

Through Young Eyes

The Children's
Commission
on Poverty

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

Supported by

The
Children's
Society

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

School is where young people spend a lot of their lives. This is why we decided to hold an inquiry to explore how poverty affects young people’s experiences of school. We wanted to remove the idea that poverty stops at the school gates.

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 not only we feel is important as The Children’s Commission on Poverty but the entire country, both government and people alike, should take upon themselves.

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

Introduction

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 these costs.

The inquiry heard how poverty can make children feel excluded, stigmatised and bullied because they cannot afford the same things as their peers. 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.

‘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’

About the inquiry

The Children’s Commission on Poverty first met in July 2013, and since then has been finding out about childhood poverty in the UK. This year, the 16 young commissioners, aged 10–19, decided to launch an inquiry into how poverty affects children’s experience of school.

The inquiry has been informed by a number of different sources, including:

- Three evidence hearings held in parliament. In total, 13 experts gave oral evidence to the young commissioners
- Responses to a call for written evidence, which received submissions from charities, public bodies, unions, professional associations, schools governors, teachers and members of the public
- An original household survey of 2000 parents and their children, aged 10–17, across Britain
- Thirteen in-depth interviews with parents and children in low-income households.

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 inquiry chose to address three areas of particular concern: school uniforms, school meals and materials and trips. All of the recommendations contained in this report were developed by the young commissioners.

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

An overview of the cost of school

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 we found out that, in some schools, poverty is reproduced rather than reduced.

**By Gulwali, 19,
young commissioner**

For many families, education-related costs make up a large portion of the family budget. Parents told us that, on average, they spend £800 per child each year on school costs.

It is clear from the inquiry that many families are burdened by these costs:

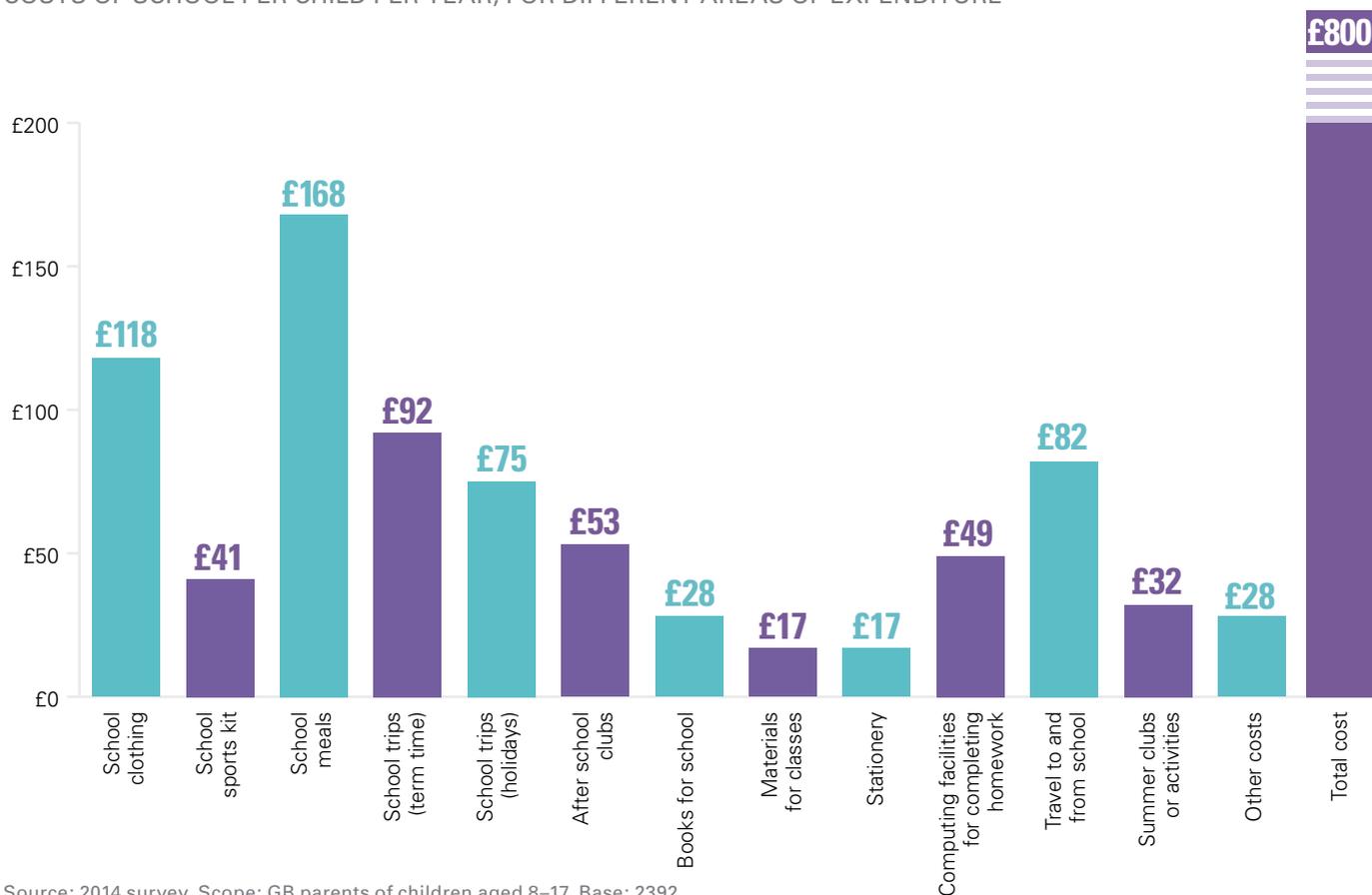
- More than two-thirds (70%) of parents say they have struggled with the cost of school. This rises to 95% of parents who live in families that are ‘not well off at all’.
- Half (51%) of parents said they had cut back on clothing, food or heating to afford school costs.
- A quarter (25%) of parents (and 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 inquiry heard that many children are acutely aware that their parents struggle with the cost of school:

