



Mobile Phone Use in Schools

Final report

April 2026

Topics: Education and Skills, Health and Wellbeing

Introduction

Over recent years, overall ‘screen time’, the amount of time individuals spend engaging with digital screens, has increased, but the ways in which technology is used have shifted significantly. Whereas television once offered a relatively limited set of activities, today’s mobile devices, including tablets and smartphones, provide access to a broad and diverse range of functions. Mobile phone¹ ownership is now widespread among children: most young people aged 8–11 have their own device, and by ages 12–15, ownership is nearly universal. Consequently, it has become common for pupils to bring personal mobile phones into school.²

As shown in figure 1, as children approach the transition to secondary school, their patterns of online access shift, with mobile phones becoming the predominant device used to go online. In contrast, younger children, particularly those aged 10 and under, continue to rely more heavily on tablets for internet use. This trend corresponds with the point at which personal device ownership increases, as most children begin to have their own mobile phone rather than sharing one within the household.

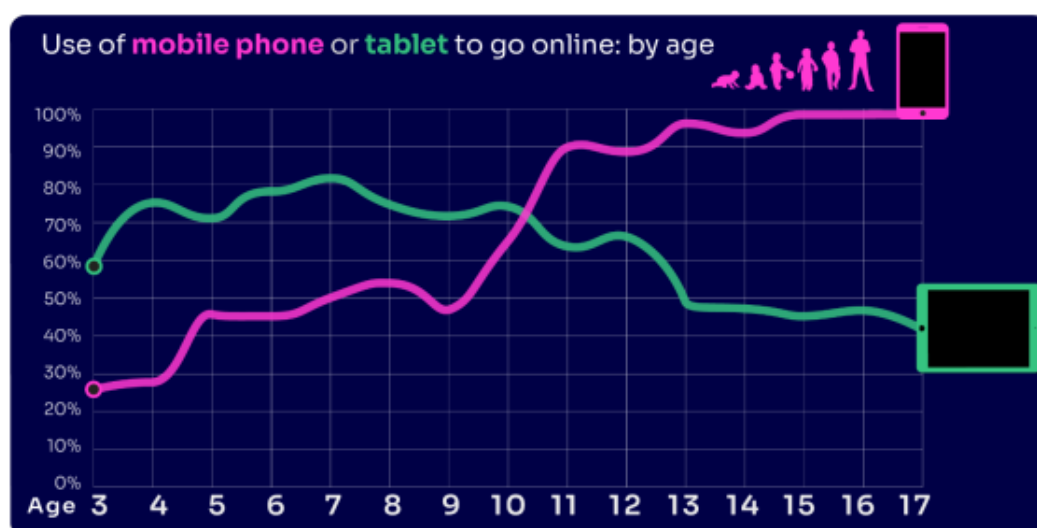


Figure 1 – Use of device to go online, by age³

Problematic mobile phone use has been linked to behavioural addiction including displacement of other activities, withdrawal (dysphoria when battery dies), preoccupation and continued use despite evidence of harm⁴. Around one-quarter of children and young people engage with their smartphones in ways that resemble behavioural addiction⁵, with Ofcom reporting UK children aged 8-14 years spend an average of 3 hours a day online, across devices such as smartphones, computers and tablets, excluding games consoles.⁶

¹ Mobile phone is used however this includes phones considered ‘smartphones’, internet enabled mobile device.

² Scottish Government. (2024).

³ Ofcom. (2025a).

⁴ Sohn et al. (2019).

⁵ House of Commons Education Committee. (2024).

⁶ Ofcom. (2025b).

As device use continues to rise, questions about its impact on children's development, wellbeing, behaviours, and learning have become central to contemporary discussions on education and public health. Mobile phone ownership in early adolescence has been linked with negative health outcomes including sleep deficiency, depression and obesity, with earlier mobile phone ownership associated with greater health risks.⁷ Research across psychology, public health, education and developmental science has explored wide-ranging benefits and harms from these technologies.

This report examines these issues by exploring how mobile phone use interacts with children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development, and how phone use within educational settings impacts teaching, learning, school climate, and pupil behaviour. Given the ongoing policy debate, and public interest, particularly around whether and how mobile phones should be restricted in schools^{8,9,10,11} it is important to draw together the strongest available evidence to inform balanced, proportionate, and context-sensitive decisions.

The aim of this report is to examine how mobile phone use presents both opportunities and risks for children within and beyond the school environment. In addition, the report explores how schools have implemented mobile phone bans, assessing the associated benefits, challenges, and implications of the approach.

To achieve this aim, the report addresses two interconnected areas of research:

1. Literature review exploring the opportunities and risks of mobile phone/leisure devices on child health and development. Both within and out with educational settings.

This includes consideration of how device use can support learning, communication, inclusion and skills development, as well as potential risks related to distraction, behavioural problems, wellbeing, cognitive load, and digital safety.

2. A summary of approaches taken to reduce/ban mobile phone use within schools, including benefits and barriers of the approaches taken.

This section reviews the benefits, challenges, and unintended consequences associated with these approaches, including impacts on learning and teaching, behaviour, school climate, equity considerations, and operational implementation.

⁷ Barzilay et al. (2026).

⁸ BBC News. (2026a).

⁹ BBC News. (2026b)

¹⁰ BBC News. (2026c)

¹¹ BBC News. (2026d).

