



Department of
Education
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PUBLIC CONSULTATION DOCUMENT
SCHOOL UNIFORM POLICY

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Minister’s Foreword for School Uniform Policy Consultation

The affordability of school uniforms has been an issue of increasing concern among parents and other stakeholders, for some time. My overarching aim is to ensure that all school governing bodies put affordability, comfort and sustainability at the centre of their decision-making when they set their school uniform requirements.

At a time where people are facing a cost-of-living crisis, I am clear that action needs to be taken to make sure uniforms are affordable, whilst recognising the important role they play in terms of equity and a sense of community for the pupils in each school. And there is much good practice to recognise across our school communities. I am keen therefore to work with schools to ensure uniforms are affordable.

The proposals in this consultation document centre around six key principles which will underpin any new guidance on uniform policy. These are that school uniforms should be: affordable, comfortable and sustainable. School uniform policies should be: developed in partnership with pupils and their parents/ carers, published and regularly reviewed.

Ultimately my aim is to ensure we both respect the rights of schools to design uniforms that adequately reflect the ethos of their school, but that also support parents in addressing the rising costs of school uniforms.

This consultation seeks views on school uniform policy and will run from Thursday 20 June 2024 until Friday 27 September 2024.

I encourage all those with an interest in this important area to contribute to the consultation and thank you for taking the time to do so.

Paul Givan MLA

Minister of Education

1. Introduction & Background

- 1.1 Schools in Northern Ireland have the right, in law, to manage their day-to-day running. This includes deciding whether to have a school uniform and, if so, what that uniform should be. While school uniforms are not compulsory almost all schools here have a school uniform. The Boards of Governors and school leaders are responsible for setting uniform policy in their school.
- 1.2 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.
- 1.3 To support schools, the Department of Education (DE) published guidance on uniforms¹ in 2004, with a revised version issuing in 2018. Schools are reminded of this guidance regularly. Schools do not, legally, have to follow the guidance.
- 1.4 The current DE guidance highlights the importance of uniform costs being kept low. It advises that school uniforms should be practical, comfortable, appropriate and represent value for money for families. It also stresses the need to ensure that items are available from a number of suppliers, so that the school uniform does not become a barrier for children attending any school. As noted above, schools are not currently legally obliged to comply with the guidance.
- 1.5 Many schools in Northern Ireland follow the guidance and work hard to keep the costs of school uniforms as low as possible, however, we know from

¹[Circular 201104 - Guidance to Schools on School Uniform Policy \(revised 5 June 2018\)](#) The Circular was first published in 2004 and revised in 2018.

listening to parents and key stakeholders that some schools continue to have uniform policies where certain items of a uniform are expensive; or restrictions are in place on where parents or carers can buy the uniform giving them little or no opportunity to ‘shop around’ to purchase cheaper, sometimes better quality school uniform items from alternative suppliers, including department stores and supermarkets.

What happens elsewhere?

- 1.6 As in Northern Ireland, in England, Wales, Scotland and the Republic of Ireland, individual schools can also decide whether they wish to have a uniform and, if so, what that should be.
- 1.7 The legal position on government guidance is, however, different across each of the jurisdictions. Scotland is in the process of introducing non-statutory guidance, which provides advice to schools. Northern Ireland has non-statutory guidance in place. The Republic of Ireland also has non-statutory guidance.
- 1.8 England and Wales have statutory guidance in place. This is guidance that is based in law and which schools must legally have regard to when developing and implementing their uniform policy.
- 1.9 The Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) supported the Welsh Government and Department for Education (DfE) in England in developing their statutory guidance and legislation. The CMA sees statutory guidance as a flexible and direct way for governments to encourage schools to consider the financial impact of school uniform policy and how to use competition between suppliers to deliver better value for money for families.

