

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

Post-14 transitions – A survey of the social activity and social networking of blind and partially sighted young people: Technical Report

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Executive Summary

This research project was designed in 2009 by a team from RNIB and VICTAR (Visual Impairment Centre for Teaching and Research at the University of Birmingham) in response to the Research Brief prepared by RNIB: “Longitudinal study from age 14 of blind and partially sighted young people in the UK”.

The key objectives of the project are:

1. To track the process of transition for blind and partially sighted young people from age 14 for five years
2. To identify the roles of professionals involved
3. To identify the factors that improve or reduce a young person’s chance of gaining employment

The project includes the following key phases:

1. Recruit and survey visual impairment services
2. Through these services, recruit and survey a sample of Year 9 (cohort 1) and 11 (cohort 2) students with visual impairment
3. Follow-up surveys of the sample of students with visual impairment

This report primarily focuses on data collection conducted in summer 2011, through telephone interviews with the participants recruited into the project. These interviews focussed specifically on the young people’s experiences of using internet-based social networking sites and also of mobile phones.

The aims of the report are to gain an understanding of:

- how blind and partially sighted young people are accessing the internet
- whether they are using social networking sites
- if they are using social networking sites, what they are using them for
- how accessible they find social networking sites
- their use of mobile phones
- how accessible they find mobile phones

The participants involved in these interviews are the same ones as described in Hewett et al (2011). These participants were recruited from Year 9 and Year 11 across the English Midlands and Wales to take part in the longitudinal project. By June 2011, 81 young people had been

recruited into the project. In total, 70 were available to take part in this particular stage of the project.

Background

Hobbies and after school activities

The young people recruited within the sample have a very wide range of interests and activities, including sport, socialising with friends, playing music, using a computer/internet and watching TV. The majority of the activities listed by the young people were ones which would typically involve other people, with only 21% of the young people listing only activities that they would do independently of their peers.

Looking at the relationship between the type of hobbies and after school activities, we have some positive evidence that their level of visual impairment is not impacting on the young people's opportunities to spend time with their peers outside of school (although it should be remembered that many of the young people with the most severe visual impairments in our sample are in residential education settings with activities set up specially for them to socialise with their peers).

Friendships

Cohort 2 largely seems to have had a positive experience of developing and maintaining relationships since the post-GCSE transition period after Year 11. Of the 47 interviewed, 44 felt that they had a network of friends at school or college.

The types of friendships experienced by the young people were mixed, although over half (54%) said that they had a 'group of friends'. Some reported that although they had one or two particularly close friends, they were also part of a wider group (which is likely to be typical of young people in general). Positively, all forty seven of cohort 2 described their experience of settling into their new courses as 'good' or 'average'.

Internet Access

Almost all (99%) of the young people (cohort 1 and 2) have access to the internet at home, and 87% have access through their own computer. The majority (76%) access the internet every day, with over half spending over an hour on the internet per day. It is most common for the young people to access the internet from home, but many also access

the internet from school/college. Accessing the internet via their mobile phones is also very common, with 69% saying that they do this.

Experience of Social Networking Sites

All but three of the young people (cohort 1 and 2) said that they were familiar with the term 'social networking sites'. When asked to name the social networking sites that they were aware of, all of them named Facebook, whilst almost 80% referred to Twitter.

The majority (91%) of young people who took part in the survey have set up their own page or profile on a social networking site. This is a higher proportion than found in an Ofcom survey of young people, where 55% of those aged 12-15 and 67% of those aged 16-17 had set up a profile.

Reasons given for not setting up a profile (or no longer using their social networking profile) include having no interest in social networking sites as an activity and having concerns about the safety of using the sites.

The vast majority of those who use social networking sites said that Facebook was the social networking site that they use or update most often, and this tended to be because it was the site that most of their friends are on.

Most (74%) of the young people also have access to or use instant messenger services, such as Skype or MSN, with MSN being the most popular service to use.

Accessibility of Social Networking Sites

Eleven of the young people said that they were unable to register on social networking sites on their own due to their visual impairment. The website that the young people were most commonly unable to register on was Facebook, although this could be expected as it was the most popular site for the young people to be using. As would be anticipated, those who struggled to register on the sites tended to be those with the most severe visual impairment, i.e. who had larger preferred print formats, or were Braille/electronic users.

Just over a fifth said that the accessibility of the site does have an impact on which social networking site they would use most frequently (although the majority were only registered on the one site, indicating they did not have an alternative to consider).

The majority of the participants access the different social networking sites through either a standard computer set up (47%) or use the inbuilt accessibility options available in Windows/Mac (14%). Some of the young people spoke of ways that they improvised to enable them to use the sites in the best way for them. For example, one person goes on the mobile phone version of Facebook as they find it more accessible than the normal Facebook site, whilst another person uses special client software on the internet because the site has its own screen reader.

Use of Social Networking Sites

The majority (60%) of the young people would visit social networking sites on a daily basis. The time spent on social networking sites each day varies considerably, but the median time is between 20-40 minutes.

It was found that the young people enjoyed using a wide range of functions available on the social networking sites, with the most common features being ones that involve making contact with friends and keeping track of what their friends are doing.

Using classifications which were created by Ofcom (2008) to describe users of social networking sites, it was found that the majority of the young people are typical of 'followers' – users who are following trends in order to keep in touch with what their peers are doing.

Almost half (48%) of the young people go onto social networking sites to use the chat function to communicate with their friends. A quarter (24%) say that they use social networking sites to keep up with friends, and a fifth (19%) use the sites to contact people living far away or people that they do not see very often. Arranging events and playing games is also popular (about one in ten participants).

The majority of participants (79%) said that they also use social networking sites to talk about lessons and homework. Most said that discussions related to asking questions about things they didn't understand and deadlines for school work and assignments. Some used it as a way of getting information if they had missed lessons.

Six of the young people reported that they felt they had been bullied through a social networking site (in one case leading to police involvement). Of these, one had been bullied in relation their eyesight and another was the victim of another young person making unpleasant comments about them.

Use of Mobile Phones

Just one of the 70 participants does not own or have access to a mobile phone. Those who do have phones reported having phones made by a wide variety of manufacturers. The majority of them (75%) had smart phones.

When asked to identify the different features that attracted them to their choice of mobile phone, the most common features that were identified were related to the accessibility of the phone. Almost two thirds (65%) were attracted by specific accessibility options on the phone, and 57% were attracted by clear text on the screen. Other particularly common features were being able to use the internet (58%), being able to use applications (49%), price (45%) and good camera (44%).

Despite 65% of the participants saying that they were attracted by the accessibility features of the phone, only 31% reported that they spent time researching which phone would suit them best before buying one.

The most common use for mobile phones, as reported by the young people is communicating with friends and family (99%) and also for text messaging (97%). Other popular activities included: listening to music (71%); internet access (68%); taking photos (65%); picking up voicemail (62%); social networking sites (59%) and using applications (55%).

Almost all (93%) of the young people use their mobile phone every day, with 65% using it five or more times a day. The amount of time that is spent using mobile phones varies considerable across the participants, with the median amount of time spent each day being 20-40 minutes.

Accessibility of Mobile Phones

Over half (54%) of the young people said that they had used accessibility features on their mobile phones. The most commonly used accessibility features are changing font size/style (32% of all participants) and using zoom functions (23%).

Almost half (49%) of the young people said the accessibility and ease of use does have an impact on which mobile phone they would buy or use. When considering accessibility options, the young people said that they would look at features of the phone (for example size, large screen and having a qwerty keyboard), compatibility with accessibility technology, and whether it has inbuilt accessibility options.

A third (35%) of the young people said that they can feel restricted in accessing mobile phones due to their visual impairment, whilst 41% of them have had mobile phones that they have been unable to use due to their visual impairment.

There were examples of some young people who said that they felt 'left out' because they could not use the same phones as their friends, or because they could not have the phone that they would like. Some also said that they felt restricted in not being able to play games on their phone.

Nearly half the participants (41%) reported that they had owned a mobile phone in the past that they were unable to use due to their visual impairment. The most common problems that were mentioned were that either the screen had been too small, that the keys were too small, or that it wasn't possible to use speech software on the phone.

There was a general consensus amongst the young people that there are still improvements which needed to be made to improve their experience as visually impaired users of mobile phones. They spoke of improvements which needed to be made in the general accessibility of phones, and observed that some manufacturers offer better solutions than others.

A comparison of the visually impaired young people with the general population of young people

The proportion of visually young people who are aware of the term social networking sites is consistent with that of the general population of young people, with 96% of our sample saying that they were familiar with this term, compared to 97% of young people aged 12-15 and 99% of young people aged 16-17 from the general population (Ofcom, 2008).

A higher proportion of the visually impaired young people appear to set up their own page or profile on a social networking site (91%) compared with the general population of young people. However, it should be remembered that the Ofcom survey was reported in 2008, and the popularity of social networking sites has increased since.

Considering the small sample size, the proportion of time reported to be spent by the visually impaired young people on social networking sites is roughly similar to that found by the Ofcom survey, although 60% of the

visually impaired cohort said that they would go onto social networking sites every day, in comparison to 30% in the Ofcom survey.

