



An Comhchoiste um Leanaí agus Comhionannas

Tuarascáil maidir le ‘Teicneolaíocht, na meáin shóisialta agus leanaí’, ina leagtar béim ar shábháilteacht agus folláine leanaí ar líne

Deireadh Fómhair 2026

Joint Committee on Children and Equality

Report on Technology, Social Media and Children with a focus on the safety and well-being of children online

October 2026

Contents

Related information	5
Publications	5
Committee videos.....	5
Committee debates	5
Contact details.....	5
Orders of Reference.....	5
Committee Membership.....	6
Cathaoirleach.....	6
Leas-Chathaoirleach.....	6
Members	6
Abbreviations	7
Cathaoirleach’s Foreword.....	8
1. Introduction.....	11
Engagement with Stakeholders	11
Table 1: Stakeholders in attendance at public meetings	11
Technology and social media in young people’s lives	15
UN Convention on the Rights of the Child	16
Online Safety.....	17
2. Benefits	18
3. Risks and Harms	19
Consequences of online harm.....	27
4. Tools and Features for Age-appropriate Experiences Online.....	28
5. Legislation, Regulation and Children’s Rights	32
Frameworks and Legislation	33
Responsibility for regulation	35
Regulatory concerns and recommendations	36
6. Consideration of an Under 16 Social Media Ban	38
Research and perspectives on the effectiveness of bans	41
Children and young people’s perspectives	44

Consideration of age threshold for social media ban	47
7. Policy and practice	49
Consultation and Engagement with Children and Young People	49
Approach.....	50
Opportunities to develop empathy	51
8. Measures to progress online safety.....	52
Safety by Design	52
Age Assurance and Verification	53
Report and complaints	55
Child Rights Assessment Frameworks.....	56
Use of simulated accounts and research observatories	56
Youth-driven Social Media Design Pilot Project.....	57
9. Online safety resources and supports	57
Information resources and programmes	57
Digital Literacy	58
Youth Work	60
Parenting Supports	61
National awareness campaigns	64
Resources and Supports for School Communities	64
National Task Force	66
10. Recommendations.....	67
Appendix 1 – Opening Statements and Written Submissions	73
Appendix 2 – Online Safety Resources.....	76

Related information

Publications

All publications for this committee are available on the [Oireachtas website](#).

Committee videos

Footage of Committee proceedings can be found on the [Committee videos page](#).

Committee debates

Transcripts of Committee debates can be found on the [Committee debates page](#).

Contact details

The contact details for the Committee can be found on the [Committee page](#).

Orders of Reference

Read the [Orders of Reference](#) for the Committee.

Committee Membership

Cathaoirleach

[Keira Keogh TD](#), Fine Gael

Leas-Chathaoirleach

[Aisling Dempsey TD](#), Fianna Fáil

Members

[Grace Boland TD](#), Fine Gael

[John Connolly TD](#), Fianna Fáil

[Emer Currie TD](#), Fine Gael

[Daniel Ennis TD](#), Social Democrats

[Claire Kerrane TD](#), Sinn Féin

[Charles Ward TD](#), 100% RDR

[Ruairí Ó Murchú TD](#), Sinn Féin

[Senator Nikki Bradley](#), Fine Gael

[Senator Nessa Cosgrove](#), Labour Party

[Senator Mike Kennelly](#), Fine Gael

[Senator Sharon Keogan](#), Independent

[Senator Margaret Murphy O'Mahony](#), Fianna Fáil

Notes:

1. Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail discharged and Deputy John Connolly appointed to serve in his stead by the Seventh Report of the Dáil Committee of Selection as agreed by Dáil Éireann on 15 January 2026.
2. Deputy Aidan Farrelly discharged and Deputy Daniel Ennis appointed to serve in his stead by the Thirteenth Report of the Dáil Committee of Selection as agreed by Dáil Éireann on 25 June 2026.

Abbreviations

ASTI - Association of Secondary Teachers, Ireland

BIK+ – Better Internet for Kids

CnaM - Coimisiún na Meán

CRA – Children’s Rights Alliance

CRIA – Child Rights Impact Assessment

CSAM – Child Sexual Abuse Material

ESCI – Education Support Centres Ireland

EU – European Union

INTO - Irish National Teachers’ Organisation

IPPN – Irish Primary Principals Network

ISPCC - Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children

LMETB – Louth Meath Education and Training Board

NAPD - National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals

NYCI – National Youth Council of Ireland

OCO – Ombudsman for Children’s Office

OECD – Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

TUI - Teachers’ Union of Ireland

UNCRC – United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

SPHE – Social Personal and Health Education

Cathaoirleach's Foreword

The Joint Committee on Children and Equality identified 'Technology, Social Media and Children' as a key policy priority for examination in its 2025 and 2026 Work Programmes and undertook a series of engagements with stakeholders commencing in December 2025.

The engagement with children and young people during two public sessions was of particular importance to Members. It is the view of the Committee that engagement with children and young people is essential to ensure that policies and decisions recognise their views, experiences and perspectives and also acknowledges them as rights-holders. The Committee notes that this reflects the principles set out in **Article 12 of the UNCRC**, which recognises the right of children and young people to be heard and to participate meaningfully in decisions that affect their lives.

Online safety was identified as a critical social and public policy concern challenge, requiring coordinated action to address the risks of social media and the online world, while preserving the benefits of digital connection.

The significant role that digital devices and online environments play in the daily lives of children and young people was highlighted to the Committee, including the benefits provided by the digital world.

The report also outlines the harms and risks identified by stakeholders. In its deliberations, the Committee considered the important distinction between risk and harm, as well as the **5Cs Framework of Online Harms**, which groups children's online experiences into five categories: content, contact, conduct, contract, and cross-cutting harms. This framework assisted the Committee in assessing the breadth and complexity of risks faced by children and young people online.

Online platforms present significant and evolving risks, with online harms increasingly resulting in real world impacts on children, families, and communities. During engagement with the Committee, social media platforms and service providers identified a number of features and tools that have been developed and introduced to protect children and young people and to provide age-appropriate experiences online.

Following the conclusion of the Committee's public hearings on the topic, the EU Commission proposed The EU KIDS Act to enhance the protection of minors online including a gradual uptake of social media and video-sharing platforms.

The report contains 45 recommendations, grounded in evidence presented to the Committee, under five themes: **legislation and regulation, approaches, measures to progressing online safety, UNCRC, and resources.**

The Committee has made recommendations that contribute to the safety and wellbeing of children online and in particular would like to highlight the following recommendations contained within the report:

- Legislation be introduced that would operationalise safety-by-design by mandating the adoption of approaches that limit predatory design features, embed behavioural design into platform design, and features that reduce harm to children.
- Mandate the disabling by default of addictive features for minors, including infinite scroll, autoplay, algorithmic amplification of harmful content, and behavioural profiling.
- Consideration should be given to strengthening regulation and accountability particularly in relation to platform design, recommender systems and algorithmic amplification to ensure the safety of children and young people and the prioritisation of their rights.
- A mandatory age classification system be established for all digital products and services based on the risk they pose to child development – as we do for toys, films and any other commercial products and services that may be engaged by children. Prioritise blocking underage access to underage content at a national level.
- Consideration be given to media literacy education being:
 - consistently delivered to ensure that critical thinking and analysis skills are developed to assist with healthy digital habits and responsible behaviours online;
 - integrated across the curriculum and that mechanisms to monitor and report progression in media literacy skills comparable to other literacy skills are developed; and
 - provided to parents, caregivers, educators and others who work with children and young people to enhance their understanding of the digital world and

strengthen their ability to provide guidance and support to children and young people.

Members of the Committee wish to express their gratitude to all witnesses that appeared before the Joint Committee and those who made written submissions, as their contributions assisted Members in their deliberations and analysis. Members would like to especially recognise the engagement with children and young people.

I would also like to thank all Members of the Committee for their collaboration and valuable contributions to this report, as well as the Secretariat for its support and assistance throughout our consideration of this important topic. Members agreed the report on 29 September 2026.



Keira Keogh TD

Cathaoirleach

29 September 2026

1. Introduction

‘Technology, Social Media and Children’ was identified and included in the [Work Programme](#) of the Committee as a key policy issue for examination, with a decision taken by the Committee to place a particular focus on the safety and well-being of children online.

Engagement with Stakeholders

The Committee engaged with 34 stakeholders during 7 public meetings held between 18 December 2025 and 7 May 2026 which are detailed in Table 1 below. As part of these engagements on 23 and 30 April, the Committee consulted with children and young people to ensure that in accordance with Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), that every child has the right to express their views on all matters affecting them and to have those views considered during the decision-making process.

Table 1: Stakeholders in attendance at public meetings

Date	Witnesses	Official record
18 December 2025	Children’s Rights Alliance • Noeline Blackwell, Online Safety Co-ordinator • Alex Murphy, Online Safety Legal Officer CyberSafeKids • Alex Cooney, Chief Executive Officer • Valerie McArdle, Policy Officer Foróige • Miriam Ryan, Director of Targeted Services and Safeguarding, Senior Management Team • Anthony O’Connor, Senior Youth Officer, Go Safely Online Safety Team National Youth Council of Ireland • Kathryn Walsh, Director of Policy and Advocacy • Siobhán Laffey, National Child Protection Programme Manager Spunout • Sinéad Keane, Chief Executive Officer • Dr Tara Logan Buckley, Director of Clinical Support	Transcript

29 January 2026	An Garda Síochána - Assistant Commissioner Angela Willis, Organised and Serious Crime - Detective Superintendent Pat Ryan, Garda National Cyber Crime Bureau Ombudsman for Children's Office - Timmy Hammersley, Head of Participation and Rights Education - Ciara Gill, Senior Policy Officer Coimisiún na Meán (CnaM) - Jeremy Godfrey, Executive Chairperson - Karen McAuley, Director of Policy for Children and Vulnerable Adults Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (ISPCC) - Fiona Jennings, Head of Policy and Public Affairs - Aoife Griffin, Services Manager Webwise - Jane McGarrigle, National Coordinator - Anthony Kilcoyne, Divisional Director, Digital Technologies, Oide Technology in Education	Transcript
05 February 2026	Barnardos Ireland - Suzanne Connolly, Chief Executive - Niamh McLoughlin, Online Safety Programme Coordinator Psychological Society of Ireland - Dr Sarah Cassidy, President - Mark Smyth, Senior Clinical Psychologist Irish Safer Internet Centre - Mick Moran, CEO, Irish Internet Hotline - Catherine Cross, Deputy CEO, National Parents Council DCU Anti-Bullying Centre - Professor James O'Higgins Norman, Director - Dr. Darragh McCashin, Chair, The Observatory on Cyberbullying, Cyberhate and Online Harassment UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, University of Galway - Professor John Canavan, Director - Dr Bernadine Brady, Associate Director	Transcript
05 March 2026	Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) Anne Horan, President	Transcript

- David Geary, Assistant General Secretary

Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI)

- Laura Conheady, Vice President
- David Duffy, Education and Research Officer

Association of Secondary Teachers, Ireland (ASTI)

- Kieran Christie, General Secretary
- Richie Bell, Vice President

Irish Primary Principals Network (IPPN)

- Deirdre Kelly, President
- Páirc Clerkin, CEO

National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD)

- Paul Crone, Director
- Rachel O'Connor, Deputy Director

Education Support Centres Ireland (ESCI)

- Ultan Mac Mathúna, Chairperson
- Catherine Doolan, Director, Laois Education Support Centre

23 April 2026

Ombudsman for Children's Office Youth Advisory Panel

[Transcript](#)

- Shakar Ali
- Emilia de Búrca
- Dr Niall Muldoon, Ombudsman for Children

National Youth Council of Ireland Youth Advisory Group

- Róisín O'Neill
- Oisín Ó Dubhshláine
- Niamh Flynn, Youth 2030 Capacity Development and Training Officer, NYCI

Youth Work Ireland

- Aisling Maloney
- Franek Dobronski

Webwise Youth Advisory Panel

- Orla Hanratty
- Sarah Davitt
- Jane McGarrigle, National Coordinator, Webwise

30 April 2026

Youth Advocates Programme Ireland

[Transcript](#)

- Amber Mooney
- Miah Morris
- Siobhán O'Dwyer, CEO

Foróige 'Connect Safely' Youth Advocacy Group

- Katelyn Warren
- Noah O'Shea

- Anthony O'Connor, Training Officer, Connect Safely, Training Learning and Development Team

Springboard Family Support Project

- Shineka Scanlon
- John Brennan, Project Manager, Sligo Springboard Family Support Service

Louth Meath Education and Training Board (LMETB)

- Charlie Grant
- Luke McCluskey
- Aaron Fowler, Youth Officer

07 May 2026

Meta

- Dualta Ó Broin, Director of Public Policy

TikTok

- Susan Moss, Head of Public Policy and Government Relations, Ireland
- Richard Collard, Minor Safety Public Policy Lead

Snap Inc.

- Freddie Cook, Public Policy, UK and Ireland

Google

- Ryan Meade, Government Affairs and Public Policy Manager, Ireland
- Chloe Setter, Child Safety Public Policy Manager

Microsoft

- Ciarán Conlon, Director of Public Policy, Ireland
- Liz Thomas, Senior Director of Global Public Policy, Digital Safety

[Transcript](#)

Some organisations, in addition to providing an opening statement, also provided additional briefing documents to the Committee; details of these documents are provided in [Appendix 1](#).

The Committee also received five requested written submissions. Additionally, two voluntary submissions were received. [Appendix 1](#) provides details of the opening statements and written submissions received and considered.

