



Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

School Uniforms (Guidelines and Allowances) Bill: Parenting Focus

4 June 2025

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Nick Mathison (Chairperson)
Mr Danny Baker
Mr David Brooks
Mr Colin Crawford
Mrs Michelle Guy
Ms Cara Hunter
Mr Peter Martin
Mrs Cathy Mason

Witnesses:

Ms Emma Hitchen Parenting Focus

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): I am happy to welcome Emma Hitchen, who is the senior participation and research officer with Parenting Focus. The session will look at parents' experiences and the input that Parenting Focus can bring in terms of understanding parents' views on the issues of affording and maintaining school uniforms, as well the perspective of Parenting Focus on the Bill.

As with other sessions at Committee, please make an opening presentation or remarks for up to 10 minutes, and then we will move into questions and answers. Over to you.

Ms Emma Hitchen (Parenting Focus): Thank you, Chair and members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak on behalf of Parenting Focus, a charity committed to representing the voice and experience of parents across Northern Ireland. Our work is rooted in listening to families, what they tell us about the pressures that they face and the support that they require. School uniforms have long been one of those issues, not because of the cost alone but because of what uniforms say about how our children are seen and valued in our education system.

In 2024, Parenting Focus conducted an online consultation and focus group with over 600 parents and carers in response to the Department of Education's review of school uniform policy. The message was clear: school uniforms need to be more affordable, inclusive and reflective of the reality of children and families and what they live with every day.

Cost was the most consistent concern. Parents described branded items that could be bought from only one supplier; mandatory PE kits that cost more than sportswear in retail shops; and requirements that placed an especially heavy burden on those with multiple children or children attending post-primary, especially grammar, schools. Many families find themselves struggling, especially those on low incomes who do not qualify for any kind of assistance. One parent told us, "I do not qualify for the

uniform grant, but I still cannot afford what the school is asking. I am choosing between school shoes and the electric bill".

Affordability is only part of the picture. Parents also raise serious concerns about how uniform policies impact on children's rights, comfort, identity and inclusion. Uniform should never create a barrier to participation or be a source of distress, yet, too often, rigid and outdated policies do just that.

Furthermore, we believe that a clear and standardised definition of what constitutes a school uniform should be included in the statutory guidance. Parents told us that there is confusion and inconsistency not just between schools but within them over whether things like coats, bags, hairstyles or personal grooming choices are considered part of the school uniform policy. We would like to see guidance strengthened on personal expression, including policies on haircuts, hairstyles, piercings, make-up and facial hair. Uniform should foster inclusion but not conformity. Consulting parents and pupils on these elements is vital. We call for clarity so that parents know exactly what is expected and what is optional.

We heard from the parents of children with sensory processing issues that children were being disciplined for not wearing itchy or tight garments that they could not physically tolerate. We heard from families who wanted their children to be able to wear clothing in line with their gender identity but who felt stigmatised or excluded because of restrictive policies.

We want to emphasise the importance of age-appropriate uniform. In the early years in primary school, uniform should support play, movement and comfort, not restrict them. A play-based curriculum requires clothing that allows children to climb, sit cross-legged, explore the outdoors and participate in physical learning. In post-primary school, especially for girls, the design of school uniform can have a major impact on participation in physical activity. We know that the discomfort and modesty concerns about impractical clothing are major deterrents to teenage girls taking part in PE. Uniform policy should be an enabler and not a barrier. We believe that all uniform policy should be based on comfort and practicality and should be gender-neutral in design and language. Children should be able to choose what works best for them, regardless of gender. Uniforms should also incorporate cultural and religious dress, and there should be flexibility on fabric and fit for disabled children and those with medical conditions. Section 75 obligations are important but must be made explicit in the Bill and not left to interpretation.

With 87% of parents telling us that they find it difficult to afford school uniforms and 77% saying that they have had to make financial sacrifices — cutting back on essentials such as food, heating and bills — to afford them, it is imperative that we tackle the cost of uniforms. In one Belfast school that we costed recently, the uniform kit, including PE, for one female pupil — just one of each item, excluding shoes — came to £690.75. That is simply unaffordable for most families.

The Bill provides a strong starting point, and Parenting Focus welcomes the requirement for the Department to issue statutory guidance. We welcome the inclusion of guidance on unfair costs and the requirement for reporting. We welcome the focus on consultation, comfort and sustainability. We are concerned that the current language, which requires schools to "have regard to" the guidance, is too weak. It creates a duty to consider but not a duty to follow. Without stronger expectations, we fear that affordability, flexibility and inclusivity will remain optional for some schools. We ask the Committee to go further and strengthen the Bill.

