Director of Public Health
Growing Up Online

Executive Summary 2025

This report explores the complex and rapidly evolving relationship between young people and social media, bringing together evidence, lived experience, professional insight, and creative youth led contributions. It highlights both the opportunities and risks that digital platforms present, with a particular focus on misinformation, loneliness and isolation, and the commercial determinants of health. The narrative reflects Warwickshire's commitment to championing the voices of children and young people, supporting families, and fostering safe and healthy online environments.

It begins by outlining what is known about patterns of social media use, illustrating how digital engagement has become embedded in daily routines, relationships, and identity forming experiences. Access to smartphones and social media is rising at younger ages, including significant under 13 use despite platform age restrictions. Young people shift from passive to active engagement as they age, increasing exposure to complex algorithms, influencer culture, and AI generated content.

Young people's own voices provide a powerful lens into these experiences. In the *"Voices of the Future"* articles we present firsthand reflections that highlight the nuanced ways digital platforms influence self–esteem, stress levels, friendships, and decision–making. Creative youth led elements feature throughout the report, including the Safer Internet Penguin (SIP), which provides relatable, child friendly messages about staying safe online. These voices help emphasise that meaningful progress in digital wellbeing requires approaches that resonate with young people's real experiences and preferred ways of communicating. The insights from children and young people set the foundation for the report's exploration of supportive strategies for parents, carers, and schools. Practical guidance and resources are offered to help adults navigate conversations about online behaviour, strengthen digital literacy, set healthy boundaries, and collaborate with young people to create safer digital routines. Existing local podcasts bring to life the issues discussed in the report and illustrate how digital storytelling can empower young voices. These contributions demonstrate how young people are not only affected by online environments but are also active creators of content and solutions.

The core of the report focuses on three critical areas: misinformation, loneliness and isolation, and the commercial determinants of health. Together, these issues illustrate how the online environment can shape health outcomes beyond individual behaviour. Tobias Lambe, a 21 year old medical student, offers a compelling commentary on how misinformation spreads, how it influences trust in healthcare, and how young people make sense of conflicting sources. Scenarios exploring loneliness and isolation add further depth, showing how online interactions can both alleviate and amplify emotional vulnerability.

The report also includes reflections and recommendations from Dr Shade Agboola, bringing a public health lens to the three focus areas. Her commentary highlights the need for systemwide action spanning education, community safety, healthcare, and regulatory partners to address the wider factors that shape healthy online behaviours. This section reinforces how public health can lead and convene efforts to tackle misinformation, build resilience, reduce social isolation, and challenge commercial practices that undermine wellbeing.

Situating this work within the broader context of the *Warwickshire Director of Public Health Annual Report 2024: The Power of People and Place.* It underscores how digital wellbeing intersects with physical, social, and community environments, and calls for a coordinated approach that champions prevention, amplifies young voices, and supports families and schools. By drawing together evidence, insight, and lived experience, the report sets out a clear direction for creating safer, healthier digital futures for Warwickshire's children and young people and supporting the places they live in.