

Advice to Government: The School Uniforms (Trousers) Bill

Introduction

The Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) was created in accordance with ‘The Commissioner for Children and Young People (Northern Ireland) Order’ (2003) to safeguard and promote the rights and best interests of children and young people in Northern Ireland. Under Articles 7(2) and (3) of this legislation, NICCY has a mandate to keep under review the adequacy and effectiveness of law, practice and services relating to the rights and best interests of children and young people by relevant authorities. Under Article 7(4), NICCY has a statutory duty to advise any relevant authority on matters concerning the rights or best interests of children and young persons. The Commissioner’s remit includes children and young people up to 18 years, or 21 years if the young person is disabled or is care experienced.

In carrying out his functions, the Commissioner’s paramount consideration is the rights of the child or young person, having particular regard to their wishes and feelings. In exercising his functions, the Commissioner has regard to all relevant provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

Children’s rights

There are several key Articles of the UNCRC relevant to this proposed Bill including provisions aiming to ensure that children are provided with basic necessities to support their growth and development, health, and access to education. There are several key Articles of the UNCRC relevant to the purpose of this Bill including provisions aiming to ensure that children are provided with basic necessities to support their growth and development, health, and access to education, summarised as follows:

- Article 2: All rights apply to all children without discrimination;
- Article 3: Best interests of the child;
- Article 12: Children’s right to have a say in decisions affecting them;
- Article 13: Right to freedom of expression;
- Article 16: Right to privacy;
- Article 27: Right to an adequate standard of living;
- Article 28: Right to education;
- Article 29: On the goals of education; and
- Article 31: Right to relax and play.

In the 2023 Concluding Observations, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, in its review of the UK Government’s periodic report, noted with concern continued inequalities in educational outcomes, and that children’s views were not systematically taken into account in national and local decision-making.¹ The Committee

¹ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, ‘Concluding Observations on the combined 6th and 7th periodic reports of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland’ (2023) (Available at:

recommended that both these issues should be remedied. The earlier consultation and ongoing legislative development process provided an important opportunity to ensure that school uniform policies prioritise children's rights and best interests, in ensuring uniforms meet the needs of children, are affordable, and that children and their parents/carers are involved in decision-making on this matter.

NICCY also wishes to draw the Ad Hoc Committee's attention to the drafting a new Optional Protocol that guarantees every child the right to free early childhood, pre-primary, and secondary education by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. It seeks to build on the rights enshrined in the UNCRC which currently ensures free and compulsory primary education. The new Optional Protocol will recognise the need for comprehensive education from early childhood to secondary school, recognising that primary education alone is insufficient in today's world.²

We recommend that in considering this short Bill, and its purpose, that the Ad Hoc Committee take a child's rights approach.

School Uniforms (Trousers) Bill

NICCY welcomes the further opportunity to provide written evidence to the Ad Hoc Committee on the School Uniforms (Trousers) Bill (the Bill) and has previously provided advice to government on this matter for many years. A copy of NICCY's more recent submissions to the Committee of Education on the School Uniforms (Guidelines and Allowances) Bill (now Act) is available [here](#), and to the Department of Education's consultation on School Uniform Policy, [here](#). NICCY responded to the Committee of Education's call for evidence survey on this proposed legislation in February 2026 and can issue the Ad Hoc Committee a full copy of the answers should the members find it of assistance.

Our 'Children and Young People's advice to government' briefing, available [here](#), which was submitted to the Committee of Education in 2025, should be read alongside this, highlighting further key areas for the Committee from our Youth Panel members to consider. It also contained feedback from youth engagement from our Road to Rights Tour in November 2024, and from ongoing discussions with primary school pupils and parents on uniforms that have been had with the Commissioner. In November 2025, the Youth Panel published their 'Right Way Forward' report, making rights-based recommendations to government on key issues affecting them. School uniforms were raised under a number of themes, including on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls, period dignity, the cost of living and providing uniforms and required PE kits,

[Concluding observations on the combined 6th and 7th periodic reports of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland](#) :, accessed on 8/7/26)

² Available at: [4th Optional Protocol to the UNCRC on Free Public Pre-primary and Secondary Education – Child Rights Connect](#), accessed on 8.7.26

barriers to participating in sports, and the need for them to be able to participate in their education across all schools consistently, including on uniform policy.³

We encourage the Committee to continue to engage directly with children and young people as part of their legislative development process and welcome their engagement and facilitation to date. NICCY has also circulated the Ad Hoc Committee's call for evidence to our Youth Panel members for their responses.

In responding to this Committee Stage call for evidence, we do not wish to repeat points that have been made, as our previous comments stand including those made at the evidence session hosted on the 4th March 2026. Whilst we were disappointed that it was not possible to secure this change as part of the now School Uniforms Act 2025 or within guidance, we do welcome the Bill being introduced by the Committee of Education and getting to this stage. NICCY hopes that it will be possible for this Bill to become an Act and receive Royal Assent before the end of the Assembly mandate in 2027, therefore being implemented in time for the start of the next school year.

Views of children and young people

In responding to the Committee's survey on girls wearing trousers in school, our Youth Panel submitted a number of comments which have previously been provided to the Committee of Education, which we consider important to issue to the Ad Hoc Committee.

In relation to the table provided in the call for evidence survey, and to the question over the existence of 'stigma or judgement' associated with girls wearing trousers. Ten members provided a response, and their comments have been provided for the Committee below:

"I think because traditionally, skirts are seen as the 'normal' or expected option for girls, so when someone chooses trousers, it can make them stand out a little bit. People sometimes read way too much into that choice [and] form unnecessary opinions. At the same time, things are changing and more schools are normalising trousers for everyone, and younger students especially tend to care less. But the fact this is even a discussion shows that the stigma hasn't fully disappeared yet."

