



Growing up in the online world: a national conversation

A response on behalf of the children, young people and parents of Dunfermline and Dollar

For more information about this response and the views contained within it, please contact Graeme Downie MP, Member of Parliament for Dunfermline and Dollar at:
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Recommendations

The UK Government should:

- **Adopt proportionate and age-based restrictions on social media**, with a legal minimum age of access set at 13, alongside targeted restrictions on higher-risk features such as location sharing and disappearing content.
- **Regulate for “restricted” or age-appropriate versions of social media accounts for under 16s**, with certain functionalities disabled by default and increased parental controls built in.
- **Ensure children, young people and parents are meaningfully involved in the ongoing design and review of online safety measures** through structured engagement such as youth advisory groups or parent forums.
- **Strengthen regulation for social media and technology companies**, particularly in relation to content moderation and the design of addictive features such as infinite scrolling and algorithm-based recommendations.
- **Prioritise education and awareness alongside regulation**, including a nationwide awareness campaign to support children and young people to safely navigate online spaces and to support parents in understanding online harms.

Summary of findings

Understanding how children use technology

- **For children and young people, being online is not separate from their daily lives**; it is an indispensable part of how they communicate, access information and express themselves.
- **Social media and the internet provide children and young people with clear benefits**, including staying connected with friends, family and their communities, access to educational content, access to news and current affairs, and pursuing hobbies and interests, often through global online communities.
- **However, social media and the internet also pose significant risks to children and young people**, including a pressure to be online constantly, impacts on mental wellbeing such as anxiety and disrupted sleep, and exposure to harmful or misleading content.

Interventions for safer, more positive experiences

- **There was broad support for proportionate age-based restrictions, favouring a minimum age of access at 13 rather than 16**. Many children and young people supported the introduction of “restricted” social media accounts for under 16s as a practical “middle ground”.
- **There was broad support for restricting higher-risk features and functionalities**, such as disappearing content.
- **Parents emphasised the need for stronger regulation of social media companies**, particularly in relation to content moderation and enforcement of safeguards.

Enforcement and compliance

- **Any age-based restrictions must be accompanied by a nationwide awareness campaign to be effective**, supporting children and young people to understand the reasons for restrictions and enabling parents to engage more confidently.
- **Parents highlighted the need for clear, consistent and recognisable regulations**, with some suggesting a model similar to the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC).
- **There was also awareness amongst children and young people of how online safety measures can be bypassed**, including through the use of VPNs.

Digital future and media literacy

- **The views and experiences of children, young people and parents must continue to shape future action in this area**, in line with Article 12 of the UNCRC which affirms the right of young people to be heard in all decisions that affect them.
- **Children, young people and parents highlighted the importance of ongoing engagement**, such as youth advisory groups and parent forums and ensuring that a diverse range of voices are represented.

Supporting families

- **Children, young people and parents supported the use of parental controls** but emphasised that these should reduce as young people get older, in line with their evolving capacities and growing independence.

Introduction

This submission is made on behalf of the children, young people and parents of the UK Parliament constituency of Dunfermline and Dollar and is submitted by their Member of Parliament. It reflects their lived experience of growing up and parenting in an increasingly digital world and captures their views on how online spaces can be made safer, more positive and more supportive.

The rapid expansion of the online world and social media has transformed how children and young people learn, socialise and engage with the world around them. For the children and young people who contributed to this response, being online is not separate from their daily lives, it is an indispensable part of how they communicate, access information and express themselves.

This response seeks to present those perspectives in a balanced manner. It highlights both the benefits and risks identified by participants, whilst also outlining their views on potential policy interventions. Throughout, this response aims to reflect the voices of participants as accurately as possible, including through the use of direct quotations.

In doing so, this response links directly to children's rights as set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), particularly in relation to access to information, freedom of expression, and meaningful participation.

Methodology

This response is informed by a series of focus groups conducted with children, young people and parents in Dunfermline and Dollar. All sessions were discussion-based and designed to allow participants to share their experiences and views in an open and accessible environment.

Focus groups were held with:

- Pittencrieff Primary School (state primary)
- Queen Anne High School (state secondary)
- Dollar Academy (independent school), involving secondary pupils, including several boarding pupils, some of whom were from overseas
- One online parent focus group, held via Microsoft Teams

In total, the engagement included:

- 52 state primary pupils
- 40 state secondary pupils
- 20 independent secondary pupils
- 6 parents

The inclusion of pupils from Dollar Academy provided an additional international perspective, with boarding pupils highlighting how digital platforms support connections with family and friends overseas.

All sessions were facilitated as structured discussions, guided by questions from this consultation and led by Graeme Downie MP. Participants were encouraged to share their views freely, and a range of prompts were used to explore both the benefits and risks of being online, as well as opinions on potential policy interventions.

Notes were taken during each session and used to identify common themes, areas of consensus, and differing viewpoints. Participants were also encouraged to make their own notes and written contributions. Where appropriate, direct quotations have been included in the response to describe participants' perspectives in their own words.

