



What do Young People Think About Adults that Work with Children and Young People Using Social Network Sites to Engage and Consult with them?

A Research Report by Sefton Young Advisors



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CONTENTS

3	Introduction
3	Who Are Sefton Young Advisors?
4	Where the Consultations Took Place
5	List of Consultation Questions
6 - 14	Consultation Results
15 – 18	Conclusion and Recommendations

Introduction

Sefton Young Advisors were commissioned by Sefton Council to find out whether young people in Sefton believe that professional organisations, such as the Council, should communicate with them through social networking media like Facebook, MySpace, Twitter and so on. This report addresses key issues, such as the safety and appropriateness of inter-generational communication via the internet.

The research was completed by young people from Sefton, the Sefton Young Advisors, to ensure that answers obtained from the participants were as honest as possible. This is because we believe more young people will feel comfortable discussing said issues with other young people from the borough, rather than adult researchers.

The Young Advisors carried out consultations at two physical locations: Crosby High School and Southport YMCA. They also consulted through Facebook with young people from across the borough. All of the consultation comprised of the same 10 questions, for which both quantitative and qualitative results were obtained.

This report also includes the views and recommendations of the Young Advisors themselves.

Who Are Sefton Young Advisors?

Young Advisors are a team of 15 to 21 year-olds who work together to influence change in our community. We support community leaders and decision makers to engage young People in community life and show them how best to engage young people in decision-making, regeneration and renewal. We offer innovative and enthusiastic problem solving skills guided by the direct experience of being a young person in today's rapidly changing world. As fully trained and employed consultants, Young Advisors can offer the following services within our borough: youth proofing, consultation, research, advice, facilitation, accreditation,

and training. Young Advisors are part of the Sefton Voices team and managed and employed by Sefton CVS.

Where the Consultations Took Place

The consultation was done with the Southport YMCA Youth Group on Friday 25th February 2011. Due to the relaxed atmosphere of the Youth Group, the consultation was kept informal. The reasons behind the consultation were explained at the start, including what its aims were and what we hoped to achieve. The consultation was carried out through a mixture of questionnaires, group and individual discussions. The YMCA was targeted for this project due to its close working relationship with young people using its facilities.

The consultation at Crosby High School was conducted on Friday 4th March 2011 with 8 pupils who have learning difficulties. At the start of the consultation, we introduced ourselves and explained what and why we were conducting the research. The consultation was straightforward and was carried out through discussions based on the same ten questions as the other consultations were using. Young Advisors encountered no problems or difficulties during the consultation.

We also chose to ask people on Facebook as this was a way to get views from people who are on social networking sites regularly and likely to be the young people social network-based consultations would target.

List of Consultation Questions

Below are the 10 questions that were used for all of the consultations:

1. Do you think adults should share sites such as Facebook, MySpace etc with young people?
2. Do you feel safe with adults being on these sites also?
3. Do you think adults should be permitted to use these sites at work?
4. Do you think these sites should be allowed in schools and colleges?
5. Should adults working with young people in their job be allowed to engage with the young people on social networking sites?
6. Should people be monitored on social networking sites?
7. Should these websites have stricter rules?
8. Should the site owners do more to prevent misuse, such as hacking?
9. Should it be more difficult to access social networking sites?
10. Should there be an age restriction for these websites?

Consultation Results

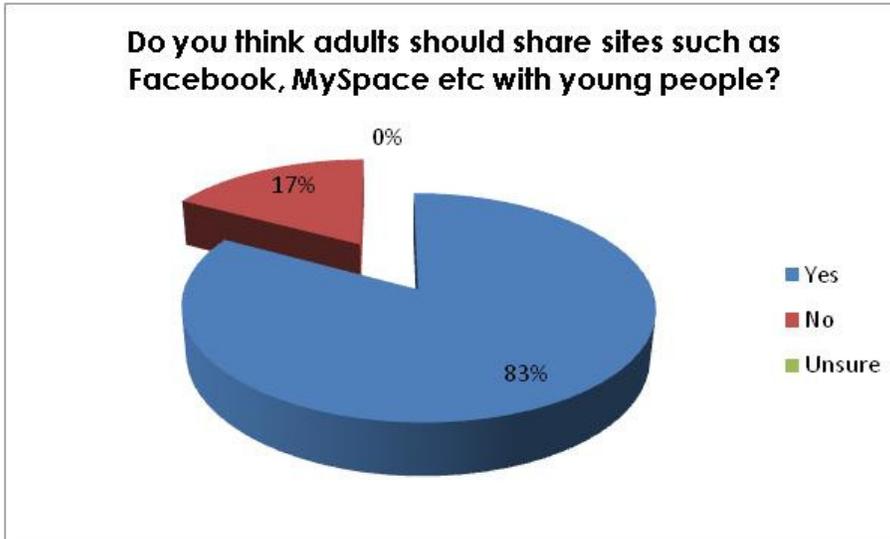
On the following page is a table collating all of the results from the consultation. Following this is a break-down of each individual question and more detail and analysis of the answers.

