



## **RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL MUNICIPAL YEAR 2024/25**

### **RESEARCH REPORT**

#### **REPORT OF THE SERVICE DIRECTOR DEMOCRATIC SERVICES & COMMUNICATIONS**

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#### **1. RESEARCH REQUEST**

- 1.1** To research the decision taken by secondary schools to ban the use of mobile devices, for improved understanding of the reasons for such action being required by schools and the observed benefits.

#### **2. RESEARCH INFORMATION**

##### **2.1 Background**

Mobile devices are continually advancing, and today combine advanced computing capabilities, high resolution cameras and access to large amounts of information, and continued innovations shape the way we interact with the digital world. Mobile devices are considered an extension of modern existence, which is much the case for young people.

The presence of mobile phones in schools presents significant challenges to the learning environment. These devices often lead to unnecessary distractions for the pupil, but can also divert the attention of teachers away from teaching, compromising instruction, and disrupting an entire class.

It is a school's purpose to lessen distraction and ensure that students remain fully present in the learning process. By restricting mobile phones, schools can foster an environment conducive to focused learning, free from external interruptions. Students are more likely to genuinely engage in face-to-face interactions and physical activities, which contribute positively to their social development and overall well-being. These habits enhance students' mental health and equip them with skills that will benefit them beyond the classroom.

The restriction of mobile devices further protects students from the risks associated with social platforms. Again, by eliminating such from the school environment, students

are better shielded from potential harm while maintaining a more balanced and secure school experience.

Ultimately, by implementing a mobile phone restriction, schools can create a safer, more focused, and calm environment, allowing all students to receive the quality education they deserve.

## **2.2 Mobile phones in schools: Guidance**

In February 2024, the UK Government published non-statutory guidance for school leaders on developing a successful policy for prohibiting the use of mobile phones throughout the school day, alongside a toolkit for communicating policies with parents and a compilation of case studies. As part of a school's behaviour policy, which aligns its legal duty and child welfare standards, it is understood that schools should implement a policy that prohibits the use of mobile devices and other smart technology throughout the entire school day.

It helps schools manage mobile device use, balanced with maintaining a focused, safe learning environment. The document advises schools to tailor policies to their specific needs, aligning with their ethos and student safety, and outlines how mobile phones can be integrated into the curriculum. The resource offers direction to schools that adopt Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) schemes to facilitate learning. It also suggests adapting rules for schools with sixth forms.

The full online resource can be accessed [here](#).

The Welsh Government provides guidance on mobile phone use in schools, though it is generally framed within broader educational policy and safeguarding frameworks. In Wales, mobile phone use is often addressed through the Digital Competence Framework and school safeguarding policies, which encourage schools to develop clear guidelines tailored to their specific needs.

While there may not be a specific standalone resource resembling that published by the UK Government, schools in Wales are encouraged to have policies that balance the educational benefits of technology with ensuring safety and minimising distractions. These policies may also include considerations around online safety and digital well-being, which are key priorities for the Welsh Government in their wider approach to education. For specific guidance, schools often refer to documents such as the [School Behaviour Policy](#) and the "[Healthy Schools Framework](#)" in Wales.

## **3. RESEARCH METHODS**

This research approach involved a review of both national and local guidance regarding the controlled use of mobile devices in schools. This included consulting published national case studies to identify common trends and best practices. A comparison of local school policies was also conducted, examining school-specific approaches to mobile device management and usage.

Additionally, a meeting with the Head Of Secondary Achievement & Wellbeing of Rhondda Cynon Taf Council was held to gather insights from the Education Service, focusing on policy development, implementation strategies, and how schools within the authority compare in their approaches to restricting mobile phones.

To provide a deeper understanding, a case study of a local secondary school was undertaken. This case study explored the school's journey through the development, implementation, and enactment of its mobile device policy, offering a detailed perspective on the challenges and successes faced in adapting the policy to the specific needs of the school community.

