

MOLLY ROSE FOUNDATION

A new settlement for children's online safety

Policy briefing – February 2026

- Parents are profoundly concerned about children's online safety and are right to demand bold and comprehensive action. However, an Australia-style social media ban risks giving parents a false sense of safety and will fail to offer the protection they deserve and demand.
- There is another way – a new online settlement for children and families. Our roadmap for action sets out the quickest, most effective and decisive route to protect children from harm, and to respond to the clear sense of urgency with a robust and comprehensive plan.

Our five-point plan for a safer online world

Our five-point plan represents a new online safety settlement that can deliver meaningful change and attract the confidence and support of parents, children, and civil society experts. If backed with political will, change will come quickly.

New MRF polling shows that **three quarters (73%) of UK adults support new legislation to strengthen regulation and better protect children and young people from online harm, with support for regulation stronger than recent support for an Australia style-ban.**^{1 2}

Labour committed to strengthening the Online Safety Act in opposition and parents expect this promise to be kept.³ **Among those who support new legislation, the overwhelming majority (84%) want to see legislation introduced this year.**⁴

What must the Government do?

Our five-point plan⁵ sets out the need to fix and strengthen the Online Safety Act; expand its scope to tackle chronic well-being risks; and better address preventable harm not just on social media but on gaming sites, messaging apps and high-risk AI chatbots.

1 Polling of 2,048 UK adults undertaken by Savanta in January 2026.

2 Polling undertaken the Good Growth Foundation found that 66% of UK adults support a legal ban on social media for children under 16.

3 Labour's now Deputy Leader Lucy Powell announced in January 2023 that an incoming Labour Government would introduce a stronger Online Safety Act as a 'top priority', with a focus on algorithmically-recommended harmful content. She told The Observer: 'I met many of the families who have lost teenagers, and I promised them we would act. We owe it to all those who have been harmed online to get this right.'

4 Savanta polling for MRF.

5 More detail on our plan is available in: Molly Rose Foundation (2026) A roadmap for a better online future.

Ministers must:

1. Fix and decisively strengthen the Online Safety Act

Regulation remains the most powerful tool available to tackle preventable harm and the underlying commercial incentives and business models that drive inaction. However, regulation is not working as intended.

Amendments could be passed within months to introduce robust, risk-based minimum age limits. This would mean platforms with high-risk functionalities, including live streaming and AI chatbots, carrying the highest age ratings, with tech firms finally being incentivised to engineer safer and more age-appropriate products in order to be available to younger teens.

Government should table a package of amendments that can fix existing weaknesses in the current Act, including measures to make companies act on the full set of harms in their risk assessments.⁶

Ultimately, a new Act is required. This must make provisions for a systemic Duty of Care, reset regulatory incentives in favour of harm reduction, and deliver an outcomes- and conduct-based regulatory approach that learns the lessons from financial services regulation, ensuring that the Act is better targeted to the size and cash-rich position of the largest companies in the world.

2. Extend the Act to cover child well-being, making wellbeing-by-design the price of admission to the UK market

The Government should expand the scope and ambition of the Act – widening its objectives to not only necessitate harm reduction but to actively deliver wellbeing-by-design.

Through new duties on platforms, and new strategic objectives of Ofcom, we can introduce a robust and demanding set of measures that mark an end to addictive and harmful design choices, with a new duty to ensure digital products are built to be age appropriate, high-quality and nourishing by design.

Algorithms should be fundamentally repurposed – if a platform intends to use them, they should not only be free of harmful toxic material but should nourish and support child development. Feeds should be made to recommend high quality, age-appropriate content from a diverse range of trusted sources, including trusted mental health support, education providers and public service broadcasters.

3. Require new levels of transparency and accountability and candour from Big Tech

Transparency is a powerful lever for change – and one of the most impactful tools in our arsenal to shape digital markets that can work for children, families and society. We need:

- New disclosure duties that require the largest firms – and their senior decision-makers – to proactively disclose information about which a regulator would expect to be made aware, mirroring those in financial services;
- A new approach to transparency across the stack, including for advertisers who unwittingly monetise social media harm, and whose advertising spend – at the core of Big Tech's business model – is attritionally lost to opaque advertising models;

⁶ A full suite of amendments has been prepared by the Online Safety Act Network, which MRF wholeheartedly endorses.

- A longer-term push to promote new accountancy standards that can draw on lessons from tackling climate change. This would require corporates to report on their exposure to online safety risks, including in their supply chain.

4. Adopt a 'polluter pays' and whole stack approach to harm reduction

The Government should adopt a 'polluter pays' funding approach, with an extension of the industry levy that currently funds Ofcom to also support civil society and academic research, pump-priming the evidence base that the regulator needs to act.

