



**The
Children's
Society**

The Wrong Blazer 2018:

Time for action on school uniform costs

August 2018

**No child
should feel
alone**

The Wrong Blazer 2018: Time for action on school uniform costs

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.¹

In January 2015 we surveyed 1000 parents to explore the issue of school uniform costs in more detail. We found that parents spent on average around £170 more per child, per year than they thought would be reasonable to spend.

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

This report updates those findings, based on a new survey with around 1000 parents which was carried out in August 2018.

It shows that on average parents overspend on school uniforms by hundreds of pounds per child each year. Many 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. Our findings indicate that a considerably greater proportion of families are negatively affected by the cost of school uniform now than in in 2015.

'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

Guidance to schools on how to set school uniform policy is clear that cost should be a top priority, noting that:

*"When considering how the school uniform should be sourced, governing bodies should give highest priority to the consideration of cost and value for money for parents."*²

¹The 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.)

²DfE (September 2013) *School uniform: guidance for governing bodies, school staff, and local authorities*

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

However, this guidance is not legally binding. Whilst following our 2015 report, the Government committed to change this³ – this has still not been acted upon, and there are no signs of this happening in the near future.⁴

Methodology

We surveyed 1,004 parents of school age children in August 2018 across the UK about the costs of school uniforms. This survey was carried out by Opinium Research. In all cases parents saying their oldest child attended an independent school were excluded from the analysis.

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’.

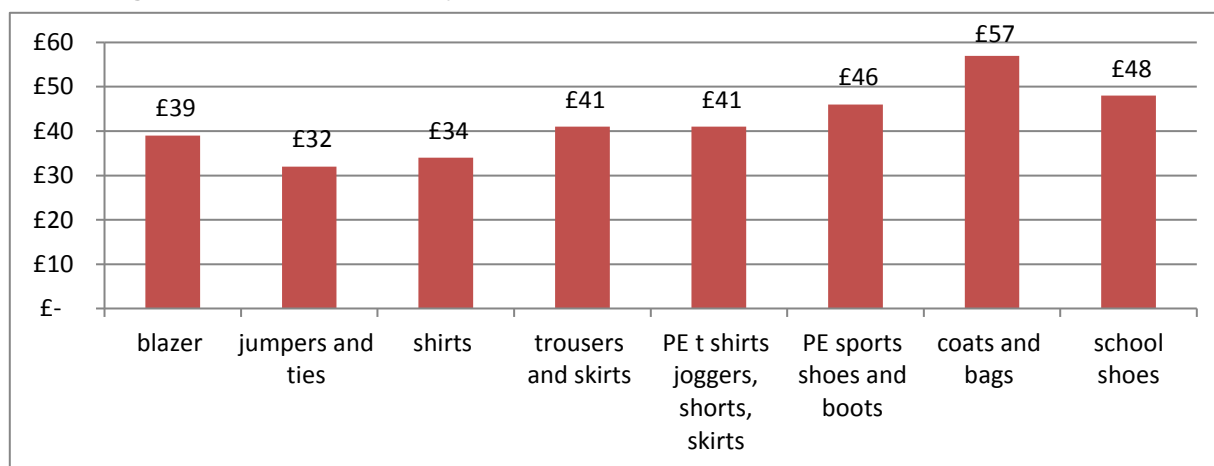
How much do families pay for school uniforms?

Overall, parents with children in state maintained schools told us that they spent £340 per year on school uniform costs for each secondary school child and £255 per year for each primary school child.

This is an increase of £24 (or 7%) on school uniform costs for secondary school children and £4 (or 2%) for primary school children compared to 2015.

We also asked parents how much they pay on average for different items of school uniform. Coats and bags, and school shoes were the most expensive two items in both primary and secondary school. Of other items of clothing, blazers were notably expensive, with secondary school parents paying an average of £39 per child for a blazer for their secondary school children.