Current position in Northern Ireland

- 1.10 In recent years, there have been growing concerns about the cost of school uniforms. A 2023 School Costs survey² found that school uniforms are the

² [2023 Irish League of Credit Unions \(ILCU\) survey on back to school costs](#)

top expense for parents and carers in Northern Ireland - both in the primary and post-primary school sectors. In 2023, 78% of parents said that covering the costs of back to school overall is a financial burden (compared to 72% in 2022). The survey also showed that 65% of parents believe that schools do not do enough to keep the costs down.

- 1.11 In addition, Parentkind carried out a survey³ in 2023 which showed 71% of parents in Northern Ireland surveyed were concerned about the overall cost of school, including uniform costs.
- 1.12 In response to complaints from parents and carers for many years about the price and quality of school uniforms, the CMA has been pro-active in encouraging schools, businesses and governments to address these concerns. In an open letter to schools and suppliers⁴ in England, the CMA explained that where schools restricted the availability of items of uniform (for example appointing an exclusive uniform supplier), prices could be considerably higher meaning parents and carers were having to pay more. The letter set out the CMA concerns in this area and advised that schools should make sure that there is competition for the supply of school uniforms to parents. Suppliers and schools should make sure arrangements with schools do not breach competition law. While the letter was not issued to schools or suppliers in Northern Ireland it is important to be aware that competition law applies equally throughout the UK, including Northern Ireland.
- 1.13 At a time of growing pressures on family budgets, the Department is extremely concerned that parents should not find the cost of a school uniform a significant outlay, nor should it deter them from applying for a particular school. It is important, therefore, for government to work with schools to ensure uniforms are affordable.

³ This was [Parentkind's National Survey 2023](#) of 5,126 parents across the UK, of which 259 were from Northern Ireland.

⁴ [CMA Open letter to Schools and retailers](#)

Stakeholder Engagement

- 1.14 The Department has, over the last number of months, met with a wide range of stakeholders including school leaders, parents, pupils, and other educationalists as well as some representative groups, to discuss the affordability of school uniforms. This engagement has helped inform this consultation.
- 1.15 During our engagement with stakeholders, we heard that there is overwhelming support for the continued use of uniforms in schools. This includes evidence from all of those consulted – pupils, parents, schools, key stakeholders, and the majority of political parties. There was widespread concern that schools only allowing their uniform to be bought from one supplier can make it more expensive for parents.
- 1.16 There was a noted difference of opinion on the use of branded PE and games kit. ‘Branded’ kits are kits that have either ‘school specific’ logos or logos of large sportswear companies. Supporters believed that it offers good value for money as it is of better quality and, in their opinion, lasts longer.
- 1.17 Those who do not support the use of branded PE and games kit suggested that there is non-branded kit which is of good quality available at a much cheaper price and that the use of a branded kit (particularly in the early years of post-primary school when pupils may be asked to take part in various sports) can increase the cost of uniforms for parents significantly.
- 1.18 Many stakeholders felt schools should not be able to exclude pupils from school due to non-compliance with school uniform policy, although a number of schools wished to retain the sanction.
- 1.19 The current Departmental guidance on uniforms covers many of the issues parents and other stakeholders have expressed concerns about and, as stated above, while some schools do adhere to the guidance, some do not.

The following sections set out how we propose to strengthen the current guidance. We would welcome your views on each of the proposals.

2. Our Proposals

Please complete the questions in this consultation online at:

[REVIEW OF SCHOOL UNIFORM POLICY - NI Direct - Citizen Space](#)

Status of current guidance

2.1 **The Department proposes** to place the current non-statutory guidance in law. This will ensure that schools and their governing boards in Northern Ireland will **have to** have regard to the guidance when developing their school uniform policies. This will require a School Uniform Bill to be passed by the Assembly to give legal authority to the guidance and make it statutory.

Q.1 Do you agree that schools should be legally required to comply with Departmental uniform guidance?

Strengthening current guidance

Key Principles

2.2 Our key principles underpinning the proposed guidance on uniforms are identified below.

School uniforms should be:

- (i) affordable;
- (ii) comfortable; and
- (iii) sustainable.

