

National Youth Agency Response to Growing up in the online world: a national conversation

About the NYA

The National Youth Agency (NYA) is the Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body (PSRB) for youth work in England. The NYA is committed to enabling high quality youth work across a range of settings to benefit the health and outcomes of young people and strengthen local communities. The NYA does this by providing guidance, support, advice, training and staff development opportunities for youth workers and youth work organisations.

About Digital Youth Work

Digital Youth Work involves the purposeful exploration, integration and use of digital tools, activities and topics within youth work practice. It not only enhances how youth work is delivered, both in-person and online, but also supports young people to develop their understanding, confidence and critical engagement with digital technologies and online environments. Through this practice, youth workers play a key role in helping young people build the skills, knowledge and resilience needed to navigate digital spaces safely and responsibly.

Read our Introduction to Digital Youth Work [here](#).

Read our Digital Youth Work Standards [here](#).

You can find more information and resources relating to Digital Youth Work [here](#).

Note: The NYA co-ordinated two focus groups with eight young people aged between 15 and 17 to gather their views and experiences of navigating the digital world. We invited representatives from the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology to attend each of these focus groups to observe and ask the young people some of their own questions. The names of young people referenced throughout this response have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect their identities and respect their privacy.

The NYA convenes the Digital Youth Workers Network, which meets monthly, and we asked these practitioners for their views on the consultation. Their voices and perspectives are also included anonymously in the below response.

Summary

We welcome the Government's "Growing up in an online world" consultation to better protect young people from online harms. As advocates and facilitators of youth voice and empowerment, in this response, the National Youth Agency (NYA) sets out the case for stronger regulation, effective digital education and safety-by-design to create the conditions for a safer online world. Youth workers are vital to delivering effective digital media literacy training and education to the young people they support because of the trusted and relational nature of their relationship. This response is informed directly by the voices of young people and youth workers and is grounded in their lived experience. During youth worker facilitated focus groups, young people told us that a blanket ban on social media would not be the most effective approach to ensuring young people stay safe online, advocating instead for more stringent safeguards and restrictions on risky and addictive features, namely infinite scroll, harmful AI models and automatic location sharing.

It is important to note that the rapid rate of technological change and advancement in recent years has coincided with funding cuts to many youth services across the country. These cuts have left many young people without safe spaces, trusted support networks or positive role models leaving them to seek out alternative role model figures online, with some perpetuating harmful ideologies such as misogyny. In addition, there are emerging trends of young people turning to AI chatbots for emotional support and advice, particularly vulnerable young people who are reportedly more likely to seek companionship from these models than their peers.

In this context, youth workers play a critical role in supporting and empowering young people to stay safe online, helping them navigate risks whilst still making the most of opportunities to connect with peers and access creative and educational tools. However, fulfilling this role effectively requires sustained investment in the youth sector as outlined in the Government's National Youth Strategy, particularly through training and upskilling youth workers and investing in new and existing youth service provision to ensure every young person has access to a trusted adult outside their home.

Chapter 1: Understanding how children use technology

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

The online world and social media present a range of benefits and can open many doors to facilitate children and young people's educational and social development. As the professional, statutory and regulatory body for youth work in England, the NYA's mission is driven by what is important to and for young people. We recognise the growing importance of the role that digital technologies play in young people's lives, and the intrinsic link between a young person's online and offline life.

Accessibility and inclusion

A significant benefit of social media and the online world is that these platforms permit people to access a multitude of opportunities, that they would otherwise be unable to for reasons relating to accessibility, additional needs and barriers relating to the cost of offline activities. It is important that young people are able to access support and activities in online spaces particularly in the context of the closure of more than 1,000 youth centres between 2010/11 and 2022/23.¹

A lack of infrastructure in certain areas means that some young people are unable to access in-person youth service provision due to unreliable transport, travel costs and safety concerns. Oliver, a young person aged 15, explained that social media is their primary connection with their friends because they *“don’t have the infrastructure in [their] village to do other things”* and they *“don’t have the abilities to meet up with [their friends] as much because the transport’s unreliable”*. The cost of transport and other costs associated with participation in face-to-face activities, can provide a barrier to young people accessing this support.

“For me, when I spend time online, a lot of the time, it's because I'm interacting with friends, and I don't have the infrastructure in my village to do other things, or I don't have the transport.”

– Oliver, a young person aged 15

Furthermore, young people may have safety concerns preventing them from accessing in-person youth services. Amelia, aged 15, explained their viewpoint that *“going outside can be a dangerous place at times as well”*, particularly areas that experience high crime rates or may be unsafe for young people to walk through alone. Digital youth work can bridge this gap, creating an inclusive and accessible service that young people can access from the safety of their own home.

Online engagements with young people, including through digital youth work, can help break down barriers to participation, allowing for a more equitable, inclusive experience that benefits many young people who have historically been unable to access certain opportunities. Furthermore, digital tools can help young people, particularly those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) reach their full potential. Amelia, aged 15, explained how using social media and AI chatbots has helped them overcome some of the difficulties they face, for example writing and typing emails, as a result of their dyslexia: *“If I didn’t have it, I’d probably struggle quite a lot, and probably, like knock myself down a bit... Probably put down my self-esteem quite a bit, because obviously I’m not able to do some things that most people can”*.

¹ [Government unveils ambitious plan to tackle youth isolation crisis and deliver real life opportunities - GOV.UK](#) Gov.UK (2025).

For young people who experience social anxiety, social media platforms can provide a safe, comforting environment where they are able to connect with others without the pressures of face-to-face interactions. In recent years, the mental health crisis amongst young people has grown significantly, with one in five young people between the ages of 8 and 25 reported to have a probable mental health disorder in 2023.² Oliver, a young person aged 15, explained how using social media and AI helped them to make connections with others, share their experiences and have meaningful conversations, that they might not otherwise make in the offline world as a result of their social anxiety.

A similar experience was shared by James, a young person aged 17, who explained that interacting with peers on social media helped to build their confidence and gradually overcome their social anxiety. James described that there was a period when they struggled significantly with anxiety and found it difficult to communicate with others. Through engaging with people online, their confidence increased and this, in turn, transferred into offline settings, enabling them to communicate more easily with people face to face.

“There was a lot of time where I struggled with a lot of social anxiety and I didn’t talk to people that much really and I found that I gained some confidence from talking to people online, and that led to me being able to actually talk to people in person more.”

