

UK announces under-16s social media ban



Reading Level 4/5

Will it protect children? Early next year, under-16s in Britain will be booted off social media. Advocates argue this will keep them safe, but others think their freedom is at stake.

A new online life: Messaging apps like WhatsApp will still be allowed under new rules — but say goodbye to Instagram.

"I feel for this generation".

The words of a **prime minister** about to introduce the most radical change to their lives yet.

Yesterday, **Keir Starmer** announced that under-16s would be banned from almost all social media sites.

Those targeted are user-to-user platforms that allow users to post material publicly online — so young people will no longer be able to use Snapchat, TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, Facebook or X.

However, they will still be able to access messaging-only services like WhatsApp and Signal.¹

Starmer has also indicated the government will go further. It is even weighing up overnight **curfews** for under-18s — something no other country has introduced.

Campaigners have been asking for this for many years. Many are parents who lost their children to mental health struggles or dangerous viral challenges.

But Starmer says this is not just about keeping children safe from harm. It is about "giving them back their childhood".

Instead of reading, playing with friends, doing their homework, and getting the sleep they need, they are spending their time scrolling through addictive content, he says.

The UK social media ban is similar to one passed in Australia, which forced social media companies operating in the country to introduce an age verification system. In most cases, this involved using facial recognition technology to estimate the age of would-be users.

Under current plans, the ban will come into force in early 2027. It is unlikely to face much political opposition: **Conservative** leader Kemi Badenoch is also in favour of it.²

Starmer knows his time as prime minister is likely coming to an end. He is hoping the social media ban will be his legacy. But will it work?

The government knows that many children will get around the ban by downloading **VPNs**. Last year, when Starmer introduced new laws requiring sites with adult content to introduce age requirements, one VPN provider announced it had seen the number of downloads of its product

spike by 1,800%.³

The same pattern appeared in Australia when its own social media ban came in. Not only was there a similar boost in VPN downloads, but experts found AI faces and even realistic-looking "old man masks" could fool the age verification technology.⁴

However, the government believes only a minority of children will get around the ban in these ways, so it will still be effective for most.

Other experts say whether or not it works, it is a violation of children's rights. They say that as human beings, they should have the same right to access the online world as anyone else, and that the ban risks depriving them of opportunities to learn and connect with others.⁵

It could even be counter-productive, they say, driving children out of better-regulated social media sites and into darker corners of the internet.

The government should be focusing on tackling harmful **algorithms**, they say, rather than simply banning young people.

Will it protect children?

1. According to the official [website](#) of the British government.
2. As she wrote in the centre-left [Guardian](#) back in January.
3. According to the [BBC](#).
4. According to Australian state broadcaster the [ABC](#).
5. For example, [UNICEF](#), the UN agency dedicated to the welfare of children, is against social media bans.

Keywords

Prime minister: A prime minister is the head of government in a country with a parliamentary system.

Keir Starmer: The leader of the UK Labour Party since 2020 and British prime minister since July 2024.

Curfews: Occasions when closing down is enforced or movement is restricted. It originally applied to the extinguishing of fires in

people's houses.

Conservative: Holding traditional values, and in a political context, favouring policies such as private ownership.

VPN: Virtual Private Network. It allows people to hide their identity online by masking their device's IP address. People can use VPNs to "relocate" themselves and browse

the internet from any country.

Algorithms: Any set of rules followed by a computer. In the context of social media, "the algorithm" refers to the intelligent AI that learns the interests of the user and presents them with posts that it thinks will interest them.

Analyse

The UK government is trying to introduce plans that will allow 16-year-olds to vote at the same time it is looking to ban under-16s from using social media. Is there a contradiction between these two positions?

Write

**"Adults should be banned from social media as well."
Do you agree or disagree?**

Use persuasive language to make your case. Want to take it further? Submit your 250- to 500-word opinion piece to studentvoices@theday.co.uk.

Find out more about [Student Voices](#).

Debate

Will it protect children? Hold a class debate. Here are some thoughts to get you started:

Yes:

Many studies have shown that social media is bad for people's mental health. It is time to free a generation from its influence.

No:

The evidence underpinning social media bans is quite weak, and many child safety experts are against them. We should focus more on regulating the platforms.

Or:

If social media is bad for young people, it is bad for everyone. It is not clear why only the under-16s should be banned from these platforms – the law should apply to everyone or it should not exist at all.

Dive in deeper

- ▶ Keir Starmer's case for a ban on social media for the under-16s. [Keir Starmer](#) (2:23)
- ▶ What do teenagers think about a social media ban? [ITV News](#) (15:22)
- 📄 What parents and children think of a social media ban. [The Guardian](#) (1,100 words)
- 📄 A European expert lays out the argument against social media bans. [Politico](#) (600 words)
- 📄 The UK government's case for the ban. [Gov.uk](#) (1,000 words)
- 📄 The case for a different way of protecting children online. [LSE](#) (900 words)

Become an expert

- ▶ Watch Keir Starmer's full announcement. [Sky News](#) (37:45)
- ▶ The case for and against the ban. [Newscast](#) (39:51)
- 📄 Why the science on a social media ban is still unclear. [EFF](#) (2,000 words)
- 📄 A slightly sceptical view of the new ban. [The Spectator](#) (paywall; 2,000 words)
- 📄 A closer look at how such bans will affect children – for good and for ill. [Brookings](#) (2,000 words)

Comprehension Quiz

1.

Which group mentioned in this article believes the ban is unfair to children?

- A) Parents who want to keep children safe online.
- B) Experts who support children's rights.
- C) Politicians who support the ban.
- D) Children who enjoy scrolling videos.

2.

True or false? The article provides strong evidence that the ban will definitely work, because no children found ways around it in Australia.

3.

According to the article, what consequence did Starmer's earlier age-verification laws have?

- A) Social media companies left the UK market entirely.
- B) VPN downloads spiked by 1,800% for one provider.
- C) Children switched to messaging-only services instead.
- D) The government abandoned plans for a social media ban.

4.

Which statement best summarises the article's overall argument about the social media ban?

- A) The ban is a straightforward solution that will restore children's wellbeing.
- B) The ban is popular but its effectiveness and rights implications remain contested.
- C) The ban primarily reflects Starmer's desire to leave a political legacy.
- D) The ban will fail entirely because age verification technology is unreliable.

5.

According to the article, what method did Australia use in most cases to verify users' ages under its social media ban?

- A) Facial recognition technology to estimate age.
- B) Government-issued ID checks uploaded to platforms.
- C) Parental consent forms submitted online.
- D) Mobile phone number registration linked to age.

6.

Match each word to its correct definition.

- A) Legacy
 - B) Violation
 - C) Prohibit
 - D) Counter-productive
1. Having the opposite effect to the one intended
 2. A lasting impact or achievement left behind
 3. A breach or failure to respect a rule or right
 4. To officially forbid something

Answers: 1. B 2. False 3. B 4. B 5. A 6. A2, B3, C4, D1