

P-05-877 Children's used uniform scheme, Correspondence - Welsh Local Government Association to Chair, 23.10.19

Dyddiad /Date:
Gofynnwch am/Please ask for:
Llinell uniongyrchol/Direct line:
Ebost/Email:

23 October 2019
D Hopkins



Janet Finch-Saunders, AM
Chair of the Petitions Committee
National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff Bay
Cardiff
CF99 1NA

Dear Ms Finch-Saunders,

Petition P-05-877 Children's used uniform scheme

Please accept my sincere apologies on behalf of the WLGA for the delay in replying to your letter of 12th June 2019.

That concerned a petition from Rachael Mackay, a pupil at Monnow Primary School, Newport, on behalf of pupils there who would like to see used school uniform schemes across Wales.

A key principle of introducing school uniforms in Welsh primary schools was of course affordability. That was a widely accepted principle at the time. Cost has to be an important consideration for all families with children of school age, particularly in areas of the country where levels of deprivation are high.

Over time, it appears that some schools not only require a uniform, but also a school logo or symbol on many items which comprise the uniform: That can be the point where costs for parents rise, as suppliers are limited by virtue of the stocks of 'badged' items held for sale. At the same time, parents know that uniform items of the required colours and styles are readily available at less cost in chain stores and supermarkets, and that can lead to frustration.

It can also lead to local bad feeling between small local suppliers of specific clothing who feel that their businesses are suffering at the hands of multi-nationals. There is also the moral question of some clothing manufacturers and suppliers internationally, who may not be offering rights to workers which Wales and the United Kingdom would expect. That may include child labour. So uniform supply is a vexed issue.

But these are broader matters, and ones WLGA suspects the Committee will be aware of. Going back to the question put from Monnow Primary School, it seems that a structured way of recycling good quality uniforms is eminently sensible. There are examples of

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**Croesawn ohebiaeth yn y Gymraeg a'r Saesneg a byddwn yn ymateb i ohebiaeth yn yr un iaith.
Ni fydd defnyddio'r naill iaith na'r llall yn arwain at oedi.**

We welcome correspondence in Welsh and English and will respond to correspondence in the same language.
Use of either language will not lead to a delay.

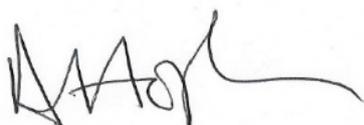
individual schools running schemes, but it is difficult to place a figure on how many, and how effective these are.

The WLGA raised this matter at a recent meeting of the Association of Directors of Education in Wales, and the attached paper describing the scheme run in Denbighshire was subsequently circulated to all local authorities to make them aware of the possibilities of such schemes.

I trust that the Petitions Committee will find these observations, and the attached paper, helpful.

Yn gywir / Yours sincerely

David Hopkins

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D Hopkins', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

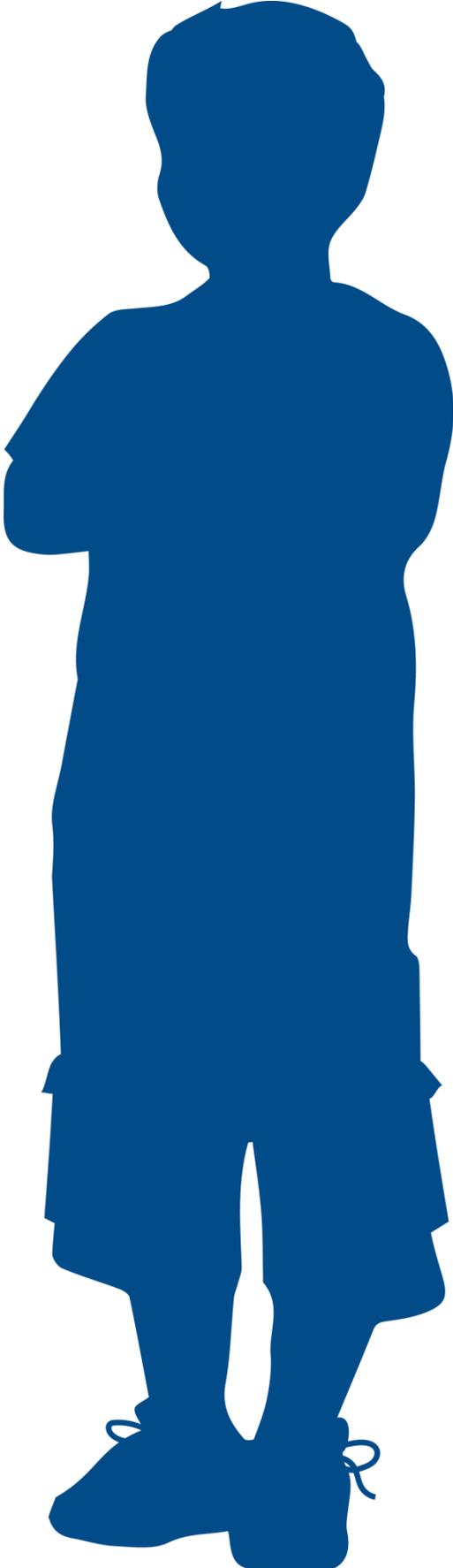
**Pennaeth Addysg dros dro
Interim Head of Education**

