



Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

School Uniforms (Guidelines and
Allowances) Bill:
Northern Ireland Youth Assembly

3 June 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:

Mr Rory Brown	Northern Ireland Youth Assembly
Ms Brooke Ewing	Northern Ireland Youth Assembly
Ms Nadia Mackiewicz	Northern Ireland Youth Assembly
Mr James Maginn	Northern Ireland Youth Assembly

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): You are all welcome to the Committee. I put on record how pleased I am to be able to facilitate a youth engagement evidence session on the School Uniforms (Guidelines and Allowances) Bill. It is legislation that will clearly impact on you directly, so it is right and appropriate that we hear evidence from you. You are very welcome. We thank you for giving up your time to present to the Committee. The purpose of the session is to gather your perspectives on the implications of the School Uniforms Bill. We will move into a presentation, and questions and answers will follow that.

Joining us today are Brooke Ewing, Nadia Mackiewicz — I hope that I pronounced your surname correctly, Nadia — James Maginn and Rory Brown, all of whom are Members of the Youth Assembly. I understand that Kerrie Finnegan is unable to attend. You are all welcome. I will hand over to you for any opening presentation that you may have. We are really up against it for time, so it is very much the case that the presentation should be "up to" 10 minutes. We are probably as interested in how you want to speak to the Bill in answers to questions, so we are keen to make sure that all Committee members get the chance to ask questions.

I will hand over to you for an opening presentation.

Ms Nadia Mackiewicz (Northern Ireland Youth Assembly): Thank you to the Committee for meeting us to discuss the School Uniforms Bill. I will give a brief introduction to the Youth Assembly. The Youth Assembly, established in June 2021, comprises 90 diverse Members from all constituencies, with representation from section 75 groups, care-experienced young people and young

people who are on free school meals entitlement. Our three main functions are engaging with the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly and its committees on inquiries and legislative scrutiny, carrying out committee-led project work and consulting Departments on youth-related issues. We established three committees: Education, Health and Rights and Equality. For the past 18 months, Youth Assembly Members have contributed to legislative scrutiny and inquiries including on the Justice Bill, pensions auto-enrolment, the Tobacco and Vapes Bill and careers and skills. We have worked with the Department of Education on curriculum reform, school improvement, free school meals, uniform grant reviews and the School Uniforms Bill.

I will give you the background to our work on school uniforms. In July 2024, we had a pre-consultation meeting with DE officials. The Minister of Education and his officials met us in September 2024. Members met throughout September 2024 to discuss and submit a response to the consultation. I should say at the outset that we are supportive of having a school uniform. It can create a level playing field for all, instil a sense of pride in us for our schools and maintain safeguarding duties. In our consultation response, we agreed with the six principles that uniforms should be affordable, comfortable and sustainable and that policy should be published publicly, reviewed regularly and developed in partnership with children, parents and carers.

We recommend that school uniforms respect all genders, beliefs, abilities and identities, with no cost difference between boys' and girls' items. Uniform policy should prioritise affordability, comfort, safety and flexibility, should be reviewed at least every three years and should involve meaningful engagement with pupils, parents and suppliers. We call for reusable crests, loanable sports kits, availability of multiple suppliers and transparency around supplier benefits. We support the introduction of compulsory uniform banks. We oppose strict appearance rules and punitive measures, and we advocate for sensory-friendly, simple uniforms and an inclusive, youth-informed inspection process.

Ms Brooke Ewing (Northern Ireland Youth Assembly): We welcome the move to make the current guidance statutory, as is the case in England and Wales. We also welcome the commitment to parent and pupil voices being heard when the uniform policies are being set, although it is a shame that it might take the Bill to make schools listen to those important stakeholders on the issue. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) emphasises children's right to an education in article 28 and prioritises our best interests in all decisions that affect us in article 3. Article 12 ensures that our voices are heard and respected. We have reviewed the Bill on the basis of those principles.

I will talk through our views on clauses 1 to 5 of the Bill. Clause 1 will compel the Department of Education to publish guidelines for school uniform policies that are set in Northern Ireland. There is no detail in the Bill about what the guidelines may look like, how often they will be reviewed or who must be consulted, which is of concern to Youth Assembly Members.