Average uniform costs (secondary)⁵

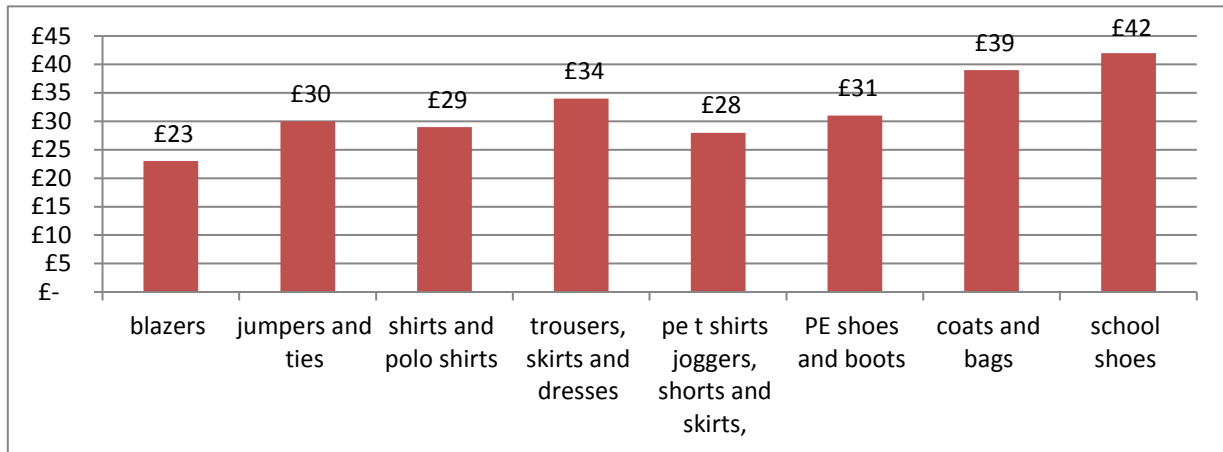


³ In the 2015 briefing “A better deal: boosting competition to bring down bills for families and firms” the Treasury announced that “The government wants to ensure that effective competition is used to drive better value for money and will therefore put existing best practice guidance for school uniform supply in England on a statutory footing. This will ensure that schools deliver the best value for parents by avoiding exclusivity arrangements unless regular competitions for suppliers are run.” https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/480798/a_better_deal_for_families_and_firms_web.pdf

⁴ <https://www.theyworkforyou.com/wrans/?id=2017-10-11.HL1903.h&s=%22school+uniform%22#gHL1903.q0>

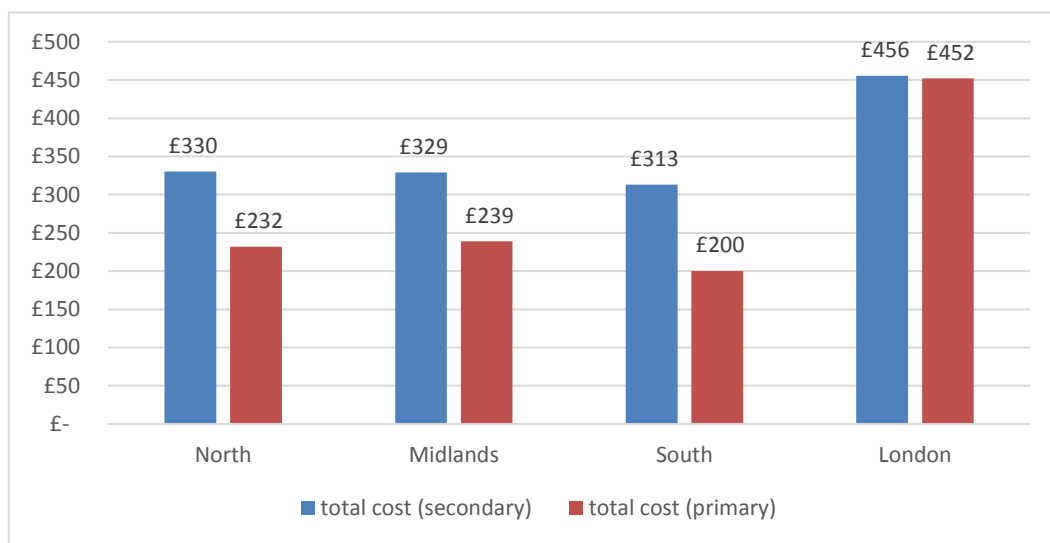
⁵ Sample sizes vary for individual items but in all cases n is between 511 and 606

