



PLANT YNG NGHYMURU
CHILDREN IN WALES

Report on the 5th Annual Child and Family Poverty Surveys 2021

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In partnership with

END CHILD POVERTY NETWORK CYMRU
RHYWDWAITH DILEU TLODI PLANT CYMRU



*“Poverty
affects every
aspect of their
lives”*
(10-13yrs)



Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the ECPN steering group members for their collaboration.

Children in Wales would also like to thank all of the practitioners, professionals, children and young people who participated in the survey. Your responses are greatly appreciated.

If you are a practitioner or professional working in Wales and would like to take part in the next Child and Family Poverty survey, please email info@childreninwales.org.uk and we will notify you when the survey is live. The survey will still be completed anonymously.

This report is funded by Welsh Government. The views expressed in this report are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the funder.

The views in this report are those of respondents to the questions in the survey and do not necessarily represent the views of Children in Wales.

About Children in Wales

We are the national umbrella body for organisations and individuals who work with children, young people and their families in Wales. We work closely with Welsh Government and organisations in Wales to ensure that children's rights are at the forefront of policy and decision making.

Our membership includes individuals and organisations from the voluntary, statutory and professional sectors. We also work directly with children and young people on a number of different projects. Our aim is to promote the interests of these groups, to improve services in Wales and to put children high on the Welsh political agenda.

To find out more about our work or become a member of Children in Wales, contact membership@childreninwales.org.uk

About End Child Poverty Network Cymru

The End Child Poverty Network (ECPN) Cymru is a coalition of organisations focused on the eradication of child poverty in Wales, co-ordinated and managed on a day-to-day basis by Children in Wales.

Its Steering Group includes representation from across the voluntary and statutory sectors, and the wider network has over a 1000 supporting members from a broad cross-section of agencies.

If you would like to join the wider End Child Poverty Network, contact Karen.mcfarlane@childreninwales.org.uk

Children's Rights and Poverty

Poverty contravenes a number of Articles laid out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

It denies children:

- Their rights to an adequate standard of living (Article 27)
- Their rights to the best possible health and nutritious food (Article 24)
- Their rights to play and leisure opportunities (Article 31)
- Their rights to benefit from social security (Article 26)
- Their rights to develop their full potential (Article 6)

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Introduction

Poverty and the impacts of poverty clearly affect children, young people and their families. Children are hungry, families are in debt and for many, this is a generational cycle. Our 5th Annual Child and Family Poverty surveys sought to understand more about the current issues families are facing, the impact this has and importantly, to hear the views of children and young people themselves.

The findings from our surveys give a greater understanding of what it is like for children, young people and families living in poverty, the issues they face on a daily basis and the impact this has on different aspects of their lives.

This report includes a comparison of poverty related issues over a 3 year period and whilst some issues have changed to a small degree over time, in general, things have remained the same. Indeed, in a number of areas and for many children, the situation has sadly deteriorated.

The findings from both the practitioners and the children and young people surveys are bleak and unacceptable. Without urgent action to address and change policies, understanding and attitudes, the cycle and detrimental impact of poverty will continue for our children, young people and their families.



Background to the survey

In 2014, Children in Wales published *Child and Family Poverty in Wales: A snapshot of key issues raised by families*. This report was the culmination of a research project undertaken with Assembly Members (now Members of the Senedd), Welsh Members of UK Parliament and Citizen Advice offices. This project aimed to identify the most common poverty related issues affecting households with children. Following on from this report, Children in Wales has conducted an annual survey to ascertain what, if anything, has changed and which poverty related issues most commonly affect families. We are grateful to the End Child Poverty Network for their input and contribution to the survey design and questions.

In 2016/17, we were keen to hear directly from children and young people. We wanted to know their views on poverty; understand how it affects them and which areas they identified as having the biggest impact on children and young people living in poverty. Since then, we have conducted 2 surveys concurrently, 1 for practitioners and professionals and the other for children and young people. Whilst the survey questions cannot mirror each other, the majority of issues and themes remain the same across both surveys.

Each year, we aim to keep a few core questions, enabling a direct comparison year on year. However, some questions and multiple choice options have necessarily changed to reflect or include changes to legislation, emerging issues or concerns raised in previous surveys.

The responses received from this year's surveys were detailed and provided much valued information. As a result, this report looks at the findings of each survey separately, rather than as a whole.

In March 2020, Wales and the other UK nations, found itself in the grip of the Coronavirus pandemic and, like the other nations, went into prolonged periods of restrictions and lockdowns. Consequently, whilst navigating through these circumstances, Children in Wales were not in a position to conduct either the practitioners' or the children and young people's annual surveys.

As an interim measure, we focused on the immediate Coronavirus situation to ascertain how the pandemic was affecting children, young people and families. Between 13 July and 10 August

2020, we conducted a short, online survey with practitioners and professionals only. Necessarily, the survey focused on the emerging and immediate issues facing children, young people and families at this time. The 3 areas of focus were:

- Food insecurity
- Digital inclusion
- Income and employment

The findings of this short survey *COVID-19 and the impact on low income and disadvantaged families* were published in Autumn 2020.

Whilst the findings of the COVID-19 survey cannot be directly compared with this or our previous surveys, they do provide a snapshot of the situation during the first wave of the pandemic and the impact this had on children, young people and families. However, this report does enable some comparison with the 2021 survey findings.

It is worth noting that this, our 2021 survey, has taken place in the context of a global pandemic and has inevitably affected the lives of everyone in Wales, but especially those living in or on the brink of poverty. These exceptional circumstances may give greater bias to some or all of the answers given by respondents, but the rate of child poverty in Wales was high prior to the pandemic, with **31%** of children and young people living in relative poverty. Whilst COVID has severely exacerbated poverty, it cannot be seen as an excuse for, or cause of the current poverty situation on its own.



Practitioners and Professionals Survey Findings

About the Survey

The survey sought to gain an insight into the experiences and observations of those working with (directly or indirectly) children, young people and their families. It was available to complete online and was widely disseminated across Wales, through Children in Wales' membership, networks and bulletins and through the networks of our external colleagues. The survey ran for a period of 5 weeks from 26 April – 30 May 2021 and was completed anonymously by respondents.

Respondents were asked to consider poverty related questions in the following areas:

- Overarching poverty issues
- The impact of Covid on poverty
- Universal Credit
- Free school meals
- Food banks
- Digital inclusion
- Education

Of the poverty related questions in the survey, 57% were multiple choice and 43% asked for open comments. The survey also asked respondents to share their thoughts and ideas on solutions, prevention or mitigation of the impact poverty has on children, young people and their families.

Who responded

Practitioners and professionals responded from 21 Local Authority areas across Wales. Those counties with the highest number of responses were Powys, Carmarthenshire and Newport.

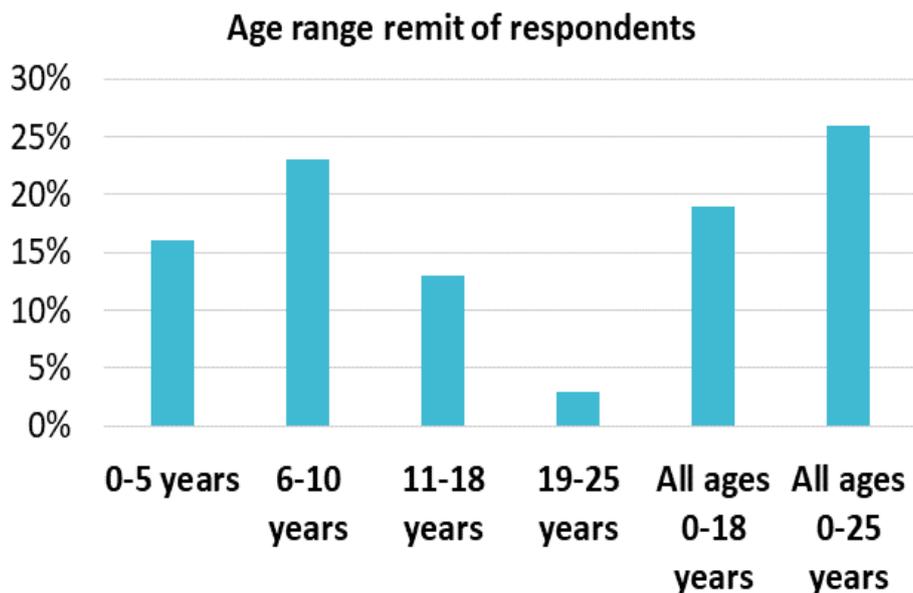
A total of 116 responses were received and all respondents had a remit for children, young people and/or families. Of the respondents, **80% worked directly with children and families, representing a minimum of 33,000 families each year.** The remaining 20% worked indirectly with children and families in areas such as policy development, managerial roles and academia.

Respondents were asked to identify the age ranges that they predominantly work with or have a remit for.

Not all respondents answered all of the questions. However, the completion rate of the survey was high and on average, 96% of respondents answered all of the multiple choice questions and 94% answered 1 or more of the free comment questions.

Respondents worked in the following areas:

- 34% education
- 29% third sector
- 25% local authority
- 12% other (including advisory services, health, academia)



Findings

Introduction

In general, the overall findings of the survey are bleak. The experiences and observations of practitioners and professionals working with over 33,000 families show that the poverty situation is deteriorating for children, young people and families.

Practitioners identified that families were struggling to cope and faced financial challenges on a daily basis. Overall, they were seeing an increase in the number of families on a reduced income, in debt and using foodbanks. Many respondents experienced children coming to settings and schools hungry and in some circumstances, taking food and hiding it, in order to give it to their families. It is therefore not surprising that throughout the survey, respondents repeatedly referred to debt levels, hunger and increased levels of anxiety, stress and the poor mental and emotional health of the families, children and young people they work with. The findings from the Children and Young People's survey, also reflect those of the practitioner and professionals' survey, with a particular emphasis on debt, emotional health and poverty related bullying.

Respondents were asked to consider poverty

related issues in the following areas:

- Overarching poverty issues
- The impact of COVID on poverty
- Universal Credit
- Free school meals
- Food banks
- Digital inclusion
- Education

On analysis, there were no significant geographical differences in the issues chosen or the comments given, nor were there differences between those working across different age groups.

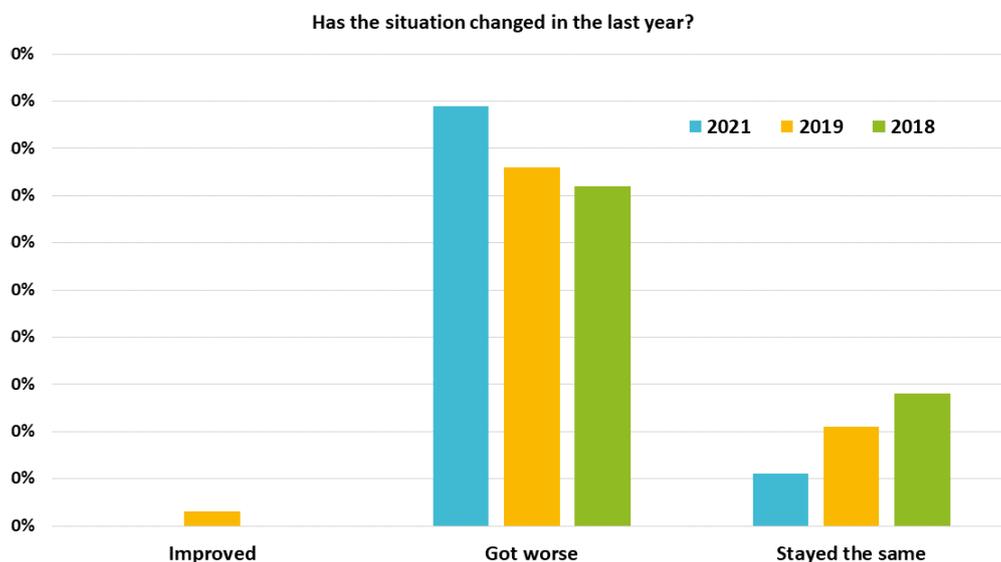
The following sections show the findings from the practitioner and professionals' survey and include a 3 year comparison of the overarching issues identified by respondents.



Overarching poverty issues: 3 year comparison

Introduction

The Annual Child and Family poverty survey is now in its 5th year. Over this period, questions have necessarily changed to reflect emerging poverty related issues and their impact. However, core questions are consistently included year on year, providing a comparable overview of the poverty situation in Wales as observed and experienced by practitioners and professionals.



