

Meeting of:	Learning and Culture Scrutiny Committee
Date of Meeting:	Thursday, 10 March 2022
Relevant Scrutiny Committee:	Learning and Culture
Report Title:	Recommendation Report of the Cost of Schooling Task and Finish Group.
Purpose of Report:	To advise Committee of the Group's findings and seek approval for the drafted Good Practice Guidance to be referred to Cabinet for their endorsement.
Report Owner:	Rob Thomas, Chief Executive
Responsible Officer:	Catherine Lindsey, Assistant Democratic and Scrutiny Services Officer.
Elected Member and Officer Consultation:	Written in consultation with Members comprising the Task and Finish Group.
Policy Framework:	None
<p>Executive Summary:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Learning and Culture Scrutiny Committee established a Task and Finish Group in January 2020 to review the costs to parents and carers of sending their children to school. • The Group have subsequently heard evidence from pupils attending school in the Vale of Glamorgan, parents whose children attend a range of Vale of Glamorgan Schools, and Local Authority Officers who have been involved in tackling challenges around the affordability of schooling, digital exclusion and period dignity, particularly in light of the impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic. • This report summarises the work undertaken by the group and presents a draft of suggested Good Practice Guidance based on their findings. The Group recommend that Committee approve the report for referral to Cabinet and, subject to their approval, that the Good Practice Guidance be circulated to the Governing Bodies and Head Teachers of all Vale of Glamorgan schools. 	

Recommendations

- 1.** That Members consider the contents of this report, and that the draft Good Practice Guidance (attached at Appendix A to the report) be endorsed subject to any amendments agreed by Committee.
- 2.** That the report and draft Good Practice Guidance, as endorsed by Committee, be referred to Cabinet for their consideration and approval.
- 3.** That the Good Practice Guidance, subject to approval by Cabinet, be circulated to all Governing Bodies and Head Teachers in Vale of Glamorgan schools and be made publicly available on the Council's website.

Reasons for Recommendations

- 1.** In order that Committee can consider the Groups findings and collectively agree the contents of any Guidance to be referred to Cabinet.
- 2.** In order that Cabinet can consider the Good Practice Guidance agreed by Committee based on the Task and Finish Group's findings and determine whether the Guidance be approved for further circulation.
- 3.** In order that Good Practice Guidance is made available to schools and residents of the Vale of Glamorgan, and families are assisted in mitigating the financial burden associated with the cost of schooling.

1. Background

- 1.1** In January 2020, the Learning and Culture Scrutiny Committee established a Task and Finish Group to review the costs to parents and carers of sending their children to school. This included three main elements:
 - Review on School Proms and the impact that these may be having on pupil's emotional wellbeing (20 June 19: Min No 71);
 - Affordability of School Uniforms (20 June 19: Min No 71).
 - Consideration of the affordability and accessibility of out of school activities (20 June 19: Min No 71).
- 1.2** At the Group's first meeting on 27th January, 2020, the Director for Learning and Skills was in attendance and highlighted to the group work recently undertaken by the Children's Commissioner for Wales which referenced the cost of the school day and provided recommendations which were specifically allocated to Welsh Government, Schools and Local Authorities, suggesting that these recommendations could provide a useful framework for the work and objectives of the group.

- 1.3** The Director also advised that the Local Authority would not be able to enforce any new rules regarding policies in this area, as guidelines are set at a national level. However, the Local Authority would be able to issue a set of good practice guidelines for adoption by schools' Governing bodies.
- 1.4** The Group agreed that their findings should formulate Good Practice Guidance which aimed to minimise cost of schooling, and make clear that all schools should be aiming to lessen the financial burden of education on families and to be as inclusive as possible in their adopted policies.
- 1.5** Throughout their work the Group have also been in agreement that any guidance issued should aim to support all families, rather than to enhance mechanisms already in place to support pupils in receipt of Free School Meals (FSM). A leading concern for the Group is that many families may not meet the threshold required to receive FSM, but will still experience hardship due to the cost of schooling.

2. Key Issues for Consideration

- 2.1** In March 2020 the Group visited Pencoedtre High School, where pupils who represented their year groups on the School's Parliament kindly met with Members to discuss their views and perception of matters relating to the cost of schooling. The meeting was also attended by the Head of Department for Wider Curriculum at Pencoedtre High School.
- 2.2** The School Parliament had, at a recent meeting, discussed the various costs associated with attending school and how these impacted on pupils, what the school was doing currently to mitigate the impact, and what further steps the school could be taking in this regard. The School Parliament's findings had been summarized in a document, which was presented to Members and used as a jumping-off point to discuss a range of topics with the pupils and Head of Department, including:
 - School Uniform
 - School Trips
 - Stationary/Equipment
 - Homework
 - Option Subjects
 - Sanitary Products
 - Proms/Leavers' Events
- 2.3** The insight provided by the pupils and Head of Department was invaluable in guiding them towards the specific issues which they wished to investigate further and include within the guidance they would eventually issue.
- 2.4** The COVID-19 pandemic posed considerable disruption to the work of the Group, however in March 2021 they reconvened to consider the findings and

recommendations of a report produced by the Children's Commissioner for Wales "*A Charter for Change: Protecting Welsh Children from the Impact of Poverty*", and the Vale of Glamorgan's subsequent response.

