



The minimum cost of education in the UK

May 2025

Summary

- 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-aged learners and 30 per cent for secondary pupils, outstripping both inflation (8 per cent) and earnings growth (12 per cent) during the same period.
- The key drivers of these rises are the cost of food during the school day, an increased need for technology including devices and, for secondary school pupils, higher subject costs such as art and design materials.
- 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 policy, 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 this by urgently scrapping the two-child limit and providing more cost-specific support to families to help with the school day, such as expansions to free school meals and cash support with uniform costs.

Introduction

Child poverty is at a record high with 4.5 million children in the UK now living below the poverty line.¹ As part of the UK 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.² It is against this backdrop of increasing levels of hardship that we seek to understand how much going to school costs families in the UK, what is driving increases in the cost of education and the impact this has on children's time at school.

Minimum cost of education

The Minimum Income Standard (MIS) for the UK is produced and updated by Loughborough University's Centre for Research in Social Policy (CRSP). MIS is based on parental consensus around the resources and experiences families in the UK need in order to achieve a minimum socially acceptable standard of living. It is possible to calculate the minimum cost of education in the UK by drawing on the essential

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

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

items and experiences that groups of parents consider every child should be able to access to participate in their education.

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.

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 ³	£486.30	£846.15
Transport	£0 ⁴	£390.00
Enrichment eg, trips, charity days and celebrations	£141.43	£139.28
TOTALS	£1,003.63	£2,274.77

Note: See full breakdown of 2024 costs in Appendix 1 and full breakdown of 2022 costs in CPAG, [The minimum income standard: Understanding the cost of education to households in the UK](#), 2023

Table 1 also shows the breakdown of these costs and the big budget items that place a strain on household finances. It should be noted that these costs only cover what parents consider to be the minimum needed to attend and participate in school – using wraparound childcare, attending additional school trips, learning a musical instrument or attending after-school clubs, for example, would lead to significantly higher costs.

Increases in the cost of education since 2022

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.⁵

For primary-aged children, these rises have predominantly been from the increased cost of food across the school day (driven by the rising cost of food for packed lunches and snacks) and the recognition that technology has become increasingly important for school children, meaning children now require digital devices, software and data to complete schoolwork at home.

For children in secondary school, the biggest cost increases relate to the cost of food across the school day and the increased need for students to have access to technology for learning. The public now agrees that all children in this age group require a laptop of their own to be able to complete homework and undertake revision for exams. In addition, the research found that, since 2022, there has been a marked increase in what children are required to have to take part in particular subjects. This includes

³ 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.

⁴ Parents agreed that it is more likely that primary school children would be able to walk to school.

⁵ CPAG's calculations from OBR, *Economic and Fiscal Outlook – March 2025*, 2025

supplying materials for design and technology (DT) and equipment for food technology, or paying for the cost of travel to sports matches.⁶

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-aged children. Previously, parents emphasised the importance of including jumpers and polo shirts from uniform stockists for primary school children, but in 2024, parents said most, but not all, uniform for this age group could be bought from supermarkets. This change may reflect increasing awareness in schools of the challenge uniform costs can cause families and the emerging impact of the Department for Education's statutory guidance on school uniform policy in England, which emphasises the need for affordability.⁷ There is also new government guidance on school uniforms in both Scotland and Wales, which seeks to bring down the cost of uniforms for families.

For secondary pupils, the list of items that must be purchased from a school stockist remained extensive in 2024, including a tie, blazer, skirt, polo shirts, PE shorts, PE jogging bottoms, socks and a hoodie. Parents agreed other items such as skirts and trousers could be bought from other places such as supermarkets. Parents also felt that secondary pupils require at least two pairs of school shoes per year, trainers for PE and football boots.

The impact of high and rising school costs

Parents and children have told us that high and rising costs can have a deep impact on a child's experience of school. Rising costs can be particularly challenging for families with multiple children, as they often do not benefit from economies of scale.

'Having more than one child is very expensive for school activities. I feel as though my children don't get to participate often as I don't have enough money. I feel very embarrassed about it and guilty to my children.' (Parent in England)

'I'm a single-parent household and I have three children in school. My two oldest between uniform, trips, concerts, fruit. It costs a lot. My oldest has asked to do after-school clubs but I just simply can't afford it. I'm dreading when my youngest who is in nursery gets to full time where I will then have to pay for her things as well.' (Parent in Wales)

Since 2022, the costs associated with studying certain subjects in secondary school have increased. Parents concluded more costs are now essential rather than optional, and this includes items such as aprons for food technology, materials for DT, or making a contribution towards the cost of textiles or wood for projects in these lessons. This is in addition to stationery, textbooks, and more general resources such as scientific calculators which students also need to complete schoolwork both at home and school. When students don't have what they need for learning, they report not being able to fully participate in lessons, struggling with homework and sometimes facing sanctions such as detentions or behaviour points as a result. These increasing costs are directly affecting children's learning, pathways and time at school.

