Supporting Change

School Uniforms

School uniforms can help to create a sense of community, belonging and identity. Alongside this, they can also help to reduce visible signs of lower income and poverty, reducing stigma, embarrassment and poverty related bullying.

However for many children and young people living in poverty, school uniforms are regularly a source of stress, anxiety and bullying. Where families are unable to afford to buy the correct uniform, learners are frequently bullied and isolated by their peers and this can lead to increased absenteeism, disengagement and demotivation.

Through this *Supporting Change: School Uniforms* briefing and accompanying case studies, we want to help schools implement changes to their current school uniform policies and practice through greater understanding of the affordability issues, increasing awareness of the impact current policies has on children, young people and their families, and share practices that are being implemented by schools to address these issues.

Children in Wales: Recommendation for change

- **Implement the Welsh Government's *School Uniform and Appearance Policy Guidance***

Anticipated outcomes of change

- **Reduced costs for families living in poverty, increasing budgets for essential items, such as food**

- **Reduced stigma, stress, anxiety and poverty related bullying**

- **Increased inclusivity, supporting all of your learners. On average around 1/3rd of your learners will be living in, or on the edge of poverty**

- **Reduction in punishments for school uniform non-compliance**

- **Increased attendance, learner self-confidence and engagement**

The case studies that accompany this briefing include examples of practice that reduce the number of badged uniform items; increases affordability; and recycling schemes that provide free uniforms for learners who need them. **Outcomes of these are often small, but effective changes include: an increase in the number of learners wearing uniform; learner self-confidence and engagement; reduced stress and anxiety; and greater family engagement viewing school as a supportive part of the wider community.**

The Issue

In a recent survey, **95% of practitioners and professionals, working with around 110,000 families, stated that the poverty situation in Wales is worse than in previous years.** Children, young people and families who live in poverty face many challenges on a daily basis. Many struggle to feed their families, provide heating and many other essential items.

In relation to education, the survey showed that **affordability of school uniforms was the most difficult cost for families to manage.** This was **exacerbated by the requirement of uniforms to include school logos or badges.**

Children and young people themselves also said that not having enough money to buy uniform has a significant impact on those living in poverty. They stated that **those who could not afford the full, or correct uniform were more likely to be bullied and isolated** as well as being more likely to be punished or sent home. This significantly affected their emotional and mental health and they believed this to be grossly unfair and recognised that **uniforms do not have to be as expensive as they are.**

For families living in poverty or on low incomes, the costs of uniforms represent a significant proportion of their budget and clearly more so, when they cannot buy the majority, or all of the substantive items from less expensive retailers, such as supermarkets. In the *Annual Child & Family Poverty Survey Report 2023,* children and young people recognised these cost issues, with some being *"angry"* that families had to choose between buying school branded uniforms or buying food. Others focused on the impact that non-compliance with school branded uniform had on bullying and subsequently, their mental health and again, believing this to be *"unfair"*.

Children and young people were asked what would help to stop poverty related bullying in school and their comments predominantly focused on the removal of all school logos or badges from uniforms and greater accessibility to free (recycled) or low cost uniforms. This would not only help to reduce poverty related bullying, but also significantly reduce the costs for families living in poverty.

