

# Education Costs: The Impact of School Uniform Costs on Families in West Sussex

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## Introduction

West Sussex Citizen Advice Bureaux have taken part in the 'Adding Up' campaign investigating the range and impact of school costs on families. This report focuses specifically on school uniform costs faced by parents in West Sussex local state schools.

Key government targets include goals to improve the educational attainment of children from low income families and to bring an end to child poverty in this country. Citizens Advice instigated the Adding Up campaign to highlight the broader costs associated with attending schools and to ascertain why these children are less likely to flourish at schools. The 'hidden' costs associated with sending children to school can have a significant impact on low income families. Children are at risk of being isolated or victimised and can often fall behind on school work due to their parent's inability to keep up with these costs. School uniform plays an important role in ensuring a child inclusion in the school community and enables them to participate fully in school life.

In February 2007 the new Schools Admissions Code introduced by the Department for Children, Schools and Families made clear reference to the importance of limiting the costs of school uniforms. The Code recommended that uniform should be widely available from a variety of suppliers and that schools should not use the sale of uniforms to raise money. It also advised that any help with school uniform costs should be widely publicised and administered discreetly to avoid any stigma being attached to claimants. Nonetheless, the mechanisms for the enforcement of these parts of the code are weak. The Citizen Advice survey in June/July 2007 found that there was little compliance with these principles of the code and that many families struggled with little or no help from the local authorities. Local authorities have discretionary powers to provide low income families with school uniform grants but this provision was described by Citizens Advice as patchy, inconsistent and in decline. The conclusion was that the inadequacy of the local authority uniform grants led to charities picking up what should be the states responsibility.

West Sussex Citizen Advice Bureaux compiled 'The Cost of a "Free" Education' report in May 2007 to examine school costs in the local area and to gauge the extent to which local schools are complying with the principles of the new code. This was motivated by parent's reports to local Bureaux highlighting difficulties in finding affordable uniform items for their children. Moreover, the discontinuation of discretionary uniform grants by West Sussex County Council led to a number of parents receiving insufficient uniform grants. The report concluded that there was a great expense involved in sending children to school in this area and "free" education is not effectively free. Moreover, the report found that many schools were not adhering to the principles of the Code as in a majority of schools the uniform items could only be purchased from one retailer. Following this report, West Sussex Bureaux have got together to campaign and influence local authorities and schools to reduce school costs and to re-vitalise the grant system. Subsequently, this 'Education Costs' report was compiled from a client survey of local parents to explore the school costs they face, the help available to them and their attitude towards this expenditure.

The 'West Sussex School Uniform Survey' was sent out to various bureaux across West Sussex and placed in the waiting room and interview rooms. The returned surveys were completed by 74 parents. We are grateful to all the clients who took time to complete this survey and contribute to the research.

9% of these responses were from parents in the Haywards Heath area, 8% were from Shoreham and Southwick, East Grinstead and Littlehampton respectively, 4% from Bognor Regis and the remaining 63% from Crawley parents.

Of the completed surveys 42% of the parents had children in Primary schools and 58% of the parents had children in Secondary schools. See appendix 1 for the schools the clients children attended (some parents choose not to name their child's school).

The Results

Over 95% of the parents had children in schools where uniform was a compulsory requirement indicating the importance of the issue of school uniform costs.

The average spent on school uniform per child was higher at Secondary schools than at Primary schools. 62% of parents paid between £50 -£150 for their child’s Primary school uniform where as 53% of Secondary school paid between £100-200. Figure 1 below compares the total expenditure on school uniform between parents with children in Primary schools with those in Secondary schools.

