

Research Briefing

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Proposals to ban social media for children



Social Networks

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Summary

In January 2026, the government announced a consultation to gather views on how to improve children's relationships with mobile phones and social media.

One of the proposals in the consultation is to ban social media for children. This follows a similar ban in Australia and an amendment to the [Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill](#) in the House of Lords that would ban social media for the under-16s.

Potential online harms for children

Children and young people can be exposed to many types of harmful content and activity online, including on social media.

Some content is illegal, like child sexual abuse images. Other material might not be illegal but can still harm children; for example, the promotion of unhealthy body-image, eating disorders, self-harm and suicide. Or it may not be harmful because it is not age appropriate, for example, pornography, sexual content, nudity, and violent content. There are also risks from activity such as cyberbullying and harassment.

Protecting children and young people from the above types of content and activity is one of the main aims of the [Online Safety Act 2023](#).

Despite [much of the 2023 act now being implemented](#), there are ongoing concerns about children's online safety, including their use of smartphones and social media.

[Statistics published in 2025](#) by Ofcom, the online safety regulator, found that:

- ownership of mobile phones increases with age group, with 19% of those aged 3 to 5 owning their own mobile phone, increasing to 97% of those aged 13 to 15
- the age group that uses social media most frequently is 13 to 15 (95%), with 96% of this age group having their own social media profile
- 37% of those aged 3 to 5 use social media, with 60% having their own social media profile

Arguments around banning social media for children

Those who support a ban say it would limit children's exposure to online harms. For example, [the Australian Government said its ban on social media for under-16s would protect young Australians](#) from risks that come from “design features that encourage them to spend more time on screens, while also serving up content that can harm their health and wellbeing”.

Those who oppose a ban say it could force children into less regulated online spaces where they may be at greater risk. Others have said it could have unintended consequences, such as limiting the ability of marginalised groups to create online communities.

Government consultation on social media use

On 19 January 2026, the government announced a three month [consultation on children's social media use](#). The purpose is to examine the most effective ways to ensure that children have “healthy online experiences”, building on the 2023 act. The consultation is seeking views on, among other things, banning social media use by children under a certain age.

Government defeat in House of Lords on a social media ban for the under-16s

On 21 January 2026, during [report stage](#) of the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill in the House of Lords, the government was defeated on an amendment moved by Lord Nash (Conservative). This would, among other things, ban social media use by the under-16s.

1 Consultation on social media use

In a press release of 19 January 2026, the government announced a [consultation on children's social media use](#).¹ The purpose is to examine the most effective ways to ensure that children have “healthy online experiences”, building on the [Online Safety Act 2023](#). The consultation is seeking views on measures including:

- a minimum age for children to access social media, including exploring a ban for younger children
- ways of improving age verification and enforcing age limits to prevent children seeing content that is not appropriate for their age
- raising the current ‘digital age of consent’, the age at which people can consent to having their personal data processed – it is currently 13
- removing or limiting design features that drive addictive or compulsive use of social media, such as ‘infinite scrolling’
- giving more support to parents to help their children use digital spaces safely, such as further guidance or parental controls²

The press release also said that Ofsted inspectors would be asked to check that schools were properly enforcing mobile phone bans and to give “stronger and clearer guidance” to headteachers.³ For further discussion of policy relating to smart phones in schools, see the Library briefing [Mobile phones in schools \(England\)](#).

1.1 Commons statement on the consultation

In a statement to the House Commons on 20 January, Liz Kendall, Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, said that the consultation would last three months.⁴ The government would consult parents, children and young people, technology companies, and organisations representing children and bereaved parents. The government would “look closely” at Australia, where a ban on social media for the under-16s has just been

¹ [Government to drive action to improve children's relationship with mobile phones and social media](#), Department for Science, Innovation and Technology / Department for Education press release [online], 19 January 2026 (accessed 9 February 2026)

² As above

³ As above

⁴ [HC Deb 20 January 2026 c152](#)

introduced, and wants the consultation to be “evidence-led, with input from independent experts”.⁵

The Secretary of State acknowledged the differing views on a social media ban:

