

School uniforms in Scotland

Response to Scottish Government

Introduction

Carers Trust Scotland works to transform the lives of unpaid carers. We partner with our network of local carer organisations to provide funding and support, deliver innovative and evidence-based programmes and raise awareness and influence policy.

Carers Trust's vision is that unpaid carers are heard and valued, with access to support, advice and resources to enable them to live fulfilled lives.

We reach around 44,000 adult carers and young carers from all groups and communities, through a unique network of local carer organisations throughout Scotland. We are positioned centrally to support local carer organisations to deliver localised action, whilst also influencing the environment for unpaid carers.

Carers Trust Scotland welcomes the opportunity to submit a response to the School uniforms in Scotland consultation and welcomes Scottish Government commitment to introduce statutory guidance which aims to address equalities issues around uniform policy and reduce the cost of school uniform, as this can be a barrier to young carers and impact on their education and wellbeing at school.

Question 1 - what matters related to school uniform would you wish to be included within the guidance? Why?

Carers Trust Scotland welcomes equalities considerations, aligned to protected characteristics, within the guidance and call on the Scottish Government to include young carers specifically within this as a seldom heard group. We consult with young carers nationally, most notably at our annual Scottish Young Carers Festival. Education has continued to be an important issue for young carers and the difficulty in balancing this with their caring responsibilities. Below you will find two illustrations from our 2022 event which highlight the lack of understanding and awareness young carers experience in schools today. One young person states 'You have no idea what I had to do just to get here.'



This was highlighted further during Young Carers Action Day 2022, where 171 young carers in Scotland shared their experiences of the pandemic, education and their lives alongside caring. The pressures of balancing school with caring were demonstrated clearly in these results, with 31% of respondents 'always' or 'usually' struggling to balance these. In terms of support, 31% felt their school 'never' or 'not often' understand their caring role¹.

These results indicate that further action is required to ensure all educational institutions are providing adequate support and staff can identify and understand the impact caring roles can have. Reference to young carers in statutory guidance will raise greater awareness of this group who are, clearly, still not being identified in schools across Scotland.

¹ 'It's Harder Than Anyone Understands: The experiences and thoughts of young carers and young adult carers.' Scotland Summary, 2022, Carers Trust Scotland: [young-carer-survey-scotland-summary-2022.pdf](https://www.carers.org/young-carer-survey-scotland-summary-2022.pdf) (carers.org)

We also welcome the affordability of school uniform included in the scope of this guidance as young carers are more likely to be affected by poverty². Families with caring responsibilities can often experience additional pressures and stressors, including disability and ill health, barriers to employment and social isolation. This has been exacerbated further due to the cost of living crisis, as highlighted during our Consultation Zone at the 2022 Scottish Young Carers Festival. One local young carers service notes:

“The cost of living has risen greatly, therefore families have to pay more for food, essentials, gas and electricity. We often have families contact the Project for help with groceries. There, they have no extra disposable income for short breaks” (Young Carer Services Worker, 2022).

The guidance must outline key recommendations around breaking down poverty related barriers to support families, ensuring that school uniform is accessible to all. Specific examples are outlined in Question 4.

We welcome non-exclusion as a compliance measure within the guidance. Carers Trust Scotland argue that a school’s day to day response of pupils not wearing correct uniform must also be addressed. As mentioned above, many young carers have shared their school’s lack understanding around caring roles which is exacerbated further through compliance measures. One young carer recalls their school’s reaction to not wearing the correct uniform,

“Wore leggings instead of a skirt or dress trousers and got a meeting with head of year teacher and wouldn’t understand that I forgot to wash my trousers, said it made the school look untidy” (Young Carer, 2022).

Cases should be handled sensitively, taking into account an individual’s circumstances, rather than disciplining or automatic exclusion. We urge that this holistic approach is outlined clearly within the guidance.

Question 2 - what role does school uniform have in the ethos and culture of schools?

