



Background

The availability of financial assistance with the costs of school uniform has been a long-standing concern of the Citizens Advice Bureaux Service. Citizens Advice Bureaux (CABx) throughout England and Wales have reported that parents have faced financial hardship as a result of the costs of school uniform for their children and have found problems in getting any assistance with the costs. The arguments in favour of school uniform are well respected by Government, schools and parents alike. The advantages of uniform are however diminished if a very strict code operates with no additional financial support. This puts extra pressure on parents with low incomes. Children feel excluded or are actually excluded from school for not having the right clothing.

A CAB evidence report published in January 2001, *Uniform failure*, demonstrated how the lack of help with school clothing costs is causing serious problems for parents on low income. The report showed that the availability and level of Local Education Authority (LEA) school clothing grants had declined in real terms since 1990 and that CABx reported that some children had been threatened with exclusion from school simply because their parents had not been able to afford the correct uniform.

This briefing shows how one year on from the publication of *Uniform failure*, the availability and value of LEA assistance with school uniform costs for families on low incomes continues to decline and CABx continue to report that clients are visiting bureaux because they can't afford to buy uniform for their children.

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In the summer of 2001 we undertook a survey of every LEA in England and Wales. We found that almost one third of LEAs (30%) provide no help whatsoever towards the costs of uniforms. Nine LEAs had slashed or abolished their grants since 2000. Only 28% of LEAs offer grants to children of both primary and secondary school age. 41% of these LEAs do not offer annual payments and they all operate strict eligibility criteria. The trend towards more restricted eligibility schemes is worrying as this may well be a step towards complete withdrawal of help.

CABx are also becoming increasingly concerned about schools introducing stricter uniform policies with some CABx reporting uniform lists that are applied with military precision. It is these policies that can cause particular difficulties for families on low incomes. The revision of the guidelines on uniforms issued by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) in Spring 2002 was very welcome. The guidelines discourage 'designer' uniforms and encourage use of 'off the peg' items.

Survey findings - types and levels of provision

Some of the authorities that say they offer assistance with school uniform costs do not actually fund the clothing grants themselves. Instead they administer grants from charitable trust funds. Five (3%) of the LEAs in our survey administer charitable funds rather than allocate funds from their own budget. This means that in

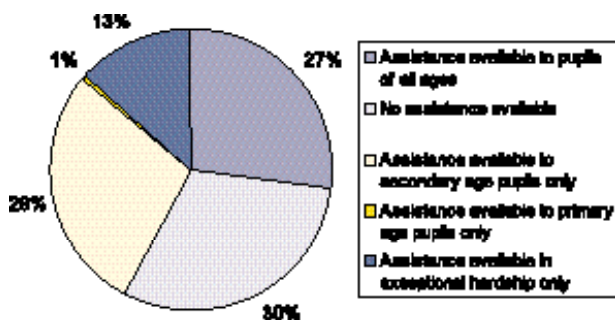
fact 33% of LEAs do not provide financial assistance with school clothing costs. Walsall, for example administers funds from three charitable organisations where all cases are considered individually. The charities give around £50 per application and families can reapply each year at any time, although one of the charities only meets to discuss applications in August.

Warrington LEA does not offer any kind of assistance but refers families to Warrington Council for Voluntary Services, which administers the Police Aided Children in Need Fund. The fund operates a grant scheme similar to many LEA schemes - grants are available every other year, and the amount is higher for the secondary school transfer year.

Three authorities in England (Stoke on Trent, Staffordshire and Rutland) do not offer grants but include the funds for assistance with school clothing costs in schools budgets. Once the budget is delegated however, there is no way to ensure that the money is used for assistance with school clothing. Cannock and Rugeley CAB in Staffordshire found that two of their local schools reported being unaware that that they had received money from their LEA to provide financial assistance with school clothing costs. For this reason we have not included these three LEAs in the total of those who provide grants.

In Wales, the delegation of the budget for school clothing grants appears to work differently. Several Welsh LEAs administer their grants through the schools and schools have the option to vary the amount offered. Budgets are devolved but the LEAs are still aware of how much and in some cases undertook the eligibility assessment. We have therefore included these Welsh LEAs in the total of LEAs that offer grant schemes. Rhondda Cynon Taff LEA, for example, undertakes a financial assessment of families, looking at their income over a thirteen week period. It then passes on those it finds eligible to the schools to decide on the amount of grant to award.

