



REACH

Online safety for children in care

EXECUTIVE GUIDE

Introducing

The internet plays a crucial role in the lives of young people today. Over one in three internet users is a child, and 59% of 11 and 12-year-olds use social media – but it's important to acknowledge that high levels of confidence and usage don't necessarily translate to high levels of skill or capability in using online platforms safely. While the internet creates many positive opportunities for young people, there are also numerous issues that make it vital to ensure they're adequately supported in their online lives.

If children and young people are to be safer and thrive online they need the guidance of the community of adults around them – particularly when there's the potential for the shifting and complex vulnerabilities of their offline lives to be exacerbated and added to when they're engaging online. For this to happen, these adults must feel confident in providing that support.



59%

OF 11 AND 12-YEAR-OLDS USE SOCIAL MEDIA

Having published [Discovery Research](#) on children's internet safety and run a [Children's Online Safety in schools programme](#) based on its findings, we're now launching a new programme that places our focus on the digital experience of a particularly vulnerable group of children and young people: those in care.

A focus on children and young people in care

In the UK, there are over 65,000 children and young people currently living in foster care with 55,000 foster families¹. The [Growing Up Digital in Care](#) report by the Children's Commissioner's Office, identified several challenges throughout the care system, including a lack of digital skills among foster carers and a resulting lack of safeguarding.

The report concluded:

"Children in care must not experience social isolation or lack the opportunity to develop their digital skills because of poor digital access or because their foster parents or key staff lack digital awareness. It is therefore necessary that

there is a significant change in the way that this is considered in all looked after settings. In support of this, care home staff, social workers and foster parents require up-to-date training that goes beyond internet safety and is designed to educate them about the ways in which children use social media and the internet, why it is important for them, and how it contributes to their skill development."

In this Executive Guide, we'll look at the journey of our programme development, outlining the three key challenges through which we aim to support organisations making a lasting difference to the online lives of young people in care.

¹ The Fostering Network



Programme development journey

In 2019, we undertook Discovery Research into [children and young people's online safety](#) in partnership with New Philanthropy Capital and Parent Zone. The research brought to light a number of factors that have helped influence the development of our new programme on online safety for children in foster care.

Headlines that stood out from our research included:

Offline vulnerabilities are enhanced online – children may have shifting and complex vulnerabilities in the offline world, which can be exacerbated and added to when engaging online – especially when the online spaces they access are designed for adults.

Children are more vulnerable to online risks without consistent, informed and confident parents or carers – particularly if those children are also experiencing vulnerabilities in other areas of their life.

As well as taking the findings from this piece of research, we conducted stakeholder interviews and sought expert advice, leading us to focus our efforts towards a group of children and young people who are particularly vulnerable in both their online and offline lives: those in and leaving care.

In the [Growing Up Digital in Care report](#), the Children's Commissioner's Office identified and explored a number of areas surrounding the digital experience for young people in care. A key theme emerging from the report was that a lack of digital skills and confidence among foster carers leaves children in care without the support or safeguarding they need in order to use the internet safely. Lack of training was often cited as a barrier.

"Foster parents and care home staff all commented on the lack of training available to them. Few felt that they understood what children did online or how their safeguarding responsibilities applied to digital activity."

CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER,
GROWING UP DIGITAL IN CARE

Against this backdrop, it's not surprising that 31% of young people in care say the advice they get from their foster carers on staying safe online isn't quite what they need².

² [Vulnerable Children in a Digital World](#)

