



UNDER 16

SOCIAL MEDIA BAN

Constituency Consultation

By Michael Shanks MP For Rutherglen

Introduction

The UK Government has been consulting on a potential ban of social media for under 16-year-olds, as part of a wider look at preparing children for the future in an age of rapid technological change.

I launched my own survey to hear directly from local people about their views on how social media platforms affect children's wellbeing and their relationship with their phones and those around them. The findings of this report will be sent to the Secretary of State for Science and Technology to feed into the wider Government consultation which finishes on 26 May 2026. My survey asks the following questions: Are you for or against a ban for U16's on social media? What benefits or challenges do you see? What alternatives could work instead? And what support would young people benefit from?

I'm grateful to everyone who responded to my survey as well as all those who have filled in the Government's survey.

Summary

43 people took part in the survey. The majority of respondents to the survey were in favour of a social media ban at 72%, with 19% against and 9% unsure. Those who were parents or carers of young people under 21 (24 respondents) were almost unanimously in favour of a ban, and those who were themselves under 21 were less likely to support a ban – out of three respondents under 21, two were opposed to a ban and one was unsure.

Most respondents, whether they supported a ban or not, identified both benefits and challenges to a ban. The benefits of a ban were seen to be:

- Reducing exposure to harmful content.
- Safeguarding from online bullying or exploitation.
- Improved mental health, better social and communication skills and improved focus.
- Protection for young people from their own risky behaviour online.

The challenges in a ban were seen to be:

- Lack of enforceability.
- Young people finding ways round the ban, either through technology or falsifying ID
- Infringement of rights by requiring age ID for all people accessing social media.
- Limiting connection among friends, particularly those from marginalised groups, potentially increasing social isolation for some.

Whether or not respondents were in favour of a ban, many identified alternatives to a ban for under 16s, including:

- Introducing a ban at a younger age.
- Limiting access, e.g. curfews or restrictions in schools.
- More comprehensive education throughout school, in health and wellbeing curriculum.
- Stronger regulation and enforcement on social media companies.
- More in-person community spaces for young people.

Most respondents also identified a range of support for young people, whether or not a ban is introduced, including:

- Digital literacy training in school on safety, misinformation, AI tools, and online identity.
- Better support and guidance for parents managing children's online activity.
- Safer platform design, better regulation, and the creation of moderated online spaces.
- Investment in youth spaces for young people to develop away from social media.

Full response

In March 2026, the Government launched a national consultation on children's social media and digital well-being, including potential age restrictions on young people under 16 accessing social media. I carried out a survey of constituents in Rutherglen to gather views locally to share with the consultation, as well as encouraging people to contribute directly to the Government's consultation.

My survey asked five questions:

- What is your view on a ban on social media for under 16s?
- What do you think are the potential benefits of a ban on under 16s using social media?
- What do you think are the potential problems or challenges with a ban?
- What alternatives to a full ban do you think could be considered (if any)?
- What other support do you think children and young people need to develop the skills and understanding to stay safe online?

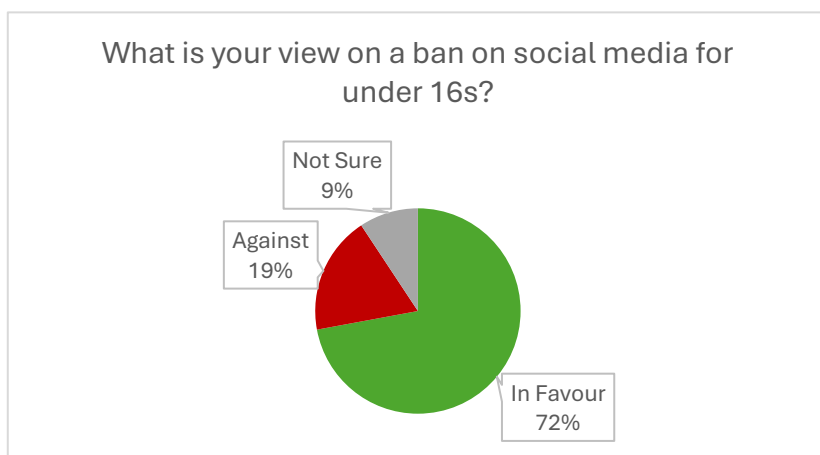
Participants were anonymous, but were asked to give some information to inform the analysis:

- Age (under 16, 16-20, over 21) – those under 16 required parental permission to complete the survey
- Postcode (to verify they were constituents)
- Whether or not they were a parent or carer of a young person under 21

The survey was shared through traditional and social media and to schools and community groups. 43 people responded to the survey, with five responses from people outside the constituency (these have not been included in the summary of responses). This response therefore captures a snapshot of views within my constituency.

