

The Fostering Network's response to *Growing up in the online world: a national consultation*

Introduction

In March 2026, the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology launched a consultation in England and Wales on potential measures to prepare children for the future in an age of rapid technological change. This includes potential age restrictions on social media and other services such as gaming sites and AI chatbots, restrictions on addictive design features and risky functionalities, and better support for parents and families.

As a membership organisation, we have created a response to this consultation based on the views of our members from across England and Wales who have specific experience of supporting children and young people in care, most of whom have experienced trauma, instability and heightened vulnerability.

In order to gather these views, we created a survey based on the consultation questions. This was completed by 226 foster carers, kinship foster carers and kinship carers, along with 25 fostering services.

The Fostering Network is the UK's leading fostering charity, bringing together everyone who is involved in the lives of children and young people who are fostered to make foster care the best it can be. We have 4,364 foster carer members in Wales and all 22 local authorities and 7 independent fostering agencies are members. We have 34,225 foster carer members in England, 145 local authorities and 158 independent fostering agencies.

Across all responses, respondents placed a consistent emphasis on increased safeguarding, and the need for stronger system level protections, highlighting particular concern for children with care experience who may need extra support.

Overview of Respondents

This response draws on 251 survey responses from foster carers and fostering services across England and Wales:

- 79.3% foster carers
- 10.9% kinship foster carers
- 10% fostering services

219 responses were from England (87.3%) and 32 responses were from Wales (12.7%). This breaks down to 194 foster carers from England, and 29 from Wales and 23 respondents from services in England and 2 from Wales. There are 42,190 fostering households in England and 3, 538 fostering households in Wales so this is roughly proportionate to the numbers of foster

carers they represent UK wide¹. The overarching views were similar across both England and Wales, so we have grouped responses together.

We have identified five key themes that summarise foster carers' experiences and concerns about children's use of online services and social media.

Key themes

1. Strong safeguarding concerns outweigh perceived benefits

While some benefits were identified such as educational uses and keeping in contact with friends and family, there were clear and overwhelming concerns about risks, including grooming and exploitation, mental health harms and exposure to harmful content.

80% of respondents said risks strongly outweigh or somewhat outweigh benefits (61.2% strongly, 18.8% somewhat).

2. Clear preference for higher minimum age thresholds (primarily 16+)

Across questions, there was 96.4% support for a legal minimum age requirement and 91.2% agreement (strongly or somewhat) for a minimum age of 16 as young people gain greater maturity and understanding of online risks.

Many respondents argued for 18+ for high-risk features while some respondents felt that 16 was too old to apply blanket restrictions, arguing instead for a graduated approach based on age. Others suggested that an age limit is difficult to suggest as children develop at different rates.

They outlined that having the legal age-restrictions would help avoid conflicts between foster carers and the children and young people they care for which can occur when trying to impose social media limits.

3. Strong support for system-level regulation

Foster carers consistently emphasised the need for the government to enforce legal backing, not individual enforcement, and the need for tech companies to take accountability for the harmful context on their platform. Respondents also expressed how difficult it can be managing the risks alone as foster carers.

4. Whole service restrictions over feature restrictions

¹ The Department for Education, Fostering in England 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025 (November 2025) - <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/fostering-in-england-1-april-2024-to-31-march-2025/main-findings-fostering-in-england-1-april-2024-to-31-march-2025>
Welsh Government, Removing profit from the care of children looked after – transition to a not-for-profit model, report 2 (November 2025) - <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2025-11/removing-profit-from-care-children-looked-after-transition-to-not-for-profit-model-report-2.pdf>

Respondents consistently favoured whole-service age restrictions over nuanced feature rules as different ages for different functions might be confusing to monitor and would prefer consistent national rules. Key features outlined by respondents as harmful include:

- **Risky interactions with others**, including strangers – such as messaging or connecting with strangers and live streaming creating concerns around grooming, coercion and harmful contact
- **Exposure of sensitive content** – such as sending and receiving nude images and videos and disappearing content creating concerns around loss of control over context, exploitation and bullying with disappearing content reducing oversight and accountability.
- **Location sharing** – was a serious safeguarding concern highlighted with risks of physical safety and being tracked or targets of abuse.
- **Addictive and persuasive designs** – features such as infinite scrolling, engagement driven algorithms, likes, notifications and autoplay create concerns around addiction, reduced self regulation, mental health impacts and loss of offline life such as family time and other interests and hobbies.

Therefore, as many social media platforms include a combination of these features members felt restrictions on services may be an easier solution.

5. Chatbots and AI should be included in the restrictions

Respondents highlighted a strongly cautious stance on chatbots and AI, many believed they offer little or no benefits to children due to significant safeguarding concerns. The key dangers outlined include the emotional realism, including mimicking romantic and friendship relationships, exposure to harmful content, misinformation and a risk of over reliance on AI which could undermine critical thinking, creativity and create difficulty distinguishing real from generated content. Some limited benefits were acknowledged, particularly in educational support, where AI can help children with disrupted education, and support those with additional learning needs. Overall, however, perceived risks were seen to outweigh the benefits, underpinning strong support for age restrictions and safeguards.

6. Children in care can face heightened risks online

Respondents emphasised that children and young people in care can face heightened risks online for a number of reasons, and that several of these risks may apply at the same time. The lasting effects of trauma, isolation and instability, alongside the higher proportion of children in care with additional learning needs, can increase vulnerability to grooming. Perpetrators may exploit these vulnerabilities by offering false affection, validation and a sense of security.

On top of this, many children in care experience changes to their living situations which means trusting relationships with parent-figures, sibling relationships, teachers and peers are disrupted and boundary or social media restrictions are harder to enforce consistently. This compounds their risk awareness and ability to talk to others about what they're seeing online. Respondents recognised that social media and being online can enable children and young people in foster care to maintain important contact with family and friends, however, there was concern that unsupervised contact can be emotionally challenging for children and young people.

The Fostering Network's view

Following consultation with our members through the survey above, we understand this is a difficult, sensitive and evolving issue which elicits a wide range of views and there is not one easy answer. However based on the responses we received and our view, we would recommend that there is a legal requirement introduced for social media services to implement minimum age requirements for access and that there should be age-appropriate restrictions on specific features and functionalities.

Responses also highlighted the particular concerns around AI chatbot use so we would strongly recommend minimum age limits for these. Strong legal enforcement would ensure that social media use is not left to foster carers to manage which can cause conflict and risk. However, we also acknowledge that children are living in a digital world so any measures or restrictions introduced should not stop them from learning to use social media safely when they are developmentally ready and mature, in line with their evolving capacities as set out in the UNCRC.

We think age appropriate measures and restrictions could play an important role in strengthening online safety and protecting children and young people from harmful content and behaviours which can occur online such as bullying and grooming, while also improving their mental health and wellbeing. Many responses to our survey highlighted the impacts of addictive features on young people's behaviour and mental health and that this has often come at the detriment of their creativity, friendship and ability to play and be present in the real world.

Respondents to our survey emphasised that introducing restrictions on social media could also remove the potential for unregulated contact between children and young people in care and family members or friends outside of supervised visits. They also strongly felt that restrictions would help protect children from criminal exploitation and grooming which young people in care can be particularly vulnerable to.

However, we are concerned that a blanket requirement for a minimum age of access will remove children's rights to access any social media services, including some that have positive benefits for their education and wellbeing. For children and young people in care specifically, it could remove online spaces where they feel included and are able to connect with others or

peers that share aspects of their identity. It would also remove spaces where they can continue to connect with friends and family that they may have moved away from and help maintain those important relationships. Children in care are more likely to feel isolated and need these spaces for connection which can be positive for their mental health if managed carefully.

We are also concerned that the restrictions proposed may not solve all the negative issues linked to social media and harmful content will still be able to reach children and young people. We would strongly recommend that technology companies running online platforms are better regulated and held to account by the Government so that children only have access to safe platforms and are appropriately safeguarded.

Chapter 1: Understanding how children use technology

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

Respondents identified some benefits of social media use, particularly in relation to connection, learning and inclusion. These benefits are often described as conditional and dependent on appropriate safeguards; with some stating there are no meaningful benefits.

Maintaining relationships

The main benefit of social media use and being online that respondents identified for children and young people is care was the ability to maintain contact with family, siblings, friends and school peers. This was particularly important for when children are living far away from home or they move foster homes and may not have any other method to maintain these relationships. In 2025, there were over 10,000 children and young people in foster care that lived 20 miles away from home in England alone² and social media is one way they are able to keep in contact with their support network.

“Social media helps children in care maintain relationships with friends, siblings, and extended family, particularly where placements have changed.” - Fostering service

“Being able to maintain relationships with family members they may no longer be able to see regularly; maintaining friendships if they have moved away; keeping in contact with friend groups who they may not be able to socialise with as much due to different rules around being in care.” - Foster carer

Educational uses

Educational benefits were highlighted by many respondents. This includes research for

² The Department for Education, Children Looked After in England including adoptions (November 2025) - <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2025>

homework and access to online learning platforms which was seen as very important for children's learning, particularly those in care.

"The internet provides access to a wide range of educational resources and life skills development. Children and young people can engage with learning opportunities, explore hobbies and interests, and access information that supports their personal development. This can be particularly beneficial where there have been gaps in education or inconsistent guidance." - Foster carer

"Educational tools as most of them are behind with their learning and this is very helpful for them and carers." - Foster carer

Reducing isolation and feeling included

Many respondents highlighted isolation as a specific issue for children which social media can help overcome. This isolation can be linked to living in rural areas, facing anxieties and being absent from school and away from peers.

"For those who struggle with face to face contact it can be a useful social tool." -Foster carer

"They can be informative and connecting for peers who may struggle with social anxiety - if managed safely." - Fostering service

"The use of social media can also reduce feelings of isolation. Children in care may feel different from their peers, and online communication allows them to maintain friendships and remain socially included." - Foster carer

And others highlighted the importance of children and young people being able to have access to resources about their rights or information on support groups, some of which might support their identity:

"Support from 'community groups' for e.g. LGBT youth or minority ethnic groups" - Foster carer

"Access to information about their rights and also support groups." - Foster carer

No benefits

There were some foster carers that felt that there were no benefits to social media, particularly for those under 16 or children in care.

"There are no benefits to social media for children that have gone through trauma." - Foster carer

"No benefits for social media, this tends to be peer pressure." - Foster carer

"None – toxic environment." - Foster carer

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

Respondents identified risks particularly focused on safeguarding, mental health, and placement stability.

Grooming and exploitation

One of the biggest risks outlined by members was online grooming. Many mentioned that children in care are particularly at risk due to the lasting effects of trauma, greater vulnerability and often finding it more difficult to trust or feel secure in relationships.

“Huge as CLA are particularly vulnerable, often not understanding risks as children of their age typically might. County Lines recruitment, sex trafficking and CSA. Scams. Access to purchase of drugs.” - Foster carer

“Fostered young people are exceptionally vulnerable and easy targets for perpetrators who disguise their identity.” - Foster carer

“Risk of exploitation, grooming, access to inappropriate content.” - Fostering service

Unregulated contact

Unregulated contact with birth families was one of the top risks of social media use identified for children and young people in care. Being able to contact birth family regularly through social media when it should be supervised can be emotionally challenging for children and young people. It can sometimes result in them feeling disconnected from their fostering family and destabilise their emotions. Some foster carers reported that this unregulated contact can lead to unplanned endings.

“The very high risk of getting in touch with family/friends and family that should be supervised as per the Court Order.” - Foster carer

“Risk to placements through children disclosing their location if there are risks. Risk of unsupervised contact between children and parents where this needs to be monitored” - Fostering service

Bullying and mental health impacts

Respondents identified online bullying and harassment as a challenge for children and young people using social media. Risks to self-esteem and negative mental health impacts was emphasised consistently, often linking it to exposure to harmful content.

“Bullying - no peace from it in the evenings and on the weekend. Harassment can follow them around and they can't get away from it.” - Foster carer

“Mental health, lack of socialisation, harm, direct messages of harm, bullying, harming ability to concentrate, impacts mood, energy and motivation.” - Fostering service

Addiction and overuse

Many foster carers described the dependency on social media and being online as negatively impacting children and young people which they attributed to its addictive nature and always being available. Respondents reported that because of this, children and young people are not having appropriate down time or getting enough sleep.

