Written evidence from the Bill Sponsor (Committee for Education)

1. Summary report on the Committee for Education's Citizen Space consultation on the proposed Bill
2. Minutes of evidence - Northern Ireland Youth Assembly - 28 January 2026
3. Minutes of evidence - Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission - 4 March 2026
4. Minutes of evidence - Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People; Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People Youth Panel - 4 March 2026
5. Minutes of evidence - Finalisation of Bill documents - 27 May 2026
6. Correspondence between the Minister of Education and the Committee for Education – January 2026
7. Report from the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly on the proposed Bill – January 2026
8. Correspondence from NASUWT, the Teachers' Union, to the Committee for Education - 10 February 2026
9. Correspondence from the youth advisory panel to the Children's Law Centre to the Committee for Education – 19 February 2026
10. Correspondence from the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission to the Committee for Education - 19 February 2026
11. Correspondence from the Belfast City Youth Council to the Committee for Education - 19 February 2026
12. Correspondence from the Free Presbyterian Education Board of Presbytery to the Committee for Education - 24 February 2026
13. Correspondence from the Women's Policy Group NI to the Committee for Education
14. Correspondence from the Women's Regional Consortium to the Committee for Education
15. Correspondence from an individual to the Committee for Education - 21 February 2026
16. Correspondence from the Department of Education to the Committee for Education - 22 May 2026
17. Correspondence from the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission to the Committee for Education - 11 June 2026
18. Correspondence from the Department of Education to the Committee for Education – 8 July 2026

Northern Ireland Assembly

Proposal for a Bill on the right to choose to wear trousers in school: Summary report

This report was created on Tuesday 01 September 2026 at 11:01 and includes **3695** responses.

The activity ran from 12/12/2025 to 20/02/2026.

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Question 1: What is your name?

Name

There were **3634** responses to this part of the question.

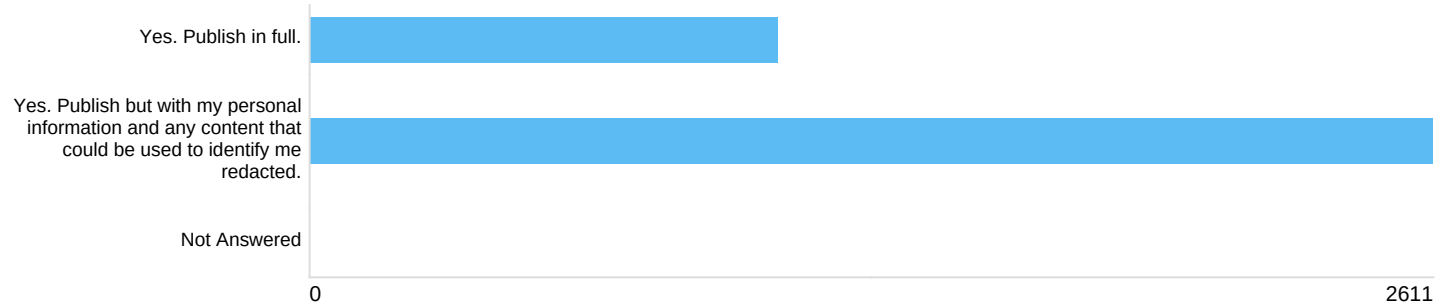
Question 2: What is your email address?

email address

There were **3608** responses to this part of the question.

Question 3: Do you consent to your submission being published on the Committee's website and included in the Committee's report?

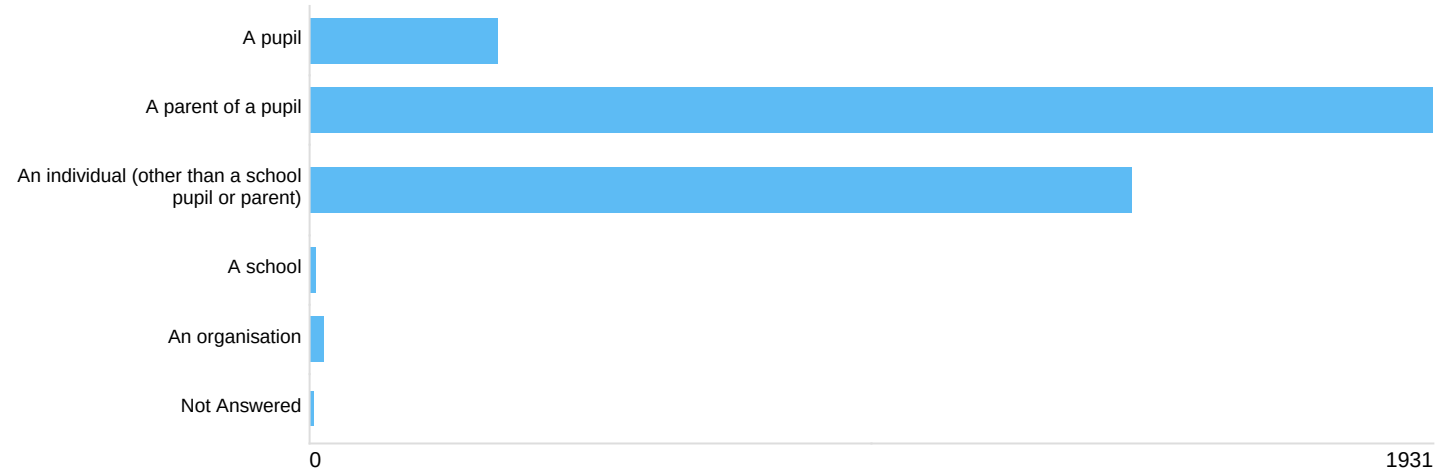
Publication consent



Option	Total	Percent
Yes. Publish in full.	1084	29.34%
Yes. Publish but with my personal information and any content that could be used to identify me redacted.	2611	70.66%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

Question 4: Are you responding as:

role



Option	Total	Percent
A pupil	322	8.71%
A parent of a pupil	1931	52.26%
An individual (other than a school pupil or parent)	1410	38.16%
A school	9	0.24%
An organisation	21	0.57%
Not Answered	2	0.05%

If you are responding on behalf of a school or organisation, what is the name of your school or organisation?

There were **255** responses to this part of the question.

Question 5: Are You?

gender



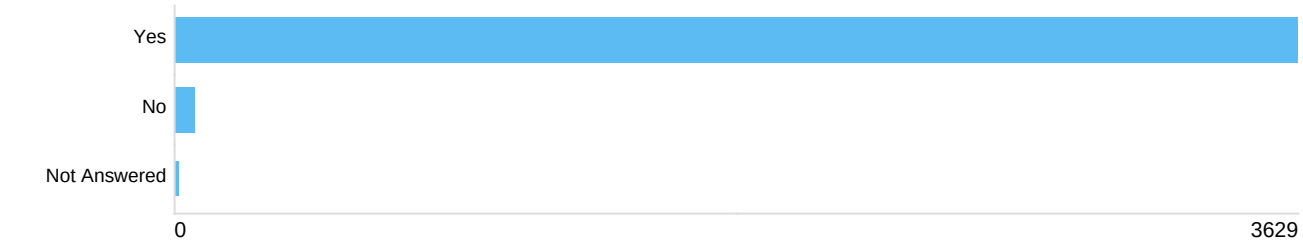
Option	Total	Percent
Male	418	11.31%
Female	3139	84.95%
Prefer not to say	65	1.76%
I use another term	40	1.08%
Not Answered	33	0.89%

are you

There were **42** responses to this part of the question.

Question 6: Do you think all pupils should be allowed the choice to wear trousers in school?

1



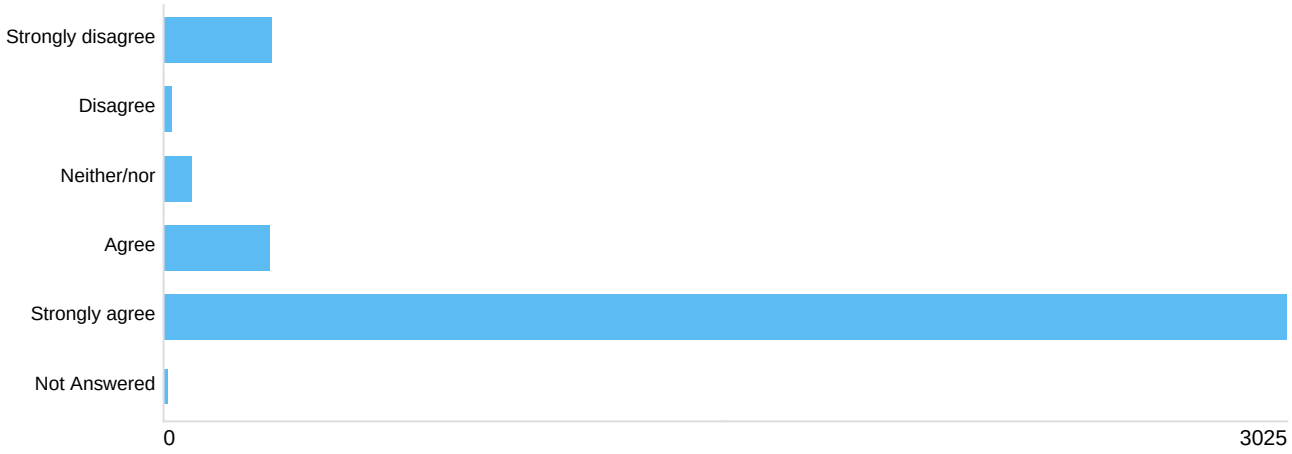
Option	Total	Percent
Yes	3629	98.21%
No	63	1.71%
Not Answered	3	0.08%

Why do you say that

There were **3016** responses to this part of the question.

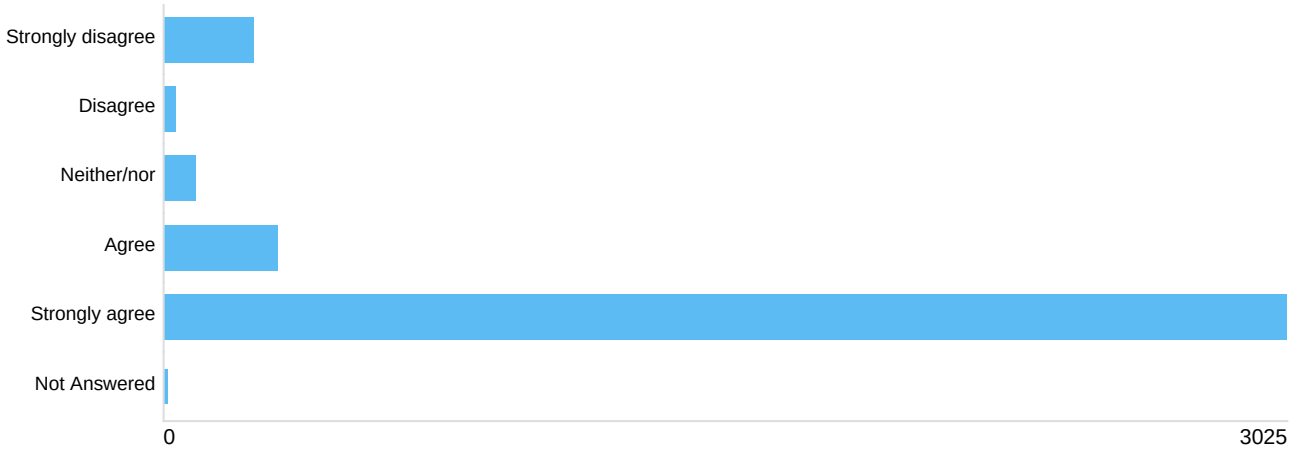
Question 7: To what extent do you agree with the following statements regarding girls having the right to wear trousers at school:

statement - It would help girls feel more physically comfortable



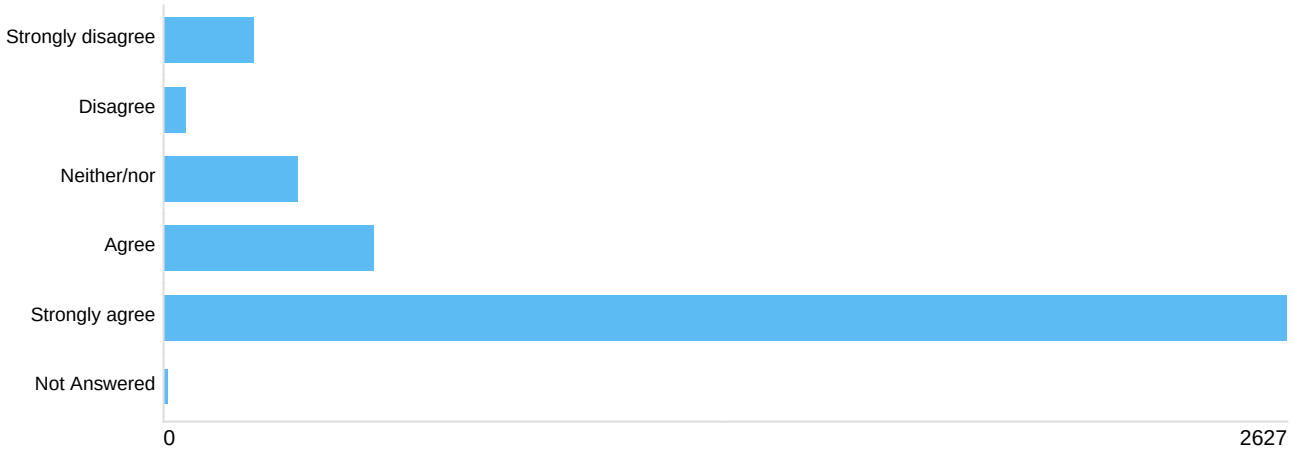
Option	Total	Percent
Strongly disagree	289	7.82%
Disagree	19	0.51%
Neither/nor	72	1.95%
Agree	282	7.63%
Strongly agree	3025	81.87%
Not Answered	8	0.22%

statement - It would help girls feel less exposed/ vulnerable



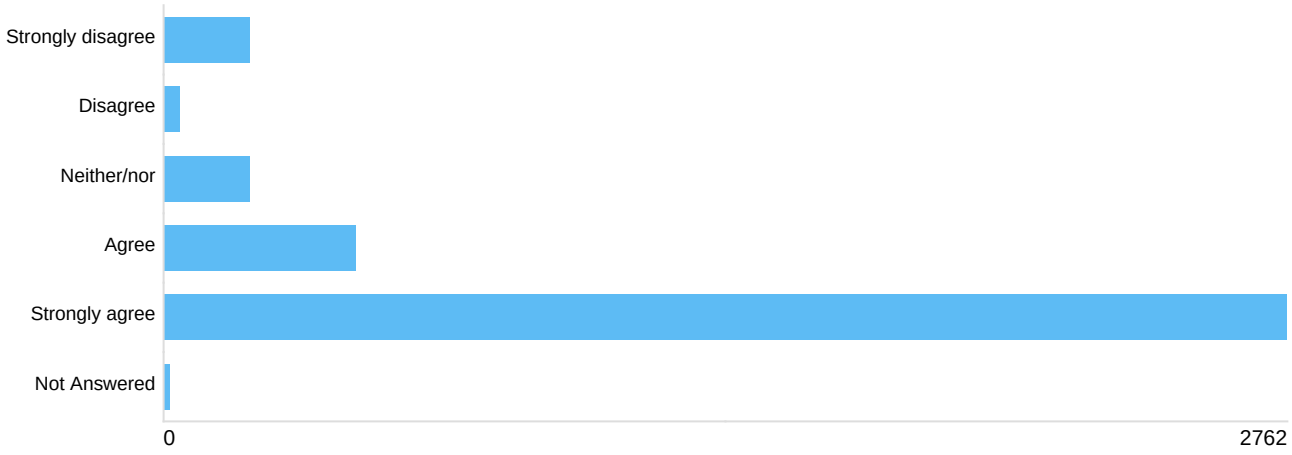
Option	Total	Percent
Strongly disagree	240	6.50%
Disagree	29	0.78%
Neither/nor	85	2.30%
Agree	306	8.28%
Strongly agree	3025	81.87%
Not Answered	10	0.27%

statement - It would help girls take part in more school activities



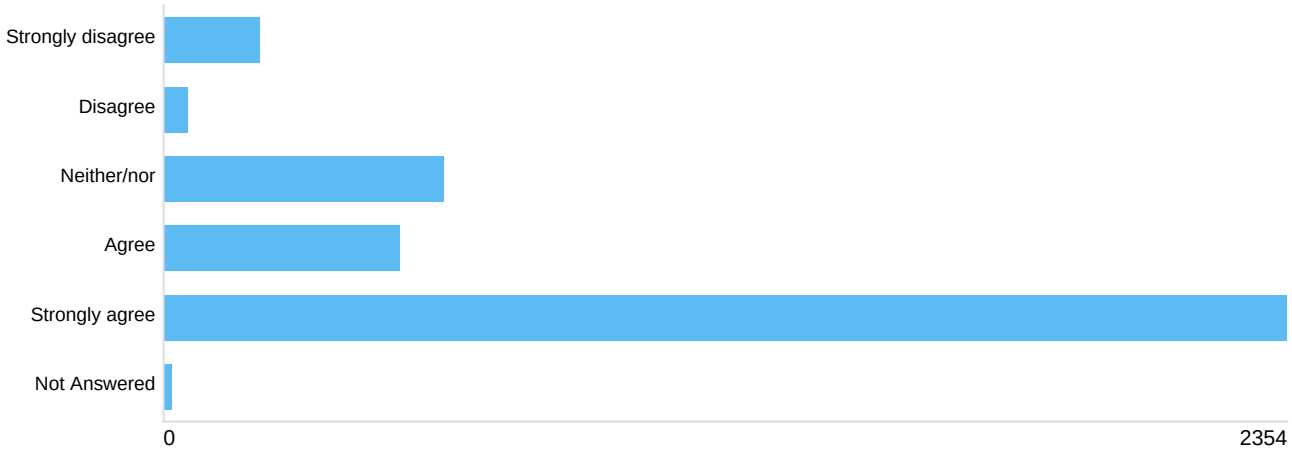
Option	Total	Percent
Strongly disagree	210	5.68%
Disagree	49	1.33%
Neither/nor	312	8.44%
Agree	489	13.23%
Strongly agree	2627	71.10%
Not Answered	8	0.22%

statement - It would make girls feel safer



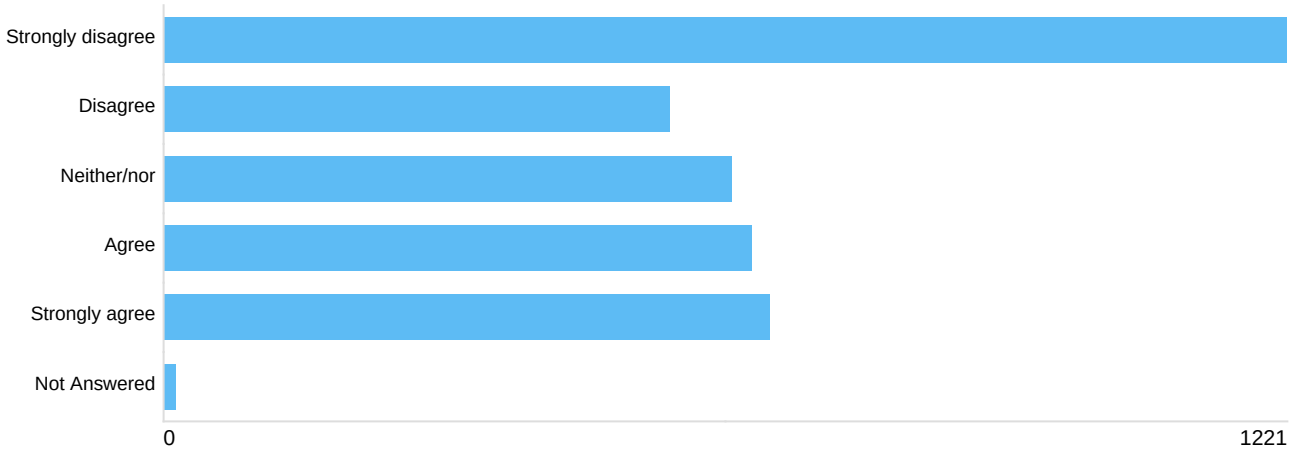
Option	Total	Percent
Strongly disagree	207	5.60%
Disagree	39	1.06%
Neither/nor	208	5.63%
Agree	468	12.67%
Strongly agree	2762	74.75%
Not Answered	11	0.30%

statement - It would help girls express their individuality



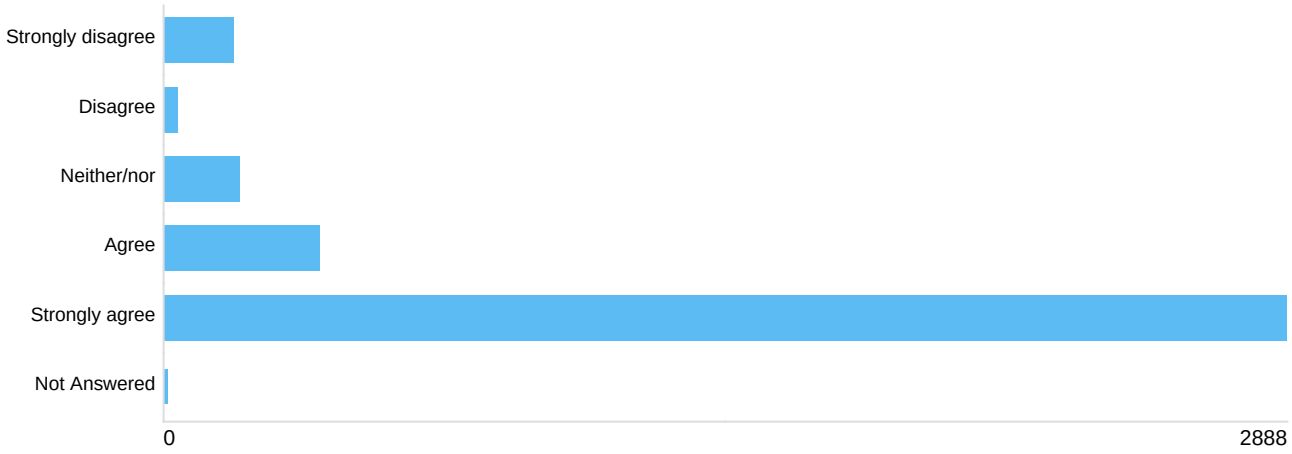
Option	Total	Percent
Strongly disagree	201	5.44%
Disagree	47	1.27%
Neither/nor	586	15.86%
Agree	493	13.34%
Strongly agree	2354	63.71%
Not Answered	14	0.38%

statement - There is stigma or judgement associated with girls wearing trousers



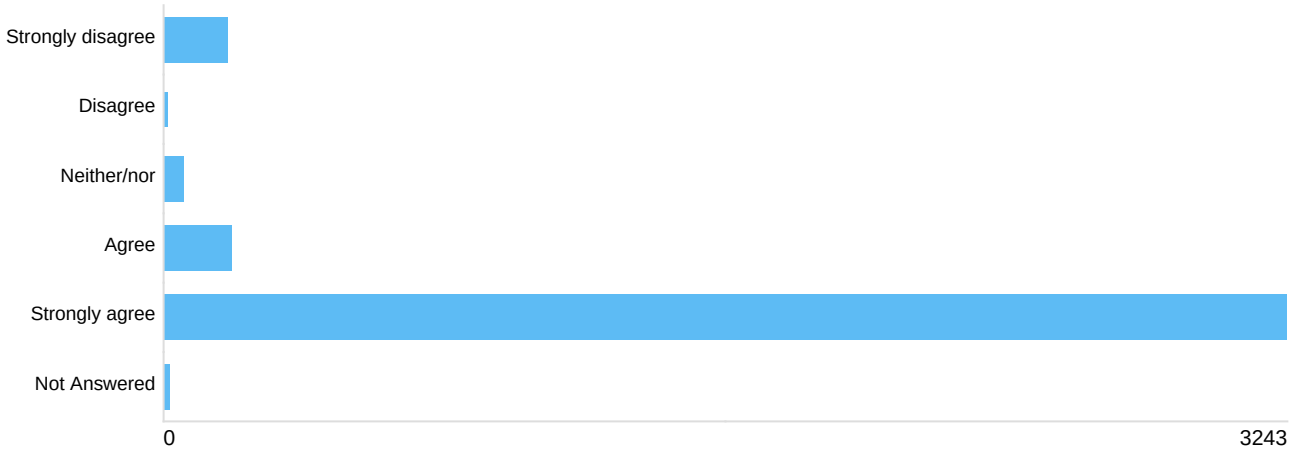
Option	Total	Percent
Strongly disagree	1221	33.04%
Disagree	549	14.86%
Neither/nor	617	16.70%
Agree	638	17.27%
Strongly agree	657	17.78%
Not Answered	13	0.35%

statement - It would enhance period dignity



Option	Total	Percent
Strongly disagree	179	4.84%
Disagree	31	0.84%
Neither/nor	192	5.20%
Agree	396	10.72%
Strongly agree	2888	78.16%
Not Answered	9	0.24%

statement - It would be fair



Option	Total	Percent
Strongly disagree	179	4.84%
Disagree	10	0.27%
Neither/nor	54	1.46%
Agree	196	5.30%
Strongly agree	3243	87.77%
Not Answered	13	0.35%

Question 8: In your view, are there any financial consequences of allowing girls to wear trousers to school?

financial consequences



Option	Total	Percent
Yes	591	15.99%
No	3070	83.09%
Not Answered	34	0.92%

Why do you say that

There were **2456** responses to this part of the question.

Question 9: Should there be any exceptions to allowing pupils the choice to wear trousers to school?

exceptions



Option	Total	Percent
Yes	271	7.33%
No	3394	91.85%
Not Answered	30	0.81%

If yes, what exception(s) should there be?

There were **536** responses to this part of the question.

Question 10: Is there anything else you would like to say about the idea of a law to allow all pupils the choice to wear trousers in school?

further information

There were **2260** responses to this part of the question.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Proposed Committee Bill to Allow All Pupils the Choice to Wear Trousers: Northern Ireland Youth Assembly

28 January 2026

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Education

Proposed Committee Bill to Allow All Pupils the Choice to Wear Trousers: Northern Ireland Youth Assembly

28 January 2026

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:
Mr Nick Mathison (Chairperson)
Mr Pat Sheehan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Danny Baker
Mr David Brooks
Mr Jon Burrows
Mrs Michelle Guy
Ms Cara Hunter
Mrs Cathy Mason

Witnesses:

Mr Raphael MacMillan-Sharkey	Northern Ireland Youth Assembly
Mr James Maginn	Northern Ireland Youth Assembly
Mr Dáire McConnell	Northern Ireland Youth Assembly
Ms Neala Owens	Northern Ireland Youth Assembly
Ms Ellie Simpson	Northern Ireland Youth Assembly

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): I welcome the new Youth Assembly Members. It is great to have you at the Committee today to speak to us. Hopefully, there will be lots of engagement with the Committee on a range of issues over the course of your term.

Everybody who is presenting today is a Member of the Youth Assembly. We have James Maginn, Dáire McConnell, Ellie Simpson, Neala Owens and Raphael MacMillan-Sharkey. You are very welcome, and thank you for giving up your time to come to speak to the Committee about our Committee Bill proposal on allowing all pupils the choice of wearing trousers as part of the school uniform. I will hand over to you to make some opening remarks or to give a presentation. I ask that it be up to 10 minutes in length, and we will then move into questions and answers from members. Over to you.

James, are you starting?

Mr James Maginn (Northern Ireland Youth Assembly): Yes. First, I thank the Committee for allowing us to meet you today to discuss the proposal on a law to allow all pupils to wear trousers at school. I am a legacy Youth Assembly Member, and I am here to support the new Youth Assembly Members during their mandate.

The Youth Assembly was established in June 2021 and comprises 90 diverse Members from all constituencies, with representation from section 75 groups, care-experienced young people and those

on free school meals. Our three main functions are engaging with the Northern Ireland Assembly and its Committees on inquiries and legislative scrutiny; carrying out our own committee-led project work; and consulting Departments and others on youth-related issues.

On Tuesday 13 January, we met to consider the Committee's consultation questions on the proposal. There were 48 current Members present, supported by 11 legacy Members. When Members were asked what mattered most when it came to school uniform, the most common response was "comfort". Comfort was mentioned more than equality, price or appearance. While some young people said that they felt comfortable in their uniform, a significant number reported feeling uncomfortable or very uncomfortable.

Comfort is not about preference or style. Discomfort affects the ability to focus, move freely and engage fully in student life. Members spoke about restrictive clothing, sensory sensitivities and long days spent sitting, walking and climbing stairs. Trousers were described as a more comfortable option for those everyday realities. One young person told us that, when pupils feel uncomfortable, it becomes harder to concentrate in class. Another said that school uniforms should not make pupils feel distracted or distressed during the school day.

From the perspective of young people, allowing them the choice to wear trousers is a straightforward way to reduce unnecessary discomfort without undermining the purpose of a school uniform. It does not remove uniformity but allows pupils to choose the option that best suits their comfort and ability to learn. The focus on comfort runs through the rest of our findings, alongside equality, dignity, safety and fairness.

I will hand over to Raphael, who will talk about how these issues connect to equality and dignity, particularly for girls.

Mr Raphael MacMillan-Sharkey (Northern Ireland Youth Assembly): My name is Raphael, and I will speak on the theme of equality, which was one of the strongest messages to emerge from our consultation. When Youth Assembly Members were asked what mattered most when it came to school uniforms, "equality" was the second most common response. Throughout the discussion, young people said that current uniform rules do not treat all pupils equally. In particular, Members asked why boys are generally allowed to wear trousers as standard while girls are not. Many described that difference as being outdated and difficult to justify.

Young people repeatedly used words such as "unfair, "unequal" and "old-fashioned" when talking about gendered uniform rules. That was not simply about clothing choices. Members framed the issue as one of equal treatment and equal respect. One young person summed it up by saying that, if boys are allowed to wear trousers, girls should be allowed the same option. Others spoke about uniform rules reinforcing gender stereotypes and sending the message that girls should just accept being less comfortable than boys. That theme was also reflected in the agreement statements. Young people strongly agreed that allowing the choice to wear trousers would be fair.

Equality was also discussed in relation to the question of who is affected most by uniform rules. Members recognised that girls are disproportionately impacted by restrictions on trousers, particularly during their periods, in cold weather or when moving around school. Others highlighted the fact that pupils with disabilities, sensory needs or religious requirements can be further disadvantaged by rigid, gendered uniform policy. Importantly, young people also spoke about equality between schools. Many felt that it was unfair that whether a pupil can wear trousers depends on the school that they attend. Members expressed a desire for consistency, so that pupils across Northern Ireland are treated equally, regardless of school type or location.

Overall, Youth Assembly Members see the option to wear trousers as a simple but meaningful step towards greater equality in schools. It is not about removing uniforms or lowering standards but about ensuring that uniform policy applies fairly to all pupils.

I now hand over to Neala, who will focus on dignity.

Ms Neala Owens (Northern Ireland Youth Assembly): My name is Neala Owens. School uniform is not just about appearance; it affects how safe, respected and confident pupils feel during the school day. For many young people, particularly girls, current uniform rules were described as undermining dignity rather than supporting it.

One of the clearest issues raised was period dignity. Members spoke openly about cramps, anxiety about leaks and the discomfort of managing menstruation while wearing skirts. Young people strongly agreed that allowing trousers would enhance period dignity. That statement received one of the highest agreement scores in the survey, with an average of 4·4, suggesting that a majority of students agreed with it.

Members also linked uniform rules to feelings of vulnerability. Many felt that skirts can leave pupils feeling exposed, particularly on stairs, in windy weather or when sitting in classrooms. Young people strongly agreed that allowing trousers would help girls to feel less exposed or vulnerable. We spoke about unwanted attention, comments and judgement linked to uniforms, and the belief that trousers could reduce those things. For Members, feeling safe in school is seen as a basic expectation, not something that should depend on uniform rules.

Issues of dignity were also raised in relation to inclusion. Members highlighted the fact that rigid uniform policies can be particularly challenging for pupils who are transgender, when it comes to feeling accepted or respected in their chosen gender; for non-binary pupils; for pupils with disabilities; and for pupils with religious modesty requirements. In those cases, uniform rules were described as being responsible for intensifying scrutiny rather than offering protection.

Overall, Members view dignity as central to an effective uniform policy. Allowing the choice to wear trousers is a practical way to protect pupils' dignity, reduce vulnerability and help young girls feel safer in their school environment.

I now hand over to Dáire, who will focus on practicality.

Mr Dáire McConnell (Northern Ireland Youth Assembly): Dia daoibh. Dáire McConnell is ainm domh. *[Translation: Hello. My name is Dáire McConnell.]* I will speak about practicality, which is another recurring theme in the Youth Assembly's discussion.

Young people spoke in practical terms about how uniforms work and do not work in everyday school life. Members highlighted the reality of the Irish climate: skirts were described as being impractical in cold, wet and windy conditions, while trousers were viewed as being more suitable all year round. One young person described how skirts blow in the wind, which leaves pupils cold, particularly during winter months.

Practicality was also discussed in relation to movement and activity. Members felt that trousers better supported walking between classes, sitting on floors, climbing stairs and participating in practical subjects. That was framed not as a preference but as a matter of functionality and needs during a normal school day. Young people also connected practicality to participation. Members recognised that comfort and safety were the most immediate impacts of allowing all young people the option of wearing trousers, with participation benefits following closely behind. That suggests that pupils see the wearing of trousers as removing small but persistent barriers that make school harder than it needs to be.

Importantly, Members did not see trousers as undermining school uniform standards; instead, they viewed them as a familiar item of school clothing that already exists in most schools. From their perspective, allowing trousers simply extends an existing, practical option to all pupils.

Overall, the evidence suggests that young people see the choice to wear trousers as a sensible adjustment that better affects the practical demands of school life without removing the structure or purpose of school uniforms.

I now hand over to Ellie, who will speak about personal autonomy and conclude on behalf of the Youth Assembly.

