



Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

School Uniforms (Guidelines and
Allowances) Bill: National Association of
Head Teachers

28 May 2025

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

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

Witnesses:

Ms Jackie Bartley	National Association of Head Teachers
Dr Graham Gault	National Association of Head Teachers

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): I am happy to welcome Jackie Bartley, the president of the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) in Northern Ireland; and Dr Graham Gault, the national secretary of NAHT. You are familiar faces at the Committee, so there is no need for much of a preamble from me. It is over to you for an opening presentation of up to 10 minutes. We will then move to questions and answers.

Dr Graham Gault (National Association of Head Teachers): You will be pleased to know that, to save you time, I have cut about 50% from the bit that I am going to talk to you about. I will pass over to Jackie, who is going to talk about uniforms. I will then mention one or two other things.

Ms Jackie Bartley (National Association of Head Teachers): On the back of all the conversations on uniform, we will talk about it from a school leader perspective. Thank you for giving us the opportunity to speak to you about it today.

NAHT NI fully supports the principle of making school uniforms much more affordable for families. Our members — school leaders across the region — are deeply aware of the financial pressures on families, particularly in the context of the ongoing cost-of-living crisis. Many of our schools run uniform banks. They offer support for low-income families in particular, and we, as school leaders, work hard to minimise unnecessary uniform changes.

However, we must express caution about the proposed move to place uniform guidance on a statutory footing. First, there is the guidance and compliance burden. While we note that England and Wales have already adopted statutory uniform guidance, we are not convinced that such a move is

necessary in Northern Ireland. Our schools already apply the guidance in good faith and, in most cases, effectively. Formalising it into law risks creating a disproportionate compliance burden on school leaders and governors without clear evidence that the current approach is failing. Introducing legal obligations to demonstrate, publish and review uniform policy at regular intervals risks adding yet another layer of bureaucracy to school leadership for a workforce that is already overextended and under-resourced.

Secondly, there are the practicalities around procurement challenges. There are practical concerns that cannot be ignored. For example, where schools have existing contracts with uniform suppliers, implementing mandatory changes could have legal and financial consequences. There needs to be a phased and sensitive approach that acknowledges such complexities, particularly for schools that have limited administrative capacity, such as some of our very small primary schools.

We caution against the notion that schools should be responsible for stimulating a competitive uniform market. Schools are not businesses. Their role is to support learning and well-being, not to serve as an intermediary in the retail economy. What schools can, and do, do is simplify uniform design, reduce branding and ensure a wide choice of purchasing options.

We absolutely support meaningful consultation with parents and pupils. However, that should be encouraged as good and effective practice, not enforced through mandatory publication requirements. School leaders are already accountable to their boards of governors and their communities; introducing legal obligations to publish the rationale for every design decision or to detail every consultation process feels like a solution looking for a problem.

We must also think carefully about how enforcement would work in practice. A statutory requirement brings with it potential legal consequences for non-compliance that could create tensions between schools and families, and between schools and the Department, at a time when we should be fostering trust and collaboration. School leaders need clarity, yes, but they also need autonomy, flexibility and, of course, support. We are not convinced that robust enforcement mechanisms will do anything other than complicate relationships with pupils and parents, especially where uniform disputes become contentious.

The Bill aspires to do something good — absolutely — and we support its aims, but good intentions are not enough unless they are implemented with care. The Bill could inadvertently increase workload, legal risk and tension for school leaders who are already under extraordinary pressure.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Thank you, Jackie. Graham, do you want to speak to your items now? We will then take questions in the round.

Dr Gault: Absolutely. For the sake of keeping us focused, I will not talk about funding, workload or the other things on which I have represented our members here on many occasions. I will touch, first, on the inspection consultation that you brought up in the previous session, Pat.