These questions are:

- Has the situation changed in the last year?
- In your experience, what do you think are the top 5 poverty related issues

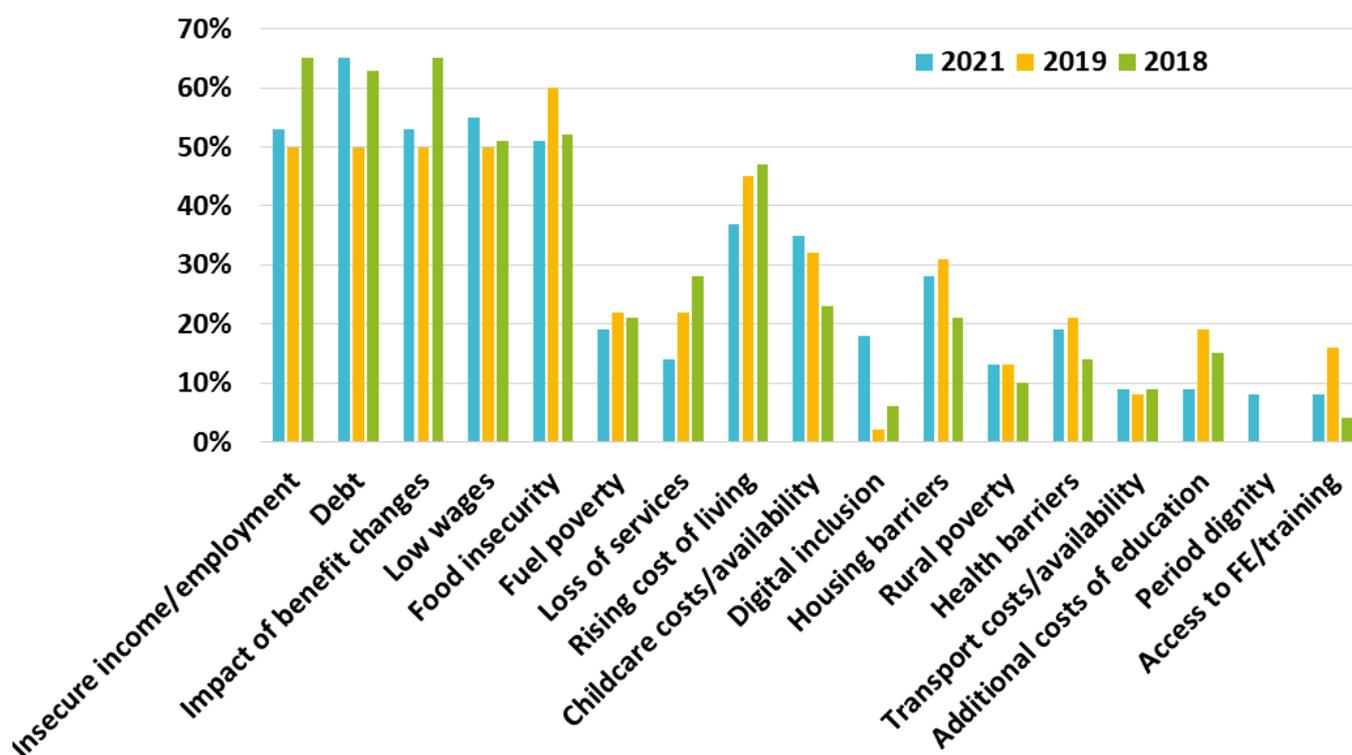
As the above chart shows, year on year, respondents are reporting that the poverty situation is increasingly worse than the previous year. Given the impact of COVID, this finding was perhaps expected for 2021, however, even before the pandemic, respondents reported a worsening situation.

The impact of COVID for families was explored during this year's survey (2021) and these findings

are detailed in latter sections of this report.

For the 2nd question, a range of 16 poverty issues were presented to respondents. Through their experience and observations, respondents were asked to identify 5 of the 16 issues that were of most concern and rank these top 5 issues in order of importance. Respondents were not asked to rank the remaining issues. The list of issues has remained the same over the last 3 years, with the exception of period dignity. This was newly added as a poverty related issue for the 2021 survey, extending the number of issues to 17. As such, there is no comparable data for period dignity.

Top 5 ranked poverty related issues - 3 year comparison



The chart above shows which of the 16 (17 for 2021) issues were ranked within the top 5 and the percentage of respondents choosing each issue over a 3 year period.

Identification of the top 5 ranked issues helps to provide a more robust comparative measure of the experiences and observations of practitioners and professionals. The findings show that overall, the top issues experienced by families have remained the same, namely debt, income related issues and food insecurity.

The **impact of benefit changes** ranks highly across all 3 comparison years, but was a particular issue in 2018. An explanation of this is likely to be the major changes introduced to the benefit system at that time. In 2014, the staged roll-out of Universal Credit (UC) in Wales began. UC replaced 6 existing means-tested benefits and tax credits and between April 2017 – December 2018, this transition extended to a full service for all claimants and included families with children across Wales.

In 2018, during the time of the Annual Child and Family Poverty Survey, many families and the practitioners that support them, were undergoing

this transition. At this time, and as highlighted in our survey findings for 2018, the National Assembly for Wales (now Senedd Cymru) identified a number of problems with Universal Credit. These included waiting times for payments, sanctions, direct payments and family dynamics. These issues were also identified by practitioners in 2018.

In the 2018 survey, one practitioner summarised the comments made by many:

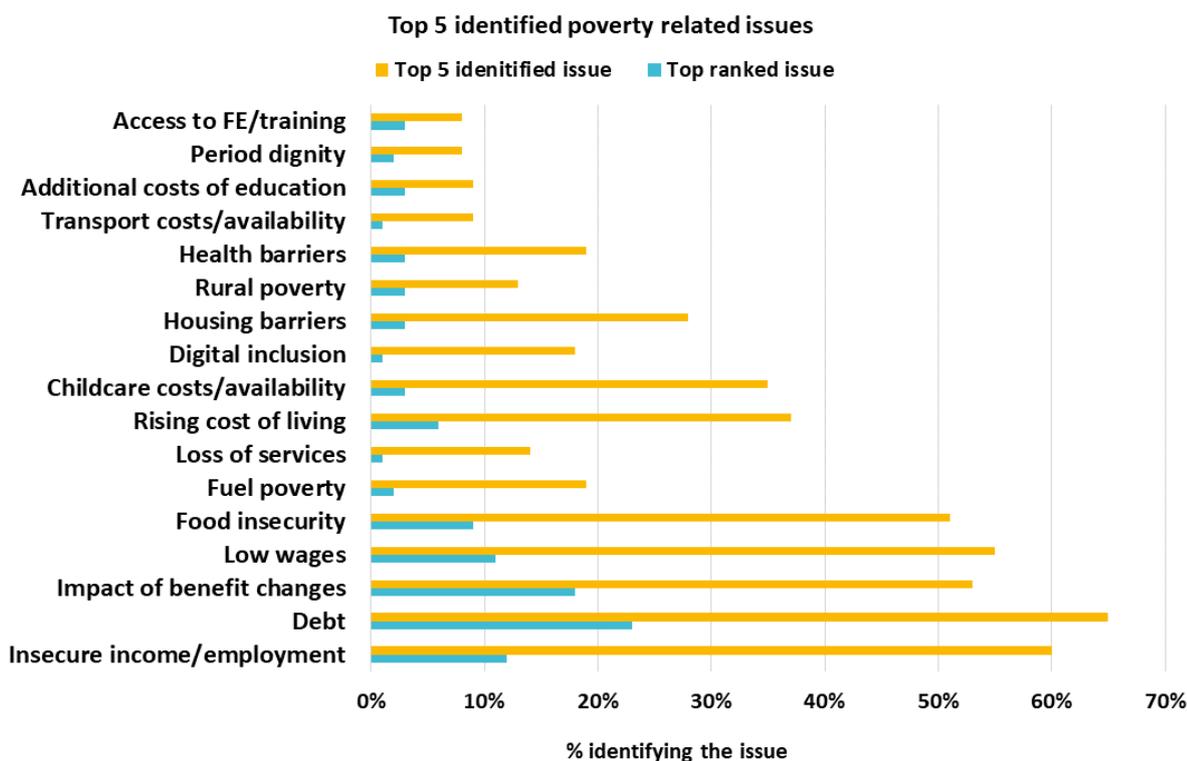
“Universal Credit is having a huge impact. Anything which triggers a change causes a problem. Money is stopped for 5 weeks, rent payment is affected”

Benefit changes have remained a constant issue across subsequent years.

Debt has also featured heavily in the findings of the last 3 years. This year, it has risen to the number 1 ranked poverty related issue. This is discussed throughout this report and has emerged as a dominant theme across all areas of the survey findings for 2021.

Overarching poverty issues: 2021

The findings below provide greater detail of the overarching poverty related issues that were identified in this year’s findings and include comments and observations from respondents. The following chart shows the 2021 issues ranked as most important by respondents (top ranked) and those ranked within the top 5.



As the findings show, all of the 17 areas were chosen by respondents as a top ranked issue. Debt was the top ranked issue, closely followed by other income related issues and overall, debt and income related issues accounted for 64% of the issues ranked at number 1.

When asked to comment on why they had ranked a particular issue at number 1, many respondents stated that they found it difficult to choose just 5 issues, believing that each of the choices were heavily intertwined and had a direct impact on each other. For example, debt was regularly linked with low paid employment and the benefit system, and food insecurity was linked with debt. It was evident from respondents’ comments that meaningful and sustainable solutions to poverty would need to

consider all of the issues as a whole and not in isolation.

Those choosing **debt** talked about “an endless cycle” and saw that getting out of debt and poverty was an “impossible task” for families. One respondent stated

“It’s like being indentured servants – limited choices, few opportunities, no mobility. All restricted until debts are paid”

Universal Credit, the ‘two child limit’, low benefit payments, zero hours contracts, low paid and short term employment, housing costs and the general increased cost of living were predominantly cited

as being causes of debt. Respondents found that irregular and unknown income led to families struggling to budget or plan, causing them to be regularly in and out of debt as their income and employment circumstances changed.

“Reliable levels of income and income taken to cover debt is pivotal to how a family may or may not cope with any changes to needs their family may have. Families find themselves in a “catch 22” scenario where they cannot afford the basics such as food or children’s school uniforms and many do not qualify for financial assistance. They are then in the ever increasing ‘working poverty’ bracket, therefore they get into debt and it becomes an ever increasing issue of any income covering interest debt repayment and not the debt itself and never having enough money to save to buy additional items such as uniforms, shoes, birthday presents etc....these are all additional pressures that cannot be covered on a low income”

Respondents’ experiences were that families found the 5-6 week wait for **Universal Credit** to be incredibly difficult. It was recognised that the benefit system allowed for loans against future payments, however, whilst it was necessary, this exacerbated the situation and merely “moved the debt around” as the regular payments received by families would be reduced in order to pay back the loan.

“Families simply do not have as much money as they need to make ends meet, thanks to the two child limit in particular. Benefits haven’t kept up with the cost of living and many people find themselves capped, so they have even less than they need to get by”

In some instances, practitioners said that their families felt unable to seek short term employment as any changes in their circumstances would inevitably mean a 5 week waiting period for Universal Credit each time, which they could not afford.

“Many families are struggling with deductions in Universal Credit and the challenge of managing tight budgets on unpredictable allowances that fluctuate from month to month”

This year’s survey saw more comments relating to **in-work poverty** than in previous surveys.

Practitioners stated that they were seeing an increase in the number of families with working parents experiencing poverty. Of the respondents ranking debt as one of the top 5 issues, 81% stated that more families were being pushed into poverty as the result of job losses or reduced hours.

It is not clear from the survey findings alone whether this is solely due to the pandemic and the impact this has had on zero hours contract, employment and insecure income, or if this is an increasing trend.

Respondents noted that many **low income, working families** could not manage on their basic wage and relied on additional working hours each week. Given the COVID related restrictions that were in place, many of these additional hours were no longer available and under furlough (job retention scheme), some families faced a 20% reduction of income

“Many families have been hit by furlough. This will have added to already existing debts. Families have bought basic things on credit/pay day loans and struggle to make repayments, then incurring further costs”

“Uncertain income and employment affects the ability of these families to engage with early years care and education provisions, as there is no guarantee that they will be able to pay for them”

For those in **less secure employment**, such as zero hours contracts, temporary and seasonal employment, furlough was not applicable and they therefore saw their income either suddenly reduce or stop completely. Respondents commented on the devastation this has caused families and their children and again, has been a major contributor to the increase in debt.

With a reduced income, respondents felt that debt was increasing in areas such as rent and utility arrears and a number also stated that food bank usage had increased because of the rise in debt. Respondents often referred to the rising cost of living versus stagnant, low wages, with many citing that families cannot make ends meet and are reliant on food banks in order to survive.

“Debt can cause mental health issues that impact every aspect of someone’s life. Multiple clients say they feel helpless, bury their head and will not open letters due to the amount of stress this causes. This affects someone’s performance and ability to work, their home life and health and puts them at a great disadvantage”

“We see families struggling with 3 minimum wage jobs and struggling to pay rent and food. Diets become very processed and fatigue becomes the norm”

Food insecurity was chosen as a top 5 poverty related issue. Respondents saw that many more families were either struggling to feed their children adequately or were now using food banks and having to choose between paying rent or buying food.

“They can’t justify the travel and childcare costs. Jobs are lost, therefore benefits in place. This causes family debt, which has an impact on food”

An increase in the number of children who were attending settings or schools hungry was also reported as well as an increase in the numbers of families reliant on free breakfasts and free school meals. This was also reflected in the Children and Young People’s survey findings, with 36% identifying a lack of money to buy lunch or snacks in schools as an issue.

“Youngsters come to youth club hungry and have food. It can be the only meal they’ve had that day”

“There is a continued growth in food poverty and hungry children that are accessing our services. Children hiding food to take home to their parents. Children are unable to concentrate due to hunger. Children not having their basic needs met”

Respondents recognised that children who were hungry lacked the ability to focus and concentrate in lessons and “can’t engage in the support that’s available to them or even enjoy everyday life”. Other comments stated that despite the support available and accessed, families were still struggling to feed their children.

