

Subject:

Circular Number: 2026/16

**GUIDANCE ON THE USE OF MOBILE PHONES IN
SCHOOLS AND EOTAS CENTRES IN NORTHERN
IRELAND**

Date of Issue:

27 August 2026

Target Audience:

- Principals and Boards of Governors (BoGs) of all grant-aided schools
- Management Committees of all voluntary providers
- Education Authority (EA)
- Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS)
- Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA)
- Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE)
- Controlled Schools' Support Council (CSSC)
- Proprietors of Independent Schools
- Governing Bodies Association of Voluntary Grammar Schools in Northern Ireland (GBANI)
- Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG)
- General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland (GTCNI)
- Teachers' Unions
- EOTAS Centres
- Middletown Centre for Autism
- Catholic Schools' Trustee Service (CSTS)

Summary of Contents:

This Circular sets out the Department's clear expectation that all schools and EOTAS centres should be mobile phone free environments by default. Any access to personal mobile phones, particularly smartphones, during the school day should be by exception only.

Enquiries:

Any enquiries about the contents of this Circular should be addressed to:

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Governor Awareness:

Essential

Status of Contents:

Guidance for schools and EOTAS centres

Expiry Date:

None

DE Website:

[Department of Education](#)

Key messages

The key messages of this guidance are:

- All schools and EOTAS centres should be mobile phone-free environments by default; anything other than this should be by exception only.
- Pupils should not have access to personal mobile phones and other similar devices during the school day. This includes smartphones and similar internet-enabled devices.
- Exceptions should be limited, individualised and clearly recorded. They may include medical needs, special educational needs, disabilities, safeguarding requirements, care needs or other agreed circumstances.
- Personal mobile phone use by staff in pupil-facing areas should be avoided unless required for professional duties, safeguarding, medical reasons or emergencies.

Purpose of Circular

1. Schools and Education Otherwise Than At School (EOTAS) centres continue to face significant challenges in supporting pupils' learning, wellbeing, behaviour and safety in an increasingly digital world. The Department recognises the important work being undertaken by schools to promote positive relationships, concentration, resilience, attendance and engagement in learning.
2. This Circular sets out the Department's expectations for schools and EOTAS centres in regard to mobile phones and provides the evidence base, principles and practical guidance to support implementation. It supersedes Circular 2024/14 *Guidance for Schools on Pupils' Personal Use of Mobile Phones and Other Similar Devices During the School Day*.
3. Schools and EOTAS centres should be mobile phone-free environments by default. Pupils should not have access to personal mobile phones or other similar devices during the school day. This includes smartphones, smartwatches and any personal device with communication, recording or internet-enabled functionality. Any departure from this position should be exceptional, supported by a clear educational, safeguarding or medical rationale, formally documented, and subject to regular review.
4. The guidance reflects a growing body of evidence highlighting the impact that unrestricted access to mobile phones and in particular smartphones can have on pupils' learning, wellbeing, behaviour and safety and the role that schools play in

supporting positive relationships, concentration and engagement in learning. Creating mobile phone-free environments is intended to support these outcomes while fostering a culture in which pupils can engage fully in school life, free from unnecessary distraction and online pressures during the school day.

5. The default position applies throughout the school day and across the school estate, including during lessons, break and lunchtime, before and after school while pupils remain on school premises, and during school-organised educational visits and activities.
6. This guidance is not intended to inhibit the appropriate use of digital technology to support teaching, learning or administration. Schools should continue to make effective use of educational technology, digital learning platforms and school-owned devices where these enhance learning. The distinction is between the controlled use of technology for educational purposes and pupils' personal access to mobile phones and similar devices during the school day.
7. Responsibility for local policy remains with Boards of Governors and school leaders, reflecting the individual circumstances of each school. This guidance does not prescribe a single mandatory approach. However, the Department expects every school and EOTAS centre to review its existing arrangements and implement policies that establish a mobile phone-free environment as the default position, with exceptions limited to those that are necessary, proportionate and clearly defined.
8. Schools should review and, where necessary, update their policies during the 2026/27 academic year to ensure expectations are clear, consistently applied and understood by staff, pupils and parents. Effective implementation should be supported by appropriate arrangements for communication, storage, enforcement, safeguarding and agreed exceptions.