The Department's consultation on inspection legislation has deeply alarmed our members. NAHT Northern Ireland strongly opposes the proposal to make inspection exempt from industrial action and, even more disturbingly, to potentially criminalise staff who engage in such action. I have to be really clear: our opposition to the proposal is not an opposition to inspection. We value inspection when it is meaningful, professional and respectful, and when it supports improvement, not just compliance. We have worked hard to build positive and constructive relationships with the Education Training Inspectorate (ETI), and our members engage positively in the new model of inspection, with which we are really pleased, but inspection should not be used as a blunt instrument to suppress lawful industrial action. Industrial action is never taken lightly, and you know that NAHT will only ever use industrial action as a last resort. The Department's proposals seek to change the law not because inspection is broken — the new model of inspection is sound; we are happy with how it is working out — but because the system that surrounds it, which includes industrial relations, workload and trust, is broken. Making obstruction of inspection a criminal offence would be not only legally disproportionate but morally wrong. It represents a shift from partnership to punishment, from social dialogue to state compulsion, and that is not the direction that we need to go on this.

Instead of potentially criminalising a workforce, the Department should ask what has driven that workforce to withdraw cooperation on certain occasions. What has happened to make the workforce feel that that is a proportionate reaction in industrial strife? If we want inspections to succeed, which we do as much as the Minister and the Department do, we have to fix the factors in the environment in which they operate that cause the difficulties. That means dealing with many other key areas.

I want to say again that we support inspection. Our members engage positively with it. They recognise that they are public servants and accountable for the public service that they provide. In our view, however, the legislation is a potential attack on workers' rights, and we resist it strongly.

I will skip the budget stuff that I had noted for you and go to the SEN issue that was mentioned in the previous session. We are still in the middle of a crisis in special educational needs. We welcome the Minister's commitment to reform in that area, but we stress that reform requires investment, capacity and a lot of listening to schools, without which it will be not reform but rhetoric. The current system is broken. We know the issues: statements are delayed; services are overstretched; and mainstream schools are expected to meet complex needs without training, resources or staff.

I was interested in the mention of Team Teach in the previous session. Team Teach is not available to mainstream schools. Every mainstream school now faces complicated needs, and our members continually stress to us that they need training in that area. I was a teacher for eight years, a vice principal for five and a principal for 10. Never did I receive guidance or training in how to intervene physically in a proportionate way when a child or a member of staff was at risk, but I had to do it, which put the child and me at risk. That is not acceptable. Our members consistently tell us that they feel morally compromised by being unable to provide the support that they know that children need and deserve. The principle of inclusion is absolutely right, but inclusion without adequate support is not inclusion; our members tell us that they believe it to be a form of neglect.

We are deeply concerned by repeated reports that the Education Authority (EA) applies implied legal pressure to school leaders and governors to place children in schools, the leaders of which have clearly stated that they cannot meet the specific needs of the children involved. That is not an occasional recurrence; it is routine. Our members never refuse a child, but, in good faith, they express the concern that they are not equipped to provide the necessary care in certain circumstances, but the children may be put into the school regardless. As a result, school leaders are left feeling complicit in a process that places vulnerable children in settings in which they cannot thrive. Some of our members have described that situation as a form of institutional neglect that they are required to be complicit in. We need a complete reset of that practice: properly funded, multi-agency provision; faster, child-centred statements; and a genuine partnership between schools, the EA, Health and parents that puts children at the centre and is not just an exercise in getting children into a seat but is about getting children into a seat in which they can flourish.

For the sake of brevity, I will finish there.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Thank you. That is great. I will pick up on school uniform as a starter. You highlighted your scepticism of the need for the guidance to be placed on a statutory footing. The feedback that came through the Department's consultation was that parents overwhelmingly feel that the current system does not work and that the cost burden of uniforms is unacceptable. Save the Children and the Women's Policy Group have done research work that shows that parents routinely get into debt to fund school uniforms. How do you respond to that? I appreciate the concerns about the bureaucracy that inevitably comes with legislation. Is there a way to strike a balance if the system does not work?

Ms Bartley: We have come up with solutions, Nick, as you know that we would as school leaders. We looked at strengthening the non-statutory guidance from DE. For example, the Department could revise and expand its existing uniform guidance. There are clear benchmarks for affordability that minimise the use of branded items. In the previous session, colleagues mentioned access for parents and ensuring widespread availability. There are always practical cases of objections to uniforms where things have happened and solutions have been found. We, as school leaders, regularly come together to look at those cases and see how we can alleviate the pressures on parents and ensure that we implement the affordable, inclusive and flexible uniform policy. Good school leadership, along with the work of the board of governors, will ensure that that happens. We always ask the Department and the EA to review the policies with school leaders to get our feedback, because that will mean that there is a continuous improvement cycle. We encourage there being regular reflective practice through professional standards and communication between us and the Department of Education.

