



PLANT YNG NGHYMRU  
CHILDREN IN WALES

# Report on the 6th Annual Child and Family Poverty Surveys 2022

Karen McFarlane | September 2022



In partnership with:

**END CHILD POVERTY NETWORK CYMRU**  
RHYWDWAITH DILEU TLODI PLANT CYMRU

# Acknowledgements

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

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The quotes used in this report are those kindly provided by the survey respondents.

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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 to become a member of Children in Wales, contact [membership@childreninwales.org.uk](mailto: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 1200 supporting members from a broad cross-section of agencies.

If you would like to join the wider End Child Poverty Network Cymru, please visit the [website](#) or contact [Karen.mcfarlane@childreninwales.org.uk](mailto: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).

The UNCRC is an international agreement setting out the rights of children and young people up to the age of 18 years. It is based on three principles: **participation, protection and provision.**

In 2011, the UNCRC became law in Wales through the Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011. This Measure places a duty on Welsh Ministers to have a due regard to the UNCRC when developing or reviewing legislation and policy. The Social Services and Well-being Act 2014 places a similar due regard duty on named public bodies, including local authorities and health boards, to the UNCRC when discharging their functions regionally and locally.

### **Poverty denies children and young people many of their rights:**

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



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# Introduction

## More than 1 in 3 children in Wales are living in poverty

Poverty in Wales is widespread with all local authorities continuing to experience high rates of child poverty. Recent [research](#) by Loughborough University, on behalf of the End Child Poverty Coalition, shows that more than one in three children in Wales are living in poverty.

Now in its 6th year, the Children in Wales Annual Child and Family Poverty surveys seek to gain more understanding of the facts and lived experiences behind the figures and the impact poverty has on children, young people and their families. Importantly, the surveys allow children, young people, practitioners and professionals to share their views and experiences of poverty in Wales and to highlight the issues that are being faced right now, on a daily basis.

Every year, our reports present a bleak picture for many children and young people, and highlight the impossible decisions that families are having to make on a daily basis. Regrettably, the findings from this 6th annual report are no different. The daily reality for many families are that they are having to choose whether to put money in the meter for electricity, or put food on the table; whether to buy school shoes or feed their children.

The practitioners and professionals who responded to this survey, work with a minimum of 42,500 families and their children. In their words, they believe that the situation is now **“critical”** and children, young people and their families are now in **“absolute crisis”**. For many respondents, they believe that debt and mental health is “rapidly deteriorating” and the effects of poverty are **“spiralling out of control”**.

It is important to acknowledge that for each statistic, percentage, comment or experience presented throughout this report, there is a child, young person and family behind each one. Without immediate action to address poverty and its effects; change policies, understanding and attitudes, the cycle and detrimental impact of poverty will continue for many of our children and young people, not only now, but as they grow into adults and begin their own families.



# Background to the surveys

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 a survey each year to ascertain what, if anything, has changed and which poverty related issues are most commonly affecting families. We are grateful to the End Child Poverty Network Cymru for their ongoing input and contributions to the survey designs and questions.

In 2016/17, we produced our first survey for children and young people. We wanted to hear 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, our surveys retain several core questions, enabling a direct comparison year on year. However, some questions and multiple choice options have necessarily changed to reflect emerging issues or concerns raised in previous surveys, or to include legislative changes. In our 2021 surveys, both practitioners' and children and young people highlighted 2 areas of particular concern; mental health and poverty related bullying. As a result of this, we have included specific questions on these areas for 2022.

Given the detailed and valued responses provided in each of the surveys, this report looks at the findings from each survey separately, rather than as a whole.

# PRACTITIONERS & PROFESSIONALS SURVEY FINDINGS

## About the survey

The survey sought to gain an insight into the experiences and observations of those working with children, young people and their families, either directly or indirectly. It was available to complete online and was widely disseminated across Wales, through Children in Wales' membership, networks and bulletins and through those of our external colleagues. The survey ran for a period of 8 weeks from 26 April – 17 June 2022 and was completed anonymously by respondents.

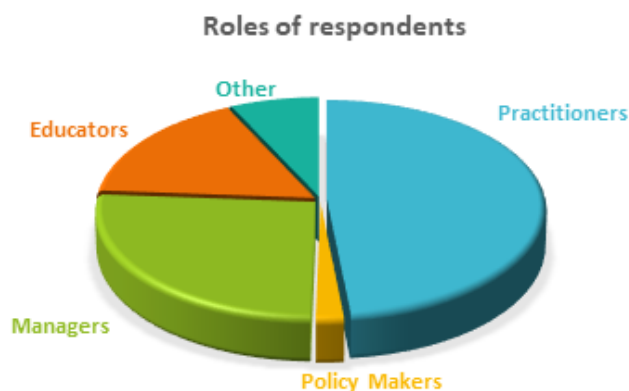
Respondents were asked to consider poverty related questions in the following areas:

- Overarching poverty issues
- Debt
- Food insecurity
- Fuel poverty
- Financial support
- Education
- Mental and emotional health
- Safeguarding
- Training for practitioners and professionals

The survey included a combination of multiple choice and open questions, enabling respondents to share their views and experiences. The survey also asked respondents to share their thoughts, ideas and solutions on preventing or mitigating the impact poverty.

## Who responded

Practitioners and professionals responded from all 22 local authority areas across Wales. Responses were equally spread across all areas of Wales, with no geographical area having a significantly higher response rate than others.

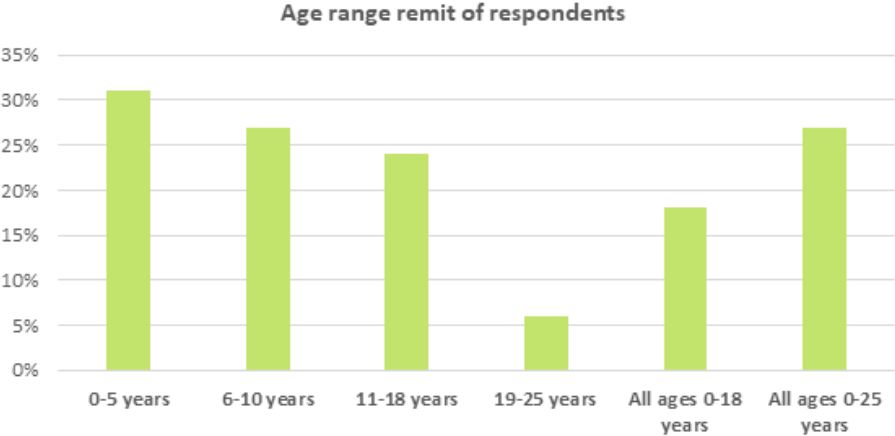




A total of 155 responses were received, an increase of 33% compared to last year, and all respondents had a remit for children, young people and/or families. Of the respondents, 79% worked directly with children and families, representing a minimum of 42,500 families each year. The remaining 21% worked 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. Please note that some respondents had a remit for more than one age group.

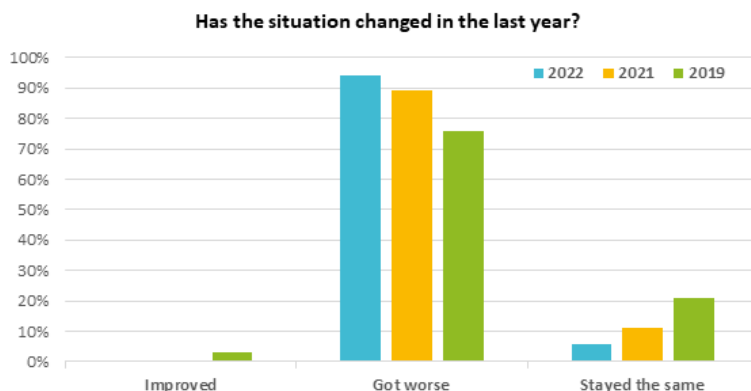


## Overarching poverty issues: 3 year comparison

*“People were already financially devastated by the pandemic - they simply don’t have anything left to cut back on. People’s health and wellbeing is being seriously compromised by insufficient income - not just by increased material deprivation, but also the loss of ability to participate in society and feel a sense of belonging and worth”*

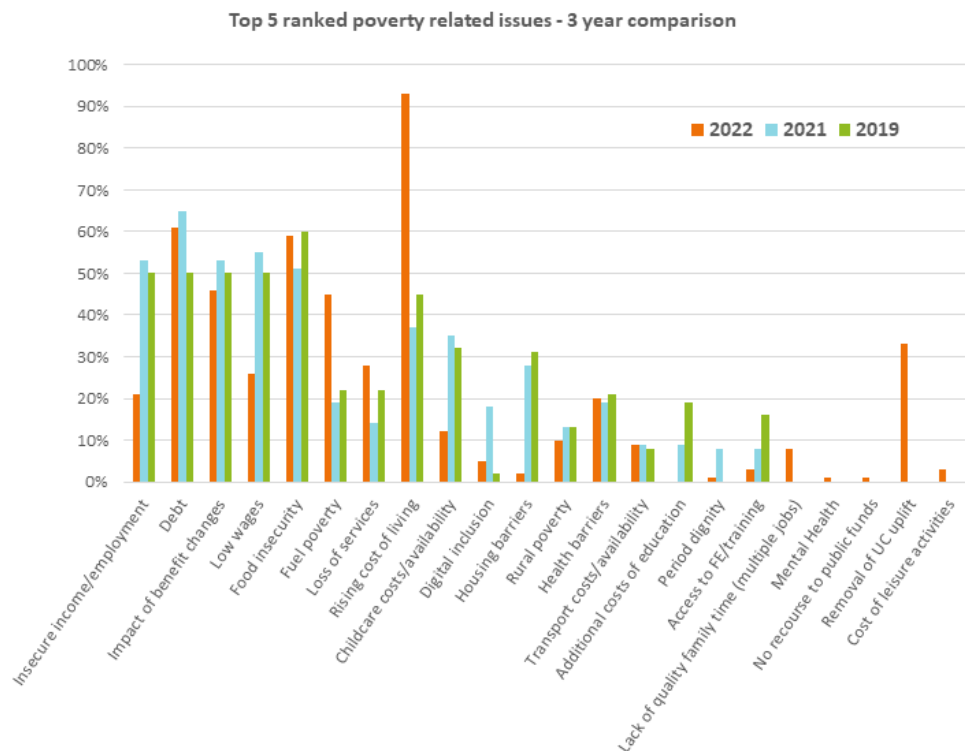
The Annual Child and Family Poverty survey is now in its 6th year. Over the years, questions have changed to reflect emerging poverty related issues and their impact. However, core questions are consistently included year on year. These core questions provide a comparable overview of the poverty situation in Wales as observed and experienced by practitioners and professionals.

Two of these questions ask if the poverty situation has changed in the last year; and in their experience, what do practitioners and professionals see as the current top 5 related poverty issues. As the chart shows, an overwhelming majority (94%) of respondents reported that over the last 12 months, the overall poverty situation for the children, young people and families they work with, has ‘got worse’. This is the highest figure seen in any of the annual surveys to date.