Literature Review

1. Literature review exploring the opportunities and risks of mobile phone/leisure devices on child health and development. Both within and out with educational settings.

Opportunities

Enhancing Learning and Teaching

Mobile phones, and mobile devices more broadly, can broaden access to learning materials within and out with an education setting by providing pupils with quick access to online learning materials, enabling them to engage in enquiry-based tasks, carry out real-time research, and work more independently.¹²

Similar benefits observed as other devices, such as tablets, including access to adaptive game-based learning improving engagement and motivation, personalised and inclusive learning through real time feedback, guidance, and assistive technologies including speech to text, visual accessibility tools and communication aids. This extends to learning beyond the school day, facilitating access to educational content. The positive outcomes are associated with specific educational use, as opposed to unsupervised entertainment purposes. School-provided tablets and laptops for learning are generally preferred over 'bring your own device' policies.

Improving Organisation and Communication

Planners, calendars, revision tools and other applications available on phones can support pupils with managing deadlines and organisational skills. Mobile phones can support pupils' independent day-to-day organisation, for example by enabling them to order school meals online and access or manage digital bus passes. Reminders may also be used to manage health, for example, medication reminders/alerts and monitoring of levels related to health conditions e.g. glucose levels for diabetes management. Young carers may also require access to a mobile phone to ensure necessary contact with those they care for.

Mobile phones can support communication between pupils and schools and pupils and parents, for example contact with parents/care givers on travelling to and from school. Parents generally emphasised the importance of phones for keeping in touch with their children and staying informed, especially as children's independence increases, while also recognising associated risks. This indicates that parents view mobile phones as important tools for safety and contact.¹³

Data Literacy and Future Skills

When used purposefully, mobile phones can support pupils to develop digital literacy, independence, and future-ready skills.^{14,15} Engagement with digital devices enables children and young people to navigate apps and online systems, supporting participation in a technology-driven society. Alongside this, structured use provides opportunities to

¹² Mannings Tutors. (2026).

¹³ Rose et al. (2022).

¹⁴ UNESCO. (2023).

¹⁵ Haleem et al. (2022).

reinforce online safety, responsible device use, and data privacy awareness. With clear expectations and guidance, mobile phones can contribute to pupils' digital literacy, complementing wider learning and digital citizenship education.

Creativity and Expression

Mobile devices also provide valuable opportunities for creative learning. They enable pupils to produce a variety of digital outputs including videos, photography, and digital storytelling, which can enhance learner engagement and support deeper conceptual understanding. When incorporated purposefully, these creative applications contribute to more dynamic and participatory learning experiences within the classroom. Art teachers have expressed the view of mobile phones not as distractions, but as essential creative tools when managed appropriately in the classroom.¹⁶

Support Wellbeing and Social Connection

Outside educational settings, mobile phone access can support social connection and aspects of wellbeing by enabling ongoing peer contact, emotional support from friends and family, and access to mental health and health-related resources, for example eating healthily and getting support. Evidence suggests these benefits are most likely where use is active, purposeful, and moderated, rather than excessive or passive. Regulated access in school can support young people where there are an additional support and/or safeguarding needs.

Behavioural

When used in structured and purposeful ways, digital devices including mobile phones, can support the development and practice of self-regulation skills by helping learners plan tasks, manage deadlines, monitor progress, and navigate distractions. Features such as timers, reminders, focus modes, and purpose-built educational applications can act as scaffolds for organisation and attention, enabling children to practise self-regulated learning, provided use is clearly bounded and guided.

In addition, digital citizenship is a vital element of safe and effective device use in education. Teaching responsible online behaviour including privacy, security, respectful communication, and the ethical use of AI helps learners navigate digital environments safely, including recognising and reporting online risks. This also includes developing awareness of ethical issues such as plagiarism, intellectual property and algorithmic bias, ensuring students use digital tools responsibly, respectfully, and ethically. Education focuses on building internal judgement, which is particularly important given pupils' independent phone use outside school.

Cognitive

Interactive educational content, delivered via mobile phones, that encourages problem-solving and critical thinking can play a key role in supporting cognitive development. This can be compared to passive consumption of content, for example prolonged watching of videos or content that is overly stimulating, or certain applications, which may not support, or even detract from cognitive development.¹⁷ Clear guidance on purposeful use is therefore important to maximise cognitive gains.

¹⁶ The Arty Teacher. (2026).

¹⁷ Clemente-Suárez et al. (2024).

Potential Risks

Digital Distraction, Reduced Focus and Behavioural

A prominent concern related to mobile phone access in schools is digital distraction and reduced concentration. Research consistently shows that non educational mobile phone usage, particularly social media and instant messaging, increases cognitive distraction and multitasking, which negatively impacts pupils focus, participation and academic performance.¹⁸ Studies have shown that even when mobile phones are not being used they can impair learning, with students reporting higher rates of intrusive thoughts related to their phone and lower information recall after a learning activity.^{19, 20}

Even short periods of phone checking can disrupt attention, as it takes time for pupils to re-engage with learning after an interruption. Evidence further suggests that pupils may experience anxiety, nervousness, or pressure to remain online, including feeling compelled to respond to messages during lessons, which can exacerbate distraction and emotional dysregulation. Students in Scotland were more likely to report that they feel nervous or anxious when separated from their device, and feel social pressure linked to online communication.²¹ This supports wider findings that mobile phones can contribute to increased cognitive load and divided attention in classroom environments.²² There is strong evidence that unregulated and unstructured mobile device use is associated with reduced attention and focus. However, the evidence also distinguishes this from purposeful, guided use of educational content, where device use is clearly bounded, supervised, and linked to learning objectives.

