Petition to ban smartphones in all schools in Wales (with exemptions for exceptional circumstances):

Engagement Findings

December 2024

Contents

1.   Engagement Summary

The following engagement summary offers an overview of the engagement programme design, delivery, and key findings.

Background

1.   The Petitions Committee is considering a petition which calls for a ban on smartphones in all schools across Wales.

2.   The Committee wished to hear directly from young people and teaching staff about the effect smartphone use in schools has on pupils' learning and wellbeing. The Citizen Engagement Team facilitated focus groups, interviews and surveys with staff and students from schools across Wales to gather their views and experiences.

Objectives

3.   The objective of the interviews was to gather the views and experiences of young people and teachers about their school's smartphone policies, as well as their perspectives on the suggestion to ban smartphones in all schools in Wales

4.   Views were gathered to ensure that those with lived experience within education contributed to the evidence-gathering programme.

Methodology

5.   Given the time and schedule restrictions associated with the school day, a mixed-method approach was conducted to provide flexibility when gathering qualitative data from pupils and teaching professionals. Where possible, focus groups and interviews were conducted with pupils and staff during school hours. A short survey was available for staff of one school who were not able to provide their views face to face.

6.   The engagement comprised of:

- 5 face to face student focus groups

- 2 face to face teacher focus groups

- 2 teacher interviews

- 1 teacher survey

Participants

7.   The participants were sourced through 5 schools from across Wales, ensuring that lived experience of teaching professionals and students from both rural and urban areas were included, as well as schools with diverse socio-economic populations.

8.   Contributions were made by staff and students from Ysgol Dyffryn Conwy, Cardiff West High School, Morriston High School, Abertillery Learning Community and Ysgol Penrhyndewi.

9.   Student participants were recruited from school councils or student voice groups in order to gather perspectives from a broad range of age groups and experiences.

10.   Schools who participated in the engagement enforced varied smartphone bans – ranging from 'hard' bans, where phones are actively locked away and inaccessible to students throughout the school day, to 'softer' bans which require phones to be turned off and unused but kept within student bags or only used under teacher instruction.

Ethical Considerations

11.   Focus groups with students were conducted under teacher supervision.

12.   The format of focus groups and interviews were comparable however some adjustments were made for students with additional needs to ensure their equal participation in the focus groups.

Key Findings

13.   Teachers who contributed agreed that banning smartphone use in schools – whether through 'hard' or 'soft' bans – had a profoundly positive effect on student learning and wellbeing. They noted fewer distractions during lessons and an ability to reclaim teaching time that was previously spent addressing phone-related issues. Attendance and punctuality have improved, which educators agree will have a long-lasting impact on student progress and attainment.

14.   Teachers also expressed concern at the seriousness of the issues that arise from mobile phone use in schools, particularly in terms of student welfare and safeguarding, and how these had decreased significantly since introducing bans.

15.   Particularly in schools where a 'hard' ban was enforced, teachers and students both agreed that social inclusion had improved, and students were more likely to engage with their peers instead of spending time on their phones. Participation in sports and outdoor activities had also therefore increased as a result, resulting in overall healthier behaviours in school.

Thank you to all the educators and students who contributed to the engagement findings.

2. Engagement Findings

This section outlines the key themes, views, and solutions expressed by the people interviewed.

Student wellbeing

16. Schools that enforced 'hard' smartphone bans reported that these policies had a profound effect on student wellbeing. The absence of constant connectivity has reduced dopamine dependency, aiding both mental and physical health.

17. They reported that students are now more active, engaging in sports and social activities, which has fostered resilience and stronger emotional boundaries. Without the "bully in their pocket," students experience a greater sense of safety and relief from the anxiety previously associated with mobile phones. These changes contribute to an overall improvement in their quality of life during school hours.

18. Students also expressed that increased face to face social interaction improved their mental health because "you're not on a screen" and they reported feeling less socially isolated because students were now engaging with each other, rather than their devices.

> *"I didn't have a phone before the ban, but all my friends did. At lunch they'd all be sitting down on their phones, and it would be quite isolating because no one's talking to each other. I was the only one who didn't have a phone, and I felt really isolated because no one was talking to me." Student Focus Group*
>
> *"I feel wellbeing has increased as pupils are not accessing social media and focusing on dramas and external issues during the school day." Teacher Survey Response*

19. Students who attended schools with 'softer' bans expressed their anxiety and discomfort at the thought of having their phones locked away or inaccessible to them during the school day. They explained that their devices provided them with a sense of safety and reassurance because otherwise they "wouldn't know what was happening at home" and would feel disconnected from their lives and

relationships outside school. Students who experienced stricter bans reported that these feelings faded as they grew accustomed to the change in policy.

