

P-06-1482: Ban smartphones in all schools in Wales (with exemptions for exceptional circumstances)

March 2025



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About the Committee

The Committee was established on 23 June 2021. Its remit can be found at:
www.senedd.wales/SeneddPetitions

Current Committee membership:



**Committee Chair:
Carolyn Thomas MS**
Welsh Labour



Rhys ab Owen MS
Independent Plaid Cymru
Member



Luke Fletcher MS
Plaid Cymru



Vaughan Gething MS
Welsh Labour



Joel James MS
Welsh Conservatives

The following Member was also a member of the Committee during this inquiry:



Peter Fox MS*
Welsh Conservatives

* Peter Fox was a member during the evidence gathering phase of this inquiry.

Contents

Chair’s foreword	5
Recommendations	7
1. The Petition	9
2. Background	10
Previous action by the Senedd	11
Welsh Government’s current position	12
Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) and Association of Directors of Education Wales (ADEW) position	13
Approach taken in other parts of the UK	14
Children’s Commissioner for Wales	14
Our evidence-gathering	15
3. Is the evidence in favour of a ban compelling? Or not?	16
Evaluating the existing data.....	18
Behaviour, focus and educational attainment.....	20
Safeguarding, and social and emotional wellbeing	21
Screen-time, sleep, development and mental health	23
4. What would the downsides of a ban be?	26
Terminology	26
Exemptions - what are “exceptional circumstances?.....	26
Young Carers	27
Mental wellbeing, neurodiversity and additional needs.....	27
Medical needs	28
Primary School.....	29
Age-appropriate restrictions.....	29
5. What would be the practical implementation issues?	30
Safeguarding and safe travel to and from school.....	30

Storage	30
Enforcement.....	30
Parental concerns and opposition.....	30
Technology use in schools	31
Sharing Best practice	31
6. Committee View and Recommendations.....	32
Annex 1: List of evidence	34
Annex 2: List of written evidence	36

Chair's foreword

Every so often a petition comes in that grabs our attention. It speaks to an issue that seems important in the moment, and we decide to look more closely.

The petition to ban smartphones in schools was one of those petitions. It struck a chord. It seemed like it might be a simple one. Phones are bad, right? Could it be that a national ban would solve a range of problems in the classroom, and improve the lives of pupils, teachers and parents?

So, we asked for the evidence. Sometimes things that seem the simplest, are much, much more complex once you scratch the surface. This report has been guided by the evidence we have heard from a wide range of sources. From pupils, from teachers, from head teachers and parents.

The growing body of evidence about the harms of smartphones outweighing the benefits for children is both compelling and concerning. However, on balance we do not believe that it supports a move to a uniform 'ban' on smartphones in all Welsh schools.

The more we heard, the clearer it became that the relationship between young people and their phones is not simple. Yes, there are children who experience distraction, cyber-bullying, addiction and anxiety delivered through their phones. There are others who are liberated by being able to manage health conditions without drawing attention to themselves, and emboldened to walk to school, knowing they can always contact a parent. There is also a complex relationship between smartphones in school, and smartphones outside.

When governments make policy, the evidence matters. They must be clear about what they are doing, why it matters, and what impact they think it will have. Our call to government, and schools, is to keep following the evidence and sharing best practice, as more data and research becomes available from those schools in Wales taking a pioneering approach, and from the different approaches being taken in neighbouring countries.

There is a range of practice in Wales today. There is much work being done to assess the impact of different policies. Developing a strong decision-making

framework for schools, will enable them to weigh their priorities and set a course that empowers young people to thrive in safe learning environments.

We have learned a lot in pulling this report together, and we hope the information will be useful for all schools in considering and setting their policies.



Carolyn Thomas MS

Chair, Petitions Committee

Recommendations

Recommendation 1. The Welsh Government should develop a national policy framework and associated guidance that all Welsh schools can use to amend or refine their existing policies on restricting use of smart devices in schools. The Committee strongly encourages the Welsh Government to work with the WLGA and ADEW to review existing policies and best practice.....Page 32

Recommendation 2. Terminology is important and Welsh Government should discourage use of the word ‘ban’ in favour of ‘restriction(s)’. Describing ‘no-phone schools’ or using similar constructive language to explain restrictions is more likely to be something that learners, teaching staff and parents can all understand and support. A focus on “right time, right place” for use of smart devices should be emphasised, recognising the needs of students to safely harness digital technology as part of their education and development.Page 32

Recommendation 3. Any framework and/or guidance introduced by the Welsh Government to support school leaders should take account of the need for exemptions for certain learners’ needs, including how to mitigate against any negative impacts that restrictions could have in singling them out from their peers. It should provide clear advice based on best practice. Grounds for exemption should be clearly defined and explained. Before issuing a final framework/guidance, consultation should be undertaken with stakeholders representing neurodiverse learners and those with additional learning needs and/or medical needs, educational and health practitioners, and parents. However, the advice on exemptions should focus primarily on balancing the rights and best interests of learners with the needs of the school to deliver a safe and effective learning environment.Page 32

Recommendation 4. Parental engagement by schools should be encouraged in the policy framework and guidance. It should clearly explain the rationale and evidence base underpinning it, to promote and encourage a ‘whole school’ and ‘whole community’ approach.....Page 33

Recommendation 5. Any national policy framework/guidance should be reviewed regularly to take account of emerging empirical evidence about the impacts of smartphone use on learners in Wales. The Committee recommends that Welsh Government sets out how it will take account of evidence from Welsh

schools and from other jurisdictions and parts of the UK where studies have been undertaken or are currently in development.Page 33

1. The Petition

This report stems from a petition by Zena Blackwell calling on Welsh Government to:

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

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.

