

## Written evidence submitted by the End Child Poverty Coalition (CWSB41)

### Recommendations for the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill – clause 23, Branded School Uniform

#### About us

The End Child Poverty Coalition is made up of over 130 organisations including child welfare groups, social justice groups, faith groups, trade unions and others. Together with a group of 20 Youth Ambassadors aged between 16 and 25, we all believe that no child growing up in the UK should live in poverty. We ask that this and future UK governments commit to end child poverty. Some organisations within the Coalition work directly to provide uniforms to children attending school. For example, Buttle UK provides grants of up to £250,000 annually for school uniforms for the most vulnerable children.

An essential part of our work is engagement with the Youth Ambassadors we work alongside. We work to provide opportunities for these Ambassadors to share their experiences with decision makers, help develop our Coalition strategy and share their experiences with the media.

Most of these Ambassadors have personal experience of growing up in a low-income background. By that we mean they may have lived in a household whose income (either through benefit payments, work or a combination of both) did not meet their children's needs, they may have qualified for free school meals, or had experience of using food banks, for example. For some Ambassadors this is still very much the situation they are living in today.

This report has been collated by Youth Ambassadors, the recommendations are based on their recent experience of attending schools which require pupils to wear branded school uniform.

#### Recommendations for the Bill Committee

These recommendations have been devised by young people with personal experience of growing up in a low-income household, whilst attending schools which require pupils to wear branded uniforms;

- **The Bill should be amended to stipulate that schools can only require pupils and their families to purchase two branded uniform items.** Four branded items – as proposed in the Bill - is still too many. These can be double the cost of unbranded items.<sup>1</sup> Even with only 3 branded items and a branded tie, costs for young people and their families would still remain high.
- Schools need to be aware of the cost requirements attached to school uniform, and always **provide or allow alternatives for 'branded' items**. For example, allowing families to sew school badges onto a grey jumper, as opposed to asking families to buy a specific branded grey jumper from one uniform supplier.

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<sup>1</sup> From <https://www.theguardian.com/education/article/2024/aug/31/branded-uk-school-uniforms-cost-double-high-street-prices-analysis-reveals>

- The Bill **should ensure schools provide access to pre-loved uniform and clothing**. Whilst there is a requirement for this in the current statutory guidance, Ambassadors often did not have access to this at their schools, meaning this guidance is not being consistently implemented in practice.
- Where students are required to buy new items of branded or unbranded uniform, and are unable to do so for financial reasons, the **school should operate a grant system - providing funds directly to families to ensure they can afford these items**.
- The Bill should ensure that **pupils are not adversely reprimanded for uniform issues**, especially when these are due to poverty. For example, **isolation should not be used as a method of punishment for this, and students should not miss out on teaching by being sent home to change**. Whilst current guidance says that students shouldn't be reprimanded if poverty is the cause, identifying this is tricky for teachers. Ambassadors have personal experience of being put into isolation and being sent home for uniform issues, which were caused by poverty.
- Schools should ensure that **when there is a change of uniform policy, a significant period of at least one term should be provided for students to obtain the new uniform**. For that term, both the old and new uniform should be allowed to be worn by students.
- Those drafting uniform policies within a school should have an understanding that it is not always families who are buying uniform. For example, **estranged young people who have no contact with their families will likely have to fund their own uniforms**. This is something which can put huge financial strain on the young person.
- There should be a quick and easy way for young people and their families to report non-compliant schools, as well as a way to ensure that schools rectify their policies immediately. For example, **Ofsted inspections could ensure that uniform policies are compliant with the law, and that policies are consistently implemented in practice**.

## Child Poverty in the UK

In 2022/23 30% of all children living in the UK were living in poverty.<sup>2</sup> That is 9 children in a school class of 30 pupils. Data from the End Child Poverty Coalition and Loughborough University shows there is widespread variation across the country. In areas such as Birmingham Hodge Hall for example, over 50% of children live in poverty – meaning half a school class will be living in a low-income household.<sup>3</sup>

Whilst branded school uniforms may be introduced by schools in the hope that students feel part of a community and ensure that those living in poverty cannot be identified, strict uniform policies with requirements for many expensive items can in fact do the opposite - highlighting children who live in families that cannot afford these items.