## **4. FINDINGS**

### **4.1 Policies prohibiting the use of mobile devices in Rhondda Cynon Taf Schools**

Policies regarding mobile device use in Rhondda Cynon Taf secondary schools, as outlined in publicly available documents, are linked at appendix A. While schools generally publish similar practices, the success of enacting these policies in practice is to some extent unknown from this research perspective.

Secondary schools in Rhondda Cynon Taf largely share expectations regarding mobile device use on school grounds, with most adopting strict policies to manage their use.

Aberdare Community School enforces a zero-tolerance approach, as do Ysgol Gyfun Cwm Rhondda, Ferndale Community School and Ysgol Gyfun Rhydywaun, where students are prohibited from using or carrying mobile devices. Cardinal Newman RC School strongly advises against bringing devices to school, while Ysgol Gyfun Rhydywaun implements a 'gate to gate' policy, which restricts device use throughout the entire school day, including during break and lunch periods, and lesson transitions. Ferndale Community School promotes the proverb, "Out of sight is alright – On display, taken away," and extends this expectation to staff and parents in communal areas, unless a device is required for a specific purpose.

Some schools, such as Ysgol Gyfun Rhydywaun and Cardinal Newman RC School, allow students to bring devices at their parents' discretion, with the requirement that they remain switched off and out of sight. Treorchy Comprehensive School restricts device use during lessons and *formal* school time, while Bryncelynog Comprehensive School does permit mobile phone use during break and lunch periods only.

Rhondda Cynon Taf secondary schools share the understanding that these policies are contributory in preventing device misuse, protecting students' social and emotional wellbeing, minimising distractions, and reducing risks of theft, damage, and cyberbullying. While most schools embrace technology, they recognise its responsibility of safeguarding both students and staff from the negative impacts of mobile devices.

Penalties for policy violations generally involve confiscation of the device on the first offense, with staged disciplinary actions for repeat or escalating infractions. In emergencies, students are permitted to contact home via staff.

### **4.2 Education and Inclusion Services, Rhondda Cynon Taf Council**

A discussion with the Head of Secondary Achievement and Wellbeing of Rhondda Cynon Taf Council, supported by anecdotal evidence from school visits, indicated a growing trend among secondary schools to regulate mobile phone use during the school day. This measure is largely driven by rising exclusion rates, some of which have been linked to the misuse of mobile devices. Specifically, an increase in incidents filmed within the school environment has had both internal and external consequences.

While there is currently no national or local mandate in Wales to prohibit mobile phones, decisions around their regulation remain at the discretion of school leaders. It is recommended that schools consult with pupils, parents, and staff when implementing such policies. Schools adopting phone restrictions are advised to take a measured, staged approach and to have a clear policy in place. Schools in the local authority serve diverse communities, and a universal policy on mobile device use may lead to confusion. It is vital for the school leadership to tailor policies based on the needs of their specific communities, involving them in the decision-making process.

Despite expectations, there is no observed difference in mobile device ownership between areas of high deprivation and affluence, as observed during a survey conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The success of these initiatives appears to be influenced by strong school leadership. In one case, a school saw a dramatic reduction in incidents, from 30-40 per day immediately following implementation, to just 2-3 cases within two weeks of introducing the phone policy. Observations also show positive behavioural changes, such as students engaging more in face-to-face conversations rather than focusing on their devices during lesson transitions. Restricting the use of devices has been instrumental in improving pupil engagement, especially for those who previously struggled to engage in classroom learning.

Although these observations are not universal across all schools, there is a general trend toward fewer incidents and increased staff comfort. Social media activity in schools continues to be closely monitored, as the rapid sharing of content can result in pupils being held accountable for their online behaviour. The influence of community issues on school environments has decreased but has not been completely eliminated, but exclusion rates for serious incidents that have the potential to go viral have decreased.

Technology remains a key tool in secondary education. The integration of mobile devices into school practices, such as daily wellbeing surveys, depends largely on school leadership. Schools are encouraged to manage the use of mobile devices effectively, particularly for wellbeing purposes, to avoid misuse.