Respondents cited that this past year has been a “tremendous struggle” for families, stating that the situation is “desperate” and many families are now in crisis.

In the 2nd of our core questions, we presented respondents with a wide range of 22 poverty related issues. Through their experience and observations, they were asked to identify 5 issues that were of most concern and rank these in order of the greatest impact on the children, young people and families they work with, or have a remit for. Respondents were not asked to rank the remaining 17 issues. The final 5 issues shown on the chart have been introduced for the 2022 survey and therefore, no comparable data is available.



The chart shows which of the issues were ranked within the top 5 and the percentage of respondents choosing each issue over a 3 year period. Whilst the issues identified by respondents in 2019 and 2021, remain relatively similar, with the exception of digital inclusion in 2021, the 2022 findings show far greater fluctuation.

The most notable difference is the spike for the *rising cost of living*. This finding was perhaps expected given the financial impact of the increased costs to families’ income and expenditure over recent months. Other areas, such as debt, food insecurity, and the impact of benefit changes, remain, as in previous years, major areas of concern.

Practitioners stated that they are seeing a dramatic increase in the number of **families that cannot meet their basic needs**, such as the provision of food, electricity and clothing. Respondents commented how desperate the situation is and the significant impact poverty is having on more and more children. They were particularly concerned about their physical and mental health, development and educational attainment.

*“Families we have supported have children who are not thriving physically, having an impact on their growth, development, and ability to function daily in schools and at home.”*

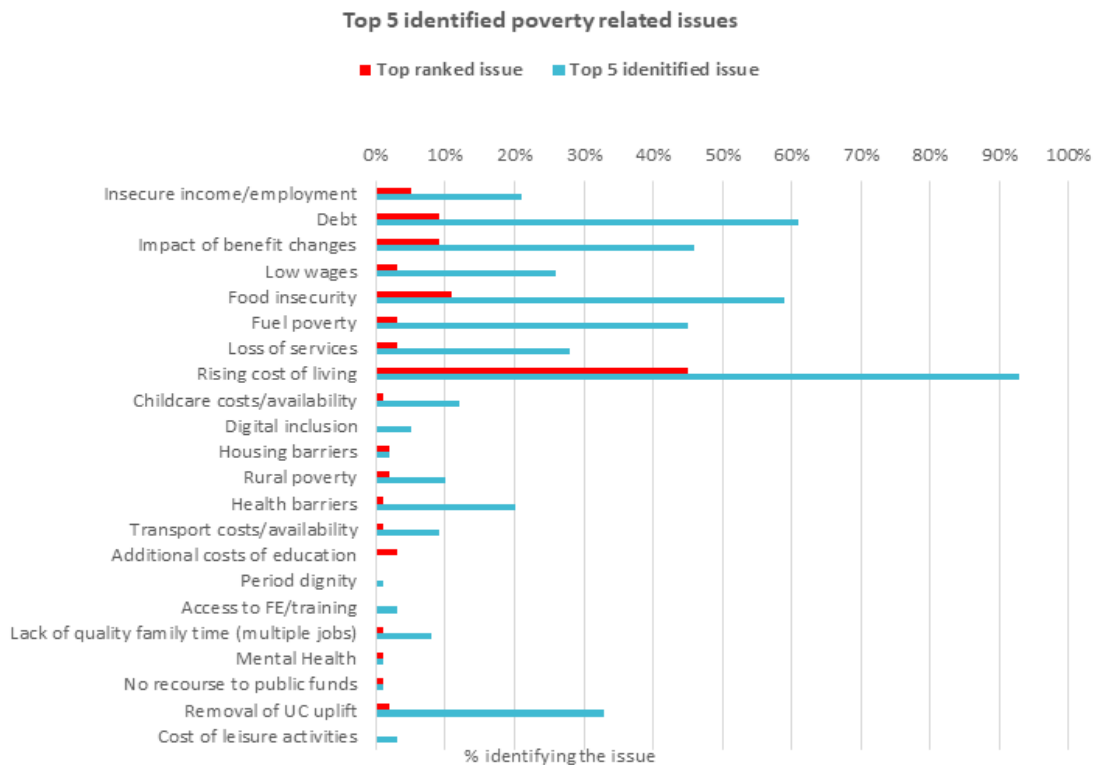
This year saw a large percentage increase in the number of respondents commenting on physical health and development. There were also examples of children being unable to attend hospital appointments as families cannot afford the cost of transport. Parents were cited as having to choose between feeding their child and attending the appointments.

As in previous years, respondents repeatedly referred to the poor and declining mental and emotional health of the children, young people and families they work with. This was commented on across all survey questions, regardless of the topics. Respondents frequently stated that many families “feel hopeless” about their situation and cannot see a way out. This area is discussed in more detail later in this report.

## Overarching poverty issues: 2022

*“This impacts on ALL children in Wales but those who are below the poverty line will be affected in every way. The rising cost of living is not sustainable and will cause further debt, fuel poverty and food insecurity.”*

This section provides greater detail of the overarching poverty related issues that were identified in this year’s findings and includes comments and observations from respondents. The following chart shows which issues respondents ranked as having the most impact on families (top ranked) and those they ranked within the top 5 for 2022.



Each of the 22 areas were identified as a top 5 poverty related issue. The rising cost of living was the top ranked issue, chosen by 45% of respondents, but included within the top 5 ranking by the majority of respondents. It should be noted that respondents were only asked to choose 5 issues for ranking. They were not asked to rank the remaining 17 issues.

The **rising cost of living** was chosen as a top 5 issue by 93% of respondents. From their experiences and observations they identified that even within the relatively short period since prices have increased, the impact is tangible and is plunging greater numbers of children, young people and their families into further deteriorating circumstances and poverty.

*“Families that were previously struggling are now in crisis”*

Respondents described the impact to children, young people and their families as “far reaching”. They commented that even prior to the cost of living increases, many families living in poverty faced impossible financial decisions on a daily basis. Some practitioners observed that as a majority of their families have been in desperate circumstances for so long, they do not have any financial resilience and therefore, any increases in the cost of living, however small, can be devastating.

*“Mum couldn’t afford to put fuel in her car to collect the emergency food parcel. This led to Mum not eating for a number of days to ensure there was food for her daughter”*

Practitioners reported that many parents and carers could not afford to feed their children and/or provide nutritious food. Children and young people were often cold, living with little or no electricity and becoming more isolated. It was reported that families increasingly have to choose whether to pay for electricity that day, or feed their children. Respondents described the situation as being “unsustainable” and “at crisis point”. There was significant concern about the increasing number of families, including many working families who were now ‘struggling’.

*“The increase in “in work poverty” is staggering. How can it be ok that you work a good job and still can’t afford to feed your family?”*

The rising cost of living was also impacting on the **physical, emotional and mental health** of not only parents and carers, but children and young people too. Respondents shared that the **physical health** of adults was declining as many were choosing not to eat, in order to provide food for the children. This lack of nutrition inevitably had an impact on a parents’ ability to manage, both physically and emotionally and they are seeing an increase in the number of adult/adult and adult/child relationships under strain. Respondents commented that parents were feeling “hopeless about improving their situation”, “ashamed”, “demoralised” and “having nowhere to turn”.

*“The choice of providing either/or options for children rather than being able to provide basic necessities is demoralising to parents and carers”*

The reality for children and young people’s health included, children missing hospital appointments as parents could not afford the transport costs; “watering down baby milk to make it last longer”; lack of food and/or nutrition; inability to concentrate or stay awake at school; and wearing clothing and footwear that is too small.

Respondents reported that children were also worried about how their families will, or are coping with the rising cost of living and frequently experience higher levels of stress and anxiety. This was reflected in the comments provided by children and young people.

Practitioners identified the **mental health** of all family members as “deteriorating” and described relationships within the home as becoming increasingly strained. They noted that the breakdown of relationships resulted in some young people becoming homeless. Practitioners also expressed concerns around domestic violence and abuse, advising that they were now working with and supporting a rising number of mothers and their children who remained in abusive situations because they felt that this provided them with more financial stability and enabled them to feed their children.

Overall, respondents were extremely concerned about the mental health of the families they work with, giving grave warnings about a pending mental health crisis for children, young people and their parents. In last year’s survey, poor and deteriorating mental health emerged as one of the biggest issues affecting families living in poverty. As a result, this 2022 survey included specific questions in this area. These findings are explored further in the *Mental and Emotional Health* section of this report.

*“The cost of living increase impacts everything. I work with young people whose families can no longer afford to buy them shoes when their feet grow. In evening sessions, when asked, only one young person was expecting food that evening (we made them all a pasta dish and sat down to eat it)”*

The rising cost of living clearly has an impact in every area. Many cited that each issue cannot be seen in isolation as each has a direct impact on the other. Respondents advised that they are seeing more children and young people going hungry and witnessing an increase in the number of families who are “barely surviving” and unable to meet their children’s basic needs. Families who had previously been able to “scrape by” on their very limited budgets are now unable to do so. Consequently, respondents reported an increase in debt, food insecurity and fuel poverty.

*“Standing charges are now 10% of Universal Credit alone. Fuel has more than doubled, food and basics up 10% plus. Wages are low, rents are high. Schools expect full uniforms and grants don’t cover them. Transport costs are spiralling.”*

In last year’s survey, debt was the top ranked poverty related issue. To explore this further, we subsequently included debt specific questions in this year’s survey. These findings are explored in a separate section of this report. Based on last year’s responses and the recent challenges around food insecurity; fuel poverty and financial support (income, benefits and Universal Credit), these too have been included as separate sections.

Other issues that were frequently commented on were loss of services; housing; rural poverty; and kinship care.

**Loss of services** was identified as a top 5 issue by 28% of respondents, an increase on the last 2 years. Whilst many services were cited, a lack of capacity in mental health and debt advisory services were of most concern. Practitioners advised that they have seen a reduction in these services despite there being an increase in need. They are finding it “harder and harder” to find support services for their families. Given this, many are concerned that in the short term, services are not coping with demand and they are witnessing children, young people and parents experiencing severe and immediate risk. Long term, they commented on the detrimental effect poverty will continue to have on many children and young people, affecting not just their mental health, but also their educational attainment and physical development. Many believed that the current situation will impact on children in every aspect of their lives and further into adulthood, with the cycle of poverty continuing.

*“Lack of services has created a situation where support is not there quick enough and specialist support is not targeted at an earlier stage to support families.”*

Respondents warned about the increasing number of children, young people and families now in urgent need. They identified that many of the families who were struggling last year are now in crisis and it is likely that those struggling this year will be in crisis next year. Practitioners cited that the situation is **“spiralling out of control”**.

*“Any little ladders that once helped are not enough and it’s a downward slide... hope is being extinguished”*

**Housing** was also identified as an issue, with the lack of affordable housing being most commonly cited. An increasing number of families are turning to private landlords. Not only was this seen as more expensive for families, but there were also concerns about the suitability, maintenance and overall “poor state of repair” of many privately rented homes. Some commented that this was affecting both the physical and mental health of their families.

