



Committee for Education

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

School Uniforms (Guidelines and  
Allowances) Bill:  
Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children  
and Young People

3 June 2025

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Nick Mathison (Chairperson)  
Mr Pat Sheehan (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Danny Baker  
Mr David Brooks  
Mr Colin Crawford  
Mrs Michelle Guy  
Mr Peter Martin  
Mrs Cathy Mason

**Witnesses:**

Ms Laura McFall	Office of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People
Mr Chris Quinn	Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People
Ms Rachel Woods	Office of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** You are all very welcome here today. It is great to have Chris Quinn, the Children's Commissioner, back at the Committee; we look forward to hearing from you. We also have, from the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY), Laura McFall, participation officer, who joined us for the previous session; and Rachel Woods, interim head of policy. As with the other sessions, this is an opportunity for the Committee to gather perspectives on the implications of the School Uniforms (Guidelines and Allowances) Bill. I will hand over to you, Chris, to make any opening remarks. You have up to 10 minutes — there is no need to treat that as a target — and then we will get into questions and answers.

**Mr Chris Quinn (Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People):** Thank you, Chair and members, for having us back in front of the Committee to give evidence on the School Uniforms Bill. I particularly thank the Committee for engaging with young people in the previous session. I want to put on record that I thought that they were amazing. The Committee heard from two 11-year-old children, along with a couple of older young people and the young people from the Youth Assembly. They all spoke really well, and fair play to the Committee for having them here.

I have submitted an evidence paper to the Committee, which I hope that you have had time to read. I will not go over the paper in detail, but I will use my opening remarks to highlight some areas of particular interest, which we can then discuss through questions. We provided advice to the Government through the consultation process in the lead-up to the Bill's introduction. You will be glad to hear that I do not intend to take the whole 10 minutes for my opening remarks.

Several articles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) are relevant to the Bill. The young people referenced a lot of those articles today, including provisions that aim to ensure that children are provided with basic necessities to support their growth and development, health and access to education. Parents are also supported to provide for the material needs of their children. I encourage the Committee to take a children's-rights approach to scrutinising the Bill and its clauses and to any discussions about amendments. I am aware that Claire Sugden has submitted an amendment, which will be debated at Consideration Stage should it be accepted. I wish to put on record my support for what that amendment seeks to achieve.

I appreciate the need for reforms and the ethos behind them. However, NICCY is acutely aware of the many issues around school uniforms, especially affordability, comfort and the barriers to education and play that they can cause. The cost of school uniforms is not a new issue for NICCY, nor, indeed, is it for parents or children and young people. Laura McFall, who accompanies me today, has worked for over 30 years on supporting children and young people on school uniform policy. NICCY has previously raised concerns about the cost and availability of uniforms, and about school policies potentially being barriers to education, and we look at it through a poverty lens.

As you heard from Astrid, Bethany, Rhea and Eva, the issue engages with a number of key children's rights in the UNCRC, namely those mentioned in articles 3, 5, 12, 16, 23, 28, 29 and 31. It also engages with article 2, which is that all rights apply to all children without discrimination; article 13, which is about the right to freedom of expression; and article 27, which guarantees that every child has the right to a standard of living that is adequate for their physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development. I take this opportunity to call for the full and direct incorporation of the UNCRC into domestic law. I hope to engage with you on that in the future.

As the Committee has heard, children and young people talk about aspects of uniforms that make it difficult for them to walk, cycle or take public transport to and from school. The requirement to wear skirts or impractical shoes hinders their ability to cycle, walk longer distances and play. That is why I encourage consideration of an additional provision in clause 2 to make it explicit that schools must consider functionality when issuing a school uniform policy. I have also recommended that a cap on costs be introduced, as that is required to make the legislation meaningful. It is also important that the uniform grant is subsequently raised to reflect the actual cost of uniforms, and I have outlined the reasons for that in my submission. It is particularly important to recognise the cost in the context of the draft anti-poverty strategy, which the Committee for Communities considered last week. Although I have not had sight of the draft policy, I would be more than happy to come back and speak to the Committee about it in the future.