*Teachers went around saying that "uniform helps to hide poverty and makes you all look the same" but I find this difficult to believe as not only is this a nonsensical argument given how pricey a school uniform is, students are targeted and punished based on incorrect uniform and the schools uniform policy instead of behaviour, which inadvertently singles out poor children, punishes them for something out of their control and isolates them from lessons, making them less likely to achieve good grades and more likely to turn to deviance.*

Noor, End Child Poverty Youth Ambassador

## Recommendations in detail

Clause 23 of the proposed Children's Wellbeing and School's Bill provides for four branded items of school uniform, to limit the number required by each school. The Department for Education have told us that this number was developed

<sup>2</sup> From Household's Below Average Income <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/households-below-average-income-for-financial-years-ending-1995-to-2023>

<sup>3</sup> From J. Stone, 2024, Local Child Poverty Data, <https://endchildpoverty.org.uk/child-poverty-2024/>

by looking at the available evidence to ensure that the right balance was struck between reducing costs for parents, and recognising the benefits that some branded items may bring to school life. However, if the aim is to ensure that children who are growing up in poverty are not adversely impacted by their school's uniform policy, then more emphasis should be placed on the lived experience of young people like End Child Poverty Youth Ambassadors, who have recent experience of attending schools with branded uniform policies in place.



*I come from an area of poverty and school uniforms are expensive, they are meant to help cover poverty but when they're so expensive it causes more stress and worry for both the parents and the student because there aren't many second hand options and there are little to no financial aids to help with the cost of school uniforms, and if we are not able to get the correct school uniform because of the cost we're punished for it.*

An End Child Poverty Youth Ambassador

### **Recommendation 1: The Bill should be amended to stipulate that schools can only require pupils to wear two branded uniform items**

Ambassadors feel strongly that four items of branded school uniform is still too many, and the accompanying costs would still be too high for families living in poverty. From their own experience these young people advise that two branded items would be a more manageable number for families to afford. For example, one Ambassador attended school in Newcastle – which has a child poverty rate of 34%. At this school the three branded items required for the uniform total £60 per child. Alongside white shirts, smart black shoes that can be polished, black V-neck jumpers, plus a PE kit. This would still be allowed under the new uniform requirements, but is a cost that is out of reach for low income families.



*I think limiting the number of branded clothes would have been so useful when I was at school because uniform is SO expensive.*

Shivi, End Child Poverty Youth Ambassador



*[...]my school required a specific blazer and skirt and these were always the most expensive parts of my school uniform. This would still be allowed under the proposals so I'm not sure that would make a lot of difference.*

Sophie, Youth Ambassador



*I was lucky to attend a school in a deprived area of my town. This meant that the focus was mostly on just getting us into school, rather than what we were wearing. Our uniform consisted of 5 branded items; our school tie, jumper and a PE kit of shorts, top and pe socks. The jumper and ties changed every two years but the PE kit stayed the same. This meant that I was able to get lots of wear from my school uniform and often worn the same items for two academic years. On the contrary, my twin brother went to a different school to me and had 6 branded school items and unlike my school, was unable to wear trainers. At his school they received detentions for incorrect school uniform whereas mine was just happy to see me attend. At my school any sports clothes was good enough for a PE kit, at his school you had to have the full branded school pe kit (socks, shorts, top and even astroturf shoes). The relaxed attitude to uniform meant that those who wanted to be in school but couldn't afford all the correct gear were not disillusioned and alienated. It encouraged participation.*

Liv, an End Child Poverty Youth Ambassador

### **Recommendation 2: Providing alternatives for 'branded' items**

In developing uniform guidance, schools should always seek to find ways to reduce costs, for example access to a badge with the school logo for a couple of pounds, which could be sewn on to a generic grey jumper. This would be as

opposed to requiring pupils to buy a specific branded item. Whilst this is current guidance,<sup>4</sup> Ambassadors were not offered this as part of their school uniform policy.