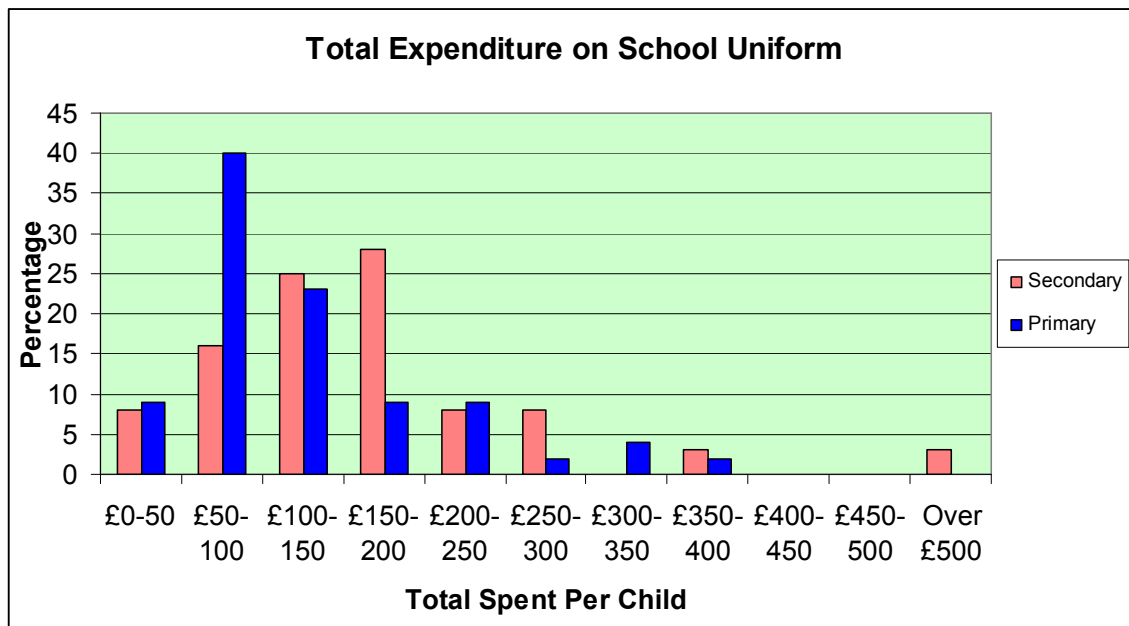


Figure 1

The majority at 54% of respondents considered that overall their child’s uniform was good value for money underlining the popularity of school uniform with parents. One parent from Crawley praised the important beneficial effects of school uniforms for low income families: “I think school uniform is best cos some of us parents do not have enough money to buy a lot of clothes for our kids” (sic). Nonetheless, although 65% of parents with children at Primary schools considered the uniform good value; 55% of Secondary school parents did not regard the prices of their child’s uniform as value for money. An example of this dissent is a respondent from Littlehampton said “The T-shirt is expensive and bad quality”.

