

Through Young Eyes

The Children's
Commission
on Poverty

AT WHAT COST? EXPOSING THE IMPACT OF POVERTY ON SCHOOL LIFE

Supported by

The
Children's
Society

**By Euan Holloway, Sorcha Mahony,
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Acknowledgments from the young commissioners

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Caitlyn, Cyrus, Emma, Eniola, Fatimah, Gulwali, Haider, India, Jess, Lauren, Luke, Olli, Precious, Sasha, Sib and Yousif

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FOREWORD

By the young commissioners,
The Children's Commission on Poverty

The Children's Commission on Poverty has been meeting since July 2013. Since then, we have been working tirelessly to come up with practical and pioneering solutions to tackle the injustice of child poverty in the UK.

School is where young people spend a lot of their young lives. This is why we decided to hold an inquiry in order to explore how poverty affects young people's experiences of school. We wanted to remove the idea that poverty stops at the school gates. For this reason we spoke to many different people and organisations with varying roles in education.

This is specifically a big issue because there are many young people who don't enjoy school due to the prices of materials for school; these are often too expensive for young people and families to afford. We identified three main categories which cost money within school; these may sometimes set a barrier due to the cost being unaffordable.

These categories are:

- **School meals**
- **School uniforms**
- **Cost of materials and trips**

This report explores the impact of these different school costs. It summarises the evidence collected through three sessions in parliament as well as interviews with children and parents about their first-hand experience. Also there's a survey about children's and parent's views on the cost of school. These, fused together, will develop to form recommendations to eradicate child poverty.

If put into practice these recommendations would prove to be a big step in establishing that children can have the same opportunities in school no matter who they are or what they have. This equality in society is a goal that we not only feel is important as The Children's Commission on Poverty but one which the entire country, both governments and people alike, should take upon themselves.

Caitlyn, Cyrus, Emma, Eniola, Fatimah, Gulwali, Haider, India, Jess, Lauren, Luke, Olli, Precious, Sasha, Sib and Yousif

'I hope for these recommendations to reach the very top of government and straight into policy and law so that the lives of children suffering with the burden of poverty can be improved dramatically. I also hope, as a secondary result of this report, that the voices of young people within policy can be heard more and more.'

Yousif, 17

'As a young commissioner, I was very surprised to find out what getting everything together for school actually costs – we always think that education is cheap or free. Also that some schools charge illegally for certain things and make a profit when they are supposed to be guiding and helping the young people that they educate.'

India, 17

'As a young commissioner I have found out a lot to do with poverty and everyone's different opinions of it, but also found out in more detail how schools deal with poverty and how it affects children. On the other hand, how isolated and vulnerable poverty can make young people feel when they can't afford to go on expensive school trips or even just constantly buying school equipment and uniform.'

Precious, 13

'During my time as a young commissioner I have found out a lot of things such as how many people are in poverty in the UK, but the thing that stood out for me is that people get bullied for it and that made me think that no one should be treated like that and it's really unfair.'

Sasha, 14

'I found coming to the commission that it has improved my speaking in a group and what I have learnt is how big of an impact it actually makes plus how big the problem is and the laws that we learnt in parliament were interesting.'

Olli, 17

'In my time as a young commissioner, the thing that stood out for me was how poverty isn't just a physical problem because of the mental effect it has on children.'

Cyrus, 14

'What surprised me most is that young children don't get a say in what I see as their future and now that I have joined The Children's Society, I think it is a step up to seeing all the pain that children are going through.'

Eniola, 13

'As a young commissioner, I have been surprised at how many cases of child poverty there actually are in the UK. Despite people believing that poverty is in less economically developed countries such as Africa only, this is not the case and things need to change.'

Caitlyn, 15

'How it makes young people miss meals because they cannot afford it.'

Emma, 18

'As a young commissioner, I found out that children in the UK experience poverty in places such as school, where they needed to be supported. I have learnt a lot more than what I knew about child poverty in the UK. What surprised me was that most people don't see this as an issue, when this is a great injustice facing our society in Britain and across the world. There is no doubt we can change lives and what has stood out for me, is that there are people who care and want to hear our views to take action.'

Gulwali, 19

'As a young commissioner, I was surprised to find out just how many children and young people are affected by poverty and that it makes them feel like an outsider in the society we live in today, because they cannot have the clothes and essentials they need, to not only make them fit in... but for them to live their lives happily with aspirations and contentment.'

Fatimah, 12

'It has made me more aware of the effects of child poverty and reasons why families end up in poverty. Also I have learnt that children can make a difference and speak out for their beliefs and own experiences.'

Lauren, 17

'I am surprised that even in the 21st century, children and young people are being subject to the harshest injustice in society even within schooling. This should never be right in one of the world's richest countries.'

Luke, 17

'As a young commissioner when I first started the commission I felt isolated about being in poverty, after I joined the commission it surprised me how nobody in that entire room of young people are judging you on your experience or how you live. I've found out that poverty is just a word not something you define someone by.'

Jess, 14

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Poverty affects every area of a child's life, and this is no different for school. We may believe that the UK offers a free education, but what children wear at school, what they eat, whether they can join in with friends, even which classes they choose to attend, are all affected by their ability to afford the costs of school.

The inquiry heard how poverty can make children feel singled out, stigmatised and bullied. It affects whether they are properly fed and clothed, and in turn their ability to concentrate and engage in learning.

Too many children are missing out on the opportunity to make the very most of their education, because they struggle to afford the costs of school life.

A lot needs to change in order to ensure that children can afford the costs of the school day, and the recommendations in this report represent an action plan which would take a big step forwards towards addressing this.

An overview of the cost of school

'...that is part of the effect of child poverty, exclusion'

For many families, the idea of a free education is very far from reality. School-related costs make up a large portion of family budgets and parents told us that, on average, they spend £800 a year on school costs.

More than two-thirds (70%) of parents say they have struggled with the cost of school. This rises to 95% of parents who live in families that are 'not well off at all'.

At the same time, more than half (52%) of parents said they had cut back on either clothing, food or heating to afford the cost of school. Nearly half (47%) cut back on clothing, 28% on food and 29% on heating.

A quarter (25%) of parents (and more than half of those in families which were 'not well off at all') said they had borrowed money in order to afford the cost of school.

The impact on children

'There is someone in my school who lives in a block of flats and isn't really as well off and [other children] talk about her...I think she finds it really hard'

Children are acutely aware that their parents struggle with the cost of school. Where children were struggling with school costs, in many cases this led to embarrassment and bullying. Nearly two-thirds (63%) of children in families who are 'not well off at all' said they had been embarrassed because they couldn't afford a cost of school. More than a quarter (27%) said they had been bullied as a result.

More than half of children have avoided asking their parents or guardian for something school related because they thought they would struggle to afford it.

School uniform

'...if there is going to be school uniforms the school should pay for them.'

Children told the inquiry that not being able to afford the right uniform, or having a uniform that is worn out, can make children stand out.

Guidance published by the government tells schools that value for money for parents should be a key priority when they set their uniform policy. Yet many schools insist on a school uniform policy which requires parents to buy expensive items of clothing emblazoned with embroidered names or logos.

More than two-thirds (71%) of parents said they had to buy either some or all items of school uniform from a specific supplier.

Parents said they spend on average £108 on school clothing for primary school children and £126 for secondary school children. But only one in five (22%) of families who are 'not well-off at all' had received any help to purchase a school uniform.

School meals

'When my mum's got the money then we can get snacks. It's 25 pence per item. We don't get snacks if it's a bad week. Sometimes we're hungry.'

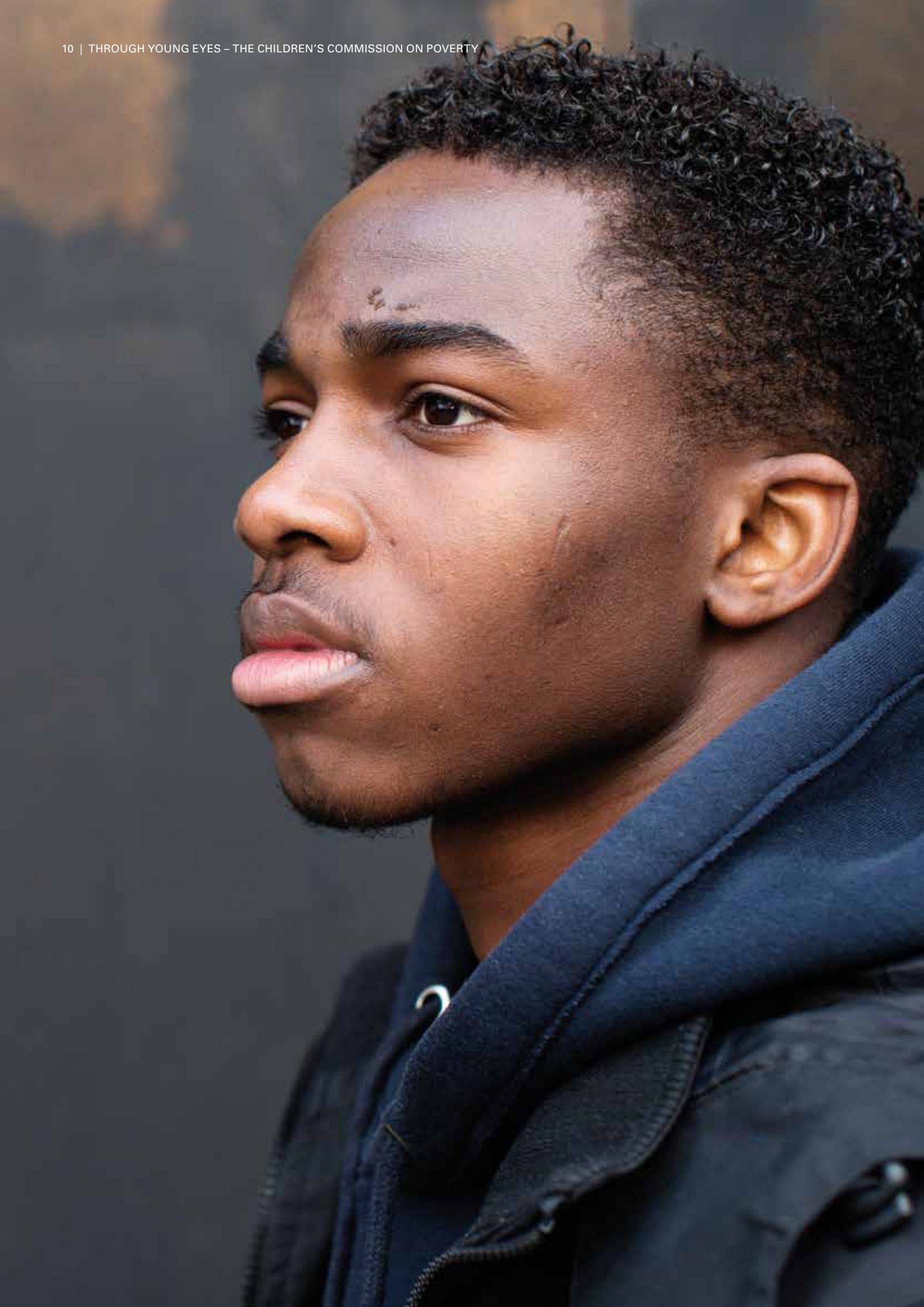
School meals have an important role in this, by ensuring that children receive a healthy, nutritious meal at least once a day. This has a significant impact upon concentration, behaviour and children's ability to learn.

However, more than half of parents (52%) said they had struggled with the cost of school meals, and one in five children (20%) said they have missed out on a school meal because they didn't have enough money.

'You can always tell when someone is having free school meals, because they hold up a card and have their card inspected'

Some schools continue to deliver free school meals in a way that singles out children in poverty, leading to stigma and embarrassment. One in five children (19%) in a family that is 'not well off at all' said they had been embarrassed because their family cannot afford meals.

More than two-thirds (70%) of parents say they have struggled with the cost of school. This rises to 95% of parents who live in families that are 'not well off at all'.



'Well I know that mum has a lot that she has to do to keep us in school and it's quite a struggle.'

Young person

Materials and participation

'We get stacks of homework and most of it is on the computer... I had to tell the teacher to print out a sheet so I could just fill it in but the teacher kept saying it wasn't high enough quality homework. I would only score a five or three out of 10.'

The law states that schools cannot charge for any materials related to the delivery of the national curriculum, but it is clear many children are finding themselves expected to pay for key materials, restricting children's ability to participate fully in education. And children are avoiding certain subjects due to the additional cost of equipment or trips.

Computers and an internet connection at home are increasingly necessary for children to complete their homework. Three in ten children whose family is "not well off at all" said they had fallen behind at school because their family could not afford the necessary computer or internet facilities at home.

A third of children who said their family is 'not well off at all' have fallen behind in class because their family could not afford the necessary books or materials.

'There was a history trip to the Big Pit in Wales, I didn't go on that. It was too expensive to go, Mum couldn't afford it at the time, it was twenty-something pound. I come home and talked to Mum about it and we couldn't afford it... It felt bad when everyone come back and said how much an amazing time they had.'

The cost of school trips also causes problems for many children. Two in five children who live in families that are 'not well off at all' have missed a term time school trip because of the cost.

1. INTRODUCTION

The proportion of children living in poverty in the United Kingdom has nearly doubled in the last 30 years. Three and a half million children live in poverty in the UK. Six in 10 of these live in low-income working families.

But for too long, the voices of children have been largely absent from the debate. The Children’s Commission on Poverty marks a major milestone in that debate.

The commission is a unique opportunity for children and young people to join forces and closely examine the stark realities facing millions of children living below the poverty line.

For the first time, children themselves will drive the debate forward, and show us, through their own eyes, what it looks and feels like to be living in poverty. This inquiry has been led by the young commissioners themselves, who have collected evidence, drawn conclusions and drafted the recommendations in this report.

Supported by The Children’s Society, a panel of 16 young commissioners – from across England and aged from 10 to 19 – have led the commission’s investigation into child poverty.

The commission first met in July 2013, and the young commissioners were appointed following an open recruitment process and have been meeting roughly every month since.

The commission was officially launched in the Houses of Parliament in October 2013 with the publication of *Through Young Eyes*, a report based on a survey of almost 2000 children and providing a snapshot of how poverty affects children in the UK today.

The commissioners spent nine months finding out about child poverty in the UK and developing the understanding and skills necessary to explore the issue in-depth. This included hearing evidence from interviews conducted with young people in poverty around the country.

In the spring of 2014, the young commissioners decided that they would launch an inquiry into the cost of school life and how living in poverty affects children’s experience of school. The commissioners wanted to focus on how poverty affected all aspects of life at school, not just attainment levels.

'...they don't believe that someone like me where I live could actually be in poverty.'

Young person

The young commissioners felt that school is such a huge part of children's lives, that no understanding of child poverty would be complete without looking at how poverty affects their experience of education.

The young commissioners led hearings in parliament, collected written evidence, analysed evidence from interviews with young people in poverty and contributed their own experiences of school life and poverty.

The Children's Society also conducted a large scale household survey on their behalf.

The commission identified three main themes which most affect the school experience of children living in poverty: the cost of materials and trips, school meals and school uniforms. The commissioners have set out in the report actions that schools, councils and the government can take to address these.

The young commissioners analysed all of the evidence collected and set the direction for the inquiry. All of the recommendations contained in this report were developed by the young commissioners.



2. METHODOLOGY

The findings of this report are based on evidence gathered by The Children’s Commission on Poverty. With the support of The Children’s Society, the young commissioners led on collecting and analysing evidence and have drafted all the recommendations in this report.

