

## **Growing up in the online world consultation: Response from Parenting Across Scotland**

### **About Parenting Across Scotland**

Parenting Across Scotland (PAS) is a national membership organisation working for a Scotland where every parent, carer and family thrives. For us this means that:

- Families live free from poverty and systemic inequalities. They are protected from the causes of poverty, and the negative consequences poverty can have on their lives.
- Families have the support they need when they need it to help them get through the challenging times.
- Systems and structures support families in the best ways possible. This includes things like work, benefits, housing, childcare and transport.
- The human rights of all family members are upheld. This includes parents / carers, babies, children and young people.
- Parents and carers can share their views and experiences with services and decision makers and their needs are listened to and acted on.

We work to achieve our goals through influencing policy and practice, gathering the views and experiences of parents and carers and testing out new services and resources to better meet the needs of families across Scotland.

### **Chapter 1: Understanding how children use technology**

#### **Question 2: What are the harms or risks of social media use, and being online, for children?**

In 2025 Parenting Across Scotland began a collaboration with Police Scotland's Cybercrime Harm Prevention Team to deliver webinars for parents and carers on how to keep children and young people safe online. In the 2025/26 financial year, we delivered 3 sessions to over 1200 parents and carers.

As part of the webinars, we ask all participants if they have any questions or topics they would like information about. This gives us a good understanding of some of the main concerns that parents and carers have about their children engaging in the online world.

Key issues that have been repeatedly raised include bullying, exposure to explicit and extremist content, online sale of drugs, fraud, and sexual predation. A selection of quotes from parents and carers are included below to illustrate this;

*'How to protect my child from cyber bullying?' (Parent / carer participant)*

*'How can we encourage young people to come forward and report online abuse or online sale of drugs etc without fear?' (Parent / carer participant)*

*How do we report suspicious behaviour online, if we believe there is a grooming attempt or predator reaching out to our children? (Parent / carer participant)*

PAS recognises that some of these concerns, such as bullying, do not only relate to children's online engagement and can be present in offline settings too. However, the parents and carers attending our webinars have specific concerns about how these harms manifest in online spaces. Often this is because parents and carers do not feel confident that they fully understand what harms their children may be exposed to or how best to protect them;

*'My children are teenagers (16 & 18) and it is almost impossible to know what they are doing online. What do you advise?' (Parent / carer participant)*

*'I find the settings in devices (ipads, phones) very daunting' (Parent / carer participant)*

*'I really need basics!' (Parent / carer participant)*

In terms of thinking about which children and young people are most at risk, we heard from a lot from parents and carers of neurodivergent children about their specific concerns;

*'Any additional advice for neurodivergent children, who may take interactions at face value or struggle to understand others intentions' (Parent / carer participant)*

*'More awareness and knowledge around ways to keep my autistic child safe online' (Parent / carer participant)*

More generally, parents and carers told us that they worry about the amount of time their children spend online and ask for advice for how to limit this;

*'it is so saddening watching your kid getting more and more addicted to the screens' (Parent / carer participant)*

*'How do I regulate my son's access to gadgets and online exposure?' (Parent / carer participant)*

However, it should also be acknowledged that some parents / carers recognised the positive benefits their children could experience online and wanted to make sure that they were taking a balanced approach;

*‘Social media can help with kids with mental health concerns as it helps to keep them connected with peer groups and included in latest trends (can also hinder), how do you recommend policing social media without impacting mental health concerns?’ (Parent / carer participant)*

## **Chapter 2: Interventions for safer, more positive experiences**

**Question 7: What do you think the impacts would be of having a minimum age requirement higher than 13 for social media services? For example, impacts on the safety and wellbeing of children, or the impact for parents and carers, as well as other users. You could also comment on the impact on all users' privacy and data or on business costs, revenue, and innovation.**

PAS fully understands the need for a minimum age requirement for some online features in order to keep children and young people safe, just like age restrictions we have in the non-digital world.

The United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child highlights children’s evolving capacities whereby they develop their understanding, autonomy and ability to exercise their rights as they grow. We recognise that thirteen is the age at which it is perceived that a child is old enough to give digital consent, and until they reach this age, it is their parent/carer who has overall consent.

It is important that any decision to alter minimum age requirements balances out a child’s right to be protected from harm with their evolving capacities. This is not an easy task, for a number of reasons.

