

Growing up in the online world: a national conversation

Consultation response from the National Governance Association, 26 May 2026

Introduction

The National Governance Association (NGA) is the sector body for school and trust governance in England, representing the interests of school governors, trustees and governance professionals across all types of schools and school structures. As the membership organisation for school governance, we support and champion good governance.

Governing boards have a strategic responsibility for their school or trust's safeguarding arrangements and must ensure that they fulfil their duties, including online safety and promoting effective behaviour management. They must have regard to relevant law and guidance, ensuring policies, procedures and training in their settings are compliant and effective. In practice, this means ensuring a whole-school approach with systems, policies and procedures that place pupils' best interests at the centre of decision-making.

Chapter 1: Understanding how children use technology

No questions in this chapter were answered.

Chapter 2: Interventions for safer, more positive experiences

Question 33. Some services are already exempt from the Online Safety Act. Examples include internal business services, services with limited functionalities and services provided by persons providing education or childcare. Are there additional types of services which you think would be appropriate to exempt from age restrictions? These might include services whose primary purpose is delivery of educational content, services that offer specific child or teen accounts or versions, or services which offer parental controls.

Edtech tools and platforms like learning management systems (LMS) such as Google classroom and gamified learning environments such as Kahoot, should be exempt from blanket age restrictions because their core function is to enable teaching, learning, and skill development, not passive consumption. Restricting access risks undermining inclusive, modern education and limiting the ability of schools to prepare pupils for a digital future.

This position aligns with NGAs AI stance, which emphasises that technology in education should be approached in a “pragmatic and open-minded” way by harnessing its benefits while putting appropriate safeguards in place. Edtech platforms, including AI-enabled and gamified systems, can reduce workload, enhance engagement and support personalised learning, but they require effective governance, not exclusion.

Rather than imposing age-based restrictions, policy should focus on robust oversight: data protection, transparency, human supervision and age-appropriate design. NGA makes clear that innovation should be balanced with safeguards such as confidentiality, accountability and human review. By applying this principle, edtech platforms can remain accessible to learners of all ages while still being safe and responsibly governed.

In short, the priority should not be restricting educational tools, but ensuring they are used ethically, securely, and in ways that enhance learning opportunities for children and young people.

Chapter 3: Enforcement and compliance

Circumvention of age limits

Question 45. Which of the options below do you think the government should prioritise to reduce circumvention of online safety rules in the UK? (Select the most important to you)

More education for children.

Mobile phones in schools

50. What impacts would there be if this guidance was made statutory and why? For example, on disruption in lessons, bullying or harassment, parental views on mobile phone policies, staff, etc.

In a recent NGA survey, 90% of our governor and trustee respondents revealed that in their school/trust, there is already some form of restriction in place. Since the guidance on restricting mobile phone use in schools will now be made statutory, the impact is less about introducing new rules but on the focus required for strengthening enforcement, consistency and confidence across the system.

Greater consistency and clarity across schools: With statutory backing, the previous “grey area” of interpretation is reduced. Schools are now operating within a clear national framework, ensuring more consistent expectations for pupils and parents regardless of setting. This helps address concerns about disparity between schools and promotes a stronger sense of fairness and equity.

Reduced disruption and improved classroom focus: As 90% of schools/trusts already had restrictions in place, the clearest benefit of the guidance’s new statutory status is to reinforce compliance and remove ambiguity, making it easier for staff to apply rules consistently. Over time, this is likely to support calmer learning environments and fewer low-level disruptions linked to mobile phone use.

Stronger backing for school leaders and reduced conflict: One of the most significant impacts is the shift in how schools manage parental challenge. Previously, 59% of our respondents felt a change in law was needed, largely due to the burden of complaints and “special pleading”. With the guidance now statutory, school leaders have clearer legal backing, allowing them to rely on national policy rather than defend individual school rules. This reduces time-consuming conflict with parents and pupils and lowers staff and governor workload.

Safeguarding and behaviour benefits: A statutory approach also strengthens schools’ ability to address issues such as bullying, harassment, and misuse of devices during the school day. While these issues are not eliminated, clearer rules and more consistent enforcement reduce opportunities for harmful behaviour and support a more proactive safeguarding culture.

Clearer expectations for parents and pupils: Statutory guidance helps remove the perception that mobile phone policies are optional or negotiable. While some resistance may remain, expectations are now clearer and more uniform, which can improve alignment between home and school over time.

Overall, making the guidance statutory has reinforced existing practice by improving consistency, reducing conflict, and giving schools the authority needed to implement restrictions effectively, rather than fundamentally changing what schools were already doing.

51. Are there specific circumstances where you think children should be permitted to have or use a mobile phone during the school day? (Please select all that apply)

Medical needs; Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) requirements; Individual safeguarding concerns; Caring responsibilities; Travel to and from school.

Chapter 4: Preparing children for a digital future

Media and digital literacy

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

Schools or childcare settings; Community or youth spaces (for example libraries, youth clubs or local charities); Parent or carer groups or networks; Public services (such as family hubs, GP surgeries or community centres); Faith or cultural groups; Non-governmental online sources (such as websites, platforms or online communities); Government websites.

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

By providing clear guidance that children can use on their own; By supporting parents and carers to support children online; By working with online platforms and services that children already use; By supporting youth organisations and community groups to help children online; By making

help or advice easy to access when something goes wrong online; By involving children and young people in designing support.

56. What types of support would help children with additional needs stay safe online and build digital skills? By ‘additional needs’, we mean children who may need extra support for a range of reasons (such as learning, communication, health or access needs). (Please select all that apply)

Clear, simple information using plain language; Content adapted for different ages, abilities or needs; Visual, audio or interactive formats; Support delivered through trusted local or community services; Flexible or on-demand support that can be accessed when needed; Support that helps parents or carers guide children online.

Promoting high quality content

58. What further action should be prioritised, to support positive online spaces for young people? (Please select all that apply)

Develop guidance for parents and carers; Develop guidance for children; Reviewing international approaches.

Chapter 5: Supporting families

No questions in this chapter were answered.