

# Ban smartphones in all schools in Wales (with exemptions for exceptional circumstances)

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau | 20 Ionawr 2025  
Petitions Committee | 20 January 2025

Reference: SR24/9617

**Petition Number:** P-06- 1482

**Petition title:** Ban smartphones in all schools in Wales (with exemptions for exceptional circumstances)

**Text of petition:** Inspired by the movements Smartphone Free Childhood and Delay Smartphones, as well as recent compelling research on the profound negative effects of smartphones on children, we call on Senedd Cymru to ban them in all schools in Wales, with exemptions for exceptional circumstances. Smartphone use poses significant wellbeing and safeguarding concerns. We are deeply worried about our children's social development and mental health and believe all pupils have the right to a smartphone-free school.

Children's mental health is at an all-time low, with smartphones & social media major contributing factors.

Research highlights the detrimental effects of smartphones on children, with a UK Parliamentary Select Committee report stating the risks of screen time outweigh the benefits. The BMJ recently called for a precautionary public health response. Smartphones disrupt brain development, lower self-esteem, trigger anxiety, and expose children to harmful content. Reports include teenagers witnessing real-life killings on social media and cases of suicide due to 'sextortion.' 83% of parents believe smartphones are harmful, with 58% supporting a ban for under-16s (Parentkind poll)

Countries including France, Finland, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, and China, along with many UK and US schools, have implemented smartphone bans, leading to improved student focus



and well-being. UNESCO and the UK government have also called for bans on smartphones in schools.

## 1. Background

### 1.1. Ownership of smartphones by children and young people

The Primary School Student Health and Wellbeing Survey 2022-23 was undertaken by the School Health Research Network (SHRN) in partnership with Public Health Wales and the Welsh Government. The survey included 354 primary schools and 32,606 pupils in Wales.

Key findings from the survey included:

- **63% of learners** reported having a smartphone.
- **83% of Year 6 learners** owned a smartphone, compared to **43% of Year 3 learners**
- There was little difference between family affluence groups in smartphone ownership.

In 2023, Ofcom reported that 26% of five to seven-year-olds, 61% of eight to 11-year-olds and 96% of 12 to 15-year-olds had their own mobile phone.

### 1.2. Impact on educational attainment

An Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) report, Students, digital devices and success (2024) found that on average **two-thirds of 15-year-olds across OECD countries reported being distracted using digital devices**, including phones, in most or every maths class. In addition, around **60% of pupils got distracted by other pupils** using digital devices.

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It also suggested that data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) showed a “tangible” association between the use of digital devices in schools and learning outcomes. Students who reported being distracted by peers using digital devices in some, most or every maths class scored significantly lower in maths tests, equivalent to three-quarters of a year’s worth of education.

However, researchers at King’s College London found that when gender, social class and school behaviour were controlled for, PISA data showed that students in schools **with phone bans actually had lower achievement across their PISA test scores than those in schools that allowed phone use.**

### 1.3.Pupil behaviour

The Scottish Government’s Behaviour in Scottish schools: research report 2023, showed that the **abusive use of mobile phones and digital technologies was one of the most frequently experienced serious disruptive behaviours** observed or experienced by secondary school staff. This included pupils using mobile phones to bully or harass other pupils and staff and filming incidents with footage then posted on social media.

The Office for National Statistics’ (ONS) Online bullying in England and Wales: year ending March 2020 estimated that one in five children in England and Wales have experienced online bullying. **Nearly three out of four children (72%) who had experienced online bullying behaviour experienced at least some of it at or during school time.**

### 1.4.Mental health and well-being

A 2019 report by the UK Chief Medical Officers (CMOs), Screen-based activities and children and young people’s mental health and psychosocial wellbeing: a systematic map of reviews, found an association between the two but was **unable to prove a causal relationship.**

The UK Parliament’s Education Committee’s inquiry Screen time: impacts on education and wellbeing (May 2024) heard evidence suggesting that **screen time has a generally negative impact on the mental health of children and young people.** They heard that

children and young people are **at risk of encountering online harms while using screens**. These included cyberbullying, racism, misogynistic abuse, pornography, and material promoting violence and self-harm. In addition, they heard that images posted online can have a negative impact on children and young people's perception of themselves, increasing body dissatisfaction and eating disorders.