Carers Trust Scotland does recognise that school uniform can play an important role in creating a positive ethos and culture in schools. However rigid school uniform policy and practice can also undo many of the positives associated with school uniform endorsement, especially for young carers who may have very valid reasons for struggling to always adhere to the school uniform dress codes. Research we undertook last year³ highlights that almost half (47%) of young

²Carers Census, Scotland, 2018/ 2019, Scottish Government: <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/statistics/2020/12/carers-census-scotland-2018-19/documents/carers-census-scotland-2018-19/carers-census-scotland-2018-19/govscot%3Adocument/carers-census-scotland-2018-19.pdf>

³ “It’s Harder Than Anyone Understand.” The experiences and thoughts of young carers and young adult carers. Scotland Summary: young-carer-survey-scotland-summary-2022.pdf (carers.org)

carers 'never' or 'not often' get help from school to balance caring with their education:

"Myself and my family were told to buy new uniform however we could not afford it, when I explained this, I was told this was no excuse. I felt humiliated as I was constantly pulled into the office and student support and reprimanded as a child with severe social anxiety. I was living in poverty, and ridiculed for it via the school uniform policy" (Young Carer, 2022).

We understand that school uniforms can create an ethos and culture of connectedness, group identity and belonging as part of a student body. Many children and young people experience a sense of pride which as a consequence can improve wellbeing. School uniforms in principle can create a sense of equality in a school environment.

Various pieces of research and ongoing consultation activities that we have undertaken highlight that many young carers experience bullying⁴ in school because of their caring role. Young carers also report that they can experience bullying due to the wider consequences of young caring and living in households where the cared for person is likely in receipt of disability benefits, such as poverty. Arguably, school uniform policies help to reduce bullying behaviours and can remove points of difference between children and young people. School uniforms can reduce pressures to wear expensive and fashionable brands to meet expectations of peers. Socioeconomic difference between pupils is not as obvious when wearing school uniform as they might be if a child or young person was to wear the same non-uniform clothes everyday:

"It (school uniform) can make a school look united but also not allow those to see whos from a less advantaged background" (Young Carer, 2022).

We also understand that school uniform can assist in creating a 'working environment' mindset and can help children and young people to separate school from other parts of their lives, such as social and home life. School uniforms can arguably create a culture of greater focus on academic work, as there may be less distraction for children and young people to worry about what they may be wearing or spending time during the school day comparing their clothes to their peers.

Young carers can experience many time pressures in the morning and may have significant caring duties to undertake well before the school day commences. A good sleep is vital for children and young people and school uniforms can save them time each morning as they do not need to consider what to wear.

We understand that school uniforms can also help with school safety, making it clearly visible who is a pupil and who is not. However, some young carers have

⁴ Young Adult Carers at School: Experiences and Perceptions of Caring and Education: <https://carers.org/downloads/resources-pdfs/young-adult-carers-at-school.pdf>

told us that strict school uniform policies can limit their freedom to express or celebrate their individuality:

“Although I’m no longer at school I used to struggle with seeing myself for who I was and covering up in a uniform that doesn’t express my personality rather difficult” (Young Carer, 2022).

Children’s rights must be considered, especially for creating a positive culture to school uniform policy and developing a successful learning environment. Children’s right to education Article 28 of the United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child (UNCRC), together with children’s best interests (Article 3) and the principle of non-discrimination (Article 2) all must be considered to decision making on school uniform policies. Dress codes for pupils must also not discriminate against children with protected characteristics – cultural considerations and appropriateness; including restrictive clothing for disabled children. Flexibility is vital to ensure children and young people’s needs are met without singling them out:

“I’m now disabled and recognise that school uniforms often do not offer accessible clothing alternatives. Children and young people who require accessible clothing either have to wear school uniform that does not meet their access needs, or are made to wear regular clothing that makes them stand out within the school - potentially isolating them” (Young Carer, 2022).

Overall, Carers Trust Scotland agrees that that school uniforms can help to create a positive ethos and culture in schools. However, these policies and their enforcement need to be executed sensitively, taking account the individual circumstances for each child and young person. For example, the rationale for non-conforming to the uniform dress code by some young carers due to experiencing poverty or time pressures associated with caring responsibilities. In these situations holistic support from the school may be required for young carers, not punishment, to help them reach their full potential in their school education.

Question 3 - Following on from Question 2, are there any particular items of school uniform which are central to that? If so, why?

There is currently no legal requirement that children and young people must wear school uniform. Carers Trust Scotland supports Scottish Government’s position that this statutory guidance does not intend to mandate school uniform items at national levels.

We hope that the statutory guidance will promote schools to undertake consultation with children and young people and their parents and guardians on the particular items for school uniform dress code. This involvement also supports a child’s rights approach and would provide the student body with a level of ownership and further connectedness with their school uniform. We

would also hope that the statutory guidance would encourage schools to re-evaluate their uniform policy annually.

