



# WLGA and ADEW Response to Petitions Committee

22 November 2024

## Senedd Cymru Smartphones and Use of Mobile Devices in Schools

Sharon Davies, Head of Education - Sharon.davies@wlga.gov.uk

Claire Homard, Chair of ADEW - claire.homard@flintshire.gov.uk

### Welsh Local Government Association - The Voice of Welsh Councils

We are The Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA); a politically led cross-party organisation that seeks to give local government a strong voice at a national level. We represent the interests of local government and promote local democracy in Wales.

The 22 councils in Wales are our members and the 3 fire and rescue authorities and 3 national park authorities are associate members.

#### **We believe that the ideas that change people's lives, happen locally.**

Communities are at their best when they feel connected to their council through local democracy. By championing, facilitating, and achieving these connections, we can build a vibrant local democracy that allows communities to thrive.

**Our ultimate goal** is to promote, protect, support, and develop democratic local government and the interests of councils in Wales.

#### **We'll achieve our vision by**

- Promoting the role and prominence of councillors and council leaders
- Ensuring maximum local discretion in legislation or statutory guidance
- Championing and securing long-term and sustainable funding for councils
- Promoting sector-led improvement
- Encouraging a vibrant local democracy, promoting greater diversity
- Supporting councils to effectively manage their workforce

### Introduction

This is a joint response from the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) and the Association of Directors of Education in Wales (ADEW).



## **Should there be a single national policy, or should schools decide for themselves?**

The general consensus is that a national position would be useful. Some suggest a single national policy should be established to guide schools from local authority level. National guidance would support heads and governors to make decisions in the best interests of students without being fearful of kickback. A single policy would remove the pressure from schools to make individual decisions, providing consistency.

A consistent, nationwide policy ensures clarity and fairness across all schools, removing ambiguities about what is permitted and what is not. This consistency would make it easier for schools to enforce the policy uniformly, creating a shared understanding and expectation among students, parents, and educators. Additionally, a national approach offers the strength and stability of a unified direction, reducing confusion and potential pushback that can arise when policies vary widely across schools.

A national steer/position from WG would be welcome in the same way as Scottish Government and UK Government have published guidance. This would support schools in taking the steps they see fit to limit the use of mobile phones up to and including a full ban on the school estate during the school day if that is their judgement.

Another advantage is that a national policy would eliminate discrepancies between schools, which could otherwise lead to frustration or complaints from parents and students about different rules in different locations. A standardised approach simplifies communication and supports schools in standing by the policy, as they can point to national guidance rather than isolated decisions. This shared framework can make policy implementation smoother and strengthen the sense that this is a public-interest matter, rather than a localised issue of individual school control.

Several European countries have now gone down the path of having national policies regarding the use of mobile phones / banning mobile phones in school. Schools would be appreciative of a national strategic direction that can underpin their rules, rather than feeling isolated in their decisions.

Some schools already restrict the use of phones in schools (we would suggest that restricting rather than ban would seem to be more suitable terminology).

Schools that have taken measures to restrict the use of phones in schools have reported improvements in behaviour and less issues relating to social media.

We offer some examples of current practice:

In Flintshire, several secondary schools that have enforced complete bans report positive changes as well. Administrators and teachers in these schools often feel that such bans contribute to a noticeable improvement in student engagement and behaviour, supporting the idea that less distraction from personal devices allows students to focus better on schoolwork. Given these outcomes, the evidence indeed



leans toward the benefits of a phone ban in enhancing the academic and behavioural atmosphere of schools.

Pembrokeshire has developed guidance for its schools, where all of its Secondaries have introduced measures. Primaries tend to generally not allow use of mobile phones but have mitigations such as exemption forms where needed. The LA worked closely with its schools in this process. In this case, the LA found that senior leaders were worried about implementing restrictions, but generally, post implementation, pupils, parents & staff welcome it.

Milford Haven High School has created a video outlining their experiences - [MHS Video](#)

We will provide under separate cover, Pembrokeshire's Draft Policy Guidance which encompasses '*a range of mobile and smart devices*' plus '*any electronic device that can pose a safeguarding concern*':

Some elements relating to the questions outlined are already covered in Pembrokeshire's guidance and are repeated below for convenience.

## **Is the evidence in favour of a ban compelling? Or not?**

The ubiquitous presence of mobile phones and devices presents significant challenges to how pupils behave and learn in school settings. Increasingly, there is mounting evidence suggesting that the unchecked use of mobile phones in schools is having a detrimental impact on pupils' mental health and academic progress, while also draining the energy of school staff who must manage resulting problems. These detrimental impacts have been highlighted by organisations such as PISA, UNESCO, and Estyn.

There is considerable evidence of misuse of mobile phones in school such as inappropriate messaging, accessing inappropriate sites, and evidence of data being taken and misused, photos and videos being taken, sexting, cyberbullying, blackmailing, etc.

