

Statutory School Uniform Guidance Consultation;  
Poverty Alliance Consultation Response  
September 2022

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October 2022

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## About us

The Poverty Alliance is Scotland's anti-poverty network. We work together with Scottish organisations and individuals to research and tackle the issue of poverty. We aim to rebalance the distribution of power and resources to challenge poverty in Scotland. We work with our members which include grassroots community groups, activists with experience of poverty, academics, large national NGOs, voluntary organisations, statutory organisations, trade unions, and faith groups.

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The Poverty Alliance is recognised as a charity by the Inland Revenue. Reference No: SCO19926

## Disclaimer

The views in this report are those of the researchers and opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the Poverty Alliance or our members.

## Acknowledgements:

We would like to thank our members [Fuse Youth Café](#) for their support with this work. For further correspondence relating to this study please email Research and Information Manager at the Poverty Alliance [fiona.mchardy@povertyalliance.org](mailto:fiona.mchardy@povertyalliance.org)

## **About the Poverty Alliance**

The Poverty Alliance is Scotland's anti-poverty network with more than 350 members across Scotland. Together we influence policy and practice, support communities to challenge poverty, build public support for the solutions to tackle poverty and provide evidence through research. Our members include grassroots community groups, people who are experiencing poverty, academics, voluntary organisations, statutory organisations, trade unions, and faith groups

### **Introduction**

We welcome the opportunity to respond to this consultation at Poverty Alliance. As part of our response, we have undertaken consultation work to understand and contextualise the experiences of young people on the issue of school uniforms. This underpins this submission and reflects our position in seeking to involve active participation of communities to share their voice.

This response seeks to understand the role that school uniforms have in everyday life, how costs can be reduced and the principles which should be included in the national school uniform policy. We are concerned about the impact of rising costs for essential items such as school uniforms as part of the approach to tackling child poverty.

### **What we did**

This research was driven and conducted as part of a summer internship program funded by the Robertson Trust. Initially a desk-based literature review was undertaken exploring themes such as clothing costs, parental experiences, current context around child poverty and other related issues.

The literature review focused on current UK research surrounding the costs of school uniform this including pertinent studies such as the 'The Cost of the School Day' by the Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland<sup>1</sup>. Following this initial literature review, and identification of themes, a focus group was arranged and held with six young people aged 11-18 about school uniform provision in Scotland. Young people were pre-selected by practitioners in the community setting and this allowed the discussion to capture wide range of views and perspectives across different age groups and school contexts.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://cpag.org.uk/cost-of-the-school-day>



## Responses to consultation questions:

### Question 1 - what matters related to school uniform would you wish to be included within the guidance? Why?

We are glad to see that the guidance considers the affordability of uniform given the impact of these costs on families living on low incomes throughout Scotland. The cost for essentials required to participate fully in society, such as school uniform, is highlighted as a struggle for those living on low incomes. Being unable to afford key costs not only creates additional stress but can lead to isolation and withdrawal from activities such as work, education, and socialisation. In the context of this current cost of living crisis, we know these pressures are being compounded for people living on low incomes. Recent research published by the Poverty Alliance and Scottish Women's Budget Group showed that women who are mothers are facing a notable tightening on their budgets with costs like school uniforms causing significant stress. One mother with a larger family (3+ children) stated in this research:

***“Clothing is expensive because kids are growing regularly so I’m just struggling now to get stuff for my kids, especially shoes, because half of the money all go on food”<sup>2</sup>***

This quote conveys the difficult choices families are having to make. Without action from local authorities and the Scottish Government, families will continue to be forced to choose between paying for food, heat, or uniforms; this is simply unjust. We therefore welcome this consultation and the inclusion of affordability of uniform within the guidance.

However, we believe that other matters should be included in the guidance. Namely, whether the guidance works towards achieving the child poverty targets set by the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017, and whether the guidance tackles poverty related stigma.

From our consultative research and from other issues that have been highlighted to us from our membership, recognising differing definitions of *affordability* for families in a diverse range of circumstances is critical. This was highlighted in research by the Poverty Alliance and the Scottish Women's Budget Group that focused on women's experiences of the cost-of-living crisis. One mother who has a child with a suspected disability (autism) described the acute difficulties she faces regarding school uniforms:

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<sup>2</sup> *“I don't live, I survive”* Women's experience of the cost-of-living crisis, Research Briefing. The Poverty Alliance & Scottish Women's Budget Group. 2022.



***“...he will wear his shoes until they’re dropping off his feet and there’s nothing we can do about that. We’ve tried to replace footwear for him and he just refuses to wear it. Eventually you can get him to wear it to school, but he’ll continue to wear the ones that are dropping off his feet while he’s playing out ...***

This experience shows why it is important that the guidance must not only cover affordability in a general sense but consider competing and complex needs for households such as those with a disabled child.