This includes:

- **Three evidence hearings held in parliament. In total 13 experts gave oral evidence on the costs of school life to a panel of young commissioners and members of parliament.**
- **Responses to a call for written evidence, which received submissions from charities, public bodies, unions, professional associations, school governors, teachers and members of the public.**
- **Thirteen in-depth interviews with parents and children from low-income families. All households had an income of less than £14,000 per year (after housing costs). This included working and non-working households. Where possible, interviews with parents and children were conducted separately.**

- **Twenty two in-depth interviews with children aged from eight to 16 who were living in poverty and entitled to free school meals.**
- **An original survey of 2000 households from across Britain, including responses from children aged 10–17 and their parents. In addition, we surveyed 500 parents of children aged eight to nine.**

As part of this survey, we asked children how well off their family are. Much of the analysis presented in this report focuses on households where children answered ‘not well off at all’. We have indicated in the text where this is the case.

A full list of written and oral submissions to the inquiry is available in Appendix A.

3. BACKGROUND

Overview

Before we decided as a commission to focus on the costs of school, my assumption was that schools are a place where children can move forward, even if you live in poverty. Education should motivate you to have higher aspirations and hope. But after hearing from children about their school experiences, we found out that in some schools, poverty is reproduced rather than reduced. We didn't realise quite how high the overall cost of school is and it puts a lot of pressure on parents. Schools did not understand what it means to live in poverty. We really need schools and teachers to learn what it means to grow up in poverty, so they can help and support children, rather than making life harder.

Children in poverty face problems at school such as bullying from teachers for not doing their homework on the computer (when they don't have one), or pressure from peers about not having new things. They are left out of trips and educational visits or can't afford things like uniform, school meals and materials necessary for some subjects. This all leads to stigma and many children find it hard to explain their circumstances. All these things undoubtedly affect attainment and impact upon a child's future.

Changes need to be made and we all need to have more understanding of how it feels and what it means to grow up in poverty. We can and we should act to change attitudes and give children the right start in life.

By Gulwali, 19, young commissioner

For many families across the country, the idea of a free education can seem a long way from reality, with additional costs ranging from uniforms and trips, to meals and books.

The inquiry found that difficulty in meeting these costs can affect all areas of children’s lives (including families’ ability to pay for other household essentials like food and heating), but crucially it directly affects children’s attainment and has emotional impacts like embarrassment, stigma and bullying.

The financial cost of school

‘They expect you to have lessons which are like £15 a time.’

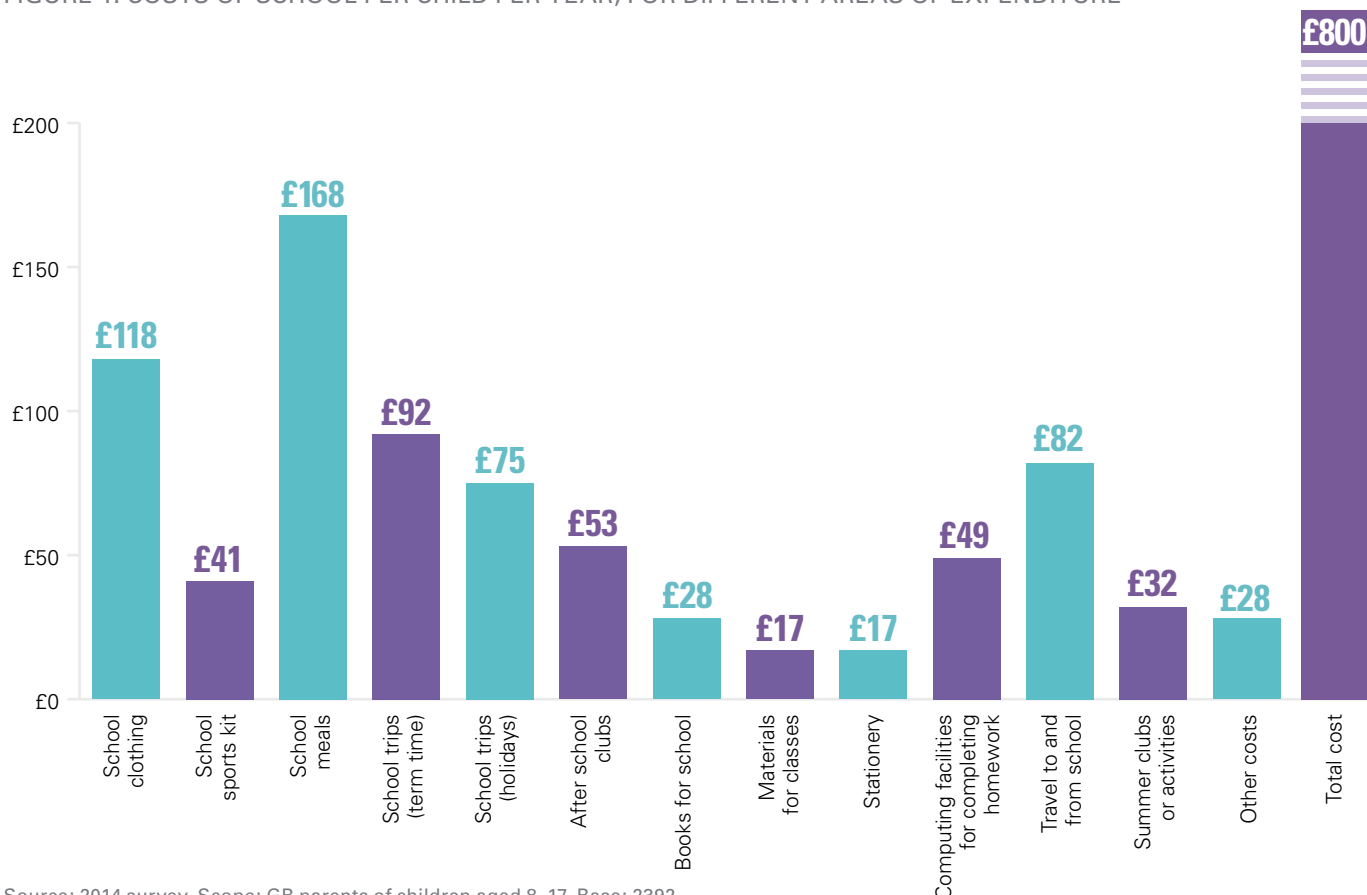
Our research found that parents spent an average of around £800 per child per year on schools costs. There are currently 8 million school-age children in state funded

primary and secondary schools in the UK, meaning that parents spend an estimated £6.4 billion a year on school costs.

The £800 total includes £168 on school meals, £159 on school uniform and sports kit, £82 on travel costs and £167 on school trips. This is at a time when, for most families, the costs of many essentials are rising faster than incomes.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation, in written evidence to the inquiry, reported that: ‘The last six years have been tough, particularly for families with children. The cost of essential items has gone up by about 28% overall’... at a time when the average wage increase has been 9% and the minimum wage has increased by 14%. At the same time, government support to families with children (through child benefit and child tax credits) has been reduced.’

FIGURE 1: COSTS OF SCHOOL PER CHILD PER YEAR, FOR DIFFERENT AREAS OF EXPENDITURE



Source: 2014 survey. Scope: GB parents of children aged 8–17. Base: 2392

The cost of school is clearly not a problem limited to children living in families in poverty. More than two thirds (69%) of parents said they struggled at least 'to a small extent' with the cost of school. This rises to 95% of parents in families where the children say they are 'not well off at all'. Parents often expressed concern about their children missing out or being bullied because they could not afford school costs. And many parents told us that they will go to great lengths so that their children can participate fully in school. But for families in poverty, this often means cutting back elsewhere, or even turning to borrowing.

'I don't want [my children] ever to lose out... I always get them on a school trip. Somehow, they're always going to get to go. But how I go about paying it off and juggling things is a different matter.' Parent

The impact of school costs on children's experience

'There is someone in my school who lives in a block of flats and isn't really as well off and [other children] talk about her...I think she finds it really hard'

There is already a wealth of evidence that living in poverty has a huge effect on children's attainment at school. And the inquiry heard evidence that children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are already arriving at school less prepared than their peers.

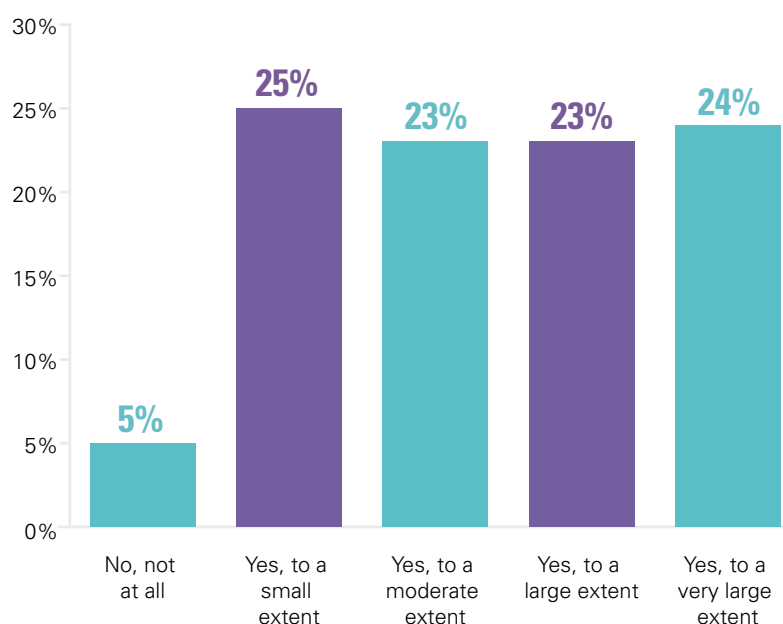
In written evidence, the charity 4Children told the inquiry that only 36% of children eligible for a free school meal had achieved a good level of development by the end of the academic year in which they turn five. This compares to 55% of all other pupils.

Exchange from the oral evidence session

'...We were talking about the problems and discussing what's going wrong and stuff, but we're not coming up with any solutions to how we can deal with it. But my question is: do you think when parents have problems paying for things at school, does it have a significant impact on their child's education?' Sib, 18, young commissioner

'I think if children feel excluded and if children experience bullying, all the impact that we've talked about today, those will have an impact on their education. So I think if children don't feel that they are part of the school in the same way, then it will impact on them.' Valentine Mulholland, Policy Advisor at National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT)

FIGURE 2: PROPORTIONS OF FAMILIES 'NOT WELL OFF AT ALL' STRUGGLING WITH THE COSTS OF SCHOOL



Source: 2014 survey. Scope: GB parents of children aged 10-17. Base: 154

'It places a great deal of stress, a kind of trauma on the lives of very young children.'

Sara, Children North East

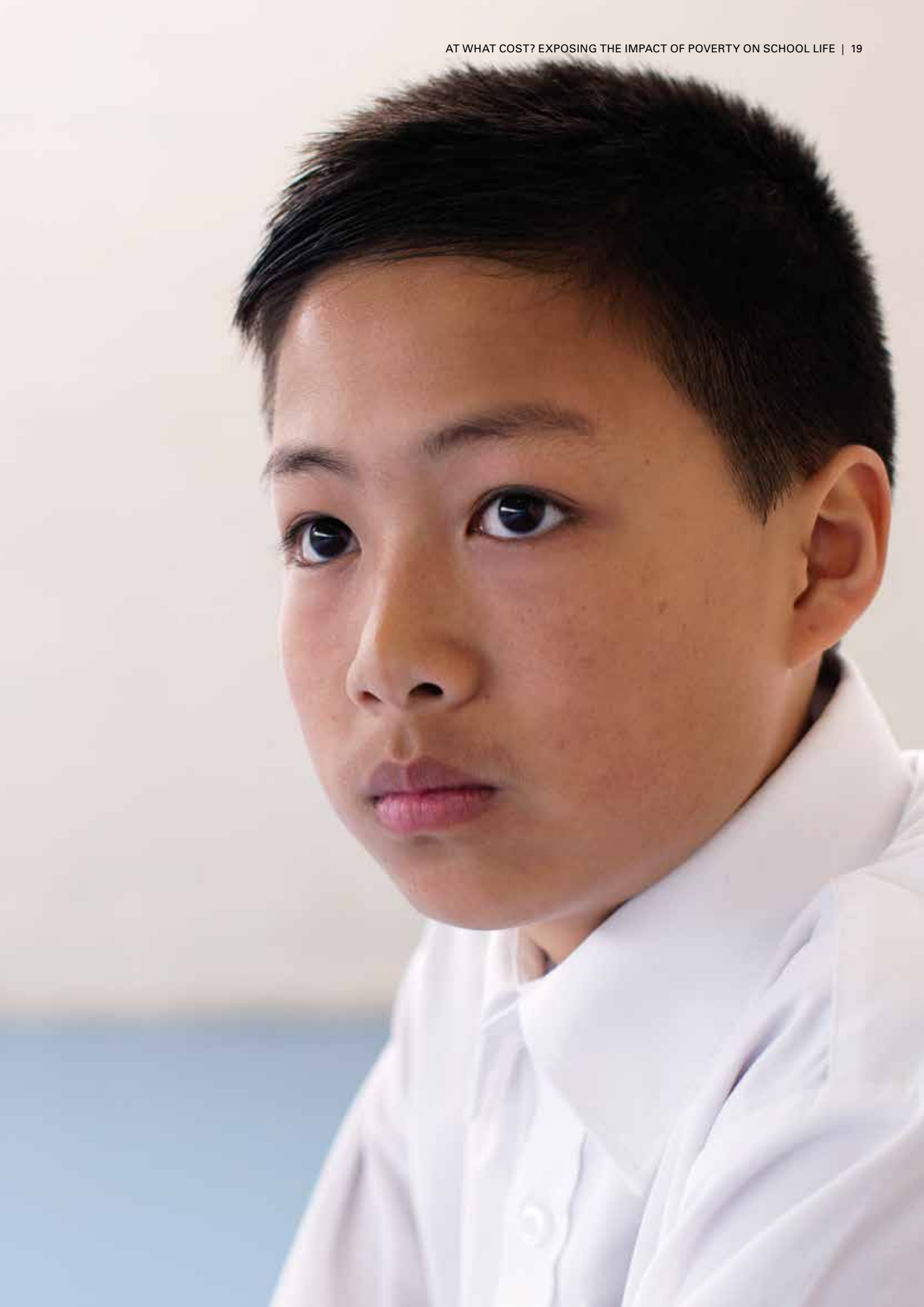
'JRF ran a programme of research looking at the link between education and poverty more broadly. It finds that low income is a predictor of educational attainment. While children from all backgrounds see the advantages of school, deprived children are more likely to feel anxious and unconfident about school, and to feel a lack of control over their learning which can make them more reluctant.' The Joseph Rowntree Foundation

All children should be able to make the most of their education, and living in poverty should not be a barrier to taking part in any aspect of schooling. So it is vital we understand how children experience the impact of poverty at school and the barriers this creates.

The inquiry heard that children, particularly those in low-income families, were very aware that their parents struggle to pay for school costs, and the stresses this could put on the family. The children we spoke to were aware that their parents worked hard and that they may not always be able to get what they wanted.

Sara Bryson, Children North East, gave the following example: '...this girl in year four was telling me about the debt letter home... Her mum really doesn't like getting the debt letter for dinner money. So she'd folded it up and drew a picture on it to kind of soften the blow... So the impact on that child at a very young age, understanding the debt issue and understanding the negative impact that was going to have when she took it home. It places a great deal of stress, a kind of trauma on the lives of very young children.'