Ms Ellie Simpson (Northern Ireland Youth Assembly): Hi. My name is Ellie. This is not about forcing anyone to wear trousers: it is about ensuring that pupils who want or need to wear trousers are not prevented from doing so.

Choice supports individuality while maintaining school identity. One young person explained that it should be possible to represent school pride while having the option of self-expression. Others noted that, in adult life and in the workplace, people are trusted to make appropriate clothing choices, so schools should help pupils prepare for that responsibility. However, we are also clear that the choice must be real. Many described situations in which trousers are technically allowed but stigma and

judgement prevent pupils from wearing them. Members said that some schools will allow trousers but only after a meeting between parents and the school principal. Girls who wear trousers described how they felt judged, talked about or seen as being different. As a result, choice in policy does not always translate into choice in practice. That is why Members support a clear, consistent approach across all schools. They feel that a universal rule would help normalise trousers, reduce stigma and ensure that pupils are treated equally, regardless of the school that they attend.

Members also recognised that implementation matters. While views differed on whether exceptions should exist, young people were clear that any policy should be applied fairly, consistently and with the voice of pupils at its centre.

The Youth Assembly's position is clear: young people overwhelmingly support allowing all pupils the choice to wear trousers at school. They see it as a practical and proportionate change that improves comfort, supports equality, protects dignity and reduces stigma. The proposal needs to become law now. We would like the option to wear trousers to be a mandatory requirement in all schools in Northern Ireland. Young people should be involved at every stage of the Bill, especially those with disabilities, those with religious requirements, LGBTQ young people and those with sensory issues. Finally, each school uniform policy must include the option to wear trousers. When developing the Bill, we encourage the Committee to consider the lived experiences that we have outlined.

Thank you for listening to young people's voices. We welcome your questions.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Thanks to all of you. I am sure that your first time presenting to a Committee is a daunting experience. It is great to have you here, and hopefully this Q & A will be painless for you.

Nothing in your evidence surprises me, because, when we looked at the School Uniform (Guidelines and Allowances) Bill, I do not think that we heard from a young person who said anything other than, "We think that there should be a clear right to wear trousers" and that that right should be universally applied. It is reassuring that there has been no shift in opinion since we received that evidence. In your survey, there was 98% support for a legislative proposal, which gives the Committee a positive platform on which to take forward the Bill.

I will reflect on the Minister's views on the issue. Since the School Uniforms Bill passed through its stages in the Assembly, there have been lots of questions on it. The Minister's position is that that legislation gives pupils the right to campaign locally, at school level, and make the case for wearing trousers. What is your view of that approach?

Mr MacMillan-Sharkey: Although people can campaign locally for the right of girls to wear trousers, they should not have to do that. Younger people in particular should not have to campaign for the right to wear trousers: it should be a right for all.

Mr Maginn: I think what Raphael is trying to say is that, while many schools are moving towards letting pupils apply for the option to wear trousers, we still consider that to be a barrier. The younger children, from the first year to the third year, may not be able to campaign for the right. We should ensure that the option to wear trousers is a complete blanket opportunity for all young people. That would cover those feeling stress or anxiety and those without the resources to campaign for that.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Ellie referenced preparing young people for their future in the workplace. It would be odd if you took a job and were told, "You have to wear a skirt for this job, but we will allow you to campaign for the right to wear something different, or you can ask for special permission". There is a disconnect there.

You mentioned equality, but you also referenced equality between schools. I have been contacted by some parents who are looking at the options in their areas for their kids' move from P7 to post-primary education. They say that, in their area learning communities, no school currently affords pupils the right to wear trousers. In that instance, if the right to wear trousers is an issue for the pupil, it will push them out of their community to find a school that will afford them that right. That is not acceptable. The point about equality of provision across the schools is also relevant.

The Minister could make the change this afternoon if he wanted to. The Committee is proposing legislation because he seems dead set against doing so. What would you say to the Minister about the actions that he should take?

Ms Owens: I just think that trousers should be accessible to every pupil, no matter what school they go to or what their beliefs are. Having the choice to wear trousers should be compulsory, and it is kind of disappointing that it is not. Young people widely approve of having that choice and feel strongly about it. I feel that, in 2026, having that choice should be compulsory.

Mr McConnell: I do not think that anybody has a problem with what the Education Minister has proposed so far, but it does not go far enough. It puts the power in the hands of principals, but I have heard from a lot of people that you have to ask for permission. You should not have to ask for permission; it should be in guidelines from the Education Department. He is the Education Minister, and he should make it that we are allowed to wear trousers. It should not be done on a school-by-school basis, because he is the Education Minister for every school, not just some schools. If anything is going to be put to the Floor, it should cover all schools, not just a minority or a majority.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): That is great. Thank you.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agaibh, agus míle buíochas libh as an chur i láthair. *[Translation: Thank you, and thanks very much for the presentation.]* I agree with everything that has been said. Girls should have the right to wear trousers if they so wish. They should not be forced to wear trousers; if they want to wear a skirt, that is OK. However, for all the reasons that you mentioned — comfort, practicality, equality and vulnerability — they should have that choice.

The Committee tabled amendments to the uniforms Bill when it was passing through the Assembly. Unfortunately, the Speaker rejected those amendments, and the Committee has now taken a decision to bring forward its own Bill to give all pupils the right to wear trousers. The Minister could do that with the stroke of a pen: are you aware of that?

Mr MacMillan-Sharkey: Yes.

Mr Sheehan: You are familiar with the way in which the legislation and the Minister's guidelines work. Unfortunately, the fact that we have to bring forward a Committee Bill to ensure that that happens costs money. It costs thousands of pounds to employ drafters to draft legislation, it takes up Committee time and it takes up time in the Assembly that could be used for other legislation or to deal with other useful items. Has the Youth Assembly had any direct communication with the Minister on the issue?

Mr MacMillan-Sharkey: None.

Mr McConnell: No, not yet.

Mr Sheehan: I advise you to write to him and let him know how you feel. The issue regarding trousers is not just about equality. Another one of our amendments that was rejected acknowledged that young people with special needs are distressed by certain types of materials and how having a tie around their necks can cause anxiety and so on. All of that should have been prescriptive in the uniforms Bill, but it was not.

I have no real question for you. Does anyone want to comment on anything that I have said?

Mr Maginn: The Youth Assembly has been behind all the proposals in the School Uniforms Bill. The Youth Assembly, together, would really like to see more movement on making the choice to wear trousers universal. We are still completely behind what the Minister has brought forward, but we are also completely open to anything more.

Mr McConnell: We are completely behind the reforms so far, but I personally — I think that I speak for the Youth Assembly on this — will always have an appetite for a little more. You will always ask for a little more. If we feel that that is possible, we will definitely try to get it. The Education Minister should listen, and I think that he will listen. I hope that what we have come here today to do will effect change.

Mr Sheehan: Good luck with that.

Mrs Mason: Go raibh maith agat, agus maith sibh. *[Translation: Thank you, and well done.]* Well done: the presentation was fantastic.

Ellie mentioned something that had not registered with me about the girls who wear trousers being seen as different. Will you expand on that a wee bit? It had not occurred to me.

Ms Simpson: At my school, only one girl wore trousers. As far as I am aware, she left due to forms of bullying in and out of school. She is now homeschooled. Typically, girls who wear trousers have been made fun of to their faces and behind their backs. That has always happened, and it is why most girls shy away from wearing trousers. You have to talk to someone just to be allowed to wear trousers, and then, when you come into school wearing them, you are treated differently, even though you feel slightly more comfortable. If the law allows you to wear trousers, it will make girls feel more comfortable and less ostracised because of their clothing choices.

Mrs Mason: Brilliant.

Mr MacMillan-Sharkey: My sister goes to the same school as me, and she wears trousers. A lot of people in my school wear trousers. A girl in my class wears trousers, and a girl in the class with whom we often work wears trousers. A lot of people wear trousers, and the process for doing so in my school is not too hard. I am not sure about other schools. There is no bullying about it in my school. I have asked a few people in my class about it, and a lot of them have said, "Why not? Obviously, we should be able to wear trousers". If the law is brought in, the bullying will be phased out until it is eradicated in the near future.

Mrs Mason: That is an excellent point.

Ms Owens: If we brought in a law that allowed trousers to be worn and they became more popular for girls, it would not be such an issue. I wore trousers when I went to playschool, but it was not the same when I went to primary school. If we started wearing trousers from a younger age, it would not be an issue and people would not be ostracised because it would be such a normal thing to see. People would be more comfortable with it and would not think of it as being a random decision, and there would be less bullying.

Mrs Mason: Absolutely. You have made excellent points.

You mentioned that a lot of people in your school wear trousers: has any harm been caused or have any issues been raised because they wear trousers?

Mr MacMillan-Sharkey: No. All the people in our class and the teachers are fine. It is about the people who do not want girls to wear trousers. Our school is good at dealing with bullying, and there is no criticism of wearing trousers. It is a lot easier to let people wear trousers than it is to force them to wear skirts.

Mrs Mason: When people talk to me about the issue, there are normally several views. Some people think that it is crazy that we are still talking about it in this day and age. Another view is that, if girls are so annoyed about it, they can wear shorts under their skirts or lobby their principal for change, although the reality is that they can still say no. Another view is that girls could just do it anyway, because who cares about the legislation or what the principal says? What is your view? If someone used that argument against providing for change through legislation, what would you say?

Mr MacMillan-Sharkey: I would say, "Honestly, it is not for you to give your opinion on what I should wear". It is their opinion. We live in a country with free speech, so why not let people do what they want? School is about preparing young people for later in life, when they will be able to wear trousers in most places. If someone has a problem with wearing trousers, they should talk to the pupils and the principal. If the principal agrees with them, they should be sacked.

Mr Maginn: A lot of what we do in the Youth Assembly is rights-based. You spoke about trousers being an issue in this day and age. Under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, you have the right to freedom of expression, and allowing all pupils to wear trousers is a good way of ensuring that right.

Ms Owens: We want to mention PE uniforms. It is not included in the proposal, and we want to know whether it will be. You mentioned wearing shorts. Some pupils are not comfortable wearing shorts either, as they find them more restrictive than skirts. Skorts are another big issue for PE. We believe

that in PE we should be allowed to wear leggings or tracksuit bottoms — whichever you are more comfortable with.

Mrs Mason: Absolutely. When we were considering our amendments, branded items was a key issue. Often, the branded items are the PE items. We looked at tabling an amendment that would limit the number of branded items so that schools cannot make you wear a certain PE uniform. Again, it should be about wearing something that you are comfortable in. You should be able to wear whatever you want. In the GAA recently, we have seen girls winning their battle to wear shorts, because they did not want to wear skorts.

Fantastic. Thank you very much. It was really insightful.

Mrs Guy: Thanks, folks, and congratulations on taking up your new role. When I spoke on the issue in the Chamber this week, I made a genuine appeal to the Minister and said that, if he will not listen to us, maybe he will listen to you. I hope that he is watching, that he will listen to you and that he acts. How does it make you feel to know that the Minister has the power to do this right now and that we do not need to bring forward legislation? He is actively changing the guidance on school coats, so how does it make you feel that he will not take action on this issue?

Mr MacMillan-Sharkey: I honestly find it annoying that the person who is supposed to represent children and those in the Youth Assembly, who are also children, is not even bothering to do something as simple as that for us.

Mr Maginn: I think that what Raphael is saying is that the Youth Assembly is always open to dialogue with the Minister and that we are completely open to any discussion of the topic with him.

Mr McConnell: Our door is always open to the Minister if he wishes to speak to any of us.

Mrs Guy: You are speaking today, so I hope that he is listening.

How do you feel about us as an Assembly and our inability to get simple things such as this done? Does that make you lose confidence in us as an Assembly? There are a lot of big issues out there that we have to tackle, and, if we cannot get something such as this done, it does not bode well, does it? We are not very popular at the minute.

Mr MacMillan-Sharkey: The Assembly has to use its time at Committee hearings, including this one, and during the drafting of a Bill, which, I think, will happen. I do not want it to sound as though I am against the Bill, but the fact that we still have to think about this in 2026 is a huge waste of time. People are allowed free expression, but we still have to consider whether girls should be able to wear trousers.

Ms Owens: I admire your dedication to pursuing the matter through legislation and to getting new proposals. It is disheartening that it did not go through in the School Uniforms Bill, but, with the right proposals and recommendations, there will, hopefully, be some change and reforms.

Mr McConnell: I completely agree. It is a simple topic. However, at times, it is divisive.

The fact that stuff is getting done is important. I thank the Committee for listening to us. From personal experience, I have been looked down on many's the time by someone who is older than I am or has a little more experience on a subject, but I feel as though I am really welcome in this room and that I have been listened to. I really appreciate that from the entire Committee, and I am sure that everyone else appreciates it as well.

Mrs Guy: We really appreciate your being here.

I have one last question. You know that, if you go down a high street now, you will see girls wearing trousers. They choose to wear trousers. That is normal in 2026, not controversial. Some people have suggested that not legislating for it and leaving it with schools is about control and the ability to control what young women in particular wear: is that a fair statement?

Mr Maginn: A large portion of what school is meant to do is prepare you for later life and the outside world. School should reflect the outside environment. I do not know whether anyone else has anything to say on that.

Mr McConnell: My mother runs a non-profit organisation that partners with the Department for Communities and the Department of Education. It is a majority woman workplace, and none of them are required to wear skirts. I personally think — I am fairly sure my mother would attest to this — that it would be seen as obscene if she went in and said, "You all have to wear skirts. I do not make the rules". I do not see how it is fair that children under the rule of the Department of Education should be held to different standards from the adults. If you go into any school in the modern day, you will see that most of the female teachers are wearing trousers. Why are they not supposed to wear skirts? Why should the girls have to?

Mrs Guy: Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Thanks, Dáire. I am glad you feel welcome, because that is something that the Committee prioritises so that we can engage with young people. I also understand the frustration when there is engagement and decisions are taken that do not reflect your views. I understand that that is frustrating.

Ms Hunter: Thank you all very much. There are some familiar faces and some new faces. It is brilliant to have you here, and I love to see the passion from our young people on the topic. Today, you are really shaping the conversation, and we are delighted to have you here.

I will echo what other members have said. I am sitting here feeling comfortable and cosy in a pair of jeans, and I had that choice. It helps facilitate my role as an MLA, and it allows me to focus on my work. I am delighted that the Committee is bringing forward the conversation about trousers, because it is a basic ask. It is a denial of your fundamental rights to comfort and equality. I went to an American high school, where you could wear whatever you wanted and express yourself. I am frustrated, because I remember what it is like to be a teenager, and it is frustrating when you do not feel listened to. I am delighted that you are here.

A number of my questions have already been asked, but I have one core question. Do you find it strange that Ministers often talk about equality, ending violence against women and girls in Northern Ireland and amplifying female voices in our society but all young people, particularly young women, have been silenced on this topic? They are not being given the same fundamental rights as their male classmates. I would love to hear your perspective on that.

Mr MacMillan-Sharkey: I agree with you about that. As a feminist, I find it strange for people to say that they want to end violence against women and girls and then not do something that could actually help. People talk about ending violence against women and girls, and then some of the people who say it — maybe even some of the people in the room — do not honestly believe in it and are just trying to get votes.

Mr Maginn: The Youth Assembly as a whole entirely supports the ending violence against women and girls campaign. As a legacy member of the Youth Assembly, I had the opportunity to compile a report on young women's rights in schools. Ensuring that all pupils have access to trousers could decrease unwanted attention. We accept that that could help decrease the situations where young women feel uncomfortable or discriminated against. We support any discussion about this, and we are thankful that the Assembly has taken forward the campaign to end violence against women and girls. We can really see that all members are moving it forward.

Ms Owens: Most students have to walk to school, which, as I said, can increase unwanted negative attention if you are in your school uniform, like getting shouted at. Wearing trousers could really decrease that and make you feel safer when walking to school. Sometimes there are after-school activities, and you have to walk home from school later at night. That can cause anxiety, especially if you live in the city. I do not — I get a bus — but, for young girls who do, it can cause anxiety and stress walking to school and back.

Mr McConnell: I second that from personal experience. I have two sisters — a twin sister and an older sister — who both wear skirts to school. I have to get two buses to school. It does not happen to me, thankfully, but, when I walk with my sisters through the city centre, I see the looks they get. If I did

not have such self-control, I would probably go over and smack those people. Bringing in trousers would negate that and remove that risk; it would help a lot with ending violence towards women and girls.

Ms Simpson: There are Committees that focus on social media, and you have probably seen it: school uniforms in the last 20 years have been sexualised a lot, and that is one of the main reasons why girls do not feel comfortable. Whether it is from people their own age or way older people, they do not feel comfortable. In schools, there are teachers who will measure your skirt's distance from your knee. The teachers complain about us rolling up our skirts, but some people just want the uniform to look better because we have no option. We are stuck with skirts.

Ms Hunter: I feel that a lot of it is about policing girls and their decisions. I have heard about some extremely uncomfortable incidents when a child has been told, "Pull that skirt down. You do not want to distract your teachers", and it is totally inappropriate.

What you have said is extremely helpful, and you rightly talked about the objectification of women. We have had huge conversations about upskirting and all the horrific, inappropriate things that happen to young girls, yet, when the Minister had the opportunity to draw a line under that, he did not take it, which is disappointing.

Finally, it is an incredible campaign, and you have helped shape the policy today by giving us your perspectives. What are your next steps? Where do you go from here?

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): A brief answer on this one, please.

Mr MacMillan-Sharkey: The next step would be trying to get it through the Assembly. We will probably face some backlash, but the Assembly should listen to young people. The Assembly should get more people's opinions from hearings like this. If the Assembly does not get this through, it will not affect me, but it will affect other people. I am not trying to speak for women and girls, but I am trying to give my sister's perspective, because she is the only girl in my family. If someone does not allow my sister to wear something that simple, it will be ridiculous.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Thank you, Raphael. We will have to draw a line at that stage.

Mr MacMillan-Sharkey: Sorry.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): No, no. The Committee is always up against time.

Mr Burrows: *[Inaudible]* and passionate input, and it is good to see my constituency represented by someone from a Ballymena school. That is doubly welcome.

I fully support a girl's right to wear trousers. To be clear, do you accept that we are talking about the right to wear a standardised pair of trousers that will become a school uniform, in the same way as a boy wears school trousers that are uniform?

Mr Maginn: I am slightly confused about what you mean.

Mr Burrows: We are not pitching that girls can wear any trousers. It is clear that girls can wear trousers as an item of school uniform, and it can be distinguished from general uniform issues and wearing your own clothes.

Mr McConnell: That is completely where we are coming from.

Mr Maginn: The Youth Assembly's view is that it is a standard pair of trousers, and we fully believe that it will not undermine uniformity and the role of uniform in ensuring that all pupils are equal in appearance.

Mr Burrows: You put it better than I did, so well done on that.

My second question is for the girls. We touched on this, but I want your opinion to get it clearly. Do we need to look at PE uniforms and the right to wear shorts or skorts instead of skirts to participate in PE? Is that supported universally or strongly among girls in school?

Ms Owens: As a girl, I feel that wearing tracksuit bottoms or leggings in school can be a lot more comfortable. Shorts and skorts can be restrictive. I was playing GAA; I do not play camogie, but there was a fight for wearing shorts instead of skorts. It was rejected at first, but, with some determination, they got it. The same should go for school uniforms. Pupils should be allowed to wear leggings and tracksuit bottoms if they feel comfortable, especially pupils with religious and modesty requirements and disabilities.

Mr Burrows: Yes. One particular issue is promoting participation in PE, particularly from year 10, when sometimes it goes down. If there was the right to wear tracksuit bottoms, skorts or whatever, instead of a skirt, would there be more willing participation in PE from year 10 onwards?

Ms Simpson: I am in year 10, so I can speak on that. In my school, we are not allowed to wear our skort home. They do not ever really touch on why, but I think it is pretty self-explanatory, as you can imagine. If we were allowed to wear leggings or tracksuit bottoms, a lot more people would want to do it, because people cannot be bothered to get changed back into their school uniform after doing a sport after school.

Mr Burrows: Thank you for your insight. It has been invaluable.

Mr Baker: Thank you for everything that you have just said in your presentation. It was brilliant.

You have not really left me many questions to ask, but I slightly disagree with you about being fully behind the School Uniforms (Guidelines and Allowances) Bill as it stands: unfortunately, I am not. I am disappointed with it because, as Pat said, 11 of our Committee amendments were thrown completely in the bin. That is not just the work that we do as a Committee; it is the evidence that we take from people like you and parents, who have covered a lot of what is being discussed today.

The only real question that I have that has not been repeated is around the criteria of the schools right now. You have an understanding of what schools ask for for girls to wear trousers and what the difference would be between some schools, where girls may be bullied, and other schools, where it does not happen so much. Is it the process that really highlights that difference?

Mr McConnell: My school, Coláiste Feirste, is sat between St Louise's and St Dominic's in Belfast. From my experience and from what I see, as well as us not being a grammar school, we find that, sometimes, our school is looked down on because girls are allowed to wear trousers. Sometimes, they see it as maybe unprofessional or not of the same standard. I would be in favour of having no exceptions. It really creates equality not just across your school but across the entire schooling system.

Really, you should not be discriminated against, not just on whether you wear a skirt or trousers but on what school you come from. If every school was made to follow the same standards, no one would be discriminated against on the basis what school they came from. I feel that they have got something that the skirts play into right now.

Mr Baker: Thank you. Are there different processes for the schools? Are you aware of different processes?

Mr Maginn: Each school will have an individual process. From my school, I know that you have to ask a member of the senior leadership team. The view of the Youth Assembly is that the otherness created for pupils who wear trousers is not necessarily because they are wearing trousers; it is because of the process. It is because it is a limited, difficult process, in that they have to go and request that, while, if it was universally allowed for all pupils, eventually, over time — it would be over time — the discrimination or otherness would slowly decrease.

Ms Owens: We had a meeting on 14 January. I heard from others that among the ways for it to be allowed was with a doctor's note or having to speak with the principal, which they can still overrule, or having to go to a senior member, as James said.

Mr MacMillan-Sharkey: Also, in my school, we have to ask the assistant special educational needs coordinator (SENCO). I remember doing that last year for my sister. I keep mentioning my sister. Last year, we had to speak to the deputy SENCO, who is really nice: Mrs Monaghan. I just wanted to give her a shout-out. *[Laughter.]* She is really nice. There was actually something around it. When we originally went there, there was something about Evangeline wearing skirts, and she misinterpreted that as me asking to wear a skirt, which I was not; instead, I was asking about her wearing trousers. The deputy SENCO was fine with my sister wearing trousers, and a lot of girls in my year have followed suit and do not wear skirts. There is virtually no bullying, as I said.

Mr Baker: This is just my interpretation, but I feel that there are some political parties — maybe even the Minister himself — who have a fear of supporting the amendments that we wanted to make because it would lead to boys being able to wear skirts. Whilst that is not the issue we are talking about today, I would just like to hear your view on it. Would you, as young people, have a problem with a boy wanting to wear a skirt?

Mr Maginn: I think it would be the view of the Youth Assembly. As an individual, I am disappointed that a lot of the dialogue about this has taken away from the focus on allowing trousers universally. The Youth Assembly is keen to focus specifically on the issue of trousers universally. It is an easy way for some to escape the dialogue or maybe avoid addressing the issue, but I think the Youth Assembly is disappointed that the dialogue has been diverted.

Mr McConnell: To add to that, we are not campaigning for this to go on a slippery slope-type dynamic or a domino effect. We are campaigning for one specific issue, which is girls being allowed to wear trousers. We have not come here to talk about boys wearing skirts. That has not been debated between us or anyone in the Youth Assembly. We are simply here to talk about girls wearing trousers and why we think that it should be allowed.

Mr MacMillan-Sharkey: Also, I would say —.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Just briefly, please, as we are pushed for time.

Mr Burrows: Chair, I am keen to say one thing.

Mr MacMillan-Sharkey: Sorry.

Mr Burrows: After you.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Go ahead, Raphael, just to briefly finish.

Mr MacMillan-Sharkey: It is less about girls wearing trousers and more about everyone being able to have the choice to wear trousers and it not being trousers for boys and skirts for girls. It should be trousers for everyone because how is it going to affect you?

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Jon, a brief comment. We have no time for further questions.

Mr Burrows: I commend the young people for that pragmatism and common sense, because attempting to turn it into an issue about boys being able to wear skirts is what could defeat a pragmatic and sensible solution, which is that everyone can wear trousers. I commend their sensible and pragmatic approach to that.

Mr Brooks: I have just one question, but first, thank you very much for your contributions. You have all spoken excellently.

Danny was pointing at the debate that has been had around whether boys can wear skirts. The reason why that was a point of discussion was that, prior to this Bill, it was on the table, so it was a relevant point of discussion at the time. It is not now. I do not speak for the Minister, but I want to clarify his position, as I understand it, because I am a member of his party.

First of all, we do not oppose this Bill; that has been made clear. Our position is more nuanced, despite what others have tried to make of it, and it is that we have always taken a consistent position of supporting the independence of schools to make their own decisions. I recognise that that will be

out of step with some of your views, but there will always be different places where you draw the line about where schools can make decisions.

We see today that schools have different colours in their uniforms and so on. We could have a situation, which some would argue for, where a Minister dictates that all schools should have similar uniforms, do exactly the same things, look exactly the same and have exactly the same ethos. That is not where we want to be, and therefore we defend the independence of schools to decide for themselves. It is a specific issue, and I realise that there are passionate views on it that you have articulated well.

You represent my former school, and I must declare an interest, as my wife used to be on the board of governors. I am concerned to hear that, from what you gather, someone has had to leave school because they felt uncomfortable around wearing trousers. Wherever trousers are worn, that should never be the case. Bullying should never be permitted anyway, but it certainly should not be permitted when it comes to choices that the school has allowed. That is concerning.

I am not sure whether it was Neala or Ellie who talked about the religious participation aspect of it. Are you aware of a situation where someone had a religious concern about wearing a skirt and wanted to wear trousers for religious reasons but was not allowed to do so?

Ms Owens: When we were chatting earlier, someone brought up the issue of being Muslim and wanting to wear tracksuit bottoms when they were doing PE. Everybody else in the class was wearing shorts, which was against their religious beliefs, so they wanted trousers for all to be more inclusive of religions.

Mr Brooks: I take that point. There have always been exemptions, and we are aware of situations in schools when there have been exemptions for people because of specific considerations that do not necessarily apply across the board. I was interested to hear that point. Schools should always be sensitive to that. To be clear, from our point of view, we do not oppose the wearing of trousers in principle.

Ms Simpson: You mentioned schools having choices and the schools' independence, but this issue is more about the pupils' choice. It is not about whether the school wants us to be allowed to wear them; it is whether the pupil feels comfortable and safe in the environment if they want to wear trousers. It is not about what the school thinks or what everyone else thinks. It is their decision on their own.

Mr Brooks: I accept that. In a nuanced way, we are in a slightly different place on that, in that we support the ability of schools to make those decisions. I do not have a problem with girls wearing trousers in principle, but I stop short of what Cara was saying about US schools and self-expression and being allowed to wear whatever you want to school. That is not something that I support. I support a school uniform. Some of us will be in a slightly different place from others in respect of decisions on where we draw that line. I want to articulate my position and, as I understand it, the Minister's position, notwithstanding the fact that he may respond differently to the requests that have been made. I do not know — I do not have an insight into that — but it is very much a case of believing that schools should have the autonomy to make their own decisions and have their own ethos and not be dictated to by a Minister of whatever party.

Ms Owens: I live in a rural area, and there are really only two schools that I can go to. If both those schools decided that they were not going to let girls wear trousers, everyone in my area would be stuck. There would be no other option. I do not have a variety of schools to pick from, so I believe that it should not be the independent choice of the school. If it was an overall right for girls to have the choice, it would make it a lot easier for people in rural communities to express their desire to wear trousers.

Mr McConnell: I second that.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): In the interests of time, this will have to be the final contribution, Dáire.

Mr McConnell: Exemptions create differences, and I am fairly sure that everybody here will agree that, at our age, exemptions create bullying and cause people to be left out and to be seen as different. I support a full allowing of trousers not just because it is something that I see fit but because I

do not want to see certain people not being allowed and then exemptions being made that lead to bullying. I am fairly sure that everybody in the Committee will agree that bullying needs to be stopped. It needs to be destroyed in the ethos of schools and the type of diverse community that we are trying to create in these Six Counties. I am fairly sure that everybody will agree with me on that.

Mr Brooks: I hear the points that you have made, and you have been powerful advocates for it.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): The evidence was really clear, from your opening remarks onwards. It is probably the most emphatic and unanimous evidence that we have ever heard at Committee. That has been really helpful in our considerations for the Committee Bill.

I will just highlight that we have received over 3,000 responses to the consultation, so there is clearly huge public interest in the issue. I really hope that there is some scope to get it dealt with through the guidelines, as that is the most efficient use of resources, as far as I can see. It is an easy thing to do.

The Clerk is nudging me to get a photograph. Given that this is the first evidence session for the new Youth Assembly, we are keen to do that.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Proposed Committee Bill to Allow All Pupils the Choice to Wear Trousers: Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission

4 March 2026

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Education

Proposed Committee Bill to Allow All Pupils the Choice to Wear Trousers: Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission

4 March 2026

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:
Mr Nick Mathison (Chairperson)
Mr Pat Sheehan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Danny Baker
Mr David Brooks
Mr Jon Burrows
Mrs Michelle Guy
Mr Peter Martin
Mrs Cathy Mason

Witnesses:

Dr Colin Caughey	Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission
Ms Alyson Kilpatrick	Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission
Ms Emma Osborne	Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): We are joined by Alyson Kilpatrick, the chief commissioner, and Colin Caughey and Emma Osborne from the commission. You are all welcome. I do not need to rehearse the drill, but I ask that your opening remarks or presentation be up to 10 minutes. We will then move to members' questions. We will aim to keep each line of questioning from each member to a five-minute engagement. I hand over to you, Alyson.

Ms Alyson Kilpatrick (Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission): I will make a few opening remarks. The Committee will be better served by us answering your questions rather than my saying too much at this stage.

Thank you for the invitation. We have been invited to add to our written evidence, which you got most recently by way of a letter, regarding the right for children — girl children — to choose to wear trousers to school or, as we put it in our letter, "not to wear skirts". When you look at it that way, it takes on a different perspective. I do not think that there is any serious disagreement on the principle that girls should be entitled to ask to wear trousers instead of skirts. The issue is whether they should have a right to choose — a right that is enforced for them, not by them. The Minister of Education refers to the legal right of a girl to petition a school in answer to the issue, but we say that that is more theoretical and illusory than practical.

We advise that if it is right that girls are given a choice — we say that it is — it is not right to place a burden on them to secure it. There are risks associated with challenging one's school that a child should not be burdened by. It is also likely to lead to inconsistency across Northern Ireland and create more distraction for teachers and pupils. It is the responsibility of the Department to ensure that all

children enjoy the right to be educated without discrimination and to receive that education in clothing that is comfortable, practical and not discriminatory.

Earlier, we were asked to consider the pros and cons of making such provision by a stand-alone Bill or by amendment to the School Uniforms (Guidelines and Allowances) Act. An amendment is likely to be a quicker process, although we know that it does not necessarily mean that. A stand-alone Bill allows for more comprehensive consideration of the issues. Law should be clear, accessible and predictable. It is not for us to advise on the appropriate legislative process, but, ultimately, the process must ensure that those principles are adhered to.

In our written evidence, we offered three key considerations for requiring choice to be offered: the potential for discrimination if it is not offered; its impact on and interrelationship with violence against women and girls; and the associated cost of uniform skirts compared with most standard uniform trousers. That is not meant to be an exhaustive list. We encourage the Committee to engage widely with children and young people to hear why it matters to them. I know that you have just concluded a session with two very impressive girls who are making the point for themselves.

There is no specific right to which we can direct you to choose to wear trousers to school, but that is not surprising. It is not how the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) works. In our view, such a right is, however, clearly established. If one looks at the interplay between the various ECHR rights, one sees that they include the right to personal autonomy, the right to privacy and physical integrity, the right not to be discriminated against, the right to full gender equality and the right to be free from violence and the threat of violence and abuse. The right of a child to education is reflected across several human rights instruments to which the UK, and, by extension, Northern Ireland, is bound. Most notably, the principle that the best interests of the child are paramount runs through human rights internationally but has also been enshrined in domestic law for many decades.

The absence of choice for girls to wear trousers to school has gendered implications. For example, it has implications for girls' ability to manage menstruation comfortably. It can lead to gender stereotyping and the sexualisation of girls. It can leave girls exposed to the elements and to unwanted intrusions such as upskirting. That is now so common that a criminal offence had to be created for it. It is not a minor problem but a severe one. I am sure that I do not need to tell the Committee that the perpetrator of crimes against Gisèle Pelicot was caught not because of what he did to her but because he was caught upskirting in public, which had just been made a criminal offence in France.

The gendered nature of dress creates anxiety for transgender and gender-nonconforming people who might otherwise choose not to wear a skirt. Article 14 of the ECHR protects against discrimination on multiple grounds, including "other status". That goes beyond domestic employment and other equality laws. "Other status" is taken to have a wide meaning and to be inclusive of gender identity and sexual orientation.

The commission raised the issue of school uniform costs. School skirts in secondary-level education are often specific to the individual school and are more expensive to purchase than the generic school trousers that are readily available in most supermarkets. It is therefore an additional uniform cost incurred by the families of girls. Again, that is not a minor point. Girls' uniforms are more expensive, making the families of girls face a higher financial burden when sending their daughters to school. That has an obvious direct impact on their ability to access education. Some parents whom I have spoken to said that a few extra pounds can make all the difference and that it does affect their choice of school.

