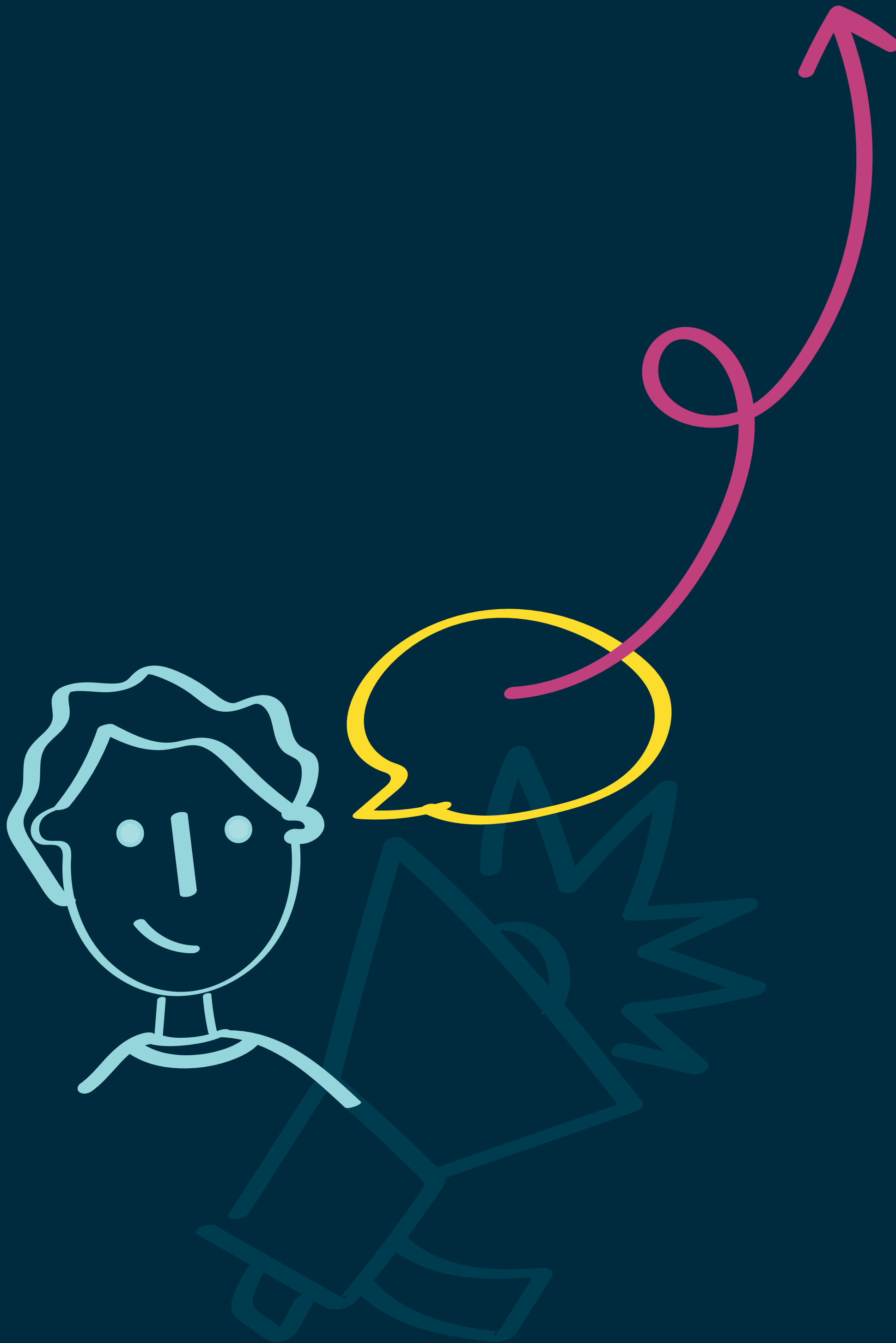


Table 5: Phase 3 Professional Stakeholder Consultation – Summary Findings

Opportunities	Professionals support the idea of addressing children where they are to be found and that digital spaces were particularly important in the lives of children and young people.
	The ability to both engage and empower young people through social and digital media offers powerful potential for youth participation.
Challenges	It is important to balance risks and opportunities and to manage the many safety issues that may compromise the participation process.
Technologies	The particular affordances of digital technologies offer a range of opportunities and benefits to enhance participation.
	Social media platforms are a great way to reach and engage young people but their application to participation practice is limited.
Rights	The State has a role in delineating and defending children's rights in the digital environment.
	To be effective, participation must be meaningful and therefore all dimensions of the participation model, connecting different rights, should be taken into account when building digital participation opportunities.

Section 6

Conclusion



6. Conclusion

Children and young people enjoy unprecedented levels of access to information, communication, and entertainment through their use of social and digital media. Given the centrality of digital technologies in children's lives (Livingstone et al., 2015), there is now an urgent need for policy makers to foster positive and rewarding online experiences for children that advance their rights and contribute to their well-being. Harnessing the opportunity to progress children's right to be heard in public decision-making is one key element of this policy priority.

This chapter brings together the main findings of the three phases of the research, including findings from the literature review, empirical evidence gathered from children and young people and from professional stakeholders. The chapter concludes with observations on the way forward for the further development of children's right to be heard through social and digital media.

6.1 What the Literature is telling us

Children's right to be heard

Children's right to be heard as expressed in Article 12 of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child supplies the foundation for the current research study. As one of the four guiding principles of the Convention, participation has received increasing attention from governments, policy makers, service providers and researchers seeking to give effect to children's right to be heard in new and meaningful ways. Supporting children's participation is a basis for respecting their rights in all the relevant contexts – the home, education, healthcare, judicial systems etc. – in which children are present. The recognition of children's right to be heard in the context of social and digital media is a new area of focus and requires further attention in both legal and policy contexts.

Children's right to be heard in public decision-making requires sufficient support for children to be included in the process of deliberation and the determination of outcomes on matters that affect them. Several models have been advanced to support effective participation. Building on Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation (1969), Hart (1992), Treseder (1997) and Kirby et al. (2003) are among those to have advanced approaches that take account of active engagement, children's abilities and potential for effective, meaningful impact. Lundy's Model of Participation (2007) has been particularly influential in this regard, including in the Irish context, and sets out the key elements required to support children's voices being heard.