'He doesn't always complete homework and always getting detentions for missing equipment.' (Parent in England)

⁶ The MIS research is carried out at UK level, however, there is variation across the UK in terms of the support provided to families with school costs and government efforts to reduce costs. In Scotland, the government has removed curriculum charges for practical subjects and music tuition, meaning the cost burden on families is reduced.

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

'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)

'My children often feel that they are judged by others and feel left out as they can't afford to take part in other activities and won't ask for stationery items and often get behaviour points as they don't have the equipment needed.' (Parent in Wales)

Ensuring children have enough food throughout the school day is a growing pressure on families. Food prices have risen considerably since 2022, and whether families are opting for packed lunches or school meals, food is a vast expense, particularly for secondary pupils who often require more food to sustain them while at school. When children don't have enough to eat, this can cause worry and affect their ability to engage and participate at school.

'A lot of people can't afford school food and it's very important to have food since they can struggle a lot with work or feel sick if their tummy is empty.' (Primary pupil in Scotland)

'They [young people] go begging to their friends or if they can't afford it they usually just have to go through the day a bit hungry and ask the teachers, my friend had to ask the teachers for the snack because he didn't have enough for a hot meal.' (Secondary pupil in England)

'Food is a must especially when you're in education so I don't understand why children should have to pay for it... education is mandatory.' (Secondary pupil in England)

'I give them extra money for school as they say food/drink is expensive and they are still hungry. In reality I can't really afford this so then I struggle with food and bills.' (Parent in Wales)

Getting to and from school can be a considerable expense for families that do not live within walking distance or qualify for subsidised or free travel. Families in rural areas may not have access to affordable public transport or safe walking routes. For lower-income families, our work with schools and families has shown that transport costs can have an impact on pupils' punctuality and attendance at school.⁸

'There is no transport to school and it is not walkable. If my car is playing up, they can't go or are late.' (Parent in Wales)

'The radius for the school's buses has been a personal issue for myself and others. The radius is 2 miles and I lay just out of this at 1.9 miles... The cost of travel to and from school is something I struggle with.' (Parent in Wales)

'Make travel more accessible. Taking the train costs a lot of money termly. It can be up to 180 quid per term, even more. And it's worse too if there are multiple children from a family attending the school.' (Secondary pupil in England)

Uniform costs are one area where costs have slightly decreased since 2022. However, they remain a significant cause of concern for parents and pupils. Our research with secondary pupils shows that affording school kit is a particularly challenging part of school life, with students often being penalised for not meeting uniform requirements, eg, given detentions, sent home from school or subject to supervised breaktimes. For this age group, the number of branded items that are required remains extensive and hard to meet.

⁸ House of Commons Education Committee, [Persistent absence and support for disadvantaged pupils](#), 2023

'Something I would like to see the school do is more help with blazers. They can be important but are expensive, if you don't have one you have to go last at lunch.' (Secondary pupil in Scotland)

'Sometimes you have to change [your uniform] at home, so you have to go back home [from school].' (Secondary pupil, England)

'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, they won't allow students to wear a plain black jumper which is half the price [of a branded jumper] and could be the only option for the family so their child won't freeze, it's just silly.' (Secondary pupil, England)

For primary-aged children, the MIS research found that parents now have more flexibility around where to purchase uniform and fewer branded items are required. Our research with families shows where this is the case this is appreciated by parents. 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.⁹

'The school doesn't put pressure on having branded uniform which is really good.' (Parent in Wales)

School trips, celebrations and charity days are also an important part of school life, supporting the curriculum, providing enrichment and bringing classroom learning to life. The minimum costs for this area of schooling have remained fairly constant since 2022, with parents still agreeing that essentials for primary-aged children include fundraising days and one residential trip, and for secondary pupils, enrichment days eg, a trip to the theatre, one end of year reward trip and a prom celebration. However, on top of these minimum costs, the school year often includes many more trips, activities and celebrations, for example, trips to museums, local monuments, book fairs and trips abroad. Without access to these, children miss out on opportunities to develop their knowledge, skills and interests.

