



PE1411/I

## Public Petition PE1411

### **‘Reforming Uniform Policy in All Scottish Local Authority Schools by producing mandatory guidelines that they have to follow in their Uniform Codes’ Response from the Scottish Youth Parliament**

#### **Background to SYP**

Our vision is of a stronger, more inclusive Scotland that empowers young people by truly involving them in the decision-making process.

The Scottish Youth Parliament (SYP) is democratically elected to represent Scotland’s youth. We listen to young people, recognise the issues that are most important to them, and ensure that their voices are heard.

In working towards our aims, we support the following values:

**Democracy** - All of our plans and activities are youth-led, and we are accountable to young people aged 14-25. Our democratic structure, and the scale of direct participation across Scotland, gives us strength and sets us apart from other organisations.

**Inclusion** - We are committed to being truly inclusive. The Scottish Youth Parliament believes that all young people have a right to a voice, it doesn’t matter who we are or where we come from. We celebrate our diversity.

**Political independence** - We are independent from political parties. Only by working with all legitimate political parties can we make progress on the policies that are important to young people.

**Passion** - We believe that drive and energy are key to successful campaigning. We are passionate about the key issues and believe that young people are part of the solution, not the problem.

#### **Introduction and Context of Response**

The Scottish Youth Parliament (SYP) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the petition. As an organisation dedicated to creating a platform to enable young people to share their views on issues that directly affect them and that they care about, school uniforms are a part of everyday life for the majority of young people in Scotland. We particularly welcome the opportunity to comment on a petition submitted by a young person, and encourage young people to petition the Scottish Parliament for change on issues they care about as part of our work.

To inform this response, the SYP conducted an online survey, ‘What do you think about school uniforms?’ between 27<sup>th</sup> March and 3<sup>rd</sup> April. A total of 151 responses were received from our Members (MSYPs) and other young people aged between 14 and 25 with an interest in the issues raised in the petition. The majority of respondents (60.3%) are currently at school, with others having left relatively

recently. This response is entirely based on their collected views. All figures and comments cited within it are from that survey unless otherwise stated.

## Current School Uniform Policies

The SPICE briefing accompanying this petition suggests that the vast majority of schools in Scotland have a uniform policy of some sort, and this was true of the schools respondents attended (or in the case of those that had left, the school they most recently attended). 96% of respondents' schools had a uniform policy, with just 4% having no school uniform.

Of those whose schools had a uniform policy, 71.7% said that it was 'strictly enforced', with 28.3% feeling that it was 'not very strictly enforced'.

Expanding on this, we asked respondents about the degree to which the uniform can be personalised or customised, giving examples of being allowed to choose between a shirt and a polo shirt, between trousers and a skirt or to wear a tie or not. In the majority of cases where there was a uniform (59.4%), respondents said that they 'could personalise some elements of it', with 40.6% stating that there was 'one specific uniform, personalisation is not allowed'.

A number of respondents commented on their answers, with significant divergence between how strict or extensive the uniform policy was from school to school. Some examples of the comments included:

*"The uniform rules were very lax. You could throw on the school tie over any body part and you were in uniform, which is what a lot of people did."*

*"I had a deputy head say to me in my fifth year that she hoped I wouldn't be returning for sixth year after I stopped wearing my tie to school, citing the "bad example" I was setting to First Years as her reason. I was taking four Highers at the time and had a clean behavioural record. A lack of properly defined rules gave her the space to be uproariously rude to me about my clothing without allowing me an official channel to respond to her through."*

*"It makes our school look brilliant; ties are always pushed up and blazers always worn. It gives a sense of community and is often commented on by members of the community. Uniform should be worn and strictly enforced."*

*"My school went to the extreme of telling you to wear a certain kind of shirt in summer and a different one in winter, and one colour of tights in winter, and socks in winter up till 4<sup>th</sup> year when you had to wear tanned tights. I'm surprised they didn't tell you what colour your underwear had to be."*

To examine gender-specific uniform policies we asked respondents whether in their school there were separate uniforms for boys and girls (asking for example, whether boys have to wear trousers and girls wear a skirt). In 10.6% of respondents' schools, the uniform policy was gender-specific and strictly enforced; in 55% the uniform was gender-specific, but pupils can choose to wear different

elements of each (e.g. girls can wear trousers instead of a skirt if they want to); and in 30.5% of cases the uniform was the same for boys and girls.

