Research report

# Teachers' and schools' interactions with students about their online lives

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## Glossary of terms

| Acronym | Meaning |
|---|---|
| AP | alternative provision |
| CPD | continuing professional development |
| CSC | children's social care |
| EHCP | Education, Health and Care Plan |
| FSM | free school meals |
| FTE | full time equivalent |
| GCSE | General Certificate of Secondary Education |
| GIAS | Get Information About Schools |
| HSA | home-school agreement |
| IT | information technology |
| ICT | information and communications technology |
| ITE | initial teacher education |
| LAC | looked after children |
| LGBTQ+ | lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning |
| MAT | multi academy trust |
| MHFA | Mental Health First Aid |
| PRU | pupil referral unit |
| PSHE | personal, social and health education |
| SEND | special educational needs and disabilities |
| SES | socio-economic status |
| SLT | senior leadership team |
| SMS | short message service |
| SMT | senior management team |
| VCS | voluntary and community sector |
| VLE | virtual learning environment |

# Executive Summary

# Aims and scope

This report presents the findings from a qualitative study on the subject of how teachers and schools engage with students about their online lives. The overall aim was to explore teachers' experiences of how, in what contexts, and for what purpose they engage with students about the internet and social media, and their perceptions of the challenges, opportunities and benefits of the digital world for students' learning and wellbeing.

The scope included schools in England only, with a focus on the secondary education phase (11-18-year olds). It included a sample of mainstream, independent, alternative provision (AP) providers and special schools. The rationale was to ensure a comparable target population (adolescents), while including a sufficient range of schools (*n*=38) and respondents (*n*=40) to compare and contrast models of engagement within diverse settings.

# Key findings

## Teachers' and schools' everyday interactions with students about their online lives

- The research showed that teachers hold unique insights to students' internet and social media use, and the ways in which this plays out within classroom systems. The continuum between students' online and offline lives was evident throughout the report. From relationships with peers, to curricular and extracurricular activities, the points of overlap with the school were far more diverse than internet safety education alone.
- Schools noted changes in students' internet use collectively during the 11-18 phase, alongside individual choices and preferences. While Key Stage 3 was characterised by open experimentation and discussion of online activities with teachers, students generally had more confident, independent and guarded digital lives by Key Stage 5. This had implications for designing teaching, pastoral and classroom management strategies.
- While schools caught glimpses of young people's use of social media, it was also apparent that they were often relying on partial information. Teachers were aware that students would filter what they were willing to share, which did not always come to the school's attention directly. This was a particular challenge when assessing the prevalence of online risks and harms, and in determining how the school should respond.
- Parental mediation influenced young people's online conduct and content in ways that were sometimes constraining, and sometimes enabling, and which schools recognised to be diverse and multi-faceted. Schools had insights to students' online conduct that was not always visible to parents and carers, which transpired when they became aware of online disputes or content sharing of which parents were unaware.

## Management and coordination of digital matters at a whole school level

- Decisions taken at a whole school level were fundamental in shaping all things digital. This included how schools perceived their responsibilities vis-à-vis those of parents and carers, the school climate and behavioural policies, and the leadership ethos. It was also guided by the extent to which schools had embraced digital technology; their IT infrastructure, and the extent to which digital topics were integrated to PSHE.
- The organisation of staffing responsibilities was also significant. Within mainstream schools in particular, knowledge was often compartmentalised due to the different types of interactions between students and teaching, pastoral and safeguarding staff. It sometimes fell to an individual manager to champion everything digital within the school, joining-up arrangements for internet safety, IT teaching, PSHE, and mental health and wellbeing provision. Without a coordinating role, these elements risked developing in a piecemeal way.

- The inclusion of independent, special and AP schools within the study brought systems, cultures and student populations into juxtaposition. It highlighted the challenges pertaining to these settings – from the transitory nature of AP placements and the heightened risks outside of school, to the challenges of supporting SEND students where difficulties relating to understanding, empathy and communication skills played out online.
- These settings also provide important examples and learning for mainstream schools. The models of parent partnership and close alignment of education and welfare within the special schools offered advantages in making these conversations part of everyday practice. The examples considered for the study also illustrated the importance of contact time, high quality PSHE, and healthy pastoral relationships for student engagement.

## Home-school communication in the context of the digital world

- The relationship between home and school was a central theme in the research. As online issues crossed beyond the school's jurisdiction, there was a shared concern at the potential for mobile phones to bring out-of-school risks and harms on site. Schools were mindful of not undermining parents and carers, while being frustrated when parents and carers placed responsibility for their child's internet use at the door of the school.
- Schools highlighted the importance of clear and open communication with parents about internet matters to avoid these jurisdictional issues becoming problematic. However, there were variations in how schools perceived the limits of their role in this regard. The measures ranged from signposting to external sources of internet safety advice, to running parent education workshops or delivering family learning activities.
- As might be anticipated, the COVID-19 crisis had impacted upon all aspects of school life in fundamental ways. Schools were responding from different starting points regarding their infrastructure and the integration of digital technologies, and the pandemic had exposed gaps and inequalities at many levels. For some schools, however, the crisis had brought schools and parents closer together in partnership.

## Teachers' views of their knowledge, skills and confidence regarding students' online lives

- The interviews highlighted wide variations in teachers' digital knowledge, skills and confidence, as well as their attitudes towards the educational value of the internet and social media. Those staff with little or no direct personal experience of the online platforms used by students were less likely to perceive their relevance than their more tech-savvy counterparts. These differences often, but not always, had a generational dimension.
- Topics relating to young people's use of the internet and social media featured only peripherally within teacher professional development, beyond safeguarding awareness training. In many schools, provision was supplementary, delivered internally, and tended to take place infrequently and / or out-of-hours. Schools had mixed experiences of using external providers, with concerns about costs and sustainability.
- Teachers and schools were aware that students were the real experts in their online lives, and even the most tech-aware staff found it difficult to keep pace with youth media trends and terminology. It was clear that students could and should have a more substantial role in developing schools' responses to the digital world, beyond awareness raising – from the co-creation of PSHE resources, to peer mentoring and advice.

Overall, the research illustrates that a holistic and integrated approach towards engagement with the digital world is needed now more than ever, beyond a narrow focus on 'internet safety' on the one hand and online teaching on the other. This report provides examples and insights and draws out key features of a whole school approach.

## Recommendations

The first set of recommendations relate to actions extending beyond the individual school level, which would require the involvement of policy-makers or commissioners on behalf of schools. These are further explained in the body of the report (Chapter Seven), and can be summarised as follows:

**a)** To review Government-supported PSHE guidance and materials, ensuring that the internet and social media-related content is sufficient to meet the needs of different school types and settings.

**b)** To strengthen the focus on the internet and social media within Government-funded mental health and wellbeing programmes for schools, including the mental health Green Paper measures.

**c)** To review existing coverage of internet and social media themes within Initial Teacher Education (ITE), and within Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programmes for teachers and school leaders.

**d)** To develop a self-evaluation tool and checklist, to assist schools in reviewing their provision relating to the digital world as part of a whole school approach, and to facilitate benchmarking and comparison.

**e)** To develop more effective and standardised data collection methodologies, to better understand students' online lives and their support needs, to inform school development planning.

**f)** To establish and support communities of practice for schools, to share resources, case studies and experiences relating to their engagement with young people on digital themes.

The study provided an indication of the types of measures that teachers and schools found to be useful as part of a whole school approach towards the digital world. The research team distilled these into a checklist, which is presented in the conclusions and recommendations chapter and which is also available as a separate flyer.

## Methodology

The research was carried out between May and July 2020 and comprised of semi-structured qualitative telephone interviews with 40 professionals from 38 schools. Schools and respondents were sampled purposively to ensure a mix of school types and characteristics, and balanced coverage of local authorities and English regions. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed with respondents' consent. The data was coded and analysed thematically, to compare and contrast responses by theme and according to school and respondent type.

The fieldwork took place during the first lockdown of the COVID-19 public health crisis. This allowed for a reflection on how schools were adapting their modes of engagement during the shift to home schooling. The research was not exclusively focussed on responses to COVID-19, however, and also considered how schools' provision has evolved over time. As with any qualitative study, the findings are not intended as nationally representative, but rather to provide insights and to explain and contextualise the work of teachers and schools on this subject.

# 1. Introduction

This report presents the findings from a qualitative study exploring the interactions between schools and students in relation to their online lives. The research was carried out as part of the wider #FOOTPRINTS project, which is a collaboration between Ecorys and the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families. The findings are based on qualitative interviews conducted with 38 schools (40 professionals[1]) between June and August 2020.

In this introductory chapter, we provide an overview of the study aims and scope, and we describe the methodology that was used. We then go on to outline the structure of the remainder of the report.

## 1.1 Background context

Schools have an important role to play in young people's social and emotional development, as well as their academic learning. This is apparent at policy and practice levels, with student wellbeing now recognised as a criterion in the national inspection framework, and new investment in Government-funded mental health and wellbeing programmes in schools following the publication of the Green Paper (DHSC and DfE, 2017).

Despite rising mobile phone ownership and social media use, however, the role of schools in supporting young people in relation to their online lives remains comparatively under-researched. Previous studies have shown that teachers often lack the knowledge and understanding needed to engage with students on these topics, as they are not covered within teacher training to any significant extent, and because young people's online activities are not directly visible to them (Day, 2016, Fellows, et. al, 2020). This can make it difficult to assess students' needs and to target interventions (Day, et. al., 2020). Although there are now a number of long-running surveys exploring trends in young people's individual internet use within the UK and internationally (Stoilova, et. al., 2020; Helsper, et. al., 2015), there is a lack of comparable research addressing these phenomena within schools.

These challenges are given extra urgency by the COVID-19 public health crisis. With missed periods of education and young people spending greater amounts of time online, there is now a widespread recognition of the need for schools to adapt to the digital turn. The prerogative to support young people to be safe and confident online is also reflected in a wider range of policy and practice developments, including those in the safeguarding field, following the publication of the Online Harms White Paper (HM Government, 2019); public health, with the publication of national guidelines on young people's screen time by the UK Chief Medical Officer (Davis, et. al., 2020), and fundamental rights, as reflected in independent review by the Children's Commissioner for England on this subject (OCC, 2018), and the recent launch of the Digital Futures Commission by the 5 Rights Foundation[2].

It was in this context that the Ecorys and the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families initiated the #FOOTPRINTS Digital Resilience and Schools Project. This report is one of a series of studies carried out on this theme, to address gap in the evidence base and to make this evidence accessible to educationalists.

Further information about the #FOOTPRINTS project is available at: www.schoolsdigital.com

## 1.2 Aims and methodology

The overall aim of the study was to explore teachers' experiences of how, in what contexts, and for what purpose they engage with students about their online lives. The research aimed to explore these interactions not only in relation to internet safety education and personal, social and health education (PSHE) curricula, but also to understand in the broadest sense how the digital world features within the life and work of schools – from school development planning through to staffing roles and responsibilities, and 'everyday' informal conversations.

The study adopted a qualitative design, based on semi-structured interviews with teachers and other school professionals. The scope included schools in England only, with a focus on secondary stage (11-18). The rationale was to ensure a comparable target population (i.e. 'adolescents'), while including a sufficient number and range of schools within the research to understand the commonalities and differences in aims and approaches taken.

### 1.2.1 Sampling and recruitment

The study team developed a sampling framework to ensure the systematic inclusion of school and respondent types and characteristics. This framework incorporated the following variables:

**Figure 1: Overview of the sampling criteria**

**School characteristics**

- **a)** School type / sector
- **b)** Ofsted rating (overall judgement at most recent inspection, where applicable[3])
- **c)** % children eligible for free school meals (FSM)
- **d)** Number of students on roll
- **e)** Government Region

**Respondent characteristics**

- **f)** Type of role
- **g)** Subject specialism(s)

Recruitment quotas were set, to ensure a minimum of five schools from each of mainstream, independent, and alternative educational settings (Alternative Providers (AP) and Special Schools). The sample also attended to socio-economic characteristics (% FSM eligibility), and geographical distribution (representation of the North, Central and Southern England). A further sub-code was created for schools with a mainly 'rural' catchment.

The recruitment involved three stages. Schools were first invited to express an interest using a combination of online and telephone recruitment. The resulting longlist was cross-matched with an extract from the Get Information About Schools (GIAS) database[4], to populate the sampling framework. Additional targeted recruitment was undertaken where necessary, to ensure that quotas were met, and to avoid potential skewing. A further breakdown of the achieved sample of schools is presented at Annex One.

### 1.2.2 Data collection and analysis

The interviews took place between May and July 2020 and were conducted by telephone using a semi-structured topic guide[5]. The interviews each lasted between 45 and 70 minutes, with variations mainly accounted for by respondents' length of time served at the current school, and the nature and extent of direct engagement with students in their day-to-day role. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed with prior consent.

The data management and analysis involved three main stages:

- **a)** reviewing notes and transcripts and précising the data within a grid organised around a coding framework
- **b)** a thematic analysis, comparing and contrasting responses to draw out commonalities and differences with attention to school and respondent types and characteristics; and finally,
- **c)** synthesis and reporting, drawing together and concluding on the key findings by theme and overall.

### 1.2.3 Data limitations and caveats

As with any study, the findings presented within this report are subject to a number of caveats:

- The research was carried out with teachers and other school professionals only. It provides an account of how teachers perceive and engage with young people's online lives. Teachers were sometimes describing student's behaviours based on partial information, and it would be necessary to triangulate the findings with research with students, parents and carers to understand the extent to which these different perceptions accord. The report is therefore very much a study *of* teachers rather than a study *of* students per se.
- Respondents within the sample ranged from classroom teachers to welfare and safeguarding professionals and senior management. This breadth was important to understand how responsibilities are organised within schools and the extent to which this affects how and when conversations take place with young people. However, respondents' knowledge of the topics often reflected their position. Less senior staff did not always feel confident reporting on 'whole school' policies or strategy development if they were not closely involved. It would be necessary to undertake further case study research to provide this requisite level of depth.
- The sample provides a 'snapshot' of activity within schools in England but does not claim to be nationally representative. There are limits to how far it is possible to identify and describe good practice on this basis, and further research would be beneficial to understand the full spectrum of activity in schools and to develop and test hypotheses about what 'good' looks like. In particular, this would require the availability of good quality comparable data linking school-level measures with a defined set of outcomes. Nonetheless, this study included sufficient numbers of key school types to facilitate a comparative analysis.

## 1.3 Structure of the report

The remainder of this report is structured as follows:

- **Chapter 2** provides an overview of how the digital world features within schools' policies, strategies and curricula, including the role of leadership and school ethos in setting the agenda at a school level.
- **Chapter 3** reviews teachers' and schools' everyday interactions with students in relation to the online world, across different settings, and draws-out some common factors for effective engagement.
- **Chapter 4** examines the role of home-school communication, from the provision of information, advice and guidance by the school, to engagement with parents about online issues affecting individual students.
- **Chapter 5** sets out the main opportunities and benefits of the online world for students, ranging from academic to welfare, life skills and personal expression, and also examines how schools perceive the risks and harms.
- **Chapter 6** goes on to consider the professional development implications of young people's changing online lives, from initial teacher education (ITE) to CPD programmes and external providers.
- **Chapter 7** draws together and concludes on the findings and recommendations from the research.

Further information about the final achieved sample of schools and respondents is provided at **Annex One**, and a bibliography for this report is presented at **Annex Two**.

# 2.

# Schools and the digital world

In this chapter, we consider how arrangements for supporting students in relation to the digital world were planned and organised within the schools in our sample. We start by comparing and contrasting schools' policies towards mobile phone use in school, and the rationale underpinning this. We go on to consider how the educational, welfare, and safeguarding aspects of student's interactions with the internet were organised at a 'whole school' level, from policy frameworks to management and staffing responsibilities. Finally, we examine the mode, medium and perceived sufficiency of arrangements for e-safety education and support for students' online wellbeing.

## Key findings

### Schools' policies towards mobile phones

- In the main, schools within the sample were pro-internet and pro-tech, but most adopted a cautious approach towards students using their mobile phones on site. Schools were mindful of the potential for mobile phones to bring out-of-school risks into the school, and for incidents to escalate via social media.
- Three broad approaches were observed:

**a)** a 'hard line' ban on students having mobile phones on their person at school;

**b)** tolerance of phones on site, with access exclusively outside of lessons, and

**c)** a more liberal approach, whereby phones could be used under close supervision in educational contexts.

- Of the most liberal group, the aim was to foster independence and responsibility, with an understanding that privileges could be taken away. Schools adopting a harder line generally viewed mobile phones as educationally inappropriate, or they had imposed a ban following behaviour-related incidents on site.
- There were some exceptions. Learners with additional support needs were afforded flexibility to use their phones where this was educationally specific, while some schools allowed for greater levels of responsibility with age and maturity. This was more common at Key Stage 5, and within designated areas of the school.
- Schools applied a range of sanctions for mobile phone misuse. While confiscations were not uncommon, there was an awareness that students' phones could play an important role in their family or caring responsibilities outside of school, and that lengthy periods of confiscation could make students less safe.

### Management and coordination arrangements

- A number of factors with a 'whole school' dimension influenced how, when, and for what purpose staff engaged with students about the digital world. These included: the school's ethos and leadership; it's digital infrastructure and aspirations; the positioning of digital topics within the curriculum and home-school links.
- Respondents were generally more confident in their schools' approach, where there was Head-teacher and SLT buy-in; objectives were widely understood; digital topics had everyday currency within the school, and time, space and resources were forthcoming. Without this, provision risked developing in a piecemeal way.
- The organisation of staffing responsibilities had quite a direct bearing on the type of interactions between staff and students about the digital world. This expertise was often found to a varying degree within pastoral and safeguarding teams, IT departments, and subject teaching. Flows of information depended on who was championing students' online safety and wellbeing, and how they had shaped this role.

## Key findings

- Form Tutors were usually at the frontline of day-to-day conversations with students about their online lives, while Safeguarding Leads and Pastoral Teams were widely considered to have the most expansive knowledge of online incidents from their specialist pastoral role. Outside of these contexts, staff often felt that they lacked a bigger picture of the types of issues that were specific to students in their school.

### Types of provision and their sufficiency

- Schools' internet-related measures invariably featured a set of policy guidelines for safe internet use and online conduct; cyber-security arrangements managed by the IT department, parental and student information provided via the school website, and PSHE curricula. Schools made varying use of workshops, special assemblies and peer-to-peer support. Some drew on external providers to support delivery.
- School type exerted quite a direct influence over PSHE delivery. The independent schools had greater freedoms to follow their own curricula, but generally adopted a similar approach to mainstream for sourcing content. Arrangements differed somewhat within AP settings and special schools, where life skills delivery was mainstreamed within day-to-day provision, often with a greater emphasis on pastoral support.
- Respondents held mixed views on the sufficiency of provision offered by their school. There was a degree of scepticism about the time allotted for PSHE, and concerns about the extent to which youth media-related content was challenging and relevant. Staff were wary of having too much 'off the peg' delivery, and variations in the quality and depth of coverage of topics at the discretion of individual form tutors.
- Schools inevitably put safeguarding first, but this was sometimes at the expense of other forms of engagement with students. This was especially the case where problem online behaviours were encountered more frequently, and the school was in perpetual crisis mode. The response was often as much down to the school's ethos as it was to actual or perceived levels of risky online activity.

## 2.1 Schools' policies towards mobile phones

Schools' policies towards mobile phones offered an entry point for conversations about their wider engagement with students about the online world. In the main, schools within the sample were pro-internet and pro-tech, but most had adopted a cautious approach towards students bringing mobile phones on site. These reservations principally related to safeguarding risks, and the potential disruption caused to students' behaviour and learning.

Three broad approaches emerged from the sample:

**a)** a 'hard line' ban on students having mobile phones on their person at school

**b)** a tolerance of phones on site, with access exclusively outside of lessons, and

**c)** a more liberal approach, whereby phones could be used for learning and communication at the discretion of departments or individual teachers, under close supervision.

Of **the most liberal group**, the aim was to foster independence and responsibility among students, within safe limits, and with an understanding that privileges could be taken away. Any such usage was typically closely monitored and underpinned by a signed acceptable internet use policy. This often also featured within the Home-School Agreement (HSA). Permissions for mobile phone usage during subject teaching were at the discretion of individual departments and sometimes individual teachers. One head of department from an independent school described how the use of mobile phones was one of a number of ground rules that were negotiated with students at the start of the academic year. Subject-specific examples included mobile phone use in drama to help learn scripts or to watch short film clips, and in music where one teacher described making fairly regular use of mobile phones to enable students to access YouTube and to download backing tracks. One self-proclaimed "*very tech-oriented*" school allowed more widespread use of phones for supervised access of the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) in classrooms, where tech appeared to be more normalised in the day to day life of the school. In these cases, respondents spoke positively of the educational benefits, although permissions required a culture and threshold of student behaviour that respondents had not always experienced at previous schools.

Not all schools adopting a liberal approach allowed the blanket use of phones in the classroom, and this was sometimes reserved for older students – generally becoming more relaxed at Key Stage 4, or for learners with additional support needs. One respondent described how phones were used by students who were "*slow processing, or visual learners*", allowing them to take photographs of work on the whiteboard and progress at their own pace within a class setting. This arrangement was subject to an individual agreement, with confiscation as a penalty for misuse. A number of the schools allowed students to being devices into school from Year 10 onwards at the teacher's discretion, where their use was "*educationally specific*". This seemed to be common to the independent schools within the sample. By Year 12, the discretion to use mobile phones was more widespread, with students usually given freedoms to use their phones in designated areas of the school at breaktimes, lunchtimes and in lessons under supervision. One of the sixth form colleges within the sample had entirely delegated decision-making about mobile phone use to individual departments. The respondent attributed this policy to the diverse range of applications of educational tech within the Level 3 and 4 courses offered.

Schools in **the middle group** allowed mobile phone use selectively during the school day but not during lesson time. They typically gave students to access their phones at breaktimes and during lunchtimes in designated areas. One school had zoned mobile phone use to the school canteen and outdoor spaces only. Again, those schools banning mobile phone use in lessons sometimes took a more lenient view towards older students having phones in the sixth form common room, as one of a number of privileges signifying the greater freedoms and responsibilities afforded to students at Key Stages 4 and 5. The sample included schools that served a wide catchment area, and phones were invariably permitted during transit where students were bussed-in. The respondent from one school serving a very rural catchment described how mobile phones were viewed as an important safety feature, with students travelling two-and-from school along "*dark and unlit country lanes*". This in turn was thought to have contributed toward a "*quite lenient*" view towards students having phones on site.

Of those **schools adopting a harder line**, respondents generally cited past incidents with a safeguarding or behavioural dimension that had prompted a policy change, although in a few cases this derived from a general standpoint that mobile phones were not educationally appropriate. One SMT member spoke with some pride about the school's low incidence of internet-related problems and attributed this to a longstanding zero tolerance policy. Other schools had taken more reluctant steps to restrict mobile phone usage following issues relating to social media misuse. In one case, this followed a series of learning walks by members of SMT who had observed a trend of mobile phones coming out before equipment and causing disruption at the start of lessons, while in another case the school had become worried about students filming their peers, altering the images and posting them online. This culminated in an incident where Year 11 students used covertly taken photographs of staff at a leavers' presentation. This proved to be a watershed moment, with the headteacher intervening to impose a ban.

