

Submitted to School Uniforms (Trousers) Bill
Submitted on 2026-08-11 11:16:34

Introduction

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3 What is your name?

Name:

[REDACTED]

4 What is your email address?

Email:

[REDACTED]

5 Are you responding as:

Another organisation - please provide details.

Please provide further details here, if relevant.:

Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI)

6 What is your gender?

Male

Purpose of the Bill

7 Do you agree with the purpose of the Bill?

Yes

Do you have any further comments?:

CiNI supports the principle of the School Uniforms (Trousers) Bill. 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.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child requires that children's best interests are a primary consideration in decisions affecting them (Article 3), that their views are given due weight (Article 12), and that their rights are secured without discrimination (Article 2). The Convention also protects children's privacy and dignity and their right to participate fully in education.

The evidence heard during the development of the Bill is particularly important. Girls and young women have described how compulsory skirts can affect their comfort, confidence and freedom of movement, including during menstruation, active play, outdoor learning and travel to school. Where children themselves identify a straightforward way of removing these barriers, their views should carry significant weight.

CiNI does not regard this as an argument against school uniform or school identity. Schools can retain a uniform while ensuring that the choices within it do not unnecessarily restrict children because of their sex. Nor should a child in Northern Ireland have to campaign within their own school for a basic, reasonable accommodation that is routinely available to pupils in other jurisdictions.

The Bill therefore establishes an important principle: the interests and dignity of the child should take precedence over tradition or convention where no compelling justification exists for restricting their choice.

Giving every pupil the right to wear trousers is a modest intervention, but for those currently denied that choice it can have a meaningful impact on equality, dignity, participation and everyday school experience.

8 Do you foresee any unintended consequences of the Bill?

No

If you have answered 'yes', please provide details:

CiNI does not foresee significant unintended consequences arising from the Bill. This is already an established and uncontroversial uniform option in many schools and education systems around the world. There are, however, some implementation issues which should be considered.

First, the right should operate as a genuine choice. In seeking to remove compulsory skirts, care should be taken not to mandate compulsory trousers for all pupils. A children's rights approach should maximise reasonable choice rather than replace one restriction with another.

Second, implementation should avoid inadvertently creating a distinction between 'boys' trousers' and trousers provided as an alternative for girls. Schools should be encouraged to frame permitted uniform items inclusively and ensure that pupils exercising the right are not singled out, stigmatised or required to seek individual permission.

Third, affordability should be considered. The exercise of a statutory right should not depend upon families purchasing an unnecessarily specialised or school-branded trouser. Existing principles concerning affordability and availability should therefore apply equally to trousers provided under the Bill. Where the legislation results in reduced demand for school-specific skirts, suppliers should be notified at the earliest opportunity of likely market effects.

Finally, CiNI recognises that questions may arise concerning the ethos of individual schools. Any competing rights considerations should be addressed consistently with applicable human rights and equality obligations, with the rights and best interests of the child given appropriate weight.

These are matters of effective implementation rather than reasons to dilute the central principle of the Bill. Indeed, clear statutory guidance can help to prevent such unintended consequences while ensuring that the entitlement is meaningful, accessible and consistent for every child.

Clauses of the Bill

Clause 1

9 Do you think Clause 1 will have the effects that are anticipated?

I believe Clause 1 will have all the anticipated effects.

If you have answered that Clause 1 will only have some of the anticipated effects, or won't have the anticipated effects, please provide details.:

CiNI considers that Clause 1 is likely to contribute positively to the outcomes identified by the Committee, but effective implementation will be key to realising those benefits.

From a children's rights perspective, the most immediate effect of Clause 1 is clear: it removes an unnecessary restriction on children's choice where that restriction can affect their dignity, privacy, comfort and participation in school life. This is consistent with the UNCRC principles of non-discrimination (Article 2), best interests (Article 3) and respect for children's views (Article 12), alongside the right to education.

Children and young people have described concerns about menstruation, unwanted exposure, body confidence, physical activity and freedom of movement associated with compulsory skirts. Their experiences should be afforded significant weight. There is also a wider evidence base indicating that gendered or restrictive school clothing can affect girls' comfort, participation and physical activity.

