



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Research and Information Service Briefing Paper

Paper 48/13

04 January 2013

NIAR 862-12

Laura McCourt

School Uniform Policy in Scotland, England, Wales and the Republic of Ireland

1 Introduction

This briefing paper provides an overview of school uniform policy in Scotland, England, Wales and the Republic of Ireland, including background information on school uniform policy in Northern Ireland.

2 Executive Summary

- There is no legislation to govern school uniform in any of the jurisdictions considered.
- School uniform policy is determined by individual schools in Northern Ireland, England, Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland.
- An Office of Fair Trading (OFT) report 2012 found that 74% of state schools continue to place restrictions on where school uniforms can be bought, placing low income families at a disadvantage.
- According to OFT, if schools reduce restrictions on the purchase of school uniform and introduce more competition, this will result in savings for parents.
- There are different schemes in place in Northern Ireland, England, Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland to aid the purchase of school uniforms for low income families experiencing financial hardship.
- There is no maximum set cost for school uniforms in Northern Ireland, England, Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland.
- Enforcement of school uniform policy in each of the jurisdictions is for individual schools to determine.

3 Northern Ireland Context

The wearing of a school uniform is not governed by legislation but is determined by individual schools in Northern Ireland, in line with arrangements in Scotland, England, Wales and the Republic of Ireland. The day-to-day management of schools, including school uniform policy, is a matter for school Principals, subject to any directions that might be given by the Board of Governors.¹

Guidance

The Department of Education in Northern Ireland has published guidance for school uniform. This guidance recommends 'schools should ensure that their school uniform policy is fair and reasonable, in practical and financial terms, and should have regard to other duties under relevant equality and other legislation'. The guidance notes 'around 20% of the school population in Northern Ireland is entitled to free school meals. The Department therefore expects Boards of Governors to give a high priority to cost considerations when designing their school uniforms'.²

Enforcement

Guidance published by the Department of Education Northern Ireland suggests school uniform policy should be linked to other relevant school policy such as discipline policy. The guidance recommends that:

- Where a pupil is not adhering to the school uniform policy, a school should make discreet enquiries as to why this is the case as there may be a number of valid reasons for it. For instance, the uniform may have been lost, stolen or damaged. In such circumstances it may not be appropriate for schools to send a child home.
- Where financial circumstances are preventing pupils from wearing the correct uniform, schools should be sensitive to the situation and allow parents sufficient time to purchase the required items. If eligible, they could assist them with an application for grant under the Clothing Allowance Scheme.³

Cost

In Northern Ireland there is a Clothing Allowance Scheme available from the Education and Library Boards to low income families to help with the buying of school uniform. The eligibility criteria for the Clothing Allowance Scheme are similar to criteria used in free school meals (Table 1). A full School Uniform Allowance consists of an allowance towards School Uniform and an allowance towards Physical Education Clothing (Table 2). In Northern Ireland there is no upper limit on the number of children per family that are entitled to the Clothing Allowance Scheme if eligible.

¹ DE, *School Uniform*, <http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/support-and-development-2/school_uniform.htm>

² DE, *School Uniform Guidance 2012*, <[school uniform guidance 2012 ni assembly.pdf](#)>

³ Ibid

Table 1: Eligibility criteria for the Clothing Allowance Scheme⁴

Eligibility Criteria
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the parent/guardian is in receipt of Income Support, Income-Based Jobseeker's Allowance, Income-Related Employment and Support Allowance, or if a pupil claims Income Support in their own name; or, • the parents receive the Child Tax Credit; and are ineligible for the Working Tax Credit; and have an annual taxable income of £16,190 or less; or, • the parents receive Working Tax Credit; and have an annual taxable income of £16,190 or less and whose child/children are born on or after 2 July 2001 and is in full-time attendance at primary school or special school; or, • he/she is the child of an asylum seeker supported by the Home Office National Asylum Support Service (NASS) • the parent receives the Guarantee element of State Pension Credit

Table 2: Level of assistance available to low income families who qualify for the Clothing Allowance Scheme⁵

Phase	Assistance (per child per school year)
Primary school	£35.75
Post-primary/special school under 15	£51
Post-primary/special school over 15	£56
Post-primary/special school PE	£22

4 Report on the supply of school uniforms

The Office of Fair Trading report on the supply of school uniforms in UK state schools published in August 2012 found that 74% of state schools continue to place restrictions on where uniforms can be bought. As a consequence parents who are not able to shop around for uniform items are paying as much as £5 to £10 too much for these items.

