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School Uniforms (Trousers) Bill

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This Bill Paper provides an overview of the School Uniforms (Trousers) Bill as introduced to the Northern Ireland Assembly on 22 June 2026. The Paper outlines the background to the Bill, the key potential public purse implications, and areas within the Bill which may merit further consideration. The Paper also considers the current legislative and policy context for school uniforms in Northern Ireland; outlines the evidence on the gendered implications of school uniforms; and considers the national and international context.

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Key Points

- The School Uniforms (Trousers) Bill was introduced to the NI Assembly by the Committee for Education on 22 June 2026. It seeks to allow all pupils to wear trousers at school, so that this becomes a statutory right.
- The origins of the Bill lie in the Committee for Education's scrutiny of the then School Uniforms (Guidelines and Allowances) Bill which received Royal Assent on 19 February 2026. This Act requires the Department of Education (DE) to issue statutory guidelines to ensure that school governing bodies prioritise affordability, comfort, practicality and sustainability when setting uniform requirements. The guidelines came into operation on 20 February 2026 and will apply from the 2026-27 school year. All grant-aided and independent primary and post-primary schools must adhere to them.
- Neither the Act nor statutory guidelines explicitly address gendered uniform policies or gendered based uniform distinctions. However, the guidelines make clear that uniform policies must be compliant with relevant equality and human rights legislation.
- The School Uniforms (Trousers) Bill seeks to amend the 2026 Act to create a statutory right for all pupils to be able to wear trousers as part of their school uniform. It sets some additional requirements for the school uniform guidelines which DE is obliged to issue under that Act so that these implement and give full effect to the right to wear trousers, and permit all pupils to wear trousers, shorts or other leg coverings, as appropriate, when engaging in recreational, sporting or outdoor activities. The Bill also places an explicit obligation on DE to publish the guidelines. The Bill requires the current guidelines to be updated and re-issued by 1 August 2027, and the statutory right for all pupils to be able to wear trousers to come into effect on 1 August 2027.
- In recent years, the gendered aspect of school uniforms has become a focus of the school uniform debate. Research into average uniform costs suggests that uniforms for girls can be more expensive than for boys. The research literature also suggests that gendered uniforms can highlight differences between girls and boys and, therefore, enhance stereotypes; limit movement

and participation in school activities; and restrict some students' personal and gender expression.

- Inclusive uniform policies are increasingly seen as a means to mitigate some of the aforementioned issues with school uniforms. Wales is the only part of the UK and Ireland to have issued statutory guidance which requires state-maintained school uniform policies not to dictate different items of clothing on the basis of gender. Some other countries worldwide have also introduced the option for girls to wear trousers as part of their school uniform. This paper presents such examples.
- The final section of this paper considers the Bill's key potential public purse implications.

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Introduction

The School Uniforms (Trousers) Bill ('the Bill' hereafter) seeks to amend the School Uniforms (Guidelines and Allowances) Act (Northern Ireland) 2026 ('the Act') so that all pupils are permitted to wear trousers as part of their school uniform. The Bill outlines additional requirements for the school uniform guidelines that the Department of Education (DE) is required to issue under the Act, so that the guidelines:

- Implement and give full effect to the right of all pupils to wear trousers as part of their school uniform.
- Permit all pupils to wear trousers, shorts or other leg coverings, as appropriate, when engaging in recreational, sporting or outdoor activities.
- Are required to be published by DE.

The Bill was introduced by the Committee for Education to the Assembly on 22 June 2026 and passed its Second Stage 30 June 2026. It has five clauses including its short title.

This paper has been written to inform Members' scrutiny of the Bill. The paper opens with background to the Bill and stakeholder engagement to date. It follows with further detail on the Bill as introduced in the context of the School Uniforms (Guidelines and Allowances) Act and accompanying guidelines. It then considers the research evidence on gendered uniforms, considers policy in the rest of the UK and Ireland, and provides some international examples where countries have mandated the choice for girls to wear trousers in school. The paper closes with a consideration of the Bill's potential public purse implications.

1 Background to the School Uniforms (Trousers) Bill

The origins of the Bill lie in the Committee for Education's scrutiny of the then School Uniforms (Guidelines and Allowances) Bill which completed on 3 July 2025.

The Committee stage of that Bill culminated in agreement on 23 amendments, including an amendment, agreed by majority, that school uniform guidelines

“include provision prohibiting any aspects of school uniform policies which restrict choice of items of clothing on the basis of sex or gender”.¹ However, this amendment was not selected for debate at Assembly Consideration Stage. The School Uniforms (Guidelines and Allowances) Bill completed the Final Stage of the Assembly’s legislative process on 13 October 2025 and received Royal Assent on 19 February 2026. All grant-aided and independent primary and post-primary schools must adhere to the Department’s school uniform guidelines issued under the Act. See Section 3 for more detail on the Act and associated statutory guidelines.

Subsequent to its scrutiny of the School Uniforms (Guidelines and Allowances) Bill and the Bill’s legislative passage, the Committee reached consensus to proceed with a Committee Bill with a single legislative objective; to make provision securing the right for pupils to wear trousers to school if they choose, no matter the school. The School Uniforms (Trousers) Bill’s Explanatory and Financial Memorandum (EFM) reflects that, for the most part, girls do not currently have the right to choose to wear trousers (or shorts) to school, and that the Committee for Education heard a strong appeal for this change.² The Bill seeks to allow all pupils to wear trousers at school, so that this becomes a universal right.

2 Consultation and engagement to date

2.1 Committee for Education consultation to inform the School Uniforms (Trousers) Bill

The Committee for Education conducted a public consultation on the proposed legislation between 12 December 2025 and 20 February 2026. A total of 3,695 responses were received: 52% were from parents; 38% from individuals other than a parent or pupil; and nine per cent from pupils. The remaining

¹ Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Education, [NIA 107/22-27 Committee for Education Report on the School Uniforms \(Guidelines and Allowances\) Bill](#) (2025)

² School Uniforms (Trousers Bill), [Explanatory and Financial Memorandum - As Introduced](#)

respondents represented schools / organisations or did not indicate their background. The majority of respondents (85%) were female.

The vast majority of respondents (98.2%) were in favour of pupils' right to be able to wear trousers as part of their school uniform. Almost 92 per cent (91.85%) indicated that there should be no exceptions to the proposal. The majority of respondents also affirmed the following statements regarding girls' right to wear trousers at school:

- It would help girls feel more physically comfortable (89.5% strongly agreed or agreed).
- It would help girls feel less exposed/ vulnerable (90.2% strongly agreed or agreed).
- It would help girls take part in more school activities (84.3% strongly agreed or agreed).
- It would make girls feel safer (87.4% strongly agreed or agreed).
- It would help girls express their individuality (77.1% strongly agreed or agreed).
- It would enhance period dignity (88.9% strongly agreed or agreed).
- It would be fair (93.1% strongly agreed or agreed).

The consultation revealed mixed perceptions of whether there is a stigma or judgement associated with girls wearing trousers; 35.1% agreed this is the case, while 47.9% disagreed.

The Committee also held evidence sessions with the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly; the Northern Ireland Teachers' Council (NITC); the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) and members of the NICCY Youth Panel; and the Chief Commissioner to the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) and NIHRC officials.

Youth Assembly members outlined a range of factors underpinning their support for a statutory right for all pupils to wear trousers, including considerations of comfort, equality, dignity, safety, and fairness.³

The Chief Commissioner to NIHRC considered the Bill proposal in the context of affordability, discrimination and gender based violence:

“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.”⁴

The Chief Commissioner to NIHRC also considered how the Bill engages various articles of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and other human rights instruments,⁵ while the Children’s Commissioner and NICCY Youth Panel members outlined how the Bill upholds international rights standards under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).⁶

A teaching union representative suggested that schools will not have to deviate substantially from existing school uniform policies to enable the choice for girls to wear trousers, whilst acknowledging potential measures to ensure that the choice of trousers is appropriate:

³ Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Education, [Official Report - Minutes of Evidence: Proposed Committee Bill to Allow All Pupils the Choice to Wear Trousers: Northern Ireland Youth Assembly](#) (28 January 2026) p1-4

⁴ Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Education, [Official Report - Minutes of Evidence: Proposed Committee Bill to Allow All Pupils the Choice to Wear Trousers: Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission](#) (4 March 2026) p2

⁵ Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Education, [Official Report - Minutes of Evidence: Proposed Committee Bill to Allow All Pupils the Choice to Wear Trousers: Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission](#) (4 March 2026) p2

⁶ Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Education, [Official Report - Minutes of Evidence: 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) p2-3

“Obviously, things may have to be put in place to ensure that the trousers that children wear are appropriate. Similarly, there are questions at times about whether the trousers of teachers and classroom assistants are appropriate... I see no reason why children should not be allowed to make that choice for themselves. In fact, that is in every school's uniform policy. The uniform policy says that children can wear trousers or a skirt. That is normally seen as a matter of gender: boys will wear trousers, and girls will wear skirts. You will not have to change your uniform policy much to say, "You have the choice".”⁷

The Committee for Education also received correspondence on 24 February 2026 from the Free Presbyterian Education Board of Presbytery to propose an exemption for independent schools on grounds of religion. Following legal and other advice on the matter, the Committee voted not to include such an exemption.⁸

Potential scrutiny point

- The Bill as introduced applies to all schools, i.e. grant-aided and independent schools, in line with the 2026 Act and associated guidelines. Although the Act does not, at present, apply to pre-school providers, the Department can, through regulations, extend the guidelines to pre-schools in the future. Members may wish to further consider the range of schools within the Bill's scope.

