



The Price of Pupil Poverty

Taking a Whole School Approach to
Improving the Well-being of children from
low income and disadvantages families



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Children in Wales is the national umbrella organisation for voluntary, statutory and professional organisations and individuals who work with children, young people and families in Wales. Its aims are to promote the interests of these groups, to improve services in Wales and to put children high on the Welsh agenda.

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Introduction



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The Price of Poverty Guides have been developed for maintained schools and other education settings in Wales to raise awareness of the lived experiences of learners from low income and disadvantaged families, setting out the impact poverty has on children's day to day lives and to provide schools with tangible and cost effective solutions which could help lift barriers towards improved learner well-being.

The 5 Guides are grounded in the Welsh Government's commitment to tackle increasing levels of child poverty and to improve the mental health and emotional well-being of all children in Wales, drawing on key Welsh Government legislation, policies and guidance.

The content of the Guides and solutions put forward, have been informed by previous work carried out in Wales and other parts of the UK which recognise the existing measures already being taken by schools to reduce the impact of poverty on learner well-being and to help improve individual learners' progress. Much research has been undertaken over the last few years with many education professionals reporting significant increases in the visibility of child poverty in their schools and the barriers this presents.

These Guides are best read as one document, but can be engaged with independently. The Guides are set out thematically, and explain how poverty impacts on different aspects of the school day

1. Understanding the causes, key drivers and impact of poverty on learners living in low income families
2. School Uniform and Clothing
3. Food and Hunger
4. Participation in the Life of the School
5. Home-School Relationship

As part of the development of these Guides, consultation has taken place with strategic partners including academics, policy makers, teachers, third sector organisations and the Children's Commissioner for Wales' office, whose recent publication 'A Charter for Change'¹ will act to complement these Guides.

In addition to being informed by present Welsh Government priorities, the Guides draw upon research which has examined the relationship between child poverty and education, as well as notable inquiries undertaken by the National Assembly for Wales' Children, Young People and Education Committee, particularly their Inquiry into Educational Outcomes for Children from Low Income Households and 'On the Money', an Inquiry which included looking into the use of the Welsh Government's Pupil Development Grant.

Each guide will give examples of what practical steps schools can take by applying a whole school approach to reduce the impact of poverty on the day to day experiences of children in school, many of which are low cost or no cost measures.

Endnotes

1

'A Charter for Change: Protecting Welsh Children from the impact of poverty', Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2019



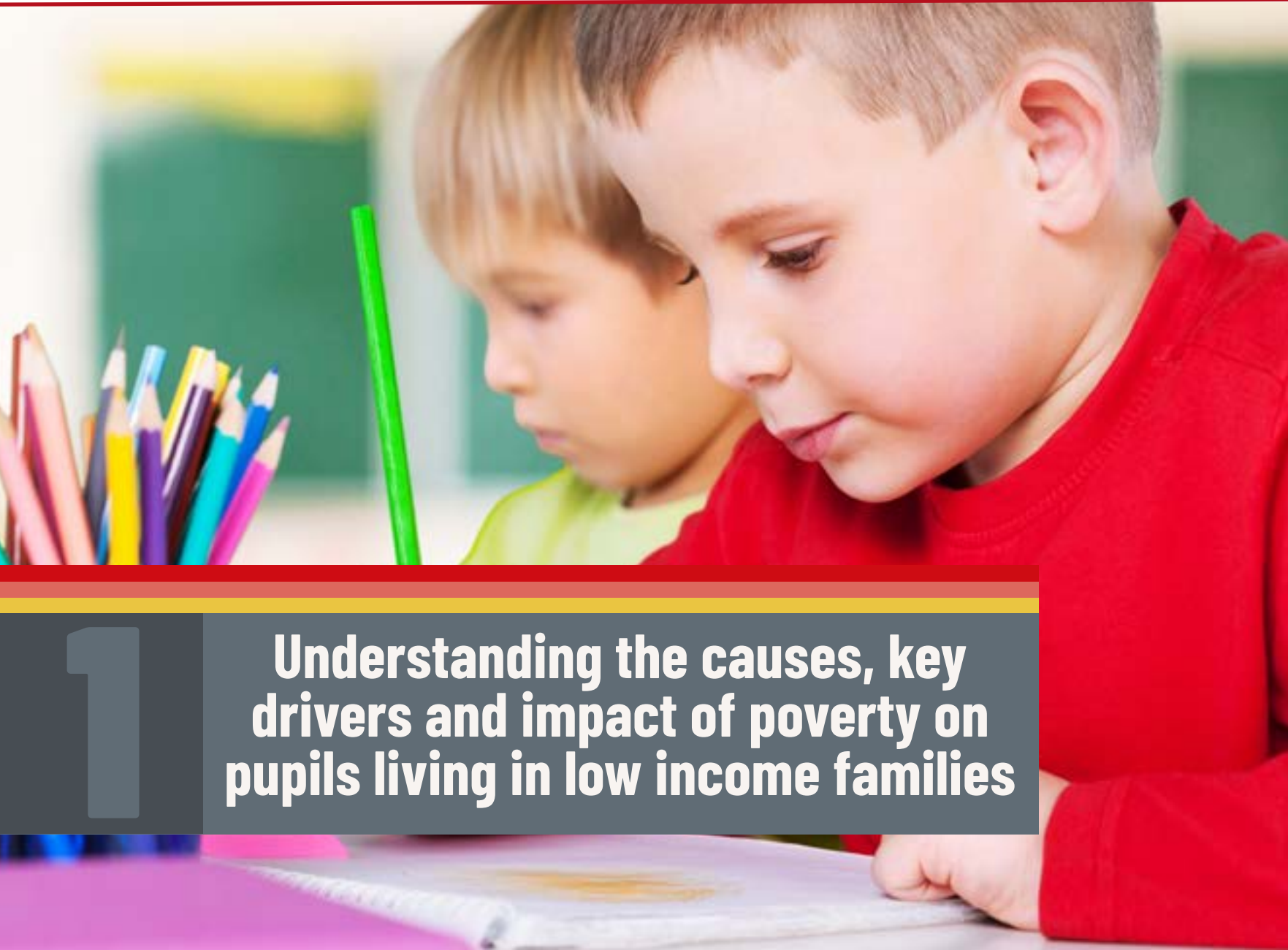
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1

Understanding the causes, key drivers and impact of poverty on pupils living in low income families



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Introduction

All children have a right to education and education in Wales is intended to be free. Not all families are however able to afford some of the additional costs associated with their child's education. Despite this, there are many practical steps that schools are taking, and can take to alleviate the impact that poverty has on children's day to day experiences of school, often at low cost or no cost to the school budget.

A school which considers and takes action to ensure that all children from low income families have an equitable experience in their school life is also a school which is helping to secure the human rights of their pupils under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Several of these rights are particularly relevant in the context of children and their school experience

- The best interests of the child must always be top priority in all decisions and actions that effect children. (Article 3)
- The right to an education which develops a child's personalities, talents and abilities to the fullest possible extent. (Articles 28 and 29)
- The right to the best health possible, this includes the right to adequate nutritious food and clean water. (Article 24)
- The right to survival and development. (Article 6)
- The right to say what they think should happen when adults are making decisions that affect them (Article 12)
- The right to non-discrimination. (Article 2)
- The right to an adequate standard of living that is good enough to meet a child's physical and social needs and support their development. Governments must help families that need support with these things. (Article 27)
- The right to leisure, play, art and cultural activities. (Article 31)



The evidence and examples provided throughout these Guides, in the form of statistics but also through the voices of children, young people, parents/carers and teachers highlight the significant impact that living in poverty can have on children being able to access these rights, from individual progress, to being made to feel different and unable to participate in school trips and enrichment activities. Whilst the focus is in respect of children from low income families, adopting a children's rights approach in schools provides a unified value base which will benefit all pupils.



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National leadership from Welsh Government

Education is central to the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2014 and all 7 Well-being Goals within the Act endorse this, delivered through the New Curriculum for Wales.

‘Prosperity for All’¹, the Welsh Government’s National Strategy sets out a commitment to ‘support young people to make the most of their potential’ through education and to improve the support in schools, to enhance children’s wellbeing with a system that ‘leaves no child behind’. This



endorses one of the key objectives of the Welsh Government’s Child Poverty Strategy² to “Reduce the inequalities which exist in the health, education and economic outcomes of children and families by improving the outcomes of the poorest.”

‘Education in Wales – Our National Mission’ sets out 4 key objectives, one of which is “Strong and inclusive schools committed to excellence, equity and well-being.” These Guides advocate this commitment to equity and well-being and their relationship to excellence.

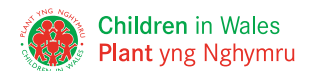
Much is being delivered through a variety of Welsh Government programmes and strategies to address the attainment gap between those children living in poverty and their better off peers. A proportion of schools in Wales have engaged with statutory and voluntary agencies, to deliver programmes that support families living in poverty, from hosting Flying Start provision, to parenting programmes and being part of community hubs.

Pupil Development Grant

The Welsh Government provides funding in the form of the Pupil Development Grant, (PDG)³, previously known as the Pupil Deprivation Grant. The PDG is available to all children and young people in receipt of free school meals (FSM), those in local authority care and eligible learners in Education Other Than At School ((EOTAS) settings. The amount for the Early Years PDG is £700 pa per pupil for 3-5 year olds and £1,150 for pupils in Years 1-11.

The Welsh Government introduced the PDG Access Grant in 2018. This grant can be put towards school uniform, sports kits, equipment such as school bags or stationery and equipment for particular activities, for example design and technology or out of school activities. It is worth £125.00 and available to eligible parents/carers of children starting Reception and Years 3 and 10. Eligible parents/carers of Year 7 pupils can get a £200 grant, reflecting the additional costs of transitioning from primary to secondary school. The grant is linked to eligibility for free school meals, based on household income. Schools are expected to ensure that funding goes directly to the families who need it the most to help with some of the costs of the school day. Local authorities have also been given funding to develop more sustainable long term solutions, which will enable groups such as youth clubs, to bid for kit stores.

A National Assembly for Wales (NAfW) Inquiry into the use of the PDG⁴, recommended that schools ensure the PDG is used to support all eligible pupils, not just low attaining pupils.



It is essential schools make best use of PDG funding alongside exploring other ways in which all children in low income and disadvantaged families are fully supported. Schools cannot of course be solely responsible for alleviating the impact poverty has on children's experiences of education. It is for this reason schools must be encouraged to work in partnership with local authorities, regional consortia, health and social care sectors, and voluntary and community organisations, which can make a real difference in maximising finite resources and delivering joined up solutions.

Impact on Children and Young People

Research undertaken by a children's charity⁵ found that poverty can make children feel excluded, stigmatised and bullied because they cannot afford the same things as their peers. Children are missing out on opportunities to be the best they can be at school, because the day to day costs of school are often unaffordable.

