



Uniform mistakes: The costs of going back to school

A [Covid Realities](#) Rapid-Response Report, April 2021

Geoff Page, Maddy Power and Ruth Patrick

Summary

School uniform costs are a source of financial and emotional stress for families living on a low-income across the UK. In this rapid-response report, we set out findings from our research with over 100 parents and carers who all report struggling to get by. Through the Nuffield Foundation funded Covid Realities research programme, parents have been working in partnership with researchers to document their experiences of everyday life in the pandemic, sharing diary entries online and taking part in online activities and virtual discussion groups. This report focuses on the cost of school uniforms; it sets out how, for many families, uniforms represent a financial burden that tip precariously balanced budgets firmly into the red. This is the case at any time, but especially in Covid times, when mechanisms for managing on a low-income have all too often become impossible. In the case of school uniforms, school uniform banks have become widely depleted or unavailable, charity shops have closed, and getting hand-me-downs from friends and family has been made widely impossible by lockdown restrictions. This report describes families' experiences and provides recommendations for policy change. We conclude by setting out best practice for schools on uniform, while also calling on the government to urgently target families with children for more financial support.

Context

At the start of each new school term, parents and carers must get their children kitted out for 'back-to-school', buying new uniform to accommodate children's growth and the changing seasons. School uniform has many advantages. As the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) note, 'Uniform is the cheapest option for families.' However, it 'still presents a significant cost' ([2015:2](#)). Moreover, uniform costs often cluster at the start of an academic term, and so for families on a low-income can be a source of acute anxiety and worry. Uniform can be hard to accommodate in precariously balanced budgets, where almost every penny is meticulously accounted for.

The costs of uniform have long been recognised as representing a significant financial burden. The Children’s Society note in their 2020 survey of approximately 1,000 UK parents...

...that parents with children in state maintained schools spent on average £337 per year on school uniform for each secondary school child and £315 per year for each primary school child. On average, these costs are more than three times what parents think is a reasonable cost for primary (£85) and secondary (£105) uniform. (2020:1)

The Children’s Society further note the impact of these costs on families that cannot afford them – with children being openly stigmatised by teachers for their parents’ inability to afford uniform (*ibid.*:1). They also document children skipping lessons and whole school days in order to avoid their inability to afford full uniform being made obvious to their peers (*ibid.*:1-2).

Schools’ decisions about uniform may exacerbate the difficulties faced by parents. Requirements to purchase badged uniform items and use ‘approved suppliers’ can dramatically increase costs, whilst reducing families’ ability to shop around and/or find bargains. Indeed, the Children’s Society identified that requiring families to buy two or more items from a specific supplier increased the costs of primary uniforms by 50% and secondary uniforms by £75 (see figure 1).



Figure 1. (Children’s Society 2020:7)

Some measures have been taken local government and by schools to mitigate these burdens. In England,

[l]ocal authorities and academy trusts may choose to provide school clothing grants or to help with the cost of school clothing in cases of financial hardship (Long 2019)

Despite this, guidance in England is non-statutory (DfE 2013), with cost playing a relatively small part in the overall framework for schools to consider. Local Authority grants vary considerably, with a recent series of Freedom of Information requests submitted to 51 councils identifying 12 councils offering grants of between £20 and £150 (Grahns 2021). The remaining 39 offered no support towards the costs

of school uniforms at all (*ibid.*). In recognition of the paucity of support, Mike Amesbury MP has been leading the *Guidance About Costs of School Uniforms Bill* through the Houses of Parliament, sponsored by Baroness Ruth Lister in the House of Lords, with (as the name suggests) the aim of making national guidance on the costs of school uniforms statutory within England.

Provision in the UK's other regions varies. The Welsh Parliament has set out statutory guidance seeking to limit the cost of school uniforms ([Welsh Government 2019](#)), with provisions for Pupil Development Grants ranging between £125 and £145 ([Welsh Parliament 2021](#)). In Northern Ireland measures are standardised. Families can apply for a 'clothing allowance' of between £35.75 (primary school uniform, with a further £22 available for PE kit) and £56 (secondary school, over 15 years old) ([Government of Northern Ireland, 2021](#)). In Scotland, Local Authorities retain discretion, but all must give grants of at least £100 to eligible families ([Scottish Government 2021](#)). Both Northern Ireland and Scotland use free school meals as a benchmark for uniform grant eligibility.