Whilst we welcome the intention behind the guidance and the reporting duty, we are concerned that the phrase "from time to time" in relation to reviewing the guidance is too vague. We urge the Committee to amend that to require regular, time-bound reviews, ideally at least every three years, to ensure that guidance stays relevant and effective. The reviews should incorporate a transparent evaluation of cost and affordability across all school types. The Bill must mandate a clear cap or maximum threshold on the total cost of a uniform. That was one of the strongest messages from parents in our consultation, with 97% supporting the introduction of a cap, echoing the 88% support among respondents to the Department's consultation.

Parents with whom we spoke suggested a cap of £50 for primary school and £120 for post-primary school for branded items. The blazer alone for the school that I referenced earlier cost almost the entire suggested cap: £113. Without a cap, there is no real safeguard against escalating costs or inequity between schools. We support the recommendation made by Save the Children and the anti-poverty strategy expert advisory panel for the establishment of a task force to help to define what "affordable" actually means for families. The task force must include experts as well as parents and

children and young people, recognising that lived experience is essential in shaping effective and realistic policy.

The Bill must require schools to clearly include PE kits in their published uniform costs and guidance. That is an area where expenses often mount unexpectedly and where requirements can vary drastically between schools. In some cases, PE kit costs approach the cost of the main uniform, and the kit often includes multiple branded items. Given that the Northern Ireland school uniform grant is lower than that in Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland, it is even more important that uniform policies here are realistic and reflect affordability. We support a limit on the number of branded or bespoke items required as part of a school uniform. Standard items available from a variety of retailers should be the default unless there is a clear and justifiable reason for something bespoke. That would allow families to shop around and spread the cost more easily.

The requirement for schools to publish their uniform policy is welcome, but that must not simply be a collation of what a school has done. It should include feedback on the consultation of parents and pupils, demonstrate how a school is implementing the guidance, detail what costs were incurred by families and reveal whether adjustments were made as a result of the consultation or complaints.

The Bill represents a valuable opportunity to create a school uniform policy that works for families, respects children's rights and reflects the diversity of society. Uniforms should be a leveller, not a burden; promote belonging, not exclusion; and support children to participate fully in school life, not limit them. We urge the Committee to support the principles of the Bill and to consider strengthening its provisions to ensure that guidance is truly enforceable, affordability is clearly defined and inclusivity is embedded in policy and translated into practice.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Thank you. You covered a range of aspects of the Bill, so I will probably not be able to cover everything. Hopefully, members will get to most of the issues.

Following on from the previous evidence session, I will start with the cost cap. Having read your consultation responses, my sense — please, correct me if I am wrong — is that the feedback from parents seemed to be broadly supportive of the cap but perhaps with the caveat that it needs to be clear, it needs to be done right, and it must not potentially create any perverse incentives for schools to increase their costs if the cap goes up. Have I understood that correctly?

Ms Hitchen: Yes. A total of 97% of the parents whom we consulted agreed with a cap, but there were concerns about how it would be implemented and what it would look like in practice. They had concerns, such as those that the Committee has raised, about what that would look like for parents and how their views could be reflected. Parenting Focus thinks that the introduction of the cap is really important. As you can see from the example of the school uniform that we costed, which is one of several that I costed as part of our process, we found it difficult to find any school uniform that would come in under £120, even if there were a maximum of three branded items. Although there is concern that the number could be seen as a target rather than a cap, it was difficult for me to find any school that would be able to meet that.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): I share that view. It would not be the best PR for schools to raise their prices at a time when a Bill has been introduced to reduce costs.

The concerns about the cap that we, as a Committee, are trying to navigate include the timelines. The Minister is keen to deliver this immediately after the summer recess, but no groundwork on what a cap would look like appears to have been prepared. There is some nervousness about including a direction in a Bill that there has been zero preparatory work on and that, perhaps, the Minister and the Department have not bought into. That is certainly a concern of mine. The Department has made it clear that it wants to consult on this and will do so soon. Would Parenting Focus welcome a broad and meaningful consultation on the cap to give stakeholders, including parents, obviously, the opportunity to clarify what they would like to be delivered?