⁷ Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Education, [Official Report - Minutes of Evidence: General Teaching Council Bill: Northern Ireland Teachers' Council](#) (14 January 2026) p16

⁸ School Uniforms (Trousers Bill), [Explanatory and Financial Memorandum - As Introduced](#)

2.2 Previous stakeholder feedback

The above responses to the Committee's consultation and engagement largely align with the key themes from DE's consultation to inform the School Uniforms (Guidelines and Allowances) Bill and the Committee scrutiny stage of that Bill.

2.2.1 DE consultation findings

DE consulted on its proposals for a School Uniforms Bill between June and September 2024. The consultation outcomes report notes that 'genderless/unisex uniforms' were amongst some of the key themes reflected in the qualitative comments made by online survey respondents. Over 200 such comments were provided across seven open field survey responses,⁹ with the following points made:

- Girls should have the option to wear trousers/should not be forced to wear skirts.
- Trousers are more comfortable than skirts.
- Skirts limit physical activity and play.
- A unisex uniform makes it easier to pass the clothes to others regardless of gender.
- Girls should be able to wear what makes them feel safe/risk of upskirting.
- There is a need to consider comfort in terms of menstruation.¹⁰

Nineteen organisations representing groups such as youth organisations, equality and human rights bodies, community forums, anti-poverty organisations, and women's organisations, provided direct submissions to the Department. The issue of unisex or gender neutral uniforms/inclusivity was amongst the most commonly raised issues by the 19 organisations. Where responses raised the issue of inclusivity and gender neutral uniforms, some noted that girls' uniforms are more rigidly monitored than boys' uniforms in some schools (e.g. measuring skirt length) and that some girls may feel

⁹There were a total of 3,444 online survey responses, and 239 comments regarding genderless/unisex uniforms were captured through seven free text boxes. Some respondents provided more than one comment.

¹⁰ Department of Education, [Final analysis of School Uniform Consultation](#) (2024) p 23 - 24

uncomfortable in skirts (e.g. due to ‘upskirting’) so allowing a trouser option for girls may increase their comfort.¹¹

Furthermore, a response from the Education Authority’s Equality and Human Rights Service was highlighted within DE’s consultation report.¹² Amongst other considerations, it recommended allowing female students to wear trousers in order to help tackle growing misogyny in schools, instances of upskirting and harassment, and to create a more inclusive environment for transgender and gender-questioning students.

The DE consultation also engaged the views of the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly. It suggested similar issues to other respondents, including that girls do not always feel comfortable in skirts at school, and the option of one uniform to be worn by all pupils.¹³

2.2.2 Committee Stage of the School Uniforms (Guidelines and Allowances) Bill

During the Committee Stage of the then School Uniforms (Guidelines and Allowances) Bill, several groups highlighted the importance of neutrality, inclusivity, and equality in school uniform policies, including on the basis of gender. This included recommendations for gender neutral school uniform options. Stakeholders, including representatives from youth groups, recommended that girls are provided the option to wear trousers as part of their school uniform for reasons related to equity, dignity, comfort, menstruation, practicality, and safety.¹⁴

3 Current school uniform legislation in Northern Ireland

The School Uniforms (Guidelines and Allowances) Bill was introduced to the Assembly on 18 February 2025. It received Royal Assent on 19 February 2026.

[The Act](#) compels the DE to set statutory school uniforms guidelines and to

¹¹ Department of Education, [Final analysis of School Uniform Consultation](#) (2024) p16 - 17

¹² Education Authority - Equality & Human Rights Service, [General Points on School Uniform Policy Call for Views Consultation](#) (2024)

¹³ Department of Education, [Final analysis of School Uniform Consultation](#) (2024) p14

¹⁴ Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Education, [NIA 107/22-27 Committee for Education Report on the School Uniforms \(Guidelines and Allowances\) Bill](#) (2025)

review (and re-issue if revised) the guidelines at least once every three years.¹⁵ It seeks to ensure that school governing bodies prioritise affordability, comfort, practicality and sustainability when setting uniform requirements.¹⁶ Nothing in the Act limits what may be included in the guidelines.¹⁷

The Department previously provided schools with non-statutory guidance on school uniforms, which was published in 2011 and updated in 2018.¹⁸ However, schools were not obliged to follow that guidance. In contrast, all grant-aided and independent primary and post-primary schools must adhere to the Department's school uniform guidelines issued under the 2026 Act.¹⁹ The [School Uniforms Guidelines](#) were first published and circulated to schools in draft form on 12 November 2025. The guidelines became statutory when the Act came into operation on 20 February 2026.

The Act requires that DE's guidelines include provision on who, including parents and pupils, that schools are to consult when uniform policies are being devised and reviewed, how often uniform policies should be reviewed,²⁰ and that schools publish the school uniform policy and other related information as prescribed in the guidelines when the terms of the policy are settled or changed.²¹ DE is required to publish a report on the guidelines, at least once every three years, comprising information including the typical or average costs of school uniforms and individual uniform items.²²

DE has the power to give directions to a school if they are found to be failing to comply with the guidelines "in one or more material respects", or if it is found that pupils are liable to be disciplined or excluded from activities for breaching the school's uniform policy.²³

¹⁵ [School Uniforms \(Guidelines and Allowances\) Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2026](#), Section 1(1)

¹⁶ [School Uniforms \(Guidelines and Allowances\) Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2026](#), Explanatory Notes

¹⁷ [School Uniforms \(Guidelines and Allowances\) Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2026](#), Section 1(5)

¹⁸ Department of Education, [Circular 2011-04 - Guidance to Schools on School Uniform Policy](#) (re-issued 5 June 2018)

¹⁹ [School Uniforms \(Guidelines and Allowances\) Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2026](#), Section 7 and Section 11

²⁰ [School Uniforms \(Guidelines and Allowances\) Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2026](#), Section 1(3)

²¹ [School Uniforms \(Guidelines and Allowances\) Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2026](#), Section 7(2)

²² [School Uniforms \(Guidelines and Allowances\) Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2026](#), Section 16

²³ [School Uniforms \(Guidelines and Allowances\) Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2026](#), Section 8

Although the Act does not, at present, apply to pre-school providers, it gives the Department the power to make regulations to extend the guidelines to pre-schools in the future.²⁴

Section 2 of the Act refers to the particular matters for inclusion in the guidelines. It does not explicitly mention inclusion i.e. in relation to gender equity, gendered uniforms, race, religion, or disability. Section 2 refers to “comfort and practicality,” but this is not defined in relation to equality or inclusion. Section 2 also refers to “accessibility” but this is in the context of affordability.²⁵

Schools are to comply with the guidelines from the 2026-27 school year. In October 2025, DE [wrote](#) to schools to encourage them to ensure their uniform requirements for 2026/27 were in line with the provisions of the anticipated legislation. The correspondence noted schools’ obligations under the [Education \(School Information and Prospectuses\) Regulations \(NI\) 2003](#) to publish information about uniform requirements in their annual prospectus. It highlighted a series of points for schools’ attention to ensure that their uniform policies for the September 2026 admissions are compliant with the new obligations. It reiterated the requirement on schools to consult with parents and pupils on uniform requirements and costs, and outlined the information that schools are required to publish including uniform rationale, consultation outcomes, uniform costs and where it can be purchased.²⁶ The letter further advised schools to take care in ensuring that uniform design requirements do not generate additional cost on the basis of gender.²⁷

3.1 What is the scope of DE’s School Uniforms Guidelines currently?

DE’s School Uniforms Guidelines comprise a total of 16 guidelines, which are underpinned by principles which seek to ensure affordability and accessibility,

²⁴ [School Uniforms \(Guidelines and Allowances\) Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2026](#), Section 14

²⁵ [School Uniforms \(Guidelines and Allowances\) Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2026](#), Section 2

²⁶ Department of Education, [Correspondence re School Uniforms \(Guidelines and Allowances\) Bill and links to School Prospectuses for 2026/27 School Year](#) (14 October 2025) p2-3

²⁷ Department of Education, [Correspondence re School Uniforms \(Guidelines and Allowances\) Bill and links to School Prospectuses for 2026/27 School Year](#) (14 October 2025) p3

promote equality and inclusion, support comfort and practicality, encourage transparency and consultation, and safeguard participation and wellbeing.

The guidelines do not explicitly address gendered uniform rules or require schools to offer trousers as a uniform option for all. They state that uniform policies must be compliant with relevant equality and human rights legislation including appropriate adjustments being made for pupils with disabilities or special educational needs (Guideline 2). Schools must be aware of the laws which prohibit unlawful discrimination including human rights, gender, race and disability. The guidelines further state that these “legal obligations form the foundation of these guidelines and must inform how schools implement the requirements of the Act”. A list of legislative and human rights instruments is linked in an annex to the guidelines.²⁸ This list is largely consistent to that included in the DE’s previous non-statutory school uniform guidance, but additionally notes The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and The United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

When developing school uniform policies, schools also need to bear in mind the risk of “indirect” discrimination. This can occur when a requirement, which, although applied equally to everyone, unfairly affects certain groups – such as those of a particular gender, race, religion or belief – who may struggle to comply with it in practice.²⁹

The guidelines further note that school uniform costs should be equitable across genders and that there should be no material cost differential between boys and girls. Schools are required to provide DE with uniform cost data,³⁰ and to

²⁸ This includes [The Human Rights Act 1998](#); [The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#); [The Race Relations \(Northern Ireland\) Order 1997](#); [The Sex Discrimination \(Northern Ireland\) Order 1976](#); [The Special Educational Needs and Disability \(Northern Ireland\) Order 2005](#); [The Equality Act \(Sexual Orientations\) Regulations \(Northern Ireland\) 2006](#); and [The United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women](#)

²⁹ Department of Education, [School Uniforms Guidelines](#) (2026) p8

³⁰ Department of Education, [School Uniforms Guidelines](#) (2026) p16

publish the cost of individual uniform items and total uniform costs on the school website.³¹

Potential scrutiny points

- Members may wish to explore how the current School Uniforms Guidelines have informed schools' 2026/27 uniform policies on matters of particular relevance to the Bill. For instance, can DE provide information on how schools have sought to adhere to the principles of: equality and inclusion, comfort and practicality, affordability and accessibility, transparency and consultation, and participation and wellbeing. Is the Department aware of any schools that have introduced the option for girls to wear trousers in response to consultation feedback?
- Will DE monitor and report on any cost differential between gendered uniform items?