Ofcom (2008) identified that teenagers tend to fall under three categories when it comes to social networking sites – alpha socialisers (people who are looking to build large networks of friends), attention seekers (those whose profiles have an effect on their social identity) and followers (people who are following trends and using social networking sites to keep in touch with what is going on with their peers). From the responses given, this group of young people seem overwhelmingly to be in the category of 'followers', prioritising using social networking sites to keep in contact with their friends (with little interest in accumulating large groups of contacts on their profiles).

A similar proportion of the visually impaired young people said that they owned or had access to a mobile phone (99%) as was found by the Joined up texting study (95%) (Haste, 2005). However, a higher proportion of the visually impaired young people said reported having a mobile phone on a fixed term contract than was found in the Joined up texting survey (46% compared to 24%). Again caution is required because the Joined up texting survey was carried in 2004 and this is a rapidly changing technology.

1 Background to the RNIB Transitions Project

1.1 Project Overview

This is a report commissioned by RNIB to investigate the experiences of blind and partially sighted young people in using social networking sites and mobile phones. The research is part of a broader, longitudinal project which follows the transition journey of a number of young people as they move from compulsory education into further education, training and employment.

The research project was designed in 2009 by a team from RNIB and VICTAR (Visual Impairment Centre for Teaching and Research at the University of Birmingham) in response to the Research Brief prepared by RNIB: “Longitudinal study from age 14 of blind and partially sighted young people in the UK”. The research started in May 2009 and is being carried out in three phases of work:

1. Recruit and survey visual impairment services
2. Through these services, recruit and survey a sample of Year 9 (cohort 1) and 11 (cohort 2) students with visual impairment
3. Follow-up surveys of the sample of students with visual impairment

This report comes from data collected during Phase 3 of the project.

Young people were recruited into the project through the 18 local authorities, 2 resource bases and 1 special school that had been recruited in Phase 1 of the project. At the time they were asked to identify all the Year 9 and Year 11 students with a visual impairment that they were supporting. Each service provider was asked to complete a short questionnaire identifying the student’s initials, gender, ethnic group, preferred reading format, whether they had additional disabilities, whether the student could independently complete a questionnaire, and details of anything else which could affect the student’s potential involvement.

Being able to ‘independently complete a questionnaire’ was used as the project inclusion criteria for the study. All those students who met the criteria were invited to take part through pre-prepared information packs. Those who consented to take part were consenting to be involved in the longitudinal project (with the freedom to request to withdrawal at any time). Since the start of Phase 2, consent forms have been received from 81 young people, although not all have taken part in every stage of

the data collection process. Comprehensive technical reports of the previous data collections have been presented in Hewett et al (2010) and Hewett et al (2011).

1.2 Data collection

The data for this report was primarily collected through telephone interviews which took place in Summer 2011. The interview schedule consisted of a combination of closed and open questions. The interview was identical for both cohorts 1 and 2, and covered the following topics:

1. Internet access
2. Experience of social networking sites
3. Accessibility of social networking sites
4. Use of social networking sites
5. Use of mobile phones
6. Accessibility of mobile phones

The interviews were completed by 28 students in cohort 1 (aged approximately 15 at the time of interview) and 42 students in cohort 2 (aged approximately 17 at the time of interview).

A small proportion of the data was collected through self completion questionnaires in Summer 2010 (where the young people were asked to give details of their hobbies, and also their computer and internet usage) and in Spring 2011 (where cohort 2 participants were asked questions about the relationships that they had formed during their transition period after finishing their GCSE examinations).

2 Background

2.1 Social Networking Sites

There are a number of definitions of social networking sites, but the one adopted for the interviews for this study was that given by Ofcom (2008, p1).

“Social networking sites are sites that offer people new and varied ways to communicate via the internet, whether through their PC or their mobile phone. They allow people to easily and simply create their own online page or profile and to construct and display an online network of contacts, often called ‘friends’. Users of these sites can communicate via their profile both with their ‘friends’ and with people outside their list of contacts. This can be on a one-to-one basis (much like an email), or in a more public way such as a comment posted for all to see.”

The Ofcom (2008) report presents findings from surveys that were conducted in 2007, and provides a detailed overview of the use of social networking sites in the UK during that time period. Although it is only three years since this report was published, it should be remembered that use of social networking sites changes rapidly. For example as is illustrated in a recent publication by Ofcom (2011) where they report that the proportion of people aged 15-24 who access social networking sites went from 38% in the first quarter of 2008 to 69% in the first quarter of 2011.

Ofcom (2008) used their data to generate five profile types reflecting different behaviours and motivations in relation to SNS use:

- Alpha socialisers – these are mostly male, aged under 25 and who use SNS for flirting and meeting new people
- Attention seekers – these are mostly female, teens to 35 who post photos to get comments from others
- Followers – both male and female users of all ages who are on SNS to keep up with old friends
- Faithfuls – both male and female, aged 20+ who are looking to find old friends
- Functionals – mostly male, aged 20+ who are pursuing interests and hobbies

The website 'roiworld' conducted a survey of teens in 2010 (see roiworld, 2010) with the objective of gaining an understanding of teens' experience with social networking and communities. The survey was completed by 600 young people, who were sampled from a group of people who were registered as users of social networking and online gaming. Their main findings were that on average these young people reported that they typically spent two hours on the internet a day, with 80% of that time being spent on a social network.

As part of a series of research reports in the USA, Lenhart et al (2010) looked at social media and internet use among teenagers (young people aged 12-17) and young adults. They found that 73% of the teenagers with internet access (93% of the teenage population) were using social networking sites (an increase from 55% in November 2006 and 65% in February 2008).

2.2 Accessibility of Social Networking Sites

There have been concerns over the development of Web 2.0 and the implications that this will have on the accessibility of the internet for particular users, such as blind and partially sighted people. The term Web 2.0 was first devised by O'Reilly (2005) as an attempt to define a new genre of websites that had emerged which enabled the user to control their own data.

There have been several independent evaluations conducted of the accessibility of social networking sites for users with disabilities, with many of these concluding that SNS have a low level of accessibility for this group of users. Examples of such surveys include Ability Net (2008) and Discapnet (2010).

2.3 Mobile phones

Due to rapid developments in phone technology, consumer behaviour (including that of teenagers) has changed rapidly in recent years. Ofcom (2011) is one of the most recent studies published which looks at the use of mobile phones by young people in the UK. Their research found that 96% of teenagers (aged 12-15) had a mobile phone.

One of the main findings in this study regarding mobile phones was the growth in ownership of 'smartphones', with sales trebling between the first quarter of 2009 and 2011. The report also concluded that the demand for smartphones, particularly among younger users, had been a

large contributor to an observed increase in the take-up of pay-monthly contracts. They found that almost half (47%) of teens (aged 12-15) own a smartphone, with text messaging being the most important function for teens and young adults. The study also found that the top three activities that teens are using smartphones for include social networking, listening to music and playing games, and they would be more likely to send text messages than make phone calls.

2.4 Accessibility of mobile phones

Providing advice on the accessibility of mobile phones has been a key focus for RNIB's Digital Accessibility team in recent years. In the past, the choice for blind and partially sighted users has been quite restrictive, with the main options being either mobile phones that are compatible with accessibility software which can be installed onto the mobile phone, or specialist mobile phones which are designed for people with visual impairments.

However, as the recent press release by RNIB (2011) describes, the choice these days is a lot more extensive. Options include: the Apple iPhone, which comes with accessibility technology built into the operating system; purchasing additional accessibility software; mobile phones with standard speech software pre-installed; and using Mobile Accessibility on Android phones.

Due to the rapid developments in the mobile phone industry, there are limited contemporary evaluations of the accessibility of mobile phones for blind and partially sighted users.

3 Project Overview

3.1 Sample recruitment and project background

Local authorities, mainstream schools with resource bases for pupils with visual impairment and special schools within England Midlands Wales were originally recruited in 2009. Twenty-six service providers were approached, and in all, positive responses (and eventual questionnaires) were received from 18 local authority visual impairment (VI) services, 2 resource bases and 1 special school designated for pupils with visual impairment. A questionnaire was sent to each head of service (or head of school or resource bases) in Autumn 2009. They were requested to complete the questionnaire and return it to the research team at VICTAR. The questionnaire focused on the blind and partially sighted students that they were supporting in Year 9 and 11, and requested the following information:

- Students initials (therefore not compromising confidentiality)
- Gender
- Ethnic group
- Preferred reading format
- Additional disabilities
- Whether the student could independently complete a questionnaire
- Details of anything else which affect the student's potential involvement

Being able to 'independently complete a questionnaire' was used as the project inclusion criteria for the study and all those students who met the criteria were invited to take part. Pre-prepared information packs were sent to the various local authorities and schools so that they could forward them onto the relevant parents and students. Approximately 143 Year 11 and 119 Year 9 information packs were sent out to parents/guardians of the students identified.

The parent/guardian information packs contained a letter, information sheet and consent form. If the parent(s)/guardian(s) decided that it would be suitable for their child to be involved, they would pass on the student information pack to them. This student pack contained a letter, information sheet and consent form – all prepared according to the young persons' preferred reading format. For any child who required a font size above 20, a CD was included which contained electronic and audio versions of the information pack. Project team contact details were

also included (email and phone number). Provision was made for those young people or families who needed the information in different languages, with translations being made into Polish and Urdu. Follow-up letters were sent by the local authorities and schools to all families approximately two weeks after the initial packs were sent, along with additional follow up letters to those who didn't respond at first. Once a student and their parent(s)/guardian(s) decided that they would like to be involved in the study, they would send their consent forms into the VICTAR office, using the prepaid envelope that was provided.