The table below provides an example of uniform costs from 2 secondary schools in Wales. These costs were calculated in August 2023, just ahead of the new school year. Where items do not require a school logo, costings are based on prices from a leading supermarket.
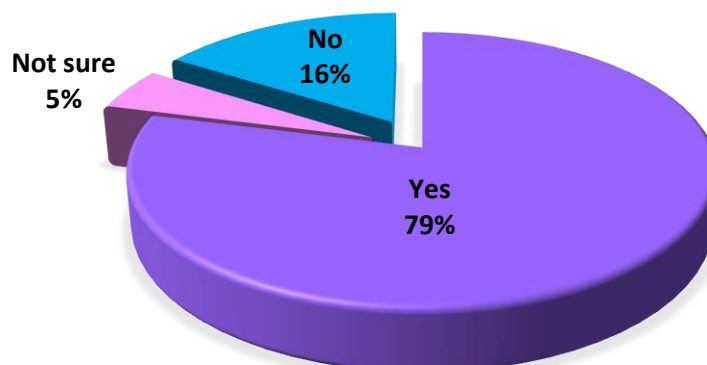
School year 23/24	School A Costs	School B Costs	Supermarket costs with no logos
Blazer	£30.00**	£30.00 **	£14.00
Skirt/trousers x 2	£ 8.00	£ 8.00	£ 8.00
Shirt x 5	£ 7.50	£ 7.50	£ 7.50
Tie	£ 7.00 **	£ 6.00 **	£ 4.00
Jumper x 2	£34.00 **	£32.00 **	£ 5.00
Socks/tights x 5	£ 5.00	£ 5.00	£ 5.00
Shoes	£14.00	£14.00	£14.00
PE top x 2	£44.00 **	£37.00 **	£ 3.00
PE shorts x 2	£24.00 **	£ 5.00	£ 5.00
Trainers	£10.00	£10.00	£10.00
<u>Total</u>	**<u>£183.50</u>**	**<u>£154.50</u>**	**<u>£75.50</u>**
** Compulsory with logo and only available from specified shop			

The Current Picture

It is perhaps surprising that despite <u>Welsh Government's statutory school uniform policy and guidance</u>, **79% of children and young people responding to the survey stated that they must wear a school badge or logo on their uniform.**

Do you have to wear a school badge or school logo on your uniform?

Not sure
5%

No
16%

Yes
79%

The statutory policy guidance recognises that uniforms are a financial burden, particularly for lower income families. To address this and alleviate the impact on lower income families, the guidance states that:

- Schools should give high priority to cost and affordability (section 3.1)
- No uniform should be so expensive as to leave pupils feeling unable to attend (3.1)
- Branded items should not be compulsory (3.1)
- Schools should ensure they have arrangements for second hand uniforms (3.1)
- High cost items, such as blazers should be avoided (3.2)
- When changing uniform policies, a transitional period should be introduced (3.2)
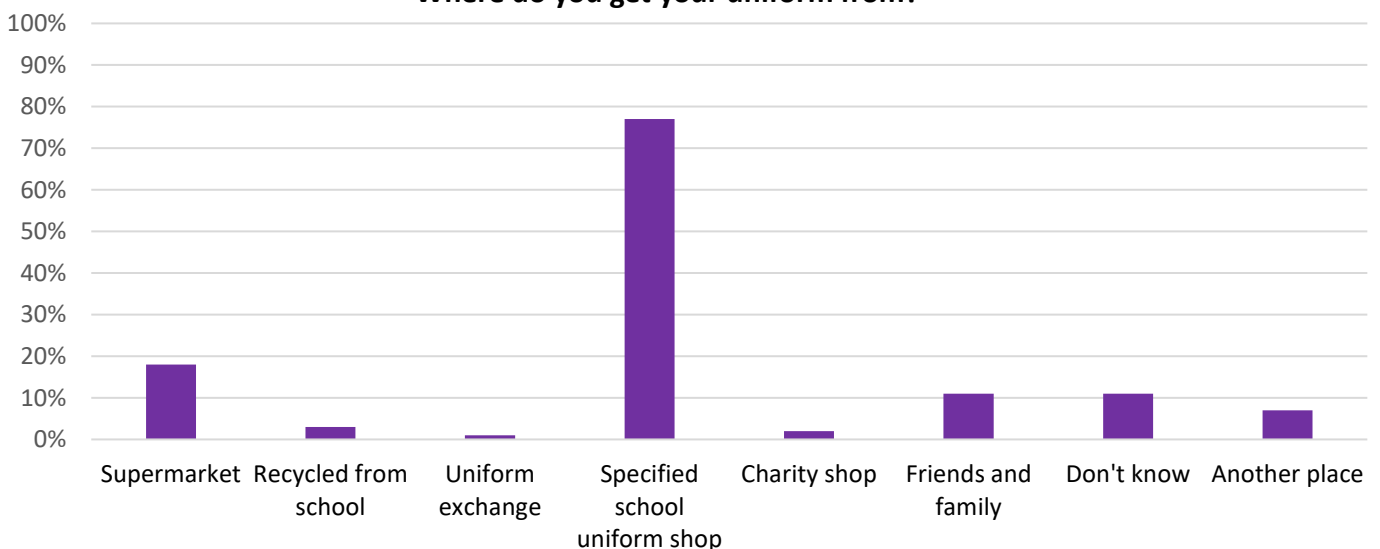- Single suppliers should be avoided as this increases costs (3.6)

The guidance discourages the use of school branded clothing and where it is used, recommends that branding is not compulsory. Whilst this non-compulsory option does help with costs, unfortunately, it often serves to highlight those young people who live in poverty. In the findings from our recent survey, one young person commented that this non-branded option operated in their school, however, wearing a non-branded blazer was seen to *"make you stand out"* and more likely to be bullied.