## 1.5. Positive uses of smartphones in schools

There are potential positives from allowing mobile phones in schools. These include:

- Use for digital learning.
- Research in lessons.
- Medical reasons. Some children need access to their mobile phone to support their health, such as to keep track of their medicine schedule or monitor their diabetes.
- Schools' internal communication.
- Maintaining regular contact with family members for this with caring responsibilities

## 2. Welsh Government action

In answer to an Oral Question on 12 November 2024, Lynne Neagle, the Cabinet Secretary for Education said:

All schools currently are able to ban mobile phones in schools if they want to, and indeed, most schools don't permit the use of mobile phones in the classroom. [...] we are publishing a behaviour toolkit to help schools, and that will include classroom management strategies and research on managing behaviour, including mobile phone usage in schools.

For me, it's really important that [children] know how to seek help as well if they're upset about something that they've seen. We are doing lots of work on keeping children and young people safe online. We've got a dedicated area of Hwb. We've got a young persons' reference group, which we're currently refreshing, and there's also lots of

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helpful information for parents about how to keep their children and young people safe.

In her letter to the Committee, the Cabinet Secretary also stated that online safety in particular is a key feature with the mandatory Curriculum for Wales: Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) Code (2022) and that educating young people on how to engage with social media is a cross-curricular issue.

### 3. Welsh Parliament action

In 2022, the Children, Young People and Education Committee undertook an inquiry into Peer on peer sexual harassment among learners. As part of the inquiry, the Committee considered whether young people were using mobile phones during school hours to sexually harass their peers, and whether schools had consistent policies on mobile phone use during the school day.

The Committee heard differing evidence including that 'mobiles phones have no place in the classroom' and that mobile phones can be an 'excellent learning tool'. They heard that teachers already use smartphones as part of their teaching and that 'the issue is therefore not with the phone but in the abuse of the phone'.

The Committee concluded that whatever the nuances of each school's position on mobile phone use, schools should have clear, well-enforced policies that are widely understood by learners, parents and staff. They recommended that:

the Welsh Government write to local authorities and/or schools to ensure that schools have clear policies on acceptable mobile phone use by learners throughout the school day, those policies are well-communicated to learners, staff and parents, and are consistently enforced by school staff.

The Welsh Government accepted this recommendation stating:

The use of mobile phones in schools is included the Welsh Government Behaviour management in the classroom: guidance for secondary schools. This guidance dates back to 2012 and all areas of technology have evolved considerably in the last 10 years. My officials will consider changes that might be required to this guidance alongside the All Wales

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**attendance policy** and the **Exclusion from schools and pupil referral units guidance**.

In her letter to the Petitions Committee, the Cabinet Secretary says that a behaviour toolkit is due to be published early this year (2025). The toolkit will include reference to the use of mobile phones in schools and keeping safe online.

## 4. Other UK countries

### 4.1. England

In February 2024, the Department for Education in England published non-statutory guidance **Mobile Phones in Schools**. This states that:

schools should develop a mobile phone policy that prohibits the use of mobile phones and other smart technology with similar functionality to mobile phones (for example the ability to send and/or receive notifications or messages via mobile phone networks or the ability to record audio and/or video) throughout the school day, including during lessons, the time between lessons, breaktimes and lunchtime.

It also states:

schools should recognise that a need for mobile phone access for some pupils may depend on their individual circumstances, including at home. Schools should allow flexibility in their policy for these pupils and consider including arrangements in other relevant policies (such as a young carers policy).

In answer to a **Written Parliamentary Question in October 2024**, the UK confirmed that it would continue with the approach set out in the February 2024 guidance.

### 4.2. Scotland

The Scottish Government issued **Guidance on Mobile Phones in Scotland's Schools** in August 2024. It concluded that a national ban was not 'appropriate or feasible' but said schools and

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councils could introduce restrictions and limitations if they wished.

### 4.3. Northern Ireland

In September 2024, Northern Ireland's Department of Education published **Guidance for Schools on Pupils' Personal Use of Mobile Phones and other Similar Devices During the School Day**. This states that school leaders, in conjunction with Boards of Governors, should develop and implement an approach to pupils' use of personal mobile phones and other similar devices that best suits their school context and phase of education. It also says that the Department recommends that Boards of Governors and principals/leaders should take steps to restrict the use of mobile phones and other similar devices for pupils' personal use throughout the school day, including during lunch and recreational periods.

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