⁴ Education Support for Northern Ireland, *School Uniform Allowance*, <<http://www.education-support.org.uk/parents/meals-and-uniforms/school-uniform-allowances/>>

⁵ NI Direct, *School Uniform Grant*, <<http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/school-uniform-grant>>

OFT noted that these figures were higher than anticipated, given guidance on uniform policy from the Department for Education and other educational authorities and the OFT's 2006 report. OFT estimate that 'for every £1 difference in price per item the total detriment to parents of school age children is £4.9 million each year for primary school children and £5.5 million for secondary school children'.⁶

Research carried out by OFT in producing this report consisted of two strands:

- An online survey distributed to all state secondary schools and roughly one-fifth of state primary schools in the UK.
- A mystery shopping exercise designed to (i) verify the price of uniform items subject to restrictive arrangements and (ii) determine a range of prices of generic uniform items available from school uniform retailers, department stores, variety stores and supermarkets.⁷

5 Scotland

In Scotland school uniform policy is not governed by legislation but falls to schools and the Local Authority Education Departments to determine. The Discipline Task Group set up by the Scottish Executive 'Better Behaviour-better Learning' report published in 2011 recommends that 'schools should consult with pupils, teachers, parents/carers in order to agree a dress code for children and young people. Local authorities should support schools in the implementation of their agreed dress code'.⁸

Cost

Most local authority education departments provide help with the cost of school clothing to families on low incomes. Policies vary between authorities.⁹

Enforcement

There is no reference to enforcement in the guidance.

6 England

The Department for Education offers non-statutory guidance on school uniforms as there is no legislation specifically aimed at dealing with school uniform. The department strongly encourages individual schools to have a uniform and a strong position on acceptable appearance as set forth by the guidance. The guidance suggests that the governing body of a school should be able to 'demonstrate how best value has been achieved and keep the cost of supplying the uniform under review'.

⁶ Office of Fair Trading, *Supply of School Uniforms*, <[OFT1436.pdf](#)> p.5

⁷ Ibid p.12

⁸ Report of the Discipline Task Group, 2001, <[Betterbehaviourbetterlearning2001.pdf](#)> p.30

⁹ Education Scotland, *Parent Zone*, <<http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/parentzone/yourchildatschool/attendingaschool/financialassistance/index.asp>>

The guidance also highlights the need for schools to:

- Consult widely on proposed school uniform policy and changes
- Consider cost and availability
- Outline uniform and acceptable appearance policy clearly¹⁰

The School Admissions Code 2012 states ‘admission authorities must ensure that their arrangements will not disadvantage unfairly, either directly or indirectly, a child from a particular social or racial group, or a child with a disability or special educational needs, and that other policies around school uniform or school trips do not discourage parents from applying for a place for their child’.¹¹

Enforcement

Guidance published by the Department for Education suggests ‘it is for the governing body of a school to decide whether there should be a school uniform and other rules relating to appearance’. The guidance notes ‘rules on wearing school uniform may be included in the home school agreement’.¹²

Cost

In England discretionary grants are provided by some local authorities (LAs) to help finance the purchase of school uniforms. LAs that offer these grants set their own criteria for eligibility. As outlined by the Department for Education schools can help limit the expense of uniforms by choosing a colour scheme rather than a full uniform.¹³

7 Wales

The Welsh Government has issued guidance on school uniform policy. This guidance suggests that school uniform and appearance requirements should be included in the school prospectus and made available on the school’s website. This would enable parents to be clear on the school’s uniform and appearance policy before electing to send their child to the school.

The guidance also states that it is the duty of the Principal to enforce school uniform rules. Where school uniform policy is in place the Principal of a school should decide what action to take when pupils infringe the rules. However the guidance is careful to note that if children are not complying with school uniform regulations as a result of financial difficulty then extra time should be allocated for the purchase of essential

¹⁰ Department for Education, *School Uniform Guidance 2012*, <[school uniform guidance 2012.pdf](#)>

¹¹ Department for Education, *The School Admissions Code 2012*, <<https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/DFE-00013-2012.pdf>>

¹² Department for Education, *School Uniform Guidance 2012*, <[school uniform guidance 2012.pdf](#)>

¹³ Department for Education, *Is there any financial help available for parents to buy school uniforms?*, <<http://education.gov.uk/popularquestions/schools/uniform/a005640/is-there-any-financial-help-available-for-parents-to-buy-school-uniforms>>

school uniform items. Under this guidance Principles may ask a pupil to go home and change their clothes without formally excluding them.¹⁴

Enforcement

Guidance published by the Welsh Government states 'where the governing body has put in place a school uniform policy and/or rules about appearance, it is for the head teacher to enforce these as part of his or her overall responsibility for the day-to-day running of the school and for maintaining discipline'. The guidance notes 'head teachers can discipline pupils for breach of the schools uniform/appearance policy'.¹⁵ In Wales head teachers may ask pupils to go home to change their clothes without formally excluding them.

