

Dressed for success:

insights from teachers and industry
on school uniform costs and habits



Introduction

Throughout April and May, The Schoolwear Association conducted two detailed surveys to understand the role school uniform continues to play in creating a secure and inclusive educational environment for children and young people across the country – and the impact of recent Government guidance in reducing costs for families.

The first, a survey of 9,000 UK teachers and headteachers, via TeacherTapp, shows that uniform continues to play a vital role in maintaining a level playing field and reducing bullying in the classroom. Interestingly, it also evidences what we have long understood to be the case – without uniform, children would be left subject to intense peer pressure to keep up with latest fashion trends – resulting in far higher clothing costs for families.

The second survey was a poll of the Schoolwear Association’s members – representing 851 secondary schools working with families across the UK – 25% of all secondary schools and 897,800 pupils.

Through this, we have found that despite skyrocketing inflation, school uniform costs have remained stable for families. This is due, in part, to swap shops and second-hand uniform sales held across the country by our members who run reliable small businesses that over the years, have become the fabric of their respective local communities.

Across both surveys one thing is clear – recent Government guidance has resulted in lower uniform costs for families – and both schools and industry are committed to working together to help families through their current cost-of-living crisis.

The importance of school uniform

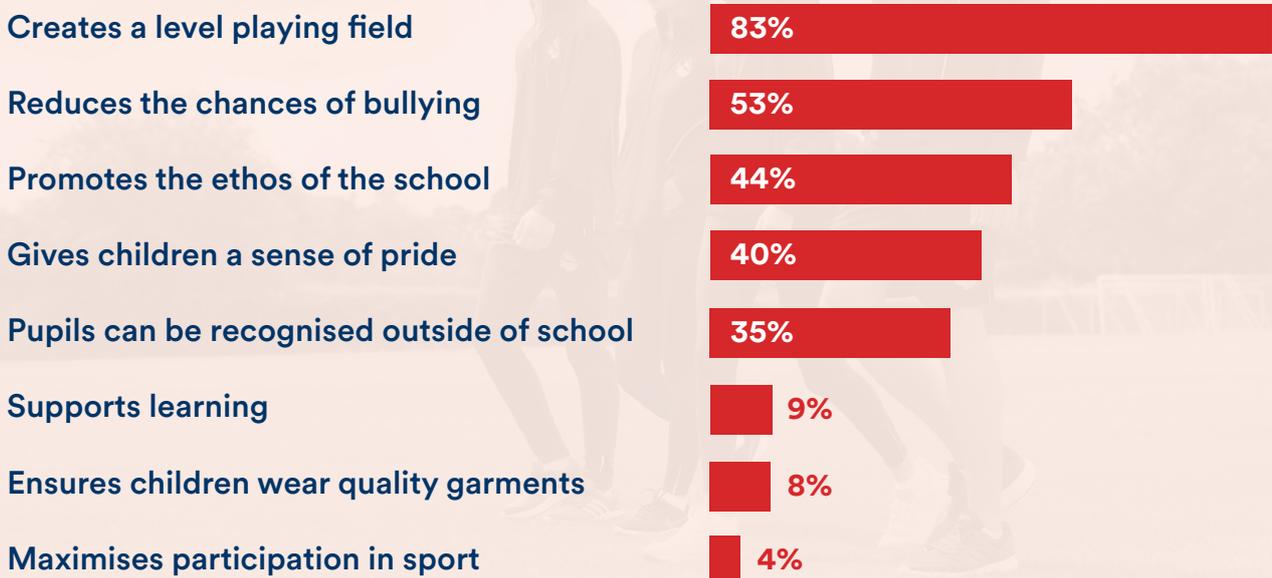
School uniform fosters a sense of belonging and creates an equal starting point for all pupils and young people regardless of their background. It reduces the chances of discrimination and allows both students and teachers to focus on their education.

According to TeacherTapp research, teachers recognise the importance of school uniform in preventing bullying and creating a level playing field. The new research shows that without school uniform, over half (59%) of all secondary school teachers believe bullying would increase, while the overwhelming

majority of teachers across the board (83%) said uniform was vital to creating a level playing field.

Other benefits recognised by teachers are outlined in the table below – only 4% said that they did not think there were any benefits to school uniform at all:

What do you think are the main benefits of school uniform?



The cost of school uniform

Following a survey of school uniform suppliers, The Schoolwear Association has found the average cost of compulsory secondary school uniform and sportswear items in England in 2023 is **£96.24 per pupil**.

6%

Children's clothing costs have increased by 6% while school uniform costs have seen a real-terms fall in price.

Food prices have rocketed up by 19% amid soaring inflation rates – just below 10% at the time of writing. The costs of children's clothes have also been strongly impacted by this inflationary pressure, up nearly 6% between Jan 2021 and Jan 2022.

