

Children's Safeguarding Digital Co-Design

Impact Acceleration Project Report

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1. Key Findings

Ways forward

- Clear frameworks for safeguarding digital policy and procedures applied locally could drive significant change and a culture shift.
- Targeted funding and investment, under a dedicated scheme such as the Safety Tech Challenge Fund, in both the public sector and the private sector, to encourage innovation and growth in the availability and application of digital safeguarding tools that enable digital access.
- Innovation will come from the public, private and community sectors engaging in co-design. It must involve children and young people who can share lived experience and structure the architecture for new technology.
- Ensure workforce upskilling by including technical agility and skills in pre and post qualifying social work training.

A digital safeguarding approach aims to use tech for good, co-designed with users. In the present project we seek to develop innovative ways in which children and young people can digitally and safely self-refer and share information with multi-agency professionals, and communicate harms in real time, transforming traditional help and support to reduce risk of harm to children and young people. This part of the project reports on the views of senior leaders in safeguarding within local authorities towards digital safeguarding.

The public sector has statutory obligations, along with private sector organisations, offering protective services, but there is general agreement that it lags behind in optimising technological advancements for information sharing and communicating directly with children and young people. There is a notable lack of innovation in the application of creative forms of technology, particularly in terms of safeguarding, stemming from the following list of key findings.

Key Findings

Policy – Progress towards digital safeguarding requires a policy framework at national and local level, which is currently lacking. Policies primarily focus on staying safe online (children and staff) and the use of case management systems. There are no existing statutory frameworks for doing safeguarding digitally.

Children's co-design – Several initiatives engage and consult with children and young people, particularly looked after young people. There was little evidence of child initiated co-designed policy and practice in digital safeguarding.

Digital Safeguarding Initiatives – Senior leaders within local authorities are enthusiastic and excited about the potential for digital safeguarding. Post-pandemic there is some evidence of online case monitoring continuing, but no local authorities have extended safeguarding practices to integrate digital access for children and families.

Barriers to implementing digital safeguarding –

respondents emphasised that changes to culture and working practices will take time. It requires:

- Developing a digitally resilient workforce that works outside normal office working hours.
- Bridging digital divides to bring social and digital agendas together.
- Case management systems that are agile, connecting to developing technology that allows easy self service engagement through parent and/or child portals. Thereafter capturing such data into new and emerging data sets.
- A dominant theme aired was the **need for leadership and strategy from a national perspective**. Alongside this were operational restrictions stemming from a **lack of knowledge and skills in the workforce; lack of resources and limits imposed by the architecture and governance of case management systems**.

2. Introduction

Digital safeguarding is generally used to denote staying safe online (see for example the Anne Craft Trust). Research by May-Chahal et al (2014) and Carlick (2018) provided evidence for the connections that children and young people make between their offline and online worlds, emphasizing how early help and digital safeguarding should take account of the ways in which children interact in an integrated online/ offline childhood space. However, the public sector along with private sector organisations offering protective services, lag behind in optimising technological advancements for information sharing and communicating directly with children and young people (Carlick, 2018). There is a fundamental lack of innovation in creative forms of technology, particularly in social care in terms of safeguarding. Carlick (2018) explored the potential for a digital front door for children to self-refer, which opens up opportunities for frontline practices in building community relationships and real time risk management. Subsequently, her research has identified greater potential for the private sector in the advancement of case management systems, new data sets, seamless sharing of information and empowerment of the children's lived experience. This impact acceleration project builds upon this previous research by Dr Sarah Carlick which has introduced the concept of children's co-design for further development of safeguarding technology initiatives (Carlick 2018).

This project was funded as part of a collaboration by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Impact Acceleration Account (IAA) Business Boost Fund with Lancaster University and MeSafe Ltd. The IAA Business Boost fund was designed to enable the social science community to work and partner with more businesses. It has been led by Dr Sarah Carlick, MeSafe Ltd and Professor Corinne May-Chahal at Lancaster University. It documents understandings of children's co - design within social care, current and possible safeguarding digital initiatives, the barriers to implementation and the way forward for investment.

THE KEY OBJECTIVES OF THE WORK WERE TO:

- Understand current co-design processes with children and young people within Local Authority Social Care settings, so as to avoid duplication by MeSafe Ltd.
- Ensure children's user experience is at the forefront of the design of new safeguarding technologies.
- Initiate and encourage co-design conversations with Children's Services Director's.
- To create a customer base for children's co-design safeguarding technology.
- To establish a space to form new conceptual thinking and progression of research methodologies and practices for safeguarding.

2.1.

Project Definitions

For the purposes of this project, the term 'children and young people' is used to refer to individuals under the age of 18 years.

Definition and the aim of co-designed digital safeguarding

Digital Safeguarding adheres to the principle of co-design research methods with children and young people to create innovative technology, for them and by them, to share information and manage risks. This approach gives children and young people an equal voice recognizing their practices as digital natives especially within changing technological environments.

A digital safeguarding approach aims to use tech for good, co-designed with users. In the present project it seeks to develop innovative ways in which children and young people can digitally and safely self refer and share their information with multi-agency professionals, and to digitally communicate harms in real time, transforming traditional help and support to reduce risk of harm to children and young people.

The aim of child co-design research methods

Child user-centred design promotes a child-centred, child-friendly, user led approach that respects children and young people as equal partners in design ideas, usability and product development.

3.

Methodology

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with a total of 13 participants drawn from senior child protection leadership positions within local authorities. ¹They comprised three Directors of Children's Services; two Assistant Directors of Children's Services and one of the following: Director of Education and Partnerships; Head of Partnership; Senior Development Officer for Participation; Senior Improvement Manager; Risk and Resilience Coordinator / Manager; Senior Researcher and Analyst; System Services Manager.

Local Authority areas were identified through the Children's Commissioners Office local vulnerability profiles and Directors of Children's Services were contacted via an email invitation. Due to the low response the same invitation email was sent to all Local Authority Directors of Children's Services and eight Local Authority areas agreed to take part. Four participants were from one Local Authority and two were from another Local Authority and all held different job roles. Local Authorities represented were Unitary (2); City Councils (2); County Councils (2); Metropolitan (1) and one London Borough Council.

The interviews took place virtually using a secure Zoom platform for no longer than one hour and were recorded and transcribed. Interviews took place between July 2022 and October 2022. Ethical approval was obtained from Lancaster University Research Ethics Committee. Thematic analysis was used to identify common theme, repeated ideas and topics, which provided a flexible method for data analysis. Four themes dominated: policy, children's co-design, safeguarding digital initiatives and barriers to implementing digital safeguarding innovation.

¹A further two participants agreed to the interview however failed to attend.

4. Policy

Participants thought there were some policies in place that loosely fell into the category of digital safeguarding including:

- Keeping and helping young people stay safe online and using their own technology (especially within foster care).
- Guidance on safe internet use.
- Guidance for staff using mobile phones and apps.

Policy and procedures provide an accountable organizational framework and enable the workforce to perform their duties. A lack of policy offers little or no strategic direction and an absence of accountability that can leave a local authority vulnerable to public and political redress. In this context it is important to note that all but one participant² reported their Local Authority did not have a specific digital safeguarding policy or digital safeguarding strategy. For example;

“I think there’s probably a raft of guidance for staff on how to keep them - selves safe in the space of interacting with children digitally, particularly on the back of a pandemic where obviously a lot of our interaction with children from an employment perspective became online. For example, you know, visits to children, there was a period for the first lockdown where sometimes the only way we could see children would be via WhatsApp video calling”. (Director of Children’s Services)

²This participant said they were not sure and were not able to confirm.

