

**School Uniforms (Guidelines and Allowances) Bill
May 2025**

**NASUWT evidence to the Northern Ireland Assembly
Committee for Education**

The NASUWT's submission sets out the Union's views on the key issues identified by the Committee in the terms of reference for the Call for Evidence. The NASUWT's evidence is informed directly by serving teacher and headteacher members and also by the work of its representative committees and consultative structures, made up of practising teachers and school leaders working in the education system.

Matt Wrack
Acting General Secretary
northernireland@mail.nasuwt.org.uk
www.nasuwt.org.uk

INTRODUCTION

1. The NASUWT welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the proposed School Uniform (Guidelines and Allowances) Bill.
2. As a UK-wide union, the NASUWT is able to draw on experience from across the four jurisdictions. As such, the Union is aware that it remains routine practice for governments to strongly encourage schools to implement school uniform policies. This is on the grounds that uniforms can instil pride, support positive behaviour and discipline, protect children from social pressures to dress in a particular way, nurture cohesion and promote good relationships between pupils.¹
3. Notwithstanding the direction of governments to continue to advocate for school uniforms, the NASUWT asserts that legislation is an important route to ensuring uniform policies are fit for purpose. For the NASUWT, with regard to the effectiveness of the proposed legislation, this means clear regulation and statutory guidance on affordability of school uniform and equalities considerations, aligned to protected characteristics, clothing and equipment for PE, physical activity and sport.

COST OF UNIFORM

4. While many schools seek to minimise the cost of uniforms, it is clear that the current strategy, based on exhorting schools to behave reasonably, is not fully effective. We therefore welcome the School Uniform (Guidelines and Allowances) Bill as a starting point to address the issues related to unaffordable and unfair uniform requirements.
5. However, the NASUWT would welcome stronger measures within the Bill, making it legally binding for schools to be unable to retain or introduce school uniform policies that put families under unnecessary financial pressure. This may be achievable through the underpinning guidelines that the Department will be required to publish once the Bill is passed.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-uniform/school-uniforms>

6. The NASUWT has long highlighted the cost pressures which overly extensive and detailed uniform policies place on families and carers. Through our engagement work, we know for many parents and carers this places unbearable pressure on them and can also lead to some children not applying for a place at certain schools because they may require a long list of expensive branded school clothing.
7. More broadly, we have also publicly called attention to the growing costs for families associated with supporting their children's education, and the degree to which children's access to educational opportunities is becoming dependent on parents' ability to pay.
8. The NASUWT asserts that school uniform rules should help promote equality and inclusion for all pupils and should not act as a barrier to education.
9. For this reason, the NASUWT welcomed the recent announcement that the UK Government intends to limit the number of branded items schools in England can require to three, under the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill. We would welcome similar clear stipulations from the Northern Ireland Assembly.
10. The Union would also like to see reference to choice within any guidance that underpins the School Uniform (Guidelines and Allowances) Bill. Evidence suggests that uniform is more accessible to all where the uniform chosen is widely available in high street shops and other retail outlets and internet suppliers, rather than from an expensive sole supplier.
11. Published guidance should also make it clear that schools should not seek to operate as sole suppliers in order to raise additional funds through the sale of new school uniforms. Guidance should also make it clear that staff involved in securing deals with suppliers cannot benefit directly or in kind.

12. Many parents report that it is the cost of branded school sports kits which cause most financial hardship. In many schools these kits are renewed on a regular basis and cannot be passed to younger children in the family. There should not be a situation where PE and uniform for sports costs significantly more than the school uniform.

CONSIDERATIONS UNDER COST OF LIVING CRISIS

13. Teachers in Northern Ireland are increasingly seeing the devastating effects of the cost-of-living crisis on pupils, with rising numbers of children and young people coming to school hungry and without the uniform and equipment they need to learn.
14. Teachers have told the Union that they are providing money, food and clothing to help children and families dealing with the deepening cost of living crisis. Fifty-eight per cent of members responding to an NASUWT survey (in September 2022) said more of their pupils were coming to school hungry. Sixty-eight per cent said more pupils did not have the equipment they needed for their lessons and 61% said more of their pupils' families were unable to afford school uniform. Fifty-eight per cent said more pupils were wearing dirty or damaged clothes and two-thirds said more pupils did not have footwear that was appropriate for school.
15. Teachers indicated that the impact of the financial hardship facing families is negatively affecting pupils' behaviour, energy and concentration.
16. Sixty-eight per cent of teachers said they had given food or clothing to their pupils, with a further 46% saying food or clothing had been given by colleagues or their school. A third said they had helped a pupil's family get access to a foodbank. Twenty-eight per cent had lent or given money to pupils and 30% had seen money lent or given to pupils by colleagues or their school.
17. We should not be seeing more and more families who are struggling or unable to feed, clothe or keep a roof over their children's heads. The

financial worry and anxiety that many parents are already experiencing is also being felt by children and is likely to have a negative impact on their education.

18. With respect to the correlation this has to school uniform, what is most important is that pupils are able to come to school in clean, warm, well-fitting clothes which enable them to concentrate on learning: this will most positively impact on their learning and the school's ethos.

EQUALITIES CONSIDERATIONS

19. The NASUWT recognises that there is a growing consensus that impractical and outdated uniform and sports clothing can be a barrier to some children's participation in education. This includes participation in sport, particularly for girls and minority groups.
20. We would welcome a stronger focus in the Bill for schools to give greater consideration for children who have hyper-sensitivities or/and are neurodivergent and can often struggle with textures and labels. This could be added to point 2a under 'particular matters for inclusion in guidelines, which addresses the issue of comfort and practicality of clothing for pupils.
21. This is a further, and compelling reason, why uniform is more accessible to all when it can be chosen from high street shops and other retailers and suppliers; as this gives many more options to those children who feel uncomfortable in certain fabrics or uniform designs.

USE OF EXCLUSION AS A COMPLIANCE MEASURE

22. The NASUWT has raised concerns previously about exclusion being used as a compliance measure for pupils to adhere to uniform policies. We therefore welcomed the inclusion in statutory guidance from the DfE that 'In cases where it is suspected that financial hardship has resulted in a pupil not complying with a school's published uniform

policy, we would expect schools to take a mindful and considerate approach to resolve the situation.'

23. The union is calling for the Committee for Education to follow this lead and include measures in the Bill to ensure no school can exclude pupils where cost of school uniform has prohibited a pupil from following guidelines.

For further information on the Union's response, contact:

Justin McCamphill
National Official
NASUWT Northern Ireland
Ben Madigan House
Edgewater Office Park
Edgewater Road
Belfast BT3 9JQ

028 9078 4480