

Better Uniforms Campaign

Research Report



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1. Introduction

School uniforms create significant sustainability challenges for families and the environment. Their intensive use and children's rapid growth result in short lifespans, creating considerable textile waste, resource use and financial pressures on families. Repair, reuse, and responsible disposal are key interventions to reduce the financial and environmental burden of school uniforms. This research explored the challenges and opportunities for more sustainable school uniform systems through exploring the attitudes and behaviours of young people, parents and teachers of practices surrounding the procuring, managing and disposing of school uniforms, with the aim of informing the future strategic direction of the Better Uniforms Campaign.

Between March and May 2026, researchers engaged with 69 participants, including students, parents and teachers from 14 schools across Bristol, North Somerset and London, using interviews, focus groups and participatory activities. This research demonstrates how families and schools navigate the practices surrounding school uniforms, identifying opportunities to improve sustainable practices such as second-hand uniform (SHU) use, repair and responsible disposal pathways.

2. Key Findings

Section 1: Sustainability and supply chain awareness:

1. Students have a limited awareness of clothing supply chains and its sustainability impacts

Students demonstrated mixed, and often limited levels of understanding of clothing supply chains, with processes often simplified and misunderstood. The environmental impacts of school uniforms were much better understood and more frequently acknowledged by students, parents and teachers compared to the social and economic impacts.

Section 2: Purchasing behaviours:

2. Expensive school uniforms are a financial burden on families

92.3% of discussions explored the high financial cost of school uniforms. Parents reported that they struggled to budget for uniforms, had support from their parents and limited how many items they bought. Students and parents recognised how expensive uniforms can exacerbate socioeconomic inequalities. Many schools had measures in place to support affordability.

3. Exclusive school uniform suppliers can increase school uniform expenditure

Many participants stated that they had to purchase branded, colour-specific and non-branded uniform items from an exclusive supplier. Items from such suppliers were often reported as more expensive than non-supplier specific items and poor quality. Many garments that students reported frequently breaking were mandatory, supplier-specific items. Parents felt frustrated that they were unable to choose uniforms that were cheaper, better quality and more environmentally sustainable and highlighted that journeys to specific shops increased the labour and time of uniform shopping.

4. Convenience, quality and cost were most important for parents when buying school uniform

Convenience was the most important factor for many parents and manifested via purchasing uniforms in-store when shopping for other products (particularly in supermarkets) or online. Parents wanted uniform shopping to fit in with existing routines to support their busy lifestyles.

Quality regarding an item's durability, ease of washing and drying, and meeting the sensory requirements for their children were important considerations. Brands impacted how parents viewed an item's quality. Cost was also important, with parents recognising children's rapid growth, and interplayed with quality, impacting how often items had to be replaced. Only two parents prioritised environmental factors when buying uniforms, despite many raising concerns about uniforms' environmental and social

sustainability. Brand sustainability credentials were important in determining sustainability, yet distrust in their legitimacy was noted. Sustainable uniforms were considered expensive, suggesting cost outweighed sustainability concerns.

Section 3: Uniform longevity and maintenance:

5. Families aim to extend the use of school uniforms by repairing items, buying larger sizes and non-white items

Most mothers and many students repaired damaged uniforms. Knee and elbow areas on uniforms were most prone to damages. Items were repaired if it was deemed worthwhile to do so, which was largely dependent on an item's cost. Limited sewing skills and poor uniform quality were barriers to repair, restricting mending to smaller tasks; limited time was also mentioned. Despite learning sewing in school, many students reported they could not remember how to do it. Many students and parents wanted to develop their skills to repair clothing, although interest was mixed with some reporting they had other priorities. Parents also bought larger sizes for their children to grow in to and non-white uniforms to minimise stain visibility and frequency of washing, to increase uniform longevity.

6. School uniforms were mainly disposed of because they were outgrown or worn-out

Students and parents reported that items were mainly discarded due to being outgrown or becoming damaged. Many participants stated that poor quality or intensively used items lasted several months.

7. Item quality and knowledge and trust of disposal systems influenced disposal choices

The quality and condition of items impacted what participants did with used uniforms. Most students and parents donated or gave away wearable uniforms for reuse; very few put wearable items in the rubbish bin. Higher quality items enabled circularity. Most students and parents reported binning unwearable items. Several parents also reported donating unwearable items as rags to charity.