“I should know this. I’m pretty confident that we do. Because I think in the sense of, I’m just thinking whether in itself is a separate policy. It certainly, features within our safeguarding, but I’m just trying to think if it’s a separate policy or not. I think it is actually now”. (Director of Children’s Services)

Policy

“I mean our approach, co-production, is that we involve young people. What I need to do is go away and find out actually do we have a strategy around it? An actual formal written strategy? We do have something on online safety but its for parents and guardians”. (Director of Children Safeguarding and Social Work)

Operationally policies are derived from both local and national direction and thus national guidance. Often this leads to the production of local frameworks. Current national guidance (HM Government, 2018) makes reference to online abuse but makes no reference to the use of technology facilitated methods in children’s safeguarding. Thus, it is in some ways unsurprising that, despite rapid technological developments in today’s society, only one participant stated they had a standalone Digital Strategy in place. This was described as a pathway plan or framework where they wish to take their digital solutions for children’s skills and education.

Whilst there are a myriad of policies that social care staff must follow on a daily basis, there is a clear absence of policies and procedures that reflect post-pandemic children’s social care practice in the digital world in which we all live . Therefore, interviews focused on how children’s social care and digital agendas could inform policy development. In discussion it became clear that if the social and digital are to be fully integrated within universal services there are significant cultural barriers and obstacles to over come.

Policy

Four participants proposed that a digital strategy in children's social care should be outlined within the next version of Working Together to Safeguarding Children and embedded through all policies in relation to children and young people. This should either be adopted through a corporate wide approach or linked to and by Safeguarding Partnership Boards and their statutory safeguarding partners. A further point was that it is not yet part of the mindset of Councils or social care professionals, and the way in which children's services are thinking is still reactive. However, a number of interviewees felt they did not know how to respond to the question which demonstrates how combining the two agendas, children's social care and the digital agenda, is not part of mainstream strategy in those local authority areas. A further mentioned difficulty with innovation in this space was the perception of organisational barriers placed by those such as Ofsted and the Department for Education. For example, digital safeguarding is not part of the current inspection or data sharing frameworks. Moreover, two participants stated that the social care workforce lacked understanding of a vision of digital usage and different ways to engage with children and young people. However, there is enthusiasm for policy change:

"I think it's a lot more about what we've already said really about that authentic voice. I'm not being disparaging in this, it's absolute human nature to put a filter on. I think if you had that more authentic voice and you'd captured it in very real time, then using that to demonstrate to policy makers what the voice is, what the experience is and where possibly change could be, but not from our perspective. Because we keep, as you know, we keep huge amounts of information on families and there couldn't be a better body of evidence if we got this right in terms of capturing the real voice for change and for how things impact on children and families. So, I think it's, it's incredibly exciting and could make an incredible difference. I don't think we'll get that until we move to a more digital solution that's very much accessible for children and families". (Assistant Director for Safeguarding and Children's Services)

Policy

“It’s interesting around that self-referral stuff and how you would get a young person putting yourself in a young person’s shoes, isn’t it? And thinking about how scary it probably is to come and navigate and ask for help and support if you were needing it and how much of a mammoth task, this seems like it, it is going to kind of change people’s mindsets and policy frameworks. It’s kind of, it’s almost like it’s such a big thing that, young people live their lives online, yet we don’t as professionals really, we’re not really paying it a great deal of attention or as much attention as we should be doing”. (Head of Partnerships)

Yeah, I suppose, I’m glad we’ve done this interview because it’s got me thinking. I haven’t been asked that question yet about our digital safeguarding strategy. So now I need to go and ask those who do more on the frontline and think, right, what are we going to do about it? But also think about there might be things happening in the corporate center. How do we draw on that? You know, because it can be a whole council approach. It doesn’t just have to be within children’s social care. It could be that we have a whole council approach that is then bought, that we refine or add to or put more things in place”. (Director of Children’s Safeguarding and Social Work)

5.

Children's Co-Design

The origin of children's safeguarding design is rooted in establishing a more child-friendly system that is inclusive of the child's voice (Munro, 2011) and repositions the child's journey. Understanding the concept is the beginning of bringing it into existence. Children's safeguarding co-design should be non-negotiable when designing any new technology, add on's to case management systems, new applications or digital services by and for children. By embracing and undertaking children's co-design, children and young people are empowered and the technology will be relevant to the child's lived experience. Furthermore, this form of user led design can lead to building community capacity and could offer children, their families and carers a self-service style engagement with protective services. It offers more freedom to the child and family as well as those who are responding, such as professionals and also technology companies. Co-design is also about equality and treating children as equal partners in user-centred design and usability (Carlick, 2018), especially for digital self-referrals.

In terms of the interviewees' understanding of digital safeguarding co-design, three overarching themes emerged. Firstly, in the context of **Participation and Consultation**, for example consultation as part of a corporate parenting strategy. Also, the use of forums to capture the voice of the young person such as the Children in Care Council; Care Leavers Forum and the SEND Young Persons Forum. These typically focused on working with young people on a project to ensure their voice was included. A second key context was **Staying Safe Online**, which meant trying to ensure children are kept safe as possible online or using a digital device such as phones, computers, and tablets. Efforts were directed at capturing the voice of young people to influence strategic direction and policy for staying safe online in terms of their usage of these devices. For example,

“So I suppose for me, that would be about working in partnership with children to develop an approach to keeping children safe in respect of their usage of the various digital online electronic apps, tools, computers, whole range of electronic systems, devices, et cetera, that bring children potentially into contact with other people”. (Director of Children's Services)

Children's Co-Design

A third, relatively new context was **Digital Services**. The majority of participants had a clear understanding that safeguarding co-design is a process for children and young people, and should be able to feed into the design of digital services. These digital services would be safe platforms for children to use that are designed with positive and helpful approaches. This included working together with young people on the service planning or development of digital aspects of service delivery. One participant went further explaining collaborative working partnerships with children and various organisations to progress operational practices and digital solutions. Giving the professionals further understanding of the design requirements of workflows so they are in the best interests of the child and then applying these to ensure integrated workflow's, summarized as "*a single voice of truth*" (System Service Manager).

Overwhelmingly it was felt if children were part of the original agreement and design then this would increase their safety and the safety elements of the platforms. Furthermore, this was followed by statements on co-production and engagement of children and young people and their families in terms of forms, how systems and platforms are used, how and what information is shared. It was agreed this would enhance accessibility and frictionless sharing of information. Allowing digital services to be offered to children that are known to the Local Authority and enabling children to access services digitally.

"Co-design. Okay. So it would be around working with young people for them to have some sort of framework to work to, that they're designed, that they understand and it's meaningful to them. So working alongside children rather than an adult kind of producing something in the hope that a young person or a child would understand it. That would be my wonderful". (Head of Partnerships)

Children's Co-Design

“My understanding of that term would be how do we digitally co-design in a way that is safe for children? So, how do we work with children and young people to create, to bring us really into the 21st century. I often say this to staff that if I give you an example around life journey work for children who are looked after, you know, they haven't got parents who are going to keep photos and videos and all of that, that responsibility sits with us as corporate parents and it gets delegated to foster carers. But where do we keep those, where do we keep them on file? And, it's really interesting, something came into my inbox and I've asked my permanence team to look into it because I said, we should be able to produce digital life journey work, not just this. What we try and do is, it's so basic, it's not even attractive trying to get albums that are available electronically. But we are so fearful of sharing information in case anybody finds out where anyone is that we don't even do that, we produce in a way scrapbooks that we then upload or we give them a laminated copy of, and it feels like 30 years too old. Why are young people going to find that attractive? So for me, you know, what this is about is making sure that we have information for our children for whom we are corporate parents that follows them digitally, that is secure, that is safe, that can't lead to anyone identifying them that we don't want to, that can't be misused, but actually doesn't get lost. It was something about doing digital life journey work. Right ? Great. And all your recordings and memories that you can keep on file as well, because our systems, even our ICT systems are not designed for it. Social workers say that the phones we provide, you know, and so if they were to take a video to transfer it, our system doesn't work. So just to even have the kit that enables us to do that, I mean, how wonderful would it be if we asked, a young person to share something that we're passionate about and that can go in the system and that's their voice, able to capture their voice, but we can't and I can't bear it!” (Director of Children's Safeguarding and Social Work)

Children's Co-Design

Although everyone thought that co-design is non-negotiable in terms of inclusion and would be useful for increasing communication and feedback, there were still some pertinent issues that arose when considering what works well in including children and young people in conversations for digital safeguarding. Three themes were derived from the participants responses; **Collaboration, Power Dynamics and Digital Capacity.**

Several respondents shared their collaborative co-design approach including focus groups and individual sessions with young people. One interviewee reported they had organized football matches and then consulted individually with young people at the football match. Lived experience was also mentioned, for example with care leavers, and having this included when creating policy documents. It was also thought that whilst in lockdown young people were happy to engage online, it is equally important to undertake collaborative activities face to face and that young people should be given the option of either approach. One Director commented that anything that is co-produced with children and young people is 'just wonderful'. However, these collaborative approaches predominantly sit at the level of consultation (Hart, 1992) and do not reflect a system that is child initiated and driven through a co-design approach.

