



Department of
Education
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PUBLIC CONSULTATION

Measures to support mobile
phone-free schools in Northern Ireland

Public Consultation on Measures to Support Mobile Phone-Free Schools in Northern Ireland

Ministerial Foreword

Mobile phones and smartphones are now a significant part of everyday life for many children and young people. They can support communication, access to information and, in some circumstances, learning. However, there is growing evidence and concern about the impact that mobile phone use during the school day can have on learning, attention, behaviour, wellbeing and safeguarding.

Schools across Northern Ireland have already taken steps to manage the use of mobile phones by pupils. Many have introduced clear policies, including “never seen, never heard” approaches, procedures for handing in devices, or restrictions on bringing mobile phones onto school premises. The Department recognises the leadership shown by schools, Boards of Governors and staff in responding to these challenges however, many schools have told the Department that further measures to support mobile phone-free environments are needed.

The Department is therefore seeking views on whether further measures, including legislation, may be required to support the consistent implementation of mobile phone-free environments across schools and Education Otherwise Than At School (EOTAS) settings.

No decision has been taken on whether legislation should be introduced. This consultation is intended to gather views from those most directly affected, including children and young people, parents and carers, school leaders, teachers, Boards of Governors, education bodies, safeguarding organisations and the wider public.

The responses received will help inform future policy decisions and determine whether legislative, policy or operational measures should be progressed.

I would encourage you to have your say on this important issue.

Paul Givan MLA
Minister of Education

Purpose of this Consultation

The Department of Education is seeking views on whether additional measures are required to support schools and EOTAS settings in creating and maintaining mobile phone-free environments during the school day.

In particular, this consultation seeks views on whether legislation should be introduced to restrict or prohibit pupil use of mobile phones and smartphones during the school day, and if so, how any such measures should operate in practice.

The consultation will help the Department to understand:

- the level of support for mobile phone-free school environments;
- whether the existing guidance set out in DE Circular 2026/16 is sufficient;
- whether strengthened guidance or legislation would be appropriate;
- how any statutory approach could be implemented fairly and practically;
- what exemptions or flexibilities may be required;
- the potential benefits, risks and unintended consequences of any future policy change.

This consultation does not assume that legislation will be introduced. It is intended to test views on a range of possible policy options before decisions are taken.

Background and Context

In September 2024, the Department published guidance to support schools in developing policies governing pupils' use of personal mobile phones during the school day. That guidance recognised that technology can have educational benefits, while also highlighting concerns relating to distraction from learning, behaviour, cyberbullying, safeguarding and pupil wellbeing.

Since then, the Department has supported a Mobile Phone-Free Pilot involving nine post-primary schools. Researchers from King's College London evaluated the pilot and the findings show that creating mobile phone-free learning environments can support improvements in classroom focus, behaviour, safeguarding and social interaction, and broadly confirmed the benefits anticipated when the Department's 2024 guidance was introduced.

Taken together with the wider national and international evidence base, the evaluation has strengthened the case for a clearer Departmental position on mobile phone use in schools. While schools should retain flexibility in how they implement arrangements locally, the Department considers there is a strong rationale for establishing a clear expectation that schools and EOTAS settings should operate as mobile phone-free environments during the school day.

In August 2026, the Department issued revised guidance advising that schools and EOTAS centres should be mobile phone-free environments by default. Whilst schools must have regard to that guidance under existing legislation, the Department does not currently have powers to require compliance through guidance alone.

The Department is therefore consulting on whether further measures, including legislation, may be required to support greater consistency across schools and EOTAS settings.

Evidence and Rationale for Consultation

The Department's current policy development has been informed by:

- the Department's 2024 guidance on personal mobile phone use in schools;
- the Mobile Phone-Free Pilot and evaluation by King's College London;
- the Department's 2026 survey of schools and EOTAS settings; and
- wider national and international evidence on mobile phone use, learning, behaviour, wellbeing and safeguarding.

The available evidence points to widespread concern about the impact of mobile phones and smartphones on school life. In particular, concerns have been raised about:

- reduced attention and classroom focus;
- disruption to learning;
- online conflict spilling into the school day;
- cyberbullying;
- safeguarding concerns;
- pupil anxiety, sleep and social pressures;
- staff workload in managing phone-related incidents;
- consistency of implementation across schools.

