

SHOULDERING THE BLAME

SCOTTISH YOUTH
PARLIAMENT RESPONSE TO
SOCIAL MEDIA BAN

JUNE 2026



Foreword

Recently the Scottish Youth Parliament has spoken to over 200 young people across Scotland about the UK Government's online safety proposals. There was a lot that came out of this work, but one message was clear: young people want social media to be safer, but they do not believe that a ban is the answer.

As young people growing up in a digital world, social media and the internet have shaped our lives. For many young people, social media is how we stay connected with friends, access information, engage with politics, find communities and learn about the world around us. This is especially true for young people who are at risk of isolation, such as those from rural areas.

Young people are not naive about the risks that exist online. They told us about harmful content, misinformation, cyberbullying, addictive algorithms and the impact social media can have on mental health. These concerns are real, and they deserve action. Our concern, shared by a majority of young respondents, is that a ban will push young people into riskier online spaces.

For me, discussions about a blanket ban distract from the real question. Why are we focusing on restricting young people instead of holding the social media giants to account?

As one young person put it: "We need to change their behaviour, not our behaviour." We want to see tech companies choose children's rights over profit. We want governments to stand up for children and young people, rather than pushing us out.

Young people consistently told us that technology companies have the greatest responsibility for making online spaces safe. They want stronger moderation, better regulation, and meaningful consequences for platforms that fail to protect users.

Ellie Craig MSYP, Chair of the Scottish Youth Parliament



Introduction

“[A ban] shoulders the blame on [young people], rather than the companies that let it happen. [...] We need to change their behaviour, not our behaviour.”

Member of the Scottish Youth Parliament

This report details the findings from consultation the Scottish Youth Parliament conducted with over 200 young people aged 12-25 across Scotland between March to May 2026.

In June 2026, 82% of Members of the Scottish Youth Parliament passed a motion opposing the social media ban:

The Scottish Youth Parliament opposes the proposed social media ban for under 16s in the UK. We call for decision makers to meaningfully engage with young people to make online spaces safer and more supportive. We believe that technology and media companies should be held to account for the harmful content which exists and is created on their platforms.

This report is a summary version of SYP's full response to the UK Government's consultation 'Growing Up in the Online World'. The full response is available at <https://syp.org.uk/our-work/political-work/consultation-responses/>.

About SYP

Scottish Youth Parliament (SYP) is the democratically elected voice of Scotland's young people. We are youth-led and represent young people aged 12-25 across Scotland.

Our vision for Scotland is a nation that values and practices the meaningful participation of its young people so that they can realise their full potential.

Find out more about SYP at www.syp.org.uk.

Key Findings

- Four fifths of young people agree or strongly agree that a ban would push young people into more risky ways of accessing social media.
- The majority of young people disagree that a ban is the most effective way to make social media safe.
- The majority of young people think a ban would have negative consequences.
- Less than 1 in 5 young people agreed or strongly agreed that they would stop using social media if it was banned.
- Over half of young survey respondents use social media to escape negative feelings.
- Younger women (12- and 13-year-olds) were more likely to be using AI chatbots than both younger men or older young people (15- and 16-year-olds).

“Restricting it now feels more like a punishment rather than safety.”

Young woman aged 16, Clackmannanshire

Recommendations

- **Involve children and young people meaningfully** in the design, implementation and evaluation of measures to increase online safety.
- **Tackle the wider societal issues** impacting young people, including diminishing public spaces for young people and poor mental health.
- **Update the digital literacy curriculum** in partnership with young people to be practical, relevant and age-appropriate.
- Ensure **all trusted adults** working with children and young people **have up-to-date platform-specific knowledge on staying safe online.**

Impact of a Ban

Young people think a full ban would make social media riskier for some young people and would have particularly negative impacts for those who rely on social media for social connections and relationships. Governments should consider the support mechanisms available for young people in the instance of a ban.

Young people were particularly concerned about the impact of a social media ban on young people who are isolated and have their primary social connections on social media. This included young people who live in rural areas, young carers, homeschooled or not attending school, those with social anxiety or mental health problems. Some young people mentioned young people who rely on social media for income, for example young entrepreneurs or influencers. A few young people also mentioned the importance of using social media for political literacy, especially for new voters.

“The public infrastructure for teenagers [...] needs drastically overlooked, since there is nowhere for the people affected by a social media ban to go to.”

