

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE – 5 NOVEMBER 2024

QUESTIONS ASKED BY AN ELECTED MEMBER UNDER
STANDING ORDER 7

Question asked by Mr. M. Hunt CC

“There is growing anxiety amongst parents and professionals of the use of smart phones in school premises on which the previous Government’s Guidance for Schools (Feb 2024) reported created a risk of “unnecessary distraction and disruption”.

The guidance suggested that a third of secondary school pupils report smart phones being used in lessons without permission. Children’s phone ownership from the age of 12 has reached 90%. The practice within schools is mixed with published statistics showing 60% of secondary schools pupils allowed to bring phones to school, but do not permit their use; while only 6% ban them from site and 3% lock them away. Meanwhile, 13 % of pupils were allowed to use phones in lessons with permission and 9% allow their use at break and lunch.

The author of the Independent Review on Children’s Social Care, Josh MacAlister, a Teach First alumnus who founded the social care training scheme Frontline, believes evidence is mounting that children “doomscroll” for several hours a day causing widespread harm and that regulation needs to be enforced uniformly by all secondary schools.

The authority owes it to children to keep them safe at school yet one in five pupils have experienced cyber bullying which threatens the ideal that a school should be protected from such risks and dangers. According to the latest statistics, there are a record number children awaiting mental health support.

With these worrying statistics in mind:

1. What are our obligations concerning the protection of mental health in children within the authority and how is this monitored?
2. Has the authority addressed the matter of smart phones in schools or with the Leicestershire Schools Forum specifically?
3. How does the Local Authority respond to parental concerns on the matter?”

Reply by the Chairman:

1. The Children’s Safeguarding Partnership has responsibility, as set out in Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023, to ensure robust safeguarding arrangements in the local area. Education and Health partners have a responsibility for universal services for children and young people including for the wellbeing of all children they work with. In addition, Health partners

provide both universal and targeted services that support children and young people's emotional wellbeing, and where there is an assessed mental health condition, support to those children.

Children's Social Care works closely with partner agencies within the structure of the Children's Safeguarding Partnership to promote the wellbeing and safeguarding of children and young people across the county. Leicestershire County Council is the lead agency with responsibility to investigate allegations of child protection and to assess and coordinate safety planning if a child is assessed to be at risk of harm. The Local Authority receives referrals from other professionals or members of the public, and if the child/ young person meets a threshold for investigation (Section 47, The Children Act 1989) and or assessment (Section 17, The Children Act 1989), will complete an assessment of need which includes the child's health and emotional wellbeing. If appropriate services can then be provided as a child in need or in need of protection. This includes both providing a timely response to referrals from education settings when children are identified to have additional needs but also more generally to promote emotional wellbeing. Requests are also made for Targeted Family help services and following an Early Help assessment a range of services can be offered.

Within the Local Authority, the Public Health department has responsibilities to commission preventive public health services. They commission, from Children and Family services, the Teen Health service. In the last 12 months, the Teen Health service and Education Effectiveness have provided support to schools identifying and responding to the emotional needs of children, more specifically in relation to self harm and suicide.

The Teen Health service works with young people aged 11-18 in education. It has developed onsite resources across local secondary schools to provide services to raise awareness of children's emotional needs and to promote their wellbeing – delivering groups and support on a one to one basis.

2. The Department has not addressed the matter of smart phone in schools, directly with schools or via the Schools Forum. Schools are responsible for the policy on smart phones in schools and already have the power to ban the use of phones in school.
3. The Department responds to any parental concerns that are received directly, and to those sent via Ofsted. However, it would always encourage parents to engage with their child's school to resolve any issues relating to this matter.