Childcare costs and availability was also cited as an issue by respondents. Whilst comments did focus on the high cost of childcare compared to low income employment, there were also comments on the availability of childcare. These comments focused not on the geographical availability, although this was mentioned, but on the times of day that childcare was available.

For many, those in low income employment do not typically work a 9am – 5pm day, but rather start or finish beyond these times and are more likely to work weekends. The availability of childcare during these hours was extremely limited, if available at all.

“I work with a lot of single mothers who would like to work, but finding childcare is very difficult and also the cost of the childcare when they do find”

Housing was another poverty related issue that was chosen by a significant (28%) proportion of respondents. Concerns were raised around the increasing cost of rent, the lack of social and ‘affordable housing’.

Respondents cited the need for stable, affordable rents, through both social and privately rented housing. Their comments frequently aligned housing costs with increased levels of debt, stress and anxiety.

“Affordable housing just isn’t affordable for most families”

The need for families to feel secure in their homes, without living in fear of eviction was also commented on. Respondents felt that this was crucial to the mental wellbeing of all family members, including children and young people. This issue was also important to children and young people. In their survey, 70% chose ‘being worried they haven’t got enough money to stay in their home’ as an issue for those living in poverty.

“Rent prices are incredibly steep. The local councils refuse to pay anywhere near the rent prices, for example, a £500, 2 bed house for a single mother will result in £374 from the council. Where does the parent find the extra when poverty is already an issue?”

Mental and emotional health

This survey did not specifically ask about the mental and emotional wellbeing of parents/carers and families. However, mental and emotional health was commented on throughout the whole survey, emerging as a significant theme. Overall, 93% of respondents commented on poor mental health and emotional wellbeing. In our previous Annual Surveys, this issue was also prevalent and was regularly raised by respondents, however, this year's survey has seen a significant increase in both the number of comments and the percentage of respondents discussing mental health and emotional wellbeing.

Respondents reported an increase in the number of parents and carers experiencing anxiety, worry and stress and finding themselves unable to cope. They also reported an increase in the number of children and young people experiencing poor mental health and struggling emotionally. This is reflected in the findings from the children and young people's survey, in which they frequently talk about depression, anxiety, stress and sadness.

Practitioners reported that poor emotional health was affecting the whole family, including children and young people, putting enormous strains on relationships between partners, adults and children and the family as a whole. In some cases, young people had left the family home. From the survey findings, it is not known whether these young people were now homeless or have found shelter or accommodation elsewhere.

“Parents and children’s anxiety and mental health has increased dramatically which has also compounded the home situation”

Emotional health was predominantly discussed alongside debt and income related issues. As these issues were ranked most often as a top 5 poverty related issue by respondents, it is perhaps not surprising that this is the case.

“Children have an increased sense of social exclusion, leading to high anxiety levels. They don’t feel good enough and have reduced hope”

“It’s very hard when you have these things hanging over you and can’t see a way out. This then leads to guilt as you know you should be doing more but your brain is taken up. This then impacts on mental health and the connection between families”

“Debt is becoming one of the main reasons our client’s call for support and has progressively increased”

“One family reported that it will take years to pay off the arrears of rent due to having their hours reduced”

Respondents reflected on how stress, anxiety and poor emotional health within the home environment negatively affected children and young people at school. Many commented that children were distracted, unable to focus and less likely to engage with peers or educators when they were worried.

“Children are less inclined to ask to go on a school trip if they know it will cause added stress or a family argument. If the child is stressed about money, this will have an impact on their ability to concentrate and give their best”

“A child takes on a lot of non-verbal and stress in the home and financial pressures are felt by the whole family”

Respondents recognised that debt and income related issues were having a direct impact on the emotional health of parents/carers, children and young people. This was affecting their ability to cope and manage with situations and for children, their ability to engage in education.

“Many children living in poverty are aware of the trials of their parents and carry this burden with them to school. They are distracted, anxious, worried and angry”

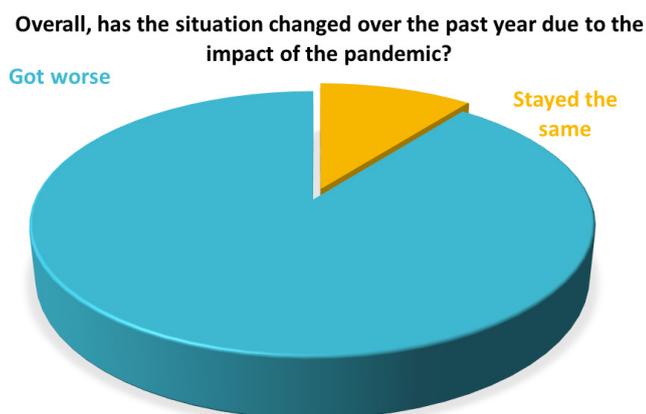
“Low wages impacts on the whole family, through stress of being able to pay for food, rent, bills etc. Low wages leads to poverty which is directly linked to lower educational attainment and poor mental and physical health. This in turn puts children at a disadvantage and continues the cycle of poverty into their adult lives”

It is worth noting that the survey did not ask respondents about their own mental health. However, through a number of the comments given, it is evident that the effects of poverty also has an impact on the emotional health of the dedicated and committed workforce working with children and families. A number of respondents cited that they often feel frustrated, helpless, anxious and despondent about the circumstances that an ever increasing number of the children and families they work with, live in.



The impact of COVID on poverty

The survey this year, necessarily included questions about the impact of COVID on those children, young people and families living in poverty. Based on their experiences and observations, respondents were asked if, overall, the situation for their service users had changed.



With such a large majority of respondents (89%) stating that the situation had worsened, inevitably, their comments covered a wide range of issues, but generally reflected those already identified as being amongst the top 5 poverty related issues in the previous section.

Again, **debt** was commented on the most and was cited as the main reason that the situation had worsened for children, young people and families. Respondents saw a dramatic increase in both the level of debt and the number of families living with or seeking help with debt.

“Many parents have lost their jobs which has negatively impacted on their finances, but they have had the additional expense of children being at home, heating being on, more food, children wanting snacks or parents purchasing tools to assist them to home educate”

Of those citing debt, 81% stated that more families were being pushed into poverty because of loss of income, employment, loss of additional working hours and an increase in the necessary expenditure of families being at home (food, utilities and data). This combination was most often cited as the reason for the increase in debt.

“Lots of families now in debt and facing years trying to pay it back”

“Parents are going without heat, food and clothes to make sure their kids have everything they need”

“Money, through loss of jobs is affecting access to food and heating. Debt is rising”

For those parents/carers who were still employed, many experienced a 20% reduction in their income under furlough (Job retention scheme). For numerous families in low paid or part time employment, this reduction had a significant impact on their ability to manage financially.

COVID restrictions also had an impact on childcare for many families. Under COVID measures many settings closed and for those using informal **childcare**, such as family or friends, this too was either severely restricted or had to cease.

“Parents have had to give up work due to childcare while schools and nurseries have been closed”

Respondents cited that for those parents/carers who were still allowed to go out to work, without childcare, this was not always possible. As a result, many families had to voluntarily give up their employment in order to care of their children. For those who were able to work remotely, many struggled to care for young children, home school older children and afford or have access to additional data and devices. Again, respondents stated that families had to make difficult choices between working and childcare.

As in other sections, **Universal Credit** was frequently referenced. Respondents saw many of their families’ employment circumstances suddenly change. These changes prompted new UC claims, leading to a 5 week waiting period before claimants received additional monies. Many working families were already struggling to make ends meet and living ‘hand to mouth’. This waiting period without wages or benefits, drove many families further into debt.

Respondents also commented that the number of pupils eligible for free school meals had risen sharply, child development had been impeded and there was an increase in the number of families with inadequate housing and an increase in the number of requests for temporary accommodation.

Respondents reported an increase in **youth homelessness**, with the breakdown of family relationships being most commonly cited. These were often intensified by lockdown, lack of income and increased financial and emotional stress. There was also concern that training and employment opportunities for young people had been lost or severely restricted and that this would have a long term impact on their future.

For those respondents (11%) who thought that the situation had remained the same during the past year, they generally commented that the full impact of COVID was as yet unseen.

“Difficult to answer as furlough has plugged a gap and we haven’t had access to our customer base as we would normally”

“Nothing has changed. Mothers still can’t find work, access childcare etc.”

“Difficult to say as I don’t think we have seen the full scale impact yet”

The survey asked respondents if they thought more families would be pushed into poverty because of the employment situation during COVID.

The majority of respondents stated that many parents had lost their jobs during the pandemic. Reasons for this included the inability to travel to work because of reduced availability of public transport, loss of seasonal work and zero hours contracts, lack of available childcare and redundancy. There was also a heavy reliance on work within the hospitality and service industry, all of which remained closed during the pandemic.

For those working families who were eligible for furlough, this did appear to give them a small amount of financial certainty. Although their wages had decreased to 80%, their income was stable throughout furlough. However, for the majority of respondents’ families, a 20% income reduction under furlough was devastating and pushed families deeper into debt.

Respondents did report that as the furlough scheme ends, families are experiencing more unstable income, reduced hours and negative changes to existing employment contracts compared to pre-COVID. They stated that this was further exacerbated by the long 5 week wait for Universal Credit.

“After furlough, security will end. Furlough to redundancy. Time between scheme ending and securing other employment/benefits will push families into poverty”

ARE MORE FAMILIES BEING PUSHED INTO POVERTY AS A RESULT OF JOB LOSSES,
REDUCTION IN HOURS OR AS FURLOUGH FINISHES?



Overall, whilst respondents recognised that everyone has been affected by COVID and the impact of restrictions, they believed that those living in poverty had been affected the most. They are seeing more and more families losing their jobs and those who were just managing each month, now unable to cope financially.

“Many parents have lost their jobs due to being unable to work during the pandemic. For those who have been high risk themselves or their children have been in the vulnerable group, they had to stop working a year ago. Some parents haven’t been able to work as many hours because of having to look after children during lockdowns or because they have lost childcare (e.g. grandparents in the vulnerable category). This financial hardship has been sustained for over a year. Of course this is going to have pushed them further into poverty, and it’s not going to be easy for families to get a job when up against

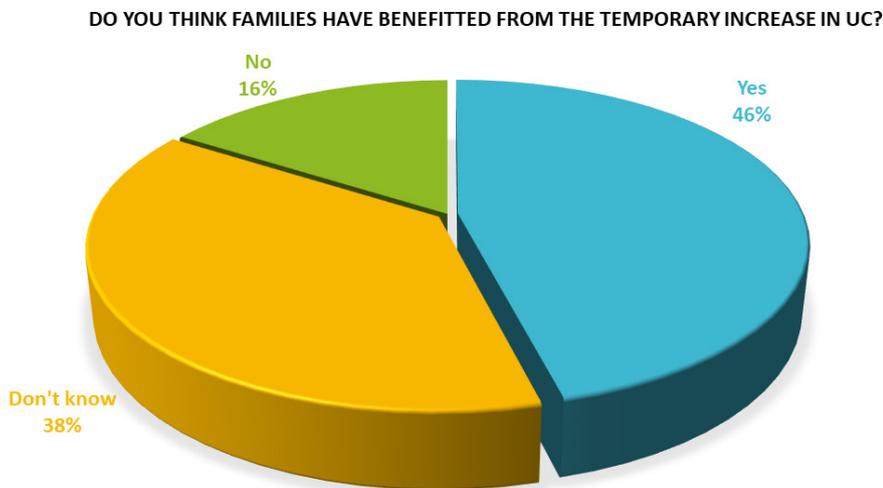
everyone else who’s also been impacted”

The crisis had highlighted existing issues and for the majority of the respondents’ families, these issues have become more severe, widened the inequality gap and placed an increasing number of families into poverty. They believe that the pandemic has put an unprecedented strain on those living in poverty and the consequences are likely to be long lasting for children, young people and families.



Universal Credit temporary uplift

In April 2020, during the initial COVID lockdown restrictions, the UK Government introduced a temporary £20 per week increase to Universal Credit. This increase was expected to continue until the end of April 2021 and has now been extended to September 2021. Our survey sought to understand if this increase had helped families and what impact, if any, it would have on families when the increase comes to an end.



Based on their experience and observations, respondents were asked to comment on the difference the temporary increase had made to families. Their comments show that the increase was welcomed and the benefits to families have been far reaching.

“For many families who live permanently on the edge of extreme poverty this increase in income has been a lifeline”

They found that the increase has resulted in children having more, or better quality food, warmer homes, that it had helped to reduce financial stress and anxiety, narrowed the gap between rent costs and housing allowance and for some families, reduced the likelihood of them sinking further into debt.

“A single Dad of 3 children reported that without the £20 a week, he simply wouldn't have been able to sufficiently feed his children. He is already concerned how he will cope when the money ends”

Whilst respondents did recognise that the temporary increase has been hugely beneficial and had significantly helped families, providing a 'safety net' for some, they also highlighted that, on its own, the UC increase is not enough. Families are still struggling to buy food, pay bills and cover their rent and associated housing costs. In many circumstances, the increase did not cover all of the costs of additional food, utilities and data usage during the lockdowns and debt had increased.

