

School clothing in Scotland Research Brief

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School clothing in Scotland

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Summary and main findings

1. Twelve of the 32 local authorities automatically pay school clothing grant to families who receive a qualifying benefit administered by the local authority such as Housing Benefit or income-related Council Tax reduction.
2. School uniform banks report difficulties that are created for families through uniform policies, for example requiring 100% black shoes, items with logos, tartan and hard to find colours, such as turquoise or maroon.
3. In 2022-23 there was a drop in the number of children for whom school clothing grant was awarded while the percentage of children living in poverty increased. A possible explanation for this drop is the provision of universal free school meals. Previously families would have been applying for both free school meals and clothing grant at the same time. This highlights the need to make it easier to receive school clothing grant.
4. Local authorities do not record information in terms of the Scottish Government's 6 priority family groupsⁱ for those applying for and/or receiving school clothing grant. Thus, local authorities cannot monitor if certain groups are less likely to apply for or receive the grant under their local Child Poverty Action Plans.
5. Eighteen local authorities have never paid more than the national minimum school clothing grant. However, other local authorities have taken a different approach, for example, in 2023-2024 East Dunbartonshire is providing double the national minimum school clothing grant (£240 for primary and £300 for secondary pupils). In 2022-2023 six authorities made an extra payment over the winter months ranging from £20 to £150.

Key recommendations

1. Automatic payments - To ensure that as many eligible families as possible receive school clothing grant, automatic payments should be introduced in all local authorities.
2. Six priority family groups - Local authorities should record information in relation to the Scottish Government's 6 priority family groups to help monitor and review local Child Poverty Action Plans.
3. Level of school clothing grant - The Scottish Government has pledged to uplift the school clothing grant by inflation in 2024-25 but a larger increase is needed to cover the total cost of school clothing.
4. Eligibility for school clothing grant - It would be useful to review the eligibility criteria as school uniform banks report an increased need for support from those who are not eligible for the grant.

Background

In England, Northern Ireland and Wales there is national guidance on school uniform which emphasises affordability and regular reviews of exclusive supplier arrangements. In Scotland it was found that 20% of publicly funded secondary schools had exclusive suppliers for school uniformⁱⁱ. In 2022 the Scottish Government conducted a consultation on national school uniform guidance. A report on an analysis of the consultation responses has been published.ⁱⁱⁱ Draft guidance is due to be released in early 2024.

School clothing is a national and local government concern. Section 54 of the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 specifies that 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. Furthermore, the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 requires Scottish Ministers to prepare a delivery plan that includes measures to support local authorities to consider the automatic payment of benefits and support.

A national minimum school clothing grant of £100 was introduced in 2018 through agreement between the Scottish Government and local authorities, up until then individual local authorities decided on whether and how much grant or the value of vouchers to provide. The school clothing grant is meant to cover school uniform and Physical Education (PE) kit. From 2021-22, for the first time, the national minimum school clothing grant was different for primary schools (£120) and secondary schools (£150). The minimum amounts have remained the same for 2022-23 and 2023-24. However, the Scottish Government has committed itself to raising the grant by inflation for the 2024-25 school year.^{iv}

While £150 for secondary and £120 for primary pupils per year appears generous in comparison to other parts of the UK, in 2023 The Children's Society has found that families in the UK spent on average £442 per year on secondary school uniform and £287 for primary school uniform.^v

Study

A Freedom of Information request was sent to all 32 local authorities in May 2023 and an online survey was sent to 25 school uniform banks and other organisations that provide school clothing in June 2023. It was found that there has been a drop in the number of children awarded school clothing grant in 2022-23. Down from 177,789 children in 2021-22 to 174,568 in 2022-23. This is while rates of child poverty have increased (see table below) and is the first time there has been a drop in the number of children awarded the grant since its creation in 2018. This reduction may be a result of universal free school meals (FSM). With families not having to apply for FSM they may not have applied for school clothing grant on its own. All 32 local authorities responded to the Freedom of Information request stating that they did not record information on who applies for school clothing grant against the Scottish Government's six priority family groups of lone parent families, families with a disabled adult or child, larger families (with 3 or more children), minority ethnic families, families with children under the age of 1 and mother under the age of 25 years.