Cost

In March 2012 the Minister for Children, Education and Lifelong Learning approved that the Welsh Government School Uniform Grant Scheme in 2012-13 will remain £105 per eligible pupil and the amount of grant awarded to local authorities for administration will be in line with what was awarded in 2011-12 (£73,535). The grant is available to Year 7 pupils (including those in special schools, special needs resource bases and pupil referral units who are aged 11 at the start of the school year) who are entitled to free school meals (FSM).¹⁶

Local education authorities in Wales harbour discretionary powers to make payments to cover the cost of school clothing where they are satisfied that payment is needed to relieve financial hardship. According to the guidance, at present these payments are available only to secondary school pupils. The amounts and frequency of local authorities grant payments vary. Some authorities offer annual school uniform grants whereas other local authorities offer grants for specific school years only. Local authorities also operate a range of methods for grant payments. Some authorities issue cheques to the parents of eligible pupils, some pay by BACs transfer into a bank account and others issue vouchers which can be redeemed at participating stores. Some schools also supply the uniform directly to eligible pupils and use the grant to cover the cost.¹⁷

Parents receiving income support, income based job seekers allowance, income related employment and support allowance, pension credit or payment on account of one of these benefits or entitlements for at least 26 weeks may be able to apply for a social fund budgeting loan under the category of clothing and footwear from Jobcentre

¹⁴ Welsh Government, 2011, *Guidance for Governing Bodies on School Uniform and Appearance Policies*, <[110803schooluniformenwales.pdf](#)>

¹⁵ Ibid p.12

¹⁶ Welsh Government, *Welsh Assembly Government School Uniform Grant Scheme*, <<http://wales.gov.uk/publications/accessinfo/drnewhomepage/dr2012/janmar/addysg/5857061/?lang=en>>

¹⁷ Ibid

Plus. Assistance may be available from local charities. Help may also be attainable from governing bodies or parents' associations of schools.¹⁸

8 Republic of Ireland

The 1998 Education Act provides that the Board of Management is the body charged with the direct governance of a school. The Board manages the school on behalf of the patron and for the benefit of the students and their parents. In the Republic of Ireland many schools require their pupils to wear a uniform as part of the school code or admissions policy.

The Board of Management is responsible for the drawing up of school policy in relation to the wearing of school uniform. According to the Department of Education and Skills the formulation of school uniform policy should allow for prior consultation with teachers, parents and pupils where appropriate. Equally, such policies should also allow for feedback from parents and for any concerns about issues such as cost.¹⁹

In 2008 the Minister for Education and Skills and the Minister for Integration Policy jointly agreed recommendations on school uniform policy, including:²⁰

1. The current system, whereby schools decide their uniform policy at a local level, is reasonable, works and should be maintained.
2. Schools, when drawing up uniform policy, should consult widely in the school community.

Enforcement

There is no reference to enforcement in the guidance.

Cost

There is a Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance available to help meet the cost of uniforms and footwear for children going to school.

The Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance (BTSCFA) is set to reduce by €50 per child in 2013. This means that the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance will reduce from €250 to €200 for children aged 12-17 (or aged 18-22 and in full-time education) and from €150 to €100 for children aged 4-11 (Table 4 and Table 5). In 2012 the Department of Social Protection will pay BTSCFA automatically to a large number of qualified people. This means that many families do not have to apply for the payment.²¹ In the Republic there is no upper limit on the number of children per

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Direct correspondence with the Department of Education and Skills [21st November 2012]

²⁰ Department of Education and Skills, 23 September 2008, *Ministers agree recommendations on school uniform policy*, [Press Release], Available at: <<http://www.education.ie/en/Press-Events/Press-Releases/2008-Press-Releases/PR08-09-23A.html>>

²¹ Citizens Information, *Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance*, <http://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/social_welfare/social_welfare_payments/social_welfare_payments_to_families_and_children/back_to_school_clothing_and_footwear_allowance.html>

family that are entitled to the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance if eligible (Table 3).

Table 3: Eligibility criteria for Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance

Eligibility Criteria ²²
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If the parent/guardian is receiving a social welfare payment (including Family Income Supplement) or a Health Service Executive payment; or, • taking part in an approved employment scheme (back to work scheme) including JobBridge and Tús; or, • taking part in a recognised education or training course; or, • involved in an Area Partnership Scheme; or, • attending a FÁS, Fáilte Ireland or LES training scheme

Table 4: Level of assistance available to low income families who qualify for the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance until 2013 ²³

Age	Assistance (per child per school year)
18-22 (in full-time education)	€250
12-17	€250
4-11	€150

²² Ibid

²³ Department for Social Protection, *Back to School Clothing and Footwear Scheme*, <http://www.welfare.ie/EN/OperationalGuidelines/Pages/swa_bts.aspx#annex>

Table 5: Level of assistance available to low income families who qualify for the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance as of 2013²⁴

Age	Assistance (per child per school year)
18-22 (in full-time education)	€200
12-17	€200
4-11	€100

²⁴ Ibid