

Motion: To engage schools and residents in Ware with the movement for a smartphone free childhood.

Proposed by Cllr Kirsty Taylor-Moran

Date of Council Meeting: 24 February 2025

Background

A fifth of 3 and 4 year olds in Britain own a smartphone and a quarter of 5-7 year olds do. Every year it's getting younger. By the age of 12, just 9% of kids are smartphone-free. A growing body of evidence is showing that smartphones, and social media in particular, are negatively impacting children's mental health, sleep and learning.

Smartphones are experience blockers, distracting children from engaging in the real world activities and relationships crucial to their healthy development. 8-12 year olds in the UK now spend an average of 3 hours a day or 21 hours a week – equivalent to a part-time job – on their smartphones.

Rates of depression, anxiety and suicide in young people have spiked globally since 2010, when children first began getting smartphones. Hertfordshire is above the national average of adolescent mental health problems, and local services are overwhelmed. The first generation to grow up with smartphones are now adults – data shows that the younger they got their first smartphone, the worse their mental health today. The amount of time these addictive devices and apps take away from real life play and interactions is a major issue for parents, young people, teachers and society. Ofcom state that 84% of bullying in 8-17 year olds is via their phone.

Smartphones act as a gateway to pornography, violent and harmful content. Often kids don't seek them out, but are exposed to them via algorithms and messaging apps. Once seen, these things can never be unseen. 90% of girls and 50% of boys say they're sent explicit content they didn't want to see.

The problems caused by smartphone usage are manifold; it has caused children to self-harm, facilitated criminal and sexual exploitation, blackmail, emotional abuse, and sexual harassment.

The problems have lasting impact. Tech companies intentionally make their products addictive, because the more time we spend on them, the more data they harvest, the more money they make. By leveraging dopamine circuits, they trigger brain responses akin to slot machine gambling. 1 in 4 young adults show signs of behavioural addiction to smartphones.

Anecdotally, a local headteacher has shared that children as young as 9-10 have been groomed online, and the sharing of indecent images and online bullying are prevalent in primary schools.

Children in Ware deserve the opportunity to thrive.

A Bill was introduced in Parliament which aimed to make smartphones less addictive for children and empower families and teachers to cut down on children's daily smartphone screen time. The bill has been supported by various groups, including Barnado's, National Education Union, the Children's commissioner and Smartphone Free Childhood. Unfortunately, the MP who made the proposal has dropped the most crucial element of the Bill, after the Labour government indicated it would not back the phone ban.

Parallel to the failed Bill, the organisation Smartphone Free Childhood (SFC) has been campaigning hard. They aim to persuade parents, and lobby schools to help parents, make a choice to delay children's access to smartphones until they are old enough to navigate social media and use the internet responsibly when unsupervised. They achieve this by asking parents and schools to sign a pact. They have three goals; growing the conversation about the harms of smartphones for children, empowering parents and schools to take collective action and create change at a local level, and putting pressure on government to protect children.

SFC launched in February 2024 and has grown to a community of more than 150,000 parents across the UK. In September 2024 they launched the Parent Pact. Pacts have been signed in over 30% of schools in the UK, with 11,145 schools registered with 95,217 children. In Hertfordshire the pact has been signed by 5,380 parents.

In May 2024 **all** the primary schools in St Albans went smartphone-free. In September 2024, after parents raised it with the head teacher, William Ransom Primary School in Hitchin asked all 25 primaries in their town to join them in their request to parents to hold off on giving their children smartphones. By October 2024 a total of 51 schools in Stevenage and North Herts have seen parents sign the pact.

The campaign understands that parents want to be in touch with their children and to keep them safe. To be clear, this is not a campaign that calls for an outright ban on smartphones, but focuses on reducing the harms of the internet on children too young and ill-equipped to use it safely. SFC have asked schools to disseminate information to parents, and directly engaged parents, to argue for a minimum age of 14 for smartphones, and 16 for social media accounts. A simple brick phone allows children to call and text without the addictive harms of a smartphone, and ticks the boxes for parents who want to be able to contact their children when they are away from home.

Parents are in an impossible position; either they give their child a smartphone with all the known harms, or they isolate them from their peers at a crucial time in their development. Due to the network effect of smartphones, and the lack of effective regulation of Big Tech, parents and children are losing out.