Evidence in relation to mobile phones and learning

9. The evidence supports a clear strategic direction: schools are more likely to secure calm, safe and focused learning environments where pupils do not have routine access to personal mobile phones during the school day. The strongest case relates to smartphones and similar internet-enabled devices because of their capacity to distract pupils, enable online harms, intensify peer conflict and disrupt learning during school time. UNESCO¹ has concluded that technology should be used in education only where it demonstrably supports learning and has highlighted concerns that smartphones can distract pupils even when they are not actively being used.

¹ [UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report, 'Technology in education: a tool on whose terms?' 2023.](#)

10. The conclusion from the evidence is not that every school must use the same operational model. Rather, it is that every school should work towards the same outcome: pupils should not be able to access personal mobile phones during the school day unless a clearly justified exception based on individual circumstances has been agreed, documented and reviewed. This reflects the developing international approach, where many jurisdictions are strengthening restrictions while allowing schools to determine the most appropriate model for their context.
11. Internationally, there has been a significant move towards stronger restrictions on mobile phones in schools. UNESCO² reported that by the end of 2024, 79 education systems, representing around 40%, had laws or policies banning smartphone use in schools, and later reported that by March 2026 this had increased to 114 education systems, representing 58% of countries worldwide. This international trend reflects growing concern about distraction, cyberbullying, behaviour, wellbeing and the wider impact of digital environments on children and young people. However, international evidence also suggests that restrictions are most effective when they are clear, consistently implemented and supported by practical arrangements for communication, exceptions, enforcement and access to appropriate educational technology.
12. The evidence is grouped below around four themes: learning and attention; behaviour and school culture; safeguarding and online harms and wellbeing and social interaction. Collectively, these themes provide a robust evidence base for the Department's expectation that schools and EOTAS centres should be mobile phone-free by default. While the evidence on direct improvements in academic attainment remains mixed, there is increasing consistency across national and international research that unrestricted access to smartphones during the school day can undermine concentration, contribute to behavioural and safeguarding challenges, and exacerbate online conflict and social pressures. Conversely, well-implemented restrictions are associated with calmer, safer and more focused learning environments, improved face-to-face interaction, and a reduction in phone-related disruption. It is this broader educational, safeguarding and wellbeing imperative, together with the need to maximise pupils' engagement in learning and school life, that underpins the Department's policy position.

Learning and attention

13. There is strong evidence that mobile phones can undermine learning by creating distraction, reducing concentration and interrupting the flow of teaching. OECD PISA 2022 evidence³ indicates that digital distraction is common in classrooms internationally and is associated with poorer educational performance. Pupils who

² [UNESCO article, 'Phone bans in schools are spreading worldwide as the policy debate rages on', 2026](#)

³ [OECD 'PISA 2022 Results \(Volume II\)', 2023](#)

reported being distracted by their own or others' use of digital devices performed less well than peers who experienced fewer such distractions.

14. Evidence from England provides further support for restricting access to mobile phones during the school day. A widely cited study by Beland and Murphy, *Ill Communication: Technology, Distraction and Student Performance*⁴, found that pupil performance in high-stakes exams improved after schools introduced mobile phone bans. The study found that the gains were driven largely by the lowest-achieving pupils, suggesting that mobile phone restrictions can be a low-cost measure to reduce educational inequalities.
15. The 2026 *Lockable Smartphone Pouches in Northern Ireland Post Primary Schools – A Cohort Study*⁵ reinforces this evidence. Teachers consistently reported improvements in classroom focus, attention, engagement and productivity following the introduction of smartphone restrictions. Many reported that lessons started more quickly, pupils settled more readily, and disruption caused by phones, notifications and covert phone use reduced significantly.
16. The Department's June 2026 survey on the use of mobile phones during the school day also supports this position. Almost two-thirds of respondents⁶, 64%, reported that mobile phone use negatively impacts classroom learning to either a significant or some extent. By contrast, only 7% considered the dominant impact of mobile phones during the school day to be positive, while 73% described the overall impact as net negative.
17. Restricting mobile phones should therefore not be viewed solely as a behaviour measure. Rather, it is a practical step to protect learning time, reduce avoidable distraction and support teachers to maintain purposeful classroom environments. Where digital technology is required for teaching and learning, schools should use school-owned or school-approved devices and platforms wherever possible.