Q. No.	Crosby High School (/8)			Southport YMCA (/13)			Facebook users (/20)			Total		
	Yes	No	Unsure	Yes	No	Unsure	Yes	No	Unsure	Yes	No	Unsure
<u>1</u>	8	0	0	8	5	0	18	2	0	34	7	0
<u>2</u>	5	1	2	9	3	1	20	0	0	34	4	3
<u>3</u>	3	5	0	4	9	0	14	6	0	21	20	0
<u>4</u>	4	4	0	10	3	0	8	12	0	22	19	0
<u>5</u>	2	6	0	6	7	0	8	12	0	16	25	0
<u>6</u>	3	3	2	9	3	1	6	4	10	18	10	13
<u>7</u>	5	1	2	12	1	0	4	16	0	21	18	2
<u>8</u>	8	0	0	-	-	-	10	10	0	18	10	0
<u>9</u>	6	2	0	2	10	1	2	18	0	10	30	1
<u>10</u>	4	4	0	7	6	0	6	14	0	17	24	0

1. Do you think adults should share sites, such as Facebook, MySpace etc. with young people?

Yes - 83%

No - 17%



The majority who opted for the reply 'yes' for this question feel safe with adults on these sites. The young people seemed to be confident about reporting any issues or dangers that they experience on the internet. This is partly due to being educated about the dangers of the internet.

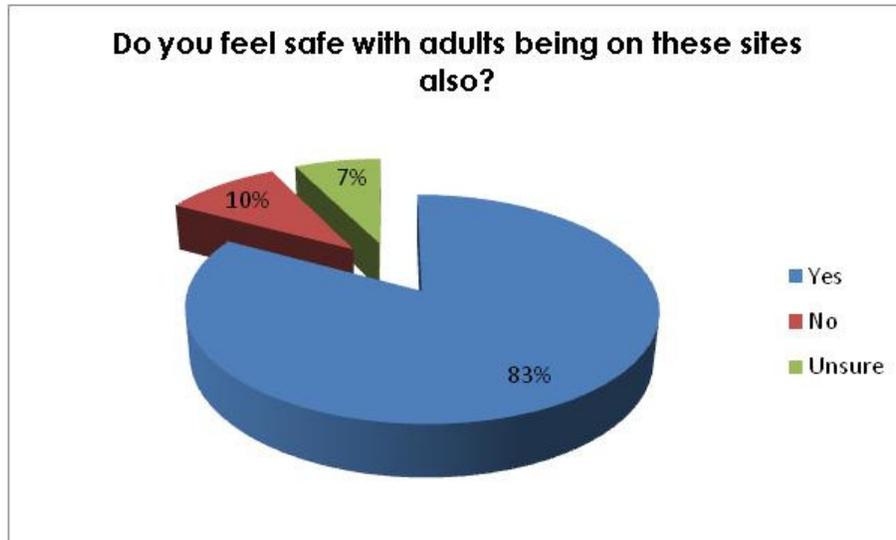
Some of the young people who said no feel that adults can be dangerous on these sites, because most of the times they have heard of people being at risk through the sites, the misuse of the site has been by adults.