A small number of respondents expanded on their answer to comment that whilst girls have the choice between a skirt and trousers, a boy had never attempted to wear a skirt or tights. They were not aware of rules specifically preventing it, but were unsure how the school would react.

To find out what was included in current uniform policies we asked respondents which of the following were included in their school uniform. If there were separate uniforms for girls and boys, we asked them to list both. The results were as follows:

<b>“Thinking about the school uniform you wear (or used to wear), which of the following does it include? If there’s separate girls’ and boys’ uniforms please include both. (You can choose more than one answer).”</b>	
<b>Option</b>	<b>% of respondents</b>
Shirt	92.7%
Polo shirt	28.5%
T-shirt	7.3%
Tie	92.1%
Dark trousers	84.1%
Grey trousers	25.2%
Shorts	4.0%
Blazer or school jacket	58.9%
Skirt	59.6%
Kilt	8.6%
A particular colour of socks	12.6%
A particular colour of tights	23.8%
A cap or hat	0.0%
Dark shoes	72.8%
There’s no school uniform	3.3%
Something else	13.9%

Of those that selected ‘something else’, responses included black shoes, variances of uniform in hot weather, variances in uniform for different groups (e.g. polo shirts for 4<sup>th</sup> year and below, blazers for prefects only) or stipulations about how uniforms should be worn (e.g. “no skirts shorter than knee length, ties tied properly”).

### Attitudes Towards School Uniforms

We surveyed respondents’ attitudes towards school uniforms in general, regardless of how extensive their own was. Putting a series of statements to them, we asked them whether they agreed, disagreed or were not sure about each. The results were as follows:

<b>“Thinking about school uniforms, have a look at the following statements and please tell us if you agree, disagree or are not sure.”</b>			
<b>Statement</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Not sure</b>
Having a school uniform gives pupils a sense of collective identity and belonging	<b>64.2%</b>	25.8%	9.9%
They make us a target for bullying from other schools, as it’s easy to see who goes to which school	38.4%	<b>47.7%</b>	13.9%
It avoids a ‘fashion show’ where pupils feel under pressure to wear expensive designer gear	<b>65.6%</b>	31.1%	3.3%
The school uniform is uncomfortable	47.0%	<b>49.0%</b>	4.0%
It makes us look smart and presentable	<b>73.3%</b>	20.7%	6.0%
The school uniform is ugly and unflattering	27.3%	<b>60.7%</b>	12.0%
The uniform we wear restricts movement and isn’t very practical	24.8%	<b>62.4%</b>	12.8%
School uniforms are too expensive	<b>50.0%</b>	36.7%	13.3%
All schools in Scotland should have a uniform	<b>55.0%</b>	30.2%	14.8%

Following on from the broad overview, we directly asked respondents whether there should be uniform in their school, or the school they used to attend. A comfortable majority were in favour of a uniform of some description, with 32.5% of all respondents favouring a uniform policy that was strictly enforced, and 41.1% stating that they would like a uniform policy which accommodated ‘personal choice and flexibility’.

Just 20.5% felt that there should be no uniform in their school with all pupils allowed to wear what they like. The remaining 6% preferred something else; generally a dress code that set out what was not acceptable.

### Consultation and Changes

At the heart of the Scottish Youth Parliament’s work - and indeed reason for existence - is our belief that young people should have a say in all decisions that affect them, and that their views should be listened to and respected. Given this, and the fact that the petitioner is putting this into practice on this issue, we asked the online survey respondents whether their school had ever asked them for their views on the school uniform policy.

In a narrow majority of respondents’ schools (55%), pupils had been consulted on school uniform policy. More worryingly however, in more cases, respondents stated that ‘nothing changed as a result of what we said’ (29.1%) than those that said that changes had been made as a result of the consultation (25.8%).

Expanding on their answers many respondents were cynical about any consultation that had been carried out. The exercises were variously described as a “*sham*”, with several respondents giving examples of pupils being consulted, but the outcome being directly opposed to what the young people voted for - blazers being imposed against the wishes of the pupils appearing to be a common issue.

