



**James Naish MP**

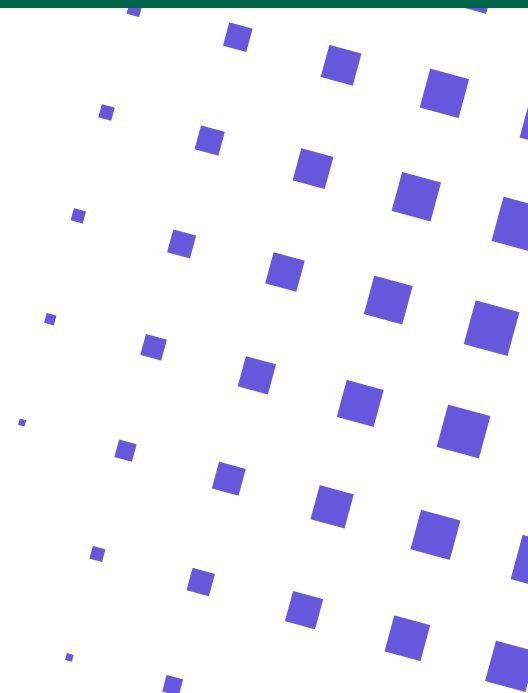
Building a **thriving** Rushcliffe for **everyone**

# ‘A journey we weren’t properly prepared for’:



INTERGENERATIONAL  
INSIGHTS FROM  
RUSHCLIFFE ABOUT  
SMARTPHONE AND  
SOCIAL MEDIA  
ACCESS AND USAGE

## Roundtable report



# Contact details

April 2026. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the author, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other non-commercial uses permitted by copyright law.

The Office of James Naish MP  
House of Commons  
Westminster  
London  
SW1A 0AA

[www.jamesnaish.com](http://www.jamesnaish.com)



# Contents

**Foreword - p.3**

**Executive summary - p.4**

Context - p.5

1. Smartphones in schools - p.6

2. Social media and age limits - p.7

3. Parental responsibility and education - p.9

4. Young people's voices - p.10

5. Conclusion - p.12

**Recommendations - p.14**



*The expert panel from 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2026,  
chaired by James Naish MP*

# Foreword

There is a moment in almost every parent's life when they hand their child a smartphone for the first time. For some, it feels like a natural step. For others, it comes with a nagging sense of unease. For almost everyone, it marks the start of a journey that they weren't properly prepared for.

This report is the result of a roundtable discussion that took place in Rushcliffe on 23rd January 2026. It came at an unexpectedly timely moment – just two days before, on 21st January, the House of Lords passed an amendment to the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill that proposed banning social media for under 16s. The day before, the government announced a three-month consultation on how to improve children's relationships with mobile phones and social media. And just weeks earlier, on 10th December 2025, Australia's landmark social media ban for under 16s came into effect. In other words, the debate about smartphone and social media access and usage is happening now, and it's moving quickly.

In advance of the roundtable, over 200 Rushcliffe parents and carers responded to an online survey that I ran on these topics. I also visited schools to hear from young people directly. What I found was not a straightforward story. Most people recognise that smartphones and social media are neither wholly 'good' nor wholly 'bad', but the current situation – where children and parents are largely left to navigate an extraordinarily complex digital landscape with limited guidance – is not working for many of them.

At the roundtable itself, I was struck, above all, by two things. The first was the sophistication of the young people who attended. They weren't passive recipients of adult opinion; rather, they were thoughtful, articulate and understood why the debate about smartphone and social media usage and access was taking place. They wanted to be part of it. The second was the sense of despair among parents and carers, many of whom were honest about feeling out of their depth and were searching for clearer, more consistent guidance.

Despite having thought a lot about this topic over recent months, I still don't have all the answers. I thought I favoured a quick outright ban, but I left the roundtable convinced that the technology companies can and must do more to help – irrespective of whether a ban is implemented or not. Without a clear commitment to technical interventions, I understand and sympathise with calls for a more definitive option.