Limitations

This submission reflects the views of participants who took part in a series of focus groups in Dunfermline and Dollar and is therefore not intended to be statistically representative of all children, young people or parents.

Participation was limited to a relatively small sample and to those willing and able to take part in discussion-based sessions. In particular, the number of parents involved was limited, and the views captured may not reflect the full diversity of perspectives. However, the focus

groups provided valuable qualitative insights into lived experiences and allowed for in-depth exploration of key themes.

Consultation Questions

- 1. Do you want to proceed with this consultation?**
 - a. Yes
- 2. Are you answering as a private individual or on behalf of an organisation?**
 - b. On behalf of an organisation
- 3. If you are responding on behalf of an organisation, please specify:**
 - a. Office of Graeme Downie MP
 - b. Member of Parliament for Dunfermline and Dollar
- 4. Organisation type:**
 - e. Other (Member of Parliament)
- 5. If you are responding as a private individual, do you have a parental or caring responsibility for at least one child who will be 21 or younger by the 26th of May of this year (2026)?**

N/A
- 6. As part of your current occupation, do you work with children aged 21 or younger in an education setting? (for example, as a teacher)**
 - b. No
- 7. Where are you located?**
 - a. In the UK
- 8. This consultation has five chapters. Please choose the ones you would like to provide answers to based on your time and interest. You will not need to complete every question in these chapters.**

Chapter 1, Chapter 2, Chapter 3, Chapter 4, Chapter 5

Chapter 1: Understanding how children use technology

9. What are the benefits of social media use, and being online, for children?

Children and young people in Dunfermline and Dollar described a wide range of clear benefits to social media use and being online. These included, but are not limited to, connection with friends, family and their local communities, entertainment, research, schoolwork, and the pursuit of hobbies and interests. Parents in Dunfermline and Dollar described some benefits of social media use and being online for children. The main benefit parents highlighted was digital literacy.

The main way in which young people use social media and the internet is to stay connected with others. For many young people this communication can be quite unremarkable. They described using social media for messaging and calling their friends and family regularly, to arrange times and locations to meet in person, or to share time sensitive information such as travel plans.

However, whilst much of this communication may be mundane, for many young people, the role of social media in helping them stay connected is vital. Using messaging or stories allows them to keep those they trust updated on their whereabouts, their mood, feelings, or events throughout the day.

Social media allows some young people to stay in touch with others who they meet outside of school at youth groups, who they would otherwise only communicate with infrequently. For some young people this ability to communicate with those who they would not see in-person on a regular basis is very important to them.

Some young people involved in the focus groups were international boarding pupils. They described social media based messaging platforms such as Snapchat, Facebook Messenger or WhatsApp as being the only easy way that they can stay in contact with friends and family who are distant or even overseas. The costs of international calls or SMS messages would be a barrier to using these methods. For these young people there was a view that social media ***“prevents isolation”***.

The role of social media in connecting one another extends beyond small family or friendship units with some young people highlighting how they use social media to stay up to date with their local community. In particular, discovering local or small businesses or following community events or groups.

Location sharing or ‘live locations’ were highlighted by many young people as a way of staying connected with each other and staying safe. One young person describes this as:

“Able to find friends if you’re alone or check in on someone if you don’t know where they are.”

Another significant benefit of social media that young people identified was its use for entertainment. TikTok, Instagram and YouTube were regularly mentioned as platforms young people use to keep themselves entertained throughout the day. The evening is a common time for young people to use social media for entertainment and young people identified social media as being a way for them to entertain themselves. One young person described this by contrasting it to a world without social media or online access:

“It would be very boring and it would drive my mum up the walls.”

Some young people talked about the role of ‘influencers’ in their lives with one young person commenting ***“influencers make us feel more confident”***. However, they also recognised that this can be dependent on being shown positive content, they continued:

“...if it is the right people and the right content, need restrictions on certain accounts, the algorithms rule what you see.”

One young person also commented that some people have ***“comfort streamers”*** and that accessing content they enjoy online can help them to be calm and to relax.

However, the benefits of social media use and being online extend far beyond social and entertainment functions. One young person described using social media for schoolwork ***“almost every day”***, with educational content on both YouTube and TikTok being highlighted by several young people as useful resources to help them learn. They also described how social media could allow them to learn on the move, allowing them to keep learning whilst travelling. During one focus group, all of the young people participating (100%) indicated they use social media for research. Young people described how they used sites like YouTube more like a search engine, with ‘how to’ videos being important for understanding complex tasks.

Several young people highlighted how listening to music or watching YouTube videos was a way they could stay motivated and productive whilst studying.

Digital literacy for young people was the main benefit of social media use and being online for children highlighted by parents. They described learning how to use the internet safely and effectively as being important for their children’s development and education in the digital world that we live in.

