House of Commons

Education Committee

Growing up in the online world: The Education Committee's response to the Government's consultation: Government Response

Fourth Special Report of Session 2026–27 HC 644

Education Committee

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Fourth Special Report

The Education Committee published its First Report of Session 2026–27, Growing up in the online world: The Education Committee's response to the Government's consultation (HC 187) on 21 May 2026. The Government Response was received on 27 August 2026 and is appended below.

Appendix: Government Response

Harms affecting children

1. **Committee recommendation: The Committee is clear that the companies whose platforms are responsible for these harms cannot be left to self-regulate. We recommend that the Government treats online harms to children explicitly as a safeguarding and public health issue, rather than relying primarily on content moderation and reactive reporting systems. Preventative regulation should focus on reducing exposure to harm by policy and by design of the platforms themselves. (Recommendation, Paragraph 8)**

Government response

The government agrees that online harms should be treated as a safeguarding and public health issue and believes that it is the responsibility of technology companies to make their products safe for their users, including children.

At the foundation of the government's approach is the Online Safety Act 2023 which seeks to make services safe by design for children by putting duties on social media companies and search services, making them more responsible for users' safety on their platforms. The strongest protections

in the Act are for children. In-scope services must prevent children from accessing the most harmful types of content including pornography, self-harm and suicide content and eating disorder content.

The Online Safety Act provided robust foundations, but we have always been clear that there is more to do. That is why we launched the *Growing up in the online world* consultation on 2 March, focusing on child online safety and wellbeing and what possible further measures could be taken in this space. Following detailed engagement with civil society, industry, parents, and children—including 116,000 responses to the consultation—the government announced on 15 June that it will build on these foundations and put in place preventative regulation to restrict social media services from offering their services to under-16s.

In addition, the government announced restrictions for harmful functions such as livestreaming and stranger communication on other online services for under-16s, including gaming services, and that these would be off by default for 16- and 17-year-olds.

On 15 July the government also announced it will require social media services to apply additional default protections for 16- and 17-year-olds, which includes overnight restrictions from between midnight and 6am by default, with push notifications muted during the curfew period, and default restrictions on persuasive design features such as autoplay on personalised feeds. The government also announced plans to protect children on chatbots, including banning under 18s from sexualised companionship chatbots and similar adult features on other chatbots, and introducing mandatory breaks for children.

These announcements build on government action in the Crime and Policing Act 2026 to protect children online. Through the Crime and Policing Act we have made it an offence to possess, adapt, supply, or offer to supply an AI model that has been optimised to generate child sexual abuse material (CSAM), and we have criminalised those who publish guides on how to exploit legitimate AI services to create such content. We have also legislated in the Crime and Policing Act to enable authorised safety testers to test generative AI models to see if they can generate CSAM and non-consensual images.

Going further still, we have taken powers in the Crime and Policing Act which allow government to close gaps in the Online Safety Act and require chatbots to protect their users from illegal content and activity, including child abuse.

This package of announcements shows the government commitment to child online safety and doing whatever is necessary to ensure children can have age-appropriate experiences online.

2. **Committee recommendation: We recommend that the Government develops and promotes clear, evidence-based national guidance for parents and carers on children's use of digital devices and online services. This guidance should:**

   - **set out age-appropriate principles for children's screen use, including for pre-teenage children aged five and over, young teenagers, and 16-to-18-year-olds**
   - **address the impact of parental and carer screen time and online behaviours on children**
   - **integrate with wider online safety, early years, health and education strategies, so that parents receive consistent messages across services. (Recommendation, Paragraph 11)**

Government response

The government agrees with this recommendation.

Responses to the *Growing up in the online world* consultation highlighted strong demand for practical support for parents, carers, children and young people regarding the use of digital devices and online services. We recognise that parents and carers need clear, practical and age-appropriate support to help children navigate the online world safely and confidently.

