

Do not ban social media for under-16s

Defend Digital Me briefing on the petition, and what age checks would do to children instead

We agree that a ban should not go ahead. Our report explains what the checks that replace it would ask of children.

The petition and the debate

Petition 757233 reached 217,682 signatures and closed on 11 August 2026. Parliament will debate it on Monday 2 November 2026. It asks the government not to ban social media for under-16s, because for many young people it is how they keep in touch with friends and find a supportive community. We share that view. A ban removes that access, and mandatory age checks place a face scan or ID check in front of it.

The timing

Ofcom published its *Rapid assessment of highly effective age assurance at 16* on 29 October 2026, so the evidence on how 16 and 17-year-olds will prove their age is already on the table. Regulations under section 214A of the Online Safety Act 2023 are expected by the end of 2026, and device-level legislation is being drafted now. A joint letter to the Minister and Ofcom, signed by 26 researchers and organisations and dated 30 October 2026, asks for the evidence to be considered before the Government acts.

What the report covers

Who is age-gating our life online? (version 3.0, 20 October 2026) follows age checks on the ten platforms covered by Australia's under-16 ban, through the chain of companies behind them. It weighs the evidence from Australia's first year and examines the UK and EU proposals.

Key findings

- **The app often isn't the company doing the check.** A child's face, ID and liveness test can pass between providers in different countries.
- **Face scans are least accurate near 16,** so borderline users are most likely to be sent to checks that ask them to nod, turn their head or speak aloud.
- **Claims of "no ID needed" are untrue.** Bank checks and digital ID wallets rest on a document verified earlier. Ofcom's own rapid assessment says photo ID is "either required as part of the method itself, or as the likely backstop" for methods such as facial age estimation, as quoted in the joint letter.
- **Around 70% of under-16s who had accounts kept access.** Half of those who lost access report no difference to their safety, and one in two now gets less news (p. 5).
- **In June 2026, 69% of British adults supported** a law requiring age verification. Support fell to 50% if everyone had to upload ID or a credit card (p. 5).

Key messages

- **Every age check is a commercial process.** Platforms pay per check, and the cheapest route for a platform is a server-side scan of the user's face (p. 49).
- **Coercive control without consent.** Children learn to turn, nod or speak on command, and to comply as the price of taking part. Consent to a check cannot be valid unless the child knows what it does (p. 83). In a US experiment, 53% to 79% of people who verified by a method other than a checkbox were uncomfortable doing so (p. 50).
- **Making children perform for a camera on demand in liveness checks** normalises a child protection risk: the opposite of what safeguarding teaches.
- **Signals move the check, not the risk.** Device age signals and credit checks change who holds the data, and an age answer still reaches whoever asks. Credit files cannot confirm a child's age at all (pp. 50 to 51).
- **A face cannot be reset after a breach,** and the risk lasts a lifetime.
- **Better measures exist:** safe by default for every user, testing before launch, enforcing existing law, action on specific harms such as sextortion, and digital literacy (p. 83).

We ask MPs to

1. Commission and publish a full, independent human and child rights impact assessment before any regulations are laid.
2. Ensure Ofcom's consultation on draft guidance covers users of all ages, effects on children's behaviour, identity and development, and lifelong data security.
3. Withdraw plans for wide age-assurance mandates, and end the routine processing of children's facial and bodily data for age checks.
4. Rule out VPN restrictions and platform blocking.
5. Hear children under UNCRC Article 12, and enforce existing Online Safety Act duties before any new access restriction.

> *"We spend years teaching children that when an adult or a stranger online tells them to do something with their body on camera, they should stop and tell someone. Age checks teach them the opposite. A screen tells a child to turn their head, nod or speak, and they do it, because that is the price of getting online. Before Parliament decides how 16 and 17-year-olds prove their age, someone needs to ask and thoroughly assess what normalising that compliance does to children and its lifetime risks."*
>
> **Jen Persson, Director, Defend Digital Me**

Report and summary | **Full report (PDF)** | **Petition 757233**

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