2. Background

The Committee decided to undertake a short inquiry on the petition, to hear the views of young people, as well as teachers and any experts in the field, before making recommendations to the Welsh Government.

- 1.** The petition closed on 7 January 2025 and collected 3,369 signatures.
- 2.** Restricting children’s use of smartphones is a highly topical issue which has attracted media coverage and documentaries exploring how children respond to ‘bans’ on their use of smart devices. As the petition highlights, there is a growing body of evidence about the impact of smartphones on young people’s social, emotional and mental wellbeing, as well as their academic performance and attainment, and different legislative approaches to online safety are being taken around the world.
- 3.** The petitioner shared significant evidence relating to existing ‘bans’ on smartphones in schools in Wales, other UK nations and internationally. She pointed to the positive impacts reported by school leaders. The petition highlights campaigns by groups including Smartphone Free Childhood¹ and Delay Smartphones², which are among those lobbying for change in the UK.
- 4.** The Primary School Student Health and Wellbeing Survey 2022-23³, found 63% of learners in Wales had a smartphone - 83% of Year 6 learners compared to 43% of Year 3 learners - and there was little difference between family affluence groups in smartphone ownership. In 2023, Ofcom⁴ 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.
- 5.** Smartphones are now a necessity to access all kinds of goods and services in everyday life. Welsh Government is working towards a Welsh Minimum Digital

¹ [Smartphone Free Childhood](#)

² [Delay Smartphones](#)

³ [Student Health and Wellbeing in Wales: Report of the 2022/23 School Health Research Network Primary School Student Health and Wellbeing Survey](#)

⁴ [Childrens Media literacy report 2024](#)

Living Standard⁵, which includes a citizen-centred definition of what constitutes digital inclusion. Minimum expectations are “An entry-level smart phone per parent and secondary and the school age child + 5GB data per month each; An extra 3GB of data per month if they have a child of pre-school or primary school age; An entry level laptop per household, parent(s) and first child share one device; An additional device for every further school age child.”

Previous action by the Senedd

6. In deciding to undertake this work, the Committee noted a 2022 inquiry by the Senedd’s Children, Young People and Education Committee (CYPE) on peer on peer sexual harassment, which took some limited evidence from the teaching unions. In its report the committee said in relation to mobile phones:

“Recommendation 15. The Welsh Government must 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.”⁶

7. This recommendation was accepted by the Welsh Government in a response which stated:

“The use of mobile phones in schools is included the Welsh Government Behaviour management in the classroom: guidance for secondary schools.⁷ 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 attendance policy⁸ and the Exclusion from schools and pupil referral units guidance.”⁹

⁵ [Towards a Welsh Minimum Digital Living Standard: final report \(summary\) \[HTML\] | GOV.WALES](#)

⁶ [Everybody’s affected](#)

⁷ [Behaviour management in the classroom: guidance for secondary schools | GOV.WALES](#)

⁸ [All Wales attendance framework | GOV.WALES](#)

⁹ [Exclusion from schools and pupil referral units \(PRU\) | GOV.WALES](#)

Welsh Government's current position

8. In response to a question on 12 June 2024, the Cabinet Secretary for Education told the Siambwr that, although almost all schools in Wales had policies in place to restrict use of mobile phones:

"... it is important there is an element of discretion for schools in this regard, because, where managed properly, teachers are finding innovative ways of integrating mobile technology into classroom teaching, and we would not want to see overly restrictive policies that would limit the use of creative ways of teaching. Governing bodies are also required by law to ensure that its schools pursue policies designed to promote positive behaviour, and that policy needs to reflect its own circumstances, and this could well include the use of mobile phones on school premises."¹⁰

9. Regarding the impact of social media on students' mental health, she went on to say that there were "pros and cons" to social media use:

"... There can also be benefits, and that's been very well documented by academics, but it does need to be used in a cautious way. That's why one of the things that we are doing through our curriculum is enabling children and young people to become discerning users of digital resources, and we also have an absolute plethora of information on Hwb's 'Keeping safe online' area, where we've got advice for schools, learners and their families on a range of digital issues, including mental health and well-being, the internet, balancing screen time and social media. We're also taking forward the national digital resilience action plan¹¹, which is designed to enhance online safety and the digital resilience of our children and young people here in Wales."¹²

10. In responding to the petition, the Cabinet Secretary acknowledged the impact of smartphones on school attendance and behaviour, but re-iterated her view that it is a matter for schools and governing bodies to decide their policies in

¹⁰ [Plenary 12 June 2024 - Welsh Parliament](#), Paragraph 142

¹¹ [enhancing-digital-resilience-in-education-an-action-plan-to-protect-children-and-young-people-online-summary-of-actions.pdf](#)

¹² [Plenary 12 June 2024 - Welsh Parliament](#), Paragraph 143

this area, and that they already had the ability to restrict their use. She also highlighted that:

“Often, the biggest challenge for schools around mobile phones and social media is not what goes on in school or during school hours, but what happens outside of the school environment. The instant, real-time access to social media, messaging apps and the internet can unquestionably lead to issues that have a detrimental impact on mental health and wellbeing.”¹³

Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) and Association of Directors of Education Wales (ADEW) position

11. The WLGA and ADEW’s joint response to our inquiry said that *“the general consensus is that a national position would be useful.”*¹⁴ It was suggested by some that a single national policy would support school leaders in implementing restrictions on smart devices in Welsh schools, and that national guidance would support heads and governors to make decisions in the best interests of students without being fearful of kickback. Benefits would include: providing clarity and a shared understanding and expectation among students, parents and educators; greater fairness and consistency; reduced confusion; simplified communication; and strengthening the sense that *“this is a public interest matter rather than a localised issue for individual school control”*.

