



The Cost of Education in Halton

August 2023

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Executive Summary

In November 2021, The Education (Guidance about Costs of School Uniforms) Act 2021 introduced statutory guidance for state funded and academy schools. The guidance required schools to place cost at the centre of their thinking when setting uniform policies. Schools have now had a full academic year to review their policies and ensure they are compliant with this guidance.

This paper builds upon work completed by Citizens Advice Halton in 2022 and explores what, if anything, has changed. This is what our clients told us;

- 18% of respondents had borrowed money to cover the cost of uniforms
- 12% of respondents had been unable to pay their priority bills such as rent and Council Tax.
- 13% had missed meals or were unable to afford the cost of food shopping.

This year, our review found that many schools have relaxed their policies, however much more needs to be done to ensure parents are aware of what these new policies say.

- 90% of our sample group told us that they knew what their schools' policies were around school uniforms. Only 13 out of 67 (19%) actually got it right. Most believed that they were required to buy far more branded items than the policy required.
- The price of uniforms targeted at those identifying as females remains significantly higher on average than that for their male peers.

Where generic items are allowed parents still felt pressured to buy branded items

- 33% of parents told us they feared their child would not fit in or be bullied if they had generic items of uniform.

Across the borough we identified significant differences in the costs of compulsory school uniforms which supports the idea that more can be done in relation to reducing the costs for families. Alternatives to branded items directly from suppliers can remarkably reduce the costs which can have a crucial positive impact on families budgets

Societal expectations have a huge impact on the pressures families face when it comes to school uniforms and much more can be done by school leaders to destigmatise the use of generic uniform items. Removal of unnecessary branded options would reduce the pressure on families to ensure their children fit in.

Families are already stretching their budgets amongst cost increases across all sectors which in turn is having a real impact on people's mental health and wellbeing. School leaders have a tangible ability to do so much more in reducing the cost of uniforms for families. This will give back much needed

finances over the summer months so pupils can benefit directly from increased household budgets and improve families quality of life during these months.

It was found that within Halton there is no direct correlation between school Ofsted ratings and branded uniform driving up the standard within schools so it begs the question as to why school leaders feel the need for stricter uniform policies. There is however a plethora of evidence detailing how socioeconomic status can be a key factor when it comes to educational attainment. Schools' hard efforts should be focused more on keeping children in the classroom compared to informal sanctions and exclusions which take children away from mainstream learning and taint the very system that is there to educate them.

Recommendations

1. School leaders should revisit their uniform policies. The policy should state the rationale for requiring branded items and evidence what steps have been taken to place cost at the centre of decision making.
2. Schools should review their communication strategies so that parents are able to access essential information more easily.
3. Where branded items are not required, schools should work to de-stigmatise the wearing of generic items.
4. Schools should ensure that their behaviour and disciplinary policies do not exacerbate financial inequalities and penalise less well-off students.
5. The Local Authority should work with schools across the borough to develop best practice and template policy documents which might easily be adopted by all.
6. The Local Authority should develop a strategy to work with larger companies and registered social landlords working within the borough to support families with the cost of uniforms.
7. The Members of Parliament should lobby for mandatory reporting of school suspensions and exclusions which includes informal exclusions and internal suspensions including instances where children are sent home for uniform breaches.

Citizens Advice Halton have sent this report to all local schools and the Local Authority as a matter of urgency and asked for feedback by the end of the current year.

We have asked school leaders, along with their governing boards, to determine if any changes are required to their own policies. Following these discussions and decisions we have asked for feedback on how these discussions unfolded and how this will be applied within their school.

This feedback will then be reviewed to ascertain what impact, if any, this will have for our local community.

Introduction

The Department for Education school uniform policy was reviewed on the 2nd June 2023. Although this makes clear that decisions regarding uniforms, including whether a uniform is necessary at all, are decisions for the individual governing boards. It also provides its own position;

We strongly encourage schools to have a uniform as it can play a key role in:

- promoting the ethos of a school*
- providing a sense of belonging and identity*
- setting an appropriate tone for education¹*

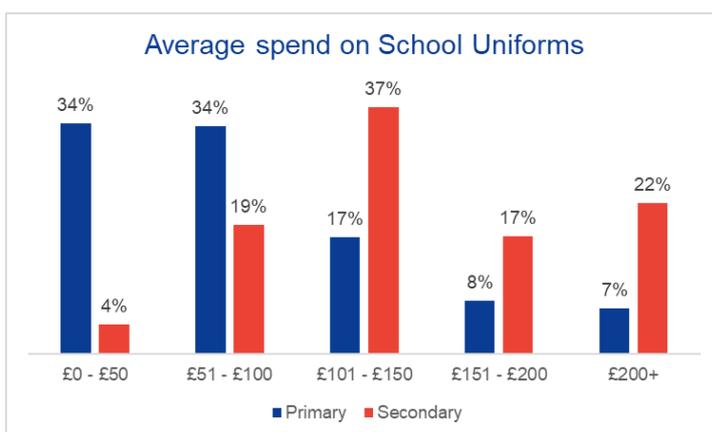
By creating a common identity amongst pupils, regardless of background, a school uniform can act as a social leveller

The Education (Guidance about Costs of School Uniforms) Act 2021 aimed to alleviate the hardship placed on families of school age children each year, caused by the purchase of school uniforms. The law placed on a statutory footing the need for the Secretary of State to introduce guidance on school uniforms, placing cost at the forefront of school policy makers' thinking.

Guidance was introduced in November 2021 and required schools, subject to limited exceptions for long term supply contracts, to comply by September 2022.

