



Committee for Education

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

School Uniforms (Guidelines and  
Allowances) Bill: Women's Regional  
Consortium

11 June 2025

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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### School Uniforms (Guidelines and Allowances) Bill: Women's Regional Consortium

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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  
Ms Cheryl Brownlee  
Mrs Michelle Guy  
Mr Peter Martin

**Witnesses:**

Ms Siobhán Harding                      Women's Regional Consortium

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Joining us is Siobhán Harding — hopefully, she will be online in just a moment — who is policy officer for the Women's Support Network. We are waiting for the tech to do its job. *[Pause.]* There we are. Good afternoon, Siobhán. Thank you for joining us. Is the audio coming through OK at your end?

**Ms Siobhán Harding (Women's Regional Consortium):** Yes, I can hear you. Thanks.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** That is great. Thank you very much for giving your time to brief the Committee and provide your evidence. This is an opportunity for you to provide your organisation's perspective on the School Uniforms (Guidelines and Allowances) Bill. I am happy to invite you to make opening remarks of up to 10 minutes, and then we will move to questions from members. Thank you for joining us. I will hand over to you.

**Ms Harding:** Good afternoon, Chair and Committee members. Thank you for the opportunity to present to you, and thanks to Mark from the Committee for facilitating my presenting via Zoom.

We welcome the Bill. It provides a starting point from which to try to address the issue of expensive school uniforms, which has such an impact on women, children and families. We welcome the focus on affordability, consultation and review and the fact that the Minister said that his:

*"focus is on making an impact for the families most in need". — [Official Report (Hansard), 3 March 2025, p80, col 1].*

I speak on behalf of the Women's Regional Consortium, which is a consortium of seven women's sector organisations that represent the views and experiences of women who live in disadvantaged and rural areas of Northern Ireland. In 2023, we published a major piece of research, with Ulster University, on the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on women. We spoke to 250 women across Northern Ireland. For women who were parents, the cost of school uniform came up time and time

again, so my contribution will focus on cost. In fact, the cost of school uniforms comes up at focus group sessions even when they do not relate specifically to the issue of uniforms. For example, last week, when I was speaking to a group of women about the Government's 'Pathways to Work' Green Paper, the cost of school uniforms was raised. That indicates how much of a pressure it is.

It is clear from our research that the cost of school uniforms is a major issue and places a huge burden on women and families, especially those on the lowest incomes, those who depend on social security benefits and those in low-paid work. Polling by Save the Children Northern Ireland shows that six in 10 parents find the cost of school uniforms and PE kit financially challenging. That figure rises to 73% for families with a low income. The cost issues that have been described to us include, as you have heard from other contributors to your inquiry, branded items, expensive blazers, PE kits, school shoes and additional items such as school bags.

We believe that, more often than not, this is a gendered issue, with school uniform costs impacting more on women, who are more likely to bear the responsibility for children's costs. We hear from women throughout the year about the cost of school uniforms. It really is a constant worry for them. They have to replace school shoes, shirts, trousers and items of PE kit when children grow out of them or lose them and when they need to be replaced due to wear and tear. We particularly hear about school uniform issues now and into the summer months, when the burden is most acute. Women are worrying about how they will save the necessary money to afford uniforms. I cannot stress enough how much that contributes to anxiety levels among those women, who are already struggling with insufficient income to afford the basics. This is in an environment in which many parents are facing into their third summer after the loss of the holiday hunger scheme, which helped them to at least meet the cost of food over the summer holiday period. A rapid response report from a number of academics detailing the consequences of cuts on education for children and young people states:

*"The removal of, or deep cuts to, schemes such as those to alleviate holiday hunger, period poverty and the high costs of school uniforms have a cumulative impact on groups which are already disadvantaged, in terms of their experience of education provision."*

In the women's sector, we often refer to women as being the shock absorbers of poverty in the home. They go without food and heat to ensure that their children have what they need, including their school uniform. The phrase "choosing between heating and eating" has been used a lot since the cost-of-living crisis and has maybe lost a bit of its impact, but this is the reality of many women's lives, as evidenced by this quote from our research. It states:

*"I have 3 kids in the house, I'm always going without to make sure they have what they need. The little one needs new school shoes and I'm trying to figure out how I'm going to pay for them. There is nowhere to take the money from. He needs them so this week I'll cut back on gas and not do a full shop so that I can save some money for his shoes."*

The Women's Regional Consortium is also concerned about the potential for rising debt levels as a result of increases in the cost of living. People are struggling to make ends meet, particularly those on the lowest incomes. We are concerned that, to afford school uniforms, some women may have to resort to borrowing, and, in some cases, that may be very expensive and may add to their financial problems. As one woman told us during our cost-of-living research:

*"I had to use a credit card for the kid's school uniform this year. I struggled to pay the kid's school uniform worse this year than any time before."*

We also heard:

*"The grant for a school uniform doesn't even go anywhere near the actual costs."*

We are also in the unenviable position of having extremely dangerous lenders, such as paramilitaries, who operate particularly in more deprived communities. Women who are outside some of the cheaper forms of borrowing because they have poor credit histories or low incomes are particularly vulnerable to that type of lending. Research by Ulster University found that universal credit was repeatedly described as a driver of illegal lending.