Often, this awareness from children would mean they simply do not ask their parents for school-related items or activities. According to our survey, over half of all children we surveyed have in the past avoided asking their parents or carers for something school related because they thought they would struggle to afford it. While half (50%), said they had done this 'once or twice', nearly a quarter (24%) said they had avoided asking more regularly.



But poverty and the cost of school does not just mean that children are going without. Many children spoke vividly of the emotional impact of poverty on school. Poverty can set children apart, particularly if it is not addressed sensitively by schools. Children who are made to feel different – because they are entitled to a free school meal, cannot take part in activities with peers or do not have the right uniform – said they have been embarrassed or experienced bullying as a result.

Sometimes, well-intentioned actions can have unintended consequences, as Sara Bryson from Children North East told the inquiry:

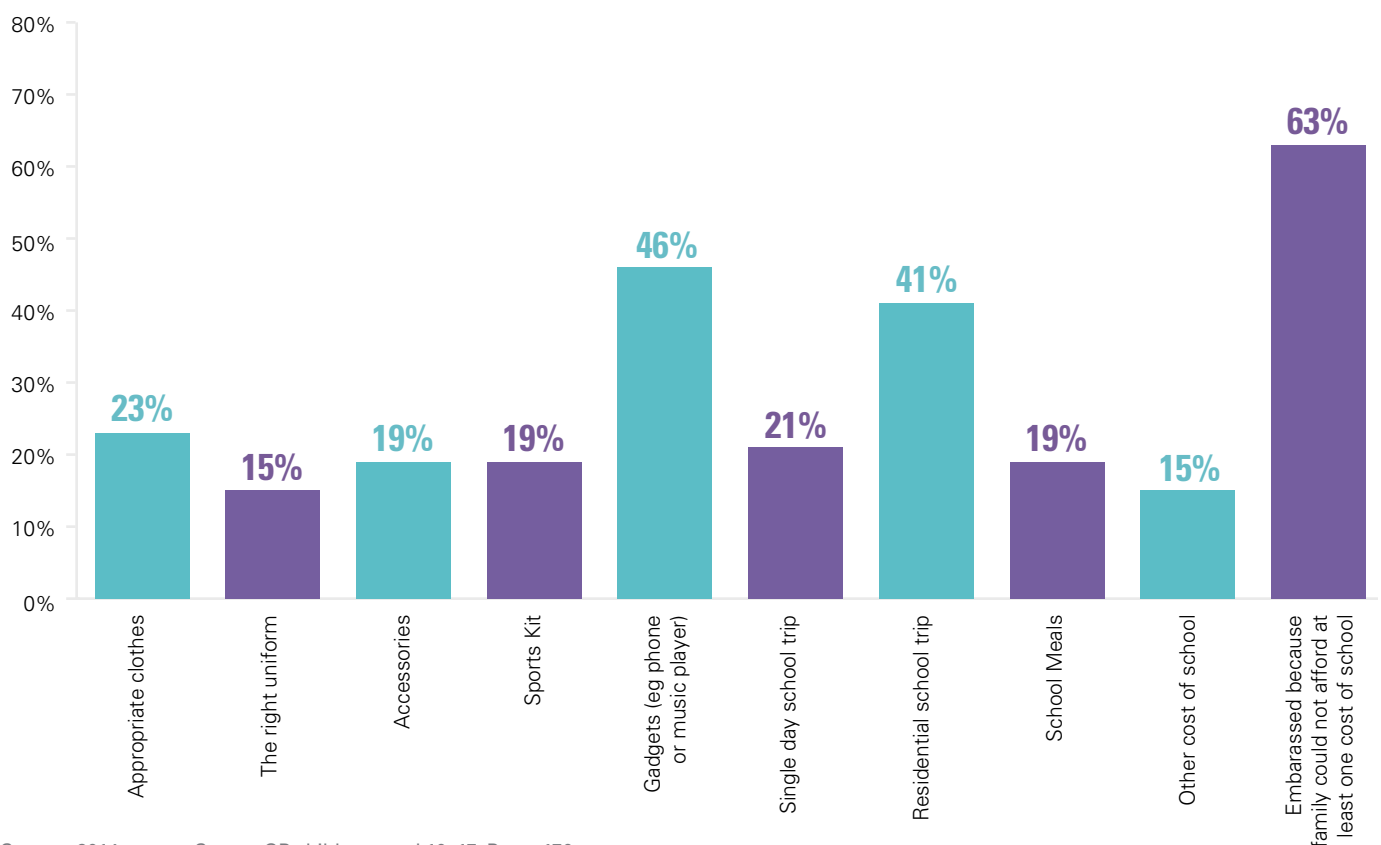
‘In one school they had a purple dot [on the books] for all pupil premium students and a blue dot for all special educational needs students. So often staff will do those things to try and track and be more

aware of what’s going on in their school but young people aren’t stupid and they pick up on those things. So sometimes it leads to bullying. Sometimes it leads to young people feeling really uncomfortable. So I think they are very aware, it has a very damaging impact.’

For children who say their families are ‘not well-off’, nearly two-thirds (63%) said that they had been embarrassed because they could not afford at least one of the school costs set out in Figure 3. And more than one in four (28%) said they had been bullied as a result.

While our inquiry heard how poverty and the cost of school can cause stigma and bullying among children, it is worth highlighting an example of where children demonstrate understanding and support for their peers who may be struggling with poverty.

FIGURE 3: PROPORTION OF CHILDREN WHO ARE ‘NOT WELL OFF AT ALL’ WHO SAY THEY ARE EMBARRASSED BECAUSE THEY CANNOT AFFORD DIFFERENT COSTS OF SCHOOL



Source: 2014 survey. Scope: GB children aged 10–17. Base: 170

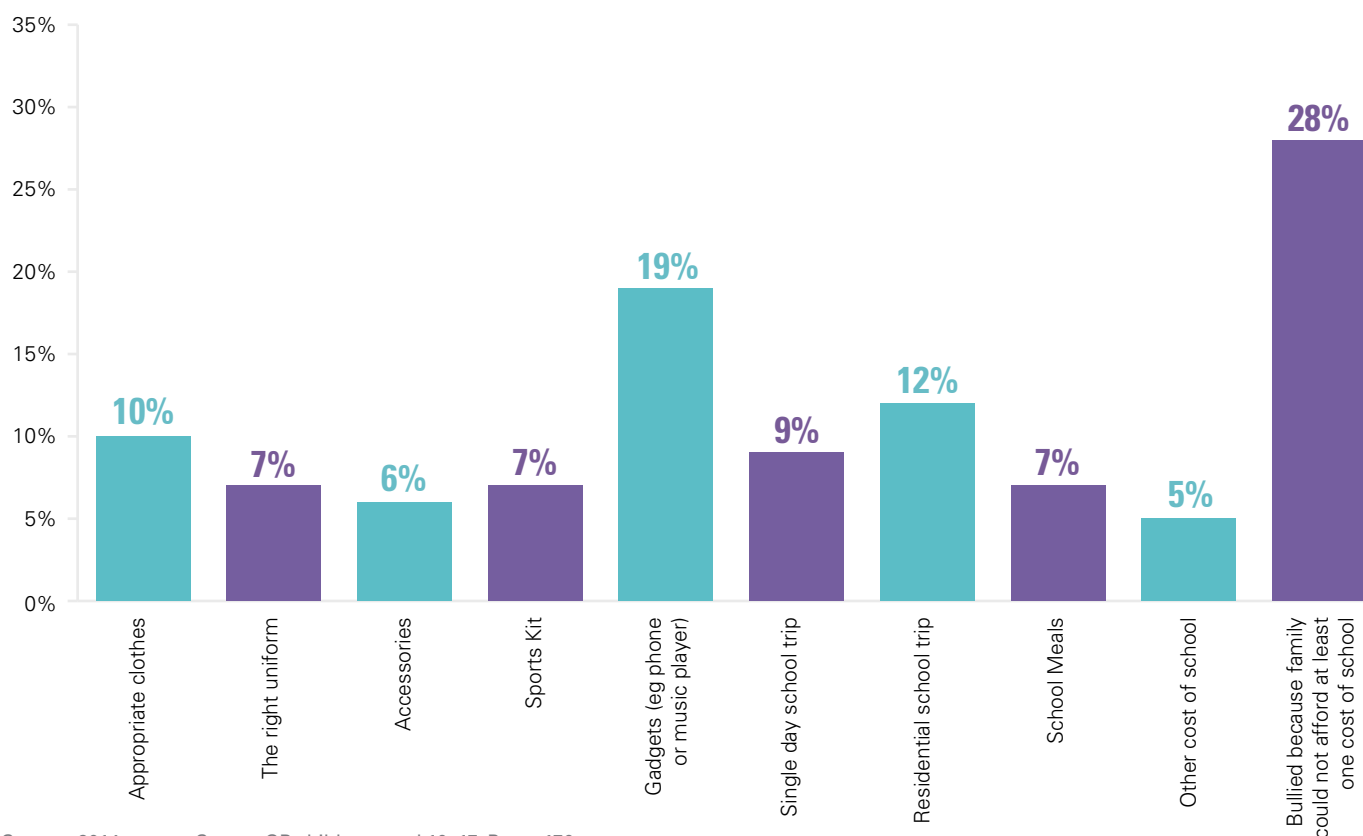
A number of the children who took part in the in-depth interviews talked about helping each other within friendship groups, for example by lending or giving each other money, particularly so their peers could be included in social activities. One young person from a low income family told interviewers:

'Money problems never arose between us as like a group. But if we went out socially, say, one of us didn't have enough, so if they brought out less and we wanted to go cinema or something or get something to eat, we'd always chip in, or just sort of top them up. So, they never felt... so we never put them out, and say, 'Well you haven't got enough, you can't come'. So, always say, 'We'll lend you, you don't have, you can pay it back as soon as you want like, time's not an issue.'

Costs of school also have an impact on children's home life. Nearly half (47%) of all parents surveyed said they had cut back on clothing to afford the cost of school, and nearly a third said they had cut back on food (27%) or heating (29%). Our survey also found that a quarter (25%) of parents said they had borrowed money in order to afford the cost of school.

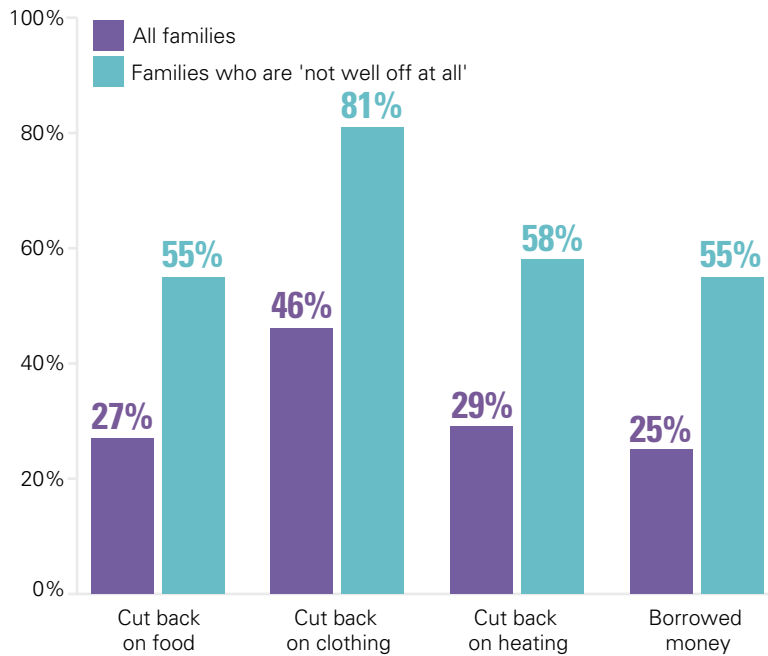
As shown in Figure 5, these proportions were considerably higher among those families who were 'not well off at all', with over half of parents (55%) in these families saying they have borrowed money in order to afford the cost of school.

FIGURE 4: PROPORTION OF CHILDREN WHO ARE 'NOT WELL OFF AT ALL' WHO HAVE BEEN BULLIED BECAUSE THEY CANNOT AFFORD DIFFERENT COSTS OF SCHOOL



Source: 2014 survey. Scope: GB children aged 10–17. Base: 170

FIGURE 5: PERCENTAGE OF FAMILIES THAT ARE ‘NOT AT ALL WELL OFF’ WHO HAVE CUT BACK OR BORROWED TO AFFORD THE COST OF SCHOOL



Source: 2014 survey. Scope: GB parents of children aged 10–17. Base: 170

The inquiry into the costs of school life

As part of the inquiry, The Children’s Commission on Poverty decided to focus on three key areas of school costs. The following chapters of this report look in more detail at the impact of the cost of school meals, school uniforms, and educational materials and trips.

The report then goes on to consider what more schools can do to address these issues and closes with a list of recommendations developed by the young commissioners to help reduce the impact of school costs on the lives of children living in poverty.



4. SCHOOL UNIFORMS

Overview

This section looks at school uniform and how the cost of the uniform affects children.

The cost of school uniforms has increased over recent years; it has affected some parents because they cannot afford it. We were surprised that over the years the school would change the uniforms and make it cost even more than the year before.

We learned that children get picked on because they can't afford new or proper school uniforms. It has been important for the commission to find out about this because it affects a lot of children and we need to know what to do about it.

By Precious (13) and Eniola (13), young commissioners

The costs and benefits of school uniforms

'You can only get [school uniform] from one shop and it's really expensive.'

The school uniform is a key cost of school. Parents said that the average cost is £118 per child a year, with the sports kit costing an additional £41. The Government has recognised concerns around this, and recently published new guidance on school uniform policy which was intended to make sure that schools secure value for money for families.²

The guidance is clear that cost should be a central consideration when schools set their school uniform policy. The school uniform should be easily available from supermarkets or good value shops and any changes to uniform should take into account the views of parents and children.

Despite this, the vast majority of those who the inquiry heard from felt that large numbers of schools are failing to follow the guidance. In particular, many schools are failing to consider the impact on the poorest pupils when setting their uniform policy and continue to use single specialist suppliers.

'School uniform is a constant source of anxiety. I am not ashamed of being poor but I always want my children to look as well cared-for as others. I go without so my children can always have what is needed.' Parent

The inquiry heard that there is a huge variability in the cost of school uniforms, with examples ranging from £34 for a complete uniform available from a supermarket, to state funded secondary schools with a uniform that costs more than £500.

On average, parents told our survey that they spent £108 on school clothing for primary-aged children, which rises to £126 for those in secondary school. The cost of school uniforms increase as children reach secondary school, partly because larger clothing for older children costs more, but also because uniform requirements become more prescriptive in secondary schools with more expensive items – such as branded blazers, book bags and even straw boaters – in some cases available only from specialist suppliers.

And the cost of school clothes is not just limited to a single school uniform. Some schools have prescriptive PE kits, with many different items for different sports. And some schools have separate summer uniforms or even different uniforms for different years.

