

Tory call for Ofsted to fail schools on mobile phone use

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Ofsted should fail schools on safeguarding if pupils are caught using smartphones in lessons, the shadow education secretary has said.

Laura Trott has written to Sir Martyn Oliver, the chief inspector, calling for the watchdog to treat smartphone use as a safeguarding concern.

While 90 per cent of secondary schools and nearly all primaries have policies on the use of mobiles, only 11 per cent of settings fully ban them from their premises, surveys suggest.

Ofsted's new toolkit for inspections, set to be implemented from November, says inspectors should look at "expectations related to mobile phones" when considering a school's behaviour and attendance policies.

Smartphones and safeguarding

In her letter, Trott told Oliver she "welcomes the fact that mobile phone use is now acknowledged...this correctly recognises the impact phones are having on behaviour in classrooms and the distractions they pose to learning and attainment.

"That is a step in the right direction, but it does not go far enough. Smartphones are not just a behaviour management issue; they present clear safeguarding risks, and Ofsted's framework should reflect that more explicitly."

Trott told Schools Week Ofsted judging smartphone policies would change behaviour in schools.

"A fundamental responsibility with Ofsted is around safeguarding, and I believe the evidence shows this is a safeguarding issue," Trott said.

"If there was a school where routinely we knew that kids could access pornography, we would obviously think that a safeguarding issue. We should see smartphones in the same light."

Trott said schools should be given warnings if they had poorly implemented smartphone policies – such as the commonly used "not seen, not heard, not used" rule – and expect



'The evidence shows mobile phones are a safeguarding issue'

an Ofsted return visit.

Under Ofsted's new inspections, safeguarding will have its own judgment area with a 'met' or 'not met' decision.

An 'overreach' from Ofsted

Michael Baxter, the head of City Academy London, introduced brick phones for year 7s last month, with plans to phase out smartphones completely.

But he said Ofsted judging school smartphone policies was "probably an overreach".

"If you're a rural school or schools in certain contexts it's quite hard to move away from allowing smartphones, whereas if you're in a city, it's easier.

"Context is important, and if Ofsted went down to a 'one size fits all' approach, schools would be playing into a deficit from the

moment they start."

Other heads support Trott's stance.

Andrew Downing, the principal of Netherwood Academy in Barnsley, said Trott's proposal "would go a significant way to addressing the rising and very real safeguarding concerns of educators and parents".

However it would depend on clear, enforceable guidelines and support for schools as it was implemented.

Scott Parker, the head of Tarleton Academy in Preston, also welcomed the proposal, but said the issue was not about the presence or absence of a device "but about ensuring that our young people can articulate with clarity the risks posed by smartphones".

The government has consistently fended off calls for a national ban in schools, with Bridget Phillipson, the education secretary, describing it as a "nanny state" policy.

Ofsted declined to comment and said it would respond to Trott in due course.