Ireland's *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making 2015 – 2020* (DCYA, 2015d) underpins governmental commitment and policy support for Article 12. *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* (DCYA, 2014), the Government's overarching national policy framework for children and young people, has as one of its goals that children's voices will be heard (Goal 3). Participatory mechanisms to support this and the *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making 2015 – 2020* include local youth councils (Comhairle na nÓg) and the national youth parliament (Dáil na nÓg). A specialised participation unit, Hub na nÓg, exists to support Government Departments, State agencies and NGOs to advance the implementation of children's right to be heard.

To date, there has been little policy attention given to the potential that social and digital media may offer as regards progressing the realisation of children's right to be heard. A mid-term review of the *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making 2015 – 2020* refers to support for online safety but does not include any role for social or digital media in participation (DCYA, 2019). At the level of national policy, the *National Youth Strategy 2015–2020* (DCYA, 2015a) recognises the presence of social and digital media in children and young people's lives. This includes reference to the quality of media provision and the acquisition of digital skills (Outcome 2.7). Social and digital media are also referenced in terms of young people contributing ideas to their communities in the

"media of their choice" (Outcome 1, DCYA, 2015b, p. 24), in the representation of young people's views in the Digital Strategy for Schools (DCYA, 2015c) and through the Webwise Youth Advisory Panel. However, explicit references to social and digital media as mechanisms for supporting children to express their views are lacking both in the *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making 2015 – 2020* and *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*.

Mobilising social and digital media use

The literature highlights a range of opportunities and benefits that social and digital media offer children and young people. However, researchers have cautioned against an over-celebratory approach in favour of careful interrogation of the evidence to understand the impact of the digital environment on children's lives and how positive opportunities may be enhanced (Buckingham, 1998; Livingstone, 2017).

Children's social and digital media use has advanced at a rapid rate, with young people to the fore as early adopters of digital technologies and services. Social media use is now deeply embedded into processes of information gathering, content sharing and identity formation for children and young people (Lincoln & Robards, 2016). Children and young people's take up of participatory activities and civic engagement is, however, not necessarily an outcome of their digital use and research shows that only a minority of children attain more interactive, creative and engaged activities characteristic of civic participation (Livingstone, Bober, & Helsper, 2005; Livingstone et al., 2011). Research from Ireland confirms this general trend, with high levels of social media use, including significant numbers of underage users, but with relatively low levels of activities associated with civic engagement or participation (O'Neill & Dinh, 2015).

Promoting civic engagement in a digital context has been addressed in several policy domains. For example, the development of digital skills and digital competence in the education domain (Carretero et al., 2017), the focus on critical media literacy in public policy (Frau-Meigs et al., 2017), and supporting competences for democratic culture (Council of Europe, 2017) have each highlighted the contribution that the digital environment can make to citizenship. Digital Citizenship, according to Third and Collin (2016), is a concept *"brimming with promise for rethinking citizenship through the digital"* yet too often policy makers restrict this to considerations of online safety and responsible online use (p.42). As such, there is wide scope for developing it further both in policy and in practice (Recommendation CM / Rec (2019)10 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on Developing and Promoting Digital Citizenship Education, 2019).

Research on young people's participatory digital use has sought to explore new notions of associative and deliberative participation characterised by citizenship in the digital environment (Loader et al., 2014), countering claims of young people's apathy or disengagement from public affairs. While there is some evidence of young people losing interest in mainstream politics and withdrawing from traditional forms of participation in the democratic process, researchers have highlighted the participation of young people in new forms of politics such as activism and new social movements as pointing to a wider view of civic and political participation (Loader & Mercea, 2011).

An interest in e-government and the benefits that ICTs can bring to the provision of public services and policy making has given rise to a large body of developmental work in technology platforms to support consultation and participation. The field of e-participation continues to develop, combining developments in interactive communications technologies, machine learning and social software solutions (European Parliament, 2016; OECD, 2020). However, low institutional and public take up of e-participation (Luna-Reyes, 2017) and insufficient connection to the policy cycle (Coelho et al., 2017) have hampered progress. Youth e-participation initiatives reflect the growing interest in harnessing the potential of digital technologies to enhance youth services more generally and in experimental work towards fostering a culture of participation for and with young people. A variety of approaches exist, including the development of dedicated e-participation platforms for young people alongside the use of social media to support

active participation. These have several limitations, however, such as the relative inaccessibility of platforms for most users and their general lack of suitability for younger children (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2017).

Participatory practice

In an Irish context, social and digital media have been used to beneficial effect in consultation activities to support input into policy making by young people. Notable examples include the consultation on the *LGBTI+ National Youth Strategy (DCYA, 2017) and the consultation on the National Youth Strategy 2015-20* (DCYA, 2015a), both of which extended the reach and depth of consultation through digital technologies. Increasing the level and broadening the nature of consultation with children and young people provide the most obvious means by which young people's participation in policy making might be extended. Few examples of deliberative processes using social and digital media were found, however, pointing to an area for further development.

Internationally, examples such as UNICEF's U-Report initiative and the innovative use by the 5 *Rights Foundation* of deliberative approaches in children's online participation stand out. The burgeoning field of youth e-participation also offers models for future development and deployment of digital technologies in public decision-making. Still at an early stage of development, dedicated platforms for youth e-participation exhibit some of the same limitations that apply to e-government more generally and require further development and stakeholder buy-in to bring about effective implementation.

Participatory practice in digital youth work provides a valuable source of guidance into the conditions needed to support children and young people's digital participation (European Commission, 2018). These include alignment with children's experiences, and developing interventions that are child-friendly, respectful of children's privacy and respond in ways that support their ongoing engagement. The development of the necessary resource framework is also paramount and underlines the observation that digital implementation requires investment and support.

Successful models of practice show that while technology on its own is not a solution, used in complementary ways that integrate online and offline interaction, it offers an approach to participation that aligns well with young people's own digital practices. Other benefits afforded by social and digital media include development of communication strategies that appeal to wider sections of the population and that overcome inequalities that may be reproduced in participatory processes (Cammaerts et al., 2013).