There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that over-exposure to mobile phone use can result in limited concentration, unhappiness and isolation. For example, data from the [PISA 2022](#) survey showed a lack of personal resilience among students, with 45% reporting feeling anxious without their phones. Regarding lessons, 65% of students reported being distracted by digital devices in some Maths lessons, and 59% said their attention was diverted due to other students using phones, tablets, or laptops. The PISA data also underscores the correlation between digital device usage and learning outcomes, noting a significant drop in Maths scores among students who spent more than an hour per day on mobile devices. Regarding limiting the distractions caused by using digital devices in classes, the OECD says "*Students who spent up to one hour per day on digital devices for learning activities in school scored 14 points higher on average in mathematics than students who spent no time. Enforced cell phone bans in class may help reduce distractions but can also hinder the ability of students to self-regulate their use of the devices*".



PISA data shows that in the 13 countries it surveyed, more than two thirds of students attend schools where mobile phone use is prohibited. It was found that the level of distraction in these countries were lower.

Similarly, in a 2021 report titled “We Don’t Tell Our Teachers,” Estyn identified five main issues associated with mobile phone use as reported by pupils. These include peer pressure for online popularity, online bullying, sexual objectification, catfishing, and negative attitudes towards female characters in digital games. Additionally, Estyn noted in a case study on a secondary school in South Wales that the eradication of mobile phones during the school day has led to significant academic and pastoral benefits.

There is also UNESCO data ([UNESCO calls for a ban on phones in schools. Here's why | World Economic Forum](#)) that supports the above. The UNESCO Agency says that even having a phone nearby when notifications are coming through is enough to break students’ concentration, with one study showing that it can take up to 20 minutes to refocus on learning - [Smartphones in school? Only when they clearly support learning | UNESCO](#)

A study from ParentKind found that 44% of parents are concerned about the impact of their children’s phone usage, particularly on their ability to form meaningful relationships. Half of families argue regularly about how much time their children spend on screens and the average screen time per day for a child is 3.3 hours - some spend more time online than in school. 50% of parents with secondary-aged children worry about the effects of excessive phone usage on their children’s social skills - [ParentKind National Parent Survey 2024](#).

Also, for consideration:

Jonathan Haidt: [The Anxious Generation](#): which makes a compelling argument that the uptick in time spent online has coincided with an alarming mental health crisis all over the world. One study found that the average teenager gets 192 alerts or notifications per day from social media and communication apps – the equivalent of 11 per waking hour, or one every five minutes. “No matter how hard it is for an adult to stay committed to one mental road, it is far harder for an adolescent, who has an immature frontal cortex and therefore limited ability to say no to off-ramps,” writes Haidt. He argues that the never-ending stream of interruptions “takes a toll on young people’s ability to think and may leave permanent marks in their rapidly reconfiguring brains”. [Screens and teens: How phones broke children’s brains | The Independent](#)

Research indicates that young people want to use their phones less, but often fail because they are addicted to the phone and that's the way everyone communicates. Research also indicates that mobile phones are addictive – if a pupil was addicted to anything else (e.g. vapes) that were health negative / causing harm, then adults / education would be expected to support, therefore mobile phones are no different. Mobile phone use at school also puts pressure on young people / families financially, having to buy the most up-to-date phone etc. Only in schools, can educators manage mobile phone use, therefore we have a responsibility to protect and educate



our pupils, especially our vulnerable children and young people from trauma, exploitation etc.

Having a ban on mobile phones offers them an experience of not having to rely on phones and electronic devices during school hours, and it is hoped that it will support their education, relationships and overall wellbeing.

Consideration of the whole school sector is critical. A consistent approach in primary schools is also required to support transition. Permitting 6th form students to use phones may be positive but would need to be carefully planned.

Additionally, with the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into mobile phones and apps, there are significant risks related to privacy, data security, and ethical use, both socially and within educational contexts.

## **What would the downsides of a ban be?**

It depends on what's meant by the word 'ban'. There are a range of approaches that schools could take from trying to ban learners from bringing their mobile phones to school, through to restricting/banning use in school.

Considerations would include negative impacts on use of smart phone educational tools, social connection with peers, parental contact concerns, educational and language support needs, emergency communication, enforcement challenges, and limiting authentic mobile phone learning.

How schools manage their policies on a day-to-day basis would need to be a key consideration.

Managing certain medical conditions such as diabetes (smart patch) needs specific consideration.

A potential downside to a total ban is that it could limit the use of phones as educational tools. In some classrooms, teachers find that allowing controlled phone use can enhance learning, particularly for research or digital activities, for example online quizzes / low-stakes class assessments etc. In these cases, phones serve as convenient devices for accessing online information, educational apps, and interactive tools that support the curriculum. Banning phones altogether may remove this accessibility, potentially requiring schools to find alternative digital resources to ensure the same level of tech-based learning. Weighing these factors, the potential gains in attentiveness, safety, and overall behaviour often outweigh these drawbacks.

Some schools have developed teaching and learning activities that rely on pupils using their phones in class to access Google Classroom etc. Removing phones would impact on these effective and established processes.

The capacity to police and enforce a ban on smartphones is a huge undertaking. There would need to be back up for a policy such as this as it could see exclusions soar and/or lots of come back from parents etc.



Some families would find this approach helpful and be very supportive whilst others may view this as interference.

