

# Adding Up

The impact of school costs on families



A Nottinghamshire Citizens Advice Bureaux report

January 2009

the charity for  
your community



## Key Findings

- 55% of all respondents were in receipt of some form of means tested benefit.
- 80% of respondents on Income Support/Income Based Jobseekers Allowance (IS/IBJSA) said they had to economise on essentials in order to meet the cost of uniforms and school trips. The figure for respondents overall was 64%.
- 78% spent £40 or more on a basic school uniform kit and 61% spent £40 or more on PE kits.
- 84% did not know about uniform grants. For those on IS/IBJSA, 65% did not know about uniform grants.
- 61% of people said it was clear in school letters that contributions for daytrips were voluntary. For residential trips, 33% of people said it was clear that contributions were voluntary for people on low incomes.
- 78% of people on IS/IBJSA said they felt they should contribute to school trips.

## Key Recommendations:

- The Department for Children, Schools and Families should produce a model charging policy for schools, outlining good practice in charging for trips and school related costs.
- Nottinghamshire and Nottingham City Councils should encourage schools to have second hand uniform shops or uniform recycling schemes and to provide other routes to cheaper school uniforms, such as sew-on logo badges.
- Nottinghamshire County Council should increase the size of the grant so it is more in line with current uniform costs and allow parents to apply for the grant more frequently during the child's schooling.
- Nottinghamshire and Nottingham City Councils should ensure clear information about grant schemes is widely publicised and easily available.
- Schools should ensure that help available for parents regarding school costs is widely publicised.
- Schools should provide clear, accessible information on what parents have to pay for and when they don't.

## Introduction

*“Parents shouldn’t have to endure sleepless nights worrying about how they meet the cost of kitting out their children for school. Children shouldn’t have to face bullying or exclusion because their parents can’t afford the right uniform or pay for expensive residential trips.”<sup>1</sup>*

For several years Citizens Advice has been concerned about the costs faced by parents when sending their children to school. In 2005 Citizens Advice, children’s charities and the National Union of Teachers launched a campaign to highlight the problems some parents have paying for uniforms, trips and other costs. Citizens Advice is looking to work in partnership with parents, schools, governing bodies, admission forums, Parent Teacher Associations and local authorities to help raise awareness of the issues.

In February 2007 a new School Admissions Code came into force and applied to all maintained schools and academies when setting their admission arrangements for September 2008. The Code places a statutory duty on governing bodies to ensure that their policies and practices do not disadvantage children; it makes clear that no family should feel unable to apply for a school place because of the high cost of uniform, sports kit or any specialist equipment.

In October 2007 the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCFS) published a *Guidance to Schools on School Uniform and Related Policies*, which strongly encourages school uniforms as they *“can instil pride; support positive behaviour and discipline; encourage identity with, and support for, school ethos; ensure pupils of all races and backgrounds feel welcome; protect children from social pressures to dress in a particular way; and nurture cohesion and promote good relations between different groups of pupils.”* The Guidance also stated that the governing body should be able to demonstrate to parents how best value has been achieved and keep the cost of supplying the uniform under review.

## Survey results

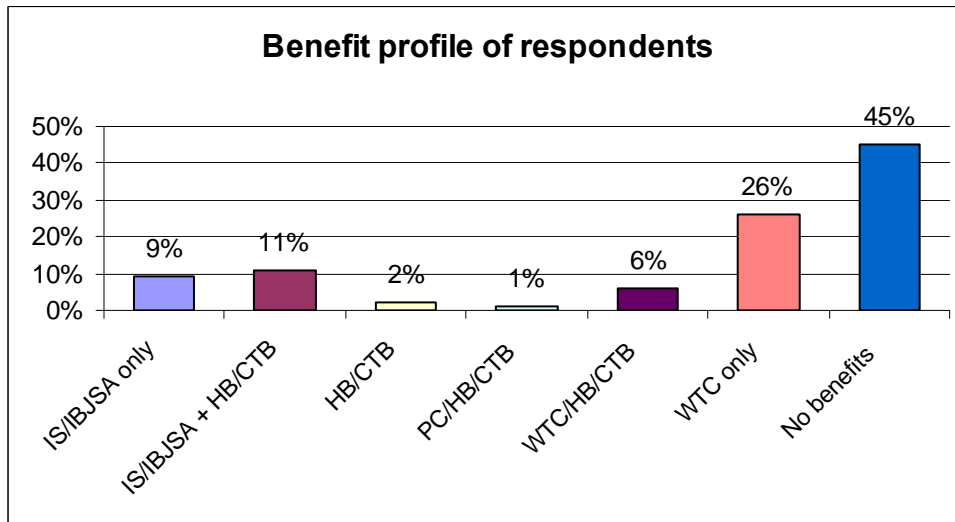
In September and October 2008 Nottinghamshire Citizens Advice Bureaux carried out a survey of people’s experience regarding school costs. The surveys were made available to clients waiting for appointments and to bureaux staff; 100 surveys were completed. See appendix for survey questions. Detailed survey results are available on request.

