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Petitions Committee - **P-06-1482 Ban smartphones in all schools in Wales with exemptions for exceptional circumstances**

Barnardo's Cymru Written Evidence

Children can be subject to devastating harm online, including exploitation and abuse, and exposure to harmful and damaging content, which can harm children's mental health and perceptions of relationships and sex. There are also concerns about children receiving smartphones at a younger age, and spending longer on them. The average age that a child receives their own smartphone is around 10 years old¹ – when children start to transition to secondary school. However, Ofcom research has found that almost a quarter of children aged 5-7 years old have their own smartphone.² Children's screentime tends to increase as they get older, with children aged 7-8 years old spending on average 2 hours 54 minutes online each day, and 15-16 year olds spending on average 4 hours 54 minutes online each day.³

However, there are also a myriad of benefits that children can experience when online – including connecting with family and friends, for entertainment, developing their own identity, and as a tool for education.

- *Should there be a single national policy, or should schools decide for themselves?*

Barnardo's believes it is important that a nuanced approach is taken to ensuring children's online safety. We believe the onus needs to be put on technology platforms to make their services safe for children and remove harmful content. We would also support steps to make smartphones safer for children by adding default settings.

We urge political parties to listen to the voices and experiences of children and young people to understand how they would like regulation to look.

Barnardo's does not support a ban on smartphones for children as we do not believe it is enforceable or practical and also would not have much of an effect. Currently, in practice children cannot buy their own smartphones – they are unable to have a contract until above the age of 18, and so in the vast majority of instances it is their parents who purchase their smartphone. We are also concerned that 'bans' on smartphones could prevent children from seeking help from their parents/ carers or other trusted adults should they experience online harms.

We do think that options could be explored to ensure that phones are safer for children – for example the introduction of default settings and age assurance through App Stores to prevent children downloading apps that are not age-appropriate for them. However, this must ensure

¹ <https://www.kidscape.org.uk/news-and-blogs/2022/december/at-what-age-should-i-give-my-child-a-phone>

² <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/news-centre/2024/a-window-into-young-childrens-online-worlds>

³ <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/45128/documents/223543/default/>

safety for all children. We know that many children receive and use second-hand devices, for example, which would not be equipped with the new regulations to ensure online safety.

Is the evidence in favour of a ban compelling? Or not?

The evidence creates a compelling case for a wider conversation, ensuring that the voices and views of children and young people are central to this, but we are not convinced that this automatically leads to enough evidence to make a ban compelling. One clear omission from the discourse on smartphones in schools is the voices of children and young people.

What would the downsides of a ban be?

- There is the potential for unintended consequences, such as the implications for drawing a hard line between student's online lives and their lives in schools. We know that secondary school pupils told Estyn as part of the *We Don't Tell Our Teachers*⁴ report that digital spaces were the most prevalent for sexual bullying and harassment to take place. However, they also shared that although this did not happen in schools but outside of school and was then taken in to school to teachers by children wishing to report their concerns. Barnardo's practitioners shared their concerns that a blanket ban may discourage children from taking anything linked to digital safeguarding into school, that they may see this as separate and not something they can or should seek support from education staff about.
- Impact on diverse groups of young people such as young carers and children and young people with medical or mental health needs. Young carers told us that they already feel uncomfortable disclosing their status as a young carer, losing access to their phone could make it even more difficult for them to attend school consistently if they cannot be in touch with family throughout the day as needed, and using the school office phone, often overheard by others, has previously made young carers feel uncomfortable.

What would be the practical implementation issues?

- What would the impact be on children living in rural communities whose families rely on them being contactable for long journeys to and from school which could include multiple buses or a long walk?
- Are schools resourced well enough to make a blanket ban work in practice? Would phones have to be stored during the day? How could this be done securely?
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⁴ Estyn - We don't tell our teachers – Experiences of peer-on-peer sexual harassment among secondary school pupils in Wales. Dec 2021 <https://estyn.gov.wales/improvement-resources/we-dont-tell-our-teachers-experiences-of-peer-on-peer-sexual-harassment-among-secondary-school-pupils-in-wales-2/>



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- There would also need to be consideration around exemptions for exceptional circumstances; what are these, and how would they work practically? There could also be consequences for children allowed smartphones within their peer group, for example, if it identifies them as a young carer despite their wish not to be widely identified as such.

What would be your recommendation to Welsh Government on this petition/issue?

To take active steps to ensure that the voices of children and young people are central to the inquiry and Welsh Government's decision-making.

Ensure that any conversation about smartphones in schools runs alongside a conversation about regulating online spaces so that children can access the online world safely, with robust measures in place that safeguard them from dangerous and harmful content and communications. We cannot treat these two issues as though they are separate.

Ultimately, children's experiences online are nuanced. To ensure that children are safe online, it is therefore important that a **nuanced and balanced approach** is taken, which ensures the protection of **all children**. The onus of children's safety should be on the technology companies and platforms that have designed services that are not safe for children, rather than excluding children from vital technologies.