

Digital youth work: Skills, knowledge and delivery in the sector



March 2025

Digital youth work research

NYA

This document presents findings from National Youth Agency (NYA) research funded by the Fusion21 Foundation. The research took place between October 2024 and March 2025.

The research explores the delivery of digital youth work by youth workers and youth sector organisations. The project examines:

- **How often youth sector organisations and youth workers deliver digital youth work**
- **Youth worker confidence in delivery of digital youth work**
- **Digital youth work training**
- **Barriers and enablers to digital youth work**

This research builds on findings from research carried out in 2024 for the Routes to Community Success programme (R2CS). Funded by the National Lottery Community Fund, this gathered data on young people's use of digital youth work. R2CS will be referenced in this report.



Survey respondents

During December 2024, NYA surveyed 228 youth workers. The sample is **two-thirds (67%) female**, with 30% male responses, 2% non-binary and 1% preferring to self-describe.

The mean and median average age of respondents is 41. Respondents tend to either have **high-level JNC qualifications** (30% Level 6 or 7 JNC) or **no JNC qualification** (28%). 7% of respondents have Level 2 JNC qualifications, 12% have Level 3. A further 9% have Level 5 professional youth worker qualifications (pre-2010).

Respondents most commonly work or volunteer for **charities (45%)**, with 35% of responses from local authorities. **83% currently deliver youth work.**



Focus groups

During January 2025, NYA carried out four focus groups with senior youth workers and practitioners. 20 youth sector workers attended these sessions.

Each session lasted 90 minutes, and explored themes arising in the survey, including:

- The role and importance of leadership in relation to digital youth work
- The nature of training which has, and could, improve digital youth work delivery
- Any challenges and enablers to digital youth work

Session participants were recruited from the survey using purposive sampling, enabling views from youth workers with a range of seniority and experience delivering digital youth work.



What is digital youth work?

The NYA defines digital youth work as the use and focus on digital media and technology in youth work practice.

Digital youth work is a setting (online), a topic, and tool for in-person. It is:

- using digital technologies to engage and support young people by actively incorporating digital methods and tools into youth work services
- not limited to online interactions and may incorporate the use of digital tools in face-to-face environments (i.e. a centre-based gaming club)
- discussions about digital as a topic, such as digital wellbeing, literacy, citizenship and online safety.



Key findings



Key findings



Almost all youth workers and organisations deliver digital youth work in some form.

More 'advanced' technologies are used less commonly.

- 97% of youth workers are actively delivering digital youth work.
- Digital youth work is much more commonly delivered as a topic, rather than as a tool or online, as a setting.
- Youth workers do use emerging technologies (such as VR, streaming, 'digital maker' activities) in their delivery, but rarely.
- This is despite young people expressing great interest in youth work using emerging technologies in previous NYA research for the National Lottery Community Fund.

Key findings



Training is key to opening up digital youth work for all.

Skills and knowledge need to be raised.

- Training has a clear impact on confidence delivering and understanding digital youth work.
- Whilst some youth workers have the skills and knowledge to confidently deliver digital youth work, many would value upskilling.
- Training would help ensure consistency of approach at sector and organisational level.
- Continuing Professional Development (CPD) is vital to match the dynamic nature of technology.
- Inclusion of digital in JNC recognised qualifications could help youth workers use it in their delivery safely and effectively.

