

Help with school uniform costs: update

Parents, schools and the government all emphasise the importance of school uniform. The recently published Five Year Plan for education states that all schools are expected to have a uniform, as uniforms 'help give pupils pride in their school, and make them ambassadors for their school in the community'¹. In a DfES survey 83 per cent of parents thought that children should wear school uniform and almost 70 per cent of all respondents thought that uniforms could improve school discipline and help raise school standards.² Many parents support uniforms as they reduce the pressure on them to buy expensive designer clothes as well the likelihood of children to be stigmatised as a result of what they are wearing. Yet in order for a school uniform policy to be effective in enhancing discipline and reducing social exclusion, it needs to be available to all families, regardless of income. In the same survey 41 per cent were concerned that uniform was too expensive. Not having the correct uniform can lead to a pupil being disciplined, marked out as being poor, or even as a disruptive influence.

Over many years Citizens Advice Bureaux have reported seeing parents who have struggled to afford school uniform for their children and we have raised serious concerns about the reduction in support from Local Education Authorities (LEAs) to meet these costs.

Following its unprecedented pledge to end child poverty in a generation, this government has taken many significant policy measures both to increase the incomes of families and to improve access to public services. However, none of these measures have so far, directly addressed the need to support families with the extra costs associated with schooling. The DfES have now carried out extensive research that examines the costs of schooling. The work is based on surveys of parents and schools and the findings due to be published shortly. We hope that the policy responses that follow will ensure that enabling families to meet the costs of schooling will be fully incorporated into the government's child poverty strategy.

The social fund recognises that extra income is needed by households at particular times of pressure, such as moving home, needing to replace bulky items or buy items for a new baby. The costs associated with starting a new school however are not considered as legislation enables LEAs to provide such assistance. When the Government has placed such a high priority on education, the role of uniform in improving standards and on social inclusion and addressing child poverty, it is surprising that so little is known about the provision of school clothing grants. As a result the potential for the contribution of LEA grants scheme to this agenda has been missed.

¹ *Five Year Strategy for Pupils and Learners: Putting people at the heart of public services*, Department for Education and Skills, 2004

² DfES, May 2003

A CAB report published in January 2001, *Uniform failure*, set out evidence demonstrating the inadequate level of LEAs support available to parents at that time to help with these costs. The results of a follow up survey undertaken in 2001, published in August 2002, confirmed that the availability of LEA school clothing grants was continuing to decline in real terms, and that parents continued to face difficulties buying uniforms for their children. It also highlighted instances of good and bad practice in schools with regard to uniform policies.

Since we first looked at the availability of LEA school clothing grants in 1991, our key recommendation has been for the introduction of a statutory duty for LEAs to provide uniform grants. This recommendation has recently been supported by the Department for Work and Pensions Select Committee when they reported on their inquiry into child poverty³. The current government however, holds the same view as the government held in 1991 when we first raised the issue. They insist that it is not appropriate to intervene and this is a matter for LEAs to decide based on local priorities. We do not believe that there is sufficient flexibility in LEA budgets to enable them provide such grants whilst assistance remains discretionary.

New research findings

This briefing is based on a survey undertaken in the spring of 2004, to further examine the LEA provision of financial assistance with school clothing. All 172 LEAs were contacted with a response rate of 100 per cent. The research findings show how the huge variation in grant schemes does not appear to

result from the responses of LEAs to local need. We believe that without government action the value and availability of these grants will continue to decline – the results of the survey, together with evidence from bureaux, confirm our view, and form the contents of this briefing.

Availability of grants

Under the 1996 Education Act, local authorities have the power to provide financial help to parents on low incomes to assist them with buying school clothing for their children. This is not, however, a statutory duty, and the availability of this assistance differs significantly between LEAs – some offer relatively generous grant schemes, some only nominal amounts, and many no help at all. The eligibility criteria for these grants are at the discretion of the LEA, with some offering payment only to people in exceptional circumstances.

