

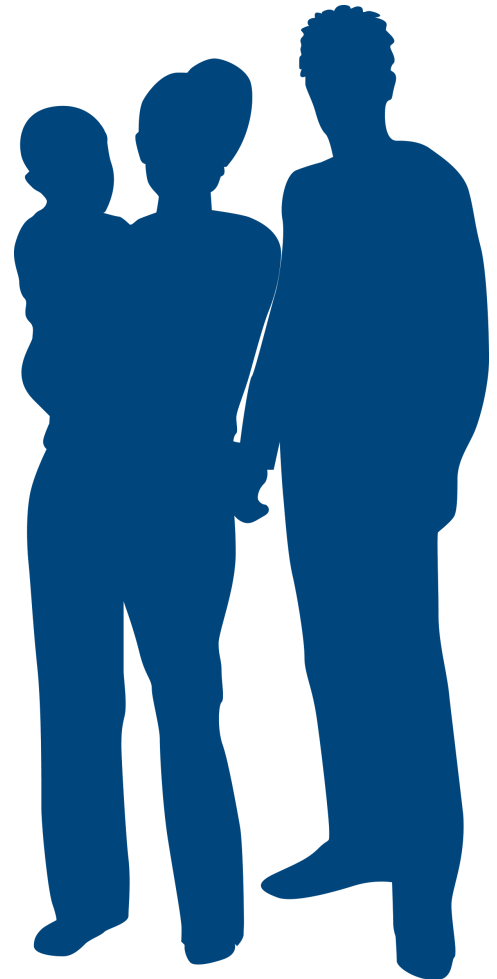
The cost of accessing education in Durham

Main findings of a
questionnaire-based
survey on the
experiences of parents
and carers

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County
Durham



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Introduction

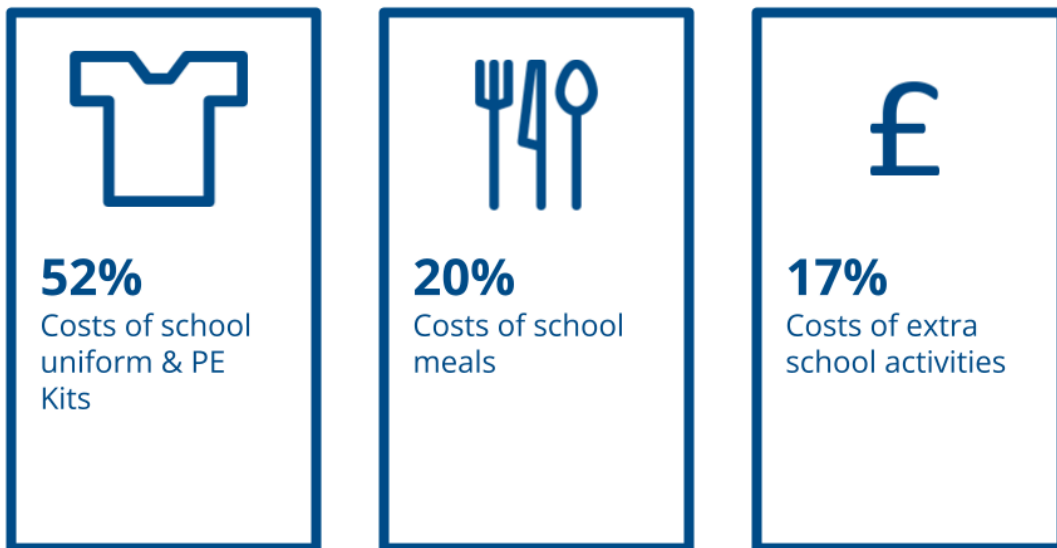
The United Kingdom has been facing a cost-of-living crisis since late 2021 in which wages and benefits have not increased by as much as the cost of essentials, such as food, energy and housing. Families have been left struggling to cope financially, leaving many unable to cover their minimum needs, including their children's education. At Citizens Advice County Durham, a great increase in the number of people, seeking financial advice, have reported problems with school associated costs, even though in theory primary and secondary education is free. This increase in people struggling to cover their children's education is in line with North East England's dramatic increase in child poverty in the past six years and now has the country's highest child poverty rate.

