

Dear Petitions Committee,

13th January 2025

*Re: Petition to ban smartphones in all schools in Wales (with exemptions for exceptional circumstances)*

Thank you for forwarding correspondence dated 20.11.24 regarding the above petition from Lynne Neagle to Carolyn Thomas. Please note that Ms Neagle's letter refers to 'mobile phone' use, whereas the petition was created to ban **Smartphones** (hereon referred to as SPs) and not **mobile phones**. Social Media will be referred to as SM.

### **Concerns with Welsh Government's Response**

Whilst Ms Neagle's letter recognises the impact SPs are having on young peoples' mental health and wellbeing, it is lacking in scope and fails to adequately address critical safeguarding concerns outlined in the petition text. These need to be addressed **as a matter of urgency** to protect our young people: the future generations of Wales. The stance of Welsh Government's Education Department is not sufficiently responsive to the evidence and global trends.

### **Social Media**

Ms Neagle's acceptance of SM as being an integral part of life for young people is deeply concerning. Worldwide, many medical professionals and experts are unanimous in their belief that SPs should be banned altogether for under 16s. SM and SPs are a very dangerous combination and it is overwhelmingly clear that they are doing real harm to young people. Schools and governments need to unite in dissuading children from using SM, not encourage it by allowing SPs on their premises.

### **Challenges From Activities Outside School and How Banning SPs Can Help**

While it's true that many challenges related to SPs and SM stem from activities outside school hours, banning SPs in schools addresses a critical aspect of the issue. Schools serve as sanctuaries where healthy habits can be modelled and reinforced, providing a critical break from the relentless pressures of SP and SM use. By prohibiting SPs during school hours, students gain respite from distractions, supporting their mental health and fostering face-to-face communication, academic focus, and mindfulness. For children who spend excessive time on devices—sometimes up to 15 hours daily—this screen-free time is invaluable for social engagement and brain development, equipping them with the resilience and skills to navigate both the real and digital worlds more responsibly.

### **Objective**

We strongly urge the Committee to recommend a nationwide policy that ensures a SP-free educational environment for **all** children in Wales. With campaigns like Smartphone Free Childhood gathering momentum and Global leaders taking bold action, we do not want to see Wales fall behind on such an important issue for our children.

### **NAHT**

The NAHT dismisses this debate as an "unnecessary distraction" from more pressing issues facing schools. However, it's worth considering whether excessive SP use might contribute to some of these challenges. Research has shown that SPs can exacerbate existing learning difficulties, such as reduced attention spans and increased anxiety, which disproportionately affect pupils with additional learning needs. Furthermore, the pervasive influence of SPs impacts

nearly all children, potentially creating new challenges such as screen addiction and impaired social skills. Staff retention issues could be linked to behavioural and other issues caused by SP use. For example, Llanishen High School, which banned SPs six years ago, has a low staff turnover.

### **Harms of SP Use**

#### **Social Media Risks:**

Grooming: Platforms like TikTok and Snapchat are exploited by predators. Sextortion crimes have risen by 66% since 2022 and many children have taken their own lives worldwide due to Sextortion.

Pornography: NSPCC reports nearly all children encounter violent pornography by age 12, with 79% viewing it by 18.

Other concerns include but are not limited to: misogyny, toxic beauty standards, extremism, racism, self-harm and pro-anorexia content, violence, body shaming, drug promotion, life-threatening challenges, homophobia and transphobia, gambling, scams and phishing. 75% of 15-year-olds have been sent beheading videos and 90% of girls and 50% of boys say they are sent unwanted explicit content.

#### **Mental and Physical Health Risks:**

Addiction: The average American spends 2.5 months per year on their SP. Teens receive 237 notifications daily, disrupting focus.

Physical Impact: Blue light disrupts melatonin production, and therefore sleep, and could even contribute to early-onset puberty. SP use has also been linked to obesity, digital eye strain and an increase in myopia, tics/tourettes, neck and back pain, poor posture and hearing problems.

### **Negative impact of SPs on the Brain and Learning**

There is a growing body of research that suggests SP use can have a negative impact on the structure and function of our brains. Some of the potential negative effects include: reduced memory and learning; reduced attention span and focus; reduced happiness in relationships; increased anxiety and depression and reduced empathy.

#### **Academic Performance**

SP distractions reduce cognitive capacity and academic achievements. A study published in the *University of Chicago Press Journals* found that the mere presence of a SP reduces available cognitive capacity.

### **Benefits of SP Bans in Schools**

A 2015 *London School of Economics* study found that test scores increased by more than 6% in schools that banned SPs. The study also found that low-achieving and low-income students improved the most.

Children at schools with effective SP bans get GCSEs 1-2 grades higher.

