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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. While there are no requirements in place on uniform, the Department for Education expects schools to take account of its [published guidance](#).

School governing bodies decide what a school's uniform policy should be.

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. The expectation is that schools will comply with the new guidance by September 2022, although there may be particular reasons, such as pre-existing contracts, why some schools come into line with the new guidance at a later date.

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 have been 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: Reforms

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

Unless such exceptions apply, the guidance states 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 are expected to have completed this by 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.

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

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

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Frequently Asked Questions

Parents often raise particular issues relating to uniform. The following FAQs draw on the [statutory guidance on cost](#) 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.

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.

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.”⁷ 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.⁸

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.

⁷ Department for Education, [School uniforms](#), November 2021

⁸ Ibid.

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Earlier legislative proposals (2015)

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:

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.⁹

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

In [response](#) to a Parliamentary Question in July 2019, the then Schools Minister stated that the Government intended “to put the school uniform guidance on a statutory footing when a suitable legislative opportunity arises.”¹⁰

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.”¹¹

⁹ HM Treasury, [A better deal: boosting competition to bring down bills for families and firms](#), November 2015, p11

¹⁰ [PQ 279414, 24 July 2019](#)

¹¹ [HC Deb 5 Nov 2019 c275-276WH](#)

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Reports on school uniform costs

DfE report: Cost of School Uniform (2015)

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. ¹ 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).¹²

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).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

¹² Department for Education, [Cost of school uniform 2015](#), June 2015, p9-10

¹³ Ibid., p10

billion in 2016 and provides essential funding for public services, including education.¹⁴

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](#).¹⁵

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.¹⁶

Children’s Society reports (2015, 2018, 2020)

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

¹⁴ [HC Deb 7 Sep 2017 c298](#)

¹⁵ Work and Pensions and Education Committees, [Oral evidence: School holiday poverty](#), 3 July 2019, HC 2459

¹⁶ 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

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.¹⁷

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.¹⁸

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.¹⁹

Schoolwear Association research (2020)

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 garments being required for an average sized pupil starting secondary school.²⁰

¹⁷ Children's Society, [School uniform costs force families into debt](#), 23 August 2018

¹⁸ Children's Society, [The Wrong Blazer 2018: Time for action on school uniform costs](#), August 2018, p9

¹⁹ Children's Society, [The Wrong Blazer 2020: Time for action on school uniform costs](#), March 2020, p1

²⁰ Schoolwear Association, [Largest survey of school uniform prices reveals £100 basket cost](#), 3 March 2020

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)

6 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.

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.²¹

A Library briefing on the [Pupil Premium](#) provides further information on this funding.²²

²¹ [PQ 170788, 10 September 2018](#)

²² House of Commons Library, [The Pupil Premium](#), CBP 6700, 11 March 2021

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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](#). It 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 age²³

The University of Aberdeen has published research on the [affordability of secondary school uniform in Scotland](#).²⁴

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
- 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.²⁵

²³ Scottish Government, [Help with school clothing costs](#), July 2021

²⁴ University of Aberdeen, [Affordability of secondary school uniform in Scotland](#), 2020

²⁵ Welsh Government, [Pupil Development Grant – Access](#)

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.²⁶

²⁶ NIDirect, [School uniform and uniform grants](#)

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