

Education (Guidance about Costs of School Uniforms) Bill

House of Commons, Second Reading

13 March 2020



Key Messages

- We support the Education (Guidance about Costs of School Uniform) Bill. The Bill seeks to provide guidance to schools in England about the costs aspects of school uniform policies.
- School uniforms can help children feel part of a community and instil a sense of pride in their school. School uniforms can also be practical and prevent bullying related harms where children are singled out for what they are wearing.
- Research undertaken by the Children's Society has found that one million children live in families across England who are getting into debt to meet the rising cost of school uniforms¹. The research also found that parents were spending an average of £340 per year for each child at secondary school – an increase of 7 per cent or £24 since 2015. Parents of primary school children spent on average £255, an increase of 2 per cent since 2015. Research undertaken by market analysts Mintel found that parents spent a total of £510 million on school uniforms in 2018, up from £395 million in 2017².
- Councils are concerned about the growing cost of school uniforms and all schools should follow a common-sense approach to their uniforms. The Department for Education should publish guidance outlining expectations on school uniforms. This should include advice that parents should be able to choose uniform items widely available on the high street, making school logos available as sew-on patches, and having a plain sports kit that can be used for different sports. Guidance should also make clear that schools should use a range of suppliers to avoid single outlets having a monopoly that allows them to raise price
- Some councils choose to help parents with the cost of school uniforms. For example, the London Borough of Hackney spent £72,300 in grants in 2018-19³. Funding pressures on councils are making it increasingly difficult for them to continue these concessionary grants.
- Any new legislation and associated guidance on school uniforms should give parents at least a year's notice of any changes so that they can make use of existing uniforms and plan for the introduction of a new uniform.
- As part of any new legislation, there should also be guidance to schools on helping disadvantaged families with the costs of a uniform. It should also point out ideal best practice to have a scheme where recyclable uniform can be collected by the school to help families that are struggling with costs.

Briefing

Background information

Children's Society research

The research undertaken by the Children's Society and published in 2018⁴ found that the high cost of uniforms can be put down in part to school policies that make parents buy clothing from specialist shops rather than giving them the choice of buying items at cheaper stores such as supermarkets or high-street chains. Where parents must buy two or more items of school uniform from a specific supplier, spending was found to be an average of £71 per year higher for secondary school children and £77 higher for primary school children.

For children themselves, the cost of school uniform can have a serious impact. Around one in 10 parents said it had led to their child wearing uniform that didn't fit properly, and more than one in 20 said that their child had been sent home for wearing the wrong clothes or shoes as a result of them struggling to afford the cost.

Based on these results and Department for Education statistics on numbers of children in primary and secondary schools across England, it's estimated that around 1.7 million children go to school wearing incorrect, unclean or ill-fitting uniform and half a million children have been sent home because of wearing the wrong items.

The report finds that parents of secondary age children pay the most for different items of clothing with coats and bags being the most expensive items, both costing £57 annually for each child. These are followed by school shoes averaging at £48 each per year and blazers at £39. PE kits and trousers, skirts and dresses are also expensive with an average price tag of £41 for secondary school pupils.

¹ https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/the-wrong-blazer-report-full-compressed_0.pdf

² <https://www.mintel.com/press-centre/retail-press-centre/counting-the-cost-brits-spend-1-2-billion-sending-kids-back-to-school>

³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-49090913>

⁴ https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/the-wrong-blazer-report-full-compressed_0.pdf