There is a wealth of research evidencing that poverty has a huge impact on children's learning at school and consequent educational attainment levels. Pupils from low income and disadvantaged families are more likely to:

- Have poorer physical health
- Experience mental or emotional health problems
- Have a low sense of well-being and life satisfaction
- Underachieve at school
- Have poorer prospects in work
- Experience social deprivation
- Feel unsafe
- Experience stigma and bullying at school



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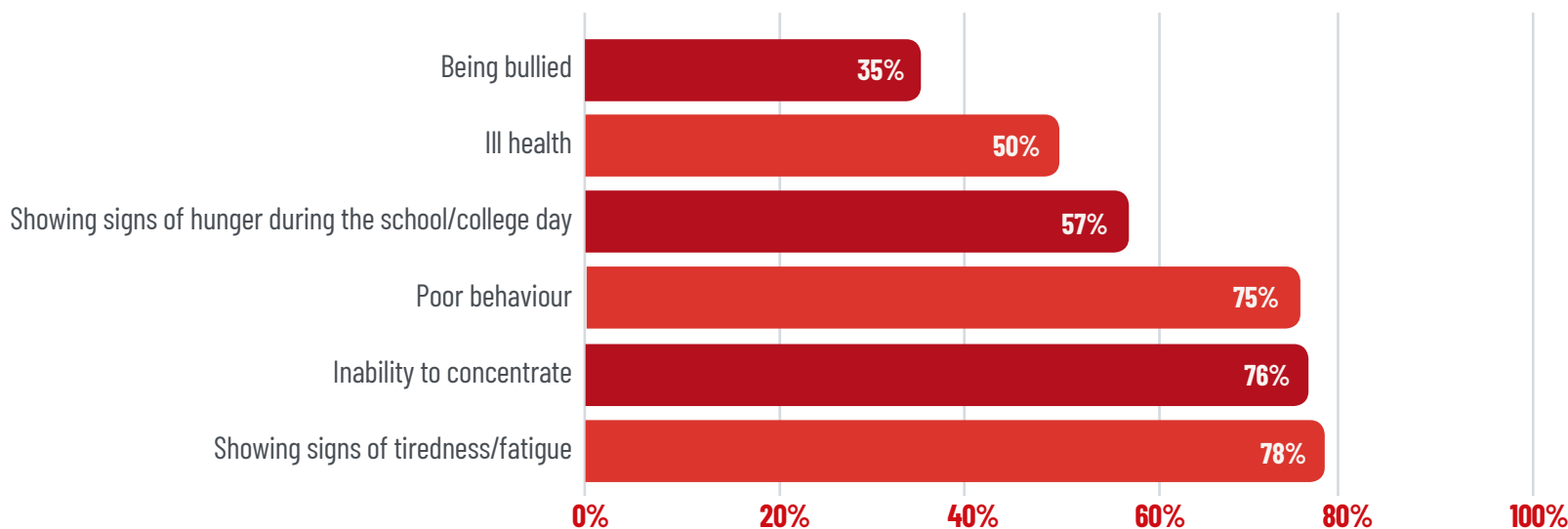
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Research into children's subjective experiences of loneliness⁶ found that 27% of children aged 10-15 receiving free school meals (FSM) reported often being lonely, compared to 18% of non-FSM pupils. A survey carried out by Children in Wales⁷ in 2017 amongst young people, revealed that poverty impacts significantly on their school life. The three top concerns expressed by children and young people were:

- 'Not being able to afford to do school activities after school or at weekends'
- 'Not having the right uniform or games kit' and
- 'Not being able to go on school trips'

A more recent survey undertaken amongst teachers and school leaders from across the UK⁸, found the impact on pupils' learning to be:

Impacts on learning attributable to poverty



Children and young people living in poverty or disadvantage are aware of the costs which impact on their family's finances. Even young children can be aware of financial constraints such as housing costs, household and food costs and know when money is short. Research undertaken by the Child Poverty Action Group⁹ found that children were much more aware of financial matters within families, such as taxes, food banks, childcare costs and benefits than others might be.

Children living in these situations can be subjected to bullying and social exclusion because they don't have the correct school uniform or games kit, cannot participate in things like 'Fun Days' or school trips, or constantly have to borrow basic school equipment, like pens, from their teachers and peers.

Learners' experiences of poverty in school can be affected by school policies, which may unintentionally stigmatise children from low income or disadvantaged families. Examples of these policies are uniform and dress, school meals, trips, behaviour, inclusion, emotional health and wellbeing, respect for equality and diversity, bullying and safeguarding.

Schools can often make a distinction between children whose parents are struggling financially and those whose parents/carers make what are seen as poor lifestyle or financial choices. This can lead to staff feeling frustrated because whatever actions they take in school to help, they cannot substantially change the situation at home. However, there is a great deal that schools can do to help mitigate the impact of poverty and enhance children's wellbeing and experience in schools.

Impact on Children and Young People

Poverty is predominantly associated with low income and these Guides focus on pupils living in low income or disadvantaged households, where disadvantage includes those learners who suffer additional challenges and barriers which can include living in a household where someone has a physical or learning disability, being from some BAME or migrant background, or living in poor housing conditions. Disadvantage can also include a lack of social opportunities, experiencing food or fuel insecurity and generally having a poor quality of life. Lack of economic, cultural and social capital will all impact on children's education, life chances and outcomes.

The experience of poverty for some young people is starkly illustrated in the following table. A group of young people from Caerphilly Youth Forum held a workshop on the experiences of poverty in schools and came up with the following comparison on the school day between pupils from low income families and those from more affluent backgrounds

Each day at school, children from low income or disadvantaged families face practical challenges that they have to overcome or negotiate. These include:

- Having the right clothes for school
- Travelling to school and transport costs
- Having the right resources and equipment for lessons
- Stigma and isolation
- Affording school trips
- Food and the ability to pay for it
- Extra-curricular activities
- Home learning



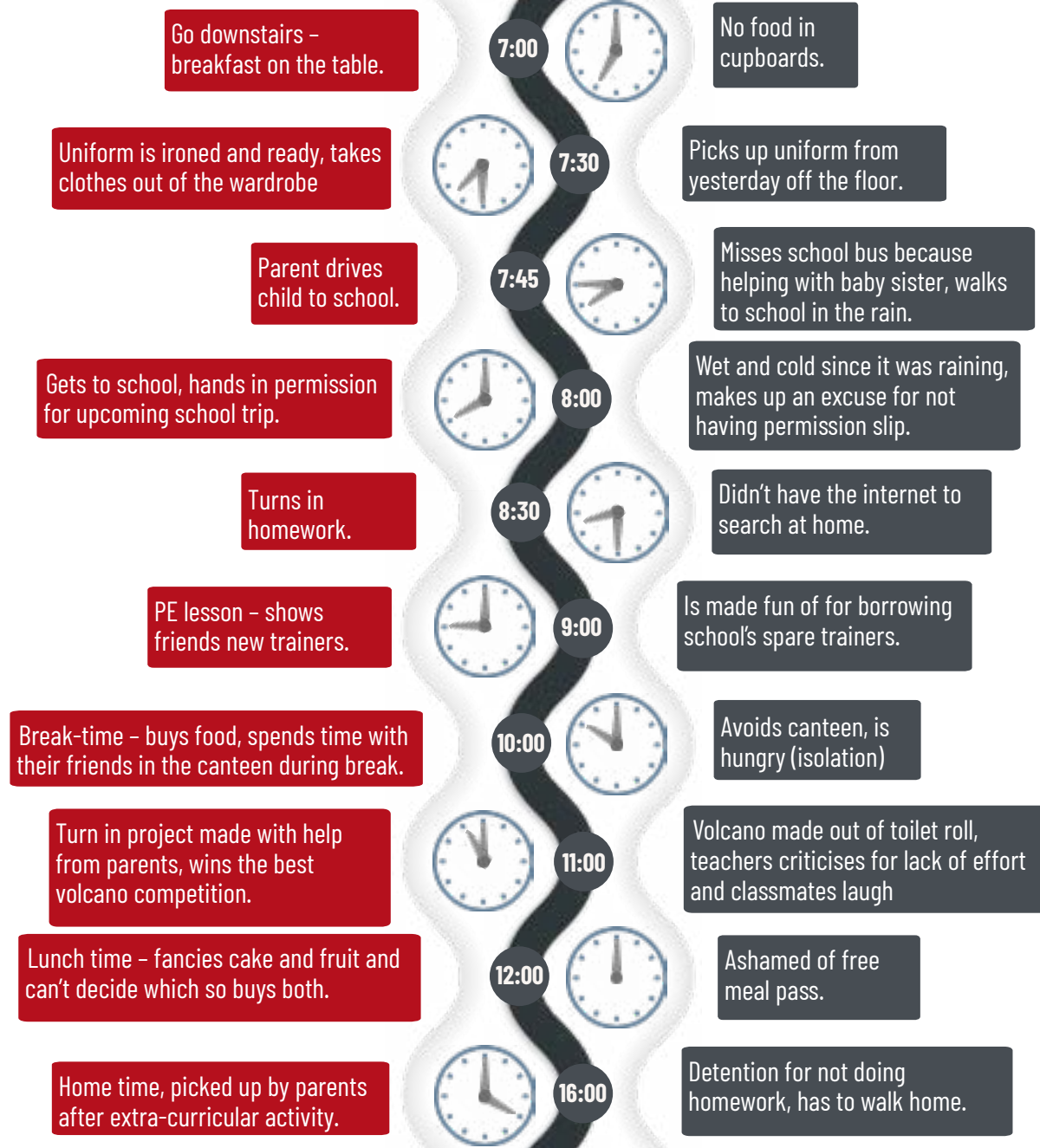
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My School Day – **Affluence** and **Poverty** Perspectives

More recently there has been increased activity in relation to sensitively asking children to share their experiences and views about child poverty, including food insecurity. There are good examples of this from across the UK¹⁰ and Scotland¹¹. This work has highlighted how children are more than able to come up with practical new approaches and suggested ways they can best be supported. There are increasing examples of children exercising their right to give their views on matters that affect them and for these views to be considered. Through school councils and other participatory arrangements, both schools and their pupils will benefit from hearing the ideas and perspectives of children, many of whom will be negatively affected by poverty.





Prevalence of child poverty in Wales

The key indicator of child poverty is the percentage of children living in households below 60% of the median UK household income (After Housing Costs). Income matters as it is a key resource which enables households to meet their everyday needs. The most recent statistics (2018) show that 29% of children in Wales are living in households in relative poverty and 26% of those children live in Absolute Low Income households, where their income is below a necessary level to maintain basic living standards (food, shelter, housing). Independent projections indicate this number is likely to grow over the coming years.

Levels of child poverty in parts of Wales are some of the highest in the UK and its impact on children's educational attainment is well documented. At Foundation Phase, the attainment gap between children entitled to free school meals and those who were not was 14.3% in 2016, which has significantly been falling over the last 10 years. However, the gap widens considerably when children reach Key Stage 4 and in 2016 stood at 32%, a figure which has remain relatively steady during the same time period. Data published by Welsh Government found that in 2018 pupils who were eligible for free school meals were between two and a half and four times less likely to achieve an age-standardised score above 115 in each of the national tests conducted by schools¹²

There has been a growing focus on poverty in Wales at cross-government level and within education, which has increased our understanding of both the complexity of poverty in Wales and its impact on pupils across different geographical locations. In a survey of teachers undertaken by the National Education Union in schools across England, Wales and Northern Ireland, 60% of respondents thought that the extent of poverty in their schools and its effect on low income pupils has got worse since 2015.