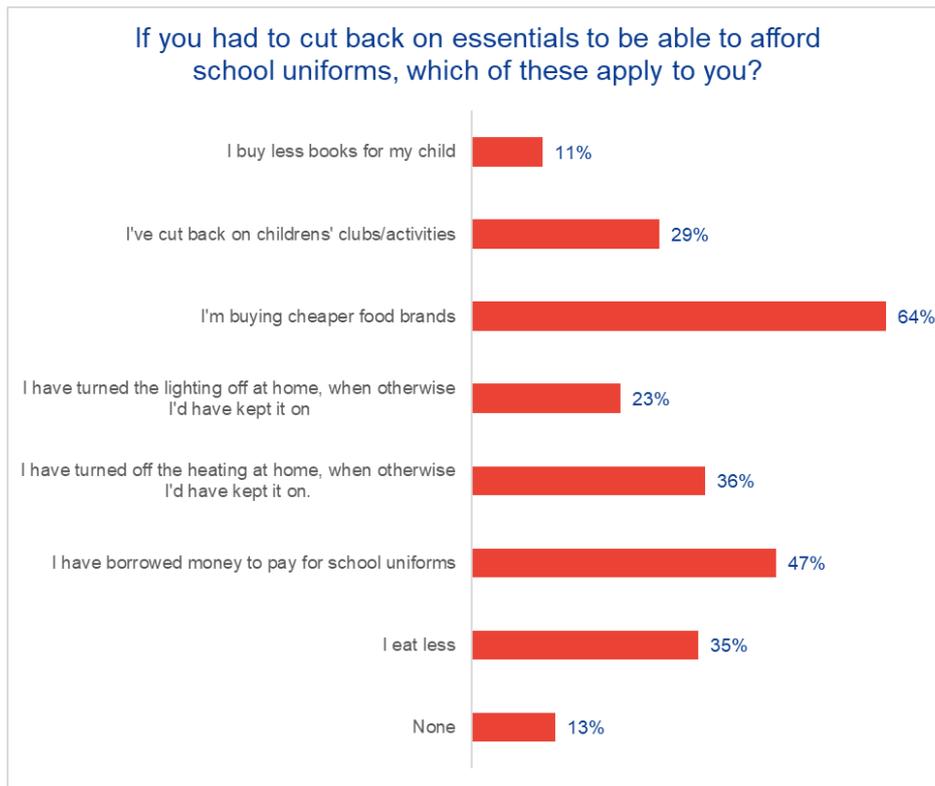
On the Eve of the deadline in July 2022 Citizens Advice Halton asked local parents to tell us about their experience. 478 local families came forward to tell us their stories and the results shocked us;

- **22% of parents with secondary school children had spent over £200 on buying branded school uniforms.**



¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-uniform/school-uniforms>

- **64% of parents with Primary School children and 74% with Secondary School children had cut back on essential items to afford uniforms for their children.**



- **50% of schools required parents to buy in excess of 4 branded items of school uniform.**
- **69% of parents told us their school only had one uniform supplier.**

The conclusions reached in 2022 were stark, schools had failed to grasp the importance of the guidance, or properly understand the impact of their uniform policies on students and their families.

Far from being a social leveller the cost of school uniform was a millstone around the neck of cash strapped families, and the natural result was that children had reduced access to extracurricular activities and books. Families had to cut food budgets and many were forced to turn off the lights or heating when they would have otherwise used it. The impact of purchases might not have been obvious at first glance in the school classroom but this undeniably widened the socioeconomic divide when the school bell rang.

Uniform in 2023

Schools have had over 12 months now to review their policies, talk to suppliers and to determine a fairer approach to school uniforms. However, in July 2023 we remain inundated with requests for help to meet the cost of school uniforms.



Julia's story

In May 2023 Julia separated from her former partner due to domestic abuse. She now lives independently with her young son. Julia was in the UK on a spouse visa, and does not have recourse to public funds.

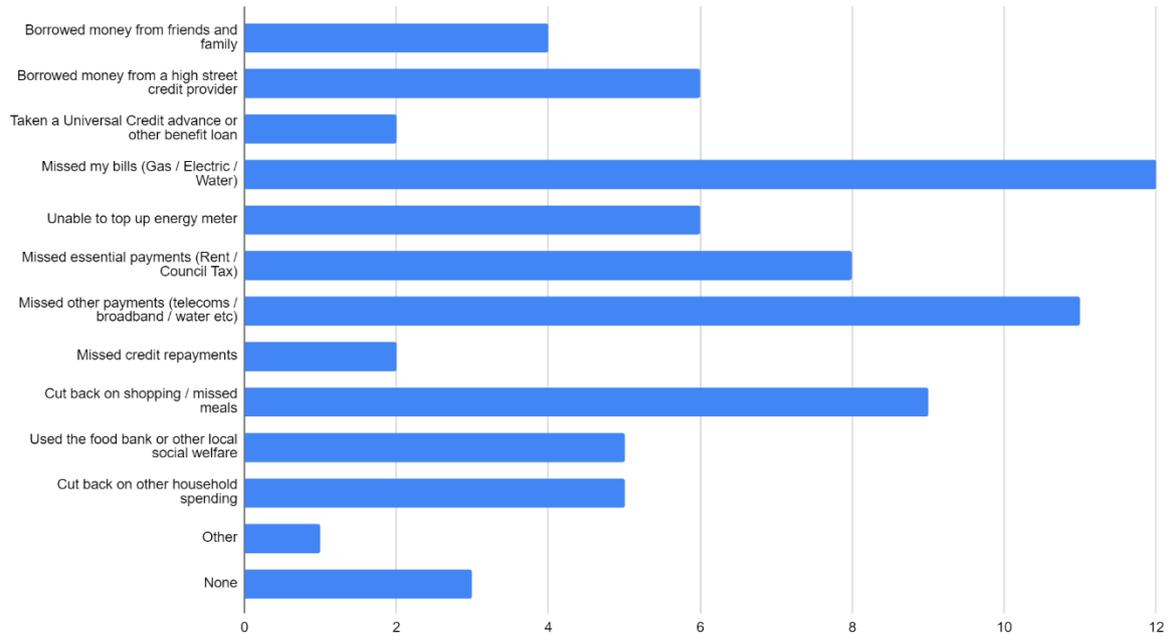
Julia has recently completed her teacher training and is working towards her QTS certificate. She was unable to secure a full-time job when she left her course and instead started doing agency work.

Unfortunately, the nature of agency work is that you don't get paid in the school holidays so Julia was left without any income.

Without her earnings from teaching Julia hasn't got any money to purchase a school uniform for her son.

As a delivery partner of Halton Housing Trust for their school uniform grant we spoke to 65 families between 27th July and 2nd August. We asked them what, if any, budgeting steps they had taken to cover the cost of school uniforms.

Have you had to cut back on essentials, or change how you budget, to afford school uniform



- **18% of families had to borrow money to meet the cost of school uniforms.**
- **12% of families told us they had or would have to miss some or all of their rent payments.**
- **27% of families told us they would not be able to afford the cost of energy.**

In light of these stories in July 2023 we decided to look again to find out what if anything had changed.

