

# Through Young Eyes

The Children's  
Commission  
on Poverty

**the  
wrong  
blazer**  
time for action  
on school  
uniform costs

Supported by

**The  
Children's  
Society**



## Introduction

In October 2014 an inquiry led by young people involved in The Children's Commission on Poverty (CCP) into the cost of schooling found for the first time that for too many children, the cost of school uniform has a real impact on their lives, and their ability to make the most of their education.<sup>1</sup>

*I never thought the school uniform costs were as high as £316 and it shocked me to see those statistics. That's also only counting one child, think about the price if the family had twins or more than one child in school at the same time.*

**Jess, young commissioner, age 15**

This follow up report is based on a survey of 1000 parents, and explores the issue of school uniform costs in more detail.

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

It shows that on average parents overspend on school uniforms by £170 per child each year but could save as much as £1.3 billion per year if they faced reasonable school uniform costs. Parents say that this is leading to children going to school in ill—fitting school uniform, being sent home from school or to families cutting back on food or other basic essentials.

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

Addressing the spiralling costs of school uniforms should be a priority for the government. While schools are expected to take full account of uniform guidance set by the Department for Education, we are aware that they are not always following this guidance. The Commission found that many schools were not aware of current guidance or aware that such guidance existed.<sup>2</sup>

Based on our findings, The Children's Society have three key recommendations to bring down the cost of school uniforms:

1. *The guidance should also be made statutory, in order to ensure that schools follow it.*
2. *The school uniform guidance should be re-issued to all schools to remind them of the requirement to ensure affordability is the top priority when setting uniform policy.*
3. *The government should explore capping the cost of school uniforms to ensure that parents are not paying unreasonable costs.*

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<sup>1</sup>The Children's Society, *At What Cost? Exposing the impact of poverty on school life*, Holloway, E., Mahony, S., Royston, S. and Mueller, D. 2014 (This involved sixteen children ranging in age from 10 to 19 ran a comprehensive inquiry to expose the true costs of school life. This involved a written call for evidence, three evidence sessions in Parliament with experts, and a survey with over 2,000 families and children.)

<sup>2</sup>DfE (September 2013) *School uniform: guidance for governing bodies, school staff, and local authorities* [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/269113/school\\_uniform\\_guidance\\_2013.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/269113/school_uniform_guidance_2013.pdf) (accessed 19/2/15)

*I think school uniforms shouldn't be a luxury to disadvantaged families. I think its wrong children miss out on learning because of uniform prices.*

**Cyrus, young commissioner, age 15**

## Methodology

We surveyed 1,007 parents of school age children between the 23<sup>rd</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> January 2015 across the UK about the costs of school. This survey was carried out by Opinium Research.

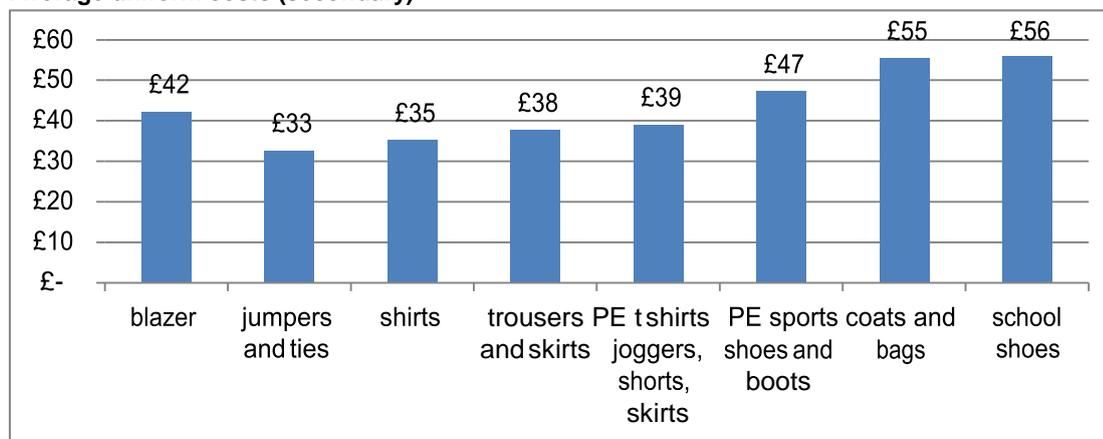
Quotes in this briefing are from interviews with young people and parents, conducted in Autumn 2014 as part of the report 'At What Cost? Exposing the impact of poverty on school life'.