The Department for Education is developing guidance for parents and carers on screen use by children and young people between 5 and 18 years old, to be published in Autumn 2026. The 5–18 guidance will build on the advice published in March 2026 for parents of children aged 0 to 5 on screen use through the Best Start in Life website, similarly informed through an independent expert panel. This early years guidance makes clear that while screens can have a role in children's lives, healthy development depends on getting enough sleep, having opportunities to play, engaging with the real world, and spending time interacting with responsive adults.

The parent-facing guidance will include considerations such as when it is appropriate for a child to start accessing a smartphone. It will avoid blanket rules, including on screen time, instead helping parents make informed decisions based on their child's age, needs and circumstances, recognising that how screens are used is as important as how long they are used. This includes recognising the impact of parental screen use and role modelling of behaviour. The guidance will align with wider existing work across online safety, health and education, as well as future online safety and regulatory developments.

The Department for Education has established an Expert Advisory Group (EAG) to support this work. Chaired by Professor Russell Viner and Dame Rachel de Souza, the Children's Commissioner, the EAG has been established to provide independent, evidence-based advice to government to inform the guidance for parents and carers on screen use by 5–18-year-olds. The group is reviewing evidence on the benefits and harms of screen use, examining what works in addressing concerns, incorporating lived experiences, and developing recommendations on both the key messages for government guidance and how these should be presented to best support parents and carers.

The government has created a single online hub to pull together information for parents and carers around their children's use of digital devices and online services. The Kids Online Safety Hub provides trusted guidance and practical resources for parents and carers of children of all ages, from the early years through to adolescence. It contains information tailored to these different ages and stages, covering topics such as online safety, social media, parental controls, online risks, reporting concerns, using first devices and preparing for young adulthood. New content continues to be developed for the site, which also signposts parents and carers to urgent help and wider sources of support.

The website has been promoted through the government's media literacy campaign and shared via Department for Education communications to schools. The 'You Won't Know Until You Ask' campaign provides parents and carers with practical tools to help children build critical thinking skills and resilience online and supports families to have regular conversations about what children see and do online. Together, these resources help ensure parents and carers can access trusted, evidence-based support.

In future, the government will continue to strengthen support for parents and carers by reducing reliance on parental controls alone, developing new screen use guidance, expanding the Kids Online Safety Hub, and strengthening media literacy support to help families navigate children's online lives with confidence as their needs evolve over time. The government has also placed strengthened guidance on mobile phones in schools on a statutory footing to reduce the disruption caused by mobile phones in the classroom and help create distraction-free environments that benefit all children.

3. **Committee recommendation: We recommend that this guidance be co-designed with parents and carers, educators and child development experts, and communicated through schools, health services and online platforms, ensuring that families are supported to create healthy digital environments at home alongside significantly strengthened regulation of social media companies. (Recommendation, Paragraph 12)**

Government response

The government agrees with this recommendation.

As set out in recommendation paragraph 11, the Department for Education has established a 5–18 screen use Expert Advisory Group. This group is co-chaired by the Children's Commissioner, Dame Rachel de Souza, and Professor Russell Viner. The Expert Advisory Group is comprised of experts from both academic backgrounds and civil society, covering areas including public health, child development and psychology, physical and mental health, clinical practice, digital safety, literacy, child rights, online safety, and representatives of parents.

This breadth of knowledge will ensure the report and subsequent guidance are reflective of the best available evidence from a range of important perspectives and capture the voices of children and parents.

In tandem with this, officials will engage with parents, charities, advocacy groups, health practitioners, experts and those from the education sector to support the range of evidence considered in the report. This builds on engagement undertaken through the Growing up in the online world consultation, which sought views from parents, carers, children, educators, experts and civil society to understand where families need additional support.

This approach also reflects the development of the Kids Online Safety Hub, which was informed by research and engagement with parents and carers to understand the information, advice and practical support they most want and need when helping children navigate online life. The Hub brings together trusted guidance in a single, accessible location, covering topics including parental controls, social media, online risks, reporting concerns and talking to children about online safety.