Technology and social media in young people's lives

Digital technologies and online platforms have become embedded in the everyday lives of children and young people, providing opportunities for connection, communication, learning, self-expression, and entertainment, while enabling young people to socialise, develop their identities, understand relationships, and engage with important issues such as mental health and world affairs.

Evidence from Ireland demonstrates the significant role that digital devices and online environments play in the daily lives of children and young people, including that:

- 93% of children aged 8 – 12 own a smart device and 97% aged 12 -14 own a smartphone;¹
- 37% of 9–10-year-olds reported daily use of smartphones, rising to 60% of 11–12-year-olds, 85% of 13–14-year-olds and 91% of 15–17-year-olds;²
- Average time spent online for 9 – 17-year-olds was 2.1 hours per day for weekdays and 3.4 hours per day at the weekend, and usage increased with age, with 15 – 17-year-olds spending an average of 3.2 hours online per day;³ and
- 71% of children aged 8 - 12 have an account on a 13+ social media/instant messaging apps, this increases to 99% of children and young people aged 12 – 15.⁴

Similar findings were evident from a survey conducted by children in advance of appearing before the Committee. The survey, included 31 participants between the ages of 5 and 13, found that:

- all had access to their own devices;
- length of time spent on devices varied depending on age; and
- all had access to social media and could access the platforms they wanted to use.⁵

The difference between social media and the online world was identified by the young people:

¹ Vicky O'Rourke Written Submission, 2; CyberSafeKids (2024), Trends and Usage Report 2023-2024 cited in GenFree Written Submission, 2.

² NACOS (2021) cited in Brian O'Neill Written Submission, 2.

³ NACOS, p.22 cited in Brian O'Neill Written Submission, 2.

⁴ IPPN Written Submission, 2; [A Life Behind Screens](#)

⁵ Transcript, 30 April 2026, 3; Transcript, 30 April 2026, 10; Transcript, 30 April 2026, 14.

In my world, social media is apps like TikTok, Snapchat and WhatsApp. Online has far bigger reach like Google, Wikipedia, AI services and all of that. Social media and online are not the same thing.⁶

However, a key challenge identified is the lack of reliable, ongoing data on young people's media use. As a result, there is limited understanding of the platforms they engage with, the content and creators they follow, and how different age groups interpret and respond to online content.

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

Articles of the UNCRC that are particularly relevant to children, young people and the digital world were highlighted, including:

- Article 13 refers to the right to seek, receive, and impart information, through various media including digital platforms;
- Article 15 provides the right for children and young people to form connections and engage with other young people who share their passions and interests, which is as relevant online as offline;
- Article 16 outlines the right to privacy, this includes in digital spaces;
- Article 17 details the right to access diverse information sources, this includes online sources;
- Articles 19, 34, and 36 describe the right to protection from harms that pervade social media platforms and apps including harmful content, manipulation, exploitation and cyberbullying; and
- Article 29 details the right to education that prepares children for a responsible life in a free society.

[General Comment 25](#) on children's rights in relation to the digital environment, published in 2021, explains how States parties should implement the UNCRC in relation to the digital environment and provides guidance on relevant legislative, policy and other measures to ensure full compliance with their obligations under the UNCRC and the Optional Protocols.

In written submission, it was highlighted that the four core principles of the UNCRC, (i) non-discrimination, (ii) best interest of the child, (iii) right to life, survival and development, and

⁶ Transcript, 23 April 2026, 17.

(iv) respect the view of the child, provide a lens for the implementation of children's rights in the digital world.⁷ Further details are outlined in the Children's Rights Alliance Briefing Document.

Other aspects identified included that:

- Children and young people are entitled, as a right, to have their evolving capacities respected so that, as their competencies, understanding and agency increase, their capacity for independent use of digital technologies should also be respected and permitted;
- Child Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA) was identified as a key measure to implement children's rights and involves an examination of the potential impacts of laws, policies, decisions or services on children and their rights, and also assists with the identification of ways to prevent or mitigate any negative impacts; and
- The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended that States introduce mandatory requirements for the business sector, including practices and products of technology and social media companies, to undertake assessments of, consultations on, and full public disclosure of children's rights impacts of their business activities and their plans to address such impacts.

Online Safety

Online safety is a whole-of-society challenge requiring co-ordinated action across the European Union (EU), governments, regulators, platform providers, and civil society, and is a matter of children's rights, well-being, and equality. The NYCI Youth Advisory Group expressed the view that concerns about social media affect people of all ages and that issues such as harmful content, hate speech, cancel culture, and excessive use are experienced across generations. Foróige's National Reference Panel, a youth participation body representing young people across Ireland, highlighted a complex tension between the benefits of digital connection and the risks of social media.

For most children, personal smart devices provide independent internet access prior to adolescence, often beginning during the primary school years. This level of access represents a profound environmental shift, evolving faster than parents, educators,

⁷ CRA Written Submission, 4.

legislators, policymakers, regulators, and public health systems can develop and implement appropriate responses and safeguards. It was stated that:

online harms are growing in scale and complexity yet children's rights to safety and protection in digital spaces remain insufficiently embedded in policy and practice.⁸

This report will detail the evidence presented to the Committee regarding the benefits and possible risks and harms of technology to children and young people, legislative and regulatory matters including a possible social media ban, policy interventions, and practical tools that can assist children, young people, their parents and caregivers, as well as school communities.

2. Benefits

A recent survey found that 48% of adolescents reported that social media has a positive impact on their mental well-being with their main motivation focusing on entertainment (57%), contact with friends or family (53%), feeling of connection with others (70%), and learning opportunities (65%).⁹ Positive well-being outcomes for children and young people depend not only on the amount of screen time, but also on the type of content consumed and the support children receive in evaluating media messages.

Stakeholders, including children and young people, identified the many benefits offered by the digital world to children and young people including:

- Opportunities to explore, understand, exercise and enjoy their rights, with artificial intelligence (AI) further enhancing their ability to enjoy many of their rights;
- Supporting their well-being through communication, knowledge, expression, and participation in the world around them;
- The power to connect young people, provide community, and the opportunity to learn from others, about themselves, and the communities they are part of, including young people whose voices are not always heard;
- Providing spaces for self-exploration, creativity, expression, advocacy, learning, participation in society, and an ability to see other ways of life;
- Facilitating the inclusion of some children who might otherwise be excluded;

⁸ Transcript, 5 February 2026, 4.

⁹ [Impact of excessive screen time and social media on young people's mental health - June 2026 - Eurobarometer survey](#)

- Providing opportunities for play, recreation and engagement with cultural life and the arts;
- Can be used to challenge mis- and dis-information;
- Affords access to health information and support services;
- Educational and learning benefits including immediate access to vast sources of knowledge and resources, such as study tips and topical issues including TikTok's STEM feed - an independently assessed and age-appropriate feed dedicated to lessons in subjects from Irish teachers; and
- Access to well-moderated, safe online spaces can confer benefits particularly for isolated, marginalised young people, neurodivergent youths and those experiencing mental health difficulties.

During the engagement with children and young people it was stated that they 'deserve to be able to maximise the benefits of technology and the opportunities it opens' for them.¹⁰

3. Risks and Harms

Online risks change as children grow, but peer harm, particularly bullying and cyberbullying, remains a consistent concern across age groups.¹¹

The important distinction between risk and harm was emphasised in written submission to the Committee. Risk refers to the probability, not the inevitability, of harm as children who encounter risks, such as exposure to content, can remain unharmed if they have the necessary skills to respond appropriately. Key factors identified include the child's age, level of digital literacy, resilience, vulnerability, self-esteem or psychological problems, and gender. International research has found that children who experience vulnerabilities offline are more likely to be harmed online and require more specialised measures and interventions to keep them safe.

The 4 Cs Framework of Online Harms, developed by EU Kids Online, was outlined to the Committee, and it was noted that this classification has subsequently been expanded to 5 Cs, to include cross-cutting risks. The 5 Cs are:

¹⁰ Transcript, 30 April 2026, 4.

¹¹ DCU Anti-Bullying Centre Written Submission, 5.

- Content – age-inappropriate, violent, sexualised, or hate-speech filled material;
- Contact – unsolicited contact from strangers, including grooming, coercion, sexual extortion, and harassment;
- Conduct - peer-to-peer interactions, including cyberbullying, image-based abuse, and participation in dangerous online trends;
- Contract – commercial exploitation through persuasive and addictive design features such as infinite scroll, autoplay, streaks, loot boxes, and algorithmic profiling; and
- Cross-cutting – such as impacts on mental health.¹²

The classification is also further refined in OECD Typology of Online Risks, which in turn supports the risk assessment framework outlined in the Article 28 Guidelines for the Protection of Minors under the EU's Digital Services Act.

Online platforms present serious and evolving risks, and online harms can translate into very real consequences for children, families and communities. It was stated that:

The online threat landscape targeting children is growing in both scale and sophistication, presenting unprecedented challenges for law enforcement. Risks now extend beyond traditional concerns such as online grooming, cyberbullying and exposure to inappropriate content, encompassing more sinister forms of exploitation through social media and gaming platforms. Technology has increased the scale, speed and anonymity with which offenders can operate, often across jurisdictions, making prevention and enforcement more complex. As recently reported, offenders are leveraging artificial intelligence tools to produce hyper-realistic deepfake child sexual abuse imagery and videos.¹³

The risks associated with social media and the vulnerability of young people in these spaces were also acknowledged. In written submission it was stated that:

The dominant platforms used by children are designed around commercial models that prioritise engagement, emotional activation, and behavioural data extraction. These systems were not built to be safe by design without considering the need for

¹² GenFree Written Submission, 2 – 3. Brian O'Neill Written Submission, 2 – 3.

¹³ Transcript, 29 January 2026, 2 – 3.

children's rights, developmental needs, or safeguarding as primary objectives. As a result, children are routinely exposed to foreseeable, preventable and systemic risks that arise not only from harmful content or bad actors, but from the architecture, algorithms, and incentives that structure their online experience.¹⁴

Irish and Ireland-linked evidence indicates that screen time is an imprecise predictor of harm, with poorer outcomes more consistently linked to specific online experiences and mechanisms. The discussion highlighted the importance of considering context, type of use, time of day and a child's developmental stage, with increased screen usage during the evening and at night impacting quality of sleep. Children with existing vulnerabilities, or those exposed to harmful online experiences, are more clearly affected by screen use and social media. Furthermore, it was highlighted that:

The impact of digital technology on well-being varies based on the type of digital media activity. The most compelling evidence points to a link between heavy social media use and increased rates of depression and anxiety in early adolescence, particularly among girls.¹⁵

The single strongest predictor of exposure to online harm identified to the Committee, is the age at which children gain unsupervised access to the internet. It was also highlighted that many children gain independent internet access before puberty and this has profound implications for rates of exposure to pornographic content, and on sexual development in particular sexual violence.

Stakeholders identified risks that the internet can pose to children and young people including online fraud, violence and hate speech, cyberbullying, grooming for sexual exploitation, trafficking and child pornography, and targeting by criminal or extremist groups. It was also suggested that generative AI has not created new digital harms for children and young people but rather has exacerbated risks of existing harms. The gendered nature of emerging online harms was emphasised to the Committee, with algorithms amplifying influencer cultures which are increasingly normalising misogyny, entitlement and sexual harassment, especially among boys, while escalating the risks to

¹⁴ GenFree Written Submission, 1.

¹⁵ ESRI Written Submission, 1.

girls through image-based abuse and the misuse of nudification tools. Data from the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD) support model has shown that the same categories of online harm recur across schools, regions and time.

Harms and risks identified in written submissions and oral evidence presented to the Committee by stakeholders, children and young people included:

- Inappropriate and harmful content
 - Data has shown that:
 - approximately one quarter of primary school children, aged between eight and 12 years, were "bothered or upset" by harmful online content, including scams, harassment, horror or sexual material and that such exposure was linked in commentary by educators to sleep disruption, anxiety and emotional distress among children;¹⁶
 - Content identified during the discussion included adult and age inappropriate such as illegal, offensive, harmful, anxiety inducing, eating disorders, self-harm, suicide, sexual material, violence, and extremism, and content that while not violative of platform policies, if seen in concentration could be problematic; and
 - Accounts of 13-year-olds receiving higher levels of harmful content across most platforms than accounts of 18-year-olds.¹⁷
- Recommender algorithms and systems
 - Exposure to inappropriate content through AI recommender systems or chatbots;
 - Manipulate content to amplify harmful content with hateful, violent and polarising content generating much more engagement than facts or tolerant conversations, and promoting regressive and discriminatory ideologies;
 - Algorithmically amplified toxic influencer cultures present a dual harm: they undermine boys' emotional wellbeing, empathy and healthy identity development, while simultaneously escalating the risk of sexualised and gendered harms to girls;

¹⁶ Transcript, 5 March 2026, 4.

¹⁷ Transcript, 29 January 2026, 6.

