



Better inspection for all: The Children's Society response

Introduction

The Children's Society supports 23,000 children and young people every year through our specialist services and children's centres. We believe in achieving a better childhood for every child but have a particular focus on children who have nowhere else to turn, such as children living in poverty, young carers, and young refugees, children at risk on the streets, disabled children and children in trouble with the law. We seek to give a voice to children and young people and influence policy and practice so they have a better chance in life.

We welcome this consultation and respond based on our findings through a major inquiry led by the Children's Commission on Poverty (CCP). Sixteen children ranging in age from 10 to 19 ran a comprehensive inquiry to expose the true costs of school life – through young eyes. Their report: *'At What Cost? Exposing the impact of poverty on school life'* looks at what school life is really like for children living in poverty and sets out urgent recommendations for change to ensure that no child is isolated, stigmatised or excluded from opportunities at school. This involved a written call for evidence, three evidence sessions in Parliament with experts, and a survey with over 2,000 families and children. Following this investigation, the Commission launched their report and recommendations at an event in the House of Commons on Wednesday, 29 October, 2014.

Through the inquiry, we found that many disadvantaged young people do not enjoy school, cannot fully benefit from lessons and cannot participate fully in school activities due to the cost of school materials, trips and school uniforms.

In addition to this data, we also draw upon our understanding of children and young people gained through our wellbeing work, where we have surveyed more than 50,000 children and young people and consulted over 20,000 children and young people face to face since 2005.

Consultation questions

Q3. Do you agree or disagree with the proposed 'quality of teaching, learning and assessment' judgement (paragraph 21)?

The Children's Society partially agrees with this proposal. However, there are over three and a half million children in poverty in the UK today and their voices and views should be considered in this consultation. We therefore believe the proposed judgement should consider the impact of poverty on school life for the many young people and their parents from low-income families.

Through the Children's Commission on Poverty - an inquiry led by a team of young commissioners, we have found that the quality of learning and assessment pertaining to many

poorer students can be adversely affected by their inability to acquire certain materials or attend certain trips. While The Education Act 1996 prohibits schools charging for activities and materials, the Commissioners found that some schools are still placing huge pressure on struggling families and restricting the ability of some children to partake in their education.¹

Three in ten children in families that were 'not well off at all' said that they had chosen not to do a course at school because of the cost. Two thirds said they had missed a school trip because of the cost. Governing bodies at schools need to be aware of what they are setting as the overall cost of education, audit the cost and think about how they can reduce them to support poorer families. While there were examples of schools offering structured payments and deposit schemes, this best practice was not in place everywhere.

A young person told the inquiry a teacher had said to them 'You might not want to go on this trip but it would really benefit your grade' The young person had responded saying 'well if you haven't got the money, of course you're going to be at a disadvantage.'

Young people are not always aware of how much materials cost in advance of choosing their courses at GCSE level. Sara Bryson, Policy and Business Development Officer for Children North East was contacted by the young commissioners as part of the inquiry. In the Children's Commission on Poverty's report 'At What Cost?' She explains how she asks schools to produce a calculated list of what costs are across all departments.² While the head of a department may be aware of the department's costs, there still exists no collective oversight - a student may take on six different subjects without knowing overall costs. Governors are therefore encouraged to assess and lay out yearly costs, then make them readily available to parents.

Children told the CCP inquiry that they found it difficult to ask their parents for money for materials or activities when they know they are struggling. Schools should deal directly with parents, to make sure that they receive communications in a timely manner and to minimise the emotional burden on children.

The NASUWT (National Association of Schoolmasters/Union of Women Teachers) told the inquiry that their research has shown that in recent years there has been an increase in the scale and scope of schools' charging activities, including in areas such as educational equipment and visits. One fifth of parents they surveyed said they have been charged for field trips that are a compulsory element of a course. A quarter of parents said they have been charged for text or reference books.³

Recommendations:

We recommend that Ofsted could do more to ensure that schools are effective in ensuring that children in poverty receive the best possible outcomes from their education through the adoption of the following indicators within the '*quality of teaching, learning and assessment*' judgement:

¹ The Department for Education – Charging for school activities: Advice for governing bodies, school leaders, school staff and local authorities www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/278060/charging_for_school_activities.pdf

² At What Cost? Exposing the impact of poverty on school life, page 18

³ NASUWT – The Cost of Education 2013/14
www.nasuwat.org.uk/consum/groups/public/@journalist/documents/nas_download/nasuwat_012729.pdf

- activity costs are kept to an absolute minimum and are eliminated where possible. No child is excluded from activities as a result of the cost.
- participation rates of students on Free School Meals are no lower than other students in any school activities and non-compulsory courses as a result of any cost.

Teachers have an understanding of the needs of children from low income households and the challenges they are likely to face.

Q4. Do you agree or disagree with the proposed 'personal development, behavior and welfare judgement (paragraphs 22-23)?

We partially agree with this proposal; however, the Children's Commission on Poverty found that the costs of school can have a profound impact on the personal development and welfare of children, and should be addressed through the inspection..