Key findings

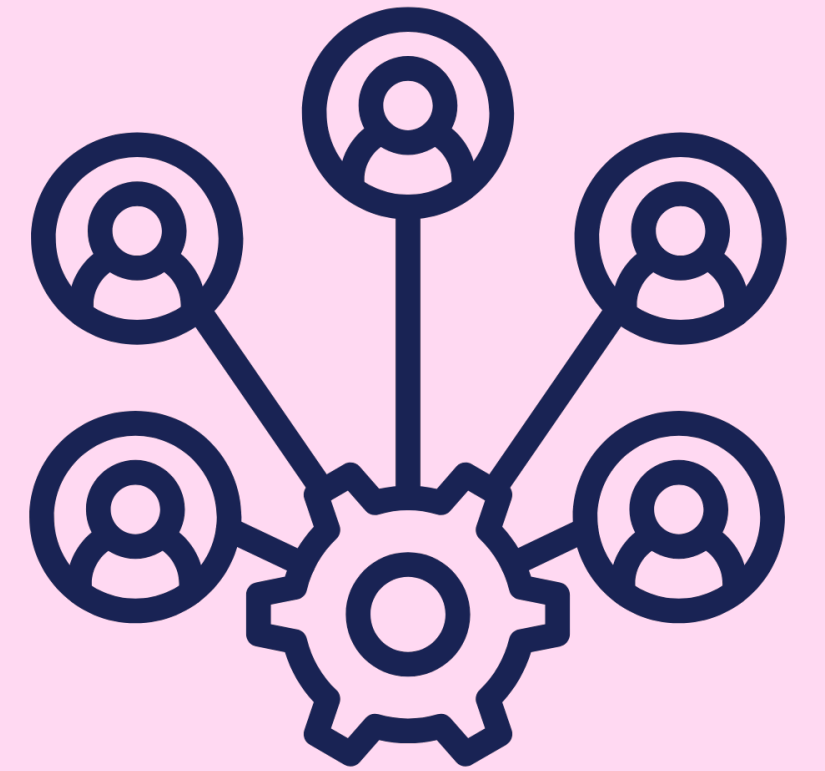


There is an attitudinal divide towards digital youth work.

Leaders in the youth sector have a vital role to promote digital and enable skill development.

- The actual and potential impact of digital is not widely recognised, including by leadership, who steer organisational priorities.
- Age affects affinity for digital, with younger youth workers more readily delivering and understanding digital youth work.
- Youth workers need freedom and encouragement to pursue digital youth work training and practice.

Organisational delivery



Frequency of digital youth work delivery

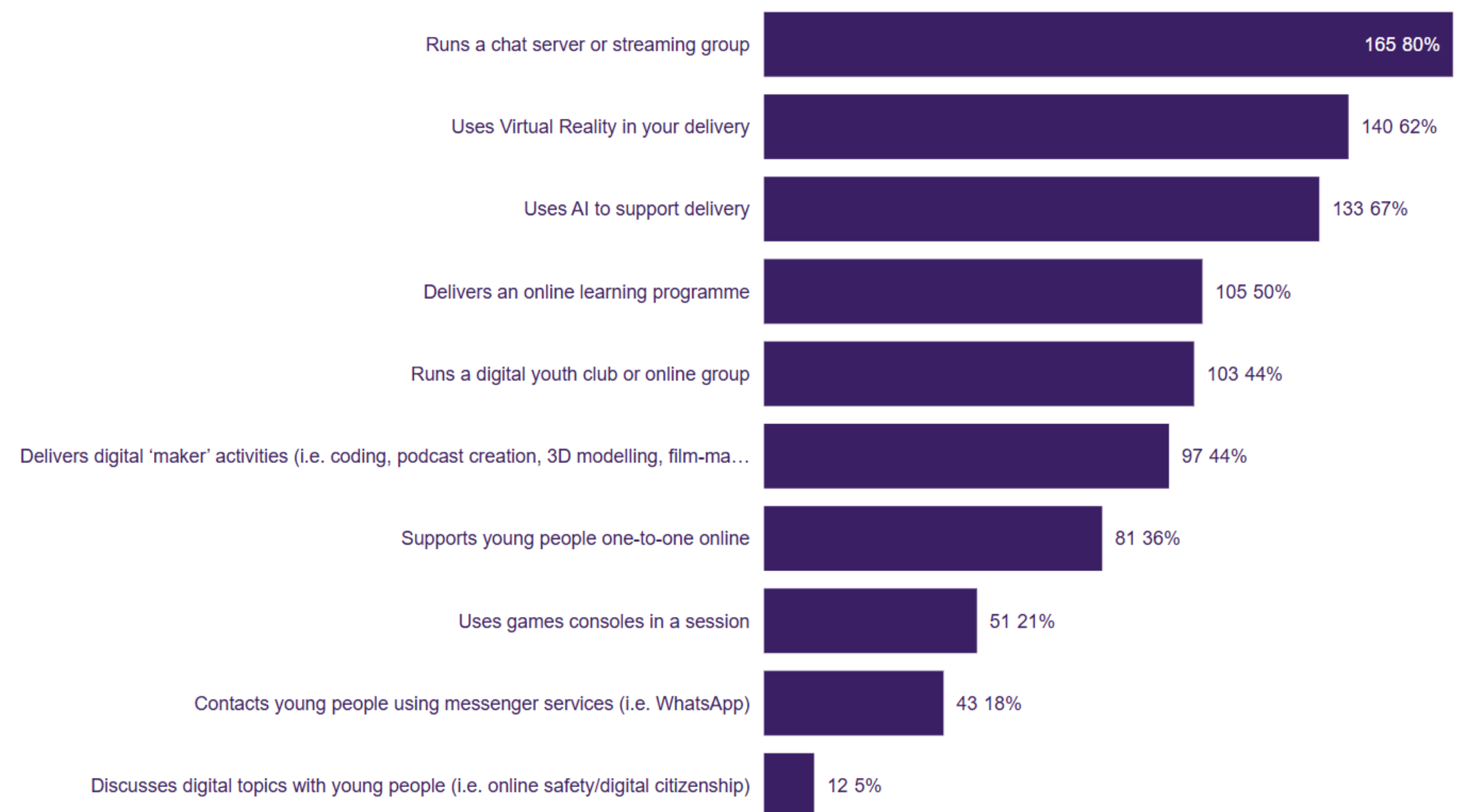
Just two organisations never deliver any form of digital youth work. The graph opposite shows how often organisations never deliver each activity.