Classroom and teaching environment

20. Teachers noted that the removal of smartphones from classrooms has led to a marked improvement in the learning environment – particularly in schools where stricter bans have been enforced. Students and teachers agreed that there were fewer distractions, allowing students to concentrate better in lessons.

> *"Loads of people used to be on their phones in lessons. They would be checking them all the time. If someone else was on their phone it would distract you too."* **Student Focus Group.**

21. This change has enabled educators to reclaim valuable teaching time that was previously spent addressing phone-related issues, removing the "constant battle of 'put your phone' away." Pastoral and Senior Leadership staff also highlighted the "phenomenal" amount of time previously spent dealing with issues related to phone misuse, which had subsequently dropped since the ban.

> *"As a teacher, you end up in a situation where you're making the decision about whether you're going to fight this battle about the phone or carry on with the lesson."* **Teacher Focus Group**
>
> *"I think it has been more beneficial for learning – especially older learners (in Years 10/11). It's quite time consuming the teacher telling everyone to put their phones away. With the ban in place teachers don't have to worry about wasting the lesson."* **Student Focus Group**

22. Additionally, teachers suggested that the development of verbal communication skills has been enhanced, which positively impacts written language abilities. Schools with hard bans also reported improved attendance and punctuality, which has also supported greater engagement and progress in learning.

> *"We've got some hard-hitting data to support the ban - punctuality to lesson has increased and attendance has improved."* **Teacher Interview**

23. In schools with softer bans, the issues around conflict between teachers and learners around phone use persists, despite bans being in place. When phones are still accessible to students, they say they have smarter ways "of concealing their phones" and using them whilst not under direct teacher supervision.

24. However, in some schools which still allowed for phones to be used for educational purposes under teacher supervision, students felt that this provided them with necessary access to educational apps and content that were otherwise not available due to limited access to technology within schools. They expressed concern that the opportunities to access these resources would become limited and therefore effect their learning.

> *"I use my phone for art lessons. There are no computers so it's how I get inspiration."* **Student Focus Group**

Social and Emotional Development

25. Teachers highlighted the improved social skills shown by students since bans have taken place. They are "interacting, playing games and exercising with each other", which has created more positive social interactions between students.

> *"Students are addicted to the phones, and we have to break that. It has a physiological impact on their brain development so the longer we can stop them having a device, the better it is for their health – physically and mentally."* **Teacher Focus Group**

26. Post-lockdown, teachers suggested that students are now rebuilding their ability to read social cues and interact face-to-face, which are crucial for their emotional growth. The ban has also alleviated anxiety for some students, creating a more supportive social environment.

> *"From my perspective there seems to be a lot less anxious kids. We know about the effects of dopamine levels and phone use and its links to anxiety."* **Teacher Interview**

27. By restricting phone use during the school day, teachers remarked that they are teaching students healthier online habits in regarding their phones as "tools"

rather than necessities. Students also agreed that in having phones locked away meant they were able to focus better and no longer thought about their phones during school time.

> *"Up until we brought in the ban, they didn't know they could switch them off…children are developing their resilience and their abilities to cope with mainstream society by not hiding behind a phone screen. We're developing their autonomy, independence and coping mechanisms by not giving them the crutch of a mobile phone."*
> *Teacher Focus Group*

28.   Some contributors noted that vulnerable and disadvantaged children in particular have benefited from increased inclusivity, as they are now more likely to engage with peers instead of isolating themselves with their phones.

> *"I used to feel really sad every lunchtime walking around looking at children on their phones in the corner, not making any social relationships, where more confident kids are able to run around and do other things."* **Teacher Focus Group**
>
> *"Our students with additional needs are so much more social. They would just sit in the canteen on their phones but now they go outside for a walk and take part in activities as opposed to just being sat there."* **Teacher Interview**

Online Bullying and Digital Behaviour

29.   Teachers noted that schools had seen a decline in online bullying during school hours because of the ban. Although it is still a challenge to monitor off campus online activities, the number of incidents recorded during the school day had seen a significant decrease.

30.   Before bans, teachers and students reported negative digital interactions between students during the school day which could very easily and quickly escalate into more serious face to face exchanges.

> *"There's far less conflict between the students because they were sending each other messages instead of talking and they weren't being very kind. All of that has gone."* **Teacher Interview**

31. Students acknowledged their own "unhealthy reliance" on their devices, admitting to feeling "addicted" to their smartphones and shared their feelings of anxiety when their phone is "out of reach". Those who attended schools with hard bans reported this feeling easing as they got used to their phones being inaccessible, admitting now they don't think about them during the school day.

> *"People prefer to sit on their phones instead of socialising and getting out. That can be why people don't exercise, and I think it's really negative."* **Student Focus Group**

Parental and Community Engagement

32. Initially, some parents resisted bans and expressed concerns about reduced direct contact with their children but after consulting with parents, staff noted that the majority were supportive.

