

Social Network Sites in youth participation

Report of a consultation day at Kongomana 2008, Devon.



What we did

We took Devon's Community Roadshow Bus to Kongomana 2008. Devon County Council's annual weekend Youth Festival.

Rather than use the computer on the bus, we used the side of the bus to magnetically display a made up Bebo profile that a local authority may use to get young people involved in decision making.

The profile could be changed by adding and removing movable bits of paper - and by changing the profile people could share their views on how they thought the local authority could and should use social network sites to get young people's voices heard.

Groups of young people (and a few adults) were supported to make their own profiles, answering key questions about local authorities and social network sites along the way. Each completed profile was photographed - and some of the key messages emerging from the way groups put together their profiles are shared in the following pages of this report.

Video Interviews

We also had five digital video cameras to hand out - and groups were able to borrow the cameras to interview their friends and other young people at Kongomana. Each camera had a simple question taped to the back. At the end of the day we collected the cameras and took notes from the videos that had been recorded. Some of the ideas shared in those short video interviews are written up in the following pages.



What were we asking & why?

The youth participation team at Devon County Council have been exploring how they can use social network sites to involve young people in decision making. After an early planning meeting - we realised (a) we needed to know more from young people about how this should work; and (b) we needed a clear policy that would make sure the safety of young people was put first when using social network sites.

So, at Kongomana, we were trying to find out what young people thought about: local authorities using SNS for participation; the important safety messages for using SNS; how local authorities should display and verify their identity on SNS; any rules for discussions in SNS discussion groups; different ways of the local authority communicating with them on SNS; and we wanted young people's advice, guidance in insights in general.

Context

This consultation was part of the **Youth Work and Social Networking** project.

The Youth Work and Social Networking project is looking at all aspects of youth work engagement with young peoples online social networking and use of social network sites (SNS). It will develop guidance and shared learning for a range of contexts including:

- Staff training;
- Group work with young people;
- Promoting youth services on SNS;
- Communicating with young people on SNS;
- Communicating with groups on SNS;
- Detached youth work on SNS;
- Youth participation on SNS;

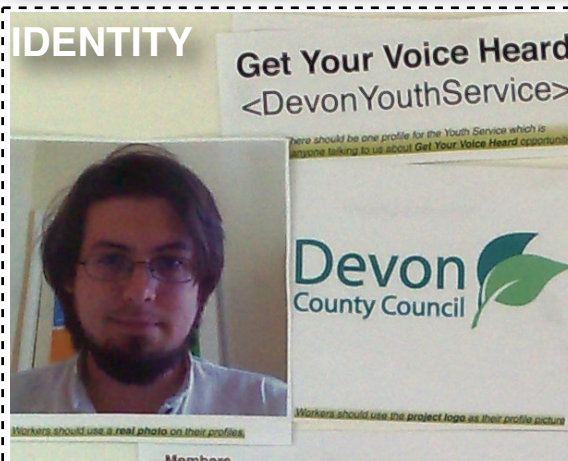
Different policy and practice approaches to social network sites are needed depending on the youth work context in which they are used. **This paper is concerned with using SNS and social networking tools for youth participation.**

Findings from the profile making activity

What you told us about Devon County Council using Social Network Sites like MySpace and Bebo.

Whose responses?

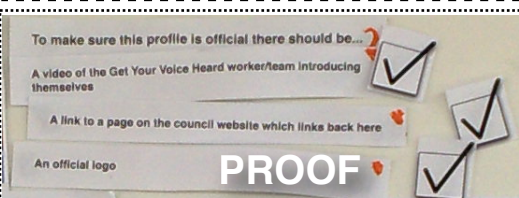
Over **60** young people took part by creating profiles or recording video clips.



We asked about how a participation project should portray itself on an SNS profile.

Most young people were keen to interact with a profile that had an **official or formal identity** – either the project name, or the full name of the worker they would be talking to.

Most of those who would prefer to interact with an official project profile wanted it to display a clear **project logo** as the profile picture – although a number opted for a formal project title, but a personal profile picture so they could **relate to the worker who they may be interacting with.**

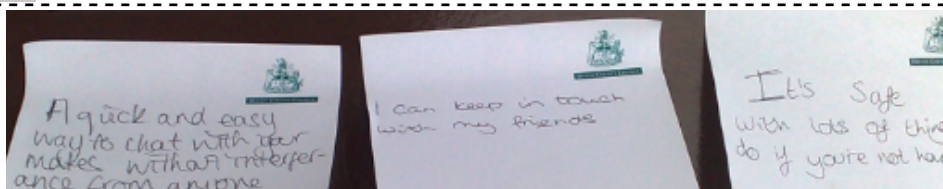


We asked how young people could know a profile was official

over 90% of responses wanted profiles to contain a link to the council website and back again to verify that it was an official profile. This idea appeared to be well understood by the groups when it was discussed.

An official logo was also a popular idea to show a profile was legitimate (87%) although only a small number of young people identified that this could be easily forged.

Just over 60% felt that including a video introduction on the profile would help them to be sure it was an authentic profile – although a number commented that if the video was boring that might put them off getting involved.



We asked what should happen if a participation worker receives a friend request or group membership request from a young person under 18 who has their profile set to public.

The worker could: (a) do nothing; (b) deny that person's friend/group membership request; (c) **allow their request, but send them a private message on the SNS to point out that their profile was public and suggest they change it.**

Only one group felt that (b), denying the request should be the response, with 39% of responses favouring no action, and 57% suggesting that a private message would be appropriate.

Some groups explained that any messages needed to be polite and friendly – and whilst few people would be offended by a message letting them know their profile was public – the messages shouldn't be telling them what to do and leaving their profile public should remain their choice.