*“Many of the families we support are paying extortionate rent to landlords”*

There was particular concern for families from ethnic backgrounds living in privately rented homes. Practitioners noted that some had little experience of how they should be treated by landlords or of what to expect from private accommodation. It was felt that a number of families were being exploited.

Compared to last year’s survey, there was a significant increase in the number of comments relating to **rural poverty**, in particular, the impact of rising fuel costs and a lack of public transport services. For example, a lack of public transport necessitated reliance on a car, with respondents citing that a round trip to the nearest supermarket can be 60 miles. The additional and rising cost of fuel, along with the ongoing financial costs of running a car, dramatically reduced the grocery budget for many rural families.

Respondents also identified poverty related issues affecting kinship carers. According to respondents, this is the largest area of growth in fostering and has tripled over the past 5 years. They explained that some kinship carers do not receive additional money to help towards the financial costs of raising and caring for a child. It was noted that whilst living within the wider family was advantageous for the child, often carers were living in, or on the brink of poverty and therefore, this could be viewed as “actively disadvantaging children”. Respondents expressed the need for policy change to address this.

## Fuel Poverty

*“People are coming to us that are brand new to our service who have been plunged into fuel debt. They were just about managing before the fuel crisis but with this increase are struggling”*

**Fuel poverty** ranked high in the top 5 poverty related issues. This is perhaps not surprising given the very recent and further anticipated increases in fuel costs. Over 87% of respondents stated that the recent fuel increases will have a significant impact on the families they work. Based on their experience and observations, practitioners advised that the impact will manifest in many different ways.

*“Parents are struggling to pay their bills now, how are they expected to cope?”*

Respondents' comments fell into 2 categories; fuel relating to vehicles; and fuel relating to household utilities. It was noted that **vehicle fuel costs** are putting additional pressure on parents in low paid employment, those working irregular hours and/or those reliant on their own transport to travel to work. A number of respondents themselves shared that they are now unable to afford the costs of both travelling to work and travelling between home visits.

Others were concerned about a reduction in school attendance, particularly for those living in rural areas and reliant on their own transport. For many families, the additional, but necessary expenditure on fuel resulted in "pinched budgets somewhere else", with increased isolation as families can no longer afford to go out or going into debt to cover extra costs.

**Household fuel poverty** was of significant concern for the majority of respondents. They raised issues around both the physical and emotional health of children, young people and their families; educational attainment and debt.

*"A family we work with have made the choice not to have electricity for most of the time"*

Respondents commented on damp, cold homes **exacerbating existing health conditions**, for children and young people and for those caring for them. There was also concern about the increased costs for families with disabled children and young people who need to use electric mobility and living aids, such as hoists, wheelchairs and feeding pumps.

There were numerous comments regarding the relationship between **nutrition and fuel poverty**. The expectation that families will cook less due to increasing fuel costs is already being realised. Practitioners state that there has been a large increase in the number of food bank users requesting microwave meals in order to reduce their energy use, along with more requests for 'boil in the bag' options that only require a kettle.

*"The rise in fuel costs outweighs any increments planned to the benefit rates and people using meters are further disadvantaged."*

Practitioners stated that a number of families are already living and sleeping in the same room to save on energy, whilst other families are only using electricity on alternate days and can no longer afford to run their fridges and freezers.

Practitioners are also concerned that increased fuel costs will affect **educational attainment**. They provided examples of parents no longer being able to afford internet access for homework, or the costs of charging and powering devices. Lighting is being restricted, making even paper based homework very difficult.

**Pre payment meter** users were seen to be at particular risk due to the higher price per unit, as were those not connected to mains utilities. It was reported that non-mains fuel costs have always been higher and in recent months, the cost of bottled gas has quadrupled in price.

*"Many are on metres which ends up being more costly. They simply do not have the money to put on the metre."*

Overall, respondents expect future fuel price increases to have a significant impact on debt, standard of living and in turn, to be detrimental to the mental wellbeing of children, young people and their families.



## Debt

*“Debt will not disappear even if things level up because families will be in debt legacy for at least a decade”*

Debt was the top ranked poverty related issue in the 2021 survey findings and became a dominant theme throughout all of the 2021 responses. Therefore, for our 2022 survey, we sought to understand more about this issue and included debt as a whole topic area. Based on experiences and observations, we asked respondents about previous and future debt levels, whether families have sought debt advice and finally, if known, where the debt is owed.



Respondents (71%) stated that over the last 12 months, debt levels had ‘got worse’ for the majority of families they work with and 88% expect these debt levels to increase over the next 12 months.

Practitioners recognised that debt had increased during the pandemic, with many families needing to borrow money in order to provide the increased demand for food and heating, many in circumstances characterised by a reduction in income. This debt legacy has continued with families having little or no spare income to repay their debts. However, respondents stated that over the last 12 months, the situation has rapidly declined, exacerbated by the rising cost of living. Practitioners are now experiencing families having to go into debt to meet even the basic essentials, such as food, heating, school uniforms and shoes.

*“It’s all hand to mouth, so any life crisis like illness, job losses, unexpected bills and rise in rent that many families are experiencing, soon lead to spiralling debt”*

Respondents stated that for many families, their income, whether through benefits or employment, is no longer sufficient to cover their basic needs, and debt is often the norm. Many parents and carers had previously borrowed from family and friends, however the frequency of this need and the inability to pay back the ‘loan’ has resulted in either parents no longer asking or it no longer being available. Some practitioners commented that whilst some family members are apparently still willing to help out financially, their own costs have increased and they themselves are now at risk of financial difficulty too. More families are now having to take out ‘payday loans’ and use credit cards, just to put food on the table.

*“People are borrowing money to get through until pay day and then have to pay back so it becomes a vicious circle. Interest rates are high and people are turning to unauthorised lenders to make ends meet”*

With debt increasing on a weekly basis, practitioners reported that families are increasingly unable to manage their debt and non-payment is “escalating out of control”. Practitioners stated that over the past 12 months, they have referred more and more people for debt advice. They also noted that regardless of their job role, they are necessarily spending much more of their time applying for and assisting with grant applications for families. They recognise that whilst this is crucial, the implications are that they are then not able to do their main role or provide their key service to the family.

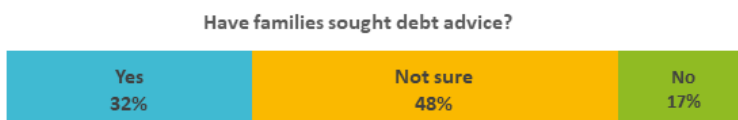
Practitioners expressed concerns around the decline in support services, both in the public and third sector. Following the pandemic, they noted that some charities had not survived and many agencies still remained remote or offered a reduced service. This had affected many services, but particularly mental health and domestic violence support services, and both were directly having an impact on the levels of debt and parents’ abilities to cope.

*“Increase in referrals where debt is leading to stress and emotional / mental health issues”*

Respondents repeatedly referred to the link between debt and poor mental health, with each fuelling the other. Practitioners commented that “there is no let up to the stress” and that “day in, day out, they worry about how they’ll get through”. High levels of stress and anxiety were seen to regularly lead to poor decision making, inevitably affecting children and young people. Practitioners gave examples of children attending settings “unkempt”; parents being late to collect children; poor relationship choices; inability to take their children outside of the home; and an increase in ‘mental health spending’.

*“Debt is the most critical component in leading to persistent and deep poverty as the stress is inescapable. This impacts choices in housing, heating and food security for the family. The stress places children at greater risk of abuse and neglect”*

The survey asked respondents if the majority of families they work with have either sought, or are seeking **debt advice** or help; 48% said that they were not sure. This is not unexpected given the breadth of respondents’ roles. Those who were able to answer this question had roles that were more likely to include a one-to-one relationship with families or provide a specific support service.



Practitioners commented that many parents and carers were often reluctant to talk about or seek help for debt, and many commented that the number of families experiencing debt is far greater than national figures may show.

*“Some families do [seek help] but some are experiencing such debt and poor mental health as a result that they cannot face seeking support.”*

Shame, embarrassment and the social stigma of debt were all cited as being reasons for many parents and carers not seeking advice and support. Families were often too afraid to confront the issue or could not cope emotionally, therefore choosing to ignore collection and repayment letters. Families are often in a “desperate situation”, “unable to pay for food and utilities and knowing that they have to go further into debt just to survive.” One practitioner stated that some families are reluctant to seek debt support services as they will no longer be able to use their credit card. This provided the only means to purchase food for the family.

Asylum seeker, refugee and migrant families were highlighted as a group that were less likely to seek support and advice. Reasons given included not knowing where to go; not understanding the system; anxious that they may get into “trouble” and being wary of sharing this type of information with formal services.

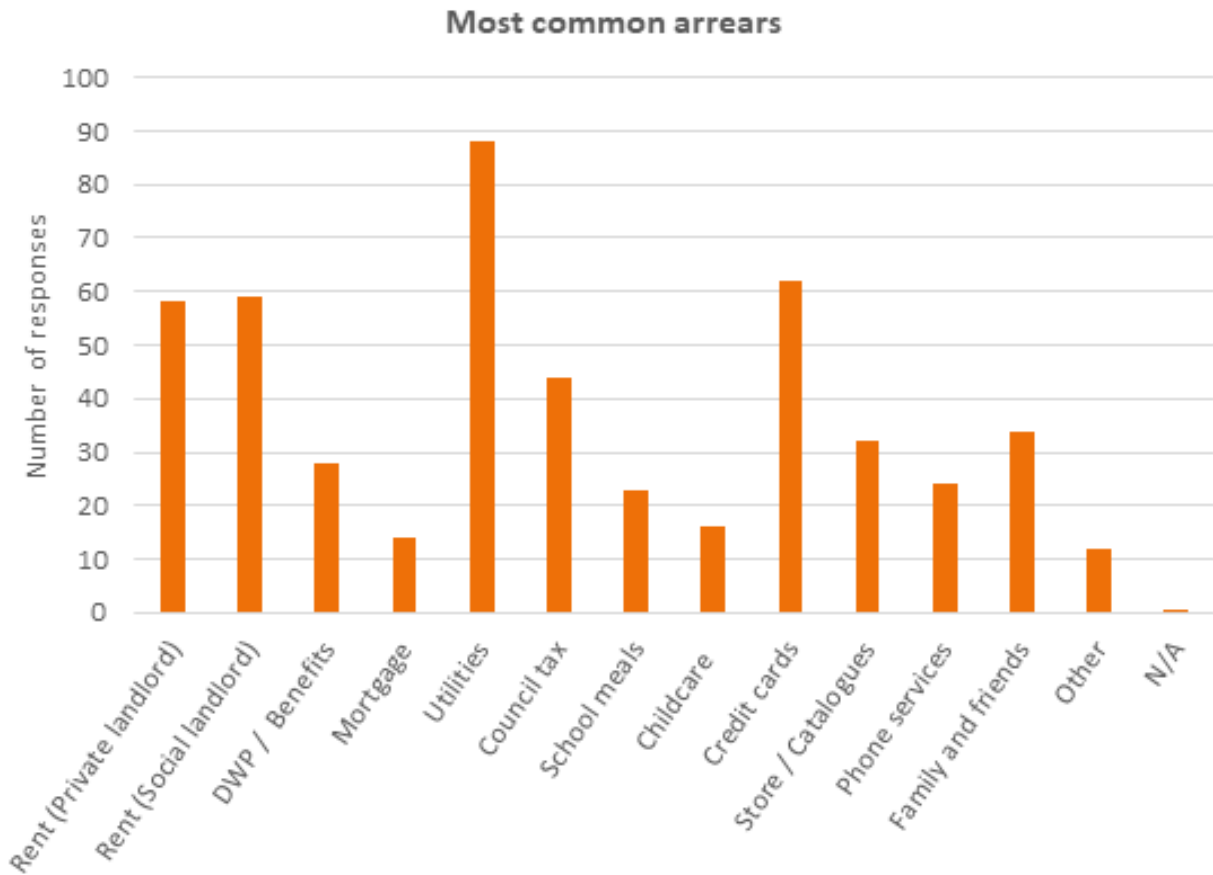
However, many families do seek help and practitioners commented that referral numbers have dramatically increased. For those respondents specialising in debt advice, they stated that the majority of their service users are only referred or seek support when they have reached crisis point.

