

# REDUCING THE COST OF SCHOOL UNIFORMS IN SCOTLAND

How the right national uniform policy guidance can help children and families on low incomes



## INTRODUCTION

### **School uniform really matters to children, young people and their families.**

At the [Cost of the School Day](#) project, uniform is consistently highlighted as the greatest expense faced by families during the school year. It's also the part of school life that causes the greatest range of difficulties for children and young people when they don't have what's required.

There is currently no national guidance on school uniform in Scotland, unlike in England and Wales. This means that uniform policies vary from school to school in areas like

- number, type, colour, branding and cost of items required
- where and how items can be purchased
- how non-wearing of uniform is dealt with.

These variations have implications for cost, affordability and also for children and young people's experiences at school.

## CONSULTATION ON NATIONAL UNIFORM GUIDANCE

The Scottish Government recognises that the cost of uniform can act as a barrier to participation in learning. It has committed to introduce statutory guidance in Scotland to reduce the cost of school uniform. It is intended that this national guidance will inform local authority and school policies. A [public consultation](#) is currently open until 14 October 2022.

**At CPAG in Scotland, we strongly welcome the introduction of statutory uniform guidance with affordability at its heart.** We believe that this has the potential to ensure more consistent affordability for families, regardless of where they live and the schools their children attend. We also believe that it offers the chance to remove a key financial barrier to children and young people's participation, learning and wellbeing at school.

### **But what do children and families say about school uniform costs? And what are schools doing right now that we can learn from and embed in national guidance?**

Over the next few pages, we'll share what we've heard about uniform from learners, families and their schools and set out what we think is important for stakeholders to bear in mind when responding to the consultation.

## THE COST OF SCHOOL UNIFORMS

School costs can be impossible to afford for families on lower incomes. Uniform represents one of the most significant costs.



The Children's Society estimates that parents pay an average of £337 per year on school uniform for each secondary school child and £315 per year for each primary school child. In some schools this will be far less - in some, far more.

Currently, families eligible for a school clothing grant receive a minimum of £150 a year for a secondary age child and £120 a year for a primary school child with a minority of local authorities paying more than the minimum.

## WHAT MAKES UNIFORM SO EXPENSIVE?

Some uniform policy requirements can lead to more expensive school uniforms and higher costs:

- Embroidered logos and badges
- Higher cost items like school blazers and kilts
- Exclusive suppliers limiting the option to shop around and use supermarkets
- Unusual uniform colours
- Specialist PE kit
- Wet weather or outdoor learning and footwear
- Different shoes for coming to school, indoor and outdoor play
- Different items for upper school/senior phase
- Additional items like school socks, bags and caps
- Fullscale changes to uniform policy.

Families foot the additional costs when school uniform policies include one or more of these requirements.

This has always been challenging for families living in poverty. Now, in the midst of the cost of living crisis, it is even more crucial that we reduce the cost of the school day and ease financial pressures wherever we can.

# WHAT PROBLEMS DO UNAFFORDABLE SCHOOL UNIFORM POLICIES CAUSE?

## 1. PRESSURE ON FAMILY BUDGETS

Uniform costs are significant, ongoing as children grow and especially high for families with more than one child. Many families struggle financially but have earnings above the current threshold for school clothing grants, meaning they miss out on help.

Unaffordable uniform policy means that parents and carers cut corners on other essentials, go without and get into debt to afford what's needed for their children to fit in, take part and be happy at school.

*I felt ashamed that I couldn't provide for my kids.*

*I end up taking out loans or borrowing money to get what is required then spend months paying it all back.*

## 2. PARTICIPATION AND LEARNING

Being unable to afford the 'right' school uniform can affect children and young people's attendance, full involvement at school and their right to education.

Having what's required to participate in all aspects of the curriculum and school life in the same way as everyone else is a basic prerequisite for learning.

*If people haven't got things ready to come to school, either uniform or materials, that can be a barrier to coming into school, either on time or at all.*

*I have struggled, this is why my son only has one jumper which I wash and dry for the next day.*

## 3. STIGMA, SHAME AND WELLBEING

Being unable to afford the 'right' school uniform makes children stick out. This can make them feel different and ashamed and can lead to exclusion and bullying. All of this affects wellbeing and happiness at school.

Poverty is often hidden. Sometimes not having the 'right' uniform is viewed as a behaviour management issue rather than an income or wellbeing issue. This can mean that young people are sanctioned for being unable to comply with their school uniform policies.