There is no causal link between poverty, child abuse and neglect.¹³ However, if school staff are concerned that a child is being neglected, they should speak to the school's designated safeguarding officer.



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Drivers of Poverty

The drivers of poverty in Wales comprise a wide range of structural, household and individual-level factors, which include:

- Levels of worklessness
- Impact of welfare reform changes
- Insecure employment
- Low wages
- Poor economic conditions
- Increased cost of living
- Poor education and skills
- Parental qualification
- Family stability
- Housing affordability and conditions
- Poor health

Poverty is complex, not simply a matter of low income and this is more so in Wales than in other parts of the UK. It is a structural problem with a lack of income at its core. It is dynamic as those people living in poverty this year are not necessarily the same group of people who will be living in poverty next year. Children most likely to be affected by poverty are those living in some minority ethnic families; in families with a disabled parent or child; in lone parent household; in a family with three or more children and living in social rented or insecure accommodation.

One of the perpetual myths is work is automatically the best way out of poverty, but unfortunately does not hold true in the current economic climate in Wales. An analysis by a UK Think Tank¹⁴ highlighted that across the UK, 57% of people in poverty are children or working-age adults living in a household where someone is in paid work, up from 35% in 1994-95. They forecast an increase of more than 50% in the proportion of children living in poverty in the UK by 2020/21.

There are a growing number of children in poverty from working families where one or both parents/carers are in low paid employment and often fall just outside the threshold for their children to be eligible for additional financial support to help with the cost of school, such as free school meals entitlement and so fall between the cracks of the very systems that should be in place to support them.



Poverty and Children's Rights

The UNCRC is based on three principles - participation, protection and provision. Learners from a low income or disadvantaged family can face additional barriers accessing their rights and may not be able to participate fully in the life of the school. Children's rights should be at the core of whole school planning and delivery. The Children's Commissioner for Wales has published 'A Children's Rights Approach for Education in Wales'.¹⁵ A Children's Rights Approach is a principled and practical framework for working with all children, grounded in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The principles of a Children's Rights Approach are:

- Embedding children's rights
- Equality and Non-discrimination
- Empowering children
- Participation
- Accountability

The framework and the document has been designed for schools in Wales. It focuses on each principle individually and gives practical advice on how it can be put into practice.

The Unicef initiative, Rights Respecting Schools¹⁶ operates an award system and provides resources and training for school staff on children's rights. The scheme is being delivered across Wales but has been signed up to by only 26% of schools in Wales, 420 out of a total of 1,617 schools.



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Poverty and Health

Research undertaken by the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health¹⁷ found that poverty is a serious issue for children's health. More than two thirds of doctors reported that ill-health in children was 'very much' attributed to poverty. The report identified that family stress, food insecurity and issues with poor housing conditions or homelessness all negatively impacted on children's health.

The inability to afford healthy food often results in children becoming overweight or obese, with a lack of open spaces in poorer areas, for children to play and exercise. Cold, damp or overcrowded housing will make illnesses such as asthma or chest infections much more common and ongoing illnesses more difficult to manage. The situation is exacerbated for families with a disabled child.

Period Poverty

According to research girls living in low income or disadvantaged families risk missing days of education, stigma and humiliation during their period.¹⁸ The Welsh Government's Period Dignity Grant for schools provides funding for local authorities to buy menstrual products to be placed in all schools in Wales, including primary schools. The funding can be used to buy sanitary products, underwear, dispensers and bins. Schools can ensure that they meet the needs of their female learners by undertaking a survey of what would work best within the schools, so that girls feel comfortable in where dispensers and bins are placed. The misinformation and stigma around periods can be addressed within the classroom with both male and female pupils, and there are many schools already taking this approach.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are stressful events that occur in childhood which can have a lifelong impact on

health and behaviour. There are many ACEs that children can experience and include:

- domestic violence
- parental abandonment through separation or divorce
- a parent with a mental health condition
- being the victim of abuse (physical, sexual and/or emotional)
- being the victim of neglect (physical and emotional)
- having a member of the household in prison
- growing up in a household in which there are adults experiencing alcohol and drug use problems

Those who have experienced 4 or more of these are likely to experience poorer physical and mental health and poorer life outcomes. They are more likely to develop problematic drug use, mental health problems, heart or circulatory disease and to use alcohol heavily.

Research has shown that having a relationship with one trusted adult during childhood can mitigate the negative impacts of ACEs. Poverty is not caused by ACEs, and nor does having experienced ACEs result in poverty; ACEs occur across social divides. However, here is a significant proportion of families with multiple ACEs who experience poverty. And when poverty and ACEs coincide they become conflated. When a child lives with ACEs, and also lives in poverty, it can lead to life-long effects, that are devastating to children in childhood, and which continue into adulthood.



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What schools can do

Taking a Whole School Approach to tackling the Price of Poverty

Schools are facing many challenges with increased costs putting pressure on their budgets but despite this, many schools are doing as much as they can to alleviate the impact of poverty on children from low income or disadvantaged families.

It is important that everyone within the school environment; management, teachers and support staff are committed to promoting equity for all learners and to help ameliorate the effect of poverty on the school day. A whole-school approach involves all parts of the school working together and being fully engaged and committed to make positive change. It requires partnership working between governors, senior leaders, teachers and all school staff, as well as parents, carers and the wider community.

Early evidence from programmes and actions taken by schools to address the barriers children from low income backgrounds face are demonstrating some success in parts of Wales and other parts of the UK. For example, schools who have implemented a poverty proofing programme found improvements in pupil progress, behaviour, attendance and uptake of free school meals and pupil wellbeing.

Many of the issues and recommendations in this and the other Guides in this series, reflect those contained in Estyn's report on the impact school has on learners' health and wellbeing' published in June 2019.¹⁹

Some of the actions schools could take are:

- Appoint an Equity Champion from amongst school staff, who can:
 - ▶ Recognise which pupils are from low income or disadvantaged families
 - ▶ Monitor and track which pupils are or are not receiving free school meals, and who should be
 - ▶ Engage with parents/carers in a positive and sensitive way, to ensure they are aware of and able to apply for any benefits or grants they may be entitled to.
 - ▶ Encourage parents/carers to have a voice in their child's education by joining the Parent Council or PTA.
 - ▶ Have a list of organisations/contacts where parents/carers can get additional help for specific problems, e.g. debt advice or food banks.
 - ▶ Develop an action plan to address barriers to school participation and which seeks to reduce all costs for families
- Appoint an Equity Ambassador from amongst the learners in school, who can be supported by school staff to develop a role that benefits all learners and informs staff of the barriers to be addressed. Ideally this should be a learner who has personal experience of what it is like to live in a low-income family.
- Take a Whole School Approach by raising awareness amongst all school staff of the signs of poverty and being observant, to identify which children show signs of being affected by their situation.



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- Identify which policies and practices unintentionally stigmatise or impact on children from families living in poverty and identify where changes can be made.
- Involve children and young people to find out what barriers and challenges may be faced in navigating the school day, for someone from a low income family.
- Implement low or no-cost changes that make a difference.
- Consider the early evidence from initiatives in other parts of the UK, demonstrating that attainment and attendance levels can be improved by different measures.
- Increase engagement and commitment from a range of stakeholders at regional, local authority and community levels.

The Children’s Commissioner for Wales has produced a ‘Check with Ceri’ Resource²⁰ which could help schools take forward some of the actions listed above. This free resource helps schools to work with children, young people and school staff to think about; the costs of the school day, how they could affect families living in poverty, what is working well and how to make a plan for what could be improved.

Endnotes

- 1 [‘Prosperity for All – The National Strategy’ – Welsh Government, 2017](#)
- 2 [Child Poverty Strategy for Wales, Welsh Government 2015](#)
- 3 [Next Steps for the PDG, National Assembly for Wales, 2018](#)
- 4 [‘On the Money – Targeted funding to improve educational outcomes’, NAFW Children, Young People and Education Committee, 2018](#)
- 5 [At what cost? Exposing the impact of poverty on school life, The Children Society, 2015](#)
- 6 [Loneliness in Childhood, The Children’s Society, 2019](#)
- 7 [Child and Family Poverty Survey Report 2018, Children in Wales, 2018](#)
- 8 [The State of Education – Child Poverty, National Education Union, April 2019](#)
- 9 [Cost of the School Day, Child Poverty Action Group \(2015\)](#)
- 10 [Children’s Future Food Inquiry, Food Foundation, 2019](#)
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- 14 [Living Standards, poverty and inequality in the UK 2018, Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2018](#)
- 15 [The Right Way – A Children’s Rights Approach for Education in Wales, Children’s Commissioner for Wales](#)
- 16 [Rights Respecting Schools - Unicef](#)
- 17 [Poverty and Child Health – Views from the frontline, CPAG and RCPCH, 2017](#)
- 18 [Research on period poverty and stigma, Plan International, 2017](#)
- 19 [Healthy and happy – school impact on pupils’ health and wellbeing, Estyn 2019](#)
- 20 [Children’s Commissioner for Wales – Resources 2019](#)

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2

School Uniform and Clothing – “It’s not just about learning”



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Introduction

The Welsh Government has issued new Statutory Guidance for school governing bodies on school uniforms and appearance policies which covers issues of affordability and availability of uniform items.¹ Although there is no legislation in Wales specifically covering the wearing of school uniform, there are clear expectations placed on all schools to have a school uniform policy in place which takes into consideration the rights, needs and concerns of children from low income and disadvantaged backgrounds, which does not discriminate on any grounds. Schools must have regard to the statutory guidance when developing, implementing or changing a school uniform and appearance policy, and should consider equality issues and consult widely with pupils, parents and others.


The Problem

Affordability

Children and young people living in low income families do face substantial barriers to learning when their families are not able to afford the costs of a school uniform. Although school uniforms offer many positives, including helping to minimise visible differences and instill a sense of identity, pride and belonging amongst learners, it still presents a significant cost for families, particularly where there are two or more children in the same or in different schools.

School uniform is a visible indicator of income poverty and a lack of the correct items can result in adverse consequences for pupils, particularly in schools with a strict enforcement policy. Replacing worn or outgrown items unexpectedly during the school year can be difficult if parents don't have access to sufficient funds. A lack of multiple school uniform items can also prove challenging. It may be that a child arrives at school without the correct uniform because they only have one jumper/trousers/jacket and if that is in the wash or damaged, there may be no spare item for them to wear.

A survey of teachers by the National Education Union in 2019 found there was a significant increase in the visibility of child poverty in their school/college.



*"Children coming to school with holes in their shoes or cheap shoes which are not weather proof. Children attending school with no coats, no socks and without other essential items of clothing."*²











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The average cost of a primary school uniform in Wales is around **£110** and **£150** for secondary schools (including sports kit). Research undertaken by the Children's Commissioner for Wales found the following examples of school uniform costs in Wales³:

Uniform Item	Examples of school shop cost	Examples of supermarket cost
 Shirts x 5	£40.00	£7.50
 Jumpers x 2	£25.00	£12.00
 Trousers x 2	£35.50	£10.00
 Tie	£4.00	£4.00
 PE Kit socks	£5.75	£5.75
 PE Kit outdoor top	£17.00	£4.00 (pack of 2)
 PE Kit shorts	£10.00	£6.00
 PE Kit Polo shirt	£12.75	£3.50 (pack of 2)
Total:	£150.00	£52.75

The Commissioner's office, on speaking to pupils and parents found that the cost of school uniforms was a consistent concern raised, particularly where schools require expensive compulsory items of clothing such as logoed items, which can only be bought through the school or at specialist school uniform shop. For low-income families where there are 2 or more children in a family, these costs can become especially challenging.