Our Approach

Using questionnaires with both qualitative and quantitative responses we set 3 aims;

- To better understand what support, if any, is available to Halton residents, so that we can better guide our clients to available support efficiently.
- To alert schools to the impact their policies have on parents and families within Halton. Promoting change to uniform policies, making them more accessible and affordable so that in future years this isn't an income shock for parents.
- Promote the need for additional financial support following the lead given by Halton Housing Trust. Seeking buy-in from the local authority, landlord's and local businesses.

To achieve these aims we identified the following key tasks;

- **Review school policies** – to understand whether schools are currently meeting their obligations. To identify examples of best practice and poor performance. We wished to understand how accessible these policies were to parents with children at the school and prospective parents. In particular we aimed to understand what support was available.
- **Gather evidence of hardship** – to understand the impact on clients of school uniform costs. This builds on the work of 2022/23 and allowed us to ask whether in parents view the issue has got better, worse or remained the same.
- **Challenge schools** – seek to engage with the schools to raise concerns, discuss the need for branded items and highlight the impact on their pupils and families. We hope our clients' stories will apply pressure for change in policies.
- **Engagement with Local Authority / Local housing providers / large employers** – building on the support provided by Halton Housing Trust and Travis Perkins, we seek to encourage the Local Authority, local housing providers and large employers to explore additional support for the communities they serve. The support would help alleviate hardship, as well as to support their staff and encourage the development of a pipeline for future talent in the borough.

What We Learnt

Academy Trusts and Maintained Schools are required to publish online a copy of their uniform policy. The policy should be accessible to parents (including parents of prospective students), easy to understand and make clear whether generic items will be accepted². The policy should have regard to the Cost of School Uniforms Guidance published in November 2021³.

We have reviewed the information published online by schools in Halton (see appendix 1), through their websites.

- **Only 81% of schools published a uniform policy document that was accessible.**

We defined accessible as meaning that within a 10 minute search of the website and associated policy documents we were unable to find reference to the uniform expectations of the provider

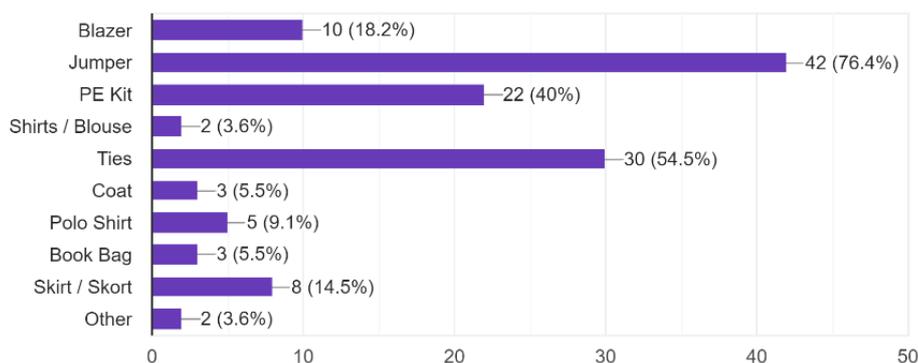
- Of those that did publish their policy, 18% did not place these in a prominent position on their websites (It took more than 2 minutes to locate the document even with integrated search bars). In 2% of cases it took over 5 minutes of searching on the websites to find the relevant information.

Of the schools which published an accessible uniform policy;

- The majority of schools (82%) required at least 1 piece of branded uniform although **9 schools in the borough required 4 or more branded items**. This is significantly lower than we discovered when we carried out similar research in 2022.

What branded items of uniform are pupils required to have?

55 responses



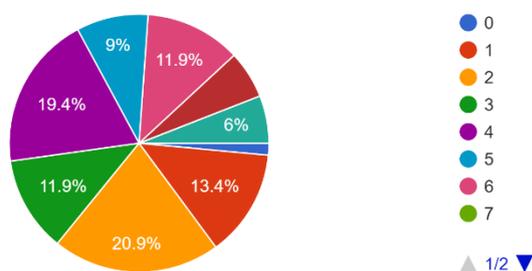
² <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/what-maintained-schools-must-publish-online#school-uniforms> and <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/what-academies-free-schools-and-colleges-should-publish-online#school-uniforms>.

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/cost-of-school-uniforms/cost-of-school-uniforms>

We then asked our sample group of 65 parents about the school policies, to find out if they knew how many items of branded uniform were compulsory. This was to test how well schools had communicated their policy to their stakeholders. Some parents had children in different schools and returned 2 responses telling us about each provider.

- **90% of respondents believed they knew what the school's uniform policy said and how many branded items they required**
- **Of those that believed they knew their school's uniform policy, 48% told us that they were required to purchase 4 or more branded items.** We were unable to verify the accuracy of 5 of the responses in the absence of an accessible uniform policy.

How many branded items of uniform does the school require?
67 responses



- **Only 13 (19%) of the responses accurately confirmed how many items of branded uniform they were required to purchase.**

In some cases, parents misunderstood the uniform requirements significantly and believed they were required to purchase more than 6 branded items when the schools stated policy only required 1 or 2.

The Guidance states;

The policy should also make clear whether a generic item will be accepted or if a branded item is required.

Schools should include sufficient information so that a parent is clear whether an item can only be purchased from a specific retailer or if it can be purchased more widely, including from second-hand retailers.⁴

The responses made clear that schools need to do more to ensure they publish their policies in an accessible format and that they are sending a consistent message to each parent to allow them to better understand what is required.

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/cost-of-school-uniforms/cost-of-school-uniforms> - Providing Information to parents

The Cost of a Uniform

The guidance to schools' states;

Where a school decides that a branded item is required, they should consider how they can maintain the benefits of a branded item whilst keeping costs low.⁵

Individually none of the items of essential branded school uniforms were excessively priced. The highest cost single item identified was a school blazer for a secondary school at £36.00. However, in practice parents are not buying one discrete item, they are required to purchase whole wardrobes suitable for use over a 5-day period.

Regardless of the quality of the items, each parent that we spoke to told us that they have to buy a new school uniform each year, as they have been outgrown or worn out by daily wear.

One of the school policies reviewed as part of this process discussed how students had been engaged to design their branded PE kits. The items were then produced by a manufacturer of professional sports kits and included numerous variations for different types of sporting endeavour and weather condition. As exciting as this undoubtedly was for students, the policy failed to explain how cost had been factored into this exercise and crucially how students, who were unlikely to understand their parent or guardians financial situation, had been able to reflect on the issue of affordability.