For many young people social media was highlighted as the main way they accessed news and current affairs allowing them to stay up to date with the world around them. This is supported by research conducted by the Scottish Youth Parliament and Young Scot with young people across Scotland. Their ‘Young People and Politics’ report states that almost half of young people surveyed (49.3%) use social media every day to find out about what’s going on in the world¹.

Access to information to allow young people to pursue hobbies and interest was also highlighted. Fashion, art, make-up, history, music, sports, cookery, languages, politics and pop-culture were all given as specific examples of areas where young people would learn from social media, influencers and apps. Young people also join online communities specific to their interests, being able to connect with others who share their interests around the world. In turn, young people also identified social media as a way they learnt about other cultures or countries.

The benefits identified by the children, young people and parents of Dunfermline and Dollar demonstrate the realisation of UNCRC rights contained within Article 13 (freedom of

¹ Scottish Youth Parliament and Young Scot. *Young People and Politics* (2026), Pg.30

expression), Article 17 (access to information from the media) and Article 31 (leisure, play and culture). Social media use for the pursuit of hobbies and interests is in clear alignment with the legal text of Article 13 which states:

“The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.”

Furthermore, it supports the realisation of the legal text of Article 31, part of which states:

“States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.”

The use of social media for digital literacy, research and to access news and current affairs is aligned with the legal text of Article 17 which states:

“States Parties recognize the important function performed by the mass media and shall ensure that the child has access to information and material from a diversity of national and international sources, especially those aimed at the promotion of his or her social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health.”

10. What are the harms or risks of social media use, and being online, for children?

Children and young people in Dunfermline and Dollar described several harms or risks of social media use and being online. These included, but are not limited to, anxiety, stress, the fear of missing out, ‘doomscrolling’, disrupted sleep and fake news. Similarly, parents in Dunfermline and Dollar also described several harms or risks of social media use and being online for children. These included harmful online content, the addictive nature of social media and the impact on children’s attention spans.

The main harm or risk that children and young people identified was the pressure they feel to be online constantly. This is driven by a fear of missing out and leads to anxiety and stress when access to online spaces is limited or disrupted. One young person described this as the ***“overwhelming need to respond”***. Related to this, many young people described the harm that social media use and being online has on their sleep. They described disrupted sleep or an inability to step away from online life to sleep.

Young people also described how social media can lead to ***“mindless scrolling”*** or ***“doomscrolling”***. Spending an excessive amount of time on social media was a common concern, particularly as this had led some young people to ***“strange corners of the internet”*** and to content that was worrying or distressing. Parents also shared these concerns and discussed in detail their fears that their young people could be accessing upsetting or harmful online content. One parent described their fear that harmful online content can develop into harmful behaviours offline:

“So, the scrolling isn't great. The scrolling is dangerous, well, bad for their brain development, but it's the content that's the most dangerous. So, when kids are seeing girls who are proudly saying that they've not eaten any food... ... the last thing you want your child to get is an eating disorder because it can kill you.”

Whilst seeing distressing content was also described as something that could lead to stress or anxiety. Some young people described how ‘doomscrolling’ could lead to distraction, procrastination and worries about not being productive. One young person described this as:

“Guilt that you haven't done anything else.”

Children and young people described how social media and influencers can create a ***“pressure to conform”***. This causes them to compare their own lives to others online in a negative way.

Parents similarly described their worries about children and young people endlessly scrolling on social media and the impact this has on their attention spans. They described this as posing challenges for them at home when encouraging their young people to step away from social media and the internet. They also feared it may impact on their schooling, describing how it could make their young people less attentive in the classroom.

Children and young people also described the risk that social media ***“echo chambers”*** can pose and their awareness of fake news, misinformation and disinformation. Whilst some young people described how social media has broadened their horizons and made them more aware of different cultures, there was also a strong feeling that social media algorithms can intentionally suggest content that aligns only with their existing views. Many young people also described how they felt social media can drive the spread of misinformation and disinformation.

The harms and risks of social media use and being online described by children, young people and parents in Dunfermline and Dollar present clear challenges to the UNCRC rights contained within Article 17 (access to information from the media) and Article 31 (leisure, play and culture).

Young people's experiences and worries of misinformation and disinformation on social media presents a barrier to the realisation of Article 17.

Part of the legal text of Article 31 states:

“States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.”

The disruption of sleep caused by social media use could create a barrier to the realisation of the right to rest under Article 31.

11. Do you think the benefits of children using social media, and being online, outweigh the risks, or the other way around?
- c. Benefits and risks are roughly equal

Chapter 2: Interventions for safer, more positive experiences

Restricting social media services by age

12. Would you support a legal requirement for social media services to have a minimum age of access?
- a. Yes
13. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: “Social media services should have a minimum age of access of at least 16 and should not be accessible to any children under that age”
- d. Somewhat disagree
14. Would you support a legal requirement for social media services to have a minimum age of access lower than 16? If so, at what age would you set it?
- a. Yes – 13

Please explain the reasoning behind your answers about minimum age requirements.