Mobile phone use was altogether more closely monitored and restricted in the AP providers and special schools within the sample. The AP providers reported heightened security and personal safety concerns arising from students' vulnerabilities and complex needs and a policy of all students handing in mobile phones for safe storage at the start of the day was the norm. One of the AP providers served a cohort of vulnerable students who did not access education provision on site and had operated via outreach and distance learning on a long-term basis, even prior to the COVID-19 crisis. The special schools in the sample had also banned the use of mobile phones on site. In one of these cases, the policy change was a recent one – the school had resisted the move because they saw the benefits for students accessing their phones as part of life skills curriculum, while listening to music had proven beneficial for students experiencing anxiety in the school setting. However, older students' misuse of mobile phones out of school was fuelling conflict within friendship groups and the school was compelled to act. They moved to a ban on mobile phone use during the school day but invested in MP3 players as an alternative.

The COVID-19 crisis cast the use of mobile phones in a new light, where schools had previously made little or no use of them. One respondent reflected on how the school had invested in a maths app during lockdown and this had proved relatively successful as a tool for engaging students. They reflected on whether the school's position towards mobile phones and other devices may soften post-lockdown with a turn towards blended learning, and a potential trade-off of phones coming out at school. The system shock presented by COVID-19 also had a knock-on for other aspects of schools' digital policies as we go on to discuss further in Chapter Three.

### 2.1.1 Navigating boundaries between school and community

Regardless of the schools' policy line, respondents shared some apprehension around the 'jurisdiction' of students' mobile phone use. There was a general awareness of the potential for mobile phones to bring out-of-school risks into the school, and for incidents taking place during the school day to escalate rapidly via social media, with reputational damage for the school. There was often some unease about where responsibilities sat, especially where social media misuse implicated young people or adults outside of the school. While some schools placed the responsibility for students' mobile phone conduct firmly at the door or parents, others saw this as a shared venture. These boundary lines were contested, however, and some schools had direct experience of situations involving mobile phones that had brought them into conflict with parents.

*"This is why some schools have a blanket ban... if it happens in school it's a school issue, if it happens outside of school it's a police issue... schools realise the if something happens at breaktime then it's on their watch. So they are closing that window".*

**(Head of department, Independent school)**

*"When students have mobile phones in school, it creates other issues that the school then has to deal with... a duty to investigate".*

**(Safeguarding professional, AP provider)**

These challenges were amplified in AP settings, where the student population was subject to greater flux with students arriving from multiple different schools – often with a backstory involving conflict with their peers at the school from which they were excluded. This sometimes also involved risks within the community relating to gang involvement and drugs, which required a tailored approach to safeguarding (see below). Moreover, the interviews suggested that mobile phone ownership within AP was not always on a par with mainstream schools. One respondent estimated that fewer than half of their students had a functioning smartphone, with cheap "*burner phones*" being the norm. This resulted in lower levels of care and maintenance, and more frequent breakage.

### 2.1.2 Compliance and sanctions

Where schools' mobile phone policies were breached, the response ranged in severity from a verbal warning to confiscation or loss of privileges, depending on the nature of the incident. Respondents described periods of confiscation lasting from a week, to a full school term. This received a mixed reception from parents, with the response varying from parents backing the school's position, to complaining to the police about the alleged 'theft' of their child's phone by the school. One school had reversed its policy requiring parents to come and collect confiscated phones, after this proved highly unpopular around parents' family and work routines and was thought to have been at risk of eroding the goodwill that the school had built up with the local community.

A number of the respondents were reticent about phone confiscations other than as a last resort, due to concerns about the impact on students' lives outside of school. There was a recognition that students' phones may play an important role in family or caring responsibilities, for example, as well as allowing parents to know their child's whereabouts, and connecting young people to their peers. From a safeguarding perspective, this highlights the paradoxical position of mobile phones representing both a source of risk and a form of protection:

*"Taking phones away after an incident can make students less safe… because of the risks in the community. [From a student's standpoint]… what if there is a threat made about you, and you don't know about it... Or of something happens to you and your friend doesn't have a phone".*

**(Assistant principal, AP provider)**

## 2.2 Management and coordination arrangements

The interviews underlined that how, when, and with what purpose staff engage with students about their online lives was shaped by a number of factors with a 'whole school' dimension. Principally, these related to the following:

- **a)** the school's ethos, leadership and management
- **b)** digital infrastructure and aspirations
- **c)** the organisation of staffing responsibilities
- **d)** the positioning of digital topics within the curriculum; and,
- **e)** home-school and community links

The importance of **strategic vision and leadership** was clear from the interviews. Arrangements at a school level were guided by the school's wider objectives regarding academic learning, behaviour management, safeguarding, citizenship, and mental health and wellbeing, which set the defaults for measures taken on-and offline. Generally, respondents expressed confidence in the leadership where there was head-teacher buy-in; objectives were widely understood; digital topics had a high profile within the school, and time, space and resources were forthcoming. These factors combined to paint a convincing picture within a number of schools within the sample.

*"The school is all about mental health awareness, independence and life skills. It's part of the culture... these are significant issues in student's lives. It comes from the top… the head[teacher] is passionate… there's an investment in training and resources".*

**(Teacher, Special school)**

Conversely, without this buy-in at a senior management level, it was apparent that these different components were at a greater risk of developing in a more piecemeal way. This was despite the best efforts of middle managers tasked with overseeing the safeguarding, wellbeing and academic aspects of the schools' approach.

*"There's no obvious home for it [students' online safety and wellbeing]. I have just drafted a mental health and wellbeing policy… It could go in there, but here isn't a lot of engagement other than me in my role… there's not the momentum. Stuff like this comes through our PSHE teacher rather than SLT".*

**(Safeguarding professional, AP provider)**

The school's ethos often shaped their outlook towards the digital world in quite specific ways. One of the schools within the sample, a UNICEF Rights Respecting School,[6] aspired towards a culture of collective responsibility for staff and students. The respondent described how this underpinned all aspects of school life and created an environment where students were encouraged to speak openly about their online lives. This was reflected both in PSHE delivery, where young people's digital rights were part of the agenda, and in informal peer support. In a further example, one of the AP providers had adopted a specific model of family-oriented provision. This afforded opportunities for the school to engage with students and parents and carers together on topics relating to social media content and conduct, and to reinforce the positive aspects of online networks for families experiencing isolation. Several of the faith schools had also tackled digital wellbeing through the lens of collective worship and individual guidance. In each of these examples, the ethos permeated all aspects of their approach.

A number of schools within the sample had **invested in digital infrastructure** and were relatively advanced in their application of ed tech across subject areas and in supporting home-school communication. One school had already started the transition towards being a 'Chromebook School' prior to the COVID-19 crisis and was delivering a substantial amount of Google Classroom-based learning, with students able to access the schools' VLE from their mobiles in the classroom. Through this approach the school aimed to "*… encourage the use of tech in a sensible and mature way*". Another was an IT specialist academy with a tech sponsor, which had secured universal laptop access and had also been utilising tech quite heavily in classrooms for a number of years.

Stark differences in IT capacity also emerged where respondents compared successive periods of employment – especially after making a transition from the mainstream to independent sectors. While the simple fact of being tech-heavy school did not equate with a particular educational ethos, it was often indicative of an environment where digital tools were normalised, and where home access and monitoring of internet use were more advanced.

### 2.2.1 Staff roles and responsibilities

The organisation of staffing responsibilities for safeguarding, e-safety, student wellbeing and PSHE or its equivalent all had quite a direct bearing on the type of interactions between staff and students, and the extent to which these had a safeguarding or personal development emphasis. This organisation of responsibilities also tended to influence how information about online 'incidents' were handled, who was party to this information, and the corresponding investment in staff training and development in line with these roles and responsibilities.

In the mainstream schools within our sample, responsibilities were typically divided between the following:

**a)** IT coordinator or head of IT

**b)** Heads of year, or other senior managers

**c)** Safeguarding lead / pastoral teams

**d)** Subject teachers (with or without form tutor responsibilities)

The differentiation of these roles took place along the following lines, in schools within the sample:

- **Form tutors** were usually at the frontline of day-to-day conversations with students about their online lives. This arose both organically as a result of the pastoral relationship and regular contact with students in their group, and because they were tasked with the delivery of the PSHE curriculum or equivalent. Schools differed in whether form groups were organised horizontally or vertically, with the latter having the effect of bringing together students from different age groups within a pastoral context (see also Chapter Three).
- **Teachers without a tutor group** or those who had previously held these responsibilities reported quite a different context for conversations with students about the digital world. This partly depended on how or whether they chose to introduce these topics within the classroom. Pastoral dimensions of classroom management and their relationship with individual students meant that these topics could arise naturally, however, and it was sometimes Teachers whom students chose to approach if they were concerned about

an incident that had occurred online. In these cases, 'problematic' internet use safeguarding dimension followed the same lines of reporting to the safeguarding lead as any other incident. School nurses, counsellors or other staff with a mental health and wellbeing remit were involved, although several of the schools had reported difficulties arising from staffing cuts and reduced capacity in this regard.

- **Heads of year** had oversight of these arrangements at a management level, typically becoming aware of issues with an online dimension where they were or a more serious nature with a disciplinary dimension. In schools without a tutor group system and where pastoral responsibilities were centralised, the head of year also assumed many of the equivalent pastoral responsibilities of form tutors for their year group.
- **IT coordinators** led on the technical aspects of e-safety, from firewalls and monitoring of students' internet use within the school, to cyber security guidance for staff and students. This role sometimes also extended to include training and the provision of written guidance for staff within the school, which was integrated to course delivery to a greater or lesser extent according to how these responsibilities were split with the PSHE Coordinator. E-safety, I-Rights and cyber skills also formed part of the curriculum for IT subject teaching in some schools, and was the remit of the head of IT.
- **Safeguarding leads and pastoral teams** were widely considered to have the most expansive knowledge and awareness of online incidents and behaviours, as a result of their specialist training and their more intensive pastoral role. The specific set-up differed between individual schools and by school types. For example, some schools had integrated their safeguarding and pastoral teams and others had split these functions. This appeared to depend to some extent on the size of the school and the catchment, as well as the resources at their disposal. For example, one large MAT sponsor lead operating in a very deprived inner-city location had a safeguarding team with three full-time equivalent (FTE) staff, and a wellbeing hub as a nurture space managed by staff with pastoral responsibilities. One of the AP providers described a split function between a Safeguarding Team with externally-facing role with links to children's social care (CSC) and police, and local multi-agency teams; and a pastoral team, tasked with supporting students directly.

The safeguarding reporting system operating within most schools had quite a direct impact on knowledge curation and management. Where incidents arose, reporting staff were involved on a 'need to know' basis, meaning that they only became aware of incidents that they had reported themselves, and at a level of detail that was necessary as part of the evidence-gathering by the safeguarding lead. This contributed to a sense of being somewhat in the dark regarding the extent and nature of online risks encountered at a school level, beyond personal experience.

The AP providers within the sample provide something of an exception in this regard. Here, respondents reported more open sharing of information among all staff as part of a culture of shared ownership of student welfare that was necessary within a much smaller setting with a high-stakes cohort of vulnerable young people. One respondent described how twice daily all staff briefings involved everyone in welfare discussions, including those with an online dimension, to pool knowledge and facilitate a rapid response if this is needed.

*"If we know that there are messages or threats are happening on online platforms, we will share with other staff... because it could translate into 'on the ground' relationships that happen during the day… everyone is aware and knows what to look out for in their passing interactions with the kids"*

**(Assistant headteacher, AP provider)**

While specific arrangements differed between schools, it is easy to see how knowledge of students' online activities and behaviours was shaped by these over-arching areas of professional responsibility. They involved a cyber security dimension, a digital skills dimension, a safeguarding dimension, and a learning and wellbeing dimension. Synergies between these roles were important to avoid compartmentalisation of knowledge. The IT coordinator might hold the technical know-how, for example, but form tutors and pastoral teams were usually first to pick up on the apps or platforms students were using, meaning that ongoing inter-professional communication was key.

These flows of information and expertise quite often also depended on *who* was championing students' online safety and wellbeing, and how they had shaped this role. Respondents quite often spoke of key individuals who went above-and-beyond their duties to ensure that these topics remained on the agenda, mobilising their colleagues. This contrasted with schools where managers held a nominal responsibility for online safety that was dormant on a day-to-day basis. Examples of these coordinating roles included the following (see box below).

**Figure 2: Coordination of roles and responsibilities**

**Example 1: New academy**

The head of IT has assumed a whole school responsibility for online safety. This involves working with heads of year to advise on appropriate PSHE content and incorporating elements of online awareness into IT lessons. It also involves engagement with parents, carers and governors to "*debunk the latest lingo online*", via presentations and through periodic updates on the school website and parent forums.

**Example 2: AP provider**

The PSHE lead at the school is also the IT lead, so responsibilities for safer internet education and wider student personal development are combined. The dual role was reported to have ensured consistent messaging, although it is ultimately for form tutors and learning mentors to put this into practice on a day-to-day basis.

## 2.3 Types of provision and their sufficiency

The interviews explored the provision offered within the schools in our sample, and the systems and protocols underpinning this offer. In the main, the formalised arrangements included some combination of the following:

**a)** a school internet policy or equivalent set of policies

**b)** whole school cyber-security arrangements, including monitoring of student's internet use

**c)** PSHE content and supporting materials for relevant Key Stages or year groups

**d)** workshops, special assemblies or themed days

**e)** peer-led support and advocacy on digital topics; and,

**f)** targeted provision involving external providers

In practice, schools combined these different strands of activity as part of an overall suite of provision, within which the different components were integrated to a greater or lesser extent. The following box provides an illustration.

## Figure 3: Schools' online safety and wellbeing provision

**Example 1: Voluntary controlled school**

The school combines e-safety education within IT lessons, with coverage of online topics through the PSHE curriculum, covering sex and relationships, and bullying, and annual themed assemblies during e-safety week. This is overlayered with online and offline parental information, and a team of student computer peer advisors: young people with more advanced IT skills who offer help when needed, supervised by the IT coordinator.

**Example 2: Academy within a MAT**

The school runs sessions on responsible use of the internet and mobile phones alongside wellbeing education delivered during 'drop-down' pillar days in years 7, 8 and 9 to build students' resilience moving from Key Stage 3 to Key stage 4. This is combined with a variety of student informational materials, available on and offline.

**Example 3: Academy converter**

The school runs a full PSHE curriculum; termly whole school briefings on wellbeing themes, which often include themes relating to social media or internet use; delivery of digital skills and cyber safety awareness in computing lessons, and a subscription to a digital magazine for schools supplied by a well-known telecoms company.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, **safer internet use policies and guidelines** were reported to be in place for all schools in the sample, although respondents had a varying degree of familiarity with their content. Arrangements ranged from having a stand-alone school internet policy, to coverage of e-safety topics within a set of linked policies. The latter included where e-safety content was split between the schools' safeguarding policy (welfare-related) and acceptable use of IT equipment policy (conduct-related) or integrated within the behaviour policy. It was not uncommon for schools to reinforce these policies through a signed code of conduct, while expectations of students' conduct online where often reinforced with parents and carers through HSAs.

The effectiveness these policies appeared to relate as much to their implementation as to the format. For example, one respondent commented on how the schools' expected codes of conduct online were "*…well known and recognised among students… and linked to [HSAs] so that parents have sign-off*", while another described how their school's internet and behavioural policies were readily downloadable alongside PSHE content via a document-sharing facility that was accessed by staff across the school. In contrast, several of the respondents were unfamiliar with their schools' policy as they had not had reason to refer to this in their role.

Schools reported drawing on a variety of sources for the delivery of online safety and wellbeing topics within the **PSHE curriculum**. In mainstream schools, the PSHE coordinator was usually responsible for providing PowerPoint slides and lesson plans for use in tutor groups, with delivery falling to form tutors. Materials often took the form of an updatable bank of resources, which were refreshed periodically (termly or annually, where specified). Respondents described a 'mix and match' approach to sourcing content.

This included, for example:

**a)** consulting Government guidelines

**b)** drawing on publicly available resources, such as branded educational materials, 'model' lesson plans and specialist websites for e-safety and mental health; and

**c)** supplementing with school-specific material, linking to internal policy guidelines.

Online topics featured in different guises within PSHE delivery: from cyber-security, to bullying, sex and relationships, healthy and unhealthy online behaviours, boundaries, social media awareness, managing and maintaining an online presence, and mental health and wellbeing topics. As with other PSHE-related materials, the content was mapped to year groups and Key Stages. For example, one respondent described how their school ramped-up PSHE delivery in Year 12 to focus on mental health, sex and relationships, and career choices. Students' online lives were covered for each of these topics, from self-image, to online risk-taking, and discussions about the implications of students' digital footprints for work and learning.

Teachers' descriptions of delivering online content in PSHE help to bring these topics to life:

*"Formally in PSHE, they talk about how they present themselves online, and have discussions in tutor groups or in whole year groups as to the challenges of getting sucked into different websites… the benefits and risks."*

**(Subject teacher, Independent school)**

*"What is your conduct like, and what is the context? We link all of our conversations and awareness-raising to those principles… Safer internet curriculum looks at social media; what's OK to share and what's not, what students are exposed to or have sent to them, and how they deal with this, plus awareness of legal frameworks."*

**(Centre head, AP provider)**

*"How to say safe online, how to use the internet, how to use your phone appropriately… the implications of whatever you put on the internet that is it... it is on there, everyone can see it,… As well as who they are interacting with."*

**(Subject teacher, Independent school)**

Schools also complemented PSHE content with ad hoc delivery of online topics, during **off-timetable days** and/or **workshops** or **special assemblies** for year groups or the whole school. They used the national Anti-Bullying Week, World Mental Health Day, and similar annual themed events with wider press coverage as a platform to deliver key online safety messages and ran additional sessions when the opportunity and / or need arose. Examples included where schools had engaged with students and parents about new apps or social media trends that were considered potentially harmful, to provide signposting and to offer reassurance.

PSHE delivery was one area where **school type** exerted quite a direct influence over provision:

- The independent schools in the sample exerted the freedoms to follow their own curricula, but generally adopted a similar approach to the mainstream schools for sourcing and delivering content. Online topics were delivered in tutor time, or sometimes with whole year groups, covering safeguarding, citizenship and wellbeing themes. This work also included strong links to faith education and featured in collective worship, where the school had a particular religious character or ethos. Smaller class sizes, lower student-teacher ratios and greater individual student contact were key features of PHSE delivery in these settings.
- Arrangements differed somewhat within AP settings within the sample, where life skills delivery was mainstreamed within day-to-day provision. One respondent from an AP provider described how digital safety and security topics were a regular fixture in the curriculum, delivered "*across all subjects and tutors*", while a further respondent described a similar approach in the context of their 'skills, work and life' curriculum, which included a unit on digital skills and awareness that was repeated on a termly basis to reinforce the key messages. There was a consistent view that the vulnerabilities within the cohort required more regular and intensive provision, due to the greater likelihood of students encountering risky situations online.
- Within the special schools, PSHE topics were also integrated rather than stand-alone. Arrangements included tailored e-safety content, one-to-one life skills coaching, parental engagement measures, and active use of external providers to build digital resilience both inside and outside of school. While the special schools in our sample had different intakes and supported young people at different levels of need, there were common challenges for building digital resilience with SEND students, and especially those on the autistic spectrum for whom interpretation of texts and social media could be more challenging, resulting in misunderstanding and disputes within peer groups. A sustained approach was needed to support healthy online relationships and to model appropriate use of social media, as we go on to consider in further detail in Chapter Three.

The interviews highlighted the use of **peer-led approaches** to promoting online safety and wellbeing in schools within the sample. One school had created a role for student online ambassadors, who reported to the teacher overseeing a cross-curricular programme of online safety education. The role was part-advocacy, in ensuring that online safety messages were clearly communicated, and also involved consultation with students about their needs and concerns. The scheme was said to have helped drive accountability for e-safety among students, but staff had encountered difficulties with recruiting older students. Another school had created a similar role for student computer advisers, who worked with the IT Teacher to co-run e-safety campaigns and assemblies.

Schools within the sample drew upon **external providers** to a varying degree. The propensity to do so appeared to depend to some extent on schools' CPD culture; their views towards commissioning extended activity provision in general, and actual / perceived affordability. While some schools reported having a very busy agenda of externally-delivered enrichment activities, others relied on internal delivery to a much greater extent. Examples within our sample included where schools made use of specialist IT providers to deliver e-safety awareness workshops; life skills or mentoring, and talks organised by the Police or local authority on e-safety topics.

As well as providing expertise that might not be available within the school, using external providers could bring an independent perspective that was one step removed from day-to-day student-teacher relationships:

### Figure 4: Involvement of external providers in delivery

**Example 1: Special school**

The school has formed a partnership with a local voluntary and community sector (VCS) provider to support SEND students with life skills, in preparation for post-16 transition. Working with this provider has the advantage of extending the school's reach: "*They go where we can't go… into the home… they have the community links that we don't have*". The two organisations have worked in partnership to reinforce messages about appropriate conduct online, after incidents outside of school caused conflict within friendship groups.

**Example 2: Academy sponsor lead**

The school, located within an inner-city area, has invested in a targeted support programme delivered by an external provider, aimed at Key Stage 4 girls at risk of exploitation online and in their wider personal life. In this case, the expertise was deemed necessary to support the school with a particularly vulnerable cohort.

One of the challenges of using externals was to build internal capacity. Expert workshops ran risk of being arms-length from internal delivery, and schools often lacked the resources to run them on a more regular basis. This was addressed by bringing external expertise more closely within PSHE planning and delivery. For example, one school had commissioned an external provider to deliver computer coding sessions. They worked with the provider to plan the content, and then used the content as a springboard for themed activities delivered by internal staff for the remainder of the term. This had the advantage of embedding the expertise within the school.

Respondents held **mixed views on the sufficiency of provision offered by their school**. There was a degree of scepticism about the ability to cover topics in depth within the time allotted for PSHE during the school week, and concerns about the extent to which youth media related content was sufficiently challenging and relevant. Staff were wary of having too much "*off the peg*" delivery, and variations in the quality and depth of coverage of topics at the discretion of individual Form Tutors, according to how knowledgeable or confident they felt about having these conversations with students (see also Chapter Five). Similarly, annual workshops were sometimes felt to be of a tick-box nature, and too infrequent to embed key messages without reinforcement through other areas of school life. There were also some concerns regarding the lack of evidence for "*whether it really has an impact*" in the absence of time or budgets for carrying out monitoring and evaluation of PSHE activities.

*"With PSHE, you don't have that time. It's forced at the start of the week, as a very short package. At times, we are against the clock to get through everything... 25 minutes if you're lucky, twice a week".*

**(Head of department, Independent school)**

*"Outside of probably your traditional ICT lessons and then perhaps your PSHE lessons I wouldn't be confident in saying it's woven throughout everything we do in a way that it should be".*

**(Assistant headteacher, Special school)**

Schools inevitably put safeguarding first, but this was sometimes at the expense of other forms of engagement with students in relation to their online lives. This was especially the case where problem online behaviours were encountered more frequently, and staff felt like the school was in perpetual "*crisis mode*". However, the response was often as much down to the school's ethos as it was to actual or perceived levels of risky activity among the student population. A heavily risk-averse approach was a feature of schools that took a hard line towards mobile phones and internet use outside of an educational context, rather than necessarily being the norm in settings where student populations might be classified as higher risk. There was a general sense among many of the respondents that schools could be doing more to engage with students' online lives to support their social and emotional development, creativity and cultural capital, but that the entry points for doing so were unclear.