Dr Gault: There have undoubtedly been instances of extremely bad practices that actively acted against the best interests of children — some of them were mentioned in the previous session — but bad policy is built on a few examples. We argue frequently, in all sorts of circumstances, that, if an individual school, school leader or board of governors has behaved in a way that is not acceptable, the employing authorities have a responsibility and legal capacity to intervene — to phone the school and

visit it to ask, "What is going on? We are getting reports of A, B and C". That does not require legislative change; that just requires proactive intervention from the employing authorities. That is what should happen in those instances, rather than the development of another set of legislative parameters with, no doubt, additional workload implications and, potentially, legal risk for school leaders.

Ms Bartley: As a school leader, I know, as all school leaders will, that, every day, the individual pastoral needs of children are brought to pastoral leads and identified. In an all-girls school, such as the one that I lead, children will need to wear make-up in certain circumstances. That happens in schools all the time. The colour of skirts was mentioned in the previous session. If parents bring such issues to a school, those issues will be identified. Any school that has children at the core of what it does will always look at the necessary adjustments that need to be made for that child. That is what should happen.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): I will leave that line of questioning there. I wanted to give you the opportunity to set out your views on that. What I hear from parents does not necessarily paint such a positive picture, but I will move on to my next question.

When the Bill was presented to the Assembly, the Minister was clear that it is crucial for the Committee Stage to be completed by the summer recess to enable the legislation to be on the statute book in time for prospectuses that will be published in November to reflect the new school uniform guidelines that the legislation will create. What is school leaders' view of that timeline? The Committee's understanding is that, with a really fair wind, the legislation will complete its Assembly stages by the middle of October. How feasible is it for a school to review a policy, engage with boards of governors, consult with parents, consult with pupils and engage with suppliers within that timescale and, if it decides that it is not in keeping with the guidelines, reflect the changes in a prospectus for November?

Ms Bartley: As a school leader, I can say that that takes an awful long time. I know the time that it takes in my school — with three uniform types and three uniform suppliers — to even go out to tender. A consultation with stakeholders, including our children, first — they are at the core, so you have to talk to them — will take more time. If you are talking about September —

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): A few weeks is not long enough.

Ms Bartley: — we are four weeks from the end of term, Nick.

Dr Gault: Bad policy is built on a few examples. It is also built in a hurry. We would say to take a bit of time.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): I certainly made it clear in the Chamber that I feel that a rush to complete this stage will not necessarily help us to deliver good legislation. I am concerned about there being a rush to deliver the legislation within a timescale that suggests that school leaders can deliver it for November, if that is not feasible; we need to give that some consideration. You mentioned supplier engagement, and I would like to pick that up with the Department when officials join us later.

There are plenty of other things that members will want to pick up on. I hand over to the Deputy Chair, and other members can indicate if they wish to come in.

Mr Sheehan: Fáilte romhat, Graham agus Jackie. I will pick up, first, on Nick's point about the guidelines and the fact that they are going to be statutory guidelines. Jackie, the difficulty is that a lot of research has been carried out, as Nick mentioned; he did not mention that of the Irish League of Credit Unions, which has talked about the affordability of school uniforms. It is also the case — I know that it is not the case in your school — that some schools have sweetheart deals with suppliers. They get something in return for ensuring that the supplier that they use has a monopoly on that supply. It is also the case that there are children who cannot access certain schools because their parents know that they cannot afford the uniform. Some schools, particularly the big grammar schools, have fancy uniforms, with braid up the sleeves and all that sort of stuff, not to mention their PE gear and so on. In my view, there is a need for statutory guidelines, because the guidelines, as they stand, are not being adhered to by all schools. Will you comment on that?

Ms Bartley: Pat, I go back to what Graham said earlier: if those things are happening in certain schools, those schools should be held to account. I understand that. However, the majority of schools serve the needs of the community that we serve and the children whom we serve, as we have to. Of course, affordability for parents has to come first. My school is a non-selective school, so it is a question of looking at our target market. Every uniform should be affordable for every child. There should not be discrimination, because that does not echo the idea of inclusion for every child.

