



Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

School Uniforms (Guidelines
and Allowances) Bill:
Menstruation Matters

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 Katrina McDonnell Menstruation Matters Belfast

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): I welcome Katrina McDonnell; thank you for your time. Katrina is a volunteer with Menstruation Matters and Homeless Period Belfast, and she will give the perspective of Menstruation Matters on the Bill. Members may recall that the Committee Stage of the Period Products (Free Provision) Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 was coordinated by the Committee in the last mandate, and some provisions in that Act should be relevant to this conversation.

Katrina, if you wish to clarify your role in either of organisation, please feel free to do so. I hand over to you for up to 10 minutes for any opening remarks that you wish to make. We will then move to questions and answers. Thank you for your written briefing, which covers the issues comprehensively.

Ms Katrina McDonnell (Menstruation Matters Belfast): Thank you. I am the founder of Menstruation Matters. It is great to be back. The last time that I was in one of these meetings was when we were trying to get a policy change on free period products in schools, and that we did, so thanks so much.

I am here to talk about our work in tackling period poverty and advocating for period equality, which includes distributing period products. We also deliver events and workshops, primarily in schools, to break the stigma around menstruation. Last year, I delivered workshops in schools that reached around 2,000 girls. While our focus is on periods, students consistently raise related issues, such as where period products are placed; access to the toilet during class, which is a big one that comes up; and, more relevant to this discussion, how uncomfortable school uniforms can be during menstruation. I want to provide insights on what was fed back to me during those meaningful workshops and what our supporters said in response to polls that we did.

A big one that always comes up, which I have mentioned, is uniform discomfort. For example, tight waistbands on skirts often exacerbate cramps. Some students said that they felt a bit sick due to the

pain and discomfort that they were experiencing. Lack of choice is also an issue. Many pupils want to be able to wear trousers, and I know that that has come up in many of your discussions over the past two weeks. Some students mentioned how they feared having to wear a skirt in case of leakage and felt uncomfortable during GCSE and A-level examinations. Of course, none of us would want to experience that. I am aware that our survey results are a bit of an echo chamber, as our supporters are very period-positive; however, the fact that 98% of them agree that an option to wear trousers should be available to students or, at the very least, an option to wear extra layers as they please provides some insight.

The impact on attendance has come up quite a lot. Students have reported missing school or going home early due to the discomfort caused by their uniform, with the fear of leakage always being the main issue while wearing skirts. Engagement is also an issue for young people, with anxiety about uniforms and periods directly affecting their focus and participation in class.

I found it interesting that, when we debated the issue of uniforms with young people and polled our supporters, the majority said that comfort, choice and affordability mattered much more than school identity and formality. The PE kit always comes up: you have discussed that at length, and it is in the Bill. From speaking to parents, financial strain is also an issue, and 85% of respondents to our survey felt that students who menstruate are disproportionately impacted on by uniform-related costs. For example, a student may have soiled tights due to leakage and always have to change their uniform as a result.

Finally, 98% of our supporters believe that all schools should have a period-aware and period-considerate uniform policy. Our recommendation is that all school uniform policies explicitly consider the menstrual health and dignity of students. That includes offering the options of dark-coloured or loose-fitting clothing during menstruation and ensuring that those items are affordable, especially for those who menstruate. The Bill rightly seeks to address cost, but it must also protect the comfort and dignity of those who menstruate, which is a large proportion of the student population. It is really important for me and for others whom I have spoken to to be mindful that uniform policies that fail to acknowledge that reality will continue to contribute to shame, distraction and exclusion.

We urge the Department of Education and the Education Committee to embed an affordable period-aware uniform policy. That is a crucial step in ensuring that no student's education is limited by what they wear during their period.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Thank you, Katrina. As I said at the outset, your written briefing was comprehensive and covered a lot of the specifics in issues that arise. I have just one question, because your recommendation is clear. You want the legislation to mandate period-aware uniform policies: is there anything specific that needs to be included in the Bill to expand on what "period-aware" means, or would that phrase create a substantial enough duty to deliver the uniform policies that you are looking to see, namely ones that take proper account of the impact of menstruation on how pupils feel about their school uniforms?

Ms McDonnell: We should be more specific. Clause 2 talks about affordability and comfort. That suggests that a one-size-fits-all solution is required, which is not the case. Failing to explicitly mention in that clause pupils who menstruate risks excluding a significant group whose uniform-related challenges are unique and pressing. Including specifics is key, and including specifics on periods and being able to wear trousers will really help destigmatise periods. That would also complement the current policy of providing free period products. The terms "period-aware" and "period-considerate" should, of course, be in there, but specifics are needed so that the Bill's provisions are not implemented at the discretion of each school. They should be more clear and less broad. Does that answer your question?

