

# Adding up

## The range and impact of school costs on families



The Government has a commitment to ending child poverty and improving educational attainment. For the vast majority of children, securing a decent education is a critical factor in determining success in adult life. Yet for a whole host of reasons, children from low income families are less likely to flourish at school. Research has found that for these children, their experiences of school can be divisive and contribute to exclusion.<sup>1</sup>

The high costs associated with attending school can have a severe impact on low income families. Families can face hardship and children are at risk of exclusion if they are not in the correct uniform or unable to afford to participate in activities and trips. In 2005 Citizens Advice, children's charities and the National Union of Teachers formed a coalition to continue to highlight the broader costs associated with attending school.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Childhood poverty and social exclusion: From a child's perspective.* Ridge, T, Bristol policy press, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> *The cost of a free education*, Barnardos, The Bedford Charity, Child Poverty Action Group, End Child Poverty, Family Welfare Association, National Union of Teachers, One Parent Families, Save the Children and Citizens Advice, 2005, 2006.

In February 2007 a new Department for Education and Skills (DfES), now Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF), *School Admissions Code* came into force in England. For the first time the Code makes clear reference to the importance of limiting the costs of school uniform and trips. In Wales the Assembly Government consulted on new guidance on uniform policies in 2004, and will be issuing guidance to school governing bodies in late September 2007. This will provide advice on ways to reduce the cost of school uniform.

In June and July Citizens Advice undertook a survey of parents<sup>3</sup> to find out whether schools' practices comply with the guidance as set out in the Code, and what further changes schools will need to make in order to comply.<sup>4</sup> Overall, the findings suggest little compliance with the principles of the Code by the schools represented in the survey. The wide range of comments include both good practice as well as poor practice, highlighting a lack of consistency between schools.

This briefing argues that stronger enforcement responsibilities need to be placed on statutory bodies to ensure that children from low income families are not disadvantaged in school.

## Key findings

### School uniform

- **Three quarters** of parents of secondary school children and **two thirds** of parents of primary school children found it difficult to meet the costs of school uniform.
- Of those respondents who needed to buy uniform items from a specialist supplier, almost **nine out of ten**

parents of secondary school children and **over half** of parents of primary school children needed to purchase at least three items.

### School trips

- **Three quarters** of parents of secondary school pupils and **two thirds** of parents of primary school pupils found it difficult to meet the cost of school trips.
- Only **one in four** parents thought it was clear that families on a low income could be exempt from some or all of the cost of the trip.

### Other costs associated with schooling

- **71%** of primary school respondents and **79%** of secondary school respondents found it difficult to meet all of the costs discussed in the survey.
- For primary school, the top three items asked for were school photographs, non-school uniform days, and items for a jumble sale, raffle, or cake sale. For secondary school, the top three items were non-school uniform days, school photographs, and equipment for lessons.

### The impact of cost

- **4 out of 5** parents of secondary school pupils and **over half** of parents of primary school pupils were worried that their child would be disciplined as a result of not having the correct uniform.
- **58%** of secondary school respondents and **55%** of primary school respondents were also worried that their child would be bullied as a result of not having the correct uniform.

<sup>3</sup> In this briefing, "parents" should be taken to include parents, guardians and carers.

<sup>4</sup> The survey ran on the Citizens Advice public website, [www.adviceguide.org.uk](http://www.adviceguide.org.uk), and received 1,089 responses from parents. The respondents were self-selecting.

- Nearly **one in ten** indicated that costs associated with schooling had affected their choice of school.

## Introduction

For many years the CAB service has been concerned about the costs faced by parents when sending their children to school. Bureaux have seen families struggle to buy uniform with no help available from their local authorities. In 2005 Citizens Advice, children's charities and the National Union of Teachers formed a coalition to continue to highlight the broader costs associated with attending school. In 2005 and 2006 the coalition published reports examining the costs of school uniforms and school trips, and the help available for parents to meet these costs.<sup>5</sup>

This subject now has new impetus as a new *School Admissions Code* came into force in February 2007 and applies to all maintained schools and academies in England when setting their admission arrangements from September 2008.<sup>6</sup> For the first time the Code makes clear reference to the importance of limiting the cost of school uniform and trips. New *DCSF Guidance to Schools on School Uniform Related Policies* is due to be published following consultation earlier in the year. In Wales the Assembly Government will also be issuing guidance to school governing bodies. This will provide advice on ways to reduce the cost of school uniform.

This briefing is based on over 1,000 responses to a CAB online survey on [www.adviceguide.org.uk](http://www.adviceguide.org.uk) in June and July 2007. The survey set out to establish from parents what level of costs were associated with schooling and how they

felt about these costs, for example, how affordable were they and whether they were good value for money. The survey was also intended to assess the level to which schools were already conforming to what is now included on school costs in the Admissions Code.<sup>7</sup>

This briefing will look at:

- School uniform; the merits of school uniform, cost and affordability, supply arrangements, and what help is available.
- School trips; cost and affordability, voluntary contributions, and budgeting.
- Other costs associated with schooling such as text books and lesson materials.
- The impact of cost on parents; concerns about bullying and discipline, distress, worry and effect on choice of school.
- Good practice by schools.

## Background

The Government is committed to eradicating child poverty and promoting inclusion in schools. Every child in England and Wales has the right to a free state education and school has the potential to provide all children with opportunities to learn, make friends and participate in activities regardless of family income.

School uniform plays an important role in contributing to inclusiveness in school and enabling children to participate fully in school life. The Government "strongly encourages schools to consider the introduction of uniforms where they do not already have them".<sup>8</sup> Research has

<sup>5</sup> *The cost of a free education*, Barnardos, The Bedford Charity, Child Poverty Action Group, End Child Poverty, Family Welfare Association, National Union of Teachers, One Parent Families, Save the Children and Citizens Advice, 2005, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> *School Admissions Code*, DfES, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> The survey ran on the Citizens Advice public website, [www.adviceguide.org.uk](http://www.adviceguide.org.uk), and received 1,089 responses from parents. The respondents were self-selecting.

also shown that parents support the use of uniforms. A recent study by the Office of Fair Trading (OFT) found that 89 per cent of parents with children at state school preferred their child to wear school uniform rather than their own clothes.<sup>9</sup>

All children should be able to participate fully in school life but not having the money to buy the correct uniform, participate in extra-curricular activities or go on school trips may leave them unable to fulfil their full potential and mark them out as being 'poor'. Children who cannot meet all of the costs associated with schooling may find themselves isolated, stigmatised and more likely to be bullied. Their academic studies may also suffer if they cannot go on school trips or pay for textbooks or other lesson materials. Living without the essentials required for school can also seriously jeopardise a child's wellbeing.<sup>10</sup>

In 2003, the DfES commissioned research to investigate the costs associated with schooling.<sup>11</sup> This first comprehensive study of school costs found that the total annual average amount spent on school uniform and PE kit was £224.69 per child, approximately £172 for primary school children and £287 for secondary school pupils. The survey also found that for primary and secondary school pupils respectively, the cost of a day trip was £8.32 and £19.38, and the cost of a residential trip was £119.60 and £186.72. The same study found that 55 per cent of families in the two lowest income groups found the costs associated with sending their child to school difficult to meet.