Mr Sheehan: Fair enough; we will agree to disagree on that.

You mentioned uniform banks in your presentation. I do not think that all schools have a uniform bank. They are a very good idea. If parents donate uniforms to the school when their children have left the school or outgrown those uniforms, the uniforms are there to be used by other children who need them. Is there any cost to that?

Ms Bartley: With our uniform bank, we get the uniforms laundered — that is the only cost — and then they are available for parents to come and see what they need. Sometimes, to protect certain parents, we do that privately through the pastoral teams in the school. That can be done in a discreet way, Pat.

Mr Sheehan: Absolutely. If uniform banks became commonplace — if there was one in all schools, and no shame attached to them — they might become normal.

I have one other short question. The Minister announced on the radio, the other morning, that he is going to have a complete ban on mobile phones in schools. Did he consult with the NAHT about that?

Dr Gault: No. We have questions about policy, particularly policy with legislative language, being produced in politically expedient ways and put out to the public, without there being a full understanding of what happens in schools. Every school has a robust mobile phone policy, and many schools allow their children to use their technology in school for learning and teaching. Mobile phones cannot be "uninvented". We have to find ways to use the technology that children will have, in various forms, in front of them for the rest of their lives in productive and safe ways. We will not support an outright ban, because it will require our members to enforce it, and it will produce levels of conflict that we cannot predict between schools, communities and children. We also do not see the need for it. Schools are very robustly inspected, as they should be, and they should be held to account for the policies that they deliver in schools. If mobile phone policies in some schools are not adequate, let those schools be identified, and let the employers address those schools.

Mr Sheehan: Can you understand why the Minister, if he is to ban mobile phones in schools, has allocated £250,000 for phone pouches?

Dr Gault: We have expressed to the Department that we can see greater need for that money elsewhere.

Mrs Guy: Thanks, folks, for your evidence today. I will start with uniforms. You have expressed your opposition to statutory guidance. It feels to me as though the ship has sailed somewhat on that: the Bill is here, and there is broad support for statutory guidance. What is happening in schools in anticipation? Are they adapting their uniform policies in readiness for it?

Dr Gault: We are aware that the ship has likely sailed on the issue. We want to highlight the fact that we are very concerned about what legislative change will mean for our members' workload.

When statutory guidance comes on the issue, our members will support it and will deliver it, but our position is that we want to warn everybody: please, make it workable for our members.

The answer to your question about what schools are doing in preparation is that they are just waiting to see.

Mrs Guy: Do you think that, if the Department were to offer a boilerplate or standard uniform policy that could be easily and quickly adapted in schools, that would be helpful, or do you feel that it should be left to the schools to have complete autonomy on that?

Ms Bartley: Schools will have to go out to consultation to all stakeholders. Schools see their uniform very much as an identity and an ethos. If a school has been around for 70 or 80 years, there are

certain things that you will have to consult parents on. That is why we talked about strengthening that non-statutory guidance. However, communication with the community and that identity for children are required, and its cost-effectiveness for our parents must be brought into effect. The key will always be that a uniform creates no barriers for any of our parents or children.

Mrs Guy: I will touch on SEN. You have covered a lot of ground, so there are a lot of things to ask. You used the phrase "institutional neglect". That is a big statement. Can you say more about what you were alluding to there? Is that specifically about children being placed in inappropriate settings and the impact that that is having on those individual kids and on your schools?

Dr Gault: I am no longer a school principal, but I was a principal in a primary school. There was a point in my career as a principal where, when a child was coming to my school, I had specified in the consultation form that my mainstream provision, without changes in the training for my staff and, potentially, changes in the geography of my building, would not be able to meet safely the needs of that particular child. However, I was compelled to accept the child. I was not saying that I would not "ever" be able to accept them, and none of our members say that. I was not saying no to the child; I was saying, "I am scared that I cannot meet this child's needs in these circumstances without a, b and c", but I was compelled to take the child into the school.