...Many people, including in this House, are strongly in favour of a ban on social media for the under-16s as the best and clearest way forward to protect children and stop acute and chronic online harms. They want action now, but others take a different view, saying that they worry about letting online platforms off the hook and that a ban would simply push harms further underground and, above all, stop children using the positives of social media, such as connecting with like-minded people, finding those who love in the same way and love the same things, and getting peer support and trusted advice...⁶

Julia Lopez, the Shadow Secretary of State, questioned the consultation’s timeline:

...Does a three-month consultation mean that legislation to introduce a social media ban will be ready in time for the King’s Speech? If not, and if MPs do not vote for a ban this week, they will not have another chance to do so for 18 months. The opportunity to change things is now. How many on the Government Benches will take that chance?⁷

She said that “[e]veryone, especially parents, can see what social media is doing to children”.⁸ It had created “an anxious generation hooked by products designed to be addictive, displacing real-world activity and undermining attention, emotional regulation and mental health”. There was an was an “urgency” in tackling these issues, including banning social media as had happened elsewhere.⁹

⁵ As above

⁶ As above

⁷ [HC Deb 20 January 2026 c154](#)

⁸ As above

⁹ As above

2 Statistics on social media and the under-16s

Ofcom publishes the [Children and Parents: media use and attitude report](#), with the latest report being for 2025.

2.1 Headline statistics from Ofcom

There has been an increase in 3-to-5-year-olds using social media platforms

Over the past few years, there has been an increase in parents of 3-to-5-year-olds who say their child uses social media apps or sites. In 2021 and 2022 about a quarter used them, rising to three in ten (29%) in 2023, and almost four in ten (37%) this year.

Over a third (36%) of parents of 3-to-5s whose child uses social media use it on their child's behalf, and over four in ten (42%) say they use these sites or apps together with their child. However, two in ten (19%) of these parents indicate that their child uses these apps independently.

16% of children's profiles include pictures of themselves

Of the 8 in 10 (79%) of 3 to 17s who have their own profile on a social media, messaging, video sharing platforms (VSP, such as YouTube) or livestreaming site, 16% include a photo of themselves which anyone can see.

This varies by age group; from 8% of 3-to-7-year-old social media users, to 14% of 8-to-12s and 21% of teenagers.

Girls are more likely than boys to have hurtful interactions online

There continues to be a gender imbalance between those who experience nasty/hurtful interactions online. In the 2025 report, 34% of girls said that they have ever experienced this compared with 28% of boys, in line with last year.

More children are watching videos for schoolwork and learning

Almost half (48%) of children aged 3 to 17 who watch videos via apps or sites are now watching videos on VSPs which help them learn new things or help them with their school/homework, an increase from 42% from 2024.

More children are watching livestreamed videos

The number of children watching livestreams has been growing over the past three years. In 2025, two-thirds (66%) of 3-to-17s watch livestreamed videos, up from 63% in 2023 and 58% in 2022. The increase this year has been driven by 8-to-12s.

Some children are more likely to see ‘worrying or nasty’ content online than others

Children aged 8 to 17 who have an [impacting condition](#) (such as a disability) are more likely than their counterparts to say they have seen online content that they found worrying/nasty (41% vs 31%).

The same is true for children this age living in urban areas compared to those in rural areas (34% vs 23%).¹⁰

Phone ownership and social media use increase with age

On social media use by age group, the report found:

- Ownership of mobile phones increases with age group with 19% of 3-to-5-year-olds owning their own mobile phone increasing to 97% of 13-to-15-year-olds.
- The age group that uses social media most frequently is 13-to-15-year-olds (95%) with 96% of this age group having their own social media profile.
- 37% of 3-to-5-year-olds use social media with 60% having their own social media profile.
- YouTube is the most popular social media app across all age groups.¹¹

Ofcom also publishes a [Children and Parents: media use and attitude report dashboard](#) with additional data and demographics on social media use by children.

