

Official Response
to the Call for Evidence

**The School Uniforms
(Guidelines and Allowances) Bill**



About **Community Union**

This is an official response on behalf of members of Community Union

Community is a general Trade Union affiliated to the TUC and GFTU. We provide legal and casework support to our members and regularly engage with them in determining our response to policy proposals.

Community's Education and Early Years sector represent thousands of serving teachers and support staff, headteachers, lecturers, nursery and early years workers, nannies and other education professionals in schools and academies, nurseries and early years settings, colleges, and universities across the whole of the UK.

This evidence was submitted to the Department of Education on behalf of our members and as such represents the views of a wide range of individuals from different backgrounds across England and the UK.

The information shared within this response may be used and quoted as appropriate for the purposes it was gathered, with Community Union acknowledged as the contributor. We would be happy to discuss the comments in this response further, please contact us using the details supplied.

This Official Response will be published on our website following the close of the consultation period.

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Background

In the past 10 years, the cost of school uniforms has seen significant increases. Some reports in England indicate a 25% increase in just five years and an Action for Children report, based on data from the Children's Society shows that a significant part of the cost increase is due to schools' insistence on branded items, such as PE kits with school logos.ⁱ

In 2015 the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) noted that the cost of school uniforms had risen by up to £10 per item due to exclusive supplier contractsⁱⁱ with the cost of uniforms averaging around £96 per pupil and projected to rise by over 50% by 2030.ⁱⁱⁱ And, with parents often needing to buy multiple items for everyday wear, as well as shoes the annual cost runs to almost £340 per year.^{iv}

This upward trend in uniform costs shows no sign of abating and while precise data is difficult to find, reports as detailed above show a consistent upward trend in the average cost of secondary school uniforms since 2015 and are forecast to rise further unless action is taken.

School Uniform

The purpose of a school uniform is to prevent children from being judged by what they wear and in doing so to try to reduce the contrast between the families who can afford expensive brands and those who cannot. In addition, school uniform can engender a sense of belonging, instil professionalism and discipline – literally in its uniformity. Importantly it can also exemplify appropriate attire and support safeguarding whilst also ensuring pupil comfort in ways which fashion trends often do not.

Every child has the right to a high-quality education, and there should be no barriers to that right. School uniform should not be a barrier to education, and Community is pleased to note that this proposed Bill has the potential to ease financial pressures on parents by reducing the financial pressure of uniform.

The cost of branded uniform, particularly items such as PE kits, is frequently raised as a matter of concern.^v Save the Children published research in 2023 that shows that one in three parents has had to borrow money to cover the cost of school uniforms and PE kits. We note that it will remain a matter for each school to decide whether it wishes its pupils to wear a uniform but that schools will be required to regularly review the cost of uniforms and look at the tendering process for suppliers. This measure will improve transparency in the uniform tendering process and ensure that any branded items are affordable.

Affordability means different things to different people, and, without a clear definition, there is a real risk that schools will technically comply whilst still setting expensive uniform requirements. If a school continues to demand multiple branded items, restricts where uniforms can be bought or insists on specific colours that are available only from one supplier, parents will still be left with high costs. Schools

must be able to demonstrate transparently how they have reduced financial pressures on families and not simply state that they have considered affordability before carrying on as usual.

In practice this must surely mean that there is an end to provider exclusivity. Where branded items are required, they must be available from at least two suppliers and schools should be required to permit non-branded alternatives wherever possible to ensure genuine choice for families. For example, this could mean a blazer purchased with a badge available as an accessory, as well as the branded blazer.

Whilst the single most expensive item of uniform is often the blazer, most pupils only require one of these at any one time. Other items such as shirts, trousers, skirts, and PE kit require multiple sets. School uniforms are meant to promote equality, discipline, and school identity but their high costs create barriers for families across all our communities. Items such as shirts, trousers and skirts should not be required to be purchased from exclusive suppliers when perfectly good generic alternatives are available. However, we do note that there are some excellent independent retailers that provide a great value-for-money service and can ensure the availability of items in a way that supermarkets and other providers ultimately cannot.

According to news reports, 94% of parents believe that current uniform prices are unreasonable with the average cost of a uniform, including PE kit, standing at £378 for a post-primary-school child and £173 for a primary-school child.

Perhaps more concerning, the Irish League of Credit Unions (ILCU) found that almost 40% of parents fall into debt just to afford a school uniform, with parents spending £826 per secondary school child and £756 at primary level.^{vi} And this is confirmed by research conducted by LucidTalk on behalf of Save the Children NI.^{vii}

As already noted, this financial burden is growing year-on-year, with the recent increases to the cost of living making things even worse. According to Save the Children NI, some families are having to reduce spending on food to manage the cost of school uniforms.

Research by Loughborough University shows the cost of essential education items including food, uniform, transport, and materials, has increased by 16% for primary-aged children and 30% for secondary pupils over the past two years far outstripping the 12% average increase in earnings.^{viii}

Many parents feel that the authorities are not doing enough^{ix} to manage school uniform costs with 30% of parents borrowing money to afford their child's school uniform or PE kit. This puts further weight to the arguments both to take action on uniform mandating and pricing, but also on the provision of uniform grants to low-income families.

Proposals

The Bill will apply to all grant-aided and independent primary and post-primary schools, with a power to make regulations through the draft affirmative procedure to place a duty on preschool providers, should that prove necessary in the future.