Most commonly, youth work organisations discuss digital topics with young people. Very few never do this.

Organisations use social media to contact young people more than any other type of digital youth work.

Organisations frequently use games consoles in their sessions. VR and 'digital maker' activities are much less likely to be delivered.

Never Delivered Type of Digital Youth Work
Sample = 258



Emerging technologies falling behind

Very few organisations deliver youth work using newer technologies.

One in five (20%) organisations have ever run a chat server or streaming group.

One in three (33%) use AI to support their delivery.

Whilst over a third (38%) use VR in their delivery, very few (8%) do this at least once a week or on an ongoing basis.

Over half (56%) of organisations have delivered digital 'maker' activities at some point. Just 11% do this at least once a week or ongoing.

Research through the Routes to Community Success (R2CS) programme found young people are most interested in new technologies, such as VR, streaming and 'digital maker' activities.

Interestingly, many young people in the R2CS research were regularly participating in youth work using emerging technologies. This suggests the few organisations doing this attract high numbers of participants.

Individual delivery



Widespread, infrequent delivery

Almost all youth workers use digital in their delivery at some point, but ongoing or weekly delivery is uncommon. Many digital youth work types are never delivered by a majority of the workforce.

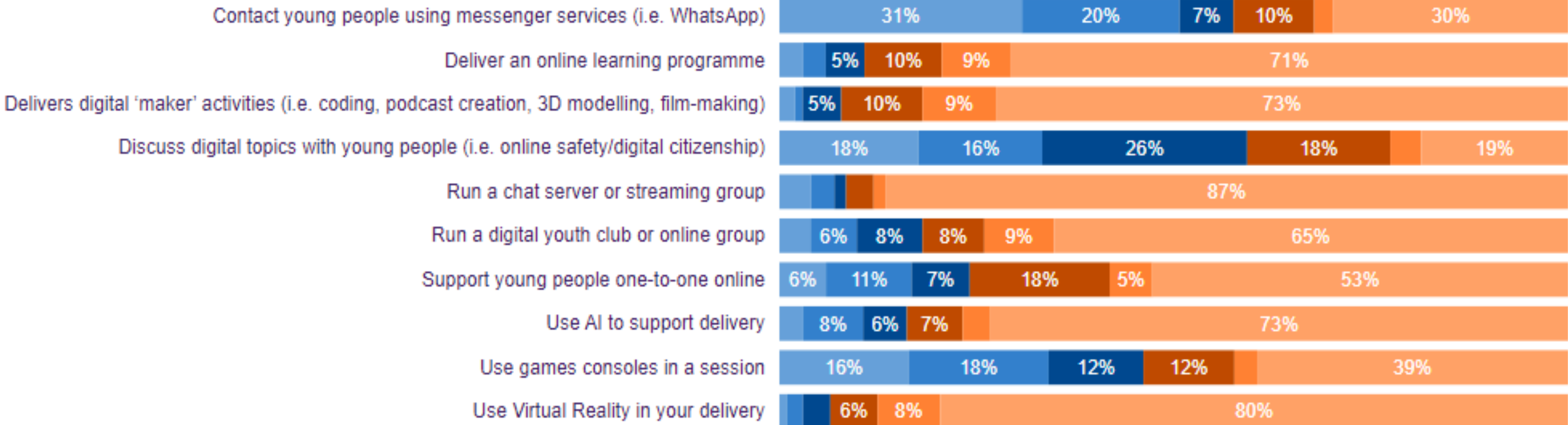
Organisational delivery largely matches individual staff delivery, with organisations more commonly delivering all digital youth work types. Emerging technologies remain the least commonly delivered, social media and digital discussions are still the most common.