Average uniform costs (primary)



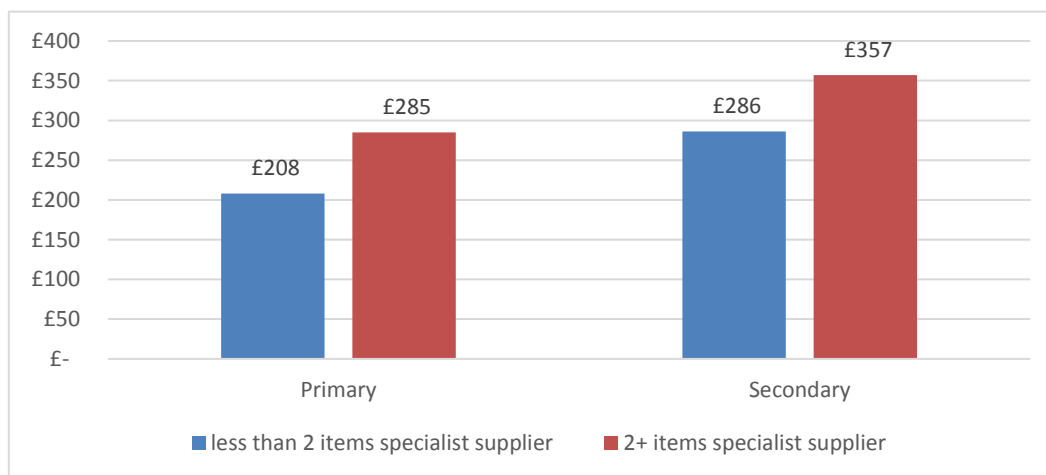
Average uniform costs were found to vary significantly across the Country. Costs were highest by some margin in London, where parents were paying an average of £456 per secondary school child and £452 per primary school child.

Regional variations in the total cost of school uniforms (average costs between primary and secondary school uniform costs)



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 two or more items of school uniform from a specific supplier, costs were an average of £71 per year higher for secondary school children and £77 higher for primary school children.

School uniform costs by whether or not two or more items must be bought from a specialist supplier⁶



N=506 (secondary) and 599 (primary)

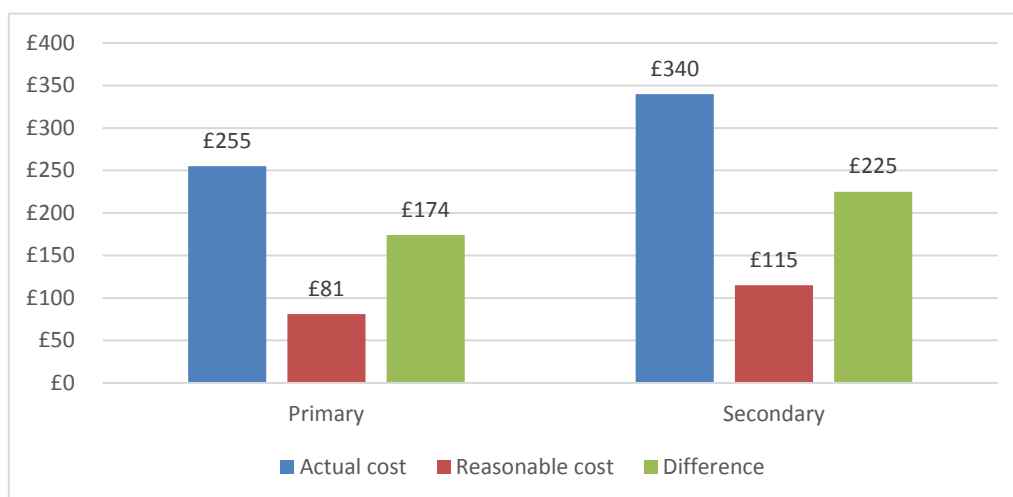
Other reasons for high costs include schools requiring many different items of uniform – including coats, different ties for different years in the school, and multiple items of sports kit.

