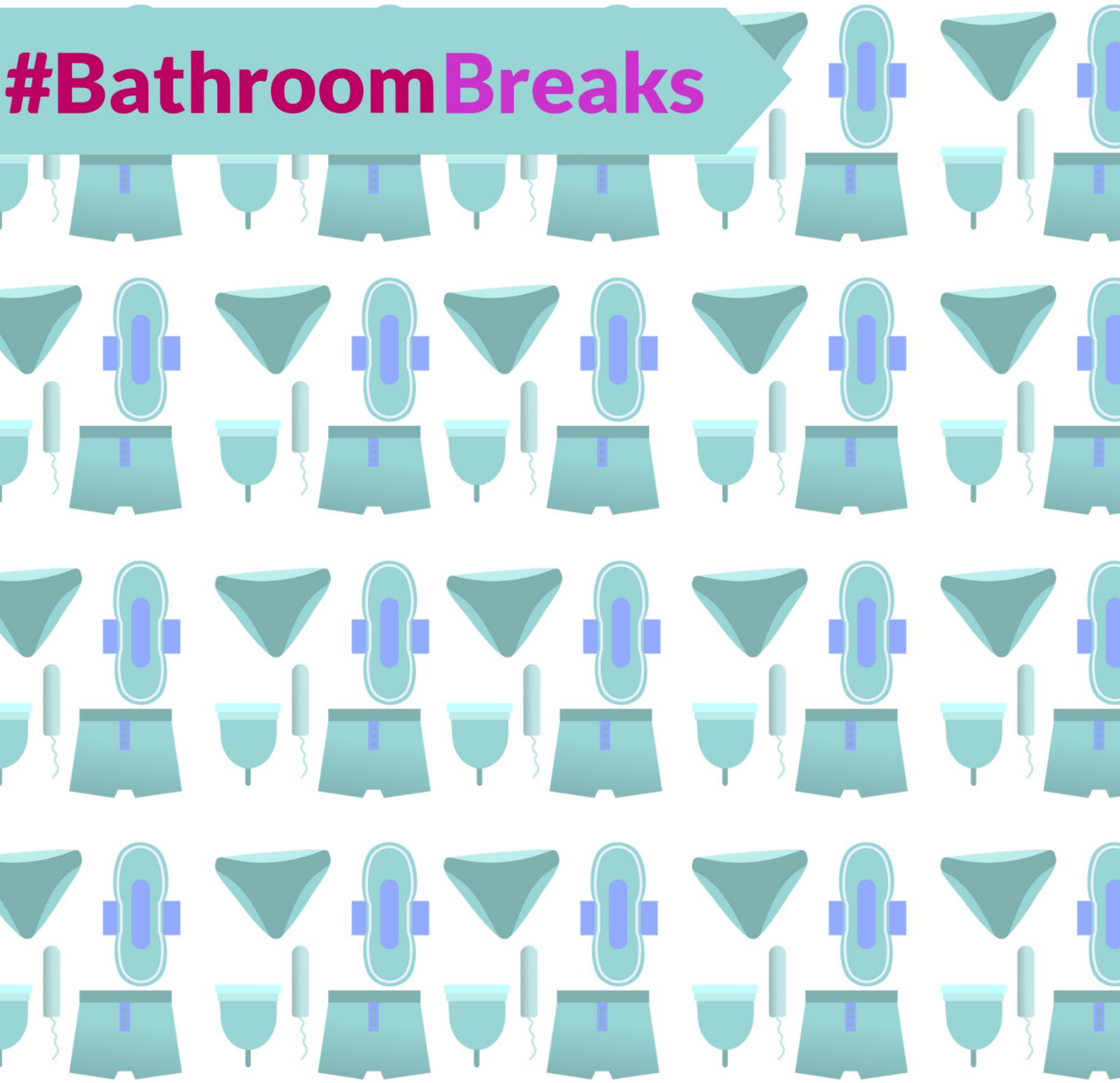


Changing the rules on bathroom breaks in schools

#BathroomBreaks



Centre

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About Centre:

Centre is both a Think Tank and a Pressure Group. Our role as a pressure group involves focusing on certain issues that we feel need attention and promoting different causes. We also act as a Think Tank and publish papers exploring different subjects in more depth. By doing this we hope to inform the public more on the different options available and to generate new policy ideas. Centre is also a registered company; its company number is 12406687 and it is registered as [CENTRETHINKTANKLTD](#).

