



The
Children's
Society

The Wrong Blazer 2020: Time for action on school uniform costs

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Introduction

“My daughter has requested I write a letter saying she is injured in order to miss PE as she had lost her socks and I couldn’t afford to replace them (so I had asked her to tell the teacher and ask if she could borrow some from lost property). My daughter would rather have skipped PE (which she enjoys) than possibly be overheard by one of her peers and risk the embarrassment of being poor.” -Parent, February 2020

School uniforms can play a vital part in contributing to the ethos of a school, particularly in ‘poverty-proofing’ classrooms from the demands of latest trends. However, needlessly high costs, particularly when school governing bodies require parents to buy exclusive or branded items, undermine the equalising quality of school uniform. Instead, expensive uniform requirements place an unnecessary burden on parents and children.

The Children’s Society’s 2020 survey (of around 1,000 parents across the UK) found that parents with children in state maintained schools spent on average £337 per year on school uniform for each secondary school child and £315 per year for each primary school child. On average, these costs are more than three times what parents think is a reasonable cost for primary (£85) and secondary (£105) uniform.

Many families struggle to pay these high costs, which in turn has negative impacts on children: our survey showed that nearly a quarter (23%) of parents said that the cost of school uniform had meant their child had worn ill-fitting, unclean or incorrect uniform. Wearing the wrong uniform can lead to children being bullied, feeling left out or even being excluded from school, through no fault of their own. We estimate that nearly half a million children¹ have been sent home from school because the costs meant they were wearing incorrect uniform.

The right uniform policy, that puts affordability and best value at its core, has the potential to make lives easier for both children and parents. Yet one in eight families reported they had cut back on food and other essentials because of uniform costs.² Our research also found that for low income families³, these impacts were greater, with more than one in five such families reporting cutting back on food and other basics to pay for uniform.⁴

Many schools also require certain items to be branded or be bought from specific suppliers. Our data showed that two thirds of parents with children in secondary schools had to buy two or more items from a specific supplier, while more than half of primary school parents had to buy two or more items from a specific supplier.⁵ Where parents had to buy two or more items from a specified supplier, the average cost of primary school uniform was around 50% more expensive.

Guidance to schools on how to set school uniform policy is clear that cost should be a top priority, noting that: “When considering how the school uniform should be sourced, governing bodies should give highest priority

¹ Approximately 494,100 children. Numbers of children are calculated by applying the proportion of parents (6.1%) who said their children had been sent home from school for wearing incorrect uniform to the number of children in state maintained schools in England (8.1million), the number for which is based on Department for Education figures - *Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2019*, published June 2019 (accessed 6 March 2020)

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/812539/Schools_Pupils_and_their_Characteristics_2019_Main_Text.pdf

² 13% of families.

³ Families with household incomes of £20,000 per year or less.

⁴ 23% of families with household incomes of £20,000 per year or less.

⁵ 52% of parents with a child in primary school and 66% of parents with a child in secondary school.

to the consideration of cost and value for money for parents.”⁶ However, this guidance is not legally binding. The Education (Guidance about costs of school uniform) Bill, seeks to rectify this by enabling the introduction of statutory guidance to address the costs of school uniforms.

The Children’s Society have played a leading role in campaigning for affordable school uniforms for many years. In October 2014, an inquiry supported by The Children’s Society, and led by young people involved in The Children’s Commission on Poverty (CCP) into the cost of schooling, found for the first time that for too many children the cost of school uniform has a real impact on their lives and their ability to make the most of their education.⁷ The Children’s Society have since published the 2015 and 2018 iterations of the *Wrong Blazer* report. Drawing on new survey data, this briefing highlights the issues facing parents struggling to afford school uniform and outlines recommendations for policy action.

Background

“I hate [school] because my mum and dad can’t afford the trousers so I have to wear trackies. But my head of my college, I always really annoy him. He goes ‘You’ve got to get your trousers sorted out!’”-Young person

The Children’s Society in 2013 brought together a group of young people involved in the Children’s Commission on Poverty (CCP) to investigate the impact of poverty on children’s lives, resulting in our 2014 report *At What Cost? Exposing the impact of poverty on school life*. It found that the cost of school uniform was putting families under unnecessary strain, resulting in bullying or children being sent home from school and disrupting learning. A key recommendation from these young commissioners was around tackling the cost of uniform by having simple uniforms with sew-on branding to make them affordable.