Against this backdrop and inspired by Children North East and Child Poverty Action Group's Report on The Cost of the School Day in England Citizens Advice County Durham carried out a questionnaire-based **survey** between July and October 2023 to enquire about the **hidden costs of primary and secondary education**. The run of the questionnaire coincided with the start of the first term of the 2023-24 academic year. The questionnaire contained questions on general demographical information along with others on the costs of school uniform, school meals, along with further questions on the financial burdens incurred with curricular and extra-curricular based materials and activities. Questions were also posed concerning the effects of the costs of schooling on the overall family financial situation.

Completed online questionnaires were received from 535 parents/carers whose children attended schools based in County Durham. Of these, 265 (49.7%) had children attending primary school and 268 (50.2%) attended secondary school. In total, children attended 77 different schools, 50 primary and 27 secondary schools.

Most respondents to the questionnaire reported that due to the rise of the cost of living, they would not be able to afford the costs of their children accessing education without cutting back on essentials e.g. food, heating, bills.

Three major causes were identified as:



This report presents findings, and survey respondents' recommendations for easing the costs of accessing primary and secondary education in the County of Durham that could inform and be implemented before the start of the 2024 academic year.

Demographics

The survey's sample of respondents largely matches the County of Durham's demographic data, and therefore represents its population accurately. However, 93% of the people who filled out the survey identified as female, meaning that they are overrepresented in the findings.

The age range of respondents showed that **83% to be aged less than 45 years** of age. Those aged **31 to 45 years constitute 73% of the sample**, 8% were over 50 and 1% below 25 years of age.

Nearly half, **49%**, of respondents stated that they did **not identify/participate with any religion**, whilst **46% identified as Christian** and **0.6% Muslim** this reflects the same percentage as the 2021 census. Other religions made up a total of 1% and 4% preferred not to say.

Most of the sample, **98%, identified themselves as White**. People identifying as Asian or Asian British constituted 0.6% of the sample along with other categories; Black, African, Caribbean; Black British; Gypsy or Irish Traveller; and Mixed or multiple ethnic groups each constituting 0.4 %.

Of the total sample **13% stated that they identified as disabled** and 2% preferred not to say.

Children were looked after by either one or two parents/carers, according to 95% of respondents. **A quarter** reported that they were the **single parent/carer** and 4% stated that three or four individuals acted in this role.

Half of the sample reported that they had **one child attending school**, **39%** stated **two children**, **8%** said **three children** and four children were reported by 2%.

When asked if they had **children with SEN or disability**, **29%** stated 'yes', and 2% preferred not to say. Of those stating 'yes', **40%** said their children suffered from **Autism/ASD**. ADHD was specified by 10%. Other disabilities included Cerebral Palsy, Speech problems, Dyspraxia, Dyslexia, Deafness, and Anxiety were each cited by 4% of respondents. In addition, 12% stated that their children had SEND without further specification.

Income

Gross Annual Household Income ranges of individuals in the sample is shown in the table below. The average annual household income is in the range **£23,881 to £32,200**. Of the sample 53% identified that this was below £32,200 and 65% have incomes less than £43,340.

Annual Income	No	%
No income	8	1.5%
£1 – £15,380	100	18.7%
£15,381 – £23,880	94	17.5%
£23,881 – £32,200	68	12.7%
£32,201 – £43,340	66	12.3%
£43,341 – £65,590	80	14.9%
£65,591 – £86,680	42	7.8%
£86,681 – £131,180	20	3.7%
More than £131,180	4	0.7%
Prefer not to say	53	9.9%

*Gross annual income per household.

A total of **53%** stated that their households currently **receive Government benefits** and 4% preferred not to say.

School Uniforms

A total of **531** subjects (**99.4%**) reported that they **paid for school uniforms and PE kit**.

The reported **cost of School Uniform and PE kit for one child per school year** is shown in the table below. The **average** spend on school uniforms is between **£151 and £200** per year with a cost of over £200 annually reported by 31% of respondents.