2. Do you feel safe with adults being on these sites also?

Yes - 83%

No - 10%

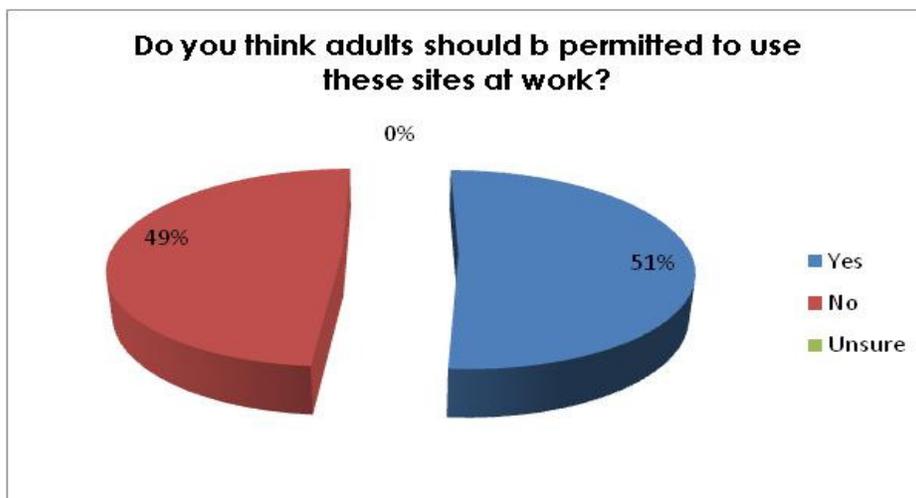
Unsure - 7%



The young people who opted for 'yes' felt safe with adults on the internet and gave reasons such as being educated about the dangers of the internet and social networking sites by schools and parents. They said that adults had watched what they were doing on the internet when they were younger and helped them learn how to react if they get into a bad situation whilst online. Some of those young people who had opted for 'no' did not feel they had been educated about the dangers of the internet, and how to approach problems.

3. Do you think adults should be permitted to use these sites at work?

Yes - 52%
 No - 48%

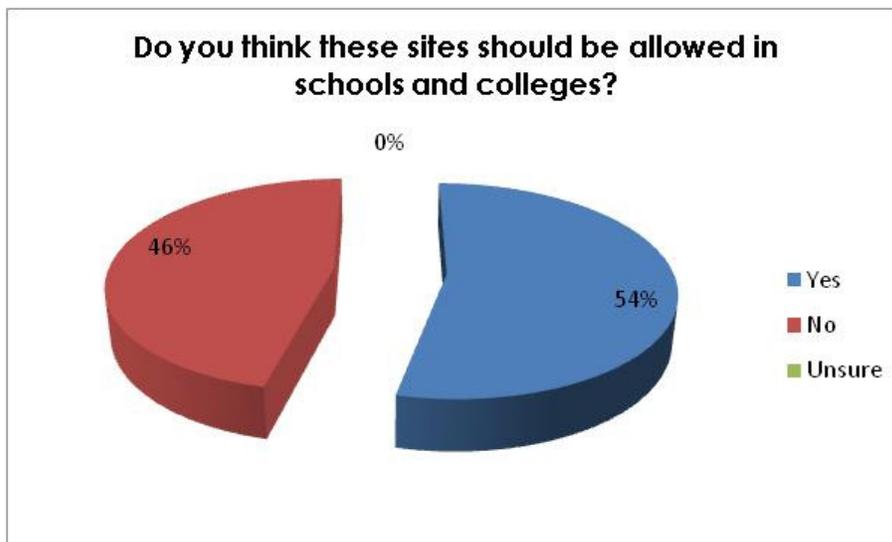


Some of the young people who said 'yes' agreed that one day they will be adults and would not want to be stopped using the social networking sites at work.

Many of those who said 'no' felt that social networking sites can be an awful distraction from work and that it would be good to not have easy access during working hours.

