SCOTLAND

NASUWT THE TEACHERS' UNION

CONSULTATION

Scottish Government

Restricting mobile phones in Scotland's schools

17 November 2026

1. The Scottish Government has committed to restricting the use of mobile phones in schools. To what extent do you agree with the following options?:

· Restrictions during class time but access to mobile phones during break and lunch.

Disagree

· Restrictions across the whole school day: mobile phones must not be used during any part of the school day, including break and lunch.

Agree

· Restrictions should be left to discretion of the school.

Don't agree

Please provide details of other types of restrictions which you would support in the box below (information on exceptions to restrictions is sought below, do not provide this information in response to this question)

NASUWT – The Teachers' Union is calling on governments across the UK to introduce a statutory requirement for pupils to lock away mobile phones and other portable electronic communication devices for the duration of the school day, as evidence mounts that device-related disruption, safeguarding risks and confrontations in classrooms are escalating.

While many headteachers have already introduced school-level bans, the Union believes that non-statutory guidance is insufficient and leaves schools exposed to inconsistency, parental challenge and escalating workload.

The NASUWT National Executive has endorsed a call for legislation requiring pupils to place their devices in lockable pouches or secure storage on arrival at school, ensuring they cannot be accessed without permission until the end of the day. This would apply across all UK nations, creating a consistent national expectation for pupils, parents and schools.

2. What is your knowledge of how phones are being used in schools at the moment?

If you are a member of school staff, how do pupils in your school use their mobile phones?

Please select all that apply

To support transport to and from school, such as checking timetables, paying for transport.

To communicate with family

To communicate with friends in school such as through messaging apps

To buy or order lunch

To support teaching and learning activities, for example researching a topic or question.

To help with accessibility and Additional Support Needs while in school.

During in-school study periods, for example to listen to music on headphones.

To relax during break and lunch times, such as gaming

Using social media

To take photos of others (pupils and/or staff) in school

To allow pupils to discreetly report behaviour incidents, such as bullying or racist incidents, for example through QR codes (REMOVE HAVE NOT KNOWN)

Other – please provide detail:

In surveys conducted by NASUWT[1] and other organisations[2], teachers and leaders have reported that pupils' use of mobile phones and other comparable devices:

- interrupts learning and damages concentration;
- causes confrontation when pupils are challenged by staff;
- contributes to poor behaviour and disrespect for the legitimate authority of teachers and leaders; and
- facilitates bullying, harassment and the misuse of technology.

Teachers are telling us that mobile phones have become one of the most persistent and damaging sources of disruption in schools. From interrupted learning and reduced concentration to confrontations when staff ask pupils to hand over devices, the situation has reached a critical point. Schools cannot be expected to manage this alone while the Government offers no meaningful support.

[1] https://www.nasuwt.org.uk/news/campaigns/better-deal-on-behaviour.html#Sidebar
[2] https://teachertapp.com/articles/phone-sanctions-displays-and-the-school-day/#phone

In the 2024 NASUWT Big Question Survey, more than a third of teachers (37%) cited mobile phone distraction as one of their most significant day-to-day behavioural concerns. In secondary schools, this figure rises to over 50%.

Although many schools have attempted to manage phone use through 'phones off in bags' policies, evidence from practice suggests that this approach is difficult to enforce consistently[3]. Schools increasingly report stronger success when devices are secured in lockable pouches or similar systems.

3. Think about the different things young people might use their phone for in school. If restrictions on mobile phones in schools were introduced, what do you think the positive impacts might be?

· Improved concentration in lessons.

Agree

· Improved in-person interaction and socialisation between pupils.

Agree

· Opportunity for children and young people to have protected screen-free time while at school.

Agree

· Reduced disruption in lessons.

Agree

· Reduced bullying or harassment.

Agree

· Reduced access to inappropriate content online while at school.