– James, young person aged 17.

Digital youth workers play a crucial role in supporting young people to build their confidence and self-esteem, developing skills that are transferrable between online and physical spaces. Charlie, aged 17, shared that the youth club server they access on Discord was *“one of the biggest things that helped”* to build their confidence and self-esteem because it allowed them to *“consistently talk to the same people”*.

Social media can provide a means of staying connected and accessing support from friends and family, as well as participating in academic and informal education when young people are physically isolated. Rachel, aged 17, shared their experience of engaging with digital youth work during an in-patient stay in hospital, explaining that the virtual youth work server gave them *“something to do and somewhere to go”* during this difficult period. Rachel was able to continue to access services when they were in hospital three and a half years ago, thanks to the online youth club their services runs through the Discord platform. Without this online service, Rachel may have been cut off from essential support and unable to stay connected with friends. If the Government were to introduce a social media ban for young people, without offering alternative provision and support, it could leave young people like

² [NHS England » One in five children and young people had a probable mental disorder in 2023](#) NHS England (2023).

Rachel cut off from their peers and unable to access essential services, including youth work.

“When I was in hospital, I had something to do and somewhere to go”

– Rachel, young person aged 17, speaking about the benefits of digital youth work.

Community Connections – Case study

Social media is an essential tool for allowing young people to keep in touch with friends and family, particularly those who live far away, as well as forge new connections. A young person aged 15, Amelia, told us that, since they are home-schooled, they use social media to socialise with friends they wouldn't otherwise get to see. Amelia also uses social media to connect with the wider, home-educated community, sharing experiences and forging new friendships.

“It's quite nice to, like, have a little group of people the understand things that you've been through as well” – Amelia, aged 15.

A supportive tool

For young people with complex needs, including young people with SEND, social media and digital platforms can support emotional regulation or be used to provide structure and routine. Repetitive, predictable content such as music, familiar videos, or calm visual media can help meet young people's needs, helping them to manage sensory overload, anxiety, or distress.

An educative tool

Social media platforms and being online can also be important tools for young people's education. Isaac, aged 17, explained that social media can provide access to a wealth of knowledge, allowing them to access *“loads of different people explaining [a topic] in different ways”*. Isaac's example highlights the benefits of social media in allowing young people to encounter information and explanations that are adapted to their individual learning style. This level of flexibility can be particularly helpful for young people who may struggle to learn in traditional classroom environments.

Rose, a young person, aged 17, highlighted practical and creative learning opportunities that young people can access online. Rose noted that social media and other online platforms can be used to learn new skills like cooking or can be used to access past papers and assist with exam revision.

These perspectives demonstrate that social media is not only used for entertainment or social connection, but can also support independent learning, skill development, and academic attainment.

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

The online world is not without risk, and children and young people are particularly vulnerable to falling victim to the spread of misinformation, deepfakes, online harm and bullying, emotional or financial manipulation and harms associated with addiction and exposure to inappropriate content including violent pornography and self-harm material.

It is important to situate this discussion within the wider context of increasing violence against women and girls (VAWG), which manifests in misogyny online, online grooming, and harmful attitudes towards romantic relationships. These dynamics can shape young people's understanding of what constitutes healthy relationships, with significant consequences for their safety, mental health, and overall wellbeing. In this context, youth workers play a vital safeguarding role, both in identifying risks and in actively challenging harmful behaviours and attitudes. Resources such as the [National Youth Agency's guidance on intimate partner abuse](#),³ and the [Youth Endowment Fund's work on youth work and violence prevention](#) highlight how practitioners can intervene early, build resilience, and promote positive relationship norms.⁴ This aligns with the government's own ambitions set out in its VAWG strategy, which places a strong emphasis on protecting young people online and tackling the root causes of abuse in both digital and offline spaces.

Online harm and violence

Social media can risk exposing young people to online harm and violence, including cyberbullying, hate speech, and targeted harassment.

Online spaces can perpetuate harmful behaviour making it difficult to escape, as bullying and harm can continue around the clock, beyond school hours, spilling into young people's home life. The persistence of online harm can have serious consequences, including negative impacts on young people's mental health, engagement with education, and relationships. Rachel, a young person aged 17, described how her younger cousin, aged 11, experiences bullying and online harm that continue after the school day ends. Rachel contrasted this with her own childhood, noting that conflicts were more likely to fade overnight, whereas online platforms now allow bullying to persist without pause.

The omnipresent nature of social media in young people's lives means that they are constantly observed and scrutinised by others, which will impact their behaviour and self-esteem. Research from the National Centre for Health Research indicates that 35% of

³ [Intimate Partner Violence and Young People: A resource for youth workers - Nov 2025](#) NYA (2025).

⁴ [Youth work and violence prevention | Youth Endowment Fund](#) YEF (2026).

adolescents use at least one social media platform “almost constantly”.⁵ As a result, young people’s lives are constantly documented through posts, images, and stories, creating a permanent digital record of their activities. This trend is reinforced by the design of devices, as most smartphones come with a built-in camera. Hardware design features should also be considered in new regulatory measures for smartphone use.

Furthermore, social media users often share carefully edited snapshots of their day, which promotes idealised and unrealistic standards for young people. These standards are reinforced by affirmation features, including likes and comments, which can limit authentic self-expression, encouraging young people to conform to societal norms and stereotypes. The constant scrutiny and judgement young people experience online can lead to self-consciousness and an over-reliance on external validation, ultimately influencing behaviour, self-worth and critical thinking.

Certain design features of social media platforms can exacerbate risks associated with online harm, particularly for people who have not received a comprehensive, or consistent digital literacy education. Amelia, a young person aged 15, shared their experience of people pretending to be their friend on social media platforms, particularly on apps such as Snapchat. Amelia explained that this behaviour can be especially risky on Snapchat, as the platform allows users’ “friends” to automatically view their live location. These features, connecting with strangers and live location sharing may lead to young people inadvertently sharing personal information or real-time location data with individuals whom they do not know or who could take advantage of them. Amelia’s experience highlights how platform design features can unintentionally increase risks for young people, particularly when features like location sharing are automatically switched on in users’ accounts.