On the other hand, the under-developed nature of the field is a limitation. To date, practice has developed in *ad hoc* ways with insufficient consideration of the resource requirements, the design implications, or the challenges, particularly for smaller organisations, to meet expectations of young people who are accustomed to highly interactive and compelling media content. For young people also, information overload and the availability of too much choice in terms of social and digital media add further barriers to participation. Educational models to support Digital Citizenship, therefore, require further support and embedding, without which children and young people may not develop the skills necessary to participate effectively or be drawn to engagement activity in the first place.

6.2 What Children are Telling Us

Building on the literature review, primary research was conducted with children and young people to collect new findings on children's experiences and to hear from them about what was most important in their digital lives. The research highlighted the extent of their immersion in the digital environment, their familiarity with digital devices and platforms and their interest in finding new opportunities to express themselves.

What children enjoy online

Evidence was provided throughout the workshops and focus groups about the positive features that children and young people enjoyed in their online activity. Two main aspects stood out. Firstly, being able to communicate and stay

connected was paramount in all the sessions held with children and young people. Secondly, and just as important, was being able to access information easily, anywhere, and anytime.

The appeal of *communicating through digital technologies* was noteworthy. Children maintain relationships with family and close friendships through a host of digital applications. Indeed, they find it difficult to imagine how they would manage without easy access to such communications devices. Children also described how they found it appealing to communicate across distance and make new contacts and friends this way. Particularly noteworthy was the finding that young people use digital platforms to discuss difficult topics and find it was easier to have conversations online about sensitive issues.

The feature of *access to information* also stood out in the consultations. Children highlighted how they enjoyed the easy access to unlimited amounts of information, available whenever they need it. They highlighted this as a powerful force for good in the digital environment and recognised its potential to overcome barriers and digital divides in the real world. Many of the schools visited had integrated digital approaches into classroom settings, something which children appreciated as it allowed them to take learning beyond the classroom. They also found learning online and through digital tools to be fun and engaging; it enabled them to pursue their own interests and to socialise with others who shared those interests.

The openness to communication and the learning styles shown by the young people who took part in the study underscored their positive disposition towards using social and digital media as a means of expression and making their voices heard.

The problems encountered

A range of challenges about the digital environment were also highlighted in the consultations. Of the various problems noted, the prevalence of cyberbullying and negative online communications stood out as inhibitors to a more positive online experience for children and young people. Participants were acutely aware of the frequent negativity that prevailed on digital platforms used by young people and the harm this caused to well-being, personal relationships, and the ability to communicate freely online. This negativity was compounded by the growing problem of unwanted contact by strangers. Young people also expressed concerns about their privacy when taking part in online discussions. While some participants had grown accustomed to prevalent online abuse and shrugged it off as something that did not bother them particularly, young people in all the workshops and focus groups had much to say about what in their view should be done to counter harmful features online. They wanted to see better controls online, better safety standards on the platforms they used and more support from industry and government in making their experience of the digital environment safer and more rewarding. They also recommended more training and digital skills for both young people and adults alike. Children and young people said they would welcome schools taking on such issues.

Having your say online

Balancing the good and the bad experiences they had in using social and digital media, children and young people were in general supportive of the notion of the digital environment as a place where they could express themselves. Young people were almost unanimous in the view that the internet is a good place to have their voices heard. Furthermore, they expressed confidence in their abilities to negotiate the various challenges involved. They viewed the digital space as one where young people could make their voices heard and responded positively to activists such as Greta Thunberg who had used digital platforms so effectively. Environmental causes, social justice, as well as climate action sustainability were particularly important topics for them and issues on which they had much to say. Participants were also motivated by issues in their local area as well as by problems facing young people in general. Issues raised included peer pressure, eating disorders, online bullying, and young people's mental health. These are all topics on which they would like to have their voices heard.

A variety of ideas arose from the discussions with children and young people about how they

could avail of new opportunities to have their voices heard using existing digital platforms. One of the ideas that received much support was the suggestion of a dedicated platform which would be both a resource to inform and educate young people about key issues of interest to them and where young people could express their opinions about prominent topics. Participants agreed that this should be a safe and secure environment to have the support of young people and adults alike. The idea of such a platform being hosted by a public or state agency was appealing to young people. They also expressed the desire for a digital participation space where young people would have confidence that they are listened to, where they could find trustworthy information, where they could be regularly polled for their opinions and where they could actively contribute their ideas and perspectives. Participants also suggested that social and digital media could be a good way for public agencies, including the Ombudsman for Children's Office, to communicate directly with children and young people while enabling them to take part in consultations and supply input into key questions and topics affecting them.

6.3 What are Professional Stakeholders Saying?

Professional stakeholders consulted included civil and public servants, academics, educators, youth organisations and industry. Stakeholders were also asked to reflect on the key issues relating to the use of social and digital media to facilitate children's right to be heard and to offer their views on the best way to create a more participatory digital future.

The benefits of going digital

Professional stakeholders acknowledged that 'going digital' in terms of communicating with young people was important as this is where young people are to be found. Employing digital technologies, it was argued, could allow better targeting to specific cohorts of young people, the ability to reach larger, more dispersed audiences while offering different points of entry for young people to become involved. Many youth organisations have pioneered the use of digital technologies in the course of their work and pointed to emerging practice in this field as a useful source of policy guidance.

The affordances of digital technologies could, professionals argued, be deployed for participation purposes. Industry professionals pointed to examples where their services were being used for this purpose. Digital technologies, it was argued, have the potential to reach larger numbers of young people than conventional consultation methods. Social and digital media also offer alternative points of contact for hard-to-reach groups, noting that special supports may be needed for vulnerable populations. Furthermore, it was noted that digital technologies provide new ways to incorporate feedback that can easily supplement existing mechanisms for that purpose.

Social and digital media, it was felt, had advantages in terms of the variety of techniques they can offer for collecting input from young people. Such approaches were also appealing to young people and had the potential to foster a new interest in participation. A further important aspect was the empowerment of young people through social and digital media, providing them with the opportunity and the skills to make their voice heard, even despite the limitations of some platforms.

In a wider context, it was argued that facilitating young people being heard through social and digital media can contribute to better support for children's rights in the digital environment (Livingstone et al., 2020). Going beyond a focus on protection to embrace positive opportunities for participation also highlighted the importance of providing a policy stimulus for children's digital participation. It was noted that there is a responsibility on industry to ensure its services are safe and secure, and that the role of the State is crucial in setting the appropriate regulatory and environmental framework.