School Uniform policies should be:

- (iv) developed in partnership with pupils and their parents/carers;
- (v) published; and
- (vi) regularly reviewed.

Q.2 Do you agree with these principles?

Q.3 Should any others be included? If yes, please state any additional principles.

Each of these principles is explored in more detail below.

(i) AFFORDABLE

2.3 Our aim is to ensure that schools, when setting their uniform policy, have kept the costs as low as possible and can demonstrate they have considered the cost of their uniform; have taken appropriate steps to ensure it is designed with cost in mind and that it can be purchased from a wide variety of suppliers, providing better value for money for parents. Some research⁵ also shows that uniforms for girls can be more expensive than for boys. Mixed sex schools should have regard to ensuring that there is not a significant cost differential between girls' and boys' uniforms.

2.4 The current guidance states:

'The cost of a school uniform and other related items such as physical education (PE) clothing can be very expensive, particularly for low income and/or large families. The Department therefore expects Boards of Governors to give a high priority to cost considerations when designing their uniforms. Families should not feel excluded from being able to select a particular school because of the cost of a uniform. In addition, Boards of Governors need to bear in mind the implications, in terms of value for money and consumer choice of supplier, of uniforms often only being available from a limited number of official suppliers'.

2.5 **We propose** that the guidance will be strengthened to make it compulsory for Boards of Governors to demonstrate:

- how they have kept the costs of their uniforms as low as possible;
- how they have considered costs in designing their uniform policy;
- the costs of all the items which form part of the uniform;
- that there is no significant cost differential between girls' and boys' uniforms;

⁵ [School Uniform: Dressing Girls to Fail \(2021\). A report by Let Clothes be Clothes for the Department for Education \(England\)](#)

- that their school uniforms can be purchased from more than one supplier; (see paragraph 2.21); and
- that certain items (e.g. socks; trousers; shirts; blouses and skirts) can be purchased from a variety of suppliers, including supermarkets or department stores.

Q.4 Do you agree that it should be compulsory for schools to demonstrate how they have taken costs into account when designing their uniform?

Q.5 Do you agree that it should be compulsory for schools to publish details of the costs of their uniform?

2.6 The following paragraphs set out our proposals around affordability in more detail.

Designing a Uniform

2.7 The design of a uniform is crucial in determining its costs. As part of the focus on affordability, we propose that schools **must** consider what necessity there is for having branded items, or items which are an unusual colour, shading, or design as part of the uniform. We also propose that schools must list all items which are deemed a compulsory part of the uniform (particularly sports/PE kit). Many school uniform items can and should, where possible, be of a generic nature available to be bought widely – for example, navy/black/grey trousers or skirts; white/blue/grey shirts/blouses; grey/navy/black socks/tights and black shoes/trainers.

2.8 Any deviation from white/grey/blue shirts at post primary school to, for example, striped or other coloured shirts can be very expensive to purchase. Similarly, branded or unique design items can add to costs.

2.9 Many schools have uniforms with coloured trim or embossed crests on jumpers or blazers making them more expensive. Generic items which are widely available (including from low-cost outlets) give parents choice and

allows them to control the cost of school uniforms. As such, schools should keep branded items to a minimum and limit their use to low cost or long-lasting items. Schools should carefully consider whether requiring a branded item is the most cost-effective way of achieving the desired result for their uniform. For instance, whilst it may be appropriate to require a certain colour for socks, requiring them to have the school logo would be unnecessary.