The [Equality Screening](#) for the school uniform guidelines reiterates that school uniform policies must comply with relevant human rights and equality legislation. It recaps on the requirements for schools to consult with parents and pupils when devising uniform policies, and notes that schools must take into consideration the needs of their consultees, publish the results of any consultation, and provide a rationale for their uniform policy. The screening further states that schools have to take into account any issues raised by consultees around gender, sexual orientation and uniform needs.³²

³¹ Department of Education, [School Uniforms Guidelines](#) (2026) p14

³² Department of Education, [Equality and Human Rights Policy Screening for School Uniform Guidelines](#) (2024) p15

3.2 Ministerial response to the Bill proposal

The Minister for Education has indicated that the guidelines will not provide an explicit ‘right’ for all pupils to wear trousers, noting that the current framework preserves schools’ discretion to decide their own uniform whilst requiring statutory consultation by schools, thereby providing a mechanism for girls to request trousers:

“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.”³³

In briefings with the Committee for Education, both the Minister of Education³⁴ and DE officials³⁵ reiterated that the Act and guidelines place a legal duty on schools to consult with pupils and parents when developing or reviewing school uniform policies. Officials highlighted the requirement on schools to publish the consultation outcome and rationale for their uniform requirements. They noted that a school would be required to provide a rationale for not introducing the option for girls to wear trousers, should a consultation indicate broad support for such a policy.³⁶

3.3 Guidelines on gendered uniforms and physical activity

The Act places a duty on DE to ensure that the guidelines address the nature and adequacy of clothing for pupils when engaging in particular parts of the curriculum, such as recreational, sporting or outdoor activities.³⁷ Accordingly,

³³ School Uniforms (Trousers) Bill, [Explanatory and Financial Memorandum](#) p2

³⁴ Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Education, [Official Report: Minutes Of Evidence - Special Educational Needs Policy Perspective: Mr Paul Givan MLA, Minister of Education](#) (22 October 2025)

³⁵ Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Education, [Official Report: Minutes Of Evidence - School Uniforms \(Guidelines and Allowances\) Bill: Department of Education](#) (3 December 2025)

³⁶ Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Education, [Official Report: Minutes Of Evidence - School Uniforms \(Guidelines and Allowances\) Bill: Department of Education](#) (3 December 2025) p12

³⁷ [School Uniforms \(Guidelines and Allowances\) Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2026](#), Section 2(2)(b)

the guidelines (Guideline 3) state that school uniform items must support practical learning; active travel to and from school; and/or active play at break and lunch times. Schools are required to explain how the uniform supports comfort, practicality and engagement in the curriculum for pupils within their school uniform rationale (Guideline 8).

However, the guidelines do not provide specific recommendations about the type of uniforms that pupils may wear during physical activity nor do they address the implication of gendered uniforms on pupils' engagement in physical activity. This is in contrast to DE's previous non-statutory school uniform guidance which reflected that the PE uniform can be perceived as a barrier to participation in PE by girls, that schools should be aware of this and sensitive to pupil concerns, and that schools should consider the use of shorts or 'skorts' instead of gym skirts and PE pants.³⁸

In engagements with the Committee for Education, members of both the NI Youth Assembly and NICCY Youth Panel called for trouser based options for physical education (PE), citing discomfort and impracticality of skirts, skorts, shorts and, for some, leggings:

"Some pupils are not comfortable wearing shorts either [for PE], 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." (NI Youth Assembly member)³⁹

"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

³⁸ Department of Education, [Circular 2011/04 - Guidance to schools on school uniform policy](#) (re-issued 5 June 2018) p4

³⁹ Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Education, [Official Report-Minutes of Evidence: Proposed Committee Bill to Allow All Pupils the Choice to Wear Trousers: Northern Ireland Youth Assembly](#) (28 January 2026) p6-7

comfortable. As girls grow, changes in our bodies make our privacy even more important.” (NICCY Youth Panel member)⁴⁰

4 The School Uniforms (Trousers) Bill

4.1 Trousers as part of school uniform for all pupils

The School Uniforms (Trousers) Bill (‘the Bill’ hereafter) seeks to amend the School Uniforms (Guidelines and Allowances) Act (Northern Ireland) 2026 (‘the Act’) to create a statutory right for all pupils to be able to wear trousers as part of their school uniform.

Clause 1(3) of the Bill inserts a new subsection (2A) into Section 2 of the Act to require DE’s school uniform guidelines to:

- Implement and give full effect to the right of all pupils to wear trousers as part of their school uniform.
- Permit all pupils to wear trousers, shorts or other leg coverings, as appropriate, when engaging in recreational, sporting or outdoor activities.

Potential scrutiny point

- Members may wish to further consider with the Bill Sponsor, DE and other stakeholders, what guidelines under clause 1(3) may look like in practical terms.

4.2 Publication of guidelines

Under section 1 of the 2026 Act, the Department must review the guidelines at least once every three years, and must reissue the guidelines if they are revised

⁴⁰ Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Education, [Official Report-Minutes of Evidence: 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) p3

following review. Section 15 of the Act requires that the guidelines be laid before the Assembly as soon as practicable after reissuing them. Clause 2 of the Bill inserts a new section 15A into the Act to explicitly require the Department to publish the guidelines as soon as practicable after they are issued or re-issued.

4.3 Transitional arrangements and commencement

Clause 3 requires that DE's existing school uniform guidelines are updated in accordance with section 1 of the Bill, and are re-issued by 1 August 2027.

Clause 4 provides for the commencement of Clause 1 on the same date by which the guidelines are to be updated and re-issued (1 August 2027). This will confer on all pupils a statutory right to be able to wear trousers as part of their school uniform, and require DE's school uniform guidelines to implement and give full effect to that right, and permit all pupils to wear trousers, shorts or other appropriate leg coverings when engaging in recreational, sporting or outdoor activities, from 1 August 2027. The other Bill provisions come into operation on the day after the day of Royal Assent.

The following paragraphs provide some further information which Members may wish to note when considering the transitional and commencement provisions.

4.3.1 Relevant responsibilities on schools under the guidelines

Under DE's guidelines (Guideline 13) schools must permit reasonable transition periods when changing uniform requirements. While a 'reasonable' timeframe is not explicitly defined, the guidelines state the importance of allowing enough time to ensure a smooth transition when changing uniform rules and introducing new items. The guidelines reflect that this "*gives parents a chance to get full use out of the uniforms they have already bought and helps suppliers manage their stock without waste or confusion.*" School leaders are informed that they should consult uniform suppliers early to support forward planning. Guideline 13

further states that it is reasonable for schools to allow a period where existing uniform items can be worn alongside any new items introduced.⁴¹

It may also be noted that, under Guideline 6, schools are expected to have generic trousers, skirts, and/or pinafores available from a wide range of suppliers including supermarkets. The use of branded items, which are defined as being of a particular make or having distinctive characteristics including unique combinations, colours, fabrics, or markings, are to be minimised.⁴²

As previously noted, schools have statutory obligations under the Act to consult with parents, pupils and any other group they consider relevant when devising or reviewing their school uniform policies (Guideline 4). However, neither the Act or guidelines prescribe a specific methodology or format for consultation. Guideline 4 clarifies that a school's first school uniform policy after the Act comes into operation constitutes the policy being devised, and subsequent uniform policies constitute review of the policy.⁴³

Guideline 5 requires school management to review their school uniform policies at least once every three years. As the Bill would require schools to revise their uniform policies to reflect the statutory right of all pupils to wear trousers, it appears that this could constitute a review of uniform policy and therefore necessitate further consultation in accordance with the relevant requirements, prior to the requisite three year review period. However, it may also be noted that Guideline 5 requires school management to check annually that its uniform policy remains affordable for parents. It is not clear what methods may be employed by schools in undertaking such checks, however, Guideline 1 encourages schools to consult with parents to gather views on affordability.⁴⁴ According to the guidelines, “*should any concerns be identified through this check... then the manager of a school should instigate a review of the school*

⁴¹ Department of Education, [School Uniforms Guidelines](#) (2026) p15

⁴² Department of Education, [School Uniforms Guidelines](#) (2026) p10 - 11

⁴³ Department of Education, [School Uniforms Guidelines](#) (2026) p9

⁴⁴ Department of Education, [School Uniforms Guidelines](#) (2026) p6

uniform policy regardless of whether it has been three years since the last review.”⁴⁵

Potential scrutiny points

- Members may wish to clarify with the Department what, if any, additional consultation may be required to be undertaken by schools to ensure compliance with existing statutory obligations under the Act and guidelines, whilst adhering to any new responsibilities that may arise from the Bill.
- Linked to the above, what might the scope and format of that consultation be? How may it differ from existing requirements on school managers to review school uniform policies and undertake annual affordability checks?
- Members may wish to consider whether the transitional provision and commencement clauses enable sufficient time for schools to consult with parents and pupils, where necessary, to adjust supply contracts, where necessary, to revise existing school uniform policies and to communicate changes.
- Members may wish to consider whether the Bill may have implications on other parts of the DE existing guidelines, for instance, Guideline 13 ‘transition periods’ and, if so, what the effect may be.