A school uniform policy should also ensure that the other items a child is required to wear are generic, for example black or grey tights, black trousers for example.



*I remember the year in secondary school [our uniform] changed from being any brand of blazer and needing to sew a patch on to an expensive one. Not only was it so expensive, it also was in a shop that was not really that accessible as it was out of the town centre. The stuff was extortionately priced, and I remember how many times kids in my year would be sent to isolation for not having the correct stuff. Which is absolutely ridiculous. It was just so much pressure so it meant over summer we didn't really do anything as me Mam had to save around £55 for a blazer. And that's not including PE kit tie and all of that stuff.*

Sophie, an End Child Poverty Youth Ambassador

### **Recommendation 3: Ensure schools provide access to pre-loved uniform and clothing**

Whilst current guidance requires schools to run a second-hand uniform shop or service to swap clothes,<sup>5</sup> many Ambassadors attended schools where this was not an option. Providing this service should be mandatory for schools that require pupils to wear branded items. Ideally this service would also be made available to families before their children start school, and pupils who start mid-term.



*My school didn't have a shop but they had a uniform cupboard where you had to change into correct uniform and like.. give it back at the end of the day*

Noor, an End Child Poverty Youth Ambassador

### **Recommendation 4: Schools should operate a grant system - providing funds directly to families to ensure they can afford uniform items.**

Where a school requires pupils to wear a branded uniform, and if that uniform is not available in their pre-loved service, schools should make grants available to low-income families to ensure these items can be purchased. This grant should cover all expensive uniform items, such as smart black shoes, waterproof coats or football boots for example, as well as branded items.



*Having my school uniform paid due to being on 110% bursary saved me a lot of trouble. It allowed me to focus my attention on school, and be carefree. It is a privilege to not worry about the price tag. My school uniform costed above £200. A burden my family could not afford. It allowed me to not worry about my mental health and the fear of not being able to fit in.*

Chelsea, an End Child Poverty Youth Ambassadors – whose uniform was paid for by grants from charities

### **Recommendation 5: Pupils are not adversely reprimanded for uniform issues, especially when this is due to poverty. Isolation or being sent home to change, should not be used as a method of punishment for uniform related issues**

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<sup>4</sup> Can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/cost-of-school-uniforms/cost-of-school-uniforms#cost-considerations>

<sup>5</sup> Can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/cost-of-school-uniforms/cost-of-school-uniforms#provision-of-second-hand-uniforms>

Current guidance encourages schools to take a mindful approach to pupil non-compliance with uniform, when the cause for this is suspected financial hardship<sup>6</sup>. The government's own research surveying parents on the cost of school uniforms showed that 4% of parents/carers reported that their child had been sent home from school because they did not have the right uniform. Yet the likelihood of a child being sent home from school increased to 18% among children whose parents/carers reported suffering financial hardship as a result of purchasing uniform.<sup>7</sup> One secondary school in south London's uniform policy states; *Students who are not in full uniform, and smartly and appropriately presented, will not be able to attend lessons; they will work independently, isolated from their peers, until the issue is resolved, or the correct uniform is brought to them or they can be sent home to change.*

Ambassadors feel that they or their families may have been reluctant to share with a school that they were facing financial hardship. School staff may not always be able to correctly identify families living in poverty, and the data above shows that young people are missing out on their education as a result of exclusions from the classroom based on a family's financial situation. Uniform policies should seek to keep students in school, not exclude or isolate students for uniform infractions – which would ensure poorer students are not disproportionately impacted.



