

Official Report: Monday 07 April 2025

School Uniforms (Guidelines and Allowances) Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

Mr Mathison (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 3 December 2025, in relation to the Committee Stage of the School Uniforms (Guidelines and Allowances) Bill.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on the debate. One amendment has been selected and is published on the Marshalled List.

Mr Mathison: In my capacity as the Chair of the Education Committee, I propose the Committee's motion to extend the Committee Stage of the School Uniforms (Guidelines and Allowances) Bill to 3 December 2025. I will outline how the Committee agreed on the motion and the extension date. Although, it is worth noting that we are in a slightly unusual context because parties have confirmed, via the media, that they will support the amendment rather than the agreed Committee motion. Speaking as Chair, I can frame my remarks only around what was discussed and agreed formally in our meetings. I cannot speak to the contributions of other parties subsequent to that, outside the Committee structures.

For the first part of the debate, I will limit my remarks to my role as Chair but I may conclude with some remarks as an Alliance MLA.

The Committee took primary legislation guidance on 8 January and, again, when the Bill was introduced in March. The Committee then took pre-legislative and introductory briefings from departmental officials, had procedural advice from the Committee and Bill Clerks and discussed the components and reasonable time frames for good Committee Stage scrutiny. The Committee agreed that the components are: a call for evidence not equivalent to the Department's consultation timeline but a first chance for the public to consider and reflect on the provisions in the draft law; oral evidence sessions on the substance of the Bill; Committee deliberation on the evidence received in those oral evidence sessions; further engagement with departmental officials to answer queries that may arise from evidence sessions and the Committee members' consideration of the Bill;

development and consideration, in conjunction with the Bill Clerk if required, of potential Committee amendments; informal and formal clause-by-clause scrutiny and approval of the Bill; and consideration and approval of the final Committee report to the Assembly. The Committee agreed to take those steps, and all members agreed that they were the appropriate stages of a Committee's scrutiny when considering any Bill.

The timelines allocated a window of time that would not prejudice any of those stages or the outcomes. It is entirely usual for the Committee Stage to be extended and, in fact, highly unusual for the 30-day term set out in Standing Order 33(2) to be applied. Members will be aware that it is rarely, if ever, applied in practice. In their contributions, Committee members emphasised that we were not yet at the end of the mandate and that, therefore, there was time to fully consider stakeholders' views and ensure, on behalf of the Assembly, that the legislation being made would take account of all the factors in the round to enable good, effective law to be enacted without, we hoped, any unintended consequences.

Further to the Committee's deliberations on the matter and its agreement to the date of 3 December, factoring in all the timescales, the Minister wrote to the Committee to express his disappointment at the proposed timetable. He formally proposed, in writing to the Committee, a truncated Committee Stage ending on 30 May. It will be helpful for me to set out how the Committee responded to the Minister, so that Members understand how the Committee's discussions gave rise to, and were reflected in, the response, which clearly sets out what was agreed:

"The Committee appreciates and shares your focus on making a difference in terms of affordability for parents in relation to school uniforms. The Committee also recognises and commends the effort that you and the Department of Education have made to urgently progress the Bill to this stage. The Committee noted your desire to see the Committee Stage concluded by 30 May. Unfortunately, this would have afforded us no time, following the close of our call for evidence, to engage with stakeholders, raise any issues with your Department or, indeed, consider any amendments which may be proposed. While we share your desire to see the Bill progress quickly, we do also need to be satisfied that the Bill will address the cost of school uniforms effectively and comprehensively. The Committee sees the extension of the Committee Stage of the Bill to 3 December not as a target to be met but as a window allowing the Committee time to carry out the component elements of Bill scrutiny without haste or unintended consequences arising. The Committee will, nonetheless, endeavour to complete the Committee Stage with urgency, hopefully well in advance of 3 December, while carrying out the careful scrutiny that its statutory role requires. It is the Committee's intention to work with both the Department and stakeholders to deliver the best possible outcome for parents and pupils."

That was the Committee's agreed position at that time on the response to the Minister. It reflected our conversations around his request to close the Committee Stage on 30 May.

It is, of course, not for the Minister to determine the length of the Committee Stage of any Bill. The Committee reassured him in that correspondence that it will proceed with urgency but apply appropriate scrutiny and allow enough time to do so. Neither is it for the Committee to determine the next steps that the Minister may envisage, but he has been clear, including in his correspondence, that he hopes to have the law in effect to permit schools to reflect it in their prospectuses, which must be published in November. When that was being considered by the Committee, members expressed concern that, once the Bill was passed, the timescales in which to channel new guidance, through various layers of consultation and communication via parents and boards of governors, into prospectuses by November, for application next year, would be extremely pressured, and that did not even factor in engagement with suppliers and their supply chains, which need to be taken into account — unless, of course, the guidance is ready now and would remain, at that point, completely unchanged, but we should not assume that that will be the case.

That aside, the Committee was interested in the effectiveness and comprehensiveness of the provisions of the primary legislation. It was clear from our discussions that members were likely to have an appetite for amendments across several areas of the Bill, not least its central planks relating to uniform styles and a potential cap on costs, which, from the Bill as drafted, it seems that the Minister is not in a position to commence, if, indeed, we have any assurance that they will be commenced at all. Committee members were keen to receive more information from the Department on that point.

Completing the Committee Stage by 30 May would leave the Assembly just five weeks in which to pass the Bill through all its stages before summer recess, which was the Minister's request. That means five weeks in which to complete Consideration Stage, Further Consideration Stage and Final Stage. The Committee was clear that the scheduling of those stages would be a matter for the Minister and the Executive Committee, but it was highlighted that delivering the stages so close together could seriously constrain Members' ability to bring amendments and contemplate the Bill fully before Final Stage.