When asked directly, one-third (33%) of the children and young people in the Dunfermline and Dollar focus groups were supportive of a minimum age of access at 13. This was the most popular option, with 14 being the next most popular, with 17% of the children and young people supportive of a minimum age of access at 14.

No child or young person (0%) involved in the focus groups were supportive of a minimum age of access at 16. However, around one third (31%) were supportive of a minimum age of access lower than 13 and 13% did not support a minimum age of access at all. Just 2% were supportive of a minimum age of access above 16.

When asked directly, most parents (83%) in Dunfermline and Dollar were supportive of a minimum age of access at 16. The remaining 17% were supportive of a minimum age of access at 13.

15. What do you think the impacts would be of having a minimum age requirements higher than 13 for social media services? *For example, impacts on the safety and wellbeing of children, or the impact for parents and carers, as well as other users. You could also comment on the impact on all users’ privacy and data or on business costs, revenue, and innovation.*

Children and young people described three impacts of having a minimum age requirement higher than 13 for social media services. The first is that 13 is the current minimum age of access for many social media services such as TikTok, Snapchat, Facebook, Instagram, and X. As such, some felt raising this age to 16 would require a change in wider cultural and social

attitudes amongst young people to implement this effectively.

Some also had concerns about the ***“group in the middle”***, those aged 13 to 15, which they describe as young people who currently have access to social media from age 13 but who could lose that access if a minimum age requirement was set at 16, prior to their sixteenth birthday.

Many were also supportive of 13 as a minimum age of access for social media as most children in Scotland turn 13 during their first year of secondary school (S1). This was felt to be a natural inflection point in their lives where they could be trusted with more responsibility.

Age of digital consent

16. At what age do you think the age of digital consent in the UK should be set for information society services?

d. 16

17. What risks or burdens may be associated with raising the minimum age of digital consent? For example, ensuring parental consent, costs to industry, access to services, volume of requests, etc.

Parents in Dunfermline and Dollar were unanimously supportive of raising the digital age of consent. However, some were concerned it could place greater responsibility on parents, who may be expected to monitor, restrict and enforce their children’s online permissions. Even though they may lack digital literacy, time or awareness of the risks involved. Furthermore, some parents worried that young people in their early to mid-teens are inclined to push boundaries. Therefore, stricter controls may lead them to conceal online activity or migrate to less regulated platforms, potentially reducing oversight rather than improving protection.

18. What should be considered to make raising the digital age of consent effective and workable? For example, suitable approaches to verify users’ ages (including where parental consent is required) or suitable approaches to verify a parent or carer’s identity, age and relationship to the child.

As with a minimum age of access to social media, children and young people in Dunfermline and Dollar felt that any increase in the digital age of consent would require a change in attitudes amongst young people. They felt information on why the digital age of consent was being raised would need to be widely and clearly communicated so that young people could understand the importance of any such change. Parents shared this view, emphasising the need for clear guidance and education to help them explain and reinforce any new rules in the home environment.

19. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: “There is a case for changing the digital age of consent for some online services but not others”

f. Don’t know / Prefer not to answer

Please explain the reasoning behind your answer.

This issue was not explored in detail during engagement in Dunfermline and Dollar, and therefore no specific data was collected to inform a view.

Restricting services based on 'risky' functionalities

20. Some online services allow their users to engage with the following functionalities.

Do you think these functionalities should be age restricted so children below a certain age cannot engage with them? (Please select all that apply)

- a. Live streaming
- b. Ability to send nude images or videos
- c. Disappearing content
- d. Location sharing
- e. Connecting or talking to strangers

21. Based on your previous answers, please specify your preferred minimum age for each of the functionalities listed below:

- a. Live streaming - 16
- b. Ability to send nude images or videos - 18
- c. Disappearing content - 16
- d. Location sharing - 16
- e. Connecting or talking to strangers – 16

22. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: “Restricting children’s access to these features/ functionalities, would provide for a safer online experience for children”. *Features/functionalities include live streaming, the ability to send nude images or videos, disappearing content, location sharing and connecting or talking to strangers.*

- a. Strongly agree

23. What do you think the impacts would be if some online services were required to introduce age restrictions on specific features and functionalities? *For example, impacts on the safety and wellbeing of children, or the impact for parents and carers, as well as other users. You could also comment on the impact on all users' privacy and data or on business costs, revenue, and innovation.*

Children and young people in Dunfermline and Dollar were supportive of restrictions on some features and functionalities, as they felt that this would have a positive impact on their lives. Whilst views varied on specific features, most children and young people believed that live streaming, the ability to send nude images or videos, disappearing content, location sharing, and connecting or talking to strangers are all features and functionalities which should be age restricted in some way.

Disappearing content was highlighted by children, young people and parents as a particularly high-risk feature which it was felt should be restricted. One young person described their view on disappearing content as:

“Very useless makes more people comfortable to say bad things.”