12. WLGA/ADEW said that Welsh schools would welcome a national steer and standardised framework to underpin their individual rules, in the same way that the Scottish Government¹⁵ and UK Government¹⁶ have published guidance: *“This would support schools in taking the steps they see fit to limit the use of mobile phones up to and including a full ban on the school estate during the school day if that is their judgement.”* WLGA/ADEW also noted that other European countries have gone down the path of a national policy, something the petition highlights.

¹³ Petitions Committee meeting, 20 January 2025, Item 2.1 - Correspondence from the Cabinet Secretary for Education, 20 November 2024

¹⁴ [Correspondence from the Welsh Local Government Committee WLGA and the Association of Directors of .pdf](#)

¹⁵ [Guidance on Mobile Phones in Scotland’s Schools](#)

¹⁶ [Mobile phones in schools - GOV.UK](#)

Approach taken in other parts of the UK

13. The Scottish Government does not think a national ban is “*appropriate or feasible*” and leaves it to schools to implement restrictions if they wish. It does not ‘intend to dictate to head teachers’, but says “*we are making clear with this guidance that our headteachers are empowered to take action up to and including a whole school bans*”. Similarly, in Northern Ireland the guidance encourages restrictions, but leaves it to school leaders and governors to have an approach that “*best suits their school context and phase of education.*”¹⁷.

14. The previous UK Government issued non-statutory guidance in February 2024, which the current Government has confirmed will continue, which takes a stronger line 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 the whole school day.¹⁸

15. Existing best practice and model guidance for schools is already available in Wales – including on how to cost-effectively implement restrictions and store smartphones – and could be shared more widely by means of a national framework and guidance if the Welsh Government was to choose that approach.

Children’s Commissioner for Wales

16. The Children’s Commissioner for Wales conducted a snapshot survey¹⁹ in October 2024 asking children and young people aged 6-18: ‘Do you have a smartphone? Do you take it to school? Do you think schools should have more rules about using smartphones?’ 1,127 children and young people across Wales answered the survey individually, a further 2,170 children took part in groups, and teachers and youth workers also submitted views. Among the headline figures were that 62% of the primary school children had a smartphone, rising to 97% of secondary age pupils, of which 94% took their phone to school, compared to only 23% of primary school pupils.

17. Only 6% of primary aged pupils said their school did not have restrictions on phones, but 22% said there should be more rules, and 30% wanted to see restrictions when they went to secondary school.

¹⁷ [Circular 2024-14 - Use of Personal Mobile Phones.pdf](#)

¹⁸ [Written questions and answers - Written questions, answers and statements - UK Parliament](#)

¹⁹ [Smartphones in Schools - A Snapshot Survey of Children and Young People in Wales](#)

18. Of the secondary school pupils, 12% said they never used their phone in school, and 9% said they used it “all the time”. When asked if they were allowed to use their phone in class, 91% said they were not. However when asked if they ever used their phone in class, 48% said they had used it for learning, and 30% said they had used it for other things.

Our evidence-gathering

19. The Committee decided to focus its engagement work on secondary school students aged 11-18, as mobile phone use is more prevalent in secondary rather than primary settings. Efforts were made to include perspectives from under-represented groups, including learners from ethnic minority backgrounds, learners with disabilities, and learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. Learners from rural and urban areas across Wales were included. Engagement work also included discussions with teaching staff to gather perspectives from educational professionals on how mobile phone bans in schools impact learner behaviour, attainment and wellbeing. Five focus groups were held with students and two with teachers, as well as two teacher interviews and a teacher survey. This report references some key findings from the work conducted by the Senedd’s citizen engagement team. The full report is available on the Committee’s website.²⁰

20. The committee also held a roundtable event on 6 January 2025 with 35 contributors including education and health practitioners and experts, teaching unions, the Children’s Commissioner for Wales and representatives of parents and children who might be particularly affected by a ‘ban’, including young carers. The interest in attending this event reflects a wish to develop the best ‘made in Wales’ solution to a complex but universal issue. The Committee is grateful to all those who gave their time to contribute to this inquiry.

²⁰ [P-06-1482 Ban smartphones in all schools in Wales with exemptions for exceptional circumstances](#)

3. Is the evidence in favour of a ban compelling? Or not?

Students, teachers and experts highlighted major concerns about negative social, psychological, developmental and educational impacts on school students. But views on the best approach to smartphone restrictions in Welsh schools were mixed, with no clear-cut solution identified.

21. While there was no firm consensus on this question, the importance of consistency across schools came up frequently. Individual classroom teachers were generally supportive of a (strict) national policy, which they felt would simplify their lives and remove the daily challenges presented by smartphone use in the classroom.

“This ban wouldn’t be as easy to enforce in every school which is why this (a blanket ban) would be such a good idea. It takes all of that discussion and extra workload away from individual schools within their communities -which can be a challenge.”

Teacher Focus Group

22. Educators participating in the Committee’s focus groups agreed that the Welsh Government should provide clear guidelines around how schools should manage smartphone infringements in order to reduce teacher workload and stress.

“Issuing a ban is great, enforcing it is the issue”

Teacher survey

23. However, head teachers in particular were keen to stress the need for flexibility at an individual school level, and for buy-in from the whole school

community, in order for enforcement not to become an issue with individual pupils/families. They emphasised that all schools are different, and serve different communities. Restrictions on use of smart devices would need to be integrated with other school policies on safeguarding, behaviour and sanctions, in the same way that schools have to police things like uniform rules, smoking and vaping and general rules of school discipline and behaviour. Some teachers in the focus groups said that they already spent more time dealing with issues with vapes than with phones, something backed up by the WLGA's evidence from the pupil referral unit network.