Regardless of their roles, many respondents do provide contact details for debt support services. Many also host events, provide regular surgeries and continue to offer referrals during home visits and through food bank services. According to respondents, the success of these vary. Some events struggle to achieve attendance, whilst others, particularly surgeries, are oversubscribed. The parameters of the survey do not allow for further investigation or understanding around this, however respondents noted that many families needed to build a rapport and trust with individuals, before they are willing to talk about debt issues. Inevitably, this can take time.

Respondents also commented on the **need to increase capacity** of the services in their areas. Where debt advice was available, there was overwhelming support for their services. However, respondents stated there was an urgent need to increase capacity as waiting lists were often extensive. They also commented on a lack of local access to such services, particularly in more rural areas.

There was appreciation of the different **funds and grants** that were available to some families, however, they also identified challenges with the systems. These particularly focused around on-line application processes. Many parents struggled to complete them on-line. This was often due to a lack of access to a device; affordability of data; technical knowledge or poor educational attainment. For many of the families, practitioners stated that there is a need to provide face-to-face application assistance, and crucially, in a private space, not an open office or room. Locality and transport costs for all support services also needed to be taken into consideration.

The final question on debt considered **where the debt is owed**. Respondents chose the 3 most common areas where arrears were due.



Given the comments provided by respondents throughout this report, the findings are not surprising. It is worth noting that this survey was conducted between 26 April and 17 June 2022, just weeks into the first energy price cap change for 2022. The findings therefore indicate that debt arrears to energy and utilities suppliers were already extensive. With an additional price increase anticipated in autumn 2022, it is likely that energy debt will increase further and will also have a negative impact on the debt owed in other areas.

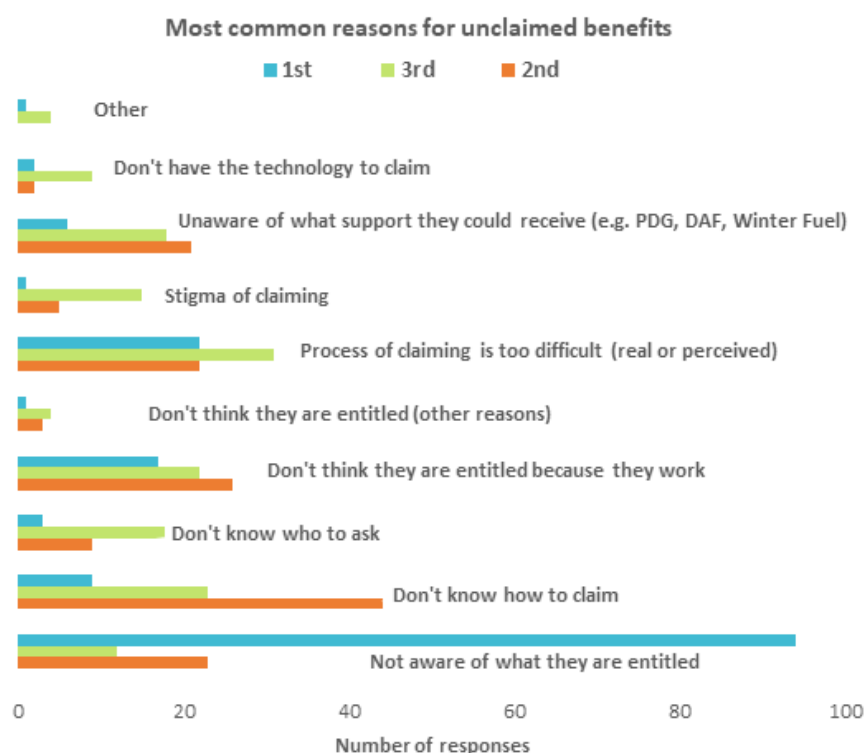
## Financial support

*“It is not enough to say people lack information about their entitlements. Many of the vulnerable people I see would not be able to navigate this complex system without a lot of ongoing support.”*

There was overwhelming recognition that for an increasing number of families, their income, whether through employment, benefits or a combination of both, was unlikely to cover their basic and essential needs. Respondents stated that Universal Credit, other benefits and grants had not been reflective of the true cost of living for a number of years and this, alongside high rent costs and low wages was cumulative in its impact.

*“Benefit income levels were already at a reduced rate prior to the cost of living crisis. Even though the minimum wage has risen, because of the cuts to benefit rates, this has resulted in many families not being any better off financially”*

The provision of financial support was appreciated and recognised by respondents, however, the majority stated that it was not enough to ensure children and young people had their basic survival needs met and for many families, there were barriers to claiming this support. Our survey sought to understand a little more about the overarching barriers to this and asked respondents, based on their experience and observations, to choose 3 barriers from the list given and rank them in order of commonality.



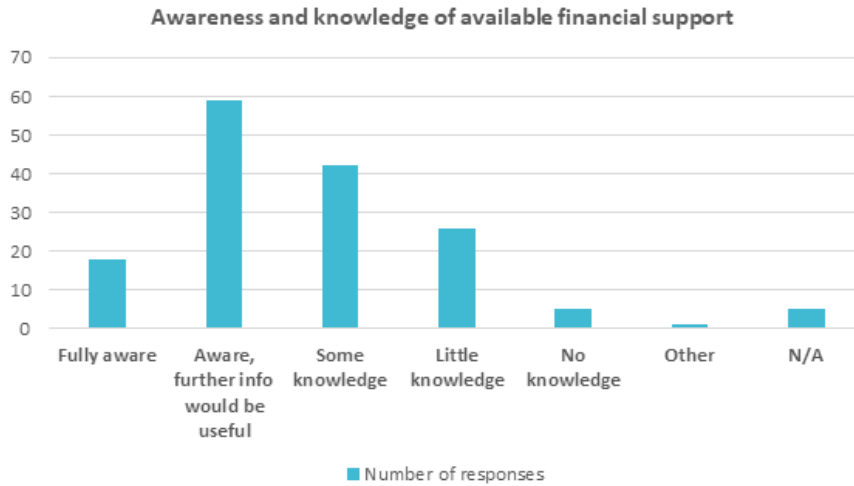
The most common barrier identified was ‘parents are unaware of what they are entitled’. However, respondents also identified that the process of claiming was often too difficult for many parents to navigate. They cited challenges in understanding the forms and process; poor use and clarity of language; the need for a professional referral; and the number of different forms that needed to be completed. Some practitioners stated that they too, often found the application process difficult when supporting parents. The system was described as “precarious and gruelling”.

*“Families can also struggle to complete the amount of paperwork that is needed in regards to benefits, due to not many services available, waiting lists, etc. This can cause backlogs and claims not being made on time leaving families with little or no money.”*

There were numerous comments about the length of time it takes for claim forms to be processed and payment to be received. This was particularly true of Universal Credit (UK), especially for those on zero hour contracts. However Welsh grants and benefits were also said to be “difficult”. Respondents highlighted the need for a “one-stop shop” and “automatic opt-in” for all Welsh benefits, whether local or national grants, including PDG and Free School Meals.

**'In-work' poverty** was repeatedly mentioned, with practitioners stating that they are referring more working families to food banks and debt advisory services. Many working families are unaware that they may be eligible for Universal Credit.

In supporting or referring families for financial support and advice, it is important that the workforce are equipped with the knowledge, skills and awareness. Our survey asked respondents about their awareness.

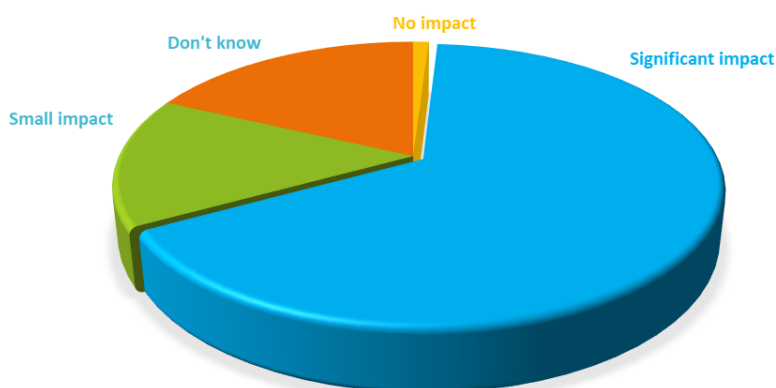


All respondents answered this question. Given the limitations of a survey, it should be noted, that although 79% of respondents do work directly with children, young people and/or their families, with 48% identifying as practitioners, the exact remit of their roles is not known and therefore their knowledge will inevitably vary. However, 47% had 'some to no knowledge' and a further 38% identified that they would 'like further knowledge'. This is replicated throughout this report with practitioners stating that they are increasingly spending more time, regardless of their roles, trying to support and advise families on finance and benefit related matters.

Whilst practitioners welcomed further awareness and knowledge of financial support and advice services, there was recognition about the **lack of capacity** within these agencies and therefore concerns around signposting. Many had experiences of services not being able to cope with levels of demand. It is not clear from the findings whether practitioners were still referring families or were reluctant to, given the capacity issues that have been highlighted.

The current claiming system, in particular for Universal Credit and **Personal Independence Payment (PIP)**, was deemed to be 'chaotic', difficult for families to navigate and set within an 'anti-claimant culture'. Even after claims had been made, additional time and resources were regularly needed to appeal "poor and often incorrect decisions". PIPs, for example, were specifically mentioned, with around 75% of the original decisions being successfully appealed.

The final question on financial support considered the **impact of the removal of the Universal Credit uplift**. Between March 2020 and October 2021, the UK Government increased the Universal Credit (UC) payment by £20 per week. This uplift was widely praised in last year's survey and seen as essential to many families.