Respondents were asked to specify whether their child’s school was primary or secondary . 51% said secondary, 38% primary and 11% didn’t answer. They were also asked to name the schools and 64% did so. When collating the survey results, no differentiation was made between city and county schools.

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<sup>1</sup> *Adding Up – A Citizens Advice campaign on education costs*, November 2007

The survey asked whether they were in receipt of a means tested benefits such as Income Support or Working Tax Credits. 55% of all respondents received some form of means tested benefit such as Income Support or Income Based Jobseekers Allowance (IS/IBJSA), Pension Credit (PC), Housing or Council Tax Benefit (HB/CTB) and Working Tax Credits (WTC).



The survey asked whether people had to economise on essentials in order to pay for school uniforms or trips. Perhaps not surprisingly, for those on Is/IBJSA the figure was 80%, however the overall figure for all the respondents was also high, at 64%.

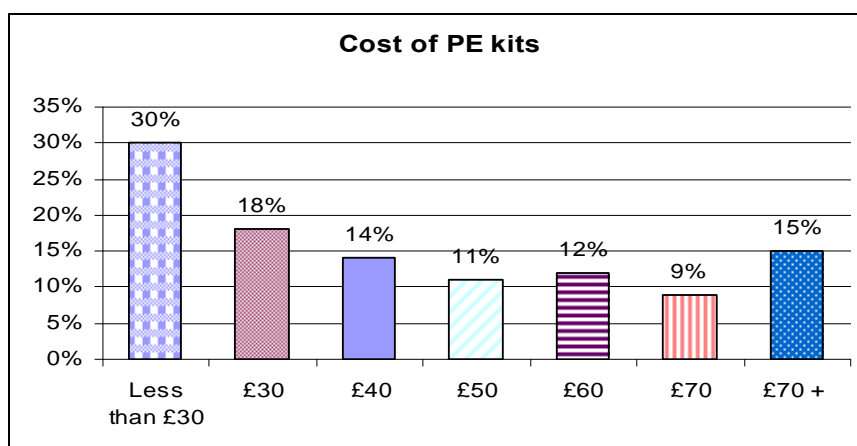
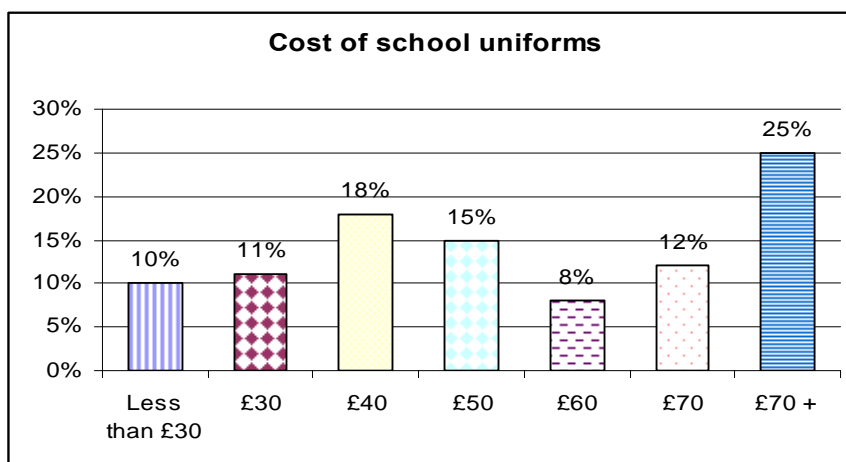
The survey asked whether schools were sympathetic to people on low incomes or tight budgets. For people on IS/IBJSA, 32% said the school was not and a further 26% said it was sometimes, while on a more positive note, 26% said it was usually or always sympathetic.