A mother of two primary school children who visited a bureau in Gloucestershire was facing financial hardship due to the cost of uniforms. The LEA offered a grant to parents of secondary school children, but no assistance was available for younger children.

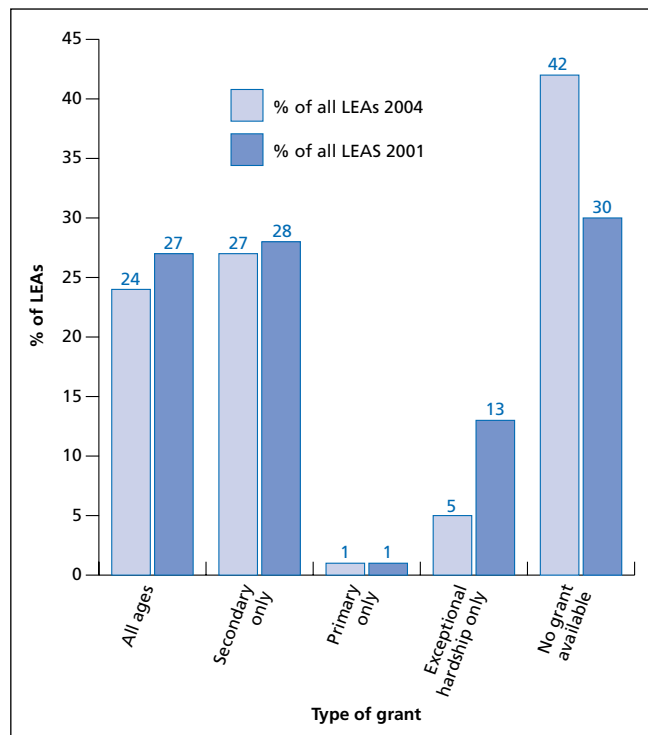
Figure 1 below illustrates how the level of provision of help with school uniform costs has changed since the last Citizens Advice survey in 2001⁴. In 2001, 27 per cent of LEAs offered grants to pupils of all ages, and 28 to secondary age pupils. Those figures have now fallen to 24 and 26 per cent. The proportion of LEAs offering assistance to pupils in exceptional circumstances has fallen from 13 to 5 per cent. There has therefore been an increase in the numbers of LEAs who offer no provision at all – 42 per cent of LEAs do not

³ DWP Select Committee, *Child Poverty in the UK*, HC 85-1, April 2004

⁴ There were 172 LEAs in our survey. Oxfordshire, which is split into five regions, has been counted as a single LEA that does not provide a grant, although some of the regions offer very restricted financial assistance to pupils who are returning to mainstream education after a period of exclusion, which may be used to meet clothing costs.

offer any kind of grant, compared to 30 per cent in 2001.

Figure 1 – LEAs provision of school uniform grants, 2001 and 2004



Value of grants and frequency of payment

The amount of money available, and the frequency with which parents can claim, differ widely between different schemes.

In 2004, the average amount of money available for students transferring to secondary school is £51.27⁵ – representing an absolute increase of only £2.01 since 2001 – a decline in real terms. This figure masks very wide variations however, between different regions as well as between different LEAs. Merthyr Tydfil continues to offer the largest lump sum on transfer, £142.58, whilst South Tyneside and Middlesbrough offer only £15 at this time – none of these values have changed since 2001. Looking at the regional picture, the east of England appears the most generous with 90 per cent of LEAs offering

some help – a proportion which has not declined since 2001, although the average value of grants is relatively low at £43.11. Only three LEAs in the East Midlands offer financial help with uniform costs, and one of these in cases of exceptional hardship only. The LEAs in this region that offer grants at the time of transfer offer relatively generous sums however – £89.11 from the City of Nottingham and £60 from Nottinghamshire. London, as a region, is also relatively benevolent – 64 per cent of LEAs offer financial assistance through a grant scheme (excluding grants for pupils in exceptional hardship only). The average value of a grant at the time of transfer is £67.93. There are wide disparities across the capital. Three LEAs (City of London, Greenwich and Hounslow) offer grants of £100 or more, while Kingston-upon-Thames gives parents only £20 towards the costs when their child moves to secondary school.