Those who sent in consent forms were agreeing to take part in a longitudinal study (with the freedom to withdrawal at any time). Since initial recruitment, there have been periods of data collection in Summer 2010, Autumn 2010, Spring 2011, and most recently in Summer 2011, with the data being collected through a combination of self completion questionnaires and telephone interviews.

3.2 Current survey

The longitudinal study had previously received ethical approval by University of Birmingham ethical committee, and approval was also gained at each individual stage of the project.

The results of the most recent data capture in Summer 2011 are presented in this report. This consisted of telephone interviews with 70 young people aged 14-17 which typically took 30-45 minutes. The interview schedule was identical for the two cohorts (year 9 and 11 at time of initial recruitment), and consisted of a combination of closed and open questions in the following sections:

1. Internet access
2. Experience of social networking sites
3. Accessibility of social networking sites
4. Use of social networking sites
5. Use of mobile phones
6. Accessibility of mobile phones

Responses were entered and analysed in PASW Statistics Version 18. The open questions were imported, coded and analysed in NVivo.

This report also presents data relating to social activity which was obtained in previous data collections. In summer 2010 the self

completion questionnaire filled in by the young people included some questions on their hobbies and also their computer and internet usage. Also the interviews with Cohort 2 included some questions in Spring 2011 about their friendships following transition after GCSE examinations.

3.3 Comparator Questions

A number of the questions were sourced from previous studies looking at usage of SNS and mobile phones. It was hoped that these questions would be able to serve as a comparator between our sample and the general population of young people.

3.3.1 Ofcom - Social Networking

This report combined a series of investigations by Ofcom in 2007 which looked at social networking usage by the UK population. Surveys were completed by over 1600 people.

3.3.2 Nestle Social Research programme - Jointed-Up Texting

The data for this report was collected by MORI between April 22 and May 21 2004, using a UK sample of 725 young people between the ages of 11 and 21.

3.4 Reporting strategy

A number of tables are referred to throughout the report. The data is presented in terms of both numbers and percentages. As our sample numbers are low, the percentages should be interpreted cautiously and numbers within individual cells of tables referred to at all times. Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number and so the sum of percentages will not always be exactly 100.

For convenience, and to avoid confusion, the Year 9 cohort are referred to as Cohort 1 throughout the report, and by the Summer 2011 interviews they were all finishing Year 10 (and were generally 15 years old), whilst the Year 11 cohort are referred to as Cohort 2 and by Summer 2012 were all finishing Year 12 (and were generally 17 years old).

3.5 Sample demographics and representativeness

A thorough breakdown of the sample demographics and representativeness of the participants within the longitudinal project can be found in Hewett et al (2011).

Taking the sampling frame of students who were initially identified by the local authority services in phase one of the project as our population, the sample was examined to assess its representativeness.

The small sample size must be taken into account. Even so, overall the sample does appear to be a good reflection of the underlying population, although the following points are noted:

1. There is an underrepresentation of Asian or Asian British young people
2. There is an overrepresentation of those with Statements of Special Educational Needs, Braille users and young people from Wales
3. There is an overrepresentation of those with additional special needs (though it should be noted that the research project was specifically targeting students who did not have learning difficulties – see section on recruitment)

Preferred font size (and reading medium) is taken in this report as an indication of the young person's level of vision. The range of preferred font size of those recruited is wide, from point 12 up to Braille users. Therefore the sample includes young people with varied needs of support and severity of visual impairment.

It was possible to make contact with 70 of the participants for the interview in relation to social networking and mobile phone use. The preferred font size (and reading medium) of these participants is presented in the table below.

Table 1: Preferred reading medium of participants in the Summer 2011 Social Networking and Mobile phone use interviews

Preferred format	Total (N)	Total (%)
Normal to large print (12-17 point)	35	50%
Large print (18-27 point)	22	31%
Very large print (≥ 28 point)	3	4%
Braille/Electronic	10	14%
Total	70	100%

4 Findings

4.1 Hobbies and after school activities

In the summer 2010 survey, the young people were asked to list three things they spend their time doing outside of school hours. This produced a wide range of responses. As they were only listing three activities (although some listed four), this list cannot be considered exhaustive. Nevertheless, it does give a good indication of the types of activities that blind and partially sighted young people are getting involved in. At the time cohort 1 were in Year 9 and cohort 2 were in Year 11.

Table 2: We are interested in how you spend your time outside of school hours. List three things that you spend time doing:

	Cohort 1 (N)	Cohort 1 (%)	Cohort 2 (N)	Cohort 2 (%)	Total (N)	Total (%)
Sport	15	48%	21	45%	36	47%
Socialising with friends	7	23%	23	49%	30	39%
Playing music	5	17%	14	30%	19	25%
Using computer / internet	8	27%	10	21%	18	23%
Watching TV	7	23%	9	19%	16	21%
Listening to music	3	10%	12	26%	15	20%
Reading	5	17%	9	19%	14	18%
Playing computer games	5	17%	5	11%	10	13%
Youth group / youth theatre	3	10%	5	11%	8	10%
School work	1	3%	5	11%	6	8%
Time with family	3	10%	2	4%	5	7%
Part time job or voluntary work	1	3%	3	6%	4	5%
Photography	1	3%	2	4%	3	4%
Another type of club	1	3%	1	2%	2	3%
Other	8	27%	9	19%	17	20%

The table above presents the most common hobbies, and reveals that those in our sample have a very wide range of interests and activities. Other activities mentioned include walking, shopping and playing with their pets. For 21% of the young people, all the activities that they listed

were ones that they might be more likely to do alone, rather than as part of a group. Examples include reading, listening to music and watching TV. It is interesting to note a higher proportion of those in Cohort 2 (49%) listed socialising as one of their activities, compared with Cohort 1 (23%). This would be expected given the older cohort is likely to have had greater independence and freedom to get out and meet with others.

The table below shows the relationship between those who only identified independent activities and the young person's preferred reading format. Taking preferred format as an indication of the severity of the young persons' visual impairment, we see that there is no apparent association between this and whether the young person spends time outside of school with their peers. This provides some positive evidence that level of visual impairment is not impacting on the young peoples' opportunities to spend time with their peers outside of school.

Table 3: Young people who only identified activities they would do independently of their peers. By Preferred Format (Summer 2010, cohort 1 and cohort 2)

Font Size (Point)	Cohort 1 (N)	Cohort 1 (%)	Cohort 2 (N)	Cohort 2 (%)	Total (N)	Total (%)
Normal to large print (12-17 point)	4	27%	4	18%	8	21%
Large print (18-27 point)	1	13%	4	24%	5	20%
Very large print (≥ 28 point)	0	0%	0	0%	0	-
Braille	2	40%	1	20%	3	30%
Electronic	0	0%	0	0%	0	-
Total	7	23%	9	19%	16	21%

Similarly, there appears to be no relationship between social activity and whether the young person had received mobility training (training in how to move about confidently and safely).

4.2 Friendships

Cohort 2 were interviewed in Spring 2011, after they had moved into Year 12, to find more about the friendships that they had developed since the transition after GCSEs. Of the 47 interviewed, 44 felt that they

had a network of friends at school or college. Of the three who did not, one was struggling due to feeling that the other young people around them did not know how to act around them because of their visual impairment. Another was at a college with largely older people and although they felt able to mix well with the other members of the group, would not classify them as friends.

Table 4: How would you best describe the friendships that you have at school/college/work?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
One or two close friends	11	24%
A group of friends	25	54%
A wide range of acquaintances	10	22%
Total	46	100%

The types of friendships experienced by the young people were mixed, although the majority (54%) said that they had a group of friends. Some reported that although they had one or two particularly close friends, they were also part of a wider group, making it more difficult to classify. Positively, when asked how well they had settled in post-GCSEs, all forty seven of the young people gave a rating of either 'good' or 'average', with most giving a rating of 'good' (85%).

Table 5: In terms of friendships and relationships, how does this compare to when you were taking your GCSEs

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Easier	27	57%
Harder	2	4%
Same	17	36%
Don't know	1	2%
Total	47	100%

The table above shows that a number of the young people had found friendships and relationships easier compared to when they were taking their GCSEs. They were asked why they thought they had found friendships and relationships easier, harder or the same. Some examples of responses are given below:

Easier

- People are more mature
- Was being bullied, but now people have backed off a bit, so can relax

- Had issues at school, new college was a new start
- Easier to socialise. More time free, not as hard on hours. Everyone that bit older.

Harder

- In classes with older people and on own more because of doing an apprenticeship
- Making friendships from scratch

Same

- Same people and have enough time to see friends
- Continuation of friendships

4.3 Computer and Internet Access

When asked in Summer 2010, 97% of students said that they had access to either their own computer, or a shared one in the household. All households had broadband connection.

In Summer 2011, all but one participant described having access to the internet at home. The majority (87%) also had access to the internet through their own personal computer at home. This is a higher percentage than found by Ofcom where only 68% of participants had internet access (although it should be noted that this was surveying people aged 15-24).

