

THE MUSLIM COUNCIL OF BRITAIN

Response to the consultation by Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT)

Growing Up in the Online World

Submitted by the Muslim Council of Britain - May 2026

About this response

The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) is the UK's largest and most diverse Muslim umbrella body, bringing together mosques, schools, charitable and professional organisations from across the UK. We welcome the Government's decision to consult on how children grow up in the online world, noting in January that "Politicians are finally waking up to the toxic and harmful effects of social media on our children" and calling for urgent action on this [ticking time bomb](#) (MCB, 2026). We submit this response on behalf of communities for whom these questions are not abstract but immediate.

The stakes for British Muslims are exceptionally high because the community is young. The 2021 Census recorded nearly four million Muslims across the UK (3.8 million in England, 120,000 in Scotland, 67,000 in Wales and 11,000 in Northern Ireland). The median age of British Muslims is just 29, against 44 for the population as a whole, and more than one in five Muslims (22%) is of school age (5–15), compared with 13% nationally. This also means **one in ten of every school-age child in the UK is Muslim** (MCB, 2025).

Deprivation compounds the risk. Two in five British Muslims (40%) live in the most deprived fifth of neighbourhoods in the country — a figure that has not improved across the 2001, 2011 and 2021 censuses — and a quarter of Muslim households (25%) live in overcrowded conditions, against 6% nationally (MCB, 2025). Children in these circumstances often have less private space, less capacity for adult digital supervision, and weaker access to early mental-health support. The online harms set out below land hardest precisely where families are least resourced to absorb them.

British Muslim children also face a specific and escalating online threat. Of the 6,000 anti-Muslim incidents in 2024 — a 43% increase on the previous year and the highest annual total ever recorded — around three-quarters took place online (Tell MAMA, 2025). Islamophobic, racist and misogynistic abuse, alongside extremist recruitment material, forms part of the everyday digital environment for many young Muslims. For all these reasons, the MCB strongly supports robust, enforceable and proportionate measures to protect children online, and our detailed answers follow.

Consultation questions

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

Social media and online platforms offer children real benefits. They sustain social connection with peers and family, particularly where in-person contact is limited; they open access to educational resources, information and news; and they help develop digital literacy and critical-thinking skills. They create space for creativity, self-expression and participation in

community and faith-based networks, and they can raise awareness of social issues and enable civic engagement.

These benefits are widely realised: by ages 13–15, 67% of children in the UK actively use social media, and half of all 8–17-year-olds (50%) now use AI tools, often to support learning (Ofcom, 2025). For a faith community that is young, digitally native and overwhelmingly urban — 99% of British Muslims live in urban areas (MCB, 2025) — online spaces are an important means of sustaining religious learning, identity and belonging. We stress, however, that these benefits are conditional: they are only safely realised in an environment where the risks set out below are properly controlled.

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

The risks are significant, well evidenced and, on several measures, worsening:

- **Mental health.** One in five (20.3%) 8–16-year-olds had a probable mental disorder in 2023, up from one in nine in 2017 and one in six in 2020 (NHS England / ONS, 2023). Adolescents who use social media for more than three hours a day face roughly double the risk of depression and anxiety symptoms (US Surgeon General, 2023), and the WHO found problematic social-media use among adolescents rose from 7% to 11% between 2018 and 2022 (WHO Europe, 2024).
- **Exposure to harmful content.** At the inquest into the death of 14-year-old Molly Russell, the coroner found that online content contributed to her death in “a more than minimal way.” Of roughly 16,000 pieces of content she engaged with in her final six months, around 2,100 related to depression, self-harm and suicide — much of it pushed to her by recommendation algorithms she had not asked for (HM Coroner, 2022).
- **Pornography and sexual norms.** More than a quarter of children (27%) have seen pornography by age 11, and some by age six; 79% have encountered violent pornography — including 58% who have seen depictions of strangulation — before turning 18 (Children’s Commissioner, 2023–2025). This material shapes attitudes: 44% of children surveyed agreed that “girls may say no at first but then can be persuaded to have sex.”
- **Child sexual exploitation.** Police recorded 7,263 Sexual Communication with a Child offences in 2024/25 — almost double the figure when the offence was introduced in 2017/18 — with more than 41,000 such crimes since 2017. Where the platform was identified, 40% occurred on Snapchat; 80% of victims were girls; the youngest recorded victim was four (NSPCC, 2025).
- **Discrimination, hate and radicalisation.** Anti-Muslim incidents reached a record 6,000+ in 2024, around three-quarters of them online (Tell MAMA, 2025). Children encounter Islamophobia, racism and misogyny, and are exposed to extremist recruitment content, on the same platforms they use for school and friendship.
- **Persuasive design and sleep.** Engagement-maximising features drive excessive use that displaces sleep: 89% of teenagers keep a device in the bedroom at night and over 70% use a phone within 30 minutes of trying to sleep, with heavier use linked to poorer sleep (UK Millennium Cohort Study; sleep research, 2024).
- **Misinformation and AI.** AI-generated content and misinformation distort children’s understanding of health, identity and current events, a risk that grows as half of 8–17-year-olds now use AI tools (Ofcom, 2025).

