



## Response to the schools admissions code consultation

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Child Poverty Action Group  
94 White Lion Street  
London N1 9PF  
[www.cpag.org.uk](http://www.cpag.org.uk)

## Introduction

1. This document responds to the *School Admissions Code* consultation document published by the Department for Education and Skills. The consultation covers a significant range, and comments here are restricted to responding to section 1, around some of the costs which often accompany education. CPAG's response to the education white paper provides a fuller analysis.<sup>1</sup>
2. CPAG welcome the code as a step forward in documenting some of the areas which can lead to different groups of children being segmented within education and with poorer children often ending up in poorer schools. Alongside this we highlight the problem of poorer children in better performing schools still themselves performing below their potential. Both factors help drive the attainment gap between children from poorer and richer families. Minimising the costs of school to poorer families and maximising the undoubted benefits which come from full inclusion in school activities should be the key aim of education policy and we recognise that concern is identified within the code.
3. Previous Department for Education and Skills (DfES) research<sup>2</sup> has quantified the extent of the costs of a free state education in 2003 with parents spending an average of £736.22 per child (£563.15 at primary level, and £948.11 for secondary schools). CPAG sees no evidence either that these costs are falling or that grant based provision has improved to help parents meet this.<sup>3</sup>
4. However in broad thrust CPAG believes that the costs of school not only dissuade parents from sending children to certain schools and that further, within schools, the costs present parents with an invidious choice – either to sacrifice spending on necessities to pay for some of the costs of school or to see their children potentially face stigma through the lack of items. CPAG therefore welcomes the code but calls for its strengthening to help schools to meet the Every Child Matters objectives, especially around 'enjoy and achieve' and 'achieving economic well-being'.

## Free school meals

5. In the UK in 2004/05 27 per cent of children were counted as poor after housing costs. The government's new preferred measure of before housing cost relative income poverty defines 21 per cent of children as poor.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, in the same year, of school age children in the United Kingdom 16.3 per cent of children were eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) and 12.4 per cent children took them up

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1 And can be downloaded at:

[http://www.cpag.org.uk/info/briefings\\_policy/CPAG\\_ed\\_skills\\_select\\_comm\\_better\\_sch\\_for\\_all.doc](http://www.cpag.org.uk/info/briefings_policy/CPAG_ed_skills_select_comm_better_sch_for_all.doc)

2 Brunwim, T, Clemens, S, Deakin, G and Mortimer, E, *The Costs of Schooling* Department for Education and Skills, 2004

3 See 'The costs of a free education' briefing, available at <http://www.cpag.org.uk/campaigns/Cost-of-free-education-briefing.pdf>

4 Figures are from Department for Work and Pensions, *Households Below Average Incomes* series an analysis of the income distribution 1994/5 – 2004/05, National Statistics, 2006. Most data is quoted for GB not UK, UK data is available in the appendix. The HBAI does not contain UK wide data for the new BHC measure so GB is quoted here, however it is unlikely that the inclusion of NI in the figures would alter the rate.

(caseload take up of around 76.1 per cent).<sup>5</sup> Either using CPAG's preferred after housing cost measure or the government's preferred before housing cost measure there is a substantial number of children in poverty who are not entitled to school meals (excluded by the narrowness of the entitlement criteria) and a larger number who are not receiving school meals. Specifically:

- Nearly 1.5 million school children were entitled to free school meals and 1.1 million received them.
  - Around 2.5 million children at school were income poor in 2004/05 (assuming 27 per cent of school children were poor).
  - This implies 1 million children at school in income poverty may have no entitlement to Free School Meals and (adding on those who are entitled but don't receive them) 1.4 million no receipt of them.
6. These figures point up the meanness of FSM entitlement, the extent of non take up of free school meals – around 1 in 4 entitled to these miss out - and the limitations of using this as an indicator: using free school meal entitlement or receipt will focus help and support on a narrower group than the government's poverty target.
  7. CPAG believes that the best solution here is for school meals to be free at the point of delivery. This has been shown to be an effective way of increasing the number of children eating school meals by the Hull pilot, which is providing free school meals for primary school children. Increasing the take up of meals can have benefits on pupil health, concentration and learning as well as easing family budgets and solving the current problem of non-take up.
  8. CPAG understands the current use of existing benefits to passport to support and does not recommend that schools impose different means tests, this risks complexity and stigma, however the restrictiveness of the FSM entitlement criteria should be something which DfES looks into as a matter of urgency. Though CPAG ultimately wants to see school meals free at the point of delivery, there are ways of widening current entitlement to free school meals, with measures to explore include extending entitlement to those low income families with maximum child tax credit, or those who are in work and in receipt of working tax credit.

## School uniforms

9. The code talks about both the up and potential downsides of school uniform, CPAG agrees – a quote from a 12 year old girl included by Tess Ridge in her recent book about children's experiences of poverty illustrates the point well:

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<sup>5</sup> Figures are for the UK and are based on an analysis of DFES, Education and Training Statistics 2005, Table 2.10, 2005. DfES data is for children attending school (9.2 million) whereas the HBAI is for all children (12.6 million) the numbers are expressed as a percentage to reduce any discrepancy.