Youth workers play an important role in safeguarding young people in online spaces, empowering them to understand the risks associated with features like location sharing. The NYA’s [Safeguarding and Risk Management Hub](#) includes a wealth of resources, including guidance for digital youth work in online settings. It is essential that youth workers are provided with the skills, training and resources to effectively safeguard and support young people, particularly owing to the changing nature of youth work and rapid advances in technology and the digital world.

Rachel, aged 17, echoed Amelia’s experience and emphasised the importance of ensuring that social media users are made aware of the information and data they are sharing. Rachel shared that they’ve noticed Snapchat will recommend people to add to their network of “friends” purely based on those in their immediate vicinity, with little regard to whether this person could pose a threat or be an inappropriate connection to make for a young person. In Rachel’s words, “*Snapchat doesn’t care whether or not that’s someone your age, or a 50-year-old man*”. This feature of Snapchat is particularly concerning because location sharing is automatically enabled for users, some of whom may not realise, or may be unable to turn it off. Rachel went on to explain that “*with Snapchat, unless you legitimately*

⁵ [Social Media and Adolescents’ and Young Adults’ Mental Health - National Center for Health Research](#) National Centre for Health Research (no date).

turn it off, it's always there. And a lot of people aren't competent enough or aren't even aware it's on."

When considering online harms and risks for young people, it is essential to recognise their digital rights, as outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC),⁶ which makes clear a responsibility to uphold children's rights to privacy, freedom of expression, protection from harm, and access to education in digital environments. As young people increasingly live and interact online, these rights must be actively safeguarded within digital spaces as well as offline contexts. Digital youth workers play a key role in safeguarding young people in online spaces and the NYA's [Digital Youth Work Standards](#) set out clear guidance for practitioners in this field.

The ease with which young people are able to share information, images, location and data can threaten young people's privacy and expose them to danger and harm. When asked what advice they would give to someone younger than them to help them navigate the digital world, Rose, aged 17, shared that they would advise younger users not to share personal information, particularly with people they've never met in person.

Exposure to harmful and inappropriate content

Social media can expose young people to harmful and inappropriate content in ways that are difficult, but essential, to regulate. A Science, Innovation and Technology Committee Report, published in the wake of the Southport attacks, found that "social media business models incentivise the spread of content that is damaging and dangerous".⁷ As a result of these profit-driven models, young people often encounter content that depicts violence, cruelty, or other distressing themes, even when they are not actively searching for it. James, a young person aged 17, shared their concerns around the increase in "*sensationalised content to drive up engagement*", in particular related to extremist views.

Social media platforms are programmed to respond to the best interests of the platform itself, rather than the needs of the user. The reality for these models is that more clicks equate to more cash. As a result, if a particular post or comment is driving engagement, it will be less likely to be taken down, no matter whether it contains harmful content, or is against "community standards". For example, photos and videos that were shared on social media of children and young people who participated in the UK Youth Parliament sitting in the House of Commons in November 2025 attracted a wave of gendered, racist, homophobic, and transphobic hate speech. Despite the NYA and partners manually reporting these comments, only two were removed.

Repeated exposure to inappropriate, harmful or extreme content can be upsetting and may distort young people's understanding of the world by making harmful behaviour appear normal or widespread. In turn, this may contribute to feelings of fear and anxiety and thereby exacerbate the growing mental health crisis facing young people. When asked

⁶ [UN Convention on Rights of a Child \(UNCRC\) - UNICEF UK](#) UNICEF (no date).

⁷ [Social media, misinformation and harmful algorithms](#) House of Commons (2025).

whether they feel the social media platforms they use have changed in recent years, Charlie, a young person aged 17, shared their view that “*there is a lot more hostility online*”.

“It’s like when people are behind a computer, they just forget how to be human.”

- Lucas, a young person aged 17.

Young people with disabilities or complex needs may be exposed to additional layers of harmful or inappropriate content on social media sites. A youth worker we spoke to highlighted the particular challenges faced by young people who are visually impaired when navigating online spaces. They explained that it is crucial to consider how images are described to young people who cannot see them for themselves. For example, if a distressing or harmful image is conveyed using a neutral or monotone description, young people may be unable to recognise its negative nature or potential impact. In a similar vein, some young people who are visually impaired may need to adjust the contrast settings of their device when viewing images online. This may, in turn, unintentionally alter the way in which the image is interpreted. These examples underline the importance of recognising each young person’s individual experience of the digital world and demonstrate the need for tailored, person-centred human support, namely from a youth worker, to help them navigate complex online environments safely and confidently.

Mis- and Disinformation

Social media can expose young people to unreliable advice and information, which may be misleading, inaccurate, or dangerous.

Oliver, aged 15, shared that, were they to give advice to younger users of social media, they would inform them of the abundance of mis- and disinformation that is spread online, particularly on social media platforms like X (formerly Twitter): “*In a newly, like, digitalised world, I think there isn’t anything more important than having the strength to critically understand things, taking points from both sides and considering the whole picture.*”

Oliver’s calls for stronger digital literacy echo the NYA’s belief that young people need a more robust, consistent education around using social media, which extends beyond school environments and runs in parallel to the implementation of stronger protections from online harms and exposure to mis- and disinformation. Youth workers should be empowered, and skilled to deliver this education to the young people they support. This includes providing them with a sufficient training offer, including clear, accessible resources, so that they themselves feel confident and have the skills to support young people in this space. Owing to the voluntary and trusted nature of their relationships with young people, youth workers, digital youth workers in particular, are uniquely placed to deliver digital literacy education. This is particularly true since youth workers often engage with young people in informal and

sometimes digital spaces, allowing learning to be grounded in real-life online experiences such as social media, gaming, AI tools and other creative, digital platforms.

Mental Health

According to the Mental Health Foundation, the majority of young people aged 16–21 (68%) have experienced online content that they found harmful or disturbing.⁸ Viewing this content has a significant negative impact on young people’s mental health, particularly when it is encountered repeatedly or without appropriate support.

Digital youth workers can play an important role in supporting young people’s wellbeing and mental health in online spaces by providing trusted, consistent, and accessible support where young people already spend time. By engaging with young people through digital platforms such as moderated social media groups, messaging services, or online youth hubs, digital youth workers can offer a safe environment for connection, conversation, and emotional support. They can help young people explore and make sense of their online experiences, identify harmful content or interactions, and develop coping strategies to manage distress, anxiety, or low mood.