The broad range of engagement with those holding different expertise and perspectives will help ensure that both the report and subsequent guidance have the right tone and provide the information parents and carers need. We will continue to draw on evidence from parents, carers, educators and experts to shape future guidance and ensure it is accessible through trusted channels, including schools, health services, community organisations and the Kids Online Safety Hub.

4. **Committee recommendation: We recommend that the Government introduces mandatory restrictions on high-risk and addictive design features, such as infinite scrolling, disappearing messages and algorithmic messages for under-18s, with appropriate age-related restrictions enabled by default, rather than relying on voluntary measures or user opt-ins. (Recommendation, Paragraph 15)**

Government response

The government agrees with the Committee that further action is needed on high-risk and persuasive design features. In the *Growing up in the online world* consultation the government asked specifically about risky functionalities and persuasive design features, including which features were deemed 'persuasive' and what possible restrictions there should be around them.

Features like autoplay and endless feeds that enable or promote excessive use are a real concern. We know that these features are core parts of many social media services and may make it harder for children to moderate the time they spend on social media.[1] We established an independent academic panel to advise the government on evidence and research about children's online wellbeing, and their discussions on online engagement have reinforced to us how specific features can encourage continued use.[2] Of those who responded to our full-length consultation, we heard that 81% thought infinite scroll was particularly persuasive, followed by personalised content recommender algorithms (78%) and autoplay (70%).[3]

As set out in the government's progress statement published 15 June 2026 following the Growing up in the online world consultation, we believe that social media services, as they are currently designed, create unique risks for children. The combination of rapid content uploading, algorithm-driven content recommendations, and other design features have created a specifically harmful environment. The government's decision to ban social media companies from offering their services to under-16s will address the risks of persuasive features for this age group.

We recognise that some features pose particular risk of harm to children. That is why in addition, we are also introducing restrictions on risky functionalities such as stranger communication and livestreaming, which will apply across a wider range of services for under-16s, with default-on restrictions for 16–17-year-olds. This includes gaming services.

1 Ofcom (2026), Exploring the relationship between persuasive design on online platforms, and the time that children spend on them, https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/research-and-data/online-research/childrens-online-experiences/exploring-the-relationship-between-persuasive-design-on-online-platforms-and-the-time-that-children-spend-on-them/exploring-the-relationship-between-persuasive-design-on-online-platforms-and-the-time-that-children-spend-on-them.pdf

2 Expert Panel for Growing up in the Online World: summary meeting minutes - GOV.UK

3 Growing Up in the Online World, Summary of evidence document – July publication. https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/growing-up-in-the-online-world-a-national-consultation

As set out in the *Growing up in the online world consultation response* on 15 July we also announced that we will be introducing new default protections for 16 and 17-year-olds on social media, including overnight access restrictions, muted push notifications, and limits on autoplay and personalised feeds. These default protections will help to create natural stopping points, reduce engagement-maximising design and help teenagers log off, sleep, study and spend time offline.

Impact on schools, teachers and children's education

5. **Committee recommendation: We recommend that the Government rebalances responsibility for child online safety decisively towards social media and technology companies. The Government must ensure that schools, teachers and families are supported by regulation rather than left to compensate for unsafe digital environments, over which they have minimal control and cannot reasonably be expected to resolve alone. (Recommendation, Paragraph 19)**

Government response

The government agrees with this recommendation and that responsibility must sit with companies. We believe it is the responsibility of companies to make their products safe for their users, especially children.

The Online Safety Act already puts a range of duties on social media companies and search services, making them responsible for their users' safety on their platforms. Through the *Growing up in the online world* consultation, we heard from parents that they are struggling to know how best to manage their children's online time, and overwhelmingly parents favoured stronger government intervention. The National Education Union has shared teachers' concerns with us, including over sleep deprivation and behavioural issues. A member poll indicates teachers perceive a link between social media and loss of concentration (71% of teachers polled), mental health impacts (67%) and sleep deprivation (66%) in their pupils.[4]

We have responded to this and other feedback by announcing that social media companies cannot provide services to children under 16. These measures should support parents and teachers in ensuring that children can have healthier, more balanced lives online and offline.