Working in partnership with Glasgow City Council, CPAG delivered [The Cost of the School Day](#) (2015) a programme aimed at reducing the barriers faced by children from low-income families attending school. Here, they summarise some of the challenges faced by low-income families:

Council clothing grants only go so far and some children and young people don't have decent or sufficient school clothing and footwear. Although uniform minimises visible differences it is still the main indicator of income and the first thing to be picked on. Strict dress code enforcement embarrasses young people and quickly replacing items of uniform can be difficult if parents don't have immediate access to funds. (CPAG 2015:2)

Building on this, within this rapid-response report, we explore how families on a low-income experience the pressures associated with school uniform, setting out issues with the cost but also with the availability of appropriate support. In doing so, we draw on new evidence from participants in the Covid Realities research programme. It should be noted that a report on this subject was not part of the Covid Realities publication plan. However, such was the volume of diary entries on the topic, that we felt it was important to share people's experiences. Emerging from family's accounts, one thing is clear: that school uniform grants are inadequate and inaccessible, and the costs of uniform are driving families into debt. The need to purchase school uniform makes hard choices about heating or eating ([Brewer and Patrick 2020](#)) even more difficult for families already struggling to get by.

About Covid Realities

Covid Realities is a major, participatory research programme looking at experiences of families on a low income during the pandemic; it is funded by the Nuffield Foundation. Through this research, we have been working directly with parents and carers to understand the impact of Covid-19 on their day-to-day lives. Parents can log onto a safe, online space, where they complete diary entries and respond to 'big questions of the week' and take part in virtual discussion groups. Diary entries began being collected in June 2020 and will continue through at least

the first half of 2021. If something is a concern for participants then it swiftly becomes apparent through their diary entries, as happened this winter – as colder days, darker nights and increased bills approached, a wave of diary entries about winter suddenly appeared. Similarly, we saw a sudden, widespread wave of warmth (and hope) as spring began to appear. The same happened with school uniform. Each time schools re-opened, a wave of concerned parents wrote about their concerns. This rapid-response report draws on the first-hand accounts of parents and carers to set out the many and overlapping problems associated with accessing and purchasing school uniforms for low income families, problems which have often worsened due to the pandemic context.

The financial cost of uniforms

From the first diary entries in summer 2020, it was apparent that school uniforms presented a huge and unmanageable cost to parents. Those who were just getting by described uniforms costing much – even most – of their monthly budgets:

It's been nothing but worry. Am anxious and financially broke, paying £310 pound for school uniform. When I only receive £556 a month (Alannah F, lone mother of one, North West England)

The inadequacy of social security for covering the costs of uniform was a persistent theme – particularly when children (being children) were growing:

Child benefit hasn't seen any meaningful increase, in line with inflation for years. My 15-year-old son wears men's clothes and is 6' 1. He takes a size 10 shoe. He's always been tall, and has big feet. It costs a fortune in clothes - uniform, shoes, football boots. If he outgrows his footwear, I need to find £250 just to cover those costs, and so he can have school appropriate footwear and do PE lessons. (Barb I, partnered mother of two, North West England)

Moreover, for those who were just managing to buy uniform, the precariousness of social security presented them with persistent fears – the £20 uplift to Universal Credit meant that Charlotte P could barely get by, but the potential loss of it made the future costs a source of deep anxiety:

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. Even with the £20 uplift there is no security that this will stay in place but even with that money I am struggling. The government did not consider children starting secondary school for the 1st time. (Charlotte P, lone mother of two, Northern Ireland)

Affordability

The costs of school uniform came within an already-pressured economic context. For many parents, uniform was a cost that pushed them over the edge. For Andrea N, the burden of buying school uniforms was one of the things that she would most like politicians to understand:

With ever increasing cost regards food, electricity and gas I am struggling now with a brand-new uniform for my eldest child. Again, due to Universal Credit poverty strikes

again... It's just money, money, money in already stressful and difficult times. (Andrea N, lone parent with two children, Northern Ireland)

Some were just managing. Syeda F had no debt deductions, and supplemented his income with paid research surveys, accessed through mobile phone apps, yet was still unsure how he would accommodate new uniforms for his daughters:

I am managing to budget but with two main provisos: I do without on many things (eg I do not have a clothes budget for me, I don't know how I am going to get the school uniform, I have no "entertainment" budget, I buy own brand on food, etc)... (Syeda F, lone father of two children, North East England)

For many others, uniform costs pushed them over the edge. Despite not being able to afford birthday presents, Dotty G's family had to find money for school restarting; and got into additional debt in order to do so:

It has been a long week. We have had birthdays this week. Unfortunately, we couldn't afford presents etc. We received emails through from our daughter's school to tell us what procedures will be in place when schools start back next week... [W]e can't afford to buy her school uniform. We had to apply for our 2nd crisis loan. (Dotty G, married mother of three, Scotland).