Table 6: Do you or does anyone in your household have access to the internet at home?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Yes	69	99%
No	1	1%
Not sure	0	0%
Total	70	100%

Table 7: Do you have internet access through your own computer at home?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Yes	61	87%
No	8	11%
Not sure	1	1%
Total	70	100%

Table 8: How often would you typically access the internet?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Every day	53	76%
Every other day	10	14%
A couple of times a week	3	4%
Once a week	2	3%
Less often	2	3%
Total	70	100%

The majority of those interviewed are regular users of the internet, with 76% (53 out of 70) going on the internet every day and only two participants going online less than once a week.

Table 9: How long on average would you spend on the internet per day?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Less than 10 minutes	1	1%
10-20 minutes	9	13%
20-40 minutes	14	20%
40 minutes to 1 hour	10	14%
1-2 hours	15	21%
Over 2 hours	21	30%
Total	70	100%

The amount of time that the young people spend online each day varied considerably, although over 50% estimated that they spent in excess of one hour per day.

Table 10: Where do you access the internet from?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Home	69	99%
School/College	62	89%
Friends house	35	50%
Library	20	28%
Other	26	37%

The young people were asked to identify where they typically access the internet from. As would be anticipated, many access the internet from home (99%) and from school or college (89%). Half accessed the internet from friends' houses, whilst a few (29%) go to the library to use the internet. Some of those who said that they would not go to the library explained that this was not possible because those computers did not have access technology installed.

Several identified 'other' locations they used to access the internet. These other locations included other family members' homes and on mobile device, most notably mobile phones.

Table 11: How would you normally access the internet?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Desktop computer	31	44%
Laptop computer	56	80%
Tablet computer (e.g. an iPad)	14	20%
Mobile/'smart' phone	48	69%
Other	4	6%

Finally, the young people were asked about the various ways in which they would normally access the internet. The majority (80%) had a laptop (in some cases these were provided by their school or college), and over two thirds (69%) use their mobile phone or smart phone to access the internet. Other popular ways of accessing the internet were through tablet computers (20%), whilst the 'other' responses included through a games console and through a Braille note.

4.4 Experience of Social Networking Sites

The following definition of social networking sites was read out to participants:

“Social networking sites and sites that offer people new and varied ways to communicate via the internet, whether

through their PC or their mobile phone. They allow people to easily and simply create their own online page or profile and to construct and display an online network of contacts, often called ‘friends’. Users of these sites can communicate via their profile both with their ‘friends’ and with people outside their list of contacts. This can be on a one-to-one basis (much like an email), or in a more public way such as a comment posted for all to see.” Ofcom (2008).

All but three participants stated that they were familiar with the term ‘social networking sites’. These figures are consistent with that found by Ofcom (2008) where 97% of young people aged 12-15 and 99% of young people aged 16-17 were familiar with the term ‘social networking sites’.

Table 12: Are you familiar with the term ‘Social Networking Sites’?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Yes	67	96%
No	1	1%
Not sure	2	3%
Total	70	100%

Table 13: Can you name some typical social networking sites?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Facebook	69	100%
Twitter	55	78%
Bebo	22	32%
MySpace	32	46%
Other	22	32%

The young people were asked if they could name some typical social networking sites. The different sites and number of times they were identified are shown in the table above. All of those who responded to this question named Facebook as a social networking site, whilst almost 80% cited Twitter. MySpace was the third most commonly identified, with 46% giving it as a response. Several other social networking sites were identified, including Tumblr and two fan fiction sites. Some examples given were not social networking sites (for example, MSN, and hotmail were mentioned).

Table 14: Have you set up your own page or profile on a website such as Bebo, hi5, Facebook, Twitter or MySpace?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Yes	64	91%
No	5	7%
Not sure	1	1%
Total	70	100%

The majority (91%) of young people who took part in the survey said they had set up their own page or profile on a social networking site. This is a higher proportion than found by the older Ofcom (2008) survey which found 55% of those aged 12-15 and 67% of those aged 16-17 had set up a profile.

Those who had not set up a profile were given a variety of possible reasons why they might choose not to use social networking sites. The responses given to these questions are presented in the table below. Although only 6 people said that they didn't have a profile on a social networking site, another two had set up a profile in the past, but chosen not to use it.

Table 15: Reasons for not using social networking sites. N=8

Question / reason	Very true	A little true	Not at all true	Unsure	Total
I do not use social networking sites because I have no interest in social networking sites as an activity	6	1	1	0	8
I do not use social networking sites because I don't have time to commit to using the sites	3	2	2	1	8
I do not use social networking sites because I don't want to 'jump on board' the social networking craze	3	3	0	2	8
I do not use social networking sites because I prefer to rely on face-to-face and other forms of communication	3	3	0	2	8
I do not use social networking sites because I have witnessed the negative side of using social networking sites among friends and have chosen to 'steer clear'	1	4	2	1	8
I do not use social networking sites because I have concerns about safety and being stalked by other users (on and offline)	5	2	1	0	8
I do not use social networking sites because I have accessibility problems in using the websites due to my visual impairment	1	1	6	0	8
I do not use social networking sites because I my parents/carers have banned me from doing so.	2	0	6	0	8
I do not use social networking sites because I do not have access to the internet	1	0	7	0	8

The eight who were not using social networking sites were then asked for the main reason for them not using such a site. Four of the eight said that they simply had no interest in it, one person said that they found it really addictive and annoying so stopped using it, and one person said that they preferred speaking to people face to face rather than on the internet. The final two participants had safety concerns, and particularly in one case the young persons' parents had said they did not want them using social networking sites due to the possibility of people threatening them. Accessibility was not identified as the main reason for not using social networking sites by any of the participants.

Those who do use social networking sites were asked 'Which is the profile [that is social networking site] you use or update most often?' The vast majority (89%) said that this was Facebook, with others using Twitter or a combination of Twitter and Facebook the most. The young people who answered the question 'Which is the profile you use or update most often?' were asked to explain why this was the case.

Table 16: Why do you choose to use or update this profile the most?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Friends are on it	39	63%
Easier to use	8	13%
Good in terms of accessibility	4	7%
Other	12	19%

The most common reason given for choosing to update a particular profile most often was that they considered it to be the most commonly used site, and so all their friends were on it. Those who gave this response (63%) were typically referring to Facebook.

Eight people said that they used a particular site because it was easier to use (including being able to access it more easily because they could get onto it through their mobile phone). Four people identified good accessibility as the main factor for them choosing a particular social networking site. Two of these used Facebook (with one saying they found it a "simple, basic layout", whilst another said they benefited from being able to zoom into the page). The other two used Twitter, stating that they have found the accessibility on it better than other social networks. One uses a special version known as "Quitter" due to the fact that it works well with their screenreader, and another reported Twitter to be "one of the easiest social networking sites to use with a screen reader".

Table 17: Do you know roughly how long you have had a social networking site for?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Up to 6 months	4	7%
6-12 months	13	21%
1-2 years	22	36%
2+ years	23	37%
Total	62	100%

The average time that the young people have had social networking sites is approximately 27 months, whilst the median time is 24 months (although as the table above shows, this length of time varies considerably).

Table 18: Do you have access to/use instant messenger services such as MSN or Skype?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Yes	50	74%
No	17	25%
Not sure	1	2%
Total	68	100%

Finally, the young people were asked if they ever use instant messenger services such as MSN or Skype. The majority (74%) said that they did, although many indicated that they still preferred to use the chat functions on Facebook. One person said that they preferred Facebook over MSN because they found it more accessible.

Table 19: Which instant messenger services do you use?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
MSN	23	51%
Skype	11	24%
MSN and Skype	11	24%
Other	1	2%
Total	45	100%

The most commonly used instant messenger service was MSN (with 76% of the young people reporting that they have used it), whilst 49% had used Skype. The only other messenger service that was mentioned was TeamTalk by one individual.

4.5 Accessibility of Social Networking Sites

Before proceeding with questions on the accessibility of social networking sites, a definition of accessibility was given:

“By accessibility we mean the ease with which you can use the site because it may be difficult to set the colours or size of things on the screen for you to see properly, or difficult for you to use a screen reader.”

Table 20: Were there any social networking sites you were unable to register on due to your visual impairment?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Yes	11	17%
No	53	80%
Not sure	2	3%
Total	66	100%

The young people were asked whether there were any social networking sites that they were unable to register on due to their visual impairment. It was explained to them that this may also have meant that they were able to register, but in order to do so they had to seek assistance from someone else. Eleven of the young people said that they were unable to register on their own as a result of their visual impairment, and were invited to give further information.

Table 21: Name of the website they were unable to register on. N=11

	Total (N)
Facebook	7
Twitter	4
Bebo	1
Youtube	1
MSN	1

The website that the young people were most commonly unable to register on was Facebook (although it must be remembered that Facebook is the most popular social networking site). Examples of comments that were made about the registration process include:

“Facebook – mum had to register account. [I’ve] not got a good enough screen reader as it’s too expensive.”

“Facebook – on the bit where you have to confirm the text writing was difficult [i.e. the security code]. Had to find someone to help, otherwise wouldn’t have been able to register.”