“Becoming addicted to it, bullying, no down time, fear of missing out, staying up late into the night, tiredness from staying up” - Foster carer

“Time sapping. Children are unable to switch off.” - Foster carer

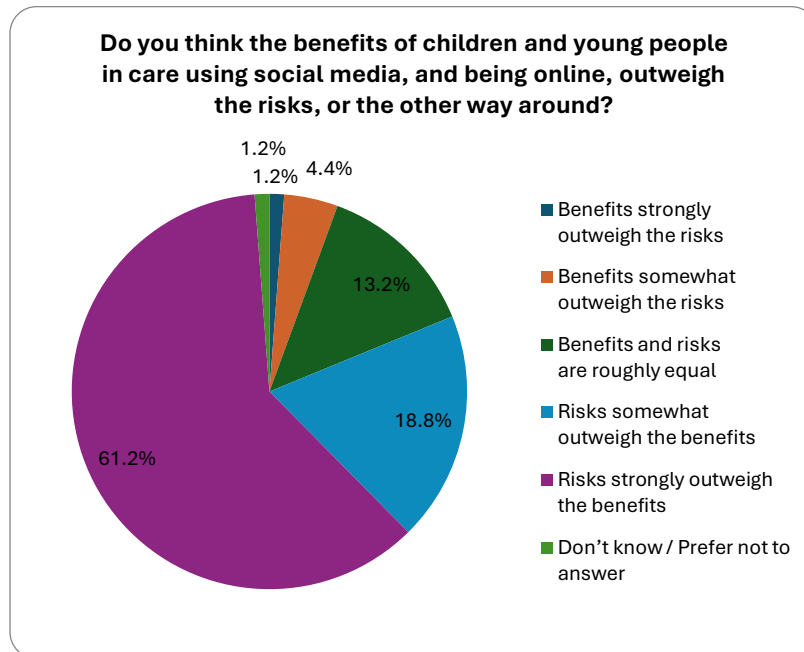
“Short attention span. Poor behaviours. Unable to use their imagination. Not physically active, poor health outcomes.” - Foster carer

Misinformation

Others identified that children and young people are being exposed to inappropriate content, extremist online views, and misinformation, with many highlighting the difficulty of distinguishing truth as risks.

“Un-edited/verified information, unreliable information which the children take for 'Real'” - Foster carer

3. Do you think the benefits of children using social media, and being online, outweigh the risks, or the other way around?



Respondents to this question overwhelmingly believed that the risks of social media and being online outweigh the benefits for children in care. As per the graph below, 80% of respondents said risks outweigh benefits, 61.2% strongly outweigh benefits and 18.8% somewhat outweigh benefits. Only 5.6% felt the benefits outweighed risks in any way, while 13.2% viewed risks and benefits as roughly equal.

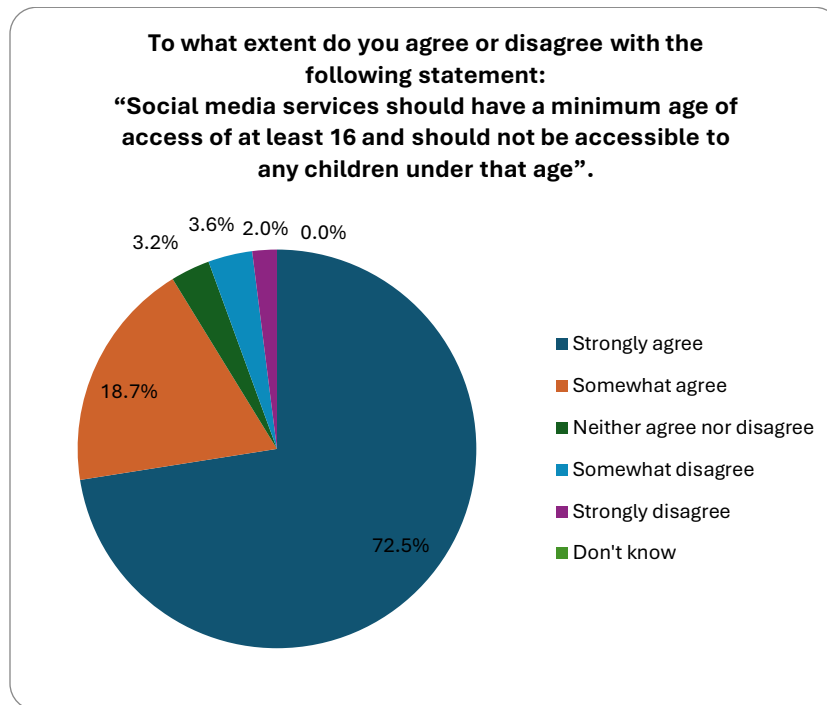
Chapter 2: Interventions for safer, more positive experiences

Restricting social media services by age

4. Would you support a legal requirement for social media services to have a minimum age of access?

Almost all respondents supported a minimum age of 16 to access social media - 96.4% of respondents to our survey said 'Yes' and only 1.2% said 'No' and 2.4% answered 'Don't know'.

5. 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.”



The majority of respondents to our survey agreed that access to social media should have a minimum age of at least 16. Over 90% of respondents said they agreed with the statement. 72.5% responded that they ‘strongly agree’ and 18.7% said they ‘somewhat agree’. Only 3.6% said they somewhat disagree, and 2.0% answered that they strongly disagree. Some respondents answered that they ‘neither agree nor disagree’ (3.2%).

6. 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?

The majority of respondents (75.2%) would not support a legal requirement lower than 16. Only 13.6 % agreed with lowering the minimum age. 6.0% agree with lowering the age to 13, 5.2% agree with lowering the age to 14 and 2.4% agree with lowering the age to 15.

Support for minimum age of 16

When asked for additional comments, some foster carers furthered their support for a minimum age of 16. They linked this to maturity, understanding of the risks and issues being exacerbated in secondary schools due to social media.

“Children will, by the age of 16, have completed their gcse programme an also have matured enough to cope with extended social media and online exposure, reducing the risk of cyber bullying etc.” - Foster carer

"I am also a secondary school teacher, and a large number of the pastoral issues we have to deal with are caused by or made worse by children using social media." - Foster carer

Experiences of children and young people with experience of care

Members also highlighted that children and young people with care experience can be living with lasting impacts of trauma and have attachment or additional learning support or special educational needs. Trauma and attachment/support needs can reduce someone's risk awareness which may lead to less ability to navigate the online world safely.

"The emotional age of many children in foster care can be younger than biological age" - Foster carer

"Often CIC are emotionally and socially below their age related expectations and this could cause problems when faced with some of the online challenges at the moment." - Foster carer

"Children with trauma history can find risk and relationships harder to manage." - Foster carer

Adult supervision and support

Others suggested that age limits may be insufficient without adult support and proper enforcement. Many responses mentioned that the ability to monitor and manage their use can be difficult without support.

"I think 16 is the right age limit, but more important is social workers supporting carers with this limit or it is my opinion that it will not be enforced." - Foster carer

"This depends on the child's (foster) carer's ability to supervise and monitor their use to ensure safety. This includes setting clear boundaries and rules, educating the child about potential risks, and using parental controls so that only the carer has access to the passwords." - Foster carer

Holding tech companies to account

Many respondents suggest that digital platforms and tech companies ought to take responsibility and shift the focus away from children and carers toward digital companies.

"The focus should be on the digital/tech companies removing harmful content and inappropriate activities. They have both the finances and intelligence to do this." - Foster carer

Lower than 16

A few respondents believe that 16 may be too old and that with careful management, younger children should be able to access social media.

"Children develop at different rates so could be managed by carer as to if they were age appropriate at 13." - Foster carer

"I think 16 a little old but 15 would mean young people are more mature at point of accessing the phone." - Foster carer

7. What do you think the impacts would be of having a minimum age requirement higher than 13 for social media services?

Respondents overwhelmingly believed that a higher minimum age for social media services would improve the safety, wellbeing and developmental outcomes of children, particularly children and young people with experience of care. While concerns exist around enforcement, foster carers consistently reported that the current threshold of 13 does not align with safeguarding realities.

Improved safety, wellbeing and mental health

Many respondents stated that a higher minimum age would improve the wellbeing and mental health of children and young people as there would be reduced exposure to online pressures and screen addictions. There would also be a reduction in the amount children would be comparing themselves with others and there will be less influence from unrealistic online content, supporting self-esteem and confidence. Respondents believe that this would make children happier and more emotionally stable with improved sleep.

Respondents also highlighted that a higher age limit would be critical for protecting children from grooming, exploitation, bullying and harmful content. They also stated that it would reduce risks linked to having contact with strangers, access to inappropriate materials, scams and data privacy concerns.

“It would save lives and improve mental health in children and young people. It would be reassuring for parents and caregivers to know that safety was being prioritised.” - Foster carer

“Children would be so much safer. They would get their childhoods back. They would be exposed to so much less harmful content and their brains would be free to develop normally during a crucial stage of their development.” - Foster carer

Social development and behaviour

Respondents also highlighted that not having access to social media would encourage children and young people to spend more time in face-to-face interactions, improving communication and social skills. It may also encourage children to engage more with physical activity, hobbies and family time. All of this was noted as having a positive impact on education creativity and behaviour.

“Children would become more engaged with their environment and the people around them. It would improve their mental health.” - Fostering Service

Supporting enforcement

Some foster carers suggested that a legal minimum age requirement would help them enforce the rules for children and young people in their care without creating friction. Others noted that it will be challenging for foster carers to enforce if there is not adequate guidance or support.

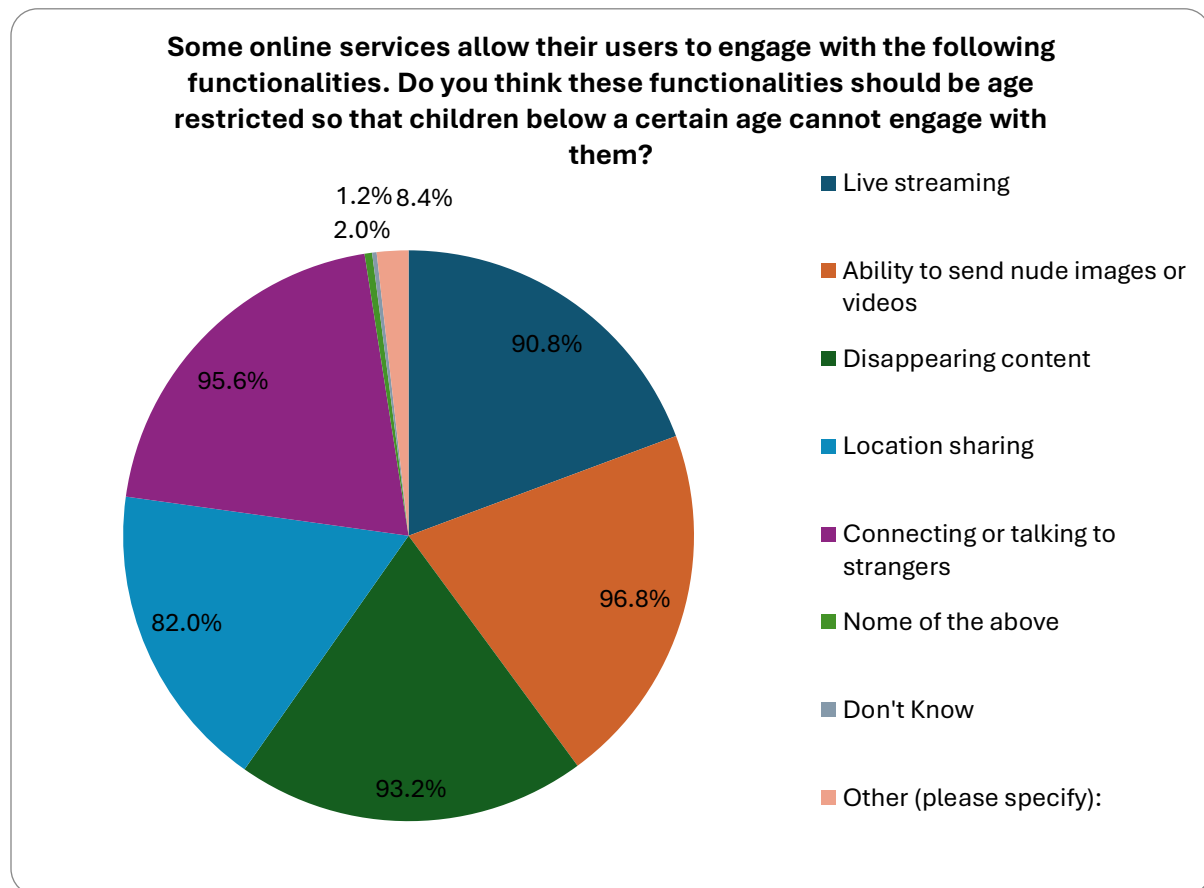
“If there was a legal limit, that would reduce pressure on parents and carers who limit access to social media already, as we would have a ‘legitimate’ reason for doing so.” - Foster carer

“There will be a lot of protest from the young people involved.” - Foster carer

“It would make parents and carers lives so much harder. Teens will pressure them. It will be a ceaseless battle.” - Foster carer

Restricting access to services based on features and functionalities

12. Some online services allow their users to engage with the following functionalities. Do you think these functionalities should be age restricted so that children below a certain age cannot engage with them? (Please select all that apply)



As you could select all that applied but not an ‘all of the above’ option, many respondents commented that all listed functionalities should be restricted for children. For example, one response stated they think that it should be ‘entirely restricted for under 16s so in other words

none of the above would be accessible' and another explained they think 'that all access to social media should be restricted until the child reaches 16 and then the above content should be restricted until the user is 18'.