If there is to be legislation on the issue, an equality impact assessment (EQIA) is likely to be required. It is also a requirement that legislation does not conflict with the Human Rights Act 1998, so a human rights impact assessment is necessary. Our advice notes that any legislation should consider its impact on the state's obligation to prevent violence against women and girls. We repeat what we stated in writing: allowing girls to wear trousers will not prevent violence against women and girls. If only it were that easy. Girls should be able to wear skirts without being concerned about victimisation. The onus should never be on policing girls' dress but on recognising that girls are more vulnerable to certain types of violence, including upskirting, and therefore should be allowed to choose what they wear. The ability to choose to wear trousers may alleviate concerns that many girls have, thus allowing them to feel more comfortable and confident on the journey to and from school and in school.

In its development of forthcoming legislation, we encourage the Committee to engage with children and young people, as it has been doing, their parents and representative organisations and to monitor the application of the law. Ultimately, uniforms can serve an important purpose. They are important to

many schools, parents and children. This is not about that, however. Rather, it is about the requirement for girls in some schools to wear a uniform that exposes them, makes some feel vulnerable, is not practical and is stereotyping. Times change, and we know more now than we used to. What was once considered traditional is no longer recognised as such.

If there is a balancing exercise to be conducted, the balance should come down clearly in favour of girls not being forced to wear skirts if they do not want to. Many experts recommend gender-neutral uniforms in schools. We encourage Northern Ireland to consider that option, but we cannot advise that it is a human rights standard that must be applied yet. I will finish there.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Thank you. I will pick up on specific elements of your evidence in a moment, but I want to flag an issue to start. If it is something that you have not had an opportunity to consider, there is no pressure on you to answer the question. We received correspondence on the proposed Bill from the Free Presbyterian Church specifically requesting that the Committee consider not extending any legislation that we introduce to independent schools, on the basis that they may have uniform policies that are informed by particular religious beliefs. It highlighted the right of the parent to have their child educated in keeping with their religious and philosophical beliefs. I may not have quoted that totally accurately. If I did not, I am sure that you will be able to correct me. Do you have a view on whether that is an appropriate approach for the Committee to take? Are there are any potential implications that we have not considered? I would welcome your views on that. You may need time to come back to us in writing on that, but I will put it out there as a starter.

Ms Kilpatrick: I will respond briefly, but we can come back to you with further information. Quite a bit could be said about it. The first important thing to say is that we value, respect and will protect the right of people to express their religion. That right is as fundamental as any other right in the ECHR. It is not, however, a right to the exclusion of everything else. That is why I said in my opening remarks that a balancing exercise may need to be conducted.

Lots of religious expressions are curtailed in schools already, for the best interests of children and for consistency across Northern Ireland. We dictate to schools in many different ways what can and cannot be done with children, usually for their best interests but sometimes just for good regulation in schools. I would not say that there is a justified exemption for something such as that. A very cogent argument would need to be made on why an exemption is reasonable and necessary and why it is a demonstration of religion that cannot be expressed in any way other than by preventing a child from choosing not to wear a skirt. I have not heard the rationale for why it is a religious expression for a girl to wear a skirt to school. If there is such an argument, it will feature in the balancing exercise, but it would be wrong to think that a school's individual ethos can dictate what society determines, through legislation, to be appropriate for schools.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Thank you for that. If members are agreed, we can potentially share the correspondence with you at the end of the session to get your response from a rights perspective, because the correspondence was framed in those terms.

Ms Kilpatrick: I can go into more detail. There are some cases, not on the right of girls to wear trousers or not to wear trousers in religious schools but on the right to wear religious items, such as jewellery. It will therefore be helpful if we analyse those cases and give you a summary of them.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): That would be helpful evidence. We will get the Committee's consensus on that. We may need to seek advice from the Assembly's Legal Services on other aspects. Those schools do not receive state funding, so there may be an argument for an exemption on that basis.

At the outset, you mentioned language, calling it the right not to wear skirts rather than the right to choose to wear trousers. Will you comment on that? Should we consider that when framing the legislation?

Ms Kilpatrick: That language adds a different sense to what we are talking about. I am sure that you heard that from the girls. I did not hear their evidence, but I have heard them before. The right to choose to wear a particular item of clothing is not really what it is about for girls. Rather, it is about their being able to wear something that covers them and that looks the same as what everybody else in the school is wearing, even the boys. It is about their not being exposed to the weather and not feeling exposed to threats or risk from boys, or from men on the way home.

I was a girl many decades ago, and I know that it is not a trivial matter. Girls grow up knowing why it is important. Unfortunately, most girls will be able to give you an example of why wearing a skirt or a pair of trousers has made a difference to them. If a girl wants to wear a skirt, that is also her choice to make. That is why we framed it as "the right to choose" in our written evidence.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): That is helpful. We can reflect that when we engage with the drafter to determine where the language might land.

Finally, you referenced article 10 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which states:

> *"States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in order to ensure to them equal rights with men in the field of education".*

The School Uniforms (Guidelines and Allowances) Act (Northern Ireland) 2026 does not address the issue of the wearing of trousers. Do you think that all necessary, appropriate measures were taken in the Act, or will the Committee's Bill enhance it and take it a step further in that direction?

Ms Kilpatrick: In our view, the proposed Bill will enhance the legislation. It would be a positive development. The right to choose could have been included in the original Act, but that does not mean that we identified a breach as such. Experts across the world, and certainly in Europe, seem to agree that it does make a difference, because the requirement for girls to wear a skirt is gender stereotyping and can result in their exposure to violence and abuse. That being the case, where there is the possibility to take a step to make such a difference, the state has an obligation to take that step. We say that it is one step: it is not the only one, but it is one step.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Thank you. I may have a further question, but I will see where other members go with theirs.

Ms Kilpatrick: The final point that I will make on that is that we are talking not just about the threat of violence or abuse but about people who may have already been subjected to violence or abuse. If you have spoken to women or girls who have been subjected to any sort of assault, you will know that the choice to wear a pair of trousers is not a trivial one. It is not a fashion choice.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): That is very helpful.

Mr Sheehan: Thanks, Alyson, for your contribution so far. I will ask a similar question to the one that I asked the two girls when they were in earlier. Can you think of any reason whatsoever why girls should be required or forced to wear a skirt rather than any other sort of attire?

Ms Kilpatrick: Speaking as the chief commissioner of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) and as a lawyer, I have to say that the answer is no. If somebody can give a reason that is not a legal reason or a human rights-based one is for them, but I cannot see a reason that justifies the requirement. Not any more, certainly.

Mr Sheehan: That is straightforward, and it is the same answer that we got from the witnesses in the previous session. For the life of me, I cannot think of any reason.

The Assembly gets lots of bad press, much of which may be deserved. I will not ask you to comment on that.

Ms Kilpatrick: We get it as well. *[Laughter.]* Some of it is deserved.

Mr Sheehan: There is support in the Assembly for the proposed legislation. If we get a fair wind and have enough time, the Committee's Bill will become law. What annoys me about the process, however, is that the Minister could stop the need for our Bill by issuing a statutory guideline under the legislation that passed into law recently. I will not ask you to comment on that unless you want to. I suppose that I am making a political point. The Assembly gets bad press. MLAs are accused of not doing enough, yet we are trying to introduce legislation that the Minister could remove the need for right now by issuing a statutory guideline to schools to give girls the right to wear trousers. I will leave it there. If you want to comment, go ahead. If not, that is good enough.

Ms Kilpatrick: We would still say that the Bill should proceed for reasons of certainty and consistency. In the meantime, though, if there were statutory guidance that had to be complied with, that would be an answer.

Mr Burrows: Thanks. What you have said is really useful. You state in your evidence:

"Trans and gender non-conforming students can face humiliation through gendered uniforms."

To me, there is a danger that we are losing common sense when discussing schools. I agree that if a girl wants to wear trousers, she can, but we then get into the question of whether a boy can wear a skirt. In your expression of support for a girl being able to wear trousers, you mentioned the risk of upskirting. If someone were to say that a boy should have the right to wear a skirt, that boy would clearly be at an increased risk of upskirting if he were wearing a skirt, logically speaking.

Ms Kilpatrick: We are not calling for boys to be allowed to wear skirts at school. There is a lot of evidence that gender-neutral uniforms benefit everyone, not just trans or gender-nonconforming children. The risk to boys is simply not the same. The history is simply not the same. If it were to end up being the case that boys were at risk of upskirting, we would probably say that they should not be wearing skirts either if their doing so were magnifying the risk. We do not see that as being the issue here, and we are not calling for boys to be allowed to wear skirts. There will, I think, come a time wholly gender-neutral uniforms will be par for the course. That certainly seems to be what is working its across GB and other parts of Europe. We are not saying —.

Mr Burrows: Is that the Human Rights Commission's view or your own ideological view? Are you giving us a legal view or your view from reading the politics?

Ms Kilpatrick: No, what I am saying is that it seems likely, because that is the direction of travel. Right back to about 2016, a lot of UK state schools were mandating gender-neutral uniforms. More and more are taking up that option, so I am simply making the statement that it is likely that that is the direction in which school uniform policy will go. As I said, however, in my opening remarks, at the minute, we are not telling anybody that that is a standard that must be complied with.

Mr Burrows: I will make an observation and then ask a final question. Some of the talk about gender-neutral uniforms and all those other things has built up hostility in some to what is the very straightforward proposal that all girls, just like women in the workplace, can wear trousers. We would be aghast if someone were to say that a woman had to wear a dress or skirt to work. That would not be accepted. We can sometimes lose the common-sense argument when we start getting into this gender-neutral thing.

Ms Kilpatrick: We cannot pretend that there are not transgender or gender-neutral people, nor can we pretend that there are not children at school who are expressing that view to teachers. The Gender Recognition Act 2004, which came into law long before my time as chief commissioner, gives a person the right to change their identity for all legal purposes. It is therefore not a construction of mine or ours. Rather, it is about recognising that people come in many different forms. If something as simple as wearing trousers, which you accept would help girls, or, at least, you are saying that they should be allowed to choose, also helps trans and non-binary children, where is the harm in that? The very nature of the argument proves the point in a sense, because it proves that skirts are gendered and are about telling girls to dress in a certain way and that they are not supposed to do physical activity in the same way as boys. Many years ago, modesty — not showing a silhouette — used to be the reason why girls had to wear long skirts. Times change. We are not pressing the issue, but it is a fact that transgender and gender-nonconforming children are expressing that stress.

Mr Burrows: I just think that there is a common-sense argument that people are making at the minute that some bodies need to catch up with. We will agree to disagree on that.

You mentioned taking a positive step to prevent upskirting. I agree with that. Are you in support of the smartphone-free schools campaign, whereby children would not have access to their phone in school? That would prevent upskirting.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): I ask for a brief response before I bring in the next member.

Ms Kilpatrick: That is a completely different thing.

Mr Burrows: It offers the same protection, so what onus do you have? What is your view, as the chief commissioner of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission?

Ms Kilpatrick: I do not have a view on that as the chief commissioner, because there is not a human rights standard that requires it. The violence and assault involved there is not simply as a result of the fact that someone has a phone in their hand. If phones in schools are got rid of, there will, unfortunately, still be boys taking advantage of the fact that some of their girl colleagues are wearing skirts. There is a —.

Mr Burrows: When you mentioned upskirting, that was therefore just a red herring. It is not really the issue at all. The issue is the individuals involved.

Ms Kilpatrick: No, it is entirely —.

Mr Burrows: You introduced phones into the argument.

Ms Kilpatrick: It is a big part of the issue. The fact of the matter is that girls have to go into school and do everything that they have to do at school while wearing something that does not cover their legs or necessarily conceal their underwear.

Mr Burrows: If upskirting is to be defined by the use of a phone —

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Final point, Jon.

Mr Burrows: — to record an image —.

Ms Kilpatrick: No, but upskirting is a different thing.

Mr Burrows: You mentioned upskirting. You introduced it.

Ms Kilpatrick: Upskirting is simply one of the things to which girls are subjected.

Mr Burrows: A very significant one. You said that it is a rising issue.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Jon, I said that that was to be your final point, because we —.

Mr Burrows: I can read what you said into the record.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Jon, excuse me. I am chairing the meeting. It is not for a member to put up their hand to say that their line of enquiry will continue.

Mr Burrows: OK, Chair. That is fine.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): We are well over time. The commissioner can make a final point in response to your question, after which we will move on.

Ms Kilpatrick: If something that I said is to be misinterpreted, I will say that upskirting is simply one of the most obvious things to which I can point. It is a matter of fact that wearing a skirt or wearing a pair of trousers makes a difference.

Mr Burrows: Absolutely.

Ms Kilpatrick: That a boy has a phone in his hand will make it easier for him to upskirt and take photographs. That is part of the offence, but not allowing phones in school does not stop assaults in other ways. There were no mobile phones in my time at school, but assaults still happened because girls were wearing skirts and boys were wearing trousers.

Mr Burrows: I want to stamp out upskirting totally. Upskirting should result in a suspension, extreme discipline and, potentially, criminal charges. That is why we need to be careful about lowering the age

of digital consent for children are allowing them to have phones in school, because it would result in a free-for-all. I note that you do not have a view on that.

Ms Kilpatrick: My view is what I have said. I am here to point to recognised human rights standards. There is no standard for children having phones in school, and that is why I am not going to stray into giving my personal view.

Mr Burrows: They do not have a right to have a mobile phone in school.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): I am going to draw a line under that now.

Mr Burrows: Thank you, Chair. I apologise for cutting across you. I was in full flow.

Mr Sheehan: On a point of information, Chair. Jon said that people would be aghast if women were told that they had to wear a skirt to work. The letter from the independent Free Presbyterian schools states that their female teachers have to wear a skirt to work.

Mr Burrows: I am aghast at that, and I go to church. I would be aghast if any woman were asked to go into a workplace in a skirt.

Mr Sheehan: I thought that I would let you know, because you did not know about it.

Mr Burrows: I am aware of some of the letter.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Thank you, Deputy Chair. If we are to conduct our meetings in good order, I remind members that —

Mr Burrows: Apologies. Apologies.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): — if I ask a member to draw their remarks to a close, it is not appropriate to raise their hand to say that they are going to continue speaking.

Mr Burrows: It was inadvertent, Chair.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): It is not about my trying to exert control but about my trying to maintain good order in the meeting.

Mr Martin: Thank you for coming along, folks. I am not going to get into the debate on trousers and whether girls should be allowed to wear them or not. I will take you to something in your evidence, which Jon started with. At the bottom of page 3, it is stated:

> *"Research also indicates that school uniform policies that have separate rules for boys and girls can reinforce negative gender stereotypes, while leaving transgender and gender non-conforming children more vulnerable to bullying, stress, and anxiety."*

I do not even want to get into the aspects of that, but you have stated it in your evidence. Are you happy to stand by that?

Ms Kilpatrick: Is that in the letter or in our previous written submission?

Mr Martin: Right.

Ms Kilpatrick: It is in the most recent letter.

Mr Martin: It is page 3. Are you happy enough?

Ms Kilpatrick: Yes.

Mr Martin: You made the contention, and you reinforced twice to Jon that there is a lot of evidence for it and that it is a fact. Footnote reference number 13 is to a paper by the Assembly's Research and

Information Service (RaISe). You will not have it in front of you, but I have a copy here. I will read out the reference for you: NIAR 158-21. The piece that you cited is in the section titled, "Impact of school uniform policies on transgender children and gender non-conforming youth". The researcher cited a paper to come to their conclusions. It is a paper by McBride and Schubotz, which is well known to the Committee, and it is titled 'Living a fairy tale: the educational experiences of transgender and gender non-conforming youth in Northern Ireland'. Are you OK so far? Are you happy enough?

I have here the paper by McBride and Schubotz on which you based your initial statement. It is a 14-page academic paper that is based on the experiences of transgender children. For context, when, say, LucidTalk does a survey in Northern Ireland, it will look at a sample of between 1,000 and 3,000 people to get reliable and valid data. Commissioner, do you know on how many people that academic research, which you then based your contention in the evidence to us, was based?

Ms Kilpatrick: We do not base our contention on that paper. If I had never read that piece of research, I would say exactly the same thing to you today, based on my analysis of the ECHR, other international treaties and many other reports and evidence from people who know more about what trans people think than I do.

Mr Martin: It is not how you cited the paper. From our evidence, it is pretty clear that you based your statement on it. I can read it to you again.

Ms Kilpatrick: No. It is in our evidence because it is referenced. It is a reference. I am not going —.

Mr Martin: Yes. That is from where you got it. I have taken you through the stages of how the evidence was created, on which you based your statement. I ask you this again: how many people were surveyed in that academic paper? Do you have any idea? Do you want to have a guess for me?

Ms Kilpatrick: I have no idea. I am here to assist with human rights compliance with the proposed legislation, not to speak about what appears to be a wholly different issue. What we do is reference. You asked me about that particular piece of research. We do not base our evidence on it. If you want to scratch out that reference, what we say will still be exactly the same. It just happens to be a place where one can see that a reference is made.

Mr Martin: You provided written evidence to the Committee. You have just used the phrase, "You could scratch that out", despite the fact that your written evidence to the Committee is based on the trail that I have just explained to you, and this paper. That is where your evidence comes from, because you referenced it.

Ms Kilpatrick: Where I disagree with you is that you say that my evidence to the Committee is based on that piece of research: it is simply not. I am saying that, if we took that piece of research out of the equation, we would still be saying exactly the same thing on the basis of the human rights standards and the case law to date. I cannot take it any further than that.

Mr Martin: It is astounding that you are back-pedalling on that. I will give you the answer: it was five.

Ms Kilpatrick: Bear in mind that we are here to give assistance, not to be held to account. It does not seem —

Mr Martin: I am just questioning the validity of the research in your evidence.

Ms Kilpatrick: Perhaps you could explain to me what was a back-pedal, so that I can answer. That is fair.

Mr Martin: You just said about rubbing out the reference.

Ms Kilpatrick: No, I said, "you could", as in, "one could". You said that our evidence is based on that research.

Mr Martin: Yes.

Ms Kilpatrick: It is not. I am saying that, if we had never read that research, on the basis of everything else, we would still be giving the same evidence.

Mr Martin: I am not asking about everything else; I am simply following the evidence that you have submitted to the Committee and looking through the paper trail, which leads me to this paper, which is based on the experiences of five individuals. I do not know whether it is commonplace for your office to make an assertion, which is what this evidence to us is, and then, when somebody spends time to look back on where it came from, they find that is based on five individuals — actually, three individuals. Researchers use something called "snowballing", which is where you ask three individuals whether they have some friends who will give evidence on an issue. It is called "snowballing" in research.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Peter, it is time to bring your point to a conclusion.

Mr Martin: This is my only question, Chair, so I am finishing here. It is astonishing and poor that it took me 45 minutes to find out that an assertion by your office is, when you trail it back, based on the experiences of three individuals — five if you count the snowballing. Frankly, that is astounding.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): We are short on time, but it is appropriate to give you the opportunity to respond.

Mr Martin: I am happy to leave it there, Chair.

Ms Kilpatrick: To say that I made an assertion based on research is simply not correct. That is simply not what we are doing here. I will let my colleagues go back to that piece of research. We can point to research all over. I am sure that you can point to research as well.

Mr Martin: I appreciate that, commissioner, but —.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): In the interests of time —

Ms Kilpatrick: Can Colin have an opportunity to —?

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): — I will allow a response, and we will then have to draw this one to a close.

Dr Colin Caughey (Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission): The advice that we are providing to the Committee is based on international human rights, so, as we do in that paragraph, we draw on a number of reports from international human rights treaty bodies. The UN independent expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity highlighted the fact that trans and gender non-conforming students can face humiliation through gendered uniforms. In the sentence that you refer to, we say "Research ... indicates". We are not basing it entirely on that. We have a number of sources that we cite when it comes to the impact that that may have, and we then apply the international human rights framework.

Mr Martin: As a Committee member, I can go only on what is in front of me, and —.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): We have to draw a line, because we are way over time. You have made your points clear, and the commissioners have had the opportunity to respond.

Mrs Guy: We have just had a wonderful evidence session with some young people about what is a really simple and straightforward legislative proposal. That this has descended into an absolute spectacle in which some members have tried to score culture war points is beyond depressing. I needed to say that before I can even form a question.

Thank you for coming here and giving us serious evidence. I have a question that is pertinent to the legislation that we are discussing, rather than for a TikTok video or internet points. I am not really clear about what any of that was about.

Will you speak to how girls' ability to engage with their education is compromised if their uniform makes them uncomfortable, perhaps even to the extent that they do not want to attend school? I am sorry: that is a poorly framed question.

Ms Kilpatrick: We touch on it. I am sure that the girls spoke to you about their experience. I know that they will be watching this evidence session. If this were turned into an issue simply about trans and non-binary, they would be very disappointed. They made it very clear that it is not about that. However, having said that, there are lots of reasons why wearing a skirt can make a significant difference to a child. One concerns a post-pubescent child who may be menstruating. I can spare you the graphics of that, but I do not know any boys who understand what a difference that could make, because they have never had to. If the vast majority of girls and women are telling you that that makes a difference because it is a very difficult thing to manage if you are wearing a skirt, I would simply take their word for it. I am not going to ask them to prove to me what it is, and I am not going to go into the graphics of that today. I do not think that that is appropriate.

I remember playing in the playground — I know that the girls said something along these lines to you — doing cartwheels and playing rounders. There were all sorts of things that we could not do because it was immodest. No boy was at risk of being immodest, because they were wearing trousers. It affected the way in which we sat in the classroom as well. I am talking personally because I happen to have personal experience of wearing a skirt to school. My personal experience is not the be-all and end-all: it is about standards, but the standards align with personal experience. There are all sorts of reasons why girls simply want to cover themselves and do not want to have to be exposed. The question is this: why should a girl expose her legs and not have the protection of a pair of trousers, which covers everything, should she choose? I do not know what the answer to that is.

Ms Emma Osborne (Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission): I think that we have cited in our evidence that the UN CEDAW Committee has identified girls managing menstruation as a barrier to education. If wearing a pair of trousers helps girls to better manage that, that would go some way to removing or, at least, minimising that barrier as much as possible. That would be a good example of removing a barrier.

Mrs Guy: Thank you. These are genuine questions for my understanding. I asked the Northern Ireland Children's Commissioner the same question. If there is a rights engagement, or if there is a breach of rights, as such, in any of that, can you take any action on that front if we run out of time and are unable to legislate for that, or is it really our jurisdiction to create that legislation in the absence of the Minister's taking action? Is there a legal proceeding, a complaint or anything such as that that can be engaged?

Ms Kilpatrick: I have to return to my being asked to give evidence for assistance as the chief commissioner. There is no standard or case that I can point to in the ECHR and say, "Go along to court and tell the judge that this is what you're also entitled to". I think that it would be possible to mount a challenge. It would be probably for a girl, although it does not have to be a girl, to mount that challenge. The question of whether a school should be required to do it, as opposed to whether a girl should be allowed to petition a school, is a different issue. We have not chosen to bring a case such as that. We do not think that the law is advanced enough for us to bring such a case. However, if you look at all the rights together, you see that there is clearly an entitlement there. Breach, proving a breach and getting a remedy are much more technical things than just applying a rights standard to it.

Mrs Guy: Thank you. I appreciate the clarity.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Danny, did you indicate that you want to come in? I have no other indications. I think that you did earlier, perhaps, during the previous exchange. I am just checking that you still want in.

Mr Baker: Yes. I was not planning to come in, to be honest. You are here for a specific reason, and I thank you for that. I find it difficult to listen to people saying to you, "Are you still with me here?" and talking about common sense. I am trying to refrain from saying things. It is not professional. On behalf of those of us who are sitting here, I apologise. That is completely wrong. It shows how very important it is that we put things in legislation to protect the rights of our young people — all young people. Clearly, there is a certain minority that is under attack and will continue to come under attack from all different parts of the world, particularly from politicians, which makes it even more dangerous. I am sorry: that was not a question. I am just frustrated after listening to that. I apologise.

Mr Brooks: I will not go into that debate again. However, following on from what Danny said, I will say, as, I think, I have mentioned previously, that, sometimes, when it comes to the appointment of commissioners and different individuals whom the Assembly has chosen to appoint over time to do various pieces of work, there is a degree of outsourcing things that should be decided and done by politicians.

When people who hold such grand offices come before us, their evidence is usually — maybe not unduly — given significant weight. However, when evidence comes before us that contains references to academic work that is not referred to by us but chosen by the witness, it is right for there to be accountability. That shows —.

Mr Baker: You laughed, you smirked, and you said, "Are you still with me?".

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Through the Chair, please, Danny.

Mr Baker: That is terrible behaviour, particularly from three men.

Mr Brooks: I know that Danny would never laugh or smirk during a meeting of the Committee, right enough.

Mr Baker: At you, but not at the witnesses.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): This is it: David's —.

Mr Brooks: Danny's apology is not on our behalf.

Mr Baker: Of course it is not.

Mr Brooks: We are holding people to account, and it is absolutely appropriate for the Committee to scrutinise the evidence that witnesses bring to it.

I will return to an issue that I had not planned to discuss in one of these sessions: the independent Christian schools' ask for an exemption. There is a very small number of such schools, and, indeed, of independent schools in general, in Northern Ireland. Is there an acceptance that those who choose to send their children to those schools very much align with their ethos and that of the Church that is associated with them? I declare an interest: I am not a "Free P", but a member of my wife's family is employed by the Free Presbyterian Church. Those who send their children to those schools are aligned with the faith of the Church that is aligned with the schools.

Ms Kilpatrick: I will clarify two things. First, I cannot make the Committee or anybody else do anything. We are here to offer our advice.

Mr Brooks: I know.

Ms Kilpatrick: We are appointed to give advice; you can ignore it.

Mr Brooks: Yes.

Ms Kilpatrick: You frequently do so, which you are quite right to do if you disagree with it. You are the legislators, which is why I have put the evidence before you in the way in which I have.

Secondly, we are saying not that schools have to mandate trousers for everybody but that girls should be given a choice. That is where our evidence stops.

As I said, you have overstated the importance of that research. I do not discredit it, however. If you do, maybe you have other research that says something different. The quality of research does not depend solely on the number of people interviewed. Two young girls have been before you today; their evidence is not discredited by there being only two of them. If there is another reason to discredit the research —.

Mr Brooks: It is right —.

Ms Kilpatrick: As I said, and as Colin made clear, we draw from all sorts of sources. We put it forward not because we expect you to accept it but because it is what is out there. We draw from different standards. Colin, Emma and I might all have different personal views on this, but we are united on the standards, and that is what is important when we are before the Committee.

Mr Brooks: It is appropriate to have shown what weight we should give it. You and Peter had an exchange of views on that, and you just have spoken to it.

Do you think —?

Ms Kilpatrick: You said that the weight to be given —.

Mr Brooks: If you do not mind, I have a set amount of time, and I would like to return to the substantive issue of my question. I have issues, as I have said, with the overbearingness of the UN when it comes to the affairs of sovereign states. Do you really think that dictating uniform policy to small religious schools is an appropriate application of human rights legislation?

Ms Kilpatrick: We are saying not that there is a right to dictate but that children should be given a choice, which is different.

Mr Brooks: You advised that an exemption would not be appropriate.

Ms Kilpatrick: I said that, once you make the decision that it is the right thing to do, it is difficult to justify an exemption. I also said —.

Mr Brooks: You also said that you do not think that it is currently a human right.

Ms Kilpatrick: No, I did not. It is —.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): The commissioner had not quite finished her point. If you ask a question, it is appropriate to hear the answer.

Ms Kilpatrick: If you are going to parse what I say by putting together a few words, rather than sentences, you have to let me return to it, because that is not what I said. That is not the full nature of what we said. We said that there would have to be arguments as to why certain schools should have exemptions. Otherwise, why would we regulate anything to do with schools, or the care of children? The fact is that some of it is regulated for the best interests of the child. Take international standards out of the equation if you wish. The Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, which has been around for a lot longer, also requires the best interests of the child to be put first. You weigh up all of those things. That is exactly what I said. I invited a balancing exercise to be conducted for Presbyterian schools to explain why it was important to them. I also said that the commission would, if necessary, and if the schools brought it to us, support their right to freedom of expression of religion. However, in this instance, I would have to see evidence before we expressed our view on whether that was justified.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): If members are content, we can come to an agreement to seek further evidence on that. David, do you have anything to add? We are over time, so there will not be time for a further question.

Mr Brooks: No, that is fine.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Are there any other indications?

Mr Burrows: I will make an observation, Chair. It is entirely right that there is probing and scrutinising in this institution, including in Committees. I distance myself from those who do not want us to ask tough, probing questions. I am glad to know that there were only five people involved, because that informs me about the weight that I can attach to it. That is objective decision-making. It should have been flagged that it was such a tiny number, because it was not presented as the lived experience of two witnesses; it was presented as a research paper. The definition of "research" is very clear.

Ms Kilpatrick: I am not going to —.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): I think that we have rehearsed the issue in some detail.

Ms Kilpatrick: I will clarify in writing what we said, and what we rely on as our evidence.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): It is entirely appropriate that you get the right to clarify, but, other than that, we will draw a line.

Ms Kilpatrick: May I respond to one last point?

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Yes.

Ms Kilpatrick: I did not have to come here — none of us did. We came here hoping that we could answer your questions, and to be questioned by you and for you to disagree with us. That is why we came here. We are scrutinised by the Assembly, and I am answerable to Westminster. I was appointed by the Secretary of State, and I am scrutinised regularly at Westminster through its Committees. There is not a lack of scrutiny. I do not disagree with your right to say anything that you say, but I ask that, when we come here, your questions be based on what we have actually said, rather than on what you think that we may have said.

Mr Martin: Chair, I read out to the witness —

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Peter, if I could —.

Mr Martin: — what they said. They sent it to us in written evidence.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): We have had a lot of back and forth on one particular issue that is on the periphery of what the Committee is trying to do in the Bill. I do not want to take up a huge amount of time with anything further on that. It is appropriate that you have a short right of response, and then I will draw this issue to a close.

Mr Martin: It will take only a short time. I read out to Alyson what was submitted in written evidence to the Committee. In answer to Danny, it would not have mattered what the issue was —.

Mr Baker: "Are you still with me?", was how you put it.

Mr Martin: It would not have mattered what the issue was; you are framing it in a certain way. It could have been any issue. A statement was presented in evidence, but, when you drill down two levels, you find out that it was based on the experiences of three individuals. It was not represented as such. It is nothing to do with the people who were involved in the research. I was just stating a fact.

Mr Baker: I will go back and watch.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): I am going to draw that to a close. The Deputy Chair wants to be brought in. Is this on another issue, Deputy Chair? I am not interested in relitigating the matter.

Mr Sheehan: It is an observation. We are here to discuss proposed legislation about giving girls the right to wear trousers, or the right not to wear skirts — whichever way we end up framing it. The debate has gone off on a tangent. I have said this before, and I say it again: I do not understand unionism's obsession with transgender young people and boys wearing skirts. I do not understand what that is about.

Ms Kilpatrick: May I have one last chance to correct the record, please?

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Yes. If I can be clear, it is appropriate that you have —.

Mr Brooks: There are many issues for me as well.

Ms Kilpatrick: I will read out what our evidence says.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): I want to be fair to everybody in the Committee. I am also conscious of the fact that we have strayed very far from the scope of the evidence session, which was specifically on the Committee Bill. It seems that we have become fixated on a footnote in a letter. I am not convinced that that is a great use of Committee time, but members can use their time on the Committee as they see fit; they have the right to do so. Do you wish to correct the record, Alyson? I think that every member has had the opportunity to speak to that issue.

Mr Brooks: On the right to reply, there was an insinuation about my contribution as well. If you are going to allow my colleague to come in, my request —.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): There will be a right to reply. We will give the commissioner the right to correct the record, and then I will draw this evidence session to a close.

Ms Kilpatrick: It was simply to say that there are lots of sentences in between what was quoted at me, one of which is:

> *"Research also indicates that school uniform policies that have separate rules for boys and girls can reinforce negative gender stereotypes, while leaving transgender and gender non-conforming children more vulnerable to bullying, stress, and anxiety."*

The footnote is:

> *"NI Assembly, 'Research and Information Service Briefing Paper: School Uniforms — Cost, Gender and Behavioural considerations', (NIA, 2021)."*

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Thank you. David, I ask you again to be brief.

Mr Brooks: This is not even on the issue that Peter raised. The whole point of my question about the independent Christian schools was to allow the commissioner — she was suggesting that I was putting words in her mouth — to articulate what she believed in that regard, and how that should be used. That is the whole point of the evidence session, and my questions. I get it that passions were raised, but there was no attempt to try to infer that she was saying something that she was not. It was a question to allow you to articulate that, and that is what we are here for.

Mr Sheehan: She articulated it very clearly.

Ms Kilpatrick: For clarification, my passions are not raised. This is a very professional and important debate for us to have. I will stay here for as long as it takes, and I will answer any question that is put to me. I did not suggest that you were putting words in my mouth. What I was suggesting was that, when you ask me about things that I have said, it sometimes needs be about the full context of what I have said, not just bits of it. I am not suggesting that you were being dishonest in any way at all. I am saying that you were giving me bits of what I said, which lacked the context and the full sentence.

Mr Brooks: I hope that you had the opportunity to articulate the bits that you felt that I left out.

Ms Kilpatrick: I absolutely did, and I thank you for allowing me to do that.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Thank you for your evidence. The Committee will make a decision collectively about how we follow up on the issue of independent schools. I put on record my thanks for the work that you do, and for the evidence that was provided today. It has been very helpful. Thank you.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Proposed Committee Bill to Allow All Pupils the Choice to Wear Trousers: Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People; Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People Youth Panel

4 March 2026

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Education

Proposed Committee Bill to Allow All Pupils the Choice to Wear Trousers: Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People; Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People Youth Panel

4 March 2026

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:
Mr Nick Mathison (Chairperson)
Mr Pat Sheehan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Danny Baker
Mr David Brooks
Mr Jon Burrows
Mrs Michelle Guy
Mr Peter Martin
Mrs Cathy Mason

Witnesses:

Mr Chris Quinn	Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People
Ms Rhea Donnell	Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People Youth Panel
Ms Astrid Knox	Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People Youth Panel
Ms Laura McFall	Office of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): We are joined by Chris Quinn, the Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY); Laura McFall, participation officer from the commissioner's office; and Rhea Donnell and Astrid Knox, who are representatives from the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People's Youth Panel. Rhea and Astrid are familiar to the Committee from their campaign on being able to wear trousers at school and the evidence that they gave to the Committee. You are all welcome, particularly Rhea and Astrid. Thank you both for giving more of your time to help us to reflect on issues to do with school uniform. I am sure that you probably thought that you would not need to come back and do this, but here you are, and we look forward to hearing from you.

