Meeting of:	EDUCATION AND YOUTH SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
Date of Meeting:	**24 NOVEMBER 2025**
Report Title:	**ONLINE SAFETY AND DIGITAL LEARNING**
Report Owner: Responsible Chief Officer / Cabinet Member	**CABINET MEMBER FOR EDUCATION AND YOUTH SERVICES** **CORPORATE DIRECTOR - EDUCATION, EARLY YEARS AND YOUNG PEOPLE**
Responsible Officer:	**MAT JONES LEAD OFFICER, DIGITAL LEARNING - EARLY YEARS AND YOUNG PEOPLE**
Policy Framework and Procedure Rules:	There is no effect on policy framework or procedure rules.
Executive Summary:	Children and young people face growing challenges in navigating the online world. As technology becomes embedded in education and everyday life, the associated risks are increasing. Schools must not only keep pace with rapid technological change but also ensure that learners develop the skills to use digital tools safely and responsibly. The Education, Early Years and Young People Directorate supports a multi-layered approach to online safety, combining education, policy, technology strategy, and school-community engagement. This approach ensures schools can help children and young people navigate the online world safely and responsibly. The local authority has seen improvements in enhancing online safety across schools, including improved digital competence among learners, staff, and families, and greater awareness of online risks. However, disparities in digital environments and practices still exist between schools, highlighting the need for continued support and consistency. Support for schools includes professional learning, technology investment, and guidance on digital policy and research. Ongoing collaboration between the local authority and schools remains vital to strengthen digital competence, raise awareness, and ensure safe, inclusive online environments.

1.   Purpose of report

1.1   The purpose of this report is to update Education and Youth Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the current position relating to online safety and digital learning in Bridgend schools.

2.   Background

2.1   As children and young people increasingly use digital technologies for learning, communication, and entertainment, schools face the challenge of equipping them with the knowledge and skills to navigate online spaces safely and responsibly.

2.2   While the digital world offers valuable opportunities for learning and social interaction, it also brings a range of risks that can affect children and young people. These include harmful online behaviours, exposure to inappropriate content, and challenges linked to emerging technologies, all of which require ongoing attention and support from schools and families.

2.3   With the widespread use of technology and the increasing complexities associated with digital and online tools, online safety has become a priority within education in Wales, particularly with the implementation of Curriculum for Wales, which places a strong emphasis on developing learners' digital competence and resilience.

2.4   The range of online challenges not only carry implications for learner safety but can also negatively impact their mental health and wellbeing, affecting emotional and behavioural regulation, social interactions, and overall educational engagement. Such concerns now make online safety part of a whole-school safeguarding priority, requiring integrated policies, a curriculum focus, staff digital skills training, investment in technology that is 'fit for purpose' and proactive engagement with learners and parents to mitigate risks.

2.5   With mobile devices now widely used by children and young people in and outside of school, and easy access to Wi-Fi and mobile networks, actively engaging online has become constant and immediate. This makes it increasingly important to ensure that children access safe, age-appropriate, and developmentally suitable online tools, services, and content.

2.6   Recently published local and national data and research presented by The Children's Commissioner for Wales, The Senedd's Petitions Committee, Estyn and School Health Research Network (SHRN) has highlighted concerning trends in online behaviours of children and young people and their attitudes towards technology.

2.7   The findings from the research and these reviews place greater responsibility on schools to provide meaningful online safety learning opportunities for all stakeholders – staff, learners, and families. Many of the key online safety themes identified in these reviews include:

- addictive digital behaviours;
- excessive screen time habits;
- cyberbullying and online harassment;
- online peer-on-peer sexual harassment;
- sexting, inappropriate image and video sharing;

- exposure to harmful or inappropriate online content;
- problematic social media use;
- under-age use of social media;
- misinformation and disinformation;
- risks associated with gaming; and
- risks linked to emerging technologies (such as., artificial intelligence (AI)).

The Children's Commissioner for Wales

2.8 In June 2024, the Children's Commissioner for Wales gathered views from children and young people on how their online lives affect school. Many behaviours and outcomes were identified. The most common concerns included feeling tired due to excessive online screen time activity and struggling with motivation and concentration during lessons. Additionally, children noted that arguments or conflicts that began online often carried over into the classroom, disrupting learning environments and peer relationships.

2.9 Today, children and young people primarily get their information online by using search engines, educational websites, artificial intelligence tools and especially social media platforms. While schools, teachers, and books remain important, digital sources dominate because they are accessible, engaging, and influenced by peers. However, this shift raises concerns about misinformation, excessive screen time, and the need for improved critical thinking skills to identify credible sources.

2.10 In February 2025, the Children's Commissioner for Wales surveyed over 850 children and young people to understand their experiences with online misinformation. The findings showed that 67% of primary-aged children had seen something online they believed was not true, and 52% felt it was easy to believe fake content.

2.11 Among secondary-aged respondents, 49% of learners said they had come across something online that they later found out was fake, while 36% of learners were unsure. The most common types of misinformation included celebrity rumours and fake news stories. When asked how they would respond to suspicious online content, the majority (68%) said they would ignore it and keep scrolling. 37% of learners reported searching online to verify the information with only 25% of learners asking a trusted adult or friend.

2.12 These results highlight the need for strong digital literacy education and parent-carer support to help children develop the critical skills required to understand what they are experiencing online.

Estyn

2.13 Estyn, the education and training inspectorate for Wales, published a thematic review in December 2021 'We don't tell our teachers'– experiences of peer-on-peer sexual harassment among secondary school learners in Wales. By visiting 35 schools across Wales, surveying 1,250 learners and hosting learner-focus groups, the review found that online peer-on-peer sexual harassment is a widespread issue among secondary school learners in Wales.

2.14　Learners reported experiencing unsolicited messages, image-based abuse, and inappropriate comments and image sharing via social media and online messaging platforms.

2.15　Most learners across the secondary school-age range stated that hurtful comments by peers about appearance is one of the most common forms of sexual harassment they experience. It was reported that this type of sexual harassment often happens online with many incidents occurring outside school hours but had a direct impact on learners' wellbeing and behaviour in school.

2.16　The Estyn review suggests that children and young people have substantial experience of harassment by their peers via the mobile phone, social media and gaming sites. This includes, online bullying, posting hurtful comments – especially about appearance, asking for, sending and sharing nude or semi-nude photographs, catfishing, unsolicited friend requests or demands for nude photos by strangers or those with a fake social media profile. Participants also reported negative attitudes towards girls in digital games.

2.17　Many learners also experience pressure to maintain a high number of online 'friends', as well as to gain 'likes' and 'comments' on their digital profiles. This reflects the significant social pressures children and young people face to remain active online to preserve their status and friendships and is highlighted within the Estyn review.

2.18　Despite the fact that children and young people value owning a mobile phone, they also recognise that the problems associated with its use can negatively affect mental health and wellbeing. Common negative online behaviours identified in this thematic review include using digital features to facilitate bullying, posting hurtful comments – particularly about appearance, sexting, sending or receiving nude images, and sharing inappropriate content. While learners are often willing to confide in friends about these issues, they report being far less likely to disclose them to a trusted adult.

School Health Research Network (SHRN)

2.19　The School Health Research Network (SHRN) is a partnership between Cardiff University, Public Health Wales, and Welsh Government, working to improve the health and well-being of young people in Wales. SHRN conducts the Student Health and Well-being (SHW) Survey every two years in maintained secondary schools across Wales.

2.20　The survey is bilingual, electronic, and administered in schools to learners aged 11 to 16-years-old, covering topics such as mental health, physical activity, substance use, sexual health, and social relationships. Participation is high, with over 90% of secondary schools taking part and more than 100,000 students responding in each round.

2.21　In addition, SHRN now runs a Primary School Student Health and Well-being Survey for children aged 7 to 11-years, providing valuable insights into younger learners' health behaviours, including social media use, bullying, and well-being. This large-scale, school-based approach ensures robust, representative data that informs national policy and supports school health improvement.

2.22 All schools in Bridgend register for participation and both the primary and secondary SHW survey reveals some telling behaviours related to online safety.

2.23 The local authority shares the findings with schools through headteacher groups and professional networks, ensuring that leaders are fully informed and able to take appropriate action to address the issues identified.

**Primary School Student Health and Wellbeing Survey 2022-2023 (key findings)**

2.24 Overall, 354 schools took part in the study from 21 out of 22 local authorities in Wales and 32,606 learners completed the questionnaires across the year groups 3 to 6. The findings were presented as a national summary and not broken down to individual local authority data.