- 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.
- Nearly two-thirds (63%) of children in families who are ‘not well off at all’ said they had been embarrassed because they could not afford a cost of school.
- More than a quarter (27%) said they had been bullied as a result.

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

School uniform

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.

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

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

Guidance published by the government is clear that cost should be a central consideration when schools set their school uniform policy, but it is clear many families are facing very high school uniform costs.

‘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.’

More than two-thirds (71%) of parents said they had to buy either some or all items of school uniform from a specific supplier. Our analysis found that parents could save hundreds of millions of pounds if schools set school uniform policies that allowed parents to buy uniforms from the best value shops.

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

Parents said they spend on average £108 on school clothing for primary school children and £126 for secondary school children. But examples included up to £500 for a uniform at a state funded school. However, only one in five (22%) of families who are ‘not well-off at all’ had received any help to purchase a school uniform.

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

‘If your shirt, like mine, has got tags with a different name... they automatically know that it’s like handed down from someone else.’

‘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

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 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.

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

Every child has the right to a decent diet which enables them to make the very most of their potential. 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, half of parents said they had struggled with the cost of school meals, and one in five children said they have missed a school meal because they did not have enough money.

We also know from our previous work that over half a million children in poverty are not entitled to receive a free school meal – usually because their parents are in low paid work.

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

Some schools continue to deliver free school meals in a way that singles out children in poverty, leading to stigma. 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.

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

Materials and trips

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. Adding up what these cost certainly made some of the group go very pale!

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

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 expected to pay for key materials.

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.

‘I have to pay for the revision books I need to revise.’

Children should not be placed in a position where decisions about the courses they study are dictated by what they can afford. But the inquiry heard that children are avoiding certain subjects due to the additional cost of equipment or trips associated with them.



