

MOLLY ROSE FOUNDATION

Ensuring every young person lives a good life online: a five-point plan for the online safety agenda

Policy briefing – September 2026

As Prime Minister, Andy Burnham can deliver an ambitious agenda that ensures every young person lives a good life online. Harmful technology is not inevitable – but parents and children will only start to feel meaningfully safer if this Government adopts a comprehensive strategy that tangibly tackles the drivers of harm and supports children to thrive.

As Government decides on the shape of its social media ban, it must recognise that an Australian-style set of platform restrictions cannot on its own solve the systemic risks to children's online safety. Instead, it's time to commit to a bold, new comprehensive settlement, in the form of a Canadian-style set of restrictions and a decisive five-point plan that can promote and protect the safety and wellbeing of every child online – across social media, gaming, messaging and AI.

A five-point plan for the online safety agenda

1. A plan for the social media ban that avoids the pitfalls of Australia

The new Government must be clear-sighted about the objectives of Keir Starmer's social media ban. Andy Burnham should set out a clear, pragmatic implementation plan that defines the scope and intended objectives of the ban, how it will be implemented, and success metrics against which its efficacy can be judged.

However, parents and teens will be poorly served by a crude replication of Australia's approach. Evidence is growing that the Australian ban is bold but ineffective: most children are still using restricted platforms;¹ time spent on social media platforms has dropped by less than 10%;² and

1 Multiple studies suggest at least 60% of children continue to use restricted platforms, with up to 85% viewing content.

2 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

research concludes that substantial improvements in youth mental health outcomes or changes to cultural norms among teens are unlikely to be realised, at least for many years.³

While ministers have been clear that they intend to learn lessons from Australia, many of the difficulties experienced by early adopters will be deeply challenging to overcome. While officials hope that stricter compliance thresholds for Highly Effective Age Assurance (HEAA) may help to avoid the ‘compliance theatre’ seen in Australia, this does little to address the strong disincentives for platforms to comply with a platform-focused set of restrictions. Moreover, restrictions would likely rely on regulatory incentives similar to those that have so far failed to drive meaningful compliance with the Online Safety Act

2. Canada, not Australia, provides a roadmap for delivering the ban

The Prime Minister should instead commit to adopting the Canadian model to implement the ban – 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.

If a platform receives an exemption, it should be hard-earned – and they must face stretching demands to keep it. That means complying with increasingly challenging conditions that prioritise safety and wellbeing measures, with a rolling set of requirements approved by the Secretary of State, reviewed and updated every year.

The Burnham Government should adopt this pragmatic approach to a ban, recognising 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 over-13s, rather than access restrictions alone.

3. Compliance incentives that regulate the market effectively

We cannot expect meaningful compliance with either the ban or regulation until there are adequate incentives in place for tech firms to play by the rules.

The Online Safety Act has largely failed to date because of regulatory risk aversion, an overreliance on fines, and a lack of belief among tech firms that sanctions will happen. Only three percent fewer teens see high-risk suicide, self-harm, eating disorder and depression content now than before the Online Safety Act came into force. 47% of girls aged 13-17 still see this truly appalling material every week.⁴

Nothing will meaningfully change until compliance incentives shift. That’s why the Government should be prepared to introduce conduct measures – targeting senior managers and learning the lessons from financial services regulation after the crash.

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

4 Molly Rose Foundation and M.E.L. Research (2026) Children’s exposure to suicide, self-harm, depression and eating disorder content on social media: wave 2 findings

This should be accompanied by fast tracked Service Disruption Orders. If a platform fails to comply with a ban or its regulatory duties, it should expect to lose the right to serve all its UK users – at first for short periods, but in the event of persistent non-compliance, for extended periods or even indefinitely.

4. Safety-by-design across the stack, including on social networks, gaming, messaging and AI

Andy Burnham has described the social media ban as a ‘first step’.⁵ He’s entirely right – what we really need is a bold and ambitious reset of product safety and wellbeing-by-design requirements right across the stack, not just on social media, but on gaming platforms, AI and messaging products.

A comprehensive, bold reboot of product safety measures is urgently required – a ban must be the starting point, not the end state, for children’s safety. Many of the most egregious harms affecting children, not least sadistic online exploitation driven by well-organised hybridised groups, are rapidly growing on platforms such as Roblox, Discord and Telegram – platforms that are likely to be excluded from the ban altogether.⁶

The Prime Minister should now act quickly to make progress on a safety-by-design agenda – the only realistic way to future proof online safety and product standards. He should instruct Ofcom to prepare a safety-by-design Code of Practice, use Second Session time to fix weakness in the Online Safety Act, and crucially, commit to an annual Digital Media, Data and Communications Bill from the Third Session onwards, finally committing Parliament to rolling action to tackle preventable harm, not continuing with the damaging aversion and inertia of recent years.

5. A decisive reset of digital and media literacy education

If children and parents are to decisively feel safer online, legislation must be accompanied by a decisive reset of digital and media literacy education.

In many respects, a ban makes a focus on digital and media literacy more important than ever – education is policy lever that protects children from harm regardless of whether a platform is in scope of a ban, and it matters even more when children may be less inclined to speak up or share their experiences of using restricted platforms.

However, this is far more than a prudent hedge against the limitations of a ban. The new Government must recognise and invest in digital and media literacy as a fundamental life skill – a prerequisite not only to inoculate children from online harm, but to protect individuals and society from a growing range of systemic and individual threats, and to support a generation as they navigate and respond to the democratic, economic and social imperatives of building AI and technological literacy.

⁵ Comments made to The Mirror, 11th June

⁶ Molly Rose Foundation (2026) Weaponised Loneliness: critical harm intelligence briefing. Prepared by Resolver.

Government must build on commitments in the Curriculum and Assessment Review and take decisive action to establish digital and media literacy as a fundamental life skill throughout education, while giving schools and teachers the support they need to deliver it effectively. This also provides an opportunity to build a smarter curriculum, embedding this life skill across subjects rather than seeking additional time within an already overcrowded curriculum.

This decisive five-point plan can decisively reset the online safety agenda – securing the confidence of parents, experts and young people, and delivering a plan that decisively puts the safety and wellbeing of children above the extractive business models of cash-rich, poorly regulated technology firms.

The new Government must ensure that it listens to what parents really want – decisive change, and change that works.

For a briefing and discussion about how we can work together to tackle preventable harm,
please contact **hello@mollyrosefoundation.org**

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