Breakdown of respondents

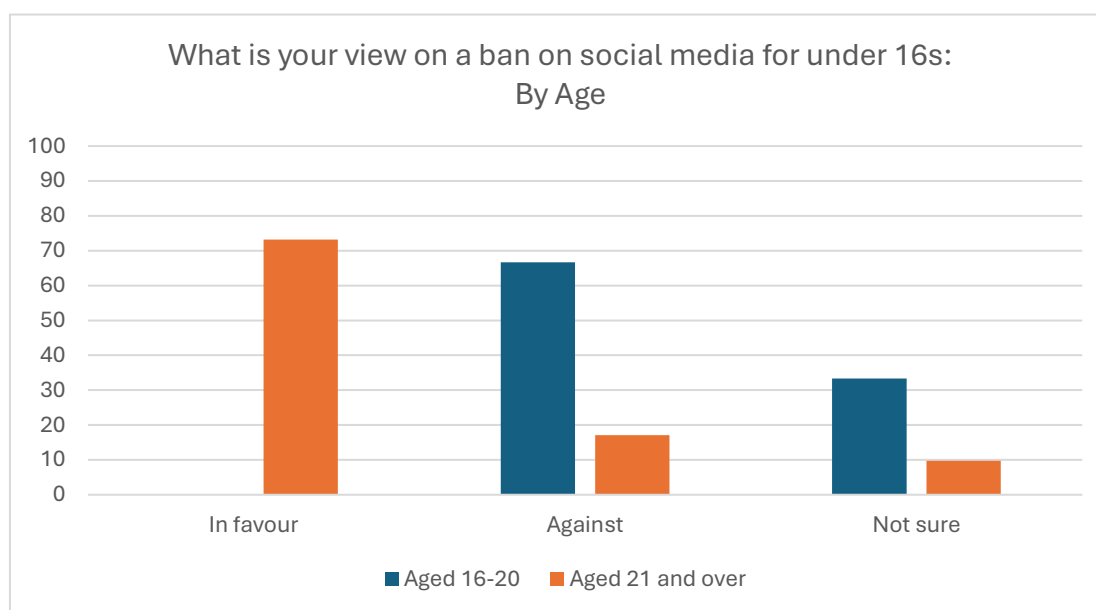
43 people responded to the survey. 72% were in favour of a social media ban for U16s (31), 19% against (8), and 9% unsure (4).



Data by Age

All respondents were over sixteen – 40 were aged 21 and over, whilst 3 were aged 16-20.

- Of those under 21, 2 were against the U16 social media ban, and 1 was unsure.
- Of those aged 21 and over, 73% (30 respondents) were in favour of the ban, 17% against (7), and 10% unsure (4).