Young man aged 18, North Ayrshire

“People like the Queer community who don't have a community in their real life or can't access information online are at risk since asking questions can be seen as taboo and weird.”

Young person aged 17, Glasgow City

“Instead of pushing a ban [...] just fix moderation, filters, age limits, etc. It's not our fault that nobody is arsed to put their foot down and solve these problems.”

Young woman aged 13, Clackmannanshire

Using Social Media

Young people use social media to connect with friends, to learn, for creativity and to relax. For most young people, the benefits of social media outweigh the risks. Most young people report balanced social media use. Half of all respondents said they use social media to escape negative feelings.

Young people use social media to connect with friends, for learning and research, staying up to date with social trends, and staying up to date with politics and what's happening in the world.

Young people reported being in control of their social media use with the majority of young people saying they can turn off social media when they want and can think about things other than social media. For most young people, social media does not impact the time spent with family, friends, on hobbies and education.

Worryingly, more than half of young women say they use social media to escape negative feelings.

“[Social media] democratizes participation in information production and distribution, not just access – allows people to actively share their views and learn from one another.”

Member of the Scottish Youth Parliament

Digital Literacy

What is digital literacy?

Digital literacy is about being smart and critical with everything we do online. It means understanding how the internet works, recognising when something doesn't feel right and knowing how to protect your personal rights. Digital literacy can help us understand and enforce our rights in the online space.

Find out more about digital literacy at [Mind Yer Time](#).

Young people want digital literacy education to be practical, up-to-date and relevant, covering a broad range of online harms and opportunities, such as using AI safely and effectively, navigating misinformation, managing screentime and mental health impacts, cyberbullying, cybersecurity, and protecting yourself from harmful content.

Young people currently learn about online safety from parents/carers and teachers. For some young people, their experience of digital literacy education was outdated, irrelevant, and left them with substantial gaps in knowledge.

Young people want the digital literacy curriculum to prioritise content on interacting with people you do not know, protecting your privacy and personal information, increasing critical thinking, and understanding the existing features for reporting on social media.

*“All of the media and digital literacy education I received at school was **VERY** out of date. It needs to keep pace with the times and regularly updated.”*

Member of the Scottish Youth Parliament

Getting Support

Most young people would ask their parents for help if something online made them feel upset or unsafe.

Young people also talk to their wider family and friends if they need support. Around a third of young people said they would not ask anyone for help.

Young people were concerned that young people might be less likely to approach parents for support if they had accessed social media against their restrictions. Young people felt this would reduce the number of trusted adults available to support them.

“I would go to my friend's first and talk to them to get comfort, and go to adults if it's something really bad.”

Young person aged 17, Glasgow City

“Maybe it's because I'm older, but if something was bothering me online I would (if it's a person) simply block them, or stop watching things that upset me.”

Young woman aged 20, Angus

Making online spaces safe

Young people want everyone to work together to make social media safe. Younger people place more of an emphasis on parental responsibility, and older young people see tech companies as ultimately responsible. Young people want governments to hold tech companies to account.

Young people wanted to see “bigger sanctions” for social media companies that do not follow legislation.

Although they agreed that young people are responsible for abiding by laws and a “moral responsibility to protect one another”, young people felt strongly that the onus of staying safe should not be on young people.

“By banning, this gives [children and young people] the message that now the most vulnerable are not on the platform [tech companies] can continue being harmful.”

Member of the Scottish Youth Parliament

Restrictions on social media

Young people are most likely to support restrictions on social media features for young people under 13 years old. Young people thought social media platforms should be safe by design. Young people want consequences for individuals and companies that break the rules.

Young people also talk to their wider family and friends if they need support for online safety. Around a third of young people said they would not ask anyone for help.

Young people were concerned that if young people might be less likely to ask their parents for help if they had accessed social media despite parental restrictions or rules.

“definitely some things on instagram, there can be really weird stuff on there i feel as kids shouldn’t be allowed to see at all”

Young woman aged 16, Clackmannanshire

“Platforms should remove harmful content faster and make reporting easier since young people need to feel confident that if they report something, action will be taken.”

Member of the Scottish Youth Parliament

AI Chatbots

Young people use AI chatbots most often as detailed search engines. Young people recognize the real risks of AI to young people's rights by providing inaccurate information, exposure to harmful content, and simulation of relationships. Young people think AI should be restricted in the type of responses it can give young people. Young women were more likely to report using AI chatbots, compared with young men.