24. Heads were concerned that enforcing a ban could become a full-time job for already stretched senior leadership teams. Although in contrast, classroom teachers felt having a ban/restrictions would make their lives easier.

25. The need for an evidence-based rationale – a *why* – was highlighted by a number of contributors. Is the driver here safeguarding, student mental health, or improved teaching and learning conditions? There are strong arguments for restricting mobile phones on all three grounds, although we heard that hard evidence was limited (but growing).

26. In the name of consistency, lots of contributors suggested that a national framework of some kind would be helpful, and the WLGA and Association of Directors of Education in Wales are among those organisations calling for a national policy. Policy developed by Pembrokeshire County Council was well received by other education professionals, and could be considered by Welsh Government as a model for a national framework.

27. The teaching union NAHT Cymru was reticent about the practicalities of implementing a national policy, suggesting there were more pressing issues²¹, and stressing the importance of trusting the professionals (school leaders) to know what would work for their school. The Children's Commissioner said a lot of schools were doing a great job and school leaders should be trusted, but a lot of teachers were asking for more consistency and support on the issue – there could be a strong role for Government to support and facilitate implementing policies locally. Teachers don't want another thing to police or another battleground.

²¹ [Senedd mobile phone debate an 'unnecessary distraction' says NAHT Cymru](#)

Evaluating the existing data

28. The evidence emerging from Pembrokeshire suggested that introducing strong restrictions had considerably improved behaviour and the teaching environment, although the sample size is relatively small - a survey of 52 staff and 212 pupils across four of Pembrokeshire's secondary schools.

Key findings from the staff survey:

96% of staff reported improved pupil concentration during lessons.

94% observed fewer behavioural challenges in lessons.

63% noted fewer behavioural challenges during breaks, lunchtimes, and transitions between lessons.

88% believed the policy positively impacted the overall wellbeing of the school community.

33% felt that pupils' resilience had improved.

80% of staff reported feeling safer due to the policy.

92% observed positive reactions from parents regarding the policy change.

98% of staff agreed that the policy was a positive development overall.

Key findings from the pupil survey:

48% of pupils felt that school was a better environment without phones.

64% reported talking to more peers during breaks and lunchtimes.

25% thought there was less bullying in school.

45% found it easier to concentrate in lessons.

65% expressed missing the use of phones for schoolwork.

30% reported feeling worried about not being able to check their phones.

50% said that their parents were pleased with the new policy.

40% felt that they learned better since the policy's implementation.

Source: Pembrokeshire County Council

29. The views of several other headteachers in ‘no phone schools’ elsewhere in Wales back up these findings. It is not clear yet whether these reported benefits will endure.

30. WLGA/ADEW, the Children’s Commissioner and others point to studies by PISA, UNESCO, OECD, Parentkind and others, and stakeholders had also conducted polls of their memberships, but the Committee has not seen empirical data on the number of schools in Wales which have restrictions or robust evaluation across the 22 Welsh local authorities.

31. The Pembrokeshire County Council evaluation to date of restricting smartphones in secondary schools has raised no concerns, and despite fears that it would result in greater exclusions, the opposite has been observed. This is possibly because behaviour overall in schools has improved, and teacher-pupil confrontations over phone usage have been removed.

32. The Children’s Commissioner for Wales said the results of her survey were more nuanced and mixed than just straightforward support for more restrictions. Children and teachers said there were already quite a lot of rules, but the vast majority did still use their phones in school – children still wanted to be able to use them at lunch and breaktime “to help them feel safe and contact families”, to access key information and for medical reasons. Some neurodiverse children and those with additional learning needs may use their phones to listen to music as a coping strategy. Both the Children’s Commissioner and Parents Voices Wales said thought needs to be given to “unintended consequences” and policy must be developed in proper consultation with the whole school community.

33. Some contributors noted that the current situation – where different schools are taking different approaches – means that there should in time be stronger evidence around what works, and in what circumstances. England has had stronger guidance for some time, which raises the question of what can be learnt from the English experience to date.

34. The University of Birmingham’s SMART Schools study²² - an observational research project in the West Midlands funded by the National Institute for Health and Care Research - is a significant example of work in this area. And on 16 January 2025 a major research project was announced, commissioned by the UK Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT), on the back of advice from England’s Chief Medical Officer, and led by a team at the University of Cambridge in collaboration with researchers at other leading UK universities - Bath, Birmingham, Bristol, Glasgow, Manchester, Nottingham, Oxford and York and the London School of Economics. It aims to improve policymakers’ understanding of the relationship between children’s wellbeing and smartphone use, including social media and messaging, and will help direct future government action in this area. Project lead Dr Amy Orben said:

“There is huge concern about the impact of smartphone use on children’s health, but the evidence base remains fairly limited. While the government is under substantial time pressure to make decisions, these will undoubtedly be better if based on improved evidence.”²³

Behaviour, focus and educational attainment

“Loads of people used to be on their phones in lessons. They would be checking them all the time. If someone else was on their phone it would distract you too.”

Student Focus Group.

35. An Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s (OECD) report, Students, digital devices and success (2024)²⁴ 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.

36. A number of stakeholders also pointed to a PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) study in 2022²⁵, which showed a “tangible”

²² [SMART Schools - University of Birmingham](#)

²³ [Cambridge leads governmental project to understand impact of smartphones and social media on young people | University of Cambridge](#)

²⁴ [9e4c0624-en.pdf](#)

²⁵ [PISA 2022 Results \(Volume I\) | OECD](#)

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 London²⁶ 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.

