Preparing young people to vote in a complex, attention-driven information environment

As Parliament considers extending the vote to 16- and 17-year-olds, **this joint briefing from Internet Matters and Full Fact** draws on new research to examine young people's confidence in navigating the online information environment, their trust in political actors, and how these factors shape their engagement with politics. The findings indicate that, without targeted support, many newly enfranchised voters may struggle to engage confidently or meaningfully in democratic life, creating a real risk of disengagement from political participation at an early age. The briefing sets out how Parliament and Government can ensure young people are supported to participate meaningfully as the franchise is expanded.

The research is based on a nationally representative, UK-wide survey of over 550 young people aged 13-17 and 800 parents of children aged 13-17. The survey findings are complemented by previous research from Internet Matters.

Why this briefing matters

The Elections Bill will extend the right to vote to all 16- and 17-year-olds in UK elections. This reform is intended to engage voters early, help build the foundations for lifelong democratic participation, and ensure young people feel represented in our democracy.[i]

Lowering the voting age creates a significant opportunity to strengthen democratic participation, but this is not a guarantee. For this reform to achieve its intended impact, young people must be equipped to engage confidently with the news, politics and current affairs they encounter online – the political information[1] that will shape their voting decisions. Our research shows that many young people lack the confidence to evaluate this information, including judging accuracy, intent and credibility, which are core media literacy skills.[2]

This confidence gap must be understood in the context of both the information environment young people are navigating and the uneven support available to help them do so. Young people increasingly encounter political information online in fast-paced, algorithmically curated spaces, where content of varying quality is presented side by side and attention-grabbing material is often prioritised over depth and context. This environment is further complicated by the growing presence of AI-generated and manipulated material. These complexities make it harder for young people to assess reliable, trustworthy and informed information.[ii]

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[1] In this briefing, "political information" refers to online content about news, politics or current affairs, including posts, videos or stories about government, politicians, elections and wider world events

[2] We define media literacy as: being able to evaluate information and distinguish between what is true and false online; being able to create and share digital content responsibly and safely; and awareness and ability to protect yourself from the risks of being online.

At the same time, not all young people receive consistent support in schools to help them navigate the information environment. Previous Internet Matters research found that only 56% of young people who consume news say their school has spoken to them about how to tell whether online news is true, with lower levels of support reported by young people from lower-income households.[iii]

Taken together, these conditions mean many young people are forming views about politics in environments where they feel uncertain about what to trust, and without consistent support to help them assess what they see. As the findings in this briefing show, this is associated with lower confidence in interpreting political information online, lower trust in political actors, and a greater likelihood of disengagement from political discussion - even before young people reach voting age.

Concerns about the public's ability to assess and judge information are echoed at parliamentary level. The House of Lords' Communications and Digital Committee has warned that "social cohesion is at risk and democracy itself is threatened by inadequate media literacy", noting that the UK has seen little improvement in people's ability to navigate an increasingly complex and digitally mediated environment.[iv]

Without action to support young people to navigate today's complex information environment with confidence, extending the vote risks becoming a missed opportunity rather than a meaningful democratic reform. If Government's intention is to foster informed, confident and sustained democratic participation from a younger age, measures to strengthen young people's ability to navigate this information online - alongside action to make platforms safer for young users - must go hand in hand with the expansion of voting rights.

Young people primarily encounter information about politics online, well before voting age

78% of young people say they have seen content about news, politics or current affairs online. This exposure begins well before voting age: nearly three in four (74% of) young people aged 13-14 report seeing this type of content online, rising to 81% among 15- to 17-year-olds.

