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School uniform costs in England



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Summary

Schools in England are not required to have a uniform, although the Department for Education (DfE) strongly recommends that they do so.

School governing bodies decide what a school's uniform policy should be. The Department for Education expects schools to take account of its [published guidance](#) when developing those policies.

In 2021, legislation was passed for statutory guidance to be put in place to ensure school uniform costs do not become excessive. Guidance published by the DfE sets out that 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.

The [statutory guidance on costs](#) published in 2021 sets out the considerations state-funded schools should have in ensuring their uniform policies do not lead to excessive costs for parents. Schools were expected to comply with the new guidance by September 2022, although there may have been particular reasons, such as pre-existing contracts, why some schools will come into line with the new guidance at a later date.

The [Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill](#) currently before parliament would set limits on the number of branded items state-funded schools may require as part of their uniform.

[Research published by the Department for Education](#) in 2024 found that the cost of school uniform was decreasing, but remained a concern for parents.

This briefing provides an overview of the rules and guidance in place relating to school uniform in England, in particular the recent changes. It addresses some Frequently Asked Questions, discusses previous proposals and reports on uniform costs, and provides information on support with uniform costs across the UK.

1 General school uniform requirements

1.1 Guidance

Schools in England are not required to have a uniform, although the Department for Education strongly recommends that they do so. School governing bodies decide what a school's uniform policy should be.

Alongside its recommendation for schools to have a uniform, the Department for Education expects schools to take account of its [published guidance](#).

The Department believes uniform can play a key role in:

- promoting the ethos of a school
- providing a sense of belonging and identity
- setting an appropriate tone for education¹

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.

Costs

The general guidance further states that 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.

The rules about the cost of school uniforms were strengthened following the passage of the [Education \(Guidance about Costs of School Uniforms\) Act 2021](#), and separate [statutory guidance on uniform costs](#) has been published. Section 2 of this briefing discusses these changes.

¹ Department for Education, [School uniforms](#), November 2021

2 Costs of school uniform: Statutory requirements

2.1 2021 Act and statutory guidance

Legislative changes

Prior to 2021, there was no legislation in place on school uniform.

The Education (Guidance about Costs of School Uniforms) Bill 2019-21 was introduced by Mike Amesbury MP following the Private Members' Bills Ballot held in January 2020.

The Bill required statutory guidance to be published on how schools should design and implement their uniform policies, with particular regard to the cost of uniform. Guidance on costs was previously published by the Department for Education, but was not on a statutory footing.

The Bill was supported by the government and received Royal Assent on 29 April 2021. A [Library briefing on the Bill](#) discusses its progress through Parliament.²

The [Education \(Guidance about Costs of School Uniforms\) Act 2021](#) requires the government to issue [statutory guidance on school uniform costs](#). The guidance was published in November 2021.

Statutory rules on uniform costs

The [statutory guidance](#) applies to state-funded schools in England. It acknowledges that some schools, or year groups within them, may not have a uniform policy or dress code, although it notes that in that case should still consider the cost implications to parents of the decision not to have a uniform.³

It sets out the following main points for schools to consider:

- Parents should not have to think about the cost of a school uniform when choosing which schools to apply for. Therefore, schools need to ensure that their uniform is affordable.

² House of Commons Library, [Education \(Guidance about Costs of School Uniforms\) Bill 2019-21](#), CBP 8813, March 2021

³ Department for Education, [Cost of school uniforms](#), November 2021

- Schools need to think about the total cost of school uniforms, taking into account all items of uniform or clothing parents will need to provide while their child is at the school.
- Schools should keep the use of branded items to a minimum.
- A school's uniform policy should be published on the school's website, be available for all parents, including parents of prospective pupils, and be easily understood.
- Schools should ensure that their uniform supplier arrangements give the highest priority to cost and value for money (including the quality and durability of the garment).
- Single supplier contracts should be avoided unless regular tendering competitions are run where more than one supplier can compete for the contract and where the best value for money is secured. This contract should be retendered at least every 5 years.
- Schools should ensure that second-hand uniforms are available for parents to acquire. Information on second-hand uniforms should be clear for parents of current and prospective pupils and published on the school's website.
- Schools should engage with parents and pupils when they are developing their school uniform policy.⁴

The guidance set out the expectation that schools would comply with the new guidance by September 2022. There were, however, exceptions described, such as if pre-existing contracts limit a school's flexibility.