*[Uniform is] quite good yeah because they can't take the mick out of you if you've got like no named stuff. But you still 'ave to 'ave good trainers or good shoes.<sup>6</sup>*

10. Uniform can have a protective effect in preventing children from being singled out as not having the latest clothing but even so there are costs associated with this – from the shoes which are needed alongside the uniform but also often from the uniform itself. CPAG views simple, affordable uniforms as an important way of boosting social inclusion for children; however expensive 'badged' uniforms, especially those which come only from one supplier can have the counter impact – both being costly to parents and – where cost means children have to go without items or use second hand clothing - can lead to children being singled out. CPAG would like to see the code strengthened on this front – there are too many 'cans' and 'should's' (in para's 1.41 and 1.42) where the code could and should go further. We note the findings of the recent Office for Fair Trading investigation into school uniform sales which illustrated the extent to which schools use sole suppliers and, in some cases, financially benefit from this preferred supplier model – this is not in the interests of children and parents and DfES should be stronger in preventing these sorts of relationships. As the Chief Executive of the OFT said in the press release accompanying the report:

*This study has shown that parents have to pay higher prices for school uniforms where exclusive agreements exist. This restriction on competition acts as a 'tax' on parents, which mostly goes to the chosen retailers. We call on school governors to eliminate these exclusive agreements<sup>7</sup>*

11. CPAG further urges DfES to strengthen the code by ensuring schools in the following ways:

- Schools should mitigate the cost to parents by ensuring uniforms are simple, inexpensive and can be purchased from more than one supplier.
- Items such as blazers or braiding on uniforms will inevitably push the costs up and are unnecessary – a cheaper way of giving school uniforms a school specific identify would be to supply school badges which might be sewn on to a simple, generic, uniform.
- Little is said in the code about school uniform grants and our experience suggests grant provision by schools is patchy at least – either being unavailable or not covering the economic cost of uniforms. We welcome what is said in para 1.42 around schemes of remission but again this is weaker than we feel is necessary – the paragraph only specifies that schools 'should' (not 'must') have provision in place and even limits this comment to schools where uniform costs are above the national average. This is not only vague for schools to interpret but implies parents are always in a position to pay if uniforms are cheaper than average with which CPAG disagrees.

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6 Ridge, T, Childhood poverty and social exclusion from a child's perspective, Policy press, 2002, p.71.

7 The press release is available at <http://www.offt.gov.uk/News/Press+releases/2006/135-06.htm>; the main report Office for Fair Trading, Supply of School Uniforms review, September 2006

- Also in para. 1.42 the code suggests schemes of remission 'should' be administered discreetly. Given all we know about the potential both for non-take up (see school meal example above) and for children to experience stigma and bullying it should be totally unacceptable for schools to operate means tested systems which are not discreet. We feel the code could be strengthened on this point.

## School trips

12. CPAG believes that all children should have full access to the opportunities of education – both in school time and outside it - irrespective of family income. We welcome the re-statement in para. 1.46 that trips either during the school day or as part of the syllabus must not have charges attached but earlier paragraphs in the same section are much weaker. Though we appreciate the sentiment in paragraph 1.44 that governing bodies should not imply trips are compulsory (where these could carry a charge and so dissuade parents from entering children for a particular school) , the implication of this, that children could miss out because their parents are unable to pay, is equally unacceptable. Paragraph 1.45 uses 'should' rather than 'must' in arguing schools should publicise help available to cover the costs. It is also unclear from this paragraph how much help might be available from schools or how schools should make decisions as to who might be eligible for this.

## Extended schools and inclusion

13. The move to extended schools offers much to be welcomed in terms of children's opportunities (though at the same time the model it implies for parents spending more time in employment and less time parenting may have downsides for many children). But CPAG is less comfortable that whilst this may offer many opportunities it also provides scope for further costs associated with education, either taxing tight family budgets or risking children's exclusion. We are supportive of the words in paragraph 1.49 and 1.50 which both imply the benefits which children from disadvantaged families could gain from extended school activities and the potential for costs to put children off participating in them.
14. However Para 1.50 contains an odd coda which we would like to see deleted. The sentence currently states '...it is important that schools ensure access to extended activities, *where they may be of educational benefit*, for children and young people whose families cannot afford them...' (emphasis added). We see no need for the coda implying a subjective decision of 'educational benefit' - if activities are worth schools' running they should be open to all children, irrespective of ability to pay.

## Voluntary contributions

15. We welcome the emphasis on ensuring that voluntary contributions are not implied to be required for children to participate. Again the terms used here are 'should not' and not 'must not' (in para 1.43, referring to prospectus details). We urge very careful monitoring of what is happening in practice, not only in terms of school policies and which parents are providing such contributions but also whether children whose parents are unable to do so are identified or treated differently by the school or other children.

16. The 'costs of school' coalition will shortly be publishing a briefing which will cover not only some of the costs of school but lays out practical steps by which local education authorities and schools can poverty proof their educational policies. The coalition will be sending this document to local councils and urge DfES to make use of it as a further way of delivering the Every Child Matters agenda.

#### About CPAG

CPAG is the leading charity campaigning for the abolition of poverty among children and young people in the UK and for the improvement of the lives of low income families. CPAG aims to: raise awareness of the causes, extent, nature and impact of poverty and strategies for its eradication and prevention; bring about positive policy changes for families with children in poverty; and enable those eligible for income maintenance to have access to their full entitlement.

**Paul Dornan**  
**Child Poverty Action Group**  
94 White Lion Street  
London N1 9PF  
tel: 020 7837 7979  
fax: 020 7837 6414  
email: [pdornan@cpag.org.uk](mailto:pdornan@cpag.org.uk)