



Department for
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& Technology

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Dame Chi Onwurah MP
Science, Innovation and
Technology Committee
House of Commons
London SW1A 0AA

15 July 2026

Consultation on “Growing up in the online world”

Dear Dame Chi,

Thank you for the Committee’s collaboration and engagement to date on our work to fundamentally reset expectations of what is safe and suitable for children online, while preparing them to thrive in the future.

Last month I announced a landmark package of measures to better protect children online. We announced that social media companies will no longer be able to offer their services to under-16s, introduced new restrictions on livestreaming and communications with strangers, and became the first country in the world to ban chatbots that offer sexualised content to children. We took these steps for a simple reason – to give children the best start in life, ensure their safety and wellbeing, and put power back in parents’ hands.

At that time, I made clear that further measures would follow.

I am writing today ahead of publication of the second part of the government’s formal response to the *Growing up in the Online World* consultation. We received more than 116,000 consultation and survey responses, alongside extensive engagement with young people, parents, carers, youth practitioners, teachers, industry and civil society, and a number of youth-led events, pilots and workshops.

I have been grateful to the Committee for consistently highlighting the need for stronger action to prevent harms and robust enforcement to ensure measures are effective. I also look forward to receiving the results of the Committee’s ‘Neuroscience and digital childhoods inquiry’, examining how digital devices and social media impact the brain development of children and adolescents. Issues like these were raised

throughout the consultation process and have informed the additional measures we are announcing today.

Default overnight and persuasive design restrictions

We know that online risks do not end when a child turns 16, and our consultation results showed that nearly 1 in 3 children want help managing their screentime. We have heard clearly that we must support older teenagers to make safe, informed choices about their experiences online. We must also ensure that older teenagers are afforded appropriate levels of responsibility and agency as they approach adulthood. We will therefore require social media services to apply sensible default protections for 16- and 17-year-olds. These will include default overnight restrictions, with alerts and push notifications muted during a curfew period of midnight to 6am, and default restrictions at all times on persuasive features such as autoplay and personalised recommender feeds to reduce infinite scrolling and make it easier for teenagers to log off.

This is about giving these older children more choice and control over the feeds and reducing that sense that they can never switch off being online. This will allow them to develop healthier online habits and focus on the development of their futures.

AI chatbots

The government is also taking further action on AI chatbots and their impact on children and young people. We heard through the consultation of the benefits chatbots can offer children, particularly around education and creativity. But we also heard concerns about novel risk emotional dependency can pose. We will therefore require mandatory breaks for under-18s using chatbots and will work with experts on how frequently, and for how long, these should happen.

I have said previously that there are serious concerns with other chatbots, including therapy chatbots. We will work with Department for Health and Social Care and the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) to take stronger action on chatbots like this that may pose risks to children, through harmful, inaccurate or unverified mental health advice. We can commit today to consider a full range of options, including, if necessary, banning certain services that present a threat to children where other regulatory and safety mechanisms are insufficient. We will ensure the regulatory system for AI medical devices supports children to access trusted, evidence-based support. This will ensure that, where children seek medical advice, children and their parents can be sure it meets certain standards and is safe.

We have always been clear that children should be able to benefit from the opportunities AI offers while being protected from harm and threats to wellbeing. We

recognise that there is public appetite to do more on AI chatbots and how children use these, and the government reserves the right to take further action in this area.

Risks of circumvention

Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) have legitimate privacy and security uses and will therefore not age-gate or ban them. Instead, we will put the onus on platforms in scope of the new restrictions to take robust steps to detect and prevent attempts by underage users to circumvent age assurance measures.

I have already asked Ofcom to report by October on what highly effective age assurance looks like for determining whether someone is over 16. Today, I have also asked them, with input from the Information Commissioner's Office as necessary, to conduct research into what more services can do to detect and prevent VPN use on their platforms. We will also engage with VPN providers on voluntary action and strengthen guidance and support for parents through the Kids Online Safety Hub.

We will keep this area under close review and reserve the right to take further action on this, should evidence show that it is needed.

Support for children and parents

Together with the Department for Education, I will strengthen children's online safety and digital resilience as wider curriculum reforms are taken forward, supported through youth organisations, libraries, community groups and civil society partners.

The Kids Online Safety Hub will be expanded with new guidance on AI, providing parents with a source of trusted guidance and practical support. We will also work closely with the Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care as they develop guidance for parents on the safe and positive use of devices by children aged 5 to 16.

Alongside this, we will take forward a programme of non-legislative measures to promote high-quality online content and make it easier for young people to discover positive online experiences, which could include working with industry, experts and civil society to create guidance and best practice principles.

This announcement completes the second part of the government's formal response to the consultation. We will now move at pace to implement our proposals, and we will continue to work on wider online safety reforms to ensure children and young people are better protected online, supported to build healthy digital habits, and able to thrive in the digital world.

This is not the end of the story, and we will not hesitate to take further measures where needed to ensure children's safety and wellbeing, while enabling them to benefit from

the opportunities that digital technologies provide, so that every child gets the best start in life.

I would again like to pay tribute to the Committee, whose work has been critical to shaping these announcements and this historic moment for children.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Liz Kendall'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name 'Liz' and the last name 'Kendall' clearly distinguishable.

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