A graph detailing individual youth worker delivery is available on the following page.

Widespread, infrequent delivery

Digital delivery by you Please tell us how often you

● Ongoing/most days ● At least once a week ● At least once a month ● A few times a year ● Once a year or less ● Never



Skills and knowledge

Youth workers tend to be more comfortable using digital during in-person sessions, compared to online settings.

They are most comfortable discussing online safety, compared to digital delivery itself.

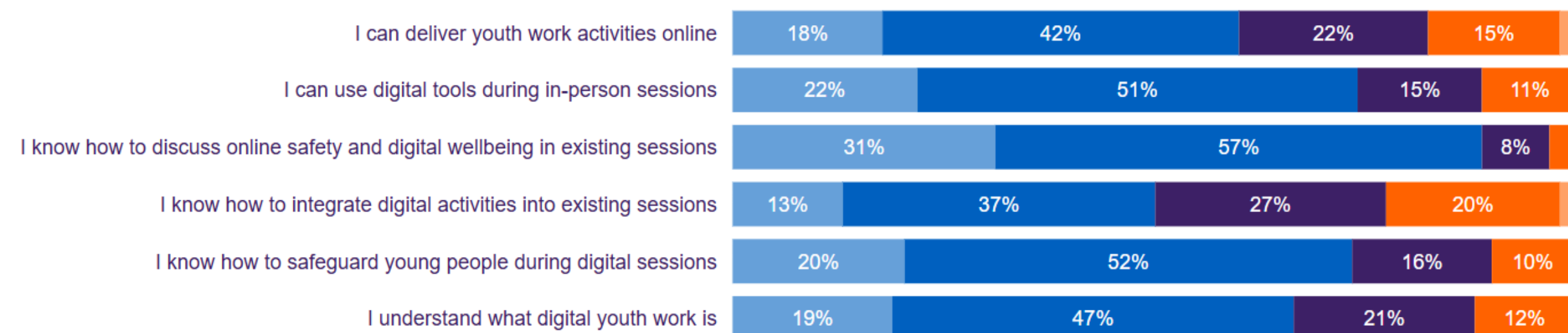
Just half agree that they can integrate digital into existing sessions.

Whilst safety is a concern, almost three-quarters (72%) of youth workers agree they can safeguard young people in digital sessions.

Your Skills and Knowledge

Sample = 241

● Strongly agree ● Agree ● Neither disagree nor agree ● Disagree ● Strongly disagree



Views of digital youth work

Most youth workers are aware of digital youth work and view it positively.

The minority who view it as complex, risky, unappealing and ineffective are important to recognise, and are potential factors limiting take up.

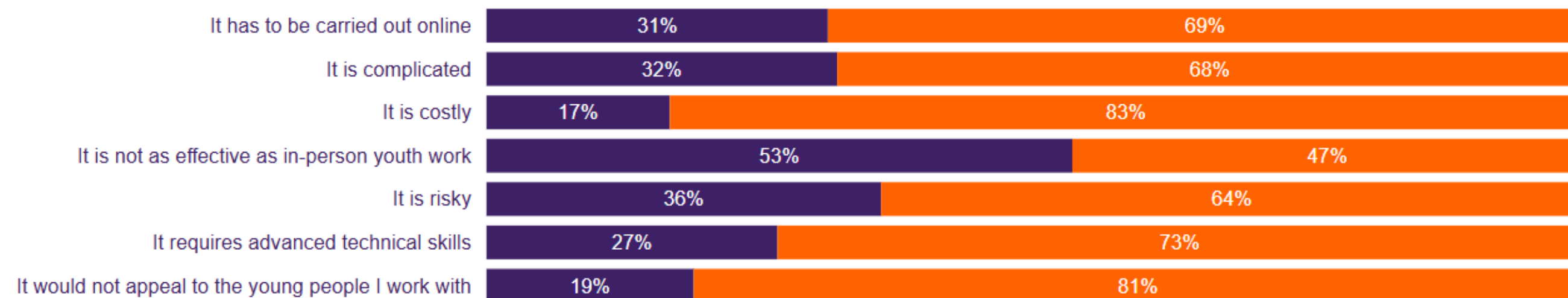
All of the statements below represent what the NYA believes are misconceptions about digital youth work.