A new Act should bring app stores into scope and set out clear and consistent minimum standards for parental controls.

Google and Apple should be legally required to adopt technically feasible device level measures that can prevent children from being coerced into sending self-generated images. This would disrupt the rapid growth of sadistically motivated group-based grooming by so-called Com groups, which see teenage girls being targeted primarily on gaming and messaging sites (rather than social networks) for the purposes of coerced acts of self-harm, sexual abuse, and even suicide.⁷

5. Prioritise education as inoculation, with a new strategic focus on critical digital and media literacy

It's time for bold reset of school-age education, recognising that critical digital and media literacy⁸ is a foundational life skill that not only inoculates children against the worst effects of online harm today, but equips them with the skills they need to flourish in our future AI and digital economy.

Building on England's Curriculum Review, we should invest in foundational skills around platform and algorithmic literacy, giving young people a critical understanding of how digital environments work and shape our lives – including the role of algorithms, data and persuasive design. The Government must also support schools to robustly embed critical digital and media literacy across the entire curriculum and all age groups, while training teachers to take responsibility for building children's digital life skills.

Together with stronger regulation, high-quality education can help to turn the tide on online harm, draining the power from algorithms that continue to expose young people to high-risk content.

This also provides an opportunity to meaningfully invest in the brain capital and economic potential of generation, giving young people the critical thinking, digital citizenship and practical skills they need to thrive in an AI economy, prepare for a new voting age of 16, and to deal with the increasing threats that a fractured information ecosystem poses to our democracy and national security.

⁷ Resolver, in partnership with MRF (2026) Weaponised loneliness: critical harm intelligence briefing.

⁸ This refers to the broad range of competencies needed to stay safe, think critically, and act and create media responsibly online. We place particular emphasis on the need for critical as well as functional skills, including critical thinking about content, interactions, and the design and operation of the online environment itself. This briefing uses both digital and media literacy to describe these competencies, in line with the approach taken by the Curriculum Review for England.

Why an Australia-style social media ban is the wrong approach

An Australia style social media ban:

Gives parents an illusory sense of comfort: In Australia, the early indications are that most children's social media accounts still remain active. Instagram has only removed one account for every eight young people aged 8–15, while Snapchat has removed just one account for every six young Australians in this age group.⁹ Parents deserve better than a poorly enforced measure that affords false comfort while their children continue to be exposed to unacceptable risk.

Creates a damaging cliff-edge at age 16: If properly enforced, a ban would introduce a deeply damaging cliff edge for older teens – and particularly girls – who are suddenly exposed to poorly regulated online spaces on their sixteenth birthday. Given that a social media ban would likely have a chilling effect on regulatory outcomes, it is unlikely there would be adequate safety-by-design measures or protective guardrails to support them – while children who are able to circumvent a ban will be left with even fewer protections than they currently receive.

Means policy decisions come ahead of the evidence: We currently lack strong scientific evidence on the impact of bans, with no high-quality systematic study that has tested the impact of reducing or wholly eliminating social media use among healthy under 16s (or that has systematically evaluated the consequences). While some supporters of a ban have invoked the precautionary principle to justify their position, we simply cannot determine what the harm-to-benefit balance of such a drastic policy solution, however well-intentioned, may be.

Risks harm migrating to other 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, despite being at the leading edge of new and emerging threats, including sadistic group offending (Com groups) that sees children being coerced into self-harm, sexual abuse and even suicide acts.¹⁰ AI chatbots are also left out of scope.

Risks unintended consequences for vulnerable teens: 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.

In Australia, the country's youth mental health agency has reported that 10% of new referrals are related to the ban – despite the relatively small proportion of accounts that have actually been removed.¹¹

Kids Helpline, Australia's equivalent of Childline, has reported levels of distress among children who have been cut off from their support networks, including children experiencing suicide ideation, teens who used social media to control self-harming behaviours, and numerous other mental health crises.¹²

For further briefing and a conversation about how Molly Rose Foundation can support your work please contact Rowan Ferguson at r.ferguson@mollyrosefoundation.org

Registered Charity No: 1179482 <https://mollyrosefoundation.org>

⁹ E-safety's data found that 95% of teens aged 13–15 used at least one major social media site.

¹⁰ Resolver Trust and Safety, in partnership with Molly Rose Foundation (2026) Weaponised Loneliness: Critical Harm Intelligence Briefing.

¹¹ Wilson, C (2025) One in 10 these seeking mental health support from headspace site social media ban as an issue. Published on Crikey.com.au 16/01/26.

¹² The West Australian (2026) 'Distressed' teens turn to Kids Helpline following social media ban, saying they've lost support networks. Published 7/01/26.