Flexibility to school uniform dress code is important. The needs of those with protected characteristics must be paramount and their needs must be met to ensure school uniforms do not impact their right to education. To create a positive culture and ethos, the execution of school uniform policies should be delivered sensitively with individual circumstances being explored further before any form of punishment is given due to a child or young person not conforming to the uniform dress code.

We recognise that to prevent injury and to ensure the safety of children and young people that some particular clothing items may be essential, such as during technology classes or to undertake specific physical education classes. We understand that practicality is also important and seasonal needs for dress codes must be considered and these may differ across areas in Scotland.

We hope that the statutory guidance will make key recommendations around breaking down poverty related barriers for many young carers and other children and young people and their families around more expensive school uniform items like blazers, kilts, embroidered clothing, specialist physical education items or specialist uniform items for the senior school phase. We would urge the statutory guidance to strongly promote that arrangements should be made by local authorities to ensure that every child or young person has access to the required clothing as prescribed in any school uniform policy.

Question 4 - What can schools do within their policies to support the aim of reducing costs of school uniform? [please give specific examples of approaches which could be considered or have been tried]

Young carers are more likely to be affected by poverty and live in areas of multiple deprivation⁵. With the current cost of living crisis, schools should seek to reduce the number of branded or logo items students should have to wear and have a more generic uniform with the option of affordable iron on badges, this would perhaps allow for more than one uniform to be purchased and saving on the cost of washing and ironing daily. It would also allow for young carers who have increased caring responsibilities more time to prepare their uniform.

“Yeah sometimes u can’t get it washed and dried in time due to caring duties” (Young Carer 2022)

⁵ Scottish Government, Carers Census (2018–2019): <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/statistics/2020/12/carers-census-scotland-2018-19/documents/carers-census-scotland-2018-19/carers-census-scotland-2018-19/govscot%3Adocument/carers-census-scotland-2018-19.pdf>

Schools should also allow for multiple suppliers such as supermarkets or buy in bulk to provide cheaper alternatives. There should be no segregation of colours in uniforms to separate year groups as this adds to the uniform costs yearly.

“Yes it’s very expensive. It’s hard to get the school colours for my child’s school, it sells out very quickly and can’t access many cheaper alternatives due to the colour being brown” (Parent Carer, 2022)

Schools should make best use of funding such as Pupil Equity Funds to have a uniform clothing bank available for pupils, this would help remove some barriers to learning. For example, if a pupil was unable to come to school due to having part or no uniform available. School fundraising could also contribute to this initiative. Schools may also want to gift items to learners at the start of a new school year such as bags etc.

Schools should consider the implementation of a uniform recycling policy. This could highlight the environmental and sustainable impact of school uniforms whilst helping to remove the stigma of clothing banks.

School staff should have awareness of the Cost of the School Day⁶ and be able to have sensitive conversations with learners, parents, guardians and unpaid carers about poverty and the impact this has on them. In addition, all school staff should undertake Young Carer Awareness Training and be able to identify and support young carers. Young carers often face significant changes within their caring role such as financial and welfare and they should be able to receive support with their caring responsibilities.

School handbooks and policies which signpost to the support available, such as clothing grants and free school meals would be helpful. These could also link to wider support available for many young carers such as information about the Young Scot’s Young Carer Package, Young Carer Statement and Young Carer Grant. These and other links to local support to promote income maximisation such as Citizens Advice should be made available in school updates and newsletters throughout the year, where possible it should avoid jargon and be available in easy read format.

Question 5 - Do you feel these draft principles are appropriate and, if you would change any of them, please set out what your alternative wording would be.

Carers Trust Scotland welcomes the draft principles and would make amendments to principles 1, 8 and 9. In addition we would encourage the addition of a principle looking at monitoring and evaluation of implementation of guidance at local level.

Principles that national school uniform policy should:

⁶ <https://cpag.org.uk/cost-of-the-school-day>

- **Be informed by the views of children and young people**

This should be further strengthened by including articles from UNCRC, including but not limited to;

Article 2 – Non-discrimination.

Article 12 – Right to be heard.

Article 28 – Right to education.

The views of parents, guardians, unpaid carers including kinship carers should also be taken into account.

- **Continues the position of no legal requirement upon pupils to wear school uniform**

This is covered in our response to Question 3.

- **Considers appropriate response for persistent non-wearing of uniform, recognising ethos and culture of promoting attendance and reducing absence**

All pupils should be welcomed to school and encouraged to participate. Sensitive and supportive conversations should be explored around non-wearing of uniform. We believe that there should be no exclusions for non-wearing of uniform and this should be reflected in school policies.

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