- Families with **primary school children**: average annual spend between **£101 and £150**
- Families with **secondary school children** was **£151 to £200**. For secondary schools 91% reported paying over £100 per year and 25.6% spent over £200 annually.

Annual Cost of Uniform	Primary		Secondary		Total	
	No	%	No	%	No	%
£1 – £50	17	6.4%	3	1.1%	20	3.9%
£51 – £100	65	24.4%	22	8.2%	87	16.2%
£101 – £150	63	23.7%	61	22.7%	124	23.1%
£151 – £200	62	23.3%	74	27.5%	136	25.4%
£201 – £250	30	11.3%	59	21.9%	89	16.6%
Over £250	29	10.9%	50	3.7%	79	14.7%

*Annual cost of uniform per one child.

A school **logo** was **required on at least one item** of school uniform or PE kit according to **64%** of respondents. **91% of primary school** children did **not require school logos** while **75% of secondary school** children reported a **logo was required**.

35% stated that, according to school regulations, all items of school uniform could be purchased from any shop. However, **19%** said that this was not possible with almost half of them reporting that at least one item had to be branded. Of those reporting that school regulations require items of **school uniform to be purchased from specialist suppliers**, 28% stated that they need to buy one or two items, however, **41%** reported the **requirement to buy 3 or 4 items**, 18% were required to purchase 5 or 6 items and 13% to buy more than 6 items. Of those respondents who identified that at least one item needed to be purchased from a specialist supplier, **76% stated that there was only one designated supplier**, 21% said there were two, and 2% reported three suppliers were available.

A **school policy for selling or swapping pre-loved school uniform** was reported to be in place by 32% of individuals and **51% said that they did not know**. Only 30% of people replying reported that they knew of any other sources of getting pre-loved school uniforms. The main sources identified were Facebook Parents Page by 60% of those responding. Much smaller numbers, 10% or less in each case, identified friends and siblings, Facebook Marketplace, charity shops, council clothing banks, local churches and second-hand clothing shops.

School Meals

Of the respondents, **67%** stated that they **paid** for their children’s **school meals**, which included packed lunches. Of the 335 who answered that they did not pay for school meals, 42% stated that they received Infant Free School Meals, **44%** reported receiving **means-tested Free School Meals**, and 15% said their children qualified, for but did not receive free school meals.

Of those who stated that they pay for their children’s school meals, the **weekly spend for one child per week** is shown in the table below. The **average** spend was **£16 to £20** per week.

Weekly Cost School Meals	Primary		Secondary		Total	
	No	%	No	%	No	%
£1 – £5	2	1.4%	11	5.0%	13	3.6%
£6 – £10	20	14.3%	16	7.2%	36	10.0%
£11 – £15	73	52.1%	51	23.1%	124	34.3%
£16 – £20	22	15.7%	71	32.1%	93	25.8%
£21 – £25	8	5.7%	47	21.3%	55	15.2%
£26 – £30	6	4.3%	14	6.3%	20	5.5%
£31 – £35	1	0.7%	4	1.8%	5	1.4%
£36 – £40	4	2.9%	0	0.0%	4	1.1%
£41 – £45	1	0.7%	1	0.5%	2	0.6%
£46 – £50	2	1.4%	3	1.4%	5	1.4%
Over £50	1	0.7%	3	1.4%	4	1.1%

*Weekly cost of school meal per child.

Of those who said that they pay for school meals **19%** reported that they had **faced money debt due to school-meal-related costs**. School-meal-related debt ranged from £6 to £840 as shown in the table below.

35 people, 52% of those saying they had incurred meal-related debt, faced debt up to £60. The **average** amount of meal-related **debt** reported was in the range of **£61 to £80**. **Debt of over £100** was reported by 21 people which is **31%** of the total.