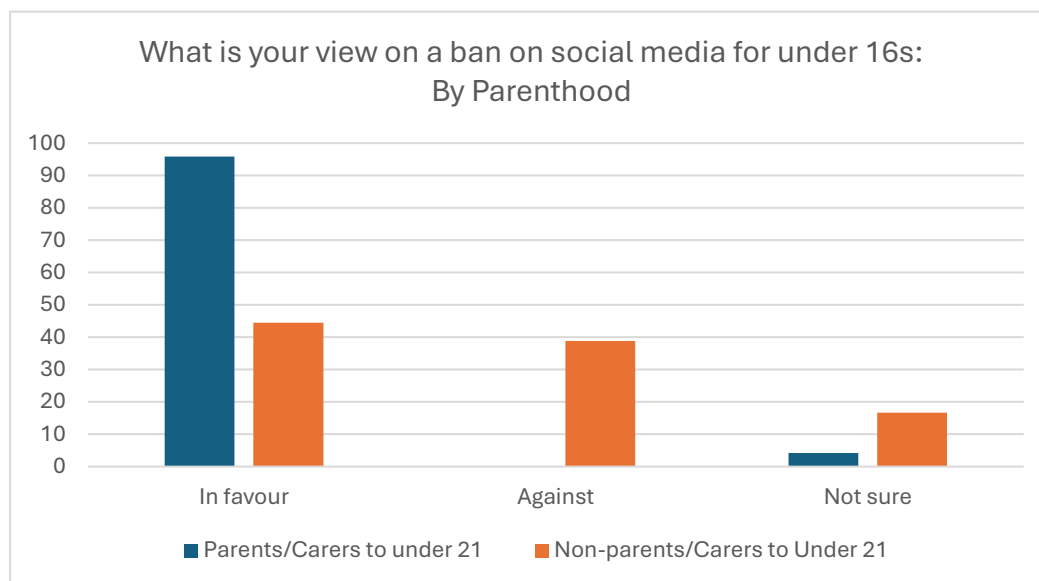


**Note: The sample size of those aged 16-20 is too small to really draw any concrete conclusions but perhaps points to a theory that should be explored further with a wider data set – those closer to the age the ban would affect, may be more likely to oppose it.*

Data by Parenthood

There was a fairly even split between those who were parent or carer to a child under 21 (24) compared to those that weren't (18). One respondent chose not to say.

- Amongst the parents/carers, 23 out of 24 were in favour of the ban with one unsure. No parent/carers who responded was against the ban.
- Of those who are not parents/carers there was a much more even split, with 44% in favour of the ban (8), 39% against (7), and 17% unsure (3).
- The respondent who chose not to say was in favour of the ban.



Emerging Themes

The following themes are drawn from across all the responses. It is worth noting that many respondents, whether supporting or opposing a ban or not sure, identified both potential benefits and challenges with a ban. This suggests there is a shared understanding of the complexity of the issue, even among those who ultimately support or oppose a ban.

Benefits of a ban for U16s on social media

The most frequently mentioned benefit was improved safety. Respondents felt that a ban could reduce young people's exposure to harmful material and inappropriate content and protect them from those seeking to harm or exploit young people. Examples of this content provided were violence and explicit sexual content. Several respondents stated that young people may not yet have the skills to keep themselves safe online, whilst parents may lack the tools and resources to adequately supervise their children.

Many respondents felt a ban could lead to better mental health, less isolation, more time to socialise with peers and enhanced communication skills. Several respondents identified that social media is designed to be addictive and so a ban could improve concentration and focus in young people. Others mentioned the unrealistic body image standards set on social media with constant comparison promoting an unhealthy relationship with diet and appearance.

Another commonly raised benefit was the reduction in online bullying. Many respondents felt a ban could reduce cyberbullying by limiting access to platforms where harmful behaviour can spread quickly and follow children outside school.

Several respondents raised concerns around radicalisation or harmful online cultures including misogyny and the 'manosphere', with some respondents noting that algorithms can promote this content to young boys in particular to drive engagement.

One respondent suggested that the ban was valuable in sending a message, even if it is difficult to enforce. They made the comparison with age certification for film which gives a clear message to young people and their parents and carers about what is appropriate at what age. One respondent said they saw it not as a ban on children accessing social media but as a ban on social media companies accessing children.

A couple of respondents suggested that a ban could provide privacy at a key stage of development. There is a risk that young people leave a negative digital footprint before they reach employment or higher education. A ban would allow time for schools and parents to educate young people about responsible online behaviour before they enter the world of social media.

Potential problems or challenges with a ban

One of the main challenges identified was how the ban would be enforced. Many respondents highlighted how difficult this would be, suggesting that young people might either lie about their age or figure out another way of getting round the ban, such as using VPNs. There were also doubts raised by a few respondents about whether social media companies themselves are capable of ensuring people comply with age limits correctly. A couple of responses noted the challenges that the Australian Government has faced rolling out similar measures.

There are also common fears that children will be pushed to other harmful sites as a result, and an extra burden will be placed on parents to monitor the sorts of content their children are accessing.

Another key problem raised centred around data confidentiality issues. Several respondents raised concerns with the age verification process and digital IDs. A few respondents felt it was infringing on the rights of adults who would be required to provide personal data to social media corporations which was then available either to marketing by the corporations or vulnerable to hacking.

A few respondents suggested that a ban would limit connection amongst friends at a key social stage and may actually increase loneliness/isolation. This was seen as particularly relevant for young people from marginalised communities such as the LGBT+ community, who might already be cut off from less supportive families and communities. This contrasts with the suggestion by other respondents that a ban would improve young people's communication skills.

Some respondents raised a concern about the impact on young people when they started using social media at 16 having not used it before then. A few respondents felt it would be difficult for young people who currently have access to social media to lose it, although one pointed out this would be a short-term problem.

Five respondents identified any potential challenges and one respondent stated that any potential challenges could be overcome.