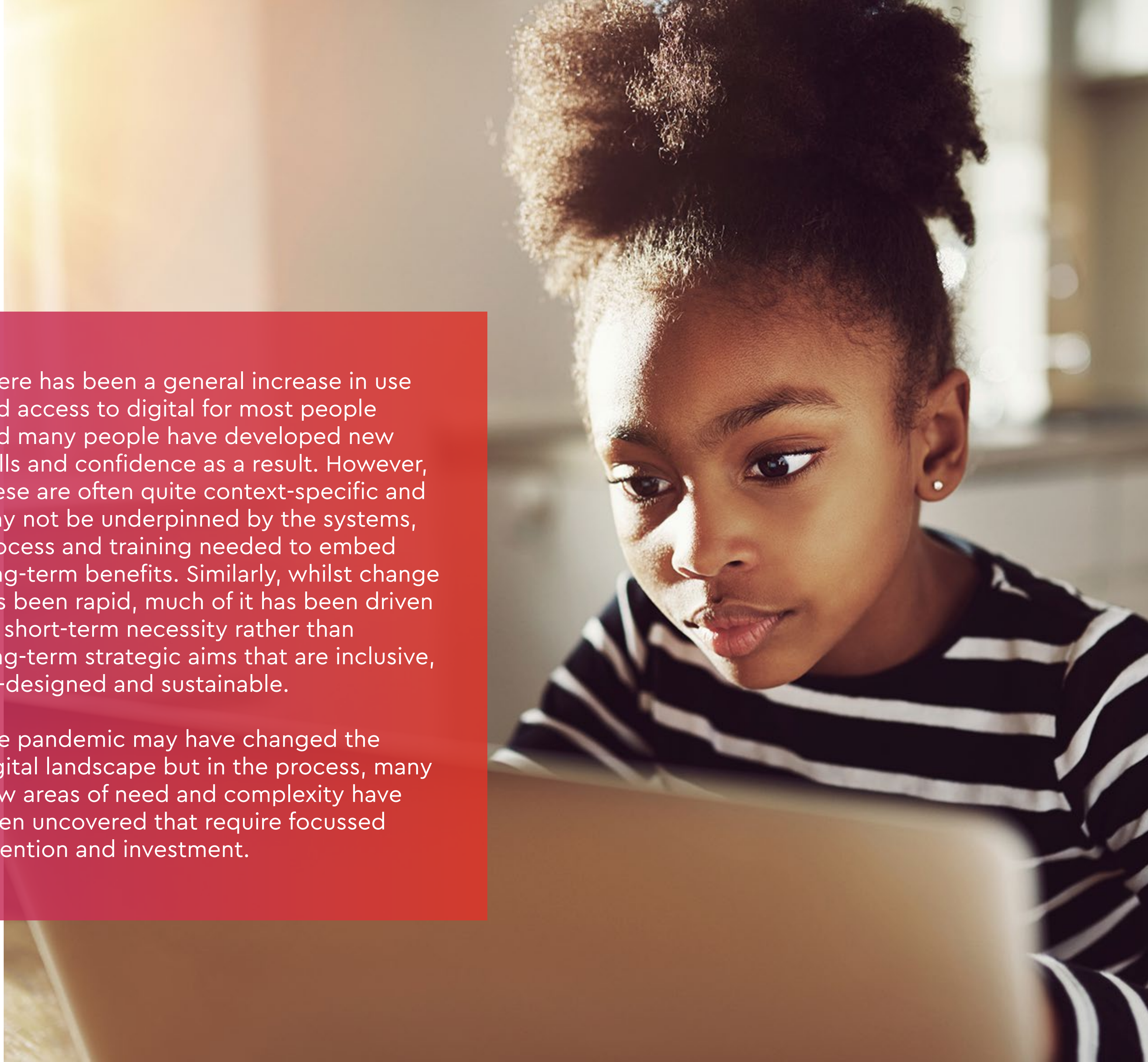
COVID-19 and digital transformation

COVID-19 has impacted all aspects of life including attitudes and experiences of digital technology. As contact, support and access to services have moved rapidly online, foster carers have had to adapt to a new working environment simply to maintain what they normally do.

During our programme development, we repeatedly heard from professionals how COVID-19 and the lockdowns had altered the digital landscape for foster carers, social workers and children in care. Those who may have been a reluctant user of technology or been 'tech pessimist' have found new skills and confidence or seen new relevance and value for themselves and the children in their care.

There has been a general increase in use and access to digital for most people and many people have developed new skills and confidence as a result. However, these are often quite context-specific and may not be underpinned by the systems, process and training needed to embed long-term benefits. Similarly, whilst change has been rapid, much of it has been driven by short-term necessity rather than long-term strategic aims that are inclusive, co-designed and sustainable.