A client of a bureau in Kent had two daughters attending a local school. When the school asked parents whether they thought blazers should be introduced the client wrote saying she would find it difficult to pay. They were introduced anyway, with a notice period. The client's family are on a restricted income and cannot afford to buy the blazers. The client reports that one of her daughters is suffering harassment from her form tutor because she is not wearing a blazer. She is threatened with having to sit outside the classroom during lessons. The bureau feel this could be a case of wrongful exclusion. When the client wrote to the school, she was told that she could apply for a grant from the LEA – but Kent County Council does not provide them.

⁵ For most LEAs this is for children transferring from primary schools to secondary at year eleven but where schools are split into lower, middle and upper the amount at transfer to upper school has been used.

Even when schemes are relatively generous at the beginning of secondary school, many do not make provision for the wear and tear on school clothes, or growth spurts, that place an extra financial burden on parents. Citizens Advice has identified only 39 schemes that provide a grant on an annual basis – 39 per cent of all the LEAs offering financial assistance.

Actual costs of school clothing

In February 2002 and June 2004 the DfES issued substantive guidelines on uniforms, and encouraged the use of 'off the peg' clothes which could be bought cheaply⁶. Despite this, uniform costs can often add up to in excess of £200, a sum simply unaffordable for parents on low incomes such as income support. A study commissioned by Norwich Union on the costs associated with school found that parents spend an average of £178 a year on uniform – £172 for primary school pupils and £185 for secondary school⁷. The study estimated that during an 11-year school career, the average parent pays for 44 shirts or blouses, 33 pairs of trousers or skirts, and 22 pairs of shoes.

In local research by a consortium of organisations in Bedfordshire in 2003 parents estimated that they spend an average of £226 a year on school uniform and P.E. kits⁸. The forthcoming research by DfES will for the first time provide much more detailed evidence of the full costs of clothing required by schools.

Although the grants provided by LEAs may only be intended to be a contribution towards costs, they are totally inadequate to offset the financial burden uniform puts on parents. A bureau in the North East reported that the LEA grant of £25, available at the time of school transfer, would, at one school, only buy

one school sweatshirt. A family living on benefit would have great difficulty finding the necessary money.

The client of a bureau in the North East, a lone parent with two children, applied for a grant towards the cost of uniform for her child starting secondary school and received £15. The estimated cost of the uniform for a child in this position is £200. The help given by the LEA is totally inadequate for a family living on benefit when costs are this high.

A bureau in the Midlands reported that their client's son was due to start secondary school in September and he was concerned about the cost of the uniform. The school had a contract with a particular supplier as the shirts had school logos on. He could obtain very similar shirts elsewhere at at least half the price. The school told him however that if he did not wear the official shirt he would be sent home.

The client of a bureau in the Midlands on income support, was struggling financially and her child was about to go to secondary school. The school refused her request to let her son wear a plain sweatshirt in the school colours rather than the school one with a logo which was three times the price.

Eligibility criteria

All LEAs are free to set their own eligibility criteria for their grants, and these vary widely between different authorities. Some authorities, for example, limit eligibility to parents who are in receipt of income support and income based jobseeker's allowance.

6 DfES, *School Uniform Guidance*, February 2002 and June 2004.

7 *School sums*, Norwich Union, 2003.

8 *The Cost of a Free Education*, The work of a discussion group in Bedfordshire, January 2004, 274 parents took part in this survey.