One Local Authority area had recently been given City status and had introduced a Youth Cabinet as a way to build the child's voice into the growth of the City. Although there was an existing Youth Council there were notable gaps, but they were finding recruitment of young people a struggle. The same Local Authority area had also used the MOMO application for a long time but at the time of this research it was being used less and less. Feedback was that there was not enough variety and they were asked the same things repeatedly.

"It [MOMO] was fine maybe the first couple of years, but after that it lost its freshness. So we actually have stopped it for a while and, you know, kind of maybe reintroduce again, I'm not sure yet really. For me it's like collaboration in all things, isn't it really before that we launch a thing or before we actually, or when we're in the design phase of the thing, we have to have young people around the table on it really". (Director of Children's Services)

Children's Co-Design

“I’d suggest the collaborative co-design approach. You know, young people have meaningful contributions to developing that approach. That their views are considered, quite highly in terms of decision-making and that they have a real opportunity to really influence those decisions and, you know, what those platforms and tools look like”.
(Senior Researcher and Analyst)

Half the participants described the knowledge around the digital space as having an unequal **power dynamic** because children often know far more than adults when it comes to digital use and technology. One interviewee suggested that as adults get older they know less about the digital space. It was also felt that digital communication is much more accessible to children and young people. It is a medium they are more in tune with, not for all children and young people but for the majority. Being able to let children and young people explain their lived experience digitally in real time, how they feel about their life, what they want to happen and their hopes for the future, would be allowing them to start from a familiar space. Furthermore, enabling them to have the ability to look at, amend and contribute to their records, and know their service history encourages a child centered approach, building trusting relationships and feedback. In response, practitioners would need to be consistently flexible and creative when working with young people, and systems would need to be adaptable.

“Children that have been using the digital tool have loved it [story boards]. They love kind of being on the iPads, the tablets and doing those drawings, and drawing pictures of the families and how they want things. So, I think it’s having some real benefits”.
(Senior Improvement Manager)

Children's Co-Design

“Well, I think you’ve got to start from a position of actually having an adult who can communicate with children. So, I think that that’s the starting point. Then I think there’s something about recognizing the power dynamic that exists between adults and children in general. And begin looking at ways in which that can be addressed. And then I think there’s something about engagement and consultation at an early stage in terms of determining how you might then go about having that initial dialogue around what digital safeguarding for young people would look like. And then in terms of a product or an outcome, I think, you know, the strength of it would have to be something that was co-produced, owned by young people, and that they were empowered to lead. I think the digital safeguarding space is really interesting because in a lot of the arenas around safeguarding, we say from a position of power as adults and professionals that we know best”. (Director of Children’s Services)

An area that is increasingly evidenced (SCIE, 2019) is lack of workforce **digital capacity**. This continued to be recognized by some participants, with claims that the general social care workforce is not sufficiently digitally skilled, and that current case management systems are not able to adapt to the ways children digitally communicate.

An Assistant Director explained how beneficial it is to have a workforce that is proficient in being able to use and talk digital technologies, in order to have more engagement and meaningful conversations. They described how this has worked in the past with children with more complex needs, who did not want to engage face to face. For example, some (male) workers who were interested in gaming and digital activities use these as a tool for engagement which resulted in positive relationships and good connections.

Children's Co-Design

“It’s a bit like the debate about drugs, I look back to when I was a social worker myself, the kids always knew more about drugs than we did. You know, some people might have dabbled in drugs at a university and you know, having experience of working with people with drugs, but some of the kids we were working with they’ve been brought up in that environment where they had access, you know, to heroin and methadone and that kind of thing and it was their lived experience. Whereas we were doing it through the lens of a professional, I’ve been on a training course. And I think it’s the same with the digital safeguarding space in that, you know the language that they’re living it, aren’t they, They’re living it, it’s their lived experience, whereas it’s not ours”. (Director of Children’s Services)

“I think in today’s world, it’s a digital world that we live in. And I think for young people, they relate probably to digital forms of communication, whether it is use of Zoom, use of Microsoft Teams, whether it’s Facebook messaging, whether it’s Instagram. There are all sorts of communication methods that can be used. The kind of protocols really for our social workers is telephones, email, I’m not even sure if young people look at emails these days because instant messaging is kind of the thing that they tend to go for these days. It’s an interesting one for me because I think looking ahead how we can actually communicate with young people. I think that our suppliers need to start thinking about integration of sort of social media platforms to make communication a lot easier. I think at the moment it’s still a little bit, should we say old school? You know for me I would like to see the major case management suppliers such as Mosaic, Liquid Logic, LM Capita, et cetera, introduce new forms of communication allowing our social care professionals to communicate with children and young people in a way that young people can really relate to. And that front door of course is critical. Cause that’s where most of our stuff comes from, the front door. And I think everything comes through Liquid logic, but I still think that looking towards the future we’ve got to look at new technologies”. (Systems Services Manager)

Children's Co-Design

To achieve digital children's safeguarding co-design there are two areas to cover, one of which is **Equal Partnerships** and the other is **age sensitivity** of different age groups of children. Ultimately the social and technical childhood space need to become one and the same with both the child and practitioners becoming end users (Carlick, 2018). Children can become equal partners and engage in child-friendly design principles via co-operative enquiry that is located within ²Child Computer Interaction. There was a clear lack of awareness and understanding of this from the majority of participants however impressively they were in general agreement that all age groups of children could fully participate in co-design activities.

There were minimal responses in terms of equal partnership. One Director observed that for digital safeguarding initiatives or policies to be successful, the starting position needs to be one of acknowledgment and acceptance that the lens in which adults see the world is very different from the world children live in and the way they see it. They went on to describe how a staff group facilitated a children's annual conference using an app for polls and voting online. Another stated:

"I think even though I've worked in this realm now for like so long I've always pushed the agenda of digital safeguards, but I think I think my understanding probably needs a rehaul as well, certainly from capturing the young person's voice from a digital point of view, I think I'm probably more looking at it from, I want to put this in the right terminology. I think you mentioned earlier, top-down approach from train the professionals, to be ambassadors, train them to offer the interventions, get a policy in place for the professionals so they can read it. And I've not really included anything from the young person's perspective. So, I think probably my understanding needs to improve, I think from the voice and influence perspective". (Risk and Resilience Coordinator)

² <https://chici.org/>

Children's Co-Design

Having early conversations with children about product design and digital engagement was regarded as important. Traditional methods such as focus groups and the use of Survey Monkey were mentioned by a few interviewees. Facebook was not deemed safe by one Director, however they did say that they had used Facebook to advertise for their Youth Parliament elections. A further suggestion was that gamification could be used as a tool and that would be more interesting than a survey or logging into an app.

The value of technology improving access to young people, particularly those who are hard to reach, was clearly recognized.

