

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee  
Wednesday 25 September 2024  
14th Meeting, 2024 (Session 6)

## PE2106: Prohibit mobile phone use in Scottish schools

### Introduction

**Petitioner** Adam Csenki

**Petition summary** Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to update guidance on mobile phones in schools to require all schools to prohibit the use of mobile phones during the school day, including at interval and lunchtime.

**Webpage** <https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE2106>

1. This is a new petition that was lodged on 19 June 2024.
2. A full summary of this petition and its aims can be found at **Annexe A**.
3. A SPICe briefing has been prepared to inform the Committee's consideration of the petition and can be found at **Annexe B**.
4. Every petition can collect signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing, 5,761 signatures have been received on this petition.
5. The Committee seeks views from the Scottish Government on all new petitions before they are formally considered.
6. The Committee has received submissions from the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, and the Petitioner, which are set out in **Annexe C** of this paper.

### Action

7. The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take on this petition.

**Clerks to the Committee**  
**September 2024**

## **Annexe A: Summary of petition**

### **PE2106: Prohibit mobile phone use in Scottish schools**

#### **Petitioner**

Adam Csenki

#### **Date Lodged**

19 June 2024

#### **Petition summary**

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to update guidance on mobile phones in schools to require all schools to prohibit the use of mobile phones during the school day, including at interval and lunchtime.

#### **Background information**

There is a greater recognition of the harm of mobile phone use in schools, shown by a growing number of Scottish independent schools and some state schools prohibiting their use.

Government-led guidance prohibiting the use of phones during the school day has been introduced in France and England.

In a May 2024 staff survey in a high school in Moray:

- 79% said phones are a distraction to pupils
- 62% said misuse of phones disrupts learning
- 59% said phones create conflict between teachers and pupils
- 49% said phones are used to film teachers and pupils without consent.

Staff have written of the pull of the online world which is always on in a child's pocket leading to severe loss in focus, the hostility with which teachers are met when attempting to challenge inappropriate phone use, and also of having to work with the fear of being filmed without permission and the footage uploaded onto the internet.

## Annexe B: SPICe briefing on petition PE2106



### 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)

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in petition briefings is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware however that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.

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## **Annexe C: Written submissions**

### **Scottish Government submission of 27 June 2024**

#### **PE2106/A: Prohibit mobile phone use in Scottish schools**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide the Scottish Government's views on the action called for within Petition PE2106, for the Scottish Government to update guidance on mobile phones in schools, to require all schools to prohibit the use of mobile phones during the school day, including at interval and lunchtime.

I share the petitioner's concerns about the impact of mobile phones on children and young people's learning. The Behaviour in Scottish Schools Research (BISSR) 2023<sup>1</sup> indicated increased concerns over the disruption the misuse of devices caused in class. Eighty-eight percent of secondary staff experience pupils using or looking at mobile phones/tablets when they shouldn't at least once a day. While the increasing use of mobile phones and social media was identified as an area of concern in BISSR 2016 research<sup>2</sup>, this type of behaviour seems to have increased substantially in the intervening years. Young people using/looking at mobile phones or tablets when they shouldn't be was the behaviour most commonly reported as having the greatest negative impact on secondary school staff's teaching experience in 2023.

The evidence from BISSR is echoed by data from the Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022<sup>3</sup>, which found that almost one in three 15-year-olds in Scotland (and across Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries) reported being distracted using digital devices in most or every maths class, and around a quarter of pupils got distracted by other pupils using digital devices. This research found that pupils appeared to be less distracted when they switched off notifications from social networks and apps on their digital devices during class, when they did not have their digital device open in class to take notes or search for information, and when they did not feel pressured to be online and answer messages while in class.

In light of this evidence, in December I announced my intention to provide refreshed guidance to schools on the use of mobile phones, as part of the joint national action plan on relationships and behaviour in schools. Our existing mobile phone guidance was produced in 2013 and it is appropriate that this be reviewed to take account of updated evidence. The refreshed guidance has been developed in consultation with the Scottish Advisory Group on Relationships and Behaviour in Schools, which comprises representatives from COSLA, the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland, Education Scotland, the main teaching unions, and parents and carers representatives.

I would ask the Committee to note that the Scottish Government cannot unilaterally ban mobile phones in schools. The decision to limit access to mobile phones in schools is a policy decision resting with head teachers and local authorities.

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<sup>1</sup> [Behaviour in Scottish schools: research report 2023 - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/resources/documents/2023/06/behaviour-in-scottish-schools-research-report-2023)

<sup>2</sup> [Behaviour in Scottish schools: 2016 research - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/resources/documents/2016/06/behaviour-in-scottish-schools-2016-research)

<sup>3</sup> [PISA - PISA \(oecd.org\)](https://www.oecd.org/pisa/)

However, our starting position is that headteachers are empowered to take the steps that they consider appropriate, and, if they see fit to restrict mobile phones in schools, the guidance will support that.