**Croesawn ohebiaeth yn y Gymraeg a'r Saesneg a byddwn yn ymateb i ohebiaeth yn yr un iaith.
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Denbigh School Uniform Recycle

Impact Document



Sir Ddinbych
Denbighshire

Foreword – Winnie Lawson, Denbigh Office Manager

It has become increasingly obvious that families with dependent children are struggling financially. Whilst the welfare reform is aimed in the main at people on long-term benefits, the consequences are also affecting working families on low income.

As a member of Citizens Advice staff and a parent and grandparent I am aware of the financial constraints on young families. Having worked for twenty years with people in Denbigh and being aware of the deprivation in the area I feel if children are to improve their situation they have to be encouraged and supported to take advantage of a good education. To ensure a child is able to fit in he or she needs the same uniform as everybody else, this helps to ensure that children are integrated and equal.

In 2014 we contacted all of the local schools to see if they wanted to participate in a scheme which enabled us to recycle good quality uniforms. This worked really well; we collected uniforms from the schools before the summer term ended. We washed, pressed and mended the uniforms and we used the HWB in Denbigh as the centre for the exchange.

The following year (2015), we developed our Recycle and raised funds with the assistance of Citizens Advice Denbigh's staff and volunteers. We received grants from Denbigh Town Council, Ruthin Rotary and Denbigh Round Table which allowed us to issue grants of £100.00 to parents on low income whose children were moving to the High School.

In 2016 we further improved the scheme by sizing the uniforms and placing them in individual bags. We have also been very grateful to Mr & Mrs Shakespeare who allowed us to use their empty premises on Denbigh High Street as a pop-up shop (they kindly allowed us to use the shop again, this year).

This proved extremely successful and we provided regulation school uniform to more than 100 children. We also promoted the take up of free school meals which directly benefit not only the family but their school through the pupil deprivation grant.

Our most recent event in August this year (2017) was an out-and-out success, with over 200 families coming to our shop. We will continue with this initiative as it is so obviously needed and our additional offer of support is helping people to improve their lives.



Winnie Lawson (left) and Tanya at the February half-term Denbigh School Uniform Recycle

Filling a need

The Denbigh School Uniform Recycle, previously known as the Denbigh Uniform Exchange, fills a clear need within the community for access to affordable school uniforms. Over the past decade, financial support available to parents for the purchase of school uniforms has been greatly reduced across the UK.

In Wales the school uniform grant helps eligible pupils acquire a school uniform, the scheme is targeted specifically at pupils entering year 7 of secondary school who are eligible for free school meals; also pupils aged 11 at the start of the school year in special schools, special needs resource bases and pupil referral units who are eligible for free school meals. The grant set by Welsh Government is £105 per pupil¹. Each local authority administers the grant scheme.

Schools can provide grants for low-income families although this is done on a discretionary basis and there has been a sharp decline over the years in the number of schools offering this help, due to the challenging financial landscape in the public sector.

These are administered by individual schools so little information is available on the number of grants awarded or the amount of these grants. Some schools subsidise the cost of uniforms, particularly those brought from a single supplier although these, like grants, are in decline. Unlike grants, which target lower-income families, these schemes also help to subsidise families who do not require this help.