“Twitter and Bebo had CAPTCHAS [security checks], couldn’t read them.”

As would be anticipated, those who reported difficulty registering on social networking sites tended to have more severe visual impairments (six of the 11 were braille readers).

Table 22: Does the accessibility of the site in any way have an impact on which social networking sites you use most frequently?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Yes	14	22%
No	44	68%
Not sure	7	11%
Total	65	100%

The young people were asked whether they thought the accessibility of the social networking sites in any way has an impact on which site they would use most frequently. Fourteen of the young people said that it would do. Some of these participants explained the response that they had given:

“If it is easier to get on, I use it more”

“If something has a more basic layout, I’m more likely to use it as it’s quicker to read.”

Table 23: Could you tell me about how you would access the different social networking sites that you use?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Through a standard computer set up	30	47%
Through using the inbuilt accessibility options in Windows/Mac	9	14%
Through using magnification software	7	11%
Through using a screen reader	4	6%
Through using a combination of magnification software and a screen reader	2	3%
Other	12	19%
Total	64	100%

The young people were asked how they accessed the different social networking sites that they used. The majority of the participants described either using a standard computer set up (47%) or using the inbuilt accessibility options available in Windows/Mac operating systems (14%). Some of the young people spoke of ways that they improvised in being able to use the sites in the best way for them. For example, one person used the mobile phone version of Facebook as they find it more accessible than the normal Facebook site, whilst another person used special client software on the internet where the site has its own screenreader.

Table 24: Do you ever feel restricted in accessing social networking sites in any way due to your visual impairment?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Yes	10	15%
No	56	85%
Not sure	0	0%
Total	66	100%

Ten participants described feeling restricted in accessing social networking sites due to their visual impairment. e.g.:

“Games are not speech compatible on Bebo and Facebook. Facebook chat is also difficult but you can adapt that with software.”

“I do wish they had a bigger print on the sites”

“To access the sites I have got to go through google and I can’t enlarge it very much which makes it really difficult. Also, when I do enlarge the screen the titles and top of pages are cut off.”

The young people were then asked if they felt there were any aspects of social networking that they were not able to engage in fully, due to their visual impairment. Eleven (17%) said there were, whilst one other was unsure. The aspects that were most commonly mentioned were the games and chat functions, but other problems identified were related to no descriptions of photos added, messaging on Facebook, status updates being hard to read and the general layout of Twitter. Examples of what was reported include:

“Chat functions on Facebook – all too small, can’t use it”

“Messages – can’t access them all of the time. Can’t see the events stuff organised through facebook. Also, can’t tell if other social networking sites are out there to use as internet searching is restricted by [her] visual impairment.”

“Status updates on facebook are very hard to read as if I enlarge it the writing blurs and cuts things off. Also the chat functions are almost impossible to use as you can’t enlarge the text box and so can’t read the writing.”

When asked whether there were any aspects of social networking that the young people felt they particularly used due to their visual impairment, eleven (17%) reported that they thought there were, whilst a further 4 were unsure. A number spoke about using Facebook as an easier way to communicate with people, rather than using text messaging.

“Easier than texting, screen bigger – better to chat to people than texting.”

“Zoom in helps to read social networking sites – easier than communicating by text.”

“Easier to arrange events and chat to people.”

4.6 Use of Social Networking Sites

Table 25: How often do you visit any sites like Piczo, Bebo, Hi5, Facebook, Twitter or MySpace?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Every day	37	60%
Every other day	13	21%
A couple of times a week	8	13%
Once a week	2	3%
Less often	2	3%
Total	62	100%

The young people were asked how often they visited the social networking sites that they used. The majority (60%) said that they used social networking sites every day. For some who are based at a special residential school this was a difficult question as when at school, they were living with a lot of their friends, and so would be less likely to go on social networking sites to keep in contact with them. In contrast, when they were on holidays they went on social networking sites a lot to communicate with their friends who live in different parts of the country.

Considering the small numbers, the distribution of responses given to this question were similar to those found by the Ofcom study where 30% described using social networking sites everyday, 20% every other day, 17% a couple of times a week, 20% once a week and 1% less often.

Table 26: How long would your typical session using social networking sites be?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Less than 10 minutes	7	11%
10-20 minutes	16	26%
20-40 minutes	15	24%
40 minutes to 1 hour	5	8%
Over 1 hour	11	18%
It is just on in the background	8	13%
Total	62	100%

The young people were also asked how long a typical session using social networking sites was. The responses to this question were varied, but the median time would be between 20-40 minutes.

Table 27: Have your parents or carers given you any rules regarding your use of social networking sites?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Yes	22	36%
No	40	65%
Total	62	100%

For many there are concerns surrounding the safety of using social networking sites, and so the young people were asked if their parents or carers had given them any rules regarding their use of social networking sites. Twenty two (36%) said that they had been given rules of this nature. The young people tended to describe these rules as being told to “be careful”, although some spoke of more specific advice such as “must keep it on privacy setting” and “don’t add people you don’t know, don’t given out your number, personal information, etc.” In comparison, 53% of those aged 8-17 in the Ofcom survey said that they had been given rules regarding their use of social networking sites (although different age ranges of the samples should be taken into account).

Before asking prompted questions on what they were using social networking sites for, the young people were asked to summarise in their own words how they use social networking sites. Although the subsequent questions revealed that their responses given weren’t an exhaustive list, the answers provided give an insight into what they see as the main purpose of their social networking accounts. The responses given were coded into nine categories, as detailed in the table below.

Table 28: Could you sum-up how you use social networking sites?

Function	Total (N)	Total (%)
Communicate through chat functions	30	48%
Keep up with friends	15	24%
Contact people living far away/people don’t see often	12	19%
Plan events	8	13%
Play games	7	11%
Write/read status updates	3	5%
Send/receive messages	3	5%
Post/read comments and wall posts	3	5%
Post/look at photos	3	5%

Almost half (48%) of the young people described using the social networking sites to use the chat function to communicate with their

friends, whilst a quarter (24%) said that they use social networking sites to keep up with friends, and a fifth (19%) used them to contact people living far away or people that they do not see very often. Arranging events and playing games was also popular (13% and 11%).

Table 29: Do you use social networking sites in any of the following ways?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
To stay in touch with friends or family you rarely see in person	59	95%
To stay in touch with friends or family you see a lot	57	92%
To look at your page or other people's pages or profiles	52	84%
To make new friends	24	39%
To contact other people with visual impairments	16	26%

The table above gives the responses to prompted questions about who the young people were using social networking sites to contact. The majority of them were using the sites to stay in touch with friends or family that they see a lot (92%), to look at their page or other people's pages or profiles (84%) and to stay in touch with friends or family they rarely see in person (95%). It was less common to use the sites to make new friends (39%) or to contact other people with visual impairments (26%). Again, these are similar proportions to those reported by Ofcom (2008): 92% of young people used social networking sites to stay in touch with friends/family they see a lot; 92% looked at profile pages; 70% stayed in touch with friends or family they rarely see in person; and 59% made new friends.

The table below gives the results of prompted questions in relation to the use social networking sites. The results given show that the young people are using a wide range of the functions available on social networking sites, with the most common features being ones that involve making contact with friends and keeping track of what friends are doing (in keeping with previous questions).

Table 30: Do you use any of the following features on social networking sites?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Browsing friends profile pages	53	86%
Chat functions on social networking sites	52	84%
Adding photos	52	84%
Joining online groups or fan pages	52	84%
Looking through friends lists of other friends to see who you might add	50	81%
Commenting on photos	44	71%
Searching for old friends	42	68%
Looking for information on music and bands	36	58%
Communicating with friends	33	53%
Playing games	31	50%
Browsing college or university groups and networks	21	34%
Arranging events	20	32%

The participants were also asked if there was anything else that they could think of that they used social networking sites for which had not been covered. One area which was mentioned was using social networking sites as a source of information:

“joined the college theatre group on Facebook – receive important information and communicates with people on that page”

“Getting information about upcoming events, racing information”

Other uses include: exchanging school/college work with friends for them to look at; discussing problems and issues with people; and using it in a work context.

Table 31: Would you ever communicate with your school friends by social networking sites to talk about your lessons and homework?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Yes	50	79%
No	13	21%
Not sure	0	0%
Total	63	100%

The young people were asked whether they would ever communicate with their school friends by social networking sites to talk about their lessons and homework. The majority (50, 79%) said that they did. Those who said that they would were asked what kind of things they would discuss. The most common responses related to asking questions about things they did not understand, what work was due, and when assignments were due to be handed in. Some used it as a way of getting information if they had missed lessons due to illness or hospital appointments. Some responses included:

“Just like what’s the homework and things – nothing important.”

“About how [the] day was and lessons and anything [I] didn’t get.”

“If I’ve missed days for hospital appointments, hand-in dates, easier than giving out mobile number.”

“Would discuss when assignments are due. If [I] need help, is very useful for getting in touch.”

There have been reports on the more negative aspects of social networking, particularly in the case of younger users, who may be subjected to bullying through such sites, or feel other forms of pressure by their peers.