2.25 Bridgend was the second highest participating local authority by school percentage at 47.8% (22 primary schools).

Table 1 Primary School Student Health and Wellbeing Survey 2022-2023 participant responses https://www.shrn.org.uk/national-data-and-reports/

	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Total
All local authority participants	7,457	7,780	8,251	9,118	32,606

Bridgend participants	2,197 learners from Year 3 to Year 6	22 schools

Electronic devices (screen use) primary school learners – summary findings

Table 2 Percentage of Year 3 to Year 6 learners who reported owning a smartphone. Produced by Public Health Wales, using SHRN data.
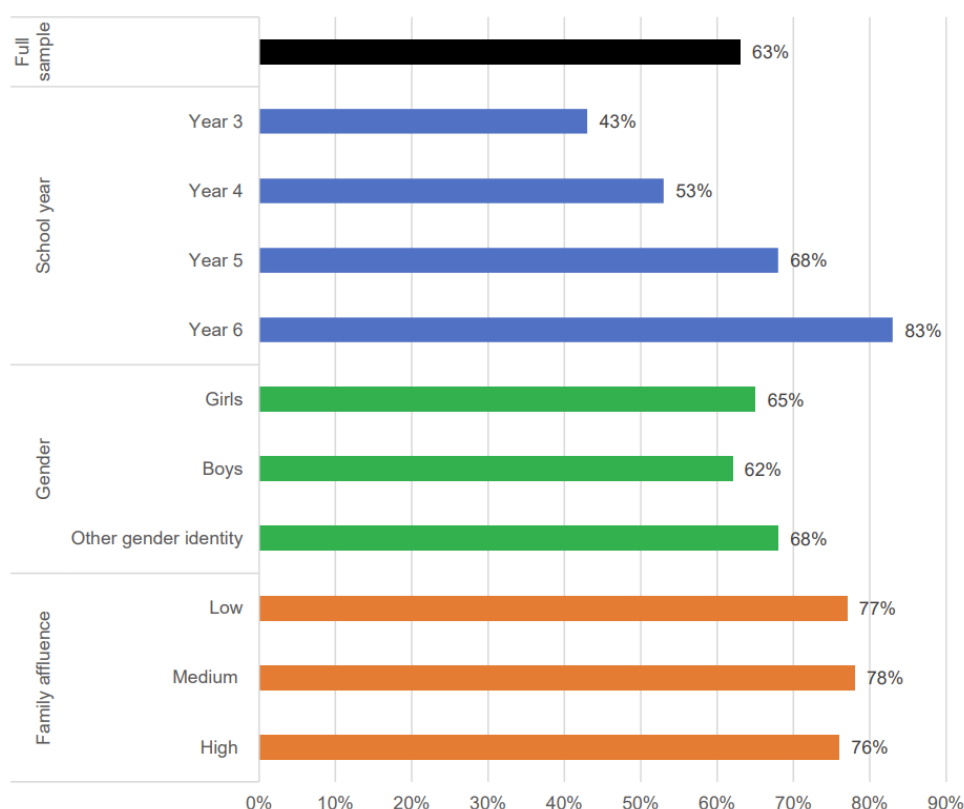
2.26   When asked about owning a smartphone, tablet and laptop device (by age, gender and family affluence) Table 2 shows:

- most learners reported owning a smartphone;
- girls were more likely to report owning a smartphone than boys;
- while a minority of Year 3 learners had their own smartphone, there is a steep increase in ownership by age, with five in six Year 6 learners owning a smartphone;
- half of learners reported owning their own computer or laptop;
- ownership increased as learners moved from Year 3 to Year 6;
- girls were less likely to own a computer or laptop compared to the other gender groups;
- laptop or computer ownership was highest among learners from more affluent families;
- over two thirds of learners reported owning a tablet;
- girls were more likely than boys to report owning a tablet; and
- there was evidence of a social gradient, with learners from more affluent families more likely to report owning a tablet.

Social media use and primary school learners – summary findings

Table 3   Percentage of Year 3 to Year 6 learners who reported using social media site or apps a few times a week or every day.
Produced by Public Health Wales, using SHRN data.
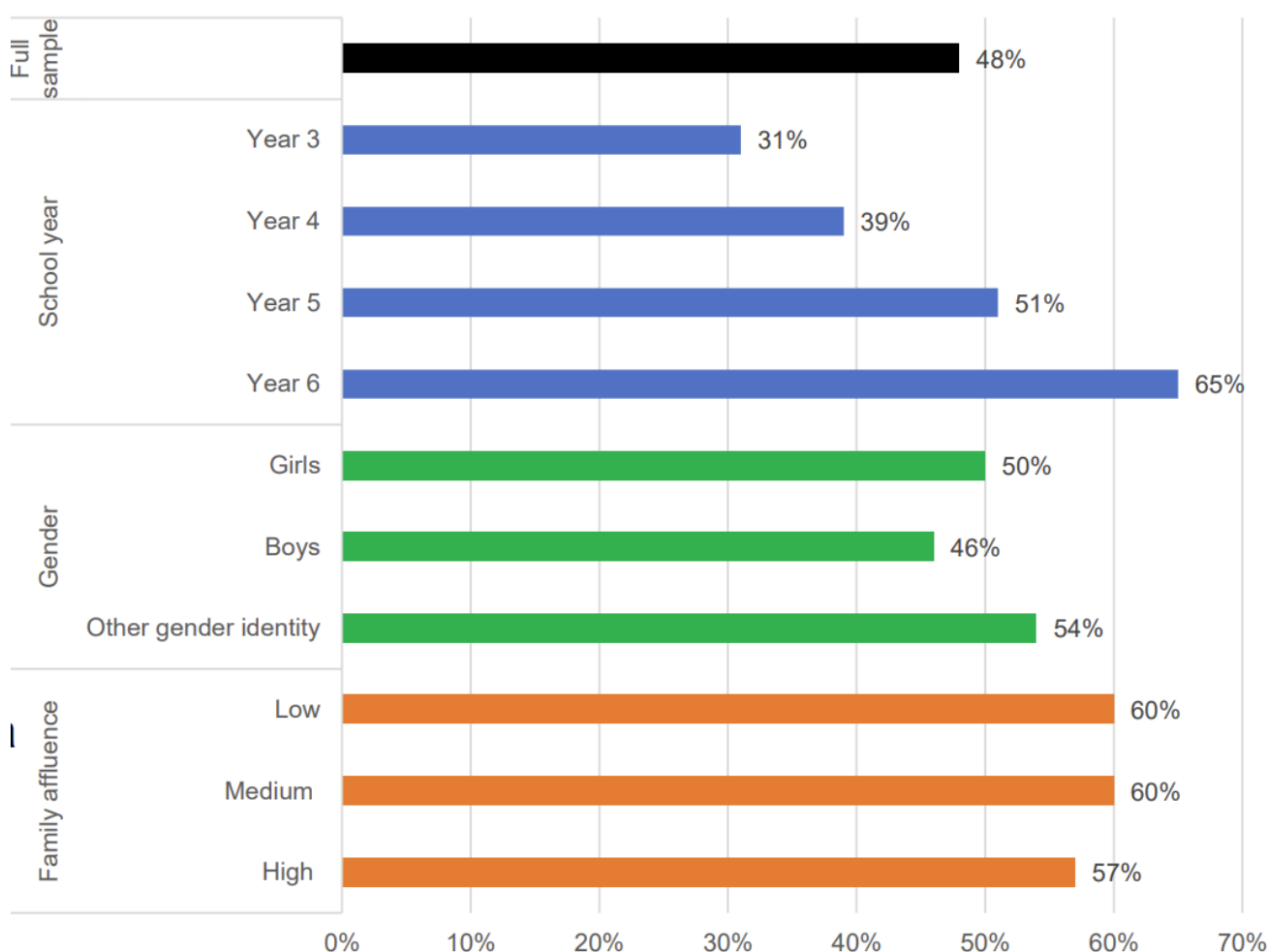
2.27 When asked about social media use (by age, gender and family affluence) Table 3 shows:

- nearly half of learners reported using social media sites or apps a few times a week or every day;
- there was a large age gradient, with regular social media use more than doubling between Year 3 and Year 6;
- girls were more likely to report using social media regularly than boys; and
- learners with high family affluence were least likely to report regular social media use.

2.28 The Primary School Student Health and Wellbeing Survey 2022-2023 also surveyed cyberbullying with Year 6 learners only. The findings in Table 4 show:

- a greater proportion of boys than girls said that they had cyberbullied others;
- cyberbullying perpetration showed evidence of a social gradient, with learners from less affluent families reporting higher rates than those from more affluent families; and
- nearly half of learners reported having been bullied at school in the past couple of months.