This aligns with previous research from Internet Matters, which found that 68% of young people aged 11-17 who consume news do so via social media.[v]

This matters because social media platforms play a central role in shaping not only what political information young people see, but how they encounter and interpret it. Political content is typically filtered through algorithmically driven feeds that prioritise attention-grabbing material over context, depth or accuracy. Within these environments, factual reporting, opinion, satire and false or misleading claims often appear side by side, and young people are more likely to encounter AI-generated or manipulated content alongside authentic sources.[vi] Moreover, platforms do not provide sufficient signals to help users assess the

information they see. These conditions can make it harder for users to judge accuracy, intent and credibility, particularly for younger audiences.
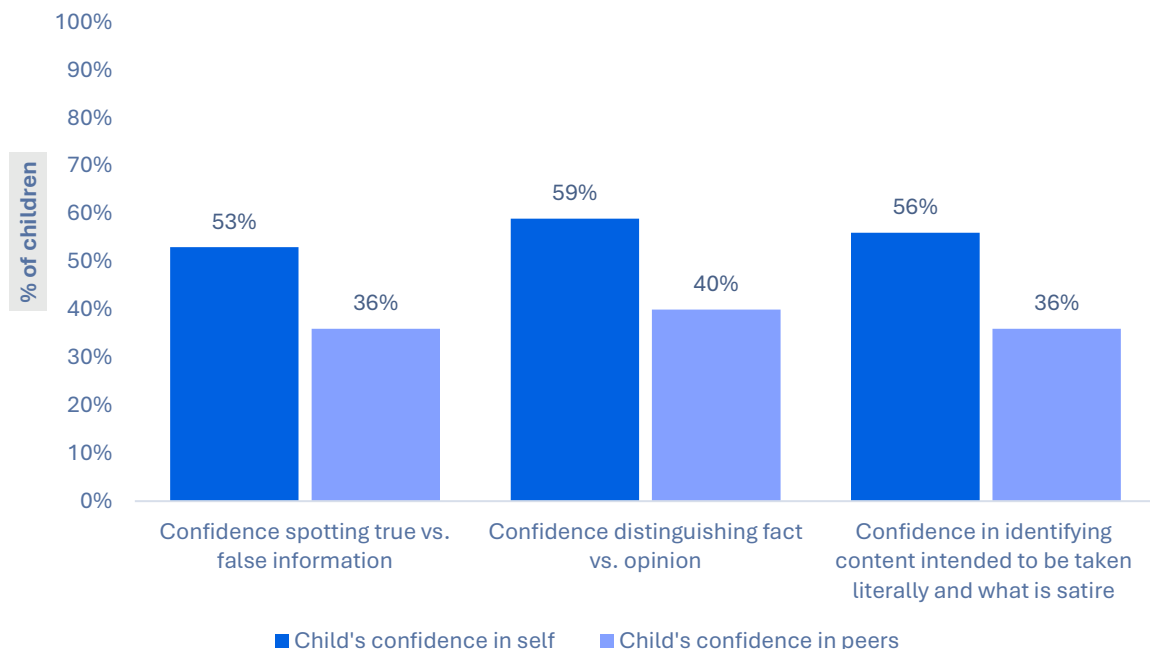
The findings below explore how confident young people feel evaluating what they encounter in these environments.

Many young people lack confidence evaluating political information online

Young people report limited confidence across several core media literacy skills when encountering information about politics and current affairs online. Only 53% of young people who see political information online say they feel confident telling whether this information is true or false. Similarly, only 59% feel confident distinguishing fact from opinion, and 56% are confident recognising when political and current affairs content is satirical rather than intended to be taken literally. These are all foundational skills for evaluating political information in online environments.

Confidence is lower still when young people consider their peers. For example, only a third (36%) say they are confident that other people their age can tell whether information online about politics is true or false.

Young people's confidence in their media literacy skills compared to their peers

Base: Children who see political content online (449); Children aged 13+ (573). Q: *When you see content online about politics and current affairs, how confident are you that you can tell the difference between...When you see content online about politics and current affairs, how confident are you that you can tell the difference between...* Q: *When thinking about other people your age, how confident are you that when they encounter politics and current affairs online, they can tell the difference between...*

To understand how this confidence translates into practice, young people were also asked to assess four real-world political claims from the 2024 General Election campaign (see Appendix

1). Each example was designed to test different aspects of evaluating political information, including identifying fact versus opinion, recognising satire, interpreting claims based on official data, and considering potential political bias.