We do not believe that it is right that parents and families are getting into debt to pay the cost of school uniforms. Polling by Save the Children Northern Ireland shows that one in three parents has had to

borrow money to cover the cost of school uniforms and PE kits and that 88% of the public do not believe that parents should experience debt to pay for uniforms.

To conclude, we welcome the legislation and the fact that guidance will be put on a statutory footing, but we would like to see an embedded price cap to ensure that costs are kept to a minimum and that they do not place an unnecessary burden on parents and children that takes advantage of the limited budget that families have, particularly in these difficult economic times.

I will finish with a case study of a mum to whom I spoke yesterday about the pressure of school uniform costs. She has six children, ranging from the youngest at eight months old — so no school uniform there yet — to the oldest, who is 14. Five of her children are currently in school: three at primary school and two at high school. She is a single parent in receipt of universal credit, and she is subject to the two-child limit, so she is getting help for only her two oldest children through universal credit. One of her children has been diagnosed with autism, and two are on the waiting list to be assessed for ADHD. She is struggling to pay her essential bills and has to use a food bank regularly. For her children at primary school, the school requires a branded cardigan at £15 and a branded T-shirt at £9. Despite the school principal's repeated requests that she get the branded items, she has, due to their cost, refused to do so. She said that she simply cannot afford it and can get a two-pack of plain cardigans for around £6. She said, "I do not know how many times I have said to the principal that my kids' uniform is exactly the same. It just does not have a badge on it. It does not affect their education in any way, and I just cannot afford it". For high school, her children are required to have a branded blazer costing £75 and a branded jumper costing £28. The trousers and skirts have to be bought from one of two shops, as they have to be the proper ones. A school skirt costs £26, and no cheaper option is allowed. For the PE kit, the children are required to have a branded polo shirt and a branded quarter-zip jumper from Podium 4 Sport. There is a skirt for the girls. Her daughter has refused to wear it, as it is too short, but girls are permitted to wear plain black tracksuit bottoms. The school has a summer PE kit and a winter PE kit, but this mum cannot afford to buy two separate kits. She gets the school uniform grant, but that does not cover the cost of a school blazer. She struggles to meet the cost of school shoes and school bags too. She is then asked to contribute money to school funds, for home economics, for breaks and for school buses, and there is no help with any of that. About shoes, she said, "For my primary-school children, I had to buy six pairs of shoes between September and Christmas. The school principal spoke to me the other day about the state of my daughter's school shoes, but I am not buying anything now. I cannot afford to, and, if I did, they would not fit her by September". She also talked about having to buy cheaper shoes to be able to afford them but said that they do not last as long. She normally buys the kids' school uniform in August. She borrows money to do that, normally from her parents, but said that they do not always have the money to give to her. She pays them back in instalments. The primary school provides a uniform swap, but there was a small selection last year, and her high school does not provide one at all. I asked her what would really help her with school uniforms, and she said, "Fewer branded items, keeping school uniform prices down and an increase in the school uniform grant".

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Thank you, Siobhán. That pretty stark evidence sets out the impact of highly inflated school uniform costs on parents.

I will start with a question. Your evidence largely confirmed this, but I want to get clarity. The Committee has heard some evidence suggesting that legislation may not be needed and that schools manage the uniform issue effectively. Do you agree? From your evidence, it seems pretty clear that that is not what you hear from the women with whom you engage.

**Ms Harding:** No, it is not. There is so much feedback from the women on the cost issue in particular. While guidelines exist, it is clear that certain schools do not pay enough regard to them. There is considerable evidence from the women to whom we speak across Northern Ireland about the expense of school uniforms.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Clearly, your organisation would welcome the approach that is being taken, which is that, when the guidelines are produced, schools must adhere to them.

**Ms Harding:** Yes, we very much support that being put on a statutory basis. The approach needs to be more rigorous and robust to ensure that schools follow the guidance, because, although it exists, there is clear evidence that a lot of schools do not follow it.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** I have one other really quick question on other evidence that we have heard. I will then move on to some specific questions on cost.

