

Social media bans are the wrong approach for children

Policy briefing – January 2026

- Calls for a social media ban for under 16s are a symptom of profound concern around children's online safety, and parents are right to demand bold and comprehensive further action.
- However, bans are not the right solution. Though well-intentioned, they risk doing more harm than good – causing harms to migrate to other high-risk platforms, introducing new mental health risks and leaving older teenagers at risk of a 'cliff-edge' when they turn sixteen.
- Blunt and simplistic solutions will fail to offer parents and children the safety and wellbeing they are rightly demanding. We must follow an evidence-based approach that tackles preventable harm, promotes wellbeing, and treats online harm as a product safety issue.
- The Government should commit to fixing and strengthening the Online Safety Act, develop a bold new strategy that inoculates children with foundational skills in critical online and algorithmic literacy, and introduce new requirements that make building safe, high quality and wellbeing-centred platforms a precondition to enter the UK market.

Calls for social media bans – a call for action but the wrong approach

Recent weeks have seen growing momentum behind a social ban for under 16s in the UK, following the introduction of similar measures in Australia.

The intention behind calls for a ban is entirely legitimate. Parents across the country are profoundly concerned about the growing scale and complexity of online risks, with the awful reality that we lose one young person to suicide every week where technology plays a role.

They are also losing faith in a regulator whose abject approach to implementing the Online Safety Act has been weak, unambitious, and fundamentally failed to deliver on the intentions of Parliament - and successive Governments that have watered down, delayed or triangulated their response to online harm.

MRF unequivocally agrees that decisive further action is urgently required to turn the tide on preventable harm. Had the OSA been implemented in full and not watered down, parents would now have confidence that meaningful change was on the way and we would all be seeing the change that we want and need.

Social media bans are not the answer. Though well-intentioned and appealing in their simplicity, they are a blunt measure that risk doing more harm than good, and that penalises children for tech firms and successive Governments' failures to act. **Bans will not deliver the long-term and fundamental improvements in safety that parents, children and parliamentarians want.**

Instead, we need comprehensive and evidence-informed solutions that meaningfully address the root causes of harm, and that enable children to safely experience the benefits of social media while gaining the real-world critical online and algorithmic literacy skills they need to stay safe as teens, flourish as adults, and to succeed in our future AI and digital economy.

MRF are calling for the Government to commit to bold steps to protect a generation from preventable harm – including ambitious action to fix the Online Safety Act, radical steps to put designing for wellbeing at the heart of UK regulation, as well as action across the broader tech and policy stack.

The risks and unintended consequences of social media bans

The evidence in favour of social media bans is unclear, and there is a strong case that they risk doing more harm than good. Bans risk:

1. Migrating harms to high-risk, poorly regulated sites

Banning children from certain platforms does not inherently improve safety, it simply means that harms will migrate to platforms that children – and bad actors – can still access. In Australia, high risk platforms like Discord, Roblox and gaming sites have been excluded from the ban, and TikTok's parent company has set up new products to enable children to stay online. AI chatbots are also out of scope.

Bad actors – like child sexual abusers or violent groups who groom vulnerable minors into suicide and self-harm – will migrate to already risky platforms in potentially unmanageable volumes.

2. Unintended consequences for wellbeing and youth mental health

While bans may reduce exposure to harmful content in the short-term, evidence shows many young people rely on social media for connection, identity exploration and support. For LGBTQ or neurodiverse children, being online can offer huge benefits around identity, self-esteem and peer-support.

Put simply, banning social media may tackle one set of mental health problems but create new ones. How social media affects youth mental health is complex, and we need a clear, evidence-based approach to tackling risks and avoiding new sets of unintended consequences.

3. Damaging the ability for teens to gain critical online and algorithmic literacy skills – harming their long term chances

Bans risk undermining the next generation's preparedness for adulthood, and particularly giving young people the critical online literacy and algorithmic literacy skills that will allow them to stay safe as teens, thrive as adults and underpin our future digital and AI economy. It is far more difficult to develop these crucial skills in schools if we are teaching children about the risks of something they cannot access. There is also clear evidence that social media can be a powerful tool for learning, expression, creativity and the fulfilment of other children's rights – benefits which we can build on through effective regulation.

