

Written evidence submitted by The Michael Roberts Charitable Trust (CWSB219)

Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill: call for evidence

MRCT promotes the value and significance of every person, empowering them to develop their potential and self-confidence.

Through social engagement we provide opportunities for community integration, relief from hardship, household resilience and neighbourly care. We enable individuals to help meet local social needs in a positive and practical way.

Our current work:

- [Maybury Open Door](#) adult drop-in centre supports over 150 people each week at two locations in Harlow.
- [Harlow Foodbank](#) is Trussell affiliated and provided emergency food for over 10,000 people in crisis in 2024, offering additional services to help manage their finances, access other types of support, advice and guidance and get back on their feet.
- [The Bounty Club](#) is a social supermarket designed to create a step-up out of Foodbank dependency for those struggling to stay afloat. It works as a half-way house between our Foodbank and regular shops. With 2,300 members it offers a wide range of food at 50 -70% of the lowest supermarket prices. Shoppers also get other social support to maximise their income and support their households.
- [Bump to Five](#), our baby bank, currently provides vital help to over 1,500 children who otherwise would have gone without household items such as beds and cots, clothes, nappies or pushchairs. These are items donated to us and given out free to families referred from children and family services and the Foodbank.
- We also run a pre-loved School Uniform Shop selling-on over 5,000 items per year at negligible cost, donated to us by local parents.
- [The Harlow Hive](#) is an organising and social action group led by people affected by hardship in the town who work to improve issues for people like them.

Part one: Care leavers

Between 2021-23 we ran a project in Harlow Foodbank, speaking to our clients to better understand what was leading them to need to visit us. Here we spoke to a man about his experience since becoming a care leaver. He outlined a journey which he was not equipped for, as he was expected to be fully independent at 18. In summary:

- Covid led to his benefits reducing and then was going through a review when he visited Harlow Foodbank: *All last week I struggled but this week I thought I have to eat, so I'm here.*
- Was working in a warehouse but can't see well so is not safe. Signed off sick so not allowed to look for work.
- Coming to the Foodbank helped because it gave a reason to get out of the house.
- Seeking support from a homelessness charity: *I don't want to be signed off. I just want to work. I've started going to the charity to help with depression, anxiety and anger.*
- Living conditions spiralling: *I'm in a shared house and everyone has different issues there, some drink and there are drugs going on. That's difficult to live with. I've been on my own since I was a kid. I lived in care when I was 14 and then when I got a council house at 18. I didn't know what to do; no one ever told me how to handle things, so I got into a bit of trouble, got into arrears and became homeless. I just want some peace and quiet.*

Part two: Schools

Breakfast clubs and food standards

At each of our projects we hear that feeding children is an issue throughout the year:

- Free School Meal vouchers are not issued / hard to get throughout the school holidays
- Breakfast clubs are expensive
- Increased cost to feed SEND children who may be particular about food and branding
- Covering the cost of catering for food intolerances and allergies

Paying for food comes on top of paying for school trips. As we have been told: *"Every week there is something to pay for. Feels like an extra strain. Breakfast clubs are expensive."*

School Uniforms

- Place statutory limits on the number of branded items of uniform state funded school can require

At MRCT we run a pre-loved school uniform shop called 'Harlow Community School Uniform Shop'. We get donated items and sell them at a significantly reduced price (all items £0.50-£3). We have a number of low-income families who make use of the shop and the reduced prices, but we also get higher income families who find the cost of uniform prohibitive and the waste of good quality uniform unsustainable.

We have run the shop over the summer holidays for the past 3 years and now open the shop throughout the year. During this time, we have received a lot of feedback regarding the impact that buying school uniform and strict uniform policies have had on a number of families from varying backgrounds:

Branding

- Many schools require all uniform to be branded, which makes the cost prohibitive
- Many schools who 'accept' generic items (such as jumpers and polo shirts) often frown upon these items being used. Schools often express a preference for branded uniform, meaning that low-income families feel pressured to conform.
- Pupils who wear generic uniform can often be seen as vulnerable or disadvantaged as their peers are using branded items. We hear feedback such as "I don't want my child to stand out by not wearing the branded uniform", "I don't want my child to feel like it's obvious to their friends that we don't have much money".
- Some schools not only require branded uniform, but they insist that they are monogrammed with the child's initials. This makes it impossible for pupils to pass on uniform to younger siblings or for parents to sell uniform to recoup some of the expense when the uniform is no longer needed.