As outlined in the submission, it is important that the Committee considers our briefing paper on the adequacy of current free school meal eligibility criteria as an effective method of targeting the provision of free school meals and uniform grants at children in poverty. Our paper draws on the findings of a report, which was commissioned by my office, from Dr Nicole Gleghorne of Queen's University. That report provides analysis of the family resource survey data from 2017 to 2020 to determine how closely the current free school meal eligibility criteria identify children in poverty. It found that the current eligibility criteria are extremely inaccurate, with only 59% of children in poverty being eligible for free school meals. Conversely, it also found that only a third of children — 34% — who are eligible for free school meals are experiencing poverty. That means that a significant proportion of working families who are on low incomes and not receiving any benefits are not entitled to free school meals, which, in turn, impacts on their eligibility for uniform grants. Children who attend nursery school are eligible to apply for free school meals, but they cannot apply for a uniform grant. As previously raised, it is concerning that the Bill does not seek to include nursery or preschools.

Grants should not be confined to one per school year. Flexibility should be built in to allow eligible families to apply for a uniform grant should their circumstances change: for example, a pupil changing school for whatever reason, such as a move to permanent accommodation in a different geographical location; or their uniform being lost or stolen. I urge the Committee to ensure that flexibility is built into the guidance.

Whilst this is not explicitly in the Bill, the introduction of new or amended school uniform policies would naturally have an impact on the nature of their enforcement. That, in turn, could mean a change in school uniform codes, policies and procedures, which might mean a record being kept of rule violations or lead to further disciplinary actions. Pupils should not face significant sanctions, such as being sent home or isolated, for breaking school uniform rules. A breach of uniform policy should not be met with discipline that could breach a child's fundamental right to education. Schools should never

use isolation as a sanction for uniform infringements or anything else. I suggest in my submission that the Committee might consider the inclusion of additional enforceable guidance in that area to ensure that that does not happen.

Policies should be flexible. Schools must ensure that the views of the pupils and their parents and carers are heard, and show flexibility and pragmatism in application of the policies. That should be done through engagement with school councils or surveys with children and young people and their parents, and could follow the same process that is being undertaken by schools prior to the Bill's enactment.

We have an opportunity to ensure that the Bill is right, in all aspects, for children and young people and their families. Whilst I welcome the Bill, we have some way to go. I believe that we can get there through a children's rights perspective. I am more than happy to take questions, and my colleagues are here to help.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Thank you for that opening presentation. I will begin with the same question that I asked the young people, because it is an issue that has taken up quite a bit of Committee time. It is on a conversation that began when we heard from the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, which was clear that it wants to see a rights-based perspective in the Bill, and stated that there was, perhaps, scope to expand that in a clause on the principles of the Bill. We have considered having — to use the shorthand — "an inclusivity clause" that looks at issues of gender, race, religion and disability, and considered whether we want to see school uniform policies being required to have an inclusive approach built in. Would you support that?

**Mr Quinn:** Yes, very much so. Inclusivity and equality must be in the Bill. We need to be explicit in our reference to gender-neutral, flexible and functional school uniforms. We are very clear on that issue.

**Ms Rachel Woods (Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People):** I know that there was discussion with the Human Rights Commission about neutral school uniform policies, which we would support. However, we want to take it back to what inclusive education is. I know that this Committee and the previous Committee have considered that matter. Inclusive education is about protection of equal opportunity for all students, regardless of their background. Choice and cultural expression should be accommodated in a school setting. School is where children and young people receive most of their education and spend most of their time growing up, and school uniform policies should promote equality and respect. We would expect, as a minimum, the promotion of inclusivity in policy, as well as inclusive education in general. We can do that through good relations as well. There are the section 75 duties but also section 76 duties about the promotion of good relations, and it could be done under those.