CiNI would, however, distinguish between contributing to these outcomes and guaranteeing them. Providing a trouser option may reduce anxiety about unwanted exposure, but responsibility for preventing upskirting must remain with those responsible for such behaviour and with effective safeguarding measures. Similarly, trouser choice may support comfort and period dignity for some pupils but is not, in itself, a solution to the wider barriers girls may experience.

The equality and inclusion effect is particularly persuasive. Clause 1 establishes the straightforward principle that access to an approved item of school uniform should not depend upon a pupil's sex. Importantly, it increases choice rather than replacing one compulsory garment with another.

Implementation will determine whether this statutory right becomes a meaningful right in practice. Departmental guidance should be clear and unambiguous, including that pupils should not have to request special permission or justify their decision to wear trousers. The Department should communicate the change effectively and engage with schools, governors, pupils and parents to support consistent implementation. Consideration should also be given to affordability and availability so that practical barriers do not restrict the exercise of the right.

CiNI would also encourage ongoing monitoring following implementation, including engagement directly with children and young people. This should identify whether the entitlement is being applied consistently, whether pupils experience barriers or stigma when exercising it, and whether the anticipated benefits are being realised.

CiNI therefore considers the anticipated effects reasonable and credible. However, the strongest justification is more fundamental: where there is no compelling reason to restrict a child's reasonable choice of uniform, their dignity, participation and expressed views should take precedence over convention.

Clause 2

10 It is appropriate for the DE to also publish its guidelines on school uniforms.

Strongly agree

Do you have any further comments? :

CiNI considers it entirely appropriate that the Department of Education should be required to publish its guidelines on school uniforms.

Laying the guidelines before the Assembly provides important democratic oversight, but publication is also necessary to ensure that they are readily accessible to the children and young people, parents, schools and governors who will rely upon them.

As highlighted in our response to Clause 1, effective implementation will be critical to ensuring that the new statutory right is meaningful in practice. Publication should therefore form part of a wider implementation and communication strategy. The Department should provide clear and unambiguous guidance and engage proactively with schools and governing bodies to ensure that the requirements are understood and applied consistently.

Children, young people and parents should also receive accessible information about the new right. This should make clear that pupils should not face unnecessary procedural requirements, be expected to justify their choice, or experience other practical barriers to exercising their entitlement.

CiNI also considers that implementation should be closely monitored following commencement. This should include engagement with children and young people to establish whether the right is being consistently respected in practice and to identify any unintended barriers, including differences in availability, affordability, school procedures or attitudes towards pupils who choose to wear trousers.

Publication is therefore important, but it should not be regarded as sufficient implementation in itself. Clear guidance, effective communication and engagement with schools, accessible information for pupils and families, and ongoing monitoring will all be necessary to ensure that the statutory right established by the Bill becomes a practical and consistently experienced right for every child.

Clause 3

11 Do you have any comments on this Clause?

Yes

If you have answered 'yes', please provide details.:

CiNI supports Clause 3. We consider the period between completion of Second Stage in June 2026 and 1 August 2027 to be a reasonable and proportionate timeframe within which to prepare for effective implementation of the new statutory right.

This provides sufficient lead-in time for the Department to revise its guidelines, communicate the new requirements clearly and engage proactively with schools, governing bodies, children and young people, parents and other relevant stakeholders. Schools will also have time to review their uniform policies and make any necessary changes to communications, procedures and procurement arrangements before the new provisions take effect.

As highlighted elsewhere in our response, effective implementation will be critical. The revised guidelines should be clear and unambiguous that the right applies consistently to all pupils and should not be subject to additional permission, justification or unnecessary procedural barriers at school level.

CiNI would encourage the Department to use the implementation period actively rather than simply awaiting the commencement date. This should include the development of an implementation and communication strategy, direct engagement with schools and accessible, child-friendly information so that pupils and families understand the new right before it comes into effect.

The lead-in period also provides an opportunity to establish a baseline against which implementation can subsequently be assessed, including identifying where trouser choice is already available and where changes will be required.