Many parents and students were unsure of the best way to dispose of uniforms. Overall, discussions with parents and students emphasise the lack of knowledge and trust in clothing disposal systems, driven by their complexity and lack of transparency, highlighting a key area to address.

Section 4: Second-hand systems

8. Families are motivated to acquire second-hand uniforms by affordability and sustainability

The most reported motivations for buying SHUs were economic and environmental factors. Participants recognised that SHUs were a cheaper option. Expensive when new and logoed items were reported selling best at second-hand sales, highlighting how expensive uniforms and seeking the best value for money drive engagement in second-hand. Environmental motivations including reducing resource use and waste were common, with participants acknowledging the rational choice of acquiring second-hand due to children's rapid growth.

Participants also recognised that SHUs provide a social opportunity to support families with fewer financial resources by making uniforms more accessible and reducing social inequalities.

9. Various barriers are preventing the wider uptake of second-hand uniforms

Barriers formed by attitudes, beliefs and practical constraints are limiting engagement with SHUs, these include:

- Quality concerns, regarding durability, particularly for garments which are considered low quality when new
- Hygiene concerns (reported mostly by students), particularly for items worn close to the skin
- Social stigma relating to either feeling embarrassed to be seen acquiring it, and negative attitudes towards what SHUs symbolise

- Lack of availability regarding quantity, quality and size
- SHUs viewed as unreliable, inconvenient and time-consuming to acquire

88.6% of students reported they were willing to wear at least one item of SHU, whereas only 59.1% already wore it, suggesting that a lack of access to SHUs may partially explain this discrepancy.

10. Families are acquiring second-hand uniforms from various sources

Differences in preference and circumstance resulted in families acquiring SHUs from various sources including family, community networks, online peer-to-peer platforms, charity shops and schools. The sources used were largely dependent on convenience and the availability of items. Inconsistent availability sometimes resulted in families buying new items and made acquiring SHU inconvenient. Access to all sources of SHUs were not equal.

11. Systems for second-hand uniform within schools are important

All schools had SHUs available to families if needed and 71.4% provided additional forms SHU provision at least once a year; considerable variation was observed in how well these second-hand systems were established. Characteristics of the better-established systems included:

- Selective inclusion of high-quality and clean stock
- Sales with clear layouts, items organised into categories and ample space for customers
- Small fee charged for garments
- Integrated acquiring SHU into existing routines
- Regular, consistent and salient sales
- Clear advertising and normalisation within the school's culture

Sales with such characteristics created a positive, convenient experience of purchasing SHUs. Whereas sales with disorganised layouts, inconsistent availability, and low visibility, increased hygiene and quality concerns, effort, and social stigma. It was also noted that more primary schools had established SHU systems and regular (at least once a term) sales than secondary schools, 66.7% compared to 12.5%, respectively.

12. Capacity restricted the implementation or expansion of school second-hand uniform systems

Teachers and parents involved with SHU systems were restricted by time and storage capacity as well as a lack of a manageable, consistent system. Existing systems were vulnerable to changes in cohorts, relied heavily on parents, particularly mothers, and required a high workload to collect, sort and redistribute uniforms. This risked burnout of those involved, created difficulties in recruiting additional volunteers and prevented systems from expanding. Limited capacity resulted in poorly stocked, irregular or inaccessible SHU sales, and in some cases, limited access to those in financial hardship, thus exacerbating social stigma. Lack of parental engagement in secondary schools further limited SHU systems in such schools. This highlights the need to provide practical support for schools to create resilient SHU systems.

3. Conclusions

This study highlights how families and schools want more sustainable and affordable school uniforms, however, barriers across purchasing, repair, disposal and SHU systems are limiting engagement. Capacity constraints, inconsistent processes, stigma and a lack of knowledge prevent SHUs and sustainable disposal from being convenient, reliable options. Through working with schools and other stakeholders to provide practical tools, clear guidance and ongoing support, the Better Uniforms Campaign has the opportunity to create resilient SHU systems, reduce parental burden and normalise sustainable uniform practices within Bristol.