Young people also used AI chatbots as learning support, through explaining school materials, revision aid, marking homework before submission, and supporting research for projects and assignments. Other uses were fun and play, supporting hobbies and sport, meal and recipe inspiration, travel advice, and within a volunteering role. A small minority of young people said they use AI chatbots for personal advice.

Young people were clear that AI chatbots should be restricted from simulating friendships or relationships for children and young people. They also thought there should be restrictions for the type of content AI chatbots produce to limit harmful, disturbing and sexualised content.

“If people are getting attached to ChatGPT there’s something deeper going on.”

Member of the Scottish Youth Parliament

Age Verification

Young people prefer existing identification methods that are widely accessible and free. Young people are wary of how their identification details will be held and processed by tech companies, and the user experience of age verification.

With regards to age verification, young people prioritised:

- Data privacy
- Accessible verification methods (for example the Young Scot National Entitlement Card)
- Simple and user-friendly process

Some young people preferred parental consent as a verification method. Other young people thought parental consent would be flawed and easy to circumvent.

“I do not trust tech companies to keep my ID for age verification reasons. We have seen big data leaks from many companies, and I do not wish to give them more data on me than they already possess.”

Young woman aged 25, Glasgow City

Conclusion

Young people recognise that there are harms online and want adults to work together to reduce and eliminate them. Young people do not think a social media ban would be effective, nor do they plan to adhere to it.

For many young people social media is integrated into their daily lives. They use social media to realise their rights to meet peers, to learn, to access information, and for culture, leisure and play.

Young people have identified many further improvements they would like to see to make social media safer for all, starting with safety by design and young people's continued meaningful participation.

Young people want to see the following steps taken:

Involve children and young people meaningfully in the design, implementation and evaluation of measures to increase online safety.

Young people should be given full, youth-friendly feedback on an ongoing and timely basis to clarify how their views have been considered and implemented and, if they have not, the reasons for this. Young people's participation should continue in the evaluation of any measures taken.

Tackle the wider societal issues impacting young people, including diminishing public spaces for young people and poor mental health.

There is urgent need to provide supportive and welcoming spaces for young people to be themselves, to learn, and to talk to trusted adults.

Update the digital literacy curriculum in partnership with young people to be practical, relevant and age-appropriate.

It should cover a broad range of topics, and young people should be meaningfully involved in the curriculum design.

Ensure all trusted adults working with children and young people have up-to-date platform-specific knowledge on staying safe online.

Young people need a range of trusted adults with whom to have open and supportive conversations.

Demographics

Young people's views and experiences were gathered through three different methods:

- Online consultation workshop with 20 Members of the Scottish Youth Parliament (MSYPs) in March 2026
- Co-hosted a consultation workshop with NSPCC with 8 young people from Aberdeen, Aberdeenshire and Angus in April 2026
- A survey with 181 young people aged 12-25, conducted between 10 April and 8 May 2026

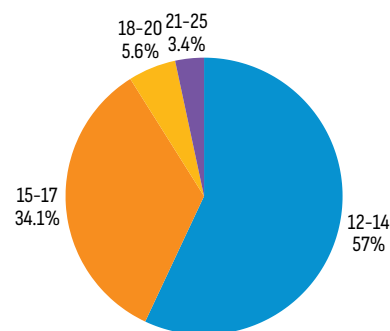
Survey

Demographics data was gathered at the start of the online survey. As the survey was only open to young people aged 12-25, those answering that they were over 25 were re-directed to the end of the survey and did not answer any further questions. 4 respondents were over 25 and therefore answered no further questions.

With the exception of age, demographics questions were optional for participants to respond to.

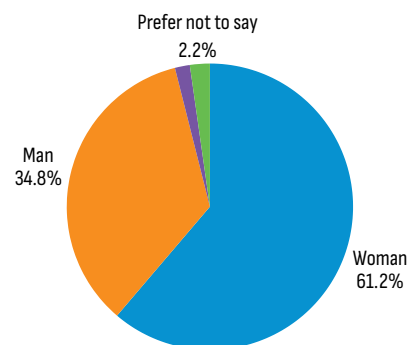
Age


Two thirds of survey respondents were aged between 12 and 15, with the remaining respondents aged between 18 and 25. Only 4% of respondents were aged between 20 and 25.



Gender

Three fifths of respondents identified as women, and one third identify as men. A very small number of respondents preferred to use their own term.





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