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# Cost and Affordability of School Uniform and Child Poverty

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## Abstract

Although there are no attendance or registration fees in the UK for publicly funded school education there are hidden costs in attending compulsory education. This article investigates one of the hidden costs: school uniform. We investigate the affordability of school uniform in Scotland, looking at what is required in school uniform policy (class uniform and Physical Education kit), the costs of uniform and to what extent the national minimum clothing grant makes uniform affordable for households on low incomes. For this research we use a unique national dataset of the school uniform policies of all 357 publicly funded secondary schools in Scotland and responses to Freedom of Information requests sent to all local authorities ( $n = 30$ ). From analysis of the uniform policies and the requirements and application processes for the national minimum clothing grant we are able to draw together recommendations for the Scottish Government, local authorities and schools. We also found a compelling need for detailed data collection on how much it costs to clothe children for a whole school year.

## Keywords

dress code – poverty – school uniform – social justice

## Introduction

While there may be no attendance or registration fees in the UK for publicly funded school education there are hidden costs in attending compulsory education. This article investigates the hidden costs of school uniform. The cost of school uniform can affect children's rights to free education as the costs can create serious challenges for poor households (Reidy 2021: Sabic-El-Rayess, Mansur, Batkhuyag, and Otgonlkhagva 2020). School uniform is the norm in a small number of countries in Europe, namely the four nations of the UK, Ireland, Cyprus and Malta, while some schools may require it, for example in France and Poland. One of the major arguments for school uniforms is that it reduces perceived socio-economic differences between pupils, but if the uniform is not affordable it may in fact exacerbate the financial hardships that some households endure, consuming financial resources that households could have used for other needs (Page, Power and Patrick 2021). In this article we investigate the affordability of school uniform in Scotland, looking at what is required (class uniform and Physical Education kit), how much uniform costs, and to what extent the national minimum clothing grant makes uniform affordable. For this research we use a unique national dataset of the school uniform policies of all 357 publicly funded secondary schools in Scotland and data gathered from Freedom of Information<sup>1</sup> requests to all 32 local authorities.

School uniform can be analysed in different ways, through a cultural, historical, psychological, sociological or economic lens. This article investigates school uniform from economic and social justice perspectives in relation to poverty alleviation and educational equity. School meals have rightly attracted much attention in relation to child poverty and the issue of school holidays for children from low-income families has also been investigated (Stewart, Watson and Campbell 2018). There are, however, many gaps in knowledge about the impact of compulsory school uniforms, the costs for poorer families and how to reduce the cost barrier for those living in poverty in order to make uniform affordable. (Freeburg and Workman 2016; Reidy 2021).

In this article we use the term affordability as defined by Penne, Delanghe and Goedemé (2021):

the ability of households to afford a specific good or service without being forced to under-consume other essential goods and services.

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<sup>1</sup> Information from Fife council has come from Freedom of information Act 2002 request for information reference 37609.

We also include the cost-compensations that low-income households can be eligible for in relation to school uniform costs. Following the example of Penne et al. (2021) and Page, Power and Patrick (2021), we are adopting The Children's Society (2020) UK-wide study to understand the cost of school uniforms to households.

This study is unique as it explores school uniform cost, and affordability with local authority support for families on low incomes. While focusing primarily on UK literature, not least because of its long history of compulsory school uniform, international evidence is drawn on where appropriate. We identify potential solutions for poverty proofing school uniform such as reviewing uniform requirements, allowing more generic items, using subsidised or second-hand exchange schemes for items such as blazers and ties and avoiding expensive exclusive supplier arrangements.

This article is structured as follows: we start with a history of school uniforms in the UK to provide context and explain the tradition of uniform. We then examine the issue of child poverty in the UK and Scotland and work that has gone into 'poverty proofing' the cost of the school day. Next, we look at national guidance on school uniform and clothing policies in the UK and the school clothing grants that are available. We then explain the methodology and findings of our research before discussing the implications of these findings for policy makers and schools. We conclude the article by suggesting further avenues for research and with five recommendations in terms of policy at government, local authority and school level.

### Context of School Uniforms in the UK

School uniform (or school wear) has a long history in the UK. It begins with the recorded adoption of a uniform for Christ's Hospital, a school established in London in 1552 for fatherless children and the poor (Stephenson 2016, 2021). Initially the school was for boys but admitted girls in 1563 and the striking long blue overcoat, matching knee breeches (skirts for girls), yellow socks and white neck bands continues to be used today (Christ's Hospital 2022). The interesting point here is that a prescribed school uniform was originally associated with a school founded to educate the poor and the uniform was donated and continues to be free of charge to the pupils. The uniform was designed to signify the low status of the poor children and reinforce their understanding of their position in society (Stephenson 2006: 18). The idea of a school uniform would continue to reinforce the understanding the pupils had of their position into

the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but also evolved into an indicator of the position of the upper and upper middle classes.