The national debate is still in its early stages, and the government's consultation will rightly shape the direction of policy. However, what is clear is that the government cannot afford to sit on its hands, as it arguably did with the Safer Phones Bill – a private member's bill tabled in early 2025 – which it could have supported and, through doing so, accelerated the conversation by almost 12 months. Politicians must, once and for all, bring more clarity, consistency, education and accountability to this immensely important policy area. The public – and future generations – won't forgive us if we fail to do so.

**James Naish MP**, Member of Parliament for Rushcliffe

## Summary of recommendations

# 1

Establish **clear, consistently enforced smartphone-free policies at both primary and secondary school**, so parents know what to expect no matter where children are educated.

# 2

As a minimum, **introduce graduated access to social media platforms through an age rating approach**, reflecting the fact that different platforms carry different levels of risk.

# 3

Provide parents, carers and young people with **clear, practical and standardised guidance** about safely navigating smartphones and social media.

# 4

Use existing powers under the Online Safety Act 2023 to **ensure that technology companies protect children by design**, rather than as an afterthought.

# 5

Ensure that all future policy development in this space is **shaped by the voices and lived experiences of young people themselves**, not just by adults speaking on their behalf.

## Report statistics

49

pupils invited to attend the **roundtable** from seven secondary schools

212

parents and carers who responded to the **pre-event survey**, promoted via social media

52%

of **roundtable attendees** supported a social media ban for under 16s

67%

of **survey respondents** said they use apps to manage their child's smartphone use

68%

of **roundtable attendees** opposed a smartphone ban for under 16s

59%

of **survey respondents** supported a smartphone ban for under 16s

83%

of **survey respondents** said they were "very concerned" about child exposure to inappropriate content

83%

of **survey respondents** agreed that the government should intervene and set more rules on smartphone access

## The national context

According to Ofcom’s 2025 ‘*Children and Parents*’ report on media use and attitudes, 97% of children aged 13 to 17 use a mobile phone to go online, and 79% of children have their own profile on a social media, messaging, video-sharing platform or livestreaming site. Perhaps most strikingly, 37% of children aged 3 to 5 already use social media apps or sites in some form. [1]

The Mental Health Foundation reports that 20% of adolescents may experience a mental health problem in any given year, and that 50% of mental health problems are established by the age of 14. [2] The link between these two sets of figures is increasingly well-documented, although there are some “mixed findings in the literature.” [3]

However, the picture is not uniform across all groups of children. Ofcom’s research, for example, has consistently found that girls are more likely to experience “nasty/hurtful interactions online” than boys (34% vs. 28%). It has also found that children with disabilities are among the most likely to encounter “worrying or nasty” content online (41%). [1]

Nationally, large numbers of children are also misrepresenting their age online. Ofcom’s data suggests that 33% of children aged 8 to 17 have used a fake age online, and that 34% of children aged 8 to 15 have a profile on at least one online service with a minimum user age of 16. [1] This is despite the current digital age of consent in the UK being 13 – evidencing how difficult digital enforcement can be.

## The local context

Rushcliffe is, by most measures, a prosperous and well-educated constituency. Its schools are among the highest performing in the country and parental engagement tends to be strong. It might, therefore, be tempting to assume that the challenges posed by smartphones and social media are less acute in Rushcliffe than elsewhere.

The evidence from this roundtable, and from the survey that preceded it, suggests otherwise. Indeed, affluence doesn’t insulate children from social media algorithms, nor does it guarantee that parents feel equipped to educate their children about a rapidly-evolving digital landscape. If anything, the Rushcliffe roundtable illustrated how even the most engaged and well-resourced families are feeling overwhelmed.

**“The status quo isn’t an option. Parents are trying to educate their children but are having to effectively navigate the regulations themselves. It’s a wild west out there**

A Rushcliffe parent

The roundtable on 23rd January 2026 brought together pupils from seven secondary schools with teachers, parents and carers from across the constituency to discuss these issues. The event started with a 45-minute panel discussion to prompt subsequent debate. The panel included **Victoria Goodyear**, Professor of Physical Activity, Health and Wellbeing at the University of Birmingham; **Ian Russell**,

1. Ofcom (2025), “*Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report*”. Available at: [ofcom.org.uk](https://www.ofcom.gov.uk/consult/condocs/childrenandparents/childrenandparents2025/).

