

# School phone policies in England

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Findings from the Children's Commissioner's  
School and College Survey

April 2025

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## Foreword from Dame Rachel de Souza



Over the last four years, I have spoken to a million young people and thousands of parents about the most pressing issues facing children growing up in England today. One issue that comes up time and again – from children, parents, and professionals alike – is online safety. While digital technology provides young people with unprecedented access to information and opportunities, it also exposes them to significant risks: harmful content, online bullying, the dangers of exploitation and grooming, and simply spending too much time online.

A key area of debate in recent months has been the role of mobile phones in children's lives, particularly in schools, and whether children's use of phones at school – and more generally – should be restricted. This led me to question what was really happening in practice across our schools and colleges when it came to mobile phone restrictions.

That is why, when I used my statutory powers to conduct the largest-ever survey of schools and colleges last year, I included questions on how schools were managing children's phone use.

This landmark research, with responses from 19,000 schools and colleges – representing nearly 90% of schools and colleges in England – provides the first comprehensive national evidence on smartphone policies. The findings are clear: the overwhelming majority of schools – 99.8% of primary schools and

90% of secondary schools – already have policies in place that limit or restrict the use of mobile phones during the school day.

While these policies are essential in maintaining focus, reducing distractions, and promoting positive behaviour in schools, they are only part of the solution. Schools tell us that, despite these policies, they remain deeply concerned about children’s online safety. That is because most of the time children spend on their phones is outside school hours. If we want to protect children, we must broaden our focus beyond school gates and ensure they are safe online at all times.

I recently commissioned a nationally representative survey<sup>i</sup> of children aged eight to 15, asking them how many hours they spent on a computer, smartphone, tablet or gaming console on a normal day. The majority of children (69%) spend more than two hours a day using one of these devices, while 23% spend more than four hours on them a day.

These children are not spending these hours on their phones while sat in school. It goes much wider than that.

It means our response must be a whole-society approach. Parents and carers need to be supported in managing their children’s online activities and setting appropriate boundaries. Schools should continue to have clear policies on mobile phone use, but they should also play a role in educating young people about online risks and responsible digital behaviour. Most crucially, technology companies must step up and take responsibility for making the online world safe by design.

Where that doesn’t happen, I will urge the government and regulators to take much stronger action to protect children from online harms. That could include banning social media for children under 16 or restricting internet enabled phone use for all children.

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<sup>i</sup> Polling carried out by YouGov in March - April 2025. 502 children aged 8-15 were asked ‘on a normal day, how many hours, if any, do you spend using an internet-enabled device (with a screen) such as a computer, smartphone, tablet, or gaming console?’ 7% said less than one hour a day, 20% said one to two hours, 25% said two to three hours, 20% said three to four hours, 10% said four to five hours, 7% said five to six hours and 6% said more than six hours.

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This report makes clear recommendations: the government should provide full support to headteachers in implementing strong smartphone policies that work for their schools. But we must also go further. We need decisive action from policymakers, regulators, tech companies, and parents to protect children in the digital world—not just during school hours, but throughout their daily lives. This is a collective responsibility, and one we must take seriously to ensure that every child can thrive in a safe and supportive environment, both online and offline.

## Executive Summary

The way children use phones is rightly receiving significant attention from policy makers. Within that, there is a particular focus on phone use at school. In that context, the Children's Commissioner's Office is publishing unique data on what phone policies schools have in place.

