

UNCAPPED COSTS OF SCHOOL UNIFORMS ARE CAUSING HARM

Key points

- Families are forced to cut back on food and fuel to cover excessive costs of school uniforms and PE kits: 6 in 10 struggled to cover the cost of school uniforms and PE kits, with a third having to borrow money.
- The cost of school uniforms and PE kits is preventing some children accessing their right to education: 1 in 10 parents said their child has missed out on school due to issues relating to school uniform or PE kit.
- The current Department of Education guidance is being ignored: despite guidance to keep cost to a minimum and ensure availability from numerous retailers parents report excessive costs and limited suppliers.
- The majority of the public do not support the current arrangements and are demanding action. 78% of the public believe not enough is being done by relevant authorities to help families manage the cost and 99% want action.
- Without action, the uncapped cost of school uniforms and PE kits will see more children denied their right to access to education.

Recommendations

- Policymakers should introduce statutory guidance for school uniform policies with an embedded price cap.
- The Department of Education should urgently review the grant threshold to ensure all children in poverty are receiving support.
- With Department of Education support schools should take immediate action to ensure no child is prevented from accessing their education.

SCHOOL UNIFORMS: MANY FAMILIES ARE FORCED TO CUT BACK ON ESSENTIALS

School uniforms can bring a school community together and help create a sense of belonging and cohesion for pupils. When school uniforms are too expensive this can't happen leaving children living in poverty disproportionately impacted. In addition, public support for the current arrangements is low with 78% believing not enough is being done by relevant authorities to support families, and 99% want action taken to alleviate the financial pressure.

As many families are forced to cut back on essentials such as food and fuel to cover the cost some schools remain fixated on high priced items that are available from limited suppliers - despite the Department of Education guidance to keep cost to a minimum and make items available 'off the peg' from numerous retailers.

*"The cost of the uniform is excessive, the same item can be bought for far less in other shops but because it doesn't have a badge on it you're not "allowed" to buy it. This then takes away from the family budget for other items like food "-
Direct quote taken from the poll data*



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“School uniform was affordable but PE kit was twice the price of the uniform. All schools own, and can only be bought directly from school. Shocking.” – Direct quote taken from the poll data

In 2023, 6 in 10 families in Northern Ireland were financially challenged by the cost of school uniforms and PE kits, with a third having to borrow money to cover the cost. For some this money was borrowed from family members and friends, for others it was credit card or other forms of debt, while others were forced to use doorstep lenders to cover the cost.

“I haven’t paid last year’s uniforms off my credit card and am about to add this year’s uniform to that debt. There is no need for branded PE kit or excessive amounts of PE items eg shorts, skort and tracksuit bottoms, the additional pieces of kit if your child is on a school team.” – Direct quote taken from the poll data

WHAT DID OUR RESEARCH SAY?

In August 2023 we commissioned LucidTalk to carry out a poll to examine the impact of school uniform policies on families in Northern Ireland and to test public attitudes towards the current arrangements. A total of 1,680 responses were received with 1,047 responses included in the final balance-weighted representative sample.

Financial impact on families

- **1 in 10 parents** said their child has missed out on school due to issues relating to school uniform or PE kit.
- **1 in 3 parents** have had to borrow money to cover the cost of school uniforms and PE kits.
- **6 in 10** find the cost of school uniforms and PE kits financially challenging.
 - For low-income families this rises to over 7 in 10 (73%)
 - For middle-income families it is almost 5 in 10 (49%)

What do the public think?

- 99% want action taken to alleviate the financial pressure.
- 88% don’t believe that parents should experience debt to pay for uniforms.
- 78% believe not enough is being done by relevant authorities to help families manage the cost.

Solutions parents and the public want to see to tackle the costs

- 97% believe schools should ensure parents have adequate choice of school uniforms/ PE kit suppliers.
- 97% believe when completing school uniform lists boards of governors must consider affordability as a priority.
- 64% support generic uniforms from high street shops.
- 51% support the introduction of a price cap.

Although support for the retention of school uniforms is high in Northern Ireland with 93% of those polled rejecting the removal of them, most people do not support the current arrangements and are demanding action.

Our qualitative data revealed a story of dread, stress, worry, and frustration with decision-making stakeholders. Grandparents shared how they provided support to ensure the costs were covered with some sharing their own stories of dread when their children were at school.

“I would like to spend money treating my grandchildren instead of contributing to school uniforms” – Direct quote taken from the poll data

Parents describe a loss of agency and choice over how they spend their limited budgets while those who could afford the uncapped cost spoke of frustration with what they had to pay but also relief they had the funds, and empathy with those who didn't. There was an overwhelming rejection of multiple branded and logoed items and support for generic items that are widely available from the high street. In addition, there were many who felt a sense of mistrust and anger towards schools who directed parents to single suppliers or sold the items themselves. This was particularly true for PE kits.