Barriers and challenges

Professional stakeholders echoed some of the issues raised in the workshops and focus groups with young people. Just as children and young people raised concerns regarding the prevalence of cyberbullying, intrusions on privacy and unwanted communications, so too professionals called attention to the

safety concerns that prompted them to adopt a cautious approach in the adoption of digital technologies for participatory purposes.

A question raised by some professional stakeholders was whether social media platforms were appropriate in any context for the purposes of engaging with and consulting young people? While digital technologies have a role to play in connecting with young people, concerns for privacy and safety on commercial platforms were such that separate, dedicated spaces would be needed, it was argued, for formal deliberative processes. Stakeholders acknowledged the active way in which young people use social and digital media to self-organise, raise awareness and to mobilise action around topics of interest. However, as many argued, this is not the same as participation in public decision-making. Such participation was not seen to be any more representative than existing methodologies for recruiting young people into consultation and participation exercises. Concerns were also expressed that digital platforms, as currently configured, were ill-suited to the requirements of youth participation, particularly when taking into account each of the dimensions outlined in the Lundy Model of Participation (Lundy, 2007).

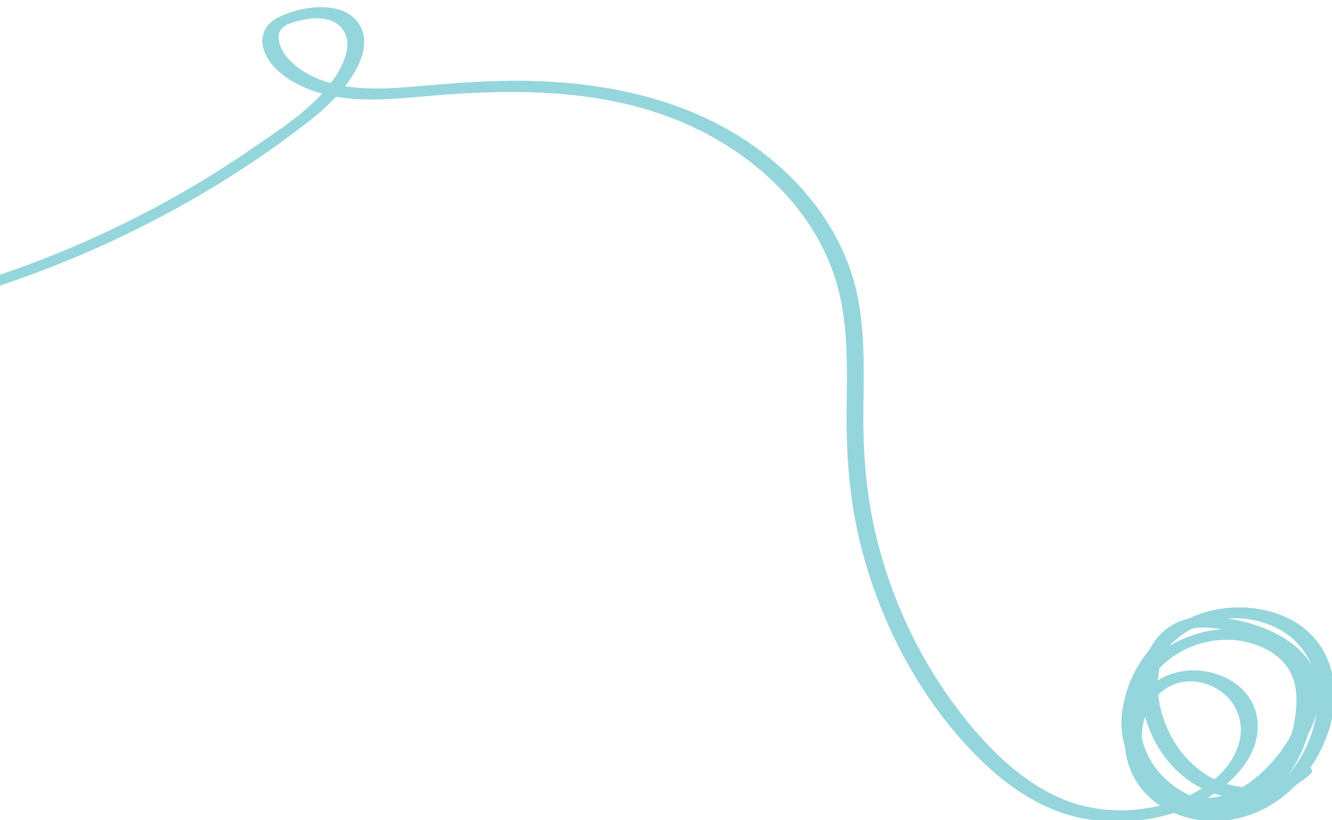
Making participation meaningful

Contributions from both consultations with young people and with professional stakeholders allowed for a consideration of the conditions necessary to provide for meaningful participation using social and digital media. Foremost in this context was the need for adequate support for participants, sponsoring agencies and target audiences. Meaningful participation was taken to mean having contributions listened to carefully and a realistic expectation that children's views, where appropriate, would influence outcomes. Feedback and 'closing the loop', so that participants know what has happened to their contribution, is also a core requirement.

Table 6: Summary of Contributions to the Research Question

	Literature Review	Children's Consultation	Professional Stakeholder Perspectives
Opportunities	Children are immersed in the digital environment. This offers opportunities to harness this enthusiasm for further creative and civic activities.	Children enjoy a wide range of benefits through social and digital media, and especially appreciate its "Communication" and "Information" functions.	Digital spaces are acknowledged to be particularly important for children. It is important to address children where they are.
	Digital youth practice and emerging international practice supplies useful guidance for implementation.	Children are confident about their ability to express themselves displaying resilience to challenges and believe the internet is a good place for young people's voices to be heard.	The ability to both engage and empower young people through social and digital media offers powerful potential for youth participation.
Challenges	Only limited numbers are reaching higher levels of civic engagement activities using digital technologies requiring a range of interventions to support digital literacy.	All children are cognisant of the barriers and challenges in the digital environment.	Safety concerns are key in considering any form of digital implementation, but this should not be an excuse for not examining potential of social and digital media.
	The range of attitudinal, systemic and technological barriers to participation that exist in offline participation need to be examined online as well.	Cyberbullying and unwanted communications are inhibitors to their ability to avail of more opportunities online.	It is important to balance risks and opportunities and to manage the many safety issues that may compromise the participation process.
Technologies	Existing participation mechanisms have made only limited use of social and digital media.	Children enjoy the functionality being connected through digital technologies and extending their horizons for communication and learning.	The particular affordances of digital technologies offer potential to youth enhance participation but require training and support.
	All levels of the participatory space (informational, communication, deliberative) need to be incorporated into the digital domain.	Children want to see a range of improvements to their digital experience: more attention to safety, respect for privacy, higher quality information, training and supports.	Social media platforms are a great way to reach and engage young people but their application to participation practice is limited.