A survey of teachers⁴ in 2016, found that **57%** of teachers had seen pupils who were unable to afford uniform, **84%** has seen pupils who had clothes that were damaged or frayed and **59%** had seen uniforms given or lent by the school. In a more recent UK survey in early 2019⁵, **71%** of school leaders who responded, thought that there had been an increase in the number of pupils affected by poverty and there was an increase in the levels of disadvantage being seen, especially over recent years. Of those surveyed, **91%** of schools reported having provided items of clothing for pupils and **47%** said the school had washed items of clothing for children.

Many schools make every effort to help children whose families cannot afford to buy or replace a school uniform. These can range from teachers giving clothes that their own children have grown out of, or keeping spare uniform and sports kit that learners can borrow, to organising end of term 'pre-loved' uniform swaps, sales or pop-up shops. As well as reducing the costs for parents, such schemes can also positively contribute to the broader environmental agenda, by helping to avoid clothing waste, promoting the concept of recycling and encouraging the re-use of items which may otherwise be disposed of. Any actions taken by schools to help learners to access a school uniform should always be done in a sensitive, non-stigmatising and

dignified way. Spare PE kits should be in a presentable condition, washed after each use and hung up. No child wants to put on clothes that have been in the back of the PE cupboard and come out creased and smelly.

PDG-Access

The Welsh Government provides funding through the Pupil Development Grant-Access Fund to parents of pupils eligible for free school meals starting Reception and Years 3, 7 and 10. Through this scheme, £125 is available for children entering Reception, Years 3 and 10, with an additional £75 available for pupils entering Year 7, to account for the increased costs of transitioning from primary to secondary school.

The grant is available to all families whose children receive free school meals and to all Looked After Children. As well as school uniforms, the grant can be used for sports kits, equipment such as school bags or stationery, and equipment for particular activities, e.g. design and technology. It can also be used for out of school activities. Local authorities are also able to give grants to youth or community groups who can bid for a 'kit store', for sports clothing and equipment.

Children, whose parents work in low paid jobs and fall just short of the free school meals eligibility criteria may be particularly affected, as will parents with children in school years outside the PDG-Access criteria. Because of this, all schools should fully ensure that when setting or revising their school uniform policy that they take into account the affordability barriers all children may face and ensure that their policy is fully inclusive.

Impact on Children and Young People

For children living in families who struggle to afford a school uniform, school can be a source of worry and anxiety. Learners may feel embarrassed and worried about being ridiculed or bullied, and pitied by their peers or school staff. They may be anxious about being sent home to change, knowing that they have nothing at home to change into. These can be the unintended consequences of a strict school uniform policy.

"I had to give a girl a winter coat; she had suffered with bronchitis and repeated chest infections last winter. I did not realise she had no winter coat until I saw her playing outside." (NASUWT)

"If you don't have a jumper on, you have to do the walk of shame to sit at the front."

"I'm one of 5, it would cost my Mam £1000 a year to buy us uniforms ... In our school we have to have trousers with the school logo on that cost £60, so my mam would buy in Tesco and sew a badge on and we'd get sent home for that."

Taking a whole school approach, and applying a consistent response across the school to infringements of school uniform policy and how they are dealt with, will reduce fear and stress amongst students who are unable to abide the uniform policy, due to lack of household income.



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What schools can do

There is much that schools can do to help lift the barriers for children from low income or disadvantages families in respect of the cost of school uniforms and sportswear. Some schools are helping by purchasing washing machines to wash school uniforms, subsidising items of clothing, or offering loan or recycling schemes for uniforms in schools.

For example, recruit an 'Equity Champion' from amongst existing school staff whose role is to identify, monitor and support learners from low income or disadvantaged families, and engage with their parents/carers in a positive and sensitive manner.

School governors should be aware of and ensure that schools adhere to the new Welsh Government Statutory Guidance on School Uniforms¹ published in July 2019 which focuses on:

- ensuring that due regard is given to securing equality of treatment between pupils of different sexes and genders; pupils from different ethnic and religious backgrounds and; disabled pupils in relation to school uniform and appearance policies;
- cost and affordability;

- practical considerations involved in introducing or changing school uniform and appearance policies;
- consultation with parents, pupils and the community.

Changes to the previous Guidance have been introduced;

- School governing bodies should have regard to the affordability, access and availability of uniform items when setting their school uniform and appearance policy.
- Schools' uniform policies should not dictate different items of clothing on the basis of sex/gender.
- School governing bodies should have a sensible, flexible approach to uniform items to account for extreme weather conditions.

School governors should consider the following:

- Whether the school logo is essential to have on items of uniform and whether the uniform colours are sufficient to identify the school and create a sense of community.
- How much flexibility is there in adhering to the uniform and how uniform infringements are handled by staff.



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Some of the actions schools could take are:

Ensuring that eligible parents of children in receipt of free school meals are made aware of the PDG-Access. Schools should engage with parents and make the grant widely known through the school website or Facebook pages, newsletters, school prospectus and other media. Operate recycling or pre-loved uniform schemes whereby former and current pupils who have outgrown items of clothing still in good condition can be donated for use by other pupils or bought for a nominal fee. Ensure that such schemes are applied in a sensitive and non-stigmatising matter. Clothes should always be clean and in good condition.

Unclaimed lost property could be recycled through one of these schemes to benefit low income families

- Financial assistance or pre-loved uniform schemes which may be available should be handled sensitively by dedicated staff.
- Carry out an audit on the impact of the current school uniform policy on all children, and especially those from low income and disadvantaged backgrounds. Review and refresh school uniform policy accordingly
- Consider whether branding of school uniform and sports kits is really necessary. If yes, consider any additional costs of this for parents and how financial support may be provided. Ensure that the school policy complies with the new Statutory Guidance on school uniforms.

- Survey parents and pupils about what they think about the school uniform and its cost.
- Ensure parents are aware of more affordable options. For instance, organising regular uniform 'swap shops', working with local charity shops, and giving information in the school prospectus, on its website or Facebook page.
- Consider whether low income families could pay in instalments. Some schools work with credit unions to help with the costs of school uniform.
- Think about different approaches to non-compliance with school policy. If pupils are not complying with the school uniform policy, the first approach should be to check if everything is OK and ask why, rather than taking a punitive approach or sending pupils home to change.
- School staff who have concerns regarding a child's school uniform being ill-fitting or worn could liaise with the schools Equity Champion to sensitively help ensure that parents are aware of any help available.
- Rewards linked to the consistent wearing of school uniform can be stigmatising for children living in poverty. These should be avoided
- Use art and craft lessons to make items that can be sold at school events to raise funds.



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Non-Uniform (see also Guide 4)

- Consider which children are often absent on non-uniform days and why, and consider those who attend school in their usual uniform because they ‘forgot’ it was a non-uniform day.
- Think about other ways to raise money for charities or school funds that doesn’t require families to contribute financially, for instance an odd socks day.
- Place collection buckets around the school for pupils to place their donations in, rather than a teacher collecting in the money. This can reduce stigma and encourage participation by all children in fundraising events.

The Children’s Commissioner’s Office has produced a series of Resources⁶ which could help schools take forward some of the actions listed above. These include the Revolve resource which can help schools explore and plan a recycling scheme with their pupils and staff.

Practice Examples

1. Citizen’s Advice Denbighshire has worked with schools across the county, with their branches in Denbigh, Rhyl and Ruthin acting as repositories for recycling school uniforms. Anyone can donate unwanted/outgrown uniforms in good condition. It is then washed, pressed and packaged to be sold or donated at pop up swap shops in the community.
2. Three mums set up a Facebook page called Cardiff and Vale and Barry school uniform donation⁷ and have been instrumental in working with schools across South Wales to set up donation and exchange schemes.
3. The PTA of a school in East Sussex has set up a Pop Up Uniform Shop⁸ selling good quality 2nd hand uniforms, with the profits being ploughed back into the school.

Endnotes

- 1 [Statutory Guidance for school governing bodies on uniform and appearance, Welsh Government, 2019](#)
- 2 [The State of Education – Child Poverty, National Education Union, 2019](#)
- 3 [A Charter for Change: Protecting Welsh Children from the impact of poverty, Children’s Commissioner for Wales, 2019](#)
- 4 [The impact of financial pressures on children and young people, NASUWT, 2016](#)
- 5 [ASCL Survey March 2019](#)
- 6 [A Charter for Change : Resources](#)
- 7 [Cardiff and Vale and Barry school uniform donation](#)
- 8 [Frewen College Pop Up Uniform Shop](#)



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3

Food and Hunger



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Introduction

All children have the right to adequate nutritious food and clean water (Article 24, UNCRC). Children's relationship with food has been a growing area of research over many years, but there has been little examination of the lived experiences of children and young people living in poverty until more recently. Studies undertaken by food experts, education unions and the Children's Commissioner for Wales have revealed a startling and worrying trend of children being hungry at school, some even resorting to stealing food, borrowing money from friends or going without. In the absence of additional support to help address food insecurity, many children are unlikely to progress well through school and achieve good qualifications or life outcomes.

The aim of this guide is to identify those children who need additional help because of food insecurity and hunger, and consider ways in which schools can best support them.



The problem

Food insecurity

For many families in Wales food insecurity is a day to day reality, due largely to a lack of adequate income and the rising cost of living. In 2018/19 food banks in Wales, run by the Trussell Trust, gave out over 113,373 three-day emergency food parcels, of which 40,793 went to children, which is an increase of nearly 15% on the 2017/18 figures¹. The Children's Future Food Inquiry reported that 160,000 children in Wales are living in families for whom a healthy diet is increasingly unaffordable². This figure represents the 20% poorest children living in households that would have to spend more than 36% of disposable household income (after paying for their housing) on food in order to afford the UK Government's Eatwell Guide diet.

The South Wales Food Poverty Alliance³, reported that 26% of 16-34 year olds surveyed in Wales ran out of food in the past year. The report also estimates that, because of increases in food prices, the poorest households in the UK paid an extra £130 for food and fuel in the last year. One of the net results of this is an increase in unhealthy weight, including obesity amongst children, whose parents/carers simply cannot afford to buy healthy food.

Food insecurity causes stress and anxiety in families which can bring about depression in both parents/carers and children; aggressive behaviour in some children, and a sense of despair amongst families who struggle to give their children the best start in life.⁴ Once children begin school, for those trapped in poverty, the food they eat during the school day is particularly important as the food at home may be insufficient or inadequate to achieve a healthy diet.

The NHS Healthy Start scheme for low income families helps expectant mothers, new parents and children up to the age of 4, to eat more healthily. It provides free vouchers to buy milk, vitamin supplements and fresh or frozen fruit and vegetables for families on welfare benefits. According to one food charity⁵, in some areas of Wales, the uptake of the scheme is very low at around 55% and more needs to be done to promote the scheme, which is something that schools and nurseries could be involved in.