Our experiences as an advice agency and through our Recycle and events in the Denbigh area show that there is a need for help with the cost of school uniforms for families with children across all school years.

Recent and ongoing welfare reform will increase the strain on parents claiming working age benefits massively. This September (2017) will be the first time that parents in Denbigh who are subject to the benefit cap will have to find the money for school uniforms from this reduced income.

From the feedback we have received from the families who have visited our school uniform recycling events, the cost of kitting out children for school is a significant financial burden on a family's finances. For those families who are "just about managing" the cost of school uniforms has become a pinch point in the family's annual budget.

Nationally, 43% of low-income (<£15,000 per annum) families say they are unhappy with the value of school uniform³ (although attitudes based on cost is not available). There has been a noticeable increase in the number of schools who require items to be purchased from specialist suppliers and a corresponding drop in the number of schools allowing purchase of any, or all, items from general clothing stores and supermarkets⁴. Parents find greater value in the cost of school uniforms when they are able to choose their own supplier.

A government report on school uniforms, published in 2015, states that the cost of school uniforms has decreased in real terms since 2007⁵. Unfortunately, welfare benefits have decreased further in real terms over the same period.

Worryingly, parents have reported that they have taken on debt to pay for school uniforms⁶. This increases the cost of school uniforms even further as interest is repaid on loans. A £200 loan with a well-known door-to-door lender would require repayment of £374.40 if paid back over a full year⁷. This creates a cycle of dependency on expensive credit as people are unable to save for next year's uniform while paying off the loan for the current year's uniform. The Illegal Money Lending Unit, Wales Office, tell of a mother in Wales asking a local loan shark for money as a direct result of school costs.

Within this context it can be seen that the Denbigh School Uniform Recycle fills a clear need.



Offering solutions

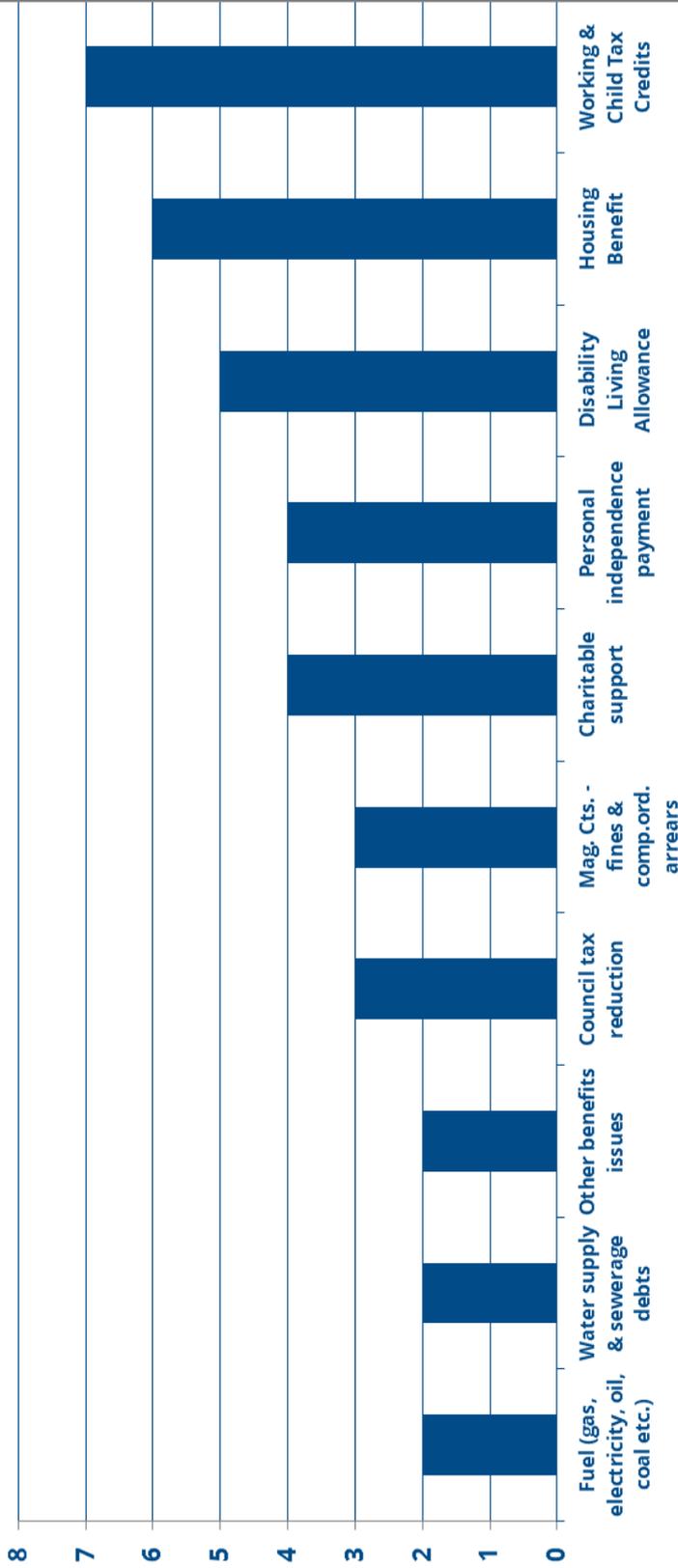
An advantage of the Denbigh School Uniform Recycle Shop perhaps, is that it operates outside of the school and is able to provide a level of discretion consistent with Citizens Advice Denbighshire's other services. It offers uniforms for all schools in the area in a single shop with complete uniforms available for an optional donation of £1. This allows parents, primary care givers and other family members to pick up uniforms in a single place, and for a nominal price.