In January 2015, we surveyed 1,000 parents to explore the issue of school uniform costs in more detail for the first time. We found that parents spent on average around £170 more per child, per year than they thought would be reasonable to spend.⁸ In August 2018, we updated those findings with another survey of around 1,000 parents and found again that on average parents overspend on school uniforms by hundreds of pounds per child each year. Many parents said that led to children going to school in ill-fitting school uniform, being sent home from school or to families cutting back on food or falling into debt.⁹

“I mean some kids get to the point where they won’t even go in, they would just bunk that lesson rather than get in trouble for being in non-uniform.” -Young person

Following our campaigning on this issue, as far back as 2015, the Government committed to give guidance around uniform affordability statutory footing.¹⁰ These commitments were repeated by the Schools Minister in 2019, prior to the General Election later that year. Five years on from our first survey and coinciding with the presentation of the Education (Guidance about costs of school uniform) Bill in March 2020, this briefing

⁶ Department for Education, *School Uniform: Guidance for governing bodies, school leaders, school staff and local authorities*, September 2013, accessed 9 March 2020

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/514978/School_Uniform_Guidance.pdf

⁷ The Children’s Society, *At What Cost? Exposing the impact of poverty on school life*, Holloway, E., Mahony, S., Royston, S. and Mueller, D. 2014 (This involved sixteen children ranging in age from 10 to 19 ran a comprehensive inquiry to expose the true costs of school life. This involved a written call for evidence, three evidence sessions in Parliament with experts, and a survey with over 2,000 families and children.)

⁸ The Children’s Society, *The Wrong Blazer (2015): Time for Action on School Uniform Costs*, February 2015

<https://www.childrengroup.org.uk/what-we-do/resources-and-publications/the-wrong-blazer-time-for-action-on-school-uniform-costs>

⁹ The Children’s Society, *The Wrong Blazer 2018: Time for Action on School Uniform Costs*, August 2018 <https://www.childrengroup.org.uk/what-we-do/resources-and-publications/the-wrong-blazer-2018-time-for-action-on-school-uniform-costs>

¹⁰ In the November 2015 briefing “A better deal: boosting competition to bring down bills for families and firms” the Treasury announced that “The government wants to ensure that effective competition is used to drive better value for money and will therefore put existing best practice guidance for school uniform supply in England on a statutory footing. This will ensure that schools deliver the best value for parents by avoiding exclusivity arrangements unless regular competitions for suppliers are run.”

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/480798/a_better_deal_for_families_and_firms_web.pdf (accessed 6 March 2020)

suggests how Government can move forward to finally deliver on making school uniforms affordable for families.

Key policy recommendations

The 2013 guidance from the Department for Education is clear that cost should be the top priority in determining school uniform policy. Despite this, parents too often face unmanageable costs because of expensive branded items or limited options to choose where to buy their uniforms.

The Education (Guidance about costs of school uniform) Bill is the ideal legislative opportunity for government to ensure all families can afford the cost of uniforms. The Bill stipulates the Secretary of State must issue guidance to the appropriate authorities of relevant schools in England about the cost aspects of school uniform policies.

We recommend this guidance should:

- **Legally require school governing bodies and relevant authorities to make affordability the top priority when setting uniform policy.** The 2013 guidance from the Department for Education (DfE) is clear that cost and value for money should be key in determining uniform policy, though this guidance currently does not have statutory footing, meaning many families struggle to pay for unnecessarily high uniform costs.
- **Ensure schools keep branded items to a minimum.** Where branding is required (for example to foster a sense of unity or community within pupils or to differentiate between schools in competitions or nearby local areas), parents should be able to buy generic items of clothing (shirts, jackets, jumpers) and sew or add on branding later.
- **Ensure parents have a choice of where to buy items of uniform, rather than being bound to single suppliers.** The DfE guidance already stipulates that exclusive single supplier contracts should be avoided unless regular, transparent tendering competitions are run where more than one supplier can compete for a contract and where governing bodies can secure best value for parents. The Secretary of State's guidance should give parents a choice of where to buy school uniform items, including but not limited to local school wear suppliers, online retailers, chains and supermarkets or via second-hand clothes swap schemes.
- **Commit the Department for Education to undertake consultation with parents regarding the changes,** as well as with other interested parties, such as school governing bodies and uniform suppliers.
- **Come into force immediately, allowing schools and parents to adjust in time for the following academic year (September 2021).**

Methodology

We surveyed 1,000 parents of school age children in February 2020 across the UK (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) about the costs of school uniforms. This survey was carried out by Opinium Research. In all cases parents saying their oldest child attended an independent/private school were excluded from the analysis, as were parents who selected the unspecified 'other' option.¹¹

We reweighted the sample to adjust for differences in proportions of respondents by region compared to 2018. This both improved the comparability to the 2018 figures and overall geographical representativeness

¹¹ Types of schools that were included: Maintained school (state or community run by local authority), maintained grammar school (state or community run by local authority), Academy, Free school.

of the sample. This reweighting slightly reduced both average¹² primary and secondary uniform costs compared to the raw sample.

The national estimates for the total number of children who may have been affected by particular impacts of school uniform costs (e.g. school exclusions) are calculated by applying the proportion of parents who responded to the survey to say that the cost of school uniform resulted in those impacts to the 8.1 million children attending state maintained schools in England.¹³

Quotes in this briefing are from interviews with young people and parents, conducted in Autumn 2014 as part of the report *At What Cost? Exposing the impact of poverty on school life* and responses to the Children's Society's February 2020 supporter survey on school uniform costs. The Luton Level Trust also provided a case study in March 2020 from a parent and child who used their Uniform Exchange programme.

¹² When referring to the 'average' we use the mean throughout.

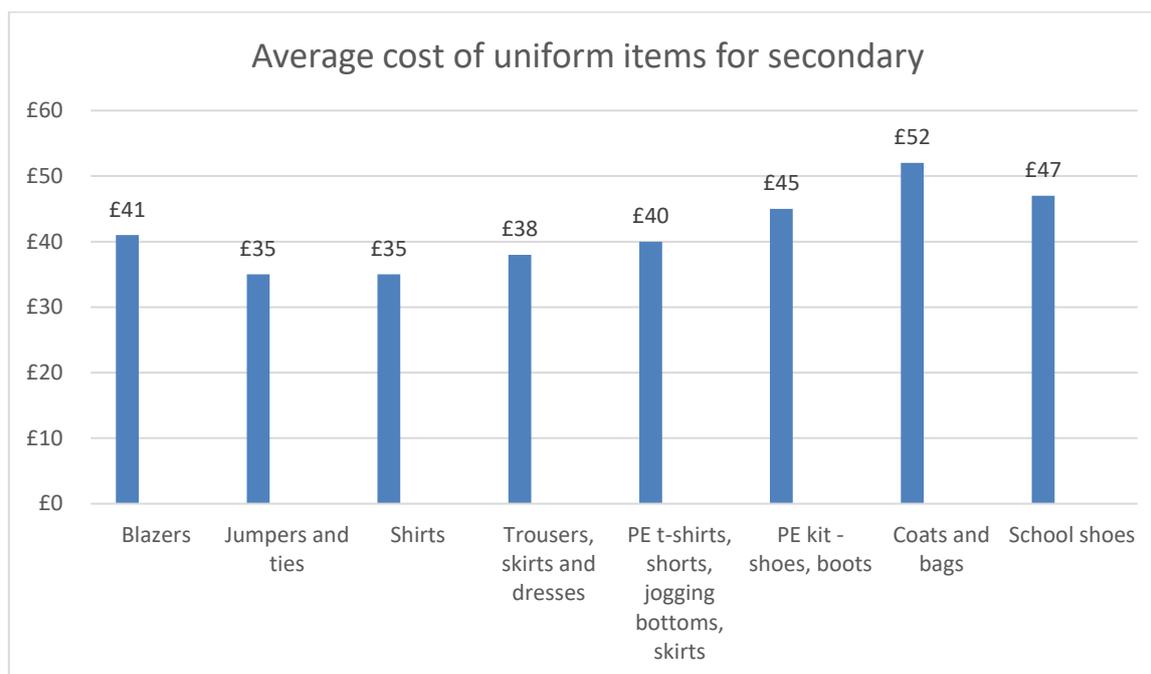
¹³ Numbers of children attending state maintained schools across England are calculated using Department for Education figures - *Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2019*, published June 2019, accessed 6 March 2020.
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/812539/Schools_Pupils_and_their_Characteristics_2019_Main_Text.pdf