“So it’s vulnerable , exploited , missing or trafficked , which is again , very professional speak. It’s kind of our young people who are at risk or being exploited currently. We found that inviting the young people to the meeting, and that could be digitally, it doesn’t have to be in person, but inviting them to the meeting to be part of that co - design over solutions and interventions is very , very helpful having easy access to those young people is gold dust. You know , being able to get them part of the meeting . One of the toughest things that these are hard to reach young people, you know, in a professional definition, these are not even people who are readily going to turn up to the town hall to sit in a meeting with police and social workers , et cetera . If you can get them to join in though on your WhatsApp or whatever, if you can get them to join in that is gold dust, the kind of stuff that they’re going tell you because it’s going keep people safe ”. (Director of Education Partnerships)

“I’m still passionate about the kind of young people who are at home all the time, gaming a lot, who stay in their rooms a lot. How could digitally we improve our relationship with them and then improve the outcomes for them in the end, starting a relationship in the place that they’re in online. So that is still an area of interest for me cause I haven’t cracked it. And we do have a number of young people like that”. (Assistant Director Integrated Children’s Services)

Children's Co-Design

There were mixed responses in determining age groups but there was general agreement that the widest range of age groups of children and young people are potentially appropriate, with some cautioning the need to be flexible with the approach dependent on specific age group. Over half thought younger children should be able to take part in co-design of digital safeguarding initiatives. Responses included:

- All age groups
- Its all about tailoring things to the age group. Age seven and upwards.
- Younger and younger children are digital savvy. 11plus but I will have to think about younger children.
- Start early don't they, I think appropriate ages have to be 16,17,18 more around teenagers but young people up to 15.
- I can't see an age group that wouldn't be appropriate to work with.
- Age 5 upwards ...children in care council , youth parliament SEND youth group. There are a variety of mechanisms in place that could help with co-production.
- Teenagers 14 upwards or 10 year olds.

"I think that different cohorts of young people want to interact in different ways and we need to be flexible to that. And I think we need to work with different ages and different cohorts separately to understand what their needs are and how they want to, how their views will influence decisions differently. I don't think there's one size that fits all". (Senior Researcher and Analyst)

Children's Co-Design

“All ages, you even take feedback from babies if you look at what they are observing. You can take their voice from the children at different ages and stages in different ways. I think in terms of meaningful service design and development, of course, I think there’s a different market and we will learn different things from primary aged children to children in secondary school. And I think based on their different contextual environment, it’s useful to take feedback from children in different ages. Whether that’s through forums digitally, whether it’s through using something they’re already doing and us engaging with them through that. Not necessarily them coming to us. Our ways are quite traditional face to face ways of asking for feedback. So maybe we should be using whatever they do digitally to ask for feedback in a safe way. So I think, yeah, that would be my ideal goal. That would take some work”. (Assistant Director in Integrated Children’s Services)

“Young people use social media from a young age I would target more 10 plus age range. The reason for that is that we, you see the spike from the OfCom data increasing substantially from that transition from primary to secondary school age. Certainly from a social care point of view in that transition age range, you know, rite of passage, young people getting a smart device as they leave primary and go into secondary to stay in touch with parents or whatever”. (Risk and Resilience Coordinator)

“Only very young not appropriate. I do have a sense that this is an unused area for us in our field and I think it could be quite useful. I think it’s in that sort of space where I think our future might lie around the fact of us really being able to collaborate with young people at whatever age, about how we can help this work the way through. I think that is where some of the consultation, proper consultation, a very early almost design stage and absolutely equal level. If I was in the room with my 18-year-old talking in this space he’s more an expert than I am at this space. So it’s not equal. He’s got more knowledge than I have. I think for me, that’s where maybe we’ve got to try and look at how we can implement some innovation in this space in our business really”. (Director of Children’s Services)

Children's Co-Design

Supporting children and young people to be equal partners in the co-design process is essential for co-operative enquiries to maintain their integrity. There was very little evidence of this form of activity taking place. Furthermore, there were only limited examples of traditional approaches such as forums, focus groups, Care / Children in Care Council, Youth Council, Send Youth Forum, none of which were specific to digital safeguarding. There was an absence of strategy other than traditional routes of participation and consultation, including finding young people who are interested in a subject so that they also took some learning away from the exercise. Most of the examples of co-creation were with care leavers. For example, an apprentice with care experience helping co design a new policy framework for foster carers or Youth Justice worked with a current and previous care leaver to rebrand the whole service including the name, logo, mission and vision statement. One example was of circulating the Children's Commissioner's Office – the Big Ask through existing channels such as schools via a hyper link or creating a policy reference group of young people so that documents could be shared.. There was one example of offering a co-design approach of workshops which followed a traditional format of round table discussions. Finally, it is was acknowledged that some information was recorded on Liquid Logic in a very linear fashion meaning at times the system cannot record effectively, authentically representing the levels and depth of engagement.

6. Safeguarding Digital Initiatives

The use of digital communications was inevitable through the Covid-19 pandemic, and this presented a myriad of challenges for children's social care teams. They did however, and do continue to, respond quickly and with some agility in adapting service delivery. Yet the digital divide can still present considerable challenges for staff and children. From a positive position, digital communities and innovation in digital safeguarding solutions can empower families within the context of family help. They can also allow children to feel heard and be non-stigmatizing if located at the front door as a mechanism for self referral. The pandemic gave rise to thinking and acting differently, and creatively in engaging with children and their families. However, this was only after bureaucracy had been set aside in what might be called a 'state of exception' (Agamben, 2008). This demonstrated that practices can be technology facilitated and used to build and maintain relationships. Children and young people can use technology as a tool to share their stories and continue trusting and supportive relationships. Furthermore, it is not surprising that the tools used were limited to digital solutions such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams and WhatsApp due to the fact that there is little availability of safeguarding apps or digital tools (Carlick, 2018). Some participants expressed how they were 'given permission' to use WhatsApp, whilst others mentioned that it was mostly the professionals who instigated the use of Microsoft Teams. One person mentioned that these live recordings of meetings enabled the capturing of the child's voice.

*"In our service we were given permission to use WhatsApp. Is that the sort of thing you mean? Which historically we weren't allowed to use with children and young people and that was it. I think it was life changing for our young people and we have continued to use it and it continues to be a really safe and supportive tool, particularly for our care leavers to use to help them feel less isolated in their experiences. Zoom as well. We didn't have permission to use Zoom and we use that as a way of keeping in touch and seeing people faces and talking to them. We continue to use that particularly again for our care leavers".
(Senior Researcher and Analyst)*

Safeguarding Digital Initiatives

“WhatsApp, so again, really interesting position. So the council has a policy position in relation to not using WhatsApp because of the way in which it’s hosted and where the servers are. Okay. I don’t know much about that. But as a general rule we wouldn’t usually use WhatsApp. Although interestingly, I know that corporately and at the very senior level there are various WhatsApp groups that do exist for communicating a number of different messages. So there’s a contradiction there. So the conversation started off with, you’re going to have to get your children to use Teams. You know, that’s just, well, that’s just not going to happen, is it? So, you know, we were having won that battle, we were then in a position where, you know, conversations with children were what was eligible to do it via WhatsApp”. (Director of Children’s Services)

“Well, so let me describe what we did and I hope I capture everything. So we did start using teams. Yes to start speaking with children, which we had never done before. I know this feels like two years now, two and a half years down the line. Like this is just the norm. But we had never done that before. I mean, you know, we do use WhatsApp messaging. So texting happens, WhatsApp messages happen. But we hadn’t really used Teams or Zoom, or I think we used Teams here. Right. We hadn’t used any of those platforms before. And for some children that worked, but for some it didn’t. And there’s a real risk, just like our staff, that if we were to only engage in those ways, it wouldn’t be a good idea of where people are at, if that makes sense. You can switch off a camera and, you know, you wouldn’t really, wouldn’t be able to see. So, that was one bit. We do have things that are available electronically in terms of information, but in my view, that is not an interaction in the same way. So those are different things. There are lots of things. You can go on the website, you can see videos, you can see audio recordings, but they are not digital interaction like you and I are interacting”. (Director of Children’s Safeguarding and Social Work)

Safeguarding Digital Initiatives

One participant explained that child protection conferences and looked after children's reviews were held initially online and then in the latter phases of the pandemic they were moved to a hybrid position. However, at the time this research took place the Local Authority had gone back to face to face and hybrid (online and face to face) was not an option. Online would only be considered for exceptional circumstances going forward such as clinically vulnerable staff, people isolating, etc. Each case would be assessed on its own merit. They shared that some partners were prepared to say things on Microsoft Teams that they may not to say face to face. In contrast, another Local Authority had embraced and kept a hybrid model, more through pragmatism and found that some agencies struggled to revert to business as usual. Moreover, there was a variety of advice and guidance shared which appeared to be centered around supporting young people online and staying safe. This included use of laptops and increased screen time. This information was shared through existing networks, such as the partners of one Digital Resilience Networking Group.

