

# Beyond the Online Safety Act: UK Proposes Sweeping Social Media Ban and Feature Restrictions

March 3, 2026

On 2 March 2026, the [UK government published a consultation on proposals](#) that would add to existing requirements under the UK Online Safety Act (OSA).

The consultation is significant because of the breadth of measures being considered by the UK government – including a social media ban – and the government’s indication that it intends to move quickly to complete the consultation and pass new measures into law.

## What the consultation covers

The UK government’s consultation covers a broad range of topics, including:

- **Social media ban:** Should the UK impose a minimum age to use social media and, if so, what age?
- **Restrictions on specific features:** Should the UK restrict child access to certain “risky” functionalities and design features that encourage excessive use?
- **Raising age of consent:** Should the UK raise the digital age of consent from 13?
- **Age assurance:** How should age verification and age assurance technologies support effective implementation of any ban/restrictions?
- **Mobile phones in schools:** Should existing guidance on the use of mobile phones in schools be put on statutory footing?
- **Parental controls:** How could new laws support parents in managing online experiences (e.g. clearer guidance, simpler parental controls)?

## What is interesting

There are a few specific aspects of the consultation worth noting:

1. **Big unanswered questions** – While the government’s ambitions are broad, it acknowledges the risk of unintended consequences (e.g. driving children toward riskier, less-regulated platforms). It also leaves the precise regulatory perimeter undefined. For example, despite asking various questions about whether respondents support age restricting access to artificial intelligence (AI) chatbots, the consultation does not articulate a clear definition of what types of services constitute “AI chatbots”. The consultation also floats potential exemptions to any social media ban for educational or low-risk services and questions whether the rules should capture gaming sites and messaging apps. These scoping issues will ultimately be crucial to the success of any future policy intervention.
2. **Imitation game** – The consultation makes clear that the UK government is closely evaluating international precedents, specifically highlighting Australia’s recent social media ban, which requires platforms to take reasonable steps to prevent users under 16 from holding accounts. The consultation specifically asks whether the UK should align with the Australian definition of social media – an interesting question given that the Australia social media ban has been subject to various criticisms linked to its rushed development. Certain of the specific feature restrictions being contemplated also reflect measures dealt with under the European Union Digital Services Act’s Article 28 Protection of Minors Guidelines and the proposed Kids’ Online Safety Bill in the United States.
3. **VPN circumvention** – To mitigate the risk of children circumventing age restrictions, the government is also considering whether users should face mandatory age checks to access virtual private networks (VPNs). This would have significant privacy and operational implications for adult users and enterprises.
4. **Silence on key questions** – There are many interesting questions that the consultation has not asked; one of them is whether age restrictions on specific features (e.g. connecting or talking to strangers) might

mitigate the perceived imperative to introduce a broader social media ban. This is a curious omission in circumstances where much of the perceived risk of social media services is expressed as stemming from such features.

## Timeline

- The consultation closes on 26 May 2026.
- The government's response is expected in summer 2026.
- Reforms to bring “chatbots” in scope of existing UK OSA requirements are expected to be added to the already pending Crime and Policing Bill imminently.
- A bill providing for new requirements may be tabled as early as autumn 2026.

## Next steps

Providers wishing to provide feedback on the consultation must act quickly to prepare and submit a robust response ahead of the **26 May 2026 deadline**. Informing the regulatory landscape at this early stage is critical to mitigating future compliance burdens.

For platforms taking a wait-and-see approach, we will be closely tracking the government's response expected in **summer 2026**, which will provide a strong directional signal of the final requirements.

The Cooley team has extensive, market-leading experience advising global technology companies on UK OSA compliance and engaging with the UK Office of Communications (Ofcom). Please reach out to discuss how these sweeping proposals could impact your platform and to begin formulating your regulatory strategy.

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## Key Contacts

Janet H. Kim Washington, DC	janetkim@cooley.com +1 202 728 7060
Tristan Lockwood London	tlockwood@cooley.com +44 20 7556 4115

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