This report contains the first findings from the Children's Commissioner's landmark School and College Survey. The survey has responses from about 19,000 schools and colleges in England, making it the most comprehensive survey of its kind. The survey enables the Children's Commissioner to provide the first national evidence about the adoption of school phone policies and any exceptions to them for children with additional needs. The survey found that:

- **There are a range of mobile phone policies being implemented in schools across England.** These vary from only allowing pupils to use their phones during breaktimes, to not allowing mobile phones on the school grounds.
- **The majority of schools are implementing mobile phone policies in line with the recommendations in the Department for Education's non-statutory guidance:** 99.8% of primary schools and 90% of secondary schools had a mobile phone policy that limited pupils' use of their mobile phones during the school day.
- **Secondary schools were more likely to allow pupils to use their phones.** Around 10% of secondary schools had a policy which allowed pupils to use their phone at some point during the school day: 5.8% had a policy which allowed pupils to use their phones when a teacher says they can during lessons; 3.9% had a policy which either allowed pupils to use their phones at break or lunch, or allowed pupils to use their phones at any time in school.
- **Primary schools are more likely to completely restrict children's use of phones in school.** One in five primary schools (21%) stated that pupils were not allowed to bring their mobile phones to school at all, compared with just 3.5% of secondary schools.
- Many schools made exceptions to their policies for children who needed to access their phones during the school day. Secondary schools were much less likely to not make exceptions (34%

made no exceptions) than primary schools (74%). **Medical needs were the most common reason for schools making exceptions to their mobile phone policies.** Nearly half of secondary schools made exceptions for children with medical needs (49%).

- Schools that were concerned about behaviour also had more restrictive phone policies. In contrast there was no relationship between concerns about online safety and the strictness of school mobile phone policies. This may indicate that school phone policies are predominantly related to managing distractions in school rather than the wider risks faced by children from the online world.

The government should offer its full support to headteachers to implement the most robust mobile phone policies which work for their schools. At the same time, it is vital that more progress is made on online safety beyond the school gates. Schools are rightly worried about the online harms children are facing but they can only do so much to keep children safe online.

The Online Safety Act remains the strongest mechanism to protect children online. The Commissioner calls upon the government to go further, to make the online world safe by design by implementing the Online Safety Act to achieve its full potential, to ensure children are protected online throughout the day, not just in school hours.

# 1. Background to children's online safety, screentime, and calls for school smartphone bans

Smartphone ownership is almost ubiquitous among children and young people in the UK. As of 2023, 96% of 12- to 15-year-olds owned a phone<sup>1</sup>. This has contributed to the discussion among parents and politicians about the impact of screentime on everything from their concentration, their mental health, their eyesight and their sleep patterns<sup>2</sup>. With conflicting evidence about the impact of smartphones on children's wellbeing and health, calls for the UK to follow other countries in mandating a ban on smartphones in schools, or even children's access to social media completely, are growing.

## 1.1. Smartphones and online safety

Smartphones are the most common gateway for children to access the online world. Ofcom's media use report published in 2024 found 71% of 5- to 15-year-olds used smartphones to go online. This was the most common access point, with 50% only using another device, such as a PC or laptop, to do so<sup>3</sup>.

The online world presents numerous types of harm to children<sup>4</sup>. In 2022, the Children's Commissioner's *Digital childhoods: a survey of children and parents* report found that 45% of children aged 8 to 17 had seen harmful online content, including sexualised and violent imagery, anonymous trolling, and content promoting self-harm, suicide or diet restriction<sup>5</sup>.

More widely, children have told the Children's Commissioner that their feelings of safety online are linked to harmful behaviours, not just the content they see. In *The Big Ambition*, children told the Children's Commissioner's office that they wanted apps to be less addictive and less harmful to their mental health. Some children remarked that their experience online was having a negative effect on other parts of their life, such as school<sup>6</sup>.



## **1.2 Current solutions to online harms**

The UK government is in the process of addressing some of those online risks. For instance, through guidance to schools on restricting phone use at school and implementing the Online Safety Act 2023.

### **1.2.1 What is recommended to schools in England?**

The last government issued non-statutory guidance in 2024 to schools on developing phone policies<sup>7</sup>, with a non-exhaustive list of suggested rules including banning phones from the school premises, requiring pupils to hand phones in on arrival, providing lockable secure areas for phones during the school day, and have a never-seen never-heard policy through the day.