I will hand over to the witnesses. Chris, will you start? You will have 10 minutes for any opening remarks or presentation, and then we will move to questions from members. We will aim to keep to around five minutes per enquiry, and I ask members and witnesses to keep those timings in mind as we go through questions and answers. Over to you, Chris.

Mr Chris Quinn (Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People): Thank you. I will keep my remarks as brief as possible. Thank you, Committee Chair and members, for having me here today. I feel as though I have become a regular fixture at the Committee, but I welcome it: education is such a big part of what we do in my office.

You may remember that I was here to discuss the School Uniforms (Guidelines and Allowances) Bill, and I am sure that you will remember these two inspirational young people, with whom I am proud to be sitting today. In a few moments, they will tell you about their lived experiences of the topic that we are here to discuss. By way of background, I note that NICCY provided a response to the call for evidence for the School Uniforms Bill, in which we covered much to do with this topic. We also made a submission to the Committee's survey on this proposed Bill, supporting the proposal.

We are here today to discuss more than just girls wearing skirts — sorry, trousers. *[Laughter.]* I beg your pardon. Girls wear trousers all the time. Boys wear trousers all the time. Trousers are part of our everyday discussions on what we wear, day in and day out. Importantly, as adults, we have a choice, which children do not always have in school. To be honest, I find it somewhat peculiar that, where dress codes exist outside school — for example, here in the Assembly, in the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and in the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) — they are, by and large, gender neutral, but that that is not the case for children in school. It is not the case for girls who want to do cartwheels at break time or to feel comfortable during cold, wet winters. Indeed, that is what Rhea and Astrid said in their letter to me: that they wanted to do cartwheels at lunchtime.

This is about equity, equality, dignity and the fundamental rights of every pupil and student in Northern Ireland. Despite the new guidance and legislation that has just come into place, school uniform policies still do not allow choice for all pupils. For too long, many schools' uniform policies seem to have been led somewhat by so-called traditionalist views and ideas of what children and young people should look like in school. That has seemingly been prioritised over a child's comfort, needs and agency. That is reflected in the views of children and young people.

Girls on our youth panel have told us about the stigma that they feel when they wear trousers, and that information was provided to the Committee in our previous submission and our response to the survey. There continues to be negative judgement associated with girls wearing trousers in school. That comes not just from their peers; there seems to be a stigma from some adults, teachers and school staff, which girls and young women have fed back to us. Young people have identified increased risks of bullying behaviour, which is often homophobic in nature, and the impact of appearing to stand out. When those matters are addressed in policy change in schools, we can ensure that young people have the right to wear school trousers as part of their school uniform.

As the Committee heard at the previous session on the matter, and throughout its call for evidence for the School Uniforms Bill, children and young people have talked about aspects of uniform that make it difficult to walk or cycle to school, and, sometimes, to travel on public transport. Having to wear a skirt hinders their ability to cycle or walk greater distances or to play — to do handstands and cartwheels at playtime. Young women feel uncomfortable when they are on their period, too.

By ensuring that girls having the choice to wear trousers in school is in law, we are not changing a dress code but upholding international rights standards under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Children and young people in Northern Ireland are rights holders, and adults are duty bearers who are responsible for upholding, promoting and fulfilling those rights. That includes all of us in the room as members of society, members of the Committee and Members of the Assembly. In a few moments, Astrid and Rhea will talk to you more about rights — the right to play, the right to be heard and the right to freedom of expression — but I will highlight article 2 of the UNCRC, which states that no child should be treated differently or disadvantaged based on their gender. That is a fundamental part of today's discussion.

I support the Committee's proposed intention to put in statute the right to wear trousers. That would be a move towards a more inclusive school environment and away from outdated policy that serves little purpose. It may also help with the original purpose of the School Uniforms (Guidelines and Allowances) Act 2026, which is to help to address the sometimes extortionate expense of school uniforms, which cripples so many families.

I will pause there and pass to Astrid and Rhea.

Ms Astrid Knox (Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People Youth Panel): Thank you for having us before the Committee again to talk about the importance of girls being allowed to wear trousers in school. We have campaigned for over a year now, and the experience of girls has not changed. We are here to ask for your help to ensure that girls can be safe and comfortable during the school day and that they can take part in play and active travel on the way to school and at break time.

Ms Rhea Donnell (Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People Youth Panel): As many of you know, we had a successful campaign in our primary school to allow girls to wear trousers if they chose to do so. That made a difference for many girls, but way too many are still not listened to when they give very valid reasons why they want to wear trousers. Astrid and I are now in a grammar school and have to wear skirts that are thin, impractical and expensive. They are not suitable for Northern Ireland's weather and walks up the hill in the wind. This is not just about us, however: we want to make sure that all girls are allowed to wear trousers, if that makes them more comfortable and active, so that we can all just get on with our educational activities.

Ms Knox: We know that some of you think that it should be up to individual schools to devise their uniform policies. However, that leads to difference across schools and even within schools, with different teachers having different opinions. We want to make sure that all girls can enjoy their rights.

Ms Donnell: Article 3 of the UNCRC is about acting in the best interests of the child. Adults should always do what is best for us as children. That means that our ability to play, focus on education and experience equality should be important to schools and to the Education Committee.

Ms Knox: Article 5 is about family guidance as children develop. Our parents support our decision to wear trousers to school, and our teachers and parents guide us in using our voices.

Ms Donnell: Article 12 is about having respect for children's views. We feel that our concerns have, at times, been dismissed or washed over. We have not been given any proper reasons why we have to wear skirts, but we have plenty of reasons why we should not. Adults should not only listen to us but take our views seriously and use those views in decision-making.

Ms Knox: Article 16 is about the protection of privacy. Wearing a skirt, even with shorts underneath, can be uncomfortable, and it can be embarrassing if your skirt blows up. Having to wear tight leggings in PE makes some of us feel uncomfortable. We do not know why we cannot wear jogging bottoms, as the boys do. Jogging bottoms make us feel more comfortable. As girls grow, changes in our bodies make our privacy even more important.

Ms Donnell: Article 23 covers the rights of children with disabilities. We want to make sure that all children with disabilities, or even short-term health issues, can easily make the choice to wear trousers, if doing so is easier for them.

Ms Knox: Article 28 is on access to education. We know lots of girls who are distracted by the feeling of their uniform. That stops them being able to focus and learn.

Ms Donnell: Article 29 is about the aims of education, which include more than our tests. Being comfortable would allow us to explore our talents. We are not alone in thinking that. Camogie players are clear that wearing shorts would make their sport easier.

Ms Knox: Article 31 is about rest, play, culture and arts. We want to be able to play and dance freely at break times without our skirts going up. We should also be able to travel easily to school by bike or walking and not be worried about getting cold or our skirts getting caught in the bike. A lead academic's research even tells us that skirts restrict movement and girls' health. We have provided a letter of support from her. We have also been asked to write about this issue for her blog and campaign group.

Ms Donnell: Article 42 states that everyone should know about children's rights. We ask that the Committee make sure that the people who are involved in making this decision in the Assembly know why it is a children's rights issue and that schools know that children's rights should be a key factor in all decisions that are made about us.

Ms Knox: The UNCRC Committee talked to children and young people about how climate change impacts on their rights. We know that our climate is changing. We will probably have more wet and windy winters, and we need to make sure that we can make choices about our clothes.

Ms Donnell: Girls and young women want to see the change that we are proposing. Experts support our campaign; the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, Chris Quinn, supports our campaign; and Dr Mairead Ryan, the lead researcher on the impact of uniforms on children's health, supports our campaign. She has shown that girls' activity levels go down if they are

made to wear skirts. As one girl recently told the BBC, having the option for girls to wear trousers should be a "no-brainer". Will you please make sure that all girls can feel comfortable, safe and active as they go to school?

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Thank you. That was a fantastic presentation. Thank you for your evidence. I will make a couple of comments to start with. It is never a great starting point, in life, to do something because it is what has always been done, yet it seems that that is where we are with a lot of schools. That is never a good starting point for making policy. Policy needs to be rational — there need to be clear reasons for it. That is, perhaps, the first time that what you have set out has been clearly articulated in that way: there are lots of reasons why girls should not be compelled to wear skirts, which you have so clearly articulated, and no reasons, that we can understand, why they should be required to wear them. That makes the policy feel irrational and raises the question of why the issue was not dealt with in the original legislation. That is why we are where we are. I wanted to begin by making that aside — that is my view on the issue.

Chris, at the start, you referenced the campaign that Rhea and Astrid ran on the issue. Having gone through the experience of running the campaign to secure the rights to wear trousers in primary schools, will you reflect on some of the comments that the Minister has made when questioned on why he did not include the option of wearing trousers for all pupils in his original legislation? He has suggested that his legislation has, in some way, enhanced girls' ability to campaign on the issue. What is your response to that? Is giving people the right to campaign the right approach, or do you think that something more should be done?

Ms Donnell: It probably should have gone through the first time, because we have been trying so hard for so long. We have been doing it for so long that it should have gone through.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Should it be up to pupils to campaign on it, or should those with the power to make changes in our law deliver it?

Ms Donnell: The pupils have to wear the clothes, so they should definitely be given the choice.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): In your presentation, you began to reference this but did not go into much detail. There may have been a suggestion that the issue comes down to the schools having discretion, with schools being able to say, "OK, if you want to wear trousers, you can come and ask us, and we may alter our policy". When a special case or exception is made for a pupil, because it is something that they have to seek permission for, rather than simply being allowed to wear trousers, what is the impact on that pupil?

Ms Donnell: It takes extra time that should not be needed. They should just have the choice to wear trousers or a skirt if doing so makes them more comfortable.

Ms Laura McFall (Office of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People): Some of the other children and young people to whom we have spoken feel that having to ask for a special case singles them out. It then becomes a bigger issue than it needs to be, rather than being about just having that broader choice of what to wear. That concern was expressed, for example, by girls who were campaigning to be allowed to wear trousers during menstruation, if that made them feel more comfortable: the concern is that doing so could single them out and force them to disclose something private when they should not need to.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): I ask Chris or Laura to answer my first question, which was on the argument put forward by the Minister that his legislation has enhanced the right to campaign on the issue and that girls should be pleased that they now have the opportunity to have their voices heard on that. Is that an appropriate policy intervention in this space?

Mr Quinn: My overall observation is that we now have a piece of guidance. Whilst there are positive things in that guidance, guidance is just guidance. I have questions around how some of those things are enforceable. Even as I looked over the guidance again today, I saw lots of grey areas. I welcome the fact that the guidance mentions the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and I welcome the fact that pupil voices are in there, but, as Astrid and Rhea alluded to, guidance does not mandate action. We can talk to pupils about what they view as being a suitable uniform, but that does not compel the "school managers" — those are the words used in the guidance, and there is a wee bit

of a grey area there, too. Who is the school manager? Is it the board of governors? Is it the head teacher? I have probably gone off topic. In summary, the guidance could be stronger.

Ms McFall: To reiterate what the girls said in their presentation, they have been campaigning for it for over a year. They just want to get on with their education and other activities, and they want that for other girls as well. Is that fair to say?

Ms Donnell: Yes.

Ms McFall: People should know about children's rights. As duty bearers, we should know the right thing to do. In public spaces, which is what schools are, being that they are publicly funded, we should be allowed to mandate that children have that option.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Thank you. I will bring in the Deputy Chair.

Mr Sheehan: Thanks, Rhea and Astrid, for your evidence today and the previous time that you were at the Committee. You gave a long list of reasons why girls should have the right to wear trousers. Can you think of any reason why they should not have that right?

Ms Donnell: The only reason that we have heard is that skirts look tidier than trousers, but boys wear trousers and they look tidy enough, so why can't we?

Mr Sheehan: I agree with you on that and all the evidence that you gave. The reason that we are bringing this Bill forward is that the Minister's School Uniforms Act does not go far enough. There are other flaws and weaknesses in that legislation that we would like to address, but it is complex, and there is only a short time left before the end of the mandate. It takes a long time for legislation to pass through the Assembly. I will give you an example of that. On the first day that the Assembly returned, Danny and I each lodged a private Member's Bill with the Bill Office. It was only yesterday that those Bills were introduced on the Floor in the Assembly. There was no delay on our part: we did everything as quickly as we could, but it took two years for the Bills to be introduced. That is why we are not bringing forward a more complex, wide-ranging Bill and instead said, "Let's pick out one thing and focus on it". That one thing is giving girls the right to wear trousers. I hope that we get the legislation finished before the end of the mandate, and I hope that you all get the right to wear trousers. I have no other questions. Thank you very much.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): If we get the Bill over the line, both of you will deserve a huge amount of credit for the public attention that you have brought to the issue. However, I maintain that it should not fall to young people to campaign for this sort of change to be delivered when it can be delivered so straightforwardly.

Mrs Mason: Thank you very much. You were so good the first time you were here that we had to have you back again. I feel that I should be asking you two for a selfie, because I have seen you everywhere.

I have a couple of things to say. Pat mentioned his and Danny's Bills. On that first day of the Assembly's return, I wanted to bring forward a private Member's Bill on the issue of school uniforms, and I know that the Chair was the same. It is therefore very annoying for me that I am not sitting here with a piece of legislation that could have made a difference; if I was, we would not have to be doing this. Girls, you said that you had spent a year doing this, and that that is extra time that should not have been needed. You should have been able to be enjoying school and taking part in your education. It is the same for us: it is annoying that we have to sit here and do this when we should be looking at other legislation, but we have no choice.

You had the confidence to go to your principal and fight in your school, saying, "This is what we want. This is what we think is right". That was at primary school. You are now in post-primary, at a grammar school. When you look at the other pupils in your class, do you think that they would have the confidence that you had to go to the principal, especially at secondary school, or to a group of five or six adults on the board of governors, and say, "No, we should be able to wear trousers"? Do you think that they would always win that battle?

Ms Donnell: I hope that they would have the confidence to do that, because, if we do not do that, we will never get what we need.

Mrs Mason: Do you think that they should have to do that?

Ms Donnell: No.

Mrs Mason: I do not think so either. It should be a choice. I have no other questions.

Mr Quinn: I will come in on the back of your question, Cathy. It is an important question. Astrid and Rhea are at a young age. I said, yesterday, that they were 13: I had them older than they are. I have a 12-year-old son. He would never have the confidence to sit in this Committee room or to have that conversation with his teachers. We need to recognise that Astrid and Rhea have broken the mould. They have support. Their parents are sitting behind us, in the Public Gallery, and they have support from children's rights defenders, who are also in the Gallery and who have encouraged and supported their campaign. That is important, but not all children have those things. I met a young person, today, who was a school refuser from second year because they were bullied. We also hear accounts of young women being bullied and stigmatised for wearing trousers or for not being able to afford a particular uniform. Lots of children do not have the capacity. That is not to take away from what you have done, Astrid and Rhea: you have done a great job.

Ms Donnell: Thanks.

Mrs Mason: You have; well done.

Mr Baker: Thank you. You have had a great campaign: that is why we are back doing this. You have put what we need to do out front. We did not get the Bill that we wanted. As a new MLA, I find that frustrating. I remember the night that I heard that the amendments had not been accepted: it was a Friday night, and I think that I paced around my estate about 100 times in pure anger, because I knew that the Bill was missing a lot and could have changed people's lives.

I know that you are not here about this, but is there anything else that you would have liked included in the Bill?

Mr Quinn: I will help you, Astrid and Rhea. I am sure that you remember that there were lots of things in the Bill when we were here previously. Your campaign was very much about your right to wear trousers. One of the things that we discussed a lot as adults, and I what I heard a lot, as commissioner, was the importance of comfort, cost and flexibility.

While I give the girls a chance to think, I will give my answer: cost. We live in a society where one in four children live in poverty. I speak a lot with parents, grandparents and carers who struggle to make ends meet. The cost of living is going through the roof. There is now a war in the Middle East, and we see fuel prices increase. I would like to have seen more done on cost.

Mr Baker: Sorry for putting you on the spot — you are here about trousers. However, I asked that question because, just as I was coming in, a parent sent me a message — I showed it to Cathy — saying, "This has just landed from my school. They're changing their PE kit. I thought this was all sorted out. There's £100 I have to drop, which I don't have". There you go. That shows that, as you said, guidelines are just guidelines.

Comfort is an important factor due to weather, for instance, and the need for a coat, gloves, scarf and all of that. I do not know what school you go to, but it should not be on you to have to campaign again and again. Maybe I could ask a favour of you, if you are going to do another campaign, because I hope that this one will be successful and that we get this done.

Young people should always be listened to and not talked down to, as seems to happen a lot. I do not want to go completely off topic, but there are to be changes to the exams that you sit in a couple of years' time, with the scrapping of AS levels and reduced coursework. I am not asking you to comment on that, but if you want to go back into your wee groups, please campaign on that. Will you, please? *[Laughter.]*

Mr Quinn: Do you have anything to add about things that you want to see? I spoke over you.

Ms Donnell: I agree with you about the cost. It is far too high.

Mr Quinn: When we were preparing for this, the other night, you were wearing neat and tidy school-branded sports gear — leggings and half-zips. That spoke to comfort and dignity.

Mr Baker: I like to wear that every day. There you go: comfort. Thank you so much.

Mrs Guy: Thanks, everybody on the panel, for coming to see us again. Chris, you are becoming a fixture. To build on what Danny said, I hope that you do not feel that being here today reflects that your campaign has failed in any way. If anything, it has succeeded. The evidence that you, and others, gave was so compelling that we felt that we had to take it forward and legislate for it. You have done an amazing job. Thank you for being so compelling and articulate.

I have thought about the reasons why this is not happening. On one end of the spectrum, it feels hostile not to do it, and, on the other, it feels weird. I think that "weird" is the word that we settled on when you were here previously. Why would you not let girls wear trousers? Have you come up with any reasons why the Minister will not do this? From what I can tell, all of us here have been persuaded; there seems to be agreement in the Assembly; and there seems be agreement from the public, going by the feedback. Why do you think the Minister will not do it? Have you come up with any good reasons?

Ms Donnell: I am not 100% sure why we have not got it through yet.

Mr Quinn: Would you feel safe saying what you said to me on the steps at the front when we were talking about why it has not been done? Can you remember? We were just chatting out in the front, and I think that it was you who said that you did not understand why and just to get it done. I cannot remember your exact words, but we were thinking along the same lines as to what the barriers are and let us consider them. What could be the reasons for not doing it? From my recollection of our conversations, your frustration was that we just have not done it yet. However, your question is a valid one.

As commissioner, I would love to understand the barriers better and reassure people. We hear about tradition and that some uniforms look beautiful; they look really nice. However, choice and comfort are a big thing for me. Personally, I do not know for sure what the barriers are, but I would like to understand them more.

Mrs Guy: You have been given a reason, but I am not sure that it really explains the barriers sufficiently or why you could not just do it when it does not even require legislation: just write it into the guidance.

Chris, I have a question for you. If we cannot legislate, for whatever reason, say, if we run out of time — you have mentioned that, in your view, it is a breach of rights — is there anything more that you can do in that context to compel or persuade or apply pressure to get it done?

Mr Quinn: I sit in a privileged position. The duties and powers of my office enable me to do certain things: I talk to young people about their rights being their superpowers. I suppose that, in some ways, I have superpowers too, but those powers include providing advice to government and analysing law and practice. I can advise, but I do not think that I can compel. I will continue to advise government on all the issues.

We need to move on more child's rights-compliant policy-making. I advocate strongly making child's rights impact assessments mandatory. That came out across the UK with the COVID inquiry. There are steps that we can take to make all our laws and policies child's rights compliant. To answer your question, I will continue to advise on the matter if we do not get the legislative change that we need.

Mrs Guy: Thank you.

Mr Brooks: I do not have a question. We have been through the issues that relate to school uniforms, if not today, when you were here previously. I said then, as I say now, that I congratulate you on your campaign, because it takes confidence to do anything that you believe in, to step up and not just advocate it in your schools. I was politically interested at a young age and got involved in things later, but I would not have had the confidence at your age to have appeared twice before a Committee, as you have. I congratulate you on that. Whatever issue you are campaigning on, it is something to be respected.

I am one of those who have consistently taken the position that you have pre-emptively discussed in your presentation, and that is to acknowledge that we take a slightly more nuanced position. We do not oppose the legislation. I understand that there is disagreement on it, but I hope you understand that it has been a consistent position of our party to respect the independence of schools on their ethos, decision-making and the rights of boards of governors to make decisions. I understand that you take a different view, and that is OK. It is right to put that on record.

I do not speak for the Department or the Minister; he can articulate for himself. However, my feeling is that not everything should be legislated for in primary legislation and schools should not be dictated to across the board. There have always been different views on this and every other issue. I understand that this issue seems simple: why can we not just get on with it? I understand that: it is one of the things that there is probably more support for than there is for other issues. That is just to outline and articulate our position.

Well done for articulating your view again today. I suspect that your campaign may well succeed in the end, regardless of our position. As I say, we do not oppose it; we are just taking a slightly more nuanced position. Thank you, and thank you, Chair.

Ms McFall: We understand that your position is that schools should have that freedom. However, from other young people to whom I have spoken, we know that there is a lack of clarity about the mandate of boards of governors regarding their duty to deliver on children's rights. As we know, all government has a duty to deliver on children's rights, but it is unclear whether that is the case for boards of governors. This could be an instance where we step in to protect children's rights completely.

Mr Brooks: That is understood. We know that there are sometimes competing narratives on rights, as, I am sure, there would be if we were to get into a discussion on this issue. The discussion has not gone to that place yet. I do not mind putting on the record that I am not always a fan of supranational organisations and the overarching legal frameworks that come with them. That is not specific to the UNCRC or any organisation. We should not be subject to any supranational organisation, and, in general, I reject legislation that comes from them. Personally, I am not comfortable with that narrative. Nevertheless, I understand the point that you make. Even within that framework, there are competing narratives, and I take a different view. However, on this issue, our position is that we will not oppose it.

Mr Burrows: As I was late, I have just one question. First, I have no issue with the principle that girls can wear trousers. However, that principle is sometimes undermined when people start saying that boys can wear skirts. I see trousers in adult life as unisex in many ways and see no issue with children wearing them, so I have no problem at all with your campaign. Well done for what you have done.

I go round a lot of schools and know that a lot of girls drop out of PE from, I think, year 10. Some of them cite PE kit as a reason. Can anything be changed on that — apologies if this question has already been asked — to make girls feel more comfortable and encourage them to stay in PE after year 10?

Ms Donnell: I do not know about other schools, but, in our school, we have to wear leggings. If we could wear jogging bottoms or something more comfortable and not as tight on your legs, that might help.

Mr Burrows: That would be helpful.

Ms Donnell: Yes.

Mr Burrows: That might encourage somebody to keep doing PE when they have a choice not to do it.

Ms Donnell: Yes.

Mr Burrows: OK. That is useful. Thank you.

Mr Quinn: Astrid, do you have anything to add? I am conscious that you have not had the chance to speak.

Ms Knox: We also have the choice to wear shorts for PE, but, every morning, when I see girls in their PE kit, I notice that their shorts are really short. I do not know whether they are forced to get them that

short or whether there is a gender basis to different shorts. If we had access to longer ones, that would give people a choice.

Mr Quinn: A paper on children's right to physical education was put together by the European Network of Ombudspersons for Children and published in September. It might be useful for us to share that paper with you. Laura, please help me here. From memory, young people from across Europe, including Northern Ireland, told us that hygiene was an issue. After doing sport, young people wanted the facility and time to get washed in safe environments and time to rest and recover. There were also big conversations about water and rehydration. Those things are not gender-specific, but it may be worth sharing that paper with you.

Mr Burrows: A rising tide lifts all boats: it will still encourage more people and, therefore, more girls. A lot of girls drop out of PE. We should address that for healthy minds and bodies.

Mr Quinn: Yes, 100%.

Mr Burrows: OK. Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): That brings the evidence session to a close. I thank Rhea and Astrid in particular for presenting to us again. We are always conscious that a Committee is never an easy environment to present in, so thank you for being prepared to step up and do that. Thank you, Chris and Laura, as well.

Mr Quinn: I dare say that you might see "Rhea MLA" and "Astrid MLA" one day. What age are you — 12?

Ms Donnell: Yes.

Mr Quinn: When can you stand for election? When you are 18 or 16? In six more years. We have a First Minister and a deputy First Minister right here. *[Laughter.]* Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Thanks, everybody.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Proposed Committee Bill to Allow All Pupils the Choice to Wear Trousers

27 May 2026

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Education

Proposed Committee Bill to Allow All Pupils the Choice to Wear Trousers

27 May 2026

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:
Mr Nick Mathison (Chairperson)
Mr Pat Sheehan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Danny Baker
Mr David Brooks
Mr Jon Burrows
Mrs Michelle Guy
Ms Cara Hunter
Mrs Cathy Mason

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): I confirm for the record that the Committee has agreed to approve the draft explanatory and financial memorandum on the Committee's proposed Bill and the text of a letter to go to the Speaker. We had agreement that the draft Bill, the explanatory and financial memorandum and that accompanying letter will now be issued to the Speaker's Office. It will then be for the Speaker's Office to undertake the legislative competence checks, which is the next stage in the process of the Bill's introduction. It was agreed that all of the evidence that the Committee heard in relation to the Committee Bill would be collated and made ready to be shared with the Committee team, who will run the processes associated with the Ad Hoc Committee that will need to be established to scrutinise the Bill once it is introduced. It was also agreed that the evidence in relation to the Bill that was gathered through the Committee's Citizen Space survey would be published on the Committee page on the Assembly website.

That, hopefully, covers everything. Do members have anything to add, or are we all content that that reflects the conversation?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): We have reached quite a significant milestone in the preparation of the Committee Bill. There really is no more work for the Committee to do on it. It will now be in the hands of others in the Assembly. I record my thanks to the Clerk, her team and all the other Assembly staff who have been involved in producing the Bill, particularly those in Legal Services and the Bill Office. Their input, their expertise and the speed at which they worked to deliver it need to be recognised. They deserve the Committee's thanks and appreciation. Does anyone have anything to add?

Mrs Mason: I concur with what you said, Chair. I thank the Clerk and the team for all the work that has been done on the Bill. I also thank the Bill Office and the legal advisers, because it has been done really quickly. It is a short Bill. It is unfortunate that we have had to take such measures, but the importance of the issue outweighs all of that. I am really pleased that we have reached this stage. As you said, Chair, it is over to others now.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Thank you, Cathy. I think that we all concur with that.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Mr Paul Givan MLA
Minister of Education
Department of Education
Rathgael House
Balloo Road
Bangor
BT19 7PR

Sent by email: [redacted]

22 January 2026

Our Ref: 2026.**007**

Dear Paul,

School Uniform Guidance

At its meeting of 14 January 2026, the Committee for Education considered the Department of Education's follow-up letter to the oral briefing by officials on 3 December 2025.

The Committee agreed that I should write to you seeking clarification on guidance regarding pupils wearing coats to school following your answer in the Assembly on 12 January 2026, including:

- What restrictions would schools be allowed to set out on style and colour, and
- What provision would be made by school for storage of coats.

On the related topic of the Committee's proposal to mandate the right for pupils to choose to wear trousers in school, the Committee noted that the majority of responses received to its survey to date were in favour of the measure.

For best use of Assembly time and given the drafting and other resources at your disposal, the Committee agreed to ask you to make mandatory in guidelines that all schools offer this right to their pupils and specify it clearly in uniform policies.

Yours sincerely,

Nick Mathison

Nick Mathison MLA
Chairperson
Committee for Education

FROM THE OFFICE OF THE MINISTER

Department of Education
www.education-ni.gov.uk

Nick Mathison MLA
Chairperson
Committee for Education

committee.education@niassembly.gov.uk

Rathgael House
43 Balloo Road
Rathgill
BANGOR
BT19 7PR

[redacted]

29 January 2026

Your Ref: 2026.007
Our Ref: COR 0088-2026

Dear Nick

Thank you for your letter of 22 January 2026, following discussion at the Education Committee on 14 January 2026 about the School Uniforms Guidelines.

Under the School Uniforms Guidelines all schools are required to permit their pupils to wear a generic i.e. non-branded coat to school. In simple terms, all pupils will be able to wear a generic coat to school. The Guidelines allow flexibility for schools to advise of a range of colours a coat should be in, but there is no provision for specific fabrics or styles to be required. To be clear, the term 'specific styles' - which includes fabrics as part of its definition in clause 10 of the School Uniforms (Guidelines and Allowances) Bill (the Bill) - is not used in the Guidelines in relation to coats.

The storage of coats is outside the remit of the Bill. The Bill places a duty on the Department of Education to issue guidelines to schools about their uniform policies and places a duty on the manager of a school to adhere to these guidelines. This relates to the uniforms themselves rather than capital matters such as storage, which are provided for through the School Buildings Handbook. The Bill does not permit instructions to schools to alter their physical spaces. Such requirements are likely to incur capital costs. I trust Committee Members will be cognisant of the stark budgetary realities within which my Department and our schools are operating, on both the capital and resource fronts.

In relation to mandating the right for pupils to choose to wear trousers to school if they wish, I have strengthened the framework under which schools will set their uniform policies. There are no barriers in the Bill or the Guidelines to girls being able to wear trousers as part of their school uniform. Schools have to set out the rationale for, as well as the cost of, their uniform requirements which in turn have to be comfortable and practical; they have to consult their pupils and their parents; this information is all published. Where girls want to wear trousers as part of their school uniform, they can

tell their school this directly through statutory consultation, providing a collective pupil voice.

I remain of the view that there is a balance to be struck between what is required through the statutory Guidelines and respecting the autonomy of schools to decide their own uniform. The Guidelines as drafted achieve this balance. It is my view that schools will respond positively to the pupil voice and I trust them to do so.

What I will also do is look forward to the impact of the Guidelines on affordability of school uniform requirements for parents.

I hope you find this information useful.

Yours sincerely



Paul Givan MLA
Minister of Education

NORTHERN IRELAND YOUTH ASSEMBLY

Young Peoples' Views on Wearing Trousers in School January 2026

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Background

The Youth Assembly was established in June 2021. The current 90 Youth Assembly Members took their seats in November 2025. At the time of recruitment, they were in school years 9-12 which is approximately age 12-16. They are a diverse group. Membership includes young people from every constituency and recruitment was designed to ensure proportionate representation of Section 75 categories such as gender, religious background, race, care experience, sexuality, disability, and young people with caring responsibilities.

The Youth Assembly was established to perform three functions:

- To engage with the work of the Northern Ireland Assembly, specifically with Assembly Committees on legislation and inquiries relevant to young people;
- To undertake project work generated by the three Youth Assembly committees; and
- To enable consultation with government Departments and to participate in youth voice projects.

In January 2026, the Youth Assembly was invited to provide evidence to the Committee for Education on their proposal for a law to allow all pupils to wear trousers at school, so that this becomes a universal right.

Youth Assembly Members met online on 13 January 2026 to consider this proposal and this report summarises their views. Youth Assembly Members will give evidence to the Committee at their meeting on 28 January 2026.

The Youth Assembly wishes to express their thanks to the Committee and its staff for the opportunity to share their views on this issue.

Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly's engagement on the Committee for Education's proposal for a law to allow all pupils the choice to wear trousers in school. The evidence is drawn from a consultation session held on Tuesday 13 January 2026 and incorporates data collected through a Mentimeter quiz, written responses, Microsoft Teams chat contributions, verbal discussion, and post-meeting email submissions. A total of 48 current Youth Assembly Members and 11 Legacy Youth Assembly Members, both male and female, attended the session.

The findings demonstrate overwhelming support among young people for allowing all pupils the choice to wear trousers at school, with 98% of respondents supporting the proposal. Young people consistently framed this issue not as a minor uniform adjustment, but as a meaningful change connected to their daily wellbeing, dignity, and sense of inclusion which should be implemented without delay.

Five key themes emerged across the evidence:

- **Comfort and wellbeing:** Comfort was the most frequently cited factor in discussions about school uniform. While many pupils reported feeling generally comfortable, 35% of respondents reported feeling uncomfortable or very uncomfortable in their current uniform. Young people described discomfort affecting concentration, sensory regulation, and engagement in school life. Allowing trousers was viewed as a practical way to reduce discomfort.
- **Equality:** Young people questioned why boys are typically permitted to wear trousers while girls are not. This was widely described as unfair and outdated. Members also highlighted inequalities between schools, noting that access to trousers currently depends on the school attended, leading to inconsistent treatment of pupils across Northern Ireland.
- **Dignity and safety:** Issues of period dignity and personal safety featured prominently, with young people suggesting that allowing trousers would help pupils feel safer, less exposed, and more dignified at school. Concerns were also raised about the impact of restrictive uniform policies on transgender and non-binary pupils, pupils with disabilities, and those with religious modesty requirements.
- **Practicality:** Trousers were described as more practical for the Northern Ireland climate, everyday movement, and participation in school activities. Young people emphasised that trousers already exist within most uniform policies and would not undermine standards or school identity.
- **Personal autonomy:** While some schools allow trousers, many young people described stigma associated with wearing them. Participants argued that a clear,

universal policy would help normalise choice, reduce judgement, and ensure that the option is real rather than symbolic.

Financial considerations were discussed, but most young people did not view allowing trousers as financially burdensome. Many felt it would be cost-neutral or potentially cost-saving, particularly by reducing reliance on specialist skirts, tights, and gender-specific items and by 'handing down' uniform within families. Where concerns were raised, they were linked to implementation rather than the principle of choice itself.

Overall, the Youth Assembly evidence shows clear, confident, and consistent support for the proposed change. Young people want uniform policies that reflect modern expectations, promote fairness, protect dignity, and enable pupils to feel comfortable, safe, and included in school.