Clause 2 discusses unfair costs, comfort and practicality, and affordability and accessibility. It also addresses specific suppliers or manufacturers, schools requiring individual items of clothing in a particular style and whether branded clothing is required. Again, it is not clear what the final guidelines might say or how they will be developed.

Clause 3 states that the guidelines may limit the number of specific clothing items that a school is allowed to enforce. That may include limiting a school to having one branded item, such as a tie. Again, it is not clear what the final guidelines might say.

Under clause 4, the Department could have the power to set a price cap. In March, DE officials told the Committee for Education that any cap would be subject to further consultation. Whom would that consultation include, and when would it be? Many Youth Assembly Members feel that it is a missed opportunity and that appropriate price caps for each stage of school life should be part of the legislation.

On clause 5, it is the view of Youth Assembly Members that all children, including those in preschool settings where a uniform is required, should be included in the Bill.

Mr Rory Brown (Northern Ireland Youth Assembly): I will talk through the Youth Assembly's views on clauses 6 to 13.

Youth Assembly Members welcome clause 6, which means that policies will be published on a school's website. We feel that the Bill should include the availability of children and young people's versions of all relevant documents.

Clause 7 deals with complaints and breaches. Youth Assembly Members feel that the Bill should require schools to make all pupils and parents aware of school and DE complaints procedures. Information should be available on the school's website. The school and the Department should keep records of complaints. Members feel that breaches of uniform policy must have proportionate disciplinary responses and must never be used to isolate, suspend or exclude any children.

On the role of the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI), Members support the inclusion of a school uniform policy as part of a whole-school inspection. The ETI should ask pupils about uniforms and consider how the school arrived at its decision and whom it consulted and should ensure that schools have robust consultation and complaints mechanisms. Members support the availability of good-practice case studies and would welcome the involvement of young people in the creation of such case studies.

On clauses 12 and 13, the Bill should immediately be applicable to all children regardless of their age or stage of school, and uniform grants should be available for preschool children who are required to wear a uniform anyway.

Mr James Maginn (Northern Ireland Youth Assembly): We have some additional comments on the Bill, the first of which is to do with the differences between the consultation and the Bill. The consultation asked questions on specific issues such as crests, branded PE kit loan, engagement with pupils and parents and a three-year review period. Those issues may be specifically included in the guidelines, but they may not. The Bill seems to be much less prescriptive than the consultation led us to believe that it might be.

I have some comments on the time frame. What is the time frame to produce the guidelines and to consult on a price cap, and how long will school suppliers have to perform the transition? Who will be consulted on the guidelines?

Research shows that there are higher school uniform costs for female pupils than for male pupils, and we are curious to know how that will be addressed. The Youth Assembly is also curious to know how the guidelines and the uniform grant may be extended to nursery schools and preschools.

There have been calls for gender-neutral uniforms and for girls to have the right to wear trousers. Members feel that those views should be considered. Comments from the Youth Assembly's March 2025 survey, 'Young Women's Rights in Schools', which is at appendix A of our report, highlighted the fact that, in many schools, trousers are not an option for girls or there may be limitations on girls wearing them. The Youth Assembly broadly agrees with the amendment proposed by Claire Sugden MLA on 23 May 2025, which agrees with and allows for greater flexibility in all schools. We would also like to know how religious expression, disability and the rights of trans students may be included in the Bill.

We would like to know whether there will be sufficient clarity in the guidelines for schools and whether there is a risk that the guidelines might appear subjective and/or open to interpretation. When it comes to adherence, how will the Department of Education oversee the introduction and enforcement of the Bill? What are the reporting requirements that the DE plans to require of schools? Are the existing complaints procedures sufficient?

How often should a school be required to review its policy? Question 23 of the DE consultation asked:

"Do you agree with the proposal that schools should review their uniform policy every three years?"

The proposal seems to have been dropped from the Bill. The Youth Assembly stated in its response that schools should conduct reviews of uniform policy at least every three years. How often will the DE guidelines be reviewed? The Bill states that the Department of Education must:

"review such guidelines from time to time".