Differences between groups

While there are common themes across the responses, there are also some differences between the different groups who responded, though it should be remembered that the sample size is small and self-selected.

In favour/against a ban

Those in favour of a ban tended to emphasise the risk of harm, particularly around mental health, exposure to inappropriate content, bullying and exploitation. The benefits of a ban were viewed as significant and immediate, with social media companies seen as not able to act in the best interests of children. Those opposing the ban were more likely to raise concerns around effectiveness and unintended consequences. They also emphasised the importance of digital literacy and the need for young people to learn the skills needed to navigate the digital world.

Under 21 year olds

Age had the strongest difference, although the group of under 21s was the smallest group responding. Those under 21 who responded were least likely to support a ban, with two out of the three respondents in this age group opposing the ban and one unsure. They highlighted the role social media plays in young people's lives, and suggested a ban would be unrealistic, unenforceable, or fail to prepare young people for the realities of social media.

Parents

Those who were parents or carers were almost unanimously in favour of a ban. Their responses often reflected the challenges for parents of managing children's social media use and the exposure of children to harmful content and addictive behaviour.

Alternatives to a full ban

Many of those in favour of a ban argued it is the only viable solution. However, others in favour of a ban, as well as those opposed or unsure, suggested a range of alternative measures.

One respondent argued that the use of technology is inevitable and instead of a ban, the focus should be on equipping young people with critical thinking skills and safe practices to prepare them for the digital world. This should be included in the school curriculum in the same way as topics such as sexual health and drug and alcohol awareness are.

Other alternate methods of stricter regulation were proposed:

- Introducing time restrictions, e.g. curfew during school hours and late at night.
- Instant ban on creators who spread hate and misinformation.
- Significant penalties for social media companies like TikTok and Snapchat for non-compliance.
- Making social media companies take some responsibility for educating children and carers.
- Holding social media companies accountable for harmful content on their sites.
- More “child friendly” platforms such as YouTube Kids” as safe spaces where content is strictly monitored.
- Lowering the age threshold, for example making it an U14 ban rather than a U16 one.
- Full ban on phones in school.
- Regulating the design of algorithms to reduce the addictive nature of social media.
- Providing phones that can’t access adult content or are parent controlled.
- More funding for in-person community spaces for young people to come together.

What other support do you think children and young people need to develop the skills and understanding to stay safe online?

A consistent theme across responses was the need for stronger education and awareness, both for young people and for parents/carers. Many respondents felt that digital literacy should be embedded more fully in the school curriculum, covering areas such as online safety, recognising misinformation, understanding algorithms, and managing online identity. There were also calls for education on specific risks including cyberbullying, grooming, sharing personal information, and the impact of unrealistic content and body image standards.

Several responses highlighted the importance of developing critical thinking skills, helping young people to question what they see online, recognise harmful or misleading content, and understand the motivations of platforms and influencers. Some suggested this should include learning about AI-generated content and how social media can shape beliefs and behaviours.

Support for parents and carers was another prominent theme. Respondents noted that many adults may lack awareness of the content their children are exposed to or the tools available to manage this. Suggested measures included providing guidance on parental controls, encouraging regular conversations within families, and offering training or resources to help parents feel more confident supporting their children online.

A number of respondents also emphasised the value of practical, real-world learning. This included classroom sessions, group discussions, and opportunities to hear from individuals

with lived experience of online harm, such as cyberbullying, grooming, or the mental health impacts of social media. These approaches were seen as a way to make risks more tangible and relatable for young people.

Finally, some respondents pointed to the need for wider structural support, including safer platform design, better regulation, and the creation of safe, moderated online spaces for younger users. Others suggested investment in offline alternatives such as community activities and youth spaces, ensuring young people still have opportunities to connect, socialise, and develop confidence outside of social media.

Overall, while views differed on the role of a ban itself, there was broad agreement that any approach must be accompanied by a comprehensive package of education, parental support, and systemic change to help young people develop the skills and resilience needed to navigate the online world safely.

Any other comments

- One respondent described this as our ‘big tobacco’ moment, while another made a comparison with the introduction of seatbelt legislation. We need to act to reduce harm to the public.
- There were a couple of calls for legislation to go further and ban all smartphones in schools or ban social media outright for adults too. Another respondent lamented the time it has taken to get to this consultation, arguing that children are already addicted, so in one sense it is too late.
- *“Although I am very for a ban it should not be implemented without structures put in place to support young people.”*