Free School Meals (FSM)

Local authorities are required to provide a free school lunch for eligible pupils, commonly referred to as a free school meal. Many local authorities choose to fulfil their obligation to provide eligible pupils with a free school lunch by providing a daily allowance to enable eligible pupils to get their lunches, particularly where a cafeteria system is in operation. The daily allowance tends to be based on the 'meal of the day' option, which should enable pupils to have a wholesome hot meal.

Children arriving at school hungry will not be ready to learn and will be reliant on the food they can access during the course of the school day, especially school meals. In most, but not all secondary schools, pupils entitled to free school meals are able to spend the daily allowance they are given to purchase a free school lunch at morning break. However, if the school does not allow this, they may be unlikely to have sufficient money to buy healthy snacks at break-time and if hungry, may spend most of the morning unable to concentrate in class, watching the clock count down to their lunch break. Conversely, where a proportion of the daily allowance has already been spent at morning break, it is unlikely the child will have enough left with which to buy the 'meal of the day' for lunch.



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Lunch breaks in secondary schools often have morning and lunch breaks which are much later in the school day than in primary schools. Long queues at lunchtime, lack of time and insufficient healthy options often adds to the stress and anxiety of not having enough to eat for many young people.

Not all pupils entitled to free school meals take them up and this can be for a variety of reasons, including stigma or fear of bullying; not being able to sit with their friends who have a packed lunch; long queues; food choices or shame and embarrassment by their parents/carers. They may choose instead to send their children to school with a packed lunch, which could simply be a packet of crisps and a piece of fruit if available. A study⁶ into rural communities has suggested that in smaller communities in North Wales, the free school meal stigma is more evident because of 'rural pride'. Some parents/carers working multiple jobs may refuse to take up their entitlement to avoid being singled out as a family who need extra financial help.



According to Welsh Government statistics for the year 2017/18 there were 74,568 children entitled to free school meals. On the school census day in January 2018, 56,881 pupils took up their entitlement, leaving 17,687 of those did not claim their entitlement (23.7%)⁷.

Schools have a legal duty to protect the identity of pupils who receive free school meals. Whilst cashless systems to pay for meals have had a positive impact in helping to reduce any stigma, embarrassment or shame can still prevent parents/carers from claiming their children's free school meal entitlement. This is particularly true in smaller rural communities where people can live in close proximity. Schools should always be mindful of any stigma associated with free school meals and take positive steps to mitigate against any negative effects.

Research undertaken by the Children's Commissioner for Wales⁸ revealed that children, young people and parents/carers reported that their level of income did not meet the eligibility criteria for free school meals but still struggled to provide money for school lunches.

Eligibility for free school meals is determined by access to certain benefits and support payments. Universal Credit is gradually replacing a range of benefits, covering families both in and out of work. The introduction of Universal Credit will affect low income and disadvantaged families. On 1 April 2019 the Welsh Government introduced an annualised net earned income threshold of £7,400 for Universal Credit claimants who wish to claim free school meals for their children. Because of this, a number of children and young people could have lost their eligibility for free school meals. "Transitional protection" was introduced to ensure that these children and young people could continue to receive free school meals for a limited period of time, until the end of the rollout of Universal Credit (in December 2023) and thereafter to the end of the child or young person's school phase (primary

or secondary). The transitional protection measures mean that learners eligible for free school meals when the criteria were changed, or any new claimants who gain free school meals during the rollout of Universal Credit, are protected against losing free school meals whilst Universal Credit is rolled out across Wales, even if their eligibility changes. Transitional protection is not extended to claimants who are not on Universal Credit or legacy benefits and are therefore unaffected by the change in free school meals eligibility criteria.

Schools are being asked to separately record, on the annual school census, pupils who are eligible for free school meals because of the benefits/support payments their parents receive, and those who are transitionally protected.

Children currently living in poverty who are not entitled to free school meals because their parents/carers are in low-paid employment continue to struggle to pay for school meals, particularly where there is more than one child in the family. This is borne out by the results from a survey undertaken by the National Education Union⁹, where over 50% of respondents felt that not enough children were eligible for free school meals, whose parents/carers cannot afford the cost of school meals. Parents/carers who are stressed by money worries are also less able to meet their children's emotional and physical needs. Local authorities and school governing bodies have the power to operate flexible charging for school meals. This can support lower income families who do not qualify for free school meals. Where flexible charging is used, local authorities and schools can implement price promotions to support lower income families and help increase the take-up of school meals.¹⁰



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Holiday Hunger

Families who rely on free school meals during term time often find it challenging to be able to feed their children for the 13 weeks of school holidays during the year. A Welsh think tank¹¹ estimate that at least 65,000 children were at risk of holiday hunger in Wales, for 170 days of the year, because pupils cannot access free school meals during school holidays.

The Welsh Government's School Holiday Enrichment Programme (SHEP)¹², administered through the Welsh Local Government Association, is a schools-based programme that provides healthy meals, food and nutrition education, physical activity and enrichment sessions to children in areas of social deprivation during the summer holidays. Together with local authorities and health professionals' the programme delivers 'Food and Fun' schemes across Wales and has recently been expanded to cover more local authorities. Other schemes are run by charitable organisations, such as churches and community groups.

School Breakfasts

Nearly all schools will have some experience of children arriving at school without having eaten breakfast, and teachers may assume that they were perhaps in a rush not to be late for the start of the school day or that their parents/carers did not ensure they had eaten before leaving their house. Learners who eat breakfast are up to twice as likely to do well in school as those who do not, according to the biggest study of its kind. Researchers at Cardiff University found a "significant link" between eating breakfast and performing above average on teacher assessment scores¹³. There was also a strong link between eating a healthy breakfast – such as cereal, bread, dairy or fruit – and doing well at school.

All children who go to a maintained primary school can have a free healthy breakfast at school, if their school provides a free breakfast scheme. Approximately 82% of primary schools provide free healthy breakfasts in Wales (funded by the Welsh Government through local authorities) and nearly 50% of secondary schools provide breakfast clubs.¹⁴ For children from low income backgrounds, having a healthy breakfast helps improve their concentration as well as their overall health.



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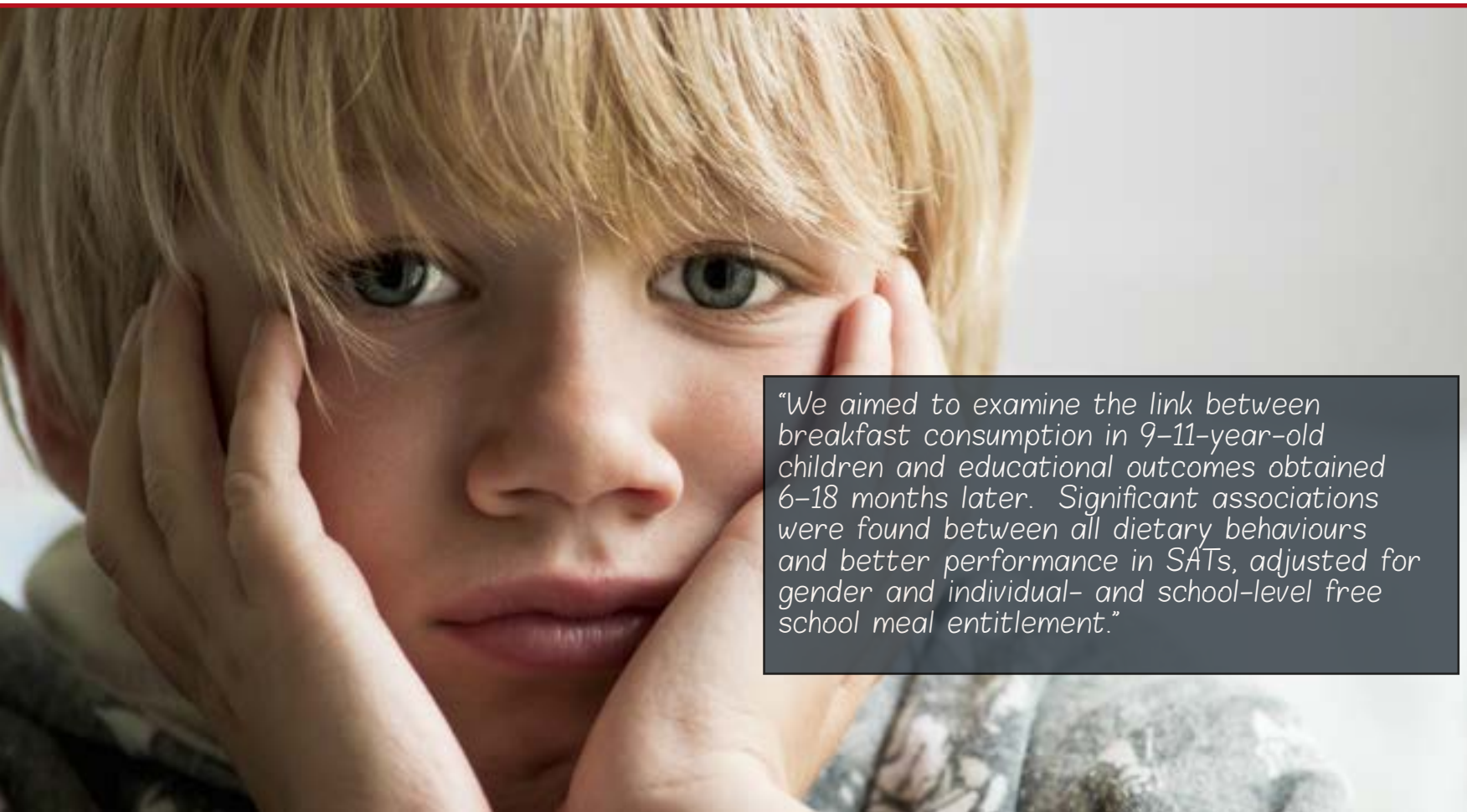
Impact on Children and Young People

It has been proven that hunger affects both children's learning and their behaviour. Hungry children can't concentrate, so learning is impaired. Hungry children become more irritable and stressed, often impacting negatively on their behaviour.

The vast majority (81%) of teachers say hungry children are unable to concentrate, while 75% say hungry children are more lethargic and 47% say hungry children are unable to learn¹⁵. These effects could significantly influence a child's ability to reach their full potential at school.

Research undertaken by Cardiff University¹⁶ in 2016 found significant positive associations between breakfast consumption and educational performance:

A survey of GPs¹⁷ reported in 2017 that more than 3 in 5 respondents said that food insecurity contributes 'very much' to the ill health of children they see, and a further quarter said that it contributes 'somewhat'.



"We aimed to examine the link between breakfast consumption in 9–11-year-old children and educational outcomes obtained 6–18 months later. Significant associations were found between all dietary behaviours and better performance in SATs, adjusted for gender and individual- and school-level free school meal entitlement."



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The Children's Future Food Inquiry¹⁸ surveyed young people about the impact that poverty has on their education. The children told the Inquiry about poor quality of food offered by schools, the inadequacy of the portion sizes and that the free school meal entitlement is not enough to buy a full meal. Young people taking part in the Inquiry had this to say about food in schools:

"The £2.30 young people on free school meals get for the day often doesn't cover a hot meal."

