

A PLAN INTERNATIONAL

SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE POLICY GUIDANCE

SAFETY ON ONLINE PLATFORMS



Guidance for staff who want to use online platforms and/or set up online groups to involve children and young people in Plan International's work

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1. INTRODUCTION

Why Do We Need This Guidance?

Plan International is increasingly using online platforms to connect with, and enable connections among, children and young people at national, regional and global levels. The speed, convenience and benefits of such platforms make them invaluable tools for maximising the impact and reach of Plan International's work. Globally, access to the internet has rapidly increased and the number of available networking platforms has significantly expanded. There are opportunities for Plan International to leverage these platforms to reach a much larger group of young people, building connections across groups and individuals, as well as amplifying their voices, making children and young people active agents in our efforts to achieve a just world that advances children's rights and equality for girls.

However, it is important to recognise that the digital world is a vast and largely unregulated space and that the online safety, security and protection risks for the young people we work with are complex and multi-faceted. Therefore, we must make all reasonable efforts to manage those risks when using these platforms while making the best use of the benefits they offer. This guidance recognises both the benefits and risks and seeks to guide staff in how to leverage digital tools effectively, responsibly and safely, while minimising risks to beneficiaries.

What is covered in this Guidance?

This document aims to provide guidance on the use of online platforms by Plan International in our work with children and young people worldwide¹. It is intended to be used by staff and other stakeholders engaged in projects/initiatives/approaches who want to use online platforms as enablers for participants to privately communicate, network and get access to information etc. These initiatives may include a component where Plan International collects anonymized data for research and/or advocacy/campaign purposes.

Online platforms refer to mobile and online platforms, apps, and social media sites. Examples of current popular platforms include Facebook and Instagram, which can be used without a contractual agreement, as well as platforms such as Workplace or custom-made online discussion forums, the use of which would be formally contracted.

What is not covered in this Guidance?

It is important to note that this guidance does not cover or replace aspects that are already addressed by existing policies, procedures and guidelines such as Data and Privacy Policy, ICT Policy, Access Control Policy and Sponsorship and Child Data Guidelines. This document complements existing Plan International policies and those must be referred to for detailed guidance where necessary.

¹ Some content of this guidance draws upon Keeping Children Safe (KCS)'s [Keeping Children Safe Online Guidance](#), Plan International Australia's [Working Together with Children and Young People for Safety in the Cyber World Guidance](#) and Plan International [Global Guidance on Safeguarding in Programming and Influencing Work](#)

It is also important to note that this document does not cover instances where online platform content is fully visible to the public/third parties. As such, it does not provide guidance for projects involving public campaigning or communications, where children or young people² may be expected to share advocacy messages publicly. Given the high prevalence of (gender-based) harassment, abuse, and violence online, as well as heightened risks related to contact, content, and conduct, public engagement by young people on online platforms through Plan International's activities will need additional guidance that is not provided here. Such initiatives will need to meet the requirements of Plan International's Safeguarding Business Standard 2 on Safe Programming and Influencing Work. [Safeguarding in Plan International's Programming and Influencing Manual](#) provides detailed guidance in this area.

2. DEFINING PLAN INTERNATIONAL'S DUTY OF CARE

Plan International's Commitment to Do No Harm

[Plan International's Safeguarding Children and Young People Policy](#) represents a serious commitment by the organisation to hold ourselves accountable to children and young people, ensuring they feel safe and protected with us and those who represent us at all times. This means that we have a responsibility to do all we can to rigorously assess and reduce risks to children and young people in all our operations and activities. This includes our engagements with children and young people in both online and offline settings.

What is Beyond Plan International's Scope?

It is unrealistic to believe that Plan International can manage all types of safety and protection risks when children and young people use the internet. While Plan International can, and should, build online resilience and educate young people involved in our work about online protection and safety measures in general, it is important to remember that we can only manage safeguarding risks within the scope of online spaces set up by the organisation.

As such, if accessing a private online space requires entry through a public platform, Plan International cannot be held accountable for content participants may encounter during the process of accessing the platform. For example, accessing a private discussion group on Facebook currently requires setting up a profile on the platform and entering the platform's public space prior to entering the private group. While efforts must be taken to educate children and young people on how to stay safe on Facebook generally, Plan International cannot be held liable for content participants may encounter while accessing the private group. That said, the benefits of any proposed use of Facebook and similar platforms must be weighed against the risks associated with the lack of private access.

² The use of the term "young person/young people" in this document refers to both children and young people who are involved in Plan International events, programmes, advocacy work and other activities. This includes all children and young people up to the age of 24 years.

Moreover, if young people engaged in Plan International's work choose to set up their own platforms for networking purposes, Plan International cannot be held liable for risks related to such initiatives, as the organisation has no control over how those platforms are set up and managed. In such situations, Plan International can only provide education about safety and protection risks and the safety measures which should be followed.

3. BENEFITS AND RISKS OF USING ONLINE PLATFORMS

Benefits of Online Networking of Young People for Plan International's Work

Online platforms, in particular social media and networking sites, are already an integral part of the lives of many children and young people across the world. While digital divides certainly exist, user numbers for the most popular platforms continue to grow as the internet becomes increasingly accessible globally.

Online platforms provide users with a range of benefits and opportunities that offline engagement is incapable of doing. The platforms allow for the creation of global networks with the ability to interact in real time. They enable access to information and the creation of communities without the requirement of physically being in the same space. They offer users opportunities to empower themselves with information, connections, and access to education, as well as means to exercise their freedom of expression and be active citizens. Safe online spaces can be a lifeline for oppressed and threatened minorities, including, for example LGBTQI+ youth, and can be indispensable in times of emergencies and disasters.