Local Authorities in England and Wales have discretionary powers to provide low income families with grants to help meet the costs of school uniforms. Regrettably,

these are patchy, inconsistent in terms of eligibility, and in decline. Citizens Advice surveys of local authority grant schemes have found a continual drop in both the availability and value of grant schemes. In 2007, 57 per cent of local authorities did not offer any uniform grant, compared with 42 per cent in 2004 and 30 per cent in 2001. Most local authorities offer their highest grant to children transferring to secondary school. In 2007 these grants ranged from £15 to £155.78. The average grant was £53.38 compared with £51.27 in 2004, a continual decline in real terms.<sup>12</sup>

The Welsh Assembly Government introduced a School Uniform Grant Scheme in June 2005 for pupils entering secondary school. In 2007/08, £770,000 will be available for families on a low income, providing a grant of £97.50, an increase on last year's grant. In 2005/06, the take-up of the grant was 85 per cent and rose to 96 per cent in 2006/07.<sup>13</sup> The grant was intended to supplement the grant schemes that existed in the majority of local authorities. Citizens Advice Cymru is monitoring provision by local authorities to check that their grants are not reduced following introduction of the statutory grant.

The inadequacy of grants to meet the costs of school uniform often leaves charities to pick up what should be a state responsibility. In 2005, the Family Welfare Association (FWA), a charity with a long history of providing grants to individuals and families in need, launched a new partnership with Barclaycard to provide school-related grants. The Barclaycard Horizons<sup>14</sup> project provides FWA with funds to provide grants for low income families headed by lone parents to help with school costs. In 2006/07, the FWA

8 *School Admissions Code*, DfES, 2006.

9 *Supply of school uniforms review*, Office of Fair Trading, September 2006.

10 *Listening to children; developing a child centred approach to childhood poverty in the UK*, Ridge, T, Family Matters No. 65, 2003.

11 *The Cost of Schooling*, DfES, 2004.

12 *Help with school uniform costs: update*, Citizens Advice, 2004 and 2007 (figures updated August 2007).

13 Welsh Assembly Government press release, 30 August 2007.

gave almost £200,000 to around 2,500 children, primarily to help with meeting school uniform costs.

Disappointingly, the Government has done little to address the issues raised by the DfES research. Although it is welcome that the new Admissions Code makes clear reference to the importance of limiting the costs of school uniforms to ensure that parents on low incomes are not deterred from applying to their school of choice. It notes that uniform should be widely available 'off the peg' rather than from expensive sole suppliers, and the school should not look to use the sale of school uniforms to raise money.

The Code also makes note of schemes for remission of school uniform costs, recommending that they should be widely publicised and administered discreetly so as not to cause embarrassment. The Code goes further and includes contributions to school funds, and contributions to participate in trips. The Code states that schools must make it clear that there is "no charge related to the admission of a child to a school". It also states that schools should "make it clear where help may be available for those unable to afford the cost of school trips." Critically, the Code plainly states that "parents must be assured that they will not be asked to explain why they prefer not to contribute and that not contributing will in no way disadvantage their child."

However the mechanisms for enforcing these parts of the Code appear to be weak. Parents can complain to the Schools Adjudicator about failure to comply with the mandatory parts of the Code. There is no formal provision, however, for parents to complain about failure to comply with the school costs section of the Code. If parents wish to

complain about school costs, they should first contact the school's governing body to make them aware of their concerns. If the governing body's response is unsatisfactory, they can contact the local authority and, through them, the admissions forum so that the issue can be considered by these bodies.

Local authorities and admissions forums can raise non-compliance with any aspect of the Code with the Schools Adjudicator. But as uniform policy doesn't form part of a school's admission arrangements, it wouldn't constitute a formal objection although it may prompt local discussion about whether fair access is being compromised.

The OFT provides an alternate option for enforcement. Expensive exclusive agreements between schools and school uniform suppliers may, in principle, be subject to enforcement action.

The survey on which this briefing is based was intended to gauge to what extent schools are already complying with the principles outlined in the new Code. By establishing a baseline of school's practices we will be able to monitor any improvements made as the new Code comes into effect.

## School uniform

### The merits of school uniform

In line with the findings of the OFT research report, many survey respondents were in favour of school uniform because they believed it saved money over having to purchase fashion wear, liked how smart the children looked, and believed it disguised income differentials.

"I would be more worried that my child would be bullied if there was no uniform, for not having the right labels or the latest fashions. Therefore I am a big fan of uniforms. In the end you save money on other clothes."

Nottinghamshire, primary school

"Better value than having to buy a variety of non school uniform trendy clothes."

Powys, secondary school

"I feel very strongly that school uniform saves money. Teenagers are very influenced by fashions and labels and what is in/out changes regularly. They would need a huge selection of clothes to wear to school if school uniform did not exist. Regulation items look smart. Also uniform gives an identity and respect for the school. It also ensures the child wears practical clothing."

Wokingham, secondary school

However, some parents suggested that these benefits can be undermined by the specific nature of schools' uniform policies. These include restricting the supplier and customising the uniform with badges and logos.

"I believe all schools should have a school uniform to alleviate pressures from peers about the latest gadgets and trends. However, only using one supplier, named by the school, is not always appropriate... If various suppliers or supermarkets were available to purchase school uniforms from, this would give parents the choice, allowing them to purchase clothes that actually fit the children and a cost within their expenditure range."

Leeds, secondary school

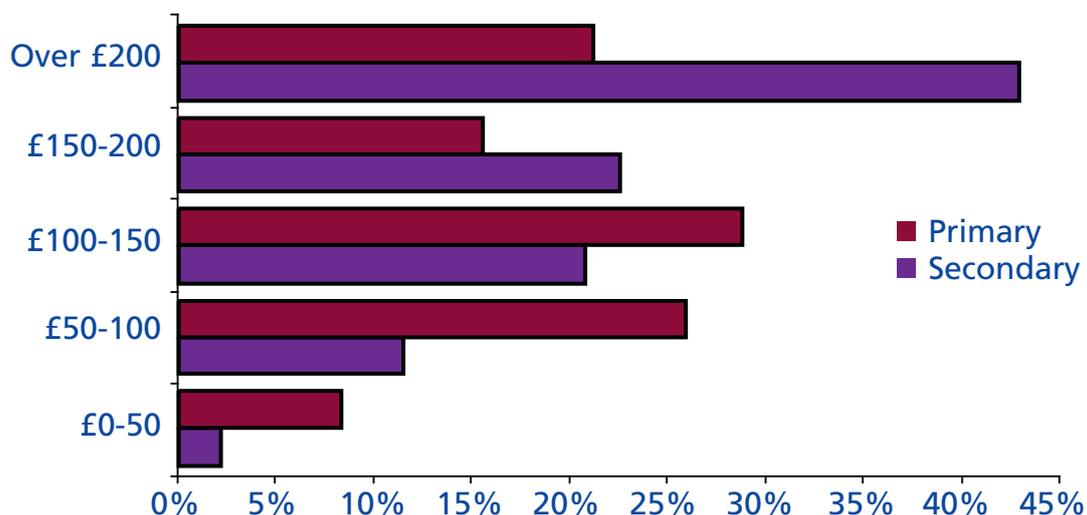
"I totally agree with uniform in principal as children don't need to compete. However, the school can take it too far – even the wrong coloured socks are a problem. The school is very fussy and specific on some items."

Northamptonshire, primary school

## The cost of uniform

The DCSF *School Admissions Code* makes specific reference to the importance of limiting the cost of school uniform to ensure that children do not feel disadvantaged or excluded as a result of not being able to afford the correct

**Figure 1: How much do you think you have spent this year in total on your child's school uniform and PE kit, including footwear?**



Base: Primary: 443 respondents, Secondary: 505 respondents.

uniform. We asked respondents how much they estimated they had spent this past academic year on school uniform and PE kit, including shoes (see figure 1).

Parents with pupils at secondary school spent more than parents with pupils at primary school.

