

# NIRN Response to the School Uniforms (Guidelines and Allowances) Bill (Northern Ireland) 2025

## Introduction

Northern Ireland Resources Network (NIRN) is the membership body for reuse, and repair organisations in Northern Ireland. Our mission is to support and promote a circular economy by encouraging the sustainable use of resources through education, advocacy, and the sharing of best practices. We work with a diverse range of members, including charities, social enterprises, community groups, and local authorities who are leading on the ground in reducing waste and promoting reuse in local communities.

In 2024–2025, NIRN delivered a **Circular Schools Pilot** in 12 schools across Northern Ireland, funded by the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) through the carrier bag levy. As part of this pilot, **uniform reuse, repair, and hand-me-down** were promoted to encourage reduced clothing waste. The pilot will expand to 16 schools in the 2024–25 academic year, reflecting strong demand and success.

## Framing Reuse Beyond Cost: Valuing Sustainability and Community

While we strongly support efforts to reduce financial pressure on families, we urge the Department of Education (DE) to carefully consider how school uniform policy is communicated and implemented. A singular focus on cost-saving can unintentionally reinforce stigma around reused or pre-loved clothing. Instead, guidance should promote a culture that values **reuse as a climate-responsible, community-oriented choice**, not a marker of economic hardship.

## Language Matters: Celebrating Hand-Me-Downs and Circular Practice

DE guidelines should encourage schools to use language that encourages pride in **"hand-me-downs"** and **shared community resources**, rather than language that implies second-hand clothing is inferior. For example:

- Swap shops and school banks can be reframed as **"uniform exchanges"** or **"circular schoolwear programmes"**.
- Families should be encouraged to see participation in reuse as a **climate action**, not just a cost-saving necessity.

## Embedding Circular Economy Principles into Policy

We recommend that the DE guidelines explicitly acknowledge the environmental benefits of reuse and repair, including:

- Reducing textile waste and the environmental impact of uniform production
- Supporting local circular initiatives, such as school-based or community-led swap shops, repair cafés, and redistribution networks
- Encouraging durable design and the ability to hand down clothing across years or between families

These principles can sit alongside affordability as policy goals, reflecting wider government commitments to sustainable development and climate action.

### **Guidance on Supplier Requirements and Uniform Design**

We support Clause 3 and Clause 4's potential to limit the number of branded or specific-style items. Excessive branding undermines the reuse value of garments, as it restricts sharing between schools and families. Design decisions should prioritise:

- **Longevity and washability**
- **Generic or universal styles** wherever possible
- Compatibility with **existing reuse channels**

### **Building Local Networks and Partnerships**

Where uniform banks or swap schemes already exist in community centres, churches, or through NIRN member projects, schools should be encouraged to collaborate, rather than duplicate effort. DE guidance should include mechanisms for schools to **signpost parents** to local reuse schemes, supported by clear, proactive communication strategies.

### **Avoiding Stigma: Celebrating Sharing and Solidarity**

Stigma around reused clothing is a significant barrier, particularly among older children. To counter this, the Bill's implementation must include:

- Positive messaging campaigns co-designed with pupils and families
- Case studies of successful swap shops and peer sharing
- Public celebration of "**reuse champions**" in schools and communities

## **Key Points in Response to the Bill**

### **Clause 1: Guidelines as to Policies on School Uniforms**

We welcome this clause's flexibility to include a broad range of issues in departmental guidance. We recommend that **reuse, sustainability, and circular economy principles** be embedded as **core policy areas** within the school uniform guidelines.

#### **Recommendations:**

- Include a requirement for schools to consider the **availability and promotion of reused uniforms**, including swap shops and preloved sales.
- Encourage schools to partner with local reuse organisations and community centres to facilitate these initiatives, especially to avoid duplication of efforts or unnecessary burdens on smaller schools.

### **Clause 2: Cost, Affordability, and Accessibility**

NIRN strongly supports the inclusion of Clause 2(4), which emphasises the **accessibility of uniform** and requires schools to ensure that **loaned items and clothing banks are available**.

Our Circular Schools programme has shown that reuse-based uniform solutions:

- Dramatically **lower costs for families**
- **Divert clothing from landfill or incineration**
- Help build a culture of **sharing, care, and sustainability**

#### **Recommendations:**

- The Bill should **explicitly recognise uniform reuse and rewear** as key strategies for achieving affordability and accessibility.
- Guidance should recommend **uniform banks, hand-me-down initiatives, or swap events** as part of school policy, with templates or toolkits provided.
- Where feasible, DE should promote coordination with **existing community uniform schemes** run by charities, churches, and local reuse organisations.

### **Clauses 6–7: Duty of Schools to Comply and DE Powers**

#### **Supporting Schools to Deliver**

We support strong compliance mechanisms. However, **schools will need guidance, support, and potentially access to small grants** to set up or partner with reuse schemes.

To embed reuse meaningfully into uniform policy, guidance from the Department must go beyond principles and provide **clear pathways for implementation** at the school level.

NIRN's work with community-based organisations has shown that reuse schemes—whether based in schools or community hubs—require more than good will; they need **space, resources, and sustained promotion** to be successful.

We recommend that the Department's guidance include the following provisions:

- Detailed, practical guidance on how to implement reuse schemes
- Examples of good practice from Northern Ireland and other jurisdictions
- Access to training and toolkits for staff or volunteers
- Funding or small grants, particularly for schools with limited space or capacity, to establish or partner with reuse initiatives
- Designated space for collection and sorting of used uniforms as Schools or community partners need access to secure, clean storage areas where donated clothing can be assessed and prepared.
- Facilities or partnerships for cleaning and repair which is essential to ensure garments meet hygiene expectations and to extend their useful life.
- Reuse schemes benefit from a thoughtful presentation—using clothing rails, signage, and sizing systems that enhance dignity and reduce stigma. Uniform banks should be **welcoming, well-marketed, and integrated into the school calendar** (e.g. uniform evenings, transition days, start-of-term events).

- Targeted communications to parents and pupils which markets reuse as a normal, responsible, and positive choice. This may include pupil-designed posters, peer advocacy, and school assemblies that celebrate participation in the circular economy. Language should normalise reuse through terms such as “**pre-loved**”, “**hand-me-down**”, or “**uniform exchange**”, rather than framing it as purely a support for low-income families.

## **Additional Recommendations**

- DE should work with circular economy partners like NIRN to **develop national guidance on uniform reuse models**, including community-led and school-led approaches.
- Establish a **Sustainable Uniform Toolkit** for schools, featuring templates and case studies
- Encourage integration of **sustainability education** into school life by involving students in the running of uniform swaps or repairs.

## **Conclusion**

We commend the Bill’s ambition and strongly encourage the Department of Education to integrate a wider sustainability framework into its guidance. Embedding reuse and repair into school uniform policy is an opportunity not just to ease financial burden, but to **recognise climate-conscious habits, community resilience, and shared social values**. This approach must be matched by supportive, non-stigmatising language and implementation that celebrates hand-me-downs and circular solutions.