4 National Education Union (2026) State of education: Social media | National Education Union. https://www.neu.org.uk/latest/press-releases/state-education-2026-social-media

Policy development on the shape of this measure will continue and we intend to lay regulations before the end of 2026.

Alongside the ban, we announced proposals we are considering for ensuring that children have easier access to high-quality content. These could include age-appropriate guidance for parents and children on recognising positive content, best practice principles for industry on availability, discovery and visibility of such content, reviews of international approaches and existing best practice and voluntary commitments to increase the prominence of trusted, educational, developmental and wellbeing-focused content for children.

The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) is also helping to make it easier for young people to find and engage with trusted news as part of the Local Media Action Plan, which was published in March 2026. This aims to help young people engage with high-quality local and national journalism online.

As part of this, government launched a new journalism careers campaign, Inspiring the Future, in partnership with the Education and Employers charity and the News Media Association. Initially rolled out in the North West, this campaign seeks to inspire young people to pursue careers in local media, while simultaneously building news literacy and helping them navigate the online information ecosystem. If successful, we will seek to roll this out nationwide. We also want to ensure that young people continue to have access to trustworthy and high-quality news online from a range of sources. To do this, DCMS are working with the Department for Education and industry to promote and improve the "Newspapers for Schools" News Library, an existing platform offering digital access to over 150 local and national news titles for all state-funded primary and secondary schools in the country.

It is also worth noting that schools are already required under Keeping Children Safe In Education (KCSIE) to not expose children to harmful content during the school day, including ensuring that school technology has in place an appropriate filtering and monitoring system.

KCSIE is also clear that safeguarding needs to be a whole school priority and that all staff should have an awareness of safeguarding issues that can put children at risk of harm. For example, behaviours linked to illegal activity, such as drug taking and/or alcohol misuse, can be signs that children are at risk.

Protection doesn't stop at regulation, education is just as important. We're committed to helping young people build the digital literacy, confidence and critical thinking they need to navigate online safely.

That's why we launched the "You Won't Know Until You Ask" campaign alongside the Kids Online Safety website, giving parents and carers practical tools to support their children.

Media literacy is already embedded across the school curriculum, from English and computing to citizenship and RSHE. We're going further by strengthening media literacy through the curriculum review - sharpening how it's taught in English and citizenship, with a new curriculum from 2027 (taught from 2028).

Updated Relationships Sex and Health Education (RHSE) guidance, coming into schools from September 2026, will ensure pupils understand how social media works, including AI and deepfakes, and how to challenge harmful or misleading content.

Children will still be able to access the online world safely for learning, news, games and staying in touch with known friends and family on messaging services.

6. **Committee recommendation: The government should publish detailed guidance on exemptions to the phone free policy, for example, for children who have smartphone enabled assistive technology or who are young carers, covering the implementation of exemptions and how children with exemptions will be protected from bullying and pressure during the school day. (Recommendation, Paragraph 23)**

Government response

The government agrees with this recommendation.

The statutory mobile phones in schools guidance is already clear that exceptions to a mobile phone policy may be required for children with specific special educational needs, disabilities or medical conditions. This includes users of health tech or assistive technology. Further, where school leaders need to make additional exceptions or flexibilities to their policies based on a child's individual needs, we trust them to do so. Schools must comply with their Equality Act 2010 duties where relevant.

There are a number of ways in which schools can ensure that they are mobile phone-free, and it is for school leaders to decide how best to achieve this within their own unique contexts. Schools are expected to comply with existing guidance and legal obligations, while retaining discretion over implementation.