Leveraging online platforms in our work has a number of potential benefits, including:

- Ability to quickly share information in multiple formats (text, images, audio, video) to geographically dispersed participants, as well as interact with, and receive information from them;
- Reach more children and young people, particularly in locations where we do not have a physical presence;
- Create communities and enable interaction between participants regardless of location, thus developing trust and strengthening engagement;
- Create new participation opportunities for young people who are not interested in participating physically. For example, a young person may be shy to participate in face-to-face activities. Online participation makes the possibility to influence more accessible.
- Ability to gain new insights by analyzing data (e.g. discussions) on online platforms;
- Cut costs and climate impact associated with face-to-face meetings.
- Young people can do volunteer work across countries, thereby getting to know new people and different cultures.
- Create an opportunity for young people to express their opinion without the influence of adults. These platforms provide opportunity for young people to be "in control" of their own voices.

Significantly, using online platforms in our work leverages technology that many young people already have and are familiar with, thereby helping make the most of the investment they have made.

What are the Common Safeguarding Risks to Consider?

With the benefits of the online platforms come a number of risks to which children and young people are particularly vulnerable. Some risks relate to the broad spectrum of children's internet use and are not restricted to online platforms. For example, any child with a browser has the risk of being exposed to harmful online materials which do not depend on interactions with others. However, by increasing the range and frequency of online contacts and enabling the transfer of material between users, online platforms magnify risks and expose young users to risks that they would not otherwise encounter. Without proper awareness of the potential risks and education on how to be safe, young users themselves may unconsciously misbehave online.

The ability to interact with anyone via social media introduces many risks as young people are able to make potentially harmful contacts and share personal information on public platforms. Risks related to internet based social networking cannot be altogether eliminated; however, they can be effectively managed using key safety features. [KCS Guidance on Keeping Children Safe Online](#) has identified safeguarding risks related to online platforms under three main areas. These include content risks, contact risks and conduct related risks. In addition to these three categories, the below table details the general safeguarding risks associated with organisations' setting up of online platforms to interact with children and young people.

Risk type and examples
<p>Content risk (user/s as recipient/s) - The principle of the "Content" risk is that children and young people access and come across online material as passive recipients. This may expose them to risk. Potential risks include the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Exposure to extreme, inappropriate or harmful content on the platform created/used by Plan International.• Young people (particularly survivors or vulnerable youth) become triggered, psychologically distressed or uncomfortable with topics/content discussed on the platform.• Exposure to adverts, links, misinformation through the platform.• Exposure to racist and/offensive content through the platform.
<p>Contact risk (user/s as participant/s) - Contact related risks occur when users knowingly or unknowingly share information about themselves or others, which puts them at risk. Potential risks include the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Users' personal data or online activity is tracked or harvested for financial gain and/or surveillance purposes.• Identity theft: Intruder/imposter joins the group or impersonates an individual's account• User in/unintentionally gives their account password or device to a family member, friend or partner who starts posting or interacting with group and/or its members (e.g., young people could share passwords with their partners as a symbol of trust in relationship).• Gender-based violence online resulting from youth not using appropriate privacy settings. This may be because young people <i>want</i> everyone to see their posts or because the platform's privacy settings and guidelines are difficult to understand or use.• Exposure to inappropriate contacts if a private group's membership is not managed properly. Users constantly changing online identity, making it harder for moderators to know who's who - name, appearance, age, location, relationship status. Their online identity does not correspond to their offline identity.• Members of the group approaching the others for personal help/ financial support.

- Youth who age out of Plan International's safeguarding remit remain active on the platform, as there is no clear process for phasing out.
- Possibility of online grooming if group contacts are not appropriately managed providing an opportunity for predators to find a large number of vulnerable people in one group.

Conduct related risks - *This type of risks occur when group members and/ moderators violate jointly agreed guidelines/ CoC for using the platform. Potential risks include the following:*

- Harassment, cyberbullying, intimidation and/or threats via direct messaging, public debate or other.
- Users and/moderators posting content which is inappropriate, extreme, offensive or racist.
- Users sharing their or other's personal information or information of a sensitive nature.
- Users inadvertently sharing inappropriate content/ personal information, which they did not want to share on the platform.
- Users and/moderator using the platform to share information of politically sensitive nature.
- Moderators condone inappropriate behaviour or do not take reported concerns seriously.

General safeguarding risks - *Potential risks include the following:*

- Failure to adequately assess safeguarding risks before setting up an online platform.
- Online platforms set up without agreeing on group guidelines/CoC on safe use of the platform.
- Users and moderators not informed/ educated on safeguarding risks and how to manage them.
- Users do not know how to report concerns.
- Accessing the group through a shared phone and forgetting to log out.
- Young people getting into risky situations to participate in group activities (e.g. going to an internet café at night/ not considering prevailing unsafe situations in their location of access).
- Young person experiences punishments from family/ school due to involvement in the platform.
- Young people developing unrealistic expectations by participating in Plan International's work (e.g. getting financial support/ job opportunities, overseas trips, etc.).
- Feeling left out of group conversations due to lack of access to internet or language constraints.
- Appropriate consent has not been sought to involve young people on the platform.
- Users below 13 years old might be added/included in the online group

4. WHAT CAN BE DONE TO MANAGE SAFEGUARDING RISKS?

Safeguarding risks related to the use of online platforms are complex and not entirely within Plan International's control. Plan International staff need to recognise this and ensure that safeguarding risks are thoroughly assessed and managed to the best reasonable extent when setting up online platforms that aim to involve children and young people. It is essential that safeguarding is factored into the core design of the online platform or, at a minimum, into how it is used by Plan International. Key aspects that need to be looked into are described in this section.

