ESTABLISHMENT OF A POLICY ON MOBILE PHONE USE IN SCHOOL

Report by Chief Officer for Education and Children's Services

PURPOSE

1.1   The purpose of the Report is to seek consideration of the establishment of a policy on the use of mobile phones and personal communication devices in schools.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2.1   With the significant increase in both the availability and capability of mobile phones and other digital devices in schools, there has been increasing consideration for the establishment of a policy to define parameters for responsible and permissible use. This is a matter receiving increasing local and national attention.

2.2   The issues relating to the use of mobile devices in schools predominantly affects our secondary schools and they have already implemented different local procedures to govern or restrict use. The establishment of a single Comhairle policy would bring consistency to such approaches across all schools.

2.3   In beginning to consider creating policy in this area, representations have also been received seeking not to control or restrict mobile phone use in school. This mainly relates to views about pupils retaining access to phones for prompt contact from parents, personal safety, monitoring health issues or, increasingly, to contribute and support learning in class. Such considerations can be integrated into consultation and the development of a policy.

2.4   Research into the use and impact of mobile phones and other digital devices has increasingly evidenced potential negative effect on learning, engagement, behaviour and relationships as well as increasing risk and exposure to bullying, intimidation and harassment. Research does also highlight the potential for devices to enhance learning and support digital inclusion as well as recognising duties upon educators to promote safe and responsible use of such technologies. The development of a policy will give the opportunity to review research in this area and inform content.

2.5   Broad consultation with all affected stakeholders would be required in the development of such a policy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1   It is recommended that the Comhairle agree to the establishment of a policy on the use of mobile phones and personal communication devices in schools.

Contact Officer: Donald Macleod, Chief Officer for Education and Children's Services
Background Papers:

IMPLICATIONS

4.1   The following implications are applicable in terms of the Report.

Resource Implications	Implications/None
Financial	None
Legal	None
Staffing	None
Assets and Property	None
Strategic Implications	**Implications/None**
Risk	None
Equalities	Consideration will need to be given to any potential equalities implications of a proposed policy in relation to potential or inadvertent discrimination. UNCRC Articles may also apply, particularly aspects of Article 29 – Goals of Education.
Corporate Strategy	**Support Children, Families and Young People:** - Ensure early intervention is in place to keep our most vulnerable children safe. - Ensure schools and lifelong learning are at the heart of our communities, with particular emphasis on Gàidhlig, digital skills and new technologies. **Support Caring and Resilient Communities and Quality of Life:** - Nurture the safety and resilience of our communities.
Environmental Impact	None
Consultation	There would be a requirement for broad consultation with all stakeholders in the establishment of such a policy.

BACKGROUND

5.1   Since the rise in popularity, availability and affordability of mobile phones, alongside the significant technological advancements, the requirement has been increasing for organisations to develop a policy to govern safe use, reduce negative impacts and ensure that practices are consistent and compliant. This can be challenging to maintain current as technology advances rapidly, both in terms of portable handsets and the software and applications they use.

DETAIL

6.1   The Comhairle currently has policies and procedures for the responsible use of computers, digital devices and the internet in schools but this was developed several years ago for users of Comhairle-owned computers and devices within schools and does not address the rapid increase in the use and prevalence of personal mobile phones and communication devices.

6.2   There have been increasing instances of mobile phone use causing issues in Comhairle secondary schools and all four schools have implemented some degree of local procedure or rules to manage their use. Such measures include the establishment of a number of 'No Phone Zones' where their use is not permitted and whole school restrictions on mobile phones being present in class, requiring them to be deposited in a box at the door at the start of every lesson.

6.3   The measures schools have already implemented, whilst providing a level of local control, are not consistent and, without a Comhairle policy in place, can risk challenge and issues with enforcement and compliance. The development of a policy would permit greater consistency between schools and support a common understanding of expectations.

6.4   There have currently been very few reported issues involving mobile phones in primary schools, with the vast majority of problems relating to secondary schools. This may change in the future as there is anecdotal evidence of mobile phone ownership extending to younger and younger ages. The majority of apps require users to be at least 13 years of age but this is often not applied or enforced by parents/carers.

6.5   As mobile phones become much more commonplace, they have been seen as a resource that teachers can use purposefully to support and enhance learning. As well as common usage for online research ad study, there are an increasing number of apps and tools available that can support communication, collaboration and assessment. The development of a policy would need to provide scope to retain capacity for such innovation within a responsible use framework.

6.6   A policy would be required to recognise legitimate mobile phone use in schools for reasons other than learning and representations are often received about permitting phones for such reasons. They include use for the management of health conditions such as diabetes; assisting in the meeting of specialist learning needs or in the interests of personal safety.

6.7   International research increasingly highlights the risks, challenges and negative impact of mobile phone use on learning, particularly in relation to causing distraction during lessons. Mobile phones are also considered to contribute to increased instances of cyber-bullying and harassment of both pupils and staff. Equally, some research indicates that access to mobile digital devices in a well-structured and governed environment can enhance learning, improve outcomes and reduce inequalities. There is also recognition that educators have a duty to ensure that learners are equipped to make safe and responsible use of digital devices and restricting their use can result in inadequate support, advice and training for young people to use these technologies safely and appropriately.

6.8   Advancements in technology are developing rapidly and the availability of artificial intelligence (AI) apps and website on mobile devices have the potential to bring significant changes to how young people access information and document their learning. Whilst this can be recognised as a risk or threat to education systems, their safe use can bring significant potential for innovation and advancement, as well as equipping learners for their workplaces of the future. A policy for the use of mobile devices will need to give consideration to the rapid developments in this area.

CONCLUSION

7.1   The change seen by schools over recent years in the volume, frequency and nature of use of mobile phones and other personal digital devices now requires the development of a consistent policy to ensure safe and responsible use in the future.