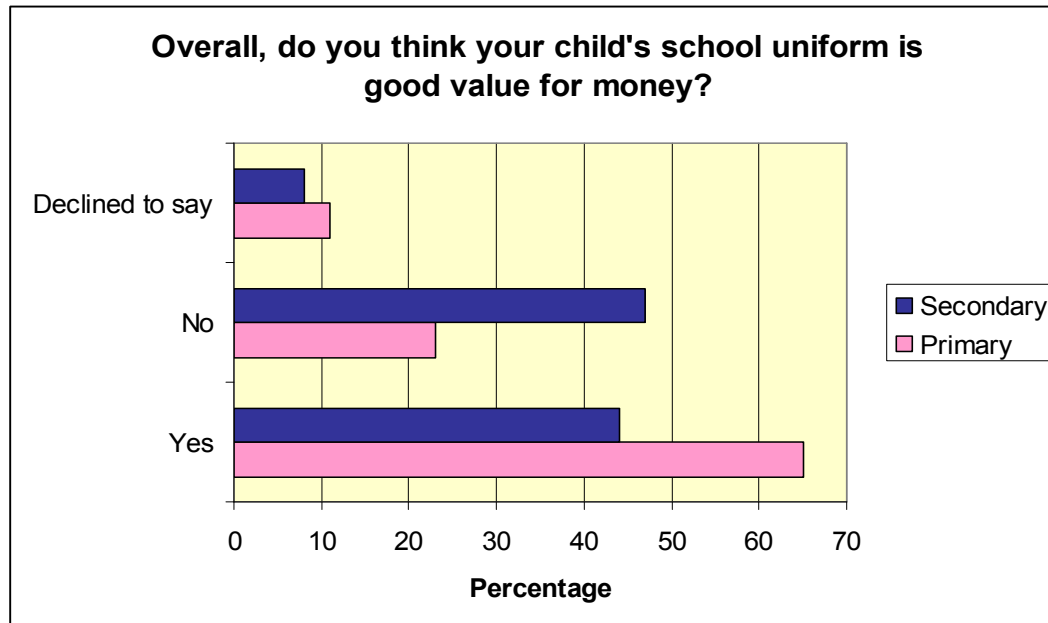


Figure 2

The majority of respondent's children had the standard uniform including a skirt/dress/trousers/shorts, jumper/cardigan/sweatshirt, shirt/blouse but some had additional items such as a blazer, tie or hat. When asked whether they considered any items of their child uniform unnecessary 73% said no; further highlighting the popularity of school uniform. Of those who said yes, ties and blazers were mainly identified as an unnecessary and extra expense. When asked if any extra items should be added to their child's uniform an overwhelming 83% said no. Nevertheless, a number of respondents who said yes wanted the addition of a winter coat proving that inexpensive and practical items of uniform can be useful in keeping overall child care costs down.

The Schools Admissions Code advised that remission of school uniform costs should be made publicly aware for low income families to access if necessary. However, 73% of respondents said there was no help available towards the cost of their child's uniform and 20% didn't know of any assistance (see figure 3). Significantly, none of the parents with primary school children said there was any help for uniform costs and 23% didn't know of any. The 14% of Secondary school parent respondents who said there was some help available mentioned vouchers and discounts to handle with school uniform costs.

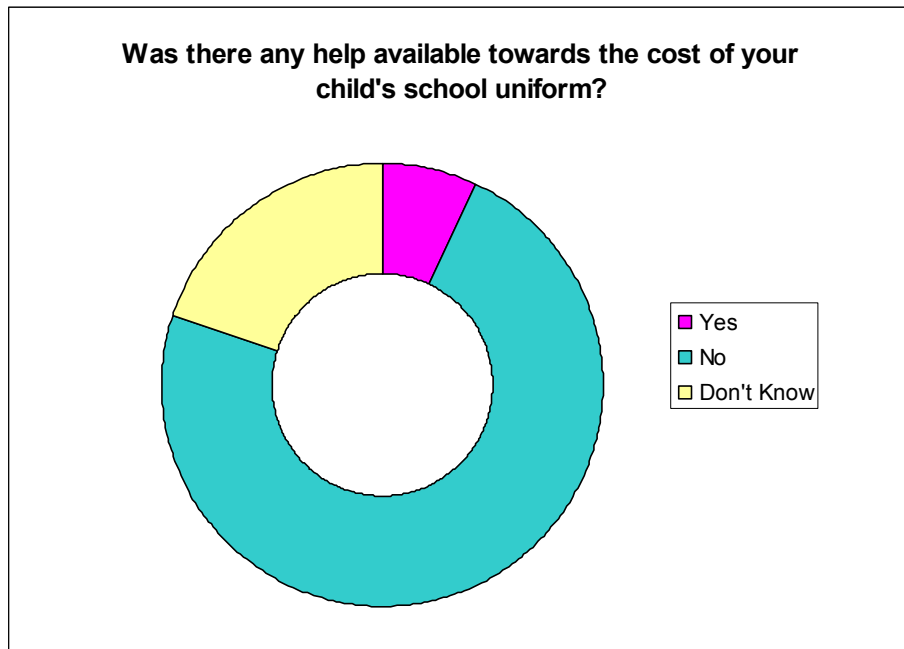


Figure 3

The impact of school costs can also lead to children from low income families being victimised by their peers or penalised by the school for not having the correct uniform. 49% of respondents were worried about their children being disciplined and 39% of respondents feared their child getting bullied for not having the correct uniform. One parent was particularly concerned by a schools uncompromising discipline over school uniform; complaining “my child has had many detentions for simply having his shirt hanging out of his trousers, which is ridiculous considering he has learning difficulties”.