Others include a variety of other benefits in their eligibility criteria, such as housing and council tax benefit, widowed parent's allowance and tax credits. Eighteen LEAs offer grants to asylum seekers. Citizens Advice welcome this recognition that families in a wide variety of circumstances may be on a low income and therefore in need of help to buy school uniforms. Only one LEA offers the grant to people in receipt of the guarantee element of pension credit. Grants are not always available for every child. In Norfolk, where grants are available annually, one award is made per family, not per pupil. This will obviously cause hardship to large families who may have several children in school.

Nine LEAs offer grants to children only in exceptional circumstances. These grants are not available regularly and are not for a guaranteed amount, but individual cases are assessed on a discretionary basis. Families likely to be eligible for this assistance are those who have been affected by fire, flooding, homelessness or theft. In some cases education welfare officers have a small fund with which to make discretionary grants to families they are working with. Often there is only a set amount of funding available for the year – North Somerset, for example, has an annual budget of £2,000. When this runs out parents will have to wait until the next academic year for any help, even though families who meet the criteria as being in 'exceptional hardship' may be in desperate circumstances.

Some LEAs place conditions of both living and attending the school in the same authority area.

[A client of a bureau in Dorset who lived in Bournemouth was unable to get help towards uniform costs because her children attended a Dorset County Council school outside Bournemouth. When Dorset County Council was](#)

[contacted they said that all monies had been distributed to schools. When the school was asked they said there was no money available. If her children attended a school in Bournemouth, she would have been eligible for a grant of £50 per child.](#)

New tax credits

The introduction of the new tax credits in April 2003 seems to have caused some confusion about entitlement in some local authorities, and has served to reduce eligibility in others. At least two LEAs, when questioned about their eligibility criteria, listed receipt of working families tax credit, which has not existed since April 2003. One authority lists family credit which has not been in existence since 2001. *Uniform failure* recommends the need for uniform grant schemes to comply with a set of minimum standards. We recommend that eligibility should be based on receipt of a range of passported benefits or a low income means test updated each year. All LEAs ensure that the range of benefits in the passport be kept under review and revised when new benefits are introduced. The need for this is clearly still evident.

Fiftyone per cent of LEAs offer grants to families who are in receipt of maximum child tax credit (CTC), have a maximum income of £13,480 and are not in receipt of working tax credit (WTC). This is the same entitlement criteria as for free school meals. We are concerned that many families in low paid work will have incomes around this level but not be entitled to free school meals or help with uniform costs. Citizens Advice Bureaux have seen instances of parents who are working, and therefore receiving WTC in addition to CTC, but still have an income below £13,480 and would therefore be eligible for assistance if not employed.

[A bureau in Kent reported that their client was on working tax credit and her](#)

total income was less than £13,480. She couldn't understand why she was unable to get free school meals for her child despite the fact that her income was lower than many families who were eligible.

The experience of a client of a bureau in Essex illustrates that the restrictive conditions of entitlement mean that some parents will be unable to claim a grant even if they are on a low income. Parents in the area are eligible for the grant if they are in receipt of child tax credit and their income is below a certain threshold, as long as they are *not* also in receipt of working tax credit. The client's income was below the specified level, but because she was receiving working tax credit she was unable to claim any assistance with her daughter's new uniform.

Publicising grant schemes

The provision of school clothing grants will only be an effective means to combat social exclusion if parents know about the help available. The Citizens Advice survey asked whether LEAs publicised their services, and what channels they used in order to do so. The survey found that after excluding those authorities that make grants in cases of exceptional hardship only, only 70 per cent of LEAs actually publicise their grants in some way. The remaining LEAs relied on schools or word of mouth to inform parents of the grant. Those LEAs that publicised their grants used a variety of means – local press, the Internet and leaflets and booklets sent out to schools, particularly admissions booklets that go out to parents of pupils transferring to secondary school.

