

School Uniforms (Guidelines and Allowances) Act (Northern Ireland) 2026

CHAPTER 1

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School Uniforms (Guidelines and Allowances) Act (Northern Ireland) 2026

2026 CHAPTER 1

An Act to make provision for binding guidelines on school uniform policies to be issued by the Department of Education and to extend eligibility for school clothing allowances payable by the Education Authority.

[19th February 2026]

BE IT ENACTED by being passed by the Northern Ireland Assembly and assented to by His Majesty as follows:

PART 1

SCHOOL UNIFORM POLICIES

CHAPTER 1

DEPARTMENT TO ISSUE GUIDELINES

Content of guidelines

Guidelines as to policies on school uniforms

1.—(1) The Department of Education—

(a) must—

(i) issue guidelines about school uniform policies applying at schools, and

(ii) review such guidelines at least once every 3 years, and

(b) may reissue such guidelines (and must do so if they are revised following review).

(2) Guidelines from the Department may include provision setting out what—

(a) particular or general factors are to be taken into account when devising or reviewing such policies, and

(b) associated or additional explanation or information requires to be presented together with or separately from such policies.

(3) Guidelines from the Department must include provision stating—

(a) who, including pupils and their parents or guardians, is to be consulted when such policies are being devised or reviewed, and

(b) how often such policies are to be reviewed.

(4) Guidelines from the Department about such policies may—

(a) include transitory, transitional or saving provision, and

(b) allow or require there to be transitory, transitional or savings arrangements in such policies (or for changes to them).

(5) Nothing in the rest of this Chapter limits what the Department may put into guidelines about such policies.

Particular matters for inclusion in guidelines

2.—(1) Guidelines under this Chapter must include provision addressing unfair costs aspects of school uniform policies.

(2) Guidelines under this Chapter are to include provision informing such policies as to—

(a) comfort and practicality of clothing for pupils,

(b) nature and adequacy of clothing for pupils when engaging in particular parts of the curriculum by doing or through involvement in things such as—

(i) classroom or academic subjects,

(ii) informal or play-based learning, or

(iii) recreational, sporting or outdoor activities, and

(c) in relation to affordability and accessibility—

(i) value for money of clothing for pupils, and

(ii) loans of, and use of clothing banks for, clothing for pupils.

(3) Guidelines under this Chapter may include provision on what is to be regarded as reasonable (or unreasonable) in requirements in such policies for pupils to wear—

(a) clothing obtained from particular suppliers or made by particular manufacturers,

(b) either (or both)—

(i) particular items or sets of clothing, or

(ii) items or sets of clothing of specific styles, or

(c) different items or sets of clothing for different activities or occasions.

Clothing supplier agreements in guidelines

3.—(1) Guidelines under this Chapter must include provision—

(a) containing a statement to the effect that school uniform policies are to be designed so as to ensure that all items or sets of clothing needed by pupils at a school are available for purchase from at least one supplier who is not party to an agreement for the sale of items or sets of clothing for the school's pupils, but

(b) making an exception in relation to a school uniform policy applying at a school which is accompanied by a declaration by a manager of the school to the effect that such an agreement secures value for money with respect to items and sets of clothing needed by pupils at the school.

(2) Guidelines under this Chapter must include provision requiring a manager of a school to publish, on the school's website, information (to be updated at least annually) about any such agreement except a pre-commencement agreement.

(3) For the purpose of this section—

(a) an agreement is an agreement (whether contractual or otherwise) entered into in the name of or on behalf of the school, and

(b) a pre-commencement agreement is an agreement so entered into before this section comes into operation.

Express limit on specific styles by guidelines

4. Guidelines under this Chapter may include provision regulating (or restricting) numbers of—

(a) items of clothing, or

(b) sets of clothing,

which school uniform policies are permitted to require, by reference to specific styles, to be worn by pupils.

Capping of expense as something for guidelines

5. Guidelines under this Chapter may include provision—

(a) fixing monetary amounts (as maximums or ranges) in relation to—

(i) particular items or sets of clothing, or

(ii) all items or sets of clothing needed by individual pupils, and

(b) containing a statement to the effect that school uniform policies are to be designed so as not to envisage or give rise to expenditure which exceeds such amounts as (in each instance) so fixed.