“We’ve got around about 168 partners on that email distribution list as present. Mostly schools, designated safeguard leads, some head teachers, external organizations, police, investigation team, lead detectives on there, community police officers, community police liaison officers on there”. (Risk and Resilience Coordinator)

Emailing of policies, research guidance, such as teaching online safety, Department of Education guidance, keeping children safe in education, changes, trends, advice and guidance to practitioners about how they operate in regard to being online where children are involved, recording and transcripts of meetings. The use of technology can increase the speed and flow of information for those that have access to the Internet and IT equipment.

If case management systems were more adaptable and agile to the development this would allow more direct access to families and their wider networks. For example, were only two comments in relation to new fields within forms on the Liquid Logic Case Management System.

Safeguarding Digital Initiatives

Participants were cautious to admitting they were not being strategic about how to manage the digital situation during the Covid-19 pandemic. In some situations they were not being risk sensible but were either risk averse or too risky. For example allowing more flexibility in regard to new circumstances and writing policies or guidance around these events.

Moving on from the Covid-19 pandemic participants were asked about digital apps or pathways their social care teams used to communicate with children and young people. Responses again mentioned Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and WhatsApp. A few Local Authorities were only given permission to use WhatsApp and one other Local Authority had implemented Microsoft Teams across Social Care as standard protocol.

“I think some of our social workers more through practice than policy found that some of our young people once they have the opportunity too access our social workers more increasingly by let’s say text and WhatsApp or whatever it is, yeah. We have continued to use that more particularly in our care leader team and our 16+ services, if you like. That seems to be a more accepted and understandable kind of form of coms really between the two. Now, I think there is something for us, not specifically talking about [the Local Authority], I’m talking about wider. I think there is something wider fostering public services about keeping up to speed in regard to what is the right way to connect. I think even when we’re talking about innovative apps or whatever, we are 20 years behind kind of many of the teenagers, aren’t we? And so from that degree we have continued some things, but I’d say in more of a, I don’t want to use the word haphazard, it’s not quite been that, but you know, kind of more it’s allowed more variety of approach, I suppose, let’s say”. (Director of Children’s Services)

Safeguarding Digital Initiatives

Four standalone digital initiatives were also described with an app that was co-designed with young people and developed by one Local Authority as a tool for education, training and apprenticeships. The app was developed before the pandemic and social workers would refer young people to it to access information. Another described how they had worked with young people to produce films with a drama group to help young people share and express their feelings about lockdown. As well as upgrading the ICT system where phase two will have a portal through which parents, children and young people can write directly to their social worker through email. Their communication will automatically go into the system (Mosaic). This is a good example of how a case management system can be agile and adaptive to service delivery and families needs, and thus a benefit to staff and families.

Another Local Authority was trialing a new app (with the pilot being extended) for direct work with children and young people. It is a general type of platform to communicate i.e., safety houses, words and pictures. The child cannot directly input into the case management system, however key workers are using it. The idea behind it is that key workers are able to capture information digitally rather than with pen and paper and they can use their mobile app to do so. It can be used for early intervention or right across to a child protection level. The digital solution can be used for all ages instead of pen and paper. It is a way that practitioners can 'capture' life experiences, story boards and the voice of the child and consider what it is that the child wants to happen.

"I looked into it myself and we did some research and commissioning to see if there were any market providers with whom we could work to develop safe platforms, through gaming for example. Okay because we know that a number of our young people on our caseload spend a lot of time at home, pre pandemic as well. Yeah. We know that they work through gaming and have social networks, but we couldn't find a safe provider to work with who did that for us. We couldn't find one and we don't have the skills and the know-how to really progress that but it's something of interest to me". (Assistant Director Integrated Children's Services)

Safeguarding Digital Initiatives

Other Digital Apps that were mentioned included:

- MOMO (one participant stated it was used for consultation but never was implemented after that and they had no further explanation).
- Slide O used to gather views via surveys
- Ollie application for digital resilience
- Leaving Well app (aimed at Care Leavers)
- Social media to run groups for young people. This was facilitated by Zoom as virtual groups undertaken by youth workers that were not employed by the Local Authority (this was a work around as the Local Authority staff were not given permission to use social media platforms or Zoom.)

“Yeah, so we used social media to run groups for young people. So through the youth services, through social media platforms. So because of the restriction of the local authority and our technology and all the barriers to IT and access, I think we attempted to do this through Facebook, which we’ve got access to. I don’t think that was very well used because young people often don’t use Facebook. It’s more for adults. Then the technology we do have is Teams, Microsoft Teams. So that was the platform we were able to use. Again, that was used, but I would say it wasn’t accessed hugely, but it was an offer that was open to young people”. (Assistant Director Integrated Children’s Services)

Safeguarding Digital Initiatives

A clear reason for using digital solutions is their capacity to increase frequency of contact and to facilitate communicating and listening or embedding the child's voice within social care plans as part of the safety planning processes. When approaching this subject few participants were able to offer an example or repeated the same virtual communication platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, WhatsApp, Google Meet and / or did not use digital solutions as a form of intervention. However, for those that were able to offer a response this can be summarized as either giving children and young people direct access digitally or having integrated systems that allowed for digital access. A clear point was made that professionals need to work within the sub-cultures of children and young people happen. It was piloted with a small cohort of workers. There is a feedback form but not one that has been designed by children and young people and works with the way they communicate and furthermore record working that way. It was acknowledged by one interviewee that they thought nothing would replace face to face and anything digital is additional. Another stated that children and young people should have a direct line into Mosaic where they can input to their own records, further stating that MOMO can now talk with Mosaic and this is an area that needs further exploration. Having undertaken a small piece of research they stated that older young people want to use an interactive tool and do not want to use pen and paper. The idea is that parent portals or child portals can be a means of community self service and can undoubtedly increase sharing of information as well as lessening stigma. For example, a parent portal in Liquid Logic offers a kind of two-way information portal. It allows the practitioner to send emails to parents so they can view information about their children. However, progressions could mean that the system was not so restrictive and there was true system integration, so that partner systems link and are easier to access and use. Many wanted to be able to assign audio recordings into the case management system.

“The thing that’s key is having a level of a confidential, where you get it confidential and trustworthy relationships with those you’re working with, so it’s about the fact for me around giving the opportunity and the wider opportunity for that communication to have done, whether that’s actually in person on the phone, digitally through messages, emails, whatever really”. (Director of Children’s Services)

Safeguarding Digital Initiatives

“I think there would be a need to ask the child in their care plan which one they would prefer. But, but our policy within the council through data protection is that we can’t use certain platforms because they are not secure. Okay you’ve got the security of WhatsApp because it’s encrypted end to end. Yes but I think it should be the choice of the child and, but then you’ve got all the issues about controlling the security and that’s absolutely key. Especially to sharing their own information, you talk in care plans, you talked about personal information and sensitive personal information”. (Risk and Resilience Manager)

“We’ve done it through very much face to face building relationships, capturing the voice of the child in very traditional ways, be it through writing, drawing, story boarding, etcetera. And then the social worker bringing that back into the system”. (Assistant Director for Safeguarding and Children’s Services)

“You know, we try and do things with them so that we actually are listening to their views. And I might just, you know, try this and see what it says. So when you go into this, it says name, telephone number, email, inquiry, and then you send the inquiry. Now, even that is a lot for a child. I mean, you know, they really want to communicate with us. They will, but you would want something which was much more fluid. Maybe they had an ID, an easy password, then you would know that this child was coming in. And without having to fill all of that in. You see, I’m with you. Because now that I’ve used it, I can see it and I’m thinking, my goodness, we’re asking for a lot of information there. So, you know, we would need a secure ID for them. Something that they could remember that we help, you know, a memorable, something memorable. I will be talking to my participation engagement worker on this one now”. (Director of Children’s Safeguarding and Social Work).