Young People's Views on Wearing Trousers in School

Introduction

On Tuesday 13 January 2026, the Youth Assembly met to consider the Committee for Education's proposal for a law to allow all pupils the choice to wear trousers in school. Members worked through the questions from the Education Committee's online consultation survey, using the session to explore the issue in depth and share their views. A total of 48 current Youth Assembly Members were present for the online discussion, alongside 11 Legacy Youth Assembly Members who attended in a supportive capacity. Of the participants, 30 identified as female, and 29 identified as male. Members could submit responses verbally, in the Microsoft Teams 'Chat' function, via a Mentimeter quiz, or after the meeting via email.

This discussion built on earlier Youth Assembly work, including a Northern Ireland–wide survey conducted by the Youth Assembly Right and Equality Committee in January and February 2025 with 1,137 young people aged 11–18, which examined issues such as sexism, period dignity, safety, and school uniform experiences. A report documenting the Youth Assembly's previous work on this topic is presented in Appendix One.

Mentimeter Quiz

56 participants engaged with a Mentimeter quiz to record their responses. The quiz was used to support structured discussion, capture anonymous views, and encourage participation from all Members. The majority of questions were drawn directly from the Education Committee's online consultation survey, ensuring alignment with the Committee's evidence-gathering process. A small number of additional questions were included to facilitate deeper discussion and reflection during the session. A full copy of the questions posed in the quiz is provided in Appendix Two.

What matters most when it comes to school uniforms?

Question 1 on the quiz asked Members what mattered most when it comes to school uniforms. Members were able to submit multiple responses. Their responses are captured in the Word Cloud below.



The most popular response was a variation of "*comfort*"[1] which was entered by 27 respondents. The second response was "*equality*," which was entered by 17 respondents. Other popular responses included "*price*" (7), "*official*" (6), "*dignity*" (5) and "*unity*" (5).

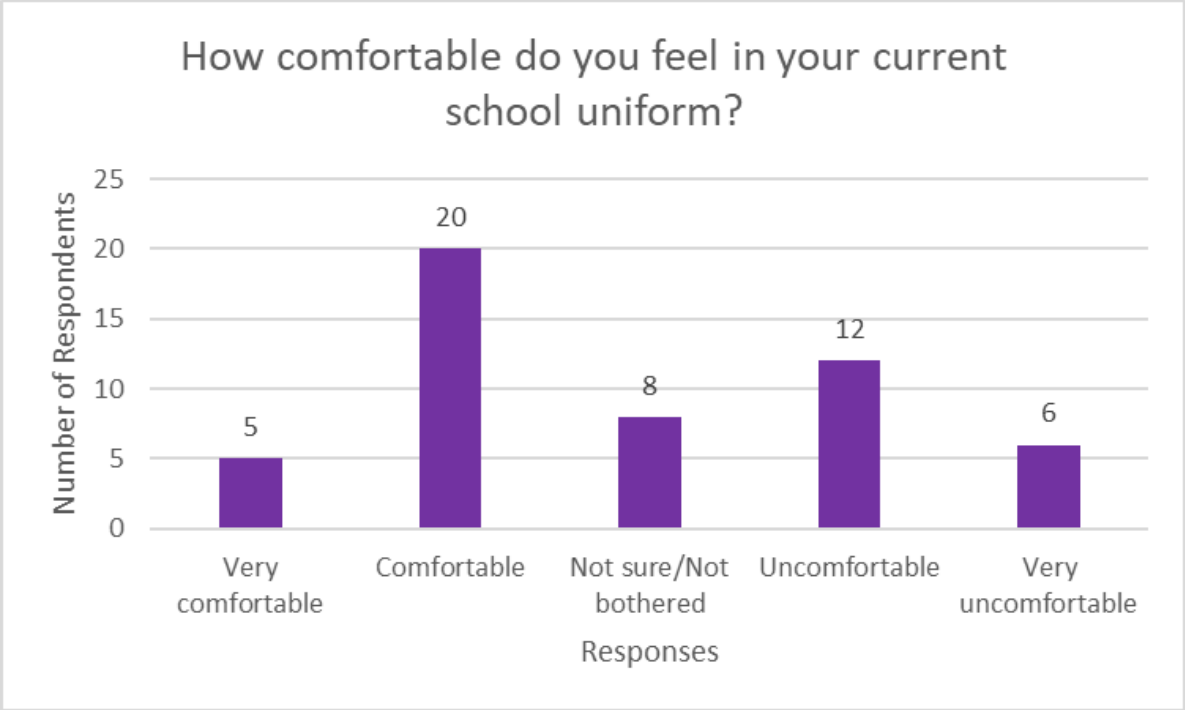
How comfortable do you feel in your current school uniform?

The second question asked participants how comfortable they felt in their current school uniform. Participants were encouraged to choose an answer from the following selection;

- Very comfortable
- Comfortable
- Not sure/Not bothered
- Uncomfortable
- Very uncomfortable

51 of the 56 participants on the Menti quiz submitted a response. These responses are presented in the bar chart below.

[1] Mentions included "confort," "comfortable" and "comfort," as well as n=21 participants entering "comfort."



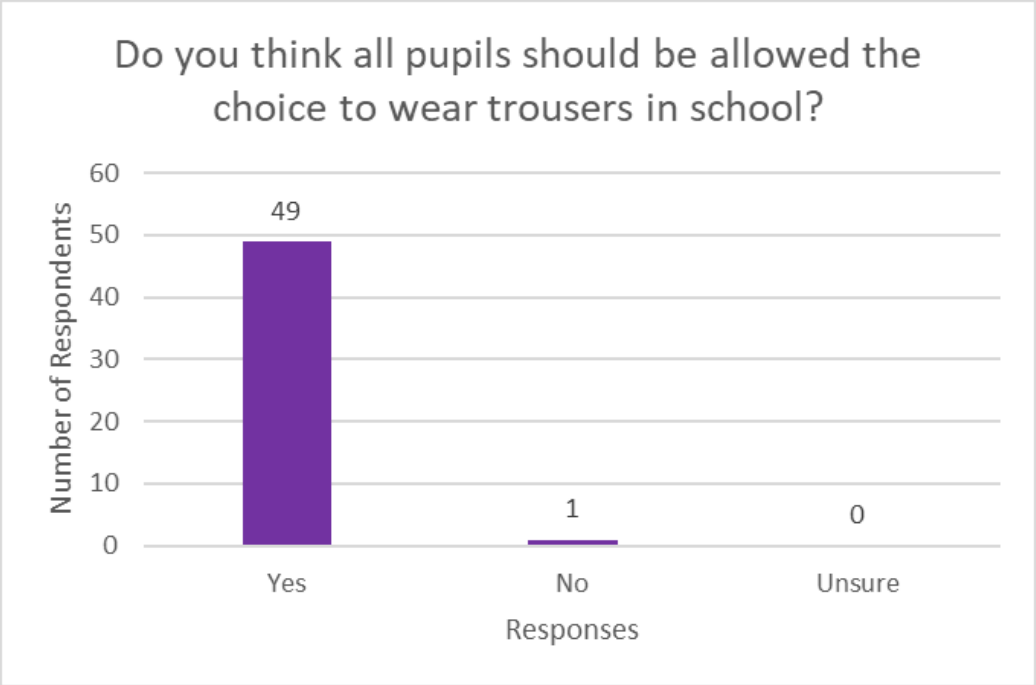
The responses indicate mixed experiences of comfort with current school uniforms. While 39% of respondents described their uniform as comfortable, only 10% felt very comfortable, suggesting that although many pupils are generally at ease, high levels of comfort are less common. At the other end of the scale, a notable proportion reported negative experiences, with 35% of respondents saying they felt either uncomfortable and or very uncomfortable. A further 8 respondents indicated they were not sure or not bothered. Overall, the findings suggest that while many of the Members feel comfortable in their school uniform, a substantial minority experience discomfort, highlighting the importance of considering comfort and practicality in school uniform policies.

Do you think all pupils should be allowed the choice to wear trousers in school?

The next question asked Members to reflect on whether all pupils should be allowed to wear trousers in school. 50 of the young people responded to the question. There were three options to choose from by way of answering the question.

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

The results to this question are presented in the bar chart below.



The findings show an overwhelming level of support for allowing all pupils the choice to wear trousers in school. The vast majority of respondents (98%) answered "*Yes*", indicating a strong consensus in favour of greater flexibility and choice within school uniform policies. Only one respondent disagreed, and no respondents selected "*Unsure*," suggesting that views on this issue are both clear and firmly held. The Member who disagreed with the statement did not elaborate on their positioning, and so it is not possible to infer the reasoning behind their response.

When asked why they selected their particular answer, 48 Members provided a written response. Some Members submitted multiple responses. These responses are presented in full in Appendix Three. Through analysis of the open-text responses, five interrelated themes have emerged.

- Comfort and wellbeing
- Equality
- Practicality
- Dignity and safety
- Autonomy

Comfort and Wellbeing

Comfort and wellbeing was the most frequently cited reason why Members felt that all pupils should be allowed the choice to wear trousers in school. Many young people described uniforms as physically uncomfortable and distracting, particularly when they restrict movement or exacerbate existing conditions. One respondent stated that "*young people should not be made to wear clothes they are not comfortable in*," while another explained that discomfort can directly affect learning: "*people are uncomfortable in their uniforms, so we*

should try and make them feel comfortable in uniform to help focus." Several responses referenced specific physical experiences, including cramps, sensory sensitivities, and medical conditions, with one young person describing standard uniform as "*EXTREMELY uncomfortable*" and another noting "*sensory issues*." The cumulative message is that comfort should be considered as foundational to pupils' ability to engage fully in school life.

Equality

The second reason why Members felt that all pupils should be allowed the choice to wear trousers related to equality. Many young people framed uniform restrictions as outdated and unjust, particularly where boys are permitted to wear trousers but girls are not. Responses continually referenced this perceived inconsistency: "*Equality, if boys are allowed to wear trousers so should girls*," and "*it's only fair if boys can wear them*." Others explicitly challenged gender norms, describing uniform rules as rooted in "*stupid gender stereotypes around girls or women*" and arguing that "*girls should not be second class citizens*." For some, this issue was firmly located within a broader social context, with one respondent linking choice of uniform to tackling violence against women and girls, and another stating simply, "*we live in the 21st century*."

Practicality

Practicality, particularly in relation to weather and daily school life, also featured prominently as an issue. Members highlighted the realities of the Northern Ireland climate, with trousers viewed as more suitable for the cold, wind, and rain. One Member noted that "*skirts are impractical and blow in the wind, leaving us cold*." Others pointed out that trousers better support movement, learning, and outdoor activity, especially across long school days.

Dignity and Safety

A significant number of responses raised issues relating to dignity and safety, particularly for girls. Several young people referred to period dignity, with one stating, "*girls deserve period dignity*," and others noting discomfort, exposure, and embarrassment. Safety concerns were also raised, including the perception that trousers can reduce unwanted attention or harassment, with one respondent suggesting it could make young women "*less likely to be harassed for their clothing*." These views echo comments made by young people in the 2025 Youth Assembly Rights and Equality report on Young Women's Rights in Schools which can be viewed in Appendix One. Religious considerations were also mentioned, with trousers described as more appropriate for pupils whose faith requires modest dress.

Personal Autonomy

Finally, a number of responses emphasised personal autonomy, arguing that allowing choice supports individuality while still maintaining school identity. One respondent captured this balance: "*you can represent school pride whilst also having the option of self-expression*." Other Members highlighted that choice reflects real-world expectations, noting that "*it*

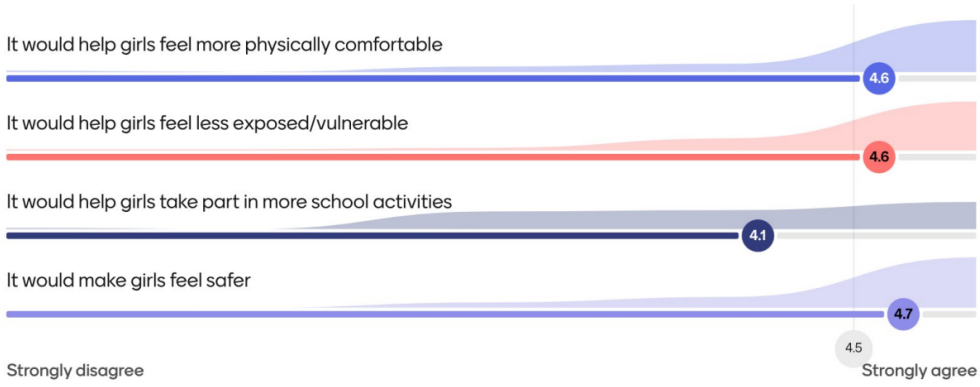
prepares us for the future workplace. We won't be denied trousers then." Even respondents who identified as boys often expressed solidarity, recognising that they do not experience the same constraints but supporting choice nonetheless: "*it shouldn't be up to me because I don't know what it feels like to be a girl.*"

Overall, the responses demonstrate that young people view the option to wear trousers not as a minor uniform adjustment, but as a meaningful issue tied to comfort, equality, dignity, inclusion, and respect. The consistency in responses suggests this is an issue on which many young people feel both confident and strongly motivated to see change.

Agreement with a series of statements

The next question asked Members to select responses to eight statements. The responses to the first four statements are presented below.

To what extent do you agree with the following statements? (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)



Responses to these statements show a very high level of agreement among the 56 young people surveyed, indicating strong consensus about the perceived benefits of allowing greater flexibility in school uniform policy. Overall, respondents expressed particularly strong agreement that such changes would improve girls' comfort, safety, and sense of vulnerability. The statement "It would help girls feel more physically comfortable" received a mean score of 4.6, suggesting near-unanimous agreement that comfort is a key issue. Similarly, respondents strongly agreed that it would help girls feel "less exposed or vulnerable" (mean 4.6), reinforcing earlier qualitative findings around dignity and protection.

The highest level of agreement was recorded for the statement "It would make girls feel safer," which achieved a mean score of 4.7. This indicates that perceptions of safety are central to young people's views on uniform choice, and that current arrangements may contribute to

feelings of insecurity for some girls. While still strongly positive, the statement "It would help girls take part in more school activities" received a slightly lower, though still high, mean score of 4.1. This suggests that respondents recognise participation benefits, but view comfort, safety, and vulnerability as more immediate and significant impacts.

Taken together, the findings suggest that Members believe that allowing choice around uniform would have tangible, positive effects on girls' physical comfort, emotional wellbeing, safety, and engagement in school life.

The responses to the first four statements are presented below.

To what extent do you agree with the following statements? (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)



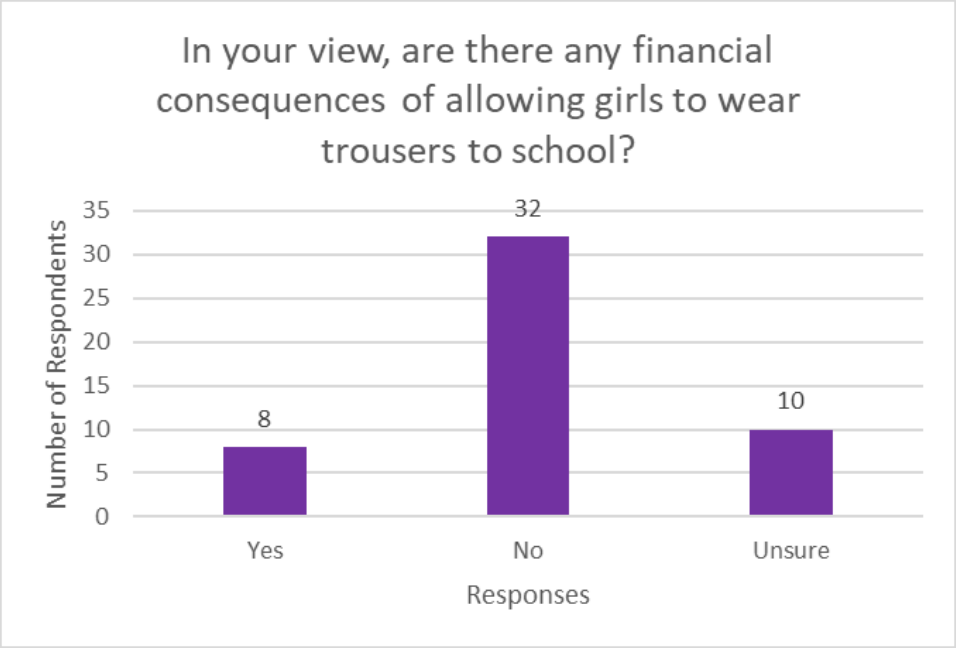
Responses to the second set of statements again demonstrate strong overall agreement among the 56 young people surveyed. The strongest agreement was recorded for the statement "It would be fair," which received a mean score of 4.6. This indicates that young people overwhelmingly view the option to wear trousers as an issue of fairness, reinforcing the theme of equality highlighted in the previous question. There was also high agreement that allowing trousers would "enhance period dignity," with a mean score of 4.4. This suggests that respondents clearly recognise the practical and emotional challenges associated with menstruation and view uniform choice as an important factor in supporting girls' comfort and dignity.

The statement "There is a stigma or judgement associated with girls wearing trousers" received a mean score of 4.2, indicating that many young people perceive social judgement or negative attitudes surrounding girls who diverge from traditional uniform expectations. Agreement was slightly lower, though still positive, for the statement "It would help girls express their individuality," which received a mean score of 3.8. While self-expression is clearly valued, this suggests that respondents see the primary benefits of uniform choice as rooted more strongly in fairness, dignity, and wellbeing than solely in individual expression.

Taken together, these findings underline that young people associate uniform flexibility with fairness and dignity first and foremost, while also recognising the role of uniform rules in reinforcing stigma and limiting personal expression.

In your view, are there any financial consequences of allowing girls to wear trousers in school?

The next question asked if there were any financial consequences of allowing girls to wear trousers in school. Of the 56 Members accessing the quiz, 50 responded to this question. Responses to the question are captured below.



The responses to this questions should be interpreted alongside the context that many Members expressed confusion about whether the question referred to positive or negative financial consequences. This uncertainty likely influenced how the young people responded. Despite this, the majority of respondents (64%) selected "*No*," indicating that most young people do not perceive allowing girls to wear trousers as having any significant financial implications, either positive or negative. A smaller number (16% of respondents) answered "*Yes*," suggesting that some felt there could be financial consequences, while 20% respondents selected "*Unsure*," likely reflecting ambiguity about the intent of the question rather than a firmly held view.

Members were asked the follow-up question, "*why do you say that?*" in order to explain their response to the question regarding the financial implication of allowing girls to wear trousers in school. Members were allowed to submit multiple responses, and 47 Members contributed via the Mentimeter quiz. A full breakdown of their responses is documented in Appendix Four.

Overall, the dominant view expressed was that allowing girls to wear trousers would be financially neutral or potentially beneficial, rather than creating additional costs. Many Members indicated that trousers are already a standard part of school uniform for boys, and therefore extending this option to girls would not require families to purchase new or specialist items. Several responses suggested that trousers are often "*already owned*," "*easier to reuse*," or "*last longer than skirts,*" implying potential cost savings over time.

Some respondents noted that greater flexibility could reduce pressure on families by allowing them to buy uniform items from a wider range of retailers, rather than being limited to gender-specific or branded options. Others highlighted that trousers may be more practical year-round, reducing the need for additional items such as tights during colder months, which can increase ongoing costs.

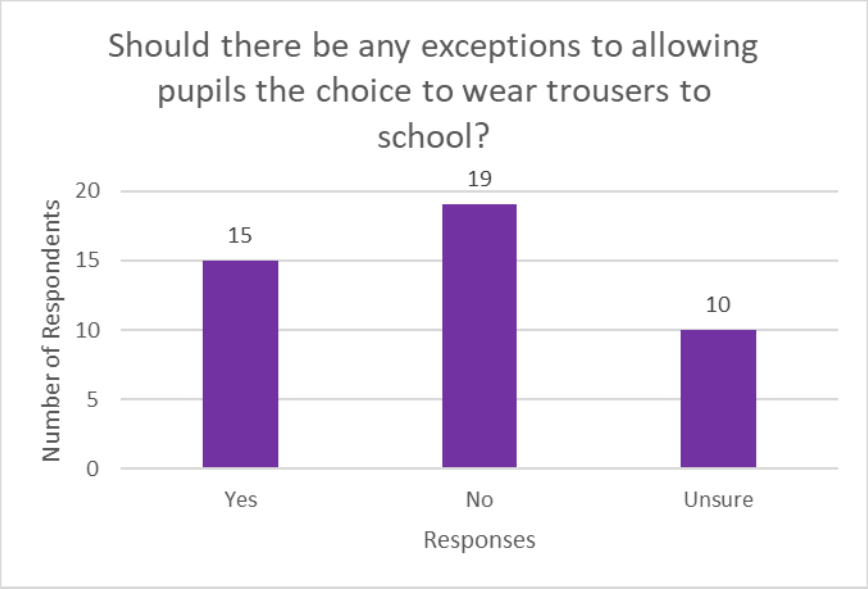
Where Members did identify possible financial implications, these were typically framed as context-dependent rather than inherent to the policy change itself. For example, a small number of responses suggested that costs could arise if schools required trousers to be purchased from specific suppliers, or if families felt obliged to buy additional items rather than choosing between existing options. However, these concerns were often accompanied by the view that such costs would be avoidable with sensible, flexible uniform policies.

A further theme running through the responses was the perception that financial considerations should not outweigh wellbeing and equality. Even where costs were mentioned, young people frequently returned to the idea that comfort, dignity, and fairness justified the change regardless of minor financial impacts.

Taken together, the responses indicate that young people largely do not view allowing girls to wear trousers as a financially burdensome change. Instead, many see it as cost-neutral, potentially cost-saving, and highly dependent on how schools implement uniform policies in practice.

Should there be any exceptions to allowing pupils the choice to wear trousers in school?

The next question asked Members if there should be any exceptions to allowing pupils the choice to wear trousers in school. Of the 56 Members accessing the Mentimeter quiz, 44 submitted a response. A breakdown of the responses is presented in the bar graph below.



Before responding to this question, a number of Members expressed uncertainty about its wording. In particular, young people were unsure about what constituted an exception. Several Members indicated that this lack of clarity made it difficult to select the response that best reflected their views, and this confusion is likely to have influenced the distribution of responses. That being said, responses to this question indicate mixed views among young people on whether any exceptions should apply to allowing pupils the choice to wear trousers to school. Of those who responded, the largest group (43% of respondents) selected "*No*," suggesting that many young people favour a universal approach with no exceptions.

A further 34% of respondents felt that there should be exceptions, and 23% of respondents were unsure, indicating some uncertainty about how such a policy should be applied in practice. This spread of responses suggests that, while there is strong overall support for choice, young people are less settled on whether that choice should be absolute or subject to specific conditions.

Members were invited to reflect on why they selected their particular response. The open-text responses provide helpful insight into how young people understood the idea of exceptions, and what they felt those exceptions should (or should not) look like in practice. As with previous questions, Members were able to submit more than one response. All responses are presented in Appendix Five.

Among those who felt exceptions should exist, the most common reasoning related to specific contexts rather than specific groups of pupils. Some young people suggested that exceptions might be appropriate for particular activities or settings, such as PE, practical subjects, or formal occasions, where uniform requirements may already differ. These responses tended to emphasise practicality and safety rather than restricting choice based on gender or identity. A smaller number of responses referred to school ethos or uniform standards, suggesting that any trousers worn should still align with agreed expectations around appearance (for example,

being smart, appropriate, or part of the official uniform). Importantly, these comments generally did not oppose the principle of choice itself but rather reflected a desire for clarity and consistency in how policies are implemented.

Those who responded that there should be no exceptions were often explicit that introducing exceptions risked undermining fairness and equality. Several responses emphasised that choice should apply equally to all pupils, without additional conditions, arguing that any exceptions could reintroduce unequal treatment or confusion. This group tended to view uniform choice as a rights-based issue, where consistency was seen as essential to avoiding discrimination.

Members who were unsure frequently acknowledged the complexity of the issue. Their responses often reflected an awareness that schools operate in diverse contexts and may face practical constraints, but without strong views on what exceptions should look like. This uncertainty suggests that while young people are confident about the principle of choice, they recognise that implementation details require careful consideration.

Overall, the qualitative responses indicate that young people are less concerned with restricting who can wear trousers, and more focused on how policies are applied fairly and sensibly. Where exceptions are supported, they are typically framed as limited, contextual, and practical, rather than value-based or exclusionary.

Is there anything else you'd like to add?

The final question invited Members to share any additional thoughts on the proposal to introduce a Bill allowing all pupils the choice to wear trousers. All of the responses to this question are presented in Appendix Six.

A number of participants expressed frustration that the issue is still being debated at all, framing it as a straightforward matter of equality: "*Why is this even a debate, for equality why not?*" and another commented, "*It's not the 1900s so let us be us*." These responses reflect a perception that current uniform restrictions are outdated and out of step with contemporary social values. This was echoed by another respondent who stated, "*We live in a progressive society. Why not change?*"

Several participants returned to the theme of stigma, particularly around girls who do not conform to traditional uniform expectations. One Member noted that "*there is a stigma around it so allowing it would dismantle the stigma,"* while another shared that girls are already subject to judgement and harassment under current rules: "*Girls sometimes get harassed or talked about for their current uniform.*" Issues of gender identity and inclusion were also raised. One respondent highlighted how rigid uniform rules can intensify scrutiny of gender expression, describing a friend who "*identifies as a girl*" but was repeatedly questioned about her gender

and bathroom use, adding that "*she could've avoided this with trousers.*" Another participant noted concerns that "*Catholic schools may not like trans people wearing skirts,*" pointing to the need for policies that protect pupils across different school contexts.

Practical considerations continued to feature strongly. Participants reiterated that trousers are often better suited to the realities of school life, particularly in colder weather or during active learning. As one Member stated, "*Trousers are often practical for school life especially in cold weather, during physical activity or while sitting on the floor.*" Others linked comfort directly to educational outcomes, with one respondent commenting, "*Studies show that greater comfort actually helps pupils focus better on learning and have improved concentration*."

Some participants also placed the issue in a wider European and international context, noting that uniform practices are not universal. One response observed, "*We are one of only 3 countries in Europe who have a school uniform in most schools*." These comments suggest that young people are aware of alternative models and question the necessity of restrictive uniform policies.

Finally, a small number of responses reflected frustration with the survey itself, with several participants stating that "*the questions were hard to understand*" or "*very poorly worded.*"

Microsoft Teams 'Chat' Function Responses

The discussion in the Microsoft Teams chat added further depth and nuance to the survey findings, with young people using the space to share lived experiences of school uniform rules and their real-world consequences. Collectively, these comments reinforce earlier themes around cost, comfort, dignity, equality, sustainability, and stigma, while also illustrating how uniform policies operate unevenly across schools.

A strong theme to emerge was practical comfort, particularly in relation to weather and movement. Several girls highlighted how skirts and tights are poorly suited to winter conditions, with one explaining that "*girls wearing skirts and tights in wintertime we can get really cold*." Comfort was also linked to safety and mobility, including a striking account of a first-year pupil who "*tripped down the stairs because of the lack of movement [in a skirt] and ended up breaking her leg.*"

Cost and financial inequality featured prominently. Many Members described girls' uniforms as significantly more expensive than boys', both upfront and over time. One Member contrasted a "*bottle green*" skirt costing *"£40 if not more"* with boys' black trousers that can be bought "*in supermarkets*" for "*around £20 cheaper*." Another summarised the issue: "*girls uniform is more expensive because of girls shoes, tights, socks, option of a scarf and skirts.*" Tights were repeatedly cited as an ongoing expense, with one participant noting they "*have to be*

continually replaced throughout the year." These costs were seen as particularly challenging for families facing financial difficulty or those without older siblings to provide hand-me-downs.

Linked to this was frustration with overly specific and inconsistent uniform requirements. Participants described skirts with "*over 12 box pleats*" that are "*highly inconvenient for ironing,*" schools that mandate "*a whole new skirt for 3rd into 4th year,*" and rules where an inch above the knee requires "*a whole new skirt at around £40*." By contrast, trousers were seen as more standardised and flexible: "*skirts have so many different designs from school to school whereas trousers seem to be standardised.*"

A small number of young people raised environmental concerns, particularly around tights. One commented that "*tights are also bad for the environment… they take like 40 years to decompose and personally I go through so many a year*." Another argued that allowing plain trousers that can be bought anywhere would reduce waste and cost, suggesting uniforms should be "*plain black, grey etc. just in order to keep pricing down*."

The chat also illustrated the role of stigma and social judgement. Even in schools where trousers are technically permitted, young people described strong cultural barriers. One participant explained that while most girls supported the option, "*no one would want to be the first to wear trousers… they feel that they might be judged*." Another shared a personal anecdote of overhearing a relative say, "*why are your friends so weird? it's weird for her to be wearing trousers.*"

Concerns about gender identity and inclusion were raised. One young person described "*a trans male person and non-binary person in my class … and the amount of judgement they have received … has been horrendous*." Others pointed out that rigid skirt requirements can conflict with religious beliefs, disabilities, or practical needs, such as using crutches or a wheelchair, where trousers are "*easier to sit comfortably*" and move safely.

Across the discussion, young people returned to the principle of choice and equality. Several argued that if the purpose of uniform is equality, then allowing trousers should not depend on the school you attend: "*it's not fair to have the choice of trousers differ from one school to the next*." Others rejected arguments about boys wearing skirts as a distraction, with one stating, "*it's not a sincere worry… I would like to know the genuine reason that the Minister objects.*" As another participant summarised, "*let the children wear what they want, a skirt isn't a girls-only piece of clothing the same way trousers aren't boys-only*."

Some comments questioned the role of uniform altogether. One participant argued that "*if school really is preparing people for the 'real' world then there should be no uniform,*" while another advocated for PE kit as a permanent uniform because it is "*warmer, more comfortable,*" and allows for layering. International comparisons were also raised, with one young person describing cheaper, more flexible uniforms used in Canada.

Taken together, the Teams chat comments show how uniform rules intersect with daily comfort, family finances, environmental sustainability, gender identity, and social pressure. They also demonstrate that even where policy technically allows choice, cultural stigma and inconsistent implementation can prevent that choice from being exercised in practice.

Verbal Contributions

The verbal contributions during the meeting reinforced and expanded upon the themes identified in the written responses, with young people speaking candidly about stigma, comfort, and the purpose of school uniform. Several participants returned to the issue of cost and affordability, especially in relation to gendered uniform requirements. One young person explained that "*passing down trousers from brother to sister will be a lot cheaper than having to buy skirts for girls and trousers for boys*," highlighting how current rules can unnecessarily increase costs for families. Others pointed to the way uniform pricing is shaped by design choices rather than necessity, noting that skirt prices can depend on "*how many pleats are in it*." Another participant described the repeated cost of replacement skirts, explaining that "*the zip of my skirt breaks a lot, so my parents have to pay for replacement skirts… which they wouldn't have to spend on trousers.*" Linked to this was frustration with restricted purchasing options. One young person described having to go to "*a certain shop*" to buy uniform trousers, while another observed from conversations with shop staff that "*it would be cheaper for them to just sell trousers,*" but that schools effectively force retailers to stock gender-specific items.

The discussion also highlighted the emotional and social cost of stigma, even in schools where trousers are technically permitted. One participant described considering wearing trousers after their school introduced the option, but explained that when they told their friends, "*they kind of just went all quiet*," adding that "*the girls who wear trousers are judged for doing it*." Another noted that in their school, "*less than 10 people wear trousers,*" and that those who do are seen as "*weird*" or assumed to "*have a problem with skirts*." Several young people reflected that if a pupil wore trousers for the first time, "*they'd feel like everyone had their eyes on them*." In this context, participants argued that legislation could play a role in normalising choice, with one stating that "*a law making schools allow trousers… would remove so much of the stigma around it*."

Concerns about comfort, dignity, and sensory needs were also raised. One participant explained how uniform can be physically distressing, sharing that being autistic meant their uniform caused "*a lot of sensory issues throughout the day*." Another described how rigid shirt requirements did not suit their body, noting that doing up the top buttons was "*pretty much impossible*," and although adjustments had been allowed, they "*didn't like really being different*." This led to suggestions for more flexible alternatives, such as polo shirts, which were seen as maintaining a sense of uniform while allowing dignity and comfort.

Girls from all-girls schools spoke about constant policing of skirt length and the impact this has on wellbeing and cost. One participant explained that skirts must sit exactly at the knee, but that this leads to ridicule if they are too long and punishment if they are too short, often resulting in being told to "*buy a new skirt*," which "*just adds on to the cost.*" They argued that trousers would "*eradicate that problem*" entirely.

Some participants questioned the purpose of school uniform more broadly, noting inconsistencies between expectations placed on pupils and the freedoms afforded to adults. One young person asked why pupils are restricted when *"adults have free choice of what they want to wear,"* adding that if school is "*preparing you for life*," then uniform policies should reflect that reality. Another pointed out the perceived double standard that "*female teachers get to wear trousers and don't get ridiculed for it,*" asking why pupils are treated differently.

Finally, several contributions emphasised choice as a principle of equality and community. One participant summarised this clearly: "*we're all members of the same community so it should be that everyone has the choice.*" Others stressed that the issue is not about forcing anyone to wear trousers but about ensuring that those who want to are not prevented "*for no particular reason other than the school doesn't deem it fit*."

Taken together, the verbal contributions provide compelling, first-hand insight into how uniform policies affect young people socially, financially, and emotionally. They underline that even where choice exists in theory, stigma, cost, and inconsistent implementation can significantly limit its impact. Participants repeatedly returned to the view that a clear, consistent policy would not only reduce inequality and cost but also remove judgement and allow young people to feel more comfortable and included in their school communities.

Post-Consultation Email Submissions

Two written submissions were received by email following the meeting, each adding further reflection and reinforcing key themes already raised by participants. A copy of these submissions is presented in Appendix Seven.

