

PE1411/E

## **LGBT Youth Scotland's Response to Petition Number: PE 1411**

### **Subject: School Uniforms**

Calls on the Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to reform school uniform policies by stopping gender-specific uniforms and changing clothes worn for uniforms to more comfortable, less physically restrictive, more affordable and practical garments.

### **Introduction**

LGBT Youth Scotland is Scotland's largest youth and community based LGBT organisation. LGBT Youth Scotland works in partnership with schools and local authorities to create more inclusive learning environments for LGBT young people. We work closely with the Scottish Government to support the inclusion of LGBT young people in key policy documents and provide information, training and resources to schools across Scotland. We are also a managing partner of the organisation **respectme** Scotland's anti bullying service and have a clear mandate to develop and implement initiatives that aim to reduce prejudice based bullying in Scottish Schools.

**LGBT Youth Scotland's Strategic Outcome 4: *"Schools and the wider learning community are safe and welcoming environments for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) young people in order that they can become successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors."***

### **Background**

The opinions and experiences of LGBT young people are at the centre of LGBT Youth Scotland's policy work. To ensure that the voices of young people were heard within this response, a focus group was held with 'Beyond Gender', a youth group for transgender young people and their friends. This response therefore includes the responses from the seven young people (aged 16-24) who took part in the consultation, as well as information gathered from our experiences of working with LGBT young people. A list of useful resources is provided at the end of this document which provides information related to definitions and further research.

Whilst there are several aspects to the petition including the comfort and affordability of school uniforms, LGBT Youth Scotland would like to focus on responding to 'stopping gender specific uniforms', as this is most relevant to our service users. Overall, LGBT Youth Scotland asks that the Scottish Government consider implementing a gender neutral school uniform policy, as well as allowing for flexibility in the dress code in order to accommodate gender expression.

***„There should be a gender neutral uniform so it is universal to all genders and so students can make their uniforms something they are comfortable with...and equal to all!“(Young Person)***

### **The Gender Binary**

LGBT Youth Scotland feels that schools can re-enforce a gender binary through gender specific school uniforms. In other words, by having distinct dress codes for young men and young women we are classifying men and women as two disconnected entities identified through masculine and feminine traits. This creates an artificial social boundary for men and women, based on assumed social norms and discourages young people from different exploring gender roles and/ or different forms of gender expression. This is particularly relevant for transgender young people who may not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth or with a specific gender at all.

***If uniforms have to exist, they should be gender neutral. Gender specific uniforms re-enforce the belief that „boys are different from girls“and often restricts students from dressing how they feel.“(young Person)***

***„I think it should attempt to be gender neutral as otherwise it re-enforces gender binaries.“(young Person)***

### **Impact of Gender Specific Uniforms: Bullying**

A gender binary can also be a mechanism whereby homophobia, biphobia and transphobia is expressed. Many lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender young people experience bullying in school settings because their peers perceive them to be LGBT, this can occur because their behavior does not fit with existing gender ‘norms’. For example, a young woman who dresses in masculine clothing may be labeled as a lesbian and be bullied because of this assumption. Bullying motivated by gender is not only applicable to LGBT young people but can affect any young person who expresses their gender outwith gender ‘norms’ .

***Sometimes, based on stereotypes, it may seem easy to identify young people who are LGBT – an effeminate boy maybe, or a young person who dresses or speaks in a way that is „typically gay“. These young people may not be LGBT and it is important not to make assumptions. (Toolkit for Teachers, 2006, LGBT Youth Scotland)***

### **Impact of Gender Specific Uniforms: Mental Health**

Research shows that due to discrimination and societal pressures to conform, transgender people experience higher levels of poor mental health in comparison to the wider population. Other research shows that transgender people can experience improved mental health when given opportunities to express their

gender identity outwith gender 'norms' or different from the gender they were assigned at birth.

LGBT Youth Scotland has worked with many transgender young people who feel that gender specific school uniforms restricted their gender expression and this; along with negative messages and forms of discrimination, had a negative impact on their mental health.