Safeguarding Digital Initiatives

There are certain digital initiatives, some of which are mentioned above such as portals, however it is clear there are areas for innovation that could offer revolutionary ways of working with children and families in a digital world. These compromise digital self-referrals into Multi-agency Safeguarding Hubs (MASHs) and digital engagement across the safeguarding spectrum from early help to child protection planning, as well as developing wider community networks (health, education, community organisations) as digital communities. At the core is improving accessibility for the child's voice, enabling it to be seamless through the system, frictionless information sharing, self-service and the improvement of case management systems. There was overwhelming agreement that participants would like children and young people to be able to digitally self refer. This included considerations about the following:

- It should be an application.
- It would be revolutionary but be a funding issue.
- This should be an option as part of digital inclusion making it easy and accessible.
- Definitely scope for young people and families doing digital self-referrals but they would still need to be followed up.
- Security end to end encryption (is an issue).
- As a child you should be able to self refer in the medium you choose or is your preference.
- The more we have for a young person voice to be heard and routes for their concerns to be heard would be great.
- To be successful it would need promoting at a national level, with a branding and communications strategy, including advertising on the television.

Safeguarding Digital Initiatives

“I think it’s different frameworks in place. It’s whether or not, I mean I’m no expert by any means. It’s whether or not they would need to, the form currently is probably a barrier in itself. It’s a massively huge great long form with lots of professional words and language. So, looking at the form as a professional, filling it in, it’s probably fairly of putting anyway the first time that you do it cause it’s quite a long form. So, for a child or a young person to look at that, I would imagine that’s a fairly scary thing to do. To pick up the phone or to fill in an online thing. So maybe if there was some sort of chat function or something that was easy for a young person to sort of say, I’m worried or I’ve got a concern, here’s what it is. That might be a way in like a chat function maybe or some sort of online thing. I think the form itself’s a barrier and it would absolutely need to think about a different way for a young person to do that. But yeah, absolutely. It would be great if they could self refer in and say, I’m worried or I’ve got a worry or a concern and this, I need some help, then why wouldn’t we want to help a young person? Of course we would. So yeah, I think we definitely need to think about about how that’s done so that it could be sensitively handled when that information or that worry’s received”. (Head of Partnerships)

“I think it [digital self-referrals] could work very well and very easily. There’s probably a quick win there, if you are worried about being hurt if you’re a child presses button, we could, probably can almost , add a button too, I’m sure there’ll be a million reasons why people tell me we can’t do this. I will think on the back of our conversation today, I will take this to our safeguarding partnership for consideration”. (Director of Children’s Services)

“My view is as a nonprofessional, yes. I think, it [digital self-referrals] would reduce the workload for our professionals, allowing them to spend more time focusing on the children..I feel that they would feel that they would have more control of their case if they were registering the information themselves rather than a phone call and somebody logging that information, puts them in control and I think it makes them more open and more receptive”. (System Service Manager)

Safeguarding Digital Initiatives

Operationally safeguarding digital initiatives could work best, be accessible and have the greatest impact across all areas of safeguarding practices digitalized responses supporting the work of multi-disciplinary teams. Suggestions put forward were as follows:

- Five participants stated safeguarding digital initiatives should be implemented at the front door and Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hubs (MASH).
- Four stated they should be across all social teams.
- One named safeguarding teams and fostering services.
- Two named children in care / leaving care teams, children with disabilities and children in need.
- Three participants named early help.
- Four named child protection and Looked After Children teams.

A Senior Research Analyst thought there would be a huge impact for parents if they could directly interact with what was being recorded about them. They had examples of negative feedback from parents about things being recorded incorrectly, such as names and dates of birth . Furthermore, this was seen as an opportunity for parents as well as children and young people. It was also thought that most social care professionals would benefit from more enhanced digital solutions.

“Children in care teams. I think about the nature of the work and often young people at great distances and we travel a way to see them. So in between that supplementing it with some excellent form of digital, and I can’t envision what that could be, but something that really helps them participate and regularly give us feedback, for example, would be really good. We did actually use a platform, brought a platform in, I think it was MOMO, I did look at it. I mean I think in the end it’s not been that well used by young people and the kind of limitations to how it was implemented and it was quite labour intensive once the feedback came in. But the kind of idea behind MOMO was a good idea”. (Assistant Director, Integrated Children’s Service)

Safeguarding Digital Initiatives

“Early help, front door, looked after children, child protection, I mean it’s something that hasn’t been touched on really in the Josh McAllister’s review social care, but I think they’ll just be happy to have enough social workers to even open on a morning, nevermind. But I think you’re absolutely right. Monday to Friday night and nine to five is a council typical operator model. And yet there’s plenty of the council officers, who collect the wheelie bin on a morning or work before nine and five and why not. And we have plenty of gate keepers and parks now Saturday and Sunday’s can always fit within the nine to five model. And it could be, you know there’s police who have child protection powers as we know but also the EDT, and it might be how they interface. In a perfect world, you’d have your whole organization kind of working through them shifts and why not. But I don’t see that as been achievable in the shorter term”. (Director of Children’s Services)

“Oh, look, my view is every team. Yeah so I think, you know, MASH, child protection, child in need teams. If we’re talking about the child’s voice through the system. It’s in early help. It’s in permanence. It’s in adoption, It’s for children in care. It’s for all of that . So, it’s around, you know, family time. When do children actually write in and say, I just had my contact and this is what I didn’t like. Real time. Yeah. Real time as they go. Because their life is short spurts of real time comms, isn’t it? Oh, it’s wherever you go. And so you need something that is in short spurts, they can actually communicate with us. That goes straight into our ICT systems that enables us to hear their voices and we see it there and we respond to it. One of the other things I was gonna say is not to forget, our young people disabilities. So, Creating things that they would be able to use that have a sensory, that there’s something sensory that they can use where they would be able to communicate with, I often say this, that they are so vulnerable that eliciting their voice and what’s happening for them we have to take extra positive action and the resource that goes into it. We must do it for inclusion”. (Director of Children’s Safeguarding and Social Work)

Safeguarding Digital Initiatives

There were two distinctive themes that emerged from discussion on how the child's voice digitally could be improved within the current systems, which were **Case Management Systems** and Digital **Self-Referrals**. The development of case management and recording systems is key for change in focusing on areas of learning from the Covid-19 pandemic, specifically on how to increase access for digital communities and digital self referrals. This included systems mergers for example Mosaic and System Space (which is a system that collects feedback from young people). Instead of having to export data and match responses; a survey tool embedded in Mosaic was recommended as a way forward. In the same context another participant wanted a technical solution where a child or young person could contribute directly into their record i.e. directly talk to the system and in effect talk to their key workers. Further responses were similar to the aforementioned; if young people had the choice of accessing digital plans or writing their own digital plans that would be a good starting point. This was not just for care planning but for child protection, early help and family plans with digital access embedded in them all. The ultimate view of this was described by another participant as a portal where children and families can contribute digitally to their records at any time of the day or week, for example on a Saturday night when things are really tough, and they can add to their records stating something like 'I don't need you however this is how I am feeling tonight'. This would give a more authentic picture and would improve the ways in which the voice of the child is included. There were also recommendations for including actual audio content (where the child's voice or wishes and feelings are heard directly) and being able to save these recordings as an attachment on digital records. Likewise uploading audio files of child protection conferences and reviews instead of paper notes and minutes of meetings would, in the opinion of many, be ideal. Overall, there was a strong sense that children and young people should not have to feel like the system is being built around them, they should naturally slot in and their voice be valued. This would mean a move to a more virtual co-design of an end to end product that is congruent with children and young people.

