

Driving down costs for families: The case for abolishing the school uniform tax



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Introduction

School uniforms are vital to the fabric of our schools. They act as a social leveller and reduce bullying, they promote pride and belonging among pupils and the wider community, and they have also been shown to boost children’s academic performance.

We are the leading organisation representing the schoolwear industry, and we understand more than anyone the benefits that uniforms bring to our schools and pupils. The provision of high quality, long-lasting school uniforms is at the heart of our ethos.

However, we also understand the financial pressures on families up and down the country, particularly since the start of the pandemic. The cost of a school uniform, and other expenses like books and stationery that parents have to meet, should never be a barrier to attending a particular school, and so uniforms must represent value for money for families.

Therefore, we are proud that over the last year industry and schools have stepped up and worked together to reduce the overall cost of compulsory uniform items, and we have supported the ongoing work to put school uniform guidance on a statutory footing.

Now it is time for the Government to take clear action to support families in meeting the costs of uniform by abolishing VAT on all school-specific uniform items – the so called school uniform tax – saving them millions of pounds a year.

In return, our members are committed to passing any savings from a VAT cut directly to families, to continuing to work closely with schools to ensure their uniform policies are as proportionate and reasonable as possible, and to continue to support families to meet the cost of uniforms, for example through the provision of second hand uniform sales and swap shops, payment plans, and voucher schemes.



About the Schoolwear Association

The Schoolwear Association represents retailers, suppliers, and manufacturers involved in the supply of school uniform, working to drive up standards and embracing a set of core values to make sure that parents get a fair deal.

Our membership includes more than 250 SMEs, which are principally local family businesses, based in high street locations that support their local communities. Together, our members clothe more than three quarters of the country’s schoolchildren, providing sustainable, long-lasting and affordable school uniform for families across the UK.



Driving down the costs of school uniform

School uniform policies must be underpinned by an accurate understanding of uniform costs, and so each year we conduct the largest industry analysis of the cost of school uniform, accounting for over 11% of state secondary schools in England, clothing over 385,000 pupils.

This year we found the average cost of compulsory secondary school uniform and sportswear items is £93 per pupil when they start secondary school. These figures are based on the actual retail price of garments charged to parents in our members' stores, reflecting the true cost of secondary school uniforms. They are up to a third lower than other estimates have suggested.

We do recognise that this may still be a big upfront cost for some families, but it is important to put these costs into context. School uniform is worn for around 195 days a year, and less than half of these items need to be replaced each year. Therefore, we calculated that the average annual spend per pupil on compulsory items at secondary school works out to just £33.21 a year, or 17 pence a day.

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We are proud to have worked closely with schools to bring these costs down too, while maintaining the quality of garments. Our data shows that over the last year the combined average basket cost of compulsory secondary school uniform and sportswear items has reduced from £101.19 per pupil in 2020 to £93 this year, a fall of over 8%.

Taken as a whole, uniform costs are manageable for the majority of parents, and a cost-effective way of clothing a child.

However, we recognise that some families will be under greater pressure and already struggle with the cost of living. The Schoolwear Association is committed to helping these individual families, and our members work actively in their local communities to support parents to meet the cost of uniform.

Through our Code of Practice, where sole supplier arrangements are in place, our members are committed to supporting children in low-income families by providing hardship measures such as swap shops, second hand uniform sales, payment plans, and voucher schemes.



Working together to reuse and recycle school uniforms

Earlier this year, our member uniform supplier Trutex launched a new campaign with Outwood Grange Academies Trust, which consists of over 30 schools across the North of England, to help lower the cost of uniforms by making high-quality recycled uniforms available.

As part of the initiative, each Outwood academy will house a recycle bin that will enable students and their families to donate items of school uniform that they no longer wear or need. These items will then be collected by Trutex to be repaired, if necessary, washed and made ready for purchase as pre-loved uniform items.

The figures behind the reason for the campaign are eye-catching as by extending the life of clothing by just nine months can reduce carbon and water usage by up to 10%, while helping reduce the staggering amount of garments that are sent to landfill every year, a figure that currently stands at over 350,000 tonnes of clothing every year.