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 £174 per year more than they thought “reasonable” and for secondary school children this was £225 per year.

This means that on average, parents of both primary and secondary school children thought that they were paying around three times the reasonable cost of a uniform.

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



N= 492 (secondary) and 588 (primary)

⁶ Children in independent schools excluded

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

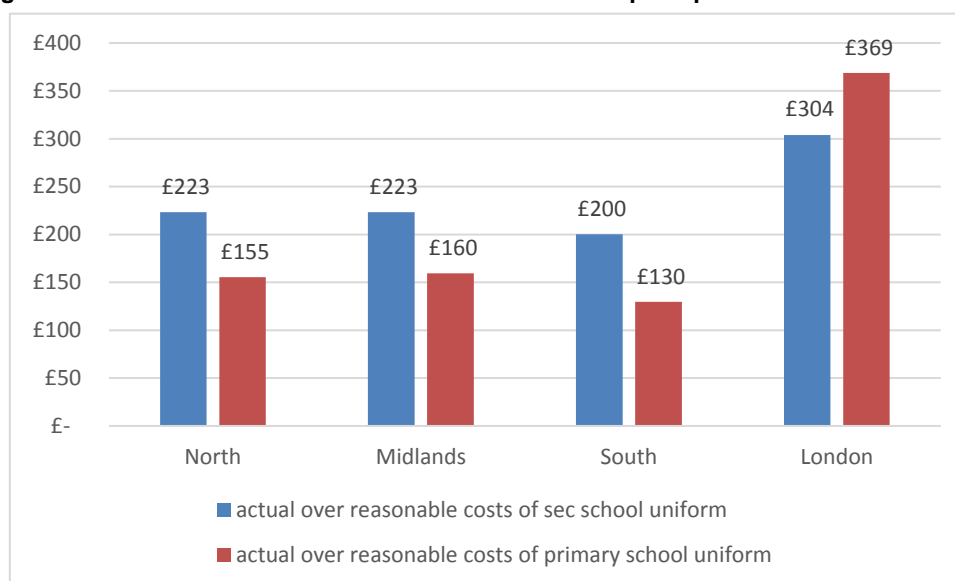
“When considering how the school uniform should be sourced, governing bodies should give highest priority to the consideration of cost and value for money for parents.”⁷

Based on statistics from the Department for Education on numbers of pupils in state maintained schools⁸, we estimate that parents across England pay around £2.3 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 £1.5 billion if they only paid what was reasonable.

	Pupil numbers (state maintained schools in England)	Estimated total payments for school uniforms	Potential savings (based on "reasonable costs")
Primary	4.7 million	£1.2 billion	£800 million
Secondary	3.3 million	£1.1 billion	£700 million
Total	8 million	£2.3 billion	£1.5 billion

As shown in the table below, the difference between the actual costs of school uniform and the price parents think reasonable to pay varies a great deal across the country – with the greatest differences in London, where parents think they spend £304 too much per secondary child and £369 too much for each primary school child.