'Sometimes if you feel hungry it can make you feel sick and you can pass out in lessons. PE is particularly difficult if you are hungry.'

'If you don't eat enough at lunch it makes you tired, it messes with your brain as you can't reach your full potential as you've not been fed.'

'If you were on free school dinners and the prices kept going up there would be less you could get for your money. You could get a panini but it wasn't enough to keep you full during the school day.'

"I have two friends at school who never have breakfast or lunch. Their parents work so they don't get free school meals. They never have money to buy lunch. They are both always hungry. I take extra food every day for them. We don't talk about it. They are too embarrassed. They would never tell teachers. There is lots of stealing at lunchtime from other kids. They get the food and leave the queue before they get to the till. They are hungry but have no money."

The young respondents were also concerned that secondary schools had no way of monitoring how learners eat or if they are eating enough of the right foods.

Evidence from the Children's Commissioner for Wales' report¹⁹, published in March 2019, heard from children, young people, parents/carers and professionals about food in school. The report cites children whose families were on a low income but not entitled to free school meals being refused a meal at lunchtime because their payment cards had not been topped up. Some children were going hungry because, as some asylum-seeking families have no recourse to public funds, they were not entitled to free school meals because of their insecure immigration status. However, local authorities have discretion to provide free school meals to children of migrants without secure immigration status and this should be encouraged to ensure that children never go hungry. The report found that where children did qualify for free school meals, the allowance did not cover a proper meal with a drink at lunchtime. The project worker heard about a school which had shut down its water fountains and pupils needed to buy water instead, despite there being statutory requirements in place requiring free drinking water to be made available for all pupils.

In some schools long queues at lunchtimes meant that there was little time to actually eat the meal and where there were staggered lunch breaks, those at the end of the queue were left with little or no choice. Pupils who have been given a lunchtime detention will often miss out altogether.

Poverty and deprivation are known to be key indicators of being overweight in childhood. Levels of childhood obesity in Wales for under 5s are the highest in the UK, with 26.4% of children starting primary school being classed as overweight or obese. Many parents/carers are unable to access sufficient healthy food and often have no other option but to give their children convenience food with little nutritional value. The importance of a healthy school meal for these children cannot be underestimated.



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What schools can do

There is much that schools can do to help learners from low income or disadvantaged families who are subject to food insecurity. For example, schools could

- Recruit an 'Equity Champion' from amongst existing school staff whose role is to identify, monitor and support learners from low income or disadvantaged families, and engage with their parents/carers in a positive and sensitive manner.

The young people consulted as part of the Children's Future Food Inquiry suggested the presence of a dedicated hunger teacher who was there to deal with these issues would make it easier to talk about hunger problems. By placing a staff member in the dining room, it would give the school a better understanding of which learners were struggling with food issues and allow them to implement more effective ways of dealing with problems in future.

- Appoint an 'Equity Ambassador' from amongst the pupils in the school, who can identify which pupils are hungry, or who have little or nothing to eat during the school day. This named pupil should be provided with appropriate support and be able to liaise with school staff and the Equity Champion to ensure that food issues are addressed.
- Raise awareness amongst all school staff on how to identify which children show signs of being hungry, and how to respond sensitively and liaise with appropriate staff.
- Ensure all parents/carers are aware of the free school meals programme. Support parents/carers to apply for free school meals and other benefits such as the Healthy Start Voucher scheme.

- Begin a conversation on food insecurity as part of the Curriculum, to dispel myths and reduce stigma.
- Survey all learners to identify where the barriers might be to ensure that everyone is treated with respect and dignity.
- If your school is part of the Free Breakfast in Primary Schools scheme, ensure that the school has sufficient free breakfast club places to accommodate all children who need one. If breakfast clubs are over-subscribed, seek solutions with the local authority to avoid turning anyone away.
- If take up of breakfast clubs is low amongst low-income families, consider how the school can work with the local authority to increase take up, including by those pupils whose parents/carers are in low paid working families.
- Ensure there is good communication between the local authority, schools and parents/carers in relation to the free school lunch entitlement and any changes that occur.
- Ensure that free water is always available for pupils in line with section 6 of the Healthy Eating in Schools (Wales) Measure 2009, and that water fountains which are broken or in poor condition are fully repaired. By offering pupils access to free drinking water, schools help promote healthier choices, reduce plastic waste and ensure that children eligible for free school meals or from low income families are able to use their funds to buy food.



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- Review school menus and ensure that learners entitled to free school meals are able to afford and be able to make healthy choices in what they choose to eat.
- Review the logistics around meal times in school. Carry out an audit of lunch breaks to see where improvements can be made, to ensure that all children have healthy and affordable choices of food and have sufficient time to eat it. Ideally, lunch breaks should be no later than 12.30pm.
- Where schools are aware of vulnerable families that are struggling with school meal debt, they should let the local authority catering team know, and encourage the families to speak to the catering team.
- Explore ways in which the cost of school lunches can be covered when a pupil is having difficulties paying, for example through lending lunch money and providing some food to children not receiving meals when they need it.
- Consider how to sensitively approach parents/carers about school meal arrears, by working with the family to try to resolve the situation and consider writing off the debt as a last resort.
- School staff should be made aware of whether they are a School Holiday Enrichment Programme provider or part of another local holiday food scheme. They should also be aware of what other local provision there are available, where children can get a healthy meal during school holidays, such as those run by local charities, churches or community groups.
- Involve all learners to be part of the decision-making process.

The Children’s Commissioner’s Office has produced a ‘Check with Ceri’ Resource²⁰ which could help schools take forward some of the actions listed above. The free resource helps schools to work with children, young people and school staff to think about the costs of the school day, how they could affect families living in poverty, what is working well and make a plan for what could be improved. There are two versions of the resource for KS2 and KS3/4 learners.

Practice Examples

1. School Holiday Enrichment Programmes operate in many local authorities in Wales, in partnership with other statutory and community organisations. For example, the Food and Fun scheme in Cardiff is a partnership between Cardiff Council, Cardiff Food, the local UBH Public Health team and Sports Cardiff, who provided the activities for the programme.
2. One primary school in Wales promoted the free school meals programme by having a 6’x3’ banner across the school during the first two weeks of the autumn term, with information on how to apply.
3. Estyn’s Report ‘Happy and Healthy’²¹ cites one secondary school who, through the local authority, have improved the nutritional value of lunches by making bread products, such as toast, paninis and baguettes with wholemeal flour. The change was introduced after consultation with pupils.
4. ‘The Choice is Yours’, a family run greengrocer’s in Swansea has teamed up with the Welsh Network of Healthy Schools Scheme, to provide fresh fruit to a number of schools across the Swansea area, which is given out a break-time.



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Endnotes

- 1 [The Trussel Trust, End of Year Statistics April 2018 – March 2019](#)
- 2 [Children’s Future Food Inquiry, Final Report May 2019](#)
- 3 [Food Poverty in South Wales: A Call to Action, South Wales Food Poverty Alliance, February 2019](#)
- 4 [Child food insecurity in the UK: a rapid review, Aceves-Martins, Cruickshank, Fraser and Brazzelli, Public Health Research V6:13 Nov 2018](#)
- 5 [Improving the uptake of Healthy Start vouchers, Sustain website \(accessed 7/6/19\)](#)
- 6 [Rethinking Educational Attainment and Poverty – in Rural Wales Final Report, ap Gruffudd, GS at al 2017](#)
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- 10 [Charging for food and drink provided by maintained schools, Welsh Government](#)
- 11 [12 Days of Christmas, Holiday Hunger Facts, Bevan Foundation 2018](#)
- 12 [School Holiday Enrichment Programme \(SHEP\), WLGA 2018](#)
- 13 [Association between breakfast consumption and educational outcomes for 9 to 11 year olds](#)
- 14 [Provision of meals and milk, Stats Wales, 2019](#)
- 15 [A Lost Education: The reality of hunger in the classroom, Kellogg’s 2013](#)
- 16 [, Association between breakfast consumption and educational outcomes in 9–11-year-old children. Hannah J Littlecott, Graham F Moore, Laurence Moore, Ronan A Lyons, Cardiff University 2016](#)
- 17 [Poverty and child health - Views from the frontline, RCPCH, 2017](#)
- 18 [Children’s Future Food Inquiry – What young people say about food, Food Foundation 2019](#)
- 19 [A Charter for Change – Protecting Welsh Children from the Impact of Poverty, Children’s Commissioner for Wales, 2019](#)
- 20 [A Charter for Change : Resources](#)
- 21 [‘Happy and Healthy: school impact on pupils’ health and wellbeing, Estyn, 2019](#)



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4

Participation in the Life of the School



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Introduction

How involved and engaged a learner is in the life of the school will, to a large extent, determine their long term educational outcomes. Pupils living in low income or disadvantaged families can face significant challenges in being able to participate in and benefit from the diverse range of curricular and non-curricular opportunities for learning in schools.

The aim of this guide is to identify those children who often face additional barriers to participating fully in the life of the school, and consider ways in which schools can best support them.

The Problem

The Education Act (1996) states that schools cannot charge for any materials related to the delivery of the national curriculum. Despite the Welsh Government having published Guidance for School Governors¹ to support this, an inquiry undertaken by the National Assembly's Children, Young People and Education Committee² discovered that additional costs associated with education proved to be a barrier, both for pupil participation and for parental engagement.

It is widely acknowledged that, with continued austerity, school budgets are being squeezed year on year and that schools are having to take some drastic measures to cut costs. One consequence of this that particularly impacts on children from low income or disadvantaged families, is that parents are increasingly being asked to pay 'voluntary contributions' to pay for or to subsidise items such as workbooks, stationery, calculators and materials related to the delivery of curricular subjects. School text books can often be in short supply and having to be loaned out, so learners needing to complete homework or coursework sometimes have a lengthy wait. Some textbooks may be out of date or in poor condition. Parents who can afford to buy the textbooks and associated items for their children do so, putting them at a distinct advantage over their less well-off peers.



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Research³ across the UK has found that 81% of teachers taught pupils who did not have the correct equipment for lessons because they could not afford it, with 58% of teachers having seen equipment being lent or given to pupils by schools. Subsequent surveys of teachers have found that the situation for pupils living in poverty is getting worse year on year. At the annual conference of the NWU in April 2019, 50% of delegates believed that the ‘presence and effects’ of poverty had got worse or significantly worse since 2016.

“Research has shown that in recent years there has been an increase in the scale and scope of schools charging for activities, including in areas such as educational equipment and visits. One fifth of parents they surveyed said they have been charged for field trips that are a compulsory element of a course. And a quarter of parents said they have been charged for text or reference books.”⁴

Expectations and responses of teachers, to those learners who arrive at school without the correct resources or materials for lessons, can vary enormously both between schools and between teachers in the same school. Inconsistent expectations and insensitive practices can be confusing and frightening for many children, whose parents despite their best efforts, are simply unable to afford any additional costs.