I am therefore content that, on balance, what I have set out reflects the Committee's deliberations and that, in full awareness of the Department's assurances about working to effect positive outcomes for pupils and parents in the context of a cost-of-living crisis, a Committee Stage extension to 3 December is reasonable and serious,

representing the Committee's good faith and commitment to making good law for every constituent who will be affected by it. I caveat that with the clear information that was included in the Committee correspondence that the hope and intention was to complete the Committee Stage well in advance of 3 December.

I will turn to the amendment that my Committee colleagues Peter Martin and David Brooks tabled, which proposes that the Committee Stage end on 30 August. I do not have a Committee position to reflect other than that in the agreed motion. I therefore reiterate my comments about the rigour of a process that potentially does not duly allocate time to the work that is required. Other Committee members have today clarified their position through media channels, and they will have the opportunity to speak to that position during the debate. It is not for me, as Committee Chair, to do so.

On the scope and capacity for a Committee Stage to be delivered over the summer period, I draw Members' attention to the fact that, last Tuesday, we received notification from the Business Committee that the Assembly will be in recess from 4 July until 31 August 2025. I hope that the Members who tabled the amendment will clarify precisely how they foresee the situation playing out, because it will require the Committee either to complete its deliberations by 4 July or to sit through the summer recess. There is not, as was suggested in the Chamber earlier today, any unwillingness on the part of the Committee to engage in that kind of work. Rather, the concern is that it is unclear at this stage whether the necessary support from Assembly staff, via the Committee Clerk, her team and the Bill Office, and, indeed, departmental officials will be available over the summer recess in order to allow the process to be delivered effectively. We are aware that staff in the Building are often required to take their leave during recess periods because they are not permitted to take leave when the Assembly is sitting, so I am concerned that, if we were to attempt to run a Committee Stage over recess, we could be severely constrained by staffing resource and availability.

Either way, it is clear from the Committee's deliberations that the Members who tabled the amendment did not divide the Committee at any stage to propose their alternative date, so the Committee does not have a record of their intentions in that regard. Furthermore, they have not, as far as I am aware, engaged directly with Assembly staff to understand their capacity to support a Committee Stage over the summer. I trust that they will have clear proposals at our next Committee meeting for how that will be delivered. It is worth noting, as I have already, that there were two separate Committee meetings at which we discussed the motion and the proposed date. Those were two separate opportunities to divide the Committee that were not taken. Instead, we have before us the rather unorthodox approach of an amendment having been tabled. With all that having been said, I am content to have moved the motion that the Committee agreed previously.

I will now make some remarks in my capacity as an Alliance Party MLA and as one of our education spokespeople. First, I make it abundantly clear that Alliance fully supports legislation to address the cost of school uniforms. Had the Minister not introduced the Bill, I was already working on a private Member's Bill on the exact same issue, so I welcome the Bill's being introduced and welcome the fact that the Committee is getting the opportunity to look at it. I welcome the fact that, here in the Assembly, we will have the opportunity to do something about the costs involved, and I hope that, once we have it on the statute book, the law will tangibly and meaningfully address the challenges that parents face.

It is not enough just to legislate, however. The legislation must be effective, and Alliance is clear that it wants to see legislation in that space that meaningfully delivers on bringing down costs. It is therefore entirely appropriate that the Education Committee take the time that it needs to scrutinise the Bill, and that goes for any Committee that has legislation in front of it. The Minister's initial proposal that we should finish our Committee Stage by 30 May was his effectively saying that there should be no scrutiny of the Bill at all. Once our call for evidence had closed, we would not have been able to hear from stakeholders, and we certainly would not have had time to reflect on the evidence that they had brought to us. Members would have had no time to seek further engagement or clarification from the Department, and the need for clarification will undoubtedly arise. There would have been no time to discuss and agree amendments. To me, the Minister's position therefore seems predicated on the assumption that the Bill is the finished article and that it cannot be improved and should not be amended.

The amendment that is before us proposes a date of 30 August and leaves us, as I have already referenced, in an equally unclear position. Assembly staff — we have to deal with facts — are on leave over recess and, in many cases, are unable to take leave at any other time, and it will be the same for many of the Minister's officials. Are we potentially proposing an extension of a Committee Stage without any support staff to deliver it effectively? Is it a smokescreen so that it looks as though we are going to do the scrutiny work? From any Member who is proposing it, I would like to hear whether Assembly staff may be asked to cancel holidays in order to make that happen.

I am clear that I am ready to do the work over the summer if required, but that needs to be supported appropriately and effectively by the Assembly staff who are put in place to deliver that.

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Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he acknowledge that this is not the only Committee in which this happens? I refer to the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee. Legal and Committee staff supplement that Committee in periods of recess as and when required.

Mr Mathison: I thank the Member for his intervention. I am not an expert on the staffing structures around the Windsor framework Committee. My understanding is that those staff are engaged on a different set of terms and conditions, but I am happy to be corrected on that point.