The survey revealed a number of examples of good practice ensuring high take-up by eligible parents. In Leeds, St Helens and the

East Riding of Yorkshire, one of the ways in which eligible parents are identified is through an automatic check on those in receipt of housing and council tax benefit. In Blackburn with Darwen, and the Wirral, information on the scheme is included on application forms for housing and council tax benefit. In a number of LEAs school uniform grant eligibility is linked to eligibility for free school meals, and parents can claim for both benefits at the same time – in North Lincolnshire those on free school meals are automatically entitled to the grant.

The experience of one bureau in the North East illustrates that many parents may go without assistance they are entitled to if the LEA does not make them aware that this help is available. Bureau advisers were aware that Durham LEA administer a benevolent fund which provides uniform grants, but that it was not well used. The bureau placed an advertisement in the local press advising that parents were entitled to a one off payment of £25 towards uniform costs. Following this, over a hundred parents who had been unaware of this visited the bureau and were helped to apply. When contacted during our survey, Durham stated that they do not publicise this scheme at all, and rely on schools to make parents aware of it. A survey done by the bureau found that most of the schools in the area do very little, if anything, to ensure that parents are aware of this support. This case illustrates the importance of publicising grants schemes to ensure that all eligible families are able to benefit from them.

It is very important that if clothing grants are available, local authorities ensure that parents are aware of this. If few parents apply due to a lack of awareness this may be interpreted as an absence of need, which could lead to budgets for school clothing grants being cut.

We welcome the work done by the Local Government Association as part of its initiative to promote benefit take-up, which encouraged LEAs to review their policies and ensure that parents were aware of their schemes⁹.

Alternative sources of help

There are other options available for parents who cannot get help from the LEA. In some cases, charities, the social fund, and schools themselves may be able to provide assistance. Yet Citizens Advice do not believe it is acceptable for parents to have to rely on the voluntary sector, patchy school provision or discretionary help from the DWP in order to buy these essential items. The fact that charities received numerous applications for assistance with these costs provides evidence that there is need that has not depleted with the Government's measures to increase the overall incomes of families and this need is not being met by local authorities – yet it is their role to provide this.

Charities

Several of the LEAs that provide uniform grants fund them not out of their own budgets, but administer funds provided by charitable trusts. As mentioned above, the £27 offered to pupils in years seven to ten by Redcar and Cleveland comes from a benevolent fund, not the local authority itself. Warrington Council for Voluntary Services provides grants of £50 (£150 for secondary transfer). The LEA refers parents to this service. In Swindon, a grant of £50 is available to secondary school pupils every other year – this scheme was established as a result of a bequest and the local authority has no power to alter the arrangements. In Brighton and Hove there is no assistance specifically for school uniforms, but the council holds

charitable trusts to which anyone up to the age of 25 can apply for help with any kind of educational cost. In York, a more generous grant is available for children at the time of secondary transfer, as a result of charitable funding which adds another £50 to the value of the grant at this time (the standard LEA voucher is worth only £30).

Some parents apply to charitable trusts for grants when there is no help available from the LEA, often with a CAB acting on their behalf. These are often local charities with varying eligibility criteria. Nationally, the Family Welfare Association receives a considerable number of requests for assistance with buying school uniform. Since publication of their own report on the cost of school uniforms in 2002, the Association has continued to receive applications for help. They believe this shows that many families on benefit or a low income are struggling with the costs of school uniforms.

Schools

In some areas, schools help parents obtain school uniforms for their children. Many of the LEAs that do not provide grants told us that the schools in the area run their own second hand stores where parents can buy uniforms at a reduced price. A small number of LEAs have allocated money for a uniform scheme to the schools themselves. When Westminster stopped running its own uniform grant scheme in March 2004, the schools in the area were invited to bid for funding to operate their own. Only some schools have done so however, and provision for pupils in this area now depends on which school they attend. A small amount of money has also been allocated to schools in Staffordshire, and the LEA states that some money is available from schools in Windsor and Maidenhead.

⁹ *Quids for Kids: good practice guide on benefits and tax credits take-up work for families with children*, Local Government Association, 2003.