The campaign between Outwood and Trutex sees the partnership between the two building on the success of the last academic year, which saw over 600,000 plastic bottles saved from landfill thanks to Outwood uniforms being made using fabric that has been manufactured from recycled drinks bottles. Each Trutex blazer saves around 36 plastic bottles from ending up in a landfill site and boys trousers, 19 bottles.

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Katy Bradford, Chief Operating Officer at Outwood, said:

At Outwood, we take our responsibilities seriously and we are passionate about the environment and promoting the importance of sustainability across the Outwood Family. We believe this campaign, and its focus on recycling, can help not only deliver cost effective benefits for parents but also help spread the important message of sustainability and aid in improving our environment by reducing the amount of clothes in landfill.

Katy Bradford

Chief Operating Officer at Outwood

“

Matthew Easter, CEO at Trutex, said:

We're excited to launch this uniform recycling initiative with Outwood to help offer cost effective uniform for parents and also utilise the quality of our garments that are often grown out of before worn out. Our ethos is "Made to Last" uniform and by making the uniform last further than the first purchaser, we can significantly help reduce costs and create a more sustainably provision. As a carbon neutral business reducing carbon and water in production is important to us and also reducing the clothing that ends up in landfill.

Matthew Easter

CEO at Trutex

Cost is an understandably important consideration for parents when buying a school uniform, but it should not be the only factor in their decision making.

Value for money should be an equally important consideration because school uniforms that are made of higher quality materials will be longer-lasting and more durable, reducing costs for families over the long term as they won't need to be replaced due to wear. Such garments are also better suited to be sold on in second hand uniform sales or passed on to younger siblings too.

Our members are committed to supporting families to meet uniform costs where we are able to, but the industry can only go so far. To support parents further, it is necessary for government intervention and therefore we are calling on the Government to abolish VAT on all school-specific uniform items, thereby scrapping the school uniform tax.



VAT on school uniform items

Since 1973, clothing and shoes for young children have been charged at zero rate VAT. However, clothing items for children 14 years old or older, or taller or larger than the average, are subject to the full standard rate of 20% VAT. This includes school uniform garments.

According to VAT Notice 714¹, which is focused on young children's clothing and footwear, the average body measurements for a 14 year old or above are as below in the table, meaning that all clothes designed to fit children of this height and size are charged VAT.

Body part measured	Boys centimetres	Boys inches	Girls centimetres	Girls inches
Height	163cm	64.0"	161cm	63.0"
Chest	84cm	33.0"	85cm	33.5"
Waist	70cm	27.5"	69cm	27.0"
Hips	85cm	33.5"	90cm	35.5"
Arm (shoulder to wrist)	59cm	23.0"	57cm	22.5"
Inside leg	77cm	30.0"	76cm	0.0"

However, data compiled by the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, based on official World Health Organisation statistics, demonstrate that children in the UK are now taller and larger than they ever have been², and we estimate that these official measurements are now closer to the average 12 or 13 year old than a 14 year old.

The Government's VAT measurement chart has simply failed to keep up with modern growth changes, meaning that parents are likely to be paying VAT on uniform items for their children before they reach the age of 14.

Many parents also purchase school uniform items, particularly blazers, before their children are ready to fit into them so that they fit large and accommodate their growth.

In reality this means that some parents of 11, 12, and 13 year olds are buying uniform items that are subject to VAT, often without realising that this brings additional cost. Furthermore, every secondary school tie is subject to VAT as they are standard sizes.

The reason that VAT has been levied on children's clothing and uniform items is due to historic European Union rules that determined that member states had to coordinate VAT rates to ensure that there was no unfair competition across national borders.

Now that the United Kingdom has left the European Union, there is a huge opportunity for the Government to abolish the school uniform tax by scrapping VAT on all school-specific uniform items to bring down costs for parents.