I will move on. There are many questions about the Bill, even from an initial cursory reading of it, before we get into any of the detail. Surely the biggest question is about what the Minister intends to do in relation to a cap on costs. That proposal received wholehearted support across the board from the majority of parental respondents to the Department's consultation, but the Bill provides only for an enabling power. We have no idea whether the Minister will ever use that power or what a proposed cap would look like, were he to do so. We do not know what criteria the Minister or his departmental officials will apply to assess when it would be appropriate to use the enabling power. The provisions will receive no serious scrutiny, even though they are, undoubtedly, complex, and will, undoubtedly, raise a range of issues about the potential consequences of delivering a cap and what it should look like. There will also be questions about when and how it should be brought forward. The idea that the Education Committee will not interrogate the reasons for the absence of a cap from the Bill or look seriously at how it could operate is completely unacceptable, given the huge public support that was demonstrated in the Department's consultation.

There are many other issues that require attention. It is concerning that the Minister has put it forward as a simple Bill. It has been presented as something so straightforward that we might ask why the Committee would require the time. No legislation ever turns out to be so simple that we can just nod it through. The purpose of this place is to ask hard questions. Some questions about the Bill stand out. How will its effectiveness be measured and monitored? Will there be a way of assessing objectively whether costs have come down? Will the enforcement regime be robust and effective enough? What exactly will that enforcement regime look like? Are we clear about what will be in the new guidance? What will it look like when it lands on the desks of boards of governors who will then have to revise their policies? Are we to accept the departmental assurance that the Committee has had that all those things will be dealt with in the guidance and that we should not get too hung up on the detail of what that will look like?

Ultimately, we can deliver the legislation quickly by trusting the Minister that the Bill is the finished article and does not require amending, or we can do it right. We can ensure that the legislation, which will impact on parents' pockets for years to come, not just for the next academic year, is fit for purpose, effective and comprehensive. The timings around the publication of school prospectuses are not in our control. I want to be clear: as an individual Member, I give my assurance that I will do nothing to stand in the way of delivering the scrutiny work well ahead of 3 December to facilitate, I hope, getting this into those prospectuses in time. If we rush to get this done to a timeline that is being imposed by the Minister just to make sure that we do not miss the cut-off for one academic year, we would, ultimately, run the risk of delivering ineffective legislation. I do not believe that parents would forgive us; it would represent a real failure.

Mr Buckley: Again, I thank the Member for giving way. As someone who is not a member of the Committee, I really struggle to understand the suggested period for Committee scrutiny. Surely the legislation is not more significant than, for example, the Integrated Education Bill, which went through the House in the previous mandate, or the legislation going through Westminster on terminal illness, for which the Committee Stage took three months. Are we suggesting that this legislation requires more Committee scrutiny than those significant pieces of legislation?

Mr Mathison: It is not helpful to draw comparisons and say that one piece of legislation is simple and another is complex. I highlight the fact that this Bill's Committee Stage includes three recess periods, so comparisons of time are not necessarily accurate. If we do not sit over summer recess, the Committee Stage will be considerably shorter than what is being proposed.

Miss McAllister: Is the Member willing to take a point?

Mr Mathison: Yes, I will give way.

Miss McAllister: I ask this for clarification because I do not sit on the Education Committee and am a bit unsure about the particular process. Were assurances given that, if Committee members decided to sit over the summer recess and were able complete all of the necessary work and hear from all of the people and organisations involved, the law would be implemented by the next academic year? If the process ran until December, would the Bill's provisions have the same start date after receiving Royal Assent?

Mr Mathison: I thank the Member for her intervention. The Minister has suggested that, if the Committee could conclude the process by, he hoped, the end of June or, let us say, given the amendment that is before us, the end of August, the Bill would then move through all of its stages in the Assembly in a number of weeks. I think that four weeks was suggested to the Committee as the timescale that the Minister was hoping for, which would be a very rapid progression through this place. If that was done, the Minister is confident that, between October and the publication of their prospectuses in November, all the consultation that schools would be required to do with parents and young people and their engagement with suppliers on lead-in times would be delivered in time for November. I am sceptical about whether that is deliverable. Do we want schools to be revising policies on a matter as important as this on the basis of something that has been cobbled together and rushed and, at that stage, would not be law? It would still be waiting for Royal Assent. We have to be realistic about that.

I will not name and shame, but we all know the very worst offenders on the cost of school uniforms, the ones that genuinely price some parents out of even considering sending their children to them. I am not convinced that those schools will do the Minister a favour and redo guidance on the basis of something that does not yet have Royal Assent and is not on the statute book. We have to be realistic. We want the legislation to be effective, and, as the first step, there has to be a law to which schools are compelled to adhere. I am not sure, given the Minister's timescales, that that is what we would be dealing with.

I will speak more broadly now. The issue of school uniform costs has sat at the desks of successive Sinn Féin and DUP Education Ministers for years. It has sat with DUP Ministers since 2016, who watched costs spiral in that time. No action was taken. We were assured that the guidance was OK and appropriate and that, if schools just followed it, there would be no issue. No action was taken to address it. That is the context and the timeline, and I factor in the times that the Assembly was not sitting. There were comments made in the Chamber earlier to the effect of, "Maybe Members just need to work harder". What about the two years in which nobody sat in this place? Lectures about how hard Members need to work will, at the very least, raise an eyebrow among the public.

Mr Buckley: Will the Member give way?

Mr Mathison: I have given way a number of times.

Should we now rush through our scrutiny to meet a deadline for this academic year while failing to assure ourselves that the legislation will deliver? Parents will not

thank us for acting quickly, if the law does not make a difference. I am committed to ensuring that the legislation is, first and foremost, robust and effective. I emphasise again — I want it on the record — that I sincerely hope that the Committee will deliver its scrutiny in advance of 3 December, and I will do all that I can to ensure that it does. However, no Member should apologise for building in time to ask hard questions of legislation, because the good scrutiny work that we do now will protect parents' pockets in the future.