Even where some young people viewed features like location sharing as *“useful”*, there was broad agreement that some features and functionalities can pose risks to users. In addition to the features and functionalities listed above, children, young people and parents were also strongly supportive of in-app purchases being age restricted. They felt that young children in particular were vulnerable to these. One young person described their view on in-app purchases as:

“Preys on kids... ..takes advantage of those who don’t understand.”

Many young people were supportive of under 16s having access to *“restricted”* social media accounts, where features and functionalities like those listed above are turned off by default. For young people supportive of a minimum age of access for social media at 13 this was viewed as a good *“middle ground”* between a minimum age of access at 16 and the current situation.

‘Addiction’, compulsive design and displacement

24. The following design features are sometimes known as ‘persuasive’, meaning they may encourage children to stay online for longer. From the following list, please select the ones you think are particularly ‘persuasive’ to children: (Please select all that apply).

- a. Infinite scrolling
- b. Autoplay
- c. Affirmation features (likes, comments)
- d. Alerts and push notifications
- e. Content recommendation algorithms

25. Which of these features do you think should be age restricted? (Please select all that apply)

- a. Infinite scrolling
- b. Autoplay
- c. Affirmation features (likes, comments)
- d. Alerts and push notifications
- e. Content recommendation algorithms

26. Based on your previous answers, please specify your preferred minimum age for each of the features below.

- a. Infinite scrolling – 16
- b. Autoplay – 16
- c. Affirmation features (e.g. likes, comments) – 16
- d. Alerts and push notifications – 16
- e. Content recommendation algorithms – 16

27. Would you support the following restrictions for children's access to online services? (Please select one)

e. Don't know / Prefer not to answer

28. What do you think the impacts would be if online platforms were required to restrict specific features or functionalities, or to introduce time limits? For example, impacts on the safety and wellbeing of children, or the impact for parents and carers, as well as other users. You could also comment on the impact on all users' privacy and data or on business costs, revenue, and innovation.

As with the features and functionalities discussed under earlier questions, children and young people in Dunfermline and Dollar were supportive of under 16s having access to **"restricted"** social media accounts. Children and young people were able to describe in detail how the features listed above impact their social media use. Their views on what features should be restricted and why were varied, but across all focus groups there was a strong feeling that restrictions were required on some features. Children, young people and parents highlighted infinite scrolling and autoplay features as having a significant impact on their social media use. Young people used words such as **"distracting"** and **"addictive"** when describing infinite scrolling. One young person described their view on infinite scrolling as:

"Addictive especially when bored, always want to see what's next."

Similarly, parents shared concerns about the impact that infinite scrolling has on children and young people. Many shared this by commenting that they find it hard to step away from infinite scrolling as adults, and that this is even worse as a young person who is trying to stay entertained. One parent said:

"I know certainly how addictive scrolling can be and getting sucked in and the algorithms and all this kind of stuff. As an adult, it's quite hard to navigate and make sure you keep that balance with life and I just think as they're younger, as they're children, I think we should be protecting them... ..they'll still be exposed to lots of the internet, lots of technology and that's all fabulous. But I just think in terms of the social media aspect, I think it's better to give them a bit more protection until they're old enough to navigate it themselves."

Children, young people and parents shared similar views on autoplay features. One young person described autoplay as causing a **"just one more loop"** making it **"hard to stop"** using social media. Another young person described their views on autoplay as:

"Could make you stay on longer, invested to see what's next."

In addition to the features listed above, children, young people and parents highlighted 'streaks' as another feature which should be restricted. 'Streaks' are a feature on social media platforms like Snapchat which keep a daily tally of messages between users. Some young people described having a fear of losing 'streaks' which they have kept going for months or even years and that this can be **"stressful"**.

Which services should age restrictions apply to

29. What factors are important when determining which apps, sites or services to apply minimum age of access restrictions to? For example, user-to-user interaction, the ability to post material, persuasive design features, risky functionalities, ability to generate non-text mediums such as video or images, the target age group, the size of the service.

Throughout every conversation, children and young people in Dunfermline and Dollar were keen to articulate that they are experts in their own lives and experiences as people growing up in the 2020s. They understand, and can articulate clearly, the risks and the benefits of their online lives and know the impacts that this has on them when offline. Therefore, the most important factor when determining which services should have minimum age restrictions is the views of young people themselves. Their views must be fully considered and taken seriously. This aligns closely with Article 12 of the UNCRC (respect for the views of the child), which states:

“States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.”

Furthermore, social media and the online world is a rapidly evolving space. The ways in which children and young people use social media are constantly changing. Therefore, another important factor is ensuring that children and young people have continuous opportunities to input into this policy area. There may be new or unexpected developments with social media in years to come and young people deserve their Article 12 right to be heard to be upheld in the future as well as in the present.

For parents in Dunfermline and Dollar, the impact that features have on their young people’s mental health, brain development and sleep was the most important factors to them when determining which services should have minimum age restrictions. Many parents spoke about their anxiety around what impact social media was having on their children’s social and emotional development, which they believed has not yet been understood fully. They want to protect their children from these impacts but did not believe they had the information or resources to do so. Again, parents expressed a strong desire for government to remain responsive to new and emerging online harms and to have continuing opportunities to share their views.