- Over one in five parents of primary school pupils spent over £200 on school uniform and PE kit.
- Almost 50% of parents of secondary school pupils spent over £200 on school uniform and PE kit.

In addition, 67 per cent of primary school respondents and 60 per cent of secondary school respondents indicated that they expected to spend slightly more or considerably more on school uniform for the upcoming academic year. For parents of primary school pupils, some of this may be accounted for by the extra costs incurred in moving up to secondary school.

## How affordable is school uniform?

- 65% of primary school respondents reported that they found it either 'quite difficult' or 'very difficult' to meet the cost.
- 76% of secondary school respondents found it either 'quite difficult' or 'very difficult' to meet the cost.

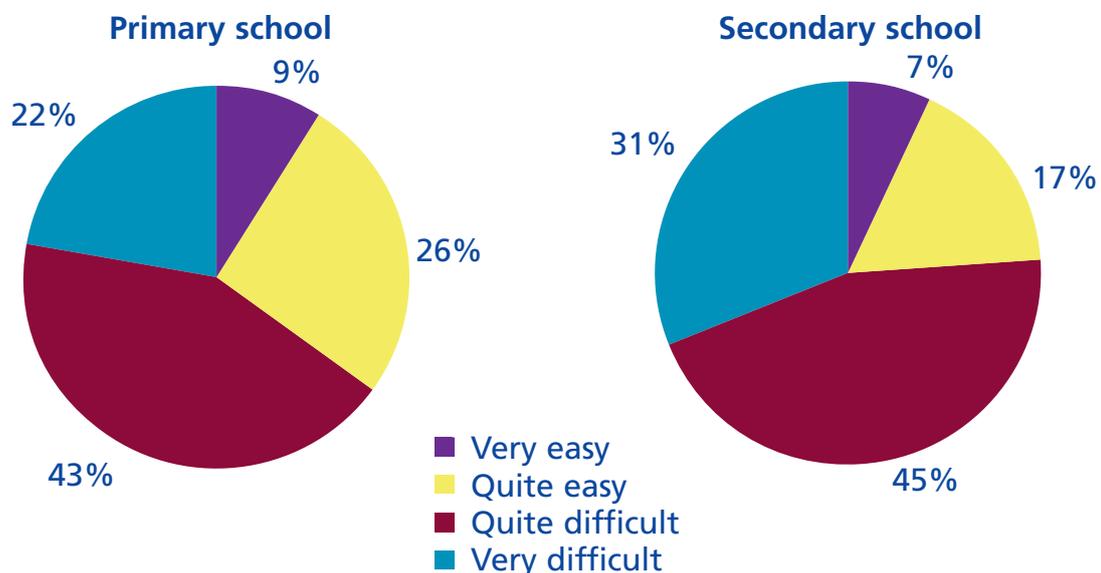
## Choice of supplier and specialist items

High costs may be due to specific items only being available from a specialist supplier, thereby preventing parents from 'shopping around' for best value items. The Code explicitly states that school uniform should be widely available 'off the peg', rather than from expensive sole suppliers.

Parents were asked which items they needed to purchase from a specialist supplier.

- Only 6% of secondary school respondents, and 22% of primary school respondents, reported that all

**Figure 2: How easy would you say it is for your family to meet the cost of your child's school uniform and PE kit?**



Base: Primary: 440 respondents, Secondary: 504 respondents.

of the items were available from a number of suppliers.

Overall, 87 per cent of parents were required to buy items from a specialist supplier. Of these:

- 56% of primary school respondents needed to buy three or more items from a specialist supplier.
- 86% of secondary school respondents needed to buy three or more items from a specialist supplier.
- The most common item for both primary and secondary schools was a jumper or sweatshirt, reported by 70%.
- The second most common uniform item for primary school was a school bag, required by 37%, and the most common item of PE kit was a t-shirt, required by 31%.
- For secondary schools, the second most common uniform item was a school tie, required by 56%. The most commonly required piece of PE kit was a t-shirt, required by 63%.

Survey comments revealed how significantly more expensive it was to buy items from specialist suppliers as compared to 'off the peg' ones. Examples included:

"My youngest child is starting secondary school in September. It is compulsory to have everything with the embroidered school logo on. This can only be purchased at a specific shop. The cost is really high compared to the same garments I could buy from a supermarket without the logo. My youngest daughter's uniform will cost me just over one week's wage."

Wigan, secondary school

"Primary school has been easy – most of the uniform is available from the big supermarkets. My eldest is off to

grammar school in September and I'm dreading the cost of the uniform – it's only available in one shop and involves blazers, hockey sticks and all sorts."

Kent, secondary school

"I don't understand why we have to have such expensive uniforms. It frustrates me to see that inexpensive items are available in large supermarkets – but instead of a £2 polo shirt from Tesco, I have to buy a £10 one from a specialist shop. My sons' rugby shirts cost almost £20 each, and I've had two stolen."

Devon, secondary school

"In my daughter's secondary school they even have to wear special school coats (fleece and anorak) which cost over £40 combined and you have to pay £2 for every item of their uniform to have their initials sewn on. You can only buy the trousers and shoes from normal retailers everything else has to come from a special uniform shop."

Cardiff, secondary school

## Quality and value for money

Parents were asked whether or not they thought their child's school uniform was good value for money:

- 73% of secondary school respondents and 48% of primary school respondents felt that the school uniform was not good value for money.

Many respondents highlighted their frustrations at the poor quality of the uniform and how well it lasted, especially when it needed to be purchased from a specialist shop. The following comments typify the points made:

"The quality of the school uniforms that you have to purchase from a specialist shop or the school itself is

absolutely diabolical. I have had my children's uniforms literally fall to pieces and all have been due to poor standards of the clothes. I have seen the jumpers shrink, cuffs fall off, stitching and seams fall apart! And I could have bought all of the items from a local high street store instead. The quality is so much better and the prices are so much lower too!"

Barnet, secondary school

"The main point about my son's uniform is that apart from having to go to a specialist supplier the actual quality of the blazer and pullover were appalling. Both are made in man-made materials – not so good for sweaty adolescents! – and are not hard wearing enough for every day wear."

Leeds, secondary school

## Compounding factors

Parents' frustrations were added to by the following factors:

- Lack of clarity around which items are compulsory. Parents reported being asked to purchase items which later turned out to be unnecessary.
- Changes to the school uniform, sometimes frequent, and often with insufficient notice or explanation.
- Specific uniform items for different school years.

As well as adding to cost, these issues increased the frustration felt by parents, especially if new specialist uniform items replaced generic ones, or if their child was about to leave the school.

Unnecessary items:

"For PE, they have to have football boots (with screw in rugby studs) and astros and/or trainers – the football boots are hardly used (and the

replacement rugby studs have never been opened) – it is a total waste of money. Schools seem to view parents as a bottomless pit of money!"

Norfolk, secondary school

"On the form, the school did not make it clear which items were absolutely necessary and I felt quite bad that I couldn't afford the hockey boots, although I did fork out £4.50 for some long socks with a blue line around the top. My daughter has never had to wear these, and has never been asked where her hockey boots are. I think the school should make it clear which items are compulsory and which optional."

Lancashire, secondary school

Changes to the uniform:

"I bought a brand new uniform last year for my daughter to start school. The Head, in her wisdom, has decided to change the whole uniform which is to start this September; every item has changed, so I now have to spend another considerable amount of money. I guess I'm lucky I only have one child at the school."

East Sussex, secondary school

"The school my child attends has added to the uniform every year for the past four years. This year they have introduced a bag and coat bearing the school logo. It has been made very clear that my child will be excluded for not having these items. As my child is due to leave next June I feel that this is an unnecessary expense."