We estimate that this would then save each family with a child over the age of 14 an average of £18.60 a year if they purchased one of every school-specific garment for their child. In reality we know that school-specific uniform items are durable and many last children a few years each, so this figure is likely to be closer to a saving of £10 a year for each child over the age of 14.

We have carried out research across the schools and retailers we work in England with to calculate:

The average cost of VAT paid by parents on school-specific uniform items across each school each year is

£2,604.00

Extrapolated across the

3,456

secondary schools in England, we can estimate that English parents pay just under

£9 million

on VAT for school-specific uniform items annually



Therefore, we have assessed that abolishing VAT on school-specific uniform in England would only cost HM Treasury approximately £9 million a year. This represents excellent value for money and would help the Government to meet its ambition of helping families to meet the cost of living and ensure that no one is left behind.



The case for abolishing the school uniform tax

The Department for Education's upcoming guidance on school uniform costs is welcome, but the Government can do more to help reduce the financial impact on hard pressed families. Schools and the industry have worked together to bring costs down, so now the Government must act to support families too.

The best way that we believe the Government can show its support for families is by abolishing the school uniform tax. This would be an important step in helping families to meet the cost of uniforms, especially after what has been a difficult year. Each family would make significant savings in clothing their child in school uniform across the lifetime of their time at school, at what is a relatively limited cost to the taxpayer.

This is important too to ensure that the tax system is fair, as the current the tax system penalises some children more than others. It is simply unfair that VAT is charged on uniform items for children aged 14 years old or older, or taller or larger than the average, but not for younger or smaller children. It is essential that all children are treated with parity.

It is also worth considering that VAT is a tax that is levied on non-essential goods, yet the overwhelming majority of schools require their students to wear a uniform, and official Department for Education guidance "strongly" encourages schools to have a uniform³. School uniforms therefore have to be considered as essential, but they are not treated as such in legislation. This must be put right. As the tampon tax was abolished in January because sanitary wear is essential, so should VAT on school uniforms.

The timing is now right too to abolish this tax, as Brexit has given the country new tax freedoms which the Government should take advantage of. As the United Kingdom is no longer bound by the European Union VAT Directive, which mandates member states to coordinate VAT rates to ensure that there is no unfair tax competition across national borders, the opportunity to scrap VAT on school-specific uniforms is ripe.

We understand the Government's concerns that abolishing VAT on all school uniform clothing could lead to smaller adults taking advantage of the tax cut by purchasing generic children's uniform items, such as plain shirts, trousers, and skirts, for themselves. This is why we only propose removing VAT on school-specific, branded items, which would only suitably be worn by children at their school. This approach also keeps costs down for the Treasury and taxpayer.

Our commitment to you

Abolishing the school uniform tax would be a huge step forward for the Government to help relieve the financial burden on hard pressed families.

Alongside this, as an industry we recognise our duty to continues to work hard to ensure that our uniforms represent best value for money, and we are committed to going further to support schools and families in this endeavour.

Through our Code of Practice, our members have pledged to uphold the following five commitments to help ensure school uniforms provide value for money and are as accessible as is possible.

- 01
- As an Association, we are committed to ensuring that our members pass any VAT cut on school uniform items directly on to families.
- 02
- Our members will continue to work closely with schools to ensure their uniform policies are as proportionate and reasonable as possible to ensure costs are kept down for families.
- 03
- Where sole supplier arrangements are in place, our members will continue to commit to offering support where parents are struggling with uniform costs, such as through second hand uniform sales and swap shops, payment plans, and voucher schemes.
- 04
- Our members will ensure that sustainability, quality, and ethical sourcing are important considerations in the production of school uniform garments.
- 05
- Our members will ensure that parents have year-round access to the garments they need and will be able to meet parents' requests for all sizes and colours.

References

¹

HM Revenue & Customs, [Young children's clothing and footwear \(VAT Notice 714\)](#), March 2015

²

Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, [UK-WHO growth charts – 2-18 years](#)

³

Department for Education, [School uniform: Guidance for governing bodies, school leaders, school staff and local authorities](#), September 2013



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