

MOLLY ROSE FOUNDATION

Online safety consultation

The next steps that adults and parents want

Research briefing – March 2026

As the Government's consultation on social media access begins, new representative polling of UK adults shows:

- **There is exceptionally high public concern about children's online safety in the UK right now (91%), with concern consistent across political affiliation, age, class and geography.**
- Strong support for a new Online Safety Act. **Three quarters (73%) of UK adults support new legislation to strengthen regulation of social media platforms, with support higher than recent polling in favour of an Australian-style ban.**
- When thinking about the next steps on online safety, most parents are focused on the ends (safer online experiences) rather than specific means to achieve them. **More than four in five adults think it is important the Government listens to both parents and the evidence, with a clear preference for decisive and evidence-based interventions.** This suggests the Government's consultation is inherently the right approach.
- There's **strong support to strengthen and expand the scope of regulation – with high public support for the Online Safety Act being extended to cover both chronic and acute harms**, as well as a broader range of risks across the tech stack, including AI.

Methodology

Savanta surveyed 2,048 adults in January 2026. This includes a sample of 808 parents with at least one child aged 18 or younger. Fieldwork was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all UK adults (aged 18+).

Results

1. Strong concern about online safety risks, across every demographic of British society

There is significant public concern about the safety risks being faced by children and young people online. An overwhelming majority of UK adults (91%) say they are concerned about the online safety of children and young people in the UK (including 92% of parents).

High levels of public concern are consistently found across political affiliation, age, class and geography. **Among those who voted at the last election, 93% of Labour voters, 94% of Conservative voters, 92% of Reform voters, and 90% of Liberal Democrat voters express concern about online safety.**

UK adults are specifically concerned about the risks of algorithmically recommended harmful content. Nine in ten adults (91%) say they are concerned about suicide and social content being recommended to children and young people on social media.

A similar proportion (93%) are concerned about children being groomed into acts of suicide and self-harm, a rapidly growing threat which has been the subject of multiple public warnings from global law enforcement agencies. This deeply disturbing new threat primarily comes from group-based offenders (Sadism Com groups),¹ **with grooming risks highest on gaming platforms, messaging apps, and livestreaming services, which fall out of scope of Australia's social media ban.**²

There are high levels of public concern about AI chatbots and the mental health risks they pose. 85% of adults say they are concerned about children being given harmful or inappropriate mental health advice when using AI chatbots (with over half of adults very concerned). Research suggests that one in eight teenagers have used AI chatbots for emotional or mental health support,³ with vulnerable children more likely to use chatbots than children and young people overall.⁴

2. Strong support for a new Online Safety Act, with most parents focused on the ends not the means

Parents are profoundly concerned about children's online safety and overwhelmingly support decisive further action. Three quarters (73%) of UK adults support new legislation to strengthen regulation and better protect children and young people from online harm,⁵ with support for regulation stronger than recent polling in favour of Australian-style social media ban.⁶

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

2 Among the highest-risk platforms for sadistically-motivated grooming are Roblox and Discord. In our recent 'Weaponised Loneliness' report, online gaming platforms were considered 'critical risk' services

3 Common Sense Media (2025) Talk, trust and trade-offs; how and why teens use AI companions.

4 Internet Matters (2025) Me, Myself and AI: understanding and safeguarding children's use of AI chatbots

5 Among those who voted in the 2024 General Election, a new Act is supported by 80% of Labour voters, 85% of Conservative voters, 81% of Liberal Democrat voters and 65% of Reform voters.

6 66% of adults supported an Australian-style social media ban, according to polling undertaken by the Good Growth Foundation in January 2026

Among those who support new legislation, the overwhelming majority (84%) want to see legislation introduced as soon as possible, ideally this year. This should translate into a legislative commitment in the King's Speech.

In respect of online safety, it appears that most parents remain focused on the ends, not a particular set of means. When deciding how to protect children's online safety, four-fifths of UK adults support the UK Government considering to a great or moderate extent both the views of parents (82%), but also the evidence around social media and its impacts (82%). Two-thirds of adults (69%) support children's views being substantially taken into account.

This suggests broad support for the urgent but considered approach being set out by the Government, with a clear 'confidence premium' being attached to solutions that are evidence-based and capable of attracting the confidence of parents, experts, civil society and young people themselves.

Put simply, vociferous calls for a ban do not necessarily represent the view of the majority of parents.

3. Deep dissatisfaction with Government, Ofcom and tech firms – but signs that the Online Safety Act is starting to deliver tangible results

Our findings show that UK adults feel neither the Government, the regulator nor tech firms are doing enough to protect children from online safety risks – making it wholly unsurprising that calls for urgent action have reached fever pitch.

Fewer than one in three adults (28%) feel the Government has performed 'well' or 'very well' when it comes to online safety. In contrast, almost (64%) two-thirds feel the Government has performed 'not very well' or 'not very well at all' on this issue.

An overwhelming majority consider that social media platforms are not doing enough to protect children on their products. 72% of adults feel that social media companies have not done well on children's online safety.