Wirral, secondary school

"When my older son was in year 8, the school changed the school uniform. My third child is just about to finish year 7. I've just found that the uniform is about to change again from polo shirts and sweatshirt to blazer, shirt and tie.

I'm sure the blazer is going to be expensive and I'm cross that, yet again, we have a change of uniform when I've just kitted out a year 7 child with an expensive school uniform."

Devon, secondary school

"This year a new logo was brought in and a whole new range of uniform. Of course both my children want all of it because everything they have has the old logo. The new stuff was bought in the middle of spring term, which I feel was quite inconvenient, although we did not have to change straight away, my children do like to remind me that they are two of the few children left with the old uniform."

Hampshire, secondary school

Specific uniform items:

"For year 11 the sweatshirt is a different colour so you have to buy another for the last few months of school."

East Sussex, secondary school

"My son attends school in Warminster, they have recently started a house system whereby all different houses have to purchase a coloured badge for

their respective house, sweatshirts with the same coloured badge plus a tie in the house colours. As parents we are expected to buy these items at inflated cost and they are only available at 'specialist' shops. We have been offered no help from the school."

Wiltshire, secondary school

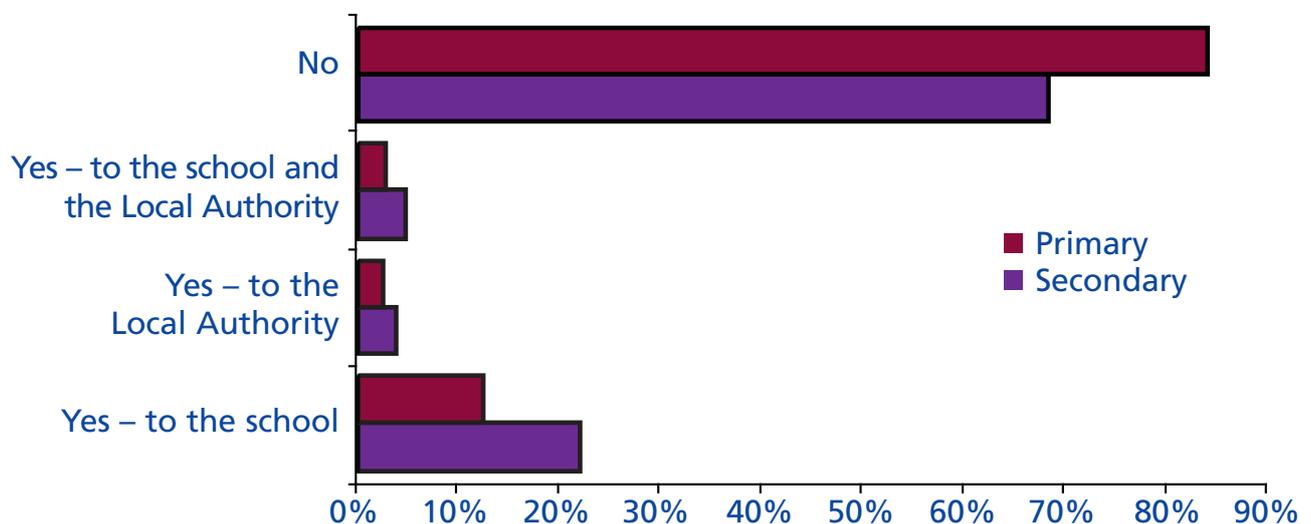
## Complaints about school uniforms

School governors are responsible for deciding uniform policies in consultation with parents. Under the new Admissions Code, local authorities in England now have a duty to ensure fair access and could complain to the Schools Adjudicator about schools that fail to comply with the Code on uniform policy. Our survey asked parents whether they had ever complained about the cost of school uniform (see figure 3).

The graph shows that despite concerns about cost, only a very small percentage of parents have ever complained, indeed 83 per cent of primary school parents and 69 per cent of secondary school parents had never complained.

Comments from the survey suggest that parents may not know who to complain

Figure 3: Have you ever complained about the cost of school uniform?



Base: Primary: 438 respondents, Secondary: 497 respondents.

to, and that if they do, many have found that their complaints are not taken seriously:

“I have not complained about the costs of uniform as I wouldn’t know who to complain to.”

Kent, primary school

“I have complained to the school about the quality of the cardigans and have had no success from the head at all.”

Sefton, primary school

“Their reasons for insisting on certain items, for example, school coat are just not tenable but any parent raising an objection is seen thereafter as a ‘troublemaker’.”

Vale of Glamorgan, secondary school

“There does not seem to be any ‘body’ that can exert influence on schools to behave reasonably. I know I have tried the DfES, OFT, OSA (Office of the Schools Administrator), and the LEA, all without any success. BUT, schools seem to have ultimate power over parents. Just try complaining to a school and see how far you get, I have been through the whole complaint process from start to finish with the school simply refusing to budge on the issue of exclusive, monogrammed uniform. I have been fighting this school for a year now and finding that seemingly no one can stop the schools doing what the heck they like.”

West Berkshire, secondary school

### **What help with uniform costs are available for parents?**

In England and Wales, some local authorities provide grants for help with school uniform costs. The provision of discretionary grants remains patchy across England and Wales and inconsistent in

terms of eligibility. Forty three per cent of local authorities currently provide grants. In addition some local authorities provide help in very exceptional circumstances. The Welsh Assembly Government provides a uniform grant for children from low income families starting secondary school. It was initially set at £85 and has increased annually, £97.50 is available for 2007 admissions. Charitable grants are also available to some low income families. Some schools offer hardship funds or second hand clothing stalls.

The survey revealed a very low level of knowledge amongst parents about what help was available to them. Parents also commented that schools often did not have other support in place, such as a second-hand uniform shop.

Of primary school respondents:

- just 6% reported that there was a local authority grant available
- only 11% said that there was a school second-hand uniform shop
- 24% said that they didn’t know of any help available
- 59% said that there was no help available.

Of secondary school respondents:

- just 7% said that there was a local authority grant available
- only 8% said that there was a school second-hand uniform shop
- 25% said that they didn’t know of any help available
- 59% said that there was no help available.

## Financial help

Comments from respondents highlight how often there is no financial assistance available for families on a low income, when there are grants available, they are either poorly publicised or woefully inadequate. The Admissions Code states that schemes for the remission of cost of uniform should be administered discreetly, so as not to cause embarrassment, and should be widely publicised and clearly explained in school literature.

These comments show that where financial help is available it is often insufficient to meet the costs:

“A £30 grant from the council doesn’t go very far!!! Especially when you need to buy a whole school uniform.”

Hampshire, primary school

“My daughter’s uniform for starting high school costs over £500, we got a £12 grant. What a joke.”

Sefton, secondary school

“I am a single parent on state benefits. The uniform grant system allows each individual school to decide how and what they give – in my case the school

provide a sweatshirt and/or a school bag. My children are fast growing and I need to replace their shoes, shirts and trousers regularly but find that there is no help for these costs to be met.”

Southampton, primary school

This comment shows that even where there is help available, parents are often unaware:

“I was not advised about the grant. I heard a feature on local radio and then asked how to apply but I had missed out for several years prior to this.”

