

# Adolescent perspectives on potential social media restrictions for under 16s

## Insights to Inform Policy

Date: 17 April 2026

Teenagers support age-based social media restrictions because they recognise the risks, but warn that blunt policies could restrict aspects of use that benefit them.

## Executive Summary

This briefing summarises key findings from six workshops about social media restrictions with 12–15-year-olds in Bradford, held in February 2026. The key messages from the discussions were:

### 1. Teenagers recognised the risks and harms associated with social media

There were widespread concerns about the addictive design; exposure to harmful content; sleep; concentration; mental health; academic performance; and displacement of other activities.

### 2. Social media also plays a central role in teenagers' social lives

Certain social media activities were highly valued, including communication with family and friends; accessing educational content; connecting with others with shared interests; and staying up to date with the news.

### 3. Teenagers perceived a lack of offline alternatives to social media

Social media was seen as filling a gap left by limited offline opportunities for socialising. Participants perceived a decline in accessible youth spaces and public spaces.

### 4. Teenagers supported targeted restrictions in their age group

Teenagers largely supported focused or graded measures such as time limits, overnight curfews, content restrictions, graduated age restrictions (rather than a single cutoff at age 16), and stronger safeguarding and security measures.

### 5. Teenagers are concerned about staggered access under age-based restrictions

Teenagers felt that age-based restrictions could result in staggered access within the same year group, potentially contributing to social exclusion and a fear of missing out.

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#### Reference for citation::

Lightfoot, K. & Lewer, D. (2026). "Adolescent perspectives on potential social media restrictions for under 16s"; Born in Bradford, [<https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.32190561>]

#### Acknowledgment:

This work was supported by the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR205448) and the Wellcome Trust (337689/Z/25/Z). The views expressed are those of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the NIHR or the Department of Health and Social Care. The funders had no role in study design, data collection and analysis, decision to publish, or preparation of the manuscript.  
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## 6. Teenagers voiced concerns about a social media ban

Teenagers were concerned about losing access to messaging services and educational resources. Most teenagers favoured focused and graded measures rather than a blanket ban.

## 7. Teenagers were unsure what would count as 'social media' under restrictive policies

Teenagers were unsure what apps and features might be affected by proposed policies. They also did not always distinguish between specific features (e.g. short-form video, long-form video, messaging) when discussing specific social media apps.

## 8. Teenagers associated addictive risks with platforms rather than shared features

Teenagers often judge social media by a platform's reputation, seeing YouTube as educational and TikTok as addictive, rather than by specific features. Those who did distinguish features identified short-form, algorithm-driven video as the most addictive.

## 9. Teenagers believed that age verification will be easily circumvented

There was unanimous scepticism about the likely effectiveness of age verification measures. Many teenagers doubted that technology companies would implement robust systems and cited multiple ways such restrictions could be bypassed.

# Background and Context

[Born in Bradford](#) is a world-leading research programme, comprising three birth cohorts, which aims to find out what keeps families healthy and happy. Participants from our original cohort are now teenagers, and social media is a major focus of our research.

In September 2026 we will launch [the IRL Trial](#), a major randomised trial of social media restrictions among 12-15 year-olds and the impact on mental health. The trial is due to deliver results in spring/summer 2027.

This policy note is based on six focus groups with 28 teenagers (14 male, 14 female; 13 White, 9 Asian, 3 Black, and 3 of Mixed ethnicities) from across the Bradford district, held in February 2026. Discussions explored attitudes about restrictive social media policies for under-16s, views on alternatives such as time limits and curfews, and the practicalities of enforcement.



# Findings in detail

## 1. Teenagers recognised the risks and harms associated with social media

Participants consistently **acknowledged the negative aspects** of social media:

- Its addictive design.

