

ABOUT CARERS NI

Carers NI is Northern Ireland's membership body for unpaid carers. We work to represent and support the over 220,000 people who provide unpaid care for ill, older or disabled family members or friends – fighting for increased recognition and support for all carers and to ensure they have a voice in policymaking.

KEY POINTS

- **Parent carers of children with special needs or disabilities face additional, inescapable school uniform costs as a consequence of the needs of their children.** This can include specialist footwear, specialist clothing, alteration of uniforms, and increased wear and tear meaning items need to be replaced more often.
- These inescapable costs of caring are one of the drivers of poverty amongst unpaid carers in Northern Ireland where over 1 in 4 carers live in poverty.
- Carer's NI welcomes the Minister's proposals to place the current non-statutory guidance on school uniforms into law and to introduce a price cap. Ensuring a greater choice of suppliers to allow families to make cost-effective choices and a limitation on branded items will also help alleviate some of the financial pressure.
- However, school uniform policies need to reflect the experiences of parent carers and the additional costs in buying and maintaining school uniforms for children with special needs or disabilities.
- School uniform grants do not currently take into consideration added costs that children with additional needs or disabilities can have when purchasing uniforms and this is limiting the support parent carers can access.

PARENT CARERS AND ADDITIONAL UNIFORM COSTS

1. 1 in 4 unpaid carers (28%) are living in poverty in Northern Ireland significantly higher than the non-carer population (17%) and higher than the poverty rate of unpaid carers in the UK (24%)¹.
2. Whilst there are several factors influencing the rates of poverty amongst unpaid carers the extra costs of care are a significant driver. The already limited income carers have at their disposal as a result of minimised income through paid work, and inadequate social security support, is squeezed further by the inescapable extra costs associated with caring for a sick or disabled family member.
3. For parent carers these extra costs of caring can include additional school uniform costs for children with special needs or disabilities. This can include specialist footwear,

¹ Carer Poverty Commission. Policy Measures to tackle poverty amongst unpaid carers in Northern Ireland. October 2023

specialist clothing, alteration of uniforms and increased wear and tear on uniforms meaning items need to be replaced more often. Rigid rules around sourcing, branded items and the current cost of living crisis mean that many parent carers are struggling to meet these costs and are having to cut back on essentials². Testimony from parent carers is set out below:

“I calculated last year that I spent £630 on school uniforms. He was in school two weeks, and he ruined his shoes and that was another £115 because he needs specialist adapted shoes.”

“He chews excessively on his coats and school jumpers and forever rips holes in his trousers when falling down, as he has poor balance.”

4. The existing school uniform grants do not take into consideration the additional costs faced by parent carers of children with special needs or disabilities.

CONCLUSION

5. Carers NI welcomes the Minister’s proposals to ensure that school uniforms are affordable, comfortable, and sustainable and are developed in consultation with pupils, parents and carers. A legal obligation on schools to comply with the Department’s uniform guidance and a cap on school uniform costs will help alleviate some of the financial pressure parents face.
6. We would however urge the Minister to remember parent carers of children with special needs or disabilities in the proposals and the additional inescapable costs they face and ensure that adequate provision is provided within school uniform policies and within school uniform grants to ensure uniforms for this group of children are affordable.

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² Carer Poverty Commission. The experiences of poverty amongst unpaid carers in Northern Ireland. August 2023.