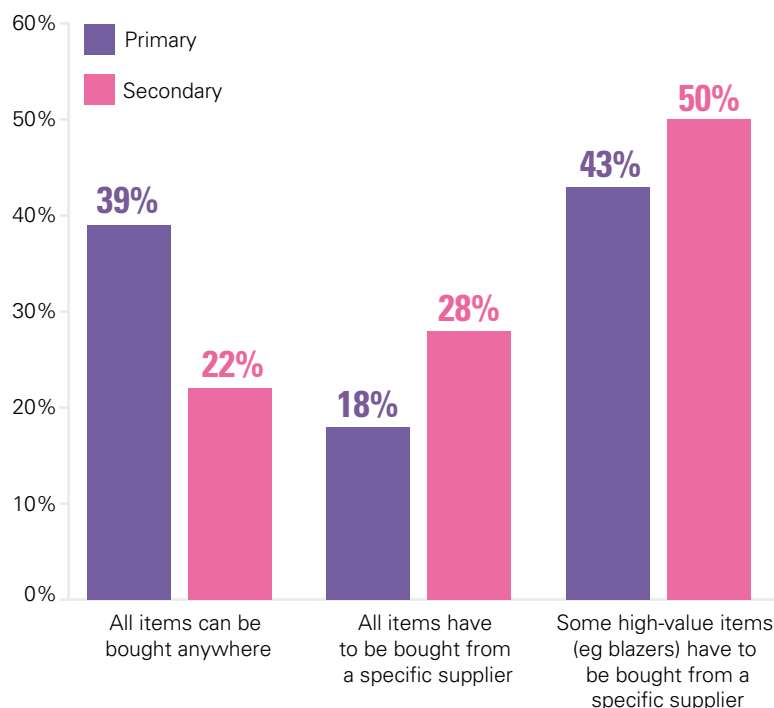
‘The normal uniform is more expensive, but there’s quite a lot of extras things. Like... you have to have hockey boots... But they do wear away quite quickly because we have PE about three times a week. And just things like some people have two pairs because if you have it three times a week by the time you get them cleaned and washed and because everything is muddy after you come back like you sometimes don’t [have them] so you have to go without trainers so you need another pair.’

In our survey, more than two-thirds (71%) of parents said they had to buy either some or all items of school uniform from a specific uniform supplier. For a quarter of parents (24%), they had to buy the entire school uniform from a specialist supplier. As shown in Figure 6, this was considerably more likely to be the case for parents of secondary than primary school children.

For many families in poverty – whether they are out of work or struggling on a low wage – finding this amount of money will prove impossible. With little help available from local authorities or schools, the inquiry heard that some parents are turning to taking out loans just to buy their children’s school uniforms. One parent told us of the crisis loan (interest free loan from the government) they took out to help with school uniform costs:

‘When she started [school], we did go and get a loan... We went online and I just typed in ‘help for parents with uniforms’... I think it’s called a crisis loan or something like that.’ Parent

FIGURE 6: WHERE PARENTS SAID THEY HAD TO BUY SCHOOL UNIFORM



‘That’s what I like about the uniform. They don’t wear their own clothes to school, so there isn’t any ‘Well I’ve got this top and you’ve got that make.’

Parent

A number of parents told us during interviews that they had borrowed on credit cards, through loans or from their family. In written evidence to the inquiry, Family Action said:

‘A London academy reportedly introduced a new uniform costing £225 – more than double the £99 cost of the old one. Some 70 families were said to have taken out loans to buy the new uniform.’

The Department for Education last updated its guidance for schools, governing bodies and local authorities on school uniform policy in 2013, and has committed to reviewing it in the summer of 2015.

Children’s and parents’ experience of school uniforms

‘We’ve got 2 different uniforms; we’ve got one for the winter and one for the summer.’

It is up to a school’s governing body to set uniform policy, including whether the school should have a uniform at all. But the government, in its guidance to schools, strongly encourages schools to adopt a uniform as it ‘can play a valuable role in contributing to the ethos of a school and setting an appropriate tone’.

This was reflected by the young people, parents and experts that our inquiry heard from, though for different reasons. In addition to benefits for behaviour, a school uniform was seen as a good ‘leveller’, and

School uniform: Guidance for governing bodies, school leaders, school staff and local authorities³ (Department for Education) – The importance of cost consideration

‘No school uniform should be so expensive as to leave pupils or their families feeling unable to apply to, or attend, a school of their choice, due to the cost of the uniform. School governing bodies should therefore give high priority to cost considerations. The governing body should be able to demonstrate how best value has been achieved and keep the cost of supplying the uniform under review.

‘When considering how the school uniform should be sourced, governing bodies should give highest priority to the consideration of cost and value for money for parents. The school uniform should be easily available for parents to purchase and schools should seek to select items that can be purchased cheaply, for example in a supermarket or other good value shop. Schools should keep compulsory branded items to a minimum and avoid specifying expensive items of uniform e.g. expensive outdoor coats.’

3. Department for Education – School uniform: Guidance for governing bodies, school leaders, school staff and local authorities www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/269113/school_uniform_guidance_2013.pdf

wearing a uniform helps children living in poverty to stand out less from their peers, which in turn helps combat bullying and feelings of stigma or shame among children and their parents.

‘That’s what I like about the uniform. They don’t wear their own clothes to school, so there isn’t any ‘Well I’ve got this top and you’ve got that make’.’ Parent.

Parents and young people felt that allowing children to choose their own clothes – rather than wear a uniform – would serve to highlight the differences between children’s socio-economic backgrounds, and place huge pressure on parents to provide their children with a large wardrobe and buy the latest, expensive ‘must have’ items.

‘If it’s a question of distinguishing pupils from different backgrounds, by not having a uniform the child that comes into school every day with the same T-shirt, the same pair of jeans, and not necessarily the same brand as everyone else, is much more distinguishable.’

But for this benefit to be fully realised, it is important that uniforms are affordable and help is available for those families that struggle with the cost.

‘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.’

The inquiry also heard about the negative impact of school uniform costs on children’s relationships with their peers. Young people and parents told us that having a second hand uniform, one that is worn out or one that is repaired can serve to make poorer children stand out and be a cause of bullying and embarrassment.

‘If your shirt, like mine, has got tags with a different name... they automatically know that it’s like handed down from someone else. And like you notice if someone’s sleeves are too small or their top rides up or they’ve got trousers that are too short for them and if they’ve got really tattered shoes. It’s really noticeable.’

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.

One parent interviewed as part of the inquiry mentioned the increasing trend for publicly funded schools to adopt uniforms more commonly seen at private schools, saying:

‘They wear a very strict uniform. They wear, like, little hats and everything, little straw boaters. So they actually look like a private school, because the uniform is so sort of defined.’ Parent.

Our survey of parents found that the difference between the cost of uniforms at fee-paying private schools and publicly funded schools is smaller than we might expect. Parents with children in fee-paying secondary schools said they spent on average £150 per child a year on school clothing, whereas this was only slightly lower at £126 for children at publicly funded secondary schools.

Parents are often restricted to a very limited number of specialist school uniform suppliers (often just one shop) and do not have the option of buying cheaper uniforms from supermarkets or other cheap stores.

Family Action told the inquiry that restrictions on where parents can buy school uniforms are costing families millions: 'Our report supported the findings of the Office of Fair Trading report in August 2012, which [found that] restrictions on where school uniforms could be bought were harming competition and inflating costs.'⁴

For families struggling financially, who may have more than one child going through school, this increased cost can be daunting. Yet the inquiry heard from several respondents that supermarkets are offering entire uniforms for a fraction of the cost.

Based on the prices advertised on their websites, the average cost of a complete school uniform from the two leading UK supermarkets is as little as £34 for primary school and £54 for secondary school aged children.⁵

There are currently over 8 million pupils in state funded primary and secondary schools in the UK.⁶ Based on our survey, in which parents told us they spend on average £108 on primary and £126 on secondary school uniforms (excluding sports kit), this means parents in England are spending a staggering £935 million per year on school uniforms.

If all parents were able to buy their entire school uniform from supermarkets, this figure could potentially fall to as little as £349 million, a saving of more than half a billion pounds (£586 million) for parents every year.

Family Action also told the inquiry that a quarter (25%) of the families they work with have told the charity that they struggle to provide a complete school uniform for their children. This often means many poorer parents will only buy one uniform per child (for example just one pair of trousers or skirt, or just one or two shirts), making it more difficult for parents to provide clean uniforms every day.

Parents told us this means uniforms wear out more quickly and have to be repaired. This contributed to poorer children being made to feel different and could increase bullying and not attending or taking part at school. For example, 8% of all children told our survey they had skipped a sports class because their family could not afford the right kit. This rises to one in five (21%) of children in families 'not well off at all'.

The near-unanimous consensus of children, parents and experts was that schools should have uniform policies which allow parents to purchase clothing from supermarkets or other cheap shops, with the exception of certain items such as ties or sew-on badges.

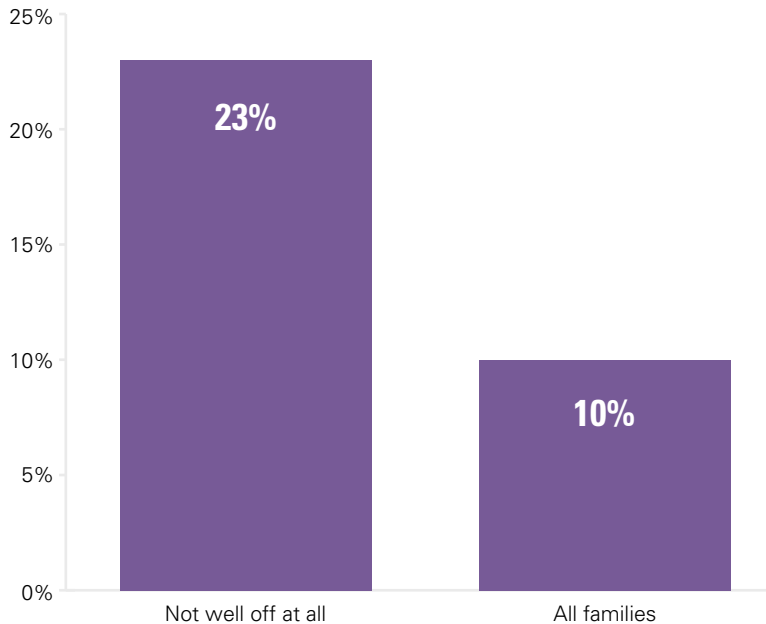
There were differing opinions on whether this should be mandated, or whether the Department for Education should issue stronger guidance to schools. But overall, simpler uniform policies which allowed for greater choice of supplier were seen as a simple solution.

'I saw some kids that didn't have blazers or coats in winter and I could see they couldn't afford it...'

Young person

4. Supply of school uniforms: Report of findings by IFF Research, Office of Fair Trading, August 2012: www.oftr.gov.uk/shared_oftr/markets-work/OFT1436.pdf
 5. This includes a sweatshirt, two polo shirts, a pack of 4/5 shirts, two pairs of trousers, school shoes and (for secondary school children) a blazer. See appendix
 6. <http://wales.gov.uk/docs/statistics/2014/140724-school-census-results-2014-en.pdf>. <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2013/12/4199/downloads#res439969>. http://www.deni.gov.uk/enrolments_at_grant-aided_primary_and_post-primary_schools_2013_14-_basic_statistics_-_final_version_105_kb.pdf. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/schools-pupils-and-their-characteristics-january-2014>

FIGURE 7: FAMILIES RECEIVING HELP WITH SCHOOL UNIFORM COSTS BY WHETHER ‘NOT WELL OFF AT ALL’



Source: 2014 survey. Scope: GB parents of children aged 10–17. Base: 1764

Help available for purchasing school uniforms

‘My blazer is £60. One blazer... and my tie is £5 and like it is just really expensive just for like the blazer and tie.’

There is little consistency between local areas and schools in relation to what help they provide to poorer families. The amount and frequency of help available, and the eligibility criteria for this help, all vary greatly. Some families have access to grants or vouchers, others rely on loans and some receive no help at all.

But overall, help with the cost of uniforms is rare. Nine out of ten (90%) parents in our survey said they had never received any help to cover the cost of school uniforms. And only one in five families (23%) that are ‘not well off at all’ received support. Our survey

found that more than two thirds (69%) of parents struggled with the costs of school; suggesting that many who could have benefited from extra help still missed out.

Due to pressures on school and local authority budgets, there is evidence of reductions in help available. A 2007 report from Citizens Advice found that in 2001, 70% of schools made a contribution towards school uniforms, but by 2007 this had gone down to 43%.⁷

‘When [my daughter] started in year seven you get a grant to help. But the grant is £45 and that’s it. Her blazer is £45. So it’s basically just a grant for the blazer.’ Parent

Valentine Mulholland from the National Association of Head Teachers told the inquiry that the trend of squeezed budgets and reduced help for poorer families is continuing:

‘...school budgets haven’t increased over the last few years and all the costs that schools bear have increased. So there’s been an incredible squeeze and I agree that that’s why schools are starting to think ‘well, where parents can afford [school costs]’... they will charge for that and I think that’s having some unintended consequences.’

Where help was available for poorer families – often in the form of grants or vouchers – this was usually well below the full cost of purchasing the uniform. Furthermore, the help available was often only provided once, for example when a child starts secondary school, whereas growing school children will often need a new uniform every year, or even within a year. Family Action reported the results of their own small survey of local authorities to the inquiry:

7. Citizens Advice – The range and impact of school costs on families www.citizensadvice.org.uk/index/policy/policy_publications/adding_up.htm

'...a lot of people think that poverty stops in school because everyone's wearing the same thing. Which is the worst thing I've heard...'

Young person

'A Family Action mini-survey of 10 local authority websites found that where grants existed to help with uniform costs they averaged about £60 per pupil, but several authorities appeared to offer nothing at all.

'Where support does exist it may prove to be inadequate. One state school in London has a uniform cost totalling £564. Families claiming benefits are eligible for £60 of vouchers from their local authority, leaving parents facing a £504 bill for their child's uniform. Further to this, the grants are offered to families only when their child starts secondary school; as the child inevitably grows out of their uniform, no additional assistance is available.'

Many schools and local authorities target support at those children who get free school meals. The Children's Society (discussed in more detail in the following chapter) has identified that half a million children living in poverty are currently not entitled to free school meals – normally because their parents are in low paid work, which disqualifies them from entitlement.⁸ This means they may also be missing out on help with uniform costs.

The inquiry heard that where help is available, the onus was on parents to seek it out, and support was not advertised or made clear to parents. Even when parents did manage to negotiate help, comments from school staff were sometimes unsympathetic. One parent told how, when claiming a uniform grant from her school, staff commented to her daughter on 'how lucky she was to have it [the grant].'

Many schools run second-hand uniform sales, where uniforms are available either for free or at a greatly reduced price. Most respondents welcomed this as an example of how schools can help poorer students. But many children and parents that the inquiry heard from highlighted how a second-hand uniform can be a cause of bullying as they make poorer children stand out.

8. Inquiry into hunger and food poverty: The Children's Society's written submission (2014) www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/Inquiry%20into%20food%20poverty%20-%20The%20Children%27s%20Society%20written%20submission.pdf

Recommendations

Schools should choose a simple, coloured uniform, available with sew-on logos to make them more affordable.

When deciding upon school uniform policy, governing bodies and schools should make sure they follow government guidance and that the ‘highest priority is given to the consideration of cost and value for money for parents. The school uniform should also be widely available.

Schools should avoid school uniform policies that include branded items only available from specialist shops, apart from a very limited number of items such as school ties or badges.

Schools should set a uniform policy that allows parents to purchase all items of the uniform – excluding school ties or badges – from supermarkets or other shops that can provide competition on price. Any branding on uniforms should come in the form of sew-on badges etc. that can be added by parents.