I know that there were questions about whether that needs to be in the Bill, and we agree with the Human Rights Commission that, yes, it does, otherwise there is wiggle room. If it is in the Bill, it will be introduced. If it is not, there is still room for interpretation. I very much support what the Human Rights Commission said. We heard about SEND from one of our young people earlier. The ages of children and any SEND issues, learning difficulties or sensory issues, whether undiagnosed or diagnosed, need to be reflected. We take them seriously, and school uniform policies must follow suit.

**Ms Laura McFall (Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People):** We also need to remember what rights, and children's rights in particular, are: they are not a gold standard or a wish list that we want to get to at some stage; they are the basic minimum standard that we expect children to be treated at — that we, as a country, have already signed up to. It is not something that we are asking for in addition. We, as a nation, have already said, "Yes, we will promote and protect children's rights". We report to the UN on it periodically. Therefore, of course, anything that relates to children should be very explicit in respecting their rights.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** That is helpful. I will move on to another issue that you raised: functionality. It came up in the evidence from the young people. You specifically referenced active travel in that regard. This came up in a discussion last week and is a bit of a hobby horse of mine: the play-based curriculum, and whether uniform policies are functional in allowing the youngest learners to access the curriculum. Are you of the view that we need some sort of additional clause in the Bill that specifically and prescriptively directs uniform policies in respect of uniforms' functionality? I note that the word "practicality" is used. Do you think that that covers it, or does it need to be stronger?

**Mr Quinn:** It needs to be stronger. I will bring it back to what children and young people, parents and carers tell me. The big thing that I am told about is cost and comfort. Under comfort, I would talk about functionality. You may have seen a 'Belfast Live' article on Rhea's campaign, in which she said:

*"I just want to do cartwheels at break time."*

She has also talked about doing farming classes in school, and I can imagine the challenges of working on a farm in inappropriate clothing. However, it goes beyond that. You heard another young person today talk about sensory issues. Young girls often talk to me about the rules around tights and socks. There are lots of variables, and the Bill could be stronger on functionality.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** I will broaden that a little bit. There has been discussion in Committee about whether the Bill, as primary legislation, should be prescriptive or if, really, we should set out some principles and wait for the guidelines. Do you have a view on the level of prescriptiveness that you want to see in the Bill?

**Ms McFall:** As Chris said, I have been working on the issue for 30 years or more, since I was a teenager. In those days, there was a man who sat at the front of the bus and would stick his hand up all the girls' skirts. Thankfully, we have moved away from those days, but we are not that far away from them. We have given schools the opportunity to be consistent across the board. We have the evidence of the impact of uniforms on children and young people, and we are not seeing any change, so now is the time to be prescriptive. I know that the Minister was minded to do things as they have been done before, but, as you mentioned earlier, police uniforms recently moved to being more functional, comfortable and in line with police duties. It is important to do similar for children and young people.

**Mr Quinn:** It should be acknowledged that lots of schools are handling the situation well. However, we come across schools that are not. Uniforms can be very costly, and the rules can be really restrictive in respect of a child's right to education. The Bill acknowledges why that is. It references that the Department published guidance in 2004 and revised that guidance in 2018. I read that as the Minister acknowledging that guidance is not always the most appropriate way to deliver the outcome. We have seen other examples of where guidance has not worked.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** That is helpful. I am conscious that we have pretty much a full Committee here today and there will be plenty of other questions. Clauses 3 and 4 might get some attention, as may the enforcement issues. In the interests of time, I will let other members cover those issues.

**Mr Sheehan:** Thanks to you all for coming in. We have covered the issue of a child's right to education, their right not to be discriminated against and so on. We have covered a lot of that comprehensively today. Chris, you said that children should not be punished if they are in breach of a school's uniform regulations. While taking account of the rights of the child, the school will also want to ensure that there is discipline and uniformity. If one kid comes in wearing something different one day and they are not pulled up on it, somebody else will come in wearing something else the next day, and you will have a domino effect. How should schools deal with that situation? I accept totally that children should not be isolated or excluded from education, but how should a school deal with it practically? It is all right talking in theory about legislation, but we have to anticipate what the outworking of it will be.