Chapter 2: Interventions for safe, more positive experiences

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

Introducing a minimum age requirement higher than 13 for social media services could have a range of intended benefits for young people, potentially combatting some of the risks we have identified above, including reducing young people’s exposure to harmful content, improving their physical and mental wellbeing and improving their capacity to participate in offline activities. Isaac, aged 17, shared their view that a world without social media would be beneficial as it would encourage people to go outside and interact with their peers offline, adding that *“it’s so easy to go on social media... You have it in your pocket constantly.”*

That said, social media is an important communication tool for many young people, allowing them to access community connections. When asked how they would respond to a social media ban for under 16s, Oliver, aged 15, shared that they would feel isolated and upset, adding that it would *“cut people off from communities”*. Oliver shared that social media groups can offer avenues of support that young people may not find in the offline world: *“I know a lot of people who may be in an LGBTQ community who have had struggles at home... Who may have disapproving parents [and] who may have maybe no one to talk to”*. Oliver added that a social media ban would *“cut [these young people] off from what could be a group that is helping them through things”*.

⁸ [Disturbing online content one of biggest looming threats to young people’s mental health | Mental Health Foundation](#) Mental Health Foundation (2025).

Moreover, there is concern that stricter age thresholds could push younger users toward platforms that are less regulated, less transparent, or wholly underground, ultimately increasing risk instead of reducing it. Early findings from the social media ban in Australia, which has been in place since December 2025, support this concern, with university researchers finding that downloads of alternative platforms increased immediately after the ban, with young people migrating to platforms that fall outside of regulations.⁹ Often these alternative platforms have weaker safeguards and content is less effectively moderated, which poses more risks for their users, particularly those who are vulnerable.

Young people we spoke to expressed different views on whether age-based restrictions on online content could effectively improve safety without creating additional risks. Lucas, aged 17, shared their view that certain content that is currently readily available to all social media users should be restricted based on age to help protect younger users from exposure to inappropriate or potentially distressing content. However, James, another young person aged 17, raised concerns about how such restrictions might operate in practice. James highlighted the risk that certain content may be incorrectly identified as inappropriate or disproportionately restricted. Moreover, censorship of certain content may reflect biases about what is deemed “inappropriate,” potentially silencing certain communities or limiting access to important educational or identity-affirming content.

Certain applications do include age verification software and take steps to promote children’s online safety, for example, Roblox has introduced a facial recognition software to verify the age of users. However, young people shared with us their views that current regulations are not working consistently. Rachel, aged 17, shared that they tried to set up a Roblox account, which uses face ID software to verify users’ ages, but was blocked from doing so as the software believed them to be too young. As well as falsely interpreting a user’s age, Rachel raised concerns that young people would easily be able to bypass this software by getting an older friend or family member to scan their face instead.

Overall, these findings suggest that restricting specific features and functionalities, as opposed to implementing a blanket age restriction, may be a more effective approach to improving online safety for young people. Without addressing the underlying issues, stricter age requirements risk shifting young people’s online behaviour, perhaps even encouraging negative habits and unhealthy usage, rather than meaningfully improving their safety and wellbeing.

What do you think the impacts would be if some online services were required to introduce age restrictions on specific features and functionalities?

Restricting certain features and functionalities, namely restricting livestreaming and connecting to or talking to strangers for young people aged under 16, could have a positive impact on their digital wellbeing. These features can expose children and young people to a

⁹ [Under-16s social media ban sees rise in alternatives in app store - ABC News](#), ABC News (2025)

plethora of risks, for instance grooming, harassment, and bullying, often with limited safeguarding or moderation from the platform itself. Limiting access to these functionalities for young people under the age of 16 may help reduce their exposure for these harms and support them to stay safe online. In turn, this could contribute to improved mental wellbeing, greater feelings of safety online, and a more positive overall experience of the digital world. In addition, livestreaming, connecting with others of a similar age, and interacting with strangers do not limit a young person's general use of social media, ability to communicate, or access to online communities that offer connection and support.

It is equally important that young people are provided with a comprehensive and consistent education on digital literacy, to ensure they understand particularly "risky" functionalities of social media platforms. Effective digital literacy education should support young people to make informed choices online, identify harmful content or interactions, and understand how to protect their personal information. Youth workers are uniquely placed to support this learning due to the trusted, relational, and voluntary nature of their work with young people, as well as their ability to engage them in safe and supportive environments that meet young people where they are. Since youth work takes place in community, youth club and digital settings, youth workers are able to challenge misinformation and harmful behaviours, intervening early for young people who are at risk of harm, for example, supporting young people who have experienced intimate partner abuse.¹⁰ Youth work principles are anti-oppressive in practice and youth workers often reach young people who may be less engaged with formal education or traditional support systems, including those facing social anxiety, digital exclusion, or complex needs.

Restricting services based on "risky" functionalities

When asked whether they think certain "risky" functionalities of social media platforms should be age restricted, 17 youth workers gave the following responses:

- Over half (53%) of the youth workers surveyed, responded in favour of restricting **live streaming** for young people aged 16 and below.
- **100% of these youth workers agreed that the ability to send nude images or videos should be restricted** for young people aged below the age of 18.
- 60% of youth workers surveyed were of the view that **disappearing content** should be restricted for young people aged 18 and below. The remaining 40% would prefer for this functionality to be banned for young people aged 16 and below.
- **85% of youth workers surveyed would be in favour of restricting location sharing** features for young people aged 18 and below.
- 30% of youth workers surveyed would be in favour of restricting the ability to **"connect or talk to strangers"** for young people aged 16 and below and a further 30% would prefer for this functionality to be banned for young people under the age of 18.

¹⁰ [Intimate Partner Violence and Young People: A resource for youth workers - Nov 2025](#) NYA (2025).

What do you think the impacts would be if online platforms were required to restrict specific features or functionalities, or to introduce time limits?

Restricting certain features of online platforms, particularly features that are designed to encourage prolonged or compulsive use, for example, infinite scrolling, would have a positive impact on the safety and wellbeing of children, without compromising the core functionality of the platform. Lucas, aged 17, shared their experience of often losing track of time whilst looking at Instagram reels: *“I then go back into previously viewed and there’s these thousands of videos that I’ve just seen but not even realising it and I thought I only just saw 20.”*

Infinite scrolling is intentionally designed to remove natural stopping points, encouraging young people to continue consuming content with little to no awareness of how much time they are spending online. This can contribute to excessive screen time, disrupted sleep, reduced concentration, and increased exposure to potentially harmful or distressing content. Introducing limits on such features for children would help re-establish natural pauses in use, supporting healthier digital habits and enabling young people to disengage more easily. This, in turn, would be likely to decrease young people’s screen time without the need for imposed limits or restricting their overnight access.