“Many families who have struggled and been forced to learn to live on the bare minimum, this £20 can be almost a week’s worth of meals”

Practitioners were also asked what they thought might happen when the temporary £20 per week increase comes to an end. Overall, respondents stated that their families will struggle to cope both financially and emotionally. There was particular concern about the number of families who are currently in debt, having to go further into debt and also concern for those families who are currently “only just managing to get by”. Respondents believed that the number of families experiencing debt and rent arrears for the first time, would also increase.

“The impact of taking it away will be devastating, as costs are going up and so many people have stagnant wages and fewer hours than before”

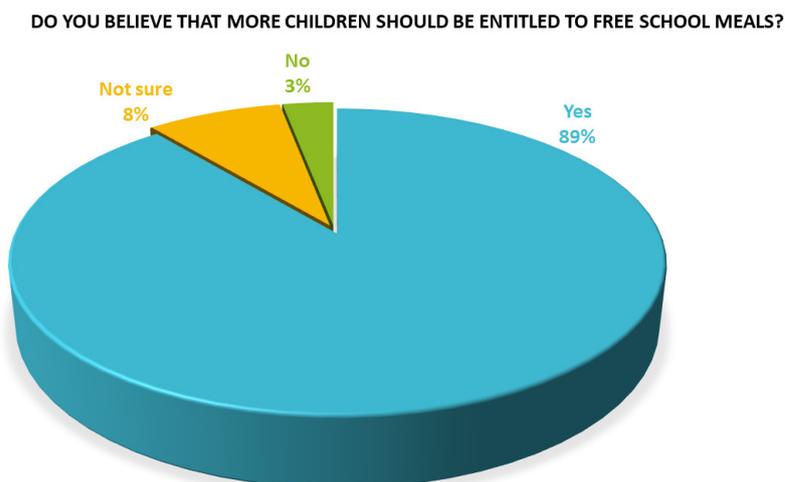
Following the removal of the UC uplift, respondents are expecting the following:

- Increased number of families needing to use food banks
- Increase in debt
- Increase in rent arrears
- Poorer home environment, including colder homes
- Greater anxiety, stress and humiliation for both adults and children
- More children struggling at school
- More children being hungry



Free school meals

The survey asked respondents to consider if the Welsh Government extension of free school meals (FSM) provided during COVID restrictions, both term time and through the holidays, had helped families. An overwhelming number of respondents, 95%, believed that this provision did help.



Respondents were also asked if they thought more children should be entitled to FSM and if so, why they thought this was important.

When asked why free school meals provision should be extended, comments focused on a number of areas: hunger; nutrition; eligibility and in-work poverty; educational attainment; further education; equality; inclusivity and removal of the stigma, real or otherwise, of receiving FSM. The majority of respondents cited at least 2 of these issues in their individual responses.

“Hungry children can’t learn”

The need to **reduce hunger** and improve nutrition was important to respondents. FSM was regularly cited as a means to improve concentration, behaviour and nutrition, which in turn, would lead to improved engagement and educational attainment. Respondents believed that “no child should go hungry in 2021” and that for many children, a meal at school was often the only meal they would receive that day.

“Some children will have toast for breakfast and for an evening meal”

“I see a lot of children with very little in their lunch boxes. These choices can be from a single croissant to a bread sandwich. It’s shocking”

“First part of education is feeding people. Even work houses fed people”

Many respondents commented on the **increase of in-work** poverty and stated the current FSM eligibility criteria was too low.

“I think every child should be entitled to school meals. Looking at pupils across the school I find it difficult to understand why more children are not eligible, there is a whole band of families just above the threshold who struggle greatly”

Respondents found that there were more children in need of FSM than were receiving them. This was

commented on by a large number of respondents and reflected the findings that 89% believed that FSM should be available to more children.

“I think that even when parents are working and earning above the wage for FSM, it doesn’t mean that they aren’t struggling. They often don’t get other financial support and FSM would leave a little over for car maintenance for example which can be an important factor in being able to continue to work”

Respondents also highlighted other benefits of FSM, such as helping to reduce debt, reducing the need to use food banks and allowing access to pupil grants and other financial assistance.

“The evidence shows that at least half the children in Wales living below the poverty line are not eligible for FSM and therefore are not eligible for other benefits like uniform grants. This is a gross and unacceptable inequality. As the main pilot for holiday hunger, our free children’s community café feeds 70-90 children and young people after school each day”

Eligibility was also linked with comments on equality, inclusivity, stigma and in some cases, emotional wellbeing. Respondents believed that increasing

the eligibility threshold would allow more children to receive FSM and therefore reduce inequality. It would improve inclusivity and “be a great equaliser for pupils comparing themselves to others”. With more pupils receiving FSM, it would “diminish the stigma for those who are on it”. The findings from the children and young people’s survey also support this and overall, they wanted to see free school meals for every child.

“With so many children growing up below or just on the poverty line, and tens of thousands experiencing material deprivation and food insecurity as well, it is unconscionable that we allow any child to go hungry at school. Too many families struggle to afford the costs of school, and children feel excluded and left out when they’re unable to enjoy the same food as their friends. I believe there should be universal free meals for all learners at school, because it is proven to boost attainment, health, inclusion and wellbeing”

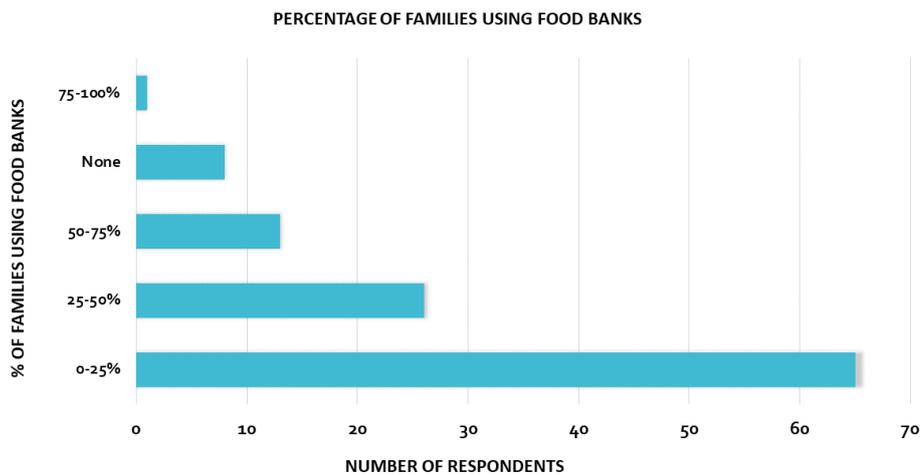
Free school meals in **further education** was also an area highlighted in the comments. It was noted that whilst the EMA grant offers £30 per week to pupils, for many, the poor financial situation at home resulted in “a lot of young people give this directly to the parents and are often still without lunch.”



Food banks

The survey sought to gain an understanding of the extent of food bank usage amongst the families that respondents work with. As previously identified, this is a minimum of 33,000 families.

Respondents were asked to give an approximation of the percentage of their families using food banks at least once a month.

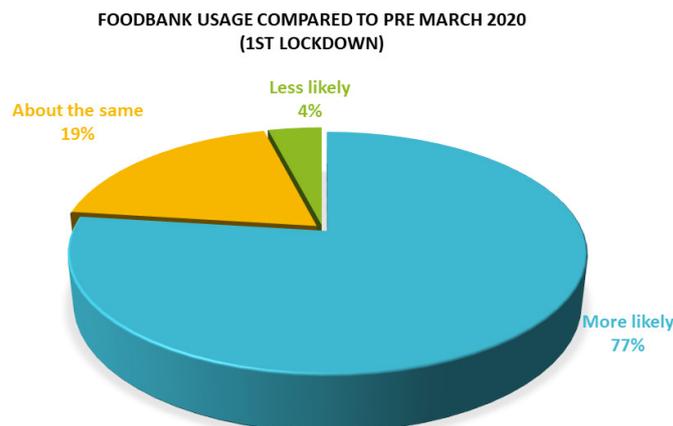


Given the limitations of a survey and the approximation of figures, an accurate figure is not possible. However, based on the findings and respondents comments, it is clear that food bank usage is widespread and a regular necessity for families.

We asked respondents if the majority of their families were more or less likely to use a food bank, compared to before the first restrictive COVID measures came into force (March 2020).

A large majority of respondents, 77%, stated that the families they work with are now more likely to use to a food bank, with 19% seeing the same need and only 4 % of families less likely to use a food bank.

Respondents reported that they were increasingly making **referrals to food banks** and advising families that they were eligible. Many families who were struggling and in desperate need of assistance did not realise that they could receive assistance from food banks. This was particularly true of first time food bank users.



“A number of my families didn’t know they were able to go to foodbanks and thought it was for the unemployed only”

Many comments identified the **stigma** around using food banks as being a barrier to assistance and stated that families were waiting until they were in crisis before using them. For many, this wait had pushed them further into debt. One respondent recognised that a number of families were not accessing food banks because of this and were in the process of “revamping how food banks are promoted”.

Numerous reasons were given for the **increase in food bank usage**, including loss of employment, reduction of income (zero and reduced hours, furlough), increase in household expenditure during lock downs and Universal Credit.

“Loss of earnings through COVID, then a 5 week wait in benefits to arrive, at a minimum. 5 weeks of no money, food banks are the only option”

“Due to universal credit taking so long a number of families have relied on local food banks to feed their families”

Universal Credit was regularly cited as being a major factor in the number of families having to access food banks. In particular, to cover the minimum 5 week waiting time for payment.

Respondents also reported seeing an increase in usage from families who did not qualify for free school meals. Comments indicate that these were more likely to be first time users of food banks and although previously struggling and just managing to cope, the additional cost of children at home during lockdown had necessitated their use of food banks.

“Working families who have been furloughed or laid off have asked for help for the first time”

“During lockdown we had families accessing food parcels at school who had never accessed prior, this has continued”

“Many families approach us in a desperate situation asking for foodbank vouchers”

“Our families have relied on them when working hours were reduced or when replacement childcare could not be found and they had to end work”

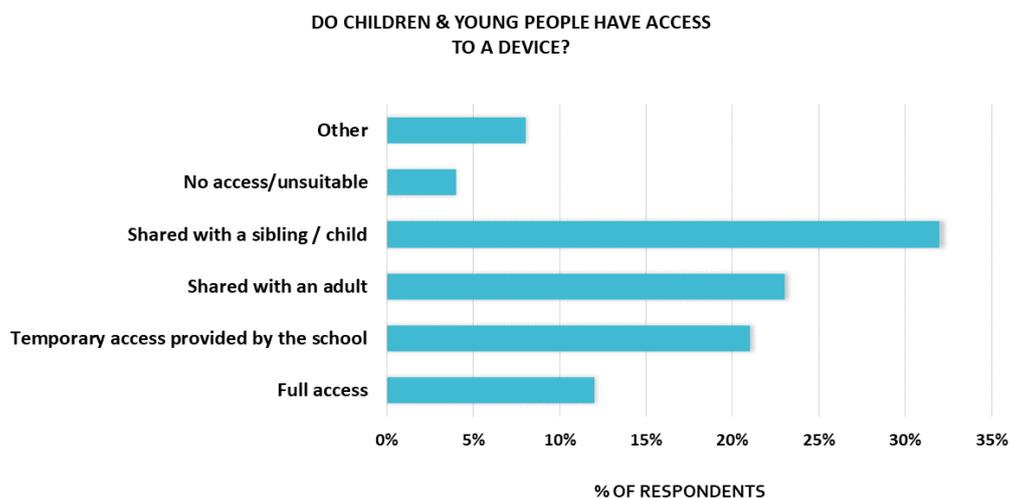
Some respondents raised the issue of poor access to food banks in **rural areas**. All of these comments related to the distance that families needed to travel and for some, the cost of travel was too prohibitive.

For those that saw food bank usage either remain the same or decrease, some commented that they were no longer making referrals or providing advice as the families were now able to contact services directly.



Digital inclusion

In our short survey, *COVID-19 and the impact on low income and disadvantaged families*, conducted in July/August 2020, we asked if digital inclusion was an issue for children, young people and families. The findings showed that it was, with 64% of respondents identifying this as an issue. Just under a year later, 59% of respondents cite that this is still an issue for the majority of children and young people that they work with and a further 21% stating that current access to a device was temporary and only possible through loan schemes. These figures indicate that digital inclusion remains an issue for large numbers of children, young people and families across Wales.



In this survey, we had the opportunity to explore this further and asked about **both device and data access**. We asked respondents to base their answers on whether the majority of the children and young people they work with had access to a device and data.

The findings show 55% of respondents stated that the majority of the children, young people and families they work with had to share a device, either with a sibling or an adult and a further 11% indicated no access to a device or that the device was unsuitable.

Comments relating to shared devices showed that families had struggled to arrange shared device time for their children and often found this to be an impossible task. On-line lesson times clashing with siblings'; children distracted during their device

time as other siblings were doing "fun stuff and activities"; and finding quiet time for concentration were amongst the issues cited.

