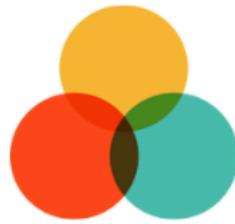




Loughborough
University



equality
action

Annual Public Lecture 2026

Keeping Our Children and
Young People Safe Online

Introduction

Equality Action's Annual Public Lecture brought together voices from across policing, education, health and the voluntary sector to explore issues that affect our communities and to encourage open, informed dialogue.

This year's lecture focused on keeping children and young people safe online, an issue that continues to grow in importance as digital spaces become central to everyday life.

Young people today spend significant amounts of time online, connecting with friends, learning new skills, gaming, creating content and exploring their identity. While these digital spaces offer many opportunities, they can also expose children to risks such as online exploitation, harmful content, misinformation, cyberbullying and social pressures.



Our 2026 lecture explored:

- the benefits and risks of online spaces
- the real challenges facing families, schools and communities
- practical ways we can support children to navigate the digital world safely

The event encouraged a shared understanding that online safety is a collective responsibility.

Keynote Speech

by Grace & Lisa



Grace Strong

Director of Prevention – Leicestershire Police

Grace Strong is a qualified Probation Officer with extensive experience in prevention, safeguarding and early intervention. She established the Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland Violence Reduction Network (VRN) in 2019 and continues to lead it in her current role.

Grace now leads **Leicestershire Police's Prevention Directorate**, focusing on child-centred policing and collaborative approaches to reduce harm affecting children and young people.

Lisa Wilkinson

Community & Young People Involvement Manager – VRN LLR

Lisa Wilkinson works to ensure that communities and young people are central to prevention work across the **Violence Reduction Network** partnership.

She leads engagement and co-production with communities, helping organisations better understand the experiences of young people and strengthen collaborative approaches to preventing harm.

Understanding Online Spaces for Young People

Children and young people engage with the online world in many different ways. Digital platforms are used daily for communication, entertainment, learning and self-expression.

Young people may use online platforms to:

- Stay connected with friends and build social networks
- Play games or participate in online communities
- Create and share content through video or live streaming
- Access learning resources and educational tools
- Explore identity and find support networks

Research shows that the internet can have a positive impact on young people's lives. Many report that it helps them learn new skills, complete schoolwork and maintain friendships. However, these benefits exist alongside increasing concerns about **online harms and digital wellbeing**.





Online Harms Affecting Children and Young People

While the online world provides opportunities for connection and learning, it can also expose children to risks.

Research highlights that a large proportion of young people encounter harmful content online, and many experience negative interactions through digital communication technologies.

Online risks can include:

- Exposure to harmful or misleading content
- Online bullying and harassment
- Grooming and exploitation
- Financial pressures and online scams
- Unrealistic portrayals of lifestyle or appearance
- Social pressure and mental health impacts

These risks often overlap with challenges that young people already face offline, meaning that **online and offline harms are closely connected.**

“A lot of young people start talking to people online who are not really safe for them, and they end up in situations they wouldn’t normally choose.”

Risk and Protective Factors

Understanding the factors that increase or reduce risk is key to supporting children and young people online.

Some young people may be more vulnerable due to factors such as low self-esteem, social isolation, previous experiences of victimisation or limited supervision online.

At the same time, several protective factors can significantly reduce risks, including:

- open conversations between parents and children
- digital literacy and online safety education
- strong friendships and trusted adults
- clear boundaries around internet use
- supportive communities and schools



Creating safe online experiences requires attention not only to technology but also to **relationships, education and support systems.**

65% of children
say being online
makes them
happy, yet **63% of**
parents believe it
negatively affects
their child's health.

A Whole-System Approach

Protecting children and young people online requires collaboration across multiple sectors.

Families, schools, community organisations, technology companies, policymakers and law enforcement all play a role in preventing harm and supporting young people to navigate digital spaces safely.

Recent legislation such as the Online Safety Act (2023) has introduced new responsibilities for platforms and created criminal offences relating to harmful online behaviour.



However, legislation alone cannot address every challenge. Effective prevention requires:

- education and awareness
- early intervention
- community engagement
- strong safeguarding practices
- support services for young people and families

A whole-system approach recognises that **safeguarding young people online is a shared responsibility.**

Panel Discussion and Q&A



Following the keynote presentations, an expert panel shared their perspectives and took part in a discussion with the audience.

The panel brought together professionals working with children and young people across health, education, youth engagement and community organisations.



Panel speakers included:

- Dr Nisha Karia - Clinical Psychologist
- Sarah Sadler - Area Director of Schools, [Learn Academies Trust](#)
- Hema Badger-Mistry - CEO, [Pedestrian](#)
- Ismail Sarwar - Youth Representative



The discussion explored practical questions including how schools and parents can support young people online, the impact of social media on mental health and identity, and how communities can recognise and respond to online harms.



Audience members also contributed questions and reflections, highlighting the importance of continued dialogue around digital safety.



Thank You

We would like to extend our thanks to our keynote speakers, panel members, partners and everyone who attended the Annual Public Lecture 2026.

How You Can Get Involved

At Equality Action, we work year-round to support communities, challenge inequality and promote inclusion. Here's how you can be part of our work:

Become a Member

Join our network and support our work tackling inequality and promoting inclusion. Members receive regular updates, event invitations and the chance to help shape our projects.

Volunteer with Us

Use your time and skills to support our community projects, from helping at events to engaging with local initiatives that break down barriers and create opportunities.

Partner with Us

Whether you're a local organisation, business or service provider, we welcome collaborations and ensure underrepresented communities get the support they deserve.



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