Table 4 Percentage of Year 6 learners who reported they had taken part in cyberbullying (by gender and family affluence).
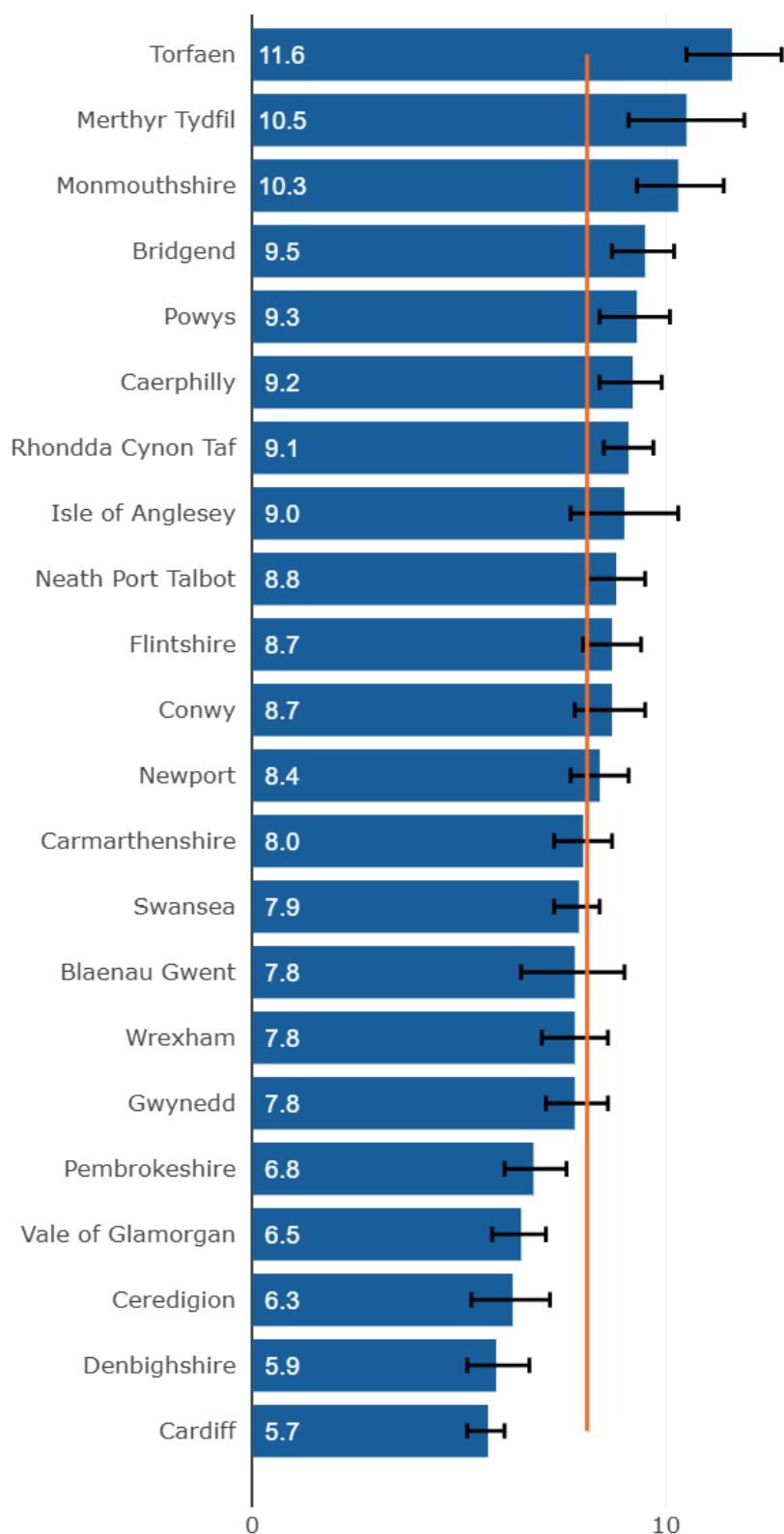Produced by Public Health Wales, using SHRN data.
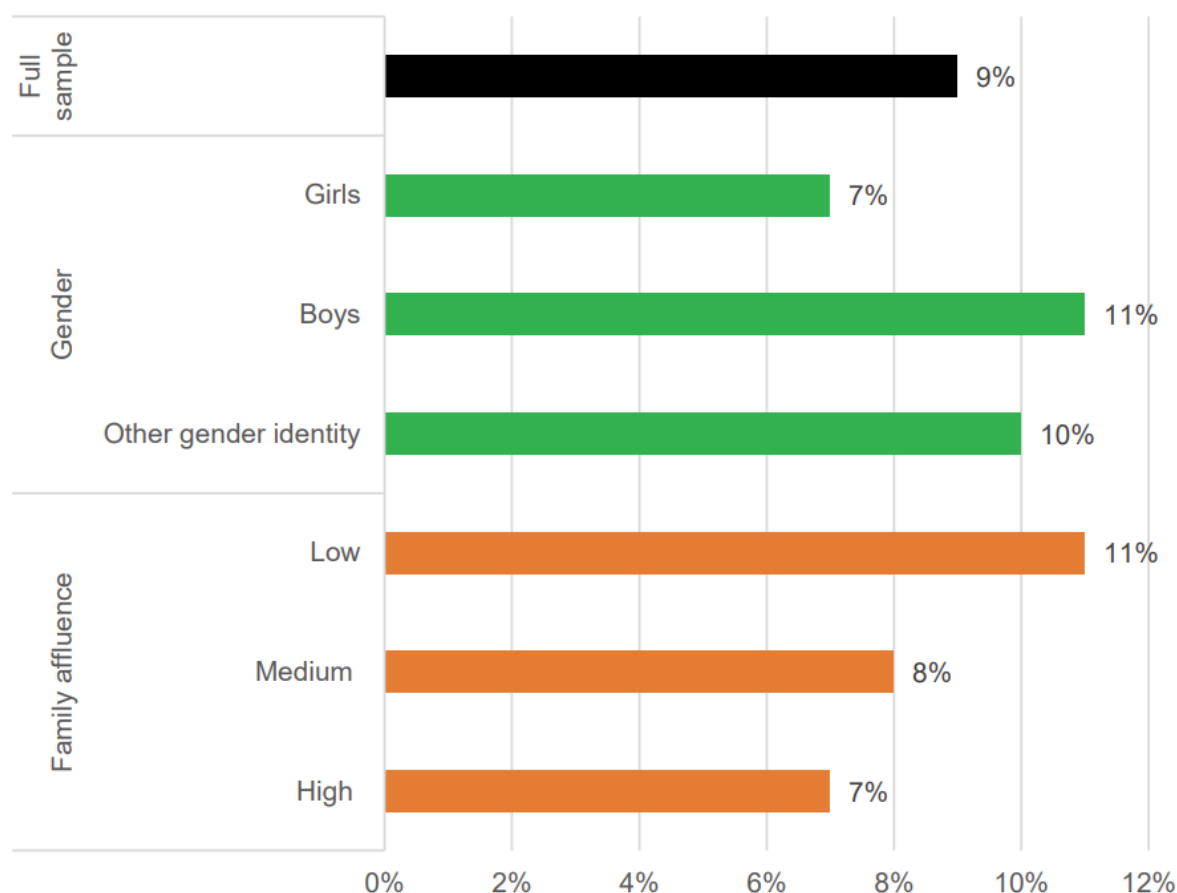
Secondary School Student Health and Wellbeing Survey 2022-2023 (key findings)

2.29   Public Health Wales has released an interactive dashboard presenting updated survey results on the health and well-being of secondary school-aged children in Wales. https://phw.nhs.wales/services-and-teams/observatory/data-and-analysis/shrn-data-dashboard/

2.30   The dashboard enables the ongoing assessment of young people's health in Wales, both nationally and regionally, and opportunities to understand trends in adolescent health and well-being, including online behaviours.

2.31   Findings show that social media significantly influences children and young people's online attitudes and behaviours. According to SHW survey data, 10% of all boys and 18% of girls in Wales in 2023 were classified as a problematic user of social media.

2.32   Nationally, girls from low affluence households (21%) and middle affluence households (19%) were more likely to be classified as problematic users than those from high affluence households (16%).

2.33   Across Wales, over 1 in 5 girls (21%) in Year 9 and Year 10 were classified as problematic users of social media, double that of boys (10%) in the same year groups in 2023.

2.34   Connections between emotional health and social media use can also be drawn with more than half of girls (54%) in Wales reported experiencing feelings of low mood, irritability, nervousness, or trouble getting to sleep, while only about one-third of boys (32%) reported the same issues.

2.35   Cyberbullying has shown an upward trend across survey periods, rising from 18% in 2021 to 21% in 2023. Greater social media use, the ease of anonymous communication, and the pressure to maintain an online presence are often seen as factors that can amplify harmful behaviours, making it easier for negative interactions to spread quickly and widely, which in turn impacts young people's mental health and sense of safety.

2.36   One area the SHW survey highlights is around young people's attitudes to sharing explicit content online. In the survey, 11 to 16-year-old learners are asked if they have sent someone a sexually explicit image of themselves. In 2021 and 2023 Bridgend school learners were positioned fourth across all Welsh local authorities for engaging in this online activity.

2.37   In 2023, 9.5% (544) of 11 to 16-year-old learners in Bridgend reported having sent someone a sexually explicit image of themselves to someone. This places Bridgend above the Wales national average for learners engaging in this online behaviour.

