

PE2106/E: Prohibit mobile phone use in Scottish schools

Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills written submission, 30 October 2024

Thank you for your letter of 2 October regarding Petition PE2106 on prohibiting mobile phone use in Scottish Schools. The Committee has sought information on what consideration was given to the impact restrictions on the use of mobile phones might have on the digital learning environment when developing the new guidance for schools.

The purpose of our mobile phone guidance is to assist schools and education authorities in introducing or updating their policies on mobile phone use in school, in ways that work best for them, in light of their local context and circumstances.

The guidance, as well as recognising the challenges mobile phones create in many of our classrooms, acknowledges that when used responsibly, mobile devices such as phones and tablets can be powerful tools to enhance learning and teaching, communication and social experiences, and may remove barriers to learning for some pupils. Personal mobile phones can also be used to access some school-based services, such as ordering school meals. The guidance therefore takes into account the potential benefits of personal mobile phones, whilst also considering the risks.

The guidance advocates an approach that promotes the respectful and responsible use of mobile phones in schools whilst encouraging schools to adopt a robust but measured response to their inappropriate use. Therefore, as well as setting out a clear position on the introduction of any restrictions on the use of mobile phones within the school day, a school's policy should also include clear guidelines on the appropriate use of mobile technology for learning and teaching purposes, and within exam conditions.

I have been clear that head teachers know their learning communities best, and decisions on restriction or limitation of access to mobile phones should be informed by local circumstances and priorities. The flexibility provided within the guidance would, for example, enable a policy approach that says mobile phones should be switched off and out of sight during class times, unless the teacher has requested that they be used in a lesson.

Evidence from PISA 2022 shows that guidelines around the use of mobile devices in school are not in and of themselves sufficient to prevent pupils from becoming distracted. How a school implements and enforces its policy will be critical to determining its effectiveness, for example that subject to any exceptions, there should be the expectation that the policy would be followed by all pupils, and that staff should be relied upon to apply a consistent approach to the implementation of the policy.

Effective implementation and enforcement will rely on the support and cooperation of all members of a school community – including staff, pupils and parents and carers. To ensure this support and cooperation, it is imperative that schools seek to develop their policies in collaboration with their whole school community to develop an approach that is appropriate for its own particular circumstances. Building pupil, staff and parental confidence in the respectful and responsible use of mobile phones in schools will help to lay the foundations for schools to positively embrace technology as another learning tool.

I noted from the Official Report that the Committee had considered whether there was sufficient evidence available to support understanding the scale of the problem of mobile phone use in schools. I would reassure the Committee that the evidence of the concerns arose from the Behaviour in Scottish Schools Research (BISSR) 2023. This survey included the views of over 3000 school staff, including headteachers, teachers and support staff. The 2023 survey is the fifth wave of this research, and this report included evidence of a changed pattern of behaviours related to mobile phones in schools. The research report is available from [Behaviour in Scottish schools: research report 2023 - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/resources/publications/2023/01/behaviour-in-scottish-schools-research-report-2023/). The establishment of the survey was overseen by the [Scottish Advisory Group on Relationships and Behaviours in Schools](https://www.gov.scot/resources/publications/2023/01/scottish-advisory-group-on-relationships-and-behaviours-in-schools/). The group includes membership from a range of organisations including COSLA and professional organisations.

My decision to prioritise publishing revised guidance was directly in response to this evidence. In undertaking the revision of the guidance my officials considered the BISSR Research and also other research and experiential evidence. This included specific research evidence on the benefits of mobile phones and technology in learning. As a result, the balanced position as set out in the guidance was achieved.

I hope the Committee finds the information in this letter helpful and is reassured that sufficient consideration is given within the guidance to the impact restrictions on the use of mobile phones might have on the digital learning environment.

Yours sincerely,

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