Key Findings

How much do families pay for school uniforms?

Overall, parents with children in state maintained schools told us that they spent £337 per year on school uniform costs for each secondary school child and £315 per year for each primary school child.¹⁴

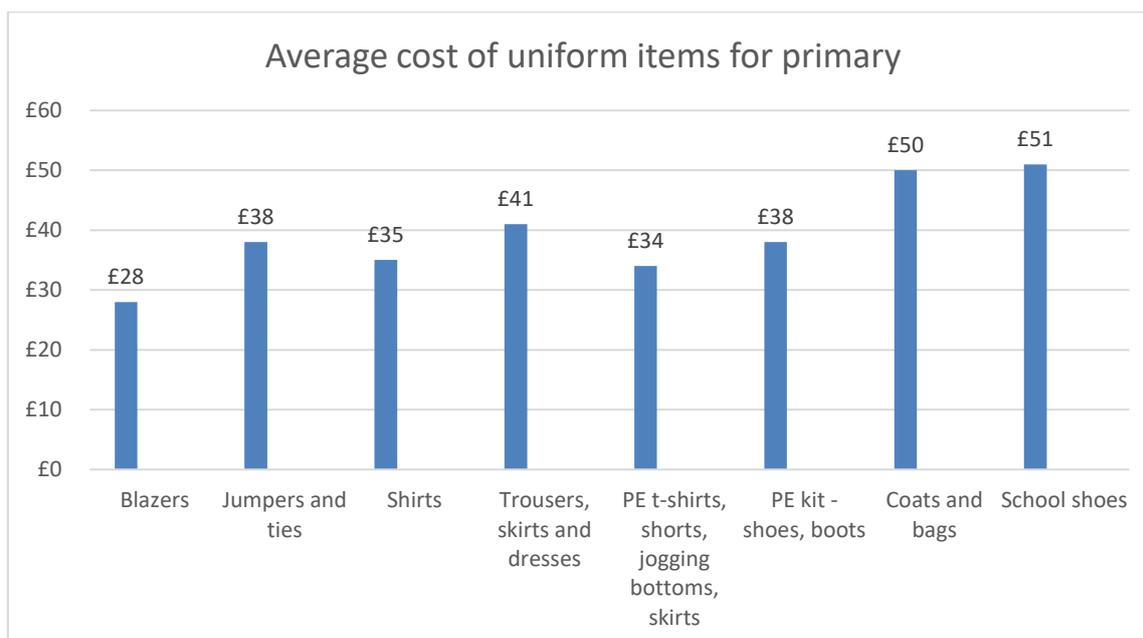
We also asked parents how much they pay on average for different items of school uniform. As with 2018 results, coats and bags, and school shoes were the most expensive items for both primary and secondary school. Of other items of clothing, blazers were notably expensive, with secondary school parents paying an average of £41 per child for blazers for their secondary school children. The below table shows the average cost of uniform for secondary school.¹⁵



¹⁴ These costs include where respondent said 'My child does not have this item', which was recoded as £0.

¹⁵ The above costs are the overall mean costs spent on blazers, shirts etc (they are not per item i.e. one blazer, one shirt). Sample sizes vary for individual items but in all cases the weighted n is between 546 and 555 (data are weighted regionally). These costs include where respondent said 'My child does not have this item', which was recoded as £0.