The government must make sure that all schools, governing bodies, parents and young people are aware of the guidance on school uniform policy. The government has committed to reviewing its school uniform guidance in the summer of 2015. The government should use this opportunity to revise the guidance so it is stronger and effective, for example by amending it to state that:

School uniform must be easily available for parents or carers to purchase and schools must select items that can be purchased cheaply, for example in a supermarket or other good value shop.



5. SCHOOL MEALS

Overview

School meals are important because lots of children go hungry at school and do not have a hot meal when they get home. But they can cost a lot of money if your parents are struggling.

Children need to eat healthily and if they don't have money to get a school meal, or are not entitled to a free one, they won't get enough nutrition. Children need this to be able to concentrate and learn.

We have found that there is stigma attached to having a free school meal if it's not handled well by the school. Children can be made to feel different and in some places are bullied. We know it's hard for children to get help with bullying because they do not always want to speak up.

We think it's important for head teachers to know about these issues so things can be improved. We got involved in the inquiry so that we can tell people what it's like and change things for other children.

**By Emma (18) and Haider (10),
young commissioners**

The benefits of school meals

'It depends really on what my mum's situation is. If I don't have the money I normally just wait until I get home [to eat]. Or me and my friends always like share food about and they normally, like, give me something.'

Food is a significant and increasing proportion of the cost of raising a child. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation, in written evidence, told the inquiry how the increase in the cost of food has outstripped wages:

'Over the past six years, the cost of food has gone up 25 %, which is faster than general prices have gone up, meaning food has become more expensive more quickly, putting pressure on family budgets.'

During term time, school meals have a significant effect on family budgets. Parents told our survey that they spend, on average, £136 a year on school meals for primary school children and £190 for secondary school pupils. This average includes those who are eligible for free school meals and so the actual costs are considerably higher; recent estimates of the cost of school meals are as much as £400 per year for those who pay for them.

‘When my mum’s got the money then we can get snacks. Its 25 pence per item. We don’t get snacks if it’s a bad week. Sometimes we’re hungry.’

In total, more than half (52%) of all parents in our survey said they have struggled with the costs of school meals at least ‘occasionally’. And one in five children (21%) said they have missed a meal at school at least once because they did not have enough money.

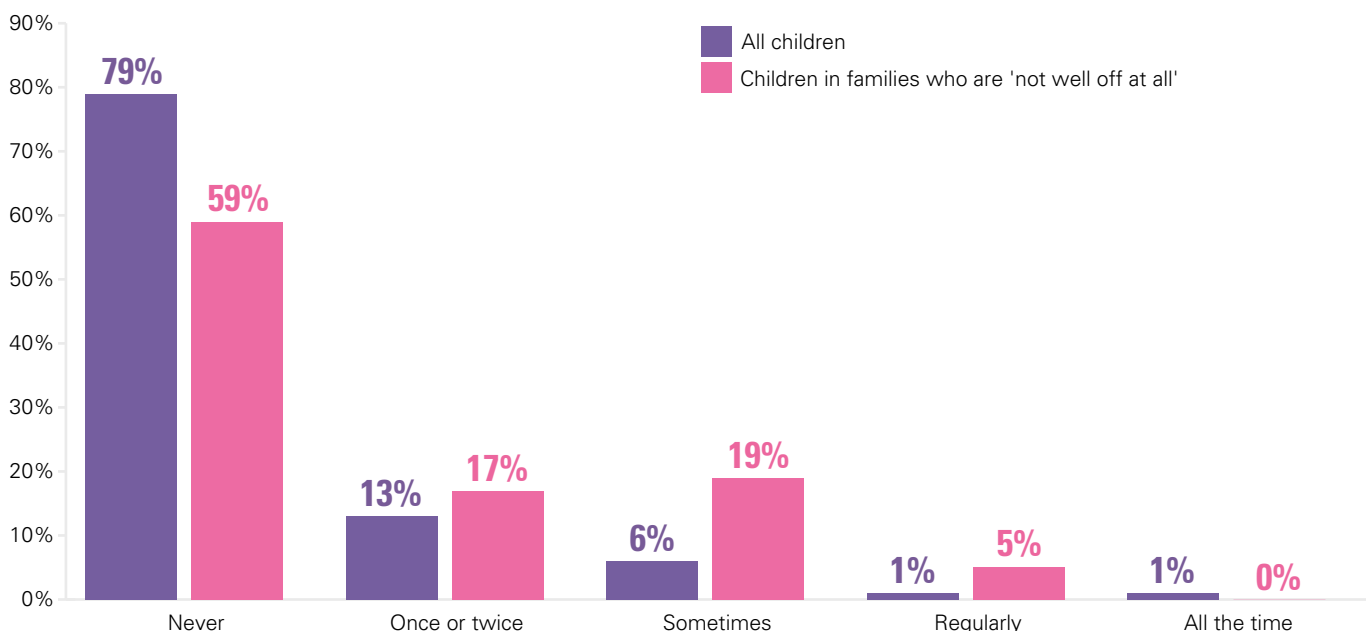
But as the inquiry heard, school meals do not just play a role in family finances. School meals have an important role to play in making sure children are receiving healthy, nutritional food, which in turn has a significant impact upon concentration, behaviour and ultimately, children’s ability to learn. Christine Blower, General Secretary of the National Union of Teachers, told the inquiry:

‘There’s a good deal of evidence to show that children who either arrive at school hungry or don’t have anything to eat at lunchtime...they just don’t concentrate or learn as well. It’s a virtuous circle... children who are fed learn better, children who learn better will understand about food.’

And it is not just about whether children eat or whether they go hungry. School meals – if prepared properly – are an opportunity to make sure that children are receiving good quality, nutritious food. Myles Bremner, Director of the School Food Plan, told the inquiry that:

‘It’s not necessarily not eating; it’s what you eat as well. It’s important to note that even children not living in poverty often consume the wrong type of food or drink... There is some very strong evidence which shows that children eating the wrong types of food at the wrong times of day can have a significant impact on their ability to concentrate and get the benefits of the school day.’

FIGURE 8: CHILDREN WHO HAVE MISSED A MEAL AT SCHOOL BECAUSE THEY DID NOT HAVE ENOUGH MONEY



Source: 2014 survey. Scope: GB children aged 10–17. Base: 1980

The provision of school meals can also play a part in educating children about food. Sue Wilkins, Acting Headteacher of The Arches Community Primary School, spoke to the inquiry about how her school uses school meals and the school catering staff to teach children and parents about food:

‘It’s about educating ourselves, educating children, parents. I’d like parents to come in and make a meal with the [school] cook and educate them in cooking sensibly with cheaper but healthy ingredients... I’ve recently seen a child refuse to eat vegetables but really it was that they’d never tasted them. It’s about increasing awareness and encouraging children to taste.’

Free school meals provide significant financial benefits for families, as well as improving children’s health, behaviour and ability to concentrate at school. The cost of food is increasingly putting a strain on family budgets. For some families on low-incomes, missing out on the benefit of free school meals can be the difference between getting by and falling into poverty.

‘Some weeks I have to borrow money for their school dinners... Sometimes I borrow from my sister for their dinner money. It’s due on a Monday and I get the child tax credit on the Thursday.’ Parent

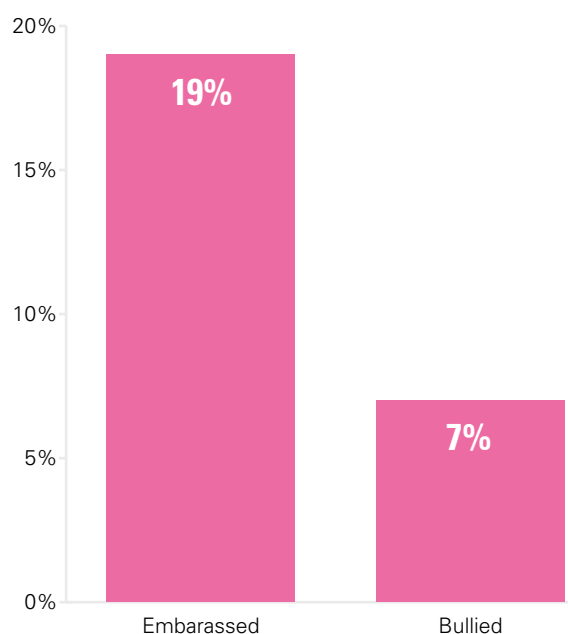
Stigma and lack of take up of free school meals

‘I remember when I was paying with a token, someone just came up to me and said ‘why do you use that... are you free school meals?’. And they were like ‘it’s because you’re poor isn’t it?’ and started saying that I was poor and everything like that.’

One key issue was around the stigma which can be associated with claiming free school meals. Both parents and young people spoke of the stigma of ‘relying on hand outs’ and concerns over bullying if children were made to appear different from their peers.

In our survey, of children who say that their family is ‘not well off at all’, one in five (19%) said they have been embarrassed because their family cannot afford school meals. One in 14 of these children (7%) said they had been bullied because of this.

FIGURE 9: CHILDREN IN FAMILIES WHICH ARE ‘NOT WELL OFF AT ALL’ REPORTING EMBARRASSMENT OR BULLYING BECAUSE THEIR FAMILY COULD NOT AFFORD SCHOOL MEALS



‘...you can always tell when someone is having free school meals because they hold up the queue and have their card inspected.’

Young person

The evidence highlighted the need for schools to consider carefully how they administer free school meals, so that children are not inadvertently singled out. Children and experts agreed that schools should have in place systems of paying for and collecting meals that do not differentiate between those who pay and those who are entitled to free school meals.

One parent told the inquiry that while her children are eligible for free school meals, her son will not claim them because he is embarrassed to do so. His school provides free school meal students with tokens that they must queue up for and hand to the cashier, singling out poorer students from their peers. Others told of how free school meal pupils are marked with stickers next to their name in the register, further serving to make them stand out.

‘My friend and her sister are on free school meals and everyone always asks her about her mum and she doesn’t like to talk about it. Her little sister gets picked on about it.’

Evidence from the Catholic Education Service, which represents schools with a higher than average intake from deprived areas, but lower than average take-up of free school meals⁹, suggest part of the problem may be cultural reasons, including: stigma associated with particular ethnic groups, language barriers, preference for international food or a lack of understanding of the system in the UK.¹⁰

Many of the proposed solutions to overcoming cultural issues – including making the application process more accessible, sharing learning between schools and promoting free school meal availability and eligibility – would also be effective in overcoming other barriers to take up.

9. Catholic Education Service – Digest of 2013 Census Data for schools and Colleges in England: www.catholiceducation.org.uk/ces-census/item/download/18977_2e3811c1c451ea06087e02cf7a00ef9d

10. Catholic Education Service – Cultural Diversity & Free School Meals: Explaining the low take up of Free School Meals in Catholic Schools

Children in poverty not entitled to receive free school meals

'A lot of poverty happens because people work, they don't have enough income, maybe they're better off than being on benefit, but like you say, her mum was not entitled to a free school meal because her mum working.'

From the start of the 2014–2015 school year, the government has extended entitlement to free school meals to include all infant school aged children (Years 1 and 2), meaning a further 160,000 children in poverty get a free school meal. However, that still leaves more than half a million (540,000) children living in poverty who are not currently entitled to free school meals.¹¹ This is principally because lone parents working 16 or more hours a week, or couples working 24 or more hours a week will not normally be entitled to free school meals – no matter how little they earn.

The inquiry heard concerns from teachers and experts that for these families, often in work but struggling on low wages, missing out on free school meals means they will simply spend less money on food – resulting in food of lower nutritional value – or children going without lunch altogether.

In oral evidence to the inquiry, Miles Bremner, Director of the School Food Plan, said: '...There are 700,000¹² children living in poverty who are not entitled to a free school meal. And the evidence shows that those children from the poorest backgrounds, if they do not eat school meals, they spend a lot less [on their food]. The average amount [the poorest children spent] on a lunch is £1.62 and what those children were eating was often of lower nutritional value which in turn then affects their ability to concentrate in the afternoon.'

The majority of those who the inquiry heard from supported the expansion of free school meals, though not all agreed whether this should be on a universal or targeted basis.

Bremner also went on to highlight evidence¹³ showing that in areas that have piloted universal free school meals, schools realised benefits including increased academic achievement and well-being. Despite being a less-targeted measure, the gain in academic achievement was most pronounced for the poorest children:

'When the policy was applied in Wolverhampton to 50% [of students], the academic benefits were not realised... and about a third did not take up their entitlement. Whereas when it became a universal benefit, take up did get up to over 80%.'

'And most startlingly, and importantly, the academic attainment was most pronounced in those poorest children. The conclusion is because you created at lunchtime a common environment, everybody was on the same level field.'

Sue Royston, Senior Policy Officer at Citizens Advice, told the inquiry that: *'There is a real concern about the children just outside the entitlement to free school meals, because their parents often can't afford to pay for the school meals, so we'd like to see entitlement to schools meals – if it can't be universal – going much higher up the income scale.'*

11. Inquiry into hunger and food poverty: The Children's Society's written submission (2014) www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/Inquiry%20into%20food%20poverty%20-%20The%20Children%27s%20Society%20written%20submission.pdf

12. Following the expansion of free school meals to infant school pupils, the latest figure is 500,000 children in poverty missing out on a free school meal. See 'Inquiry into hunger and food poverty: The Children's Society's written submission' above

13. Department for Education – Evaluation of the free school meals pilot: impact report (2012) www.gov.uk/government/publications/evaluation-of-the-free-school-meals-pilot-impact-report

Free school meals and Universal Credit

‘My mum got denied from me having free school dinners, ‘cause she works too many hours.’

A number of charities – including The Children’s Society – have expressed concern that changes to the benefits system following the introduction of Universal Credit could mean that some children lose out on free school meals.

In particular, concerns have been raised that under Universal Credit, entitlement may be linked to earnings. This means that at a certain point of earnings, families would lose the entitlement to free school meals and the estimated £370 per child, per year this is worth.¹⁴

Sue Royston, at Citizens Advice, told the inquiry: ‘Under Universal Credit there will be a gradual gain from work as your hours of work go up. But if, as we think is going to happen,¹⁵ at a certain point of earning you lose free school meals, then you will lose – if you’ve got two children – £20 a week compared to if you were working for less.

‘Now that means one of two things is going to happen: either there’s no way parents are going to pay for school meals, or that’s going to be a barrier [to earning more] which will effectively trap children in poverty’.

The government is currently piloting the introduction of Universal Credit in a number of areas across England. Presently, any children in families who get Universal Credit will also be entitled to a free school meal.

The Children’s Society is among a number of charities calling on the government to commit to these same criteria when they roll Universal Credit out across the country. But the government is yet to propose a long term entitlement criteria for free school meals.

Free school meals and benefit delays

‘...they have certain rules and even though they know you need it [free school meals], they wouldn’t give you.’

Another reason that many families miss out on free school meals is that they experience delays in receiving the benefits or tax credits they are entitled to, or have these suspended incorrectly. In some cases receipt of these benefits are required in order to gain entitlement to free school meals, in these cases this can prevent children from receiving free school meals.

Sue Royston, of Citizens Advice, explained: ‘In order to have free school meals you have to be on certain benefits. So if your benefit is delayed that will then stop the person getting the free school meal. And, of course, you get backdating for the benefit but you don’t get backdating of the money you’ve lost from the free school meals.

‘And there has been an increasing tendency, particularly with the tax credit system, for child tax credit to be stopped while an investigation is done. These investigations can take many months and [children] have lost the free school meals throughout that period.’