The Minister has been clear that he wants to deliver the process quickly so that the new guidance can be in the prospectuses by November. We have already discussed that point regarding the amendment, so I will not labour it. We have to be realistic about whether that is deliverable. Will we rush through our Committee Stage with undue haste, fail to deliver the scrutiny and potentially still not have the changes reflected properly, appropriately and meaningfully in a way that makes a difference for parents in those prospectuses? We could end up doing neither, and, again, I am not sure that the public will thank us for that.

I encourage Members to consider supporting the motion and not to vote for a truncated Committee Stage, particularly as that truncated stage runs over a summer recess and it remains entirely unclear whether Committee members would have the Assembly staff support available to allow us to reliably deliver a Committee Stage. Regrettably, on the basis of what has gone out in the media today, I suggest that minds are already made up. Despite some members speaking in Committee in clear, unequivocal support for the motion, they will choose not to support it in the Chamber. However, those Committee members can articulate that for themselves.

Mr Brooks: Will the Member give way?

Mr Mathison: I will.

Mr Brooks: While the Member is on the subject, does he accept that, whilst we chose not to divide the Committee, we made our concerns known in Committee, on our part at least?

Mr Mathison: I thank the Member for his intervention. Both DUP Committee members expressed their concerns about the time, but they acknowledged the critical importance of good scrutiny and acknowledged that there was a balance to be struck. That is important to note.

Ultimately, this is about ensuring that parents are protected from rising uniform costs. All Members agree on that. I want to be very clear: I have welcomed the Minister's legislation. I am glad to see that we have a Minister who has finally brought something forward for the Assembly to look at, but parents want the law to be enacted as soon as possible. That is right and appropriate. I imagine, however, that they will also want that law to have been fully scrutinised to ensure that it achieves what it sets out to do: bring down the costs of uniforms. They will look back in years to come — we have to be honest about it — and they will not ask how quickly the Minister delivered the school uniforms Bill. That will not be the question that they will ask. They will ask whether he delivered something that was effective and made a difference where they felt it: in their pockets. I hope that Members will consider giving the Committee time to do that work properly, appropriately and in the best interests of the parents who need the legislation to be effective.

Mr Martin: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out "3 December 2025" and insert "30 August 2025".

Mr Speaker: There will be no time limit on any contributions to the debate. Please open the debate on the amendment.

Mr Martin: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I thank the Committee Chair for the considered comments that he made. I will address a couple of those before making other comments. The date that he mentioned was 30 August, and he referenced the date that the Minister had previously suggested. We see the amendment as a compromise that gives scope to allow for the scrutiny role, which, as he said — I agree with him — is so important. He mentioned dividing the Committee. I appreciate that some of his comments were probably not levelled at me and my colleague, as we raised concerns in Committee about the length of the proposed Committee Stage. We did not divide the Committee, but I will point out that I have divided the Committee on three occasions and lost three times. It was fairly clear to the Education Committee members who were there where everyone stood, and I hope that other Committee members will know where David and I stood on the 38-week extension.

The Committee Chair and I had a congenial debate on a BBC radio programme this morning. We mentioned scrutiny and the fact that we think that it is important, and I committed myself and my colleague, who is sitting behind me, to coming in during summer recess at some point and giving additional time to scrutinising the Bill, because there is no doubt — no one in the Chamber will argue otherwise — that scrutiny is crucial. We are committed to doing that; there is no doubt there. I

appreciate that that could be problematic, but, if we could find full days — a couple of full days — it would probably be doable, and it would certainly be helpful in giving the Bill the due regard that it needs at Committee level. I will make other comments along the way.

We have heard repeatedly in the Chamber of the need to support hard-working families, and we have rightly heard many call for a reform of school uniform and sportswear costs.

We have heard the SDLP Opposition call for Ministers to bring forward more legislation. Before us this afternoon is a Bill, which was introduced by, as referenced, a DUP Education Minister, that meets all those criteria.

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I do not plan to go into the same detail as the Committee Chair, because we are not here to debate the Bill. However, we are here to debate how long the Committee should take to do its work. If the motion that the Committee Chair proposed is agreed, it could see the Education Committee debate the Bill for a possible 38 weeks, and that will have clear consequences for the families that the legislation undoubtedly seeks to support.

As the Minister mentioned this afternoon in the Chamber, the Bill is a DUP manifesto commitment. We have been clear about that. We want to make sure that its benefits are realised for all people in Northern Ireland, regardless of creed, colour, faith or background. For the parents who are perhaps watching the debate this afternoon or those stakeholders who contributed to the Department's consultation last year, such as the Trussell Trust, Parentkind, Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI), the Children's Law Centre (CLC) and Carers NI — there were about 18, but I will pick those five — you heard that right: we are considering a Committee Stage of 38 weeks. I fully accept that, during the Committee's consideration, the Chair made it clear that 38 weeks was not the target date for completion and that we were not aiming towards that. However, if the Committee motion is agreed, the Committee can, if it so wishes, debate and consult on the Bill until 3 December.

Following the close of the Department's consultation last year —.

Mr Mathison: Will the Member give way?

Mr Martin: I will indeed.

Mr Mathison: Does the Member agree that, as he highlighted, I have been very clear that 3 December is not a target and that, when we were factoring in our considerations, the option of sitting over summer recess and, indeed, Easter recess was not set out? Does the Member agree that characterising the Committee Stage by its length in weeks is not entirely accurate in reflecting the Committee's deliberations on that?