Schools recommend that parents refrain from communicating directly with pupils during school hours, as this can escalate situations. Instead, schools advise parents to engage with staff, as schools have various communication channels in place for this purpose. Regular updates on pupils can be arranged through school management.

In conclusion, the evidence suggests that regulating mobile phone use can lead to a significant reduction in disruptive incidents, and many school leaders consider it a beneficial step. A national policy to guide the management of mobile phone use in schools would be beneficial, though it would need to be flexible to accommodate the varying needs of different communities. A standardised approach may be interpreted differently depending on local contexts.

#### **4.3 Observed benefits from nationally published case studies**

As part of the national resource by the UK government, a suite of case studies were published and can be accessed [here](#), which cite the below mentioned advantages of implementing such policy.

Policy development to prohibit the use of mobile phones has proven highly effective in creating a safe and focused learning environment. With pupils understanding the policy, there is minimal disruption from mobile phones, and most pupils refrain from trying to access them during the school day. Prohibiting phone use helps protect pupils from distractions like cyberbullying, inappropriate content, and harmful online interactions. This restriction also fosters a calmer atmosphere for learning, allowing pupils and staff to focus. Additionally, pupils are encouraged to interact socially in person, strengthening relationships and improving communication skills. Policy setting has contributed to a safer, happier school culture with better relationships between pupils and staff, enhancing the overall school experience.

#### **4.4 Case Study – A revived mobile device policy at Ysgol Gyfun Gymraeg Rhydywaun**

At the close of the autumn term 2024/25, Mr H Voyle of Ysgol Gyfun Rhydywaun offered the below account of the school's development and implementation of mobile device policy.

Assistant Headteacher, Mr H Voyle, referred back to two years previous where the mobile device policy for Ysgol Gyfun Rhydywaun was in need of revision. The policy allowed the possession of devices on school premises, but prohibited their use. Pupils would first receive warning if caught using their device, followed by confiscation for a repeated offence. The policy was difficult to enact as warnings were not recorded, leading to inconsistencies in applying penalties. The lack of an enforceable policy led to several challenges:

**Increased Incidents:** The misuse of mobile devices contributed to student conflicts, arising from both within the school and the wider community, and attributed to the accessibility of social media and communication platforms.

**Safeguarding Concerns:** The ability to capture and share images and videos poses significant concerns for safeguarding of pupils and staff.

**Escalation of Issues:** Incidents are misrelayed to parents or guardians, sometimes escalating conflicts unnecessarily.

##### **Research and proposal**

To address the issue, the Assistant Headteacher commenced research, citing the below listed resources.

[UK Government Guidance on Mobile Phones in Schools](#)

[National Behaviour Survey Reports](#)

[Ofcom's Children's Media Use and Attitudes Report](#)

"Stolen Focus" by Johann Hari (Author)

[Online bullying in England and Wales](#)

Further to research, it was proposed to retain the policy that mobile devices were permitted on school grounds, with the stipulation that they be switched off upon entry, and would be confiscated from the first offence if a device was seen in use. Pupils would not be punished for the offence, aside from having their device confiscated for

the day. Three offences in one week would prompt a call to home from the responsible Head of Year.

### **Consultation and implementation**

Consultations were held with parents and the school council. Approximately 25% of parents responded, with 65% in favour of the proposed policy. Among the 35% who disagreed, many lacked clarity on the policy's terms. Parents expressing concerns were contacted by the school, with invitation to continue dialogue on the matter and offer assurances. Feedback from the school council was largely positive.

The revised policy was implemented during the summer term of the 2023/4 academic year and was well implemented due to the overwhelming compliance by students of Ysgol Gyfun Gymraeg Rhydywaun. As a result, the school observed several improvements:

- **Reduced mobile device use:** Non-compliance is rarely observed, and in the most-part, mobile devices are not seen during the school day.
- **Fewer conflicts:** The policy led to reduced student conflicts, and improved communication and collegiality.
- **Improved well-being:** Both the physical well-being of students and the overall school environment improved.