The benefits that families receive from free school meals, but lose out on because of delays, can amount to a significant sum. The inquiry heard suggestions that the government should compensate parents affected by this.

14. The Children’s Society – Extending free school meals: What it means for child poverty in the UK www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/free_school_meals_and_child_poverty_briefing_nov_2012.pdf

15. Citizens Advice – Free School Meals policy means low income families could lose money for working extra hours www.citizensadvice.org.uk/index/pressoffice/press_index/press_2040401.htm

Recommendations

All schools should have a cashless system for school meals

The stigma which can be associated with free school meals can be a real problem for many children. In some cases the inquiry heard about schools segregating children on free school meals, making them join separate queues or giving them free school meal tickets.

However, many of the parents and young people told the inquiry that their school makes sure those students on free school meals are not made to stand out. In particular, they use cashless systems, such as swipe cards, for children to buy their lunch.

All schools should implement a cashless system. This will help increase take-up of free school meals and reduce incidents of bullying and embarrassment, which this inquiry found to be significant problems.

The government should expand free school meal eligibility to all families with children living on low incomes

More than half a million children living in poverty are currently missing out on a free school meal, and it is unacceptable that so many of these children miss out simply because their parents are in low paid work.

The government must make it a priority to make sure that all children living in poverty, including those in low income working families, are entitled to receive a free school meal. The best way to do this is to provide free school meals to all families in receipt of Universal Credit.

During delays or suspensions of benefits payments, children should be entitled to receive a free school meal. If they miss out, schools and the government should seek to compensate them for missing out on benefits they are entitled to.

Pupils on free school meals should be able to roll over unspent money from day to day

In most secondary schools, children on free school meals are allocated a daily budget for buying food – usually around £2 – which is added to their school account. Whereas other children can roll over any unspent money in their school accounts to the next day, children on free school meals lose any money they do not spend.

Children on free school meals should not be treated differently, and should be allowed to roll-over any unspent money, so they get the full benefit of their entitlement.

Some children told the inquiry that they did not like the meals provided at lunch time by schools, and many simply went without lunch. Allowing children to roll over money would mean they can choose to buy breakfasts in the morning or snacks at break times instead.

Children should not be penalised for being on free school meals, and should have the same flexibility and be able to make the same choices as their peers.

6. SCHOOL MATERIALS AND TRIPS

Overview

In the inquiry, we found that school materials cost quite a bit. We're not just talking about pens and notebooks that you buy at the beginning of the year – we mean things such as books for an English Literature course or make up kits for Hair and Beauty.

The cost or need to acquire these is usually not revealed until they are required, usually well into the term. Adding up what these cost certainly made some of the group go very pale! But the point? They shouldn't have to, as it's actually illegal for schools to charge for course materials related to the curriculum, whether they are A-level, GCSE or even below.

By India (17), Fatimah (12), Olli (17) and Cyrus (14), young commissioners

The Education Act 1996 sets out the law on charging for school activities, and government guidance is clear that schools cannot charge for any materials related to the delivery of the national curriculum, whether that relates to education during or outside of school hours.

But it is clear from our inquiry that some schools are charging for many materials, placing huge pressure on struggling families and restricting children's ability to take part fully in their education. As discussed later in this section, 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. Nearly two thirds said that they had missed a school trip because of the cost.

But the inquiry heard that some schools did not understand the overall cost of education. Different teachers and school departments may be setting costs at what they believe is a reasonable amount, without realising that parents are being faced with multiple costs from across the school.

Schools – particularly the governing bodies – need to be more aware of what they are setting as the overall cost of education. Governors should audit the costs to families at their school and think about how they can reduce them and support poorer families.

‘[Teachers] say, ‘You might not want to go on this trip but it would really benefit your grade.’ Well if you haven’t got the money of course you’re going to be at a disadvantage.’

Young person

Exchange from the oral evidence sessions

Cyrus, 14, young commissioner: ‘Do young people always know how much course materials will cost in advance of choosing their courses?’

Tess Ridge, Professor of Social Policy, University of Bath: ‘...It would be very hard, until you’d gone through that particular part of your schooling to have a really good sense of all the extra things that you might need. You wouldn’t know about that before you started.’

Sara Bryson, Children North East: ‘We try and ask schools to produce a calculator of what’s happening across all departments because often the head of department will know what the costs are in music or PE but there’s no-one with oversight. If you’re doing six different subjects, what would the cost be within a whole year? So we often do challenge governors to try and get a handle on that and produce it much more clearly laid out what those costs are going to be for a year.’

Charging for school activities: Advice for governing bodies, school leaders, school staff and local authorities (Department for Education)¹⁶

‘School governing bodies and local authorities, cannot charge for:

- education provided during school hours (including the supply of any materials, books, instruments or other equipment);
- education provided outside school hours if it is part of the national curriculum¹, or part of a syllabus for a prescribed public examination that the pupil is being prepared for at the school, or part of religious education;

‘It is important to note that no child should be excluded from an activity simply because his or her parents are unwilling or unable to pay... If a parent is unwilling or unable to pay, their child must still be given an equal chance to go on the visit. Schools should make it clear to parents at the outset what their policy for allocating places on school visits will be.

‘When making requests for voluntary contributions, parents must not be made to feel pressurised into paying as it is voluntary and not compulsory.’

16. 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

Children’s experience of the cost of materials

‘One of the big things is that child poverty actually affects your education, not just how you seem at school but actually how you learn at school, whether that’s through buying textbooks or ingredients for like, Food Tech, and stuff like that. All of it really has an impact.’

As well as school uniforms and meals, materials and equipment – such as text books, work books, dictionaries, stationery and specialised equipment – all add to the cost of education for children and parents. On average parents said that they spent more than £60 per child each year on these costs.

While schools should not charge for materials related to the delivery of the curriculum, they are allowed to charge for ‘extras’. But there was concern from some experts that schools have broad definitions of what ‘optional extras’ are.

While these costs may not seem much on their own, when the costs for all subjects that a child studies are added together – or the costs for siblings in school – they can often reach a daunting amount. This can be especially problematic if requests come all at the same time at the beginning of term.

Schools need to be clearer about these costs not only to help them audit the price they are setting as the cost of participation, but also to help parents and children prepare.

‘[Schools] should have a list of what it’s going to cost you for all the materials, because they don’t tell you that it’s going to cost until they go, ‘Yeah, you’re going to have to pay for such and such.’ And then [you] get told that there’s no budget for it [but] you don’t actually have that money spare.’

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. And a quarter of parents said they have been charged for text or reference books.¹⁷

Excerpt from the oral evidence sessions

Young commissioner: ‘I think I agree with all of you... But I recently interviewed my former head teacher and he was like ‘we don’t provide any courses [for] which you have to buy materials’. But in actual fact, they do. He was saying ‘If you need to buy materials the school will help you’. But the issue with that is some people are not able, or they don’t have access to the information to go about finding out how the school can support them. You just don’t want to go to the school and say ‘look, I need help. I need to buy books, I can’t afford it.’ [It’s] just kind of a shameful thing. You just feel guilty about it. So I think more needs to be done in terms of information sharing and advice and support... That has to be done in a way that doesn’t make you feel bad.’

'At the end of the day, if you don't get a good education, then you're not going to get out of poverty.'

Young person

Where they could not afford to buy the right equipment, families felt that many teachers lacked an understanding that this might be as a result of living in poverty. This led to some teachers handling situations insensitively, and to children feeling embarrassed or ashamed.

'[My daughter] kept going to Art and the teacher kept saying to her about this folder [that I couldn't afford to buy] and she felt quite intimidated. You know, the teacher could have stepped back and thought 'well why hasn't she got this folder?'. Parent

The charity Children North East told the inquiry of one school where children were required to bring in their own ingredients for a home economics class. Those who did not bring the ingredients had them provided them by the school.

But while the school allowed children who brought in their own ingredients to eat what they made, the children who used the school's ingredients had the food they had made thrown in the bin. The school had not considered the possibility that some of those students who 'forgot' their ingredients in fact simply could not afford to buy them.

'For design we have to pay £6 to make our models and take them home. So if we don't pay for it then we can't use it so we have made it for no reason.'

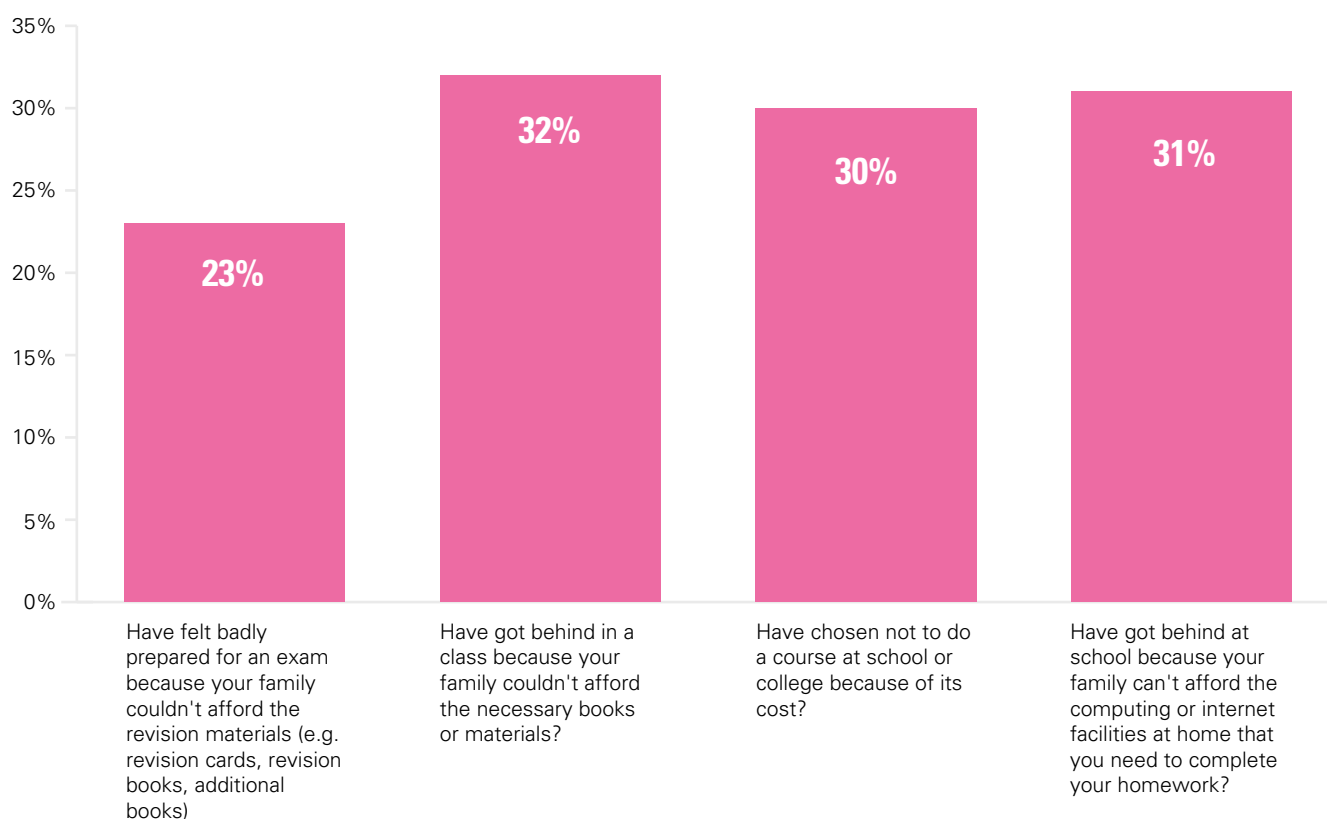
It should be better understood that if children are not able to keep their own work they are more likely to feel disengaged from the curriculum, and may also be embarrassed in front of their peers. Guidance should clarify that children being able to keep the products of their work is core to their experience of the curriculum.

The inquiry also heard that paying large deposits – particularly non-refundable deposits – at short notice can be a struggle for families in poverty. Tess Ridge, Professor of Social Policy of at the University of Bath, told the inquiry that:

'If you haven't got very much money, what seems like a small deposit to perhaps a teacher or a school can be really hard to get....we're quite often talking about children who've got brothers and sisters who might also need a deposit, or need to go on the trip, or need extra clothes or equipment. And [it's] not only the size of the deposit but any latitude and any space to pay the deposit, so everybody else has to pay their money by a certain point. Some families need a bit longer to get that little bit of money and they don't get it quite often.'

Schools should not require payment of non-refundable deposits for activities and enable families to make payments in instalments in order to spread the cost of activities.

FIGURE 10: PROBLEMS EXPERIENCED BY CHILDREN WHO SAY THEIR FAMILIES ARE 'NOT WELL-OFF AT ALL'



Source: 2014 survey. Scope: GB children aged 10–17. Base: 170

Children priced out of subjects

'When I first got into secondary school, it got progressively more tough because of the requirements. We needed to pay for things like my sketchbooks for Art and Tech... The money was being stretched quite far, and, like, I started realising then that I couldn't keep asking for those things.'

Children should never be put in a position where decisions about the courses they want to take are dictated by what they can afford.

But the inquiry heard evidence from a number of sources that children – particularly in secondary schools – are avoiding certain subjects because of the additional costs of equipment, trips or 'extras' associated with them. This was seen as a particular problem for subjects like PE, Music, Design, Art, Drama or Photography, which require expensive equipment or activities.

'With Art, the teachers told us that if you don't have your own camera it would be harder to take Art as you would have to borrow their cameras. It makes it harder to do that option.'

Our survey of young people aged 10–17 found that one in six (14%) of all children said they had chosen not to take a course at school or college because of the cost of materials. This increases to almost one in three (30%) children who say they live in families that are 'not well off at all'.

The Child Poverty Action Group similarly presented evidence to the inquiry – based on interviews with 400 young people – that one in four low income students had dropped a subject based upon the cost of materials.

Many young people – including the young commissioners themselves – gave examples of being charged by their schools for text books, work books and revision guides.

And while some subjects didn't exclude children completely, success did depend on the ability of a child's family to pay for materials. Sara Bryson, of Children North East, gave an example during the third oral evidence session:

'What happens in practice in terms of materials for children in school is that it's very discriminatory and stigmatising... We had children doing GCSE Art who said that certain materials were provided. But the more materials you had [at home] the better grade you would get.

'So if you were doing course work and you only had access to pencils you would get a limited grade but if you had acrylic paints, watercolour paints, all kinds of other materials at home that you could use you were more likely to get a better grade in that subject.'

These examples are supported by our research. Nearly a third of children whose family were 'not well off at all' told our survey they have fallen behind in class because their family could not afford the necessary books or materials.

'I have to pay for the revision books I need to revise.'

Revision guides were repeatedly mentioned as materials children are charged for. And our survey revealed the extent to which this can affect children, with nearly a quarter of children in families who were 'not well off at all' telling our survey that they felt badly-prepared for an exam because their family could not afford revision materials.

Homework and digital access

'We get stacks of homework and most of it is on the computer... I had to tell the teacher to print out a sheet so I could just fill it in but the teacher kept saying it wasn't high enough quality homework. I would only score a five or three out of ten.'

There is an increasing expectation that children will have access to a computer and internet connection at home. Homework is increasingly being set which requires online research or directs children to specific web addresses, and many schools use online homework logs to help parents track their child's homework. There is an acceptance from parents and young people that computers and the internet are an increasing part of daily life in schools.

However, not having internet or computer access – or not having the latest computer equipment, software or adequate broadband – should not be allowed to affect children's ability to complete homework.

