



## BRIEFING PAPER

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# School uniform costs in England

By Robert Long

## 1. The rules relating to school uniform

### Are schools required to have uniforms?

There is no legislation in place relating to school uniform in England. Schools are not required to have a uniform policy at all, although the Department for Education strongly recommends that they do so. School governing bodies decide what a school's uniform policy should be.

### Guidance

While there are no requirements in place on uniform, the DfE strongly encourages schools to have a uniform and expects schools to take account of its [published guidance](#). The Department believes uniform "can play a valuable role in contributing to the ethos of a school and setting an appropriate tone."<sup>1</sup>

The guidance states that a school's uniform policy should be clearly set out, be subject to reasonable requests for variation, and that any changes should take into account the views of parents and pupils.

A key section provides more detail on the actions the Government expects schools to take in ensuring that school uniform is affordable:

No school uniform should be so expensive as to leave pupils or their families feeling unable to apply to, or attend, a school of their choice, due to the cost of the uniform. School governing bodies should therefore give high priority to cost considerations. The governing body should be able to demonstrate how best value has been achieved and keep the cost of supplying the uniform under review.

When considering how the school uniform should be sourced, governing bodies should give highest priority to the consideration of cost and value for money for parents. The school uniform should be easily available for parents to purchase and schools should seek to select items that can be purchased cheaply, for example in a supermarket or other good value shop. Schools should keep compulsory branded items to a minimum and avoid specifying expensive items of uniform eg expensive outdoor coats.

<sup>1</sup> Department for Education, [School uniform: Guidance for governing bodies, school leaders, school staff and local authorities](#), September 2013, p4

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Governing bodies should be able to demonstrate that they have obtained the best value for money from suppliers. Any savings negotiated with suppliers should be passed on to parents wherever possible. Schools should not enter into cash back arrangements. Exclusive single supplier contracts should be avoided unless regular tendering competitions are run where more than one supplier can compete for the contract and where best value for parents is secured.<sup>2</sup>

The Department for Education's [guidance on general procurement issues](#) for schools and academies provides more information.

In 2015, the Competition and Markets Authority [wrote to head teachers, school governing boards and school uniform suppliers](#) to remind them of their obligations to parents under competition law.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. 2015 legislative proposal: statutory guidance

In November 2015, the HM Treasury publication, [A better deal: boosting competition to bring down bills for families and firms](#), indicated that the Government would legislate to put current best practice guidance, including avoiding exclusivity arrangements for uniforms, on a statutory footing:

2.5 The government wants to ensure that families get the best value for school uniforms. A 2015 Department for Education survey found that nearly one-fifth of parents and carers reported that they had suffered financial hardship as a result of purchasing their child's school uniform. The survey found that parents and carers are significantly less likely to report that they have experienced hardship if schools allow them to purchase uniforms from a variety of suppliers. The government wants to ensure that effective competition is used to drive better value for money and **will therefore put existing best practice guidance for school uniform supply in England on a statutory footing**. This will ensure that schools deliver the best value for parents by avoiding exclusivity arrangements unless regular competitions for suppliers are run. (pg 11)

No legislation, however, was subsequently put before Parliament to implement this change.

In [response](#) to a Parliamentary Question in July 2019, the Schools Minister stated that the Government "intends to put the school uniform guidance on a statutory footing when a suitable legislative opportunity arises."<sup>4</sup>

The Minister repeated the commitment in a [Westminster Hall debate](#) shortly before Parliament dissolved for the 2019 General Election, stating that "if a Conservative Government are returned with a functioning majority, I am sure that we will give urgent priority to legislating on the matter in question...the Government have made a commitment to legislate on the issue, which we intend to honour."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> As above, p5

<sup>3</sup> Competition and Markets Authority, [Letter from the CMA to schools and school uniform suppliers on competition law](#), 15 October 2015

<sup>4</sup> [PQ 279414, 24 July 2019](#)

<sup>5</sup> [HC Deb 5 Nov 2019 c275-276WH](#)

## 3. Reports on school uniform costs

### DfE report: Cost of School Uniform (2015)

The legislative proposals were prompted by the DfE research report on the [Cost of School Uniform](#), published in June 2015.