Percentage of LEAs providing financial assistance with school uniform costs



Base: NACAB survey of 172 LEAs in England and Wales, 2001

Regional variations in provision

Whilst 97 LEAs in England and Wales (56%) offer grants for children of primary, secondary or both age groups, provision is not evenly spread across England and Wales. When the provision is examined by Government Office Region we can see that 90% of authorities in the East of England and 80% of authorities in the North-West provide grant assistance for families on low income. The Midlands and the South East fare the worst with only 26% of authorities in these regions offering grants. Whilst only 31% of authorities in the South West offer grants, in addition to this eight LEAs (50%) offer discretionary grants or assistance in exceptional hardship. This means that 81% of authorities in this region offer some form of assistance, but for most authorities in the South West being a recipient of low income would not be sufficient to qualify parents for help.

Government office regions	% of all LEAs offering grants* in 2001
East Midlands	22%
West Midlands	29%
East of England	90%
North East	42%
Yorkshire and Humber	67%
North West	80%
London	76%
South East	26%
South West	31%
Wales	68%

* excluding discretionary hardship funds

Value of grants and frequency of payment

The amounts and frequencies of grants vary hugely between different schemes. Most authorities who offer grants offer them either annually or every other year. Many authorities focus their budgets on those transferring from one school to another, either by offering a higher amount for children going into year seven, age eleven or offering a one off payment at this time.

The average grant available for children transferring schools¹ is £49.26 but this varies quite considerably in different regions. In London the

average grant for children transferring is £68.33 but in the North it is £30.33. The highest grant offered at transfer is £142.58 available in Merthyr Tydfil. The lowest is £15 available from Middlesbrough and South Tyneside.

Merthyr Tydfil offers the highest grants overall, for secondary level pupils. For year seven (age eleven) it offers £142.58 and then for years eight to eleven offers £69.54. Peterborough offers the second highest grant with £68 every year in secondary school. There are a number of LEAs that offer higher than average grants but these are only available every other year. The City of London offers £105 for years seven and nine and £98 at year eleven. Hounslow offers £95 every year from secondary school. Lambeth offers the highest one-off grant for those transferring to secondary school followed by Lancashire offering £90. The lowest one-off grant is £30, offered by Powys and North Yorkshire LEAs.

The actual costs of even the most basic school uniform requirements vastly exceed the level of the average grant currently available from LEAs. Where a school has an inflexible uniform with highly specific requirements there is a huge gulf between the grant and the costs low income households face.

The cost of uniform varies considerably from school to school. CABx have reported costs of uniforms including P.E. kits up to £274. In a report published at the beginning of 2002, the Family Welfare Association (FWA) identified the costs of a typical low cost simple colour based uniform. Costing all items usually required for all school activities they found that a boys primary school uniform would typically cost £92.00 and a girls £114.00. For secondary school the costs would increase to £156.50 for boys and £157.00 for girls. These costings are however based on being able purchase all the items from a supermarket chain or department store and make no provision for replacement due to growth or wear and tear. Many schools require blazers with the school logo on to be purchased from a specific shop and this can cost on average an extra £27.

¹ 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.

Cases

A CAB in Kent report a client who could not afford to buy school uniform for her 14 year old daughter. There was no grant available from the local education authority and no second hand shop at the school. Her daughter was refusing to attend school because she didn't have the uniform and the school welfare officer had become involved due to her non-attendance.

A CAB in Wales reported a client who was on income support had always been able to purchase her son's uniform from his school in two or three payments. She was concerned therefore when she was informed that the school would be no longer supplying uniform but that it would be available from a sports shop in a town 9 miles away. Whilst she was told she would still be able to pay for it in instalments, the uniform would be more expensive and she would in addition have to pay for the travel costs of using the train or the bus, neither of which ran a good service.

A CAB in the Midlands reported a client on income support whose son is due to start secondary school in September. The list of things she has been given by the school is unattainable on her income but her LEA offer no assistance with the costs. The CAB had to help her apply for a grant from the Family Welfare Association.