Our question on Universal Credit this year, sought to understand more about the impact in the 6 month period following removal of the uplift. Only 1% of respondents stated that for the majority of their families, the removal was not detrimental, 81% however, identified that it did, and continues to have a detrimental impact on children, young people and families.

*£80 a month could pay for a full trolley of food shopping, this has had a huge impact on families who are already struggling”*

Respondents predominantly commented on the removal of the uplift as having significant effects on food insecurity, fuel poverty, debt and an increase in the number of families “falling into poverty”. Many highlighted that even prior to the uplift, benefits and income were not in line with the current cost of living. On receipt of the uplift, families still struggled, but were more likely to be able to afford food and fuel bills. It “provided a lifeline for many families” and helped with their essential and basic needs. Practitioners cited that families “needed the additional money just to survive”.

*“Universal Credit uplift removal combined with fuel/food prices rising has plunged more families into poverty and debt.”*

Following its removal, respondents have observed an almost instant detrimental impact. They witnessed an increase in the number of families using and reliant on food banks; an increase in the number of families in debt and in the amount of each debt; reduction in the quantity and nutritional value of food; and families “sinking deeper and deeper into poverty”.

The timing of the removal just ahead of winter and the increased demand for heating was noted. This, followed by the rising cost of living and dramatic increases in fuel costs is leaving many families in dire circumstances. One respondents gave this comparison:

*“Remove a 6th of your income. Now raise your outgoings by a 6th and you will appreciate this”*

Some respondents remain angry about the decision to remove the uplift and many more questioned the reasoning, commenting that removing income from those that need it the most will, inevitably, cost more money in the future. It is, and will continue to have a detrimental impact on children and young people, affecting their educational attainment, emotional health, physical development and family relationships.

*“Health and wellbeing is being seriously compromised by insufficient income - not just by increased material deprivation, but also the loss of ability to participate in society and feel a sense of belonging and worth.”*

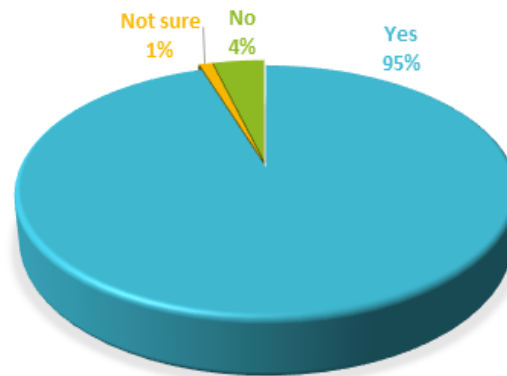
## Free school meals

*“Like education itself, school meals should be universal. It would benefit all, avoid stigma and be a good investment in the end”*

In December 2021, through the Co-operation Agreement with Plaid Cymru, Welsh Government made a commitment to extend free school meals to all primary school pupils over the lifetime of this Welsh parliamentary term. This will be delivered through a phased, 3 year roll-out beginning in September 2022 and starting with the youngest primary school pupils.

Our survey asked respondents if they believed more children should receive free school meals.

Do you believe that more children should be entitled to free school meals?



The majority of respondents, 95%, believed that more children should receive free school meals (FSM). Of these, 94% stated FSM should be universally provided to all school aged children and young people. One respondent commented that “hunger does not stop when a child reaches secondary school age”.

When asked why this was important, comments centred around four main areas: hunger; educational attainment; equality and inclusivity; and reducing cost burden for parents.

**Reducing hunger** and improving nutrition for children and young people of all ages was commented on most often. Respondents identified that whilst there were increasing numbers of pupils becoming eligible for FSM, there were equally many more thousands that did not qualify, but still experienced the same need. The majority of respondents firmly believed that all children and young people should receive at least one hot, nutritious meal each day and for many, this would only be available at school.

*“Having a nutritious meal during the day is essential to ensure the physical development of children of all ages, as well as enabling them to focus on education rather than worrying about their next meal.”*

The provision of universal FSM for all ages was widely cited as a means to **improve educational attainment**. Respondents added that “full bellies” improve concentration, lead to better engagement and behaviour and in some circumstances, improve regularity of attendance knowing that they will be fed.



Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that access to FSM through universal provision would **improve equality and inclusion**. Many practitioners commented on the embarrassment felt by the families and pupils who currently receive FSM. Universal provision for all ages would reduce the stigma, relieve anxiety and alleviate some of the emotional burden carried by many experiencing poverty. They cited that for so many pupils, universal provision would help to “level the playing field”; allowing children and young people to “feel like their peers, even if just for a short time every day”; and provide some relief from their circumstances.

*“Food is a basic need and we should have equal right to it”*

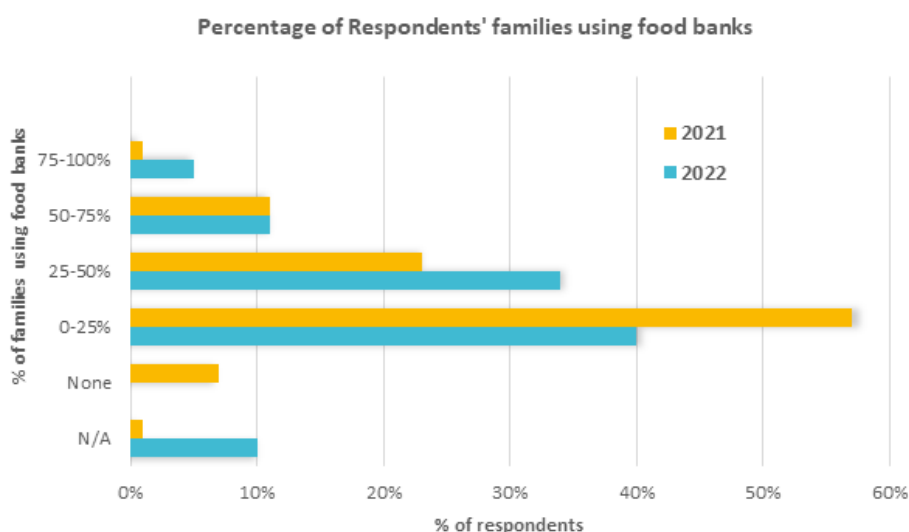
The **cost burden of school meals** was regularly highlighted by respondents. Universal provision for all ages, not just primary school, would help to improve families’ finances and remove future school meal debt, particularly for those who are in need, but not currently eligible for FSM. Respondents commented that prior to the increase in living costs, many of their families were already struggling to pay for school meals. There was general concern about the current financial situation of families and, as we move into the autumn term, whether or not families will be able to afford school meals. Earlier in this report, respondents were asked to identify common areas of debt arrears. Respondents identified school meals as already being amongst these and believe that this will increase.

## Food banks

*“For many families, food banks are now their reality”*

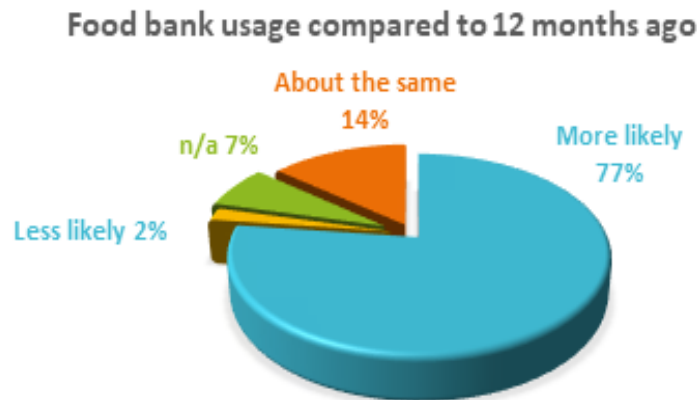
Through the survey, we wanted to gain an understanding of the extent of food bank usage amongst the families that respondents work with. As previously identified by respondents, this is a minimum of 42,500 families.

Respondents were asked to give an approximation of the percentage of their families using food banks at least once a month. The chart also includes figures from our 2021 survey as a comparison.



Given the limitations of a survey; approximation of figures; potentially different respondents; and varied roles, it is not possible to present accurate figures of food bank usage, therefore these should be viewed as indicative figures.

We asked respondents if the majority of their families were more or less likely to use a food bank, compared to 12 months ago.



A large majority of respondents, 77%, stated that the families they work with are now more likely to use to a food bank. Many comments aligned the rising cost of living with an increase in food bank usage and in particular, cited an increase in first time usage for working families. The majority of practitioners commented on the necessary increase in the number of referrals they were making to food banks, with a few citing that making referrals and collecting food vouchers for families is now forming a large part of their role.

### *“Food banks are a LIFELINE to families”*

Respondents gave examples of more community and ‘fare share’ shops being set up as well as an increase in the numbers of schools setting up donation points and/or food banks.

However with the increased need for food banks, comes an increased need for donations. Comments were divided on this, with some respondents seeing a heartening increase in community response and food donations, whilst others reported empty shelves and issues in getting enough donations to meet the demand. Where this was the case, respondents stated that community donations were declining as families could no longer afford to donate food and where businesses had previously donated food, the amount of food donated has also declined. Respondents stated that donations from businesses were being ‘spread too thinly’.

### *“Food banks in our area have empty shelves. Families who were in a position to help others by donating, can’t do that anymore”*

Some respondents also highlighted that families are regularly turned away from food banks or are deemed ineligible for vouchers due to the frequency of their food bank usage. It is not clear from the responses how, and if these families are able to access food.

Practitioners stated that although parents and carers still attached a stigma to the use of food banks, this was slowly, but steadily declining. Respondents suggested that increased numbers of families using food banks, media coverage and absolute necessity had reduced the stigma. However, they reported that there were still many parents struggling to come to terms with their need to use food banks. This was affecting their emotional wellbeing; causing them to question their abilities as a parent; impacting on their confidence; and regularly leaving them with feelings of “shame” and “embarrassment”.

### *“Situations are becoming more and more dire every month”*

Overall, more families have an increased and regular need to access foodbanks. They are often a parents' last resort. For so many families, their income, whether through benefits, employment or a combination, is not enough to meet the costs of their basic needs.

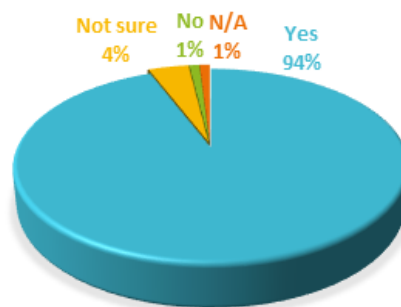
In the children and young people's survey, they were asked if there were any local examples where something positive happens to help families who live in poverty. Their overwhelmingly response was "food banks".

## Education and poverty

*“Relentless. Almost all school classes with pupils now impacted visibly or quietly. Absenteeism rising because no food or sleep. Have to feed pupils regularly. Many at 15/16 yrs are working, not studying, to help with costs. Not known it this bad in a 20 year career.”*

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

Does poverty affect children & young people's experience of school and learning?