4. A cliff edge for older teens and a sharp increase in risks while a ban passes

Any ban would introduce a deeply damaging cliff edge for older teens – and particularly girls – when they are suddenly exposed to poorly regulated online spaces on their sixteenth birthday. Girls may face an immediate barrage of harms, from misogyny and sexual predators, to self-harm and eating disorder content, while being wholly unprepared to safely manage these risks.

Any announcement of a ban would also have an immediate chilling effect on years of hard-earned progress on safety by design and platform responses to threats. Preparations for a ban would likely drain energy and resource away from ongoing efforts to improve protections for children, while in-scope platforms would be disincentivised to cooperate with regulation or innovate in responsible design, leaving children at greater risk in the potentially lengthy period before implementation.

For children who circumvent a ban – as we are already seeing in Australia where early indications are that the rollout has been rocky – there would be limited if any guardrails to protect them.

5. Distracting us from new and emerging threats

Bans on social media ignores the rapid growth of new and disturbing threats from AI, including the mental health risks of chatbots. As the threat profile shifts with new tech, a ban risks taking our eyes off the ball – and with a decreased focus on safety and wellbeing by design, means we become increasingly less prepared to tackle threats on other platforms and technologies effectively.

What needs to happen instead: key steps to turn the tide on preventable online harm

Calls for a social media ban are a clear sign that action to strengthen protections for children is urgently required. But while Government must heed this concern, calls for bans are a symptom not the solution.

The right answer is a bold, comprehensive and evidence-based plan to make regulation fit for purpose, strengthen education, and reframe our response to social media so it not only tackles harm but prioritises and promotes wellbeing.

Eight years on from Molly's death, Molly Rose Foundation is calling for comprehensive action to turn the tide on preventable harm. These are ambitious, evidence-informed actions, aimed at strengthening our approach to Online Safety across the whole policy stack. They are also pro-growth,¹ and will equip teenagers with the skills they and our future digital and AI economy will need to thrive.

Committing to these measures will demonstrate to parents that the Government is serious about change – and should attract cross party support to give parents and children the safety they need. They include:

1. **Fixing the Online Safety Act.** The OSA remains the most powerful vehicle we have to protect children from preventable harm. However, it is not working as intended, with Ofcom's weak and unambitious approach to implementation highlighting structural issues in the current framework.
The Government must make an immediate commitment to legislative amendments and a White Paper that sets out how the Act can be fixed. Legislation must follow in 2027 and be passed without delay. This must include **reasserting an overarching Duty of Care** on platforms, ensuring they cannot claim compliance with Ofcom's codes of practice while still exposing children to risk. It must also introduce a new **harm reduction Duty on Ofcom** holding the regulator accountable for annual reductions in harm, and injecting much needed urgency into the regulator's approach.
2. **Inoculating children from harm through turbo-charging critical online and algorithmic literacy In schools.** Digital and media literacy education has long been a 'nice to have', undermined by a lack of prioritisation, funding and status in the curriculum.
This must change, with digital and media literacy prioritised as a fundamental life skill for the modern age. This should include an **expanded focus on critical online and algorithmic literacy** across the curriculum, as well as **funding for training, robust assessment and high quality resources**. This should be underpinned by **sustainable funding for digital literacy initiatives via an expanded industry levy**, and greater **strategic emphasis and ownership within Government**.
3. **A radical reset – requiring wellbeing by design.** There is a huge opportunity for a radical reset of the expectations regulation places on platforms, requiring not only that they prevent harm, but that they actively promote wellbeing and the wider benefits that social media can offer.
The Government should take steps to ensure that the price of entry to the UK market is design that actively supports positive outcomes. This should include **new legal duties on platforms to promote wellbeing by design**, as well as a clear framework of how to deliver this. This should include **quotas around the prominence of high-quality health, civics and education content in recommender feeds**, and requirements for design that **promotes agency and healthy social connection**.

For further briefing and a conversation about how Molly Rose Foundation can support your work please contact Katie Hayman Joyce at k.haymanjoyce@mollyrosefoundation.org

¹ DSIT's own modelling suggests a 15% reduction in Online Harm would lead to £4 billion in annualised economic return.