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Acknowledgements:

We would like to thank everyone who helped write this paper. This includes members of the Centre team who helped us with both finding sources and proofreading it.

Serial title and volume number:

Centre Think Tank, Vol 3.

Released: 03/03/2020

Previous updates: 06/03/2020, 20/07/2020 and 29/07/2020

Executive summary:



At the moment, teachers have the power to stop students from going to the toilet. If this power is abused, it can hurt students and there are multiple high-profile instances of this happening.



There are currently huge issues with access to toilets in schools. “Almost 70% of UK girls are not allowed to go to the toilet during school lesson times”.



Both full bans on students going to the toilets and common-sense policies, where it's up to teachers to let students go to the toilet, have both ended with some students bleeding through their cloths.



We want new rules that mean teachers have to let students go to the toilet if they ask. We also propose a new complaints system for students through Ofsted so students can raise complaints about teachers if needed.



These changes need to take place across the UK. This would involve English and devolved statutory guidance or curriculums to ensure students have access to bathroom breaks.

Introduction:

This paper both looks at the issues students face in being unable to access to bathrooms during lesson times and provides solutions in tackling these issues.

The issue in brief:

This campaign is being run due to some students across the U.K. being forced to remain in classrooms when they need to go to the toilet. This is most important for those students with bladder issues and who are on their period, as it prevents them from suffering incontinence or bleeding through their clothes. Often, these failures come from a false assumption that students can either hold in their urine or have regular and predictable periods. These two facts are not always true for everyone. Therefore, these failures in the system disproportionately target those who are undergoing medical matters or periods in the classroom.

Evidence of this issue:

Listed below is some evidence of this issue and some incidents that have taken place across the country due to students not being allowed to access the toilet during lessons:

1. In 2017, Bedale High School in North Yorkshire restricted access to the school toilets to break times only. This resulted in a mass protest of over 40 students and resulted in the police being called.¹
2. In September 2018, an 11-year-old girl who attended Hasting's Academy in East Sussex was made to sit through a lesson in blood-soaked clothing as she didn't have a medical note. This led to her feeling frightened and distressed. It is also reported that members of the school staff also asked whether there were medical steps that were being taken to lighten her flow.²
3. In January 2019, it was reported that an 11-year-old who attended Cotham School in Bristol was denied from going to the toilet in lesson and therefore bled through her light blue jeans. Upon complaining, the school assured that it would not happen again, but it did. The second incident was the result of a male teacher saying that the pupil could not leave the classroom and go to the toilet. If she did, she would be punished by being put in the SL classroom. The pupil said that this left her not wanting to come to school.³
4. In July 2019, it was reported that Maisie-Rae Adams was told to "control her period" by a member of staff at Rednock School in Dursley, Gloucester. This led to her storming out of class and facing detention as punishment. This is despite her family having a history of endometriosis.⁴
5. In November 2019, the Wales Online reported St Julian' school in Newport had banned pupils from going to the toilet during lesson time.⁵
6. In February 2020, it was reported that Wyre school in Blackpool had installed shutters over their bathroom doors and kept them locked during lesson time. This meant that students had to wait to use them until break and reportedly fuelled anxiety among the student population.⁶

¹ Harvey, Nicola. *School bans pupils from spending too much time in the toilets as police called to rowdy protest*, The Telegraph. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/03/10/school-bans-pupils-spending-much-time-toilets-police-called/> [Accessed March 4th, 2020]