The quality of all uniforms at the exchange is guaranteed by Winnie and the volunteers; no faded, torn or over-repaired uniforms are displayed (they are donated to recycling centres) let alone sold. Winnie and the volunteers take days at a time to wash, iron and package the uniforms into attractive, easily sold packs. This presentation greatly increases uptake, a child in a local primary school was unwilling to take a uniform offered to him by Winnie but when he opened the pack, and was hit with the smell of fabric freshener, he immediately took it home.

The greatest advantage for the Denbigh School Uniform Recycle is that Winnie and the volunteers have decades of combined experience in giving advice and supporting the local community. Citizens Advice Denbighshire caseworkers also help when the shop is open. While the primary purpose is the exchange and selling of uniforms, informal advice is often given. It has been shown that whenever we can engage with clients who may not have realised they required advice, invariably there are positive outcomes for clients, even if delivery of advice is a secondary purpose.

A requirement for help with school uniform costs is often a symptom of low income and other issues, including servicing debt. As can be seen on the graph below, these clients have issues we would expect as clients on a low-income; with benefit- and debt-related issues appearing most (note that these are not debts for non-essential items such as catalogues but such as water & fuel arrears). The charitable support issue is of note as the sub-issue to this, for these clients, is the issue of a foodbank voucher.

AIC Part 2 Exclusive (One Count Per Enquiry)



Sir Ddinbych Denbighshire

cyngor ar bobeth

citizens advice

Source: Citizens Advice Denbighshire

Income maximisation is an important part of creating sustainable futures for families in Denbigh in regards to school uniform costs. Through the Denbigh School Uniform Recycle, we have engaged with clients and found £16,495.60 of unclaimed benefits between 10 customers (25 customers signed up for follow-on advice).

In April, as part of follow-up advice, we sent all 25 Denbigh School Uniform Recycle customers who had volunteered their contact information a leaflet advertising our new, NEA-funded, Cosy Cymru scheme. The scheme aims to provide energy saving measures and essential white goods, we awarded over £700 of energy saving measures and white goods to customers who contacted us.

Through the Denbigh School Uniform Recycle we found parents weren't always aware of all 'passport' help available with the costs of school and childcare. Encouraging families to sign up for free school meals is advice well suited to the Denbigh School Uniform Recycle as it does not require knowing personal information beyond whether they are already receiving them.

To encourage take up of free school meals, we focus on the annual costs; showing that the price of a typical child's lunch is about £2 per day - around £400 per school year, per child. Putting daily and weekly costs into an annual context is a common budgeting technique. The cost saving of a free school meal then becomes evident.