Table 32: Do you feel that you have ever been bullied through a social networking site?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Yes	6	9%
No	56	88%
Not sure	2	3%
Total	64	100%

Six of the young people (9%) report that they felt as though they had been bullied through a social networking site. They were asked if they were happy to give more information about this. One person had been bullied about their visual impairment, and the police had got involved, another was the victim of some other young people making unpleasant comments about them, and stated that “it is the downside of social networking sites...it isn’t nice”.

Table 33: Do you ever feel any peer pressure to use a social networking site?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Yes	7	11%
No	54	83%
Not sure	4	6%
Total	65	100%

Seven of the participants (11%) said that they had felt peer pressure to use a social networking site, whilst a further four were not sure. When asked to explain about this further, the responses indicated that their main reason for feeling peer pressure was due to all their friends being on social networking sites, and them not wanting to miss out due to not being on there.

“A lot of people say to get in contact with them just look for them on a social networking site – is often the only way to communicate with them.”

“Need to know what’s going on.”

“It’s all conformity.”

Table 34: How important to you is the ‘number of friends’ you have on a social networking site?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Very important	0	0%
Important	4	7%
Not really important	35	5%
Not important at all	22	36%
Not sure	1	2%
Total	62	100%

Group ‘profiles’ of social networking users, as identified by the Ofcom study, reflect that there are different motivations for using social networking sites. The Ofsted study found that teens tend to come under the categories of ‘alpha socialisers’ (who use social networking sites in a way to try and maximise the number of friends that they have), ‘attention seekers’ (whose social networking sites have a big effect on their social identity) and ‘followers’ (those who are following a trend in order to be part of what is going on with their peers).

The young people were asked how important the number of friends that they have on social networking sites is to them. It was clarified that number of friends refers to the size of the persons contacts list, or how many 'connections' an individual has on a social networking site. Most (57, 93%) of the young people responded that it was either 'not really important' or 'not important at all' to them. A variety of explanations were given for the responses, e.g.:

"Because you can't measure life by friends... it's better to have a handful of close friends."

"Don't think it's quantity, it's quality. Don't think it will affect peoples' opinions. Won't affect my ego."

It is 'sort of a competition' between her sisters and her to see who can have the most friends. Also, she wants to stay in touch with lots of people and so having lots of friends on the sites is important for this.

"Depends on the site – on Twitter it's more important as more followers means more links."

Related to this, the young people were asked how many people they had on their contact list on the site that they use most frequently. The average number was 267, with the median number being 518.

Table 35: Are the majority of your friends’ online people that you know outside of social networking, or are they people you have met through social networking sites?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Friends from outside of social networking	58	94%
Friends met through using social networks	2	3%
Approximately evenly split between the two	2	3%
Not sure	0	0%
Total	62	100%

Almost all (94%) of the participants reported that the majority of friends that they have on social networking sites are friends that they know from outside of social networking. When asked about the proportions of friends from outside of social networking to friends made through social networking, many reported that all their friends were made outside of social networking sites (whilst the majority of others spoke of knowing 90%+ of their contacts outside of social networking).

Table 36: Have you ever added anyone on a social networking site that you don’t know, or accepted a friend request from someone you don’t know?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Yes	22	36%
No	31	51%
Not sure	8	13%
Total	61	100%

Twenty two (36%) said that they had either added someone on a social networking site who they did not know, or accepted a friend request from them. Some clarified this by saying that some of the people they added were ‘friends of friends’.

From the responses given, most of the young people that we interviewed could be categorised as ‘followers’, tending to use social networking sites to keep up with their peers, and to be part of what was going on.

The interview section in relation to social networking was concluded by asking the participants if they had anymore comments about social networking that they would like to make. Two people made additional comments about accessibility problems:

“Facebook is confusing because it tells you to do things and you have to be able to read them. I agreed for my information to be public on Facebook, but I couldn’t see that I had done that – had to ask a friend for assistance to help change settings.”

"Social networking sites are very difficult to access, would really help if there was more access for visually impaired persons on the sites – particularly with chat functions and enlarging text boxes.”

4.7 Use of Mobile Phones

Table 37: Do you own, or have access to a mobile phone?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Yes	69	99%
No	1	1%
Not sure	0	0%
Total	70	100%

The vast majority of participants reported using a mobile phone. A similarly high figure (95%) was found for the general population of young people in an earlier study by Haste (2005). Only one of the visually impaired participants did not own, or have access to a mobile phone. This person was prompted for the reasons why (with possible responses ‘very true’, ‘a little true’, ‘not at all true for me’ and ‘unsure’). The responses given are presented in the table below.

The responses given by this one person indicates that their decision was made due to them having no interest in a mobile phone, rather than due to any accessibility problems.

Table 38: Reason why participant does not own, or have access to a mobile phone. N=1.

Statement	Response
I do not use a mobile phone because I have no interest in using a mobile phone as an activity	Very true
I do not use a mobile phone because I don't have time to commit to using mobile phones	Unsure
I do not use a mobile phone because I prefer to rely on face-to-face and other forms of communication	A little true
I do not use a mobile phone because I have accessibility problems in using mobile phones due to my visual impairment	Not at all true for me
I do not use a mobile phone because my parents/carers have banned me from doing so	Not at all true for me
Other reasons I do not use a mobile phone	No use for one

Those young people who did use a mobile phone were asked if they knew the brand and type of phone that they owned. The number of people with each brand of phone is recorded in the table below.

Table 39: Do you know the make and model of the mobile phone that you have?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Samsung	16	25%
Blackberry	14	22%
Nokia	9	14%
Apple	7	11%
Other	7	11%
HTC	4	6%
Sony Ericsson	4	6%
LG	2	3%
Motorola	2	3%
Total	65	100%

As could be expected due to the large number of brands of mobile that there are, the young people owned mobile phones from a wide range of manufacturers. The most commonly owned brands were Samsung (25%) and Blackberry (22%).

Table 40: Do the participants own a smart phone or a standard mobile phone?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Smart phone	49	75%
Standard mobile phone	5	8%
Unclear	11	17%
Total	65	100%

The majority of the young people (75%) reported owning a ‘smart phone’ (a mobile phone that combines the functions of a mobile phone and a personal digital assistant), whilst a further 17% were unsure of the type of mobile phone that they owned.

Table 41: What attracted you to your (choice of) mobile phone?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Accessibility options on the phone	45	65%
Able to use the internet	40	58%
Clear text on the screen	39	57%
Able to use applications	34	49%
Price	31	45%
Other	31	45%
Good camera	30	44%
Brand name/Popular brand	27	39%
Was a present	26	38%
Large keys	25	36%
Inbuilt MP3 player	20	29%
Friends/family having the same model	19	28%
Able to play games	17	25%
I was given it (including ‘inherited’)	3	4%

The young people were asked to identify the different features that attracted them to their mobile phone. The most common features that identified were related to the accessibility of the phone. Almost two thirds (65%) were attracted by specific accessibility options on the phone, and 57% were attracted by clear text on the screen. Other commonly identified features were being able to use the internet (58%), being able to use applications (49%), price (45%) and good camera (44%). ‘Other’ features were identified by 31 (45%) of individuals, which included:

Table 42: What attracted you to your mobile phone? Other

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Appearance/size	10	15%
Qwerty keyboard	5	7%
Touchscreen/zoom options	5	7%
Large text on keys/screen	4	6%
Blackberry messenger	3	4%
Part of good contract	3	4%
Easy to use	3	4%
Large/good quality screen	2	3%
Needed a cheap replacement	2	3%
Wanted a standard phone	2	3%

From the previous two tables we see that young people identified a variety of factors which can attract them to a mobile phone. This may be particularly relevant for a blind and partially sighted young person, who in addition to 'mainstream' factors (e.g. functions, brand, price) also has other 'accessibility' issues to consider (e.g. accessibility functions and compatibility, clear text)

Table 43: Did you spend much time researching which phone would suit you best before buying one?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Yes	21	31%
No	42	63%
Not sure	4	6%
Total	67	100%

Despite 65% of the participants saying that they were attracted by the accessibility features of the phone, only 31% reported that they spent time researching which phone would suit them best before purchase. The participants were asked to explain the responses that they gave to this question: eight of the participants said that they looked at phones in stores and/or asked the advice of people working in stores; 12 conducted independent research; six had phones recommended to them or received them as presents; and three did not really research into whether the phone would be best suited for them.

“Should have looked more at software and whether accessibility was ok, was lucky that it was that good.”

“Looked in shops – tried out a few that were meant to be good for people with visual impairments.”

“Researched the accessibility of phones – what the writing would be like.”

“Knew from sister that Blackberry had good accessibility options.”

Table 44: Which, if any, of the following best describe the type of phone payment arrangement you have for your mobile phone?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
A fixed contract	32	46%
Pay as you go	33	48%
A mixed package	2	3%
Don't know	2	3%
Total	69	100%

The young people were asked what payment arrangements they had for their mobile phone. Approximately half (46%) had a fixed contract and the remaining half (48%) used a ‘pay as you go’ arrangement. In a study of general teenager use of mobile phones, Haste (2005) found a lower proportion (24%) of respondents said that their payment arrangement was through a fixed contract. One possible explanation for this might be that fixed contracts will often include a smart phone and therefore give visually impaired young people a means of getting an expensive and accessible phone relatively cheaply (although it also should be remembered that this comparator study was conducted in 2004, and mobile phone usage has changed considerably in recent years).