*If you haven't got money to get the right stuff all at the one time and say you've got stuff from last year you'd get slagged.*

*It would be hard to tell teachers why you didn't have the right clothes.*

## SCHOOL ETHOS AND CULTURE

There are a wide variety of strongly held opinions on school uniform: whether it should exist, what it should look like and even the point of having it in the first place.

School staff often tell us that uniform is key to a positive culture and ethos. They say that, when it works, uniform shows that every child has an equal place in the school community, regardless of background or income. They say that uniform reduces the risk of peer pressure, competition and stigma or bullying, creates a sense of school identity, belonging, and pride and helps children to feel like they have an equal chance to learn and achieve.

**These are fantastic aspirations. But school uniform can never be the lever for equity it's so often described as while some families are struggling to afford it.**

School uniform policies can support a positive culture and ethos when they are right for their school communities, including families on low incomes. Uniform policies should facilitate affordable access for all learners and be implemented in a poverty aware and supportive way.

## HOW WE THINK NATIONAL GUIDANCE COULD HELP

We believe that statutory uniform policy guidance with affordability and poverty awareness at its core can achieve the following things:

- The consistent development of poverty aware uniform policies across Scotland, so that the cost of your uniform doesn't depend on where you live or the school you attend
- A standard set of cost expectations for children and families when it comes to school uniform.

Guidance can support school uniform policies which work better for children and families on low incomes:

- Removing barriers to participation, reducing stigma and reducing financial pressure by ensuring uniform is affordable and accessible to all families
- Promoting consistent, empathic, poverty aware approaches to dress code enforcement
- Consistently reinforcing the importance of school clothing grants to encourage uptake amongst eligible families
- Supporting all family budgets, including those just above current eligibility thresholds for school clothing grants
- Appropriate for each school community, devised and implemented with the involvement of that community: children and young people, parents, carers, school staff and partners.



# WHAT CAN SCHOOLS DO WITHIN THEIR POLICIES TO REDUCE UNIFORM COSTS?

Many schools understand the financial challenges their families are facing and work hard to reduce uniform costs. We need to learn from what schools are doing well and reflect this best practice in national guidance. Making these approaches consistent and standard across Scotland will make a difference to children and families on low incomes. Some key approaches are listed here:

## 1. Consultation and careful consideration of items required

- Policy developed with the involvement of the whole school community, particularly learners and their families, to understand what is affordable and desirable from their perspectives
  - Carefully considering rationale for which and how many items are required with affordability and flexibility as key consideration and attention paid to how requirements might impact on larger families.
- Considering requirements for more expensive items like blazers and kilts, embroidered logos or badges, specialist PE items and 'special' items for upper school and senior phase - and, if they are required, making arrangements to ensure that every child and young person has them
  - Ensuring that the price of chosen items is kept as low as possible:
    - Ensuring multiple rather than exclusive suppliers for all items, including supermarkets
    - Uniform colours which are commonly available
    - Advice to families on where to source cheapest options
  - Considering restrictions on branded and designer items with attention paid to inadvertent consequences – for example, a ban on trainers and insistence on smart black shoes might be problematic if a family can't afford two sets of footwear for every child.

*We have a range of uniform suppliers, encouraging parents to use supermarkets where possible.*

*Buying new uniform can be expensive but they have stopped logos on uniform so this reduced the cost a lot.*

*We surveyed parents on colours and chose the cheaper option.*

*Simpler means there is much more consistency of uniform meaning fewer children stand out as having or not having.*

# WHAT CAN SCHOOLS DO WITHIN THEIR POLICIES TO REDUCE UNIFORM COSTS?

## 2. Measures to ensure that every family can meet policy requirements

- Mention in policy of the school clothing grant, eligibility criteria, how to access the grant and other key financial entitlements, who to contact for support with applications and how to contact them
- Creative ways to support families with costs - instalments, hire schemes, subsidies and selling at lower prices in-school
- Using Pupil Equity Funding to purchase new uniform stock which can be provided when necessary
- Gifting key items of uniform at start of year or at transition points
- Setting up non-stigmatising preloved uniform shops and linking with similar services in the community
- Collaboration between secondary school and feeder primaries with regards to uniform colours.

## 3. Supportive approaches and communication with families

- Stating that income will consistently be taken into account in non-compliance with uniform policy and that children and young people will be supported to acquire the correct uniform rather than sanctioned
- Specifying generous timeframes for purchasing new items when needed and support available to acquire them if needed
- Making clear to families what support is available with uniform costs, both in school and via the clothing grant and other entitlements
- Wording and communicating policy in clear, simple and friendly language for parents, carers and learners.

