



# Minimum cost of education in the UK:

## Briefing for MPs in England

May 2025

This briefing provides information on the minimum cost to families of sending children to state-funded schools in the UK based on 2024 costings.

### Introduction

Child poverty is at a record high with 4.5 million children in the UK now living below the poverty line.<sup>1</sup> As part of the government's mission to break down barriers to opportunity, it has committed to publishing a child poverty strategy later this year. However, without bold government action on poverty-producing policies such as the two-child limit, the number of children living in poverty is projected to rise to 4.8 million over this parliamentary term.<sup>2</sup> It is against this backdrop of increasing levels of hardship that Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) and the Centre for Research in Social Policy (CRSP) have published new analysis on the minimum cost of education to families across the UK. The analysis shows that the minimum cost of education has increased significantly since 2022.

### Summary of findings

- Going to school is not free. The minimum cost of education parents in the UK must meet is now over £1,000 a year for a child at primary school and nearly £2,300 a year for a child at secondary school (based on 2024 costings).
- Since 2022, the cost of education has risen by 16 per cent for primary pupils and 30 per cent for secondary pupils, outstripping both inflation (8 per cent) and earnings growth (12 per cent) during the same period.
- An inadequate social security system also means more children are living in poverty and families are increasingly struggling to meet the rising cost of education. The two-child limit, which is the biggest driver of rising child poverty, means families lose £3,513 per affected child.
- This growing gap between costs and income is making it harder for children from lower-income families to make the most of their time at school.
- The upcoming child poverty strategy must address these issues by urgently scrapping the two-child limit and providing more support to families to help with costs, such as expansions to free school meals and cash support with uniform costs.

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<sup>1</sup> DWP, [Households below average income: for financial years ending 1995 to 2024](#), 2025

<sup>2</sup> CPAG, [Reducing child poverty: the role of the two-child limit](#), 2025

## Minimum cost of education and recent increases

Table 1 shows that the minimum cost of sending a child to primary school in the UK now exceeds £1,000 a year. For secondary-aged children, the basic cost is nearly £2,300 a year.<sup>3</sup>

Table 1: Minimum cost of sending a child to school in the UK, 2024 prices

	Primary school annual costs (UK, 2024 prices)	Secondary school annual costs (UK, 2024 prices)
Learning	£64.66	£449.67
Uniform, PE kit, shoes and bags	£311.24	£449.68
Packed lunches and snacks <sup>4</sup>	£486.30	£846.15
Transport	£0 <sup>5</sup>	£390.00
Enrichment eg, trips, charity days and celebrations	£141.43	£139.28
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>£1,003.63</b>	<b>£2,274.77</b>

These costs represent a 16 per cent increase for families of primary children and a 30 per cent rise for families of secondary children, compared to our 2022 costings. These rises far outstrip both inflation (8 per cent) and earnings growth (12 per cent) over the same period.<sup>6</sup>

For both primary and secondary children, these rises have predominantly been from the higher cost of food across the school day and the recognition that technology has become increasingly important to be able to engage with learning at home and at school. For secondary pupils, the cost of learning and taking part in lessons has increased since 2022, with parents expected to supply materials for design and technology (DT), equipment for food technology or pay for the cost of travel to sports matches.

*'We didn't have the right equipment for a DT project so had to buy some but it was near the end of the month so didn't have enough so we had to leave it until pay day and then hand the homework late.'* (Parent in England)

Although it is still a significant cost, it is notable that the minimum cost of uniform for primary and secondary pupils has reduced slightly since 2022, with parents saying there is now more flexibility about where uniform can be purchased than previously, particularly for primary children. This change may reflect the emerging impact of the Department for Education's statutory guidance on school uniform policy in England, which emphasises the need for affordability.<sup>7 8</sup> However, for secondary pupils the list of items that need to be purchased from a school stockist remained extensive in 2024, and uniform costs are still a significant outlay for families.

<sup>3</sup> These costs only cover what parents consider to be the minimum needed to attend school and participate in school – other costs eg, attending additional school trips or learning a musical instrument are not included.

<sup>4</sup> In research discussions, many parents have previously highlighted the benefits of hot school lunches. However, the groups consistently concluded that an adequate packed lunch is the minimum that children need.

<sup>5</sup> Parents agreed that it is more likely that primary school children would be able to walk to school.

<sup>6</sup> CPAG's calculations from Economic and Fiscal Outlook – March 2025, OBR, 2025

<sup>7</sup> Department for Education, [School Uniforms: Guidance for Schools](#), 2024

<sup>8</sup> The UK government is also bringing in further legislation which sets a limit on the number of branded items state-funded schools in England can require as part of their uniform (including PE kit). This will be set at three for primary schools and four for secondary schools if this includes a tie.

*'Our blazer is compulsory at our school and if you don't have it you get a detention, not everyone has a spare £45 just laying around and their jumpers which [are] plain black with a stripe, they won't allow students to wear a plain black jumper which is half the price and could be the only option for the family so their child wont freeze, it's just silly.'* (Secondary pupil, England)

## Key recommendations

### 1. Scrap the two-child limit

The government's forthcoming child poverty strategy must commit to scrapping the two-child limit immediately. This policy is the key driver of rising child poverty across the UK. It makes it harder for families to cover their basic costs, including the cost of education, which is rising faster than other areas.

### 2. Provide more support to families with the cost of the school day

The government must make a concerted effort to remove the hidden costs of education that are preventing children from attending, taking part and achieving at school. England is lagging behind Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in this area.

- As part of the child poverty strategy, the government must expand free school meals to more families, working towards a universal system, as well as automatically enrolling those children who are already eligible.
- The government must also provide families in England with cash support to help with the cost of uniform and kit, as happens in all other UK nations.

## Conclusion

The cost of sending children to school in the UK has significantly increased since previous research in 2022, outstripping both inflation and earnings growth during this period. Child poverty levels are also at a record high and rising every day due to the two-child limit policy. While the introduction of the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill is welcome and will support families through the introduction of breakfast clubs and reduced uniform costs, there is much more to do. For families facing hardship, poverty is getting in the way of children taking part in normal childhood experiences such as joining sports teams, having music lessons or being able to go on school trips. It's also getting in the way of their learning, excluding them from parts of the curriculum and holding them back from developing their talents – and without government action, things are set to get worse.

At this critical time, the government must prioritise increasing household incomes for families with children and reducing school costs by increasing free school meal provision and providing more help to families with other costs. These changes would improve living standards for families, ensure children can get on at school and increase the long-term prosperity of the country, with improved outcomes for children carrying into adulthood. It's not right that some children can't afford the bare essentials they need to participate, let alone thrive, at school.

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## About us

**Child Poverty Action Group** (CPAG) works on behalf of the more than one in four children in the UK growing up in poverty. It doesn't have to be like this. We use our understanding of what causes poverty and the impact it has on children's lives to campaign for policies that will prevent and solve poverty – for good. We provide training, advice and information to make sure hard-up families get the financial support they need. We also carry out high profile legal work to establish and protect families' rights. Child Poverty Action Group is a registered charity in England and Wales (294841) and Scotland (SC039339). [cpag.org.uk](http://cpag.org.uk)

**The Centre for Research in Social Policy** (CRSP) is an independent research centre based in the School of Social Sciences and Humanities at Loughborough University. Over the past 40 years, it has built a national and international reputation for high quality applied policy research and analysis focused on issues related to poverty, living standards and income adequacy.