Risk Assessment

Assessing safeguarding risks in relation to the specific project/intervention is the most effective starting point. However, for the risk assessment to be effective staff will need to plan all basic details about the engagement. This includes deciding:

- The purpose of creating/using the online platform;

- What platform is best suited for the intended purpose and what are the specific risks and benefits associated with it;
- Who will be involved in the platform and how user access is managed;
- How will participants be recruited? There are different considerations for peer-to-peer recruitment (e.g. participants invite their friends) and for face-to-face recruitment by staff.
- The profile of the young people you want to involve (eg. Age, gender, level of digital literacy, vulnerabilities).
- How many will be involved initially and subsequently?
- Who will moderate the platform and how?
- How long the platform will be active and what is the phase out plan?

When clarity has been established on the above areas, it is good practice to put together a Terms of Reference to inform the safeguarding risk assessment. As a minimum, the risk assessment needs to identify the risks relating to content, contact risks and conduct along with any other general safeguarding risks associated with setting up of the platform. Plan International's standard risk assessment template can be used for this and it is recommended to think through the following areas:

1. Who is at risk?
2. How are they at risk?
3. Identify what is currently in place to reduce the risk.
4. Consider additional actions to be taken to reduce the level of risk.

[Click here](#) to access the safeguarding risk assessment template

When carrying out the risk assessment it is important to think about different social norms, attitudes, economic, cultural and legal contexts of intended members. This can help determining what safeguarding implications should be considered for those young people taking part in the platform. (E.g., restrictions for social media in some countries, parents' concerns regarding screen time and missing schoolwork, societal views regarding girls going online and/or using online devices etc.). The following set of questions are intended to help staff think through some important aspects:

- What is the possibility of inappropriate/ harmful/ extreme/ offensive content being shared on the platform?
- How could young users be exposed to risks because of information they and others share on the platform?
- How could young users be at risk of harm because of the conduct of other platform users?
- What are the social norms, attitudes and behaviours towards girls, boys and young people in all their diversity and how could this impact on their involvement?
- What topic/issue is the programme/influence work focused on and what are the local views and implications for those involved? (*For example, how may a programme of sexual health for young girls, or one on LGBTI rights be viewed, what are the risks and how can this be managed?*)
- What is the possibility of young users facing backlash from family/school/community because of their involvement in the platform?
- What needs to be in place for girls, boys and young people in all their diversity, particularly girls in order for them to feel 'safe to' participate and engage on the platform?

- Have you considered the age, gender, and other identities of the users (sexual orientation, nationality, ethnic origin, colour, race, disabilities etc.) and any implications for safeguarding?
- Have you considered any other specific vulnerabilities of the target group (e.g. the absence of parental care, girls and boys who have already experienced abuse, displacement, association with armed conflict) and the implications for their safety?
- Have you considered the possibility of a disclosure of abuse made in the online platform? Is there a ready response plan?
- How will you ensure safety and protection is not compromised in the use of images and storytelling (compromising privacy, perpetuating negative stereotyping, etc.)?
- Who are staff/adults involved in the platform and do they have the appropriate knowledge skills and attitude to work safely with young users in all their diversity inclusively and respectfully?
- Do you have enough moderators and the ability to increase the number if needed?
- How about the commitment of the staff to moderate the platform? Are there second liners in case the original moderators leave the organisation?
- Do moderators understand, and are they conscious of their own biases to make better choices over their actions? Are they fully conversant with expectations and obligations on reporting and understand how to maintain the safety of children and young people?
- Has a reporting mechanism that is friendly and accessible to all users been introduced? Is there a reporting mechanism within the platform that links directly to Plan International and individuals/ services who can help identified?
- Who has the responsibility for monitoring the safeguarding aspects on the platform?
- How is the site and discussions within the online space secured?
- Who owns the data?
- What level of privacy do platform users have?

Choosing the Right Platform

The ecosystem of online platforms is constantly evolving, and the popularity of different applications changes over time and across different contexts and user groups. As such, which platform to use should be directed by the project's context and objectives, importantly through direct engagement with the intended users.

The below provides a brief overview of some of the current popular platforms, including their pros and cons in terms of potential use by Plan International for the purpose of online interaction. The overview is not exhaustive, and it should be noted that platforms undergo regular updates and publish new features on an ongoing basis, as a result of which information may be outdated.

