

Affordability of secondary school uniform in Scotland

Summary & main findings

A researcher at the University of Aberdeen has found that **almost 20% (n=70) of secondary schools in Scotland specify an exclusive supplier for school uniform**. The research shows that almost every secondary school has a compulsory uniform (over 96%). Of the 343 schools with a compulsory uniform, **320 uniforms include a school tie, 235 include a blazer and 200 schools ban jeans**.

While the Scottish Government has called for the automatic payment of benefits such as the national minimum clothing grant¹, only **6 local authorities make automatic awards of this grant** when families are applying for other benefits. **Nine local authorities roll over the school clothing grant into the next school year** without requiring families to re-apply and **1 local authority has both automatic grants and rollover of school clothing grant in place**.

Key recommendations from the research

1. Statutory guidance on school uniform policies be developed with affordability as the top priority.
2. The statutory guidance requires regular reviews of exclusive supply arrangements of school uniform items in order to reduce the cost of the school uniform.
3. School uniform, dress code and appearance policies are required to involve pupils in decision-making in both their creation and regular reviews.

This briefing provides background, research findings and wider policy context relating to the cost and affordability of school uniforms in publicly funded secondary schools in Scotland.

Background

The cost of school uniforms is an important issue because of the proportion of children in Scotland who live in relative poverty and whose families are struggling to make ends meet. The issue is not the cost of school uniform per se but the ability of parents to afford to buy it and the impact this has on children and young people's ability to access education. The Scottish Government is committed to the Sustainable Development Goals which include goal 1 'End poverty in all its forms everywhere' and goal 4 'Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all'. While the Scottish Government

¹ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2017/6/section/9/enacted>

is committed to ending child poverty by 2030, poverty has been rising and Scotland is not on course to meet interim child poverty targets.²

The Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 requires Scottish Ministers to prepare a delivery plan including measures to take to support local authorities to consider the automatic payment of benefits and support. A national minimum school clothing grant of £100 was introduced in 2018 as a result of agreement between the Scottish Government and local authorities, prior to this it was up to individual local authorities to decide on how much to provide.³

Previously, the Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland has found that, while uniform is the cheapest option, it still represents a significant cost to families, and strict dress code enforcement can cause problems for young people.⁴ The EIS trade union conducted a survey on child poverty and 67% of the survey respondents indicated a greater frequency of pupils coming to school inappropriately dressed for the weather conditions, and 36% reported an increased incidence of children not wearing school uniform where it is the norm to do so.⁵

In 2020, a study by The Children's Society found that families in the UK spent on average £337 per year on school uniform for each secondary school child.⁶ The same study found that these costs are more than three times what parents think is a reasonable cost for secondary uniform (£105). As well as the financial cost, there are other effects of school uniform policies, for example in relation to equality and children's human rights. Under Section 54 of the Education (Scotland) Act 1980, education authorities must ensure that no child, attending a school under their management, is unable to take advantage of the education provided because of the inadequacy or unsuitability of their clothing. In September 2020, the Scottish Government proposed the incorporation of the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) into Scots law and this will present issues for schools and local authorities, for example in relation to article 12 which stipulates that children and young people should be consulted on, and be able to influence, decisions that affect them.

Study and key findings

There are 357 publicly funded secondary schools in Scotland and almost 20% of secondary schools in Scotland specify an exclusive supplier for school uniform. An analysis of school

² Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2020) *Poverty in Scotland 2020. The independent annual report*. Available at: <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/poverty-scotland-2020>

³ <https://www.gov.scot/news/new-national-school-clothing-grant/>

⁴ Child Poverty Action Group (2015) *Cost of the School Day*. Child Poverty Action Group: Glasgow. Available at: [https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/CPAG-Scot-Cost-Of-School-Day-Report\(Oct15\)_0.pdf](https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/CPAG-Scot-Cost-Of-School-Day-Report(Oct15)_0.pdf)

⁵ EIS (2017) *EIS Child Poverty Survey 2016*. EIS: Edinburgh. Available at: <https://www.eis.org.uk/Content/images/campaigns/poverty/Child%20Poverty%20Survey%202017.pdf>

⁶ The Children's Society (2020) *The Wrong Blazer 2020: Time for action on school uniform costs*, available at <https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-10/the-wrong-blazer-report-2020.pdf>

handbooks and school websites show that almost every secondary school has a compulsory uniform (over 96%). Of the 343 schools with a compulsory uniform, 320 uniforms include a school tie, 235 include a blazer and 200 schools ban jeans.

From a review of all 32 Scottish local authority websites, it was found that at least 6 local authorities make automatic awards of the school clothing grant when families are applying for other benefits, and 9 local authorities roll over the school clothing grant into the next school year without families having to re-apply. Only 1 local authority appears to have both automatic grants and rollover of school clothing grant in place.

