

School Clothing Grant in Scotland Policy Briefing

Summary & main findings

A researcher at the University of Aberdeen has found that in the 2021-22 school year the total paid out for school clothing grant in 31 of the 32 local authorities was **£22,558,489.00** for more than **161,000 children**. The approach taken by councils varies across Scotland with **4 local authorities providing both automatic grants and rollover of school clothing grant from one year to the next and 3 other local authorities making automatic awards** when families are applying for other benefits. **One local authority rolls over the school clothing grant into the next school year** without requiring families to re-apply. This is despite the Scottish Government calling for the automatic payment of benefits such as this¹. In research funded by the University of Aberdeen it was found that there are over **30 dedicated school clothing banks** across Scotland as well as other organisations supporting families with new and/or second-hand clothing for school. With the current cost of living crisis and increasing financial pressures on families with children, the school clothing grant is an important mechanism to ensure access to education, alleviate poverty and reduce stigma.

Key recommendations from the research

1. Local authorities, that do not already do so, consider automatic payment of school clothing grant when other benefits, such as Housing Benefit or Council Tax reduction, are claimed.
2. Local authorities, that do not already do so, consider rolling over school clothing grant from one school year to the next (when there is no change of circumstances).
3. Local authorities consider a higher amount for the first year of secondary schools when there are likely to be more items to buy. This could mirror the Best Start Grant School Age Payment.
4. Schools, that have not done so already, consider costing their uniform policies to ensure that any uniform requirements are affordable within the limits of the local authority's clothing grant.
5. Local authorities and schools, not already doing so, set up ways to donate and share second-hand school clothing and work with school uniform banks and other relevant organisations.

Background

A school uniform guidance consultation is currently underway in Scotland and this briefing is designed to provide background information to stakeholders.² 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. A national minimum school clothing grant of £100 was introduced in

¹ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2017/6/section/9/enacted>

² <https://www.gov.scot/publications/school-uniform-guidance-consultation/pages/1/>

2018 through agreement between the Scottish Government and local authorities, prior to this it was up to individual local authorities to decide on how much to provide. The school clothing grant has 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. However, back in 2020 The Children's Society found that families in the UK spent on average £337 per year on school uniform for each secondary school child.³ The same study found that these costs are more than three times what parents think is a reasonable cost for secondary uniform (£105).

Research Findings

A Freedom of Information request was sent to all 32 local authorities between November 2021 and January 2022 and by June 2022 31 of the 32 had replied (Midlothian did not respond). Repeated checks were made of all local authority websites and the University of Aberdeen funded a small research project on the Affordability and Sustainability of School Uniform in 2021.⁴

It was found that the total allocated for school clothing grant in the 2021-22 school year for 31 of the 32 local authorities was £22,558,489.00 for more than 161,000 children. Table 1 below is organised according to local authority poverty rate with the amount of clothing grant set by each local authority for this and the last 3 school years. It is important to note that the poverty rates were lower in 2020/21 due to the temporary £20 a week uplift to Universal Credit during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The table below shows that a minority of local authorities provide more than the national minimum level, and these are not all local authorities with higher rates of child poverty. Fewer local authorities are now offering more than the minimum. The Scottish minimum is no longer the most generous scheme of its kind in the UK as there is additional £100 provided this year in Wales which brings the basic grant to £225 per learner and £300 for those starting secondary school, recognising the extra costs associated with this transition.⁵ While Scotland now has the Best Start Grant School Age Payment providing a one-off payment of £267.65 for those about to start primary school, there is no similar payment or extra school clothing grant for those starting secondary school. There is no similar national payment in England and in Northern Ireland while the amounts have recently been increased they are still much lower than for Scotland and Wales with £42.90 for primary pupils, and at secondary a total of £87.40 for uniform and PE kit for those under 15 years and £93.40 for those over 15 years old. There have been recent calls to set a cap on school uniform costs there.⁶

³ The Children's Society (2020) *The Wrong Blazer 2020: Time for action on school uniform costs*, available at <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-10/the-wrong-blazer-report-2020.pdf>

⁴ See also Shanks, R. & McKinney, S.J. (2022). Cost and affordability of school uniform and child poverty. *Scottish Educational Review*, 54(1).

⁵ <https://gov.wales/pupil-development-grant-access>

⁶ https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-62444200?at_campaign=KARANGA&at_medium=RSS

Table 1: Local authority school clothing grants by rate of child poverty 2019/20 to 2022/23

