Northern Ireland Assembly

Ad Hoc Committee on the School Uniforms (Trousers) Bill

Report on the School Uniforms (Trousers) Bill

Ordered by the Ad Hoc Committee on the School Uniforms (Trousers) Bill to be published 6 October 2026

Report: NIA 193/22-27 Ad Hoc Committee on the School Uniforms (Trousers) Bill

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Powers and Membership

Powers

Under Standing Order 53 ad hoc committees shall be established from time to time to deal with any specific time-bounded terms of reference that the Assembly may set. The Assembly shall decide the membership of any such committee and may direct its method of operation.

The Ad Hoc Committee on the School Uniforms (Trousers) Bill ('the Committee') was established by resolution of the Assembly on Tuesday 30 June 2026 in accordance with Standing Order 53(1).

The remit of the Committee is to consider the School Uniforms (Trousers) Bill ('the Bill') and to submit a report to the Assembly by 7 October 2026.

Each ad hoc committee may exercise the power in section 44(1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 as follows:

"(1) The Assembly may require any person—

(a) to attend its proceedings for the purpose of giving evidence; or

(b) to produce documents in his custody or under his control, relating to any of the matters mentioned in subsection (2).

(2) Those matters are—

(a) transferred matters concerning Northern Ireland;

(b) other matters in relation to which statutory functions are exercisable by Ministers or the Northern Ireland departments."

Membership

The Committee has seven members, including a Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson, and a quorum of five members. The membership of the Committee is as follows:

- Ms Aoife Finnegan MLA (Chairperson)
- Ms Pam Cameron MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
- Ms Deborah Erskine MLA
- Ms Sinéad McLaughlin MLA
- Mr Andrew McMurray MLA
- Ms Emma Sheerin MLA
- Mr John Stewart MLA[1]

[1] With effect from 10 September 2026, Mr John Stewart MLA replaced Mr Robbie Butler MLA as a member of the Committee.

Executive Summary

1. This report sets out the consideration of the School Uniforms (Trousers) Bill by the Ad Hoc Committee on the School Uniforms (Trousers) Bill.

2. The purpose of the Bill is to permit all pupils to wear trousers as part of their school uniform.

3. Evidence from individuals and organisations indicated very strong support for the Bill. Key themes such as equality and non-discrimination were highlighted, as well as benefits which the Bill would bring for girls, such as improved comfort, wellbeing, dignity, safety, and participation in school activities.

4. The Committee considered various issues raised in the evidence, including that certain schools should be exempt from the requirements of the Bill; that the change should be implemented sooner; and that the term ‘leg coverings’ could be open to interpretation.

5. Following its consideration of all the evidence received, the Committee concluded that it was content with all the Clauses of the Bill as drafted.

The School Uniforms (Trousers) Bill

6. The School Uniforms (Trousers) Bill (NIA Bill 40/22-27) was introduced to the Assembly on 22 June 2026 by the Chairperson of the Committee for Education (the Bill Sponsor), Nick Mathison MLA. In accordance with Standing Order 30, the Chairperson made the following statement:

> "*In my view the School Uniforms (Trousers) Bill would be within the legislative competence of the Northern Ireland Assembly".*

7. The Bill contains five clauses. Its stated purpose is to permit all pupils to wear trousers as part of their school uniform.

Committee Approach

8. On 30 June 2026, the Bill passed its Second Stage and was referred to the Ad Hoc Committee on the School Uniforms (Trousers) Bill for Committee Stage scrutiny with a reporting date of 7 October 2026.

9. The Committee considered the Bill at six meetings. The minutes of proceedings of these meetings can be found at Appendix 1.

10. At its first meeting on 2 July 2026, the Committee considered the Bill and the accompanying Explanatory and Financial Memorandum.

11. At the same meeting, the Committee agreed to undertake a public consultation on the Bill and launched a Citizen Space survey, with a closing date of 23 August 2026. The Committee also agreed to issue a targeted call for evidence to a range of key stakeholders. The stakeholders were identified by the Assembly's Research and Information Service (RaISe) - the list of stakeholders can be found at Appendix 4. In addition, the Committee asked RaISe to identify further organisations representing parents and invited those organisations - the Parent Participation Service (part of Children in Northern Ireland) and Parents for Inclusive Education - to participate in the call for evidence. The Committee also agreed to arrange oral evidence sessions with the Bill Sponsor, the

Department of Education ('the Department') and the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly ('the Youth Assembly').

12. The Committee received a total of 1531 submissions to its consultation. Of these, 1520 submissions were received through Citizen Space and 11 responses were received by email. Ten submissions were received from schools, and 21 submissions were received from organisations, including 12 organisations which had been included in the Committee's targeted call for evidence. A summary report of the Citizen Space survey, a compilation of the comments submitted through Citizen Space, and the written submissions received from organisations and schools are included at Appendix 3.