'There were a few kids now complaining that their parents can't afford it and it's just so sad because the residential is really fun.' (Primary pupil in England)

'When my daughter comes home and says that all her friends are going on the London trip costing almost £500 but we can't afford to send her, that's hard. She understands the reasons why and would never whinge and whine that she can't go, but seeing the disappointment in her face, breaks my heart.' (Parent in Wales)

'School trips are very expensive and many students are never able to go on one, which could make them feel left out.' (Secondary learner in Wales)

'Trips need to be a more realistic price for people to pay so young people don't lack opportunities.' (Secondary pupil in Scotland)

'Let everyone get a chance to do the same things.' (Secondary pupil in Scotland)

The impact of rising family poverty in schools

It is not just families that report the effects of poverty and rising costs on children's education. In a 2023 survey of the education workforce in England, we were told that pupils were frequently coming to school tired and hungry, worried, unable to concentrate, and without the equipment they need to engage

⁹ House of Commons Library, [School uniform costs in England](#), 2025

with the curriculum. School staff were being heavily diverted from other parts of their roles in order to address the poverty-related needs of their school community. Although school staff were dedicated to doing the best they could for the families in their community, this work often required them to go beyond their remit.¹⁰

'Staff are increasingly concerned and have been spending more time helping vulnerable families. This leads to members of staff having to leave their allocated roles to attend to pupils and also to contact statutory services to seek assistance and advice.' (Primary teaching assistant, England)

What support is available?

Some families across the UK receive some additional support specifically with the cost of schooling, however, this varies by UK nation. Previous research¹¹ shows that families in Scotland receive the most government support with the cost of going to school, for example through school clothing grants for eligible families, wider expansion of universal free school meal provision and the Best Start Grant School Age Payment.¹² Families in England fare worst. Across all nations, this support has limitations as it only applies to a small proportion of families or certain age groups, only covers a fraction of the costs families face, and eligibility thresholds for support do not usually account for family size.

'We get the free uniform grant, but that is a one-off payment and barely covers what you need, by the time you have bought a bag, coat, or shoes then there is not a lot to buy the actual uniform as they are so expensive.' (Parent in Wales, 2025)

What's more, since 2010, major cuts have stripped £50bn out of the annual social security system budget, and there have been sharp rises in the cost of living, meaning many families find it much harder to cover their basic costs, including education.¹³ Families with three or more children are particularly badly off because many are affected by the two-child limit policy which leaves them without the universal credit child element (worth £3,513 a year) for their third and subsequent children.¹⁴ This policy does not just affect the youngest child in the households; all siblings lose out equally from this damaging policy that removes the link between entitlement and need. The policy currently affects 1.6 million children, and when fully rolled out 2.5 million children will lose out.¹⁵

For children to be able to make the most of their time at school, more support is needed to close this growing gap between family incomes and the cost of education. Investing in the social security system is the most effective way to boost household incomes and bring down the number of children in poverty. This has been demonstrated in Scotland where the Scottish child payment¹⁶ means child poverty figures are falling – compared to elsewhere in the UK where numbers are increasing year on year. This investment should be combined with efforts to reduce the cost of the school day for families.

¹⁰ CPAG, [There's Only So Much We Can Do: school staff in England on the impact of poverty on children and school life](#), 2023

¹¹ CPAG, [School sums: What does going to school really cost families?](#), 2023

¹² The Best Start Grant School Age Payment is one-off payment paid provided to families in the year that children start school to help with costs of preparing for school.

¹³ CPAG's calculations from the *Policy Measures Database*, March 2025. The sum of all policies in the 'Social security benefits', 'Tax credits', 'Welfare inside cap' and 'Welfare outside cap' categories for 2025/26, except 'Devolution disability benefits to the Scottish government.' These cover all policies announced from the 2010 Budget to the 2025 Spring Statement.

¹⁴ The Scottish government is seeking to counter the two-child limit and has committed to scrapping the policy for families in Scotland by 2026. However, families elsewhere will remain subject to the policy without UK government intervention.

¹⁵ CPAG, [Things will only get worse: Why the two-child limit must go](#), 2025

¹⁶ The Scottish Child Payment is a weekly payment to lower-income families in Scotland for children aged under 16.

Key recommendations for the forthcoming child poverty strategy and devolved governments

1. Scrap the two-child limit

The UK 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, making it harder for families to cover their basic costs, including the cost of education, which is rising faster than other areas. Removing this policy will not only improve living standards for millions of children across the UK, but it is also an essential step for government to meet its manifesto commitment to reduce child poverty over this parliament and break down barriers to opportunity.

