

Cowdenbeath & Kirkcaldy Online Safety Consultation

*Listening to our young people, parents, and
teachers.*



Melanie Ward MP
Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy
constituency

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PARENTS
from across
Cowdenbeath
& Kirkcaldy
constituency
listened
to

TEACHERS
from
Cowdenbeath
& Kirkcaldy
constituency
shared their
views

166 STUDENTS
from across
Cowdenbeath &
Kirkcaldy shared
their online
experiences

Summary

Social media and smartphones have fundamentally changed the environment in which our children grow up. With that shift has come a growing concern about harmful content amplified by algorithms designed to maximise engagement and make money for social media platforms.

This report draws on 166 survey responses from 53 pupils aged 13 to 15 across schools in the Cowdenbeath & Kirkcaldy constituency, with Beath High School, Viewforth High School, St Andrews RC High School, Balwearie High School, Inverkeithing High School, and Kirkcaldy High School all invited to take part. The findings are further informed by conversations with teachers and parents. Prior to the survey, forums were held with children from Beath High School to identify issues facing them online.

The survey findings show that smartphones and social media are central to children's daily lives, but are also associated with significant challenges relating to mental health, behaviour, education, and safety.

Evidence from this study suggests that there is much to be gained from a ban on social media for under-16s. It also suggests that we need stronger regulation and greater responsibility placed on social media platforms and companies to protect our young people.

Young people report frequent exposure to content recommended to them by platforms, including material that can be harmful, distressing, or inappropriate. Many describe pressure to remain constantly connected, alongside feelings of anxiety and a fear of missing out.

Teachers have raised serious concerns with me about the impact of online culture on behaviour in schools, including the normalisation of misogynistic language and attitudes among some pupils, and the influence of online content on classroom behaviour. Parents expressed frustration about their ability to protect their children in a digital environment that they feel is difficult to control. There was widespread support among parents for stronger protections for under-16s.

The evidence suggests that while digital technologies are now an inescapable part of childhood, the current online environment is not consistently safe, transparent, or age-appropriate. Families and schools are often left to manage the consequences without sufficient support. This report reflects a growing recognition that stronger safeguards, clearer accountability from technology companies, and more effective protections for children are urgently needed.

Thank you to everyone who made this work possible. It will inform the UK Government's consultation and next steps on online safety.

Social Media and Smartphone Usage

The results show that smartphones and social media are now almost universal among teenagers in Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy constituency

SMARTPHONE OWNERSHIP

- **98%** reported owning a smartphone
- **41%** first owned a smartphone between 5 and 10 years old
- **45%** first owned a smartphone between 10 and 12 years old



SOCIAL MEDIA USE

- **99%** reported having a social media account
- The most commonly used platforms were: **TikTok, Snapchat and Instagram**
- **20%** say they spend more than 9 hours online per day on weekends
- **57%** say they spend 4-9 hours online per day on weekends
- **On weekdays, young people on average say they spend 5.3 hrs a day online and spend 5.4hrs per day online on weekends**

Almost all respondents – 98–99% – own smartphones and social media accounts, with most getting their first device before starting secondary school

Algorithms and AI-Generated Content

During initial forums with young people in the Cowdenbeath & Kirkcaldy constituency, the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and AI-generated content emerged as a key theme. Teenagers report frequent exposure to unsolicited content driven by platform algorithms and AI-generated material.

UNWANTED CONTENT EXPOSURE

- **1 in 5 respondents** reported always or usually seeing inappropriate content without searching for it



WHERE DOES THIS HAPPEN?

