

22 November 2024

Committee Secretary  
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

*Lodged via Parliament of Australia website*

Dear Committee Secretary

**Re: Inquiry into the Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Bill 2024**

Thank you for the invitation to make a submission to your inquiry into Online Safety (Social Media Minimum Age) Bill 2024.

**About headspace**

headspace is the National Youth Mental Health Foundation, providing early intervention mental health services to 12 to 25 year olds. headspace has 163 services across Australia in metropolitan, regional and remote areas, and offers online and phone support services and digital resources through eheadspace. We provide multidisciplinary care for mental health, physical health, alcohol and other drug use, and work and study needs.

**Centring young people and their needs in the conversation**

While many will welcome age restrictions, young people may be feeling upset, worried or angry about what the change means for them.

While the restrictions underscore the importance of working with young people and family to build skills and supports for online safety, this is an enduring component of headspace's work.

Regulation is just one part of the puzzle when it comes to making the online world a safer place for young people.

In light of social media age restrictions, our support must also include resources for young people and family that help them navigate the changes, including unintended consequences that could disproportionately impact those young people who are more at risk of poor mental health.

**We acknowledge concerns about social media, and the risk of harms**

Social media is an integral part of daily life for most young people, and their relationship with social media and online connection is interwoven in their lives. This comes with the risk of harm. The government's proposal to introduce age restrictions on social media reflects community sentiment that more must be done to protect younger people from these harms. It also signals to social media companies that government is committed to addressing the risks of social media platforms and provides an incentive to minimise harms and improve safety.

While the age-based social media restrictions are designed to improve the health, wellbeing and safety of children and young people, there is a risk that many will be left feeling unheard and without access to the connections, information and support currently accessible via social media. It is important that through the implementation of the new restrictions, government takes action to address this risk and minimise any unintended consequences.

**Considered implementation, with the involvement of young people and families, is a must**

Young people have consistently and strongly said that they want to help shape any legislation, regulation or policies that aim to protect them on social media or online. They want their experiences,

agency and voice to be heard and respected in the development and implementation of changes that impact them.

Despite this, they report feeling unheard throughout the debate and discussion about age-related bans. Government must seek to address this, prioritising engagement with young people in the implementation of age-based restrictions. The proposed 12-month implementation period will be necessary to achieve this, and to ensure effective implementation of the legislation.

### **Young people will need alternate sources of connection, information and support**

Social media provides young people with opportunities for connection and to have their voices heard, especially young people who belong to marginalised communities or who live in remote locations. Many young people report benefits from being able to find connection, peer support and information.

Loss of access to social media among younger teens will leave many without these ties, during a period when they are navigating big life changes and learning about themselves and their relationships with others. This loss will disproportionately impact those young people who are most at risk of poor mental health, especially young people who belong to marginalised communities or who live in remote places, lack supportive relationships, or depend on being able to connect virtually with their sources of safety and assurance.

Many young people also use social media to find out about mental health and wellbeing, and for help-seeking. Research by ReachOut found that 73 per cent of young people use social media for mental health support. Without this, these young people will need alternative safe, credible and non-judgemental sources of mental health information and support, available when, where and how they want to engage with them.

Providing alternate, safe sources of information, opportunities for connection and channels to seek support will be critical for younger teens. These need to be designed with young people and families, nationally available, and provide evidence-based support for young people aged under 16.

### **Young people and families nationally will need support**

It is clear that Australian families are very concerned about the harms and risks associated with social media and online harms more broadly, and currently feel ill equipped when considering how to support their children to navigate and manage their online lives. There is a significant need for education and support for young people and families to build their digital literacy and confidence in this area.

More broadly, young people and families will need access to accurate, accessible and nationally consistent messages about the social media changes and available supports, with appropriate tailoring to the needs of young people and families.

### **Government needs to continue to address online safety more broadly**

The risk of harms from online activity are not limited to social media, nor those under 16 years of age. We support placing greater responsibility for safety with technology companies (including the use of safety by design principles) and continued education for young people and families about online safety and harmful privacy practices.

headspace welcomes the opportunity to discuss this bill with the Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications in more detail.

Yours sincerely

**Jason Trethowan**  
Chief Executive Officer