Even a minority viewing digital youth work in a 'negative' light suggests these misconceptions are important to address.

In your opinion, which of the following are true of digital youth work

Sample = 276

Answer ● true ● false



Influencing factors

The **age of youth workers** appears to have an effect on their self-reported ability to deliver digital activities.

The **youngest (18-25)** and **oldest (over 55)** age groups are **less likely** than middle age groups to say they can deliver various digital youth activities.

However, 18-25 year old youth workers are **more aware of what digital youth work is** compared to over 55 staff (61% aware compared to 44%).

Moving forwards, younger, more 'aware' youth workers will **become more experienced and adept** delivering digital youth work.

Older youth workers are **more likely to be JNC qualified** than younger counterparts; half of 18-25 year olds have **no JNC** compared to one in ten over 55s.

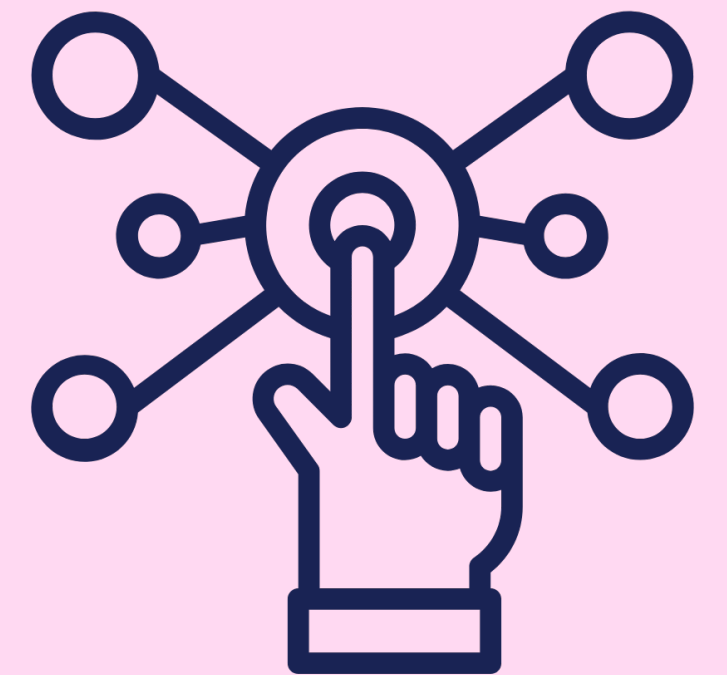
Lack of digital understanding and delivery amongst over 55s may be linked to **under-exposure to digital** especially through less recent JNCs, ingrained perceptions of the role of youth work and differences between training.

This is **not** to suggest older youth workers are *against* digital youth work.

Emerging themes

The following themes arise in the survey, and were explored in depth during the focus groups:

- Safety and safeguarding
- Finance and affordability
- Awareness and attitude
- Motivation and priority
- Skills and training



Safety and safeguarding



“The fear of being online is a barrier to people fully taking it on as a strategy. We made a lot of safeguarding considerations to enable us to work safely within a digital space.”

The survey found around a **third** of youth workers express concern that **digital youth work is complicated** (32%) and **risky** (36%).

Focus groups found that this concern is often *perception of the danger of digital*, exacerbated by **lack of familiarity** with tools and digital overall.

Youth workers recognise an **aversion to risk** prevents some youth sector organisations from exploring new digital delivery, especially in **local authorities**.

Youth workers often feel **less in control** of digital environments and want guidance on how to manage this.

Staff believe support to **safely deliver digital** elements in their sessions is vital to enabling **consistent approaches**.

Minimising risk, rather than completely avoiding it, is central to all forms of youth work – digital should reflect this.

Skills and training

“A lot of people feel really under-skilled when it comes to this work, particularly the online work.”



Training for digital youth work is **not widely available**, and just a **quarter (24%)** of youth workers have undertaken any.

Youth workers feel knowledge to **keep young people safe** is most important for enabling digital delivery.