Ms Hitchen: Absolutely. It came through clearly in our responses from parents that there is a lot of ambiguity. They do not understand what a cap would look like. Consultation with the Department would be helpful for parents, as would information on the options that would be available. As we have seen, however, 97% of parents agree with the cap in principle, so we could, I think, foresee how parents would react to that.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): The feeling on it is pretty clear.

Ms Hitchen: Absolutely. Meaningful consultation with the Department will be really important.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Sure. Is there a similar level of support for a limit on the number of branded items — another enabling power — from parents who engaged with the consultation?

Ms Hitchen: Yes. Across the board, in our focus groups and online survey, parents told us that. A cap on the number of branded items seems to be the preferred option, perhaps because parents understand more how that would be reflected in practice. They are keen on that. I suggest capping the number of items at three, in line with the proposed Westminster policy, and parents are keen on that. They have repeatedly told us that the number of branded items, especially for PE kits, means that children cannot participate in sport; it is prohibitive. For parents, especially those who are trying to encourage their teenage girls, that is a major factor.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): You suggest capping the number of branded items at three, which is under consideration in England. If we were to land on a cap of three branded items, would that be likely to have a positive impact on PE? Is that issue the driver for it?

Ms Hitchen: Absolutely. When I was costing the items, I found that, between their PE kit and their school uniform, most schools require about eight branded items. Reducing that to three would have a dramatic impact on the cost for families.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): That is really helpful. I have a couple more questions for you to deal with as quickly as you can. I will just put it out there that the first issue is a particular hobby horse of mine: I was really pleased to hear you mention early years. All the conversations seem to be focused on post-primary. It is vital that, in primary, in early years and at foundation stage, we ensure that uniform policies give kids the best opportunity to access the play-based curriculum. It was welcome to hear that, and I just note it. We hope to hear from the Bill Office about a potential amendment to build that into the Bill. Maybe you can bring that feedback to parents: it would be subject to Committee agreement, but we are looking into it.

The only other thing that I want to raise, to move away from cost briefly, is the notion of inclusivity, which you mentioned at the start of your evidence. We are, again, waiting for the draft text of a potential amendment to insert an inclusivity clause. Different views have been expressed in the Committee as to whether that would be helpful. We would be looking at having something that requires uniform policies to make provision for gender neutrality, for needs that arise from disability, race, religion, cultural observance — those sorts of issues. Would Parenting Focus support that?

Ms Hitchen: Absolutely. Aside from the cost, one of the main concerns for parents is gender neutrality. It was one of the main things that came up. Parents across the board told us that they feel that their daughters should be allowed to wear trousers, if that is what they want to wear in school. They like having the option and feel that it is unfair if they do not. One of the comments was, "In this day and age, why would they have to wear a skirt?". We would really support that. Again, special educational needs is a huge concern, with many parents telling us that their children had faced disciplinary measures for not wearing the appropriate shoes, not wearing their jumper in school or not having a top button done. We understand that it is difficult for a school to manage that. A lot of parents have really good experiences, where schools are reactive and able to put things in place to ensure that the child feels comfortable. Many parents say that, when their children are not comfortable, that is not conducive to them achieving their best in school. Absolutely, we would support that.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): That is great. I will leave it at that, other than to say that there is a clear message from young people on those specific issues. It came through clearly. We will hear from Menstruation Matters in the next evidence session, which, again, will draw out some of those issues, particularly gender. That has been really helpful. I will open it up to members.

Mrs Guy: Emma, thank you very much for that. You have covered a lot of ground, but I want to ask about the definition of a school uniform. You referenced that in your briefing. Will you explain why you feel that it is so important to have that specifically defined?

Ms Hitchen: That is another main concern that parents came back to us about: the ambiguity in schools around what constitutes a school uniform. Shoes are one of the main concerns, as well as piercings and make-up. We heard about a child who was subject to disciplinary measures and was not allowed breakfast, because they had worn make-up to school. That is the extent to which some

schools go. Parents were then looking at the school uniform policy and saying, "Actually, we can see no rule in here that our child is breaking". It is important to have that transparency in every school uniform policy so that parents and children understand what the policy is and so that there is no wiggle room.

Mrs Guy: Last week, we heard from the National Association of Head Teachers, which seems to think that there is no need for any legislation or statutory guidance. The evidence that you have given today and your written briefing contradict that. Could you say a bit more about parents' feelings on the issue?