Table 5 11 to 16-year-old learners (all Wales) reported having sent someone a sexually explicit image of themselves (by percentage, persons, multiple local authorities, Wales, 2023).
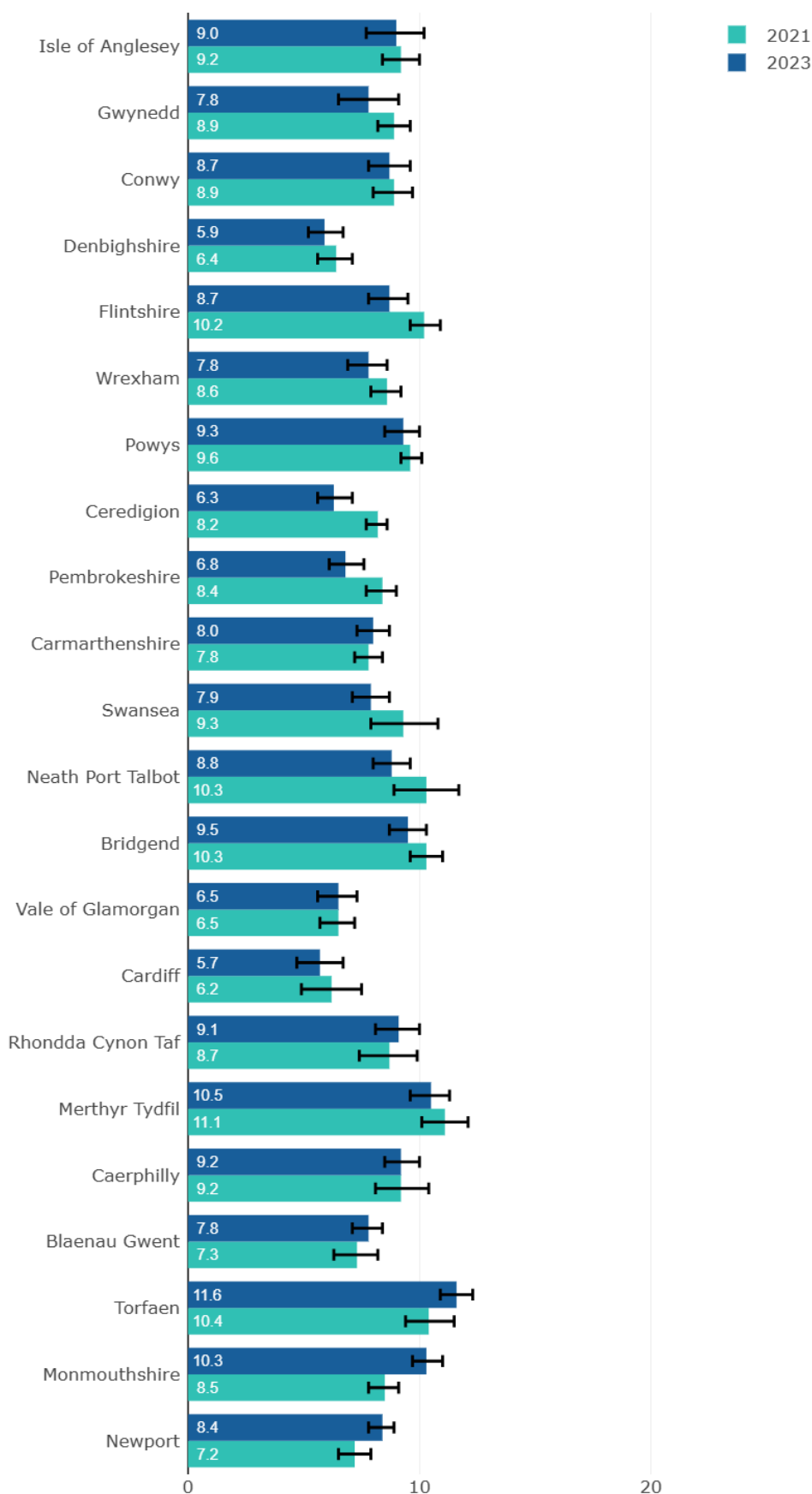
Produced by Public Health Wales, using SHRN data.

Local Authority	Percentage
Torfaen	11.6
Merthyr Tydfil	10.5
Monmouthshire	10.3
Bridgend	9.5
Powys	9.3
Caerphilly	9.2
Rhondda Cynon Taf	9.1
Isle of Anglesey	9.0
Neath Port Talbot	8.8
Flintshire	8.7
Conwy	8.7
Newport	8.4
Carmarthenshire	8.0
Swansea	7.9
Blaenau Gwent	7.8
Wrexham	7.8
Gwynedd	7.8
Pembrokeshire	6.8
Vale of Glamorgan	6.5
Ceredigion	6.3
Denbighshire	5.9
Cardiff	5.7

2.38   The data in 2023 (9.5% or 544 of 5,748 surveyed Bridgend learners aged 11 to 16-years-old), compared to the data in 2021 (10.3% or 503 of 4,896 surveyed Bridgend learners aged 11 to 16-years-old), indicates a small percentage decrease in this type of online behaviour over the survey period.

Table 6 11 to 16-year-old learners (all Wales) reported having sent someone a sexually explicit image of themselves (by percentage, persons, multiple local authorities, 2021 and 2023 comparison).

Produced by Public Health Wales, using SHRN data.

Local Authority	2023	2021
Isle of Anglesey	9.0	9.2
Gwynedd	7.8	8.9
Conwy	8.7	8.9
Denbighshire	5.9	6.4
Flintshire	8.7	10.2
Wrexham	7.8	8.6
Powys	9.3	9.6
Ceredigion	6.3	8.2
Pembrokeshire	6.8	8.4
Carmarthenshire	8.0	7.8
Swansea	7.9	9.3
Neath Port Talbot	8.8	10.3
Bridgend	9.5	10.3
Vale of Glamorgan	6.5	6.5
Cardiff	5.7	6.2
Rhondda Cynon Taf	9.1	8.7
Merthyr Tydfil	10.5	11.1
Caerphilly	9.2	9.2
Blaenau Gwent	7.8	7.3
Torfaen	11.6	10.4
Monmouthshire	10.3	8.5
Newport	8.4	7.2

2.39   When looking at this type of online behaviour across age brackets, overall, this behaviour increases with age (see Table 7).

2.40   When compared to 2021 results, the 2023 data show a decrease in this behaviour for learners aged 12, 14, 15 and 16-years-old, but show a small increase in this behaviour for learners aged 11 and 13-years-old (see Table 7).

Table 7   11 to 16-year-old learners (all Wales) by age reported having sent someone a sexually explicit image of themselves (by percentage, persons, multiple ages, Wales, 2021 and 2023).

Produced by Public Health Wales, using SHRN data.
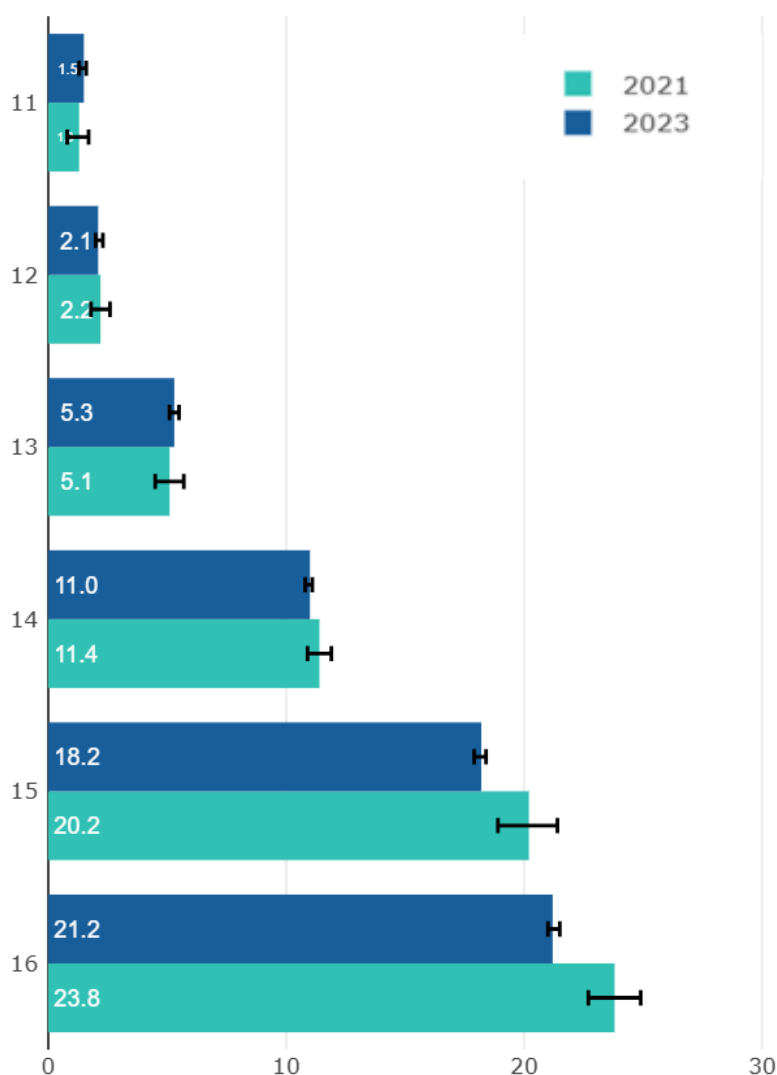
Age	2021 Count	2021 Survey Total	2023 Count	2023 Survey Total	% Proportion Increase
11	**213**	16,842	**269**	17,438	Yes
12	**506**	22,737	**494**	24,043	No
13	**1,165**	23,004	**1,276**	23,854	Yes
14	**2,356**	20,748	**2,318**	21,039	No
15	**3,788**	18,754	**3,644**	20,022	No
16	**1,088**	4,576	**1,070**	5,043	No

2.41   When looking at this behaviour across secondary school year groups, overall, this behaviour increases from Year 7 to Year 11 (see Table 8).