Behaviour and school culture

18. Evidence from the 2026 *Lockable Smartphone Pouches in Northern Ireland Post Primary Schools – A Cohort Study* indicates that effective restrictions can change the culture of the school day. Teachers and school leaders reported fewer phone-related disruptions, calmer classrooms, improved engagement at break and lunchtime, and fewer incidents linked to mobile phone use. Many described a wider cultural shift in which phones were no longer viewed as an acceptable or normal part of the school day.

⁴ ['Ill Communication: Technology, Distraction and Student Performance', Beland and Murphy, 2016.](#)

⁵ KCL Final report for Department of Education Northern Ireland, 'Lockable Smartphone Pouches in Northern Ireland Post Primary Schools – A Cohort Study', 2026

⁶ Survey issued to all Northern Ireland post primary schools and EOTAS settings - 167 schools / EOTAS settings responded.

19. The Department's June 2026 survey on the use of mobile phones during the school day found a strong perceived link between mobile phones and behaviour. More than 93% of respondents reported that mobile phones were linked to behaviour issues to either a moderate or strong extent, including 49% who reported a very strong link.
20. The 2026 *Lockable Smartphone Pouches in Northern Ireland Post Primary Schools – A Cohort Study* also demonstrated that implementation matters. Restrictions were most effective where they formed part of a whole-school culture rather than a narrow compliance exercise. Schools reported stronger implementation where expectations were clear, staff applied the policy consistently, sanctions were proportionate and understood, and parents were given clear information about the rationale and arrangements.

Safeguarding and online harms

21. Safeguarding considerations are a key rationale for creating mobile phone-free environments during the school day. While digital technologies can provide educational and social benefits, personal smartphones also give pupils immediate and often unsupervised access to social media, messaging platforms, image and video sharing applications, livestreaming and internet content. This can increase exposure to a range of online harms, including cyberbullying, online harassment, harmful or inappropriate content, coercion, exploitation, sextortion, non-consensual image sharing and other forms of child-on-child abuse.
22. The availability of personal devices during the school day can enable these harms to occur, escalate rapidly and have an immediate impact on pupils' safety, wellbeing and learning. Consistent with the Department's safeguarding guidance, mobile phone-free environments represent a preventative safeguarding measure that reduces opportunities for harm and supports a safer school environment.
23. *The UK Government's (UKG) Growing Up Online: National Conversation* (July 2026)⁷ highlighted strong public support for firmer intervention on children's smartphone use in schools, with 75% of respondents to the full consultation supporting a statutory approach to guidance on mobile phone restrictions. Although specific to England and Wales, the findings are indicative of a wider shift in public and professional opinion across the UK, recognising the growing evidence linking smartphone use to distraction from learning, reduced wellbeing, exposure to online harms and safeguarding concerns. The consultation therefore provides further support for establishing clear, consistent expectations around the use of mobile phones during the school day in order to promote safer and more focused educational environments.

⁷ [Growing up in the online world: government response](#)

24. The Department's approach aligns with the direction of travel across the other UK jurisdictions and a wider international movement⁸, as an increasing number of countries are adopting mobile phone restrictions during the school day to reduce exposure to online harms, support positive behaviour and wellbeing, and create safer, more focused learning environments. This places Northern Ireland alongside a growing body of governments seeking to rebalance children's access to digital technology within educational settings.
24. The Department's June 2026 survey on the use of mobile phones during the school day demonstrated the scale of these concerns. Schools identified safeguarding concerns such as inappropriate content or image-sharing in 77% of responses, cyberbullying in 71%, and disruption to the school day, including pupils contacting parents directly, in 57%.
25. Teachers involved in the 2026 *Lockable Smartphone Pouches in Northern Ireland Post Primary Schools – A Cohort Study* reported reductions in incidents involving filming, photographing and sharing content without consent. They also reported that online disputes were less likely to escalate during school hours because pupils no longer had immediate access to messaging and social media platforms.
26. Emerging research also points to concerns in relation to digital safeguarding incidents in schools with and without smartphone policies⁹, reflecting wider concern that unrestricted smartphone access can increase the opportunity for online harms to enter the school environment.

Wellbeing and social interaction

25. Evidence from Northern Ireland highlights the complex relationship between digital technology, social media and pupil wellbeing. While online access can support communication, learning and social connection, increasing levels of online engagement are also associated with wellbeing risks. Research from the Kids' Life and Times (KLT)¹⁰ survey found a clear link between online bullying and poorer wellbeing and social self-esteem among children, with those experiencing online bullying reporting significantly lower wellbeing scores than their peers. Furthermore, the *Screens, Safety and Social Media* report¹¹ found that higher levels of social media use among 16-year-olds were associated with poorer mental health outcomes, while over half of respondents reported experiencing illegal or harmful behaviours online.