To examine what sort of changes pupils would make in a meaningful consultation, we surveyed respondents’ views on what, if any, changes they would make to their uniform if they were making decisions about it. The results were as follows:

“If it were up to you, would you make any of the following changes to your school uniform policy? (You can choose more than one answer)”	
Option	% of respondents
I wouldn’t make any changes	11.3%
Make it less formal/traditional	28.5%
Make it more formal/traditional	13.2%
Allow pupils to personalise/customise elements of it	43.0%
Enforce it more strictly - stop pupils customising	17.2%
Make it more comfortable	42.4%
Make it less expensive to buy	51.7%
Make it non-gender specific (same uniform for everyone)	17.2%
Allow everyone to choose between trousers and a skirt	33.8%

“If it were up to you, would you make any of the following changes to your school uniform policy? (You can choose more than one answer)”	
Change the colour of it	19.9%
Have no school uniform	21.2%
Introduce a school uniform (if your school doesn't have one)	0.7%
Something else	10.6%

## National Guidelines

The petitioner’s proposal of a set of national guidelines for school uniform policies to ensure that uniforms were comfortable for pupils and affordable to buy proved popular with young people. When we asked our survey respondents, 71.5% were in favour of this proposal, with just 20.5% opposed (7.9% were unsure).

When asked about the petitioner’s specific suggestion of replacing traditional uniforms with loose trousers or skirt, a single-coloured t-shirt/polo shirt and comfortable, flat shoes, 47% agreed that it would be a good idea, with 29.1% disagreeing. 23.8% felt that it was ‘along the right lines, but [they would] suggest something slightly different’. Most of those agreed with the general principle, but would prefer something smarter or more formal.

## Gender Specific Uniforms and Young People’s Attitudes

With the specific issue raised in the petition of gender specific school uniforms, we consulted young people responding to the online survey on two key points - firstly, whether uniforms should be gender specific and secondly, to explore young people’s attitudes towards pupils wearing uniform items of different genders.

When we asked about whether school uniforms should be gender specific, the largest group (47%) agreed with the statement that ‘there should be separate uniforms but pupils should be allowed to choose which they’re more comfortable wearing’. 23% felt that ‘the uniform should be the same for both girls and boys’, with 18.5% choosing the option that ‘there shouldn’t be any uniform; everyone should be allowed to wear what they want to’. Just 7.9% chose the option that ‘there should be separate girls’ and boys’ uniforms’ with no choice for the pupil. 3.3% were ‘not sure’.

This tended to provoke strong views amongst a number of respondents. Comments ranged from one participant describing the moves as *“a really terrible idea. If someone is uncomfortable with a uniform, he/she can move to a different school”* to another stating *“all pupils should be able to choose from a range of clothing. I would end the discriminatory practices, but allow both uniforms to exist and allow pupils the choice of self determination.”*

Exploring young people’s attitudes to pupils wearing uniforms traditionally associated with the other gender we asked about both how they thought they would react, and about how others might respond. To gauge specific reaction, we asked our survey respondents about two different scenarios - firstly, if a boy were to come to their school wearing traditionally female uniform items, for example a skirt. We then went on to ask them the same options for a girl coming into school wearing traditionally male uniform items, for instance trousers.

In the scenario of a boy in a skirt, respondents’ felt their own reactions would be markedly different to those of others.

<b>“If a boy was to come to your school wearing traditionally female uniform items (e.g. a skirt) how do you think you’d react? And how do you think others would react?”</b>		
<b>Option</b>	<b>Own reaction</b>	<b>Others’ reaction</b>
Fine with it/no problem	52.1%	0.0%
Would think it’s a bit weird/might laugh	23.9%	39.1%
Would be a bit uncomfortable, but wouldn’t say anything	23.2%	0.7%
Would bully them	0.7%	52.2%

Commenting on their answers, a mixture of views emerged from respondents. Some of them were as follows:

*“The only time it would be acceptable for a boy to wear a skirt is if it were for a laugh or if it were a kilt. It is a farce to let boys wear skirts as uniform, because although the problem with transgender discrimination is controlled and eliminated at school, in the real world people will bully them. It is better that they learn to accept their sex than have them be bullied for the rest of their life.”*

*“I’d congratulate them for being a lot braver than I ever was. The more neddy students would laugh and what not, but they’d get bored soon enough.”*

*“I’d think it’s weird, but I also think “good on them”...can’t really say that of others, though. I reckon the kid’d be bullied mercilessly, which is a shame.”*

*“There needs to be more awareness campaigns in school to start addressing [these] issues before boys can be safe doing what they want.”*