*We make sure that all children start with a uniform. This helps them feel that it is their school, they are no different. All our children are warm and cosy.*

*It's relaxed. It's cheap. It's good to know my child's not gonna get bullied for what they wear. There's scope to adjust it according to your budget.*

*They told us about the grant and it was so helpful. It's just helped us enormously.*

## DRAFT UNIFORM POLICY GUIDANCE PRINCIPLES

The Scottish Government [national uniform policy consultation](#) contains a set of draft principles for comment from stakeholders .

We welcome the principles that guidance should reduce the cost of uniform for families and support equity. We agree it should apply to all uniform uses, including PE and senior phase, and apply to all schools. We agree it should recognise practicality and sustainable approaches to uniform, recognise specific matters related to protected characteristics and continue the position of no legal requirement to wear uniform. We agree that guidance should build upon good practice in schools and have provided examples in this paper to learn from.

- 'Be informed by the views of children and young people' should be closer in language to Article 12 UNCRC which states children's views be given 'due weight'. The need for parents' and carers' views should also be included here
- 'Consider appropriate response for persistent non-wearing of uniform' should change to make clear that no child will be excluded and have their right to education denied due to uniform non-wearing
- 'Does not introduce unnecessary barriers to school uniform policy and practices' is unclear and could be used to justify practice outwith the spirit of the guidance

### National guidance should also:

- Consider uniform in the context of school trips, clubs and dress down/non-uniform days
- Take account of current clothing grant levels and recommend that the cost of uniform specified in policies is more in line with these amounts
- Make clear how compliance with statutory guidance will be monitored
- Set out arrangements for children and families to have their voices heard if their policies are not meeting statutory guidance requirements
- Avoid ambiguous language around items being 'kept to a minimum' or 'discouraged'. Let's be decisive about what is needed to ensure consistency and shared expectations for families and schools.

We know the challenges that unaffordable school uniform policies can create for children, young people and their parents and carers.

We know what makes uniform so expensive. And we know how school uniform policies can help reduce these costs and ensure that uniform is affordable.

Let's make sure we get our national uniform policy guidance right for children and families.



## FURTHER INFORMATION

- [Welsh statutory guidance](#) for school governing bodies on school uniform and appearance policies
- [English statutory guidance](#) on cost of school uniforms
- [Short Cost of the School Day films](#) featuring children, young people and school staff talking about reducing uniform costs and taking action on other school costs.
- [Affordable School Uniforms: a guide for schools in England](#) by CPAG, Children's Society and Children North East
- [The Wrong Blazer 2020](#) from the Children's Society
- Policy briefings from Rachel Shanks at the University of Aberdeen: [Affordability of secondary school uniform in Scotland](#) and [School Clothing Grant in Scotland](#)
- Evidence on school uniform from the [Education Endowment Foundation](#)

*I think having a simple school uniform and being flexible about footwear is so helpful. I'm so glad there aren't blazers.*

*It's harder with bigger kids as need adult sizes and these have adult prices.*

*I sit in the middle band, work earn too much for help but not enough not to worry and find it hard at times to find money needed.*

*My daughter has lost items in school and grown out of things. As a single parent unable to work right now, this expense is crippling.*

*I don't qualify for help but this doesn't mean I don't find providing two pairs of shoes and another pair of trainers or kitting out with uniform difficult!*

*It means nobody feels singled out or different, everybody can just get what they need and get on with things.*

## COST OF THE SCHOOL DAY

Cost of the School Day at Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) in Scotland works with schools and local authorities seeking to reduce the cost of the school day for their children and families.

Supported through the Scottish Attainment Challenge, we work directly in schools, provide advisory support and professional learning opportunities, carry out research which amplifies the voices of low-income children and families and share good practice in reducing financial pressures and stigma from schools across Scotland.

The Cost of the School Day Toolkit supports schools to involve learners, families and staff in identifying cost barriers and designing policy and practice solutions.

[cpag.org.uk/CoSD](http://cpag.org.uk/CoSD)

## CHILD POVERTY ACTION GROUP IN SCOTLAND

Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) in Scotland works for the one in four children in Scotland growing up in poverty. It doesn't have to be like this.

We collect evidence from families living in poverty and campaign for solutions to bring about a society where children have a fair chance in life free from hardship. We provide training, advice and information on social security to frontline workers to make sure families get the financial support they need.

[cpag.org.uk/scotland](http://cpag.org.uk/scotland)

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