While a majority of parents feel that Ofcom has not performed well on children's safety (60%), there are encouraging signs that **one-third (35%) feel that their children's online safety has started to improve since the Online Safety Act came into force.**

This suggests that well-enforced regulation can meaningfully translate into tangible safety improvements – and that if Ofcom is instructed to adopt a more ambitious approach to how it implements and enforces the online safety regime, a material shift in children's online safety and wellbeing will follow.

4. Clear support for strengthening and expanding the Act, to better target harm reduction, product safety testing and mandate child wellbeing-by-design

Last month, Molly Rose Foundation set out extensive proposals to strengthen the Online Safety Act, expand its scope to cover chronic harms, and demonstrate to parents that meaningful and decisive change is on the way.⁷ Our polling shows high levels of public support for many of these proposals.

There is pronounced public support for strengthening the Act: building on the current framework with a series of measures that explicitly target harm reduction, afford primacy to the fundamental rights of victims, and that better focus the regime on product safety risks.

Harm reduction and risk assessment duties

More than three quarters of UK adults (76%) would support the introduction of a harm reduction duty on Ofcom, a legal requirement to reduce children's exposure to online harm.

Almost seven in ten (68%) would support social media platforms only being accessible to children if they had been demonstrably shown to be safe beforehand. In practice, this could be achieved through a strengthened set of product safety testing duties and the adoption of new risk-based age limits for social media.

Under MRF's proposals, minimum joining ages would be determined by a platform-specific assessment of age appropriateness and risk, thereby incentivising the market to adopt lower risk functionalities if they wish to be accessible to younger users. The highest risk functionalities, including livestreaming and AI chatbots with human personas, would carry the highest age ratings.

Two-thirds of adults (66%) would support social media companies being required to publish their risk ratings for children – i.e. whether they have determined through their risk assessment process that they are high, medium or low risk for suicide, self-harm and other priority harms.

As it stands, Ofcom has published aggregate analysis of platform risk ratings but has not disclosed any platform-specific results.⁸ MRF is concerned that online platforms are systematically downplaying the risks posed by their products in risk assessments – remarkably not a single social media platform determined they were high-risk for suicide, self-harm and depression content for children.⁹ This is despite contemporaneous MRF research showing how Instagram and TikTok continued to bombard teen accounts with harmful suicide and self-harm content.¹⁰

Three-fifths of adults (58%) would support Ofcom having an explicit duty to protect the fundamental right to life of victims. The regulator currently faces similar cross-cutting duties in respect of privacy and free expression, but in the absence of similar pro-victim duties, has failed to act urgently and decisively enough in the face of immediate threats to life.

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7 Molly Rose Foundation (2026) A roadmap for a better future: a new online safety settlement for children, parents and families.

8 Ofcom (2025) Online safety risk assessments – year one; report on standards and improvements.

9 In January 2026, MRF wrote to 12 major social media and gaming platforms asking them to voluntarily disclose their risk ratings, but none were prepared to do so.

10 Our research undertaken in summer 2025 showed that more than 95% of the posts recommended to a 15-year old girl's account on TikTok's For You Page and Instagram's Reels surface contained potentially harmful suicide, self-harm and intense depression content. Molly Rose Foundation (2025) Pervasive-by-design: suicide, self-harm and intense depression content on TikTok and Instagram, and how their algorithms recommend it to teens

Extending the Act to cover wellbeing, making wellbeing-by-design the price of admission to the UK market

MRF believes the Online Safety Act should not only necessitate harm reduction but also actively promote and protect children’s wellbeing by design. Digital products must be built to be age appropriate, high quality and safe.

An overwhelming proportion of UK adults (75%) would support the introduction of a legal duty on social media sites to design and run their services with children’s wellbeing in mind.

For MRF, this should take the form of a bold and ambitious set of measures that can mark an end to addictive and harmful design choices, and that could result in regulatory action against corporate entities and senior managers who continue to treat children’s wellbeing as an optional consideration.

Around two thirds of adults (63%) would like to see tech firms having to share a quota of high-quality content on children’s social media feeds i.e. content from public service broadcasters, educational content, and trusted mental health advice.

MRF believes that feeds should be made to recommend high-quality, age-appropriate content from a diverse range of trusted sources. Algorithms should be fundamentally repurposed – if a platform intends to use them, they should not only be free of harmful and toxic material, but should nourish and support our children’s development, prioritising quality, diversity and positive value.

5. Taking decisive regulatory action on child-specific AI risks

There is strong support for legislative action to better protect children from the risks associated with AI, including AI chatbots. By a seven-to-one margin, UK adults support legislation to regulate the risks that AI poses to children. Some 71% of adults would support legislation that strengthens AI regulation in this regard.

MRF strongly supports the Government’s commitment to bring AI chatbots into scope of the Online Safety Act, but without significant strengthening of the regulatory regime, this is unlikely to offer the level of protection that children and young people need.

We strongly encourage the Government to expand the regime to require rigorous product safety testing as a condition of bringing AI products targeted at children to market. As it stands, Ofcom determines that product safety testing is an optional but not compulsory component of a platform’s risk assessment duties.¹¹

11 Ofcom’s Codes of Practice.

For a briefing and discussion about how we can work together to tackle preventable harm, please contact Andy Burrows: andy.burrows@mollyrosefoundation.org

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