	Literature Review	Children's Consultation	Professional Stakeholder Perspectives
Rights	A comprehensive rights-based framework to support children in the digital environment is needed.	Government leadership in this area is welcomed but more can be done to fulfil children's right to be heard.	The State has a role in delineating and defending children's rights in the digital environment.
	Digital Citizenship offers potential to develop the skills, values, attitudes and knowledge needed to support children's progression on the ladder of digital opportunities.	Children would like to see a dedicated space where young people could express their views, safely and securely.	To be effective, participation must be meaningful and therefore all dimensions of the participation model, connecting different rights, should be taken into account when in building digital participation opportunities.



6.4 Principles for Successful Digital Participation

Table 6 summarises the findings from each phase of the research – the literature review, consultations with children and young people, and interviews with professional stakeholders – with reference to the research question: *how can social and digital media be mobilised appropriately and effectively to progress the realisation of children and young people's right to be heard and to have their views considered in the context of public decision-making processes affecting them?*

These findings are elaborated below in the form of a set of principles to guide practice. These function as a distillation of the key messages from each phase and seek to address the main opportunities and challenges identified over the course of the research.

a) **Use social and digital media for building engagement**
A key finding in each phase of the research was that ***digital technologies offer scope in building engagement and interest in civic participation.*** The communicative power of digital technologies to reach wide and diverse audiences and to mobilise the support of large numbers of children and young people, it was argued, should be exploited to encourage more children and young people to become involved. Practice shows that many government departments and public agencies are using social and digital media platforms effectively. This could be extended further beyond the informational and communication levels to create better awareness of decision-making processes while creating spaces where children and young people can become more actively involved.

b) **Digital participation must be meaningful and rights-based**
Similarly, in each phase of the research, it was noted that, regardless of the form it takes, ***participation must be meaningful so that children and young people can be truly engaged in the process*** and can have confidence that their views will be given due consideration in the relevant legislative or policy process. There was overall support from children and most professionals that social and digital media platforms could facilitate young people's voices to be heard. What is crucial, however, is the manner and context in which this is done. Digital participation cannot be a tick-box exercise; it needs to be fully underpinned by children's rights thus ensuring that children's voices are heard and that the principle of the best interests of the child applies. Children and young people expressed the concern that their input would not be given due weight while professional stakeholders noted the challenge to ensure that resulting policy outputs reflected the full extent of what children and young people said as opposed to an adult interpretation of what they had said.

c) **Not all topics may be suitable for digital consultation**
It was acknowledged that ***not all aspects of participation as currently practiced could be successfully replicated in the digital environment.*** Equally, not every subject matter may be suitable to deliberation within digital spaces. Sensitive subjects, particularly in the context of vulnerable or hard-to-reach or lesser-heard groups, were considered by some professional stakeholders to be less amenable to digital forms of participation, despite the potential that digital technology has in widening access. Interestingly, children and young people offered a different perspective –that it can be easier to talk about sensitive topics online rather than face-to-face.

On the other hand, certain topics appear to lend themselves readily to digital participation. Such topics were described as those that needed "a national conversation" and would benefit from wide scale and diverse input. Topics such

as climate action, racism and hate speech, "Vote at 16", and marriage equality, were mentioned both by children and by professionals as suited to attracting and engaging young people's interest. The consultation on the *LGBTI+ National Youth Strategy* was cited as a good example of a topic that was suited to a digital approach and where the process resulted in a consultation output that had impact.

d) **Involve children and young people in the design of participation opportunities**
Professional stakeholders advocated, and young people agreed, that in keeping with child rights principles and best practice, ***co-designing the consultation and participation process*** is important to ensuring successful buy-in and ongoing support from participants. In the digital context, where adult perceptions are often at variance with young people's experiences, it is particularly important to avoid a top-down approach. The digital space is one in which many young people feel a sense of ownership and within which they have developed their own competences. This is not to imply that all children are "digital natives" and do not need support or Digital Citizenship skills. Rather, what is needed is active and meaningful involvement of children and young people from the start so that the decisions made about choices of platform or methods of participation are ones that young people are interested in. Such an approach is likely to be more inclusive and to be accepted by participants.

e) **Simplicity, openness, and transparency are key**
Simplicity of design was recommended both in the literature and by professional stakeholders as important, not least because of the many distractions that compete for attention in the digital space. The *U-Report* initiative, which began as a simple text-based SMS service, was held up as an example of a technology that was effective because of its straightforward ease of application. Against a background of increasingly sophisticated digital marketing techniques, the simplicity of SMS was held as a model from which much could be learned.

Allied to the notion of design simplicity is the importance given to ***openness and transparency in the technology processes particularly regarding data collection.*** Against the background of a crisis in the information sphere with widely reported misuses of personal data and the prevalence of false and misleading information, supporting public confidence was recognised to be especially important for any services used by young people. Accordingly, fostering trust though openness and transparency is vital for future success. This equates to ensuring that processes in digital participation are always open and transparent in their documentation methods, that there is clarity in relation to the processing of data and openness with participants in terms of expectations about the impact and future influence of the process.

f) **A blended approach may be best**
Balancing the risks and opportunities identified throughout the research, and echoing a view held by some professional stakeholders, was that ***a blended approach may be the best way*** of working towards implementation of a digital approach to children and young people's participation. The field of youth digital participation was regarded to be at an early stage of development. Many of the practical issues about how to successfully apply participation strategies to online settings have yet to be worked out. To leverage the benefits of digital technologies, it was regarded that a phased approach, combining elements of the offline and online, was likely to be more successful.

