

Lockable Smartphone Pouches in Northern Ireland Post Primary Schools – A Cohort Study

Final Report

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Preface

This report presents the findings of an evaluation of the introduction of lockable smartphone pouches in post-primary schools in Northern Ireland during the 2025-26 academic year. The evaluation examines the implementation of the intervention and its perceived effects on classroom behaviour, academic engagement, participation in school life, and wellbeing.

The primary audience for this report is the Northern Ireland Department of Education. However, the findings may also be of interest to school leaders, boards of governors, the Education Authority, public health and wellbeing teams, and representatives of parents and pupils across the UK who are considering similar approaches to smartphone management in schools.

Smartphone use in classrooms has become one of the most visible behavioural and safeguarding issues facing UK post-primary schools. While 90 per cent of post-primary schools in the UK now operate some form of smartphone restriction, evidence on whether more intensive measures, such as a physical lock-and-store pouch, change pupil behaviour, attainment, or wellbeing, has, to date, been limited and contested. This evaluation was commissioned to begin to fill that gap, focusing on a specific, defined intervention rolled out in a real-world school setting.

This work was funded by the Northern Ireland Department of Education and conducted by King's College London. The views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Department of Education.

Keywords: smartphone policy; lockable smartphone pouches; post-primary schools; classroom behaviour; academic engagement; adolescent wellbeing; Northern Ireland.

Executive Summary

Background

Smartphone ownership among UK adolescents is now near universal, and teachers consistently report that phone-related disruption is among the most common behavioural issues they manage in primary or post-primary schools. Concerns about classroom focus, peer relationships, safeguarding incidents and pupil mental health have prompted a wave of policy responses, from at-the-door bag-and-tag arrangements through to outright bans. The evidence base underpinning these decisions, however, remains thin: most existing studies are cross-sectional and rely on either pupils' self-report alone or aggregate school-level indicators, with very few following the same schools through the implementation of a defined intervention.

Against this backdrop, the Northern Ireland Department of Education funded a pilot study of lockable smartphone pouches, a magnetically sealed pouch into which pupils place their phone at the start of the day and is unlocked at the end of the day. The pilot was small in scale and intended as a test-and-learn exercise to inform future policy on smartphone restriction in Northern Ireland and the wider UK. All post primary schools in Northern Ireland were invited to put themselves forward to be part of the scheme.

Study Aims

This evaluation aimed to understand how the pouch worked in practice, who it worked for, and under what conditions. Specifically, it asked:

- What was the impact of the pouch on classroom behaviour, attainment and pupil engagement in school life?
- What was the impact on pupil wellbeing, including anxiety, low mood and problematic smartphone use?
- Did effects differ for pupils who may be most at risk, including those with special educational needs or neurodivergent diagnoses, and those from more deprived areas?
- How did pupils, teachers and school leaders experience the pouch, and what were the main barriers and enablers to effective implementation?

Methods

The evaluation used a mixed-methods cohort design across nine Northern Ireland post-primary schools. Eight of the nine schools engaged with King's College London for the evaluation, with data collected on behaviours and attitudes before the pouch implementation and at follow-up points across the 2025–26 academic year. Pupils completed an online questionnaire covering homework completion, classroom disruption, participation in Physical Education and extracurricular activities, peer interaction and smartphone use, together with the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), the Revised Child Anxiety and Depression Scale (RCADS), the Smartphone Addiction Scale – Short Version (SAS-SV) and the Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS). Schools also provided aggregate half-termly records of exclusions, detentions, CAMHS referrals, counsellor visits and parent visits dating back to September 2023, allowing an interrupted time-series analysis around the point of pouch implementation. Qualitative data were collected through termly focus groups with pupils and staff, and semi-structured interviews with school leads, and were analysed thematically. Findings from the two strands were integrated to produce a nuanced understanding of how the pouch operated in real-world settings.

Key Findings

In a large qualitative set of focus groups of students and teachers; alongside a quantitative cohort study, the introduction of the smartphone free pilot was found associated with a reduction of smartphone usage.

Teachers reported experiences of behavioural benefits of the pouch restriction policy, and a reduction of classroom disruptions was seen as well as improved social interaction amongst students. Students exhibited mixed views of the benefits of the policy. This was reflected in the measures of student mental health and wellbeing – with negligible change in difficulties, but some decrease in anxiety and depressions symptoms.

The pilot was implemented successfully across many of the schools. Almost all teachers reported benefits of having a clear policy, and the pouch offered a noticeable change of school smartphone policy when implementing the pilot. Students reported mixed findings over the introduction of the policy with many highlighting the challenges that the policy gave

them. Additionally, student adherence to the pouch policy varied by year group, with younger students perceived as more likely to adhere than older students.

There was a cultural shift in schools, where phones at later timepoints were no longer seen as acceptable to use in school which led to a greater compliance from students and fewer instances of parental concerns being raised. For students, this increased peer connection.

Consistent implementation challenges were found including: inadequate locking/ unlocking points; damages to pouches; inconsistent enforcement. Many of the challenges reported appeared to be transient and were accepted by students at later timepoints.

Recommendations

Department Level Recommendations

1. Strengthen the Departmental policy framework: In light of the emerging evidence on the benefits for learning, behaviour and wellbeing, the Department should move beyond advisory guidance and set a clearer strategic expectation that schools restrict smartphone use as part of a consistent, whole-school approach to improving the learning environment.
2. Allow schools flexibility to implement approach best suited to individual context: Rather than mandating a single smartphone restriction model, the Department should establish an approved, evidence-informed framework of options that enables schools to adopt the approach best suited to their phase, context and operational capacity, while securing greater consistency of intent, implementation and outcomes across the system.
3. Embed staff role-modelling within whole-school policy: To ensure credibility and consistent implementation, the Department should strengthen guidance so that staff smartphone use is restricted in pupil-facing areas, except where there is a clear professional, operational or safeguarding requirement. This would reinforce the policy intent, avoid perceived double standards and support a coherent culture of compliance across schools.
4. Consider introducing age-differentiated arrangements: The Department should recognise that the impact and proportionality of smartphone restrictions may vary by age and stage. Guidance should therefore support schools to adopt differentiated arrangements for older pupils, balancing the policy objectives of improving learning,

behaviour and wellbeing with pupils' increasing need for independent study, responsible technology use and preparation for post-school settings.

5. Accessibility of alternative educational technology: A consistent concern from staff and pupils was the loss of smartphones as learning tools, such as the use of Google classroom for classroom learning and homework. The Department should consider how the restriction of smartphones interacts with the use of technology in education, including both for access to alternative technologies, such as laptops or computers, and the wider overall evidence base on the educational impact of technology.
6. Establish a consistent implementation framework: To translate policy intent into effective practice, the Department should develop a clear implementation framework that supports consistent enforcement across schools while allowing appropriate local adaptation. This should include standard operating guidance, staff training materials, parent communication templates, agreed sanctions, escalation routes and monitoring arrangements to support compliance, reduce variation and strengthen delivery confidence across the system.

School-Level Recommendations

7. Plan implementation as a managed change programme: Schools should build in sufficient lead-in time before introducing smartphone restrictions, using evidence from the pilot to secure pupil, staff and parent buy-in and clearly communicate the educational, behavioural and wellbeing benefits of the policy.
8. Strengthen parent communication and reassurance: Schools should put clear arrangements in place for routine contact, emergency procedures, safeguarding, and limited phone access where required, ensuring parents understand how communication will be maintained under the policy.
9. Protect pupils with additional care needs: Schools should ensure reasonable adjustments are in place for pupils with medical, SEN or care needs, including agreed alternatives or individual care plans where smartphone access is required to support safety, wellbeing or learning.
10. Review unlocking systems and end-of-day logistics: If adopting the pouch approach, schools should consider the number and location of unlocking stations; schedule of staff supervising unlocking facilities, staggered release times or bus-priority unlocking systems.
11. Embed staff role-modelling: Schools should set clear expectations for staff phone use, model the behaviours expected of pupils, and provide alternative technology where phones are required for legitimate professional purposes.

12. Clarify technology use within school policy: Schools should ensure their smartphone restriction policy clearly sets out when and how technology may be used for learning, including access to appropriate alternatives such as iPads, laptops or computer suites where required for classwork, homework or research.

Potential Recommendations for Further Research

13. Conduct a larger controlled study: The report identifies several limitations, including differing pre/post groups, incomplete school participation and a lack of control schools. Considerations should be made to the barriers to engagement schools face to participate in research. A future study of a longer time period would allow more robust quantitative data in relation to: educational attainment outcomes; attendance; exclusions; mental health outcomes; long-term behavioural effects; impact on disadvantaged and SEN pupils.

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1. Introduction

Virtually all adolescents in the UK (99% of 12- to 15-year-olds) have internet access and spend time online daily, engaging in streaming, social media use, and messaging^{1,2}.

Research on the association between children and young people's health and time spent on a smartphone or online have gained in popularity^{3,4,5,6} but often come to conflicting and/or varying conclusions.

There is some evidence for a beneficial relationship between smartphone time and wellbeing, mostly at shorter durations^{7,8,9,10,11}, and some find that smartphones can act as educational tools^{12,13,14,15}.

At the same time, there is a growing concern regarding the impact of smartphone use on behaviour, health, and classroom management of pupils^{16,17,18}. Mobile phones and digital technologies are implicated in disruptive incidents and negative learning outcomes during school hours^{19,20,21}. Teachers describe inappropriate smartphone use during lessons, misuse of digital platforms, and incidents involving the recording or sharing of content without consent²². For adolescents, problematic smartphone use interferes with academic responsibilities, social functioning, and psychological and physical wellbeing^{23,24,25}.

Simultaneously, other research suggests little to no association between screentime and wellbeing in young people²⁶.

In the UK, 90% of post-primary schools now enforce restrictions or bans on smartphone use to reduce distractions and support classroom engagement²⁷, although the efficacy of such measures is contested^{28,29}.

To date, UK based evaluations of school smartphone policies have been limited. To extend emerging evidence, particularly by following pupils and schools prospectively through the implementation of a defined intervention, by combining individual level survey measures with school level disciplinary records collected from September 2023, and by examining heterogeneity across pupil subgroups, we aim to characterise the impact of a lockable smartphone pouch on educational attainment and behaviour, assess effects on general functioning and psychological wellbeing, and evaluate changes in school level indicators.

1.1. Study Aims and Hypotheses

- I. To evaluate the impact of introducing lockable smartphone pouches on student behaviour during the school day.
- II. To assess the effect of smartphone pouches on young people's wellbeing, including anxiety and low mood.
- III. To examine the influence of the intervention on academic outcomes, such as engagement and attainment.
- IV. To explore the feasibility, acceptability, and implementation fidelity from the perspectives of students, school staff, and parents.
- V. To identify potential barriers and facilitators to effective adoption of smartphone restriction strategies.

We hypothesised that restricting smartphone access through lockable pouches would reduce classroom disruption and inattentive behaviours, improve students' wellbeing (including lower levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms), and enhance academic engagement, with the potential for improved educational attainment.

2. Qualitative Methodology

2.1 Focus Groups

2.1.1 Participants

187 students and 93 teachers were invited from each participating school to take part in focus groups during the autumn, spring and summer terms of the 2025-26 academic year. Student participants were either selected by the school through student groups (e.g. student council) or by year group. Staff participants self-selected after being emailed an advertisement for the focus group by their school lead.

Student eligibility criteria were that they had access to a smartphone and, if under 16 years of age, had not been opted out of participation by their parents or guardians. Staff were eligible if they were aged 18 years or over and spoke English. No incentives were provided to participants for attending the focus groups.

2.1.2 Parents

Fifteen parents of children attending the participating schools were also invited to participate in focus groups in the summer term. Parents self-selected to attend the focus groups by contacting the research team or their school lead. Parents were eligible to participate if they were aged 18 years or over and spoke English. No incentives were provided to attendees of the focus groups.

2.1.3 Procedure and Materials

All participants were provided with an information sheet prior to the focus group, and upon arrival completed a paper-based consent form. All consent forms were collected by the researchers and later stored securely in a locked cabinet upon return from the schools. Participants took part in an audio-recorded focus group with the researchers (JJ and AK) acting as facilitators. Student and teacher focus groups were conducted in person, in a private room in the schools, where participants discussed their experiences of the new smartphone policy (see Appendix A and B for focus group guides). After the focus group, participants were thanked for their time. Parent focus groups were conducted online, via Microsoft Teams, where audio discussions were recorded. Parents completed an online consent form and returned this to the researchers prior to participation in the focus group.

2.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

2.2.1 Participants

School leads were invited to semi-structured interviews to discuss their experiences of implementing the new smartphone policy.

2.2.2 Procedure

Interviews took place online, via Microsoft Teams, where audio discussions were recorded. School leads were provided with an information sheet and returned an online e-consent form to the interviewer before starting the interview. The interviewer (NK) was a separate member of the research team, who did not conduct the focus groups, and had prior experience of conducting semi-structured interviews.

2.2.3 Sample Size

Four school leads took part in semi-structured interviews. Three of the interviews took place in the autumn term, and one interview was conducted at the beginning of the summer term. Most participants were female, aged 40-50. The average semi-structured interview duration was 46 minutes and 24 seconds.

2.3 Ethical considerations

The study was approved by King's College London's Ethics Committee and with Northern Ireland's Department of Education through a Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA).

Participants under 16 were confirmed to not have been opted out of the study by their parents prior to invitation to focus groups. All participants then gave informed consent and were instructed to keep the contents of their focus group or interview confidential. The researchers assured participants that if anything distressing was mentioned, they could be signposted to appropriate support services.

2.3 Qualitative Data Processing

All transcripts were processed and reviewed by the researchers (JJ and AK). Each transcript was checked against the focus group audio recording. Once checked, all identifiable information was redacted from the transcript. All focus group participants were given pseudonyms in the original transcripts that were later replaced with anonymous participant

numbers (e.g. P1, P2, P3). Upon completing transcript redactions and anonymisation, the transcript was cross-checked by another researcher to confirm all identifiable information was redacted and ready for analysis.

2.4 Qualitative Data Analysis

Data analysis strategy

A reflexive thematic analysis was conducted in NVivo to identify patterns in perceptions and experiences of the phone pouch intervention, with consideration given to similarities and differences between the stakeholder groups. This was guided by a coding plan prepared a-priori (see Appendix H) and topic guides to identify initial codes and create themes. This changed reflexively during the coding progress and were discussed with the wider team.

Our analysis followed the 6 stages of thematic analysis³⁰:

(1) familiarisation with the transcripts and field notes, (2) generation of initial codes utilising the full transcripts and topic guides, (3) searching for and organising codes into themes, (4) reviewing themes for their fit with the coded data, coding framework, and discussions with the research team, (5) defining and naming themes and, (6) writing the report.

Reflexivity

The two researchers who conducted and analysed the focus groups (JJ and AK) were employed as Research Assistants by King's College London. Both had experience with facilitating focus groups, transcribing discussions and analysing qualitative data.

3. Quantitative Methodology

3.1 Study Design and Participants

Design

This was a mixed-methods cohort study conducted in Northern Ireland post-primary schools during the 2025-26 academic year, using retrospective and prospective data to evaluate the introduction of the phone pouch.

Ethical Clearance was granted by the King's College London Ethics Committee (Reference Number: HR-24/25-51368). To ensure data was processed lawfully during this study, a DPIA was obtained in October 2025, signed off by the Northern Ireland Department of Education and King's College London.

Participants & Recruitment

Participants were recruited through convenience sampling from consented post-primary schools across Northern Ireland. Schools implementing the pouch were invited to participate and provided with information about the study. School leads later returned a signed consent form to agree to their school's participation. Parents of students under 16 were sent a study information sheet and given one week to opt their child out of the study.

Researchers attended participating schools' assemblies to introduce the study and invite students to take part in surveys and focus groups. Students interested in participating signed a consent form, with those under 16 confirmed to not have been opted out by their parents. Surveys were completed by students both inside and outside of school, whilst focus groups took place on school grounds during the school day.

Participants self-screened for inclusion and exclusion criteria listed below.

Inclusion criteria:

Participants will need to own a smartphone

Participants will need to be planning to be at the school for the full school year

Participants will need to be able to read and write in English.

Exclusion criteria:

Participants who are unable to participate in the phone pouch scheme because they need to keep their smartphone with them and an adapted pouch would not be suitable. This

included the use of a phone for physical health conditions, such as epilepsy, where the phone is used to monitor the condition and could not be kept in an adapted pouch.

3.2 Primary and Secondary Outcomes

Primary Outcomes

The primary outcomes of this study were to investigate educational attainment and behaviour through quantitative and qualitative methods.

Educational attainment was measured through reports of homework completion from student questionnaire responses.

Behaviour and difficulties were measured using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire³¹. The SDQ consists of 25-items about positive and negative behaviours, measured on a 3-point Likert scale from 1: “Not true” to 3: “Certainly true”, with scores ranging from 0-40. It has shown good validity and reliability in determining clinical symptoms in children³² through 5 domains (emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity, peer difficulties, and prosocial behaviour). Questions on disruptions and participation in school activities were measured using a 5-point Likert scale from 1: “Very often” to 5: “Never” or continuous measure of time in minutes.

Secondary Outcomes

Secondary outcomes were other measures of behaviour, psychological effects, and smartphone usage.

Further measures of behaviour included bespoke questions on frequency of classroom disruptions, engagement in physical education, extracurricular activities, and breaktime social interactions.

Psychological effects were measured using validated scales and adapted questionnaires. Anxiety and low mood were measured using the Revised Child and Anxiety and Depression scale short form (RCADS-SF)³³, a 25-item scale asking about negative or anxious thoughts and feelings. It is measured using a 4-point Likert scale from 1: “Never” to 4: “Always”. This is a widely used instrument that measures depression and anxiety symptoms³⁴. The T-score is age and sex dependent, allowing results to be compared across children of different ages³⁵. Psychological effects were also covered in the qualitative sub-study (see Section 2).

Problematic smartphone usage was measured using the Smartphone addiction scale – short form (SAS-SV)³⁶ and the Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS)³⁷. The SAS-SV is a 10-item questionnaire rated on a 6-point Likert scale from 1: “Strongly disagree” to 6: “Strongly agree”, to identify the levels of risk of smartphone addiction. The BMAS is a 6-item questionnaire on social media use behaviours, scored on a 5-point Likert scale from 1: “Very rarely” to 5: “Very often”. Both measures are well validated for assessing problematic smartphone use^{38,39}, with higher scores indicating a greater risk of smartphone addiction or social media addiction respectively.

Smartphone reduction strategies used by students were measured using an adapted questionnaire from Sohn et al., 2021. This questionnaire measured the use and perceived effectiveness of eleven different smartphone reduction strategies, from 1: “Ineffective” to 4: “Very effective”.

3.3 Sample Size

Eight schools across Northern Ireland took part in the quantitative study. Seven of these schools took part in the cohort study with questionnaire responses, and six schools provided termly aggregate level data.

3.4 Assessment Timepoints

Outcome data was collected during the Autumn term, just after the smartphone policy was implemented and students were asked to complete the questionnaire retrospectively, true to how they felt prior to the smartphone policy. This timepoint has been labelled ‘pre-policy’. Data was collected again at the beginning and end of the Spring term, after the smartphone policy implementation. These timepoints were combined and labelled ‘post-policy’.

3.5 Analysis

Continuous outcomes were analysed using a multilevel linear regression model, adjusted for fixed effects of gender, school year, school-level index of multiple deprivation and a random effect for school. Adjusted mean differences alongside 95% confidence intervals were presented. Cohen's d was calculated as a measure of effect size. Unlike p-values, which indicate the probability that a result occurred by chance, effect size quantifies the magnitude of the observed difference in practical terms. Cohen's d expresses this difference in standardised units, allowing for comparison across outcomes. Values of

approximately 0.2 indicate a small effect, 0.5 a medium effect, and 0.8 or above a large effect.

Categorical outcomes were collapsed into binary variables and analysed using a multilevel logistic regression model. The same variables were adjusted for as in the continuous outcomes. The adjusted odds ratio and marginal odds ratio were presented alongside their 95% confidence intervals. An odds ratio expresses the likelihood of an outcome occurring in the post-policy group, relative to the pre-policy group.

Data on school outcomes, such as exclusions, suspensions and parent visits, were collected from schools for each term from the end of the 2022/23 academic year. The pooled means were described, prior to and after the smartphone policy was implemented.

4. Qualitative Results

4.1 Term 1 Qualitative Results

Eleven focus groups took place between December 1st and December 5th, 2025. Six student focus groups and five teacher focus groups were conducted in five participating schools.

A total of 81 participants took part in the autumn term focus groups, of which 49 were students, and 32 were teachers or members of school staff. Most student participants were female, aged 14-16. Most staff participants were female, aged between 30-40 (see Table 1 for full demographics). The average focus group duration was 45 minutes and 39 seconds.

	Total (N=81) N (%)
Sex	
Female	60 (74.1%)
Male	21 (25.9%)
Age	
11-13	16 (19.8%)
14-16	20 (24.7%)
16-18	13 (16.0%)
20-30	5 (6.2%)
30-40	14 (17.3%)
40-50	31 (16.1%)
Group	
Student	49 (60.5%)
Staff	32 (39.5%)

Table 1. Term 1 Focus Group Demographics

Each section of the qualitative results will be split into five core themes: Practicalities, Classroom Engagement, Social and Extracurricular Engagement, Behaviour, and Mental Health and Wellbeing.

Within these themes, sub-themes that were identified across groups are discussed to provide further understanding to each theme. Additionally, inductively identified themes are discussed at the end of each section, these themes did not fit into the above five categories but were relevant to the evaluation of the smartphone free pilot.

Implementation is discussed in Section 6. For Term 2 results, each section reflects on changes in themes from Term 1 to Term 2, where issues are resolved and other themes become more prevalent in the continuation of the smartphone free pilot.

4.1.1 Teacher's Focus Groups

Practicalities

This section discusses the prominent themes identified during thematic analysis of the teacher focus groups that took place during the autumn term. Firstly, this section identifies the Practicalities of Enforcing the pilot, including the Experiences of Teachers in Enforcement and Monitoring Adherence. This is followed by practical issues encountered, such as the Loss of Phones as a Learning Tool, Issues with Alternative Technology, workload for teachers and Policy Costs.