In 2003, following the discovery that Kent LEA had stopped providing uniform grants six years earlier, Maidstone CAB decided to find out to what extent schools themselves assisted families on low incomes to comply with their uniform policies. They received responses from 37 schools in the area and concluded that most schools were able to offer some support to individual pupils who might need it. All the primary schools offered simple colour based uniform policies and half of them offered assistance by way of bulk purchase of items such as sweatshirts. Secondary schools were more varied in their response – one had a blazer only available from one supplier. Most of them operated second hand sales and had charitable resources they could use for individual pupils whose parents were struggling with the costs. They reported that the uniform policies were strictly enforced, to the extent of excluding pupils, but with the qualification that they handled infringements of the policies sensitively.

One CAB has reported one example of school provision being available over and above the assistance offered by the LEA. The bureau’s client was an asylum seeker who had been granted £27 from the local authority, which would not cover the full price of a uniform. When an adviser contacted the school however, the client was informed that as she was an asylum seeker the school would provide a uniform and she needed only to buy shoes and shorts for PE.

The social fund

When there is no other source of help available, some parents make applications for budgeting loans to pay for a school uniform. A recent DWP report, which examined how families use the social fund, found that a child

reaching the age of five, and therefore starting school, was the second most likely ‘life event’ to trigger an application to the social fund. Not all families on low incomes are eligible for social fund loans however – only those on income support or income-based job seeker’s allowance qualify – and many applications are refused. If a budgeting loan is granted, the rate of repayment will leave families living on incomes below income support levels, and is likely to cause hardship.

Regional variations

As the figure 2 below indicates, the decline in the provision of school uniform grants is not even across all regions in England and Wales. The proportion of LEAs offering grants has fallen in five government office regions, remained the same in four and actually increased in one – Wales – where a new scheme has been announced in Wrexham since we last conducted a survey.

Figure 2

Government office region	Percentage of LEAs offering grants	
	2001*	2004*
London	76	64
North West	80	68
Yorkshire & the Humber	67	60
South West	31	25
North East	42	38
East Midlands	22	22
East of England	90	90
South East	26	26
West Midlands	29	29
Wales**	68	77

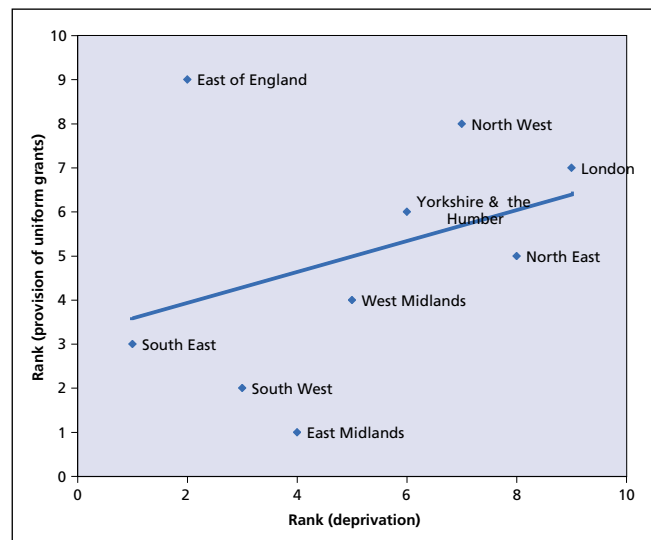
* standard grants schemes only – excluding discretionary hardship schemes