While mobile device-related conflicts originating from the community still occasionally find their way into the school, the policy has proven effective in managing in-school issues. The school has taken steps to address parental concerns by ensuring that students can always contact home if needed, and parents are regularly alerted to emerging themes and potential risks relating to the misuse of mobile devices during parents evenings.

### **Key Learnings**

**Behind-the-Scenes Effort:** The successful implementation of the policy can be attributed to careful planning and foresight in anticipating challenges. The Assistant Head found the school to be over-prepared, if anything, which helped in gaining student buy-in.

**Consistency:** A clear, consistent approach to penalties was vital in ensuring the policy's success.

**Community Support:** The majority of parents supported the new policy once they understood it fully, and the school continued to engage with those who had concerns.

**Willingness to Adapt:** While the policy has not needed to be altered, the school remains open to adjustments if future issues arise.

### **Conclusion**

The mobile device policy at Ysgol Gyfun Gymraeg Rhydywaun has been successfully implemented, with positive outcomes in reducing conflicts and improving student behaviour. Through careful research, consultation, and clear communication, the school has created a framework that balances the digital footprint with safeguarding and well-being. The school remains committed to

maintaining this policy and will continue to monitor its effectiveness, ready to adapt if necessary.

## **5 CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, this report into the need to control mobile devices in schools highlights several key factors for successful policy development. Allocating sufficient time for policy creation, consultation, and implementation is crucial, as evidenced by a national case study where consistent policy application led to increasing acceptance by both pupils and staff. Introducing practical solutions, such as lockers with charging points such that pupil's leave school with devices fully charged, can help ease transitions and provide incentives, reinforcing the benefits of the policy while promoting positive behavioural changes. Over time, schools that have thoroughly planned and adapted their policies, like Ysgol Gyfun Rhydywaun, have seen a shift in the school culture, making enforcement less challenging.

It is important for schools to be flexible, recognizing the need for reasonable adjustments in exceptional circumstances, particularly for students requiring specific accommodations. This includes being willing to adapt policies based on individual needs, such as those of sixth form students, and working with professional recommendations when making exemptions.

Parental trust plays a central role in the success of mobile device policies. Ensuring parents are aware that they can contact the school in an emergency and that the school has outreach resources available fosters a supportive relationship. Consistent communication, particularly regarding online safety through newsletters and school events, strengthens this trust and helps parents reinforce safe practices at home.

Despite the absence a directive from the Welsh Government, there is a clear opportunity for schools to share resources, experiences, and best practices. Secondary schools, and even primary schools, can collaborate to address common challenges related to mobile device use and online safety, drawing from successful models like that of Ysgol Gyfun Rhydywaun.

Finally, a policy on mobile devices should go beyond prohibition, embedding a broader education on digital responsibility. Schools should continue to educate both students and parents on the importance of safe social media use, online safety, and the responsibilities students have in protecting themselves in the digital world. By integrating these lessons into the curriculum and supporting families through regular updates and advice, schools can create a more comprehensive approach to safeguarding the well-being of their students in both the physical and online environments.

## Appendix A: Mobile device policies of Rhondda Cynon Taf Secondary Schools.

The below table provides links to the publicly available mobile device policies for Rhondda Cynon Taf secondary schools. Where no such dedicated policy is available, this is either specified below, or the link directs to the relevant section of the webpage outlining the school's principles on mobile devices.

School name	Policy Link
Aberdare Community School	<a href="#">Link to policy</a>
Bryncelynog Comprehensive School	<a href="#">Link to policy</a>
Cardinal Newman RC Comprehensive School	<a href="#">Link to policy</a>
Ysgol Gyfun Cwm Rhondda	<a href="#">Link to policy</a>
<b>Ferndale Community School</b>	<a href="#">Link to policy</a>
<b>Mountain Ash Comprehensive</b>	Webpage currently under construction
<b>Ysgol Gyfun Rhydywaun</b>	<a href="#">Link to policy</a>
<b>St John Baptist C in W High School</b>	No policy linked to school webpage
<b>Treorchy Comprehensive School</b>	<a href="#">Link to policy</a>
Y Pant Comprehensive School	No policy linked to school webpage