Ms Hitchen: In the consultation process, we spoke to 600 parents. In the past five months, I have spoken to about 2,000 parents. In every focus group that I have had, parents have brought up the issue of the cost of accessing education, especially the cost of school uniforms. Some schools do it really well, but there is a disconnect between some principals and the families that their schools serve — a disconnect around affordability and what is affordable to families. I have seen that it is a real concern for parents across the board; they are struggling. We also do a Big Parenting Survey biannually, and, every year, we hear consistent concerns about the cost of uniforms and the cost of accessing education in general. There is an absolutely a need for primary legislation because of the schools that are the outliers and not doing it as well as others.

Mrs Mason: Emma, thanks a million for coming in and for all the work that Parenting Focus does on this issue and many others. Among the witnesses whom we heard from yesterday was a parent who has used a school uniform swap scheme. We heard about how valuable that is and that, if she did not have it, she would not have been able to send her children to school. She certainly did not feel any embarrassment or stigma for using that, but she acknowledged that there probably is a stigma. She knew of other parents who maybe do not go at certain times to avoid being seen. I know that that is covered in the Bill, but is the Bill strong enough on it? Are you picking up from parents that they are able to use the swaps, and does the Bill address that?

Ms Hitchen: The Bill does not address it in the way that it should. We hear from parents that there is still a stigma attached to the school banks. Schools are good at finding creative ways to encourage parents to use it. Should it be open at certain times? I have heard of occasions when, to try to remove that stigma, schools have directly messaged parents to let them know that they can come in at a certain time. However, we encourage a relationship between the community and schools, including parental participation in schools. When there is an inclusive school culture, parents are much more likely to do that. If some of that — looking at that culture in the school — were included in the Bill or in the guidelines, it would be really helpful. On numerous occasions, we have heard of asylum-seeking families or newcomer families being heavily reliant on school banks, because they may have moved several times within the year, and it would be simply unaffordable for them to send their children to school otherwise. Schools have been really good at coming up with creative ways to encourage their use. If there were something like that, perhaps more so in the guidelines, that would be really helpful.

Mrs Mason: That is really useful, including what you said about that community link. To pick up on the Chair's point, you mentioned the play-based curriculum, early years and comfort. Do you pick up on that issue in post-primary as well? I have picked it up while talking to young people. It may not be about play-based learning at post-primary, but they take part in technology, science and things like that, and they are just not comfortable in the collar, the skirt or whatever it might be. Yesterday, we heard the Deputy Chair talk about a school that has completely changed its uniform to being trousers or leggings for girls, whichever they prefer; trousers for boys; a branded half-zip top rather than a blazer and collared shirt; and things like that. What is your view on that?

Ms Hitchen: Yesterday, the Children's Commissioner picked up on the functionality of uniform: we really support that. On the basis only of our consultation, there is a distinct difference whereby rural primary schools seem to have much more functional uniforms: girls and boys wear leggings or tracksuit bottoms, a polo shirt and a jumper, which means that they are able to access their curriculum in all those ways. Then, there is a real, distinct change when they go to post-primary, where the uniform is often much more restrictive. Parents pick up on that as well. I know about it, because I am from a rural area, and, to get home from school, I walked miles wearing high-heeled shoes that were just not practical. We hear from parents that, a lot of the time, their children do not go to things after school because of the lack of functionality of their uniform. Parents asked many times, "Why can they

not just have trousers and a half-zip top?". Parents also report that some schools encourage children to come in wearing their PE kit, because they will be doing something for which the PE kit will be much more practical. Parents ask, "If they can do that on certain days, why can it not be the norm?".

Mrs Mason: OK, that is great. That is interesting. Thank you.

Mr Brooks: Thank you very much for your evidence so far. I picked up in your written submission that one of the things that, you think, should be taken into account is ethical purchasing. There is an obvious tension between ethical products and cost. If a cap is decided on, how it should take into account ethical products?

Ms Hitchen: If the cap limits the number of branded products, it would be much easier to have ethical purchasing. That is not our area of expertise, but sustainability —

Mr Brooks: It is in your written evidence. It is not as black and white a matter as a school being able to have ethical products or low-cost products but not both; there is probably a happy medium somewhere. We are asking for legislation on all these things, and you are pushing particularly hard on the cap and so on. We are being asked to draw quite hard lines. If you want us and the Minister to consider ethical products, we need to know what exactly that would look like. It could add significantly to costs. If a school is looking to meet a cap, it will say, "These unbranded items can be sourced on Amazon, at Tesco or wherever at the lowest possible price". Being ethical is a corporate responsibility, rather than the responsibility of the consumer. It is not reasonable to ask people to go around thinking about where exactly their T-shirts were made. Schools that are required to have uniforms at low cost will try to meet the guidance under that target so that they can say that they are compliant. How should a cap take that into account? Should a cap be made up only of a survey of items that are deemed to be ethical?