"One family with 3 children, all with differing needs and only one laptop to share. Made online learning difficult for all"

Sharing devices appeared to be particularly difficult for families with older children as school work required them to spend a greater amount of time on their device. Respondents advised that families were regularly sharing devices between adults and 2 or 3 children. Comments also included difficulties with adults working remotely, as they also needed access to a device for work, but had to juggle device time with their children.

It was not just the **sharing of devices** that was problematic, but also the **suitability** of those devices. For some children and young people, the only device available to them was a parent's smart phone. Respondents cited that children were trying to complete school work on this type of device, eventually finding it too difficult and becoming frustrated and disengaged.

“This is something that is an ongoing problem for homework tasks regardless of the lockdowns”

Even with access to a device, however limited or unsuitable, children still struggled to undertake school work at home without **additional equipment**. For example, some activities and lessons required a printer. One respondent highlighted that because of this issue, they were now providing printer, ink and paper to families.

Geography, location and school catchment areas will, inevitably, have had a bearing on the number of children and young people who were in need of a device. This would therefore have an impact on local services' ability to fund and provide equipment. In some areas, the need was low, whilst in others, it was very high.

One respondent shared the findings from a survey conducted in their school for reception to year 6 children.

- **5% stated they did not have appropriate connectivity (wifi)**
- **16% did not have access to a device (Chromebook, laptop, phone, ipad, gaming console)**
- **44% do not have access to an appropriate device to be able to complete home learning**

This school was able to provide devices through a loan scheme and also distributed 104 donated devices that families were allowed to keep. The school also provided Mifi units.

Respondents recognised **loan schemes** and their value and indeed, in many cases were involved in either a local scheme through individual schools, communities and local authorities or the national 'Donate IT Wales' scheme. Many children and young people received devices through these

schemes. However, nearly half of the respondents also raised issues relating to some loan schemes. Respondents were concerned that those who were most in need had not received a device, either because of difficulties engaging with services or because, in a number of cases, devices were only loaned to those in receipt of free school meals.

“We heard from children in need who were turned down for help because they didn't qualify for FSM”

“Many kids were waiting the whole lockdown for a laptop which never arrived”

Many commented on the quality and appropriateness of the devices their families received, citing that a large number of loaned devices had technical issues. This resulted in children and young people still not having access to support services and on-line lessons. Families did not have the technical knowledge to fix issues, even the smallest ones, meaning that devices could not be used. Where families did notify providers of the issues, they were advised that replacements were not possible as all available devices were already out on loan.

“Others were loaned chrome books that barely worked, or were working off tablets when they really needed a keyboard set up”

Respondents also commented on the length of time it took for devices to be offered or loaned to children and young people, with some stating that devices still had not been received (survey was completed April/May 2020).

Whilst issues regarding loan schemes were cited by a significant number of respondents, there were also numerous examples of **positive initiatives** and work to address the lack of access to devices. Examples were given of funding and delivery partnerships between charities, statutory services, communities, schools and local businesses.

“Young parents with school age children have found it difficult to support their children digitally with only a mobile phone. We have been successful in finding funding to buy some laptops and data for them”

Respondents commented that a number of services had changed how they worked during the pandemic. In some instances, support services had offered extended times, including evenings, thus avoiding the struggle with shared access, schools were visiting families and providing paper based work where device access was an issue.

“As a charity, over 70% of children we supported received a laptop/tablet or wifi. Parents/carers have told us that without it they wouldn’t have been able to access home schooling, or speak to friends & family. Many report that before, they were trying to complete school work using Mum’s smart phone”

Lack of device access also raised other issues. Respondents were concerned that children and young people were falling further behind in their education; were more **disengaged**; and becoming increasingly isolated from their peers. There were also concerns for adult family members who, prior to the restrictions were accessing face to face support services, but were now unable to do so. These included mental and emotional support and domestic abuse recovery programmes.

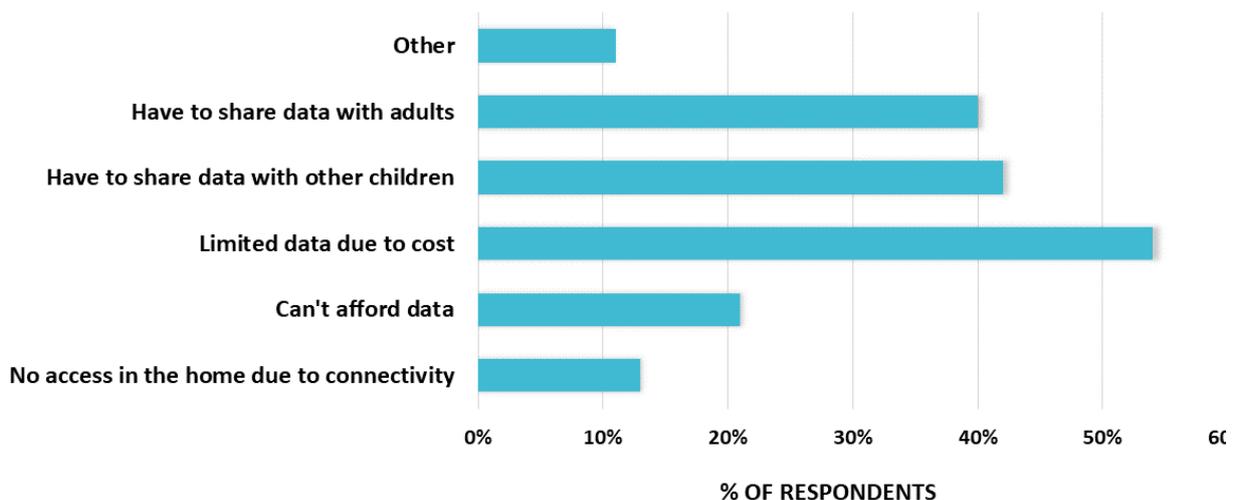
“As a school we provided 20% of our pupils with devices and wifi. Many pupils under normal circumstances do not have access to digital devices which makes it a two tier system for school pupils”

The survey also explored access to data. **Affordability and availability of data** was raised by respondents in our report *COVID-19 and the impact on low income and disadvantaged families (August 2020)*. This report found that a lack of data was an issue for almost 70% of families that the respondents worked with and in particular the ability to afford data. Respondents commented that whilst children and young people were receiving devices, without data these devices could not be used.

Based on those findings, our 2021 survey asked the respondents whether the majority of the children and young people they work with could access data.

Respondents were asked to choose from the above categories and tick all areas that applied to the majority of their families. The category of other included accessing data through community hubs, although this was not always possible due to COVID restrictions.

CAN CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE ACCESS DATA?



Respondents reported that for the majority of their families, **affordability** of data remains the biggest issue. Many more children and young people now have access to a device, but parents are struggling to afford the amount of data needed. Under the loan schemes, some children did receive dongles or mifi, but this was not necessarily included in all schemes. Some parents were advised that they could apply for additional data, dongles or mifi via a number of local authority or third sector schemes, however this needed to be done on-line. Given the affordability issues, not all parents were able to do this. In previous sections of these findings, respondents commented on the need to buy data as one of the factors that added to the debts of families.

Many respondents commented that children and young people were only able to access on-line lessons occasionally as families needed to 'share the data around'. Children and young people also struggled to carry out on-line research, often a requirement for lessons and homework.

“Some parents did not have enough data for the children to do their work”

As support services moved on-line, those parents and carers unable to afford the additional data were also affected. This included parenting support services, recovery programmes and mental health services.

“Being able to attend virtual parenting groups is limited”

For young people in further education, undertaking training or looking for employment, access to devices and data was essential. However, financial support for this was often very limited or not available to them at all.

“Access to on line courses was limited due to data or wifi”

Respondents stated that some organisations did move information to their facebook pages. This was more accessible to parents using smart phones or other small screen devices. Whilst this change did significantly help some families, respondents still commented that “completing forms on a smart phone with limited data is not ideal”.

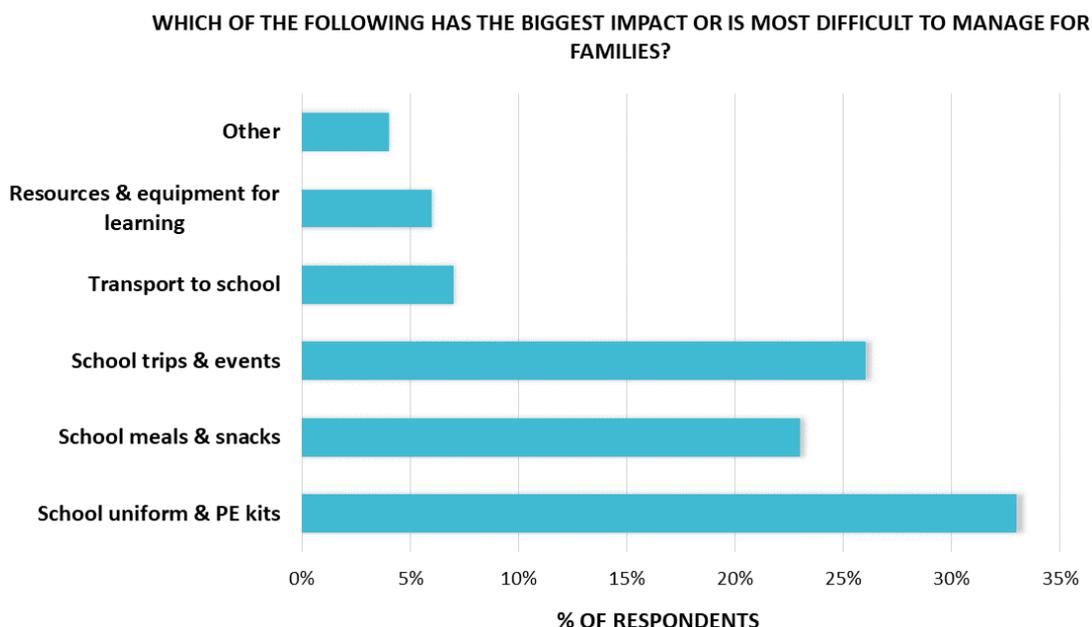
There were also many comments on **connectivity** for those families who could access data. Issues with poor and intermittent access were cited, especially where multiple devices were being used or in rural areas. One respondent stated: “It is simply not possible for all CYP and their parents to all be online working at the same time”.

“We can refer to Job Centre and Communities for Work for digital support, funding or devices. However there is a referral process and it is not a quick fix solution which some customers need”

Overall, respondents commented that schools, third sector, statutory and other organisations have worked hard in difficult and changing circumstances, to identify and provide families with devices and, where possible, data. However, large gaps remain and given that more services are moving to on-line access only and children and young people will still need provision for home work, training and employment, this is an ongoing issue post Covid.

Education

Based on their experiences and observations, respondents were asked if they thought poverty affects children and young people's experience of school and learning and which aspect of education had the greatest financial impact on families.



The topics given above are areas that are known to have a financial impact on families and have been highlighted by the [Price of Pupil Poverty project](#). This project provides a resource for education providers on how to reduce the cost of the school day. The project is funded by Welsh Government and delivered by Children in Wales.

Given respondents' comments throughout the survey, it is not surprising that school uniforms, trips and school meals are reported as being amongst the areas that families most struggle with financially.

Nearly all of the respondents (94%) believed that poverty did affect children and young people's experience of school and learning.

Their comments predominantly fell into 3 main areas;

- Bullying
- Poor emotional wellbeing
- Hunger

Respondents identified that children and young people were regularly bullied because they live in poverty. Bullying and poor emotional wellbeing were regularly cited together by respondents. They stated that children and young who lived in poverty were mainly bullied for the following reasons:

- They were in receipt of free school meals
- Could not afford to take part in activities (school trips, clubs, charity and donation events at school)
- Did not have the correct uniform or wore poorly fitted or "tatty" uniforms
- Did not have mobile phones or devices
- Did not take part in activities out of school (cinema, "hanging out", birthday parties or proms etc.)

These findings mirror those from the children and young people's survey in which 73% of them stated that being bullied and looked down on was an issue for children living in poverty.

Respondents commented that many children and young people who live in poverty experience **low self-esteem**, had lower life expectations, were more worried, anxious and stressed than other children, felt less able to achieve, were often isolated from their peers and were more likely to be disengaged from the whole school experience.

“Poverty affects every aspect of education, from belonging and wellbeing, to participation and attainment. Even if children are well cared for by their parents, poverty holds them back because they cannot join in like better-off children can, and must forego many of the expected things that modern childhood should entail”

“Children are very aware if they have hand me down uniforms. Some children are provided with snacks, whereas others can’t afford 20p a day for an apple. School trips are extremely expensive and some parents rather keep their child at home because they can’t afford to send them”

Inequity and the lack of opportunities, choice and experiences for children and young people living in, or on the edge of poverty were cited by almost all of the respondents. This included the lack of opportunity to go on school trips and have a shared experience with peers. Reference was also made to the lack of opportunities to attend Welsh medium schools. For a number of families, Welsh medium schools were often a distance away and transport costs were either difficult or prohibitive.