- Exacerbate the strength of addiction particularly of young people in relation to content that promotes masculinity, traditional gender roles and content related to unhealthy eating habits; and
- Use of personal data to target children and young people which undermines their right to privacy.
- Platform design features
 - including infinite scroll, and autoplay and algorithmic recommendations, with excessive time spent scrolling associated with reduced time available for sleep, homework and interactions with friends and family.
- Bullying and cyberbullying
 - Data provided indicates the prevalence of this harm, including:
 - 6.4% of second-year post-primary students reported online bullying victimisation at least once a month, with boys (9.6%) more than twice as likely as girls (3.8%) to report monthly online victimisation;¹⁸
 - 60% of young people reported having witnessed cyberbullying on social networks, highlighting that many encounter online bullying even if they are not direct targets;¹⁹
 - Among primary school children aged 8 – 12, 22% reported experiencing cyberbullying, whereas 34% of 12 – 15-year-olds in secondary school experienced cyberbullying; with both groups most commonly reporting being kept out of chat/groups, and receiving hurtful messages;²⁰
 - Online behaviours through social media represent the greatest single contributor to bullying and interpersonal conflict experienced by young people;
 - Online bullying is a significant minority experience and that bystander exposure is even more common making bystander dynamics a critical component of understanding bullying in the digital age;
 - The lack of accountability for users who mistreat others, and the impact that this can have including self-harm and suicide; and

¹⁸ O'Higgins Norman et al., 2026, in review cited in DCU Anti-Bullying Centre Written Submission, 5.

¹⁹ Sanmartin et al 2023 cited in DCU Anti-Bullying Centre Written Submission, 5.

²⁰ [A Life Behind Screens](#)

- Continuation of school-related peer pressure, negative interactions and bullying beyond the school environment through social media.
- Reinforcement of bias and discrimination
 - Data provided included
 - Research by BelongTo in 2023 found that 87% of LGBTQ+ young people had witnessed or experienced anti-LGBTQ+ hate and harassment on social media in the previous year, with social media companies taking action in 1 in 5 reported cases;²¹
 - A recent survey published by the OCO found that 63% of young people said they came across views they would consider extreme online, in contrast to 6% in real life;²²
 - AI developments risk increasing threats to children and young people's right to freedom from discrimination when bias leads to unfair outcomes for people with similar characteristics;²³
 - While online spaces can provide ethnic minority young people with opportunities for cultural connection and representation, they are also frequently exposed to racist and hostile discourses; and
 - Travellers also face discrimination and hate online which have been described as 'cruel words attacking you and everyone in the images for how you look, making fun of you, and belittling your heritage'.²⁴
- Breaches of privacy and misuse of data
 - Privacy protection; and
 - AI through pervasive data collection, scraping and processing, pose a serious threat to children's privacy.²⁵
- Grooming and stranger danger,
 - A report has found that stranger contact is common, with almost 65% of children contacted by a stranger in an online game;²⁶

²¹ 2022 School Climate Survey cited in NYCI Written Submission, 17.

²² Transcript, 23 April 2026, 7; Transcript, 29 January 2026, 4.

²³ CRA Written Submission, 9.

²⁴ Hoey, J. (2024) 'Racial abuse online: Irish Travellers and the consequences of weak legislation', Travellers Voice, 29 November cited in NYCI Written Submission, 17.

²⁵ CRA Written Submission, 9.

²⁶ Barnardo's online gaming report cited in Transcript, 5 February 2026, 3.

- In a gaming environment it can take 45 minutes for a grooming situation to develop, but that this can be as little as 19 seconds;²⁷
- Children are being contacted by adults online who try to move them from open public online spaces to encrypted ones where their vulnerability is heightened;
- Making friendships through online gaming with people they had never met in person, who lived abroad, were older gamers, and concealing this from their parents; and
- Sharing too much information without realising or fully understanding the risks including contact from strangers who are not who they claim to be.
- Child sexual exploitation and online sexual harms
 - Data relating to this harm includes:
 - A survey of 4,000 children reported that 1 in 8 had a sexual image of them sent without their consent;²⁸
 - a 166% increase in reports of self-generated child sexual abuse material (CSAM) in Ireland in 2024,²⁹ and a further 10.8% rise in 2025;³⁰
 - 90% of mainstream porn, the kind being targeted at children online, contains physical aggression, coercion, or violence, which is increasingly normalised, with 94% of that violence being perpetrated against women, who are mostly directed to respond with a neutral or pleasurable expression;³¹
 - An increase of 1,325% in reports of sexual extortion involving generative AI in 2024, with Ireland receiving almost 28,000 reports;³²
 - Deepfake pornography makes up 98% of all deepfake videos online, and 99% of the individuals targeted in deepfake pornography are women;³³

²⁷ Transcript, 29 January 2026, 6.

²⁸ Transcript, 30 April 2026, 4.

²⁹ NYCI Written Submission, 13.

³⁰ [Irish Internet Hotline: Annual Report 2025 - The work you don't see.](#)

³¹ GenFree Written Submission, 4.

³² NCMEC CyberTipline Report (2024) and NCMEC (2024) CyberTipline Reports by Country referenced in NYCI Written Submission, 14.

³³ Transcript, 23 April 2026, 5.

- Unrestricted access to online pornography represents one of the most significant and under-regulated risks;
- Child sexual exploitation through child abuse, trafficking, sharing intimate images, and deepfakes;
- Generative AI can be used to create CSAM and non-consensual intimate imagery, and has the potential to produce a significant increase in CSAM;
- Technology facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, including coerced exposure to sexual content, online solicitation, and sexual extortion; and
- Violence and harmful messaging contained within pornography with non-fatal strangulation becoming ubiquitous in pornography and now believed by many teenagers to be a normal part of a sexual interaction.
- AI companions / Chatbot friends
 - Data regarding the use and experience of children and young people include:
 - Approximately one in three teens have used AI companions for social interaction and relationships, including role-playing, romantic interactions, emotional support, friendship, or conversation practice;³⁴
 - One in three teen AI companion users report:
 - feeling uncomfortable with something an AI companion has said or done, and
 - have chosen to discuss important or serious matters with AI companions instead of real people;³⁵
 - Create an additional dimension of risk and have been found to foster trust, crossing boundaries between real and mechanical responses, may reinforce negative feelings and push children to harmful mental states or activities; and
 - Concern was expressed regarding the level of positive validation provided and the resulting bond that is created.
- Misinformation and disinformation

³⁴ NYCI Written Submission, 16.

³⁵ Robb, M.B., & Mann, S. (2025) cited in NYCI Written Submission, 16.

- Young people often encounter mis- and disinformation, not through high-profile accounts, but via smaller “mimic accounts”, comment sections, and closed online safe spaces such as buy-and-sell groups;
- Young people are more adept at spotting political misinformation, but struggle more with other forms, particularly “self-help” misinformation related to health and finance, as well as recognising AI-generated content;
- AI-generated misinformation is becoming more realistic and harder to detect;
- Harmful impact of misinformation, with regular exposure violating children’s rights under the UNCRC to receive information that supports their development and well-being;
- The targeting of misinformation to children and young people including healthcare, dieting advice, and harmful lifestyle trends; and
- Young people are using social media for mental health information instead of professional supports, which presents significant risks as the content may be inaccurate or misleading.

Consequences of online harm

The impact of technology on children is a complex public health and children’s rights issue. The risks associated with social media may emerge subtly and may not always present as a clear decline in well-being or mental health. Negative impacts of increased digital technology and social media use on health, mental health and development were detailed in evidence to the Committee, including:

- Excessive or problematic use is associated with anxiety, low self-esteem, sleep disruption, and reduced well-being;³⁶
- A large-scale international study has found that teenagers who spend five hours or more per day online are approximately 70% more likely than those who don’t, to exhibit at least one major suicide risk factor;³⁷

³⁶ World Health Organization, 2024; Sanders, T. et al., 2024; Twenge & Campbell, 2018; and Montag, C. et al., 2024 cited in Vicky O’Rourke Written Submission, 3.

³⁷ Twenge, J. M., Joiner, T. E., Rogers, M. L., & Martin, G. N. (2018). *Increases in depressive symptoms, suicide-related outcomes, and suicide rates among U.S. adolescents after 2010*. Clinical Psychological Science cited in GenFree Written Submission, 3.

- Sleep disruption is a critical mechanism linking digital use to poor mental health outcomes, as late-night device use, constant notifications, and fear of missing out can significantly reduce sleep duration and quality;³⁸
- Excessive screen exposure has been associated with sedentary behaviour, obesity risk, musculoskeletal pain, and visual strain;³⁹
- Evidence has suggested that more than 10% of children exhibit behaviours consistent with addiction, including an inability to control social media usage, withdrawal symptoms and facing negative consequences in their lives as a result of excessive use;⁴⁰ and
- Schools are increasingly dealing with the consequences of online harm. Issues that originate outside the school gate are manifesting inside classrooms and are affecting behaviour, learning, relationships and overall well-being.⁴¹

4. Tools and Features for Age-appropriate Experiences Online

Social media platforms and service providers identified a number of features and tools that have been developed and introduced to protect children and young people and to provide age-appropriate experiences online.

Meta stated that:

we have fundamentally changed how teenagers experience our platforms. Rather than simply providing parents and teens with the tools to manage their own experiences, we have rolled out teen accounts on Instagram, Facebook and Messenger, which place teens in age-appropriate experiences with built-in restrictions and parental oversight.⁴²

The features of teen accounts include built-in protections, such as private accounts by default, the strictest content control settings with users under 18 placed into a 13+ content setting, overnight notifications turned off, and app usage reminders after 60 minutes. It was also highlighted that the ability to send nude images through direct messaging to each other is turned off by default.

³⁸ GenFree Written Submission, 3.

³⁹ GenFree Written Submission, 3.

⁴⁰ World Health Organization (WHO), 2024. Teens, screens and mental health cited in Vicky O'Rourke Written Submission, 4.

⁴¹ Transcript, 5 March 2026, 3. Similarly, IPPN Written Submission, 5.

⁴² Transcript, 7 May 2026, 3.

Technology has also been deployed by Meta to proactively identify accounts suspected to belong to teenagers, and to place those accounts into teen protection accounts with AI being used to detect underage accounts by analysing profiles for contextual clues.

Other steps for online safety include simplified reporting processes that allow users to flag suspected underage accounts, and strengthened security measures to prevent new accounts being set up by underage users. The use of AI for the detection of CSAM, with the vast majority of the material being removed prior to it being reported.

TikTok outlined the safeguards included by default on its platform including private accounts by default, restrictions on direct messaging, a 60-minute screen time limit, and a total of 50 pre-set safety settings designed for younger people. Additionally, it was outlined that new features have been added to parental controls that were introduced five years ago. Improvements to safety technologies and content moderation processes were noted and it was stated that in Ireland,

- 95% of user-reported content was removed within two hours of being reported;
- 98% of violative videos are proactively detected and removed before they are ever reported; and
- 90% of videos that break the company's rules are removed before they receive a single view.

According to TikTok, automated technology removed the vast majority of violative content before it was reported to the platform. A combination of AI, multimodal models, large language models and people are used to moderate content. AI models have increased in accuracy with current rates reported at over 90% and also decreased response times. TikTok's dispersion tool was also referenced, which aims to make sure that users do not have a concentrated, narrow experience and provides new forms of content to ensure a diverse range of material.

Direct messaging is completely disabled for TikTok users aged 13 to 16, and this is mandatory.

AI technology has been deployed by TikTok to identify children under 13 who are on the platform through circumvention of age requirements, and where such accounts are identified, they are removed from the platform. Similarly, those with 18+ accounts have been moved to the relevant age-appropriate account experience.

Family pairing allows parents or guardians to customise safety settings for their children. While teenagers can increase their own restrictions, they cannot reduce those set by the parent or guardian.

In response to questions from Members, it was stated that safety by design is followed, and that people with a variety of backgrounds including child development, clinical psychology, and law enforcement are involved in decisions regarding policy and products. TikTok stated that 'We would not say it is designed to be addictive'.⁴³

Snap Inc. advised that their platform was intentionally designed to be different from traditional social media and that Snapchat opens directly to a camera interface, encouraging people to talk to close friends in real time rather than broadcast to large public audiences. The company's approach to safety was articulated as grounded in young people's rights, particularly the UNCRC.⁴⁴ It was commented that:

At Snap, this starts with product design. We take steps to make it harder for strangers to find and contact teens. We default under 18s into more protective settings, and we reduce the prominence of public content in their online experience. We invest heavily in proactive detection of the gravest harms, including grooming for sexual purposes, sexual exploitation and self-harm. We report illegal child sexual abuse material to the relevant authorities.⁴⁵

It was stated that design choices delineate between teen experiences and over 18s including: teens cannot be messaged by someone they have not added as a friend or do not have in their phone contacts, and an in-app warning prompting them to pause and consider the contact when chatting with someone they may not know.

The dynamics of group chats were acknowledged as a possible source of bullying/cyberbullying and the Committee was informed that Snap Inc. is actively considering protections in this regard such as mechanisms for existing groups and settings regarding notifications. An announcement regarding product changes in respect of this is expected in the immediate future.

Google emphasised that high-quality, safe and age-appropriate experiences for young people is something that their users can and should expect of them.⁴⁶ It was outlined that

⁴³ Transcript, 7 May 2026, 10; Transcript, 7 May 2026, 11.

⁴⁴ Transcript, 7 May 2026, 5.

⁴⁵ Transcript, 7 May 2026, 5.

⁴⁶ Transcript, 7 May 2026, 6.

their approach is built on three pillars: ‘protecting young people online, respecting families’ unique relationships with technology, and empowering youth to safely learn and explore in the digital world’.⁴⁷ It was highlighted that they:

- build age-appropriate experiences with products such as Family Link and YouTubeKids;
- build products aligned with the developmental stages and needs of children and young people;
- offer tools that give families flexibility to manage their unique relationship with technology; and
- implement policy protections and programmes specifically tailored to youth experiences, including default on privacy protection and features such as bedtime and take-a-break reminders for users under the age of 18.