Crucially, 67% of respondents found it either quite or very difficult to meet the cost of their child’s uniform. This indicates that although (as stated earlier) the majority of parents believed their child’s uniform to be good value for money; it is still difficult practically for them to keep up with the cost. Again, parents with children in Secondary schools found it harder than Primary school parents as 69% of Secondary school respondents found it very or quite difficult in contrast 63% of Primary school respondents. Moreover, 35% of Primary school parents found that meeting the costs for their child’s school uniform was actually quite easy although only 2% found it very easy. However, a significant 22% of Secondary school respondents and 19% of Primary school respondents found paying for their child’s school uniform very difficult.

A major reason for these difficulties identified by Citizen Advice is that often school uniform is only available from one usually expensive outlet as the school logo must be on the uniform. The previous report ‘The Cost of a “Free” Education’ found that 57% of West Sussex schools do not allow all items of uniform to be purchased from more than one retailer even though this is against the recommendations of the Schools Admissions Code. One respondent from Haywards Heath to the ‘Education Costs’ survey said “uniforms should be available from more than one outlet”.

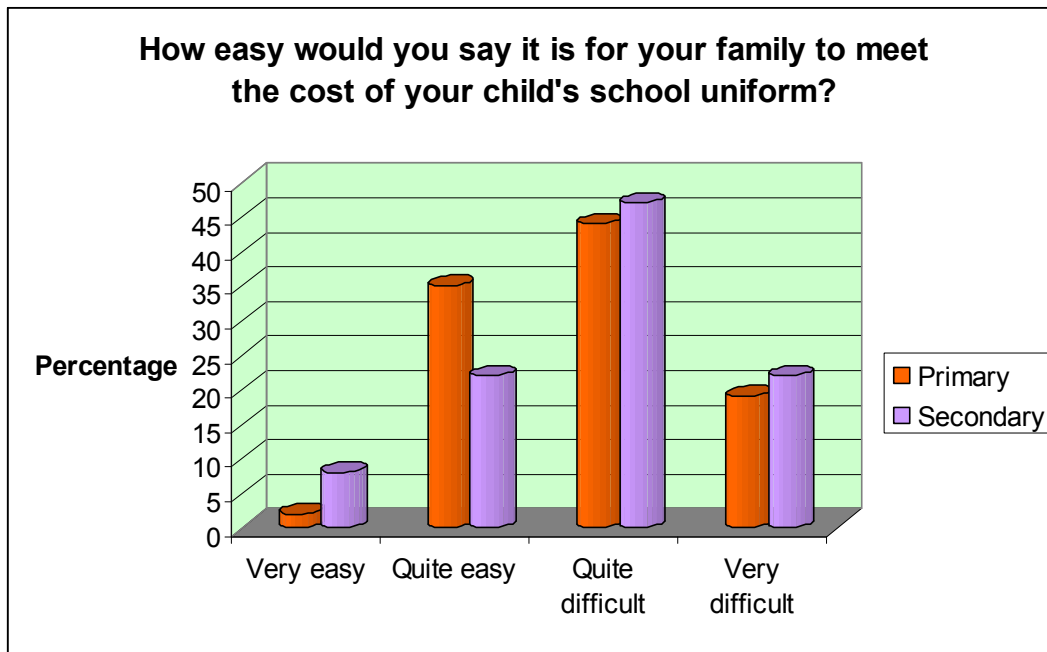


Figure 4

### Conclusions and Recommendations

One respondent from Crawley said “If education is an obligation we must try to contain the cost of uniform” this is the central message of this report. With the overwhelming majority of schools in this area imposing a compulsory school uniform policy; the cost of uniform is an issue faced by all parents but most especially those from low income families.

