Restricting Mobile Phones in Scotland's Schools

Response from Together (Scottish Alliance for Children's Rights) to Scottish Government's consultation on restricting personal use of mobile phones in Scotland's schools.

November 2026

About Together (Scottish Alliance for Children's Rights)

Together (Scottish Alliance for Children's Rights) is an alliance that works to improve the awareness, understanding and implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and other international human rights treaties across Scotland. We have over 600 members ranging from large international and national non-governmental organisations (NGOs) through to small volunteer-led after school clubs and interested professionals. The views expressed in this submission are based on wide consultation with our members but may not necessarily reflect the specific views of every one of our member organisations. Views expressed separately should also be taken into account.

Introduction

Together (Scottish Alliance for Children's Rights) welcomes the opportunity to inform Scottish Government's consideration of legislation to restrict personal use of mobile phones in schools, commenting on the extent, scope, and impact of potential restrictions and exemptions that should apply to any restrictive measures.

Our response primarily draws from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), academic publications, and data from the City of Edinburgh Council. We also cite evidence from children and young people, taken from previous editions of our State of Children's Rights reports as well as recent deputations to the City of Edinburgh Council by the Young Complainers of Edinburgh Youth Action.

We have answered the consultation questions most relevant to our expertise, and for which we have the most evidence from children and young people. We also encourage Scottish Government to have regard to submissions from our member organisations.

We call on Scottish Government to:

- **Ensure that any proposals to restrict the personal use of mobile phones in schools are informed by a robust assessment of the children's rights impacts:** Scottish Ministers have a statutory duty to conduct and publish a Child

Rights and Wellbeing Impact Assessment (CRWIA) for new legislation and decisions of a strategic nature.[1]

- **Ensure that children and young people's views are taken into account and considered in any decisions taken and their implementation:** particular attention must be paid to children and young people whose rights are most at risk, and for whom exemptions may be necessary.

Together, these steps will help ensure that all legal and policy measures uphold children's rights, including their rights to education, information, play, participation, non-discrimination and more under the UNCRC.

Consultation Questions

Question 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. ✓
- Restrictions across the whole school day: mobile phones must not be used during any part of the school day, including break and lunch.
- Restrictions should be left to discretion of the school. ✓
- Other – please provide details of other types of restrictions which you would support in the box below

Any restrictions on the personal use of mobile phones in schools must align with the best interests of children and young people, as enshrined under Article 3 of the UNCRC. They must also align with other UNCRC rights, such as the rights to information (Articles 13 and 17), education (Article 28), and play (Article 31). As such, restrictions should be proportionate, taking into account children and young people's views and experiences, and situations where mobile phone usage can enable them to exercise their rights.

Consideration must be given to whether the intended aims of limits on phone usage can be achieved through less restrictive means. For example, preventing phone use during lesson times, while permitting it during breaktimes and lunchtimes, may achieve the intended benefits while placing fewer restrictions than an all-day ban. This recognises

[1] Section 17, UNCRC (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024. https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2024/1/contents [Date accessed: 13/11/26]

that while restrictions may support the realisation of certain rights, they may also limit others. An appropriate balance must be struck.

Children and young people tend to oppose overly restrictive phone usage policies in schools. Through a consultation with children and young people launched in early 2026, City of Edinburgh Council found that 53% of secondary school students favoured an arrangement where phones would not be permitted during lesson times, but allowed during breaktimes and lunchtimes. 32% were opposed to restrictions of any form, while only 3% were in support of all-day bans.[2]

Additionally, in their deputation to the City of Edinburgh Council's Education, Children, and Families Committee, young people from the Young Complainers who form part of Edinburgh Youth Action argued that decisions on restrictions should be left to the discretion of individual schools.[3] They made clear that proposed restrictions should not compromise schools' autonomy, and that authority-wide measures may not be well-suited to the unique needs and circumstances of particular schools. We would therefore support national restrictions during class time, with schools able to decide how these work in practice, in partnership with their students.

It is important to note that prohibiting the use of mobile phones throughout the school day does not teach self-regulation skills, responsible use, or safety.[4] If restrictive measures are put in place without accompanying support, this could put students in a vulnerable position where they lack the digital literacy skills to deal with the challenges that come with phone usage. This is contrary to the guidance issued by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in General Comment no. 25, which urges states to ensure that children are taught digital literacy in schools from an early age.[5] Academic research has also reiterated this call. [6]

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[2] *City of Edinburgh Council, Education, Children and Families Committee (9 June 2026). Report on Mobile Phones in Schools. https://democracy.edinburgh.gov.uk/documents/s99512/7.2%20-%20Mobile%20Phones%20in%20Schools.html?CT=2. See subsection 4.14. [Date accessed: 11/11/2026]*

[3] *City of Edinburgh Council, Education, Children and Families Committee (9 June 2026). Webcast of the June 2026 meeting of the City of Edinburgh Council's Education, Children and Families Committee. https://edinburgh.public-i.tv/core/portal/webcast_interactive/1096293. See recording beginning 00:13:41. [Date accessed: 11/11/2026]*

[4] Bar et al (2025) 'Student perspectives on banning mobile phones in South Australian secondary schools: A large-scale qualitative analysis'. Computers in Human Behaviour, 167, 1-8. See page 5.

