

EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

SUBJECT CHOICES INQUIRY

SUBMISSION FROM CHILD POVERTY ACTION GROUP (CPAG) IN SCOTLAND

Evidence from CPAG in Scotland's Cost of the School Day project to Education and Skills Committee inquiry into subject choices

Since 2014, CPAG's [Cost of the School Day](#) project has been working with children, parents and staff in schools across Scotland to identify actions which help tackle financial barriers to children's participation, learning and wellbeing at school.

CPAG in Scotland is responding specifically to question (e) '**Have you experienced any changes in the level of uptake in particular subjects in the past 5 years? If so, what subjects in particular and what do you think has caused this change?**' We are answering from the perspective of an organisation working with schools rather than as practitioners with in depth knowledge of changing uptake patterns but would like to highlight evidence from school staff and young people on how costs and charges can affect uptake in particular subjects.

The Cabinet Secretary's 21 February letter to the Education and Skills Committee states that there should be no charges for children and young people to participate in activities which are part of the core curricular offer but that some schools may 'choose' to ask for a 'contribution' for materials while ensuring that pupils unable to pay are not excluded. The same letter states that there is no national picture of which education authorities sanction charging for in-school activities or the level of these charges, and that a survey to find this out is not practical.

Cost of the School Day evidence suggests that charges for children and young people to participate in the curriculum are commonplace across a wide range of subjects and that inability to afford these costs risks uptake of certain subjects.

Young people and teachers have highlighted a range of subject related costs which families are asked to meet:

- Subject charges: Home Economics (e.g. ingredients and containers), Design and Technology (e.g. materials), Art and Design (e.g. portfolios, materials), Music (e.g. instrument hire)
- Curricular trips (e.g. live performances for Drama or Geography field trips)
- Costs for clothing and equipment (e.g. PE kits, swimwear, clothing for exams)
- Equipment across subjects such as replacement jotters, pencils, pens, folders and calculators
- Texts for English and Drama
- Past papers and study materials

Staff and pupils say that inability to pay for subject costs can affect which subjects young people go on to choose. Costs mean that young people may not be able to develop their talents and achieve their full potential in particular areas of the curriculum

"There will be certain pupils who will not pick certain courses knowing that there's costs assigned to it." (Teacher)

"Some kids will have a natural talent for drama but they're penalised because of the costs involved." (Teacher)

"I didnae want to pay 50 pence on Home Eccies. I didn't want to pay that because I couldn't be bothered because then that takes money off my lunch money, and I was like, nah." (Pupil S4)

"I'm lucky that my parents have a decent amount of money - I'm lucky that I could pay for these subjects and actually do these subjects." (Pupil S6)

For some subjects such as Home Economics, even if curricular charges can be managed, ongoing uptake of the subject incurs extra charges: *"to practice a similar dish [as made in class] we're saying you need to spend £30 on all of these ingredients that many children won't have" (Teacher)*

Inability to pay can lead to non- participation in certain subjects

Practice in 'chasing up' payment appears to vary between schools and often between teachers in the same school. Similarly, decisions vary about whether young people are allowed to participate if they haven't paid - frequently we hear that pupils might be let off with payment for a couple of weeks but then chased up or stopped from participating in practical activities.

School staff report feeling frustrated when tasked with asking pupils to pay as they are aware that money is difficult to find and asking for it can lead to embarrassment and stigma.

"A lot of pupils are taking 20p out their own dinner money to pay." (Teacher)

"Children have the embarrassment of us saying 'do you have your money? You can't cook today'. If you're collecting money there are other things you're not doing." (Teacher)

"Course fees are just really unfair. It's not a free curriculum." (Teacher)

Many schools are trying to reduce subject charges and costs for young people and their families but this is difficult to achieve

Pupils often talk positively about the ways in which their schools have helped them with costs and resources that are required but this varies between schools and between teachers. We are aware of schools using Pupil Equity Funding (PEF) to pay for curriculum charges, e.g. weekly Home Economics charges at BGE level, containers for food, scientific calculators, subsidies or payments for curricular trips. However, two concerns are often raised which may limit the effectiveness of this support:

- Accurate targeting of resources: SIMD statistics and free meal entitlement help schools to identify some young people on low incomes but staff are aware that poverty is often hidden and that there are families sitting above the FME eligibility thresholds and

outwith the lowest SIMD datazones who struggle financially: "*We sat down to try and work out who we could waive the fees for and it was a mine field, it wasn't clear cut, 'cause there were loads [of young people] that weren't being picked up.*" (Staff)

- Sustainability: while PEF exists, some costs and charges can be subsidised or waived, but school staff are fearful about raising expectations by lowering costs now only to raise them again in future years if PEF ends.

Inability to pay for subject costs and charges can affect young people's experiences at school and whether they choose to take subject at certificate level. We would urge the committee to take the potential impact of charges to access the curriculum into account when looking at the wider topic of subject choices.