Yet nearly a third of children in our survey who were in families that were 'not well off at all' said they had fallen behind at school because their family cannot afford the computer or internet facilities at home they need to complete their homework.

Many felt that while help may be available, the onus is on young people to approach the school and say they do not have a computer or internet access, which can be difficult for children worried about the stigma of poverty.

'We didn't have internet in the house and that made it really difficult because we had to drive to Grandma's... They have an ICT suite at school but it closes at a certain time and my mum needs to pick me up [so] I used to have to do it at break and lunch.'

Most schools run homework clubs where children without internet access at home can complete work, either at lunch time or after school. But young people told the inquiry it was difficult to find free computers during lunch or break time. And accessing them after school means poorer children miss out on joining clubs and extra-curricular activities with their peers. As one respondent put it, homework club risks becoming ‘poor kids’ homework club’.

Children North East told the third oral evidence session: ‘We find that the onus is always on the young people to have to approach someone and say, ‘I do not have computer access.’ And when that has happened young people have said that there’s either complete disbelief from the teacher thinking they’re lying to get out of completing their homework or they say ‘go to the homework club’ which is on sometimes after school against other very exciting clubs that, again, mean young people miss out on opportunities, or in some cases becomes basically the poor kids’ homework club. The homework club for anyone who hasn’t got a computer. And people don’t want to go to them, they’re embarrassed, they kind of really stigmatised and people get bullied if they do go to them.’

One option is for children without internet access or a computer to do their work in local public libraries. But this is not always a realistic option for children, especially those in rural areas where accessing a library can mean a long journey on public transport. And pressures on local authority funds have seen a number of libraries closures and reduced services over the last four years.

‘They just said that you have to use school computers. But the school computers are full at lunchtimes and break time. We can use them [after school] but I need to take the bus home.’

Many young people described being met with disbelief when they told a teacher that they did not have a computer or internet access at home. This underlines that reducing the impact of poverty is not just about providing support, but also about developing teachers’ understanding of how poverty affects children’s school lives and how to reduce stigma.

‘I had to do tech homework on the computer and the teacher started shouting at me because I didn’t do it. I keep telling him that I didn’t have a computer and then he just kept shouting at me and I had to say out loud that I didn’t have a computer and everyone started laughing.’

‘...for Spanish, they said to go on this dictionary website and it didn’t work on the old computer that I had so I got detention.’

Young person

'Voluntary' contributions

'Some trips are compulsory and you have to go to get a grade. So [for] Art, I had to go to this museum that I had to pay for, it was compulsory to go. Otherwise, I wouldn't have got a bit of my grade so I had to go.'

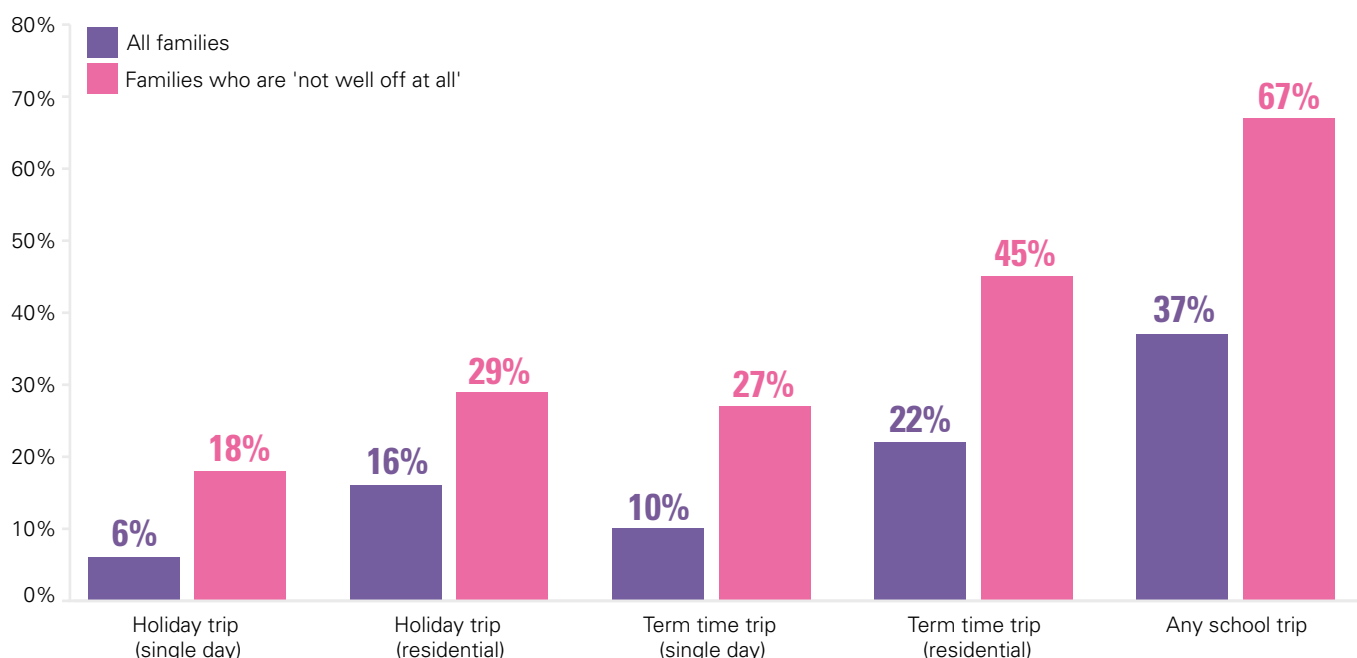
Where schools ask parents for voluntary contributions, government guidance says they should make it clear that parents are under no obligation to contribute. The guidance also states that parents must not be made to feel pressurised into paying voluntary contributions.

However, many schools are failing to communicate this clearly with parents when asking for contributions. This was particularly the case for school trips. Sue Royston of Citizens Advice told the first oral evidence session that:

'[One thing schools can do is to] make sure that it's very clear that the payments are voluntary. Again we did a survey of parents and they said it was often very difficult to actually tell that it was voluntary for a parent to pay for the school trip.'

The Association of Teachers and Lecturers told of one school where 'the voluntary contributions requested are very high and last year, parents who didn't pay them were sent letters as reminders, and asked why they didn't pay them. For parents who simply can't afford them, this was a humiliating situation.'

FIGURE 11: CHILDREN SAYING THEY HAVE MISSED OUT ON A TRIP DUE TO COST



Source: 2014 survey. Scope: GB children aged 10–17. Base: 1980

‘Our school’s doing a trip now to Iceland and it’s like £925.’

Young person

School trips

‘There was a history trip to the Big Pit in Wales, I didn’t go on that. It was too expensive to go, mum couldn’t afford it at the time, it was twenty-something pound. I come home and talked to mum about it and we couldn’t afford it... It felt bad when everyone come back and said how much [of] an amazing time they had.’

Government guidance states that ‘no child should be excluded from an activity simply because his or her parents are unwilling or unable to pay... If a parent is unwilling or unable to pay, their child must still be given an equal chance to go on the visit.’

But in practice, many parents and young people who gave evidence to the inquiry spoke of missing out on schools trips they could not afford, or being told they must contribute to mandatory trips and visits.

This can affect not just children’s ability to participate in education – where the trip has an educational element – but also means children in poverty are missing out on the important social aspect of schools trips.

‘I think it’s quite sad they [children who can’t afford trips] get left out because really as soon as you get back, it’s the talk of the school. Everyone’s talking about it for the rest of the year, even when you get to secondary school you still talk about it.’

Despite the seemingly clear guidance, large numbers of children are missing out on trips due to affordability. In our survey, one in five (22%) of all children said they missed out on a trip during term-time because the family couldn’t afford it. This increased to two in five (38%) children who said their family was ‘not well off at all’.

‘I think that if those people don’t have enough [to go on a trip], instead of just leaving them there to do work I think the school should help pay for the trip.’

‘[My daughter] had a chance to go to camp this year with the school and I think that was £280. That’s if you’re on benefits, that was the cut price. I just couldn’t afford it.’
Parent

Recommendations

'Poverty proofing' should be promoted as a model of good practice

The inquiry heard that children are expected to pay for materials across many of their courses, with many children priced out of some courses altogether. But schools, governors and teachers may not necessarily have a good handle on the cost of participation. A first step to tackling the impact of poverty is to make sure schools are aware of these barriers.

Children North East told the inquiry about their work with schools to 'poverty proof' the school day. This involved an audit of pupils to explore a range of issues concerning the cost of school. Children would themselves interview teachers, parents and governors to explore the issues and produce a tailored plan for the school to tackle issues of poverty within the school.

The commission felt this was an extremely effective local approach to helping children living in poverty, and should be promoted across the country, with schools encouraged to report on the steps they have taken.

Ofsted should also have a role inspecting how well schools are doing at 'poverty proofing' (see later recommendations).

Voluntary must mean voluntary; no child should be excluded for an inability to pay

Government guidance should be strengthened to make sure schools communicate effectively with parents to clearly explain when contributions are voluntary and make clear that no child should miss out on a key part of the school day because their family can't afford to pay.

In particular, guidance should clarify that children should be able to take home any projects they make at school as a crucial part of their engagement with the curriculum, regardless of their ability to pay. Not only would this be an incentive to pupils to learn and feel pride in their work, it would also prevent children in low-income families from being singled out and embarrassed.

There should be no non-returnable deposits for school activities and there should always be an option to pay by instalments

The inquiry heard of many parents who would do 'anything it takes' to get their children on school trips or to take part in school activities. But demands for up-front payments are a barrier for families who simply do not have savings or surplus income.

They create situations where low-income families, who have little money to spare, are asked to risk putting the limited cash they have into a deposit they may lose. Many will not put their children forward for a trip as a result.

Government guidance on charging for materials should require schools to provide payment options and not insist on non-returnable deposits. This would give more families the space to budget so their children can take part in the same activities as their peers.

Itemised costs should be made available prior to signing up for a course

Government guidance should require schools, particularly school governors, to maintain an oversight of the costs of school in general, and of specific subjects. Being open with parents about these costs up front allows families to take informed decisions and plan for expenditure, and makes sure that schools have a handle on the costs they are asking parents to meet.

7. HOW CAN SCHOOLS REDUCE THE IMPACT OF POVERTY

Exchange from the oral evidence sessions

Emma, 18, young commissioner: 'Do you think staff in schools have the right attitude towards young children living in poverty?'

Sue Wilkins, Acting Headteacher of The Arches Community Primary School: 'I would have thought staff, particularly in areas of social deprivation, are well aware of [the impact of living in poverty]. I would say that they're very emotionally in tune with the children's feelings.'

'We do an awful lot of work, and I'm sure all schools do, to redress the balance and to work on ensuring that self-esteem and the capacity to work in school and be ready for school is there... For example Sats have just gone, haven't they? Summer Sats, we've all done them.'

'My staff will be in there at eight in the morning making sure children have breakfast before the test, extra revision in the evenings, just going that extra mile to make sure those children make significant improvements in their education, and it does work.'

'That's obviously going above and beyond the demands of a school day, making sure that after school things are in place and homework is there and everything. It's just making sure that maybe some families who haven't got the capacity to do that at home, they haven't got the computers, they haven't got the money to buy these books to support the learning, we give them these to take home.'

'[But] I think you will have staff that don't understand and I think you would in any walk of life. You're always going to find people that don't emotionally attach to people and cannot see their needs, and that's a fact. You could have that in any profession.'

'However I think particularly in the teaching profession I think the staff are very aware, very in tune and often obviously go into it to support children... It would be sad if that wasn't the case, but I'm sure it has happened... I think it's just about putting on the table that this can happen if we're not careful.'

The inquiry heard that children in poverty face a postcode lottery when it comes to the help they get from schools and local authorities. Some schools actively seek to understand and address the impacts of poverty on children, while others seem ignorant or indifferent, and offer little or no help.

The government issues guidance to schools on the cost of school uniforms, activities and materials, and legislation governs which students are entitled to free school meals. But beyond this, the help that is provided to poorer pupils is largely a matter for individual local councils, schools and governing bodies to decide. In some areas, the impact of poverty on children's school experience is being amplified by schools failing to address the issue.

But the inquiry found that there are many examples of good practice. And those schools doing well are keen to share this knowledge with others. In particular, the inquiry found many examples of teachers going above and beyond what is required in their efforts to support children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

This inquiry found there is a very important role for school governors in lessening the impact of poverty on children, and this was something the young commissioners were keen to address.

Governors can have a significant impact on a wide range of areas, including: making sure that schools clearly communicate with parents, making sure that the school understands poverty in their area, auditing the total cost of taking part in education, ensuring the school operates flexible payment options and being transparent and consultative when it comes to how pupil premium money is being spent.

'The school experience is not separate from the home experience. Children with wealthy parents have a different experience of childhood and school than poor ones'
Parent

Some schools have allocated one governor a remit that includes keeping an eye on what parents are being asked to pay. Governors can have oversight of the costs across the whole school, which teachers responsible for particular courses or departments may not know.



Pupil premium

‘My school isn’t too bad, ‘cause it’s such a small school we are all kind of in the same boat and they do help you with financial stuff most of the time. Like, if you go on a school trip they’ll say: ‘you can pay it off in certain months’. They’re alright with that.’

For every child entitled to and registered for the pupil premium, schools receive between £300 and £1900, depending on factors such as their age, whether they are living in care or they are children of service personnel. For a pupil in primary school who has been eligible for free school meals at any point in the last six years, the government will provide the school with £1300 a year in additional funding. For a pupil in secondary school, the figure is £935.

Yet the inquiry heard that in some local authorities, under-registration of pupil premium is as high as 30–40%.¹⁸ It is clear that these councils need to make sure they are working with schools to make sure every pupil entitled to the premium is registered.

Many young people also said that there should be more oversight of how schools choose to spend the pupil premium and the children entitled to this support should have a say in how it is spent. The extra funding should benefit the disadvantaged pupils it is intended to support, rather than fund general, untargeted activities.

Lucy Powell MP told the inquiry: ‘some schools do use it to help with the school uniform but a lot of them don’t, and a lot of it is spent on things like sports coaches who run extracurricular activities which these children don’t go to, or music after school which these children don’t go to.’

Robbie Coleman, from the Education Endowment Fund, gave a further example: ‘For example, something that’s quite appealing or quite popular in terms of spending the pupil premium will be something like reducing class sizes because parents like the idea that their children are in smaller classes.’

‘..But in actual fact, the evidence suggests that schools have found it quite hard in the past to reduce class sizes by a small number of pupils and to improve attainment. So that would be quite a good example where we would suggest looking at the wider evidence [of where pupil premium works] is useful because it can sometimes actually encourage schools to question some initial assumptions.’

Instead, pupil premium should be spent in areas that directly benefit the most disadvantaged pupils, such as help with school uniforms, transport, breakfast clubs or helping to remove other barriers to learning to help narrow the attainment gap between children living in poverty and their peers.

‘I was part of [the] Children in Care consultation, all children in care are entitled to the pupil premium which the school gets from the government... The school can spend it the way they want to and they could spend it on other children and young people rather than specifically focussing on them.’

To do this, schools need to have a sound understanding of the particular needs of children living in low income families in their area. They should use evidence about what works elsewhere, and be willing to share and learn from best practice.

18. Department for Education – Pupils not claiming Free School Meals (2013)

And while there is undoubtedly a role for school governors in overseeing how pupil premium money is spent, others called for Ofsted, local councils or the government to have a greater role in ensuring schools spend their pupil premium money in a way that benefits the most disadvantaged children.