2. Mental Health Foundation, “*Children and young people: statistics*”. Available at: [mentalhealth.org.uk](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/statistics/children-and-young-people).

3. Tølbøll, K.B. (2026), “*Review: Social media use and adolescent mental health – an umbrella review and power analysis*”. *Child Adolesc Ment Health*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/camh.70071>.

founder of the Molly Rose Foundation, **Arwen Spencer**, founder of Screenwise Children and a Rushcliffe parent; **Tim Cuthbert**, Rushcliffe’s Neighbourhood Police Inspector; and **Dr Laura Spells**, a Specialty Doctor in CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health).

## Section 1: Smartphones in schools

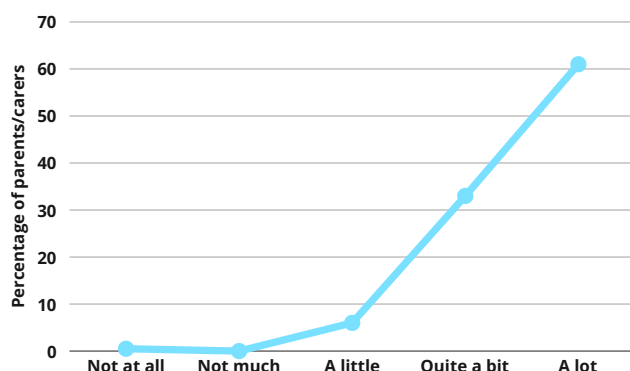
The roundtable discussion following the panel debate began with what is, in many ways, the most immediate and actionable question: should smartphones be banned from schools? The answer was overwhelmingly ‘yes’, with pupils and parents generally united on this principle.

Teachers, too, were supportive of this idea, although they noted that in most schools, bans already exist on paper but are poorly or inconsistently enforced. The Education Secretary’s recent announcement that Ofsted inspectors will check school mobile phone policies and enforcement on every inspection was, therefore, seen as a positive and necessary step.

### The challenge of enforcement

Indeed, enforcement was the point at which positivity about the concept of a school-based ban typically gave way to scepticism.

How much have you thought about smartphone access and usage?



Pupils were particularly candid about this, with several noting that phones “officially stay in bags” but “people still use them” – most often in toilets which are understandably and rightly private spaces for pupils.



***I got my phone when I was 11, but it was mainly for practical things. My brother is just about to turn 11 and I worry about him following the crowd. His personality is so different to mine***

A Rushcliffe pupil



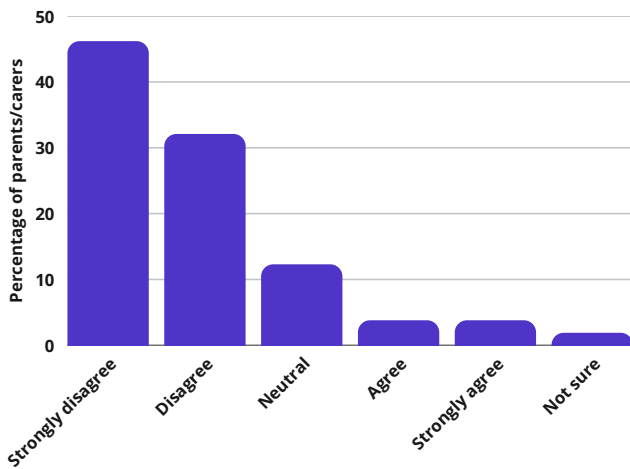
It was also noted that over recent years, in advance of the emerging national debate about online safety, schools had embraced smartphones and incorporated them into teaching, often encouraging pupils to use apps for homework or research. A cultural reorientation within schools will, therefore, be essential to make a ban truly work.