⁴⁵ Department of Education, [School Uniforms Guidelines](#) (2026) P10

4.3.2 Obligations on schools to include school uniform information in their annual prospectus

As noted at Section 3, schools are required under the [Education \(School Information and Prospectuses\) Regulations \(NI\) 2003](#) to publish information in their annual prospectus about school uniform requirements. Regulations require that prospectuses are aligned with the admissions cycle, and available “not later than six weeks before the date up to which parents may express a preference for a school”.⁴⁶ Generally, admissions criteria are published on the EA website in December, and applications live in January for most schools.^{47,48} As such, many schools will have published their prospectuses, including relevant uniform policy, several months in advance of the 2027/28 school year.

Potential scrutiny point

- Members may wish to consider the implications of the Bill on school uniform policies already established for the September 2027 admissions cycle.

4.4 Human rights and equality considerations

The Explanatory and Financial Memorandum (EFM) states the School Uniforms (Trousers) Bill’s compatibility with the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), and suggests that it engages various articles of the ECHR, including Article 2 of Protocol No. 1 on the basis that it reduces potential barriers to participation in education.

The Chief Commissioner to the NIHRC previously suggested in evidence to the Education Committee that the Bill proposal was likely to require an Equality

⁴⁶ [Education \(School Information and Prospectuses\) Regulations \(Northern Ireland\) 2003](#) regulation 6

⁴⁷ Admissions for senior high schools in the Dickson Plan area have previously fallen later than pre-school, primary and post-primary admissions.

⁴⁸ Education Authority, [Admissions Key Dates](#)

Impact Assessment (EQIA).⁴⁹ Guidance from the Equality Commission reflects that an EQIA is to be undertaken where a policy is likely to have a significant impact on one or more of the section 75 equality groups.⁵⁰

The Committee considered that the Bill does not have an adverse effect on any of the groups identified in section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. An EQIA has not been undertaken.

Potential scrutiny point

- Members may wish to further consider any potential equality impacts of the Bill on any of the section 75 groups.

5 Research literature on gendered school uniforms

In recent years, the gendered aspect of school uniforms has become a focus of the school uniform debate. Various research studies have considered the implications of gender segregated school uniform policies on gender stereotypes; movement and participation in school activities; and students' personal and gender expression.

A summary of the gendered implications of school uniforms, as identified in the research literature, is presented below:

- **Female stereotypes:** Commentators have argued that segregated school uniform policies can reinforce unfair gender expectations, particularly for female pupils where policies stipulate a skirt or dress as their regulation uniform. The literature also highlights that school skirts can restrict movement, and that skirt-wearing, consciously and

⁴⁹ Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Education, [Official Report - Minutes of Evidence: Proposed Committee Bill to Allow All Pupils the Choice to Wear Trousers: Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission](#) (4 March 2026) p2

⁵⁰ Equality Commission Northern Ireland, [Equality impact assessments \(EQIA's\)](#)

unconsciously, imposes considerations of modesty and immodesty in ways that trousers do not.^{51,52}

- Some authors argue that skirt-based uniform requirements can create additional expectations around modesty, and how girls should present and conduct themselves.⁵³ Other cited impacts of traditional school uniforms on female pupils relate to body image, wellbeing, health, learning, social norms and equality.^{54,55,56,57} Qualitative research suggests that school uniform policies may be more prescriptive for girls, and that girls may experience more stringent enforcement of uniform policies than boys.^{58,59,60}
- **Physical activity:** There is evidence suggesting that gendered school uniform policies may act as a barrier to

⁵¹ A Happel, '[Ritualized girling: school uniforms and the compulsory performance of gender](#)', *Journal of Gender Studies* (2013) Vol. 22(1), p92-96

⁵² J Reidy, '[Reviewing school uniform through a public health lens: Evidence about the impacts of school uniform on education and health](#)', *Public Health Reviews* (2021) Vol. 42

⁵³ A Happel, '[Ritualized girling: school uniforms and the compulsory performance of gender](#)', *Journal of Gender Studies* (2013) Vol. 22(1), p92-96

⁵⁴ R Shanks and K Phelps, '[School Uniform: It's Different for Girls](#)'. Paper developed as part of the University of Aberdeen Conference on Conceptualising Difference (2021)

⁵⁵ W Cumming-Potvin, '[The politics of school dress codes and uniform policies: Towards gender diversity and gender equity in schools](#)', *International Journal of Educational Research* (2023) Vol. 122

⁵⁶ J Reidy, '[Reviewing school uniform through a public health lens: Evidence about the impacts of school uniform on education and health](#)', *Public Health Reviews* (2021) Vol. 42

⁵⁷ A Mergler and S Cariss, [Girls School Uniform Choices](#) (2017)

⁵⁸ R Shanks, [School Uniform Policy in Scottish schools: Control and Consent](#) (2021)

⁵⁹ S Bragg and J Ringrose, '[Intervening in School Uniform Debates: Making Equity Matter in England](#)'. in: R Shanks et al. (eds.) [School Uniforms: New Materialist Perspectives](#), (2023) p45 - 65

⁶⁰ Plan International, [The State of Girls' Rights in the UK 2024](#) (2024), p97

participation in physical activity, particularly for girls.^{61,62,63,64}

Self-consciousness, discomfort, limited choice and the impracticality of some PE uniforms, including the restricted movement that can be caused by skirts, have also been cited as barriers to participation in physical activity in school.^{65,66,67,68}

- **Harassment:** some sources indicate that skirt-based uniform requirements may increase exposure to certain forms of gendered harassment including upskirting.^{69,70}
- **Gender identity:** the literature reflects that gender-specific uniform rules can create challenges for pupils with diverse

⁶¹ M Ryan et al., '[Are school uniforms associated with gender inequalities in physical activity? A pooled analysis of population-level data from 135 countries/regions](#)', *Journal of Sport and Health Science* (2024) Vol. 13(4), p590-598

⁶² T Howard, '[Practical, professional or patriarchal? An investigation into the socio-cultural impacts of gendered school sports uniform and the role uniform plays in shaping female experiences of school sport](#)', *Sport, Education and Society* (2024) Vol. 29(6) p726-743

⁶³ H Norrish et al., '[The effect of school uniform on incidental physical activity among 10-year old children](#)', *Asia-Pacific Journal of Health, Sport and Physical Education*, (2012) Vol. 3(1), p51-56

⁶⁴ A Watson et al., '[Perceived barriers and facilitators to participation in physical activity during the school lunch break for girls aged 12 -13 years](#)', *European Physical Education Review* (2015) Vol. 21(2), p257-271

⁶⁵ "[Girls shouldn't feel insecure in their PE kit](#)". *BBC News*, 1 September 2025

⁶⁶ Youth Sport Trust, '[Girls Active National Reports 2024](#)' (2024)

⁶⁷ H Norrish et al., '[The effect of school uniform on incidental physical activity among 10-year old children](#)', *Asia-Pacific Journal of Health, Sport and Physical Education*, (2012) Vol. 3(1), p51-56

⁶⁸ A Porter et al., '[A qualitative study in UK secondary schools exploring how PE uniform policies influence body image attitudes and PE engagement among adolescent girls](#)', *BMJ Open*, (2025) Vol. 15(7)

⁶⁹ Plan International UK, '[Street Harassment - It's Not OK. Girls' Experiences and Views](#)' (2018), p37 - 40

⁷⁰ Crown Prosecution Service, '[Upskirting: Public urged to report offenders as prosecutions double](#)' (2021)

gender identities, and may contribute to experiences of exclusion, anxiety, bullying and school disengagement.^{71, 72,73}

The research also suggests that uniforms for girls can be more expensive than for boys. For instance, a 2023 survey on the cost of school uniforms, commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE) in England, found that the average total expenditure on all school uniform items was higher for girls in both primary and post-primary settings, as illustrated in Table 1 below. A similar pattern was reflected in the DfE previous cost of school uniform survey in 2015.

Table 1: Average total expenditure on all school uniform items by gender

Phase	Boys (£)	Girls (£)	Difference (Girls – Boys)
Primary	217.65	246.80	29.15
Secondary	266.14	289.04	22.90

Source: DfE Cost of school uniform survey 2023⁷⁴

A further UK based analysis of 40 school uniform policies also found that uniform requirements for girls were often more expensive than for boys.⁷⁵ The gendered cost differential is also noted in international sources.^{76,77}

⁷¹ T Jones et al., ‘[School experiences of transgender and gender diverse students in Australia](#)’, *Sex Education* (2015) Vol. 16(2), p156–171

⁷² R S McBride, [Grasping the Nettle: The Experiences of Gender Variant Children and Transgender Youth Living in Northern Ireland](#) (2013)

⁷³ R S McBride et al., [The post-primary school experiences of transgender and gender diverse youth in Ireland](#) (2020)

⁷⁴ Department for Education England, [Cost of School Uniforms Survey 2023 Research Report](#) (2024) p40

⁷⁵ F Cambridge Mallen, [School Uniform: Dressing Girls to Fail \(2021\)](#) (2022)

⁷⁶ University of Otago, [Reimagining school uniforms](#) (2022)

⁷⁷ Uniform Market, [School Uniform Statistics: Cost, Safety, and Facts \(2026\)](#) (2026)

6 National and international examples

This section commences with an overview of school uniform policy and provision across the UK and Republic of Ireland (hereafter Ireland) relative to the Bill as introduced. Section 6.2 then considers international examples.