## **What would be the practical implementation issues?**

When drafting their policies, schools should consider any legal implications, such as those related to the [Equality Act 2010](#), [Children and Families Act 2014](#), as well as rights of confiscation and powers of searching for prohibited items under Sections 91, 93, and 94 of the [Education and Inspections Act 2006](#).

Practical implementation issues would include:

**Enforcement:** Difficult to ensure compliance, time-consuming, and may lead to conflicts. Enforcement of any measures is always cited as a challenge including use during break times etc.

**Storage:** Requires secure storage and logistical planning.

**Parental Concerns:** Parental opposition due to reliance on phones for communication.

**Learning and Medical Needs:** Impacts on educational or medical purposes.

**Consistency:** Challenges around to applying a uniform approach, impacting on a school's policy effectiveness. Consistent approach in primary schools to support transition.

**Resistance:** Potential disciplinary issues from learner/student resistance.

**Diminished Importance:** Would restricting mobile phone use in schools diminish the importance of continually providing learning opportunities through mobile phone technology by their very absence? How would learner-mindset be affected for mobile phone use when outside of school?

**Cost:** National Policy direction needs to be costed, and where necessary, funding should be provided. There could be cost implications should a school implement an in-school storage solution.

**Planning** - Planned and timely introduction / implementation with sound reasoning and supporting evidence.

**Policy** - The School's Acceptable Use Policies should reflect the school-wide strategy.

**Resources** - Information for in school discussions around reasoning etc.

**Support** - Use support from external agencies on dangers of mobile phones.

**Communication** - Communication will be key with learners, parents and all members of the school community and ensuring sufficient buy in. Clear communication with whole school community is required.

**Curriculum** - there needs to be a mesh with the Citizenship element of the Digital Eligibility Framework and this should fit with the School's Acceptable Use Policies.

These are outlined for convenience here:

### **Health and Wellbeing:**

**CC1** - I am able to identify and use a range of digital media and devices from familiar experiences.

**CC2** - I am able to recognise the age and suitability limitations of digital media and devices, e.g. *understanding PEGI ratings, playing/watching inappropriate content/games, buying things on apps.*



**CC3** - I can understand the importance of having a balance between time playing games or screen time and other areas of my life, e.g. *considering the possible reasons why I am tempted to spend more time playing games or struggling to stop playing and the impact this has on my wellbeing*. I am able to identify the wider positive and negative influences of technology, e.g. *on my life, on society, on the environment*. I can identify marketing elements that are designed to distract me.

**CC4** - I am able to reflect on the role of digital media in my life and practice. I am able to practice healthy online behaviours and identify unacceptable behaviours. I can identify ways to report unacceptable online behaviour.

**CC5** - I can take reasonable steps to avoid health problems caused by the use of technology and suggest strategies to prevent or reduce the physical and psychological problems.

If schools have determined a ban for themselves, then they will have considered the implications and how to mitigate for this, whereas an enforced ban is a whole different ballgame.

Schools would likely need a lead-in period to communicate the new policy to students, parents, and staff. During this time, it would be essential to explain the reasons behind the ban, outline the expectations, and address any concerns. This preparatory phase would allow stakeholders to adjust to the new expectations and minimise resistance. Schools might also need to establish clear procedures for managing confiscated phones or addressing breaches of the policy. However, with sufficient planning, these logistics should not pose significant barriers. Many schools already have protocols for managing restricted items, and these could be adapted as needed. Training staff to enforce the policy consistently and providing resources for alternative tech access in classrooms would be useful steps in ensuring smooth implementation.

## **Specific view from Pupil Referral Units**

The ADEW PRU / EOTAS Network offers the following information specific to their area:

- Mobile phone use is a constant battle in PRU settings, particularly when they have a new intake
- Policies differ from outright ban to challenging when used inappropriately (mostly KS 4)
- Some colleagues encountering conversations between staff and pupil being recorded (and, in some cases, parents supportive of this)
- Some kick-back from parents who feel that they should be able to contact their children at any time of the day
- Colleagues felt they were encountering more issues with vapes than mobile phones/devices.

## **What would be your recommendation to Welsh Government on this petition/issue?**

# Smartphones and Use of Mobile Devices in Schools

22 November 2024



- To develop a national position / policy for schools to implement with the support of their local authorities.
- Consideration of a transition period.
- Implementing a behaviour process to police a ban.
- Consideration of teaching and learning activities which have been developed using phones.
- Consideration of those pupils who travel or walk to and from schools where phones are useful for parents to contact/track where their child is.
- Consideration of the impact on children who would have specific exemptions.
- Implement pilot studies in a few schools to test the effectiveness of a mobile phone ban and/or use existing examples as case studies
- Consult children and young people (and parents and carers) to align and inform worries, concerns and risks.
- Highlight the importance of digital literacy development to promote health attitudes to smart phone use.
- Information sessions for pupils and parents on the risks and implications of excessive mobile phone use, how to use parental controls etc., and are offered nationally – to ensure buy in.
- Policy should refer to mobile phone use in general e.g. staff use of phones in school to ensure role models (and support staff wellbeing)

**-End-**