But the key point landed by most roundtable participants was the importance of consistency – not only within a school but across schools within local authority areas. It was suggested that feeder school policies should align with secondary school policies so that the ‘digital transition’ is understood between years 6 and 7, and nearby secondary schools should ideally have the same smartphone policies so all young people are treated and feel the same. The lack of consistency within and between schools is a major obstacle to effective enforcement of *existing* smartphone bans, and this must improve to end the current malaise.

### Exceptions and edge cases

That said, it was widely recognised that

To what extent do you agree with the statement: smartphones are valuable educational tools



exceptions may still be required. The most commonly cited justifiable exception was medical need (e.g. diabetes monitoring). Safety on the journey to and from school was another major concern for parents, carers and pupils. Several pupils said that they rely on their phones to contact parents if plans change at the last minute, and some pupils use transport apps on their journey home.

The consensus was that these concerns were valid but could be addressed without undermining the principle of a smartphone-free school day. Several parents suggested that ‘brick’ phones – basic handsets capable only of calls and texts – could serve the purpose of keeping children safe on their journeys without putting the full weight of the Internet into children’s hands. Others suggested that schools could contact parents in emergencies without pupils needing a device – as was the case 10 to 15 years ago.

However, the fundamental takeaway was that the current local, school-by-school approach to smartphone management can only do so much. Ultimately, a consistent national standard, backed by proper

enforcement, is what most Rushcliffe parents and teachers – and most pupils – said they wanted to see.

## Section 2: Social media and age limits

After answering a relatively straightforward question about having a smartphone ban in schools, roundtable participants turned their attention to the idea of limiting social media access and usage for youngsters. This conversation was more complex and, in some cases, more divisive.

### Parents want action; pupils expect nuance

Parents and carers at the roundtable were, by and large, supportive of a social media ban for under 16s. Many expressed relief at the government’s consultation and at the House of Lords’ recent amendment, viewing these moves as long overdue recognition of a problem that parents in particular had been worrying about for years. One parent said simply: “I would support a ban as there are no better solutions at the moment.” Several other parents and carers noted that a ban would make conversations with their children easier, removing the risk of being the sole enforcer of online / smartphone limits in a world where their child’s friends could potentially all be online.



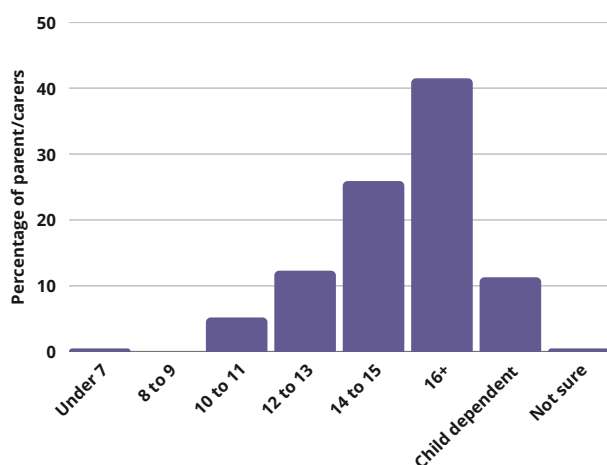
***I’m 14. I wouldn’t be allowed to go and see an 18 film. Why can’t we have a similar approach to social media?***

A Rushcliffe pupil



Pupils, by contrast, were generally more cautious. They did not dismiss the risks out of hand – in fact, several participants

**What age do you think is appropriate for a child to have their own smartphone?**



acknowledged that social media made them feel worse, and one said that they had “found no reason to be on social media” and would agree with a ban. However, the dominant pupil view was that a blanket approach would be blunt, difficult to enforce and – for children with mental health or social anxieties – potentially counterproductive and harmful.

### *Not all social media is the same*

One of the most consistently made points by participants, and one that the panel discussion had raised earlier in the day, was that ‘social media’ is not a single entity. YouTube, used by millions of young people for learning and revision, is a fundamentally different product from TikTok or Snapchat. WhatsApp, used by many families as their primary means of communication, is different again. A ban that treated all of these platforms identically was seen, by pupils in particular, as both impractical and unfair.