By way of example, the *LGBTI+ National Youth Strategy* combined elements of face-to-face interaction with online forms of consultation to validate methods and cross-reference data from one mode to the other. A process such as this could be adapted according to the topic in question, retaining the support of a reference group such as a Youth Advisory Group whilst reaching out to a much wider audience. Such an approach would enable lessons to be learned and a phased implementation of digital methodologies that have proven to be beneficial alongside established practices.

g) Training and supports are needed for young people

The needs for training and support for children and young people to participate actively and effectively in the policy process apply in the digital environment just as much as in the physical environment. In addition to the briefing and preparation needed to guide participants through any consultation process, there may also be requirements for digital skills training that need to be considered. Professional stakeholders commented that neither adults nor young people's digital skills can be taken for granted. The added requirements for managing substantial amounts of data and the skills needed to analyse that while maintaining the validity of the process were also highlighted. Giving adequate time to the process is also a key requirement, considering the collection of data, reporting of that data and provision of feedback on an ongoing basis throughout a deliberative process.

h) Training for decision-makers and adults is also needed

Effective participation processes require not only training and supports for the young people involved, ***the sponsoring government departments and agencies wishing to incorporate digital participation methods also need training and support.*** Ireland's National Participation Strategy has posited Hub na nÓg as a national centre of excellence and co-ordination. This has facilitated the development of experience internally within government departments instead of it being outsourced externally. Its resources are limited, however, and mainstreaming digital youth participation practice will require much wider dissemination of awareness, training, and expertise.

The investment needed for such a task should not be underestimated. A recommendation made by one civil servant was that interested organisations or governments department should appoint a Digital Champion to oversee implementation of digital participation methods and to encourage their development by promoting outputs, channelling results, and overseeing any changes needed. Other proposals included the development of pilot programmes that might start a transitioning process for the adoption of digital participation methodologies.

i) Building on the Lundy Model of Participation as a way forward

There was much support within the literature and among professional stakeholders for the Lundy Model of Participation (Lundy, 2007). It was acknowledged that this model sets a high standard and has proven its worth since it was adopted. Adherence to the Lundy model was also recognised to be challenging, especially in terms of implementing each of the four dimensions of space, voice, audience, and influence. The progress made in implementing the Lundy model in Ireland was agreed to be significant (Kennan et al., 2019). While professional stakeholders were divided as to whether all four dimensions could be replicated in the digital environment, it was agreed that it is a good, if demanding,

model to follow and should set the standard by which any such process that may developed in a digital environment should be evaluated.

6.5 Recommendations to Progress the Right to be Heard Through Social and Digital Media

Rapidly evolving digital technologies have transformed and will continue to shape the 21st century environment that children and young people live in. Young people are fully immersed in the use of social and digital media, having fun, communicating with friends, learning, and discovering and exchanging their views. Children gain a variety of benefits in the digital environment, though to date only limited numbers reach levels of digital competence or experience the full range of opportunities that the digital environment affords. Moreover, Artificial Intelligence, machine learning, and automation are now part of contemporary society, including its deliberative and decision-making processes, placing new demands on today's generation of young people if they are to engage fully and participate in society. Public action is needed, therefore, to ensure that digital opportunities are available and accessible to all if this potential is to be realised. There is a distinctive opportunity in the context of public decision-making affecting children to bridge the gap through the incorporation of digital technologies. This not only brings deliberative processes closer to children, progressing their right to be heard but also advances children's rights as whole within the digital environment.

This is a wide and cross-cutting set of issues and therefore requires support from all stakeholders. Drawing on the current research, the following recommendations are put forward as a starting point in advancing the overarching question addressed throughout the research, namely, mobilising social and digital media appropriately and effectively to progress the realisation of children's right to be heard in the context of public decision-making processes affecting them. Actions are addressed to the sector as opposed to any one individual organisation or body for the purposes of initiating a debate and inviting responses from stakeholder groups to take this agenda forward.

Recommendation No.1: ***A Digital Participation Expert Forum should be convened that draws on the relevant expertise across the public sector, academia, youth organisations and industry to distil best practice and to develop new policies on how social and digital media may be used in public decision-making affecting children.***

A Digital Participation Expert Forum would bring together the collective expertise across relevant areas of the public sector, civil society, academia, and the private sector. Such a grouping, whether it met occasionally (as, for example, through a national symposium) or was more formally convened as an Expert Group, would be well-positioned to advise public decision-making bodies on resources already available in this field; to highlight opportunities within the public decision-making sphere where digital participation can make a difference; to identify challenges and needs arising at the local and national level as regards children's rights, child online safety, protection of children's data etc.; to monitor developments regarding the implementation of policies and strategies; and to contribute ideas for new policy and practice through exchange of good practices and promoting dialogue between stakeholders.

Recommendation No.2: ***Develop a Charter for Children and Young People's Digital Participation to underpin the rights-based nature of children's participation in public decision-making on matters affecting them.***

With growing recognition of the importance of defending children's rights in the digital environment, the creation of a Charter for Children and Young People's Digital Participation would be an important statement of commitment on advancing children's participation in the digital space. Such a charter would be an important follow up to the General Comment on children's rights in relation to the digital environment (UNCRC, 2021), the Council of Europe

Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)7 Guidelines to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of the child in the digital environment, and the European Network of Ombudspersons for Children Position Statement on "Children's Rights in the Digital Environment" (ENOC, 2019). The purpose of the Charter would be to establish principles, set goals for where young people could be involved and identify standards for the support structures involved. The Charter could inform national policy and provide valuable guidance for state agencies, local authorities, school management boards and all relevant bodies within the remit of public decision-making to ensure consistency of approach and a framework for the further development of children and young people's digital participation.

Recommendation No.3: ***Develop a Digital Participation Toolkit to support take-up of best digital participation practice and the fostering of Digital Citizenship across a range of settings.***

The dearth of established practice and availability of materials for digital participation points to a real need for high quality resources to support this emergent field. A Digital Participation Toolkit would therefore be an especially important contribution. Such a toolkit could collate information on the different digital tools available and how they can be used. It could function as a knowledge base on proven methods and applications of digital participation practice. And crucially, it can outline expert guidance on design of digital participation practice in individual settings.