The findings for this question were identical to those from the 2021 survey, with nearly all of the respondents (94%) believing that poverty did affect children and young people's experience of school and learning.

The areas most frequently commented on by respondents were poor mental health; bullying and stigmatisation; hunger; absenteeism; and inequity. Respondents commented that each of these areas were not issues in isolation, rather each had a direct impact on the other.

*“Poverty means huge pressures in every area of life for children and young people.”*

As previously stated, poor and deteriorating **mental health** has been cited throughout the survey findings. Respondents reported that as the numbers of children and young people living in poverty increases, so do the numbers of children experiencing poor mental health.

Practitioners commented that many more children and young people are experiencing extensive stress, anxiety and depression, with many withdrawing from engagement and increasingly isolating themselves during the school day.

Children are regularly anxious and concerned about their parents' mental health, with some too worried to leave them. Debt, family hunger and strained family relationships were also cited as significant factors in the deterioration of child mental health.

*“Children pick up on the parents’ stresses. They know their parents can’t afford to feed them. This increases anxiety and depression in children.”*

It was felt that many children and young people living in poverty have little or no respite from the impact of financial and emotional stress. Many experience this in their home circumstances and this continues when they attend school each day, from not being able to pay for food or trips, to being bullied because their uniform is too small. For many, this is the **perpetual cycle** of their educational experience.

Respondents identified that children and young people experiencing poverty were **bullied** on a regular basis, stigmatised and excluded by their peers. It was also noted that they were often “treated differently” and sometimes “dismissed by professionals” within the school. For many their self-esteem, personal value, sense of belonging and societal worth no longer existed.

*“Poor self-esteem can lead to poor choices for the more vulnerable - gang culture and exploitation.”*

**Absenteeism** was also frequently referenced in this year’s survey, but again, as with the other areas, not in isolation. Respondents commented that parents’ mental health had an impact on absenteeism, stating that some could not “face” the school run or were too “overwhelmed” to get their children to school. More commonly though, practitioners identified that financial pressures increased absenteeism. For example, the cost of getting children to school, lack of money to provide school uniforms, shoes and PE kits were factors. There were increased absences during dress down days and payment deadlines for school trips. It was also noted that expectations to submit homework could also lead to absenteeism, particularly if resources were needed to ‘create’ homework pieces or where there was a reliance on access to the internet for research.

*“They often cannot come to school as they do not have shoes or equipment and also feel they cannot ask for school trips as they know there is no money available to pay for them.”*

Inevitably, given the number of cumulative internal and external factors experienced by many children and young people experiencing poverty, it is not surprising that respondents commented on the increased number pupils who are absent.

The final area that was frequently discussed was the **inequity and lack of opportunities** for children and young people experiencing poverty. These included a number of references to the very basic level of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, summarising that “if a child’s basic needs are not met, then they can’t function and thrive.”

*“If they are hungry, don’t have a safe home etc., how can they be expected to go to school, focus, concentrate and learn? They are already at a disadvantage before they start the day.”*

**Hunger** was cited as a factor that increased inequity. Children who were attending school hungry, were less likely to focus, be able to concentrate not have the energy to engage with learning. Practitioners were increasingly providing breakfast for children in order to help improve their ability to engage.

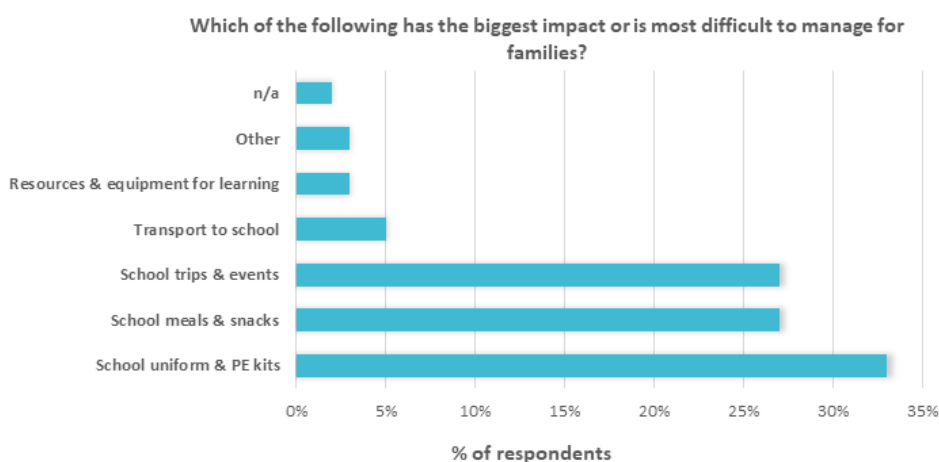
Many other respondents commented on the **inequity** in other areas such as school trips; clubs and extracurricular activities. These were identified as helping to improve a child’s experience of education, providing respite from their circumstances, reducing social exclusion and having a positive impact on emotional wellbeing. Crucially, respondents saw these activities as an opportunity to “expand their experiences, horizons and outlook”, with some citing an improvement in aspirations.

*“Education dictates opportunities and outlook on life. It’s already an un-level playing field and this continues to exacerbate – the gap is widening.”*

References were repeatedly made to poverty increasingly widening the gap in educational attainment. This has been further highlighted by the recent pandemic and the necessary educational “catch-up” that parents’ feel is necessary. Practitioners cited that there has been a sharp increase in the number of more affluent families arranging private tuition for their children.

*“The divide between those who can and can’t afford things is widening.”*

In relation to education, respondents were asked to choose one area from the list provided, that had the biggest impact on families’ financially or were the most difficult for them to manage.



The topics given 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 mitigate the impact of poverty in education and reduce the cost of the school day. The project is funded by Welsh Government and delivered by Children in Wales.

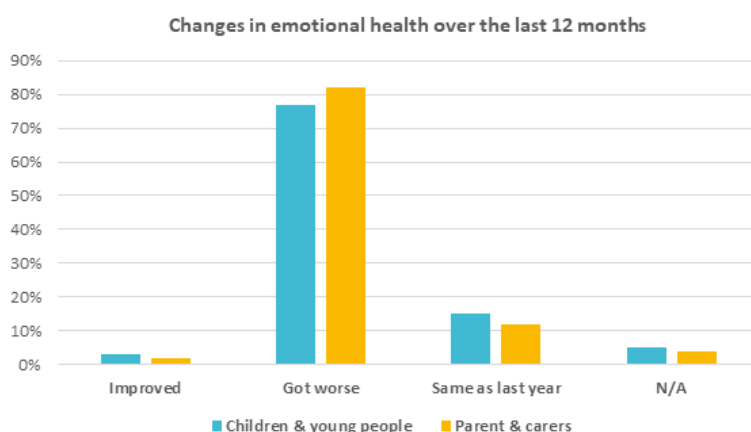
## Mental and emotional health

*“So many families and parents are in a worse position now than they were 12 months ago. The significant negative impact this is having on their mental health and relationships is terrible.”*

As the findings throughout this survey have shown, poverty does have a detrimental impact on the emotional health of children, young people and their families. In all areas and topics within this report, mental health is directly impacted by, and intertwined with the circumstances of poverty.

In our 2021 Annual Child and Family Poverty survey, mental and emotional health emerged as a significant theme throughout, with 93% of respondents citing this as an issue. As a result, the 2022 survey for practitioners and professionals included overarching questions on child and parental mental health. Respondents in this year’s survey showed an increase in the strength, frequency and urgency of their comments. When reading the findings, it is not difficult to understand why this is.

Based on their experience and observations, the survey asked respondents if the emotional health of children, young people, parents and carers had changed over the last 12 months.



Respondents overwhelmingly cited that the mental and emotional health of children, young people, parents and carers has deteriorated over the last 12 months. This was across all local authority and health board areas in Wales. They identified a rapidly increasing and urgent need for support services. A significant number of practitioners also reported an increase in the numbers of children, young people and parents who were at severe and immediate risk.

Whilst it was recognised by respondents that many children, young people and their carers were experiencing poor mental health prior to the pandemic, it was felt that Covid had exacerbated the current situation. In commenting on the **mental health of parents and carers**, respondents related the pressures of the pandemic as having a direct impact on deteriorating mental health. Examples given included increased intensity and proximity of relationships, both with children and partners during lockdowns; increased stress of home schooling; reduced income; additional household expenditure and debt; reduction in and lack of access to existing services, including family support, parenting groups, informal and formal support services and mental health professionals.

*“Most of the children and young people I work with now have 1 or both parents with a mental health condition”*

The rising cost of living, debt, and financial inability to feed their families were cited major factors in the declining emotional and mental wellbeing of parents.

*“The high fuel bills and rising costs of living are causing just as much stress. Children are seeing and feeling this in their own homes”*

Practitioners identified the significant impact that parental mental health can have on children and young people too. Parents are “exhausted” and often struggle to get through the day. Examples were given of “children not attending school due to the parents’ mental health” and parents/carers increasingly removing themselves from social engagements. Respondents also commented that many children and young people are regularly “concerned”, “anxious” or “stressed” about their parents. This has continued post pandemic as children continue to see parents worry about finances and their ability to feed their family and pay bills.

*“We have referred a number of young people to mental health support services, many more than we normally would do during the course of 6 months”*

The majority of respondents (77%) stated that the **mental health of children and young people** had ‘got worse’ over the last 12 months. Many of the comments referenced the pandemic and the associated issues. However, respondents repeatedly referred to the cumulative effects that living in poverty had on the emotional health of children and young people experience. They are witnessing children and young people isolating themselves, become increasingly withdrawn, upset and unable to cope in many circumstances. Many children are now continually stressed about money and “worry about this all of the time”. Practitioners cited children as young as 9 and 10 years old being in a constant state of anxiety about their families’ ability to pay for food, rent and electricity.

*“There are long waiting lists for children to be seen by CAMHS and other mental health services”*

It is important to note that many respondents expressed concerns about the lack of access to and the **capacity of mental health services** across all areas of Wales. Whilst they appreciated that they are “increasingly having to make more referrals to mental health services” and therefore the services are “now busier than ever”, respondents are experiencing more children, young people and parents/carers with severe and immediate need. They stated that as the waiting lists get longer, the need gets greater.

*“It is difficult to support someone’s mental health when their social circumstances are crushing”*

Practitioners felt that as the need for services exceeds capacity, there is now little proactive action being taken. Instead, service provision is likely to be reactive and even then, only managing to support those in crisis.

*“There is no opportunity to ‘nip things in the bud’ or build proactive strategies to avoid crisis situations”*

Unfortunately, many of the observations related by respondents are reflected in those provided by children and young people in their survey findings. They frequently commented on sadness and depression, of being anxious, lonely and feeling isolated.

Whilst poverty greatly impacts on the mental health of many children, young people and their families, working with and witnessing the impact of poverty can also have an impact on the workforce. In the 2021 survey, a significant number of respondents identified that their own emotional health had been affected by the poverty related circumstances they observed. As a result of this, an optional question for respondents was included in this year's survey, allowing them to express the **impact of their observations and experiences on their own emotional health**. A number of respondents expressed their appreciation of this question. The survey asked; "How are you".