Uncertainty was common. Overall, 41% of young people selected "I don't know / unsure" for at least one of the four examples. This pattern was consistent across age groups, with 13-year-olds just as likely to say they were unsure (45%) as 16-year-olds (47%). On average, 24% of young people selected "I don't know / unsure" for each claim.
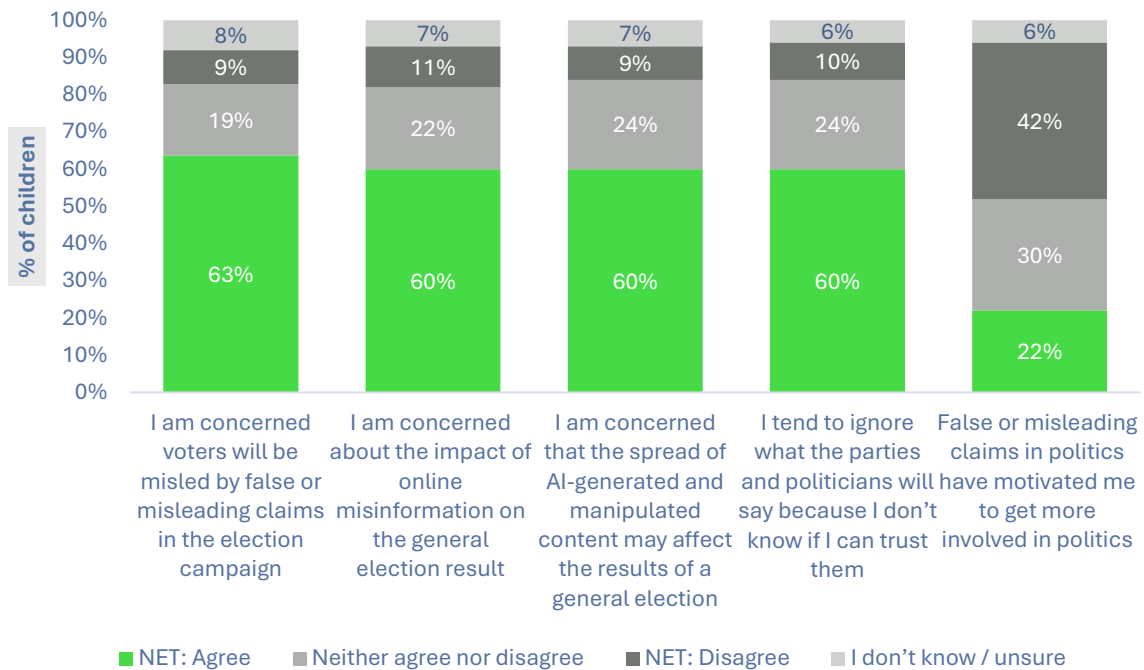
Taken together, these findings suggest that when asked to apply media literacy skills to real-world political content, many young people are uncertain how to judge whether information is factual or opinion-based, satirical, grounded in official sources, or shaped by political bias.

Low trust in election campaigns and political actors is evident from a young age

Concerns about the integrity of election campaigns are widespread among young people. Six in ten (63%) say they are concerned that voters will be misled by false or misleading claims during election campaigns. Similar proportions are concerned about the impact of online misinformation on election results (60%), and the spread of AI-generated or manipulated images, audio or video influencing electoral outcomes (60%).

Alongside these concerns, many young people report low trust in political actors and messaging. Over 60% say they tend to ignore what political parties and politicians say because they do not know if they can trust them. This view is evident from an early age, with 57% of 13- to 14-year-olds agreeing with this statement.