- **TikTok (78%)**
- **Snapchat (33%)**
- **Instagram (39%)**

EXPOSURE TO AI-GENERATED CONTENT

- **36%** reported always seeing AI content
 - **37%** reported usually seeing AI content
 - **20%** reported sometimes seeing AI content
- So, more than **70%** regularly see AI-generated content

Nearly 1 in 4 feel misled by AI content and 70% are unsure or say AI content is not clearly labelled 'Made with AI'

Mental Health and Education

While social media is central to communication, many teenagers also recognise its negative impact on mental health, concentration and learning

PRESSURE

Many teenagers experience social pressure to be constantly connected, including:

- **Fear of missing out**
- **Pressure from group chats**
- **Difficulty disconnecting from social media**

MENTAL HEALTH

Many teenagers reported that social media can have a negative impact on their emotions. Common concerns include:

- **Anxiety**
- **Insecurity**
- **Expectations**

DISTRACTION FROM LEARNING

A high number reported that smartphones interfere with their learning.

Common concerns include:

- **Distraction during lessons**
- **Distraction from homework**



Online Bullying and Contact from Strangers

A concerning number of respondents alluded to their experiences of online bullying and contact from strangers on a variety of social media platforms

ONLINE BULLYING

40% said that they knew someone or they themselves had been bullied, threatened or blackmailed through social media or gaming

- **Snapchat (27%), TikTok (7%) and Fortnite (8%) and Roblox (7%)**



CONTACT FROM STRANGERS

- **70% of teenagers said that they had been contacted by people they don't know online, predominantly through Snapchat (31%), TikTok (16%) and Instagram (8%)**
- More than half of young people stated they were either unsure or would not tell a parent or teacher if someone they didn't know tried to contact them online



Online Messaging and Exposure to Inappropriate Content

UNCOMFORTABLE MESSAGES

40% said that they had received a message online which made them feel uncomfortable

- **38% of whom reported the person who sent the message, while an alarming 12% did nothing.**

FALSE IDENTITIES

One in three (32%) reported that they had been contacted by someone lying about their true age or identity through mainstream social media platforms, predominantly through Snapchat (33%) and Roblox (11%)

- A third of respondents indicated that anyone can see the content that they post online (33%)

INAPPROPRIATE CONTENT

38% of teenagers reported either 'sometimes', 'usually', or 'always' seeing inappropriate content without searching for it

- **This typically appears on TikTok (55%), Snapchat (24%), Instagram (22%), YouTube Shorts (13%), and on Twitter/X (12%).**



Non-Consensual Information Sharing

STRANGERS ASKING FOR INAPPROPRIATE INFORMATION, PHOTOS OR VIDEOS

32% of respondents said they or someone they know had been asked by a stranger for personal information, photos or videos

- This was most common on Snapchat (38%) and TikTok (10%)

EXPERIENCES OF PERSONAL INFORMATION SHARED ONLINE WITHOUT CONSENT

A third of all respondents had experienced their personal information or content being shared online by others without their consent

- 32% had experienced this
- 22% were unsure

NON-CONSENSUAL SHARING OF PERSONAL INFORMATION, PHOTOS AND VIDEOS

An alarming number of young people noted experiences of personal information being distributed online without their consent

- 26% had seen personal information, photos, or videos of people they know shared online that they would not want you to see

Conversations with Parents

In March 2026, I hosted a meeting with a number of parents who had previously contacted me regarding social media restrictions for children.

All attendees were parents of young children who understand the harms associated with social media. They shared serious concerns about what the right approach is when their children reach the age where social media use becomes unavoidable. Our discussion centred around three main concerns:

How are parents to tackle technology use when kids are using technology more extensively in their education?

How can parents keep kids safe on social media, when platform features are flimsy, ineffective, or can be easily bypassed?

The need for the Government to intervene

One attendee, a teacher, explained that mobile phone use in her class had become so widespread that, at times, she was completely unable to teach effectively. She stated that, in her view, excessive mobile phone use had contributed to a growing number of 16 and 17-year-olds who were innumerate, illiterate, or both.

Almost every **parent who engaged in my consultation supported a statutory ban on social media for under-16s**. It is clear that many parents are crying out for support and action on this issue.

What Teachers Say

In my work as the MP for Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy, I have had the opportunity to speak with many of our dedicated teachers, as well as with local Violence Against Women organisations who work with teachers. Through these conversations, teachers have shared deeply concerning experiences from the classroom, such as young boys using phrases such as “go make me a sandwich.” This is language commonly associated with several notorious ‘manosphere’ influencers. One teacher had recounted a boy telling her: “You’re so ugly, I wouldn’t even rape you.”