Agree

[3] https://teachertapp.com/articles/teacher-tapp-dials-in-on-mobile-phones/

· Staff spend less time managing inappropriate behaviour.

Agree

Are there other benefits or positive impacts you would like to highlight? Please provide detail:

Several studies suggest that restricting the use of phones and other connected devices during the school day can lead to improved academic outcomes[4], particularly for younger students or those who may be more easily distracted. However, the effectiveness can vary depending on how the policy is implemented and enforced.

Limiting phone and other connected device use during the school day can reduce opportunities for students to send harmful messages, share inappropriate content or engage in online harassment.

While in 2023, NASUWT did state we were opposed to mandated restrictions, our position has now evolved in response to significant changes in both evidence and context.

Firstly, recent feedback from members indicates that issues related to mobile phone use in schools have intensified. What was once an emerging concern has now become a widespread challenge affecting teaching, learning and wellbeing.

Secondly, the availability of practical, enforceable solutions, such as lockable pouches, demonstrates that there are viable ways for schools to manage mobile phone use effectively. While we may not formally endorse these methods, we cannot overlook the positive results being reported by schools that have implemented them.

[4] University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin). 'Mobile phone bans lead to rise in student test scores.' ScienceDaily. ScienceDaily, 20 May 2015 www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2015/05/150518121140.htm, Louis-Philippe Beland and Richard Murphy, 'Ill communication: Technology, distraction and student performance', Centre for Economic Performance discussion paper, May 2015 https://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/dp1350.pdf

Thirdly, there is growing evidence that mobile phones are being used to disseminate harmful and extremist content, including material from far-right groups. As a union, we recognise that addressing this requires a comprehensive and co-ordinated response.

Taken together, these factors place us in a very different position than we were in two years ago. It is both legitimate and responsible to adjust our stance in light of new evidence, challenges and concerns.

This can help create a safer school environment.

Evidence in support of restrictions has been gathered and explored across a wide range of sources and sectors.

Learning, attention and cognitive load

Teachers report that devices undermine learning by:

- splitting pupils' attention between lesson content and device;
- creating anxiety around notifications and social media; and
- undermining sustained focus and task engagement.

Qualitative evidence from teacher surveys highlights that many pupils now struggle to maintain attention for extended periods without checking their device, contributing to disengagement and surface-level learning[5].

International guidance also supports restricting devices in class unless there are clear educational grounds for use[6].

Behaviour and school climate

Mobile phones and other portable electronic communication devices have been found to contribute to:

[5] In the qualitative findings of the Behaviour in Schools research, commentary from teachers included: 'Pupils believe it is their right to access their mobile phones throughout the day, interrupting learning, causing confrontations, damaging their ability to concentrate due to their growing addiction to phone use.'

[6] UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report 2023: Technology in education: a tool on whose terms? https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/smartphones-school-only-when-they-clearly-support-learning

- increased low-level disruption;
- conflict between staff and pupils when devices are removed;
- escalation of bullying through filming, sharing and online harassment[7]; and
- normalisation of misogyny, abuse and harmful online trends imported into school environments[8].

Teachers report that inappropriate recording and sharing of incidents has become a significant safeguarding and behavioural issue, especially in secondary schools.

Schools that have moved to lockable pouch systems report:

- reduced detentions linked to device use;
- fewer confrontations over devices;
- improved classroom engagement; and
- better social interaction among pupils during breaks.

Safeguarding and online harms

Mobile phones and other devices provide in-school access to:

- violent, sexual or extremist content;
- misogynistic and harmful online ideologies; and
- platforms enabling cyberbullying and harassment[9].

Teacher evidence highlights growing concern over links between online content and classroom behaviour, including racism, misogyny and abuse towards staff and pupils[10].

Reducing access during the school day significantly lowers opportunities for harmful content to be accessed, shared or acted upon while pupils are on school premises.

