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Mobile phones in schools (England)

Use of mobile phones by children in schools, and whether they should be prohibited, has been a subject of regular debate in recent years. This short briefing provides an overview of the current position in England, recent discussion in parliament, and introduces some relevant research.

Schools policy is a devolved matter, and this briefing focuses on debate in England, but an overview is included of the position in the other countries of the UK.

1 Current position in England

1.1 Guidance for schools

There is no statute or regulation prohibiting the use of mobile phones in schools in England, and schools have always been able to prohibit mobile phone use as part of their behaviour policies.

In February 2024, the Department for Education published non-statutory guidance that said schools should develop a mobile phone policy that prohibits the use of mobile phones and other smart technology with similar functionality during the school day, including at break times.[1]

[1] Department for Education, Mobile phones in schools, February 2024

While the guidance on mobile phones in schools is not statutory, the government expects schools to prohibit the use of mobiles as part of their behaviour policies.[2]

Schools may develop their own policies to implement this rule. The guidance suggests the following systems that could be adopted:

- No mobile phones allowed on the school premises
- Mobile phones handed in on arrival
- Mobile phones kept in secure location, which pupils do not access throughout the school day
- Pupils may keep their phones but they are "never used, seen or heard"

Schools may adapt their policies where necessary for the needs or circumstances of specific pupils.

Position in other countries of the UK

Scotland

In August 2024, the Scottish Government published Mobile phones: guidance for Scotland's schools. The introduction to the guidance by the Scottish Cabinet Secretary for Education, Jenny Gilruth, said:

> The Scottish Government does not intend to dictate approaches to our headteachers – they know better than anyone the specific approach which will work best in their school. But we are making clear with this guidance that our headteachers are empowered to take action up to and including a whole school bans. This Government supports Scotland's schools in taking the necessary steps to tackle the negative effects associated with mobile phone use; to enhance outcomes for all of Scotland's young people.[3]

On 12 December 2023, the Scottish Cabinet Secretary for Education had made a statement to the Scottish Parliament on literacy and numeracy which said the Scottish Government planned to draw up the guidance supporting bans on use of mobile phones in schools. This was in response to the 2023 Behaviour in Scottish Schools Research (BISSR), which identified mobile phones as a cause of worsening behaviour in schools.

Wales

Lynne Neagle, the Welsh Cabinet Secretary for Education, responded to a Senedd petition in January 2025 calling for the Welsh Government to ban smartphones in all schools in Wales with exemptions for exceptional

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2 Department for Education, Behaviour in schools: advice for headteachers and school staff, February 2024, provides wider information

3 Scottish Government, Mobile phones: guidance for Scotland's schools, August 2024

circumstances. She said that "often, the biggest challenge for schools around mobile phones and social media is not what goes on in school or during school hours, but what happens outside of the school environment," and that:

> When setting their mobile phone and behaviour policies, we encourage schools to consider the effect mobiles could have on learning and learner wellbeing. Where headteachers consider the use of mobile phones in school is having a detrimental impact on learners, they already have the authority to ban or restrict their use including other electronic devices such as tablets if they choose to do so. Schools are best placed to make this decision, reflecting on the way they use technology within a school setting and the needs of their learners.[4]

The response also said the Welsh Government would publish a behaviour toolkit to support schools, including mobile phone usage.

In March 2025, the Senedd's Petitions Committee published a report which did not support an outright ban on smartphones in schools, but instead called for more support for schools to set their own restrictions.[5]

Senedd Research have published a range of related information to the petition.

Northern Ireland

In September 2024, Northern Ireland's Department of Education published Guidance for Schools on Pupils' Personal Use of Mobile Phones and other Similar Devices During the School Day.

The guidance states that schools set their own policies and procedures on the use of mobile phones and this is legally a matter for individual Boards of Governors and principals.