Some foster carers highlighted specific functionalities that provide safeguarding concerns:

"Tik Tok videos can be very negative, encouraging self harm and dangerous risk taking behaviour." - Foster carer

"Location sharing should be restricted to parents/caregivers - friends/strangers should not be able to access it" - Foster carer

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

Minimum age of 16-18

Responses showed strong support for a minimum age to be 16 for all or most online functionalities, with some suggesting 18+ would be more appropriate for high-risk features.

"None of these functions should be available to anyone under the age of 18 in my opinion." - Foster carer

"Age 16 for all, except apps for location sharing, to enable parents and carers to know the whereabouts and movements of their child." - Foster carer

Lower minimum age than 16

Some suggested lower ages with adult supervision, however, there were concerns around on how monitoring would work, and who would hold the responsibility.

"14, but should be down to parents when they feel their children are ready. Parents/carers should have ability to access accounts or summary should be sent to their emails." - Fostering service

"As already stated I believe all young people need the guidance and also support of a trusted adult to negotiate engagement with online services." - Foster carer

Consistency

Others highlighted that a consistent approach is most important as different ages for different functions could be confusing.

"I think a set age for everything is important for consistency and ease of use. it would be a nightmare to limit certain things and not others! And very easy then to fake accounts etc..." - Foster carer

“Originally I felt different medias are ok to have different ages so children get use to the world we live in but I think it would be to hard for parents to follow so doing an age across all media’s only seems the way it can be done.” - Foster carer

14. 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/functionality include live streaming, the ability to send nude images or videos, disappearing content, location sharing and connecting or talking to strangers.

As mentioned above, there was a consensus that restricting children’s access to functionalities such as live streaming, sending nude images or videos, disappearing content, location sharing and connecting or talking to strangers would provide a safer online experience for children.

96.4% of respondents agreed, 87.6% strongly agreed and 8.8% somewhat agreed while only 3.2% disagreed, 1.2% somewhat disagreed and 2.0% strongly disagreed.

15. 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.

There was strong overall support for age restrictions on online features. Respondents consistently emphasised improved safety and wellbeing for children and highlighted concerns about enforceability, workarounds, and unintended impacts such as exclusion or pressure shifting elsewhere. Many responses noted how restrictions could support carers and provide consistency across households. However, there was also scepticism about whether restrictions could be effectively implemented without robust age verification and platform accountability.

Increased safety, safeguarding, and protection from harm:

There was a clear consensus that restrictions would reduce risks such as grooming, exploitation, bullying, and exposure to harmful content.

“Children would be safer and it would be easier for parents/carers to manage and monitor the risks” – Fostering Service

“It would help prevent the online exploitation of children.” – Foster carer

“For our children in care it would provide a safety net” – Foster carer

Improved wellbeing, mental health, and social development:

Many respondents believed restrictions would reduce anxiety, addiction, and peer pressure, while supporting healthier development and offline relationships.

“Legal age restrictions would reduce anxiety, pressure, improve emotional and mental health, combat phone use addiction, and enhance face to face social interaction” – Foster carer

“Improve emotional wellbeing of young people” – Foster carer

“Improvements in safety, attainment and mental health” – Foster carer

Support for carers and consistency across households:

Age restrictions were seen as helpful for foster carers to manage risk, reduce conflict, and create shared expectations.

“The age restriction would also remove friction and confrontation between the child and parent/carers as it would be a blanket rule.” – Foster carer

“It would be easier to enforce if it was the same rule for every child. The children wouldn’t feel like they are being individually punished” – Foster carer

“It would be a god send as you can’t watch over children 24 hrs a day it would take some the pressure off carers” – Foster carer

Concerns about enforcement, workarounds, and effectiveness:

Many respondents were sceptical that restrictions will not work without robust enforcement, with repeated references to children bypassing rules, lying about age, or adults enabling access.

“It’s a start, but I imagine most teens would soon find a way to get round the restrictions” – Foster carer

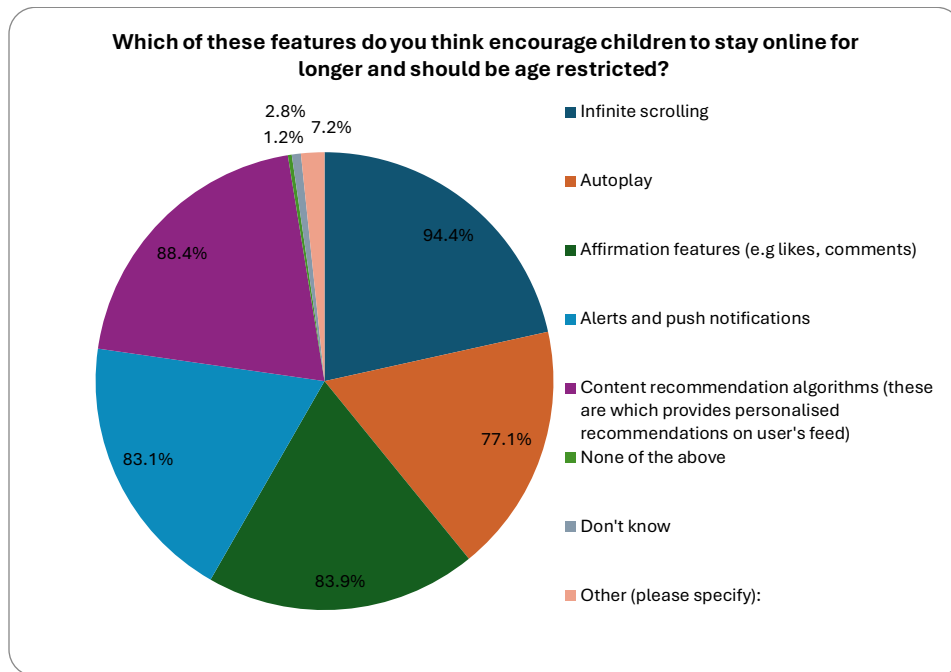
Potential unintended impacts:

Some respondents raised concerns about negative impacts, including social exclusion, young people rebelling, or risks shifting offline.

“There may also be impacts on young people’s sense of inclusion if features are restricted.” – Foster carer

‘Addiction’, compulsive design and displacement

16 &17. Which of these features do you think encourage children to stay online for longer and should be age restricted? (Please select all that apply)



When asked for additional comments, some mentioned addiction, algorithms, and unlimited content feeds as particular concerns. Many stated that all persuasive features are harmful for children.

Many foster carers linked intentionally addictive features with undermining self-regulation and a loss of family time and would like to see algorithms that create these addictive features more regulated.

“Digital content can be addictive for adults therefore even more prevalent in children. They need support with this.” - Foster carer

“The fact they can see anything as content is unlimited. Games they play look like real life so gives them more appeal.” - Foster carer

“Loss of off screen personal interest. The loss of family interaction because of the screen” - Foster carer

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

Respondents supported a minimum age of 16 for all persuasive design features. There was significant support for 18+ for some or all features and some argue for lower ages, or adult supervision.

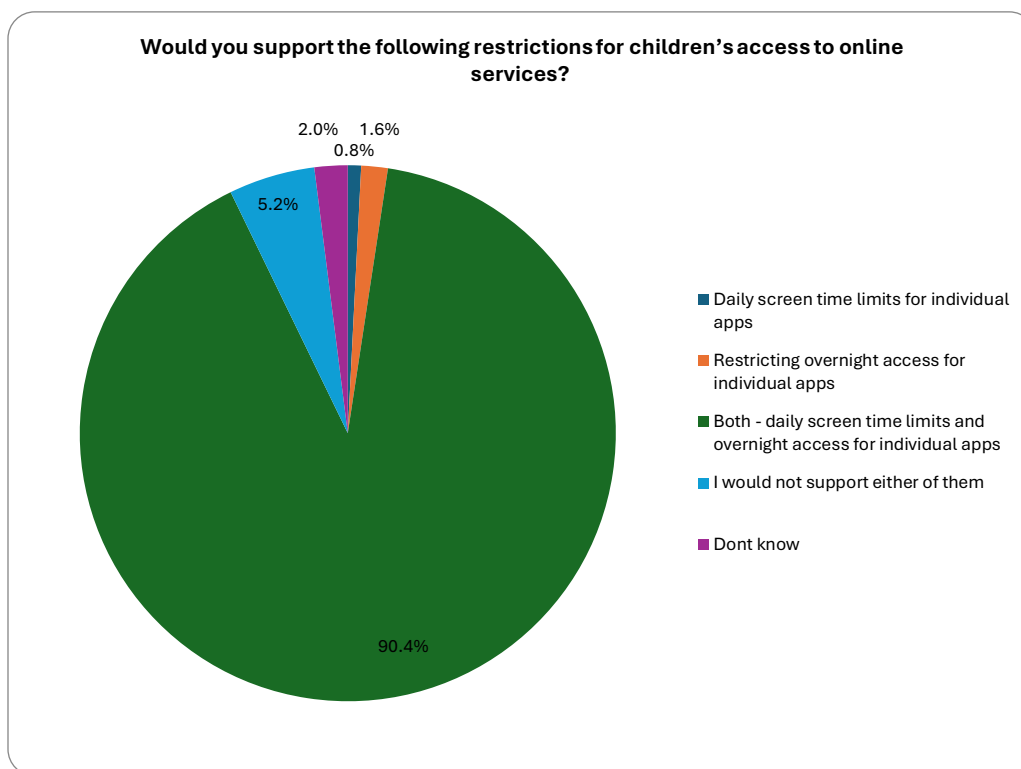
“16 years old should be the minimum requirement. This would support a safety environment” - Foster carer

“Preferably 18 in my opinion. Although realistically the legal requirement should be at least 16.” - Foster carer

“Same as before ie 16-18 due to the added vulnerabilities of children regarding safety.” - Fostering service

“I don't think there is an age, I think these features should stop as they make it addictive for adults as well as children.” - Foster carer

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



Over 90% of respondents agreed that both daily screen time limits and overnight access for individual apps should be restricted for children. Only 5.2% would not support either restriction.

20. 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.

Respondents said they would expect positive impacts on children's safety, wellbeing, sleep, behaviour, and development if platforms were required to limit features or impose time limits. Respondents also repeatedly described such measures as reducing pressure on parents and carers, improving family life, and shifting responsibility back to platforms rather than individual households.

While most respondents prioritised safeguarding over business impacts, some raised concerns about how the government and tech companies will be able to enforce it, data privacy, and unintended consequences, including frustration for children or workarounds via other platforms. Overall, respondents were strongly in favour of restrictions and time limits.

Safety and wellbeing

Most respondents suggested there will be significant improvements in safety, mental health, sleep and engagement with offline activities if there were restrictions to features and time limits.

"The impact on younger people's safety, in my opinion, would be of a greater good." - Foster carer

"Improved mental health and face to face socialising" - Foster carer

"Children would get better quality of sleep, be able to think more creatively and use their time more wisely" - Foster carer

Support for parents and carers

A recurring theme from respondents was that higher level restrictions would make it easier for parents and carers to set and enforce boundaries and reduce conflicts. Specifically linked to challenges foster carers face when setting boundaries with children and young people when they first begin looking after them as they may be used to different boundaries.

"This would be something that children shouldn't be able to get around so it would be fair for everyone, leading to less arguments about screen time and access." - Foster carer

"Only positive. As a parent and carer I usually put these restrictions in place ... However when new children join our family and come with their own phone, it can be difficult to implement it..." - Foster carer

Impact on education and behaviour

Many respondents expected it would have positive effects on education, behaviour and social skills for children and young people as they will be spending less time on their phones and have more time for healthier activities.