Concerns about behaviour are also reflected in Scottish evidence. The behaviour in Scottish school's research reports that both primary and secondary staff identify pupils using/looking at mobile phones or tablets when they should not be as having the highest negative impact on learning and classroom experience. Secondary school staff also reporting it as the most frequently experienced form of serious disruptive behaviour, underlining the link between unrestricted mobile device access, behaviour, and learning disruption.²³

Developmental, Mental Health and Wellbeing

Adolescents are more vulnerable than adults to developing problematic mobile phone use because their physical, emotional and neurological development is still ongoing, which can make self-regulation and emotion management more challenging.²⁴ Evidence from Scotland indicates that young people themselves express significant concern about their online lives, with 79% of teenagers reporting worry about harmful online content and 78% anxiety about the impact of social media.²⁵

Research examining the relationship between mobile phone use and mental health is mixed and often bidirectional. Some studies associate higher levels of screen or mobile phone use with poorer mental health outcomes, while others suggest that children and young people

¹⁸ Martin et al. (2025).

¹⁹ Tanil, C. T., and Yong, M. H. (2020).

²⁰ Stothart et al. (2015).

²¹ Scottish Government. (2023a).

²² Botteger et al. (2023).

²³ Scottish Government. (2023a).

²⁴ Wood et al. (2023).

²⁵ Inspiring Scotland. (2025).

experiencing mental health difficulties may use digital devices more frequently. Vasconcellos et al. (2025) found that screen use can contribute to socio-emotional challenges, but that children with existing socio-emotional challenges are also more likely to use screens as a coping mechanism.²⁶

Caution is therefore required when linking mobile phone and social media use directly to negative mental health outcomes. Evidence suggests that associated factors include disrupted sleep, reduced physical activity, anxiety, and negative self-image play an important role.^{27,28} A meta-analysis focusing on children aged 10 years and younger found that increased screen time is linked to anxiety, depression, aggression and hyperactivity however, these effects were dependent on both the amount and type of screen use. Moderate duration with educational content, where sleep, physical activity and social interaction were not displaced, was associated with minimal socio-emotional risk.²⁹

Overall, the impact of mobile phone use appears to depend on purpose and duration. Purposeful, constructive and goal-directed use may be neutral or sometimes beneficial, while excessive, non-educational use is more consistently associated with adverse outcomes, in part due to the displacement of health-supporting behaviours.^{30,31}

Displacement (Displacement Hypothesis) and Social Development

Increased access to mobile phones, and digital devices more broadly, may displace other developmental activities within and out with the school environment, such as reading, playing sport, playing an instrument, time spent in natural environments and face to face interaction. Reduced engagement in such activities that support social and cognitive development presents a potential risk, highlighting the importance of considering both the duration of device use and the need for ongoing monitoring of use across education and home settings. Restrictive school phone policies may reduce use during the school day but may not reduce overall screen time, with evidence suggesting some pupils compensate through increased evening and weekend use, displacing other activities. Young people need to understand how to balance their online activities with offline pursuits.

The development of social and emotional skills may also be affected where mobile phone use displaces real-world interactions. Reduced opportunities for in-person communication, collaboration and play can limit the practice of key skills such as empathy, emotional regulation, and conflict resolution. These patterns have been observed not only in mobile phone use during and outside the school day, but also across other digital contexts, including online gaming and social media use.

Safety and Online Risk

Increased access to online content introduces risk in terms of safety, and access to harmful and illegal content. Research shows that children's exposure to harmful online material, including misogynistic and violent content, as well as widespread disinformation and aggressive commercial advertising, can significantly impact their mental health and wellbeing. Such exposure can also shape negative attitudes and behaviours. The design features of many social media platforms, particularly algorithm-driven content

²⁶ Vasconcellos et al. (2025).

²⁷ Weiss & Bonell. (2025).

²⁸ Tsomokos. (2025).

²⁹ Vasconcellos et al. (2025).

³⁰ Shen et al. (2026).

³¹ Tang et al. (2025).

recommendation systems, can heighten children's contact with harmful material and foster patterns of addictive online engagement.³²

Celcis³³ highlights the following risks associated with digital technology:

- bullying, coercion, or intimidation through email, messaging and social media (cyber-bullying)
- sharing personal images without permission
- identity theft and abuse of personal information
- exposure to material concerning harm to health such as eating disorders, self-harm or suicidal ideation
- sexual exploitation by online predators (including grooming, sexting and sextortion).