*Half way through year 9, school introduced the policy that skirts and trousers must be branded, your trousers must cover your ankles and skirts must be no more than 5cm above the knee, or you get put in isolation. This directly targets children in poverty as not only had they basically tripled the price of normal school trousers and skirts you can buy from retailers like Tesco or Asda - because of a little logo that was now compulsory, many students were poor and couldn't afford skirts and trousers that fit them. I was one of the lucky ones in this respect as my auntie works for an embroidery business and was willing to put the logos on for free - we could not afford the official skirts and trousers.*

Noor, an End Child Poverty Youth Ambassador



*I lost a PE kit once and because my mum couldn't afford to get me a new one in time, I was punished for not having one. I wasn't allowed to take part in the PE session and missed that day's break time. I didn't tell them outright [that poverty was the cause] because I felt embarrassed about it, I think it would've helped if they made it more clear that people in that position were supported so it feels like it would've been worth talking about.*

An End Child Poverty Youth Ambassador

### **Recommendation 6: When there is a change of uniform policy, a significant period of at least one term should be provided, for students to obtain the new uniform**

Changes to uniform policy which require new clothes to be purchased can impact low-income families, who are not always able to find funds to purchase items with little notice, or chance to budget. Providing a cross over period, where new items can be purchased over time would help with this.



*My school let older years wear old uniform whilst younger wore the new one.*

Darcy, an End Child Poverty Youth Ambassador – whose school switched uniform requirements



*When I was in Reception, I was made to stand up in front of the whole class whilst my teacher pointed out to everyone that my tights were the wrong ones for our school. Our uniform changed mid-year and my mum had bought everything*

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<sup>6</sup> More information here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/cost-of-school-uniforms/cost-of-school-uniforms#pupil-non-compliance>

<sup>7</sup> Department for Education; Cost of School Uniform 2023, available from: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/677ea36522a085c5ff5c04db/Cost\\_of\\_school\\_uniform\\_survey\\_2023.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/677ea36522a085c5ff5c04db/Cost_of_school_uniform_survey_2023.pdf)

*we needed and couldn't pay out for new tights a few weeks before the summer holidays. I was only 5 but I still remember it so clearly*

An End Child Poverty Youth Ambassador

### **Recommendation 7: Views and experience of estranged young people who have no contact with their families, should be considered - they will need to fund their own uniforms**

Estranged young people are those who have no contact with their parents, families or previous caregivers. It is estimated that there are 150,000 estranged young people in the UK.<sup>8</sup> These young people are often vulnerable, and have experienced trauma, and are likely to be supporting themselves financially too. Meaning they would have to meet the cost of their school uniform.

A grant to cover the full cost for the complete school uniform required should be provided to estranged young people, via their school. To ensure they do not have to meet these costs themselves.



*I went to school with strict uniform policies, often needing specific items that are sold only by designated suppliers, making costs much higher; I lived on limited budgets during sixth form and my inability to afford uniforms led to me face exclusion or punishment at school, including detentions and being sent home, which further disrupted my education. Also, the stress of not meeting uniform requirements especially when peers didn't understand my situation was embarrassing. Eventually I had to skip meals and neglect other essentials to save money for uniforms. My school also didn't run a second-hand uniform shop.*

Kefira, an estranged young person, and an End Child Poverty Youth Ambassador

### **Recommendation 8: A real mechanism for reporting non-compliant schools**

Whilst young people and their families should be encouraged to report instances where school uniform policies don't meet guidance or the law to the school and its trustees, there needs to be a further enforcement mechanism for non-complaint schools. For example, Ofsted inspectors should look at uniform policies, and the set-up of a school's pre-loved uniform shop for example, as part of their inspection process.

*January 2025*

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<sup>8</sup> From [https://buttleuk.org/our-research/research-reports/surviving-estrangement-estranged-young-people-co-produced-report/#:~:text=An%20estimated%20150%2C000%20young%20people%20\(2.7%20of,to%20estranged%20young%20people%20since%20COVID%2D19%20began.](https://buttleuk.org/our-research/research-reports/surviving-estrangement-estranged-young-people-co-produced-report/#:~:text=An%20estimated%20150%2C000%20young%20people%20(2.7%20of,to%20estranged%20young%20people%20since%20COVID%2D19%20began.)