Regional differences between cost of school uniform and price parents think reasonable to pay



⁷ *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 (accessed 19 February 2015)

⁸ *Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2018*, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/schools-pupils-and-their-characteristics-january-2018> (accessed 13 August 2018)

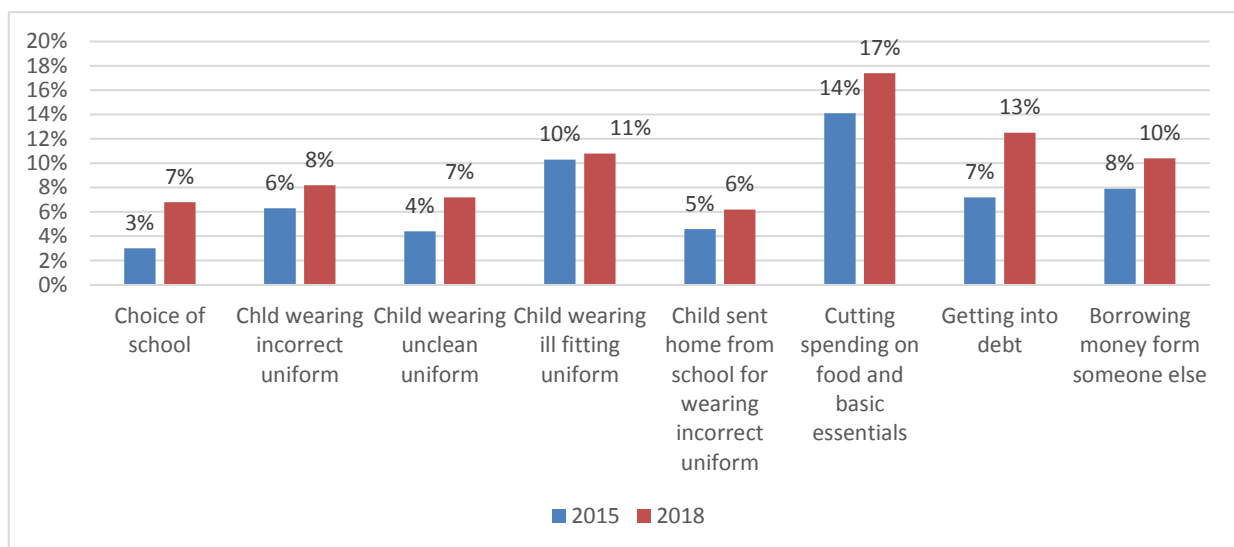
What impact do school uniform costs have on children’s lives?

For many children, the cost of school uniform can have a serious impact. Around one in ten parents said the cost of uniform led to their child wearing ill-fitting uniform, and more than one in twenty said that their child was sent home for wearing incorrect uniform.

For 7% of parents, the costs of school uniform affected the school which they chose for their children (around twice the proportion compared to 2015). This is despite statutory guidance which states that school uniform policies must not discourage parents from applying for a place.⁹

‘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’. Parent¹⁰

Cost of school uniforms: the impact on children – proportion of children affected (2015 and 2018)



N=948 in 2015, 946 in 2018

‘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.’ Parent¹¹

In many cases, parents have to cut back on other essentials in order to afford uniform costs. Nearly one in five parents reported that they have cut back spending on food or other basic essentials as a result of the cost of school uniforms. More than one in ten parents report having got into debt as a result of uniform costs.

⁹ School Admissions code, 2012

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/275598/school_admissions_code_1_february_2012.pdf (accessed 19 February 2015)