Nine local authorities provide more than the minimum clothing grant of £100 per pupil, the highest grant being £145. One local authority provides different amounts for primary and secondary school age children, £125 and £135 respectively. While the websites of 6 local authorities do not clearly show the amount of the clothing grant, a newspaper reported these authorities as all paying the minimum amount⁷. There are variations in the grounds for qualifying for the clothing grant linked to benefits, for example in relation to the income levels of families who receive Child Tax Credit and Working Tax Credit.

Scottish policy background

In 2018 the Scottish Parliament's Education and Skills Committee recommended that education authorities invite schools to poverty-proof their uniform policies and stated that 'no pupil should be denied access to education due to the inability to afford school uniform.'⁸ The Scottish Government's responded by pointing to the minimum school uniform grant of £100 and funding for the Child Poverty Action Group's Cost of the School Day project. It also referred to the duty in the Education (Scotland) Act 2016 which amended the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc. Act 2000 and requires 'education authorities to have due regard to the need to carry out school education functions in a way designed to reduce inequalities of outcome for those pupils experiencing them as a result of socio-economic disadvantage.'⁹ The Education Committee noted that while this duty requires education authorities to have regard to socio-economic disadvantage in new strategic decisions it does not cover existing policies and it recommended that schools and education authorities undertake impact

⁷ <https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/lifestyle/money/school-clothing-grant--what-22237096>

⁸ Education and Skills Committee (2018) *What support works? Inquiry into attainment and achievement of school children experiencing poverty*. Scottish Parliament Paper 365 4th Report, 2018 (Session 5). Available at: <https://sp-bpr-en-prod-cdnep.azureedge.net/published/ES/2018/7/12/What-support-works--Inquiry-into-attainment-and-achievement-of-school-children-experiencing-poverty/ESS052018R04.pdf>

⁹ Scottish Government (2018) *Response to the Education and Skills Committee Inquiry: What support works? Inquiry into attainment and achievement of school children experiencing poverty*. Available at: https://www.parliament.scot/S5_Education/Inquiries/20180911In_DFM_response_to_ES_poverty_and_attainment_inquiry.pdf

assessments on existing policies and practices to assess their impact on low-income families.

Policy in other parts of the UK

While there is currently no legislation or national guidance for Scotland specifically covering the wearing of school uniform or the appearance of pupils, this is not the situation in the rest of the UK. Statutory guidance exists in Wales and is clear that 'No school uniform should be so expensive as to leave pupils or their families feeling unable to apply for admission or to attend a particular school'.¹⁰ The guidance goes on to lay down specific details on how to achieve this, for example by only stipulating basic items and colours so that 'items can be bought from multiple retail chains at reasonable prices and not just from one authorised supplier.' In addition, governing bodies are advised to 'avoid high cost items such as blazers.' In Wales grants of between £125 to £200 are available towards the cost of school uniform.

Non-statutory guidance in Northern Ireland lays down that school uniform policy should be 'fair and reasonable, in practical and financial terms, and should have regard to ... relevant equality and other legislation'.¹¹ In relation to cost it states 'the need to keep costs to a minimum and ensure that items are available "off the peg" from a number of retail outlets so that the school uniform does not become a barrier from low income families attending the school.'

In England, there is currently non-statutory guidance¹² and The Education (Guidance about Costs of School Uniforms) Bill 2019-21 has been introduced by Mike Amesbury.¹³ This Bill, if passed, would prevent schools in England from using a single supplier of uniform in order to reduce costs for families.

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¹⁰ Welsh Government (2019) *Statutory guidance for school governing bodies on school uniform and appearance policies* Education, Wales, Guidance document no: 247/2019. Available at: <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-07/statutory-guidance-for-school-governing-bodies-on-school-uniform-and-appearance-policies.pdf>

¹¹ Department of Education Northern Ireland (DENI) (2018) *Guidance to schools on school uniform policy*, Circular Number: 2011/04, Date of Issue: 30 March 2011 (Re-issued 5 June 2018). Available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Circular%20201104%20-%20Guidance%20to%20Schools%20on%20School%20Uniform%20Policy%20%28revised%205%20June%202018%29.pdf>

¹² Department for Education (2013) *School uniform. Guidance for governing bodies, school leaders, school staff and local authorities*. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/514978/School_Uniform_Guidance.pdf

¹³ Long, R. (2020) *Education (Guidance about Costs of School Uniforms) Bill 2019-21*. House of Commons Library Briefing Paper Number 8813, 6 March 2020. Available at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8813/>