More recently, Google’s ‘Teen Quality Principles’ were introduced that were developed in collaboration with their family advisory committee which includes clinical psychologists and developmental experts. These principles aim to incentivise creators to ‘create better content that is age appropriate, educational and enriching for young people’.⁴⁸

YouTube does not allow direct messaging for under 18s; however, Google Messages is allowed for under-18s with in-built features that blur nudity, and a pop up asks the sender if they wish to send the message which is on by default for under-18s.

It was also noted that for any Google account set up as an adult account will have a machine learning estimation model applied, and if there is uncertainty regarding the account holder being an adult they are treated as a minor until the company is satisfied that they are over 18.

A shorts timer, an industry first, launched earlier this year, was a tool introduced in recognition of concerns expressed regarding short-form content.⁴⁹

Microsoft’s approach to online safety focuses on three pillars:

- calibration, described as safety by design which builds protections that are proportionate to the risk and sensitive to context;

⁴⁷ Transcript, 7 May 2026, 6.

⁴⁸ Transcript, 7 May 2026, 15.

⁴⁹ Transcript, 7 May 2026, 15.

- content moderation, complements design measures through consistent and transparent processes to prevent, detect and respond to illegal and harmful content and conduct; and
- collaboration, recognises that digital safety is a whole-of-society challenge.

A Gaming Safety Toolkit has been developed with the intention of simplifying parental controls. It provides a set of guardrails that can be deployed in the context of a holistic approach to digital parenting, and suggests ways in which parents might want to use these tools with a child or young person as part of the overall family conversation regarding the online world.⁵⁰

The view was expressed that protections are strongest when paired with initiatives that build awareness, confidence and responsible behaviour. Further details of Microsoft's initiative are outlined in [Appendix 2](#).

Sony Interactive Entertainment declined an invitation to appear before the Committee and instead provided a written submission which detailed its three-pillar approach to online safety:

- Control your experience, includes tools that empower players and parents to tailor their online gaming experiences;
- Shield our players, consists of safety measures to help ensure that play experiences are positive; and
- Enforce our standards, involves monitoring player behaviour to ensure that standards are consistently upheld.

Key features include the ability of players to block, mute and report negative interactions, customisable parental controls, a 'My Account Support Portal', passkey-secure login, 'Text Profanity Filter', machine learning tools to detect bad actors, and skilled moderators to ensure fair and respectful enforcement of the Code of Conduct. Further information can be found in the [written submission](#).

5. Legislation, Regulation and Children's Rights

Findings from a recent survey showed that 50% of EU citizens believe digital rights are well protected, and even fewer consider the digital space safe for children.⁵¹ The pace of digital

⁵⁰ Transcript, 7 May 2026, 20.

⁵¹ NYCI Written Submission, 12.

innovation means legislation struggles to keep pace with emerging technologies, evolving online risks, and the increasingly global nature of digital platforms and services.

In written submission to the Committee, it was stated that:

For Ireland to be successful in effectively protecting children’s rights online, much depends on the implementation of the regulations. If the regulations work well, platforms will diligently assess the risks to children and will take steps to address them. Children and young people will not be faced with illegal or harmful material when they are online. Their data will not be mined for commercial purposes without their consent. There will be effective ways to report offensive content and have it removed. Platforms will ensure that they adequately assess the risks to the physical, moral and mental wellbeing of minors and take steps to mitigate and remove that risk.⁵²

However, the primary responsibility for producing safe products and content rests with the online platforms and those producing online content that children and young people consume. Children, their parents, guardians and caregivers are stakeholders and participants in the digital environment.

Frameworks and Legislation

Provisions aimed at safeguarding children are included in EU frameworks including the General Data Protection Regulation, Digital Services Act, and the Audiovisual Media Services Directive. The EU’s Digital Services Act was described in submission to the Committee as a vital instrument that establishes a mandatory, systemic, and rights-based regulatory framework for platform accountability and child safety, with global significance. However, the Committee heard that the effectiveness of the legislation is yet to be fully demonstrated. In addition, the EU Artificial Intelligence Act became partly operational in February 2025 and will continue to be incrementally operationalised over the next few years.

These measures were described as remaining ‘largely principle-based and lack the specificity needed to be effective without protracted and expensive legal processes.’⁵³

Coimisiún na Meán (CnaM) expressed the view that under Article 28 of the EU Digital Services Act there is a clear expectation that children should not be exposed to recommender systems that have addictive design features, create toxic feeds, infinite

⁵² CRA Written Submission, 9.

⁵³ NYCI Written Submission, 12.

scrolling or recommend inappropriate or adult-only content. It was commented during public session that the current framework does not provide a clear regulatory environment.

The Guidelines for the Protection of Minors under Article 28 of the EU Digital Services Act are of particular relevance as they are the ‘most comprehensive statement to date on giving effect to children’s best interests and fostering a culture of rights-respecting digital services’.⁵⁴ The non-binding guidelines include:

- A requirement for age assurance or verification if a platform offers a service to children, ensuring that the platform can identify which of its users are children;
- That addictive design features, like infinite scrolling, pop-up notifications and the promotion of streaks, must either not be made available to children or be disabled by default; and
- That children must not be exposed to inappropriate content like pornography or extreme violence.

However, under these guidelines companies are allowed to assess their own level of risk as high, medium or low, and the view was expressed that it is not clear what constitutes medium or low. It was highlighted that the upcoming revision of the Audiovisual Media Services Directive provides an opportunity to:

modernise the EU’s audiovisual legal framework and to address new issues, including the role of influencers and content creators alongside pressing challenges of Artificial intelligence and algorithmic risks, mental health, harmful content, cyberbullying, and gender-based harassment.⁵⁵

In written submission it was stated that:

The EU AI Act specifically notes the vulnerability of children to the risks of AI but has failed – for example – to designate AI companions as a high risk to children who may fail to distinguish between real and artificial conversation or images and thus be led into harm or danger by the failure of online platforms to sufficiently flag the difference.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Brian O’Neill Written Submission, 5.

⁵⁵ Brian O’Neill Written Submission, 7.

⁵⁶ CRA Written Submission, 9.

Responsibility for regulation

Very large video sharing online platforms with European headquarters in Ireland are regulated by CnaM under the Online Safety Code, and the EU Digital Services Act with responsibility shared between the Irish Digital Services Co-ordinator at CnaM and the EU Commission. CnaM has the authority to monitor and enforce compliance with the Online Safety Code, Digital Services Act and Guidelines, and the Terrorist Content Act.⁵⁷ These require platforms to have effective age-assurance measures, prevent children from accessing pornographic or extremely violent content, and that they take steps to ensure that children do not access harmful content.

Companies that do not qualify under the very large video sharing online platform may be subject to regulation in Ireland under the Digital Services Act and its guidelines for the Protection for Minors, as this act applies to a wider range of platform sizes and prohibits illegal and certain harmful material. The Irish regulator may still act as co-supervisor.

For other social media platforms with a weaker or non-existent link to Ireland, a complaint may still be made to the Irish regulator, but the power and obligation to supervise, monitor and investigate is the responsibility of a regulator in another jurisdiction.

Some platforms will not be subject to regulation. Another concern raised was that when large platforms introduce age assurance measures, some users may use or move to smaller platforms that are less regulated and less moderated but still cause harm.

Under Ireland's legislative framework, CnaM holds platforms to account regarding their obligations which include that they must:

- Adhere to obligations to keep users safe online, to risk-assess services and mitigate those risks;
- Remove illegal content once it has been reported;
- Protect the safety, security and privacy of children online;
- Restrict video content which is harmful to children or incites hatred or violence on grounds of protected characteristics, terrorism and child sex abuse material (for video sharing platforms);
- Put effective age-assurance measures in place if their platform allows adult content, such as pornography and extreme violence; and
- Must have parental controls.

⁵⁷ CRA Written Submission, 6.

However, a stakeholder commented that the current framework does not provide a clear regulatory environment. Furthermore, it was remarked that legislation to protect children has tended to be developed in silos with many overlapping; for example, online harms (illegal and harmful content, cyberbullying), privacy and data protection (data flows, algorithmic processing), and consumer law (targeted advertising, addictive design).

The Data Protection Commission also has a role as the age of digital consent in Ireland has been set at 16, meaning that online service providers that rely on consent as the legal basis for processing data must obtain consent of the child's parents in order to offer online services to them.

Regulatory concerns and recommendations

The view was expressed that efforts to provide adequate legislation to tackle CSAM are stalling, that the pace of progress in updating the EU's Child Sexual Abuse Material Directive is slow, and that there has been a failure to enact a regulation on the topic. This leaves little or no effective deterrent against the cruelty and exploitation of children for sexual abuse online, or from the dissemination of CSAM. Under current legislation there are offences for individuals and bodies corporate for both the generation and circulation of CSAM and intimate abuse imagery. It was acknowledged that one of the issues for progressing investigations was access to data and that this has been addressed at Commission level. Furthermore, it was noted that the e-evidence regulation is due to come into effect this year.

A number of regulatory uncertainties were highlighted to the Committee including:

- Interplay of laws: Overlaps and potential inconsistencies between frameworks such as the Digital Services Act and the Artificial Intelligence Act;
- Private Space Gaps: Regulatory gaps in the protection of minors in private communications spaces or "interpersonal communication services", particularly regarding end-to-end encrypted platforms like WhatsApp; and
- Hybrid environments: such as gaming platforms, chatbots, and AI agents, that do not fit easily into traditional types of services and complicate the application of existing laws.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Brian O'Neill Written Submission, 5.

It was noted that CnaM are considering if they should advocate for the expansion of the list of high-risk systems under the AI Act, to bring chatbots within regulation.⁵⁹

In evidence to the Committee, it was outlined that a digital duty of care is being considered in Australia which would place a duty of care on online services to take reasonable steps to prevent foreseeable harms. This would shift the responsibility for managing harms from the individual to the service providers and also prevent harm.⁶⁰

A number of stakeholders made recommendations to the Committee including the introduction of new legislation, the consolidation of existing frameworks and the strengthening of their enforcement. Further details can be found in the relevant submissions; see [Appendix 1](#). These suggestions included:

- A Code of conduct for the protection of minors;⁶¹
- To end Digital exceptionalism;⁶²
- Introduce Individual Executive Criminal Liability;⁶³
- Require mandatory, trusted third-party privacy-preserving age verification;⁶⁴
- Establish an Online Services Classification System;⁶⁵
- Enforce Safety-by-Design Standards, and introduce legislation that would operationalise safety-by-design by mandating the adoption of approaches that (i) limit predatory design features, such as infinite scrolling and autoplay, (ii) embeds behavioural design into platform design, and (iii) features that have been shown to reduce harm such as skip options on harmful content, reverse-chronological feeds, and gamified guidance as default settings;⁶⁶
- Support the EU Digital Fairness Act;⁶⁷
- Introduce EU wide legislation to require platforms to better regulate harmful material and to criminalise the spread of CSAM online;⁶⁸
- Introduce robust legislation to protect children from exposure to online content, ensuring their safety and well-being so that every child can grow, learn and thrive in a safe digital environment;⁶⁹

⁵⁹ Transcript, 29 January 2026, 22.

⁶⁰ Transcript, 20 January 2026, 26.

⁶¹ Brian O'Neill Written Submission, 10 – 11.

⁶² GenFree Written Submission, 5.

⁶³ GenFree Written Submission, 5.

⁶⁴ GenFree Written Submission, 5.

⁶⁵ GenFree Written Submission, 5.

⁶⁶ GenFree Written Submission, 5; Transcript, 5 February 2026, 4; ESRI Written Submission, 3.

⁶⁷ GenFree Written Submission, 5.

⁶⁸ Transcript, 5 March 2026, 5; IPPN Written Submission, 4.

⁶⁹ Transcript, 5 March 2026, 5.

- Investigative and information-gathering powers for CnaM before opening a formal investigation;⁷⁰
- Align the powers under the Online Safety Code and the Digital Services Act so that CnaM has the same powers to compel people to produce information under both mechanisms;⁷¹
- Commence Section 30 of the [Data Protection Act](#) which specifically looks at micro-targeting and profiling of children;⁷² and
- Update the definitions of child sexual abuse material and child pornography within the Child Trafficking and Pornography Act 1998.⁷³

Measures suggested by the children and young people to assist with making the online world safer included:

- Increased penalties for companies found to be acting against legislation or regulations;⁷⁴
- Introduction of legislation that would make social media companies accountable for their role in facilitating cyberbullying;⁷⁵ and
- Stricter regulation and oversight of advertising and product placement on social media to ensure that safe, tested, age-appropriate, and regulated products are promoted.⁷⁶

6. Consideration of an Under 16 Social Media Ban

Shortly after the Committee commenced its consideration of the topic, a number of countries introduced or proposed age-based restrictions on social media use for children and young people. Australia has introduced a ban preventing children under 16 from accessing certain social media platforms. The French parliament approved a bill on July 21, 2026, to ban social media use for children under 15, however France's Constitutional Council struck it down in August 2026. Subsequently, a new proposal for a ban has been submitted. Similar restrictions are being considered in several other EU countries. The President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, commissioned a special

⁷⁰ Transcript, 29 January 2026, 9; Transcript, 29 January 2026, 25.

⁷¹ Transcript, 29 January 2026, 9.

⁷² Transcript, 5 February 2026, 14.

⁷³ Transcript, 5 February 2026, 24.

⁷⁴ Transcript, 30 April 2026, 6.

⁷⁵ Transcript, 30 April 2026, 8.

⁷⁶ Transcript, 30 April 2026, 27.

expert panel to develop a strong and practical European approach to keep children safe online and potential age restrictions for social media. Recently, the report by the special panel was published, [Child safety online: protecting and empowering minors in a digital world](#).