Platform and description	Pros	Cons
<p><u>Facebook</u></p> <p>Social media platform with around 2.5 billion users worldwide. Unlimited use of the app is often included in mobile data plans. Use requires registration, which requires use of full name. Minimum age limit: 13</p>	<p>Easy to access, well known and used by many.</p> <p>Inclusion in many mobile data plans means users are able to access it at very low cost.</p>	<p>Accessing private groups requires accessing public platform and creating a (public) profile.</p> <p>Risks include harvesting of data, privacy implications, risks</p>

Platform and description	Pros	Cons
<p>Allows users to connect with others (through Friend requests), create public and private groups, have 1-1 interaction through Messenger.</p> <p>Users are exposed to (personalised) ads for products and services. Facebook makes users' content available to advertisers and other websites and generates income from advertising on their site.</p>	<p>Can be used without contractual agreement.</p> <p>Sophisticated group moderator tools.</p> <p>Many young people already spend time on the platform, so participating in a Plan International moderated group does not require them to change their online behavior.</p>	<p>related to unsuitable content and unsupervised 1-1 communication.</p> <p>Ineffective reporting function (if you develop a good partnership with Facebook and know exactly how to report issues, it is easier to get them to act on reports).</p>
<p><u>Workplace</u></p> <p>Like Facebook, but more secure as Workplace datasets are held securely with Plan International IT safeguards and are not publicly available without prior explicit, informed consent.</p> <p>Platform access by invite only.</p>	<p>Workplace provides a secure environment in which Plan International can respond to Subject Access Requests, carry out investigations into complaints and remove content deemed inappropriate.</p> <p>Workplace profiles are only visible to those who are members of the same groups; reducing the risk of unsolicited attention from others via direct messages.</p> <p>Lower risk of exposure to potentially harmful content compared to hosting groups on e.g. Facebook.</p>	<p>Requires advanced user management, not built for engaging with "beneficiaries".</p> <p>Requires a more advanced strategy for engagement as it is a new platform for most users.</p> <p>Generally not included in data plans – use incurs data charges.</p>
<p><u>WhatsApp</u></p> <p>Messaging service owned by Facebook that allows for the creation of groups with up to 256 people. Text, image, and voice messaging, video and voice calls possible – all 1-1.</p> <p>Age limit: 16 in Europe (with legal guardian's permission younger children can use it). Age limit is 13 years in other parts of the world.</p>	<p>Security by default: End-to-end encryption, data not stored on WhatsApp servers.</p> <p>Use of WhatsApp is often included in mobile data plans.</p> <p>Can be used without contractual agreement.</p>	<p>Inability to monitor communications; need for SIM card.</p> <p>Only moderators can invite new participants (as opposed to FB where anyone can invite but the moderator approves).</p>

Platform and description	Pros	Cons
		<p>Young person's personal phone number is visible to other users.</p> <p>Unsupervised 1-1 communications</p>
<p><u>Snapchat</u></p> <p>Multimedia messaging app. Messages are usually only available for a short time before they become inaccessible to the users and deleted from the Snapchat server. Messages can be shared 1-1, in groups chats, or publicly.</p> <p>Users are exposed to (personalised) ads for products and services.</p> <p>Age limit: 13</p>	<p>Can be used without contractual agreement.</p>	<p>Unsupervised 1-1 communication that does not leave a trace</p> <p>Data harvesting</p>
<p><u>Instagram</u></p> <p>Facebook-owned online mobile photo- and video-sharing networking service where users follow other users. Public and private settings possible.</p> <p>Age limit: 13 (may be higher in some jurisdictions)</p>	<p>Very popular in certain age groups, e.g. 18-29 year-olds in Europe and the US.</p> <p>Can be used without contractual agreement.</p>	<p>Accessing private channel requires accessing public platform.</p> <p>Harvesting of data, privacy implications, and risks related to unsuitable content and unsupervised 1-1 communication.</p> <p>Users are exposed to personalised ads, products and services.</p>
<p><u>Online discussion forum/collaboration spaces</u></p> <p>Online discussion forums or collaboration spaces can take different forms, from being entirely custom built to leveraging existing platforms such as Slack or Discord.</p>	<p>Potential for safeguarding and security by design.</p>	<p>Cost of maintenance and updates.</p> <p>Need to create an additional profile and use an additional application may be a barrier to use. Previous experiences suggest this is expensive and ineffective.</p>
<p><u>Skype</u></p> <p>Free online application for calls and chats. Video, screen sharing, live subtitles, and ability to call phones (at extra cost). Ability to host</p>	<p>End-to-end encrypted private conversations possible.</p> <p>Can be used without contractual agreement.</p>	<p>Unsupervised 1-1 communications</p>

Platform and description	Pros	Cons
video or audio conference with up to 50 people. No public communication platform.	Can also involve young people in group calls by calling their phone number with Skype Credit facility.	
<p><u>Microsoft Teams</u></p> <p>Online meeting tool (including app) that forms part of Plan International's Microsoft 365 suite of tools. Calls, chats, video, screen sharing, and live recording. Also possibility to create project workspaces and share files.</p> <p>Team spaces can be set up by anyone at Plan International, and external stakeholders can be invited to join these (including through a web browser).</p>	<p>Forms part of Plan International's suite of digital tools, staff engagement is through professional profile.</p> <p>Better call quality than e.g. Skype</p> <p>Private discussion spaces for groups.</p>	<p>Unsupervised 1-1 communications.</p> <p>The need for external stakeholders to access an additional online space may be a barrier.</p> <p>User management of external users falls on the project administrator.</p>
<p><u>Zoom</u></p> <p>Online meeting tool (including app) for calls, video conferencing, screen sharing, and live recording.</p> <p>Free version has limitations on use, e.g. 40 minute limit on group meetings. Requires sign-up by meeting host.</p>	<p>Better call quality than e.g. Skype</p> <p>Can be used free without contractual agreement.</p>	<p>Unsupervised 1-1 communications</p> <p>Concerns regarding privacy of Zoom.</p> <p>Cost of tool and limitations on free version.</p>

Popular online platforms that at the moment only or primarily allow for public engagement include:

- **YouTube:** Video-sharing platform, Google subsidiary. Offers a wide variety of user-generated and corporate media videos, including educational content. Ability to view its videos on web pages outside their website. Some 5 billion videos are watched on YouTube each day; over a quarter of online users access YouTube at least once per day.
- **TikTok:** Video-sharing social networking service allows users to create short music and lip-sync videos of 3 to 15 seconds and short looping videos of 3 to 60 seconds. Number of users growing very fast, particularly among children and young people. Privacy, cyberbullying, addiction, and national security concerns have been raised in connection to the site.
- **Twitter:** Microblogging and social networking service where users send and read 280-character messages. Users must be registered to send tweets, but anyone can read them. Searching hashtags could lead users to harmful content.