That school uniforms prompted a family to enter into additional debt through a 'crisis' loan should raise serious questions about the adequacy of current provisions and the extent of current costs against a background of chronic low income.

Trade-offs

Some parents explicitly described the trade-offs they made in order to afford school uniform. Erik J was already unable to pay for many of the activities enjoyed by his daughter's peers. The prospect of a new school uniform meant facing tough decisions about whether to compromise on essentials:

I am unable to send [my daughter] to swimming lessons or most after school clubs due to the cost... [Politicians] must be made to understand the real problems many families face having to choose between eating a healthy diet and being able to switch the heating on in order to keep warm in the winter. My daughter is in need of school uniform but this means cutting back on other essential items in order to be able to afford the cost. (Erik J, lone father of one, South East England)

Betty P faced similar tough decisions – finding adequate school clothing for her son meant a month of living on a monotonous, unhealthy and unbalanced diet:

Initially I thought I'd get all he needed for less than £150 shoes included. Unfortunately he has slim feet so it's expensive... Nothing his size in the sale or anywhere so we had to go to more expensive shops which pretty much means pasta to eat all month. His Dad who is rolling in it wouldn't even stump up half. A pretty stressful morning. (Betty P, divorced mother of two, South East England).

Despite attempting to save Child Benefit to cover the costs, Michael R found it inadequate – facing a choice of sending his daughter to school in clothes that no longer fit, or putting off paying essential bills:

I think child benefit should be increased as it does not go far enough. I try to put what I receive away to pay for school uniform, shoes, pe kit etc. but these items are not cheap. I find myself having to delay paying bills or sending my daughter to school in ill-fitting uniform. (Michael R, lone father of one, South East England)

Additional costs of lockdown

One of the core messages to emerge from the pandemic is that families who were already struggling have undergone a significant additional financial squeeze ([Power et al 2020](#)). Hill and Webber describe how families on a low income manage by drawing on informal networks of support for financial, practical and emotional needs; and note that all of these have been disrupted by lockdown ([2021](#): 29-30). Moreover, lockdown has brought with it additional costs – of utilities, of home schooling, of food at home – with parents identifying that back-to-school costs rose in 2020 compared to previous years ([CPAG and Children North East 2020](#)). Because of this, those families who were struggling to manage before lockdown have found it even harder to get by.

Parents described how school uniform policies placed additional financial pressure on families at an already challenging time. These additional pressures were reflected in the diarists' account, making the financial squeeze to afford uniforms tighter still. Michael, for example, described the additional, unavoidable costs of home schooling as the final straw:

I am very careful when it comes to budgeting and try to keep up to date with rent / bills etc. but this can be very difficult especially during lockdown as there was a need for internet connection for my daughter's schoolwork. After making payments it is very hard to try and find enough money for food and school uniforms. my daughter is in desperate need of a new school blazer and I myself do not have a coat to wear now that the winter has arrived again. (Michael R, lone father of one, South East England)

Other diarists described pressures in other areas – with lockdown making it impossible to see friends and family, and so to receive support or hand-me-down clothes from other relatives (QV: [Hill and Webber 2021](#)). Again, this proved critical for Tahlia – lockdown stripped her of the supportive networks and cheaper shops she relied on to clothe and uniform her children. This led to a cascade of difficulties, with spiralling debt and Tahlia unable to feed both herself and her children properly:

Before covid I would see my brother every few months, and he would give us hand-me-down clothes... A few mums would do the same. 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 ran out of food over last weekend... I've only eaten a diet based on bread and potatoes this last month as I wanted to ensure my kids had food. I was becoming nutrient deficient. (Tahlia J, lone mum of 3, Southern England)

Ted, too, had gone into debt for school shoes despite extensive planning:

School shoes I've had to get on instalments for now. A neighbour asked if I was all done for uniforms yesterday, I said "no", her reply was "what the hell? You were all in before us... last year." (Ted S, lone father of two, North East England)

These families were often getting by before lockdown; but despite rigorous budgeting and planning, soon found it impossible to stay on top of everyday necessities once additional costs, including school uniforms, crept in.

