CELCIS's response to the Scottish Government's consultation on Restricting Mobile Phones in Scotland's Schools

November 2026

CELCIS, the Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection, is a leading improvement, innovation and research centre for children and young people's support, care and protection, based at the University of Strathclyde. We work with local, national and international partners to improve the lives of children, young people and families by strengthening the systems, services and practices that support them, helping to address their needs and realise their rights. Working alongside people and organisations responsible for their care and protection, we bring together evidence, lived experience and practical insight to facilitate and enable change, support the implementation of policy into practice, and drive meaningful and lasting improvement.

CELCIS welcomes the opportunity to submit our views in response to the Scottish Government's consultation on Restricting mobile phones in Scotland's schools. Our response is underpinned by research evidence, practice experience, and extensive insight and intelligence from lived experience and professional practice gathered through our long-standing, cross-organisational and interest-specific networks, as well as our group of consultants with lived experience of care. These networks include people across the workforce, including leaders working across the spectrum of children's services and other public services working in support of children, young people and their families, adults with care experience, amongst others.

Please note that 'looked after' and 'looked after child' are the terms used in current legislation to refer to a child or young person who is cared for under a formal arrangement with a local authority. It has a specific legal meaning, but wherever possible, we use the term 'care experience.'

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**.
  Neither agree nor disagree

- **Restrictions across the whole school day: mobile phones must not be used during any part of the school day, including break and lunch.**
  Neither agree nor disagree

- **Restrictions should be left to discretion of the school.**
  Agree

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

CELCIS supports legislation to restrict pupils personal use of mobile phones in schools. Specifically, we would support a national requirement that mobile phones are not used during teaching and learning time, with each school having the flexibility to implement further restrictions according to the needs of their communities.

Schools are best placed to understand their own context. Contextual safeguarding, as set out in the National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland, recognises that children's safety and experiences of harm are shaped by their peers, their school and their community (Scottish Government 2023). Most schools will know whether harm is arising from phone use at break and lunch periods, and what a proportionate response looks like for its pupils.

A national requirement to restrict the use of mobile phones during teaching and learning time, with local discretion over further restrictions

would give children, families and staff consistency while allowing schools to respond to the needs of their pupils. This includes care experienced children who may have needs at times related to their care status.

Whatever type of restriction is adopted, CELCIS would support an approach that is applied consistently across a school, explained to children and young people clearly and through the lens of children's rights. An approach that all pupils fully understand is important to protect relationships between pupils and staff and avoid potential confrontation.

References

Scottish Government (2023) *National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland 2021 – updated 2023.* https://www.gov.scot/publications/national-guidance-child-protection-scotland-2021-updated-2023/documents/

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

For example, if you are a young person, how do you or your friends use their mobile phones while at school? If you are a parent or carer, how do your children use their mobile phones in school? If you are a member of school staff, how do pupils in your school use their mobile phones?

Please select all that apply

☒ To support transport to and from school, such as checking timetables, paying for transport.
☒ To communicate with family
☒ To communicate with friends in school such as through messaging apps
☒ To buy or order lunch
☒ To support teaching and learning activities, for example researching a topic or question.
☒ To help with accessibility and Additional Support Needs while in school.

☒ During in-school study periods, for example to listen to music on headphones.
☒ To relax during break and lunch times, such as gaming
☒ Using social media
☒ To take photos of others (pupils and/or staff) in school
☒ To allow pupils to discreetly report behaviour incidents, such as bullying or racist
incidents, for example through QR codes
☐ None – my school / my child's school does not allow the use of mobile phones.
☒ Other – please provide detail:

CELCIS collects evidence from research, practice experience, and feedback from our long-standing education networks, comprising practitioners and leaders working across education in schools children's residential homes and local authorities across Scotland. We hold evidence on how to improve the experiences of children and young people in need of care and protection, including care experienced children and young people.

Care experienced children and young people are a diverse group of of learners and there will be differences in the ways they use their phones. They will use their phones for the same reasons as many other children will do. However, some will also use their phones for reasons related to their care experience. For some these reasons will be constant and others these will arise during key transition points or major life events.