Some platforms provide group owner with data and insights on how users are engaging on the platform. It is also possible to develop systems that analyse platform engagement to e.g. understand what topics users most commonly discuss. This data could be useful for advocacy purposes. It is however important to ensure that platform users are aware of how data on the platform is used, and

have provided prior, informed consent on the further use of data from the platform, even in instances where it has been anonymized. Given that many platforms automatically provide the group owner with data, there is no way of opting out while remaining in the group. It must be stressed that if a user does not want to share their data, they cannot be part of the group or send any messages to the moderators.

Things to Consider When Setting up the Group and Creating User Profiles

In general, most online groups set up by Plan International are linked to an ongoing project/campaign. Meaning that the prospective group of young people are already connected with the organisation. Therefore, it is good practice to consult them on your proposal to connect with them in an online group by sharing information on how this could be beneficial for achieving the project/campaign goals. To make the online engagement a success, work with the group to identify which platform will best serve your purpose.

The process of setting up the platform should start with relevant Plan International staff sharing an initial information pack with the prospective users. The information should explain the following:

- Purpose of the platform;
- Who can join;
- Pre-requisites for joining (having an account, access to internet etc.) and terms of engagement;
- What support will be provided by Plan International and disclaimers on risk factors that Plan International has no control over;

Consent to join - When it comes to creating groups on Facebook, if a young person under 18 years old already has a profile, we do not need to obtain parental consent for them to join the group. This means that the easiest form of recruitment is by participants inviting their friends to the group via Facebook. If a young person below 18 years does not have a Facebook account but would like to join, we need parental consent to help them create an account. This rule applies to all third party platforms. While we do not need to obtain parental or participant consent outside what is already in the platform, we do have to be transparent about how we moderate our groups and how data is used, so participants can make an informed decision on whether to take part or not.

If a young person does not have a user account on the selected platform, Plan International can share information on how to set up one. However, staff must not create user profiles for young people on public social media platforms (e.g. Facebook). If a private platform (e.g. Workplace) has been selected, Plan International staff will have to create the user accounts with appropriate consent sought from the young person (and their legal guardian if below 18 years).

Plan International should also provide prospective users with information on possible risks of social media and online safety. This should include instructions on safety measures to be followed when setting up / creating user profiles, which can include the following:

- Using a strong password
- How to configure privacy settings
- Setting up security answers

- How to minimise personal information shared (e.g. don't use full name, don't include contact details, addresses, don't use profile pictures with identifying information such as school uniforms, date of birth, etc.)
- Disabling geotagging
- Verifying friend requests and blocking fake accounts
- Knowing how to preserve evidence on social media platforms.

Creating Awareness, Communication and Education about Online Safety

Users' conduct can give rise to many safeguarding risks on an online platform. Much of this can be prevented if the users have a thorough understanding of the safety and security issues and how to manage them. Both the young users and staff involved in the platform need to be aware of what codes of behaviour are expected of them and their responsibilities to prevent harm to themselves and others. To this end, it is important that Plan International staff who are setting up online platforms consider how to educate the users and moderators about online safety. This can be done by:

- Organising a workshop or integrating a session on online safety into an existing one;
- Setting up a webinar or enrolling prospective participants in an online training session;
- Developing terms and conditions of engagement, ideally together with the young people, and getting all users to sign up to the T&Cs;
- Developing clear community guidelines/ codes of behaviour and sharing them with all users before adding them to the platform (as part of T&Cs);
- Establishing clear issue-reporting lines and making sure that all users are aware of these;
- Sharing periodic reminder posts about appropriate/respectful behaviour in the community;
- Ensuring adequate platform moderation (enough staff) and leveraging technology to help highlight risks such as inappropriate content or behavior.

It is important that all awareness and education efforts focus on how to use and behave on the specific platform. Additionally, it is advisable to provide broader advice on how to stay safe online, particularly when access to the group is through a public platform, e.g. Facebook. Importantly, education about online safety also needs to include education about how to safely access the internet, including guidance on accessing the internet in public spaces and on shared devices. Where possible, it is also important to educate parents on online safety risks and how to minimise them.