Amount of School Meal Related Debt	No	%
£6 – £20	9	13.4%
£21 – £40	14	20.9%
£41 – £60	12	17.9%
£61 – £80	5	7.5%
£81 – £100	6	9.0%
£101 – £150	10	14.9%
£151 – £250	8	11.9%
£250 – £500	2	3.0%
£840	1	1.5%

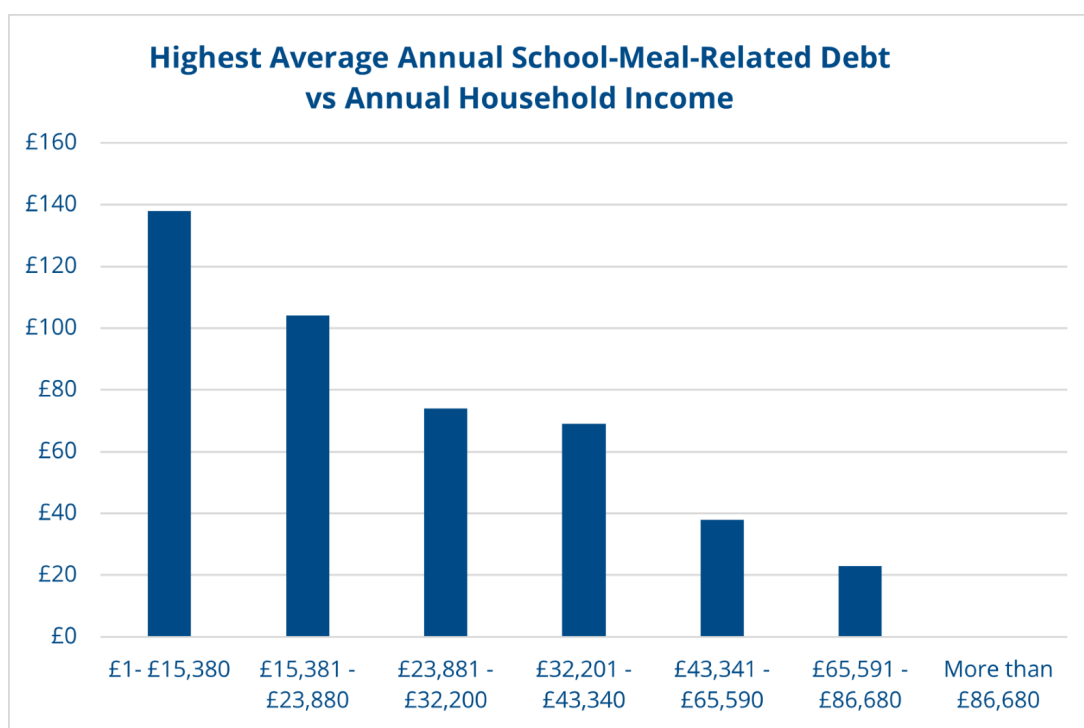
*Highest amount of debt ever faced due to school-meal-related costs.

The percentage of individuals reporting having faced **school-meal-related debt decreases in line with increases in annual household income** – this relationship and the respective numbers are shown in the table below. While only one respondent with no income reported to have faced school-meal-related debt **72%** of the respondents replying they have faced school-meal-related debt were in households with **incomes less than £32,200**. However, **19%** were in the **income ranges above £43,300**. Only households with an income over **£131,180** reported **no debt**. It should also be noted that only one person with no income reported to have faced school-meal-related debt which reflects the effect of free school meals.

Annual Household Income Range	Number Reporting School-Meal-Related Debt	%
No income	1	1.3%
£1 – £15,380	23	30.3%
£15,381 – £23,880	19	25.0%
£23,881 – £32,200	12	15.8%
£32,201 – £43,340	7	9.2%
£43,341 – £65,590	9	11.8%
£65,591 – £86,680	3	3.9%
£86,681 – £131,180	2	2.6%
More than £131,180	0	0.0%

*Number of people reporting to have faced school meal related money debt relative to household income.