Filtering and monitoring systems are mandatory on school-provided digital devices to monitor usage and block access to harmful content. In addition, the school curriculum includes teaching on internet safety and cyber security to promote safe and responsible online behaviour.³⁴

Restricting or removing mobile phone access during the school day can reduce pupils' immediate access to online content. However, even where unsupervised mobile phone use is limited in school, young people may still be exposed to harmful content, online risks, and cyberbullying outside school hours. Evidence from the SMART Schools project highlights that pupils' engagement with mobile phones extends beyond the school environment, noting that students' engagement with mobile phones is continuous and extends beyond the school day, meaning that issues such as bullying and peer conflict often originate outside school hours but continue to affect school life, regardless of in-school phone policies.³⁵ This reinforces the need for a whole-school approach that combines proportionate restrictions, digital safety education, and wider support for young people's online lives both in and beyond school.

The Online Safety Act (2023) prevents children from accessing harmful or age-inappropriate content, placing increased duties on companies to detect, remove and reduce illegal content. This includes enforcing minimum age limits and transparent reporting mechanisms for harm. The act reduces but does not eliminate risk when accessing online content when using mobile phones. Many under 13 year olds have access to social media sites, with Ofcom reporting 7 in 10 children aged 3-17 years having at least one own profile on a social media, messenger, live streaming or video sharing platforms (VSP), with 4 in 10 parents of this age group saying they would allow their child to have a profile on these apps before the minimum age requirement of 13.³⁶ An under 16 social media bans has been raised in the UK government consultation.^{37, 38}

These risks highlight the need for platform providers to take greater responsibility for the safety of their services and to embed robust safety-by-design measures from the outset. Identifying and mitigating harms caused by commercial digital products to children and young people should be a priority for technology companies. There is growing and broad consensus among policymakers, regulators, and researchers that bold, coordinated, and

³² Scottish Government. (2026)

³³ Celcis. (2024).

³⁴ NSPCC Learning. (2025).

³⁵ Goodyear et al. (2025).

³⁶ Ofcom. (2025b).

³⁷ House of Commons Library. (2024).

³⁸ Department for Science, Innovation and Technology. (2026).

sustained action is urgently required to ensure digital environments are safe, responsible, and supportive of children's wellbeing.

While the Online Safety Act strengthens online protections, legislation and platform controls, these alone cannot fully prevent children from experiencing online harms, including cyberbullying. Studies show that many children continue to face bullying, emotional distress and exposure to risky content even when safety systems are in place. This highlights the need for schools, families and communities to actively help children develop appropriate digital habits, critical thinking and safer online behaviours, rather than relying solely on regulatory safeguards.

Screen Time and Health Concerns

Research has shown a link between the use of digital devices by children and an increased risk of eye strain and related conditions, referred to as digital eye strain (DES).³⁹ Although symptoms of DES are recorded in adults and children, there is evidence that increased digital use may lead to myopia progression or increase in short sightedness.⁴⁰ This is also influenced by device viewing distances.

It must be noted that different digital device use, for example using a device to watch TV, social media and for gaming, sometimes referred to as 'sedentary leisure', has different associated risks compared to accessing educational applications and learning platforms that promote active learning, often referred to as EdTech. Information regarding digital hygiene, including the importance of taking breaks from screens and practicing good posture when using digital devices, is required to mitigate risks.

Safety, Privacy, and Data Protection

Unmanaged mobile phone use can undermine safety, privacy and data protection within school environments. Unlike school-issued devices, personal mobile phones are not subject to consistent security controls, content filtering, monitoring or acceptable use agreements, making privacy and safeguarding risks more difficult to manage. Their use increases the risk of unauthorised recording, photography and data sharing, raising concerns around consent and compliance with data-protection responsibilities. Inappropriate capture or sharing of images and videos can directly compromise pupil safety and wellbeing. In addition, mobile phones routinely collect location, behavioural and personal data, often through systems and applications that are not transparent or easily understood by children and young people.

Mobile phone policies should therefore be informed by a children's rights-based approach, ensuring that decisions promote pupils' safety and wellbeing while respecting their rights to privacy, dignity and participation in matters that affect them.

³⁹ Kaur et al. (2022).

⁴⁰ Specsavers (nd).

Opportunity and Risk - Summary

Mobile devices including phones can offer a range of educational advantages when incorporated thoughtfully into learning environments. These tools can broaden pupils' access to digital learning materials, support more personalised approaches to instruction, and help develop essential digital skills. They can also enable pupils to carry out research more independently, communicate more efficiently, and participate in creative tasks such as producing multimedia content. In addition, such devices can play a role in fostering inclusive learning by offering built-in accessibility features that assist pupils with varied needs. When integrated effectively into classroom practice, mobile devices have the potential to increase learner engagement and contribute to more flexible, student-centred learning experiences.

Excessive or unsupervised use of mobile phones and leisure devices can pose a range of developmental challenges for children. High levels of screen time have been associated with reduced physical activity, disrupted sleep routines, and difficulties with behaviour and emotional regulation. Extended device use may also affect concentration and contribute to cognitive fatigue, making it harder for some children to sustain attention during learning or social interactions. In more problematic patterns of use, such as when device habits become compulsive, children may be more vulnerable to experiences of anxiety, low mood, or difficulties managing relationships. Beyond individual effects, wider concerns have been raised about children's exposure to online risks, including cyberbullying, inappropriate content, and the pressures that can arise through social media engagement. As digital technologies continue to develop rapidly and become embedded in daily life, these challenges highlight the importance of ongoing efforts to understand how children can be supported to use devices safely, and in a balanced way across both school and home environments.

