

Purpose of the Report

To present the findings of the Children's Services Scrutiny Forum following the investigation in to 'Youth Involvement / Participation in the Development and Delivery of Council Services, Including the Safeguarding of Young People'.

Setting the Scene

As part of the Children's Service Scrutiny Forum we were given the opportunity to pick a topic that we were interested in and lead on our own investigation. After some discussion we picked the topic of Social Networking. This was because we felt it was very relevant to a large majority of young people. We decided to focus our investigation on 'how the council could use social networking as a way to promote and advertise what's on offer'.

Background

Social networking sites like facebook, and twitter a have grown massively over the Years and are heavily accessed by young people. Research by the National Youth Agency found that 'Over 60% of 13 – 17 year olds have profiles on social networking sites and that many Young People are spending upwards of two hours a night on online social networking activities', and only 18% of young people have not tried using a social networking site' (NYA 2008 - appendix 1).

Social networking sites are merely a communication tool for young people and they use the sites similar to how they use their mobile phones. They allow young people to have a voice in Society and can allow young people to express their thoughts and opinions.

Sites like facebook and twitter are therefore an ideal way to promote services to young people. They are simply used too frequently for them simply to be dismissed as a method of communicating to both young people as well as adults. However throughout our investigation we have placed a huge emphasis on safeguarding and tried to cover as much as we could on how Social Networking can be used safely within council departments.

What are young people doing in Hartlepool?

Although we had statistics on how popular Social Networking is, we still wanted to ask the question on a local basis. We put together some questions and used existing groups of young people to find out just how popular social networking was amongst young people in Hartlepool. We ran a number of sessions that were facilitated by our Youth Workers and asked some key questions around Social Networking.

What we found was that almost every young person who took part in the focus groups used Facebook as the main way to communicate with their friends. The second most popular way of communicating was via their mobile phones. When young people

were asked how they would like to be consulted with, Social Networking sites was their first answer.

When we asked what they thought about using Facebook young people gave comments like:

‘I could not live without being able to go on Facebook’

‘I use Facebook every night’

This confirmed the fact that Social Networking is the most popular and preferred method of communicating to young people in Hartlepool and that there is definitely scope for Council Services to increase young people’s participation.

What is already happening within Council departments?

When we first began the investigation we were unsure if the Local Authority could use it as a means of communicating events and activities to young people in a safe and appropriate way. However once we begun our investigation it became apparent that some departments within the Council have used, and still do use, sites like Facebook, as a way of communicating what’s going on to both adults and young people.

The Tall Ships Facebook page was set up within the Council in order to get feedback on issues around access to and on the site. It was also used as a platform in which people could post comments on and upload their photographs of the event. Whilst there were no safeguarding issues or concerns that arose as a result from the page being set up it did raise some concerns for us which we will later explore.

Another example of a council department using Social Networking as a means to communicate is Sports development. The site is set up by an individual within the department and is used to attract a specific target audience to events and activities that sports development are holding. This again raised some concerns for us as there seems to be no real policy or guidance put in place that identifies some clear procedures when using facebook as a means of communication.

This led us to ask the question below, at the Children’s Services Scrutiny Forum;

“Where the responsibility would be if a young person was to be put at risk using Facebook or Twitter to access Council information.”

The response we received was from Jim Murdoch, Business Manager for Hartlepool Safeguarding Children Board,

‘Accessing Council information via the Council web site should present no risk to anyone as there is no contribution from the person making the enquiry. The Council web site is “read only” rather than being interactive.

During the Tall ships there was a Facebook account where information about that event was available. However, every precaution was taken to remove any

risk to users. The Council has a small group currently considering standards to be followed for any social networking site set up by staff as part of the Council approach to communicating with the public.

There is no way in which one person accessing the Council web site can access any details of another person who is, or has been, connected to the site.

There are risks to using any of the social networking sites if the relevant safety measures are not implemented and the responsibility rests with the user.' 18th February 2011.

Safeguarding Young People

Whilst we appreciate the response we do still feel that as a council we owe a duty of care to any young person, to keep them safe while accessing any of our services. And we are concerned that whilst the tall ships page was safely monitored that this is not always the case in other areas.

As part of our investigation we became familiar with the much publicised case of Ashleigh Hall (see appendix 2). This raised concerns for us over how paedophiles can access sites like facebook to groom young people.

In addition there are other concerns such as bullying and the role Social networking plays in this.

Whilst we understand the risks will always be there when using Social Networking as a method of communicating Council services to young people, we feel that it is therefore vital that the Council has some clear policy and guidance put in place that departments can follow.

Recommendations

We think that using Social Networking to promote council activities and/or engage young people is an excellent tool we would make the following recommendations that will support doing this safely:

- Some Clear policy and guidance put in place for all departments within the council to follow
- Have a standard procedure – departments should not go ahead and do this on their own
- Closed sites that can not be commented on or someone to be responsible for the site 24 hours a day. This would include fast and effective takedown procedures!
- Employers should have basic legal training. If not don't do it!

- Education is a good way of ensuring young people are safe when they are online. Ashleigh's rules go some way in to supporting this. This could be advertised when each department sets up a site
- Take in to consideration examples of good practice. Some Councils may be ahead of others so link with them where possible
- Social networking is not for everyone so other methods of communicating such as posters and leaflets will still need to be in place.

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