Nonetheless, the guidance from the Department of Education "advises that the personal use of pupil mobile phones and other similar devices should be restricted during the school day for the vast majority of pupils. This includes during lunch and recreational periods."[6]

1.2 Education Committee report (2024)

Shortly before the dissolution of parliament for the 2024 general election, the House of Commons Education Committee published a report, Screen time: impacts on education and wellbeing, which said "it is clear that a ban can

4 Senedd, Letter from the Cabinet Secretary for Education – Response to Petition (PDF), January 2025
5 Senedd, Smartphone "ban" is not the right call for schools, 12 March 2025
6 Northern Ireland Department of Education, Circular 2024/14 - Guidance for Schools on Pupils' Personal Use of Mobile Phones and other Similar Devices During the School Day, September 2024

have a positive impact on the mental health and educational outcomes of children."[7]

The committee recommended that if the new guidance had not proven effective in twelve months, a statutory ban on phones in schools should be implemented.[8]

The government has not yet responded to the committee's report.

1.3 Recent parliamentary debate

During Committee Stage of the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill 2024-25, an Opposition amendment was moved to legislate for a ban on mobile phones in schools.

Neil O'Brien (Con) moved new clause 48 to the bill, which would have required all schools in England to ban the use of mobile telephones, and other devices with similar functionality, during the school day.

Neil O'Brien cited evidence of widespread concerns about mental health among young people, particularly relating to social media. Referring to existing non-statutory guidance, he said:

> The idea that guidance has done the trick and that there is no longer a problem to solve is contradicted by the Department [for Education]'s evidence. Work by the company Teacher Tapp, also known as School Surveys, similarly finds very high levels of problems and no signs of progress.[9]

He said that a ban, rather than guidance, was necessary to support schools, and also to reset social norms about children and smartphones.[10]

Munira Wilson (LD), said that she was becoming convinced of the need for a ban, which "would give headteachers and teaching staff the clout they need with parents who particularly want their children to have their phones during the school day" and ensure resources from the government for enforcement.[11]

Damian Hinds (Con) spoke in support of the new clause, and clarified that it did not apply outside of school time (such as on school journeys) or preclude

7 Education Committee, Screen Time: Impacts on education and wellbeing, Fourth report of session 2023-24, 25 May 2024, HC 118, p4
8 Education Committee, Screen Time: Impacts on education and wellbeing, Fourth report of session 2023-24, 25 May 2024, HC 118, p5
9 PBC Deb 11 February 2025 c552
10 PBC Deb 11 February 2025 c553
11 PBC Deb 11 February 2025 c553-554

exceptions for children with particular requirements. He said that a ban "is not a panacea—far from it—but it will make a difference in schools."[12]

Amanda Martin (Lab) said that making decisions about this matter at school level would "allow for the reasonable use of phones and technology, and it would allow for a balanced approach to technology."[13]

The parliamentary under-secretary of state, Stephen Morgan (Lab), spoke in favour of decisions on mobile phones being made at school level, adding:

> New clause 48 lacks the flexibility required to accommodate some individual needs, such as a mobile phone as an adaptation for a disabled child. We know that schools are already prohibiting the use of mobile phones, including through outright bans. Even before guidance was published, around 97% of all schools in England had policies restricting mobile phone use in some way.[14]

The new clause was put to a vote and defeated (by 10 votes to 6).[15]

The issue was debated again during Report Stage of the bill in the Commons. The Opposition tabled a new clause that would, among other things, have required all schools in England to have a policy prohibiting the use and carrying of mobile phones and other devices by pupils during the school day. The new clause was put to a voted and defeated (by 317 votes to 159).[16]

The bill is scheduled to have its second reading in the House of Lords on 1 May 2025.

1.4 Related research and reports

The use of mobile phones in schools, and the impacts of phones and social media on young people more widely, has been the subject of regular debate in recent years. This section covers some relevant research and articles discussing related topics. It is not intended to be exhaustive, but to provide an introduction to the relevant issues.

- The House of Lords Library published a briefing on Mobile phones in schools: Mandating a ban? (November 2024) discussing these issues.
- The Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology has a briefing on Screen use and health in young people (2020) which provides an overview of how children/young people use screens, the opportunities

12 PBC Deb 11 February 2025 c560
13 PBC Deb 11 February 2025 c561
14 PBC Deb 11 February 2025 c562-563
15 PBC Deb 11 February 2025 c5632-564
16 HC Deb 17 March 2025 c116-119

and risks of this use, evidence on the possible effects on health and development, and evidence on ways to support healthy screen use.