Firstly, not all children and young people’s capacities evolve at the same rate, so for some children and young people, parent / carer support will always be required, whereas others will be capable of making informed decisions earlier. Secondly, we know from the Australian experience that children have found ways to circumnavigate the social media ban, making it difficult to monitor and implement<sup>1</sup>.

Many children and young people are extremely tech-savvy as they have grown up with technology. Even with the current age of digital consent being 13, evidence suggests that high numbers of younger children already access social media (81% of 10-12 year olds used at least one social media site in Ofcom’s research<sup>2</sup>). If the current minimum

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<sup>1</sup> [Three months into Australia’s world-first social media ban for under-16s, has it been a success? | Social media ban | The Guardian](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Growing up in the online world: a national conversation - GOV.UK](#)

age limit rule is not being implemented effectively, we question whether increasing the age further would have any significant effect.

Moreover, PAS shares concerns with other organisations in the children and families sector that increasing the minimum age requirement may contribute to making online spaces less rather than more safe. If children and young people find ways to bypass age restrictions this could therefore leave them at increased risk of harm, which their parents and carers may not be aware of.

Thirdly, children can be exposed to online harm beyond their own engagement. In our Keeping Children Safe Online webinars one of the topics we discuss is 'sharenting' exploring how parents and carers may inadvertently expose their children to harm through sharing pictures and information online through their own social media accounts.

Information shared online can be used by criminals to cause emotional, financial and reputational harm. Barclays has forecasted that by 2030, sharenting will account for two-thirds of identity fraud that young people face, costing an estimated £667million per year<sup>3</sup>.

By highlighting this statistic, it is not our intention to blame parents and carers about what they have shared about their children and young people. The parents and carers present in our webinars were not always aware of these risks beforehand and some told us their behaviour would now change with this knowledge;

*'made me think about my child's digital footprint through my online sharing' (parent / carer participant)*

*'I deleted all of my kids pictures of instagram and fb last night. I hadn't considered the long term impact.'* (parent / carer participant)

But it does show that blanket measures, such as increasing the minimum age requirement will not necessarily solve the problem of online harm. Clear guidance and awareness raising for children, young people, parents and carers may be more effective in reducing harm than increasing age requirements.

**Question 9: What risks or burdens may be associated with raising the minimum age of digital consent? For example, ensuring parental consent, costs to industry, access to services, volume of requests, etc.**

As stated in the consultation paper, it is 'no longer accurate or meaningful to present children's lives as divided into online and offline spheres'. The two spheres are intrinsically linked, and children now grow up with technology and social media in their

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<sup>3</sup> BBC News (2018), ['Sharenting' puts young at risk of online fraud - BBC News](#)

lives, including for many positive reasons such as engaging in their education, connecting with their friends and enjoying hobbies. Introducing any such measures as ‘bans’ or raising minimum ages have the potential to reduce the positive elements of being online, as well as the harms. These competing factors need to be weighed up carefully.

As we have said earlier, increasing the minimum age will not be sufficient to remove online risks for children and young people. Urgent focus is required on how we can make the online world safer overall. Parenting Across Scotland supports the findings of the Irish Government’s Online Health Taskforce, which calls for a public health response to online harm<sup>4</sup>. The Taskforce’s final report recommends that all providers of digital products and services should be *‘required by legislation to incorporate ‘Child Rights by Design’ principles into the design, features and functioning of their services and algorithms encompassing the full spectrum of children and young people’s rights including equity and diversity, best interests of the child, consultation, participation, age-appropriateness, privacy, safety, well-being, development, and agency’*.

This recommendation illustrates how multifaceted and systemic online harm is, and we recommend that the UK Government adopts a similar public health approach grounded in children’s rights. Of course, any new legislation needs to be backed up with appropriate enforcement and accountability measures.

The Taskforce also recommends the introduction of an *‘evidence-informed critical digital literacy campaign and educational programme’* for children, young people, parents, carers and professionals.