37. Both teachers and students told the Committee that removing smartphones from classrooms had led to a marked improvement in the learning environment – particularly in schools where stricter ‘bans’ have been enforced. Students and teachers agreed there were fewer distractions, allowing students to concentrate better in lessons. Teachers spend less time in classroom battles over phone use, and pastoral and senior leadership staff also highlighted the “phenomenal” amount of time previously spent dealing with issues related to phone misuse. Filming in the classroom was highlighted as a particular problem.

Safeguarding, and social and emotional wellbeing

38. There is a weight of anecdotal evidence - as seen in our focus groups - that smartphones have a negative impact on student attention and ability to learn; can be a flashpoint for student-teacher and student-student conflict; can facilitate bullying; can escalate the seriousness of incidents in the school; and can allow vulnerable students to receive messages directly which might be better delivered by a trusted figure.

39. Safeguarding issues include the ability to protect children who are being contacted during the school day for purposes of criminal and/or sexual exploitation and county lines activity. Contributors noted that the toxic aspects of smartphone use are not limited to school hours, and that wider interventions would be desirable.

“Daily, all I was dealing with was issues to do with nasty things that were being sent on mobile phones...there would be sexting, texting, children looking at inappropriate things, children talking to people they didn't know online, online grooming. It was constant children

²⁶ [Mobile phone bans in schools: Impact on achievement | BERA](#)

safeguarding issues. I just thought this is crazy, we have to protect the children.”

Headteacher Interview

40. Barnardo’s Cymru/Wales does not believe a ‘ban’ is enforceable or practical or would have much of an effect, particularly as it is parents who provide their children with smartphones. They warn that ‘bans’ on smartphones *“could prevent children from seeking help from their parents/carers or other trusted adults should they experience online harms”*. NSPCC Cymru also said children *“must be supported to understand school as a safe space to share and disclose harm and abuse.”*²⁷.

41. Both Barnardo’s Cymru/Wales and NSPCC Cymru said the emphasis should be on regulating phones to make them safer, with default settings and age-assurance, and getting technology platforms to regulate the online space: *“The onus of children’s safety should be on the technology companies and platforms that have designed services that are not safe for children, rather than excluding children from vital technologies.”*²⁸.

42. Barnardo’s Cymru/Wales also point to evidence from Estyn’s 2021 report ‘We Don’t Tell Our Teachers’²⁹ about possible unintended consequences of a ban in the digital space: *“Barnardo’s practitioners shared their concerns that a blanket ban may discourage children from taking anything linked to digital safeguarding into school, that they may see this as separate and not something they can or should seek support from education staff about.”*

43. Both NSPCC Cymru and Barnardo’s Cymru/Wales welcome the wider conversation on this issue, which they point out should not be considered separately from wider online safety, but urge a rights-based approach, and for political parties to *“listen to the voices and experiences of children and young people to understand how they would like regulation to look.”*³⁰.

²⁷ NSPCC Cymru additional evidence

²⁸ Barnardo’s Cymru/Wales additional evidence

²⁹ [We don’t tell our teachers - Experiences of peer-on-peer sexual harassment among secondary school pupils in Wales - Estyn](#)

³⁰ Barnardo’s Cymru/Wales – additional evidence

Screen-time, sleep, development and mental health

44. Contributors also felt that sleep was an underappreciated issue for students – ‘phone hygiene’ is an important aspect of ‘sleep hygiene’. Scientific journal The Lancet reported the findings from the UK Millennium Cohort Study on social media use and adolescent mental health, which it said were “highly relevant” to the development of guidelines for the safe use of social media:

“The magnitude of association between social media use and depressive symptoms was larger for girls than for boys. Compared with 1–3 h of daily use: 3 to <5 h 26% increase in scores vs 21%; ≥5 h 50% vs 35% for girls and boys respectively. Greater social media use related to online harassment, poor sleep, low self-esteem and poor body image; in turn these related to higher depressive symptom scores. Multiple potential intervening pathways were apparent, for example: greater hours social media use related to body weight dissatisfaction (≥5 h 31% more likely to be dissatisfied), which in turn linked to depressive symptom scores directly (body dissatisfaction 15% higher depressive symptom scores) and indirectly via self-esteem.”³¹

45. Platfform – a charity working for mental health and social change in Wales – pointed Members to the addiction aspect of smartphones, as weapons-grade technology designed by big-tech to encourage consumption. Community clinical psychologist Dr Jen Daffin also pointed to the evidence relating to effects on brain development.³² She said that a trauma-informed approach was needed to address the issue, and schools could play an important role in that. Members also have concerns about the role that smartphones play – along with online gaming – in encouraging microtransactions as an introduction to gambling.

46. The WLGA and ADEW drew attention to research by prominent US social psychologist and author Jonathan Haidt, author of ‘The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness’:

“It makes ‘a compelling argument that the uptick in time spent online has coincided with an alarming mental health crisis all

³¹ [Social Media Use and Adolescent Mental Health: Findings From the UK Millennium Cohort Study - eClinicalMedicine](#)

³² Platfform – additional evidence

over the world.” One study found that the average teenager gets 192 alerts or notifications per day from social media and communication apps – the equivalent of 11 per waking hour, or one every five minutes. ‘No matter how hard it is for an adult to stay committed to one mental road, it is far harder for an adolescent, who has an immature frontal cortex and therefore limited ability to say no to off-ramps’ writes Haidt. He argues that the never-ending stream of interruptions ‘takes a toll on young people’s ability to think and may leave permanent marks in their rapidly reconfiguring brains.’”³³

47. Both teachers and students participating in the focus groups reported that smartphone restrictions had a profound positive effect on student wellbeing, aiding both mental and physical health. Teachers said that students are now more active, engaging in sports and social activities, which has fostered resilience and stronger emotional boundaries, with students experiencing a greater sense of safety and relief from the anxiety previously associated with their phones. These changes contribute to an overall improvement in their quality of life during school hours. Students also expressed that increased face to face social interaction improved their mental health because “you’re not on a screen” and they reported feeling less socially isolated because students were now engaging with each other, rather than their devices. In schools with stricter policies, students said their initial anxiety about being without their phone dissipated over time, and head teachers from ‘no phone’ schools also said this was the case.