“Poverty does affect education. They can’t afford school uniforms so don’t feel like they fit in with peers, which then means they don’t engage. If they are hungry, they can’t take in the information and learn. If they can’t afford travel, they can’t physically get to school. If they can’t afford school trips, they miss out on those learning experiences, and again feel separate from their peers. It is all very simple, and all very sad”

Other areas that were referenced included children **not attending school** during ‘dress down days’ or at the end of term, when traditionally presents are given to the teacher. Both of these had financial implications for children and their families and to ‘save face’, they would rather not attend school than have to explain their reasons why they couldn’t

take part. A few respondents also aligned this with regular absences on PE days due to a lack of kit or equipment.

One respondent summarised many of the points made in this section:

“They have less opportunities available to them, due the costs of activities or equipment. If childcare is an issue within the family, they may be expected to assist with this, thus not allowing them the time to access activities. The material things that wealthier families have e.g. WiFi, electronic devices, fridges full of food, choice of food, regular availability to uniform, school equipment and leisure/outside school clothes, equipment for hobbies, such as sporting equipment, art, design, music, money to travel and visit places of interest, money to go on holiday, access to a car, or transport.

Poverty can in turn affect a family’s health and wellbeing and other factors, such as secure housing, transport, etc which can further impact on a young person’s educational opportunities”

Respondents also identified that **hunger** had an impact of children’s ability to learn, citing that hunger and poor nutrition led to a lack of concentration and motivation, poor focus and poor behaviour. For many, those children who were not eligible for free school meals were more likely to experience hunger.

A number of respondents also felt that bullying, poor learning experiences and factors that reduce attainment levels, often led to a **generational cycle of poverty**. Their experiences showed the parents of children and young people living in poverty had themselves had similar negative experiences at school. This often reduced their ability to value education or have the confidence to support their children through education. Respondents believed that parents’ own educational disengagement was more likely to lead to their children being disengaged.

“Our local childcare provision has identified that children behaving badly are hungry. Feed them and behaviour and therefore participation in learning activities improves”

Early years: A sector specific summary of responses

The findings from respondents who work in early years have been included throughout this report. However, a summary of the findings relating specifically to this sector are provided below. The ‘early years’ are a crucial time for children. Children grow rapidly and both their physical and mental development are affected by the environment in which they find themselves in. The first three years of life are particularly important for healthy development due to the fast rate of neurological growth that occurs during this period. There is an abundance of research showing that investing in the first years of a child’s life improves outcomes for them throughout the rest of their lives.

In order to understand the early years and the development of any particular child, consideration needs to be given to three aspects; the child as an individual, their environment, and the socioeconomic culture which surrounds the child and family (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2012).

Every child is unique and their needs will reflect this; however the quality of the environment/s and the socioeconomic culture around children greatly impact their early experiences.

Those practitioners working with children 0-5 years old and families have highlighted their concerns and views which are summarised here.

The top 5 poverty related issues cited included:

- Impact of benefits
- Low wages
- Debt
- Childcare cost and availability
- Housing barriers and rising cost of living

It is clear that every part of life has been strained due to the pandemic and problems have been magnified. 76% of practitioners said that more families are being pushed into poverty by the Coronavirus crisis; due to low wages; reduced hours, zero hour contract alongside higher living costs. All families have struggled.

There is a clear call for more affordable childcare; with particular focus on expanding the childcare offer to younger children.

“Those families who were just managing are now really struggling”

“Giving every child a level playing field”

“No child should go hungry”

82% of practitioners working with the under 5’s are in agreement that free school meals should be available to all children.

When asked if poverty affects children’s learning and development; 94% cited yes and highlighted the huge impact hunger can have on all areas of learning and development. Our youngest children are developing at a rapid pace and the first few years of life are crucial to long term development and set the pattern for life long habits. If we want to make a difference we need to start with our youngest children and give them the ‘best start in life’

All children and families should and need access to vital resources to support their learning and development; offering both choices and fair opportunities.

“Children notice inequalities early and impacts confidence and self-esteem”

The home environment is so important and even more so for our youngest children. It is where they should find safety; love and food and get their basic needs met (Maslow’s hierarchy of needs).

Practitioners are calling for ‘help for all families’; making sure every family has enough money to live regardless of whether or not they are in employment.

‘Support for the whole family’; parents need to be supported in their role and helped to provide those basic needs for their child/ren.

“...it’s very hard to focus on parenting and giving your children full attention when you have these things hanging over you and can’t see a way out. ... This then impacts on mental health and the connection between families”

Failing to support the needs of the youngest children not only lets them down but also enables problems to develop and accumulate.

Key themes emerging from the findings:

- More affordable childcare; with particular focus on expanding the childcare offer to support the rise of in work poverty.
- Expand FSM to all under 5’s.
- Help for all families; offering choice and opportunities
- A recognition that the early years play a vital role in life long health and development outcomes.



Tackling poverty and its impact – Respondents' views

The final question to participants asked them to identify one thing they would change if they were the leader of the Welsh Government. Over 78% of those who took part in the survey, answered this question. Summaries of their answers are given below. The first 6 bullet points show the changes/comments most often cited by respondents.

- Universal **free school meals**, including FE and HE. This would help to reduce the stigma of poverty and relieve family finances. Trial FSM in 1 local authority area and review the impact. Increase the existing FSM allowance and eligibility threshold.
 - **FSM** during all holidays for those eligible (not universal during holidays).
 - **Free school uniforms** to those on benefits. Increase eligibility threshold to ensure working, low income families were able to access this.
 - **Increase benefits** ensuring that they cover families' basic needs. Benefit system should automatically review individual's situation to ensure the claimant is receiving all of their entitlements.
 - **Universal credit**. Make the uplift permanent. Devolve the benefit system to stop respective governments blaming each other and changing nothing. Stop the 5 week waiting time.
 - **Increase minimum wage**. Increasing the living wage is not enough as employers are not required to conform to this. All wages should be enough to ensure basic needs are met.
- “Create a child poverty strategy with binding targets and make it the number one policy priority”*
- End **zero hours contracts** or provide more flexible financial support for parents on zero hours.
 - **Device and data access** should be free for all children and young people living in poverty, ensuring they have the same opportunities as other children. This should include FE and HE
 - Good quality, cheaper **childcare**. Free childcare for all ages to support parents on UC into better employment or education. Childcare needs to be more accessible, with more flexible hours. This would encourage more flexible working and support shift patterns
 - **Free breakfast and after school clubs** for those living in poverty, with extended hours into evening to allow for a range of shift patterns
 - **Extra curricular activities** should be free. These increase confidence and self-esteem.
- “Ensure digital devices including data/free wifi are available to all pupils. Provide quiet secure places to work and online, out of school hours mentors to support pupils their learning”*
- **Free public transport** for those living in poverty, enabling to afford to travel to work
 - Provide more **social housing** that is affordable to families living in poverty and ensure RSL properties are fit for purpose.
 - Address the **stigma of poverty**
 - Remove outdated means tested frameworks. These are no longer effective and many families are missed.

- **Remove council tax**
- **Provide training opportunities** for all, not just those who are unemployed.

“Introduce a constant advertising campaign to educate people about the impact of poverty. Very sad to say, but unfortunately there are people in society who do not realise the constant fight and struggle families in poverty face day to day”

- Ensure **equality** for those living in poverty
- Provide free, timely and accessible **debt management support**
- **Expansion of open access play work.** Needs radical and long term commitment in all of the most deprived communities in Wales. This lessens the terrible, lifelong damage done to children from never ending poverty

- Ensure **funding to community projects and centres.** They need to continue support families and communities.
- **More third sector support.** They pick up the pieces.

“Don’t be political, poverty is bigger than that”

“It’s not about one thing – there needs to be a sea change in attitudes and society needs to change with it”



Children & Young People's Survey Findings

About the survey

Through this survey, we wanted to gain a greater understanding of which poverty related issues are important to children and young people and the impact these issues may have on their lives. It is important to note that dissemination of the survey did not specifically target children and young people who live in poverty and/or deprived areas. The survey was widely promoted and disseminated across Wales, through Children in Wales' membership, networks, bulletins, Young Wales and through the networks of our external colleagues.

This survey ran concurrently with the practitioner and professionals' survey and was available for completion over a period of 5 weeks from 26 April – 30 May 2021. The survey was completed anonymously by respondents and available to all ages.

Children and young people were asked to consider poverty related issues in the following areas:

- Money
- School
- Home
- Community
- Poverty in the context of COVID

Each of the above categories provided multiple choice options, as well as the opportunity to provide open comments about how each issue would affect children who lived in poverty.

All questions were asked in the third person and the survey provided children and young people

with careful and simple explanations of specific terminology, such as what was meant by the terms 'poverty' and 'debt'. These terms, whilst simplistic in explanation, provided explanations that could be understood by all participant age groups.

At the end of the survey, children and young people were asked to provide examples of positive practice that they believed had helped tackle poverty in their area. Our final question for the children and young people asked, if they were the First Minister, what would they do to stop poverty happening.

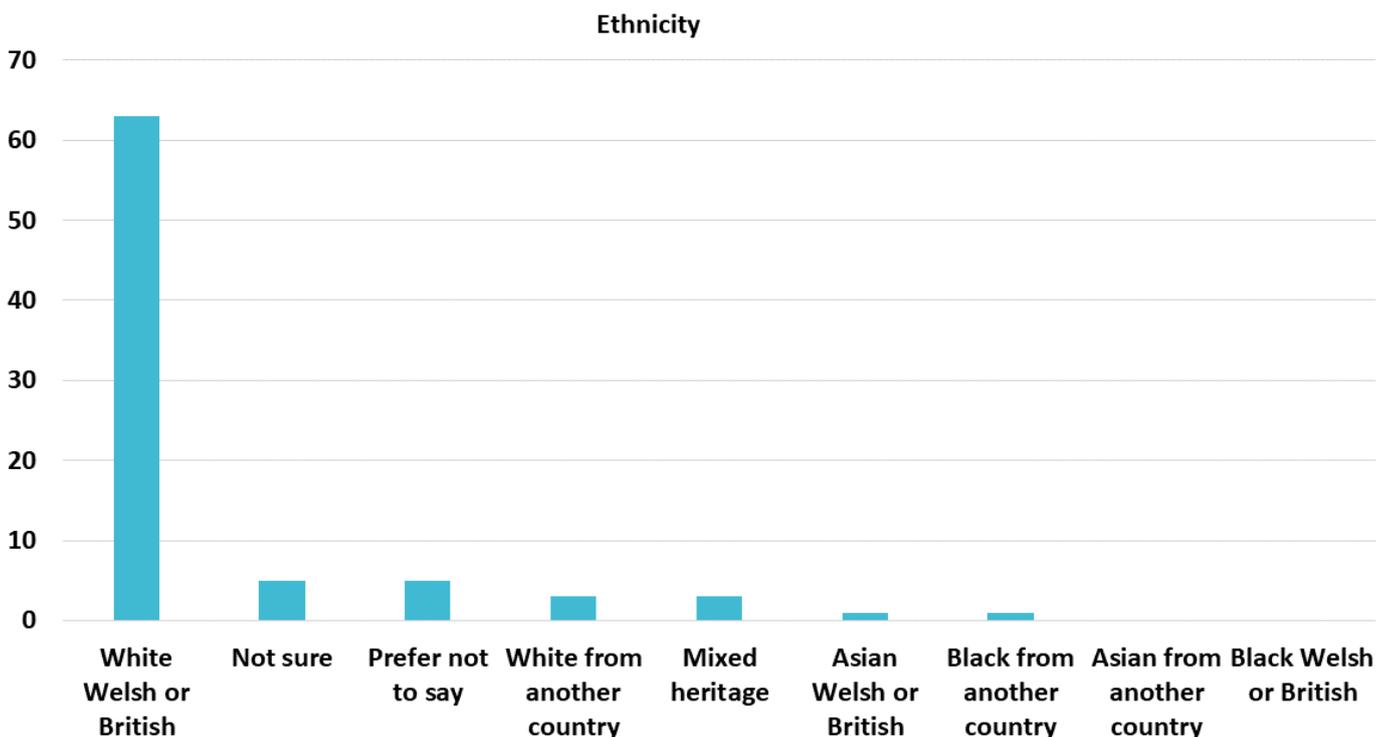
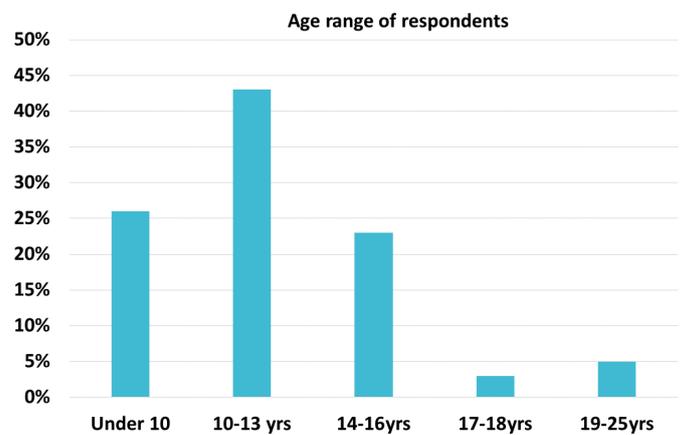
Who responded

The survey did not ask children and young people if they themselves lived in poverty. Instead, the survey sought their views on how poverty might affect different aspects of children's lives. However, given some of the responses throughout the survey, it is evident that at least 34% of those responding are currently living in, or are on, the edge of poverty.