## How much do families pay for school uniforms?

Overall, parents with children in state maintained schools told us that they spent £316 per year on school uniform costs for secondary school children and £251 per year for primary school children.

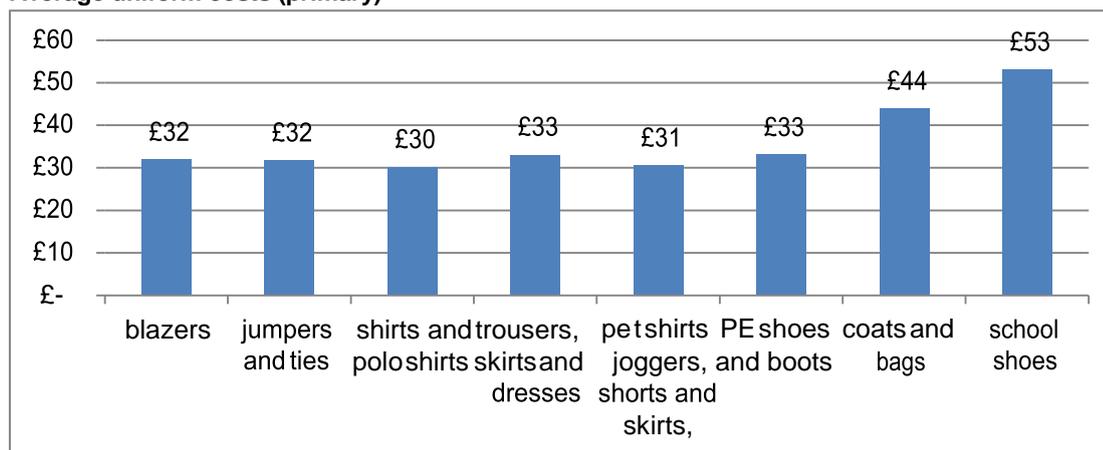
We also asked parents how much on average they pay for different items of school uniform. School shoes were the most expensive item in both primary and secondary school, followed by coats and bags. Of other items of clothing, blazers were notably expensive, with parents paying an average of £42 per child for a blazer for their secondary school children.

**Average uniform costs (secondary)<sup>3</sup>**



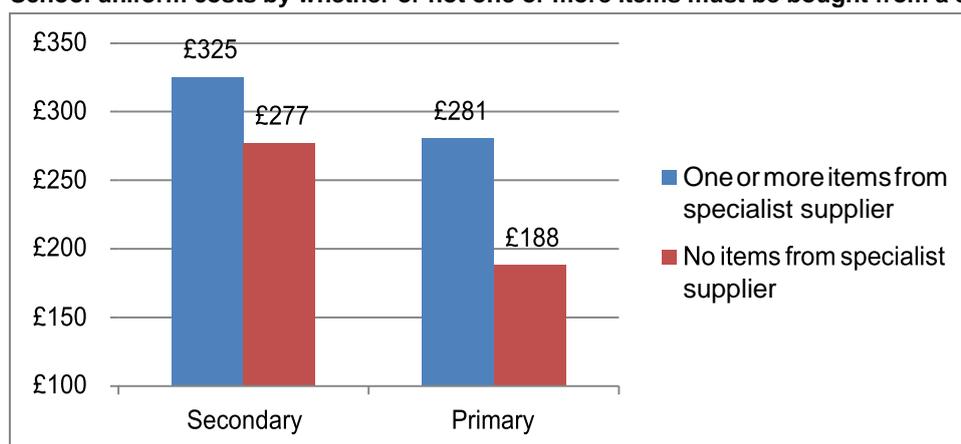
<sup>3</sup> Sample sizes vary for individual items but in all cases n is between 230 and 587

### Average uniform costs (primary)



One of the key reasons for the high costs are school uniform policies that make parents buy specific items of clothing and accessories from specialist shops – rather than allowing them to buy cheaper clothes from supermarkets and sew on a badge or logo later. Where parents have to buy one or more items of school uniform from a specific supplier, costs were an average of £48 per year higher for secondary school children and £93 higher for primary school children.