Adherence and enforcement

Teachers' Experience of the Smartphone Free Policy

Teachers experienced enforcing the pouch policy as well as monitoring student adherence. Throughout the first term most identified that students had started to adapt to the new rule. One commented:

"I suppose I never expected pupils to actually put them in the pouches, buy in, ... since this came out."

(Teacher, 40-50)

As teachers were the primary group enforcing the policy, they mentioned the surprise of a rapid acceptance of the new rule, noting that students understood the consequences of non-adherence.

Another teacher said:

"I think they're more accepting now of the consequences of it, you know. Previously, we've been training for us as teachers to, say, put away the phone... Can I have your phone. Can you switch the phone off. Whereas now because they know the school policy, they know when we go can I have that phone? You shouldn't have had that out... then we can take it and put it straight in there. And there's no argument there. I

haven't had anybody argue with me about handing over the phone. They've just handed it over and I said collect it at the end of the [day] which is good."

(Teacher, 40-50)

Similarly, teachers mentioned the importance of enforcing the pouch policy with clear rules to further ensure adherence, without having to impose as harsh sanctions as they expected.

One teacher said:

"I quite like the fact that we've had a high level of compliance without really having to come down very hard on pupils...Maybe... we do a little bit more to make sure everyone said they're compliant, but pupils will find a way round that anyway, you know. We've set out the rules and pupils have been relatively compliant, have we seen a dip in the... use of phone and across to the school day, yes. So I would be wary about becoming really hard line. Yeah, rigid with it because I think there have been benefits already without having to do that."

(Teacher, 20-30)

Adherence to the policy was made easier by the clarity the rule gave, allowing teachers to easily identify when students were not adhering simply by the presence of a phone. The new smartphone policy drew a clear line for unacceptable phone use within the school and teachers felt this boundary was made clear without the need for additional enforcement. This change also meant that there was less room to interpret phone use. One teacher commented:

"That's a big thing as well, because in the past they wouldn't have. They would have almost felt annoyed that if as a member of staff you took their phone, they would be annoyed at that whereas now. It's so black and white, it's like, well, OK, fair catch, Sir. You know, there's my phone."

(Teacher, 40-50).

Teachers found students to be less confrontational when it came to handing in their phone and allowed for easier confiscations without the conflict that teachers experienced the previous academic year. This ease was attributed to the new precedent set by the policy which allowed for easier management and enforcement according to teachers. However, despite a majority accepting the rule, teachers also recognised different methods of non-adherence from students.

Non-adherence to the Smartphone Free Policy

A new policy is likely to produce levels of non-adherence, this was acknowledged by teachers as their experience of enforcement allowed them to identify common methods used by students in attempts to avoid locking their phone away. Teachers mentioned the use of fake phones or burner phones that students put inside their phone pouch to look as if students were seemingly adhered to the rule whilst keeping their real phone outside of the locked pouch. Other students used physical methods to break pouches open, as one teacher mentioned:

" They're using the shoes and pencils to prop it open. Then one of the [students] actually showed me. I was like, I was, like, shocked. I was like, how do you even think of that? "

(Teacher, 20-30)

Two major concerns were brought up consistently by teachers across the pilot schools: that students were breaking pouches to access their phone; and that students were becoming better at hiding their phone to access them throughout the school day. These concern regarding adherence were considered by teachers as the main methods of non-adherence to the school's smartphone policy, and whether these methods were covert or obvert, teachers recognised that this was an issue.

One teacher commented:

"There's a question mark over whether or not they're [the pouches] being used I suppose."

(Teacher, 30-40)

However, the issue of non-adherence was not solely focused on whether phone pouches were used or not. It also raised the concern of active pushback from both students and parents regarding the policy. Teachers reasoned that this pushback was due to systemic reliance on smartphones within schools and wider society that creates a barrier to student compliance due to the perceived need for a smartphone in their daily life. This created difficulties in dealing with both student non-adherence as well as parental retaliation. One teacher reported that parents, though supportive of the policy, did not want it applied to their child:

"It's really quite strange we are and there's one parent in particular. I mean, we only had, as I say, 4 that were basically saying that we're not doing this. They're not allowing this survey or initiative to happen, but they're kind of coming back and saying

we know all about, you know, the improvement of mental health, we know all about, you know, the idea behind this scheme. "Yeah, I think it's a brilliant scheme, but my daughter's not doing it "and it was it was bizarre because they were saying all the positives that we were saying they were agreeing with all the positives.

(Teacher, 40-50)

Yet, teachers recognised that it was a minority of parents that complained about the policy in comparison to the number of students attending the school. Alternatively, where parents were supportive of the policy, they also expected teachers to follow up on their non-adhering child:

"I've had parents want me to say, can you sort this out? My daughter won't put her phone in the pouch. She's got to. She's just putting a piece of wood in that pouch. You know? So then... I said, "well parent her", you know."

(Teacher, 30-40)

The responsibility of encouraging student adherence was left to teachers, who felt that enforcement inside school was already time consuming.

Additionally, this raised concerns about the use of financial sanctions for non-adherent students who broke their pouch. Teachers were conflicted about enforcing the use of financial sanctions as this would be burdened on the parent of the non-adhering child. This created further concern about enforcement, as one teacher mentioned:

"If pupils have deliberately broken it and the parent just doesn't pay for the pouch, what do you do?"

(Teacher, 30-40).

These issues invited the question, "who do you sanction for non-adherence when students and parents refuse?". This remained another point of contention when teachers enforced the policy, as there was a lack of guidance on how to proceed with both student and parent non-adherence to the school's smartphone policy, which impacted the use of certain sanctions.

Policy Costs

The responsibility of enforcing a new policy, as well as the requirements for adhering to the policy, demand substantial costs from both the enforcer and adherer. Notably, teachers recognised the cost not only to them but to students in adhering to the pouch policy.

Time consuming to Implement and Adhere

Students

Teachers reported several practical consequences for students resulting from the pouch policy. A recurring concern was its effect on transport to and from school, with some students arriving to class late as a result of having to lock their pouches. One teacher noted:

" [once] they've made it in ... some of the buses get in late and then by the time then they get their pouch, etcetera, etcetera. "

(Teacher, 30-40)

Delays were also reported at the end of the day, with students queuing to unlock their phones, which some teachers felt contributed to poorer punctuality home. As one teacher explained:

"You have to go out to unlock them to get the buses, cause the buses will go on and everybody here bus from, it's it could be like could be ... 45 minutes away. They have to get 3 buses. So if they missed the first one. They're not getting home until it's 6:00 at night."

(Teacher, 30-40)

Another teacher also shared their concerns about being unable to sacrifice teaching time to ensure students managed to get to their transport on time:

"Even I've had to drive the girls to the bus stop one day. Like we have girls who due to the swarms [of students locking their pouches], they're late. Not every class teacher is letting them out five minutes early, and they're late for their bus because the queue."

(Teacher, 30-40)

Additionally, practical concerns raised by teachers noted that in an emergency situation where students were unable to access their phones, teachers were put under strain to

manage both students and incoming parents during an emergency. One teacher commented:

"That day was a stress because you seen with the ones that opened their phones. ... because [it was] the first time they were allowed their phone in class they were like, you could see them getting really excited to be on their phone which never happened before."

(Teacher, 30-40)

Another teacher noted:

"Thing is those kids that weren't bringing their phones to school at that point...So, they didn't bring them to school. And I end up having to ring parents that day."

(Teacher, 40-50)

The additional workload brought about stress for teachers who noted that if students had their phones available, would have been more manageable. These issues were observed across multiple schools, as teachers were unaccustomed to the newly implemented pilot.

Teachers

Loss of Phones as a Learning Tool

Teachers also identified a number of practical issues affecting their work. A concern mentioned by the majority of teachers was the time-consuming nature of enforcing and managing the pouch policy, including the loss of using phones as a learning tool. Teachers noted their concerns about the loss of phones as a way to engage students with learning, one teacher said:

"We talked about when you're teaching a lesson, your lesson needs to be as engaging as that [a smartphone]. So, you need technology that interacts with them as well. Like when I was teaching them, we had, you know, different handsets that you could do quizzes on the board, you know like, "who wants to be a millionaire" or something like that you, but we are starting to do things like that with the phones. And then the phones disappeared and we're talking about, like, curie pod lessons and things like that. That's all interactive. But we don't have the technology to do it. Whereas if we had the phones, we could do that every lesson. So there is things being lost in that way. The first lesson of IT would be how to set up your Google Classroom when you came in, on your phone."

(Teacher, 40-50)

Another teacher noted the importance of a phone as a method of independent learning for students, explaining:

"That instead of me telling them the information they were learning that themselves. So, they're more likely to remember it and test that way."

(Teacher, 30-40)

Teachers recognised that though phones were a considerable issue in schools, they also had a place to contribute to engaging learning. Phones were embedded into their teaching system and therefore, left an issue where teachers could not use updated technology to teach. One teacher mentioned:

"Take them away in here and you expect them to engage with us and they don't because we're not using up-to-date technology"

(Teacher, 40-50)

The loss of smartphones in the school learning environment was considered a major practical issue by teachers who had become reliant on the use of smartphones of engaging learning activities. This issue is further discussed in the recommendations section to address how alternative engaging learning could be used.

Lack of Alternative Technology

Another issue mentioned by many teachers concerned the lack of alternative technologies available to make up for the loss of phones in the classroom. One teacher noted:

"That's the lack of technology. That's what I really personally say I'm concerned about, the lack of technology to replace the fact that we were using kids phones as a learning [tool] in class, like we don't have the facilities in school to provide every kid with access to technology. We don't even have it for a full year group, never mind every kid."

(Teacher, 40-50)

This concern was shared by several other teachers, particularly regarding how they can make their lessons engaging without the use of phones. Another teacher stated:

"We talked about when you're teaching a lesson, your lesson needs to be as engaging as that [a phone]. So you need technology that interacts with them as well."

(Teacher, 40-50)

Some teachers shared that they had investigated using alternative technologies, such as laptops or tablets for learning. However, they also shared issues of using these alternatives:

"We looked at the start of the implementation, can we get our laptops, tablets for pupils that [we] don't have and you know. They would have previously relied on their phone, and we're saying you can't use your phone. You know, we offered them to hire, none of our pupils pick that one."

(Teacher, 40-50)

Other teachers also noted the utility of phones as the only available technology to their students, that is that many of their students do not have access to alternative technologies at home and therefore rely on their phones to complete their work. One teacher noted:

"Because kids don't have computers with them. This [the phone] is their computer at home, and if you can't show them how to access it on their phone, they go home and they're totally lost and they can't access homework online and they can't get on to their school emails"

(Teacher, 40-50)

The removal of phones may create an unequal learning environment between those who can afford to buy alternative technologies compared to those who rely on their phone to access and complete their work.

Teacher's Workload

Teachers described an increased workload associated with the smartphone free pilot, both in terms of the time required to enforce it and the responsibilities it created. Some mentioned the time-consuming process of ensuring unlocking stations were opened and closed for students, one noted:

"It's taking classroom assistance [time] I suppose away from the other duties"

(Teacher, 30-40).

Another teacher agreed that the policy demands time away from teaching, which puts teachers under strain to deliver their lessons with less time. A teacher stated:

"So there are teachers then being taken from class, they help unlock them [the pouch unlocking facilities]."

(Teacher, 30-40)

Additionally, teachers mentioned that enforcement and dealing with pouch related issues takes more time away from their lessons, one teacher noted:

"It's time investment checking all we're talking about and then dealing with broken phone pouches and all of that."

(Teacher, 40-50)

Despite these added responsibilities, teachers acknowledged that enforcement became less time consuming, particularly for their senior team. Several noted a reduction in parental disruptions once the policy became embedded. One teacher explained:

"It just means that you can kind of plan your level of importance of what you can deal with. Whereas if you're constantly being rang, it just means that you have to go deal with that and then something else. So, it definitely makes your job slightly easier."

(Teacher, 50-60)

These reductions in disruptions were particularly noticeable for teachers, which saved teachers time that would have been spent dealing with phone related disruptions. Overall, teachers benefitted from the additional time they gained back from phones being removed in school, though there were increases in administrative workload, teachers perceived this as worth the effort to implement the policy.

Classroom and Academic Engagement

Engagement

The majority of teachers reported improvements in student concentration, focus, productivity and classroom engagement following implementation of the smartphone free pilot.

Attention and Focus

Many teachers expressed that the policy had made a noticeable difference to student's ability to focus in lessons. One teacher said,

"I think everybody probably thinks very positively about it because we have, I myself have noticed a massive difference in teaching and learning, but they're more engaged."

(Teacher, 30-40)

Another teacher noted a better ability to focus:

"In the classroom, like [other teachers] were saying about engagement and retention, there's so much more focus."

(Teacher, 40-50)

Teachers also reported that as students were able to concentrate on their work, they also completed more work, one teacher mentioned:

"So as a teacher taking away that distraction from the classroom, I have found, and I'm not sure whether my colleagues would agree, they're getting a lot more done. They are completing tasks a lot quicker and... they're more conscious about their work. They're not handing in just rubbish. They're actually focused on the research. Focused on reading because they don't have that distraction of the mobile phone."

(Teacher, 40-50)

Teachers also explained the reasoning for these improvements to students classwork and focus, stating that:

"I suppose that's kinda not constantly feeling the need to be checking it. It's probably a positive thing for them too. They're fully focused on what they're doing in school and fully engaged."

(Teacher, 30-40)

The improvements in attention and focus recognised by teachers were consistently linked to a lack of disruptions in the classroom environment, from both smartphone related disruptions and general distractions within the classroom.

Classroom Environment

Several teachers linked the pouch policy to fewer disruptions caused by phone use, contributing to a more productive classroom environment. As one teacher described:

"[The] knock on effect with disruption in your class. You had maybe 3 or 4 or 5, 6 even out in a half an hour block running to the toilet. But before that, yeah meeting their friends. But without that now there's less disruption."

(Teacher, 30-40)

Another teacher noted that without phones, it takes a shorter amount of time for students to settle into the lesson, allowing them to start the lesson quicker. A teacher reported:

"I think also at the start of the lesson especially it's been really important because they seem to be settling much quicker, as in settling into their learning because I would have had to go right girls now can you put that phone away? Put that away. Set it down. Turn it upside down. Switch that off. Put it back in your bag right girls, are we all paying attention? And I've spent, used to spend maybe 10 minutes every class, especially with sixth formers who can't put their mobile phones down. Making sure that they were trying to be focused on the lesson, whereas now they are coming in for me as a [subject] teacher. They're getting logged straight onto the computer system and then they're waiting for me to tell them what they're gonna be doing in this class. You know what learning is taking place. What task they have to complete."

(Teacher, 40-50)

Additionally, teachers mentioned that they are forming positive relationships with students, enabling them to foster a safe learning environment without having to reprimand students for using their phones. One teacher stated:

"The teacher pupil relationship has also benefited because, you know, I knew last year I had the same you know, four or five pupils that always had the phone out. And I was always negatively speaking to them, you know, when, because they had the phone out all the time and I was picking up on them all the time, they then had a block against me. And I also saw them coming in the classroom and I thought, "here we go again", where now there's not that kind of confrontation anymore. And that has really improved a lot of relationships."

(Teacher, 40-50)

This has allowed for more positive interactions between teachers and students, which may contribute to a stable learning environment.

Behaviour

Teachers widely identified reductions in behavioural incidents linked to phone use. Several described regaining a sense of control in the classroom, alongside fewer issues stemming from social media-related conflicts. One teacher stated:

"I would notice that we would have had serious concerns with people videoed, say if there was things maybe there had been a fight, one off event, they would video that and that had a knock-on effect with parents phoning in, very concerned. That would have been an enormous issue for us. So that's been totally squashed, which I think is great."

(Teacher, 30-40)

Teachers noticed that social media related issues were less frequent, as students were unable to escalate such issues during school. One teacher explained:

"The nasty messages that used to be sent around in school time... but as soon as the phones go in the pouch, the arguments stop and it becomes an issue outside of school. Instead of or issue again, I suppose in a way."

(Teacher, 40-50)

Additionally, without access to phones, teachers noticed students were not as aggressive, and felt able to reason with students regarding their behaviour, as one teacher mentioned:

"That aggression from them has kind of gone"

(Teacher, 40-50)

Yet, despite phone related behavioural issues decreasing, some teachers noted that other behavioural issues had increased instead. One teacher described:

"But one of the things that I've noticed as we're watching it over time, which is quite interesting, that whilst, behaviour issues of, misuse of mobile phone... and all of those challenges have absolutely went down, it's interesting to see the other areas of behaviours that perhaps have increased. So obviously children are going to talk more. So, there's more issues of perhaps disruption from talking in class. And so, it's interesting to see whilst those behaviours drastically fell, what ones then rose to nearly take their place. Because we want children to talk more so we are going to talk more or they're going to talk more in class. So, it's interesting to see that whilst we removed that."

(Teacher, 30-40)

Changes in behaviour after the introduction of the smartphone free pilot were mostly positive. Many teachers noticing students were less agitated in school and behavioural incidents that occurred outside school hours were not being transferred into the school

environment. However, there was some mentions of other behavioural disruptions that may have been to compensate for this, though these incidents were sparse.

Mental Health and Wellbeing

In contrast to other themes, teachers were largely uncertain about the policy's impact on student mental health and wellbeing. Many felt it was too early to draw conclusions, with several explicitly stating that more time was needed to observe any meaningful change. One teacher reflected:

"It's maybe too early to say if there's a, you know, emotional benefits to it that are obvious to us."

(Teacher, 20-30)

Another noted:

"Because there are some that were putting fake phones into the pouches and having their phones so, and they're the ones that maybe you probably would see the difference in, but they just still have their phones."

(Teacher, 40-50)

Yet, in regards to teacher's wellbeing, most felt the policy gave them a level of protection against being photographed or videoed at work. One teacher mentioned:

"We all feel safer, we don't feel unsafe that a phone will be used or pictures will be taken of us in the class. And then I think my children realise that, having particularly older children who have experienced the old way where it was kind of free flowing and free going."

(Teacher, 30-40)

Overall, teachers were uncertain of the effects of the smartphone free pilot on mental health and wellbeing of their students, this was mainly due to the recent implementation of the pilot that meant that any impacts were too early to observe during the first term.

Social and Extracurricular Life

Socialising

Teachers reported changes in students' social behaviour as a result of reduced phone use. Many noted increased face-to-face socialising and friendships during the school day. One teacher stated:

"I've seen in my class, like whenever we're doing 4 periods, that would be an hour and 20 minutes. Sometimes you just have to take brain breaks. We would have done that before. The amount of kids would have just straight away peel out their phone. I thought now brain breaks turn into conversation with somebody else. So that's maybe another aspect of it."

(Teacher, 40-50)

Notably, other teachers mentioned students forming new friendships as a result of interacting with more students both inside and outside classes, one teacher mentioned:

"you're seeing some friendships blossom that you've never seen before. So, you're seeing children who really, where the phone really masked and hid their identity now flourishing and finding their path, finding their tribe."

(Teacher, 30-40)

However, teachers did not report any clear evidence of increased engagement in extracurricular activities as a result of the policy, suggesting that behavioural changes were largely confined to the school day.

4.1.2 Student's Focus Groups

Practicalities

Compliance and Adherence to the Policy

Students' accounts at T1 indicated that compliance with the smartphone free pilot varied by year group, with younger students perceived as more likely to adhere than older students. This was often explained in terms of habit and adjustment. Younger students were described as having had less prior experience of using phones in school (i.e., not knowing any different), and therefore having fewer established routines to change. In contrast, older students were seen as having been accustomed to having access to their phones during the school day, making the introduction of the pouch policy more difficult to accept and follow.

One student explained:

“Yeah, I think it was hard to adapt to that, cause like we’ve been in this school for five years and it’s never really been a problem. So, when it was introduced, people were just like... not everyone was willing to even give it a go.”

(Student, 16-18)

Non-compliance was not always framed by students as simple rule-breaking, but as a response to a sudden change in expectations. For students who had spent several years in school with access to their phones, the policy represented a disruption to an established norm. Some students therefore felt that older pupils were less willing or able to adapt to the new requirements. A younger student observed and linked this difficulty directly to students’ everyday habits around phone possession:

“I feel like for some people.... it could get more people in trouble because so many people are like, just having their phones on them all the time, and then you have to put it in the pouches... they just don’t do it because they’re so used to having their phones on them.”

(Student, 11-13)

Students also observed that adherence was affected by the extent to which the policy was monitored and enforced. In some accounts, students felt that the pouch policy was more likely to be followed when staff were actively checking whether phones had been secured in the pouches. Where monitoring was limited, students described greater opportunities for non-adherence. Thus, effectiveness depended on continued reinforcement by staff.

A small number of students suggested that peer norms shaped adherence to the policy. Although younger students were generally perceived as more compliant, participants felt that junior pupils could be influenced by older students who were less likely to follow the rules. Visible phone use among senior students was therefore described as something that could weaken adherence among younger students. However, it is important to note that this perspective was expressed by only a minority of participants.

“When you’re coming from first year, they’ve never had any different. They’re not allowed their phones in primary school, so I don’t think it’ll affect the first years too much. But I think it kind of depends, especially in junior school, if the Year 8’s see the Year 10’s going on their phones, they’re even like, ‘Oh well, they’re big people, they’re allowed on their phones or they’re disobeying the rules, so it’s fine if I disobey the rule.’”

(Student, 14-16)

The same student went on to distinguish their observation, suggesting that older students may be more able to manage their own phone use due to greater maturity and awareness of their educational priorities. In this account, phone use among older students was presented as less problematic where students were able to self-regulate.

“When you get older you mature and you’re like, well, I’m here to improve my education and build a career or go to university so I know what’s best for me. I’m going to put my phone in. I may not necessarily lock it up, but I want to put my phone away because I know it’s best for me. I think it’s important to lay out how it really can affect your learning in Years 8 to 10. But I think when you get older, you kind of know yourself how important it is. So, you have more self-discipline.”