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

Across the UK, governments must make a concerted effort to reduce the cost of sending children to school and ensure that the hidden costs of education are not preventing children from attending, taking part and achieving at school.

Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have made more progress in this area, with England lagging behind. However, all governments can do more to support children to thrive.

- As part of the child poverty strategy, the UK 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 UK 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.
- Devolved governments must also build on progress made and continue to expand free school meal provision as a stepping stone towards a universal system.
- Devolved governments must increase the current thresholds for school cost related grants, as the current thresholds are so low many children in poverty are excluded from these schemes.

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 as a result of the two-child limit policy. This growing gap between income and costs is making it ever harder for children to access and maximise their time at school. While schools across the UK are doing what they can to reduce costs for families eg, offering payment plans, subsidising trips, washing uniforms, and identifying additional funding to support participation, the cost of schooling remains prohibitive for too many families and bolder government action is needed to remove barriers to opportunity and education.

At this critical time, the UK government must increase household incomes which have fallen so far below what families need to support their children. This must start with scrapping the two-child limit. The UK government and devolved governments must also put in place measures to further reduce school costs such as expanding free school meal provision to more children and providing greater cash support with school-related costs. It's not right that some families can't afford the bare essentials children need to participate, let alone thrive, at school.

About us

The Centre for Research in Social Policy, Loughborough University

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.

Child Poverty Action Group

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

Appendix 1: Full breakdown of 2024 school costs

Primary school child (UK, 2024 prices)	Weekly cost	Annual cost
School lunches (39 weeks a year)	£11.87	£462.97
Lunch box and water bottle	£0.45	£23.33
School uniform and shoes	£5.50	£287.04
School bags (book bag, backpack and PE bag)	£0.46	£24.20
School trips	£1.44	£75.00
Technology (tablet)	£1.05	£54.66
Primary school residential	£0.89	£46.43
School charity days (eg, Red Nose Day, Children in Need)	£0.38	£20.00
Other costs (eg, printing budget)	£0.19	£10.00
Total	£22.24	£1,003.63
<i>Childcare (lone parent) (includes before- and after-school clubs and holiday clubs)</i>	93.36	£4,867.93
<i>Childcare (partnered parents) (includes before- and after-school clubs and holiday clubs)</i>	87.36	£4,555.14
Secondary school child (2024 prices)	Weekly cost	Annual cost
School lunches (39 weeks a year)	£20.35	£793.71
Lunch box and water bottle	£1.01	£52.44
School uniform and shoes	£8.07	£420.71
School bags (backpack and PE bag)	£0.56	£28.97
Transport (39 weeks a year)	£7.48	£390.00
School trips	£1.92	£100.00
Technology (laptop and headphones)	£2.61	£136.33
School charity days (eg, Red Nose Day, Children in Need)	£0.29	£15.00
Ingredients/materials for food technology, design and technology etc.	£2.30	£120.00
School prom	£0.47	£24.28
Other costs (including mobile phone, stationery etc.)	£3.71	£193.33
Totals	£48.76	£2,274.77
Household costs (2024 prices)	Weekly cost	Annual cost
Printer, for households with any secondary pupils	£0.29	£15.00
Ink and paper for households with one or two secondary pupils	£0.97	£50.49
Ink and paper for households with three or four secondary pupils	£1.41	£73.59
Totals	£2.67	£139.08

Appendix 2: Minimum Income Standard methodology

This report uses the established MIS research to look at the minimum cost of primary and secondary school education to households with children in the UK. Since it began in 2008, the MIS research has set out what the public thinks is needed for a minimum socially acceptable standard of living in urban UK, including what primary and secondary school children need and need to be able to do to have this dignified standard of living. The focus of MIS research is on establishing minimum household needs holistically – that is, establishing what different households need to cover all of their minimum needs. However, within this ‘holistic’ living standard, it is possible to focus in on particular aspects, in this case, education. MIS research can be used to show what the public agrees primary and secondary school children, and the households they live in, need to meet their minimum educational needs. This is not just about material needs associated with going to school, such as school uniform, but also what is needed to participate and to be included within primary and secondary education.

Using the MIS research, in 2023 CPAG published, *The Minimum Income Standard: Understanding the cost of education to households in the UK*. This research included 2022 costings for a minimum education. This research has now been updated and uses 2024 costings.

You can find the latest full MIS report for 2024 [here](#).