4. Do you think these sites should be allowed in schools and colleges?

Yes - 54%
No - 46%



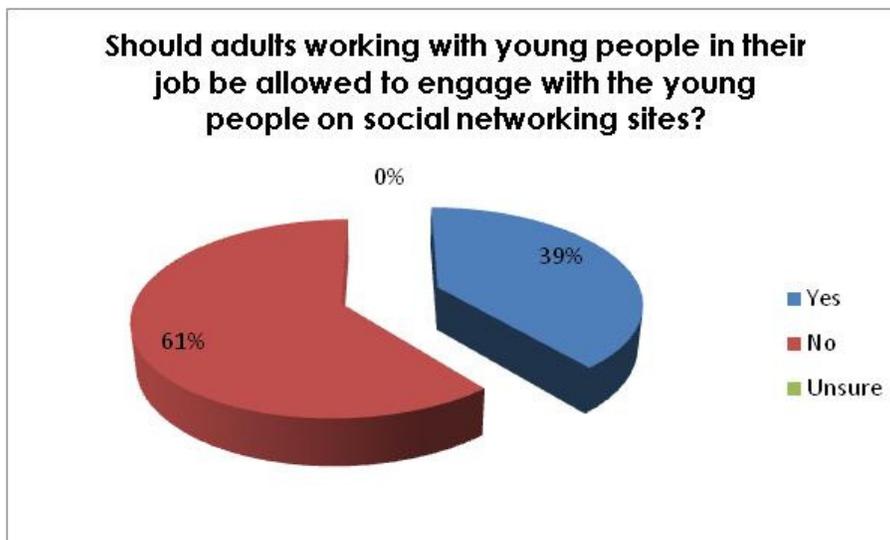
One person had a different perspective to others, and stated that they feel use of the sites should be allowed in colleges, but not schools, as school pupils will go on the sites to avoid school work. As pupils attending college have more choice about being there, this person felt they are less likely to avoid doing work by using the sites. However, the majority of people who said 'yes' didn't highlight a difference between schools and colleges and so may have been reflecting their own feelings about wanting to be able to use social networking sites in school/college, rather than seeing any wider impact this could have on education.

The potential impact on education was something those who said 'no' primarily focused on. They felt use of social network sites would be a massive distraction to people's studies and therefore should not be allowed in either schools or colleges.

5. Should adults working with young people in their job be allowed to engage with the young people on social networking sites?

Yes - 39%

No - 61%



Many people thought that it would be inappropriate for professional people to be 'friends' with young people they have a working relationship with on social networking sites. This is because young people add pictures and information about themselves on these sites which may be inappropriate and even dangerous for their youth worker (or other professional) to see.

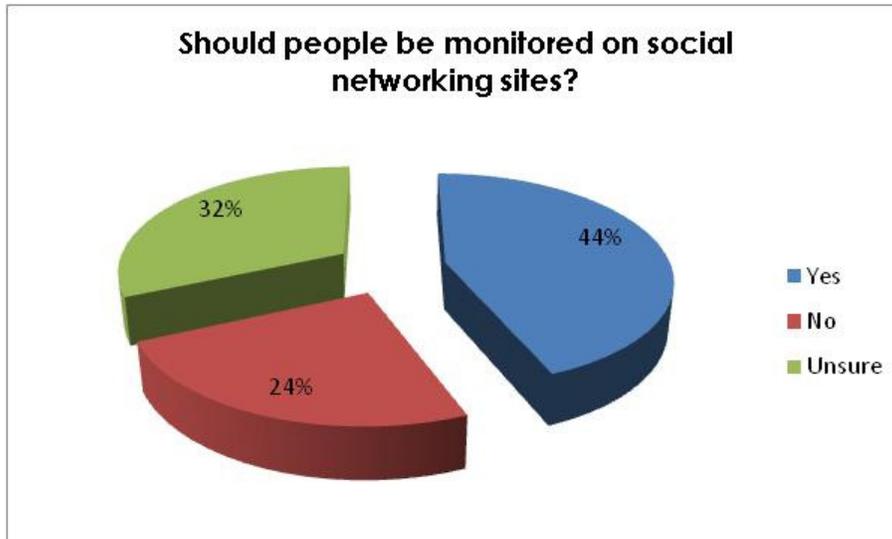
If professionals urgently need to reach young people they work with, then contact details young people and parents/carers have given permission to be used should already be the first port of call, not social networking sites.

6. Should all people using the social networking sites be monitored?

Yes - 44%

No - 24%

Unsure - 32%



With this question, we were referring to anyone who uses these sites: young people, adults, professionals, organisations, etc.