(Student, 14-16)

Many students reported that some continued to use their phones despite the policy and were caught doing so. Students observed that the smartphone free policy did not eliminate phone use entirely. Rather, some suggested that students who wanted to use their phone would continue to find ways round the policy. In these accounts, non-compliance reflected the behaviour of students who were already unlikely to follow school rules. Students therefore described the policy as more effective for those willing to comply, while acknowledging that it was less likely to prevent phone use among pupils determined to avoid it.

“Like if you're not willing to do it, you'll find a way around it. It's not the hardest concept to break.”

(Student, 16–18)

Students described compliance as reducing over time. Some reported that adherence was stronger when the policy was first introduced but declined after half-term as the novelty of the pouches wore off.

Methods of Non-Adherence

Students described a range of ways in which some attempted to avoid or work around the smartphone free policy. These included not putting their phone in the pouch, keeping their phones in their bags, saying they had left it at home, or placing a different (either an old or second phone) in the pouch while retaining access to their own device.

“Most people they don't actually put their real phone in. They just put their second fake phone in and they're on their phones, so [the policy] it's not really doing anything.”

(Student, 16–18)

Students also described scenarios where pupils appeared to follow the policy but did not fully secure their phones. This included not locking the pouch, folding it in a way that allowed access, or otherwise preventing it from functioning as intended. In these cases, non-compliance was presented as less visible, as pupils could appear to be following the rules while still maintaining access to their phone.

A further form of non-adherence related to damage or tampering with the pouches themselves. Students referred to pouches being ripped, broken, or tampered with, including attempts to interfere with the unlocking mechanism. While issues with pouch quality are considered separately, these accounts indicate that many students actively altered or damaged the pouches as a way of avoiding the policy.

“I’ve seen someone breaking them one time like someone was holding one side and then the other one was holding on the other side and then they pulled it at the same time and broke just to get the phone.”

(Student, 11–13)

Quality of Pouches

Students across all schools raised concerns about the quality and durability of the pouches. All students described pouches as unintentionally breaking easily, with some reporting that pouches had become ripped, damaged, or otherwise unusable. As noted in the previous section, students referred to both unintentional damage and instances where students had deliberately broken pouches. It was difficult to determine the extent to which reported durability issues reflected quality concerns versus intentional damage. In some accounts, students felt they were blamed for broken pouches even when the damage was not deliberate.

“The pouches got broken at the start of the year. We didn't even do anything and they’re blaming us... The teachers don’t believe us.”

(Student, 14-16)

Many students across all participating schools expressed concerns about the effect of the pouches on their phones. Several students reported that phones had become unusable, failed to turn on, or appeared damaged after being placed in the pouch. Others described

battery-related issues, including phones losing charge more quickly or batteries deteriorating over time. Some students attributed these problems to the pouch's magnetic locking mechanism or to phones not being powered off before being secured. These concerns appeared to contribute to negative views of the pouches, particularly where students felt that the policy placed their personal devices at risk.

“There was a girl that I know whose phone broke because of it [the pouches]. It wasn't like someone stepped on it or anything, but when she turned it on, her whole screen was green.”

(Student, 14-16)

The cost of replacement pouches was another recurring issue. Students described pouches as expensive and raised concerns about having to pay for replacements if a pouch was lost or damaged. Some felt hesitant to pay for a replacement, particularly where they viewed the pouch as poor quality or where damage was perceived as unavoidable. A small number of students also referred to schools running out of replacement pouches, suggesting that supply and replacement processes were part of students' practical experience of the policy.

Experience of the Policy

Students described several practical issues associated with locking and unlocking their phones before and after the school day. A recurring issue was the time taken to unlock pouches, particularly at the end of the day. Students referred to long queues and crowds at unlocking stations, difficulties with the unlocking mechanisms, and delays when leaving school. Many described having to wait for access to an unlocking station, while others reported that pouches did not always unlock easily. Students also mentioned forgetting to unlock their pouch before leaving school and having to rush after school. For the majority, these delays were linked to concerns around missing transport home or being unable to contact parents with regards to after-school activities or the time they would reach home.

Variations in how the policy was implemented by staff was raised on multiple occasions. Some referred to spot checks, searches, and teachers checking pouches, while others reported that teachers did not always check pouches or were more relaxed about the rule. Examples were given of teachers informally relaxing the rule in class where phone use was seen as more convenient for completing tasks or managing the classroom.

“Certain teachers, when we have to take photos of things or they just want us to be quiet and put our earphones in, they're like, ‘No, I don't care if your phone isn't in

your pouch. I'll just look the other way because it's more convenient for me for you guys to just use it'.

(Student, 16–18)

Students also identified wider resource and technology issues linked to the policy. These included unequal access to learning resources where phones could no longer be used for class activities, such as Kahoot quizzes, as well as shortages of alternative devices such as Chromebooks. For some sixth form students, restricted phone access also affected independent study periods, as they reported using their phones to complete coursework, access notes, or provide internet access through a hotspot where school devices or network access were limited. In these accounts, the removal of phones created practical challenges where schools did not have sufficient replacement technology available. Some sixth form students described study periods as less productive as a result, with work then needing to be completed at home and contributing to a greater workload outside school.

“Yesterday, for example, we were given an hour to do our [subject] coursework, but we were down in the basement. You couldn't use your phone to hotspot, you had no Wi-Fi, people didn't have their iPads, so it was just like a wasted hour. Then I had to go home last night and do my coursework because I couldn't do it in school, so I feel like that brings more stress.”

(Student, 16–18)

Students also raised concerns about staff modelling of the policy. Some described teachers using their own phones during lessons, including for non-teaching purposes, while students were expected to keep their phones locked away. Students presented this as inconsistent or hypocritical, particularly where they faced sanctions for phone use. These accounts contributed to wider concerns about fairness and consistency in the implementation of the policy.

Utility of Phones and Why Students Think they are Needed

To contextualise students' responses to the pouch policy, it is important to consider how they reported using phones during the school day. Students described phones as serving practical, educational, and social functions, which shaped their views on the restrictions.

A prominent theme was the use of smartphones as a learning resource. Students reported using phones to access Google Classroom, complete classwork, conduct research, take photographs of classwork, use digital resources, and support interactive learning activities.

For some students, phones also saved time in lessons, particularly where they could quickly photograph material or access resources directly.

Phones were also described as important for independent study and coursework, particularly among older students and sixth form pupils. Students reported using phones during study sessions to access notes, keep track of coursework, complete homework, or support revision. Some also described phones as useful where access to school devices or internet connection was limited, for example by using mobile data or a hotspot. In these accounts, phones were presented as a practical tool for managing schoolwork rather than only as a source of distraction.

Communication with parents and carers was another recurring function of phones. Students described using phones to contact parents during the school day, update them about travel or after-school arrangements, and check in if they were unwell. Some students also reported that parents continued to message them after the introduction of the smartphone free policy, suggesting that family communication practices did not always align with the restrictions in school. Concerns about emergencies were also raised, with some students describing phone access as important if they needed urgent support or needed to contact home quickly.

Students also referred to phones as supporting everyday organisation and personal responsibilities. This included checking the time, setting alarms, managing public transport, and using phones for payments. Payment methods were mentioned relatively frequently, with students describing phones as part of their normal routine for buying items or managing money during the day. A small number of students also described phones as important for private communication. This included being able to contact parents, carers or friends about personal matters without having to disclose the issue to staff. Some students suggested that they might feel uncomfortable or embarrassed asking a teacher for help in certain situations, and that phone access allowed them to manage these matters more privately.

Phones also had a social function for students. Some described using phones to communicate with friends, arrange where to meet during break or lunch, stay connected with friends outside school, or maintain different friendship groups. A smaller number of students described phones as helping with socialising, including making friends or sharing social media with peers. Others reported feeling that they were missing out when they did not have access to their phones.

Finally, some students also described phones as supporting concentration, particularly through listening to music while completing homework or independent study. Restricted

phone access therefore limited a strategy that some students used to support focus during study sessions.

Classroom / Academic Engagement

Attention and Focus

Students commonly described phones as affecting concentration and attentiveness, particularly when completing homework or revising for exams. Some students reported that restricted phone access during the school day could lead to greater phone use after school, which then made it harder to settle into homework or revision.

“Whenever I get home, I’m like, okay right this is my scroll time, but then I don’t really set a limit on it... I’ll have stuff to do after, but I’m like, okay it’s now five o’clock, I need to get my dinner. And then the day just kind of chips away from there.”

(Student, 14-16)

Others linked this directly to exam preparation, describing phone use as reducing the time available for revision.

“When you’re going to revise for exams, you have more to catch up on so you’re more tempted to go on your phone, so your results could be worse because you’re not revising as much as you should be.”

(Student, 14-16)

Accounts of focus within lessons were more mixed. Some students reported that having phones locked away made it easier to concentrate in class, as they were less tempted to check or use them. Others described little change in their focus or work rate, suggesting that the policy did not affect all students in the same way.

“Whenever you’re in class... I can feel it going into the head a lot more and it’s really benefitting me and my exams.”

(Student, 14-16)

A small number of students also described the strictness of the rule itself as distracting. For these students, attention could shift away from learning and towards concerns about following the policy correctly or avoiding sanctions. Overall, students’ accounts suggest

that phones were widely recognised as a potential distraction, but the perceived impact of the pouch policy on classroom focus varied.

Engagement

Students described barriers to academic engagement where phones had previously been used as learning tools. This was particularly evident in accounts from older students, who reported using phones to access digital textbooks, Google Classroom, coursework materials, or subject-specific resources. Where students did not have access to an iPad, laptop, physical textbook, or suitable school device, the removal of phones limited their ability to complete work during study periods or lessons.

“It was just expected in September that you didn’t have your phone for those things that you needed anymore. So, you just have to sort out another way, which I spent £700 of my own money on an iPad, but not everybody can do that... For some people that’s the only option.”

(Student, 16-18)

Students also described the policy as creating practical interruptions to learning. In practical or coursework-based subjects, students reported needing phones to take photographs, film work, or access materials, but unlocking and relocking pouches took time out of lessons. Others described delays in accessing phones during study sessions, including having to find an unlocking station before taking a study break or resuming work. At the same time, a small number of students reported more positive changes, including reading more when phones were unavailable or fewer pupils leaving class to use their phones.

Distractions

Some students described phones as a source of distraction, particularly during homework. Some reported that the pouch policy reduced phone-related distractions in class, including fewer notifications and less temptation to check their phones. A small number also described lessons as less disrupted when phones were not accessible.

However, students also reported that the policy did not remove distractions entirely. Some described other devices, such as iPads or laptops, as equally distracting during study periods or free periods. As one student explained:

“I’ll be sitting on my laptop not working... it still creates the same distraction for me, whether I have my phone in the pouch or not, because I always have something else.”

(Student, 16-18)

Students also described new distractions after the introduction of pouches, including disruption linked to pupils finding alternative ways to use phones, behavioural incidents related to the policy, or the practical process of managing pouches. Overall, students’ accounts suggest that the policy reduced some phone-related distractions but did not eliminate distraction from the classroom environment.

Behaviour

General Behaviour and Discipline

Students’ accounts of behaviour and discipline were mixed, although increased conflict was the most frequently raised issue. Some students described more arguments between pupils and staff following the introduction of the smartphone free policy, particularly where pupils were challenged about phone use, had phones confiscated, or received sanctions. In these accounts, the policy created additional points of confrontation within the school day.

“In general, the behaviours are a lot worse, everyone’s arguing... My mate got her phone took off her yesterday and she refused to move until they gave it back.”

(Student, 16-18)

Students also linked the policy to an increase in phone-related detentions and warnings. Some described this as creating frustration, particularly where sanctions were viewed as disproportionate or where end-of-day unlocking routines caused crowding and arguments. However, this was not reported consistently across all schools. Some students described behaviour as broadly unchanged, while others reported less confrontation or less “drama” since phones were restricted.

Habits and Self-Regulation

Students described the policy as disrupting established habits, particularly for older students who were used to having phones available during the school day. Some students

continued to use phones despite the policy, including in toilets or other less visible spaces, while others became more secretive about having their phones. A small number also described phones as supporting emotional regulation, particularly during break or lunch when students wanted time alone rather than social interaction.

Students also reported increased phone use after school, with some describing this as compensating for restricted access during the day. One student described using their phone more outside school because they felt they had missed what had happened online during the day:

“I find myself going on my phone more... out of school because I’ve been missing everything that’s gone on when I wasn’t there.”

(Student, 14-16)

Other students suggested that restriction itself could increase the desire to use phones:

“If you aren’t allowed to do something, that makes you want to do it more.”

(Student, 16-18)

These accounts highlighted challenges with self-regulation. Students described increased phone use after school, which affected homework and revision. At the same time, many argued that phone use should be an individual responsibility, with students expected to regulate their own behaviour and accept any consequences for their academic performance. Some also suggested that more motivated students were less likely to feel the need to check their phones during lessons.

Well-being / Mental Health

Students described restricted phone access as contributing to stress, worry and anxiety for some pupils. Phones were often associated with reassurance, comfort and a sense of security, particularly where students were used to being able to contact parents, carers or friends during the school day. Some students also described phones as providing a break or a way to recharge.

One student questioned whether restricting phones during school addressed mental health concerns, particularly in relation to cyberbullying:

“One of the biggest reasons they give it to us for is mental health, like cyberbullying and stuff, but honestly, for cyberbullying, putting your phone away in class, it’s just gonna make you even more stressed.”

(Student, 16-18)

A small number of students reported that the policy had little or no effect on their mental health. However, more commonly, students described feeling more worried or stressed without phone access. Some also linked this to fear of missing out, with increased phone use after school described as a way of catching up on what had been missed during the day.

Extracurriculars and Social Engagement

Socialising and Friendships in School

Students described some positive changes to socialising after the introduction of the smartphone free policy. Several reported that pupils were more sociable, talked more in person, and were more likely to make plans face to face. Some also described enjoying school more when phones were less central to break and lunch times.

“Instead of just being on your phone, you actually get to socialise.”

(Student, 14-16)

Students also reflected that phones could previously take time away from conversations and peer interaction. One student described face-to-face interaction as allowing pupils to develop stronger connections:

“You get more of a connection with people than you would online.”

(Student, 14-16)

However, students’ accounts were not entirely positive. Some described younger pupils continuing to use phones in hidden or less supervised spaces rather than socialising with peers. In these accounts, restricted phone access did not always lead to greater in-person interaction and, for some pupils, appeared to contribute to more isolated phone use.

Some students noted that the policy was more difficult for pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN), who may use phones for support, communication, reassurance or emotional regulation during the school day.

Reflections and Responses

Student Views on Phones and the Policy

Students' overall views of the pouch policy were largely mixed, but many accounts were critical. Students commonly described the policy as inconvenient, unnecessary, strict, or a waste of time and money. Some preferred the previous phone rules, viewing them as less disruptive while still allowing sanctions for inappropriate use. Others felt the policy removed freedom or treated older pupils as less mature than they were.

“Everyone’s kind of bringing their fake phones, not locking it properly. So that just defeats the purpose... It’s also kind of a waste of money that they spend all this money on the pouches.”

(Student, 11-13)

A recurring view was that the policy did not fully reflect how students used phones. Students challenged assumptions that phones were mainly used for disruption, arguing that phone use was not always linked to poor behaviour, reduced focus, or cyberbullying. Some also felt that a one-size-fits-all approach overlooked students' different ages, responsibilities and learning needs, particularly for senior pupils who felt able to manage their own phone use.

Students also raised concerns about fairness and consistency. Some described the policy as unfair because teachers could still use phones, while pupils were restricted. Others felt that sanctions were disproportionate or became increasingly frustrating over time. Despite these concerns, some students acknowledged that the policy was “good in theory” or that phones were not needed in class, suggesting that criticism was often directed at the method of implementation rather than the idea of reducing phone-related distraction altogether.

Parents' Opinions and Experiences of the Policy

Students reported mixed parent views on the policy. Some described parents as supportive of reduced phone access, or as seeing benefits in pupils not having phones constantly available. However, more commonly, students reported parent concerns around loss of communication, particularly where parents wanted to contact their child during the school day or did not want them penalised for phone use.

Students also described parental concerns about cost and value for money. Some reported that parents viewed the pouches as expensive, particularly where they believed money could have been better spent on resources or support for pupils instead.

“The money should be put towards supplies for the school, like books or pens... or maybe programmes for pupils, like mental health or something like that.”

(Student, 16-18)

Replacement costs were also raised as a source of frustration for families:

“My mum... was like, ‘I’m not paying for something I never asked for.’”

(Student, 11-13)

Suggestions / Improvements for the Policy

Students’ suggestions centred mainly on moving away from a one-size-fits-all approach. Many felt the policy did not account for differences in age, maturity, responsibilities, or learning needs, with sixth form students particularly describing the policy as incompatible with their routines and expectations. Students suggested that older pupils should be trusted with greater responsibility for managing phone use, while stricter restrictions may be more appropriate for younger students, who were seen as less used to having phones in school.

“Like, why would we want to pay for a new one? I don't think they should spend that much on phone pouches when there's clearly so many other struggles in the school. Every time I ask for something its “not in the budget”, even if you ask for a glue stick or photocopying.”

(Student, 14-16)

“I would let sixth form use it... I don’t have any technology except my phone that I can use. So, it’s such a hassle... we get told, especially Year 13, ‘you’ve decided to be here, so you have responsibility to do your work’... we’re about to be adults and some people are adults in upper sixth. So then I feel like it’s really contradictory to try and treat us like adults and then take away our phones.”

(Student, 16-18)

Students also proposed alternative approaches to managing phones. A frequently raised suggestion across all schools was a phone box policy, where phones could be stored away during lesson times but accessed during break and lunch times. Others suggested allowing

phones to remain in bags, relaxing the policy for senior pupils, introducing different levels of strictness by year group, or focusing more on teaching students to regulate their own phone use. Some students also argued that the money spent on pouches could have been better used for school resources, infrastructure, mental health support, or improved alternative technology.

“I do get the concept of ‘no phones in school’ during your class time... I just think that it’s created so much more problems than it was intended to... something like phone pouches on the wall in their classroom... you put your phone in and then you went and sat down... but then if [a teacher] is like, ‘you need to take a photo of this practical’, then I just get up, get my phone out of the accessible pouch and take a photo.”

(Student, 14-16)

4.2 Term 2 Qualitative Results

Twelve focus groups were conducted from January 26th to January 30th, 2026. This was comprised of six student focus groups, and six teacher focus groups from six participating schools.

85 participants took part in the spring term focus groups, of which 55 were students, and 30 were teachers or members of school staff. Most student participants were female, aged 14-16. Most staff participants were female, aged between 30-40 (see Table 2 for full demographics). The average focus group duration was 49 minutes and 49 seconds.

Factor	Total (N=85) N (%)
Sex	
Female	56 (65.9%)
Male	29 (34.1%)
Age	
11-13	11 (12.9%)
14-16	27 (31.8%)
16-18	17 (20.0%)
20-30	6 (7.1%)
30-40	12 (14.1%)
40-60	12 (14.1%)
Group	
Student	55 (64.7%)
Staff	30 (35.3%)

Table 2. Term 2 Focus Group Demographics

4.2.1 Teacher's Focus Groups

Practicalities

Adherence and Enforcement

By the second term, teachers described enforcement of the pouch policy as somewhat easier, freeing up more time to focus on teaching rather than continuous monitoring. One teacher reflected on this shift:

"It's real minimal requirements for us, like it's been so effortless of like, OK, check in the Pouch, OK, go lock it, unlock it, whatever, but compared to "put your phone away, put your phone away, where have you put your phone, what are you doing on your phone? What's the phone?" Like, massive."

(Teacher, 30-40)

While another noted the change in their student's self-enforcement of the policy:

"They are aware that if we see the mobile phone, it's a no-mobile-phone policy so there is going to be consequences to that so it tends to be, I suppose the pouches have helped in respect of maybe they don't use the pouch, but it stops them bringing their phone out because they know they should use the pouch."

(Teacher, 30-40)

This ease of enforcement was linked to a change in how teachers conceptualised compliance. Rather than checking whether phones had physically been placed in pouches, compliance was increasingly understood in terms of simply not seeing or hearing a phone during the day, in line with an overarching "no see, no hear" policy. One teacher explained:

"It's an extra layer that we don't have to entertain, I would say. You know, you should bring your pouch, you know that, that's the policy. So, it kind of takes that, "oh what you get up to, I need to look at my phone and then looking at a notification". They know."

(Teacher, 30-40)

Several teachers acknowledged uncertainties as to whether pouches were genuinely being used but felt this mattered less than the absence of visible phone use. The pouches themselves were also described as serving a symbolic function, acting as a physical reminder of the new policy, which teachers felt was helpful in ensuring they were enforcing the policy.

Teachers further reflected on how the policy had clarified expectations, reducing room for interpretation or leniency around phone use and removing many of the excuses students had previously relied upon. One teacher noted:

"The policy very much is never seen, never heard from [start] until the end of the school day. And we have found that has worked particularly well."

(Teacher, 40-60)

Some teachers noted the policy was not necessarily about achieving complete adherence, but about reinforcing that there were no longer any valid excuses for having a phone out, something teachers described as a persistent problem prior to implementation. Another teacher stated:

"we are finding that by having them [the pouches], it's another layer to a policy and the children know that, so it stops an argument because there is no argument because the children know it should be in that place."

(Teacher, 30-40)

Despite this, teachers acknowledged ongoing instances of non-adherence among students, with particular methods being used by students. Mainly that students were putting fake phones, calculators or other objects to make it seem like they were using the phone pouch properly, but in actuality had their smartphone on their person outside of the locked pouch. However, teachers consistently framed this as a minority issue, with overall adherence to the no phone expectation remaining high. As one teacher noted:

"I have only confiscated one phone. This academic year. This academic year, since the pouch has been in, no one really complained about sixth formers before. But from a sixth form point of view, I've only had to take [very few] phone off any sixth former and put into the office for one day. That's been it."

(Teacher, 40-60)

The shift from enforcing the specified pouch policy to a broader school wide smartphone restriction policy helped teachers by simplifying their enforcement workload to only looking for phones outside of pouches, rather than having to repeatedly check pouches.