Many organisations / websites offer online training and information on online safety. Some of these are provided on the next page:

<p>CEOP and THINK U KNOW https://www.thinkuknow.co.uk</p>	<p>Child Exploitation Online Protection Command (CEOP) is a Command of the UK's National Crime Agency and is tasked to work both nationally and internationally to bring online child sex offenders including those involved in the production, distribution and viewing of child abuse material to the UK courts. CEOP works with many professionals and organisations including Plan International. The CEOP Thinkuknow website has information and advice to help children, parents and professionals to keep children safe online.</p>
<p>Childnet International https://www.childnet.com/</p>	<p>Childnet's mission is to work in partnership with others around the world to help make the internet a great and safe place for children. Visit Childnet's Website to find out some resources and tools related to online safety and protection.</p>
<p>CRC Asia https://www.crcasia.org/</p>	<p>Child Rights Coalition Asia (CRC Asia) is a network of child rights organisations working together to be a strong voice for and with children in the region. CRC Asia has produced a useful guidance on online safety for children and young people, which can be downloaded from this link.</p>
<p>Digital Kids Asia Pacific https://dkap.org/</p>	<p>UNESCO's Digital Kids Asia-Pacific project (DKAP), supported by Korean Funds-in-Trust, aims to assist Member States to develop evidence-based policies that foster children's digital citizenship and promote their safe, effective and responsible use of ICT.</p>
<p>Family Online Safety Institute https://www.fosi.org/</p>	<p>FOSI brings together and highlights the best safety messages, tools and methods to reach parents, children and caregivers. FOSI resources has useful guidance on how to take a balanced approach to online safety.</p>
<p>Better Internet for Kids (BIK) https://www.betterinternetforkids.eu/</p>	<p>Better Internet for Kids is a service platform that aims to create a better internet for children and young people within the European Union. This platform has resources that can be used to educate children, parents and staff on safe use of internet.</p>
<p>Safer Sisters https://safesisters.net/</p>	<p>Safesisters is a platform that has a wealth of useful information and resources to learn about the risks related to internet with a particular focus on women and girls. These resources help users learn how to make informed decisions and use the internet in an effective and safe manner.</p>
<p>ConnectSafely https://www.connectsafely.org/</p>	<p>ConnectSafely is a non-profit organization dedicated to educating users of connected technology about safety, privacy, and security.</p>
<p>ECPAT https://www.ecpat.org</p>	<p>ECPAT's mandate is to end the sexual exploitation of children. ECPAT's Website has various resources on online child sexual abuse and exploitation that may help training and awareness raising.</p>
<p>Facebook Safety http://facebook.com/safety</p>	<p>Facebook Safety aims to provide users updates and information to help keep them and their families safe while using Facebook.</p>

Developing Group Guidelines and User Management Procedures

All users of any online platform set up by Plan International must be able to engage with other users and staff in a safe, respectful and meaningful manner, having open interactions that support the achievement of the intended goals of using the platform. It is always good to agree on community guidelines at the very outset. This helps to set the tone of the group by outlining the ways in which users can positively contribute in group discussions. Having community guidelines will ensure that we are able to:

- Clearly communicate Plan International's expectations of all platform users in terms of conduct;
- Ensure that all users are supported to feel secure, confident and included;
- Ensure that interactions among users are warm, responsive and built on trusting relationships;
- Support users to develop knowledge, skills and understandings to participate fully in interactions and contribute in a meaningful manner;
- Support users to become informed and active in ensuring their own and others' safety and security throughout the engagement, and to be knowledgeable on how to deal with inappropriate content or conduct. More broadly, it is also about supporting users to become responsible digital citizens;
- Prevent conflict as the group grows and provide a feeling of safety for group members;
- Respond appropriately to unacceptable conduct/breaches and report issues safely;
- Maintain respect for, and the rights of, all users at all times;
- Provide information to legal guardians about Plan International's objectives in setting up the platform, codes of behaviour expected of users and the limitations of Plan International's ability to manage risks of the engagement, which are beyond its control ;
- Minimise security and privacy breaches.

When possible, it is important to consult prospective users in developing community guidelines. Such collaboration and consultative processes can ensure that all those involved on the platform are committed to upholding guidelines in an informed manner through the clear expression of goals, values and codes of behaviour expected of everyone. It is also important to set a positive tone by encouraging users to have positive interactions with each other rather than listing what is not allowed. Moderators can share periodic updates or refer to specific points of the group guidelines to remind everyone of the expectations.

To make sure that community guidelines are effective and serve the intended purposes, Plan International staff must ensure that the guidelines:

- are clear and practical;
- underpinned by children's rights principles and Plan International's values;
- provide information on how to report concerns;
- outline what actions will be taken in the event of a breach of the agreed guidelines
- are periodically reviewed to ensure that they remain fit for purpose

An Example of Community Guidelines for Online Platforms³

Purpose of the online platform

Outline the overall purpose of setting up the platform

Guidelines: Plan International considers preserving your safety and privacy as of utmost importance when you use this online platform. To this end, we will take all reasonable measures within our control. We will also educate you on online safety in general, as we believe that you have a critical role to play in ensuring your and other users' safety. As a member of this online platform, Plan International expects you to uphold the following community guidelines:

1. Always be polite and respectful to other members of the group. Bullying, aggression or offensive remarks of any kind will not be tolerated.
2. Share only the information that is relevant to the purpose and activities of the group. Spam, posts or links that are not relevant to its purpose will not be allowed.
3. Always keep your username and password safe and do not share it with others. Use only your own account to interact in the group.
4. Always communicate in a manner that all members in the group can see/read . Sending direct messages to other members is discouraged.
5. Quickly report any messages/communications or actions that are inappropriate or make you feel uncomfortable.
6. Always respect everyone's privacy. Never share anyone's personal information on the platform to which you do not have appropriate consent.
7. Exchanges within the platform should never be shared outside of the platform, either online or offline unless such a decision is agreed by consensus.

What you can expect from staff involved in the platform: Staff involved in this platform will always treat you with dignity and respect and they will be sensitive to your age, gender, ethnicity, background, sexuality, religion, and other important personal characteristics. They will never:

- Flirt with you or make sexual comments
- Act or say things in any way that may be abusive or put you at risk.
- Engage in activity or behaviour that may be illegal or unsafe.
- Use offensive language or allow you to use offensive language.
- Ask you to be their friend on other online platforms, such as social media sites, or meet you offline except for during Plan International organised activities or events.