**The introduction of a grant scheme by one local authority, Wrexham, is responsible for this percentage change.

Regional variations and deprivation indices

The Government believes that decisions regarding the provision of help with school clothing costs are best left with local authorities to enable them to respond to local need in their area. LEAs could therefore argue that they do not provide grants because of the low level of need in their area. A broad analysis of the grant provision by authorities in the most deprived regions however, does not indicate that this is the case. In fact there seems to be little correlation between the availability of school uniform grants and the level of childhood deprivation in each government office region in England, as measured by the percentage of children living in income deprived households¹⁰. We have ranked local government office regions according to the proportion of LEAs that provide uniform grants (1=lowest provision, 9=highest), and levels of deprivation (1=lowest deprivation, 9=highest). If LEAs were really responding to local need, we could expect to see a strong correlation between the level of grant provision and the level of deprivation. Figure 3 shows that this is not the case, suggesting that LEAs are not responding to local needs, and giving weight to the argument that action needs to be taken nationally.

Figure 3 – Correlation between indices of deprivation and provision of uniform grants* by LEAs in English government office regions



*standard grants schemes only – excluding discretionary hardship schemes

Figures 2 and 3 also together show that the number of grant schemes has declined in the three regions with the highest proportions of children living in income deprived households – London, the North West and the North East. Sixty-eight per cent of LEAs in London, the region with the highest percentage of children living in income deprived households, offer grants. The percentage of children living in poverty is only slightly lower in the North East, where only 38 per cent of LEAs offer financial assistance with uniform costs. In the East of England, where only 15 per cent of children live in income deprived households, some 90 per cent of LEAs offer grants, but in the East Midlands, where 18 per cent of children live in this situation, only 22 per cent do.

There is also a wide disparity within regions. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister names Newham, Tower Hamlets and Hackney as being among the most deprived boroughs in London, yet the three LEAs in this area have very different policies regarding school uniform grants. While Hackney and Tower

¹⁰ *The English Indices of Deprivation 2004 (Revised)*, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2004. Comparable statistics for Wales are not available.

Hamlets offer relatively generous grants to parents on a wide variety of benefits at the time of school transfer (£60 and £77 respectively), Newham does not offer any financial assistance and refers parents to the social fund.

Wrexham Borough Council is the only LEA to have reintroduced a uniform grant in recent years. After the publication of *Uniform failure*, the Chief Strategic Services Officer contacted Citizens Advice expressing regret that their grant had been withdrawn in 1997. Councillors in Wrexham were unhappy about the decision, and in 2003 a grant scheme was re-established, offering secondary school pupils £28 to help with these costs. The grant is to be increased to £35 for the school year 2004/05, and a spokesman from the LEA told us that the work Citizens Advice had done on this issue had influenced this decision.

This unevenness in the provision of uniform grant schemes is caused by the lack of central guidance from the DfES, the Welsh assembly or local government associations. Whilst there is no statutory duty to provide help with school clothing costs there is no guarantee that parents and children living in the most deprived areas will have access to this assistance.

It is possible that schools in areas of high deprivation are more aware of the importance of considering affordability when setting their uniform policies. Schools in these areas may follow the Government's guidelines to choose 'off the peg' items and also provide additional support for those in need, but since there is no data on school's uniform policies such comparisons cannot be made. In such areas local collaboration between different interest groups and organisations including schools and LEAs can be really effective in helping to ensure that schools policies don't serve to

exclude children from low-income families. A group in Bedfordshire have been working together for a number of years to consider the costs of education to families.

In Bedfordshire, following the publication of *Uniform failure* a number of organisations got together to explore the difficulties that many families experience in meeting school related costs. The project group comprises representatives from the Bedfordshire and Luton Education Business Partnership, The Children's Fund, Bedfordshire County Council (Education Welfare Service), Bedfordshire Child Poverty Action Group and The Bedford Charity.

The initiative has resulted in the production of a video documentary entitled *The cost of a free education*. The documentary features families, schools and representatives from key agencies and explores not only the problems but also practical ways forward in addressing the needs of low-income families. The group has implemented the joint administration of statutory and charitable hardship fund to assist people on low income with buying a school uniform. They are also working on a pilot scheme that supports staff in a pyramid of schools to look at the policies and practices they use and how these can be reviewed to have a positive effect on low-income families.