Safeguarding Digital Initiatives

Learning from the Covid-19 pandemic has meant that some participants had a better understanding of digital accessibility. One, for example, described how their Council had developed new ways of creating digital communities, including overcoming barriers through using digital language interpreters, and noted that digital chat options are good to explore. Virtual hubs were reported to have worked well for young people during the around relevant topics. Young people used these virtual hubs to talk about the issues that were of immediate concern to them, such as mental health and lack of contact with teachers. Again, the success here was due to accessibility and more so for looked after children placed outside the Local Authority area. These initiatives gave young people a voice and a sense of belonging. In the same context, the use of digital forums and taking the information into case management systems, generated the idea that digital self access and a system upgrade can be combined. Making the system accessible to the public would allow self- service, thus enabling people to register themselves with notifications sent to care professionals. This has the potential to compliment or replace the standard front door referral route through a phone call, email which must be accompanied by an electronic form. These developments were presented as having significant potential for the future. As a Senior Development Officer for Participation stated:

“Digital self-referral definitely. There is definitely an option of having a digital self-referral, but quite a simple one maybe, so then it’s followed up by a call from a professional, but really simple, like, what is it? You know, what’s the issue? What is it you want the support with? And so that it’s not too off putting, because we know sometimes self-referrals in any circumstance can be difficult for people”. (Senior Development Officer for Participation)

Another participant thought self-referrals should definitely only be for older young people and perhaps not ‘a four-year-old child’. However, offering children and young a range of options for self-referrals was seen as important.

Safeguarding Digital Initiatives

“I’m open to all of those, but what I don’t want to do is overwhelm the system as well and create so many pathways that we can’t track them. So, I think for safeguarding there is so many new referrals coming in, coming to our MASH then where children can refer themselves brilliant idea. And maybe through our portal, we’d be able to do more of that. Children who already open to us to create pathways for them so that that information goes to trusted people, trusted adults. And I think it needs to happen in the early help. It needs to happen across the child’s journey. But we just need to make sure that we design the pathways, design the systems, make sure the information is collated, and more importantly, that it’s making a difference to children. Because it can just become part of the wallpaper of practice without us then paying attention to it. And sometimes that’s the bit, whatever we do, we need to make sure that we are measuring its impact”. (Director of Children’s Safeguarding and Social Work)

“So, I think just a general bug bear of mine would be there are 80,000 children in [name of Local Authority]. There are at 56,000 children of school age in [name of Local Authority]. And we have a youth parliament and we have a children in care council and we have care leaver groups and we have this children with disability group. We are proud of the fact that we can demonstrate our reach in terms of an engagement with all of our looked after children, for example, of which there are 700. Okay. The bug bear is there are 80,000 children, 56,000 of school age. And we are not capturing their views and their voice in any meaningful way. And then we pat ourselves on the back because we’ve consulted or we’ve engaged. So, good example of this at the moment would be, we’re currently just concluding the consultation about the current council plan. Okay. Now, there’s nothing in the council plan that you wouldn’t think is a great idea. So, three key priorities, one’s around prosperity, one’s around vulnerability, and one’s around climate change. We know locally that two key issues to children based on consultation, would be environment, the green agenda, climate change and access to mental health services and CAMHs and post pandemic, feelings of harm, suicide, depression and general emotional well-being and health. I don’t think that we would argue with either of those messages particularly, but I do worry about the large number of children that we’ve not been able to reach and that have not fed back and have not had their say. So, I suppose there’s an opportunity to do something better, but I don’t think as a council we are not particularly skilled at sort of that technical, that digital technical engagement with young people type approach, if that makes sense”. (Director of Children’s Services)

Safeguarding Digital Initiatives

Digital safeguarding initiatives could have useful application in building relationships, as tools for practice, or as a tool for self referrals. There is always the question of how to do it and make a difference in terms of outcomes, protection and cost benefits. When posed with the question how to evaluate the impact of safeguarding digital initiatives, the majority had difficulty in answering the question. There was limited knowledge of, or if, evaluation and impact analysis was taking place. There was agreement that there was a gap and that this is an area in which to embed new learning, and skills. Responses included:

- Some recollection of evaluation of MOMO but the evaluation was only in the context of finances.
- Leaving Well app maybe more through the lens of children but was not aware of the details.
- Most responses come from people filling in paper straight after a meeting.
- Commissioned Barnardo's to undertake a piece of work on digital resilience but in terms of impact that's always the hard question when it's linked to prevention.
- Evaluation by analysis of the click rate on foster care recruitment online.
- Sexting and youth, sexual imagery subject to a scrutiny report
- Some had used focus groups, surveys and case examples.

"I have seen there was some research done. I saw a report which was seeking feedback from professionals about the impact of holding meetings and conferences, reviews online and there was some positives from families. The impact from not having to travel, being comfortable in your own home, feeling safer, rather than walking into a room full of professionals, that it was certainly a lot easier for some, but then I think there were difficulties for others. We certainly evaluated the impact of using WhatsApp with our care leavers and we have feedback from lots and lots of our care leavers about the impact of the WhatsApp group in terms of support providing a network and a community for them of support knowing that they're not on their own". (Senior Researcher and Analyst)

Safeguarding Digital Initiatives

“So I think that is a very pertinent, very difficult question to answer. I think that that is where we’re not quite there yet. So, we can evaluate the implementation of something like the number, that piece of work we can evaluate through the milestones. Did it do what I said it was going to do by such and such but does that then make young people safer? That’s much harder to measure, but ultimately that’s what this is all about. It’s the output measures that we’re at rather than the outcome”. (Director of Education and Partnerships)

“Evaluation is two-fold, what children and families feel about using technology, did it increase their confidence and participation? Did it allow them to be clearer about their wishes and feelings? Do the staff understand more clearly? So, is there a way of looking at what we traditionally did and what we’re doing now, and does it have any impact on a quicker outcome, a better outcome a more accurate plan? So, is it helping with disclosure? Is it helping with making the plans for safety, more child centered, more focused, that’s, you know, to see a real impact”. (Senior Improvement Manager)

7. Barriers to Implementation

There are many challenges and barriers to adoption and implementation at both a national and local level. Some of these are complex and changes to culture and working practices will take time. It requires developing a digitally resilient workforce that works outside normal office working hours as found by Carlick (2018) and recommended by the independent review of children's social care (MacAlister, 2022). There remain a host of digital divides that require political solutions to bring social and digital agendas together. Case management systems that are agile, connecting to developing technology that allow easy self service engagement through parent and/or child portals, for example. Thereafter capturing such data into new and emerging data sets. When asked about the barriers and changes that need to take place for implementation of digital safeguarding, respondents were appreciative of being able to share their thoughts. A dominant theme aired was **lack of leadership and strategy from a national perspective**. Alongside this were operational restrictions stemming from a lack of knowledge and skills in the workforce; **lack of resources and the architecture and governance of case management systems**. As one Director of Children's Services put it, the main barrier to implementation was:

“National Government, it's about trusting the professionals I think a little bit really. So, I think whenever there is a child death, then we've got to allow for less innovation and we've got to tell these people they've got to do this in a structured way. So that I think to me that's the main barrier really”.

Following a similar line, another Director of Children's Services thought there was a lack of vision, with no one steering Local Authorities to embrace digital change:

“I think it's around like organizational progress, where we're at now, where we're at in the future. It doesn't factor this in, it's just doing more of the same. So, we need that kind of stop. Completely. So, where's your benefit realization around this kind of stuff? I think part of it is a lack of anyone to turn to who could provide that steer. You know, some kind of providing the vision on it. Big organizations, big ships are slow to turn. So sometimes needs someone to kind of show the way, show the possibilities”.

Barriers to Implementation

A consistent message was the lack of digital knowledge and skills of the workforce, not only in using up to date equipment but also the risks that children and young people face regarding online harms. In this context however it is about using technology for good and understanding the benefits of digital safeguarding. These need to be explained to the workforce and families, in terms of how they will benefit, what needs to happen, being clear about why change is necessary, and what is going to be better as a result. There is a need for professional education to change, with digital resilience and digital skills embedded within qualifying and post-qualifying frameworks. Similar views were expressed regarding the level of education for foster carers with concerns that what is currently offered is not robust.

In terms of the lack of resources to make change happen, no one was averse to the possibility of new ways of working, indeed most thought that with the correct resources such as dedicated allocated budgets; investment in equipment and systems that are fit for purpose; and availability of technology for future ways of working could be supported. Taking positive action and assigning resources was seen as crucial and critical to managing the every-day pressures.