The growth and development of the elite public school system throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (primarily) in England was supported by the upper class and emerging upper middle classes (Stephenson 2016). These schools served several purposes: the exclusive nature of the schools consolidated class difference and the school was intended to be a process of creating generations of gentlemen, moulded in thought and behaviour. The school uniforms of the late nineteenth century were simple and typically in dark colours. Stephenson (2016: 71) traces the emergence of the 'shirt, blazer and tie model' to Stowe public school which opened in 1923. As the education of girls became more widespread, girls' schools adopted the dress associated with the boys' public schools to demonstrate that the academic ability and achievement of the girls matched that of the boys (Stephenson 2016: 9).

School uniforms remain very popular in Britain and are more widespread than in most other countries (Stephenson 2016). Michael Gove called for a return to the traditional uniform of blazers and ties in a white paper in 2010 and the Academies that were introduced into England in 2010 adopted this traditional uniform (The Independent 2011). As has been seen, while the origins of school uniform were associated with the poor, the school uniform became associated with class distinctions and the preservation of class elitism. The contemporary discussion of the continued use of a prescribed school uniform in the present-day UK focusses on three major issues: poverty, voice, and gender. We will be focussing primarily on poverty, but acknowledge the importance of voice (Firmin, Smith and Perry 2006; Jones, Richardson, Jensen and Whiting 2020; Fraser-Smith, Morrison, Morrison, and Templeton 2021) and gender (Da Costa 2006; Happel 2013; Deane 2015; Glickman 2016; Freeburg and Workman 2016; Harbach 2016; Green 2017; Mallen, 2021).

### Affordability

As has been stated, one of the major arguments for mandating uniform is that it reduces 'markers of economic disparity' (Bodine 2003: 55). It is also sometimes argued that school uniform saves households money as it reduces so-called competitive dressing and demands for the latest fashions. There is evidence that pupils, even at primary school level, are aware of brand and cost differences for clothes, shoes, bags and jackets (Naven et al. 2019). The contemporary issue of school uniform and poverty in the United Kingdom, is focussed on the costs of school uniform and the suppliers – whether obtained from high street retailers

and supermarkets, designated shops or through the school. Hamilton (2021) noted that a majority of children in poverty were found to have been embarrassed and to have felt isolated because of their household's inability to afford school uniform, school trips and equipment for school. There is some counter evidence that households with uniform purchases (for school or work) spent more on other clothing than households without expenditure on uniform. It is suggested that having a uniform meant that household members had 'various wardrobes of clothing specific to different occasions and functions' rather than having a more versatile wardrobe (Norum, Weagley and Norton 1998).

### Child Poverty in the UK and Scotland

The levels of child poverty in the United Kingdom are alarmingly high: 4.2 million children in 2018–2019 (30% of all children). The figure for Scotland is 230,000 children living in poverty (around 25% of all children) (Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland 2021). The Scottish Government has adopted the Sustainable Development Goals which include (1) Goal 1 'End poverty in all its forms everywhere', (2) Goal 4 'Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' and (3) Goal 10 'Reduce inequality within and among countries'. As part of its strategy, the Scottish Government has made a commitment to tackling child poverty through the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 which contains highly ambitious targets to reduce levels of child poverty by 2030. In Scotland the definition of poverty is having less than 60% of median household income. The targets are: less than 10% in relative poverty; less than 5% in absolute poverty; less than 5% in combined low income and material deprivation and less than 5% in persistent poverty. The Government must prepare a delivery plan for three periods between 2018 and 2031 and produce more regular progress reports. However, poverty has been rising and Scotland is not on course to meet interim child poverty targets (Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2020). The Scottish Government has introduced other national initiatives to tackle the effects of child poverty on education: *The National Attainment Challenge* introduced in 2015 (to address the perceived poverty related attainment gap) and *The Pupil Equity Fund (PEF)* introduced in 2016 provides funds to individual schools across the country to help close the attainment gap (Scottish Government 2016). It is expected that the rise of child poverty will be exacerbated by the economic downturn caused by the effects of the pandemic, the rise in energy prices, inflation and increases in the cost of living.