Unless such exceptions apply, the guidance stated that "the following actions need to happen before parents seek to purchase or acquire uniform items in summer 2022":

- changes to the uniform policy which do not fit with these exceptions, such as removing an unnecessary branded item.
- publishing the uniform policy on the school's website and ensuring it is easily understood.
- making sure that second-hand uniforms are available to acquire (either from the school directly or from an established scheme).⁵

Where a competitive process to set up a new contract to secure a supplier for elements of their uniform, schools were expected to have completed this by

⁴ Department for Education, [Cost of school uniforms](#), November 2021

⁵ As above

December 2022, to allow time for suppliers to provide the new uniform for the summer of 2023.⁶

Any disputes about the cost of school uniforms would be resolved locally, in accordance with the complaints policy each school is required to have in place.

In June 2023, the then schools minister summarised the Conservative government's position as part of a response to a Parliamentary Question:

Rather than subsidising expensive uniform policies with financial assistance, the Department published statutory guidance on the cost of school uniform to ensure uniform is affordable for all families. The guidance came into force in September 2022 and is available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/cost-of-school-uniforms/cost-of-school-uniforms> opens in a new tab).

Schools must have regard to this guidance when designing and implementing their uniform policy and PE and Sport kit. The guidance requires schools to ensure that their uniform is affordable and secures best value for money for parents.

There is no specific funding for schools to support low income families with the cost of uniform, but schools may offer additional support in cases of financial hardship where they choose to do so.⁷ [...]

2.2 Further 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.

2.3 Children's Wellbeing Bill 2024-25: limiting branded items of uniform

[The King's Speech](#) in July 2024 included a Children's Wellbeing Bill, which the incoming Labour government said would include:

⁶ Department for Education, [Cost of school uniforms](#), November 2021

⁷ [PQ 189102 \[Schools: Uniforms\], 23 June 2023](#)

legislation to limit the number of branded items of uniform and PE kits that a school can require to bring down costs for parents and remove barriers from children accessing sport and other school activities.⁸

The [Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill](#) was introduced to parliament on 17 December 2024. [Second reading debate](#) in the Commons took place on 8 January 2025.

The bill would set limits on the number of branded items state-funded schools may require as part of their uniform, building on the measures to reduce uniform costs introduced in 2021:

- At primary level: no more than three different branded items of uniform for use during a school year
- At secondary level: no more than three different branded items of uniform for use during a school year, or four if one of those items is a tie

These limits include a bag and any clothing required for school or school clubs and activities. This means the limit includes PE kit and extends to optional activities.

The schools minister, Catherine McKinnell, has said that the [existing statutory guidance will be updated](#) once the new legislation has received royal assent.⁹

The Library briefing on the [Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill 2024-25](#) provides further information.

⁸ [King's Speech 2024: background briefing notes](#), p63

⁹ [PQ 3429 \[Schools: Uniforms\], 9 September 2024](#)

3

Frequently Asked Questions

Parents often raise particular issues relating to uniform. The following FAQs draw on the [statutory guidance on costs](#) and include the changes introduced in 2021.

Are schools required to have uniforms?

No. The Department for Education recommends that schools have a uniform, but this is not required.

Are schools allowed to have branded items as part of their uniforms?

Yes. However, schools should keep branded items to a minimum and limit their use to low cost or long-lasting items. This may involve using sew- or iron- on labels or limiting the branded items to longer-lasting items such as ties. There is no specific limit on the number of branded items, although legislation is currently before parliament to introduce such limits.