Ms Hitchen: The cap should just reflect the branded items. If we do that, it will be much easier to have ethically produced products that are capped at that price. If the uniform is a plain black pair of trousers and a plain top, that will be much easier to find. We are not saying that there should be any restrictions on that, but, if we cap the branded items at a certain cost, that should make it easier for schools to find ethically produced items.

Mr Brooks: I still think that there are ways in which those items could be sourced, but we will move on.

I am not trying to be pedantic, but, if you were a principal trying to come to this decision, where would you draw the line around the scope of flexibility in materials and designs? There are a number of principles to a uniform, and you have outlined some of them, but one of the main ideas is to have a degree of uniformity across pupils. You talked about haircuts and other things: you may disagree with this, but, in my opinion, there is a degree to which you want fashion trends and so on to be absent from uniforms. How do you encourage uniformity across the school but allow for flexibility in design and materials? I understand the inclusivity piece for people with special needs or other considerations. There will always be exceptions, whatever rules we draw, and that should absolutely be taken into account. We talked about that yesterday. What scope for flexibility are you talking about?

Ms Hitchen: We are talking about that in relation to inclusivity for children with special educational needs.

Mr Brooks: So, for you, flexibility is about exceptions rather than across the board.

Ms Hitchen: Yes, absolutely.

Mr Brooks: It is not about saying that anyone can choose something as long as it is the right colour.

Ms Hitchen: No; it is not that at all.

Mr Brooks: OK.

Ms Hitchen: For children who have special educational needs or some form of disability that means that they cannot wear certain clothes or that it would be uncomfortable for them to do so, we would

like to see that flexibility made explicit in the policy rather than families having to ask for it, which we have heard about. We have heard of children with ASD who have to fight to wear trousers of a different material and things like that. We would like to see flexibility for special educational needs explicitly outlined in the policy, rather than it being the norm.

Mr Brooks: My last question is on a cap. I am sure that the parents who have spoken to you have considered that at length, but, often, the question that you are asked will shape the response that you give. We hear a lot about a cap. If you talk to people on the street, they will talk about the School Uniforms Bill putting a cap on the cost of school uniforms. I get the feeling that parents, understandably, are more focused on the outcome than the mechanism. We are with them: most parties have something in their manifestos on lowering the cost of school uniform, so it is an objective for us all. When we talk about a cap, do parents hear that as a guarantee to them of lower cost, whereas what they really want is for schools not to rip the backside out of it when it comes to the cost of uniforms?

Ms Hitchen: Parents' main concern is that they struggle so much with the cost of accessing education. That is why they highlight the cap: they see it as a means to an end. They may not look at the Bill as a whole. Cost is the main concern for parents. We need to consult parents meaningfully. There are examples where schools have told us that they have consulted parents, but, when we look at the consultation process, we see that it is not a meaningful consultation. I would like the Department's guidelines to be based on a proper, meaningful consultation with parents to ensure that what parents tell them is followed through.

We promote the use of the Lundy model of participation, whereby we provide parents with the space, a voice, an audience and an influence. We have heard about many occasions when that is not the case. In this consultation, a principal told me, "There is no point in asking parents, because they do not know what they want". He did a consultation with the parents in his school, but then that was his comment, so it was never going to be a meaningful consultation process. I would really like that to be included in the guidelines. You are right: parents and people in general are sometimes led by the questions. That is why it is so important that the guidelines include proper, meaningful consultation.

Mr Brooks: I accept that. It is perfectly possible that parents in a certain school will have different views on things, which would make it difficult to bring together one view, but, as a traditionalist in many areas, I think that there are schools that need to reflect on where they have got to and whether their approach is suitable and in the best interests of the families whom they serve.

Thank you very much, Emma.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): I think that it surprised everybody that the Bill does not mandate that parents or young people be consulted. I assume that your organisation would like to see that. We have looked at an amendment that the Committee could bring forward in that regard.