The survey results illustrate that many parents struggle to pay for the costs of their child’s school uniform finding it very hard to meet these expenses. With the average price of Primary school uniforms between £50-£150 and the average cost of Secondary school uniforms between £100-£250; parents can end up paying a significant amount of money towards their child’s uniform especially if they have multiple children or are lone parent families. Add to this the further expense of PE kits, school trips, textbooks, school photographs etc and low income families are facing massive difficulties in maintaining their child in the state school system.

Secondary school uniforms were found to be harder to pay for, considered worse value for money and more expensive than Primary school uniforms. A significantly large minority of parents with children at primary school found it ‘quite easy’ to pay for their uniforms compared to only a limited number of secondary school parents. However, secondary uniforms do not necessarily have to be much more expensive than primary school uniforms.

One of the reasons for this is that more secondary school uniforms can only be purchased from official retailers that carry the school logo. These retailers tend to be more expensive for example high street shops or supermarkets will charge around £3 to £5 for a polo shirt where as in specialist stores they can cost up to £15. These schools policies of limiting uniform purchasing options to one store goes against the guidance of the Schools Admissions Code.

However, this research shows that many parents consider uniform to be good value demonstrating the popularity and benefits of school uniform. A low cost, good quality and basic school uniform could actually help lower childcare costs for low income families. Arguably the unnecessary additions of expensive blazers, ties, bags and hats may be what are driving the cost of school uniform up.

A critical point to come out of this survey is the lack of help available towards school uniform costs and the lack of awareness of assistance if it is available. This goes directly against the Schools Admissions Code guidance to ensure any financial aid towards uniform costs should be freely and openly available.

## Recommendations:

- The schools costs section of the Schools Admissions Code should be made enforceable in its own right.
- Increase the publicity of uniform schemes and assistance in school newsletters and prospectuses.
- Schools and PTAs should be encouraged to provide a recycling and second hand shop which is open to all. This could help take the stigma out of the process.
- Schools should also be encouraged to set a uniform policy which is generic but with an individual badge that can be sewn on. This would allow for uniform to be brought from a number of high street retailers.
- Simplified uniform policies would also reduce costs for parents. The use of sweatshirts and polo shorts will significantly reduce the cost of some uniform items.
- Secondary school uniform prices should be brought nearer to the costs of primary school uniforms by expanding the number of outlets uniform items can be purchased from.

We would like to thank the parents of the following Citizens Advice Bureau who took part in the survey:

- Crawley
- Shoreham & Southwick
- Littlehampton
- Mid Sussex – East Grinstead
- Mid Sussex – Haywards Heath
- Bognor

We asked parents who completed the survey form to identify the schools their children went to. The following schools had parents who participated in the survey:

Shoreham & Southwick CAB parents

- Portslade Infants School
- Kings Manor Community College
- North Lancing School

Littlehampton CAB parents

- Arunvale Infants School
- Littlehampton Community College
- Connaught Junior School
- Georgian Gardens Primary School

East Grinstead CAB parents

- Sackville school

- St Mary's Cof E Primary School
- Imberhorne School

Bognor Regis CAB parents

- Felpham Community College

Haywards Heath CAB parents

- Oathall Community College
- Downlands Community School
- St Lawrence Cof E Primary School
- Harlands Primary School
- Broadbridge School

Crawley CAB parents

- Thomas Bennett School
- Hazelwick School
- Northgate Primary School
- The Oaks Primary School
- Oriel High School
- Manor Green College
- St Wilfred's School
- Ifield Community College
- Waterfield School
- St Francis School
- Maidenbower Infants School
- Holy Trinity School
- Bewbush Primary