

UK ministers considering banning sale of smartphones to under-16s

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Ministers are considering banning the sale of smartphones to children under the age of 16 after a number of polls have shown significant public support for such a curb. The government issued guidance on the use of mobile phones in English schools two months ago, but other curbs are said to have been considered to better protect children after a number of campaigns. Esther Ghey, the mother of 16-year-old Brianna, who was murdered last year, has been campaigning for an age limit for smartphone usage and stricter controls on access to social media apps. Ghey told the BBC in February: “We’d like a law introduced so that there are mobile phones that are only suitable for under-16s ... So if you’re over 16 you can have an adult phone, but then under the age of 16, you can have a children’s phone, which will not have all of the social media apps that are out there now.” A March survey by Parentkind, of 2,496 parents of school-age children in England, found 58% of parents believe the government should ban smartphones for under-16s. It also found more than four in five parents said they felt smartphones were “harmful” to children and young people. Another survey by More in Common revealed 64% of people thought that a ban on selling smartphones to under-16s would be a good idea, compared with 20% who said it was a bad idea. The curb was even popular among 2019 Tory voters, according to the thinktank, which found 72% backed a ban, as did 61% of Labour voters. But the thought of another ban has left some Conservatives uneasy. One Tory government source described the idea as “out of touch”, noting: “It’s not the government’s role to step in and microparent; we’re meant to make parents more aware of the powers they have like restrictions on websites, apps and even the use of parental control apps.” They said only in extreme cases could the government “parent better than actual parents and guardians”. A government spokesperson said: “We do not comment on speculation. Our commitment to making the UK the safest place to be a child online is unwavering, as evidenced by our landmark Online Safety Act.” Rishi Sunak is already braced for a backlash to his plan to ban the next generation from being able to buy cigarettes. Anyone born on or after 1 January 2009 – in effect anyone who is 14 or younger now – will not legally be able to buy cigarettes in England during their lives as the smoking age is raised by one year every year, subject to MPs’ approval, under the plans first reported in the Guardian. The policy was first announced at Conservative party conference last year. But since, then, the Conservative government of New Zealand has said it will revoke the country’s own policy on banning smoking.