Mindful of these challenges, a number of schools had taken steps to boost the 'digital' components of their PSHE curriculum delivery, as illustrated in the following box.

## Figure 5: Enhancing digital resilience through the curriculum

**Example 1: Free school**

The school is part of a multi-school partnership delivering an enhanced programme of life skills provision Year 7 students, supported by the local authority. This programme is reported to be "*very tech-based*" and was reported to have helped normalise laptop use in lessons, as well as tackling challenging topics.

**Example 2: Voluntary controlled school**

The school has opted to deliver a core strand of their e-safety curriculum via ICT lessons in Years 7 to 9. Through this approach, the school aims to cover a core set of topics by the end of Key Stage 3, ensuring that all students are cyber-aware, over-and-above coverage through PSHE in tutor groups.

**Example 3: AP provider**

The school has registered with the National Nurturing Schools Programme[7]. They saw this as an opportunity to shift the focus of engagement with students, away from interactions around safeguarding and managing risky online behaviours alone. The PSHE lead commented that: "*If we can develop an understanding of digital spaces through a 'nurture' lens... that would be helpful... that's what we are working towards*".

# 3.

# Teachers and schools' everyday interactions with students

In this chapter, we examine schools' everyday interactions with students in relation to the online world. We start by examining how and when these interactions tool place, and the similarities and differences between settings. We go on to consider the influence of student characteristics, and teachers' observations about how students' internet use changes throughout the 11-18 phase. Finally, we draw-out some promising practice examples.

## Key findings

### Student engagement in different contexts

- Tutor groups were a focal point for conversations between staff and students about the online world, which was helped by continuity. Teachers distinguished between students discussing their interests as part of a healthy pastoral relationship and the need for intervention to address problematic internet use.
- Overall, teachers were conscious that students were selective about what they would share with staff, and that they gave a carefully managed account of their online lives. Although younger students would sometimes over-share details of their online activities, they quickly became aware of the consequences of doing so.
- Aside from tutor groups, staff picked-up on students' casual use of the internet and social media during non-curricular activities such as off-timetable days and after school clubs. While phones were not always permitted, summer schools or residential trips afforded prolonged contact with students in this pastoral mode.
- There were wider variations in the use of internet and social media as topics within teaching practice in the classroom. This related to individual teaching and behaviour management strategies; contexts for discussing these topics within the curriculum, and expectations set at a departmental or school level.
- Individual teachers assigned varying degrees of significance to internet-related topics, depending on their perceived relevance or otherwise to the curriculum. Irrespective of the subject area, however, some teachers made use of social media references to capture students' interest and to bring examples to life.
- Safeguarding disclosures with an online dimension were fairly widespread among schools in the sample. It was not uncommon for disclosures to follow a PSHE session or assembly where online risks or harms were discussed. This could be more challenging where it involved young people or adults outside of the school.

### Student engagement in different school types

- High quality student-teacher interactions and regular contact were key enablers for student engagement. This came partly from individual teachers, but different school types and settings also played a role.
- The special schools in the sample reported having regular opportunities for conversations with students, arising from high levels of ongoing support. The emphasis on developing communication skills was conducive to open discussion with students about their routines both inside and outside of school.
- Then AP settings were also characterised by smaller class sizes, and high levels of student support. However, the transitory nature of AP meant that there was less continuity in relationships where students arrived on temporary placements, and there was greater turnover within the student population.
- The student-staff ratios were lower in independent schools within the sample than within mainstream settings, afforded more regular contact time. This engagement took place in the context of high expectations for academic achievement, which also set the tone for home-school communication.

## Key findings

### Student characteristics and their influence

- Perceptions of gender differences centred on types of online media used by students and what they would speak about. Boys defaulted towards "*covert*" social media use, and they tended to downplay its importance within their lives. Girls were observed to externalise to a greater extent, with a "*more expressive*" reaction. Respondents were aware that these observations afforded only a superficial view of actual online activity.
- Respondents consistently observed changes in students' confidence and competence in managing their online presence according to age and maturity, and they described the moderating influence of peers, parents and home internet routines. This in turn had bearing on what students were willing to share.
- Year 7 was a time when many students were establishing themselves online and testing boundaries. This was characterised by relative unfamiliarity with apps and social media used by their older peers, and a lack of awareness of inappropriate content and of the consequences of posting online. A levelling-off period was not unusual, while newcomers to social media caught-up with their peers who were active at primary stage.
- By Year 9, students were often more guarded and considered in what information they chose to disclose, coupled with an orientation towards approval from peers rather than from teachers. By this stage, social media use was described as being "more poignant" or "more social", and better integrated to everyday life.
- These differences also had a bearing on strategies used by the school. Key Stage 3 centred on setting and reinforcing ground rules – self-awareness and knowing how and when to report abusive content. As students grew more anonymous online, the school needed more sophisticated ways to coax out key information.
- Age and maturity were also implicated in students' resilience to criticism or negative comments encountered online. Establishing an online identity required a degree of bravery and a willingness to bounce back from upsetting encounters, but schools recognised that this was an important part of adolescent development.

### Key features of promising practices

- A number of common themes emerged, where schools consistently experienced success with engaging and supporting students. They included: creating safe spaces for conversations to occur between students and teachers; developing trusted pastoral relationships; credibility and relevance of PSHE teaching the involvement of peers in delivering awareness messages; and alignment of support at home and school.

## 3.1 Student engagement in different contexts

We start by considering the different contexts and settings within which engagement takes place, and the strategies that were adopted by teachers and schools covered within the study.

### 3.1.1 Tutor groups and pastoral settings

Across the sample of schools, tutor groups were a focal point for conversations between staff and students about the online world. This was helped by the pastoral nature of the form tutor and student relationship, continuity and familiarity within the group, and regular opportunities for informal discussion. Conversations about students' online lives were sometimes a continuation of more formal PSHE delivery or topics covered in year group assemblies, but they also arose "*organically*" in the context of everyday discussion.

Teachers with tutor group responsibilities described triangulating between information that they picked-up from direct engagement with students – individually and within the group, and indirectly from overheard conversations. There was also a general distinction between students discussing their online interests as part of a healthy pastoral relationship, and intervention to address problematic internet use. This ranged from students inadvertently drawing attention to inappropriate online behaviours, to instances where students had approached their form tutor about a specific issue asking for advice or support, to safeguarding disclosures.

On balance, the subject of day-to-day conversations oriented towards students' leisure time and their social use of the internet, with teachers listening-in out of professional curiosity. Respondents recounted the main topics:

*"A lot of it is gaming or certain TV series or testing online".*

**(Subject teacher, Independent school)**

*"TikTok or Snapchat, or someone will bring in GIF or a meme".*

**(Head of year, Academy)**

*"General online activities, and their online presence... chats about 'Call of Duty'".*

**(Head of department, Academy converter)**

*"It's mainly… recent quizzes or TikTok dances the students have done".*

**(Subject teacher, Academy sponsor led)**

Inevitably, where trust was established, students felt more comfortable sharing with teachers one-to-one:

*"If you have a good relationship with the young person, they may bring up something [relating to social media] that they find amusing to get a positive reaction".*

**(Head of department, Foundation school)**

*"They discuss something they have seen on Instagram… Some come and show me a picture they have seen… some artist's work… something they like that has inspired them"*

**(Subject teacher, Independent school)**

In some instances, respondents observed a degree of 'over-sharing', where students were uncertain of the boundaries. At one level, this openness could be useful from a pastoral viewpoint, to assist with engagement, and to spot the early signs of problems where they arose. At the same time, however, it could be problematic where students over-stepped the mark. This included examples where students had requested to take photographs of teachers or to add them on their social media accounts. These boundaries required some negotiating:

*"Some will share absolutely everything, which can be useful from a pastoral perspective. They may show images from a party [for example]… If they are proud of something whether they should be or shouldn't be they will happily share it. It's just an extension of their life ... it is just their life".*

**(Headteacher, Voluntary controlled school)**

This over-sharing sometimes provided insights to students' online behaviours outside of school:

*"I pick up on conversations where kids will be saying 'she said this' and 'well she commented this' and you kind of think these kids are up to God knows what time maybe 3 or 4 in the morning, texting friends or some kind of arguments occur".*

**(Subject teacher, Independent school)**

Nevertheless, there was often a sense that students were selective about what they chose to share with staff, and that they presented an incomplete picture of their online activities. This required some reading between the lines:

*"They express interest and are quite open, but they do filter somewhat when talking to teachers. You only ever know as much as they let on… you get a broad overview and general idea of what they like but don't have all the facts. You still need to take everything seriously".*

**(Subject teacher, Independent school)**

Open discussions about internet use were by no means universal, however, and some respondents spoke of a more restrained approach within form groups. Indeed, individual teachers and sometimes individual schools lent towards a view that these conversations were counterproductive and brought too much of the disruptive potential of students' social lives into the school. Here, the context was focussed more narrowly on safeguarding.

Respondents with form tutor responsibilities described problematic internet use arising with a varying degree of regularity. This was associated with the school type and student cohort, as we go on to discuss below. In almost all cases form tutors had encountered quarrels between students with an online dimension to them. It was also not uncommon for students to approach form tutors where something that had occurred online had caused upset or was a source of worry. This regularly implicated friendship groups and involved social media.

### 3.1.2 Summer schools and extended activities

Aside from tutor groups, staff picked-up on students' casual use of the internet and social media during non-curricular activities such as off-timetable days, or after school clubs. These provided an opportunity to observe students interacting in a more relaxed setting, where conversations involving mobile phones occurred naturally:

*"If they get access to a classroom during wet break, young people will tell us what they are watching online… all of the boys will be watching gamers and things like that. The girls will be talking about TikTok, some have their own YouTube channels... maintaining their digital presence".*

**(Subject teacher, Voluntary aided school)**

While phones were not always permitted, summer schools or residential trips afforded prolonged contact with students in this pastoral mode and showed a side to their online activities that was not always visible on a day to day basis, and providing a window to the digital know-how and interests of the incoming cohort. One head of department described how: "*with these residentials, where there are informal opportunities… you see their lives*".

### 3.1.3 Subject teaching and classroom management

There were wider variations in the use of internet and social media as topics within teaching practice in the classroom. From the interviews, this related to individual teaching and behaviour management strategies; contexts for discussing these topics within the curriculum, and expectations set at a departmental or school level.

Behaviour management was one of these considerations. This was framed in terms of levels of tolerance for students bringing their social media lives into the classroom. One teacher compared their current school, where there was a stricter mobile phone policy and very few incidents, but infrequent discussion of social media and internet topics in class, to their previous school where there was greater visibility of mobile phones and "*more frequent talk*", but also "*more misuse of the internet*". A more liberal policy therefore had potential advantages in making these subjects more accessible, and drawbacks by increasing the risk of inappropriate behaviour.

Respondents often attached significance to subject relevance, based on the natural affinity or otherwise of online topics to the curriculum. For some, this was viewed as somewhat peripheral:

*"It doesn't come up so much [in science]. There isn't often time and space for these conversations".*

**(Subject teacher, Community school)**

*"Science involves a lot of application of abstract concepts and ideas, so we're not using computers that much... but it does occasionally come up".*

**(Subject teacher, Independent school)**

For others, the subject relevance was perceived to be a closer fit:

*"Yes, to some extent. I teach science so I have taught sex education lessons to Year 7s".*

**(Head of department, Independent school)**

*"It comes up quite a lot in lessons. The school does persuasive writing, so mobile phones and internet use are well suited to this".*

**(Subject teacher, Academy converter)**

Irrespective of the subject area, some teachers purposively made use of social media topics as a tool for engagement. Here, they were used to provide familiar hooks and reference points for students:

*"I use Instagram as a discussion tool, because they [students] use it a lot".*

**(Subject teacher, Independent school)**

*"As an English department, one of our issues is engagement, so we try to engage in what they know and care about and make it relevant... they don't use TV like we did, they use i-Pads and YouTube".*

**(Subject teacher, Academy converter)**

*"Cultural references, feeds on Instagram, posts, new platforms that they would access online… are fairly common and built into teaching practice, a lot of what we do uses online content, embedded into PowerPoints or using as online stimulus in lessons".*

**(Safeguarding professional, Academy sponsor led)**

One respondent, an English teacher, gave the example of a recent lesson they had delivered on gender stereotypes. This was based on an article about Hugh Heffner in *The Telegraph*. The respondent was aware that the context may be unfamiliar to the students, so they used social media references to make the connection: "*The students don't know about Hugh Heffner, [so I asked]… 'have you seen the Victoria Secrets account on Instagram? There is only a certain type of model as a male fantasy'*. This had the desired outcome: "*It sparked a conversation*".

## 3.1.4 Managing disclosures

Safeguarding disclosures were fairly commonplace among schools in the sample. More often than not, it was form tutors, learning mentors or other staff with a pastoral role to whom students turned to disclose a concern with an online dimension – either relating to themselves or to someone in their peer group. In contrast, students were often more reluctant to broach these issues with teaching staff, managers or other staff in a direct position of authority.

This was very much contingent on the strength of the relationship with the member of staff. In some instances, safeguarding issues were noticed where students alluded to needing help, or where staff spotted signs that gave cause for concern. Knowing the young person and the wider context was important in this context:

*"Their friendships, dreams and aspirations... it's all tech-related. Knowing what they are doing online helps with safeguarding".*

**(Assistant principal, AP provider)**

In other cases, staff were approached directly. Again, where the student may have become comfortable with discussing their online life, this extra step could be easier to take:

*"The pastoral system helps students to feel confident speaking about issues. They often come and need someone to confide in… especially about sexual stuff. They want help and they will report it".*

**(Assistant headteacher, Voluntary aided school)**

*"The kids tend to go to people that are linked to outside clubs, actually… sports or drama. They will be more honest and open about what they've seen."*

**(Head of department, Academy sponsor led)**

As with other aspects of sharing, respondents were mindful of the potential that students may be showing only partial information – especially where the issue may involve their peers. Disclosures with an online dimension could also involve individuals outside of the school, even if it was a member of staff at the school to whom the student had turned for help (see also Chapter Four for a further discussion on management of online risks).

It was not uncommon for disclosures to follow a session delivered in PSHE or in a special assembly where online risks and harms had been discussed. This sometimes occurred where students had come to the realisation that there was a problem, or where the session provided the impetus to come forward. One respondent recalled how they were unaware of sexting having been an issue at the school. Upon changes to the national legislation, they ran a session with students, and it transpired that many more students had been personally affected than was realised. In another school, the pastoral lead described how workshops run by the school had the same effect:

*"Once a term, we do deliver a conversation about the online world. We speak openly in the class… we encourage a lot of self-reflection and challenging conversations… we had two people approach us after the talk [on blackmailing online], to say 'I am being blackmailed'… and another session we ran a few years ago on the 'Blue Whale' game, which had been linked in the media with self-harm and suicide ideation".*

**(Safeguarding professional, Post-16 provider)**

## 3.2 Student engagement in different school types

The quality of student-teacher interactions and levels of contact time were key enablers for student engagement. This came partly from individual teachers, but different school types and settings also clearly played a role. This arose from the needs and characteristics of the students, and how provision was organised to meet these needs.

The **special schools** within the sample reported having regular opportunities for conversations with students, arising from high levels of ongoing support and supervision. This applied not only to individual learner support within classroom settings, but also to students' movements throughout the school day:

*"They are out every single day having conversations in the playground. They do have conversations around what they have been doing. In terms of sharing things about their online lives. Some of our students are quite upfront and they are not afraid of sharing information… it's very black and white ".*

*"We are with them from breakfast until they go. There are so many opportunities to talk... shuttle bus connections, walking between rooms, at the tills in the canteen... we get to know them very, very well. Build up a close relationship with them".*

**(Teacher, Special school)**

The emphasis on developing communication skills was also conducive to open discussion with students about their routines both inside and outside of school. For example, one respondent described how Key Stage 4 students would start their school week with a pastoral discussion on "*weekend news*", which was oriented around developing speaking and listening skills, and turn-taking. These conversations underlined the role of the internet and social media within student's home life and leisure time: "*I had lots of views... I did this on TikTok, etc*".

The students' needs within the special schools also shaped the delivery of PSHE and internet safety messages in quite specific ways. One of the two schools in the sample had a high proportion of students on the autistic spectrum, ranging from moderate to severe. This brought additional challenges for online communication, related to empathy and understanding boundaries. Social media was therefore a frequent cause of upset between peers. The school was quite actively involved in providing support and guidance where these issues arose, as social media conversations outside of school regularly spilled-over into the school day. Whereas in mainstream settings, the school's involvement in delivering these messages would often fall-off by Key Stage 4 in accordance with students' growing independence and confidence, this was not always the case within special schools.

*"With safer internet use and social media, we have to keep repeating and reinforcing messages around self-esteem and mental health... how words are interpreted, or a reaction to something... they haven't thought about the impact of sharing things that someone else isn't happy with, so we have to find ways to break it down... 'how did that happen, and why do you think they are upset?'... it has to be repeated a lot, because the social cues that come to us... it doesn't happen".*

**(Teacher, Special school)**

This messaging required a careful balance between harm avoidance, while recognising the importance of students' online lives to them during and beyond their time at the school. Staff were mindful of students' self-awareness of their autism or learning difficulties, and of the benefits of the internet and social media played in helping them to feel connected with the world and for self-expression. The ability to manage their online presence and conduct appropriately was therefore an important part of preparing for independent living, and the school recognised that it was part of their remit to help equip students with these skills alongside preparation for work and learning.

Within the **AP providers**, conversations with students about their online lives were often described to occur naturally during the school day. This greater openness was attributed in part to the organisation of AP, which was characterised by smaller class sizes, and higher levels of student support. It also pertained to differences in ethos. The AP providers within the sample described having something of a 'flatter' hierarchy; closer integration of subject teaching and life skills, and differences in styles and modes of classroom engagement when compared with mainstream teaching. These elements combined to create a school climate where students were often less guarded in their conversations with staff, meaning that internet-related topics arose on a regular basis.

*"They [students] don't necessarily have the same wariness or filter when talking about sensitive topics. If a teacher were to ask about… a new app, or an incident, then young people tend to be quite open and just answer".*

**(Subject teacher, AP provider)**

Offsetting these benefits, however, respondents described the greater difficulties arising from the turnover within the AP population. Student-staff relationships had to form more quickly where students arrived on short-term placements. This meant that classrooms tended to lack the cohesion and continuity of mainstream schools, where relationships were able to build over time, and where staff had a longer view of students' development.

*"This is an inherent challenge [in AP settings]... it's not a stable cohort. Young people come and go at different times of the year.... inevitably, it's quite reactive... things don't have the chance to embed".*

**(Assistant headteacher, AP provider)**

By extension, incidents occurring online did not always benefit from the 'crowd effect' of mainstream schools, where news spread more quickly, coming to the attention of staff from a variety of channels:

*"We're missing that informal community of a thousand kids in a mainstream school where 200 will see that pic or vid and tell."*

**(Centre head, AP provider)**

The transitory nature of AP meant that some students saw the setting as a stepping-stone and were disinclined to invest in relationships with staff and peers. Conversely, AP sometimes represented a step change for students with negative experiences of mainstream. In these instances, relationships assumed far greater significance and students tended to over-share with staff. These dynamics were set against a backdrop of greater levels of vulnerability among the student population, which contributed towards a sense of staff being on alert at all times.

The **independent schools** within the sample had varying policies towards mobile phones and the internet. As with AP, however, respondents attached significance to the lower student-staff ratios. Within tutor groups, this meant that there was more contact time with individual students, while smaller numbers were conducive to greater familiarity with students and parents. Engagement took place in the context of high expectations for academic achievement, which was also a factor guiding levels of communication with parents and carers (see Section 3.4).

## 3.3 Student characteristics and their influence

The interviews further explored the significance of different student characteristics for interactions with staff about their internet use. Respondents were prompted on the extent to which any differences were observed according to age or gender, and how or whether SEND or other forms of vulnerability also had an online dimension. As before, these themes are covered from teachers' and schools' perspectives and should be interpreted accordingly.

### 3.3.1 Gender dimensions of internet use

Staff perceptions of gender differences in online activities centred on types of media used by students and how they expressed their interests to staff and their peers. Overall, staff were reluctant to generalise because they saw so little of how students spent their time online, meaning that any perceived differences were mainly anecdotal.

At a broad level, boys were observed to prefer online gaming, with girls indicating a greater interest in social media and celebrities, although these distinctions were by no means universal. There was a perception that boys' social media use was sometimes more "*covert*", and they tended to downplay its importance within their lives. However, as one respondent noted: "*they still get the social media references when they come up in class*". This bravado also presented as boys misusing the internet to impress their peers with nuisance behaviour – by creating fake social media accounts with photographs of teachers for example. Social interactions between students around online gaming could also tip into bullying. One example was where restrictions on home internet use became the subject of ridicule among students with greater freedoms: "*did you hear that [X] had to stop playing at 9.30pm!*"

Girls were observed to externalise their grievances more regularly with peers and staff. This was described by one respondent as a "*more expressive*" reaction to the things they encountered online:

*"Girls are more willing to talk about spats or disputes, if they're upset… it comes from an emotional front. Being a female teacher, they look to you for advice and support, and trust your judgement."*

**(Head of department, Academy converter)**

In contrast, boys' emotional responses to online were often more restrained. One respondent expressed curiosity as to boys' activities on WhatsApp, as the content of these conversations remained an enigma: "*by Year 10, the boys are all in [groups], but nothing ever seems to come of it*".

Setting these issues aside, however, some respondents downplayed any gender differences. Among those students who had access, the internet was thought to offer many common experiences:

*"The content might be different, but ultimately the use of social media is similar for boys and girls".*

**(Head of department, Academy sponsor lead)**

*"They're all on the same platforms and channels… they're all doing it".*

**(Safeguarding professional, Voluntary aided school)**

## 3.3.2 Ages and Key Stages – students' evolving online competence

The interviews provided a snapshot of students' evolving digital know-how throughout secondary stage, and of the enabling role of the internet and social media – both for individual socialisation, and with regard to the formation of relationships within "*classroom systems*". Respondents consistently observed changes in students' confidence and competence in managing their online presence according to age and maturity and described the moderating influence of peers, parents and home internet routines. This in turn had bearing on what students were willing to share with teachers, and the strategies that were adopted to support and sanction students' online activities.

Teachers often observed younger age groups undergoing a period of acclimatising to internet and social media upon transition from primary to secondary. Year 7 was a time when many students were establishing an online presence and testing boundaries. This was characterised by relative unfamiliarity with apps and social media used by their older peers, and a lack of awareness of inappropriate content and of the consequences of posting online. These factors resulted in more frequent and visible online incidents, which spilled-over into the classroom:

*"When they come in Year 7, they are fresh-faced and it's a big world. Then they get on a wave of social media… despite how many times we say, 'think before you type' they just don't get it".*

**(Head of department, Academy converter)**

Access to internet and social media at primary stage was also reported to have quite a significant influence upon transition to Year 7. It was at this stage that discrepancies in the social media awareness and know-how of students was most acute, underlining the gulf of experience between young people for whom mobile phone access was heavily supervised outside of school, and those who were well versed in using apps and online gaming independently from an early age. A levelling-off period was not unusual, while newcomers to social media caught-up with their peers. Some respondents had observed a rapid rolling-back of the age at which students accessed social media, with apps such as *WhatsApp* increasingly normalised at primary stage. They could only speculate on the extent to which the COVID-19 crisis and lockdown had exacerbated this trend.