- 2.10 The term 'branded item' is not just an item with a logo. It is used to describe an item of clothing with distinctive characteristics which make it unique to the school. As a general rule, if an item cannot be purchased at a range of suppliers it is likely to be a branded item. Such items are often designed specifically for the school and are unique in colour, design, or fabric. For instance, a blazer with a school logo embroidered onto it, a sweatshirt, blazer or jumper with a specific coloured trim, or trousers with a unique style which are therefore only available from a specific supplier, would all be classed as branded items. In comparison, a navy skirt or a grey cardigan that can be bought from a variety of retailers would not be considered a branded item.
- 2.11 Where a school decides that a branded item is required and where they have provided a rationale for them, they should consider how they can maintain the benefits of a branded item whilst keeping costs low. This may involve using sew or iron on logos or limiting the branded items to longer-lasting items such as ties, rather than items that the parent may need to purchase more frequently or in larger quantities such as shirts. Schools should also consider whether changes to the specification of a branded item might reduce costs for parents.
- 2.12 To avoid parents having to purchase multiple expensive items such as coats, bags, and trainers, which they may already have purchased for use on non-school days, schools should avoid being overly specific about such items in their uniform policy. For instance, it may be appropriate to require a coat to be simple, sensible and without any branding but requiring a coat to have the school logo or certain school colours would be unnecessary. Similarly,

schools should be mindful of the cost implication for parents when they make requirements on what is deemed appropriate footwear, including footwear required for sport.

- 2.13 Our current guidance advises schools to “*consider the cost of including branded items and items in unusual colours/shades before requiring them to be worn and review the cost of these items on an ongoing basis*”.
- 2.14 **We propose** that schools **must** review their uniform policy and consider if unusual colours/designs are necessary. If a school insists on the need for an unusual colour/design it should explain why that needs to be the case. If not, it should begin the process of standardising the colour, through time avoiding unusual colours; and aim to have a more standardised basic uniform which can be bought in a variety of shops. Schools that continue to make it compulsory to have unusual coloured uniforms or unusual designs will need to show how costs of these differ from widely available colours/designs (e.g. blue/grey/black; non pleated skirts) and what action they are taking to reduce the costs to parents. We would propose that any changes to uniforms would be phased in over a number of years to avoid additional costs to parents/carers.
- Q.6 Do you agree with our proposals that schools must review their uniform policy and explain their decision to use any unusual colours or designs?**
- 2.15 **We are also proposing** that where a crest is considered necessary on a blazer or jumper by the school that an option to purchase the crest alone should be available and that it can be reusable.
- Q.7 Do you agree that where a crest is considered necessary on a blazer or jumper that an option to purchase the crest alone should be available?**
- Q.8 Do you agree that this crest should be reusable?**

PE kits

- 2.16 Our current guidance sets out clearly the rationale for schools having a PE kit and states that as *“PE is a compulsory part of the statutory curriculum from age 4 to 16. Clothing and footwear are therefore very important aspects to safety in PE. A change of clothing for PE is important, including at primary school, for reasons of hygiene and to ensure the clothing is suited to the physical activity. A school should therefore choose a PE uniform which is practical, comfortable and appropriate to the activity involved bearing in mind the needs of different pupils”*.
- 2.17 Since the current guidance issued, and as a result of the Covid pandemic, many schools changed their practice to allow students to wear their PE kit or elements of it, to school. This practise has continued and has potential advantages, including allowing for more curriculum time for PE. Some schools specify that pupils should buy sportswear from a specific manufacturer or supplier for their PE kit and also that different items are required for different sports. Pupils representing their schools in sports at post-primary schools are predominantly required to purchase their own team kit.
- 2.18 **We are proposing** a generic PE kit. This kit should not be from a branded sportswear company unless it can be proven to be cheaper or more cost effective and that competition rules have been adhered to. Where pupils are representing their schools in different sports and a specific kit different to the generic PE kit is to be worn, we propose that schools should state clearly when and why the item is needed (e.g. the child has been picked for a specific school team), when and where these items can be purchased and how much the items are likely to cost. In addition, schools should make every effort to hold a stock of team items that can be loaned to pupils representing their school.
- Q.9 Do you agree that branded sports kits should not be compulsory elements of a school PE kit?**

Q.10 Do you agree that parents should only have to purchase specific branded or school sports kits when their child is chosen to represent the school, either as part of a team or individually?

Q.11 Do you agree that schools should aim to have team kits available for loan for those representing the school?