*“I think in any school in Scotland it would probably be laughed at if a boy was to wear a skirt, and in many cases this would result in bullying, because we still have such strict ideas of how to present “masculinity”, and this is certainly reinforced by gender-specific school uniforms. The biggest problem is that in many schools it*



*is ok for a girl to wear trousers, but it is unheard of for boys to wear skirts. I think it's time to allow dress codes for men to move into the 21<sup>st</sup> century."*

*"Schools need to address transgender issues as part of the PSE curriculum. URGENTLY!"*

In contrast, the anticipated reaction to girls wearing traditionally male uniform items from respondents was very different, with a much more consistent view of how they would react, compared with the previous question.

<b>"If a girl was to come to your school wearing traditionally male uniform items (e.g. trousers) how do you think you'd react? And how do you think others would react?"</b>		
<b>Option</b>	<b>Own reaction</b>	<b>Others' reaction</b>
Fine with it/no problem	<b>92.2%</b>	<b>79.7%</b>
Would think it's a bit weird/might laugh	4.3%	13.0%
Would be a bit uncomfortable, but wouldn't say anything	3.5%	4.3%
Would bully them	0.0%	2.9%

The respondents that commented on their answers to this question either commented on the nature of gender dress, or gave specific examples. Some of these were:

*"Gender barriers have been broken down far more easily for girls than for boys."*

*"My uniform was very strict so girls had to wear skirts, but in other circumstances obviously it would not be laughed at for a girl to wear trousers, but I think if a girl was actually dressed in a full boy's uniform (basically a suit), this would result in them being made fun of on some level, especially in such a strict and backward environment."*

*"I am a girl and have come to school in male uniform almost every day since I started school. It is a silly idea to make trousers for boys and skirts for girls."*

*"This is commonplace now (but I would still be uncomfortable with a guy in a dress, even if that became commonplace)."*

*"A girl at my high school wore man's clothing the entire high school period, nobody bullied her, but she did get funny looks by the younger pupils occasionally."*



## Conclusion

With our consultation with young people revealing that some sort of school uniform policy being almost universal, the issues contained in the petition are clearly of direct relevance to young people in Scotland, and judging from the strong response to our online survey, one which they are keen to share their views on.

The current picture of school uniform policies appears to be varied from school to school, containing a range of clothing items and levels of enforcement. In most schools, uniforms appear to be gender specific in some form, but a girl having a choice between trousers and a skirt appears to be fairly common. Many uniform policies and attitudes towards boys in skirts appear to be largely untested in practice.

An issue of concern for the Scottish Youth Parliament is the level to which schools appear to embark on consultation with pupils about uniforms but ignore the results if they are not to the liking of management. This is tokenism and does not treat the views of young people with the respect they deserve, or do much to convince them that when asked for their opinion it would be worth sharing.

School uniforms in themselves seem to be widely supported, with a clear majority supporting both a uniform for their own school, and for every school in Scotland. There is also clear support for the principle of national guidelines being drawn up for the creation of uniform policies. Whilst comfort and practicality of uniforms was not of significant concern (although of course recognising that due to the variety of types of uniform young people's experiences differed in this regard, the expense of a uniform was a factor for many. With a majority agreeing that uniforms avoid the 'fashion show' as outlined in the petition, 'making uniforms less expensive' was the one change that attracted a clear majority of all respondents when it came to the change they would like to make. The petitioner's suggested uniform met with a degree of approval, though a slightly more formal uniform may be preferred by a large number of pupils. There appeared to be support for some reasonable personalisation of school dress in addition.

The widest range of views came to the exploration of gender dress. Whilst girls wearing traditionally male items of clothing pass without comment or problem in the main, the concept of a boy in a skirt elicits a strong reaction. Whilst a majority of respondents stated that they would have no issue with it personally, they felt that a boy who wore a skirt to their school would be bullied by others. Whether this would turn out to be the case in practice, and is indicative of a wider issue of attitudes towards gender dress and transgender understanding generally go beyond the scope of this consultation and solutions it can offer.

However, responses towards giving pupils a choice in what they wear appear to be broadly favourable, although again some will draw the distinction between females in male dress and males in female dress. Nonetheless, many of the issues raised in the petition appear to have support amongst Scotland's young people and we would recommend the Public Petitions Committee pursue the petition further.