

**From the Permanent Secretary
Mark Browne**



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**ALL MEMBERS OF BOARDS OF GOVERNORS OF GRANT-AIDED SCHOOLS
PRINCIPALS OF GRANT-AIDED SCHOOLS**

Dear Principal/ Member of Board of Governors

SCHOOL UNIFORM POLICY AND FORTHCOMING LEGISLATION

My letter of 8 May 2024 (and my previous letter of 13 June 2023) stressed the importance of keeping costs of school uniforms to a minimum and advised schools to follow the current guidance on school uniforms. I am very much aware that many schools have sought to keep the costs of their uniforms as low as possible, have followed the guidance and continue to seek innovative ways of supporting parents when it comes to buying uniforms. To ensure that all schools follow this guidance there is a need to bring forward legislation in this area. As a result, you will be aware the Minister of Education, Paul Givan MLA, launched a consultation on school uniform policy on 20 June 2024 which will run until 27 September 2024. The consultation can be accessed via: [School Uniform Policy Consultation | Department of Education \(education-ni.gov.uk\)](https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/school-uniform-policy-consultation) and I would encourage anyone who has yet to complete it to do so. Your views and perspectives are especially relevant and I thank those who have completed the consultation survey to date.

The purpose of this letter is to ensure that you are fully aware of the anticipated strengthening of requirements in relation to how schools determine the uniform items they require their pupils to wear. Currently, as you know, it is a matter for the Boards of Governors in schools to determine if they wish to set uniform requirements for their pupils and there is no intention to change this. What is intended to change is the status of the Departmental [guidance about school uniform requirements](#).

Forthcoming legal requirement

Once the consultation closes, the Minister will bring forward primary legislation to the Executive and the Assembly. This is intended to make the guidance statutory i.e. schools **must** follow it or be in breach of a statutory duty which leaves them open to challenge through judicial proceedings.

To assist schools with this, I am issuing this letter to provide as much notice as possible about what we consider the main impact will be for Boards of Governors. This is all predicated on the passage of the legislation along the lines supported by the consultation responses to date. Whilst legislation can change as it goes through the Assembly process, I would emphasise the importance of acting now to ensure that, once legislation is made, you are in a position to implement it fully and as quickly as possible, for the benefit of your parents and pupils. We anticipate that the legislation will come into operation before the end of June 2025. The majority of the changes are putting the current non-statutory guidance on a statutory basis and therefore should be familiar to you.

The Department recognises that school uniforms play an important part in the engagement of pupils with their school, promoting a sense of identity, pride and unity and supporting the ethos of the school. They can also ensure pupils from all backgrounds feel welcome, protecting children from social pressures to dress in a particular way and promoting good relations between different groups of pupils. In addition, school uniforms support the safe-guarding policy of a school, making it easier to identify any individuals who should not be on the premises.

The Department is also aware of increasing and ongoing concerns raised by parents about the costs associated with uniform requirements and it is important that schools carefully consider again the rationale for such requirements. Schools should review their uniform requirements taking into account comfort and flexibility for pupils and sustainability for families and the broader environment, within the context of affordability for all parents.

Key and immediate action for schools

It will be a requirement of the incoming statutory guidance that schools review their uniform policy in consultation with their parents and pupils. **I urge you to begin this process now.** Doing so will not only ensure that you are compliant with new legislative requirements but will also benefit your parents and pupils, supporting positive relations with your school.

The Department's intention is that it remains a matter for the Board of Governors of each school to determine whether they require their pupils to wear a uniform and, if so, to have a published uniform policy.

It is anticipated that the requirements for any school uniform policy will include that it:

- is developed in consultation with parents and pupils – all must have an opportunity to feed in their views and schools should actively seek to encourage and facilitate input from all parents, including those who may not traditionally

respond to communications from school. Schools will need to provide information in their published policy about how this consultation was conducted, with whom, its findings and the impact on final uniform requirements.

- sets out the rationale for having a uniform and for the items selected as part of the uniform requirements. This will include how the uniform meets the requirements of comfort, flexibility and safety. Underpinning principles will be that uniforms should be affordable, comfortable and sustainable.
- sets out how costs of each item - and overall - have been taken into consideration in developing the uniform requirements.
- sets out the actual cost – or a range of costs – for each uniform item.
- sets out where each uniform item can be bought; this should provide the widest range of options possible to support competitive pricing.
- explains why any unusual colours are part of the uniform; schools will also need to be careful to ensure any variation in shades of colours from the widest range of suppliers is not an issue.
- demonstrates that there is no significant cost differential between girls' and boys' uniforms.
- explains why a school has a single – or limited – supplier arrangement in place or seeks to introduce one. Schools will also need to set out the cost in comparison to using a wider range of suppliers e.g. economies of scale may mean an agreement has been negotiated with one supplier which makes the uniform item cost less than if more suppliers were selling the uniform item. Single or limited supplier arrangements should not be entered into if they bring no direct cost benefit for parents. It is anticipated that schools will be expected to run a tendering process for any future exclusive agreement and this will need to be run at least once in every five years.
- sets out any financial or in-kind benefits from suppliers or manufacturers which the school is receiving.
- addresses the use of re-usable crests e.g. iron on, making these a normal option to reduce costs.
- explains why any requirement for PE/ games kit over a generic kit requirement is in place. This should be specifically commented on in relation to consultation with parents and pupils also. Where branded PE kit is required, a clear explanation of why this is necessary should be provided by the school alongside the costs.
- sets out any arrangements a school has in place, or is putting in place, to either only require branded PE/ games kit and/or to lend such kit e.g. where this is required for pupil participation in individual or team events representing the school and a pupil is selected for such participation.
- sets out how a school will operate a uniform bank.

- must be available to the Education and Training Inspectorate and the Department at any time.

Much of this is covered in the existing non-statutory guidance so many of you will already be familiar with and operate such good practice. Steps such as documenting the proactive consultation with parents and pupils to develop school uniform requirements and the publication of the rationale for, and costs of, uniform requirements are new.

The Department does not expect schools to extend existing or enter into new single or limited supplier arrangements – including in relation to PE/games kit - in advance of legislation coming into operation, without a clear rationale that sets out how it brings a direct cost benefit to parents. Schools should bear in mind that they will be required to publish all such arrangements once the legislation comes into operation.

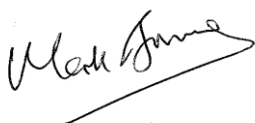
I would strongly encourage that you now:

- begin the process of planning and undertaking the consultation with parents and pupils;
- consider, review and articulate clearly the rationale for your school's uniform requirements; and
- set out the costs associated with each item of your school's uniform requirements in preparation for publication once the guidance becomes statutory.

These steps will support you in meeting the expected key requirements of the forthcoming legislation which we anticipate will come into operation before the end of June 2025. While there may be a short transition period, it is expected that all schools will implement the new statutory guidance from the earliest possible date following enactment of the legislation. Further guidance will issue at that time.

I would also like to take this opportunity as we start the 2024/25 school year to thank you for all the time and effort you continue to commit to your school on a regular basis.

Yours sincerely,



MARK BROWNE (Dr)