**Mr Quinn:** I will quote the very wise 11-year-old — young Rhea — who was sat here just a few moments ago. She said two things that I think are really powerful and that I hope will not be lost. First, she said:

*"Just speak to a few students."*

Let us speak to the children. Let us involve them in decisions around their uniform and their schools. In scenarios where uniform rules are being breached regularly, speak to the child. That is step one. Secondly, she said:

*"If that person only has Nike Air trainers, they should wear them".*

That statement is powerful. If breaching of uniform rules is an issue, let us talk to the child and understand why. The Bill is very much focused on cost and protecting children from social pressures. It talks about that a lot. I am not in support of a punitive approach. There are big issues currently with school absence, and NICCY will be looking into that this year. I would much prefer for a child to come to school not wearing the right footwear or the right jogging bottoms than for that child not to come to school at all as a consequence. I do not think that a punitive approach works. You can see how schools can manage it, and many schools are managing it.

**Ms McFall:** There is a significant body of work from other disciplines that we can look at. Employee engagement is a massive field of HR right now. It is clear that, where there is better engagement between employers and employees, there is improved performance. The same applies to children: if they feel like they are engaged with the school, that they are part of the school community and that they have a voice and a say, they are more likely to engage fully with the school and with their education. We do not expect things to change dramatically, but let us look at the evidence that shows how children can be better engaged, be better informed and enjoy their learning more.

**Mr Sheehan:** Are you in favour of toughening up this legislation to make sure that schools, when they are developing uniform policy, must consult with children in the school, as well as with their parents or carers and any other stakeholders?

**Mr Quinn:** Yes, that is an absolute must. As I said earlier, children and young people, parents and carers talk to me about that issue a lot. We get calls to our office about various aspects of it. Fundamentally, the Bill should include the voice of the child. Today, a number of very impressive young people told you why that is absolutely the case. In some ways, that is a means to an end. Earlier, we heard questions about uniform rules. If young people are helping to set those rules, they are more likely to abide by them.

**Ms Woods:** We have identified clause 1(3)(a) as somewhere where it could be mentioned, if the Committee were minded to consider it, that schools must engage directly with pupils and young people. I appreciate that the Bill gives the Department the power to issue guidelines, including those that are to be consulted on. This is a regulation-making Bill, and guidance will come through secondary regulations. We have not seen the guidance, so we cannot advise you on what it says. However, we can certainly advise from the perspective of children's rights, and our perspective is that children and young people should be explicitly mentioned in the Bill to ensure that their article 12 rights are upheld and that they are fully engaged in it. That is just one clause. You could build a "child's best interests" principle into the entire Bill, but clause 1(3)(a) is where we see that children and young people could be mentioned explicitly with regard to the engagement and consultation that will come after the Bill.

**Mr Quinn:** More "must" as opposed to "may".

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Yes. Those questions came up last week in the Committee's engagement with the Department. Why would you not just make some of those things a requirement? If you think that it is likely to be relevant, put it in. Obviously, you have a bit of freedom with the guidelines regarding how much emphasis you want to put on it, but some of the instances of "may" are a bit baffling.

**Mr Baker:** Thank you. We await the guidelines with anticipation, because they will be all-singing, all-dancing. When we ask questions, a lot of the time, we are told, "That will be covered in the guidelines". What is clear to me today is that it needs to come in primary legislation. Our young people are telling us that their rights are not enshrined in the Bill.

I want to come at the school items from a different wee angle. We have listened to our young people. There is a real emphasis here on school uniforms. People are proud of their uniforms and their schools and all that goes with that. However, we are an outlier in Europe: most children in Europe do not wear uniforms. There is also the pastoral care side of it. More and more of our young people just want flexibility. A secondary-school uniform always has a blazer. Why can the school crest not just be on a half-zip? Why can pupils not wear leggings? We are starting to hear that. What are the barriers to that coming through legislation? Why is it always enforced that a uniform has to be certain items, and, if you do not wear it, you have to be disciplined?