Parenting Focus and a couple of other witnesses highlighted the fact that the legislation as drafted does not create a mandatory requirement for schools to consult parents when they look at a revised uniform policy or set their policy. Would the women whom you engage with through your organisation welcome that requirement being put in? The Committee is looking at the idea that schools should have to engage meaningfully with parents when they set such policies.

**Ms Harding:** Yes, very much so. It is really important to have that level of engagement with parents and pupils, because it gives a real understanding of the communities to which the schools belong and the situations in which many families find themselves. The mother whom I spoke to yesterday lives in a community where there are high levels of deprivation. It is important for the school to understand the pressures that parents face and to be clear on the level of need in the community. Some schools do that really well; others do not do it so well.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** That is fine. I have only one other question, and then I will open it up to other members. What change to the Bill would you propose to make it more effective?

**Ms Harding:** We would like to see the price cap embedded in the Bill, because we feel that the guidelines need to be much stronger in order to ensure that schools pay more than just "due regard" to affordability. Rather than just giving the legislation a glance, they would be mandated to stay within its requirements. We would like it to be stronger on the need for an embedded price cap to keep prices lower.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Thank you, Siobhán. I will pass to the Deputy Chair and then other members.

**Mr Sheehan:** Thanks for your evidence, Siobhán. Some of us have looked at that price cap point and discussed it with the Bill Office. There are some complications with it. For example, does setting a price cap set a target? What happens if inflation is particularly high? An alternative suggestion is a cap on the number of branded items. You mentioned a mother who bought unbranded items. How do you feel about that?

**Ms Harding:** That is brought up time and again, and we talk to women about the number of branded items in school uniform. Reducing that number would considerably reduce the cost. I appreciate what you said about setting a price cap starting a race to the maximum. There is scope for tackling this on several levels. We could have a price cap and a reduction in the number of branded items.

**Mr Sheehan:** Thanks for that. I do not know whether you are aware that a school in County Armagh, the former Brownlow Integrated College, which has been rebranded as Craigavon Integrated College, has designed a completely new uniform that does away with blazers. Instead, the young people in the school can wear leggings or track bottoms and a polo top, a half-zip and a branded puffer jacket. The principal of the school says that the price of that uniform comes in under the value of the uniform grant. Is there a need to rethink what a school uniform looks like?

**Ms Harding:** Yes, I agree. There is so much emphasis in schools on who has what and who is able to afford certain pieces of uniform, when that makes no difference to the child's learning but can restrict their opportunities. There is widespread support for generic school uniform — the plainer items that you described — and a rethink is needed. It does not matter whether a child has a badge on their blazer, jumper or any other item. It makes no difference to their learning. It is about their comfort during the school day and providing them with the right conditions in which to learn and take the opportunities that are afforded to them through the school.

**Mr Sheehan:** OK. Thanks for that, Siobhán.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Danny has indicated. Any other members who wish to come in should also indicate.

**Mr Baker:** Siobhán, thank you. You highlighted many other costs of education. I will talk about a proposal for a private Member's Bill to end holiday hunger that I am bringing forward simply because the Minister will not. I want to hear about how many obstacles families face when it comes to education, because uniforms are only one part of it. We have to make it all affordable for everybody.

**Ms Harding:** Yes. I responded to the consultation on your private Member's Bill on behalf of the Women's Regional Consortium. The impact of the loss of holiday hunger payments has been quite substantial for a lot of the women to whom we speak. We hear all the time about the struggle to afford food and heat. If women divert money to school uniforms that their children must have, that money has to come from somewhere. What they do is take it from their own ability to eat and the ability to heat their homes. Obviously, that has implications for them, their children and families. The money has to be found from somewhere, and, if there is nowhere else to go, it is taken from household budgets or becomes a debt. That is a particularly worrying aspect, as I outlined to you. It is an enormous pressure not only on household budgets but on the women and families. We hear about the level of anxiety that it causes and the stress about affording uniforms year after year. We hear about that all the time but especially at this time of year.

**Mr Baker:** Thanks, Siobhán. Another wee point that we have heard in our evidence sessions relates to the design of blazers for some schools. There can be different designs for girls and boys, meaning that families might not be able to hand down a blazer. Do you hear much about that from families? Do you hear much about that issue when it comes to schools and recycling uniforms?

**Ms Harding:** We have heard a few of the women talk about that. Sometimes, schools have separate blazers for students of a certain age or those who do specific things, such as music and stuff like that. There are sometimes requirements around that. We have heard examples of that. They are not really widespread, but there have been examples. It causes issues around passing the uniform down.