“Children would be more sociable with their families and they would have more time for homework” – Foster carer

“Children would spend more time on healthy activities which support positive learning and social behaviour.” – Foster carer

Enforcement:

Whilst most respondents support restrictions, many raised doubts about the effectiveness without robust enforcement. A small number also raised concerns around age verification and data protections.

“Children could set up different accounts to get around time limits so again an outright ban is the only way forward” – Foster carer

“There would still be the concern that they would use other people’s devices to access the denied contact.” – Foster carer

Others warn there could be frustration during transition of imposing restrictions from young people.

“Young person would definitely get annoyed but if age restriction comes in, it would be out of our hands” – Foster carer

What type of services should restrictions apply to

21. 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, the ability to generate non-text mediums such as video or images, the target age group, the size of the service.

Most respondents thought that all services and features that enable interaction, sharing, visibility, or persuasion should be subject to minimum age restrictions, typically under 16 and, in some cases, under 18. Respondents emphasised risk, harm potential, and safeguarding realities, particularly highlighting that children with care experience can face extra challenges.

Several respondents said that every factor listed; interaction, content sharing, persuasive design, risky functionalities, media generation, target age group and service size, should be considered.

User-to-user interaction:

Respondents consistently identified interaction with strangers as one of the most important determinant for age restriction.

“Those with ability to chat/connect with strangers by online message” – Foster carer

“All sites where adults can pretend to be children and groom children. All the chat sites, all social media sites.” – Foster carer

Posting, sharing and generation of images / videos:

The ability to post and share images and video was also seen as important to consider as images can be shared without consent and can be used for bullying.

“All sites that allow external communication with others and viewing/sharing images and/or audio.”- Foster carer

“Restrict the ability to post online pics and videos to over 16’s only and if any sexual / suicidal/ radicalising content then to over 18’s.”- Foster carer

Risky functionalities:

Features such as location sharing, live chats and disappearing content were also as highlighted as these can create serious safeguarding issues. The ability for strangers to contact young people, or know their location increases the likelihood of harmful interactions.

“When the app allows functionality which has the potential to put the user at risk. Including, but not limited to, sending photos or sending location.”- Foster carer

“Live chat / streaming, Inappropriate advertising, Location sharing, Need to purchase packs to play” – Foster carer

Addictive features:

Respondents also identified that apps with features intended to maximise engagement should be included when deciding which social media should have age restrictions. These features can lead to children and young people being addicted to social media, such as never ending scrolling and algorithms that prioritise engagement rather than safety which can promote harmful material.

“Anything addictive or which reduces their attention span should be restricted” – Foster carer

“Content primarily, but also never-ending links to other platforms and posts” – Foster carer

“Anything with an algorithm that is based on what is addictive and appealing” – Foster carer

Target age group:

Respondents also highlighted that social media apps are often not designed for children and young people which is why they might be harmful for them. Therefore, if a social media platform is designed for adults, it should automatically have an age restriction.

“Is the site & content appropriate to the emotional and developmental age of the child just like the film industry does” – Foster carer

Service size

Respondents also highlighted the scale and power some of the social media platforms have as amplifiers of harm as they may have millions of users which increases the likelihood of harmful content being shared. The tech companies behind these platforms may also prioritise profit and growth over safety and transparency which can lead to limited action taken to improve children and young people’s online safety. Therefore, these types of companies should be considered for minimum age limits.

“Lack of transparency.” – Foster carer

“The more the services know about you the easier it is to exploit you.” – Fostering service

Whilst most favoured across the board restrictions, a small number cautioned against feature level nuance or government level controls. There was some uncertainty around who should decide and enforce restrictions, although most people supported a consistent and clear approach.

“I feel restrictions should apply across the board.”- Foster carer

“I don’t agree with these restrictions being imposed by the government. It should be left to parent/ carers who know the teen” – Foster carer

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

Most respondents argue that all social media platforms, messaging apps, video-sharing services, gaming platforms with social features, and services allowing interaction with strangers should be captured. A strong minority go further, calling for restrictions across all non-educational online services.

Social media

The most frequent response was that all social media platforms should fall within minimum-age restrictions. Often concerns were linked to private messaging and a lack of monitoring. Some respondents listed well-known social media platforms, such as Tik Tok, YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, and X, as well as other anonymous messaging apps.

Respondents frequently identified live streaming, as well as video sharing and image based platforms as particularly risky for children.

“All social media and should be 16 to use them.” – Foster carer

“All social media, video media and games where conversations and messages are not monitored.” – Foster carer

“Any apps that allow content from/between unknown people.” – Foster carer

“Any platform that allows uploading of videos and livestreaming or encourages endless scrolling.” – Foster carer

Harmful content

Respondents consistently argued for restrictions on adult and harmful material.

“Sites promoting anything illegal. Sites promoting self harm, suicide, drug use and sale of drugs.” – Foster carer

“All major social media apps where people mistreat each other or unsuitable material is posted” – Foster carer

Educational

Some respondents stated that some services should be excluded, particularly where they are educational.

“Information providers such as Wikipedia should have a junior and adult separation so the info is age appropriate.” – Foster carer

“All sites unless they are designed for educational use” – Foster carer

Online gaming platforms

Gaming apps were repeatedly identified as risky, particularly where they include chat functions and purchases.

“Gaming platforms with open chat functions”- Foster carer

“Games with in app purchases” – Foster carer

Smartphones ban

A small number of respondents also advocated for an out-right ban of smart phones and blanket restrictions.

“All of them - I honestly would prefer a conversation around the banning of smartphones for under 16s instead of social media.” – Fostering service

“If smartphones were banned, this whole discussion would not be needed.” – Fostering service

“The phone should be for talking or texting only.” – Foster carer

23. 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, the ability to generate non-text mediums such as video or images, the target age group, the size of the service.

Similarly to the previous question, respondents to our survey showed a strong agreement that all listed factors are important due to safeguarding risks whilst recognising educational uses.

Risk of harm

Many responses framed age restrictions around risk of harm to children.

“If the app or website could be used to put the child risk or the use of it has proved to have a negative effect on child development.” – Foster carer

“The most important factor is how risky the feature is for children, especially whether it allows contact with others, sharing of content, or encourages excessive use” – Fostering service

Some pointed out the maturity and emotional development of children and young people needs to be taken into context:

“Restrict for under 16 years of age.” – Foster carer

“Under 18's do not need to be able to do anything more than message” – Foster carer

“Not just age appropriate but emotional appropriate” – Foster carer

Educational

Some highlighted that educational functions are important and need to be considered.

“Unless they are educational, I believe they all need age/ time restrictions on them.” – Foster carer

“Use to be limited to educational purposes.” – Foster carer

“There is no need for educational sites to have user to user interaction therefore they should be a safer platform for younger children to use at will.” – Foster carer

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

Responses showed overwhelming agreement that most or all apps, sites and services should be captured by age-restrictions on features and functionalities.

Many foster carers repeatedly said that social media, messaging, video-sharing, gaming with social interaction, and monetised platforms should not be exempt and there should be an emphasis on feature-based risk rather than platform names.

A significant number extended the argument to smartphone access itself, suggesting that feature level restrictions alone are insufficient for safeguarding children under 16.

25. 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.

Many responses supported a consistent and clearly defined approach to exemptions. Primarily for educational, health, and wellbeing services, as long as safeguards are strong. Some argued that nothing should be exempt.

Educational

A large number of foster carers supported exemptions for services whose primary purpose is education, particularly school-managed or curriculum-based platforms.

“Educational resources being exempt is acceptable provided they are restricted to week day, daytime use only.” – Foster carer

“Educational settings, that are inspected by Ofsted/Estyn etc.. should be able to use these services... and children should be supervised whilst using the content/services.” – Foster carer

“Educational platforms whose primary purpose is learning with minimal social interaction” – Foster carer

Health and wellbeing

Many responses argued that mental health, wellbeing and safety information should remain accessible. Some responses cautioned against over-restricting sensitive information that could help support children and young people.

“Educational sites and information sites that signpost young people to services such as mental health awareness.” – Foster carer

“Yes you should have access to information on anything which helps support their safety eg Info about drugs, mental health services and education.” – Foster carer

“Any mental or sexual health websites built by reputable organisations... Children and young people should be able to view open examples of bodies and information on gender, sexuality, mental health conditions etc for them to explore themselves.” – Foster carer

“Services which are tightly controlled and are advantageous to children should be exempt.” – Foster carer

Youth accounts and parental controls

Some supported exemptions for child-specific or teen accounts, with strict limitations.

*“Teen account versions help such as YouTube kids but harder to deal with as child gets older.”
– Foster carer*

“All should offer parental controls/ permission.” – Foster carer

“Must be careful with parental controls though as most young people are more adept at changing / setting them than their parents are.” – Foster carer

No exemptions

There were some responses to the survey that suggested no services should be exempt from age restrictions.

“Nothing should be exempt.”- Foster carer

“No child should have access to online social media.” – Foster carer

Chatbots and AI

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

A large proportion of foster carers stated there are no benefits to children using AI chatbots, particularly for those under 16. Where benefits were acknowledged, they were most often related to education, information seeking and creativity.

No benefits

A significant number of responses explicitly stated that AI chatbots offer no benefit to children and linked risks to learning, creativity, social development and emotional wellbeing.

“Not of benefit. Children need to use their own social skills, imaginations etc.” – Foster carer

Educational related benefits

Where benefits were acknowledged, education was the most mentioned area. Some specifically mentioned how it can support education for children in care who may have experienced disruption in their education and others explained how it has supported education for children with additional learning needs. However, some cautioned, it should still be supervised by adults.

“For children in care, who may have experienced disrupted education, AI tools can offer consistent and immediate support.” – Foster carer

“They can support children with additional needs by adapting language, simplifying explanations.” – Foster carer

“They can help with educational information but should be used in a communal setting with adult supervision.” – Foster carer

Creativity

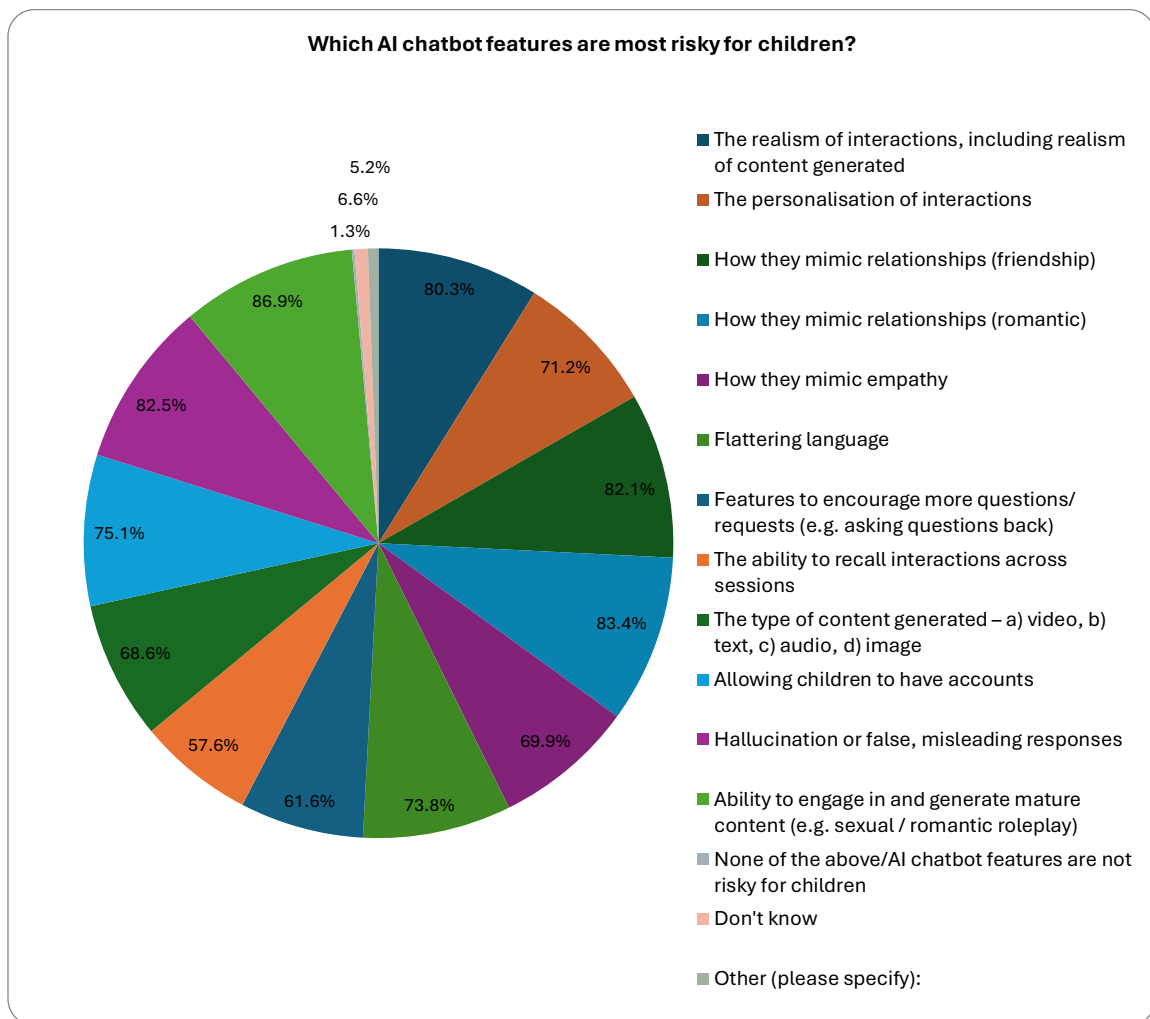
Some responses identified AI chatbots as helping children and young people express their creativity, whilst others argue that it limits creativity.

