



FAO

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Public Petitions Committee

CONSIDERATION OF PETITION PE1411

We welcome the opportunity to respond to Petition PE1411 which

'calls upon the Scottish 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 physical-restrictive, more affordable and practical garments'.

ARGH is fully independent, self funded and self governed we are a group of Autistic self advocates with members across the Highland region. Our response has been formulated by drawing upon our experiences as Autistic people, as parents of Autistic pupils and from those of us that have professional experience within the field of education.

ARGH supports the aim of the petition to reform uniform policy in all Scottish Local Authority Schools in order to ensure all pupils are able to wear uniforms which are not gender specific, physically restrictive or prohibitively costly.

We recognise that currently individual schools are able to set their own uniform policies but there are no clear national guidelines to ensure continuity. Use of the equality act would enable disabled students (including Autistic pupils) to be allowed reasonable adjustments such as variation in clothing at school, however invoking legislation is never a preferred option and if we could get things right from the start without having to go to such lengths this would be a much preferred option.

Pupils and or parents feeling that they have to challenge schools in order to get their needs met can be damaging to the relationship between school and home and is extremely undesirable.

Having a school uniform is a positive thing; it can mean those pupils from families with lower incomes or who have other reasons to struggle to keep up with fashion and trends aren't seen as different by the other students; they don't stand out as much if all of their clothing isn't the 'right' label.

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Those with sensory issues would struggle with fashion and trends if a uniform wasn't in place as the fit or feel of an item is often irrelevant when it comes to fashion. Also, a uniform makes choices of what to wear easier; as long as suitable uniform is available this can reduce stress for the parent and pupil.

A uniform also has an added benefit in that it can act as a useful tool in the transition from home to school, and back to home: a very concrete way to reinforce the change.

Cost of replacement uniform could be a particular issue for families of disabled students who may be more likely to be living on lower incomes and who may need to replace clothing items more frequently, thus having a lower cost uniform would bring benefits.

When responding our members / children focussed mostly on the fabrics and feel / fit of uniforms.

The unacceptability of certain clothing types / feelings and the distress caused by enforcing their wear is way underestimated by those who don't experience it, it's often seen as a choice or just a slight preference, and people assume fussiness. It is in fact far more fundamental.

For Autistic people and others that experience sensitivity to touch and other sensory issues a restrictive uniform or one made of a fabric that they are sensitive to will be a barrier to their learning, disrupt peer relationships, it will impact on their whole school experience and may lead to behaviour that the school would (wrongly) take for wilful unruliness. Some pupils may be unable to concentrate, have to continually get up or fidget, they may even strip as the feelings become intolerable. When describing unsuitable clothing autistic people (and others with sensitivities) may liken it to (amongst other things) their skin being on fire, the feeling of insects crawling all over their bodies, the feeling of being unable to breathe, an overwhelming need to run away to get out of the clothing. This is a very serious and real problem.

Belts, buttons, zips, tight clothing, fabric types (natural materials are often, but not always preferred), labels inside clothing, collars and cuffs, are just some of the problems mentioned again and again but as everyone is an individual there is no fixed solution.

We would suggest a flexible approach to uniform rules, with a wide choice from a range of styles and fabric types, ensuring something is available to suit everyone's needs.

This would be non gender specific and include the more traditional items that many schools still have now alongside softer styles and fabrics, also the option to wear your own clothing styles not on the list could be permitted but with restrictions of colour.

This is really all about allowing everyone equal access to the curriculum without the need to adhere to uniform rules that limit that access, whilst still

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being able to maintain a school identity: a uniform designed for pupils and effective learning environments, rather than systems.