

Research Briefing

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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.

The government has said it [expects schools to follow this guidance](#) and that the “overwhelming majority of schools... already have policies in place that limit or restrict the use of mobile phones during the school day.”³

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.⁴

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

² Department for Education, [Behaviour in schools: advice for headteachers and school staff](#), February 2024, provides wider information

³ [PQ 85539 \[Schools: Mobile Phones\], 12 November 2025](#); the minister referred to survey results of the Children’s Commissioner for England, [School phone policies in England: Findings from the Children’s Commissioner’s School and College Survey](#), 10 April 2025

⁴ Scottish Government, [Mobile phones: guidance for Scotland's schools](#), August 2024

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 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.⁵

The response also said the Welsh Government would publish a behaviour toolkit to support schools, including mobile phone usage – the [toolkit was published in September 2025](#).

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.⁶

In May 2025, Senedd Research published an overview of the position in Wales and relevant research, [Smartphones in schools: helpful tool or harmful distraction?](#)

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

⁵ Senedd, [Letter from the Cabinet Secretary for Education – Response to Petition](#) (PDF), January 2025

⁶ Senedd, [Smartphone “ban” is not the right call for schools](#), 12 March 2025

restricted during the school day for the vast majority of pupils. This includes during lunch and recreational periods.”⁷

In September 2025, a [phone-free pilot was launched](#) in nine schools to explore the potential benefits of restricting mobile phone use during the school day. The pilot is planned to run until March 2026, with a report due in June 2026.⁸

1.2 Education Committee report (2024) and government response

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 have a positive impact on the mental health and educational outcomes of children.”⁹

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.¹⁰

In its [response to the report](#), published in May 2025, the government said it would “continue to build a robust evidence base” on the effectiveness of school mobile phone policies, including “a call for evidence which will ask questions about schools policies’ on mobile phones,” but rejected calls for a statutory ban:

The current school-led approach allows schools to ensure their policies reflect school circumstances... A statutory ban to give more force to the existing guidance is not necessary when survey evidence suggests schools are following the guidance already.¹¹

1.3 Opposition calls for a statutory ban

The Shadow Education Secretary, Laura Trott (Con), has called for [the ban on mobile phones in classrooms to be made statutory](#).¹² In October 2025, she

⁷ 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

⁸ Department of Education, [Givan welcomes start of phone-free school pilot](#), 25 September 2025

⁹ Education Committee, [Screen Time: Impacts on education and wellbeing](#), Fourth report of session 2023-24, 25 May 2024, HC 118, p4

¹⁰ Education Committee, [Screen Time: Impacts on education and wellbeing](#), Fourth report of session 2023-24, 25 May 2024, HC 118, p5

¹¹ Education Committee, [Screen time: Impacts on education and wellbeing: Government Response](#), Third Special Report of Session 2024-25, HC 915, p4

¹² Laura Trott, [Laura Trott MP backs ban for smartphones in schools](#), 31 January 2025

[wrote to Sir Martyn Oliver, HM Chief Inspector at Ofsted](#), to urge Ofsted to formally recognise smartphone use as a safeguarding issue in schools, and for schools to fail the safeguarding check if phones were present during the school day.¹³

A statutory ban has also been raised at different stages of the [Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill 2024-25](#). For example, during committee stage in the Commons, 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.¹⁴

He said that a ban, rather than guidance, was necessary to support schools, and also to reset social norms about children and smartphones.¹⁵ The new clause was put to a vote and defeated (by 10 votes to 6).¹⁶

Munira Wilson (LD) has also called in Parliament for the government's [guidance on mobile phones in schools to be made statutory](#), "to give teachers and headteachers the back-up and, crucially, the resources that they need in order to restrict their use."¹⁷

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 has published a briefing on [Mobile phones in schools: Mandating a ban?](#) (November 2024) discussing these issues,

¹³ [Laura Trott MP \(@LauraTrottMP\), X \(Twitter\), 25 September 2025](#) [accessed 13 November 2025]

¹⁴ [PBC Deb 11 February 2025 c552](#)

¹⁵ [PBC Deb 11 February 2025 c553](#)

¹⁶ [PBC Deb 11 February 2025 c5632-564](#)

¹⁷ [HC Deb HC Deb 20 October 2025 c618](#)

and also [Smartphones in schools: Practice, policy and international perspectives](#) (October 2025)

- 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 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.
- In April 2025, the Children's Commissioner for England, Dame Rachel de Souza, [published survey results](#) which found the "overwhelming majority of schools – 99.8% of primary schools and 90% of secondary schools – already have policies in place that limit or restrict the use of mobile phones during the school day."¹⁸ The Commissioner has [opposed a national ban](#) on mobiles in schools.¹⁹
- 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"

¹⁸ Children's Commissioner for England, [School phone policies in England: Findings from the Children's Commissioner's School and College Survey](#), 10 April 2025

¹⁹ BBC News, [Leave school phone bans to head teachers, children's commissioner says](#), 10 April 2025

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.²⁰

- 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 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.”²¹

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.²²

- 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.

²⁰ Scottish Government, [Behaviour in Scottish schools: research report 2023](#), November 2023

²¹ OECD, [Students, digital devices and success](#), May 2024

²² BERA, [Mobile phone bans in schools: Impact on achievement](#), 15 February 2024

- 12% of adolescents were at risk of problematic gaming, with boys more likely than girls to show signs of problematic gaming (16% vs 7%).²³
- 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.²⁴

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.

²³ World Health Organisation, [Teens, screens and mental health](#), 25 September 2024

²⁴ 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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