Young people's concerns about election campaigns

% of children

	I am concerned voters will be misled by false or misleading claims in the election campaign	I am concerned about the impact of online misinformation on the general election result	I am concerned that the spread of AI-generated and manipulated content may affect the results of a general election	I tend to ignore what the parties and politicians will say because I don't know if I can trust them	False or misleading claims in politics will have motivated me to get more involved in politics
I don't know / unsure	8%	7%	7%	6%	6%
NET: Disagree	9%	11%	9%	10%	42%
Neither agree nor disagree	19%	22%	24%	24%	30%
NET: Agree	63%	60%	60%	60%	22%

■ NET: Agree   ■ Neither agree nor disagree   ■ NET: Disagree   ■ I don't know / unsure
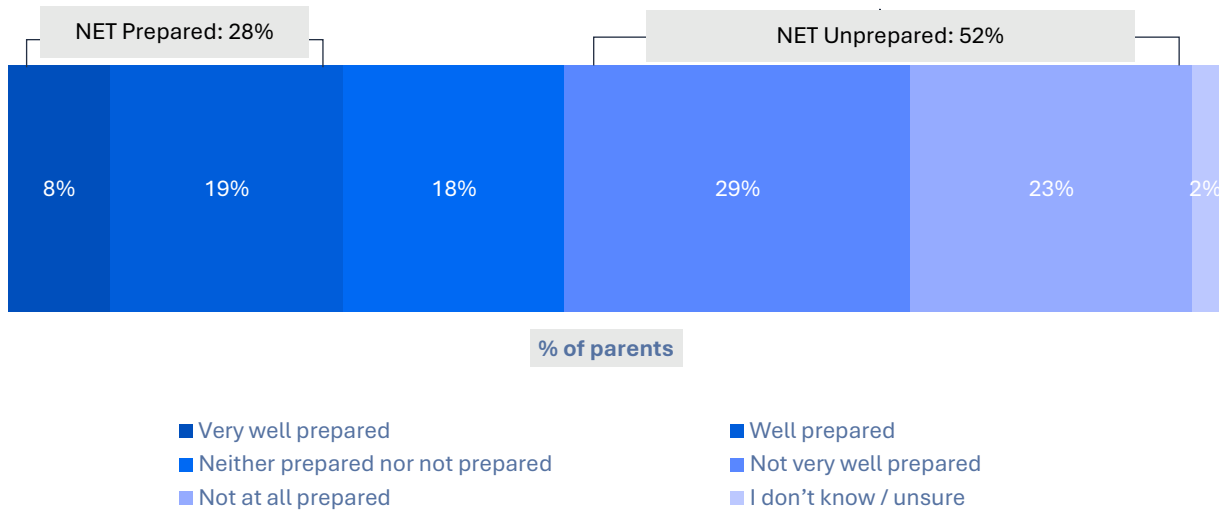
Base: Children (574). Q: *Under upcoming UK law, 16- and 17-year-olds will be given the right to vote in UK-wide elections. Below is a list of statements about campaigns during general elections. Please select how far you agree, or disagree, with each of the following statements.*

Exposure to misleading political claims does not appear to be motivating greater political engagement. Only around one in five (22%) young people say that false or misleading claims have motivated them to get more involved in politics. By contrast, most young people either disagree (42%) with this statement or feel neutral (30%), suggesting that exposure to false or misleading claims in politics is more commonly associated with disengagement or indifference than with increased participation.