However, school uniform has bucked this trend. Despite the broader inflationary pressures increasing pressures on families, school uniform costs have seen a real-terms decrease. The average cost of school uniform has increased by just 0.5% since 2022 and remains well below the 2020 average of £101.19 per pupil. In real terms, this equates to a significant decrease in school uniform costs overall, and demonstrates how the new statutory guidance has effectively reduced the number of school branded items that schools are specifying – keeping costs down for families.

Children wear school uniforms for approximately 195 days of the year, making it crucial for garments to be made of high-quality materials and designed to withstand daily wear and tear. This means school uniforms hold significant value for money and can be handed down to siblings, minimising environmental impact and maximising affordability.

77%

77% of secondary school teachers say that if children had complete freedom in their clothing choices at school, children would worry about what to wear each day.

The survey of teachers also suggested that school uniform was a crucial factor in reducing costs for families, providing children with quality, durable clothing which lasts pupils' school career. According to the research, this was a particular concern for secondary school teachers, as teenagers typically become more concerned with appearances and feel peer and social pressure to abide by the latest fashion trends.

66%

66% said that without school uniform, teens would most likely demand more expensive, and designer, clothing from parents to keep up with latest fashion trends.

The impact of the guidance

Due to strong advocacy for school uniforms to offer the best value for money by Labour MP Mike Amesbury, the government's new guidance has yielded significant improvements in the affordability of school uniforms and is already benefitting families across the nation.

The guidance was published by the Department of Education last year, and aimed to reduce the cost of school uniforms for families. It instructed schools keep the number of branded items to a minimum as far as possible, as well as ensuring second-hand uniform was easily available and clearly signposted for both existing and prospective pupils.

Our survey results show that the guidance is having an impact – schools are reviewing uniform policies and changing their uniform as a direct result of the guidance.

Despite only coming into effect for this academic year, schools have adapted their uniform policies in line with the updated guidance – nearly half (49%) of school uniform providers said they believed that more than 50% of the schools they worked with had reviewed the guidance, and a quarter (24%) of schools had changed their uniform as a result of the guidance.

This was echoed by Head Teachers in our TeacherTapp survey, with 61% saying they had already reviewed their uniform policy and

made a variety of changes, with only one-in-four saying they have not reviewed policies in line with guidance at all. Secondary school teachers were also more likely to say that their school had reviewed their policy, compared to primary schools. However, it is important to note that most schools are promoting positive school uniform policies and therefore shouldn't need to make amendments.

The survey results, supported by a real terms drop in the cost of school uniform show the new guidance has brought about positive change for pupils, families and schools and will continue to develop as we head into the next academic year.

38%

Of the schools that had recently reviewed their policy, the most common measure taken was reducing the number of branded garments.

The impact of the cost-of-living crisis

The impact of the cost-of-living crisis can be seen in shifting school uniform sales and buying habits – but schools are responding by taking measures to support struggling families such as swap shops.

More families are buying ‘up a size’ to save money where they can on school uniform, with a quarter of school uniform shops saying they have noticed this behaviour from customers. Buying a larger size to cut long-term costs was most common for blazers and jumpers.

Similarly, there has been an increase in parents and carers enquiring about second-hand school uniforms, with 37% of school uniform providers reporting an increase.

In the face of the cost-of-living crisis, industry and schools are working hand in hand to support families with the cost of uniform.

What our members say

“We offer a savings club and lay away schemes that enables parents to put away their uniform requirements as early as May and either pay it in instalments online or all when they collect in August.”

“In February 2022 we reviewed all supply lines and have offered budget cost uniforms alongside the big brands, and we have seen an increase in sales of 56% in our first full year.

We have also introduced payment plans, and worked with all schools we can to reduce the average price of uniform by 40% averaged across the board.”

“We started a uniform bank 4 years ago that we have now extended it to cover all 50+ schools. Most items are sold at £2.50 and then are reinvested into the scheme.”

“We review with each school annually their uniform and offer any improvements bearing in mind that uniform is often handed down to up to 4 children, so any changes have a cost implication for the parents, we advise on the best way of managing any uniform change.”

“We offer ‘bundles’ for new Year 7 pupils, everything they need to start at a reduced price and have saving and loyalty schemes too.”

“For several years, we have provided support for families with the cost of secondary school uniform, typically at the value of around £1500 to £2000 per school.

We also provide free uniform for refugee students where we’ve been made aware of their status.”