² Littlejohn, Georgina. *11-year-old girl forced to sit through classes in blood-soaked clothes after getting first period*, The Independent. Available at: <https://inews.co.uk/news/mothers-anger-after-school-refused-her-daughter-a-toilet-break-during-her-period-247791> [Accessed March 4th, 2020]

³ Weatherby, Bronwen. *Schoolgirl on period 'traumatised' after bleeding through clothes twice when denied a toilet pass*, Bristol Live. Available at: <https://www.bristolpost.co.uk/news/bristol-news/schoolgirl-period-traumatised-after-bleeding-2427405> [Accessed March 4th, 2020]

⁴ Oppenheim, Maya. *Teenage girl claims teacher told her to 'control her period' after she was not allowed to go toilet*, The Telegraph. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/period-control-school-teacher-toilet-maisie-rae-adams-menstruation-a9017506.html> [Accessed March 4th, 2020]

⁵ Wightwick, Abbie. *School bans children from going to the toilet in lessons - and says they should go at home or break*, Wales Online. Available at: <https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/newport-st-julians-school-loo-17281015> [Accessed March 4th, 2020]

⁶ Beardmore, Rebecca. *Wyre school "takes children's' basic human rights away" after shutters installed on toilets*, The Gazette. Available at: <https://www.blackpoolgazette.co.uk/education/wyre-school-takes-childrens-basic-human-rights-away-after-shutters-installed-toilets-1996234> [Accessed March 4th, 2020]

7. This issue was also the feature of a Channel 5 news probe- who found that children are being denied access to the toilet within schools.
8. Students not having access to the toilet during lessons is something that they are talking about on public forums. This can be seen on the Student Room, which is a website that students often used to communicate with each-other regarding educational content and procedures.⁷⁸
9. This issue has also been discussed by parents on the UK-based parenting forum 'Mumsnet', which has over 1000 responses to this topic.⁹
10. Plan International UK has found that 49% of girls have missed at least an entire day of school due to being on their period and that 70% of girls had been banned from going to the toilet during lessons.¹⁰

⁷ The Student Room, thread entitled "ever needed the toilet and teacher wouldn't let you go?" Available at: <https://www.thestudentroom.co.uk/showthread.php?t=5477398> [Accessed March 5th, 2020].

⁸ The Student Room, thread entitled "Ever been denied the toilet at school??" Available at: <https://www.thestudentroom.co.uk/showthread.php?t=4790530> [Accessed March 5th, 2020].

⁹ Mumsnet, thread entitled "Is it legal for a teacher to deny a child access to the toilet?" Available at: https://www.mumsnet.com/Talk/am_i_being_unreasonable/2891939-Is-it-legal-for-a-teacher-to-deny-a-child-access-to-a-toilet [Accessed March 5th, 2020].

¹⁰ Plan International UK, *Menstruation*. Available at: <https://plan-uk.org/about/our-work/healthcare-and-clean-water/menstruation> [Accessed March 6th, 2020].

Why current procedures are failing:

Different schools have slightly different procedures over this issue (as it is up to the school to write and implement their own policy) yet there are three main types. These are:

- A blanket ban system- where students are not allowed to go to the toilet during lessons at all unless a medical note is supplied.
- A 'common sense' based approach- where students are allowed to go to the toilet on the discretion of a teacher.
- No restrictions at all- where students can either get up and go to the bathroom without permission or tell the teacher that they are going to and then leave without restriction.

Part of the issue with the current system is that student's ability to access toilets varies across different schools- with there being no statutory requirements/guidance on this issue that schools have to follow. This means that some students across the U.K. are being denied access to toilets during lessons, meaning that their individual rights are being violated.