Several participants suggested that the answer might lie in banning specific features within platforms, rather than entire platforms. However, the idea that seemed to gain most traction across age groups was

the introduction of age ratings, similar to those used for films. This was discussed at several tables after being raised by Ian Russell during the panel debate, and was generally welcomed as a concept.

### *The cliff-edge problem*

One concern flagged by several parents and carers was the “cliff-edge effect” of a total ban which would, in theory, suddenly end when a child turned 16. It was noted that gaining access to all social media platforms at the same time, without having learned how to manage the online world, could be problematic in itself. It was also noted that this type of ban would end at a pivotal moment for most teenagers, when sitting their GCSEs. This was not seen as the right time to gain unlimited access to the Internet.

A related concern was the practical reality of birthday-based enforcement. Children born in August, for example, would gain access to social media almost a year after some of their classmates. This generated concerns about enforced social isolation during what is already a vulnerable period for youngsters. The consensus among attendees who raised this point was that a graduated, staged approach – rather than a single transition point – would, therefore, be fairer and more effective.

**“ As much as I worry about all this technology and hate most of it, all [my daughter] wants is a smartphone and social media access – and I can’t bear the thought of her being left out**  
A Rushcliffe parent

Australia’s social media ban for under 16s, which came into effect in December 2025,

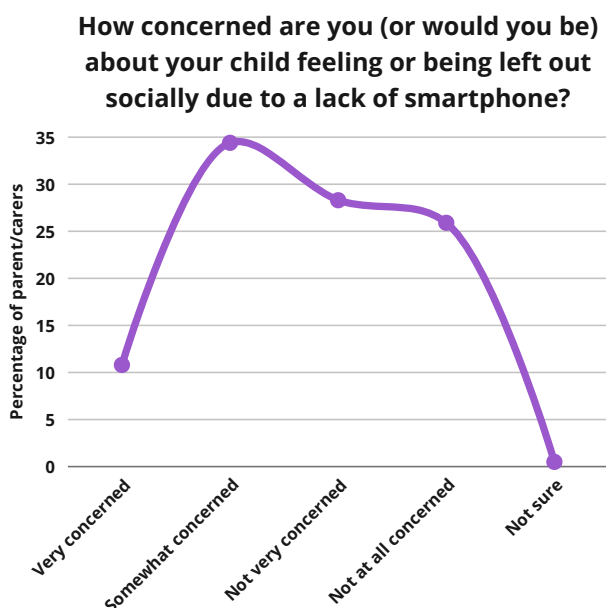
was discussed at several tables. Views were generally mixed: some parents and carers saw it as a model to be followed; others, and particularly pupils, were sceptical about its enforceability. Several pupils noted, with some amusement, that Australian teenagers were already sharing tips online about how to circumvent the ban.

That said, the prevailing view was that Australia’s experiment was worth watching closely and responding to quickly. However, roundtable participants were clear that the UK shouldn’t simply copy its approach and should, instead, aim to learn from the policy’s successes and failures.

### Section 3: Parental responsibility and education

Underpinning many of the roundtable discussions was a simple question: whose job is it to keep children safe online? Parents and carers? Tech companies? Politicians? The users themselves? Roundtable participants were clear that all these groups have a role to play, but this doesn’t justify waiting for others to make a decisive move.

#### Parents want guidance, not just blame



One of the most striking themes to emerge from the roundtable was parents and carers feeling out of their depth. The survey conducted before the event showed that 93% of respondents identified parents and carers as the group “mainly responsible” for keeping children safe from smartphone-related harm; however, the roundtable discussions revealed that this feels unachievable in practice. Many parents and carers said they simply didn’t have the knowledge or skills themselves to make sound judgement calls or to stop their children from circumnavigating agreed ground rules. They felt that the technology companies and their children were always several steps ahead of them.