- 2.5** In December 2020 the Children's Commissioner had written to the Council requesting an update regarding a number of poverty actions that were highlighted within her report, and the Council's letter of response was presented to the Group alongside the report itself.
- 2.6** The Group were pleased to note that they had already identified all of the poverty actions which could be considered to fall within the remit of their review, and that mention of the Group's work had in fact been made in the Council's response to the Children's Commissioner.
- 2.7** The Group had also agreed that, given the drastic change in circumstances which had taken place since they had last met due to the COVID-19 pandemic, they wished to incorporate the financial implications of home schooling as an additional area of consideration for their review. At their next meeting in April 2021, the Group were presented with reports regarding work carried out by the Vale of Glamorgan Council to tackle digital exclusion and ensure period dignity for schools and families throughout national lockdowns, and the Group were encouraged and pleased to hear of the stellar inter-departmental work which had been carried out in these areas.
- 2.8** Subsequently, the Partnership and Prevention Manager had contacted a number of parents whose children attended a range of schools within the Vale of Glamorgan, and they were invited to attend a meeting of the Group in July 2021 in order to discuss their own experiences with the affordability of education. Group Members and parents discussed the same topics that had been highlighted by pupils at Pencoedre High School previously, and further insight was gained on these issues from the perspective of those who were required to actually manage the impact of the cost of schooling on a day-to-day basis.
- 2.9** Taking all evidence heard into consideration, a set of Good Practice Guidance was drafted and presented to the Group at a meeting in February 2022, and with their suggested amendments having been incorporated, the draft has been presented for Committee's consideration at Appendix A to this report.
- 2.10** As acknowledged within the draft Guidance itself, there is already much good practice in this area taking place in schools throughout the Vale of Glamorgan, but there were also reports that troubled the Group in some instances. The intention of the draft Guidance is therefore to highlight and commend good practice already in place, and to encourage the continued implementation of such practice on a wider scale.
- 2.11** The Group welcomes the views of the wider Committee on this matter and, subject to any amendments agreed during the course of debate, recommend

that the draft Guidance be endorsed and referred to Cabinet for their consideration, in the hope that it will receive their approval for circulation to Governing Bodies and Head Teachers of all schools in the Vale of Glamorgan, as well as being made publicly available to Vale of Glamorgan residents via the Council's website.

3. How do proposals evidence the Five Ways of Working and contribute to our Well-being Objectives?

- 3.1** The work Task and Finish Group will support the Council and schools in the Local Authority Area to achieve Corporate Plan Well-being Outcome 3 – 'All Vale of Glamorgan citizens have opportunities to achieve their full potential'.

4. Resources and Legal Considerations

Financial

- 4.1** There are no direct financial implications in respect of this report.

Employment

- 4.2** There are no employment implications in respect of this report.

Legal (Including Equalities)

- 4.3** There are no direct legal implications in respect of this report.

5. Background Papers

[A Charter for Change: Protecting Welsh Children from the Impact of Poverty](#)

Good Practice Guidance for Mitigating the Costs of Schooling for Families in the Vale of Glamorgan

This Guidance has been written by a Task and Finish Group composed of Members of the Vale of Glamorgan's Learning and Culture Scrutiny Committee, and has subsequently been approved by the Scrutiny Committee and the Council's Cabinet for circulation to all Governing Bodies and Head Teachers of Vale of Glamorgan schools. The Guidance is also available to all Vale of Glamorgan residents to access on the Council's website.

The primary aim of this guidance is to assist families in mitigating the financial burden associated with the cost of schooling, and to emphasise that school policies relating to the matters outlined below should be as inclusive as possible of pupils from families across the income spectrum.

The Guidance acknowledges that there are already mechanisms in place to support pupils in receipt of Free School Meals (FSM), and therefore intends to support all families in the Vale of Glamorgan rather than to enhance existing support for those in receipt of FSM. The Task and Finish Group throughout their work have become increasingly concerned that many families may not meet the threshold required to receive FSM, but will still experience hardship due to the everyday costs of schooling.