**Mr Quinn:** There is a lot in that, Danny. Sometimes, I feel as though we need to go right back to what the purpose of education is. Let us think about articles 28 and 29, which state that education should

be free and should nurture and develop the talents and best interests of the child. A lot of the time, I feel frustrated with the way in which the system works. Sometimes, it feels as though children are little marketing tools. They have the nicest blazer, the nicest trousers, the nicest satchel and the nicest shoes. They get the highest grades, and their school scores highly in the league tables. In my opinion, children are sometimes seen as little lemmings to be used to market the school and to buy into that big system. That is a big answer to your question, but I think that we need to reconsider what the purpose of education is and what a uniform looks like. I agree with you: why can it not be —? I think that Pat asked earlier why it could not be a pair of leggings and a half-zip. Could it be a pair of jeans and a polo shirt? Could it be a shirt and tie and trousers? Young people need to be part of those conversations with their schools' boards of governors. I am sure that we could come to solutions pretty quickly. That goes back to the "must" as regards consulting and engaging with children and young people on individual schools' policies.

**Mr Baker:** School attendance is a real worry. Are you finding that the barriers that school uniforms present play a part in that? I hear that from the young people whom I engage with, but you obviously have wider engagement.

**Ms McFall:** We hear that anecdotally. We are conducting further research on school absence and the reasons for it. We will provide more evidence on that when the research is complete. However, anecdotally, when we talk to children and young people out and about, it is said to be a factor, particularly for young girls who are menstruating or for children with ASD who are perhaps waiting to be diagnosed. As I said, there is inconsistency in the approach of schools on that. Some schools are very willing to acknowledge that there is an issue and provide flexibility; others are not

Chris talked about children being used to represent the school. I understand why schools want them to do that, but it also leads to certain children being targeted. We had children tell us, "When we go to the shopping centre, we are not allowed to bring our bags in. Only the kids from the grammar school are allowed to bring in their bags". We are seeing uniforms being used to discriminate against children and young people on the basis of the school that they go to, and assumptions being made about what type of person that makes them. That is not an OK way to be in the world. That must have a significant impact on the mental health and self-esteem of those children.

The girls kept asking earlier, "Why do we need to be neat and tidy?". Some children have told us that you can only get a place on the school council or be a prefect if you are well turned out: that is about looking nice in a uniform. We know that children develop at different stages and may have growth spurts during the year. A child's uniform is not going to look the same on them consistently throughout one year never mind three or four years. They are not always going to be well turned out. Our primary objective for our children should not be that they look nice. We have gone beyond the times of, "Children should be seen and not heard". We very much think that they should be heard and that what they look like is not that important.

**Mr Baker:** That is why it is important that we put their rights down on paper.

**Ms Woods:** It is not only about formal education; there is the impact on sport, and not just sport in school. Two days ago, Ulster University published a report on the cost of sport called, 'Sport is NOT a luxury'. It is a really good read. One of the statistics in that report is that 37% of parents and guardians said that their children had missed out on sport or physical activity because of the cost. Parents are telling us that. Children and parents are saying that the cost of school uniforms, branded PE kits and all the equipment is too high. The cost of education, which is supposed to be free, is a barrier to children attending school or taking part in sports and physical activity.

**Mr Brooks:** I have a few points to make. You can respond to some of them, depending on how much time we have.

Stopping pupils from carrying their school bags into shopping centres because they are high-school pupils is appalling. However, I must say that, while the uniform is being used to discriminate in that case, it is the shopping centre that has the appalling policy. That is not the fault of the uniform; it is about attitudes. Whether it is a half-zip or a school uniform, people will still know the school, the badge and everything else. It is right to say that that policy is absolutely appalling, but I do not think that it should necessarily be conflated with the uniform issue.

I do not think that there is any issue with schools having pride in their pupils representing the school and wearing the uniform. Trying to ensure that pupils are well turned out is a part of that. I accept that

many people at my school looked better than me in the uniform. Nevertheless, it was right that we all tried to take pride in our appearance. We were taught to do that. We have all had pride in belonging to organisations, whether they are schools or football teams, which wear different kits. We all want to be associated with the organisations that we are a part of, and the uniform can play a part in building that pride.