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[7] https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/onlinebullyinginenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2020

[8] https://www.nasuwt.org.uk/news/campaigns/better-deal-on-behaviour.html#Sidebar

[9] Ofcom, A window into young children's online worlds, April 2024

[10] https://www.nasuwt.org.uk/news/campaigns/better-deal-on-behaviour.html#Sidebar

Evidence from healthcare professionals

There is a growing body of clinical observations across multiple healthcare disciplines indicating significant risks and harms associated with excessive mobile phone and social media use.

Health Professionals for Safer Screens, a coalition comprising consultant paediatricians, speech and language therapists, child psychologists, psychotherapists and psychiatrists, public health consultants, social workers, dieticians, and general practitioners, is calling for strengthened regulatory measures on children's and adolescents' use of digital technologies[11].

Members report increasing incidences of behavioural, developmental, psychological and physical health challenges linked to patterns of overuse and, in some cases, clear indicators of dependency[12].

4. Thinking again about the different things young people might use their phone for in school, if restrictions on mobile phones in schools were introduced, what do you think the negative impacts might be?

· Use of school staff time to implement and enforce restrictions, at the expense of other important duties.

Neither agree nor disagree

· Difficulties accessing school-based services on personal mobile phones, such as ordering school meals.

Agree

· Reduced ability of young people to use phones during the school day to keep in touch with friends and family.

Don't agree

[11] https://healthprofessionalsforsaferscreens.org/
[12] https://www.nasuwt.org.uk/news/campaigns/better-deal-on-behaviour.html#Sidebar

· Impact on young people's ability to plan for their time outside school, such as checking bus routes.

Don't agree

If you think there are other drawbacks or concerns which have not been noted above, please add them using the box below

NASUWT recognises that there are legitimate and reasonable counterarguments in the debate on restrictions on devices. These include the cost and logistics of implementation and the potential impacts on vulnerable pupils if exemptions are not properly managed.

Some academic research has suggested that restrictions alone do not guarantee improvements in mental health or academic outcomes[13]. It is also argued that access to personal smartphones in classrooms can support digital learning and literacy development.

However, teachers' lived experience and international practice suggest that access to technology for learning does not require unrestricted access to a personal device. The supervised use of school-provided devices can meet educational needs without the drawbacks associated with pupils having free access to their own devices.

The Union's engagement with teachers and school leaders on this issue consistently found that while many would like to control the use of connected devices during the school day, they felt less able to do so without government support.

5. If restrictions on mobile phones in schools were introduced, there would be exceptions to allow certain children and young people to use their phones if they have an important need to do so. This would mean those children and young people would have access to their phones only for the purpose of using them for their specific need.

[13] Goodyear, Victoria A. et al. School phone policies and their association with mental wellbeing, phone use, and social media use (SMART Schools): a cross-sectional observational study https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/news/2025/school-bans-alone-not-enough-to-tackle-negative-impacts-of-phone-and-social-media-use

To what extent do you agree with the following potential exceptions to restrictions on mobile phones in schools?

· Exceptions for children and young people who have medical conditions, like diabetes, that require monitoring using mobile phones.

Agree

· Exceptions for children and young people who are young carers and who require ongoing contact with family members. .

Agree

· Exceptions for children and young people with additional support needs if access to their mobile phone is used as part of a planned approach to managing their learning needs.

Agree

· Exceptions for children and young people with disabilities who use their mobile phone as part of a reasonable adjustment, including access to augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) etc.

Agree

If you think there are other circumstances where an exemption may be appropriate, and which have not been noted above, please add them using the box below.

The balance of evidence indicates that firm, consistent restriction of access to mobile phones and other devices improves classroom discipline, reduces distraction, strengthens safeguarding and contributes positively to the learning environment. But there are legitimate and necessary exceptions, including for young carers and pupils with medical needs or additional support needs (ASN). School policies restricting access to devices must not be applied in a way that disadvantages vulnerable or marginalised pupils. Clear and transparent exemptions must be available where a demonstrable need is established for:

- young carers who may need contact with dependent family members;
- pupils with medical conditions, e.g. diabetes monitoring;
- pupils with disabilities or ASN requiring assistive technology that a school is genuinely unable to provide directly; and
- pupils who require access for communication, regulation or safeguarding purposes.