⁸ [Phone bans in schools are spreading worldwide as the policy debate rages on | Global Education Monitoring Report](#)

⁹ ['Digital safeguarding incidents in schools with and without smartphone policies: A cross-sectional study in England', Sullivan et al., 2026](#)

¹⁰ [The Kids' Life and Time Survey](#)

¹¹ ['Screens, safety and social media', Butler et al, 2025](#)

These findings reinforce the importance of measures that reduce opportunities for online harms during the school day and support environments that promote positive wellbeing, healthy relationships and meaningful engagement in learning. The relationship between smartphones and wellbeing is complex, and the evidence does not support a simple claim that school restrictions alone will improve mental health outcomes. However, there is growing evidence that problematic smartphone and social media use is associated with anxiety, disrupted sleep, social comparison and reduced wellbeing for some young people.^{12 13}

27. The Department's June 2026 survey on the use of mobile phones during the school day found strong concern among education professionals about the impact of mobile phones on wellbeing. More than 97% of respondents considered mobile phones to have either a significant or moderate impact on pupil wellbeing, with 71% identifying a significant impact.
28. The 2026 *Lockable Smartphone Pouches in Northern Ireland Post Primary Schools – A Cohort Study* found stronger qualitative evidence of benefits for social interaction and school culture. Teachers reported that pupils were talking more, engaging more readily with peers during breaks and lunchtime, and developing more positive face-to-face relationships. Pupils' views were more mixed, but some also reported that reduced phone access encouraged more in-person social interaction.
29. The evidence therefore suggests that the wellbeing benefits of smartphone restrictions are most likely to arise indirectly. Restrictions reduce distraction, online pressure and phone-related conflict during the school day, while creating greater opportunities for pupils to engage with learning, staff and peers in person.

Legal position

30. The Board of Governors has a legal duty, under Article 17 of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 2003, to safeguard and promote the welfare of registered pupils at the school when the pupils are on school premises or in the lawful control or charge of a member of school staff.
31. Policies and procedures on mobile phone-free environments within schools fall within the wider legal responsibilities of Boards of Governors and principals in relation to pupil behaviour and discipline (Articles 3-6 of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998). This duty requires Boards of Governors to make, and keep under review (consulting with the principal, the registered pupils and the parents of those pupils and to consider any guidance given by the Department) a written statement of 'general

¹² 'The Impact of Social Media Use on Sleep and Mental Health in Youth: a Scoping Review', Yu et al, 2024

¹³ 'The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness', Haidt, 2024

principles' about positive pupil behaviour, which the principal will have regard to in their duty in determining school rules and behaviour policies, which they must also consult with pupils and parents on.

32. The principal is responsible for determining measures which the school will take to:
 - promote self-discipline and proper regard for authority among pupils;
 - encourage good behaviour, respect for others and prevent all forms of bullying among pupils;
 - secure an acceptable standard of pupil behaviour; and
 - regulate the conduct of pupils.
33. A school's policy on being a mobile phone-free environment can be included within the school's wider behaviour policies or as a standalone document.
34. The Department's Child Protection and Safeguarding in Education guidance requires schools to take reasonable and proportionate steps to prevent harm and safeguard children and young people in all aspects of school life, including within the digital environment. The implementation of mobile phone-free environments by default during the school day is a preventative safeguarding measure that helps reduce exposure to online harms, cyberbullying, inappropriate content and other digital risks. By limiting access to personal mobile devices during school hours, this approach supports pupil safety and wellbeing, promotes positive behaviour and engagement, and contributes to a safer and more focused learning environment.
35. As set out in the Department's *Child Protection and Safeguarding in Education* guidance and *DE Circular 2016/27 Online Safety* (currently under review), schools' online safety policies should include clear arrangements for the management and acceptable use of personal mobile devices. These arrangements support schools in reducing digital safeguarding risks, minimising disruption to learning, and promoting pupil safety and wellbeing.