The figures were slightly different for the respondents as a whole . 28% said it was not, 29% said it was sometimes and 20% said it was usually or always sympathetic. A substantial percentage (23%) said they did not know whether the school was sympathetic or not, which might suggest that they had never discussed this issue with their child's school.

## School uniform and PE kits

The DCSF Guidance states *“School uniform and other items that must be purchased in accordance with school rules can be expensive, particularly for low income and large families. In deciding the design of its school uniform, DCSF expects the school governing body to give high priority to cost considerations. No school uniform should be so expensive as to leave pupils or their families feeling unable to apply to, or attend a school of their choice, due to the cost of the uniform.”*

In the survey, 21% of respondents paid £30 or less for a basic school uniform but 78% paid £40 or more for a uniform. For PE kits, 38% paid £30 or less and 61% paid £40 or more . see charts, below.



One parent commented:

*“My son started secondary school Sept 07 - full uniform was purchased in hope most of it would cover 2 yrs. June 08, informed uniform had changed - totally and all items had to be replaced by Sept 08 therefore full uniform has had to be purchased in 2 consecutive yrs - this must have put an exceptional strain on families with more than one child at this school.”*

The School Admissions Code states that **“Governing bodies should ensure that the uniform chosen is widely available in high street shops and other retail outlets, and internet suppliers rather than from an expensive sole supplier.”**

The survey asked people to say whether they had to get any uniform items at a specific shop; 88% said they did. Of the respondents who received IS/IBJSA, the figure drops only slightly to 85%. The most common items were jumpers, blazers and ties. The survey asked the same question about PE kits; 63% (55% for those on Is/IBJSA) said they had to buy items such as rugby shirts and PE tops from a specific shop.

One parent whose child went to secondary school said:

*"I do not agree that parents have to buy school clothing from school only as these prices are inflated compared to retail outlets. This makes me feel we are being held to ransom and ripped off."*

When asked about school logos, 82% of parents said at least one item of uniform had a school logo and 85% said they could not buy it as a sew-on or iron-on badge.

When asked whether their child's school had a second hand uniform shop; 77% said there was none. Of the parents who had to buy a blazer from a specific shop, 86% did not have a second hand shop to go to. We were surprised that these figures were so high and believe it would be a good idea to have second hand shops or recycling schemes once it was established that parents would use them.

*The Code says: "All schools which have a uniform policy should have arrangements in place to ensure that no family feels unable to apply for admission on account of high uniform costs. This applies equally to sports kits and any other specialist equipment outlined in the policy. Schemes for remission of cost should cover children eligible for free school meals, and children whose parents are entitled to the maximum level of Working Tax Credits. Schemes should be administered discreetly so that no parent is embarrassed to ask for help. These schemes should be widely publicised and clearly explained in admissions, or other literature provided by the school."*

Some local authorities provide discretionary grants to help with buying school uniforms and set their own criteria for eligibility. In a Citizens Advice survey in 2004, only half of the local authorities gave any money. Nottinghamshire County Council offers a uniform grant of £35 for parents or carers when the child leaves primary school and enters secondary school. The parent or carer must be in receipt of certain qualifying benefits, such as Income Support. Nottingham City Council offers varying grant amounts for every school year up to Year 11, ranging from £28.17 to £93.08. The parent or carer must receive qualifying benefits such as Income Support.

The survey asked respondents whether they knew about the existence of a uniform grant and 84% said they did not. Of the people on IS/IBJSA (who, as they are on a qualifying benefit, would be expected to be informed), 65% did not know about the grant.