The pandemic may have changed the digital landscape but in the process, many new areas of need and complexity have been uncovered that require focussed attention and investment.





Introducing

REACH

Our Discovery Research highlighted that for children and young people in care, and for young care leavers, life brings more challenges than it does for their peers. That's why we've put together REACH, a large-scale programme we believe will bring significant improvements to the lives of young people in care.

Children in care are disproportionately vulnerable to online risks. As part of our work to improve the safety of the internet, we've launched a programme that will help to ensure these vulnerable young people aren't just safe online, but resilient and at less risk of harm. It's part of our ambition to improve the lives of a million young people each year.

Through REACH, we've worked to build a programme that can make a meaningful and significant contribution to the online safety ecosystem of young people in care and young care leavers –by improving support around digital for foster carers, bolstering the integration of digital within the care system, and by helping to elevate the voice of young people, so that they can shape the policies that support them.

REACH has given grant funding and support to expert organisations working in this space, for projects lasting up to 18 months.

Working with Parent Zone

Parent Zone is a social enterprise that sits at the heart of modern family life, providing advice, knowledge and support to shape the best possible future for children as they embrace the online world. Parent Zone bridges the gap between parents, policy and platforms, providing insights and knowledge in order to shape a better future for all. We initially partnered with them on our Discovery Research, before bringing them on board to provide expertise and guidance as we developed our funding programme.

As well as supporting the development of the programme with strategic recommendations and subject-specific expertise, Parent Zone has contributed to the decision-making process of awarding grants. They'll also be providing on-going support to grantee partners for the duration of the programme.



"Many factors may make children more vulnerable online – often linked to offline vulnerabilities and intersectionalities. This will inevitably shape the nature of the approach, support and opportunities they need in order to develop and maintain their digital resilience."

CLIFF MANNING, PARENT ZONE

So that we can prioritise creating meaningful and sustainable impact, we've chosen three complementary focus areas that we will progress together to ensure maximum and lasting impact on the online safety of young people in care. These are:

- 1 Improving digital training and skills for foster carers
- 2 Increasing the integration and recognition of digital safety and resilience in children's social care systems
- 3 Providing more inclusive, representative and elevated opportunities for young people to influence care policy and process, focusing on digital resilience and internet safety

Based on these core aims, we've placed our focus on three design challenges.

Our theory of change

Design Challenge 1: Building foster carers' digital skills and confidence



THE CHALLENGE

Digital skills training, support and guidance for foster carers and other youth-facing workers isn't consistently fit for purpose. It needs significant improvement to reduce the online vulnerability of children and young people in foster care.

Foster carers play a key role in reducing the online risks and harms to which children in foster care may be exposed – and the relationship between carers, those in their care and

local children's services is important too. However, our research indicates that digital skills and understanding among this segment of carers is often lacking.

This is made more challenging by the average demographic of foster carers, the difficulty of accessing up-to-date information and the time it takes to invest in knowledge development. What's more, as many children will pass through multiple foster homes whilst in care, all-important consistency in the digital skills of foster carers is often lacking.



THE RESPONSE

Design Challenge 1 is all about improving the digital skills gap among foster carers across the UK care system. By building better relationships around digital, we can reduce the potential online harms faced by children in foster care and develop better informed support and outcomes for them.

We're doing that by offering grants to experienced national organisations who can design and deliver programmes that will engage and empower foster carers to develop their digital knowledge, skills and confidence.



Partners working to build foster carers' digital skills and confidence



ACTION FOR CHILDREN

Action for Children is a children's charity and a fostering agency, with over 100 years of experience finding safe and stable homes for children across the UK. They're developing a digital product to help foster carers build their digital skills and confidence, so they can better support the children in their care to thrive online. The project will explore the experiences of foster carers, gaps in the support available and barriers to improving their skills, knowledge and confidence. It will also consider how children in care find the support they get from their foster carers – and what they'd like to change.