The below table shows the average cost of uniform for primary school.¹⁶



Many schools require certain items to be branded or be bought from specific shops. Our data showed that two thirds of parents (66%) with children in secondary schools had to buy two or more items from a specific supplier, while more than half of primary school parents (52%) had to buy two or more items from a specific shop. Furthermore, only one in five parents of children in secondary school (18%) and one in four parents of a child in primary school (24%) could buy all of their uniform from any shop.

Where parents had to buy two or more items from specific shops, the average cost of a primary school uniform was around 50% more expensive (£248 average cost when fewer than two items came from a specialist supplier, compared with £375). For secondary schools where parents have to buy two or more items of school uniform from a specific supplier, costs were an average of £75 per year higher.¹⁷

¹⁶ The above costs are the overall mean costs spent on blazers, shirts etc (they are not per item i.e. one blazer, one shirt). Sample sizes vary for individual items but in all cases the weighted n is between 493 and 501 (data are weighted regionally). These costs include where respondent said 'My child does not have this item', which was recoded as £0.

¹⁷ £286 average cost when fewer than two items came from a specific shop, compared with £361. The weighted n for primary is 485, weighted n for secondary is 537 (data are weighted regionally). Total average costs for those who provided an answer to questions about all eight items of uniform (based on the midpoint of the cost range provided). It includes those who responded 0 (My child does not have this item), where a zero cost value has been allocated. Parents with children in independent/private or unspecified 'other' schools have been omitted, as with all results in this analysis. The differences in the means by number of items are statistically significant for primary (P<0.001) and secondary (P=0.004).



How much did families think was a reasonable amount to pay for school uniform?

The Children's Society's 2020 survey found that parents with children in state maintained schools spent on average £337 per year on school uniform for each secondary school child, though they believed a reasonable cost is closer to £105. Primary school parents thought £85 was a reasonable cost, though the actual average cost is £315. On average, actual costs are more than three times what parents think is reasonable.¹⁸



¹⁸ Actual costs are total average cost for those who provided an answer to questions about all eight items of uniform (based on the midpoint of the cost range provided). It includes those who responded 0 (My child does not have this item), where a zero cost value has been allocated.

What impact do school uniform costs have on children's lives?

Case Study: Denise and Kirsty (names changed), Luton Level Trust Uniform Exchange

Denise came into the Uniform Exchange with her 15-year-old daughter Kirsty. This is what she told them:

"I spend two to three plus [hundred pounds on school uniform per year] definitely easily. It doesn't sound like a lot but without a job at the moment it's too much. I'm putting CVs in but no go. I have really come unstuck since August. They didn't make me redundant, last in first to go. It was helping me wage wise, they cut back and I was first to go. Deep down I think she [Kirsty] is beginning to understand mama is struggling. I don't want her to miss out on school.

She has missed P.E. for three Thursdays sitting in the changing room for 35 minutes staring out the window. Watching the other kids who have the P.E. uniform. Watching Netball, Basketball. The teachers say it just takes three days for the kit to come in. Without the P.E. kit, in those three weeks she has not done P.E. She says it's OK, she doesn't mind watching but it's a bit boring.

Everything about the school is spot on. My jaw dropped to see how everything is so perfect. Except the uniform is too expensive and can they sell it on site? Then I don't have to go to Barton [village outside of Luton where school uniform shop is located]. Thank God for Level Trust I would be struggling. She [Kirsty] wouldn't be in school at the moment. You have to wear jumper, jacket, coat. Without that they are not interested."

Denise told staff at the Uniform Exchange the school didn't know the full extent of her problems. She didn't want them to know.