This guidance stated that schools have a legal obligation to ensure disabled pupils are not disadvantaged or discriminated against by smartphone policies. The guidance set out the importance of flexibility in the policies. The guidance, and these flexibilities, were welcomed by the Education Select Committee, who supported giving freedom to schools to choose the most suitable means of limiting pupils' smartphone use for their particular school<sup>8</sup>.

### **1.2.2 The Online Safety Act 2023**

The Online Safety Act 2023 was designed to tackle harmful online content and is currently being implemented by Ofcom, with the full raft of safety measures which have been promised to protect users from harm online to be in place by 2026. When it is fully implemented, the Act should protect children from harmful content, including pornography, eating disorder and self-harm content, hate content and illegal content.

However, the Act has raised various concerns. The Act focusses on particular forms of content, rather than wider risks often known as 'behaviour risks', such as screen time. It has also taken a long time to implement the measures meaning that there is a risk that the rapid emergence of new harms is simply outstripping the pace of the safety measures.

## **1.3 What other measures are being considered?**

In that context, there is an ongoing debate about further measures that could be implemented to better protect children from the risks of the online world.

### **1.3.1 Recommendations from political parties**

Whether or not smartphone bans are the correct course of action to protect children from online harms has divided decision-makers and representatives from the main political parties. The Conservative Party has recently called for smartphone bans in schools<sup>9</sup>, but the UK's Labour government has been maintaining that headteachers are responsible for setting their own smartphone policies<sup>10</sup>.

Last year, the then Education Select Committee welcomed the previous Conservative government's decision to bring in stronger non-statutory mobile phone policies in schools<sup>11</sup>, and also supported the flexibility this guidance allowed headteachers. However, the Committee recommended that a statutory ban should be introduced should the existing measures prove to be ineffective in promoting the education and best interests of children.

### **1.3.2 Parents**

The debate around smartphone bans is not confined to government. Grassroots campaigners, many of whom are parents, have organised across the country to call for bans in schools and beyond. Parents are making pledges to the Smartphone Free Childhood campaign<sup>12</sup>, where parents sign a pact to refrain from giving their children smartphones, until at least the end of Year 9.

The Children's Commissioner's *"I've seen horrible things": children's experiences of online harms* found that parents highlighted a disconnect between how children and adults feel about how safe children were online. 75% of the child respondents to *The Big Ambition* survey of over 250,000 children reported feeling safe online. In contrast, only 52% of the parents surveyed said they felt children were safe online<sup>13</sup>.

### **1.3.3 Child rights advocates and academics**

Some academics contend that complete bans can be blunt instruments which limit children's participation in the online world<sup>14</sup>, and distract from the requirement for technology companies to make their services safe from the offset.

Academics are divided over the question of whether smartphone policies in schools have a positive impact on children. It is rare for studies to be designed to allow confident conclusions on effectiveness or ineffectiveness, and there are very few UK-based studies of the impact of school mobile phone policies on children's educational attainment.

There is some strong evidence that phone use in school has a detrimental impact on the lowest-achieving pupils but not necessarily on higher achieving children<sup>15</sup>. Other evidence shows that students in countries with more schools adopting restrictive policies, such as Albania and Greece, had lower mean scores of maths, reading and science than those with fewer schools banning smartphones entirely, such as Singapore and Finland<sup>16</sup>. The study controlled for gender, social class and school behaviour and found that academic scores were lower in schools that banned smartphones.

### **1.3.4 International solutions**

International developments have also contributed to the debate in the UK. Last year, Australia introduced legislation that would ban all under-16s from social media. This means no child under the age of 16 will be allowed to access social media from any device, and at any time of day. It is a move which tightened the existing law brought in only a year ago which banned smartphones from the classroom. Under the previous administration in the United States of America, 15 states introduced smartphone restrictions in schools<sup>17</sup>.