How many do you need?

We asked our sample group how many of each item were required, so that you were able to provide a full school uniform each day.

The responses were varied. Some parents felt they could get by with a single set of branded uniform, washing and drying it every day. Others highlighted that with the cost of energy and limited time it was not practical to wash this frequently and instead needed 5 complete uniforms.

Our survey highlighted that there is a difference between secondary and primary education.

- 46% of respondents with primary age children told us they could get by with 2 school uniforms. This was the most popular selection. However, 51% of parents told us they required 3 or more uniforms. For primary age children we have preferred the median value of 3 uniforms to better reflect the sample set.
- 63% of responses for secondary education suggested 2 complete uniforms was the minimum. The median value confirmed this also. We have therefore used this value when calculating the cost of branded uniforms.

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/cost-of-school-uniforms/cost-of-school-uniforms>

The Gender Tax

In addition to the guidance on costs, schools must ensure that their policies do not unlawfully discriminate against pupils with protected characteristics⁶.

6 schools within the Halton area, including 2 primary schools, currently include a tartan skirt in school colours within the mandatory uniform requirements. The skirt is aimed at members of the student body who identify as female and is often described within school policies or websites as the “girls’ uniform”.

The average cost of the skirts is £21.50 per item, and most parents have told us they need at least 2-3 of these to manage washing and drying throughout the week.



The “boys uniform” however in each case provides for black or dark grey trousers. The price of generic uniform items (black or grey trousers or skirts) from local supermarkets or high street retailers starts at 2 for £7.00, or approximately 15% of the cost of the branded item.

This means that families with children that identify as female will have to spend significantly more than their peers who identify as male.

Our research identified the frequent use of non-inclusive gendered terminology throughout many of the policy documents reviewed.

The public sector equality duty is a duty on public authorities including schools to consciously eliminate discrimination against any of the protected characteristics outlined within the Equality Act. The use of non-gender inclusive language by some schools within the borough shows that school leaders responsible for these policies fall far short of their public sector equality duty. Gender neutral and inclusive language should be championed by school leaders in the production of these policies and any associated advertising of them on their websites.

Although outside of the scope of this report we would encourage school leaders to reflect carefully on the choice of language adopted in any revised policy.

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/equality-act-2010-advice-for-schools>, Uniforms, paragraphs 2.15 – 2.18 page 15-16. Published May 2014.

Cost

Based on what our clients told us about their uniform needs, we considered how much the average family would need to spend to secure all compulsory branded items.

It has been presumed that, where required, a single branded PE kit will be sufficient. However, students taking part in GCSE PE may require additional items above the costs calculated.

Compulsory Uniform Costs Per Student.

	"Boys Uniform"	"Girls Uniform"
Primary - Range*	£0 - £76.75	£0 - £111.50
Primary - Mean Cost*	£34.44	£36.73
Secondary - Range	£66 - £126.50	£66 - £174.00
Secondary - Mean Cost	£106.94	£130.94

**Pricing for 16 schools was not accessible online*

Mark told us;

He has 2 daughters going through school and his eldest daughter always looked after her uniform, so he had been able to keep some of the branded items to pass down. However, the school changed uniform and now he is back to square one. Mark told us he had no idea how he was going to afford to buy 2 full sets of uniform.

Are there alternatives to branded items?

The guidance provides examples of how schools might best achieve the aims of the guidance, including;

using sew or iron on labels or limiting the branded items to longer-lasting items such as ties rather than items that the parent may need to purchase more frequently or in larger quantities such as shirts

There are a number of suppliers offering bespoke embroidered badge designs in iron on and sew on varieties. The cost of such items depends largely on the volume of badge supplied, however conservative cost estimates suggest that badges are available for between £0.25 and £0.50 per item. This approach offers a potential saving of £20-30 per child on uniform costs compared to branded item costs from local suppliers.

Alternatively, T-shirt printing services allow generic items to be branded at relatively low cost and although impractical on an individual basis for parents, this offers an opportunity for each school to reduce the cost to their pupils' families by direct ordering.

Optional Branded Items

The statutory guidance says;

To ensure that school uniform acts as a social leveller, optional branded items should also be kept to a minimum.

The use of optional branded uniform remained common place with all but 3 schools offering at least 1 item of non-essential branded uniform. On Average schools offered 3 items of non-essential branded uniform, however, one primary school offers 8 items.

Of the policies we reviewed we identified **1 school which offered 3 different hats and 2 different coats as part of their optional range.**

In another school the **cost to purchase non-essential branded items was £116.75**

The most common non-essential uniform item was a school coat.

It is likely that individual schools have limited control over the number of non-essential items being offered. Our review highlighted trends with specific uniform suppliers, which suggested that the non-essential branded items were a standard part of the supply contract.

None of the policies we reviewed explained what steps had been taken to minimise the number of non-essential branded items.

The Social impact of optional branded items

Many of our parents told us that even if an item of branded uniform is not compulsory that they still felt obliged to purchase it;

- **33% told us that they feared their child would not fit in or would be bullied if they did not wear the full branded uniform.**

Only 1 of the policies we read explained what steps the school would take to de-stigmatise the use of generic uniform items.

Additional Costs

The cost of uniforms covers more than just branded items. In many cases parents are able to access generic items such as;

- Shirts / Blouses
- Polo Shirts
- Trousers / Shorts

- PE T-shirts
- Black Shoes

The cost of these items is not to be underestimated. We have tried to identify the cheapest high street providers trading locally. Not all uniform items are available from all suppliers and some suppliers were only able to offer generic uniform items for primary age children.

	Tesco	Asda	Morrisons	Aldi	Marks and Spencer's
Shirts		2 for £4.50	2 for £5		2 for £16
Blouse		2 for £4.50	2 for £5		2 for £16
Polo Shirt	3 for £4	£1.25	2 for £4	£1.75	2 for £11
Trousers	2 for £8	2 for £7	£5.00	£1.75	2 for £17
Skirt	2 for £10	2 for £7		£1.75	2 for £14
School Jumper	2 for £8	2 for £5		£1.50	2 for £9
Blazer		£14.00			£26.00
School Shoes		£15.00			£22.00
PE Shorts		2 for £4			
PE T-Shirts		2 for £4			

Although we have included the costs for the lowest priced footwear item from 2 suppliers it is important to note that these items may not be compliant with some of the uniform policies reviewed. Where school policies required a more formal style of dress shoe, prices increased to £33.00

The true cost of a uniform

Considering all of the information above we have calculated the average cost of securing a full school uniform compliant with each school's uniform policies per child.

