



Response to

School Uniforms (Trousers) Bill

August 2026

1.0 INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

UNISON is the leading trade union in Northern Ireland representing 52,000 members and is the largest trade union in the UK with over 1.3 million members. Our membership includes public service workers in health and social care; the education and higher education services; the library service; local government; youth justice; private companies providing public services; and the community and voluntary sector. 80% of our membership in Northern Ireland are women.

In relation to education, UNISON not only seeks to protect and promote the rights of our members, but we also advocate for the rights of children to a high-quality education which develops their personality, talents, and abilities to the fullest, in line with the standards set under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

2.0 GENERAL COMMENTS

UNISON firmly believe in providing education to all children in a wholly accessible way and so we support measures from The Department that address the financial impediments to a child accessing education. This included our support, in principle, for the The School Uniforms (Guidelines and Allowances) Act (Northern Ireland) 2026. However, we were deeply disappointed that a provision was not made within this Act to allow all pupils the choice of wearing trousers. We therefore welcome the work of the Ad Hoc Committee on the School Uniforms (Trousers) Bill and the consultation on this Bill to afford all pupils that choice.

UNISON welcomes the School Uniforms (Trousers) Bill and strongly supports its objective of establishing a statutory right for all pupils to wear trousers as part of their school uniform.

The Bill is a straightforward and proportionate measure that would ensure that a pupil's ability to wear trousers is not dependent upon the uniform policy of the individual school they attend. The principle that all pupils should have this choice is one of equality, dignity, comfort and personal autonomy.

UNISON is particularly concerned that school uniform policies should be developed and implemented in a way that recognises the needs and experiences of children and young people. Uniform policies should support pupils to participate fully in education rather than imposing unnecessary restrictions on them.

We note that the Bill follows extensive consideration of the issue by the Committee for Education and that the overwhelming majority of respondents to the Committee's earlier consultation supported the principle of a universal right for pupils to wear trousers.¹

¹ <https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/legislation/2022-2027-mandate/primary-legislation-bills-22-27-mandate/school-uniforms-trousers-bill/efm---as-introduced/>

3.0 RESPONSE TO CONSULTATION

Clause 1

UNISON strongly supports Clause 1. The provision would establish a statutory right for all pupils to wear trousers as part of their school uniform. It would also require the Department of Education's guidelines to give full effect to this right and to permit appropriate leg coverings, including trousers and shorts, for recreational, sporting and outdoor activities. This is important to ensure consistency and equality across schools. A pupil should not have fewer choices about their school uniform simply because of the school they attend.

We firmly believe that school uniform policies should not be gendered. Policies that mandate different uniform options according to gender can reinforce gender stereotypes and create unnecessary barriers for pupils. The right to wear trousers should therefore apply universally. A school uniform policy should be centred around dignity, comfort, autonomy and the needs of the pupil rather than the control of the school.

Comfort should be a key consideration in school uniform policy. Pupils spend a substantial amount of time in school and should be able to wear clothing that allows them to learn, move and participate comfortably. For many pupils, trousers will be more comfortable and practical than skirts. This may be particularly important during their period when participating in physical activity, during colder weather, or simply because of an individual pupil's personal preference. The ability to choose trousers can also give

pupils greater confidence and agency over how they present themselves during their formative years.

Allowing pupils to wear trousers may reduce the opportunity for upskirting and may therefore provide an additional benefit in terms of pupils' safety and dignity.

However, UNISON strongly emphasises that preventing upskirting is never the responsibility of the pupil or dependent upon how a pupil chooses to dress. Responsibility for preventing sexual harassment and abuse rests with those who perpetrate it and with the systems and institutions responsible for safeguarding children. Age-appropriate and inclusive, scientifically accurate RSE is essential to ensuring that pupils understand consent, bodily autonomy, sexual harassment and respect for others.

Inclusion and individual needs

Uniform policies should accommodate the individual requirements of pupils. This should include consideration of a pupils sensory needs, particularly for those with special educational needs, the requirements of pupils with disabilities, the needs of pupils participation in sports and physical activities and reasonable cultural considerations for pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds. A uniform policy should not create unnecessary barriers to participation for pupils with different physical, sensory, cultural or personal needs.

Non-intrusive uniform policies

UNISON believes that school uniform policies should be as non-intrusive as possible. Uniform policies should take account of weather and temperature. Pupils should not be prevented from keeping warm in winter or appropriately cool in warmer weather because of unnecessarily rigid uniform requirements. Allowing all pupils the option to wear trousers would allow for this. The overall principle should be that uniform requirements are proportionate, practical and genuinely connected to the purpose of a school uniform. Not to control what clothing a pupil, mostly girls, has to wear.

Clause 2

UNISON supports Clause 2. The Department of Education should be required to publish its school uniform guidelines so that pupils, parents and carers, schools, governors and other stakeholders can clearly understand the requirements that apply. Transparency is particularly important where guidelines contain statutory requirements for schools. The publication of guidelines should be accompanied by clear communication to schools and families so that there is a shared understanding of the new requirements.

Clause 3

UNISON supports the principle of updating the existing guidelines but believes that the proposed deadline of 1 August 2027 should be changed to 1 June 2027. The Bill currently requires the existing guidelines to be revised and reissued by 1 August 2027, with the substantive right to wear trousers commencing on the same date.

It is disappointing that the right will not be in place for the 2026–27 academic year. Given that the purpose of the Bill is to establish a straightforward and universal right, there is no reason for implementation to be delayed beyond what is necessary. The guidelines should therefore be updated by 1 June 2027 at the latest.

This would allow schools sufficient time to review and amend their uniform policies before the end of the academic year and would give parents and carers sufficient time to plan for and purchase uniform for the following academic year where necessary. As many schools and parents make arrangements and purchases of uniforms early in the summer break, sometimes even before the end of the academic year, a deadline of 1st August 2027 may mean that some pupils are unable to avail of the new guidelines.

An earlier publication date would also give schools greater certainty and allow the requirements of the Bill to be communicated properly to pupils, parents and staff.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, UNISON strongly supports the School Uniforms (Trousers) Bill and its objective of establishing a statutory right for all pupils to wear trousers as part of their school uniform. We believe this is a straightforward and proportionate measure that would promote equality, dignity, comfort and personal autonomy, while ensuring that uniform policies support rather than restrict pupils' full participation in education. Given the extensive consideration of this issue and the strong public support for a universal right to wear trousers, UNISON urges the Committee to support the Bill and ensure that all pupils have this choice.

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