Local authority	Poverty rates, 2020/21 (2019/20) *	Clothing grant provided by local authorities			
		2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23**
25-30% of children living in poverty					
Glasgow City	29.4% (32.2%)	£110	£110	£120/£150	£120/£150
20-25% of children living in poverty					
North Ayrshire	24.7% (27.9%)	£100	£100	£120/£150	£120/£150
East Ayrshire	24% (27.3%)	£110	£120	£120/£150	£120/£150
Clackmannanshire	23.9% (27.3%)	£100	£100	£120/£150	£120/£150
West Dunbartonshire	23.4% (26.8%)	£100	£100	£120/£150	£300 ↑
North Lanarkshire+	23.2% (26.5%)	£100	£110	£140/£150	£140/£150
Dumfries and Galloway	22.9% (26.7%)	£134	£134	£134/£150	£134/£150
Dundee City	22.5% (26.8%)	£100	£100	£120/£150	£120/£150
Fife++	22.1% (26.4%)	£100	£100	£120/£150	£120/£150
Falkirk	21.5% (24.8%)	£120	£120	£120/£150	£120/£150
Moray	21.3% (23.4%)	£100	£100	£120/£150	£120/£150
West Lothian	21.1% (24.6%)	£125/135	£125/135	£150/180	£150/£180
Angus	20.6% (24.0%)	£100	£100	£120/£150	£120/£150
South Ayrshire	20.6% (24.8%)	£100	£110	£120/£150	£120/£150
Highland	20.5% (23.6%)	£140	£140	£140/£150	£140/£150
15-20% of children living in poverty					
Midlothian	20.0% (23.9%)	No FOI response		£120/£150	£120/£150
South Lanarkshire	19.6% (23.1%)	£130	£130	£130/£150	£130/£150
Renfrewshire	19.5% (23.1%)	£100	£100	£120/£150	£120/£150
Scottish Borders	19.5% (24.2%)	£100	£100	£120/£150	£120/£150
Argyll and Bute	18.9% (23.3%)	£100	£100	£120/£150	£120/£150
East Lothian	18.9% (24.5%)	£100	£100	£120/£150	£130/£160 ↑
Perth and Kinross	18.7% (22.6%)	£100	£100	£120/£150	£120/£150
Shetland Islands+	18.7% (15.8%)	£100	£100	£120/£150	£120/£150
Aberdeen City	18.3% (21.3%)	£100	£100	£120/£150	£120/£150
Inverclyde	18.2% (23.8%)	£145	£145	£150/£150	£150/£150
Orkney Islands	18.2% (22.7%)	£100	£100	£120/£150	£120/£150
Stirling	18.1% (21.3%)	£130	£130	£130/£150	£200/£200 ↑
City of Edinburgh	17.2% (20.3%)	£100	£100	£120/£150	£120/£150
Na h-Eileanan Siar+++	16.7% (20.7%)	£100	£100	£120/£150	£120/£150
Under 15% of children living in poverty					
Aberdeenshire	14.2% (16.7%)	£100	£100	£120/£150	£120/£150
East Renfrewshire	12.8% (15.8%)	£100	£100	£120/£150	£120/£150
East Dunbartonshire++++	12.5% (16.3%)	Not available	£100	£120/£150	£240/£300 ↑

Key to table

Figures in **bold** indicate grant higher than the national minimum and ↑ denotes 2022/23 increase

* End Child Poverty (2021, 2022) estimates of poverty rates after housing costs.⁷

** 2022/23 figures accessed via <https://www.mygov.scot/clothing-grants> for each local authority with Moray and Na h-Eileanan Siar figures taken from the Daily Record.⁸

+ North Lanarkshire (£140) and Shetland Islands (£100) provide grant per child for early years too

++ Freedom of information Act 2002 request for information reference 37609

+++ December 2020 extra £100 clothing grant provided to buy extra layers for colder classrooms.

++++ East Dunbartonshire Council has used additional monies from the Scottish Government Local Authority COVID Economic Recovery Fund to help families cope with the current cost of living increases and the increase is only for academic year 2022/23.

In Scotland, the eligibility criteria for clothing grant vary across the 32 authorities. Unlike for free school meals, it is up to each local authority to decide on the criteria. 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 on 13 local authority websites is for 16- to 18-year-olds who may qualify based on their own circumstances. While 10 local authorities state that 16–18-year-olds are eligible to claim the grant in their own right, 9 authorities state they must claim for the Education Maintenance Allowance instead. Fourteen local authorities have criteria for the clothing grant which are more generous than free school meals criteria, for example allowing a higher income level. Furthermore, there are 15 authorities that added extra ways to qualify beyond the free school meals criteria (up from 9 authorities in 2021-22). On a less positive note, two authorities' webpages state that asylum seekers are not 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. An unintended consequence of universal school meals in Primary 1 to 5 could be a reduction in the number who apply for school clothing grant as they are often applied for at the same time.

The Scottish Government has called for the automatic payment of benefits such as school clothing grant. In September 2020 there were 6 local authorities making automatic awards when families were applying for other benefits, e.g., housing benefit, Council Tax reduction, and this had risen to 16 authorities by March 2021 but has since dropped to 7 for 2022-23 school year. Four of these authorities also rollover the grant from one year to the next and one other authority also does this. It may be that authorities temporarily used rollover and automatic payments because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

⁷ See <https://endchildpoverty.org.uk/child-poverty/>

⁸ <https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/lifestyle/money/school-uniform-clothing-grants-applications-27515869>

There are different solutions on how to alleviate the costs of school uniform to make them affordable. School uniform banks have spread across Scotland with some for a single school and others covering part or all of a local authority area. Schools have reduced uniform costs by, for example, removing the requirement for logos, reducing the number of mandated items, operating a blazer deposit scheme, uniform donation and exchange, ending exclusive supplier arrangements, as part of wider efforts to reduce the cost of the school day for families.⁹ Earlier research showed 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.¹⁰ For 2022/23 there are five local authorities paying more than the national minimum for secondary school pupils and ten paying more for primary pupils (see table above). Only two local authorities, East and West Dunbartonshire providing £300 for secondary school pupils are providing close to the £337 that The Children’s Society (2020) study found was needed for this age group.

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 new English statutory guidance requires schools to provide second-hand uniform to parents¹¹, the earlier study of school handbooks in Scotland found only 2 schools that mentioned recycling school uniform in their uniform policies. The current consultation on school uniform guidance provides an opportunity to rethink school uniform requirements and ensure that families living in poverty are not made worse off through school uniform policies.

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⁹ Many schools have used resources developed by the Child Poverty Action Group for Scotland. See <https://cpag.org.uk/scotland/CoSD/toolkit> and <https://cpag.org.uk/cost-of-the-school-day>

¹⁰ 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

¹¹ UK Government (2021) *Cost of school uniforms. Statutory guidance on developing a school uniform policy and managing uniform suppliers to ensure the cost of school uniforms is reasonable*. Available from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/cost-of-school-uniforms>