CiNI therefore considers the proposed timeframe both reasonable and proportionate. The priority should be to use that time effectively to ensure that, from August 2027, the statutory entitlement is understood, consistently applied and free from practical or procedural barriers, with implementation subsequently monitored through engagement with children and young people, schools and families.

Financial effects of the Bill

12 The financial effects of the Bill will be minimal. (See Paragraphs 19 and 20 of the Explanatory and Financial Memorandum.)

Strongly agree

Do you have any further comments? :

CiNI broadly agrees that the direct financial effects of the Bill are likely to be minimal.

The Bill does not require families to purchase an additional uniform item; rather, it ensures that trousers are available as a choice within existing uniform arrangements. For some schools, trousers are already an established option for all pupils.

As noted in our opening comments, there may be some market displacement effects. Increased uptake of trousers may reduce demand for skirts or other traditionally gender-specific items while increasing demand for trousers. This is principally a change in the composition of existing uniform expenditure rather than a significant additional cost arising from the Bill, although any transitional effects should be monitored, and there should be clear communication to suppliers at the earliest opportunity.

CiNI's long-standing position is that school uniforms should, first and foremost, be affordable and comfortable for children and young people. The implementation of this Bill should reinforce that principle. The right to wear trousers must not result in families being required to purchase expensive, specialised or unnecessarily branded garments.

CiNI believes schools should adopt uniform policies based, wherever possible, on generic items and readily available colours that can be purchased from multiple suppliers. This promotes competition and parental choice, facilitates reuse and second-hand provision, and helps reduce the financial burden of school uniform on families. Trousers provided for under the new entitlement should follow the same approach.

There may also be some minimal administrative costs associated with guidance, communication, engagement and monitoring, but these are necessary to support effective implementation.

Overall, affordability and availability of uniform items should continue to be monitored to ensure that cost does not become a practical barrier to any child exercising the new statutory right.

Additional Comments and Observations

13 Additional comments and observations

Comment Box :

CiNI welcomes the Bill as a modest but important measure to strengthen children's rights within school uniform policy. We particularly welcome that it is framed around choice and entitlement: it does not require pupils to wear trousers but removes the ability to deny them that option.

From a children's rights perspective, this is consistent with the UNCRC principles of non-discrimination (Article 2), best interests (Article 3), respect for children's views (Article 12), privacy and dignity (Article 16), and the right to education (Articles 28 and 29). School uniform forms part of children's everyday experience of education and can affect their comfort, dignity and participation.

The evidence gathered during development of the Bill is particularly important. Children and young people have described how compulsory skirts can affect menstruation, privacy, body confidence, freedom of movement and participation. Their experiences should be afforded significant weight when considering whether restricting this choice serves any sufficiently compelling purpose.

There is also relevant academic evidence. Reidy (2021), reviewing school uniform through a public-health lens in New Zealand, found that poorly designed uniform policies can have physical and psychological impacts, with girls among those disproportionately affected. Howard (2023), examining gendered school sports uniform in the UK, found that clothing requirements can influence girls' body confidence, comfort and participation in physical activity. Wolfe (2024), in a qualitative study in Australia, highlights an important implementation issue: trousers may technically be available to girls while continuing to be perceived as the 'boys' uniform'. This demonstrates the difference between formal permission and a genuinely accepted choice. Contemporary research reminds us that trouser choice is unable, by itself, to resolve wider inequalities or guarantee improvements in wellbeing, participation or period dignity. It does, however, support the broader argument that school clothing is not neutral in its effects and unnecessary restrictions can affect children negatively.

The Bill also provides an opportunity to reinforce the position that school uniforms should, first and foremost, be comfortable, affordable, practical and inclusive - with generic items widely available to drive down costs.

Finally, implementation will be critical. Clear guidance, effective communication and engagement with schools and uniform suppliers, accessible information for pupils and families, and ongoing monitoring will be necessary to identify any procedural, financial, cultural or attitudinal barriers.

The Bill's success should ultimately be judged not simply by whether trousers for all pupils appear in school policies, but by whether every child who wishes to exercise the right can do so freely, comfortably and affordably, without seeking special permission, having to justify their choice or experiencing stigma.