13. At its meeting on 8 September 2026, the Committee received a briefing from the Bill Clerk on procedural matters. The Committee also heard oral evidence from the Bill Sponsor (represented by the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Education), and considered the written evidence it had submitted. The minutes of evidence are at Appendix 2 and the written evidence is at Appendix 3.

14. At that meeting, the Committee considered the written evidence received in response to its public consultation and noted both the significant volume and range of responses. Further, the Committee noted that oral evidence sessions had been scheduled with the Youth Assembly and the Department of Education.

15. Taking into account the written evidence received and the scheduled oral evidence sessions, the Committee was satisfied that sufficient evidence was available to inform its scrutiny of the Bill and therefore agreed not to seek an extension to Committee Stage as provided for in Assembly Standing Orders.

16. At this meeting, the Committee also noted a research paper on the Bill prepared by RaISe and a Convention Rights Memorandum provided by Assembly Legal Services. These documents are included at Appendix 4.

17. At its meeting on 15 September 2026, the Committee heard oral evidence from the Youth Assembly and the Department of Education. The minutes of these

evidence sessions are included at Appendix 2. The Committee also considered a report from the Youth Assembly and written evidence from the Department, which are included at Appendix 3.

18. At this meeting, the Committee noted that, on 11 September 2026, the Minister of Education had announced that he had issued revised school uniforms guidelines requiring all schools to offer girls the option to wear trousers as part of their uniform, including for PE and games, from the 2027/28 academic year. The Youth Assembly commented on this during its oral evidence session, stating that it was strongly of the view that the right of all pupils to wear trousers as part of their school uniform should be enshrined in primary legislation.

19. Following its consideration of the evidence, the Committee agreed to write to the Bill Sponsor to seek views on the Department's written evidence. In light of the Minister's revision of the guidelines, the Committee also asked whether the Bill Sponsor intended to proceed with the Bill to enshrine the provision in primary legislation, and highlighted the view of the Youth Assembly on this matter.

20. At its meeting on 22 September 2026, the Committee considered the Bill Sponsor's response and noted the intention to proceed with the legislative passage of the Bill. The Committee also received a further briefing from the Bill Clerk on drafting and procedural matters. The Committee then deliberated on all the evidence received.

21. At its meeting on 29 September 2026, the Committee undertook its formal clause-by-clause scrutiny of the Bill.

22. At its meeting on 6 October 2026, the Committee agreed its report and that it should be published.

Consideration of the Bill

23. In response to its call for evidence, the Committee received 1520 responses via Citizen Space and 11 written submissions via email. The Committee also heard oral evidence from the Bill Sponsor, the Youth Assembly, and the Department of Education.

24. This section of the report provides a summary of the evidence considered by the Committee. The evidence received on each clause, and on wider issues raised in the call for evidence, is not rehearsed in this section of the report. A complete picture of the written and oral evidence received can be found in Appendices 2 and 3.

25. A summary report of the Citizen Space survey, including a demographic breakdown of the respondents, and a compilation of the comments submitted, can be found at Appendix 3. The vast majority (97.3%) of respondents to the Committee's Citizen Space survey agreed with the purpose of the Bill. The survey also gathered views on the main clauses of the Bill, its potential benefits, and possible unintended consequences.

Clause 1: Trousers as part of school uniform for all pupils

26. Clause 1 amends the School Uniforms (Guidelines and Allowances) Act ('the 2026 Act'). It creates a statutory right for all pupils to be able to wear trousers as part of their school uniform and sets out additional requirements for the guidelines on school uniforms which the Department is obliged to issue under the 2026 Act. The guidelines must include provision *"implementing and giving full effect to the right of all pupils to wear trousers, as part of their school uniform, and permitting all pupils to wear trousers, shorts or other leg coverings, whilst taking part in recreational, sporting or outdoor activities, as appropriate for that activity, as part of their school uniform".*

27. There was significant support among organisations and individuals responding to the consultation for the right for all pupils to be able to wear trousers. Support centred around giving pupils greater choice over what they wear, with many

arguing that the ability to choose trousers would improve comfort, equality, confidence, dignity, and participation in school activities. Personal experiences were frequently cited, particularly in relation to menstruation, body confidence, sensory sensitivities, and discomfort associated with skirts. Many felt that providing a statutory right to wear trousers would promote fairness and inclusion and remove an unnecessary restriction on pupils.

28. A large majority (91.45%) of respondents to the Citizen Space survey stated that they believe Clause 1 would have all the anticipated effects (as set out in the Explanatory and Financial Memorandum, for example, that it would reduce upskirting, provide greater comfort and dignity for girls, and increase their participation in activities). A further 6.12% stated that they believe Clause 1 would have some of the anticipated effects – some respondents highlighted that wider issues such as safeguarding and educational attainment cannot be resolved by uniform changes alone.