The main point that I want to get to — I am not trying to be pedantic or facetious, although I know that it may look that way — is the issue of unintended consequences. You could do away with uniform tomorrow. I would not support it, but you could do that. You would find that pupils are not competing in respect of what brand their school shoes are or whether they wear the fancier blazer or the less fancy one, but — I can take a walk through east Belfast on any given weekend and see plenty of people running about in Balenciaga trainers. The socio-economic profile of the area that I walk through would suggest that people, for the most part, are not spending £800 on a pair of trainers. There is, however, that wish to project the idea that they are. We are talking about doing away with brands when it comes to school uniforms, which is a genuine thing that we all agree with. However, if you loosen that up in other ways and move away from uniformity, you create an arms war in which peers are competing with each other. Some of the pressures that you are rightly talking about will also apply to people if they are wearing normal clothing. We see that in everyday society, and school should be the place where children and young people are a little bit more protected from that.

**Mr Quinn:** I do not think that anyone is arguing with that principle. In fact, when I speak to children, their views are mixed. Some children say that they want to get rid of uniforms but most acknowledge the benefits of having a uniform, as do most parents, for the reasons that you have set out. You can have a school uniform that is comfortable but not costly. Those are the two things that children, young people and parents constantly tell me they want in a uniform. As Laura articulated, a child will learn best when they are comfortable. I do not necessarily disagree with your points about uniforms. Of course, you want children to be proud of their school and their community, but we do not have to put them in very expensive attire to do that.

**Ms McFall:** In some ways, you are making the point that we are making, David. Nobody is asking for uniforms to be banned. We are saying that they should be basic, affordable and comfortable. Schools are increasingly requiring girls to wear long pleated skirts. However, those skirts are not functional, they are very uncomfortable and, largely, they can only be bought in one or two suppliers, whereas the trousers that boys wear can be bought in supermarkets and elsewhere. We are not talking about doing away with uniforms. Why do girls' uniforms cost more? Why do you have to wear a certain thing in order to have pride in your appearance? You can have pride in your appearance, as you quite rightly said, by wearing a sports kit.

**Mr Brooks:** In large part, I am not far away from you, particularly on cost or on the principle of comfort. I might disagree with you in some respects, but I am not going to go into the granular detail. I am not going to go with you on jeans and a polo shirt, Chris, to be honest with you.

**Mr Quinn:** That is fine.

**Mr Brooks:** I get the comfort of half-zips and so on, but you then become subject to the trends of the time, which change. The classic school uniform has not changed that much. You can say that there are negatives to that, but there are also positives to it. For example, a few years ago the trend might have been to wear a hoodie rather than a half-zip, so there is a benefit to not being subject to the trend of the time. That is the main body of what I wanted to say. Thank you, Chair.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Thank you, David.

**Mrs Guy:** Thanks for your time today, folks. The core purpose of the Bill is supposed to be about affordability. I want to get your sense of how well the Bill, as drafted, will achieve more affordable uniforms. I wanted to touch specifically on the provision for a cost cap. At the moment, that is an enabling power. Do you feel that that goes far enough? Limiting the number of branded goods is the other issue that people will comment on in that space. I am thinking about PE kits in particular. What are your views on those provisions in the Bill?

**Mr Quinn:** First, I welcome the Minister's intention to reduce the cost of uniforms. I mentioned poverty and the research that we did into free school meals. There is also the Ulster University research into the cost of sport, which Rachel pointed to a few moments ago. We need to view any cap through the



lens of poverty and what is affordable for a family that is living in poverty. We need to approach it from that perspective. We mentioned uniform grants and the fact that they should be considered. Will grants be enough on their own? Probably not. We need to consider the price of shoes as part of a uniform for some of the reasons that were discussed. A price cap is important, and more thought needs to be given to that in the context of poverty.