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

Risks strongly outweigh the benefits. The benefits in Question 1 are real but largely substitutable through safer, better-designed services; the harms in Question 2 are severe, often irreversible, and are landing on a generation during a documented mental-health emergency — with a fifth of children now experiencing a probable mental disorder (NHS England / ONS, 2023).

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

Yes. Voluntary self-regulation has repeatedly failed to keep underage children off these platforms — around 40% of under-13s already have a social-media profile despite a notional minimum age of 13, and use begins early, with 12% of 6–7-year-olds already holding their own profile (Ofcom, 2025). A statutory minimum age, enforced against platforms rather than children, is necessary. Australia’s under-16 ban, in force since December 2025, demonstrates that such a requirement is workable at national scale (eSafety Commissioner, 2024–2025).

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”?

Somewhat agree. We support raising the minimum age well above 13, and 16 is a defensible threshold given the concentration of risk in early adolescence. We stop short of full agreement only because an absolute prohibition is harder to enforce than a higher age combined with a tiered, tightly safeguarded model for younger teens (see Questions 6 and 7). The principle of a substantially higher floor, however, we support firmly.

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?

Yes — 15. A floor of 15, paired with strict safeguards for 15–16-year-olds, balances strong protection against the practical risk that an absolute under-16 ban drives circumvention.

Reasoning behind our answers on minimum age. The case for raising the minimum age is compelling: the most acute documented harms — the doubling of depression and anxiety risk above three hours’ daily use (US Surgeon General, 2023), algorithmic exposure to self-harm content of the kind found in the Molly Russell inquest, and the rise of probable mental disorders to one in five children (NHS England / ONS, 2023) — cluster in early adolescence, the very stage a higher age would protect. A complete prohibition below 16, however, may be difficult to enforce and could prompt circumvention. A proportionate approach therefore sets a higher minimum age alongside a tiered system that permits limited, highly regulated access for younger users, with strong default safeguards, parental oversight and restricted functionality.

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

Raising the minimum age above 13 is likely to deliver clear benefits for children's safety and wellbeing: reduced exposure to harmful content, improved mental-health outcomes, and better sleep — a direct gain given that the majority of teenagers keep devices in the bedroom overnight (UK Millennium Cohort Study, sleep research, 2024). It supports healthier social development, reduces platform dependency, and gives parents and carers clearer, externally-backed boundaries rather than leaving each household to negotiate access alone. The potential challenges — enforcement difficulty, false age declarations, and the risk of excluding children from beneficial educational or social opportunities, with some impact on platform revenue and growth — are real but manageable. They are addressed by placing the duty on platforms, by privacy-preserving age assurance, and by exempting genuinely educational services (Question 25). On balance the child-welfare gains decisively outweigh the costs.

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

16. Aligning the digital age of consent with 16 reflects the developmental evidence and brings the UK into line with the upper end of the GDPR range and with Australia's new statutory threshold. A 16-year floor better protects children during the period of greatest documented vulnerability to algorithmic harm, data exploitation and child sexual exploitation.