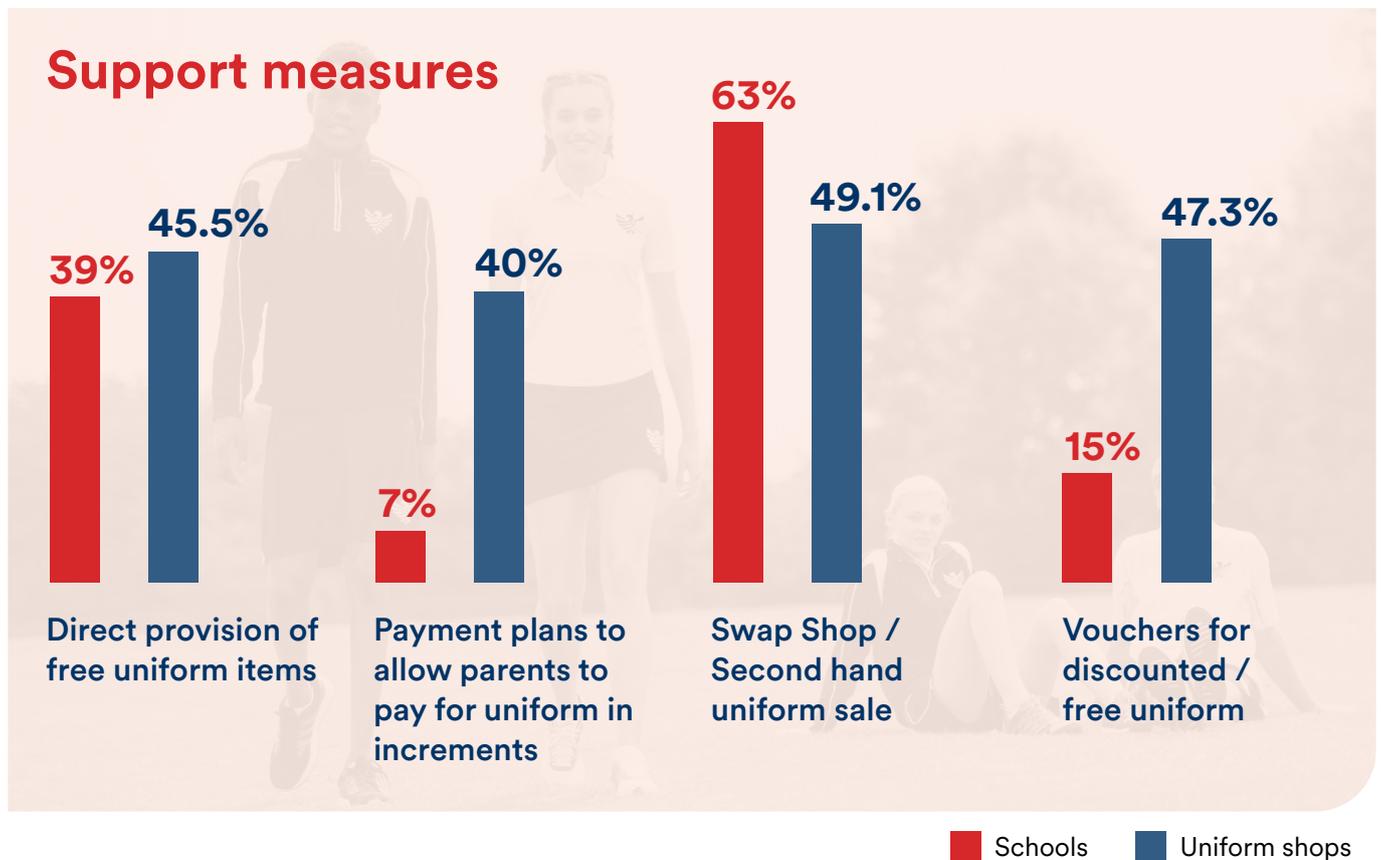
The impact of the cost-of-living crisis continued

Of the measures taken to support families by school uniform providers, swap shops/second hand uniform sales were the most common measure, with 49% of providers offering this to help support families.

Here, we can also attribute this rise in promoting ‘swap shops’ as a mark of success

of the new guidance, with nearly a quarter (23%) of providers saying they have introduced swap shops as a direct result of the new guidance.

Other popular measures to support families through the cost-of-living crisis were as follows:



Summary

The findings overwhelmingly demonstrate that school uniforms continue to play a vital role in maintaining a level playing field, reducing bullying, and preventing peer pressure related to fashion trends. Despite children’s clothes prices increasing by more than 6%, the average cost of compulsory school uniforms has remained stable for families, thanks in part to the efforts of Schoolwear Association members working to mitigate cost increases through their supply chains and locally with

schools to ensure their uniform policies are the most cost effective for parents. Furthermore, the increasing focus on swap shops and second-hand uniform sales has helped to reduce ongoing costs for parents, who can access good quality items for less. This all demonstrates the value of the new statutory guidance in keeping costs down for families and shows a clear positive impact, with schools reviewing their uniform policies and making changes to align with the guidance.

Methodology

TeacherTapp

TeacherTapp is a daily survey app that asks over 9,000 teachers questions each day and reweights the results to make them representative. The survey for the Schoolwear Association was conducted between the 25th and 26th April.

Schoolwear Association survey of members

As the cost-of-living crisis continues to keep a spotlight on uniform costs, Schoolwear Association surveyed its members to build a picture that accurately demonstrates how the Government's guidance is working as schools are reviewing their policies and compulsory uniform costs remain low, how the industry is working closely with schools to provide affordability support to those families that need it, and how the industry is largely comprised of small local businesses, who are suffering now too with a drop in sales and customer numbers.

The member survey draws on the uniform costs for 851 schools across England, Wales and Scotland.



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