I do not see the need for branded sportswear. I do not see the need for a PE kit. Schools should be providing sports kits for the children who play on their teams. That could lower the burden quite significantly. I would definitely move away from branded sports kits. When we talk about brands, we are talking about things like the school tie, if that is retained, and the school badge. We do need to look at how that was managed in other jurisdictions.

**Ms Woods:** I want to comment on the issue of a cap. My points about clauses 3 and 4 are similar. My understanding is that they are subject to commencement orders, but I am not sure why. I would welcome more information on that if the Committee has it. It would not be consistent to pass the Bill if those clauses are subject to commencement clauses. With my limited knowledge of the legislative process in the House, I would expect the Bill's provisions to be in place in the next nine months to a year, and a commencement order would then depend on stages. If the Bill is passed and receives Royal Assent but the provisions in clauses 3 and 4 do not commence, neither the expressed limit on specific styles nor the cap on expense would be in the guidelines. I am sure that the Committee has had conversations about clauses 3 and 4 being subject to commencement orders, but we are unclear on what it would mean for the guidelines and their purpose, which is to reduce uniform costs for families, if a limit on specific styles was not in place. I am not sure what the purpose of the guidelines would be without the commencement of the provisions in those two clauses.

There will be further discussions on how that could impact on people who are in poverty. I am happy to go through the research on free school meals and their eligibility criteria. We would welcome a cap on the number of uniform items, and a more explicit price cap. I appreciate that the Committee will be speaking to the Competition and Markets Authority tomorrow, and I will be listening with interest to what is said. Price caps are in place for other services and items in our society, and we should not shy away from them when it comes to something as important for families as school uniforms.

**Ms McFall:** Astrid's mummy, Gráinne, contacted me a couple of weeks ago to ask when the legislation will be in place. I asked her why, and she said that she had just received Astrid's form 1 uniform guidelines. I told her that nothing would be in place by then. She said that she was asking because the type of skirt that she has to buy for Astrid is available at only one supplier and costs nearly three times as much as a pair of trousers. She was wondering whether she could just send her to school in trousers as that would be cheaper. That is the lived experience of families. That family is not living in poverty, but the cost of a uniform is still having a significant impact on them. The cost of school uniforms has a significant impact on the working poor — families who are in poverty but are not receiving benefits.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** To pick up on Rachel's point, we have had some articulation from the Department. I do not want to speak for the Department — its officials will be back before the Committee, so they can clarify the position then — but there was certainly a suggestion that the Department is concerned about unintended consequences with clause 4. The Department feels that the intervention in clause 4 could be a complex one and has undertaken to consult more widely on that. It is fair to put that on the record. We are also keen to hear from the Competition and Markets Authority on what some of those unintended consequences might be. I am not clear on why the provisions in clause 3 will not be enacted at the same time as the other provisions in the Bill. Again, those are issues that we will continue to explore with the Department.

**Mr Martin:** Thank you for your evidence this afternoon. Chris, you mentioned Nike Air trainers. One of the Bill's key goals is to ensure that uniform costs are reduced and that kids wear cheaper, non-branded items so that they feel that everyone is more or less wearing the same. Let us say that you have a class full of girls who are all wearing black, unbranded trainers, and a girl comes in wearing Christian Dior trainers at £250. On non-compliance — let us get past the fact that the teacher should chat with that child — if the child says, "I just wanna wear these", what happens next?

**Mr Quinn:** That is not a situation that I have ever come across, to be fair. I imagine that the school would, rightly, deal with that. It is very hypothetical.

**Mr Martin:** It will not be when the Bill comes in. The premise of the Bill is to put a cost limit on branded items such as trainers, and I hope that it will. I want to tease this out with you. If a child comes in with really expensive Nike Air or Christian Dior trainers, and she or he is the only one in the class who has them, what happens when the teacher says, "You shouldn't be wearing those", and the pupil goes, "I don't care. I like these, and I'm bringing them in"? You mentioned that example earlier in your evidence. How does a school deal with that?

