



Women's Experiences of the Cost-of-Living Crisis in Northern Ireland: *Costs of Education*



Context

Polling for Save the Children NI found that 60% of parents in NI find it financially challenging to cover the costs of their children's school uniform with 73% of low-income households finding covering the cost financially challenging. The polling also showed that 30% of parents have had to borrow money to afford their child's uniform or PE kit and one in ten said their child had to miss school over issues related to uniform/PE kit.

The school uniform grant in NI is significantly less than in other parts of the UK and there is no legislation on issues such as competition between suppliers. The Parent Engagement Group (PEG) has raised concerns about the cost of branded items, limited choice of suppliers and called for legislation to introduce a cap on uniform costs.

Free School Meals are not provided on a universal basis in NI. Statistics show that the uptake for free school meals in 2022/23 was 62.3% (96,300 children) meaning there are just under 40% of children who are entitled but have not claimed it.

Cuts to the NI Budget have meant the loss of the 'Holiday Hunger Scheme' which provided support to approx. 96,300 families entitled to Free School Meals during holiday periods (£27 per child every 2 weeks). The 'Extended Schools Programme' which provides support to schools in disadvantaged areas for activities to support children's learning has also been cut.

Primary school children are not entitled to free transport if they live within 2 miles of the school and 3 miles for post-primary. Work commitments and children at different schools often makes it difficult to walk to school. Paying for a return bus journey/taxi fare can add a considerable cost to the school day. The cost of public transport can exclude children from low-income families from taking part in extra-curricular activities.

You can read the full research paper "Women's Experiences of the Cost-of-Living Crisis in Northern Ireland" here: <https://bit.ly/44UPleX>

Findings

Many of the women who were interviewed stated that educational costs put a significant financial strain on their household budgets. This included everything from the cost of school uniforms to everyday school costs including food and extra-curricular activities:

- School costs were frequently raised as a burden for parents with 27% of the women reporting that they were finding it difficult to pay for school costs.
- Women reported difficulty paying for the costs of school snacks, lunches, school uniform including PE gear, school shoes, school trips and the cost of school activities including after-school clubs and special events such as 'World Book Day' and non-uniform days.
- 38% of the women felt that increased help with school costs would help them cope better with increases in the Cost of Living.

Recommendations

- The Holiday Hunger Scheme should be urgently reinstated to mitigate against food insecurity for women and children during holiday periods.
- A system of auto-enrolment for school meals would support maximum uptake. Offering all children, a hot meal during the school day would remove the stigma for the recipient and improve children's capacity to learn.
- The School Uniform Grant should be increased to reflect the average cost of a school uniform (including PE kit) which would move it closer in line with other countries in the UK.
- Introduce legislation with an embedded price cap to help stabilise school uniform costs for all households.
- School staff should adopt a compassion first approach to pupils who do not have the required items for the school day.
- Schools should seek to minimise events/activities which are likely to place additional costs on parents including dressing up events.
- Funding for the Extended Schools Programme should be reinstated to ensure all children can avail of opportunities and achieve their full potential and to support parents, families and local communities.

Quotes from Participants

Schools put pressure on too. My youngest is starting secondary school this year and I'm dreading it. It's £65 for a blazer. The grant for a school uniform doesn't even go anywhere near the actual costs.

I had to use a credit card for the kid's school uniform this year. I struggled to pay the kid's school uniform worse this year than any time before.

For World Book Day the kids were supposed to dress up as their favourite character. I saw costumes in Tesco for £20. I'm just going to keep my two kids off, I can't do it. I feel bad sending them in not dressed up if the rest of the kids are. I'd rather keep them off for the day than go through all the stress and expense of it, then they have to pay another £1 to take part.

I'd love to put my daughter into gymnastics but there's no way of me affording it now. I used to be able to put money aside for that kind of thing. I'd put a bit aside for each child but I can't do that anymore so they don't get any extras. I miss out on activities for me but I still try and do things for them but now it's just the bare minimum.

My daughter used to go swimming it was £25/month. I've stopped it as I can't afford that £25/month now. She's asking me when am I going to be able to go back to swimming. I have to tell her when mummy can afford it.

I have three kids and with uniforms, shoes, school bags and all the extras it cost me over £1,000 for the three of them and we get no help.

I got the groceries at the weekend and I'm having to warn the kids not to eat anything because it's for their school lunches. I go to get something to put in their lunchboxes and they've eaten it and I have to go again. I'm telling them not to touch yoghurts, etc. It's a sin like.

My son needs a new school uniform every day as he has sensory issues and there are a lot of changes. I had to buy all his school uniform, shoes, PE kit, school bag and contents. It was £345 for primary school. I literally broke down in tears because I had to get for my daughter as well and she's in secondary school.

The school uniform grant is nowhere near enough. Hoodies are £50, a secondary school blazer is £100. The school uniform grant should be increased and it should be open to more people.

See non-uniform days in schools I can't afford those – people end up spending more to get new stuff or their parents don't send them in that day. Same with pyjama day – you feel like you need to send them in new pyjamas.

The school uniform grant is less than £50, what would that buy you now? It's £65 for a PE kit and £60 for my son's shoes – he has size 11 feet.

Apples and bananas and school snacks are going up and up and up. If you send them in with a cheaper snack you're getting told off. I sent in a wee pack of Cheddars and they said I wasn't allowed, it has to be fruit.

My kids were used to something different – going to after school clubs, etc. but now they're more stuck in the house because I can't afford them.

My wee girl has to get the bus to school every day and that's gone up as well. I tried to get help as it's costing me £100/month. There were days I just couldn't afford to send her to school. I had to phone the Principal and explain to her that I couldn't get her to school the rest of the week because of money. The school gave me the money to top up her bus card but it was a one-time thing. I didn't want her missing out on her education.

My wee mans football club through the school is very expensive. I just can't do it now. You're having to pay for all the after schools clubs – you never used to have to pay for them but they're not free now.

When the child comes home from school and hands you a letter and you're thinking please don't have something on it that asks for money! There was a note the other day asking for £9 for a cinema trip.

My daughter gets free school meals but the allowance doesn't cover a lunch. Some days she can't get a bottle of water or an apple as the sandwich is coming up to the limit. I'm having to give her an extra £4-£5 a week to top it up.

The kids are missing out on school trips and their education is being affected because we don't have the money.

The free school meals are stopping for everyone in my kids school. They were getting breakfast and lunch and it's been great. It's saving me £45/week. I have three kids and I've to give them £3 each every day and that's only for a basic school meal. We're not entitled to anything as my husband works.