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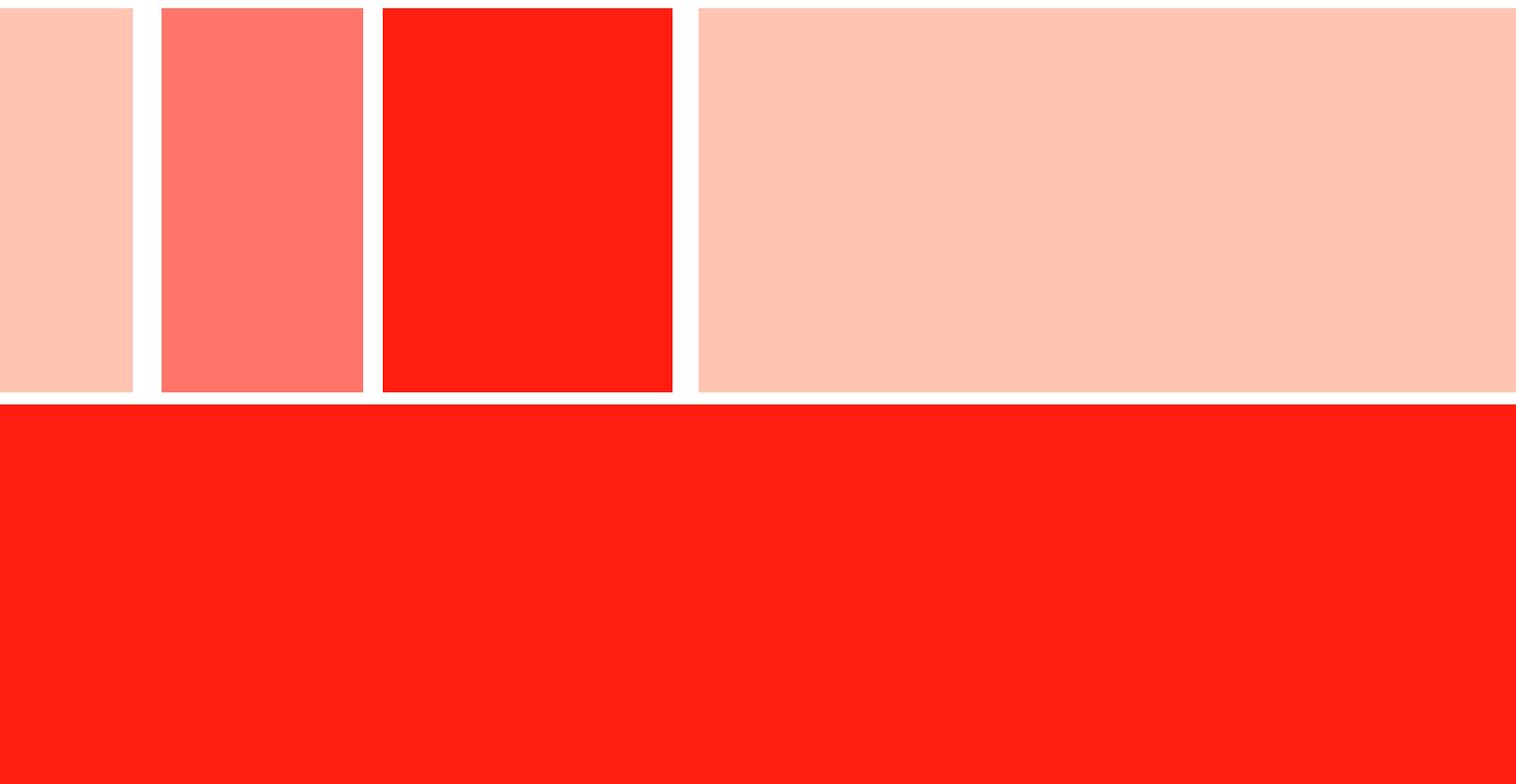
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Executive Summary: School Uniform and Other Costs of Schooling: views and experiences in Wales



School Uniform and Other Costs of Schooling: views and experiences in Wales

Final Report

Contractor: BMG Research

Author: Karen Kellard, Mary Costello and David Godfrey

Views expressed in this report are those of the researcher and not necessarily those of the Welsh Assembly Government

For further information please contact:

Julie Owens

Research and Evaluation Branch

Department of the First Minister and Cabinet

Welsh Assembly Government

Llandudno Junction

Conwy

LL31 9RZ

Tel: 0300 062 5484

Email: Julie.Owens@wales.gsi.gov.uk

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Glossary of acronyms

List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

CAB	Citizens Advice Bureaux
DCELLS	Department for Children Education Lifelong Learning and Skills
DCSF	Department for Children Schools and Families
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
FE	Further Education
ICT	Information Communication Technology
JSA	Job Seekers Allowance
LA	Local Authority
LEA	Local Education Authority
OFT	Office for Fair Trading
PE	Physical Education
PTA	Parents and Teachers Association
WAG	Welsh Assembly Government

Executive Summary

BMG Research was commissioned in the autumn of 2009 by the Department for Children Education, Lifelong Learning Skills (DCELLS) of the Welsh Assembly Government to undertake research of views of parent/carers in Wales on school uniforms and the wider costs of schooling.

It is recognised that whilst a school uniform policy can be beneficial to schools, its pupils and their parents (if correctly implemented), there can be a risk of marginalisation or disadvantage to some groups because of, for example, the cost of the required items, perceptions and views on what is mandatory and what is voluntary and the availability of financial support for the cost of school uniform items. The Welsh Assembly Government is keen to understand these and other related issues in more detail to provide a sound evidence base on which to develop subsequent policy and practice around school uniform, to remove stigmatisation and to contribute to the wider target of the eradication of child poverty and disadvantage.

Research aim and objectives

The overall aim of the research was therefore to explore the views of parents/carers and young people in Wales on the validity, usefulness and benefits of having school uniforms and their experiences and views on the cost and availability of buying uniforms, and to explore how the wider costs of schooling impacts on children, families and schools. The research objectives thus relate to exploration and identification of the following:

- children and young people's views and experiences of school uniforms;
- how many schools have specific school uniform requirements/retailers or whether they are more widely available (and parental views);
- views of the cost of school uniforms, and the extent to which this can place some families at a disadvantage or feeling discriminated;
- the extent to which there is consultation with/consideration of parents' views in developing a school uniform policy;
- wider costs of schooling and how this impacts on different families or leads to the marginalisation or disengagement of some; and

- availability and role of financial support (grants, free school meals etc) – and parental awareness.

Research method

The study commenced with an inception phase, followed by:

- desk based research;
- stakeholder consultations;
- a telephone survey with parents and carers of school age children;
- postal survey of all schools; and
- qualitative case studies with schools and families.

Findings

School Uniform Costs

- School uniform requirements were evident in virtually all schools, with only one per cent of respondents reporting that there was no school uniform requirement at their child's school. School uniform requirements tended to be for jumpers, fleeces and/or cardigans, skirts or trousers, shoes, school bags, socks and coats.
- For the main items that were required, four fifths of tops needed to be badged or logoed and about half of shirts needed to be badged or logoed.
- Although blazers were only required by about a fifth of pupils (mostly in secondary schools), it was this item that was mostly likely to be only available from one specialist retailer.
- Ties and tops (fleeces, sweatshirts etc) were also only available from one specialist retailer in the majority of cases.
- Overall, 42 per cent reported experiencing some level of financial difficulty when buying their child's school uniform. Such difficulties were far more likely to be reported among families with a household income of less than £25,000. However, even among those with household incomes above £25,000, a fifth reported financial difficulties when buying their child's school uniform.
- The items that caused the most difficulty were jumpers/sweatshirts/tops. Costs of these (with logos) were said to be in the region of £12 to £15 per top.
- Sixteen percent of respondents reported that the financial difficulties had been such that they had had occasion where they had not bought a required

item because of the cost – this was more likely to be the case among households with a lower income. The most common consequence of such difficulties was having to make an adjustment elsewhere in the household budget.

- Although the majority of respondents reported that they were happy with the costs of school uniform, 26 per cent said that they were not – unsurprisingly this was more likely to be the case among low income households. Similar figures were evident for the costs of PE/sports kit.
- In terms of PE and sports kit requirements, 86 per cent of parents indicated that there were such requirements for their child – mostly shorts, shirt and trainers.
- In the majority of cases, PE/sports kit items were not required to be badged or logoed – the exception to this was t-shirts/tops where in around half of cases a logoed version was required.
- No specific sports equipment was required in 70 per cent of cases—where there was a requirement it was mostly related to shin pads, a gum shield or hockey stick.
- A minority of parents (10 per cent) said that they had not bought an item of PE/sports kit because of cost – again this was much more likely to be reported among the lower household income group.