What length of time between reviews of uniform policy is appropriate? That should be more specific. How will the implementation of new uniform guidelines be evaluated by the Department of Education?

In closing, we encourage the Committee to read the results relating to school uniforms from the 'Young Women's Rights in Schools' survey at appendix A of our report. It was completed by over 1,100 young people in March 2025. Respondents shared their lived experiences of how comfortable

they feel in their uniform and PE kits and of trousers, gender-neutral uniforms and non-uniform day restrictions.

Thank you. We welcome your questions.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Thank you all for that comprehensive overview of your reflections on the Bill. It was helpful to have that clause-by-clause summary of your deliberations; that has been a helpful start.

I will focus on some of the issues around inclusion that you raised. The Committee has discussed, to quite a lengthy degree, whether there is a need for something more to go into the Bill to reflect some of the issues around equality — you used the word "equality" in your submission — as an additional principle. Would you support another clause or an expanded clause that would put in specific provisions around school uniform policies? You mentioned some issues around gender neutrality, disability, race and religion. Would you support that? Will you expand on that?

Mr Brown: I would definitely support it. It is needed; it is a great idea.

Mr Maginn: I am on the Youth Assembly's rights and equality committee. We have been focusing on young women's rights in schools. There were a lot of mentions in the recent survey on young women's rights in schools of the option for girls to wear trousers in school. There was also discussion of the fact that those who are given the option have to go to the principal, with their parents, to make the request. That is an uncomfortable experience. You also stand out if you wear trousers. To ensure equality amongst all pupils, why should we not simply offer all those things? Most of our Members agree that it is something that we need more on in the Bill.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): You would like to see choice offered by default in the policies being built into the Bill.

Mr Maginn: Yes.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): That is helpful.

Rory, you mentioned how the disciplinary outworkings of a school uniform policy should not be used to exclude pupils in any scenario. Can you give examples from your experience of where you have seen that happen and say how, you think, the Bill could ensure that young people are not disadvantaged because of the application of a uniform policy?

Mr Brown: Disciplinary action is understandable if a student comes in wearing absolutely nothing to do with the uniform and there is a complete violation of the policy. What annoy me with disciplinary action on school uniforms are the small things, such as, "Your tie is too short" or "Your shirt isn't tucked in". Those are demerits, or, in my school, we have a negative points system. It feels nitpicky and as though we have to be perfect all the time. It is not a great feeling to have in school.

Thankfully, I have not seen too much exclusion, but I have heard of people coming into other schools wearing something that resembles the uniform but with one thing wrong with it — something to do with their hair, for example. They have been turned around at the gate and made to go home or have been given a detention. That is a bit extreme. You are putting them at a disadvantage for something that, in the view of most Members of the Youth Assembly, is quite a small thing. We do not think that it calls for exclusion.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Are any of the other panel members aware of scenarios in which someone has been excluded? PE has been referenced. Are you aware of instances in which people have been unable to participate in that aspect of the curriculum?

Ms Ewing: Yes, we have people in our school who were not allowed to participate in PE because they were not wearing the exact uniform or their trainers were not right. We had an issue in our school, last year. Our uniform policy states that you have to wear navy leggings, but a lot of the girls decided to wear their own navy leggings. Our student leadership team (SLT) decided to kick up a bit about that. We said, "We're not comfortable wearing those leggings", and they said, "If you're not wearing the right leggings, you're not doing PE".

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): That means potentially missing out on a statutory part of the curriculum over a uniform violation. Would you welcome a provision in the Bill to ensure that that is not permitted in schools? Is that what you support?

Ms Ewing: Absolutely.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): That is all really helpful. I am conscious that there is a huge amount to get through, and we have some big panels of evidence, so I will not take up any more time with my questions. I will open it up to other members.

I really need members to work with me today by getting straight to their questions. Will the panel, as far as possible, limit itself to one person answering each question so that we can keep to time? Obviously, if you really want to contribute something of burning significance, I will not block that. I will open up the floor and go first to the Deputy Chair.