After the public hearings on this topic had concluded and during the drafting of the report, the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in the State of the Union address noted that the European Commission is proposing the EU KIDS Act, which was subsequently announced on 17 September and will complement existing rules. The Act is built around four pillars namely:

- A social media delay;
- Safety by design principles;
- Age assurance and parental responsibilities; and
- Strong enforcement.

The EU KIDS Act proposes a gradual uptake of social media and video-sharing platforms, with an EU-wide minimum age of 15 for minors to create autonomous accounts. The proposal also includes the following:

- no accounts permitted for children under 13, children can access specially-designed child-friendly video-sharing services through their guardians' accounts;
- From 13 to under 15, mini social media accounts and video-sharing accounts set up and supervised by their guardians with limited features and time restriction; and
- From 15 to under 18, autonomous accounts without prior parental consent, operating within a safe-by-design environment can be set up.

The EU KIDS Act obliges all online services designed for children to follow strict rules and principles to ensure children's safety online including:

- No addictive design features;
- Recommender algorithms that are safe for children;
- Safe account settings to keep content private and minimise the risk of unwanted contact;
- Easy to use parental controls; and
- No options for minors to livestream.

Age assurance measures will require that platforms must verify the age of users opening an account as well as to check the age of users who already have an account once the rules come into force. The EU age verification tool or other reliable, secure, and privacy-preserving third-party solutions can be used to verify the user's age.

Enforcement measures include:

- Providers of large online platforms will have to prove their services are safe by design with an ex-ante report;
- Very large online platforms will have to submit a compliance plan to the Commission for new services, features or functionalities;
- Fines can reach 6% of total worldwide annual turnover. An expedited procedure applies for services and systems supervised by the Commission with the aim of concluding investigations within 90 days; and
- National authorities designated by Member States will supervise the new rules for video games that are not online platforms.

The Government has committed to supporting work on age verification solutions, working with EU Member States, and through the implementation of Ireland's Government Digital Wallet. The Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport, Patrick O'Donovan T.D., has stated that the position of the Government on restricting access to social media platforms for children under 16 years of age is set out in the National Digital and AI Strategy, [Digital Ireland – Connecting our People, Securing our Future](#), and is informed by the position that any decision on a digital age of majority would be better taken by the EU and EU Member States together. The Government is committed to working closely with like-minded EU member states on proposals to restrict social media access for children and young people, with 16 being the Government's preferred age threshold. Across the EU there are different views on whether there should be a digital age of majority, and if there was such an age, what that age should be and whether it should be an outright ban or a ban subject to parental consent. Under Ireland's Presidency of the Council of the EU strengthening online safety for young people is a key priority and high-level meetings and conferences on this topic have been convened.

Research and perspectives on the effectiveness of bans

In written submission to the Committee, it was stated that:

There has been much debate recently about whether restrictions on social media access—or a “social media ban”—should be implemented in response to widespread concerns regarding their impact on youth mental health and well-being. This is a large and complex issue, not only in terms of the evidence for and against such an approach, but also in what is actually being proposed. [. . .] The motivations behind proposals for such radical measures are understandable and reflect genuine public concerns about the generational impact of platforms that are severely degraded by toxicity, lack robust content moderation, and exhibit inadequate responses to long-standing issues in regulating for safe digital spaces.⁷⁷

Early reports suggest mixed experiences among adolescents and parents in Australia, while implementation evidence points to challenges with age verification, circumvention, and migration to alternative platforms as compensatory behaviour. Recently published research from [Barnes et al](#) has found that despite the intent of Australia’s Social Media Minimum Age Act 2024 to delay access to social media platforms and reduce the potential for online harms, little evidence was found of immediate substantive reductions in reported social media use by adolescents under 16 years. Results indicated that more than 85% of participants under 16 were still using social media platforms covered by the legislation predominantly via use of their own accounts, with 66% of whom reported exposure to platform age-verification. Efforts to circumvent restrictions were also reported. The study suggests that implementation of age assurance measures by social media platforms is suboptimal, and that the effects of the Act on social media use seem to be limited. However, the study highlights that its findings reflect only the early stages of implementation. The authors note that the effects of the Act may increase over time as platforms strengthen age-verification measures and enforcement activity develops. They therefore conclude that longer-term monitoring and evaluation will be required to assess whether the legislation achieves its intended objectives and to better understand its broader impacts on young people's online behaviours and wellbeing.

⁷⁷ Brian O'Neill Written Submission, 10.

Research presented to the Committee on restrictive policies and bans found that:

- evidence from UK schools with over 1,200 students found no evidence that restrictive school policies were associated with overall phone and social media use or better mental well-being in adolescents;⁷⁸
- best practice randomised controlled trials and observational studies have evaluated the impact of smartphone bans and digital detoxes, with mixed overall findings;⁷⁹ and
- a large portion of research regarding school bans showed no significant changes in the mental health and well-being of participants, their average time spent on social media or their educational outcomes.⁸⁰

Stakeholders noted that most bans target a limited number of platforms, potentially leaving children and young people exposed to similar risks across a wider range of online services.

In written submissions to the Committee, it was stated that:

The emerging evidence suggests that blanket bans are highly visible and rapidly implemented interventions, but they do not directly address the underlying drivers of harm, such as addictive design, algorithmic amplification, and exposure to harmful content, contact, conduct and contracts. As a result, the risks that motivate these policies are likely to persist for older adolescents and for younger users who bypass restrictions and use alternative platforms, raising questions about whether bans alone can deliver sustained improvements in children's digital well-being.⁸¹

Undoubtedly, it's attractive to adult decision makers. It is something that can be done and one is seen to be doing something, it [would] not stop children accessing social media content on their browsers, nor going onto other platforms not subject to the ban which, as less regulated, may have even less protections than those on the banned platforms.⁸²

⁷⁸ Goodyear et al., 2025 cited in DCU Anti-Bullying Centre Written Submission, 8.

⁷⁹ DCU Anti-Bullying Centre Written Submission, 5.

⁸⁰ DCU Anti-Bullying Centre Written Submission, 5.

⁸¹ ESRI Written submission, 3.

⁸² CRA perspective quoted in IPPN Written Submission, 4.

A similar viewpoint was expressed by Meta:

Australia has brought in a certain model targeting a number of companies. What we have seen there is that other apps are being used, perhaps apps that do not have the same number of safety restrictions and do not have the same amount of regulation - let us be clear about it. If we are trying to achieve an ecosystem solution to ensuring that parents are involved in deciding which apps are not being used by their children, and basing that decision on what are the safety tools that are in place on each of those services, the Operating System-level solution we have been talking about would be the way forward. It would also not allow for the VPN-type workaround being used in Australia.⁸³

A number of stakeholders expressed reservations regarding the introduction of a social media ban, citing that:

- current bans in other countries do not include gaming and generative-AI platforms, and have practical challenges in effective implementation;⁸⁴
- banning social media use does not mean the risk is gone, it just means one category of risk is gone;⁸⁵
- banning children from certain online services places responsibility on children and their parents, potentially discouraging them from seeking help when problems arise, while failing to hold platforms and companies accountable for creating safer online environments;⁸⁶
- Very poor evidence that social media bans work or that they improve mental well-being or reduce harm, particularly when they are not accompanied by broader educational, regulatory and rights-based approaches;⁸⁷ and
- Outright bans might worsen rather than solve the problem as such measures fail to address the root causes of online risks and could have unintended negative consequences.⁸⁸

⁸³ Transcript, 7 May 2026, 23.

⁸⁴ DCU Anti-Bullying Centre Written Submission, 8.

⁸⁵ Transcript, 29 January 2026, 15.

⁸⁶ Transcript, 5 February 2026, 20.

⁸⁷ Livingstone, 2026; Radtke et al., 2022 cited in DCU Anti-Bullying Centre Written Submission, 8; Transcript, 5 February 2026, 6.

⁸⁸ EU Kids Online. (2025). Bans are problematic. London School of Economics and Political Science cited in Brian O'Neill Written Submission, 10.

Children and young people's perspectives

As referenced earlier in this report, the Committee engaged with children and young people who agreed with the views expressed above in terms of the ineffectiveness of bans as a measure, challenges and circumvention of age verification, addressing the underlying issues with social media, and the importance of holding platforms accountable. Young people expressed the views that:

As much as we like to believe that banning will fix the online issues, it will not.⁸⁹

Social media is such an important part of our lives.... It is our school... our work and passions... I would not be the person I am without the social media I have had access to.⁹⁰

There are so many benefits to social media we need to highlight to ensure those are kept safe when we are putting in regulations that will benefit children in the long run.⁹¹

If a ban was implemented it would be catastrophic.⁹²

Young people also provided the following additional perspectives:

- Children and young people do not need to be removed from the online world; they need to be better protected within it;⁹³
- A ban would:
 - shield children and young people from the opportunity to find a community, keep up-to-date and stay connected with the world;⁹⁴
 - deny young people access to the benefits of the online world, and that in practice it would be difficult to enforce given how ineffective existing age-verification technology can be;⁹⁵ and

⁸⁹ Transcript, 23 April 2026, 5.

⁹⁰ Transcript, 23 April 2026, 12.

⁹¹ Transcript, 23 April 2026, 12.

⁹² Transcript, 23 April 2026, 13.

⁹³ Transcript, 23 April 2026, 4.

⁹⁴ Transcript, 23 April 2026, 5 – 6.

⁹⁵ Transcript, 23 April 2026, 7.

- prevent young people from developing the skills needed to use it properly;⁹⁶
- The onus would be put on children and young people to stay off social media, rather than making social media channels safer in the first place, and the pressures on parents could be exacerbated as they would have to make sure that their children are not bypassing restrictions;⁹⁷
- While some initial relief maybe felt at the introduction of a ban to protect children and young people from harmful online content, that the relief would be short-lived as a ban could leave children and young people unprepared to deal with the challenges and risks, and may be ineffective in the long term;⁹⁸
- The educational supports, including guidance on the safe use of social media would not be developed or provided;⁹⁹
- Social media develops a sense of responsibility among young people and helps them develop skills as they transition into adulthood;¹⁰⁰ and
- A ban would ignore the views of children and young people that were put to the Committee.¹⁰¹

Research provided in written submission to the Committee indicates that neither primary nor post-primary students have been meaningfully consulted on proposed smartphone bans and other issues related to social media and the internet, nor has their feedback been systematically sought in contexts where such bans have already been implemented. It was highlighted that this raises significant concerns in relation to Article 12 of the UNCRC, as children and young people have been excluded from decisions that directly affect their daily lives.

In advance of appearing before the Committee, Webwise consulted its Youth Advisory Panel to explore their perspectives on a potential social media ban for under-16s, with 20% supporting an outright ban and 80% against it. A summary of the view was presented to the Committee:

⁹⁶ Transcript, 23 April 2026, 13.

⁹⁷ Transcript, 23 April 2026, 7; Transcript, 23 April 2026, 16.

⁹⁸ Transcript, 23 April 2026, 14.

⁹⁹ Transcript, 23 April 2026, 14.

¹⁰⁰ Transcript, 30 April 2026, 13.

¹⁰¹ Transcript, 23 April 2026, 14.

Those in favour of a ban raised serious concerns about harmful content, mental health impacts and excessive screen time. Those against a ban shared concerns about those risks while emphasising that social media plays an important role in learning, connection, news and entertainment. Many argued that banning access would fail to address underlying problems such as mis- and disinformation, cyberbullying and harmful content, and could push young people into less regulated online spaces.¹⁰²

Similarly, the views expressed by members of the CnaM Youth Advisory Committee were summarised as follows:

... a ban might push young people into unregulated spaces online and shift the problems elsewhere, where they are harder to reach by regulation. They felt it might deter young people who circumvent or find ways to circumvent a ban from reporting if they then subsequently experience harm online because they will feel as though they have done something wrong. They also made the point that children and young people may see the ban as a form of punishment.¹⁰³

A young person expressed the view that a ban would be more favourable for companies than restrictions. It was suggested that the issue should be approached in a manner similar to age-based restrictions in physical settings. For example, while young people can enter a shop, they cannot purchase alcohol. It was commented that restrictions should be content based and linked to age groups, rather than denying access to the entire platform. Another witness also advocated for a phased approach to access in line with their age and maturity, beginning with basic digital activities before progressing to social media, alongside education delivered through formal or informal settings to help young people develop the skills and knowledge needed to navigate the digital world. In contrast, another witness expressed the view that gradual age-based restrictions would be difficult to implement in practice and that Irish people are protective about their rights and that questions would

¹⁰² Transcript, 20 January 2026, 7.

¹⁰³ Transcript, 29 January 2026, 21.

arise as to why the Government should determine the type of account or online experience available to an individual.¹⁰⁴

Consideration of age threshold for social media ban

During public meetings, there were robust discussions regarding the implementation of a ban for under 16-year-olds. During the engagement with children and young people, the conversation began with everyone being clear in their views of being against a ban; however, as discussions progressed reference was made that while some relief may be felt by the introduction of a ban that this could lead to long term regret. It should be recognised that the vast majority of witnesses were not in favour of a ban.