School trips, activities and equipment

- A third of parents were asked to pay for 1 or 2 school trips for their child.
- Around three quarters of parents were happy with the amount of school trips they were asked to contribute towards, but around a quarter were not happy. Although those in the lower household income groups were slightly more likely to be unhappy about this, respondents in both groups expressed concern.
- One in 10 parents had not sent their child on a school day trip because of the cost, and one in 5 had not sent their child on a residential trip because of the cost. The likelihood of this increased among the lower income households (and particularly among those reliant on benefits as their main source of income), but remained an issue for both lower and higher income groups.

- Respondents whose main household income was from both employment and benefits were more likely than those whose main income was either just benefits or just employment not to send their child on a residential trip because of cost.
- Over half of the sample reported that they were *not* invited to discuss any difficulties in paying for school trips with the teacher, although 27 per cent said they were *always* invited to discuss such difficulties.
- That said, around two thirds of parents said that they were broadly happy with the costs associated with school trips for their child, with more parents from lower income household groups likely to express they were unhappy
- Around half of respondents felt pressurised into contributing to the cost of school trips.
- Contributions to a wide range of other school related costs were also apparent, including contributions to cookery lessons, design and technology equipment, art materials, charitable donations, contributions to school fetes/raffles and cake stalls or similar. Qualitative evidence indicates that the cost of some of these activities can be significant – for example cooking ingredients can be £3 or £4 a week.
- Over half of parents said that they purchased a school photo of their child during the last year; in the large majority of cases this cost was more than £10.
- Over two fifths of the sample also paid for additional activities for their child such as a school disco, school play costs or other hobbies at school.

Support with costs of schooling

- Overall 45 per cent of the sample found it difficult to meet all of the schooling costs discussed in the survey. Low income households and larger families were much more likely to report difficulties than others, although the presence of difficulties was evident in all groups.

- However, there appeared to be a lack of awareness about support that might be available to families, particularly for those on benefits who could access some support with the cost of residential trips or support by way of school uniform grants.
- The majority of parents also indicated that there were no opportunities to purchase second hand uniform items at their school (66 per cent) – although evidence from the schools themselves indicated that a higher proportion did indeed have such a facility.
- Qualitative evidence from schools suggests that efforts are made to ensure that children are not excluded or marginalised because of not being able to afford school uniform items or to go on school trips (for example, by discretely offering support). However, according to parents there was some reluctance to seek help, and a general lack of awareness of what help was available.

Overview

This research has provided an evidence base on school uniform policies and practices in Wales, as well as parents' and schools' views on the implementation of such policies and the extent to which they have an impact on families. This has been achieved through adopting a range of research approaches, including a survey of parents' views and experiences, a survey of schools practices and policies and qualitative case studies with families and schools, as well as a brief review of existing evidence. The scope of the research was also informed by early stakeholder consultations with representatives from the Welsh Assembly Government and the Child Poverty Expert Group.

In the main, although families clearly feel the financial strain of providing school uniform and other school costs for their children, they are supportive of school uniforms. Evidence of financial difficulties in paying for school costs is, unsurprisingly, concentrated among lower income families - although this applies to both those families reliant on benefits as their main source of income as well as families in low paid work. These difficulties increase as the number of children increases. Costs increase as children move through secondary schools, with a

greater number of financial demands for school items (eg, sports kit, cooking ingredients) and school trips.

Thus, a persistent core of around 1 in 10 of families appear to experience significant difficulties in terms of affordability for school uniforms and school trips. From the case study work, it appears as though some schools have found ways of managing the difficulties that some families can face, through knowing their schools' families and by providing support in a discrete non-stigmatising manner (for example, waiving the cost for some items, or allowing the family to pay for trips in instalments).

Generally, however, it appears as though schools tend to play down support that they are able to offer, amid a fear of opening 'floodgates' of demand for financial help (perhaps in some cases from families who may not particularly need it). Furthermore, families may not always be aware of the support available and/or may be reluctant to seek help.

Recommendations

Overall, there was overwhelming support for school uniform *per se* from parents, pupils and the schools themselves. However, a number of recommendations have emerged from the evidence, relating to both policy and practice.