6.1 UK and Ireland

6.1.1 Wales

Wales is the only jurisdiction within the UK and Ireland to have issued statutory school uniform guidance that requires governing bodies of state-maintained schools to avoid restricting uniform items to pupils of a particular gender.⁷⁸

The guidance, first published in 2019 and updated in 2023, requires a non-discriminatory approach to uniform policy, and that all students must be offered the same options:

*“A governing body will state the composition of its school uniform and ensure an inclusive school uniform policy that does not discriminate on the basis of sex or gender identity. A school uniform policy should list items of clothing which are permitted to be worn in school, without any requirements for items of clothing to only be worn by students of a certain gender”.*⁷⁹

The guidance states that failure to allow a pupil to wear the uniform aligning with their gender identity could be unlawful discrimination on the basis of gender reassignment.⁸⁰ Governing bodies are required to justify any differences in school uniform policies on the basis of sex and gender identity, with exceptions made for religious observance:

⁷⁸ Welsh Government, [School uniform and appearance: policy guidance for governing bodies \(WG23-17\)](#) (updated 2023)

⁷⁹ Welsh Government, [School uniform and appearance: policy guidance for governing bodies \(WG23-17\)](#) (updated 2023) Para 2.9

⁸⁰ Welsh Government, [School uniform and appearance: policy guidance for governing bodies \(WG23-17\)](#) (updated 2023) Para 2.10

*“One ground for justification might be that a certain religion lays down different dress and appearance codes for different sexes. Failure to respect such codes could amount to race discrimination or a breach of human rights.”*⁸¹

School governing bodies and head teachers have responsibility for the development, implementation, revision and evaluation of school uniform policies. Schools are required to consult with parents, pupils, and other stakeholders when devising, reviewing or revising policies. The consultation should involve wider community groups, including representatives for pupils with special educational needs, disabilities and gender identities. The guidance further notes that any complaints or concerns about school uniform policies should be raised and dealt with by the school governing body.⁸²

To date, there is limited publicly available information on the impact of the school uniform guidance in Wales, including the practical outworkings of gender neutral uniform policies in schools, or the reaction from pupils, parents and schools. However, consultations to inform the guidance highlighted generally strong support for the removal of gendered uniform policies. For instance, a 2019 consultation on the draft guidance found that 71% of respondents agreed that schools’ uniform policies should not dictate different items of clothing on the basis of sex or gender.⁸³ A separate survey of parents found that 88% of respondents were in favour of the government’s proposals for school uniform policies, including those related to gendered uniform items.⁸⁴

The Welsh Government outlined plans to conduct a review to consider changes and impact on schools, learners and families, one year after the initial implementation of the revised guidance in 2023-24.⁸⁵ As of September 2026, no

⁸¹ Welsh Government, [School uniform and appearance: policy guidance for governing bodies \(WG23-17\)](#) (updated 2023) Para 2.11

⁸² Welsh Government, [School uniform and appearance: policy guidance for governing bodies \(WG23-17\)](#) (updated 2023) Para 4.2 and 4.7

⁸³ Welsh Government, [Consultation on draft statutory guidance to school governing bodies on school uniform and appearance policies](#) (2019)

⁸⁴ Parentkind, [Parents in Wales give us their views on school uniform policy ahead of changes](#) (2019)

⁸⁵ Senedd Written Questions [WQ89191](#) and [WQ94681](#)

review of the impact of the revised guidance is publicly available and it is unclear whether this has been undertaken.

6.1.2 England

In England, schools must have regard to statutory guidance⁸⁶ on the cost of school uniforms when developing and implementing their uniform policies. From September 2026, this includes statutory limits on branded uniform items.

Separate non-statutory guidance outlines further considerations for schools when devising and implementing uniform policies, including human rights, equality and discrimination considerations, reminding schools of their obligations not to discriminate unlawfully. The guidance notes that some schools in England provide a choice of uniform that can be worn by both sexes, and that *“this approach aligns with advice in the Cass Review to maintain flexibility and avoid rigid rules based on gender stereotypes”*. While schools may have different boys’ and girls’ uniforms, any distinctions must not unlawfully discriminate. Girls’ uniforms should not be significantly more expensive than those of boys.⁸⁷ The guidance further suggests school uniform adaptations during extreme or adverse weather, including that trousers be allowed rather than skirts in very cold weather.⁸⁸ It advises schools to consider how a PE kit supports inclusion, participation and engagement for all pupils, for example, *“by offering pupils a choice of items so they feel comfortable, such as offering girls a choice of shorts, skorts, tracksuit bottoms or leggings.”*⁸⁹

Whilst there is no statutory requirement, some individual schools and trusts in England have opted to introduce gender neutral uniform policies including non-gendered school uniform lists and ‘trouser only’ options for girls.^{90,91,92} In July 2025, the Northern Education Trust, which runs 17 secondary schools across

⁸⁶ Department for Education England, [Statutory Guidance - Cost of school uniforms](#) (updated 2026)

⁸⁷ Department for Education, England, [Guidance - Developing school uniform policy](#) (updated 2026)

⁸⁸ Department for Education, England, [Guidance - Developing school uniform policy](#) (updated 2026)

⁸⁹ Department for Education, England, [Guidance - Developing school uniform policy](#) (updated 2026)

⁹⁰ ‘[UK state schools get gender-neutral uniforms](#)’. *Guardian*, 13 June 2016

⁹¹ ‘[Schools reject boys’ and girls’ uniform lists in favour of gender-neutral clothing](#)’. *Sky News*, 3 September 2023

⁹² ‘[School bans skirts in new 'gender neutral' uniform policy to stop girls 'abusing' rules](#)’. *LBC*, 11 June 2022

the North of England, announced that it would be implementing a 'trouser only' policy from September 2026, and that skirts for girls would no longer be permitted. The trust states that the move is to ensure equality, inclusivity and consistency in uniform policy, and is being taken following stakeholder feedback.⁹³ Other schools in Greater Manchester also moved to trouser only policies from September 2025. However, the move was met with resistance by some pupils and parents.⁹⁴

6.1.3 Scotland

The Scottish Government issued non-statutory guidance on school uniform in September 2024.⁹⁵ Amongst its key considerations is the need to prioritise wellbeing, comfort of pupils, and include gender neutral options. The guidance notes that schools should "actively promote a culture of gender equality which avoids gendered assumptions about what type of clothing is preferred and supports pupils to choose the items they prefer to wear." It further advises that uniform policies should avoid reinforcing gender stereotypes and should be responsive to pupils' needs, circumstances and identity.

The Scottish Government previously stated its intention to place the guidance on a statutory footing.⁹⁶ As of September 2026, the guidance remains non-statutory.

6.1.4 Ireland

The then Department of Education and Skills issued non-statutory guidance in 2017, which outlined cost-effective principles schools should use to keep financial expenditure down, including measures on which to base their uniform policy.⁹⁷ This guidance does not address gendered uniform or gender neutral policies.

⁹³ '[More secondary schools to ban skirts in major uniform rule change](#)'. *Manchester Evening News*, 4 July 2025

⁹⁴ '[Pupils and parents criticise skirt ban in schools](#)'. *BBC News*, 18 July 2025

⁹⁵ Scottish Government, [School uniform and clothing in Scotland](#) (2024)

⁹⁶ Scottish Government, [School Uniform Guidance: Consultation](#) (2022)

⁹⁷ Department of Education and Skills, [Circular 0032/2017 Measures to be adopted by schools to reduce the cost of school uniforms and other costs](#) (2017)

However, while there is no explicit statutory guidance on gendered uniform rules, schools are expected to respect diversity and accommodate students fairly.⁹⁸ The Equal Status Acts (2000-2018) apply to schools and prohibit discrimination in education.^{99,100}

6.2 International examples

This section considers international countries that have permitted girls the option to wear trousers as part of their school uniform. It should be noted that the following should not be considered a complete or exhaustive overview of international examples. A number of factors impacted on the available information.

Firstly, whilst school uniforms are common in many primary and secondary school settings,¹⁰¹ they are not universal. School uniforms are rarely required in most European countries,¹⁰² and in the majority of public schools in the United States.¹⁰³ In other continents such as Asia, school uniforms remain common practice, with students wearing traditional uniforms as a sign of respect for the school institution and the values of discipline and societal respect.¹⁰⁴

Therefore, whether uniforms are used, and how they are perceived and applied, varies considerably by history, culture and social norms. In more socially conservative contexts, uniform policy can be tied to wider expectations around gender roles and national/cultural identity. Commentators have argued that, in countries with traditionally patriarchal societal perspectives, the introduction of

⁹⁸ School Development Planning Initiative and the Equality Authority, [Guidelines for second level schools on Embedding Equality in School Development Planning](#) (2010)

⁹⁹ Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, [A Guide to the Equal Status Acts 2000-2018](#) (2020)

¹⁰⁰ Department of Education and Youth Ireland, [Schools and the Equal Status Act](#) (2020)

¹⁰¹ M Ryan et al., '[Are school uniforms associated with gender inequalities in physical activity? A pooled analysis of population-level data from 135 countries/regions](#)', *Journal of Sport and Health Science* (2024) Vol. 13(4), p590-598

¹⁰² R Shanks and SJ McKinney, '[Cost and Affordability of School Uniform and Child Poverty](#)', *Scottish Educational Review* (2022) Vol. 54, p26 - 48

¹⁰³ National Center for Educational Statistics, [School Uniforms](#)

¹⁰⁴ A Karaoulas, '[The School Uniform in European Educational History: From Uniformity to Modern Educational Reality](#)', *International Journal of Research in Education Humanities and Commerce* (2025) Vol. 6(2), p552-564

gender neutral school uniform policies would likely be problematic, and met with resistance.¹⁰⁵

Secondly, authority over uniform policy varies. In some places, it is set at national level; elsewhere it is devolved to states/provinces/territories; and in others it is largely a matter for school governing bodies. Where powers are devolved, there can be substantial within-country variation by region and by school in whether a trousers option for girls exists and how it is implemented. In some places, such as parts of India^{106,107,108} and New Zealand,^{109, 110} some schools have adopted gender neutral uniforms or provided girls the option of wearing trousers or skirts, without a national or regional directive to do so.