When discussing the drawbacks of infinite scrolling, Isaac, a young person aged 17 made it clear that these addictive features negatively impact a young person’s safety and wellbeing online: *“It keeps you online, it keeps you away from everything else, it keeps you like isolated on your phone. I think that the benefits of social media in general are obviously the communication, but if there weren’t things like infinite scrolling, reels, TikToks, whatever you use, people would spend a lot less time on their phones. If you look at someone’s screen time, the majority of it isn’t going to be on communication apps. It’ll be just sat there, infinitely scrolling on TikTok. Just rots your brain. There’s no benefit to it.”*

Importantly, restricting addictive features like infinite scrolling, will not impact a young person’s ability to interact with their peers, access content, or remain connected and up to date with the online world. Instead, these measures would target the design elements most closely associated with excessive and compulsive use, without undermining the core social and communicative benefits of digital platforms. In contrast, blanket restrictions on overnight access to social media or introducing general time limits could disproportionately impact young people who may want to keep in touch with family and friends in different time zones or need to access emotional support and social connection outside of standard hours. Furthermore, some young people may need to use their device in a crisis situation that may occur overnight.

Imposing restrictions on specific, harmful features of social media would, therefore, be a much more effective and equitable way of improving children’s digital wellbeing and reducing their screen time.

“Addiction”, compulsive design and displacement

When asked whether they think certain “persuasive” features of social media platforms should be age restricted, 17 youth workers gave the following responses.

- **100% of youth workers surveyed, responded in favour of restricting infinite scrolling for young people below the age of 18.**
- 38% of youth workers surveyed responded in favour of **restricting autoplay for young people below the age of 18**, with over half of respondents selecting “Don’t know”.
- 29% of respondents did not know and a further 29% felt no age restriction would be needed for **affirmation features**, for example likes and comments. 21% felt that these features should be banned for young people under the age of 16.
- 62% of youth workers surveyed responded in favour of **restricting alerts and push notifications for young people aged 16 and below.**
- 50% of youth workers surveyed responded in favour of **restricting content recommendation algorithms for young people aged 18 and below.**

Which services should age restrictions apply to?

Introducing minimum age of access restrictions to certain sites or services is complicated and would likely lead to an increase in young people seeking out less regulated or higher-risk spaces online or turning to alternative platforms that fall outside the scope of the restrictions.

Clearly defining what constitutes social media would be essential to ensuring consistent messaging and a shared understanding among young people, as well as their parents and carers. This is particularly important given how many digital services now incorporate social media-like features, such as messaging, short-form video content, affirmative features and recommended algorithms. Without clear guidance on what a social media ban would include, there is a risk that apps, sites and services, including those which provide key channels of connection and communication for young people, are unfairly penalised.

Alternatively, social media platforms could circumvent restrictions by re-branding or launching new sites and services under a different name, such as “wellness”, which may still include the addictive and risky features of social media, but under a different name. For example, Meta, which owns a myriad of social media services, launched mandatory “teen accounts” on Instagram in September 2024. Despite claims that harmful content could not be accessed, there were reports of the algorithm showing inappropriate, violent or sexual content.¹¹

¹¹ [Instagram still poses risk to children despite new safety tools, says Meta whistleblower | Internet safety | The Guardian](#) The Guardian (2025).

It is essential that new restrictions are flexible and responsive to rapid changes, as new and emerging technologies develop. It is important that policymakers recognise that digital environments evolve far quicker than traditional policy and legislative frameworks, so policies must be kept up to date to ensure that young people are not left exposed to the harms posed by the online world. In order to keep policies up to date, frameworks must be continuously reviewed to ensure that safeguards can evolve alongside technological advances.

Evidence from Australia's ban on social media for under-16s suggests that blanket age-of-access restrictions may not be the most effective approach to improving young people's digital wellbeing. Early evaluations of the ban indicate that many young people have continued to access banned platforms by bypassing age checks or have migrated to alternative and often less regulated services, or "darker corners" of the internet. According to research carried out by the Molly Rose Foundation in March 2026, 61% of 12–15 year-olds who previously held accounts on restricted platforms, including TikTok, YouTube and Instagram, continue to have access to one or more active accounts and 70% of children still using restricted sites say that it was "easy" to circumvent the ban.¹²

These findings highlight the limitations of relying on a blanket social media ban alone and underline the importance of introducing measures to address addictive design features. Approaches that focus on addressing features such as infinite scrolling, autoplay, and algorithmically driven engagement would be more likely to address the underlying drivers of excessive use and harm, while still allowing young people to retain access to age-appropriate online spaces and digital communities.

Artificial intelligence (AI) chatbots

What are the benefits to children of using AI chatbots?

AI chatbots have become more frequently available for young people to use as an educational tool, able to answer questions and even offer emotional support.

Accessibility

AI chatbots can assist young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), and learning difficulties, including dyslexia. Amelia, aged, 15, shared their experience of using AI chatbots as a tool to help overcome difficulties they face in drafting emails and other pieces of work: *"I use it mostly for helping with drafting up things, like emails and things, because I'm dyslexic, so I get my words quite mixed up. I kind of say what's in my head and obviously it doesn't make sense to some people, so I put it all in there and it does it for me."* For many young people with SEND, communicating their thoughts and ideas in written form can be a significant barrier, impacting both their studies and everyday administrative tasks like writing emails or messages. Amelia's experience of AI demonstrated their capacity to help bridge this gap, helping young people to translate

¹² [Molly Rose Foundation Briefing](#) Molly Rose Foundation (2026).

their thoughts into more structured, coherent text, reducing frustration and building confidence.

Creative or Educative Tools

AI chatbots can function as a creative and educational tool to support young people's learning and skill development. Isaac, aged 17, explained that AI helps them to understand difficult academic concepts *“because of the natural language processing that they have, they can explain it in a way that another person might, instead of having to go scrolling through loads of different websites to find the answer you need.”* Isaac's example highlights how AI can offer personalised explanations and reduce barriers to learning, particularly for young people who benefit from information being presented in different ways.