ENABLE CONSORTIUM

Led by Dr. Aiman El Asam (Psychology Department, Kingston University), Enable Consortium brings together academics, the consultancy Youthworks, online safety specialists, a youth engagement group, and both public and private care teams, to develop a CPD-accredited (Continuing Professional Development), evaluated online safety training programme for foster carers. With our funding, they will develop both basic and advanced training courses and a knowledge bank of resources and case studies, as well as providing support to foster carers in person.



THE FOSTERING NETWORK

The Fostering Network is working in partnership with Internet Matters – a prominent online safety organisation for parents, carers, and other professionals. The organisations are also collaborating with Dr. Simon P Hammond and Dr. Kimberley Bartholomew from the University of East Anglia – leading researchers in digital resilience, and motivation and well-being respectively. Together they will deliver CPD-accredited training, giving foster carers the choice between self-study or trainer-led learning. Our funding will help increase understanding of how supporting foster carers to improve their digital skills can positively impact the digital resilience of children in their care.

Design Challenge 2: Embedding support for children's digital lives in social care



THE CHALLENGE

The ecosystem of digital tools, processes and services supporting children in care – as well as the carers themselves – is fragmented and poorly established. This results in issues such as online safety being poorly addressed.

To ensure children in care get the digital support, protection and opportunities they need to be safe online, we need to recognise gaps, identify solutions and amplify effective practice. Support for children's digital lives needs to be better integrated within policies, systems and processes within the social care system.



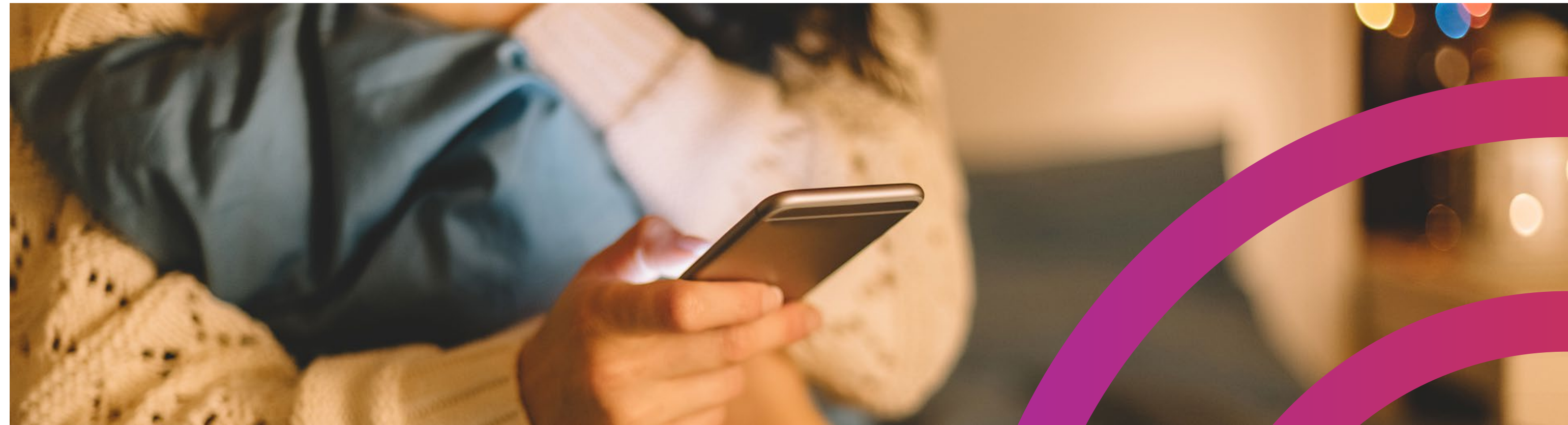
THE RESPONSE

Through better definition, development and delivery, the care system can embrace the benefits of digital, providing better outcomes for young people and reducing their vulnerability to online harm.

With Design Challenge 2, we're supporting two organisations running specific digital projects at a critical stage of development, with a focus on delivering critical digital services that reduce online harms.