### **1.3.5 The Safer Phones Bill**

The Safer Phones Bill, known formally as the Protection of Children (Digital Safety and Data Protection) Bill, was introduced to the House of Commons in October 2024 by Josh MacAlister MP as a Private Members Bill. The Bill's stated intention is to 'make smartphones less addictive for children and empower families and teachers to cut down on children's daily smartphone screen time'<sup>18</sup>.

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## 2. The Children's Commissioner's School Survey

To inform the debate, the Children's Commissioner included questions about how schools manage mobile phone use by their pupils in her survey of all schools and colleges.

### **The School and College Survey**

The Children's Commissioner for England has statutory powers under Section 2F of the Children Act 2004 to collect data relating to children. All public sector organisations in England are legally required to provide data the Commissioner requests.

In 2024, the Commissioner launched her survey of all state-funded schools and colleges in England with the aim of driving improvements in the support available to children in school. The School and College Survey asked about the support schools and colleges offer to pupils and their families, staff roles and responsibilities, and the characteristics and vulnerabilities of pupils. The survey was open from September 2024 to January 2025 and around 19,000 schools and colleges responded.

The survey included two questions on mobile phone use:

- *Which of the following best describes how pupils are allowed to use mobile phones while at school?*
- *Which of the following groups, if any, do you make exceptions for in your school's approach to mobile phones?*

Schools and colleges were advised they should 'select one option that most accurately describes the rules on mobile phones at your school. If the rules vary by year group, please select the option that most accurately describes the rules for the majority of your pupils.' Respondents could also leave a free-text response. The office examined a sample of free-text responses which show the majority of schools who left a free-text response had a restrictive mobile phone policy.

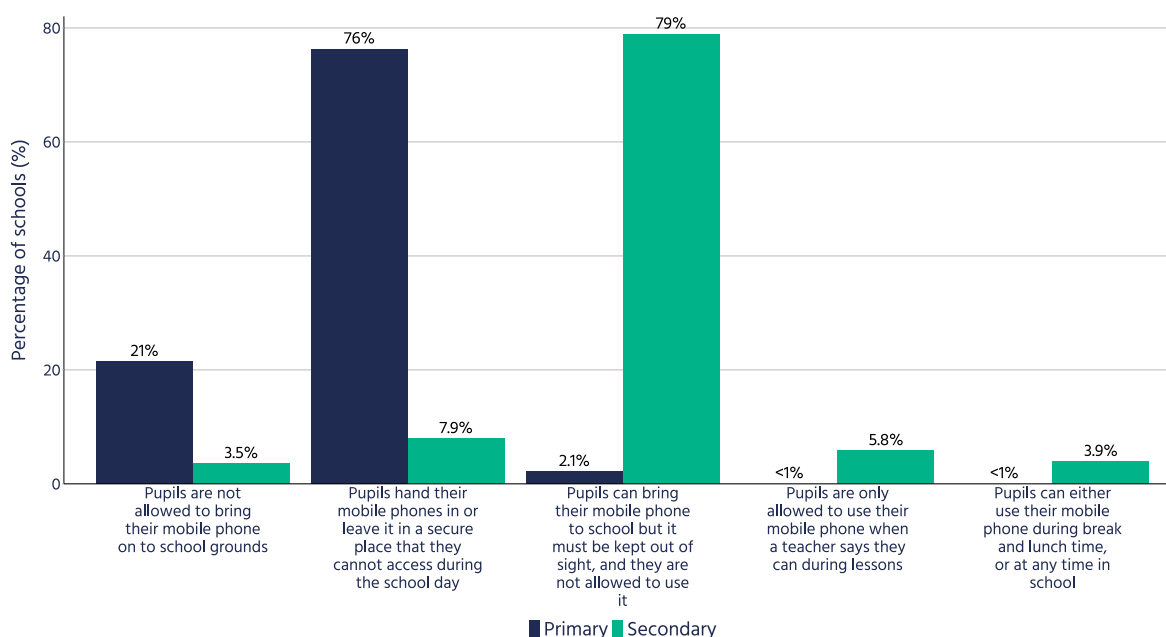
The School and College Survey offers the most comprehensive picture yet of school mobile phone policies in England, including the first data on any exceptions for cohorts of children in school phone policies. Analysis of the findings are presented below.