Parents express concern about young people's preparedness to vote

Just over half (52%) of parents of children aged 13-17 say they do not think young voters are prepared to make informed decisions at the ballot box, including nearly a quarter (23%) who believe that young voters aged 16 and above are not at all prepared to vote.
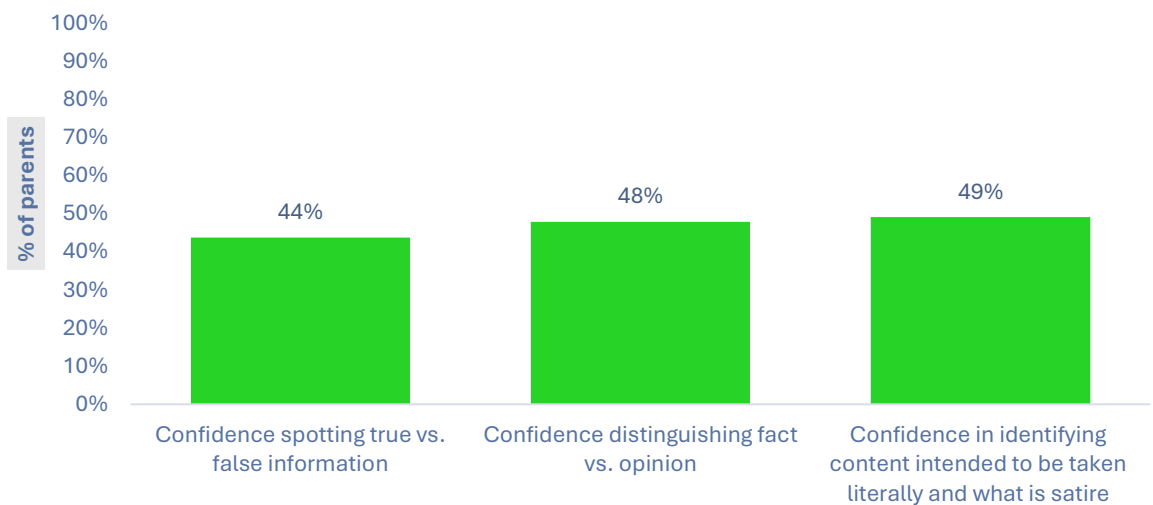
Parents' views on young voters (16+) preparedness to make informed political and electoral decisions

NET Prepared: 28%   NET Unprepared: 52%

| 8% | 19% | 18% | 29% | 23% | 2% |

% of parents

■ Very well prepared   ■ Well prepared
■ Neither prepared nor not prepared   ■ Not very well prepared
■ Not at all prepared   ■ I don't know / unsure

Base: Parents (801). Q. *How well prepared do you think young voters, aged 16 and above, are to make informed decisions about politics and elections?*

These concerns align with parents' confidence in young people's ability to evaluate political information online. Fewer than half believe their child can reliably tell the difference between information that is true or false (44%), distinguish fact from opinion (48%), or recognise satire (49%).

Parents' confidence in their child's media literacy skills

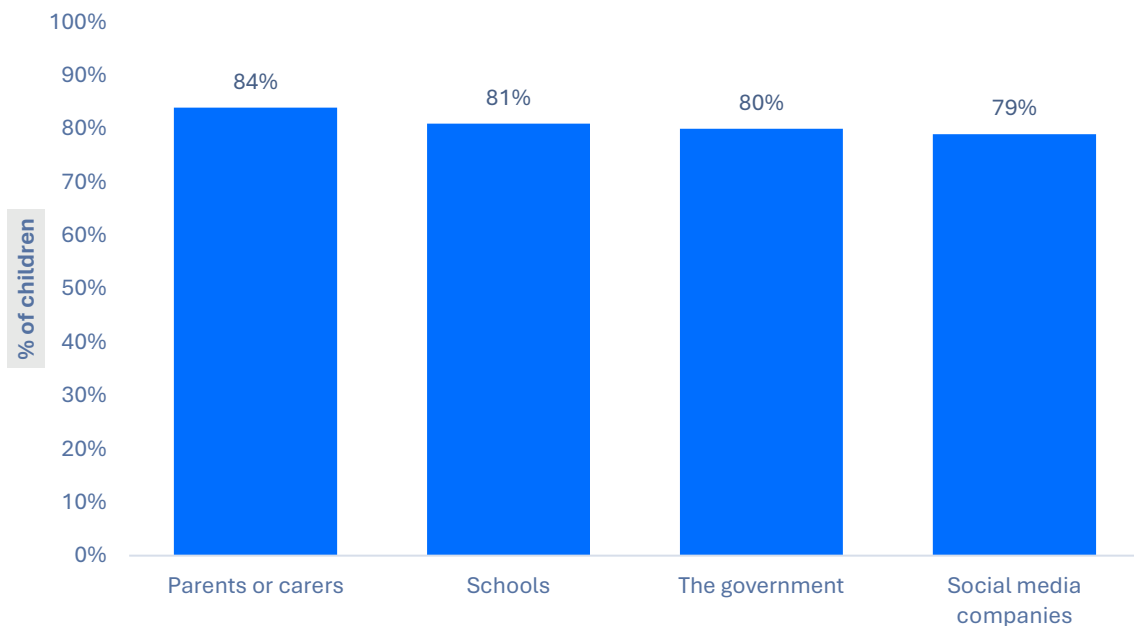|		
44%	48%	49%
Confidence spotting true vs. false information	Confidence distinguishing fact vs. opinion	Confidence in identifying content intended to be taken literally and what is satire