A total of 82 children and young people responded from 13 Local Authority areas across Wales. Those areas with the largest numbers of responses were Powys, Monmouthshire and Newport. Their ages ranged from under 10 years up to 25 years.

Of the respondents, 87% described themselves as not having a disability, 9% preferred not to say and 4% stated that they did have a disability. Children and young people were also asked about their ethnicity and these findings are shown in the chart below.

Given the small percentages of those identifying as disabled, black, Asian or in minority ethnic groups, it is not possible to robustly analyse if the answers were significantly different from those given by other respondents.



Findings

Introduction

Overall, as with the practitioner and professionals' survey, the findings from the children and young people's survey are stark. They show a picture of many children struggling at home, school and in their communities. Stress, worry, anxiety, sadness and depression were words regularly used by children and young people throughout the whole survey.

Poverty related bullying at school was identified as a specific issue by 73% of respondents and commented on by 85%. Children and young people also talked about debt, the impact of having no money, being socially isolated and about hunger. Throughout the survey, 3 themes emerged.

- Poor emotional health of many children who live in poverty
- Poverty related bullying
- Money and debt.

children and young people mirror those identified by practitioners and professionals in their survey.

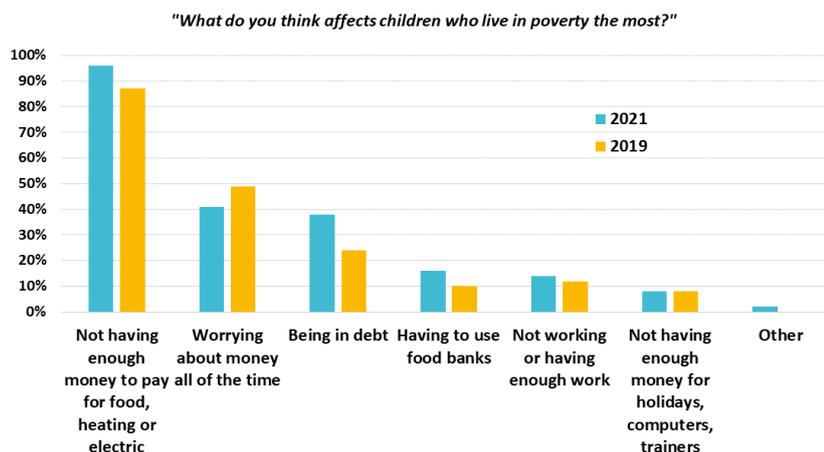
The findings below include many verbatim comments from children and young people. Whilst many of these do make for uncomfortable reading, they have still been included in this report. The aim of this is not to shock or sensationalise, but rather provide a greater understanding of the impacts of poverty for many of the thousands of children and young people who live this reality on a daily basis.

The issues identified and commented on by the



Poverty and money

In this first section, children and young people were asked what they thought affected children living in poverty the most. They were asked to choose 2 issues from the list provided. This list was based on issues that had been raised by children and young people in previous surveys and workshops and as such, provides a comparison with the previous survey conducted in 2019.



In this question, poverty and debt were described in the following ways:

Poverty:

This means not having enough money to buy things you need every day, like food or clothes.

Debt:

This means when someone owes someone else money, but doesn't have enough money to give it back to them.

The survey then asked respondents to "tell us how you think poverty and money affects children and young people". Children and young people answered this question either from their observational experience of poverty or through their own direct experiences. There were many comments about debt in particular, but also lack of food, hunger and not being able to "take part". A few respondents commented on the inability to go to school as there was not enough money to afford transport, school shoes or uniforms. One respondent also commented on the lack of money to buy female sanitary products.

However, comments predominantly focused on bullying and poor emotional health, with the children and young people regularly using words such as stress, anxiety, worry and depression.

"Bullying, hungry, dirty clothes and being seen differently to your friends. No toys"

(Under 10yrs)

"They get bullied by people for not having as good things"

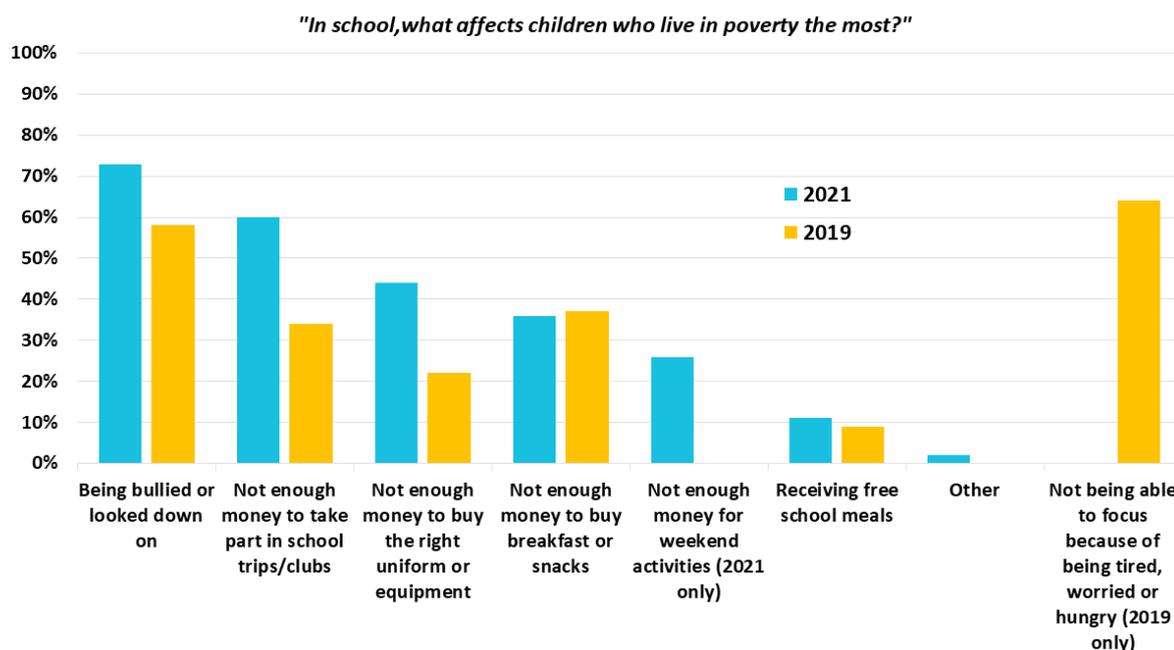
(14-16yrs)

"They feel like a dog in a cage with no means of escape"

(Under 10yrs)

Poverty and school

As with the previous question, children and young people were asked to choose 2 issues from the list of options below.



‘Being bullied or looked down on’ was chosen by 73% of respondents; but when asked how poverty affects children and young people in school, 85% mentioned poverty related bullying in their comments. This also reflects the issues identified in the previous section, poverty and money.

Bullying and the effects this has on emotional health, were usually cited together. Again, many of the comments discussed feelings of isolation, exclusion and “being left out” within the school environment.

“It affects them badly if they are bullied or maybe feel like the worst person on the face of the earth”
(Under 10yrs)

“I think poverty affects young people in schools as they might be bullied because they have a second hand uniform or a small lunch”
(10-13yrs)

“You get made to feel inferior”
(14-16yrs)

When citing **bullying**, respondents frequently commented that children were bullied in school when:

- They could not afford to go on school trips
- They did not have the correct uniform
- They did not have the right equipment
- They could not afford to take part in activities

In the practitioner and professionals’ survey, the stigma of receiving free school meals was frequently cited. However, this was only chosen as an issue by 11% of children and young people and only 3% associated bullying with free school meals. This finding is difficult to compare as the survey did not seek to identify how many respondents were in receipt of free school meals and therefore we cannot comment of any potential attached bias.

From the comments given, it was evident that those not living in poverty were also affected by it.

“It’s very sad, I need to help them. I want to be able to use what I have or school has to help them”
(14-16yrs)

“Makes you different and have to pretend that you’ve done things when you haven’t so that other don’t know you live in the make-believe so that you’re not bullied”

(Under 10)

They stated that they witnessed bullying; saw other children go hungry; become excluded by their peers and treated unfairly. Some mentioned how cruel it was and how sad and helpless it sometimes made them feel.

Whilst material deprivation was often commented on by many respondents, there was particular focus on the impact poverty had on the emotional health of those living in these circumstances.

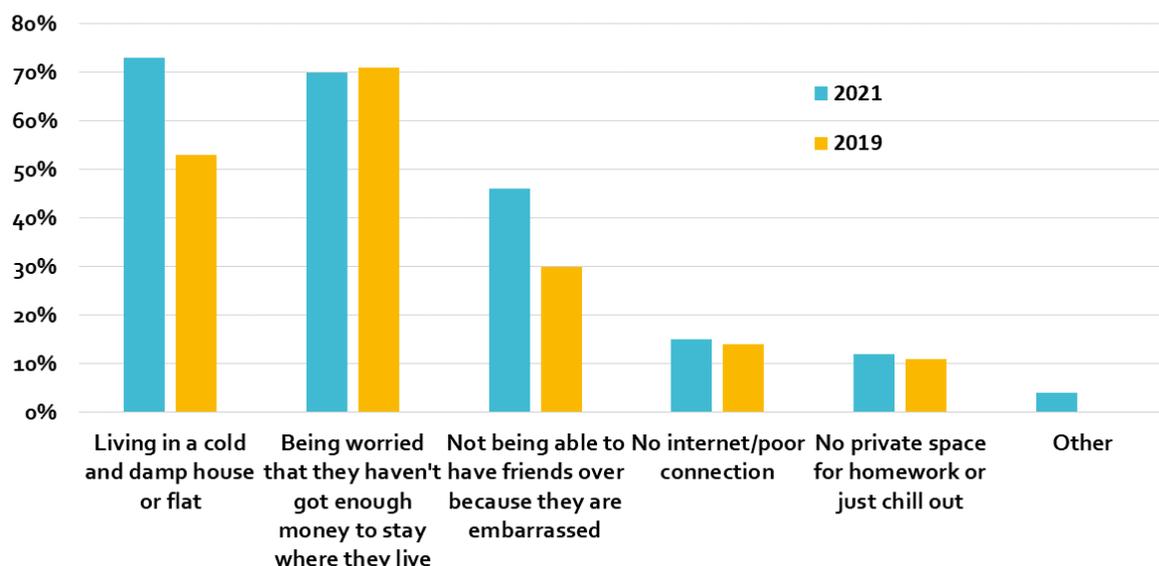
Around 60% of respondents specifically referred to **poor emotional health**. These are just some of the words they used to describe how children living in poverty might feel in a school environment.



Poverty and home

The survey asked respondents to consider what they thought would affect children who live in poverty the most, when they are at home. Again, the question format remained the same as with previous topics.

At home, what affects children who live in poverty the most?



Overall the home environment and the need for permanency in their home were seen as issues that might affect children and young people living in poverty. The comments generally fell into 2 categories; the physical home environment; and, as in previous answers, emotional wellbeing.

For the **physical environment**, respondents predominantly cited a lack of food and heating; damp and cold rooms; no carpets and little furniture. Respondents also commented on debt and the inability to pay bills, including rent, which may result in children and young people “having to leave their home”.

“Having a damp house and no bed”
(10-13yrs)

“Living in fear from maybe having to move”
(10-13yrs)

Rather than being a safe haven for children and young people, it was likely to be an area where they “couldn’t relax”, were “constantly worrying about money”, were too embarrassed to invite friends over and therefore felt isolated.

“They see the affect it has on parents and this stress passes to them. Horrible for them”
(10-13yrs)

“Makes them feel sad, embarrassed and left out”
(10-13yrs)

Whilst the survey phrased questions in the third person, given their answers, we surmise that at least 34% of respondents were living in poverty. These are some of their comments, providing an insight into how poverty affects them within their home environment.

Over half of the respondents discussed **poor emotional health** within the home environment.

“We’ve got less money than we’ve ever had before. My Mum worries about money all the time, especially the debt man coming round. She looks really scared and cries afterwards.”

(14-16yrs)

“Being lonely and depressed”

(10-13yrs)

“Parents are upset and stressed and it means everyone in the house is sad”

(Under 10)

“Not feeling comfortable and safe in your home even though it’s an escape from life, it’s more distressing”

(14-16yrs)

Constant worry about what’s going to happen next”

(14-16yrs)

“Had to shut the small bedroom because of council tax, so no space to call my own”

(Under 10)

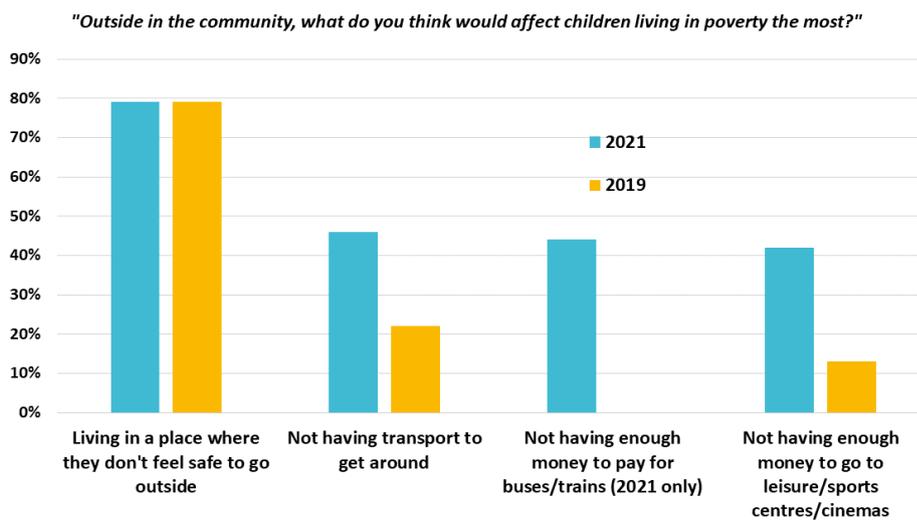
“Life is very hard”

(19-25yrs)



Poverty in the community

As with other questions, respondents were asked to choose 2 of the options shown below. As the chart shows, 73% of children and young people stated that living in a place where they don't feel safe to go outside would be most likely to affect those living in poverty. This finding is perhaps not surprising, as in the previous section, their home environment was cited as an important issue and community may be seen as an extension of that.