Tables below: Local authority school clothing grants by rate of child poverty, 2018/19 to 2023/24

Local authority with over 30% of children living in poverty	Poverty rates, %, 2021/22 (2020/21) *	2018/19 £	2019/20 £	2020/21 £	2021/22 £	2022/23 £	2023/24** £
Glasgow City	32.0 (29.4)	110	110	110	120/150	120/ 150	120/ 150

Local authorities with 25-30% of children living in poverty	Poverty rates, %, 2021/22 (2020/21) *	2018/19 £	2019/20 £	2020/21 £	2021/22 £	2022/23 £	2023/24** £
North Ayrshire	29.0 (24.7)	100	100	100	120/150	120/150	126/157.50
Clackmannanshire	28.3 (23.9)	100	100	100	120/150	120/150	120/150
West Dunbartonshire	27.6 (23.4)	100	100	100	120/150	300 ↑	150/150
East Ayrshire	27.2 (24.0)	No figures	110	120	120/150	120/150	120/150
Dundee City	27.1 (22.5)	100	100	100	120/150	120/150	120/150
North Lanarkshire	26.6 (23.2)	110	100	110	140/150	140/150	140/160
Fife***	26.1 (22.1)	100	100	100	120/150	120/150 + 50	170/200
Dumfries and Galloway	26.0 (22.9)	100	134	134	134/150	134/150	134/150
Falkirk	25.3 (21.5)	120	120	120	120/150	120/150	125/155

Local authorities with 20-25% of children living in poverty	Poverty rates, %, 2021/22 (2020/21) *	2018/19 £	2019/20 £	2020/21 £	2021/22 £	2022/23 £	2023/24** £
South Ayrshire	24.4 (20.6)	110/110	100	110	120/150	120/150	120/150
Angus	24.2 (20.6)	Not stated	100	100	120/150	120/150	120/150
Moray	24.1 (21.3)	100	100	100	120/150	120/150	Amount not on website
West Lothian	23.9 (21.1)	125/ 135	125/ 135	125/135	150/180	150/180 + 80	150/180
Scottish Borders	23.4 (19.5)	100	100	100	120/150	120/150 + 100	120/150
Renfrewshire	23.3 (19.5)	100/ 120	100	100	120/150	120/150	120/150
Highland	22.8 (20.5)	140	140	140	140/150	140/150	140/150
South Lanarkshire	22.8 (19.6)	100/100	130	130	130/150	130/150	130/150
Midlothian	22.7 (20.0)	Not provided	Not provided	Not provided	120/150	120/150	120/150
Inverclyde	24.4 (18.2)	100 + 45	145	145	150/150	150/150	150/150
Perth and Kinross	21.9 (18.7)	100	100	100	120/150	120/150	126/157.50
Argyll and Bute	21.7 (18.9)	100	100	100	120/150	120/150	120/150

Local authorities with 20-25% of children living in poverty	Poverty rates, %, 2021/22 (2020/21) *	2018/19 £	2019/20 £	2020/21 £	2021/22 £	2022/23 £	2023/24** £
						+ 75	
East Lothian	21.1 (18.9)	100	100	100	120/150	130/160 ↑	130/160
Aberdeen City	20.5 (18.3)	100	100	100	120/150	120/150 + 20	Amount not on website
Stirling	20.8 (18.1)	130	130	130	130/150	200/ 200 ↑	Amount not on website
Orkney Islands	20.1 (18.2)	100	100	100	120/150	120/150	120/150

Local authorities with 15-20% of children living in poverty	Poverty rates, 2021/22 (2020/21) *	2018/19 £	2019/20 £	2020/21 £	2021/22 £	2022/23 £	2023/24** £
Na h-Eileanan Siar	19.8 (16.7)	100	100	100 + 100	120/ 150	120/150	120/150
City of Edinburgh	19.5 (17.2)	100	100	100	120/150	120/150 + 150	120/150
Aberdeenshire	16 (14.2)	100	100	100	120/150	120/150	120/150
Shetland Islands	15.4 (18.7)	100	100	100	120/150	120/150	180/225

Local authorities with under 15% of children living in poverty	Poverty rates, 2021/22 (2020/21) *	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24**
East Dunbartonshire****	14.9 (12.5)	100	Not available	100	120/150	240/300 ↑	240/300
East Renfrewshire	14.4 (12.8)	100	100	100	120/150	120/150	120/150

Key to table

Figures in **bold** indicate grant higher than the national minimum and ↑ ↓ denotes an increase or decrease.

* End Child Poverty (2021, 2022) estimates of poverty rates after housing costs.^{vi}

** Figures accessed via <https://www.mygov.scot/clothing-grants> for each local authority

*** Freedom of information Act 2002 requests for information reference 37609 and 45842

**** Additional monies from the Scottish Government Local Authority COVID Economic Recovery Fund have been used to help families cope with the current cost of living increases in 2022/23.

Local authorities in Scotland take different views on the use of council collected data for automatic payment of school clothing grant with 12 local authorities making automatic payments. These payments are triggered by families with children applying for housing benefit, council tax reduction, free school meals. One authority stated the reason that automatic payment could not be made was because that local authority pegged its criteria to those set by the Scottish Government for FSM and therefore, they did not control the criteria for the grant. Just seven local authorities had put in place joint payment of FSM and school clothing grant.