Mr Sheehan: Thanks very much to all of you for coming in. I will not ask you any questions. Most of the points that you touched on in your presentations are issues that have been discussed at the Committee and among the Sinn Féin Committee group. We are broadly in agreement with most of the points that you raised. I will leave it there. I will not waste any time asking questions to which I probably know the answers.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): That is probably the quickest-ever contribution from the Deputy Chair at the Committee.

Mr Martin: Well done, Pat.

Mr Sheehan: Peter made a liar out of me. *[Laughter.]* He told me that he was not coming.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): We had apologies registered in error.

Mr Martin: My thing got cancelled. Apologies, Chair and Deputy Chair.

Mr Sheehan: No problem.

Ms Hunter: I have to leave a little earlier today for a protest in my constituency.

I really welcome the opportunity to have young people here today. I know that all of us on the Committee love to hear directly from young people about their experience. No one knows your lived experience better than you.

Last week at the Committee, a trade union discussed the need for uniform policies not to be intrusive. What that means, essentially, is not punishing young people for being creative with make-up, piercings and hair dye. Some people may not think that that is an issue, but I would love to hear what young people think about that and the right to self-expression. Do you have any comments? That is my only question.

Mr Maginn: The Bill does not focus loads on hairstyles and make-up. Youth Assembly Members agree that there needs to be a little more focus on hairstyles, make-up and hair colour, because, in many ways, those are part of the uniform. Those things are included in the school rules on uniform.

Everybody has a right to self-expression via their make-up, hair colour or the way in which they wear their hair. That is valid, and it is important to create a varied school environment. We talk so much about the fact that uniforms are uniform so that everyone looks the same, but it is possible to have that while expressing yourself through things such as hairstyles and make-up.

Ms Hunter: You are right. For a year or two, I attended school in America, where there are no school uniforms, but there are guidelines to keep everybody right and on the same page. From my school experience in Northern Ireland, I know that guys who had long hair or long beards were pulled aside and strict rules were placed on them. Your insight today on the right to freedom of expression is certainly helpful for us as a Committee, and we will definitely take that into account when talking about the Bill. Thank you.

Mr Baker: Thank you. That was really comprehensive. As Pat said, we broadly agree with what you said. To pick up on the negative sides, Brooke, you mentioned trainers. Out of curiosity, what is the issue with wearing trainers in school?

Ms Ewing: I think that the uniform policy in our school changed this year, but, last year, trainers had to be either black or white. It was to do with the colour of the trainers; they had to be plain. The issue was brightly coloured, vibrant trainers. You could not wear those.

Mr Baker: On the negative stuff that is happening in schools, from your discussions with Youth Assembly Members, how common is it for schools to exclude someone from classes or school for the whole day or to punish them with detention? Do only some schools do that, or is it a problem across the board?

Ms Ewing: From our group discussions and what we heard back from surveys, I think that there are exclusions over uniforms across pretty much all schools.

Mr Baker: That feeds into the importance of having a rights-based approach in the Bill, because, as it sits, it does not cover the articles that you pointed out. Thanks very much.

Mr Brooks: Thank you for your evidence. One of my questions was going to be about the trainers. It is not to be pedantic, but I want to get an idea of what parameters, you think, are reasonable for a uniform. With regard to the leggings, was it about different materials?

Ms Ewing: The school regulation leggings are the Kukri brand, but the girls decided to wear another brand of navy leggings; for example, Nike or Gymshark ones. There was an issue because they were not the right brand.

Mr Brooks: OK. Was it more to do with an exclusive deal with a particular manufacturer in that instance?

Ms Ewing: Probably.

Ms Mackiewicz: We agree that it is completely ridiculous that female students, especially, are being punished for something so small — just for not having a small Kukri brand on the side of their thigh. There should be no issue with girls bringing in their own leggings, because, in our experience, the PE uniform is extremely expensive; it can be upwards of £100. Bringing in your own brand of leggings could help, for example, lower-income families. As a Youth Assembly, we find it completely ridiculous.