We know that many parents and carers worry about the safety of their children online and feel ill equipped to manage this issue. An important message from our ‘Keeping Children Safe Online’ webinars with Police Scotland is that there are already steps families can take to reduce the risks for children of being online. These include, but are not limited to, strong passwords, changing the settings on apps and having conversations about risks and how to keep safe. Throughout the sessions, we emphasise the importance of shared decision making between children and their parents, so that keeping children safe online is a collaborative effort;

*‘I need to work more in partnership with my child regarding online safety’ (Parent / carer participant)*

We appreciate that this is not always easy for parents and carers, as they have to deal with peer pressure and different rules in different households. Clear advice and guidance from trusted sources is required to support parents and carers in this role.

The government and society’s role is to make both the online and offline worlds nurturing environments for children and young people. Whilst there can be work done to

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<sup>4</sup> [Online Health Taskforce Report Final Sept 2025.pdf](#)

encourage children and young people to spend less time on screens and social media, there must be a conscious effort to invest in alternative safe spaces and activities. The Irish Taskforce report states that;

*‘The need to invest in and strengthen offline spaces and places for young people is not separate from – but is integral to – addressing the challenges of the digital world.’<sup>5</sup>*

Parenting Across Scotland’s campaign to increase children and young people’s access hobbies to children and young people provides one route to strengthening offline spaces. Our campaign draws on learning from Nordic hobbies models in Iceland and Finland, recognising that hobbies can have multiple benefits for children and young people, including mental and physical health, socialisation, fun, learning and skills development<sup>6</sup>. In 2025, we undertook research with over 570 parents and carers across Scotland to gather their views about hobbies<sup>7</sup>. The parents and carers who responded were overwhelmingly positive about the benefits associated with hobbies but noted that for some children and young people “screens have unfortunately taken over hobbies”.

Survey participants felt that increasing access to hobbies could help to remind children and young people “there is more to life than screens.” . [You can read more about this work here.](#)

**Question 37: Which of the options below do you think the government should prioritise to reduce circumvention of online safety rules in the UK? (Please select the most important one to you)**

- a. More education for children
- b. Restricting children’s access to VPNs
- c. None of the above
- d. Other (please specify) - more education for parents and carers for how to support their child as well as education for children and young people
- e. Don’t know/ Prefer not to answer

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<sup>5</sup> [Online\\_Health\\_Taskforce\\_Report\\_Final\\_Sept\\_2025.pdf](#)

<sup>6</sup> [exploring-national-approaches-to-increasing-access-to-hobbies-for-children-and-young-people-churchill-fellowship.pdf](#)

<sup>7</sup> [pas\\_hobbies-report\\_january-2026\\_final.pdf](#)

## Chapter 4: Preparing children for a digital future and enriching their online experiences

**Question 44: Which areas of media or digital literacy do children and families most need additional help with? (Please select all that apply)**

- a. Managing screen time and online habits
- b. Spotting adverts, sponsored posts or AI generated content
- c. Keeping personal information private
- d. Online behaviour and experiences (bullying, respect, comparison or peer pressure)
- e. Checking if information is true
- f. Understanding how social media works (for example, 'likes' or algorithms)
- g. Staying safe online (including how to have conversations about online safety)
- h. Reporting harmful or upsetting content
- i. Knowing which apps or sites are right for their age
- j. None of the above
- k. Don't know/ Prefer not to answer
- l. Other (please specify)

**Question 46: Where, if anywhere, would you like to see more support available in the future? This could include places you already use but don't offer support and you would like them to, or places that could offer more support with help from government or others. (Please select all that apply)**

- m. Schools or childcare settings
- n. Community or youth spaces (for example libraries, youth clubs or local charities)
- o. Parent or carer groups or networks
- p. Public services (such as family hubs, GP surgeries or community centres)
- q. Faith or cultural groups
- Non-governmental online sources (such as websites, platforms or online communities)
- r. Government websites
- s. None of the above/I would not use these to find help
- t. Don't know/ Prefer not to answer
- u. Other (please specify)

**Question 47: Outside of schools, how could the UK government better support children and young people to stay safe and feel supported online? (Please select all that apply)**

- v. By providing clear guidance that children can use on their own
- w. By supporting parents and carers to support children online
- x. By working with platforms and services that children already use
- y. By supporting youth organisations and community groups to help children online
- z. By making help or advice easy to access when something goes wrong online
- aa. By involving children and young people in designing support
- bb. None of the above
- cc. Don't know/ Prefer not to answer

**Question 50: What further action should be prioritised to support positive online spaces for young people? (Please select all that apply)**

- dd. Develop best practice principles for industry
- ee. Develop guidance for parents and carers
- ff. Develop guidance for children
- gg. Reviewing international approaches
- hh. Industry voluntarily promoting high quality content for children
- ii. None of the above
- jj. Don't know/ Prefer not to answer
- kk. Other (please specify)

**Question 51: What should be considered when taking further action to support positive online spaces and content for young people? *For example, how would this work in practice for services, taking into account existing best practice across industry, and who should feed into future guidance***

With the digital world so embedded in society, we need to ensure that children and young people are growing up educated on the possible risks they face, just like we should in relation to the risks they face in the physical world. We need to promote healthy conversations between parents and carers and their children and young people on this topic.

