



Science, Innovation
and Technology
Committee

Rt Hon Liz Kendall MP,
Secretary of State
Department for Science, Innovation and Technology

Kanishka Narayan MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State
Minister for AI and Online Safety
Department for Science, Innovation and Technology

By email only

29 April 2026

Subject: Consultation on “Growing up in the online world”

Dear Liz, Kanishka,

On 11 March my committee held an evidence session to assess the strength of the evidence for and against restricting access to social media accounts for children under 16. In coming to our conclusions, we took evidence from clinicians, experts on both sides of the debate, bereaved family members, representatives of those with direct experience of harms, and those monitoring the early implementation of the age restriction in Australia. We are grateful to all those who contributed to our work.

In summary, we have concluded from our work that:

- There is strong evidence of individual harms and further protections are needed.
- The status quo – where social media companies are neither accountable nor responsible for preventing harms – is not acceptable.
- Young people and parents are not responsible for preventing online harms.
- Government should revisit our previous recommendations on tackling the dangers of social media and harmful algorithms.
- Gaps in regulation, legislation and enforcement should be addressed and transparency of data improved.
- The absence of data should not delay swift action to address the problems we already know about.

Strong evidence of harm

We were struck by the examples of a range of significant harms to individuals from the use of social media. The evidence for harms to individuals is consistent, strong and linked temporally to use and there is a building body of evidence of wider negative



impacts correlated to social media use. While lack of data from social media companies means that evidence for population-level harms for young people is less clear, there is still good evidence that higher use is predictive of subsequent poorer mental health. Harms are attested by clinicians, academic research, parents, teachers and children. When we reached out to schools to ask children about the science and technology issues that mattered most to them, many told us about their concerns about online safety in relation to digital content that can impact mood, self-esteem and behaviour.

A range of evidence sources associate negative behavioural impacts such as attention deficit, loss of sleep and poorer mental health outcomes. Possible physical harms range from eye problems from screen use, which can develop from short-sightedness to cataracts, glaucoma, retinal detachment and sight-loss; to multiple inactivity-linked causes of mortality. Social media can also expose users to direct cyberbullying, harassment, online exploitation, mis- or disinformation, and content which is illegal, age inappropriate, or promotes dangerous activities, radicalisation, unhealthy body-image, eating disorders, self-harm or suicide.

No action is not an option

There is a clear need to protect people, especially the young, from these harms. The question of how to achieve this is more nuanced. With limited evidence available for the efficacy of different approaches, we heard heartfelt and reasonable arguments both for and against age restrictions.

The status quo – where social media companies are neither accountable for these harms nor responsible for preventing them while they work to grow their user base among the young – is not acceptable. The onus must not fall on young people or parents to act to prevent social media-related harm. Individuals should not have to take legal action against massively wealthy and powerful companies to seek damages after the fact. Instead, the onus must be on anyone marketing an information society service (such as a social media platform) to demonstrate that they meet strong consumer safety standards set by government in the same way they would have to for a toy or domestic appliance. We have heard that enough severe harm has been demonstrated from social media services that would, in other products, lead to a recall or change of that product. As with any physical product, such as a children's toy, any new feature or service should demonstrate that it meets safety standards before going to market.

The government accepted almost all the conclusions in our July 2025 Report on 'Social media, misinformation and harmful algorithms', but almost none of our



recommendations. We urge government to revisit them now and that should include bringing forth new legislation. For example, we concluded that social media companies are not merely platforms but curators of content, the amplification and spread of which can have serious impacts. They should be regulated as such. Meta told us that their algorithm can manipulate engagement with content, reducing engagement by down-ranking content by up to 80-90%. The algorithms that these platforms create must not be allowed to blindly promote any content that drives engagement while relying on individuals to report each item of harmful or illegal content. The volume of such content is growing and is not being blocked effectively, or at all, in many cases.

Our conclusions on effective protection measures

There should be effective enforcement of existing age restrictions. The digital age of consent, currently set at 13, should be enforced. Companies which set a minimum user age should be required to use effective and privacy preserving age verification, and to provide regulators with the necessary data to evidence their effectiveness.

Further conclusions we ask you to consider in developing policy on this matter are:

- Services should be safe by design for all users. Features that can cause behavioural addiction, such as infinite scrolling, should be designed out in social media and AI online services.
- The definition of regulated services used under any age restriction or other measure following the consultation should be based on functionality and not platform type. It should be as broad as possible to prevent new products from being designed to avoid it. As we have recommended previously, our online safety regime should be based on principles that remain sound in the face of technological development.¹ It should include any service or platform on which users can post comments or directly interact with a person or an AI.
- There should be greater transparency about the algorithms social media companies use. As part of achieving digital sovereignty, the legal and economic consequences of algorithm design choices should be considered in relation to the UK social and political context. Algorithms used in the UK should ultimately reflect UK values.
- There should be strong and enforceable regulatory requirements for companies to demonstrate that they are effectively filtering out illegal content and blocking young people from seeing legal but harmful content.

¹ Science, Innovation and Technology Committee, Second Report of Session 2024-26, [Social media, misinformation and harmful algorithms](#), HC 441, July 2025



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- Gaps in the Online Safety Act (OSA) which mean that AI Chatbots using closed databases are not covered must be identified and filled, as set out in our July 2025 Report.² This will require amendments to the OSA.
- Lack of transparency from companies has prevented an accurate assessment of the scale of the problems and access to evidence on which to base policy decisions. Tech companies must, as a condition of operating in the UK, be required to provide the data needed to allow conclusive research on specific causes of harms and effective regulatory enforcement. This again was a key recommendation from our July 2025 report.³ While access to this data is necessary, its absence should not delay swift action needed to address the problems we already know about.

Our scrutiny continues

The digital environment is a huge and growing part of our society, which brings great benefits, but significant legal and regulatory changes are required to harness these benefits and protect the public, especially children. Identifying the right approach will require a clear-eyed assessment of the evidence, and engagement with issues of concern to the public. My committee has recently launched an inquiry into neuroscience and digital childhoods to shed light on the impact of digital devices and social media on the brain development of children and young people, and their health and educational outcomes. We will hear from experts in the field and share our findings in due course.

I would be grateful if you could consider my committee's views as part of the consultation and reply to the substantive points raised by 27 May. I intend to place this letter, and your response, in the public domain.

With best wishes,

Dame Chi Onwurah MP

Chair – Science, Innovation and Technology Committee

² Science, Innovation and Technology Committee, Second Report of Session 2024-26, [Social media, misinformation and harmful algorithms](#), HC 441, July 2025, p39

³ Science, Innovation and Technology Committee, Second Report of Session 2024-26, [Social media, misinformation and harmful algorithms](#), HC 441, July 2025, p3 and 6