2.42   When compared to 2021 results, the 2023 data show a decrease in this behaviour for Year 10 and 11 learners, with no change for Year 8 learners and increase in this behaviour for Year 7 and 9 learners (see Table 8).

Table 8   11 to 16-year-old learners (all Wales) reported having sent someone a sexually explicit image of themselves, percentage, persons, multiple year groups, Wales, 2021 and 2023.

Produced by Public Health Wales, using SHRN data.
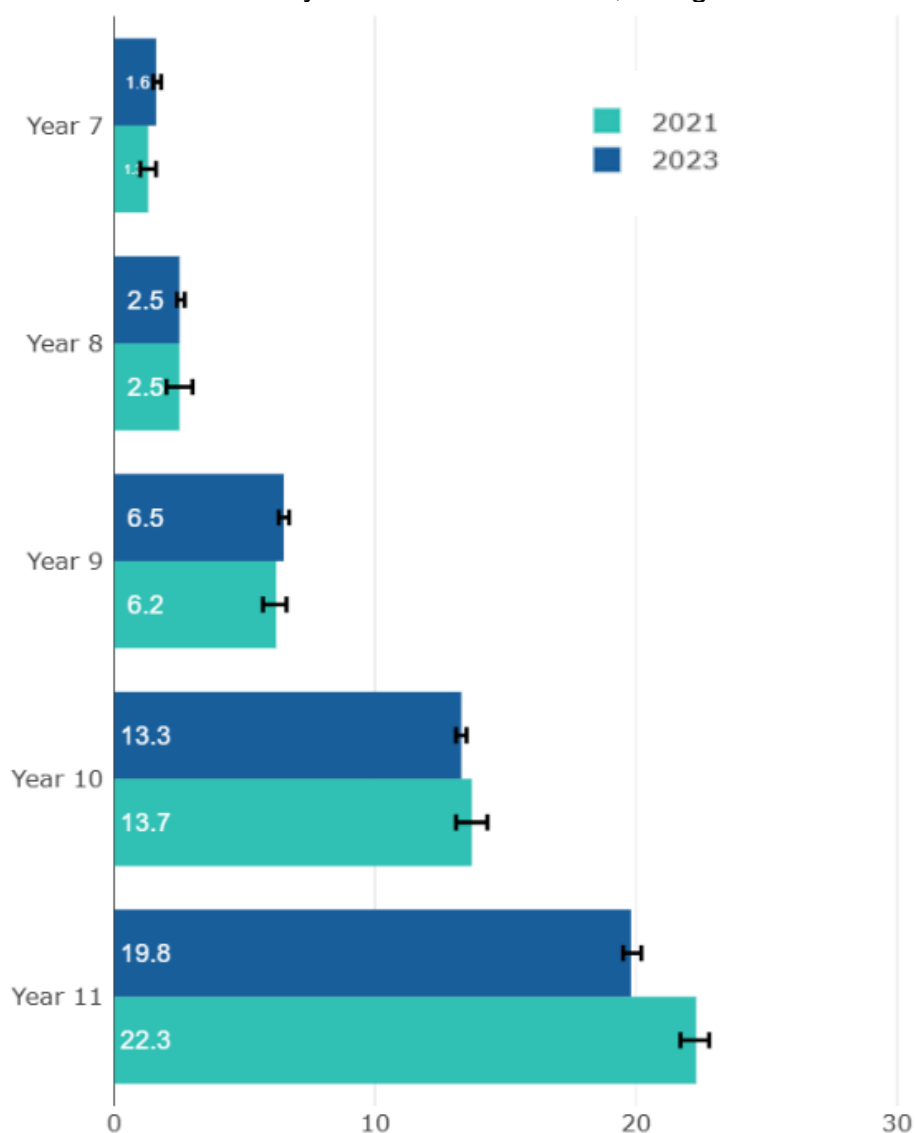
School Year Group	2021 Count	2021 Survey Total	2023 Count	2023 Survey Total	% Proportion Increase
7	306	22,754	390	23,987	Yes
8	579	22,768	597	24,096	No
9	1,426	22,842	1,512	23,316	Yes
10	2,772	20,227	2,755	20,739	No
11	4,033	18,070	3,817	19,301	No

2.43   Wider research from organisations such as Office of Communications (Ofcom), UK Safer Internet, Childnet and National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPPC) point to several reasons why children and young people may engage in sexting or sharing nude images. These include curiosity, exploring romantic relationships, seeking attention or validation, feeling pressured by peers or partners and behavioural normalisation.

2.44   The widespread access to the internet, use of smartphones (mobile phones) and social media can make this behavior seem normal, even though it carries significant emotional, social, and legal risks.

2.45   The local authority shares these findings extensively across schools in Bridgend to ensure staff, parents-carers and learners are aware of inappropriate image and video sharing, particularly those of a sexual nature, both digitally and online.

2.46   This behaviour is a growing concern among young people. Such actions can have serious and lasting consequences, including damaging future education and career prospects, harming personal relationships, and impacting mental health.

2.47   Curriculum for Wales highlights learning opportunities centred around 'sexting' and importantly draws attention towards needing to know that; creating, possessing, or distributing sexual images of anyone under 18 is a criminal offense under UK law, even if shared consensually.

2.48   The local authority provides guidance to schools through established school networks, sign-posting age and developmentally appropriate resources to support curriculum learning and promote online safety awareness and responsible digital behaviour among children and young people.

Table 9   Proportion of children who have their own mobile phone, by age. Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report, published by Ofcom, 7 May 2025.

Age Group	3 to 5 years	6 to 7 years	8 to 9 years	10 to 12 years	13 to 15 years	16 to 17 years
Smartphone Ownership	19%	30%	42%	82%	97%	99%

2.49   In 2024, 96% of children went online, underscoring the central role of the internet in their daily lives. As children grow older, their access to smartphones and connection to the online world increases significantly. This widespread access enables children to engage with a variety of online media sources and participate in diverse digital activities.

2.50   Online activities include viewing content, playing games, learning, and interacting with others, reflecting evolving behaviours and habits shaped by digital environments. The data highlights how smartphones are not just communication tools but gateways to broader online experiences that influence children's development, socialisation, and learning.

Table 10   Proportion of children who go online, by age.
Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report, published by Ofcom, 7 May 2025.

Age Group	3 to 5 years	6 to 7 years	8 to 9 years	10 to 12 years	13 to 15 years	16 to 17 years
Active online	85%	96%	97%	100%	100%	100%

2.51   In the Subject Overview and Scrutiny Committee 1 meeting on 8 May 2025, officers referred to a 'Pupil Behaviour National Behaviour Summit' being held in May 2025, with a section on online safety and digital learning. The final report, 'Behaviour in schools and colleges in Wales' was published in July 2025 and referenced the recommended enhanced guidance for schools on smartphone use established in advance of the 'Pupil Behaviour National Behaviour Summit' by the Senedd Petitions Committee in March 2025 – 'A ban on smartphones in schools in Wales' (March 2025).

2.52   In January 2025, Bridgend County Borough Council participated in the Senedd Petitions Committee debate that was triggered by a petition signed by over 3,300 people calling for a ban on smartphones in all Welsh schools, with exemptions for exceptional circumstances.

2.53   The Senedd's Petitions Committee launched an inquiry, gathering evidence from teachers, parents, learners, and organisations such as the Children's Commissioner, NSPCC, and Barnardo's.

2.54   The Committee acknowledged the growing concerns about smartphones causing classroom disruption, cyberbullying, addiction, and mental health issues. However, it also recognised benefits, such as supporting children with medical conditions and providing safety for travel.

2.55   The Senedd's Petitions Committee concluded that a blanket ban on smartphones in schools is not appropriate, given the complex relationship young people have with these devices.

2.56   While evidence highlighted harms such as distraction, anxiety and access to inappropriate content, it also showed that some learners rely on phones for health management and personal safety.

2.57   The Senedd's Petitions Committee recommended that Welsh Government develop a national framework to guide schools on restricting smartphone use, using inclusive language, considering learner needs, involving parents, and reviewing policies based on evidence.

2.58   Based on the evidence presented to the Senedd's Petitions Committee, five recommendations were put forward to Welsh Government for consideration.

2.59   Welsh Government broadly accepted these recommendations and will work with stakeholders to develop guidance as part of a wider behaviour strategy.