The findings presented in this report present the data provided by schools only, not colleges. This was to present evidence that would be most useful considering the Department for Education’s non-statutory guidance was issued to schools only. The findings relate only to schools who responded to the survey and question on mobile phone policies and have not been weighted to the population of schools.

## 2.1 Mobile phone use policies

**Most schools are implementing school smartphone policies suggested by the Department for Education:** Of the 12,730 primary schools who responded to the question about how they managed the use of mobile phones, 99.8% stated they had a policy that limited children’s use of their mobile phone in school. Secondary schools were less restrictive, though the majority had a policy listed in the DfE guidance. Overall, 90% of the 2,467 secondary schools who responded, had a policy that stopped children using their mobile phone in school.

**Figure 1: Mobile phone policies in primary and secondary schools**



**Some schools are adopting policies which do not align with the Department for Education non-statutory guidance on school phone policies.**

- A very small number of primary schools (0.2%) had a policy that allowed children to use their phones at some point during the school day.
- **Around 10% of secondary schools had a policy which allowed pupils to use their phone at some point during the school day.** 5.8% of secondary schools had a policy which allowed pupils to use their phones when a teacher says they can during lessons, and 3.9% had a policy which either allowed pupils to use their phones at break or lunch, or allowed pupils to use their phones at any time in school.

**The types of policies implemented by primary and secondary schools varied.** Primary schools are limiting children's use of smartphones in school more than secondary schools:

- One in five primary schools (21%) stated that pupils were not allowed to bring their mobile phones to school at all, compared with just 3.5% of secondary schools.
- The most common policy used by primary schools (76%) was for pupils to hand in their phone or leave it in a secure place that they could not access during the day.
- Over three quarters of secondary schools (79%) allowed pupils to bring their mobile phones to school but with the expectation that the phone must be kept out of sight and that pupils were not allowed to use it.

These findings highlight schools' commitment to limiting the use of mobile phones. The extent to which schools enforce their policies, and the extent of success of any enforcement, was not covered by the survey.

## 2.1.1 Existing evidence on school phone policies

The School and College survey provides the first large scale assessment of how pupil phone use is being managed. The headline findings support existing evidence. Surveys of teachers at 5,404 schools, of which 723 answered a question about mobile phone policies, by the Department for Education between December 2023 and January 2024 found that all schools had a smartphone policy which limited children's use of phones in some way<sup>19</sup>.

The survey found that primary schools were more likely to have stricter policies than secondary schools. 72% of primary schools reported that pupils could 'bring their phone to school, but must hand it in or leave it in a secure place' and 66% of secondary schools reported that pupils could 'bring their phone to school, but cannot use it'.

## 2.2 Do schools make exceptions?

Schools were asked whether they made any exceptions to their mobile phone policies for six groups of children: children who are young carers, children who speak English as an additional language, children with medical needs (such as diabetes), children with mental health difficulties, children with special educational needs and children with exceptional circumstances (such as parental illness) or 'other'. They could also choose 'none of these'. 17,039 schools responded to the question.

**Primary schools were less likely to make exceptions to their mobile phone policies for children who may need to access their phones during the school day:** Almost three quarters (74%) of primary schools did not make any exceptions for any of the six groups of children, compared to just one in three (34%) secondary schools.

### In primary schools:

- Around 16% said they make an exception for children with medical needs
  - 7% for 'exceptional circumstances'
  - 1.3% for children who are young carers
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- And less than 1% of primary schools made exceptions for children with mental health difficulties (0.5%), children who speak English as an Additional Language (0.4%), or children with special educational needs (0.5%).