Schools must comply with their duties under the Equality Act 2010 as appropriate, as well as relevant guidance on pupils with medical needs.

We are clear that any such restrictions need to be carefully designed, piloted and implemented.

6. Legislation on restricting the use of mobile phones in schools will reduce parents' direct contact with their children during the school day. Schools which have introduced restrictions on mobile phones currently ask parents to contact the school office if they require to communicate with their child. Is there anything about this approach that you would like to comment on?

Yes

Please outline the reasons for your response:

A national requirement for restrictions creates parity for all schools. By having to enforce restrictions without a legally backed mandate, school leaders report they are at risk of complaints and challenge from parents, with the potential for the policy to be overturned.

Opinions from parents and carers remain mixed. Some parents support policies restricting mobile phones and other devices in schools to reduce distraction and bullying, while others worry about safety and the ability to stay in touch with their children during the day, particularly during travel to and from school.

This is one of the reasons cited by those schools which have adopted the use of pouches. Students have the phones in their possession and are able to

freely use them when travelling to and from school. It is only restricted once on school premises.

It is also important to recognise that messaging during school can be disruptive. Schools provide channels for urgent communication. If contact during the day is critical, parents can contact the school office.

7. Do you agree that national restrictions on the use of mobile phones should apply to independent and grant-aided schools in addition to schools run by education authorities?

· Independent schools

Yes

· Grant-aided schools

Yes

8. Should restrictions on mobile phones also apply to wearable digital devices, for example smartwatches which have notifications enabled?

Yes – NASUWT policy relating to 'portable electronic communication devices' includes mobile phones, tablets, smartwatches, and any other personal devices capable of accessing the internet, making or receiving calls or messages, and recording or capturing images, audio or video.

9. Which other issues would you like us to be aware of?

A statutory framework should be introduced requiring publicly funded schools to implement secure device storage arrangements, with flexibility in method but clear national minimum standards developed in conjunction with NASUWT. The statutory framework must include legally robust provisions for exemptions for pupils with medical needs, ASN or caring responsibilities, in accordance with equality duties and safeguarding responsibilities. New

national guidance should accompany any statutory requirement, providing schools with:

- models of implementation based on pilot evidence;
- templates and guidance on handling exemptions;
- advice on staff training and communication with parents and pupils; and
- safeguarding, equality and enforcement guidance.

This guidance should be developed in full consultation with NASUWT and other relevant stakeholders.

Given the costs associated with lockable pouch systems, particularly for large secondary schools, governments should ensure that schools have adequate funding to ensure that no pupil is disadvantaged in accessing the system because of their financial circumstances.

A national evaluation process should be established to monitor the longer - term impact of the policy on matters including:

- behaviour and classroom disruption;
- teaching and learning conditions;
- staff workload and retention; and
- safeguarding issues.

This should be reviewed periodically with NASUWT and other stakeholder consultation built into the process.

While acknowledging that no policy is without trade-offs, NASUWT believes that a national, consistent and carefully piloted approach to restricting device access through secure storage systems represents a proportionate and necessary response.

If developed in partnership with NASUWT and other stakeholder organisations and implemented with clear exemptions and adequate support, such a policy would significantly strengthen the learning environment for pupils, as well as the working environment for teachers and leaders across the UK.

Finally, we have established principles to guide judgements about the opportunities and risks of AI and digital technologies in education. These principles inform our response to this consultation and can be found here: https://www.nasuwt.org.uk/advice/in-the-classroom/artificial-intelligence-and-digital-technologies.html.