Table 11 The Senedd Petitions Committee recommendations and Welsh Government's response.

Recommendations	Summary	Welsh Government response	Status
1. **National framework**	Develop national guidance for schools on smart device restrictions.	Will be developed with key partners as part of a wider behaviour strategy.	Accepted
2. **Inclusive language**	Use 'restrictions' instead of 'ban' and promote 'right time, right place'.	Language will reflect stakeholder and learner input.	Accepted
3. **Learner exemptions**	Provide clear guidance on exemptions for learners with additional needs.	Will be considered by key partners, expert groups (including school leaders); local flexibility needed.	Accepted in principle
4. **Parental engagement**	Encourage schools to involve parents and explain policy rationale.	Will explore how best to support parental engagement by schools.	Accepted in principle
5. **Evidence-based review**	Regularly update framework based on emerging research and data.	Expert group will use evidence to inform updates.	Accepted

2.60 Welsh Government emphasised the importance of balancing learner wellbeing with digital competence, ensuring alignment with Curriculum for Wales and an approach that reflects the need to equip learners with the skills to navigate technology responsibly while safeguarding their mental health and educational experience.

2.61 The Committee also highlighted significant variation in current school policies, which has created inconsistency across Wales. In response, Welsh Government acknowledged that an outright national ban would limit schools' ability to manage the specific needs of their learners, thereby impacting school autonomy.

2.62 In Bridgend, secondary schools have adopted smartphone restrictions during the school day, with some schools permitting restrictive use based on schoolwork-use only and specific permissions.

2.63 These policies based on wider recommendations aim to improve learner wellbeing,

reduce distractions, address issues such as cyberbullying and misuse of social media whilst maintaining school autonomy.

Table 12   Smartphone policies across Bridgend secondary schools.

School	School Policy (smartphone use in school)
Archbishop McGrath Catholic High School	Not permitted
Brynteg Comprehensive School	Not permitted
Bryntirion Comprehensive School	Limited use only (schoolwork related)
Coleg Cymunedol Y Dderwen	Not permitted
Cynffig Comprehensive School	Not permitted
Pencoed Comprehensive School	Not permitted
Porthcawl Comprehensive School	Not permitted
Ysgol Maesteg	Not permitted
Ysgol Gyfun Gymraeg Llangynwyd	Not permitted (Sixth Form learners only in designated areas).

2.64   There is no single solution to the online safety challenges faced by children and young people today. However, supporting schools, learners, and families to stay informed – through up-to-date research and accessible information – is essential for understanding how young people engage with technology. These insights are critical for shaping effective, balanced policies, supporting curriculum-based learning opportunities, engaging families, and promoting the safe, responsible, and purposeful use of digital and online tools in education.

3.   Current situation/proposal

3.1   The Education, Early Years and Young People Directorate recognises the online safety challenges schools face and is committed to ensuring schools are made aware of the latest information and research related to technology and online safety. Through collaboration the directorate ensures Bridgend schools and other local authority services are provided with insight and understanding needed to respond effectively to current online safety matters and can act in the best interests of all users of technology.

3.2   The local authority works closely with schools and has made significant progress in strengthening schools' capacity to deliver relevant and targeted online safety education, while ensuring that school technology meets the digital standards set by Welsh Government and is also reflective of the technology learners experience in their everyday lives.

3.3   Effective collaboration between schools and the local authority ensures that investments in technology – such as devices, networks, and infrastructure – provide safe, reliable, and robust digital tools for both learners and staff. This partnership also supports schools in adopting appropriate policies and practices related to technology and online safety, helping to maintain and continually enhance a secure digital environment across all educational settings.

3.4   The 'Team Bridgend' approach remains central to collaboration between the local authority and schools on education and online safety. Through collaborative groups and professional networks comprising of headteachers, school leaders, ICT Support and local authority officers, the local authority can support schools with informed guidance and strategy to improve online safety outcomes for learners and staff.

3.5   The Digital Leaders' Group is a Bridgend schools' practitioners' network that meets termly and plays a vital role in advancing the online safety and digital curriculum agenda. It provides school leaders and practitioners with professional learning opportunities, skills development, and access to key information on technology, curriculum priorities, and learner activities. Coordinated in partnership with schools, the network also hosts Welsh Government representatives and technology partners to ensure schools remain informed, supported, and aligned with national and local digital strategies.

3.6   School budgetary pressures and limited staff release time are increasingly affecting attendance and engagement with the Digital Leaders' Group network. This, in turn, impacts access to professional learning opportunities, underlining the need for sustained support and more flexible delivery models to ensure schools keep pace with technological and digital-behavioural change.

3.7   Additional local authority digital and online safety groups, such as Bridgend Schools' ICT Strategy Group and Bridgend Schools' Web Filtering Group provide schools with strategic guidance on digital infrastructure and device deployment. These groups also establish policies and standards for technology 'best practice', strengthening online safety measures for both learners and staff across schools.

Curriculum for Wales, Digital Competence Framework (DCF)

3.8   Schools play a vital role in helping children and young people develop the knowledge and skills needed to stay safe online and challenge their attitudes, behaviours and decisions through a wide range of online safety learning experiences and opportunities.

3.9   Curriculum for Wales embeds online safety learning within a mandatory cross-curricular framework of digital competencies and skills designed to support learners aged 3 to 16-years-old. Known as the Digital Competence Framework it places digital and online learning on equal footing with literacy, numeracy, and the Welsh language.

3.10   The delivery of the Digital Competence Framework is a shared responsibility across all curriculum areas and for all school practitioners. It is essential that all educators provide meaningful and engaging learning experiences that equip learners to navigate a wide range of online safety challenges confidently and responsibly.

3.11   The Digital Competence Framework sets out clear national expectations for what learners should know and be able to do in a digital world. The Digital Competence Framework focuses on four key areas that align with the concepts, concerns and challenges identified in online safety research and is structured as follows:

- Citizenship – promoting safe, legal, and ethical behaviour online.
- Interacting and collaborating – using digital tools to communicate and work with others.
- Producing – creating digital content for different audiences and purposes.
- Data and computational thinking – understanding data, logic, and problem-solving through technology.

3.12   These four areas are broken down further by schools into progressive, age-appropriate and developmental learning steps to ensure comprehensive coverage of online safety topics, which include:

- identity, image and reputation;
- digital rights, licensing and ownership;
- online behaviour and cyberbullying;
- online identity and footprint;
- password security;
- age-appropriate content and media;
- plagiarism and copyright;
- appropriate online communication;
- metadata awareness;
- location sharing risks;
- secure websites and privacy seals;
- managing digital reputation;
- digital image editing and permissions;
- sexting and legal consequences;
- recognising offensive language online;
- collaborative online behaviour; and
- balancing screen time and well-being.

3.13   While the overarching Digital Competence Framework is national, decisions on how digital competence and online safety learning are embedded and developed within and across the curriculum are made at a local and school level, aligning with each school's individual approach and often addressing current local, national and global matters of concern for online safety.

3.14   It is important to recognise that digital and online safety education is no longer the sole responsibility of digital or technology specialists; it is a shared commitment across the whole school workforce. All educators, regardless of subject discipline, play a vital role in embedding digital resilience, promoting safe and responsible online behaviours, and equipping learners to navigate the complexities of digital life with confidence and critical awareness. This is a fundamental expectation of

Curriculum for Wales whereby promoting wider responsibility for online safety.

3.15 The Education Early Years and Young People Directorate provides continued support to schools to meet the requirements of Curriculum for Wales and the Digital Competence Framework to enhance delivery of meaningful, cross-curricular digital learning experiences. This includes supporting and providing schools with:

- professional support networks and links with technology partners;
- professional development for online safety;
- digital and technology skills training;
- innovative teaching and learning pedagogy;
- digital curriculum design;
- guidance and policy development for online safety and technology;
- sharing relevant information and research relating to technology; and
- supporting online safety and technology learner activities, events and resources.

3.16 With support from the local authority, schools offer a range of enriched digital learning opportunities to encourage learner engagement with online safety and digital skill development:

- The local authority supports schools with a Digital Competence Framework 'planning for progression' resource that suggest a range of innovative teaching and learning activities than can be applied across all curriculum areas (for example, podcast making, sound and music production, animation, photography, cyber security).

- Schools are being supported by the local authority with the introduction of generative artificial intelligence (Gen AI) resources and schools are developing learning around responsible and ethical use of generative artificial intelligence to reflect the increased use of artificial intelligence in society.

- The local authority supports schools with enriched digital learning through emerging technologies, including gamified platforms like Minecraft Education and Scratch, and creative tools enhanced by artificial intelligence, such as those within Microsoft365, Google Workspace for Education and Adobe Creative Cloud. These innovative opportunities help learners develop computational thinking, creativity, and responsible digital skills.

- Through the Digital Leaders' Group network and the Bridgend Schools' ICT Strategy Group the local authority provides strategic guidance and promotes best practices to help schools ensure learners have access to modern, industry-standard digital tools and services via the Welsh Government's Hwb platform. This includes cloud-based technology, integrated artificial intelligence features, communication tools, online safety resources and a suite of creative and productivity resources that support both Curriculum for Wales and real-world digital learning experiences.