Valentine Mulholland, of the National Association of Headteachers, told the inquiry: 'the schools that are using pupil premium well are really thinking about what makes up disadvantage, and how can I tackle it. And that will include the things you've been looking at this week. And it will include what you're talking about which is about understanding how children feel disadvantaged in a school.'

'... this could be something that is reviewed as part of pupil premium reviews so that when Ofsted are looking at how children from disadvantaged backgrounds that are being supported, that they look more widely at [whether there are] other policies which are discriminating against children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

'But I think it's also [about government] publicising the guidance. It's been published less than a year ago.. and my colleagues were not aware of it. '



‘...teachers need to be speaking to students, speaking to parents... to find out about the situation of students.’

Young person

Communication and transparency

‘I don’t want to go to my teacher and say: ‘I can’t afford it’.’

Lessening the impact of poverty on children’s school experience can be as simple as improving the way that schools communicate with children and their families.

Parents need to know well in advance that costs are coming, be explicitly made aware when costs are voluntary and be actively told about support available, rather than being left to approach the school when they’re already struggling.

Schools must also make sure that help is offered in a way that doesn’t stigmatise children and set them apart from their peers. Parents spoke of it being ‘embarrassing’ or ‘shameful’ to have to approach schools to ask for help. This could be made easier for them if the help available was clearly communicated.

Many parents also told the inquiry that schools need to make sure they are flexible in their request for money. The finances of the poorest families are usually the most unpredictable, and it can take many weeks or months for families to save up enough money for items such as school trips or uniforms.

Being flexible in this regard could include accepting payments over time, not asking for large or non-refundable deposits or even setting up savings schemes so families can set aside small amounts every week for school related costs.

The inquiry heard from a number of young people who said they delayed or avoided asking their parents to pay for school related costs or passing on letters, because they did not want to put pressure on their parents.

In addition to the possible distress caused to children being asked to deliver news they believe will upset their parents, this can result in parents only finding out about payments due close to the deadline or children missing out when in fact support is available.

The efforts of teachers

‘Well it depends on the teacher. Like, if they understand it then they’ll help you but... if they don’t understand it, then they just won’t ‘cause they don’t know what it’s about.’

The inquiry heard a number of examples of individual teachers helping children from their own pockets and under their own initiatives, with teachers providing a safety net for children, particularly when it comes to food.

Teachers are providing food directly to children, and driving the establishment of breakfast clubs with free or affordable food. The inquiry heard of teachers putting

money into children's school accounts, so the children could afford to buy snacks without other pupils knowing they were receiving help.

'...The lunch people, if you don't have enough money they sometimes let you off... they give you crisps or a cookie.'

Myles Bremner, Director of the School Food Plan, told the inquiry:

'When it comes to hungry children, I have not yet visited a school where teachers won't provide food from their own pockets or ensure that the school has a mechanism for a breakfast club where there's either a free or very cheap breakfast available... [but] that doesn't necessarily mean we should be getting to that point. I do not underestimate the role that teachers play in providing a safety net for young people.'

This relies on teachers intimately knowing the circumstances of the families and communities they work with and having an understanding of the impact on families. Struggling families, particularly those working for low wages or those who have experienced recent changes to their circumstances, will often slip through this informal safety net.

Sue Wilkins, Acting Headteacher of The Arches Community Primary School, told the inquiry: '...where children have no money for a snack in the morning... I would put money on their account... [But] that is the children that I really know, and I know the families really well. I would just know to do that. But there will be children that are slipping through that I don't know... families who may just be going into struggling.'

While the inquiry heard many examples of the positive role that teachers played, they also heard examples of teachers who failed to understand how poverty can impact children's experience of school. While half of children told our survey that they felt able to approach a teacher if they struggle to afford something school-related, just under a third (30%) said they would feel unable to go to any teacher or member of staff.

Most teachers will have no training – whether in teacher training or as part of their on-going professional development – on the impact of poverty for a child's education. If they have not experienced these issues first hand, many will be unaware these problems exist.

This can affect, for example, how teachers react to children who do not have the right equipment or uniform. For children, this can be the difference between feeling singled out and punished for being poor and feeling supported.

Exchange from the oral evidence sessions

Cyrus, 14, young commissioner: 'How could we do that, how could we ensure that schools do cover those essential basic things for their teacher training? So how could we persuade schools to do it or enforce them?'

Sara Bryson, Children North East: 'In the North East... we developed training that looks at what is poverty, how you measure poverty, the impact that poverty has on a child's life and we use the latest research and knowledge... And we found that teachers and governors are constantly asking for it. There's a real thirst out there.'

Recommendations

Teachers should receive training to improve their understanding of poverty

The government, local councils and governors all have a role to play in reducing the impact of poverty on children’s school experience. But it is teachers who work with children every day who can have the most direct impact on children.

Given the attainment gap for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, this is not just an issue of fairness for children or their experience of school, but is also key to raising standards. Child poverty exists in every community, and it is not enough for only the schools working in the most deprived areas to be aware of these issues. All teachers should receive training on poverty and its impact on children’s education.

Ofsted should inspect schools on how they support the poorest pupils, including confidential consultations with students

The current Ofsted framework already makes clear that inspectors will look at the attainment of specific groups of pupils, including those eligible for the pupil premium. But the young commissioners felt the current inspection framework is too narrow, and focuses largely on attainment.

The young commissioners felt it was appropriate for Ofsted to have a role in monitoring how schools support children from poorer backgrounds, how schools lessen the impact of poverty and whether school policies on materials and participation are discriminating against children on the basis of their family’s ability to pay.

This should include speaking confidentially to poorer pupils about their experience.

Communications should be direct with parents rather than through the children

Children have told the inquiry they find it difficult to ask their parents for money for

materials or activities when they know they are struggling. Schools should make sure they are dealing directly with parents, to ensure they receive communications in a timely manner and to minimise the emotional burden on children.

Schools must be transparent with parents and students on how pupil premium money is being spent. Pupils for whom pupil premium funding is paid should have a say in how it is spent.

The government are clear that pupil premium is ‘given to publicly funded schools to raise the attainment of disadvantaged pupils and close the gap between them and their peers’.¹⁹

Head teachers and school governing bodies are accountable for this impact, and are already required to publish annual details of how they spend pupil premium money and the impact it has had.²⁰

But the quality of these reports varies greatly. Many provide little information on how the money has been spent, no evidence or information about impact and no information on how much money has been spent on particular activities.

The young commissioners felt that schools should be consulting directly with young people who qualify for pupil premium funding, to make sure it benefits the children it is directed towards. Schools need to be much better at providing detail on how they are spending pupil premium money and the impact it has, by publishing a meaningful annual report.

The government should consider making the publication of an annual report an explicit requirement of the pupil premium ‘conditions of grant’, with specific guidance on what it must contain.²¹

19. Department for Education – Pupil premium: funding for schools and alternative provision www.gov.uk/pupil-premium-information-for-schools-and-alternative-provision-settings

20. Department for Education – What maintained schools must publish online www.gov.uk/what-maintained-schools-must-publish-online#pupil-premium

21. Department for Education – Pupil premium grant 2014 to 2015: conditions of grant www.gov.uk/government/publications/pupil-premium-grant-2014-to-2015-conditions-of-grant

8. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

For too long, we have not understood the true cost of school for children and young people. This report provides fresh and compelling evidence after an in-depth investigation over several months, led by the young commissioners.

Across the country, millions of families are struggling with the cost of school life, leading to too many children missing out on the opportunity to make the very most of their education. The findings of this inquiry show that the impact of school costs is leading to children feeling embarrassed, bullied and excluded because they cannot afford the same things as their peers.

In many cases, schools, local authorities and national government are all not doing enough to make sure children receive a genuinely free education. From government failing to provide free school meals to every child in poverty, through to schools throwing away children's work where they cannot pay for materials, there are opportunities to do more at every level.

There is a great deal of good practice too. Children and adults alike told the inquiry of the lengths to which teachers will go to support children struggling with the costs of school; from giving up their time to support those children without access to books or computers at home, through to paying from their own pocket when a child comes to school without lunch.

However, this form of informal safety net cannot, and should not, be relied upon to give children the consistent support they need to make sure they are always able to afford the costs of school. Change is needed to provide children with the support they need in the future.

Poverty affects every area of a child's life, and this is no different for school. The inquiry heard how poverty can make children feel singled out, stigmatised and bullied. It affects whether they are properly fed and clothed, and in turn their ability to concentrate and engage in learning.

The young commissioners have developed the recommendations of this inquiry based on both the evidence they gathered and their own experiences of school. They have set out an action plan to make sure no child suffers as a result of the cost of school life.

Recommendations by the young commissioners

Tackling the cost of school uniform

1. Schools should choose a simple, coloured uniform available with sew-on logos to make them more affordable

Too often families are being expected to find large amounts of money for uniforms which are available only from specialist suppliers. The Government must strengthen guidance to make sure that young people in poverty are not being adversely affected by school uniform policies.

Tackling the cost of school meals

2. All schools should have a cashless system for school meals

The stigma which can be associated with free school meals can be a real problem for many children. In some cases the inquiry heard about schools segregating children on free school meals, making them join separate queues or giving them free school meal tickets.

All schools should implement a cashless system. This will help with increasing take-up of school meals and reduce incidents of bullying and embarrassment.

3. The government should expand free school meal eligibility to all families with children living on low incomes

More than half a million children living in poverty are currently missing out on a free school meal. The government must make it a priority to ensure that all children living in poverty – including those in low income working families are entitled to receive a free school meal. The best way to make sure this is to provide Free School Meals to all families in receipt of Universal Credit.

Children should also be entitled to free school meals during delays or suspension of benefit payments, or families compensated for missing out.

4. Pupils on free school meals should be able to roll over unspent money from day to day

In most secondary schools, children on free school meals are allocated a daily budget for buying food – usually around £2 – which is added to their school account. Children lose any money that is left unspent by the end of the day.

Children on free school meals should be able to roll-over any unspent money, to give them more flexibility and make sure they are treated in the same way as their peers.

Tackling the cost of school materials and trips

5. 'Poverty proofing' should be promoted as a model of good practice

A first step to tackling the impact of poverty on school life is to make sure schools are aware of these barriers by checking, or 'poverty proofing', their ways of working, to make sure they don't cause problems to children in families on a low income.

6. Voluntary must mean voluntary; no child should be excluded for an inability to pay

In particular, guidance should be further strengthened to make sure schools communicate with parents and clearly explain when contributions are voluntary. In particular, guidance should clarify that taking home the things they make is a crucial part of a child's learning and helps them to engage with the curriculum. No school should ever throw away a child's work because they are unable to afford to pay for it.

7. There should be no non-returnable deposits for school activities and there should always be an option to pay by instalments

The inquiry heard of many parents who would do 'anything it takes' to get their children on school trips or to take part in school activities. But demands for up-front payments are a barrier for families who simply do not have savings or surplus income.

By providing payment options and not insisting on non-returnable deposits, this gives families more space to budget so their children can take part.

8. Itemised costs should be made available prior to signing up for a course

Schools should be required to maintain an oversight of the costs of school in general, and of specific subjects. Being open with parents about these costs up front allows families to plan, and means schools have a handle on the costs they are asking parents to meet.

Action for schools to tackle the impact of poverty

9. Communications from school should be direct with parents rather than through the children

Children have told the inquiry they find 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.

10. Schools must be more transparent with parents and students on how pupil premium money is being spent and young people for whom pupil premium funding is paid should have a say in what it gets spent on

Schools should be consulting directly with young people in receipt of pupil premium, to make sure it benefits the most disadvantaged children.

Additionally, schools need to be much better at providing detail on how they are spending pupil premium money and the impact it has, by publishing a meaningful annual report. The Government should consider making the publication of an annual report an explicit requirement of the pupil premium 'conditions of grant', with specific guidance on what it must contain.

11. Teachers should receive training to improve their understanding of poverty

National government, local councils and school governors all have a role to play in reducing the impact of poverty on children's school experience. But teachers who work with children every day have the most direct impact on children. All teachers should receive training on poverty and its impact upon children's education.

12. Ofsted should inspect schools on how they support the poorest pupils, including confidential consultations with students'

The current Ofsted framework already makes clear that inspectors will look at the attainment of specific groups of pupils, including those eligible for the pupil premium. However, the current inspection framework is too narrow, and focuses largely on attainment.

The young commissioners felt it was appropriate for Ofsted to have a role in monitoring how schools lessen the impact of poverty and whether school policies on materials and participation are discriminating against children on the basis of their family's ability to pay. This should include speaking confidentially to pupils from low income families about their experience.

A lot needs to change in order to ensure that children can afford the costs of the school day, and the recommendations in this report represent an action plan which would take a big step forwards towards addressing this.

APPENDIX A

The commission issued a call for written evidence to the inquiry. The following organisations and individuals submitted written evidence.

1. Joseph Rowntree Foundation
2. Action for Children
3. 4Children
4. NASUWT (National Association of School Masters/Union of Women Teachers)
5. Family Action
6. Association of Teachers and Lecturers
7. Catholic Education Service
8. Chair of Governors, Haverstock Primary School
9. Advice Nottingham
10. Community Links
11. The Schoolwear Association
12. The Sutton Trust
13. Six individual members of the public

The commission held three oral evidence sessions in parliament, led by the young commissioners. The following individuals gave oral evidence to the inquiry.

Oral evidence

1. Myles Bremner, Director, School Food Plan
2. Sue Royston, Senior Policy Officer, Citizens Advice
3. Sue Wilkins, Acting Headteacher, The Arches Community Primary School, Cheshire
4. Christine Blower, General Secretary, National Union Teachers
5. Heather Loxley, Director of Services and Innovation, Family Action
6. Robbie Coleman, Education Endowment Foundation
7. Sally Booth, Operations Manager, Tyne Gateway Trust
8. Churanjite Singh Digbal, Tyne Gateway Trust
9. Rt Rev James Newcombe, Bishop of Carlisle
10. Sara Bryson, Policy Officer, Children North East
11. Tess Ridge, Professor of Social Policy, University of Bath
12. Valentine Mulholland, National Association of Head Teachers
13. Moussa Haddad, Child Poverty Action Group

APPENDIX B

We calculated the cost of the cost of a complete school uniform from the UK's two leading supermarkets, based on prices advertised on their websites on 2 October 2014.

COST FOR PRIMARY SCHOOL AGED CHILDREN

Item	Tesco	ASDA	Supermarket average	Actual average spend per child
Sweatshirt	£3–£4	£2–£3	-	-
Polo shirt (pack of two)	£2.50–£3.50	£2.50–£3.50	-	-
Trousers (pack of two)	£8–£10	£6–£8	-	-
Shirt (pack of four or five)	£8.50–£11	£7	-	-
School shoes	£11–£16	£9–£10	-	-
Total	£33.00–£44.50	£26.50–£31.50	£33.86	£108

COST FOR SECONDARY SCHOOL AGED CHILDREN

Item	Tesco	ASDA	Supermarket average	Actual average spend per child
Sweatshirt	£4–5	£4	-	-
Polo shirt (pack of two)	£5	£3.50–£4	-	-
Trousers (pack of two)	£12	£8–£10	-	-
Shirt (pack of four or five)	£13.50 (x5)	£5.50–£6.50 (x4)	-	-
Blazer	£12	£10–£12	-	-
School shoes	£13–£14	£10–£18	-	-
Total	£59.50–£61.50	£41–£54.50	£54.13	£126

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