CPD is widely considered **vital to maintaining understanding** of new technologies. There is also appetite amongst youth workers for **greater inclusion of digital in JNC** recognised qualifications.

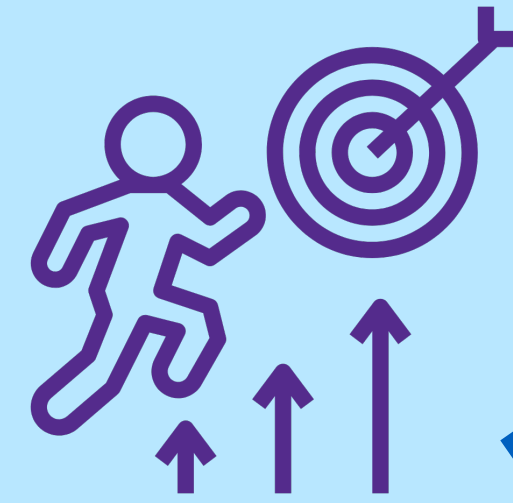
Youth workers see **great value in internal training**, to ensure practical applications and consistent approaches in their context.

Accessible external training is seen as the most important enabler to digital youth work delivery. The sector would benefit from **guidance from bodies** with expertise, like the NYA, particularly to help develop their own CPD.

NYA knows from its annual Census and Workforce surveys that many types of training, especially non-mandatory, cannot be prioritised due to high workload.

Motivation and priority

“Our whole programme is designed around being face-to-face. We want to engage them in something that doesn’t mean digital engagement all the time.”



Just **18%** of youth organisations have a **digital strategy**, and over half (**57%**) of staff believe digital youth work is **not prioritised** in their organisation.

Organisational senior leaders tend to be older, with higher levels of qualification. Though not always the case, we found the **oldest age bracket view digital as less effective**.

“Digital youth work sounds very new and overwhelming for a lot, especially the older generation that works with us because they’re not very tech-savvy.”

Without organisational drive, **onus is on the individual** youth worker to push their own digital development. This is often why **self-led training is so common**.

Some organisations offer activities less obviously linked to digital (i.e. sport). These youth workers find it **hard to incorporate digital** as they do not see where it fits.

Local authority and commissioned services find KPIs and other priorities can **inhibit freedom to diversify** their offer, as they do not allow for flexibility of approach or innovation and tend to be outcomes driven.

Awareness and attitude

“I wonder if there is a general push away from wanting young people to be online... whether we admit it or not, that actually we don’t know if we want to encourage that.”



Youth workers’ priority is to support young people, using whichever means is most effective. Not all youth workers see digital as effective as other types of delivery, and have **not seen the impact** it can have.

Seeing digital youth work in action was ranked as the second most important enabler to digital delivery.

Digital can be seen as **replacing more traditional forms of youth work delivery**, rather than augmenting and enabling access to them.

Awareness of digital youth work, and the impact it has in practice, is an **enabler to effective, confident delivery**. This is expressed by youth workers who have and haven't yet seen the impact.

Finance and affordability



“Finance is an obstacle, certainly for us as a smaller charity. Buying licences or hiring hardware can be prohibitive and has been a challenge.”

Cost is not the central concern for digital, with just 17% believing it is too costly.

Most concerns around money relate to **young people’s digital poverty** and organisations struggling to make digital more accessible (i.e. through costly technology loans).

Whilst some tech *can* be costly, youth workers with greater knowledge of digital keep it cheap by using **free software** or games young people already have.

Funding and commissioning models rarely focus on **digital delivery**, unless evidence shows it addresses young people’s needs.

Funding is tight in the youth sector and **traditional delivery methods are considered most impactful**, and with an established evidence base are **prioritised over digital**.