**“ We have basically become part of an experiment in effective parenting, and parents everywhere are stabbing in the dark. The government has got to do more to help. Doing nothing isn’t an option ”**  
A Rushcliffe parent

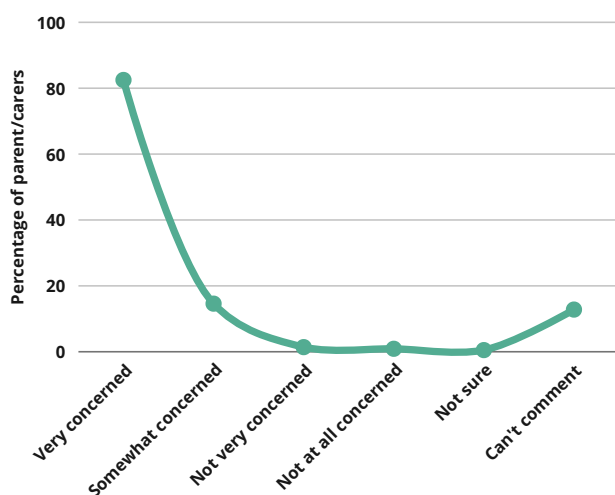
This is why national-level guidance – ideally underpinned with real consequences if not being appropriately observed – was broadly welcomed by adult participants (although it was notable that some parents said that, in seeking and calling for this type of guidance, they felt like they had already failed).

#### The case for education in schools

If parents are to be empowered to enforce more positive behaviours, education must be part of the answer, and several roundtable participants argued that schools are the right place to deliver quality training.

One teacher drew a comparison that resonated with her table. She said: “We know

**How concerned are you about your child's exposure to inappropriate content?**



that teenagers drink, so we acknowledge it happens and educate them on safe drinking. It should be the same with social media. We must all be educated, and educating, about it.” It was noted that the same logic has previously been applied to drugs education, to good effect. Some participants suggested that digital safety should be a formal and distinctive part of the school curriculum, purposefully separate from citizenship. One parent advocated for smartphone and social media education to be woven into the *whole* curriculum proactively, rather than being seen primarily as a pastoral matter.

Pupils also supported the idea of better digital safety education, with one group suggesting that it should be compulsory for both children *and* parents. One pupil acknowledged that “parents don’t always fully understand the technology” and said that this made managing and agreeing online safety rules, without extra support, almost impossible for older generations.

### The role of technology companies

Perhaps the most consistent and forceful point made throughout the roundtable

discussions – by parents, carers, teachers and pupils – was that technology companies are not doing enough. This was not a fringe view – it was the consensus.

Parents were particularly blunt. One said: “Where are the tech companies? The Online Safety Act has the power to make tech companies change. Use it. Fine them big money.” Another parent observed that a “massive social shift” was needed in how tech companies design products. And pupils on the whole agreed. One said: “The algorithms can drive young people towards porn and violence, so surely they could work the other way around too?” Another pupil said “tech companies started it” and advocated for better intervention by the private sector *before* the government introduces legislation.



***Where are the tech companies in this? The Online Safety Act has the power to make them change. Use it. Fine them big money***

A Rushcliffe parent



The Molly Rose Foundation’s Ian Russell, one of the five panellists in the initial debate, was cited by many parents and carers as being a particularly compelling voice. His message, born of the most personal and painful experience, was clear: that the platforms know the harm they are causing, yet they continue to choose profit and convenience over children’s safety.

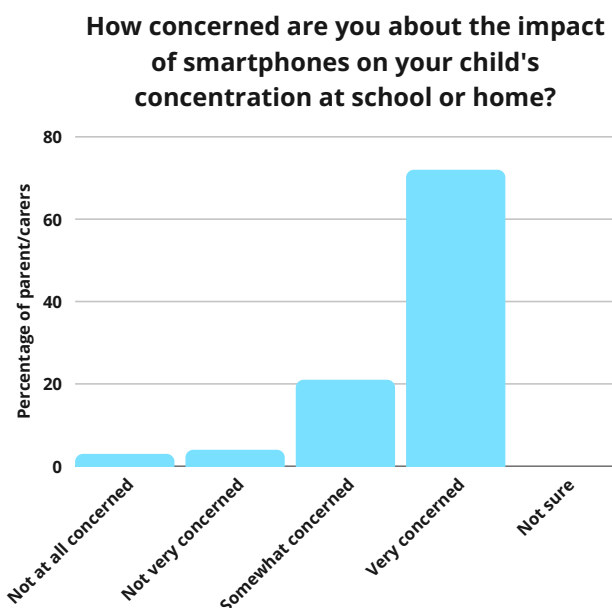
### **Section 4: Young people’s voices**