All schools are required by law to have a behaviour policy which outlines effective strategies that will encourage good behaviour and measures to prevent all forms of bullying.

The Behaviour in Schools guidance provides advice for schools on developing and implementing a behaviour policy which outlines effective strategies that will encourage good behaviour.

The Department for Education has also published guidance on Preventing and Tackling Bullying, as well as the Respectful School Communities toolkit, a self-review and signposting tool to support schools to develop a whole-school approach which promotes respect and discipline.

We have committed to reviewing and if necessary, updating, the mobile phones guidance by September 2027.

The role and responsibilities of social media organisations

7. **Committee recommendation: We recommend that the Government uses the powers available to it to impose clear, enforceable duties on platforms to prioritise child safety by design, backed by meaningful sanctions for non-compliance. (Recommendation, Paragraph 28)**

Government response

The government agrees with this recommendation that platforms must be held to account.

In our response to recommendation paragraph 8, we have set out how the Online Safety Act puts a range of duties on social media companies and search services to make them more responsible for their users' safety on their platforms. The strongest protections in the Act have been designed for children. Robust enforcement is a top priority for the government. Services should be in no doubt that where they break UK law, they will face the consequences. Ofcom has strong powers under the Online Safety Act, including fines of up to £18 million or 10% of qualifying worldwide revenue and to pursue business disruption measures against non-compliant services. The Act also contains criminal offences that may arise following non-compliance with certain Ofcom enforcement requirements, with senior managers and corporate officers potentially liable in certain circumstances.

The previous DSIT Secretary of State wrote to Sir Ian Cheshire (Ofcom's new Chair) and Dame Melanie Dawes (Ofcom CEO) on 15 June to make clear that robust, proportionate and prompt enforcement of the Online Safety Act, and the new social media restrictions for under-16s, must be a top priority for Ofcom. The government will ensure Ofcom has the funding it needs to enforce these new restrictions and take strong enforcement action to protect all users.

The case for restricting social media use

8. **Committee recommendation: The Committee recommends that the Government introduces a statutory ban on the use of social media platforms for children under the age of 16. It is time to apply the brakes and prioritise children's safety. (Recommendation, Paragraph 33)**

Government response

The government agrees with this recommendation. That's why, in June, as set out under recommendation paragraph 8, the government announced its intention to ban social media companies from offering their services to under-16s. We plan to use a similar model as Australia, covering user-to-user platforms that allow users to post material alongside algorithms. Further detail will be set out in the regulations.

Overwhelmingly, our consultation showed that people are concerned about what children can be exposed to online, including harmful and age-inappropriate content, bullying, abuse and exploitation. Many were also worried about children spending too much time online, and the displacement of healthy activities and the impact this can have on sleep, exercise, physical health and school. We also heard concerns about the negative effects on emotional wellbeing and mental health, including anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, loneliness, as well as self-harm and suicidal thoughts.

As set out in the answer to recommendation paragraph 15, certain design features have created specifically harmful environments. The government intends to lay the first regulations related to service level age restrictions on social media services before Parliament by the end of 2026. The government will provide regular updates and put out clear information answering the questions we know many young people will have, before this comes into effect.

Ensuring children are given the best start in life and can have access to enriching real-world activities is vital. Youth Matters, the government's National Youth Strategy is therefore helping improve young people in England's access to enriching activities such as sport, arts and youth provision, improving pathways into education, training and employment, and ensuring young people can build essential skills both in and outside of school.

9. **Committee recommendation: We recommend that the Government introduces a risk-based and age-appropriate regulatory framework that applies consistently across social media, gaming and hybrid platforms, private messaging sites and AI chatbots, including sites and**

platforms widely used by children. This would have clear benefits in terms of future-proofing the approach to safeguarding children online. (Recommendation, Paragraph 35)

Government response

The government agrees with this recommendation.

Under the Online Safety Act, user to user services and search services are required to protect users from illegal content and children from harmful content under a risk based and age-appropriate regulatory framework. This includes social media, gaming, messaging services, many AI chatbots and hybrid services.