The prohibitively high cost of school uniforms is having a serious impact on children and their ability to make the most of their education. Our survey showed that nearly a quarter (23%) of parents said that the cost of school uniform had meant their child had worn ill-fitting, unclean or incorrect uniform. Based on the number of children in state maintained schools in England (8.1 million), we estimate that this refers to more than 1.8 million children.¹⁹ Wearing the wrong uniform can lead to children being bullied, feeling left out or even being sent home from school: we estimate that nearly half a million children have been sent home from school for wearing incorrect uniform because their families could not afford the correct uniform.²⁰

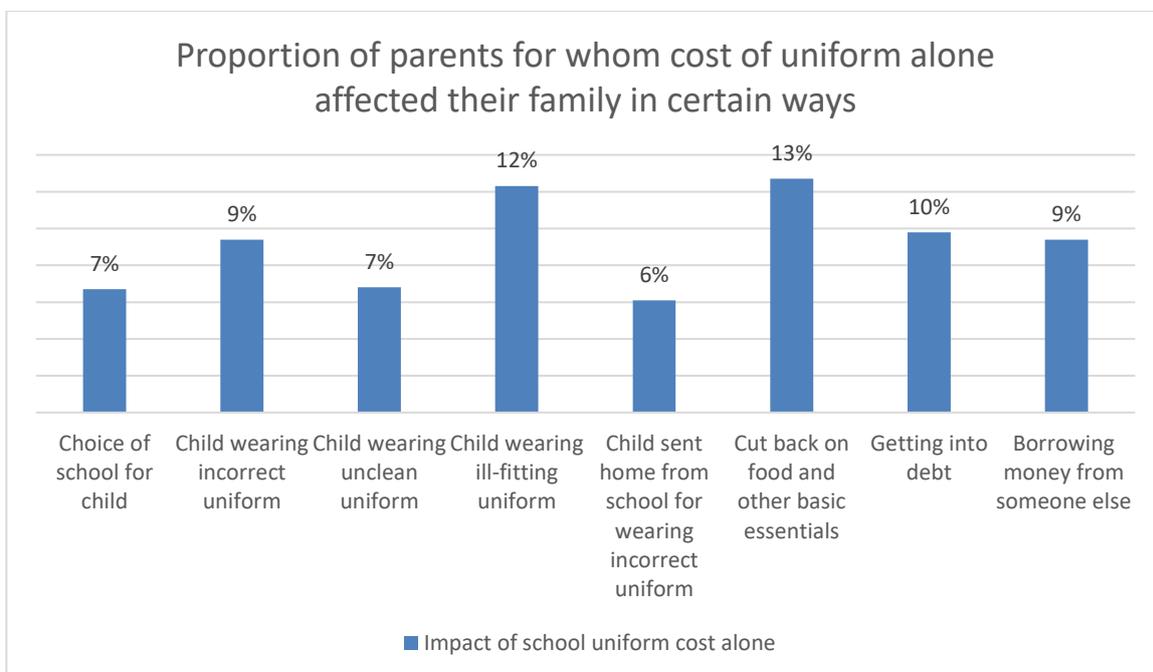
"My oldest daughter, they sent her home and said she wasn't allowed to come back until she had the correct shoes. So then I had to write a letter to say that we'll be able to get some in a week or so, I didn't have any money." -Parent

Furthermore, uniform costs continue to have an impact on family finances. One in eight families reported they had cut back on food and other essentials because of uniform costs, which we estimate affects more than one million families.²¹ One in 10 families also reported getting into debt trying to pay for uniform costs. Overall, 43% of parents said the cost of school uniform alone had affected their families in some way.