If you join a participation group for under 18s, and your profile is set up public, what should happen:

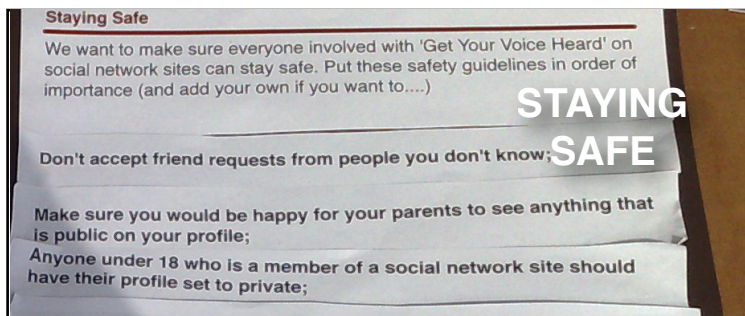
DEALING WITH PUBLIC PROFILE

Nothing.

You shouldn't be allowed to join the group;

Workers should contact you to remind you to set your profile to private;





STAYING SAFE

We asked what the most important safety messages to give out were.

Whilst there were some big disagreements between the groups - some trends with crop up.

Top safety messages were:

- Don't share any information in discussions or photos which could help someone work out where you live or go to school.
- If you see anything that worries you, report it to a responsible adult.

Most people thought that the message

- Make sure you would be happy for a **stranger** to see anything that is public on your profile was a more important or effective safety message than:
- Make sure you would be happy for your **parents** to see anything that is public on your profile.

Whilst 5 out of 23 groups choose

- Don't accept friend request from people you don't know
- as their most important message, 6 groups had it as least important.

There was a similar difference of opinion over the message:

- Any under 18 who is a member of a social network site should have their profile set to private

but overall this appears to have been thought less important as a safety message, with only one group choosing it as most important.

A safety message of:

- If anyone says or does anything in the 'Get Your Voice Heard' groups that you are unhappy with – tell the moderator.
- had the lowest overall rating.

We asked groups to pick five rules or guidelines for engaging in discussions in an SNS participation group from a selection of 12.

In order of popularity these were:

- No bullying (Chosen by 87% of groups)
- No sharing personal data such as phone numbers or e-mail addresses (74%)
- Respect everyone's point of view
- Don't spam (52%)
- Keep discussions private/confidential (48%)
- Don't get aggressive (39%)
- If you don't know what something means – just ask (35%)
- No swearing (26%)
- Under 18s Only (22%)
- If you start being involved in a conversation – check back regularly (9%)
- Anyone swearing will be banned (4%)
- Only young people from Devon can take part (4%)

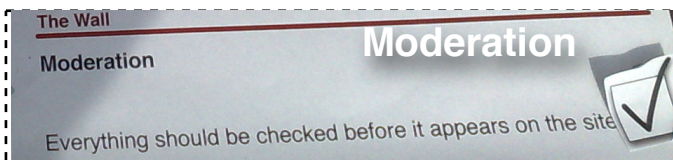


We asked young people about how they would like to be notified of new opportunities to get involved.

Many young people mentioned that they didn't want 'invasive' messages and 'more spam' – although a number did say they would value personal/direct messages to let them know about opportunities.

Overall – e-mail remained the most popular way to let young people know about participation opportunities – with less invasive message sent to a list on Bebo, and using status updates also popular.

A number of young people said they would be interested in an application which they could add to their profiles that would tell their friends about opportunities to get involved.



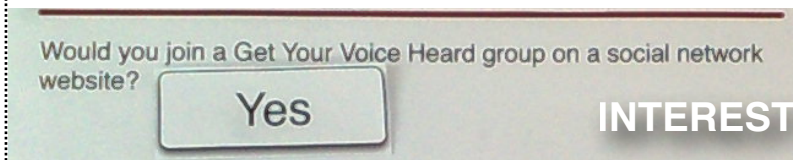
We asked if membership of a SNS participation group/friending a SNS profile should be subject to moderation and approval

60% said that it should – often citing the need to protect privacy of discussions or to check that unsuitable people were not joining in. Some felt that requiring approval would put them off joining.

We asked young people if they thought messages should be pre-moderated before they appear in a discussion space. Of those who responded, 92% felt that they should.

When asked, 94% of responses said they would be interested in engaging with a SNS opportunities for participation in Devon.

80% said they would be likely to share opportunities with their friends – with some suggesting they would be selective about which friends they shared opportunities with.



Video Interviews
What three words do you think of when I say Bebo?
(The larger a word, the more it was used)

Some early conclusions

Young people would welcome SNS participation opportunities;

They want official looking, safe spaces to engage in. Safety from bullying is specially important.

Finding the right way to let people know about opportunities is going to be key.



Where next?

In Devon this consultation will feed into a strategy and policy and a trial project in using Social Network Sites to help get young people's voices heard. **That means that between October 2008 and early 2009 we'll be building on everything we have heard and will be learning more about how we can provide opportunities for participation on social networking sites safely and effectively.**

Nationally this consultation will inform the final report of the Youth Work and Social Networking project and will be used by many other local authorities around the country to help them think about their youth participation online.

With thanks to:

Katie, Carl and Russell and Tim for preparing and running the consultation at Kongomana (and to everyone else who helped, from the admin team to the Devon Community Roadshow Bus bus driver).

All the young people who took part.

If you want to know more about participation opportunities in Devon, contact katie.bacon@devon.gov.uk.

For more on the national research, drop an e-mail to: tim@practicalparticipation.co.uk