¹⁰ Ofcom, [Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report](#), 7 May 2025, pp4-6

¹¹ As above, pp7-8

Large minorities of children say they are older than they are online

Ofcom publishes data on children who fake their social media profile age as part of [their children's online 'user ages'](#) collection with the latest data being for [wave 4 2025](#). Ofcom estimated that:

- Just over a third of children (34%) aged 8 to 15 have their own profile on an online service (for example, social media) reporting a user age of at least 16.
- 20% of children aged 8 to 17 with their own profile on an online service have a user age of at least 18. This includes nearly 20% of 8-to-12-year-olds and 13-to-15-year-olds.
- Facebook, Tiktok and X are the social media platforms where 8-to-17-year-olds are the most likely to have changed their date of birth¹²

It should be noted that the data is gathered from a survey, some respondents may not answer truthfully or accurately recollect the age used when setting up their own profile or how long they have had their own profile.¹³

¹² Ofcom, [Children's User Age Wave 4, 2025](#), p51

¹³ As above, pp9-10

3

The UK's digital age of consent

Under data protection law – [article 8 of the UK General Data Protection Regulation](#) – the age at which children in the UK can access information society services (ISSs) is 13. This is known as the digital age of consent.

Most online services are ISSs, including social media platforms, apps, content streaming services (such as video, music or gaming services), online games, and news or educational websites.

The digital age of consent is higher in other countries. For example, it is 16 in Ireland, Germany and the Netherlands.

In March 2025, when the [Data \(Use and Access\) Bill](#) (now an act) was being considered, Victoria Collins (Liberal Democrat) moved a new clause at committee stage that would have increased the digital age of consent from 13 to 16.

Chris Bryant, then Minister for Telecoms and Data Protection, resisted the new clause. He noted that young people's use of smartphones and social media was a "very live issue", and that the government was "trying to work out the best way forward". He also said it was difficult to know whether the Online Safety Act 2023 went far enough in protecting children as it was not yet fully implemented.¹⁴ The minister said that the new clause was therefore not an appropriate measure to take forward. Young people's online safety, and the age limit of 13 would, however, "be kept under review".¹⁵ The committee voted against adding new clause 21 to the bill.¹⁶

¹⁴ [Public Bill Committee 11 March 2025 c80](#)

¹⁵ [Public Bill Committee 11 March 2025 c81](#)

¹⁶ [Public Bill Committee 11 March 2025 c128](#)

4 Children's online safety

Much of the recent concern about children's online safety has focused on their use of smartphones, social media and the digital age of consent of 13.

Children and young people can be exposed to many types of harmful content and activity online, including on social media. This can be user-generated or through artificial intelligence. Some content is illegal, like child sexual abuse images or content promoting terrorism. Other material might not be illegal but can still harm children; for example, the promotion of unhealthy body-image, eating disorders, self-harm and suicide. There is also content that can be harmful because it isn't age appropriate – for example, pornography, sexual content, nudity, violent content.

There are additional risks from activity such as cyberbullying, abuse and harassment.¹⁷

Children may also encounter misinformation (false or inaccurate information) or disinformation (false information which is deliberately intended to mislead).

Protecting children and young people from the above types of content is one of the main aims of the Online Safety Act 2023.

4.1 The Online Safety Act 2023

The [Online Safety Act 2023](#) received Royal Assent on 26 October 2023. Ofcom, the online safety regulator, is implementing the act in phases, as [summarised on its website](#). The government has published an [explainer on the act](#), setting out what it means for users and companies.¹⁸

The framework established under the act requires in-scope services (for example, social media platforms) to implement systems and processes to keep all users safe from harmful and illegal content, and to protect under-18s from age-inappropriate content. Ofcom can take enforcement action against services that fail to protect users as required by the act.

¹⁷ See, for example, [Online harms: protecting children and young people](#), NSPCC blog, January 2024. Gill V, et al, [Qualitative research project to investigate the impact of online harms on children](#) (PDF), Ecorys, April 2022 (both accessed 9 February 2026)

¹⁸ Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, [Online Safety Act: explainer](#), 24 April 2025 (accessed 9 February 2026)

Detailed information on the act is available from the [online safety section](#) of Ofcom’s website.

Protecting users from illegal content

All regulated user-to-user services and search services must implement measures to reduce the risk of their services being used for illegal activity. They must also put in place systems for removing illegal content when it does appear.