Primary school: £67.59.

Secondary school: £171.44

For the most expensive school identified by our review the cost of a full school uniform increases to £222.50 for those wearing the "girls uniform", more than 30% higher than the mean average cost for secondary providers across the borough.

It is important to stress that this relies on parents shopping around for the lowest cost items from a number of retailers. In many cases this is simply not practical.

It is also important to stress that the majority of the parents we interviewed had more than 1 child in education, with the largest family interviewed having 5 school age children.



Katie's Story

Katie is a single parent and lives with her 4 children. She works part time and the family also receive Universal Credit, but this is reduced due to the 2 child limit and a historic tax credit overpayment.

Katie told us that every month the family struggle to get by and she has run up significant priority debts due to increases in the cost of living.

So far Katie told us that she had spent £600 buying uniform for her children, she'd cut down on food and had no money to top up the energy meter. Katie has already exhausted support from the food bank and didn't know where to turn next.

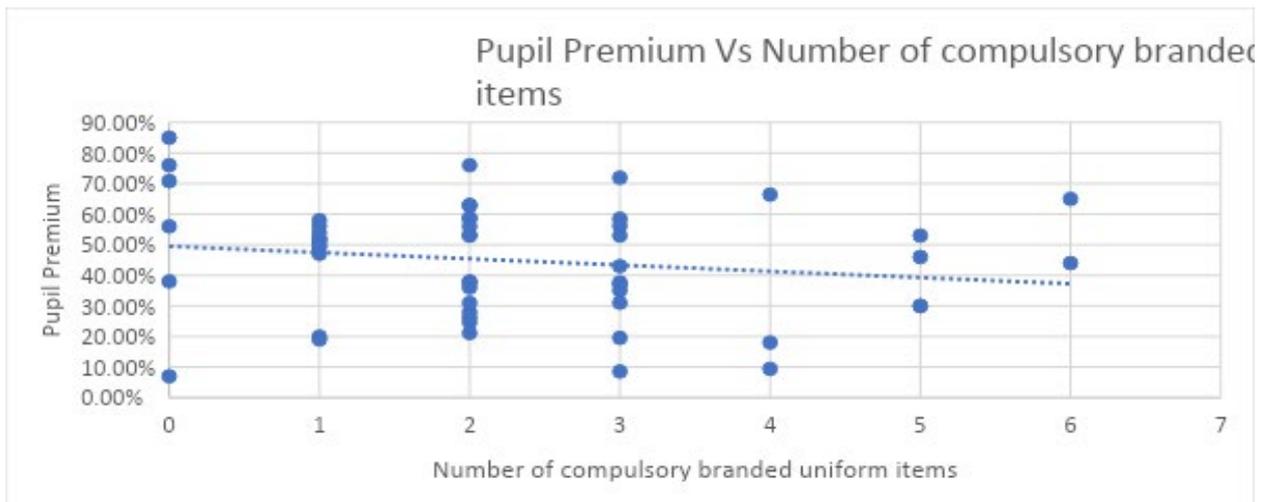
For some larger families they are being asked to find hundreds or pounds for uniforms at times when they are facing competing pressures due to cost of living, childcare costs during school holidays, additional food and energy costs due to having children off school.

Do schools reflect the communities they support?

We hypothesised that the number of branded items may in some way be linked to the communities served by the schools, so we explored whether there was any link between the pupil premium and the number of compulsory branded items.

However, we found that the school publishing the lowest pupil premium (7%) had no compulsory branded uniform and recommended that parents should access uniform items via high street stores.

Conversely the school with the most compulsory branded items as part of their uniform (6 items) had a much higher pupil premium of 65%.



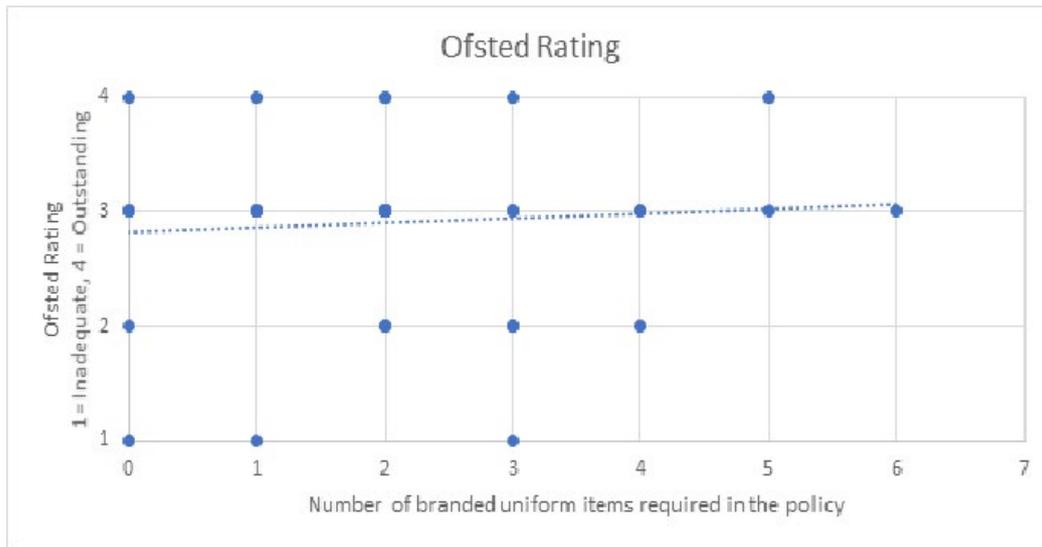
The data indicated no strong trend between the relative affluence of the student's families and the number of branded uniform items required

Is a branded uniform necessary?

The policies reviewed often referred to the importance of school uniforms in improving performance and setting the tone for learning.

We therefore hypothesised that there would be a strong correlation between outcomes with Ofsted and increased branded uniform requirements. However, there was no obvious link between the school's performance at Ofsted and uniform.