“Creativity yes and ability to connect with technology at a young age.” – Foster carer

“It’s been really helpful at helping our kids be creative.” – Foster carer

“AI is reducing free thought and creativity and stopping our children from thinking through situations and solving things for themselves.” – Foster carer

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



Responses to this question indicated that all of the AI chatbot features were seen as risky for children as they all have high percentages with the highest risk coming from the ability to engage in and generate mature content.

A small number of respondents answered that AI chatbots are not risky for children with 1.3% selecting none of the above, 6.6% don't know and 5.2% with other.

Those that selected other explained that the difficulty distinguishing what is real and fake as a particular risk for children and there is risk of children accessing harmful content through AI.

“Adults are finding it difficult to distinguish between AI generated videos and real films of animals, etc on YouTube. Children will struggle to know what it true or not.” – Foster carer

“Most of these features increase risk because they can make AI systems feel socially or emotionally real, encourage prolonged engagement, or produce inaccurate or inappropriate content. The combination of realism, personalisation, memory, and emotional simulation is particularly significant, as it may lead children to over-trust the system or form unhealthy attachments, while also increasing exposure to harmful or misleading information.” – Foster carer

“Some AI chats can become inappropriate, like those that are sexually explicit or those that encourages self harm. These are not only unsuitable but dangerous for vulnerable children.” – Foster carer

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

Responses strongly supported minimum age restrictions across all AI chatbot functionalities, linking to unknown risks, emotional realism, misinformation, and harmful content. Many specifically mentioned that there should be a minimum age of 16, with some suggesting 18+.

Mimicking relationships:

From the responses, the AI functionality of chatbots simulating relationships or emotional connections was frequently identified as a risk to children and young people.

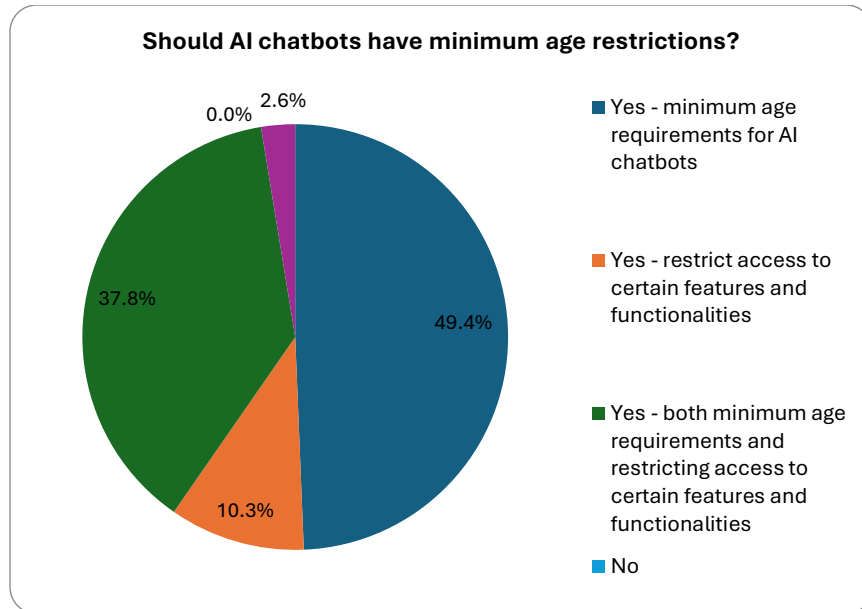
“How they mimic relationships is a real worry.” – Foster carer

“Use of information stored and used to build a non existent artificial relationship.” – Foster carer

“Anything that pretends to be a relationship as I think this is affecting children's development and socialisation.” – Foster carer

29. Should AI chatbots have minimum age restrictions?

Following from the previous question, the graph below demonstrates that almost all respondents to this survey suggested that there does need to be minimum age restrictions on AI chatbots as 0% ticked no and only 2.6% replied don't know.



30. 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.

Introducing age restrictions on AI chatbots was widely seen as necessary to protect children from emotional harm, misinformation, unsafe relationships, and over reliance on technology.

Safety

The main theme throughout the responses was improved safety for children, many responses framed age restrictions as helping reduce the risks to children.

“Safety of every child is a must.” – Foster carer

“Only impact would be to keep children safe and understand what is real.” – Foster carer

“Safer children, not relying on robots to talk to they can ask parents of teachers instead.” – Foster carer

Mental health

Many responses connected age restrictions to improved mental and emotional wellbeing.

“For children in care, who may be more vulnerable to seeking emotional reassurance or guidance online, restrictions on features such as human-like emotional simulation, persistent memory, or highly personalised interaction could help reduce the risk of emotional dependency or confusion between AI and real relationships.” – Foster carer

Clearer boundaries

Restrictions were seen as helping adults manage risk and reducing the anxiety of setting boundaries to keep children and young people safe.

“Improve safety and wellbeing and help carers and parents feel more relaxed about internet access.” – Foster carer

“Peace of mind for carers.” – Foster carer

Misinformation

Several responses mentioned the misinformation on AI chatbots to be a risk to children and young people.

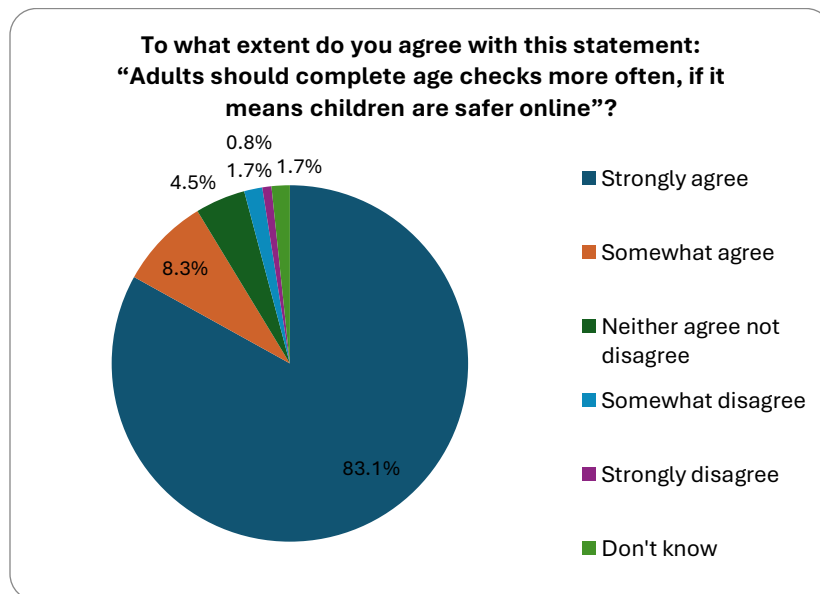
“AI is now becoming so accessible both children AND adults are being presented with highly believable misinformation.” – Fostering service

“Reduce misinformation and reliance on tech rather than using and developing a child’s own executive functioning and processing.” – Foster carer

Chapter 3: Effective compliance and enforcement of online safety rules

Improving age assurance

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



32. 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.

Consistently applied restrictions that are legally enforceable and backed by reliable age verifications were viewed as the only way minimum age restrictions would be workable. There was a wide understanding that feature level controls alone are insufficient.

Whole service restrictions

The majority of the responses explained that restricting entire services is clearer and easier to enforce, with many linking to legal requirements.

“It would be better to impose age restrictions on whole services than put children at risk through the danger of loopholes. A blanket age restriction is clear and easier to implement” – Foster carer

“Clear age restriction, screening and legal enforcement” – Foster carer

“If children under 16 are able to access the service the companies should be fined and or services closed down.” – Fostering service

Minimum age or feature restrictions

Many referenced 16 as the minimum age, with some advocating 13, 14 or 18+. While others highlighted that it is difficult to suggest a particular age, and some suggest that the removal of addictive features would be better.

“Overall age ban for under 16s, then restrictions for under 18s.” – Fostering service

“Not sure, everybody is different. There should be no addictive features that are damaging to people.” – Foster carer

“Age restrictions for specific risky or ‘addictive’ features or functionalities, however if this is cannot be implemented, then age restrictions for access to whole services.” – Fostering service

Age verification

There was agreement amongst most of the responses that self-declaration of age is insufficient and that age restrictions must be enforceable.

“Reliable age assurance (not just self-declaration). A key challenge is that many platforms currently rely on users simply stating their age.” - Foster carer

“It must be harder for children (and their parents) to get around age restrictions - don't know how this can be done in practice but it must be done.” – Foster carer

“Combining multiple approaches (self-declaration, AI estimation, trusted third-party verification) can improve accuracy. – Foster carer

However, others flagged privacy concerns or mentioned that it may be difficult to police.

“Age restrictions that require adults to upload ID is a data privacy and security concern.” – Foster carer

“It will be difficult to police whatever is used.” – Foster carer

Adult supervision

As mentioned above, some responses indicated that there needs to be adult supervision linked to age verification checks and explained that it needs to be clear who would hold this responsibility, particularly for children in care where parental responsibility does not lie with the foster carer.

“Age restrictions and authorisation from legal guardians.” – Foster carer

“However this may still cause problems for foster carers if birth family's hold the control. Best solution is no social media under 16.” – Foster carer

33. 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.

Requiring age assurance across more platforms was seen as improving child safety and wellbeing as well as giving foster carers greater peace of mind.

Increased safety and improved mental health

Similarly with previous questions, many responses stated that age assurance would significantly improve safety and wellbeing for children.

“Increased safety, mental health, academic achievement.” – Foster carer

“Children would be safer and have better mental health, and be able to learn better.” – Foster carer

“For children in care, who may be more vulnerable to online exploitation or emotional harm, this could provide an additional layer of safeguarding.” – Foster carer

Clear boundaries

Several continued to state it would be easier for foster carers and reduce conflict for families with boundary setting.

“Better overall safety online for children and less stress and worry for parents and (foster) carers.” – Foster carer

“Parents would know they don’t have to look over their child’s shoulder the whole time.” – Foster carer

Concerns around privacy and enforcement

Alongside support, some raised concerns around privacy and how age assurance would be enforceable as some children and young people may find other ways to access them.

“Sharing personal information online is risky.” – Foster carer

“Users move to more risky ways of accessing content they cannot access - VPNs, dark/deep web, peer-to-peer sharing etc.” – Foster carer

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

Respondents largely said they support stronger age assurance if it is robust, legally enforced and designed around safeguarding rather than convenience. Responses recognised that no system will be fully effective without wider structural change and adult accountability. Respondents also acknowledged that it is difficult to overcome some of these challenges. Some responses outlined a lack of confidence that this could work at all, and others suggested an easier solution is an out-right ban on smart phones altogether.

ID based age verification

Many respondents believed age assurance would only be effective if it relies on formal identification such as a passport or other ID, rather than self declaration.

Whilst others question the privacy of sharing too much information.

“I wouldn’t want to share too much data with apps such as NI number.” – Foster carer

Biometrics and facial recognition

A significant number of respondents proposed biometric solutions or facial recognition to verify age.

“Require a digital ID card/passport for children to prove age - with biometric data (but requires lots of data)” – Foster carer

Centralised age assurance systems

Some respondents suggested that a single trusted system would be more effective and safer than multiple platform checks and age assurance is repeatedly described as ineffective without legal backing.

“Robustly implemented and through a single Government implemented or appointed verification process” – Foster carer

“Digital I.D’s made compulsory in the UK for all under 18 young and use biometric identification” – Foster carer

Parental or carer verification

Many respondents stated that adults should be the ones verified, with children's access dependent on them.