The *Growing up in the online world* consultation asked questions about building on this foundation and further restrictions on social media, gaming, and AI chatbots.

On social media, consultation questions were asked about the benefits, harms or risks of social media and restricting services by age. 9 out of 10 of parents who responded to the consultation supported a minimum age of at least 16 for children to access social media. As the Committee will have seen from the progress statement published on the 15 June, and as set out in this response, following the consultation *Growing up in the online world*, the government has now announced that social media companies will be banned from offering their services to under-16s.

Respondents to the consultation were clear that they wanted steps taken on specific risky functionalities including livestreaming, the ability to send nude images or videos, connecting or talking to strangers, location sharing and disappearing content. 93% of respondents to the parents' consultation are concerned about their children being contacted by strangers and 90% are worried about the ability to send nude images and videos.[5]

As set out in the response to recommendation paragraphs 8 and 15, government has announced that it will restrict some harmful functionalities across a wider range of services, including gaming platforms.

On AI chatbots, the consultation asked questions about their benefits, risky functionalities, and minimum age restrictions. Respondents made clear that although there are some real benefits to children, including learning and helping to find information, there were also clear risks. 95% of responses to the parents' consultation thought AI chatbots should have functionality

5 Chapter 4, Growing up in the online world: progress statement https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/growing-up-in-the-online-world-a-national-consultation/outcome/growing-up-in-the-online-world-progress-statement

restrictions, and 74% of children and young people (16–21) thought the same.[6] Therefore, government has announced that AI chatbot services whose primary purpose is to provide sexual relationships to their users will not be available to children under 18. Furthermore, users will need to prove they are over 18 to access features that enable sexually explicit interaction on all chatbots, including general purpose services.

The government is also taking further action on AI chatbots to tackle novel harms such as emotional dependency. We will introduce mandatory breaks for under-18s using chatbots to support healthier online habits for children.

The government remains concerned about the risk posed to children from unqualified and harmful mental health advice on chatbots. We will work with the Department of Health and Social Care and the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) to take stronger action on chatbots that may pose risks to children, through harmful, inaccurate or unverified mental health advice. A full range of options will be considered as part of this work.

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 we will continue to consider what further action may be needed in this area.

These broad spectrum of measures on a variety of services demonstrate the strong action government is taking to ensure that its approach is future proofed and keeping children safe online. Getting the balance on protection of children from the dangers of the online world, while still being able to access its benefits is key. Children will still be able to use messaging services to stay in touch with family and friends. They will still be able to access educational, informational and creative online spaces, and that the responsibility for compliance sits with platforms, not with children themselves.

10. Committee recommendation: We recommend that the Government works with mobile phone manufacturers to ensure that robust safety-by-design features are available and can be activated on all phones that can be used by children, including strengthening age-verification processes for downloading apps. (Recommendation, Paragraph 37)

6 Chapter 5, Growing up in the online world: progress statement, https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/growing-up-in-the-online-world-a-national-consultation/outcome/growing-up-in-the-online-world-progress-statement

Government response

The government agrees with this recommendation.

The government agrees that safety by design features on devices have an important role to play in improving children's online safety, including reducing exposure to harmful content online and supporting effective age assurance. We are already taking forward a range of measures in this area.

The government is actively engaging with industry, including operating system providers and device manufacturers, to encourage the deployment of stronger built-in safety protections for children. On 8 June the government called on companies to introduce device level nudity detection features at the operating system level to make it impossible for children to take, share or view nude imagery. Adult users will be able to turn these features off after verifying their age at device level. We have been clear that we expect rapid progress in this area and will legislate if companies do not act.

The government also recognises the potential for device level approaches to support age assurance and complement platform-based approaches under the Online Safety Act. In its guidance on highly effective age assurance, Ofcom notes that device level age assurance could contribute to the deployment of age assurance under the Act.