Mr Martin: I thank the Committee Chair for his intervention. I can go only by the calendar weeks. I accept the point that he makes about Easter recess and summer recess, and I will address those comments a little bit later. I accept his point. The 38-week period is, however, the calendar period.

Following the close of the Department's consultation last year, the Minister managed to get the prospective legislation drafted by, I assume, the Office of the Legislative Counsel (OLC) and tabled in the Assembly within 20 weeks. I pay tribute to the Minister for the enthusiasm and vigour that he has brought to his role, not least in this area. I also note the excellent work that was carried out on the policy area by departmental officials Shirley Sweeney and Margaret Rose McNaughton.

The Department received 7,500 responses to its consultation. That is a staggering number for a government consultation. What really stuck out to me was the fact that 4,000 of those were received from children and young people in Northern Ireland. That illustrates the strength of feeling out there where the proverbial rubber hits the road. There were lots of views on some of the issues that the Committee Chair highlighted, such as the cost of uniforms, especially the cost of school sportswear, and the types of uniforms that we see in our schools. That further illustrates the need for this place to take the issue seriously and to prioritise the legislation.

I will pick up on one other theme that the Committee Chair mentioned. Our amendment does not seek to limit scrutiny of the Bill by any stretch of the imagination. We are instead saying that this piece of legislation needs to get Committee priority. We all work in Committees, and we all know how they function. We are not saying that we should not scrutinise or pay due attention or due regard to the issues that are obviously very important to people in Northern Ireland. Instead, we are saying that the legislation should be prioritised and, to a degree, carry that weight, especially over the next few months. There are families in Northern Ireland

right now counting every penny, and the Bill should significantly reduce at least one cost that they have to face on a year-to-year basis. Just this morning, I think that it was Sam's jumper that I put in the dryer, and it shrank to a size that no man could fit into, so that might be one more burden to bear, as I tumble-dried something that should not have been tumble-dried.

We all accept that change is required in this area. I think that there is agreement in the Chamber that the Bill is non-contentious and that the benefits that it brings will be felt by all families, regardless of their religious background or political affiliation. It does not seek to advantage anyone. I find that exciting, and I hope that everyone agrees with that.

In the Second Stage debate, the Alliance Member for Lagan Valley, Mrs Guy, said:

"School uniforms are important in ensuring a sense of community and equality." — [Official Report (Hansard), 3 March 2025, page 83, col 2].

I agree with her completely, about the issue itself and about the wider issue that equality is important. The last piece of legislation to come before the Committee for Education for scrutiny was the Integrated Education Bill, as my colleague behind me pointed out. That was brought as a private Member's Bill by a colleague of Mrs Guy's. On that occasion, the Education Committee took 18 weeks at Committee Stage. It should also be noticed that during that —

Ms K Armstrong: Will the Member give way?

Mr Martin: I will indeed.

Ms K Armstrong: I do not think that the Member is 100% right on that, because the Committee actually extended the period not to include the summer recess. It was actually 1,000 days for the Education Committee, and, believe me, I suffered every one of those days. The 18 weeks did not include the summer recess period.

Mr Martin: I thank the Member for her comments. I will not claim authority on that; she probably should have authority on that. I did go to the Bill process and looked up the dates, and I got out my calculator. I did notice, however, that summer recess was in that period. It ran over that, and therefore this Bill has similarities in that the Integrated Education Bill's Committee Stage — the 18 weeks that I am referring to —

did run through the summer recess, but I am happy to be corrected on that. This Bill is a similar length to the one that I have just discussed. This Bill is probably less complex than the Integrated Education Bill — Members can disagree, but I suffered it as well — and is certainly less contentious.

Mr Mathison: I thank the Member for giving way. He has been very generous in taking interventions. Would he accept, however, that we are not in the same context as when the Integrated Education Bill came forward, when we were at the end of a mandate and time in this place was under huge pressure? I am sure that the Education Committee would have welcomed more time to scrutinise it, but, as was referenced by the Deputy Chair of the Committee in our discussions on this, we are not at the end of the mandate, so we should not feel the need to shorten our scrutiny stage.

Mr Martin: I always appreciate the comments of the Chair of the Education Committee. I cannot disagree with him. We are in a different place with regard to the mandate, and I think that there was a sense of urgency with the Integrated Education Bill. However, I again gently point out that we will receive no thanks if we do not manage to get this through. Many families are facing bills, and, for many of them, this is a large cost. I think that a Member opposite made the point in a recent debate — it was a good one — that in no way should the cost of school uniforms ever dictate which school a child ends up in. If a child wants to go to a certain school and has whatever he or she needs to get into that school, surely the last barrier that he or she should face is a large uniform bill that would somehow prohibit him or her from getting there.

I will get back to my speech. Getting the Bill through the Chamber and Committee in a timely manner would be a win-win situation. If others decide not to support our amendment, as has already been noted, it is up to them to explain that. We have had some chat about that, even in the Chamber this afternoon.

I am one of the parents who has kids at school and who wants to see the Bill progress. It is certainly my understanding — the Committee Chair mentioned it as well — that, if we can manage to get the Bill through Committee Stage by the end of August, which reflects our amendment and is a compromise between what the Minister initially suggested and what the Committee wants to see, there remains a chance — an open door — to complete the fourth and fifth stages during September 2025. It will be up to the Assembly to prioritise the scheduling of that, and that will be out of our hands, but it will at least give us that realistic opportunity to see some benefit for parents in 2026. Certainly, the feedback that I have received is that, if we leave the motion as it is, we will not see the benefits — parents will not see the benefits — until 2027.