Online safety and digital learning: good practice across Bridgend schools

3.17 Bridgend schools continue to make strong progress in digital curriculum learning and online safety. By aligning with the Digital Competence Framework and

responding to emerging challenges, schools have created inclusive, forward-thinking environments where learners develop the skills, confidence, and awareness needed to thrive in a connected world. The following examples highlight how schools across Bridgend are embedding digital competence and promoting responsible, ethical use of technology.

- Afon-y-Felin Primary School has been recognised by Welsh Government for its inspirational use of Hwb. Staff and learners demonstrated confident and creative digital learning, showing a strong commitment to online safety and digital competence.

- Maes yr Haul Primary School provides a strong foundation in digital competence. Estyn recognised nearly all learners make good progress in digital skills, alongside literacy and numeracy, with a clear focus on safe and responsible technology use.

- Maes yr Haul Primary School participated in the Minecraft Education 'Club of the Future' competition, in partnership with the Welsh Rugby Union and supported by Hwb. Additionally, the school supported Hwb with the development of a new Hwb platform homepage that will include new artificial intelligence search features.

- Mynydd Cynffig Primary School was recognised by Estyn for supporting learners in developing strong communication and digital skills. Learners apply these skills across the curriculum, promoting safe and effective use of technology.

- Coychurch Primary School has earned 360 Safe Cymru accreditation. This reflects its proactive approach to online safety and its commitment to creating a secure digital learning environment.

- Brynteg School has been spotlighted by Estyn for its digital skills provision. Learners use devices responsibly and develop real-world digital skills through coding and data tasks.

- Bryntirion Comprehensive School has been spotlighted by Estyn for embedding digital skills and online safety across the curriculum. Learners explore ethical issues and develop multimedia projects that support informed digital behaviour.

- Pencoed Comprehensive School has received national recognition for its cybersecurity education. Through competitions, partnerships, and leadership programmes, learners gain real-world experience and develop strong digital and online safety skills.

- Bridgend schools are making significant progress in integrating artificial intelligence and online safety into education. Supported by national and local strategies, schools are adopting local authority-developed policies and practices, using artificial intelligence teaching and learning resources to enhance learning, and promoting safe, responsible online behaviour as part of a digitally secure learning environment.

- A 'Plagiarism and Artificial Intelligence (AI) Malpractice Guide', developed collaboratively with local schools and praised by Welsh Government, ensures a

consistent and proactive approach to AI-related challenges. This work reflects Bridgend's commitment to preparing learners for a future shaped by emerging technologies, while safeguarding integrity and promoting responsible digital behaviour.

- Welsh Government has recognised the strategic approach of Coleg Cymunedol Y Dderwen (CCYD) with mobile phone use in schools and invited representation from CCYD in the newly established Welsh Government Mobile Phone Use in Schools Forum.

Technology to support online safety

3.18   As technology continues to shape the way children and young people learn, it is essential that schools are equipped with digital systems that are robust, safe, and fit for purpose. These systems must support the delivery of Curriculum for Wales and reflect the tools and platforms learners use in their everyday lives.

3.19   To ensure safe and effective curriculum delivery, schools are advised to use modern, secure digital devices and network infrastructure that meet current performance standards. Guided by the Bridgend Schools' ICT Strategy Group, schools receive strategic advice on which technologies to adopt or avoid – those that are aligned with Welsh Government digital standards. This ensures users are protected from cyber threats, compromised data, inappropriate online content but also ensures compatibility with educational platforms and online tools.

3.20   Welsh Government has praised Bridgend Schools' Digital Learning Strategy 2025-2028 for its strong alignment with national priorities, including its Curriculum for Wales and the 'Hwb-first approach'. The strategy was recognised as comprehensive, with commendation for its robust governance structures, stakeholder engagement, online safety support and the detailed overview of digital tools in use across schools, which provides valuable insight into the local digital landscape.

The Hwb Programme

3.21   The [Hwb Programme](#) is Welsh Government's national initiative to transform digital education across all maintained schools in Wales. It provides a bilingual digital platform that supports Curriculum for Wales and aims to:

- equip learners to thrive in a global digital society.
- embed digital competencies, skills, and culture in education;
- deliver a sustainable digital infrastructure, treating digital as the 'fourth utility';
- reduce bureaucracy and support school leaders;
- enable a "Once for Wales" approach to digital transformation in education;
- enhance digital resilience and online safety;
- provide professional learning and support for educators; and
- ensure equitable access to bilingual digital services and content.

3.22   The programme is aligned with the [Digital Strategy for Wales](#) and works collaboratively with local authorities, school improvement partners, and technology suppliers to ensure effective procurement, infrastructure, and service delivery.

3.23   To meet the growing need for effective digital learning, the local authority is

committed to ensuring that all schools benefit fully from Welsh Government's Hwb programme. This strategic approach aims to provide schools with access to safe, modern, and cost-effective technology that supports the delivery of the Curriculum for Wales and reflects the digital tools and experiences familiar to children and young people.

3.24   As part of this commitment, the local authority is working towards becoming a Hwb-first local authority, focused on maximising the full potential of the national Hwb platform, ensuring schools can transition from 'own digital tenants' to Hwb to enhance all areas of learning, including digital citizenship and online safety and provide a safer more robust digital environment for all.

3.25   Bridgend Schools' Digital Learning Strategy 2025-2028 outlines this commitment to the Hwb programme which guides schools by promoting inclusive access to modern digital tools, supports staff development, and places secure infrastructure and online safety and at the heart of its approach ensuring learners can thrive safely in a connected, digital world.

Bridgend Schools' Hwb Migration Plan

3.26   Recent developments have seen the local authority, in collaboration with Welsh Government, develop a strategic Hwb migration plan to support all schools in transitioning from their individually owned digital systems ('own digital tenants') to Welsh Government's Hwb digital ecosystem.

3.27   This transition is designed to maximise equitable access to curriculum-aligned and nationally supported digital tools and services. It also strengthens digital security for all users, improves cost-effectiveness, and enhances teaching and learning opportunities across Bridgend schools.

3.28   Following consultation with Welsh Government and including Bridgend Schools' ICT Strategy Group, school leaders, IT support engineers and learners; the local authority is leading schools through this challenging yet successful Hwb digital tools and services migration plan.

3.29   This collaborative effort has resulted in significant progress to date, supporting schools in transitioning to the Hwb digital platform against an agreed timeline, thereby strengthening the school digital environment and means for delivering effective digital learning and online safety for all school technology users across Bridgend.

Table 13   Bridgend Schools' Hwb Migration Plan 2024-2025.

School Hwb Migration status (September 2025)	Complete	Not Complete
Primary schools	35	13
Secondary schools	2	7
Special schools and PRU	2	1

3.30 Transitioning to Welsh Government's Hwb platform enables schools to access a, 'fit for purpose', secure and comprehensive digital ecosystem designed to support teaching and learning. The local authority actively guides schools through this transition to ensure they can fully benefit from the wide range of tools and services available; many of which include:

- Microsoft 365 Education
- Google Workspace for Education
- Adobe Express for Education
- Adobe Creative Cloud
- Just2Easy
- Minecraft Education
- Britannica Education
- Britannica ImageQuest
- Live lessons and video conferencing
- Hwb resources and playlists
- Apple Regional Training Centre resources
- Artificial intelligence and online safety teaching and learning resources
- Generative AI guidance
- Artificial intelligence foundations training module
- Curriculum for Wales guidance and support
- Generative AI policy template
- 360 Safe Cymru school online safety self-review tool
- Guides for families and learners

Educational technology funding for schools (Hwb)

3.31 Bridgend County Borough Council continues to demonstrate a strong commitment to the Hwb programme, ensuring that schools across Bridgend benefit from ongoing national investment in digital technology through the All-Wales EdTech Commercial Service. This provides future technology licensing with device and infrastructure upgrade opportunities that enhance end-user security and promote safe online learning environments.

3.32 The local authority supports and advises schools in accessing the All-Wales EdTech Commercial Service funding and is responsible for maintaining Bridgend schools' digital estate, which includes:

Table 14 Bridgend schools' 'End Users'.

End User Type	Count
School Staff	3,000
Learners	22,500

Table 15   Bridgend Schools' digital estate as of 2025 (technology deployed in school).

Device Type	Primary school learners	Primary school staff	Secondary school learners	Secondary school staff	Special school learners	Special school staff
Windows desktops	2,282	950	2,127	716	38	95
Windows laptops	2,034	1,718	781	659	58	294
Apple desktops	77	27	15	16	2	1
Apple laptops	29	171	12	130	0	0
Apple iPads	4,707	683	1,311	158	95	67
Android tablets	126	63	126	47	0	0
Chromebooks	11,062	193	6,661	138	133	0
Chrome-enabled devices	11,856	10,492	40	0	0	0
Touch screen monitors/boards	907	–	362	–	82	–
Non-touch screen monitors/boards	1,582	–	1,431	–	10	–
Audio-Visual projectors	234	–	182	–	2	–

3.33   Bridgend's capital funding allocation through the EdTech Commercial Service for 2025 to 2026 was £576,058. This funding, part of the £200 million already invested in education technology across Wales, was directed entirely toward school equipment. It built on previous successful initiatives and supported the continued implementation of the Hwb and EdTech Programme – reinforcing sustainable digital learning aligned with Curriculum for Wales and online safety in schools.

