

School uniform costs are a source of financial and emotional stress for families living on a low income



[Geoff Page](#), [Maddy Power](#), and [Ruth Patrick](#) discuss how, for many families, school uniforms represent a financial burden that tips precariously balanced budgets firmly into the red. They call on the government to urgently target families with children for more financial support.

This week, many UK children will clamber out of bed, clamber into their uniform, and return to school for the summer term. School uniforms impose a uniform baseline cost on the families who need them: estimated at [£337 per year](#) for a child in secondary school, and [£315](#) for a child in primary. This can [hit those who have the least the hardest](#). Every time schools have gone back, a wave of diary entries has been shared on our Covid Realities website, documenting the unmanageable costs of uniform and the inadequacy of grants meant to help meet some of the costs. As a new school term begins, we wanted to share what parents and carers have been saying about their efforts to manage the cost of uniforms.

Costs

Despite extensive planning and budgeting, the costs of many uniforms are completely unmanageable for those on limited budgets – just one uniform took over half of Alannah F's total monthly income:

Am anxious and financially broke, paying £310 pound for school uniform. When I only receive £556 a month (England)

Parents choosing between 'heating and eating' [have been widely documented](#), but many Covid Realities families described choosing between heating or eating because of uniforms:

With ever increasing cost regards food, electricity and gas I am struggling now with a brand-new uniform for my eldest child... It's just money, money, money in already stressful and difficult times. (Andrea N, Northern Ireland)

The priority given to uniforms within parents' budgets is huge. Uniforms took precedence over birthday presents for Dotty G's family, and drove her to seek a crisis loan:

We have had birthdays this week. Unfortunately, we couldn't afford presents etc. We received emails through from our daughter's school... [W]e can't afford to buy her school uniform. We had to apply for our 2nd crisis loan.(Dotty G, Scotland).

Uniform costs, lockdown costs, spiralling costs

Many families' budgeting strategies have become impossible during lockdown, [whilst costs have risen](#). Tahlia once relied on charity shops and hand-me-downs from friends and family for uniforms. The inaccessibility of these during lockdown triggered a spiral of bills, debt, and hunger:

Because of covid... I've not received any hand me down clothes for my sons this whole year... In September had to buy 3 children all brand new uniform... I'm £2000 in debt, I ran out of money a week last Thursday... I've only eaten a diet based on bread and potatoes this last month as I wanted to ensure my kids had food. (Tahlia J, England)

Michael needed an internet connection for home schooling. This was one bill too many, with Michael having to choose between uniforms or food:

[D]uring lockdown there was a need for internet connection for my daughter's school work. After making payments it is very hard to try and find enough money for food and school uniforms. (Michael R, England)

That school uniform is competing with food as a priority cost is a major concern.

Additional needs, additional costs

Families with additional needs can find sourcing school uniforms more difficult or expensive. For disabled and shielding parents, shops and queues could be completely inaccessible:

I've been shielding for months and now have to go to shops and buy my son's uniform. Except I can't stand for very long, without substantial pain. All the shops have queues, and it means I still can't access them. (Conan M, England)

Other factors also upped the costs and complexity of uniform. Teddie G had to find uniforms for her larger family, and could only manage by using her children's disability allowance:

That's 5 pairs of shoes, 5 uniforms one to wash and one to wear each... then PE kits and footwear then school bags and stationary... Our only saving grace is as some of the children have SEN and receive DLA we can use some of that on these extras but should we really be forced to have to spend money that belongs to our disabled children on uniforms and shoes? (Teddie G, North East)

Starting school for the first time also triggered significant additional costs:

My daughter started secondary school and extra CoVid related expenses and her uniform and school expenses has nearly left me broken both financially and emotionally. (Charlotte P, Northern Ireland)

Inaccessible, inadequate support

Up to 80% of English Local Authorities [offer low-income families no support](#) with the costs of uniform, whilst [Scotland](#) and [Wales](#) guarantee more generous uniform grants and [Northern Ireland](#) provides some financial support. Even where they exist, however, local processes weren't working for many Covid Realities participants. Ayda applied to her council four weeks in advance; but heard nothing by the time her daughter returned to school:

I applied to our local authority for school clothing grant & free school meals 4 weeks ago & I still have not received any word on the outcome... Feeling very let down by our local authority. (Ayda A, Scotland).

Teddie found she was ineligible because her family received legacy benefits:

I saw advertised about uniform grants and thought 'oh great we must be able to apply' WRONG!!!! "No," yet again because of the working tax credit..... (Teddie G, England)

And when they received them, parents consistently described uniform grants as inadequate. Many did not even cover the cost of a blazer:

The uniform is a few hundred pounds. The uniform grant is £73 or thereabouts. That doesn't even cover the price of a blazer. (Andrea N, Northern Ireland)

Call for change

Too often, school uniforms are an additional expense that families on a low-income struggle to meet. Covid Realities participants reported being driven to choose between heating or eating, and uniforms. They chose between birthday presents and uniforms, and took on 'crisis loans' and new debt to manage the cost. The support that is available with school uniform is non-existent for some and inadequate for all. In England, making [national guidance on the cost of a school uniform](#) statutory is one step towards making uniforms less damaging to families with the least, but serious consideration must also be given to more meaningful support. Here, the obvious answer is targeted, cash-based support to help meet the costs of children.

Families are not uniform; it is unacceptable that they are being driven to debt, or to choose between blazers and eating. As we see the children return to school for the summer term, let's also see concerted action to support families better.

Note: This blog shares findings from a new rapid-response report published by the Covid Realities research programme. You can read the full report [here](#). The project on which the above draws has been funded by the [Nuffield Foundation](#), but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily the Foundation.

About the Authors



[Geoff Page](#) is Research Associate at the University of York.



[Maddy Power](#) is a Research Fellow at the University of York.



[Ruth Patrick](#) is Lecturer in Social Policy at the University of York.

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