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): I think that it does. Just to check, do you want to see more specific language in the Bill, or is it the guidelines that you would like to see expanded to draw out what is in your written briefing?

Ms McDonnell: Having it in guidelines makes it a bit broad, and schools can end up just doing what they want to do. We feel strongly about this and want it to be enforced, so we would like to see it in a clause. However, if it was in the guidelines, that would be great, too.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Great. That is helpful. As a Committee, we have been working through how prescriptive the legislation should be on a range of issues and how much of it should sit in guidelines. There is always a balance.

I put on record my thanks for bringing this specific issue to the Committee, because it is important that we have these conversations and ensure that we are period-aware in any policy decisions that are made in schools. All schools need to shift their thinking on a range of issues. You mentioned toilet access: when we speak to students, they raise the matter of some of the policies on toilet access all the time, and that can cause real issues. It would be good to think about hearing some more evidence about some of the wider issues that impact on pupils in schools when it comes to this specific issue.

That is everything from me at this stage.

Mr Brooks: Thanks for your evidence so far. I would like to explore what is in your submission and so on about the fact that some would like the option of, for instance, wearing PE clothes for comfort whenever they are menstruating. It is good that we have seen some of that being taken into account in sports and so on, making it easier for women to engage in sport; where possible, consideration should be given in this field too. However, if there were a rule that allowed for the wearing of PE clothes by people who are menstruating, I would worry about how it would be policed so that we do not end up in a situation where people who want to wear PE clothes for comfort just wear them all the time, if you understand. That would lead to there being one rule for one and another rule for another. I understand that there may be some people — some of them may be around the table — who would say, "Why shouldn't they be able to wear PE clothes all the time?": I am not of that view, to be honest, and am not likely to be of that view. I ask you to speak to that in the current context.

Ms McDonnell: That is a fair concern, and it has definitely been brought up. We always open a debate in the workshops to empower young people to debate against each other on such issues. Some people are for that, and others are against it. If we allowed students to wear trousers as well as skirts, we would not need to rely on PE uniform; that is a temporary thing at the minute, I think, because trousers are not an option. If we were to bring in the option to wear trousers, we could avoid students always wanting to wear PE gear. That is my response: let us bring in trousers so that we do not have the issue whereby students might end up taking advantage of that.

Mr Brooks: I accept that. Thanks for that answer.

I understand the example that you gave of people tying a jumper around their waist or something, so I will not challenge it. I would never have imagined that that was being done for that purpose. You mentioned wearing "extra layers as they please" during your evidence. Do you not think that that poses a similar challenge? It depends on what the layers are. There should be some allowance — I am not trying to shut that down — but, if pupils are told that there is a bit of a free-for-all, they will naturally use that to challenge boundaries. How does that sit? How can that challenge be managed?

Ms McDonnell: Again, that is a fair point about the risks of that. I will give a similar response: if they had trousers, they would not need to wear an extra layer around a skirt. I return to our stance: we agree with the 98% of our respondents and supporters who believe that, at that point, comfort comes before formality and school identity. Comfort should be the priority for young people, so that they can go about their school day without having to worry about the discomfort of their period or about leaking. I cannot labour enough the point about the worry about leaking. Young people's experience of leaking is at the fore all the time, so students want to cover up their skirts, adding that extra layer. If we just had those trousers or a bit more flexibility, we would avoid all the things that you are talking about.

Mr Brooks: I have no problem with saying that comfort should be a consideration; of course it should. I certainly think that young women's needs in that regard should be considered as well. Thank you for your answers.

Mrs Mason: Katrina, thanks so much not just for the presentation but for the work that you have done prior to this. You have gone over some of it. There are people, including people in this room, who will never comprehend the sheer embarrassment of having a leak during a period. The work that you do to highlight that is fabulous. From listening to you, I feel that these simply are not things that teenage girls should have to worry about. There is enough going on, especially at that age. Others here have teenage girls who are going through this right now.

I want to pick up on a point that, I think, the Chair made on whether specific language should be in guidance or in the legislation. You answered it, but I want to share my concern. If it is just put in guidance, there is always the concern that, a number of years down the line, another Minister could take it out or rewrite the guidance. Are you concerned that, if it is not in the legislation, it might be changed, in time?

Ms McDonnell: Absolutely. That is why I said that we would like it primarily to be in a clause, so that it can be enforced. Schools need to be held to account. I see the problem even with the provision of period products. As a community voice, I sit on the Department of Education's steering committee for the provision of free period products in schools, and we are up against those issues. Some things are guidelines, such as the placement of products. If the placement of period products in toilets had been enforced, we would not have all the issues that we have now. For the change to be meaningful, have a better impact and meet the needs of menstruators, schools should not be left to their choice or discretion in what they do. It needs to be applied more strictly by being in the clause rather than in the guidelines. I share your concern.