[Section 59 of the act](#) defines “priority offences”. These are the “most serious and prevalent illegal content and activity, against which companies must take proactive measures”.¹⁹ Priority offences are set out in the following schedules:

- [schedule 5](#) (terrorism offences)
- [schedule 6](#) (offences related to child sexual exploitation and abuse)
- [schedule 7](#) (other priority offences; these include racially or religiously aggravated public order offences, immigration offences, and drugs and weapons offences)

The illegal content duties have been in force since March 2025.²⁰

Ofcom has published a [set of regulatory documents and guidance](#) to help services understand and implement their obligations on illegal content.²¹

In November 2025, Ofcom published additional guidance on what services need to do to protect women and girls from online harms.²²

Protecting children

The protection of children is one of the main aims of the 2023 act.

Under the act, all regulated user-to-user services and search services must protect children from harmful content if their service is likely to be accessed by children. They must do so by, among other things:

- removing illegal content quickly or preventing it from appearing in the first place

¹⁹ As above

²⁰ Ofcom, [Enforcing the Online Safety Act: Platforms must start tackling illegal material from today](#), 17 March 2025 (accessed 9 February 2026)

²¹ See also: Ofcom, [Protecting people in the UK from illegal online content – regardless of its origin](#), 13 October 2025 (accessed 9 February 2026)

²² [Tech firms must up their game to tackle online harms against women and girls](#), Ofcom news [online], 25 November 2025 (accessed 9 February 2026)

- preventing children from accessing harmful and age-inappropriate content including:
 - pornographic content
 - content that promotes, encourages or provides instructions for suicide, self-harm or eating disorders
 - content depicting or encouraging serious violence
 - bullying content
- enforcing age limits and using age-checking measures on platforms where content harmful to children is published

[Section 12 of the act](#) sets out the duties for regulated user-to-user services to protect children from illegal and harmful content.

[Section 81](#) requires platforms that publish their own pornographic content (known as [part 5 services](#)) to implement age-assurance measures to protect children from this content.

Since the end of July 2025, platforms that allow users to upload pornographic content have been required to use “highly effective age assurance” systems to prevent children from accessing this material.²³

Investigations and enforcement

Ofcom has taken enforcement action against companies for failing to comply with the act’s requirements.²⁴ On 4 December 2025, it fined AVS Group Ltd (which runs 18 adult websites) £1 million for not having robust age checks in place, plus £50,000 for failing to respond to information requests.²⁵

Also on 4 December 2025, Ofcom expanded its investigation into 4chan Community Support LLC (‘4chan’) to include consideration of whether it had failed, or was failing, to protect children from primary priority content (including pornography) through age-assurance systems.²⁶ Ofcom has already fined 4chan £20,000 for failing to comply with a statutory request for information.²⁷

²³ [What’s changing for children on social media from 25 July 2025](#), Department for Science, Innovation and Technology press release, 24 July 2025; Ofcom’s website has detailed information on [age assurance and children’s access](#) (both accessed 9 February 2026)

²⁴ For details of its investigations, see Ofcom, [Enforcement Programme to protect children from encountering pornographic content through the use of age assurance](#) (accessed 9 February 2026)

²⁵ Ofcom, [Ofcom fines porn company £1 million for not having robust age checks](#), 4 December 2025 (accessed 9 February 2026)

²⁶ Ofcom, [Investigation into 4chan and its compliance with duties to protect its users from illegal content](#), 4 December 2025 (accessed 9 February 2026)

²⁷ As above

On 20 November 2025, Ofcom imposed a £50,000 fine on Itai Tech Ltd (which runs a ‘nudification’ site) for failing to use highly effective age assurance to protect children from encountering pornographic content.²⁸ An additional £5,000 penalty was imposed for the company not complying with a statutory information request.

Ofcom is investigating an online suicide forum which it believes is still available to UK users, despite the service implementing a block to restrict users with UK IP addresses from accessing it.²⁹

On 12 January 2026, Ofcom announced that it was opening an investigation into X over the use of Grok³⁰ to create sexualised imagery and child sexual abuse material.³¹

In December 2025, Ofcom published a summary of the technology sector’s response to the duties that came into force during the year.³² The report sets out areas of focus for Ofcom in 2026.