Ms Hitchen: Yes, of course. The Bill will directly impact on parents and their children and young people. We know that it is a huge concern for parents, so they need to be consulted. Some schools are good at consulting parents, but it is about making sure that that consultation process is meaningful. We would like to see that.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): It seems an odd omission. I am not sure what the objection to it could have been, but there you go.

Mr Baker: Emma, thanks very much. You have covered so much. I agree with everything that you have said. You said that one uniform cost £690, and the blazer alone cost £113. I guess that, if you do not have all of that £690 uniform, you cannot participate in everything in that school.

Ms Hitchen: I included in that calculation one blazer and one jumper — everyday wear. It also included a summer blouse, which is required in the third term, and two pieces of PE kit that, from what I could gauge, are required for different things. My understanding is that that is all required for a child to participate in activities in that school. I should mention that there were other options on top of that £690 that I did not include.

Mr Baker: Yes, but, basically, that is the standard rate for that school.

Ms Hitchen: Yes.

Mr Baker: You engage with more parents than I do. Is that a deliberate policy from the school to exclude pupils from certain backgrounds?

Ms Hitchen: I cannot answer that, but it is a prohibitive factor for some parents when they choose which school to send their child to. Some parents have told us that they do not want to encourage their child to aim for certain schools because they know that the cost will not work for their family. Although we have not yet reached the end of the school year, we have already had calls from parents who tell us that they are concerned about the cost of PE kit. They have just paid for a full school uniform. One parent told us that her child had bought a jumper but she was not sure whether everyone else wears a cardigan. The child said, "Sure, you can just buy me it in September". The mum is already panicking about how she will afford to buy another piece of uniform on top of that.

Mr Baker: You talked about only three branded items being allowed: that measure alone would prevent schools from doing that.

Ms Hitchen: Absolutely.

Mr Baker: That is just one measure. Doing that would only be one piece of the puzzle. It is really worrying when it is like that. The presentations that we have had so far, particularly the ones that we received last night and yours today, convince me more than ever that, although we have not seen the guidance, I want to see a lot more in the primary legislation. It is clear that that will stop that abuse. I know that not all schools do it. I also know that there is massive support out there for uniforms, but what is a uniform? That should be the question. Do we really need blazers any more? They can cost £113. I think that, across the board, blazers are the most expensive of all the items: why could it not be a zip-up top instead? You would still be proud of your school, but you would be comfortable.

I think that you have covered everything.

Mr Martin: Thank you, Emma, for your evidence this afternoon. You used a phrase in your oral evidence — I think that you mainly explained it to my colleague David — that I wrote down: "inclusion but not conformity". Will you take a minute to explain what that means?

Ms Hitchen: There seem to be a lot of issues with children around what the uniform looks like and how schools implement the uniform policy. We say that there should be some slight room for self-expression. I gave parents the example of earrings: they could be hoops but not studs. There should be some room in the policy for children to have self-expression at school while having an understanding of where they are and the fact that they represent the school. There should be clarity in the policies around that.

We have heard from a lot of parents that their children have been sent home from school because they had dyed hair, yet their teachers also had dyed hair. Parents struggle to understand the impact that having dyed hair has on their child's learning. The majority of parents are not trying to send their children to school with green hair or something outrageous; we could be talking about blonde highlights in a 16-year-old girl's hair. Parents say, "What impact does that have on my child's learning?". There should be a degree of flexibility in the policy, especially for post-16 students. That is our interpretation.

Mr Martin: That is fine. I agree, but I am a bit frustrated, because the guidance is there. What we are talking about in Committee is the primary legislation that will put the guidance on a legal footing. The guidance is there. As we have reflected at the Committee on several occasions, schools should already be doing this. It is all there, and lots of schools do it. The schools that are not doing it are forcing the measures into legislation, which should not be necessary.

My view, which was reflected in some of Danny's questions to you, is that the sole purpose of the Bill is to ensure that no child has to make a decision on what school to go to on the basis of how much the uniform costs. In no way should that be a factor that a parent or child has to consider when deciding where they go next. That is what we have to do through the Bill. Other Committee members might have other ideas about what the Bill should look like, but, for me, that is the *raison d'être* of the Bill.

Ms Hitchen: I absolutely agree. Most schools adhere to the guidance, but —

Mr Martin: We know that not all of them do.

Ms Hitchen: — not all schools do. That is the issue. We have heard about lots of regulations and punitive measures in relation to school uniform policy. Girls often feel humiliated. I gave the example of a child who was told that she was not allowed to participate in breakfast club at school. Despite being in receipt of free school meals, she was denied access to breakfast club because she was wearing make-up. There is a lot of concern from parents about examples like that, where the punishment is not proportionate to the crime.