Even where younger students were "*tech-savvy*", however, the sophistication of their networks and relationships in Year 7 was not equivalent to their older peers. Having access to social media apps did not necessarily mirror the social contexts within which this technology was utilised at Key Stage 4 and upwards. One respondent described how younger students may, for instance, download Snapchat but not really understand or make active use of it. They might then pick it back up again at a later date, because all of their friends were using the platform.

Where the student-teacher dimension was concerned, respondents described a greater tendency towards "*over-sharing*" among the younger age groups. This was attributed to the formative stage for relationships with staff, and a propensity for students to "*seek approval from teachers*" – often in quite an unguarded way. Students were less likely to be aware of the action taken by the school when reporting something that they or their peers had seen or done online. This naivety was eroded over the course of Years 7 and 8 as students became more aware of how incidents were reported, and what would prompt a safeguarding response and / or parental involvement.

By Key Stage 4, students were often more guarded and considered in what information they chose to disclose, coupled with an orientation towards approval from peers rather than from teachers. By this stage, social media use was described as being "*more poignant*" or "*more social*", and better integrated to everyday life. The contexts of work experience and college applications also presented students' digital footprints in a new light, with the growing need to adopt a wider contextualised view of their online identity beyond a purely social one:

*"The older ones know what they are supposed to do, how they are supposed to manage their online presence. They don't always do it ... but ... they are coming out of that stage where it is everything to them. they have an awareness of how things are going".*

**(Head teacher, Voluntary controlled school)**

These differences also had a bearing on teaching strategies. At the younger end of the spectrum (Year 7s and Year 8s), the approach was described in terms of setting ground rules – messages about self-awareness and knowing how and when to report abusive content. Here, repetition was the key. As students grew better-informed and more anonymous online, the challenge shifted to finding ways to coax out key information. This required a greater degree of impetus from staff, which meant keeping on top of social media trends:

*"The older students don't talk about this so much. It tends to come out when there is a more specific meme, video or phrase doing the rounds. This relies on some knowledge and awareness among the staff… [such as] when it's mutually viewed by teachers and students… 'oh so you saw that too?'"*

**(Subject teacher, Academy converter)**

Indeed, when older students volunteered information about incidents that had occurred online, this was more likely to be done with knowledge of the consequences. This sometimes implied a need for adult intervention:

*"Classroom management changes in Year 9, because they are more guarded and self-aware… they won't show us something unless they want to for a reason, or unless there is no reason not to".*

**(Subject teacher, Foundation school)**

Post-16, students' internet use was often characterised by greater freedoms and more open use of phones on campus. Digital media was also used in wider contexts. One respondent described how the college had a large marketing team and active social media presence. Individual departments had Instagram accounts and would post daily with routine communication about college life. However, this greater independence was offset by the unfamiliar environment. One respondent reflected on how mobile phones offered something of a "*safe haven*" for Year 12 students, who would retreat into the privacy of their phone at breaktimes. There was a marked change in behaviour by Year 13, with lone mobile phone use replaced by students moving around in friendship groups. A similar period of rapport-building was also needed with staff, for students in the new intake:

*"They are a bit cagey, as you don't know them for as long and relationship isn't as strong compared to a school where you have known a child since Year 7, and they trust you more. So they don't really offer any insights".*

**(Head of department, Post-16 provider)**

Age and maturity were also implicated in students' resilience to criticism or negative comments encountered online. The process of establishing an online identity required a degree of bravery and a willingness to bounce back from upsetting encounters. Indeed, it was commonly thought that e-safety "*stranger danger*" messages were embedded from a much earlier age, and that self-image, peer approval and managing online relationships presented the main challenges to students' wellbeing at secondary stage. Even where students may have become more competent at managing their online presence by Key Stage 4, the anxieties relating to popularity and influence often persisted. One respondent described how, during online teaching in lockdown, Year 10s were reluctant to be seen, heard or judged in any way, whereas Year 12s had generally fund this unproblematic. They drew parallels with students' self-awareness on social media platforms.

*" There is an element of confidence needed to put yourself online and join-in... you need to be quite thick-skinned. The younger ones don't handle it so well… things like using TikTok to write inappropriate comments, friendship squabbles, falling out".*

**(subject teacher, Independent school)**

For some respondents, this exposure was considered a necessary part of the resilience-building that students needed to thrive online. Schools had a role in providing safe spaces for experimentation and risk-taking, while establishing the trust that was needed for students to view staff as a legitimate source of advice and help:

*"They need to be streetwise, but over the internet… being able to cope with a bit of criticism. Learning that if someone puts a thumbs down, it doesn't matter. Understanding when they need to report and why".*

**(Subject teacher, Academy sponsor lead)**

*"If between Years 7 and 9 we can develop those skills and build resilience, then that better equips them at Key Stage 4 when they may be exposed to a higher level of risk".*

**(Subject teacher, Academy converter)**

Indeed, the interviews highlighted the difficulties that could arise where students lacked this exposure and were subsequently exposed to challenging situations online. One respondent recalled a period of teaching in a special school, where a lack of managed exposure to the online world was sometimes detrimental for older students:

*"In special education, it Is the older ones who are problematic, because as kids are protected and don't have access [to a mobile phone] in Y7 and Y8. So they get their first phone at 16, and there are problems... a complete lack of resilience".*

**(Subject teacher, Independent school)**

**Contact between different age groups** also had a bearing on how students acquired their knowledge. Vertical tutoring was an obvious example of where this took place within a manged setting – one respondent described the relative advantages of these age differences, with older and younger students paired to discuss PSHE topics and to share their feedback. This included discussions about the internet and social media. Other respondents cited the "*copied behaviour*" arising from younger students looking up to the Year 11s, which could include an online dimension and had both advantages and drawbacks depending on the appropriateness of the behaviour.

## 3.4 Key features of 'promising' practices

A number of common themes emerged, where schools consistently experienced success with engaging and supporting students. Although it would be inappropriate to reach conclusions about what constitutes 'good practice' without deeper exploration, the study alludes to a number of key features of 'promising' practices. They include:

**a)** creating safe spaces for conversations

**b)** trusted pastoral relationships

**c)** credibility and relevance

**d)** involving peers in delivery; and,

**e)** alignment of support at home and school

First, it was apparent that having **safe spaces** to talk was important when encouraging students to share their interests and concerns. This not only related to class sizes, and the frequency and duration of contact with students, but also to the contexts within which discussions took place. It was often easier where there were more regular informal activities such as sports and arts extracurricular provision. School culture also had a role to play. For example, one respondent reflected on how tutor groups worked well as a forum for discussing "*healthy and unhealthy*" online behaviours, due to a combination of small form groups; an environment in which "*…teachers are encouraged to talk to students about their interests inside and outside of school*".

**Trusted pastoral relationships** were another a common factor – whether with teaching or non-teaching staff. This came up repeatedly as a theme within the interviews, across all of the school types:

*"There is no substitution for positive relationships between staff and students. Where there is a high level of trust, these conversations can occur"*

**(Safeguarding professional, Post-16 provider)**

**Credibility and relevance** were also important. There was a recognition that students' confidence and interest could be quickly lost if the content was outdated or repetitious. A number of the interviews highlighted a degree of complacency in how some schools turned to off-the-shelf material to deliver generic messages about e-safety:

*"With online safety education, there is that element of 'eye roll' if it's pitched too low… Sometimes, the same video clips come up, year-on year in assemblies."*

**(Head of department, Independent school)**

*"Young people have had online safety drummed into them since Year 4. They need real examples".*

**(Subject teacher, Academy converter)**

The willingness for teachers to speak from personal experience was often valued, and could help to counteract a view that the school was relying on older sets of materials to get by:

*"I talk to them about my own children, who are a similar age. I tell them that I don't allow this or that, and that I track my son's phone... they were astonished that I was stricter [than their parents], but that started conversations".*

**(Subject teacher, Community school)**

Students often valued a willingness on the part of their teachers to broach more 'difficult' subject matter. This usually required tailoring to scenarios that the students were likely to have encountered, and issues that were specific to their age group. By extension, it required a degree of confidence by staff delivering the session, and required active participation by students, with an emphasis on self-reflection and sharing experiences within the group. One respondent recalled the example of a session about pornography, which was delivered as part of PSHE with a Year 10 tutor group in a girls' school. This stood out as having been particularly impactful:

*"They weren't expecting the openness, the bluntness of the discussion, but they appreciated it. It was good to get rid of those misperceptions. If it's a 15 or 16-year-old girl then it needs to be about the types of relationships that they have online... pitched for 'where they are at'."*

**(Head of department, Independent school)**

**Involving peers in delivery** was also apparent from this example. It was clear that when students were supported to take a lead, the examples were usually more relevant and struck a chord within the group:

*"They were quite honest eventually, and there were some verbal cues [from their peers]. What happens if you have a group of lads watching porn and they want you to watch it, what do you do? Even the ones sat listening were absorbing this new information".*

**(Head of department, Independent school)**

A similar supportive peer environment was described by staff in another (UNICEF Rights Respecting School):

*"They talk openly with each other about using the internet, which has been beneficial during lockdown... It's a caring group… very caring… from what we can gather from the conversations we have; they look out for each other".*

**(Subject teacher, Independent school)**

In other examples, this peer to peer element was designed-in more formally. This was facilitated through older students delivering to younger in one school (sixth formers to Key Stages 3 and 4), and through 'online student ambassadors' in another. The latter involved students meeting with their peers to offer online safety advice and practical demonstration, as well as running campaigns on topics such as cyber-bullying. The approach was thought to have added a dimension to the school's established PSHE offer, which was based on teacher-led delivery.

# 4. Parental engagement

This chapter turns from 'school' to 'home'. As we will discuss, schools' engagement with parents about their children's online lives fell into three broad categories, which were often combined. They included: a) parental information, advice and guidance; b) parental interactions about individual students; and c) parental support groups, networks and family learning. We go on to consider each in turn, before summarising some of the key factors influencing how schools organised their parental engagement and with what degree of success.

## Key findings

### Parental information, advice and guidance

- Schools routinely set expectations for online conduct within written policies and underwrote them with home-school agreements and parent handbooks. They also updated parents about relevant e-safety issues with a whole school dimension when the need arose, through written communication and the school website.
- Many of the schools also ran internet safety workshops for parents and carers. Schools differed in the extent to which they saw it as their responsibility to deliver parental education on these topics, however, with some offering practical advice and guidance, and others signposting to external providers or specialist websites.

### Interactions with parents and carers about individual students

- Established modes of one-to-one communication such as parents' evenings tended to be academic progress-oriented, with fewer opportunities to discuss the child's internet use in a wellbeing context. The COVID-19 crisis represented a watershed in this respect, with an overall widening of these conversations.
- Some schools, independents in particular, also made extensive use of their VLE for ongoing communication with parents, although there were variations in how these channels were used by individual departments and teachers. Others found that parents responded well to the flexibility of SMS texting and WhatsApp groups.
- At times, parents' and carers' use of social media brought families into direct conflict with the school. Examples included where parents had taken to social media to express dissatisfaction at a perceived injustice involving their child, or where online conflict involving students escalated when parents got involved.

### Parental support groups, networks and family learning

- Schools within the sample sometimes provided opportunities for parents and carers to engage with staff, and with each other, directly to access help or support. This was managed either through a regular informal drop-in type format, or through adult or family learning provision coordinated by the school.
- Conversations about students' online lives at home and school arose more explicitly within this type of provision, which had potential benefits in allowing the school to gain an understanding of the students' life outside of school as well as focussing on parents' support needs beyond their child's learning.

### Factors influencing schools' approaches to parental engagement

- A number of factors appeared to moderate schools' interactions with parents about the online world and cut across the schools that were included within our sample. These related to parental knowledge and confidence; parents' attitudes and behaviours towards their child's internet use, and the school environment.

## Key findings

- Schools exercised some caution when dealing with different home internet routines and permissions. There was a fine line between reinforcing internet use policies and encroaching on parental roles and responsibilities – especially when this related to students' internet access outside of school.
- Even where schools considered that they had a very good relationship, the reaction was unpredictable when challenging parents and carers about online incidents involving their child. This stemmed from parents and carers not always being aware of their child's online activities, which could come as a shock to them.
- As with other themes for the study, school types and settings framed parental engagement in particular ways:
  - The special schools within the sample reported having very regular contact. This was an integral part of managing the student's learning welfare needs as part of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs),
  - Within AP settings, respondents cited the extra steps needed to build trust where parents and carers had negative experience from their child's previous school, or from their own education.
  - Sixth Form Colleges had to contend with the separation between the school and parents and carers at Key Stage 5, and the distance between students and their parents and carers regarding their online lives.
- The influence of socio-economic status (SES) was more ambiguous. Low income and differential internet access had the potential to compound online risks, alongside other vulnerabilities. However, students' online transgressions often related as much to individual decision-making as they did to family background.
- The COVID-19 crisis and lockdown had quite substantial repercussions for parental engagement, as for other aspects of school life. The interviews highlighted both negative and positive aspects to home school communication during this period. For some, it prompted a rethink and facilitated a partnership approach. Other schools reported tensions surrounding accountability for students' learning and wellbeing.

## 4.1 Parental information, advice and guidance

Written information about internet-related topics was delivered through a variety of channels. Schools routinely provided induction booklets or parent handbooks, alongside links to relevant policies relating to acceptable internet use (see also Section 2.1). Alongside this more 'static' material, schools periodically communicated with parents as a group whenever the need arose. This ranged from letters from the SMT drawing attention to incidents that had occurred at the school, to bulletins or factual information on internet-related topics. Some schools had the confidence to go beyond signposting to offer more specific advice and guidance. This included one example where the school provided tips for parents on monitoring their children's online behaviours; a list of potentially harmful sites to look out for, and a 'virtual help' function linked to external providers from the schools' website.

SMS texting and WhatsApp groups were also used to support home-school communication. One school had introduced regular texts, online newsletters and short surveys, in an effort to normalise online engagement. This came after the school had clashed with parents and carers about students' inappropriate use of mobile phones. The respondent described how, rather than shying away from the issue, the solution was to: "*…positively engage parents via their phones… consciously doing this, to avoid it only being about the negatives*". Another school saw a role for social media in connecting vulnerable or isolated parents and carers. This built upon their weekly drop-ins, with the aim of extending relationships that had formed within the setting.

Schools also ran internet safety events for parents and carers, which sometimes formed part of a wider programme throughout the year. Schools differed in the extent to which they saw it as their responsibility or area of competence to deliver parental education, however, with some sourcing external providers and others preferring to deliver these messages in house. One school, a MAT, had recently added a new annual workshop on the subject of screen time. The aim was to make parents aware of the potential impact of screen time on students' health and wellbeing, and of the impact of parental screen time on their children. Another school delivered presentations to parents of Year 6 students in feeder schools, to raise these topics at an early stage:

*"[We cover] ICT ownership and phone ownership of children, what percentage of young people have accessed pornography, how many have sexted, how many are texting late at night. As parents it's easy to put your head in the sand and pretend it's not happening, so it's important to raise awareness".*

**(Assistant headteacher, Academy converter)**

Despite often running these events in the evenings to make them more accessible, attendance was rather mixed. This was attributed to some parents struggling to get into the school, and others not engaging at all.

## 4.2 Interactions with parents and carers about individual students

Contexts for having conversations with individual parents about their child's internet use mirrored the schools' organisation of parental engagement around the academic calendar. For the mainstream schools, one-to-ones centred on parents' evenings and communication with parents through the schools' VLE. As both of these contexts were academic progress oriented, there were more limited opportunities to discuss the child's internet use, unless this was raised by the parent, or where online topics had featured within subject teaching and were discussed in the context of the student's work. As such, one-to-ones with parents and carers that were initiated outside of this cycle tended to be of a troubleshooting nature and involved problem behaviours with an online dimension. The school responded on a sliding scale, from the form tutor, to the head of year, to safeguarding personnel.

*"It is normally to do with the "nastiness" and just telling the parents there has been some issue."*

**(Headteacher, Voluntary controlled school)**

*"Parents are notified for anything involving bullying, inappropriate language, homophobic or racist content"*

**(Head of department. Academy converter)**

*"The [safeguarding lead] will speak to parents if there has been a specific incident. Teachers not so much… in general, it's more discretely pastoral".*

**(Subject teacher. Academy converter)**

For some schools, their portal or VLE offered an advantage of 'real time' reporting of attendance, academic and behavioural issues. Parents would receive an automatic notification and typically a follow-up call or email. Much of the value stemmed from *how* these platforms were used. One respondent described making very active use of the school's online portal, to upload resources and as a direct line of communication with students, parents and carers. However, they thought there was a "*massive disparity*" in terms of how the resource was utilised by individual departments, which represented something of a missed opportunity. VLEs were utilised quite extensively within a number of the independent schools within the sample, where much more regular and direct engagement in monitoring student progress was the norm. This high-performance culture provided a hook for parental engagement and kept channels of communication open, although the focus was explicitly academic:

*"Parents have accounts and are able to log-in as themselves and check their pupil's stats… we check pupils' homework's and leave comments so parents can read that feedback. It's really transparent, so parents or carers can see what is going on day to day… [and] it's a good communication tool, as we don't see the parents until parents evening."*

**(Subject teacher. Independent school)**

There were also examples where teachers used virtual communication to support students with additional barriers to learning. One respondent described having regular three-way texts and calls with home during the school day for a young person who suffered from anxiety and who had a history of non-attendance. Over a period of months, this proved effective in supporting more sustained periods of attendance and engagement in school life.

A further, more challenging, context was where parents' use of social media brought families into direct conflict with the school. This sometimes occurred where parents had taken to social media to express dissatisfaction with action taken by the school – usually where there was a perceived injustice involving their child. Parent chat groups

could quite quickly become vexatious in these scenarios. One respondent recalled an incident where a student was reported to have stolen food from the canteen, and the school had refused to serve him. The parent had taken to Facebook for support and the school was faced with "*several hundred comments from angry parents*". Having investigated the issue, however, the complaint was upheld. This type of scenario was by no means exceptional:

*"If there is a case of online bullying then we will tell the parents. But sometimes it's the parents who make it worse - they post something on social media… Parents can so easily go online to air grievances which are untrue, and not apologise".*

**(Subject teacher, Academy converter)**

In other instances, social media disputes between students took on a more serious dimension when adults also became involved. This was sometimes exacerbated by students editing or censoring conversation threads to present a partial account of the incident before material was shared.

*"Last year, a girl had an argument on social media involving another student, and her parents got involved: 'don't you call my daughter an [X]'... and then you're dealing with adults as well".*

**(Head of year, Academy converter)**

*"Especially being a small close-knit school community this means that the ripples caused are bigger… bickering involving the kids can escalate... 'did you know this girl said this to [X]?' It's proper antsy... teenagers do just fall out, but with parents involved too it's far worse".*

**(Subject teacher, Independent school)**

These incidents underlined the importance of keeping lines of communication between students, school and home as open as possible, and avoiding a position where the schools' stance appeared adversarial.

## 4.3 Parental support groups, networks and family learning

A final type of engagement found within the sample was where schools provided opportunities for parents and carers to engage with staff, and with each other, directly to access help or support. This differed somewhat to e-safety awareness sessions described above, as the aims were less about information-giving and more about relationship-building focussed on families' needs. This was managed either through a regular informal drop-in type format, where parents and carers could visit the school outside of the context of their child's learning (e.g. coffee mornings or welfare sessions), or through family learning where parents and students participated together.

Conversations about students' online lives at home and school arose more or less explicitly within this type of provision, which had potential benefits in allowing the school to gain an understanding of the students' life outside of school as well as focussing on parents' support needs. The examples found within the sample were more prominent within non-mainstream settings, although not exclusively so. The following box provides an illustration.

### Figure 6: Schools' direct provision of support to parents and carers

**Example 1: AP provider**

The school runs a regular drop-in session for parents on Fridays to go over social media content and conduct, covering dos and don'ts. This format was thought to be particularly well suited to parents and carers who do not have English as a first language, and those with SEND, who may struggle to search for information online. Sessions are tailored so that "*messages are delivered at a slower pace, so that [they are] easier to understand*".

The school also offers whole family sessions with a therapeutic focus, bringing parents and carers and students together in parent-child parings during core curriculum time. This provides a very immediate way to tackle topics relating to online content and conduct and to explore home and school influences. The rapport built during these sessions also has the benefit of personalising ongoing home-school communication.

While some schools incorporated e-safety related content directly, others used it as a means to strengthen home-school links and to allow any such conversations to happen independently of the sessions, having built trust with parents in the group. One sixth form college found that evening classes were a popular hook for parents looking to re-engage in learning, which was a useful lever for home-school communication:

*"In our department, we also deliver the A-level as an evening course for parents of students. On a Friday evening... parents can come along as well. It's a two-hour session and we don't charge for this… we've seen the benefits for student attendance and behaviour, and conversations at home are linked more to the classroom... 'my mum did it, my brother did it', etc."*

**(Head of department, Post-16 provider)**

Schools sometimes combined different types of provision to bolster parental engagement on multiple fronts. For example, one Special School had identified Key Stage 5 as a critical phase for students in preparing for transition to future work or study. By this stage, parents and carers often reported feeling out of touch with the social media tools that had become an important part of their child's social world, as well as requiring additional support from the school in preparation for the young person's transition. The school ramped-up levels of contact at this stage, with coffee mornings, informal family workshops and drop-ins, to ensure that parents felt adequately supported.

## 4.4 Factors influencing schools' approaches to parental engagement

A number of factors appeared to moderate the ways in which schools interacted with parents about the online world and cut across the schools that were included within our sample. These related to the following:

**a)** parental knowledge and confidence

**b)** parents' attitudes and behaviours towards their child's internet use

**c)** the school environment in different types of settings; and.

**d)** the impact of COVID-19 crisis and lockdown on home-school communication.

Respondents observed quite wide differences in **parents' knowledge and confidence about digital technology and social media platforms**, as well as their awareness of the types of behaviours that were encountered by the school within their child's peer group. These differences became more apparent during the lockdown (see also below). While being mindful that parents' experiences of using digital technology varied immensely across the student population, respondents tended to lean towards a more pessimistic view. This was often attributed to generational differences in technology use between parents and their children, albeit in a generalised way:

*"Parents feel they didn't have the technology when they were growing up… they don't understand how the tech works, how to access it, [or] what the requirements are"*

**(Head of department, Academy converter)**

Younger teachers sometimes found themselves positioned in a bridging role, with regard to their knowledge and experience: "*I am almost the intermediary between their age group and the parents' age group*". This view was commonly shared by parents, some of whom saw the school as a source of help on tech matters (see below).