Schools should also avoid requiring branded versions of expensive items such as coats or trainers.

Is branded PE kit allowed?

Yes, however schools should follow a similar procedure to everyday uniform and avoid being overly specific in their kit requirements for different sports. Schools should keep the number of items, particularly the number of branded items, to a minimum.

The legislation before parliament to limit the number of permitted branded items would include PE kits.

Can schools use single suppliers of uniform?

Yes, although statutory guidance sets out that single supplier contracts should be avoided unless regular tendering competitions are run, where more than one supplier can compete for the contract and where the best value is secured. This contract should be retendered at least every 5 years.

Can schools have different uniform requirements for boys and girls?

Yes. Schools are advised, however, that their uniform policy should be as inclusive as possible, and should ensure their policies are not discriminatory (for example, that girls' uniforms are not more expensive than boys' or vice versa).

Can children be sent home for wearing incorrect uniform?

Yes. Teachers can discipline pupils for breaching the school's rules on appearance or uniform. This should be done in a proportionate and fair way, and be carried out in accordance with the school's published behaviour policy.

Can uniform policies restrict expressions of personal belief?

The [uniform guidance](#) states that "Pupils have the right to manifest a religion or belief, but not necessarily at all times, places or in a particular manner."¹⁰ Schools are expected to be sensitive to the needs of different cultures, races and religions and act reasonably in accommodating these needs. The guidance further states:

It should be possible for most religious requirements to be met within a school uniform policy and a governing board should act reasonably through consultation and dialogue in accommodating these.¹¹

At all times, schools should ensure that they comply with their obligations under the [Human Rights Act 1998](#) and the [Equality Act 2010](#).

Guidance for schools on [how to comply with the Equality Act 2010](#) and [Technical guidance for schools](#) from the Equality and Human Rights Commission provide detailed information.

¹⁰ Department for Education, [School uniforms](#), November 2021

¹¹ As above

4 Reports on school uniform costs

4.1 DfE reports: Cost of School Uniform (2015 and 2024)

2024 report

In September 2024, the Department for Education (DfE) published research on its [cost of school uniforms survey](#) (carried out in 2023), which it commissioned to assess whether the relative cost of school uniforms has changed since the previous ‘Cost of school Uniforms 2015’ study (see following section).

The survey found:

- Nearly all children were required to wear school uniforms
- Compared with 2015 (adjusted for inflation) the cost of most items and overall average expenditure on school uniforms had decreased
- Average expenditure on PE kit had increased since 2015. This was due, for the most part, to more expensive trainers chosen over cheaper plimsolls in primary schools
- Compared with 2015, parents/carers were more likely to report that they were able to purchase school uniform and PE kit from somewhere other than from designated shops and/or from the school, and this had helped to bring expenditure down
- Changes schools were making to uniform policies were not necessarily leading to a reduction in the overall number of branded items required
- A significant increase since 2015 in parents/carers reporting that their child’s school makes second-hand school uniforms available for purchase
- Parents remained concerned about the cost of school uniform, suggesting that “achieving significant change within schools in this area remains a work in progress”¹²

¹² Department for Education, [Cost of School Uniforms survey 2023: research report](#), September 2024, p71

2015 report

The 2015 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. ¹³ 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).¹³

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).¹⁴

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.¹⁵

¹³ Department for Education, [Cost of school uniform 2015](#), June 2015, p9-10

¹⁴ As above, p10

¹⁵ [HC Deb 7 Sep 2017 c298](#)

4.2 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](#).¹⁶

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.¹⁷

4.3 Children’s Society reports

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

¹⁶ Work and Pensions and Education Committees, [Oral evidence: School holiday poverty](#), 3 July 2019, HC 2459