The women whom we represent use swaps and things. Not all of them use them, but there are women who do and find them valuable. There are issues with swaps when it comes to what comes into the swaps and its quality, as well as the stigma involved. If your uniform does not look the same or as good as everybody else's, it makes a difference. There are issues around what is included at swaps. The mum whom I spoke to yesterday said that there was not much there, so she was not able to get a lot of what she needed through the swap. There are issues with that too, and stigma is part of it as well.

**Mr Martin:** Thank you, Siobhán, for coming to the Committee meeting this afternoon. I suspect that we agree on about 95% of the Bill. I will ask you about some aspects of the Bill other than price and cost caps.

Your written evidence says that school uniform policy should address:

*"A mandatory requirement for gender-neutral options for school uniforms".*

Will you explain what you mean by "gender-neutral options"?

**Ms Harding:** I know that you have had evidence from some girls about the ability to wear trousers. We definitely support that. We want to see school uniforms that are not only affordable but comfortable and flexible and that accommodate pupils' needs. That includes pupils with special educational needs. We want pupils to be able to choose what works for them and for school uniform policy not to reinforce harms. That includes harms to trans and gender-nonconforming students. We want pupils to be comfortable in school so that they can learn and take opportunities.

**Mr Martin:** Thank you for that. Certainly, those things are important. You mentioned in your evidence that gender-neutral options involve girls having the right to wear trousers. We have heard evidence about the reasons for that, which relate to upskirting and periods. Is it your evidence that you support any boys who wish to wear skirts or summer dresses?

**Ms Harding:** I suspect that we will disagree on this.

**Mr Martin:** You never know.

**Ms Harding:** No. We want the school uniform to be flexible and have options for pupils. It is important that children feel comfortable and that they can learn at school. Options should be inclusive and provide for everybody.

**Mr Martin:** I will ask you that question again. You said that it should be a mandatory requirement that girls should be allowed to wear trousers but you did not say whether boys should have the right in legislation to wear skirts or summer dresses to school. An amendment may come forward on that.

**Ms Harding:** I support the fact that the legislation should be inclusive for everybody.

**Mr Martin:** What does that mean for boys who wish to wear skirts or dresses to school? Should they have a legislative right to do that?

**Ms Harding:** Yes.

**Mr Martin:** OK. In my next question, I am not necessarily talking about students who have gender dysphoria: I am talking about boys, because the Committee has to consider such things. If an amendment put into legislation the right for girls to wear trousers and boys to wear skirts or summer dresses to school, how should a school proceed if a boy who was wearing a dress, skirt or tunic wanted, for example, to use the girls' bathrooms in the school? Would the boys have a right to do that?

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** I emphasise, Siobhán, that the member has a right to ask the question that he chooses, but you also have the right to keep your answers within the scope of the Bill as far as you are comfortable. It is entirely for you to decide how you want to respond.

**Ms Harding:** Yes. I am primarily here to speak about the issue of cost, which is what my research is about and what the evidence that I have, which comes from the women, is about. I do not hear stuff like that from the women whom I speak to. They are concerned about cost, affordability and comfort in school. That is the evidence that I have and that is what I will concentrate on.

**Mr Martin:** I am very glad that you shared that, because that is certainly what the scope of the Bill is. I agree 100% with what you have just said. Clearly, you have given evidence, and it is your right not to answer these questions. However, the Committee has to scrutinise the Bill, and, if we were to include your suggestion around mandatory requirements for gender-neutral options, which includes the rights of boys to wear skirts, tunics or summer dresses — I see Danny, across the table, shaking his head at me — it would not be for the Committee to have to deal with that; it would be for principals, boards of governors and individual teachers to police how the school interacts with any boys who decide one day, as is their right, if that was passed into legislation, to put on a tunic and perhaps want to access the girls' bathrooms for whatever reason. That is why I ask the question. I do not think that it is a ridiculous example. If legislation was passed that underpins some of the evidence that you have given, schools would have to deal with that. Do you accept that?

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Again —.

**Mr Sheehan:** Chair, may I make a point? There is a bit of a stretch here. Peter seems to be obsessed with boys wearing skirts: I do not know what that is about. However, it is a bit of a stretch to say that they are going to wear skirts and then they are going to go into the girls' toilets. I am not sure what that has to do with this.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Thank you, Deputy Chair. I was about to say, again, that it is the member's right to ask the question. However, I put on record that no amendment has been discussed that has covered access to bathrooms over the course of the Committee Stage. It is important to note that. It has also not been suggested that, if girls were permitted to wear trousers, they would seek permission to use the boys' bathrooms. It is important to note that from what the Committee has discussed, but it is for you, Siobhán, to decide whether you want to answer that specific question.