We hear from youth workers that AI presents both opportunities and emerging challenges for young people. Youth workers report that young people find AI to be a useful tool to aid with research, homework and job applications. This view is supported by research from the Alan Turing Institute, which found that children felt that generative AI opened up new possibilities for creativity, allowing them to express ideas in ways they would otherwise be unable to.¹³ However, these opportunities are accompanied by risks, including over-reliance, misinformation, and a lack of critical understanding of AI outputs. Youth workers are uniquely placed to help young people navigate the challenges posed by AI chatbots as they can support young people to explore AI in a safe and reflective way, whilst also developing critical understanding.

Mental Health Support

More and more young people are turning to AI chatbots for emotional support, which does pose risks if this is the primary or only source of support they are receiving. Research from the Youth Endowment Fund found that 40% of 13-to 17-year-olds in England and Wales affected by youth violence are turning to AI chatbots for mental health support.¹⁴ These young people see their AI companion as a friend, citing confidentiality and accessibility as reasons they would choose a digital confidant over a teacher or parent. Similarly, the Me, Myself, AI report carried out by Internet Matters found that 23% of vulnerable young people said they use AI chatbots because they don't have anyone else to talk to.¹⁵ These findings raise concerns about emotional reliance on AI, particularly among young people who may already be experiencing isolation or unmet support needs.

The NYA's National Youth Work Curriculum is a flexible framework that enables youth workers to identify how their interventions can be used to support the personal and social development of young people. The health and wellbeing element of the curriculum highlights that youth workers are often the first adults young people turn to when they have unmet health and education needs. In response, youth workers can identify what

¹³ [understanding the impacts of generative ai use on children - wp2 report.pdf](#) The Alan Turing Institute (2025)

¹⁴ [Access to Mental Health Support | Youth Endowment Fund](#) Youth Endowment Fund (2025)

¹⁵ [Me-Myself-AI-Report.pdf](#) Internet Matters (2025)

support a young person needs early on, engage with relevant agencies including schools and adjust programmes to support young people with health conditions or disabilities.

The National Youth Strategy's *"People Who Care"* chapter reinforces the importance of ensuring that every young person has access to a trusted adult, particularly in the context of the increasing reliance on AI chatbots for emotional support. The Strategy's ambition for half a million more young people to have access to a trusted adult outside of their home by 2035 is crucial, recognising that positive, human relationships are central to safeguarding, early intervention, and healthy development.

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

Many functionalities of AI chatbots threaten children and young people's mental health and wellbeing and online safety. Many of these features are designed to maximise engagement and increase revenue, aligning with the needs of the platform, rather than prioritising the wellbeing and safety of users. In prioritising engagement over safety, harmful outputs are less likely to be challenged or removed promptly by platforms.

AI chatbots have become gamified to encourage users to use them more frequently. For example, XAI's Grok platform has built in streaks, which reward users for continuous engagement on a daily basis. These features can encourage habitual and compulsive use, inducing a sense of failure or loss when the streak is broken, thus pressuring users to return to the platform even when interaction is no longer helpful or appropriate. Features such as streaks discourage pauses or boundaries, making it harder for young people to step back, reflect on their use, or recognise when a chatbot is no longer serving their needs. In turn, these features can lead to unhealthy habits, interrupted sleep patterns or emotional over-reliance on the platform and, consequently, should be age restricted to protect younger users.

There is a clear need for stricter regulations relating to AI user age verification. Through using AI, children and young people can be exposed to explicit and age-inappropriate content. Internet Matters found that AI platforms including ChatGPT, Snapchat's My AI and character.ai did not have robust age verification mechanisms in place in line with the Online Safety Act (OSA).¹⁶ Despite some platforms requiring a date of birth on registration, there was no further confirmation or verification, so this could easily be falsified. XAI's Grok platform has made the headlines recently for enabling users to create sexualised images of children and our own research with Grok's AI companion features raises serious safeguarding concerns with such platforms displaying hyper-sexualised behaviour, reinforcing hateful and extremist views, and using engagement tactics that can make users, especially young people, emotionally dependent. While these features are claimed to be for 18+ users, age checks are extremely weak. The OSA already requires age verification for

¹⁶ [Me-Myself-AI-Report.pdf](#) Internet Matters (2025)

pornography websites, and the same principle should apply to harmful content found on AI platforms and tools.

Through the NYA's own experimentation with XAI's model Grok, exploring how AI models behave and operate, we found that age-inappropriate and harmful content was easily accessible through very limited age verification checks. During our testing with the chatbot, Ani, we found that after only a small number of interactions, conversations became highly sexualised. The AI companion, with minimal user input, delivered sexualised role-play scenarios within a matter of prompts and actively encouraged the continuation and escalation of this type of interaction. Furthermore, another chatbot, Bad Rudi, frequently focused on themes such as the 'woke army' and consistently adopted an aggressive and outspoken tone. This companion appeared to reinforce hostile or polarising narratives rather than challenging them, raising questions about how extremist views might be validated or amplified through these interactions. While four of the five available Grok companions are labelled as 18+, the sign-up and registration process relies solely on self-reported year of birth, with no additional age-verification safeguards in place. Exposure to age-inappropriate content could have detrimental effects on the wellbeing of children and young people. Our findings highlight the urgent need for stronger safeguards, including more stringent age assurance mechanisms and clearer accountability for developers.

The tendency of AI platforms to glorify the user risks creating an echo chamber, which may encourage dangerous behaviour and perpetuate extremist ideologies. AI chatbots are designed to create an agreeable and supportive experience for users, reflecting their own language and views to maintain engagement. James, aged 17, noted that AI "*constantly reaffirms what you're saying*" as they are designed to appeal to users rather than critically examine the content of the discussion. Isaac, aged 17, agreed that AI chatbots "*will always side with the user*", adding that if a chatbot were to disagree, the user would likely "*move off that site and go to a different AI that'll tell them they're right.*" Over time, this dynamic may reduce exposure to alternative perspectives and challenge, discourage reflection, and, in more extreme cases, contribute to the reinforcement of harmful behaviours or ideologies. This trend is particularly damaging for young people, who are still developing their critical thinking skills and may be more likely to take what chatbots are saying at face value.