Ms K Armstrong: Will the Member give way?

Mr Martin: I will give way.

Ms K Armstrong: I will just ask a question, because that has me confused. The Department, or the Education Authority, has actually already asked governors to submit their proposals for next year's choices. How will that actually come into effect in the timescale for the extension that you have calculated? I am on a board of governors. As governors, we will have to sit and go through all our criteria again and rewrite that. I am really not sure that the practicalities of it will work. I am asking that question simply as a school governor. I do not think that the timings would work like that, even if the legislation were to be passed in four weeks.

Mr Martin: I thank the Member for her question. I am not on a board of governors, but I think that I understand what she is saying. Certainly, if the Bill progresses in that time frame, as the Committee Chair mentioned, it might not get Royal Assent until after the things that the Member is talking about actually have to come into effect. However, if the Bill has been passed by the Assembly and is to become legislation, even if it has not got Royal Assent — we know that Bills that are passed by the Assembly always get Royal Assent — schools will know that that — I will not call it "policy intent" — legislative intent is coming into being. I accept that, as the Committee Chair said, some schools may just choose to ignore it, and maybe, at that point, they could do so, but, if there are any that do so, it will be a very small number. It would be silly of them to do that. I accept that, with those time frames, it will certainly be tight. There are few certainties in life. However, if Members support the amendment, I feel that the Bill has a good chance — or, at least, a chance — to be enacted in 2026. It would be marvellous for parents if we could get it passed.

Let me be crystal clear: scrutiny is crucial in the Chamber and in Committee. That is an integral part of what we do. Agreeing to my party's tabled amendment will still leave the Committee time to do its job. Yes, we may need to have additional Committee sessions. My party is certainly up for that work. The schedule might need to be changed. Yes, the Bill may need to receive full priority over the next number of months, and the forward work programme may need some rejigging, but we are up for the challenge. The DUP absolutely believes that getting the Bill across the line is pivotal to supporting hard-working families in Northern Ireland. I commend our amendment to the House.

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Mr Baker: Families are under huge financial pressure, and we need to act swiftly to make school uniforms more affordable. That being said, scrutiny is essential. There are real issues with the Bill that need to be addressed. In order for it to make tangible changes for families, scrutiny is needed. There are key principles missing from the Bill, so lot of work needs to go into it, particularly around special educational needs and gender neutrality.

We need to make sure that we deliver what works and not just what looks good on paper, but let us be clear: we are determined to do that quickly and efficiently. If we have to come in and work with the Chair, we will do that. We have to work across the Chamber. The Minister, who is not here, needs to be positive as well. There is an onus on him and his officials, because the Bill is not the finished article — far from it. We are willing to work with everybody in the Chamber to make it happen as quickly as possible. Families need that support now and not in a year or two years' time, so it needs to be done quickly. We are up for that challenge, and I am willing to be here every single day to make sure that it happens.

Mr Crawford: The Bill has the potential to make a real and meaningful difference to the lives of children and young people and their families across Northern Ireland. It is designed to address a growing and deeply felt issue in our communities: the escalating cost of school uniforms. The Bill has one clear and simple objective: to make school uniforms more affordable. That should not be controversial or complicated, but it should be given the diligence that it deserves.

The cost of school uniforms has become a growing burden for families, particularly in the current economic climate. As Members, we have all heard from parents who are struggling to meet the rising costs of blazers, sports kits and branded uniforms that, often, are mandated with little regard for affordability. These are not luxuries or optional extras; they are basic, essential requirements for access to education. When a parent is forced to choose between buying a winter coat or a school jumper, that is a political failure. When families are turning to food banks so that they can cover the cost of uniforms, that is a societal failure. When the Chamber has the power to act but fails to do so, that is a legislative failure.

Members will be aware that this is not the first time that the House has failed. Let us be honest with ourselves and the public: as the Chair alluded to, over the past 10 years, the Assembly has spent more time collapsed than it has spent legislating. That is a damning indictment of political dysfunction, and it is our constituents — the very people whom we represent — who have paid the price. During the years of

impasse, key legislation was stalled, opportunities were lost and vital decisions were left unmade. For too long, we have expected the public to carry on while we have stood still.

Now, with Stormont restored, the public rightly expect us to get on with the job at hand. I understand the importance of due process and the need to hear from stakeholders. Like the Chair and other Committee members, I commit to doing all that I can, even over the summer recess, and playing my part to ensure that that takes place. Let us work collectively, across party lines, to progress the Committee Stage of the Bill. Let us show that the Assembly can function as it should: not just as a debating Chamber but as a vehicle for real change.

Ms K Armstrong: I thank the Member for giving way. I stand not to argue with you but simply to ask a question. I sit on the Committee on Procedures, and we consider the Standing Orders of the House. As we know, Standing Order 33 is about Committee Stage. It is for a Committee or even a Minister to extend Committee Stage. Given the consternation that the issue has caused, should we not be looking at our Standing Orders and extending the time frame from 30 days? As other Members have said, no scrutiny happens in 30 days: it is too short a period. Is it therefore time for us to start to review our Standing Orders in order to make Committee Stage more reasonable for future Bills and for us as Members to scrutinise them, as the Member has talked about?

Mr Crawford: I thank the Member for her intervention. Yes, that is something that definitely needs to be looked at over time.