The first email submission set out a clear, structured case in favour of allowing trousers, arguing that current skirt requirements can "*enforce outdated gender stereotypes*" and that trousers are "*more practical for sports and the North's common cold weather*," with benefits for comfort and concentration in school. The Member highlighted the importance of religious inclusion, noting that trousers can better support modesty requirements, and gender identity, stating that skirts can negatively affect "*a transgender or non-binary student's ability to feel safe and affirmed in their identity*." The submission further framed gendered uniform policies as a potential equality issue, suggesting that giving girls fewer clothing options could be viewed as "*sex discrimination*" and therefore inconsistent with equality legislation.

This submission included an account shared by a parent, describing a daughter who wears trousers due to "*sensory issues*" and "*gets bullied for being different.*" Crucially, the parent believed that if trousers were a genuine personal choice for all pupils, "*more people would wear them and thus the bullying would no longer be an issue.*" This reinforces the recurring theme that stigma is often driven not by the clothing itself, but by how uncommon or exceptional it is made to appear.

The second email submission focused explicitly on fear of standing out and the social risks of being perceived as different. Drawing on personal experience, the contributor explained that people who dress "*out of the norm*" in their local area are often mocked and described being "*ridiculed and laughed at by older years*" after dyeing their hair with pink highlights. They argued that similar dynamics would apply in school settings, where pupils may be "*scared to be different*" if they are treated negatively for deviating from expected norms.

Conclusion

The evidence gathered through the Youth Assembly's discussion indicates clear and consistent support for the Committee for Education's proposal for a law to allow all pupils the choice to wear trousers in school. Across the Mentimeter responses, written comments, Microsoft Teams chat contributions, verbal discussion, and post-meeting emails, Members repeatedly framed the issue as one of comfort, equality, practicality, dignity, safety, and personal autonomy.

While experiences of comfort in current uniforms were mixed, the prominence of "*comfort*" and "*equality*" as the two most important factors for Members underscores the significance of this issue in young people's daily school experience. Support for trouser choice was almost unanimous among those who responded, and the open-text responses demonstrate that young people do not view this as a minor policy adjustment, but as a meaningful change linked to wellbeing, participation, inclusion, and respect.

Members also expressed strong agreement that allowing trousers would benefit girls, improving comfort, safety, and period dignity. Many recognised that stigma and judgement can currently prevent pupils from exercising choice, even where trousers are technically permitted. Although some Members expressed uncertainty regarding financial implications and possible exceptions, the dominant view was that allowing trousers is likely to be cost-neutral or cost-saving, with any potential costs largely dependent on implementation. Where exceptions were discussed, young people tended to emphasise fair and consistent application over restricting choice.

Taken together, the Youth Assembly findings suggest that young people want uniform policies that reflect modern expectations, promote equality, and support pupils to feel comfortable, safe, and included in school.

Appendices

Appendix One - Young Women's rights in Schools: Insights from the Youth Assembly Report 2025

In January 2025, the Youth Assembly's Rights and Equality Committee launched a Northern Ireland–wide survey through CitizenSpace. Working in partnership with youth organisations and post-primary schools, the committee gathered the views of 1,137 young people aged 11–18. The survey explored a range of issues connected to young women's rights in school, including sexism, period dignity, safety, and PE and sports provision. This report presents the findings relating specifically to school uniforms. The full report can be accessed here: Committee Reports – Northern Ireland Youth Assembly

The age profile of respondents, as depicted in Table 1, demonstrates a broad and balanced spread across year groups, with each age contributing meaningfully to the overall picture. The largest groups of respondents were aged 17 (n=211), 14 (n=195), and 16 (n=165), but responses were received across the full age range. Younger participants were also represented, including 27 respondents aged 11. A small number of responses (n=21) came from individuals completing the survey on behalf of a young person aged 11–18, reflecting situations where support was needed to complete the questions.

Age	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
11	27	2.4%
12	116	10.2%
13	138	12.1%
14	195	17.15%
15	156	13.7%
16	165	14.5%
17	211	18.6%
18	108	9.5%
Responding on behalf of a young person aged 11-18	21	1.9%

Table 1: Age distribution of respondents to the Youth Assembly Rights and Equality Survey.

Alongside age, respondents were also asked to indicate their gender. As shown in Table 2, the majority of participants identified as female (n=771), with 29.1% (n=331) identifying as male. A smaller proportion (n=35) selected 'prefer not to say', reflecting the importance of allowing young people the choice to respond in a way that feels most comfortable to them. The gender distribution of respondents is presented in Table 2.

Gender	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Female	771	67.8%
Male	331	29.1%
Prefer not to say	35	3.1%

Table 2: Gender distribution of respondents to the Youth Assembly Rights and Equality Survey.

Respondents were also asked whether girls in their school currently had the option of wearing trousers as part of the uniform. The results show a fairly even split between those who reported that trousers are permitted (n=412) and those who said they are not (n=390). A significant proportion (n=264) indicated that they were unsure, suggesting that uniform policies may not always be clearly communicated or consistently implemented. A smaller group (n=71) selected "not relevant."

Response	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Yes	412	36.2%
No	390	34.3%
Don't know	264	23.2%
Not relevant	71	6.2%

Table 3: Respondents' understanding on whether girls can wear trousers as part of their school uniform.

Respondents were asked whether they believed that girls feel comfortable in their current school uniforms. The responses show a mixed picture, with relatively few young people expressing confidence that girls are fully comfortable. 20.1% of respondents (n=229) felt that girls are comfortable in their uniforms, while the largest proportion (n=426) felt girls are comfortable 'to some extent', suggesting that many see the issue as nuanced or context specific.

Notably, almost one quarter (n=283) of respondents believed that girls do not feel comfortable in their school uniforms. A further 17.6% (n=199) of young people selected 'don't know'. These responses are presented in Table 4.

Response	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Yes	229	20.1%
To some extent	426	37.5%
No	283	24.9%
Don't know	199	17.6%

Table 4: Respondents' views on whether girls feel comfortable in their school uniforms.

Participants were asked whether they thought girls felt comfortable in their PE kits. The responses again suggest varying experiences across schools. While approximately a third of respondents (n=397) believe that girls do feel comfortable, a considerable proportion (n=328) felt this was only true 'to some extent'. Notably, 16% (n=182) answered 'No', indicating that a

substantial minority perceive discomfort among girls during PE. A further 17.6% (n=200) selected 'Don't know', reflecting uncertainty or limited visibility of others' experiences, and 2.6% of respondents indicated that the question was 'Not relevant' to them. These responses are captured in Table 5.

Response	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Yes	397	34.9%
To some extent	328	28.9%
No	182	16%
Don't know	200	17.6%
Not relevant	30	2.6%

Table 5: Respondents' views on whether girls feel comfortable in their PE kits.

Respondents were also asked whether they believed that school uniforms should be gender neutral. Almost half of the survey respondents (n=517, 45.5%) stated that uniforms should be gender neutral, reflecting a growing desire among young people for options that accommodate comfort, identity, and personal expression. Just over a quarter (n=286, 25.2%) felt that uniforms should not be gender neutral, while 29.4% (n=334) selected the answer, 'Don't know.'

Response	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Yes	517	45.5%
No	286	25.2%
Don't know	334	29.4%

Table 6: Respondents' views on whether school uniforms should be gender neutral.

The survey then invited respondents to share any further comments they had regarding school uniforms. The volume and tone of responses underline how strongly the survey participants feel about these issues. One of the key themes which emerged was in relation to the physical discomfort experienced by young women through wearing their school uniform. Over 80 responses referred to itchy tights, heavy or scratchy fabrics, and skirts that are ill-fitted.

> *"Our school uniform is extremely uncomfortable and often restricts the amount of attention you can give to things that matter, such as lessons. They are not suitable for all weather types, despite adjustments such as socks or short-sleeved shirts. They're also very expensive."*

> *"The tights are way too uncomfortable, and we are forced to wear them all year round, even in summer."*

Several respondents also mentioned being unable to remove their blazers or school jumpers in the summer because their white school shirts were "see-through."

> *"Almost all brands that make school shirts in an affordable price range are see-through… Many girls won't take off their blazers even when they're too warm."*

School skirts were also mentioned frequently, with respondents criticising how they fit, how they feel, and how they are monitored. Skirts were described as poorly designed, and multiple respondents felt that they were too short.

> *"The skirts we are forced to wear in my school are rather short. Myself and many others feel rather uncomfortable in these skirts. They ride up a lot and become even shorter. This makes me feel self conscious and sexualised."*

Other respondents expressed frustration that rules regarding skirt length were often framed in sexualised terms.

> *"Girls are told that their skirt length makes male staff uncomfortable, which it shouldn't, because we are young girls."*

> *"There's a focus on skirt length within school, which I think promotes the idea that girls are responsible for how men perceive them/how they are sexualised."*

Closely linked to the topic of skirt length were concerns about safety, upskirting, and sexual harassment. A significant number of respondents gave specific examples of times when young men in their school had looked up skirts, taken photos, or made sexual comments about the skirts their female peers were wearing. Survey responses regularly highlighted that school uniform policies did little to protect the young women in school and often seemed to instead shift responsibility onto the girls themselves.

> *"We have to wear tights all year round because boys might upskirt us walking up steps or in classrooms. Why is it on us to wear the tights and not on the boys to be taught not to be inappropriate?"*

An incredibly common suggestion was for the option of trousers to be offered as an alternative to skirts, without stigma, bureaucracy, or special permissions required. Many respondents felt that trousers should be an ordinary and available option, rather than something that young women had to earn through medical notes, meetings with the school leadership team, or gender identity disclosures.

> *"In my school, there had to be a reason to let the girls wear trousers, whether that be a medical condition or that you had changed your gender identity. Even at that, there had to be a meeting with parents."*

> *"In order for a girl to wear trousers she must get permission from our principal. I have seen 1 female student wearing trousers in my entire time at the school. I do not wear trousers because I believe I would be bullied."*

There was also strong feedback about PE kits being too short and restrictive, particularly in relation to skorts.

"My P.E kit last year was SO BAD – the skort was tiny and it covered nothing… They're restricting, uncomfortable, itchy and sexist."

"The PE skorts are extremely short and tight. It's not okay."

Many survey responses described different standards for young men and young women. Respondents said that boys could often wear shorts in hot weather, whereas girls were more likely to be reprimanded for minor uniform violations, like sock length, rolled skirts, and tights.

"There are way more restrictions on what girls can wear. Boys just have to look neat."

"Boys are far more likely to get away with uniform violations, whereas for girls skirt length has become a huge topic of conversation."

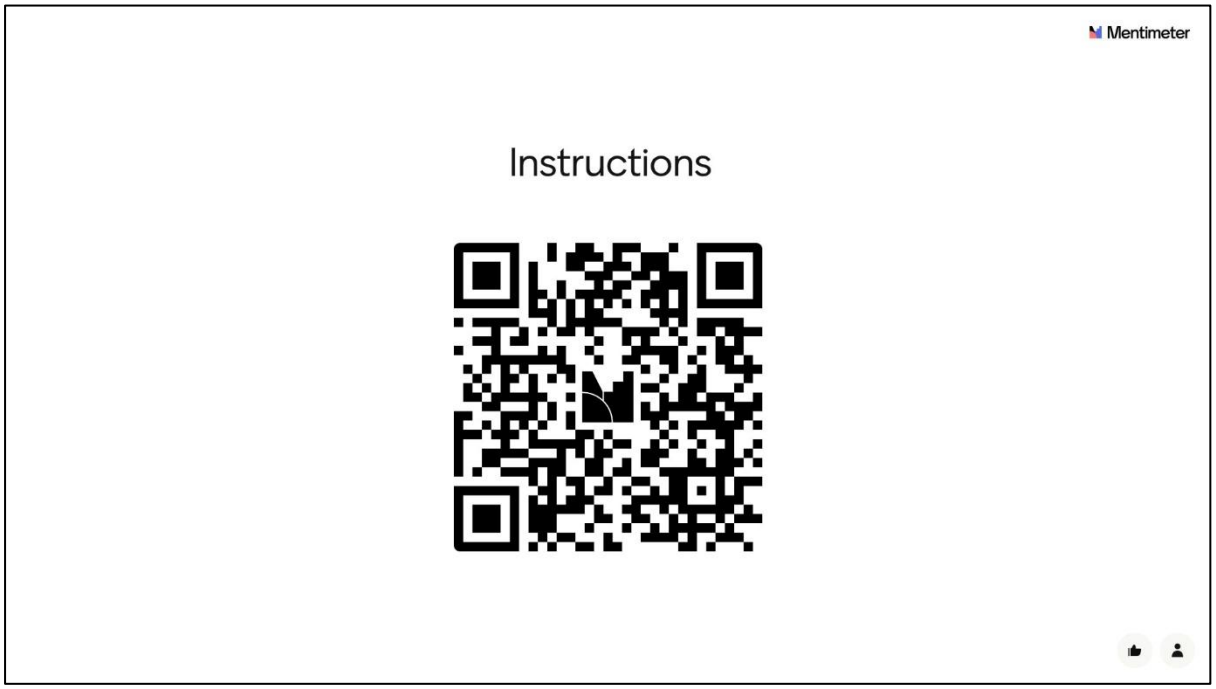
A smaller number of respondents highlighted sensory needs or disabilities make standard uniforms especially challenging. One student with ASD described uniform as

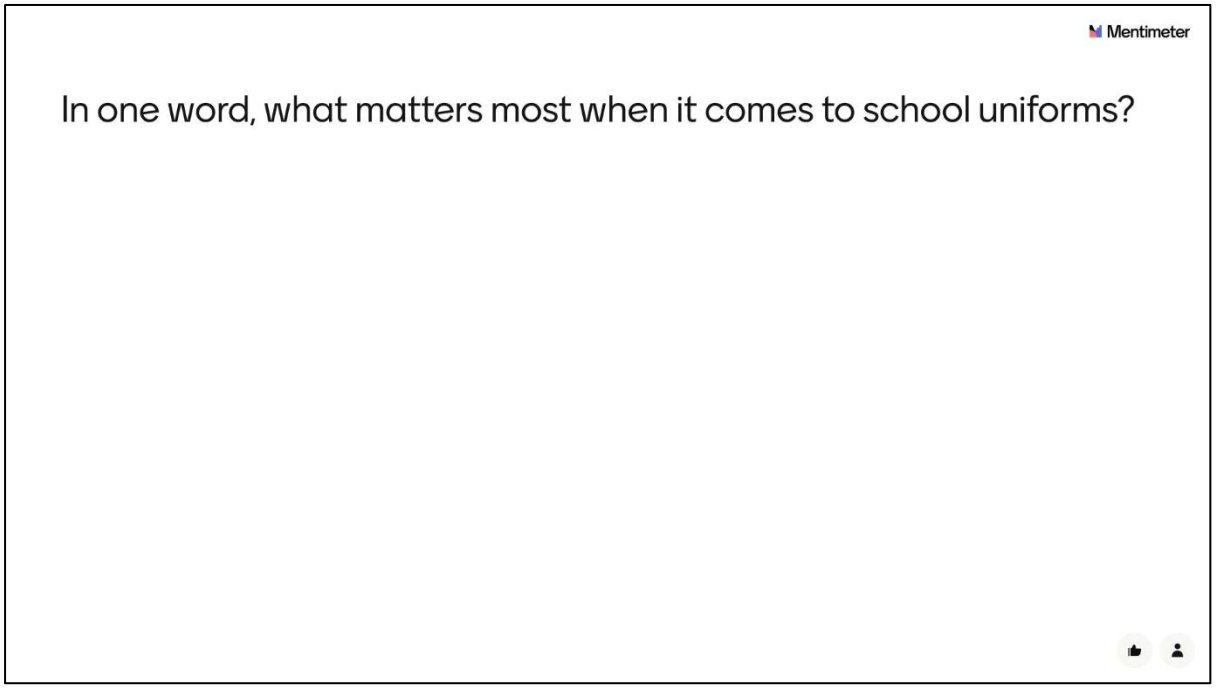
"*always been an issue… sensory wise and it's never taken into consideration*."

Summary

Overall, the survey findings indicate that young people's experiences of school uniform in Northern Ireland are complex. The quantitative responses show that many young people believe girls are only "to some extent" comfortable in their uniforms and PE kits. This is supported by the qualitative feedback describing uniforms as physically uncomfortable, poorly designed for girls' bodies, and often impractical for the weather. Cost and affordability also emerged as recurring concerns, particularly in relation to tights, PE kit and the need to replace items that are easily damaged or do not fit well. The narrative comments further highlight how uniform policies intersect with issues of dignity, safety and sexism. There was strong support for girls being able to choose trousers without stigma, bureaucracy or special permission, and for greater flexibility and choice within PE kit, including longer shorts, leggings and less revealing options.

Appendix Two - Mentimeter Quiz on wearing Trousers in School





Mentimeter

How comfortable do you feel in your current school uniform?



Mentimeter

Do you think all pupils should be allowed the choice to wear trousers in school?



Mentimeter

Why do you say that?

Mentimeter

To what extent do you agree with the following statements? (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)



Mentimeter

In your view, are there any financial consequences of allowing girls to wear trousers to school?



Mentimeter

Why do you say that?

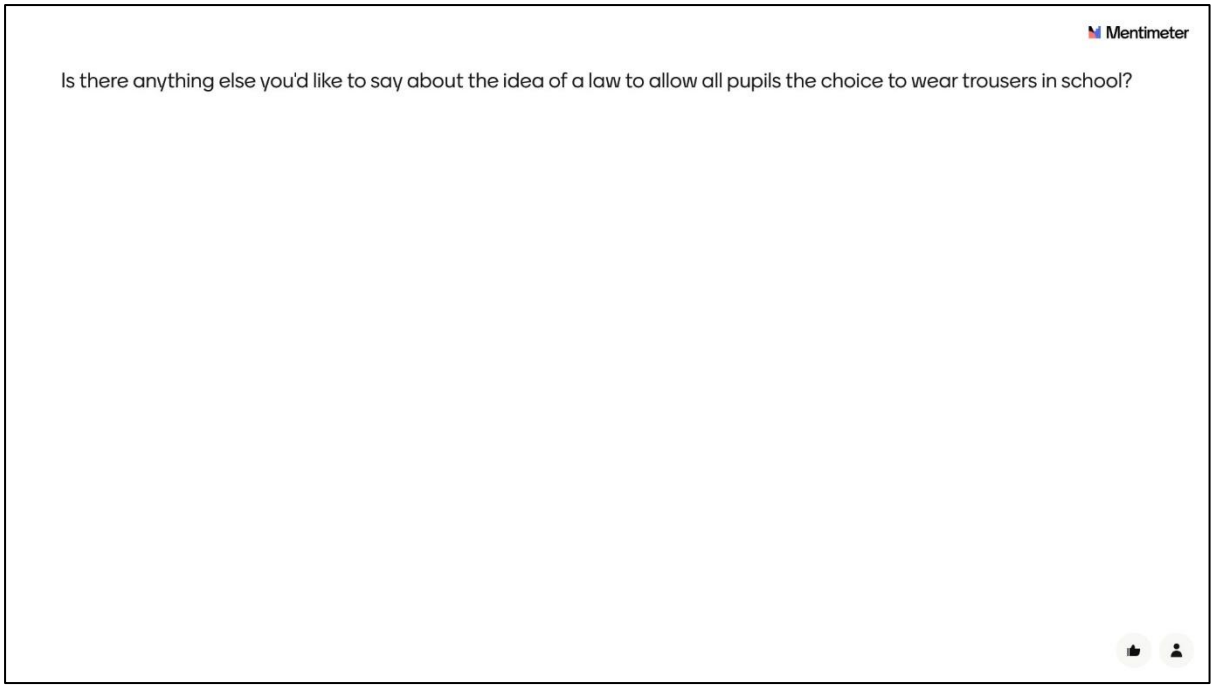
Mentimeter

Should there be any exceptions to allowing pupils the choice to wear trousers to school?



Mentimeter

If you said 'yes', what exception(s) should there be?


Mentimeter
Is there anything else you'd like to say about the idea of a law to allow all pupils the choice to wear trousers in school?

Appendix Three – Should all pupils be allowed the choice to wear trousers? - Open Text Comments from Youth Assembly Members

Do you think all pupils should be allowed the choice to wear trousers in school? Why do you say that?

- *Young people should not be made wear clothes they are not comfortable in.*
- *It doesn't harm anyone if you wear trousers.*
- *Just annoying to wear compared to own clothes.*
- *It's important for modern day gender equality.*
- *Young people should be able to feel comfortable while going to school as it would make school life ultimately better for that person.*
- *I think that people whoever should be able to because it is more comfortable and freeing then skirts and making it more equal in school.*
- *It's just fabric. So often schools dislike female students having uniform for conservatism or Christian ethos, yet it's accepted in wider society.*
- *Equality, if boys are allowed to wear trousers so should girls.*
- *I think it's important that you can represent school pride whilst also having the option of self-expression and if it's comfortable why should it be such a big issue and it doesn't harm anyone.*
- *Because I'm not a girl so they can wear what they like it's not a bad thing to wear it.*
- *People are uncomfortable in their uniforms, so we should try and make them feel comfortable in uniform to help focus.*
- *I believe that every students of any gender should have the choice of trousers or skirts.*
- *Uncomfortable rubbing against stomach when you have cramps.*
- *Everyone should be able to wear what they feel comfortable in and adults can wear trousers so why can't young adults??*
- *Because why should this part of the UK be dragging behind others due to stupid gender stereotypes around girls or women.*
- *Because people should feel comfortable with what they wear in school.*
- *I think we should be allowed as girl can feel more comfortable and get less cold.*
- *So, people can feel comfortable in what they're wearing.*
- *Because everyone should be allowed self-expression. But people taking the mick out of these rules takes away the purpose.*
- *Everyone should be allowed to express themselves and if wearing trousers does that then so be it.*

- *There is no valid reason for people not being able to wear trousers at school especially during situations where pupils are uncomfortable or not equipped to deal with weather.*
- *I feel like I feel this way as I as a boy always wear trousers and mostly all of my friends are girls including my LSA and one of my friends always wear trousers as it's just more comfortable.*
- *Everyone should have a choice.*
- *It promotes equality, comfort and inclusion. It is practical for learning, movement and weather conditions (especially living in Northern Ireland. And it helps to ensure schools don't disadvantage.*
- *People should be able to express themselves and be comfortable in what they wear.*
- *There are no drawbacks to allowing all pupils to wear trousers, it can help people feel more equal and give them more choice.*
- *Girls should be able to feel comfortable in their uniform, in the exam hall we were all freezing in tights and shirt while in a PE kit we were better.*
- *Everyone should have the option and the right to be comfortable and feel safe in their uniform.*
- *I have a condition which makes the standard shirt, tie and blazer, EXTREMELY uncomfortable and also look HORRIFIC compared to how it looks on other pupils.*
- *I feel that in winter months people should be able to wear trousers especially in negative temperatures and in the summertime clothes that are not prone to make you sweat.*
- *We attend school for six hours a day, five days a week from the ages of 4 til 18. If a female student feels more comfortable and confident in trousers, then I see no reason why they shouldn't be all.*
- *Everyone deserves to feel comfortable in their uniform.*
- *I firmly believe that if you attend a school you should be comfortable with rules before joining.*
- *For specific religions where it's not allowed to show skin, trousers would be easier as with skirts you will still be able to see skin which would be against the religion.*
- *Personal autonomy. If boys can then girls can.*
- *Everyone should be able to wear what makes them most comfortable.*
- *It's only fair if boys can wear them.*
- *It's personal preference, what works for one, may not work for another.*
- *To allow equality and to help to bring about a change to social norms helping support EVAWG and our future.*
- *Equality. Girls and boys should be equal, what point is there in making girls wear less comfortable clothes?*
- *Because we live in the 21st century.*
- *It's very important that everyone should feel respected and comfortable in your uniform and doesn't matter what gender you are.*
- *Girls might feel more comfortable, safer, and more dignified.*

- *Boys and girls should be able to be equal and girls should not be second class citizens and wear potentially revealing clothes.*
- *I think they should be able to have a choice because it is way better for comfort.*
- *I believe we should have the choice as even depending on the weather skirts are impractical and blow in the wind, leave us cold and so on.*
- *To showcase community between everyone and we shouldn't be divided though gender.*
- *Because I am a boy and it shouldn't be up to me because I don't know what it feels like to be a girl!*
- *Girls deserve period dignity.*
- *It will make everyone feel equal.*
- *Equality, comfort, mental well-being, safety, inclusion, and modernisation.*
- *It can stop young women from being put out there and being less likely to be harassed for their clothing.*
- *Sensory issues.*
- *They should feel comfortable in school.*
- *Everyone deserves to choose the way they dress; it prepares us for the future workplace. We won't be denied trousers then.*

Appendix Four – Financial Consequences - Open Text Comments from Youth Assembly Members

In your view, are there any financial consequences of allowing girls to wear trousers to school? Why do you say that?

- *As a boy, I am not aware of the price of skirts in relation to trousers so I don't feel qualified to comment.*
- *Inevitably schools who require girls and boys to buy specific trousers and skirts will make a specific par of trousers for girls. It doesn't make a gain or loss.*
- *Wearing trousers would be cheaper than a skirt as for me my skirt is £40 and I know a lot of girls who do wear trousers to school who have said it is cheaper than buying a skirt.*
- *Skirts in many catholic girls schools are mad expensive.*
- *Personally, my school has a petrol blue girls uniform and also brown shoes so it costs £40-£50 more than the plain black boys uniform, I think it would be cheaper to manufacture as well as afford.*
- *Well people have said it is cheaper than a skirt.*
- *It's a strange question. Skirts usually are harder to get to match and girls' uniforms cost more either way.*
- *Less fabric for trousers than skirts and cheaper for parents and school shops.*
- *I don't really understand what the question is asking me sorry.*
- *Trousers tend to be cheaper than skirts as school skirts tend to have to be from a certain supplier/shop whereas trousers tend to just be normal grey ones you can get from anywhere.*
- *Trousers are cheaper to buy.*
- *Skirts can be very expensive.*
- *Schools skirts, especially those who are brightly coloured, cannot be bought from Tesco's or M&S. But black trousers can be bought there. There would be a positive financial benefit.*
- *There are lots of school charity shops/ clothes banks which could help families save some money when it comes to buying school trousers if they have a certain design.*
- *All financial problems that arise from girls wearing trousers to school will be eliminated over time via hand me down clothing for those with siblings.*
- *It can be a financial down or up depending on the school but in my school it's always been that they could choose to wear either or not.*
- *Yes because it would be cheaper to just sell trousers.*

- *It is a lot cheaper to sell trousers, and especially for those who struggle financially because my school skirt is £60, to buy a boys uniform it is around £150 and a girls over £200.*
- *I feel allowing girls to wear trousers does not give any financial positives or negatives, however my sister wears trousers to school and feels greatly more comfortable as a result.*
- *While yes, there are some schools who use specific shades of trousers. There are still schools with standard trousers, there aren't any standard skirts. However, poor wording from the bill.*
- *I would have expected uniform prices to be almost the same for girls and boys.*
- *Because suppliers are already producing them so ultimately there would be no negative consequence even any at all.*
- *Question is confusing.*
- *I am unsure as it is hard to understand which type of financial gain it is for, schools, families, shops? it was very unclear, either way it is hard to shape what the question means more explanation.*
- *It cost the same if boys were buying trousers.*
- *In most cases skirts cost more than trousers.*
- *Trousers are much cheaper.*
- *This question led to some confusion for me due to questions such as is it positive or negative effects and who is the impact for schools? Parents? Or shops and companies?*
- *There could be positive consequences for the children/families? Trousers are often cheaper than skirts.*
- *It decreases cost for the supplier in terms of bulk buys in shops which supply to mixed gender schools or multiple schools.*
- *Skirts are more expensive than trousers because there is less fabric being used.*
- *Possibility for hand-me-downs between brothers and sisters.*
- *Passing down trousers and trousers are from Tesco usually.*
- *The wording sounds strange with a potentially accidental bias against.*
- *Lots of tights are single use and this causes a large waste of money especially in schools with non-standard coloured tights which can be more expensive.*
- *Because my trousers are like 15 quid and my sisters skirt is nearly double.*
- *As I typed in chat, my school uniform skirt is a bottle green colour and is impossible to find in stores and in our uniform store it is £40 whereas the boys have a standard black trousers around £20.*
- *It's not a specific question, financial implication for school? Or home?*
- *The question is confusing and for my school are skirt is a pleated skirt which costs £40 so black trousers would be much cheaper.*
- *Skirts break easily, e.g. the hems of skirt tend to break meaning you have to buy a replacement regularly.*

- *Trousers in general cheaper than skirts as some are long skirts with loads of fabric and trousers generally are the same price.*
- *My tights are so hard to find anywhere also.*
- *This question could be worded better to make it a more specific question that is easier to understand and answer effectively and helpfully.*
- *And if your whole siblings wore the same thing it would be so much handier.*
- *This question is a bit too generic and vague so but it might be a good matter to discuss with schools' senior leadership teams.*
- *Tights can be single use as differently coloured tights often only come in nylon and can be a lot more expensive in the first place.*
- *Teachers are pressured to police uniforms and to ensure uniforms are up to high standards which can ruin teacher- student relations and can take away from crucial class time wasted on school uniforms.*

Appendix Five – Exceptions - Open Text Comments from Youth Assembly Members

Should there be any exceptions to allowing pupils the choice to wear trousers to school? If you said 'yes', what exception(s) should there be?

- *This question feels like someone wants an excuse to not allow people to wear trousers.*
- *There could be acceptances for catholic/religious schools or for individual religious reasons.*
- *I thought it meant like an exception for boys to wear skirts.*
- *Any student of any gender or identity should have the choice of wearing trousers or skirts.*
- *Medical and other reasons.*
- *An exception is maybe you have a medical condition and are allergic to tights or maybe the skirt material then you should have the exception to wear trousers.*
- *People using the rule unfairly. Or abusing the rule to try and get out of wearing uniform? Does that make sense?*
- *I completely misunderstood that question.*
- *Some schools which may be catholic may prevent biological girls (if they're trans)*
- *Maybe for religious reasons? In predominantly catholic/ CoI schools they would be against tighter clothing I suppose? Only exception I can think of. But I think there would be exceptions.*
- *I'm very confused but maybe to do with religious beliefs, all girls schools wanting to keep their uniforms.*
- *I didn't understand the question fully but possibly maybe religious or medical reason.*
- *In my perspective I feel like the expectations they are thinking about is religious beliefs where they can't show skin or if anyone's having a disability, trousers would make it more accessible.*
- *I don't really know what it means.*
- *I felt this was a very poorly worded question I do not know what it was actually asking.*

Appendix Six – Additional points - Open Text Comments from Youth Assembly Members

Is there anything else you'd like to say about the idea of a law to allow all pupils the choice to wear trousers in school?

- *Why is this even a debate, for equality why not?*
- *There is a stigma around it so allowing it would dismantle the stigma.*
- *I've seen from personal experience that there has been no bullying or problems with girls wearing trousers actually the main problems at my school in England were girls wearing too short skirts.*
- *It's not the 1900sm so let us be us.*
- *The question's not clear at all.*
- *Catholic schools may not like trans people wearing skirts.*
- *The survey was hard to understand.*
- *Allowing all pupils to wear trousers ensures equal treatment regardless of gender. Girls should have the same clothing choices as boys, and uniforms should not reinforce outdated gender norms.*
- *Period dignity is an easy way to get it passed when I'd say I feel more comfortable in a dark coloured skirt than grey trousers. Trousers can be less form fitting than skirts.*
- *Girls sometimes get harassed or talked about for their current uniform.*
- *We are one of only 3 countries in Europe who have a school uniform in most schools. School uniform has also been banned completely in Finland.*
- *I feel many of these questions were very poorly worded and I along with others did not understand what many of these questions were.*
- *We live in a progressive society Why not change?*
- *Trousers are often practical for school life's especially in cold weather, during physical activity or while sitting on the floor.*
- *My friend looked quite masculine but identifies as a girl. She would be constantly asked "what bathroom do you use" and asked if she was boy or a girl. She could've avoided this with trousers.*
- *Studies show that greater comfort actually helps pupils focus better on learning and have improved concentration.*

Appendix Seven – Youth Assembly Email Responses

Email Submission 1

I am in support of trousers in schools for the following reasons:

- *Skirts may feel like they are enforcing outdated gender stereotypes.*
- *Trousers are more practical for sports and the North's common cold weather, improving students' comfort and focus.*
- *Trousers can also better accommodate religious requirements for modesty.*
- *Skirts can also impact a transgender or non-binary student's ability to feel safe and affirmed in their identity.*
- *Gendered uniform policies can be seen as sex discrimination, therefore potentially breaching equality laws by giving girls less favourable treatment.*

Also, I put out a post yesterday, talking about how I would be on a call with the Youth Assembly with regard to this consultation, and I was contacted by a mother who told me her daughter wears trousers for sensory issues and gets bullied for being different and her mother believes if wearing trousers were a personal choice, more people would wear them and thus the bullying would no longer be an issue.

I want to also briefly give my views on the 'no uniform at all' conversation we had. I support uniforms not just because they make you feel a part of a team, but because of the more personal reasons: If there were no uniforms, and a student wore the same outfit two days in a row, they might get bullied or talked about. If someone wore a certain t-shirt, jumper, jeans, trousers or pair of shoes they might get bullied or talked about and with there already being staggering statistics telling us how bad the mental health crisis is in young people, we can't risk giving bullies another thing to talk about.

I'd also like to build on Rafael's point of passing down from brother to sister, I thought that was a really good point. I know Lucy said that girls are a different shape as they grow and that girls' trousers are different to boys' trousers, I get that, but currently 64% of children from a working household live in poverty and despite the obvious gender differences, I still think this would help reduce costs for many families.

Email Submission 2

Another thing is on the people who are saying that people will feel more safe in their own clothing instead of their school uniform, a lot of people I know who dress "out of the norm" in our town sometimes gets made fun of. My cousin lives around an area where there's a lot of people wearing mainly "normal" clothes make fun of people wearing out of the normal clothing, which would be the same in my school — I recently got my hair dyed with pink highlights and

even then I got ridiculed and laughed at by older years, some people would be scared to be different in their schools if they are treated differently or like I said, dress out of the norm in schools that have schools in the norm!

