

Written evidence submitted by the Schoolwear Association to The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill Committee (CWSB20).

Executive Summary:

- The proposed cap on school-branded uniform items to three (plus a tie for secondary pupils) will inadvertently increase costs for families, weaken school standards, and put local uniform retailers at significant risk of closure.
- Existing 2021 Department for Education (DfE) guidance has already led to a 25% reduction in uniform costs, proving effective without imposing rigid limits.
- Branded uniforms promote equality, improve behaviour, and foster school pride. Capping branded items as proposed will significantly undermine these benefits.
- Small, specialist schoolwear retailers risk closure, leading to much reduced year-round uniform availability and job losses.
- The proposed policy has lacked proper consultation with key stakeholders, including the schoolwear industry and school leaders.

The Schoolwear Association represents over 200 specialist school uniform retailers across the UK, providing durable, high-quality uniforms and supporting local communities. We are submitting this evidence to highlight the risks associated with the proposed cap on branded school uniform items in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill and to advocate for a more balanced, evidence-based approach.

We believe the Government's proposal in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill—to limit school authorities to a maximum of three branded uniform items (or three plus a tie for secondary schools)—will increase long-term costs for families, harm children's wellbeing, and reduce meaningful support for financially struggling parents.

Impact on Families:

1. Higher long-term costs:
 - Branded items produced by specialist school uniform businesses, such as blazers, last longer and are worn on average for 2.4 years, compared to just one year for cheaper supermarket alternatives.
 - Families spend an average of £92.35 per pupil on compulsory secondary school uniforms, down 4% from the previous year, despite inflation. This is based on the average basket cost across 347 schools representing 365,738 pupils (survey carried out December 2023 to March 2024).
 - 69% of retailers report they will need to scale back financial support, such as discounts and free uniforms, to offset increased operational costs.
2. Increased PE kit costs and risk to sports participation:
 - Specialist retailers offer PE kits up to 74% cheaper than mainstream sports brands. For example, the Schoolwear Association found that the average cost of schoolwear retailer sports top was £11.10 compared to a premium sports brand – such as Nike or Adidas – which was on average £19.99.
 - Over 50% of schools indicated they would remove PE kits from their uniform policy if a strict cap were imposed, risking reduced sports participation due to pressure to wear the latest brands, particularly among teenage girls.

Impact on Schools:

1. Weakened behavioural standards and equality:
 - According to a survey of school leaders conducted in July 2024, 88% of school leaders believe school-specific uniforms reduce visible inequalities.
 - A further 78% believe branded uniforms improve academic performance and behaviour.
 - Branded items are essential tools that help schools maintain consistent standards and enforce behaviour policies – weakening uniform policies risks damaging educational standards. Uniform policies act as a social leveller, supporting inclusion and reducing peer pressure, allowing children to enter an environment where they are ready to learn. Deregulating more items will mean the basic principles of uniform cannot be upheld and its well accepted benefits lost.
2. Operational burden:
 - Schools will need to rewrite uniform policies, diverting time and resources from critical issues like attendance and behaviour management. Furthermore they have already been through a review process following the introduction of statutory guidance that they were mandated to comply with by September 2023.

Impact on Local Businesses:

1. Risk to small retailers:
 - Uniform retailers are almost exclusively family-run small businesses that have been clothing children in the communities they serve for generations.
 - Retailers work hard with their schools and communities to ensure that their uniform is of a high standard and affordable – accounting for inflation, the cost of uniform decreased by 4% from 2023 - 2024.
 - Imposing a strict three-item cap on retailers will have disastrous consequences for brick-and-mortar high street businesses already grappling with rising operating costs. This restriction risks undermining economies of scale and pushing profit margins into unprofitability.
 - According to a survey of our own members, 31% of school uniform retailers report that they are at risk of closure if the cap is introduced.
 - 88% also state that they may need to consider staff redundancies, threatening thousands of jobs across the UK.
 - Specialist retailers provide an essential service to parents by offering year-round availability, bespoke sizing, and flexible payment options—support that is especially crucial for pupils with SEND.

Impact on Charities:

1. Risk to uniform “swap shops”
 - Uniform "swap shops" are community-led charities that collect donated school uniforms from parents and provide them free of charge to other children.

- These swap shops are vital support networks for parents struggling with the cost of school uniforms, relying on high-quality garments that can withstand significant wear and be reused by multiple children.
- However, swap shop leaders have raised concerns that the Government’s proposed cap on branded uniform items could push more sales towards supermarkets, where uniforms are often of lower quality.
- Lower-quality uniforms have shorter lifespans and are less suitable for reuse, meaning they are not suitable for re-offering through swap shops and weakening a critical support system for families in need.

Policy Concerns:

- The government’s proposal lacks sufficient consultation with industry stakeholders and schools.
- A blanket cap is a blunt policy tool that fails to account for the diverse needs of school communities.
- The industry requires a clear timeline for policy implementation. Given the seven-month production cycle for uniforms, changes should be phased in no earlier than September 2026 to avoid supply disruptions.

Recommended Amendment: **Replace Clause 23, Subsection 3, with:** *“After the italic heading insert—*

“551ZA School uniforms: limits on branded items

(1) The appropriate authority of a relevant school may not require a pupil to have more than five different branded items of school uniform for use during a school year, or more than six different branded items if one of those items is a tie.”

- This amendment proposes a reasonable cap of five branded items (plus a tie) for all pupils, aligning with the current average of 5.2 items across sports and day wear.
- Schools should retain autonomy to decide how this split is applied, with a suggested balance of three daywear and two sportswear items to reflect local needs and priorities.
- Non-compulsory branded items, such as optional sports hoodies, should be excluded from the cap to give families more flexibility and prevent unnecessary financial strain.
- This approach prevents disproportionate impacts on sportswear, protecting student participation in physical activity.

The proposed cap on branded school uniform items risks harming families, schools, and small businesses. The current DfE guidance has effectively reduced costs without compromising the benefits of school-specific uniforms. We urge the government to reconsider this policy and adopt the proposed amendment to support pupils, families, and local economies. Timely adoption of this amendment will help safeguard the wellbeing of students, support struggling families, and protect local businesses from irreversible harm.

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