**Ms Harding:** With all due respect to Peter for the question, I have evidence in relation to the affordability of a school uniform. I came here to speak about what I have heard from the women whom I spoke to over the course of our research. I would like to keep it to that. Thank you.

**Mr Martin:** Siobhán, I completely accept that.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Will you finish briefly, as time is against us?

**Mr Martin:** That is fine. I am on the record as supporting exactly what you said. I remind Committee members that the Bill's intent is to reduce the cost of school uniforms for parents in Northern Ireland. I am concerned about and will continue to scrutinise at the Committee the outworking of any amendments brought forward that suggest that "gender neutral" means, for example, boys wearing dresses to school and the outworking of that for schools in Northern Ireland. That is the Committee's job. It is not just to sign off on something and think, "That is OK", and then, suddenly, there is a statutory right to do x and y. The Committee will not have to deal with the consequences of that. The Education Department, teachers, boards of governors and principals will have to deal with the outworking of any legislation that passes through the Committee. I am concerned that suggestions around that area will have substantial implications for education in Northern Ireland in a whole host of ways.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Finish up, as time is against you.

**Mrs Guy:** *[Inaudible.]*

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** There will be every opportunity at the clause-by-clause stage to go through every single possible —.

**Mr Martin:** Michelle, I am not putting it on Facebook.

**Mrs Guy:** I feel as though this is getting into my time, as I am probably coming in next. I was waiting for a question that did not come. I am not sure whether or not that was directed to Siobhán.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** I ask Michelle to direct any comments through the Chair. I will bring this section to a close, because we are well over time. You had well over five minutes. You will have every opportunity to raise those issues at another stage of the Committee's scrutiny. Michelle, I will bring you in now.

**Mrs Guy:** Thank you, Chair.

Siobhán, thank you very much for your evidence today on affordability and on the real circumstances that many families face around the affordability of school uniforms. It is very much appreciated. I will ask you some questions related to that, which, I think, is why you are here. Should schools or the Department publish the cost of school uniforms?

**Ms Harding:** Yes, absolutely. It is about being open and transparent about the costs that are involved. I see no reason why that should not be the case.

**Mrs Guy:** Thank you. You referenced the cost cap, and the Deputy Chair raised the fact that there are some concerns about the practicalities of implementing that. Should the Department consult further on the cost cap so that we can flesh out some of the issues?

**Ms Harding:** Yes, that is a good idea. There are a lot of issues around what affordability means, because it means different things to different people. It is about providing some kind of definition of affordability, asking some questions around what that means and what it should be set at and then consulting further on how the cap might be put in place. Families are desperate for help with school uniform costs. I am really saying two different things there: I want to see help directed towards families as soon as possible, because this has been an ongoing issue for so long, and I support the consultation, which will obviously take a bit of time. It is worth doing some genuine consultation with all those involved on how the cap might work, affordability in general and what that means, because, as I said, it means different things to different people.

**Mrs Guy:** Thank you. The Deputy Chair also mentioned taking an alternative approach to branded items and restricting the number of branded items. I want to get a sense of what we think of as branded items. You used the example of the lady who bought a regular cardigan. An alternative is sewing or stitching a crest on to items to make them a bit more affordable. Do you support that?

**Ms Harding:** We support anything that helps to genuinely reduce costs. If there happened to be a requirement for a crest, that could be sewn on. Again, we support limiting the use of a crest to maybe one item of school uniform, rather than having it on lots of items. The polling that was done by Save the Children Northern Ireland showed strong support for generic school uniform items. Making as



much of the school uniform as generic as possible will provide parents with a choice and the ability to buy cheaper items. If there must be branding, it should be kept to an absolute minimum. Where branding exists, a sewn-on badge would be helpful.

**Mrs Guy:** Thank you. I will not pull you over this again, but I want to comment that you handled the question on gender neutrality very well and in a measured way. If you want to comment, you can. The evidence that the Committee has received has exclusively been about young women wearing trousers, because women wear trousers in 2025. It is not an extraordinary or ridiculous thing to ask our schools to do. You are more than welcome to add anything, but I do not require you to do that. Thank you for your very measured evidence on that point. Thank you.

**Ms Harding:** Thanks, Michelle. We are, obviously, very supportive of girls being able to wear trousers. I heard the evidence that the Committee received from girls about that, and nothing can add to the power of what was said by them. The fact that girls should be able to wear trousers is very sensible in this day and age.

**Mrs Guy:** Thank you, Siobhán. I appreciate that.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** I do not have any other indications. That brings our evidence session to a close. Siobhán, thank you for your time. We will take that forward in our ongoing consideration of the Bill. Thank you.