



Friday November 22, 2024

## Submission: Senate Standing Committees on Environment & Communications

### *Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Bill 2024 [Provisions]*

As Australia's youth-driven movement against (cyber)bullying, hate and prejudice, [PROJECT ROCKIT](#) works directly with thousands of school-aged young people across the country every week. As a Trusted Provider endorsed by the eSafety Commissioner, PROJECT ROCKIT provides extensive online safety training to equip young people to navigate digital tech responsibly and thrive online. Additionally, our organisation is a vocal advocate to social media companies to make their platforms safer spaces for young people, particularly in regards to bullying and mental health related issues. We serve on global Safety Advisory Boards of Meta, Snapchat, and Spotify which is a critical avenue for us to hold social media platforms accountable to the wellbeing of younger users. Digital technologies are core to our work, and play a vital role in the lives of our target audience.

PROJECT ROCKIT welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the inquiry into the Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Bill. We applaud the Federal Government's commitment to tackling the harms young people face on social media – a reality we witness daily through our work. We are heartened by some of the Government's initiatives, such as the introduction of the Digital Duty of Care and the provision of an exemption framework within the proposed Social Media Minimum Age Bill. These pathways are essential, proactive steps towards holding big tech accountable while preserving young people's online participation.

However, our engagement leading up to the introduction of this legislation have raised significant concerns about this process and resulting blanket bans for under 16s. Our concerns are outlined below.

### **The legislation is not supported by experts**

*"73 per cent of young people in Australia turn to social media when it comes to support for their mental health"*  
– ReachOut, 2024 [\[source\]](#)

A majority of Australian and International academic experts and leading youth and mental health organisations do not support the proposed legislation, as evidenced by:

- **Joint Position Statement** [\[source\]](#) (September 10, 2024) signed by 10 leading youth and mental health orgs warning that proposed bans will *not* make social media safer for young people.
- **Open Letter** [\[source\]](#) (October 9, 2024) signed by 100+ Australian and International experts, urging the Government to rethink its decision to ban under 16s from social media.

PROJECT is a signatory on both of these statements. A strong consensus exists across the sector that banning social media is not an effective solution to the challenges young people face online. To date, neither group has had meaningful engagement with the Government or opportunity to shape its approach.

### **The legislation reflects a consultation bias**

*"We've consulted widely with experts, with parents, with youth organisations, with advocacy groups, with academics and of course, our state and territory colleagues. I want to particularly thank NSW and South Australia for jointly hosting the Social Media Summit which was most instructive in this regard."* – Anthony Albanese, November 7, 2024 [\[source\]](#)

PROJECT ROCKIT was grateful to receive an invitation to attend the recent 'Social Media Summit' jointly hosted by the NSW and SA Government in October. As noted above, the Federal Government has credited the Summit as being a key source of consultation in the development of the proposed legislation.

However, internal communications recently obtained by journalist Cam Wilson under an FOI have revealed that the SA and NSW Social Media Summit was engineered to support a pre-existing agenda "with the intent of building momentum," despite being billed as a genuine exploration of the challenges and solutions surrounding online harms for young people. We are gravely concerned to learn the Summit was designed with a pre-determined policy conclusion in mind, although not surprised. In attending the Summit, it was apparent that main stage keynotes were carefully curated to amplify the views of a select group of international speakers whose findings conveniently aligned with the government's pre-determined stance, while globally respected Australian research was sidelined.

## The legislation is not backed by findings of the Joint Select Committee

*"After months of evidence from experts, parents, young people, organisations and community members, this Joint Committee Inquiry has not recommended an age ban on social media." – Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Australian Society, 2024. [\[source\]](#)*

The Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Australian Society delivered its final report on November 18, 2024. Drawing on 220 written submissions and 10 public hearings, the Committee proposed 12 recommendations relating to young people's health and wellbeing online. The Committee noted, "unlike the Albanese Government's recent announcement of an age ban of 16, which has been supported by Peter Dutton and the Coalition, the Committee's decision is supported by evidence and facts." The recommendation to ban social media for young people was not supported by the Committee findings, as it instead opted to provide a "well-informed majority decision."

## Remaining concerns

To close, we reiterate our concerns with the legislation itself that remain unaddressed to date:

**Unintended negative impacts:** While young people under 16 are undoubtedly exposed to harm online, they also derive critical mental health and participation benefits from social media, which this legislation jeopardises. To date, no measures have been proposed to mitigate these risks. While the legislation seeks to uphold young people's right to protection, it overlooks their participation rights, as enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Social media plays a pivotal role in young people's self-expression, skill development, access to information, and advocacy on issues that matter to them. Restricting access risks rolling back these rights and freedoms and isolating young people from vital supports and communities.

**Implementation issues:** The proposed bans are unenforceable with current technology and introduce significant privacy and security concerns that remain unresolved. Mandatory age checks will infringe on the privacy and accessibility rights of *all* users, not just teens. Furthermore, young people are likely to bypass these measures, rendering bans costly for taxpayers and easily circumvented. Despite its intended aims, the legislation risks *reducing* platform accountability. If young people are deemed 'off-platform' (though likely still present), social media companies will face diminished pressure to prioritise the safety of younger users.

Despite our concerns, PROJECT ROCKIT remains *strongly* committed to working with Government, community, and industry stakeholders to drive evidence-based solutions that genuinely improve youth online safety and wellbeing. It's time for the Government to balance the harms and benefits of social media, ensuring young people have safe and meaningful opportunities to thrive in an increasingly digital world.