¹⁷ 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

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.¹⁸

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.¹⁹

A further update to the report was published in March 2020. [The Wrong Blazer 2020](#) included evidence, from a Children's Society survey, that parents with children in state maintained schools spent on average £337 per year on school uniform for each secondary school child and £315 per year for each primary school child. 23% of parents surveyed stated that the cost of school uniform had meant their child had worn ill-fitting, unclean or incorrect uniform.²⁰

In June 2023, a Children's Society survey found that parents spend on average £422 a year on secondary and £287 on primary uniforms.²¹

4.4

Schoolwear Association research

The Schoolwear Association, which represents retailers, manufacturers, and others involved in the supply of school uniform, published [research on the cost of school uniform](#) in March 2020.

The Association surveyed retailers who supply around 12% of state secondary schools in England.

The Association's analysis of responses found that:

- The average cost of compulsory school uniform and sportswear items was £101.19 per pupil.
- On average, the spend per pupil of compulsory items was £36.24 per year – as not all items need to be replaced annually

This basket cost was derived from the average cost for boys' and girls' compulsory school-specific uniform and sportswear – with an average of 6.1

¹⁸ Children's Society, [School uniform costs force families into debt](#), 23 August 2018

¹⁹ Children's Society, [The Wrong Blazer 2018: Time for action on school uniform costs](#), August 2018, p9

²⁰ Children's Society, [The Wrong Blazer 2020: Time for action on school uniform costs](#), March 2020, p1

²¹ BBC News, ['Parents forgo holidays over school uniform costs'](#), 28 June 2023

garments being required for an average sized pupil starting secondary school.²²

In June 2023, the [Schoolwear Association published a further survey](#) of its membership of suppliers and retailers, which found the average cost of compulsory secondary school uniform and sportswear items in England in 2023 to be £96.24 per pupil, a notable decrease from the earlier survey.²³

In April 2024, the Schoolwear Association published [another survey](#) (PDF) that found the average cost of compulsory secondary school uniform and sportswear items for a child starting secondary school in England in 2024 had declined by 4% to £92.35.²⁴

²² Schoolwear Association, [Largest survey of school uniform prices reveals £100 basket cost](#), 3 March 2020

²³ Schoolwear Association, [Average cost of school uniform 2023](#), 28 June 2023

²⁴ Schoolwear Association, [Average cost of school uniform 2024](#), April 2024

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.

The eligibility criteria and the amount of money available are decided by the local council. The grant is usually provided as cash.

The Scottish Government website sets out that everybody who gets a school clothing grant will get at least:

- £120 per child of primary school age
- £150 per child of secondary school age²⁵

The University of Aberdeen has published research on the [affordability of secondary school uniform in Scotland](#).²⁶

In **Wales**, [School Essentials Grants](#) are available for children of compulsory school age whose families are on lower incomes and [qualify for certain benefits](#), who can apply for a grant of:

- £125 per learner
- £200 for learners entering year 7 (to help with increased costs associated with starting secondary school)

All looked after children qualify for the grant, whether they receive free school meals or not. Learners who receive free school meals due to transitional protection arrangements do not qualify.

Families are only entitled to claim once per child, per school year.²⁷

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

²⁵ Scottish Government, [Help with school clothing costs](#), June 2022

²⁶ University of Aberdeen, [Affordability of secondary school uniform in Scotland](#), 2020

²⁷ Welsh Government, [School Essentials Grant](#)

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 £15,000 per year.

Or:-

- if they are an Asylum Seeker supported by the Home Office Asylum Support Assessment Team (ASAT); or
- if their 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:

- £42.90 for a primary school pupil
- £61.20 for a post primary/special school pupil under 15 years old
- £67.20 for a post primary/special school pupil over 15 years old
- £26.40 for a post primary/special school pupil physical education kit

A school pupil can usually only get one clothing allowance during the school year.²⁸

²⁸ NIDirect, [School uniform and uniform grants](#)

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