Bridgend Schools' online web filtering

3.34   Bridgend schools' benefit from WebSafe filtering as part of their secure digital infrastructure, delivered through the Public Sector Broadband Aggregation (PSBA) network and supported by the Hwb EdTech Programme, this filtering system for all user is designed to:

- Authenticate users via Hwb credentials.
- Block inappropriate or harmful content.
- Support safeguarding policies and online safety education.

3.35   The local authority ensures that WebSafe filtering is consistently applied across school networks, aligning with national standards for digital resilience and cybersecurity. This forms a core part of Bridgend's commitment to creating safe, inclusive, and digitally secure learning environments for all learners.

3.36   To support safe and secure access to online content, resources, and digital environments, across all Bridgend school networks, the Bridgend Web Filtering Schools ICT Strategy Sub-Group was recently established.

3.37   This advisory group works in partnership with schools to develop and maintain

Bridgend's WebSafe filtering standards. Its core purpose is to agree on local digital filtering standards based on Welsh Government guidance. It advises schools on internet access requests, maintains an audit trail of filtering changes, and contributes to online safety and digital safeguarding across all school settings.

Online safety support and training for schools (staff, learners and families)

3.38   Online safety and digital learning can be complex, requiring continual skill and knowledge development. Bridgend schools are fully committed to promoting safe, responsible, and considerate behaviour online and support is provided to schools through a range of initiatives that ensure that learners, staff, and families can develop a better understanding of safe, responsible and considerate behaviour online.

3.39   There has been a significant increase in demand for school practitioner skills training support as the use and reliance on digital technology in education has increased over time.

3.40   To meet this demand the local authority's Lead Officer, Digital Learning, in collaboration with Hwb and technology partners now provides a range of skills-based training for school staff.

3.41   Throughout the 2024-2025 school year, Bridgend schools have been offered a comprehensive range of online safety and digital skills training.

3.42   Despite continued budgetary pressures impacting on staff release-time, many schools have engaged with the skills training offered by the local authority and receive regular communication through the Digital Leaders' Group school network.

3.43   The programme of skills training and professional learning support has significantly strengthened teachers' knowledge and understanding of children's behaviours and their interactions with technology, introduced practical curriculum tools and resources to support effective online safety and developed staff digital competence to enhance the delivery of digital learning across the curriculum.

Table 16   Number of schools attending local authority digital and online safety skills training through the school year (2024 to 2025).

Type of online safety and digital skills training	In school	Network events
Online Safety (teaching and learning)	27	60
Curriculum for Wales (DCF) Planning for Progression	18	41
Artificial Intelligence and Emerging Technology	12	39
360 Safe Cymru (self-review)	2	41
Adobe Creative Cloud	11	39
Microsoft 365	9	43
Google Workspace for Education	2	41
Computer Science	4	-
School Health Research Network and Estyn Reviews	27	60
Digital Leaders' Group (school network representatives)	-	41

Online safety support for learners and families

3.44 In collaboration with the local authority, throughout 2024-2025 schools have created opportunities for families to deepen their understanding and awareness of online safety, digital wellbeing, and the responsible use of technology through presentation and workshop-style online safety learning sessions.

3.45 A variety of online safety learning sessions for families have been held both in-person (in school) and online (via Teams link) across many Bridgend schools to ensure family members have the best opportunity to attend.

3.46 98% of family members that have attended the learning sessions have reported that the events have positively met their expectations with 87% of attendees reporting an improvement in the knowledge and information gained from the learning events.

3.47 Prior to the learning sessions delivered by the local authority (Lead Officer, Digital Learning) and schools, 70% reported having limited or poor knowledge and understanding of online safety issues relating to their children and technology.

3.48 Following the learning sessions delivered by the local authority (Lead Officer, Digital Learning) and schools, 95% reported improved knowledge and understanding of key online safety matters, with family members feeling more confident in supporting their children with the safer use of technology.

3.49 Parents and carers found the following themes the most informative from the 2024-2025 learning sessions and workshops:

- mobile apps: categories of apps and age-restriction;
- child development: are children ready for social media and over-aged apps?;
- monitoring apps: mobile apps to be aware of, restriction and device configuration;
- WhatsApp and YouTube: what parents and carers need to know, risks and advice;
- Bridgend online safety context: research studies highlighting online safety outcomes for learners in Bridgend; and
- family agreement: setting guidelines for online life in and out of the home.

3.50 Families reported that the online safety learning sessions provided by the local authority and schools have significantly improved their understanding and will guide their future actions, including:

- setting up age restrictions and parental controls on devices and apps;
- installing safety features on children's mobile phones and tablets;
- developing family agreements and clear guidelines for online behaviour;
- increasing awareness of app-related risks, including hidden or inappropriate apps;
- gaining confidence to delay device or social media use until an appropriate age;
- learning how to monitor app permissions, screen time, and online activity;
- improving their ability to start open conversations about online safety and risks;
- accessing trusted resources (such as., Hwb, school guidance) for ongoing

support; and

- strengthening understanding of digital wellbeing and social media maturity.

Table 17   Schools hosting online safety learning sessions in 2024-2025 (delivered by the Lead Officer, Digital Learning).

Online safety events	Count
Events for parents-carers only	20
Events and workshops for learners and family members	7
Series of learner workshops, lessons and assemblies	8

3.51   Families are encouraged within local authority-led online learning sessions and through school communications to visit the Welsh Government's Hwb 'Keeping Safe Online – In the Know' webpage https://hwb.gov.wales/keeping-safe-online/in-the-know/ for practical support and guidance. This comprehensive resource helps families understand and begin to manage the digital world their children engage with by offering:

- app guides for families – information on popular apps children and young people may be using;
- screen time advice –tips on managing healthy device use;
- online safety risks – guidance on identifying and responding to potential online harms;
- digital wellbeing – support for promoting balanced and positive technology use;
- privacy and security – advice on protecting personal information online; and
- social media awareness – insights into platform-use and potential risks.

3.52   The 'Keeping Safe Online' resource provides the latest training and guidance and supports schools, learners, and families in working together to create safer, more informed digital environments. Importantly, the guidance is always subject to change based on the latest information, research and technological changes.

3.53   All support, progress and developments in online safety and digital learning across schools in Bridgend are aligned with the Education Early Years and Young People Directorate Strategic Plan (2023-2028) and reported monthly within directorate's performance management system.

4.   Equality implications (including Socio-economic Duty and Welsh Language)

4.1   The protected characteristics identified within the Equality Act, Socio-economic Duty and the impact on the use of the Welsh Language have been considered in the preparation of this report. As a public body in Wales the Council must consider the impact of strategic decisions, such as the development or the review of policies, strategies, services and functions. This is an information report, therefore it is not necessary to carry out an Equality Impact Assessment in the production of this report. It is considered that there will be no significant or unacceptable equality impacts because of this report.

5.   Well-being of Future Generations implications and connection to Corporate Well-being Objectives

5.1   The well-being goals and principles prescribed for within the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 connect directly to the approach to supporting children, young people and their families. The approach is consistent with the five ways of working as defined within the sustainable development principle and more specifically as follows:

Long term	The approach to online safety and digital learning aims to develop digitally competent, resilient and safer online behaviours in learners, equipping them to thrive as ethical, informed, and confident citizens.
Prevention	The focus of online safety and digital learning is upon ensuring that there is appropriate curriculum provision in place to meet the needs of digital and online challenges.
Integration	The approach to online safety and digital learning addresses the need for a coherent delivery of digital and online safeguarding service.
Collaboration	A fundamental principal of the approach to online safety and digital learning focuses on collaboration to create a safer digital learning environment.
Involvement	Ensuring that all stakeholders are at the heart of the online safety and digital learning.

6.   Climate Change and Nature Implications

6.1   There are no climate change or nature implications resulting from this report. However, we are committed to supporting the implementation of the local authority's 'Bridgend 2030 – Net Zero Carbon Strategy' and Welsh Government's carbon reduction commitments.

7.   Safeguarding and Corporate Parent Implications

7.1   The directorate has a robust approach to safeguarding, and this is detailed within the directorate's strategic plan. The Education, Early Years and Young People Directorate Strategic Plan 2023-2026 is aligned with Bridgend County Borough Council's (BCBC's) Corporate Parenting Strategy.

8.   Financial Implications

8.1   There are no financial implications specifically relating to this report.

9.   Recommendations

9.1   It is recommended that the Education and Youth Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee considers the contents of the report and provides feedback.

Background documents None