

Introduction

The Governing Bodies Association (GBA) is the sectoral body representing the Boards of Governors (Managing Authorities) of the 50 Voluntary Grammar schools in Northern Ireland (NI). Voluntary Grammar schools are amongst the largest schools in Northern Ireland (NI) and collectively educate almost a third (32.7%; 51,111 pupils¹) of the NI post-primary cohort.

The GBA provides policy information, advice and support for member schools, as well as representing their views to the Department of Education, politicians, policy makers, media and other educational stakeholders. The GBA Executive Committee members are drawn from the Boards of Governors of their constituent schools. Co-opted members are added as and when required, bringing additional professional skills, experience, and expertise to the work of the Committee.

As the only sectoral body representing school governors, we welcome the opportunity to input into the Department's school uniform policy consultation, given the key role that governors play in setting the strategic direction and ethos of their school.

GBA member schools, as independent entities, will have their own individual and specific views regarding the Department's proposals and questions within the consultation document. This GBA response is focused on key principles which could be applied by governors when developing their respective school uniform policy with a view to increasing affordability and accessibility for parents/caregivers.

Department of Education Proposals

Key Principles

We agree that key principles should be adopted and be at the forefront of governors' minds when developing school uniform policy. This is currently the case for many schools across Northern Ireland. We have provided a response below in relation to each of the key principles/actions (a-e) as outlined in the Department's consultation document:

¹ [School enrolment - school level data 2023/24 | Department of Education \(education-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

(a) Affordability

School uniforms provide many benefits to pupils, parents/caregivers and schools, including safeguarding, equity, and fostering a sense of unity amongst pupils which ultimately benefits learning. Therefore, it is important that a school uniform should be accessible and affordable to all.

While we agree that affordability, value for money, and sustainability should be key guiding principles for uniform policy, it must also be noted that increasing the affordability of a school uniform does not guarantee that all parents/caregivers will be able to cover the costs. It will be important to retain and review grant schemes and communicate the availability of this and other support.

We agree with the Departments suggestions regarding “banding” in relation to school uniform grants, i.e., a band for pupils as they move into Year 8 or Year 13 (and Year 11 for Dickson plan schools), to provide additional grant for families at these key transition points when costs are typically higher.

Regarding a cap on school uniform costs, we do not believe that this will increase affordability or accessibility given the unintended adverse implications the Department has outlined within the consultation document. A cap would place unnecessary and additional administrative burden on schools and is likely to create problems in the longer-term due to inflation and legislative restrictions, for example, there may not be the political will to adjust a cap.

A number of other suggestions to reduce cost are included in the consultation, for example, allowing only generic items/ limited branded items, use of iron-on crests, avoiding unusual colours, and restrictions around PE kits. We agree that these are sensible options for consideration by a Board of Governors however schools will have differing opinions depending on their context, cost analyses, practical implications, and what is deemed as justifiable. In this regard, if governors are at risk of breaching legislation, the guidance must clearly outline what justifications are acceptable.

(b) Comfortable

School uniforms should be comfortable and practical to enable pupils to focus on their learning. Further consideration should be given to pupils with Special Educational Needs who may, for

example, have sensory issues or fine motor difficulties, necessitating adjustments to the usual school uniform. This could be outlined within a school uniform policy to ensure inclusivity and avoid any issues which may arise otherwise.

In addition to comfort, appropriateness should also be included as a key guiding principle to ensure the safeguarding of children and young people. If a policy is too flexible, and without prescription, it may result in the wearing of clothing which is not sufficiently modest or appropriate and uncomfortable.

(c) Sustainable

Sustainability is a key measure which will help to reduce costs for parents/caregivers and improve accessibility. Sustainable, quality uniform items will be longer-lasting, potentially offering a saving to parents by avoiding duplicate purchases later in the year. This will also enable uniforms to be utilised at uniform banks or similar schemes, promoting environmental conservation by minimising waste.

The GBA recently surveyed member schools regarding their use of uniform banks/ similar schemes. The majority (85%) of respondents indicated that they operate a uniform shop on the school premises, offering pre-owned items at low to no cost. Other schools indicated that they participate in uniform schemes organised and managed by local voluntary/ community organisations or local councils. Some schools have also made use of a discretionary fund to help those in hardship.

While a majority of GBA member schools have a uniform bank in operation, it must be noted that the feedback we received highlighted the various other schemes in place. Therefore, the proposal that schools should be required to establish a uniform bank may not be a sensible approach when there are very successful, well-known schemes run by, for example, local councils. In this regard, the Department of Education, in conjunction with the Department for Communities may wish to adopt a joined-up approach to the use and management of uniform banks and similar schemes.

School uniform policies should be:

(d) Developed in partnership with pupils and parents/carers

To expect a school to carry out a statutory, comprehensive consultation process on a regular basis is both unwieldy and unfair. This will create unnecessary additional workload for school principals and governors who are already under significant pressure to deliver their statutory duties in the context of reduced budgets, amongst other challenges.

A more appropriate and effective approach would be to have the option to seek views through already existing mechanisms, such as student councils and parent governors, and to have due regard for these views.

(e) Published

We agree with the Department's proposal that it should be compulsory for schools to publish their school uniform policy. This is something that many schools do already, recognising the importance of communication and transparency. Regarding the statutory publishing of uniform prices, again, this is something that many schools currently do however we do not feel that it should be necessary for this aspect to be compulsory, especially if schools are to introduce greater flexibility such as the use of generic items – the policy document would likely quickly become inaccurate/obsolete, adding to the administrative burden of schools.

(f) Regularly reviewed

We agree that a school's uniform policy should be reviewed regularly and in the context of key principles, particularly affordability, however, this process should not be unnecessarily bureaucratic and governors should retain a certain level of autonomy in this regard given their role in decision making and setting the strategic direction of the school.

Concluding remarks

We must reiterate that schools are individual institutions with unique circumstances and differing opinions regarding school uniforms. However, they all have the same statutory duties and must adhere to these and any others which come into effect, such as statutory uniform guidance. With this in mind, we feel that strong guiding principles should be in place but also flexibility, to allow schools to tailor their policy to their own context and traditions in a justifiable manner.

The cost of school uniforms continues to put pressure on household budgets, and it is important that we, as a society, do what we can to address this. While statutory uniform policy guidelines may help increase affordability, a wider, more strategic approach could be adopted through the development of a cross-departmental NI Anti-Poverty Strategy, as we are acutely aware that families are facing pressures more broadly.