*“There are times when a change of career has been considered as it is too much, but on good days, I still love my job and want to continue to support families in our local area”*

This optional question was answered by 57% of respondents and of these, 44% commented that they were generally “fine” and “doing well”, with some identifying as thriving. However, for the majority of those answering (66%), this was not the case. 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, young people and their families.

Respondents repeatedly cited that they regularly feel overwhelmed by what they witness, increasingly feel frustrated, helpless and anxious. They described the emotional toll of seeing families who are struggling financially, unable to feed their children and who are despondent about the future for themselves and their children.

*“It feels heavy taking on young people’s emotional struggles and not being able to help, often when issues are poverty related”*

A number of practitioners also shared that their own personal, financial circumstances are very difficult and that they too are now in debt and struggling with the rising cost of living, with some having to use foodbanks. Emotionally, they often found it very difficult to support families given that their own circumstances were not dissimilar. A few respondents shared that they are currently receiving formal mental health support.

Respondents also expressed concerns about their excessive workloads, borne of the increasing needs of their families. They stated that the poverty situation was getting worse and that more families were in need of more support. Many commented that they have exhausted support avenues and have to tell families that there is “nothing more they can do”.

*“I have worked in the third sector for over 15 years and things have never been this bad. Working in these circumstances, seeing more and more families struggling and very little support available means that we have limited options to help them. This is really difficult on my own emotional health.”*



Respondents described this as demoralising, feeling as though they have “failed” in their role and most importantly, that they are failing families and their children. A number of respondents shared that, as a result, they are actively seeking a change of employment or are “seriously considering” leaving their sector completely.

Practitioners and professionals also expressed their anger and frustration, citing the need for; national policies and action to address all poverty related issues; support for families in the long term; and increasing financial resilience. The comment below summarised the feelings and voices of some of the practitioners.

*“I am utterly exhausted. Seeing and hearing so many harrowing stories, helping people who have been utterly failed by the state. Furious that the Welsh Government doesn’t even have a strategy to address child poverty. Another whole generation of children growing up without any plan to address the single biggest threat to the enjoyment of their full human rights.”*

In response to “How are you?”, the comments provided clearly show that many in the workforce are struggling emotionally and regularly find their roles difficult. However, despite these circumstances, their overarching concerns remain with the children, young people and families they work with, and their commitment and need to support them. We would like to thank all of the respondents who shared their personal, and often difficult experiences in this section. It is appreciated and we hope that it encourages further conversations about mental health throughout the workforce and enables greater understanding of the impact poverty has on everyone.

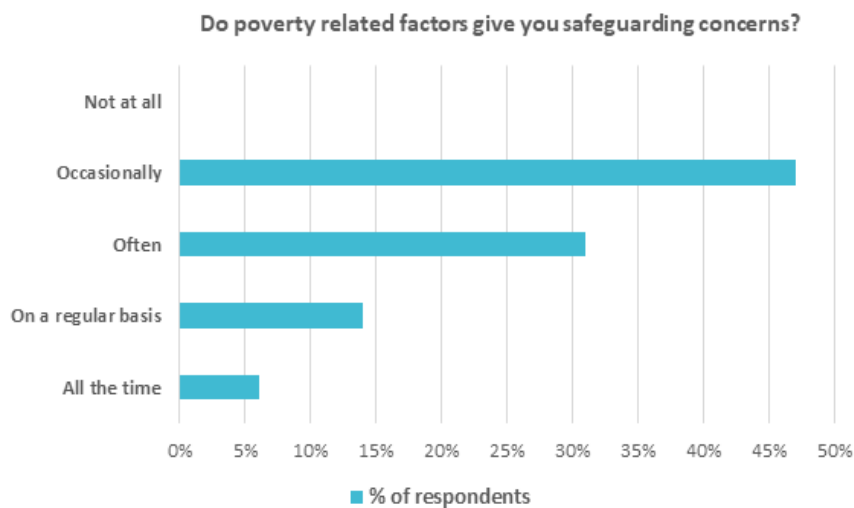


## Poverty and safeguarding concerns

*“In over 20 years of social work, I have never worked with a family who actively chose to inflict harm on their children. The situation and factors surrounding them had led to complex issues and lack of options. Poverty is preventing parents from being at their best, resulting in far greater costs to our society. This will continue to impact future generations until we achieve full scale policy change.”*

Poverty, in itself, is not a safeguarding issue and parents do their utmost to protect children from the impact of poverty. However, poverty can lead to issues which may give rise to safeguarding concerns, such as lack of food, warmth and increased emotional stress on individuals and between relationships.

Based on their experience, the survey asked respondents whether poverty related factors gave them safeguarding concerns.



There were no significant differences between the age ranges and frequency of concerns. Respondents recognised the pressures that poverty brings, both financially and emotionally. They cited that families are doing their utmost to provide for their children in ever increasingly difficult circumstances.

*“Children not being fed, not having clean clothing to wear. We work with many families where there are children who do not have their own beds.”*

However, respondents did identify that the consequences of poverty can lead to safeguarding concerns. Where families are struggling financially, understandably, there is often a lack of food, living environments can be cold and damp and housing is often unsuitable and poorly maintained. Many parents have to face the difficult decision of ‘eating or heating’. Financial pressures were frequently cited as leading to stress, anxiety, relationship issues, including domestic abuse and deteriorating mental health.

Poor mental health was identified as reducing the ability of many parents and carers to cope, and respondents commented that this had an impact on the behaviour and emotional wellbeing of children and young people.

*“Poverty doesn’t come alone, it has an impact on all aspects of life, mental health being the most affected.”*

Practitioners and professionals recognised the poverty related causes of potential safeguarding concerns, and where possible, made referrals to support services, such as food banks and mental health services. However, they stated that the impact of these factors can and do escalate into safeguarding concerns, particularly under the category of neglect.

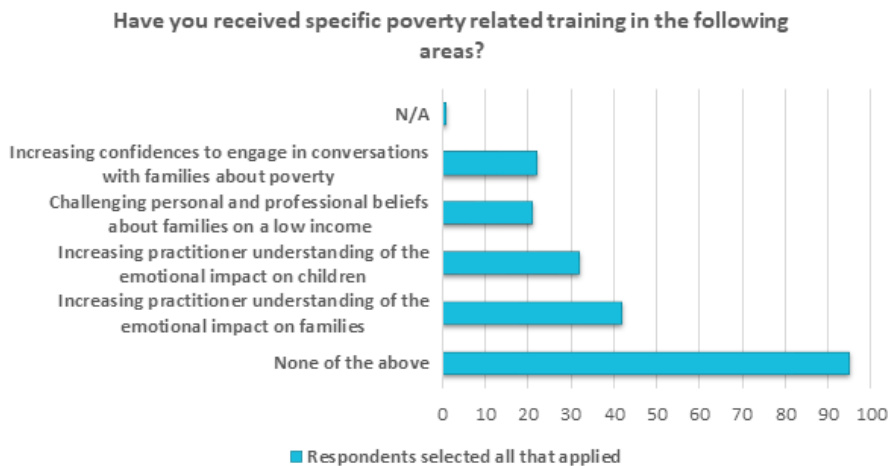
*“We have recently worked with a family under the category of neglect. As it turned out, Mum was not neglectful, she was poor.”*

Respondents commonly cited that their priority had to be the welfare of children and young people. Where the basic needs of children cannot be met, then this is likely to lead to safeguarding concerns.

## Poverty related training

In recent years, throughout our surveys, respondents, including children and young people, have commented that practitioners, professionals, services and Government can sometimes lack understanding and empathy of the daily challenges and experiences of those living in poverty.

In this year’s survey we wanted to identify if the workforce has received specific training on the emotional impact of poverty, including understanding and empathy and personal and professional beliefs.



Over 61% of respondents had not received any training in these areas. Of those who had received training in a least one of the areas specified, there was no indication that a practitioner’s role, service, sector, age remit or local authority area influenced whether they had received training or not.

## Tackling poverty and its impact – Respondents' views

The final question to participants asked; “**If you were First Minister**, what one change would you be making to help tackle poverty and its impact?” The majority of respondents, 79%, answered this question. Summaries of the 10 most commonly raised areas are given below and are ordered accordingly, with 1 being the most frequently cited.

- 1. Universal free school meals:** Provide free school meals to all school aged children and for this to include breakfast. Free school meals should continue during holiday periods for those who are eligible or in need.
- 2. Benefits:** Lobby UK Government for reinstatement of the Universal Credit uplift and increase all benefits in line with the cost of living. The process of claiming any, and all financial support should be made easier, be more transparent and accessed from one point of contact. Remove barriers to claiming, including ‘on-line only’ claims and the requirement for a professional to support a Discretionary Assistance Fund claim
- 3. Equity in education:** Ensure school budgets are sufficient to allow for the provision of uniforms, including PE kits; equipment, including topic specific equipment (e.g. cookery ingredients); and school trips. Ensure full adherence to the Welsh Government’s school uniform guidance. Schools should increase awareness of poverty and its impact through the curriculum and through the Price of Pupil Poverty project.
- 4. Universal basic income:** Expedite plans for the provision of universal basic income, ensuring the income is aligned to ‘real’ cost of living.
- 5. Childcare:** Extend the provision of free childcare to support parents on low incomes. Childcare needs to be more accessible and support shift patterns.
- 6. Mental health services:** Increase the capacity of, and access to mental health services, particularly for children and young people.
- 7. Working income:** Provision of better employment opportunities in areas of deprivation and address the necessary infrastructure to support this (e.g. transport, childcare). Support a ‘real’ living wage and increase vocational training and apprenticeships.
- 8. Housing:** Provide more social housing, ensuring it is affordable and accessible to families on the lowest income. Provide support to those who are deemed ineligible for social housing due to existing or previous debt. Address poor standard of housing in the private rented sector.
- 9. Poverty Strategy:** Commit to and prioritise the reduction of child poverty through a national child poverty strategy. This would incorporate a holistic approach to tackling poverty, addressing its causes and, in parallel the impact and consequences for those children and families living in poverty now.
- 10. Listening to lived experiences:** Actively seek, encourage and engage with children, young people and their families who have lived experience of poverty. Those with lived experience should be involved in discussions, policies, processes and practice development at the very beginning and throughout each stage. Their voices are crucial and experiences invaluable. These should be heard as part of the concept, not just the process.

We also asked children and young people the same question. Their responses can be found towards the end of this report. It is particularly interesting to note that the answers they provided to this question, mirror many of those given by practitioners and professionals.

# CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE'S SURVEY FINDINGS

## About the survey

The Children and Young People's survey forms a crucial part of our annual poverty report. Each year, the survey gives a voice to children and young people, ensuring that their views, opinions and experiences of poverty are heard. As practitioners, professionals, educators, policy makers and ultimately, protectors, it is our duty to listen to their voices and take steps to ensure that all children and young people can realise their rights.