The report set out the following findings on school uniform costs:

The average total expenditure on school uniform for the 2014/15 school year to date (so up to the end of February 2015) was £212.88. <sup>1</sup> This was less expensive for those in primary school (£192.14 for boys and £201.04 for girls) than in secondary school (£231.01 for boys and £239.93 for girls).

The average total expenditure was also less expensive when items could be purchased from any shop (£188.82).

Additionally, the report included the following on PE kit costs:

The average total expenditure on PE kit to date based on the items required in 2015 was £87.67. This was less expensive for those in primary school (£66.23 for boys and £62.60 for girls) than in secondary school (£130.52 for boys and £103.63 for girls).

As with school uniform, the average total expenditure was also less expensive when items could be purchased from any shop (£63.13).

### VAT

In September 2017, the issue of VAT for school uniform was raised in the House:

**Sarah Jones:** Our children go back to school this week, and parents are still paying a fortune for branded school uniforms. Cutting VAT on uniforms for older children would save some £200 million, but this cannot be done under current EU law. My constituents have asked me to ask Ministers to raise this matter whenever the negotiations turn to VAT.

**Mr Steve Baker:** The hon. Lady raises an interesting point, which I know has been heard by those on the Treasury Bench and will be heard by the Chancellor. However, I would gently point out to her that VAT raised £120 billion in 2016 and provides essential funding for public services, including education.

[\[HC Deb 7 Sep 2017 c298\]](#)

### Work and Pensions Committee: letter to Secretary of State (2019)

In July 2019, the Work and Pensions Committee and Education Committee held a joint evidence session on [school holiday poverty](#).<sup>6</sup>

Following the session, the chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, Frank Field, sent a [letter to the Secretary of State for Education](#), stating that the testimony at the session from parents and parental support organisations was “profoundly distressing” and raised the issue of school uniform costs, in particular schools using particular providers for generic items.

The letter asked the Secretary of State to consider what the Government to support parents dealing with high uniform costs. It further stated that the committees would return to the wider issue later in the year, with further evidence sessions and a report.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Work and Pensions and Education Committees, [Oral evidence: School holiday poverty](#), 3 July 2019, HC 2459

<sup>7</sup> The letter was also addressed to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, on related issues. Work and Pensions Committee, [letter to Rt Hon Amber Rudd MP and Rt Hon Gavin Williamson MP](#), 25 July 2019

## Children's Society reports (2015 & 2018)

The Children's Commission on Poverty, supported by the Children's Society, published [The Wrong Blazer: Time for action on school uniform costs](#) in 2015, a report that highlighted concerns about uniform costs, recommended making the DfE guidance statutory, as well as that the Government should explore a school uniform cost cap.

In August 2018, the Children's Society published an [update to the report](#), based on a survey of 1,000 parents, which highlighted uniform costs and the potential impact on children:

The report, *The Wrong Blazer 2018: Time for action on school uniform costs*, an update of The Children's Society's survey from 2015, reveals families are shelling out more on school uniforms with an average of £340 per year for each child at secondary school – an increase of 7% or £24 since 2015. Parents of primary school children spent on average £255, an increase of 2% since 2015. [...]

The high cost of uniforms can be put down in part to school policies that make parents buy clothing from specialist shops rather than giving them the choice of buying items at cheaper stores such as supermarkets or high-street chains. Where parents have to buy two or more items of school uniform from a specific supplier, spending was found to be an average of £71 per year higher for secondary school children and £77 higher for primary school children.

For children themselves, the cost of school uniform can have a serious impact. Around one in 10 parents said it had led to their child wearing uniform that didn't fit properly, and more than one in 20 said that their child had been sent home for wearing the wrong clothes or shoes as a result of them struggling to afford the cost.<sup>8</sup>

The [full report](#) again recommended that the Government make the DfE guidance statutory, and also that the Government should end the freeze on key benefits and tax credits for families with children.<sup>9</sup>

## Other reports

The following reports have also discussed issues relating to school uniform costs:

- Office of Fair Trading report – [School Uniforms Survey](#) (2012)
- Children's Commissioner for England - ["It might be best if you looked elsewhere"](#) report on school admissions (2014) (see section pg 28-30 on school uniform costs)

## 4. Help with costs

Local authorities and academy trusts may choose to provide school clothing grants or to help with the cost of school clothing in cases of financial hardship. Individual schools may run their own schemes to provide assistance.