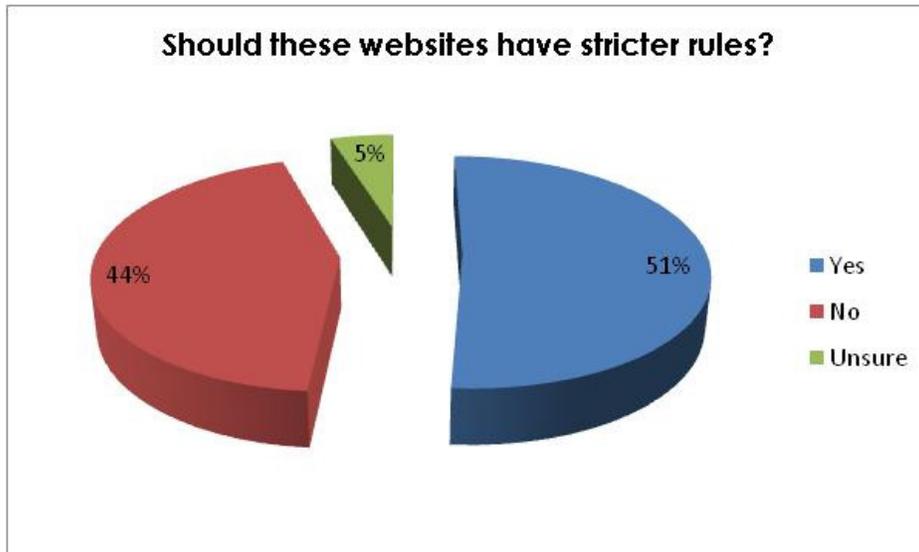
People who thought these sites should be monitored, suggested by the owners or agencies such as the Police.

Those who replied 'no' thought the sites are for fun and being monitored would wreck this for them.

The people who were 'unsure' about monitoring pointed out that it would be a very difficult job and would often be pointless. This is because people would need to report incidents for them to be monitored. Some genuine threats would not be reported because of fear, confusion, or even coercion. Also, what one young person regards as a threat, may not be regarded as such by another young person.

7. Should these websites have stricter rules?

Yes – 51%
No – 44%
Unsure – 5%

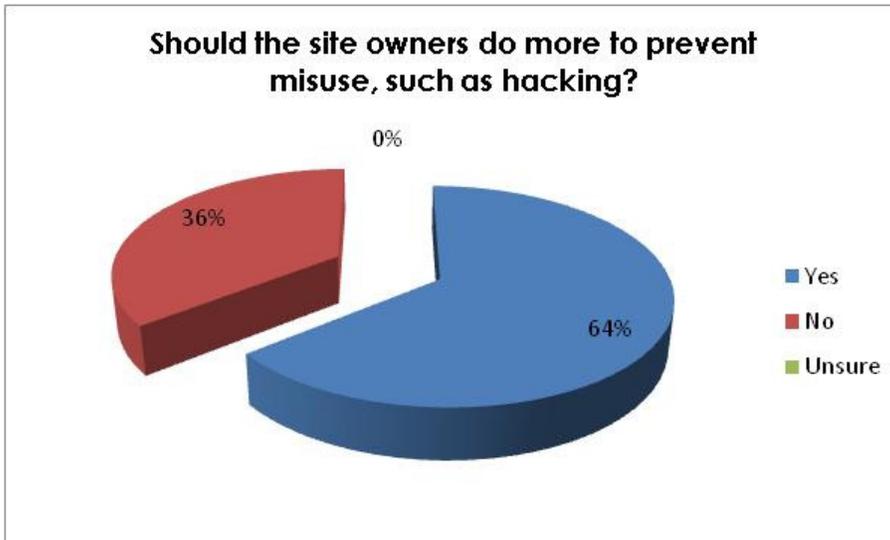


Many people who said 'no' thought a username and password were enough as people stated they may not remember, or be bothered, having to give more detail or read more rules to use the sites. The rules already established are often followed, but those who don't follow them get punished for their actions (or they should).

Many of those who said 'yes' thought stricter rules might make it harder for people to use the sites for abusive purposes.