- **Of the schools achieving an outstanding rating, 45% required 1 or fewer items of branded uniform.**
- **Of the schools assessed as requiring improvement or inadequate 40% required 3 or more branded items.**



We were unable to find any evidence to support that branded uniform is a factor in driving up the standards within a school.

What Help is Available?

Local Authorities are afforded a discretion within the Education Act 1996, section 510 to provide financial assistance or uniform to students within the local area who appears to be unable to afford this independently. Such discretion has in recent years been all but abolished in light of reductions in Local Authority budgets and increasing numbers of people facing financial difficulties due to austerity cuts and subsequent cost of living crisis.

As a consequence of these cuts and absence of support, schools have had to develop strategies to deal with these issues independently.

The guidance states;

Second-hand uniforms can benefit all parents, particularly those on low incomes. In addition, by extending the life of garments, it is more sustainable.

Schools should ensure that arrangements are in place so that second-hand school uniforms are available for parents to acquire (for example through periodic second-hand uniform sales or swap shops).

... [All] schools should ensure that information on second-hand uniforms is clear for parents of current and prospective pupils and published on the school's website. This should clearly state where second-hand uniforms are available to be purchased.⁷

Options available to people struggling with the costs of uniforms include school-based offers of pre-loved uniforms or swap shops; however, these seem to be inconsistently offered across schools within Halton. Within our research some people reported that where this was offered by their school they would often be cancelled due to low demand, rained off and never reorganised or at an unsuitable point within the last term. Others reported that they felt unable to use this type of support as their children would feel shame or embarrassment that they did not have a new uniform and feared that they would be bullied if others found out.

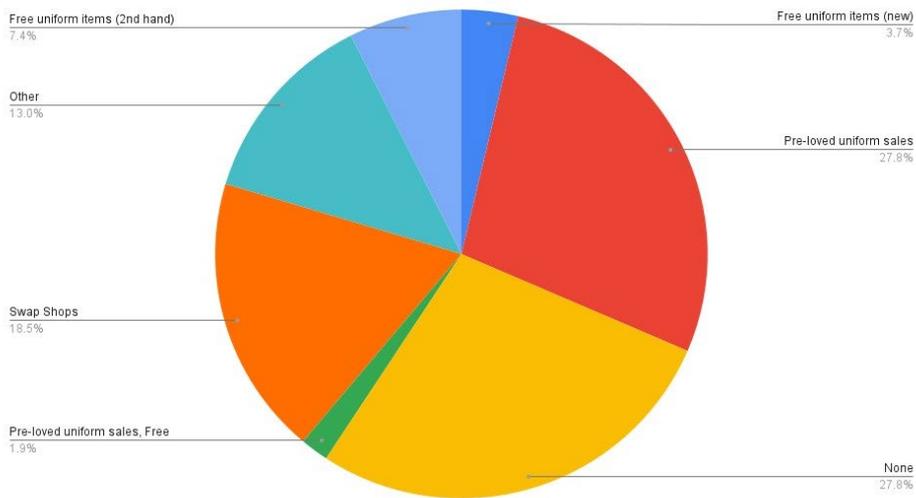
Across Halton there are a number of community sanctioned uniform swap shops available. However, it is unclear of the demand or uptake of these events. Those that reported having used these options reported struggling to find suitably sized garments and limited availability of secondary school items.

Other options include possible grants from charity organisations however these are very limited, usually require further evidence of eligibility and can take weeks or sometimes months to process.

As part of our research we looked closely at the information available on each local schools' website to find out what provision they made for parents experiencing hardship meeting the cost of school uniforms.

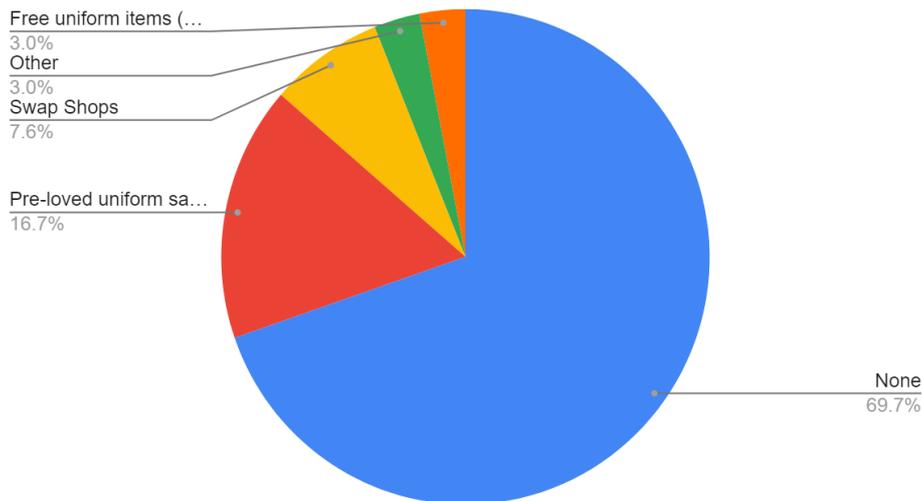
⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/cost-of-school-uniforms/cost-of-school-uniforms#provision-of-second-hand-uniforms>

What support do schools offer in their policy documents?



Our research suggested that there was a significant difference between the support discussed within school uniform policies and parents' experiences. We asked our sample group to tell us what support their school offered.

What support are parents aware of.



The vast majority of respondents were unaware of any support available from their schools. Even where our clients were aware of available support we received mixed reviews of the benefit these offered.

There were a number of reports that where people had enquired about an advance payment on their Universal Credit they were declined as 'new clothes' where not something this should be used for.

Halton Housing Trust in partnership with **Travis Perkins** have come together to help with school uniforms for their tenants. It is impossible to underestimate the benefit that scheme has offered to struggling families. That support has allowed them to avoid taking further borrowing, meet the cost of everyday living or simply spend more time with their children. Here's what some of the recipients told us;

"I received £140 towards the cost of uniforms, this has helped my family a lot. The funds I would have used for uniforms I have been able to use for food. Without this I would have had to rely on family for help and cut back on essentials over the next coming weeks. "

"The grant has also made a big difference and took some stress off of me. We would have been in an awkward position by trying to find money to pay for uniforms and ending up owing money out so we're so thankful."