I had previously committed to publishing the refreshed mobile phone guidance in advance of summer recess. However, in view of the announcement of the UK Parliamentary election on 4th July I have had to consider whether this action remains appropriate. Publication will now take place after the election, to coincide with schools returning after the summer break.

I would be happy to share a copy of this guidance with the committee once it has been published.

I hope the Committee finds the information in this letter helpful, and the Committee is reassured of my commitment to bring forward refreshed guidance on the use of mobile phones in Scottish schools.

Yours sincerely

**JENNY GILRUTH  
CABINET SECRETARY FOR EDUCATION AND SKILLS**

### **Petitioner written submission, 10 September 2024**

#### **PE2106/B: Prohibit mobile phone use in Scottish schools**

We would ask the Committee to consider the following, in light of new information regarding mobile phones in schools since the petition was first published.

- a) As of 3rd September 2024, Northern Ireland now joins England in requiring schools to prohibit their pupils from using mobile phones during the entirety of the school day, including break and lunch. This blanket support and guidance from the government takes the pressure off individual Heads to make the decision and ensures an equal school experience for all pupils across these nations. We call on the Scottish Government to do the same, rather than place the onus on Heads to act if they choose to do so.
- b) In August 2024, the Head of Grantown Grammar School in Highland gave a series of interviews on local and national news<sup>4</sup>, giving evidence of the changes seen in that school since phone use was restricted in May 2024. The words used included that the change was “transformational”, there were “fewer disruptions”, the whole school was “more social” and there was “more of a buzz”. We ask that the Scottish Government note the growing evidence base of the benefits in schools that have restricted phone use. In many schools across Scotland, there is the need to raise attainment. This would

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<sup>4</sup> Press and Journal (in print and online), also interview on BBC Good Morning Scotland (radio), Aug 2024

also be a benefit of providing pupils with a phone-free school day, as noted in the 2024 Policy Exchange publication ‘Disconnect’<sup>5</sup>.

- c) In August 2024, the Scottish Government updated its guidance on mobile phone use in Scottish Schools. In the guidance, the Scottish Government chose not to mandate one rule for all, as has been done for English and Northern Irish Schools, but rather offer support to individual Heads who wish to restrict phone use.

We believe that the benefit of a phone-free school experience should be available to all children in the UK, indeed, especially to all children in Scotland. While we welcome the updated guidance from the Scottish Government, we would like to suggest that, by avoiding making a blanket policy (as other UK nations have done) and instead leaving it up to individual Heads to choose to act or not, an unequal school experience for Scottish pupils is created. In schools with a Head who is proactive and supported by his/her staff to enforce and police a restricting of phone use, the benefits above will be seen. Unfortunately, in schools where the Head is unwilling for whatever reason to make the change and restrict phone use at break time and lunch time, the negative effects of allowing young teenagers unrestricted access to their phones, including issues of distraction, lack of focus, online bullying, reduced social interaction, exposure to inappropriate content, and a host of by now well documented other issues will continue to be seen. In effect, a postcode lottery will be created with a drastically different school experience in schools with different policies.

Furthermore, the absence of a centrally mandated rule for all schools also creates unequal working conditions for Scottish teachers. In schools where phone use is restricted, the likelihood of a teacher being filmed and the footage uploaded online is significantly reduced. Currently, all Scottish teachers (with the exception now of teachers at Grantown Grammar and most private schools which have already restricted phone use across the school day) work with the possibility that they might be filmed without their consent. Again, we call on the Scottish Government to create a phone-free school experience in all schools in Scotland, for the benefit of pupils and teachers alike.

We close with the words used in the current Scottish Government guidance on mobile phones in schools: “...there is a growing body of evidence to suggest that over-exposure to mobile phone use can result in limited concentration, unhappiness and isolation.” We welcome the fact that the Scottish Government recognises this. We now ask it to mandate that Scottish schools join English and Northern Irish schools in giving pupils six hours or so in a day where they do not have access to them.

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<sup>5</sup> “[there is a] clear correlation between an effective phone ban and better school performance, as measured by both Ofsted rating and Progress 8. Particularly taking into account the strong support given to effective bans by many school leaders who have implemented effective bans, and the wide range of international evidence demonstrating that effective bans on phones in school can have a positive impact on attainment, attention and other factors such as a reduction in bullying or improved mental health, these results offer further support for all schools implementing an effective ban on mobile phones.”



**CPPP/S6/24/14/12**

Thank you for your consideration.