If other items are required to be of a specific style then the cost can increase even further. Size can also make a considerable difference to the cost. The FWA have also identified examples of actual costs ranging from £186 to £238.

Of the 81 LEAs that provided grants and appeared in both surveys only 24 LEAs (30%) increased their grant at all, which means that in real monetary terms 70% of LEA grant schemes have lost value even if all other aspects of the authority's policies, such as frequency of awards or eligibility criteria remained constant between 2000 and 2001.

Survey findings: eligibility criteria and scope of grants

LEAs often limit eligibility to their schemes to families on income support or income-based jobseeker's allowance. Some LEAs operate an additional low income means test where those on working families' tax credit could become eligible. London LEAs however, operate much broader eligibility criteria. In ten of the LEAs in London, families are eligible for grants if they are in receipt of income support, income-based jobseeker's allowance, working families' tax credit or where incapacity benefit, retirement pension or widowed mother's allowance are their sole source of income. It is good to see the inclusion of these extra eligibility criteria as it demonstrates recognition of the range of family circumstances.

Exceptional hardship

Eighteen LEAs only provide assistance in cases of extreme or exceptional hardship². In these LEAs there is no assistance for all those on low income with children in a specific school year. In addition to being on a low income, families only qualify if they are assessed as having exceptional need or facing exceptional circumstances or emergency situations. In Poole, North Somerset, Bath and North East Somerset detailed criteria include fire, theft, flood, relevant medical conditions, homelessness. In other areas individuals are assessed on a discretionary basis. In some cases small discretionary grants are available via the

² This compares with eight identified in the previous survey. As well as the larger sample size the increase can primarily be explained in terms of finding on closer examination that a few of the authorities that were previously thought to offer no assistance would do in extreme circumstances

education welfare officer. In East Sussex for example, a grant is only available if the child is an ongoing case for the education welfare team and if clothing costs are keeping them from attending school. The criteria were so tight that for the financial year 2000/01 some of the small budget was unspent whilst many families were struggling and Hastings and Rother CAB attained over 30 charity grants on families' behalf.

Scope of grants

Whilst the majority of LEAs do not specify which items of clothing the grant must be used for, nine per cent of LEAs who offer support do put specific requirements on its use: this tends to be for essential items such as coats and shoes. Two authorities in Wales for example, specify how much of the grant each year is for clothing and how much is for shoes. Shoes are the only item for which Herefordshire LEA's grant can be used.

Local or regional patterns and variations

We have observed some patterns at a regional and local level but these do not appear to be intentional, rational or co-ordinated.

In London there seems to be a pattern of LEAs offering grants to families whose sole source of income is state retirement pension, widowed mother's allowance or incapacity benefit. No other LEA in England or Wales includes state retirement pension as one of its eligibility criteria and only two LEAs in Wales include widowed mother's allowance in their criteria.

Even where LEAs have similar eligibility and policies on the frequency of grants, the value of provision can differ considerably. For example, both Lambeth and Southwark LEAs offer a one-off grant at transfer to year seven. Their eligibility criteria extends to all families in receipt of income support, income-based jobseeker's allowance, working families' tax credit or where incapacity benefit, retirement pension or widowed mother's allowance are their sole source of income. However, whilst Lambeth's grant is £100,

Southwark, its neighbouring LEA offered only £45. It is difficult to see that there are likely to be differences in costs of school clothing between two adjacent London boroughs. In terms of deprivation levels, two of Lambeth's 21 wards are in the top five hundred most deprived wards in England, whilst eight of Southwark's 21 wards are in the top five hundred most deprived wards in England³.

The three LEAs in Wales that devolve or administer their grants through schools are geographically adjacent to each other.