Base: Parents (801). Q: *When your child sees content online about politics and current affairs, how confident are you that they can tell the difference between…*

Supporting young people to be engaged voters is a shared responsibility

Young people see responsibility for helping them identify false or misleading information online as shared across schools, parents and carers, Government, and social media companies. No single actor is viewed as solely responsible; instead, young people recognise that navigating political information requires support across multiple parts of their lives.

Responsibility to help young people learn how to spot false or misleading information online

Base: Children (574). How much, if at all, do you think each of the following should be responsible for helping young people learn how to spot false or misleading information online? *{NET: 'Very responsible' & 'Mostly responsible'}*

At the same time, young people express strong support for interventions that would help them navigate political information more confidently. The majority (79%) say that social media platforms should be required to label or fact-check false or misleading information, and 75% believe schools should do more to teach young people how to evaluate political information. Taken together, these findings point to an expectation that improved education and greater platform responsibility should work in tandem.

What Parliament can do to support young people

Extending the franchise to 16- and 17-year-olds creates a real opportunity to strengthen democratic participation, but this outcome is not guaranteed. For the Elections Bill to achieve its stated aims, lowering the voting age must be matched by sustained action to ensure young people are equipped to navigate political information confidently and to understand how the integrity of elections is protected.

Without such support, newly enfranchised voters risk being asked to engage with a complex and contested information environment without adequate preparation, undermining the Bill's ambition to build informed, confident and lifelong democratic participation. **Parliament and**

Government therefore have a critical role to play in ensuring that young people have access to accurate, trustworthy and clearly signposted political information, alongside the skills needed to engage with it effectively.

To deliver on this ambition, Parliament and Government should take the following actions.

1. Support schools to strengthen media and digital literacy education across the curriculum through clear guidance, resources and teacher training

We welcome the Government's commitment, following the independent Curriculum and Assessment Review, to strengthen the teaching of media and digital literacy across the curriculum. In particular, we welcome plans to expand digital literacy within Computing and to integrate media literacy more consistently into subjects such as Citizenship, which will now be taught from primary school onwards.

To ensure these reforms have a meaningful impact, Government must support schools and teachers to deliver media and digital literacy education effectively across subjects and key stages. This should include building young people's ability to critically evaluate political content online - such as telling fact from opinion, recognising satire, assessing the reliability of sources, and identifying misleading or AI-generated material - and understanding how such content can influence democratic participation.

This support should include:

- **Clear and coherent guidance for schools:** Media literacy guidance has historically been fragmented across multiple documents.[vii] Government should provide clear, consolidated guidance setting out what media and digital literacy skills and knowledge should be taught, how they relate to democratic participation, and how they are expected to be delivered across subjects and key stages.

- **Teacher training and professional development:** Teachers need adequate training through Initial Teacher Training (ITT) and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) to feel confident teaching media and digital literacy, including how to address misinformation and AI-generated content.