In June 2026, the Department carried out a survey of schools and EOTAS settings to gather updated evidence on the impact and management of mobile phone use in schools in Northern Ireland. A total of 167 responses were received, including responses from 97 post-primary schools, 57 primary schools, and a smaller number of special schools, nursery schools and EOTAS settings.

The survey found that schools continue to view mobile phones as having a predominantly negative impact on school life. Almost three-quarters of respondents, 73%, considered the overall impact of mobile phones to be net negative, meaning that the drawbacks outweigh the benefits. A total of 71% reported a significant impact on pupil wellbeing, including anxiety, sleep and social pressures. Respondents also highlighted links between mobile phones and online conflict spilling into school, safeguarding concerns and cyberbullying.

The survey also indicates that schools have responded proactively. Almost 87% of respondents reported having a mobile phone policy in place, with common approaches including “never seen, never heard” policies, requiring pupils to hand devices in on arrival, or prohibiting mobile phones from the school premises altogether. No respondent reported permitting unrestricted mobile phone use throughout the school day.

While many schools, particularly primary schools, indicated that their current arrangements are effective, there was also support for stronger Departmental action. More than half of respondents, 53%, supported legislation to underpin a ban on mobile phone use during the school day, while 49% supported strengthened Departmental guidance.

For that reason, the Department considers that a public consultation is necessary to ensure that pupils, parents, schools and wider stakeholders have an opportunity to contribute before any decisions are taken on future legislative or policy proposals.

Current Legal and Policy Position

Boards of Governors have statutory responsibilities in relation to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of registered pupils. They are also responsible for maintaining policies on pupil behaviour, discipline and conduct.

Principals are responsible for determining the measures necessary to promote good behaviour, prevent bullying, maintain discipline and regulate pupil conduct within their schools.

Existing statutory provisions relating to safeguarding, bullying, school discipline and pupil welfare support the policy objectives underpinning mobile phone-free school environments. However, no existing statutory provision has been identified that would enable the Department to issue binding statutory guidance requiring schools to operate as mobile phone-free environments. The Department may issue non-statutory guidance and schools have a duty to have regard to this, but it does not currently have powers to compel compliance through guidance alone.

Therefore, if the Department were to require schools to establish and maintain mobile phone-free environments, or to introduce a statutory framework similar to approaches adopted elsewhere, this would require primary legislation or alternative legislative provision.

Given the significance of such a policy change, the Department considers that a public consultation should be undertaken before any decisions are taken on whether to pursue legislation.

Scope of this Consultation

This consultation is focused on the use of mobile phones and smartphones by pupils during the school day in schools and EOTAS settings in Northern Ireland.

For the purposes of this consultation, “mobile phones” includes smartphones and other internet-enabled personal mobile communication devices brought to school by pupils.

This consultation seeks views on:

- whether legislation should be introduced to require schools and EOTAS settings to operate as mobile phone-free environments during the school day;
- whether any legislative requirement should apply to all schools and EOTAS settings or whether different arrangements should apply across primary, post-primary, special school and EOTAS provision;
- whether restrictions should apply throughout the entire school day, including break and lunch periods;
- the most appropriate methods of restricting mobile phone use;
- the extent to which schools should have flexibility in determining how any legislative requirement is implemented;
- whether exemptions should be permitted and, if so, the circumstances in which they should apply, including medical, special educational needs, disability, safeguarding or other exceptional circumstances;
- the practical implications of introducing legislation for schools, pupils and parents; and
- the support and implementation arrangements that schools may require.

This consultation is not seeking views on regulating children's and young people's use of mobile phones outside the school day, including evenings, weekends, holidays or travel time that is not under the supervision of the school or EOTAS setting.

While the Department recognises that mobile phone and social media use outside school can have an impact on learning, behaviour, wellbeing and safeguarding within school, this consultation is focused specifically on whether legislative measures are

required to support mobile phone-free school environments during the school day. Respondents may, however, provide evidence on how out-of-school mobile phone use affects schools where it is relevant to the legislative proposal under consideration.

The Department's aim is to ensure that any future approach is evidence-led, proportionate, practical and in the best interests of children and young people.

Timescales and Ways to Respond

The consultation will open on Thursday 27 August 2026 and close at 23:59 on Thursday 19 November 2026. The closing time and date apply to all methods of response.

This questionnaire can be completed [online](#)

If you prefer, you can submit your response by email or post. The consultations questions can be found at the end of this booklet.