Two key documents were published in 2015 focussing on the levels of child poverty and the effects of child poverty on the education of children and young people in Scotland. The first was published by the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG): *Cost of the School Day Glasgow* (2015). The document reported on qualitative research into the hidden costs in the school day for children and young people from low-income households in primary and secondary schools in Glasgow. The second document was published by the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS): *Face up to Child Poverty* (2015). Both documents highlight the hidden costs of the school day and recommend ways to 'poverty-proof' schools. Both documents mention school uniform as an area of concern for families on low incomes: the inadequacy of school uniform grants to meet the annual costs of uniform and replacement uniform and the costs for families that just miss the threshold for a uniform grant and who struggle to pay for items of uniform. Recommendations have included greater flexibility in uniforms (not requiring school logos on jumpers) and less rigidity in suppliers (acceptability of cheaper options from supermarkets rather than a designated, and expensive, supplier). Both the CPAG and the EIS have published subsequent documents that continue to address the issue of school uniform, as has Education Scotland (EIS 2017; Education Scotland 2020; Child Poverty Action group 2021). On 19 May 2022 a consultation on school uniform was launched by the Scottish Government and it closes on 14 October 2022 (see <https://www.gov.scot/publications/school-uniform-guidance-consultation/>).

### National Guidance on School Uniform Policies in the UK

There is non-statutory guidance in Northern Ireland and statutory guidance in England and Wales. The Welsh guidance is clear that:

No school uniform should be so expensive as to leave pupils or their families feeling unable to apply for admission or to attend a particular school.

WELSH GOVERNMENT 2022a

The guidance goes on to lay down specific details on how to achieve this, for example by only stipulating basic items and colours but not styles of clothes so that:

so that items can be bought from multiple retail chains at reasonable prices and not just from one authorised supplier.

Furthermore, governing bodies are advised to ‘avoid high-cost items such as blazers and caps’. The Welsh statutory guidance requires school governing bodies to regularly review arrangements where there are single suppliers of uniform items and to seek to ensure that items are affordable. In Wales, the Pupil Development Grant (PDG) or school uniform grant is now available every school year and is £125 with the exception of Year 7 when it is £200, recognising the increased costs associated with starting secondary school (Welsh Government 2022b). Eligibility for the grant is the same as for free school meal entitlement.

For schools in England, there is now statutory guidance as a result of the Education (Guidance about Costs of School Uniforms) Act, 2021. This legislation was originally introduced by Mike Amesbury MP as a private member’s bill but then gained the support of the UK Government (Long 2020). The 2021 Act places a statutory duty on the Secretary of State to issue guidance to the appropriate authorities of relevant schools in England about the costs aspects of school uniform policies. The aim of the new statutory guidance is to ‘ensure the cost of school uniforms is reasonable and secures the best value of money’ (UK Government 2021). It had been found that the costs of school uniform were affecting the choice of school in England for an increasing number of parents (Dosa 2019: 29). Before summer 2022 schools in England were to remove unnecessary branded items, publish their uniform policy on their website and ensure that second hand uniform is available to obtain. While exclusive suppliers are not banned there must be a five-yearly tendering process. Schools have also been told to engage with parents and pupils when they develop their uniform policy. Schools must also consider their obligations under the Equalities Act 2010 and the Human Rights Act 1998. The guidance clearly states that it covers PE kit and extra-curricular activities as well as standard uniform. Further guidance is provided on the impact that variations in uniform can have, for example house colours, specific clothing for different year groups. However, the guidance does not follow Dosa’s (2019) recommendation that pupils should not be punished if not wearing their uniform or for not bringing other necessary equipment to school. The 2021 guidance states that:

Teachers can discipline pupils for breaching the school’s rules on appearance or uniform. This should be carried out in accordance with the school’s published behaviour policy. We would expect schools to deal with pupil non-compliance in a proportionate and fair way.

The non-statutory guidance in Northern Ireland lays down that school uniform policy should be ‘fair and reasonable, in practical and financial terms, and

should have regard to ... relevant equality and other legislation' (Department of Education Northern Ireland 2018). In relation to cost it states:

the need to keep costs to a minimum and ensure that items are available "off the peg" from a number of retail outlets so that the school uniform does not become a barrier from low-income families attending the school.

Grants are available and are currently £35.75 for primary with no extra amount for PE and for secondary school £51 or £56 (for pupils over 15 years) plus £22 for PE kit. Eligibility is the same as the free school meal eligibility criteria. In contrast to other parts of the UK the uniform grant is payable to young people under the age of 18 who are at college rather than school.

