# Parents criticise East Dunbartonshire Council for using AI to analyse school phone policy survey



In the wake of increasing concerns about smartphone usage in schools, East Dunbartonshire Council has embarked on developing a new policy aimed at regulating mobile phone access. This initiative involved an extensive consultation process, which included online surveys targeting teachers, parents, and students. The result was an impressive response rate, with over 11,000 participants contributing their views over a two-week period. However, the methodology employed in processing this data has come under scrutiny, particularly regarding the use of AI tools to analyse the open-ended responses.

Council officials stated they utilised AI platforms including ChatGPT and Microsoft Copilot to summarise anonymous comments from survey participants, allegedly to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the concerns raised. Although the council indicated that cross-validation and human oversight were applied to maintain accuracy, the lack of transparency about the AI's involvement has raised alarm among parents and stakeholders. The Information Commissioner’s Office, the body overseeing data protection standards in the UK, has highlighted the necessity for organisations to disclose how they handle data, particularly when implementing AI tools.

Parents expressed outrage upon discovering that the surveys did not pose a crucial question on the possibility of a complete ban on smartphone use throughout the school day. This question was notably included for teachers and students, leading to accusations of inadequate representation of parental views. Complaints have since been lodged against the council for misrepresenting the findings and failing to provide a robust platform for addressing the nuanced concerns shared by parents.

The significance of public consultation in this context cannot be understated. Research indicates a growing consensus among parents that smartphone usage can be detrimental to children’s mental health and academic performance. A survey by Parentkind revealed that 83% of parents believe smartphones pose risks to young people, with strong support for government-led initiatives to restrict their use among children. Further studies reinforce these concerns, indicating that many parents wish they had delayed introducing smartphones to their children, fearing risks such as cyberbullying and exposure to inappropriate content.

This backdrop highlights a broader national debate about smartphone policies in schools. A recent survey amongst teachers found that while 92% reported that mobile phones disrupt lessons, only 10% felt existing policies were effective. These findings suggest a widespread recognition of the issues surrounding mobile phone usage in educational settings but also reveal a frustrating lack of effective policy solutions.

The council’s handling of feedback, specifically through AI summarisation, has raised questions about the fidelity of insights derived from personal narratives shared by parents. Instances of trauma recounted in the open responses, including students grappling with sleep loss and privacy violations, underscore the urgent need for meaningful engagement with community concerns. While the council maintains that the input has been represented through five key policy considerations, many parents fear that their detailed accounts have been overlooked.

As the council works towards finalising a new phone policy, a collective call for transparency is emerging. The inconsistency in the reported timeline of policy drafting and submission further exacerbates feelings of mistrust among parents, as they seek clarity over how their voices will shape the final document. The call for cross-sectional involvement — engaging parents, teachers, and health experts — may not only ensure that varied perspectives are considered but also address the potential implications of data processing in public policy formulation.

Ultimately, the approach to smartphone policies in schools reflects wider societal challenges regarding digital safety. With youths increasingly exposed to the complexities and potential harms of internet and device use, there is an urgent imperative to arm both parents and pupils with the necessary skills and knowledge. As highlighted in recent government reports, fostering a safe digital landscape requires co-ordinated efforts from all stakeholders, necessitating transparency, inclusivity, and above all, a genuine consideration of the nuanced views from the community.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/25203620.parents-slam-council-new-phone-policy-schools/?ref=rss)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/25203620.parents-slam-council-new-phone-policy-schools/?ref=rss), [[2]](https://www.gov.scot/publications/towards-scottish-minimum-digital-living-standard-interim-report/pages/6/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://www.tes.com/magazine/news/secondary/schools-scotland-struggling-find-effective-mobile-phone-policies), [[4]](https://www.thenational.scot/news/national/24199943.majority-parents-want-ban-smartphones-children-16/), [[5]](https://news.stv.tv/scotland/parents-regret-giving-children-smartphones-amid-mental-health-concerns)
* Paragraph 4 – [[6]](https://inews.co.uk/news/politics/parents-want-smart-phone-use-illegal-schools-3325207)
* Paragraph 5 – [[5]](https://news.stv.tv/scotland/parents-regret-giving-children-smartphones-amid-mental-health-concerns), [[7]](https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5804/cmselect/cmeduc/118/report.html)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/25203620.parents-slam-council-new-phone-policy-schools/?ref=rss> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/towards-scottish-minimum-digital-living-standard-interim-report/pages/6/> - This interim report discusses the challenges and support needed for implementing a Scottish Minimum Digital Living Standard (MDLS). It highlights concerns about children's use of generative AI tools, such as ChatGPT, and the necessity for developing digital skills to navigate online environments safely. The report also addresses the need for parents and children to acquire appropriate safety knowledge before engaging online, emphasizing the importance of equipping young people with critical skills early on to ensure responsible digital participation.
3. <https://www.tes.com/magazine/news/secondary/schools-scotland-struggling-find-effective-mobile-phone-policies> - A survey of 1,451 members of the Scottish Secondary Teachers’ Association (SSTA) reveals that 92% of teachers report lessons being disrupted by mobile phones. Despite 72% of schools having a mobile phone policy, only 10% find it extremely effective. Teachers face challenges such as inconsistency, legal issues, and lack of support from local authorities in enforcing these policies. The survey underscores the need for a concerted effort from the Scottish government, local authorities, schools, teachers, pupils, and parents to address mobile phone use in schools.
4. <https://www.thenational.scot/news/national/24199943.majority-parents-want-ban-smartphones-children-16/> - A survey commissioned by Parentkind indicates that 83% of parents believe smartphones are harmful to children and young people. The poll also shows that 58% of parents support a government ban on smartphones for under-16s, with the figure rising to 77% among parents of primary school children. The survey highlights concerns about online bullying, access to harmful content, and the pressure to provide smartphones to children at a younger age than preferred.
5. <https://news.stv.tv/scotland/parents-regret-giving-children-smartphones-amid-mental-health-concerns> - A study by HMD reveals that many parents regret giving their children smartphones, citing concerns over mental health impacts. The survey of 10,000 parents across multiple countries found that the average age for a child's first smartphone is 11, yet over half of parents wish they had waited longer. Nearly 75% fear smartphones expose their children to internet dangers. The study also highlights that 65% of parents are concerned about the impact of smartphone use on their child's mental health, attention span, and social confidence.
6. <https://inews.co.uk/news/politics/parents-want-smart-phone-use-illegal-schools-3325207> - A poll by strategy consultancy Stonehaven shows that 68% of adults believe the government should ban smartphones in schools. Additionally, 70% support prohibiting under-16s from owning phones that allow access to addictive apps and social media. The survey reflects growing concerns about the impact of smartphones on children's education and well-being, with proposed legislation to block access to certain apps for under-16s expected to be introduced in the Commons.
7. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5804/cmselect/cmeduc/118/report.html> - The Education Committee's report discusses the impact of screen time on education and well-being, highlighting the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) tools among children. It outlines risks such as cyberbullying, disinformation, privacy concerns, and potential negative effects on learning. The report emphasizes the need for regulation and protective measures, noting that while the Online Safety Act addresses some aspects, many areas, including AI regulation, remain unaddressed, prompting calls for quicker action to protect children online.