Table 45: Who would typically pay for your mobile phone usage?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Parents/carers	45	65%
Yourself	31	45%
Other	1	1%

The young people were also asked who would typically pay for their mobile phone usage. It was most common for parents/carers to pay for their mobile phone usage (65%). A small number reported that their phone usage would be paid for by both them and their parents/carers.

The participants were asked if they could summarise in their own words why they had a mobile phone and what they used it for. The responses given tended to centre around the same things, with the young people saying that they would use their mobile phones to contact friends and family (through text messaging and phone calls), use their phone for security when they are out of the house (both in terms of having a phone to call for help in an emergency, and also use their phone so their parents could find them if necessary). There were some who reported using other features of mobile phones more associated with smart phones, such as: a camera; listening to music; playing games; using applications and going on the internet.

The table below shows the responses given to prompted questions about what the young people used their mobile phones for.

Table 46: Do you use a mobile phone for any of the following activities?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Speaking to friends	68	99%
Speaking to parents	68	99%
Text messaging	67	97%
Storing new numbers	65	81%
Listening to music	49	71%
Internet access	47	68%
Taking photos	45	65%
Picking up voicemail	43	62%
Social Networking Sites	41	59%
Applications	38	55%
Taking moving videos	40	44%
Recording notes	29	42%
Playing games	28	41%
Maps/Navigation	26	38%
Sending photos	22	32%
Predictive text messaging	22	32%
Work/work experience purposes	19	28%
Other	8	12%
Recording phone conversations	1	1%

The most commonly reported use for mobile phones was for communicating with friends and family (99%) and also for text messaging (97%). Other popular activities included: listening to music

(71%); internet access (68%); taking photos (65%); picking up voicemail (62%); social networking sites (59%) and using applications (55%).

Table 47: Would you ever use a mobile phone to communicate with your school friends about your lessons or homework?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Yes	54	78%
No	14	20%
Not sure	1	1%
Total	69	100%

In a previous section of the report (4.6) it was reported that 79% of the young people said that they used social networking sites for communicating with their school friends about their lessons or homework. A similar response (78%) was given when asked whether they ever use a mobile phone to communicate about lessons or homework. When asked what kind of things they discussed, they reported the same sort of things as they would discuss on social networking sites, such as when work and assignments were due to be handed in.

Table 48: On average, how often do you use a mobile phone?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
5+ times a day	45	65%
2-4 times a day	13	19%
Once a day	6	9%
A couple of times a week	4	6%
Once a week	1	1%
Once a month	0	0%
Less often	0	0%
Never	0	0%
Total	69	100%

The young people were asked how often they used a mobile phone. Almost all (93%) reported using it at least once a day, with 65% using it five or more times a day.

Table 49: How long on average would you spend on a mobile phone per day?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Less than 10 minutes	12	18%
10-20 minutes	14	21%
20-40 minutes	9	13%
40 minutes to 1 hour	6	9%
1-2 hours	12	18%
Over 2 hours	15	22%
Total	68	100%

The amount of time that is spent using mobile phones varies considerably across the young people, with the median amount of time spent each day being 20-40 minutes.

Table 50: When using your mobile who do you generally call and speak to?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Only friends, never parents	3	4%
Mostly friends, partly parents	30	44%
Equal parents and friends	22	32%
Mostly parents, partly friends	11	16%
Only parents, never friends	1	2%
Do not speak to anybody on your mobile phone	0	0%
Don't know	1	2%
Total	68	100%

The table above shows that, overall, phone calls made by the young people are more commonly to their friends (although parents were often called too). The distribution of responses given were very similar to those given by respondents of the Joined up Texting study, where 5% described speaking to only their friends but never parents, 50% described speaking to mostly their friends and partly their parents, and 28% described speaking to parents and friends equally often.

The table below shows a similar pattern in relation text messaging, although this seems to be relatively more commonly used to communicate with parents (although overall communication with friends remains the most common).

Table 51: When texting people on your mobile, who do you generally text?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Only friends, never parents	9	13%
Mostly friends, partly parents	39	57%
Equal parents and friends	17	25%
Mostly parents, partly friends	2	3%
Only parents, never friends	0	0%
Do not use your mobile for sending text messages	1	2%
Don't know	0	0%
Total	68	100%

Table 52: Have your parents or carers given you any rules regarding your mobile phone?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Yes	20	29%
No	49	71%
Not sure	0	0%
Total	69	100%

The majority (71%) of young people reported not being given any rules from their parents or careers regarding their mobile phone use. Where rules did exist, they tended to centre around being careful not to go over their contract allowance, or not to waste money. Two said they have been told not to give out their number to strangers (and in one case to make sure their number is only given out to people they like).

Most commonly reported were rules in relation to mobile phone use given by schools and colleges (reported by N=40, 59% of participants).

Table 53: Have your school/college given you any rules regarding your mobile phone?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Yes	40	59%
No	28	41%
Not sure	0	0%
Total	68	100%

Table 54: Have your school/college given you any rules regarding your mobile phone? Details

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Don't use phones in lessons	20	29%
Don't have phones in school	10	15%
No bullying using your mobile phone	3	4%
Can take calls in lessons if important	2	3%
Don't use after bedtime	2	3%

The most common rule that the young people reported was not using their mobile phones in lessons (29%). Some schools / colleges appeared to be more restrictive with the rule that phones should not be brought onto the school site (15% of participants reported this). One participant reported that they are the only person in the school allowed to bring in a mobile phone, and this is due to their visual impairment. Those who referred to not using their phone after bedtime were students at a residential school.

Table 55: Do you ever feel any peer pressure to own a mobile phone?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Yes	8	12%
No	61	88%
Not sure	0	0%
Total	69	100%

When asked whether they feel any peer pressure to own a mobile phone, only a small number (12%) said that they did. Some of those who said that they did, explained that it was more linked to all their friends having mobile phones, and so they would feel that they were missing out if they did not have one.

Slightly more of the young people (N=11, 16%) felt some peer pressure to own a particular brand or style of mobile phone. Some responses

suggested that there was pressure to have the latest up-to-date phones, or most expensive phones:

“If you haven’t got the most up to date phone, it’s not good – so you want the most up to date phone”

“Got to be good, otherwise people think badly”

“When you say you’re going to get a phone people put pressure on you to get a Blackberry – but I can’t use them”

“You get judged if it’s not as new as everyone else’s”

Table 56: In which, if any of the following situations have you personally ever used a mobile phone?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
For friends or family to contact you in an emergency	55	81%
For you to contact friends or family in an emergency	48	71%
For directions when lost	34	50%
To ask for emergency help/999 calls	9	13%
To report a crime or dangerous situation	5	7%

The young people were asked whether they had ever used a mobile phone in various emergency type situations. Most said that they had used their mobile phone for friends or family to contact them in an emergency situation (or vice versa). Half had used their mobile phone to get directions when lost, whilst, as could be anticipated, less had used their phone to make 999 calls (13%) or to report a crime or dangerous situation (7%).

Table 57: How would you be most likely to contact a friend if you needed to communicate with them?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Texting on a mobile phone	33	48%
Phoning on a mobile phone	16	23%
Send a message via a social networking site	12	17%
Phoning on a landline	3	4%
Other	3	4%
Email	2	3%
Total	69	100%

The participants were asked how they would be most likely to contact a friend if they needed to communicate with them, and prompted with a variety of options. The majority reported communicating using a mobile phone – either through texting (48%) or by phoning (23%). Sending messages via a social networking site was the next most popular form of contact (17%).

Table 58: Which, if any of the following could you NOT bear to be without (choose one)?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Mobile phone	27	39%
Access to the internet	17	25%
Satellite/cable TV	8	12%
Could live without all of these items	7	10%
Video games (either on a console or computer)	5	7%
Personal computer	4	6%
Email	1	1%
Teletext	0	0%
Don't know	0	0%
Total	69	100%

Finally, the young people were given a list of different gadgets or services that they might use, and asked to identify one particular item that they 'could not bear to be without' (or to state that they could live without all of them, if appropriate). The most popular gadgets/services reported by the young people were mobile phones (39%) and access to the internet (25%)

4.8 Accessibility of Mobile Phones

To conclude, the young people were asked some questions about their experience of the accessibility of mobile phones. To ensure that the participants understood what was meant by accessibility, this was defined in this context:

“By accessibility we mean the ease with which you can use mobile phones because it may be difficult to set the colours or size of the things on the screen for you to see properly, or difficult for you to use with a screen reader”.

Table 59: Do you use any accessibility features on your mobile phone?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Yes	37	54%
No	31	45%
Not sure	1	1%
Total	69	100%

Over half (54%) of the young people said that they had used accessibility features on their mobile phones. They were asked to give more details of this, and discuss the accessibility features that they use. The responses given are presented in the table below.

Table 60: Do you use any accessibility features on your mobile phone? - Details

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Change font size/style	22	32%
Use zoom	16	23%
Change colours/contrast	9	13%
Use speech software	9	13%
Other	4	6%
None	31	54%
Not sure	1	1%

The most commonly reported accessibility features used by the young people was to change the font size and/or style of font (32%), or in one case applying a bold font. Others use the zoom functions available (23%), change the colours/contrast (for example white on black) or use speech software (13%) (this could be done by using either inbuilt screen readers or through using screen reader software which could be installed on the phone). The ‘other’ responses included having the

phone set up for answering and dialling through voice commands, having numbers on speed dial and having differentiated sounds for the ring tone and text messages so they were able to recognise the difference. One person said that they were not aware of any accessibility options on their phone, and used a handheld magnifier instead.