More broadly, guidance should also recognise hidden barriers which impact a household’s ability to access school uniform such as digital exclusion, transport and poverty related stigma. The issues of digital exclusion and transport are particularly relevant for pupils in rural areas and those who attend schools who make the decision to use exclusive suppliers of uniform. Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) highlighted in their Cost of the School Day research in Dundee that some schools require uniforms to be bought from online suppliers who offer good quality uniforms at competitive prices.<sup>3</sup> However, families without access to the internet or debit or credit cards may not be able to access them. In the same thread, if a school chose to rely on a specific supplier who has a physical retailer, this may cause issues for families where transport costs are an issue, particularly those living in rural areas. We know from research we conducted with Transport Scotland that the high cost of transport can prevent people from being able to access essential services.<sup>4</sup> This again reinforces the need for guidance to consider the implications of the guidance on wider policy strategies such as tackling poverty and within the wider context of our economy and how different structures work together.

Considering this, guidance must particularly explore the active participation of groups who may face additional challenges. This could include for example those in the asylum seeking or refugee populations, those who are care experienced, have long term health conditions, and gypsy traveller populations to ensure that this guidance assists in achieving positive outcomes for children and young people from these groups. In addition, guidance needs to recognise core transitions and challenges families may face throughout the school year. For example, changing schools during term time (particularly given recent data that shows an increase in the number of children living in temporary accommodation<sup>5</sup> who may therefore have to move out with catchment areas), seasonal pressures in income and specific needs of children

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<sup>3</sup> <https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/Cost%20of%20the%20School%20Day%20Dundee%20-%20Full%20Report.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.povertyalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Transport-and-Child-Poverty-Beyond-the-Pandemic.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Homelessness in Scotland: 2021/22, Scottish Government.



and young people, such as growth spurts, which cannot be predicted or accounted for easily in household budgets. One mother highlighted the on-going maintenance costs for uniforms as a particular issue:

***“it’s crazy ...the term one and term two, I went through nearly two or three pairs of school shoes, which is a cost of, what forty, fifty quid, because you feel you have to kind of give them ones that, you know, that they’ll fit in, which just then adds a pressure as well because you’re constantly having to offset money for that.”***

These experiences demonstrate why affordability of uniform must not be siloed to the beginning of term or school year. Unexpected costs such as having to buy a new jacket, school bag, etc, can be the reason a parent may have to go without certain essential items themselves.

The above quote also highlighted the issue of poverty related stigma. In the forthcoming report by the Cross-Party Group on Poverty, evidence showed that parents in households experiencing poverty may go without essential needs to provide for their children. Relatedly, parents may overspend on certain items (clothing, gifts) to conceal the struggle they are facing.<sup>6</sup> There was also evidence that showed that some children have an acute awareness when the costs of items will cause stress for their families and therefore hold back from asking for new items, this was further highlighted during our consultation with young people who demonstrated that they have a strong awareness of the cost for families for uniforms.<sup>7</sup> It is therefore imperative that guidance on school uniform aims to be as inclusive and flexible as possible, along with being affordable, to ensure that families who are experiencing poverty do not feel pressure to buy above and beyond their means to help their child fit in. This links into wider work around the need to tackle poverty related stigma which is however beyond the scope of this constellation.

In terms of recognising the barriers that low-income households face, guidance needs to focus around upholding the human right to education. Within this it must ensure a dignified approach to ensuring access to school uniform for all those who require it, alongside the removal of other barriers that may impact on the fulfilment of that right.

It must also consider the role that uniform plays in harnessing a sense of belonging and community. If a child’s family cannot afford the correct uniform, then we know that this leads to isolation, withdrawal and poor attainment. This goes further than

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<sup>6</sup> An enquiry into the role of stigma in exacerbating poverty levels in Scotland by the Cross Party Group on Poverty in the Scottish Parliament. (Unpublished - forthcoming)

<sup>7</sup> Consultative focus group work carried out by Gemma McKenzie on behalf of Poverty Alliance



simply considering the cost; however, this is a large part of the issue, and stems into notions of being able to access school in the first place.

### **Question 2 – what role does school uniform have in the ethos and culture of schools?**

We believe school uniform should allow for children to feel included in the school community. During our focus group with young people there was a general agreement in the room that school uniform was important to a sense of identity within the school. Uniform plays a crucial role in identifying the pupils during lunch breaks and is an important aspect of keeping children safe on school trips.

School uniform allows for pupils to dress like their peers to avoid experiences of bullying or peer pressure on what they choose to wear. During the Poverty Alliance focus group, young people stated that they did not think there was pressure to keep up with their peers and choose items of uniform because they liked it, rather than to keep up with trends. It was clear schools made them aware of the issues of bullying and peer pressure and therefore pupils were aware of the increased potential for experiences of bullying and peer pressure if school uniform policies were ended.

### **Question 3 – Following on from Question 2, are there any particular items of school uniform which are central to that? If so, why?**

Young people in our focus group told us that ties and blazers were an important part of uniform which were expected to be worn along with white shirt, black skirt or trousers and black shoes. The school logo on jumpers, blazers or ties was mentioned as an important part of school uniform as it helps the school recognise their pupils. It also identifies which year group pupils are in by having different blazers and ties. Despite this buying ties for different ages within a school setting was seen as unnecessary. Furthermore, personalisation such as through braiding on blazers to indicate prefect status also meant that blazers and similar items could not be handed down and posed hidden costs.