"Thank you so much for the uniform vouchers, it's helped me so much towards my daughters uniform. If I wouldn't have had the help I would have had to put her old uniform on from last year. Thank you so much Halton housing. "

"I can't express how much this has helped us. What money I would've spent on uniforms I spent on food throughout the summer holidays....I'm just grateful we had the opportunity to get these vouchers as it has helped soooo much. It might not seem like much to some people but to us it was a huge help. With the cost of uniforms these days, especially high school ones, these vouchers have been a lifesaver as my children will go to school with a good supply of new uniforms."

"Without the grant I would have struggled left my family short for bills food gas electricity etc my kids would be bored all summer as would've had to use some of day out money for uniform"

The Consequences of Incorrect Uniform

Our parents told us that they felt obliged to buy all of the branded uniform items as they feared their children would be unfairly punished if they did not have correct clothing. It is easy to understand why parents would have this fear. Each September the tabloid news and social media is full of stories of parents who have got it wrong and their children have faced exclusion.

That schools having a right to discipline students breaking school rules is not in dispute. The guidance makes clear that sanctions may be used in cases of non-compliance with uniform policies.

In Halton, 17 out of 67 schools reviewed (25%), included specific mention within their behaviours policies of sanctions where students failed to meet the expected uniform standard.

Those sanctions included;

Pupils will be sent home to correct their uniform.

Students who are not in correct uniform may be taken out of circulation to work until uniform is corrected'

Pupils who do not adhere to the Academy's uniform policy may face appropriate sanctions. These could include: detentions, report card, phone calls to parents/carers and internal exclusion

For breaches of school uniform policy, more serious punishments like suspension or expulsion from the school should only be considered if the pupil's disregard of uniform policy is persistent and/or defiant.

On a rare occasion where a student persistently chooses to wear incorrect uniform they may be asked to work in isolation or return home to change

If there are no good reasons and the student persistently fails to observe the academy uniform policy he or she will be refused entry to the academy and only allowed back when the problem has been remedied.

Students identified as having inappropriate dress will be given a guidance, and will be directed to the shop, located in the hub, to retrieve items like ties, blazers and shoes.

Students will be expected to return borrowed items at the end of the school day and the shop team will keep track of items out on loan around the school.

In most cases the behaviour policies seek to stress that the schools will make discreet enquiries to establish the reasons for uniform breaches. However, it is not possible to assess how effective those interactions are, what, if any, training has been provided to the staff having those conversations and crucially what the level of engagement is in those conversations from low income groups or vulnerable pupils and families.

We would raise significant concerns regarding schools operating a loan model for uniform items requiring return during the school day. This is reasonably likely to cause significant embarrassment and distress, single out those in financial hardship and force families into making impossible budgeting decisions.

The link between time away from the classroom and attainment has been clear for a number of years.⁸

Whereas schools are required to report all formal suspensions and exclusions, the law does not require the same level of scrutiny of internal interventions.

Some of the policies read highlighted that children will be sent home as a result of uniform breaches. We understand that such informal exclusions will be treated as an authorised absence within the child's record, however this does not reduce the impact on the child's access to learning.

As part of our research for this report we have heard numerous stories from parents regarding the treatment of their children for seemingly minor breaches in uniform standards (e.g. the wearing of wrap around pleated skirts as opposed to other styles or those with clasps instead of buttons). Parents have told us about students lining up for uniform inspections before entering school premises, removal from mainstream learning and placement in behavioural units. Consistently, parents told us that this created a negative feeling towards the school and left children feeling excluded from learning.

In light of the issues identified here regarding cost, and ineffective communications, it is our view that no child should be disadvantaged or punished for uniform breaches and would encourage each provider to reflect again on their own policies.

⁸ <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/the-link-between-absence-and-attainment-at-ks2-and-ks4>

Recommendations

Although we have identified a number of improvements made since September 2022, this could still go much further.

A significant proportion of Halton's schools continue to require 4 or more branded uniform items. The majority of schools continue to offer a significant number of non-essential branded items. The majority of schools still use only one uniform supplier.

Our review has identified significant differences between the policies of each provider not only around uniform standards but how these are to be enforced. We therefore make 7 recommendations;

1. **Schools should review their uniform policies.**

The policies should clearly state the reasoning for requiring each branded item, what alternatives have been explored and why the ultimate decision has been made. The policies need to evidence what steps have been taken to place cost at the centre of decision-making process.

Where a number of optional branded items are available or where schools will accept generic items as substitutes for branded ones they should explain the rationale for retaining the branded items. As our research shows this results in undue pressure on parents who feel their children will experience bullying if they do not have these.

Schools may wish to consider consulting with their students and their families, not on the design for uniform items but on possible cost reductions and savings.

Furthermore, schools should also review their policies to make sure they are in line with their equality, diversity and inclusion strategy and meet the expectations of their public duty.

2. **Schools should review their communication strategies**

Our research showed significant shortcomings in how important information regarding uniform and available support is conveyed to parents.

Schools should review how they publish their information online to ensure that this is accessible efficiently within 1 or 2 clicks of the home page.

Additionally, schools should reflect on how they talk to their students' parents through newsletters, apps, in playground conversations, so that consistent information is being relayed.

3. **Where branded items are not required, schools should work to de-stigmatise the wearing of generic items.**

Parents report feeling pressured to buy branded items to avoid bullying.

Schools should work with students and their families to ensure that everyone understands the uniform expectations of the school and what is available.

Schools should avoid phrases like “branded items are preferred, but high street alternatives are available” within their policies and communications with parents as this is likely to be interpreted by parents as support for stigmatising non-branded items.

4. Schools should review their behaviour and disciplinary policies

Schools should look to their behaviour policies to ensure that they are not penalising financial inequalities.

The policies should explain how sensitive conversations will be conducted and recorded and what training has been provided so that pupils and their families can feel safe disclosing any financial concerns. Schools should develop links with local providers to ensure that underlying financial pressure can be resolved by someone qualified to undertake this work.

We would encourage schools to reconsider any policy of removing children from mainstream learning or providing short term loaned items. Such policies are likely to result in distress or embarrassment to students and their families.

5. The Local Authority should work with schools across the borough to develop best practice and template policy documents which might easily be adopted by all.

Our research identified that although there is evidently a number of template policies in circulation, these are not consistently applied and have often been amended to lose a lot of their original value.

Many of the policies pay lip service only to the current guidance on uniform costs and rarely did we identify policies explaining what practical steps have been taken to engage with the spirit of that guidance.