9. What risks or burdens may be associated with raising the minimum age of digital consent?

Raising the age of digital consent may increase the administrative burden on parents and carers, who would need to provide consent for younger users, and could require more robust age-verification systems that raise privacy concerns through additional data collection. For industry there would be compliance costs and operational complexity. There is also a risk that children are excluded from beneficial services if consent mechanisms are not accessible — a particular concern for the 40% of British Muslim families who reside in the most deprived neighbourhoods and the quarter in overcrowded housing (MCB, 2025), who may have less capacity to navigate cumbersome consent processes. These burdens are real but containable, provided verification is privacy-preserving, low-friction and designed with disadvantaged households in mind.

10. What should be considered to make raising the digital age of consent effective and workable?

Effective implementation requires robust, privacy-preserving age-assurance mechanisms and clear, accessible systems for obtaining and managing parental consent. Responsibility should rest primarily with platforms, not users, with consistent regulatory standards across services and effective enforcement. The early evidence from the Online Safety Act's age-check duties is encouraging: an additional five million age checks are now carried out each day (Age Verification Providers Association, 2025), and — contrary to predictions of mass circumvention — research found no spike in children's VPN use after the checks were introduced, with only around one in ten VPN users being a child (Internet Matters; Ofcom,

2025). This shows that workable age assurance is achievable; the priority now is consistency, independent auditing, and enforcement against non-compliant services.

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

Strongly agree. Different services present very different levels of risk. Platforms that enable direct interaction with strangers, live content sharing, or algorithmically amplified feeds pose far greater risks than those offering passive or educational content. The child sexual exploitation data make the point: 40% of identified Sexual Communication with a Child offences occurred on a single interaction-heavy platform (NSPCC, 2025). A differentiated approach lets regulation be proportionate and targeted, concentrating the strongest controls where the evidence of harm is greatest.

12. Do you think these functionalities should be age restricted so that children below a certain age cannot engage with them?

Yes — all of them: (a) live streaming, (b) the ability to send nude images or videos, (c) disappearing content, (d) location sharing, and (e) connecting or talking to strangers. Each maps directly onto a documented harm vector — child sexual exploitation, image-based abuse, and exploitation — and each is repeatedly implicated in the offences recorded against children (NSPCC, 2025).

13. Please specify your preferred minimum age for each functionality.

Live streaming: 16. Ability to send nude images or videos: 18. Disappearing content: 16. Location sharing: 16. Connecting or talking to strangers: 16. Disappearing and ephemeral content warrants particular attention because it removes the evidentiary trail that protects children: the platform on which 40% of identified child sexual exploitation offences occurred is built around exactly this functionality (NSPCC, 2025). An 18 threshold for the sending of nude imagery reflects both child-protection law and the scale of image-based abuse.

14. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the statement: “Restricting children’s access to these features/functionalities would provide for a safer online experience for children”?

Strongly agree. These functionalities are the primary conduits for child sexual exploitation and image-based abuse. Restricting them removes the highest-risk interaction surfaces while leaving the core benefits of being online — connection, learning and creativity — largely intact. The concentration of recorded offences on platforms offering disappearing content and stranger contact is direct evidence that feature-level restriction would reduce harm (NSPCC, 2025).

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

Age-restricting high-risk features is likely to improve child safety substantially by reducing exposure to child sexual exploitation and harmful interactions, while supporting a safer-by-default environment and increasing parental confidence. Because such restrictions target

specific functions rather than whole platforms, they preserve children's access to beneficial content and impose narrower costs on business than outright exclusion. The main challenges — enforcement, circumvention and implementation cost — are the same ones the Online Safety Act's age-assurance regime is already showing can be managed at scale (Age Verification Providers Association, 2025).

16. Which of the following design features do you think are particularly 'persuasive' to children?

All of them: (a) infinite scrolling, (b) autoplay, (c) affirmation features such as likes and comments, (d) alerts and push notifications, and (e) content-recommendation algorithms. These features are engineered to maximise time-on-platform, and it was a recommendation algorithm that pushed unrequested self-harm content to Molly Russell (HM Coroner, 2022). Push notifications and autoplay are also strongly implicated in the displacement of sleep (UK Millennium Cohort Study, sleep research, 2024).