29. In its oral evidence, the Youth Assembly told the Committee: "*Across different pieces of research, different groups of young people and at different points in time we heard the same message, namely that young people want a consistent right for all pupils to choose the uniform option that best meets their needs…for young people, this is about much more than trousers: it is about comfort, confidence, dignity and participation in school life*".

30. In oral evidence, the Chairperson of the Committee for Education commented on the evidence it had considered on school uniforms and the 2026 Act: "*Every single youth organisation and young person who presented to the Committee referenced the issue of girls not being allowed to wear trousers. Some framed it around gender-neutrality, but the vast majority referred to issues to do with period dignity and girls feeling able to travel actively to school: on a bike, for example. All the issues concerning upskirting and so on were raised. I could list examples all day long. It was also about basic comfort. The evidence was unanimous".*

31. In written evidence, Children in Northern Ireland stated, "*At its heart, this is a simple children's rights issue: children and young people should not be denied*

a reasonable choice about what they wear to school where that choice affects their dignity, comfort, privacy and ability to participate fully in school life". Other organisations, such as the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, the Women's Regional Consortium, and the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission also commented on the Bill in the context of rights, and highlighted potential benefits such as equality, dignity, safety and privacy.

32. There was a mixed response from the schools which responded to the consultation. Four were supportive of the purpose of the Bill and stated that it would have all the anticipated effects. Six schools disagreed with the purpose of the Bill. Some argued that decisions about school uniforms should remain with individual schools and an exemption was requested for certain schools where compliance could conflict with their religious ethos and beliefs.

33. The Chairperson of the Committee for Education addressed this point in oral evidence to the Committee, stating, "*On the question of whether there should be any exemption to that right, 91.85% of respondents said that no school should be left out of the provisions, which should cover all schools in Northern Ireland. Taken along with the legal and human rights advice that we received, that response therefore influenced the Committee in deciding against any exemption on any grounds…we decided against including an exemption, on the basis that the Bill offers a choice rather than adopts a prescriptive approach"*.

34. In written evidence, the Catholic Schools' Trustee Service commented that the wording "*trousers, shorts or other leg coverings…as appropriate for that activity*" could be open to interpretation (but noted that this could be clarified in the departmental guidelines) and suggested that issues could arise where sports have specific clothing requirements for competitions. In its oral evidence, the Department also said it considered the term 'leg coverings' "*to be open to misinterpretation, not least if a pupil decided that jeans, leg warmers or tights, for example, could constitute leg coverings…it would be better if the Bill were to state that guidelines should include provision for school uniform policies to include options allowing all pupils to wear trousers, insofar as is appropriate by reference to any subjects that they might be undertaking. Using language that*

is open to interpretation creates risks of unintended consequences, particularly for schools".

35. The Department also raised some concerns about the technical drafting and structure of this clause.

36. The Committee asked the Bill Sponsor to comment on the Department's written evidence. The Bill Sponsor's response is included at Appendix 4. The Committee considered the Bill Sponsor's rationale for drafting Clause 1 in this manner, including its aim to ensure the accessibility of the measure, to remove ambiguity, and to create a legal right and direct route to justiciability.

37. In considering this matter, the Committee also noted that the Minister of Education can table amendments to address any technical or drafting concerns in the later stages of the Bill's passage.

38. Following consideration of the use of the term 'leg coverings', the Committee noted that this is intended to cover a range of garments and ensure that the Bill is sufficiently flexible in the future: the terminology used is intended to be inclusive not exhaustive. The Committee noted the qualifying term in the Bill, '*as appropriate*', the Department's duty to interpret the legislation 'reasonably', and that further details and clarity can be provided in the uniforms guidelines issued by the Department. The Committee therefore agreed, when it shares the report with the Minister, to draw this matter to his attention, asking him to ensure that the guidelines continue to reflect that a variety of appropriate garments may be worn for recreational, sporting or outdoor activities.

39. Having considered all the oral and written evidence in relation to Clause 1, the Committee had no further issues to raise.

Clause 2: Publication of Guidelines

40. The 2026 Act already obliges the Department to lay the guidelines on school uniforms before the Assembly. Clause 2 of the Bill obliges the Department to also publish those guidelines.

41. A large majority (89.34%) of respondents to the Citizen Space survey agreed or strongly agreed that it is appropriate for the Department to publish its guidelines. A small number of respondents (1.78%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with provision; and 8.88% were neutral or said they did not know. Those individuals and organisations who were in favour expressed the view that publication would improve transparency and accountability, and provide clarity. It was also suggested by some that publication would improve awareness of rights and ensure consistent implementation across schools.