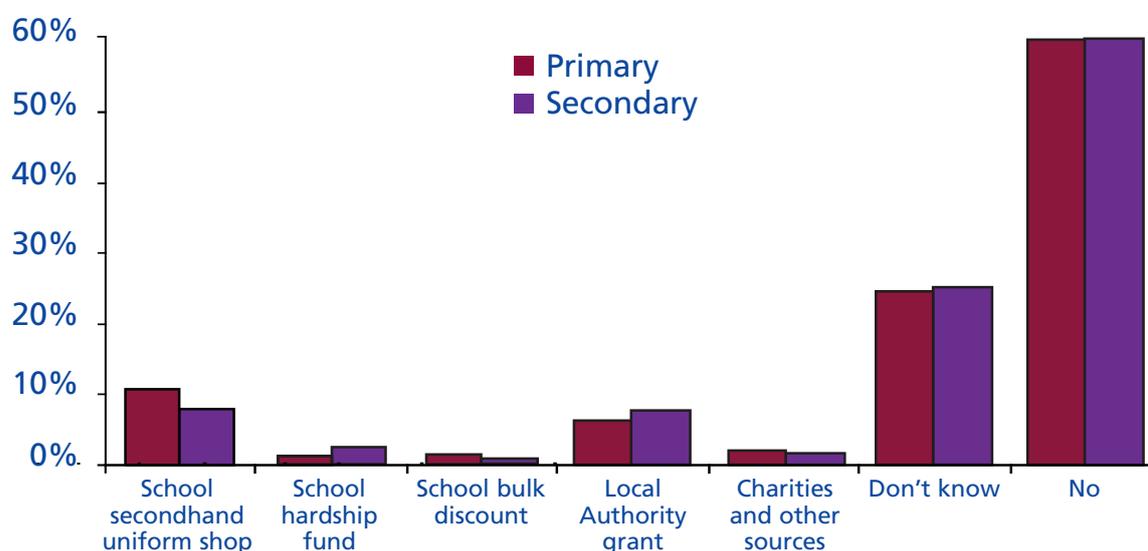
Sefton, secondary school

These comments illustrate situations where there is no financial help available:

“Our local school uniform grants/county council education department here in Essex discontinued funding for those like ourselves on means tested benefits. It is a challenge to meet the expensive rising costs of specialist school uniform when one is long term too ill to work and have mounting debts and poverty issues within the family.”

Essex, secondary school

**Figure 4: Was there any help available towards the cost of school uniforms and PE kits?**



Base: Primary: 435 respondents, Secondary: 500 respondents. More than one option could be selected.

“I have approached the school about help with uniform costs only for them to look at me blankly and tell me that if she doesn’t turn up in full uniform that she will be sent home. That’s really going to help.”

City of Bristol, secondary school

## Non-financial help

Other comments supported the figures shown in figure 4, illustrating how many schools have missed the opportunity to provide support in other ways. It was shocking, for example, that so few schools operated a second-hand uniform stall.

“There is a PTA for the school who sell cheap second hand school clothes, but they are more often than not, unavailable when there’s a school function. I live some distance from my daughters’ school and don’t have my own transport, so this makes it difficult for me to get there if they are available at other times. The school do not let us know if and when the PTA are going to be available to get some second hand school uniform from them.”

Kent, secondary school

“There is no second hand uniform shop.”

Cumbria, secondary school

This comment reveals just how desperate some parents are:

“I would love to be able to get some help – from a very desperate, single, working and tired mum.”

City of Nottingham, secondary school

## School trips

The *School Admissions Code* states that: “School trips are an important part of school life and can contribute to the ethos of the school”.

The Code also states that schools: “must

make it clear that...voluntary contributions to trips are not mandatory, and that the expectation is that low income families will contribute a small amount, or nothing. Parents must be assured that they will not be asked to explain why they prefer not to contribute and that not contributing will in no way disadvantage their child.” Compliance with this part of the Code is mandatory and action can be taken against schools who do not comply.

The survey asked parents questions on the average cost of an educational day trip and residential trip. It also asked how easy it was for their family to meet the cost of school trips and whether or not enough notice was given to enable them to budget for the trip.

## The cost of school trips

Where children had been asked on a day trip in the last year:

- The most common cost for a day trip for primary school respondents was £5-10. However, 42% of respondents were asked for more than this.
- For secondary school respondents, the most common cost for a day trip was £10-£15, but 44% were asked for more.

Where children had been asked on an educational residential trip:

- Parents of primary school pupils were most often asked for £100-£150 per trip, whilst almost a quarter were asked for more.
- Parents of secondary school pupils were most often asked for £250-£350 per trip, whilst 40% were asked for more than this.

## How affordable are school trips?

Parents often reported that they were concerned about the cost of school trips and were worried about being able to afford them.

- 76% of respondents with pupils at secondary school found it “quite difficult” or “very difficult” to meet the cost of school trips, as did 63% of primary school respondents.

“My child has been asked on many residential, prices ranging from £100-£700, and has attended two of these. They are expensive but parents feel obliged to get their children on these trips to support their education. It is only because of financial support from his grandparents that he has been able to go.”

Middlesbrough, secondary school

“Day trips are a nightmare, not only do you have to pay for them, you have to provide your child with lunch plus spending money. Before you know it a day trip costs £50.”

Medway, secondary school

“The school had a trip to the Isle of Wight. We couldn’t afford that, no matter how long we had to pay. I pay half towards trips, it’s all we can afford.”

Southend-on-Sea, primary school

## Budgeting

We asked whether sufficient notice was given to allow them to budget. For those whose children were asked on a school trip:

- 40% of primary school respondents felt they hadn’t been given enough notice to budget for day trips, and 38% felt they hadn’t had enough notice for residential trips.
- For secondary school pupil respondents, the figures were 44% and 37% respectively.

“A day trip made two weeks ago gave us 48 hours notice for a payment of £28

per child. Since the beginning of July we have contributed £222 to one school and £75 to another – impossible to budget for and you cannot say no.”

Trafford, secondary school

“I found the day trips especially hard, as sometimes there was very little notice given for day trips which cost over £10 a time. I felt under pressure and bad to say no in case my child was then left out. So in the end I had to make the sacrifice.”

Lewisham, primary school

## Voluntary payments

Our survey suggests that the voluntary nature of contributions is not always clear to parents, and as such schools are not complying with the Code. Only 26 per cent of parents with children at primary school and 28 per cent of parents with children at secondary school thought that it was clear that families on a low income could be exempt from some or all of the cost of the trips.

Many parents did not feel that they had an option not to pay. Letters home often gave the impression that by not paying, their child would miss out, or that the whole trip would have to be cancelled.

“It was explained to me that my daughter would have to stay at home if I could not provide the so called ‘voluntary’ contribution. There was no offer of omitting the contribution for families with extreme financial circumstances, or any indication that there was a school hardship fund.”

City of Bristol, primary school

“On one occasion when I did not send in the ‘voluntary’ funds I was chased for payment by THREE letters home and TWO phone calls! Asked why they were chasing me for this payment if it

was meant to be voluntary I was told that the term 'voluntary' had to be used because schools are not allowed to ask parents for payment."

Hertfordshire, primary school

"On all requests from school a suggested 'voluntary contribution' is stated, along with the words 'if you do not contribute we will be unable to proceed with this activity as school funds will be substantially reduced.' The implied guilt/pressure placed upon parents to make 'voluntary contributions' ensures we keep making them."

Vale of Glamorgan, primary school

Even where the option not to pay is clearly stated, parents have commented that it is necessary to make an appointment with the school to discuss why they are not able to pay.

"Regarding school trips you can only get help if you personally go and explain your circumstances to the head

teacher, which means I have to go and tell her that I am the only adult in the household on a very low income with no assistance whatsoever from the children's father. It is not very discreetly done."