Type of Uniform

- Schools often require very specific types of uniform for things like PE, which makes the number of items being purchased quite significant. Some schools need different length of leggings for PE activities and different types of shorts or t-shirts for different sports in PE.
- Schools require parents to buy different types of footwear for school, PE and Football, which makes it incredibly challenging for many families. This is particularly

challenging as children grow rapidly during school years so often these items have to be replaced once or twice during the academic year.

- Most secondary schools require pupils to wear blazers, which are expensive items to purchase. Blazers are not available to buy in a lot of low-cost shops, requiring families to go to high end shops or specific uniform shops, where the costs are prohibitive (£35+ per blazer). Blazers also have to fit well on children, so you can't buy a large size to allow the child to grow (as you can with a jumper, which tends to be more forgiving with sizes), which means they need to be purchased more regularly. It is much more difficult to find a second-hand blazer that fits your child well than it would be to buy a jumper, forcing many families to buy them new. We often receive this type of feedback: "I'm trying to buy everything else second-hand so I can save up money to buy the blazer new, because it'll be difficult to find one that fits". Blazers are the fastest-selling items in our shop for this reason.
- Most schools require girls to wear specific skirts (plaid is most common) which are usually very expensive and cannot be purchased in a regular shop. This puts families with girls at a disadvantage to boys who can often wear generic black trousers.
- Schools often require school shoes to be leather and formal. Again, this type of shoe is generally more expensive and more difficult to find in low-cost shops (as opposed to trainers, for example). Formal shoes do not last as long as other shoes and so often have to be replaced. We get a lot of feedback from parents that their children have to stay in tight shoes that they have outgrown because they can't afford to buy them again. Shoes also sell incredibly well in the shop, however, second-hand shoes are not ideal for children as they've often been worn in by the previous user and moulded to their feet.
- School ties have become incredibly specific in recent years. We have a number of ties in the shop but often get told it is the wrong shape or it belongs to a specific house etc, which means not all pupils from the same school can wear the same one. Ties tend to have a detail in a different colour for different houses or forms, which makes it difficult for parents to pass on to other siblings or buy them from second hand shops.
- We have seen an increase in Primary schools requiring formal trousers, shirts, blazers and ties for all pupils. Children as young as Reception are being asked to wear this type of uniform, which makes it so expensive for parents for all the primary years as well as the secondary years.

It seems that school uniform has many unnecessary and expensive items (such as blazers and ties, formal footwear, specific shorts or skirts etc) which significantly increase the cost and forces parents to buy and replace several pieces of clothing each academic year. The

biggest impact on lowering school uniform cost could be achieved by redefining what schools can demand as necessary attire for school.

Changes to uniform

- We have received a lot of feedback recently about schools making changes to their uniform requiring families to buy all the school items again. Most schools start the new uniform policy for children entering school in a specific year, meaning that older children in the school don't need to replace everything, however, it does mean that uniform can't be passed down to younger siblings and it means families can't pass on or sell the "old" uniform when their child outgrows it. It also means that second-hand shops such as ours can't help families for a year or two until the new cohort start to outgrow their uniform (in addition, the impact on the environment is significant as the uniform is unusable and unsellable).
- Small changes to uniform (such as adding or removing a stripe from an item, or tweaking the school crest) occur on a fairly regular basis creating the problem outlined above. This is often applied to all year groups so pupils with good uniform are having to replace items simply because of a small change.
- New Headteachers entering a school is the most common cause of changes to uniform design.

Children not in school / Changes relating to academies

This comment was given to us by a grandparent buying food from our Bounty Club project:

Some children are recorded as being on register but are on a dramatically reduced timetable, so may only be there for the registration period. My grandchild is currently not in school at all as the academy she was registered at is only equipped to handle perfect children. There are issues with accommodating neurodivergent children, and a long wait for ECHP (two years). Places extra strain on parents homeschooling, especially when self employed and unable to find that time to generate an income.

February 2025