8. Should the site owners do more to prevent misuse, such as hacking?

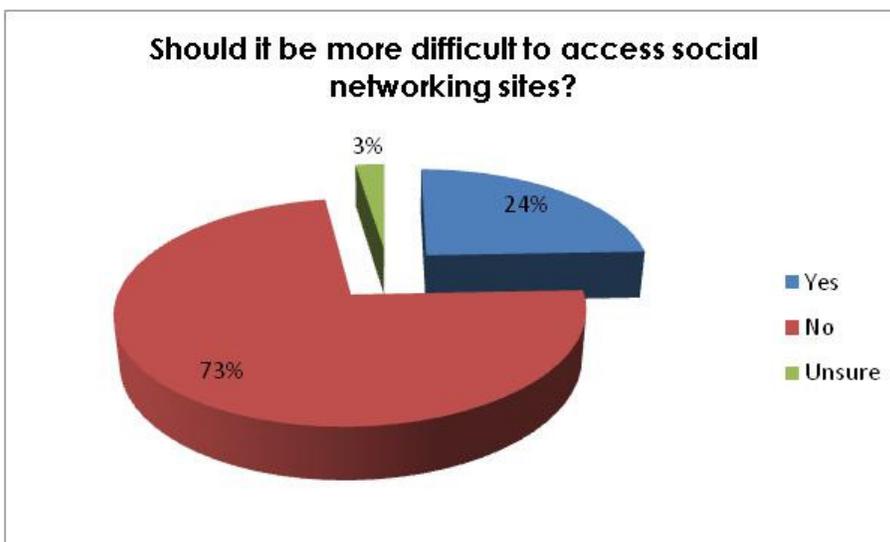
Yes - 64%
No - 36%



People wanted extra measures to be put in place to stop hacking, but didn't want to have to bother with extra safety measures. Most felt a username and password are safe enough, but believed people should be reported if acting suspiciously online.

9. Should it be more difficult to access social networking sites?

Yes - 73%
 No - 24%
 Unsure - 3%



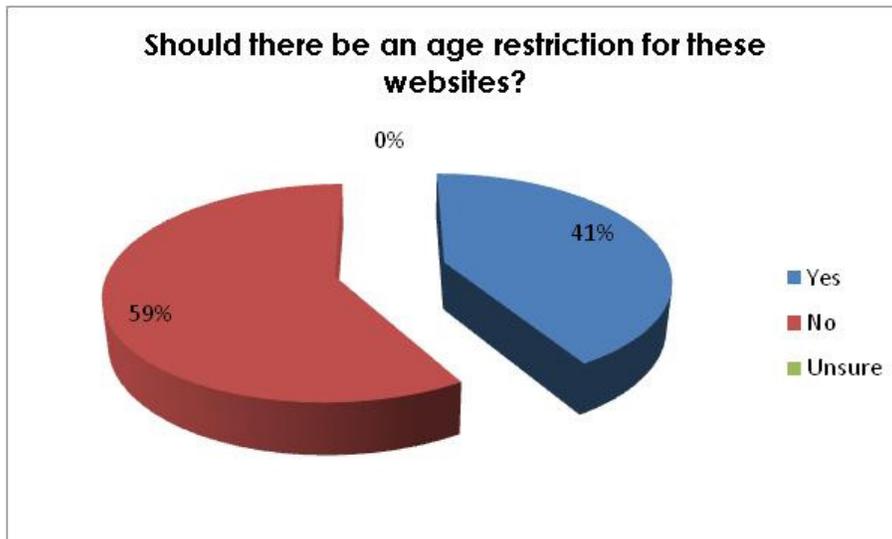
Those who answered 'no' to this question wanted quick and easy access to talk to friends outside of school/colleges.

Those who answered 'yes' to this question thought making it more difficult to access the sites might make it harder for people who want to use the sites for abusive purposes.

10. Should there be an age restriction for these websites?

Yes - 41%

No - 59%



Yes ~ some people thought the age should be over 8's while others thought it should be over 11's.

People who said 'no' to this question felt that people will always find a way around rules and age limits have not stopped a lot of underage people accessing these sites in the past.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The first questions show that the majority of young people are not concerned with adults having a profile on social networking sites. However, for question 5, 61% said that adults working with young people in their job should *not* be allowed use the sites to engage with young people. So, although there doesn't appear to be any issues with adults using the sites, it is the way they use them to contact the young people themselves that provokes the most anxiety. There is a clear uncertainty as to how professionals should use social network sites in the workplace. The figures shown for question 3 support this idea. It appears that whilst most of the young people we consulted with are happy to share social networking sites with adults, they are not happy to have those that work with them as 'friends.' The implications of this are discussed later in the conclusion.

The final questions discussed the rules and restrictions on social networking sites. Few participants thought that access to a social networking account should be made more difficult. However, many did think that site owners should do more to prevent problems, such as hacking, to safeguard users.

Most young people do not feel that social networking would be a good way of consulting with them. There were several reasons for this. Firstly, it appeared that safety was at the forefront of most of the young people's minds. The idea of adults, many of whom young people do not know, contacting them through social networking sites, appeared to concern some young people. This could bring up safeguarding issues. Any consultation that is done using this method should be done with the full cooperation and knowledge of the Local Safeguarding Children's Board and its E-Safety sub-group. Also, many young people use social networking as their private space, quite often making things public which may not be appropriate for people they do not know to see. It could make the young people involved feel uncomfortable about expressing their feelings on the social networking site.