²⁸ Ofcom, [Ofcom fines nudification site £50,000 for failing to introduce age-checks](#), 20 November 2025 (accessed 9 February 2026)

²⁹ Ofcom, [Update on investigation into online suicide forum](#), 14 November 2025 (accessed 9 February 2026)

³⁰ Grok is an AI assistant and chatbot developed by xAI, an AI company founded by Elon Musk. Grok can generate text and images and engage in conversations with users, similar to ChatGPT and other tools. Unlike other chatbots, it can access information in real-time through X (formerly Twitter)

³¹ [Ofcom launches investigation into X over Grok sexualised imagery](#), Ofcom news [online], 12 January 2026 (accessed 9 February 2026)

³² Ofcom, [Online Safety in 2025: A summary of the technology sector’s response to the UK’s new online safety rules](#) (PDF), 4 December 2025 (accessed 9 February 2026)

5 A social media ban for the under-16s?

Concerns about children's online safety, including the impact of social media and smartphone use, continue to be raised by charities, parents, academics and parliamentarians. However, opinions differ on whether social media should be banned for the under-16s.

5.1 Australia's social media ban

In Australia, from 10 December 2025, age-restricted social media platforms have had to take reasonable steps to prevent under-16s from creating or keeping an account. Information on the ban is available from the Australian Government's eSafety Commissioner:

- [Social media age restrictions](#)
- [Social media age restrictions hub](#)

On 16 January 2026, it was reported that social media companies had removed access to about 4.7 million accounts identified as belonging to children under 16 in the first half of December to comply with the ban.³³

Press and stakeholder discussion on the Australian ban is available in the further reading section of this briefing.

5.2 Calls for a UK ban

In 2025, an e-petition calling for social media companies to be banned from letting the under-16s create social media accounts received over 132,000 signatures.³⁴ In its response, the government said that it was not currently minded to support a ban. This was because it had to "strike the right balance" so that children could access the benefits of being online while putting their safety first (through implementation of the Online Safety Act). The government said it also had to protect the right of parents to make

³³ [Platforms restrict access to 4.7 million under-16 accounts across Australia](#), eSafety Commissioner news [online], 16 January 2026 (accessed 9 February 2026)

³⁴ [Introduce 16 as the minimum age for children to have social media](#), government response to E-petition 700086

decisions about their child’s upbringing.³⁵ The petition was debated on 24 February 2025.³⁶

In January 2026, Esher Grey, the mother of the murdered teenager Brianna Ghey, wrote to the Prime Minister calling for a social media ban for under-16s. She said that Brianna had a “social media addiction and struggled with her mental health from the age of 14. She developed an eating disorder and was self-harming, and all of this was significantly exacerbated by the harmful content she was consuming online.”³⁷

Over 60 Labour MPs have called on the Prime Minister to ban social media for under-16s.³⁸

Kemi Badenoch, Conservative Party leader, has also called for a ban.³⁹ She claims that, although parents are “best placed to raise their own children”, they cannot be “all-seeing”:

...Children want to be doing what their friends are doing, and are clever enough to figure out how to do it. That’s why I know that the vast majority of parents support a ban, however difficult it will be to implement.⁴⁰

Kemi Badenoch also said that restricting children’s social media use would also give more freedoms to adults online:

...We will no longer need to contort digital spaces to be universally “child-friendly”, or impose blanket restrictions on speech and content because children might see it. If we stop treating children like adults, we can stop treating adults like children too.⁴¹

On 21 January 2026, during report stage of the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill in the House of Lords, the government was defeated on an amendment that would, among other things, raise the age limit for social media to 16 (see section 5.4 below for further detail on the amendment).