48. The Cabinet Secretary’s response to the petition notes that smartphone use is not just a school problem, and stakeholders agreed it needs addressing as a ‘whole school’ and a ‘whole community’ issue. Although the school day is quite short, head teachers in ‘no-phone’ schools in Wales say that restricting use in school is offering valuable respite to children, and the adults that work with them.

49. Adults also need to manage their own relationship with smartphones. The importance of ‘right time, right place’ for smartphone use was seen as an important part of developing students’ ability to manage their use of digital technology appropriately, and take breaks, as they progress to adulthood and the workplace. Adults in school become important role models to help children with

³³ WLGA/ADEW Briefing

this, and schools could play an important part in a wider approach to breaking the cycle.

50. There was a suggestion that perhaps Estyn could be asked to undertake a thematic review to assess what constitutes best practice in terms of smartphone restrictions in Welsh schools, although headteachers were reluctant to expand the role of Estyn into this area. It should be noted that Estyn has previously undertaken a thematic review on peer-on-peer harassment in secondary schools³⁴ at the request of the Minister for Education.

³⁴ [‘We don’t tell our teachers’: experiences of peer-on-peer sexual harassment among secondary school pupils in Wales - Estyn](#)

4. What would the downsides of a ban be?

Terminology

51. Most participants recoiled at the term “ban”, even where there was support for strict restrictions. Some schools with restrictions in place use language like “we are a no phone school” or “smartphone-free school”. Head teachers in ‘no phone schools’, where teachers used walkie-talkies to communicate instead of phones, noted that this description sent a clear and consistent message to the whole school community.

52. Whatever approach is taken by the Welsh Government in response to evidence on this issue, Members agreed that the term “ban” should be avoided in favour of referring to “restrictions”. This supports the “right time, right place” approach to use of smart devices. Where possible in this report we have used the term ‘restrictions’ to emphasise this important point. Contributors also noted that, in terms of issues relating to access to messaging and social media during the school day, “smartphones” are just one type of “smart device” that could be subject to restrictions.

53. One contributor spoke of the importance of ensuring cross-party support for any action, which should be based on solid evidence, to ensure that it did not become a politically divisive issue.

Exemptions - what are “exceptional circumstances”?

54. The petition specifically calls for exemptions for “exceptional circumstances”. The Committee’s focus group work in schools found that implementing restrictions had posed some logistical challenges for some schools, such as managing exemptions for medical needs, young carers and school trips, as well as challenging an existing culture of smartphone reliance amongst students.. But schools had successfully navigated these hurdles and demonstrated the feasibility of such policies by allowing for exemptions and “reasonable adjustments to be made”, which catered to the needs of individual students and their circumstances.

55. There is currently no consensus on how exceptional circumstances would be defined. The Committee received information from ALN campaigners suggesting that some of the children they advocate for might have relevant circumstances. Any national policy would need to be very clear on necessary exemptions. The

Pembrokeshire example allows for individuals to apply to the headteacher for an exemption.

Young Carers

56. While in theory schools would provide young carers with some relief from their responsibilities, it remains the case that there are a group of carers who may need to be contactable, and might be anxious without the assurance that they can be contacted in an emergency. At the very least they would need reassuring that the school had a reliable alternative mechanism for them to receive urgent messages e.g. via school reception. Pupils with caring responsibilities should be known to the school so that appropriate arrangements could be put in place.

57. Barnardo Cymru pointed out that *“young carers told us that they already feel uncomfortable disclosing their status as a young carer, losing access to their phone could make it even more difficult for them to attend school consistently if they cannot be in touch with family throughout the day as needed, and using the school office phone, often overheard by others, has previously made young carers feel uncomfortable.”*³⁵.

58. Existing guidance in England and Scotland³⁶ refers to exemptions for young carers, and Carers Trust Wales said *“If we were to see similar guidance or restrictions in Wales, Carers Trust would expect young carers to be named as an exempted group, and for reference to be made to a school’s Young Carer Policy in their development of a school Mobile Phone policy.”*³⁷.

Mental wellbeing, neurodiversity and additional needs

59. Anxiety was raised as a key issue for students, particularly neurodiverse students and those with additional learning needs (ALN). Levels of anxiety and mental ill-health are higher than ever in the school population³⁸, a trend backed up by analysis by Public Health Wales.³⁹ Addressing this is a Welsh Government priority, with a new mental health and wellbeing strategy 2024-2034 in development. The Petitions Committee has heard frequent claims that ALN support is still not where it should be in Wales.