Since the very first event we have also informed parents about the Pupil Deprivation Grant, a Welsh Government grant which allocates extra resources to schools with high pupil deprivation (measured by the number of children in receipt of free school meals). Through focusing on the personal benefits and those for their children's school during our February event, 10 customers stated their intention to apply for free school meals.

We appreciate that the take up of free school meals is important to the individuals and has a wider educational benefit. We are keen to work more closely with schools and the Local Authority to promote this element.

With the Denbigh School Uniform Recycle entering its fourth year, Winnie has been able to provide quality uniforms to deprived families in the area and has built strong relationships with local schools. Parents and guardians are more aware of the help they can receive with school costs. Clients who engage with Citizens Advice Denbigh are informed about the Denbigh School Uniform Recycle, relieving them of the stress of school uniform costs, and customers that we have already engaged with through the Denbigh School Uniform Recycle have received advice that has led to increased income, managed debt and/or reduced expenditure.

Sarah, 44, first attended our offices in November 2016 following a referral from Team Around the Family. She had recently been affected by several life events: she had recently lost her job, there was an increase in family size and her son was demonstrating behavioural problems in school.

Sarah was waiting for her benefits to be in place and had an income of only £150 per week Child Benefit and Child Tax Credit for her family of 4, which included an infant. She was issued 2 food bank vouchers to help her with the immediate costs. She was also offered assistance with her son's uniform, the loss of her job had meant she could only afford a single set of this and due to his behavioural problems and age, 13, were often getting torn or being outgrown.

We immediately booked Sarah an appointment with a Welfare Benefits Caseworker so that her correct entitlement could be checked and an application for Child Disability Living Allowance made. We were able to gather the required medical evidence and this claim was successful. This also allowed Sarah to claim Carer's Allowance.

Sarah received the immediate help she needed in the short-term and has, through our help, been able to create a sustainable future for her family. Her income has increased to approximately £500 per week and her son is receiving the help and support he needs.



Summer 2017

The first draft of this report, originally created in July, predicted that the Denbigh School Uniform Recycle would be busier this year than ever before. With Welfare Reform affecting many families in Denbigh and working families' budgets being squeezed harder than ever, this was an easy prediction to make.

We promoted the Denbigh School Uniform Recycle through local schools and also meetings with local councillors and MP Chris Ruane. We advertised the event on Facebook & Twitter; the post on Facebook reached nearly 7000 people. The use of Facebook also allowed us to answer questions about the upcoming event.

The summer event was set to run from Monday 7th August to Friday 11th August this year. By the time 10 o'clock came around on Monday, there was a large queue on Denbigh High Street. Over 200 families purchased, for the nominal amount of £1, at least one item during the week, with many kitting out several children, making it nearly as successful as all previous events combined.

Dozens of families left their details with us so we can follow up with benefit entitlement checks and other forms of income maximisation in the coming months.

Customers sent really positive feedback, unbidden, over Facebook during the event;



We also asked clients to fill in a short 10 question survey, via Facebook and Google Forms, 2 weeks after the event. We received 43 responses and the feedback was overwhelmingly positive and informative regarding the types of uniforms people required.

42 respondents described the quality of the uniforms as very good, while one said good, and all 43 felt the Denbigh School Uniform Recycle offered good value. All 43 respondents would recommend the Denbigh School Uniform Recycle to their friends or family.

41 respondents stated that the Denbigh School Uniform Recycle helped reduce the stress associated with school costs. While the original intention of the Denbigh School Uniform Recycle was to make sure each child in Denbigh had the correct school uniform, reducing stress for parents was an important secondary goal and this has clearly been achieved.

This year's summer event was a runaway success. The Denbigh School Uniform Recycle served over 200 Denbigh families, saving them hundreds of pounds compared to the full retail price of the uniforms. We were able to produce the desired soft outcomes regarding reduction of stress on the family. We were able to restock more uniforms during the week as many customers brought in items, with an important restock of Denbigh High School uniforms halfway through the week. Even though it was extremely busy the Denbigh School Uniform Exchange was still able to gather contact details and encourage customers to engage with Citizens Advice Denbighshire.



Winnie Lawson at midday on the Monday of this year's summer event (note the rapidly emptying tables just 2 hours after opening).