Smartphones are a social justice issue, with children in care, children experiencing poverty, and those with additional needs most vulnerable to the risk of harm. A growing digital divide is emerging between those parents/carers who are aware of how harmful smartphones are and proactively manage their children's online lives, and those who aren't or can't.

Ware Town Council

“Safeguarding is Everyone’s Responsibility”

There are approximately 4,000 children living in Ware. In addition to the social justice highlighted above, smartphones represent a public health crisis that will affect most children in Ware. In the absence of legislation to protect children, Ware Town Council has the opportunity to be vocal in recognition of the problem, and support schools and parents to engage with the campaign for smartphone free childhood.

As the bottom tier of local government, we are well situated at the heart of our community. WTC’s facilities and events are accessed and attended by children, and we have demonstrated a commitment to wellbeing. It is appropriate for WTC to assert its position on an issue that affects such a large proportion of the local population. Ware Town Council has made significant investment in leisure facilities in Ware and delivers a comprehensive events programme for children. It is important that barriers to using these facilities are considered.

Our schools

The following state funded schools are situated within the town boundaries.

Primary Schools:

Larkspur Academy

Priors Wood Primary School

Sacred Heart RC Primary School

Christ Church CofE VA Primary & Nursery School

St Catherine’s CofE Primary School

Secondary Schools:

Presdales School

Chauncy School

The Proposal

The movement is reliant on widespread support to make it a success because the main drivers in giving children smartphones are peer pressure and safety reasons. In a survey of parents in Harpenden, 61% of parents said that other parents delaying giving their children would definitely impact their decision, and 77% said it would definitely or possibly impact their decision. For the movement to create culture shift in Ware it needs to achieve critical mass. Tandem to banning smartphones at school, schools can ask parents to sign the parent pact. It is anonymous and provides parents with reassurance that their child will not be the odd one out.

Ware Town Council can help amalgamate existing support for the movement locally. At a recent Ware & Hertford Headteacher meeting smartphones were on the agenda, with schools indicating support for a ban. Through council comms, Ware Town

Council can encourage engagement and normalise children not having smartphones before year 9. WTC can empower parents and schools to enforce this by publicly backing the campaign. We can signal that Ware Town Council acknowledges the importance of happy and healthy childhoods for the children in our community

Recommendation

It is recommended that Ware Town Council writes to the primary and secondary school settings listed above, using the attached templates, to encourage them to commit to the movement for smartphone free childhoods. Ware Town Council will include the parent pact leaflet, or appropriate summary of the information contained within it, in WTC comms to spread awareness of the campaign:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1gyElpmNe-uqyu6Zz_RBykFRS-RNKh-Ee/view

Dear Primary Head Teacher,

At a recent Full Council meeting, Ware Town Councillors voted to support a motion for smartphone free childhood. This is a national campaign that calls for smartphones to be delayed until the age of 14, and access to social media delayed until 16. We write to you to ask for your support in spreading awareness about the campaign, and to encourage you to ban smartphones for children in your setting. We know how much pressure schools are under, and we are sure that as a school leader you are already acutely aware of the impact of smartphones on children. You are in a powerful position to help shift societal norms and facilitate a culture shift for children locally, because children spend more time in school than any other place outside the home. The growth of the national 'Smartphone Free Childhood' movement has shown that parents – and many young people themselves – want schools to help them minimise the impact of smartphones in their lives.

The problem

When children first started using smartphones, there was little understanding of their impact. Now, there is a growing body of evidence linking smartphone use with an array of harms. Smartphones are correlated with anxiety, depression and loneliness. They are a gateway to pornography, cyberbullying, grooming, violent and extreme content. Research shows that smartphones affect academic performance and many children show signs of behavioural addiction to their devices.

Underpinning these harms is one that is potentially the most significant of all. Smartphones are experience blockers, distracting children from engaging in the real world. The average UK 12-year-old now spends 29 hours a week – equivalent to a part-time job – on their smartphone. This leaves little time for the real world activities and relationships that enable them to learn the essential life skills needed for the transition to adulthood. It is not surprising that new research shows that the younger a child receives their first smartphone, the worse their mental health.