The guidance in all three countries is helpful in that the financial challenges for low-income families in buying school uniform is recognised. In Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales education authorities must provide grants to families on low incomes but in England this is not currently mandated and not all authorities offer this support. Nevertheless, there are serious questions about the continued high cost of items of uniform and whether there are sufficient levels of support for these families in obtaining school uniforms in order to make them affordable.

### Clothing Grants in Scotland

In Scotland, a national minimum school clothing grant of £100 was introduced in 2018 as a result of an agreement between the Scottish Government and local authorities (to be reviewed every two years to ensure that it remained in line with the cost of living) (Scottish Government 2018). Prior to this, the individual local authorities had the discretion to decide on the amount to provide. Before the national minimum was set at £100 local authorities often provided much less in grants, for example in 2017–18 in Angus it was just £50, in Scottish Borders it was £70 and in East Lothian it was £60 for primary and £65 for secondary school. Local authorities in Scotland now give cash payments rather than vouchers but before the introduction of the national minimum clothing grant at least one local authority was giving vouchers which might have restricted where they could buy the uniform and might have made it more expensive (Spencer, Fairweather and Egan 2016: 10).

As has been stated above, the Scottish Ministers are mandated to prepare a regular delivery plan for the progress in the aims of the Child Poverty



(Scotland) Act 2017. This includes measures to support local authorities in the automatic payment of benefits and support that ensures that families on a low income receive the clothing grant. There is some mixed evidence on the affordability of the different forms of clothing for schools for families on low incomes, but the Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland found that uniform is the cheapest option for school dress. Yet school uniform still represents a significant cost to families, and a strict (or expensive) uniform policy can cause problems for the social inclusion of young people in the school and within peer friendship groups (Child Poverty Action Group 2015). If school uniform is a cause of exclusion, then the issue is related to equality and children's human rights in Scotland. This has been observed in the guidance in Northern Ireland and Wales that emphasises that the cost of school uniform should not lead to any form of exclusion.

The Scottish Government reviewed the minimum clothing grant in 2021 with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) and, in line with the Scottish National Party 2021 Parliamentary election manifesto, increased the clothing grant to:

...at least £120 in primary school and £150 in secondary school and ensure it increases each year with inflation.

SCOTTISH NATIONAL PARTY 2021: 61

Furthermore, there was a commitment to:

develop statutory guidance on school uniform policies – ending expensive insistence on exclusive suppliers – and support automation of school clothing grants in every local authority to remove barriers to application and boost uptake.

SCOTTISH NATIONAL PARTY 2021: 61

This is now part of the Scottish Government and Scottish Green Party's Shared Policy Programme (Scottish Government 2021: 5).

## Method

In this article we are seeking insight into the affordability of school uniform at secondary level in Scotland. The objective of the study was threefold:

1. What school uniform do schools require? What is required to be purchased and worn and what is not allowed?

2. Where are compulsory uniform items to be purchased and to what extent do schools have exclusive supplier arrangements?
3. What support is provided towards school uniform costs to the households with the lowest incomes?

This research has been conducted in two strands, first in relation to the school uniform policies of all publicly funded secondary schools in Scotland and secondly, a review of the policies of the 32 local authorities in Scotland which are responsible for all but one of the publicly funded secondary schools.<sup>2</sup> From each school website the school handbook and the school uniform policy (when there was a separate policy document) and other artefacts (e.g. communications to parents) were collected in 2019 for all 357 publicly funded secondary schools in Scotland. This data collection was conducted by the first author and thirteen students at the University of Aberdeen as part of an applied qualitative research training programme (see <https://blog.eera-ecer.de/tag/school-uniform/> for further information). The research was granted ethical approval and all the students signed consent forms agreeing to their work being used by the tutor. As well as collecting policies the students and the first author analysed the policies, handbooks and other artefacts in the qualitative data analysis software NVivo with two rounds of coding (Saldaña 2016). In the first cycle of coding, content analysis was used to identify where having school uniform was justified. Then in a second cycle of coding, other issues were identified such as the level of formality of the uniform. In the coding a formal uniform included a blazer and a tie, a more informal approach had the requirement to wear a blazer but no tie or a tie but no blazer and finally a small number of schools had no requirement to wear either a blazer or a tie while still having a compulsory uniform.