For children, young people and parents, the enforceability of restrictions was another important factor when determining which services should have minimum age restrictions. The shared view was that parents were best placed to make decisions about what their children can, or cannot, access online. Many young people shared this view, describing it as:

“Parents know their children well enough to know what they need and when is a good time to give them social media.”

“...also parents should take a role in preventing their children from having an unlimited access to screen time.”

When asked directly who should make decisions about what young people can access on the internet, no child, young person or parent (0%) said that the main decision-maker should be government.

However, they also expressed that there needs to be strong frameworks in place to support this, such as mandatory parental controls, **“restricted”** social media accounts for under 16s and a robust education and awareness programme on whatever changes are brought forward in policy or legislation. Several young people described this view:

“Tell kids how to use social media properly – expose kids to the correct way – and what to do if you find something you don’t like/aren’t comfortable seeing.”

“I think they should teach us about the unsafe behaviour and have more teaching about it because just taking it away is like taking cigarettes away from a smoker it doesn’t solve the problem.”

“Adults/caregivers/guardians can control social media use for their children instead of getting the government to enforce their beliefs for their children.”

Children, young people and parents were also clear that social media and technology companies must be held to account if, and when, they breach any new restrictions, and their content moderation needs to improve. For one parent, there was a fear that without action to regulate social media and technology companies they would continue to act without young people’s best interests in mind. They described this as:

“If they are left to make the moral judgement on their own, profit will always come first.”

30. Are there any types of apps, sites or services that you would want to be captured by minimum age of access restrictions?

There was consensus amongst children, young people and parents in Dunfermline and Dollar that some services needed to be restricted. However, views were varied on exactly which services should be restricted. This highlights an area which may require further or continuous consultation.

31. What factors are important when determining which apps, sites or services to apply age-restrictions on specific features and functionalities? For example, user-to-user interaction, the ability to post material, persuasive design features, risky functionalities, ability to generate non-text mediums such as video or images, the target age group, the size of the service.

The age appropriateness of any restrictions was important to children and young people when they were considering which services should have age restrictions on specific features. They felt that restrictions should be proportionate and were sceptical of any

blanket bans. They also felt that government should communicate clearly why certain features are being restricted if new restrictions are introduced. One young person said:

“If they restrict apps they should give reasons or teens will just find a way around it. Applies to the government as well.”

Parents also stressed the importance of clear guidance and support from trusted sources, including government, charities, and organisations working with children and young people. They felt that consistent messaging from these bodies could help reduce pressure on parents to provide access to restricted features and support them in making decisions that prioritise children’s wellbeing. One parent suggested that more basic alternatives, such as **“dumb phones”**, could be appropriate for younger users, but emphasised that a broader shift in social attitudes would be required for this to be effective:

“Possibly having a message that smartphones and social medias are not really appropriate for children and whereas something like a brick phone or a dumb phone would be what's considered socially appropriate might be a way forward. That would be, I would imagine, would involve changing social attitudes over quite a long period of time. But again, if it comes as a message from government, from charities, from groups that work with children and young adults, I think that would help parents in making those decisions. Because at the moment, I think there's a lot of pressure on a lot of parents to buy smartphones because children don't want to feel left out. They don't want to be seen as othered by their peers.”

32. Are there any types of apps, sites or services that you want to be captured by age-restrictions to features/ functionalities?

In addition to the features mentioned earlier in this consultation, services that use in-app purchases and streaks were highlighted by children, young people and parents in Dunfermline and Dollar as needing restrictions.

33. Some services are already exempt from the Online Safety Act. Examples include internal business services, services with limited functionalities and services provided by persons providing education or childcare. Are there additional types of service which you think would be appropriate to exempt from age restrictions? *These might include services whose primary purpose is delivery of educational content, services that offer specific child or teen accounts or versions, or services which offer parental controls.*

Services which offer, or which could offer, educational content or access to news and current affairs should be considered carefully. Research, schoolwork, and the pursuit of hobbies and interests were identified by children and young people as benefits to social media use and being online. Therefore, to avoid adverse impacts on their education and development and to uphold their Article 17 right to access information, any restrictions on these services should be avoided or very limited.

AI chatbots

34. What are the benefits to children of using AI chatbots? *For example, this might include as a search function, for educational purposes, for creativity.*

Children and young people in Dunfermline and Dollar described using AI chatbots for research, schoolwork, and the pursuit of hobbies and interests as a main benefit. They described using AI chatbots like search engines to find 'how to' guides and to close knowledge gaps on specific matters. However, they worried about AI chatbots making mistakes or using poor quality sources to answer questions. Overall, participants saw clear benefits but had concerns about accuracy and reliability of AI chatbots.