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Call **028 90 784480**
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Your Ref:
Our Ref:

Date: 10 FEB 2026

MATT WRACK
GENERAL SECRETARY

Aoibhinn Treanor (Committee Clerk)
Committee for Education
Parliament Buildings
Stormont
Belfast
BT4 3XX

By email: committee.education@niassembly.gov.uk

Dear Aoibhinn

RE: Proposal for a Bill on the right to choose to wear trousers in school

I am writing to confirm that the NASUWT supports the proposal by the Committee to bring forward legislation to allow all pupils to wear trousers at school, so that this becomes a universal right.

It was very disappointing that the work done by the committee this year was ignored by the Assembly Speaker and we wish you well with this legislation.

Best Regards

[redacted]

Justin McCamphill
National Official (Northern Ireland)

Young People's Voices: Youth@CLC's submission to the Committee for Education's proposal for a Bill on the right to wear trousers in school

"I can't really believe that we are still having this conversation in 2026, it feels like a waste of time given how many really serious things are going on. It's just straight common sense that girls should be allowed to wear trousers and have that choice."

- Member of Youth@CLC during focus group

Children's Law Centre

February 2026

For further information please contact the Policy and Public Affairs Team at the Children's Law Centre: policy@childrenslawcentre.org

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Introduction

Youth@CLC are a group of 14–17-year-olds from across Northern Ireland who are committed to making children's rights a reality. They act as the youth advisory panel to the Children's Law Centre (CLC) and aim to make sure that children and young people's voices are heard at local and national levels of decision-making. The work of Youth@CLC is underpinned by Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child which states:

'You have the right to an opinion, for it to be listened to and to be taken seriously.'

The primary aim of Youth@CLC is to promote awareness of children's rights, with the ultimate goal being for every child and young person in Northern Ireland to be fully aware of their rights and the laws which affect them. To fulfil this, Youth@CLC engage in lobbying, consultation with government on policies relating to children and young people, issue-based campaign work, and working with other groups of young people on children's rights issues.

This submission, developed in response to the Committee for Education's proposal for a Bill on the right to wear trousers in school, is primarily a response which reflects the views, considerations and deliberations of Youth@CLC. These were obtained through a focus group which was structured using the questions in the Committee's consultation survey and facilitated by youth participation and policy staff at CLC who subsequently drafted this response on behalf of Youth@CLC. Notably, all participants in the focus group were girls who felt particularly strongly about this issue and were passionate about how this would impact their daily lives.

This submission is structured through themes that were considered in the consultation questionnaire, including choice and fairness; comfort and practicality; equality; safety and cost. Where possible, we have included direct quotes from members of Youth@CLC.

Choice and Fairness

While members of Youth@CLC provided a number of reasons why they felt it is important for girls to have the option to wear trousers, it is also worth noting how participants contextualised their engagement in the focus group discussions. That is, they overwhelmingly conveyed a sense that it was "obvious" that girls should have the right to wear trousers. Many of them also expressed a sense of disbelief that this was a conversation that was occurring in 2026, and that having to articulate this position and advocate for it in the context of wider political issues felt like a waste of time and resources. Nonetheless, participants were keen to express their position and ensure that their support was explicit:

"I can't really believe that we are still having this conversation in 2026, it feels like a waste of time given how many really serious things are going on. It's just straight common sense that girls should be allowed to wear trousers and have that choice."

- Member of Youth@CLC during focus group

Further, when asked why it was important that girls have this choice, participants initially brought up the idea of having a right to choose and fairness. They stated that providing girls with the option to wear trousers does not remove choice from anyone, rather, it expands it. They felt it was unfair that boys are allowed to wear trousers as standard uniform while girls must go through additional hurdles to wear their preference. They also stressed that providing this right expands choice for everyone; girls who prefer to wear skirts can still wear one, and girls who prefer to wear trousers should have the same opportunity to make a decision that suits them:

"It would just make everything fairer. It literally doesn't make any sense that we don't have the basic choice. There's no reason not to."

- Member of Youth@CLC during focus group

One member of Youth@CLC also outlined how forcing girls to wear skirts in school is not reflective of the society that we live in. They stated that wearing skirts is increasingly unpopular, even in formal work settings, and that they spend most of their time outside of school wearing some form of trousers:

"If school is preparing us for life, adults rarely even wear skirts anymore. I do kind of think uniforms are important but having that basic choice between trousers and a skirt shouldn't be controversial because for the rest of my life, I'll be able to make that decision."

- Member of Youth@CLC during focus group

Comfort and Practicality

Members of Youth@CLC were also keen to outline how this change would impact their comfort and improve the general practicality of their school day. They noted how trousers are comfier, and are warmer for winter months:

"Having the option to wear trousers in the winter would be so much better. At the minute I have to wear two pairs of tights to stay warm and it's so uncomfortable."

- Member of Youth@CLC during focus group

They linked the feeling of being uncomfortable with their ability to participate in school, noting how being physically uncomfortable makes them struggle with concentrating in class. One participant, who is neurodiverse, stressed that the combination of tights and a skirt make them overstimulated, causing them to zone out in lessons and only focus on their sensory discomfort. They added that they are also much more able to focus when they are allowed to move around or adjust their seating position to being cross-legged, which would be easier to do if they were allowed to wear trousers.

Another member raised the issue of practicality. Trousers allow for greater ease of movement without the need to constantly adjust clothing. For lessons such as Drama, where movement is often a requirement, trousers would result in reduced lesson disruption and enable easier participation:

"In drama at the minute, our teacher makes us all change into tracksuit bottoms that we have to bring in ourselves. We can't do the lesson in skirts so we have to spend time changing before and after class. It's a waste of time and it also adds on extra requirements for the school day. It would all be so much easier if we were already wearing trousers."

- *Member of Youth@CLC during focus group*

Participants were generally concerned that the issue of comfort seemed to be considered a luxury. To them, feeling comfortable in school should be a priority to enable a learning environment where everyone felt able to participate and engage both academically and socially:

"I think the reluctance to do this is really worrying because the biggest issue is actually that not enough young people feel comfortable at school as a whole. Not just physically and in a practical sense, but also safety-wise and identity-wise. And that really needs to change."

- Member of Youth@CLC during focus group

Equality, Gender Norms, and Diversity

On identity issues, members of Youth@CLC raised the fact that some people don't feel comfortable wearing skirts because it doesn't relfect their gender expression or individual identity. They outlined how some students may not identify within traditional expressions of gender and that having a flexible uniform policy that ensures that all students can wear something that aligns with their identity and comfort is crucial to reinforcing dignity and non-discrimination:

"At the minute in my school, non-binary and gender diverse students have to disclose their identity to school staff in order to justify why they want to wear trousers. This is a huge barrier, especially for young people, so some just put up with being uncomfortable everyday so that they don't have to disclose personal information. If everyone had an automatic choice, people could just wear what they felt more comfortable in."

- Member of Youth@CLC during focus group

Members also raised the fact that rigid clothing rules reflect traditional assumptions and expectations about gender. They outlined how skirts have been associated with femininity, while trousers have been seen as masculine. They outlined how these rigid expressions of gender identity has ripple effects on stigma associated with wearing trousers in the context where it is an exception rather than a general rule:

"In my school, you're allowed to wear trousers, but you have to ask a teacher so most people don't bother unless they really want to. But because it's not a norm, when someone does do it, there's a stereotype around who wears them and what type of person that 'makes' you. People get labelled as being queer, for example, and get singled out or made fun of. People make massive assumptions because these really rigid gender norms are still there in schools. But if we all had the option and there were no barriers in place, that stigma and those rigid roles would start to break down."

- Member of Youth@CLC during focus group

While members of Youth@CLC identified that there is currently some stigma associated with wearing trousers, this was not expressed as something that should act as a barrier to letting girls wear them. In fact, members stated that the only reason there *is* stigma is because it's not currently the norm and there are barriers to wearing trousers. However, if everyone had the automatic option, a larger proportion of girls would choose to wear trousers, and it would be a less stigmatising experience. They also outlined the importance of allowing girls to easily wear trousers in eliminating restrictions and expected behaviours that are based solely on gender. In a "modern", "equality-respecting" society, this was identified as being extremely outdated and not in service of young people's best interests.

Stigma was also raised in relation to cultural, religious or personal values. One member in particular highlighted how those choosing to wear trousers for modesty or religious reasons can experience embarrassment or social exclusion similar to that highlighted above. A more flexible uniform policy, however, can accommodate diverse backgrounds without forcing students to justify their decisions or be made to feel like their preferences are abnormal. When trousers are offered as a standard option rather than an exception, stigma is reduced and choice becomes normalised.

Safety

When asked whether having the option to wear trousers would make them feel safer, some members of Youth@CLC outlined how wearing trousers while walking home and being in public outside of school settings would provide a level of safety. While they acknowledged that clothing never causes harassment and that responsibility always lies with those who behave inappropriately, they nonetheless stressed that providing the option of trousers would reduce their anxiety around unwanted attention:

"I'd feel so much safer walking home and not having to worry about feeling exposed. Sorry to be blunt, but no one's going to look up my skirt if there's no skirt to look up."

- *Member of Youth@CLC during focus group*

One member of Youth@CLC noted that while she herself doesn't feel unsafe wearing a skirt, her personal circumstances may be different to others:

"It doesn't really impact me but that's my personal reality. If it helps some people feel safer then why not provide that option?"

- *Member of Youth@CLC during focus group*

For some members of Youth@CLC, the question of safety was directly connected to the question of period dignity and ensuring emotional safety. They outlined how wearing trousers helps them to feel more secure and confident when they are on their period as it provides additional coverage and reassurance against leaks. This also circled the conversation back to comfort, with members noting that trousers are more comfortable when they are experiencing cramps and fatigue. They stressed that providing the option of trousers would help them feel more confident and able to participate in school life without anxiety.

Cost

On the issue of cost, one member of Youth@CLC outlined how trousers are a more versatile uniform option and are likely to last longer in school environment:

> "I'm constantly having to replace ripped tights and I'm also only allowed to wear a specific colour of tights that are really hard to get so it's both really expensive and logistically really annoying. Having the option of standard black or grey trousers would make things so much easier."
>
> - Member of Youth@CLC during focus group

Another member of Youth@CLC noted that handing down uniforms between siblings could be easier if girls were allowed to wear trousers. While they acknowledged that the introduction of trousers would probably still require different trousers between girls and boys, they stressed that this didn't have to be the case and that having uniforms be less gender-restrictive would, over time, reduce overall uniform costs for some families.

Conclusion

Overall, members of Youth@CLC who participated in the focus group on this issue were **resolute** in their view that girls should be given the automatic option to wear trousers. Doing so, they felt, would support fairness, comfort, equality, safety, dignity, and longer-term affordability.

Critically, they were keen to refute the idea that girls in Northern Ireland already have access to this option. They outlined how some schools decline girls' requests to wear trousers, and the necessity of having to seek permission from school staff is an unnecessary barrier. If girls must seek special permission to wear trousers, it is not truly a free or equal choice. Genuine choice means that an option is available on the same terms as other options, without extra hurdles, justification, or scrutiny.

A simple (and long overdue) change – offering trousers as an automatic choice – will broaden inclusion, remove unnecessary barriers, and contribute to shaping school environments where girls feel secure, comfortable, and fully able to participate.

NORTHERN IRELAND HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

Mr Nick Mathison MLA
Chair of the Committee for Education
Room 428, Parliament Buildings
Ballymiscaw, Stormont
Belfast BT4 3XX

By email: committee.education@niassembly.gov.uk

19 February 2026

Dear Chair,

Re: Consultation on Proposal for a Bill on the Right to Choose to Wear Trousers in School

The NI Human Rights Commission (the Commission) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Committee for Education's Call for Views on its proposal to introduce a Bill on the right to choose to wear trousers to school.

The Commission, pursuant to Section 69(1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, reviews the adequacy and effectiveness of law and practice relating to the protection of human rights. In accordance with these functions, the following advice is submitted to the Committee for Education to inform the development of any subsequent Bill.

The Commission welcomes the aim of the proposal, to introduce a Bill to allow girls to choose to wear trousers to school. The Commission understands that, as things stand, girls can petition their school on this matter.[1] However, this places the significant burden of advocacy on the young person. The Commission appreciates that tackling this issue via legislation is arguably a more protracted process, unlike the statutory policy route.[2] However, it seems reasonable that the Committee would opt to take the issue forward in legislation, for reasons of certainty and consistency.

[1] Council of Europe, 'ECtHR: Guide on Article 14 of the Convention (prohibition of discrimination) and on Article 1 of Protocol No. 12 (general prohibition of discrimination)', (CoE, 2024).
[2] NI Assembly Hansard, 'NI Assembly: Right of Girls to Wear Trousers in Schools – Michelle Guy MLA', 27 January 2026.

While there is not any express human right for girls to wear trousers to school (perhaps better expressed as a right not to wear skirts), there are several ECHR human rights standards that should inform policy and legislative progress, including the right to personal autonomy, the right to privacy and physical integrity, the right not to be discriminated against, the right to full gender equality, the right to be free from violence and the threat of violence and abuse. To add to such rights, there is of course the practical issue of increased cost, which has a direct impact upon the right to education and to choose one's school.

Human Rights Framework

Article 2 of Protocol 1 of the ECHR recognises the right to education, confirming that "no person shall be denied the right to education".[3] The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) has noted that the right to education "is indispensable to the furtherance of human rights" and "a restrictive interpretation… would not be consistent with the aim or purpose of that provision".[4] The right to education is enshrined across several other human rights instruments to which the UK Government, and by extension the NI Executive, is bound, including UN Convention on the Rights of Children (CRC), Articles 28-29; UN International Convention on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), Article 13; UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), Article 24; UN Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Article 10; UN Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), Article 5; and the UN Refugee Convention, Article 22. General Comments and Concluding Observations attached to these treaties provide guidance and best practice standards, which should be followed. In particular, the Commission encourages the Committee to include explicit reference to the 'best interests of the child' principle in any proposed Bill, in accordance with the UN CRC.[5] The Commission also encourages the Committee to develop any legislation with the meaningful participation of children and young people, in keeping with a proper human rights-based approach.[6]

The Commission encourages the Committee to adopt a robust human rights-based approach to the development and implementation of proposed legislation on the right to choose to wear trousers to school.

Non-Discrimination

The lack of statutory guidance in relation to the ability to choose to wear trousers has a gendered implication, given that it is currently the case that girls are primarily expected to wear skirts to school, with many schools not providing

[3] Other ECHR rights relevant to this potential legislation include ECHR Article 2, right to life, Article 3, freedom from torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, Article 8, respect for private and family life and Article 14, freedom from discrimination.
[4] Leyla Şahin v Turkey (2004) ECHR 299, at para 137.
[5] Article 3(1), UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989.
[6] European Network of National Human Rights Institutions, 'Human Rights-Based Approach'. Available at: Human Rights-Based Approach - ENNHRI; A human rights based approach centres on the guiding principles of participation, accountability, non-discrimination, empowerment and legality.

an option to choose to wear trousers. Additionally, gender non-conforming students will be significantly affected by current uniform policy. The ECHR, Article 14,[7] requires that the enjoyment of ECHR rights, including the right to education, is upheld without discrimination. This is not a stand-alone right and must be asserted in conjunction with another right that is within the ambit of the ECHR. Article 14 guarantees that "the enjoyment of the rights and freedoms set forth in this Convention shall be secured without discrimination on any ground such as sex, race, colour, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, association with a national minority, property, birth or other status". The ECtHR has generally given the words "other status" a wide meaning, to include grounds such as age, gender identity, sexual orientation, health and disability, among others.[8]

The Equality Commission NI has advised that it is permissible for schools to have different unform policy for boys and girls, however it notes that what is an acceptable form of dress in school depends on what is currently considered to be a "conventional form of dress".[9] It elaborates that "because it is quite normal for girls to wear trousers, there is a strong argument that it is unlawful sex discrimination to deny a girl the opportunity to wear smart trousers as an alternative to skirts as part of a uniform code".[10]

It should also be noted that the ability to wear dark coloured or looser fitting trousers to more comfortably manage menstruation has been identified as a reason to allow girls this choice.[11] Article 10 of UN CEDAW requires states to "take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in order to ensure to them equal rights with men in the field of education". The UN CEDAW Committee has noted that compliance with Article 10 requires that essential consideration be given to "providing adequate infrastructure in educational institutions in order to remove the barriers to the successful completion of school faced by girls from the age of menarche".[12] Allowing girls to make a choice on whether to wear a skirt or trousers will provide greater flexibility to manage their menstruation.

Research also indicates that school uniform policies that have separate rules for boys and girls can reinforce negative gender stereotypes, while leaving transgender and gender non-conforming children more vulnerable to bullying, stress, and anxiety.[13] The UN CEDAW Committee requires States to address

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[7] The right to freedom from discrimination is also provided for within UN ICESCR, Article 2; UN CRPD, Article 5; UN CERD, Article 5, and UN CEDAW Article 10.
[8] Council of Europe, 'ECtHR: Guide on Article 14 of the Convention (prohibition of discrimination) and on Article 1 of Protocol No. 12 (general prohibition of discrimination)', (CoE, 2024).
[9] Equality Commission for NI, 'Schools: Education service providers'. Available at: ECNI - Schools, Education Service Providers, Equality Commission, Northern Ireland
[10] Equality Commission for NI, 'Schools: Education service providers'. Available at: ECNI - Schools, Education Service Providers, Equality Commission, Northern Ireland
[11] Menstruation Matters, 'Briefing Paper: Menstruation Matters and the School Uniforms Bill' (Menstruation Matters, 2025).
[12] CEDAW/C/GC/36, 'UN CEDAW Committee General Comment No 36: the Right of Women and Girls to Education', 27 November 2017, at para 30.
[13] NI Assembly, 'Research and Information Service Briefing Paper: School Uniforms – Cost, Gender and Behavioural considerations', (NIA, 2021).

gender stereotyping in schools.[14] The UN Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity highlights that Trans and gender non-conforming students can face humiliation through gendered uniforms".[15] Adopting flexible uniform policies is likely to alleviate to some extent issues of gender stereotyping and LGBT+ related bullying. Research conducted by the NI Assembly recommends that as a matter of good practice, schools in NI may wish to adopt a flexible approach to school uniform policy by avoiding strict requirements and by having a gender-neutral uniform option available.[16] The Commission suggests that 'may' be read as 'should'.

Violence against Women and Girls

Allowing girls to have the choice to wear trousers to school is in keeping with good trauma informed practice.[17] In 2024, 17 per cent of 16 year old girls who were surveyed had experienced sexual violence in NI.[18] It has been noted that being required to wear skirts leaves girls more vulnerable to "upskirting". For example, the Mental Health Champion for NI has identified that a trouser option should always be available, and that "no pupil should be forced to wear clothing that leaves them vulnerable to upskirting… or feeling exposed".[19] Research carried out in England has identified that female pupils reported that they were having their skirt length "policed" by schools in a way that felt sexist and sexualising.[20] While it was not the intention of school policies to be sexist or sexualising, in practice they had a similar impact.[21]

The UN CEDAW Committee notes that despite "rampant sexual harassment and abuse of girls in educational institutions… those facts have not been systematically factored into educational policy and programmes".[22] It is vital to note that the allowance to wear trousers will not prevent violence against women and girls, and girls should be able to wear skirts without being concerned about being victimised. However, having the option to wear trousers could permit girls to feel more comfortable and safer in school settings.

[14] CEDAW/C/GC/36, 'UN CEDAW Committee General Comment No 36: the Right of Women and Girls to Education', 27 November 2017, at para 25.
[15] UN OHCHR, 'Press Release: The inclusion of LGBT people in education settings of paramount importance to "leaving no one behind"', 2 October 2019.
[16] NI Assembly, 'Research and Information Service Briefing Paper: School Uniforms – Cost, Gender and Behavioural considerations', (NIA, 2021).
[17] NI Assembly Hansard, 'Mental Health Issues in Schools: Mental Health – Professor Siobhán O'Neill', 24 September 2025.
[18] The Executive Office, 'Ending Violence against Women and Girls: Experiences and Attitudes of 16 Year Olds in NI' (NISRA, 2024).
[19] NI Assembly Hansard, 'Mental Health Issues in Schools: Mental Health – Professor Siobhán O'Neill', 24 September 2025.
[20] Rape Crisis Tyneside and Northumberland, 'Roll Down Your Skirt: How Schools Teach Victim-Blaming and Rape Culture Through Uniform Checks' (Rape Crises Tyneside and Northumberland, 2019).
[21]Rape Crisis Tyneside and Northumberland, 'Roll Down Your Skirt: How Schools Teach Victim-Blaming and Rape Culture Through Uniform Checks' (Rape Crises Tyneside and Northumberland, 2019).
[22] CEDAW/C/GC/36, 'UN CEDAW Committee General Comment No 36: the Right of Women and Girls to Education', 27 November 2017, at para 25.

Uniform Costs

Finally, it is worth noting that school skirts, particularly in secondary school settings, are usually specific to the individual school and are therefore more expensive than generic school trousers that are available to boys. This is an additional uniform cost incurred by families of girls. In relation to the affordability of unforms, the UN CEDAW Committee has highlighted that "parents are faced with meeting the hidden cost of uniforms, transportation, textbooks and other school materials, lunch and various levies and user fees with students from the poorest quintile being most adversely affected and often stigmatised".[23] This additional cost for families of girls and transgender and non-binary children could be mitigated by the option to wear school trousers.

I hope that this is helpful. If we can provide any further assistance, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,



Alyson Kilpatrick
Chief Commissioner

[23] CEDAW/C/GC/36 'UN CEDAW Committee General Recommendation No. 36 on Girls' and Women's Right to Education', 16 November 2017, at para 36.

From: [redacted]
Sent: 19 February 2026 19:09
To: +Comm Education Public Email <committee.education@niassembly.gov.uk>
Cc: [redacted]

Subject: Right to Choose to Wear Trousers to School Bill Consultation

Dear Clerk,

My name is [redacted] and I am the member of the Belfast City Youth Council (BCYC) who is leading on developing a response to the consultation on the proposal for a Committee Bill on the right to choose to wear trousers to school. I have CC'D [redacted] from the Belfast City Council, who is currently overseeing the BCYC. I am emailing you to introduce the BCYC as we have not previously submitted to this committee. I will be submitting our formal response via the Citizen Space form shortly.

The Belfast City Youth Council is the official Youth Participation Structure of the Belfast City Council and is made up of members from across the city, aged 13-18, or 21 if they are disabled or care experienced. The Belfast City Youth Council was previously known as the Belfast Youth Forum, work of the Belfast Youth Forum has previously been cited at the committee, such as the 'Any Use' report which explored the views of young people around the issue of Relationship and Sexuality Education. We rebranded to become the Belfast City Youth Council in 2021. We are made up of around 25 members and out of this, myself and 10 other members formed the response to this consultation. The views expressed in the consultation response reflect solely on the views of BCYC members who took part and not those of Belfast City Council, its elected members or employees. This is an issue many members of the BCYC are deeply passionate about and we are grateful to provide a formal response, and we would welcome and be more than happy to engage in further consultation and engagement opportunities with the committee on this issue and others, as a stakeholder group, as it is key that the voices and experiences of young people are heard in these important matters.

Thank you

FREE PRESBYTERIAN
Education Board of Presbytery

Convenor
Rev Brian McClung
[redacted]

Secretary
Rev Darryl Abernethy
[redacted]

Treasurer
Mr John Irwin
[redacted]

24th February 2026

Dear Members of the Education Committee,

It has just recently been brought to our attention that the proposed legislative change to allow all pupils to wear trousers at school may well cover Independent Schools, including our five Independent Christian Schools associated with the Free Presbyterian Church.

We would request an exemption from this proposed change in the law being applied to our Schools.

We would request this for the following reasons:

1. The distinction in dress and appearance between boys and girls has been a point of our School ethos since the formation of our Christian Schools. This is reflective of the denominational position that dress is modest and appropriate. Distinction in dress between males and females is carried over into our contracts of employment as an 'Occupational Requirement' for teaching staff. To permit pupils to do something which is contrary to our ethos and employment requirements will only create confusion within our schools and go contrary to our Biblical ethos and sincerely held beliefs.
2. Our school parents, have historically and do presently support the school ethos on the matter of dress and appearance. In over 40 years of existence no one has ever raised this as an issue of concern. This is one of the reasons why Christian parents desire to send their pupils to our schools. They desire for these distinctions to be maintained.

3. It is acknowledged in Article 2, Protocol 1, of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms that *...In the exercise of any functions which it assumes in relation to education and to teaching, the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching is in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions*.

4. Historically, exemptions have been given recognising the Biblical ethos and sincerely held views of those within religious organisations. I enclose a few examples.

   (i) The Sex Discrimination (Northern Ireland) Order 1976 as specifically amended by Sex Discrimination (Amendment of Legislation) Regulations 2008, (see section 35ZA Excluded matters).

   (ii) The Sex Discrimination Gender Reassignment Regulations Northern Ireland 1999, (see section 5).

   (iii) The Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006 and The Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006, (see regulation 16).

5. There may be other non-Christian 'independent schools' which this proposed change may have a bearing upon as well. I am unaware what the official status is or the uniform criteria might be for the Islamic School in Belfast.

We would therefore request that Independent Schools be exempted from this proposed legislation.

Yours Sincerely

Brian McClung

WPG NI Response to Bill on the right to choose to wear trousers in school

February 2026

Contact:

[redacted]

Women's Sector Lobbyist

[redacted]

1. Introduction:

The Women's Policy Group (WPG) is a group of policy experts and practitioners who advocate collectively for women and girls by promoting gender equality through an intersectional feminist lens. We challenge systemic injustice and discrimination affecting women and girls by informing society and influencing policy and law. Our work is informed by women and girls' lived experiences and rooted in international human rights law.

The WPG is made up of women from trade unions, grassroots women's organisations, women's networks, feminist campaigning organisations, LGBTQ+ organisations, migrant groups, support service providers, NGOs, human rights and equality organisations and individuals. Over the years this important network has ensured there is good communication between politicians, policy makers and women's organisations on the ground. The WPG is endorsed as a coalition of expert voices that advocates for women in Northern Ireland on a policy level.

If you have any questions or queries about this response, or would like to discuss this evidence further with the WPG, please contact Elaine Crory, Women's Sector Lobbyist at [redacted]

This response was prepared by the following WPG members:

- Elaine Crory – Women's Resource and Development Agency
- Meghan Hoyt - Women's Resource and Development Agency
- Dervilia Kernaghan - Women's Platform

Please note that this response also includes evidence from other WPG work, compiled by a range of WPG members, and not all member organisations have specific policy positions on all the areas covered in this response.

1.1 Endorsements

The WPG would like to endorse the response submitted to this call for evidence by

- Women's Regional Consortium (2026) 'Proposal for a Bill on the Right to Choose to Wear Trousers' Consultation Response

2. Past Consultations Responses, Evidence Submissions and Briefings:

The WPG has published a wide range of evidence through various evidence submissions, public consultation responses and specific briefings on issues relating to the right to wear trousers. Responses made by the WPG, and some of our members, in relation to these issues include:

- WPG School Uniform Consultation (Sept 2024)[1]

2.1. Content from previous WPG Responses

In response to the School Uniform Consultation (2024) the WPG made two central points which are also relevant to this consultation.

1) **School uniform policy should centre the agency of the student not the control of the school.** To ensure dignity and equality, school uniforms must allow students the flexibility to dress for school in a comfortable manner. The right for all students to choose to wear trousers is an important part of this.

   End gender specific uniform policies. Gendered uniform policies reinforce patriarchal hierarchies and gender stereotypes, which cause real harm to students.[2] We are emphatic in pushing for statutory requirements that compel schools to offer a range of uniform options to students of all genders. While this is particularly important for affirming trans and gender nonconforming students, cis-gendered male and female students must also be offered multiple options in order to break down harmful gender stereotypes.

3. General Comments on the Right to Wear Trousers Consultation

The WPG would like to stress that a school uniform policy which allows all children to wear trousers should not be controversial. Women and girls wearing trousers in all

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[1] WPG (Sept 2024) School Uniform Consultation https://static1.squarespace.com/static/66c475c740e7194ba8ee6a81/t/6789343b6dcd13585e5be8d0/1737045051537/WPG+response+to+DoE+School+Uniform+Consultation+%281%29.pdf

[2] Wolfe, M. (2024) 'School uniforms that hurt: an Australian perspective on gendered mattering' The Australian Educational Researcher. Vol: 51 pp. 909-927; Bragg, S & Ringrose, J. (2023) 'Intervening in School Uniform Debates: Making Equity Matter in England' in Shanks, R., Ovington, J., Cross, B., Carnarvon, A. (eds) *School Uniforms. The Cultural and Social Foundations of Education*. Palgrave Macmillan. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-32939-5_4 ;Let Clothes be Clothes (2021) 'Dressing Girls to Fail' Report for the Department of Education.

aspects of life is commonplace and there are no reasonable objections to the implementation of this policy. It should have been standard school policy in Northern Ireland decades ago. With this in mind, the WPG would like to strongly reiterate our key points from above, reminding the Committee that:

1) School uniform policy should centre the comfort and needs of the student. This view was also taken by young people themselves who overwhelmingly support this policy change.
2) School uniform policies should not be gendered. The right to wear trousers to school is about equality and combating gender-based discrimination.

4. Response to Consultation Questions

1. Do you consent to your submission being published on the Committee's website and included in the Committee's report?

Yes

2. Are you responding as:

An organisation

If you are responding on behalf of a school or organisation, what is the name of your school or organisation?

Women's Resource and Development Agency

<u>School uniform</u>

3. Do you think all pupils should be allowed the choice to wear trousers in school?

Yes

Why do you say that

The WPG shares the view expressed by the Women's Regional Consortium that this is an issue of gender-based discrimination and should be immediately remedied. The

WRC response also notes that discrimination cases have been taken against schools, though there is no settled case law on this issue.[3]

7. To what extent do you agree with the following statements regarding girls having the right to wear trousers at school:

Strongly agree

It would help girls feel less exposed/ vulnerable

Strongly agree

It would help girls take part in more school activities

Strongly agree

It would make girls feel safer

Strongly agree

It would help girls express their individuality

Strongly agree

There is stigma or judgement associated with girls wearing trousers

Strongly disagree

It would enhance period dignity

Strongly agree

It would be fair

Strongly agree

[3] https://www.equalityni.org/https/www-equalityni-org/Individuals/I-have-a-problem-with-an-education-service/SethanthanMoreoverx

8. In your view, are there any financial consequences of allowing girls to wear trousers to school?

No

Why do you say that:

School uniform trousers are often slightly more affordable than skirts. Moreover, allowing gender neutral uniform options could enable more families to pass uniforms down to younger siblings.

9. Should there be any exceptions to allowing pupils the choice to wear trousers to school?

No

10. Is there anything else you would like to say about the idea of a law to allow all pupils the choice to wear trousers in school?

The WPG cannot emphasize strongly enough how much we believe that all students should be allowed to wear trousers at school. It is frankly incomprehensible that this is not already common practice in all schools. Forcing girls to wear skirts is nothing short of gender-based discrimination and can inhibit girls' ability to fully participate in school life. Student comfort and dignity should be central to any school uniform policy and it is difficult to see how there could be any reasonable objections to this becoming law.

ENDS

For any questions or queries relating to this submission, please contact:

- [redacted] Women's Sector Lobbyist at WRDA: [redacted] or
- [redacted] Women's Sector Lobbyist Policy Assistant at WRDA: [redacted]

Consortium for the Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas

Response to: Proposal for a Bill on the right to choose to wear trousers in school

Issued by: Committee for Education

February 2026

Prepared by: [redacted]
Women's Support Network
Email: policy@wsn.org.uk

Women's Regional Consortium: Working to Support Women in Rural Communities and Disadvantaged Urban Areas

1. Introduction

1.1 This response has been undertaken collaboratively by the members of the Consortium for the Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas (hereafter, either the Women's Regional Consortium or simply the Consortium), which is funded by the Department for Communities and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

1.2 The Women's Regional Consortium consists of seven established women's sector organisations that are committed to working in partnership with each other, government, statutory organisations and women's organisations, centres and groups in disadvantaged and rural areas, to ensure that organisations working for women are given the best possible support in the work they do in tackling disadvantage and social exclusion.[1] The seven groups are as follows:

- ♀ Training for Women Network (TWN) – Project lead
- ♀ Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA)
- ♀ Women's Support Network (WSN)
- ♀ Northern Ireland's Rural Women's Network (NIRWN)
- ♀ Women's TEC
- ♀ Women's Centre Derry
- ♀ Foyle Women's Information Network (FWIN)

[1] Sections 1.2-1.3 represent the official description of the Consortium's work, as agreed and authored by its seven partner organisations.

1.3 The Consortium is the established link and strategic partner between government and statutory agencies and women in disadvantaged and rural areas, including all groups, centres and organisations delivering essential frontline services, advice and support. The Consortium ensures that there is a continuous two-way flow of information between government and the sector. It also ensures that organisations/centres and groups are made aware of consultations, government planning and policy implementation. In turn, the Consortium ascertains the views, needs and aspirations of women in disadvantaged and rural areas and takes these views forward to influence policy development and future government planning, which ultimately results in the empowerment of local women in disadvantaged and rurally isolated communities.

1.4 The Women's Regional Consortium appreciates the opportunity to respond to the Committee for Education's consultation on the Right to Choose to Wear Trousers in School. We wish to endorse the response made by the Women's Policy Group of which we are a member.

2.0 General Comments

It is incredulous that in 2026 this consultation is needed and that girls do not have the right to wear trousers in school. Women and girls wear trousers in all sorts of settings and indeed it has been a workplace norm for many decades. Trousers are an acceptable form of dress for women and most organisations where uniforms are required have changed their dress codes accordingly. Trousers are quite often cheaper, more comfortable and more practical and there is no rational argument as to why girls should not be allowed to wear trousers at school.

