

# SWGfL Summary Response to the UK Government Consultation: *Growing Up in the Online World – A National Conversation*

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## Introduction

SWGfL has responded to the UK Government's consultation, *Growing Up in the Online World – A National Conversation* drawing on the perspectives of 803 professionals working closely with children and young people across education, safeguarding, and youth services.

The insights that have been analysed by Professor Andy Phippen (Professor of Digital Rights at Bournemouth University) highlight a complex landscape in which digital environments offer both significant opportunities and serious risks. While there is clear concern about online harms, there is also strong caution against simplistic solutions, particularly those focused solely on bans, restrictions or prohibitions.

## Executive Summary

The findings suggest that children's digital lives cannot be separated from their wider development and wellbeing. Online spaces provide valuable opportunities for connection, creativity, and learning, but current platform design can also amplify harm.

Although many professionals support restrictions on social media use for under-16s, this support is often cautious and still reflects ongoing concern. There is a clear preference for systemic approaches that focus on improving platform design, strengthening support systems, and addressing the wider environment in which young people engage in.

## Key Findings

### Online Engagement Brings Both Benefits and Risks

Professionals consistently emphasise that children's online and offline lives are deeply interconnected. Digital spaces play a central role in helping young people build relationships, access wellbeing support, develop creative skills, and gain independence. For some, particularly those who are vulnerable or isolated, online communities can be a vital source of belonging and support.

At the same time, there is concern that overly restrictive approaches could unintentionally limit these benefits. This is especially important for marginalised groups, who may depend more heavily on online spaces to access support and express themselves.

## **Support for Restrictions, but Concerns About Impact**

While a strong majority of professionals express support for some form of restriction on social media use among under-16s, this support is not absolute. It is often driven by a desire for change rather than a belief that restrictions alone will be effective.

Many respondents doubt that bans would address the underlying causes of harm. They also anticipate significant practical challenges, particularly in enforcing restrictions consistently. This suggests that support for such measures is largely precautionary and should not be interpreted as endorsement of bans as a complete solution.

## **Likelihood of Circumvention and Unintended Consequences**

A widely shared concern is that young people would find ways to bypass restrictions. Professionals expect that workarounds such as using false accounts, accessing adult profiles, or moving to less regulated platforms would become common.

This raises important safeguarding issues. If young people are pushed into more hidden or unregulated spaces, adults may have less visibility and fewer opportunities to intervene early. In this way, restrictions could unintentionally increase risk rather than reduce it.

## **Platform Design as a Key Driver of Harm**

A central theme across responses is that risks are not simply about access, but about how platforms are designed. Features such as algorithm-driven content recommendations, infinite scrolling, and engagement-based systems are seen as actively contributing to harmful experiences.

There is particular concern about the way these systems can amplify extreme or inappropriate content and encourage prolonged or compulsive use. Professionals also highlight risks associated with features that enable contact with strangers or facilitate risky interactions.

## **Strong Support for Safety-by-Design**

The strongest consensus among professionals is the need to focus on systemic, design-led solutions. There is clear support for stronger regulation of platforms, alongside requirements for age-appropriate design and safer default settings.

Rather than broad bans, respondents favour targeted measures that limit exposure to risk. This includes addressing high-risk features and reducing the influence of persuasive design techniques that keep young people engaged for extended periods. These approaches are widely seen as more effective, proportionate, and aligned with the sources of harm.

## **The Role of Parents, Schools and Support Systems**

Professionals emphasise that responsibility for online safety cannot sit with any single group. Parents play a key role but need better support, including clearer guidance and easier-to-use tools to help manage children's online experiences. Encouraging open and informed conversations within families is seen as essential.

Schools are also recognised as important contributors, particularly in setting expectations and managing device use during the school day. While there is support for restrictions such as limiting mobile phone use in schools, there is also concern about placing too much responsibility on education settings alone. Schools are viewed as one part of a wider system of support.

## **Online Safety as an Ecosystem Challenge**

A key conclusion from this work is that online harms arise from a complex and interconnected ecosystem. Factors such as platform design, business models, social pressures, parental capacity, and educational resources all interact to shape young people's experiences.

Because of this complexity, no single intervention (such as a ban) can fully address the issue. Effective solutions must take a holistic approach that considers all parts of the system and how they influence one another.

## Conclusion

This submission highlights the need for a balanced and evidence-led approach to online safety. While concerns about harm are both real and urgent, policies must reflect the realities of young people's digital lives.

Approaches focused solely on restricting access risk being ineffective or even counterproductive. Instead, there is strong support for systemic, safety-by-design interventions that make online environments safer by default, alongside strengthened support for families, schools, and safeguarding professionals.

A comprehensive, ecosystem-based strategy offers the best opportunity to reduce harm while preserving the many benefits that digital engagement provides to children and young people.