“

*It gives us such a dopamine hit. The moment we're off it it's almost like a withdrawal.*

“

*I think TikTok is one of the biggest problems [...] I deleted it, but when I had it, it kept asking me, 'what do you think of the video above?'. The For You page would just constantly ask questions and try and suit to your wants and passions so that's what made it addictive so that's why I deleted it.*

“

*It just takes up a lot of time, like I'll get home after school and instantly, I'll want to go on my phone ..., and then the next thing I know I've been doomscrolling for two hours when I could have been doing something else. It just takes a lot of time out of my day.*

- The potential for exposure to harmful content (including cyberbullying, predatory behaviour, violent or sexual content, and misinformation).

“

*Social media has negative parts that maybe teenagers shouldn't be seeing and the addictive nature makes it more likely that teenagers are going to see things that maybe they shouldn't, which can obviously negatively impact their mental health.*

- Its impact on sleep, concentration, mental health, academic performance, as well as displacement of other activities, including in-person social connection.

“

*We used to go on walks in the summer and adventuring around the woodland near me, but I just feel like ever since we got more into social media, we haven't done it as much.*

“

*People are just on their phones a lot more which I think is not great 'cause you miss out on quite a lot of like social interaction. And like if you want to meet new people in real life it's quite hard because people do seem to just be on social media in public quite a lot so it's hard to kind of make new connections and make new friends.*

“

*It's stopped how much I've been reading. I used to read quite a lot before I had my phone and then suddenly, I just stopped.*

### Policy implication:

Young people's recognition of harm supports the case for targeted social media restrictions.

# Findings in detail

## 2. Social media also plays a central role in teenagers' social lives

In addition to recognising the harms of social media for themselves and their peers, young people were clear about the value they derive from certain social media activities:

- Staying in contact with friends and family.



*You can communicate with people... For example, I have this friend that I see like once a year but with Snapchat I can just add her easily and then we can stay in contact throughout the year.*



*With people that I don't see very often, it's much easier with social media to kind of keep in touch with people and see what they do.*



*You can just talk to people whenever.*

- Accessing educational content.



*You get to learn new things, like how to bake or something.*



*It can teach good things, like self-defence.*



*It can show you things that you wouldn't know otherwise, about like different places or different things, like food.*

- Connecting with others with shared interests.



*The connectivity that it brings, especially with things like Discord, they provide a great platform for you to interact with other people, discover communities...and it can provide you with activities that wouldn't be otherwise accessible to you.*



*You can communicate with people you wouldn't normally speak to. Like if you see videos on football, you can talk to people from around the world. And like, that's what I do.*

- Following news and current events.



*So the main reasons how people know what's going on in the world is because someone's posted it, reposted it, talked about it, so it spreads quite quickly on different platforms. So I think it's quite good for getting news.*

### Policy implications:

1. Teenagers identify beneficial activities that support social connectedness. However, these activities do not account for the majority of time spent on social media apps (which is likely dominated by short form videos).
2. Any restrictive policy may benefit from recognising the tension between the benefits and harms of social media for teenagers. Teenagers may support measures that limit features that are focused on maximising engagement, whilst allowing access to educational or creative content.

# Findings in detail

## 3. Teenagers perceived a lack of offline alternatives to social media

Some teenagers described social media as filling a gap left by limited offline opportunities for socialising. Participants highlighted a perceived decline in accessible youth spaces and public spaces, as well as safety, as key concerns:



*I think that there's no spaces for children and teens anymore. Nowhere is necessarily safe anymore, and like places like shopping centres are just closing down and there's no culture or community of people getting together and meeting outside, it's more of a thing inside. But you can't take away social media, what we've been using so long, and be expected to just adapt to it when we have no alternatives.*

Such concerns were also highlighted in relation to marginalised groups, where online spaces were seen as providing access to communities that may not be available offline:



*I think that for a lot of people online, especially marginalised communities like the LGBTQ+ community, they don't have safe spaces to speak with people like them [...] I think for young people, it's so important to have people that you can talk to that are similar to you, even if it's not in real life.*

### Policy implication:

Teenagers want to know what alternative provision can support offline activities and socialising.