It is these very issues, that practitioners, professionals, children and young people highlighted as**; barriers to attending school because of uniform affordability; increasing bullying for those with non-compliant uniform; and instigating punishment that they believed was unfair for those not able to afford the costs.**

"If you do not have the correct uniform, you are given a uniform slip to take home and if the uniform is not corrected, you get a negative behaviour point which can escalate to detention" **(14-16yrs)**

The survey asked how many and which items of their school uniform required a school badge or logo. These items varied but included branded blazers (31%) and PE kits (60%). Children and young people were not asked how many items within their PE kits required branding, however, from their comments, it is clear that many schools require the logo on between 2 and 4 items (e.g. hoody, sports top, shorts/skirts and long training trousers). It is therefore likely that some schools require up to 9 branded items.

"Where do you get your uniform from?"

"If uniforms had no badges and was plain, it would be cheaper and more accessible to more people. The school could even sell iron on badges so it would be cheaper because having to buy from a uniform shop is very expensive" **(10-13yrs)**

A few children and young people remarked that their schools were proactive in helping families who could not afford uniforms. They noted *"uniform recycling"*, donated by other learners and given to families. These were seen as very positive steps in helping children who live in poverty.

"Our school really works to make sure children in poverty don't obviously stand out. There is free uniform for children who need it and it's been donated by other children" **(10-13yrs)**

Where this was happening, children and young people were extremely proud of their school, their own actions and how children were treated within the setting. When analysing the findings, it was very interesting to discover that those who commented on positive, mitigating actions taken within the school, including the removal of school branded uniforms and recycling, did not comment about bullying, unfairness or isolation. This was unusual compared to other respondents.

The overarching theme from children and young people across Wales is that things need to change and that **everyone deserves equity and educational experiences should not be dependent on income or circumstances.**

Recommendations for change from children and young people

- **"Ban logos on school uniform. They make uniforms expensive and you can't buy them in supermarkets"**

- **"All schools should have uniform recycling points so that all children can afford a school uniform"**

- **"Treat everybody equally. We all deserve respect and to be treated with kindness, whatever our circumstances."**

Supporting Change

There are many practice and policy changes that schools can implement to mitigate the impact of poverty for children, young people and their families, most of which can be achieved with little or no cost. From recycling uniforms, focusing on colours rather than badges, providing iron on badges, reducing the number of items requiring badges or the removal of badged uniform completely, all of these changes will have a positive impact.

We appreciate that change cannot be made overnight, but with so many learners living in poverty or in low-income families, change is necessary and urgently needed. Addressing the issues that families face around uniforms, planning for and implementing change is an achievable, positive step towards equitable educational experiences for all of our learners.

Children in Wales can support you to make this and other changes with _The Tackling the Impact of Poverty on Education_ resources.

> *The _Tackling the Impact of Poverty on Education_ resources include a 'Price of Pupil Poverty' Guide and an effective toolkit designed to help schools recognise and understand the impact of poverty on children, young people and their families and the mitigating actions that can be taken in their settings.*
>
> **Information and resources for this programme are available on Hwb or you can contact Children in Wales for further information: pupilpoverty@childreninwales.org.uk**

Case Studies

Case Study 1: Blaenhoddan Primary

Case Study 2: Buttington Trewern Primary

Case Study 3: Gnoll Primary

Case Study 4: Emmanuel Primary

Case Study 5: Tir Morfa, Special

Case Study 6: Jenner Park Primary

Case Study 7: Jubilee Park Primary

Case Study 8: Rhyl High

Pictures of Practice

For further information on Supporting Change: _School Uniforms_ please contact:
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