35. Which AI chatbot features are most risky for children? (Please select all that apply)

- g. Features to encourage more questions/ requests (e.g. asking questions back)
- k. Hallucination or false, misleading responses

36. Which functionalities of AI chatbots should minimum age restrictions apply to?

This issue was not explored in detail during engagement in Dunfermline and Dollar, and therefore no specific data was collected to inform a view.

37. Should AI chatbots have minimum age restrictions?

- e. Don't know/ Prefer not to answer

Please explain the reasoning behind your answer.

This issue was not explored in detail during engagement in Dunfermline and Dollar, and therefore no specific data was collected to inform a view.

38. What do you think the impact would be of introducing age restrictions on AI chatbots or certain features and functions? *For example, impacts on the safety and wellbeing of children, or the impact for parents and carers, as well as other users. You could also comment on the impact on all users' privacy and data or on business costs, revenue, and innovation.*

As with social media, children and young people in Dunfermline and Dollar described using AI chatbots for research, schoolwork, and the pursuit of hobbies and interests. Thus, in the same vein as restrictions on social media, children's UNCRC Article 17 right to access information should be considered if introducing restrictions on AI chatbots.

Chapter 3: Enforcement and compliance

Age assurance

39. To what extent do you agree with this statement: "Adults should complete age checks more often, if it means children are safer online"?

- a. Strongly agree

40. What should be considered to make minimum age restrictions effective and workable? *This could mean either age restrictions for access to whole services, or for specific risky or 'addictive' features or functionalities.*

Again, children, young people and parents were clear that to make minimum age restrictions effective and workable, they must be accompanied by a nationwide awareness campaign. It must be focused on supporting children to understand why any new restrictions are being introduced and support parents to engage in more conversations with their children about their online lives.

However, parents also felt that any age restrictions need to be clear and easy to understand. Some parents used the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) rating as an example of something they would like to see introduced for online content. They felt that using, or adapting, an existing framework was beneficial as it was a set of rules they were already enforcing at home.

41. What do you think the impacts might be from requiring age assurance across a greater number of online platforms? *For example, impacts on the safety and wellbeing of children, or the impact for parents and carers, as well as other users. You could also comment on the impact on all users' privacy and data or on business costs, revenue, and innovation.*

Children, young people and parents in Dunfermline and Dollar were strongly supportive of adults completing age verification more often if it means children are safer online. Amongst many reasons why children, young people and parents were supportive of requiring age assurance is they felt it would lead to children having to seek permission from their parents to access online spaces more often. Thus, prompting more conversations between parents and children about their online presence which they viewed as a positive outcome.

42. How, if at all, could age assurance be made more effective?

This issue was not explored in detail during engagement in Dunfermline and Dollar, and therefore no specific data was collected to inform a view.

43. What should be considered when assessing the effectiveness of age verification and age-assurance technologies?

This issue was not explored in detail during engagement in Dunfermline and Dollar, and therefore no specific data was collected to inform a view.

Circumvention of age limits

44. What methods to circumvent online safety rules do you think children in the UK use, beyond Virtual Private Networks (VPNs), or similar technologies?

Some children and young people in Dunfermline and Dollar described how they already use VPNs to circumvent existing online safety rules such as restrictions on school Wi-Fi networks. Many children and young people shared how they would consider using VPNs in the future to circumvent any future online safety rules. Parents in Dunfermline and Dollar expressed their fear that without adequate information and support from government their children will find methods to circumvent online safety rules without their knowledge.

45. Which of the options below do you think the government should prioritise to reduce circumvention of online safety rules in the UK? (Select the most important to you)

b. Restricting children's access to VPNs

46. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: "Everyone should go through age checks to access a VPN if it would prevent children using them"

f. Don't know/ Prefer not to answer

47. What do you think the impacts would be if VPNs were age-restricted? For example, impacts on the safety and wellbeing of children, or the impact for parents and carers, as well as other users. You could also comment on the impact on all users' privacy and data or on business costs, revenue, and innovation.

Some of the young people involved in focus groups in Dunfermline and Dollar were international boarding pupils. They shared how they use VPNs to access content and websites from their home countries that they cannot otherwise access in the UK. They described this as being important to them as it allowed them to stay connected with life back home. Therefore, the impact on young people like them should be considered as VPNs serve as a vital tool for them to stay connected with their own cultures.

48. What should be considered to make age-restricting VPNs effective and workable? For example, public trust and engagement with increased age assurance requirements, accessibility of age assurance methods and variations of age assurance approaches across services, interaction with legitimate uses of VPNs.

The views of children, young people and parents themselves must be the main priority when considering what restrictions on VPNs should be. Their views, worries and experiences must feature heavily in how restrictions are designed to ensure any such restrictions are workable and effective.

Mobile phones in schools

49. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: "To address some of the challenges schools face with mobile phones, the Department for Education's (DfE) non-statutory guidance on 'mobile phones in schools' should be made statutory." This would mean schools have a legal duty to follow the guidance, which explains to individual schools and trusts how to implement a policy that prohibits the use of mobile phones throughout the school day, unless they have good reasons not to. This includes during lessons, the time between lessons, breaktimes and lunchtime.

f. Don't know/prefer not to answer

50. What impacts would there be if this guidance was made statutory and why? For example, on disruption in lessons, bullying

This issue was not explored in detail during engagement in Dunfermline and Dollar due to it being a devolved matter.