“We as a local authority. I don’t know about others. We’re not technologically advanced perhaps in terms of our actual hardware but also probably in terms of our knowledge as a local authority outside of social care. The infrastructure side of the local authority that buys products for us as a whole system. They’re probably not as knowledgeable again on the children’s aspect and safeguarding and then what technology is useful because of course corporately they’re just looking at what technology meets the norm or fits for most people”. (Assistant Director, Integrated Children’s Services)

Barriers to Implementation

Case management systems were seen as limited or under funded. The current systems are limited in terms of what the technology can do but also reflecting a limited understanding of how people interact with the technology. Some thought their current case management systems were inoperable and most felt that the current frameworks don't help; assessment systems, tools, and current policies are not set up to incorporate emerging digital technology. Frustrations were aired about information governance especially when information could not be shared. This also referred to data sharing around the front door between Local Authority areas.

“More open systems and social care tech providers working more closely. We have the major key suppliers of social care systems and there's five or six big companies out there, but there are also a lot of smaller companies developing some really useful products. Those systems have got to be able to link to the big systems. And what I want to see is those bigger suppliers being more responsive to developing those APIs to allow that interoperability. That way we 're not duplicating information recording things twice. I'd really like to see changes there. So, for me that's the challenge. I still think there's some cultural changes need to be made, especially around the health services because there is a sense of nervousness that if they share information, once information leaves their infrastructure , they no longer have control of it”. (System Services Manager)

Put simply, there is literally no funding allocated unless it is ring fenced for case management systems. The majority of participants highlighted that there was no allocated funding and no scope in the budget for safeguarding digital initiatives. One local authority had received external funding for a very specific project; financial investment for work to integrate five different IT systems that operated independently into two systems so that the education and social care systems were now linked. A further issue mentioned was the cost of support and maintenance, and add on modules associated with systems such as Liquid Logic. There was appreciation that the right investment could save money in the long term.

Barriers to Implementation

“Financial? I don’t know but as you’re aware, there’s an awful lot that doesn’t need to be financial. There is the element of human resources, it’s about the investment in training. It’s the investment in mobiles and digital devices for young people. I don’t think we actually bring that together. We did buy computers for young people during the pandemic. We actually give computers out to young people, laptops so that they can do the homework, they can do school-work. They were all purchased. But I don’t think we bring one figure together to be able to give you a financial total”. (Systems Service Manager)

“I certainly don’t know and it’s certainly not none and it’s not enough , but I’m sure equally, I probably haven’t got a kind of budget line that says financial, don’t think it is a separate kind of consideration or pulled out for consideration, it should be really. It would be, I think, subsumed within our consultation mechanisms or it’d be across different lines really. And I think it does feel sometimes we are a victim to Liquid Logic or a Mosaic or a whoever is put upon us and we are really feeling to be in control of that space, the millions and it probably is millions and there’s the electoral authority, how we spend on these sort of things. It does feel that its kind of it’s slightly tail by dog really”. (Director of Children’s Services)

Barriers to Implementation

“It can’t be just on its own in one place. So it becomes part of everybody’s thinking. And my view, to be honest, is that you do save money in the end”. (Director of Children’s Safeguarding and Social Work)

“Yeah, there’s probably not anything assigned to it. But I suppose again depends how broad you would want to go. You could say the actual case management systems, the kind of the charge, the payment of licenses for them, the licenses for our accredited forms for kind of our systems. And then again, going wider the actual kit that works and then obviously even like the pilot that we’ve got, that’s kind of investment then again that ongoing cost with case management suppliers”. (Senior Improvement Manager)

8 Conclusion

The rapid pace of digital growth and the Covid-19 pandemic are a catalyst for the change in children's social care practices. For example, the use of WhatsApp was a game changer for young people and professionals alike where historically this would have never been allowed. It is now time to consider new ways of working, along with intended and unintended consequences, underpinned by national leadership with a social care digital strategy. This would in turn form new data sets for decision making. Clear frameworks for safeguarding digital policy and procedures applied locally could drive significant change and a culture shift. This needs to be underpinned by targeted funding and investment in both the public sector and the private sector, to enable co-designed add on's, improved agility of case management systems and also to encourage innovation and growth in the availability and application of digital safeguarding tools. This could replicate the Safety Tech Challenge Fund to encourage the development of proof of concept tools that will be subject to clear evaluation criteria. A specific digital safeguarding strategy should not only be for social care but must form part of the Local Authority overall digital strategy, to ensure there is joining up and digital solidarity between statutory safeguarding partners. This should then follow through and be reflected within national inspection frameworks to guarantee the embedding of a hybrid model of digital practices, available and accessible for local communities. Taking learning from the Covid-19 pandemic, areas of digital practise should become normal operating practice. In this way, digital tools can encourage, support and work alongside traditional face to face social work and multi-disciplinary working practices.

Conclusion

Innovation in this space will come from the public, private and community sectors engaging in co-design. It must involve children and young people who can share lived experience and structure the architecture for new technology. This recognizes that children are digital natives and encourages industry and professionals to be working with them in a more accessible format. Alongside this, case management systems need to be able to adapt to this accessibility and be more agile for analysing and sharing information in different formats, with new design bolt-ons and updating in order to contribute to new data sets. If there were, for example, a digital self-referral or digital self service for all family members and their extended networks, this has the potential to create digital communities that could act in a similar way to national data sets and health management approaches for data analysis. To date, digital self-referrals to statutory child protection services do not exist, however this research clearly identifies evidence to at least justify a pilot approach. This should include an impact assessment and long-term cost benefit analysis. Financial investment is critical to its success, which could be drawn from the pooled budgets of statutory safeguarding partners. Schools are also key (Carlick, 2018 and MacAlister, 2022) for co-design, marketing campaigns and accessibility to children and young people. The earlier children are included in the conversations of stages of tech development the stronger product outcome will be, with a sense of ownership. Thus, the current safeguarding system would need to flex to accommodate this. Offering a range of digital service delivery options would indeed increase the need not only for the workforce to be up skilled but also for public sector organisations to ensure they have up to date and fit for purpose IT devices to carry out their statutory duties. Most importantly it will give children and young people choice for their voice to be heard in a way that is accessible and in a format that reflects their everyday forms of communication. Children safeguarding co-design and digital safeguarding initiatives have a place in all aspects of child safeguarding. These support information sharing processes, think family and community self services, reducing case recording and sharing advice and guidance.

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APPENDIX

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is your understanding of the term 'digital safeguarding co-design'?
2. Has your LA implemented any new digital safeguarding measures that include children and young people? If yes what are these?
3. Since the Covid-19 pandemic what digital apps or pathways have your children's social care teams used to communicate with children and young people?
4. Which of the digital apps, platforms or pathways would you consider to be key to communicating and listening (or embedding) the child's voice within social care plans?
5. What do you think works well to including children and young people in conversations for digital safeguarding?
6. What strategies, interventions, digital tools would you recommend so that children and young people can be equal partners in the development of safeguarding digital initiatives? What age groups do you feel would be appropriate?
7. a) How do you evaluate the impact of digital initiatives?
b) (supplementary question)
Do you evaluate whether digital initiatives enhance the child's voice within their care planning and safety?
8. a) What would you like to see in place to improve the child's voice within the current systems
b) (Supplementary prompts) for example , digital communities , merging of data sources, digital self referrals, more digital chat services, virtual hubs?
9. Would you support children and young people as equal partners in research and design in the development of new digital safeguarding initiatives?
10. a) How do you think that children's social care and digital agendas can inform policy development?
b) What policies do you think digital safeguarding initiatives would need to be linked to?
11. a) In your opinion what are the barriers to implementing digital safeguarding for social care services?
b) And what changes need to take place to overcome these barriers?
12. a) Would you like to see children and young people to be able to digitally self refer in to the MASH/CSC?
b) How do you think this could work?
13. In which social care teams do you think digital safeguarding initiatives could best work?
14. To your knowledge, how much financial investment does the LA as- sign to digital safeguarding initiatives?
13. Do you have any additional comments?