**Mr Quinn:** I struggle to understand why wearing a pair of Balenciaga trainers would be a barrier to learning. To me, that is not an issue.

**Mr Martin:** It is the opposite of what the Bill is trying to achieve, which is a levelling of the field so that kids who maybe cannot afford such items do not feel that they should have to be able to afford them.

**Mr Quinn:** What I am saying is that the child should not be excluded or punished for wearing a different pair of shoes.

**Ms McFall:** We said before that it is about engaging children in the policy and, as part of that, in what the sanctions will be. Have those discussions with the children: we do so regularly. When we have a residential or group meetings, we create a group contract with the young people we are working with. We all know that we need to respect the boundaries of those whom we are engaging with. When we explain to children that they cannot wear Balenciaga trainers because it puts undue pressure on others, they are quite reasonable; they will understand that if they are part of the negotiation. We do not see a lot of rebellion for the sake of rebellion or showing off; we just do not see it. We see rebellion when rules do not make sense and people are not given fair or justifiable reasons. When they are engaged with properly and feel part of the school community, they are much more likely to comply with the uniform policy.

**Mr Martin:** I accept that. However, I gave you a real-world example that we will not have to deal with, but, when the Bill provisions come into force, teachers, principals and boards of governors absolutely will have to.

I have one more question. Under the heading, "Suggested further areas for consideration", your evidence states:

*"The guidance should propose that one set of uniform requirements should be provided from which pupils may choose, to include trousers and other items - not differentiating uniform requirements by gender."*

The Deputy Chair mentioned Claire Sugden's amendment. Claire said that that is to address the issue of upskirting and that, as such, girls should be allowed to wear trousers. Should girls be allowed to wear trousers in school across the board?

**Mr Quinn:** Yes. As we said at the start, gender neutrality, inclusivity and equality are key fundamentals in the Bill.

**Ms McFall:** Eva made a point that is quite relevant to what you are saying: skirts are not the cause of upskirting.

**Mr Martin:** She did make that point.

**Ms McFall:** Mobile phones are not the cause of upskirting either. The cause of upskirting is a lack of respect for young women amongst, largely, young men. That is the thing that we need to address. Given that we are still not addressing violence against women and girls effectively, surely we can allow girls to wear trousers, if that makes them feel more comfortable, while we try to do so.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** We are very short on time.

**Mr Martin:** I appreciate that.

Based on your evidence that I read out there, should boys be allowed to wear skirts?

**Ms McFall:** If they want to. We have been clear in that boys are not asking us to wear skirts. You will notice that we have not brought any boys with us this evening. That is because no boys expressed an interest in coming. Boys agree that there should be uniform equality and that girls should be allowed to wear trousers, but they are not telling us that they want to wear skirts. If they were telling us that, why should they not be able to? Men wear kilts in Scotland. It is quite a normal thing. The key point that we are making is that clothes do not impact on your ability to learn. What does impact on your ability to learn? The most important things are feeling included, feeling respected, feeling part of a community, cohesion and inclusion. Three girls have told me that, when they asked to wear trousers in their schools, they were told that they had to get a letter from their parents to say that they were trans. None of those young women was trans, but that was the schools' approach to the situation because they had that in their policies. In what realm is that a more balanced approach than just allowing girls to wear a pair of trousers? We need to get away from the spirit of the law when it comes to school uniforms and prioritise children's well-being and their inclusion and engagement in education. Those are the areas on which we need to focus.

I will wrap up. Incorporate children's rights into legislation; take the example of the Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 (CSCA) to bring together all the parts of the service in relation to school uniforms; take advice from active travel; talk to the Department for Communities about poverty; use the CSCA to bring all those things together in order to do better for children and young people; and use this as an opportunity to make the Bill as useful as possible for the well-being and education of children and young people.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Thank you, Laura. You are doing my job well for me with that nice summing up to finish the session. We really appreciate your time today with the youth panel, as well as your evidence. You are key stakeholders in the Bill, so it has been great to hear from you. We will draw the session to a close.

**Ms McFall:** Thank you very much.