School Trips

School trips linked to the curriculum are not chargeable. Welsh Government guidance on charging states that families of any child in receipt of free school meals, should not be charged for school trips. However, figures indicate that up to 30% of families with children entitled to free school meals do not take them up because of stigma or embarrassment, and many low-income families do not meet the eligibility threshold for free school meals. Pupils in these situations, may not be able to afford the cost of any suggested ‘voluntary contributions’ and could miss out. For children who also have additional support needs, affordability can be an even greater barrier

Welsh Government Guidance on School Charging states:

“When arranging school trips and activities governing bodies and head teachers should do as much as is practicable to ensure that children and young people living in poverty are not unfairly disadvantaged. The cost pressures on families with low incomes are significant and governing bodies and head teachers should try to ensure this is not exacerbated to the detriment of the child or young person. It is important to balance the education value of residential trips against their financial cost.”

Missing out on educational visits and trips means that pupils whose families cannot afford the cost feel isolated, embarrassed and disappointed. Not only do they miss out of the educational value and enrichment of the trip, they also miss out on the anticipation and excitement prior to a trip, and the stories and experiences that are shared after the event amongst their peer group. They may find means by which to protect themselves and their family from the shame of not being able to attend, from being excluded through their misbehaviour, express disinterest in attending or illness.



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*'There was a history trip to the Big Pit, I didn't go on that. It was too expensive to go, mum couldn't afford it at the time, it was twenty-something pound. I come home and talked to mum about it and we couldn't afford it... It felt bad when everyone come back and said how much [of] an amazing time they had.'*⁵

Pupils have reported feeling embarrassed by having to ask teachers for help with paying for the costs of a school trip, and the 'additional extras' often associated with residential trips, such as appropriate clothing, equipment and sleeping bags. Even where schools are able to subsidise or pay in full for excursions, there are typically the extra costs of spending money required for extra activities, food and snacks. It is not unknown for parents to go into debt and take out high interest loans to enable their children to attend. Some funding for school trips has been made available through the Welsh Government's PDG-Access to help cover additional equipment for such trips.



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Enrichment Activities

Enrichment activities are fast becoming out of reach for many children in low income families because schools can no longer afford to offer these for free. For example, although there is Welsh Government funding to local authorities for county-wide music services across Wales, many councils do not provide musical instruments or offer free music lessons in schools, as these come under the category of 'optional extras'. The cost of an inexpensive guitar (around £50) is beyond the means of low income families and schools in many local authorities have to charge for music tuition.

After-school activities which are presented as free, such as homework clubs, first aid or sports activities can also be beyond many learners who rely on free school transport which becomes a barrier for learners being able to stay on after the end of the normal school day. If a learner is unable to complete homework at home, they may be advised to go to homework club, but this is not always possible.

Fundraising initiatives or 'fun' days, where pupils pay a nominal sum to come to school in their own clothes or are encouraged to dress up instead of wearing their school uniform can impact on children's attendance and it is not uncommon for pupils to stay away from school. Children may be excluded in many ways. Their parents/carers may not be able to afford the additional cost, particularly if they have more than one child in the school. Children whose parents/carers do find the money for such events may not have the 'right' clothes or costume to wear, and will come to school in their uniform, saying they 'forgot' in an attempt to avoid embarrassment, stigma or exclusion.

Present buying for teachers at the end of the school year has become the norm in many schools and parents often seek to purchase an expensive or unusual present for teachers. Once again this can especially be a challenge and pressure for low income families, who may feel that by not buying an end of term/year present this may be misinterpreted by the school, other parents or other pupils. End of term activities, such as 'leavers' events, often organised by other parents, can be also prove costly and again exclude many learners who are unable to financially contribute and will therefore miss out.



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Impact on Children and Young People

Pupils from low income or disadvantaged families are very aware of social differences and worry about stigma and being judged by their peers and teachers. It negatively affects their self-esteem, confidence and well-being, and their overall ability to fully participate in school life. UK research revealed that 63% of children from low income or disadvantages families were embarrassed because their family could not afford at least one cost of school and 46% said they felt embarrassed by not having the right phone or other electronic gadget.⁵

One young person told the Children's Commissioner for Wales that if they did not have the correct text books, they could borrow them in school but not take them home, leaving them disadvantaged against those whose parents could afford the books.⁶

The subjects that learners choose to do at GCSE or 'A' level can be hugely dependent on the ancillary costs of taking that subject. For example, a child who is talented in art, design and technology, or music and drama may be unable to take up the subject because of the extra costs of resources and materials, which their family cannot afford. Around 30% of children from low income families have fallen behind in core subjects because their family could not afford the necessary books or materials.⁵



'For design we have to pay £6 to make our models and take them home. So if we don't pay for it then we can't use it so we have made it for no reason.'

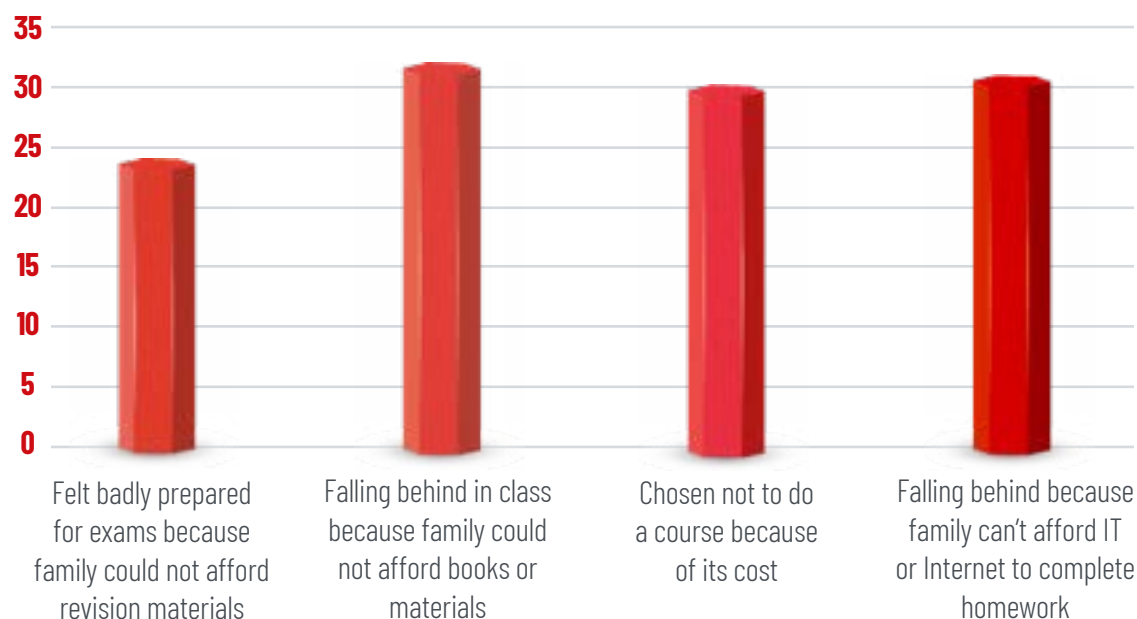


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Percentage of learners whose academic performance affected by low income*



* The Children's Commission on Poverty, The Children's Society, 2014

A further example is Food Technology provisions and the ability to take food home. As a general rule, schools charge for cooking ingredients but can supply these to learners whose families cannot afford the cost of ingredients. However, whilst learners who buy their own ingredients are able to take the end product home, this is not always the case for those who are provided for by the school.⁵ It would appear that the actions by some schools are a result of the school's charging policy, which may state that any 'equipment' supplied by the school remains the property of the school. This denies the learner the sense of achievement in taking the items they made, home to be enjoyed by the family. The negative impact may be a lack of motivation, with the pupil becoming disengaged from those parts of the curriculum.



What schools can do

Participation in all aspects of school life and all the opportunities presented by both classroom and extra-curricular activities will increase learners' confidence, self-esteem, social skills and ultimately their education attainment. There is much that schools can do to help pupils from low income or disadvantages families and lift many barriers to participating in the life of the school. For example, schools could recruit an 'Equity Champion' from amongst existing school staff whose role is to identify, monitor and support learners from low income or disadvantaged families, and engage with their parents/carers in a positive and sensitive manner.

Subject Choices

- Ensure that any costs associated with particular GCSE or 'A' Level courses are not a deterrent to a pupil undertaking a particular course. Learners must not be discouraged from choosing a particular subject or face financial barriers to fully participate.
- Access and/or inform parents about small education grants or bursaries that can support learners to purchase the necessary specialist resources needed to undertake a particular subject.

Trips and Activities

- Approaches to subsidising school trip costs need to be sensitive and non-stigmatising. For example, pupils should not be expected to have to ask for help. A trusted member of staff who can approach pupils in a sensitive manner will make them feel less stigmatised and embarrassed. This approach should be embedded in school policies and in the ethos of the school.

Other measures could include:

- If schools have a dedicated Equity Champion or pupil well-being staff member, part of their role could be to apply for small grants that can be used towards supporting the cost of school trips.
- Organise school trips that are affordable and accessible to the majority of pupils.
- Giving sufficient notice of trips being organised which will enable parents/carers to plan and budget more easily.
- The option of paying by instalments could also ease the pressure on parents and their children.
- Raise awareness of the PDG-Access Fund which can contribute or pay for school trips, amongst the families of learners entitled to free school meals (and looked after children).
- Engage with local companies, enterprises and institutions to bring activities into the school, rather



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than taking children out of the school. For example companies that cater for theme based children's parties such as animal parties, can also visit schools.

- Ensure information is available to parents on low cost lenders, such as credit unions.
- Support for learners in classes where a trip is planned to help undertake fundraising activities, linked to the curriculum, to help pay for the trip.

Fundraising activities, that do not ask pupils directly for money, are many and varied, depending on the needs, facilities and resources of the school and can include:

- ▶ A sponsored swim or virtual cycle ride on an exercise bike to the trip venue
- ▶ Advertise fundraising events on local and social media
- ▶ Organise a supermarket collection or a blanket collection at local sporting events
- ▶ Set up an interview on a local radio station and make an appeal
- ▶ Get the PTA or Parents' Council to organise a sponsored event, such as a Bingo Night or Pub Quiz
- ▶ Get local businesses to sponsor litter picks in a local park or town centre

There are numerous websites that can be found with more ideas and tips for fundraising.

The 'Check with Ceri' resources developed by the Children's Commissioner for Wales' office can be used to help schools and pupils identify costs and solutions to issues identified in this Guide⁷.

Practice Examples

1. Rocket Fund is a non-profit crowdfunding platform that specialises in crowdfunding for schools (other platforms are available).
2. Business in the Community, in partnership with Careers Wales runs a programme called 'Business Class' which builds partnerships between schools and businesses, matching the needs of the schools and the priorities of businesses.

Endnotes

- 1 [Guigance for Governing Bodies on Charging for School Activities, Welsh Government 2013](#)
- 2 [Inquiry into Educational Outcomes for Children from Low Income Households, NAFW 2015](#)
- 3 [The impact of financial pressures on children and young people, NASUWT 2016](#)
- 4 [Through Young Eyes, The Children's Society 2013](#)
- 5 [At What Cost? Exposing the Impact of Poverty on School Life, The Children's Society, 2014](#)
- 6 [A Charter for Change: Protecting children from the impact of poverty, Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2019](#)
- 7 [A Charter for Change : Resources](#)



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The Price of Pupil Poverty

Taking a Whole School Approach to Improving the Well-being of children from low income and disadvantages families



5

Home-School Relationship



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Introduction

The importance of the home-school relationship cannot be over-emphasised. There is a recognised link between the home learning environment and children's performance at school at all ages. Research has shown that the degree to which families engage with the school is more influential on the child's educational attainment than the quality of the teaching. Where a child lives, who they live with, and the environment in which they live will all impact on a child's ability and readiness to learn at school, as well as their present and future mental health and well-being. It is well documented that children whose parents are positively engaged in their child's education are more likely to achieve better educational outcomes. Many schools are very proactive and already doing well in engaging families and in identifying solutions to lift the barriers to enable better home-school relationships.