Thirdly, what counts as a “trousers option” is not uniform across contexts. In some systems, girls’ everyday uniform has long incorporated trouser-based or tunic-type garments (e.g., salwar-style garments in parts of South Asia).

6.2.1 Australia

The last decade has seen a progressive shift towards inclusive uniform policies across Australia. Western Australia was one of the first states to mandate that all public schools offer girls the option of shorts or trousers in 2017,¹¹¹ closely followed by Victoria in the same year.¹¹² In 2018, both Queensland and New South Wales enforced similar policies to give girls the option to wear trousers or shorts in public schools. The New South Wales policy further called for school items to be affordable, comfortable and suitable for all body types.^{113,114} In more recent years, some states have updated their policies, while others have

¹⁰⁵ [‘How schools can adopt a gender-neutral uniform policy’](#). *Tes Magazine*, 22 July 2021

¹⁰⁶ [‘Gender neutrality starts with school uniforms’](#). *Times of India*, 27 September 2019

¹⁰⁷ [‘Kerala school uniform: Why some Muslim groups are protesting’](#). *BBC News*, 22 December 2021

¹⁰⁸ [‘In India’s Kerala, schools foster equality with gender-neutral dress’](#). *Arab News Pakistan*, 6 January 2022

¹⁰⁹ [‘School abolishes gendered uniforms’](#), *The Educator Australia*, 22 March 2017

¹¹⁰ [‘OGHS pupils given option of trousers’](#). *Otago Daily Times*, 26 October 2018

¹¹¹ [‘Should Australian schools force girls to wear skirts?’](#) *ABC News*, 7 September 2017

¹¹² [‘Victoria to change state school uniform policy to let girls wear shorts or pants instead of dresses and skirts’](#). *ABC News*, 13 September 2017

¹¹³ [‘Gender neutral School Uniforms: Queensland and New South Wales Join the Push for Pants’](#). *Ideagen School Governance*, 1 August 2018

¹¹⁴ [‘Gender neutral uniform update’](#). *SchoolNews – Australia*, 5 November 2024

introduced guidance to ensure greater gender equity in school uniforms. Across policies, the general trend has been to offer choice; to extend the uniform offering to include trousers or shorts but not prohibit girls from wearing skirts if they choose. The following points provide an essence of the current policies in some Australian states and territories:

- **Western Australia:** places a responsibility on school principals to ensure dress code requirements are similar for all students and include gender neutral options.¹¹⁵
- **Victoria:** requires all dress codes to be inclusive and flexible to support gender, cultural and religious identity. The policy explicitly states that student dress codes must be flexible to “affirm the gender of trans and gender diverse students and allow for cultural and religious expression”.¹¹⁶ Student dress codes must ensure that students are able to wear the uniform items that they feel comfortable wearing.¹¹⁷
- **Queensland:** dress codes must offer uniform options for all students, including shorts and trousers, irrespective of gender.¹¹⁸
- **New South Wales:** Principals have a duty to ensure that uniform clothing lists are categorised in non-gender specific terms. The policy was updated in 2024 to clarify that uniforms must allow for the right of choice and gender expression, and include the option of trousers and shorts for girls.¹¹⁹
- **South Australia:** school dress codes should support student diversity, gender expression and freedom of choice. Uniform clothing lists should be categorised in non-gender specific terms.¹²⁰

¹¹⁵ Department of Education, Government of Western Australia, [Dress Codes for Students in Public Schools Policy](#) (updated 2026)

¹¹⁶ Department of Education, Victoria, [Student Dress Code: Policy](#) (updated 2025)

¹¹⁷ Department of Education, Victoria, [Student Dress Code: Guidance](#) (updated 2025)

¹¹⁸ Queensland Government, [Student dress code procedure](#) (2022)

¹¹⁹ New South Wales Government, [Uniforms at school procedures](#) (updated 2025)

¹²⁰ Department for Education, Government of South Australia, [School dress code administrative instruction](#) (updated 2021)

- **Tasmania:** requires the provision of gender neutral options in addition to any male and female specific items.¹²¹
- **Australian Capital Territory:** offers a fact sheet to support schools to offer equitable uniform options. School uniform procedures should promote freedom of choice by categorising options by clothing type, rather than gender. Schools are advised to offer gender neutral options, where possible, that include items that can be worn by all students irrespective of their gender or gender identity.¹²²

6.2.2 Mexico City

In June 2019, Mexico City introduced a policy requiring state schools to allow students the choice between skirts and trousers with immediate effect and without restriction.¹²³ The policy represented a marked change of direction from previous guidelines which drew a distinction between different clothing items on the basis of gender, stating that, "just as the skirt is the basic garment of a girl's daily school uniform, so trousers are for boys".¹²⁴

In 2023, the Mexico City Congress agreed modifications to the City's Education Law to secure the use of general neutral uniforms in educational establishments.^{125,126,127} Schools are eligible to be sanctioned if they do not allow gender neutral uniforms.¹²⁸

¹²¹Department for Education, Children and Young People, Tasmanian Government, [School Student Dress Code and Uniform Policy](#) (updated 2026)

¹²² Australian Capital Territory, Education Directorate, [Fact sheet for schools: offering students equitable uniform options](#)

¹²³Ministry of Public Education Mexico, [Bulletin No.87 SEP issues guidelines for the use of neutral uniforms in public schools in Mexico City](#) (2019) (translated)

¹²⁴ 'Mexico City drops gender-specific school uniforms'. *BBC News*, 4 June 2019

¹²⁵ Mexico City Official Gazette, [Reform to the Education Law of Mexico City](#) (2023) (translated)

¹²⁶ Mexico City Congress, [Local Congress approves reforms to the Education Law of Mexico City](#) (2023) (translated)

¹²⁷ 'Local Congress approves neutral school uniform in Mexico City'. *Azteca News*, 25 May 2023 (translated)

¹²⁸ 'This is what you should do if a school doesn't allow the neutral uniform'. *Azteca News*, 26 May 2023 (translated)

In recent years, other Mexican states have followed suit and modified State Education Laws to secure pupils the choice to wear skirts or trousers as part of their school uniform.^{129,130}

6.2.3 Ecuador

In April 2018, the Ministry of Education in Ecuador issued a directive to enable girls the choice to wear skirts as part of their school uniform from the 2018-19 school year.¹³¹ The statutory measure was issued as part of the "guidelines for the use of school uniforms in public, municipal, fiscal, and private schools in the country", and makes clear that skirts should not be compulsory for any reason, including attendance at class or other official activities. It aimed to enhance student comfort, particularly in cold weather conditions, and to facilitate physical activities and school travel.¹³² The Minister of Education indicated that the directive was considered after receiving "numerous requests" from students and some mothers.¹³³

6.2.4 Japan

Japan has a strong, historically gendered school uniform tradition rooted in military and naval styles. However, recent years have seen a move away from strictly gendered school uniforms. In 2019, two wards in Tokyo announced that girls in junior high schools were to be given the option to wear trousers.¹³⁴ Subsequent years have seen other districts in Japan permit gender neutral options, and school uniform manufacturer data for 2019-2023 reveals a marked increase in the number of schools adding a girls' trouser option.^{135,136,137} Reports also suggest a rapid increase in the number of schools that have

¹²⁹ [‘Neutral uniform approved in Sonora schools’](#). *Aristegui News*, 14 September 2022 (translated)

¹³⁰ Congress of Morelos, [The plenary session of the Congress of Morelos approves the use of neutral uniforms in educational establishments](#) (2024) (translated)

¹³¹ Ecuador Ministry of Education, [Ministerial Agreement 034-A Guidelines for the use of school uniforms in public, municipal, tax, private schools in the country](#) (2018) (translated)

¹³² As cited immediately above

¹³³ [‘Ministerial agreement determines that the use of skirts in schools and colleges is optional’](#). *El Comercio*, 6 April 2018 (translated)

¹³⁴ News on Japan, [‘2 Tokyo wards to allow schoolgirls to wear pants’](#) (2019)

¹³⁵ Unseen Japan, [A New School Year in Japan Brings Gender-Free Uniform Choices](#)

¹³⁶ [Picking Up the Slacks: Gender-Neutral School Uniform Options Increasing in Japan](#), *Nippon.com*, 12 April 2023

¹³⁷ [‘Saitama high schools to allow girls to wear slacks’](#). *The Asahi Shimbun*, 1 March 2023

permitted greater freedom of choice in uniform, allowing students to select accessories like ribbons and ties regardless of their gender identity.¹³⁸

6.3 Summary

This section provides an overview of the uniform policy in the UK and Ireland, and outlines international examples of countries that have permitted all pupils to wear trousers as part of their uniform. It may be noted that, in Australia, the cited policies primarily apply to publicly funded schools, whereas in Ecuador and Mexico City, measures extend to both public and private educational institutions. In Japan, change has largely occurred through decisions taken at local level rather than through national legislation.