Time and energy to secure

Beyond the profound difficulties of juggling complex financial stresses with too few resources, finding uniform at manageable costs also ate into families' time and energy. Community resources for cheaper uniforms, such as 'school uniform banks', might not have every item in every size in stock and trying to find affordable shops who accepted vouchers could readily eat up whole days:

My eldest is starting school in two weeks. Finding and buying her uniform has been a huge undertaking. We don't have the funds to simply buy it all new online in one go. For us it's involved multiple trips to the school uniform bank to find correct sizes, searching for bargains, and making appointments with the official school uniform provider (to spend our measly £26 voucher). It's taken up a lot of our time and energy. All whilst trying to make this transition as gentle and stress free for my daughter as possible. I worry about what school will be like with Covid restrictions, and I'm anxious about settling her in. (Maria N, partnered mother of two, North West England)

Nellie K faced similar challenges, travelling between multiple shops in order to try and find affordable uniform when lockdown rendered her usual processes of buying in charity shops and supermarkets impossible. However, these efforts were then subverted by the school's response to lockdown – changing requirements (and so imposing additional costs) at the last minute:

We rely on charity shops a fair bit so when they were closed we spent more. I would have bought my daughters school uniform from the supermarket but couldn't because it sold so fast and had to buy it at a higher price online. The Covid restrictions have also meant that my daughters school have changed uniform requirements at the last minute - requesting two days to wear joggers and trainers - which has meant an increased spend on uniform. (Nellie K, partnered mother of two, North West England)

What Nellie K's account also shows is the ways in which families' usual strategies and mechanisms for managing to purchase school uniform (accessing charity shops, school uniform banks) were often frustrated, if not made impossible, because of the circumstances of the pandemic.

Families with additional needs – a significant proportion of Covid Realities participants – found these processes even harder to navigate. Jade felt triply restricted, due to her school's restrictions on where and when uniform could be purchased, the costs this necessarily imposed, and her own inability (due to disability) to queue or wait for significant periods of time.

My son is due back in school, in a couple of weeks, I'm really worried as I was in the shielding category. I still have to get the remainder of his uniform too. I can't stand and queue, outside shops, due to my disability. Except my son's school will only permit

uniform from one supplier, and their prices are at a premium. (Jade D partnered mother of two, North West England)

As these accounts emphasise, the burdens of sourcing and paying for school uniforms rarely existed in a vacuum. For Nellie and Maria, they added additional stresses at a time when they wanted to be reassuring their children about a global pandemic and a worrying return to school. For Jade, the pressure of finding school uniform were exacerbated by her need to shield and her difficulties in standing. For all of these parents, the additional strains of school uniform added significantly to their burdens.

Insufficient solutions: grants to help with school uniform costs

Northern Ireland offers standardised support for the cost of school uniforms, the Scottish Government requires Local Authorities to pay at least £100 per eligible child, and the Welsh Parliament's Pupil Development Grant is more generous still. However, there is no statutory requirement for the provision of grants in England, with the handful of Local Authorities that offer grants delivering programmes that vary considerably in the level of support they offer, and the eligibility criteria they apply. Covid Realities diarists described very different local contexts, in which they are often required to negotiate complex local requirements in order to access financial support. Ayda applied to her council well in advance; but as the school term approached she still had not heard if she would receive any help:

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. So between a friend who lent us money, my daughters birthday money & a friend who used her store discount we managed to get a school uniform for my daughter. Feeling very let down by our local authority. (Ayda A, married mother of three, Scotland)

Ayda's account highlights further problems with the nature of support – even when support is notionally available, it can be unresponsive and unhelpful for families on a low income; and application processes can consume significant time and energy.

Teddie applied in advance, expecting some support given her financially precarious position; only to find out that her receipt of legacy benefits rendered her family ineligible. Having a large family added significantly to the cost burden uniform imposed, with Teddie having to use her children's disability benefits to make up the shortfall:

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... So off we will have to go to buy new school uniforms, the children have been off since March so nothing fits plus one is starting a whole new school so 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 it all adds up no help because we receive that working tax credit... it sure would be cheaper if primary age children didn't wear uniform like years ago! 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? money that is supposed to be for their care needs! (Teddie G, married mother of five, North East England)