In the Yorkshire and Humber Government Office Region, we can see an example of how authorities worked together to facilitate the administration of their grants schemes. When the system broke down it appears that there was little co-ordination about the future of individual policies and practices with regard to grant schemes. In 2000 when we carried out our first survey Yorkshire and Humber was one of the best provided for areas of the country with 88% of LEAs offering grant schemes. A number of authorities used to provide purchasing orders for a particular supplier and therefore offered similar provision with similar eligibility criteria. This was usually income support or income based jobseeker's allowance and, in some cases, some families on working families' tax credit. The grants were small, around £20, but available for all age groups and annually. When the supplier ceased to operate in 2001, the LEAs using them had to make alternative arrangements. They responded in different ways: Wakefield moved to voucher provision; Doncaster felt that even vouchers would lead to an unsustainable increase in costs and ceased to operate a grant altogether. Barnsley also stopped provision of assistance.

A couple of other examples of similarities appear to arise out of proximity of LEAs to each other or, in the case of Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire, they used to form part of the same local authority. Blackpool, Blackburn and Darwen and Bolton's policies are very similar- the amount of grant

³ Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, Indices of Deprivation 2000

available depends on the time of year the application is made. A reduced grant is available if the application is made after the first term.

The existence of huge variations in policies across England and Wales, combined with some apparent similarities between neighbouring LEAs is not surprising when there has never been any guidance on grant schemes issued by the DfES or local government organisations. A patchwork of provision has built up. Also the availability of assistance in one LEA compared with another will not necessarily depend on there being a high level of low-income families in the area. People living in 23 of the one hundred most deprived wards spread across twelve different local authorities in England do not have access to a grant scheme³.

Examples of good practices that schools operate:

- Simple colour based school uniform requirements⁵ that are not onerous and can be met easily from a variety of stores so parents can shop around.
- Offering good quality second-hand stalls at parents' evenings or other occasions.
- Bulk purchase items and then sell them on to parents at a discounted price. Some schools even offer easy payment schemes.
- Actively publicising LEA grant schemes where they exist.
- Holding discretionary hardship funds.
- Indicating on their school kit lists when items are required by so that parents are not requested to buy all items at once, in fact some items such as sports kits are seasonal and not required until some time later in the year.

Payment methods

Whilst most LEAs (53%) pay their grants by way of cheques, 47% of LEAs only offer financial assistance by giving vouchers of various types, redeemable at specific stores⁴. These vouchers vary in form and include letters to specific school clothing stores asking the shop to give the item and charge the school, vouchers redeemable at a couple of specific stores and vouchers for department stores. Certain items of uniform such as blazers and ties may only be available at specific shops, but for less specialised items it may be more cost effective for parents to shop around. Voucher systems can, therefore, deny parents choice and prevent them from getting the best value for money.

A CAB in Manchester for example, was concerned about how the use of vouchers in Oldham means that the value of the grant is decreasing because they are only redeemable at one shop whilst schools themselves are increasingly requesting items that are only available directly from them. Recent changes to the rules governing the use of the vouchers also mean that change or credit notes are no longer given for the vouchers and therefore all the value must be spent at once.

Schools and their uniform policies and practices

Schools can do much to reduce the pressure of educational costs on low-income families. Following on from the publication of **Uniform failure** a number of CABx have carried out surveys of their local schools to find out more about their uniform policies and the support they make available to assist low-income families.

Uniform policies were not stricter in the areas where the LEA grants were most widely available. CABx did find however that where uniforms were simple colour based⁵ and items are available from many stores, parents on low income seemed to experience fewer problems. It seemed that some

⁴ Base: 105 LEAs that offer assistance with school uniform costs for which we have this information.

⁵ Where the uniform is based on specific colours rather than on colours and style.

schools operating strict and more specific uniform codes did not offer any assistance to low-income families. It also seemed that it was more often the primary schools that offered a simple colour based uniform with school sweatshirts and that in addition operated second hand clothing stalls.

Berwick CAB in Northumberland wrote to the head teachers of all primary and secondary schools in their catchment area and found that all schools seemed to either operate a fairly simple colour based uniform where the majority of the items were available from a variety of stores and/or they were aware of the potential costs of uniform to parents. All of the four secondary schools that responded said that they recognised that clothing costs were (or could be) a problem for some families. One school reported that their uniform was very colour and style specific but available from any supplier and that the school regularly helped parents purchase uniform. There is not a grant scheme available from Northumberland LEA.