Inconsistency in Enforcement Across Staff

A notable development in the second term was that enforcement had become increasingly inconsistent, depending on the individual teacher. One teacher observed:

"One of the biggest issues is the consistency across the [number of] form tutors. We have form tutors who are not very good. And they don't see this as their job. And therefore, the pouches would be really good and implemented consistently every day if we had our form tutor doing it on the home every day. But we don't."

(Teacher, 40-60)

This inconsistency was, in part, attributed to difficulties some staff faced in modelling expected behaviour, with examples given of colleagues relying on their own phones during the school day. One teacher reflected on this issue:

"Our phones have ingrained this culture of always responding immediately every week beep that you get, you know, with notification about this, notification about that. And it's crept into our professional way of dealing with things. An e-mail goes out, there's 10 people CC'd into it and...everybody's CC'ing back. I don't know if that's what it's like in the sale or whatever, but certainly here that there is a culture of feeling that you always have to respond at every single notification, at every single e-mail right away."

(Teacher, 30-40)

Some teachers acknowledged their own phone use, and had started initiatives to reduce staff usage in order to better model the policy to their students, one teacher noted:

"I know adults in the workplace is very different from children in a school, but if you're expecting the children to do something, surely the adults should be doing the same thing and leading by example and, you know, I've always had an issue with staff phone on their desk, I've actually implemented a ban within the [subject] department, you'll probably see the posters, they're different from the other ones, where I actually relay the fact that staff are not to be on their phones and we expect the same, I expect the same of the staff as what I do to pupils."

(Teacher, 40-60)

Teachers also discussed the time demands enforcement placed on their workload, despite the overall policy becoming easier to manage. Several described struggling to fit necessary checks, such as monitoring unlocking stations or managing pouch-related administration, into the school day. One teacher explained:

"A lot of my form time has been lost. And obviously with anything new, you need to lose that time. And I think part of me would have found it really beneficial if like you were saying, [redacted], all form tutors were doing the same thing ... I don't mind if

that one week is that they are doing that consistently and they're checking the phone pages. But I think sometimes some of my kids, from talking to them, are losing out: form tutors aren't doing activities with them, they're not engaging with them, and they're also then not doing the phone pouches and checking. So from that kind of sense, I feel like there's been a bit of time lost, but I think that's purely down to not buy-in from some staff. You know, it's not necessarily the phone pouch thing, because again, anything running new, it's going to take up time and it needs the time to embed it."

(Teacher, 40-60)

Overall, staff buy in to the policy was a barrier to proper enforcement of the pouch policy and noted by some teachers as an area of improvement both on an individual and school level.

Teacher Workload

Teachers described both benefits and costs to their workload arising from the policy. Similar to the first term, several noted that time previously spent on continuous enforcement had been freed up, as the pouch system enabled a level of self-enforcement among students. One teacher observed:

"I think what a nice way to be with the children nearly policing themselves with it and, it would be great if we could get to that point."

(Teacher, 40-60)

However, this was balanced against new demands introduced by the policy itself, including logistics around unlocking stations, administrative tasks, and pouch checks. One teacher described:

"it's also time-wise also, asking form teachers to check every single morning and then record all the things that a child is saying they have a pouch or they don't have a pouch. I mean, that is essentially also, we have to be honest, it's extra admin on the form teacher in the morning as well as late coming notes and punctuality and absent notes and, you know, when kids go out for appointments and, you know, it does take a very collegiate approach from the staff and the willingness behind that."

(Teacher, 40-60)

Another teacher noted concerns regarding the increased workload undertaken to enforce the pouch policy:

"I think in some ways we've probably made a little bit of a rope to beat our own backs with as regards how accommodating our admin staff are and how much I think our parents, particularly in the school, expect from our admin staff in getting messages through and that, contact them that is faster."

(Teacher, 40-60).

Despite these added burdens, other teachers generally felt the trade-off was worthwhile. As one teacher put it:

"Overall, the net benefit is positive."

(Teacher, 40-60)

Loss of the Phone as a Learning & Communication Tool

Teachers also mentioned the loss of phones as a learning and communication tool similar to those in the first term focus groups. They noted that phones had previously saved teacher time, particularly in practical subjects, and enabled faster communication with students regarding their school work. One teacher explained:

"One thing I've noticed, I think we need to be more organized, like with, you know, cover work. Not that you want to be out that much, but I would post cover work on Google Classroom for senior students that can't access Google Classroom on their phones. So you have to make sure and tell them well in advance this will be in Google Classroom, "You need to check the night before". "

(Teacher, 40-50)

Another teacher observed the impact the policy has had on using engaging learning tools:

"even playing like Kahoot and stuff, they could have done those kind of things on their phones in the past, whereas they can't now."

(Teacher, 40-60)

Several teachers noted how deeply embedded smartphones had become in school learning systems, meaning their removal created practical issues requiring adaptation. One teacher described issues relating to collecting student feedback:

"And that's one thing from our point of view. I can see the surveys, they're not answering surveys quite as well as what they would have. But the only thing is they shouldn't have been answering surveys at like 10 past 10 during the day. Our survey responses would be less. "

(Teacher, 30-40)

Another reflected on the broader need to rethink systems reliant on phone use:

"Now you're missing is actually implementing on their coursework a fair bit, where now they have to wait till they go home, then they're sending it later that evening, while if, we used to give, I would have things printed like that in class in their hands, they had it to go home with it, you know."

(Teacher, 40-60)

The loss of smartphones as a learning and communication tool remained a consistent issue for teachers, displaying the need for further consideration to how the utilities of smartphones can be replaced in schools.

Behaviour

Reduction in Behavioural Incidents

Teachers widely reported reductions in behavioural incidents linked to phone use, crediting this to the preventative effect of the pouch policy in stopping incidents from escalating. Several noted a reduction in cyberbullying specifically, as students were no longer able to record fights, take unconsented photographs, or share messages during the school day. One teacher explained:

"I'm just thinking of a child, if a photo is taken of them and someone's taking their, you know, the mick out of them or whatever. I feel that they might feel a bit more confident, the fact that they're not, that's not becoming an issue in their school day because they can't. "

(Teacher, 30-40)

The pouch policy was said to limit the extent to which online incidents were brought into the school environment, contributing to an overall sense that the school felt safer. As one teacher noted:

"I definitely think there is an element of that like school time is like as their digital detox."

(Teacher, 30-40)

However, some teachers mentioned that there were limited changes in the behavioural incidents they had to deal with, one teacher stated:

"And I was thinking in... how do we weigh up? We have less problems with more kids, more substantial problems with some high profile kids, you say, because they are using, they're sort of weaponizing the policy to cause problems and, you know, act out, which they say kids will do, you know"

(Teacher, 40-60)

Reductions were also reported regarding phone-related incidents, such as filming or sharing content, which teachers felt had eased pressure on pastoral teams. One teacher noted:

"So, definitely behaviour wise, just even like I, it's halved, more than halved, what I am dealing with as [pastoral role] in relation to phones. "

(Teacher, 30-40)

Furthermore, teachers mentioned this having a knock-on effect on incidences with parents, one described:

"So definitely for us, teaching and learning, we're dealing with less issues where parents are involved saying there's no learning happening, they're sitting on their phones or something like that."

(Teacher, 30-40)

However, effects on cyberbullying specifically were described as limited, as teachers were uncertain the pouch policy affected this, as cyberbullying may continue outside of school. One teacher noted:

"But no, in terms of bullying, I don't think we had an issue with bullying within, like, them being in a mobile phone pouch hasn't affected bullying all and social behaviour in school or anything like that."

(Teacher, 40-60)

Overall, consistent changes in behaviour were noticed by teachers, particularly related to decreased pastoral incidents. However, behavioural incidents within certain groups of

students remained consistent, suggesting that though problematic behaviours of the majority have decreased, issues with a minority of students remained.

Behavioural Dependency on Phones

Teachers also observed changes in students' habitual phone use, describing reduced instances of habitual checking, such as checking the time or texting, as well as fewer toilet visits linked to secretive phone use. One teacher commented:

"When you've [number of] teenagers between lessons, they would have had their phones out checking it. That has now gone in the new policy. Obviously, everyone has it in the pouch, or supposedly got it in the pouch."

(Teacher, 40-60)

Some teachers raised initial concerns about students experiencing fear of missing out (FOMO), though this subsided over the course of the year. One teacher described:

"I think at the start of the year that was a big thing when in school, that they were missing everything that had happened and it was such a like, shock to them that when they weren't here that they actually missed out."

(Teacher, 30-40)

Another teacher noted that students were starting to develop independence from their phone whilst in school:

"So I think there was more a worry about what way it was going to, but it's actually turned out quite well and that taking them away from the phone and the constant like, need for it, has, and I do think the Pouch helps because they can feel it. They know it's there, if they really, really need it, they know it's there, but they don't actually use it."

(Teacher, 30-40)

The change in student reliance on phones suggested that habitual phone use was seemingly due to the ability to access and depend on their phone during the school day, and once removed, reduced habitual use and reliance, as observed by teachers.

Classroom and Academic Engagement

Attention and Focus

Teachers reported notable improvements in student attention and focus following implementation of the smartphone free policy, with several noting reduced distraction and less attempted discrete phone use during lessons. One teacher described:

"My biggest one was sixth form. That's what I said to my kids. That was the ones I was most looking forward to, getting rid of it. I just couldn't help but not try and look in their bags or reach into their pockets or even simple tasks, if you were asking them to take a date somewhere, it was an excuse to get their phone out and then write the date in. But then, and I've seen, that's where I've seen the biggest impact in my sixth form classes, my A-level classes, and the kids have even said themselves that they feel they're more focused."

(Teacher, 40-60)

Some teachers also linked this reduction in distraction to further development of academic skills, such as critical thinking, as one teacher explained:

"Kids are actually having to, like, I teach a lot of like coursework subjects, so last year they were just jumping straight to their phone for AI, whereas this year they're actually having to think. So like we are actually just taking a wee bit more time in terms of like answering the questions."

(Teacher, 30-40)

Additionally, some teachers noted students who had previously used AI to complete their classwork were starting to engage in lessons. One teacher described:

"I think they can't access like the Google AI or the ChatGPT. And even just like circulating around the room, like I don't see them, like they don't have a chance to get on it, whereas last year obviously with their phones like quickly under the table they were able to... so they are actually putting a wee bit of work in this year."

(Teacher, 30-40)

Most teachers attributed these changes to the reduction of distractions phones caused in the classroom. One teacher noted

"The fact that young people can't concentrate for very long because of how much time they spend on their phones and in other contexts. There's an impact of that."

(Teacher, 40-60)

Changes in the Learning Environment

A majority of teachers noticed how phones had previously disrupted the learning environment. Several mentioned a marked reduction in these disruptions, with fewer notifications and less discrete phone use in class. One teacher commented:

"And even within the class, with like classroom management and stuff, I think, do you know that they're more engaged they're not... they're not distracted by notifications. They're more engaged, they're paying attention, do you know, so like they're more motivated to learn too, do you know? Well, I find anyway."

(Teacher, 30-40).

Another teacher agreed, stating:

"I think it's great that there's no pinging. You know, like you'd be teaching a lesson and there's notifications coming through to them and you don't know where it's coming from and you're like, "turn that off or whatever". But I haven't had one notification this year and I just feel like the lesson is so much smoother. There's no interruptions."

(Teacher, 30-40)

However, some teachers noted that the effect varied between classes, particularly depending on the time of day they had each class. One teacher noted:

"But even just being in during the day, I've got the same [year group] class, who I had in [year group]. But I had them last year at the end of the day, which was tough. And I have them on a Friday morning, and they're a completely different class, so just trying to determine what it is. It's just like there's too many variables there."

(Teacher, 40-60)

Overall, teachers described noticeable improvements in the learning environment that they credited to the new smartphone restriction policy.

Extracurricular and Social Engagement

Social Interactions

Many teachers observed that reduced phone use had created more opportunities for students to socialise, particularly during form time, breaks, and lunch. Teachers described students socialising more, developing communication skills, and building stronger connections with staff members. One teacher reflected:

"To me, I think it's transformed the pupils, do you know, like they're right to be the guy in the land in the lobby or whatever now, they're chatting to each other, they're having a craic, they're talking, and that never happened, do you know, before, like in my experience, do you know."

(Teacher, 30-40)

Other teachers mentioned students engaging in break time activities and further developing their social skills during unstructured time:

"I would just say the level of noise, break time, unstructured times, but it's not bad. It's actually quite nice to see, like the boys are playing football or some of the cheering that goes on. It's great to see."

(Teacher, 30-40)

Some teachers recognised that student socialising also extended to their interactions with teachers and other staff members. One teacher noticed:

"There's more conversations with kids now. Kids are more sociable, even with each other and with us as staff."

(Teacher, 20-30)

However, some teachers noted limited difference in social interaction patterns in the context that their students were not allowed to use their phones during break times. One teacher commented:

"Because it wasn't allowed to use it for them anyway. You know, it's not like it's an increased interaction being the policy itself, because we were never allowed to have the phones during break and lunch."

(Teacher, 40-60)

There were some mixed observations by teachers on the impact of the smartphone policy on student socialising, though mostly teachers reported the positive effects the policy had on student's ability to socialise with their peers and with teachers.

Extracurricular Participation

There were limited accounts of student engagement with extracurricular activities. One school reported differences in this area:

"But because we don't allow them now, they're actually engaging in the lunchtime clubs and they're going to them and they're full and we have different ones popping up left, right and centre and the pupils are going to them, when you go around it, it's packed."

(Teacher, 30-40)

However, teachers noted this coincided with the introduction of additional clubs at the start of the school year:

"So the likes of the Nest...and things like that, there's loads of initiatives running now that never ran before. And I think the uptake has been far, far better. It's been great. Has been good"

(Teacher, 40-60)

Therefore, though some increases in engagement with extracurricular clubs were noted, overall evidence of any effect on student extracurricular participation remains limited.

Wellbeing and Mental Health

Similarly to the first term, teachers remained cautious in their assessments of the policy's impact on student mental health, with many feeling it remained too early to draw firm conclusions. One teacher stated:

"It's hard to measure. Are we not still quite early days on this, again, to see a marked increase in like happiness in any group or in a child. We are still at the sort of cusp of this."

(Teacher, 40-60)

Student Emotional Wellbeing

Many teachers described initial frustrations among students following implementation, including anxiety associated with being without a phone, referred to as "nomophobia." One teacher described the changes in students attachment to their phones:

"I suppose, what, you're thinking around anxiety, if we were looking, if the boys previously had the phone and they were able to check it without any consequence, well then... You probably had that anxiety, I need to check my phone. Now that has been removed. "

(Teacher, 40-60)

Several teachers noted that phones had previously served as an emotional regulation tool for some students, particularly those with special educational needs (SEN). One teacher explained:

"We had [a number of] very anxious [students] with ASD (autistic spectrum disorder) that were worried about it and had health issues and they were really anxious. They emailed. They were shown how to e-mail and they were allowed to bring their own devices in to e-mail parents. And so that they could also, if they liked listening to music, to keep their ASD, they had their own laptop and in their study time they could put their headphones on because they have an ASD base."

(Teacher, 20-30)

By the second term, teachers observed students adapting to the absence of phones as an emotional regulation tool, with specific adaptations made for SEN students. However, some systemic limitations were also noted, including a lack of school mental health provisions, with teachers describing the evidence in this area as still limited. As one teacher stated:

"I mean, it's hard to clarify that. The school counsellors are still oversubscribed."

(Teacher, 40-60)

Overall, teachers observed some improvements to student wellbeing, however, this may also be due to additional support put in place to support students, and similar systemic issues regarding the mental health and wellbeing support remained.

Teacher Emotional Wellbeing

In contrast, teachers described clearer improvements to their own emotional wellbeing, noting reduced fear of being recorded and a greater sense of safety and protection at work. One teacher noted:

"I had that too, and then they make TikTok, so you don't know.. Some take sneaky photos, you know, like you couldn't have watched them."

(Teacher, 40-60)

Several also described improved confidence in their role as a result of the policy. As one teacher put it:

"I think it's the confidence knowing no one can snap a photo of them, take a snapshot of them, or do anything. And we are supposed to police, but it's very difficult in the practical. If you're turning around trying to get someone's costume on, someone could quickly just zip it."

(Teacher, 40-60)

Teachers mostly agreed in that their smartphone policy improved their wellbeing, particularly around feeling safe in their work environment knowing students could not video or photograph them.

4.2.2 Student's Focus Groups

Practicalities

Compliance and Adherence to the Policy

In Term 2, students expressed mixed views regarding compliance. The most frequently identified theme was non-compliance, especially amongst older students.

"I wouldn't say everybody follows it, especially like upper school."

(Student, 14-16)

Many observed that phones weren't being put into the pouches for several reasons, including relaxation of the policy by teachers as time progressed.

"I think there's more people now who aren't [using the pouches] because the teachers have become a bit more lenient and they're not checking them as often. Like

they used to check them a lot more when we first got them, but they haven't really checked them since."

(Student, 14-16)

In contrast, several students reported that although the pouches were not used by the majority, there was an overall reduction in phone use during school hours. This was particularly evident during lessons, where phones were no longer being taken out of pockets or used discreetly under desks. Students also indicated that the strict enforcement of sanctions acted as a deterrent, discouraging phone use during the school day.

"I would say people aren't on their phones as much, even if they're not like using the pouches, they're not like getting their phones out as much."

(Student, 16-18)

Ways Round the Policy

In Term 2, the most commonly reported method students used to circumvent the policy was leaving their pouches unlocked, allowing them to retain access to their phones during the school day, if needed. Students suggested that the leniency of the policy's implementation over time allowed this to occur.

"Not many people would lock it in the pouch because no one's checking [the phone's] in. No teachers are there, so they just walk in."

(Student, 11-13)

Additionally, many students reported alternative phones or old devices being put into the pouch, allowing students to access their primary phones during the day. Another reported strategy involved physically damaging the pouches so that they were unusable.

"I think people realised that if you hit it hard enough off a desk, it would break"

(Student, 16-18)

Experience of the Policy

Students' experience of the policy was largely shaped by how consistently it was implemented across the year. A recurring issue was variation in teacher enforcement, with students reporting differences in how frequently teachers checked pouches and applied

sanctions. As mentioned above, some students perceived that the policy had become increasingly lenient over time, with reduced checks contributing to weaker adherence.

Despite these inconsistencies, sanctions were viewed as an important factor influencing student behaviour. Many reported feeling concerned about receiving sanctions, while others identified the consequences of breaking the policy as a deterrent to phone use during school hours.

Quality of Pouches

In Term 2, students continued to report concerns about the quality and functionality of the pouches. Issues included pouches not working effectively, some phones not fitting properly, and concerns that the unlocking mechanism was not sufficiently strong or durable.

“You could like push it out and bend the wires and then it locks, but you can just pull it apart and unlock it so it looks the same as a locked one.”

(Student, 16-18)

A continued source of frustration was the impact of the pouches on phones, particularly concerns that they contributed to reduced battery life. Students also raised concerns about the longer-term durability and cost of pouches. Although some damage occurred unintentionally, reports of students deliberately breaking pouches suggested that some continued to seek ways around the restrictions. Additionally, perceptions that the pouches were expensive contributed to concerns about their value and effectiveness.

Utility of Phones

Students continued to highlight the practical functions that phones served beyond social use. Smartphones were viewed as a useful learning resource, with students referencing access to platforms such as Google Classroom, AI tools, and online materials to support their studies.

“It’s been a bit of a difference because sometimes [our teachers] would get us to use our phones for Google Classroom and stuff.”

(Student, 16-18)

Students also identified phones as important for communication with parents. However, some reported frustrations around losing access to other everyday functions, including

checking the time and listening to music, which some felt supported their focus and organisation.

Classroom Engagement

Distractions

In Term 2, students generally recognised that restricting phone access helped reduce distractions and support focus during learning. Some felt that having phones restricted reduced the temptation to access social media during private study, meaning they were less likely to spend extended periods of time on social media and could use that time more productively.

“I just think, if I had my phone in private study, I’d be more likely to go on social media.”

(Student, 16-18)

“I’m sick of wasting a few hours on social media.”

(Student, 14-16)

However, students also acknowledged that distractions could still occur through other devices, such as iPads, suggesting the policy’s impact depended on the wider learning environment and how technology was used.

“I just feel that so I focus, but other people would have social media on their iPad, so it doesn’t make a difference.”

(Student, 16-18)

Behaviour

Pastoral Related Issues

One pastoral-related issue mentioned was the challenge schools face in addressing behaviours that occur outside of school hours. One participant noted that harmful interactions, such as those occurring in group chats after school, could still affect students’ wellbeing but were perceived as being beyond the school’s direct control:

“There’s still like some stuff that the school has to deal with like group chats that happens after the school ends. There’s not much they can do about it.”

(Student, 16-18)

This highlights participants' recognition of the blurred boundaries between school-based pastoral responsibilities and students' online interactions outside the school environment.

Wellbeing

Most participants reported that the policy made no difference to their wellbeing outside of school. Students generally described feeling the same during weekends and school holidays, with one stating:

“Pretty normal. Nothing like, oh, I’m excited to get my phone during the holidays...”

(Student, 16-18)

Although a small number of participants reported feeling more frustrated or more stressed, the predominant view was that wellbeing outside of school remained unchanged.

Policy Implementation

A commonly reported factor influencing the perceived longevity of the policy across the year was the consistency of teacher enforcement. Participants felt that compliance with the policy depended largely on whether teachers checked that phones has been placed in the pouches.

“I don’t think my pouch has ever been checked if we have our phones in our pouches. I feel like if it keeps going like that, they’ll just not forget about it, but not check it at all.”

(Student, 11-13)

4.3 Term 3 Focus Groups

Eleven focus groups took place between 28th April and 1st May, 2026. Six student focus groups and five teacher focus groups were conducted in seven participating schools.

129 participants took part in the summer term focus groups, of which 83 were students, and 31 were teachers or members of school staff. Most student participants were female, aged 14-16. Most staff participants were female, aged between 40-60 (see Table 3 for full demographics).