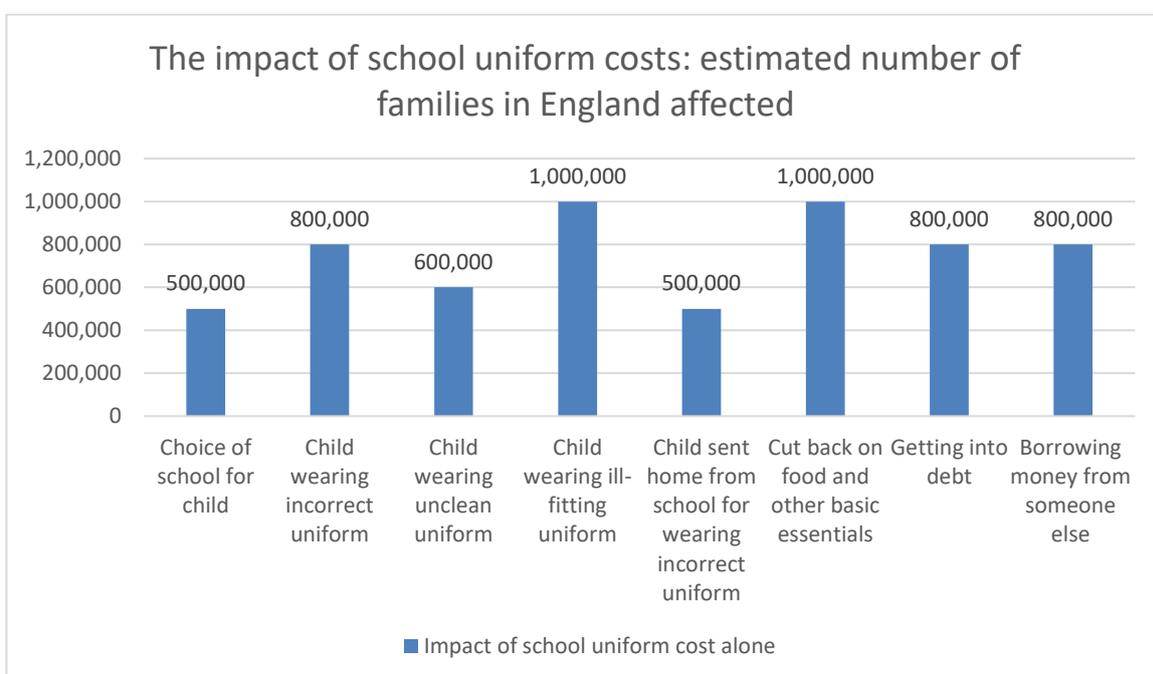
¹⁹ Approximately 1,863,000 children. Numbers of children are calculated by applying the proportion of parents (23%) who said their children had worn incorrect, unclean or ill-fitting uniform to the number of children in state maintained schools in England (8.1million), the number for which is based on Department for Education figures.

²⁰ Approximately 494,100 children. Numbers of children are calculated by applying the proportion of parents (6.1%) who said their children had been sent home from school for wearing incorrect uniform to the number of children in state maintained schools in England (8.1million), the number for which is based on Department for Education figures.

²¹ Approximately 12.7% of respondents or 1,028, 700 families if calculated as explained above.



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Based on responses to our survey, we estimate that for around half a million parents, the price of school uniform alone had an impact on what school they chose to send their child.²⁴ This is particularly worrying given that the Schools Admission Code (statutory) guidance states that school uniform policies must not discourage parents from applying for a place.²⁵

²² Responses are not mutually exclusive and respondents could pick more than one option. A very small number (8 when weighted) of inconsistent responses were removed from the analysis. Percentages have been rounded.

²³ Numbers of children are calculated by applying the proportion of parents who said the cost of uniform had affected them in a certain way to the number of children in state maintained schools in England (8.1million), the number for which is based on Department for Education figures. Calculated with non-rounded percentages, results rounded to the nearest hundred thousand.

²⁴ Approximately 542,700. Numbers of children are calculated by applying the proportion of parents (6.7%) who said the cost of uniform had affected their choice of school for their child to the number of children in state maintained schools in England (8.1million), the number for which is based on Department for Education figures.

²⁵ *School Admissions code*, 2014, Department for Education, accessed 6 March 2020

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/389388/School_Admissions_Code_2014_-_19_Dec.pdf

The proportion of parents saying that their child had been sent home from school for wearing incorrect uniform because of cost and those saying the cost uniform influenced their choice of school are in line with our findings in 2018,²⁶ showing how unnecessarily high costs of uniform continue to have a negative impact on children's experience of and access to school.