I lost many nights of sleep over that child in the first couple of years of their school career. I expressed that to the Education Authority frequently, saying, "The best that my staff and I can do is keep this child safe. We are not a specialist unit with specialist provision for the complexity of their needs, and we cannot adequately meet their needs. We are a mainstream primary school. We have no experience, no understanding and no capacity to meet this child's needs. The best that we can do is keep this child safe. This wee child will never flourish in my care, no matter how much heart and soul my staff and I put into it".

I cried frequently about that child. I begged for help, and I begged for support. That child got a proper placement only after a couple of moments when members of staff were hurt. I had to use the school's discipline policy and suspend the child — completely inappropriately, actually, because the child was not misbehaving, but their needs were not being met. A placement was then found. That is my experience. If the system were functioning properly, it would say, "Here is the child, and here is their list of needs. What does the school need to meet this child's needs?". The school would come back and say that it needed "this, this and this to meet the child's needs", and the resource would come.

Mrs Guy: Children are placed inappropriately, and maybe that is the point of neglect: they are forced into a placement just to get them off the list and bring the stats down. There is no follow-up. No one, aware that the child is in the wrong setting, comes back to develop any kind of plan to meet that child's needs further down the line. That child is off the books, and it is time to move on to the next one.

Dr Gault: There is then an endless struggle from the school to have the child's needs met. Restraint and seclusion, distinct from what you were talking about earlier, Peter, when you spoke about children's behaviour, can be used for children with complex needs. When children are in the wrong setting, schools find themselves having to engage in practices that are not acceptable, but that is because those children's needs are not being met, and they are not in the right place.

Ms Bartley: You met Aurelia, who was placed in my school. We took Aurelia, but the phone call came only in the middle of August. Aurelia was in the system for seven years of primary school and, before that, in nursery school. She was not able to come directly into my school, because the building had to be adapted to meet her needs. For four months, Aurelia was not able to attend school. A big issue, as the unions mentioned in the previous session, is that we have a workforce that has not been trained to the level required to meet the needs of every child who sits in front of us. It cannot be right that we are not meeting those children's needs because our teaching workforce has not been trained to the standard that it should be. The knock-on effect of that is that children are not being placed in the correct school.

Mrs Guy: It continues after transition, and there is no support for them then either.

Ms Bartley: Exactly.

Mrs Mason: Graham, thanks for sharing that with us. I am sure that you are not the only principal who has experienced something like that. Do you think that the SEN reform plan that we have seen will bring change to stop that happening and prevent other principals having that experience?

Dr Gault: I am certainly not the only principal. The NAHT conference was just a couple of weeks ago in Limavady, and there were maybe 120 or 130 members in the room. We were having this conversation, and almost everybody was indicating by a show of hands, nods and so on that they were experiencing the same thing.

Before I address your question directly, I want to say that we do not blame anybody in the Education Authority, anybody in the Department or any individual or group of people. This is a result of cumulative years of underinvestment. This is a money issue. The current practice — these are my words, and they may offend some people — is akin to special needs provision on the cheap. Just get children crammed in anywhere you can, throw a few thousand pounds towards it and hope for the best. It is absolutely not good enough, and I think that, collectively, as a society, we should be pretty ashamed of this provision. It is not good at all.

On your question of whether the SEN reform plan will change the situation, we do not feel very positive about that. We recognise and are very appreciative of the Minister's commitment. This is the first time in a while that we have had so much weight behind change in this area, but, as I said, it requires a huge amount of money. As I have said in this room before, for years, politicians from every party have expressed that education is a priority. We believe that that is the case for the individuals who have said that, but we need to see that followed up with huge investment from Westminster and prioritised here by Stormont to make sure that money goes to schools to meet children's needs. The problems now are an outworking of underinvestment. The direction of travel for SEN reform is good and positive. There has been a lot of consultation, but, without huge amounts of money, it will be just another exercise.

Mrs Mason: Thank you. You mentioned Team Teach training. Are you aware of any alternative? We have been told that Team Teach is not available now. Are you aware of the Education Authority providing any alternative?

Dr Gault: No, there is nothing.

Mrs Mason: OK. Thank you.