Mr Brooks: I have some sympathy with the idea if it is about a deal or some financial incentive for the school to have a single brand. There is a grey area in my mind, because what we do not want in schools and what uniforms are partially aimed at combating is some kind of arms race of brands. We are talking about having uniforms that are not branded to make sure that parents are not paying out big money for brands. I can understand the white or black trainer regulation, because you do not want people having to compete with one another and feeling that they need to fit in with their peers who are wearing expensive trainers or newly in-trend items for any type of clothing. That is the area that I am trying to explore. I have some sympathy with the idea if it is about exclusive deals with sportswear companies. It is about how that interacts. There is a bit of a contrast between trying to push back on brands for uniforms and opening it up to people expressing themselves with different brands. We need to think about how that makes people who maybe cannot afford those brands feel.

Rory, you spoke about the uniform rules. We have all been familiar with being pulled at school for the tie being too short or the top button being undone. I have started the Committee tieless and have been pulled into line. I have some sympathy with that. Are there reasonable parameters to be exercised in school to maintain discipline and professionalism in how you look? I imagine that you are talking about the tie. If the tie is slightly too short, you feel that some of the punishments are overbearing, but do you agree that it is not appropriate for people to wear short ties? Certainly, in my day, some people wore their tie short; I do not know about it nowadays. It is maybe difficult for schools to find a reasonable line between what should be sanctioned and what should not.

Mr Brown: Yes, as you said, for professionalism, it is important. You cannot come in with a short tie. My tie does not have lines on it, but some schools have rules about how many lines have to be shown. I would be more annoyed at the little things. For example, if your shirt has become untucked during

the day while walking between classes, that is not a cause for a demerit or its equivalent. It should be more about a teacher saying, "Sorry, your shirt is untucked"; you tuck it back in and get on with it. Certainly, in my experience, when that sort of thing happens, it feels like the teachers blame you almost for your uniform becoming slightly less tidy during the day. I understand why they want it to be tidy — after all, you are representing their establishment — but I just do not believe that punishments are the right way to go.

Mr Brooks: Is it fair to say that you think that any sanctions should be proportionate but you understand the need for uniformity?

Mr Brown: Yes, I would say so.

Mr Brooks: Thank you very much.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): To pick up really quickly on branded items, would you support it being mandated in the Bill that no branded items should be required for participation in PE?

Mr Maginn: Definitely, because the issue with branded items is massive.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Do you mean a manufacturer's brand?

Mr Maginn: Yes, a manufacturer's brand.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): There has been a bit of confusion about what is meant by "branding".

Mr Maginn: What was the name of the PE brand?

Ms Mackiewicz: Kukri.

Mr Maginn: Kukri is a big one. The issue is with people who are in low-income households getting the money to buy that brand. I accept the point about the uniform grant, but, again, some people will still struggle to purchase those items.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): A uniform grant most certainly does not buy a full Kukri PE kit.

Mr Crawford: Thank you for coming back. It is great to have you here. I genuinely could listen to you all afternoon.

I scribbled down a few points, because it has been 23 years since I put on a school uniform. It is really important that, when legislation is being made and passed in this place, we take time out to listen and give you guys the opportunity to feed into that process. What could we, as a Committee, do more of to ensure that your voices and input continue to be fed in not only to this Bill but to the other legislation that is going through the House? What can we, as politicians, do more of not only to listen to you but to take on board what you guys feed back?

Ms Ewing: Honestly, just being able to meet young people is a good thing. You should do that not just to tick boxes but to take into account what young people say. It is all well and good for politicians to meet young people, but you want to make sure that you actually take into account what they say and do what young people want you to do.

Mr Maginn: On the point about not just ticking a box and to bring it back to the Bill, we talked about the fact that the Bill mentions that schools need to consult students on uniform rules. Again, that needs to be not just about ticking a box: a school needs to show clearly how it has consulted students and parents on uniform rules, and there needs to be a way that they can share that with the Department.

Ms Mackiewicz: Recently, we had a problem in our school when it sent out an email to all the parents saying that length of skirts is being changed to calf-length and that that must be implemented by December. That came completely out of nowhere, and nobody was consulted on it. I am on the school council. A lot of people are now struggling to get those skirts, because our skirts were originally knee-

length. Spending £40 on a skirt, for example, especially for people who are now going into year 14 and have just one year left, is completely ridiculous.