Mrs Mason: That is a really good, practical example of where something not being in the legislation has caused problems down the line. I really appreciate that.

That is all I have, Katrina. Thanks a million. We have had a really important witness today.

Ms McDonnell: Thank you so much for your kind words as well.

Ms Hunter: Thank you, Katrina. I echo Cathy's words: we are so grateful for all the work that you have done and for the number of times that you have been to Stormont to speak up and advocate on the issue. As a woman, I thank you, and, as a legislator, I think that your work undeniably shaped the period poverty Act, so we are grateful to have you here.

You detailed really well the true cost of embarrassment when it comes to things such as leaks and how they link in with affordability. If a student leaks onto their skirt, they may have to buy a new skirt and get rid of their tights. That may not have been highlighted at the Committee as much as it should have been until now, when it has been, thanks to you.

You touched on the fact that we want to keep our young girls in sports and in the classroom and on the importance of dark materials. As we shape the Bill, should we mandate black trousers or the provision of choice for a black trouser? Choice is really important. Should we look at language to mandate an option for black PE clothes as well? Being a woman, I think of the importance of choice. We saw recently in the debate around camogs the importance of choice over what women wear and what colour their clothes are, given our cycles.

Ms McDonnell: Yes, absolutely. Choice is definitely at the fore. It should be dark colours such as navy, browns and blacks so that there is a bit more choice and more diversity of colours. More broadly, I have homed in on clause 2, which speaks to our work a little more. In general, though, there needs to be consultation with young people, because they are the ones wearing the uniforms. The school policy should be somewhat co-produced. It is them wearing the uniform, and their comfort and needs should definitely be priorities, so put it out to them whether it is navy, brown or black. I agree that choice in those colours is important.

Ms Hunter: Absolutely. The period poverty Act covered the provision of products, but leaks are just inevitable and are part of life, so it is important that the Committee notes that. Is the Department doing enough to monitor young people who stay off school because of menstruation or those uniform-related issues? Is it doing enough from a data perspective to home in on those issues and recognise the severity of them?

Ms McDonnell: The Department could definitely do more. It is difficult to monitor that. I am sorry that I do not have actual data for you guys; I just have testimonies from the workshops, when they felt comfortable with me because I was an outsider to the organisation and they opened up, so I can speak only to that. However, that issue comes up a lot. When I was working with GCSE and A-level students in particular, they said that, even during their exams, that was at the back of their minds. That specific example from a few of them really touched me, because they are already stressed and should not have to be worried about skirts or leaking at such an important time in their lives as GCSE examinations.

That does not fully answer your question, because you are talking more about attendance in general. However, more feedback surveys that are anonymised to enable young people to say why or when they took time off school would probably be a better way to get an insight into that, rather than just discussions with someone who comes in from outside the organisation to feed that back to you.

Ms Hunter: No, of course. That is really helpful. You are right to say that it is important to listen to young people. I have spoken to some of them about bathroom breaks. Sometimes they were denied access to the bathroom, particularly during an exam. You are right: if it is always at the back of students' minds when they should be focusing on their studies, that is not fair.

Again, thank you so much for being here. Your briefing is so valuable to share with the Committee where young people's minds are with this and how it impacts on their learning.

Ms McDonnell: Great. Thanks so much, Cara.

Mr Baker: Thank you, Katrina, for the work that you do. Following on from what Cara was saying, your survey found that 98% of pupils rated comfort above school identity. I would argue that, if we dealt with comfort, we could still have school identity anyway, because you could wear your PE clothes, and that is having pride in your school.

From your engagement with young people and parents, do you think that addressing the issue of the number of branded items a school has help to bring down the cost of a uniform?

Ms McDonnell: Yes. For example, trousers do not need to be branded, if you have your crest on your jumper and blazer. The ties would be somewhat branded — you would know the school colours — whereas the trousers would not be branded. If you could get the trousers from anywhere, that would be a great way to bring down the cost.

Mr Baker: Trousers and leggings are a popular topic right now, especially for our young girls. The angle I want to go in is, if pupils had the freedom and if schools were not restrictive about the number of items, would that address what Cara was saying about wider issues, as in not attending school? The legislation could be about much more than just affordability; it could cover a lot of areas where we see young people disengaging from education.

Ms McDonnell: Yes, I agree. If keeping children engaged and not off school means having a bit of a uniform reform, we should definitely do that.