In order to formulate their findings, the Task and Finish Group met with pupils attending school in the Vale of Glamorgan, parents of pupils attending a range of Vale of Glamorgan schools, and Local Authority Officers who have been involved in tackling challenges around the affordability of schooling. The Group acknowledges that much of the good practice outlined below is already taking place in many schools across the Local Authority area, and this Guidance is therefore issued with the intention of highlighting and commending good practice already in place, and encouraging the continued implementation of such practice on a wider scale.

Good Practice Guidance

School Uniform and PE Kit

1. External Uniform Swap Events

Schools should ensure they keep abreast of any such events taking place locally and look to actively promote these to all pupils/parents at key points (i.e. the end/start) of the school year via established communication channels and social media accounts if appropriate.

2. Internal Uniform Swap/Recycling Schemes

If there are none already in place, schools should consider establishing these. Many parents rely on communication amongst themselves (e.g Whatsapp groups for class parents, Facebook groups) to organise swaps or hand-me-downs, but this risks not reaching all parents due to factors such as social isolation. Schools should aim to have an internal scheme accessible to all parents which allows them to swap or recycle used uniform, and may wish to liaise with the Local Authority's ICT Services regarding assistance they might be able to provide with mechanisms that could facilitate this (for instance a 'Swap Shop' as is available on the Vale's StaffNet).

3. Sale of second-hand uniform

An alternative to recycling/swapping schemes could be that schools collect second hand uniform items and re-sell these at school events, for instance Summer or Christmas fairs/fetes.

4. Discarded Uniform

The Group heard that at one school's care-taking staff had found upwards of 40 coats while cleaning the school over the course of a year which had not been claimed through lost and found. Staff had subsequently set up a system whereby any coats which were fit for re-use and which weren't claimed within a certain time frame through lost and found were washed and made available via the Wellbeing department or Key Stage Offices for pupils who needed them. Any schools encountering high levels of usable discarded clothing items should consider establishing a similar system.

5. Reduce/Minimise the number of school uniform or PE kit items which are branded or school-specific

The ability to buy 'generic' uniform items from mainstream retail outlets (e.g. supermarkets or high street clothing stores) is essential for many families, particularly those on lower incomes. Branded items are also frequently only available from specific suppliers unless ordered online, and suppliers are not easily accessible to all families. For instance, the Group have heard that there is no longer a supplier of Ysgol Gymraeg Bro Morgannwg uniform available in the Vale, with parents having to travel to Canton (Cardiff) if children wish to try on uniform prior to purchase.

Schools should minimise the number of school uniform items that are branded or that feature design elements specific to the school, allowing parents to bulk buy items at cheaper prices and alleviating some of the pressure of school uniform costs.

If requiring branded/school-specific items, schools should ensure that the items are easily and affordably cared for and maintained (the Group heard that some blazers were dry-clean only).

6. Iron/Sew-on School Badges

Where a uniform or PE kit item must be branded with a school logo, good practice would be to make available for purchase iron or sew-on school logo badges. Branded jumpers or blazers (for example) are often costly and may need replacing regularly as pupils grow, or with wear and tear. Making logo badges available on their own would provide greater flexibility for lower income families, allowing parents to purchase cheaper 'generic' uniform items and still conform with uniform policy. Moreover, badges might only need to be bought once and could be transferred between multiple uniform items as pupils grew out of them.

7. Shoes

While a uniform policy may express a preference for appropriate 'school shoes', schools should acknowledge that these are not affordable for every family, particularly for families with multiple children and bearing in mind that children might be growing quickly and may require multiple pairs of shoes within a school year. It is therefore advisable for policies to be lenient in this regard and not take punitive measures if other shoe styles are worn, provided they are coherent with the rest of the uniform (e.g. are black/grey/brown).

8. School Uniform Policies

Schools should ensure that up to date versions of their uniform policies are easy to find on their websites in order that parents can be sure their children are compliant and not at risk of breaching the policy. Copies should also be readily available on school premises.

9. Punitive measures

The Group heard of pupils not being allowed to attend lessons due to small breaches such as having a hole in a blazer, and some policies state that pupils can be sent home to rectify non-adherence. If lower income families are unable to replace or repair uniform items immediately then punitive measures such as this will disproportionately impact them. Schools' responses to pupils who are found to be in breach in of uniform policy should therefore be proportionate and not at any point be detrimental to pupils' education.

An alternative option to punishment might be that schools, whether through the collection of second hand uniform or usable discarded uniform items, have a supply of compliant uniform available which pupils in breach of policy can change into for the rest of the school day and hand back before going home. This would minimise any detrimental effects on the education of pupils across the income spectrum.