The Problem

Parental Engagement

All parents/carers will want the best for their children, regardless of their current situation, their background or their previous experience of learning and school. Some learners from low income and disadvantaged backgrounds may however have parents/carers who are less likely to be actively involved in their children's education and studies. How families interact with the school their child attends will depend on a number of factors, from their own childhood experiences of school, to how far away the school is from the child's home, to work commitments and caring responsibilities, and to how receptive the school is towards parental engagement.

Establishing closer links between the school and the home has been found to have a positive effect on pupil's wellbeing¹. Some schools make huge efforts to engage parents/carers, such as promoting initiatives aimed at building strong links between schools and parents through family learning events, informal open days and home visits.

It is acknowledged that it is much easier to build and maintain relationships with parents/carers in primary schools than it is in secondary, due in part to the numbers of pupils. However, if parents/carers are engaged at primary school level, it is more likely they will continue to take an active interest in their child's education, once they make the transition to secondary school.

Effective communication with families, tailored to the different needs of parents is vital to achieving positive parental engagement. Methods of communication with families by schools varies enormously, and will typically lead to different outcomes. Some schools send out letters to parents/carers, which can often remain unseen. Parents have reported that written communications from schools is often difficult to understand, not always in Plain English and not always received. Text messaging is generally used for important announcements, such as school closures, and social media such as Twitter is also proving popular as a method of communication by some schools. Some low income or disadvantaged families may not engage with schools because they lack the necessary literacy and communication skills, or the confidence in responding through social media. An 'open door' policy, or having a dedicated member of staff, such as a family inclusion worker available at the start and end of the school day whom parents can talk to, can be valuable in building trust and rapport between parents and the school.



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Homework

Parents/carers can also face many barriers in supporting their child's learning. A report on children's rights in Wales² identified that 10% of children eligible for free school meals and 6% of those ineligible, did not have access to a computer at home. Parents from low income families told a Welsh Government Inquiry³ that they were unable to help their children with homework, either because they lacked the necessary skills or because they had several jobs or competing caring responsibilities, leaving them with little or no time to properly support their children.

Computers and an internet connection at home are increasingly necessary for children to access and complete their homework. Children told researchers⁴ they had fallen behind at school because their family could not afford the necessary equipment or internet facilities at home, or that they lived in an area with inadequate broadband coverage.

Many schools in Wales are now using homework software or apps to set homework and request that it is submitted online. Low income families may not have a computer which can support the software needed to complete homework or have only one device which is shared between several children and family members. Homework clubs are a positive development but may not always be accessible to children from disadvantaged families, as those who rely on free transport to get home will be unable to attend. Learners may be encouraged to use the local library to complete homework but this can also produce barriers if the nearest library is some distance away, or they have to wait for a computer to become available. Many public libraries have also been affected by local authority cuts, reducing their opening hours or have been closed.

"We get stacks of homework and most of it is on the computer... I had to tell the teacher to print out a sheet so I could just fill it in but the teacher kept saying it wasn't high enough quality homework. I would only score a five or three out of 10."



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Transport

Free travel for children under 16 between their home and school is dependent on distance, rather than a family's ability to pay. For primary school pupils it is 2 miles or more from school and 3 miles for secondary pupils. For those pupils living within walking distance, or those not in the catchment area, weekly child bus tickets cost around £10 per week in Wales. This means that transport costs could be as high as £80 per month for a family with 2 school aged children, which is a significant cost for low income families to have to find each month. For young people aged 16-21, the Welsh Government has introduced My Travel Pass scheme⁵, which provides 1/3 off bus fares, but many students from low income or disadvantaged families may still struggle to find that money for travel.

Reliance on school transport impacts on a learner's ability to participate in activities that take place after the end of the school day, such as enrichment or homework clubs and sports activities. If a family cannot afford to pay for alternative public transport options to enable their child to participate in these activities, then their child will miss out on important opportunities for learning, play and social interaction.



Home environment

The home environment can be a significant enabler or barrier in determining how children relate to and perform in school. Homelessness, housing insecurity, overcrowding and living in sub-standard housing can all negatively impact on a pupil's achievement levels. For example, in an overcrowded home, there is unlikely to be anywhere quiet with little personal space to complete homework or out-of-school tasks. Poor housing which is cold or damp will also have a negative impact on a child's wellbeing and learning. One head teacher, interviewed in Newport, whose school visits the families of all new pupils coming into Reception Year, reported that there are some homes they visit lack essentials such as carpets, washing machine, TV or furniture.

Living in difficult housing conditions has a social and emotional impact on children. Shame and stigma cause stress and anxiety to both parents/carers and children. It can affect friendships and limit social interactions, as children often feel unable to invite friends home because they are embarrassed by their home or lack the necessary space. This can frustrate some children wishing to study or complete school tasks in a group with their peers.

Having an awareness and understanding of a learner's home environment can enable schools to determine the type and level of support that a child requires from school staff. Knowing the barriers children from low income families' face can help schools tailor their support according to the child's lived experience.



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What schools can do

There is much that schools can do to help support learners from low income or disadvantaged families and improve the home-learning relationship between learner, parents/carers and the school. For example, schools could:

- Recruit an 'Equity Champion' from amongst existing school staff whose role is to identify, monitor and support learners from low income or disadvantaged families, and engage with their parents/carers in a positive and sensitive manner.
- Develop a whole school culture that values parental engagement and provides a positive welcoming atmosphere within the school for parents/carers.
- Consider the content of the Welsh Government's Family Engagement Toolkit⁶.

Consider undertaking the Investors in Families Wales award scheme. Their website has lots on information and resources. Appoint a family engagement worker, which could be funded through the Pupil Development Grant, to build links with parents/carers who face barriers and have little contact with the school.

Offer opportunities to parents/carers for their own learning and development by introducing family learning events in partnership with other agencies. For example, a workshop on financial inclusion could be delivered in partnership with the local credit union, bank or Citizen's Advice.

Primary schools could adopt a policy of visiting all new pupils in their home. Not only will new pupils have a recognised face on their first day, but parents will have a better understanding of the school ethos and the school will gain an insight into the home environment and any support needs required.

Review the school's homework policy to ensure it is inclusive and gives consideration to the ability of all learners to complete homework tasks at home.

Schools should explore ways in which some homework tasks may be completed during the school day without it compromising or limiting recreational and lunch times. Access grants to purchase laptops, either for all pupils or a smaller number for use by pupils who don't have IT equipment to use for homework at home. There are a number of websites to help with this, one example can be found here (others are available).

Secondary schools could introduce a Parent's Welcome Evening to meet with personal tutors, perhaps with light refreshments, to encourage parents into the school and give opportunities to develop meaningful relationships. Always be sensitive to the home circumstances of pupils from low income or disadvantaged families, including those pupils with caring responsibilities, parents working in low-paid shift jobs and those with childcare responsibilities.

Consider when the school holds homework clubs, to make them accessible to learners whose family might struggle to afford up to date IT equipment, but also be mindful that these same learners might miss out on a school meal at lunchtime if clubs are held during this period.

Undertake an audit or survey of who takes part in after school activities, to establish whether school transport is a barrier to disadvantaged learners attending activities and how this could be overcome.



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Work with PTAs or School Councils to think of innovative ways to encourage participation by low income or disadvantaged families in having a voice in the life of the school.

Consider setting up a Parent Council to help inform and support ways to improve parental engagement

Involve all children in the decision-making process

The resources developed by the Children's Commissioner for Wales can be used to help schools and pupils identify costs and solutions to many of the issues identified in this Guide⁷.

Practice Examples

1. In Herbert Thompson Primary School creating stronger bonds with parents/carers is part of a wider vision to put well-being at the heart of the school's mission and work more closely with a range of community agencies, including the local authority children's services and families-focused organisations. The school is looking beyond the school gate and addressing the barriers in the home and community. They place great importance on positive relationships between the school, families and the community. They work hard to build relationships with parents/carers so they play an active part in the life of the school and take a close interest in their children's education. This has involved interventions such as the Parent Council, whose objectives are engagement and parent/carer voice; the school's parent hub – which opens daily and allows mums and dads a chance to mingle on the school premises – and adult learning provision, but also appropriate staffing and professional development.
2. Ty[^] Gwyn School is an all-age special school that caters for learners with profound and complex needs. The school has a Family Centre, open every day of the week in term time, staffed by one higher level teaching assistant and one senior teaching assistant. The centre provides a wide range of support and training for families with children aged 0–19, including Incredible Years training for parents/carers, therapy support, touch therapy, a toy library and assistive technology centre, counselling, home visits and outreach work, creative arts sessions and English as an Additional Language (EAL) lessons. The school evaluates all activities using questionnaires and face-to-face interviews and there is a high level of engagement and activity with parents/carers and the community due to the variety of opportunities available.
3. Newport High School's whole school approach involves all teaching members of staff. Each has a one hour home contact session on the timetable, when they contact the parents/carers of their tutor group. This usually involves a positive phone call to highlight one encouraging aspect of the pupil's academic progress, approach to school life or behaviour. The whole school approach is supported by a family engagement officer, funded by the Pupil Development Grant, who works to increase family involvement in school life, particularly those families whose children are eligible for free school meals. They also attend academic review days and organise regular workshops and learning events for parents/carers. Pupils transitioning from Years 6 to 7 are visited in primary feeders by Yr 7 tutors.



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4. Ysgol Parc Waundew Richmond Park School runs 'PEAS' (Parents Engaged Actively in School) and 'DREAMS' (Developing Reading, English And Maths) initiatives aimed at engaging with parents/carers to raise attendance, literacy and numeracy. Families are encouraged into school with 'Family Fridays', Learndirect Club and 'Generation Games' after school club where parents/carers and children attend and learn together, including ICT, reading and cooking skills, etc. The school helps families develop consistent approaches to literacy and numeracy ('teaching them to teach'). Online 'Bug Club' and 'Sumdog' accounts allow every child to access books and numeracy materials at home. Parent/carer reading volunteers help out in classrooms. Families are also engaged via Facebook and Twitter. Reading ages, numeracy centiles and attendance rates have all risen significantly.

Endnotes

- 1 [Good practice in parental involvement, Estyn 2009](#)
- 2 [The Human Rights of Children in Wales: An Evidence Review, WISERD/Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2018](#)
- 3 ['Inquiry into Educational Outcomes for Children from Low Income Households' National Assembly for Wales, 2015](#)
- 4 [At What Cost – The Impact of Poverty on School Life, The Children's Society, 2014](#)
- 5 [My Travel Pass, Welsh Government website](#)
- 6 [Family and Community Engagement Toolkit for Schools in Wales, Welsh Government, 2016](#)
- 7 [A Charter for Change : Resources](#)

