**Gen Free Charter for Primary Schools**

*“Free from smartphones, free from social media and free to be kids.”*

Press Release

For immediate Release

The combined primary schools of City and County in collaboration with Barnardos have today launched the voluntary *Gen Free Charter* for all primary school children across the county. The charter aims to support and empower parents to connect their children to the things that matter, instead of their smartphones. The charter has three pillars;

1) No smartphones while in primary school.

2) No social media while in primary school.

3) Respect the age ratings on video games.

We are calling our primary aged children *Gen Free - Free from smartphones, Free from social media and Free to be kids.*

The primary schools in city have taken this step as they have experienced growing concern around smartphones and social media in their classrooms. While creating their recent *Action Plan on Bullying* the Department of Education found that cyberbullying was the biggest concern for parents of young people. In addition to bullying, teachers are reporting a decrease in attention levels in classrooms, as well as a decrease in children’s ability to perform basic motor skills such as holding a pencil, or throwing a ball. Dr. Brian Barron the principal of Portlaw National School said that, “I’m very concerned that our children are becoming inactive and sedentary by spending too much time on screens each day. With social media we are exposing our children to often inappropriate and troubling content that they are just not ready to negotiate”.

Triona Daly principal of St. Ursula’s Ursuline primary school in Waterford City said “more and more we are seeing young children experiencing issues around anxiety. I have seen first-hand that many of these issues are due to the influence of social media. Many primary school children don't yet have the emotional maturity to deal with the pressures that social media bring. Over the last few years, primary school children are presenting with issues that were previously deemed to be more 'teenage issues'. Self-harming and cyber-bullying are just some of the problematic issues we're dealing with on a regular basis. No matter what adults do to try to protect children online, children can still be exposed to age-inappropriate content. I feel it's now essential to introduce this charter that will benefit the Well-being of all primary school pupils."

Each school in Waterford will organise the charter in their own way, but the main point is that schools are working with parents to help them make the difficult decision to not get their child a smartphone or allow them onto social media. Dr. Barron said that “it is very difficult for parents to say no, especially when other children in the class have phones and are on social media. Our hope is that this charter will encourage parents to start a conversation amongst themselves and to empower them to draw a line for their children. This charter is not about no technology for children, it is very specifically about smart phones, social media and age-appropriate video games”.

From September 1st each primary school in Waterford will display the *Gen Free Charter* in its school and will invite parents to sign up, by filling in the family charter and displaying it at home. This is a first step in Co. Waterford that the primary schools intend to continue through cooperation with parent groups and Barnardos.