Recommendation No.4: ***Establish a dedicated Digital Participation Space or platform that can be shared by relevant actors and public agencies for children and young people's digital participation in public decision-making.***

One of the findings from the research was that children and young people in the workshops and focus groups saw exciting potential in the idea of a digital participation space where they could exchange views and contribute their ideas to public agencies. It was agreed by children and professional stakeholders alike that dedicated platforms for digital participation are best suited to address the various challenges that may arise in the digital environment. A dedicated platform is needed, it was argued, to supply a safe, secure, and supportive environment for digital participation in the context of public decision-making. As such, a further important action to progress children's opportunities in this field is the creation of a digital participation space to host active deliberation on key policy topics that impact on children. This would ideally be a shared resource to which different agencies could subscribe, thus sharing the costs of resourcing the necessary technical and training support. Open-source tools could be deployed, drawing on existing resources that have been publicly funded and developed at the European level. Such a dedicated participation space would provide the ideal test site to further assess the suitability of digital technologies and the wider scope for participation that they may provide.

Recommendation No.5: ***Initiate a series of demonstrator projects to pilot new and innovative forms of children and young people's participation in decision-making processes.***

To develop practice and to have tangible examples of how social and digital media may be best deployed, it will be important to build a portfolio of demonstrator projects and sites where this work can be advanced. In this context, schools are well-placed to lead on implementation of digital participation. The Our Voices, Our Schools[19] initiative supplies a ready-made framework for such practice. Schools could further develop this initiative by incorporating digital methods of supporting children and young people to express their views and to be heard. Schools are also well-equipped to facilitate children and young people's acquisition of the skills, values, attitudes, and knowledge to participate safely, effectively and meaningfully using social and digital media. Similarly, the youth sector has gained a lot of experience through participating in initiatives such as the EU Structured Dialogue process offering potential to put in place similar initiatives at the national level.

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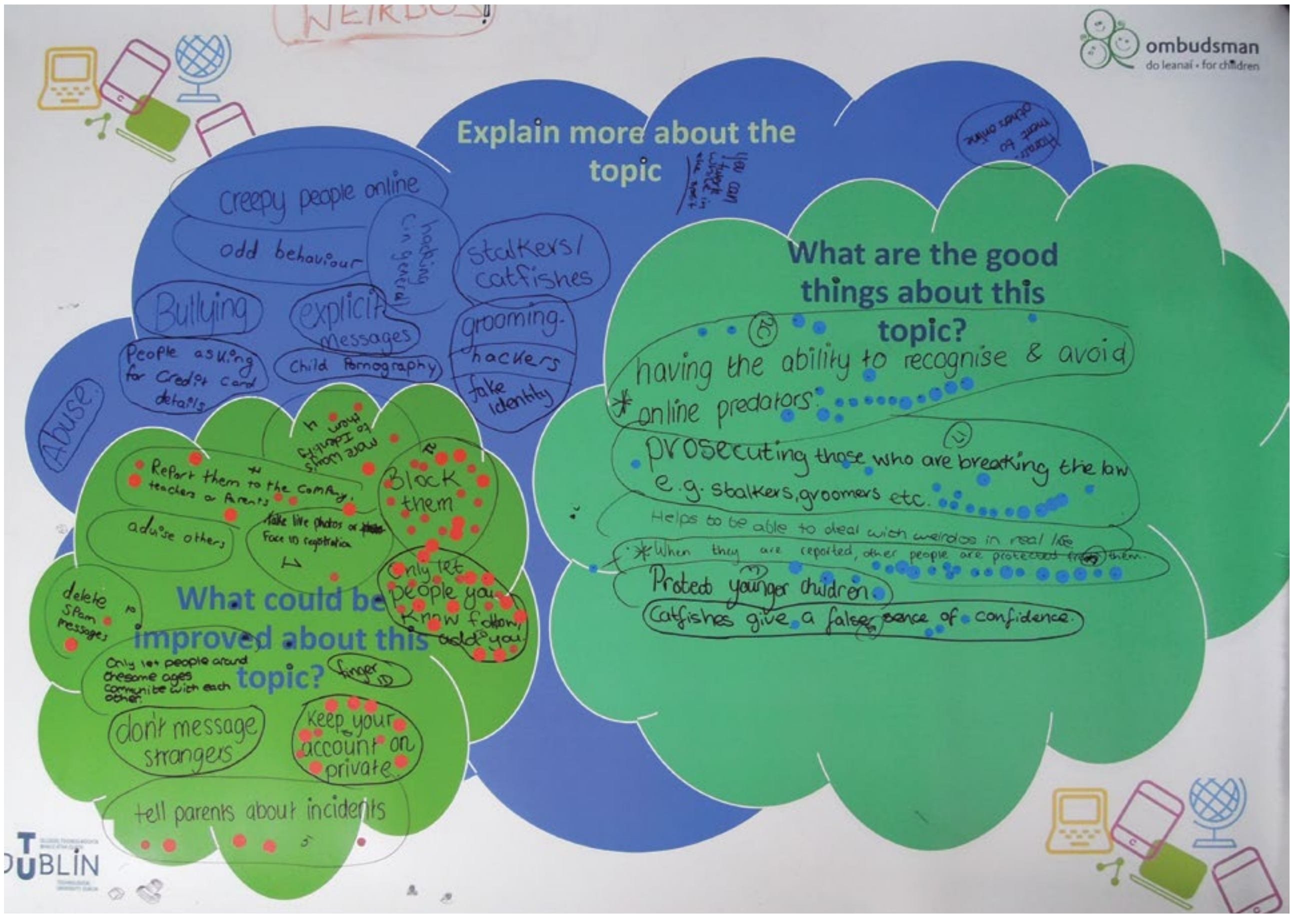
Appendices