By email: mobilephonepolicy@education-ni.gov.uk

By post: Additional Educational Needs Team

Room F11
Department of Education
Rathgael House
43 Balloo Road
Rathgill
BANGOR
BT19 7PR

Public Consultation on Measures to Support Mobile Phone-Free Schools in Northern Ireland

Consultation Questions

About You

Name: (optional)

Please select the box that best describes you as a respondent (required):

Parent/Guardian ☐

Pupil ☐

School Leader ☐

Teacher ☐

Classroom Assistant ☐

Other School Staff ☐

School Governor ☐

Health and Social Care Staff ☐

Trade Union Representative ☐

Education Body ☐

Other Interested Member of the Public, if Other, please specify:

If you are responding on behalf of an organisation, please specify: (optional)

Section A: Legislative Proposal

Q1. Do you support or otherwise the introduction of legislation requiring schools and EOTAS settings in Northern Ireland to operate as mobile phone-free environments during the school day? Please tick one of the following:

- Strongly support
- Support
- Neither support nor oppose
- Oppose
- Strongly oppose

Please explain the reasons for your answer

Q2. If legislation were introduced, which approach would you prefer?

Please tick one of the following:

- A statutory requirement prohibiting pupil use of mobile phones throughout the school day
- A statutory requirement requiring schools to have a mobile phone restriction policy, while allowing schools flexibility to determine arrangements locally
- Other (please specify in the text box below)

Section B: Scope of Any Legislative Requirement

Q3. If legislation were introduced, which settings should it apply to?

Please tick one of the following:

- All schools and EOTAS settings
- Primary schools only
- Post-primary schools only
- Different legislative requirements for different phases
- Other (please specify in the text box below)

Q4. If legislation were introduced, should restrictions apply throughout the entire school day, including break and lunch periods? Please tick one of the following:

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

Please explain the reasons for your answer

Section C: Methods of Restricting Mobile Phone Use

Q5. If schools are required to operate as mobile phone-free environments, which methods should be permitted? Please select all that apply:

- No pupils' personal mobile devices on the school premises
- Smartphone-free policy, permitting brick phones¹ only
- Never used, seen or heard
- Use of phone-free solutions (e.g. locked pouch or secure storage model)
- Schools should be free to choose the most appropriate method
- Other (please specify in the text box below)

Q6. Which of these methods do you consider most effective in supporting a mobile phone-free environment? Please tick one of the following:

- No pupils' personal mobile devices of any type on the school premises
- Smartphone-free policy, permitting brick phones² only
- Never used, seen or heard
- Use of phone-free solutions (e.g. locked pouch or secure storage model)
- Other (please specify in the text box below)

Q7. Should schools retain flexibility to determine the method used to implement mobile phone restrictions, provided they meet any legislative requirements? Please tick one of the following:

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

Please explain your answer.

¹ A brick phone is a basic mobile telephone designed primarily for calls and text messages. Unlike a smartphone, it does not ordinarily provide internet access, social media, app-based services, photography, video recording or other advanced digital functionality.

² A brick phone is a basic mobile telephone designed primarily for calls and text messages. Unlike a smartphone, it does not ordinarily provide internet access, social media, app-based services, photography, video recording or other advanced digital functionality.

Section D: Exemptions and Exceptional Circumstances

Q8.1 If legislation were introduced, should exemptions for certain pupils be allowed? Please tick one of the following:

- Yes – please go to Q8.2
- No – please go to Q9
- Unsure – please go to Q9

Q8.2. If yes, which pupils should in your opinion be exempt? Please tick all that apply:

- Pupils with medical needs
- Pupils with a disability or Special Educational Needs
- Pupils with specific safeguarding concerns
- Pupils with exceptional family circumstance
- Pupils travelling travel to and from school
- Other (please specify)

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Section E: Implementation and Enforcement

Q9. What are the main practical issues that schools would need to consider in implementing a legislative requirement for mobile phone-free environments?

Q10. What support would schools require to implement a legislative requirement to operate as mobile phone-free environments successfully?

Q11. What sanctions, if any, should be available where pupils do not comply with school mobile phone restrictions?

Section F: Final Comments

Q12. Do you have any additional comments on the proposal to introduce legislation requiring schools and EOTAS settings to operate as mobile phone-free environments during the school day?