³⁵ Barnardo’s Cymru/Wales – additional evidence

³⁶ [Guidance on Mobile Phones in Scotland’s Schools](#)

³⁷ Carers Trust – additional evidence

³⁸ [Facts and figures about young people and mental health | Mind - Mind](#)

³⁹ [New analysis reveals trends in children and young people’s mental health care in Wales - Public Health Wales](#)

60. The Committee was told that students using their smartphones to manage anxiety or as a coping strategy goes beyond the ability to contact a parent or carer for support during the school day. Some learners use phones to photograph the whiteboard, listen to music during break times, or to access online emotional support resources. Parents Voices Wales noted the ALN Community of Practice is being set up by Welsh Government Education, and questioned if there is enough understanding of the issues for ALN pupils before providing stricter or more definitive guidelines. Parents Voices Wales had gathered views from parents and carers of children with additional learning needs, which reflected a very diverse range of views on whether a school ‘ban’ was a good thing or not. The organisation cautioned against implementing restrictions without full consultation, saying there must be a needs-led approach, with appropriate parental engagement, to guard against any unintended consequences for those pupils. Several contributors, including the Children’s Commissioner, highlighted the need to carefully address the attachment issues for children when it comes to their smartphones.

Medical needs

61. Use of smart devices to manage diabetes was specifically raised by several stakeholders. Exemptions would be needed to allow learners to manage any medical or health condition requiring a smart device throughout the school day. Diabetes UK Cymru said “Any policies around mobile phones in schools must comply with the statutory duty to support children with medical conditions and ensure they can access the technology they need to manage their health effectively”⁴⁰. The evidence from young people with diabetes and health professionals who work with them points to the need to consult with both groups in developing policy and guidance around the necessary exemption.

62. Diabetes UK Cymru urged any guidance to place the child who requires their smart devices for medical or other needs at the centre of the policy, noting that restrictions will “have the undesired effect of also highlighting the reasons why someone needs a smart device. This may not cause any added pressure on pupils’ education, but it may highlight their condition/reason without their consent. In such instances, the smart devices may divide pupils and place some in awkward positions of explaining their condition/reason to their fellow pupils where they hadn’t needed to before or had only confided to a close friend or network/group of friends”. Sensitive handling is vital to avoid creating any increased isolation,

⁴⁰ Additional evidence – Diabetes UK Cymru

anxiety or stigma for young people who need to monitor their glucose levels via a smart device, including at exam times. This is particularly the case for a child who may be newly-diagnosed.

63. It is unclear how to ensure that exemptions aren't used by parents to undermine the system. Without strong direction from the centre, there is a risk that this responsibility falls wholly on headteachers and senior school leaders.

64. However, one headteacher from a 'no-phone school' told Members she did not believe there were any concerns raised by children and parents where a solution could not be found. It was noted that children with additional learning needs, neurodiversity, anxiety or specific medical needs would have an IDP or one page profile, and the exemption could be included in that.

65. Members have sympathy with the view that children saying they feel 'safer' with their phones is actually a red flag, given the mounting evidence of the harms associated with them, and that it is the job of adults to question why children feel that way, and address the reasons they feel unsafe. The addictive nature of smartphones for both adults and children cannot be ignored. Members are strongly of the view that "something needs to be done", and that adults may live to regret not having taken decisive action soon enough.

Primary School

66. The Committee focused more on secondary schools, but Members felt that there are stronger justifications for restrictions in primary schools, where fewer learners were likely to have, or need, a smartphone. The WLGA say consistency is key particularly for pupils transitioning to secondary school.

Age-appropriate restrictions

67. Many children remain in school until the age of 18, and restrictions would be incredibly hard to police in sixth form where students have greater freedoms. In any case, children by age 16 can consent to medical treatment, and in some cases may be considered competent to make decisions under the age of 16. At 16 many leave school and go to college, enter the workplace or take up an apprenticeship. Stakeholders were clear that the policy for sixth form students should be different. Some 'no-phone schools' allow students their phones for sixth form study, but expect those students to adhere to restrictions in the same way as teachers and other adult staff - not using smartphones when moving around the school near younger pupils.

5. What would be the practical implementation issues?

Safeguarding and safe travel to and from school

68. Parents Voices Wales, the WLGA and Barnardo's Cymru/Wales were among those pointing out that children would need a phone either side of the school day for safe travel to and from school, particularly so for children in more rural areas of Wales.

Storage

69. The logistics and cost of storing phones was raised, and certainly there are schools which have bought specially designed pouches sold by companies operating in this commercial space. However, the WLGA shared draft policy guidance for schools which includes advice on storage options, which challenges the idea that it has to be very costly or burdensome.

Enforcement

70. The WLGA and ADEW identified enforcing compliance as a challenge, particularly where schools allow phones to be used at break times. The ADEW network for Pupil Referral Units and 'Education Other Than at School (EOTAS) said that mobile phone use was "a constant battle in PRU settings, particularly when they have a new intake" and policies varied. Some colleagues encountered conversations between staff and pupil being recorded (and, in some cases, parents supportive of this), and there was some 'kick back' from parents who feel that they should be able to contact their children at any time of the day."

Parental concerns and opposition

71. Several contributors said that often opposition waned and most parents were supportive once restrictions became a normal part of school policy. Head teachers who have worked in 'no phone schools' recognised the importance of listening to and engaging with parents, including addressing resistance from parents who want to be able to contact their children during the school day. The focus group work found that, particularly in schools where stricter phone bans are enforced, teachers recognised the healthier boundaries that had been adopted

between parents and children, and there was better management of issues between home and school.

Technology use in schools

72. In some schools learners are allowed to use their phones as an educational resource for purposes including research, class quizzes, revision and to access school assignments. While it is clear that some schools allow or encourage smart phone use in some lessons as a way of overcoming the shortcomings (or shortage) of suitable school-owned technology, Members feel this is undesirable, particularly on grounds of equity. The Committee’s focus group work found that by assuming all students have access to smartphones in lessons, teachers are ignoring the reality that for some, particularly those in disadvantaged areas, even “data is a privilege”.