Following on from the analysis of school policies, data was collected from the websites of all 32 Scottish local authorities that included: the amount of grant provided, whether automatic payments were made and if roll over of the grant took place. The policies of local authorities in relation to the national minimum clothing grant were collated and compared in September 2020 (see Shanks, 2020) and again in March 2021. The grounds for qualifying for the clothing grant were compared to the eligibility criteria for free school meals. This information was put into and organised in an Excel spreadsheet. Then all the local authorities were sent a Freedom of Information request asking how many school clothing grants had been paid out so far in the 2021–2022 school year, how much the grant was for primary and secondary pupils, whether it was paid out for pupils at early years settings and why applications were turned

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2 Jordanhill Secondary School is the one grant maintained secondary school in Scotland.

down. To date 30 of the 32 local authorities have responded to this Freedom of Information request.

## Findings

The findings are in three sections with the first two sections coming from the school data and the third section covering data from Freedom of Information requests to local authorities.

We present the findings under the following three themes:

1. Requirements for school uniform
2. Exclusive Supplier Arrangements
3. Support for costs of school uniform

## Requirements for School Uniform

It was found that of the 357 publicly funded secondary schools in Scotland over 96% of the schools (n = 343) had a compulsory uniform. Of the 14 schools that did not have a compulsory school uniform, eleven had no uniform and three schools had an optional or 'unofficial' uniform. Of the schools that did require a uniform a small number did not require a school tie (n = 10) or had optional ties or ties were required for pupils in the senior stage (n = 13). This meant that at schools with a compulsory uniform, 90% required a school tie (n = 320). The requirement to wear a blazer to secondary school was found in 66% of the school uniform policies (n = 235). See below in figure 1 which is an infographic highlighting some of the key findings on what is required and what is banned in secondary school uniform policies in Scotland.

Most schools had a formal uniform meaning a blazer and tie as we defined it (252 schools), 136 schools had blazer or tie and 40 schools had more informal uniform policies with sweatshirts and no blazer or tie. While in 108 schools a blazer was not required as part of the compulsory uniform, in some schools it was a compulsory item for pupils in later stages (n = 28 schools). Sometimes the blazer was compulsory for S4-S6 (6 schools), S5-S6 (9 schools), S6 (8 schools), for prefects (5 schools) and one school had different blazers for junior and senior prefects, house captains and the head boy/girl.

Many schools had different uniforms in the school rather than the same uniform for all pupils. The biggest difference in uniform requirements was for school progression with changes between stages, S1-3 and S4-6 and/or S6 (138 schools). There are also schools which have winter/summer variations in their

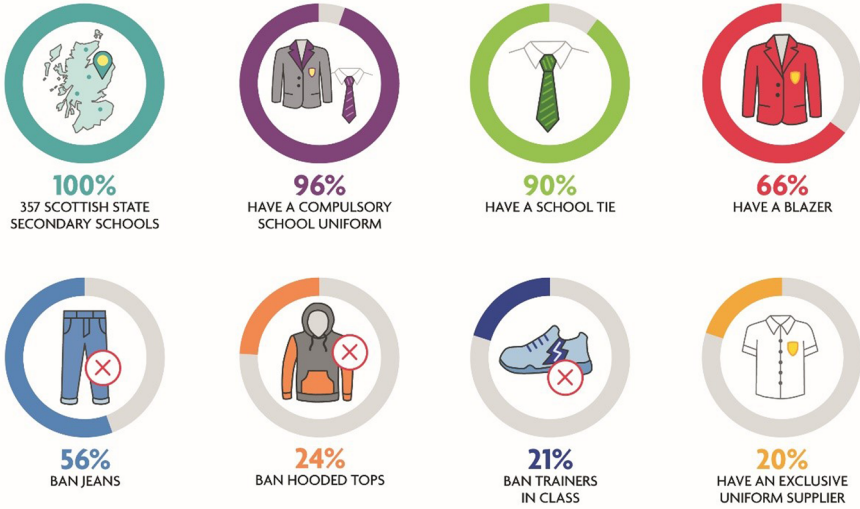


FIGURE 1 What is required and what is banned in secondary school uniform policies.

uniforms (n = 38). A total of 39 schools had uniforms that varied in relation to other issues, for example to do with school houses (15 schools). Finally, Prefects often had slightly different uniforms (43 schools) and sometimes the Head Boy and Head Girl had braiding on their blazer.

There were other changes in school uniform as pupils moved into the Senior Phase of S4-S6, for example at one school the uniform changed from ‘maroon V-neck knitwear with school logo’ in S1 to S3 to a ‘black V-neck knitwear with school logo’ in S5 (with S4 seemingly overlooked). In another school in another part of the country S6 pupils were ‘permitted to wear a plain collared black shirt/blouse as an alternative to the white shirt and are expected to wear the school tie at all times’.