For a girl to have to wear a skirt at school when she can wear trousers anywhere else sends a very particular message. She is not simply a pupil, she is a female pupil and this can affect her perceptions of her own abilities and responses to particular subject areas reinforcing gender stereotypes, for example, girls are not good at maths. Schools should be the last places where these gendered stereotypes are perpetuated. Schools should be places where girls are instilled with ambition, encouraged to realise their full potential and shatter patriarchal norms.

The ability for girls to wear trousers at school would also help girls during their period making them more comfortable at school. Menstruation Matters highlighted their disappointment that the right to wear trousers was not included in the School Uniforms Bill missing a crucial opportunity to make school uniforms more comfortable for students:

"We're deeply disappointed in the Education Minister's School Uniforms Bill blocking school students' choice to wear trousers. An amendment we called for and briefed the committee on. This simple, progressive step would have helped reduce shame and discomfort during periods, with 98% of those we polled in support. Girls are telling us what they need – so why aren't we listening to them? This is a missed opportunity to make sure that no student's education is limited by what they're wearing during their period."[2]

[2] https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1286755760157410&set=pb.100064689939577.-2207520000&locale=en_GB

We believe that forcing girls to wear trousers at school is prejudicial and a form of gender discrimination. Trousers for All (a UK-wide group that campaigned to give girls the option of wearing trousers as part of their school uniform) suggests that: *"Schools forcing girls to wear skirts is equivalent to states forcing females to wear a veil and to companies forcing females to wear high heels. All of these are expressions of sexism."*

The Equality Commission for NI states that there is no decided case law on sex discrimination arising from school uniform policies in Northern Ireland and that schools are allowed to set the rules around what pupils should wear at school. It does however suggest that: *"it is good practice for schools to review school uniform requirements regularly to ensure that they reflect current conventions on dress."*[3] The Equality Commission's website also provides an example of a challenge on this issue which resulted in the school in question changing its policy allowing girls to wear trousers:

A pupil, Nadia Coyle, took a case against the Board of Governors of St Joseph's Grammar School in Donaghmore. She argued that in light of what is now conventional dress for girls, it was unlawful sex discrimination to deny a girl the opportunity to wear smart trousers as an alternative to a skirt. The case was settled out of court in 2007 and the school subsequently changed its policy allowing female pupils to wear trousers.

We highlight the recent excellent campaigning work by two school girls from Enniskillen Integrated Primary School (Rhea and Astrid) who successfully campaigned for their school to allow girls to wear trousers. They said it was "*weird and unfair*" that some schools still enforce skirts and the Women's Regional Consortium agrees with their sentiments and pays tribute to their powerful advocacy on this subject! Rhea and Astrid contacted Dr Mairead Ryan who was involved in research to suggest that school uniform policies could be restricting young people from being active, particularly primary school-aged girls. Dr Ryan said in a letter to Enniskillen Integrated Primary School that "*Gendered uniforms can limit girls' movement and engagement in physical activities…..*

[3] https://www.equalityni.org/https/www-equalityni-org/Individuals/I-have-a-problem-with-an-education-service/Sex

Uniform items like dresses and skirts can restrict certain movements and inhibit young girls from climbing, jumping, and participating in other forms of active play that are crucial for their development."[4]

We also refer the Committee to our response to the School Uniform Consultation in 2024[5] where we supported the Department for Education's key principles on school uniforms including that they should be comfortable and that school uniform policies should be developed in partnership with pupils and their parents/carers. We made the point that schools should be legally required to comply with the Departmental Uniform Guidance. If so, we believe that girls would be allowed to wear trousers at school as for may girls trousers are more comfortable and if properly consulted the majority of female pupils would agree with this option.

We also advocated for the principle of **Flexibility** to be included within the key principles on school uniforms moving away from policies which seek to control, towards policies which are child-centred, and allow a degree of flexibility according to the circumstances. As part of this we supported a mandatory requirement for gender-neutral options for school uniforms so that pupils have the ability to choose the options that work for them and which do not reinforce harm to trans and gender non-conforming students. All students should be offered gender-neutral options for school uniform to help break down harmful gender stereotypes.

[4] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cvgd10plp5eo
[5] https://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Womens-Regional-Consortium-Response-to-School-Uniform-Policy-Consultation.pdf

3.0 Consultation Questions

1. What is your name?

[redacted]

2. What is your email address?

policy@wsn.org.uk

3. Do you consent to your submission being published on the Committee's website and included in the Committee's report?

(Required)

Yes.

4. Are you responding as:

An organisation

If you are responding on behalf of a school or organisation, what is the name of your school or organisation?

Women's Regional Consortium

5. Are You?

Female

6. Do you think all pupils should be allowed the choice to wear trousers in school?

Yes

Why do you say that:

Please see **2.0 General Comments** for why we believe that all pupils should be allowed the choice to wear trousers in school.

International human rights standards underscore the principle of non-discrimination. Prohibiting girls from wearing trousers in school is a discriminatory practice that violates the principles of gender equality and the rights of women and girls. A number of international human rights standards apply in support of the right of girls to wear trousers in school including:

- **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)**. CEDAW contains a number of articles which support the right to wear trousers in school:

    - **Article 1 Definition of Discrimination -** defines discrimination against women as any distinction, exclusion, or restriction made on the basis of sex that hinders the recognition of women's rights. This would include anything that restricts clothing choices based on gender which can be viewed as a form of gender-based discrimination.
    - **Article 2 Measures –** obligates states to eliminate discrimination and take appropriate steps to ensure equality in all areas including in education.
    - **Article 5 Stereotypes –** CEDAW calls for the modification of social and cultural patterns that perpetuate discrimination. Enforcing traditional gender norms around clothing can perpetuate harmful stereotypes.
    - **Article 10 Education -** CEDAW emphasises the need for equal access to education and the importance of removing obstacles to educational attainment for girls. Enforcing uniform policy that limits the clothing choices of girls, including prohibiting trousers, may hinder their comfort and participation in educational environments.
- **Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)**. Article 2 includes the right of children to be free from discrimination and Article 12 includes the right of children to express themselves. Restricting the ability of girls to wear trousers in school can be seen as a breach of their right to express themselves and their gender identity.
- **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)**. Article 19 ensures the right to freedom of expression and Article 26 prohibits discrimination on various grounds including sex. The right to wear trousers in school should be protected as it can be viewed as an expression of identity.
- **European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR)**. The ECHR is incorporated into domestic law through the Human Rights Act 1998. Article 8 guarantees the right to respect for private and family life and Protocol No. 12 prohibits discrimination on any ground including sex. These rights may be violated by dress codes that enforce gender-specific clothing.

7. To what extent do you agree with the following statements regarding girls having the right to wear trousers at school:

It would help girls feel more physically comfortable

Strongly agree

It would help girls feel less exposed/ vulnerable

Strongly agree

It would help girls take part in more school activities

Strongly agree

It would make girls feel safer

Strongly agree

It would help girls express their individuality

Strongly agree

There is stigma or judgement associated with girls wearing trousers

Strongly disagree

It would enhance period dignity

Strongly agree

It would be fair

Strongly agree

8. In your view, are there any financial consequences of allowing girls to wear trousers to school?

No

Why do you say that:

On a cursory internet search on a high street retailers school uniforms the costs of generic school trousers and skirts is the same (Tesco, 2 pack black school trousers and 2-pack black pleated school skirts both cost £7 (age 6-7)).

In terms of specialist school uniform providers, it would also seem to suggest that the cost of trousers would actually be cheaper (assuming both the skirt and the trousers were

bought through a specialist shop). For example, a search on Warnocks website[6] shows the following (based on a selection of grammar schools in North Belfast):

- **Belfast Royal Academy** – black trousers (youth) £24.95-£29.95, navy long pleated skirt (junior school) £32.95-£35.95.
- **Dominican College Fortwilliam** (girls school) – 6th form pleated skirt £36.95-£39.95
- **St Malachy's College, Belfast** (boys school) – black trousers (mens) £30.95-£34.95 (assuming mens sizing for 6th form so it is comparable with a pupil at Dominican College at the same age)

It must be noted that for many school skirts it is impossible to buy a generic version from a high street retailer forcing families with girls to have to pay more for these items while on the other hand trousers are readily available from high street retailers to suit the vast majority of schools if not all.

9. Should there be any exceptions to allowing pupils the choice to wear trousers to school?

No

10. Is there anything else you would like to say about the idea of a law to allow all pupils the choice to wear trousers in school?

Schools should not have to be forced to provide equality for all their pupils and given that skirts are not required as part of any other uniform it is highly disappointing that this law is needed at all. While it is disappointing that a law is needed it should have happened a long time ago.

[6] https://warnocks.co.uk/grammar-and-high-schools/ (accessed 22/01/26)

From: [redacted]
Sent: 21 February 2026 11:20
To: +Comm Education Public Email

Subject: Re GIRLS NOT ALLOWED TO WEAR TROUSERS

Hi I'm a Granny and I think girls should be allowed to wear trousers to school. They should be the same colour as boys wear, and could be leggings or some type of trousers that make them feel comfortable. I remember my time at school and being freezing . What a bunch of old fashion pompous people we have on committees, and in Northern Ireland assembly/ government. Who are overpaid and lost the ability to remember the common man Regards [redacted]

Department of Education
www.education-ni.gov.uk

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22 May 2026

GM – 0341 - 2026
Your Ref: 2026.318

Dear Aoibhinn
Thank you for your letter of 6 May 2026. Officials have provided the following information in response.

"In paragraphs addressing its financial implications, the School Uniforms (Guidelines and Allowances) Act 2025 EFM did not identify that costs would be incurred by the Department for said Guidelines. Instead, they suggest that the Department would have capacity within its existing resources to produce and thereafter to review them, and as necessary to both revise and re-issue them."

Committee question 1
"Please confirm whether such review and subsequent revision and reissue is part of routine DE practice and procedure under the Minister's legislation, with any incurred costs relating to said Guidelines to be assumed within normal DE expenditure. Does it follow that any costs incurred as a result of any DE review, amendment and re-issue under a Committee Bill would be treated similarly?"

The Department considers the review, revision and re-issue of School Uniforms Guidelines under the School Uniform (Guidelines and Allowances) Act (Northern Ireland) 2026 to be part of the core business of the relevant team. Without having sight of, or time to assess, a draft of a Committee Bill the Department cannot guarantee that the work arising is also manageable within the core business of the relevant team. This is particularly the case in relation to your next question about post-legislative scrutiny via monitoring of pupil uptake of trousers as a uniform option.

Committee question 2
"Similarly, should the Committee's proposal seek to facilitate post-legislative scrutiny via monitoring of pupils' uptake of the trousers option, might that be incorporated into Northern Ireland Assembly existing DE annual uniform-related

data collections and absorbed into existing DE staffing roles, or would further resource be required to enable such collection?"

There is no existing mechanism to seek to establish how many pupils would make a choice to wear trousers as part of their uniform because of a Committee Bill. The Department is not clear how this would be achieved other than a voluntary survey of the circa 329,914 pupils attending the 1,020 schools the guidelines currently apply to. The logical route to issuing such a survey would be through the schools and, given there are existing workload concerns, this is not an approach the Department considers appropriate. Schools are required to provide information on adherence to the guidelines; asking them to also facilitate a survey of what choice pupils make in relation to one uniform element and whether that relates to the Committee Bill (post-legislative scrutiny) seems disproportionate.

The Department is not clear on what basis such pupil-choice monitoring information would be required – its return can only ever be voluntary therefore without guarantee of 100% response/ accuracy. The Department understands that the intention of the Committee Bill is to ensure every pupil has the right to choose to wear trousers as part of their school uniform. The Department also understands that the means of legislating for this is to be through a duty placed on a school to explicitly include trousers as an option for all pupils in its uniform policy.

Any monitoring of the legislation would therefore be on the discharging of the statutory duty i.e. has a school explicitly included trousers as an option for all pupils in its uniform policy.

Monitoring the choices made by circa 329,914 pupils - given that there is no legal requirement for them to have to wear trousers – has no basis in the legislation proposed. The scale of the task is significant. The success of the legislation being proposed by the Committee surely relates to whether schools include the option of trousers for all pupils in their uniform policy; not the number of pupils who make a personal choice to do so.

There are pupils currently wearing trousers as part of their uniform which pre-dates any Committee Bill. Is it the proposal of the Committee that the Department be required to disaggregate the motivation and timing of when pupils made the choice to wear trousers in order to establish the uptake based on the Committee Bill in question - if this monitoring is intended to be post-legislative scrutiny?

The Department's focus is on monitoring adherence by schools to the guidelines and therefore, in relation to the outworkings of the Committee Bill, monitoring would reasonably focus on ensuring schools include the right for all pupils to wear trousers in their individual policies. Officials are sure the Committee will appreciate that this applies across 1,020 schools so, on its own, monitoring adherence to the guidelines represents a sizeable piece of work. The Department has no existing mechanism and no capacity to monitor a choice made by pupils in terms of individual uniform items worn.

Committee question 3
"Has the Department considered the estimated potential costs that it believes could arise from a school's failure to comply with its consultation outcome?"
Committee question 4
"What DE resources would the Department need to investigate and decide in such cases?"

The School Uniform (Guidelines and Allowances) Act (Northern Ireland) 2026 requires that the Department give a direction should a school materially not adhere to the guidelines. Guideline 3 of the associated School Uniforms Guidelines requires the manager of a school to consult parents, pupils and any other group they consider relevant when devising or reviewing their school uniform policies. Guideline 12 includes the requirement that information about, including the outcome of, a school's consultation with parents, pupils, any others must be published. Any failure to adhere to any requirement of the guidelines risks being assessed as a material non-adherence. Such an assessment leads to a direction. Officials are not clear what precisely is meant by the questions, but costs and resources of any assessment of non-adherence to the requirements of the guidelines are likely to be in the territory of legal advice and staff time. At this stage of implementation of the School Uniforms Guidelines the Department has not estimated such potential costs.

Committee comment
"Should the Committee propose monitoring of the uptake of its measure, it might yield savings for the Department by potentially reducing such complaints."

The Department does not consider this assessment to be likely given the substantive points set out in response to question 2.

I trust the Committee finds the information provided helpful.

Yours sincerely

[redacted]

Acting Departmental Assembly Liaison Officer

NORTHERN IRELAND HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

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11 June 2026

Dear Chair,

Re: Exemptions from Proposed Legislative Changes to Allow Pupils to Choose to Wear Trousers to School

The NIHRC welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Committee for Education's request for advice pertaining to a letter from the Free Presbyterian Education Board of Presbytery, dated 24 February 2026, (the letter). The letter seeks an exemption, for Independent Schools, from the proposed legislative changes allowing girl pupils to choose to wear trousers to school.

The letter refers to the ethos of the five Independent Christian Schools associated with the Free Presbyterian Church. That ethos, it is said, requires a distinction in dress between boys and girls, which is "reflective of the denominational position that dress is modest and appropriate". Moreover, it is noted in the letter that the same distinction in dress is contractually required of teachers'. It follows, it is suggested, that permitting pupils to do something which is contrary to the school's ethos and the employment requirements for teachers "will only create confusion within our schools and go contrary to our Biblical ethos and sincerely held beliefs".

The NIHRC has provided advice to the Committee on the right for girls to wear trousers, or better put, not to wear skirts,[1] which we will not restate here. This

[1] Letter to the Committee for Education from the NI Human Rights Commission, 19 February 2026.

advice deals principally with Article 9 and Article 2 of Protocol 1 of the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ECHR).[2]

Article 9 ECHR

Article 9 provides as follows:

> "1. Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance.
>
> 2. Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs shall be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others."

The Article 9(1) right to 'freedom' of thought, conscience and religion is unqualified, meaning it cannot be restricted.[3] However, the right to 'manifest' one's religion or beliefs, is qualified, meaning it can be limited if prescribed by law and necessary in a democratic society in pursuit of one or more of the legitimate aims set out in Article 9(2).[4] The ECtHR has clarified what constitutes 'manifestation' of religious belief, which may take the form of "worship, teaching, practice and observance".[5] While the unqualified right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion within Article 9(1) protects views that attain a certain level of cogency, seriousness, cohesion and importance,[6] "even where the belief in question attains the required level of cogency and importance, it cannot be said that every act which is in some way inspired, motivated or influenced by it constitutes a 'manifestation' of the belief.[7] To be protected as a manifestation of belief, the relevant act must be "intimately linked to the religion or belief. An example would be an act of worship or devotion which forms part of the practice of a religion or belief in a generally recognised form. However, the manifestation of religion or belief is not limited to such acts; the existence of a sufficiently close and direct nexus between the act and the underlying belief must be determined on the facts of each case. In particular, there is no requirement on the applicant to establish that he or she acted in fulfilment of a duty mandated by the religion in question."[8]

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[2] Article 9, European Convention of Human Rights. Freedom of thought, conscience and religion is protected across several other human rights instruments, including Article 18, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; Article 14, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child; and Article 5(d)(vii), UN Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination.
[3] *Ivanova v. Bulgaria*, application No 52435/99, judgment of 15 April 2007, at para 79.
[4] *Eweida and Others v United Kingdom*, application No 48420/10, judgment of 15 January 2013, at para 80.
[5] *Eweida and Others v United Kingdom*, application No 48420/10, judgment of 15 January 2013, para 80.
[6] *Ibid,* para 81.
[7] *Ibid*, para 82.
[8] *Ibid*.

The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) has made it clear that to limit such right requires serious and compelling reasons within the wording of Article 9(2).[9] As States are afforded a 'margin of appreciation' in their management of rights so the ECtHR will "have regard to what is at stake, namely the need to protect the rights and freedoms of others, to preserve public order and to secure civil peace and true religious pluralism, which is vital to the survival of a democratic society".[10]

Wearing religious clothing or symbols, in certain circumstances, has been found to constitute a manifestation of a person's religion or belief and therefore to engage Article 9. It is particularly relevant that it is of "value to an individual who has made religion a central tenet of his or her life to be able to communicate that belief to others".[11] In the case of *Hamidović v Bosnia and Herzegovina*, the ECtHR found that, even where the wearing of an article of clothing does not represent a strong religious duty, the strength of its traditional roots may be considered by many people to constitute a religious duty.[12] That case concerned the punishment of a Muslim witness in a criminal trial for refusing to remove a skullcap. The ECtHR emphasised that it was not a case "about the wearing of religious symbols and clothing at the workplace… which is a completely different issue." The ECtHR, in finding that the punishment imposed on the applicant for wearing a skullcap in a courtroom constituted a limitation on the manifestation of his religion, observed that wearing a skullcap was in line with "the official position of the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina, according to which the wearing of the skullcap does not represent a strong religious duty, but it has such strong traditional roots that it is considered by many people to constitute a religious duty. Having found it to be a limitation, the ECtHR went on to consider whether it was within Article 9(2). To determine that, it had to be considered whether it was prescribed by law, pursued one or more of the legitimate aims set out in 9(2) and was necessary in a democratic society to achieve the aim or aims concerned.[13] By way of example, in the case of *X v United Kingdom*, concerning the penalisation of a Sikh man who refused to remove his turban to wear a helmet while riding his motorcycle, the ECtHR found that any interference with the applicant's Article 9 rights was "justified for the protection of health".[14]

In another case, *S.A.S v France*, concerning the banning of the wearing of a niqab in public, the ECtHR held that the relevant limitations did not constitute a breach.[15] In that case the ECtHR noted the relevance of the fact that the applicant accepted that she wore the niqab in public and in private, but not systematically: she might not wear it, for example, when she visited the doctor, when meeting friends in a public place, or when she wanted to socialise in public. She was thus content not to wear the niqab in public places at all times but wished to be able to wear it when she chose to do so, depending in

[9] *Leyla Şahin v Turkey*, application No 44774/98, judgment of 10 November 2005, at para 107.
[10] *Ibid*, at para 110.
[11] *Ibid*, at para 94.
[12] *Hamidović v Bosnia and Herzegovina*, application No 57792/15, judgment of 5 December 2017, at para 30.
[13] *Ibid*. para 30.
[14] *X v United Kingdom*, application No 7992/77, judgment of 12 July 1978.
[15] SAS v France *Ibid*.

particular on her spiritual feelings. There were certain times (for example, during religious events such as Ramadan) when she believed that she ought to wear it in public in order to express her religious, personal and cultural faith. Her aim was not to annoy others but to feel at inner peace with herself. The applicant did not claim that she should be able to keep the niqab on when undergoing a security check, at the bank or in airports, and she agreed to show her face when requested to do so for necessary identity checks. The ECtHR noted that "personal choices as to an individual's desired appearance, whether in public or in private places, relate to the expression of his or her personality and thus fall within the notion of private life. It has found to this effect previously as regards a haircut…"

The ECtHR reiterated that the enumeration of the exceptions to the individual's freedom to manifest his or her religion or beliefs, as listed in Article 9(2), is exhaustive and that their definition is restrictive. It observed that "In democratic societies, in which several religions coexist within one and the same population, it may be necessary to place limitations on freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs in order to reconcile the interests of the various groups and ensure that everyone's beliefs are respected."[16] It continued noting that the ECtHR "has frequently emphasised the State's role as the neutral and impartial organiser of the exercise of various religions, faiths and beliefs, and has stated that this role is conducive to public order, religious harmony and tolerance in a democratic society. As indicated previously, it also considers that the State's duty of neutrality and impartiality is incompatible with any power on the State's part to assess the legitimacy of religious beliefs or the ways in which those beliefs are expressed… Although individual interests must on occasion be subordinated to those of a group, democracy does not simply mean that the views of a majority must always prevail: a balance must be achieved which ensures the fair treatment of people from minorities and avoids any abuse of a dominant position."[17]

The ECtHR also observed that "the national authorities have direct democratic legitimation and are, as the Court has held on many occasions, in principle better placed than an international court to evaluate local needs and conditions. In matters of general policy, on which opinions within a democratic society may reasonably differ widely, the role of the domestic policy-maker should be given special weight."[18] This margin of appreciation, however, goes hand in hand with supervision embracing both the law and the decisions applying it. The task is to determine whether the measures taken at national level were justified in principle and proportionate. Ultimately, on the facts of the S.A.S. case the ECtHR found that "in view of its impact on the rights of women who wish to wear the full-face veil for religious reasons, a blanket ban on the wearing in public places of clothing designed to conceal the face can be regarded as proportionate only in a context where there is a general threat to public safety."[19]

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[16] *Ibid*. para 126.
[17] *Ibid.* para. 127.
[18] *Ibid.* para. 129.
[19] *Ibid*. para. 139.

However, the French Government also argued that it was responding to a practice that the State deemed incompatible, in French society, with the ground rules of social communication and more broadly the requirements of living together. From that perspective, it was noted that the State was seeking to protect a principle of interaction between individuals, which in its view was essential for the expression not only of pluralism, but also of tolerance and broadmindedness without which there is no democratic society. The ECtHR noted "It can thus be said that the question whether or not it should be permitted to wear the full-face veil in public places constitutes a choice of society."[20] Finally, having regard in particular to the breadth of the margin of appreciation afforded to France the Court held that the ban was "proportionate to the aim pursued, namely the preservation of the conditions of "living together" as an element of the protection of the rights and freedoms of others… [and] can thus be regarded as necessary in a democratic society."[21]

In *Eweida and Others v United Kingdom*, the UK Government argued that Article 9 ECHR does not protect each and every act or form of behaviour motivated or inspired by religion or belief. They argued that behaviour which was motivated or inspired by religion or belief, but which was not an act of practice of a religion in a generally recognised form, falls outside the protection of Article 9. In that case, two applicants complained that their desire to wear a visible cross at work was protected. Another applicant complained that his objection to providing psycho-sexual therapy to same-sex couples was protected but the UK Government argued that it could not be described as the practice of religion in a generally recognised form. In the alternative, the Government argued that even if the visible wearing of the cross, or the refusal to offer specific services to homosexual couples, were a manifestation of belief and thus a right protected by Article 9, there had been no interference with this right in respect of any of the applicants.

The ECtHR noted that, as enshrined in Article 9, freedom of thought, conscience and religion is one of the foundations of a democratic society. In its "religious dimension it is one of the most vital elements that go to make up the identity of believers and their conception of life, but it is also a precious asset for atheists, agnostics, sceptics and the unconcerned. The pluralism indissociable from a democratic society, which has been dearly won over the centuries, depends on it."[22] It explained that religious freedom is "primarily a matter of individual thought and conscience. This aspect of the right set out in the first paragraph of Article 9, to hold any religious belief and to change religion or belief, is absolute and unqualified. However, as further set out in Article 9(1), freedom of religion also encompasses the freedom to manifest one's belief… The manifestation of religious belief may take the form of worship, teaching, practice and observance. Bearing witness in words and deeds is bound up with the existence of religious convictions… Since the manifestation by one person of his or her religious belief may have an impact on others, the drafters of the Convention qualified this aspect of freedom of religion in the manner set out in Article 9(2). This second paragraph

[20] *Ibid*. para. 153.
[21] *Ibid*. paras. 157-158.
[22] *Eweida v UK* ibid. at para. 79.

provides that any limitation placed on a person's freedom to manifest religion or belief must be prescribed by law and necessary in a democratic society in pursuit of one or more of the legitimate aims" set out in Article 9(2).

It is helpful to consider the reasoning in respect of two different outcomes within the Eweida case. In respect of the wearing of a cross by an employee of the private company, the ECtHR observed that the UK courts did not strike a fair balance between the applicant's rights under Article 9 and the company's wish to protect its brand, where the latter was afforded too much weight.[23] In the same case, a second applicant who wore a necklace with a cross, while working as a nurse, was asked to remove that necklace for the purposes of health and safety.[24] The ECtHR observed that the decision to wear a cross necklace to work was a manifestation of her faith, but observed that "the reason for asking her to remove the cross, namely the protection of health and safety on a hospital ward, was inherently of a greater magnitude than that which applied [to the first applicant]" and held that there had been no violation of Article 9 in this instance.[25]

In respect of educational settings, the ECtHR has also afforded States a wide margin of appreciation noting "it is not possible to "discern throughout Europe a uniform conception of the significance of religion in society and the meaning or impact of the public expression of a religious belief will differ according to time and context".[26] In relation to the banning of wearing of religious dress in schools, the ECtHR observed that "the State may limit the freedom to manifest a religion, for example by wearing an Islamic headscarf, if the exercise of that freedom clashes with the aim of protecting the rights and freedoms of others, public order and public safety".[27] The principles are applied in the same way as set out above, however, weight will also be given to the fact that the provision will apply to minors, in a school setting, and may involve considerations of the safety of girls travelling to and from school as well as at school. Both the children and the children's parent(s) have rights, with particular weight likely to be given to the child's right to safety.

Article 2, Protocol 1 ECHR

Also relevant to any consideration of an exemption is Article 2 of Protocol 1 of the ECHR.[28]

Article 2 of Protocol 1 (A2P1) provides:

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[23] *Eweida and Others v United Kingdom*, application No 48420/10, judgment of 15 January 2013, at para 94.
[24] *Ibid*, at para 96.
[25] *Ibid*, at paras 99-10
[26] *Leyla Şahin v Turkey*, application No 44774/98, judgment of 10 November 2005, at para 109.
[27] *Dogru v France,* application No 27058/05, judgment of 4 December 2008, at para 64.
[28] The right to education is enshrined across several other human rights instruments to which the UK Government, and by extension the NI Executive, is bound, including Articles 28-29, UN Convention on the Rights of Children; Article 13, UN International Convention on Economic Social and Cultural Rights; Article 24, UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; Article 10, UN Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women; Article 5, UN Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination; and Article 22, UN Refugee Convention.

> "No person shall be denied a right to an education. In the exercise of any functions which it assumes in relation to education and to teaching, the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching is in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions."

According to the Council of Europe, A2P1, in its first sentence, protects the right of an individual to receive an education. The second sentence guarantees the right of parents to have their children educated in conformity with their religious and philosophical convictions.[29] The Council of Europe explains "Article 2 of Protocol No. 1 constitutes a whole that is dominated by its first sentence, the right set out in the second sentence being an adjunct of the fundamental right to education…"[30] requires the State to respect parents' religious and philosophical convictions, throughout the State education system.[31] In order to ensure that restrictions that may be imposed do not curtail the right to education to such an extent as to impair its very essence and deprive it of its effectiveness, the restrictions must be foreseeable for those concerned and pursue a legitimate aim The ECtHR observed that the central aim of the second sentence of Article 2 of Protocol 1 is to safeguard "the possibility of pluralism in education, which possibility is essential for the preservation of "democratic society" as conceived by the Convention".[32] The ECtHR also considered rules on dress under this part of A2P1 in *Kose and Others v Turkey*, holding that an obligation to not cover their heads did not deprive the parents of their rights to educate their children in line with their own religious convictions and consequently did not find a breach.[33] It has been described as follows, onto the fundamental right to education that is grafted the right of parents to respect for their religious and philosophical convictions. Consequently, parents may not refuse a child's right to education on the basis of their convictions.[34]

In its letter, The Education Board of Presbytery states, in respect of A2P1 ECHR, that "in the exercise of any functions which it assumes in relation to education and to teaching, the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching is in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions". We understand this to raise two issues. First, that an exemption should be provided for in any proposed legislative amendment. Secondly, the basis on which a potential exemption should be granted. There is therefore a balancing exercise to be conducted of the child's right to an education, the parents' right to have their child taught in conformity with their religious and philosophical convictions, if they differ. The Article 9 rights - of a child to manifest their own religious and philosophical belief – are also relevant.

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[29] Council of Europe Guide to Art. 2, Protocol 1, Council of Europe/European Court of Human Rights, 2015.
[30] See also *Campbell and Cosans* v. UK para. 40.
[31] *Kjeldsen, Busk Madsen and Pedersen* v Denmark (1976) ECHR 6, at para 51.
[32] *Kose and Others v Turkey*, application No 26625/02, judgment of 24 January 2006. See also *Kjeldsen, Busk Madsen and Pedersen v. Denmark*, application No 5095/71, judgment of 7 December 1979, at para 50.
[33] *Kose and Others v Turkey*, application No 26625/02, judgment of 24 January 2006.
[34] *Konrad and Others v. Germany*

As referred to above, the State has a wide margin of appreciation. There is no direct caselaw on the specific issue of whether the wearing of a skirt is a manifestation of religious and philosophical convictions. Neither is the Commission able to offer any reliable advice on whether different dress for girl pupils is intimately linked to the religion or belief of those who subscribe to the Free Presbyterian Church. That is a matter for the schools advocating for an exemption to establish. If it is, it is then a matter for the State to determine whether and if so how Article 9 is engaged. While subjective beliefs are relevant, it is the State ultimately which determines whether such beliefs can be reasonably understood as a manifestation of belief and whether Article 9 requires their manifestation to be protected. [35]

The second sentence of A2P1 prevents States from pursuing an aim of indoctrination that might be considered as not respecting parents' religious and philosophical convictions. However, the ECtHR has taken the view that the presence of crucifixes in State-school classrooms did not entail a violation of A2P1. The ECtHR observed that while it was true that by prescribing the presence of crucifixes – a sign which undoubtedly referred to Christianity – the regulations conferred on the country's majority religion preponderant visibility in the school environment, that was not in itself sufficient to denote a process of indoctrination on the State's part.[36] A State has a role as a neutral arbiter and must be very careful to ensure that when they permit students to manifest their religious beliefs on school premises, "such manifestation does not become ostentatious and thus a source of pressure and exclusion." Consequently, the fact of refusing access to school to young girls wearing the veil did not constitute a violation of A2P1 since it did not deprive the parents of their right to guide their children on a path in line with the parents' own religious or philosophical convictions, and provided the refusal was foreseeable and proportionate.[37]

It is also relevant to consider a child's right to private and family life, which includes the right to personal integrity (Article 8 ECHR), and the right to be protected from harm by others (Articles 2 and 3). Should a child be deterred from attending school or at risk of harm by the requirement to wear a skirt and not trousers, this might be a material factor in an individual case

To conclude, the Commission is unable to determine the issue for the Committee but does recognise the duty of the State to carry out a balancing exercise taking into account the rights of the child and the rights of the parent(s) or guardian. In the case of independent schools, the fundamental duty to provide education to children is the same as in public schools, albeit a child and parent can indicate their wish by choosing education in an independent school which has a uniform policy. If it is established that the wearing of skirts by girls does satisfy the test as to manifestation of religious belief, which is not outweighed by the child's right to an education, an exemption is unlikely to be in breach of the first sentence of A2P1 and is likely to be covered by A2P1. If, however, a child

[35] See for example, the UK case of *R (Watkins-Singh) v Aberdare High School* [2008] EWHC 1865 (Admin), at para 56.
[36] *Lautsi and Others v. Italy* (Grand Chamber), [2011] paras. 71-76
[37] *Kose and Others v. Turkey ibid*.

expresses that their religious belief requires them to be covered, a requirement to attend school in a skirt is likely to engage the child's right under Article 9 to manifest their own religious belief or convictions. The Commission is of the view that to permit such an exemption as advocated by the Free Presbyterian Education Board of Presbytery is, on balance, within the margin of appreciation afforded to the State.

Importantly, however, the Commission's understanding of the Committee's proposal to legislate is to offer girls the *option* to wear trousers to school. Such an amendment could still permit girls to continue to wear skirts to school if that is in line with their faith and they choose to do so.

I hope that this is helpful. If we can provide any further assistance, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,



Alyson Kilpatrick
Chief Commissioner

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8 July 2026

Your Ref: 2026.396
Our ref: GM-0485-2026

Dear Aoibhinn

Thank you for your letter of 18 June 2026 advising that the Committee Bill has completed its legislative competence checks and is ready for introduction, alongside the associated documents.

I note that the Bill has now passed Second Stage and that an Ad Hoc Committee has been established to consider the Bill.

As the Minister has previously stated, the Department remains of the view that there is no barrier whatsoever in the School Uniforms (Guidelines and Allowances) Act (Northern Ireland) 2026 or the School Uniforms Guidelines to all pupils wearing trousers as part of their school uniform, should they wish to do so.

Yours sincerely,

[redacted]
Acting Departmental Assembly Liaison Officer