Mr Martin: I agree. Yesterday, we had a debate with the Children's Commissioner — I certainly did — on what happens when a child does not do the right thing or does not appear. In the example that you just gave, it is about saying "here are the rules", but denying a child breakfast — do not start me on that.

I have one more question. Yesterday, we talked about the Claire Sugden amendment. It states — I hope that Claire does not mind me paraphrasing it — that there should be trousers for all and shorts instead of skirts. I do not want to get into the rights and wrongs of that, because, on the basis of the research that I have done and from speaking with them, teenage girls want to wear leggings instead of shorts or skirts. I am not sure whether "leggings" will go into the primary legislation. However, let us leave aside what that amendment will look like. In your evidence, you said that you feel that girls should be allowed to wear trousers in school: do you believe that boys should be allowed to wear skirts in school?

Ms Hitchen: The policy should be gender-neutral. If a boy were to decide to do that, there should not be an issue with that in the school. I said that the policy should be gender-neutral in its practicalities and its language. That issue is not something that often comes up at Parenting Focus, but we advocate for the policy to be gender-neutral for all. The main concern in this, though, is that girls are not allowed to wear trousers to school.

Mr Martin: It would be written into primary legislation. I am interested in whether you have consulted parents on that. If that was in primary legislation, there could be instances in which boys, maybe a whole class, dressed up in skirts for a day as a joke. You could see a range of things happening in schools, and the pupils would be entitled to do them due to the primary legislation. Do you foresee any problems with the maintenance of good order and discipline in a school, if that were the case?

Ms Hitchen: If such things were being done as a joke by the entire class, as in the example that you gave, there would be no maintenance of good order in that school anyway. We have heard a lot of evidence about upskirting and other issues around that —

Mr Martin: I accept that.

Ms Hitchen: — and we advocate a gender-neutral policy. I do not see how that would cause any issues. We hope to move towards a more inclusive society. If a boy chose to wear a skirt to school, hopefully there would be no issue with that.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Thank you, Peter.

Colin is still having issues with his audio, so I will bring in Cara in.

Ms Hunter: Thank you so much for being here. You did a fantastic job in engaging with MLAs and the Committee ahead of the debates on relationships and sexuality education (RSE). It is great that you are here today. The fact that you had 594 responses to your survey reflects how important it is to have you here to communicate parents' needs and concerns.

I go back to the topic of self-expression. We had the luxury of having our young people with us yesterday, and I got the chance to ask them some questions. They felt that it was important that children be afforded self-expression when it comes to uniform and appearance. You touched on the example of a child being denied breakfast, which is utterly disgraceful. It concerns me that each school has a different approach to that kind of policy. My question is about balancing the right to self-expression. We know that article 13 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child allows children to have self-expression. You have already spoken to this to some extent, but, in shaping the Bill, how can we, as a Committee, balance our young people's right to self-expression with the need to keep

them appropriately dressed for school? How can we allow an element of flexibility so that children can be themselves but also be dressed appropriately?

Ms Hitchen: There are many good examples. The Assembly does not have a uniform policy; it has a dress code. There are many such examples with work attire, which mean that people can look smart but still have the ability to express themselves. If we look at those examples of good practice and how they are implemented in workplaces and other areas, we should be able to apply the same kinds of policies in our schools.

As children get older and enter the post-16 age group, they may be going to work after school. Girls say that they want to wear light make-up and have highlights in their hair, which causes issues with their school. Their parents are really concerned that the punishment due to school policy, rather than the make-up or hair highlights, is adversely affecting their education. There are other examples of good practice that we can look at and try to reflect in school uniform policy to give room for self-expression within school parameters.

Ms Hunter: Absolutely. My argument is that, if the parent is OK with that and it is acceptable in the school setting, it is not really an issue. The young people and parents whom I have spoken to say that it is very much a gendered issue because, time and time again, it seems that the students who are being pulled out of classrooms and told to remove make-up are girls. There is an element of shame to that. When I speak to young people, that comes through strongly.

My final question is this: from your discussions with parents, are you aware of a student having been suspended for having a beard or hair that was too long or for wearing make-up?