Young people expressed the opinion that a ban for a portion of society would not provide realistic, nuanced, and evidence-based targeted solutions. The discussion emphasised the complexity of the issue, with its layered characteristics and with views often differing depending on age. Young people suggested that effective solutions will not come from restrictions but from building a digital environment that respects their rights, protects their well-being and supports them to thrive. The importance of involving children and young people in discussions regarding new regulations or a ban was highlighted. In written submission, young people emphasised that:

The Government and its desire to keep young people safe is welcomed. It is not believed that a ban will help to keep young people safe. Not only this, but there is a concern that a ban would increase the risks of social media for young people. It is recommended that an alternative approach be adopted to combat these risks.¹⁰⁵

Foróige's National Reference Panel consultations on social media revealed divided views regarding a potential ban for those under 16:

proponents argue it preserves childhood and protects mental health from addictive algorithms, while opponents believe age 16 is too restrictive, fearing it creates digital exclusion and limits educational autonomy.¹⁰⁶

A social media ban for under 16-year-olds was supported by a young person, once communication apps are available to ensure connection between friends and family.

¹⁰⁴ Transcript, 23 April 2026, 22.

¹⁰⁵ NYCI Youth Advisory Group, 9.

¹⁰⁶ Foróige Written Submission, 30 April 2026, 3.

Another suggested that banning social media for teenagers would be difficult as it is embedded in their lives, and that they would find ways around restrictions, with the experience of users in Australia quickly finding workarounds being cited.¹⁰⁷ The opinion was expressed that legislation could slowly reduce reliance on social media over time and that it would no longer be the norm.¹⁰⁸

It was commented that ‘a ban would be more supported or more realistic’ for under 13 years olds, but that the witness would not personally support it and outlined:

- that parents would not receive the support required, and it would place more pressure on them;
- that the underlying issues would remain unaddressed including digital literacy and education in online safety; and
- that additional pressure would be placed on schools.

Another witness expressed the view that under 13-year-olds should be restricted from using social media platforms, in line with the current minimum age requirements, with limited exceptions for communication apps such as WhatsApp. A number of questions were also raised by young people, and Members are of the view that the following should be addressed in advance of any restriction or ban being introduced:

- Which specific harms and risks associated with online spaces a ban would aim to address?
- Whether alternative methods of safeguarding would be more effective? and
- What evidence exists to suggest that a ban is the best course of action?

It is the view of the Committee that robust engagement from online platforms, EU institutions, regulators and legislators is essential to creating a safer digital environment for children. Strong and effective legislation, underpinned by clear regulatory frameworks, is required to set high standards for online safety and accountability. Achieving meaningful and lasting protection for children online will require all stakeholders to work collectively and collaboratively, ensuring that policies, enforcement measures and industry practices are aligned in the best interests of children and young people.

¹⁰⁷ Transcript, 30 April 2026, 13.

¹⁰⁸ Transcript, 30 April 2026, 13.

7. Policy and practice

A significant evolution in policies for children's online safety and well-being was outlined in written submission, from a largely protectionist approach to a shift towards a children's rights-based approach. A children's rights perspective involves a balance between protection, provision and participation. The European Commission's [Better Internet for Kids \(BIK+\) Strategy](#) reflects this perspective with its three pillars (i) safe digital experiences, (ii) digital empowerment, and (iii) active participation. Ireland's Online Safety and Media Regulation Act 2022 was identified as a framework that balances children's rights. Online safety policies should be rooted in children's rights as set out in the UNCRC, and coordinated and sustained policy efforts are needed to:

reaffirm and operationalise fundamental principles relating to children's rights in the digital environment, and to ensure that governance and implementation frameworks are coherent, fit for purpose, and equipped with the necessary authority and resources.¹⁰⁹

Consultation and Engagement with Children and Young People

You cannot build an online world that is safe for young people without building it with them.¹¹⁰

During the engagement with children and young people, it was emphasised that they should be part of the conversation, that their views should be taken seriously and acted upon, and that they wished for their contributions to be heard and considered in policymaking and political discussions. The view was also expressed that young people want to be included in shaping these spaces for the better and not excluded from them. It was also suggested that young people should be supported and given the opportunity, through youth services, school or other forums, to discuss issues themselves.

The members of CnaM's Youth Advisory Committee have played a crucial role in the development of the Online Safety Code aimed at ensuring harmful content, such as cyberbullying, self-harm and dangerous challenges, are addressed and matters relating to online safety.

¹⁰⁹ Brian O'Neill Written Submission, 6.

¹¹⁰ Transcript, 23 April 2026, 23.

Approach

During the Committee's engagement, approaches and vital elements underpinning any strategy to online safety were highlighted. It was stated that too often the conversation focuses on individual responsibility by telling young people to spend less time online or parents to exercise greater control over their children's online activity.

A public health approach was advocated for by a stakeholder, and it was outlined that this would include:

- Working from interventions with parents and young people, all the way to societal-level public health messaging regarding social media use;
- Incorporate an immediate, specific focus on regulatory aspects, ensuring the social media companies fulfil their responsibilities to ensure that their platforms are safe for children and young people; and
- Commercial interests being encouraged by the State to reshape 'the systems and design elements that underpin these platforms' to optimise the value of social media and limit its harm.

A stakeholder suggested placing a focus on developing mindsets that promote health interactions with digital technology, and a balanced view that acknowledges both the positive and negative aspects of social media through digital literacy programmes could assist young people navigate social media more mindfully, reduce the likelihood of negative outcomes, and help build more resilient relationships.

The children and young people identified that 'a variety of considered, well-thought-through solutions' that are 'realistic, nuanced, evidence-based, [and] targeted' are required.¹¹¹ In written submission to the Committee a similar approach was emphasised. It was noted that this approach aligns with the recent recommendations of the Online Health Taskforce particularly in relation to:

- a strong children and young people's rights focus;
- safety-by-design approaches to online services;
- the development of critical digital literacy skills;
- robust enforcement and accountability mechanisms; and

¹¹¹ Transcript, 23 April 2026, 3.

- coherence between EU and national regulatory frameworks.¹¹²

The advantages of a children's rights approach to online safety and participation were outlined. This approach treats children as rights holders and respects all rights set out in the UNCRC, including protection from harm, privacy, freedom of expression, access to information, education and play.

Additional approaches and their components identified by stakeholders included:

- a layered approach that combines legislation, regulation, policy, education and enforcement;
- a combination of whole-school preventative approaches, meaningful platform accountability, proportionate legal enforcement and sustained investment in digital literacy;
- balanced, evidence-informed approaches are needed to protect child development, reduce online harm and support positive digital engagement;
- child safety and child empowerment should form part of all strategies and plans involving digital technology; and
- a holistic, whole-of society approach to online safety.

Opportunities to develop empathy

In written submission, it was highlighted that the United Nations and OECD have recognised empathy as an important foundation for social cohesion and democracy. It was suggested that policy should focus on 'strengthening young people's social ecology to provide more opportunities to develop empathy'.¹¹³ Actions suggested included:

- investing in social outlets for young people, including youth work, sports, and drama, to enhance social connection;
- supporting positive parent-child relationships;
- placing a focus on empathy in online interactions in formal and non-formal education for young people; and
- supporting research into how online environments can be designed to promote empathy.

¹¹² DCU Anti-Bullying Centre Written Submission, 9.

¹¹³ UNESCO Written Submission, 4.

8. Measures to progress online safety

Safety by Design

It was stated to the Committee that:

Parents cannot be expected to keep pace with dangers that children potentially face online. It underlines why safety by design rather than reactive measures after harm has occurred must become the norm.¹¹⁴

Widespread agreement that safety measures should be proactively embedded into the design, content and delivery of all online products and systems was identified in written submission. During public session, the Committee heard that it is the design of the products themselves that is more harmful than the content, with specific reference made to the recommender systems. Concern was also expressed during the hearings about the design of AI chatbots from a policy perspective. It was noted that chatbots are engineered to be agreeable, to imitate empathy and not to challenge users, with challenge identified as part of the therapeutic process. In written submission it was commented that:

online harm must be understood as a child protection, public health, and human rights issue - it requires a whole of society approach and a multistakeholder response. Responsibility must shift decisively from individual users toward the State and digital service providers, through enforceable safety-by-design-based and prevention focussed regulation, meaningful and effective accountability measures, and strong, well-resourced oversight.¹¹⁵

The principles that underpin safety by design were described as a child-friendly, rights-based approach, that if widely adopted, could empower children and reduce risks in their engagement with the digital environment. It was recommended during public hearings that child-centred design needs to be the guiding principle. Furthermore, safety by design has been described as ‘one of the most important approaches’ to protecting children and respecting their rights and it was commented that this should be a ‘top policy priority’.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Transcript, 5 February 2026, 3.

¹¹⁵ GenFree Written Submission, 1.

¹¹⁶ Brian O’Neill Written Submission, 6.

In written submission, it was suggested that age-appropriate design be adopted, encompassing key safety-by-design principles scaled to children's age and developmental stage, as essential for safe, empowering, and rights respecting participation in the digital world. Snap Inc. expressed the view that they see 'real value in stronger age appropriate design requirements'.¹¹⁷ It was noted that a key action under the BIK+ strategy is the development of a comprehensive EU Code of Conduct on age-appropriate design which has not yet been finalised.¹¹⁸ The aim of the code is to reinforce the involvement of industry in protecting children when using digital products, with the ultimate goal of ensuring their privacy, safety and security online.¹¹⁹

During the engagement with children and young people, they highlighted that:

Social media companies need more effective measures to keep young people safe on their platforms, leading with a safety-by design approach and preventing harm in the way that their platform is built.¹²⁰

However, in written submission it was noted that recent research has shown that many claimed safety features on social media platforms either do not operate or perform poorly.¹²¹

Age Assurance and Verification

Age verification does not absolve any individual app or service of the need to ensure that teens have age-appropriate experiences on their platforms.¹²²

During public session, it was acknowledged that age assurance is a complex issue, but critical to delivering age-appropriate experiences. In written submission, it was stated that current regulations oblige platforms to have systems in place which are robust and effective, while protecting the individual's privacy rights, to identify when users are children and to protect them from encountering or accessing inappropriate content online. It was highlighted that robustness of age-assurance varies, with some measures depending on user self-verification, which may be insufficient where a child may encounter harmful or

¹¹⁷ Transcript, 7 May 2026, 5.

¹¹⁸ Brian O'Neill Written Submission, 9

¹¹⁹ Brian O'Neill Written Submission, 9.

¹²⁰ Transcript, 30 April 2026, 5.

¹²¹ ESRI Written Submission, 3.

¹²² Transcript, 7 May 2026, 4.

inappropriate material. Microsoft suggested that ‘discussions on age assurance should focus on solutions that are effective and proportionate and that respect children’s rights to privacy, participation and inclusion’.¹²³

In written submission, reference was made to a previous recommendation made to the European Parliament’s Culture and Education Committee to address harms children may face which stated that:

Age assurance and digital identity systems are necessary but missing components in ensuring the highest level of privacy, safety and security for children online.

Multistakeholder support is needed to overcome barriers to implementation and ensure effectiveness.¹²⁴

During the engagement with social media platforms, differing views emerged regarding the level at which age verification should take place. Meta expressed the view that the most efficient and effective way for age verification to be deployed would be at the operating system or app-store level. Under this model, parents could verify the age of their child once, allowing their child to be placed into age-appropriate experiences across all applications. As previously referenced, the operating system level would allow parents to access the safe tools and would not allow for a VPN workaround. It was acknowledged that irrespective of the method deployed, it must be as easy as possible for parents to use and as privacy protected as possible. In contrast, the view was expressed that proposals at the app-store level are flawed and ineffective. Rationale for this view included that service level responsibility already exists and is enshrined under the Digital Services Act, and that it would place the responsibility on the app store and remove the responsibility from each individual platform to know their users and place the burden of gatekeeping for every app with the app store. It was suggested that the platforms are best placed to know both the people using the services and the risk profile of their platform. Another matter raised was that apps are not the only way that content can be accessed and therefore any kind of app store solution would not cover websites.

The Committee was made aware of advances including the development of a Digital Wallet by the EU Commission. In Ireland the public consultation process for the Government

¹²³ Transcript, 7 May 2026, 8.

¹²⁴ Brian O’Neill Written Submission, 6.

Digital Wallet has been completed and has now moved into a pilot testing phase ahead of a mandatory national rollout by December 2026. The view was expressed in written submission that if the Digital Wallet works as intended it should allow users to prove their age without additional data being shared. It was also stated that this measure may be based on national ID cards in some countries. It was noted that some may choose not to share their information with a government authority, and it was suggested that there will need to be an authorised, scrutinised alternative privacy preserving accessible means of verification.

Report and complaints

Children and those who advocate or care for them can report harmful content, but the decision on whether the complaint is accepted rests with the platform. A binding individual scheme for cases involving harmful content where a user has not obtained satisfaction from the relevant platform(s) is provided by CnaM. However, in written submission, it was stated that reporting mechanisms, mandated by regulations such as the EU Digital Services Act, are often inconsistently implemented and poorly designed.

Recently, several platforms have been subject to investigation for inadequate reporting mechanisms under the Digital Services Act.¹²⁵ It was noted that:

While a strong regulatory response is essential, there is still limited evidence on what makes reporting systems truly effective. Their impact depends on careful, evidence-based design that makes reporting easy and convenient, empowering children and adolescents to report harm.¹²⁶

A stakeholder referenced research that found that feelings of shame and perceived complicity relating to CSAM can create barriers to disclosure for children and young people. It was commented that it is essential to raise awareness and provide education for both adults and young people on the issue.

Suggestions made to the Committee included:

- the need for fast response times when online bullying or inappropriate material is reported;

¹²⁵ ESRI Written Submission, 3.

¹²⁶ ESRI Written Submission, 3.

- that reporting mechanisms should be clearly understood by children and young people; and
- that research is needed to ensure reporting mechanisms meaningfully contribute to safer digital environments.