- **Accessible, up-to-date teaching resources:** Teachers need access to high-quality, engaging and regularly updated resources. Government should develop a central, easily accessible online hub bringing together trusted materials to support media and digital literacy teaching for all learners.

2. Establish a clear, coordinated national approach to media literacy

To date, Government action on media literacy has been fragmented across departments, with limited coordination, accountability or long-term strategic direction.[viii] This has contributed to a lack of clarity about responsibility for supporting citizens' media literacy.

As part of its approach to strengthening democratic participation and electoral resilience, Government should establish a clear, coordinated and accountable national approach to media literacy.

This should include:

- **Urgent publication of the Media Literacy Vision Statement:** Government should publish its Media Literacy Vision Statement[ix] without delay, clearly setting out objectives, priorities and measures of success, including how media literacy will support informed participation in democratic processes and confidence in election integrity.

- **Clear leadership and accountability:** The cross-government working group on media literacy, led by AI Minister Kanishka Narayan as of February 2026, should have a clearly defined remit and report annually to Parliament on progress, impact and future priorities.

3. Provide sustained funding for media literacy delivery beyond schools

A coordinated national strategy should include sustained, long-term investment in delivering media literacy outside the classroom. The Communications and Digital Committee highlighted that media literacy provision outside schools is patchy and often reliant on underfunded third-sector organisations, limiting its reach and consistency.[x]

This gap matters. Internet Matters research shows that many young people rely on trusted adults when navigating online information: 52% say they turn to a trusted adult when they encounter distressing news content on social media, and 51% say they would speak to a trusted adult if they wanted to verify whether news content is accurate.[xi] This underlines the importance of equipping parents and carers, as well as young people, with the knowledge and confidence to support informed engagement.

Government should therefore ensure that parents and carers have access to clear, reliable information and guidance to support young people in navigating today's information environment. This requires sustained investment in organisations beyond schools that have the specialist expertise and reach to deliver effective media literacy education to families and communities.

In practice, this should include increased and sustained funding for the **Electoral Commission** to deliver evidence-based public information campaigns on issues such as misinformation, disinformation and AI-generated content, **alongside funding for Ofcom and civil society organisations** to deliver targeted media literacy initiatives for different audiences.

4. Require social media platforms to support media literacy by design

Social media platforms play a central role in shaping how young people encounter, interpret and engage with information about news, politics and current affairs. While education is essential, young people also require support at the point where information is encountered, particularly in fast-paced, algorithmically curated environments.

Parliament should ensure that social media platforms are required to embed media literacy by design[3] features that actively support young people's ability to evaluate information and reduce exposure to harm. Parliament should ensure that there is a statutory duty on platforms to provide effective media literacy, and this should be underpinned by a code of practice.

This should include:

- **Clear indicators for AI-generated or manipulated content,** enabling users to understand when material may not reflect real events or people.

- **Design features that support critical evaluation,** such as prompts that encourage users to pause before sharing unverified content, and tools that provide contextual information or signal the reliability of sources.

- **Greater transparency and user control over recommender systems, i**ncluding clear explanations of why content is shown and accessible options to manage, filter or report misleading or distressing material.

Embedding these features would reinforce media literacy skills in practice, reduce the burden placed on young people to navigate complex information environments alone, and complement education-based approaches by supporting safer and more informed engagement online.

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[3] Media literacy by design means including features that actively help children to evaluate, question and contextualise the information they see.

About this briefing

This joint briefing has been produced by Internet Matters and Full Fact to inform parliamentary consideration of the Elections Bill and its implications for young people's engagement with political information.

Methodology

This briefing draws on a data from Internet Matters Pulse, a nationally representative survey conducted by Opinium Research from 24 October -13 November 2025. The findings are based on a survey of 573 children aged 13-17 and 801 parents of children aged 13-17 based in the UK.