Aside from parents' familiarity with the technology, schools encountered quite varying levels of **parental awareness about their child's mobile phone and social media use**. This ranged from parents who were confident in their oversight of their child's internet use, to those for whom this was a source of anxiety. Parental confidence was sometimes misplaced, however, when triangulated with intelligence gathered by the school. Schools were often aware of the fact that some students had multiple phones or accounts to ensure that their social media use remained private, for example, even if this knowledge was somewhat impressionistic:

*"It is almost impossible to keep up with the apps that the kids use, and even those parents that think they have a good handle on it, they generally do not. [Parents and carers might say]… 'oh, I follow them on social media', but no… you follow the account they want you to follow, they have a separate one".*

**(Headteacher, Voluntary controlled school)**

Some respondents described having been involved with internet awareness sessions that proved to be "*quite a revelation*" for parents, compared with what they thought their child was doing on their phone. More often, however, it was students' involvement in a particular online incident that shed new light on their online behaviours. Parents were not necessarily even aware that their child had a mobile phone until such an incident occurred, or that they had been accessing the internet at a friends' house to curb parental restrictions. As one respondent noted:

*"If your son or daughter has a friend who has internet access then your son or daughter has internet access… their loyalties are with their peers"*

**(Subject teacher, Foundation school)**

Schools exercised some caution when dealing with different **home internet routines and permissions**. There was often a fine line between reinforcing internet use policies and encroaching on parental roles and responsibilities – especially when the school was more pro-active in offering advice and guidance about students' internet access outside of school. Some schools aimed to raise awareness of issues relating to screen time and sleep, but these were beyond their jurisdiction to monitor unless parents and carers were seeking advice:

*"It's difficult to get the right balance between making helpful suggestions and being paternalistic and infuriating parents."*

**(Subject teacher, Academy converter)**

*"It's hard to support from school when different households have different rules... it's difficult to avoid treading on parents' toes"*

**(Teacher, Special School)**

While schools were limited in offering help where this was not welcomed by families, they were also faced with an almost opposite situation - where parents placed responsibility for out-of-school incidents at the schools' door. Respondents gave examples where a child had been bullied on social media and the parents approached the school asking what they intended to do about it. Upon investigating, the majority of the activity had occurred outside of school time and was not linked to the school, other than the young people involved both attended the school.

*"The parents want the school to fix it… but often you look at the messages and it's 9, 10 and 11 o'clock at night, where these children should be under the parents' control".*

**(Subject teacher, Voluntary aided school)**

The **propensity of parents and carers to support the school** was also a factor in the success or otherwise of schools' measures to support students online. Even where schools considered that they had a very good relationship with parents and carers, and that the "*overwhelming majority*" had confidence in the school to act in their child's best interests, the reaction was more unpredictable when it involved their child. Respondents described a wide-ranging parental response where students had been involved in inappropriate online activities, from banning their child from social media platforms to having no perceived interest in any kind of sanctions.

In some cases, it was the parents' blind spot regarding their child's online activities that prompted them to come to their child's defence. They either believed that their child was too young or incapable of the behaviour in question. This left the school needing to take additional steps to confront them with the evidence:

*"I've worked in schools where children have gone down the pornography route and parents wouldn't believe unless you physically show them."*

**(Subject teacher, Independent school)**

The influence of **different household characteristics, and particularly socio-economic status (SES)** was more ambiguous. Respondents cited material differences relating to low income and differential levels of internet access, while other vulnerabilities arising from poverty and disadvantage were believed to have the potential to compound online risks. Respondents were often only able to speculate as to the day-to-day online activities within these households, however. Teaching staff in particular were not party to the same information as Safeguarding Teams, and held only a more general impression of how SES might interplay with students' online lives:

*"For teachers, there is a question of how much do we know what goes on in homes where it's chaotic… kids come home at 4am… we have the kids who come in half asleep because they have been on their phones all night"*

**(Safeguarding professional, AP provider)**

Online transgressions often related as much to individual decision-making as they did to socio-economic background. As one respondent commented: "*…just because your child is getting straight 'A' grades doesn't mean they are behaving appropriately online*". Moreover, some risks around parental monitoring and supervision of home internet access were associated with parents' working patterns. The fact of long periods of unsupervised access due to parents' working hours were the common factor, but this cut across income groups within the sample:

*"The parents who are working the longer hours... the girls who are online... 'that's their life'... they are in a big house; they virtually have their own areas of the house. They are very independent and unsupervised online".*

**(Head of department, Independent school)**

*"I passed on a concern about a child who was very tired in class… raised it with safeguarding. It turned out that he was on PlayStation unsupervised... [because] the family own a takeaway business. It was brought to the attention of the student and family".*

**(Subject teacher, Independent school)**

There were some references to looked after children (LAC) within the interviews. In these cases, one school reported liaising with carers and care homes regularly about use of social media, via their Tutor Team. Another school (MAT) had reported "*a lot of issues*" with young people in care whose carers do not think they had access to the internet when the school knew this to be the case. This issue was not reported elsewhere within the sample and may have been specific to the school, or the respondent's understanding of the issue.

As with so many other facets of student's online lives, parental engagement took on different forms relating to the **type of setting**. The challenges were somewhat compounded in the sixth form colleges within the sample, reflecting both the greater separation between the school and parents and carers at Key Stage 5, and the distance between students and their parents and carers regarding their online lives. One respondent, a member of the senior management team in the sixth form college, described how parental contact was an uncommon event:

*"As the college is the stepping-stone between school and university, the responsibility lies with the student. We rarely interact with parents, and only see them twice in the two years they are at college."*

**(Head of department, Post-16 provider)**

Challenges for parental engagement were also reported within the AP settings. For example, one respondent with previous experience of teaching in mainstream schools observed a stark contrast:

*"We'll have 12 parents [out of 100 students on roll] turn up to a parents' evening. In mainstream, I was used to seeing 80% parental attendance".*

**(Safeguarding professional, AP provider)**

Respondents cited the extra steps needed to build trust where parents and carers had a negative experience of interacting with their child's previous school(s). Although in some cases the relationships were reported to be very close, where parents valued the lifeline provided by the AP setting. Indeed, one of the AP providers within the sample offering family-based group work reported having strong links. This was also helped by the fact that the PSHE teacher also carried out the role of family support worker, which gave an enhanced 'family' dimension to pastoral provision and maintained open channels of one-to-one communication with parent and carers.

The special schools within the sample reported having very regular opportunities to engage with parents and carers. This contact was an integral part of managing the student's additional learning and welfare needs and was formalised within EHCPs. Teachers would phone home on a regular basis, and many students were collected, so there was engagement at the start and end of the day. This allowed informal conversations to occur, without the time pressures encountered in a mainstream setting. Moreover, this regular contact was conducive to a more open and trusting pastoral relationship with parents and carers:

*"It's almost like a primary approach… you really get to know the families of the students… there are so many other issues [like] medical issues that you need to be aware of... you do tend to need to call home more often".*

**(Head of department, Post-16 provider)**

*"Parents are notified for anything involving bullying, inappropriate language, homophobic or racist content"*

**(Assistant Headteacher, Academy converter)**

**The COVID-19 crisis and lockdown** had quite substantial repercussions for parental engagement, as for other aspects of school life. The interviews highlighted both negative and positive aspects to home school communication during this period. There were concerns about the quality of home schooling and of a potential widening of the gap between higher achieving students and those who required additional support, as well as risks posed by parents not always having the digital know-how to keep their children safe during a heightened period of exposure to the internet and social media. For example, one respondent commented that: "*with their kids being at home, they are on the wrong types of thing online and they [parents] can't stop them*". It was also clear that there were many unknowns at the time when the interviews tool place, with the true picture of students' welfare and educational progress only becoming fully apparent upon schools reopening in the autumn term.

Undoubtedly, the COVID-19 crisis brought questions about the sharing of responsibilities between home and school to the fore. Schools increasingly found themselves on the receiving end of general tech-related questions from parents: "*do you know how I put locks on my child's phone?*", and became aware of power struggles between students and parents at home: "*they're not doing their homework, so we've had to turn the internet off*". These interactions were under-written by home-schooling, as parents became more aware of their own and their children's strengths and limitations for online learning. In turn, there was a realisation among schools of the importance of parental input: "*parents are pivotal on anything online, their support is massively important*".

Schools within the sample responded to these challenges in different ways. For some, it opened the door for conversations to take place and was conducive to a partnership approach between home and school. For example, one respondent recalled having been approached by a parent about their child's lack of engagement in learning during lockdown. They were able to triangulate what they knew to better understand the situation:

*"I had one conversation with a parent this year, where their daughter was always on a laptop, but they didn't know what she was doing… I could see that she hadn't been accessing [the VLE], so I had that conversation... there is a time and place for YouTube, but learning has to take priority".*

**(Subject teacher, Academy converter)**

Other schools reported tensions surrounding accountability for students' learning during lockdown. Indeed, some expressed frustration that parents put responsibility for online learning at the schools' door. They felt that the school could only do so much without parents and carers playing a role.

One of the potential advantages of lockdown was to disrupt the established cycle of parents' evenings and formal progress reviews, and to challenge schools to become more accessible. This was the case for several of the AP providers, who reported unexpected positives for home-school communication. One school had introduced welfare-oriented telephone calls with families three times per week, due to the vulnerability of the students. They encountered a very positive response from parents and carers, some of whom had seen this as a "*lifeline*". This was considered to have been a success, and they planned to continue with regular direct parental contact post-lockdown. In another school that had introduced a similar more regular scheduled of calls and outreach visits, it was the shift in emphasis to include the wellbeing of the parent or carer which seemed to make the difference. This challenged preconceptions about the schools' motivations and helped to build trust.

*"This is a general check-in conversation... 'How is your child? How are the other children? How are you?' These wellbeing conversations have sometimes raised issues around families not having enough money or food… or concerns about parental mental health and wellbeing. In some instances, this has re-set relationships with parents and helped to undo the negative connotations of school... this is an opportunity to engage with them beyond only their parental role to focus on their needs."*

**(Assistant headteacher, AP provider)**

# 5.

# Teachers' perceptions of online opportunities and risks

In this chapter we explore the opportunities, risks, and drawbacks of young people's internet use from the perspective of study respondents. Most chose to focus on the benefits and drawbacks of using the internet for educational purposes; offering, amongst other things, an insight into how schools had experienced the shift to remote learning and communication through the COVID-19 lockdown. They also spoke about the role of the internet in young peoples' social and personal development, and they offered illustrative examples.

## Key findings

### Opportunities and benefits

- Teachers were most likely to recognise and value the educational benefits of the internet for young people above anything else, drawing on their personal classroom experience. Recent examples were framed by the COVID-19 crisis, which had amplified the role of digital platforms - both positively and negatively.
- Specific educational benefits related to the potential for independent study, real time feedback, and validation of learning outcomes. Teachers also found digital tools to be a valuable resource for them to review progress and communicate remotely. Despite these benefits, however, schools were sometimes concerned about the superficiality of online content, which they saw as a barrier to developing critical thinking skills.
- Relatedly, teachers noted the discrepancy between students' social media literacy and gaps in IT fundamentals such as spell checking and using search engines. They observed that students seemed to overlook the breadth of applications of their phone at the expense of a narrower focus on social media.
- Teachers acknowledged the importance of the internet for students' social, emotional, and personal development. Again, there was a palpable sense of untapped potential – from meditation and mindfulness to learning touch-typing, schools were aware that students could be benefiting from much more of what the online world has to offer, but did not always feel confident supporting students to navigate this content
- Lockdown highlighted the multi-faceted nature of digital divide – from access to devices, to affordability of Wi-Fi, and the challenges presented by home-working and home-schooling. The level of disruption posed by the COVID-19 crisis appeared to substantially both within student populations and between schools.

### Risks and harms

- Despite their concerns about more serious safeguarding issues online, such as criminal and sexual exploitation, many of the day-to-day issues revolved around peer-to-peer conduct issues and sharing of inappropriate content. This included threats, arguments, and sharing inappropriate images between peers.
- More serious events involving the internet with a whole school dimension were rarer within the sample, and respondents tended to rely to a greater extent on anecdotal evidence from training or other schools rather than direct personal experience involving students or teachers whom they knew personally.
- Schools recognised the inevitability of healthy experimentation during adolescence, which included an element of risk-taking and learning from upsetting or stressful experiences. Nonetheless, the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable conduct were regularly tested and could quickly become disruptive.
- There was a common belief that 'fallout' from the online world was more likely to affect girls, with more serious issues also affecting older children. Respondents noted that girls were particularly susceptible to peer-to-peer conflict and more vulnerable to exploitation. Those who were disadvantaged or vulnerable in other aspects of their lives also presented online with specific issues relating to their family life and peers.

## Key findings

- All of the issues outlined above required the school to act. This may be, for instance, to refer incidents to multi-agency safeguarding teams, to resolve online peer disagreements which have spilled over into school, or to involve parents. Such actions had a direct implication for teacher and managerial workloads.
- There was a common view that many issues arose because young people often hold different views of online privacy issues to adults. Respondents reported instances of young people filming teachers or others without their consent or sharing inappropriate images or videos of their peers. This caused fallout that young people were not expecting, demonstrating that some were not aware of the consequences of their actions.

## 5.1 Opportunities and benefits

From their own experience, respondents oriented towards describing the educational value of students' internet use. There was a widespread acknowledgement of benefits relating to access to resources, facilitating flexible study and widening students' horizons. Respondents also noted the benefits of using the internet as a teaching resource. This section will be split into two parts – firstly looking at how respondents perceived the benefits for their students and, secondly, how they perceived the benefits for themselves as teaching professionals.

It is important to recognise that recent contextual factors may have influenced how respondents viewed the educational benefits of the internet. Schools had very different experiences of the shift to remote learning during the COVID-19 lockdown and, due to the timings of the interviews, these experiences were still extremely relevant. For example, one school had foreseen the lockdown and collapsed timetables, fast-tracked staff training, and put in place plans for lessons to be delivered online. Another had mobilised an online timetable from 9.30am-1.30pm every school day, covering all year groups, including daily 'online form time'. This is in contrast to others who had experienced significant issues with mobilising laptops for students, poor access at home and lack of engagement.

These differences were reported to be attributable to a number of factors including school culture, IT infrastructure, as well as things outside of schools' control, including availability of technology at home. These factors were apparent in how respondents viewed online learning and the value of digital tools in education.

### 5.1.1 Educational benefits for students

The interviews underlined the importance of the internet as a knowledge base with the potential to support self-study. This benefit was particularly noted for those with the ability to work independently, such as older students and those in mainstream education, and self-study at GCSE and Sixth-Form level. With a wide variety of resources to draw upon, respondents outlined that the internet enabled students to access revision resources and practice papers online to help them prepare for exams; to present work innovatively and work together with their peers to produce high quality outputs. Several apps and online resources were mentioned as particularly useful, including GCSE Podcast, Cahoot, MyMaths, YouTube, Noodle, Microsoft Teams, Educake, and Academic Journals.

The specific emphases within the interviews related to the following:

- **Independent learning and self-study skills**: online access by students in the context of curriculum delivery was a recurring theme and tended to centre around access to the schools' virtual learning environment (VLE) or equivalent. One sixth form, for instance, had an e-learning platform which was "*central*" to course delivery, with students having 1.5 hours per week designated self-study time. Respondents also noted that, through lockdown, learners who were independent had completed significant amounts of work. There were also cases of students who would normally be distracted by friends in school who reportedly settled and became more focussed during lockdown. Even looking back beyond the COVID-19 situation, however, online self-study was greatly valued. As one teacher commented: "*In pretty much every subject… you can introduce something to [the students], and they will use the internet to expand on what we teach*".
- **Working flexibly**: online resources created the hypothetical possibility for students to learn at "*any time, any place*". As one respondent outlined: "*[GCSE Pod] is most downloaded at 11pm… they are on their phones in bed and decide to do some revision, or…'I was on the bus, so I put a GCSE podcast on'*". Flexibly was noted as a particular benefit during COVID-19. In one of the sample schools, a large proportion of the cohort were celebrating Ramadan and Eid during lockdown. The flexibility with online learning enabled them to take advantage of sleeping in the day and getting up later in the afternoon to help with fasting.

This flexibly was also noted as beneficial for those that struggle to pick things up quickly:

- **Political engagement**: with the ability to access local and global news, respondents noted that students were able to use the internet to make "*big things feel a lot smaller*". Students could engage in debates they may not have otherwise been able to – particularly if political topics were not routinely discussed at home, and to source and interpret information alongside or as an alternative to mainstream news channels.
- **Acquisition of digital skills**: in some instances, the shift towards remote access during COVID-19 meant that students gained in confidence at using digital platforms. One respondent noted that students at their school had learnt the etiquette of digital communication in a way that was less embedded previously.

*"For students that find that lessons go too fast, they were able to attend the live lesson but then they were saying that they were actually able to watch the lesson back again and were able pause it so that they could really listen, or re-listen to what they teacher was saying. So for students who find that processing side hard in mainstream secondary, it is useful. Because we have so much content to get in and an hour to do it, so those students found it beneficial".*

**(Head of year, Academy sponsor led)**

Assistive technology was also described in the context of learner support for student who were falling behind. One respondent noted that braille notes online are particularly useful for visually impaired learners. Another noted "*reading pens*" as a technological tool which enabled young people with SEND to access the curriculum. "*Tracker apps*" were also mentioned as something used by parents of young people with SEND to offer them more independence in day-to-day life; enabling them to learn new life skills. Online writing assistants were another tool mentioned in assisting students to work independently at their own pace.

### 5.1.2 Educational benefits for teachers

Beyond how students benefited from the internet directly, teaching professionals often described incorporating online tools into their own practice. This sometimes proved to be particularly beneficial during the COVID-19 lockdown; ranging from the use of generalist online tools, such as YouTube to deliver lessons, social media to, and free online software to create more engaging performing arts lessons. In one AP setting, the use of such generalist internet tools enabled teachers to meet complex students' needs under time pressure. Respondents also noted the use of more specialised tools to aid in the delivery of specific subjects.

Teachers valued online classrooms such as Google Classroom to set assignments, create an online dialogue, provide a platform for students to turn in work. This was, again, particularly welcomed during the COVID-19 lockdown. They were generally positive about the ability to set and monitor work for students online, with many of these resources offering students "*instant feedback*" on work completed and thus reducing teacher workload. Several respondents noted that online resources enabled them to meet the needs of learners more appropriately, giving pupils work directly to their phones and reaching more visual or audio learners in addition to those who do not engage well with face-to-face learning. By setting work online, respondents noted that the internet was a useful tool to reinforce the learning and understanding of subject teaching delivered in lessons.

Teachers' descriptions help to illustrate the use of online resources within subject teaching:

*"When I do my PowerPoints and teach my lessons, I will sometimes use YouTube videos... they can be simple and eye-catching. When prepping for lessons you are constantly learning about [what's available online]"*

**(Subject teacher, Community school)**

*"I use it [Educake] in Science to provide students with exam-style questions [that] can be accessed from a mobile, laptop or tablet … this provides the department with 'real time' data"*

**(Subject teacher, Independent school)**

*"We need to think on our feet. So the internet is good for that … [because] … it can be accessed quickly and can make the lesson visual... I use a lot of film and video"*

**(Safeguarding professional, AP provider)**

Respondents also valued the additional IT skills they had developed throughout lockdown during the COVID-19 crisis. Many had also engaged in online courses and discovered new resources online. This had given some the time and space to reflect on the potential of the internet and social media for students' learning and wellbeing.

*"I think we often see the teenage world as being separate from our own, but over the lockdown I found out about online counselling and did training with colleagues on self-care. Someone suggested downloading a Meditation App. These are all things I would never previously have thought to suggest to my students"*

**(Assistant principal, AP provider).**

The interviews also sometimes highlighted the potential cost-saving benefits of educational online resources for schools. This particularly related to the fact that online textbooks mean that schools no longer need to purchase these resources. Indeed, for some teachers the COVID-19 crisis had helped to make a business case to the school for investment in digital platforms and training, which they felt to have been lacking prior to the lockdown.

### 5.1.3 Challenges to realising educational benefits

While educational benefits from using the internet were widely reported in subject teaching and learning contexts, respondents were also keen to stress the drawbacks. Reflecting on COVID-19 in particular, online teaching was sometimes viewed as a "*damage limitation*" exercise, with a greater degree of scepticism about the educational benefits to come out of the move to remote learning. Here, there were concerns that the main focus on securing access had obscured questions about the efficacy of online delivery and of teachers' preparedness.

Furthermore, a reliance on self-study skills had sometimes exacerbated the gap between students with greater or lesser capacity to learn independently without the equivalent one-to-one support. One teacher based in an AP setting indicated that a move entirely online during lockdown had largely proven to be problematic:

*"[Our students] are not independent learners, and their executive functioning and metacognition is not where it needs to be... most have struggled when the systems and support were taken away... a small minority have thrived... [but] the majority have switched-off."*

**(Assistant headteacher, AP provider)**

Respondents also noted that varied access to digital technology meant that online learning did not suit all students. Many said that the COVID-19 lockdown had highlighted access issues for some families more than others. Yet, aside from the impact of socio-economic status (SES), there were families across all socio-economic groups for whom access was challenging during lockdown. Examples included families with multiple children and adults sharing devices, and multi-household families. For one of the MAT schools in the sample, 50 out of 280 students within a given year group did not have access to a laptop, and others had to share access with another family member. This was a substantial barrier to the rollout of synchronous online teaching during lockdown. This lack of access, in turn, affected motivation which also made some young people less likely to engage:

*"Where students were frustrated that they were not able to access resources ... [this] … had a negative impact on their motivation so they think, 'oh what is the point?' They are not able to access the live lesson, we recorded them, but that still does not enable them to get the same kind of feedback that the live lessons did. So a lot of students lost hope."*

**(Head of year, Academy sponsor led)**

Lockdown also highlighted issues with access that some respondents did not know existed. For instance, while young people may be online using their mobiles regularly in school, they may be using the school Wi-Fi and may not be able access this in the same way at home. One respondent gave an example of a young person who, during lockdown, had to use a neighbour's Wi-Fi for homework because there was no access at home. Even if students could access the internet through their mobile, there was an understanding that they were not able to engage in the same quality of learning remotely. Lack of digital technology was not the only issue noted with access. A supposedly simple instruction (such as 'read a book' or 'print a worksheet') become logistically challenging during lockdown as not all young people had access to these resources. Respondents also noted barriers to learning if parents did not understand the content as there was no one available to give students one-to-one support.

Talking to parents and carers about these issues was sometimes very beneficial and helped to break down barriers. While there was some hesitancy to broach these conversations during the early period of the lockdown, the more sustained period of home schooling provided an incentive for teachers and parents and carers to talk more frankly about home access difficulties and to explore the alternatives.

Crosscutting the COVID-19 pandemic and the specific challenges presented by lockdown were perceptual differences between teachers and schools regarding the educational benefits of students' internet use in the context of their schooling. Some teachers expressed reservations about the extent to which young people applied or acquired critical thinking and analytical skills when navigating the internet. This included concerns about whether self-guided learning was conducive to making meaningful educational gains without more active instruction.

*"The kinds of home learning that have gone on since March… there are limits to the creativity that is possible with an online platform, compared with what can be achieved in school with real world [teacher and student] interactions."*

**(Subject teacher, Academy converter)**

Similar comments were expressed about young people's ability to appraise the quality of information sourced online. While there was an understanding that students' ability to synthesise sources varied according to age and development, teachers observed that students sometimes seemed to rely on platforms such as YouTube or Wikipedia for quick access to factual content. Here, the challenge was described in terms of the proliferation of information sources online which could make it harder to assess their credibility.

