

## **Briefing for the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee on [PE2106](#): Prohibit mobile phone use in Scottish schools, lodged by Adam Csenki**

### **Brief overview of issues raised by the petition**

The petitioner is asking that the Scottish Government issue guidance that would “require all schools to prohibit the use of mobile phones during the school day, including at interval and lunchtime”.

### **Current guidance in Scotland**

Decisions on the use of mobile phones in schools is a matter for local authorities or schools themselves. Schools may choose to develop a policy on mobile phones that prohibits or restricts mobile phone usage in the school day.

The [Scottish Government published new guidance on mobile phones in schools in August 2024](#). This said—

“It is important we equip the next generation with the necessary skills and resilience associated with the modern age. Mobile phone use impacts on learning and teaching. Within this context it is important that Scotland’s headteachers are empowered to act in the best interests of their pupils, to support our hard-working teachers to ensure a consistent learning environment is provided to all pupils in our classrooms.

“That means empowering headteachers to take the steps they see fit to limit the use of mobile phones in our schools, up to and including a full ban on the school estate during the school day, if that is their judgement. ...

“Crucially, however, this decision is one which rests with Scotland’s headteachers, who know their pupils and their staff and who we trust to take the best decisions in the interests of their school communities.”

The guidance sets out what schools may wish to consider in developing policy on mobile phone usage and engaging with parents/carers and the wider school community.

In [a statement to Parliament on 3 September 2024](#), the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, Jenny Gilruth MSP, said—

“Members will know that, as cabinet secretary, I do not currently have the power to ban mobile phones. However, the updated national guidance goes as far towards a national ban as I am currently able to go, by setting out the Government’s clear support for whole-school bans. Our headteachers are empowered to take the steps that they consider appropriate to create an environment that is free from the disruption that is caused by mobile phones—an environment in which pupils are better able to focus on their learning and actively listen to one another, and which supports positive relationships between peers and with staff. If such an environment is best created by banning phones in the entirety of the school estate and for the entirety of the school day, the guidance supports such a decision.”

## **Behaviour in Scottish Schools**

The Scottish Government commissioned the Scottish Centre for Social Research to conduct a fifth wave of Behaviour in Scottish Schools in 2023. The report outlining the conclusions on this [research was published in November 2023](#).

The report explores the use of mobile technology in two ways. The low-level disruption of pupils using/looking at mobile phones/tablets etc. when they shouldn’t and the more serious issue of using digital technology abusively. In relation to mobile phone use, the report stated “pupils being under the influence of drugs or alcohol and using digital technology/mobile phones abusively have also risen since [the previous research in] 2016.” It also stated—

“The three behaviours that staff identified as having the greatest overall negative impact were all low-level disruptive behaviours: talking out of turn; hindering other pupils; and using/looking at mobile phones/tablets inappropriately.”

Exploring this in more detail, the report stated—

“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 [local authority] 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.

...

“Where schools had mobile phone policies, these were often applied inconsistently, with some staff allowing pupils to use their phones for research or to listen to music during quiet study time. This, in turn, was perceived as making it more difficult for other teachers to enforce no-phone policies. However, staff also spoke about the challenges in navigating mobile phone use policies in an increasingly digital world, describing them as “part of life”, which made attempts to control their use in schools more problematical.”

Later the research stated—

“Some secondary schools had developed policies specifically around the use of mobile phones in school (for example, pupils handing in their phones to the teacher at the start of the lesson), though it should be noted these were thought to have had varying degrees of success.”

## **UK Government guidance**

The petition references UK Government guidance on mobile phone usage in schools. This was [published in February 2024](#) and is non-statutory guidance “on prohibiting the use of mobile phones throughout the school day”. This guidance says—

“School leaders should develop and implement a policy to prohibit the use of mobile phones and other similar devices which reflects their school’s individual contexts and needs. This will depend on several factors including the age and needs of all pupils.”

Ned Sharratt  
SPICe Researcher

5 September 2024

The purpose of this briefing is to provide a brief overview of issues raised by the petition. SPICe research specialists are not able to discuss the content of petition briefings with petitioners or other members of the public. However, if you have any comments on any petition briefing you can email us at [spice@parliament.scot](mailto:spice@parliament.scot)

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