Although each school operates independently or within its own academy trust there is an opportunity to develop borough wide best practice in consultation with head teachers, boards of governors, trustees and other stakeholders, so that schools do not lose their individual identities but continue to best serve the communities they are part of.

6. The Local Authority should develop a strategy for supporting families with the cost of uniforms and work with both the public and private sector to develop a fund which will support families who experience financial hardship as a result of these costs.

It is crucial that Halton continues to develop young leaders and skilled professionals. The best way to achieve this is to ensure that every child has access to a full education.

There is already a well stated attainment gap between students from low income households and their better off peers⁹, it is therefore imperative that we support the young people of Halton to overcome any barriers that hold them back from achieving their potential.

The work of Halton Housing Trust in supporting their residents has shown that a relatively modest sum of money has the potential to change the lives of many young people and their families.

The Local Authority is therefore asked to revisit the need for financial support for families in meeting the cost of school uniforms. We acknowledge the financial pressures on the Authority and so we would encourage it to work with large employers operating in the borough in both the private and public sector, to develop a fund to meet the cost of this scheme in a sustainable way. The benefits to employers through improved staff welfare and the development of a pipeline of future talent, should be placed at the forefront of discussions.

We would encourage a model where the Local Authority works with third sector partners and the local schools to ensure that funds are distributed to the most vulnerable parts of our community.

7. We ask MP's to lobby for changes in the reporting of school suspensions and exclusions so that the data includes informal exclusions and internal suspensions and instances where children are sent home for uniform breaches.

The link between absence and attainment is well proven. We believe that schools should take all reasonable steps to keep children within the classroom to maximise lifelong opportunities.

Throughout our research we have heard parents recite stories of military style uniform inspections and internal exclusions in behavioural units for those falling fowl of expectations. These stories are played out each September in the media.

Schools having a right to discipline pupils for policy breaches is not in doubt, however it is crucial that there is accountability for these interventions so that the impact can be reviewed and monitored in the same way as other absences.

MP's are asked to lobby for mandatory reporting by schools of all internal exclusions, suspensions and referrals to behavioural units.

⁹ https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Closing-the-Gap_EPI-.pdf

Next Steps

This report has been shared with local Members of Parliament, all of the local schools considered in this report, the Local Authority, and affected stakeholders. The data has been anonymised so as not to cause unnecessary concern for those affected.

We have asked school leaders, along with their governing boards, to determine if any changes are required to their own policies. Following these discussions and decisions we have asked for feedback on how these discussions unfolded and how this will be applied within their school.

It is important to us at Citizens Advice Halton that the annual cycle of poverty caused by the purchase of school uniform ends. We therefore aim to review the contents of this report in 2024 to assess what if any changes have been made and to hold to account those who continue to fail to adhere to both the spirit and wording of the statutory guidance.

Addendum

Since the drafting of this report in August 2023, Citizens Advice Halton have become aware of one school operating within the borough who has moved to introduce an unbranded uniform accessible via high street outlets.

Throughout this report we have highlighted many of the negative aspects of uniform policies, however we find it important to commend this provider on the adoption of both the spirit and the wording of the guidance.

We would encourage other providers to review this example when exploring possible changes within their own uniform policies, so as to bring to an end the exceptional financial pressures placed on parents of school age children.

Appendix 1

Schools List

Accessed July 2023 from: <https://www.find-school-performance-data.service.gov.uk/?searchtype=search-by-la&la=876&keywords=Halton>

[All Saints Upton Church of England Voluntary Controlled Primary School](#)
[Ashley High School](#)
[Astmoor Primary School](#)
[Beechwood Primary School](#)
[Bridgewater Park Primary School](#)
[Brookfields School](#)
[Brookvale Primary School](#)
[Castle View Primary School](#)
[Chesnut Lodge Special School \(Primary\)](#)
[Chesnut Lodge Special School \(Secondary\)](#)
[Daresbury Primary School](#)
[Ditton Primary School](#)
[Fairfield Primary School](#)
[Farnworth CofE Primary School](#)
[Gorsewood Primary School](#)
[Hale Church of England Voluntary Controlled Primary School](#)
[Halebank CofE Primary School](#)
[Hallwood Park Primary School and Nursery](#)
[Halton Lodge Primary School](#)
[Halton School](#)
[Hillview Primary School](#)
[Hope Corner School](#)
[Kingsway Primary Academy School](#)
[Lunts Heath Primary School](#)
[Moore Primary School](#)
[Moorfield Primary School](#)
[Murdishaw West Community Primary School](#)
[Oakfield Community Primary School](#)
[Ormiston Bolingbroke Academy](#)
[Ormiston Chadwick Academy](#)
[Our Lady Mother of the Saviour Catholic Primary School](#)
[Our Lady of Perpetual Succour Catholic Primary School](#)
[Palace Fields Primary Academy](#)
[Pewithall School](#)
[Poppy Field School](#)
[Runcorn All Saints CofE Primary School](#)
[Saints Peter and Paul Catholic High School](#)
[Sandymoor Ormiston Academy](#)
[St Augustine's Catholic Primary School, A Voluntary Academy](#)

[St Basil's Catholic Primary School](#)
[St Bede's Catholic Infant School](#)
[St Bede's Catholic Junior School](#)
[St Berteline's CofE Primary School](#)
[St Chads Catholic and Church of England High School](#)
[St Clement's Catholic Primary School](#)
[St Edward's Catholic Primary School](#)
[St Gerard's Catholic Primary and Nursery School](#)
[St John Fisher Catholic Primary School](#)
[St Martin's Catholic Primary School](#)
[St Mary's Church of England Primary School](#)
[St Michael with St Thomas CE Primary School](#)
[St Michaels Catholic Primary School](#)
[The Brow Community Primary School](#)
[The Cavendish High Academy](#)
[The Grange \(Primary School\)](#)
[The Grange \(Secondary School\)](#)
[The Heath School](#)
[The Holy Spirit Catholic Primary School](#)
[Victoria Road Primary School \(KS1\)](#)
[Victoria Road Primary School \(KS2\)](#)
[Wade Deacon High School](#)
[Westfield Primary School](#)
[Weston Point Community Primary School](#)
[Weston Primary School](#)
[Widnes Academy](#)
[Windmill Hill Primary School](#)
[Woodside Primary School](#)