



SUBMISSION FROM THE WELFARE AND WELL BEING PANEL AND THE STATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE OF THE COUNCIL OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN IRELAND TO THE CALL FOR EVIDENCE FOR THE SCHOOL UNIFORMS (GUIDELINES AND ALLOWANCES) BILL

Introduction

1. The Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI) has over 190,000 members belonging to over 500 congregations across 19 Presbyteries throughout Ireland, north and south. The Council for Public Affairs is authorised by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland to speak on behalf of PCI on matters of public policy, with the Welfare and Well Being Panel tasked with carrying out specific responsibility for matters relating to poverty and the impacts of the ongoing cost of living crisis,¹ and the State Education Committee carrying specific responsibility for education matters in Northern Ireland.

Need for Change: The cost of School Uniforms

2. As a denomination we acknowledge that school uniforms play an important part in the engagement of pupils with their school, promoting a sense of identity, and ensuring that pupils from all background feel welcome. They also serve to protect children from social pressures to dress in a particular way and help to promote good relations between different groups of pupils.
3. As outlined on 'the Education Hub' blog 'School Uniforms- What you need to know' ...'uniforms provide a sense of belonging for students. They are helpful in fostering a good learning environment and can promote the ethos of a school.'
4. At PCI we support the right of School Governors to set the ethos and management policy for individual schools: this includes the right to decide on the school uniform policy. However, this should be done in consultation with the guidance from the Education Authority about uniform. Despite the existence of the current non-statutory guidance, it is clear that by and large this is being ignored and schools are not doing enough to ensure that school uniform costs are being kept to a minimum.
5. Research carried out by 'Save the Children NI' in August 2023 found that 49% of parents surveyed reported uniform costs as a challenge, while 73% of low-income households found the cost of uniforms financially challenging. One in ten reported that their child had to miss school

¹ <https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2021/11/school-uniforms-what-you-need-to-know/>

due to issues relating to uniform or PE kit.² One parent told the charity, 'It's a debt I need to get every year to cover the cost' with another adding, 'It's a sizeable chunk of money and by paying so much we have to reduce spending on food.'³

6. This research also found that in 2023, 6 in 10 families struggled to cover the cost of school uniforms and PE kits, with a third having to borrow money, either from a friend or family member, or through credit cards or other forms of debt, while others were forced to use doorstep lenders to cover the cost.⁴
7. The Presbyterian Church in Ireland is concerned that the current cost of school uniforms is forcing families into unnecessary debt and therefore we support the broad principles of the bill including, the key aim of placing guidance in a statutory footing.

The Bill

8. PCI supports the broad principles and power afforded to the Department in Clauses 1 & 2, however we recommend a timetable for the mandatory review included in Clause 1. It is also important that any guidance affords individual schools the flexibility to implement a policy that best suits their needs based on a criterion sent down from the Department.
9. While Clause 2 affords the Department the discretion to address the unfair costs of school uniforms, we believe that this Clause and Clause 3 should be more robust to ensure a meaningful change in the cost associated with uniforms. An obligation should be placed on schools to issue a school uniform policy which is affordable and includes, for example, availability from multiple outlets/high street suppliers.
10. Clause 4 allows the Department to set either a maximum cap on, or range of monetary cost, for an item or a set of items. PCI recommends that the Department should set a uniform cap, as this is vitally important when it comes to keeping uniform costs affordable.

School Clothing Allowances

11. At PCI we are concerned that the current rate for school uniform grants is not sufficient. In NI the average cost of a post-primary school uniform is estimated to be £378 per year⁵ with uniforms grants paying between £87.60- £93.60 per student.⁶ This creates a shortfall of approx. £280 -£290. For any school uniform policy to be effective for families struggling to cope with the cost, the uniform should not exceed the value of the school uniform grant.

² <https://www.belfastlive.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/northern-ireland-families-having-cut-27611084>

³ Ibid.

⁴ [https://i.stci.uk/dam/Uncapped Costs of School Uniforms are Causing Harm.pdf-ch11218126.pdf/garp1vo01vhk050a2y4bya61h2ov7o4r.pdf](https://i.stci.uk/dam/Uncapped+Costs+of+School+Uniforms+are+Causing+Harm.pdf-ch11218126.pdf/garp1vo01vhk050a2y4bya61h2ov7o4r.pdf)

⁵ <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/education/school-uniforms-ni-parents-spending-over-a-quarter-of-august-income-on-post-primary-uniform-for-one-child/41900150.html>

⁶ <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/school-uniform-and-uniform-grants>

12. PCI therefore recommends that the Bill be amended to make any payable uniform grant equal to the uniform cap.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'DKane', with a stylized, somewhat abstract flourish below the name.

Rev Daniel Kane
Convenor of the Council of Public Affairs

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rebecca Stevenson', written in a cursive, flowing style.

Dr Rebecca Stevenson
Public Affairs Officer