

Briefing for the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee on petition [PE1914](#): Ban school uniforms in secondary schools, lodged by Matthew Lewis Simpson

Calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to remove the requirement for school uniforms in secondary schools. The petitioner states that school uniforms:

- Prevent students from expressing their personality and culture;
- Are a source of anxiety for low income families;
- Are uncomfortable for students;
- Do not prevent judgement from others;
- Are unnecessary.

Introduction

Pupils are not legally obliged to wear school uniform in Scotland. School uniform policy is determined by schools and the Local Authority Education Departments. However, headteachers may insist upon an “acceptable dress standard” from pupils. Schools must also consider the health and safety of pupils and may insist on certain dress (including how hair is worn) for certain activities (e.g. PE, Science etc.)

Recent research by [Dr Rachel Shanks](#) at the University of Aberdeen found that almost every secondary school in Scotland has a compulsory uniform (over 96%). And almost 20% of Scottish secondary schools specify an exclusive supplier for school uniform. Research carried out by [The Children’s Society](#) in 2020 found that in the UK families spent, on average, £337 per year per child attending secondary school. In 2018 the Scottish Government introduced a national minimum school clothing

grant of £100. Following an agreement between the Scottish Government and local authorities, the minimum grant was increased to £150 per eligible secondary school pupil in 2021.

Attitudes Towards School Uniforms

Supporters of school uniform identify a number of benefits from schools having a uniform. The [Schoolwear Association](#) states “School uniform creates a sense of community and equality in a school environment, placing children on a level playing field and developing a sense of pride.”

In 2011, the [Scottish Youth Parliament](#) responded to a petition ([PE1411](#)) calling for ‘reforming uniform policy in all Scottish local authority schools by producing mandatory guidelines’. They conducted an online survey receiving a total of 151 responses from Members aged between 14 and 25. Most of the respondents were still at school at the time.

Of those whose schools had a uniform policy, 71.7% said that it was ‘strictly enforced’, with 28.3% feeling that it was ‘not very strictly enforced.’

When asked about the degree to which the uniform could be personalised, such as being allowed to choose between a shirt and a polo shirt, or whether or not to wear a tie, the majority of respondents (59.4%) said that they could personalise ‘some elements’ of their uniform; 40.6% said that there was ‘one specific uniform, personalisation is not allowed’.

Of the 151 respondents, 49% did not find their school uniform uncomfortable. And 24.8% of respondents felt that their school uniform restricted their movement and was not very practical. When asked if school uniform ‘avoids a “fashion show” where pupils feel under pressure to wear expensive designer gear’, 65.6% of respondents agreed with this statement. Finally, the respondents were asked whether all schools in Scotland should have a uniform; 55% agreed, 30.2% disagreed and 14.8% were unsure.

In 2014-15, the [Cost of the School Day](#) action research project, involving 229 pupils and 111 staff across eight schools in Glasgow City, identified barriers that prevented children and young people from low-income households fully participating in schools. The project found wide support from school uniform from teachers and pupils with children and young

people recognising the value in everyone wearing the same clothes and minimising visible income differences.

With that being said, the project found that uniform was still a key income indicator and potential trigger for exclusion and stigma. Some schools included in the study applied a strict policy which prohibited branded clothing in an effort to minimise differences. In some cases, this had unintended consequences by placing pressure on families unable to afford school uniforms. Pupils attending school without the correct uniform were sanctioned by staff, leading to embarrassment.

The Cost of the School Day project is ongoing and provides [information](#) relating to uniform policy in schools across Scotland. It finds that uniform is the cheapest option but still represents a significant cost for families. It also finds that strict dress code enforcement embarrasses young people who likely have little control over the replacement of uniform. Although school uniforms minimise visible differences, it is still the main indicator of income at school. Non-uniform days were found, in some instances, to affect attendance. Children and young people said that they feel pressure to buy new clothes for non-uniform days. Some schools have stopped non-uniform days as a result.

The Education Endowment Foundation provides summaries of research of a wide range of interventions and the evidence of the impact of those interventions. It reports that the “evidence base on school uniform and academic outcomes is extremely weak”. The EEF notes that often school uniform policies are introduced at the same time as other measures which clouds any effect of the school uniform policy. The EEF also noted that “there is a general belief in the UK that school uniform leads to improvements in pupils’ behaviour.”

Scottish Parliament Action

On 18 May 2021, Jeremy Balfour, Lothian, Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party asked the Scottish Government whether, similar to Wales and Northern Ireland, it will produce guidance on school uniform supplies, regarding (a) reducing costs, (b) preventing exclusive suppliers and (c) making uniforms affordable for all, and if so, when the guidance will be delivered ([ref. S6W-00094](#)).

On 24 May 2021, Shirley-Anne Sommerville answered:

The Scottish Government recognises the cost of buying a school uniform can be considerable for many families. In 2018, in partnership with local authorities, we introduced the national minimum school clothing grant of £100 for all eligible children and young people.

We are committed to developing guidance to ensure consistency on school uniform policies across all of Scotland, ending expensive insistence on exclusive suppliers and to support the automation of school clothing grants in every local authority area in order to remove barriers to application and to boost uptake. We will work with our partners in local government on the development of guidance and on measures to support the automation of school clothing grants during 2021-22.

On 7 September 2021, a motion was lodged by Fulton MacGregor, Coatbridge and Chryston, Scottish National Party: Alleviating Poverty Associated with the Purchase of School Uniforms in Scotland ([ref. S6M-01065](#)).

Scottish Government Action

In July 2021, the Scottish Government and local authorities reached an agreement to increase the school clothing grant to a minimum of £150 per eligible secondary school pupil.

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02/12/2021

The purpose of this briefing is to provide a brief overview of issues raised by the petition. SPICe research specialists are not able to discuss the content of petition briefings with petitioners or other members of the public. However, if you have any comments on any petition briefing you can email us at spice@parliament.scot

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