Suffolk, secondary school

"We are a family on a low income...We are entitled to help with costs for school trips etc, but the school make it very difficult and embarrassing. It is easier just to pay."

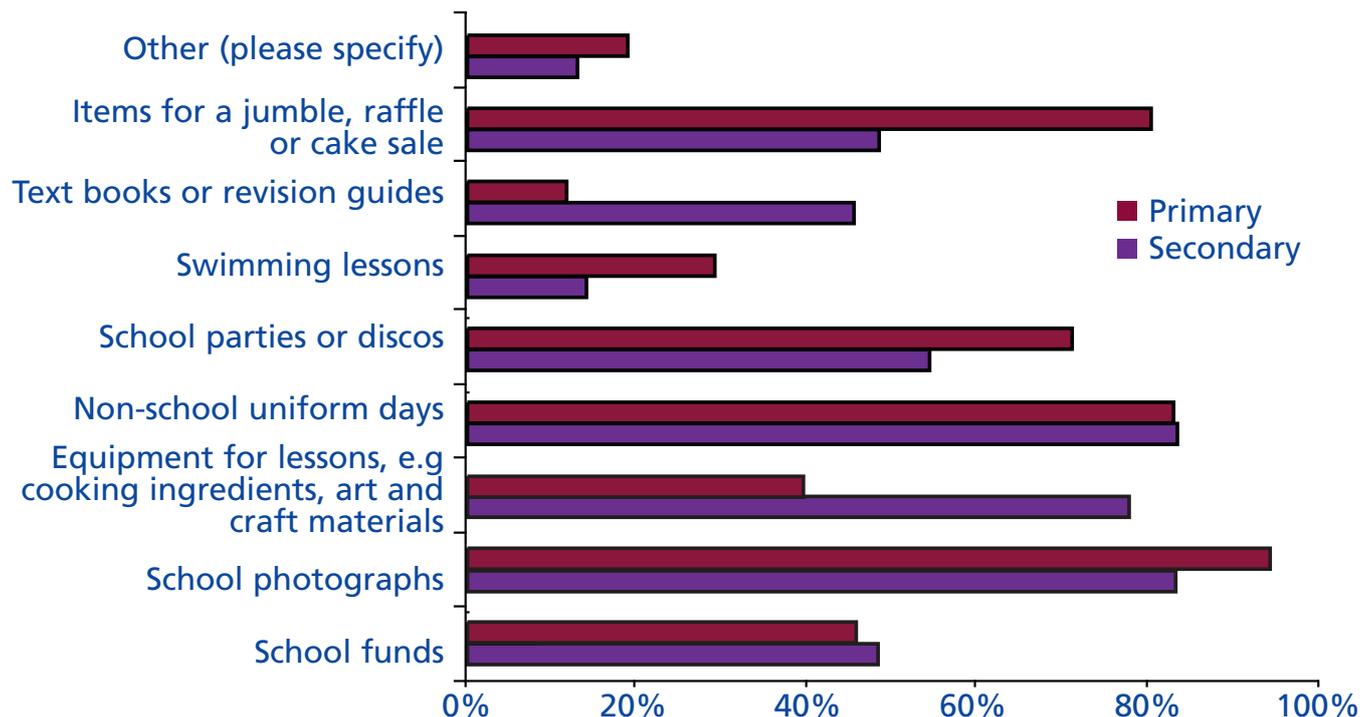
Sefton, secondary school

### Other costs associated with schooling

School uniforms and trips only form part of the costs associated with schooling for many parents (see figure 5).

- For primary school, the top four items asked for were school photographs, non-school uniform days, items for a jumble, raffle, or cake sale, and school parties or discos.<sup>15</sup>

Figure 5: What else have you been asked to contribute towards?



Base: Primary: 416 respondents, Secondary: 467 respondents. More than one option could be selected.

<sup>15</sup> Non-school uniform days are fundraising events where children are allowed to attend school in their own clothes instead of school uniform, in return for a donation to the school.

- For secondary school, the top four items were non-school uniform days, school photographs, equipment for lessons, and school parties or discos.

Other items mentioned by parents included:

- music lessons
- stationery
- sponsored activities
- computer access
- charity events and collections
- bake sales and school fairs
- travel costs
- swimming lessons
- lockers and coat pegs
- school plays
- children’s work in order to be able to bring it home
- staff collections and staff leaving gifts
- visits from outside parties to the school such as travelling theatres and workshops.

Parents have even been asked to purchase pencils bearing the school logo and fruit each week for the class to share.

These extra items and activities just add further cost and financial pressure to parents:

“The thing I was really angry about was to be told that my daughter wouldn’t be able to take home a piece of her work at the end of the year unless you paid a voluntary contribution. I FELT BLACKMAILED. It’s important for them to feel proud by bringing home their work to show you.”

East Sussex, secondary school

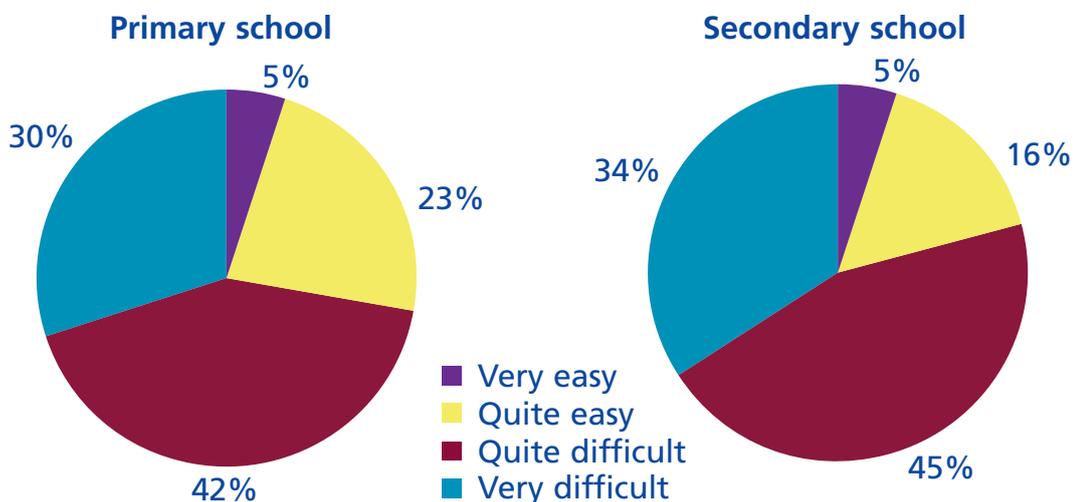
“Non-uniform days cost my family £3 for funds then also money for the clothes to ensure that they are up to date so that they are not socially outcast.”

Caerphilly, primary school

“For extra curricular activities such as music lessons, Spanish lessons and dance classes fees are expected. Travel to school sports events such as tennis/football/athletic/swimming is paid for by parents, either funding the bus, or taking children in their own cars. As a part-time working, single parent of two, without my own parents taking on the responsibility of funding sport and music my children would have been unable to engage in any of these events.”

Vale of Glamorgan, primary school

**Figure 6: How easy would you say it is for your family to meet all of the costs discussed in this survey?**



Base: Primary – 415 respondents, Secondary – 473 respondents.

Finally, our survey asked respondents how easy they felt it was to meet all of the costs discussed in the survey: school uniforms, school trips, and other costs (see figure 6).

- 72% of primary school respondents reported finding it 'quite difficult' or 'very difficult' to meet the costs, as did, 79% of secondary school respondents.