Variety of schools and pupils under guidelines

6. Guidelines under this Chapter may include provision—

(a) covering schools or pupils generally,

(b) concerning particular types or descriptions of schools,

(c) relating to pupils specifically by reference to—

(i) ages or year groups,

(ii) primary education or secondary education, or

(iii) attendance at particular types or descriptions of schools,

(d) for or in connection with—

(i) particular school terms or years in future, or

(ii) future school terms or years generally, or

(e) referring to Foundation Stage, or Key Stage 1, 2, 3 or 4, as mentioned in the Education (Curriculum Minimum Content) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007.

Adherence to guidelines

Duty of schools to adhere to guidelines

7.—(1) A manager of a school must adhere (and ensure adherence by staff at the school) to guidelines under this Chapter, so far as relevant in connection with the school and the school's pupils—

(a) whenever a school uniform policy for the school is being devised or reviewed by the manager (or by staff at the school), and

(b) in the implementation and enforcement of the policy by the manager (or by staff at the school).

(2) A manager of a school must, once the terms of the school uniform policy are settled (including when changed) for implementation at the school, publish on the school's website—

(a) the policy, and

(b) whatever associated or additional explanation or information is required to be presented too.

Directions on adherence to guidelines

8.—(1) The Department must give directions to a manager of a school as follows if the Department is satisfied that the manager is (or staff at the school are) in one or more material respects failing to adhere as required to guidelines under this Chapter.

(2) The Department may give directions to a manager of a school as follows if the Department is satisfied that the school's pupils are liable to disciplinary measures or participatory disadvantages at the insistence of the manager (or of staff at the school) in consequence of breaching a school uniform policy applying at the school.

(3) The Department is entitled to be so satisfied only on the basis of its assessment of—

(a) the terms of the school uniform policy applying at the school, or

(b) information in—

(i) a complaint coming to the Department from any source,

(ii) a report prepared with respect to the school under Article 102(6A) of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986, or

(iii) a report of an investigation relating to the school if sent to the Department under section 43 of the Public Services Ombudsman Act (Northern Ireland) 2016.

(4) However, the Department is not obliged to act in response to such a complaint concerning the school uniform policy if it appears to the Department that the school's own complaints procedures have not been exhausted in the particular case.

(5) The Department is to invite representations from the manager of the school so as to inform the Department's assessment of such information.

(6) Directions given by the Department to the manager of the school in relation to adherence to guidelines may include the instruction that the failure is (in specific respects) to be rectified—

(a) by particular times, or

(b) for or in connection with—

(i) particular school terms or years in future, or

(ii) future school terms or years generally.

(7) Directions given by the Department to the manager of the school in relation to disciplinary measures or participatory disadvantages may include the instruction that they are to be—

(a) ended (wholly or partly), or

(b) moderated (in specific respects).

(8) Directions given by the Department to the manager in relation to—

(a) adherence to guidelines, or

(b) disciplinary measures or participatory disadvantages,

create the same duty in every case, and are enforceable in every case in the same way, as mentioned (in different circumstances) in Article 101(6) of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986.

(9) Where the Department gives directions under this section, the Department must publish the text of them within 3 months of giving them.

Definitions as to guidelines

Meaning of unfair costs aspects

9.—(1) The reference in this Chapter to unfair costs aspects of school uniform policies is to any aspects of school uniform policies which, in the Department's view, could in any way raise questions as to—

(a) excessive costs of school uniforms, including by virtue of costs of—

(i) particular items or sets of clothing, or

(ii) all items or sets of clothing needed by individual pupils, or

(b) unreasonable costs of obtaining school uniforms arising (to any extent) by virtue of limited choice of places at which, or retailers from whom, suitable items or sets of clothing are readily available.

(2) The Department is, in reaching its view as to such excessive costs, to have special regard to any evidence it has on—

(a) significantly higher costs of school uniforms comprising clothing of specific styles (chiefly as compared to such uniforms comprising more generic styles), and

(b) widespread problems as to non-affordability of school uniforms to lower income households (including in light of the sorts of financial constraints that are commonly understood to prevail in such households).