"I think also at the moment because rules are different in each school because in a lot of schools you have to ask for permission to wear trousers some people might also be afraid that they would 'stand out' in school if most other girls wore skirts, young people should feel comfortable in school no matter what uniform they choose to wear."

"I find that I see lots of bullying of girls that choose to wear trousers rather than skirts as it is seen as abnormal so in my school some girls prefer to wear plain

³ NICCY Youth Panel, 'The Right Way Forward: A Rights-Based Perspective to Improving the Lives of Children and Young People in NI' (2025) (Available at: [The-Right-Way-Forward.pdf](#), accessed on 8.7.6)

black leggings instead however they are put in isolation and giving a detention as punishment just because they refused to be bullied or be in a skirt and I had overheard a member of staff saying to a pupil that the bullying is not their fault and the pupil had it coming. I feel that this is an important part and needs to change.”

“I think the fact that school uniforms are so stiff and hard to move in and are expensive are a part of the problem. Because why do kids who are meant to have a right to education have to pay above a £100 just to wear an uncomfortable out of date uniform. Schools could very easily have kids wear something similar to a primary school uniform (slightly more stylish of course) while being a lot cheaper and simpler to produce. This would also help with accessibility for those with sensory issues.”

“Skirts are traditionally a more feminine thing, and nowadays girls are often looked at weird for doing something as simple as not following society's stereotypes or fitting in with all the others wearing skirts.”

“This was something I noticed happening in my secondary school, not often, but enough. Also, my sister has to wear trousers due to her disabilities, and when she was in a mainstream primary there were a lot of (often rude or unnecessary) questions from adults about the reasons why. For her and a lot of other people this is/could be a very important and viable option to make school easier to cope with (if the current uniform results in sensory issues) or accessibility and practicality (for accessing bathrooms, or for some diabetic people it might make the insulin pumps easier to work with etc). And slightly off topic, but to me there is also the additional fact that you have to teach young girls soon much far too soon about how people can be inappropriate. That shouldn't be a concern for a 5-year-old just trying to play and learn.”

“Because people who don't agree with LGBT even though it's not got anything to do with it start bullying!”

“There's an automatic assumption that you're LGBTQ+ for being more comfortable in trousers, and with that comes cruel and unnecessary comments and judgey behaviour, which is not only unacceptable even if you were part of that community, but totally unfounded and irrelevant.”

“I have known people to wear trousers in school for various reasons. The standing fact is that it makes us no different in what we wear. The automatic assumption about being part of the LGBTQ+ community is totally absurd and is definitely something that needs to be addressed by staff. Nobody knows why you need to wear trousers (or has the right to know)...it could be due to disability or sensory issues which is totally acceptable. The fact that these types of people are more susceptible to bullying makes me worry that staff aren't doing enough inside the school to prevent this.”

“I think a fair place to start is to establish whether I believe it is right for schools to mandate gendered uniforms. In short, no. The long version of the answer is that I believe that all norms are inherently constrictive and therefore have a negative starting point to their evaluation and need to be justified over and above this restriction’s cost, to be supported. An example of this might be the norm of using cutlery, it is a thing we teach to children and socially enforce because it promotes hygiene, which is sufficient justification for its existence, which is also relatively low cost.

Returning to uniform, there is a downside to this in excess of the usual considerations of any norm, in that there are issues surrounding gender identity, up skirting, considerations about fabric feel and simply weather, amongst many others. On the other hand, it is not obvious to me that there is any significant upside to this norm- let alone enforcing it with rules.

Furthermore, it is possible that an objection might be raised that we should leave it to individual institutions to decide- a favourite line of argument for those running out of legitimate reasons. I think this can be fairly easily dismissed by recognising that all schools in Northern Ireland receive public funding without exception, and therefore we are perfectly justified in intervening by way of legislation to put a stop to what I view as a harmful practice.

There is nothing about a piece of clothing that makes it inherently for anybody- and it is entirely the responsibility of the individual to decide what they choose to wear, and they had ought to be provided with the opportunity to do so. If anybody can wear it, anybody can wear it. In summary:

- There is no benefit to mandating gendered uniforms*
- There are many downsides, such as identity, up skirting, fabric feel and comfort in different weather conditions*
- We have a duty to prevent harmful policies in institutions which are funded by the state.”*

As previously advised, in discussions with our NYP members, we reflected on the fact that the term ‘uniform’ highlights the primary goal of standardising the clothing that children wear to school. While this can ensure that all children attend school on an equal basis, particularly in relation to economic status, it is important that school leaders and Boards of Governors recognise that there is no standard child, and that children are individuals, and can have different needs. School uniform policies should reflect this and be sufficiently flexible, both in the drafting and application, to meet the best interests of all children attending the school or those potentially attending the school in the future.

The Committee should also be aware of two inspiring young people who presented to the Committee of Education on two occasions relating to this matter, and NICCY encourages the Ad Hoc Committee members to fully consider their evidence and

advice. Rhea Donnell and Astrid Knox ran a successful campaign for girls to wear trousers as part of their uniforms in Fermanagh, winning the Youth Community Award for their work in 2025. Recordings of their Committee sessions, the first in June 2025 are available [here](#), and the second on the 4th March 2026, available [here](#).

Conclusion

Every child should feel comfortable in their school uniform if they have one, and be able to have a choice over items, and wear trousers no matter what gender. Children and young people have been clear on their views and we encourage the Committee to ensure that these are taken on board. NICCY therefore fully supports the stated purpose of this Bill.

Should the Ad Hoc Committee require any further detail to assist with the scrutiny of this Bill, please do not hesitate to [REDACTED]