"Sometimes it does seem like you put your hand in your pocket every time you go through the school gates!"  
 Gateshead, primary school

## The impact of cost

Costs have a wider ranging impact than either preventing a family from purchasing goods such as school uniforms, or services, such as school trips and other activities. Children may be disciplined as a result of not having the correct uniform. They may be bullied by their peers, either for not having the correct uniform or for not going on school trips or participating in other activities. Poor arrangements for children not taking part may lead parents to choose to keep their children away from school on trip or activity days.

Stress and anxiety about school costs can also cause significant distress to families; respondents reported feeling guilty for not being able to afford all of the costs asked for, especially where trips were offered to children as a reward, for example, for good behaviour.

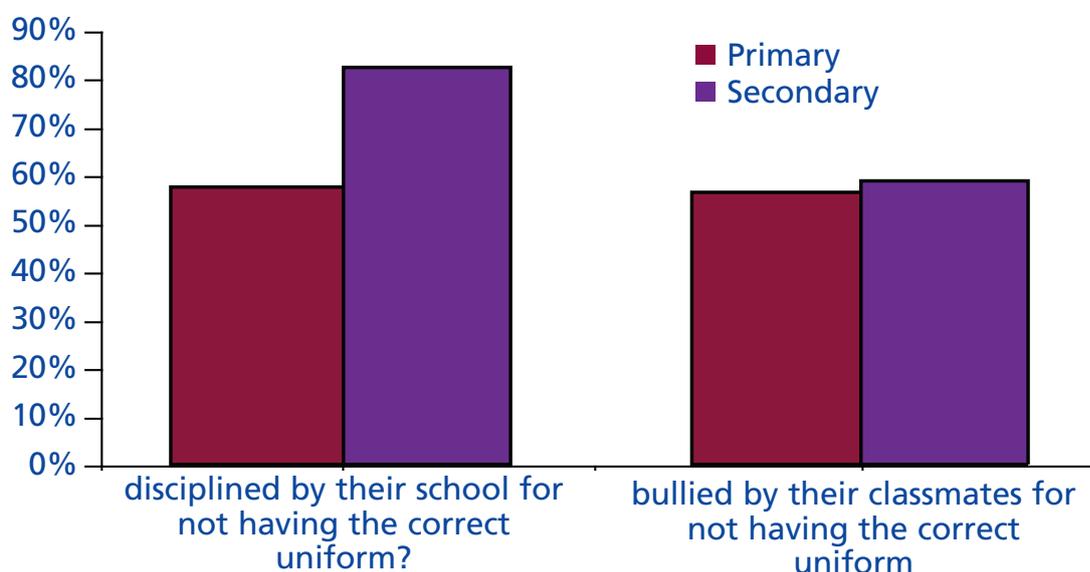
## Discipline and bullying

Many parents reported that they felt great pressure to provide the correct school uniform for their children, either because they were worried that their child might be bullied by their peers, or that they might be disciplined by school staff, for not having the correct uniform. A high percentage of both primary school and secondary school respondents reported being concerned about their child being either disciplined or bullied as a result of not having the correct uniform (see figure 7).

The following comments illustrate situations where a child has been disciplined for either not having the right school uniform, or for not contributing to the cost of activities:

"My eldest child has been excluded from cookery lessons in the secondary school

**Figure 7: Respondents who answered "Yes" to the question "Are you worried that your child might be...?"**



Base: Primary: 435 respondents, Secondary: 499 respondents.

and made to feel different and reprimanded just because I cannot afford to send in these costs."

Wigan, secondary school

"My daughter was given detention for not having the correct pleats on her skirt."

Lancashire, secondary school

"My son was disciplined in front of the whole class because he had the wrong trousers on and I could not afford to buy new ones, he had gone through the knee on his old pair."

Essex, primary school

"My daughter had to write lines because she had the wrong colour shorts. What is that teaching my child?!"

Primary school

These comments show that parents are also concerned about their child being bullied or picked on by their peers if they don't meet the costs:

"I am on income support and find that on average I spend £30-40 PER WEEK on school functions/activities. If I didn't do this, my children would be isolated by other children as being PAUPERS as everyone else gets involved."

Liverpool, primary school

"I find the money because I don't want my child to be picked on by other students because of old/hand-me-down uniforms."

Hampshire, secondary school

"If you do not pay for these trips your child misses out and gets bullied from their classmates so you feel you can't say no even when you don't have the money."

Blackpool, primary school

## Distress caused

Comments made by survey respondents reveal high levels of distress caused by not being able to meet all of the demands for payment.

"The weeks leading up to the end of the summer holidays brings depression concern and dread. It is such a worry and a stressful time when you can't afford expensive replacement uniforms and PE kits that they have outgrown or worn out such as new blazers, shoes, stationary needs and specialist lesson materials such as cookery art or crafts including trips and other miscellaneous expenses."

Essex, secondary school

"My children's school awards good behaviour/attendance with leisure trips out – however the cost of these trips needs to be met by parents (usually at very short notice). This puts added pressure on me not to disappoint my children or show support for their good behaviour."

Liverpool, secondary school

"All costs are rising in order for my child just to attend school. I am constantly struggling to provide her with money so she can join in whatever is going on. The school fair is coming up and I am dreading it but she wants to join in. I try to make sure she will not be bullied by other people by not having decent clothes and shoes. Recently she had a second pair of shoes this year, the first ones had holes in and other children were talking about them. I do not know what I am going to do in September. When they start back, she needs all her kit."

Wigan, primary school

“My daughter is going to grammar school and I’m terrified that I’m not going to be able to meet the costs. I’m also having lots of sleepless nights about how I’m going to pay for her uniform which I’ve added up will come to over £400 because she has to have certain things done in a certain way from a certain shop. My son will also need a new uniform this year. I’m beginning to dread them going to school. There really should be much more help available.”

Buckinghamshire, secondary school

“The cost of uniform didn’t make a difference to the school I choose as the money saved on uniform would not be worth the petrol money having to take him to a different school.”

Kent, primary school

“I have no choice but to send my children to the local secondary school as a working single mum. They need to be able to get there.”

Wigan, secondary school

“We do not have a choice of school. Our children have to attend the nearest to their address. If we apply to another school we are in danger of not being able to send them to the nearest school if they are turned down to attend the school of our choice.”

Milton Keynes, secondary school

“The secondary school uniform is going to cost approximately £350 and we certainly cannot afford it and have had to ask family members to contribute – it would be fantastic if some help could be given to low income families for uniforms – we want to send our daughters to the best schools for them not the ones with the cheapest uniforms.”

Kent, primary school

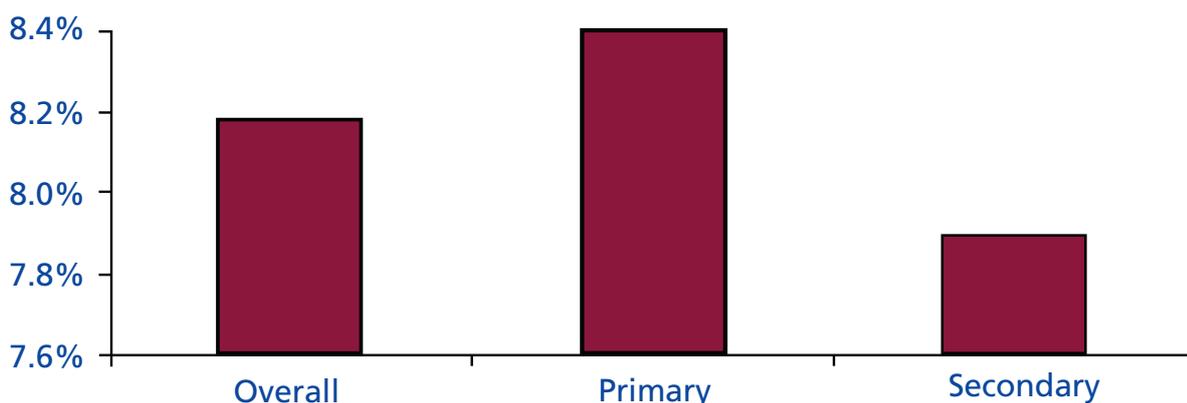
## The effect of cost on choice

The *School Admissions Code* makes it clear that parents on low incomes should not be deterred from applying to their school of choice as a result of cost.

