



HOUSE OF COMMONS  
LONDON SW1A 0AA

Rt Hon Liz Kendall MP  
Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology  
100 Parliament Street  
London  
SW1A 2BQ

26<sup>th</sup> May 2026

*Dear Secretary of State,*

**Growing up in the online world: a national conversation**

Please accept this letter as a submission to the consultation.

**Constituents' feedback**

I have received more than 900 emails on this issue, have held constituency meetings to hear views from parents, carers and grandparents directly, and had a number of smaller-group conversations with teenagers.

Most parents I met were strongly in favour of a ban on social media for children under 16. There was a widespread view that social media companies cannot be trusted to enforce meaningful protections for children, because their business models depend on capturing attention and maximising engagement. Parents expressed deep frustration that harmful and abusive material is allowed to remain on these platforms, with many questioning why major technology companies are not being required to do more to remove it.

Parents repeatedly stressed that the primary issue is not children actively searching for harmful or disturbing material online, but that it is simply too easy for them to encounter it while using social media for everyday activities such as keeping in touch with friends, following trends or watching influencers. Particular concern was expressed about the impact on children aged 11 to 15, a critical period of brain development, with many arguing that constant exposure to social media content is effectively 're-wiring' young minds. Once harmful content has been seen, parents noted, it cannot be unseen, and the psychological effects can be lasting. There was also a

strong belief that some platforms are deliberately designed to be addictive, creating issues that could affect children into adulthood.

Many participants felt that advances in AI are likely to intensify these problems by making harmful content more sophisticated, personalised and difficult to control, or for parents even to be aware of.

### **Summary of concerns**

The main areas of concern can be summarised as:

- **Content** – from the distorting effects of unreal worlds and curated lives, to disinformation and corrosive narratives, to the proximity of extreme pornography and violence.
- **Contact** – the incidence of bullying which now also follows you home, the increased risk of contact from bad influences, to potential uses in the worst cases for enabling child abuse.
- The sheer amount of **time** taken, which compounds the other two. This can manifest in effects on sleep and concentration, even physical development (possible links to increased incidence of myopia for example), and more generally the ‘crowding out’ of other activities parents would rather their children were doing.

Parents today face an impossible balance: protecting their children from the risks of the online world, while still wanting them to benefit from technology, and knowing that so much of their social lives now happens online. While instinctively, the answer to this could or should be use of parental controls, in practice the complexity and number of different sets of controls – by device or operating system, individual platform (and in some cases individual features within platforms), and per child if you have more than one – makes this impractical for busy parents. Parents need to have confidence in enforcement of protections and children need to be protected, in what they can access and in the design of the systems they can, from harmful content.

As things stand, many parents are deeply worried about how easy it is for children to find or stumble across harmful content online, and believe that existing interventions are not working effectively and further robust interventions must be put in place.

## **Setting a minimum age for children to access social media – and what this should cover**

Reflecting what I have heard overwhelmingly from constituents, I support the introduction of a minimum age of 16 for access to social media.

I acknowledge that while for many platforms it is obvious that they should be in scope, there are still definitional questions about exactly what constitutes social media, and that some of the harm potential associated with social media is also present in other online properties that we would not term social media. Given the dynamic nature of the online world, there is inherent risk in trying to define what it is we are legislating or regulating for by reference only to the current market.

One approach would be to define two layers of what should be in scope:

- define a first set of indicators such as whether users can receive unwanted contact within the platform from someone they do not know, and whether the user may be exposed through content recommendation algorithms to material that has not been verified as suitable for under 16s;
- then, regardless of those first indicators, whether the platform deploys either inherently risky functionalities along the lines of the list given in the consultation document on pp. 23-26, or ‘compulsive design’ features such as those listed on p. 29.

Whatever the lists of indicators, features and functions, they need to be amendable in future as unforeseen product developments occur.

The Consultation asks about the so-called ‘age of digital consent’ as a question separate from the age of access. The two are closely related, since it is the processing of personal data that allows targeted content to be presented, including targeted ads, which create the revenue for the platform. It would make sense to harmonise them at age 16 – although as the Data Protection Act 2018 and GDPR apply to a wider range of services (including those without such targeting and ads) some exceptions would need to be made – for example for bona fide health, education and child protection purposes, among others<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> I suggested a formulation for these sorts of exceptions in an amendment I proposed to the Data (Use and Access) Bill:  
<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3825/stages/19751/amendments/10020992#:~:text=Member's%20explanatory%20statement,%C2%A9%20UK%20Parliament%202026>

Age assurance methods are imperfect, but a balanced approach should be retained, and it will be important to learn from the experiences of the Australian 'waterfall' approach.

### **16- and 17-year olds**

The introduction of a minimum age of 16 to access social media will not mean that no further work is required to make the online world safer for children. For one thing, as noted above, age assurance is imperfect. Moreover, the duty of protection of children, per the Children Act 1989, means up to age 18; it is important that there are appropriate online safety measures for 16 and 17 year olds who will be on social media and other platforms.

Yours,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Damian Hinds".

Damian Hinds  
Member of Parliament for East Hampshire

cc OSA\_consultation@dsit.gov.uk