“The school insists on branded sportswear for PE in the school colours that can only be purchased directly from the school. It is a money-making racket!!!” – Direct quote taken from the poll data

UNCAPPED COSTS ARE IMPACTING THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION

At Save the Children we are gravely concerned at the pressure families are under to afford school uniforms and PE kits, and the impact uncapped costs are having upon children living in poverty. With 1 in 10 parents telling us their child has missed out on school due to issues related to school uniforms or PE kits it is clear, **the cost of school uniforms and PE kits is preventing some children accessing their right to education.** This should raise significant concerns among decision-making stakeholders and duty-bearing Departments.

When asked for support the Department of Education frequently point to their school uniform guidance¹ citing the autonomy of individual boards of governors to set their own policies and praise their frequent reminders to schools to keep costs to a minimum. Despite this regular communication to school leaders, mandatory lists remain unaffordable for many families and branded and logoed items continue to increase in number, driving up the price and pushing many families to the brink.

The community and voluntary sector have stepped in with many organisations providing pre-loved uniforms often for struggling families to ensure children can attend school. **With one school uniform hub describing a volunteer workforce of over**

¹ [Circular 2011/04 - Guidance to schools on school uniform policy \(revised 5 June 2018\) | Department of Education \(education-ni.gov.uk\)](#)



70 people and constant demand throughout the summer months, it is clear the current Department of Education guidance is being ignored and families are bearing the brunt of unaccountable decision-making.

THE COST OF EDUCATION

Recent research from the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) estimates that it costs families £864.87 to send a child to primary school and £1,755.97 for a post-primary pupil – that is to meet minimum educational needs. School uniforms are one of the most expensive elements of education at an estimated annual cost of £352.86 for a primary school child and £481.77 for a post-primary child². In addition, the uncapped cost adds to the financial strain many families face especially during the summer months when costs like childcare are higher than other times of the year. Add to this the cost-of-living crisis and many families are reaching breaking point.

“We have 3 kids at school age and struggle to afford the uniform. We often have to borrow money from the credit union at this time of year. Our son is starting high school this year. The boys wear a different uniform and blazer to the girls. As a result he cannot use my daughter's old blazer, so we have to buy two new ones this year. This adds to our stress and worry. It's especially bad this year as the price of everything is so high. It's putting strain on our marriage and family life.” – Direct quote taken from the poll data

URGENT ACTION IS REQUIRED TO TACKLE THE UNCAPPED COSTS

“This issue has plagued families for generations. It needs addressed now.” - Direct quote taken from the poll data

The uncapped cost of uniforms and PE kits is a deepening shadow for families across Northern Ireland. This is not a new issue - for several years families struggling with the financial strain of uniform and PE kits has hit the media headlines and yet the problem persists. Despite the current cost-of-living crisis little to no concessions have been made by many schools to offset the rising costs, with many continuing to require multiple branded and logoed items which many parents simply cannot afford to buy. This year pre-loved uniform shops are reporting higher levels of demand with queues forming with parents anxious to kit their children out as best they can. The issue is long past its due date for action and children are paying the price.

“Major impact on finances during the summer months when uniform is being purchased at the same time as additional childcare costs are being paid. Also unfair pressure on children, particularly primary age, to keep uniform good - has

² CPAG, School Sums What does going to school really cost families? May 2023
[School_sums_what_does_going_to_school_really_cost_families.pdf \(cpag.org.uk\)](https://www.cpag.org.uk/school-sums-what-does-going-to-school-really-cost-families.pdf)

been a factor in holding my daughter back during messy play and outdoor sessions.” – Direct quote taken from the poll data

SAVE THE CHILDREN RECOMMENDS:

- 1. The introduction of statutory guidance for school uniform policies with an embedded price cap.** The price cap should be informed by an independent advice panel which includes children, young people, and parents. This will ensure all families in Northern Ireland are protected from unaffordable and unreasonable demands on their finances.
- 2. The Department of Education should urgently review the grant threshold to ensure all children in poverty are receiving support.**
- 3. With the support of the Department of Education schools should take immediate action to ensure no child is prevented from accessing their education due to uncapped costs for uniforms and PE kits.** This should include but not be limited to:
 - Complete Child’s Rights Impact Assessment on current school uniform policies
 - Urgently engage with parents/carers and pupils to understand the financial impact of their uniform policy.
 - Ensure logoed and branded items are kept to a minimum.
 - Increase the number of items available from high street shops.
 - Ensure suppliers offer value for money and avoid single supplier monopolies.
 - Establish uniform swap shops to support families throughout the year.
 - Adopt a compassion first approach to policy enforcement.
 - **Be brave and lead the change.**

For more information on our policy work around school uniforms and the cost of education please contact Naomi McBurney, Policy and Public Affairs Adviser, n.mcburney@savethechildren.org.uk

We would like to thank all those who told us about their personal experiences of school uniform policy and the uncapped cost of uniforms and PE kits.

ABOUT SAVE THE CHILDREN NORTHERN IRELAND

At Save the Children Northern Ireland we want all children to have a fair start in life, to enjoy their childhood and have the best life chances. We strive to make sure reducing child poverty remains a central priority for decision-makers. We do this because we recognise that poverty diminishes children’s rights, and the burden of living in poverty reduces the opportunity for children to reach their full potential.

To find out more about our work follow us: @SCUKNI