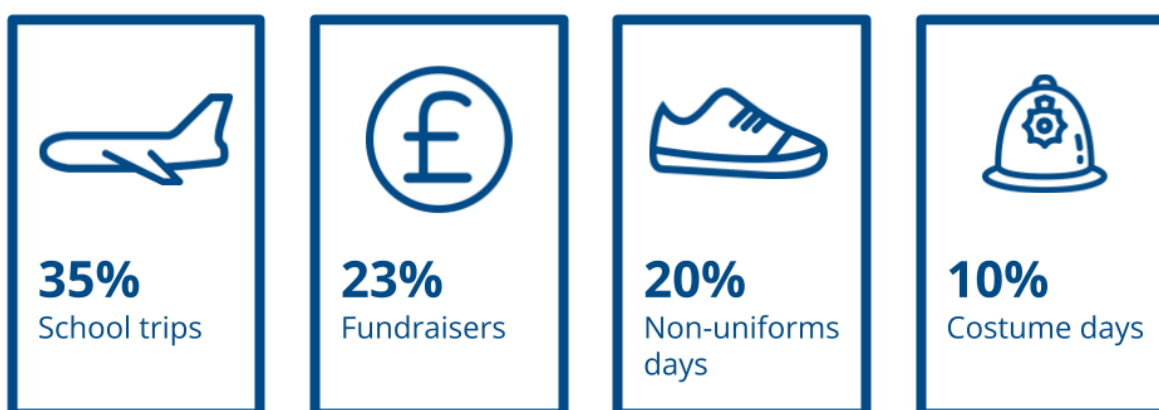
In a similar vein, the **average highest school-meal-related debt** was **£138** for the **£1-£15,380** income range, decreasing to **£104** for the **£15,381 - £23,880** income bracket, **£74** for income range of **£23,881 - £32,200**, **£69** for those in the range **£32,201 - £43,340**, **£38** for those in the income range **£43,341 - £65,590**, and **£23** for individuals in the **£65,591 - £86,680** range.



Individuals, who said they were **single parents or carers**, reported a **mean highest school-meal-related debt of £100**. For **two parents/carers** families this was **£95**, and for those reporting **three parents/carers** of children this decreased to **£40**.

Extra School Activities

The cost of paying for extra school activities was problematic. **83%** of people responding said that they **had to pay for extra school activities**, such as school trips, uniform days and fundraisers. The activities identified as **costing the most** in the last year were:



At **secondary school** level **proms** and **school merchandise** were also identified as expensive extra activities (6%).

The amount spent on extra-curricular activities by those people is shown in the table below. Average annual spend on extra school activities was reported to be in the range of £ 101 - £150 with that of £51-150 for primary school children and £101-£150 for secondary school. A spend of over £400 was reported for 5% of secondary school children compared with 4% for primary school.

Annual Cost of Extra School Activities	Primary		Secondary		Total	
	No	%	No	%	No	%
£1 – £50	117	51.3%	69	32.9%	186	40.1%
£51 – £100	54	23.7%	67	31.9%	121	26.2%
£101 – £150	21	9.2%	33	15.7%	54	11.7%
£151 – £200	12	4.3%	7	3.3%	19	4.1%
£201 – £251	7	3.1%	13	6.2%	20	4.3%
£251 – £300	7	3.1%	11	5.2%	18	3.9%
£301 – £350	2	0.9%	1	0.5%	3	0.6%
£351 – £400	3	1.3%	2	1.0%	5	1.1%
£401 – £450	1	0.4%	4	1.9%	5	1.1%
£451 – £500	1	0.4%	3	1.4%	4	0.9%
over £500	3	1.3%	24	11.4%	27	5.8%