Recommendations for policy – issues to be considered by the Welsh Assembly Government

- Review the provision of board and lodging costs (for residential trips) for those eligible for free school meals and who should meet this cost to avoid placing considerable strain on the finances of schools (particularly those schools that have a high concentration of potential eligibility).
- Continue to provide guidance for schools on developing and implementing a school uniform policy (including examples of good practice), whilst ensuring that schools are still able to develop their policies according to their school's specific requirements. If possible, alignment with primary school requirements could be taken into account by secondary schools, to see whether any core items (such as

sports equipment or basic school uniform items) could continue to be used at secondary schools.

- Consider extending support for school uniform costs to those on low incomes (for example, in receipt of a high rate of tax credits) as currently they are ineligible for any financial support but can face significant difficulties in paying for required items.
- Ensure that the Welsh Assembly Government one off grant (£100 payable at Year 7) is not replacing any LEA provision.
- Ensure that LEA provision is consistently available across all LEAs
- Consider the feasibility of capping the annual or individual cost of residential trips – perhaps in consultation with schools and parents.
- Ensure that there is appropriate policy guidance for schools in offering financial assistance to families to help them meet the costs of school trips. Currently, it appears as though some parents are unaware of the availability of support and others feel reluctant to seek it out.
- Offer guidance for schools wishing to set up their own school uniform shop, which would enable them to deal directly with ‘mail order’ suppliers.
- Review outcomes from the One Wales Laptop pilot to assess whether this approach needs to be applied to secondary schools in addition to primary schools.

Recommendations for practice – issues to be considered by schools

- Consideration of access to school uniform suppliers – some families (particularly those without a car) could find it difficult to access suppliers. As noted above, one option may be for the school to host a school uniform shop, making access easier, keeping the cost down for parents and enabling any profits to be fed directly into school funds. It may also be possible for parents to access school uniform supplies online (assuming they have access to the internet).
- Explore the feasibility of establishing a direct relationship with a school uniform supplier who is able to supply the school directly (perhaps

through mail order) – in some cases suppliers may be happy to provide a small proportion of income from orders placed by parents to go directly into a school fund.

- The requirement for compulsory logoed items needs to be carefully considered by schools when they are developing their uniform policies; and schools should endeavour to have an appropriate balance of having its own distinct identity, whilst also ensuring that uniform items are widely available and affordable. Schools should therefore review the need for logoed items, or limiting them to just one or two (reasonably priced) items of clothing.
- Schools should explore the feasibility of being able to sew badges or logos on to school items to enable parents to have the flexibility and choice to buy items from a range of suppliers which can then have the school logo added.
- Encourage greater ‘ownership ‘ of school uniform policy among pupils and parents – where there is input from these groups into school uniform policy there is likely to be a greater acceptance and hence compliance.
- Ensure that pupils on lower incomes do not feel marginalised in any way (for example, by sitting in a different part of the dining hall to eat packed lunches or by it being easy to identify who does not go on a school trip or residential break).
- Consider the use of a school uniform loan or donation scheme for those in extreme hardship.
- Schools need to communicate with all parents in advising them about the different types of uniform support that are available (loan of spare items, availability of second hand uniform and so on) since some families do not wish to draw attention to their own financial circumstances.
- Promote and encourage school second hand uniform shops.
- Consider setting up a resource room at schools where pupils can loan items in a non-stigmatising way (for example, by utilising the room for other activities such as quiet study).

- Consider the introduction of a staged payment scheme for school residential trips, enabling payments by instalments (extending after the school trip if needed).
- Staggering the timings of school trips or running them on several occasions so it is not readily apparent who has been unable to go because of affordability.
- To give due consideration to families who may have limited access to the internet/broadband at home, and ensure that the children are not disadvantaged in any way because of this.
- Schools should undertake ongoing consultation with young people (possibly through school councils) to ensure that there is awareness and understanding of the impacts of costs of uniform and other associated costs.

Recommendations for practice – issues to be considered by schools and voluntary sector organisations

- Encourage partnership working between schools and organisations working with families on low incomes so that schools can refer parents to these organisations for help and advice with budgeting and claim support that they are eligible for such as free school meals.
- Promote head teachers' attendance at training and awareness raising sessions run by organisations with expertise in child poverty so that they can learn about the issues that low income families encounter and good practice in minimising the costs of schooling.