

The UK's social media ban: The next steps that children want

Research briefing – September 2026

The new Government has reiterated its intention to proceed with a social media ban. If the Government is to succeed in its policy objectives, the scope and design of these restrictions must be actively informed by the needs and preferences of young people – many of whom feel ignored so far.

New representative polling from Molly Rose Foundation, FlippGen and Breck Foundation finds that a clear majority of 12 to 15-year-olds continue to oppose an Australian-style set of platform restrictions, with a clear preference for the Government to incentivise platforms to become safer-by-design. We found that:

- Two thirds (67%) of 12 to 15-year-olds oppose Australian-style platform-level restrictions. Almost seven in ten (68%) believe that most young people will try to find ways round restrictions.
- Young people are evenly split about the likely impacts of a platform-level ban. More than two-fifths (44%) feel it will 'make no real difference' to their online safety, compared to 42% who expect a positive impact.
- Fewer than three in ten 12 to 15-year-olds (28%) feel a ban will have a positive impact on their mental wellbeing. A similar proportion anticipate a negative impact (26%) and many children (40%) expect little impact.
- 12 to 15-year-olds express a clear preference for platforms to be made safe-by-design, with consistent support for action to address a range of harmful and addictive features. This should inform the Government's approach – with some countries, notably Canada, introducing a ban that provides for an exemption once strict safety-by-design conditions are met.
- Children support ambitious action across a broad range of user-to-user platforms, including gaming sites and AI chatbots. Only a very small proportion of 12 to 15-year-olds (fewer than 10%) believe no further action is required to tackle safety risks on gaming, AI chatbots and livestreaming services.
- If the Government proceeds with platform restrictions, safeguarding risks may result. Among girls aged 12–15, confidence to disclose online safety concerns to a teacher drops by 19 percentage points, from 55% to 36%, assuming they remain on social media once a ban takes effect.

Methodology

YouGov surveyed 1,041 children aged 12–15 between June 22nd and 30th 2026, after the announcement of a social media ban. Fieldwork was carried out online. Eligible parents/guardians were contacted and asked to invite one of their children aged 12–15 to complete the survey. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB children aged 12–15.

Findings

1. Most young people oppose Australian-style platform restrictions and think a majority of 12 to 15-year-olds will try to circumvent them

Two thirds (67%) of 12 to 15-year-olds oppose plans for an Australian-style set of platform restrictions. 40% of young people are strongly opposed.

A significant majority of young people (68%) believe most under-16s will try to circumvent the ban, with fewer than one in six (15%) expecting most young people will follow the rules.

This sharply underscores the policy challenge that ministers face – if they now proceed with platform-level restrictions without a high level of confidence that Highly Effective Age Assurance (HEAA) is technically feasible and can also result in high levels of industry compliance, young people's behaviour is unlikely to shift. In this scenario, the majority of young people will continue to use restricted apps and view content on them.

Academic research from the University of Chicago shows that, in the absence of well-functioning age assurance, the majority of Australian under-16s continue to use restricted platforms on an almost daily basis¹ – with adherence to the social media ban among teens now starting to fall.²

A social media ban can only succeed if it is meaningfully enforced by social media platforms –with high compliance rates appearing to be a prerequisite to deliver the cultural change in social media use advocated by the ban's proponents.

Behavioural science modelling suggests that the compliance threshold necessary to secure a cultural shift in social media use has not and is unlikely to be met by an Australian-style set of restrictions – suggesting a ceiling to the delivery ambitions that ministers should reasonably expect if they proceed with a broadly similar version of Australia's ban.³

1 Barnes, C et al (2026) Assessing early effects of Australia's Social Media Minimum Age Act on adolescents' social media use: observational study. *BMJ* 2026;393:e363695

2 Bursztyn, L et al (2026) Why bans fail: tipping points and Australia's social media ban. National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper 35162

3 Ibid.

2. Young people are split on whether an Australian-style ban will deliver meaningful changes in their safety and wellbeing

Young people have mixed views about the potential impacts of an Australian-style social media ban. Over two-fifths (44%) of young people believe that current plans would have no real impact on their safety online, while 42% believe they will have a positive impact.