How to report concerns: If you are worried or concerned about your or another members' safety or wellbeing or if you want to report any breaches of these community guidelines, please text/speak to the following staff members:

Staff 1:

Staff 2:

³ It is good practice to develop these guidelines with the intended users. However, staff must know what minimum content must be included.

Plan International Staff Acting as Moderators

For the platform to be safe and effective, it is important that the staff who moderate the platform have a good understanding of associated risks, Plan International's duty of care and safeguarding commitment. They must be fully conversant with expectations and obligations on reporting and understand how to maintain safety of all children and young people involved. To this end, the relevant managers must ensure that the staff who act as moderators:

- have relevant knowledge, skills and attitude to work with children and young people and guide the interactions on the platform;
- are offered appropriate training including an orientation on safeguarding children and young people;
- are supported to manage safeguarding risks, monitor the activities of the platform and deal with difficult situations.
- are known to be responsible and have good background on their own social media accounts and online transactions. This is in addition to having an official account to be used for moderating the platform.

The number of moderators required per platform will vary depending, for instance, on the type of engagement and the number of users, as well as the ability to leverage digital tools to flag inappropriate content/behavior. The need for moderation will need to be continuously assessed. While digital tools (such as AI) can help with moderation by flagging inappropriate behavior/content, it is essential that humans lead moderation of Plan International's digital spaces.

It must be made clear that Plan International's Safeguarding Policy, Code of Conduct and related guidelines will govern the conduct of all Plan International staff involved on the online platform. Additionally, the following steps should be taken to ensure the overall safety of children, young people and the staff members involved.

- Instead of using their personal social media accounts, Plan International staff involved in the platform must set up a new account using their work email to connect. This is so they will be able to maintain professional and personal boundaries. If a handheld device is used for connecting to the platform, staff must always ensure that the device and connection (phone number) belong to Plan International (e.g. engaging young people on a WhatsApp group).
- The account created to connect to the online platform must only be used for the specific purpose and never for personal purposes. The profile should clearly state that the account belongs to a member of Plan International staff/moderator of the group/platform.
- It is good practice to ensure that staff get involved in platform interactions only during work hours in order to keep a safe boundary between work and personal life. To make it practical it helps to identify staff located in different time zones to assist the moderators. It will also be useful to provide awareness to parents/ legal guardians on how to respond to incidents in case young people are unable to access moderators for any reason.
- There is a high possibility that participants will reach out to moderators using one-to-one chat with questions and concerns. Therefore, it is important to set up a routine where someone (e.g. Project Lead) logs into the moderator's account and checks all private conversations on a regular basis (e.g. every two weeks).
- Staff acting as moderators may need to produce periodic updates to the relevant managers on platform activities and the efficiency of the safeguarding measures in place.

Setting up Reporting Mechanisms

Having a clear reporting and responding mechanism is an important aspect of setting up an online platform that seeks to involve children and young people. While the community guidelines help users to understand their rights and codes of behaviour, a reporting mechanism helps in passing on concerns or breaches of agreed guidelines.

When choosing an online platform, it is important to consider what inbuilt reporting mechanisms exist. Many platforms provide users with the option to report inappropriate content/abuse directly to platform administrators. If the existing mechanism does not allow for reporting issues directly to the Plan International staff moderating the platform, it is important that the users are made aware of this and are provided with a reporting option managed by Plan International.

To this end, users can be provided with the option of reporting the incident/concern via direct messaging or calling the designated moderator/s who will act as the safeguarding focal point/s for the platform. The focal points' names, and details on how to report incidents/ concerns need to be shared with all users when they join the platform and information about how to report should be repeated frequently as well as be easily accessible.

When reporting incidents, it is important that users describe the incident that has occurred, take screenshots of any inappropriate posts/messages, and share them with their report. Plan International staff must also be aware of the laws and legal context in their respective countries particularly in keeping evidence when it involves child sexual abuse materials or other materials that could be perceived as child pornography. In some countries, it is illegal to keep/share screenshots of certain materials even for reporting purposes. For example, a nude photo that a young person shares on a platform needs to be immediately deleted to avoid the recipient being accused of possessing or sharing child pornography. These challenges must be identified at the very outset and addressed in setting up reporting mechanisms.

In addition to the staff involved in running the online platform, users must also be provided with information on safeguarding focal points of the Plan International Office in their countries. This will enable users to report any concerns to the designated safeguarding focal point if their concern involves a staff member who is running the platform.

Phasing out/Closing the Platforms

It is important to plan how the platform phase out will happen. We must not have a situation where platforms or groups on third party platforms are created and then left idling when the project is over. This inevitably creates many risks as the platform/group would not be adequately supervised by the staff members who used to run the project (and may no longer be working with the organisation) and users may continue to access sensitive data on the platform. For this reason, it is very important to plan the phase out at the beginning of the project and ensure that the online platform/group is properly terminated at the end. This should include a plan for how to retain and/or dispose of data on platform/group. Making sure platforms are appropriately terminated and any data contained on the platforms is handled appropriately is particularly important when using third platforms without contractual agreement as Plan International does not have full control over these.

