

THE BUSINESS OF ETHICS

With companies increasingly held accountable for their social and ethical responsibilities, Luke Conod, owner of School Uniform Shop in Hereford, discusses best practice in the schoolwear industry.

Laura Turner: You're something of an ambassador for ethical and sustainable schoolwear supply – how did this happen?

Luke Conod: I'm heavily involved with the Rotary Club, which organises local community and overseas volunteering. As a result, I've travelled the world and some staggering disparities became very apparent; namely, the production of cheap school uniforms for children in the UK, which in many cases is being made by children overseas who not only cannot afford school uniforms themselves, but actually can't go to school.

While I can't fix the world, I can do my bit for school uniform. I decided as there are several wholesale school uniform suppliers who are ethical, that we would buy only from them. That way, we could offer UK schools who care about their ethics a better, guilt-free product and service.

LT: What are your key business values?

LC: Firstly, ethical – at School Uniform Shop, all of our uniforms are ethically sourced.

Also pride – we are proud to be one of the only suppliers of all ethical uniforms in the business. We are proud of what we have achieved as a business and proud of our customers' continuous support.

Then there's quality – our aim is to provide excellent quality clothing for every child's needs. Our tried and tested uniforms have consistently good reviews from parents and are always easy to care for – most items can be put straight into the washing machine. The detailing on each garment is always to the highest standard too.

Affordability is another key value. We may not be the cheapest supplier, but we are definitely the best value for money. Our uniforms are of the best quality at affordable prices. You can buy a complete plain school uniform from us for as little as £23. Purchasing from us will also give the customer peace of mind that their child's school uniform is being manufactured ethically and responsibly.

Then relationships – we pride ourselves on the relationships we build, whether that be with the schools we work with or our customers.



And finally, our team. We are an approachable, trustworthy, friendly and kind team that offers professional and expert knowledge and advice.

LT: What is the criteria for the suppliers you use?

LC: No child labour, safe and hygienic working conditions, working hours that aren't excessive with regular breaks, wages of the industry or country norm, that

employment itself is freely chosen, with no person taken against their will or forced to work, and that the factories undergo rigorous checks and audits to make sure they are safe and secure structures.

LT: Which school uniform suppliers do you stock?

LC: David Luke, William Turner, Rowlinson, Banner, Falcon and Trutex.



LT: How hard is it to source school uniforms that meets all of your requirements?

LC: We have worked with all our suppliers for a number of years and are very fortunate that they all work extremely hard to ensure they manufacture their products to the very highest standards. This is in terms of both quality and ensuring the very highest working conditions and fair pay for the people who manufacture their garments, whether they produce these in the UK or overseas.

LT: Are there any school uniform suppliers you feel are particularly pioneering in ethical and sustainable production?

LC: We are particularly proud to work with David Luke, as it really shares and embraces our ethos. It is a family business and has been trading for over 30 years. Its motto is "Durability in Mind. Ethics at Heart." We firmly believe in David Luke as a brand that fits in well with our ethics, values and customers.

In 2010, David Luke began working on an Eco-uniform concept. Fast forward two years, and that concept became a reality when it began using recycled plastic bottles to manufacture its blazers. Since it launched the Eco-uniform, David Luke has saved a total of 8.84 million two litre bottles from landfill. We think that's incredible and are proud to be a supporter and supplier.

LT: Retailers are increasingly introducing own-brand labels to meet specific needs – have you considered launching an ethical and sustainable schoolwear brand?

LC: We're piloting a scheme with Aim Apparel, which is a charity based in Phnom Penn in Cambodia. I visited personally in 2017. They take women out of sex trafficking and employ them in good conditions to put together ethical clothing. At the moment, we've trialled 15 designs of T-shirts and hope to be able to roll this out to schoolwear in time.

LT: How receptive are schools and pupils to your ethos?