For example, parents, young people and experts that our inquiry heard from explained school uniform is a good leveller and wearing one can help children in poverty stand out less from their peers which in turn helps combat bullying and feelings of stigma or shame among children.⁴ For these benefits to be realised, it is important that uniforms are affordable and help is available for families that struggle with the cost.

Through our inquiry with the Commission, we found that the inability to purchase correct and adequate school uniform could negatively affect prompt and regular attendance at school; the following of any guidelines for behaviour and conduct; management of their own feelings and behaviour; bullying and how pupils relate to others.

Young people and parents told the Commission that having a second-hand, incorrect, worn out or repaired uniform, can serve to make poorer children stand out and be a cause of bullying and embarrassment. This stifles self-confidence and self-assurance for many pupils and can affect the knowledge of their potential to be a successful learner. In order to add greater weight to assessing 'behaviour and welfare' within a school, inspections need to investigate the quality/type of support available for these pupils.

For example, one young person commented during the consultation: 'I'm nervous about getting bullied and getting lost [at secondary school]. There is a girl, she thinks [I'm acting like a boy - but I'm not - 'cause I wore trousers... I wanted a skirt for ages. My mum couldn't afford a skirt so I wore trousers.'

A recurrent theme in the evidence heard by the inquiry was that schools are increasingly insisting on a uniform policy that requires parents to buy items of clothing with embroidered names and logos, or expensive items such as branded sports kit, coats or blazers. Some schools also expect children to have additional summer uniforms.

Schools receive funding through the pupil premium which can be used to support the personal development and welfare of disadvantaged young people. The Children's Commission on Poverty recommended that schools should be consulting directly with young people who are in

⁴ At What Cost? Exposing the impact of poverty on school life, page 25

receipt of pupil premium, to make sure it benefits the most disadvantaged children. This should include providing detail on how they are spending pupil premium money and the impact it has, by publishing a meaningful annual report. Young people told the inquiry they would like a direct say in how this money was spent. They believed the extra funding should benefit the disadvantaged pupils by focusing on areas such as school uniform, transport and breakfast clubs, rather than funding general, untargeted activities.

At The Children's Society, our Good Childhood (or wellbeing) work is one of our main pieces of work that we produce and has taught us that schools need to take a holistic view when trying to improve the welfare of young people. The report is the third in a series of annual reports published by The Children's Society about how children in the UK feel about their lives and contains new findings from our ground breaking, nine-year programme, of research on children's well-being, involving around 50,000 children. This work is carried out in collaboration with the University of York and has become the most extensive national research programme on children's subjective well-being in the world. It is the most comprehensive insight into the wellbeing of British children available⁵ Through this work, we know that children who are bullied in school have significantly lower well-being. It has been recognized recently that lower wellbeing can negatively impact attainment.⁶ If children are bullied due to their inability to afford the costs of school and as a result suffer lower wellbeing, it is likely that as a result, their attainment in school will suffer as well.

Recommendations:

We recommend that Ofsted could do more to ensure that schools are effective in ensuring that children in poverty receive the best possible outcomes from their education through the adoption of the following indicators within the '*personal development, behavior and welfare*' judgement:

- consultation with pupils from low income households is held as part of the process of determining how funding targeted at children from low income households (such as the pupil premium) is spent.
- The voices of children and young people should further be included in the assessment of their welfare and wellbeing, either through child-centred survey elements or through face-to-face consultations.
- Children are never stigmatised or excluded as a result of the cost of items or activities related to their education.

Q11. Are there specific changes to the way inspectors gather evidence that you think could make our judgements more reliable and robust?

The young commissioners involved in the CCP inquiry felt it was appropriate for Ofsted to have a significant role in distinctly monitoring how schools lessen the impact of poverty and

⁵ The Good Childhood Report 2014 <http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/research/well-being-1/good-childhood-report-2014>

⁶ Public Health England (2014: The link between pupil health and wellbeing and attainment - https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/370686/HT_briefing_layoutvFINAL_vii.pdf

whether school policies are discriminating against children on the basis of their family's ability to pay. This should particularly include speaking confidentially to pupils from low income families about their experience. Assessing the school experience in this way is known as 'poverty proofing'.

A lot needs to change in order to ensure that children can afford the costs of the school day. The recommendations put forward in our report: '*At What Cost? Exposing the impact of poverty on school life*' presents an action plan which would take big steps towards addressing this. In order to achieve this, it is crucial that inspectors should consider the impact of poverty on children's experiences of school throughout the assessment process, and gather evidence accordingly.

It is also imperative that the voices of children and young people in general are included in the evidence gathered by inspectors, as well as specifically in the 'poverty-proofing' process. This should be done in a child-friendly manner, either through an inclusion of survey elements for children and young people, or through face-to-face consultations. The Children's Society has great experience in this area, and would be happy to either provide further information and training on face-to-face consultations with children and young people, or on child-centred survey questions about the school experience and wellbeing.

Recommendations:

Inspectors should ensure that they gather evidence in a way which recognises the impact that poverty can have on children's experiences, and considers the role of the educational setting in "poverty proofing" children's experiences.

Ofsted inspectors should receive sufficient training in consulting children and young people.

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