Fifteen parents also took part in focus groups, via online video meetings, during the summer term. Most parents were female, aged 40-50.

Variable	Total (N=129) N (%)
Sex	
Female	78 (68.4%)
Male	36 (31.6%)
Age	
11-13	28 (24.6%)
14-16	42 (36.8%)
16-18	13 (11.4%)
20-40	15 (13.1%)
40-60	16 (14.1%)
Group	
Student	83 (72.8%)
Staff	31 (27.2%)

Table 3. Term 3 Focus Group Demographics

5. Quantitative results

5.1 Aggregate data

A total of 6 schools provided aggregate-level data on a variety of measures from the end of the 2022/23 academic year until the 2025/26 January-April term. Table 4 shows the measures, available data and average value pre and post smartphone policy implementation.

Measure	Available data N (%)	Pre-policy Mean (SD)	Post-policy Mean (SD)
Exclusions	5/6 (83.3%)	16.2 (30.2)	15.7 (38.1)
Detentions	3/6 (50%)	113.7 (176.7)	93.6 (167.9)
Counsellor visits	4/6 (66.7%)	45.3 (63.1)	36.9 (42.5)
Parent visits	1/6 (16.7%)	4 (4.6)	1 (0)
Staff turnover (%)	3/6 (50%)	3.4 (2.5)	0.79 (0.40)
Staff absences (days)	2/6 (33.3%)	61.0 (85.2)	104.9 (113.8)

Table 4. Aggregate data description

The number of exclusions, detentions, counsellor visits and parent visits decreased after the implementation of the smartphone policy. However, it should be noted that the standard deviation of these measures are very large due to the sparsity of data and the large variations of reported measures between schools. For example, one school reported more than ten exclusions per term whereas the majority of schools reported none or one exclusion per term.

Due to the sparsity of available data, an interrupted time series analysis was not conducted. More data is needed from schools and from the Summer term of the 2025/26 academic year.

5.2 Consented

Questionnaires were sent out up to seven schools for students to complete. In Wave 1, students were asked to complete the questionnaire retrospectively, thinking back on before a smartphone policy was implemented in their school. Waves 2 and 3 were then completed as students felt currently, after the policy implementation.

Data was collected from all waves and cleaned, with any invalid entries removed. For any duplicate entries from the same student, the furthest completed version of the questionnaire was kept and the other duplicates removed. Any observations with less than

15% of the questionnaire completed were removed, as this meant no demographic or outcome data had been entered.

Waves 2 and 3 were merged for the purposes of analysis. Table 5 below shows the number who consented to complete the questionnaire and those who completed the questionnaire. Completing the questionnaire is defined as the student clicking through until the end of the questionnaire so can still include missing data.

Wave	Completed/ Consented (%)
1 – Pre policy	504/584 (86.3%)
2 – Post policy	398/454 (87.7%)
3 – Post policy + 1 term	223/223 (100%)
2 + 3 – Post policy	621/677 (91.7%)

Table 5. Consent and completion of the questionnaire

After combining waves 2 and 3, there were a slightly larger number of students who completed the questionnaire post-smartphone policy implementation. A total of 1261 unique students completed the questionnaire overall.

5.3 Demographics

Table 6 details demographics of the population who answered the questionnaire, by pre- and post- smartphone policy implementation and overall.

	Pre-policy (N=584)	Post-policy (N=677)	Total (N=1261)
Gender			
Female	558 (95.5%)	366 (54.1%)	924 (73.3%)
Male	19 (3.3%)	161 (23.8%)	180 (14.3%)
Prefer not to say	7 (1.2%)	5 (0.7%)	12 (1.0%)
Missing	0 (0.0%)	145 (21.4%)	145 (11.5%)
Sex at birth same as gender			
No	8 (1.4%)	5 (0.7%)	13 (1.0%)
Prefer not to say	9 (1.5%)	12 (1.8%)	21 (1.7%)
Yes	567 (97.1%)	304 (44.9%)	871 (69.1%)
Missing	0 (0.0%)	356 (52.6%)	356 (28.2%)
School			
School 1	28 (4.8%)	62 (9.2%)	90 (7.1%)
School 2	471 (80.7%)	0 (0.0%)	471 (37.4%)
School 3	6 (1.0%)	174 (25.7%)	180 (14.3%)
School 4	0 (0.0%)	68 (10.1%)	68 (5.4%)
School 5	66 (11.3%)	176 (26.0%)	242 (19.2%)
School 6	0 (0.0%)	50 (7.4%)	50 (4.0%)
School 7	13 (2.2%)	147 (21.7%)	160 (12.7%)
School Year			
Year 8	108 (18.5%)	139 (20.5%)	247 (19.6%)
Year 9	69 (11.8%)	150 (22.2%)	219 (17.4%)
Year 10	57 (9.8%)	122 (18.0%)	179 (14.2%)
Year 11	120 (20.5%)	112 (16.5%)	232 (18.4%)
Year 12	138 (23.6%)	64 (9.5%)	202 (16.0%)
Year 13	47 (8.0%)	56 (8.3%)	103 (8.2%)
Year 14	45 (7.7%)	34 (5.0%)	79 (6.3%)
Ethnicity			
White	538 (92.1%)	264 (39.0%)	802 (63.6%)
Asian or Asian British, Black or African American, Black British, Black Caribbean	17 (2.9%)	29 (4.3%)	46 (3.6%)
Mixed	9 (1.5%)	12 (1.8%)	21 (1.7%)
Other	8 (1.4%)	6 (0.9%)	14 (1.1%)
Prefer not to say	12 (2.1%)	10 (1.5%)	22 (1.7%)
Missing	0 (0.0%)	356 (52.6%)	356 (28.2%)
Approximate household yearly income (£)			
Less than 20,000	25 (4.3%)	13 (1.9%)	38 (3.0%)

20,000 - 69,999	103 (17.6%)	61 (9.0%)	164 (13.0%)
70,000 - 99,999	42 (7.2%)	22 (3.2%)	64 (5.1%)
More than 100,000	49 (8.4%)	35 (5.2%)	84 (6.7%)
Unsure	291 (49.8%)	141 (20.8%)	432 (34.3%)
Missing	74 (12.7%)	405 (59.8%)	479 (38.0%)
Use of GP in past 3 months			
Child and adolescent mental health service	18 (3.1%)	23 (3.4%)	41 (3.3%)
Clinical services due to poor sleep / sleep and mental health services	5 (0.8%)	7 (1.0%)	12 (1.0%)
Not accessed any services	464 (79.5%)	510 (75.3%)	974 (77.2%)
Prefer not to say	88 (15.1%)	125 (18.5%)	213 (16.9%)
Missing	9 (1.5%)	12 (1.8%)	21 (1.7%)
Special Educational Needs (SEN)			
No	528 (90.4%)	558 (82.4%)	1,086 (86.1%)
Prefer not to say	30 (5.1%)	63 (9.3%)	93 (7.4%)
Yes	21 (3.6%)	56 (8.3%)	77 (6.1%)
Missing	5 (0.9%)	0 (0.0%)	5 (0.4%)
Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)			
No	533 (91.3%)	577 (85.2%)	1,110 (88.0%)
Prefer not to say	21 (3.6%)	34 (5.0%)	55 (4.4%)
Yes	23 (3.9%)	65 (9.6%)	88 (7.0%)
Missing	7 (1.2%)	1 (0.1%)	8 (0.6%)
Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)			
No	532 (91.1%)	589 (87.0%)	1,121 (88.9%)
Prefer not to say	30 (5.1%)	47 (6.9%)	77 (6.1%)
Yes	16 (2.7%)	40 (5.9%)	56 (4.4%)
Missing	6 (1.0%)	1 (0.1%)	7 (0.6%)
Other neurodivergent condition			
No	534 (91.4%)	600 (88.6%)	1,134 (89.9%)
Prefer not to say	33 (5.7%)	48 (7.1%)	81 (6.4%)
Yes	10 (1.7%)	27 (4.0%)	37 (2.9%)
Missing	7 (1.2%)	2 (0.3%)	9 (0.7%)
Any neurodivergent condition or SEN			
No	467 (80.0%)	486 (71.8%)	953 (75.6%)
Prefer not to say	58 (9.9%)	76 (11.2%)	134 (10.6%)
Yes	51 (8.7%)	114 (16.8%)	165 (13.1%)
Missing	8 (1.4%)	1 (0.1%)	9 (0.7%)

Table 6. Demographics

Demographics varied between pre- and post-smartphone policy implementation. Overall, there were more female students completing the questionnaire (73.3%) than male students (14.3%). There were a small number of male students who completed the questionnaire pre-policy at 19 (3.3%). This increased to 161 (23.8%) post-policy. A total of seven schools completed the questionnaire. School 2 withdrew from the study before completion of the post-policy questionnaire due to concerns in relation to the study measures. Some schools were recruited later into the year and only contributed a small amount/no data to the pre-policy questionnaire. School year was well represented across all years and both timepoints, including 14.5% of students in sixth form. Most participants were white. A small minority of participants had accessed Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) within the last 3 months (<5% at both timepoints). A higher proportion of participants had SEN post-policy (8.3% compared to 3.6%), and there were also more participants with an autism diagnosis (9.6% versus 3.9%) and ADHD (5.9% versus 2.7%). The number of participants with any neurodivergent condition or any special educational needs was 51 (8.7%) pre-policy and 114 (16.8%) post-policy.

Table 7 details the smartphone characteristics for each timepoint.

	Pre-policy (N=584)	Post-policy (N=677)	Total (N=1261)
Own a smartphone			
No	4 (0.7%)	11 (1.6%)	15 (1.2%)
Yes	580 (99.3%)	631 (93.2%)	1,211 (96.0%)
Missing	0 (0.0%)	35 (5.2%)	35 (2.8%)
Type of smartphone			
Any Android Phone	140 (24.0%)	85 (12.6%)	225 (17.8%)
Other	19 (3.3%)	28 (4.1%)	47 (3.7%)
iPhone	421 (72.1%)	196 (29.0%)	617 (48.9%)
Missing	4 (0.7%)	368 (54.4%)	372 (29.5%)
Own more than one phone			
No	511 (87.5%)	248 (36.6%)	759 (60.2%)
Yes	68 (11.6%)	61 (9.0%)	129 (10.2%)
Missing	5 (0.9%)	368 (54.4%)	373 (29.6%)
Own a simple mobile phone			
No	516 (88.4%)	244 (36.0%)	760 (60.3%)
Yes	64 (11.0%)	74 (10.9%)	138 (10.9%)
Missing	4 (0.7%)	359 (53.0%)	363 (28.8%)
Age when given first phone (years)			
N, Median (IQR), Range	582, 10, (9, 11), 4-15	310, 10, (8, 11), 4-19	892, 10, (8, 11), 4-19

Table 7. Phone Characteristics

Very few students did not own a smartphone (1.2% overall), with the majority of students owning an iPhone. There was a substantial proportion who owned more than one phone (10.2% overall), similar to the proportion who owned a simple mobile phone (10.9%). The average age when given their first phone was 10 at both timepoints.

The number of students owning a simple mobile phone was explored for those who owned more than one phone in Table 8.

Students with more than one phone	Pre-policy (N=68)	Post-policy (N=61)	Overall (N=129)
Own a simple mobile phone			
No	52 (76.4%)	45 (73.8%)	97 (75.2%)
Yes	16 (23.5%)	16 (26.2%)	32 (24.8%)

Table 8. Ownership of multiple phones and simple mobile phones

Most students who own more than one phone do not own a simple mobile phone (75.2%), implying these students own multiple smartphones.

5.4 Measurement of outcomes

Outcomes are split into questionnaire scores and categorical and count outcomes. Table 9 shows the questionnaire scores pre- and post-policy and overall.

Questionnaire	Pre-policy (N=584)		Post-policy (N=677)		Overall (N=1261)	
	Available data N (%)	Mean (SD)	Available data N (%)	Mean (SD)	Available data N (%)	Mean (SD)
SDQ	529/584 (90.6%)	11.8 (6.6)	638/677 (94.2%)	12.4 (6.5)	1167/1261 (92.5%)	12.1 (6.5)
SDQ - Emotional Difficulties	529/584 (90.6%)	4.0 (2.8)	640/677 (94.5%)	3.9 (2.7)	1169/1261 (92.7%)	4.0 (2.7)
SDQ - Conduct Difficulties	529/584 (90.6%)	1.5 (1.7)	639/677 (94.4%)	1.9 (1.8)	1168/1261 (92.6%)	1.8 (1.8)
SDQ - Hyperactivity	530/584 (90.8%)	4.6 (2.7)	639/677 (94.4%)	4.5 (2.6)	1169/1261 (92.7%)	4.5 (2.7)
SDQ - Peer Difficulties	530/584 (90.8%)	1.7 (1.5)	639/677 (94.4%)	2.1 (1.8)	1169/1261 (92.7%)	1.9 (1.7)
SDQ - Prosocial	530/584 (90.8%)	8.2 (1.6)	640/677 (94.5%)	7.4 (2.2)	1170/1261 (92.8%)	7.8 (2.0)
RCADS - Total T-score	509/584 (87.2%)	50.8 (15.8)	476/677 (70.3%)	48.4 (17.3)	985/1261 (78.1%)	49.6 (16.6)
RCADS - Depression T-score	509/584 (87.2%)	50.4 (15.5)	476/677 (70.3%)	48.4 (15.4)	985/1261 (78.1%)	49.4 (15.5)
RCADS - Anxiety T-score	508/584 (87%)	51.0 (14.8)	476/677 (70.3%)	48.8 (16.4)	984/1261 (78%)	50.0 (15.6)
SAS-SV	503/584 (86.1%)	23.8 (8.8)	614/677 (90.7%)	23.6 (9.7)	1117/1261 (88.6%)	23.7 (9.3)
BSMAS	491/584 (84.1%)	12.4 (4.6)	611/677 (90.3%)	12.2 (5.0)	1102/1261 (87.4%)	12.3 (4.9)

Table 9. Questionnaire scores

*SDQ = Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire; RCADS = Revised Childrens Anxiety and Depression Scale;
SAS-SV = Smartphone Addiction Scale -Short Form; BSMAS = Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale.

Below is a list of the questionnaires and what they measure:

SDQ (Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire) – 25-item questionnaire comprising of 5 domains. All domains are summed together, excluding the prosocial score, resulting in a total difficulties score ranging from 0-40, with 0-14 close to average, 15-17 slightly raised, 18-19 high and 20-40 very high.

RCADS (Revised Children’s Anxiety and Depression Scale – Short Form) – A 25-item questionnaire that helps monitor symptoms of anxiety and depression in young people. The

T-score, adjusted for school year and sex, can be found for the anxiety (15-item) subscale, depression (10-item) subscale and total score. T scores of 65 or higher indicate scores above the borderline clinical threshold. T scores of 70 or higher indicates scores above the clinical threshold.

SAS-SV (Smartphone Addiction Scale – Short Version) – 10-item scale with scores ranging from 10 to 60. A higher score indicates greater risk of smartphone addiction.

BSMAS (Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale) – 6-item questionnaire with total score between 6 and 30. A higher score indicates greater risk of social media addiction.

A total of 1167 (92.5%) students completed the SDQ across both timepoints. The mean score increased slightly from 11.8 pre-policy to 12.4 post-policy, though this remains in the close to average bracket. This indicates the average student experiences close to average difficulties and this does not change meaningfully between timepoints. The SDQ contains 5 domains, with the first four domains used to generate the total difficulties score. A higher score within each of the emotional difficulties, conduct problems, hyperactivity and peer difficulties domains indicates more difficulties experienced, with the range for all domains being 0-10. The prosocial domain indicates positive social behaviour (such as sharing) and a higher score indicates more helpful behaviour.

The domains show similar scores across timepoints, with higher scores in the emotional difficulties (pre-policy mean=4.0; post-policy mean=3.9) and hyperactivity domains (pre-policy mean=4.6; post-policy mean=4.5).

The domain of prosocial has a higher score than the other domains (pre-policy mean=8.2; post-policy mean=7.4), indicating the typical child has positive behaviour towards others.

Table 10 measures behaviour, educational attainment and smartphone usage by pre- and post-policy and overall.

	Pre-policy (N=584)	Post-policy (N=677)	Overall (N=1261)
Homework completed on time			
Never or Rarely	28 (4.8%)	56 (8.3%)	84 (6.6%)
Sometimes	40 (6.8%)	86 (12.7%)	126 (10.0%)
Most of the time	179 (30.7%)	237 (35.0%)	416 (33.0%)
Always	312 (53.4%)	282 (41.7%)	594 (47.1%)
Missing	25 (4.3%)	16 (2.4%)	41 (3.3%)
Frequency of classroom disruptions			
Never	131 (22.4%)	79 (11.7%)	210 (16.7%)
Rarely	229 (39.2%)	190 (28.1%)	419 (33.2%)
Sometimes	122 (20.9%)	211 (31.2%)	333 (26.4%)
Often	36 (6.2%)	93 (13.7%)	129 (10.2%)
Very often	18 (3.1%)	83 (12.3%)	101 (8.0%)
Missing	48 (8.2%)	21 (3.1%)	69 (5.5%)
Seen a classroom disruption due to a smartphone			
Less than once a month	114 (19.5%)	115 (17.0%)	229 (18.2%)
At least once a month	111 (19.0%)	116 (17.1%)	227 (18.0%)
At least once every two weeks	29 (5.0%)	35 (5.2%)	64 (5.1%)
At least once a week	28 (4.8%)	38 (5.6%)	66 (5.2%)
At least twice a week	20 (3.4%)	19 (2.8%)	39 (3.1%)
At least once a day	15 (2.6%)	17 (2.5%)	32 (2.5%)
At least twice a day	8 (1.4%)	13 (1.9%)	21 (1.7%)
Unsure	210 (36.0%)	301 (44.5%)	511 (40.5%)
Missing	49 (8.4%)	23 (3.4%)	72 (5.7%)
Involved in a classroom disruption due to a smartphone			
No	470 (80.5%)	597 (88.2%)	1,067 (84.6%)
Yes	66 (11.3%)	61 (9.0%)	127 (10.1%)
Missing	48 (8.2%)	19 (2.8%)	67 (5.3%)
Frequency of PE participation			
Never	23 (3.9%)	90 (13.3%)	113 (9.0%)
Rarely	17 (2.9%)	48 (7.1%)	65 (5.2%)
Sometimes	57 (9.8%)	85 (12.6%)	142 (11.3%)
Often	123 (21.1%)	147 (21.7%)	270 (21.4%)
Very often	315 (53.9%)	285 (42.1%)	600 (47.6%)
Missing	49 (8.4%)	22 (3.2%)	71 (5.6%)
Engagement during PE lessons			

Not Engaged	34 (5.8%)	108 (16.0%)	142 (11.3%)
Slightly Engaged	26 (4.5%)	37 (5.5%)	63 (5.0%)
Moderately Engaged	109 (18.7%)	138 (20.4%)	247 (19.6%)
Very Engaged	139 (23.8%)	147 (21.7%)	286 (22.7%)
Fully Engaged	226 (38.7%)	219 (32.3%)	445 (35.3%)
Missing	50 (8.6%)	28 (4.1%)	78 (6.2%)
Involved in any extracurricular activities			
No	140 (24.0%)	309 (45.6%)	449 (35.6%)
Yes	396 (67.8%)	349 (51.6%)	745 (59.1%)
Missing	48 (8.2%)	19 (2.8%)	67 (5.3%)
Frequency of extracurricular activities			
Less than or equal to once per month	5 (1.3%)	10 (2.8%)	15 (2.0%)
Several times per month	13 (3.3%)	10 (2.9%)	23 (3.1%)
Once per week	140 (35.4%)	124 (35.5%)	264 (35.4%)
Several times per week	233 (58.8%)	204 (58.5%)	437 (58.7%)
Missing	5 (1.3%)	1 (0.3%)	6 (0.8%)
Frequency of interactions with friends during breaktime			
Never	6 (1.0%)	6 (0.9%)	12 (1.0%)
Rarely	6 (1.0%)	7 (1.0%)	13 (1.0%)
Sometimes	15 (2.6%)	26 (3.8%)	41 (3.3%)
Often	55 (9.4%)	90 (13.3%)	145 (11.5%)
Very often	453 (77.6%)	529 (78.1%)	982 (77.9%)
Missing	49 (8.4%)	19 (2.8%)	68 (5.4%)
Quality of friend interactions			
Poor or Fair	19 (3.2%)	50 (7.4%)	69 (5.5%)
Good	38 (6.5%)	111 (16.4%)	149 (11.8%)
Very Good	153 (26.2%)	197 (29.1%)	350 (27.8%)
Excellent	326 (55.8%)	300 (44.3%)	626 (49.6%)
Missing	48 (8.2%)	19 (2.8%)	67 (5.3%)
On average during lunch, how long did you spend:			
Talking to friends (minutes)	392, 35 (13)	510, 29 (14)	902, 32 (14)
Over 45 mins:	162 (27.7%)	146 (21.6%)	308 (24.4%)
Using social media (minutes)	541, 4 (7)	620, 3 (8)	1,161, 4 (8)
Over 45 mins:	14 (2.4%)	31 (4.6%)	45 (3.6%)
On smartphone in general (minutes)	530, 6 (9)	607, 3 (8)	1,137, 4 (8)
Over 45 mins:	24 (4.1%)	45 (6.6%)	69 (5.5%)

In detention (minutes)	550, 0 (3)	645, 1 (4)	1,195, 1 (4)
Over 45 mins:	4 (0.7%)	8 (1.2%)	12 (1.0%)
Average time spent on phone:			
On a weekday (minutes)	481, 298 (252)	561, 312 (230)	1,042, 306 (241)
In school (minutes)	520, 18 (38)	627, 12 (39)	1,147, 15 (39)

*Table 10. Behaviour, educational attainment, engagement and smartphone usage
Data summarised as number (%) or N, Mean (SD) as relevant.*

Most students completed their homework on time either always or most of the time. There were a small proportion of students who never or rarely completed their homework on time (6.6% overall). This was lower in the pre-policy group, who answered the questionnaire in the Autumn term.