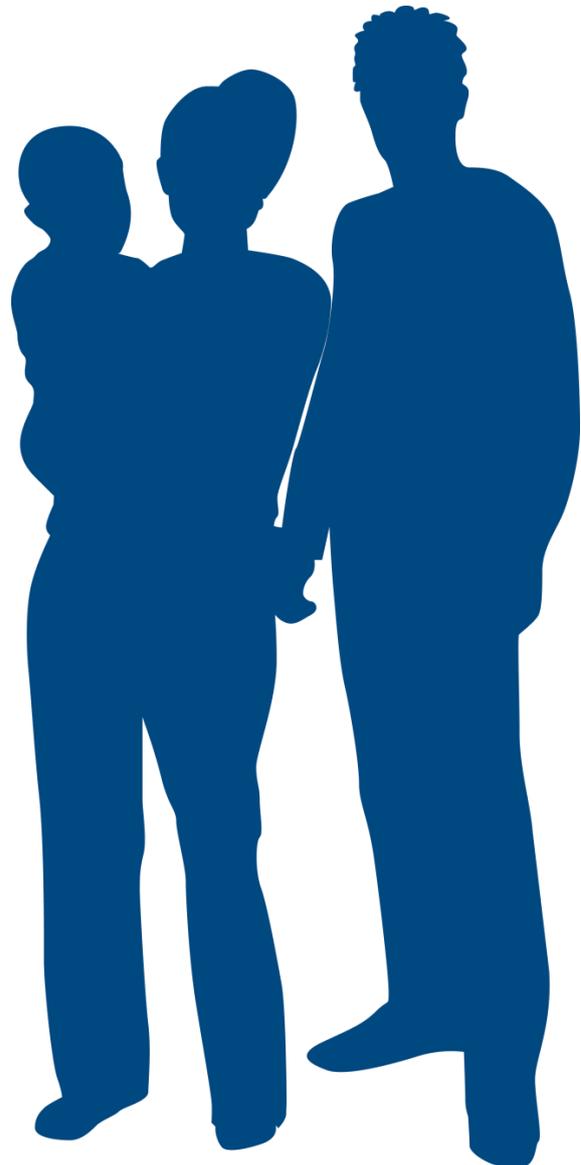
Vanessa, 33, visited the Denbigh School Uniform Recycle on Tuesday 8th August. She had seen the Facebook post advertising the event and was hoping to get uniforms for her 3 school-aged children.

Vanessa lives with her husband and 4 children, including one new-born. She had lost her job in November 2016 and her family were living on her husband's part-time salary along with Child Tax Credits, Child Benefit and some Council Tax Reduction. She was already caring for her second-to-youngest child while she was working as he had complex needs.

Vanessa was asked, like all customers, whether she had applied for, or was receiving, free school meals. She stated that she was not entitled to any help. We found that as she had lost her job while pregnant (there was no discrimination), she should be entitled to Maternity Allowance. The second-to-youngest child's complex needs also pointed to an underlying entitlement to Disability Living Allowance.

We made an appointment with a caseworker for the following week and helped her to apply for Maternity Allowance and Child Disability Living Allowance. If successful (which is highly likely), this will increase the household income by over £1000 per month.

Vanessa was able to get correct uniform for all of her school-age children and saved a significant sum by attending the Denbigh School Uniform Recycle. Vanessa was absolutely convinced before attending the Denbigh School Uniform Recycle that she was not entitled to any financial help and almost certainly would not have come to see Citizens Advice Denbighshire before her low-income had caused serious financial difficulty.



References:

1. <https://www.denbighshire.gov.uk/en/resident/education/grants-and-funding/school-uniform-grants.aspx> (accessed 13/09/2017)
2. At what cost? Exposing the impact of poverty on school life – The Children’s Commission on Poverty (2014) (Page 28)
3. Cost of school uniform 2015 Research report – Elizabeth Davies – BMG Research (Page 21)
4. Cost of school uniform 2015 Research report – Elizabeth Davies – BMG Research (Page 9)
5. Cost of school uniform 2015 Research report – Elizabeth Davies – BMG Research (Page 11)
6. At what cost? Exposing the impact of poverty on school life – The Children’s Commission on Poverty (2014) (Page 26)
7. <https://www.providentpersonalcredit.com> (accessed 13/09/2017)



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