"Require a registered adult to approve (so adults register - not the child)" – Foster carer

"Admission to sites given by carer only. Carer able to see all content" – Foster carer

"There is potential if parents/carers have to provide ID, but then this isn't secure if there is an unsafe adult purporting to be a child's parent/carers." – Fostering service

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

Respondents believed that age verification systems can only be effective if they are accurate, legally enforced, and secure.

Accuracy

A main concern from the responses was whether systems can correctly identify a user's age.

"The most important thing is whether the age check is accurate, easy to use, hard to bypass, and protects people's privacy." – Fostering service

"That proof has to be provided and verified, it can't just be a box to tick." – Foster carer

Legally enforced

Many respondents stated that the effectiveness depends on legal requirements and consequences to be made clear.

"Whether they work and whether there is a legal requirement to do so...and also a proper consequence to the providers" – Foster carer

Secure

Many responses stated that the verification checks would need to be secure so that they can confirm the correct details have been inputted and that GDPR would be assured.

"How secure a child's information is e.g. if facial recognition is used could that be stolen/exploited by hackers." – Fostering service

"Children will by pass and use other peoples details. Adults might approve who shouldn't "- Foster carer

"It's complex as parents say no I wouldn't do that but then they allow their kids access to everything. Also as a foster carer would I have the authority to authorise this?" – Foster carer

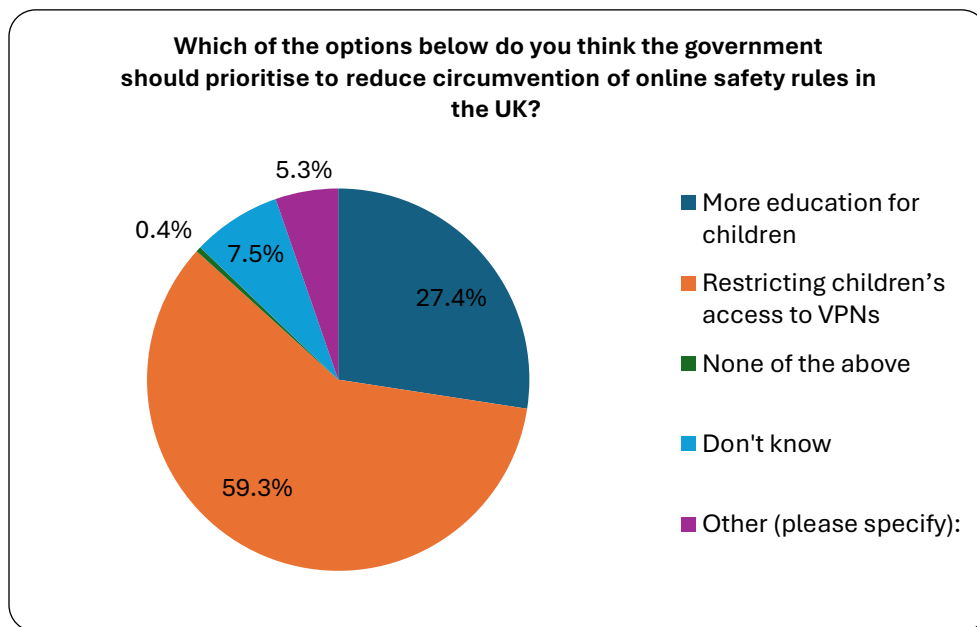
Circumvention of age limits

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

Responses to this question showed a high level of uncertainty among members, with many stating that they do not know how children circumvent online safety rules. Where respondents did provide insight, they consistently identified low-tech, easily accessible workarounds rather than sophisticated tools. The most common methods described involve falsifying personal information (particularly age), using other people’s accounts or devices, creating multiple or hidden accounts, and relying on peers or adults to bypass safeguards.

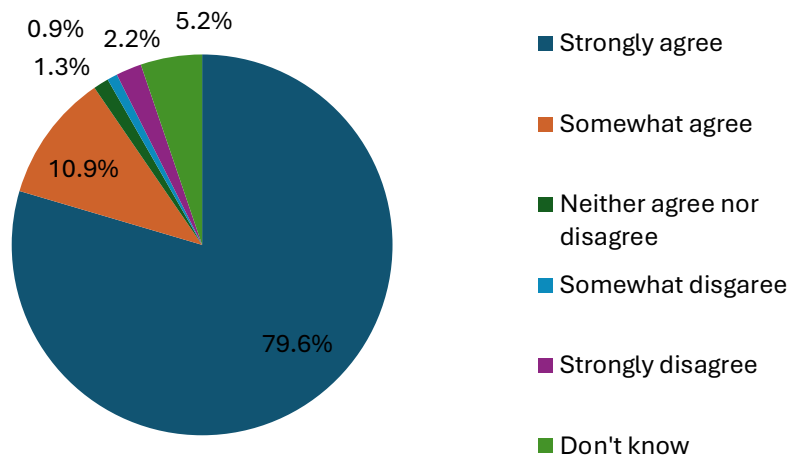
Respondents also highlighted that children’s technological knowledge exceeds that of carers and it is a challenge for carers to keep up with evolving digital behaviours and other peers or adults in enabling access.

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



38. 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”

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”



39. What do you think the impacts would be if VPNs were age-restricted?

Respondents were largely supportive of age-restricting VPNs, with most participants believing it would improve children’s safety and wellbeing online. However, there were notable concerns about privacy, freedom of access, effectiveness, and practical implementation.

Improve child safety and wellbeing

Many respondents emphasised safeguarding benefits, particularly protection from online harms and abuse. This is directly relevant to foster carers responsible for children’s safety.

Reduced foster carer anxiety

Some respondents indicated that having age restrictions on VPNs would reduce worry for them as it would minimise the risk of the children and young people in their care bypassing the age restriction and still accessing harmful content.

Effectiveness

Some respondents doubted whether age restrictions would work in practice, noting that children may find ways around controls, which is particularly relevant for foster carers managing complex digital behaviours.

“They will be angry when it is restricted and will find ways around it with older siblings or parents.” – Foster carer

Practical and wider impacts

Respondents highlighted potential downsides including inconvenience to others who use VPNs such as businesses and the economic impacts. Along with concern around privacy and how they will confirm age restrictions.

40. 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.

Responses to this question highlighted that making age-restricting VPNs effective and workable would require a combination of public trust, robust and accessible age verification systems, clear legal frameworks, and consideration of legitimate VPN uses.

Public trust, education, and engagement

Respondents repeatedly stressed that public confidence and understanding are critical to any system working.

“We need a countrywide educational campaign that serves to inform and educate and create buy in from the public” – Foster carer

Robust, enforceable age verification systems

Respondents also focused on the need for strong verification methods that are difficult for children to bypass, with suggestions including biometrics and official ID.

“Official identification with facial, iris or fingerprint recognition or children will just check a box to say they are older” – Foster carer

Balancing child safety with privacy, data protection, and legitimate VPN use

A key tension identified was between safeguarding children and preserving privacy, lawful access, and legitimate uses of VPNs

“Any approach would need to balance child safety, privacy rights, technical feasibility, and enforceability.” – Foster carer

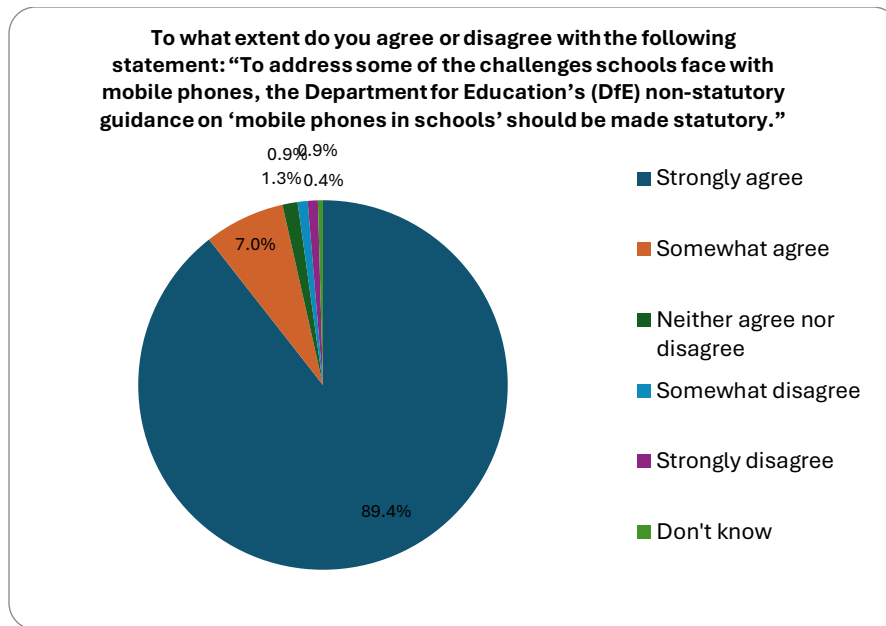
Enforcement of mobile phone policies in schools

The Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Act, which passed in April 2026, includes statutory guidance for schools in England that states that schools must now develop a mobile phone policy that prohibits the use of mobile phones and other smart technology with similar functionality during the school day, including at break times from 29 June 2026. This consultation was created before this law was passed.

41. 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, they have good reasons not to. This includes during lessons, the time between lessons, breaktimes and lunchtime.



42. What impacts would there be if this guidance was made statutory and why? For example, on disruption in lessons, bullying or harassment, parental views on mobile phone policies, staff, etc.

Overall, responses strongly indicated that making the guidance statutory would have predominantly positive impacts on behaviour, learning, and safety in schools, particularly through reducing disruption and bullying. However, there were consistent concerns about enforcement pressures on schools, loss of communication between children and foster carers, and unintended consequences for children and young people with experience in care.

There was also a clear divide between those supporting a blanket national approach for consistency and those highlighting flexibility, implementation challenges, and the role of parents rather than schools.

Reduced disruption and improved focus in class

Responses consistently highlighted improved concentration, behaviour, and learning outcomes if restrictions became statutory.

"Teachers could teach, children could learn without the additional distractions and time taken to sort out problems" – Foster carer

Reduction in bullying and peer pressure

Respondents believed that it would also reduce cyberbullying, covert harassment, and social pressures linked to phone use. As children and young people would not have access to their phones during school hours it would limit harmful messages and photos taken to bully peers.

"Bullying, sharing inappropriate images, buying expensive phones - peer pressure not every family can afford to buy them" – Foster carer

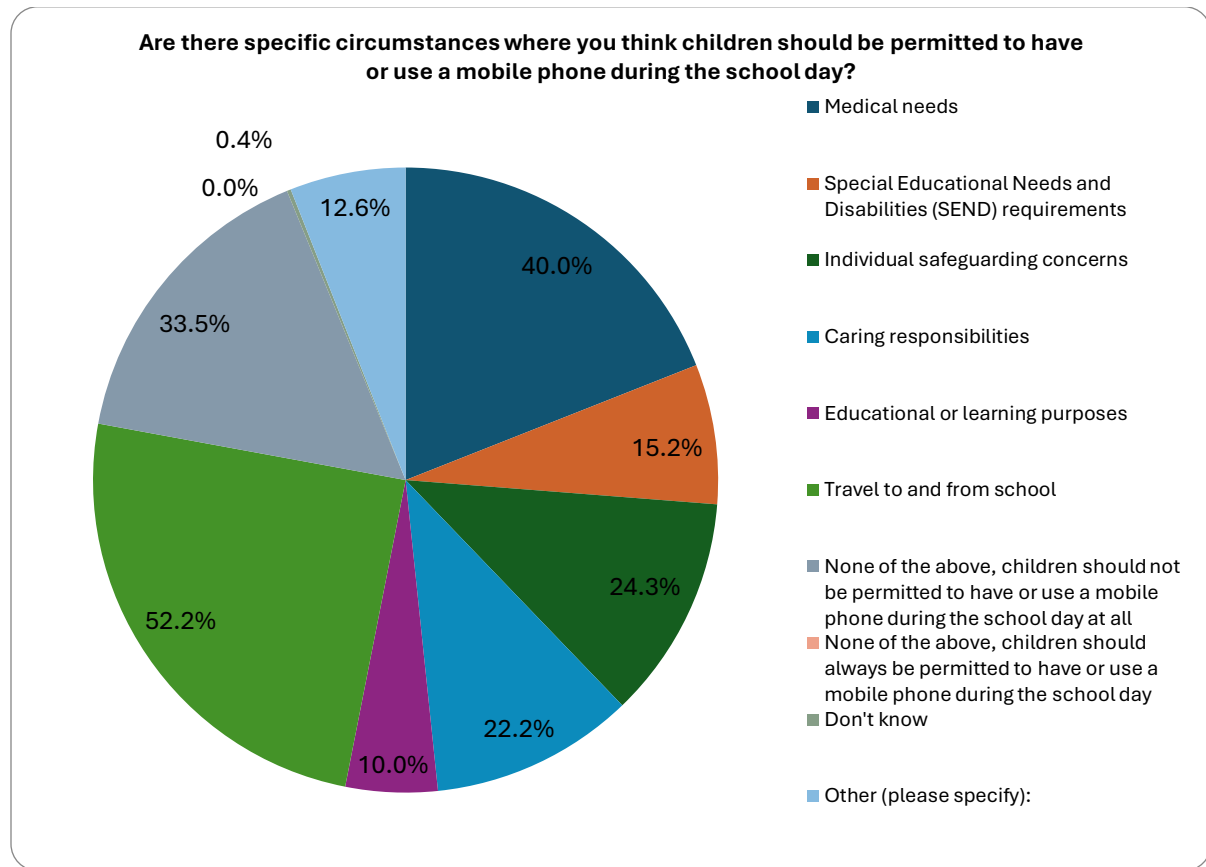
Improved wellbeing and behaviour

Respondents frequently noted benefits beyond academics, including mental health, socialisation, and reduced anxiety.