General classroom disruptions were rare. Classroom disruptions involving a smartphone usually occurred every month or less (36.2% overall). The number of students involved in a classroom disruption was low at 10.1%.

Time spent in detention, talking to friends or on a phone were summarised using mean and standard deviation for students who gave a response between 0 and 45 minutes, and the students who selected Over 45 minutes was summarised by number of percentage. Overall, 24% of students spent more than 45 minutes talking to friends at lunch, with the average time being 32 minutes for those below 45 minutes. They were rarely on their phone during lunchtime, with the average time being 6 minutes pre-policy (SD: 9) and 3 minutes post-policy (SD: 8) and 5.5% reporting more than 45 minutes. Whilst time spent on their phone on a weekday increased by 14 minutes (298 minutes pre-policy, 312 minutes post-policy), their time on a smartphone in school decreased (from an average of 18 minutes (SD: 38) to 12 minutes (SD: 39)). The wide standard deviations show that there are a minority of students who spent a significant amount of time on their phones.

Further results on disruptions, using a phone for homework and schoolwork and participation in school life are reported in the Appendix.

5.5 Statistical Analysis

5.5.1 Questionnaire scores

The results of the analysis of the questionnaires are presented in Table 11. The adjusted mean difference alongside 95% confidence interval was presented, as well as effect size, measured using Cohen's d.

Outcome	Number pre-policy	Number post-policy	Adjusted mean difference	95% CI	p-value	Effect size
SDQ	529	638	0.39	-0.67, 1.45	0.4694	0.06
RCADS T-score						
Anxiety	508	476	-1.92	-4.54, 0.70	0.1500	-0.19
Depression	509	476	-1.35	-3.93, 1.22	0.3034	-0.12
Total	509	476	-1.82	-4.59, 0.96	0.2002	-0.17
SAS-SV	503	614	0.68	-0.87, 2.23	0.3895	0.07
BSMAS	491	611	0.12	-0.70, 0.95	0.7747	0.02

Table 11. Analysis of questionnaires

The primary outcome of difficulties, measured by the SDQ, had no significant change since policy implementation (effect size=0.06; p-value=0.47).

There was a minor decrease in anxiety t-score (adjusted mean difference = 1.92; 95% CI: -4.54, 0.70). This was not significant (p-value=0.1500). Similarly, depression and total scores showed small non-significant reductions (adjusted mean differences -1.35 and -1.82 respectively).

Smartphone and social media addiction, measured by the SAS-SV and BSMAS respectively, showed no meaningful change (effect sizes of 0.07 and 0.02 respectively).

5.5.2 Categorical outcomes

Educational attainment was measured by students being asked whether they completed their homework on time. Homework completed on time was collapsed to a binary variable, where 'Never', 'Rarely' and 'Sometimes' was collapsed to 'No', and 'Most of the time' and 'Always' was collapsed to 'Yes'. Seeing a classroom disruption due to a smartphone was collapsed identically. General disruption frequency was collapsed to 'Less than once a week' and 'At least once a week'.

The results of the analysis of the categorical outcomes are presented in Table 12. The adjusted odds ratio and marginal odds ratios are presented alongside their 95% confidence intervals.

The adjusted odds ratio represents the effect of the policy for a specific reference group based on the covariates the model adjusted for (e.g. for a specific gender, school year, or school). The marginal odds ratio is estimated by averaging the predicted effect of the intervention across all participants in the sample, regardless of their individual covariate values. The marginal odds ratio is a more generalisable estimate of the population-level effect.

Outcome	Pre-policy Events/Total	Post-policy Events/Total	Odds Ratio	95% CI	p-value
Homework completion	491/559 (87.8%)	519/661 (78.5%)	0.58	0.32, 1.03	0.0632
<i>Marginal</i>			0.59	0.27, 0.92	
General disruptions	176/536 (32.8%)	387/656 (59%)	2.20	1.40, 3.46	0.0006
<i>Marginal</i>			2.15	1.19, 3.11	
Seen disruptions involving smartphone	63/203 (31%)	74/225 (32.9%)	0.74	0.36, 1.52	0.4140
<i>Marginal</i>			0.76	0.27, 1.25	
Involved in disruptions with smartphone	66/536 (12.3%)	61/658 (9.3%)	0.74	0.43, 1.29	0.2893
<i>Marginal</i>			0.75	0.34, 1.15	
PE attendance	438/535 (81.9%)	432/655 (66%)	0.39	0.26, 0.58	<0.0001
<i>Marginal</i>			0.45	0.30, 0.61	
PE engagement	474/534 (88.8%)	504/649 (77.7%)	0.45	0.28, 0.71	0.0006
<i>Marginal</i>			0.50	0.30, 0.70	

Table 12. Analysis of categorical outcomes

An odds ratio of 1.0 indicates no difference between groups, meaning the outcome is equally likely pre- and post-policy. Values greater than 1.0 indicate that the outcome is more likely post-policy, whilst values below 1.0 indicate that the outcome is less likely.

Homework completion decreased post-policy implementation. Students post-policy had 0.59 times the odds of completing their homework on time compared to students pre-policy. The odds of a general disruption occurring at least once a week increased post-policy

(marginal OR: 2.15, 95% CI: 1.19, 3.11) and this was statistically significant (p-value=0.0006). The odds of either witnessing or being involved in disruptions with a smartphone both decreased post-policy (marginal OR: 0.76, 0.75 respectively), though this was not a significant reduction. The odds of attending and engaging in PE lessons reduced post-policy and this was statistically significant.

These results should be interpreted with caution. The post-policy questionnaire was completed in the Spring term and the pre-policy in the Autumn term; as disruptions are generally more common and PE lessons less common in the spring term (with the focus being on preparing for exams), this may explain why the findings appear to show the opposite of what was expected. Unfortunately, it was not possible to adjust for this difference in the analysis.

5.5.3 Smartphone usage

Time spent (mins)	Number pre-policy	Number post-policy	Adjusted mean difference	95% CI	p-value
on phone at lunch	554	650	-3.09	-7.52, 1.33	0.1708
on phone during the school day	520	627	-26.15	-35.12, -17.19	<0.0001
with friends at lunch	554	656	0.75	-2.18, 3.67	0.6171
in detention at lunch	554	653	0.38	-0.60, 1.36	0.4458

Table 13. Analysis of smartphone use

Students spent less time on their phone at lunchtime, with an adjusted mean difference of -3.09 minutes (95% CI: -7.52, 1.33). This difference was not statistically significant (p-value=0.1708).

Time spent on their phone during the school day decreased massively, which is as expected. Students spent 26.15 minutes (95% CI: -35.12, -17.29) less on their phone post-policy implementation and this was statistically significant (p-value<0.0001).

There was no meaningful change in time spent taking to friends and time spent in detention at lunchtime between students pre- and post-policy implementation.

5.5.4 Subgroup analysis

Students with any neurodivergent diagnosis or otherwise requiring special educational needs (SEN) were analysed as a subgroup. This included 51 students who answered the pre-policy questionnaire and 114 who answered the post-policy questionnaire.

Analysis of homework completion and questionnaire results evaluating difficulties, anxiety, depression, smartphone addiction and social media addiction are presented in Table 14 and Table 15.

Outcome	Number pre-policy	Number post-policy	Adjusted mean difference	95% CI	p-value	Effect size
SDQ	45	111	0.01	-2.64, 2.66	0.9933	0.00
RCADS t-score						
Anxiety	44	93	-4.42	-13.16, 4.33	0.3221	-0.27
Depression	44	93	-4.22	-13.19, 4.75	0.3564	-0.25
Total	44	93	-4.64	-13.95, 4.66	0.3282	-0.27
SAS-SV	44	106	0.53	-3.58, 4.64	0.8018	0.05
BSMAS	43	106	0.39	-1.83, 2.61	0.7320	0.08

Table 14. Neurodivergent/SEN results

Difficulties, measured by the SDQ, had no significant change since policy implementation in the neurodivergent/SEN population (effect size=0.00; p-value=0.99).

Anxiety and depression were measured using the RCADS t-score. There was a decrease in anxiety, depression and overall scores, as seen by the effect sizes (-0.27, -0.25, -0.27 respectively), which indicate a small effect. These changes were not significant – this is due to the small sample size of students with a neurodivergent condition or requiring SEN. A larger sample size is needed to gain more confidence in this result.

Smartphone and social media addiction, measured by the SAS-SV and BSMAS respectively, showed no meaningful change (effect sizes of 0.05 and 0.08 respectively).

The effect of the smartphone policy implementation on anxiety and depression in this subgroup of students have shown larger effects than observed in the general student population. More research with a bigger sample size is needed to see whether this change is significant.

Outcome	Events pre-policy	Events post-policy	Adjusted odds ratio	95% CI	p-value
Homework completion	43/49 (87.8%)	78/111 (70.3%)	0.19	0.05, 0.76	0.0190
<i>Marginal</i>			0.21	0.05, 0.48	

Table 15. Neurodivergent/SEN results for homework completion

Completion of homework decreased in this population after the policy implementation. The odds of completing homework on time were 79% lower post-policy compared to pre-policy. However, this was confounded with the time of year.

6. Implementation data

The implementation policy by school is detailed in Table 16.

School	Policy	Disciplinary response	Implementation date
School 1	Individual pouches given to Years 8-14. No phone access at breaks	Phone confiscation and collection by parent from reception	September 2025
School 2	Individual pouches given to Years 8-14. No phone access at breaks	Phone confiscation, collection from reception. If pouch is broken this must be paid for by the parents	October 2025
School 3	Individual pouches given to Years 8-11. No phone access at breaks	Confiscation, detention and possible suspension	November 2025
School 4	Shared pouches for Years 8-14, which changed to individual pouches in Term 2 (January 2026). No phone access at breaks	Phone confiscation, collection from reception.	October 2025
School 5	Individual pouches given to Years 8-14. No phone access at breaks	Confiscation, parents contacted. Head of year notified and yellow card given	September 2025
School 6	Individual pouches given to Years 8-12. No phone access at breaks	Positive behaviour management policy	November 2025
School 7	Individual pouches given to Years 8-14. No phone access at breaks	Tiered response of confiscation. Stage 1. Collect at end of day Stage 2. Parents collect phone Stage 3. Phone retained overnight	September 2025
School 8	Shared pouches for Years 8-14, although Years 13/14 are allowed access in study periods due to homework being set on an online platform. Originally phone access given at breaks, but no longer.	Detention, phone confiscated until the end of the day	November 2025

Table 16. Implementation policies across schools

6.1 Policy Implementation Qualitative Findings

Students: Term 1

Issues with the Policy

Students identified several practical issues with the policy, including cost, inconsistent implementation, and limited resources. They described replacement pouches as expensive and raised concerns about the financial burden on families, particularly where pouches broke, were lost, mixed up, or schools ran out of replacements. Some also questioned whether the policy represented good value for money, while others noted inconsistencies such as teachers not always applying sanctions, older pupils keeping phones in pockets, some pupils not receiving pouches, and shared pouches being taken home.

Students also highlighted limited digital provision as a barrier. Phones had previously supported studying, coursework, transport arrangements and access to learning materials, but alternative devices were not always available or equivalent. Some students reported needing to buy additional technology, while others noted that school devices did not always match the functions of phones, such as camera quality. Students also questioned whether the policy supported longer-term self-regulation, arguing that restricting access did not necessarily teach pupils to manage their own phone use.

Sanctions

Students described sanctions for non-adherence as centred mainly on phone confiscation and parent or carer collection. Phones were reported as being taken to the school office, kept for longer periods, or, in some cases, held over the weekend. Students raised concerns about the inconvenience this created for families, particularly where parents were unavailable, worked far from school, or could not collect the phone.

“If your parent works in [area redacted] and you normally take the bus home, then your phone is in school overnight... you can’t pick it up because they say your parent has to come pick it up.”

(Student, 11-13)

Some students viewed parent collection as disproportionate, as the consequence affected parents as well as pupils. In these accounts, sanctions were not only experienced as a response to non-adherence, but also as creating practical difficulties for travel, family routines and communication after school.

Alternative Technologies

Alternative provisions varied across schools and included iPads, laptops and bring-your-own-device arrangements. However, students reported that these alternatives did not always match the functionality of phones and could create similar distractions due to access to social media. Some also raised concerns about unequal access, particularly for pupils without suitable devices.

Teachers: Term 1

Policy Details

The majority of schools visited in Term 1 implemented individual pouches for students. One schools used shared pouches, where students would hand in their pouch at the end of the school day and use a new one at the start of the next school day. Teachers reported that individual pouches worked better than shared pouches, with one teacher commenting on the issues shared pouches had:

"I think that going in at the start we didn't think that they break as much. That was a good idea to collect them, bring them in and put them back. But because then so many are breaking and stuff, right. But they get these people do need to individually be responsible for their own."

(Teacher, 30-40)

Another mentioned hygiene issues with the shared pouches:

"So you know an issue is it being shared. Yeah. Yeah. Some are getting a bit smelly."
(Teacher, 40-50).

These issues contributed to the decision to move to individual pouches. Teachers also described the practicalities of implementing the policy, which was characterised by several as following a "never seen, never heard" approach. This involved a range of preparatory work, including informing staff, students, and parents, establishing clear sanctions, and deciding on the timing of rollout. Teachers also acknowledged the additional work required of staff during this preparatory phase, as well as broader sacrifices made to ensure successful implementation. One teacher noted the importance on receiving support from students, parents and staff for the policy before it was implemented:

"I think for me, the buy-in from parents has been really good. I anticipated there would be a lot more kickback from certain parents. As a year ahead, I have had no parental

complaints. Everything has been very positive. And I also think for the vast, vast majority of pupils who have been major buy-in, they even can see it themselves. And there are still obviously ones who will try, but they're a few and far between. They're definitely in a minority. So, there's been buy-in from everybody. So that's made it an awful lot easier as well then."

(Teacher, 30-40)

Another described the importance of using a blanket approach:

"They don't feel you're ever treating them unfairly because it's equity. It's absolutely everyone. It's a blanket approach. So there are the few with medical, but there's no one feeling you're treating them unfairly"

(Teacher, 20-30)

However, some teachers noted the importance of providing reasonable adjustments for students with additional needs (e.g. diabetes, epilepsy, SEN). Some teachers expressed initial concerns about implementing a smartphone restriction policy for students with additional needs, as one teacher explained:

"A couple of things that we have noticed and we spoke about at the very beginning was the amount of maybe children with special needs like ADHD or autism who really, we had spoke about that and, you know, we had said how heavily dependent they were on that [the phone] for regulation. And that's just the way that they had learned to regulate themselves"

(Teacher, 40-50)

Teachers at some schools identified this issue and adjusted the school's restriction policy to ensure that students with additional needs were provided with a level of care that met their ensured they were considered by the school policy. One teacher stated:

"Working with educational psychologist on one occasion, we were discussing the pupil and they said, you know, we would give the pupil [a] timeout pass. And during that timeout pass last year, they would have used their phone and it regulated them. And we were very worried. We were very concerned when the school opened with this mobile phone [policy], like how would we manage them? Because that's what they did to calm down and when they had those 5, 10 minutes. But they found other ways that they maybe go on movement breaks, brain breaks, things like that. So, it is good in that respect."

(Teacher, 20-30)

Teachers agreed that their school policy required some more adjustments to ensure the restrictions can be clearly enforced, adhered to and adapted for pupils with additional needs.

Issues with the Smartphone Free Pilot

Quality of the Pouches

Several practical issues were identified in relation to the pouches themselves, including instances of pouches breaking, schools running out of stock, and concerns about the overall quality of the pouches. One teacher commented:

"It's good theory, it's just the product isn't there"

(Teacher, 40-50).

Other teachers noted concerns with the pouches being easily or unintentionally broken by students,

"I would expect a higher kind of quality product. Because it's been mass produced, so it should be cheaper and a lot more to me, it should be a lot more sturdy. I've had ones come and saying to me like this, I haven't done anything with this. It's just kind of, you know, the wee click thing at the top has come loose and shouldn't really be happening this early on in the year, if you know what I mean, with something that's quite new."

(Teacher, 40-50)

Additionally, many teachers noted that the size of the pouches was too large for students to carry on their person, creating more concern around adherence, as students disliked the idea of leaving their phones in their school bags. Another teacher explained:

"It's more the pouches themselves, when everything first arrived. That so they were huge. They don't fit in the pockets, so really they have to then go in school bags, which is really that's secure, you know? But so in some ways, you know, I can understand why pupils are just deciding to leave their phone at home."

(Teacher, 40-50)

These concerns were raised considerably across teacher focus groups, with many teachers stating that these issues were due to the quality of the pouch product itself. Teachers did

note that some pouches were intentionally damaged as a method to pushback against the pilot, one teacher noted:

“There are a lot of broken pouches, so that's an issue. They are being tampered with as well.”

(Teacher, 20-30)

Therefore, it is difficult to ascertain whether the destruction of pouches was due to the quality of the product or due to intentional damage.

Teachers raised additional concerns about a broader lack of provisions and resources, often linked to financial difficulties faced by schools in maintaining the policy. As one teacher explained,

"If they're going to bring in policies like that, they need to put funding in place in the first place to ensure that we have technology to replace what we're losing and that wasn't done. There was no forethought into what we were losing as a resource in the classroom."

(Teacher, 40-50)

This was a particular issue for teachers at a few schools, where they felt that the removal of phones from the school environment left a gap in their available resources for learning, yet this was not consistently observed across all schools.

Suggested Improvements

Teachers offered a number of suggestions for improving the policy going forward. Some proposed alternative methods of phone storage, such as lockers or lockable boxes, as a more durable or practical solution than pouches. One teacher suggested:

"Some [pouches] of a hard case rather than more lockers. Sit in a room that's locked at this again with it. Good. Those lockers that you see in airports are great, you know, like and kids would be more inclined to put the phone in and get away charging inside them."

(Teacher, 30-40)

Others felt that responsibility for providing resources to support this policy should sit with government rather than individual schools, with calls for greater financial support and equipment provision. As one teacher noted:

"You need to increase other technology money ... because you're taking that resource away, which teachers were using because we've been underfunded for so long. So they're using that resources thing like I can't get a computer, but you got a smartphone. So it's in now a resource that everybody was able to use and use well like again."

(Teacher, 30-40)

Ultimately, teachers acknowledged the need for improvements to their school's smartphone restriction policy, through both the method of smartphone restriction and the finances and resources provided to implement a restriction policy.

Teachers: Term 2

Changes from Term One to Term Two

Teachers described a few changes in the implementation of the pouch policy since the first term, including improved enforcement in some schools. One teacher noted increasing enforcement:

"That's just a member of staff at the gate in the morning, you know, actively checking."

(Teacher, 40-50)

Several teachers also observed reduced pushback from students and parents as the policy became normalised, alongside changes to allowances around alternative technology. One teacher mentioned:

"I teach a variety of Key Stage 3, a variety of Key Stage 4 subjects, and I've confiscated a few phones in class since October. Prior to that, I would probably be confiscating a lot more per lesson, per class. or even asking them to put them away or even confiscating them because the volume."

(Teacher, 40-50)

Teachers observed some changes both to and from the policy by the second term that felt like a natural progression as the policy became more embedded in the school system.

Ongoing Issues with the Pilot

Despite these improvements, teachers identified a number of issues that remained ongoing, including the financial and time costs associated with the policy, equipment needs, pouch quality, and concerns about the locking system itself. One teacher commented:

"[As] someone who's subject and materials is all consumables- I know yours is a lot too, but it's again the money and go, "God, could have been doing with that money" you know, some part of it, whatever. It's a big investment"

(Teacher, 50-60)

Though the cost of the pouches was funded by the Department of Education, teachers mentioned additional financial concerns that came as a result of the pilot, such as time costs for teachers and administrators, costs of replacement pouches not purchased through the Department, and additional equipment to supplement learning without the use of a phone. One teacher explained:

"It just takes a caretaker to physically manually go and do that [open and close the unlocking stations]. Now, that is money."

(Teacher, 40-50)

Another agreed:

"Especially when we're struggling for books, pens, the basics, you know?"

(Teacher, 50-60)

Without the use of phones in the classroom, schools also had to finance additional equipment to compensate for previous phone use, as one teacher noted:

"And they [now] have that whole facility of extra IT equipment as such."

(Teacher, 50-60)

Teachers were generally concerned that the money spent by both the Department and the school was too high for the pilot that could have helped provide schools with more educational resources.

Several teachers also raised concerns about the financial cost the pilot had for students, as the removal of phones created a barrier to students completing work that was set using online systems such as Google classroom. One teacher observed:

"When this [pilot] came in, when you would normally use your phone to access Google classroom to complete homework or ... private study, and that was no longer possible. And we don't have devices for every child in the school, the alternative

devices.... [students] ended up buying an iPad if they didn't have one at home or some sort of alternative device. Otherwise, what you can productively do in private study was really minimal ... as staff, we're putting the resources there for you to use and it's expensive.”

(Teacher, 40-50)

Another issue identified by several teachers was the use of handheld unlocking devices in school. As each school set their own rules for their school policy, most teachers were unsure about the use of handheld unlocking devices during school hours. As one teacher explained:

“I could probably go into my class next period and say, OK, we're going to do a thing where we're collaboratively working on this, so get your phones out. Indeed. And we all could get their phone out. But then that undermines the policy because am I not going to sanction that because I actually wanted to use it? Or am I going to sanction the fact that they didn't have them in the pouch and then kind of look a bit silly that I actually need to use it anyway?”

(Teacher, 40-50)

Teachers were uncertain about using handheld unlocking devices in classrooms as that some reasoned it would discredit the point of the pilot. Others also reasoned that it would produce logistical difficulties to use handheld unlocking devices as it would be time consuming. One teacher noted:

“And then we don't really have to be having [phones] out of your class when, you know, time is gold, you know, like you're pushed for it.”

(Teacher, 40-50)

Teachers consistently identified continued issues related to the smartphone restriction policy, notably the financial impact of the pilot, that teachers felt put pressure on both the Department of Education and the individual participating schools.