None of the countries cited appear to have adopted a general policy requiring girls to wear trousers or abolishing skirts; rather, each has expanded options and sought to permit girls the option to choose.

7 Key potential public purse implications

This section addresses key potential “public purse” implications for Northern Ireland that could directly arise from the School Uniforms (Trousers) Bill, if the Bill is enacted and implemented, as introduced. First, to provide wider framing for that subsequent discussion, key definitions and the challenging Northern Ireland public finance context are set out below.

7.1 Background

7.1.1 “Public purse” defined

The “public purse” refers to taxpayers’ money raised through taxation and other sources of government revenue. Government departments - including their Ministers and individual officials - are custodians of the public purse – meaning they are required to use public funds “efficiently, effectively and economically”. Moreover, departmental Accounting Officers are personally responsible for

¹³⁸ [Picking Up the Slacks: Gender-Neutral School Uniform Options Increasing in Japan](#), *Nippon.com*, 12 April 2023

ensuring value for money in accordance with public finance management principles.

In Northern Ireland, the public purse comprises the Northern Ireland block grant allocated by His Majesty's (HM) Treasury, locally generated revenues and any other public funding streams.

Any public purse costs that could arise from the School Uniforms (Trousers) Bill would be met by departmental spending – that is, either within the existing Department of Education budget, or through reprioritisation within the Executive's overall spending envelope.

7.1.2 Central and devolved public finance context

When examining key public purse considerations that could arise from the Bill as introduced, it is important to have some understanding of the ongoing challenging period for public finances at both the central and devolved levels across the United Kingdom. Of note for purposes of this Review of Costs, key public finance developments across the period February 2024 up to the time of writing this Paper are outlined below in **Figure 1**.

Figure 1: A Challenging Period for Public Finances: Timeline of Key Developments from February 2024 – Present

Implementation of Political Agreements (February 2024 - Present)

- Since the restoration of the Executive in February 2024, Departments have been undertaking work to facilitate the Executive's implementation of political and financial agreements - such as the Interim Fiscal Framework (May 2024), the Budget Sustainability Plan (October 2024) and the accompanying Budget Improvement Plan Roadmap (December 2024), as well as the establishment of the Interim Transformation Board (March 2025). These measures have been broadly targeted to improve the position of Northern Ireland's public finances.

Budget Information Gathering Exercise (August-September 2024)

- The Department of Finance (DoF) undertook a 2025-28 Budget Information Gathering Exercise, requesting returns from all Northern Ireland Departments, marking the start of the planning stage in the 2025/26 Northern Ireland Executive Budget cycle. The DoF outlined that "Departments identified a reported £767 million of unfunded pressures", as reported to the Assembly on 23 September 2024.

UK Autumn Budget 2024 (October 2024)

- The Chancellor's Autumn Budget 2024 set out some of the multi-year competing pressures facing the United Kingdom Government, potentially adversely impacting the Government's spending power in certain areas, along with other decisions relating to social security - see RalSe Briefing Paper 47/24 entitled "Chancellor's Autumn Budget 2024: initial considerations for Northern Ireland".

Departmental Bids Exceed Budget Allocation (December 2024)

- Northern Ireland Departmental resource and capital expenditure bids exceeded the Northern Ireland Budget allocated by the United Kingdom Government to the Executive. Later that month, the 2025/26 Draft Executive Budget and accompanying Written Statement by the Finance Minister highlighted ongoing "pay and inflationary pressures" and "growing demands" on public services.

UK Spring Statement 2025 (March 2025)

- The Chancellor's 2025 Spring Statement announced a number of policy decisions, which included reforms to the welfare system, increased defence spending and a £3.25 billion "Transformation Fund" to reform public services. (Note: this is a central government development - the Northern Ireland Executive Budget is a sub-cycle within the United Kingdom Government's Budget cycle.)

Executive Agrees 2025/26 Budget (3 April 2025)

- The Executive agreed the 2025/26 Executive Budget, which the Finance Minister described as "setting out a direction of travel" which "clearly prioritises its Programme for Government priorities".

US Trade Tariffs (4 April 2025)

- The American President announced substantial international trade tariffs, resulting in: plummeting stock markets across the globe; a collapsing American bond market; the subsequent 9 April 90-day pause on some new US tariffs; other countries' similar pauses; further consideration of retaliatory tariffs on the US; and an international trade war arising between the US and China.

US-UK Trade Deal (8 May 2025)

- A non-binding trade deal was agreed by the US and UK Governments, with the general terms subsequently published in the UK-US Economic Prosperity Deal (EPD); the deal is non-binding, meaning further negotiations are required to work through the detail of the deal.

Executive Spending Plans Published (24 June 2025)

- The DoF published its 2025-26 Budget Factsheet, setting out the Executive's spending plans for the one-year period from 1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026.

Finance Minister Written Statement (3 October 2025)

- The Finance Minister provided a Written Ministerial Statement detailing Treasury Funding Available 2026-2029/30.

UK Autumn Budget 2025 (26 November 2025)

- The Chancellor's Autumn Budget 2025 detailed the United Kingdom Government's resource spending plans up to 2028/29 and capital plans up to 2029/30.

NI Draft Multi-Year Budget (6 January 2026)

- The Finance Minister published the Draft Budget 2026-2029/30 (not agreed by the Executive) and announced an eight-week public consultation on the draft. The Finance Minister, in a Written Ministerial Statement to the Assembly, outlined that *"...both the Resource and Capital DEL funding position remain extremely constrained."* The Finance Minister continued: *"Delivering our Programme for Government priorities will require the Executive collectively, and individual Ministers, to take challenging decisions to prioritise the available funding to deliver the desired outcomes."*

Treasury Agrees £400m Reserve Claim (11 February 2026)

- HM Treasury agreed a reserve claim for the Northern Ireland Executive, to provide £400 million for 2025/26, which is to be repaid over three years. The Finance Minister confirmed in a Written Statement on the same day that the Reserve Claim would be allocated as follows, as agreed by the Executive:
 - Department of Education: £214.6 million
 - Department of Health: £185.4 million

UK Spring Forecast 2026 (3 March 2026)

- The Chancellor delivered her 2026 Spring Forecast. Later that day, in an Oral Statement to the Assembly, the Finance Minister confirmed additional £390 million Barnett consequential over the next three-year period, consisting of £380 million RDEL and £9 million CDEL.

Update on Multi-Year Budget Discussions (16 April 2026)

- Speaking publicly following a meeting of Executive Ministers, the deputy First Minister stated that the Executive wanted a multi-year Budget agreed "as quickly as we can".
- She added, *"...but the reality is that there is a very, very significant shortfall...the moment that Budget would be agreed, unless we secure additional resource from the Treasury, would simply lead to significant cuts and massive impacts in terms of our public services and on the people that we are here to serve."*
- The Finance Minister echoed these sentiments, stating that *"to achieve the ambition of the Budget is going to take an injection of investment from the British Government."*

Parties Meet SoSNI on Budget Progress (2 July 2026)

- Speaking after the meeting, Hilary Benn MP said they had 'agreed a programme of work' that will 'look, first of all, at the pressures that the Executive's finances are facing'.
- He said the work would also look at the Executive's plan for "fiscal sustainability, efficiencies and public service transformation".

Budget Act Deadline Passes (31 July 2026)

- As the Executive were unable to pass a Budget by this deadline, an automatic departmental expenditure limit of 95% of last year's funding was triggered under public finance laws.

Executive Writes to PM on Financial Pressures (13 August 2026)

- The Executive collectively wrote to PM Andy Burnham, calling for a 'fair funding envelope'. The letter said the current funding from Westminster 'does not provide a sufficient basis to fund public services' in NI.

SoSNI Statement on Budget Impasse (25 August 2026)

- SoSNI Chris Bryant MP said the Executive will have to engage in 'self-help' and look at revenue raising to resolve Northern Ireland's budget issues. He further added "I understand the financial pressures that there are in Northern Ireland, and I'm very happy to take them very seriously."

7.2 Draft Budget 2026-2029/30 – DE Allocations

On 6 January 2026, the Finance Minister published a Written Ministerial Statement to the Assembly on the Draft Budget 2026-29/30. The Statement outlined proposed funding allocations for Resource Departmental Expenditure Limits (RDEL) and Capital Departmental Expenditure Limits (CDEL) during the specified period, including the DE, which would be the Department responsible for implementing this Bill if enacted, as reproduced below in **Table 2**.

Table 2: Proposed DE Budget Outcome 2026-30, £ million¹³⁹

Funding Category	2026-27	2027-28	2028-29	2029-30
Resource DEL	3,244.6	3,313.0	3,393.1	-
Capital DEL	355.2	283.7	291.4	290.9
Total DEL	3,599.8	3,596.7	3,684.5	290.9

Source: [Draft Budget 2026-29/30](#)

At the time of writing, the Draft Budget 2026-2029/30 remains unagreed by the Executive, as noted by the Education Minister in a [Written Ministerial Statement](#) in response to the Draft Budget on 6 January 2026. The Minister stated:

While I acknowledge the significant challenges involved in setting a budget, it is important to be clear: even if I was prepared to accept the devastating cuts implicit in this draft, as a practical matter, such a budget would be undeliverable. A budget must be more than figures on paper; it must be deliverable in reality.¹⁴⁰

The Minister concluded, stating:

Education has faced historic underfunding for many years, with an inadequate baseline that has only been sustained through in-year allocations. This structural weakness cannot be ignored.¹⁴¹

This Review of Costs does not comment on the sufficiency or otherwise of the funding provided to individual Executive departments. Rather, the above

¹³⁹ Draft Budget 2026-29/30, Department of Finance, available [here](#).