We found that children are more likely to be engaged in learning when they feel comfortable. Speaking to the young people in the focus group it was clear items of uniform often got lost and worn and had to be replaced throughout the school year. Therefore, it is important to consider the pressures parents are facing with the upkeep of uniform and how it is affecting their children's education.

Another matter which needs to be considered is the growth of children. Children tend to grow out of clothes quickly which is not considered when restricting clothing grants to an annual one-off payment. Parents may need to buy multiple sizes throughout the school year to accommodate a child's needs. Evidence of this was demonstrated



in the quote regarding one mother's experience of having to buy multiple pairs of shoes in question 1. Similarly, for older children the transition of going from a children's sizing to adults is a significant increase in cost which many parents cannot afford.

**Question 4 – What can schools do within their policies to support the aim of reducing costs of school uniform?** [please give specific examples of approaches which could be considered or have been tried]

The most effective way to ensure that school uniforms are affordable is to make policies as flexible and accessible as possible. This could be policies such as allowing smart trainers and black jeans as part of the uniform as these clothes can be worn outside of school, not using exclusive suppliers, and not requiring embroidery on jumpers and blazers.

From our consultation work with young people, they voiced their desire for greater promotion of support available for families struggling with uniform costs. Schools should ensure parents and caregivers are aware of the clothing grant which is available and give out information of how and when to apply. This could be in the form of pages on school hubs, letters home at the beginning of terms and advertised on school notice boards for events like parents evening.

When deciding on the amounts to give for the clothing grant it would be beneficial to talk to parents/carers of young people to find out how much is appropriate to cover the costs of the uniforms. The current uniform grant is £120 for primary school children and £150 for secondary school children<sup>8</sup>. Funding could be made available from Pupil Equity Funds to allow for additional uniforms to be bought for families struggling with costs.

To reduce costs, guidance should encourage schools to ensure that uniforms are available to buy from supermarkets and high street shops instead of individual suppliers. Having the option of iron-on badges to cheaper jumpers and blazers would reduce costs of getting them made from a supplier and make them more accessible to struggling families. From our focus group we found that the young people bought most of their uniform from high street shops but items such as blazers, ties and pe tops were to be ordered through the school. Pupils were expected to wear different blazers for different year groups which creates greater and unnecessary expense. One young person said throughout high school they will have to purchase three different ties and two blazers which adds to the costs of the essential uniform. When asking how much these items cost, one participant said the ties were around £6 and

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<sup>8</sup> Help with school clothing costs, Scottish Government, 2022





the blazers around £35. When adding up the multiple ties and blazers which had to be bought through the school years this was expensive on top of other school essentials.

Child Poverty Action Group's Cost of the School Day research based in Dundee noted that if schools do choose to use a supplier - and this supplier is only available online - then provisions should be put in place by the school to support families to make purchases online for example at parent's evenings.<sup>9</sup>

Second hand uniform pop-up shops were another common method to make uniforms more accessible and affordable and are already active in some schools in Scotland. There are often feelings of shame associated with using donated or charitable sources, as highlighted in work Poverty Alliance have conducted on foodbank use for example.<sup>10</sup> Whilst these sources of support can be helpful for families experiencing a cash crisis, they are not a long-term solution to the question of how to access a school uniform.

Two of the younger participants mentioned that the school provided them with a starter pack when they entered S1 which gave them essentials such as a calculator, a water bottle, a PE bag and a pe top. This is an effective way to make sure all young people are equal on this equipment when starting school and should be considered in other schools in Scotland.

**Question 5 - Do you feel these draft principles are appropriate and, if you would change any of them, please set out what your alternative wording would be.**

**Draft principles which are intended to be incorporated as part of national school uniform policy.**

### **Principles**

That national school uniform policy should:

- Be informed by the views of children and young people
- Apply to education authority, grant-aided and independent schools
- Seek to reduce the cost of school uniform for families Supports equity in relation to school uniform
- Promotes equality, including recognising specific matters relating to religion and belief, disability, sex and gender

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<sup>9</sup> The Cost of the School Day Dundee, Child Poverty Action Group

<sup>10</sup> Response to Scottish Government consultation on ending the need for foodbanks, Poverty Alliance



- Applies to all uniform uses, including PE and senior phase
- Recognises the need for practicality, including in relation to seasonal needs
- Reflects sustainable approaches to school uniform
- Continues the position of no legal requirement upon pupils to wear school uniform
- Considers appropriate response for persistent non-wearing of uniform, recognising ethos and culture of promoting attendance and reducing absence
- Recognises and builds upon current good practice within schools
- Does not introduce unnecessary barriers to school uniform policy and practices.

We welcome the draft principles but would ask that these wider implications of these principles are considered taking account of the guidance on child poverty targets, the issues of digital exclusion and transport, and the role of poverty related stigma.