Our Keeping Children Safe Online webinars provide us with valuable information about what parents and carers feel they need in order to play their part in these conversations. Parents and carers tell us they want to gain confidence, knowledge, awareness and understanding of how to keep their children safe online. Parents and carers make it

clear they do not feel well equipped to support their children to be online: *“How do we keep up with our children who are so tech smart.”* (Parent, online session)

Social media channels such as Youtube, Snapchat and Tiktok are frequently highlighted as platforms parents and carers would like to know more about, but they also mention gaming apps, with worries about Roblox being the most common, possibly because it attracts younger children;

*‘is he safe playing Roblox?’* (Parent / carer respondent)

*‘Interested to hear about risks of Roblox game and how parents can allow their child to play this safely.’* (Parent / carer respondent)

*‘Is roblox safe for children? I worry about the chat feature.’* (Parent / carer respondent)

Given their use and widespread appeal to children and young people, it is important therefore that online gaming is within scope of any policy or legislation response to increasing digital safety.

Our experience of working in this area so far would tell us that parents and carers are desperate for trusted information and guidance on how to keep their children safe but are struggling to make sense of all the information out there. We have seen first hand the benefits of the webinar format and suggest the following elements as being particularly helpful;

- Free
- Non-judgemental approach
- Accessible language and pace
- Provided by credible organisations
- Option to ask questions
- Nuanced approach recognising the benefits of digital engagement as well as the risks
- Child rights framing, emphasising the importance of conversations and shared decision making
- Sources of further help and support to follow up afterwards.

As one participant stated, *‘I liked the emphasis on communication and the need for there to be a collaborative approach between parents and children’*

By promoting conversations and education, this supports families to be proactive rather than reactive in their approach to internet safety.

Our sessions are predominantly aimed at residents in Scotland but we welcome anyone to attend. At our most recent event, one participant stated *“...I am based in England...”*

*As I could not find anything locally.”<sup>8</sup>* We also get comments from attendees who are there in order to gain a better understanding of how to support the children and young people they work with, including CAMHS nurses, foster carers, support workers and residential home workers. Given that each session we have delivered has quickly sold out, it is reasonable to conclude from this evidence that awareness raising, guidance and advice needs to be made available at a far greater scale than it currently is across the UK.

## **Chapter 5: Supporting families**

**Question 54: What would help parents and carers to more effectively use parental controls? For example, more information on how to do this on purchase of a phone, help from platforms on how to set up, or greater standardisation across tools.**

Within our online sessions that we host in partnership with Police Scotland, we discuss the framing of ‘parental controls’ and how it may be beneficial to reframe these instead as ‘wellbeing settings’. References to control may cause friction between parents/carers and young people, particularly as young people grow older and want to feel they have more freedom. In addition, it could be useful to encourage the wider use of wellbeing settings by everyone in society, not just children and young people. Children and young people are shaped by those around them growing up, which for many is their parents, carers and adults in their lives. Therefore, if those trusted adults in their lives are promoting wellbeing focused use of social media and devices, then they are more likely to learn that behaviour.

Parents and carers in our sessions often feedback that they want examples of how to ensure the devices and platforms their children and young people are safe. We often get comments like *“Please do not skip the basics. Some people may already know a lot while others have no clue on how to make their devices safe for their children to use”*. With the vast array of platforms that exist, with each having different rules and elements, it can make the online world confusing to keep up to date with. We often promote the website Internet Matters<sup>9</sup> as a source of helpful information on individual apps.

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<sup>8</sup> Parenting Across Scotland, Keeping Children Safe Online Webinar

<sup>9</sup> [Keep Children Safe Online: Information, advice, support - Internet Matters](#)