73. While accepting not all would agree, one headteacher of a ‘no-phone school’ said that the investment in ICT in schools made as a result of the pandemic meant that there were plenty of alternative digital tools available as teaching aids, and digital learning in general would not be restricted by specific smartphone restrictions.

74. Many Welsh schools appear to have been able to effectively implement policies that require smartphones to be locked away, however NSPCC Cymru was among those saying schools should have funding support for implementation.⁴¹

Sharing Best practice

75. Many of the perceived barriers to implementing restrictions may be overcome by sharing best practice and model policy and guidance that already exists in Wales. The Committee urges the Welsh Government to look to what is already out there, and use it to support all schools in addressing this challenging issue.

76. The WLGA/ADEW called for a transition period/preparatory phase before bringing in any national policy. They also referred to the importance of meshing smartphone policy with the citizenship element of the Digital Eligibility Framework in the Curriculum for Wales.

⁴¹ NSPCC Cymru additional evidence

6. Committee View and Recommendations

77. The growing body of evidence about the harms of smartphones outweighing the benefits for children is both compelling and concerning. However, on balance the Committee does not believe that the evidence it has gathered supports a move to a uniform ‘ban’ on smartphones in all Welsh schools. Members can see that school leaders are already grasping the nettle on this very challenging issue, often in the face of strong resistance, and commends them for that. The Committee notes there is plenty of good practice and model guidance available in Wales on which to draw. Although robust Wales-specific empirical data is still lacking, there is a lot of strong anecdotal evidence and some survey data to consider, as well as experience and data to draw on from other jurisdictions. The issue is constantly evolving, but Members are persuaded that Welsh Government could do more to support school leaders, teachers, teaching staff and learners, by issuing a national framework and further guidance on restricting use of smart devices in schools that will provide consistency and ease the pressure on everyone.

Recommendation 1. The Welsh Government should develop a national policy framework and associated guidance that all Welsh schools can use to amend or refine their existing policies on restricting use of smart devices in schools. The Committee strongly encourages the Welsh Government to work with the WLGA and ADEW to review existing policies and best practice.

Recommendation 2. Terminology is important and Welsh Government should discourage use of the word ‘ban’ in favour of ‘restriction(s)’. Describing ‘no-phone schools’ or using similar constructive language to explain restrictions is more likely to be something that learners, teaching staff and parents can all understand and support. A focus on “right time, right place” for use of smart devices should be emphasised, recognising the needs of students to safely harness digital technology as part of their education and development.

Recommendation 3. Any framework and/or guidance introduced by the Welsh Government to support school leaders should take account of the need for exemptions for certain learners’ needs, including how to mitigate against any negative impacts that restrictions could have in singling them out from their peers. It should provide clear advice based on best practice. Grounds for exemption should be clearly defined and explained. Before issuing a final framework/guidance, consultation should be undertaken with stakeholders

representing neurodiverse learners and those with additional learning needs and/or medical needs, educational and health practitioners, and parents. However, the advice on exemptions should focus primarily on balancing the rights and best interests of learners with the needs of the school to deliver a safe and effective learning environment.

Recommendation 4. Parental engagement by schools should be encouraged in the policy framework and guidance. It should clearly explain the rationale and evidence base underpinning it, to promote and encourage a ‘whole school’ and ‘whole community’ approach.

Recommendation 5. Any national policy framework/guidance should be reviewed regularly to take account of emerging empirical evidence about the impacts of smartphone use on learners in Wales. The Committee recommends that Welsh Government sets out how it will take account of evidence from Welsh schools and from other jurisdictions and parts of the UK where studies have been undertaken or are currently in development.

Annex 1: List of evidence

The following individuals and organisations participated in evidence gathering.

Date	Name and Organisation
October-December 2025	<p>Engagement findings: Contributions were made by staff and students from Ysgol Dyffryn Conwy, Cardiff West High School, Morryston High School, Abertillery Learning Community and Ysgol Penrhyndewi.</p>
6 January 2025	<p>Stakeholder roundtable event - representatives from: Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) Barnardo’s Cymru/Wales Bridgend Local Authority (ADEW) British Psychological Society Children’s Commissioner for Wales Carers Trust Llantwit School National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) National Education Union NSPCC Cymru Parents Voice Wales CIC Parentkind Pembrokeshire Council (ADEW) Platform Royal College of General Practitioners Royal College of Psychiatrists Wales Stanwell School Penarth Third Sector Additional Needs Alliance (Children in Wales) Undeb Cenedlaethol Athrawon Cymru (UCAC) Violence Prevention Unit, Public Health Wales Whitmore High School Barry Ysgol Castell Alun (ADEW) Ysgol Uwchradd Caergybi in Holyhead Ysgol Penrhyn Dewi, St Davids, Pembrokeshire</p>

Date	Name and Organisation
20 January 2025	Item 2.1: P-06-1482: Ban smartphones in all schools in Wales, with exemptions for exceptional circumstances Petitioner: Zena Blackwell

Annex 2: List of written evidence

The following people and organisations provided written evidence to the Committee which can be viewed on the Committee's website.⁴²

Title	Date
WLGA/ADEW Briefing	January 2025
Carers Trust Wales	January 2025
Parents Voices Wales	January 2025
NSPCC Cymru	January 2025
Barnardo's Cymru/Wales	January 2025
Letter from the Cabinet Secretary for Education – Response to Petition	January 2025
Petitioner's response	January 2025
Senedd Research Brief	January 2025
Statistics from survey of Pembrokeshire schools	January 2025
Platform	February 2025
Diabetes UK	February 2025

⁴² [P-06-1482 Ban smartphones in all schools in Wales with exemptions for exceptional circumstances](#)