

School Uniform – a high street takeover?

What schools need to know about the DfE guidance which requires school uniforms to be affordable for all.

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The Department for Education (DfE) has issued [guidance](#) following the implementation of a new law ([Education \(guidance about costs of school uniforms\) Act 2021](#)) earlier this year which requires school uniforms to be affordable for all.

The statutory guidance requires schools to ensure that costs of school uniforms are reasonable/affordable and that parents (those with parental responsibility, guardians and/or carers) get best value for money. Schools must have regard to this guidance when developing and implementing their uniform policy. The key takeaway is that parents should not have to think about the costs of uniform when choosing a school and that uniforms should not be a barrier to accessing education.

Uniform provides a sense of identity for children and young people as they form part of their school community, but it is becoming an increasing burden on parents with more and more items becoming branded with school logos and schools increasingly putting in place sole supply contracts, driving up costs – particularly for parents with more than one child at a school. This in turn led, in some cases, to breaches of uniform policy which led to breaches of school rules, disciplinary matters, attendance problems which led to problems with some pupils accessing education.

Pupils should not be excluded from activities for not having the right uniform or kit, children should not be, in effect, priced out of education. The ongoing concerns over uniform costs could be a real risk to the Government's 'levelling-up' agenda, and so this year saw cross party support for the new law after research by The Children's Society showed that many pupils were having to go to school wearing ill-fitting, unclean or incorrect clothing. Further highlighting that childhood poverty/disadvantage is still a key issue and that helping parents save money and ensuring children can access education must continue to be a priority.

Following the release of the new guidance here's what schools need to know:

- They must make sure contracts with uniform suppliers are competitive in order to lower costs (but costs will not be capped), single supplier contracts should be avoided (as before) unless regular tendering competitions are run where more than one supplier can compete for the contract and best value is secured (these should be re-tendered at least every five years).
- The quality and durability of garments is to be considered when choosing suppliers or styles, alongside the cost.
- The cost of a uniform should not become a barrier to parents when considering where pupils go to school.
- Schools should consider high street alternatives and remove unnecessary branded items (do you really need branded socks?) within the uniform policy. This approach should also apply to extracurricular kit.
- Encourage the use of second-hand uniform – use swap-shops or uniform sales at school. Information about second-hand uniforms should be made available to parents on the school's website.
- Ensure the uniform policy is published on the school's website and is clear and easily accessible for parents (especially new parents).

All schools will need to have taken clear steps to comply with the Guidance in time for parents to purchase new uniforms in time for the new academic year (September 2022). However, those schools that need to secure new contracts with a uniform supplier by setting up a competitive tender or where this would breach a pre-existing contract, have been given until December 2022 to get plans for changes and contracts in places. All schools and trusts are expected to be fully compliant by summer 2023 (save for those with contracts which need to run their course).

What to think about in your school uniform policy:

- Avoid frequent changes – allow adequate transition periods, so that old uniform can be worn until it requires replacement etc or consider only making new uniforms applicable to a new intake.
- Overall costs – think about the impact of multiple items, spare items and how soon items will be outgrown (especially any branded items).
- Variations – do you have house colours, differences in year groups – how does that impact costs?
- Different groups – how are they represented at school? And have you considered the impact of uniform on those with protected characteristics?
- Extra-curricular – sports/drama/music – do they need any extra items? Would it prevent pupils taking part if so?

It is time to look at your uniform policy and requirements in detail. Do you have unnecessary branded items which could be removed? Do you need to be clearer about second-hand uniforms? Schools should engage with parents and pupils when they are developing or updating their school uniform policy. It is a good time to really hear what your community think.

Developing your school uniform policy requires consideration of several factors such as practicality, obligations under the Equality Act, safeguarding, health and safety as well as costs. However, schools will need to demonstrate how best value is achieved when developing or changing their uniform policy. It is not enough just to consider everyday wear, but all the costs of clothing needed while a child is at school – how will additional kit for sports or other activities factor into these costs? No pupil should be discouraged from participating in any aspect of school life because of the cost of additional uniform requirements.

The new guidance should help schools fully understand their duties around school uniform and put in place fair policies which mean uniform is accessible to all. There is a useful level of detail on engaging with suppliers and this will help in uniform supply negotiations to ensure schools are getting best value for money, but also ensure fairness for pupils hopefully leading to a better school uniform experience for all.

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