### School uniform costs by whether or not one or more items must be bought from a specialist supplier<sup>4</sup>



N=550 (secondary) and 507 (primary)

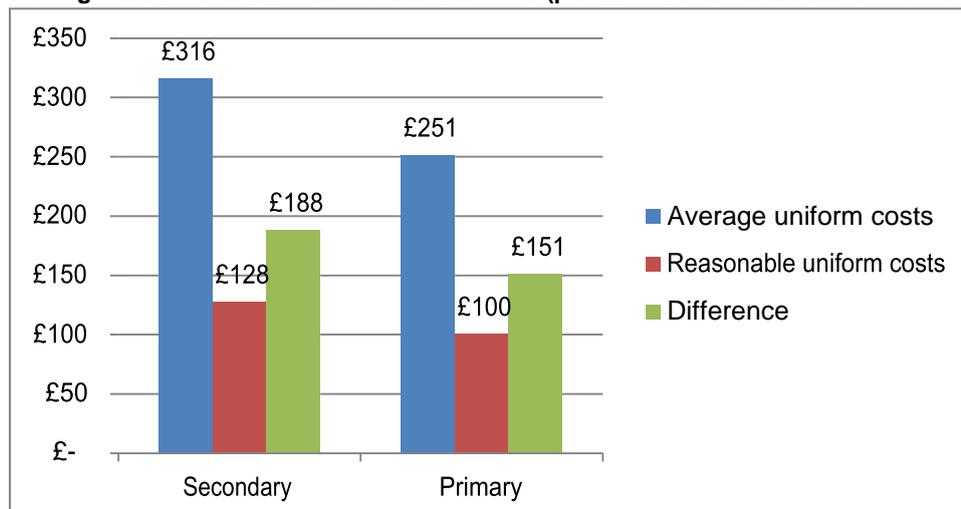
Other reasons for high costs include schools requiring many different items of uniform – including coats, different ties for different years in the school, and multiple items of sports kit.

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

We also asked parents how much they thought was reasonable to pay for school uniform costs. Notably, the amount that parents thought was reasonable to pay for a child's school uniform was substantially lower than the payments that families actually made. For primary school children, parents told us they spent an average of £151 per year more than they thought "reasonable" and for secondary school children this was £188 per year. An overwhelming 95% of parents said the amount they pay is "unreasonable".

<sup>4</sup> Children in independent schools excluded

**Average and reasonable school uniform costs (parents of state maintained school children)**



**N= 550 (secondary) and 508 (primary)**

Based on statistics from the Department for Education on numbers of pupils in state maintained schools<sup>5</sup>, parents pay around £2.1 billion per year on school uniform costs. Based on the difference between this and the costs that parents think are “reasonable” families could save more than half of this (£1.3 billion) if they only paid what was reasonable.

This is despite government guidance which states that schools should do what they can to keep the cost of school uniforms down. This guidance (which is not statutory) states that

*“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.”<sup>6</sup>*

	Pupil numbers (state maintained schools)	Total payments for school uniforms	Potential savings (based on “reasonable costs”)
Primary	4.4 million	£1.1 billion	£700 million
Secondary	3.2 million	£1 billion	£600 million
Total	7.6 million	£2.1 billion	£1.3 billion