Child Rights Assessment Frameworks

In written submission, a lack of assessment frameworks to measure digital services compliance with children's rights obligations and adherence to safety- or rights-by-design was identified. It was stated that

UNICEF's work on developing instruments to assess the impacts on child rights in the digital environment (the D-CRIA toolbox) is the most advanced version of this approach and should be widely promoted.¹²⁷

Use of simulated accounts and research observatories

Another previous recommendation to the European Parliament's Culture and Education (CULT) Committee was included in written submission that suggested the need for a strong research observatory function at European level to future-proof policies and to ensure that existing policies and initiatives are appropriate and effective.

Embedding simulated child accounts within permanent digital observatories was suggested, and it was commented that this would enable continuous, systematic monitoring of platforms, including content moderation, reporting mechanisms, and algorithmic recommendations.¹²⁸ It was noted that research using simulated accounts has consistently shown that underage users are exposed to harmful content, even when platforms are aware the user is a child and that gaming platforms have been identified as a particular area of concern.¹²⁹ It was suggested that digital observatories could operationalise safety-by-design and strengthen accountability for children's online protection, by providing evidence of how platforms manage risks in practice, help inform parents, guide policymakers as well as creating reputational and market pressure for platforms to prioritise safety.¹³⁰

¹²⁷ Brian O'Neill Written Submission, 8.

¹²⁸ ESRI Written Submission, 4.

¹²⁹ ESRI Written Submission, 3.

¹³⁰ ESRI Written Submission, 4.

Youth-driven Social Media Design Pilot Project

The Youth-Driven Social Media Design Pilot Project is a new European Commission pilot initiative launched under the 2026 Pilot Projects and Preparatory Actions Programme. The call for proposal seeks to fund a project that achieves the following general objective:

Through co-creation under youth participation, design and test a Fediverse based/Authenticated Transfer (AT) Protocol-based social media platform that is targeted specifically at young EU citizens and is focused on user well-being, and adapt a roll-out strategy based on market research and stakeholder consultation.

This €1.48 million pilot project will involve young people from different countries and backgrounds in the conceptualisation and development of new European social media platforms, focusing on user safety, mental health, privacy and ease of use.

9. Online safety resources and supports

Information resources and programmes

Throughout the Committee's engagements, a variety of online safety resources were identified for children and young people, parents and guardians, teachers, and other trusted adults in a child's life. These resources include information sources, tools, programmes, projects, and helplines; [Appendix 2](#).

The Irish Safer Internet Centre was appointed by the European Commission under the European Strategy for a Better Internet for Children (2012). The Committee heard that the funding model for the centre was identified as a challenge as the Centre depends heavily on an EU Commission Action Grant, which covers 50% of the programme costs. It was noted that EU funding cycles range from 12 to 36 months and are not guaranteed, and that each partner organisation is required to independently secure matched funding.

It was acknowledged in written submission that while many organisations provide valuable digital safety and education resources, the large number of available materials can be confusing and make it difficult for users to judge their quality and reliability. The development of a centralised repository of vetted resources that meet standards for accessibility, accuracy, privacy, and child rights and of resources relevant to and available for youth services was recommended.

Digital Literacy

It was stated that:

Providing children and young people with a broad and deep education in online safety, media literacy and digital citizenship is crucial for enabling and empowering them to develop and thrive in an ever-increasingly connected world. Many of the digital skills, attitudes and behaviours that children develop will also carry through to their adult lives, so supporting them to become responsible digital citizens is very important.¹³¹

A stakeholder identified that media literacy education is advocated for in the UNCRC, and that the benefits of providing media literacy education are also articulated in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), numbers 3, 4, 10, and 16.

In written submission, it was noted that the BIK+ strategy recognises that digital and media literacy are essential for equipping children with the skills, including critical thinking, needed to navigate the digital environment safely and responsibly. It was also highlighted that the Council of Europe has sought to support children in their digital lives by the holistic concept of digital citizenship education, which aims to develop the knowledge skills, values and attitudes needed for future digital citizens to participate fully and responsibly in society.

Research findings provided to the Committee have shown that school-based media literacy education interventions are associated with improved well-being outcomes. Media literacy education was depicted by a stakeholder as a proven, rights-based policy response that complements regulation, and a key developmental window was identified between the ages of 8 to 12 for the acquirement of media literacy education skills. It was stated that school-based media literacy education improves children's ability to recognise persuasion, to evaluate misinformation, and to manage online risks, supporting positive wellbeing outcomes.

It was identified in written submission that a significant literacy gap exists, with some young people not having the critical understanding needed to manage their privacy online or recognising the long-term consequences of sharing information, leaving some more

¹³¹ Better Internet for Kids, Teaching online safety, media literacy and digital citizenship in primary and secondary schools quoted in CRA Written Submission, 9.

vulnerable to risk than others. It was stated that delivering effective online safety education and support to all children and young people across diverse services and settings remains a challenge and that a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach has proven inadequate, with teenagers often pushing back against traditional ‘online safety’ lessons. It was suggested that ‘children’s capacity should be built in a manner that enables them to make informed decisions regarding the platforms they engage with’.

Online safety is taught as part of the social, personal, and health education (SPHE) curriculum in primary schools, where pupils are encouraged to use the Internet responsibly, protect their personal information and recognise online risks. A stakeholder noted that the time afforded to physical education and SPHE has been extended but that it does not go far enough to enable consistent delivery of media literacy education in the classroom. Both the Junior Cycle and redeveloped Senior Cycle have digital literacy and technological competencies embedded in the key skills and core competencies and online safety is included in Junior Cycle SPHE and Senior Cycle SPHE, which will become mandatory. Resources identified during the Committee’s deliberations are detailed in [Appendix 2](#).

It was identified that a dynamic national media literacy curricula, with regular updates, is required to strengthen digital literacy. It was stated that:

collaboration between the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), media literacy experts, data analysts, social media platform providers, video game industry representatives, developmental psychologists and other mental health experts will ensure MLE curriculum remains responsive to environmental developments.¹³²

As technology evolves rapidly and new online trends emerge constantly, ongoing efforts are needed to build digital awareness and skills among children, families, professionals, and the wider public, enabling them to understand both the opportunities and risks of the digital environment.¹³³

A number of issues and barriers to the delivery of media literacy education were identified to the Committee including: (i) inconsistent delivery; (ii) lacking content relating to

¹³² Vicky O’Rourke Written Submission, 7.

¹³³ CRA Written Submission, 9.

understanding persuasion, identifying misinformation and/or deceptive practices; (iii) fragmented teaching resources; (iv) loss of relevance of content over a short period; and (v) lack of teacher confidence to address curriculum content that is challenging for them to stay abreast of.

Suggestions presented to the Committee included:

- dynamic teaching resources that are equitable and inclusive to promote systemic inclusion of vulnerable children; those with disabilities, from minority backgrounds, and/or lower socio-economic groups;
- clear step-by step lesson plans that teachers can implement with ease;
- short continuing professional development programmes to support each revision of curriculum content;
- developing media literacy learning outcomes across subjects such as English, History and Art would enable teachers to prioritise media literacy skills and create greater opportunities for their delivery throughout the school day;
- inclusion of critical media literacy skills on children's annual report cards in a similar manner to other literacy skills; and
- commissioning of a national study that systematically examines the progression of critical media literacy skills, competencies, and associated wellbeing outcomes within the Irish primary education system.

Youth Work

Youth work organisations were identified as having a vital role in supporting young people by providing trusted spaces to discuss their online experiences, develop digital skills, and build awareness about issues such as privacy, cyberbullying, and online well-being as well as promoting advanced digital skills. The creation of safe offline spaces, through relational practice, building trusted, voluntary relationships, and by putting the needs of young people first, allows young people to discuss their online experiences. These connections allow youth workers to provide accurate information, guidance, and non-judgemental support, helping young people navigate online challenges safely.

The three key approaches to tackling online harm adopted by youth work are:

- Delivery of education, information, and guidance that empowers young people to navigate the digital world confidently and critically;

- Providing responsive support when online abuse or harm occurs, ensuring young people are not left to face challenges alone; and
- Creating safe offline spaces where young people can connect, feel supported and build resilience.

For further details on these approaches please refer to the NYCI written submission.

During engagement with children and young people, a shortage of free and accessible physical spaces where teenagers can socialise, be creative and explore their interests outside of school was emphasised. VR SafeSpace was identified as a tool utilised to allow children through technology to connect with friends and to develop as young people. However, it was noted that one such platform ceased operation in June 2026.

Funding challenges facing many youth work organisations were identified during the Committee's engagements. The young people highlighted that many of the organisations depend on different EU programmes and EU funding streams. It was suggested that domestic funding is required to expand opportunities as they are limited and highly competitive due to the strong demand, capacity and willingness among young people and organisations.

Foróige highlighted that it has over 20 years of experience delivering digital youth work under the umbrella brand of Foróige Go. To reach young people, the organisation has used initiatives such as podcasting, video production, robotics and virtual reality youth spaces. Digital youth work programmes are designed to facilitate young people to grow their empathy, critical thinking, and digital citizenship. Further information can be found in [Appendix 2](#).

Parenting Supports

The ever-evolving digital landscape means that parents face unprecedented challenges in keeping their children safe.¹³⁴

¹³⁴ Transcript, 29 January 2026, 5.

Parents and guardians play a significant role in keeping children safe online and ‘remain the first and most effective line of defence in safeguarding children online.’¹³⁵ In written submission, it was stated that recent evaluation reports have found that parents and professionals feel a significant skills gap despite the increasing availability of digital tools.¹³⁶

Irish policy was described as reflecting ‘an acceptance of the significance of parenting and parenting support for the wellbeing of children’.¹³⁷ The National Model for Parenting Support Services was highlighted to the Committee, and it was suggested that the policy and action plan could be a platform for incorporating any parenting support measures for a policy response to social media use and the safety and wellbeing of young people.

In written submission, it was outlined that children’s digital maturity, resilience, safety and a reduced risk of negative experiences can be achieved by active mediation, which includes discussions and exploration of digital technology and support for skill development, and the setting of clear rules and boundaries around digital device use. It was also noted that the more general aspect of parental warmth (positive, supportive and affectionate interactions) is critical in active mediation, supporting a focus on general parenting competence and style and a specific focus on technology. Evidence provided to the Committee suggests that parental support can have a protective role in realising positive and preventing negative outcomes from social media use, including problematic social media use and cyberbullying.

In written submission it was highlighted that:

- excessive parental screen time disrupts parent-child interactions, undermines family relationships, and contributes to children’s emotional distress and problematic internet use; and
- data from the Growing Up in Ireland study show parental screen time predicts children’s use more than household rules do.

Supporting parents to manage their own digital habits was suggested as a practical, family-focused strategy to improve children’s well-being and reduce device usage. Evidence from Ireland provided to the Committee has shown that parents often underestimate the online

¹³⁵ ESRI Written Submission, 2.

¹³⁶ Brian O’Neill, 8.

¹³⁷ UNESCO Written Submission, 1.

risks their children face, with many unaware of their children's exposure to harmful content, interactions with strangers, or experiences of online harm. Evidence from recent research was also referenced in which almost two-thirds of primary school children do not discuss their online activity with parents.

Stakeholders also highlighted that adolescents often do not disclose harmful online experiences to their parents. Another stakeholder noted that the extent to which parents use or benefit from the programmes and resources available to them is unclear, and it was suggested that research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness, accessibility and scalability of parenting interventions aimed at promoting children's well-being online. A number of resources for parents were identified during the Committee's deliberations including:

- ISPPC's Parenting Hub, which provides topical advice, support and guidance;
- Webwise's Parenting Hub, which provides advice and information; and
- National Parent's Council Helpline.

The children and young people highlighted actions that parents and guardians can take to assist them to be safe in the digital world, including:

- setting up parental controls when a young person gets a phone;
- having open discussions about the positive and negative aspects of social media;
- providing guidance and encouraging communication; and
- They can help young people use social media safely and feel comfortable seeking support if problems arise.

In evidence to the Committee, it was highlighted that:

- parents need and want support in their parenting role;
- high-quality, evidence-based family and parent support interventions can make a significant difference to outcomes for the well-being of both children and parents;
- parenting support interventions specifically focused on children's online safety and wellbeing must be part of the State's policy response; and
- Through the existing National Model for Parenting Support Services and the extensive network of provision via state, community and voluntary sector

organisations, the existing policy and service provision landscape has the capacity to respond to parents' needs in this area, if it is fully resourced.

National awareness campaigns

Reference was also made to national media awareness campaigns, including:

- a campaign by Webwise that targeted parents;
- CnaM's national awareness campaign, supported by the Department of Health, for parents and young people on harmful online content, the importance of reporting, and how to do so; and
- the Data Protection Commission's 'Pause before you post' campaign to raise awareness of 'sharenting'.

A number of suggestions were made to the Committee, including that:

- sustained, consistent and co-ordinated national campaigns should be delivered and also integrated with existing family-facing services such as early childhood settings, health centres and community organisations;
- a national targeted awareness and signposting campaign to be led by the Safer Internet Centre to help parents and caregivers navigate online safety resources and supports; and
- consistent messaging be adopted that highlights the supports offered by the Irish Safer Internet Centre, CnaM and An Garda Síochána.

Resources and Supports for School Communities

Digital citizenship education was identified by a stakeholder as a whole-school approach to online safety. This approach seeks to embed digital citizenship across the curriculum including not only risks and harms but also opportunities, participation, access and understanding rights online.

