Harrow Monitoring Group

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Harrow Monitoring Group - email

Growing up in the online world: a national conversation

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Sent via email OSA_consultation@dsit.gov.uk on 7 March 2026

Executive Summary

This response welcomes the consultation by the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology on the proposal to introduce a statutory minimum age of 16 for access to social media services. Protecting children's wellbeing online is an important and legitimate public policy objective. However, the likely effectiveness of a blanket ban must be assessed within the wider social and political environment in which young people live. Children's attitudes, behaviours, and vulnerabilities are shaped by experiences of inequality, discrimination, economic pressure, and social exclusion. Social media does not operate independently from these influences.

If policy treats social media use as an isolated cause of harm, it risks overlooking the structural conditions that shape how young people interpret information, form identity, and respond to adversity. Evidence from youth engagement work also shows that online spaces can provide social connection, information, and awareness of rights and wellbeing. Effective regulation therefore requires a balanced approach that protects children from harm while recognising their need for information, support, and gradual digital participation.

Key points for consideration

1. A blanket prohibition on social media access for under 16s may have limited effectiveness if it does not address the wider social and structural factors that shape young people's experiences and vulnerabilities.
2. Evidence from local youth engagement in Harrow demonstrates that digital platforms are embedded within existing social relationships and communication networks for young people.

3. Online spaces can expose young people to risk but also provide access to information, support networks, and awareness of rights and wellbeing.

4. Enforcement challenges and the likelihood of circumvention mean that prohibition may shift young users to less regulated online spaces rather than reduce exposure to harm.

5. A more proportionate approach may involve stronger platform accountability, age-appropriate design standards, and sustained digital literacy education rather than a universal access ban.

Social media ban in the context of young people's socio-political environment

1. Young people in the United Kingdom increasingly grow up in environments shaped by economic pressure, service gaps, and exposure to polarised public discourse. These wider conditions influence how children interpret online information and engage with digital platforms. Experiences of discrimination, marginalisation, or insecurity frequently shape opinion formation more strongly than exposure to online content alone. Social media may amplify these experiences but it rarely creates them independently. A policy that focuses primarily on restricting access to platforms risks addressing the medium rather than the underlying causes that shape young people's attitudes and emotional wellbeing.

2. Evidence from the Young Harrow Foundation borough wide youth survey demonstrates that digital interaction is already embedded in everyday social relationships. The HAY Harrow Youth Voice Survey involved nearly 8,000 young people aged 9 to 18 across the borough. The findings indicate that almost half of young people communicate with close friends or family online on a daily basis. This suggests that digital communication often supports existing social networks rather than replacing them. A complete prohibition may therefore disrupt established communication patterns without necessarily addressing the wider pressures affecting young people's wellbeing.

3. Local evidence also illustrates that digital environments can amplify harmful behaviour among peers. Reports from the London Borough of Harrow described social media accounts that attempted to organise confrontations between students from different secondary schools by encouraging pupils to film and share incidents. Although no serious incidents occurred locally, the situation demonstrates how online dynamics can escalate peer conflict or risk-taking behaviour. These risks require targeted intervention through rapid moderation, platform accountability, and safeguarding responses rather than a universal prohibition on access.

4. Social media also plays an important role in informing young people about issues that affect their lives directly. Many young people first encounter information about mental health support, discrimination, safeguarding, climate change, and civic participation through digital platforms. These channels can help young people understand their rights

and recognise situations that may harm their wellbeing. Restricting access until the age of 16 may delay exposure to this information at a stage when many adolescents are beginning to form social awareness and civic understanding.

5. The HAY Harrow survey also demonstrates that digital experiences vary significantly across different groups of young people. Vulnerable groups often report higher levels of online exposure and greater risk of negative experiences. Young people with special educational needs, those from asylum seeker backgrounds, and those identifying as non-binary report higher levels of device use and higher rates of uncomfortable or inappropriate online interaction. These patterns suggest that vulnerability is shaped by wider social and structural conditions rather than technology alone. Effective policy responses must therefore combine platform regulation with targeted support for vulnerable groups.

6. The practical enforceability of a blanket ban must also be considered. Many young people possess sufficient digital skills to bypass restrictions through age misrepresentation or the use of virtual private networks. If mainstream platforms become inaccessible, some users may migrate to less regulated digital spaces with weaker moderation and fewer safety controls. In such cases the overall level of risk could increase because platforms and regulators lose visibility over youth online behaviour.

7. Adolescence is a developmental stage characterised by identity formation, peer interaction, and increasing independence. These developmental processes continue regardless of regulatory restrictions. A sudden transition at age 16 from prohibition to unrestricted access may expose young people to complex digital environments without the skills or resilience required to navigate them safely. A staged approach that builds digital literacy and critical understanding over time may therefore be more effective in supporting safe participation.

8. It is also necessary to consider the role of online spaces for young people who experience exclusion or conflict in their immediate environments. Some young people rely on online communities to seek advice, discuss identity, or access peer support that may not be available within family or local networks. This may be particularly relevant for young people experiencing discrimination, social isolation, or cultural stigma. A blanket prohibition may unintentionally remove support mechanisms for those who depend on digital spaces for information or emotional support.

9. Taken together, this evidence suggests that the proposed under 16 social media ban may have limited effectiveness if it is implemented without addressing the wider conditions that shape young people's experiences. Social media can contribute to harm but it also provides information, connection, and opportunities for awareness of rights and wellbeing. Policy interventions should therefore focus on reducing specific risks rather than eliminating access entirely.

Conclusion

10. The proposal to introduce a statutory minimum age of 16 for social media access reflects legitimate concern about online harm and the wellbeing of children. However, the effectiveness of a blanket prohibition is likely to be limited if it does not account for the wider social conditions that shape young people's experiences. Young people form attitudes and behaviours within environments that may include economic hardship, discrimination, and social exclusion. Social media often reflects and amplifies these conditions rather than creating them independently.

11. Digital platforms also provide significant benefits for many young people. They support social connection, educational engagement, and access to information about wellbeing and rights. For some young people who feel marginalised or isolated within their immediate environment, online communities provide a vital source of advice and support. Removing access until the age of 16 may therefore reduce opportunities for early awareness of safeguarding issues and support services.

12. A more proportionate regulatory framework may therefore be more effective. This could include stronger safety by design requirements for platforms used by young people, including limits on algorithmic amplification of harmful content and greater transparency in content recommendation systems.

13. Government may also consider strengthening age assurance and age-appropriate design standards so that younger users encounter progressively safer digital environments rather than a binary system of prohibition followed by unrestricted access.

14. Policy should also be supported by sustained investment in digital literacy, media literacy, and rights based online safety education within schools and youth services. Equipping young people with the skills to recognise manipulation, misinformation, exploitation, and harmful content is likely to provide more durable protection than restriction alone.

15. A regulatory approach that combines platform accountability, stronger safeguards, and education would better reflect the complex realities of young people's digital lives. Such an approach recognises young people not only as individuals who require protection but also as emerging citizens who benefit from access to reliable information and the ability to understand and respond to the issues that affect their wellbeing.

(References next)

References

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