Community believes this is the right approach because it will ensure that all schools are held to a consistent standard in regard to school uniform policy. The proposals in this Bill seek to ensure that no pupil is disadvantaged due to differing uniform expectations or costs that may be imposed due to school insistence on certain special uniform items.

It is important at this stage that flexibility is built into the Bill to reflect the diverse needs of schools, pupils, and parents. School uniform policy varies across Northern Ireland, and it is appropriate to ensure that the Bill is flexible enough to encompass these differences. It is also important for the Bill to have a flexible approach to implementation. There may be a cap on the numbers of branded items and/or the cost of individual items or an entire uniform (clauses 3 and 4), or it could also be a combination of those factors. Whichever route is chosen it must be of benefit to both the school identity and the needs of the local community and pupil population. Indeed, the approach taken may need to evolve over time.

The plan to draft a positive procedure to cover a possible future duty on preschool providers shows foresight and flexibility. However, as with any open-ended proposal, it will be important to ensure that there are safeguards in place to ensure the wording is such to allow the aim to be successfully achieved now whilst also leaving the option open for a subsequent duty to be placed on preschool providers should the need arise, but also ensuring that the power is not also open to misuse at a future time.

While school uniforms can promote a sense of belonging and discipline, the key focus of schools is high-quality learning and ensuring that every child has the opportunity to succeed, regardless of what they wear. Therefore, any legislation concerning school uniforms needs to take practicality and availability as well as affordability, into account.

Any revisions to school uniform policies should be shaped through meaningful consultation with those most affected - parents and pupils. By actively involving the school community, schools can ensure that their decisions reflect the diverse needs and concerns of the users. This could include decisions around shirt colour, discussions around jumpers, sweatshirts and blazers, and practical considerations to ensure suitability for a wide range of subjects and activities.

We have already stated that uniforms should be affordable and accessible to every family, regardless of income. We think this can be best achieved through the introduction of reasonable price caps on uniform or a limit on the number of branded uniform items, and through local collaboration with suppliers and local businesses to offer options to support affordability. This could also encourage schools to adopt flexible uniform policies—for example, allowing parents to buy unbranded, generic items from a range of retailers rather than from exclusive specialist suppliers.

Community notes the almost 7,500 responses to the Department of Education NI consultation, in particular the over 4,000 responses from children and young people showing just how important an issue this is.^x

Over 77% of the 7,500 responses supported making school uniform policy guidance statutory and 88% of respondents were in favour of cost controls. Therefore it is right and proper for The Department to take action over this.

We have also seen action taken by the Government in England and the Senedd in Wales over this issue and when considered together with the public response Community believes that it is clear that cost control measures and statutory guidance are appropriate proposals.

Impact on Educational Outcomes

In addition to the financial considerations of the Bill, there is also a potential academic impact that may arise. The availability of uniform, and the standardised way of dressing has been shown to have a positive impact on the sense of belonging. This can be especially the case for girls, with research from the University of Houston showing a 7% decrease in the absence rate following the introduction of school uniforms.^{xi} Of course, as has already been described, the financial impact of uniforms must be mitigated in order to prevent the uniform itself becoming a barrier to attendance with one in ten parents reporting their child missing school due to uniform issues.^{xii} Therefore, making uniforms more affordable could reduce absenteeism, which strongly correlates to better academic outcomes.

There is also evidence to show that uniforms help to reduce the stigma that can be felt by pupils from more deprived backgrounds and who may otherwise stand out due to their clothing. Standardised, affordable uniforms can improve self-esteem because they “reduce visible signs of lower income and poverty, reducing stigma, embarrassment and poverty related bullying,”^{xiii} which all helps to produce a more positive learning environment. And, by removing stress over uniforms, pupils and families are better able to concentrate on education itself which supports social mobility.

Grants

As already mentioned, affordability means different things to different people, and it is critical that those who need support are able to access it. We know that where families are unable to afford to buy the correct uniform, learners are at risk of being bullied and isolated by their peers, and this can lead to increased absenteeism, disengagement, and demotivation which in turn leads to poorer academic outcomes and risks damaging life chances.

Therefore, Community also agrees with the proposal to extend access to the uniform grant operated by the Education Authority (EA) under the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 to pupils at independent schools as specified in clause

14. This will ensure that all pupils from low-income families can access a uniform grant regardless of where they receive their education.

But the rate of the uniform grant also needs to be reassessed to ensure that it is fit-for-purpose in 2025. When the cost of uniform has risen by an average of 23%, meaning some parents face a bill of hundreds of pounds a grant of £67.20, whilst helpful is not really effective enough to address the issue. Therefore in addition to widening access to uniform grants, Community would also support an increase to the rate so that it better meets the needs of low-income families. Furthermore, it is crucial that any grant also keeps pace with future increases in costs.

Summary

Community believes that action against the spiralling costs of school uniform is necessary and that the proposals are a proportionate response because they aim to reduce the economic burden, but also because of the focus on putting the education of children front and centre of the proposals as exemplified by the consultation responses.

Any final proposals, together with future national changes and local changes to school uniform policies should be developed through consultation with parents, pupils and students to ensure that the policies reflect their needs and concerns.

These proposals are well-aligned with the needs of low-income families and additionally have the potential to enhance educational outcomes by improving attendance, reducing stigma, and fostering inclusion. However, continued oversight, clear affordability standards, and school accountability will be key to achieving these outcomes.

Sources

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