Even when families were able to access grants, they barely covered costs. Uniform blazers were highlighted as a particularly severe financial burden, with many grants not even covering this one item of clothing alone. Charlotte, a lone mother of two in Northern Ireland, described the inadequacy of her Child Benefit and uniform grant combined to meet the costs of uniform:

The entire child benefit for September went towards the 2 uniforms. My daughters secondary school uniform was over £300 and my son at primary school was £100 that included shoes and trainers. The grant for primary is £35. For secondary its £75. My daughter's blazer alone was £90. I'm still waiting to save for her trainers and family managed to buy her shoes (Charlotte P, lone mother of two, Northern Ireland)

Across all of these accounts was a sense (voiced by participants) that families felt that they were being treated as if they did not matter because they were in receipt of support. The restrictions and stigma of uniform grants was summarised by Nellie, who described the additional, unnecessary costs in time and labour imposed by the restrictions on the support her family received:

I feel like, because we're on benefits we don't matter as much... [T]oday we had to go in person to the school uniform shop as they don't accept the school uniform vouchers on their online platform. I felt so unsafe in there. It feels discriminatory. Surely you should be able to use the vouchers... either online or in person. Is the assumption that people on benefits don't have access to the internet? My trip to the school uniform shop today meant my partner had to take time off work to look after our youngest child! (Nellie K, partnered mother of two, North West England)

School uniforms – compounding precariousness

As these quotations make clear, parents and carers living on a low income employ extensive planning and budgeting practices, and cautious money management. Nonetheless, the need to purchase school uniforms imposed sudden and significant financial burdens on strained budgets that – in the context of inadequate support – led them to make sacrifices on food and heating, and on occasions to enter into debt. This builds on a broader picture – for families who were already in a precarious financial situation, managing school uniform in the context of school closures and the additional costs of lockdown contributed to a sense of relentless, everyday insecurity. As Andrea said,

With ever increasing cost regards food, electricity and gas I am struggling now with a brand-new uniform for my eldest child. Again, due to Universal Credit poverty strikes again... It's just money, money, money in already stressful and difficult times. (Andrea N, lone mother of two, Northern Ireland)

This precarity could lead families to be scared of spending anything, for fear that yet another looming expensive disaster – vet bills, a broken car, a taxi in a family emergency – could drive them even further over the edge. For Howie, the only things she now felt comfortable spending on were for ‘immediate survival’:

Overall, now, I am scared to spend any money at all as I am so anxious about what is around the corner... When I do earn money... I am afraid to use it, even for things we need like school uniform because everything is so uncertain... I also owe money for some things and have been afraid to pay them unless its for immediate survival. My vehicle needs work done but I have not prioritised it as I'm not sure if we will be in lockdown again and it will be money spent on the wrong thing, a bit like school shoes and uniform and the usual Christmas treats. (Howie P, lone mother of three, South West England).

Again and again, diarists described a sense of the unmanageable – of living with unmanageable expenses, with school uniform representing another turn of the financial screw. As Madeleine framed it, this led to compound sorrow – not just because life was difficult now, but because of a sense that the additional unmanageability of the present meant that children could also be missing out on their futures:

No one has ever been able to explain how a man of immense material wealth is unable to afford to pay child maintenance... [H]e cannot pay towards his children's education or school. uniform/lunches. I am sure there will be many critical folk assuming I am bitter and twisted. I'm not. I feel incredibly sad for my children as they miss out on a decent education, opportunities lost for the children forever (Madeleine T, lone mother of two, North East England)

Policy recommendations

Families living in poverty plan, budget and implement cautious and careful financial strategies ([Brewer and Patrick 2021](#)) in their efforts to get by. Covid and lockdown has simultaneously made many of these strategies impossible, whilst also increasing household costs linked to additional spending on food and utility bills. This all too often leaves many families with unsustainable financial pressures, with uniform an additional (and often significant) expenses that pushes many deeper into hardship.

Too often, school uniforms are an additional financial burden that it is hard for families on a low-income to meet. The disparities between even the highest levels of uniform grant and the average cost of state school uniforms are stark, and average well over £100 per child ([Children's Society 2021](#)). There are good reasons to have school uniforms: they can help people feel pride in their school and prevent bullying where children cannot afford access to the 'right' gear ([CPAG 2015](#)). But we need to make sure that uniforms are affordable to all, and do not create additional financial and indeed emotional stress.

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', triggering new debt in efforts to manage the cost of uniforms. Those with additional family needs were even harder hit by both accessibility and price. The support that is available to assist with the cost of school uniform is inaccessible to some and inadequate for all, in some cases barely covering the cost of one blazer.