17. Which of these features do you think should be age restricted?

All of them: (a) infinite scrolling, (b) autoplay, (c) affirmation features, (d) alerts and push notifications, and (e) content-recommendation algorithms. The same persuasive mechanics that drive excessive use also amplify exposure to harmful material, so each should be restricted or set to a protective default for children.

18. Please specify your preferred minimum age for each feature.

Infinite scrolling: 16. Autoplay: 16. Affirmation features (likes/comments): 13–16 with safeguards. Alerts and push notifications: 16. Content-recommendation algorithms: 16. For children below these ages, the corresponding feature should be off by default — for example, chronological rather than algorithmic feeds, autoplay disabled, and notifications suppressed overnight — rather than available on an opt-out basis.

19. Would you support the following restrictions for children's access to online services?

Both — daily screen-time limits and overnight access restrictions for individual apps. Overnight restriction is especially important given that 89% of teenagers keep a device in the bedroom and more than 70% use a phone within half an hour of sleep, with heavier use linked to poorer sleep and, in turn, to worse mental health (UK Millennium Cohort Study; sleep research, 2024).

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?

Such measures are likely to improve children's wellbeing through better sleep and reduced excessive use, and to support parents in setting boundaries and building healthier digital habits at a population level rather than household by household. Implementation will require careful design — around enforcement, default settings and respect for older teens' autonomy — but these are matters of execution rather than objections of principle. Given the scale of the sleep and mental-health evidence, the wellbeing gains are considerable.

21. What factors are important when determining which apps, sites or services to apply minimum age of access restrictions to?

The key factors are the level of user-to-user interaction; exposure to strangers; the type of content, particularly video and image-based content; the presence of persuasive design features; the use of recommendation algorithms; and the overall potential for harm. The size and reach of a service also matter, but scale should not be a shield: harm to a child is no less serious on a smaller platform, and risky functionality should be the primary trigger rather than user numbers alone.

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

Yes: social-media platforms; messaging services that allow interaction with strangers; video-sharing platforms; live-streaming services; and AI chatbot services. These are the categories most consistently associated in the evidence with child sexual exploitation, exposure to harmful content, and exploitation (NSPCC, 2025; Children's Commissioner, 2023–2025).

23. What factors are important when determining which apps, sites or services to apply age-restrictions on specific features and functionalities?

Decisions should be driven by the level of risk attached to specific features: the privacy implications of the feature; whether it enables real-time interaction; its potential for exploitation; and its psychological impact, including the engagement-maximising design of recommendation and reward mechanics. A feature that creates an unmonitored, ephemeral or stranger-facing channel should attract the strongest controls regardless of the platform it sits within.

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

Yes: social-media platforms, live-streaming services, messaging applications and AI chatbot platforms should all be captured by feature-level age restrictions, in addition to any platform-level minimum age that applies.

25. Are there additional types of service which you think would be appropriate to exempt from age restrictions?

Exemptions may be appropriate for services whose primary purpose is the delivery of educational content, for platforms designed specifically for children with robust safeguards, and for services with genuinely strong parental controls. Any exemption should be conditional and narrowly drawn: it must apply only where the safeguarding rationale is clear, must not become a loophole for general-purpose platforms that bolt on a nominal "education" or "teen" mode, and should be subject to independent verification and periodic review.

26. What are the benefits to children of using AI chatbots?

AI chatbots can support learning, provide an accessible search and information function, assist with creativity, and help develop communication and problem-solving skills. Their use

is already widespread — half of 8–17-year-olds report using AI tools (Ofcom, 2025) — which makes proportionate safeguards, rather than prohibition of beneficial uses, the right policy goal.

27. Which AI chatbot features are most risky for children?

The risks are immense - and this is a gross understatement. The most risky features are: the realism of interactions and generated content; the personalisation of interactions; the simulation of friendship and of romantic relationships; the mimicking of empathy and the use of flattering language; features designed to prolong engagement (such as asking questions back); the ability to recall interactions across sessions; the generation of video, audio, image and text content; allowing children to hold accounts; hallucination or false and misleading responses; and the ability to generate mature content such as sexual or romantic role-play.