- 51. Are there specific circumstances where you think children should be permitted to have or use a mobile phone during the school day? (Please select all that apply)**
- i. Don't know/ Prefer not to answer

Chapter 4: Digital future and media literacy

Media and digital literacy

- 52. Which areas of media or digital literacy do children and families most need additional help with? (Please select all that apply)**
- a. Managing screen time and online habits
 - b. Spotting adverts, sponsored posts or AI generated content
 - c. Keeping personal information private
 - d. Online behaviour and experiences (bullying, respect, comparison or peer pressure)
 - e. Checking if information is true
 - f. Understanding how social media works (for example, 'likes' or algorithms)
 - g. Staying safe online (including how to have conversations about online safety)
 - h. Reporting harmful or upsetting content
 - i. Knowing which apps or sites are right for their age
- 53. If you are responding as a private individual, where do you go for help with online safety or media literacy skills? By online safety or media literacy skills, we mean things like staying safe online, understanding digital content and using the internet confidently and responsibly. (Please select all that apply)**
- N/A
- 54. Where, if anywhere, would you like to see more support available in the future? This could include places you already use but don't offer support and you would like them to, or places that could offer more support with help from government or others. (Please select all that apply)**
- a. Schools or childcare settings
 - b. Community or youth spaces (for example libraries, youth clubs or local charities)
 - c. Parent or carer groups or networks
 - d. Public services (such as family hubs, GP surgeries or community centres)
 - e. Faith or cultural groups
 - f. Non-governmental online sources (such as websites, platforms or online communities)
 - g. Government websites

55. Outside of schools, how could the UK government better support children and young people to stay safe and feel supported online? (Please select all that apply)

- a. By providing clear guidance that children can use on their own
- b. By supporting parents and carers to support children online
- c. By working with online platforms and services that children already use
- d. By supporting youth organisations and community groups to help children online
- e. By making help or advice easy to access when something goes wrong online
- f. By involving children and young people in designing support

56. What types of support would help children with additional needs stay safe online and build digital skills? By 'additional needs', we mean children who may need extra support for a range of reasons (such as learning, communication, health or access needs). (Please select all that apply)

- a. Clear, simple information using plain language
- b. Content adapted for different ages, abilities or needs
- c. Visual, audio or interactive formats
- d. Support delivered through trusted local or community services
- e. Flexible or on-demand support that can be accessed when needed
- f. Support that helps parents or carers guide children online

Promoting high quality content

57. Who would you trust to determine what is meant by 'high quality' online content' for children 13-16? (Please select all that apply)

- k. Other (An independent regulatory body similar to the BBFC)

58. What further action should be prioritised to support positive online spaces for young people? (Please select all that apply)

- a. Develop best practice principles for industry
- b. Develop guidance for parents and carers
- c. Develop guidance for children

59. What should be considered when taking further action to support positive online spaces and content for young people? *For example, how would this work in practice for services, taking into account existing best practice across industry, and who should feed into future guidance.*

The views and experiences of children, young people and parents must continue to feature in any future conversations regarding further actions. This should be consistent with Article 12 of the UNCRC, which affirms the right of children and young people to express their views freely in all matters affecting them, and to have those views given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity.

In the context of supporting positive online spaces, this requires a shift from one off consultations towards meaningful and sustained participation. Children, young people and their caregivers should be actively involved in the design, development, implementation and review of online services and safety measures. This could be facilitated through structured mechanisms such as youth advisory groups, co-design processes and parent forums. These

should be accessible and allow continuous improvement to be embedded within policy design. Particular attention should be given to ensuring that participation is inclusive and captures the perspectives of a diverse range of young people, including those who may be at greater risk of harm or whose voices are seldom heard.

Chapter 5: Supporting families

Parental controls

60. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: “Parents should have control over the online experiences of their children”

a. Strongly agree

Please explain the reasoning behind your answer.

Children, young people and parents in Dunfermline and Dollar were strongly supportive of parental controls.

61. How should this level of control change for children of different ages? *For example, a 16-year-old and an 11-year-old.*

Children, young people and parents in Dunfermline and Dollar were supportive of parental controls but felt that these should reduce as young people get older, in line with their evolving capacities. Whilst there were mixed views on a minimum age of access to social media, there was consensus that by the age of 16 there was no longer the same need for restrictions.

62. What would help parents and carers to more effectively use parental controls? *For example, more information on how to do this on purchase of a phone, help from platforms on how to set up, or greater standardisation across tools.*

Children, young people and parents in Dunfermline and Dollar were strongly supportive of increased resources and educational materials to support parental controls. Information for children and young people which explains why parental controls are important to keep them safe online and information for parents which explains how to use parental controls effectively.