One parent who was on Income Support commented:

*"Grant payments for school uniform [are] only paid for the first year of secondary school and [there] should be more help over all the school years."*

Another parent who received Working Tax Credits, Housing and Council Tax Benefits said:

*"I'm on [a] low income, working part time but cannot get a uniform grant."*

## 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". It also states that schools should "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."*

People were asked how much notice they received about day trips and residential trips. The majority of people said they had several weeks notice of day trips (57%) and several months notice (70%) of residential trips, thus allowing them to plan their finances accordingly. However, a sizeable minority . 20% - said that they had just a few days notice for day trips. For residential trips, 3% said they had just one week notice. This would not allow them to save up for any costs relating to the trip and may put a strain on their household budget.

The survey asked people to say whether they received an advance payment card for residential trips, which would allow them to make regular payments towards a trip rather than one lump sum . 61% said they did have a card but a large minority . 39% - said they did not. Of those who received a card, 64% were given it six months or more in advance.

The survey asked people about the clarity of school letters regarding school and residential trips. The majority of respondents (61%) said that the letters made it clear that contributions were voluntary for day trips. For residential trips, only 33% said it was clear that contributions were voluntary if on a low income.

When asked if they felt they should contribute, 87% said yes. For those on IS/IBJSA, the figure was also high, at 78%; this must put a huge pressure on families with extremely low incomes who already struggle to meet household bills. When asked how much they were asked to contribute, 91% of respondents said a set amount

*"Re letters - usually clear that contributions are voluntary, but at least one said it was not voluntary! Don't know what happens re trips if we don't send in a contribution - never dared do it! We are always being asked for money towards things - it must be very hard for families on a fixed low income. This was the same at the primary school."*

The survey asked what consequences there would be if a parent or carer did not contribute - people could tick as many options as applied. The question did not distinguish between day trips and residential trips when asking about the

consequences of not contributing . for residential trips, schools can charge those *not* on a low income for board and lodging. 46% said their child would not be allowed on the trip, 21% said nothing would happen, 40% said they would receive a second letter and 23% said their child would be asked in class.

The questions around school trips provoked a lot of comments from respondents:

*Missed payment for trip and my child was constantly being asked for the payment and the teacher was shirty."*

*"Told that trips cannot go ahead without contributions."*

*"The cost is simply unjustifiable, school should be free, education should not cost anything, school day trips and residential trips should not be on a contribution basis."*

*"Letters about daytrips are clear, but do they mean it - everyone pays. Don't know what happens if I don't send in a contribution - I never chanced it. The school tries to do a lot of fundraising also and I feel children always put under most pressure. I think Senior school will be the most costly ref more named/logo items - sticker on labels and trips/holidays - I must admit this is already on my mind ref this will also add to the decision of which school I choose as I don't want any other added pressures."*

*"I get very frustrated about charging for school trips. They always state a 'voluntary' contribution, but then state that if you do not pay your child cannot go. I disagree with this as they always say the trip is required for your child to meet their course/exam needs but are not willing to let your child go on the trip without paying. So, in essence, they are willing to let your child compromise their education if you don't pay and therefore have you over a barrel."*

*"School is in an affluent area - most parents like myself are happy to contribute in order to widen opportunities for children. Most contributions are voluntary but this is not usually stated - you only find out if you don't pay. There are a few occasions eg residential trips which children cannot attend unless they pay. The alternative was clearly stated on the letter - I believe there was also guidance for people on a low income."*

*"More information before term starts on extra payments would be useful."*

*"Never not paid - always found the money." (Parent on Working Tax Credits)*

## Recommendations

The Government has committed to halving child poverty by 2010 and there is still a lot to do to overcome the isolation and exclusion experienced by children of families who struggle to pay for essential school costs. Whilst the Schools Admission Code and the Guidance are welcomed as a step in the right direction, there are still further improvements that could be made.