Single supplier arrangements

2.19 Some schools stipulate a single or very small number of suppliers where parents must purchase all or many items of its school uniform. We have discussed earlier, at paragraph 1.12, the many concerns this raises, including with the Competition and Markets Authority.

2.20 **Our current guidance** states that *“Boards of Governors need to bear in mind the implications, in terms of value for money and consumer choice of supplier, of uniforms often only being available from a limited number of official suppliers”*.

2.21 **We propose that** parents are given a wider range of suppliers to shop with. If a school decides that school uniform items can only be purchased from specific school uniform suppliers or if the school itself is the supplier, then the reason for this must be clearly set out.

2.22 Schools will be required to demonstrate how their costs have been arrived at and to publish on the school website the costs of all the items which form part of the uniform.

2.23 It will be compulsory for schools and their governing boards to ensure that their school uniforms can be purchased from a range of suppliers including supermarkets and department stores, unless the school can justify the

decision to only have one supplier, has completed a tendering process and can ensure it is in line with competition law.

Q.12 Do you agree that all schools should be required to list more than one supplier of their compulsory uniform items?

Arrangements with suppliers and/or manufacturers

2.24 If a school benefits financially or in kind by directing pupils to buy specific items from certain companies (e.g. branded sportswear), **we are proposing** that such arrangements should be transparent on the school website.

Q.13 Do you agree that any financial or in-kind benefits to schools from arrangements with suppliers or manufacturers should be published?

Cost Control on Uniforms

2.25 While there is no cap on the costs of uniforms in any of the other three countries of the UK, there is increasing discussion in Northern Ireland about the possibility of introducing a cap on the total costs for a school uniform. A cap would set an upper cost limit for school uniform items. Any such cap would be placed on schools, who would therefore have to design their uniform requirements to make sure that the total cost did not go above that cap.

2.26 Whilst a cap may initially seem like a simple way to control uniform costs, there are a number of issues to be considered which may impact on its practicality. A competitive market is one of the most effective ways to get the best price for each uniform item and keep costs down for parents. When competition works well, everyone benefits. Schools requiring many branded items or expensive detailing on their uniforms, coupled with not enabling parents to use, for example, iron on crests/logos on standard items can lead to higher prices. Having very specific requirements for uniforms can result in exclusive arrangements with suppliers, leading to no or limited competition. A competitive market benefits school uniform suppliers/retailers and their

customers (schools and parents/carers). Customers can benefit from lower prices, better quality goods and services, new and innovative products and greater choice. For suppliers/retailers, competition allows them to offer better deals than their competitors and win custom. This in turn should drive all suppliers/retailers to be more competitive in their pricing structures.

- 2.27 Legislating for a cost cap brings with it a number of risks which may result in unintended adverse implications, particularly if that cap is set at a level above what some parents can obtain a uniform for at present. This may lead to a focal point being on prices, leading to prices being higher than they would be in the absence of a cost cap. A further potential risk could be that more exclusive contracts than is currently the case would be in place, as some schools might see a guaranteed contractual price as a way of making sure they stay within the cost cap.
- 2.28 In addition, there is also a risk that suppliers or schools could put in place measures which sit outside the remit of a cap, for example by putting in place an order charge or increased postage fee. Adversely, and especially over time, all of this could mean that some parents end up paying a higher price for items that may otherwise have cost less if a generic open market approach was taken.
- 2.29 Mindful that many stakeholders consider a cost cap to be the solution to rising costs of uniforms, the Department is keen to ensure that all actions taken make a real impact on the concerns facing parents regarding the costs of school uniforms and wishes to consider all potential steps it could take to achieve this. Your views are sought on the following questions that can then inform consideration of any risks and benefits that may be associated with the practicalities of setting and operating a cap, including administrative costs. Analysis of the responses will inform a decision to be taken about whether a cap is considered an effective way to keep prices down, or not.