Although many people commented that they did not have a choice, 10 per cent still reported that the costs associated with schooling had influenced their choice of school. Interestingly, a higher percentage of parents with pupils at primary school stated that the costs had influenced their choice than parents with pupils at secondary school (see figure 8).

Many parents may have to choose the closest school for transport reasons. Others would also choose to pay extra costs for their child to attend a good school – often causing hardships in other spheres of life.

**Figure 8: Respondents who replied “Yes” to the question “Did the costs associated with schooling influence the choice of school for your child?”**



Base: Primary: 417 respondents, Secondary: 469 respondents.

## Good practice

Although the majority of responses to the survey highlighted poor practices by schools, there were a number of responses which drew attention to the good practice of some schools. Parents commented on school uniform practices, how schools approached trips and how they asked for payments, and finally about what help was available at the school for families on a low income. The comments below from parents show the wide range of good practice.

### Uniform

These comments refer to good uniform policies held by schools, such as clothing being available 'off the peg' with sew on badges, if applicable, and schools having a stock of branded uniform for special events, such as sport matches.

"My son's school has a very good uniform policy. Only the sweatshirt, PE top and shorts have to be purchased via the school shop, which is very competitively priced. Our school uniform has a polo shirt instead of a formal shirt, which are available from most high street stores for not much money. I think this is a policy that should be adopted by all schools."

Wandsworth, primary school

"School uniform suppliers sell sew on school badges, which enables you to buy cheaper blazers from high street shops."

Kent, secondary school

"My children's primary school in Lewisham offer a FREE PE kit."

Lewisham, primary school

"At my child's primary school we had a simple PE kit which was a white polo shirt and black shorts and an optional

dark coloured track suit which could be purchased from any chain store. They introduced a new PE kit but it was optional, and was only available from the school office, but was reasonably priced. If your child was picked for a school team they could borrow the new PE kit, we didn't have to purchase it"

Shropshire, secondary school

"Our school offers second hand uniforms in a discrete manner so as not to cause any offence. I have three children, one of which is going to comprehensive this year and have recently bought his school uniform. All the shops I visited offered a payment plan and were very helpful."

Caerphilly, primary school

### Trips

Good practice mentioned by parents in relation to trips included payment plans, long notice periods, considerate wording of letters home, and financial assistance for parents from school bodies.

"The expensive residential trip came with a payment plan and two years notice: VERY sensible, as it made it possible for our child to go."

Kent, secondary school

"One teacher wrote a wonderful letter re. a trip which [was] very clear and early on said 'we are asking for a voluntary contribution from those who feel they can afford it of £10 however please understand that regardless of payment all children who wish to come are entitled to a place'. This actually made me more inclined to pay and I made a point of thanking him for the way he had put it which I felt was very inclusive – as it should be."

Devon, secondary school

“An active PTA raises a lot of funds for the school so that trips, books, equipment etc are supplemented by the money raised – approximately £20k per annum.”

Trafford, primary school

“Regarding the school trips funding, my child’s school so far have not charged for any of the day trips they have been on, also the children do not have to take any money with them for drinks/snacks as the tuck fund we all pay into each week covers this cost also.”

Wrexham, primary school

## **Help available**

Help mentioned as available to families on a low income included a hardship fund, a second hand uniform stall, and finally, a general attitude of the school towards ensuring that children from low income families are not excluded for financial reasons.

“The head teacher holds an amount for hardship funds. The Friends of the school are quite generous in support – for example, the Year 7s are asked to go on a residential course and the Friends will fund those not able to fund themselves.”

Cornwall, secondary school

## Conclusions and recommendations

Our survey found that many parents are faced with significant costs associated with sending their children to school. These costs vary considerably between schools and can cause financial difficulties for low income families. The survey responses indicate that the majority of schools represented do not follow the principles laid down in the Admissions Code. However some responses highlight the good practice of schools around the country, showing that it is possible for schools to implement the Code and adhere to its principles.

Despite the welcome inclusion of school cost issues in the Admissions Code, we are concerned that these elements are not enforceable in their own right. Poor compliance can only be addressed where it can be shown to affect fair admissions arrangements.

As much of the Code is just guidance, unless schools choose to make substantial changes to their policies and practices, there is a risk that children from low income families will continue to be disadvantaged by their inability to meet costs.

In our view, recourse for parents wishing to complain about the non-statutory provisions of the Code is wholly inadequate. This presents a real barrier to parents seeking to complain about excessive costs and endless requests for voluntary contributions.

**We recommend that each aspect of the Code should be enforceable in its own right. For example, the school costs section should be enforceable without needing to demonstrate how the principles of fair access are being compromised.**

**We recommend that the powers of the Schools Adjudicator be extended to allow parents to complain directly to them in situations where schools are not complying with the guidelines contained within the Code.**

**We also recommend that:**

**The DCSF should:**

- Place more emphasis on compliance and auditing of the guidance on school costs.
- Produce a model charging policy for schools, outlining good practice in charging for trips and all costs associated with schooling. This should include standardised wording for letters home to parents regarding voluntary contributions.
- Consider placing a statutory duty on local authorities, backed up by earmarked funding, to provide school uniform grants for children whose families are in receipt of maximum child tax credit.

**The Welsh Assembly Government needs to:**

- Once published, monitor adherence to the new guidance on uniform policies.
- Review and monitor the provision of grants on an annual basis by Welsh local authorities and to introduce safeguards to ensure that they are not using the introduction of the Welsh Assembly grant as an opportunity to reduce their own.
- Produce a model charging policy for schools, outlining good practice in charging for trips and all costs associated with schooling. This should include standardised wording for letters home to parents regarding voluntary contributions.

### **Local authorities must:**

- Maintain their local authority grant schemes to ensure that they do not lose value.
- Ensure that help available for parents with the costs of uniform and school trips is widely publicised.
- Ensure that schools' policies are routinely monitored and audited by the relevant authority to ensure that schools are not employing practices which may either exclude some parents from applying to that school for their child or which directly contravene the guidance.
- Disseminate good practice across all schools.

### **It is essential that schools:**

- Make parents more aware of the channels available to them for complaining about their concerns.
- Ensure that help available for parents with the costs of uniform and school trips is widely publicised.

### **Parents can work with schools and local authorities to:**

- Highlight the hardship faced by families on a low income caused by school costs.
- Campaign for the (re)introduction of school hardship grants and local authority uniform grants.
- Help set up second hand uniform shops and other (non-financial) means of help.

Finally, we believe that for the Code to be effective it is important to ensure proactive monitoring of compliance by admissions forums and local authorities. The responsibility for complaining about incidences where a school deviates from the guidance should not fall solely on parents.

Produced by:  
Citizens Advice  
Myddelton House, 115-123 Pentonville Road,  
London N1 9LZ  
Tel: 020 7833 2181 Fax: 020 7833 4371  
[www.citizensadvice.org.uk](http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk)

Citizens Advice is an operating name of The National  
Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux. Registered charity  
number: 279057.

Produced: September 2007