Our research also found that for low income families²⁷, these impacts were greater. More than one in five families from lower income backgrounds reported cutting back on food and other essentials because of school uniform costs (compared to one in nine families with higher incomes), highlighting how uniform costs have a disproportionate impact on those children and families already facing financial barriers.²⁸ Nearly one in five parents from low income households also reported borrowing money from someone else because of high uniform costs, compared with around one in 13 families with higher incomes.²⁹

Conclusion

School uniforms are and will continue to be an effective way to 'poverty-proof' classrooms,³⁰ and uniform policies that give affordability highest priority can reduce unnecessary stresses for parents and children. However, as findings show, in reality parents often face unmanageable costs because of expensive branded items or limited options to choose where to buy their children's uniforms.

Our study found that two thirds of parents with children in secondary schools had to buy two or more items from a specific supplier, while the same was true for more than half of primary school parents.³¹ On average, actual costs of uniform are more than three times what parents think is reasonable.³²

This is having significant impact on young people and we estimate that more than 1.8 million children have worn ill-fitting, unclean or incorrect uniform because of the cost of uniform.³³ Furthermore, we estimate that nearly half a million children have been sent home from school for wearing incorrect uniform, highlighting how high costs of uniform are actually hindering children's educational opportunities.³⁴

The Children's Society's position on school uniform remains clear: we support schools having school uniform, especially uniform policies that do not leave families out of pocket or result in children missing out on their education because their parents could not afford to buy specific items. The Education (Guidance about costs of school uniform) Bill is the perfect opportunity for government to ensure all families can afford the cost of uniforms. By making it a legal requirement for schools to put affordability as top consideration when setting uniform policy, the government can finally 'poverty-proof' school uniforms themselves.

²⁶ In 2018, 7% of parents said the cost of school uniform alone had impacted their choice of school for their child and 6% said their child had been sent home from school for wearing incorrect uniform (because of cost). Please see The Children's Society, *The Wrong Blazer 2018: Time for Action on School Uniform Costs*, August 2018 <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/resources-and-publications/the-wrong-blazer-2018-time-for-action-on-school-uniform-costs>

²⁷ Respondents from households with incomes of £20,000 per year or below.

²⁸ Approximately 23% of families with income of £20,000 a year or below compared with 11% of families with higher than £20,000 income per year.

²⁹ Approximately 19% of families with income of £20,000 a year or below compared with 8% of families with higher than £20,000 income per year.

³⁰ The Children's Commission on Poverty highlighted the need to promote 'poverty-proofing' as a model of good practice across schools. Uniform policy is one way through which cost-related barriers to participation for young people can be managed. Others include reviewing costs of school materials and trips. The Children's Society, *At What Cost? Exposing the impact of poverty on school life*, Holloway, E., Mahony, S., Royston, S. and Mueller, D. 2014 (This involved sixteen children ranging in age from 10 to 19 ran a comprehensive inquiry to expose the true costs of school life. This involved a written call for evidence, three evidence sessions in Parliament with experts, and a survey with over 2,000 families and children.)

³¹ 52% of parents with a child in primary school and 66% of parents with a child in secondary school.

³² Actual costs are total average cost for those who provided an answer to questions about all eight items of uniform (based on the midpoint of the cost range provided). It includes those who responded 0 (My child does not have this item), where a zero cost value has been allocated.

³³ Approximately 1,863,000 children. Numbers of children are calculated by applying the proportion of parents (23%) who said their children had worn incorrect, unclean or ill-fitting uniform to the number of children in state maintained schools in England (8.1million), the number for which is based on Department for Education figures.

³⁴ Approximately 494,100 children. Numbers of children are calculated by applying the proportion of parents (6.1%) who said their children had been sent home from school for wearing incorrect uniform to the number of children in state maintained schools in England (8.1million), the number for which is based on Department for Education figures.

**The Children's Society and our supporters
have been there for vulnerable children
and young people for more than 130 years.**

We believe that every young person should
have the support they need in order to enjoy
a safe, happy childhood.

That's why we run services and campaigns to make
children's lives better and change the systems that
are placing them in danger.

**Together with our supporters, we're improving
the lives of children today and long into the future.**



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Further information

For more information on this study, or to sign up
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