10. Differences in uniform between year groups/school houses.

Schools should carefully consider the difference between uniforms for different Key Stages and/or Sixth Form, whether these changes are truly necessary, and if so look to ensure that the uniform items denoting the transition between year groups are affordable and easily accessible for all families, so that lower income pupils are not disadvantaged.

The group heard of at least one school which required pupils' PE kits to be of specific 'school house' colours. For lower income families who may rely on handing down items of clothing from older to younger siblings, this could complicate matters if siblings were placed in different houses for example, and schools should consider the impact of this when setting uniform policies.

11. Gender-specific Uniform Items.

Adopting a sensible approach, schools should aim to minimise any requirements for gender-specific uniform items. For example, there should be no restrictions to female pupils wearing trousers, or colour differentiation in uniform items depending on gender. This will assist families in being able to bulk-buy uniform and pass down between siblings.

12. Specific Kit for Sports Competitions

Schools should look to minimise any differences in kit required for competing in sports competitions, for instance differences between year groups, ability levels or specific tournaments. Requirements to purchase several different kits either in-year or over a number of years may be a deterrent to pupils from lower income families participating. If the requirements for a specific tournament are beyond a school's control, they should consider procuring and keeping some stock on-site to loan to pupils who are unable to purchase them.

13. Sources of Financial Support

Schools should actively promote any resources for financial support that are available to parents, for instance the Family Support Grant or the Welsh Government Uniform Grant, and ensure that information regarding how to access these and the relevant eligibility criteria are easily accessed on their websites and from the school's reception.

School Trips

14. Subsidising school trips

Some Parent Teacher Associations allocate funding specifically to subsidise the attendance of children from lower income families on school trips, and the Group would encourage this as standard practice where possible.

15. Notice of expensive school trips

Parents should be provided with as much notice of costly school trips as possible, with options regarding payment plans or subsidies being clearly signposted from the outset, as this may assist parents from lower income households in meeting these costs.

16. In-school experiences

Schools should consider, as an alternative to trips, whether visitors or experiences can be brought to the pupils on-site instead. Many educational attractions (such as galleries and museums) both nationally and abroad offer packages which allow pupils to study and engage with educational material within a classroom setting, allowing children from families across the income spectrum to enhance their education in the same way and enjoy the same experiences.

17. Educational Value of School Trips

It was not clear to the Group that all trips, particularly some of those that were costly, had educational value, and as such they risked the social exclusion of pupils from lower income families for reasons which bore little or no educational merit. Schools should be able to clearly demonstrate the educational value of the trips they organise, and how they integrate with the curriculum in order to enhance pupils' learning experiences.

Academic Matters

18. Revision Materials

At GCSE/A Level, where books are required for revision of a subject, pupils should be encouraged to donate these back to the school once courses have been completed in order that they can be used by pupils in the next cohort who may not be able to afford them. Schools should also ensure that their libraries have sufficient stock of any required books.

Schools may also find that they are able to purchase bulk stocks of revision books from the consortium which in turn could mean that pupils are able to buy the books at a cheaper rate through the school than they would through external retailers.

19. Homework/Revision Clubs

The Group heard of good practice wherein some schools had established after-school clubs where pupils would be able to do homework or revision for exams in a suitable working environment, as it was recognised that not every pupil had access to this at home. In some instances there was also provision of food, and all schools should investigate establishing similar provision where possible.

20. Funding for Option Subjects

The Group heard that some schools have in place a 'Special Fund' (made up of a portion of the pupil Development Grant) which teachers could apply for should they be aware of pupils who required assistance meeting costs associated with specific school subjects. Schools should consider setting up similar schemes if they have not done so already, and once established should ensure parents are made aware via

opportunities such as options evenings, in order that lower income families don't feel there is a barrier to their children choosing to study certain subjects.

Period Dignity

21. Sanitary Items

Significant work has been carried out by the Vale of Glamorgan Council to ensure period dignity for women and girls from low income families, both prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Group wishes to reinforce the message that all schools (Secondary and Primary) should be co-operating with the Council at every opportunity to secure pupils' access to products as needed. Access to supplies should be easy and administered by a suitable member of staff.

Proms/Leavers' Events

22. Assistance with Prom/Leavers' Events

The Group acknowledges that these events are difficult to monitor or control as they are often organised externally by parents or the pupils themselves. However, schools outside of the Local Authority area have set up successful schemes whereby they appeal for and have received donations of suitable clothing for prom events which pupils could rent at a low price for the evening to avoid a costly one-off expenditure. Schools should consider setting up similar schemes or look at other ways of ensuring that lower income pupils are not excluded from attending the events, for instance by appealing for pupils to donate their used prom outfits after an event in order that they can be used by the next cohort. Schools may also wish to consider collaborating or coordinating efforts with other schools within their locality and/or the wider Vale of Glamorgan area.