¹⁴⁰ [Written Ministerial Statement - Department of Education: Response to publication of the Draft Multi-Year Budget for Consultation](#) (6 January 2026)

¹⁴¹ See footnote 140 immediately above

context-setting is intended to frame the extent of financial pressures which currently are facing the Executive as a whole.

Potential scrutiny point

- Given the existing budgetary challenges and competing pressures in Northern Ireland, how would DE ensure that appropriate resourcing is provided to fully implement the Bill's provisions, should it be enacted and implemented as currently introduced?

7.3 Explanatory and Financial Memorandum – Financial effects of the Bill

The Explanatory and Financial Memorandum (EFM) accompanying the introduced Bill provided some consideration of the Bill's potential financial effects, stating:

*It is anticipated that the financial effects of the Bill will be minimal. The Department will be required to update and reissue guidance in order to reflect the new legislative responsibilities on schools. However, it appears unlikely that significant costs would be incurred as a result.*¹⁴²

The EFM continued:

*A school's non-compliance could expose it or the Department to legal challenge, with associated public purse cost implications. Conversely, making the right explicit could reduce pupils', parents' or guardians' complaints and litigation overall, potentially easing financial pressures.*¹⁴³

¹⁴² [School Uniforms \(Trousers\) Bill – EFM](#)

¹⁴³ See footnote 142 immediately above

7.4 Key potential public purse implications

Below considers key potential public purse implications for Northern Ireland that could directly arise from the Bill, if enacted and implemented as introduced. It draws on relevant, publicly available information - namely:

- The Committee's ongoing deliberations regarding this Bill, including its individual Committee meetings and other – for example, its public [consultation](#)
- The [School Uniforms \(Trousers\) Bill](#), as introduced, and its accompanying [EFM](#)
- The [School Uniforms \(Guidelines and Allowances\) Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2026](#) (the 2026 Act) and its accompanying EFM, as amended during the Bill's Further Consideration Stage

It discusses:

- [Guidelines](#)
- [Potential issues of non-compliance and enforcement](#)
- [Schools' requirement to consult when reviewing uniform policy](#)

When relying on the below, please note:

- Identified potential public purse implications are not intended to provide an exhaustive list
- Discussions around potential costs are informed by publicly available information at the time of writing
- Any discussion regarding the prevailing law, including existing legislation, is not intended to provide legal advice or opinion

7.4.1 Guidelines

If the Bill would be enacted and implemented as introduced, it would require the re-issuance of the DE guidelines made under the recently enacted 2026 Act pursuant to Section 1 of the 2026 Act. As stated in the Bill's accompanying EFM:

*It is anticipated that the financial effects of the Bill will be minimal. The Department will be required to update and reissue guidance in order to reflect the new legislative responsibilities on schools. However, it appears unlikely that significant costs would be incurred as a result.*¹⁴⁴

That re-issuance would be a one-off event, albeit before the three-year review cycle required by the 2026 Act.

As noted at [Section 4.2](#) of this Bill Paper, the Department is required to review and report on those guidelines at least once every three years, and if revised following such a review, the DE would reissue them:¹⁴⁵

(1) The Department of Education—

(a) must—

(i) issue guidelines about school uniform policies applying at schools, and

(ii) review such guidelines at least once every 3 years, and

(b) may reissue such guidelines (and must do so if they are revised following review).

If the Bill would be enacted and implemented as introduced, said guidelines would be informed by this Bill, and part of the required review under the 2026 Act and any amendments arising therefrom, as well as reissuance of the guidelines. Those reviews would occur “... at least once every three years ...”. The DE therefore would bear any costs arising.

Here, it is worth noting that the EFM accompanying the 2026 Bill which became the 2026 Act was amended at Further Consideration Stage. The EFM was

¹⁴⁴ See footnote 142

¹⁴⁵ [School Uniforms \(Guidelines and Allowances\) Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2026](#) (Accessed 11 August 2026)

amended at paragraphs 34 - 35 which addressed the proposed legislation's financial implications. Moreover, those paragraphs do not identify costs that would be incurred by the DE for said guidelines. They suggest the DE would have capacity from within its existing resources to produce said guidelines, as required, and thereafter when reviewing them, and as necessary when both revising and re-issuing them.

It therefore seems such a review and any subsequent revision and re-issuance would be part of routine DE practice and procedure under the 2026 Act, with any incurred costs relating to said guidelines to be assumed within normal DE expenditure.

Potential scrutiny point

- Members, including those of the Ad Hoc Committee, may wish to ask the DE whether a review and any subsequent revision and re-issuance would be part of routine DE practice and procedure under the 2026 Act, with any incurred costs relating to said guidelines to be assumed within normal DE expenditure?

7.4.2 Potential issues of non-compliance

Potential financial implications could arise if schools would fail to meet the specified requirements of the Bill, if enacted and implemented as introduced. The Bill's accompanying EFM states:

A school's non-compliance could expose it or the Department to legal challenge, with associated public purse cost implications.

Cost savings also could arise from any legal challenges that no longer would be taken – that is, pupils and parents no longer needing to take a legal case to wear trousers to school. In that regard, the Bill's EFM continues:

Conversely, making the right explicit could reduce pupils', parents' or guardians' complaints and litigation overall, potentially easing financial pressures.¹⁴⁶

In this context, [Section 8](#) of the 2026 Act should be considered. It states:

Directions on adherence to guidelines

8.— (1) The Department must give directions to a manager of a school as follows if the Department is satisfied that the manager is (or staff at the school are) in one or more material respects failing to adhere as required to guidelines under this Chapter.

(2) The Department may give directions to a manager of a school as follows if the Department is satisfied that the school's pupils are liable to disciplinary measures or participatory disadvantages at the insistence of the manager (or of staff at the school) in consequence of breaching a school uniform policy applying at the school.

(3) The Department is entitled to be so satisfied only on the basis of its assessment of—

(a) the terms of the school uniform policy applying at the school, or

(b) information in—

(i) a complaint coming to the Department from any source,

(ii) a report prepared with respect to the school under Article 102(6A) of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986, or

¹⁴⁶ See footnote 142

(iii) a report of an investigation relating to the school if sent to the Department under section 43 of the Public Services Ombudsman Act (Northern Ireland) 2016.¹⁴⁷

Under Section 8 of the 2026 Act, the DE if required, can invest resource to investigate, consult and determine whether a Departmental direction is required. In addition, such directions are enforceable by mandamus (a court procedure), which could incur costs to both the Department and the Court Service, including seeking and issuing such a procedure.

Similarly, the Bill here seeks to make an explicit legal requirement for schools to provide girls the option of wearing trousers and if a school would infringe that legal right. If enacted and implemented as introduced, then the given school and/or the DE could face legal challenge that would need to be addressed, including a requirement of legal representation. Such incidents would incur costs to the public purse for public bodies.

Conversely, the Bill could reduce potential complaints made against the Department on matters of non-adherence and or potential legal challenge more generally, if enacted and implemented as introduced. That thereby could have a positive effect on public finances, and at a time when there are significant constraints on the funding available.

7.4.3 Schools' requirement to consult when reviewing uniform policy

As noted in [Section 4.3.1](#), schools are required under the 2026 Act to consult with parents, pupils and any other group they consider relevant when devising or reviewing their school uniform policies. As previously stated, Guideline 5 of the [School Uniforms Guidelines](#) requires school management to review their school uniform policies at least once every three years. As the Bill would require schools to revise their uniform policies to reflect the statutory right of all pupils to wear trousers, it appears that could constitute a review of uniform policy and therefore necessitate further consultation in accordance with the relevant

¹⁴⁷ <https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/legislation/bills/executive-bills/mandate-2022-2027/school-uniforms/school-uniforms-guidelines-and-allowances-bill---as-amended-at-fcs---fpv2.pdf>

requirements, prior to the requisite three-year review period. If schools would conduct consultations, that would require some resource and would likely incur some cost to the school. It is unclear at this time as to the method which a school is required to follow when undertaking such consultation. As such, different forms of consultation would incur a different level of cost – for example, online survey, email, in-person meetings – each would require a lesser or greater amount of resource to conduct compared to another method.

Potential scrutiny point

- Members, including those of the Ad Hoc Committee, may wish to seek information on the methodology and scale schools are required to undertake when consulting on a review of uniform policy.

7.5 Key takeaways

- Any public expenditure arising from the Bill would likely be met from within the Department of Education's existing budget or through wider Executive budget prioritisation, rather than requiring a separate funding allocation.
- The principal identifiable cost relates to the Department of Education updating and reissuing School Uniform guidelines to reflect the new statutory requirement. The paper suggests these costs are likely to be absorbed through normal departmental business processes.
- The Department is already required under the School Uniforms (Guidelines and Allowances) Act (Northern Ireland) 2026 to review guidance at least every three years. The Bill would likely necessitate an earlier review and reissuance of guidance.
- Potential costs could arise from non-compliance by schools if the Bill becomes law. Schools or the Department could face complaints, investigations or legal challenges where the statutory right to wear trousers is not upheld.

- Under Section 8 of the 2026 Act, the Department may need to investigate complaints, assess compliance and issue directions to schools. These activities require staff resources and could generate administrative and legal costs.
- The Bill could also generate financial savings by reducing complaints, disputes and litigation from pupils, parents or guardians regarding the ability of girls to wear trousers as part of school uniform policy.
- Schools may incur some administrative costs associated with reviewing uniform policies and consulting stakeholders, as required under existing law when uniform policies are revised.
- Consultation costs are difficult to quantify because they will depend on the approach adopted by individual schools, with online surveys, email engagement and in-person meetings all carrying different resource implications.