Partners working to embed support for children's digital lives in social care



EAST SUSSEX COUNTY COUNCIL

East Sussex County Council will create a 'digital hub' to spark a cultural shift for their foster carers, social workers and policy makers and ensure children and young people engage safely with the digital world. This will be supported by digital ambassadors including children in care, care leavers, foster carers, social workers and digital experts.



ARC ADOPTION NORTH EAST

ARC Adoption NE will build a secure and flexible digital Communications Management Application that can be used by Local Authorities and organisations to manage the varying contact scenarios between birth families and all care settings. Currently, often traditional methods of contact management can contribute to young people making unofficial and unvetted contact with their birth relatives directly, bypassing intermediaries and breaking contact agreements.

The digital Communications Management Application will enable effective management and coordination of all communications, provide secure, safe communication between children and significant people in their lives, in strict accordance with their communications plan.



Design Challenge 3: Elevating young peoples' voices to influence the services that impact on their digital safety and opportunities



THE CHALLENGE

Young people who've experienced care can offer invaluable insights, but these are currently under-used when it comes to digital and online safety policy development.

To ensure young people in and those leaving care can influence the service policies, processes and practices that impact their digital lives, we need to extend participation and diversify and improve channels of communication and feedback.



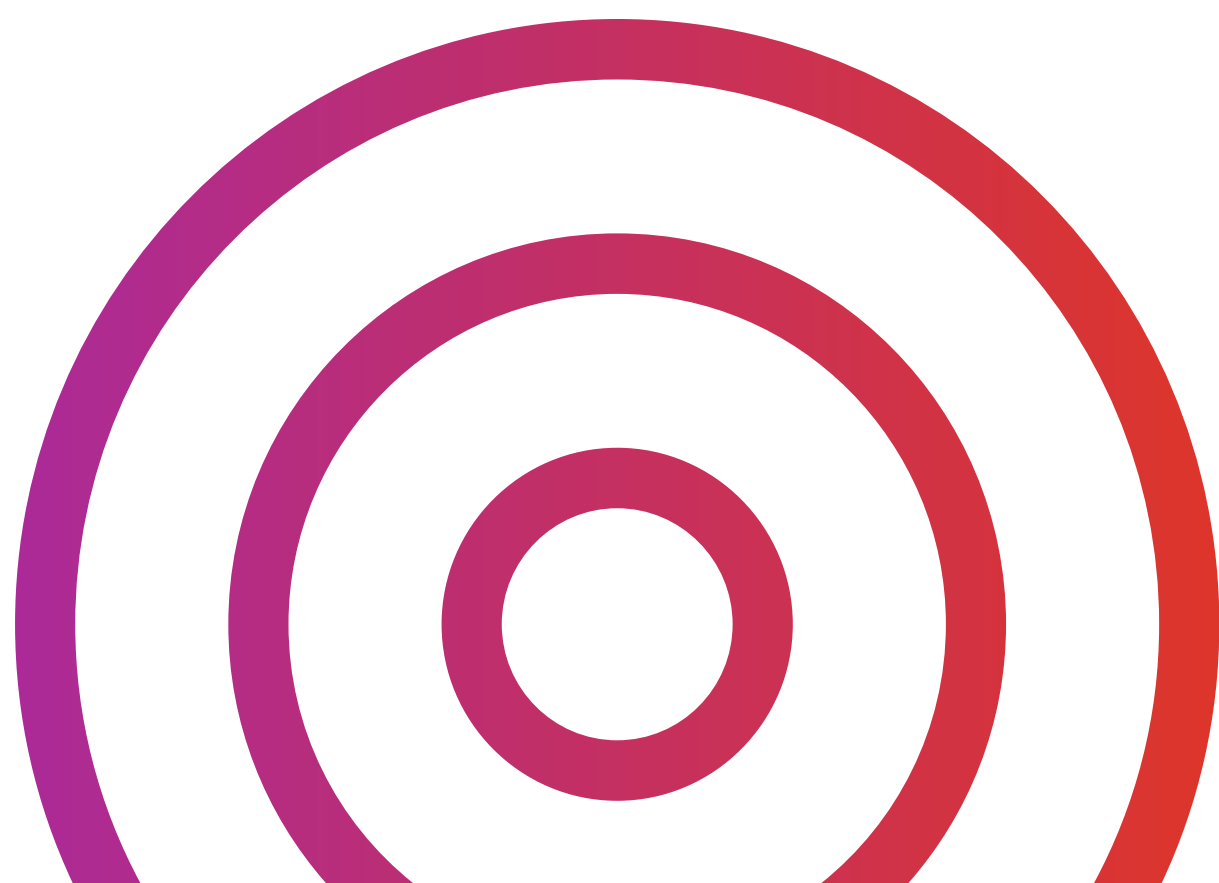
THE RESPONSE

We believe that by working with partners to amplify the voices of care-experienced young people, the UK's social care system can better adapt to serve their needs. In turn, this should help improve the effectiveness of internet safety programmes at reducing online harms.

Design Challenge 3 will therefore support organisations who can elevate the needs and participation of care-experienced young people on these issues, ensuring their views are represented and articulated to all key stakeholders.



Partners working to elevate young peoples' voices to influence the services that impact on their digital safety and opportunities



ST CHRISTOPHER'S FELLOWSHIP

St Christopher's Fellowship is a charity providing fostering, children's homes, care leaver accommodation and support and early help services. With our funding, they'll increase young people's influence over policy and training for fostering digital safeguarding. Care leavers will co-facilitate policy and practice review workshops with fostered young people and carers. They'll enrich practice and decision-making to reflect the complexity of young people's needs, supporting them to develop online skills, and supporting natural adolescent development of identity safely in the digital space.



MIDDLESBROUGH COUNCIL