4. Recommendations to inform the Better Uniforms Campaign's strategy

Whilst promoting the benefits of sustainable uniforms will be key for the Better Uniforms Campaign, it must also address barriers to sustainable uniform practices through improving families' repair skills, understanding of clothing supply chains, and making SHU acquisition reliable, convenient, and embedded within social norms. Table 1 provides a range of recommendations that should be considered when implementing the Better Uniform Campaign's strategy.

Table 1: Recommendations for the Better Uniforms Campaign.

Recommendation	Points of Action
1. Increase awareness of clothing supply chains	Support schools to develop a new D&T curriculum which considers pedagogical approaches to ensure engagement, learning and agency, ahead of Curriculum and Assessment Review in 2027.
2. Increase repair skills among families to increase uniform longevity and shift attitudes around a throwaway culture	- Work with schools and local communities to run repair sessions for families in locations and at times that are convenient for them. - Develop opportunities for students to practice repair skills to embed what they have learnt at school.
3. Support the sustainable disposal of school uniforms	- Advocate for more standardised uniform material compositions to support recycling. - Increase awareness of sustainable clothing disposal options (including items in different conditions) through campaigns and curriculum changes. - Advocate for more transparency in disposal pathways including charity shops and recycling. - Implement drop-off points for unwearable school uniforms.
4. Encourage a reliable supply of good-quality second-hand uniforms	- Implement consistent, regular collection systems at schools (ensure variation in garment types and sizes). - Ensure selectivity and rigorous quality control of items (remove stained, damaged items and prioritise higher quality items).
5. Reduce the quality and hygiene stigma of second-hand uniforms through stock management and presentation	- Wash all second-hand uniforms before redistribution and clearly communicate this to families. - Remove items with odours or stains to prevent reinforcing hygiene stigma. - Display garments in an organised way.
6. Improve second-hand uniform accessibility and convenience at schools	- Establish clear sorting categories (size, item type, condition) to reduce search effort. - Accessible presentation of garments including displaying on shelves or rails. - Provide spacious environment to improve experience. - Ensure good stock management e.g. consistent collection system, variation of sizes, garment type etc. - Create salient sales to act as a visual reminder. - Run regular, consistent sales e.g. after school on the last day of term, to establish routine. - Run sales where it is part of parents' routines. - In secondary schools, create a uniform shop where students can access second-hand uniforms themselves to reduce mothers' burden. - Consider a variety of options, including online, for accessing second-hand uniforms to account for variation in preferences. - Increase the instances of sales to increase availability and reduce overcrowded sales. - Regularly communicate when sales are happening to increase parents' awareness, particularly in secondary schools.
7. Increase the salience and normalisation of second-hand uniforms	- Run highly visible sales e.g. where most parents will pass during school pick-up. - Run regular sales to normalise second-hand through routine.

	• Frame second-hand as normal and positive through communications to families via campaigns and schools. • Encourage collective participation and minimise targeted provision of second-hand to those from low-income families
8. Support schools to implement second-hand uniform systems	• Provide detailed, guided implementation plan. • Distribute leadership of second-hand system to increase resilience to changing cohorts by preventing over-reliance of certain individuals. • Provide ongoing support to schools. • Create a replicable implementation plan that is adaptable for different schools.
9. Reduce the reliance on parents, particularly mothers, to run school systems	• Distribute the workload by sharing leadership and other tasks. • Recruit volunteers other than mothers e.g. members of school or local community. • Provide training opportunities for individuals to develop repair and organisation skills. • Embed opportunities for students within system plan, particularly in secondary schools e.g. work experience, clubs, projects to develop skills, embed second-hand within schools' culture, increase engagement and share workload.
10. Address social stigma through communications and system design	• Promote economic and environmental benefits of second-hand, focusing messages on value for money and waste reduction. • Reduce negative associations of second-hand through normalising it. • Charge a small fee for items. • Communicate that many families are using second-hand to normalise it. • Promote collective engagement to show others are using second-hand.
11. Advocate for improved uniform quality	• Minimise single supplier contracts that limit purchasing options and provide poor quality garments. • Work with garment producers and providers to use a more durable design, particularly through reinforcing areas prone to breaking, and material whilst considering cost-effectiveness. • Advocate for non-white uniforms that stain easily to increase circularity.