

Response to Motion regarding School uniform Costs

Dear Andrea,

Thank you for your correspondence regarding the statutory guidance on the Cost of school uniform.

The Department shares your commitment to ensuring the cost of school uniform is reasonable. The cost of school uniform should not leave pupils or their families feeling unable to apply to, or attend, a school of their choice. We therefore welcome the work you are doing in the Kirklees area to support schools to understand the importance of ensuring their uniform is affordable.

The Department is also aware of the excellent work done by Kate France in creating the Uniform Exchange. Officials in the School Uniform Policy team met with her in September last year to learn more about this project. They were impressed with both the scale of the scheme and her strong commitment to helping children in Kirklees have access to affordable school uniform.

As you know, the Department published statutory guidance on the Cost of school uniform in November 2021. It is the Government's position that, rather than subsidising expensive uniform policies by providing uniform grants, schools should ensure their uniform is affordable for all. As the guidance is statutory, schools must have regard to it when they are developing and implementing their uniform policy. They must follow the guidance unless they have a good reason not to. The guidance came into force in September 2022 with the expectation that schools be fully compliant by Sept 2023 and there are no current plans to review or update it.

You state that you believe the guidance is having a limited impact. It is worth noting the implementation period contained within the guidance. Whilst the guidance required immediate actions, including removing unnecessary branded items and making sure that second hand uniforms are available to acquire, it did not require schools to make sudden, drastic changes to uniform policies which might result in disruption to schools and retailers or, more importantly, might increase the financial burden on parents who would have to replace uniform items. However, as of summer 2023, all schools should now be fully compliant with the guidance (although we recognise that some schools may not be able to fully comply until their existing supplier contracts come to an end, which may be later).

We also know that school leaders are aware of the guidance (our own survey in March 2023 found almost 9 in 10 of school leaders were aware) and are making changes as a result. The research report is available here: [School and College panel: March 2023 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

We continue to work with stakeholders and with schools to ensure that they fully understand the requirements of the guidance, including hosting a live webinar in November 2023 to help schools implement the guidance - [Cutting the Cost of School Uniform Webinar \(youtube.com\)](#).

In your letter you raise some specific concerns and suggestions about the guidance, including: the absence of a specific limit on the number of branded items or a cap on the cost of school uniform; that it should provide more information about the requirements for multiple items of footwear; and that it should prevent schools from making frequent changes to their uniform policies.

The guidance sets out the key principles which schools should consider in order to ensure that their uniform policy is affordable. It is, however, the responsibility of the governing board of a school to decide whether there should be a school uniform, and if so, what it should be. It is also for the governing board to decide how the uniform should be sourced. A more prescriptive approach, such as introducing a cap on the cost of school uniform would be difficult to implement effectively across all schools. For example, different uniform requirements for primary and secondary schools, regional price variations and inflation could all result in varying prices across schools. Likewise, a numeric cap on the number of branded items would limit the ability of school leaders, who know their school communities best, to make decisions on branded items that are most appropriate to their school. However, we are aware that branded items are often more expensive than generic items of uniform. That is why the guidance requires schools to keep branded items to a minimum and limit their use to low cost or long-lasting items and, where they decide a branded item is required, to consider how they can maintain the benefits of a branded item whilst keeping costs low.

In relation to your concerns on footwear, the guidance is clear that schools should not require parents to purchase multiple expensive items of clothing such as trainers and that schools should be mindful of the cost implications when they make requirements on what is deemed appropriate footwear. This includes the footwear required for both their uniform and their P.E. kit.

We agree that frequent changes to uniforms can result in additional expense to parents and so the guidance states that schools should avoid frequent changes to their uniform specifications. It also states that schools ***“should show how any change in uniform specifications secures the best value for money or why the change is required.”*** and that when making changes, they should ***“take action to minimise any financial impact of any change on parents (such as allowing pupils to continue to wear the old uniform for a reasonable period).”***

In line with their statutory duty, schools should follow the guidance unless they have good reason not to.

You also state that parents should be able to complain to the Department about their school’s uniform policy and that Ofsted could be tasked with policing school compliance with the guidance. It may be helpful to explain the complaints procedure. As school uniform is set by the school’s governing body, any disputes regarding school uniform should be addressed, in the first instance, via the school’s complaints policy. Governing bodies must have a published complaints process in place to deal with complaints about school issues, including school uniform. If, having gone through the school’s complaints process, a parent is not satisfied by the way the school has addressed their concerns, they can complain to the Department.

Ofsted's role does not include the scrutiny of individual schools' uniform policies and the guidance on the Cost of school uniform does not change this. Requiring them to inspect school uniform policies in addition to their current work would be an unnecessary distraction from the key work they need to carry out, especially as there is already an established complaints procedure.

I hope that this information is helpful.

Yours sincerely,
Connor SHUTTLEWORTH

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