33. Particularly in schools where stricter phone bans are enforced, teachers recognised the healthier boundaries that had been adopted between parents and children. It was noted that the number of "storm in a teacup" situations that arose from students contacting home directly about issues at school, has significantly decreased, which has reclaimed valuable teacher time.

> *"Sometimes in the past students would message home if something happens in school – things blow up and parents could turn up at the school."* **Teacher Focus Group**

34. Teaching staff highlighted the importance of curated communication through the school office, which allowed messages between students and teachers to be relayed thoughtfully, reducing panic and stress and fostering stronger relationships. This avoids the "danger of disjointed messaging" and allows schools to carefully manage situations in the interest of students' wellbeing.

> *"I would prefer [parents] to phone the front office, because it informs the teachers if something has happened. If the teachers don't know*

and you feel weird and you don't tell the teachers, then the teachers are going to be worried about you." Student Focus Group

35.   Students who attend schools with softer bans reported however, that they often still used their phones despite enforced restrictions. They found it easier to contact home directly on their own devices, rather than going through the school, as it is quicker and more efficient form of communication.

"For some students it can be nerve wracking going to the office and say you're ill or lost something. Messaging your mum is better." Student Focus Group

Operational and Policy Implementation

36.   Implementing the smartphone ban has posed some logistical challenges for some schools, such as managing exemptions for medical needs, young carers and school trips, as well as challenging an existing culture of smartphone reliance amongst students. Nonetheless, schools have successfully navigated these hurdles and demonstrated the feasibility of such policies by allowing for exemptions and "reasonable adjustments to be made", which cater to the needs of individual students and their circumstances.

37.   The beginning of strictly enforced smartphone bans in several schools initially increased teacher-student conflict. However, the consistency of policies ensured that over time, students became accustomed to the change in policy and the escalation of incidents regarding phone use has reduced.

"Our policy is enforced on teachers as well – even on visitors who come into the office. In corridors, staff shouldn't be on their phones to set an example and to role model." Teacher Interview

38.   Enforcing stricter smartphone bans also initially meant there were increased calls to the school office, placing some pressures on office staff. However, as parents became accustomed to change in policy, these also "settled down."

Societal Implications

39.   Teaching staff highlighted those broader societal issues, such as digital inequality, can become more apparent with smartphone use in schools and can

exacerbate disparities among students. In assuming all students have access to smartphones in lessons, teachers are ignoring the reality that for some students, particularly those in disadvantaged areas, even "data is a privilege".

40. Teachers also expressed grave concerns over the number of serious safeguarding issues they were handling daily in regard to smartphone use, placing additional burdens on school staff, as well as wider services such as Police Liaison Officers. Since bans have been in place, schools have reported a drop in the number of cases they are experiencing, demonstrating the effectiveness of restricting smartphone use on children's overall safety.

> *"Daily, all I was dealing with was issues to do with nasty things that were being sent on mobile phones…there would be sexting, texting, children looking at inappropriate things, children talking to people they didn't know online, online grooming. It was constant children safeguarding issues. I just thought this is crazy, we have to protect the children."* **Headteacher Interview**

41. Emerging data on attendance and student wellbeing further supports the efficacy of the ban, ensuring that school communities are fostering environments where children are developing socially and emotionally. Teachers believe this has a direct positive effect on student engagement, learning and attainment.

3.   Solutions

In this section, we present a collection of ideas suggested by participants during the engagement sessions. These ideas represent diverse perspectives aimed at improving the current situation.

42. Whilst a number of issues are identified, the dominant solution suggested by educators is that there is a need for a consistent, nationwide policy on banning

smartphones in Welsh schools. This would alleviate the burden on individual schools to design and enforce their own policies - which has proven challenging.

> *"This ban wouldn't be as easy to enforce in every school which is why this (a blanket ban) would be such a good idea. It takes all of that discussion and extra workload away from individual schools within their communities -which can be a challenge."* **Teacher Focus Group**

43. A nationwide ban would ensure uniformity, reducing the administrative burden on schools and teachers. Educators suggested that all schools are provided with the tools to enforce stricter policies such as lockable pouches or safes, which takes additional pressure off teachers in policing mobile phone infringements which occur when students have the devices on their person.

44. Teachers also expressed the need for the Welsh Government to embed more detailed, robust and compulsory lessons around phone etiquette and safe digital behaviours into the national curriculum. This would ensure consistency across Wales in which children and young people learn how to sensibly and safely navigate online environments and it will successfully prepare them for a digitally connected, yet balanced future.

