

Written Ministerial Statement

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The Department of Education

School Uniform Policy Consultation

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Mr Givan (The Minister of Education): This statement announces the launch of the consultation on school uniform policy on Thursday 20 June 2024. It will run until Friday 27 September 2024. Members will be aware that 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.

In recent years, there have been growing concerns about the cost of school uniforms. A 2023 School Costs survey¹ found that school uniforms are the 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.

In addition, Parentkind carried out a survey² in 2023 which showed 71% of parents in Northern Ireland surveyed were concerned about the overall cost of school, including uniform costs.

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. It is important, therefore, for government to work with schools to ensure uniforms are affordable.

Officials in my department undertook pre-consultation engagement last year and I thank everyone who has contributed to the debate on school uniform costs so far. There were clear messages coming through from this engagement and these messages underpin the consultation launching on 20 June 2024.

¹ [2023 Irish League of Credit Unions \(ILCU\) survey on back to school costs](#)

² This was [Parentkind's National Survey 2023](#) of 5,126 parents across the UK, of which 259 were from Northern Ireland.

Unsurprisingly the main concerns raised during that pre-consultation centred on the requirement for branded items and expensive PE kits, as well as parents being restricted in the choice of suppliers of the uniform.

The proposals to make the costs of uniforms more affordable therefore centre around 6 key principles which will underpin the proposed guidance on uniforms. 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.

Proposals set out in the consultation

The proposals within this consultation take as a starting point that the current Departmental guidance, which is non-statutory, needs to be built on and strengthened. A key aspect of strengthening it will be to make it statutory. Other proposals include requiring schools to review their uniform policies and consult with their parents and pupils in developing these. Schools will need to publish their policy and include specific information – this includes the reason for the design, colour and choice of uniform items. The published policy will need to include the cost of each item and a list of suppliers it is available to buy from. Branded PE kit should not be a requirement and consideration should be given to asking parents to purchase specific branded or school sports kits only when their child is chosen to represent the school, either as part of a team or individually - views are also sought on whether schools should aim to lend such kit to pupils representing the school.

The proposals include that schools should review uniform policies at least every three years and demonstrate how their uniform fulfils the conditions of comfort, flexibility and safety. This does not mean schools have to change their uniform every three years, but they should ensure it still meets all requirements. We propose that schools should establish uniform banks and it is welcome that many already do this.

A cap on costs of uniforms

The consultation seeks views about the potential for a cap on costs of uniforms, setting out the key risks and benefits of any cost cap including consideration of any unintended consequences. A competitive market is one of the most effective ways to obtain 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.

Ultimately, I want to tackle rising uniform costs and responses to the consultation will inform consideration of the practicalities of setting and operating a cap.

Following the consultation

Following the close of the consultation at the end of September all responses will be analysed to ensure that, if the approach is supported, everything which needs to be included in the associated primary legislation is clear. I will then be engaging with Executive colleagues, seeking agreement to formally instruct the Office of the Legislative Counsel to draft this legislation.

While I recognise that the timeframe for bringing forward legislation is extremely tight and it may not be possible to have legislation in place in time for uniform policies to change in advance of school prospectus' issuing in 2024/25, my Department will be working with schools to ensure best practice case studies are shared with all schools in early Autumn. This will give those schools that need to amend their uniform policies the opportunity to begin the process in advance of legislation being in place. Ultimately my aim is to ensure we both respect the rights of schools to ensure uniform requirements adequately reflect the ethos of their school, and also support parents and address the rising costs of school uniforms.

I look forward to your engagement with this consultation and would welcome your comments on the proposals. I know you will agree that it is important we get this right and ensure that all actions taken make a difference to the school uniform costs parents face every year.