Every week that we delay is another week that a family goes without support, that another school term begins with financial strain and that another child feels different, singled out or excluded because they cannot afford the branded items that others take for granted. That is not what the Assembly or we as Members should stand for. We should stand for fairness, inclusion and practical solutions to everyday problems.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Michelle Guy, as the business in the Order Paper is not expected to be disposed of by 6.00 pm, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3), I will allow business to continue until 7.00 pm.

Mrs Guy: Following the Deputy Chair's unexpected U-turn on the motion, I will be making the winding-up speech on the Committee motion, which is to extend the Committee Stage until 3 December. I emphasise that this is a Committee motion, not an Alliance Party motion.

Mr Speaker: Order. Mrs Guy, are you making the winding-up speech on the motion?

Mrs Guy: Yes.

Mr Speaker: OK. I understood that Nick Mathison was to do that, so I will call you after Mr Brooks makes the winding-up speech on the amendment. I am sorry about that.

Mr Brooks: In making the winding-up speech on our amendment, I do not need to rehearse the arguments for the entire Bill. As has been said before, the Bill has been well discussed in this place, and, in fairness, all parties will acknowledge that their general aims and wishes are not that far removed from one another's.

There is not much new in what I can add to what my colleague Peter Martin said earlier and what others covered throughout the debate. As has been stated, our concern is that extending the Committee Stage until 3 December 2025 rather than until 30 August would mean that the main provisions in the Bill would not become operational until September 2027 rather than September 2026. Such a delay would be unnecessary and unacceptable, and we should do all the work that we can to implement the Bill as early as possible. If we were to have the luxury of additional time, the cost would be to have parents wait a further year for its implementation. Members will be well aware of the complexities around timelines for the Bill, which, if implemented fairly, means having regard not only to the school term and prospectuses but to lead-in and turnaround times for local retailers to ensure that they are not left holding stock that they may be unable to sell should local schools change their uniform policy as a result of the legislation.

With all of that having been rightly considered, my colleague and I tabled the amendment because we believe that we should be doing what we can to ensure that parents feel the benefits of the legislation as soon as possible. We have not heard any truly compelling reasons today for why the Bill could not make its way through each of its stages via a more ambitious timescale. Extending Committee Stage may well be right and necessary in certain circumstances, but I question whether it should be the business-as-usual approach for the legislative scrutiny process in this place. Again, I emphasise that more time for MLAs means a longer wait for hard-working families. Having given it due consideration, we felt that the balance struck was wrong and that an extension until 3 December was not something that we were prepared to go along with.

As my colleague said, the Department of Education has already undertaken significant consultation on the issue. The Committee must rightly exercise its primary function diligently and, of course, conduct appropriate engagement. There also needs to be an ambition to avoid undue delay, however. Although I have not been through this process before, my party colleague rightly pointed to much more complex and contentious legislation, such as the Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022, which, he has just looked up and confirmed, took just 18 weeks —.

Mr Martin: I thank the Member for giving way. I congratulate the Member for Strangford for making me doubt myself about the length of the Integrated Education Bill's Committee Stage. However, I have it in front of me and can confirm that the Committee Stage for the Integrated Education Bill ran from 6 July 2021 to 24 November 2021. At that time, it made its Committee report. I can confirm that, similarly, it ran over the summer. Does the Chair — sorry, the Member — agree that there is some similarity between the two, with the exception that the amendment that we have suggested is actually for seven weeks longer than the scrutiny for the Integrated Education Bill?

Mr Brooks: I do, of course, agree, and I thank him for the promotion to Chair, but I will not be challenging my Committee colleague for that role.

The Committee has recently undertaken its RSE inquiry. Respecting the differing views across the House, it was, at best, a misstep of Committee priorities, given the scale of challenges across education. In that not-so-mini inquiry, we heard many voices, mostly relevant but, often, with large degrees of duplication of arguments. Do not get me wrong: it was right that we heard from a spectrum of voices, and the Chair was trying to meet that challenge in good faith. I recognise the work and the challenge that he faced. We all shared a view that, if we were doing that over again, we would not undertake it in exactly the same way that we did.

Mr Baker: Will the Member give way?

Mr Brooks: Yes.

Mr Baker: We did not have a Bill in front of us, but I am sure that all members of the Committee would agree that it was a very effective piece of work on RSE, particularly when you talk to our young people. If you have not watched the hit TV show 'Adolescence' yet, I suggest that you do, because there are key parts in there that we all need to be educated on, and we need to support our young people. I have to disagree with the Member's saying that it was not a good use of our time: it very

much was. As a member of the Committee, I say that we work extremely hard, and I give credit to the Chair and the Clerk, who do great, tangible work.

Mr Brooks: I thank the Member for his intervention. I think that he would recognise that I did give credit to the Chair. We might not all agree on what we would change, but I think that most members would say that there were probably aspects of what we undertook that we would relook at if we were put in the same position.

Mr Speaker: I remind the Member that we are not talking about RSE today.

Mr Brooks: Yes. I will return to my comments on the amendment, Mr Speaker. I appreciate that.

The main point that I would draw from what I was talking about is that, with the considerable evidence gathering undertaken and the significant amount of Committee time given to it, I am not sure that many members ended up with a very different point of view or voting intention than the one that they had had at the start. Clearly, this is a slightly different proposition, and I acknowledge the Member's point about delivering scrutiny to a Bill, which is our primary role.