45. Educators agreed that consistency in the implementation of their smartphone policies has been instrumental in their success, and that the Welsh Government should provide clear guidelines around how schools should manage smartphone infringements in order to reduce teacher workload and stress.

> *"Issuing a ban is great, enforcing it is the issue"* **Teacher survey**

46. Some educators also agreed that the Welsh Government should take further action to alleviate the issues associated with smartphone use in young people. This includes banning smartphones for all under 16s, making students take a compulsory etiquette test similar to a driving theory test.

> *"You can't buy alcohol until your 18, you can't drive until you're 17. They should not have a smartphone until they're 12-14. They should have lessons in schools on how to use them. We will look back in 30 years' time and think what the hell have we done [in allowing children to have smartphones]"* **Headteacher Interview**

47. Additionally, teachers expressed a desire to see more education and support regarding smartphone use and young people's digital behaviours to be shared with parents and families. They believe that consistent, national guidance provided by the Welsh Government would arm parents with the information needed to support schools in managing young people's behaviours online.

48. Educators also expressed concern about the growing issues linked with phone and social media misuse, such as deepfakes and video sharing, therefore they suggested that stronger legislation be put in place to safeguard children and educators. To help alleviate the pressures faced by schools in managing excessive social media use in young people, some teachers also expressed a need for higher age limits on social media accounts.

49. In order to alleviate student worries about safety and contact with parents, educators and students agreed that still allowing pupils to have access to their phones at the beginning and the end of the school day provided them with the necessary contact with their parents and guardians, in order to safely travel to and from school.

Annex 1: Interview Questions

The following questions served as a flexible guide for the interviewer and were not all asked of each participant.

50. The interviews were participant-led, allowing for an organic conversation flow; questions were not presented in a specific order or exact wording but were used to facilitate discussion based on the participants' responses and needs.

Questions for students:

Schools without mobile phone bans

1. What is the school's current mobile phone policy? Do you agree? What would you change?

2. Do you think mobile phone use in school is beneficial or harmful to your wellbeing and/or learning?

3. For those members of the group in year 7 & 8, what was the biggest change you noticed between using your phone in primary school compared to secondary school?

4. In what circumstances might you need to access your phone during the day? (i.e. messages to parents, travelling to and from school). Are you ever asked to use your phone instead of a chrome-book/computer or to access apps for online learning/school messages?

5. Do you think there should be a ban on smartphone use in all schools in Wales (excluding exemptional circumstances)?

6. If there is a ban, what should the exemptional circumstances be?

What do you think needs to be done to help young people manage their reliance or dependence on mobile phones?

Schools with mobile phone bans

1. Do you agree with the school's mobile phone ban? What would you change and why?

2. Do you think banning mobile phones in schools has been beneficial to your learning, wellbeing and behaviour? Why?

3. For those members of the group in year 7 & 8, what was the biggest change you noticed between using your phone in primary school compared to secondary school?

4. In what circumstances might you need to access your phone during the day? (i.e. messages to parents, travelling to and from school). How do you feel when you don't have access to your phone? Do you ever need to access your phone to use apps that are relevant to school-work (teams/email etc)?

5. Do you think there should be a ban on smartphone use in all schools in Wales (excluding exemptional circumstances)?

Questions for teachers

<u>Schools without mobile phone bans</u>

1. What is the schools current mobile phone policy? Has this policy recently changed, or has it been consistent over the last 3 years?

1. How difficult is the policy to enforce? What challenges do you face?

2. What impact does phone use in school have on students' attention?

3. What kind of behaviours are associated with student's use of smartphones in the classroom and around the school site?

4. What impact does smartphone use in school have on pupil wellbeing?

5. How much has smartphone use on school site affected the levels of online bullying amongst students?

6. What impact does smartphone use in school have on pupil attainment?

7. Do you think a ban on all smartphones in Welsh schools should be enforced? What should the exemptions be if it is?

8. What other strategies can be used to support young people with reliance on smartphones?

9. Is there anything else you would like to share around the topic of smartphone use in schools?

<u>Schools with mobile phone bans</u>

1. When and why did the school enforce a ban on mobile phones in school?

2. How difficult is the policy to enforce? What challenges do you face?

3. What impact does the mobile phone ban in school have on students' attention, behaviours and wellbeing? Has it impacted level of online bullying for example?

4. What impact does a mobile phone ban have on school have on pupil attainment? What does school data suggest?

5. Are students required to still access apps or software for educational purposes (such as Teams/Outlook/Blackboard) which conflicts with this policy? How do you overcome this?

6. Do you think a ban on all smartphones in Welsh schools should be enforced? What should the exemptions be if it is?

7. Are there any downsides to the ban?

8. What other strategies can be used to support young people with reliance on smartphones?

9. Is there anything else you would like to share around the topic of smartphone use in schools?