5.3

Against a UK ban

Research from the children’s charity NSPCC has revealed differing opinions between children and parents on accessing social media, owning a

³⁵ [Introduce 16 as the minimum age for children to have social media](#), government response to E-petition 700086

³⁶ [HC Deb 24 February 2025 cc253-96WH](#)

³⁷ [Mother of murdered Brianna Ghey urges Starmer to ban social media for under-16s](#), Guardian [online], 19 January 2026 (accessed 9 February 2026)

³⁸ [More than 60 Labour MPs urge PM to ban social media for under-16s](#), BBC news [online], 18 January 2026 (accessed 9 February 2026)

³⁹ Kemi Badenoch, [As a parent – and a Conservative – I know that banning social media for under-16s is the right thing to do](#), Guardian [online], 21 January 2026 (accessed 9 February 2026)

⁴⁰ As above

⁴¹ As above

smartphone, and the impact of technology on mental health and wellbeing.⁴² On social media, children said that it was “essential” for building and nurturing relationships. They also said they would miss out on opportunities, including learning, if they were not given access.⁴³

A January 2026 joint statement from 42 child protection charities, online safety groups, academics and bereaved families warned that a social media ban for under-16s could have “serious unintended consequences that could put children at greater risk”.⁴⁴ The statement claims that a ban, although well-intentioned, would not improve children’s safety and wellbeing. It would be a “blunt response that fails to address the successive shortcomings of tech companies and governments to act decisively and sooner”:

Banning children from social media risks an array of unintended consequences. It would create a false sense of safety that would see children – but also the threats to them – migrate to other areas online. Children aged 16 would face a dangerous cliffedge when they start to use high-risk platforms, with girls particularly being exposed to a range of threats from misogyny to sexual abuse.

Social media bans would offer limited protection from the toxic effects of algorithms, but children - including LGBTQ and neurodiverse children - also require platforms for connection, self-identity, peer support and access to trusted sources of advice and help (including Childline).⁴⁵

Rather than banning social media, it said a “broader and more targeted” approach was needed:

...Personalised services like social media (but also games and AI chatbots) should not be accessible to children under 13 - existing law to this end should be robustly enforced.

For over 13s, social media platforms must be required to rigorously enforce risk-based age limits, blocking features and functionalities that are risky for children under a given age. Decisions should be made on the basis of the best available evidence, and it should be a tough prerequisite that, to offer online services to children in the UK, tech companies promote and protect children’s wellbeing.⁴⁶

The statement also says it is “vital that solutions are based on high-quality evidence”.⁴⁷ The Molly Rose Foundation, the NSPCC and the 5 Rights Foundation are among the signatories.

⁴² NSPCC, [How do children and parents feel about the impact of smartphones and social media?](#), 14 November 2024 (accessed 9 February 2026)

⁴³ As above

⁴⁴ Molly Rose Foundation, [Children’s and online safety campaigners issue joint statement on social media ban for under-16s](#) [online], 18 January 2026 (accessed 9 February 2026)

⁴⁵ Molly Rose Foundation, [Joint statement from children’s and online safety organisations, experts and bereaved families on a social media ban for under-16s](#) (PDF), 18 January 2026 (accessed 9 February 2026)

⁴⁶ As above

⁴⁷ As above

Emily Setty, a professor of criminology at the University of Surrey, has argued that a social media ban “risks misunderstanding both the problem and the solution”.⁴⁸ According to Setty, the harms experienced by young people online – for example, bullying, racism, sexism, coercion, exclusion and body image pressures – pre-date social media. While digital platforms can amplify these problems, they did not create them. A ban would treat social media as the problem, rather than asking deeper questions about why such behaviours occur in the first place.⁴⁹

Setty also claims that a blanket ban would treat young people as “a single homogeneous group, ignoring the diversity of their experiences, needs and circumstances”:

It assumes that what is protective for one young person will be protective for all, rather than recognising that risks and benefits are shaped by identity, relationships, resources and context.⁵⁰

Sonia Livingstone, a professor in the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics, is another academic arguing against a social media ban. She has said that “caution and more evidence” is needed before introducing a ban.⁵¹

5.4

Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill – Lords amendment

On 21 January 2026, during report stage of the [Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill](#) in the House of Lords, the government was defeated on an amendment that would, among other things, ban the under-16s from using social media.⁵² The amendment was moved by Lord Nash (Conservative). He explained that his amendment would do five things:

First, it would raise the age limit. Secondly, it would require social media companies to put in place highly effective age assurance—currently, many, if not most, social media companies have no really effective age assurance at 13. Thirdly, the amendment would direct the Chief Medical Officer to prepare and publish advice to parents and carers on the use of social media by children... Fourthly, the amendment would send a message that draws a line in the sand for parents, carers and others to use when discussing social media with children, which they are crying out for. Fifthly, it would allow 12 months for implementation.⁵³

⁴⁸ [I research the harm that can come to teenagers on social media. I don’t support a ban](#), The Conversation [online], 21 January 2026 (accessed 9 February 2026)

⁴⁹ As above

⁵⁰ As above

⁵¹ Livingstone S, [The UK shouldn’t rush to a social media ban for children under 16](#), LSE blog, 23 January 2026 (accessed 9 February 2026)

⁵² Amendment 94A. The text of the amendment is available at [HL Deb 21 January 2026 cc353-4](#)

⁵³ [HL Deb 21 January 2026 c307](#)

When speaking to the amendment, Lord Nash referred to the “societal catastrophe” of children being addicted to social media:

...Many teenagers are spending long hours—five, six, seven or more a day—on social media. The evidence of the damage this is causing is now overwhelming. We have long passed the point of correlation or causation. There is now so much evidence from across the world that it is clear that, by every metric—health, cognitive ability, educational attainment, crime and economic productivity—children are being harmed. I have sent noble Lords an evidence document prepared by health professionals which sets out over 50 studies from around the world showing a clear link between excessive use of social media and harm to our children...⁵⁴

He spoke of the “health emergency confronting children”:

...Since 2016, there has been a 477% increase in children’s contact with mental health services, and eating disorders among 17 to 19 year-olds have risen sixteenfold. There has been a sevenfold rise in young girls admitted to hospital with eating disorders, and the evidence is clear that there is a strong link between this and the substantial increase in rates of ADHD, suicide, depression, anxiety and self-harm among teenagers with overexposure to social media.⁵⁵

Lord Nash also referred to social media being the “number one cause of disruptive behaviour” in schools; being at “the centre of county lines and radicalisation”; and being “used extensively for sextortion”.⁵⁶

For the government, Baroness Smith of Malvern referred, among other things, to the government’s consultation on children’s social media use. She said there wasn’t an issue about whether the government should act, but about how it should act.⁵⁷

The minister also noted the role of the Online Safety Act in tackling illegal content and activity and protecting children from harmful and age-inappropriate content. In response to concerns about the extent to which the act was being fully utilised, Baroness Smith of Malvern pointed out that Ofcom had been prioritising its initial enforcement action against the most “egregious harms”, for example, child sexual abuse material, self-harm content and children accessing pornography. The minister also explained how the government had “built on the act’s foundations” in relation to content that promotes self-harm and suicide, the creation of non-consensual intimate images, intimate image abuse and cyber flashing, and the use of AI to create child sexual abuse material.⁵⁸

Lord Nash’s amendment was passed by 261 votes to 150.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ [HL Deb 21 January 2026 c307](#)

⁵⁵ [HL Deb 21 January 2026 cc307-8](#)

⁵⁶ [HL Deb 21 January 2026 c308](#)

⁵⁷ [HL Deb 21 January 2026 c348](#)

⁵⁸ [HL Deb 21 January 2026 c347](#)

⁵⁹ [HL Deb 21 January 2026 cc358-60](#)

6 Further reading

A selection of material on banning social media use by children is set out below. It is not intended to be exhaustive.

6.1 Stakeholders and organisations

[Growing up online: The good, the bad and the potential ban – Children’s Commissioner’s Youth Ambassadors speak to Lord Nash](#), Children’s Commissioner blog, 26 January 2026

[The complexities of a social media ban for children](#), CARE news [online], 23 January 2026

[Protecting young people begins with rebuilding community, not banning platforms](#), Race Equality Foundation press release [online], 21 January 2026

[Under-16s social media ban consultation](#), Barnardo’s news [online], 20 January 2026

[Statement from the Children’s Commissioner on the consultation to improve children’s relationship with mobile phones and social media](#), Children’s Commissioner statement [online], 20 January 2026