The analysis is supplemented by previous Internet Matters research on young people's news consumption, media literacy and wellbeing.

About Internet Matters

Internet Matters is a not-for-profit that supports parents and carers, and professionals, to keep children safe online. We produce expert guidance and resources, and use our research and insights to champion the views and interests of families, making evidence-based recommendations to those with influence over children's digital lives. This includes government, policymakers and parliamentarians, as well as industry partners.

About Full Fact

Full Fact is an independent UK charity. We seek to build a better information environment to restore trust and work to find, expose and counter the harms of bad information. We scrutinise all sides in any political debate impartially, and hold everyone in public office to high standards. Last year, we published **839** fact checks and other articles including liveblogs and explainers. We also secured **74** corrections from newspapers, broadcasters and MPs.

Appendix 1: Political claims from 2024 General Election

These political claims are statements which have previously been fact-checked by Full Fact.

STATEMENT
From the UK Conversative Party's (@Conservatives) official X (formerly Twitter) account ([source](#)) "Labour have pledged to open Britain's borders to 100,000 more migrants. Arriving each and every year."
From a Facebook user's post in 'The Progressive Alliance – Uniting Against the Tories' Facebook group. ([source](#)) A black background with this white text: "On the day Gordon Brown left office we had a functioning NHS, low inflation, 2000,000 less children living in poverty since 1997, and a handful of food banks. Place blame where blame is due."
From an article in The Independent titled "Small boat arrivals in 2023: Key numbers" ([source](#)) "There were 29,437 arrivals in 2023, according to provisional figures from the Home Office. This is more than a third (36%) lower than the 45,775 arrivals in 2022. It is the first time the total number of arrivals has fallen year on year since current records began."
TikTok video from Bull Nose News ([source](#)) Video of narrator speaking with text overlaid: "Rishi Sunak has announced plans to pay people to get them to leave the UK." In the clip, the narrator says that Sunak announced these plans in order to bring down net migration and make figures look better to conservative base. The narrator states that "an initial figure touted for paying somebody to relocate would be £75,000". Tags: #fyp #rishisunak #primeminister #politics #uk #tory #toryparty #conservatives #ukpolitics #england #englandtiktok #pay #abroad #leavemeansleave #migration #netmigration #75k #conservativeparty #foru #foryou #foryoupage #joke #parody #BNN #BullsNoseNews #satire #satirenews #satirecomedy #comedy #greenscreen #greenscreenvideo #satireaccount #satiretiktok #politicstiktok #politicsfunny #britain #british #uktiktok #greatbritain

[i] Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (July 2025) *Policy paper: Restoring trust in our democracy: Our strategy for modern and secure elections. Available* at: source

[ii] Internet Matters (2025) *Informed or Overwhelmed?: Understanding the impact of Online news on children and young people's wellbeing*. Available at: source

[iii] Internet Matters (2025) *Informed or Overwhelmed?: Understanding the impact of Online news on children and young people's wellbeing*. Available at: source

[iv] House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee (July 2025) *Media Literacy 3rd Report of Session 2024-25*. Available at: source

[v] Internet Matters (2025) *Informed or Overwhelmed?: Understanding the impact of Online news on children and young people's wellbeing*. Available at: source

[vi] Internet Matters (2025) *Informed or Overwhelmed?: Understanding the impact of Online news on children and young people's wellbeing*. Available at: source

[vii] Internet Matters (2024) *A Vision for Media Literacy*. Available at: source

[viii] House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee (July 2025) *Media Literacy 3rd Report of Session 2024-25*. Available at: source

[ix] Government announced development of a statement in its response to the House of Lords' Communication and Digital Committee's report on media literacy.

[x] House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee (July 2025) *Media Literacy 3rd Report of Session 2024-25*. Available at: source

[xi] [xi] Internet Matters (2025) *Informed or Overwhelmed?: Understanding the impact of Online news on children and young people's wellbeing*. Available at: source