There is an added risk that AI systems can generate "hallucinations" or false responses, including inaccurate, misleading or fabricated information. These examples highlight both the need for appropriate, robust safeguards and restrictions for young users, and the importance of a trusted adult relationship, for example between a youth worker and young person, to offer guidance and support to safely navigate AI tools and chatbots. Amelia, aged 15, shared their view that they would rather turn to a trusted adult for support, as opposed to an AI chatbot.

“I would never use [a] chatbot for support and help, because I don't feel like it's useful to me. I'd rather have someone in person to speak to who's trusted and obviously I don't want to share information to someone online”

– Amelia, young person aged 17

Should AI chatbots have minimum age restrictions?

Most young people in our focus groups agreed that AI should be restricted for young people, particularly those under the age of 16 to 18.

AI chatbots can offer a wealth of information across a range of topics, many of which will be inappropriate for younger users. Isaac, aged 17, identified this issue, stating that *“there are lots of things that a 14- or 13-year-old shouldn't be learning about at that age that an AI chatbot would just give them the information about if they asked.”* Isaac added that *“there's no age check for using them, and there are no models for a younger audience”* and as a result, these models should be restricted for young people under the age of 16.

Oliver, aged 15, felt that AI chatbots should be restricted for all young people under the age of 18, identifying their concerns that over-reliance on AI generated content will reduce young people's ability to think for themselves: *“When people stop thinking for themselves and start relying on AI, that's obviously going to have massive implications of an entire generation that was raised by AI when in reality, AI can be wrong.”* Oliver emphasised the importance of educating younger users to improve their critical thinking and digital literacy before they are able to access AI chatbots, stating that access to these platforms should be *“restricted until [young people] can understand that AI is not going to be correct on everything, and [they] have the awareness that it's not going to be perfect”*.

Given the harms and risks already identified in the short period since the emergence of AI, coupled with the uncertainty surrounding long-term impacts of these platforms on mental health, wellbeing, and cognitive development, age restrictions should be implemented to access this technology. Without clear and enforceable safeguards, there is a significant risk of repeating the mistakes made in the regulation of social media, where insufficient early oversight has allowed harms to become deeply embedded. These lessons must now be applied to AI, with strong and proactive protections built in from the outset to safeguard children and young people.

Chapter 3: Enforcement and compliance

Age assurance and the circumvention of age limits

Age verification should begin at device level, for example, in in-built app stores, with enforceable restrictions on who can download and access certain applications or features, using trusted age assurance providers rather than a single, easily circumvented verification layer.

In addition, platforms themselves must be required to ensure there is a reliable link between a real individual and their personal account. There should be a limit to the number of personal accounts that individual users are permitted to open, in the context of a rise in the number of so-called “troll” accounts created exclusively to cause harm to other users by spreading hateful content.

A coordinated, double-layered approach is essential to hold users to account and ensure they can only access age-appropriate content. App stores must implement robust age assurance, while social media platforms should enforce ongoing identity verification and accountability for personal accounts. Together, these measures would significantly reduce the ability of young people to access age-inappropriate services and content. At the same time, they would help prevent the creation and use of accounts designed to harass, abuse, or harm others.

It is important that there is sufficient and robust education in place to ensure that children are aware of the risks associated with using VPNs to circumvent online safety rules in the UK. While VPNs can be legitimate tools for privacy and security, their misuse can allow young people to bypass safeguards designed to protect them from harmful or inappropriate content. Without a clear understanding of these risks, children may unintentionally expose themselves to unsafe online environments, including content that is age-inappropriate, misleading, or exploitative. This education should be supported by schools, parents and carers, and youth workers to ensure messaging is consistent.

It is essential that specific training around VPNs, age assurance and the circumvention of age limits is rolled out, as part of wider digital media literacy training, for youth workers to empower them to support young people in these spaces. This is particularly important so that practitioners are aware of ways that young people may misuse tools like VPNs, and the subsequent risks they may be exposed to.

Chapter 4: Preparing children for a digital future

Where, if anywhere, would you like to see more support available in the future?

Digital Youth Work

Digital youth work is growing as a means of connecting with, engaging and supporting young people, especially those who have additional needs and/or are unable to

access physical youth service provision due to a lack of infrastructure in their area. The NYA has published Digital Youth Work Standards to provide a framework to help youth workers integrate digital tools and topics into their work.¹⁷

It is important to meet young people where they are, in the places and spaces they are comfortable using. With this in mind, digital youth work involves the use and integration of digital tools, activities and topics into existing youth work practice, including engaging with young people over social media and in other online spaces, such as gaming platforms. This emerging strand of digital youth work is particularly important in the context of 73% of funding cut to youth services since 2010, which has significantly reduced the number of physical youth clubs that young people are able to access, with almost half of all council areas in England described as having youth work “black holes”.¹⁸ These funding cuts have left many young people isolated and without support, thus paving the way for digital youth work to partly fill this gap in service delivery. Digital youth work is an important step in ensuring that youth work remains “*a dynamic and evolving field of practice, which seeks to engage with young people in a meaningful way and support their growth and development as they transition to adulthood.*”¹⁹ By engaging with young people in online spaces, digital youth workers meet young people where they are, creating alternative pathways of support for young people, particularly those in areas with limited physical youth spaces. In the current technological age, it is essential to provide young people with digital front doors to access services as well as physical entrances.

Even in areas with physical youth clubs and other services, there are a plethora of barriers young people may face in attending in-person events and activities, including cost, unreliable transport, safety concerns and poor mental health. James, a young person aged 17, explained that digital youth work delivered through social media has allowed them to create and maintain friendships with people they would otherwise not have met due to geographical barriers: “*It’s basically the only way I possibly could’ve met these people because we’re all from different places around Devon and it would just be impossible for us to all commute to one place.*” James explains that they were able to meet their friends through their online youth service, build relationships and subsequently arrange to meet up in-person when convenient, roughly once a term.

Youth workers told us that when young people lack safe spaces and trusted adult role models, they often turn to online figures for guidance. Some of these online alternative figures promote harmful ideologies and behaviours, such as misogyny, which can shape how young people think and behave offline. It is important to consider that, if young people are not provided with physical spaces to connect with each other, access support and participate in extracurricular and enrichment activities, they will turn to online spaces. While digital spaces can offer community connection, they often cannot fully replicate the social,

¹⁷ [1768-NYA-Digital-Youth-Work-Standards---DIGITAL.pdf](#), NYA (2025).