We also found some schools require a change of tie as pupils progress through school, at least 12 schools did this, with different ties for prefects in one school, different ties between S1-S4 and S5-6 or in S1-S3 or S4-S6 in 8 schools. Two schools had three different ties: a S1-S3 or S4 tie, an S4 and S5 or S5 tie and an S6 tie. As stated above in 5 schools only the senior pupils had to wear ties (S4-S6 or S5-S6 or S6 only). While this may seem a trivial point the cost of a school tie varies between schools with some as low as £3, but others can cost £7.50 or £8.

Alongside the uniform to be worn in class at school there are also the sometimes-forgotten costs of the Physical Education (PE) kit. Extra uniform required for PE was found in 259 uniform policies. Items which are often required for PE

include: training shoes; a suitable sports top; shorts/ jogging trousers/leggings; socks; swimming costume and towel (example from one school).

### *What is Not Allowed?*

Almost all schools listed some banned items (341 out of 357 and corresponds closely to the number with a compulsory school uniform). The most commonly banned items were jeans (banned by 56% of schools), followed by hoodies (24%) and trainers in class (21%). Other banned items included: football club items, leggings, logos, sports jackets, jewellery and brightly coloured clothing. The banning of jeans and trainers has cost implications as that means that clothes have to be bought for use in school and outside school. Trainers are required for PE so this means two pairs of shoes each time a child/young person grows and needs new shoes. In Scotland PE is compulsory for the first four years of secondary school.

### **Exclusive Supplier Arrangements**

A further increase in costs on parents is the use of exclusive suppliers as it has been found that uniform from exclusive suppliers regularly costs more (Children's Society 2018). In this study we found that almost 20% of schools (n = 70) specified an exclusive supplier for their uniform. Statutory guidance in England now places an obligation on schools there to ensure there is best value for money (UK Government 2021). This is not yet the statutory position in Scotland.

### **Support for Costs of School Uniform**

Between November 2021 and January 2022 replies to a Freedom of Information request to all 32 local authorities in Scotland showed that, at that stage, the total allocated for school clothing grant in the 2021–22 school year for 30 of the 32 local authorities was £22,232,289.00 for more than 160,000 children. Table 1 is showing the level of poverty in each of the local authorities and the level of clothing grant set by each one for the last 3 school years.

Table 1 shows that a minority of local authorities provide more than the national minimum level, and these are not all local authorities with the higher rates of child poverty. The increase of the national minimum rate to £120 for primary pupils and £150 for secondary pupils had the effect of matching some of the previous most generous rates and as a result fewer local authorities are

TABLE 1 Local authority school clothing grants by level of child poverty

Local authority	Poverty rates, 2019/20*	Clothing grant provided by local authorities		
		2019/2020	2020/2021	2021/2022
Above 30% of children living in poverty				
Glasgow City	32.2%	<b>£110</b>	<b>£110</b>	£120/£150
25–30% of children living in poverty				
North Ayrshire	27.9%	£100	£100	£120/£150
Clackmannanshire	27.3%	£100	£100	£120/£150
East Ayrshire	27.3%	<b>£110</b>	<b>£120</b>	£120/£150
Dundee City	26.8%	£100	£100	£120/£150
West Dunbartonshire	26.8%	£100	£100	£120/£150
Dumfries and Galloway	26.7%	<b>£134</b>	<b>£134</b>	<b>£134</b> /£150
North Lanarkshire	26.5%	£100	<b>£110</b>	<b>£140</b> /£150
Fife	26.4%	£100	£100	£120/£150
20–25% of children living in poverty				
Falkirk	24.8%	<b>£120</b>	<b>£120</b>	£120/£150
South Ayrshire	24.8%	£100	<b>£110</b>	£120/£150
West Lothian	24.6%	<b>£125/135</b>	<b>£125/135</b>	<b>£150/180</b>
East Lothian	24.5%	£100	£100	£120/£150
Scottish Borders	24.2%	£100	£100	£120/£150
Angus	24.0%	£100	£100	£120/£150
Midlothian	23.9%	No FOI response		£120/£150**
Inverclyde	23.8%	<b>£145</b>	<b>£145</b>	<b>£150</b> /£150
Highland	23.6%	<b>£140</b>	<b>£140</b>	<b>£140</b> /£150
Moray	23.4%	£100	£100	£120/£150
Argyll and Bute	23.3%	£100	£100	£120/£150
Renfrewshire	23.1%	£100	£100	£120/£150
South Lanarkshire	23.1%	<b>£130</b>	<b>£130</b>	<b>£130</b> /£150
Orkney Islands	22.7%	£100	£100	£120/£150
Perth and Kinross	22.6%	£100	£100	£120/£150
Aberdeen City	21.3%	£100	£100	£120/£150
Stirling	21.3%	<b>£130</b>	<b>£130</b>	<b>£130</b> /£150
Na h-Eileanan Siar	20.7%	£100	£100	£120/£150
City of Edinburgh	20.3%	£100	£100	£120/£150