Quality of Pouches

Teachers consistently raised concerns about the physical quality of the pouches themselves. Many reported pouches breaking easily, often unintentionally, due to the pouch's material. One teacher commented:

"We've had some students obviously who have deliberately broken them. But we also have some students who just through the sheer use. Yeah, they're having them. School bags open, closing, open, closing. Like our students bring them home. Even they take ownership... And they try and deal with the logistics of how we would reissue them in the morning and stuff. And I just have not stood up to the test of students carrying them every single day, bringing them home and bringing them back in, which is where I feel the never seen, never heard is a great fall back on." (Teacher, 30-40)

This was an ongoing challenge to maintaining the policy, as schools accumulated growing numbers of broken pouches. One teacher explained:

"When I said I don't think the pouches have worked, I don't feel that it's a long-term solution, because we have had close to all of the broken pouches... We're all out of our pouches now. "

(Teacher, 30-40)

These quality issues were also linked to increased costs, with broken pouches resulting in increased pressures for schools to order more pouches. One teacher noted:

"It's a big investment. I just didn't expect them to be destroyed so easily."

(Teacher, 50-60)

Teachers offered a number of suggested improvements in this area, with several emphasising that pouch quality required major consideration going forward. One teacher spoke of an alternative where phones are put in metal lockers for the day to ensure phones cannot be accessed, stating:

"I mean, the pouch in itself, I like the policy...[but] I love the idea of the [phone] lockers."

(Teacher, 50-60).

Additionally, some teachers suggested other improvements regarding the locking facility used to open the pouches, one teacher explained:

"Another thing that probably moving forward we need to look into, it's not working great at the moment, is the locking and unlocking of the little unlock stations. Pupils can get access to those at times, whenever they haven't been closed off, at times when they shouldn't, and they're physically able to open their pouch during school day. And that has caused an issue."

(Teacher, 40-50)

The overall quality of the smartphone pouches was an issue mentioned universally by teachers in the focus groups. Whether the breakages of pouches were due to the quality of the pouches or the resistance from students is unclear, however, the call for more robust pouches were consistently noted as a suggested improvement.

Sustainability of the Pilot

Teachers expressed mixed views on the long-term sustainability of the policy. Some felt that, given the apparent issues of the pouch quality and the workload required to enforce the policy, the approach may be unsustainable in the long term. One teacher reflected:

"I'm just not convinced that our model of how we use the phone pouches is a long-term solution. Given the size of our site, the lack of a main entrance, given that we're allowing the students to take the pouches home themselves, given that we have unlocking devices because of our site, they're dotted all over the place and they have to be because we have to get our students to our school buses."

(Teacher, 30-40)

Nevertheless, many teachers felt the benefits observed made the policy worthwhile, describing a broader cultural shift within the school. As one teacher summarised:

"It has really helped to change that culture, but as you say, do we need them? You know, it's more just, as you say, "never seen, never heard", like, and being consistent with that and having those like harsh consequences in place for whenever they do break the rules."

(Teacher, 30-40)

Some teachers also credited the pouch policy to a positive change in the school image, allowing them to address school-based issues through a singular policy. One teacher stated:

"Teaching and learning, behaviour. I've never seen one thing change so many facets of school life all at one time."

(Teacher, 40-50)

Many teachers also expressed a need for government action regarding phone use in schools. One teacher stated:

"The government should just bring it in the law, their phones are banned in schools, but it makes it a lot easier for us to deal with, rather than the logistics of every school on their own. If this wee way of dealing with it, why don't we just drag it and say, No, no phones in schools."

(Teacher, 30-40)

Ultimately, the sustainability of the smartphone free pilot remains uncertain, as teachers valued differing aspects of the policy. Some teachers noted the benefits of the pouches as a method to enforce a “never see, never heard” overarching policy, and cultural shifts around the presence of phones in a school setting that facilitated a calmer learning environment.

Though significant benefits were observed, the continuation of the pilot in the future may depend on the ability to resolve the issues of implementation presented in this section that would allow for sustained engagement and enforcement.

7. Discussion

Our study included eight of the nine schools in the pilot study. We saw a large reduction of smartphone usage following introduction of the smartphone policy. We also found that the views of teachers and students saw benefits of removing smartphones from the classrooms and the pouches were a successful mechanism for achieving this. Teachers reported benefits of the reduction in behavioural incidents but offered mixed results over mental health benefits.

Key headline Qualitative results

Students Term 1

Practicalities

Compliance with the pouch policy was inconsistent, varying by year group and enforcement. Students reported numerous workarounds such as leaving phones in bags or using fake phones. Additionally, practical problems were also commonly mentioned, including pouches breaking easily and long queues at unlocking stations causing delays. Though the cause of the broken pouches could not be clearly determined between unintentional breakages and intentional damage.

Classroom/Academic Engagement

Phones were seen as both a helpful and distracting to learning by students. Their removal disrupted uses for educational purposes and created lesson interruptions in practical subjects requiring photos or video.

Behaviour

The policy increased conflict and frustration, particularly around perceived disproportionate sanctions and logistical issues of crowded unlocking stations. Some students became more secretive about phone use, and self-regulation issues led to increased phone use after school, affecting homework completion.

Well-being / Mental Health

Restricted access to phones heightened stress and anxiety for some students, largely due to loss of the reassurance and security phones provided for contacting parents/carers and friends.

Extracurriculars and Social Engagement

Students reported some positive shifts toward in-person socialising, though some younger pupils continuing to use phones in hidden or less supervised spaces rather than socialising with peers.

Reflections and Responses

Overall student views were mixed-to-critical, with the policy commonly described as inconvenient, overly strict, and not worthwhile.

Student Opinions and Experiences of the Policy

Students' overall views of the pouch policy were largely mixed, but many accounts were critical. Students commonly described the policy as inconvenient, unnecessary, strict, or a waste of time and money.

Suggestions / Improvements for the Policy

Students suggested moving away from a one-size-fits-all model, with the most popular alternative being a policy, where phones could be stored away during lesson times but accessed during break and lunch times, alongside suggestions for allowing phones in school bag, relaxing the policy for senior pupils, and education on self-regulation of phone use.

Teachers Term 1

Practicalities

As the primary group enforcing the policy, teachers reported surprisingly high student compliance, attributing this to the clarity and consistency of the policy, and noting that students understood the consequences of non-adherence. However, non-adherence persisted through fake phones, physically tampering with pouches, and hiding devices.

Teachers reported overall increases in workload from managing unlocking stations, handling broken pouches, and responding to emergency situations. Teachers were concerned about losing phones as an engagement and independent-learning tool, with no adequate technological alternative provided by schools.

Classroom and Academic Engagement

Teachers widely reported improved student focus, productivity, and engagement due to reduced phone-related distraction, attributed to the smartphone free pilot. Teacher-student

relationships also improved, as confrontations over phone use reduced, fostering a more positive classroom climate.

Behaviour

Phone-related behavioural incidents and social media related conflicts decreased. However, some teachers noted a rise in other classroom disruptions, such as increased talking disruptions, as phone-related issues reduced.

Mental Health and Wellbeing

Teachers felt it was too early to assess clear impacts on student wellbeing. However, teachers reported feeling safer themselves, with reduced fear of being photographed or filmed during lessons.

Social and Extracurricular Life

Teachers observed increased face-to-face socialising and the formation of new friendships during the school day, though no clear evidence emerged of increased engagement in extracurricular activities.

Policy Implementation

Individual pouches were preferred over shared pouches, which raised hygiene and breakage concerns. Successful implementation relied on adequate preparation from staff and a consistent "blanket approach" applied equally to all students.

Issues with Policy

Pouch quality was a recurring concern, with reports of pouch breakages and stock shortages. Teachers linked these issues to a lack of funding and resourcing for the policy's implementation, such as provisions of alternative technologies, time costs to staff providing policy enforcement and financial costs to students for adherence to the pilot.

Suggested Improvements

Teachers proposed more durable alternatives to pouches such as lockable boxes or phone lockers and called for increased government funding to support technology provision lost as a result of the policy.

Teachers Term 2

Practicalities

By Term 2, enforcement had become easier and less confrontational, shifting from checking pouches to a broader "no see, no hear" standard of compliance. Non-adherence persisted; however, this was framed as a minor issue with overall adherence remaining high.

Enforcement consistency varied across staff, partly linked to some teachers' own phone usage undermining their ability to model the policy.

The loss of phones as a learning and communication tool was an issue teachers consistently mentioned through both terms, as it previously saved teacher time, and enabled faster communication with students regarding their school work.

Teachers described a trade-off between reduced phone related confrontations and new administrative duties.

Classroom and Academic Engagement

Teachers observed clear improvements in student attention and reduced distraction due to fewer notifications and interruptions. Some also linked the policy to greater independent thinking, as students could no longer rely on phones for AI-assisted shortcuts.

Behaviour

Most teachers reported reductions in phone-related behavioural incidents, including cyberbullying, filming, pastoral incidents, and transferring of outside incidents into school. They attributed this to the preventative effect of the pilot in stopping incidents from escalating. However, some teachers noted limited overall change in problem behaviour, with concerns that certain students were "weaponising" the policy to act out instead.

Wellbeing and Mental Health

Teachers remained cautious about drawing conclusions on student mental health, stating it as too early to assess and noting persistent gaps in school mental health provision. Similar to term 1, teachers reported clearer improvements to their own wellbeing, due to reduced fears of being recorded.

Extracurricular and Social Engagement

Teachers widely reported increased student socialising during breaks and form time, alongside stronger student-staff relationships. Evidence for increased extracurricular

participation was limited to one school where more clubs were created at the start of the academic year.

Implementation

Enforcement improved over time, with reduced pushback from students and parents. Pouch durability, costs of replacement, and problems with unlocking stations were consistently mentioned as ongoing issues. Many teachers called for a government-mandated policy and better-quality policy related equipment.

Key headline Qualitative results

Aggregate data

This data was sparse, due to lack of consistent data collection across schools and a lack of engagement from some schools. On a purely descriptive side, there is a reduction in the number of detentions, exclusions, and parent visits post-introduction of the smartphone pilot. However, conclusions are limited by the sparsity of data. Data from the Summer term and from a wider range of schools would aid in providing more robust conclusions.

Cohort data

Smartphone usage

We saw a large decrease in the time spent on a smartphone in school (adjusted mean difference = -26.15, 95% CI: -35.12, -17.19). This was expected as smartphones were banned. However, there were still students reporting phone use post-policy, this could be due to policy non-adherence (as described in the qualitative data).

Mental health

No meaningful change in symptoms of depression (SDQ - key primary). No significant change in any domain outcomes, but there was a small decrease in anxiety post-policy (Cohen's d -0.19).

School work

There was a decrease in homework completion (marginal OR = 0.59, 95% CI: 0.27, 0.92; $p=0.06$). There was a statistically significant increase in general disruption frequency, though students reported non-significant decreases in witnessing disruptions caused by smartphones and being involved in disruptions caused by smartphones. This would indicate

that whilst disruptions have increased, this is unrelated to smartphone use and they are being caused less by smartphones.

The decrease in homework completion and increase in general disruption frequency may also be due to the timing of the questionnaires; the first questionnaire was circulated in the Autumn term near the beginning of the school year, whereas the post-policy questionnaires were circulated across the Spring term. A 2025 report on pupil engagement in England Schools showed that engagement and pupil views of behaviour fell between Autumn and Spring terms⁴⁰. Also, the proportion of boys answering the questionnaire increased from 3.3% pre-policy to 23.8% post-policy. Previous evidence shows boys, as a group, tend to display more disruptive behaviour and lower homework engagement than girls^{41, 42}. Whilst gender was adjusted for in the analysis to try and mitigate this effect, the low representation of boys pre-policy cannot be fully offset.

Smartphone ownership

Many students reported that they owned more than one phone, and as detailed earlier, that this was often multiple smartphones. The lack of effect of the policy on smartphone or social media usage may be due to this. A number of students views were not convinced by introduction of the pouches.

Disruptions

There was an increase in student-reported general disruptions and decrease in student-reported homework completion.

Comparison with other findings

This work is consistent with previous work which suggested more restrictive school-based smartphone policies were associated with reductions of smartphone usage²⁸. Equally there was no change in student based mental health symptoms, however, this should be seen as needing further work. We found mixed results compared to changes in behaviour.

Strengths & limitations

We included a large sample size, or diverse schools (ranged between co-ed state schools, grammar schools, range of deprivation by school, etc.). The qualitative data was the largest qualitative study to date across the key stakeholders - students, teachers, parents, headteachers

Students who completed the questionnaire varied at different timepoints, which meant we could not compare the same students' experiences pre- and post-smartphone implementation. This meant that any differences between the groups (e.g. gender, school year) would affect our results. Whilst we did adjust for this in the analysis, the low number of boys who took part in the questionnaire pre-policy meant we would be uncertain on the results pre-policy for boys. In a similar vein, one school dropped out after the first questionnaire and other schools were only introduced by the second questionnaire.

As the smartphone policy was implemented at the beginning of the school year for the majority of schools, the questionnaire was not asked to students before the smartphone policy and instead was asked post the introduction of the policy, asking students to complete this retrospectively as if it was before the policy implementation. This could invoke recall bias in student, not necessarily reliable. This also feeds into the below:

Further research

Greater experimental methodological considerations if this work were to be repeated to ensure the pre-post comparability of respondents included within future cohort studies. Greater consistency for reported behavioural metrics within and across schools to DE Northern Ireland.

Regardless of smartphone restriction policy, some students continue to use smartphones in a problematic and excess manner and many of these would benefit from an intervention with a focus on reducing problematic usage.

8. Summary & Conclusions

The introduction of interventions, such as the pouch approach, can significantly support the implementation and embedding of a smartphone free environment in schools, with teachers recording a range of resulting positive impacts. Schools should seek to create smartphone-free learning environments, but future policy should prioritise flexible implementation. Consideration should be given to age-appropriate approaches, digital self-regulation education, and investment in alternative learning technologies.

Department Level Recommendations

1. Strengthen the Departmental policy framework

In light of the emerging evidence on the benefits for learning, behaviour and wellbeing, the Department should move beyond advisory guidance and set a clearer strategic expectation that schools restrict smartphone use as part of a consistent, whole-school approach to improving the learning environment.

2. Allow schools flexibility to implement approach best suited to individual context

Rather than mandating a single smartphone restriction model, the Department should establish an approved, evidence-informed framework of options that enables schools to adopt the approach best suited to their phase, context and operational capacity, while securing greater consistency of intent, implementation and outcomes across the system.

3. Embed staff role-modelling within whole-school policy

To ensure credibility and consistent implementation, the Department should strengthen guidance so that staff smartphone use is restricted in pupil-facing areas, except where there is a clear professional, operational or safeguarding requirement. This would reinforce the policy intent, avoid perceived double standards and support a coherent culture of compliance across schools.

4. Consider introducing age-differentiated arrangements

The Department should recognise that the impact and proportionality of smartphone restrictions may vary by age and stage. Guidance should therefore support schools to adopt differentiated arrangements for older pupils, balancing the policy objectives of improving learning, behaviour and wellbeing with pupils' increasing need for independent study, responsible technology use and preparation for post-school settings.

5. Accessibility of alternative educational technology

A consistent concern from staff and pupils was the loss of smartphones as learning tools, such as the use of Google classroom for classroom learning and homework. The Department should consider how the restriction of smartphones interacts with the use of technology in education, including both for access to alternative technologies, such as laptops or computers, and the wider overall evidence base on the educational impact of technology.

6. Establish a consistent implementation framework

To translate policy intent into effective practice, the Department should develop a clear implementation framework that supports consistent enforcement across schools while allowing appropriate local adaptation. This should include standard operating guidance, staff training materials, parent communication templates, agreed sanctions, escalation routes and monitoring arrangements to support compliance, reduce variation and strengthen delivery confidence across the system.

School-Level Recommendations

7. Plan implementation as a managed change programme

Schools should build in sufficient lead-in time before introducing smartphone restrictions, using evidence from the pilot to secure pupil, staff and parent buy-in and clearly communicate the educational, behavioural and wellbeing benefits of the policy.

8. Strengthen parent communication and reassurance

Schools should put clear arrangements in place for routine contact, emergency procedures, safeguarding, and limited phone access where required, ensuring parents understand how communication will be maintained under the policy.

9. Protect pupils with additional care needs

Schools should ensure reasonable adjustments are in place for pupils with medical, SEN or care needs, including agreed alternatives or individual care plans where smartphone access is required to support safety, wellbeing or learning.

10. Review unlocking systems and end-of-day logistics

If adopting the pouch approach, schools should consider the number and location of unlocking stations; schedule of staff supervising unlocking facilities, staggered release times or bus-priority unlocking systems.

11. Embed staff role-modelling

Schools should set clear expectations for staff phone use, model the behaviours expected of pupils, and provide alternative technology where phones are required for legitimate professional purposes.

12. Clarify technology use within school policy

Schools should ensure their smartphone restriction policy clearly sets out when and how technology may be used for learning, including access to appropriate alternatives such as iPads, laptops or computer suites where required for classwork, homework or research.

Potential Recommendations for Further Research

13. Conduct a larger controlled study

The report identifies several limitations, including differing pre/post groups, incomplete school participation and a lack of control schools. Considerations should be made to the barriers to engagement schools face to participate in research. A future study of a longer time period would allow more robust quantitative data in relation to: educational attainment outcomes; attendance; exclusions; mental health outcomes; long-term behavioural effects; impact on disadvantaged and SEN pupils.

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10. Appendix

Appendix A- Focus group guide for Students

Focus Group Topic Guide: Students' Experiences of Smartphone Reduction in School

Opening & Warm-Up (5–10 minutes)

- Welcome and thank participants for joining.
- Introduce yourself as the group facilitator: “My name is ..., I am a [role] at King’s College London on this project about smartphone use in schools. It’s nice to meet you all. Firstly, I will explain the purpose of this group and lay out some ground rules. Then we will get started!”
- Explain purpose: to hear their experiences and views about the school’s rules or changes around smartphone use.
- Reassure: no right/wrong answers, and all opinions are valued.
- Confidentiality: “We are recording the focus group only to produce a transcribed/text version of the conversation, all personal information (eg. name, voice etc.) will be deleted, so the conversation will remain anonymous.”
- Quick ice-breaker: “*If you had to describe your phone in one word, what would it be?*”
- Additional Icebreaker: “*Can you tell us one word or phrase that comes to mind when you think of smartphones in school?*”

1. Impact of Smartphones (Before and After the Intervention)

- **Learning & Concentration**
 - How does/did using your phone in school affect your ability to focus on lessons?
 - Do you ever try to resist looking at your phones during lessons? How easy do you find doing this?
 - How does/did using your phone in school affect your ability to focus on homework?
 - How do phones affect your participation in lessons / how do you feel it affects your academic performance? (this can be both good and bad things)
- **Behaviour & Social Life**

- How do/did phones affect behaviour in class or around school?
- How do you find using your phone at break time? (do you prefer talking with others or staying on your phone etc.)
- Have you noticed incidents at school related to smartphone use?
- **Well-being**
 - How does/did using your phone at school make you feel (e.g. relaxed, stressed, left out)?

2. Acceptability of the Smartphone Intervention (Before: Q1, Q3, Q4; During/After Pouch Implementation: All)

- **Feelings (Affective Attitude)**
 - How do you feel about the new rules? Do you think they're fair? Why/why not?
- **Effort (Burden)**
 - How easy or hard is it for you to follow them?
- **Fit (Ethicality)**
 - Do the rules feel right for your school and for you as a student? Why/why not?
- **Understanding (Intervention Coherence)**
 - Why do you think the school made these changes?
- **Does it work? (Perceived Effectiveness)**
 - Do you think the rules have made a difference? How?
- **What you miss (Opportunity Costs)**
 - What have you had to give up because of the rules (e.g. listening to music, messaging friends)?
- **Confidence (Self-efficacy)**
 - How confident are you that you can stick to the new rules long-term?

3. Barriers and Facilitators (During/After Implementation)

- Do you think all students follow the rules the same way? Why/why not?
- What helps make it easier (e.g. teachers, friends, clear rules)?
- What makes it hard for you or others to follow the rules?
- What strategies do you use to get around the rules?
- How have your parents reacted to the new rules?
- What do you think of their reaction/ or lack thereof?

4. Experiences of the Intervention (Unexpected Consequences) (During/After Implementation)

- Since the rules started, what changes have you noticed — good or bad?
- Have there been any surprising effects?
- Has the intervention changed things outside of school (e.g. at home, with family, with friends)?
- How? Why do you think that is?
- If you were in charge, would you do anything differently? If so, what would you do?

Closing Questions (5 minutes)

- If you could change *one thing* about the school's phone rules, what would it be? (note this may have been covered above in section 4– if so – omit)
- What advice would you give to another school thinking about bringing in rules like this?
- Any final thoughts you'd like to share?
- Ending: "Those are all the questions I had for today! Thank you all again for joining me. If you have any questions or concerns about anything mentioned today, please come speak to me afterwards or you can email me at pouchstudy@kcl.ac.uk."

Appendix B- Focus Group Guide for Teachers

Focus Group Topic Guide: Teachers

Opening & Warm-Up (5–10 minutes)

- Welcome and thank participants.
- Introduce yourself as the group facilitator: “My name is ..., I am a [role] at King’s College London on this project about smartphone use in schools. It’s nice to meet you all. Firstly, I will explain the purpose of this group and lay out some ground rules. Then we will get started!”
- Explain purpose: to explore experiences and views around smartphone use in schools, its impact, and possible interventions.
- Reassure confidentiality and that there are no right/wrong answers.
- Confidentiality: “We are recording the focus group only to produce a transcribed/text version of the conversation, all personal information (e.g. name, voice etc.) will be deleted, so the conversation will remain anonymous.”
- Policy background: “*Can you talk us through your school’s smartphone/pouch policy and how it works.*”
- Quick warm-up: “*Can you tell us one word or phrase that comes to mind when you think of smartphones in school?*”

1. Impact of Smartphones (Attainment, Behaviour, Well-being) (ALL Focus Groups)

Attainment / Learning

- How do you feel smartphones affect students’ concentration and learning in lessons?
- Do they have any positive educational uses? If so, what have you observed?
- Are there differences between students in terms of smartphone usage (e.g., high/low achievers, age groups)?