Many children manage arrangements for legal processes including Children's Hearings, reviews and meetings with social workers, which are often communicated by phone and can change at short notice. Some children use their phone to keep connected with their birth parents, brothers and sisters, carers and other important people in their lives, who will often live in more than one household.

A phone can help some children regulate their emotions and maintain important relationships. This is especially important for children who have experienced trauma or disruption to their relationships. A phone can

provide a way to reach a trusted adult. It can also support children with caring responsibilities, including those in kinship care living with older relatives or helping to care for brothers and sisters. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, who are care experienced, or any child with family abroad or who are learning English as an additional language may also use their phones to keep connected with family members and friends overseas or to translate text and live speech.

Some care experienced children have health or communication needs, or a disability. For these children, a phone can help them manage health conditions, access assistive technology and communicate with others, supporting them to be heard, seen and able to engage with the people and environments around them.

CELCIS recognises the benefits of limiting mobile phone use in schools, but government, schools and the people who support care experienced children in schools should understand what a phone may represent for an individual child. A phone may be a lifeline, communication tool or source of comfort particularly during significant life events and take these factors into decision making about whether an individual child should be able to access their mobile phone during the school day. This does not mean that every care experienced child needs their phone during the school day. Most will manage restrictions as their peers do, but for a minority, access to a phone will matter and have more potential significance.

References

CELCIS (2021) *The digital divide: The impact on the rights of care leavers in Scotland.* https://www.celcis.org/application/files/5516/1158/7905/The_digital_divide_The_impact_on_the_rights_of_care_leavers_in_Scotland_Inform.pdf

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

- **Improved concentration in lessons.**

Agree

- **Improved in-person interaction and socialisation between pupils.**
  Agree

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

- **Reduced disruption in lessons.**
  Agree

- **Reduced bullying or harassment.**
  Agree

- **Reduced access to inappropriate content online while at school.**
  Agree

- **Staff spend less time managing inappropriate behaviour.**
  Agree

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

CELCIS's view based on evidence from research, practice experience and feedback from education networks is that restricting mobile phones in schools is likely to bring benefits for all pupils, including care experienced children and young people, but that these benefits should not be assumed. The benefits should be evaluated over time, in ways that allow the experiences of care experienced learners to be understood, including through recording the views of children and young people.

The most likely benefit will be a reduction in disruption throughout the school day. The Behaviour in Scottish Schools Research found that using or looking at mobile phones was a significant challenge that staff identified as having the greatest negative impact (Scottish Government

2023). It also found that the use of mobile phones to cause harm had risen since 2016. PISA 2022 found that almost a third of Scottish 15-year-olds reported being distracted by digital devices in some lessons.

Other research has also shown that restrictions can reduce overall phone use and therefore screen time during the school day. A study of 30 schools and 1,227 pupils in England found pupils in schools with restrictions used their phones for less during the school day and resulted in more face-to-face interaction (Goodyear et al. 2025).

There is limited research on the impact of digital restriction on care experienced learners. Our understanding based on evidence from practice and feedback from education networks is that there are likely to be wider relational and psychological benefits. The importance of relationships with teachers and education staff for care experienced learners cannot be overstated. Encouraging calmer, more predictable environments and greater opportunities for face-to-face interaction can strengthen relationships, and support care experienced learners to experience a sense of belonging and feeling safe. Restrictions may also reduce the risk of children being photographed or filmed without consent, which matters for some care experienced children whose identity or whereabouts needs to be protected. For others, protected time during the school day may also offer a break from unwanted, pressured or unsafe contact from people within or outside the school. Any restriction that reduces access to digital content that is inappropriate, misinformed, addictive, harasses, promotes unrealistic expectations, or is exploitative will be beneficial for all children and young people.

There is less certainty about other benefits. A scoping review of 22 studies did not find any randomised control trials of school mobile phone restrictions. What it did conclude was that there were mixed findings on bullying connected to the use of mobile phones (Campbell et al. 2024). The SMART Schools Study found no difference in wellbeing, attainment or overall phone use (Goodyear et al. 2025). A national working paper from the United States found average effects on test scores were close to zero, with disciplinary incidents rising in the first year before the effect faded (Allcott et al. 2026). Some research is encouraging for groups that may

include care experienced learners. A study of four English cities found the most significant gains were for pupils with additional needs (Beland and Murphy 2016). Findings from research in Norway included reductions in bullying for boys and girls, and improvements in girls' mental health and attainment with larger effects for girls from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Abrahamsson 2024).