*Young people know the risks and want to be taken seriously*

It would be easy to assume that young people are either oblivious to the harms of social media or indifferent to them. The roundtable showed neither to be true. The pupils present were acutely aware of the risks of spending too much time online. One observed that they recognised and felt the impact of “instant dopamine hits”. Another said that spending more time on screens during the school holidays made them “feel worse ... 2 hours a day makes me feel worse.” A third said that they tried to keep their phone out of the bedroom and had deliberately thought about reducing their screen time.

What pupils objected to was not the idea of limits, but the idea that adults could set limits without really listening to them. “Every new thing,” one pupil said, “is going to have something wrong with it. But you can’t just ban it – you have to think about the wider consequences.” It was repeatedly noted that there is a risk that future policy decisions are taken by people who lack the same digital capability, knowledge and/or understanding as the generation they are making decisions about – and this could result in wrong decisions being taken.

An unexpected but valid point raised by



pupils was the question of what happens if smartphones and social media are banned. Several pupils noted that youth clubs, sports clubs and other offline social activities are not always accessible due to cost, transport and/or availability. The implication was clear: if the government and schools are serious about reducing screen time, they must also be serious about investing in positive alternatives. A smartphone ban, without a corresponding investment in youth provision, risks, in the words of one pupil, “just shifting the problem somewhere else.”

**“ I find that if I go home early, I often spend the extra time on my phone. I have to work really hard to find something else to do. It’s hard to always be disciplined ”**  
A Rushcliffe pupil

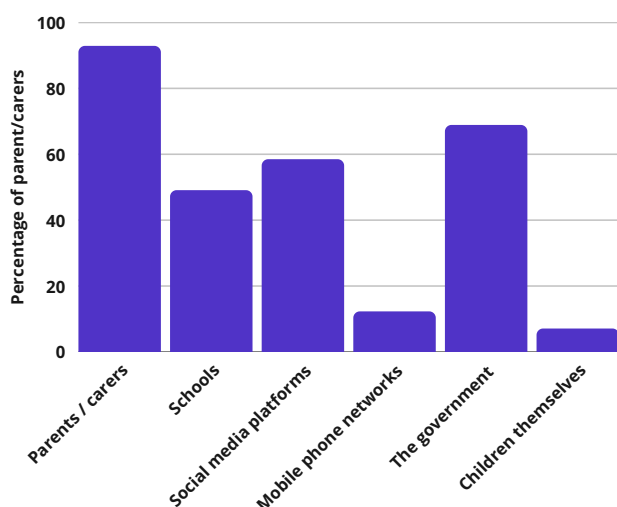
Bullying: happens offline as well as online

The risks of online bullying were discussed at a couple of tables, with this often being seen as justification for an outright ban. Pupils’ views were generally more measured than this, with one noting that “bullying is going to happen anyway, unless you ban young people from socialising altogether which is never going to happen.” This was not a dismissal of cyberbullying as a serious issue, but a recognition that banning social media would not, in itself, eliminate underlying behaviours. Education and support about bullying, some argued, are just as important as more online restrictions.

The right age: what pupils think

When asked directly what age they thought was appropriate for smartphone and social

**Who do you think is mainly responsible for keeping children safe from smartphone-related harm? (Select up to three options)**



media access, pupils at the roundtable were broadly aligned. For smartphones (distinct from basic communication devices), the most common answer was aged 11 to 13. For social media access and usage, the proposed age range was wider: from 13 to 16, with most pupils coalescing around 14 as a reasonable starting point for graduated access, be it via a smartphone or another online device. While it was often suggested that “it ultimately depends on the individual child and their maturity”, it is clear that the desired consistency referred to earlier in this report cannot be achieved if this remains a guiding principle.