[5] *CRC/C/GC/25. Para 104.*

[6] Reed, J. and Dunn, C. (2024) 'Postdigital Young People's Rights: A Critical Perspective on the UK Government's Guidance to Ban Phones in England's Schools'. Postdigital Science and Education, 7, 376-385. See p 382.

Question 2: What is your knowledge of how phones are being used in schools at the moment? 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
- None – my school / my child's school does not allow the use of mobile phones.
- Other – please provide detail

Question 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. ✓
- Improved in-person interaction and socialisation between pupils. ✓
- Opportunity for children and young people to have protected screen-free time while at school.
- Reduced disruption in lessons. ✓
- Reduced bullying or harassment. ✓
- Reduced access to inappropriate content online while at school.
- Staff spend less time managing inappropriate behaviour. ✓

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

Restrictions on the personal use of mobile phones during class time may be conducive to more focused learning, as students, parents, and teaching staff alike have identified phones as a potential distraction in the classroom.[7] This could result in positive impacts for children's right to education (Article 28 UNCRC).

Additionally, children and young people in New Zealand schools expressed concerns that mobile phones could exacerbate existing issues with bullying and compromise students' mental health.[8] They also recalled instances where some students would use their phones to take and upload photos and videos of other students and staff without consent.[9] Such incidents may result in breaches of the UNCRC rights to health (Article 24), privacy (Article 16) and freedom from all forms of violence, including bullying (Article 19). Introducing restrictions on phone usage for part of the school day may help to tackle these issues.

Question 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.
- Difficulties accessing school-based services on personal mobile phones, such as ordering school meals. ✓
- Reduced ability of young people to use phones during the school day to keep in touch with friends and family. ✓
- Impact on young people's ability to plan for their time outside school, such as checking bus routes. ✓

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

Some children and young people with additional support needs have said that listening to music on their mobile phones helps with concentration throughout the school day, so restrictions may negatively impact this aspect of their learning and productivity [10] as

[7] Rahali, M., Kidron, B. and Livingstone, S. (2024). Smartphone policies in schools: What does the evidence say?, p16. https://researchonline.lse.ac.uk/id/eprint/125554/ [Date accessed: 11/11/2026]
[8] Gath, M., Monk, L., Scott, A. and Gillon, G. (2024). 'Smartphones at School: A Mixed-Methods Analysis of Educators' and Students' Perspectives on Mobile Phone Use at School.' Education Sciences, 14(4), 351-367. See section 3.2.2.
[9] Ibid.
[10] *Together (Scottish Alliance for Children's Rights) (2024). State of Children's Rights Report 2024. p149. https://www.togetherscotland.org.uk/media/3800/socrr2024_final.pdf [date accessed: 11/11/2026]*

well as raise implications for Article 2 (non-discrimination) and Article 23 (rights of disabled children).

Students in Australia also reported a deteriorating relationship between teachers and students due to mobile phone bans, with distrust deepening due to staff perceptions that students lack self-control and self-discipline when it comes to phone use.[11]

Moreover, those who require access to a mobile phone for health-related purposes may struggle with restrictions in schools. The aforementioned Young Complainers' deputation pinpointed those with medical needs who rely on mobile phone-controlled medical devices;[12] restrictions on these individuals' mobile phone usage may put their UNCRC Article 24 (right to health) and Article 23 (disabled children) rights at risk.

Furthermore, children and young people may feel that their sense of security is compromised without access to their phones, especially if they are facing situations in their family or home environment that may cause them distress. For example, children from armed forces families supported by Forces Children Scotland said that the certainty of having access to their phones so they can keep in contact with parents and/or carers on deployment makes them feel safer and puts their minds at ease.[13]

Nevertheless, many students in Australia without special home and/or familial circumstances expressed that they would experience distress if a blanket ban on mobile phones was implemented. They said that a ban would prevent them from contacting parents about school pickups or in the event of private emergencies, or reaching employers about after-school work arrangements.[14] Some also reported a reliance on their phones to manage emotions such as anxiety, sadness, and loneliness.[15] While students should certainly be given guidance and education on healthy ways to cope with their emotions to prevent over-dependence on their phones for this purpose, in the absence of such guidance, an outright ban could remove a primary tool for mood regulation and thus have negative implications for their UNCRC Article 24 right to health.