TABLE 1 Local authority school clothing grants by level of child poverty (*cont.*)

Local authority	Poverty rates, 2019/20*	Clothing grant provided by local authorities		
		2019/2020	2020/2021	2021/2022
<b>15–20% children living in poverty</b>				
Aberdeenshire	16.7%	£100	£100	£120/£150
East Dunbartonshire	16.3%	No FOI response		£120/£150**
East Renfrewshire	15.8%	£100	£100	£120/£150
Shetland Islands	15.8%	£100	£100	£120/£150

\* End Child Poverty (2021) estimates of poverty rates after housing costs.

\*\* Figures taken from the local authority websites.

Figures in bold are where the grant is higher than the national minimum at the time.

offering more than the minimum. However, the Scottish Government provides the most generous scheme of its kind in the UK. As noted above, that does not mean that the full cost of school clothing is covered: there is often a Physical Education (PE) kit to buy as well.

The criteria on which the allocation of the grant is given varied across the 32 authorities. Unlike the eligibility criteria for free school meals, it is up to each local authority to decide on the criteria for allocating the national minimum clothing grant. However, the six criteria related to social security benefits and income levels in the free school meals eligibility criteria are mirrored, if not identical, in the clothing grant criteria. One of the free school meals criteria that is missing in the majority of local authority websites is for 16- to 18-year-olds who may qualify based on their own circumstances. There are 14 local authorities that have more generous criteria for the clothing grant than the national limits set for free school meals, for example allowing a higher income level. Furthermore, there are 9 authorities that added extra ways to qualify beyond the free school meals criteria. On a less positive note, there are 8 authorities that do not mention that asylum seekers are eligible. Just one authority refers to the statutory duty to ensure that pupils have adequate clothing to attend school and another authority refers to the list of criteria not being exhaustive.<sup>3</sup>

3 Under Section 54 of the Education (Scotland) Act 1980, education authorities must ensure that no child, attending a school under their management, is unable to take advantage of the education provided because of the inadequacy or unsuitability of their clothing.

There were 6 of the 32 authorities that made automatic awards when families were applying for other benefits, e.g., housing benefit, Council Tax reduction, in September 2020 and this had risen to 16 authorities in March 2021. In addition, there are 10 authorities that do not require families to re-apply for the clothing grant every school year if their circumstances have remained the same. It is worth noting that there is little overlap between those providing the automatic allocation of the grant and those enabling rollover of entitlement – in 2021 only four local authorities provided both.

A further way that families can be supported with school uniform costs is through the reuse of items with hand-me-downs and second hand clothing. While the new English statutory guidance requires schools to provide second hand uniform to parents, only two of the Scottish schools in this study were found to have mentioned recycling school uniform in their uniform policies in their 2018–2019 school handbooks.

## Discussion

A number of school policies in our study referred to the financial benefits of having a school uniform ( $n = 39$ ). This does not appear to take into account the cost of buying all the necessary items for attending school. Sabic-El-Rayess et al. (2020) note that a school's uniform policy needs to be contextualised so that it fulfils its objectives and does not create unintended consequences. Some school policies stated that a uniform prevents competition and discrimination ( $n = 60$ ). However, the extent to which school uniform reduces competition and bullying is contested. In Firmin, Smith and Perry's (2006) study, young people were not as likely as parents to say that uniform reduced competition between them. While arguments are made that school uniform reduces the pressure to buy expensive 'designer' items, this ignores how accessories and items such as shoes can still produce this competitive effect (Freeburg and Workman 2016; Swain 2002). Another difficulty is that most school uniform costs come at the same time at the beginning of the school year which is mid-August in Scotland (Page, Power and Patrick 2021; Child Poverty Action Group 2015).

It was found that sometimes pupils are allowed to go to school without their compulsory uniform, often to raise funds for charities such as Children in Need, however this can have the unintended consequence of putting pressure on households. One secondary school referred to 'Casual Fridays' when pupils could wear their casual clothes every Friday for the last two months of the school year. Again, this may have increased clothing costs for families and shows how school policy changes are made without considering the cost they



may be imposing on families. Non-uniform or dress-up days have been found to cause school absence so that children avoid the stigma of wearing their non-uniform clothes (Mazzoli Smith and Todd 2019). On ordinary uniform days it has also been found that children miss individual lessons or whole days so that the absence of uniform items is not noticed by peers (The Children's Society 2020).