*"They don't necessarily know how to triangulate what they need, or to understand the biases in information… I don't think this is hugely different from back in the day... I wouldn't have known that not everything in [tabloid newspaper] is real... these things are just magnified digitally".*

**(Subject teacher, AP provider)**

Some teachers made an association between the tendency for students to source information from social media, and what they had observed to be a superficial understanding of social or political issues or events. One respondent gave the example of recent class debate with Year 8 students on Black Lives Matter and JK Rowling's comments on LGBTQ+ rights. They had been surprised by the gaps in factual knowledge within the group.

*"No-one in Year 9 watches the news anymore... they are getting their news from YouTube... they're in their algorithm bubble on social media… as soon as we have a detailed discussion, young people get very animated. But they don't know much beyond the headlines... they can't always back up their opinions".*

**(Head of department, Academy converter)**

Nonetheless, teachers were mindful of gaps in their knowledge regarding how and when young people access, and process information sourced from the internet and social media. The COVID-19 crisis had prompted a rapid and unprecedented shift online. Schools had needed to be reactive under the circumstances, but the realisation that this could be a longer-term reality had brought these questions to the fore. Teachers were anxious to ensure that they had the right pedagogical tools and knowledge to support students to navigate the internet proficiently.

### 5.1.4 Communication and managing relationships

While teachers oriented towards describing educational benefits and drawbacks, the interviews also explored the social and personal developmental opportunities associated with the digital world. This included 'extrinsic' benefits relating to online communication, managing relationships with teachers, family members and other students, and the 'intrinsic' benefits of recreational use, and young people's online creativity or cultural expression.

On balance, it was the former that was most widely recognised and valued by respondents. This included:

- **Communication between teachers and students**: messaging apps such as WhatsApp and social media, including Facebook, were much valued tools for home-school communication during the COVID-19 lockdown. Numerous examples were cited of teachers creating chat groups to maintain contact with students during this time and to share resources. This was particularly the case at Key Stage 4 and 5, with the six forms in the sample embracing a shift online. Zoom and Google Classrooms were also valued by some teachers for maintaining interactivity within teaching and learning during this time. There was often a specific advantage to engaging with students in these online spaces where they may feel more comfortable and confident.
- **Maintaining peer social networks**: this activity was thought to be particularly beneficial during the COVID-19 lockdown, enabling students to retain contact with friends despite the limitations on face-to-face contact. Some outlined that students' preferred platforms were gender-specific. Boys, for instance, were thought to be more likely to communicate through games (such as X-box and PlayStation). For girls, respondents pointed to social media platforms such as Snapchat and TikTok. The utility of social media was particularly apparent where students might otherwise face additional barriers to interacting with their peers. In one of the Special Schools, many of the students faced a double challenge of travelling some distance to school and communication difficulties arising from SEND. Mobile phones and social media offered a lifeline.
- **Communication between home and school**: digital technology was essential for keeping parents involved in learning during COVID-19. This included engaging parents in online learning alongside their children, and engaging parents on social media. One respondent gave the example of how engaging parents in digital learning had actually had the effect of changing perspectives around the schools' behaviour policy, with the school and the parent community reaching greater consensus than was previously the case. Outside of the context of COVID-19, some schools also reported longstanding benefits of using social media and messaging apps to engage parents and carers positively, beyond addressing problem internet use (see Chapter Four).

The following quotes illustrate some of these communication and social benefits:

*"Their mobile phones, their digital lives are very important to them. So actually being able to reach them through those means, alongside what you would normally do in the classroom… can actually be really helpful… [especially] for students who struggle to access work in school, and speak up "*

**(Head of department, Foundation school)**

*"For a lot of our students, social media is a main source of communication. They don't have the freedom to go out socially. They put a lot of time into it... friends... constantly messaging, constantly sending invitations to video calls it makes them connect with the world and feel 'normal'... a lot of our students know they are autistic, and that this presents barriers to them" ".*

**(Teacher, Special school)**

## 5.1.5 Personal, creative and cultural expression

While there was a tendency to default to discussion on education or safeguarding themes, respondents also noted the benefits of the internet and social media for students' identity formation, nurturing creativity, managing peer relationships and networks, and participating in community life. Teachers were aware that this side of students' lives was often less visible to the school, but from conversations with students about their interests and leisure time they had often picked-up on the positive potential of the internet for students beyond the school.

There was a recognition that digital spaces could have a levelling effect where students faced additional barriers to gaining the recognition of their peers offline. The fact that anyone could become a social influencer was not lost on teachers, many of whom had seen their students invest time and effort to cultivate an online presence.

*"What you actually have with the internet is that there are so many influencers with so many different backgrounds…. they're more likely to find someone they can relate to."*

**(Headteacher, Voluntary controlled school)**

*"With influencers, anyone can rise to fame.... they feel like they can be part of that".*

**(Head of department, Independent school)**

Teachers sometimes expressed that the ways in which students participated online were fundamentally quite different from their own experiences of internet use for recreation or sourcing information. Although they did not always fully understand how, there was an appreciation that students' online lives were existentially positioned quite differently to the ways in which previous generations connected online.

*"At their age, it's part of their culture, whereas I use it to organise events and find things out. I do think they have evolved it in a very different way... how it influences their fashion and style"*

**(Subject teacher, Academy converter)**

*"[With TikTok] what struck me was that move towards… it's not comments-based, it's image-based. You do get the impression they walk down the street and say, "I'll do a TikTok". They naturally think their life is online, literally".*

**(Head of department, Independent school)**

There was a sense that these benefits had been amplified during the lockdown and that the internet had played an important role in maintaining social contacts and networks during a time when young people may otherwise have risked becoming isolated. This realisation came in part from teachers' personal experiences of how beneficial the internet had become during this period, and the benefits that they had seen as a result of having time and space to use the internet as a source of tools and information to support their wellbeing.

## 5.2 Risks and harms

The interviews also explored the risks and potential harms arising from students' online activities and how this manifests in safeguarding and pastoral issues for the school. As we go on to discuss, while serious safeguarding issues were always in the background as a concern, day-to-day issues tended to centre around lower level disputes within friendship groups and poor decision making with regard to inappropriate content. Respondents were aware that there was often a fine line between more trivial and potentially harmful contact and content, however, with students sometimes perceived to be blasé about sexual content and privacy in particular.

When prompted on how they became aware of risky or harmful content, respondents cited a wide range of sources through which this had come to the attention of the school(see box below). In the main, it was safeguarding or welfare personnel who were thought to hold a fuller picture of the range of different types of issues.

**Figure 7: Sources of evidence used by schools**

Respondents were asked to provide details of how they are aware of online risky behaviours or harms. They reported a number of ways in which this information reaches staff.

**Commonly identified sources**

**a)** Teacher observation: non-formal / routine, and formal (e.g. learning walks by senior staff).

**b)** Students directly reporting issues to staff: ranging from disclosures to expressing concerns, to overheard conversations that warranted follow-up.

**c)** Parental complaints or concerns: raised directly with the school.

**d)** Anecdotal evidence: either from training sessions or conversations with other professionals.

**Less commonly identified sources**

**e)** Pupil surveys and online reporting: for pupils to report generalised concerns confidentially. One school had introduced an online reporting mechanism to raise the alarm about potentially harmful online content. after warning signs on social media had been missed which may have averted a tragic event in school.

**f)** Information sharing with multi-agency services: including social workers and police. One AP provider was connected with C-Poms (multi-agency safeguarding system), which proved valuable for pooling risk-related information across services. Another provider was linked to the DIGISAFE London Grid.

## 5.2.1 Inappropriate conduct and content

Respondents generally noted regularly needing to remind students to be being mindful of what they posted online, echoing messages that were given in PSHE and online safety education. These reminders commonly related to privacy issues, with younger students especially being more inclined to post images or personal information online without considering the consequences. This included photographs of a personal or sexualised nature, but it could also include re-sharing inappropriate graphic violent or sexual content that was circulating among peers.

It was not uncommon for inappropriate online conduct to involve staff in a compromising way; either to push boundaries and seek a reaction from peers, or as retribution for grievances towards individual members of staff. Respondents spoke of students filming members of staff without consent or creating fake social media or dating profiles and then posting content or spamming colleagues and other students.

*"The kids find it funny to set up Instagram accounts of us or of the school, they find images of us on the internet and then edit them however they want and then post it on the account… It is regular, I would say once a month I am contacting Instagram because they are using the school name or teachers' names".*

**(Head of year, Academy in MAT)**

Schools commonly delivered sessions to raise students' awareness of the ethical and legal boundaries of what they posted online, and to explain the consequences. Nonetheless, an ongoing dialogue was often needed to engage with students on these topics and to encourage them to consider their digital footprint. One teacher recalled an incident at a previous school where a student posted an extract from an AS exam paper on a WhatsApp chat group. The potential seriousness of the situation seemed to have been lost on them: "*18 or 19 kids in the group were jeopardising their AS levels by having that on their phone*". Others described incidents in different schools where students had managed to bypass the cyber-security system and had accessed confidential files or data.

### 5.2.2 Mental health and wellbeing implications

A further common area of concern among respondents related to the perceived association between students' online lives, and issues relating to anxiety and low self-esteem and negative body image. These associations were somewhat ambiguous, and they varied according to teachers' personal views and values regarding acceptable online conduct. Indeed teachers sometimes viewed students' online presence with a degree of admiration, where individual students had established themselves as prolific vloggers, bloggers, or content creators online. At times they expressed surprise that these online followings were incongruent with the low profile kept by students in a classroom setting, and with their smaller circles of friends offline within a school setting.

At an immediate level, students' online conduct became concerning to teachers where this involved a perceived level of external pressure and coercion. This was usually inferred rather than directly reported.

*"[Social media] 'likes' are everything, and I think that does affect their self-esteem... if you don't have an online presence then you're not relevant and being relevant online is synonymous with being relevant in school. We'll ask them... why do you put so much onus on this… how can you change your thinking?"*

**(Subject teacher, Community school)**

Often, there was a fine line between what was deemed an unhealthy over-reliance on peers for validation, and specific incidents of students being excluded from friendship groups, persecuted, or bullied. However, some respondents expressed more fundamental concerns about the blurring of boundaries between the online and offline, and the perceived superficiality of students' online friends. Some were concerned that this risked distorting young people's judgement, to the detriment of relationships with their peers offline.

*"It can make it difficult to understand what is real and what is not… it's about balancing that with the impact on 'real life' reciprocal relationships... their ability to process the world around them".*

**(Safeguarding professional, Free school)**

Similarly, teachers sometimes became aware of students spending long hours online gaming or on apps and were concerned about the impact this might have on sleep patterns and their self-care. This ranged from a generalised view that "*excessive*" time online was unhealthy, and that it might indicate addictive patterns of behaviour, to a more specific concern that students' online lives were impeding students' academic progress. Intervention was more likely in this latter scenario, although the school often lacked supporting evidence.

*"I wonder how much time they spend on Instagram and Snapchat or on YouTube at home, but it's not really a conversation that is had with students… if a student is consistently falling asleep in a lesson it would go straight to chid protection anyway".*

**(Subject teacher, Academy converter)**

There was some evidence of gender differences in how or whether this information was volunteered. Some teachers observed that it was more common for boys to share this information more freely – whether unintentionally or with a degree of bravado: "*I was on Snapchat until 3am, Sir*". Screen time was more of a taboo subject in other classrooms and schools, however, and was something that generally came to light when a behavioural had transpired. After talking to parents, for example, it might become apparent that the young person had been missing sleep due to spending long periods of time gaming or on social media. Unsurprisingly, there were heightened concerns about the impact of long period of unmediated screen time during the lockdown.

### 5.2.3 Bullying and disputes within peer groups

While problematic internet use often related to individual online conduct, peer disputes were also widely reported to have an online dimension. Lower level falling-out between peers was substantially more commonplace than bullying, although there was often a fine line between the two. This included where arguments on social media had spilled over into the classroom and had come to the attention of staff or where "*online beef*" between students translated into a physical fight on the school grounds. Teachers reported having been shocked in some instances where students' online personae were in sharp contrast to their conduct on a day to day basis within school.

In some cases, this involved unambiguous incidences of cyberbullying. As one respondent outlined "*we don't shy away from the issue [of cyberbullying] … we have some students on suicide watch*". Many respondents mentioned cyberbullying as an issue in passing, but some saw this as their main concern. Some schools noted how easy it was to bully others though the internet without schools knowing; with cyberbullying being a particular issue on social media sites as well as games creating a "*bullying culture*". Several respondents gave examples of cyberbullying issues in their school which had affected the behaviour and emotional wellbeing of students. This included where incidents had happened outside of school, but it was staff at the school to spot the signs: "*what happens at the weekend… it hits them mid-week. It can take a while to come out*".

The anonymity afforded to students by private messaging online was often thought to have been a factor, with comments escalating more quickly to a point where a face to face confrontation was unavoidable, or in cases of more covert antagonistic behaviour: "*when issues pop-up, you get to see what they are like online… it's quite scary how different students can be once behind a mobile phone*". Peer disputes with an online dimension were a particular challenge within one of the special schools in the sample, where student's communication difficulties quite often resulted in comments that were perceived as hurtful or inappropriate. This required a fine balance by the school, who recognised that avoidance was not an option as a long-term solution.

*"[If there are friendship issues on Instagram] ... the school will say 'well, maybe you should delete your Insta account', but by Monday they are back again ... it's difficult because social media is part of the world they are going into".*

**(Teacher, Special school)**

These kinds of online disagreements were often time consuming for the school to resolve. Teachers described how they would find themselves in the position where students presented them with evidence on their mobile phones. This put staff in a position of mediators by default, with the added challenge that the content presented by students was edited to convey the dispute in a particular way. It was not uncommon for the school to involve parents and carers, if there were indications that students had been excluded from friendship groups or there were signs of bullying, which carried a risk of further escalating the situation of the parent had already been given a particular account of what had happened by their child. One respondent speculated about the potential implications of the COVID-19 crisis and lockdown for these peer relationships online, where schools had not been in a position to mediate over the summer. It was thought that this could have a knock-on effect for friendship groups upon schools re-opening in the autumn.

### 5.2.4 Criminal and sexual exploitation

Alongside everyday internet and social media transgressions, teachers often expressed concern about more serious safeguarding issues with an online dimension, such as those involving criminal or sexual exploitation. Overall, however, the prevalence of these issues was somewhat unclear. For teaching staff, this was on a "*need to know*" basis, and they would usually be unaware of incidents referred to safeguarding teams unless they had direct involvement. There was also a disparity between the perceived concerns about these risks, which were quite widespread, and the much lower reported incidence of teachers having directly encountered them within their practice. Indeed, behaviours perceived as risky were far more commonplace than actual incidences of harm.

Nevertheless, a number of respondents had observed that these types issues with a more serious safeguarding nature were more prevalent than was the case three or four years ago. This was particularly the case for incidents involving organised crime (such as 'county lines'). There were also concerns that safeguarding had been problematic during COVID-19 due to a lack of face-to-face contact which was often used to spot the warning signs.

The principal types of online risks and harms mentioned by respondents included:

- **Grooming and sexual exploitation**: this was the most widely reported area of concern with a more serious safeguarding and criminal element among the study group, especially but not exclusively within the AP providers. Among the most concerning aspects was the extent to which schools lacked visibility over these issues, beyond observing changes in students' mood or behaviour. Incidents were rarely picked-up through disclosures to staff directly, although examples were given where students had over-shared with teachers about potentially risky online conduct, which was followed-up with a safeguarding referral. At a more general level, teachers often found it unnerving that students' "online friends" who were people about whom they knew very little or had never met. This was considered a potential area of risk, especially for younger students and those whom they considered to be vulnerable in other ways.

  At the same time, it was recognised that students were spending more time online from an earlier age, and that this was conducive to developing the skills needed to navigate potentially risky scenarios. Moreover, schools were mindful of the need to tailor internet safety messages at primary and secondary stage, and of the inevitability of students expanding their online presence and contacts from Key Stage 3 onwards.

- **Radicalisation**: respondents noted political and religious extremism as being areas of concern. These concerns sometimes were sometimes linked to community level risks of which the school was aware and had taken action to counteract. One school within the study was based in a constituency that has experienced difficulties with far-right groups and radicalisation. The Headteacher was in close contact with police and community leaders on an ongoing basis and had taken active measures to counteract this through whole school awareness raising campaigns, and a strong focus on equality and citizenship themes within PSHE. The school had made active use of social media references and examples to animate these topics.

- **County lines**: while some respondents reported few known issues with gangs or drugs involving the school, for others this was an ongoing challenge. The different respondent roles and school types within the sample should be noted in this regard. Several of the AP providers had a direct line to multi-agency teams and were informed rapidly of issues involving students who were known to them which may have an online dimension:

  Outside of these more formally reported incidents, schools often needed to triangulate between sources of information that might point towards risky activity. Changes in patterns of mobile phone ownership and use were sometimes an indicator, where these occurred in the context of other forms of vulnerability:

*"The old 'stranger danger' risks are generally less of an issue... one consequence of increased screen time is that students are more clued-up than they used to be… they are less likely to meet someone online and then in real life".*

**(Subject teacher, Academy converter)**

*"[Examples of risky content include]… messages relating to gangs sending warnings to each other; rumours or stories in group chats, or image sharing".*

**(Assistant headteacher, AP provider).**

*"We know that the kids are very clever at hiding what is on their mobiles, we know there are a few that have had second mobiles ... and trying to explain to a parent the risks of that ... they've suddenly got some really cheap untraceable mobile and why that should be flagging up huge concerns" .*

**(Headteacher, Community school).**

When respondents gave examples of incidents that involved young people and the internet, not all of these came from the school at which they were currently teaching. Rather, it was more usually the case that 'high profile' incidents had prompted schools to act. This sometimes-followed stories in the national news or on social media, such as the Blue Whale online game that was linked to young people committing suicide, but was more often a response to something that had occurred within the local area that had directly affected families of students attending the school. Examples within the study sample included a teacher who was the subject of a very serious assault following threats that had circulated on social media. This has prompted the school to instate a whistleblowing policy so that students could anonymously report threatening or harmful online content to staff.

# 6. Implications for teacher professional development

In this chapter, we examine teachers' views on their knowledge, skills and confidence in supporting students to be safe and resilient online, including the perceived sufficiency of initial teacher education and in-service training. We consider the extent to which views of the requisite skills vary by professional role, subject area and school type. We go on to outline the factors influencing teachers' propensity to engage with students on these topics, and we conclude by considering gaps and potential areas where further training or resources might be beneficial.

## Key findings

### Professional knowledge, skills and confidence

- Generational differences directly influenced teachers' confidence, particularly where older teachers were out of touch with the latest technology and digital trends. This was a direct reflection of their experiences of using online technology, especially social media, which was often more limited than younger colleagues.
- This lack of confidence could sometimes result in older members of staff avoiding the topic or being reluctant to embrace new technologies, which could be a source of frustration from some younger colleagues. Moreover, even younger colleagues considered their online skills to lag behind their students.
- As well as their self-confidence, the amount of time teachers spent talking to their students about online safety topics depended on the setting they were in and how appropriate they considered this to be. Keeping up to speed with the latest technologies and social media trends felt out of reach to most respondents.
- To combat this, a number of individual teachers had decided to take matters into their own hands by self-educating on some of the latest trends including apps, popular culture and digital skills, which in their view enabled them to relate better to the conversations their students were having.

### Types and sources of training and their sufficiency

- Professional development was most often conducted internally by members of school staff. This meant sessions could be infrequent and attendance poor, as they sometimes had to be run outside of teachers' core hours due to a lack of dedicated space in their timetable.
- External CPD often happened just annually, and in some cases only took place online. For some it was delivered on a more general level, rather than on internet safety exclusively, and respondents tended to have vague recall as to the content of the training, when it was delivered and who it was facilitated by.
- In order to plug the gaps created by this infrequent formal professional development, teachers would share intelligence. However, opportunities for knowledge sharing could be more sporadic in mainstream schools, as opposed to AP and PRUs where small school sizes lent themselves to more frequent conversations.
- The move to digital teaching since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic was positive for many respondents, who felt more confident at using online resources in the classroom and more appreciative of the potential educational benefits for students. However, not all schools had the time to upskill at the necessary pace.
- The move to digital teaching since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic was positive for many respondents, who felt more confident at using online resources in the classroom and more appreciative of the potential educational benefits for their students. However not all schools have had the time to upskill staff adequately, leaving some to feel further left behind in terms of their digital literacy.
- Training sessions or PSHE content which is relevant and tailored to different age groups was perceived as the most impactful by some staff who had experience of using these.

## Key findings

- Overall, the biggest barriers to delivering more professional development were cost – relative to other training and development priorities – and time – to fit training into teachers' already crowded timetables.

### Future training and CPD priorities

- The need to stay on top of the latest online trends was considered vital for almost all respondents, who would like more regular updates on new apps and social media platforms and their pitfalls so that they could alert their students to the potential risks they present.
- With many teachers considering that keeping on top of online trends was something that was beyond their reach, a few suggested that harnessing students' knowledge and encouraging them to engage in peer learning was a better and more realistic solution.
- Some respondents focused on the potential of PSHE and believed that with more time for these lessons and better resources to equip teachers to address online safety, they could be really valuable.
- Many expressed a desire for more regular updates on online trends, perhaps delivered in the form of bulletins or newsletters so as not to take up too much time. Elsewhere, others emphasised the benefits of receiving external training, though were keen to see content tailored towards knowledge levels of individual teachers.

## 6.1 Professional knowledge, skills and confidence

Teachers' knowledge, skills and confidence varied widely across the sample, and was often influenced by their experience at using digital technology and social media platforms. Age was the biggest contributing factor to these discrepancies, with older members of staff sometimes feeling so out of touch with technology that they would try to avoid using it or talking about it where possible, though other factors also came into play such as teaching department and relationship to students. Even younger members of staff did not feel they were adequately up to speed with the latest online trends, a though they tried to overcome this as much as possible by downloading apps and engaging in the popular cultures that were popular amongst their students.

*"A lot of the staff have social media in terms of Facebook, Instagram and probably Twitter, but the kids are using snapchat and TikTok… so we have to work these out… pretty quickly"*

**(Headteacher, Voluntary controlled school)**

### 6.1.1 Factors affecting knowledge, skills and confidence

Respondents commonly mentioned **generational differences** when discussing their knowledge of social media and the internet. Unprompted, they were often quick to compare themselves with colleagues within their school or department, whom they organised into age bands. On probing, this 'age factor' included a number of elements. The first related to different experiences of apps and platforms between the generations, resulting lack of familiarity with newer platforms favoured by the students. This was sometimes accompanied by a view that younger members of staff were more in touch with youth media, and that they benefited from having had direct experience.

*"I suppose… different people of different generations may have slightly different outlooks. I'm of the generation that did not grow up with social media and the internet, so generally I am quite wary".*

**(Head of department, Academy in MAT)**

*"I was in my 20s when interactive whiteboards first came in… [but] the younger members of staff have grown up with that, and on more of the platforms the kids are on".*

**(Subject teacher, Independent school)**

The currency of this experience was thought to diminish fairly quickly, with even some teachers in their mid-20s considering themselves one step removed from the latest social media trends. This was seen as surmountable, however, and respondents sometimes talked with a degree of pride about being able to stay connected.