Table 61: Does accessibility and ease of use in any way have an impact on which mobile phone you buy/use?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Yes	34	50%
No	33	48%
Not sure	2	3%
Total	69	100%

Almost half (49%) of the young people said the accessibility and ease of use does have an impact on which mobile phone they would buy or use.

Phone features

A number of the young people gave examples of specific things that they look for in a phone, such as a large screen and qwerty keyboard.

“If the phone’s designed too small or text is too small, I can’t use it”

“General size of the screen – look for big buttons, high contrast colours, qwerty keyboard”

“Would always need a ‘big’ phone

Compatible with accessibility technology

Some of the young people would look for mobile phones which work with accessibility software that can be installed onto the phone

If she can’t put speech software on the phone then there is no point having it

Needs a phone that can take speech software

Comes with inbuilt accessibility options

“Would want a good one with accessibility features”

“Because if you have to pay extra to be able to access the phone, it’s not worth it”

“If I know that it has a large print accessibility then I’ll choose that.”

Different attitudes

Finally some of the responses showed examples of the different priorities that the young people could place on having a phone that is accessible to them:

“Obviously if can’t use then will not [buy] it. Would not [buy the] phone online – have to try out the phone first.”

Was 'just luck' he ended up with an accessible one.

Accessibility and ease of use doesn’t impact her choice of phone but it does for [her] parents.

Table 62: Do you ever feel restricted in accessing mobile phones in any way due to your visual impairment?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Yes	24	35%
No	45	65%
Not sure	0	0%
Total	69	100%

Table 63: Have there been any mobile phones you were unable to use due to your visual impairment?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Yes	28	41%
No	40	58%
Not sure	1	1%
Total	69	100%

Over a third (35%) of the young people said that they can feel restricted in accessing mobile phones due to their visual impairment, whilst 41% of them have had mobile phones that they have been unable to use due to their visual impairment. Those who said that they have felt restricted were asked to explain how.

Feeling left out

Some gave responses indicating that they feel left out in not being able to use the same phones that their friends use or the phone that they would like, e.g.:

“Friends phones – they give them to me and I can’t see it – makes me feel quite sad but you learn to adapt”

“Not many phones that work with ‘Talks’ [screenreader]. Not the same choices as everyone else – either an iPhone or phone with Symbian operating system”

“Would really like an iPhone but it isn’t accessible as other phones, and so have to compromise”

iPhones require a lot of management set-up on the computer – she finds this too difficult and feels restricted in using this type of phone because of this

Not using some features

Others spoke of certain features on the phone that they were not able to use, due to their visual impairment.

Although she is not able to access text messages, people know if they want to chat they should phone her.

“Games are quite visual, that’s why don’t use as much”

“Some apps don’t work with phone. Standard games are not accessible.”

Linked to this, participants were asked for details about mobile phones they had *not* been able to use. The most common problems that were reported were that either the screen was too small, that the keys were too small or that it wasn’t possible to use speech software on the phone. The following are some examples of what was reported:

“Before Nokia [I] had a Samsung which was difficult – no speech software. Difficult as not as user friendly as Nokia. Would also struggle without the speech software on Nokia.”

“Blackberry – buttons and screen far too small”

“Can’t use any without speech software”

“Struggled with touchscreen”

“Nokia, iPhones – all the print is too small and haven’t got the right apps”

Finally, the young people were asked “Do you think that, when considering your visual impairment, there are any ways in which your experience of using a mobile phone could be improved?” The consensus seemed to be that there were still improvements which needed to be made in terms of the general accessibility of phones, with some manufacturers offering better solutions than others.

“Extend the accessibility options to other brands apart from just Nokia and Apple”

“All phones should have font choices and these should be made clearer”

“Apple have screen reader and magnification software installed – more manufacturers need to follow their example”

“If more phones on the market had larger text. Would prefer more choice, limited with suitable ones.”

“More applications for the visually impaired. Choose better fonts/sizes/colours. More phones with voiceover/speech software and cameras that are suitable for visual impairment.”

It is interesting to note that some of the young people have reported that they are not able to use certain mobile phones due to them not having accessibility features, whilst others talk about the same phones and the accessibility features available in them (one example of this would be the iPhone). This may suggest that there are different accessibility features which are suited to particular visual conditions (e.g. people with no sight will have different requirements). It also suggests that some of the young people may not be fully aware of the accessibility options available on their mobile phone, and therefore not using them in the optimum way, or discounting phones which could suit them. The

responses by two of the young people indicate that there is limited assistance for blind and partially sighted people in learning about accessibility functions on phones and learning how they can be used:

Thinks improvements need to be made in terms of the accessibility options being made clearer as often she has to figure it out for herself, which can be especially difficult with her visual impairment.

“Companies could release or publicise more accessibility tools”

5 Conclusions and future plans

5.1 Key Findings

5.1.1 Hobbies, after school activities and socialising with peers

The young people have a wide range of hobbies and activities that they like to do out of school hours, with the majority reporting at least one activity that they would like to do alongside their peers. A possible hypothesis is that those who have a more severe visual impairment are less likely to be socialising with others due to lack of confidence or independence in getting around in order to meet with others. However, the findings no evidence that those with more severe visual impairments are any less likely to spend time out of school with their friends.

However, it should be remembered that those in our small sample who have more severe visual impairments are more likely to be at the residential special school where they have access to many social activities as part of the school programme. With this group it would be interesting to see how they adapt socially once they leave the school and go on to further education or employment.

5.1.2 Computer and internet access

The use of computers and the internet appears to be an important part of the lives of this group of young people with 90% saying that they would access the internet either everyday or every other day. Many also have access to the internet using their mobile phones, with 69% saying that they would choose to access the internet in this way. In some cases, this appears to be for reasons of accessibility. For example, it was highlighted by several that the mobile version of Facebook is more accessible, and so they choose to go onto Facebook on their mobile phone instead (or use the mobile version of the website through their desktop computer). As many mobile phones have accessibility technology included in them, the responses suggest that many are 'adapting' by taking advantage of these features to help them in accessing the internet more readily.

5.1.3 Experience of Social Networking Sites

One of the primary reasons for these young people to go online is to use social networking sites. Their use of the sites appears to be typical of young people generally – to communicate with their friends (and family), to make plans and to discuss school work. There are some who choose

not to go on these sites, but this does not appear to be related to their visual impairment (e.g. because of access issues).

A sixth of the young people did have problems when registering on social networking sites suggesting that there is a danger of visually impaired users being excluded in this way. Nevertheless, those who did have problems overcame this by asking for assistance from others, and once registered it seems that the vast majority were able to use these sites. Research in the past has found that the registration process can be very difficult for visually impaired users, and these responses suggest that it may have improved (or that visually impaired young people are managing to adapt to these barriers better).

Unsurprisingly, when choosing a social networking site to join, young people give priority to using the social networking sites which most of their friends use, rather than investigating the site with the greatest accessibility for them. It is interesting to see that over half were choosing to access social networking sites using a standard computer set up, or through the inbuilt accessibility options available to them through Windows/Mac operating system. The survey also provided evidence of the ways that the young people are adapting to using technology, for some in the absence of what one described as 'expensive screen readers'. Examples include accessing Facebook through the simpler and more accessible mobile version of the site, and going through a particular site which has its own inbuilt screenreader.

5.1.4 Use and accessibility of mobile phones

The responses given during these interviews demonstrate that visually impaired young people are engaging in using mobile phones, with all but one of the respondents saying that they own or have access to one.

The majority of the young people have 'smart phones', which have greater functionality, and more likely to have accessibility options available on them (although it's also possible to purchase specially designed accessible mobile phones). This could explain why such a large proportion has fixed contracts which often include a free smart phone (therefore giving them a means of getting an expensive and accessible phone).

A number of features relating to accessibility were identified as key factors for the young people when selecting their mobile phone. Even so, less than a third of participants said that they spent much time researching which phone would suit them best before purchase.

Although it is unclear whether this was because they did not know where to get this information or because they did not see the importance of doing so.

It is interesting to note that some of the young people reported that they are not able to use certain mobile phones due to them not having accessibility features, whilst others talk about the same phones and the accessibility features available in them. This may be partly linked to different individual accessibility needs. It also suggests that some of the young people may not be fully aware of the accessibility options available on mobile phones which may mean that they are not using the technology in the optimum way or discounting phones which could suit them.

5.2 Future Plans

The RNIB Transitions Project is designed as a 5 year longitudinal study in two stages. We are coming to the end of stage 1, and will be moving into stage 2 after Easter 2012, continuing onto Easter 2015. Primarily the focus of this research will be on their transition experience as they move onto further education, training and employment. The research plans to conduct tailored interviews with both cohorts, and more in depth case studies of some of the participants. Although social networking sites and mobile phones is not of primary interest in this study, it is likely that we will be asking questions relating to this area again, as understanding how visually impaired young people build relationships with their peers and access information is an important aspect of the transitions process.

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