Ofcom is required to publish a report on children's use of app stores by January 2027. The report will assess the role app stores play in children encountering harmful content, examine the use and effectiveness of age assurance used by app stores, and explore whether children's safety online would be better protected by greater use of age assurance at the app store level. This will support the Secretary of State in determining whether duties should be applied to app stores where they are not appropriately regulated by the Act already.

Taken together, these measures support the wider availability of safety by design features across devices, operating systems and app stores, and will contribute to strengthening age assurance across the digital ecosystem. We recognise this is an evolving area, and we will continue to explore the merits of further protections at the device level.

11. **Committee recommendation: We recommend that the Government establishes a clear and enforceable framework for age assurance across platforms likely to be accessed by children, with independent oversight and regular assessment of effectiveness. (Recommendation, Paragraph 38)**

Government response

The government agrees with this recommendation, and agrees that robust, enforceable and independently overseen age assurance is essential to keep children safe online.

The Online Safety Act has established a statutory framework for services which are likely to be accessed by children, requiring them to take proportionate measures to protect children from harmful content. The strongest duties apply to preventing children from accessing Primary Priority Content, which is pornographic content or content that encourages or promotes suicide, self-harm or eating disorders, where services must use highly effective age assurance (HEAA).

Ofcom, as the independent online safety regulator, is responsible for producing guidance on HEAA and assessing services' compliance with duties under the Act. Ofcom's guidance sets out how services may determine whether a user is a child and its statutory reporting will provide an ongoing assessment of the effectiveness of current HEAA measures. The first of Ofcom's statutory reports on HEAA was published in July 2026.

Government recognises that HEAA used to determine whether a user is 18 may differ from the approach used to determine whether a user is 16. The previous DSIT Secretary of State therefore tasked Ofcom to produce a rapid assessment of what HEAA will apply in this context by October 2026.

Additionally, government is already enabling the use of trusted and secure digital verification services across a wide range of use cases. These certified and registered services allow people to securely prove things about themselves, such as their age, in a privacy preserving way. Oversight of this regime is delivered through the Office for Digital Identities and Attributes.

Certified and registered digital verification services are already set out in Ofcom's 'Guidance on highly effective age assurance' as an option that is capable of delivering highly effective age assurance. The use of trusted digital verification services enables people to choose trusted, secure and inclusive services that minimise the amount of personal data that is shared at the point of use.

12. **Committee recommendation: The Committee welcomes the publication of screentime guidance for under-5s and recommends that the Government urgently publishes evidence-based screentime guidance for children and young people from the age of 5–18 with appropriate age-related strata. (Recommendation, Paragraph 39)**

Government response

The government agrees with this recommendation and the Department for Education is in the process of developing screen use guidance for children and young people between the ages of 5 and 18. An Expert Advisory Group was established following the *Growing up in the online world* consultation and national conversation to provide independent, evidence-based advice to government to inform guidance for parents and carers on screen use for 5–18-year-olds.

The guidance will include considerations such as the appropriate age for smartphone use. It will avoid blanket rules, including on screen time, instead helping parents make informed decisions based on their child's age, needs and circumstances, recognising that how screens are used is as important as how long they are used.

This builds on the advice for parents of children aged 0 to 5 on screen use through the Best Start in Life website, similarly informed through an independent expert panel.

The guidance makes clear that while screens can have a role in children's lives, healthy development depends on getting enough sleep, having opportunities to play, engaging with the real world, and spending time interacting with responsive adults.

13. **Committee recommendation: The Committee is clear that further research is needed on both the risks and dangers of social media, and gaming and hybrid platforms for those aged under 18, and the effectiveness of the measures that are needed to tackle and mitigate these pressing problems. As part of the implementation of the restrictions that we would like to see the Government bring in, it is important that, in order to assess the effectiveness of these new restrictions, there is a programme of Government-funded research, including provision for social media companies to grant independent researchers access to relevant internal data. (Recommendation, Paragraph 40)**

Government response

The government agrees with the recommendation.