*"Especially as a younger teacher, it comes up more. I am 28... but even just four years younger than me is so different, in terms of social media awareness... the 18-24 bracket".*

**(Subject teacher, Academy converter)**

*"I went through a phase when I wanted the 'likes' [on social media]. I know where they are coming from… I can relate to the students more".*

**(Subject teacher, Community school)**

*"I am an active user of tech, and I have a smartphone. I don't have an issue, personally"*

**(Safeguarding lead, Sixth form college)**

In contrast, some older colleagues were perceived to adopt an evasive approach towards the internet and social media, lacking the confidence and / or not perceiving them to merit discussion within a classroom setting. This lack of understanding prevented older staff from engaging with newer forms of media, something which was highlighted amongst a couple of respondents in rural schools.

*"You will find that a lot of the staff who are older will take little or no interest and will brush it under the carpet... whereas younger staff might do videos".*

**(Subject teacher, Independent school)**

Older colleagues themselves could be quite self-deprecating in criticising their digital literacy, which they linked to age, with them quick to cite that they feel they need additional support in light of this. One respondent in their fifties, for example, felt left behind as they did not use social media and therefore felt unfamiliar with not only the platforms but also the way in which they tend to be used.

Aside from age-related factors, **teachers' confidence at navigating digital technology depended on their role**. Teaching staff, for example, would use the internet to different extents within their lessons depending on what subject they teach. One interviewee remarked that the English department in their school used the internet frequently in lessons, for example to show students YouTube videos, meaning that they tended to be more confident at navigating the internet alongside their students. On the other hand, another respondent who teaches Chemistry, was of the opinion that using online resources in their subject area was not beneficial, and therefore was reticent to engage with their students when it comes to technology in the classroom.

Others reiterated the importance of a close relationship between staff and students being the most important factor in helping young people stay safe online, arguing that young people would open up to school staff with whom they have a close relationship, regardless of that member of staff's confidence and ability at discussing their

online behaviour. These benefits were particularly noted by respondents in sixth form colleges, whose students have dedicated tutors who are more well-equipped to support young people with any problems that might arise from their online behaviour due to the time they can afford them. One interviewee also indicated that pastoral staff at their college tended to be younger, which in their view made them more relatable to students wishing to discuss their online lives, suggesting that generational differences can permeate across some of the other influences on teachers' confidence at navigating the online world.

Beyond teachers' self-efficacy, it was apparent that **core values and beliefs** also shaped the ways in which staff engaged with students on these topics. Not all respondents considered that it was appropriate to bring conversations about students' social internet use into the classroom. For some, this was felt to cross professional boundaries and to venture too far into student' personal lives. Particularly where respondents did not have a Form Tutor role, the appropriate contexts for having these conversations were sometimes felt to be more limited.

*"It's not something I would be keen to approach students about really, in terms of talking about their personal lives on social media or on the internet ... I don't think it's appropriate ... it's almost like being inside their own conversations as a group and it's up to them about what they want to share".*

**(Headteacher, Community school)**

*"Teachers need to be prepared to engage with these challenging topics [e.g. sexting, pornography]... it can't just be delivered externally, or students will see that you don't know... our students are very relationship-focussed. If it's a positive relationship, then they will engage"*

**(Assistant principal, AP provider)**

Irrespective of age, however, teachers almost universally reported that they felt like their **digital knowledge and skills were 'lagging behind'** where they would like them to be. Many thought it important to be up to date with the latest technology and aware of the latest social media trends in order to connect to students around these issues - a feeling that was even reported amongst self-professed 'clued-up' teachers. It was interesting, therefore, that having a better aptitude for digital technology than most of their colleagues was insufficient for some teachers, whose comparison point was the knowledge of their students, despite them conceding how quickly their students' online habits evolve.

Nevertheless, staff members' digital skills and experience with social media could have a significant bearing on their students' education. Some respondents expressed a fear that a lack of universal CPD in schools left students' education down to the experience and attitudes of individuals (often form tutors, who tend to be the ones who deliver PSHE), and therefore some may miss out on important conversations around online safety, if, for example, their teacher did not feel confident enough to broach the subject. In this sense, some respondents felt that too much is currently left to chance, with students' experiences too reliant on individuals' knowledge, skills and confidence.

This perceived shortcoming in staff's digital skillsets is not often due to a lack of willingness on their part, however, and many respondents reported being frustrated by their lack of knowledge, which was holding them back from helping students manage their digital lives. Teachers described being frustrated that they are looked to as all-round knowledge experts, but when it comes to the online world, they did not have enough information at their disposal to be up-to-date in the same way they strive to be in other areas. This left some feeling constrained by their perceived

lack of confidence, which they believed held them back from helping students to unlock their digital potential and embrace the opportunities of the digital world.

*"[As teachers] we need to be able to support students to use those phones as tools, rather than being constrained by them. If you're into gaming, how to design your own game... I want to teach them coding, practical design, enterprise… the internet shouldn't just be a source of anxiety".*

**(Assistant headteacher, AP provider)**

*"What's quite difficult (especially as you get older as a teacher) is teachers use Facebook and Twitter. But kids aren't using them anymore. Can feel like you're not really aware of what their world is. So you're not necessarily sure of the opportunities that they could explore."*

**(Assistant headteacher, Academy converter)**

Due to a reported absence of sufficient training in-school (explored in the next sub-section) many staff felt as if they need to take their own responsibility to advance their digital skills and keep up to date with the latest technology and social media trends. Such upskilling largely relied on individual self-education, which often took place in informally. In some cases, they shared their insights with colleagues, though this varied widely between individuals and was rarely reported as being a structured dissemination but rather delivered anecdotally.

**Figure 8: Teachers self-educating to stay up to date with the latest digital trends**

A senior manager from one of the AP provider undertook a coding course to upskill their digital skills and be able to better relate to their students' knowledge. They became aware of this course after a teacher friend told them about it and decided to enrol and complete the course of their own impetus.

In order to better understand the context of their students' conversations, one respondent from an academy converter decided to download TikTok and Instagram "*so that when they start talking about something [in school], I can then join in*". This teacher hoped that their openness with young people would be reciprocated.

## 6.2 Types and sources of training and their sufficiency

Teacher training was often infrequent and irregular, due to a lack of budget in schools and a lack of time to incorporate it into their time, which for most teachers was already stretched. Due to the cost of external training, much professional development was run internally by other staff members, and any external sessions were either delivered online or infrequently via face to face methods. Since most teachers felt they needed to keep up to date with online advancements more frequently than their formal training allows them, they turn to other methods to self-educate and share learnings informally between colleagues. There was, however, a cautious optimism that the pandemic had helped to promote the cause of upskilling teachers' digital literacy and students' online safety as more teachers recognise the benefits that using the internet in the classroom can present.

### 6.2.1 Teacher professional development

**Most professional development referenced by teachers was carried out internally**, often designed and facilitated by members of staff within the school. In these cases, training was usually delivered by staff members responsible for safeguarding or ICT and involved dedicated sessions on online safety or wider training sessions where online safety is covered alongside other material. The decision to deliver the majority of training online was often motivated by cost, and many teachers referenced how their schools' budgets could not often stretch to external training which was deemed expensive. With school staff expected to deliver training personally, in a responsibility often beyond their usual job role, sessions could be few and far between due to a lack of spare capacity. Furthermore, an absence of dedicated timetabling for these types of CPD meant that they were often conducted outside of staff's core hours, for example after the end of the school day, which impacted on attendance and reduced the school's ability to make these sessions compulsory for all staff.

Whilst this was a familiar story for many respondents, provision of internal training did vary between schools, with some teachers very satisfied with the training they received. Others, however, accepted that they would probably never feel fully knowledgeable and confident at dealing with all of the safety issues that the internet can present, and it was enough for them to know who to escalate problems to, where to seek advice, and where they could signpost their students to if they were unable to answer a question personally.

**The majority of internal professional development on digital topics was infrequent and irregular**, though a couple of respondents did receive frequent training in school which aimed to keep them up to date with the benefits and risks of popular social media apps as well as the way in which their students are using them. A few respondents did note that efforts to upskill teachers on this front had increased since the onset of the pandemic, and many respondents felt more equipped to support students online as a result. However one or two were sceptical as to whether this would lead to a permanent shift in culture within the school, or if this renewed focus on professional development was a reactive response to the move towards online teaching.

**External professional development, meanwhile, tended to be very limited**. Many respondents reported that face to face training around online safety was run either on an ad-hoc basis or infrequently, with annual sessions being fairly common. When asked about external CPD in more detail, respondents often described general sessions without pinpointing whether they covered online safety specifically. When they did, many could only recall external trainers in vague detail without being able to remember who delivered training, when it was delivered and what it covered. This was perhaps not helped by external sessions described as 'flat' which offered uninspiring and generic presentations that were either out-of-date or repeating information that had been delivered in previous years, as described by some respondents. Elsewhere, some respondents mainly received CPD from external sources via online training which was often conducted on an annual basis and covered online technology as a wider topic, rather than being exclusively about internet safety. In some mainstream schools, teachers reported that external training courses were optional offerings from the school which required self-enrolment and therefore were not very well attended, reinforcing the fact that teachers who have less of an interest in digital technology may be the ones missing out on development causing the digital divide to widen.

Where respondents did recall sources of external training, they usually referenced local authorities such as the police and the council who provide e-Bulletins and offer some face to face sessions. Training was generally ad-hoc and provided in light of important updates around e-Safety issues linked to social media, with one respondent giving the example of apps which were linked to gangs in the area. Local authority training was generally received positively by those involved, though their involvement too intermittent for some.

One teacher described how mental health first aid (MHFA) training had been particularly useful in highlighting the available mental health and wellbeing related apps that are "*aimed at teenagers... to help them manage their emotions, and mindfulness*". Subsequently, the teacher was able to draw on this information to supplement the resources and signposting that was made available by the school.

### 6.2.2 Professional peer learning

Where there are gaps in training offered by schools, staff often tried to fill them with self-education and peer learning. **Some teachers discussed internet-related issues between themselves**, exchanging anecdotes on the latest trends amongst students' behaviour. One respondent gave the example of their safeguarding team downloading unfamiliar apps to acquaint themselves with how they might be used, for colleagues' benefit.

Sometimes discussions simply aimed to update each other more generally and to share intelligence:

*"We will discuss [students'] conversations - the apps they are using, the sites they are visiting, the slang they are using".*

**(Assistant headteacher, AP provider)**

*"A colleague thought my IT skills were great. But I said, 'it's a con'. Somebody showed me some Apps, so I teach them. You go to a conference and somebody shows you. You adapt it... colleagues can take an Excel spreadsheet and present it in a better way"*

**(Assistant principal, Post-16 provider)**

The extent to which staff exchanged learnings often depended on school type, with **these kinds of conversations happening less formally and less frequently in mainstream schools**, where anecdotes might be shared in department meetings, for example. However smaller school sizes and a shared responsibility for student welfare leads teachers in alternative provision and pupil referral units to pool their knowledge on a more regular basis, with one respondent sharing how daily debriefs provide a regular forum for open discussion about online safety and child protection issues amongst staff.

*"If we know that there are messages or threats are happening on online platforms, we will share with other staff... because it could translate into 'on the ground' relationships that happen during the day".*

**(Assistant headteacher, AP provider)**

There is some indication that peer enablement sessions might be on the rise in mainstream schools, however, with some respondents indicating that the recent need for online teaching has prompted more regular forums for staff to share learnings on digital engagement with students.

### 6.2.3 Facilitators and Barriers

Certainly, **the COVID-19 pandemic had galvanised action on digital literacy**, according to a number of respondents who reported an increase in CPD since the move to online teaching. For individual teachers, this helped them to feel more confident at navigating digital technology as well as using the internet in lessons. This new way of working made some teachers aware of how the internet can be used to benefit students' learning and gave them reassurance around letting students have autonomy online and using the internet to progress with their lessons. Whether this prompts a culture change amongst teachers who were reticent to incorporate online resources into their lessons before the pandemic remains to be seen, however some respondents were hopeful that SLTs will prioritise this going forwards.

With the increased use of the internet in schools came a keener interest in students' online safety, which for some schools was quickly pushed up the SLT's agenda since the COVID-19 outbreak, leaving some teachers hopeful of an increased emphasis on equipping staff to keep students safe online in future.

Indeed taking the time to upskill teachers is a huge facilitating factor in improving staff confidence for those schools can find this time. For example, a respondent from one independent school noted how the SLT reduced the timetable when school closures (due to COVID-19) were imminent to upskill all staff members to use Google classrooms in order to aid a smoother transition to online teaching. This helped equip all staff with the confidence and knowledge they needed to support students remotely, though the respondent did acknowledge that "*it was a luxury to be given this time*".

Certainly, some respondents mentioned staff who had been 'left behind' in this mass digitalisation of teaching, for whom the skills gap between them and their students had grown noticeably. Anxious about looking 'inadequate', the pandemic had dented the confidence of some of the least digitally literate teachers, whose schools may not have been able to afford the time to train them sufficiently.

Aside from COVID-19, a few teachers noted how tailored resources and training sessions have proved most useful and memorable. For example, one respondent recalled an external trainer who delivered tailored sessions to each year group within the school on the dangers of apps relevant to their age group, as well as separate sessions for parents, which the staff found really useful and learned a lot from. Otherwise having relevant and impactful teaching resources, such as PSHE materials, was found to be a good confidence-booster for some teachers.

## 6.3 Future training and CPD priorities

Without a doubt, most respondents felt they needed more training and professional development, and many expressed a desire for this to be more frequent to keep on top of changes in online trends as much as they could. Some suggested that receiving bitesize, digestible information, such as e-Bulletins, containing information on the latest apps and their potential risks would be the most useful and realistic way to increase their CPD in this space. Others felt that keeping up to date was an impossible task, and that schools should make more use of existing student knowledge and encourage peer-to-peer learning in both formal and informal settings. Ensuring that training content is relevant to staff's skillsets and incorporating sufficient guidelines on how to deliver resources would be invaluable, however for staff to really benefit from these improvements, they would need more time dedicated to CPD which, in some respondents' views, can only be secured through SLT buy-in.

### 6.3.1 Updating knowledge and awareness

The most commonly mentioned area where teachers needed more support was with **keeping up to date with the fast-paced nature of digital technologies and social media trends**. Almost all respondents emphasised wanting to get a better grip on their knowledge of the online world but feeling that it was always slightly beyond their reach, as once they familiarise themselves with something it has already moved on. This was a source of frustration for most

respondents, who wanted to know more about the current apps students are downloading before they become a problem so that they could better support those who may not be aware of the new risks and pitfalls of the latest platforms they were using.

*"The moment we're on top of something the kids have got something else. We might know certain apps, so the kids are into something else".*

**(Headteacher, Voluntary controlled school)**

*"Things happen so quickly in the teaching world… pupils know more than we do [teachers] on a social media front".*

**(Head of Department, Academy)**

These gaps in knowledge extend more widely than just social media, however, as some teachers expressed concern that their lack of awareness of the digital skills their students need to learn in order to succeed in their future may be holding them back. In order to properly equip students with the skills they need, teachers felt they needed to be familiar with what they are and how to teach them to students.

*"Tech is involved in every aspect of our lives now, from mental health to education and training... I am teaching to the 2030 job market and beyond, but I'm not future proofed enough to know what that is... it's not part of CPD in schools but [it needs to be]…*

**(Assistant principal, AP provider)**

Professional development that can address these knowledge gaps was much needed. Even staff who considered themselves familiar with a number of digital platforms and apps reported a need for more training. Specifically, a number of teachers mentioned that up to date training covering the main *risks* of new and popular apps and social media sites – and how to avoid them – would be invaluable. In order to achieve this, updates would need to be more frequent than they currently are for many schools, which may mean that the format of such training would need to be shorter or integrated elsewhere for teachers to make time for it. Certainly, those couple of respondents who already received similar types of training talked about it favourably during their interviews.

## 6.3.2 Ideas and suggestions

Reflecting on the idea that keeping up to speed with changing digital trends is perceived as an impossible task for teachers, many suggested turning to their students instead. Peer to peer support, teachers believed, could overcome the difficulties of facilitating external training (cost) and internal training (staff capacity). Rather than engaging in a futile bid to keep pace with students, therefore, a number of respondents argued that **schools should draw on students' existing knowledge** to facilitate structured peer to peer learning. This could be informal, in terms of inviting students to share their thoughts as and when the topic arises, or inviting students to share their

knowledge more formally, for example in PSHE lessons. Certainly, this would reflect the success of student online ambassadors that a handful of schools in the sample already engaged to bridge the gap between passing online safety concerns between students and staff.

*"Students may know better ways of doing things, because of how they live their lives online. The 'schooling mentality' is that we [teachers] are mean to bring the knowledge... but [maybe we should be asking students more often]... do you know of a good App for that?"*

**(Head of department, Independent school)**

*"It's hard for individual teachers to tap into this knowledge, in the context of a teacher-student relationship, but we could facilitate the students to share their skills... [just like] in enterprise, we set them to showcase their skillset to each other. If one of my students is a YouTuber, then they can teach their peers".*

**(Assistant headteacher, AP provider)**

Elsewhere, a number of respondents stressed the importance of making time for teaching online safety in schools so that it is given the importance it merits. Teachers emphasised that they would also appreciate better resources and more support in delivering tutorials in online safety, especially for staff who are less confident in the subject. One of the ways of doing this was **allocating more lesson time to PSHE** and ensuring that enough attention is paid to online safety within the PSHE curriculum. The current time allocation to PSHE, in some teachers' opinion, just is not adequate enough. A minority of teachers went further and argued that online safety should become a mandatory part of the school curriculum, rather than an optional 'add-on'.

*"In developing our IT literacy, we are often behind the kids…. In some ways it's embarrassing, but they haven't necessarily learned it formally. As an adult, I am so busy, I don't have the rime to get up to speed".*

**(Assistant principal, Post-16 provider)**

## 6.3.3 Types of training

As previously explored, many teachers expressed a desire for professional development to become more frequent in order to stay up to date with the ever-changing online world. To avoid this taking up too much valuable staff time, frequent updates would have to be in easily digestible formats, such as e-Newsletters or e-Bulletins with information on key online trends and issues discussed amongst students.

*"The lingo changes all the time... maybe not a weekly bulletin, but certainly regular e-alerts... as opposed to sit down training"*

**(Head of department, Academy)**

Indeed, the most impactful training was sessions where the content was tailored, and in a similar fashion some respondents emphasised that training should be more nuanced to account for differences in staff knowledge, with one respondent maintaining that off-the-shelf solutions do not work well. It is certainly apparent that many staff lack confidence in their digital skills, which in some cases holds them back from covering topics around online safety with their students, so training which is at their level could be beneficial at boosting their confidence to support students with these issues.

There is undoubtably merit, according to some teachers, in external training, which one respondent emphasised can "*spark people's imaginations*". It was thought that specialists could offer teachers a fresh perspective on the issues they face regularly and have the bandwidth to offer more intensive and dedicated training. When promoted, a respondent felt they would want such training at least annually, and another noted that training delivered in a workshop-style would be particularly effective at engaging staff.

Those respondents who have already experienced training from their local authorities would like to see more on this front. In fact, these respondents felt strongly that local authorities should take responsibility on centralising training in schools and suggested that training sessions which gathered staff from across different schools could be particularly useful. It was noted that Teaching Schools might take a lead in this respect.

### 6.3.4 Potential barriers

In order to take the above suggestions into account and improve staff training and professional development, **creating time** was the biggest barrier that would need to be overcome, respondents noted. Many reiterated how teachers are already overstretched and there is far too much already demanded from schools.

*"Subject teachers don't have much time - they are already overworked and stressed and agitated... [it ends up being] just another document to read"*

**(Safeguarding professional, Post-16 provider)**

**Senior leadership buy-in** is needed to allow staff the space, time and priority for more CPD in their schedules, according to teachers. In some cases, respondents noted how senior leadership at their schools would talk about delivering skills for the 21st century but had not generated the learning culture to make this happen, even if the IT infrastructure was in place. One respondent noted how staff "*weren't given the structural scope to put this into practice*".

It could also be difficult for schools to navigate who is responsible for matters of online safety which often permeate beyond the school gates into students' home lives. Given teachers' lack of time for CPD, some emphasised that staff cannot be expected to account entirely for their students' online safety, and that boundaries may have to be un-blurred in order to make the scope of CPD around online safety realistic and achievable.

# 7. Conclusions

This report has presented the findings from research carried out with teachers on the subject of young people's online lives, to explore this topic in the context of all aspects of schooling during the 11-18 phase. The study adopted a qualitative design and included schools from the mainstream and independent sectors, AP providers and special schools to provide breath and to create the possibility for learning between sectors and settings.

In the previous chapters, we examined schools' policies towards students' use of mobile phones and the underpinning rationale for this. We then went on to examine how schools address 'digital' themes and topics at a policy and planning level, from subject teaching to safeguarding, PSHE and extracurricular activities, mental health and wellbeing provision and safeguarding; how these arrangements are reflected in staff roles and responsibilities, and how this moderates the contexts within which staff engage with students, parents and carers about the digital world. We explored the main risks and opportunities as perceived by schools, before examining the ways in which schools source their knowledge and expertise on this subject, and what else (if anything) teachers considered that they need to equip them to provide support and challenge to students in relation to their online lives.

In this final chapter, we draw together and conclude on the findings from the study. We start by reflecting on the key messages and the extent to which these support or refute previous research. We then go on to present a number of key recommendations that emerge for schools, sector bodies and policymakers.

## 7.1 Reflecting on the key messages

The research focussed on secondary stage, providing a teachers' eye view of young people's evolving uses of the internet and social media during adolescence, and how these play out within classroom systems. The continuum between students' online and offline lives was evident throughout the report. From relationships with peers, to curricular and extracurricular activities, the points of overlap with the school were more diverse than internet safety education alone. The interviews showed how these interactions develop through the 11-18 phase, from open experimentation and sharing of information about online activities with teachers at Key Stage 3, to more confident, independent and guarded digital lives by Key Stage 5. They also showed the corresponding adjustments needed for schools to engage with students at different ages and stages, in subject teaching and pastoral contexts.

### Minding the 'blind spot' for schools

While schools had unique glimpses of young people's use of social media, it was also apparent that they were often relying on partial information. Teachers were aware that students would filter what they were willing to share, which resulted in an edited account of their online lives. These potential 'blind spots' were especially apparent when it came to discussing online risks and harms. Knowledge of risky activities with an online dimension tended to be locked within safeguarding teams and was not general knowledge to staff. Moreover, special assemblies delivered by the school or by external providers might prompt students to come forward afterwards with personal experiences of cyberbullying or sextortion, but schools generally had a limited awareness of the prevalence of these issues within the student population. Similarly, harms relating to excess screen time were a common area of concern among staff, but the evidence was largely conjectural. In the main, it was lower level risks pertaining to disputes within peer groups and sharing of inappropriate content that came to the school's attention directly.

### Acknowledging diverse student needs and characteristics

The research provides insights to the similarities and differences in students' online lives and behaviours according to various sets of background characteristics. Respondents observed a gendered aspect to student's online activities, with gaming more prolific among boys, while social media use was widespread among boys and girls. These impressions largely concur with existing research (Smahel, et. al., 2020). There was a perceived shift in exposure to risks according to age, with students more often implicated in serious incidents with an online dimension such as those relating to self-harm or suicide ideation from Key Stage 4 onwards, while issues relating to peer disputes and sharing of inappropriate content were widespread and visible to schools from Key Stage 3. Respondents were mindful that some degree of exposure to adversity was necessary for students to become competent and resilient online, and that this formed a normal part of controlled risk-taking during adolescence.