Implementing mobile phone-free environments

36. It is for each school, working with its Board of Governors and wider school community, to determine the most appropriate approach for its context. The approach should reflect the size, phase, location, pupil needs, estate, staffing arrangements and existing behaviour and safeguarding policies of the school.
37. However, all approaches should secure the same outcome:

- All schools and EOTAS centres should be mobile phone-free environments by default; anything other than this should be by exception only.
- Pupils should not have access to personal mobile phones and other similar devices during the school day. This includes smartphones and similar internet-enabled devices.

Implementation

38. Schools should plan implementation as a whole-school change rather than a standalone rule. This should include clear communication with staff, pupils and parents/carers; a shared explanation of the purpose and benefits; agreed procedures for routine and emergency contact; practical arrangements for storage or restriction; consistent behaviour management; and arrangements for agreed exceptions and reasonable adjustments.
39. Before implementation, schools should consider how the policy will operate in practice. This includes how devices will be restricted, stored or checked; how breaches will be managed; how staff will model expected behaviour; how parents/carers will contact pupils during the day; how pupils can contact home when necessary; and how exceptions will be agreed, recorded and reviewed for pupils with medical, special educational, disability, safeguarding or care-related needs.
40. Schools should consider how the policy will be monitored, including behaviour incidents, pupil and staff feedback, parental concerns, administrative burden, safeguarding issues, educational access and equality impacts.
41. Schools should clearly distinguish between mobile phone restrictions and the appropriate use of digital technology to support learning. Policies should explain when pupils may access school-provided devices and digital resources and identify suitable alternatives where technology is required for educational purposes. Schools should ensure that pupils continue to have equitable access to digital learning opportunities through school-owned devices, computer suites or other approved technologies. Personal smartphones should not be relied upon as a routine means of accessing learning activities during the school day.

Communication and engagement

42. School leaders should engage with staff, pupils, and parents/carers before implementation to explain the rationale for creating a mobile phone-free environment, the benefits of this approach, and the importance of consistency and adherence to the policy across the entire school community.

43. Communications may draw on the evidence outlined in this guidance and provide clear information about the purpose, expectations, and benefits of the policy.
44. Schools should clearly explain the arrangements for communication between home and school during the school day. Parents/carers should be informed about how they can contact their child if necessary and how pupils can contact home when required. Information should cover routine communication, emergency procedures, safeguarding arrangements, and any agreed exceptions to the policy.
45. Schools should provide reassurance that established school communication channels will continue to operate as normal and that restricting mobile phone use does not prevent timely communication when it is needed.

Exceptional Circumstances and Reasonable Adjustments

46. As an integral part of implementing a mobile phone-free environment, schools should identify any pupils who may require reasonable adjustments. This may include pupils with medical conditions, special educational needs, disabilities, safeguarding requirements, or other care and support needs. Schools should work collaboratively with parents/carers, any relevant professionals, and the pupil, where appropriate, to agree suitable arrangements that support individual needs while maintaining the overall aims of the policy.
47. Any agreed exceptions should be recorded through existing support mechanisms, such as care plans, risk assessments, or individual support plans, and should be reviewed regularly to ensure they remain appropriate and proportionate. Where reasonable adjustments are required, any access to a smartphone should be restricted to what is necessary to support the pupil's identified medical, educational, safeguarding, or care needs. Exceptions should be proportionate, clearly defined, and should not extend beyond the specific purpose for which they have been agreed.
48. Schools should also consider whether pupils in Years 13 and 14 (Sixth Form) may be permitted access to mobile devices at certain times and locations reflecting this period of education as one of increased independence and responsibility. Such an approach should not undermine the school's policy on the use of mobile phones for other pupils.

Potential practical approaches to creating and maintaining mobile phone free environments

49. Schools should select the approach, or combination of approaches, that is most effective in creating and maintaining a mobile phone-free environment within their own context. Whatever model is adopted, it should be easy to understand, clearly communicated to pupils and parents/carers, consistently enforced, and capable of accommodating any agreed exceptions or reasonable adjustments.

50. The approaches below are illustrative rather than exhaustive and may be adapted to reflect local circumstances. Any combined model should remain simple to understand, consistently enforced and aligned with the default expectation. Regardless of the model chosen, the central expectation should remain the same: pupils should not have routine access to personal mobile phones, particularly smartphones, during the school day.