References

Abrahamsson, S. (2024) *Smartphone Bans, Student Outcomes and Mental Health*. https://swopec.hhs.se/nhheco/abs/nhheco2024_001.htm

Allcott, H. et al. (2026) *The Effects of School Phone Bans: National Evidence from Lockable Pouches, NBER Working Paper 35132.* https://www.nber.org/papers/w35132

Beland, L.P. and Murphy, R. (2016) *Ill Communication, Labour Economics 41.* https://www.lpbeland.com/uploads/7/8/7/5/7875420/lpblabour_1-s2.0-s0927537116300136-main.pdf

Campbell, M. et al. (2024) *Evidence for and against banning mobile phones in schools: a scoping review.* https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/20556365241270394

Goodyear, V. et al. (2025) *SMART Schools Study, The Lancet Regional Health – Europe.* https://pure-oai.bham.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/256423016/GoodyearVA2025School.pdf

Scottish Government (2023*) Behaviour in Scottish Schools Research 2023*. https://www.gov.scot/publications/behaviour-scottish-schools-research-report-2023/pages/5/

Scottish Government (2023) *Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA 2022): Highlights from Scotland's Results.* https://www.gov.scot/publications/programme-international-student-assessment-pisa-2022-highlights-scotlands-results/pages/6/

Scottish Government (2026) *Guidance on mobile phones in Scotland's schools: update 2026*. https://www.gov.scot/publications/guidance-mobile-phones-scotlands-schools-update-2026/

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.**
  Agree

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

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

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

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

CELCIS agrees that each of these could bring about potential negative impacts. We note that these negative impacts will not be felt equally and care experienced children and young people are among those for whom they may be greatest.

Implementation and enforcement of restrictions are potentially sources of tension as schools and children adjust to new practices. The Behaviour in Scottish Schools Research found that policies could be applied inconsistently (Scottish Government 2023), and that asking pupils to put

phones away could lead to conflict and escalate into more serious disruption. Research in Swedish schools found collecting phones was challenging, time-consuming and stressful for staff and harmed relationships with pupils (Grigic Magnusson et al. 2023). A national working paper in the United States found disciplinary incidents rising in the first year before the effect faded (Allcott et al. 2026). The implementation of restrictions can cause friction between teachers and pupils and damage relationships.

A teaching union in Scotland noted that no additional funding, time or resources have been committed to support the roll out of approaches to restricting mobile phone use in schools (NASUWT Scotland 2026). Our networks tell us that many schools are already implementing mobile phone restrictions and their learning is that any new duties should be matched by resource including for the practicalities of phone storage as well as the staff time to devise systems and implement phone restrictions.

For some children who have experienced trauma, having a phone taken or locked away could feel like a loss of control, be experienced as a breach of trust, a restriction of their rights, as well as a disconnection from sources of support and feelings of security. A large qualitative study in South Australia found pupils reported reduced contact with parents and more difficulty managing emotional distress (Bar et al. 2025). In two schools in the United States, the proportion of pupils saying adults were available to contact when they needed their help fell (Allcott et al. 2026). For some care experienced children, their phone is a communication tool for a network that might involve several households as well as a range of different support services and practitioners. Many are informed about being able to spend time with family members, legal decisions and social care appointments by being contacted through their phone. It is also important to understand that some care experienced children travel long distances to remain in their school after changes in their home circumstances and so also rely on their phone to manage changing transport arrangements.

This does not mean that every care experienced child will experience negative consequences because of not being able to access their phone

during the school day. Most will manage restrictions as their peers will do, but for a minority, access to a phone will matter more and have more significance. This means schools, government and those who support care experienced children and young people should understand what a phone may represent for an individual child as a lifeline, communication tool or source of comfort particularly during significant life events.

