

School Uniform (Guidelines and Allowances) Bill - Briefing Note

1. Introduction

- 1.1. This briefing note has been prepared by the Rainbow Project, an organisation working for a better Northern Ireland for LGBTQIA+ people and their families, for the Education Committee's consideration of the School Uniform (Guidelines and Allowances) Bill, following an invite to submit evidence.
- 1.2. We are broadly supportive of the stated aims of this Bill, namely to address school uniform affordability for families, and provide greater options for families with limited resources. We do, however, have a number of concerns, namely that the guideline-setting powers contained within this legislation are being debated and discussed without any detailed proposals as to what those guidelines will include.
- 1.3. We endorse the oral statement shared with the Committee by our colleagues in the Women's Support Network, and share concerns expressed by both WSN and the Women's Policy Group in their submissions to the previous consultation on this Bill that the provisions within it may not go far enough, and may still result in some of the most vulnerable or less economically stable families falling through the cracks left by these proposals.
- 1.4. This briefing note has been prepared to focus specifically on areas which have been raised by the Committee around proposals for gender neutral uniform policies, with particular relation to an amendment brought by Claire Sugden MLA which would allow all pupils to have the option of wearing trousers or shorts.

2. Clauses 2 and 3

- 2.1. The relatively broad regulation-setting powers afforded to the Minister through this proposed Bill, and the requirement for schools to abide by those regulations, could have unintended consequences for certain sections of the student population.
- 2.2. In recent years, individual schools have demonstrated a willingness to move away from restrictive, inflexible uniform policies, towards more flexible policies which reflect and can respond to the changing needs of individual pupils.¹
- 2.3. This currently results in somewhat of a postcode lottery, where - for instance - a trans or gender diverse pupil attending a school in

¹ [LGBT rights: Methodist College launches review of uniform rules](#) (BBC News); [Victoria College: Belfast girls school gives pupils trousers option](#) (BBC News)

Belfast which operates a gender neutral uniform policy may feel like their rights and dignity are being upheld and maintained in a manner that a pupil attending a rural school with no such policy may not.

- 2.3.1. Notably, this flexibility and accommodation of trans pupils through uniform policy has no bearing on how individual schools manage toilets and changing facilities for transgender young people, as has been raised during a recent evidence session on this Bill and the proposed amendment.²
- 2.4. This situation is similar when considering uniform cost - many schools have programmes in place designed to support parents and young people in ensuring access to school uniforms on an affordable basis, with some having sought to reduce uniform cost through their suppliers to an acceptable level for families. A family in the catchment area for one specific school which has taken these measures may feel more supported and able to fully engage in education than a family in an area/school without that support.
- 2.5. As such, a more uniform approach across the jurisdiction, ensuring that all pupils have the same rights and choice as all others, regardless of their school or geographical area, would be welcomed and would provide certainty for all pupils as to their rights. This is particularly relevant to provisions and guidelines relating to capping uniform expenses, limiting requirements for school crests/patches on all items of uniform including PE kits, and other methods of cost-saving for families within any future guidelines.
- 2.6. However, these broad regulation-setting powers could also result in a situation whereby the ability of trans and gender diverse pupils to change which uniform they wear could be targeted at any point from the passage of this Bill, by a current or future Education Minister, with limited recourse for schools, affected pupils, parents or elected representatives to challenge this.
- 2.7. From another perspective, guidelines could be produced which further enshrine the ability of all pupils to choose which uniform they wear, giving girls who wish to wear trousers, boys who wish to wear skirts or pinafores, and trans or gender diverse pupils for whom their current uniform feels incongruent with how they wish to present,

² [NI Assembly \(11th June\) - Official Report: Minutes of Evidence](#)

“If an amendment put into legislation the right for girls to wear trousers and boys to wear skirts or summer dresses to school, how should a school proceed if a boy who was wearing a dress, skirt or tunic wanted, for example, to use the girls' bathrooms in the school? Would the boys have a right to do that?”

the ability to do so regardless of the school they attend or the area within which they live.

- 2.8. The Department's own research identified a number of issues affecting LGBTQIA+ pupils' experience in post-primary education. Issues around school uniforms were identified by the vast majority - 65% - of trans participants in the research as a challenge faced by them within education.³ Having flexible, inclusive uniform policies would alleviate this concern for the majority of trans and gender diverse pupils.
- 2.9. The uncertainty, and the potential for these guidelines to change depending on the position of the individual holding the post of Education Minister, creates concerns that trans and gender diverse pupils could have their rights and dignity in school used as a political football, as has been the case in recent months,⁴ rather than taking an approach which values and respects those pupils and their differing needs.

3. Suggested Amendments

- 3.1. We are supportive of the amendment brought by Claire Sugden MLA ensuring that all pupils will have the option of wearing trousers or shorts for PE or related activities.
- 3.2. We would support an expansion of this amendment, or a separate amendment, ensuring that the Bill would enshrine the right of all pupils to choose the uniform style which is most comfortable for them. The text of this amendment could be as follows:
 - 3.2.1. Clause 3, Page 2, Line 34
At end insert -
“(2) Guidelines under this Chapter must include provision requiring all schools to offer every pupil the option of wearing:
(i) shorts of a specific style or styles as part of school uniform for all sporting or leisure activities or occasions;
(ii) trousers of a specific style or styles as part of school uniform on all other occasions, and;
(iii) any specific style or styles of shorts, trousers, skirts, pinafores or other garments offered as part of school uniform, or as part of school uniform for all sporting or leisure activities or occasions.”

³ Department of Education (2017) - [Post-Primary School Experiences of 16-21 Year Old People who are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and/or Transgender](#)

⁴ BBC News (May 2025) - [Education minister urges compliance on Supreme Court gender ruling](#)