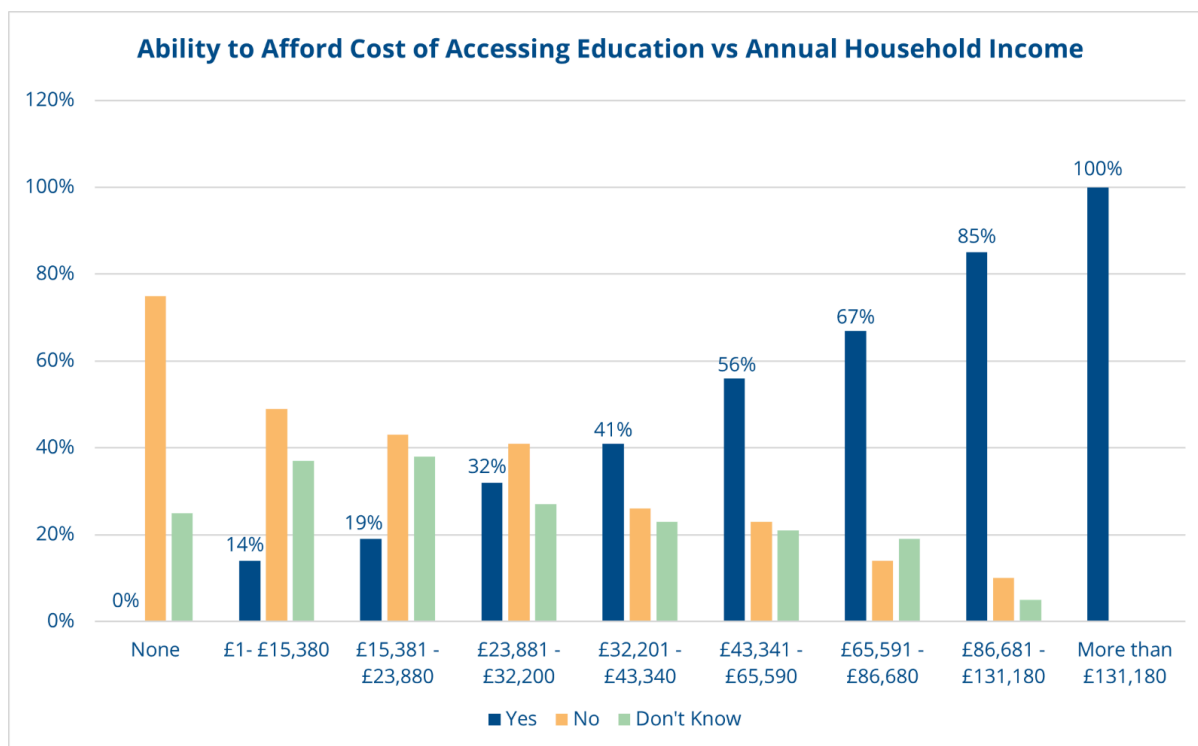
*Annual cost of extra school activities per child.

Overall, **28%** of respondents reported that their **children** had been **unable to participate in extra school activities** because they were not able to face those costs. For primary school children this position was reported by 19% compared with 38% for secondary school children.

Concluding Findings

When asked whether respondents of the survey would be able to **afford the costs of their children accessing education without cutting back on essentials** such as food and bills, **62%** said 'no' or that they **didn't know** – **only 38%** of the survey respondents replied they could **confidently afford those costs**. According to our results, there is a correlation between household income and the ability to afford those costs without cutting back on essentials.

Only parents and carers with an annual **household income of over £65,591** said they **could afford the costs of their children accessing school** without cutting back. Out of the households with an income between **£43,341 and £65,590**, **34%** of the respondents still answered they **couldn't or didn't know** whether they are able to afford those costs. For the income band of **£23,881 - £32,200** this **number almost doubles to 67%**, and it further increases to **81%** for respondents with a household income **£15,381 - £23,880**, to **86%** for those earning between **£1 and £15,380**, and finally a shocking **100%** for respondents **without an income**.



Recommendations

Survey respondents who stated that they had faced difficulties to cover school-related costs, suggestions of adjustments that would ease some of those costs were made.

- **Call for reduction of costs of school uniform**, including making uniforms available in all shops, non-branded or having a logo (65%)
- **School meals should be free for all children** (25%)
- The **purchase of uniform items** and PE kit could be made easier by having a **monthly installment scheme** (21%)
- **School trips should be made cheaper** by choosing cheaper options or subsidising the costs (18%).

Citizens Advice County Durham recommends:

- Schools should follow the **legal Government guidance** on the cost of school uniforms, to ensure that they are affordable and not a barrier to applying for, and attending, a school. The number of branded items in the uniform should be limited, and **sew-on badges re-introduced**.
- Schools should ensure that they **check eligibility for means-tested** free school meals for all pupils receiving infant free school meals.
- The cost of **extra-curricular activities is kept to a minimum** for all students regardless of income.
- Travel costs to attend an education setting are **fair and reflective** of the current financial climate.
- All schools and academies should look at **Poverty Proofing the school day** by contacting Children North East children-ne.org.uk/poverty-proofing-the-school-day

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