¹⁸ [Youth work ‘black holes’ in half of all council areas in England, study finds | Young people | The Guardian](#) The Guardian (2026).

¹⁹ [1768-NYA-Digital-Youth-Work-Standards---DIGITAL.pdf](#), NYA (2025), p.11.

developmental, and wellbeing benefits that in-person interaction provides, particularly through physical youth work services.

In 2023, the NYA received funding from the National Lottery Community Fund to deliver the Routes to Community Success programme, which included working with young people to map the use and demand for digital youth work services.²⁰ The following video provides insights from the NYA's young digital directors who supported [this project](#). This research revealed a gap in the demand for and delivery of digital youth work, which the NYA is working to address. Furthermore, evidence from this programme revealed that social media group participation is the most used type of digital youth work, at 46%, which demonstrated the importance of harnessing the reach and availability of social media platforms to connect with and support young people. Many youth groups now use social media platforms, such as Discord, to create safe and inclusive digital youth clubs for young people to connect with peers and access support from their youth worker. For example, Space Youth Services offer an online youth centre on Discord, which offers a range of services including information and support from youth workers, a social space to chat with peers, as well as the opportunity to get involved with games, art and music. More information about Space's online youth service can be found here: [Online Youth Centre \(Discord\) — Space Youth Services | Online Youth Work | Digital Youth Work](#)

The importance of Digital Youth Work – Case study

In one of our focus groups, when asked what impact banning social media for under 16s would have had on them, James, a young person aged 17, responded that they would “**probably still be alone**” because their digital youth work service allowed them to meet their current group of friends.

Media and digital literacy

There needs to be a clear and shared understanding that young people inhabit a “digital neighbourhood” that extends well beyond mainstream social media platforms, encompassing gaming spaces, messaging apps, online forums and other emerging virtual environments. These spaces are integral to how young people socialise, learn and form identity, and so must be recognised as legitimate contexts for youth engagement rather than purely recreational. With this recognition should come a concurrent commitment to invest in training and presence of trusted adults within these digital environments. The Government's National Youth Strategy is committed to investing in youth workers, volunteers and trusted adults, including supporting organisations with training and recruitment of these practitioners. It is essential that this offer extends to the online world,

²⁰ [Routes to Community Success - National Youth Agency](#) NYA (2023).

with recognition, both financial and otherwise, that young people need support from youth workers and trusted adults in their online and offline communities.

It is essential that consistent and coherent education and support in media and digital literacy are embedded across community and youth spaces, including youth clubs. These settings play a crucial role in reaching young people who may fall between the cracks of the formal education system, providing trusted, supportive spaces to reinforce learning and healthy digital habits. Media and digital literacy are key to equip children and young people with the skills they need to navigate the ever-changing online world. This also applies to all professionals working with young people, including youth workers. Young people should be supported to identify mis- and dis-information, understand the risks associated with being online, including exposure to harmful content, scams and cyberbullying.

Concurrently, it is essential that the youth workforce is upskilled and empowered to deliver media and digital literacy training and education to the young people they serve. There must be practical, accessible and continuous training for youth workers, covering key areas of online safety and digital wellbeing. This training should be adapted and kept up to date with new technological advances and accompanied by clear, practical resources that support learning.

Media and digital literacy education programmes and training should be embedded within existing youth work, particularly digital youth work. The NYA's Digital Youth Work Standards includes guidance on topics to include in digital youth work programmes and methods used in practice. Key to digital youth work practice, as outlined on page 10 of the standards, is both digital literacy and safeguarding.²¹ It is essential that discussions around safeguarding young people online are interwoven into digital youth work, rather than sitting in silo. This will make education more relevant and easier to deliver in existing and trusted settings where practitioners can draw on real life examples. Embedding media and digital literacy and safeguarding in existing youth services would reduce barriers to delivery for youth workers as well as ensuring consistency in messaging, reinforcing safe and responsible online engagement across all areas of youth work practice.

What should be considered when taking further action to support positive online spaces and content for young people?

Promoting high quality content

The underlying intentions of social media, AI and other online platforms should be considered when planning further action to support positive online spaces. The financial incentives of social media platforms to prioritise profits can conflict with the need to safeguard young people's wellbeing. Personalised content streams, infinite scroll and autoplay, along with other addictive and persuasive features of social media and AI platforms encourage sustained engagement with sites and services, increasing young

²¹ [1768-NYA-Digital-Youth-Work-Standards---DIGITAL.pdf](#) NYA (2025), p.10.

users' screen time, which could impact their sleep, attention span and time spent on other activities. Where currently, individual users are expected to self-regulate, platforms must be held to account when it comes to children and young people's online usage. Wellbeing of users must be centred in discussions of how best to support positive online spaces and content for young people, particularly considering how to remove harmful or inappropriate content, no matter how much engagement or profit it may generate.

Digital media platforms should introduce more stringent restrictions to prevent young people accidentally being exposed to harmful or age-inappropriate content. Lucas, a young person aged 17, identified the ease with which young people using social media can bypass pop-ups and warning messages that may appear when attempting to view sensitive content. Currently, a young user may simply agree that they wish to continue to view the content by closing the pop-up, without further need to verify their age nor any additional safeguarding measures to prevent the content reaching young viewers. Social media sites should include more robust measures to ensure that inappropriate content is not accessible to children and young people, including warning messages, facial ID and other age verification software.

Social media and online platforms should offer prompts for young users asking them if they are sure they want to post certain content. These prompts can act as interventions, encouraging users to pause and reflect before they share content and may dissuade some users from posting comments, images or videos that could be inappropriate or explicit. When combined with further restrictions on risky features and functionalities of social media and AI chatbots as well as digital literacy and platform accountability, these interventions can contribute to safer online experiences for young people.

Youth workers often balance supporting young people to have autonomy with protecting them from harm, which is why they are particularly well placed to support young people's digital wellbeing. This balanced approach is especially important in digital contexts, where overly restrictive approaches may push young people to explore darker corners of the web, while a lack of clear guidance and education can leave young people vulnerable to risks.

“It would make sense to have youth workers and youth leaders to have that educational knowledge about digital literacy and to say, hey, if you do need help and if you need us to come to you and help you with this, then by all means that should be offered. I mean, as we do get more digitally literate... the youth services, the youth workers have to be able to expand on that further.”

– Oliver, young person aged 17

For more information, please contact policy@nya.org.uk