And yet, the age a child gets their first smartphone is getting younger and younger. In the UK, a fifth of 3-4 year olds own their own device and 24% of 5-7 year-olds do. Many people don't want to get their child a smartphone but feel they have no choice because everyone else is. Parents do not want to be responsible for isolating their child from their peer group.

What role do primary schools play?

Currently there is no guidance from the government or NHS around when children should get smartphones, and in that vacuum, primary schools can play a powerful role in resetting to healthier norms. If primary schools are explicitly smartphone free, there is less peer pressure for children to have one. It becomes easier for parents to make pacts to delay together, meaning whole peer groups can transition to secondary school with simple phones rather than smartphones. If Heads support parents in delaying, parents will feel more confident in saying "no". It is hoped that

schools would benefit from fewer smartphone-related incidents that require significant staff input and resources to handle.

What we're asking of you:

1. *Please consider making your school a genuinely smartphone free school environment.*

Letting everyone know that your school doesn't allow smartphones on the premises sends a powerful message to the whole school community. We realise this is a big ask, but it is worth looking at recent national media coverage of the positive impact that happens when schools adopt a decisive policy position.

2. *Encourage parents to delay.*

Please consider encouraging parents not to buy a smartphone until their children are at least 14. Parents would appreciate guidance on this issue, and your support would help parents to say "no" with confidence. A starting point is letting parents know about the Smartphone Free Childhood [Parent Pact](#) via the school newsletter. This is a simple digital tool that enables parents to come together and delay with others in their school community.

3. *Start taking collective action with other primary school heads*

There is a growing call for smartphone free schools in Hertfordshire. First in St Albans, and then a reported 51 schools in Stevenage and North Herts have joined the movement. We understand there have been discussions locally between schools, and Ware Town Councillors are keen to lend their support.

Yours sincerely,

Ware Town Council

Dear Secondary Head Teacher,

At a recent Full Council meeting, Ware Town Councillors voted to support a motion for smartphone free childhood. This is a national campaign that calls for smartphones to be delayed until the age of 14, and access to social media delayed until 16. We write to you to ask for your support in spreading awareness about the campaign, and to encourage you to ban smartphones for children under 14 in your setting.

We know how much pressure schools are under, and we are sure that as a school leader you are already acutely aware of the impact of smartphones on children. You are in a powerful position to help shift societal norms and facilitate a culture shift for children locally, because children spend more time in school than any other place outside the home. The growth of the national 'Smartphone Free Childhood' movement has shown that parents – and many young people themselves – want schools to help them minimise the impact of smartphones in their lives.

The problem

When children first started using smartphones, there was little understanding of their impact. Now, there is a growing body of evidence linking smartphone use with an array of harms. Smartphones are correlated with anxiety, depression and loneliness. They are a gateway to pornography, cyberbullying, grooming, violent and extreme content. Research shows that smartphones affect academic performance and many children show signs of behavioural addiction to their devices.

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What role do schools play?

When smartphones are removed from the school day, children do better. One study, conducted in four English cities, found that students' GCSE scores improved in schools that went smartphone-free. This effect was especially pronounced for lower-achieving students. In addition to this, Schools with an effective smartphone policy are more than twice as likely to be rated Outstanding. One study found that even the "mere presence" of a mobile phone, even if not being used, can result in attention and performance deficits, so it's not surprising that removing them has a positive effect.

What we're asking of you:

1. *Please make your school a genuinely smartphone free school environment.*

Pupils at schools that are genuinely smartphone free achieve 1-2 grades higher at GCSE. However, at present, only 11% of schools have an effective smartphone-free policy. In recent months, an increasing number of schools have taken bold steps to strengthen their policies, to ensure that phones are completely locked away during the school day. Some schools are now going further by stipulating that only simple phones may be brought to school. We would urge you to consider doing the same, either removing smartphones from the premises altogether or ensuring they are locked away for the entire school day.

2. *Encourage parents to delay.*

Please consider encouraging parents not to buy a smartphone until their children are at least 14. Parents are desperate for guidance on this issue, and your support would help parents to say “no” with confidence. Consider letting them know about the Smartphone Free Childhood [Parent Pact](#) via the school newsletter – it’s a digital tool that enables parents to come together and delay with others in their school community.

We are keen to support the local community to reset the norm around smartphones, and protect childhood for longer.

Yours sincerely,

Ware Town Council