High-quality, independent research is essential to understanding how online services affect children and to assess whether new protections are working as intended. The measures announced in response to the *Growing up in the online world* consultation will be implemented alongside ongoing monitoring and evaluation, drawing on evidence from children and young people, parents, educators, experts, civil society, industry and Ofcom.

The government also recognises that researchers need better access to information held by platforms in order to understand how harms emerge, how platform design contributes to risk, and how effective mitigation measures are. Ofcom's report on researchers' access to information from regulated services, prepared under section 162 of the Online Safety Act, highlighted the barriers researchers currently face and the potential benefits of clearer, safer and more privacy-preserving routes to data access.

To support this, the government will consult later this year on a researcher access to data regime, which will be created under section 154A of the Online Safety Act. This will inform how independent researchers can access relevant information from regulated services in a way that supports robust online safety research while protecting users' privacy, children's rights, and commercially sensitive information.

In parallel, Ofcom has broad powers under the Online Safety Act to gather information from regulated services, require transparency reporting, monitor compliance and take enforcement action where companies fail to meet their duties. These powers will support assessment of how services are responding to the child safety duties and provide an important evidence base for future policy decisions.

As the new restrictions are developed and implemented, the government will continue to review the evidence on social media, gaming, hybrid platforms and other services used by children. We will use this evidence to assess effectiveness, identify unintended consequences, and ensure the regulatory framework remains proportionate, enforceable and responsive to emerging risks.

14. **Committee recommendation: Although it is beyond the scope of this Committee's remit, it is clear that the issues that impact children also extend into adulthood. We encourage the Government to expand its work on social media harms and to investigate thoroughly their impact on adults. (Recommendation, Paragraph 41)**

Government response

The government agrees with this recommendation.

Online harms can affect adults as well as children. The Online Safety Act was designed to improve online safety outcomes for all users, laying the foundation for strong protections against illegal content, while also introducing targeted measures for children and additional protections for adults on the largest services. All in-scope services are required to tackle

illegal content and activity, including where this affects adult users, and must provide effective reporting and complaints mechanisms as part of this duty.

In 2027, additional Online Safety Act duties will come into force for large user-to-user services that Ofcom designates as Category 1. These services will be required to offer user empowerment tools that enable adults to reduce their exposure to content relating to suicide, self-harm, eating disorders, and abusive or hateful content, while preserving adults' freedom to access lawful content if they choose. Category 1 services must also offer adults the option to verify their identity and provide tools that allow users to filter out content from, and restrict interactions with, non-verified users. In addition, these services will be required to set out clearly in their terms of service what legal content and behaviours they prohibit, and to enforce those terms consistently and transparently. On 10 July, Ofcom published a register of categorised services and launched consultations on additional duties for these services; this includes user empowerment and user verification duties for Category 1 services; the consultation is now live until October.

The online safety framework is designed to ensure that regulation can respond as risks evolve. Ofcom has broad powers to gather information, conduct research into online harms, require transparency reporting from major providers, and take enforcement action where companies fail to comply with their duties. Ofcom currently produce the 'experiences of using online services' report, a quantitative tracking survey that examines people's attitudes to, and experiences of using online services. This survey forms part of the monitoring and evaluation framework in place to keep abreast of emerging harms.

Alongside regulation, the government is taking a cross-government approach to improving media literacy, as set out in the Media Literacy Action Plan, 'A Safe, Informed Digital Nation', published on 16 March. By 2029, the Action Plan will aim to improve critical engagement with online content, including recognition of mis- and disinformation and access to trusted information, supported through schools, libraries, and local services.

The government will continue to monitor the impact of social media harms on adults as the Online Safety Act is implemented, working closely with Ofcom, civil society, experts and those with lived experience. We will keep the evidence and regulatory framework under review to ensure it remains effective in protecting both children and adults online.