- (i) **No pupils' personal mobile devices on the school premises** - A school may decide that no mobile phones or other similar devices should be brought to school by its pupils. This provides the clearest boundary and may be easiest to communicate and enforce. This remains the Department's recommended approach for schools, with exceptional circumstances permitted on a case-by-case basis. Schools should set out arrangements for travel-related concerns, emergency contact, breaches and agreed exceptions.
- (ii) **Smartphone-free policy, permitting brick phones¹⁴ only** - A school may decide that no smartphones or other similar devices should be brought to school by its pupils. Schools may however encourage or require pupils who need a device for travel to use a brick-phone rather than a smartphone. A brick-phone approach may reduce internet, camera, app and social media risks while preserving basic call/text contact outside school hours. Smartphone Free Childhood¹⁵ provide a range of information and resources that may be useful in supporting this approach.
- (iii) **Never used, seen or heard** - Some schools may choose to adopt a policy where pupils keep possession of their personal mobile devices, however, they are never used, seen or heard during school hours, including lunch and recreational periods. This approach relies heavily on compliance, staff confidence and consistent consequences.
- (iv) **Pupils' personal mobile devices handed in on arrival** - A school may decide that pupils require access to their mobile devices before and after school but should not have access during the school day. If a pupil chooses to bring a device to school, they hand it to school staff on arrival and collect it at the end of the school day. This can create a clear, enforceable boundary and a clear daily routine but requires planning for secure storage, staff time,

¹⁴ For the purposes of this guidance, 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.

¹⁵ [Smartphone Free Childhood](#)

careful administration and procedures for loss, damage, late arrival, early departure and exceptions.

(v) **Use of phone-free solutions** - A further possible approach is the use of pouches or other solutions which restrict mobile phone use. Such products may support enforcement and reduce visible devices, but schools should consider procurement, accessibility, exceptions, cost and whether the approach is proportionate and workable. Examples include:

- **Locked pouch model:** Pupils may bring smartphones to school but must secure them in a locked pouch for the duration of the school day. This can support travel-related access while preventing use during school hours. Schools should consider cost, supervision, compliance and arrangements for unlocking devices.
- **Secure storage model:** Pupils place devices in lockers, storage boxes or other designated secure locations for the duration of the school day. This may be suitable where schools already have appropriate facilities but requires clear supervision and enforcement to prevent access during the day.

Other key considerations

Personal mobile phone use by staff

51. All staff should understand, support and consistently apply the school's approach to maintaining a mobile phone-free environment. Staff should model the behaviours expected of pupils and avoid the personal use of mobile phones in pupil-facing areas, except where required for professional duties, safeguarding, medical needs or emergencies. Consistent adult role-modelling is critical to establishing credibility, reinforcing expectations and embedding a culture in which learning, wellbeing and positive relationships take precedence over personal device use.

Safe and Responsible Use of Mobile Technology

52. Preparing children and young people to use technology safely, responsibly and effectively is an important part of education. Digital technologies provide significant opportunities for learning, communication and participation in society. However, they also present risks that require pupils to develop the knowledge, skills and judgement needed to navigate an increasingly complex online environment. As technology continues to evolve rapidly, schools have a key role in supporting pupils to become informed, responsible and resilient digital citizens.

53. There is growing concern among educators, parents, researchers and policymakers about the impact of smartphone use on children and young people's development, wellbeing and safety. Particular concerns relate to excessive screen time, exposure to harmful or age-inappropriate content, cyberbullying, online exploitation, social media pressures and the impact of device use on sleep, concentration and social development. Evidence suggests that younger children may be particularly vulnerable to these risks and may require greater support and protection in navigating online environments.
54. Restricting access to mobile phones during the school day should not be viewed as an alternative to education on online safety and digital responsibility. Rather, it should complement schools' wider efforts to equip pupils with the knowledge needed to use technology safely and appropriately. Schools should continue to provide age-appropriate learning that helps pupils to manage screen time, protect their privacy, recognise and respond to online risks, evaluate the reliability of information, understand the influence of algorithms and social media, prevent and report cyberbullying, and engage respectfully and responsibly online.
55. Schools have access to a range of resources to support this work, including the Safer Schools NI Platform, the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland Online Safety Hub and CCEA digital learning resources. Schools should make use of these and other relevant materials to support the development of safe, responsible and age-appropriate use of digital technology.

Next Steps

56. The Department will keep this guidance under review as further evidence emerges, including evidence from school implementation, research on mobile phone-free policies and developments in other jurisdictions.