5. CASE STUDIES

Girls Out Loud

Girls Out Loud (GOL) provides safe, private online spaces for girls to discuss key gender issues. In private Facebook and Instagram groups moderated by Plan International, girls ask questions and discuss topics such as self-image, gender-based violence, early pregnancies, prevention and abortion. Following a successful implementation in Colombia with over 900 girls taking part, as of March 2020 GoL is live in four more countries. Guatemala, Dominican Republic and Senegal launched in September 2019 and the group in the United Kingdom is getting started.

The project's social listening dashboard, created in collaboration with IBM and Accenture, analyses the group discussions using artificial intelligence. Insights have been used in research, programme design and proposal writing.

GOL allows Plan International to know what girls are thinking and feeling, right now. How do they feel about the situation in their communities? What issues are most important? What do they think should be done to bring about the right change? However, it is also a channel where we can inform girls of their rights, help them stay safe online or encourage them to take action in their communities.

When the project started, digital safeguarding was new to the project team. However, a range of safeguarding risks were identified before the platform was launched ([Click here](#) to see the safeguarding risk assessment) Here are some of the most important things the team learnt on the way:

1. Keeping an online space safe is a full-time job - Keeping the group safe is a time-consuming task, and needs a dedicated person. Every GOL group has a full-time moderator who encourages discussion, answers questions and ensures that the group stays safe.

Top tip! Involve technical advisors and safeguarding focal points from the start – the moderator will need their help throughout.

2. Take care when accepting new members - GOL groups are set as private. The moderator is the only profile that has admin rights and can accept new members. Before accepting new members, the moderator conducts extensive vetting of their profiles. Does the girl have any friends who are already in the group? Do they look like a teenage girl in their picture? If there is any doubt, the moderator will contact the person directly through Messenger and ask more in-depth questions.

Top tip! Use group names that do not often pop up in searches in order to avoid unwanted solicitations. GoL have used made-up words, names in local languages or odd abbreviations.

3. Reiterate the importance of staying safe online - GOL group members spend a lot of time on Facebook, so the team tries to teach them ways of staying safe - both in the group and on Facebook in general. This includes how to set profile settings to private, block users, or report upsetting content. How to keep passwords safe is worth reiterating regularly as there have been many stories of girls sharing passwords with boyfriends.

"It's a place where we express our feelings and opinions, a place where we are not afraid of being judged.

A place where we get support when we have problems."

- Girl 17, Colombia

4. Be prepared to deal with polarised discussions - In GOL groups, opinions vary widely. Sensitive topics such as abortion frequently cause heated discussions. The moderator's role is to make sure everyone respects each other's opinions and lets them know that disrespectful comments or upsetting content will not be tolerated.

Top tip! Use the moderator tool 'Rules' to set up a code of conduct for your group. Group members can then report posts or comments that break the rules, and the moderator can remove group members if necessary.

5. As you build trust, group members will start reaching out for help - Big discussions are held on the Facebook Group wall, but there are also important interactions between the moderators and the girls happening on Messenger. As the moderators build trust, the girls start to ask sensitive questions on Messenger that they will not ask publicly in the group. Some report serious issues, such as abuse or being forced into marriage. These cases are immediately transferred to the office's protection and safeguarding focal point.

6. Be transparent about how personal data is used - We want to be as transparent as possible about who has access to the groups' conversations and member data, so that each member can decide whether or not they want to take part. Facebook's own terms and conditions are very complicated, so we have tried to explain how we use the group's data using simple Q&A infographics.

[Click here](#) to access a more detailed version of this case study on Safeguarding Unit SharePoint.

GGE Core Group's Facebook Group - Plan International Philippines

To enable easier coordination and promote a more effective way of communicating with the youth advocates, Plan International Philippines, through its Girls Get Equal (GGE) Campaign, created and launched a Facebook group in December 2019. The objective of this was to provide members of the GGE Youth Leaders Core Group with a platform where they can access and share relevant advocacy and campaign information and materials.

"I would also like to use the platform in which we, the advocates, can express our opinions and issues about girls and young women" – Laica, Member of the GGE Group, Philippines

The creation of the Facebook group started from the desire of the Communications and Advocacy Unit to maintain constant communication with the girls after the National Leadership Summit where the core group was formed. During this training, the core group was consulted on what communications platforms are conducive for them. Top in their recommendations is the use of a Facebook group for official GGE communication.

Plan International Philippines introduced the following safeguarding measures to make sure that this platform is safe for the young people involved:

1. **Conducted a comprehensive [safeguarding risk assessment](#)** in collaboration with the Child Protection Unit to determine possible risks of establishing the aforementioned platform and the measures that the organization can implement to minimize, if not avoid, such risks.
2. **Followed some processes before members were added to the Facebook group** to ensure that the members are able to read and fill-out the [Facebook Community Standards Google Form](#),

and review the Code of Conduct that contains the general guidelines, rules and regulations for both the administrator and members of the Facebook.

3. **Configured setting** in such a way to ensure that only the authorised staff can add members in the group. Posting is open to all but needs to be approved by the administrators.
4. **Relevant staff regularly reach out to the GGE Core Group members** who are not usually active online via text messages and phone calls.
5. **Constant effort is made to foster a culture of respect within the group** and provide reassurance that everyone has a right to freely express their views online. This is important as some members tend to communicate their views privately through direct messaging due to the fear of being judged based on their opinions.
6. **Periodic monitoring of controls in place** ([click here](#) to see a periodic monitoring report) to ensure that safety measures and group activities are safe, respectful and inclusive.

[Click here](#) to access a more detailed version of this case study on Safeguarding Unit SharePoint.