Overall, the literature suggests that mobile phones/devices can offer meaningful developmental and educational advantages when used in a balanced, well-managed manner. However, these benefits coexist with a broad set of potential risks, indicating the importance of context, supervision, usage patterns, and the ongoing development of evidence-based guidance for families, educators, and policymakers. Devices provided by schools, which have increased security measures, applications for specific educational purposes promote the positive advantages of device use, whilst minimising the negative risks associated with personal mobile phone use. A clear message is evident that young people require support in building healthy digital habits within and out with the school environment.

Approaches

2. A summary of approaches taken to reduce/ban mobile phone use within schools, including benefits and barriers of the approaches taken.

Current policy and management in Fife

At present, there is no standardised approach to managing the use of mobile phones and other personal digital devices in schools across Fife. Policies and management practices vary by school, with many schools requiring mobile phones to be switched off and out of sight during lessons.

Current government guidance

The vision of the current Scottish Government's guidance⁴¹ is for schools and local authorities to have respectful and responsible use of mobile technology, and for any policy approaches for mobile phone use in schools to:

- ensure that the best interests of the child is a key consideration
- be informed by the need to protect both pupils and staff from the risks of mobiles phones
- ensure that policies are consistent with relevant legislation for staff and pupils (e.g. health and safety) and existing IT codes of conduct
- be developed through engagement with the whole school community – pupils, staff, parents and carers
- ensure two-way engagement and commitment to the policy
- set out clear expectations of what standards of behaviour are expected from all members of the school community, as well as what action will be taken when such expectations are not met
- be clearly communicated and the standards applied consistently
- be regularly reviewed to ensure commitment of the approach, and that implementation experience and new developments in technology are considered.

In Scotland, the guidance also highlights that teachers are empowered to restrict mobile phone use during the school day where such use is adversely impacting on learning and teaching.

Many schools across the UK have already implemented some form of restrictions or limitations of mobile phone use in order to improve learning, focus, and pupil wellbeing. In January 2026 the UK Department for Education (DfE) advised that all schools in England should be mobile phone free environments, including break times and lunchtimes, with exceptions permitted only in specific circumstances (e.g. medical needs).⁴²

⁴¹ Scottish Government. (2024).

⁴² UK Government. (2026).

Potential benefits

Approaches to reduce/ban mobile phone use within schools, may see benefits such as:

- improved learning environment
- improved classroom focus and engagement in learning
- fewer classroom distractions
- increase in social interactions and wellbeing
- improved safeguarding and behaviour management relating to mobile phone misuse
- reduction in cyberbullying and harmful digital interactions
- strengthened school culture
- improved pupil boundaries and relationships between school, personal life and technology.

Potential barriers/challenges

Introducing changes and new approaches, may be faced with barriers/challenges such as:

- pupil pushback behavioural issues
- resistance from parents/carers
- resistance from teachers/staff
- equity and inclusion issues
- hidden use (e.g. smartwatches) or increase in pupils 'needing to leave the classroom'
- enforcement challenges and consistency between staff
- logistical constraints over storage of phones
- cost and financing of technology-based solutions.

A recent study by the University of Birmingham reported that pupils may compensate for lack of phone access during the school day, pushing phone use to out of school, which may displace other activities such as homework, physical activity or sleep.⁴³

⁴³ University of Birmingham. (2026).

Approaches currently being taken

The table below summarises some approaches currently being taken in the UK, and outlines benefits and challenges that schools may face in implementing these measures.

Examples	Approach	Benefits	Challenges
Perth & Kinross Council, Scotland ⁴⁴ (Apr 2025)	Schools have own rules, with overall framework requiring phones off or on silent during class time. • Personal Mobile Device Policy for Schools developed in conjunction with staff, pupils and parents/carers. • Policy provides information and guidance on the safe and responsible use of mobile technology, supporting calm and inclusive learning environments that are fully focused on learning and teaching. • Supports the appropriate use of mobile technology to enhance learning whilst supporting pupils' awareness of safe and secure use of digital technologies and an anti-bullying culture to protect staff and pupils from the consequences of inappropriate use and abuse. • Designed to support school leaders to implement approaches within their own school setting, i.e. each school will be able to manage in a way that suits their context, whilst having a basic approach underpinning that, ensuring that rules and potential policy violation consequences are clearly displayed. • The use of mobile devices and digital devices is strictly prohibited during lesson time, unless explicitly permitted for educational purposes. As a minimum, devices must be turned off or set to silent mode and stored out of sight, so not to disturb the learning environment or the wellbeing of others. • Individual circumstances, e.g. pupils who need their mobile phones for medical purposes, or young carers requiring ongoing contact with family members, or for learning support, will be permitted to use their devices based on their needs, and the school will manage these cases appropriately. • Schools may implement a secure system for pupils to store their mobile phones, e.g. storage in classrooms, or lockers in corridors. • In emergencies, the school office will be the primary means of contact between the school and home. Pupils are not permitted to contact their parents/carers during class time on a digital device. • Staff mobile phones to be turned off or place on silent during teaching times. • Mobile phones and digital devices are not allowed in examination rooms unless required for the exam and approved by the school SQA coordinator.	Expected benefits: • enhanced learning and teaching experiences • improved communication and social experiences • increased sense of security for pupils, parents/carers and staff • support for pupils who require access to digital technology to support their learning • reduced disruption to learning caused by inappropriate use of digital devices • fewer incidents of bullying, harassment, and misuse of mobile technology • stronger alignment of school policies with local policy and national guidance. [Review report due Apr 2027]	• staff and parent councils support strict policies in primary schools, with secure storage for mobile phones, however secondary schools can face greater potential challenge due to higher levels of mobile phone ownership.