12 to 15-year-olds are more sceptical than the ban's supporters about its likely impacts on their mental health and wellbeing. Three in ten young people (28%) believe that platform restrictions will improve their mental health, 40% believe it will make no difference, and 26% believe it will make it worse.

Young people generally expect that platform level restrictions would have more negative than positive impacts, including in respect of their ability to: stay in touch with friends (60%), learn new things and develop interests (53%), keep up with the news (46%), and be creative (44%).

Children expect that a ban may deliver positive impacts on reducing their screentime (44% expect this will have a positive effect). Interestingly, in Australia daily visits to restricted apps and time spent using them has dropped only marginally.⁴

Table 1: How 12 to 15-year-olds think a social media ban might impact different areas of their lives⁵

	Negative impact	No real difference	Positive impact
Online safety	8%	44%	42%
Ability to stay in touch with friends	60%	29%	10%
Ability to stay in touch with the news and world events	46%	39%	11%
Mental health and wellbeing	26%	40%	28%
Reducing screentime	12%	38%	44%
Ability to be creative and express yourself	44%	36%	15%
Ability to learn new things and develop your interests	53%	28%	15%

Q: Do you think plans to ban under-16s from using major social media apps (such as TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat) will have a positive or negative impact on ... ? Base: all respondents (n=1041)

4 Barnes, C et al (2026) Assessing early effects of Australia's Social Media Minimum Age Act on adolescents' social media use: observational study. BMJ 2026;393:e363695

5 Respondents answering 'don't know' are not included in this table.

3. Young people could feel less confident disclosing online safety concerns after a ban, increasing safeguarding risks

Our findings suggest that young people may be markedly less likely to raise online safety concerns, if they continue to use social media platforms once a ban has taken effect.

Among girls aged 12–15, confidence to disclose online safety concerns to a teacher drops by 19 percentage points, from 55% to 36% in the scenario where they stay on social media despite a ban. Girls also expect to feel less confident disclosing online safety concerns to their parent or carer, with an 11-point reduction from 88% to 77% in confidence levels.

A ban is not without risks – and if the Government decides to proceed with Australian-style platform restrictions, it must be ready to announce a clear and comprehensive strategy to address and effectively mitigate these.

The Government must recognise that, in this context, online safety education arguably becomes more important than ever – equipping young people with the knowledge, skills and confidence to manage risks, speak up and get the help they need. Almost two-thirds (70%) of young people say that online safety education will be at least as important or more important once a ban takes effect.

Despite this, over two thirds (69%) of 12 to 15-year-olds say their teachers know ‘not very much’ or ‘nothing’ about online safety, compared with just 24% who say their teachers know ‘a lot’ or ‘a fair amount.’

4. Young people would prefer platforms to be made safer-by-design rather than banned outright

12 to 15-year-olds have a different vision for how online safety should be strengthened, and continue to strongly reject a blunt social media ban. By a six-to-one margin, young people prefer social media companies being made to make their platforms safer, with three quarters (75%) supporting a safety-by-design agenda and just one-in-eight (13%) supporting an outright Australian-style ban.

There is strong support among young people for decisive action to tackle a range of harmful and addictive design features.

Almost two-thirds (63%) of young people believe restrictions on location sharing, livestreaming and disappearing content would make them safer online. A similar proportion (61%) believe action to remove addictive design features such as endless scroll and autoplay would prove effective.

There is also support for a broader range of safety-by-design and time restriction measures. For example, more than half of young people (54%) believe that it would prove effective to prevent under-16s from using algorithmically recommended content feeds until strict safety standards had been met.

56% of 12 to 15-year-olds believe that overnight curfews on social media use would make them safer online. A similar proportion (55%) believe that daily time caps would prove effective.

.....

5. Young people want action across the technology stack – not just on social media but on gaming, messaging and AI chatbots.

Evidence shows that online harm is not limited to major social media platforms, with young people experiencing mounting risks across gaming platforms, messaging sites and AI chatbots. In this context, most young people support action to tackle online risks across the whole technology stack, with restrictions targeted solely at a handful of social media platforms falling badly short.