#### *A note on one pupil's experience*

One pupil at the roundtable had only recently moved to the UK from another country. He suggested, with evident surprise, that very few people in his previous home “bothered with social media”. He said he was “shocked how people stay in their houses on their phones.” His table discussed whether it was social media that was keeping children indoors, or whether children staying indoors was driving social media use, and no conclusion was reached. But the observation itself was

striking, and a reminder that the current situation in Britain is not inevitable and that other ways of growing up are possible.

### Conclusion

The Rushcliffe roundtable took place at a pivotal moment in the national conversation about children and their relationship with technology. The room was full of energy and ideas, and a sense that something important was taking place both locally and nationally. The presence of the BBC throughout, followed by a headline slot on the regional news that evening, showed that the effort to bring parents, carers, teachers, experts and pupils into a single room was worthwhile and, potentially, a unique contribution to the wider debate.



***If we let this moment slip away, what message does that send to our young people?***

A Rushcliffe parent



The five recommendations that follow are drawn from the feedback that emerged from both the pre-event survey and the roundtable discussion. The recommendations may not be as radical as some people would like – they do not, for example, call for an immediate ban on smartphones or social media for under 16s. But they do make a clear call for greater clarity, consistency, education and accountability across multiple areas of government policy.

Indeed, there is so much more that can be done at a national level, irrespective of whether there is a historic legislative

decision in the coming months. The government must heed the calls of parents, pupils and teachers by leading on finding practical solutions, and by promoting policy interventions across a range of sectors that make it easier to be a non-digital child.

This, I believe, is the only way of genuinely salvaging precious childhood and teenage years ... and to stop them being lost to an unexpectedly addictive and immensely powerful six-inch screen.

\*\*\*

*Note: the UK government consultation, "Growing up in the online world: a national conversation", which includes proposals about smartphone use and social media access for children, closes on 26th May 2026. Please participate if you can.*



# Recommendations

## 1. Formalise and standardise smartphone-free policies in school.

- Establish clear, consistently enforced smartphone-free policies at both primary and secondary school, so parents know what to expect no matter where children are being educated – and can plan appropriately for the all-important transition.
- These policies should be properly enforced, with an accompanying and genuine cultural shift in schools about how we expect children to consume information.

## 2. Introduce graduated access to social media.

- As a minimum, introduce graduated access to social media platforms through an age rating approach, reflecting the fact that different platforms carry different levels of risk to youngsters, and some platforms have better safeguards in place than others. Don't simply copy other countries' approaches but learn quickly from their successes and failures.
- Recognise that digital understanding is a core life skill and cannot be 'switched on' at a particular moment in someone's life. This, in itself, could prove overwhelming.

## 3. Invest in education for parents and young people.

- Through schools and other organisations, provide parents, carers and young people with clear, practical and standardised guidance about safely navigating smartphones and social media. Make safety education compulsory for young people, and a core component in the new curriculum – across a range of relevant subjects.
- The government should fund and facilitate wider digital safety education of adults, especially those who didn't grow up with today's technology. Make this easy to access.

## 4. Hold technology companies to proper account.

- Use existing powers under the Online Safety Act 2023 to ensure that technology companies, which have benefited so much from the online revolution, protect children *by design*, rather than as an afterthought.
- The burden of keeping children safe should not fall overwhelmingly on parents or schools, but on those who have profited from their exploitation over the past two decades.

## 5. Keep young people at the centre of policy discussions.

- Ensure that all future policy development in this space, local or national, is shaped by the voices and lived experiences of young people themselves. They understand the technology as well as, if not better than, most key decision-makers.
- To this end, the government's consultation should purposefully focus – at least in part – on the voices of children and young people, not just adults speaking on their behalf.

The Office of James Naish MP  
House of Commons  
Westminster  
London  
SW1A 0AA

[www.jamesnaish.com](http://www.jamesnaish.com)