- A House of Lords Library article written during the pandemic, Covid-19: Lockdown measures and children's screen time (2020), considered the impact of lockdown.

- The Science and Technology Committee's report on the Impact of social media and screen-use on young people's health (2019) raised concerns about the impact of social media and said that mobile phones could be both a help and a hindrance to learning.

- UNESCO's 2023 Global Education Monitoring Report - Technology in education: A tool on whose terms? (PDF), published in July 2023, said that "mere proximity to a mobile device was found to distract students and to have a negative impact on learning."

- The Behaviour in Scottish Schools Research (BISSR) published in December 2023 found there has been "a general deterioration in the behaviour of pupils in primary and secondary schools in Scotland since 2016". In secondary schools, the behaviour most commonly reported as having the greatest negative impact on the learning experience was students using and looking at mobile phones and tablets when they shouldn't be. The BISSR said:

> While the increasing use of mobile phones and social media was identified as an area of concern in the 2016 research, this type of behaviour seems to have increased substantially in the intervening years and was mentioned commonly among by school staff and LA representatives. Primary schools reported fewer issues and concerns around mobile phone and social media use, partly due to the ages of the pupils, though primary school staff did on occasion speak about mobile phone use among upper primary pupils. In secondary schools, mobile phone use was described as a significant challenge across almost all schools visited. Pupils' use of mobile phones in class was described "a bane" and a source of considerable disruption, with teachers asking pupils to put their phones away potentially leading to conflict from which more serious disruptive behaviour could escalate. [...]
>
> Social media was also highlighted as a negative influence on pupil behaviour. LA representatives and school staff described instances of pupils videoing fights and incidents among pupils, taking pictures of staff members during classes and pupils under toilet cubicle doors, before sharing them on social media. The use of social media in bullying incidents was also outlined, with school staff describing the way in which social media was inescapable as young people had their phones with them at all times and were accessing social media late into the night.[17]

- A 2024 OECD report, Students, digital devices and success, found that on average two-thirds of 15-year-olds across OECD countries reported being distracted using digital devices, including phones, in most or every

[17] Scottish Government, Behaviour in Scottish schools: research report 2023, November 2023

maths class. It said that recent findings from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) survey indicated "a negative correlation between leisurely digital device use at school and academic performance."[18]

However, researchers at King's College London who analysed the PISA data identified "a curious and contradictory finding" that when gender, social class and school behaviour were controlled for, the data showed that students in schools with phone bans had lower achievement across their PISA test scores than those in schools that allowed phone use.[19]

- A World Health Organisation study on Teens, screens and mental health in 2024, drawing on a survey of young people aged 11, 13 and 15 across 44 countries and regions in Europe, central Asia and Canada, found:
  - More than 1 in 10 adolescents (11%) showed signs of problematic social media behaviour, struggling to control their use and experiencing negative consequences. Girls reported higher levels of problematic social media use than boys (13% vs 9%).
  - Over a third (36%) of young people reported constant contact with friends online, with the highest rates among 15-year-old girls (44%).
  - A third (34%) of adolescents played digital games daily, with more than 1 in 5 (22%) playing for at least 4 hours on days when they engage in gaming.
  - 12% of adolescents were at risk of problematic gaming, with boys more likely than girls to show signs of problematic gaming (16% vs 7%).[20]
- An article in the Lancet in 2025 found that there was "no evidence that restrictive school policies are associated with overall phone and social media use or better mental wellbeing in adolescents," although more generally the study found associations between increased time spent on phones and social media and lower mental wellbeing.[21]

A YouGov survey in February 2024 found that 79% of adults in Great Britain agreed that mobile phones probably or definitely should be banned during the school day.

18 OECD, Students, digital devices and success, May 2024
19 BERA, Mobile phone bans in schools: Impact on achievement, 15 February 2024
20 World Health Organisation, Teens, screens and mental health, 25 September 2024
21 Goodyear and others, School phone policies and their association with mental wellbeing, phone use, and social media use (SMART Schools): a cross-sectional observational study, Lancet, April 2025

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