These risks are not hypothetical. In the case of 14-year-old Sewell Setzer III, a chatbot engaged in sexualised role-play, presented itself as a romantic partner, falsely claimed to be a licensed therapist, and failed to direct him to help when he disclosed suicidal thoughts; multiple families have since brought similar claims, which the developer agreed to settle in January 2026 (CNN; NPR, 2025–2026).

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

At a bare minimum, restrictions should apply to relationship-simulation features (romantic and friendship personas), highly personalised interactions, memory retention across sessions, and the generation of mature or sensitive content. These are the functionalities most directly implicated in emotional manipulation, dependency and exposure to harmful material.

29. Should AI chatbots have minimum age restrictions?

Yes — both minimum age requirements and restricting access to certain features and functionalities. AI chatbots present distinctive risks because their realism and personalisation give them an unusual capacity to influence children's behaviour and beliefs, leaving young users vulnerable to emotional manipulation, misinformation and inappropriate content. The harms documented in the Character.AI cases — sexualised role-play, simulated romantic attachment, and the absence of crisis safeguards, culminating in a teenager's death — show why neither an age limit nor feature restrictions alone is sufficient; both are required (CNN; NPR, 2025–2026). Notably, the developer itself moved to bar under-18s from open-ended chats in October 2025, an implicit acknowledgement that the prior model was unsafe for children.

30. What do you think the impact would be of introducing age restrictions on AI chatbots or certain features and functions?

Such restrictions would contribute to reduction of risks related to misinformation, emotional dependency and exposure to harmful content, and would support safer engagement with AI for children. There are trade-offs — reduced access to some beneficial tools and additional compliance costs for providers — but the rapid, often unsupervised adoption of these tools by children, combined with documented and in some cases fatal harms, makes early and clear regulation both proportionate and urgent. Acting now, while children's AI use is still forming, is far preferable to retrofitting protections after harm has become entrenched.

Conclusion

The Muslim Council of Britain urges the Government to legislate decisively. British Muslim children — who make up one in ten of all school-age children in the country, who are disproportionately concentrated in the most deprived neighbourhoods, and who face record levels of online abuse — would benefit greatly from a safer internet, and to lose more than most from continued delay. We support a substantially higher minimum age, strong feature-level restrictions, robust and privacy-preserving age assurance, and clear regulation of AI chatbots, with the duty placed firmly on platforms, supported by robust enforcement of the technology platform providers who are already benefiting from immense profits. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss this submission further.

References

- Muslim Council of Britain (2026). Raising the Social Media Access Age to 16 Is Long Overdue for Young Britons. [\[link\]](#)
- Ofcom (2025). Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report 2025. [\[link\]](#)
- NHS England / ONS / NatCen (2023). Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2023. [\[link\]](#)
- World Health Organization, Regional Office for Europe (2024). Teens, screens and mental health. [\[link\]](#)
- Children's Commissioner for England (2023–2025). 'A lot of it is actually just abuse': Young people and pornography; and related research. [\[link\]](#)
- NSPCC (2025). Record levels of online grooming: Sexual Communication with a Child offences data. [\[link\]](#)
- NSPCC (2024). Online grooming crimes increase by 89% in six years. [\[link\]](#)
- HM Senior Coroner (2022). Inquest into the death of Molly Russell; Prevention of Future Deaths report. [\[link\]](#)
- Tell MAMA (2025). The New Norm of Anti-Muslim Hate: Tell MAMA Annual Report 2025. [\[link\]](#)
- Muslim Council of Britain (2025). British Muslims in Numbers: Census Report (M. Asaria, LSE). [\[link\]](#)
- Internet Matters (2025). New data shows no rise in children's VPN use after the introduction of online age checks. [\[link\]](#)
- eSafety Commissioner / Australian Government (2024–2025). Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Act 2024. [\[link\]](#)
- CNN Business (2026). Character.AI and Google agree to settle lawsuits over teen mental-health harms and suicides. [\[link\]](#)
- NPR (2025). Their teen sons died by suicide. Now they want safeguards on AI. [\[link\]](#)
- US Surgeon General (2023). Social Media and Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory. [\[link\]](#)
- UK Millennium Cohort Study (2019). Social media use and adolescent sleep patterns. [\[link\]](#)

Note: All figures are drawn from the publicly available sources listed above and reflect the most recent data available at the time of writing (May 2026).