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[11] Bar et al (2025) 'Student perspectives on banning mobile phones in South Australian secondary schools: A large-scale qualitative analysis'. Computers in Human Behaviour, 167, 1-8. See page 5.
[12] *City of Edinburgh Council, Education, Children and Families Committee (9 June 2026). Webcast of the June 2026 meeting of the City of Edinburgh Council's Education, Children and Families Committee. https://edinburgh.public-i.tv/core/portal/webcast_interactive/1096293. See recording beginning 00:14:48. [Date accessed: 11/11/2026]*
[13] *Together (Scottish Alliance for Children's Rights) (2024). State of Children's Rights Report 2024. p145. https://www.togetherscotland.org.uk/media/3800/socrr2024_final.pdf [date accessed: 11/11/2026]*
[14] Bar et al (2025) 'Student perspectives on banning mobile phones in South Australian secondary schools: A large-scale qualitative analysis'. Computers in Human Behaviour, 167, 1-8. See page 5.
[15] Ibid. See page 6.

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

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.

Please see our response to the previous question about children from armed forces families.

We encourage Scottish Government to have regard to responses from our member organisations and any groups of children and young people they identify as requiring exemptions.

Question 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**

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

Senior students in Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Australia have all called for phased and/or tiered restrictions, supporting more stringent rules for younger students while feeling that they should be trusted to use their phones.[16] [17] [18] Scottish Government may wish to consider whether such an approach would better reflect the concept of evolving capacities, as outlined in the UNCRC.[19]

It is also important to note that research on the effects of mobile phone restrictions on students' academic performance has yielded inconclusive results thus far. Some evidence from 2016 suggests that restrictions can be beneficial for disadvantaged students, but studies replicated later in other contexts have not corroborated those results.[20]

Regardless of the final restrictions put in place, Scottish Government must conduct and publish a Child Rights and Wellbeing Impact Assessment (CRWIA) to assess the impact of the proposals on children's rights, identifying any mitigative actions needed. It should take a comprehensive approach to this end, facilitating a dialogue with children and young people, parents, carers, school staff, and civil society organisations that work with and for them.

In this process, Scottish Government must ensure that any opportunities for participation are meaningful and inclusive. In their deputation, the Young Complainers from Edinburgh Youth Action expressed numerous concerns about the City of Edinburgh Council's engagement efforts. They pointed out that the survey was long-winded and therefore inaccessible to certain groups of children and young people, such as dyslexic individuals and those who speak English as a second language.[21] They also identified technical issues with the survey which made it challenging to complete, such as not

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[16] *City of Edinburgh Council, Education, Children and Families Committee (9 June 2026). Webcast of the June 2026 meeting of the City of Edinburgh Council's Education, Children and Families Committee. https://edinburgh.public-i.tv/core/portal/webcast_interactive/1096293. See recording beginning 00:09:33. [Date accessed: 11/11/2026]*

[17] *BBC Newsline (2026). A total ban on pupils having their mobile phones with them in schools could be on the cards in Northern Ireland. https://www.facebook.com/BBCNewsline/videos/a-total-ban-on-pupils-having-their-mobile-phones-with-them-in-schools-could-be-o/1014414518220595/ [Date accessed: 11/11/2026]*

[18] Bar et al (2025) 'Student perspectives on banning mobile phones in South Australian secondary schools: A large-scale qualitative analysis'. Computers in Human Behaviour, 167, 1-8. See page 5.

[19] UN General Assembly, Convention on the Rights of the Child, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 1577, p. 3, 20 November 1989, https://www.refworld.org/legal/agreements/unga/1989/en/18815. See Article 5.

[20] Rahali, M., Kidron, B. and Livingstone, S. (2024). Smartphone policies in schools: What does the evidence say?, p12. https://researchonline.lse.ac.uk/id/eprint/125554/ [Date accessed: 11/11/2026]

[21] *City of Edinburgh Council, Education, Children and Families Committee (9 June 2026). Webcast of the June 2026 meeting of the City of Edinburgh Council's Education, Children and Families Committee. https://edinburgh.public-i.tv/core/portal/webcast_interactive/1096293. See recording beginning 00:16:30. [Date accessed: 11/11/2026]*

being able to save and return to their responses at a later time.[22] Future engagement should thus address these issues.

Finally, to elaborate on Question 7 regarding restrictions applicable to independent and grant-aided schools, children's rights should not depend on the type of school a child attends. All children are entitled to their rights under the UNCRC without discrimination (Article 2). This is the same principle that led Together to argue for the compatibility duty in section 6 of the UNCRC (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024 to reach further than the Human Rights Act 1998, so that the protection of children's rights does not depend on who delivers a service. Section 6 makes clear that functions of a public nature include those carried out under a contract or other arrangement with a public authority (section 6(6)). It also provides that functions are not excluded from being public solely because they are not publicly funded (section 6(7)), a provision included partly with privately funded services in mind. Any national restrictions, and the exemptions that go with them, should therefore apply equally to pupils in independent and grant-aided schools.

Question 10: Are you a:

- Membership representative body: Together (Scottish Alliance for Children's Rights)

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[22] Ibid. See recording starting 16:56.