#### **In secondary schools:**

- Medical needs were the most common reason for exceptions (49%)
- Nearly a third made exceptions for 'exceptional circumstances' (31%)
- 11% for children who speak English as an Additional Language
- 7.2% for young carers
- 6.3% for children with mental health difficulties
- And 5.8% for children with special educational needs.

The nature of school exceptions may be driven by their underlying policies – schools with more permissive policies are likely to need fewer exceptions. Exceptions are likely to also depend on the circumstances of their pupils – there is less need for exceptions if fewer pupils have underlying needs – and by overall phone use within their pupil population.

### **2.3 Do schools with stricter mobile phone policies have different priorities?**

Schools were asked to select up to four of the most concerning issues both in school and in the local area. Online safety was a concern for around 55% of schools. This percentage was similar across primary and secondary schools. Although CAMHS was the most cited concern for schools (70% of schools said this was a concern), online safety was the second largest cited concern for schools.

There was no correlation between schools who cited online safety as a concern and the strictness of mobile phone restrictions. Despite this there were some differences between schools who said that they had concerns about behaviour in school. Schools with tighter restrictions had slightly higher concerns about behaviour. This may be an indication that schools are using mobile phone restrictions



based on their concerns about behaviour, and evidence that phones are seen as a distraction. Online safety is a concern regardless of the level of phone restriction in place. Further details can be found in the Annex.

## The Way Forward

The Children's Commissioner's findings from the School and College Survey provide the most comprehensive insights into the use of mobile phones in schools in England. The findings offer a clear picture of how different settings have adopted phone policies.

The evidence demonstrates that while most schools have implemented policies in line with the Department for Education's non-statutory guidance, there remains a small proportion of secondary schools which allow all children to use their phones in some circumstances. These schools must take further action to align with the existing government guidance, to ensure a more consistent approach to limiting phone use in schools.

However, it is essential to remember that schools are only one part of the system. Children spend most of their time outside of school, where they remain at risk to harmful content and behaviours stemming from the online world. Tackling this risk requires collective action from tech companies, regulators and parents to ensure that screen time and online content does not negatively impact children's wellbeing and development.

To protect children, both in and outside of school, the government should:

- Continue to support headteachers to choose and implement smartphone policies that are the most appropriate for their schools' needs while aligning their policy with the best practices outlined in the government's non-statutory guidance; and
- Continue to support Ofcom as it implements the Online Safety Act to its full potential to ensure children are protected online throughout the day, not just during school hours. The Children's Code must put the highest protections in place for children and must be proven to be effective in keeping them safe. The Act remains the strongest mechanism to protect children online.
- Conduct more research into the potential benefits of wider restrictions on children's use of phones, particularly social media.

Only by taking a coordinated approach across schools, policymakers, and the tech industry, we can better safeguard children from the risks of excessive screen time and harmful online content.

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## Annex

**Table 1: Percentage of secondary schools who have concerns about online safety and behaviour by the type of phone restrictions they have<sup>ii</sup>**

	Heavy phone restrictions	Light phone restrictions	p-value
<b>Concerns about online safety</b>	55%	54%	0.944
<b>Concerns about behaviour</b>	29%	22%	0.036*

**Table 2: Percentage of primary schools who have concerns about online safety and behaviour by the type of phone restrictions they have<sup>ii</sup>**

	Heavy phone restrictions	Light phone restrictions	p-value
<b>Concerns about online safety</b>	56%	50%	0.722
<b>Concerns about behaviour</b>	23%	25%	N/A

<sup>ii</sup> Note: proportions have been tested with a chi-squared test where \* denotes a statistically significant difference at 5% level. Schools are considered to have heavy restrictions if they do not allow pupils to bring their phone to schools, require pupils to hand their mobile phones in or leave them in a secure place, or require pupils to keep their phones out of sight. Light restrictions are defined as pupils who are only allowed to use their phone when teachers tell them they can, only allowed to use their phone during break and lunch time, or allow pupils to use their phone at any time during school.

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