There are also issues with adult staff members using social network as a consultation method and (innocently or deviously) becoming

friendly with young people outside of a professional environment. This brings up safeguarding issues, and could also cause parental concern with far-reaching implications for the child, their family, the professional involved, and their employer. Many parents would understandably feel uncomfortable with their children becoming too friendly with an adult online. As the results show, the young people don't mind sharing social networking sites with adults and feel safe with this, but that is very different to actually having adults as friends on these sites. Social networking sites are also meant to be places of leisure, so bringing issues that feel like work into the sites may be an unpopular move with young users. Care needs to be taken not to alienate, rather than engage, young people through social network-based consultation. Young Advisors can help support organisations to achieve a balanced approach.

Whilst the consultations do show that a significant proportion of young people would not want to be consulted via social networking sites, it can still be seen as a useful tool for consultation and should not be discounted. The popularity of social networking, especially among young people, means it could be valuable. Direct consultation, however, should be seen as the key approach for all consultation. It is by far the most effective way of consultation, being more active and in depth, and, if done well, reaches a greater range of people in the community. Perhaps social networking could be more used as a means of gathering initial small samples of information, or offering wider access to reports and feedback, rather than hosting the whole consultation itself.

Meaningful consultation is still best carried out face to face – through schools, youth groups, and outreach. More detail and information is given this way and people will often make additional comments outside of their answers. Face to face consultation also gives more opportunities to ask supplementary questions and can be a more relaxed environment (so more honest answers are likely). Organisations and agencies using social network sites to consult should consider carefully if they are utilising this approach for their own ease and convenience or

whether it provides a genuinely meaningful element of a consultation.

Cost may be a driving factor in using social network sites – as it could be seen as cheaper than delivering face to face consultations – but, even in times of austerity, the long-term benefits of genuine, meaningful participation should be focussed on. Attempts to save money by using potentially tokenistic approaches will lead to unrepresentative evidence and services and activities that do not reflect what a lot of young people would like. There is a danger that consultation using social networking sites is seen as an easy, minimum effort way of consulting. Our research clearly demonstrates that a lot of young people are unlikely to be engaged through social network consultations, so it is a method of engagement that could, if used in isolation, be viewed as tokenistic and non-representative.

In the case of Facebook (at present, this is likely to be the most popular choice for consulting with young people), it is essential that staff and volunteers working with young people do not become 'friends' with young people they work with. Any opportunities for consultation should be circulated or hosted without the need for young people to become 'friends' with adults they don't have a pre-existing personal relationship with; this would at least minimise the personal interaction between young person and adult that could become unhealthy.

Many young people have also highlighted the issue of cyber bullying during this consultation. Although the questions we asked do not fully reflect this issue, it is something that must be considered, and Young Advisors would be keen to support further research and consultancy in this area. Being seen to interact with adults (particularly professionals or any kind of authority figure) can be a source of embarrassment for some young people and lead to bullying from their peers. In addition, if a young person has a difficult relationship with an adult and feels they are being bullied by them, it would be very distressing to have to interact with them on social network sites as well as in the physical world. This is an issue that is much wider than can be reflected here and certainly requires further study.

If social networking sites are used for consultation, it should be under clear, easy to follow guidelines approved and monitored by the LSCB's E-Safety sub-group, with the support of Young Advisors. Online consultation should not be seen as a quick and easy shortcut. Ideally, there should be a route for consultations to be approved by the LSCB (as an independent body) before going online.

Training and support should be considered for staff and volunteers who are planning to use social networking sites to consult with young people. This is to ensure children and young people are protected, but also to protect the staff and volunteers from putting themselves in situations that could be dangerous.

As Young Advisors, we support the use of social networking sites to be used as *one of many* tools to be used to engage and consult with young people, but we strongly emphasise the importance of safeguarding procedures being in place to guide and monitor this process. Staff and volunteers who use these methods must be appropriately trained, supervised and be subject to enhanced criminal record checks. We also emphasise the importance of not relying on it as the primary method of consultation – it should only be used when appropriate and as one part of a wider process.

Research and report designed, facilitated and written by (in alphabetical order):

Mark Cameron; Georgia Jones; Brian Mok; Matt Smith; Emily Woodruff

For more information about Sefton Young Advisors, please visit their website: <http://sefton.youngadvisors.org.uk>, email Dan Copley at dan.copley@seftoncvcs.org.uk or call 0151 920 0726 ex: 301