Both blanket ban systems and a 'common sense' based approach can have major consequences for students in the classroom. Blanket bans stop pupils from going to the toilet at all during lessons, meaning that students lose their right over their own body. This can result in physical pain, incontinence or if on their period, bleeding through their clothes. This can be traumatic and embarrassing for students, who may get bullied or experience medical issues as a result. The medical and emotional consequences of such policies are further explained later in this paper. Whilst these protect students with medical needs, who are issued with a pass, often requiring access to the toilet is unpredictable and doesn't cover such circumstances.

The 'common sense' based approach is also a flawed one- with toilet access only being granted by a teacher. Within this dynamic, it is clear that the teacher holds the power- having the ability to grant or deny a child's ability to go to the bathroom, which we believe should be a right. Often a child instead has to disclose personal information as to why they have to go, either that they are about to suffer incontinence or that they are on their period. Both of these are a violation of students' individual privacy. This approach also relies on teachers trusting that the students' needs are urgent, with them still having the ability to deny access to the toilet.

Having no restrictions at all for students is the approach that we aim to implement across all schools with this policy paper.

Reasons why pupils need the toilet access during lessons:

Students need access to toilet facilities during lessons for a number of period-related and medical conditions. Although there are also other medical conditions that students may suffer from that result in them needing to go to the bathroom during lessons.

Periods

Due to the unpredictable nature of periods, it is vital that children have access to toilets. Often, especially, in young people who are in the midst of puberty, it can be difficult to predict the timing of them.¹¹ Other medical conditions also mean that often periods are irregular, such as Polycystic Ovary Syndrome, which is predicted to affect 1 in 5 women in the UK.¹²

The flow experienced by different women also varies, meaning that they it can be so heavy that they result in students from bleeding through their clothes. This is often the result of other medical conditions such as endometriosis.¹³

Urinary incontinence

There are a number of urinary problems that may lead to students needing access to the toilet during lessons, all of which will lead to incontinence. There are three main types of incontinence that affect students within schools, each with different causes. These are listed below.

- Stress incontinence
- Urge incontinence
- Overflow incontinence

Stress incontinence occurs when the pressure inside the bladder becomes larger than the strength of the urethra to stay closed. Any extra sudden pressure can lead to extra pressure being put on these muscles, such as something as trivial as sneezing. Obesity may also lead to more pressure being put on these muscles than normal, or damage to the pelvic floor. Problems with these muscles may also be caused by some neurological issues, or the muscles themselves may be weakened due to some medications that students may be taking.

Urge incontinence occurs when people feel the need to pee frequently, caused by their detrusor muscles (which are in the walls of the bladder) contracting too often. This can be caused by not drinking enough water, constipation or having a urinary tract infection. It is also a sudden urgent desire to pass urine meaning you are not able to put off going to the toilet.

¹¹ NHS, *irregular periods*. Available at: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/irregular-periods/> [Accessed March 5th, 2020]

¹² NHS, *Overview, Polycystic ovary syndrome*. Available at: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/polycystic-ovary-syndrome-pcos/> [Accessed March 5th, 2020]

¹³ NHS, *Endometriosis*. Available at: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/endometriosis/> [Accessed March 6th, 2020]

Overflow incontinence is suffered if there is or has been a blockage affecting your bladder and results in people being unable to empty their bladder completely, even when they try. This may be caused by small bladder stones or constipation. Taking certain medications can also lead to it.

Moreover, there are other causes of incontinence. Some common medications also affect the normal process of storing and passing urine. These include diuretics (which are used to help treat some kidney conditions) and antidepressants.¹⁴ Students with conditions such as diabetes are also likely to need the toilet more.¹⁵

Inflammatory Bowel Disease

It is predicted that nearly 700,000 people in the UK are also suffering from inflammatory bowel disease. The two most common are colitis and Crohn's disease. Children suffering from these or other bowel-related conditions would require access to the toilet more regularly as these conditions result in an increased amount of bowel movements.¹⁶

¹⁴ NHS, *Urinary incontinence*. Available at: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/urinary-incontinence/causes/> [Accessed March 6th, 2020].