References

Aberdeen City Council (2026) *Mobile phone rapid evidence review.* https://communityplanningaberdeen.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/HDRCA-Mobile-phones-evidence-review.pdf

Allcott, H., Baron, E.J., Dee, T., Duckworth, A.L., Gentzkow, M. and Jacob, B. (2026) *The Effects of School Phone Bans: National Evidence from Lockable Pouches. NBER Working Paper 35132.* https://www.nber.org/papers/w35132nber

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Grigic Magnusson, A., Ott, T., Hård af Segerstad, Y. and Sofkova Hashemi, S. (2023) *Complexities of Managing a Mobile Phone Ban in the Digitalized Schools' Classroom.* Computers in the Schools, 40(3), 303–323. https://doi.org/10.1080/07380569.2023.2211062

NASUWT Scotland (2026) *Relationships, behaviour and mobile phones.* https://www.nasuwt.org.uk/article-listing/relationships-behaviour-mobile-phone-scottish.html

Scottish Government (2023) *Behaviour in Scottish Schools Research 2023.* https://www.gov.scot/publications/behaviour-scottish-schools-research-report-2023/pages/5/

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.**
  Agree

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

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

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

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

CELCIS agrees with all four proposed exceptions. We also ask the Scottish Government to consider an exemption for care experienced children and young people, meaning those who are, or have been, in care.

The four proposed exceptions may not reliably or fully cover the unique needs of care experienced learners. Care experienced children and young people are named across Scottish policy and legislation as a group who require particular attention in the development of policy or who are entitled to additional support in their lives. As corporate parents, public bodies have a duty to be alert to matters that may adversely affect their wellbeing, and to promote their interests.

The Promise of the Independent Care Review is clear about the importance of nurturing children's relationships with their families and others who support them (2020). National legislation must should not create any barrier to nurturing relationships. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which is incorporated into domestic law in Scotland, requires public authorities to act compatibly with children's rights, with Article 9 setting out the right for children who are separated from their parents to maintain direct contact with their family when it is in their best interests. Section 13 of the Children (Scotland) Act 2020 sets out the duty of local authorities to promote contact between 'looked after' children and their brothers and sisters.

We do not suggest naming care experienced learners in order to create a blanket exception. Most care experienced learners will be able to manage restrictions as their peers do. Any exception should be needs-led, agreed with the child and recorded within existing planning, such as the Child's Plan, rather than a new process. It should be applied discreetly so children are not singled out or feel stigmatised and reviewed at points of change, such as a placement move, a Children's Hearing or other significant life events.

Scotland already has the infrastructure to support this. Schools are expected to have a Designated Manager, a senior member of staff with responsibility for care experienced children and young people in their school. CELCIS's Looked After and Learning guidance identifies

commitment to the Designated Manager role as one of the key areas for improving the learning journey of 'looked after' children (2015). Designated Managers are well placed to agree, record and review any exception with children, their carers and social worker. In the local authorities that have them, Virtual School Head Teachers are a further source of advice, guidance and support. A Virtual School Head Teacher is a senior member of education staff who works at a strategic level with a focus to improve the educational experiences and outcomes of care experienced learners (CELCIS 2025). They can advise on applying exceptions consistently and support decisions when a child's circumstances change.

References

Bettencourt, M. et al. (2025) *A Role Profile for a Virtual School Head Teacher in Scotland.* CELCIS. https://www.celcis.org/application/files/4817/4887/1284/VSHT_Role_Profile.pdf

CELCIS (2015) *Looked after and learning: Improving the learning journey of looked after children.* https://www.celcis.org/knowledge-bank/search-bank/looked-after-and-learning

Independent Care Review (2020) *The Promise.* https://www.carereview.scot/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/The-Promise.pdf

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024. https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2024/1/contents

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

Yes.

CELCIS considers that the proposal for parents to contact the school office may require additional consideration.

Care experienced children are likely to have relationships across more than one household. During the school day, several people may try to reach them, and parental authority may be shared across family and social care. These could include foster, kinship or residential carers. Birth parents, who may or may not hold parental rights may also want to make contact as well as brothers and sisters living in other placements. Wider family as well as practitioners such as social workers may also want or need to contact children and young people for a variety of urgent reasons.

Any person in or around the network of support for a care experienced child or young person may be trying to make contact about changes to time with the child's family, for example. Social workers may sometimes need to communicate at short notice about home moves or the outcome of a Children's Hearing or review. There are practical end-of-day arrangements around transport that may arise as well as more pressing emergencies such as illness or bereavement.