We recommend that:

- The government make the Admissions Code enforceable, rather than just guidelines as it is now.
- The Department for Children, Schools and Families produce a model charging policy for schools, outlining good practice in charging for trips and all costs associated with schooling. This could include standardised wording for letters to parents regarding voluntary contributions.
- The government should place a duty on local authorities to provide grants to a wider range of recipients, including those who receive the maximum rate of Child Tax Credit, and back this up with funding.
- Local Authorities should ensure that grant schemes are widely publicised.
- Local authorities should encourage schools to have second hand uniform shops, (if it is established that parents would use them), and to provide other routes to cheaper school uniforms, such as sew-on logo badges.
- Currently in Nottinghamshire, the grant is only available to children who are moving from primary to secondary school, but parents might have to buy school uniforms and PE kits every year. As our survey illustrates, the cost of a basic school uniform is generally over £35 so it would be beneficial if the grant amount could be increased to a more realistic level. Nottinghamshire County Council should increase the size of the grant so it is more in line with current uniform costs and allow eligible parents to apply for the grant more frequently during a child's schooling, ideally once a year.
- Schoolsqbest practice ensures that information about the help is available for parents regarding school costs is widely publicised.
- Schoolsqbest practice provides an easily understood leaflet giving clear information on what parents do and don't have to pay with regard to school trips and other expenditure such as art supplies.

## Appendix:



# HAVE YOUR SAY!

## Citizens Advice Campaign On School Costs



*“Parents shouldn’t have to endure sleepless nights worrying about how they will meet the cost of kitting out their children for school. Children shouldn’t have to face bullying or exclusion because their parents can’t afford the right uniform or pay for expensive residential trips.”*

We want to hear your experiences (good and bad) of paying for:

- School uniform
- School trips
- Additional materials (eg for woodwork, art, cookery)

**We want to hear from you today – please fill in one of these quick survey forms and hand it in to reception.**

**Please complete one form for each school attended.**

### Within the last year...

School attended by your child?	Primary / Secondary
<b>Uniform / PE kit</b>	
<i>How much (approx) is</i> <b>1. the basic school uniform</b> ( blouse/shirt, trousers/skirt, jumper, blazer, socks)	£ less than 30 / 30 / 40 / 50 / 60 / 70 / more than 70
<b>2. the basic PE kit</b> (trainers/football boots, socks, shorts, rugby style shirt, PE shirt)	£ less than 30 / 30 / 40 / 50 / 60 / 70 / more than 70
Can some items <b>only</b> be bought from the school or a particular shop?	Uniform: Yes / No PE kit: Yes / No

Which items?	
Is there a second-hand uniform shop?	Yes / No
Does the uniform/PE kit have a school logo?	Yes / No
Can you buy this as a sew-on or iron-on badge?	Yes / No
Do you know of uniform grants available when starting secondary school if on a low income?	Yes / No Where from? How much? £
<b>Trips</b>	
How much notice are you given of: <b>Day trips:</b> <b>Residential trips:</b>	1 day / several days / a week / several weeks 1 week / fortnight / month / several months
Are letters clear that contributions to <b>daytrips</b> in school time are purely voluntary?	Yes / No
Are letters clear that contributions to <b>residential trips</b> in school time are purely voluntary <b>if you are on a low income</b> ?	Yes / No
Do you feel that you should contribute?	Yes / No
How much are you asked to contribute?	Nothing / a set amount / what I can afford / any amount I choose
If you do not send in a contribution for a school trip taking place in school time, what happens?  <b>(please tick all that apply)</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Nothing . my child would go on the trip with the others <input type="checkbox"/> I would receive a second letter <input type="checkbox"/> My child would be asked for the contribution in class <input type="checkbox"/> My child would not be allowed on the trip
For more expensive trips, are you given a payment card in advance?	Yes / No
How far in advance?	1 week /1 month /3 months /6 months /1 year
Is your household in receipt of  <b>(please tick all that apply)</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Income Support/Income based JSA <input type="checkbox"/> Pension Credit <input type="checkbox"/> Working Tax Credits <input type="checkbox"/> Housing Benefit/Council Tax Benefit
Have you had to economise on essentials so that you can pay for school items?	Yes / No
In general, do you feel the school is sympathetic to people on low incomes or tight budgets?	No / Sometimes / Usually / Always / Don't know

Any other comments (eg on payments for cookery items etc) :

*All information provided is confidential, however we may be interested in investigating your particular case further.*

If you are happy for us to contact you, please give your:

NAME: ..... CONTACT NO. ....

**And if you wish to praise your school or have a real gripe, and might be willing to “go public”, please tick here**