# Findings in detail

## 4. Teenagers supported targeted restrictions in their age group

Teenagers recognised different levels of risk related to different social media features or activities and noted the difficulty of managing their own usage (“I think it [social media] would be difficult for young people to manage themselves. I know I would find it difficult to manage myself even though I’ve tried to restrict it”). They were generally open to targeted measures to support restricted use.

Restrictions discussed included:

- **Time limits:** Most participants considered one to two hours of social media per day to be acceptable. Three hours was viewed as too much. Several already had self-imposed or parent-imposed time limits and found them helpful.



*Time limits are very good for kids our age. I'd say one to two hours of screen [time] and that should be alright.*

- **Overnight curfews:** There was support for curfews, with advance warning before a curfew activated (e.g. 30 minutes' notice). Some wanted flexibility on weekends and holidays. Participants linked curfews directly to improved sleep and academic performance.



*I know people who stay up until like 3 AM just on TikTok [...] I think it definitely really impacts people's sleep.*



*I think definitely having time limits and curfews to stop people ruining their sleep schedules because it impacts everyone else around them as well as themselves.*

- **Content restrictions:** Participants supported stronger action against harmful content, particularly short-form video (e.g., TikTok), which they identified as especially addictive.



*Even on YouTube shorts [...] inappropriate ads come up.*

- **Graduated age restrictions by platform:** Participants felt that 13 should be the minimum age for social media access of any kind, with higher thresholds (14+) for more addictive or higher-risk platforms such as TikTok.



*There's really nice sides of TikTok but then there can be like...bad sides. So, I think you have to make sure you're mature enough to handle it.*

- **Stronger safeguarding and security measures:** Participants wanted stronger protections on platforms where they may be exposed to unmoderated contact with strangers and unfiltered content.



*On Discord you can just talk to random people like there's no restrictions or anything. People can just send pictures or calls...it's way more unfiltered and unsecure.*



*I think apps where it's more about being social, I think there should be less restrictions on time, but more restrictions on safeguarding and security checks.*

# Findings in detail

## 5. Teenagers are concerned about staggered access under age-based restrictions

Despite being in favour of restrictions, participants were concerned that age-based restrictions could result in staggered access within the same year group, with some young people gaining access months earlier than others. This was seen as potentially leading to social exclusion (“everyone’s a bit too staggered”) and a fear of missing out (“All throughout the year, people would be like, ‘have you got this app yet?’”). One young person shared:



*I'd be very close to being the youngest in my year, and I feel like when everyone would have it [social media] back, they'd all be like 'oh yeah', and then when I finally got it back, I'd probably feel like I'd fit in again.*

### Policy implication:

Age-based restrictions may contribute to feelings of social exclusion amongst teenagers.



# Findings in detail

## 6. Teenagers voiced concerns about a social media ban

Young people were concerned that restricting social media may affect:

- **Schoolwork and learning:** Teenagers assumed a ban could remove access to YouTube for education, GCSE resources, or subject-specific videos.

*“In my school, we use iPads for work, so I don't know how it would affect that...Sometimes you're on YouTube to watch things for lessons.”*

*“I'm home educated, and I do online school. YouTube is one of the main ways I find resources for my education towards GCSEs.”*

*“I think [banning] YouTube is a bit excessive. For example, I do drama GCSE and today I was looking up a monologue from a play, but it swore – because I have to swear in my monologue – but obviously you're not gonna get that on YouTube Kids, but how would I access that otherwise? Like, it's just for research purposes.”*

- **Communication channels:** Young people were concerned that restrictions might block messaging functions, which they rely on for social connection and emergencies.

*“I think some people might lose contact with people. I don't like the idea of that.”*

*“It depends what social media is banned because I think I can live without Instagram or whatever, but like if they banned WhatsApp or something like that – or Snapchat – [...] that's usually how I communicate so I wouldn't like that.”*

- **Access to news or information:** Some teenagers were concerned that restrictions could limit their ability to stay informed about world events.