"More positive social Interactions, better focus, and better learning and retention amongst students." – Foster carer

"Children will be happier and calmer in school and more able to concentrate" – Foster carer

43. 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)



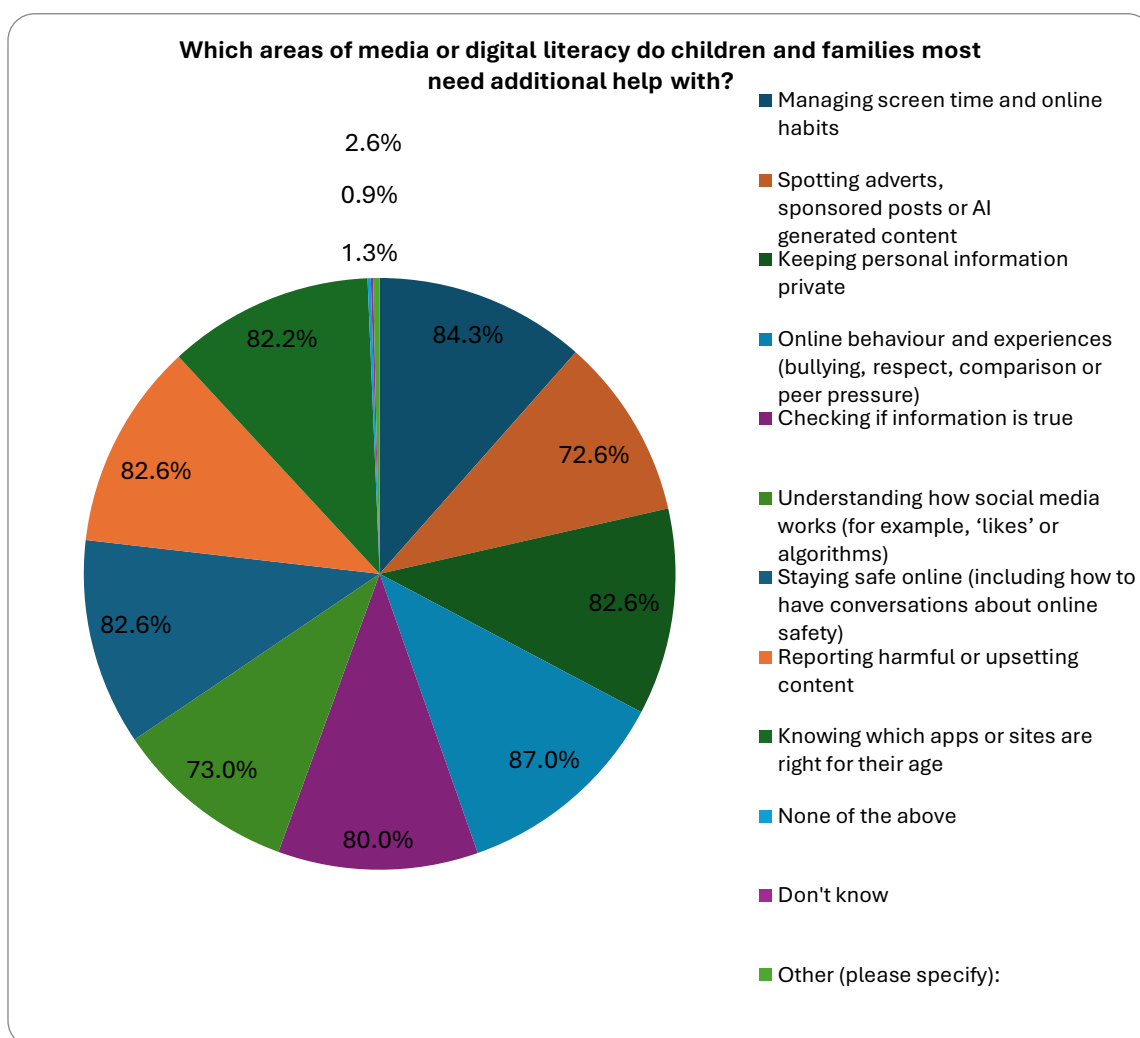
Respondents that selected 'other' indicated that members do not support children using mobile phones during the school day, except in limited, clearly defined circumstances. Where use is supported, this is typically restricted to medical needs, safety while travelling, or specific individual circumstances, with a strong preference for controlled, supervised, or non-

smartphone access. Many responses emphasised that schools should manage communication with parents or carers instead of personal phone use or children have non-smart phones.

There was a clear emphasis on individual assessment of need, but also concern that too many exceptions could undermine rules.

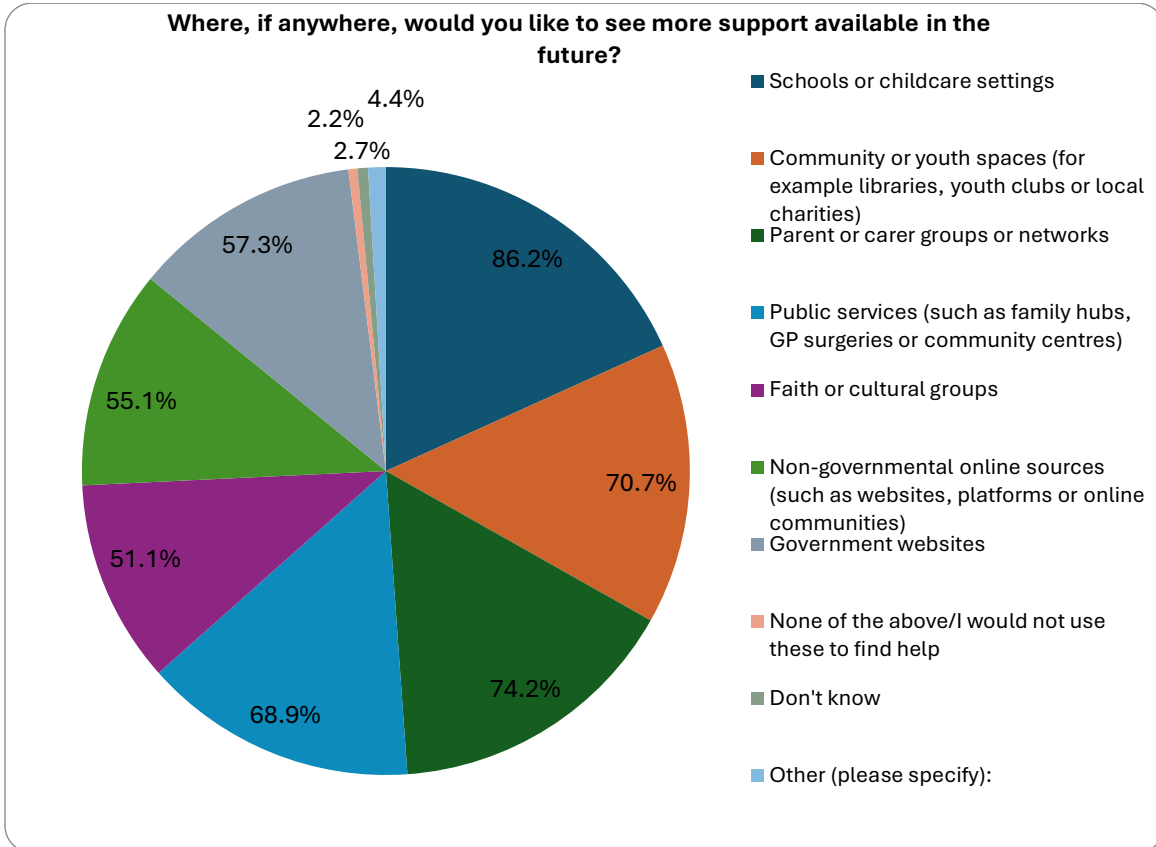
Chapter 4: Preparing children for a digital future and enriching their online experiences

44. Which areas of media or digital literacy do children and families most need additional help with?



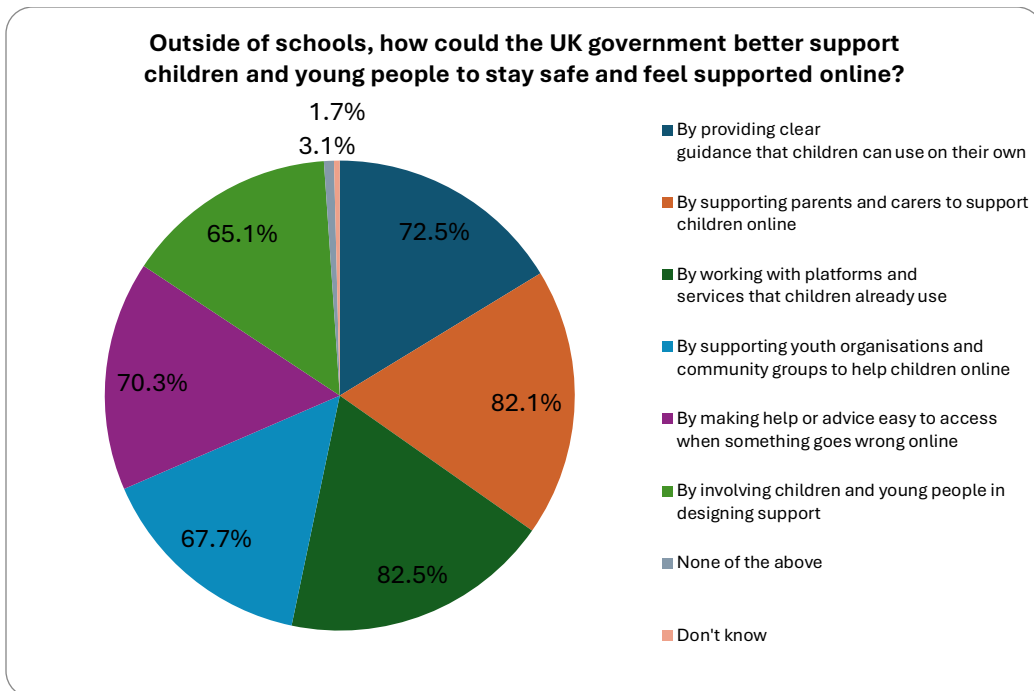
Respondents who selected 'other' noted that children may be "tech savvy" but still require guidance due to evolving risks and systems and are concerned that that technology evolves too quickly for families to keep up, requiring continuous learning and support.