¹⁵ NHS, *Symptoms, Type 2 Diabetes*. Available at: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/type-2-diabetes/symptoms/> [Accessed March 6th, 2020].

¹⁶ Bawden, Tom. *Inflammatory bowel disease is 'three times as common as previously thought.'* Available at: <https://inews.co.uk/news/health/hundreds-of-thousands-of-britons-have-inflammatory-bowel-disease-817228> [Accessed March 6th, 2020].

Current guidance/documentation in each state:

Overall, there is little guidance on allowing students to go to the bathroom in the UK.

England/Northern Ireland and Scotland

Within the English, Northern Irish and Scottish systems, there seems to be no guidance at all around this issue. This conclusion was reached through our own personal research as an organisation.

Disclaimer: We have emailed the relevant department for each state and are awaiting a response, if anything new is received then we will amend this paper.

Wales

Such guidance does exist although it is not mandatory. This guidance in the “School toilets: Good practice guidance for schools in Wales”¹⁷

This guidance also contains responses to a Welsh Government survey, a section of this is reprinted below:

Have you come across the following problems in your school toilets?		
Not allowed to use the toilet when you need to	Often	31% (545)
	Sometimes	41% (726)
	Never	25% (451)
	Not identified	3% (64)

This guidance is clearly ineffective as there are some schools within Wales that are still not letting their children access the toilet during lessons. This is seen by St Julian’s School in Newport.

¹⁷ Llywodraeth Cymru. *School toilets: Good practise guidance for schools in Wales*. Available at: <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-03/school-toilets-good-practice-guidance-for-schools-in-wales.pdf> [Accessed March 6th, 2020] Pg.13.

Why other proposed solutions would not work:

The use of 'medical notes'

Medical notes are a system that some schools currently use, these allowing only students with medical reasons to go to the bathroom. However, as discussed previously in the paper- medical conditions are not the only sole cause of urinary incontinence. Moreover, not allowing students to access the toilet, even without a medical condition, can still have negative consequences and lead to ill-health. Holding urine can expose the body to harmful bacteria, which increases the risk of them getting a urinary tract infection.¹⁸

Moreover, medical notes themselves often cost money¹⁹, which would disadvantage those from poorer backgrounds.

Current legislation being put forward

Layla Moran MP is currently putting forward the below motion to Parliament:

School Toilets (Access During Lessons) Bill

“A Bill to require the Secretary of State to publish guidance for state-funded schools on allowing pupil access to toilets during lessons; and for connected purposes.”

However, the Bill has the following issues:

1. It is only a proposed solution for England and not the rest of the United Kingdom, as education is a devolved matter.
2. Guidance doesn't have to be followed by teachers or schools; therefore, it can be ignored and thus these issues persist. This can be seen within Wales, where despite guidance around this issue existing, it is still a problem within Welsh schools.²⁰

Our proposed solutions would solve these two major issues with the Bill. It lays out the procedure needed to solve this issue within each devolved body and England, whilst also making sure that legislation on this issue would be statutory.

¹⁸ Gladwell, Hattie. *Students should not be refused the right to use the toilet during lessons*. The Metro. Available at: <https://metro.co.uk/2018/02/16/students-should-not-be-refused-the-right-to-use-the-toilet-during-lessons-7314691/> [Accessed March 6th, 2020].

¹⁹ Littlejohn, Georgina. *11-year-old girl forced to sit through classes in blood-soaked clothes after getting first period*, The Independent. Available at: <https://inews.co.uk/news/mothers-anger-after-school-refused-her-daughter-a-toilet-break-during-her-period-247791> [Accessed March 4th, 2020].

²⁰ Wightwick, Abbie. *School bans children from going to the toilet in lessons - and says they should go at home or break*, Wales Online. Available at: <https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/newport-st-julians-school-loo-17281015> [Accessed March 4th, 2020].