LC: We've been really surprised – and delighted – at how receptive the schools and pupils have been to our ethical and sustainable policies. While the parents can, understandably, be

resistant to the price increase that this policy can often require, the kids themselves are lobbying for fair pricing and a better world. They seem to get the idea very quickly that there is a particular irony with the risk that the school uniform they are wearing is being subsidised by a child or family that can't afford to actually attend school in the first place.

LT: Do you take any measures to ensure the day-to-day running of your business is as ethical and sustainable as possible?

LC: Our mantra is People Planet Profit. These are words we live by and which influence everything we do. For instance, all our plastic bags are made from biodegradable materials and all plastic, paper and cardboard packaging that we receive from our suppliers is recycled locally. We use Pedi Cargo for the stores in the city centre and Quick Skip Recycling for everything from our warehouse.

LT: Are you working on any other projects at the moment?

LC: Yes, we're currently working with Cambodia's Ponheary Ly Foundation, which promotes access to public education opportunities and the health and well-being of children and young people in Cambodia. Also the Rotary Club in Hereford on three projects at the Koh Ker School.

The first project is the library at Koh Ker School in Cambodia, which is so much more than a place to come and read a book. It schedules activities such as art and crafts, checkers and a chess club, colouring in sessions and it even has Lego the children can play with. Ponheary Ly Foundation describes it beautifully as: "In places where there is not much 'push' from the family for the children to come to school, there must be a tremendous amount of 'pull' and everything that goes on in PLF libraries does just that."

The library at Koh Ker School was only opened in September 2015 and already it has proven to be educational, but most importantly, a fun place to be for all of the children. It has a well-trained librarian, who keeps the books, games, activities and children playing and learning as they should be. She is also trained as the school nurse, which we think is amazing.

We're also working on a Wellness Programme. Obviously it's important that children are well cared for and clean all around the world. Unfortunately, however, we know that isn't always the case. In Cambodia, the children who attend Koh Ker School do not have this care at home, so it's important for the school to introduce this into the children's daily routines. Things that are covered within the wellness programme include basic hygiene, first aid and basic medicine, clean water and transport to hospital. Students at Koh Ker School have access to endless supplies of soap and clean water, and have a wash in the mornings as soon as they arrive at the school before breakfast. Tooth brushing classes are given to provide invaluable education about dental hygiene and all children clean their teeth after breakfast every morning.

Finally, we're also working on English language instruction. The children at Koh Ker School are taught English from the age of 11, continuing through their schooling up to the age of 15 or 16. English as a language in Cambodia is important for a number of reasons. Students who have basic English skills will perform better in classes and technology classes, when they are old enough to take them. When the students take technology classes, they will have access to online training courses and internet research classes. They can access foreign news sources to get a clearer view of the world than that which is offered by the heavily censored Cambodian media. There are very few academic books in the Khmer language, so learning how to read, write and speak English will give these students access to a wider variety of books. Cambodia is also a growing tourist destination, especially around Siem Reap where over three million tourists flock per year to visit the temples of Angkor Wat. By learning English, it greatly increases chances of securing a job in the country's growing tourism industry. For students who make it to University in Cambodia, many courses will be taught exclusively in English and will only use English language textbooks. If they do not know business level English, it will prevent students from entering fields such as medicine, engineering and IT. There are two English teachers at Koh Ker School who teach Grades 5 and 6 after school. This initiative funds the teachers' salaries, provides textbooks and workbooks for the students, as well as teachers' manuals, audio equipment and other teaching materials.

LT: Finally, what changes you would like to see within the schoolwear industry to make it a more sustainable and ethical one?

LC: It's quite simple really; all retailers, including the supermarkets, should sign up to a code of ethics that ensures all school uniforms for the UK market are produced by people who are able to have a decent standard of living, work in a safe environment and be paid enough to be able to send their own children to school.

Every summer, the supermarkets advertise a complete school uniform for £3.50 – less than a cup of coffee. It's clear by selling uniforms at these prices that the supermarkets are keeping the people who manufacture their school uniforms in poverty.