Considering when mobiles should be used as a support mechanism, NASUWT would note that an AI chatbot may be useful in supporting learning, for instance for reinforcing and possibly extending what has been learned in a lesson. It might be useful in supporting homework which builds on what has been taught by the teacher in class and to practise what they have been taught. However, it would be crucial that the AI chatbot supports the teaching and that the class teacher retains professional oversight of the learning process. This includes ensuring that the teacher retains control over decisions about educational goals and objectives, the needs of the learner and the best way of meeting those needs.

AI chatbots cannot replace the teacher. Human and social interaction between the learner and the class teacher remain fundamental elements of high-quality education. This applies in respect of all learners of school age, irrespective of their needs. We have concerns that some learners, e.g. those with special and additional needs such as autism, may be at particular risk of being ‘taught’ by an AI chatbot rather than a human teacher.

We recognise that AI may offer opportunities for learners to be creative and that it may be used to support learners who have social and emotional difficulties. While we don’t oppose the use of AI in such circumstances, we stress the need to ensure that there is human oversight from an appropriately qualified and trained professional and that the benefits of using the AI are clear.

Research looking at the use of AI agents to support learners who are neuro-divergent found that AI Agents can help to increase their engagement in learning by fostering a sense of community and belonging. (Dieker, Lisa et al. Using an Artificial Intelligence (AI) Agent to Support Teacher Instruction and Student Learning in Journal of Special Education Preparation 4 (2) 2024 pages 78-88. Available at: https://doi.org/10.33043/d8xb94q7 (accessed 27/3/2026).)

However, the researchers stress that AI agents will not work for all students. They also found that effectiveness is dependent on the student first building a relationship with the AI agent and that the teacher needs to factor relationship building into any work that they do to use AI agents to support a student's learning.

Our focus, as a teachers' union, is primarily on the use of AI chatbots in education contexts. As indicated, we believe that it is vital that learners' access to and use of AI, including AI chatbots, has clear educational purposes and benefits; that decisions about whether, when and how they are used are made by a teacher; and that AI chatbots are not used as a substitute for a teacher. This means that access and functionalities would need to framed by educational purpose and the professional judgement of the teacher.

Outside of education, we believe that it is also important to restrict access to AI chatbots and functionalities on the grounds of the risks that these may pose to children and young people, including their mental health and wellbeing, but also because of the indirect impacts on education, including on their learning and their behaviour in schools. We draw parallels with our concerns about the negative impacts of social media on children and young people's learning, behaviour, and mental health. Our position statement on restricting under-16s access to social media can be found here: https://www.nasuwt.org.uk/advice/in-the-classroom/behaviour-management-for-teachers-in-the-classroom/social-media-restrict-under-16s-position-statement.html

We have clearly set out our concerns about the risks of AI chatbots in relation to children's and young people's mental health, and their learning and

behaviour in schools in our response to the previous question. However, we also want to highlight concerns about the risks arising from the commercial interests of companies providing the AI chatbots. We believe that tighter regulation is needed to ensure that personal data, including interactions with chatbots, is protected. This includes measures addressing where data is stored as well as how it is used, including its use in training AI systems. We believe that such measures must ensure transparency – the user must be aware of what data is collected and how it is used and this should be communicated in ways that are easily understood. We believe that regulation must clarify that a company must not use or sell personal data without the express permission of any adult user. In relation to children and young people, such regulations should place significant restrictions on the storage of personal data and its use for commercial purposes.

While we recognise the value of innovation, it is crucial that education-related innovations are located within a framework which prioritises education goals, objectives and purposes. This means that teachers and educators should be actively engaged in the design, development and trialling of AI tools and chatbots that are used in education and that educational benefits must determine decisions about whether, when and how they are used.

10. Are you a: SELECT ALL THAT APPLY

Membership representative body (please add detail below)

NASUWT is the Teachers' Union, representing teachers and school leaders in all sectors of education and across all 32 local authorities in Scotland.