Mr Baker: As society changes, it is more ideological for people who get uniforms that — I am not against uniforms, by the way — it has to be a blazer, it has to be a jumper. Young people to whom I talk are very much removed from that: are you picking that up as well? They want to take pride in their school — there is no question about that: they love their school identity and representing their school — but does it have to be in a blazer? That is the most expensive uniform item when they go to secondary school.

Ms McDonnell: Absolutely. I went to Dominican College Fortwilliam, and I used to get Bs on my report card if I did not wear my blazer. Some schools are very strict, but blazers are so expensive. As I said, last year, I reached nearly 2,000 schoolgirls from schools across NI. I see a lot of them wearing PE gear during the workshops. I do not know whether that is an option because it is a workshop and not on the timetable, so it may be a case of, "Wear what you want and be comfortable", but, especially in primary schools, I see less formality. In secondary schools, the older the year group, the more leniency there is.

It is definitely time for uniform reform. We are not where we were decades ago, when formality was at its core and the code of conduct had to be adhered to. We have moved beyond that, and the excellent results that come out of NI are a testament to that. You do not have to wear a certain formal uniform to get good grades or have good behaviour. We do not ask people in any other workplace to wear suits, apart from maybe lawyers and barristers and stuff, so why are we asking — you are nodding your head there, so maybe in Stormont sometimes.

Mr Baker: I have had trouble with that, but I take your point.

Ms McDonnell: We do not do that as much anywhere else, and I do not know why we ask children to do it. That is what I am trying to say.

Mr Baker: Thank you so much.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): I suspect that Danny might bring in his own Bill on dress codes in the Assembly at some point. Maybe we should look out for that. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Baker: I could get Katrina to help me.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): He is picking up some ideas.

Mr Martin: I love the fact, Danny, that you got that question on dress.

Katrina, thank you so much for your evidence. I do not know whether you caught the earlier sessions, but, in the past couple of days, we have been talking a lot about the Claire Sugden amendment, trousers for all and shorts instead of skirts. It was interesting to hear your evidence from a different perspective. Claire introduced it because of upskirting and a range of things there, but we have heard your evidence that trousers would be incredibly useful in dealing with the menstruation issues that girls face. That is something that I have taken away from what you said.

I want to pick up one thing. In your briefing document, you talk about "young people", yet you just used the phrase "young girls". I wonder why you did not mention the word "girls" in the document. Girls and women are the ones who menstruate; boys do not. Is there a reason why you used that language in your briefing document?

Ms McDonnell: Yes. We will have to agree to disagree there. I do not want to get into a debate about it, but I think that you know why I used that phrase. We are inclusive of all genders, and we believe that it is not just women who have periods. There are non-binary students and trans men. At Menstruation Matters, we are clear about that. Even in the legislation on free period products in selected buildings and the policy in schools, we use inclusive language, so that mirrors that. It is consistent with legislation and policy in schools already.

Mr Martin: I will ask one more question, as I have time. Do you agree with the statement that only biological females have periods?

Ms McDonnell: I did not realise that I was coming on to a call today to get into that sort of debate; I thought that we were going to be talking about uniforms. I will push back on that one, because that is not why I am here today.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Katrina, I will come in there. You are here to give evidence on the school uniforms Bill, and you need not feel obliged to move outside that area if you are not comfortable in doing so. I suggest that the member keeps questions focused on the Bill.

Ms McDonnell: I appreciate that, Chair. Thank you.

Mr Martin: That is me, Chair.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): No further questions?

Mr Martin: No.

Mrs Guy: Thank you, Katrina. I have only one question. I am sitting here in a pair of trousers — gasp — and it is pretty normal for people to wear trousers, full stop. Is it weird that people are pushing back on allowing girls or anyone to wear trousers in school?

Ms McDonnell: Are you asking whether I think that it is weird that people are pushing back on that?

Mrs Guy: Yes.

Ms McDonnell: It is regressive, so yes. It is of the past. We have moved beyond that, and we should allow students to wear gender-neutral uniforms depending on their taste. Even beyond the periods issue, I agree with allowing trousers. Not everyone feels very feminine: people prefer trousers for a particular style or taste or to express themselves. I know that the importance of self-expression has come up in your meetings. I imagine that the people who are pushing back on trousers like formality and tradition, mostly.

Mrs Guy: It is perhaps about controlling how young women wear clothes or present themselves.

Ms McDonnell: Exactly, yes.

Mrs Guy: OK, Katrina, thank you. I appreciate that.

Ms McDonnell: Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): That has brought us to the end of the evidence session. Thank you for your time today, Katrina. That has been a really helpful briefing and has brought attention to a particular area of the Bill that we have not covered before. Thank you for your time and your input.

Ms McDonnell: Thank you so much, and good luck with the Bill.