46. 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)

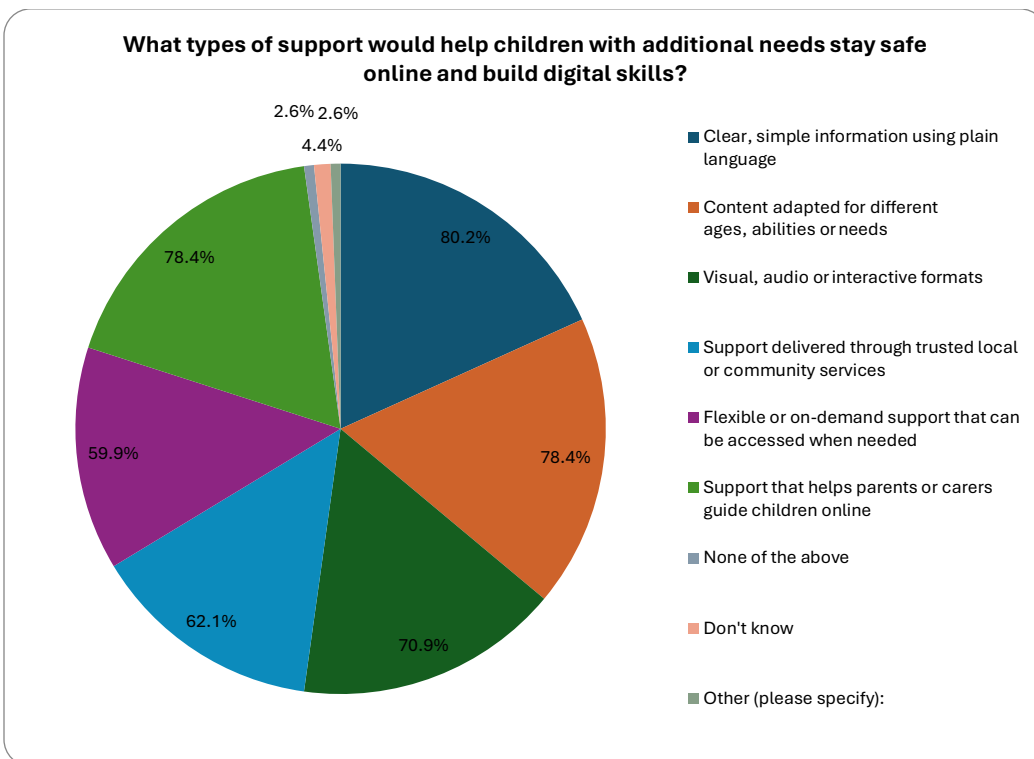


Respondents who selected other emphasised that support should be available wherever children and families are already engaging, including schools, public spaces, libraries, and online platforms. With one respondent stating that “the sites themselves should advertise their own safety features”.

47. 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)



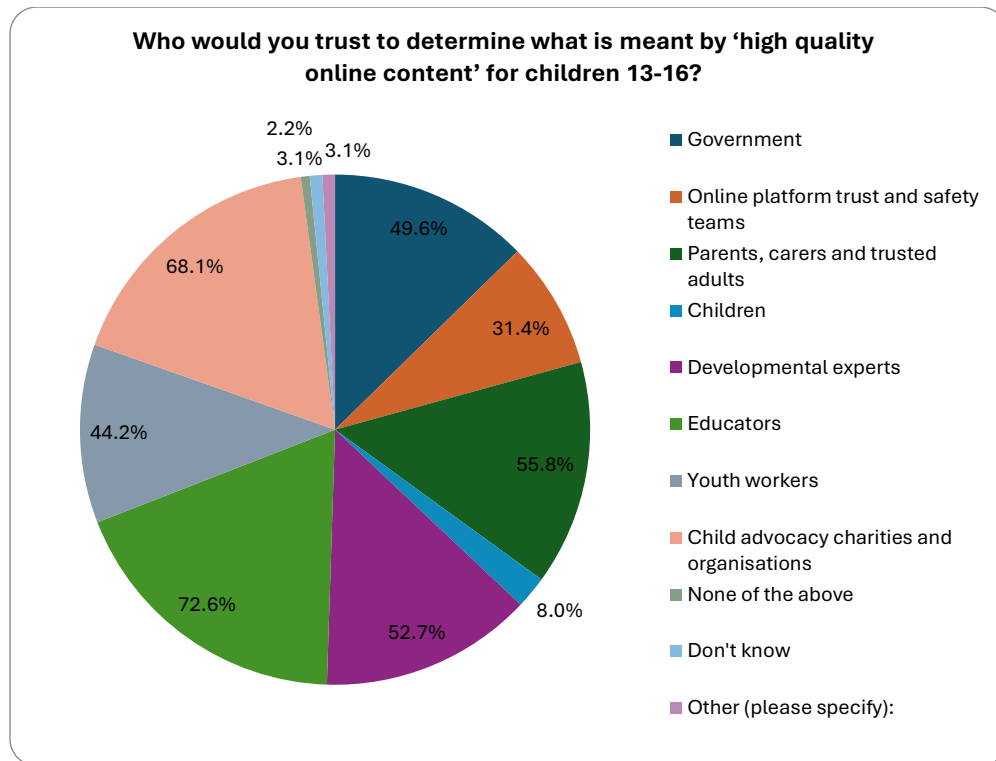
48. What types of support would help children with additional needs stay safe online and build digital skills? By 'additional needs', we mean children who may need extra support for a range of reasons (such as learning, communication, health or access needs). (Please select all that apply)



Respondents who selected other also highlighted the role of community spaces like libraries in providing controlled access to media, while others argued for more preventative approaches centred on limiting access to smartphones altogether.

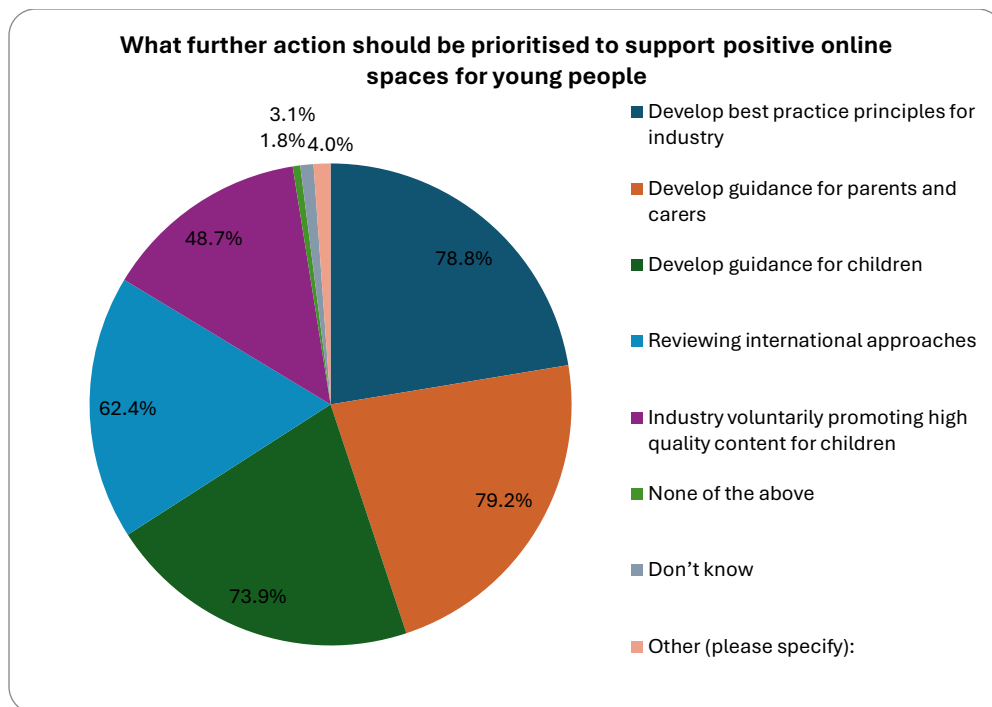
Promoting access to high quality content

49. Who would you trust to determine what is meant by ‘high quality context’ for children 13-16?



Respondents who selected other favoured a collaborative, multi-stakeholder approach to defining “high quality online content” for children aged 13–16, combining the roles of government, technology companies, and other actors, with a strong emphasis on clear standards, effective regulation, and removal of harmful content at source. There is also a clear expectation that any framework should be objective and free from bias, while recognising that no single group has the full expertise to determine quality alone.

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



Respondents who selected other also wanted clear expectation that government and industry should take more decisive and enforceable action, rather than relying on voluntary measures, and that online spaces should be fair and unbiased.

51. 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.

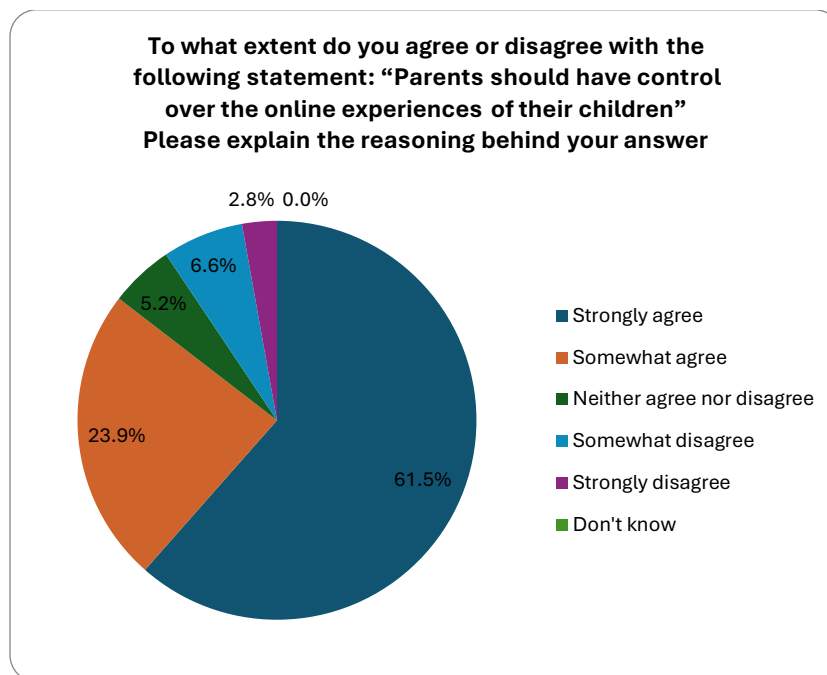
Responses indicated that there is a need for stronger regulation, clearer safeguards, and a coordinated multi-agency approach to support positive online spaces for young people. There was a consistent call for government leadership, accountability from technology companies, and inclusion of those with direct experience of children’s lives, including parents, carers, and young people themselves. Respondents also highlighted the importance of age-appropriate protections, accessibility of guidance, and a focus on wellbeing, while noting challenges around enforcement, feasibility, and existing system effectiveness.

"Input should come from a wide range of stakeholders, including children and young people (especially those with care experience), parents/carers, educators, social workers, regulators such as Ofcom, and industry." – Foster carer

"Everyone should be working together to ensure children are kept safe without any thought to cost. Government, education, social media platforms etc." – Foster carer

Chapter 5: Supporting families

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



Responses showed broad agreement that parents should play an important role in shaping children’s online experiences, particularly in terms of safety, guidance, and oversight. However, there was strong recognition that parental control alone is insufficient in practice, due to differences in parental capability, knowledge, and engagement, as well as the complexity of the online environment. Many respondents emphasised the need for shared responsibility between parents, government, schools, and platforms, alongside age-appropriate approaches that gradually increase young people’s autonomy. Concerns are also raised about consistency, peer pressure, and challenges specific to children needing support, including children with care experience. Respondents also emphasised that parental control should vary depending on the child’s age and development, with increasing independence over time.

"They should be involved, set limits, do spot checks and support and educate as well as being approachable and listening." – Foster carer

"Not all parents are educated in what’s safe or unsafe online. Parents may know less than the child about the content of some apps and games." – Foster carer

"There needs to be broad legislative powers about this as well as curiosity and involvement from parents." – Foster carer

" Parents are not able to monitor what their children are doing online for various reasons, so leaving it up to parents isn't enough." – Fostering service

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

Respondents had a consistent view that levels of control should generally decrease with age, moving from high restriction in younger children to more independence in older teenagers, though not necessarily full autonomy before 18. Many emphasised that age alone is not sufficient, and that maturity, support needed, and individual circumstances (including children with care experience and those with additional needs) should shape decisions. There was also a strong divergence between those supporting a strict blanket approach (often under 16 or under 18) and those favouring a graduated, developmental model of increasing independence.

"Control inevitably gets less as children get older. An 11 year old needs and will accept much more support and guidance than a 16 year old." – Foster carer

"The older a child is, the more freedoms they should have. (Age isn't the only factor that should be taken into consideration though)." – Foster carer

54. 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.

Responses highlighted that parents and carers need greater support, clearer systems, and stronger safeguards to effectively use parental controls. The most consistent message was that current tools are often confusing, inconsistent, and difficult to implement, and that improvements should focus on simplicity, standardisation, and accessible guidance. Respondents also emphasised the importance of training and ongoing support, alongside legal and systemic changes to reduce reliance on parents alone.

"Standardisation is key as all IT is different. It is hard to know how to effectively implement parental control due to these differences." – Foster carer

"Clear, simple guidance at point of purchase (e.g. step-by-step setup when buying a device or app) would help." – Foster carer

"All parental controls are limited and confusing. You cannot rely on these to keep children safe." – Foster carer