¹⁰ *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

¹¹ Ibid

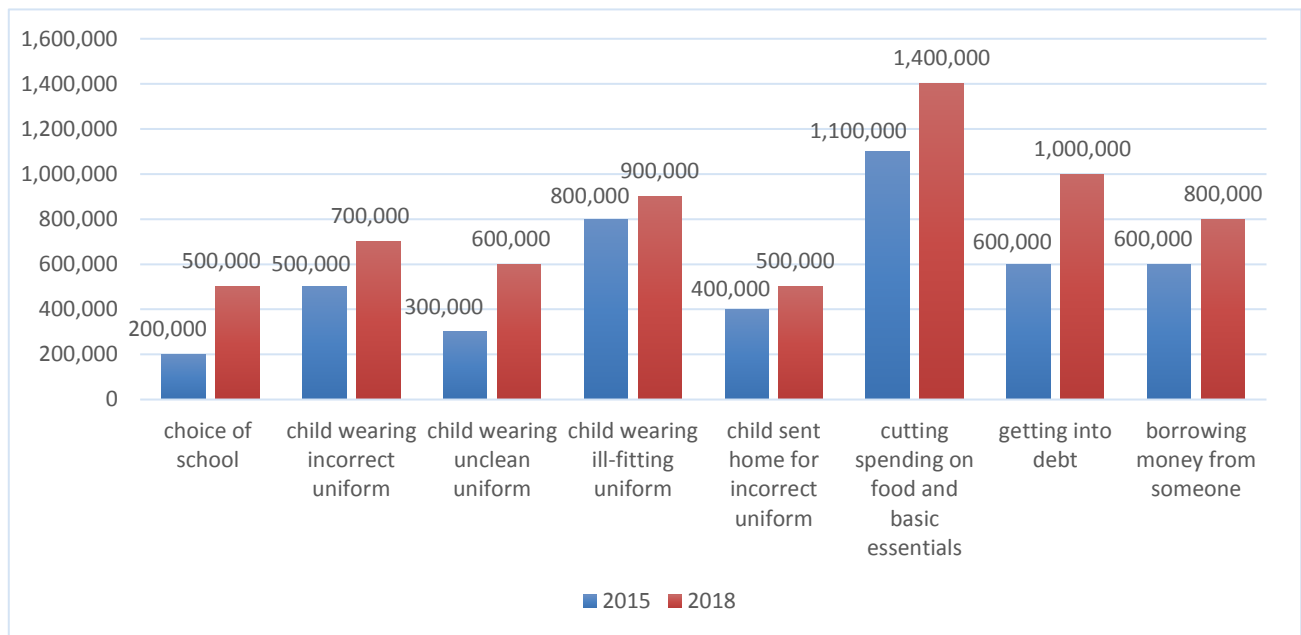
'School uniform is a constant source of anxiety. I am not ashamed of being poor but I always want my children to look as well cared-for as others. I go without so my children can always have what is needed' Parent¹²

Based on the results of our survey and DfE statistics on numbers of children in state maintained primary and secondary schools, we estimate that around 2 million children across England¹³ go to school wearing incorrect, unclean or ill-fitting uniform. Almost half a million children have been sent home because of wearing incorrect uniform.

Our 2018 survey responses show that 1 million children across England live in families who report having got into debt as a result of the cost of school uniform. This is approaching double the number of children living in families who found themselves getting into debt to cover uniform costs in 2015.

We estimate that more families are facing negative impacts as a result of school uniform costs now than in 2015, with 330,000 more families having to cut back on food and basic essentials in 2018, compared to 2015 and 200,000 more families borrowing money from someone as a result of uniform costs.

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

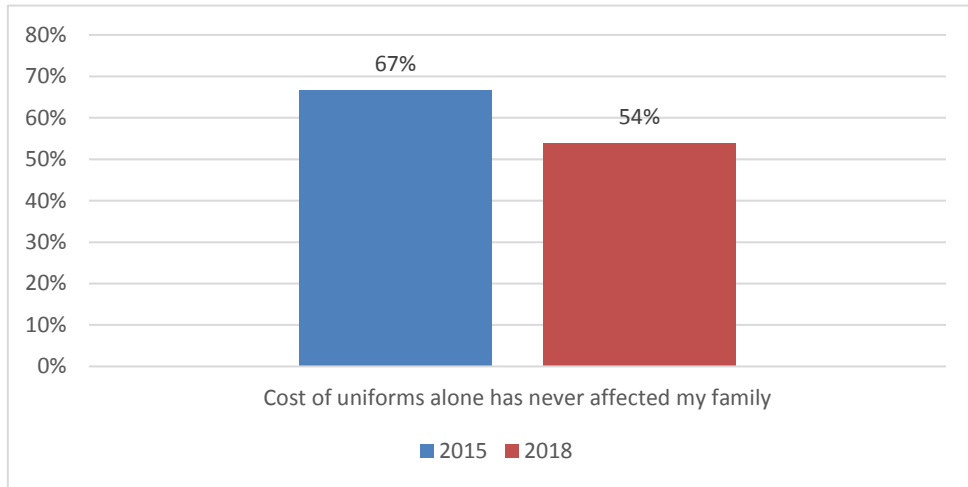


As shown in the table below – the proportion of parents saying that the cost of uniform had not affected their family reduced from two thirds in 2015, to a little over half in 2018.

