

FROM THE OFFICE OF THE MINISTER

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Dear Marie

Thank you for your letter of 2 July 2026, inviting officials to provide a written briefing and give oral evidence on the School Uniforms (Trousers) Bill.

I can confirm that the following officials from the Department of Education will attend the scheduled oral evidence session on 15 September 2026:

- Margaret Rose McNaughton, Director of Transport and Food in Schools
- Shirley Sweeney, Deputy Director Teaching and Learning Excellence

I should point out that the Minister of Education, Paul Givan MLA, has updated the School Uniforms Guidelines for the 2027/28 school year. The Minister has amended the Guidelines to include the specific requirement that girls are to be permitted to wear trousers as part of their uniform, including for PE/ games. The School Uniforms Guidelines can be accessed via [School Uniforms Guidelines | Department of Education](#).

The Minister has also written to the Education Committee advising them of this.

The Minister was disappointed to see further legislation being brought forward in the School Uniforms (Trousers) Bill – even though it is a short Bill of five clauses – it is not sufficiently clear in either its language or structure and therefore generates risks to schools in relation to real-world outworkings.

The enclosed briefing sets out more information which officials hope you and Committee Members find helpful.

Yours sincerely

Departmental Assembly Liaison Officer

Department of Education written briefing to the Ad Hoc Committee on the School Uniforms (Trousers) Bill

Background

1. The School Uniforms (Trousers) Bill (the Bill) completed second stage in the Assembly on 30 June 2026. It has five clauses including the short title. The stated aim of the Bill is to ensure that all pupils can wear trousers at school, so that this becomes a universal right. It seeks to amend the School Uniforms (Guidelines and Allowances) Act (Northern Ireland) 2026 (the Act). The Department has taken legal advice on the Bill and this informs the points made in this briefing note
2. Clause 1 of the Bill would place the following statement at the outset of the Act:
“All pupils are permitted to wear trousers as part of their school uniform.” It would then amend section 2 of the Act to include that:
“(2A) Guidelines under this Chapter must include provision—
(a) implementing and giving full effect to the right of all pupils to wear trousers, as part of their school uniform,
(b) permitting all pupils to wear trousers, shorts or other leg coverings, whilst taking part in recreational, sporting or outdoor activities, as appropriate for that activity, as part of their school uniform.”.

Departmental comments

3. The Department notes that the purpose of the Act as made is to “make provision for binding guidelines on school uniform policies to be issued by the Department of Education and to extend eligibility for school clothing allowances payable by the Education Authority”.
Section 1 of the Act as made relates to “Guidelines as to policies on school uniforms”. The Act is structured to place duties on the Department of Education in relation to the issuing and content of the Guidelines and on the managers of grant-aided and independent primary and post-primary schools in relation to the fact that they must adhere to them.
4. The Department considers that amending the Act so that, before Guidelines are even mentioned, a statement is inserted about a single item of uniform clothing, is outwith its structure and inconsistent with the approach taken throughout the Act to focus on Guidelines relating to school uniform policies.
5. The Department does not consider this statement to be necessary to achieve the stated intent of the Bill and is firmly of the view that it is not appropriate to place any such statement at the outset of the Act.
6. Furthermore, the statement as drafted – because it bears no link to Guidelines about school uniform policies, especially given where it is placed by the Bill – does not operate effectively with the powers/ duties set out in the Act as made in terms of the issue of and adherence to School Uniforms Guidelines. It does not operate effectively with the section 8 powers of enforcement in terms of

ensuring adherence by schools to the Guidelines. In short, this statement creates a risk of legal uncertainty in terms of how it operates in the context of the Act, including how it is monitored and enforced.

7. The Bill's amendment to section 2 is more closely aligned with the structure of the Act, especially in relation to clause 2A(a). The Department has significant concerns about the terminology of clause 2A(b) and considers it to be loose, not aligned with curriculum terminology and open to interpretation. 'Other leg coverings' in particular is a term that the Department considers open to misinterpretation. Whilst we understand the wording around "recreational, sporting or outdoor activities" is taken from the Act, it does not provide the curriculum context that section 2(2)(b)(iii) sits within.
8. The Department considers that it would be better for legislation to be clear from the outset. If the aim is to enable e.g. tracksuit bottoms or leggings to be worn during PE and Games it is relevant that the normal definition of trousers already covers e.g. short trousers or tracksuit trousers. It would be better for the Bill to state that Guidelines should include provision for school uniform policies to include options allowing all pupils to wear trousers so far as appropriate by reference to different kinds of subjects, learning or activities. Having the right clothes for the right occasion is clearly important.
9. Clause 2 of the Bill requires the Department to publish the Guidelines as soon as practicable after issuing or reissuing them.

Departmental comments

10. The Department is not clear why this requirement is being placed in legislation. The non-statutory guidance which preceded the Act has been published on the Department's website for years. The School Uniforms Guidelines, which issued in February 2026, are published on the Department's website. Publishing the Guidelines is the normal means by which they are shared i.e. issued – a link is provided directly to them. The Department considers this provision in the Bill to be unnecessary.
11. Section 15 of the Act already requires the Department to lay the Guidelines before the Assembly as soon as practicable after issuing or reissuing them. Should clause 2 proceed, it would make better legislative sense for any requirement to publish Guidelines to sit within section 15, rather than separately.
12. Clause 3 of the Bill sets out that its provisions apply to the current School Uniforms Guidelines and requires that these must be revised to include the provisions of clause 1 of the Bill and be reissued by 1 August 2027.
13. Clause 4 of the Bill brings clause 1 into operation on 1 August 2027 and clarifies that all other clauses will come into operation on the day after the Bill receives Royal Assent.

Departmental comments

14. Taken together, the Department considers these clauses to be unnecessarily complicated and confusing. The requirement is for the Department to revise and reissue the School Uniforms Guidelines, including clause 1 – universal right to wear trousers – by 1 August 2027. However, clause 1 only comes into operation on 1 August 2027.
15. The Department is not clear what is being attempted in this sequencing but considers that it would be more effective and straightforward for clause 1 of the Bill to commence the day after Royal Assent alongside the other provisions. Therefore, the Department considers that the whole Bill should go live on commencement and that any transitional provisions are capable of being addressed through the powers in the Act as made.
16. The Department further notes that schools publish their uniform policies well in advance of 1 August 2027 in any year.

Overall comments

17. The position remains that the Act contains all the necessary powers to ensure that uniform is comfortable and practical - there is an appropriate balance to be struck in relation to schools' setting their own uniform policies in line with the Guidelines. The School Uniforms Guidelines, which schools must adhere to, are explicit in requiring uniform policies to comply with human rights and equality legislation; schools must consult with all parents and all pupils in relation to the rationale for and cost of their uniform policies; information must be published. There are no barriers in the Act as made, or the Guidelines as issued, to girls wearing trousers as part of their school uniform should they wish to do so. Indeed, having listened carefully to young people over recent months, the Minister has moved to remove any uncertainty for pupils, parents and schools. The Guidelines now stipulate that school uniform policies for the 2027/28 school year onwards must include the option for girls to wear trousers throughout the school year, including for PE and Games.
18. The School Uniforms Guidelines can be accessed via [School Uniforms Guidelines | Department of Education](#).