Conclusions and recommendations

In June 2004 the DfES published new guidance on school uniform for governors (who are responsible for setting uniform policy for individual schools), which Citizens Advice welcomes. The guidance states that when considering school uniform policy, governing bodies should give 'high priority' to cost considerations, and that 'No school uniform should be so expensive as to leave pupil or their families feeling socially excluded'¹¹. The guidance also states that the cost of a uniform should not deter parents from applying to the school of their choice. The guidance re-emphasises that clothing should be available 'off the peg', so parents can shop around for the most cost-effective option. The guidance also states that similar considerations should be made when setting rules for uniform for PE, and that schools should consult parents before introducing uniforms or amending the dress code.

In Wales, the National Assembly is responsible for issuing guidance on uniform. The Assembly issued a consultation document on the guidance for governors in December 2003 (to which Citizens Advice responded), and the Assembly is due to issue new guidance for schools in September 2004. The Minister will be seeking funding from the Assembly for a scheme to provide financial assistance to families to purchase school uniforms. The scheme would be available to families whose children are entitled to free school meals and would be introduced from September 2005.

In addition, the Minister has provided financial support for a low cost loan scheme to help parents purchase school uniforms through Wales Credit Unions. Launched in June 2004,

the scheme will be offered to parents in four pilot areas. Assembly support has been provided through the Education Budget for 2004/05 to ensure that families are able to benefit.

In order to ensure these guidelines have some impact on policy in individual schools however, they need to be widely publicised and monitored. Citizens Advice has concerns that the current guidance is not adequately monitored however, and that individual school policies vary widely.

Without more decisive action being taken centrally it seems likely that the pattern of decline in availability of uniform grants will continue. When surveyed, a number of LEAs indicated that their schemes had fallen in value due to budgetary pressures, or were vulnerable to future cuts.

"We expected to put the value of the grants up this year, after looking at the price of uniforms, but then the budget was cut by two thirds, and it just wasn't possible."

"The conditions of eligibility were changed last year – they were restricted and now less people are able to claim the grant."

"Our scheme looked likely to be scaled down this year – in the end it escaped the budget cut, but it's always under threat. The grant for primary school pupils went several years ago."

It is clear that action is needed at national level to safeguard these schemes and ensure they are extended to cover all children.

Uniform failure made numerous recommendations to the Government, DfES, to LEAs and to schools. As the provision of assistance to help with school uniform costs has changed since its publication, these recommendations are now more salient than ever.

- The Government should introduce a statutory duty on LEAs to meet minimum standards for providing school uniform grants. This will need to be backed up with earmarked funding within the education standard spending assessment. Minimum standards should cover eligibility criteria including the requirement to ensure they are kept up to date with benefit changes, levels of grants, publicity, payment methods and accessibility of the schemes.
- The Department for Education and Skills and the National Assembly for Wales should issue guidance on good practice on school uniform grant schemes incorporating a set of minimum standards Citizens Advice outlined in *Uniform failure*.
- LEAs that do not have school uniform grant schemes should introduce one which is consistent with minimum standards proposed by Citizens Advice.

- LEAs that do have school uniform grant schemes should review their present schemes against the minimum standards proposed by Citizens Advice service. In addition schools and LEAs should seek to improve co-ordination on LEA grant schemes and uniform policies in order that budgets could be better utilised. For example where vouchers are used it must be ensured that all schools' uniforms can be purchased with them. LEAs should ensure that their grants are sufficiently advertised, so all eligible parents are aware of the help available.

We believe that the Government needs to address the issues of the costs associated with schooling and review the provision of assistance with school clothing through LEAs. We welcome the extensive research undertaken by the DfES on the costs of schooling that is due to report in the early autumn of 2004 and urge the Government to make full use of its findings to ensure that this aspect of child poverty and social exclusion is incorporated fully in the Government's child poverty strategy.

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