These conversations point to a pattern of harmful online influence filtering into schools and classrooms, ultimately harming our children. In my conversations with teachers, there has been **an overwhelming consensus that a statutory ban on social media for under-16s is needed.**

Thursday March 19, 2026 www.central-express.com

Pupil: 'You're so ugly I wouldn't even rape you'

This is what a Fife schoolboy told his teacher - MP says this can't go on

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A Fife MP has spoken to the UK Parliament about how one schoolboy told a female teacher, "You're so ugly, I wouldn't even rape you."

Melaine Ward, Labour MP for Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy, raised the issue at Westminster when she was speaking on the dangers of social media in sharing misogynistic views.

This comes after she met with the Fife Violence Against Women Partnership (FVAWP). The organisation previously ran a Reclaim the Night march in Dundee last year.

The group aims to understand the key issues and needs of women and girls who have experienced violence.

Speaking to Parliament, Melaine Ward said "They shared with me their concerns about social media and the misogyny spread online by so-called male influencers."

"I heard shocking reports about some of the things that local school boys have said to female teachers, comments that they have learned online."

These included female teachers being told by boys that they teach, and I quote, "You're so ugly I wouldn't even rape you."

"I was shocked and very concerned to hear reports of some of the misogynistic abuse that women teachers in Fife are being subjected to by boys in their classrooms, and of the linkages with content those boys have viewed on social media."

"There is no place for this. It is further evidence that proper action is needed to regulate the message that young people have to social media."

"Dangerous algorithms are pushing harmful content to many of our young people, including content that glorifies hatred of women, and sometimes violence against women, which is served up to impressionable young boys."

"The impact of this is already harmful, as this example shows."

"Left unchecked, it will only create more harmful and damage in our communities. I know that many teachers and parents are crying out for action."

"The UK Government is now consulting on the measures it should take in this area."

"I will continue to be a strong voice for action that makes our young people safer and supports parents and teachers."

WORRY: Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy MP Melaine Ward. Picture: Alexandra Balf MP

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Conclusion


This study reveals a concerning picture of children's online experiences in Fife. Young people report being exposed to harmful content and interactions, including cyberbullying, unsolicited messaging from strangers, age-inappropriate or distressing content, and violent and graphic material. Many young people noted their experiences of witnessing others being bullied or targeted online, even when they themselves were not the immediate victim.

40% said that they themselves or someone they know has been bullied, threatened, or blackmailed through social media, with 37% saying this occurred through Snapchat or TikTok. Nearly three in ten children (31%) reported being contacted online by someone they did not want to hear from, with Snapchat the primary platform (31%), followed by TikTok (16%) and Instagram (8%).

More broadly, 71% had been contacted online by someone they did not know, and 40% had received messages which made them uncomfortable. Perhaps most alarming is what young people do not do when this happens. Over half of respondents said they would not tell a parent or teacher if a stranger contacted them online (48%), or were unsure whether they would (18%).

As well as asking the school children to tell us about their experiences in this survey, we also asked about the impact of social media on their lives and what they thought should be done to address it. Most denied that they were ever distracted by their phones and did not want action that meant they spent less time online. This was illuminating in itself and helped to demonstrate the problem that currently exists, and the need for Government action. More than half of them are spending over six hours each weekday online, yet they do not believe that this is having an effect on their lives. This is perhaps unsurprising; we should not expect 13 and 14 year olds to be able to think like adults. The fact that the children could not fully articulate the harm being done to them only strengthens the case for action because, if children cannot identify the damage, they certainly cannot protect themselves from it.

Together with the fact that parents and teachers are crying out for help on this issue, this further strengthens the case for Government and Parliamentarians to step in with regulation. I will ensure that the results of this survey are heard in Westminster. As well as the UK Government bringing in a **social media ban for under-16s**, the Scottish Government should also **ban mobile phones from classrooms**. There is no more time to waste.

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