⁴⁴ Perth & Kinross Council. *Personal Mobile Device Policy for Schools*. (2025).

Examples	Approach	Benefits	Challenges
The City of Edinburgh Council ^{45 46 47} (May 2025)	2-year phone free pilot using lockable pouches at 2 high schools. - Interim Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA) included considering pupils with medical or caring needs who may need mobile phone access during the school day. (IIA to be concluded Jan 2026). - Following consultation with pupils and parents/carers, in May 2025 a 2-year phone-free pilot begun at Portobello High School and Queensferry High School, using lockable pouches which stays on their person and restricts access to mobile phones during the school day. - Jan-Mar 2026 – consultation with parents/carers, pupils and staff, on restricting the use of mobile phones in all schools, received almost 14,000 responses. Results show 97% staff responses in favour of mobile phone restrictions, and parents/carers 94% in favour. (Consultation included focus groups and meetings with pupils about mobile phones in school). - The following options for enforcing mobile phone restrictions were put to committee in Jan 2026, and the budget is to be identified, depending on the consultation outcome and committee decision. - Option 1: lockable pouches for all secondary schools and lockable cabinets in all primary schools - Option 2: lockable cabinets for all primary and secondary schools - Option 3: lockable pouches in some secondary schools and lockable cabinets in all primary schools - Option 4: agree a policy ban but require schools to determine how this will be enforced at local level.	Expected benefits: - pouches encourage pupils to give thought to their mobile phone use, and contribute to removing any distraction or temptation - thought to protected learning environment - reduced distractions - improved engagement and focus on learning - encouraging a healthier approach to managing time online and increased face-to-face interaction. [Consultation analysis due Mar 2026] [Review report due Jun 2026]	- responses from secondary school pupils showed 53% would prefer restrictions during class time only, however 32% did not think there should be any restrictions at all - cost per lockable phone pouch is around £25 (replacement cost for lost/damaged pouch £2-£7), pupils responsible for pouches, with additional and recurring costs for implementation and associated technology, potentially ranging from a few to several thousand pounds - centralised model would incur a budget pressure of initial costs of £0.4m, including set-up costs, with annual recurring costs of £0.08m to £0.1m - Options 1 & 2 would create equity for schools and families but requires the funding - Option 4 places additional burden on schools to determine and implement ways to enforce the restrictions on phone use in their school, which could include pouches and cabinets, but some schools may struggle to fund this - procurement process time.

⁴⁵ The City of Edinburgh Council. *Mobile phones in schools update to Committee*. (2026).

⁴⁶ Children in Scotland. *Phone-free policy to be piloted in two secondary schools in Edinburgh news item*. (2025)

⁴⁷ The City of Edinburgh Council. *Mobile phones in schools consultation shows broad support for restrictions during the school day news item*. (2026)

Examples	Approach	Benefits	Challenges
Moray Council^{48 49} (Aug 2025)	Primary school ban, with secondary schools being “out of sight”. • Consulted with parents/carers, pupils and staff, with 73% of total respondents in favour of there being no mobile phones present in schools. • Use of Mobile Technology in Schools Guidance provides information and guidance on the safe and responsible use of mobile technology in school and protect pupils and staff from harassment and abuse which can arise from the misuse of such technology. • Designed to provide schools with advice on how to develop local school policies and linked to school vision and values. [Refer to Appendix A for example of Lossiemouth High School Mobile Device Policy]. • Any breach of expectations in relation to mobile technology should be handled in the same way as other unacceptable behaviours in line with the school’s behaviour/positive relationships policy. Staff are expected to respond consistently to any irresponsible use of mobile technology and will explain to pupils why certain behaviours are unacceptable, and what the potential impact of such behaviours might be. • Incorporates digital citizenship principles: - safeguarding and child protection - digital etiquette (standards of conduct when using any mobile devices) - digital rights and responsibilities (what people can do if they feel uncomfortable with digital communication and how they can report misuse) - digital security (precautions that can be taken to ensure digital safety) • Primary schools – no mobile phones or devices present in school unless to support a medical need or other exceptions. • Secondary schools – mobile phones or devices should be switched off and out of sight during the school day unless to support a medical need or for learning support. • Considerations for exceptions for individual circumstances, e.g. pupils who are young carers and require ongoing contact with family members, medical conditions that require monitoring using mobile technology, and for learning support.	Expected benefits: • provide a focused and supportive school environment • reduced distractions • promote positive learning environments. [Review report due May 2026]	• 57% of pupils who responded to the consultation disagreed with no mobile phones in school • concerns about enforcement practicality • concerns about the need for exceptions for medical reasons • importance of having alternative technology available for education purposes – highlighting whether schools have sufficient digital devices • concerns about the need to review primary school guidance to permit pupils to take phones to school for safety reasons, e.g. walking to/from school.

⁴⁸ Moray Council. *Mobile Phone Usage in Schools report*. (2025).

⁴⁹ Moray Council. *Minutes of Meeting of 13 May 2025*. (2025).