While 20% of secondary schools in Scotland have exclusive suppliers of uniform, it is not possible to make a direct comparison as no similar nationwide study of school uniform policies in England has taken place. What is known is that parents consistently estimate the costs as higher when there are exclusive suppliers in place (e.g., Davies 2015; Children's Society 2020).

There are different solutions on how to alleviate the costs of school uniform to make them affordable. From our research we can see that publicly funded secondary schools in Scotland expect households to provide many items of clothing which will cost more than the £150 of the national minimum clothing grant for secondary school pupils. Only one local authority, West Lothian, pays more than the national minimum for secondary school pupils but the £180 per year per pupil is still less than half what the Children's Society (2020) study found was needed for this age group. There have been calls for a cap on school costs (Dosa 2019; Child Poverty Action Group 2015).

## Conclusion

In this article we have focused on the cost and affordability of school uniform that is required for children who must attend school. We have not considered the arguments about the effects of school uniform in relation to achievement. It should be noted that there is no body of evidence that school uniform in and of itself improves learning (Yeung 2009; Gentile and Imberman 2011; Reidy 2021; Education Endowment Foundation 2021).

We are aware of the limitations of our research for this paper, we have considered the written policies of all the publicly funded secondary schools in Scotland rather than the enactment of those policies and we have gathered limited information through Freedom of Information requests to local authorities. However, we believe this is an appropriate starting point to draw attention to the consequences of mandating school uniform during compulsory education. While making uniform affordable does not negate other aspects related to growing up in poverty in Scotland, it could reduce one financial burden on households and reduce stigma around what is worn to school.

Further research into the effectiveness of mitigating the cost of school-related items would be useful to help increase the affordability of compulsory school education. Penne et al. (2021) highlight the work that has been done in the Netherlands and in Flanders in Belgium with 'school costs monitors' showing that school-related costs can be monitored in a holistic and systematic way with data collected from the random sampling of schools and school pupils. This is similar to the Child Poverty Action Group's work on the Cost of the School Day. A specially designed survey with a sufficiently sized random sample of schoolteachers, principals, pupils and parents would be useful to determine the implications of essential school uniform expenses in compulsory education and attitudes towards the acceptability of second-hand items. Equally, it would be helpful if school uniform could be included in household expenditure survey research: for example, a large random sample of households with school-age children to investigate the issue of the costs of mandatory school uniforms (Norum et al. 1998). As well as surveys it is important to carry out focus group research. This is a method used by the Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland and Penne et al. (2021) and it allows for a more representative approach that could include parents, pupils and teachers. A constant scrutiny of legislation, policy and government initiatives is important to monitor what is happening at a national level (ibid).

In conclusion, we make five recommendations, two at national level, one at local government level and two for schools. First, that following the 2022 consultation, statutory guidance is developed in Scotland so that schools have clear guidelines into what they should consider and who should be included when creating and reviewing school clothing and dress code policies. Affordability should be given high priority in this process. Making this statutory, as opposed to non-statutory, guidance means it is legally enforceable. A second recommendation for the Scottish Government is to set a higher amount for the national minimum clothing grant for the first year of primary and the first year of secondary schools when there are likely to be more items to buy (as is the case in Wales for the first year of secondary school). Thirdly, that all local authorities introduce automatic payment of school clothing grant when other benefits, such as Housing Benefit or Council Tax reduction, are claimed, and that payment of the grant is rolled over from one school year to the next without families having to reapply (when there is no change of circumstances). The fourth recommendation is for schools, who do not already do this, to start calculating the exact cost and affordability of their school uniform requirements (this may be part of national statutory guidance in the future), taking into consideration a whole school year with children growing or needing replacement

items due to wear and tear. The final recommendation is for schools to review their school uniform policies.

While poverty should be tackled at source rather than addressing its effects through food banks, school clothing grants and school uniform banks, there are concrete steps that schools can follow to remove barriers and stigma for children living in poverty. A compulsory school uniform policy can exacerbate the effects of poverty on those who are already marginalised if the policy is not ‘understood and managed through a social justice framework’ (Sabic-El-Rayess et al. 2020: 16). Above all, schools need to consider the purpose of their school uniform policy and ensure that it does not create financial challenges for families living in poverty.

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