***„It can also restrict transgender students from dressing as their „appropriate gender“ and can add to a negative mental health impact.“***  
(Young Person)

***„From a young age I have always known who I really am. At primary school I was bullied because I chose to play with girls and made excuses not to take part in sports.. (later) I began to express myself more openly and began to wear make-up and dress differently. I was then suspended from school for being disruptive. I had never been rude so couldn't understand it... I left home because my situation at home had got so bad. I was encouraged not to express my gender by the housing association and not to wear women's clothes. I tried to kill myself at 18 years of age.“***(Transgender young woman: Toolkit for Teachers, 2006, LGBT Youth Scotland)

### **Young People's Rights, Legislation and Policy**

LGBT Youth Scotland feels that overall there is a need for flexibility for transgender young people to wear school uniforms that reflect the gender with which they identify rather than the one they were assigned at birth. This suggests that rather than simply implementing gender neutral uniforms, there is also a need to consider the needs of individual pupils. This is reflected in Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence which strives to meet the needs of individual learners and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Overall the welfare of the Child should be paramount rather than school policies that enforce gender specific uniforms.

**Article 3 (Best interests of the child): The best interests of children must be the primary concern in making decisions that may affect them. All adults should do what is best for children. When adults make decisions, they should think about how their decisions will affect children. This particularly applies to budget, policy and law makers.**

It could also be implied that schools that fail to meet the needs of LGBT people are in breach of Equality legislation and their duty to ensure that all young people achieve their full potential. ***„Discrimination related to gender is already illegal in most fields and should be the same in the education system.“***(Young Person)

## Other Comments

There were mixed views from young people in relation to the need for uniforms. Some feel that they are expensive and therefore unequal for those who can't afford it, whilst others thought they created similarities and reduced the risk of bullying.

***„I think school uniforms are completely unnecessary in schools...They are expensive, especially during times of recession, are often uncomfortable and impractical, and often add to student appearance insecurities.“***

***„I feel that schools and uniforms are important to aid a sense of community and to reduce bullying related to clothing. However, they should definitely be non-gender specific“.***

*There was also some recognition that it might be difficult to create completely gender neutral uniforms:*

***„I don't think you can make a school uniform gender neutral without having specific shoes and trousers too which I've never known a school to do.“***

## Key Points

- Gender neutral uniforms would be beneficial for transgender young people and for lesbian, gay and bisexual young people who do not wish to express their gender within perceived gender 'norms' or stereotypes.
- Schools should be equal and fair places for all pupils including lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender young people and policies that enforce gender specific uniforms can mean that their needs are not considered.
- There is a need for flexible school uniforms for transgender pupils and gender specific uniforms could have a negative impact on transgender young people's mental health and wellbeing.

## Useful Resources

- A guide for Parents and Family Members or Trans People in the UK: Gendered Intelligence [www.genderedintelligence.co.uk](http://www.genderedintelligence.co.uk)
- Issues of Bullying Around Trans and Gender Variant Students in Schools, Colleges and University [www.genderedintelligence.co.uk](http://www.genderedintelligence.co.uk)
- A Guide for Young Trans People in the UK (2007), Department of Health [www.dh.gov.uk/publications](http://www.dh.gov.uk/publications)
- Transgender Experiences in Scotland (2008) Scottish Transgender Alliance [www.scottishtrans.org](http://www.scottishtrans.org)
- Medical care for gender variant children and young people: answering families' questions (2008) Department of Health [www.dh.gov.uk/publications](http://www.dh.gov.uk/publications)

- Promoting Equal Opportunities in Education: GUIDANCE ON DEALING WITH HOMOPHOBIC INCIDENTS Executive Summary (2006) O'Loan et al, LGBT Youth Scotland
- Toolkit for Teachers: Dealing with Homophobia and Homophobic Bullying in Scottish Schools (2007), LGBT Youth Scotland.