The Department for Education provides a link on [help with school clothing costs](#), through which parents can search for support in their local area.

A response to a Parliamentary Question provides an overview of the Government's position:

**Grahame Morris:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if he will make it his policy to introduce a scheme to support (a) low income families and (b) families with multiple school-age children with the cost of (i) compulsory uniforms, (ii) school equipment and (iii) school-based activities.

<sup>8</sup> Children's Society, [School uniform costs force families into debt](#), 23 August 2018

<sup>9</sup> Children's Society, [The Wrong Blazer 2018: Time for action on school uniform costs](#), August 2018, p9

**Nadhim Zahawi:** Through the pupil premium, which is worth more than £2.4 billion each year, schools receive significant additional grant funding to support the children of low-income families. The grant allocation is based on the number of eligible pupils attending the school each January. Therefore, greater numbers of pupils claiming free school meals (FSM) generate greater grant funding for the school.

School leaders are free to use the money in any way that they choose to benefit their pupils. This may include providing financial support for uniform and equipment purchase, school trips and activities. We understand how important it is for pupils to be ready to learn and to participate in school activities. We know that many schools use the pupil premium to help their pupils with these necessities.

The department publishes uniform guidance, which places great emphasis on schools giving the highest priority to cost considerations. The high cost of a school uniform should not leave pupils or their families feeling unable to apply to, or attend, a school of their choice. Some English local authorities provide discretionary grants to help with buying school uniforms, using their own eligibility criteria.

We publish clear rules about school charging parents for elements of their child's education. This states that schools cannot:

- charge registered pupils for education provided as part of the school's duties to provide the national curriculum
- charge parents for materials and equipment needed to take part in education during the school day, unless the parent wishes to own the item.

Where a school trip involves education for which the school cannot charge, the school must fully remit the cost of any board and lodgings for pupils eligible for FSM.<sup>10</sup>

The Library briefing on the [Pupil Premium](#), SN 6700, provides further information on this funding.

## 5. Support in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland

As schools policy is a devolved issue, different sources of support are in place elsewhere in the UK.

In **Scotland**, parents may be able to get financial help with their child's school clothing and shoes through a 'school clothing grant', available from local councils.

Local councils give this financial support as either:

- cash grants (paid into your bank account)
- vouchers for shops

The eligibility criteria and the amount of money available are decided by the local council.

The Scottish Government website provides information on [clothing grants](#).

In **Wales**, a [Pupil Development Grant](#) can provide £125 to buy school uniform, equipment, sports kit and kit for activities outside of school. In Year 7, the grant is £200, because of the increased costs associated with starting secondary school.

Looked-after children and learners eligible for free school meals will be eligible for this grant if they are:

- entering reception class in primary school

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<sup>10</sup> [PQ 170788, 10 September 2018](#)

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- entering year 7 in secondary school
- aged 4 or 11 in special schools, special needs resource bases or pupil referral units

The Grant is administered by local authorities.

In **Northern Ireland**, [uniform grants](#) are available for parents on a similar basis to free school meal eligibility.

Uniform grants are available to parents who receive the following benefits:

- Income Support;
- Income Based Jobseeker's Allowance;
- Income Related Employment and Support Allowance;
- Guarantee Element of State Pension Credit;
- Child Tax Credit or Working Tax Credit with an annual taxable income of £16,190 or less;
- Universal credit and have net household earnings not exceeding £14,000 per year.

Or:-

- if you are an Asylum Seeker supported by the Home Office Asylum Support Assessment Team (ASAT); or
- if your child has a statement of special educational needs and is designated to require a special diet.

Children will also be eligible if they qualify for these benefits in their own right. The Education Authority provides information on [How to Apply](#).

A uniform grant can pay:

- £35.75 for a primary school pupil
- £51 for a post-primary/special school pupil under 15 years old
- £56 for a post-primary/special school pupil over 15 years old
- £22 for a post-primary/special school pupil physical education kit

A school pupil can usually only get one clothing allowance during the school year.

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