Mr Martin: Jackie and Graham, thank you for your evidence today. I will pick up on the Deputy's Chair point about mobile phone use. I think, from what you said, that you feel that the outcome of banning mobile phones in schools would be problematic for logistical or practical reasons. Is that fair enough?

Ms Bartley: The whole emphasis on AI being part of the curriculum is really important. It is about teaching young people how to use mobile phones effectively. I am a school leader whose budget has been totally decimated. The majority of our school budgets is taken up by teacher salaries and salaries as a whole. There is very little money for investment in technology in schools. Therefore, every child has a mobile phone, and we, as classroom practitioners, use them in all subject areas and curriculum areas. I am talking about post-primary schools, but it is the same for primary schools. They are very much used, but schools are guided by their mobile phone policy. I know that somebody raised a point about the mobile phone policy. We are always mindful of child protection issues in mobile phone policies. They dovetail: one sits inside the other. As school leaders, we are constantly learning and adapting our mobile phone policy according to the risks to our children. The policies are adapted and updated by boards of governors every year in line with things that happen.

Good things happen with mobile phones. They enrich the curriculum and subject areas. AI has a huge part to play in the whole school curriculum, particularly when we look at TransformED and all the new curriculum changes that will come in. AI will go hand in hand and run parallel with all those curriculum changes, from nursery to post-primary, including special education and primary provision. Speaking as someone who as an IT teacher years ago, mobile phones transform lives, but we have to have a robust policy to support their use.

Mr Martin: Thanks, Jackie. In the future, we might have AI NAHT members before the Committee. A virtual Graham: what a terrifying thought that is.

I want to flag some figures. This is more for your ears than anyone else's. I am concerned about general mobile phone use, smartphone use in particular, and social media use among kids, especially girls. I used these figures recently in a debate, and they are well researched and well documented. At zero hours of smartphone/social media use, 12% of girls have depression or a low sense of well-being. At 6 hours, it goes from 12% to 38%. There is a direct correlation, and I am quite concerned about that. I could talk about this issue for the rest of my four minutes, but I will not. It is quite important that we do something in that area.

I will move on to seclusion and restraint, which you picked up on. I want to ask a question about paragraphs (a), (b) and (c) of article 4(1) of the Education Order. You heard the last example that I cited. I am sure that you have lots of examples. I am concerned about how we move forward. This is not so much about seclusion, because that is a different issue and one that we really have to address now in light of the examples that have been given; it just should not be happening. On restraint, as I cited, the departmental guidance states:

"reasonable force/restraint should only be used as a measure of last resort."

With your NAHT hats on, how do you feel about altering article 4 to make sure that principals or, in particular, staff have some level of legal cover to maintain discipline and order in our school system?

Dr Gault: Thank you, Peter. We agree on the mobile phone issue. We are deeply concerned about smartphone technology and children having access to all sorts of horrific stuff. We do not believe that banning smartphones in schools will change people's behaviour with mobile technology outside schools. I was a primary-school principal, and I would prefer that there was never a mobile phone in my building, but some children required it for their own circumstances, and we sometimes use the technology in school for beneficial reasons, so a ban is possibly not the right thing. There may be a better approach. We urge the Minister to talk to the unions and work together on something that is workable, deliverable and beneficial for kids.

If there is a child with complex needs, and their health plan, medical information and statement of need require them to have some level of core support or something like that, that is very different from the documentation that we see around restraint. We say that, where it is appropriate in a health plan for a child's medical needs, that is fine. Otherwise, a child should never be restrained unless they pose a risk to themselves or other people. I can think of an example. I was walking children to a leisure centre, and a child in a garden somewhere kicked a ball. It went over my head and the heads of my group of children, and one of my children was going to run out to get the ball. I put my hand out and stopped them, and my hand and their body connected as I stopped that child from running on to a road. Yes, school professionals need protection to be able to intervene proportionately in that event or in any other kind of event where there is a definitive need to keep a child or somebody else safe. That also applies in circumstances where a child is being aggressive and somebody is in danger, including the child themselves, or where there may even be significant property damage or something like that. Our school leaders need clear parameters to work within and training for their staff.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Time has beaten us on that one. We are well over time, but thank you for your answer on that.

I have one quick question about the maintenance of good order and being permitted to use reasonable force. Is that guidance the same as the statutory guidance on when it is appropriate to restrain a child?

