

**Joint statement from children's and online safety organisations, experts and bereaved families on a social media ban for under-16s.**

Parents across the country are profoundly concerned by the risks to children's safety and wellbeing online. As children's and online safety organisations, experts and bereaved families we share their concerns and, for many years, have been raising the alarm and calling for bold and decisive action. But, collectively, we believe that 'social media bans' are the wrong solution.

We undoubtedly need action to protect children from preventable online harm. Parents are right to demand that the Government stands on the side of children and families, and finally call time on tech giants being able to treat children's lives and wellbeing as someone else's concern.

Though well-intentioned, blanket bans on social media would fail to deliver the improvement in children's safety and wellbeing that they so urgently need. They are 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 cliff-edge 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).

A social media ban is not the answer. Instead, an approach which is both broader and more targeted is 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.

It is vital that solutions are based on high-quality evidence. Last year the Government commissioned an important review into online harm and we urge them to publish the results to date without delay to inform debate and decisions on next steps.

We agree swift action is required. The Government should urgently introduce new legislation that strengthens the Online Safety Act to give our laws and regulators every possible tool to tackle the harms children are experiencing. We want to see a requirement on platforms to use highly effective age assurance that robustly enforces minimum age limits. Just as films and video games have different ratings reflecting the risk they pose to children, social media platforms have different levels of risk too and their minimum age limits should reflect this. Companies should be required to set minimum age limits based on their functionalities and risk level to deliver age-appropriate experiences.

Most of all, it is time for a fundamental reset of our expectations on tech firms. Social media firms should be required to move away from addictive design, but also have strong and unambiguous duties to build and promote responsible, child centred products that once and for all promote and reinforce agency, healthy interaction and exposure to high-quality content.

Regulation should be strengthened and more effectively enforced, but also expanded so that tech firms not only tackle harm but are left in no doubt that the price of doing business in the UK is to comply with a strong and clear set of measures that prioritises the lives and wellbeing of our children and young people.

**Signed,**

Molly Rose Foundation

NSPCC

5 Rights Foundation

Nexus NI

FlippGen / 'For Us' campaign

Centre for Protecting Women Online

Beyond

Breck Foundation

Internet Matters

Full Fact

Thomas William Parfett Foundation

Children United

Internet Watch Foundation

Fresh Start Media

Parent Zone

Marie Collins Foundation

Victim Support NI

Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland

ASSIST NI - Domestic & Sexual Abuse Advocacy Service

Invisible Traffick

WISE KIDS

SWGfL

UK Safer Internet Centre

Politics in Action

Childnet

Alliance to Counter Crime Online

ProMo Cymru

Women's Resource & Development Agency

Child Online Harms Policy Think Tank

Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD)

NWG Network

Adele Zeynep Walton

Mariano Janin, Mia's father

Ian & Penny Banyard

Tanya & Michael Absalom, parents of Kady Absalom

Ros & Mark Dowey, parents of Murray Dowey

Dr Richard Graham, Consultant Child & Adolescent Psychiatrist

Dr Lizzy Winstone, University of Bristol

V.L.A.D. Outreach CIC

Children's Law Centre (NI)

Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse

The Children's Media Foundation