Mr Martin: Your evidence has been exceptional this afternoon. Rory, if you do not end up in politics, you are getting really bad careers advice. A career in politics perhaps beckons for you.

I will start off with the point about uniform infringement. Rory, you gave the example of your shirt being out. My shirt is out a lot in this place. I tuck it in, but no one tells me off. For those really small things, a teacher should probably just say, "Tuck your shirt in". Will you accept the wider point that having rules for uniforms is important because it means that everyone is the same? One of the key components of the Bill is to make sure that people are not buying really expensive brands that distinguish them. Do you accept that some rules about uniforms, what people can wear and maybe what length their tie should be are important?

Mr Brown: I would say so. It is definitely important to have some rules, because, if you have none, it is hardly a uniform. It is a bit tricky to think about it in that way, because, as you said, if it is just a matter of your shirt being untucked, you should be asked to tuck it back in. Most of the teachers in my school do that, but some are a bit more accusatory — I do not know whether that is the right word — and blame you a bit more. Punishments are completely out of the road for that, but rules are definitely important. I do not really have too much of a problem with rules such as your tie having to be a certain length. I do not have a problem with those rules; I have a problem with how they are enforced.

Mr Martin: My second question is on the general principles of the Bill. What does the panel think is the most important thing that the Bill should deliver? I would be interested in that. I will leave that nice and open for you.

Ms Ewing: It should make sure that all children are included, including those who are in preschool, which it does not cover as much. If you have to pay for a uniform, you should still get a grant and there should still be regulations for that.

Mr Martin: I will forgo my third question. I would like to hear from every panel member on that one. What is the most important thing that the Bill should deliver?

Mr Maginn: As I mentioned, I am on the Youth Assembly's rights and equality committee. Given what we have been focusing on, including young women's rights in schools, providing trousers for girls and young women especially as a standard option is a really key thing that the Bill does not mention, but I feel strongly that it should deliver on that.

Ms Mackiewicz: I completely agree with James. It is just a matter of equality, especially if a student is transgender, for example, and they are refused the ability to wear trousers. That happened in my school. My friend asked the school if he could wear trousers, but he was completely denied, so he had to move school.

It is just a matter of equality and comfort. For example, a Muslim woman might not be comfortable wearing a knee-length skirt and might want to wear trousers. In general, women should be allowed to wear trousers in school, because there is zero problem with that.

Mr Brown: For me, the most important thing is the consultation with young people. It should not stop here. It should be done by everyone. Schools should be encouraged to regularly ask groups of young people for their opinion on the school uniform. After all, I am one of the thousands of students in Northern Ireland who wear a school uniform every day. Getting a wide range of thorough consultation from young people is the way forward for uniforms.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Rory, school councils are often used as a consultative forum. Should consultation go wider than that in schools? Do you think that it is important to hear from as many pupils as possible, or do school councils provide a good forum?

Mr Brown: School councils can definitely provide a good baseline. In all schools, they are elected. In my school they are elected, and there is an election process that encourages everyone to vote, so councils provide good representation. However, on issues such as uniforms, which apply to everyone, it would not harm anyone to get a wider range of views. For smaller things, school councils are a good

idea, but for a wider issue that will affect everyone every day, a good selection of pupils need to be asked.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): The wider the consultation, the better, effectively.

Mrs Guy: Thanks so much for your evidence. A lot of ground has been covered, but there is one thing that I want to ask you that I am curious about. I am not trying to pitch you against your head teachers in asking this, but we heard evidence last week from one of the head teachers' unions, and it suggested that there was no need for statutory guidance on uniforms and that schools were already doing a great job on that. Do you agree with that characterisation?

Mr Maginn: As with everything, there are examples of good practice and of bad practice. The purpose of the statutory guidance is that it will ensure that there is blanket good practice. I am sure that many schools in Northern Ireland are showing great signs of good practice already, but it is about having that discussion on equality whereby everybody has that right to good practice in uniforms.

