

SA POSITION DOCUMENT

On the 29th November, the Welsh Government launched a consultation on plans to introduce new statutory guidance on school uniforms in Wales. The Schoolwear Association has compiled this document in response to it.

Representing the school-specific uniform industry in the UK, the association supports manufacturers, distributors and retailers. It believes the proposed regulations could have a detrimental impact on many of these independent, sometimes family-run, businesses.

What would the change mean?

If the plans get the go-ahead, schools and their governing bodies will have to re-evaluate their school uniform policies – in particular, how they can bring down the cost.

Changes in the proposed policy mean schools could be limited to a uniform consisting of basic clothing and colours, but not a specific style of garment, for instance, a smart blazer.

Furthermore, the proposed regulations would call into question whether school logos, and the tradition they encompass, are even strictly necessary. If they are, logos could be limited to a single garment and/or provided free-of-charge, increasing the cost-burden on schools. In a departure from high-quality embroidered designs, a school's identity may be reduced to a badge sewn or stuck onto any piece of clothing.

With the consultation period now underway, The Schoolwear Association will be opposing the proposed change, based upon the points below.

Schools will no longer get a say

Should the regulations be introduced, schools will see their choice of uniforms severely diminished. Every school currently has the freedom to select a specific colour and dress code for their uniform, yet the proposals would remove much of that choice from the school, instead leaving just a colour code to be adhered to.

This would lead to inconsistencies in pupils' appearance, with one child wearing a blazer, one a jumper, and another in a cardigan. To compound matters further, one supplier's version of 'navy blue' may look very different from another's – which surely defeats the purpose of a standard uniform?

One of the main reasons for having a proper uniform is to help equalise every student no matter their socio-economic situation. This is particularly key for secondary schools where discipline and standards are essential for a school to function effectively. The only time there is a significant cost to parents is in Year 7, when the child moves to their new school. The Schoolwear Association advocates that "Every Child Is Worth It", meaning that all parts of the process, specialist suppliers, the schools and local support networks should all work together to help benefit all students. Schoolwear Association members are encouraged to also offer 'Lay Aside' and 'Saving Schemes' to help parents.

Reported costs of School Uniform can be highly misleading. The Schoolwear Association has clear evidence of how much the average uniform actually costs, for primary and secondary state schools. It usually represents good value, particularly when the life and condition of the uniform is taken into account. Cheap price doesn't always correlate with best value.

Saving on cost may impact on quality, and could actually end up costing much more!

When discussing affordability, it's important to remember that there are usually significant differences in the price of state and private school uniforms. This leads to the common misconception that *all* school-specific uniforms cost more.

The new legislation would mean parents are likely to select low-priced uniforms from high street stores and supermarkets. Although they may be cheaper at the time of purchase, they can prove to be a false economy if they have to be replaced more frequently. All-too-often, these garments are ill suited to the rigours of school life when worn every day. At the other end of the spectrum, many students will cajole their parents into buying expensive brands from sports and fashion retailers. This could have a major impact on the harmony within the school.

The impact on pupils

Drawing on the combined experience of our members, we understand the role a smart, consistent and quality school uniform plays in fostering a sense of pride and belonging among pupils. This, in turn, helps to promote productivity and concentration in the classroom.

Inconsistencies in appearance will do little to support these goals and, in some cases, could lead to poor behaviour and low confidence. Pupils from low-income families may be left feeling inadequate compared to those who wear more expensive shoes and clothing.

Irregular standards among the school uniform will add to the stress young people face today, potentially distracting them from learning and gaining an education.

More than anything, a properly balanced uniform unites pupils in the same way that it brings sports teams and companies together. It means they look smart while representing the school on school trips or during their commute – but an easily-identifiable logo can also promote safety, confidence and enable teachers to spend more of their time teaching.

Moving away from a throwaway culture – sustainability is key

As well as adversely impacting pupils and schools, it's important to remember cheap uniforms can also be detrimental to the environment.

There is no escaping a culture of fast fashion in supermarkets and on the high street – yet independent retailers, distributors and manufacturers tend to have shorter supply chains and focus on quality, rather than solely on low prices. Cheaper school uniforms may need to be replaced more often, which makes them less sustainable, especially if they are thrown away rather than passed on, or recycled.

Most schools are proud of their environmental credentials, whether it's recycling or encouraging children to walk rather than travel by car. A culture of 'fast fashion' does little to support their work on sustainability.

The more durable uniform is, the more likely it is to be passed down to younger siblings, friends or sold at a second-hand sale. Some supermarkets offer a 100-day guarantee, but what does that really mean? It certainly does not represent a full school year.

More pressure on the high street

Everyone is familiar with the challenge independent high street retailers face, from high operating costs, big chain stores and online competition. These regulations will further add to the pressure and could cause some to cease trading completely.

Many schoolwear retailers play a key role in their communities, building relationships with families, providing employment and retaining money within the local area. At a time when these institutions need support, it seems absurd that parents should be directed to large corporations with headquarters elsewhere in the UK, or even abroad.

We need your support

If there were to be proposals for sensible, balanced, school uniform guidelines, The Schoolwear Association would be supportive. We would look to work with the Welsh Government to help produce positive guidelines, that would lead to a better outcome for everyone involved, especially

the students, their parents and the schools. A copy of the current SA Uniform Guidelines is enclosed.

The Schoolwear Association is asking for your support to prevent what we view to be a negative legislation from being passed in Wales. As outlined above, we believe it will have a negative impact on pupils, parents, schools and our members. *Not only that, but if the law is passed in Wales, it could only be a matter of time before we see similar rules being introduced in the rest of the UK.*

The consultation is now well underway – and it is your opportunity to make your views known. Only by taking part in the discussion can we ensure that this process is as fair as it can be to everyone involved.

The consultation period ends on **21st February 2019**.

You can read the proposed changes here:

<https://beta.gov.wales/sites/default/files/consultations/2018-11/draft-statutory-guidance-for-school-governing-bodies-on-school-uniform-and-appearance-policies-1.pdf>.