In evidence to the Committee, the NAPD outlined a support model that was introduced to assist schools with managing online incidents of online safety and reputational damage. The model uses the services of RiskEye, in partnership with ARAG Legal Services, to provide mitigation, legal and well-being supports, and structured platform engagement.

Education Support Centres Ireland (ESCI) is the representative body for the national network of education supports centres that operate in each region and provides continuing

professional development for teachers in primary, post-primary, and special education settings. ESCI in collaboration with Oide Technology in Education and Webwise facilitate nationwide training on a variety of topics. ESCI also assist their Communities of Practice, including principals, by providing high-quality input on areas of specific interest, and by quickly gathering information and providing support.

The children and young people during their engagement with the Committee recommended the following actions that school communities could take to support them in the online world:

- Age-appropriate social media education that focuses on safe and positive online use, including privacy settings, blocking users and reporting; and
- Training could be offered through schools to parents to assist with understanding parental controls, online safety, how to have conversations with young people about social media, and how to make reports, if necessary.

A number of recommendations were proposed to the Committee to support and provide services to schools, including:

- mental health supports in schools by establishing multidisciplinary health and education teams to work directly with schools and school clusters, ensuring timely access to adequate supports for children, and providing training to help schools build a strong culture of well-being. However, it was noted that mental health supports are currently being piloted in a number of areas across the country;
- increasing the allocation of guidance counsellors and home school liaison coordinators;
- Clear national guidelines for the protection of children in the digital world to support school communities;
- A national social media safety framework for education settings;
- continuing professional development to include whole-of-school training on online safety and digital literacy;
- Modules on generative AI, to include safety, and how to integrate it into the educational process without compromising data privacy;
- Better information on how to support students in education; exemplified by cyberbullying remaining the most frequent reason to contact helplines, yet many teachers feel ill-equipped to handle this issue in the classroom;

- A central hub for trustworthy reliable information and age-appropriate teaching materials; and
- Increased funding for school devices to prevent students using their personal devices in school settings.

National Task Force

The establishment of a National Task Force was suggested to coordinate a coherent national response to online harm comprising Government, regulators, teachers, parents, young people and wider civil society. The Children's Rights Alliance advised that it would be conducting a mapping exercise to identify those working in the online safety space with the hope of forming a coalition. This action by the CRA may assist with identifying members of a national task force.

10. Recommendations

The Committee Recommends that:

Theme: Legislation and Regulation

1. Consideration be given to the reclassification of all online platforms and services with algorithmic curation as publishers, recognising their active role in determining what children and young people view and engage with online.
2. Legislation be introduced that would operationalise safety-by-design by mandating the adoption of approaches that limit predatory design features, embed behavioural design into platform design, and features that reduce harm to children.
3. Mandate the disabling by default of addictive features, including infinite scroll, autoplay, algorithmic amplification of harmful content, and behavioural profiling in all circumstances.
4. A mandatory age classification system be established for all digital products and services based on the risk they pose to child development - as we do for toys, films and any other commercial products and services that may be engaged by children. Prioritise blocking underage access to adult content at a national level.
5. Robust legislation be introduced to:
 - protect children from exposure to online content ensuring their safety and well-being;
 - require platforms to better regulate harmful material and ensure there are effective enforcement measures and repercussions for companies who fail to comply with these regulations; and
 - criminalise the spread of CSAM online.
6. Regulation and accountability should be strengthened particularly in relation to platform design, recommender systems and algorithmic amplification to ensure the safety of children and young people and the prioritisation of their rights.
7. Mandatory robust trusted third-party privacy preserving age verification mechanisms be implemented for high-risk services, and ensuring the following:
 - that pornography, gambling and gambling like features, social media and AI chatbot services are adequately fulfilling their obligations to safeguard children;
 - with specific consideration for sites that feature pornography or gambling or gambling like features to ensure that they are not accessible to children; and
 - ensuring that age verification is not used as a standalone feature but rather may be considered alongside safety-by-design features.

8. There should be robust age verification processes in operation and that consideration be given for regulators to be provided with the necessary powers to ensure compliance.
9. Consideration be given to providing investigative and information-gathering powers to Coimisiún na Meán before a formal investigation is open.
10. Consideration should be given to align the powers under the Online Safety Code and the Digital Services Act so that Coimisiún na Meán has the same powers to compel people to produce information under both mechanisms.
11. Consideration should be given to commencement of Section 30 of the Data Protection Act, relating to the micro-targeting and profiling of children.
12. Consideration should be given to updating the definitions of child sexual abuse material and child pornography within the Child Trafficking and Pornography Act 1998.
13. Consideration be given to transitioning the non-binding Article 28 Guidelines into a formal Code of Conduct for the Protection of Minors (under Article 45 of the EU Digital Services Act) and developing and adopting a comprehensive Code of Conduct on age-appropriate design.
14. Consideration be given to supporting the EU Digital Fairness Act by advocating for a digital professional diligence standard that explicitly prohibits manipulative dark patterns and commercial exploitation of children.
15. The alternatives to an outright ban suggested by stakeholders contained in this report be considered in detail and explored.
16. All platforms accessed by children should be governed by legislation and regulation.
17. The Committee welcomes the EU Kids Act and believes that, at a minimum children under 13 should not hold traditional social media accounts. Based on evidence to the committee a blanket ban alone on social media use for children under 16 would unlikely provide a comprehensive solution to the harms experienced by children online. Access for younger teenagers should be limited, age appropriate, and subject to parental supervision. Autonomous accounts should only be permitted on services shown to be safe by design.
18. The experiences of countries that implement bans, or age-based restrictions, should be evaluated and considered when drafting any future legislation or regulations.

Theme: Approaches

19. A nuanced, child's rights-based, evidenced-informed, and public health approach that combines legislation, regulation, policy, education and enforcement to online safety and wellbeing for children and young people be adopted. Additionally, that the elements detailed within the report be considered and implemented.
20. Cross-departmental approaches are deployed to ensure that policy, regulation and education are aligned to deal with the developments in technology.
21. A focus on preventing and responding to high-risk online experiences be adopted.
22. Gendered and sexual harms be explicitly addressed including image-based abuse, coercive sexual communication, and appearance-related pressures.
23. Consideration be given to ensuring that Coimisiún na Meán is adequately funded and resourced to be an effective regulator and that funding and resources allocations are reviewed regularly.

Theme: Measures to progress online safety

24. The Government should actively engage with and support the European Commission's €1.48 million Youth-Driven Social Media Design Pilot Project which seeks to develop new European social media platforms focusing on user safety, mental health, privacy and ease of use.
25. The reporting and complaint mechanisms relating to children's experiences in the online world are developed and deployed to ensure that:
 - Children and young people can easily understand the reporting process;
 - The mechanisms meaningfully contribute to safer digital environments;
 - Response times to reports by children and young people are promptly addressed;
 - Accessible reporting systems be developed and adopted with clear reporting pathways, and that platforms must ensure that children can easily report harms; and
 - Research is conducted into reporting systems to ensure that mechanisms are effective, accessible, and make a meaningful contribution to safer digital environments for children and adolescents.
26. Child rights assessment frameworks be developed to measure digital services' compliance with children's rights and safety- or rights-by-design obligations and that any such instruments, such as UNICEF's D-CRIA toolbox, be promoted.

27. Consideration be given to simulated child accounts being embedded into digital observatories to offer systemic oversight and inform parents, guide policy makers, and allow regulators to monitor platform safety.
28. Age-appropriate design be adopted by all platforms and digital services providers, encompassing key safety-by-design principles scaled to children's age and developmental stage, as essential for safe, empowering, and rights respecting participation in the digital world.
29. Age-appropriate protections across childhood be adopted that recognise that online risks and protective needs change significantly from early childhood through adolescence.
30. Consideration be given to age assurance and digital identity systems including all necessary elements to ensure the highest level of privacy, safety and security for children online and that any barriers to implementation be addressed to ensure effectiveness.

Theme: Resources

31. Resources and capacity within youth work organisations be increased and include a dedicated role for online safety within NYCI's Child Protection Programme to support the development of formal partnerships with key agencies to monitor emerging online risks, provide targeted training, and promote online safety awareness.
32. A dedicated funding stream is established for youth information services, youth work and digital literacy projects.
33. That public policy actively prioritise funding and developing physical, community activities, youth clubs, and safe social spaces for young people, explicitly aimed at reducing structural dependency on the internet for basic peer-to-peer socialisation.
34. Consideration be given to developing a centralised repository of vetted resources that adhere to standards for accessibility, accuracy, privacy, and child rights.
35. Consideration be given to Media literacy education being:
 - consistently delivered to ensure that critical thinking and analysis skills are developed to assist with healthy digital habits and responsible behaviours online;
 - integrated across the curriculum and that mechanisms to monitor and report progression in media literacy skills comparable to other literacy skills are developed; and

- provided to parents, caregivers, educators and others who work with children and young people to enhance their understanding of the digital world and strengthen their ability to provide guidance and support to children and young people.
36. Universal access be provided to digital literacy and digital citizenship education and that community-based initiatives such as the Agree to Agree Pilot Project be developed and implemented nationwide.
37. The training needs for adults to respond to child safety and well-being online be addressed including child protection issues.
38. Consideration be given to
- Teaching resources, including lesson plans and continuing professional development programmes on digital resilience, AI literacy, and emerging technologies, be developed and implemented;
 - That support services including ESCI are supported and resourced to provide practical supports and guidance to school communities;
 - Comprehensive guidelines be developed for the protection of children in the digital world to support school communities; and
 - Mental health supports be delivered by multidisciplinary health and education teams that work with schools and school clusters ensuring timely access to adequate supports for children.
39. Consideration be given to:
- Structured supports for parents be provided, reviewed and expanded to meet the challenges of parenting in a digital world, including digital literacy for parents on how to keep themselves safe online;
 - Evidence-based family and parent support interventions be provided; and
 - The existing policy and service provision landscape be fully resourced.
40. National awareness campaigns should:
- Adopt consistent messaging that highlights the available supports, and
 - Be delivered with sustained, consistent, co-ordinated and integrated with existing family-facing services such as early childhood settings, health centres and community organisations.
41. Consideration be given to interventions that strengthen self-efficacy and bystander empowerment be adopted, particularly in school and youth settings.
42. Child helplines are positioned and supported as the first step, after a trusted adult, for those who want to talk about online safety issues.

43. Consideration be given to establishing a national taskforce including Departments, educators, parents, young people, and civil society groups to coordinate a coherent national response.

Theme: UNCRC

44. The voices of children and young people must be heard and considered when decisions are being made that impact their rights and daily lives.
45. The UNCRC should be fully incorporated into domestic legislation to promote and protect children's rights, and to ensure compliance with obligations.

Appendix 1 – Opening Statements and Written Submissions

Opening Statements

Date	Stakeholder	Link to Opening Statement
18 December 2025	Children's Rights Alliance	Opening Statement Briefing document
18 December 2025	CyberSafeKids	Opening Statement
18 December 2025	Foróige	Opening Statement Briefing document
18 December 2025	National Youth Council of Ireland	Opening Statement Briefing document
18 December 2025	Spunout	Opening Statement
29 January 2026	An Garda Síochána	Opening Statement
29 January 2026	Ombudsman for Children's Office	Opening Statement Briefing document
29 January 2026	Coimisiún na Meán (CnaM)	Opening Statement
29 January 2026	Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (ISPCC)	Opening Statement
29 January 2026	Webwise	Opening Statement
05 February 2026	Barnardos	Opening Statement
05 February 2026	Psychological Society of Ireland	Opening Statement
05 February 2026	Irish Safer Internet Centre	Opening Statement Briefing document 1 Briefing document 2 Briefing document 3
05 February 2026	DCU Anti-Bullying Centre	Opening Statement Briefing document
05 February 2026	UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, University of Galway	Opening Statement Briefing document
05 March 2026	Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO)	Opening Statement
05 March 2026	Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI)	Opening Statement

05 March 2026	Association of Secondary Teachers, Ireland (ASTI)	Opening Statement
05 March 2026	Irish Primary Principals Network (IPPN)	Opening Statement Briefing document 1 Briefing document 2
05 March 2026	National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD)	Opening Statement Briefing document
05 March 2026	Education Support Centres Ireland	Opening Statement
23 April 2026	Ombudsman for Children's Office Youth Advisory Panel	Opening Statement
23 April 2026	National Youth Council of Ireland Youth Advisory Group	Opening Statement Briefing document
23 April 2026	Youth Work Ireland	Opening Statement
23 April 2026	Webwise Youth Advisory Panel	Opening Statement
30 April 2026	Youth Advocates Programme Ireland	Opening Statement
30 April 2026	Foróige Connect Safely Youth Advocacy Group	Opening Statement Briefing document
30 April 2026	Springboard Family Support Project	Opening Statement
30 April 2026	Louth Meath Education and Training Board	Opening Statement Briefing document 1 Briefing document 2
07 May 2026	Meta	Opening Statement
07 May 2026	TikTok	Opening Statement
07 May 2026	Snap Inc.	Opening Statement
07 May 2026	Google	Opening Statement
07 May 2026	Microsoft	Opening Statement Briefing document

Requested Written Submissions

Stakeholder	Link to Submission
Dr Vicky O'Rourke	Submission
Economic and Social Research Institute	Submission
GenFree	Submission
Professor Brian O'Neill	Submission
Professor Eoin Whelan	Submission

Voluntary Written Submissions

Stakeholder	Link to Submission
Sony Interactive Entertainment	Submission
Roscommon Comhairle na nÓg	Submission

Appendix 2 – Online Safety Resources

Appendix 2 can be accessed [here](#).