The most common reason for local authorities turning down applications for school clothing grant is that income is too high. Other reasons include duplicate applications, applicants not receiving eligible benefits, not qualifying under the set criteria, the child not living with the person who had applied for the grant, evidence not being provided, change of circumstances, no record of the child on the education system, the grant having been paid already that school year, the child had left school, or the young person was at school 'beyond the school leaving age'.

Sixteen local authorities actively identified families that were entitled to school clothing grant, for example through housing benefit data, council tax reduction, headteachers identifying this, Children's Services Finance Team, Family Support Workers. Other local authorities referred to the mechanisms they had in place for sending out information to parents and having income maximisation advisers.

The shortfall between the amount of school clothing grant and the cost of clothing and shoeing a child/ young person for a school year is highlighted in the extra payments that were made by six local authorities in 2022-23 school year. Six local authorities made one-off payments of between £20 and £150. Dundee referred to help through clothing banks and links with local stores who provide clothes and East Dunbartonshire referred to their doubling of the school clothing grant payment.

[Survey to school clothing and uniform banks](#)

An online survey of school clothing and uniform banks in Scotland was completed by 11 organisations spread across Scotland. The organisations accepted self-referrals as well as referrals from others and they provided school clothing help and signposting services. The organisations were set up between 2011 and 2020. The organisations had 28 members of paid staff between them and a total of 229 volunteers. Most received both new and pre-loved (second hand) clothes. They received a mixture of funding with 5 receiving local authority funding and most fundraising for their activities as well. Three of the uniform banks collected information in relation to the Scottish Government's 6 priority family groups.

Challenges faced by school clothing and uniform banks were school branding and logos. Items with school logos are far more expensive and this is one of the reasons that several school uniform banks do not supply logo-ed items. It was also mentioned that items with logos are of poor quality, and it is harder to get mainstream textile recyclers to accept branded clothing. There are difficulties for families who are not eligible to receive school clothing grant and some clothing banks have recently seen a large increase in need, with demand for their services doubling. They have noted a greater demand for basics such as footwear and coats. High schools insisting on 100% black shoes was identified as a problem by more than one school uniform bank.

Other issues identified by the school uniform banks related to how it is hard for families to source items such as turquoise polo t-shirts, maroon blazers and tartan skirts. Schools do not take into account that tartan items are very expensive and unique to each school. School uniform banks are aware of issues with the ability of children to deal with buttons, zips and tights as they are more used to wearing joggers and leggings. The sensory needs of children and young people were

not taken into consideration. This is especially important for children and young people who are autistic or neurodivergent. There are also challenges with children and young people's sizes increasing. Primary pupils needing clothes for age 13 or 14 years and at secondary school young people needing XXL adult size clothing which is difficult to source in school-style clothing.

One organisation noted that schools "do not truly reflect the issues facing families such as the cost-of-living crisis/ accessibility/ comfort issues in their policies and put undue pressure on families".

[Consultation on Scottish guidance on school clothing](#)

In the Scottish Government's 2021-22 Programme of Government a commitment was made to issue national guidance on school uniform. In May to October 2022 a consultation on this guidance took place and an analysis of the responses was published in June 2023. From the responses to the consultation, it was clear that the two main concerns were affordability and sustainability. The Children's Parliament worked with primary school pupils and their main concern was to do with school clothing being comfortable. Therefore, it to be of most use the national guidance on school clothing should prioritise its affordability, comfort and sustainability and provide a mechanism for effective review and monitoring of policies and practices in schools. One way to ensure that school uniform policies and practices are regularly reviewed and include children and young people's involvement would be to include the need for consultation on school clothing with pupils and parents into the school inspection process.

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ⁱ Scottish Government (2023) *Tackling child poverty priority families overview* <https://www.gov.scot/publications/tackling-child-poverty-priority-families-overview/>

ⁱⁱ Shanks, R. (2020) *Affordability of secondary school uniform in Scotland: Policy Briefing*, University of Aberdeen: Aberdeen. Available from: http://aura.abdn.ac.uk/bitstream/2164/15388/1/Shanks_ABDN_AffordabilityOfSecondary_VoR.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ Scottish Government (2023) *School uniform: consultation analysis*. Analysis report on the responses we received to our consultation on school uniforms in Scotland. At <https://www.gov.scot/publications/analysis-report-responses-consultation-school-uniform-scotland/>

^{iv} Scottish Government (2023) *Equality, Opportunity, Community. Our Programme for Government*. At <https://www.gov.scot/programme-for-government/>

^v <https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/66027873>

^{vi} See <https://endchildpoverty.org.uk/child-poverty/>