[Children’s and online safety campaigners issue joint statement on social media ban for under-16s](#), Molly Rose Foundation [online], 18 January 2026

[Social media bans are the wrong approach for children](#), Molly Rose Foundation [online], January 2026

[Under 16s Social Media Ban: A premature discussion?](#), TechUK news [online], 16 January 2026

[Ban social media for under-16s to prevent harm](#), NASUWT article [online], 11 January 2026

[Smartphones have reshaped childhood](#), Smartphone Free Childhood website

[After the social media ban, is the job done on child safety and wellbeing?](#), Australian Human Rights Commission opinion piece [online], 10 December 2024

[Teens, screens and mental health](#), World Health Organization news [online], 25 September 2024

6.2

Press

[Learn from Australia – banning social media for under-16s is no panacea](#), The House [online], 9 February 2026

[Even British teenagers want tighter laws around social media – but let’s make it part of a broader vision for children](#), Guardian [online], 28 January 2026

[‘Major step’: French MPs vote in favour of bill to ban social media for under-15s](#), BBC news [online], 26 January 2026

[Keir Starmer hesitant to ban apps for under-16s ‘due to his kids’](#), Times [online], 26 January 2026

[Bereaved parents fear delays to social media ban could harm children](#), BBC news [online], 25 January 2026

[Inside The Battle Over Banning Under-16s From Social Media](#), The House [online], 24 January 2026

[Six weeks on, is Australia’s teenage social media ban working?](#), Times [online], 24 January 2026

[The House of Lords has voted to stop under 16s using social media – what happens now?](#), The Conversation [online], 22 January 2026

[Lords put pressure on Starmer with vote to ban social media for under-16s](#), Guardian [online], 21 January 2026

[NSPCC: Social media ban would punish teens for big tech’s failures](#), The House [online], 21 January 2026

[Starmer faces humiliation in Lords over social media ban for children](#), Telegraph [online], 21 January 2026

[Labour MP Says Potential Social Media Ban Must Be Compatible With Votes For 16-Year-Olds](#), PoliticsHome [online], 21 January 2026

[A social media ban insults the intelligence of parents](#), Telegraph opinion [online], 21 January 2026

[Use film-style age ratings to limit teens’ social media, say Lib Dems](#), BBC news [online], 16 January 2026

[Meta blocks 550,000 accounts under Australia’s social media ban](#), BBC news [online], 12 January 2026

[Most people think social media is bad for kids. Australia is trying to prove it](#), BBC Science Focus news [online], 1 January 2026

[Under-16s social media ban sees rise in alternatives in app store](#), ABC news [online], 22 December 2025

[Will other countries follow Australia's social media ban for under-16s?](#), Guardian [online], 13 December 2025

[Australia's social media ban won't stop cyberbullying](#), The Conversation [online], 10 December 2025

[Australian teenagers say they're finding a way around social media ban](#), Sky News [online], 10 December 2025

[What countries do to regulate children's social media access](#), Reuters [online], 26 November 2025

6.3

Academic

[Is an under-16 social media ban the right course?](#), Oxford Internet Institute news [online], 23 January 2026

Nash V, [Expert comment: Is an under-16 social media ban the right course?](#), University of Oxford news [online], 23 January 2026

[Thousands of UK schoolchildren to take part in major study of social media use and teen mental health](#), University of Cambridge news [online], 20 January 2026

Thimm-Kaiser M and Keyes K, [What is Australia's under-16 social media ban? The world-first law explained](#), University of Sydney news [online], 5 December 2025

Champion K et al, [Debate: Social media in children and young people – time for a ban? Beyond the ban – empowering parents and schools to keep adolescents safe on social media](#), Child and Adolescent Mental Health, 30 (4), 2025, pp411–13, first published 10 September 2025

[Beyond the social media ban](#), The Lancet editorial [online], Volume 7, April 2025

Fardouly J, [Potential effects of the social media age ban in Australia for children younger than 16 years](#), The Lancet [online], Volume 7, April 2025

Blake JA et al, [Will restricting the age of access to social media reduce mental illness in Australian youth?](#), Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry, 59(3), 2025

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