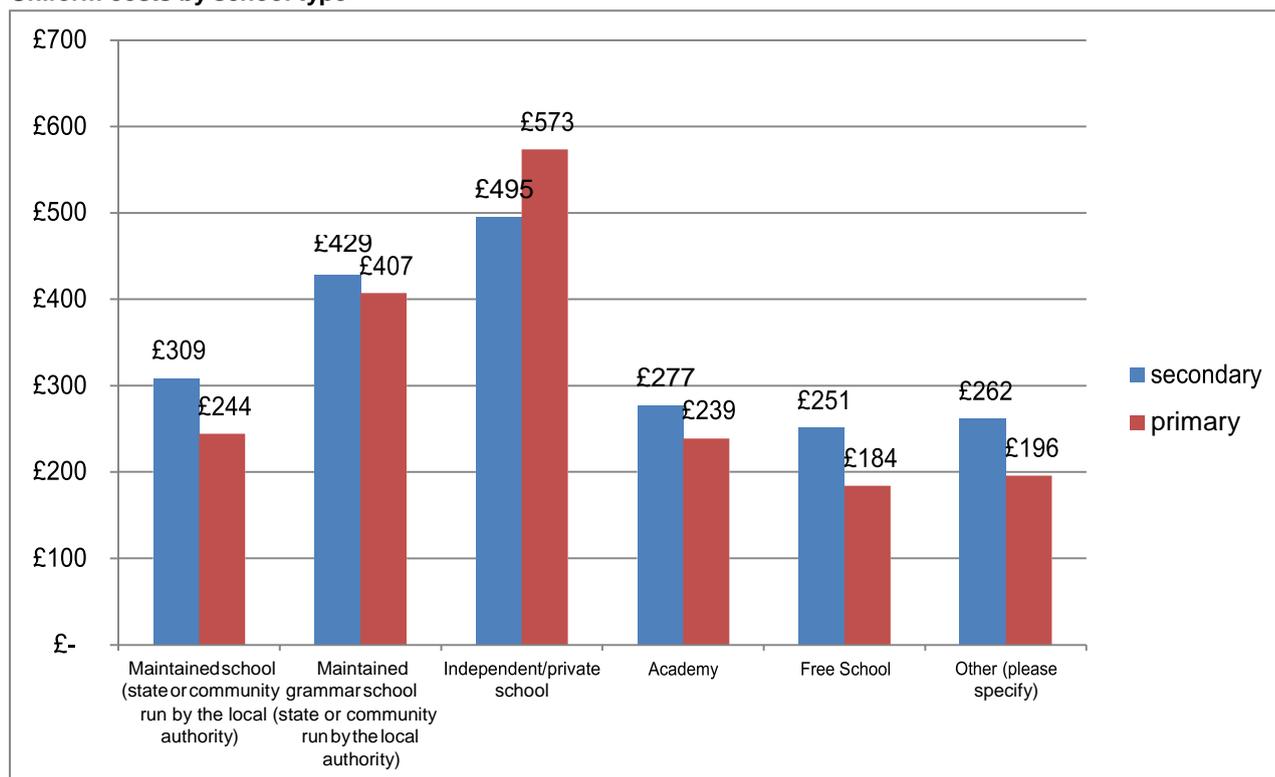
Our analysis revealed that uniform costs varied significantly between school types.<sup>7</sup> Unsurprisingly independent schools had the highest uniform costs. This was followed by Grammar schools. Interestingly Academies and Free Schools had the lowest school uniform costs. One potential reason for this may be because Academies and Free Schools are frequently more recent introductions – their school uniform policy may have been developed since the school uniform guidance was revised to re-emphasise costs. This may suggest the need for other schools to revisit their school uniform guidance in order to reduce costs.

<sup>5</sup> *Schools, pupils and their characteristics*, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/schools-pupils-and-their-characteristics-january-2014> (accessed 19 February 2015)

<sup>6</sup> *School uniform: Guidance for governing bodies, school leaders, school staff and local authorities*, 2013 [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/269113/school\\_uniform\\_guidance\\_2013.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/269113/school_uniform_guidance_2013.pdf) (accessed 19 February 2015)

<sup>7</sup> Differences between mean uniform costs explored through an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) test

### Uniform costs by school type



N=591 P=0.000

### What is the impact of school uniform costs on children's lives?

For many children, the cost of school uniform can have a serious impact. Based on responses to our survey, we estimate that 1.2 million school children go to school in incorrect, unclean or poorly fitting uniform as a result of the cost. 400,000 children have been sent home because of wearing incorrect uniform as a result.

For nearly a quarter of a million children, the school that they attend was affected by school uniform costs. This is despite statutory guidance which states that school uniform policies must not discourage parents from applying for a place.<sup>8</sup>

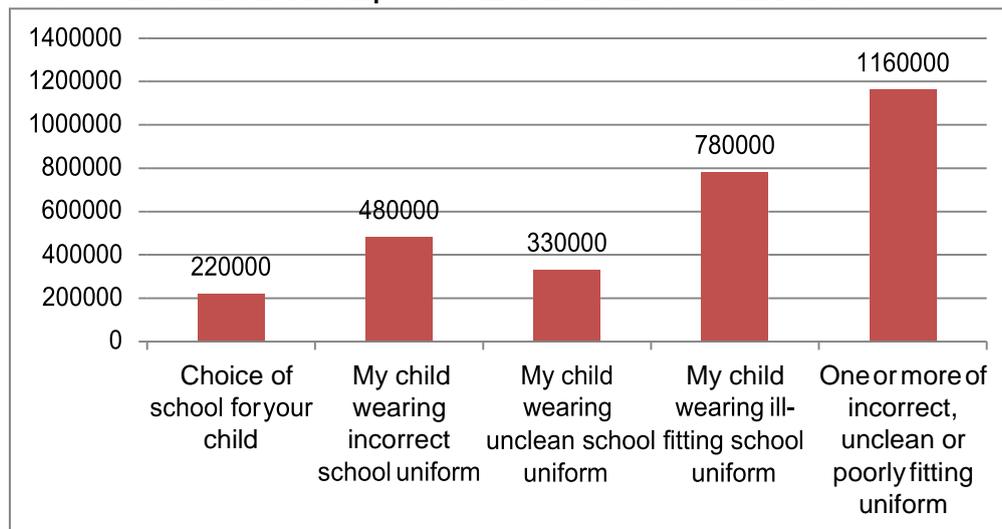
*'Yeah, she was (a mother) keeping them off school because she couldn't afford the uniform, she only had one set of uniform so it wasn't dry or clean enough for the next day for the children to go to school so she wouldn't send them'. Parent<sup>9</sup>*