2.30 The Department will continue to consider how a cap might work in practice. Our initial thinking is that the Department would be required to carry out market scoping to ensure an appropriate cost cap is set. The cost cap would be placed on the school, so that when designing its school uniform and calculating the costs of that uniform, the school cannot stipulate a uniform that would cost more than the cap set. This will require schools to carry out this process on a regular basis to ensure its costs are not going over and above the cost cap set. This will undoubtedly be an additional administrative requirement for schools.

2.31 In setting a cap, there is likely to be a requirement for a ‘right of appeal’ of the amount set should a school simply not be able to source its uniform within the cost cap rate. We are also considering if a regulator would need to be appointed to oversee the implementation of a cost cap and to consider any appeals (by parents or schools) of the amount set. In the meantime, we would welcome your views as follows:

Q.14 Do you consider that a method of cost control should be introduced, for example, a cost cap?

Q.15 Do you agree that a key consideration in all actions taken by the Department should be to encourage schools to change their practice in setting uniform policies to ensure there is a competitive market for uniform items?

(ii) COMFORTABLE

- 2.32 Comfort is a key factor for any item of clothing but particularly for school uniforms. Ensuring that children and young people are able to focus on their education without concern about what to wear each day, or how a uniform fits and feels, is important. This is especially true for young children or children with additional needs. Well-fitting clothes made from non-irritating materials help to ensure that children are comfortable during the school day, can concentrate better during lessons and can enjoy play and break times more. Consideration should be given to children and young people with Special Educational Needs, particularly those who have sensory issues, when specifying a uniform, especially concerning clothing texture, ease of use of zips/buttons, etc.
- 2.33 Feeling safe and secure is an important element of comfort. When all students can afford and wear the same clothes, it avoids the opportunity to highlight disparities and reduces the potential for bullying, helping to create a sense of belonging.
- 2.34 The current guidance states schools should:
“Consider how comfortable and practical the clothing is, especially for young children. Consider the seasonable suitability of wearing shorts or skirts in the winter and wearing heavy tights or warm blazers in the summer. Consider greater flexibility within the policy rather than costly separate winter and summer uniforms eg allow boots in the winter and non-uniform additional clothing during periods of extreme weather. Consider how safety can be built into elements of the uniform eg reflective strips on outer wear, no ties for younger children etc”.
- 2.35 In designing its uniform, schools should be more innovative and consider (in consultation with pupils) what the uniform should consist of. For example, schools could consider if there is still a need to have ankle length skirts or pinafores which can add to the cost and restrict where parents can buy. In addition, schools could consider the need for a blazer, could a navy or black

coat which could double up as an outdoor coat meet the uniform requirements? There are many ways schools could reduce the costs of their uniforms by being more creative and modern in their designs.

2.36 **We propose** to strengthen this guidance to state that schools **must** demonstrate in their published policy, how their uniform policy has taken account of each of the issues of comfort, flexibility and safety as set out above.

Q.16 Do you agree with the proposal to make it compulsory for schools to demonstrate how their school uniform policy fulfils the conditions of comfort, flexibility and safety?

(iii) SUSTAINABLE

- 2.37 A sustainable uniform should be durable, practical and capable of being re-used and/or recycled. A school's uniform policy should take into account factors such as how regularly an item is likely to be worn and laundered and how long an item is likely to last. The regularity with which some items will need to be replaced should also be considered.
- 2.38 The ability for uniform items, particularly more costly items such as blazers (where they are to remain part of the uniform policy), to be re-used by students at the same school or recycled for students at other schools should also be considered when setting uniform policy. Schools are also encouraged to put in place schemes whereby parents can access pre-loved uniform items. Indeed, many schools already operate such schemes. This will not only help families to manage costs but will also help contribute towards more environmentally friendly policies.
- 2.39 It will be important that the rationale for any uniform requirements is set out clearly for parents and pupils – including prospective parents and pupils. If there is evidence that certain items provide longer term value for money but cost more initially, schools must specifically seek the views of their parents and pupils about the affordability of such an approach and take on board, where possible, these views. There should be no opportunity for visible differences in school uniform, including for sports/ PE, as a result of family income circumstances.