Ms Hitchen: No. I do not think that we have come across examples of that. We have come across continuous disciplinary processes in which suspension might have been threatened, but I do not think that we have come across a case that led to suspension. However, parents are concerned. I have heard of numerous cases of parents getting phone calls about their child having a beard or their child's hair being too long. Those cases mainly involve boys, and the parents say that they have no issue with how their child has their hair. In those cases, the parents are concerned that the school is infringing on the child's rights at that point, when they have no issue with it.

Ms Hunter: That is a brilliant point. We want our kids to be confident and comfortable in an affordable uniform that does not burden parents. Thank you so much for coming to the Committee and articulating where parents and young people are. It is very helpful.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Cathy, you asked to come in briefly.

Mrs Mason: I hope you do not mind me coming in briefly. My question is slightly away from what we are discussing but is still related. It is about your survey findings and something that was flagged with me by the Irish League of Credit Unions. The cost of school uniforms is frightening for some parents, and they are having to borrow money to pay for them. Voluntary contributions is another issue that was high up there. Is that something that you find? Are you getting feedback that parents are under pressure in that respect?

Ms Hitchen: Absolutely. We have consulted about 2,000 parents in recent months about their participation in their children's education and the cost of accessing education, including voluntary contributions. It involves even the technology that schools require their children to have. We have heard of grammar schools that require extortionate costs for uniforms and then require students to have a laptop in the first week of term. Parents who have finally managed to send their children to that school then have another huge burden placed on them. Voluntary contributions and the question of whether they are voluntary are another huge concern for parents. That has very much been highlighted by parents who have not been able to make such contributions. That is a huge concern for parents, as is the cost of accessing education as a whole.

Mrs Mason: That is good to know. It is something that the Committee has asked about, and nobody in the Department seems to know the policy on that. Thank you very much.

Mr Baker: Can I ask a wee follow-up question on that?

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): That is fine. As we have witnesses here to speak to the Bill, we may as well hear evidence from them.

Mr Baker: That is a really good point about the cost of education. Schools are asking for voluntary contributions, but they are not voluntary. Is it the case that some schools ask for £50 while others ask for £500? Are you seeing that? I do not want to labour the example of the school that asked for £690, but I suspect that it is guilty of asking for the highest amount possible.

Ms Hitchen: I am not aware of the costs for that school. In the consultation, parents were quoting figures from £120 up to £800 for voluntary contributions.

Mr Baker: A school asked for £800?

Ms Hitchen: Yes. Some schools asked for a voluntary contribution each term and put in place various mechanisms by which parents can pay, which, I suppose, is to encourage payment of the voluntary contribution.

Mr Baker: What sort of pressure do schools apply? Is there any experience of what happens when the contribution is not paid? Do parents avoid going to the school? Are they getting emails or text messages?

Ms Hitchen: Parents have told us about the school ringing them to say that they have not set up a direct debit for their voluntary contribution. We have also heard of parents avoiding phone calls from the school or being unsure whether they should answer such calls, as they could be about their child but could also be about the voluntary contribution.

Mr Baker: Wow. Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): There is the additional issue that voluntary grammars are permitted in law to charge for their capital costs. There is a contribution required from parents for that as well. Those things can ramp up. After we get through the scrutiny of the Bill, it may be worth probing some of that with the Department again.

I do not see any other indications from members. Thank you for your time — David, do you want to come in?

Mr Brooks: I have a point. I understand the example you gave about stud earrings: I agree with that. This is less of a question and more of a comment. Part of the problem for some schools is that having a policy that says, for example, that no make-up is permitted is a clear line, but having one that allows minimal make-up is more difficult to enforce. I am not an expert on make-up, so I defer to your expertise on that. I am mindful that, for schools that are trying to manage such situations, creating grey areas can lead to more tension between schools and parents. For example, schools may say, "This teacher has decided that that is just on the wrong side of the line".

Ms Hitchen: The consultation with parents on that is important so that parents, teachers and the school understand and are in agreement on what is deemed to be acceptable in the school. If that consultation is done correctly, that should be fine.

Mr Brooks: I agree that there is a difference between saying to someone, "Please do not do that" —.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): I must bring this to a close.

Mr Brooks: OK. Thanks Chair.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): If we start down a rabbit hole, we could be here all afternoon.

Mr Brooks: Yes.

Ms Hitchen: Thank you for your time. The issues on the Bill got a really thorough run-through. Thank you, Emma. No doubt there will be issues arising from your evidence when we have a conversation at the end of the meeting.