Our solutions:

We support a safe and stable environment for all students to learn in along with the ability for students to have control over their own bodies. To change this system and thus ensure that these two things are kept within UK schools, we call for:

- Mandatory guidelines mean that teachers can't stop students from going to the toilet.

England

- A clause on this issue inserted in "The national curriculum in England" "Framework document", within section four "inclusion" and in the section titled "Responding to pupils' needs and overcoming potential barriers for individuals and groups of pupils". This is in the same for the Key Stage 1 Framework²¹, the primary curriculum framework²² and the secondary curriculum framework.²³
- It could also be a separate document in the governments "Schools: statutory guidance"²⁴
- This clause would make it a statutory requirement that teachers allow their students to go to the toilet during a lesson.
- Ofsted would have to investigate potential breaches of the rules and would need to create new lines of communications for any complaints about staff that have broken the rules. This could include an online form or a helpline for students or parents to report breaches to.

²¹ Department of Education. *National curriculum in England: framework for key stages 1 to 4*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-curriculum-in-england-framework-for-key-stages-1-to-4> [Accessed March 4th, 2020].

²² Department of Education. *National curriculum in England- primary curriculum*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-curriculum-in-england-primary-curriculum> [Accessed March 4th, 2020].

²³ Department of Education. *National curriculum in England: secondary curriculum*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-curriculum-in-england-secondary-curriculum> [Accessed March 4th, 2020].

²⁴ Department of Education. *Schools: statutory guidance*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statutory-guidance-schools#safeguarding-children-and-young-people> [Accessed March 4th, 2020].

Wales

- Update the document released by the Welsh government “School toilets: Good practice guidance for schools in Wales”²⁵ to also include statutory rules requiring students to have toilet access during lessons.
- Estyn would have to investigate potential breaches of the rules and would need to create new lines of communications for any complaints about staff that have broken the rules. This could include an online form or a helpline for students or parents to report breaches to.

Scotland

- A clause making it a statutory requirement that teachers allow students go to the toilet during lessons will be placed in the Scottish “curriculum for excellence” in the “Health and wellbeing across learning: responsibilities of all Principles and practice” section.²⁶
- Education Scotland would have to investigate potential breaches of the rules and would need to create new lines of communications for any complaints about staff that have broken the rules. This could include an online form or a helpline for students or parents to report breaches to.

Northern Ireland

- Statutory guidance on this issue would be included in the new wellbeing framework, which is currently being proposed.²⁷
- The Education and Training Inspectorate would have to investigate potential breaches of the rules and would need to create new lines of communications for any complaints about staff that have broken the rules. This could include an online form or a helpline for students or parents to report breaches to.

Schools that do not follow the national curriculum

- For schools that do not operate under the national curriculum this will fall under safeguarding measures and will still be mandatory for students.

²⁵ Llywodraeth Cymru. *School toilets: Good practise guidance for schools in Wales*. Available at: <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-03/school-toilets-good-practice-guidance-for-schools-in-wales.pdf> [Accessed March 6th, 2020].

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How these changes will affect teachers:

Whilst we would support students having the right to use the toilets during lessons, we also understand that teachers will be worried about such a system being abused by students. It must therefore be stressed that teachers will still be able to log students that leave the classroom and can follow up with students if they leave the classroom multiple times. This will also help to tackle the deeper issue behind why students want to leave the classroom such as bullying or family issues.

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To reference this paper:

Reference as a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO):

Centre Think Tank, 'Changing the rules on bathroom breaks in schools' (London, Centre Think Tank, 2020)

Reference the website link:

Centre Think Tank, *Changing the rules on bathroom breaks in schools*. Available at: <https://www.centreuk.co.uk/mainpages/bathroombreaks.pdf> [Accessed 00/00/0000].

Reference as a journal article:

Samrai, J. Wilkins, T. 'Bathroom Breaks', *Centre Think Tank*, 3 (2020) pp. 1-22.

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