Meaning of clothing and styles

10. In this Chapter—

(a) the references to clothing include footwear, and

(b) the references to clothing of specific styles include clothing—

(i) of particular makes or brands (or having particular logos), or

(ii) of unique combinations, colours or fabrics (or with unique badges, emblems or markings).

Schools and related expressions

11.—(1) For the purposes of this Chapter—

(a) a school is an institution, namely a grant-aided school or an independent school, which provides (either or both) primary education or secondary education,

(b) a pupil of a school is a person who is receiving primary education or secondary education at the school, and

(c) a manager of a school is the person or authority responsible for the management of the school, including where known as—

(i) the Board of Governors, or

(ii) the proprietor.

(2) To be construed in accordance with Article 2(2) of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 are—

(a) a reference in this section to a grant-aided school or an independent school, and

(b) the references in this Chapter to primary education and to secondary education.

References to the Department

12. In this Chapter, "the Department" is the Department of Education.

CHAPTER 2

NURSERY AGES WITHIN GUIDELINES

No application to children below compulsory school age

13.—(1) By virtue of this section—

(a) nothing in Chapter 1 enables guidelines to apply, and

(b) nothing in guidelines under Chapter 1 is to be taken to apply,

with respect to children who are under compulsory school age.

(2) The reference in this section to compulsory school age has the meaning mentioned in Article 2(2) of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986.

(3) This section is subject to regulations made under this Chapter (for which see the next section).

Power to extend application to pre-school education

14.—(1) The Department of Education may make regulations which, despite the previous section—

(a) enable guidelines under Chapter 1 to apply, and

(b) cause guidelines under Chapter 1 to be taken to apply,

with respect to children who are receiving pre-school education.

(2) The reference in this section to pre-school education—

(a) has the meaning given by Article 17(8) of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 (which relates to education at certain schools or other premises), and

(b) includes primary education within the meaning given by the second limb (but not the first limb) of the relevant definition in Article 2(2) of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986,

as each of these elements is informed by the meaning of compulsory school age mentioned in Article 2(2) of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986.

(3) Regulations under this Chapter may include—

(a) consequential or ancillary provision, and

(b) provision amending, or modifying the effect of, Chapter 1.

(4) Regulations under this Chapter may not be made unless a draft of them has been laid before, and approved by a resolution of, the Assembly.

CHAPTER 3

LAYING AND REPORTING FORMALITIES

Laying of guidelines

15. Guidelines under Chapter 1 must be laid before the Assembly by the Department of Education as soon as practicable after issuing or reissuing them.

Reporting on guidelines and costs

16.—(1) At least once every 3 years, the Department of Education must publish a report—

(a) setting out the Department's plans for—

(i) reviewing (and revising) guidelines under Chapter 1, and

(ii) guidelines under Chapter 1 to include provision, or to have no or altered provision, as to capping of expense, and

(b) containing broader information in accordance with the following subsections.

(2) The report must—

(a) summarise—

(i) as the Department's best estimates, the typical or average costs of school uniforms and individual pieces of such uniforms, and

(ii) so far as known to the Department, the various factors contributing to such costs rising, remaining unchanged or becoming lower, and

(b) the Department's assessment of the impact of provision as to capping of expense for the time being included in guidelines under Chapter 1.

(3) The report must, if no provision as to capping of expense is for the time being included in guidelines under Chapter 1, state the Department's explanation for this.

(4) The report may reflect the distinctions, as appearing to the Department, between uniforms worn—

(a) at particular types or descriptions of schools, or

(b) by pupils—

(i) in particular age or year groups, or

(ii) receiving primary education or secondary education as construed in accordance with Article 2(2) of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986.

PART 2

SCHOOL CLOTHING ALLOWANCES

Extension of Article 60(1) of the 1986 Order

17. In the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986—

(a) in the title of Article 60, for "grant-aided" substitute "certain", and

(b) in paragraph (1) of Article 60, after "grant-aided school" insert ", independent school".

PART 3

COMMENCEMENT AND SHORT TITLE

Commencement

18.—(1) Section 5 comes into operation on such day or days as the Department of Education may by order appoint.

(2) The rest of this Act comes into operation on the day after the day of Royal Assent.

Short title

19. This Act may be cited as the School Uniforms (Guidelines and Allowances) Act (Northern Ireland) 2026.

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