To this end, we fully support the recommendations developed by CPAG, developed through collaboration with over a thousand children and school staff and as part of wider efforts to poverty-proof the costs of the school day. CPAG notes that schools implementing good practice did the following:

- *Removed the need for badged uniform.*
- *Improved the promotion of school clothing grants to parents and carers.*
- *Hold uniform recycling days.*
- *Sourced and recommend cheaper suppliers to parents and carers.*
- *Give the 'benefit of the doubt' when children or young people arrive at school uniform not wearing full uniform or suitable clothing. Schools have opted to explore this sensitively, rather than disciplining automatically ([CPAG 2021](#)).*

It is hard to see how any of these points can be contentious, and we support them fully.

Outside of school specific measures, statutory guidance on the cost of a school uniform is one step towards making uniforms less damaging to families with the least, and the bill to instigate this in England that is currently being debated in parliament is very welcome ([Education \(Guidance on the Cost of School Uniforms\) Bill 2019-20](#)).

At the same, time, however, and arguably most importantly of all, the issues around the (in)affordability of school uniforms points to a wider structural problem concerning the extent, nature and consequences of child poverty in Britain today. Just as the problem of parents struggling to feed their children cannot be solved by food banks alone, and instead requires structural reforms to both social security and the labour market ([IFAN, 2020](#)), so too meeting the costs of the school day for families in poverty requires concerted action to stem the rising tide of child poverty (see [DWP, 2021](#)). At root, then, there is an urgent and pressing need to provide effective financial support to families with children experiencing poverty to ensure adequate incomes to allow a decent and dignified standard of living. This financial support is best provided through cash-based assistance, which is more effective at targeting need (see [Cooper and Stewart, 2017](#)) than in-kind support such as food parcels or recycled school uniforms. Importantly, too, cash support is, as diarists described, also more dignified in offering families autonomy and agency in managing their household budget and finances.

The Government needs to take urgent action to provide additional and direct financial support to families with children. While we have seen some additional support made available through the social security system during the pandemic, targeted support for families with children has sadly been notable only by its absence. This needs to be corrected, and soon. There are a number of methods through which the Westminster Government could support families via the social security system. We have previously called for an increase in Child Benefit as a response to child poverty (see [Power et al, 2020](#)) and we would repeat that call here. Other policy options include abolishing the two-child limit, removing or raising the benefit cap (which disproportionately affects households with children), and increasing the child allowance in Universal Credit. Above all, we call for a social security system which supports families with children to enjoy a decent standard

of living, one which includes purchasing school uniforms when needed without stress or anxiety, buying and eating sufficient and nutritious food, and maintaining a home that is warm and comfortable.

Conclusions

Families are not uniform; it is simply unacceptable that they are being driven into debt, or to choose between blazers and eating, in today's Britain. Through our collaborative work with parents and carers across the UK, we have generated a rich and vital evidence base, which documents the extent and nature of hardship that families are facing. Our live archival data shows the everyday struggles parents face, and the extent to which these have often become harder still because of the circumstances of the pandemic.

Diary entries from families have regularly highlighted the issue of school uniform, with this a recurring cause of stress and financial precarity. In this rapid-response report, we have set out family's experiences, experiences which show the urgent need for concerted action. This requires changes both at the school level, but also by looking more broadly to action on child poverty. Policy change is here needed to address the underpinning, structural problem families in poverty face: a lack of income and benefit levels which are too low to meet the costs of raising children. As we see the children return to school for the summer term, let's also see concerted action to support families better.

About this report

This briefing has been written by Geoff Page, Maddy Power and Ruth Patrick. They thank the Covid Realities participants who shared their experiences and developed the policy recommendations in partnership with the research team. This wider research team is made up of Kayleigh Garthwaite, Katie Pybus and Jim Kaufman. Covid Realities is a research programme funded by the Nuffield Foundation (more details at www.covidrealities.org).

Acknowledgement



The Nuffield Foundation is an independent charitable trust with a mission to advance social well-being. It funds research that informs social policy, primarily in Education, Welfare, and Justice. It also funds student programmes that provide opportunities for young people to develop skills in quantitative and scientific methods. The Nuffield Foundation is the founder and co-funder of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics and the Ada Lovelace Institute. The

Foundation has funded this project, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily the Foundation. Visit www.nuffieldfoundation.org