School uniforms are an issue on which there has been a greater degree of agreement — at least on the general direction — and I do not think that we require a similarly lengthy or quite so expansive process to allow those who have specific issues with our considerations of the Bill that they may wish to share with us to do that in a meaningful way. Most organisations — as is the case with our parties — will have considered it in the round already, will have already helped to inform the departmental consultation and will be able and prepared to share analysis with us. We need to ensure that the opportunity for points to be raised appropriately is there, but we also need to do it efficiently. If we are to get on with the business of delivering real change for families facing hardship and uncertainty in society, there must not be prevarication on our part in the Assembly.

It seems to me that some people, very clearly, as they have outlined today in the media, want to see a cap in a different form in the Bill. I may well be unduly sceptical, but I do not think that their or our ultimate view on it will change because of a longer Committee Stage. I say to them that we have been, in principle, supportive of a cap and the Minister has, in the Bill, as has been mentioned, given himself the ability to bring it forward in the future if it is deemed necessary and beneficial. Probably more to the point is the fact that where we have seen the outworking of such a policy

elsewhere, successfully or otherwise, we know that, where the system has been tried, it has not been without complications.

Further work on the detail of how a cap might operate can be taken forward in parallel with, but without delaying, the implementation of the statutory guidelines and other aspects of the Bill.

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The School Uniforms Bill will deliver. It will deliver the necessary powers to cap branded items and/or uniform costs, and it will deliver access to uniform grants for eligible pupils who attend independent schools. It will support parents and families in a range of ways. We want to see that happening sooner, not later. The Bill gives statutory effect to departmental guidance, placing a duty on relevant schools to adhere to that guidance, providing a power of direction in the event of non-compliance by schools and defining key terms, such as "specific styles" and "unfair costs aspects", to be addressed via school uniform policy. When taken together, all those measures will make a real impact for hard-pressed families. Let us realise that impact, and let us do so quickly. On that basis, I commend our amendment to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call Michelle Guy to make a winding-up speech on the motion.

Mrs Guy: Thank you, Mr Speaker: we will try this again. [Laughter.]

I support the Committee's motion for an extension of the Committee Stage to 3 December. I emphasise that it is a Committee motion, not an Alliance motion: it was agreed unanimously by the Committee. The Chair offered the Committee two opportunities to divide and no member took him up on that offer. Let me be clear that 3 December is a limit, not a target. We can extend the Committee Stage only once, so that is a hard limit. The Committee —.

Mr Brooks: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Guy: Yes, go for it.

Mr Brooks: That is slightly disingenuous. We did not divide the Committee, but the Member is well aware that, as the Chair confirmed, we made our objections clear. We did not divide the Committee largely because we did not feel that there was an appetite for that amongst Committee members.

Mrs Guy: Thank you for the intervention. It is reasonable for you to say that. You are correct that there did not seem to be an appetite for that, so today's outcome is peculiar to say the least. You were, however, consistent and raised objections. Others did not, but have since changed their mind for some reason. They can explain that.

Let me be clear that 3 December is a limit, not a target. We can extend this stage only once, so it is a hard limit. The Committee took advice and considered a timeline that included all the phases of a good Committee Stage, Assembly recesses and other relevant factors, many of which are outside of our control. The Committee Stage provides the first opportunity for stakeholders from across the public, private and voluntary sectors, not to mention parents and schoolchildren, to take the time and space to consider the Bill as introduced and bring their perspective to the Committee.

The Bill addresses matters that are significant and long-standing for parents and children across Northern Ireland. The Committee supports the general principles of the Bill and welcomed its introduction. We are committed, however, to the Bill being delivered right, rather than fast, and being given due consideration by the Assembly throughout the legislative process. The Committee Stage is the sole stage of the legislative process that is not in the hands of the Minister. As a Committee, we are obliged to ensure that we consider the Bill's provisions and their effects as fully as possible and set aside sufficient time to do so. My priority, and that of my colleague Mr Mathison, is to get this right for families. I am genuinely concerned that a condensed Committee Stage will result in our letting them down.

I will add a few words in my capacity as an Alliance MLA. The Alliance Party supports and has long campaigned for legislation to make school uniforms more affordable. It is essential that we get the legislation right so that we ensure that families feel the difference in their pockets. That is where my focus is; not on press releases or optics, but on delivering effective legislation for families. At the most fundamental level, I want assurances that, once the Bill's provisions come into force, parents will see prices becoming more affordable. That will be the very clear test of success or failure. It remains to be seen whether the Bill as it stands will have that effect. That is why proper Committee scrutiny of the Bill is essential, and that includes giving young people and families the time to give their views and be heard by the Committee. We need time to take evidence from stakeholders and to engage

with departmental officials. We need time to consider the cost cap mechanism and which legal requirements will ensure that it is enforceable.

The Committee has been clear that the extension is not a target, but instead provides a window that will allow it time to carry out proper scrutiny. We will scrutinise the legislation in good faith, with every intention of expediting our work as quickly as possible. Nodding through a Bill, when genuine concerns have been raised about its effectiveness within the Committee and externally by stakeholders, would be poor governance.

Of course, I will not stand in the way of speeding up this process. I want it done as quickly as possible, but only as long as there are commitments that proper scrutiny can be ensured, and I have not been provided with that assurance. Maybe Sinn Féin and the DUP can give that assurance.

It is worth repeating that the DUP has held the Education portfolio for 10 years. The issue of unaffordable school uniforms is not a new one, yet it has not done anything about it over that time. In fact, the DUP, like Sinn Féin, was happy to collapse this place, meaning that legislation such as this could not progress. Therefore, we will continue to vote for good governance and making an impact for families.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 30 August 2025, in relation to the Committee Stage of the School Uniforms (Guidelines and Allowances) Bill.

[EXTRACT]