Boothferry CAB sent a questionnaire to all 30 of the schools in its catchment area in East Riding of Yorkshire LEA. Of the 21 schools that replied, 76% indicated that they had had experience of parents having difficulties affording school uniform, but only 29% reported that they had their own arrangements for assisting families on low income. One third of schools advised that they would make their uniform compulsory if they believed that there was adequate support for low-income families. The CAB is working with the LEA to produce guidelines for schools to use to sell their own uniforms directly to parents at low cost.

Examples of good simple uniform policies:

A first school (age 4-9) operate a uniform where the children have to wear grey shorts or a grey skirt that can be bought anywhere and a sweatshirt costing £7.50 which is available from the school. At the end of each year the school organises a 'uniform pool' of unwanted sweatshirts that are in good condition. They are then available to parents second-hand.

A secondary school in the Midlands have their own school shop where pupils can either pay weekly for items of uniform or have them free of charge. They also have a supply of 'nearly new' uniform which the school nurse organises. All children have swipe cards for their school dinners and so no distinction can be observed between those who have free school dinners and those who pay.

Example of good practice:

A school in East London planned to change its uniform policy in September 2002 to include a blazer for all pupils. In its correspondence with the parents the school recognised the extra cost of this and potential difficulties this could raise for some families. They gave details of the grant help available from the LEA and offered discretionary assistance for those not eligible to LEA assistance. In addition the blazer would not be made compulsory for pupils moving into the top two years in September 2002 as they would have limited wear and hence reduced value for money from it.

And not so good practice:

A school in Surrey introduced a new uniform policy which included an expensive blazer (the cost ranging from £35-£45 as compared with £27 to £29 for the other local comprehensive school). The blazer is only available from one supplier and a different style for boys and girls so it is not possible to pass it down through families.

Conclusions and recommendations

The DfES and National Assembly for Wales issue guidance to Governors on the law. This covers school uniforms and exclusion policies⁶. In Spring 2002 the Department for Education and Skills reissued its guidance to schools in England on uniforms, emphasising that schools should look carefully at the issues of affordability and practicality when considering introducing or changing school uniforms⁷. This followed a survey of parents they commissioned which found that 89% preferred their children to wear uniforms but that one in three parents were concerned about the cost of uniforms. The National Assembly for Wales, which is responsible for education in Wales, has not yet issued similar guidance as that for England.

Uniform Failure recommended that DfES guidance to schools on uniforms should be amended and the Family Welfare Association in their report supported this recommendation. However in order for these guidelines to be effective it is essential for them to be widely publicised and monitored. Whilst the Government's recognition that the uniform requirements of some schools are excessive and needlessly expensive is very important, we continue to believe that action is required to standardise practices of local authorities in relation to assistance offered. We would also like to see the National Assembly for Wales issuing similar extended guidance.

Uniform failure made a number of other recommendations to the Government, the Department for Education and Skills (then Education and Employment), for LEAs and for schools. One year on, the provision of assistance with school uniform costs has declined and the need for a co-ordinated approach to uniforms and their costs is even more apparent. We believe that the Department for Education and Skills needs to provide leadership in conjunction with the Welsh Assembly on this issue

to prevent further decline and redress the inequities of the discretionary grant schemes. The recommendations of **Uniform failure** essentially still stand:

- The Government should introduce a new 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, levels of grants, 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 NACAB has outlined in the report **Uniform failure**.
- LEAs that do not have school uniform grant schemes should introduce one which is consistent with minimum standards proposed by the CAB Service.
- LEAs that do have school uniform grant schemes should review their present schemes against the minimum standards proposed by the CAB 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 an LEA issues vouchers it must ensure that all schools' uniforms can actually be purchased with them.

Uniform failure: CAB clients' experience of help with school uniform costs (NACAB 2001) is available from the social policy department on 020 7833 2181 or on the NACAB website: www.nacab.org.uk

Grants for School Uniforms: Evidence from the Family Welfare Association (FWA 2002)

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Social Policy Department
National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux
115 Pentonville Road, London N1 9LZ
T: 020 7833 2181 F: 020 7833 4371
www.nacab.org.uk

⁶ DfES, November 2001 and National Assembly for Wales November 2001

⁷ DfES, 27 February 2002