Examples	Approach	Benefits	Challenges
Cheshire East Council ^{50 51 52} (Sep 2025)	Phone free environment for all learners and rolling out lockable pouches. Council is working closely with Cheshire's Police and Crime Commissioner to support the ambition for Cheshire to be the first county in the country where every school is using lockable phone pouches and phone-free environments by Sep 2026. • The wellbeing, safety and focus of pupils is a priority for this council, ultimately giving pupils the best chance to succeed, free from unnecessary pressures and interruptions, and ensuring schools are places pupils can learn, socialise and feel safe. • They aim to reduce phone-related safeguarding incidents in their schools, cut exposure to harmful content and classroom disruptions, and create safer learning environments for both teachers and pupils.	Initial benefits: • an immediate improvement in behaviour and concentration in class, and academic attainment • safeguarding concerns linked to phones and social media have taken a noticeable drop • pupils are engaging more positively with their learning and one another.	• £150k funding from Cheshire Police & Crime Commissioner • seeking funding sources and potentially schools part-funding the programme.
Case study 2 ⁵³	• Refers to a system using pouches, that are not lockable or magnetic but instead are similar in material and size to a pencil case. • These pouches can act as enough of a deterrent, with staff being able to see that mobile phones are placed inside these pouches and are placed on a desk. • The case study school relies on the strong behaviour culture within the school that has been built up over time with pupils and families.		• If pupils do not follow the policy, devices can be confiscated.

⁵⁰ Cheshire East Council. *Council supports stronger measures to curb smartphone use in Cheshire schools.* (2026).

⁵¹ Cheshire East Council. *Prohibiting Smartphone Use in Local Authority Schools report.* (2026).

⁵² Cheshire Police & Crime Commissioner. *A phone free and safe education in Cheshire.* (2025).

⁵³ UK Government, Department for Education. *Creating a mobile phone-free environment: School case studies.* (2026).

Summary of approaches

While some approaches to restricting or banning mobile phone use in schools have reported improvements in pupil engagement and behaviour, it remains difficult to determine whether any changes in overall academic attainment or pupil wellbeing can be directly attributed to these measures. Reducing mobile phone use at schools alone is not sufficient to address the wider negative impacts associated with mobile phone and social media use, as a broader shift in mindset and school culture is essential. Additional measures are needed to support children in developing awareness of their digital habits, understanding how their device use affects their own health and wellbeing, and recognising the impact their online behaviour may have on peers.

The main barrier of introducing policy changes is the associated cost. This includes not only the initial resourcing required for planning and implementation – which will vary depending on the equipment selected, such as lockers, lockable cabinets or secure pouches – but also the ongoing costs of maintaining this equipment. In addition, staff will need to dedicate time to consistent implementation, management and monitoring of the policy throughout the school day. These demands may be more challenging for larger schools and could be perceived as infringing on teaching time and focus.

Regardless of school size or location, some level of resistance from pupils and/or parents/carers is expected. Policies are likely to be more effective when the whole school community has been meaningfully consulted, ensuring that the views of pupils, parents/carers and staff are heard and reflected in the policy's developed. Clear communication, accessible guidance and consistent enforcement mechanisms are essential. Exceptions relating to health needs, disability, caring responsibilities or other individual circumstances should be clearly outlined within the policy and handled sensitively and consistently.

Considerations for Fife

A policy for Fife could include restricting personal mobile phone and digital device use within school grounds within the school day, at school events, and on school outings, or limiting use during class time only by requiring devices to be “off and away”. Policy should be applied consistently and fairly and recommend that the rules around phone use are re-iterated to all students, staff, and parents throughout the year.

It is important to recognise the limitations of any such policy. While restrictions may offer certain benefits, the policy should be regularly assessed and reviewed annually to ensure it continues to meet the needs of the whole school community, particularly given the continually evolving digital landscape. Consideration will also need to be given to how the policy may be reflected in, or impact upon, school inspections.

Due to the recent rollout of digital devices, all secondary and upper primary pupils now have access to their own device in the classroom. As a result, pupils no longer need to rely on personal mobile phones to support their learning during the school day. This creates a timely opportunity for schools to adopt an approach that restricts mobile phone use.

However, when considering which approach to implement, it is important to take account of the significant costs of the recent device rollout and the concerns and opposition that have been expressed regarding the level of funding allocated to this project. In particular, these concerns have been raised in the context of competing educational priorities, such as additional support needs provision. In light of this, the adoption of a high cost solution to restrict mobile phone use in schools may not be appropriate at this time.

Conclusion

This report demonstrates that approaches to mobile phone use in schools across local authorities are diverse and shaped by local context, leadership judgement, and perceived need. There is no single, uniform model in operation; instead, schools and authorities adopt a range of approaches, including full bans, partial restrictions, and regulated use, often evolving in response to behaviour, safeguarding concerns, and changes in digital culture. This variation reflects differing local priorities and pupil populations, as well as the autonomy afforded to schools within existing national guidance.

Evidence gathered within this report indicates broad agreement among local authorities and school leaders that unrestricted mobile phone use can contribute to distraction, classroom disruption, and online harms, including cyberbullying. These concerns are particularly evident in secondary settings and among older pupils, where personal device ownership and social media use are near universal.⁵⁴ As a result, many local authorities have moved towards clearer and more consistent restrictions on mobile phone use during the school day, with an emphasis on supporting learning, relationships, and behaviour.