Uniform Banks

- 2.40 Some schools have introduced creative ways in which school uniforms can be re-used. This not only supports families in reducing the cost of school uniforms but highlights and supports efforts to create a more waste free environment. We propose that all schools should consider establishing Uniform Banks, whereby items in good condition and PE branded kit either worn only for a short time or not worn at all can be donated to the bank and

can be provided free of charge, or with a small charge, to any pupil who requires the item.

Q.17 Do you agree that all schools should be required to establish a Uniform Bank?

School Uniform Policies should be:

(iv) DEVELOPED IN PARTNERSHIP WITH PUPILS AND THEIR PARENTS/CARERS

2.41 The current uniform guidance states that Schools should “*Consult widely on proposed policies and changes to established policies. This should include prospective and current pupils and parents, community groups, road safety groups, representatives of any minority ethnic and religious groups in the school’s catchment area and groups representing pupils with special educational needs or disabilities etc. Schools should take account of the accessibility and literacy needs of those they are consulting with and consider methods, beyond letters and questionnaires, to engage with them as appropriate.*”

2.42 Any uniform policy ought to be inclusive, support equity, and pupils should have an opportunity to actively input their views. Schools should consider the underlying purpose of having a school uniform and whether adaptations may be beneficial in terms of matters such as disability equality. There are examples of good practice where schools have actively engaged with pupils about uniform policy and adapted the policy based on the outcomes of such engagement; supporting pupil attendance and comfort are important elements to take account of in any uniform policy.

2.43 Schools should take great care to ensure that any relevant circumstances of a pupil not adhering strictly to the school uniform is given significant consideration; automatic disciplinary action will not be appropriate if there are matters of affordability or additional needs that underpin any non-compliance with the uniform requirements by a pupil.

2.44 **We propose** that, in strengthening the guidance, schools will need to show how they have identified key stakeholders and actively consulted with them. This engagement will need to be documented.

Q.18 Do you agree that engagement with pupils on uniform policy should be mandatory?

Q.19 Do you agree that engagement with parents on uniform policy should be mandatory?

Q.20 Do you agree that schools should be required to publish details of stakeholder consultation on uniform policy?

(v) PUBLISHED

2.45 As set out throughout this document, schools will be required to demonstrate how and why their uniform has been designed as it has, including compulsory items of uniform and optional items, and that they should publish those details on the school website.

Q.21 Do you agree that it should become a legal requirement to publish details on the development of the uniform policy?

Q.22. If yes, which of the following should schools be required to publish? Details of all stakeholders consulted; Response to issues raised by stakeholders; Rationale for a specific design or colour (if it is not a standardised colour); A list of compulsory and optional items; Estimated costs; A list of suppliers; Other

(vi) REGULARLY REVIEWED

2.46 Schools will be required to regularly review their school uniform policy. Our current guidance states “[schools should] *Consider the timeframe for introducing a new uniform policy or amending an existing one. Factors such*

as the time period before a group of pupils leave the school and whether expensive items are purchased second hand or are passed on to siblings should be taken into account. A transitional period for phasing out the old uniform and introducing the new one should also be considered”.

2.47 **We propose** to add to the current guidance that schools should review their school uniform policies at least every three years particularly with regard to the costs of the uniform. This does not mean that a new uniform should be introduced at each review point. Should any changes to the uniform policy be required following such a review, a transitional period will continue to be required for current pupils.

Q.23 Do you agree with the proposal that schools should review their uniform policy every three years?