Throughout the survey, **poverty related bullying** has been a dominant theme and here, this issue is again raised by many of the respondents. When asked how they thought poverty affects children and young people in their community, almost half of the respondents mentioned poverty related bullying, resulting in children and young people feeling 'unsafe', 'vulnerable', 'nervous' or 'scared'. They stated that children and young people would not be safe to go outside or play or simply 'hang around' in their community.

"People are going to bully you"
(10-13yrs)

"Not being fashionable or in with the crowd so causes bullying and being picked on"
(19-25yrs)

"Nervous about normal people"
(10-13yrs)

embarrassed and ashamed of where they live and the clothes and footwear they wore. There were also numerous comments about attitudes within their communities and of 'being judged' and 'looked down on' because they were poor and this too would generate feelings of vulnerability and isolation.

"Everyone in my community is poor. In town, I feel people look down on us"
(14-16yrs)

"People might look down at them like they're strange"
(10-13yrs)

"People in the community may look down on children as they are poorer than other"
(10-13yrs)

Social isolation and 'fitting in' was also cited as an issue that affected children and young people within the community. Half of the respondents believed

that a lack of money had a direct impact on the ability to socialise. They commented that children and young people would not be able to afford travel costs in order to meet with their friends, or pay for social activities or the necessary equipment, such as cinema trips or football boots.

“They can’t join in on things or go to clubs and make friends because they have no way of getting to them”
(14-16yrs)

“Can’t go out with friends because of not having money to food or anything and if there is money, feeling bad for spending it”
(14-16yrs)

Respondents also commented that even where travel costs and admission fees were not applicable, just meeting up with friends could be problematic. They stated that their peers would have money to spend on snacks or drinks and therefore, as they could not afford to do this and ‘fit in’, they chose not to go.

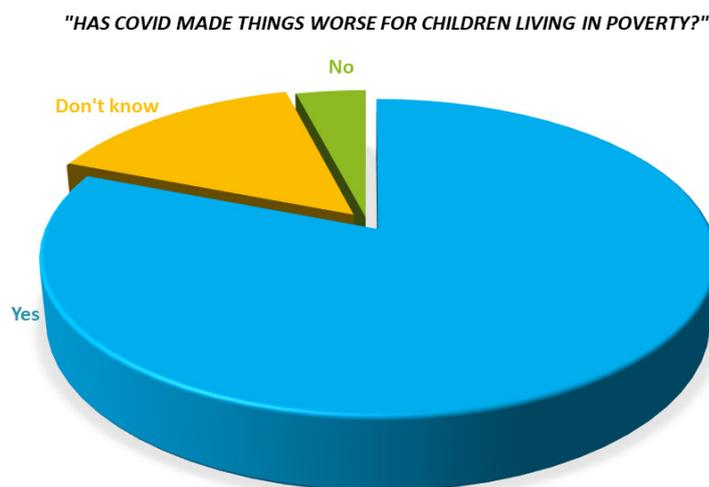
“Just have to be inventive with my stories of why I can’t go places”
(Under 10)

“My youth club is now free to go to, but not able to join in, no spending money”
(14-16yrs)



COVID and poverty

At the time of this survey (April/May 2020), the majority of children and young people were just emerging from a prolonged, intermittent and uncertain period of restrictive measures and home schooling. Whilst many were beginning a more ‘normalised’ school experience, many other parts of society remained restricted, including visits to extended family members and access to many leisure activities. The practitioner and professionals’ survey also asked questions about the impact of COVID on families. We wanted to ascertain if children and young people were experiencing a similar impact. It is within this context that the survey asked if COVID had made things worse for children and young people living in poverty and if so, how.



With 81% of respondents stating that COVID had made things worse for children and young people living in poverty, there were inevitably a variety of comments. Those areas most commonly discussed were education; social isolation; loss of family income and employment; lack of food; and emotional health.

Comments on **education** included a lack of devices for home schooling, poor internet connection and affordability of data (including internet). Respondents mentioned “struggling” with home schooling because of these issues. A couple of respondents also commented that because of COVID, they could not have their “quiet place” in school. In general, children and young people missed school; from their lessons and school friends to after school clubs.

“Doing classes over the internet instead of going to school. We have missed out on lots of lessons, missing all my school friends”

(10-13yrs)

“They may not want to call their friends as they’re ashamed of where they live. This would have caused further mental health harm”

(14-16yrs)

As stated in the previous section, Poverty and Community, **social isolation** was again raised as an issue. Respondents believed that this had a greater impact on children and young people living in poverty. They would “probably not have internet or even a phone”, be unable to contact their friends and be “even more isolated at home”.

Other respondents focused on the isolation from extended family, not only on the emotional aspect of ‘missing’ them, but also from a practical side. For example, one respondent stated: “Can’t visit family who make us food and help with the washing” (14-16 yrs).

As with the practitioner and professionals’ findings, **loss of income and employment** were cited by many as an issue affecting those living in poverty. Respondents were aware that “Mums and Dads are losing jobs”. They recognised that businesses were closing, jobs were being lost and for many parents, remote working was not always possible. They stated that for children and young people living in poverty, this would make their situation worse.

“Parents lost their money, only got part of it, so very worried as couldn’t pay the bills. They’ve had to pay for extra food as we’ve been home all time”

(Under 10)

“They will not be able to have a free school meal”

(Under 10)

“COVID has caused businesses to lay off workers and if they are already minimum wage workers, they wouldn’t have enough money to keep going”

(14-16yrs)

A **lack of food** was closely associated with income reduction and school closures. Respondents frequently commented that with job losses, families living in poverty would not have enough money for the additional food needed during the ‘lockdowns’. One respondent cited that prior to COVID, their family did use a food bank, however, during the restrictions this had not been possible. The reason for this is not known.

The **emotional health** of children and young people has been heavily commented on throughout the survey responses, with the same issues and feelings being repeatedly raised across all topic areas. This is also true for the responses given in this section, with children and young people commenting on being worried, anxious, feeling isolated and lonely. It is of note that in other sections, bullying, whilst not cited as the sole cause of poor emotional health, does dominate emotional health comments. This section is different and is the only area of the survey where children and young people do not mention bullying in any of their responses.

“More time at home in bad situations”

(10-13yrs)



Final thoughts from children and young people

Towards the end of the survey, respondents were given the opportunity to say anything they wished about how poverty affects children and young people, 32% of respondents chose to do so. As they had throughout the survey, the children and young people provided frank and often stark comments. These are some of their comments:

“Children in poverty just want to be equal to everyone else”

(Under 10)

“They might feel like they are nothing and that they are never going to escape this life and that is NOT OK. We need to treat them with respect and try and help them even just a little bit”

(10-13yrs)

“Poverty shouldn’t make people define the young people”

(10-13yrs)

“People shouldn’t be mean to them, they should be kind and help them out in hard times”

(Under 10)

*“It’s s**t, it just never ends”*

(14 - 16 yrs)

Final thoughts from children and young people

“No one should be living in poverty”
(10-13yrs)

“Children in poverty just want to be equal to everyone else”
(Under 10)

“More can be done to help them as there are people in my school who don’t have a lot and have through the years, got bullied”
(14 - 16 yrs)

“Many politicians and people in power have NO IDEA about what living in poverty is like and are far too judgemental about the people affected”
(14-16 yrs)

“Has a huge impact on our mental health. I hate being poor”
(Under 10)

“Poverty affects every aspect of their lives”
(10 - 13 yrs)

“Poverty affects in many ways and unless you experience living with very little money, how would those in charge know what it’s like, they do not”
(10 - 13 yrs)

“Stop making a judgement on those who try very hard to manage with very little spare money. Give us all free school meals”
(Under 10)

Examples of positive practice

We asked children and young people to provide “examples where something good has been done to help tackle poverty in your area, even if it’s a small thing”. A large proportion, 64%, responded to this question.

The majority (62%) of children and young people cited examples of positive practice that related to food and most commonly, food banks. They were pleased to see that more food banks had opened and therefore, more families would receive the food they needed. A number of the respondents were food banks users and their comments highlighted the positive difference it had made to them.

“Food banks, otherwise we would starve”

(10-13yrs)

“We have food banks that you can visit for groceries that help to stop us going hungry”

(10-13yrs)

There were other examples where children and young people had donated food themselves and these acts, also had a positive effect on their own emotional health

“I helped by asking my neighbours for tins for me to hand to the food bank. A few neighbours helped very much, which made me happy to be helping those in need”

(19-25yrs)

Free school meals were also cited as a positive practice, as well as reports of “Marcus Rashford” in the media. Respondents recognised that some schools had delivered free school meals in their

area and one respondent stated that their local youth service were also delivering free meals to young people.

It was not only statutory services that were providing free meals. Venture, in Wrexham provided free meals and one respondent stated that “everyone gets them, so you don’t feel people looking at you ‘cos you’re poor”.

There were a number of other positive acts cited by respondents, including; laptop loans; shoe box appeals; charitable clothing donations; “free rent”; craft boxes; activity kits and for one respondent, a shared food parcel by a neighbour.

“The council gave my neighbour food because they are old, but because Mum and Dad don’t get benefits, we couldn’t get it. Our neighbour shared with us. That was nice”

(14-16yrs)

If I was the First Minister...

We asked children and young people; “If you were the First Minister, what would you do to stop poverty happening?” Over 73% of respondents answered this question.

Not surprisingly, their responses reflected the comments given throughout the survey. Topics covered included; housing; food poverty; free school meals; employment; low wages; and the need for more emotional support for those living in poverty. Given the number of comments, it is not possible to include all of them in this report. Below are just a few examples of the changes that children and young people would like to see.

“I would create more food banks and more community housing and more support groups to help with poverty”

(Under 10)

“Make school meals and trips free for everyone”

(Under 10)

“Free school meals at summer holiday time”

(Under 10)

“Think how to help people in need without making them feel poor. Needing help feels shameful, even in people don’t mean to be like that”

(14 - 16 yrs)

“Increase employment rates in rural areas, better transport for those in rural areas so that they can also enjoy a range of different activities in the community”

(14 - 16 yrs)

“This is a really big question. Make sure children and young people have safe places to go, make things more equal, have money classes in school”

(14 - 16 yrs)

If I was the First Minister...

“Provide more schools with stationery to give to people who need it, free lunches at schools and colleges and teach kids about poverty so that they can help out”

(14 - 16 yrs)

“Minimum wages to be raised, especially for apprenticeships. All children of all ages should be having free school meals and be supported by the government to be fed in school holidays; e.g. food vouchers or parcels delivered. Cookery classes on how to cook or spend little money for healthy meals.”

(14-16 yrs)

“Prioritise businesses in areas with higher poverty through strict restrictions. Use taxes both from richer corporations and ones from the area once they have grown, to give universal welfare benefits, adjusted to region to cut bureaucracy”

(14 - 16 yrs)

“I think most of my friends get free school meals but me and my two sisters don’t, which isn’t fair and I don’t get why. Everyone should be paid fairly in the first place. I don’t know how you do that. I’m 16 and I’ve always been poor as long as I can remember. The man who got elected seems like a nice man, but I don’t know if he is going to do anything about it.”

(14 - 16 yrs)

“Stop councils charging so much for rent and reduce the community charge, which is unfair”

(14 - 16 yrs)

“I would provide newer housing and estates for people living in poverty. Electricity would come from solar panels so they wouldn’t have to pay electric bills, which cuts down on expenses. They could also get paid as part of the SEG scheme, which is already in place today. The former homes would be transformed into shops or even additional small parks and wildlife sanctuaries to make up for the damage to the environment. Therapy would be paid for by the government in an attempt to help people who suffer from depression and anxiety. Furthermore, if you are on minimum wage, the government will give you 15% of your monthly income to help fund school and day trips that boost a child’s mental health. While this would have a big impact on the economy, the hope would be that with even more people doing well in life, they can contribute more to the economy in the future”

(14 - 16 yrs)

As a final comment, Children in Wales would like to sincerely thank all of the children and young people who took in this survey.

Thank you for taking the time to tell us what you thought. You shared your experiences and opinions and gave us lots of detailed comments. These really are important to us.

You’ve been amazing

THANK YOU



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