This raises practical and safeguarding issues. School offices need accurate, up-to-date information about who has parental responsibility, who is caring for the child, and who is and is not permitted contact. An approach that works for most families could expose a care experienced child to unsanctioned contact or confirm the child's school to someone who should not know it. Most schools will already be accustomed to these safeguarding issues but restrictions on phones could increase the volume or need to contact a school office, particularly during the roll out of restrictions.

The mechanics of how messages are conveyed to children also matters. Being called to the office in front of classmates can single a child out. Significant news about their family, for example, should be shared by a trusted adult in a way that respects their privacy and dignity. Existing guidance already asks designated managers in schools to help balance a child's educational needs against any need for contact with family or key

adults within school hours, and this role should be part of how schools manage contact.

We would ask that any national guidance recognises the complexities of children in need of care and protection. Arrangements for care experienced children should be agreed with the child, their carers and social worker, recorded in their plan, and shared appropriately with the school.

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

- **Independent schools**
  Yes

- **Grant-aided schools**
  Yes

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

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

We recognise that the proposed restrictions apply to all children and young people of school age. Our response aims to offer a specific perspective on the potential impact on care experienced pupils, meaning children and young people who are, or have been, in care. It draws on research evidence, practice experience and feedback from our long-standing education networks.

Scottish Government Educational Outcomes data from 2024/25 shows that 'looked after' children, on average, have lower attendance rates, higher exclusion rates, leave school earlier, and attain fewer qualifications than all other children (Scottish Government 2026). Whilst having

experience of care is not a predictor of later education outcomes, this data highlights the importance of providing effective, timely and responsive support to meet care experienced pupils' individual needs.

Most care experienced children and young people are likely to benefit from restrictions to mobile phone use in schools. Care experienced children use phones for the same reasons as their peers, but for some, a phone will be used for reasons explicitly related to their care experience. For example, phones maintain the network of people around them, alerts them to key meetings and legal arrangements, supports regulation and safety, and may be their only connection to external sources of support. While restrictions are likely to reduce disruption and support in-person relationships within school settings, evidence on wider benefits is limited and these should be evaluated. The negative impacts may fall hardest on children who rely on their phone to stay connected to a network across more than one household.

We ask the Scottish Government to consider adding care experienced learners to the exceptions, applied through existing planning and supported by Designated Managers and Virtual School Head Teachers. Findings from CELCIS research on care leavers found a 'rights deficit' for care experienced children and young people in digital access and called for this to be recognised as a rights issue and a corporate parenting responsibility (2021). Many of the risks and implications identified there apply to the question of care experienced children's access to mobile phones.

We would also highlight the following issues:

<u>Residential and secure care</u>
Some care experienced children live and learn in the same setting, including residential schools and secure care, and move between rules for school and rules for home within a single day. We would advise that there be consideration of the alignment between school restrictions and the expectations of care settings, so that children experience consistency and restrictions in education are not confused with permissions or restrictions in their homes.

Children who are 'looked after' because of disability

Some disabled children are cared for in residential care to ensure that their support needs are fully met, including staying for short periods of time. Guidance should ensure that their communication and health needs are met, as well as their ability to maintain relationships with their family members, alongside the proposed exception for disabled children and young people.

Wider context

Restrictions on mobile phone use in schools should be seen as separate from wider debates about restrictions to children's social media access and limiting time spent looking at a screen. Most children's phone use happens outside school, so any restrictions in school should sit alongside measures to improve digital literacy and offer support to children and families, rather than be seen as a solution in itself.

Mobile phone restrictions do not remove harm that begins outside of school. The SMART Schools Study found that conflicts that began outside of school continued and sometimes escalated during the school day (Goodyear et al. 2026), and other research found that pupils felt less able to report online harm when bans on using mobile phones in schools where in place (Ringrose et al. 2026). Schools will still need relational, trauma-informed approaches to respond to what children bring with them into school.

CELCIS, together with the Virtual School Head Teacher Network, would welcome the opportunity to support the Scottish Government in developing guidance that meets the needs of care experienced learners.

References

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