The findings were somewhat ambiguous regarding the relationship between online risks and harms and other forms of adversity that occur offline. This finding corresponds with other studies (Stoilova, et. al., 2020; Haddon and Vincent, 2015; Livingstone et. al., 2012). The COVID-19 crisis and shift to home schooling was perceived to have impacted disproportionately on low socio-economic status (SES) students. However, access to the internet for education and leisure during this period was influenced by numerous factors including the availability and sharing of devices and Wi-Fi with siblings and parents, living arrangements, and how the school responded.

Although risk taking offline and online overlapped and sometimes spilled over into the school, students' vulnerability online was moderated by factors relating to personal decision-making, risk aversion, and the involvement of parents and carers. Indeed, home internet permissions played a role in students' mobile phone use by Year 7, as well as their participation in gaming, social media, screen time and online interactions with their peers outside of school. Parental mediation interacted with young people's decision making in ways that were sometimes constraining and sometimes enabling, and which schools recognised to be diverse and multi-faceted. At the same time, schools had insights to students' online conduct that was not always visible to parents and carers, which transpired when they became aware of online disputes or content sharing of which parents were unaware.

## Towards a whole school approach

The interviews reinforced the importance of the decisions taken at a whole school level, in determining how and when conversations occur with students and the support that is offered. Fundamentally, this seemed to depend on how schools perceived their responsibilities vis-a-vis parents and carers; the wider school climate, and the ethos of the headteacher and the SLT. It was also guided by the extent to which schools had embraced digital technology; their IT infrastructure, and the depth and breadth of the PSHE curriculum. Resourcing had been a challenge for some of the mainstream schools in particular, where staffing cuts in recent years had resulted in a scaling-back of student welfare and safeguarding teams. Where teachers had moved between schools during their recent career, they had often observed differences in terms how 'problem' behaviour relating to the internet was handled; the mode and medium for internet safety education, and schools' outlook towards mobile phones.

The organisation of staffing responsibilities was also significant. Within mainstream schools in particular, knowledge was often compartmentalised as a result of separate interactions between students and form tutors, subject teachers, and safeguarding teams. Although students often had a rapport with individual teachers, the 'everyday' conversations about their online lives typically occurred outside of subject teaching within tutor groups or during contact with pastoral teams. This was partly a consequence of how PSHE afforded ring-fenced time to discuss personal development topics, but it also reflected the different types of relationships between professionals and students according to their role. The pastoral orientation of form tutors was conducive to building trust and for exercising professional curiosity in a way that was more difficult within formal subject teaching. Similarly, conversations about the internet and social media also came up more naturally within extra-curricular activities and residential trips. Respondents were mindful of the importance of preserving time and space within the school timetable for these activities, alongside academic learning.

In some instances, a specific individual member of staff had championed all things 'digital' within the school, and they were instrumental in joining-up provision for internet safety education, IT subject teaching, PSHE content, and mental health and wellbeing. This role was typically performed by a deputy head teacher or by the head of IT, although the headteacher had sometimes made this their personal responsibility. These different elements of internet-related provision risked developing in a more piecemeal way without strong leadership, and in the absence of an over-arching strategy and formalisation within the school's development plan and policy framework.

## Personal and professional internet boundaries

The interviews also showed how teachers' knowledge, skills and confidence play a central role in how these topics are addressed. It was clear that teachers were aware of the rapid expansion of mobile phone ownership among students, and of their access to online gaming and social media from a younger age – trends that had become apparent with incoming cohorts of students to Year 7, many of whom were already social media experienced.

There was a spectrum of views towards the place of the internet and social media within the school, however, with mobile phones often being at the centre of these debates. Where some teachers advocated a clear demarcation between the educational and social uses of technology and viewed mobile phones as largely disruptive, others thought it was essential for schools to engage with students about their social media lives to contextualise their subject teaching, and in preparing students for 21st century life and work. Many saw the potential for the internet as a source of tools and resources for students to manage their health and wellbeing, to connect with their peers, and to develop independent study skills. Nonetheless, there was a sense of frustration that this potential had not been realised and that the school lacked the knowledge or resources to go as far as they wanted to.

These differences related in part to teachers' personal attitudes and beliefs about the educational value of the internet and social media, and in part to their varying levels of digital skills and confidence. Those teachers who reported making active use of the internet and social media themselves were often better informed about young people's online behaviours and had a greater propensity to update their knowledge of the apps and social media that their students were using. This had sometimes resulted in a gap within departments and schools, which typically – but not exclusively – played out along generational lines. Older staff who had little, or no direct personal experience of the social media platforms used by students would generally take a different view to their younger and more tech-savvy counterparts. These gaps were further exposed by the shift to online teaching during lockdown. Without a whole school approach, therefore, students' experiences were heavily influenced by individual teachers' decisions about how or whether to engage with the internet and social media in the classroom.

## Learning from beyond the mainstream

The inclusion of independent, special and AP schools within the study was hugely beneficial, and it brought systems, cultures and student populations into juxtaposition. Clear differences were apparent, some of which were structural, and highlighted the ways in which conversations about the online world arise in school settings with lower staff to student ratios, higher levels of individual support, and smaller class sizes. There were also different challenges pertaining to these settings – from the transitory nature of AP placements and the heightened risks outside of school arising from students' vulnerability online and offline, to the challenges of supporting students in special schools where difficulties relating to understanding, empathy and communication skills framed vulnerability online in quite specific ways. Here, there was a greater need for repetition of messages about online conduct.

These settings also provide important examples and learning for mainstream schools. The models of parental engagement and closer alignment of education and welfare within the special schools offered real advantages in making these conversations part of everyday practice. Similarly within the AP providers, life skills, personal development and wellbeing featured prominently within the school timetable, allowing for a more holistic treatment of young people's online lives. This was in contrast with PSHE delivery within many of the mainstream schools, where staff were frustrated by having finite windows of opportunity to engage with students outside of a crowded academic timetable. The need for more imaginative and tailored PSHE content with real world examples was apparent, and yet the time, space and expertise needed for this was not always forthcoming. Schools often found themselves starting from scratch without having access to case studies, tools or examples from other schools.

These differences were also reflected within the interactions between staff. A notable feature of the AP settings was the regular opportunity for teachers and pastoral staff to brief and de-brief on issues arising during the school day. This included anything relevant that had occurred between students with an online dimension. Staff reported feeling like everyone was informed, and that safeguarding, and welfare really were "*everyone's business*". While these arrangements reflect the risk profile of AP cohorts and do not translate directly to mainstream settings, they nonetheless underline the challenges presented by the often-solitary nature of mainstream teaching. A stronger peer learning and reflective practice dimension among staff would be beneficial in formulating policies and PSHE content, beyond the windows of opportunity provided by departmental meetings.

Notwithstanding these differences, the hallmarks of promising practice were fairly consistent across the piece. Respondents' views converged on the importance of developing trusted pastoral relationships with students; ensuring the credibility and relevance of digital content within PSHE teaching; the involvement of students in delivering awareness messages, and the alignment of support between home and school.

## Sourcing the right tools and expertise

The research further shone a light on the sufficiency of the staff training and development that is available to schools. The interviews showed that topics relating to young people's use of the internet and social media featured only peripherally within teacher professional development, beyond safeguarding awareness training. This meant that schools often relied on internally-delivered content, alongside internet safety awareness provided by external specialists. For many, this had resulted in mixed levels of uptake, because provision was supplementary, enrichment-oriented, and tended to take place infrequently and / or out of hours. Schools had mixed experiences of using external providers, and of sourcing and adapting PSHE related content for internal delivery. Costs were a factor in this respect, alongside concerns that in-sourcing was not always the optimum way to embed knowledge and expertise within the school, or that it lacked differentiation according to the development needs of staff.

Overall, it was clear that schools would benefit from a combination of ways and means to acquire this expertise. Greater prominence within ITE and CPD of the professional challenges and opportunities presented by the online world was one area. Schools also saw a continuing place for in-sourcing high-quality external expertise as one piece of the puzzle, and some had managed to do so cost effectively by planning their provision on a collegiate or collaborate basis. Further, there was demand for regular 'bite-sized' information about the latest internet and social media trends, terminology, and perceived risky behaviours so that teachers were mindful of these in their everyday practice. Such updates existed among the schools that were included within the study, but they were usually at the instigation of key individual professionals who had made peer education a part of their role.

## A question of peer power

Irrespective of sourcing additional staff training and professional development, teachers were aware that students were the real experts in their online lives. Even the more youthful and social media savvy teachers who used these references as classroom currency found that it was an almost impossible task to keep pace with their students. Similarly, even the best externally sourced e-awareness content was not guaranteed to be in synch with the risks and opportunities, and the relationships and networks, that were specific to the school.

It was clear, therefore, that students could have a far more prominent role within all things digital, and that student voices are an essential part of a 'whole school' approach – from policy development, to sourcing PSHE content, to identifying opportunities or areas of concern regarding the digital world. Indeed, some schools had already engaged with students in marketing and awareness raising, running internet safety related campaigns, and offering peer-to-peer support for internet matters. The research indicates that that peer power may be a valuable untapped resource in addressing the challenges presented by teachers' limited visibility of students' online lives. It also highlights the potential role of students in the co-creation of online resources with schools.

### Alignment of home and school

Finally, the relationship between home and school was a central theme throughout the report. As online issues crossed beyond the school's jurisdiction, there was a shared concern at the potential for mobile phones to bring out-of-school risks and harms on site. This was a primary consideration in schools limiting students' mobile phone use during the school day, alongside the need to manage the potential disruption to subject teaching. In particular, young people's internet use had the potential to bring school policies and home internet routines into conflict. Schools were mindful of not over-stepping the mark and undermining parents and carers, while being frustrated when parents and carers placed responsibility for their child's internet use at the door of the school. Nonetheless, a mutual respect generally abounded, and schools recognised the diversity of family traditions and routines while avoiding a narrow or 'homogenising' view of parental influences (Livingstone and Blum-Ross, 2020).

The research underlined the importance of clear and open communication with parents about internet matters to avoid these jurisdictional issues becoming problematic. Teachers recalled incidents where parents had taken to social media to air their complaints about the school, while also recognising that parents and carers saw aspects of young people's internet use that the school did not. The COVID-19 crisis had unexpected benefits for some, in creating opportunities to respond to any concerns about the young person's screen time and online conduct. In the most positive examples, this had helped to re-establish a dialogue between teachers and parents that was missing prior to the lockdown, and to break the cycle of internet-related conversations with parents and carers only occurring in 'troubleshooting' mode. Indeed, some schools had made efforts to normalise the use of texting and apps for home-school communication to adjust for the otherwise negative connotations of mobile phones.

Beyond this, schools differed considerably in how they viewed the limits of their role. This ranged from signposting parents to external sources of information about internet safety, to running awareness-raising sessions, to instances where schools offered parental education or family learning on subjects relating to online safety and internet awareness. The report suggests that schools may benefit from sharing their experiences.

As might be expected, parental engagement varied substantially according to school type. While avoiding generalisation, clear themes emerged in terms of the more sustained parental communication in independent schools, albeit with a heavy orientation towards reporting on academic progress; the ongoing and more pastoral-oriented work with parents and carers within the special schools, and the varied picture within the AP providers. Here, parental engagement was sometimes more limited and sometimes stronger due to the 'second chance' afforded by the AP placement following negative experiences of mainstream; findings which concur with the wider research on parental engagement within the AP sector (MacLeod et. al., 2020; Mills and Thomson, 2018). It was sixth form colleges and FE settings where connections with parents and carers were the most distant. In these settings, tutors lacked the equivalent back-story for students compared to mainstream where teachers had often known the young person since Year 7. This was compounded by guarded internet use among the older age group, and it required a more adult-oriented approach towards initiating conversations about the digital world.

## 7.2 Study recommendations

The study was conducted independently as part of the #FOOTPRINTS project on digital resilience and schools. The authors are not mandated to provide recommendations for a specific funder or commissioner. Nonetheless, the evidence from the study points towards a number of actions that might be taken by schools and policymakers as well as a checklist based on the findings. We have presented and explained each of them below.

## For policymakers and commissioners

The first set of recommendations relate to actions extending beyond the individual school level.

a) **To review Government-supported PSHE guidance and materials, ensuring that the internet and social media-related content is sufficient to meet the needs of different school types and settings.**

The report findings are a reminder of how the online world cuts across all aspects of young people's personal and social development, from leisure time, to sex and relationships, bullying, body image, self-care and maintaining positive mental health and wellbeing, as well as providing opportunities for independent academic study. Ensuring that national guidance for schools is in tune with these topics is more important now than ever, with the digital turn that has been accelerated by the COVID-19, and in the context of Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Health Education becoming compulsory aspects of PSHE education in all secondary schools in England.

The report also indicates that active engagement of young people and teachers in the design and implementation of PSHE curricula is essential to ensure its continued relevance at the level of individual schools.

b) **To strengthen the focus on the internet and social media within Government-funded mental health and wellbeing programmes for schools, including rollout of the mental health Green Paper measures.**

Mental health and wellbeing have been a policy priority for schools in England following the joint DHSC and DfE Green Paper in 2017. With the rollout of designated leads for mental health in schools and colleges, and community-based mental health support teams at the time of writing, there are opportunities to review and strengthen the 'digital' element. This report has illustrated how issues relating to the internet and social media are integral to students' lives and the recognition among teachers and school leaders that digital resilience is an important part of healthy adolescent development and that this has a place within schools' mental health and wellbeing provision. The report has also indicated that policy experimentation in relation to digital resilience would be beneficial to understand the effectiveness of different types of school-based interventions in this space.

c) **To review existing coverage of internet and social media themes within Initial Teacher Education (ITE), and within Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programmes for teachers and school leaders.**

The report has highlighted the extent to which teachers and other school-based professionals often rely on quite limited opportunities for external training on topics relating to the internet and social media as these affect young people's lives inside and outside of school. While safeguarding teams were generally well informed, teachers tended to rely on a combination of internally-delivered briefings, external CPD which was often infrequent, and self-education. This was especially problematic given wide disparities in knowledge, skills and confidence within schools, which was often reflective of the age and prior social media exposure of staff. A larger scale quantitative exercise would shine further light on these issues. However, the study provides an indication of underlying gaps that may call for a review of how these topics are covered within teacher development.

d) **To develop a self-evaluation tool and checklist, to assist schools in reviewing their provision relating to the digital world as part of a whole school approach, and to facilitate benchmarking.**

The report also indicates that schools would benefit from access to resources to assist with needs assessment, planning and evaluating their efforts to engage with young people on topics relating to the internet as these affect a range of activity from subject teaching, to IT teaching and digital skills, internet safety, PSHE, and health and wellbeing programmes. Individual schools within the study demonstrated promising examples of practice, but these had often been developed at the instigation of particular individuals who had taken it upon themselves to champion all things 'digital' or had evolved over a period of time through trial and error. A toolkit would be beneficial in this respect, to assist headteachers and senior managers in their planning and to benchmark. This would need to include sufficient differentiation to mainstream, independent, AP and special school contexts.

e) **To develop more effective and standardised data collection methodologies, to better understand students' online lives and their support needs, to inform school development planning.**

Linked to the point above, the study showed that schools too often needed to take a reactive approach towards issues arising online, based on partial information. In some schools, this worked against efforts to promote a strengths-based outlook towards young people's online lives, because efforts were engaged in troubleshooting. In turn, this often resulted in more antagonistic exchanges with students, parents and carers. While problems relating to online conduct and content clearly present a challenge to many schools and should not be underestimated, better data is arguably needed to allow schools to quantify the problem, while also better understanding the ways in which the internet and social media are used in positive ways by students to support their learning and wellbeing.

Although some schools have already taken steps to gather these data, there would be advantages to making available a set of validated tools and a framework to support schools' efforts in this regard. This would have the advantage of standardising the data, to give schools greater confidence that their policies and provision are needs-based and evidence-based. This would facilitate an improved understanding of the digital risk and resilience profile of individual schools. Moreover, it would have the potential to generate data enabling researchers to examine the interaction between the digital world and school systems through a cross-school comparison.

f) **To establish and support communities of practice for schools, to share resources, case studies and experiences relating to their engagement with young people on digital themes.**

There was an appetite among the schools and teachers within the study for access to examples, tools and information from other schools that have had success with engaging students, parents of carers on these topics. As well as having access to case study information, schools were particularly interested in the potential to link with their statistical neighbours – those that may be dealing with similar challenges within the student cohort, rather than geographical neighbours who may not always be starting from the same point. This implies a need for signposting and brokerage, to put information more readily the fingertips of schools and of the individual staff who have been tasked with developing the schools' PSHE, internet safety education, and / or wellbeing provision.

A nationally moderated community of practice with an online presence would be an effective way to meet this need, without placing an additional time commitment on schools to source the information they need from scratch.

Recommendations d), e) and f) are being actively addressed through the wider #FOOTPRINTS project and will form part of the next phase of the collaboration between Ecorys and AFNCCF in 2021.

## For school leaders and education professionals

The second set of recommendations are intended as a checklist, based on the types of measures that the participating teachers and schools found to be useful as part of a whole school approach towards engaging with students about their digital lives. This list is guided by the study evidence and is not intended to be exhaustive.

## Figure 9: Key features of a whole school approach towards the digital world

**a)** Engage staff and students in creating and updating a whole school digital strategy, outlining the schools' aspirations for realising the potential of the digital world for students, and presenting the overall offer – from IT and digital skills, to PSHE, citizenship, safeguarding, and mental health and wellbeing provision.

**b)** Appoint students to take a lead role in awareness raising and needs assessment, setting and reviewing objectives, and sourcing or co-creating materials. Consider establishing a peer support programme as a central strand of the schools' digital offer and build other measures around this.

**c)** Utilise this group of students alongside other sources to provide regular updates on the apps, platforms and terminology that students are using, to complement other e-safety information used by the school.

**d)** Review staffing arrangements to ensure that roles are clear, and to facilitate communication between heads of IT, PSHE coordinators and other staff with a responsibility for internet awareness. Consider allocating a single lead at a management level to consolidate these arrangements, reporting to the SMT.

**e)** Create regular opportunities for dialogue between students, teachers and parents and carers and governors about students' online lives, to debunk myths about the digital world and to maintain open home-school communication. Consider offering parent education or family learning as appropriate.

**f)** Seek anonymous feedback from students, staff, parents and carers and governors to better understand the challenges and opportunities of the digital world that are specific to the school, and how these differ according to year groups, gender, ethnicity, and other relevant characteristics. To explore as a minimum:

- types of potentially harmful content or conduct encountered online
- confidence in managing different types of risks, and
- positive aspects of the internet for learning and wellbeing.

**g)** Review the involvement of external providers to ensure that the school is sourcing the best quality and most appropriate expertise and CPD opportunities, and tailor content to reflect needs and issues that are specific to the school. Consider using collegiate or collaborative approaches to make this cost effective.

**h)** Periodically ensure that internet matters form an agenda item on whole staff briefings, so that there are opportunities to share and review intel. Consider adding these topics to training needs analysis and appraisals for staff, to better understand and respond to gaps in skills, knowledge and confidence.

**i)** Seek anonymous feedback periodically on the quality, relevance and coherence of the schools' digital offer, and share the results with students, staff, parents and carers, and identify any follow-up actions.

# Annexes

# Annex One: Sampling Information

## A1.1: Respondent characteristics

### Figure 10: Respondent type

| Category | Total |
|---|---|
| Head-teacher / Deputy / Assistant | 8 |
| Head of Department / Course Leader | 9 |
| Head of Year / House | 4 |
| Safeguarding or Welfare | 6 |
| Subject Teacher | 14 |
| **Total** | **40*** |

* Two respondents were interviewed in two of the schools within the sample, to reflect the division of roles and responsibilities.

## A1.2: School characteristics

### Figure 11: School type (full)

| Category | Total |
|---|---|
| Academy converter | 10 |
| Other independent school | 8 |
| Academy in MAT | 4 |
| Pupil Referral Unit | 4 |
| Voluntary aided school | 3 |
| Academy sponsor lead | 2 |
| Free school AP | 2 |
| Community school | 1 |
| Community special school | 1 |
| Foundation school | 1 |
| Free School | 1 |
| Further education | 1 |
| **Total** | **38** |

### Figure 12: School type (grouped)

| Category | Total |
|---|---|
| Mainstream | 22 |
| Independent | 8 |
| Alternative Provision (AP) | 6 |
| Special | 2 |
| **Total** | **38** |

### Figure 13: Number of students on roll

| Category | Total |
|---|---|
| 1600+ | 3 |
| 1200-1599 | 8 |
| 800-1199 | 5 |
| 400-799 | 8 |
| 0-399 | 11 |
| NR | 3 |
| **Total** | **38** |

### Figure 14: % children eligible for FSM

| Category | Total |
|---|---|
| 60+ | 2 |
| 45-59 | 0 |
| 30-44 | 4 |
| 15-29 | 7 |
| 0-14 | 20 |
| NR | 5 |
| **Total** | **38** |

### Figure 15: Government region breakdown

| Category | Total |
|---|---|
| West Midlands | 11 |
| South East | 7 |
| London | 6 |
| Y&H | 6 |
| East Midlands | 3 |
| North West | 3 |
| South West | 2 |
| **Total** | **38** |

### Figure 16: Local authority breakdown

| Category | Total |
|---|---|
| Birmingham | 6 |
| Leeds | 3 |
| Newham | 2 |
| Solihull | 2 |
| Wiltshire | 2 |
| Wirral | 2 |
| Barking & Dagenham | 1 |
| Bournemouth | 1 |
| Bradford | 1 |
| Cheshire West | 1 |
| Croydon | 1 |
| Derbyshire | 1 |
| Hertfordshire | 1 |
| Islington | 1 |

| Category | Total |
|---|---|
| Kirklees | 1 |
| Luton | 1 |
| Milton Keynes | 1 |
| Nottingham | 1 |
| Nottinghamshire | 1 |
| Oxfordshire | 1 |
| Sandwell | 1 |
| Slough | 1 |
| Southwark | 1 |
| Staffordshire | 1 |
| Wakefield | 1 |
| West Sussex | 1 |
| Worcestershire | 1 |
| **Total** | **38** |

# Annex Two: Bibliography

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# Endnotes

1. Two respondents were interviewed in two of the schools within the sample, to reflect the division of roles and responsibilities.
2. Further details can be found at: https://digitalfuturescommission.org.uk/ [Viewed, 29.10.20]
3. Independent schools in England fall under the remit of The Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI), which is monitored by Ofsted on behalf of the Department for Education.
4. Further details can be found at: https://get-information-schools.service.gov.uk/ [Viewed, 29.10.20]
5. The topic guide included four main sections: a) everyday interactions with students about their digital lives; b) opportunities and risks; c) the COVID-19 public health crisis and its impact, and d) whole school approaches to supporting young people online. A final set of questions was designed as a 'concept testing' exercise for the #FOOTPRINTS framework.
6. Further details are available at: https://www.unicef.org.uk/rights-respecting-schools/. [Viewed, 29.10.20]
7. Further details at: https://www.nurtureuk.org/our-services/training/national-nurturing-schools-programme-0 [Viewed, 29.10.20]

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