*“They wouldn't really have a clue, and I think that's almost kind of dangerous in a way to say they don't know what's going on in the world and they're the next generation that will be voting and making a change.”*

- **Creative or hobby-based content:** Some feared losing access to creative inspiration.

*“Last night I was on Pinterest, and I was looking up like things to copy to draw like to practise drawing and I thought, oh, like, people won't be as creative [if Pinterest is banned].”*

# Findings in detail

## 7. Teenagers were unsure what would count as 'social media' under restrictive policies

Teenagers often evaluated social media at the platform level (e.g. TikTok, YouTube, Snapchat), rather than distinguishing between features within those platforms (e.g. short-form feeds, private messaging, educational long-form content).

This contributed to uncertainty about what would count as social media (“Does Pinterest count as a social media?”; “Are you counting WhatsApp as social media or not?”). More broadly, while teenagers recognised that different features and activities carry varying levels of risk, they found it difficult to translate these distinctions into clear boundaries around what should be restricted under a ban.

## 8. Teenagers associated addictive risks with platforms rather than shared features

Teenagers often judged social media by the overall reputation of a platform rather than the specific features within it. They tended to view YouTube as educational and TikTok as addictive, overlooking the fact that the same features, such as short-form, algorithmically driven video, exist across multiple apps. For those who did distinguish between platforms and features, short-form video was identified as the most impulsive or addictive feature:



*I'd say heavy restriction on short form content such as TikTok. Facebook reels Instagram reels, like with time limits and stuff.*



*Short form content has literally been proven to be really addictive, and it literally messes up our attention span.*

### Policy implication:

Effective policy may benefit from a distinction between platforms and features, and consideration of targeted regulation focusing on the most harmful and risky features.



# Findings in detail

## 9. Teenagers believed that age verification will be easily circumvented

Young people were unanimous in their scepticism of the effectiveness of age verification (*"I think that everyone will find a way to avoid the ban or like, swerve the rules and still use social media."*) Despite some expressing the intention to follow rules, they acknowledged difficulty in practice: *"I would try my hardest to [follow the rules], but I know how much I'm always reaching for my phone just to doomscroll again."*

Participants felt that *"it would be difficult to enforce"* and that *"no-one really ever follows the rules online"*. They cited multiple strategies to circumvent restrictions:

- Lying about age.

*"So many people I know have had TikToks since they were nine and just lied about their age."*

- First-hand experience of inaccurate age verification.

*"My face will accept immediately because everyone thinks I'm 18 or 19 – even the ones online."*

*"When I was on Roblox, I did my picture and it said like 15 to 16, so a bit of a difference going on."*

- Ideas around tricking facial age estimation.

*"You could put makeup and make yourself look older than you are. It won't be difficult."*

*"Also, with the use of AI now it's easier to take a photo of yourself and go, 'Make me old. Make me look older. Make me look 25.' It's quite scary just to think like, how many people could be doing that to sidestep rules that are implemented for safety."*

- Purchasing access to age-restricted platforms.

*"Basically, if you wanna be in a certain age group [on Roblox] you can like go on eBay or something and then buy an account that's got an already linked photo to it and it's in that age group."*

- Using a VPN.

*"A ban has already happened in Australia and people are not following the rules. They try and find ways around it, such as VPNs."*

Young people felt that technology companies should be subject to stronger regulation and accountability and expressed little confidence that they will implement robust age verification. One young person commented, *"Companies, they don't care. They want you to scroll. They want more money. They will do anything they can to pass, like the checks and keep people on the app."* Another noted that social media content and usage, *"can be so life changing for people in a good or a bad way...they need to take a lot more responsibility."*

### Policy implication:

Policies that involve age verification may benefit from age-appropriate communication campaigns that explain the mechanisms and their effectiveness.

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