Mrs Guy: I want to ask about the style of school uniforms now. I have two teenagers in my house, and we joke that the only person who leaves in the morning wearing a suit is my son. He goes to school wearing his tie, shirt, blazer and trousers. My husband is a professional, and he does not dress like that any more. He and his colleagues go to work wearing open shirts and have a more casual look, but they are professional and can still go in and do an exceptional job.

Do you think that there generally needs to be a rethink of what is required for school uniforms for you guys? I think in particular of special educational needs (SEN) kids. The focus in the Bill ought to be more on what is comfortable and will enable pupils to learn sufficiently, rather than on looking a particular way. The head teachers also suggested last week that they want a level of freedom to express their ethos through their uniform. What do you think about those issues?

Mr Maginn: Teachers and students — everybody — talk so much about how school needs to prepare you for your future life in the world of employment. There are many discussions to be had about the uniform, such as on the tie and the blazer. School should prepare you for adult life and employment, and there needs to be actions for those who disobey the rules about uniform, excluding exclusion. We should ensure that, if the school is to prepare us for our future life and as the world and society evolve, there are discussions about the uniform for SEN pupils and how young women should be able to wear trousers. We should always ensure that school prepares us for future life.

Mr Brown: I would like to comment on that question. If the uniform is irritating students with special educational needs, it should not be a question of whether the uniform needs to be altered or the student can do something else about it. For example, my school has a wool blazer, and that can be irritating for some students with special educational needs; even I find it irritating sometimes. It is completely understandable. We are there to learn and feel comfortable, and, if you happen to have those extra needs, there should be the requirement that they be catered for. Otherwise, it seems a bit like discrimination.

Mrs Guy: Rory, I am glad that you came in at the end, because you could do a lot better than have politics as a career, despite the advice you were given. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): That brings us to the end of the evidence session — sorry, the deputy Chair wants to come in. Apologies.

Mr Sheehan: You expressed support for Claire Sugden's amendment. Last week, someone from the Bill Office explained the technical details of legislation. If there were a legal challenge to any amendment, including Claire's, the judge would take account of the narrative on the amendment. In Claire's contributions to some radio shows last week, she said that she wanted girls to wear trousers because of the possibility of upskirting and things like that. You might have heard the Minister on the radio last week. He announced that he is going to ban mobile phones from schools. In theory, if there were no mobile phones in schools, girls would not have to worry about upskirting and, therefore, there would be no reason for them to have to wear trousers. If that were the case, would you prefer a stronger amendment that is based on human rights and equality law?

Mr Maginn: Where upskirting and mobile phones in schools are concerned, not everybody will follow the rules — everybody sitting here knows that — so I am sure that, unfortunately, there will still be

situations in which upskirting happens. There are comments from our survey about young women's rights in schools in the appendix to our report, and some are about upskirting.

Mr Sheehan: It could happen outside school too.

Mr Maginn: It could.

Mr Sheehan: On the school bus, for example.

Mr Maginn: We should aim to prevent upskirting in school. It is important, even if phones were banned in schools and you could say that the problem of upskirting had been removed, to ask why we would stop a girl or young woman who wants to wear trousers for any reason. I do not see how not having phones in schools and thereby removing upskirting as a factor prevents us offering trousers as an option.

Mr Sheehan: You are agreeing with me. I do not want girls to wear trousers on the basis that they might be upskirted; I want them to wear trousers on the basis of equality and non-discrimination.

Ms Ewing: Speaking of girls wearing skirts in schools, yes, you can take upskirting with a phone out of the discussion, but it is still possible for someone to look up a girl's skirt. They do not need to have a phone to look up your skirt. They can still touch you. Some young women may still feel unsafe in certain schools.

Mr Sheehan: Yes. OK. Thanks for that.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Apologies; I had forgotten that the Deputy Chair had asked to come in at the end.

Formally, on behalf of the whole Committee, I thank you for your evidence. We always really welcome the opportunity to engage with the Youth Assembly. That was a comprehensive briefing on and overview of your reflections on the Bill, and it has been really helpful for our considerations. Thank you for your time.