Youth Workshop Sample Schedule

Consultations with young people on social and digital media: 9th December 2019	
9.00	**Introduction**
	Brian to explain what the consultation is about, who has commissioned the research, who else is being consulted, what will happen to the information collected etc. Sandra to explain what methods we will use and child protection statement
9.10	**Icebreaker Activity**
9.20	**Open Space Activity**
	Open Space Questions: 1. *What are the good things about online use?* 2. *What are the bad things about online use?* – 3 post-its for each young person on each question, e.g. 3 green post-its for question 1 and 3 blue post-its for question 2 – 6 young people volunteer to group post-its into agreed themes, with support from facilitators, e.g. 3 young people grouping the 'good things' and 3 young people grouping the 'bad things' – **Moving debate exercise** for young people who are not grouping post-its (young people's responses can be noted)
9.50	**World Café/placemat exercise on the topics identified in the open space session, with the questions:**
	• Explain more about this topic? • What are the good things about this topic? • What could be improved about this topic? World Café (4 moves, 20 minutes for the first topic and 10 minutes per move)
10.40	**Sticky dot voting on the most important themes identified**
	• Participants vote at each table • Young people get 3 green sticky dots to vote on top 3 themes on what's good • Young people get 3 blue sticky dots to vote on top 3 themes on what could be improved
10.50	**Break**
11.00	**Ballot box voting on most important themes identified**
	• Young people vote on top 2 topics on what's good • Young people vote on top 2 topics on what could be improved
11.15	**Brick Wall of Ideas Exercise**
	• Young people go back into original groups and write on a brick wall of ideas sheet with the question, 'What things would you most like to have a say about online?'
11.30	**Evaluation**
11.40	**Close**

Figure 14: Brick Wall of Ideas Template

Figure 15: Placemat Template



'Progressing children's right to be heard through social and digital media'

Consent form for Interviewees

By signing this form, I agree that:

❑	I have read the information leaflet about the research and the aims of the project have been explained to me.
❑	I understand I can choose not to answer any question or leave the discussion at any time.
❑	I agree that the interview will be recorded and transcribed. Parts of the discussion may feature in the report of the project and/or publications arising from the research.
❑Yes ❑ No	I give permission to be named as an interviewee for the research
❑	I agree that to take part in this interview.
Name:	
Signature:	
Date:	

Consent form – Interviews – 2019

'Progressing children's right to be heard through social and digital media'

Assent form for young people and teenagers

	Yes	No
The Researcher has explained what we are doing.	❑ ☺	❑ ☹
If I have any questions I can ask the Researcher or my teacher, and they will do their best to answer.	❑ ☺	❑ ☹
The Researcher will make notes, audio record and transcribe the discussion as part of the research project. Parts of the discussion may feature in the report of the project and/or publications arising from the research. I understand that they will not use my name.	❑ ☺	❑ ☹
If, for some reason, I don't want to or can't carry on doing this project, I can withdraw at any time. *Please note that once the focus groups have been written and anonymised (no names or personal identifying details), it's no longer possible to withdraw your contribution.*	❑ ☺	❑ ☹
The Researcher has explained the process of what will happen if I disclose or tell them anything which suggests that I might be in danger of being hurt.	❑ ☺	❑ ☹
I agree to take part in this project.	❑ ☺	❑ ☹
My name:		
My age:		
My signature:		

Assent form for young people and teenagers – 2019

Information about the project

We are undertaking the research on behalf of the Ombudsman for Children's Office to better understand how social and digital media can be used to help support children's right to be heard. As an expert in the field of youth and public decision-making whose work is relevant to this project, we would like to hear your opinion on how social and digital media might be deployed to advance children's expression and participation.

We would like to learn more about your perspective on the uses of digital technologies for this purpose, where and how you might see relevance in your line of work and about any potential obstacles or barriers in this context.

Our objective is to publish a report that will be make recommendations on how social and digital media can be used by decision making bodies to be more inclusive of children's voices.

If you would like to find out more or discuss any aspect of this project, please contact the organisers, details below.

What is the aim of the research?

The overall aim of the research is to identify how social and digital media can be mobilised appropriately and effectively to progress the realisation of children and young people's right to be heard and to have their views considered in the context of public decision-making affecting them. The Office of Ombudsman for Children has commissioned this research to assist it in its role as an advocate for the rights of children and to promote best practice in consulting with children on public policy and decision making that affects their lives.

How is the project organised?

The research is organised in three distinct phases as follows:

- Phase 1: A literature and state of the art review (2017-18) Now complete.
- Phase 2: Qualitative primary research to elicit the perspectives of a diverse cohort of children and young people; and
- Phase 3: Qualitative primary research to elicit the perspectives of other key stakeholders from relevant government departments, public bodies, industry, and civil society.

What is the purpose of the interviews?

This part of the research involves key stakeholders including expert interviews with policy makers, educationalists and government officials and other related stakeholders will be conducted to elicit the views of key stakeholders and decision makers who are in a position to influence practice when it comes to ensuring that young people's voices are heard. The aim of these interviews is to determine from a policy making standpoint the opportunities and the likely obstacles to mobilising social and digital media when consulting with children. The discussions will be audio recorded so that that they can be transcribed later. The transcripts of the sessions will be anonymised and no one will be able to identify who said what.

Information Leaflet

What is this about?

We are undertaking the research on behalf of the Ombudsman for Children's Office to better understand how social and digital media can be used to help support children's right to be heard. We are looking to talk to you - boys and girls / young people aged between 6 and 17 years – about your experiences of expressing yourself online through social media platforms and digital devices.

What will happen if I agree to take part to the research?

You will be invited to join a focus group discussion with other young people. There will be approximately 6 of you in each focus group. There will be separate groups for younger children (6-8; 9-12 years) and for teenagers (13-17 years). Groups will be mixed gender and ideally will have an equal number of boys and girls.

What is a focus group?

This is a group discussion where there will be a lively discussion with others facilitated by a moderator who will pose a number of child-friendly and age-appropriate questions to be discussed by the group. You don't have to answer any question if you don't want to. There are no right or wrong answers and all views are equally respected. The focus group will take the form of a group discussion lasting approximately 90 minutes. The discussions will be recorded so that that they can be transcribed later. The transcripts of the sessions will be anonymised and no one will be able to identify who said what.

Can I withdraw if I don't want to take part?

Of course! You can end your participation at any point without having to give any reasons. Please note that once the focus groups have been written up and anonymised (no names or personal identifying details), it's no longer possible to withdraw your contribution.

Is this confidential?

We will keep recordings, transcripts and notes in a safe and secure location. All identifying information (personal names or names of schools or community) will not be included in any subsequent reports or publications so that no one knows who said what. The only exception is where there is a disclosure of a child protection issue.

How will the information be used?

We will publish a report about the results of the project by the end of 2019. The report will be in English and will be publicly available. Again, confidentiality of focus group participant will be maintained throughout. Your participation can help us to better understand and improve young people's digital experiences!

If you would like to find out more or discuss any aspect of this project, please contact the organisers, details below.

Person in charge

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