However, the findings also highlight that mobile phone policies are most effective when embedded within wider whole-school and authority-level strategies. Local practice shows that restrictions alone do not resolve underlying issues related to digital behaviour. Successful implementation is linked to clear communication with pupils and parents, consistent enforcement, supportive behaviour policies, and complementary work on digital citizenship, online safety, and wellbeing. Where these elements are present, schools report improved classroom focus and greater clarity of expectations for both staff and learners.

Importantly, the report underscores the need for proportionate and inclusive approaches. Local authorities consistently emphasise the importance of allowing flexibility for pupils with additional support needs, safeguarding requirements, or assistive technology needs, to ensure that mobile phone policies do not inadvertently create new barriers to learning or wellbeing. This aligns with a rights-based approach that balances protection from harm with fairness, inclusion, and pastoral support. In this context, the recent deployment of digital learning devices to pupils has the potential to address some barriers to learning and support greater flexibility for many learners.

Overall, the evidence from local authority approaches suggests that the central challenge is to design phone policies that restrict phone use in ways that can maximize benefits, support learning, minimise the potential risks and generate ‘buy in’ from pupils, parents and teaching staff. The findings support a balanced model in which schools are empowered to restrict mobile phone use where necessary, while also focusing on helping young people embed digital wellbeing, developing healthy, responsible digital habits that extend beyond the school environment. Such an approach recognises that managing mobile phone use in schools is a shared responsibility requiring coordinated action from schools, local authorities, families, and wider systems. Parents and carers need support to build confidence in managing their children’s online lives, including setting age-appropriate boundaries and, importantly, having regular, open conversations at home about online experiences and how to navigate them.

⁵⁴ Studies have highlighted further research in mobile phone access and impact in primary schools is required.

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Appendix A

Lossiemouth High School (Moray Council) - Mobile Device Policy ⁵⁵

 Mobile Device Policy: Disconnect to Reconnect	
Overview In line with Moray Council policy, Lossiemouth High School is a mobile phone free school. Mobiles phones must be off and out of sight at all times within the building. Mobile phones can be used outside before 8.45am and outside during break and lunch. Smart watches can be worn, but they must be disconnected from your mobile phone. <i>The purpose of this policy is to reduce distraction, enhance learning and support wellbeing¹ it is also important that we support young people to learn boundaries expected in life and work.</i> The information below outlines the protocol for each group within our school community.	
Pupils Pupils must switch off their phones and put them in their bag before entering the building. If a young person forgets their bag, their phone will be required to be placed in a locker or left at the school office. Any pupil who needs to make contact with home should go to the office. <u>In Class</u> Pupils with a mobile phone out or switched on in <u>class</u> will be required to place their device in the storage box. The phone will be handed in to the office by the member of staff at their earliest convenience. First incident, pupil collects phone from a member of SLT (school office) at the start of lunch or the end of the day. A warning will be issued and text sent home. For every subsequent incident, a detention will be issued and the parent will be required to collect the phone at the end of the day. <u>Social Space</u> Pupils with a mobile phone out or switched on in any <u>social space</u>, including in corridors, will be asked to put it away. First incident, a warning will be issued and text sent home. For every subsequent incident, a detention will be issued and the parent will be required to collect the phone at the end of the day. Pupils should ensure that they have money on their Young Scot card or have cash/card for food in the event that their phone has been confiscated. The school's positive relationships/discipline system will be used for ongoing issues or refusal to co-operate.	Staff Staff should model responsible behaviour with mobile phones. Staff should put their phones away before 8.45am. Staff should not be using mobile phones in view of pupils, including classrooms or in any social spaces e.g. corridor, canteen/atrium, staffroom. Staff are encouraged to update their emergency contact details to the school number. Staff requiring to use a mobile device in an emergency should either go outside or go to a private space to do so. N.B the duty person will carry a school mobile (not a smart phone). Visitors and Partners On arrival, all visitors and partners will be reminded that we are a mobile free school and mobile phones should not be in view of pupils and staff. Visitors and partners requiring to use a mobile device in an emergency should either go outside or ask for a private space to do so.

¹ UNCRC Article 29: education should develop a child's personality, talents and abilities to their fullest potential.

⁵⁵ Lossiemouth High School. (2025).

About this report

Fife Council Research and Insight Team works on prioritised projects to deliver strategic insight for the Council and community planning partners in Fife.

We aim to deliver engaging high-quality general insight for those involved in delivering public services across Fife.

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Important notes on this report

1. This report has been commissioned by Education Directorate to inform discussion and decision-making on the use of mobile phones in Fife's schools.
2. The report provides a contextual overview of mobile phone use by children and young people, drawing on current research evidence, national policy, and emerging practice across education systems. It outlines both the potential benefits and the risks associated with mobile phone access in school settings.
3. The purpose of the report is not to recommend a single prescriptive approach, but to support evidence-informed discussion by setting out relevant considerations, emerging consensus, and implications for policy and practice in Fife. It is intended to provide a foundation for future engagement with school leaders, staff, pupils, and parents/carers.
4. For further information regarding the Transforming Learning Strategy in Fife please contact education.services@fife.gov.uk