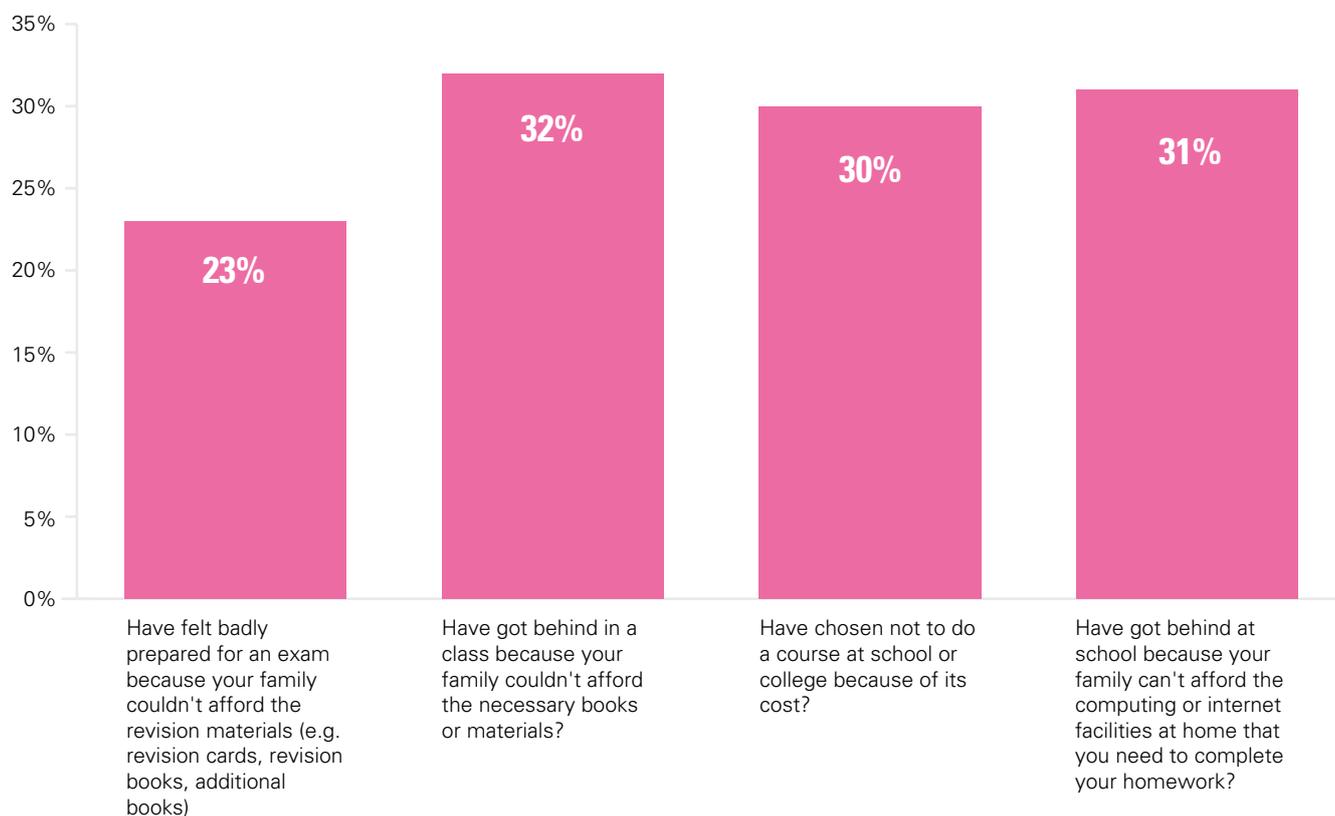
‘There was a history trip to the Big Pit in Wales... It felt bad when everyone came back and said how much [of] an amazing time they had.’

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.

School trips also cause 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.

‘...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.’

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



Conclusion and recommendations

Across the country, millions of families are struggling with the cost of school. Urgent change is needed in schools to make sure that children living in poorer families are not excluded, stigmatised or unable to achieve their potential in education.

In many cases schools, local authorities and national government are 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 charging for compulsory course materials, there are opportunities to do more at every level.

The young commissioners have set out an action plan to make sure no child suffers as a result of the costs of school life.

Recommendations by the young commissioners

- 1 Schools should choose a simple, coloured uniform, available with sew-on logos to make them more affordable.** The government must strengthen their guidance on the affordability of school uniforms.
- 2 All schools should have a cashless system for school meals** to help increase the take-up of free 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. Children should also receive 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** to give them more flexibility and make sure they are treated in the same way as their peers.
- 5 ‘Poverty proofing’ should be promoted as a model of good practice.** Schools should check or ‘poverty proof’, their ways of working, to make sure they do not 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.** Guidance should also be strengthened to make sure schools inform parents whether costs are voluntary.
- 7 There should be no non-returnable deposits for school activities and there should always be an option to pay by instalments** to allow families more space to budget.
- 8 Itemised costs should be made available prior to signing up for a course** to allow families to plan, and schools to better understand the costs they are asking parents to meet.
- 9 Communications from school should be direct with parents rather than through the children** to make sure that they receive communications in a timely manner and to reduce 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 publish an annual report on how they spend this money and the government should consider making this 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.**
- 12 Ofsted should inspect schools on how they support the poorest pupils, including confidential consultations with students.** The current inspection framework is too narrow, and focuses largely on attainment. Ofsted should have a role in monitoring how schools lessen the impact of poverty and whether school policies on materials and participation discriminate against children on the basis of their family’s ability to pay.

For more information on this report and the work of the young commissioners, please contact:

Sam Royston

Head of Policy and Public Affairs
The Children's Society
policy@childrenssociety.org.uk

Martin Jones

Project Manager
Children's Commission on Poverty
campaigns@childrenssociety.org.uk

childrenscommission.org.uk