Dr Gault: No, because our understanding of what "good order" means probably differs from somebody else's. Everybody will have a different definition of that. Where a child or other person's safety is at risk, that represents a point at which there could be a case for a physical intervention to save somebody from harm.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Peter referenced some of the guidance on that — the committing of an offence. That could be spray-painting your name on a wall. Is reasonable force required to stop that, or is saying "Stop" enough? That is my concern about reasonable force and good order
[Inaudible.]

Dr Gault: Those parameters need to be clearly defined.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): That is a conversation for another time. David indicated that he wants in.

Mr Brooks: Apologies for being late. I had a long-awaited ministerial visit at Dundonald High School, which people have heard me talk about quite a few times in the Committee. That was my reason for being late. Sorry for missing your presentation. I will do my best to catch up with that in my own time.

I was not planning to ask a question, but I will do so on the back of the discussions about smartphones. I have listened to the discussion about the use of smartphones in school and how different apps and so on can be used. I am slightly concerned that that is self-defeating, in that it adds to the peer pressure that parents and children feel to have their own phone — their own device. I am sure that, by the time that you get to your mid-teens, phone ownership is almost universal. I worry, however, that if a phone becomes a piece of school apparatus that a child is almost expected to have, it will start to encourage children to have phones at a younger and younger age and will normalise that. That seems to be an argument that you make for not bringing in a ban, for instance. That is concerning.

Ms Bartley: Schools will always have to have facilities to provide for children who do not have phone access. Among the major elements in the use of mobile phones has to be the preventative curriculum, support for children, the use of mobile phones and how they are used appropriately.

Mr Brooks: Surely you can have those discussions without having the phone in front of you. There is also the teaching aspect. No doubt, schools will have iPads, although not everyone will have one.

Ms Bartley: Absolutely. There will be demonstrations, and teachers will use their expertise. However, look at society and all the things that are impacting on young people through the use of mobile phones. It is not necessarily the use in schools that is responsible for that.

Mr Brooks: I am for realism, but I wonder whether, particularly at that age, it would be good to show that there is one time of day — one part of your day — when you can be without your phone. I accept that you are saying that, in an ideal world, you would not have to do that. It may be an issue of how, in your view, it would be enforceable. I take that point. On a point of principle, it would be a positive thing to leave it as late as possible for kids to have their phones in front of them and, certainly, as late as possible for kids to feel that a phone is something that they must have for school.

Dr Gault: I think that we would agree on that —

Ms Bartley: We would.

Dr Gault: — but, as you said, we want to maintain realism. Many schools still do not have iPads, and many schools that were able to afford iPads eight or 10 years ago now operate on antiquated devices, because technology moves so quickly. We do not want children to have a sense of competition with devices and so on. We would prefer that they were not a feature of their lives, but we recognise that they are. An outright ban is not the answer. Consultation on what is the answer is the answer.

Mr Brooks: I realise that there is probably no perfect solution. I will say, however, that it is important that we do not have this discussion in the margins. That is an aspect of this conversation that I have heard quite a lot. I do not think that anyone is arguing against the use of a phone where there is a specific need or where an exception has been granted. Schools have always had rules but with exceptions for those with good arguments. I do not think that anyone is arguing that a child who needs a phone for their diabetes or whatever should not have it, but it should be the exception rather than the rule.

Ms Bartley: We want children to be able to play, chat and spend lunchtimes phone-free. That is encouraged. In the main, mobile phones are not allowed in school, as part of policy, unless directed by a teacher for use as part of the curriculum or whatever. We encourage face-to-face relationships, and we want to minimise anxiety in schools. The preventative curriculum helps with that. As a school leader, I will say that it would be brilliant if we could not have mobile phones in schools.

Mr Brooks: We hear more and more from employers about soft social skills and so on. You can see that for yourself.

Ms Bartley: It is about encouraging those.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): There are no more indications from members, so that brings the session to a close. Thank you for your time. We have covered a lot of ground, and there are issues to pick up. As I said to previous witnesses, there is always an open door. If you have issues that you want to explore in more detail with the Committee, please keep in touch.

Ms Bartley: Thank you very much.