<sup>8</sup> School Admissions code, 2012

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/275598/school\\_admissions\\_code\\_1\\_february\\_2012.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/275598/school_admissions_code_1_february_2012.pdf) (accessed 19 February 2015)

<sup>9</sup> *At What Cost: Exposing the Impact of Poverty in School Life*, The Children's Society, Holloway, E., Mahony, S., Royston, S. and Mueller, D. 2014

**Cost of school uniforms: the impact on children – numbers of children affected**



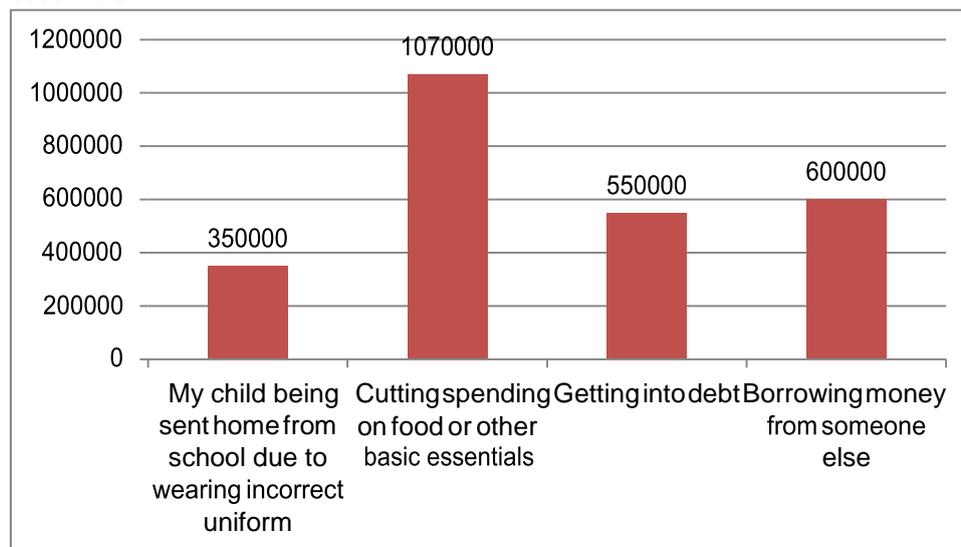
**N=948 in all cases**

*‘My oldest daughter, they sent her home and said she wasn’t allowed to come back until she had the correct shoes. So then I had to write a letter to say that we’ll be able to get some in a week or so, I didn’t have any money.’ Parent<sup>10</sup>*

In many cases, parents have to cut back on other essentials in order to afford uniform costs. More than one million children live in families that have cut back spending on food or other basic essentials as a result of the cost of school uniforms. More than half a million are living in families that have got into debt as a result of uniform costs.

*‘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<sup>11</sup>*

**Cost of school uniforms: the impact on children – numbers of children affected by cutting back on basic essentials**



**N=948 in all cases**

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

## **Conclusion and recommendations**

The vast majority of parents think that school uniform costs are too high, and in too many cases this is having a real impact on children's lives and their ability to participate in education.

The current guidance is clear that cost should be the top priority in determining school uniform supplier. However, despite this, too often parents are facing higher costs as a result of limited options to choose where to buy their uniforms.

The government should take three key steps to bring down the cost of uniforms, potentially saving families hundreds of millions of pounds, without costing the government a penny.

1. As a first step, the DfE should reissue the school uniform guidance to all schools to ensure all schools are aware of the guidance and remind them of their responsibilities in relation to the affordability and availability of school uniforms.
2. The government should make the guidance on school uniforms statutory so schools have a legally binding commitment to comply with this and make uniform cost a top priority.
3. Finally, the government should explore capping the cost of school uniforms to ensure that parents are not paying unreasonable costs.

**for more information on this report and  
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