Behaviour

- What kinds of classroom management issues do smartphones create?
- Have you seen any link between phone use and behavioural problems?
- Do they affect peer relationships, e.g. bullying or social dynamics?

Well-being

- How do smartphones affect students' mental health or emotional well-being (positively or negatively)?
- How do students respond when phones are restricted or removed?

2. Barriers, Facilitators and Acceptability (Before implementation: Q1 & 2; After implementation: All Questions)

- What are your thoughts or feelings about the intervention (e.g. smartphone pouches)? (affective acceptability)
- What do think the intervention aims to achieve? (coherence)
- How does it fit with your philosophy as an educator? And the school's ethos? (ethicality)
- Are there examples of past policies (e.g. uniform, behaviour, technology) that worked well or poorly, that we can learn from?
- What challenges has the school faced in putting such an intervention in place?
- How much work has it been for you to implement/monitor/enforce it? (burden)
- How have students, parents, or staff resisted it, if at all?
- What would help make it easier to implement?
- Is there anything that you've had to give up to implement it? (opportunity cost)
- Is there anything that your students have had to give up? (opportunity cost)

3. Experiences of the Intervention (Unexpected Consequences) (During/After Implementation)

(If mentioned/ talked about in section 2 then skip this question)

- Since the intervention was introduced, what effects have you noticed — expected or unexpected?
- Have there been any positive effects?
- Have there been any negative consequences?
- How have students, parents, and staff adapted to it over time?
- Why do you think those may have occurred?

- Looking back, is there anything you would have done differently in how it was introduced?
- What would you want to keep monitoring going forward?
- How confident are you that it is a sustainable intervention in your setting? And why/why not?

4. Closing Questions (5 minutes)

- If you could change *one thing* about how smartphones are managed in school, what would it be?
- What advice would you give to school leaders considering reducing smartphone use?
- Any final thoughts you'd like to share?
- Ending: "Those are all the questions I had for today! Thank you all again for joining me. If you have any questions or concerns about anything mentioned today, please come speak to me afterwards or you can email me at pouchstudy@kcl.ac.uk."

Appendix C- Semi structured interview guide

Semi Structured Interview Guide (for Headteachers and/or Wellbeing Leads)

Opening & Warm-Up (5–10 minutes)

- Welcome and thank participants.
- Introduce yourself as the interviewer: “My name is ..., I am a [role] at King’s College London on this project about smartphone use in schools. It’s nice to meet you. Firstly, I will explain the purpose of this interview and lay out some ground rules. Then we will get started!”
- Explain purpose: to explore the rationale for the phone pouch intervention, how it fits into your school’s context, its acceptability, your experience of implementation and outcomes, and what barriers and facilitators you have encountered. This interview will last approximately an hour.
- Reassure confidentiality and that there are no right/wrong answers.
- Confidentiality: “We are recording the interview only to produce a transcribed/text version of the conversation, all personal information (e.g. name, voice etc.) will be deleted after transcripts are confirmed, so the conversation will remain anonymous.”
- Quick warm-up: “*Can you tell me one word or phrase that comes to mind when you think of smartphones in school?*”

What are the environmental enrichment options for students? (e.g. After school clubs, library, study groups)

1. Impact of Smartphones (Attainment, Behaviour, Well-being)

Attainment / Learning

- Can you tell me about how you see the risks and benefits of smartphone use in the classroom?
- Probe for first qn: How does smartphones affect students’ concentration and learning in lessons?
- Are there any groups of students who seem more vulnerable to the downsides of smartphone use?

Behaviour

- What kinds of classroom management issues do smartphones create?
- How do they affect peer relationships?

Well-being

- What is the relationship between smartphone use and students' emotional well-being or mental health?
- How do students respond when phones are restricted or removed?

2. Policy and School specific Insights

Context of Policy

- Why/how did you decide on this new smartphone policy?

External Education Environment

- How does this policy fit into the broader educational policy framework in Northern Ireland from your perspective?
- Are there any external factors outside of your school that have influenced your decision to implement this policy, or any responses that have occurred after implementation?

Context of the School

- Can you tell me a bit about your school's context and the community that it serves? (can include the one below as a prompt if they get stuck)
- How would you describe your school's demographics? (e.g. social classes, ethnicity, gender identity, etc.)

3. Barriers, Facilitators and Acceptability

- How does the pouch intervention with your philosophy as an educator and school leader? And the school's ethos? (ethicality)
- What do you believe the intervention will achieve?
- Have other educators you have interacted with agreed with this?

- Are there examples of past policies (e.g. uniform, behaviour, technology) that worked well or poorly, that we can learn from?
- What challenges has the school faced in putting such an intervention in place?
 - How much work has it been for you to implement/monitor/enforce it? (burden)
 - How have students, parents, or staff resisted it, if at all?
 - What would help make it easier to implement?

4. Experiences of the Intervention (Unexpected Consequences)

- Since the intervention was introduced, what effects have you noticed — expected or unexpected?
 - Have there been any negative consequences?
 - Have there been any positive effects?
 - How have students, parents, and staff adapted to it over time?
 - Why do you think those may have occurred?
- Looking back, is there anything you would have done differently in how it was introduced?
 - What would you want to keep monitoring going forward?
 - How confident are you that it is a sustainable intervention in your setting? And why/why not?

5. Closing Questions (5 minutes)

- If you could change *one thing* about how smartphones are managed in school, what would it be?
- What advice would you give to school leaders considering reducing smartphone use?
- Any final thoughts you'd like to share?
- Ending: "Those are all the questions I had for today! Thank you again for joining me. If you have any questions or concerns about anything mentioned today, please let me know or you can email me at pouchstudy@kcl.ac.uk."

Appendix D – Smartphone Usage

The full table of smartphone usage at lunchtime, on school days and on the weekend is shown here. Data is presented as N, Mean (SD) or Number (%). Upper limits for were capped at 45 minutes at lunchtime and 120 minutes during the school day or weekend. The proportion of students who were over the upper limit are summarised as number (%).

	Pre-policy (N=584)	Post-policy (N=677)	Overall (N=1261)
Usefulness of smartphone during school for schoolwork			
Not at all useful	115 (19.7%)	226 (33.4%)	341 (27.0%)
Slightly useful	88 (15.1%)	84 (12.4%)	172 (13.6%)
Moderately useful	125 (21.4%)	124 (18.3%)	249 (19.7%)
Very useful	124 (21.2%)	102 (15.1%)	226 (17.9%)
Extremely useful	83 (14.2%)	117 (17.3%)	200 (15.9%)
Missing	49 (8.4%)	24 (3.5%)	73 (5.8%)
Frequency of completing homework using smartphone outside of school			
Never	52 (8.9%)	54 (8.0%)	106 (8.4%)
Rarely	81 (13.9%)	120 (17.7%)	201 (15.9%)
Sometimes	125 (21.4%)	176 (26.0%)	301 (23.9%)
Often	146 (25.0%)	164 (24.2%)	310 (24.6%)
Very often	131 (22.4%)	141 (20.8%)	272 (21.6%)
Missing	49 (8.4%)	22 (3.2%)	71 (5.6%)
On average during lunch, how long did you spend:			
Talking to friends (minutes)	392, 35 (13)	510, 29 (14)	902, 32 (14)
Over 45 mins:	162 (27.7%)	146 (21.6%)	308 (24.4%)
Talking to parents (minutes)	507, 3 (7)	624, 3 (7)	1,131, 3 (7)
Over 45 mins:	47 (8.0%)	29 (4.3%)	76 (6.0%)
Using WhatsApp (minutes)	553, 2 (5)	643, 2 (6)	1,196, 2 (6)
Over 45 mins:	2 (0.3%)	10 (1.5%)	12 (1.0%)
Using other social media (minutes)	541, 4 (7)	620, 3 (8)	1,161, 4 (8)
Over 45 mins:	14 (2.4%)	31 (4.6%)	45 (3.6%)
On smartphone in general (minutes)	530, 6 (9)	607, 3 (8)	1,137, 4 (8)
Over 45 mins:	24 (4.1%)	45 (6.6%)	69 (5.5%)
In detention (minutes)	550, 0 (3)	645, 1 (4)	1,195, 1 (4)

Over 45 mins:	4 (0.7%)	8 (1.2%)	12 (1.0%)
On average during a school day, how long did you spend:			
On TikTok (minutes)	530, 7 (17)	620, 9 (22)	1,150, 8 (20)
Over 120 mins:	19 (3.3%)	33 (4.9%)	52 (4.1%)
On emails (minutes)	547, 1 (5)	648, 1 (5)	1,195, 1 (5)
Over 120 mins:	1 (0.2%)	3 (0.4%)	4 (0.3%)
On YouTube (minutes)	547, 4 (12)	641, 5 (16)	1,188, 4 (14)
Over 120 mins:	2 (0.3%)	11 (1.6%)	13 (1.0%)
On Instagram (minutes)	548, 3 (9)	651, 3 (11)	1,199, 3 (10)
Over 120 mins:	1 (0.2%)	2 (0.3%)	3 (0.2%)
On Snapchat (minutes)	539, 7 (16)	626, 7 (16)	1,165, 7 (16)
Over 120 mins:	10 (1.7%)	26 (3.8%)	36 (2.9%)
On average during a Saturday or Sunday, how long did you spend:			
On TikTok (minutes)	371, 37 (40)	407, 36 (40)	778, 37 (40)
Over 120 mins:	165 (28.3%)	245 (36.2%)	410 (32.5%)
On emails (minutes)	535, 2 (6)	642, 4 (9)	1,177, 3 (8)
Over 120 mins:	1 (0.2%)	5 (0.7%)	6 (0.5%)
On YouTube (minutes)	473, 27 (32)	559, 25 (31)	1,032, 26 (31)
Over 120 mins:	63 (10.8%)	90 (13.3%)	153 (12.1%)
On Instagram (minutes)	514, 22 (28)	624, 15 (24)	1,138, 18 (26)
Over 120 mins:	21 (3.6%)	23 (3.4%)	44 (3.5%)
On Snapchat (minutes)	433, 31 (36)	492, 27 (33)	925, 29 (34)
Over 120 mins:	104 (17.8%)	159 (23.5%)	263 (20.9%)
Average time on phone on a weekday (minutes)	481, 298 (252)	561, 312 (230)	1,042, 306 (241)
Average time on phone in school (minutes)	520, 18 (38)	627, 12 (39)	1,147, 15 (39)
Was screentime used to access this information?			
No	378 (64.7%)	403 (59.5%)	781 (61.9%)
Yes	174 (29.8%)	254 (37.5%)	428 (33.9%)
Missing	32 (5.5%)	20 (3.0%)	52 (4.1%)

Appendix E- Reducing Usage

Students were asked whether they used a variety of methods to reduce smartphone usage, and how effective they found them.

	Pre-policy (N=584)	Post-policy (N=677)	Overall (N=1261)
Phone in another room at bedtime			
No	250 (42.8%)	343 (50.7%)	593 (47.0%)
Yes	246 (42.1%)	261 (38.6%)	507 (40.2%)
Missing	88 (15.1%)	73 (10.8%)	161 (12.8%)
Effectiveness			
Ineffective	52 (21.1%)	67 (25.7%)	119 (23.5%)
Slightly effective	60 (24.4%)	59 (22.6%)	119 (23.5%)
Effective	66 (26.8%)	72 (27.6%)	138 (27.2%)
Very effective	68 (27.6%)	61 (23.4%)	129 (25.4%)
Missing	0 (0.0%)	2 (0.8%)	2 (0.4%)
Parental intervention			
No	278 (47.6%)	358 (52.9%)	636 (50.4%)
Yes	218 (37.3%)	246 (36.3%)	464 (36.8%)
Missing	88 (15.1%)	73 (10.8%)	161 (12.8%)
Effectiveness			
Ineffective	54 (24.8%)	70 (28.5%)	124 (26.7%)
Slightly effective	55 (25.2%)	47 (19.1%)	102 (22.0%)
Effective	57 (26.1%)	70 (28.5%)	127 (27.4%)
Very effective	52 (23.9%)	56 (22.8%)	108 (23.3%)
Missing	0 (0.0%)	3 (1.2%)	3 (0.6%)
Do not disturb/aeroplane mode at night			
No	117 (20.0%)	175 (25.8%)	292 (23.2%)
Yes	379 (64.9%)	429 (63.4%)	808 (64.1%)
Missing	88 (15.1%)	73 (10.8%)	161 (12.8%)
Effectiveness			
Ineffective	49 (12.9%)	63 (14.7%)	112 (13.9%)
Slightly effective	98 (25.9%)	84 (19.6%)	182 (22.5%)
Effective	122 (32.2%)	148 (34.5%)	270 (33.4%)
Very effective	108 (28.5%)	131 (30.5%)	239 (29.6%)
Missing	2 (0.5%)	3 (0.7%)	5 (0.6%)
Phone in locked box during revision			
No	436 (74.7%)	524 (77.4%)	960 (76.1%)
Yes	59 (10.1%)	82 (12.1%)	141 (11.2%)
Missing	89 (15.2%)	71 (10.5%)	160 (12.7%)
Effectiveness			

Ineffective	8 (13.6%)	15 (18.3%)	23 (16.3%)
Slightly effective	16 (27.1%)	18 (22.0%)	34 (24.1%)
Effective	20 (33.9%)	24 (29.3%)	44 (31.2%)
Very effective	14 (23.7%)	25 (30.5%)	39 (27.7%)
Missing	1 (1.7%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.7%)
Using an app that monitors time spent on phone			
No	254 (43.5%)	369 (54.5%)	623 (49.4%)
Yes	241 (41.3%)	236 (34.9%)	477 (37.8%)
Missing	89 (15.2%)	72 (10.6%)	161 (12.8%)
Effectiveness			
Ineffective	54 (22.4%)	61 (25.8%)	115 (24.1%)
Slightly effective	83 (34.4%)	78 (33.1%)	161 (33.8%)
Effective	73 (30.3%)	62 (26.3%)	135 (28.3%)
Very effective	29 (12.0%)	33 (14.0%)	62 (13.0%)
Missing	2 (0.8%)	2 (0.8%)	4 (0.8%)
Using an app that limits time on specific apps			
No	264 (45.2%)	408 (60.3%)	672 (53.3%)
Yes	231 (39.6%)	196 (29.0%)	427 (33.9%)
Missing	89 (15.2%)	73 (10.8%)	162 (12.8%)
Effectiveness			
Ineffective	48 (20.8%)	59 (30.1%)	107 (25.1%)
Slightly effective	80 (34.6%)	42 (21.4%)	122 (28.6%)
Effective	71 (30.7%)	52 (26.5%)	123 (28.8%)
Very effective	30 (13.0%)	41 (20.9%)	71 (16.6%)
Missing	2 (0.9%)	2 (1.0%)	4 (0.9%)
Turning off notifications			
No	123 (21.1%)	172 (25.4%)	295 (23.4%)
Yes	372 (63.7%)	431 (63.7%)	803 (63.7%)
Missing	89 (15.2%)	74 (10.9%)	163 (12.9%)
Effectiveness			
Ineffective	57 (15.3%)	65 (15.1%)	122 (15.2%)
Slightly effective	108 (29.0%)	103 (23.9%)	211 (26.3%)
Effective	132 (35.5%)	166 (38.5%)	298 (37.1%)
Very effective	73 (19.6%)	95 (22.0%)	168 (20.9%)
Missing	2 (0.5%)	2 (0.5%)	4 (0.5%)
Putting your phone on 'silent'			
No	49 (8.4%)	100 (14.8%)	149 (11.8%)
Yes	446 (76.4%)	503 (74.3%)	949 (75.3%)
Missing	89 (15.2%)	74 (10.9%)	163 (12.9%)
Effectiveness			
Ineffective	82 (18.4%)	78 (15.5%)	160 (16.9%)
Slightly effective	110 (24.7%)	128 (25.4%)	238 (25.1%)

Effective	152 (34.1%)	183 (36.4%)	335 (35.3%)
Very effective	100 (22.4%)	109 (21.7%)	209 (22.0%)
Missing	2 (0.4%)	5 (1.0%)	7 (0.7%)
Making your screen black and white			
No	428 (73.3%)	492 (72.7%)	920 (73.0%)
Yes	67 (11.5%)	113 (16.7%)	180 (14.3%)
Missing	89 (15.2%)	72 (10.6%)	161 (12.8%)
Effectiveness			
Ineffective	25 (37.3%)	44 (38.9%)	69 (38.3%)
Slightly effective	22 (32.8%)	30 (26.5%)	52 (28.9%)
Effective	16 (23.9%)	29 (25.7%)	45 (25.0%)
Very effective	3 (4.5%)	8 (7.1%)	11 (6.1%)
Missing	1 (1.5%)	2 (1.8%)	3 (1.7%)
Using an app that provides rewards for limiting phone use			
No	413 (70.7%)	541 (79.9%)	954 (75.7%)
Yes	81 (13.9%)	62 (9.2%)	143 (11.3%)
Missing	90 (15.4%)	74 (10.9%)	164 (13.0%)
Effectiveness			
Ineffective	17 (21.0%)	22 (35.5%)	39 (27.3%)
Slightly effective	29 (35.8%)	11 (17.7%)	40 (28.0%)
Effective	18 (22.2%)	19 (30.6%)	37 (25.9%)
Very effective	16 (19.8%)	10 (16.1%)	26 (18.2%)
Missing	1 (1.2%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.7%)
Phone stacking			
No	394 (67.5%)	507 (74.9%)	901 (71.5%)
Yes	100 (17.1%)	97 (14.3%)	197 (15.6%)
Missing	90 (15.4%)	73 (10.8%)	163 (12.9%)
Effectiveness			
Ineffective	15 (15.0%)	25 (25.8%)	40 (20.3%)
Slightly effective	23 (23.0%)	13 (13.4%)	36 (18.3%)
Effective	36 (36.0%)	30 (30.9%)	66 (33.5%)
Very effective	25 (25.0%)	28 (28.9%)	53 (26.9%)
Missing	1 (1.0%)	1 (1.0%)	2 (1.0%)
Would you like help from services to help to cut down your smartphone use?			
No	464 (79.5%)	564 (83.3%)	1028 (81.5%)
Yes	36 (6.2%)	49 (7.2%)	85 (6.7%)
Missing	84 (14.4%)	64 (9.5%)	148 (11.7%)

Appendix F – Use of AI

Students were asked about their use of AI. This was only asked in waves 2 and 3, but students were asked to complete this retrospectively as to what they felt before the smartphone policy was introduced.

Question	Overall (N=677)
Used AI to reinforce beliefs people didn't agree with	
Strongly Disagree	240 (35.5%)
Disagree	180 (26.6%)
Neither Agree nor Disagree	171 (25.3%)
Agree	41 (6.1%)
Strongly Agree	8 (1.2%)
Missing	37 (5.5%)
Used AI for personal (friend, romantic) relationships	
Strongly Disagree	302 (44.6%)
Disagree	162 (23.9%)
Neither Agree nor Disagree	122 (18.0%)
Agree	41 (6.1%)
Strongly Agree	12 (1.8%)
Missing	38 (5.6%)
Used AI for companionship over engaging with other activities	
Strongly Disagree	281 (41.5%)
Disagree	150 (22.2%)
Neither Agree nor Disagree	124 (18.3%)
Agree	64 (9.5%)
Strongly Agree	21 (3.1%)
Missing	37 (5.5%)
Experience anxiety/irritability when unable to access AI	
Strongly Disagree	344 (50.8%)
Disagree	155 (22.9%)
Neither Agree nor Disagree	108 (16.0%)
Agree	25 (3.7%)
Strongly Agree	7 (1.0%)
Missing	38 (5.6%)

Appendix G – Social media and eating disorders

Students were asked about their relationship with social media and eating patterns. This was only asked in waves 2 and 3, but students were asked to complete this retrospectively as to what they felt before the smartphone policy was introduced.

Question	Overall (N=677)
Use social media for advice/information on nutrition and diet	
Strongly Disagree	119 (17.6%)
Disagree	131 (19.4%)
Neither Agree nor Disagree	186 (27.5%)
Agree	163 (24.1%)
Strongly Agree	53 (7.8%)
Missing	25 (3.7%)
Social media influenced diet or eating patterns	
Strongly Disagree	173 (25.6%)
Disagree	189 (27.9%)
Neither Agree nor Disagree	157 (23.2%)
Agree	107 (15.8%)
Strongly Agree	26 (3.8%)
Missing	25 (3.7%)
Social media made me compare my appearance to others	
Strongly Disagree	150 (22.2%)
Disagree	155 (22.9%)
Neither Agree nor Disagree	146 (21.6%)
Agree	126 (18.6%)
Strongly Agree	76 (11.2%)
Missing	24 (3.5%)
Social media had a negative influence on my body	
Strongly Disagree	192 (28.4%)
Disagree	194 (28.7%)
Neither Agree nor Disagree	130 (19.2%)
Agree	82 (12.1%)
Strongly Agree	53 (7.8%)
Missing	26 (3.8%)

Appendix H- Qualitative Analysis Coding Questions

Coding Questions

Engagement with Learning:

Does the use of mobile phone pouches affect attention, concentration, and engagement during lessons?

Are there impacts on academic performance (e.g., participation in discussions, assignment completion)?

Are there any other observed benefits or challenges related to student engagement?

Participation in School Life:

- How does restricting phone usage affect students' participation in extracurricular activities and school events?
- What changes occur in students' social interactions during breaks and lunchtime?
- Are there other benefits or challenges identified?

Behaviour:

- Does the use of mobile phone pouches reduce behaviour incidents linked to phone use?
- How does the intervention affect the classroom learning environment?
- Are there additional benefits or challenges in relation to student behaviour?

Wellbeing:

- What impact does limiting phone access have on pupils' mental and emotional wellbeing (e.g., anxiety, stress)?
- Do pupils report any significant changes in their wellbeing as a result of the pilot?
- What other benefits or challenges are related to pupils' wellbeing?

Practicalities/ Implementation:

- What are the practical challenges of implementing mobile phone pouches (e.g., time spent on locking/unlocking pouches, enforcement issues)?
- Are there other practical considerations identified by schools?