### **Global Context and Evidence**

More than a year ago, UNESCO called for a global ban on SPs in schools, yet the Welsh Government is effectively condoning and endorsing the use of products that were not designed

for children; are not suitable for children; and are wreaking havoc with childrens' and parents' lives.

### **Calls for Action and Expert Support**

- Bereaved parents, such as those of Molly Russell, Brianna Ghey, and Jools Sweeney, advocate for urgent changes in policy.
- Experts including Dr. Rangan Chaterjee and Jonathan Haight, and public figures such as **Bill Gates** and **Martin Lewis** support limiting access to SPs and SM for under-16s.
- The Irish Medical Association has called for a SP ban for under-16s, deeming their use by children a public health emergency.
- The United States Surgeon General has called for tobacco-style warning labels on SM and Australia has recently banned SM for children under 16.

### **Injustice and Risks of Allowing Individual Schools to Implement SP Bans**

It is unjust that some schools have SP bans while others do not. All children deserve the right to a SP-free educational setting. Most parents support banning SPs in schools.

While Welsh Government is leaving this critical decision to the discretion of individual schools, this approach fails to acknowledge that all children—and indeed, all people—are fundamentally vulnerable to the addictive design of SPs and the harmful content they can expose them to. These risks are universal and not dependent on a school's unique community or circumstances.

We do not believe schools are best placed to make such decisions. While they may know their pupils and communities well, they cannot fully grasp or mitigate the wide-ranging and deeply rooted risks associated with SP use. **The issues of addiction, exposure to harmful content, and mental health consequences affect all children equally and require a unified, nationwide approach, not a fragmented policy that leaves some children unprotected.**

### **Contradictions in the Digital Safety Argument**

Children do not need SPs in school to learn about digital safety. Allowing unregulated devices in schools:

- Risks inappropriate content sharing.
- Exposes children to algorithms serving unsolicited harmful content (e.g., Channel 4 documentary *Swiped* shows how some children can be served violent pornography within minutes of opening a SM account).

### **The Role of Schools and Government**

We believe schools have a crucial role in helping parents manage this issue. A policy change could set a positive example and help shift the norm.

#### **Opportunity Cost:**

The average UK 12-year-old spends approximately 29 hours a week – the equivalent of a part-time job – on their SP. This extensive screen time leaves little opportunity for real-world activities and relationships that are essential for developing life skills necessary for the transition into adulthood. Introducing a blanket ban on SP use could result in young people spending approximately 1,170 fewer hours on their devices annually.

Evidence indicates a significant decline in face-to-face social interactions among adolescents, with a 2022 study revealing a 30% drop in in-person interactions compared to a decade ago. This underscores the importance of fostering opportunities for meaningful social connections within schools. Limiting SP use in educational settings can help encourage real-world interactions, supporting the development of essential life skills and deeper relationships

### **Parent and Teen Support:**

Schools and governments should be actively discouraging SP and SM use in children. Parents overwhelmingly want SPs banned in schools and many teenagers are now recognising the impact SPs are having on them. A quarter of teenagers surveyed would consider swapping their SP for a basic phone, according to a survey for *BBC Bitesize* and *BBC Radio 5 Live*.

### **Dangers of Big Tech and Addiction**

The pervasive influence of Big Tech on our culture, driven by profit, raises major concerns. Many tech executives strictly limit their own children's screen time, often opting for tech-free schools, highlighting a stark hypocrisy.

Big Tech borrows strategies from Big Tobacco, exploiting human psychological weaknesses to foster addiction. SM platforms, for example, are designed to trigger dopamine responses, keeping users hooked. Some experts call for regulating Big Tech as strictly as Big Tobacco to protect public health. Restricting SP use in schools could help mitigate these negative impacts on children's development and mental well-being.

### **Social Exclusion and Inequality**

Allowing SPs in schools deepens social exclusion for children without access due to financial, cultural, or health reasons. While most children own SPs, those without them face barriers in lessons and peer interactions. This "digital divide" reinforces inequalities, leading to exclusion and long-term issues like low self-esteem and academic disengagement. Schools must adopt inclusive policies that do not rely on SPs use to prevent further marginalisation.

### **Conclusion**

It is essential that all children have access to a SP-free educational environment, where they are free from the pressures and distractions that come with digital devices. The current situation, where decisions about SP use are left to individual schools, fails to address the widespread concerns and evidence regarding their detrimental effects. The rise in bullying and antisocial behavior, often fuelled by unrestricted internet access, cannot be ignored. Without a national policy in place, children continue to be exposed to these risks, and the social pressures to own SPs only grow. Parents are left in the difficult position of providing their children with devices they know may expose them to harm, all to avoid the stigma of being a "have-not." We urge Welsh Government to take decisive action by implementing a national ban on SPs in schools. This would not only create a safer and healthier environment for students but also foster a more equitable and supportive atmosphere where all children can thrive without the pressures of SM and digital distractions.

Thank you