¹² Ibid

¹³ Percentages of families affected are for the whole of the UK, estimated numbers of children affected are for England only because of the way school population statistics are compiled.

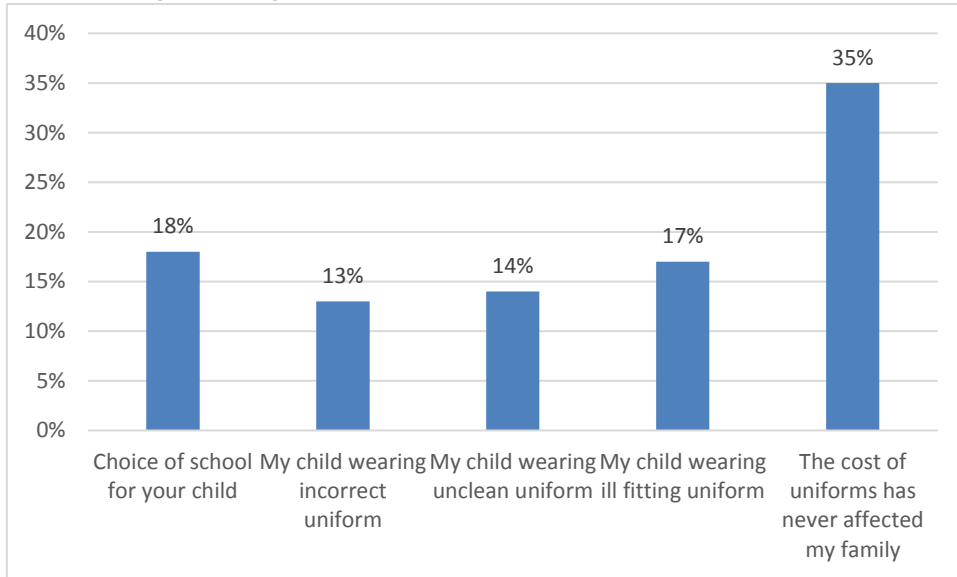
% of parents in 2015 and 2018 saying that the cost of uniforms had not affected their family



N=948 in 2015, 946 in 2018

Young parents were particularly likely to be adversely impacted by the cost of school uniforms. As shown in the table below 18% of parents aged 19-30 say that the cost of uniform had affected the choice of school for their child (compared with 7% of all parents), and just 35% saying that the cost of uniforms had not affected their family (compared with 54% of all parents).

Cost of school uniforms: the impact on children – proportion of children affected (responding parent aged 19-30)



N=99

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. Despite this, too often parents are facing higher costs as a result of limited options to choose where to buy their uniforms.

At the same time, the impact of school uniform costs is now having an impact on more families than in 2015. Whilst much of this may be the result of rising costs, a major part of the reason for this is also likely to be the squeeze on family incomes caused by reductions in financial support – including the current four year freeze on key benefits and tax credits.

The government should take two key steps to ensure that all families can afford the cost of uniforms:

1. 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. Following the publication of our last report on this issue in 2015, the Government committed to do this, but no action has been taken since then.

This change would potentially save families hundreds of millions of pounds, without costing the government a penny.

2. The government should end the freeze on key benefits and tax credits for families with children, as this is making it increasingly hard for families to afford key essentials.

Right now in Britain there are children and young people who feel scared, unloved and unable to cope. The Children's Society works with these young people, step by step, for as long as it takes.

We listen. We support. We act.

There are no simple answers so we work with others to tackle complex problems. Only together can we make a difference to the lives of children now and in the future.

Because no child should feel alone.

Further information

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