A substantial majority of young people (67%) feel that a lot or a fair amount of action is needed to make social media platforms safer for children. 61% feel similarly about livestreaming sites, 59% in respect of AI chatbots, and 53% believed a lot or a fair amount of action was needed to improve children's safety on gaming sites.

53% believe a lot or a fair amount of action is needed to tackle the risks on online forums, such as Reddit.

The new Prime Minister has rightly described a ban as a 'first step'. Looking ahead, young people want his Government to deliver a bold and ambitious reset of product safety and wellbeing-by-design requirements right across the stack. Ministers should adopt a risk-based approach to their online safety agenda, focusing on the needs and concerns of children as much as well-organised parental concerns and lobby groups.

Table 2: 12 to 15-year-olds' views on whether action is needed to make different kinds of online platforms safer for children

	A lot / a fair amount of action needed	Not very much / no action needed	Don't know
Social media apps	67%	22%	11%
Gaming sites	53%	34%	13%
AI Chatbots	59%	23%	18%
Messaging apps	42%	47%	10%
Livestreaming apps	61%	20%	19%
Online forums	53%	21%	26%

Q: How much action, if any, do you think is needed to make the following types of online platforms safer for children? Base: All respondents (n=1041)

Policy implications

Ensuring a ban delivers for children and families

Over the coming months, the new Government will decide on the scope and design of its social media ban – and has an opportunity to deliver a broader reset of its online safety agenda.

While ministers have been clear they intend to learn lessons from Australia, many of the challenges experienced by early adopters of the ban may be deeply challenging to overcome.

For example, Ministers have instructed Ofcom to develop recommendations for Highly Effective Age Assurance, in the belief that setting stricter compliance thresholds than in Australia will avoid the ‘compliance theatre’ that has blighted that country’s rollout (and led to a large majority of under-16s continuing to use restricted social media platforms every day).

However, the reality may be more complex. There are strong disincentives for platforms to comply with a platform-focused set of restrictions – in both Australia and Indonesia, two of the first countries to implement a ban, platforms have removed only a fraction of the accounts that would be expected.

Here in the UK, social media restrictions will be enforced by Ofcom, presumably with a similar if not identical set of regulatory incentives to those set out in the Online Safety Act with highly limited effects.

Ministers would be wise to explore alternatives to a blunt Australian approach.

For example, there are considerable merits to the approach adopted by Canada’s Safe Social Media Act – legislation that views a ban as a means to an end, incentivising platforms to meet a strict set of safety and age-appropriateness standards if they are to be exempted from age restrictions otherwise applied by default.

The Burnham Government should adopt a pragmatic approach to the ban’s design and application – and recognise that the greatest chance of driving safety improvements is likely to result from clustering with other Middle Powers, including Canada and the EU, both of which are placing the emphasis on safety-by-design objectives for the over 13s, rather than access restrictions alone.

Listening to young people

The Government must work hard to listen and act on the concerns and behaviours of young people – many of whom feel Sir Keir Starmer’s Government sought to understand but then overlooked their concerns.

Our research shows that young people expect they will be able to circumvent a ban – and that without much stronger compliance incentives in place, behavioural science anticipates that restricted social media sites will continue to be a prominent part of children’s lives, whether the Government proceeds with an Australian-style ban or not.

.....

From the Prime Minister downwards, the Government must also heed the safeguarding risks that young people are signalling may be coming. An Australian-style ban is not a zero-cost option, but one that will result in a cohort of young people less willing to disclose harm and abuse. It may exacerbate risks among some of our most vulnerable under-16s.

The Government must be ready to intervene. If it decides to proceed with Australian-style approach, ministers must be ready to announce a clear and comprehensive strategy to address and effectively mitigate safeguarding risks. The cure cannot exacerbate the disease, however well-intentioned the course of treatment.

For further briefing or to discuss these issues with Molly Rose Foundation, FlippGen or Breck Foundation please contact: hello@mollyrosefoundation.org

<https://mollyrosefoundation.org> <https://www.breckfoundation.org> <https://www.flippgen.com>