Middlesbrough Council will gather views and elevate the voice of children and young people in their care to affect best practice policy, working with care-experienced young people (including an apprentice) to co-design policy for audiences including corporate parents, social workers and children in care. Changes made through the programme will be built into the Council's foster carer procurement, helping to bring about permanent and systematic change in their social care system.



EQUALITY | RESPECT | LOVE

WHO CARES? SCOTLAND

Through their Annual Participation Programme, Who Cares? Scotland will focus on the theme of Digital Wellbeing. They'll provide participation opportunities for their membership of over 3,000+ care experienced people and will work with their National Representative Body to use these findings to influence policy and practice. With our funding, they'll recruit a Digital Participation Officer who'll widen engagement in the programme, set targets to ensure representation of care, work with Edinburgh University to capture the learning and develop effective digital resources for young people, carers and professionals. Although based in Scotland, they'll work with partners to share the impact UK-wide.



EAST SUSSEX COUNTY COUNCIL

Alongside their work under Design Challenge 2, East Sussex County Council will work with digital ambassadors including children in care, care leavers, foster carers, social workers and digital experts, who'll form a Digital in Care Steering Group to provide consultations, surgeries and seminars to other children and young people in care, foster carers and social workers.



BARNARDO'S

Barnardo's and Plymouth City Council have joined forces for a 2-year co-production programme that takes the innovative approach of improving digital resilience by tackling loneliness and isolation. The goal is to apply a proven model of co-production with care-experienced young people to influence and shape services, so they can support young people to be connected safely – thereby reducing loneliness and isolation, and in turn, online vulnerability. They aim to share their lessons learned so they can be used more widely to improve outcomes for young people in foster care.

"Our funding will help us to develop our co-production activities to involve care experienced young people as experts, and to reach as many individuals as we can to help understand how we can build digital resilience by addressing young people's isolation. "

ROB HARRISON
PLYMOUTH CARE JOURNEYS



ABOUT NOMINET

Nominet is driven by a commitment to use technology to improve connectivity, security and inclusivity online. For 25 years, Nominet has run the .UK internet infrastructure, developing an expertise in the Domain Name System (DNS) that now underpins sophisticated threat monitoring, detection, prevention, and analytics that is used by governments to mitigate cyber threats. Our public benefit programme aims to improve the lives of one million people, providing support and opportunities to tackle some of the most important digital issues facing young people in the UK today.



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