3. School Uniform Grant

School Uniform Grant

- 3.1 Support for some parents on low incomes is currently available in the form of a clothing allowance, more commonly called a “uniform grant” and the eligibility criteria for the grant are based on similar criteria for free school meals. The current grant is provided as a contribution to the costs of a uniform and is not intended to cover the entire costs.
- 3.2 Our current guidance sets out the financial assistance available to parents to help with the costs of purchasing a school uniform. This support is targeted at families on low income and is not targeted on the needs of specific children. The guidance advises *“Financial assistance is available through the Education Authority’s Clothing Allowance Scheme for certain categories of pupils at grant-aided primary and post-primary schools, or day pupils at special schools, towards the cost of school uniforms and appropriate clothing suitable for PE. The eligibility criteria are the same as those used for free school meals. As uniforms are not a legislative requirement, but are a matter for individual schools to determine whether they are needed, the Scheme is not intended to cover the full cost of a uniform. Rather it is designed to assist those in need with the cost of purchase. The rates of assistance are determined by the Education Authority and reviewed annually in line with inflation.*
- 3.3 Currently the Education Authority spends around £6m annually in providing uniform grant support to over 94,000 school pupils. Uniform grants are available to pupils in Primary 1 and older. The rates of uniform grant are set by the Education Authority and were raised by 20% for the 2022/23 school year. There are currently several different bands of uniform grant provided by the Education Authority, each with a different rate of payment. The school clothing allowance or grant is currently:
- £42.90 for a primary school pupil
 - £61.20 for a post primary/special school pupil under 15 years old
 - £67.20 for a post primary/special school pupil over 15 years old

£26.40 for a post primary/special school pupil physical education kit

A school pupil can usually only get one payment of clothing allowance during the school year.

Increasing the number of bands of provision of the School Uniform Grant

3.4 Costs of school uniforms are usually higher for pupils in transition years when a full uniform, rather than just some items, are required to be bought for example when transferring from primary to post primary education.

3.5 While it is for the Education Authority to determine the amount of the grant to be paid, based on the availability of funding, **we propose** that the bandings for school uniforms should include a band for pupils as they move into Year 8 or Year 13 (sixth form), when uniform costs for families may be higher. For families with children attending schools operating the Dickson plan⁶, Year 11 would also be included. This would provide additional grant for families at these key transition points when children are either changing schools or entering sixth form.

Q.24 Do you agree that an additional banding should be introduced (subject to available funding) for pupils entering Year 8 and Year 13 and also for Year 11 in the Dickson plan areas?

⁶ The Dickson Plan operates in some post primary schools within the Controlled Sector in the Craigavon Area. Children transfer at age 11 years from Primary School to a Controlled Junior High School. At the end of Key Stage 3 (age 14 years) after 3 years attendance pupils then transfer to a Senior High School within the Craigavon Area or to another post primary school outside the Dickson Plan to complete their compulsory education in Key Stage 4

4. Monitoring & Next Steps

4.1 Schools will be legally required to adhere to statutory guidance. It is important to have in place effective arrangements for monitoring and evaluation. It is, therefore, proposed that schools will be required to complete a return to the Department every three years demonstrating how they have followed the guidance.

4.2 The Education and Training Inspectorate's (ETI) *Empowering Improvement: New Framework for Inspection* places emphasis on how well schools are developing and embedding equitable, diverse and inclusive practices to support high quality learning experiences and outcomes for all of the children and young people. Inspection may, therefore, identify highly effective practices and/or specific areas for action relating to the implementation of the statutory guidance. ETI will also develop case studies of effective practice in schools from which others may learn.

4.3 We will also commission a specific independent evaluation into the effectiveness of the statutory guidance within three years of its implementation.

Q.25 Do you agree with the proposed plans for monitoring and evaluation?

Next Steps

- 4.4 Following this consultation and subject to agreement that our current guidance (strengthened as set out in this document) should be placed on a statutory basis, and potentially that we legislate for a cap, a School Uniform Bill will be drafted.
- 4.5 While it may take a period of time for a Bill to progress through the Assembly, schools will be expected to begin the process of reviewing their school uniform policies in line with revised guidance, so that school uniform policies will comply with the legislation and any associated statutory guidance before it comes into operation. To assist schools to begin the process of reviewing their uniform policies the department intends to issue case studies or examples of best practice where schools have shown innovative ways to reduce or keep costs of uniforms to a minimum. We will publish these in the autumn.