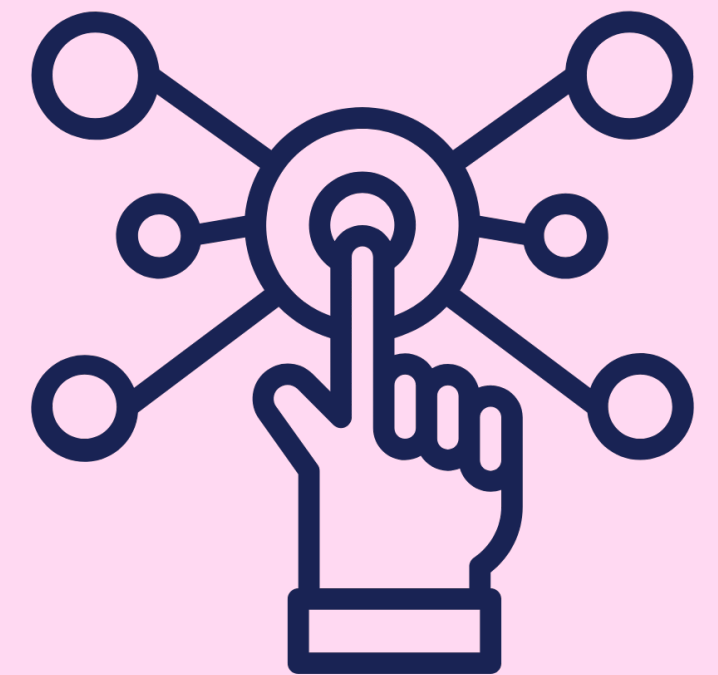
Where funding is available, it tends to be spent on discrete pieces of technology rather than creating a **programme of digital activities**. This is a more committed investment of time and money, but would lead to **better integration of technology**.

Recommendations

Greater clarity and sector-wide agreement on the definition of digital youth work and will help the youth sector understand how and where to use it. Resources and guidance will also promote wider and more impactful use of digital in youth work.

A greater body of evidence, including case studies and evaluations showcasing impact, can help relevant leaders prioritise digital youth work

More digital youth work training needs to be available to the youth sector, particularly focussing on safeguarding, data protection and awareness. Youth sector organisations and workers would benefit from encouragement to take up this training.

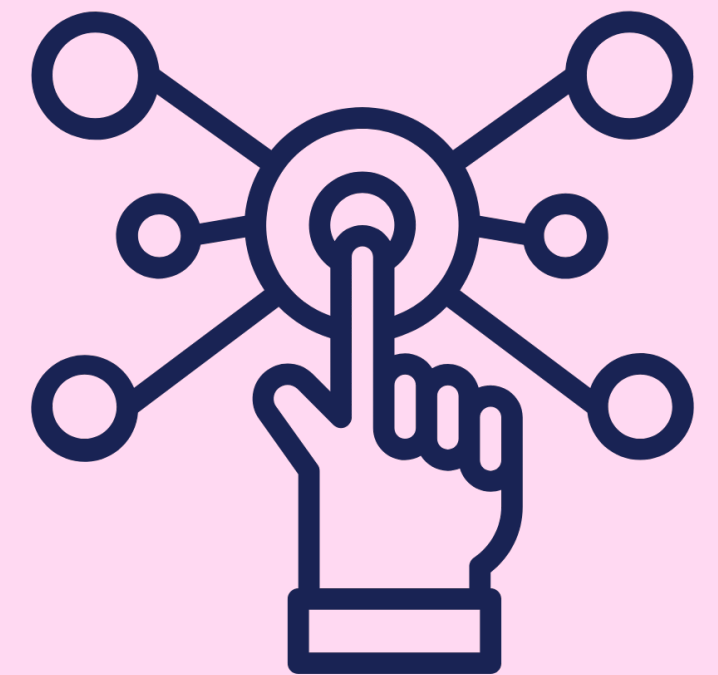


Recommendations

Policymakers and funders would benefit from improved understanding of the potential impact of digital youth work. They should also support providers by funding long-term, strategic approaches to digital youth work.

Youth sector organisations should encourage their staff and volunteers to pursue appropriate self-led CPD supporting digital youth work delivery. They should also source external and build internal training to ensure youth workers can safely and consistently deliver using digital methods.

Youth workers can take ownership for development of their own digital youth work literacy and delivery skills by seeking out available CPD. They should evidence and showcase the impact of digital youth work wherever possible.



Next steps



Using findings from this research, NYA has published standards for delivery of digital youth work:
nya.org.uk/digital-youth-work

NYA have also begun to develop Continuing Professional Development (CPD) modules in line with the findings, and will explore informal training in digital youth work (i.e. webinars). Watch this space for updates:
nya.org.uk/cpd

Findings from this research were presented at NYA's digital youth work event, hosted by Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) in March 2025.



With thanks to

FUSION²¹

for supporting this research

 @National-Youth-Agency

 @NatYouthAgency

 @NationalYouthAgency

 @NationalYouthAgency

 @NationalYouthAgency



nya.org.uk