42. In its written evidence, the Department highlighted that it considers this provision in the Bill to be "unnecessary" because the guidelines are normally published and issued through a link to the publication.

43. Having considered all the oral and written evidence in relation to Clause 2, the Committee had no further issues to raise.

Clauses 3 and 4: Transitional arrangements and Commencement

44. Clause 3 requires the current school uniforms guidelines to be updated to take into account these new rules by 1 August 2027. Clause 4 contains the commencement provisions (Clause 1 comes into operation on 1 August 2027, and the rest of the Bill comes into operation the day after Royal Assent).

45. The prevailing view of those commenting on the implementation date of the legislation was that the timeframe is too long, with many respondents arguing that the changes should take effect immediately or much sooner. In its written evidence, UNISON suggested that the revised guidelines should be published by 1 June 2027 rather than 1 August 2027, to give schools and parents more time to prepare.

46. Other respondents considered it a reasonable and proportionate implementation period, noting that sufficient time is required to update guidance, communicate changes, review policies, engage stakeholders and make practical arrangements before the new requirements come into effect. For example, schools would need an adequate lead-in period because they may already have contracts and procurement arrangements in place.

47. These competing priorities were reflected by the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Education: *"We want the provisions to be implemented as quickly as possible, but we understand that there are practical difficulties with doing so…We took advice from the Bill Office and others about what was a reasonable date to suggest, and 1 August 2027 was the one on which we landed*."

48. In written evidence, the Department stated that it considers the sequencing of the clauses to be "complicated and confusing", suggesting "*the whole Bill should go live on commencement and…any transitional provisions are capable of being addressed through the powers in the Act as made*".

49. Having considered all the oral and written evidence, the Committee had no further issues to raise in relation to Clauses 3 and 4, noting that the Minister of Education can table amendments to address any technical or drafting concerns in the later stages of the Bill.

Clause 5: Short title

50. This clause provides for the Bill's short title.

51. Having considered the evidence, the Committee had no issues to raise in relation to Clause 5.

Clause-by-Clause Scrutiny of the Bill

52. The Committee conducted its deliberations on all the written and oral evidence received on the Bill at its meeting on 22 September 2026. The Committee supported all the clauses of the Bill. The previous section of this report outlines the Committee's deliberations on the evidence received and provides the context for the conclusions reached.

53. The Committee undertook its formal clause-by-clause scrutiny at its meeting on 29 September 2026. The minutes of proceedings which record the Committee's clause-by-clause scrutiny are at Appendix 1.

Clause 1: Trousers as part of school uniform for all pupils

54. **Agreed**: The Committee is content with Clause 1 as drafted.

Clause 2: Publication of guidelines

55. **Agreed**: The Committee is content with Clause 2 as drafted.

Clause 3: Transitional arrangements

56. **Agreed**: The Committee is content with Clause 3 as drafted.

Clause 4: Commencement

57. **Agreed**: The Committee is content with Clause 4 as drafted.

Clause 5: Short title

58. **Agreed**: The Committee is content with Clause 5 as drafted.

Long Title

59. **Agreed**: The Committee is content with the Long Title of the Bill as drafted.

Links to Appendices

Appendix 1: Minutes of Proceedings

View Minutes of Proceedings of Committee meetings related to the report

Appendix 2: Minutes of Evidence

View all Minutes of Evidence related to the report

- Minutes of Evidence – Bill Sponsor (the Committee for Education) – 8 September 2026
- Minutes of Evidence – Northern Ireland Youth Assembly – 15 September 2026
- Minutes of Evidence – Department of Education – 15 September 2026

Appendix 3: Written Submissions

View all written submissions received in relation to the report

- Citizen Space summary report and comments
- Belfast City Youth Council
- Bill Sponsor (Committee for Education)
- Catholic Schools' Trustee Service (CSTS)
- Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI)
- Department of Education
- Drumellan Community Association
- Focus Project School Uniform Scheme, Creggan Enterprises
- Foyle Women's Information Network
- Home-Start Down District
- Mid and East Antrim Pride Community Organisation
- Mid Ulster District Council
- Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY)
- Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE)
- Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC)
- Northern Ireland Youth Assembly

- RISE NI Speech and Language Therapist (schools)
- School 1
- School 2
- School 3
- School 4
- School 5
- School 6
- School 7
- School 8
- School 9
- School 10
- Schoolwear Association
- Submissions from individuals via email
- Women's Regional Consortium
- Through Her Eyes
- UNISON
- Western Health and Social Care Trust (WHSCT)
- Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA)
- Youth Service

Appendix 4: Correspondence and Other Papers

- RaISe list of key stakeholders
- RaISe briefing paper on the School Uniforms (Trousers) Bill
- Response from the Bill Sponsor – 22 September 2026
- Convention Rights Memorandum

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