Through this survey, we wanted to gain a greater understanding of the poverty related issues that are important to children and young people and the impact these issues may have on their lives.

The survey was widely promoted and disseminated across Wales and ran concurrently with the practitioner and professionals' survey. It was available for completion over a period of 8 weeks from 26 April – 17 June 2022, available to all ages of children and young people and was completed anonymously by respondents.

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

- Poverty and Money
- Poverty and School
- Poverty and Home
- Poverty in the Community
- Bullying and Poverty

Each of the above categories provided multiple choice options, as well as the opportunity to provide open comments about how each issue could 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 easily understood explanations of specific terminology, such as what was meant by the terms 'poverty' and 'debt'. These terms, provided explanations that could be understood by all participant age groups.

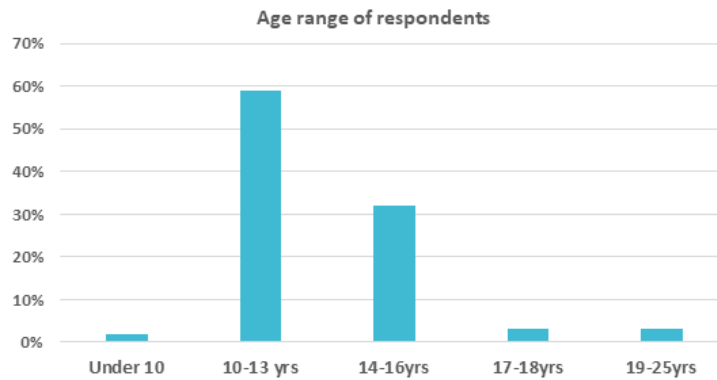
At the end of the survey, children and young people were asked to provide examples of positive practice that they believed had helped tackle poverty in their area. Our final question for the children and young people asked was, 'if they were the First Minister', what would they do to stop poverty happening.

## Who responded

It is important to note that dissemination of the survey did not specifically target children and young people who live in poverty and/or live in deprived areas; nor did the survey ask children and young people if they themselves lived in, or had experienced poverty. Instead, the survey sought their views on how poverty might affect different aspects of children's lives.

Given these parameters, it is therefore not known how many respondents have lived experiences of poverty or whether they live in areas of deprivation.

A total of 250 children and young people responded from 19 Local Authority areas across Wales. Their ages ranged from under 10 years up to 25 years.



Of the respondents, 2% stated they did have a disability, 1% preferred not to say, 9% were unsure and 88% described themselves as not having a disability. Children and young people were also asked about their ethnicity and identified as: Asian Welsh or British (6); Mixed Heritage (5); White from another country (3); White Welsh or British (204); Not sure (25); and Preferred not to say (3).

Given the small numbers of those identifying as disabled or in minority ethnic groups, it is not possible to analyse if responses and findings from these groups are significantly different from those of other respondents.

## Introduction

The findings from the children and young people’s survey predominantly focus on emotional and mental health. Not just their own, but empathy for children and young people experiencing poverty and how this affects them on a daily basis. They were also concerned about the emotional health of their parents and carers, particularly in the current financial climate of rising costs.

The children and young people described how poverty might affect children in different aspects of their lives, and were particularly considered about the impact of poverty on education.

All of the issues identified and commented on by children and young people reflect those identified by practitioners and professionals in their survey.

The findings below include verbatim comments from children and young people. These help to provide a greater understanding of the impact of poverty for many of the thousands of children and young people who live this reality on a daily basis.

## Poverty and money

*“It [poverty] ruins their childhood”*

*(10-13yrs)*

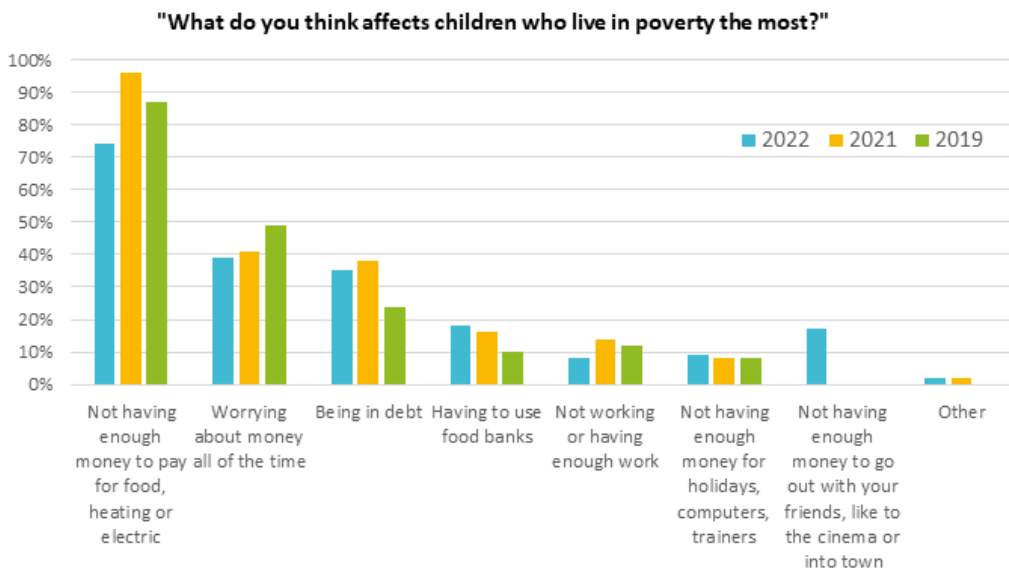
The survey asked children and young people what they thought affected children living in poverty the most. They were asked to choose 2 options from the list provided. These options are based on issues that have been raised by children and young people in previous surveys.

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 following chart shows the 2 options chosen by children and young people. In last year's survey, children and young people highlighted the negative impact of not being able to afford to go out with friends. As a result, we have included this as an option in this year's survey.



The survey then asked respondents to “tell us how you think poverty and money affects children and young people”. Children and young people overwhelmingly referenced **poor mental health**. They commented about poverty increasing anxiety; stress, depression and sadness; about feeling judged by others and “below everyone else”. They commented on feelings of shame and embarrassment, leading to “shyness” and social isolation.

*“[Poverty] deprives children of stress free, happy childhoods”  
(10-13 yrs)*

There were also a number of comments about how parents felt and that they too may feel stressed and “upset” that they sometimes can’t provide for their children. This was generally given as a reason why children may feel sad as they are “in a state of constant worry about their parents”. These concerns were frequently mentioned throughout the survey, regardless of the question.

**Bullying** was also regularly cited. They identified that children would be “picked on” and “made fun of” because they couldn’t afford the ‘right’ clothes or afford to go out with their friends. Bullying was frequently used alongside their comments on poor mental health.

**Hunger** was also raised, explaining that children and young people do not have enough to eat and this affected their physical health as well as their mental health. It was felt that not having basic things like food, clothing, school uniforms and heating is “something that a young person shouldn’t have to deal with”.

*“Being hungry, shoes broken but can’t get new ones, can’t have a dog”  
(10-13yrs)*

A few comments were made around the need for young people to work in order to financially support their families and the resulting impact this had on school work, socialisation and reduced opportunities to meet with friends. They also cited that the need to work did increase stress and anxiety levels. These comments were made by young people aged between 14-18 years.

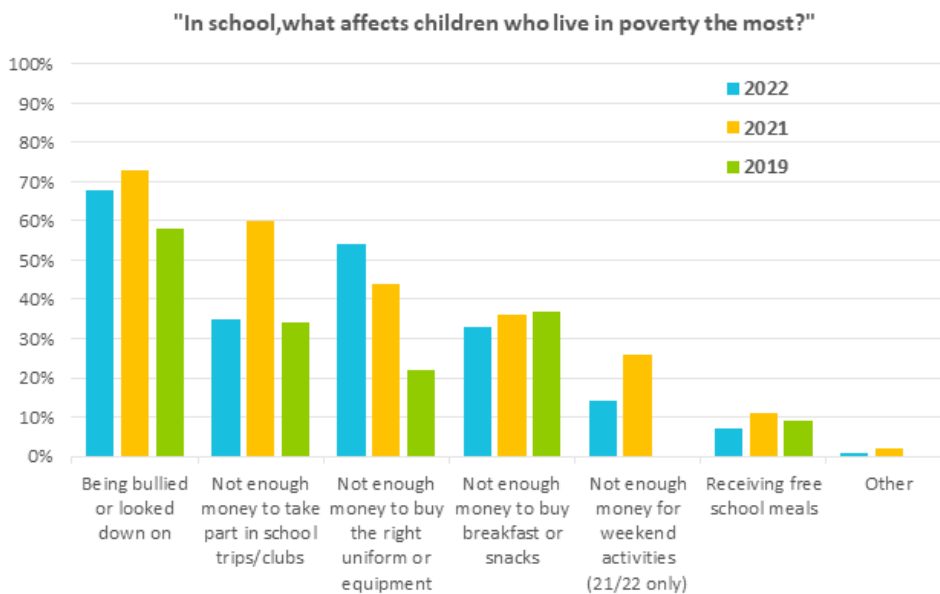
*“The anxiety of having to work to help support your family”  
(17-18yrs)*

All of the responses from the children and young people are echoed in the responses given by practitioners and professionals.

## Poverty and school

*“Constantly thinking about food and not being able to concentrate leads to a failure of exams and not being able to get a further education, just adding to the evil cycle.”  
(14-16yrs)*

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



As in previous years, ‘being bullied or looked down on’ was the option most commonly chosen. However, in other areas, there have been significant changes in the options chosen.

The reason for this cannot be analysed based on the parameters of the data collected in this survey. For example, we do not know the socio economic backgrounds of those responding, which schools they attend or their lived experiences of poverty.



Possible considerations for the fluctuation may include, for example; a reduction in the number of school trips being organised post pandemic and therefore less importance attached to these; an increase in the number of children receiving free school meals or greater acceptance and normalisation of poverty due to media coverage and campaigns. Whatever the reasons may be, the main issues around bullying, uniforms and food have remained a constant.

*“It’s embarrassing, you feel left out and can’t explain your feelings to anyone.”  
(14-16yrs)*

In line with the most commonly chosen issue about poverty and school, **bullying** was the most cited. Respondents commented that children and young people were bullied because they didn’t have the correct uniform or equipment or enough money to buy snacks. As with the findings from previous surveys, bullying not only affected those who were bullied, but also those witnessing it, with descriptions of feeling helpless and sad. It is therefore not surprising that many children and young people also commented on poor mental health, stating that children felt isolated, left out and alone and were discriminated against.

This year, the survey did ask specific questions around bullying and these findings can be found further on in this report.

The children and young people also noted that those experiencing poverty were less likely to have the same **equal opportunities to learn**, commenting that many were “tired” and hungry and therefore couldn’t concentrate. There were also a number of comments about being punished for being tired or not having the right equipment during classes and “schools not understanding the issues faced by children and young people” living in poverty. This created anxiety and further isolation.

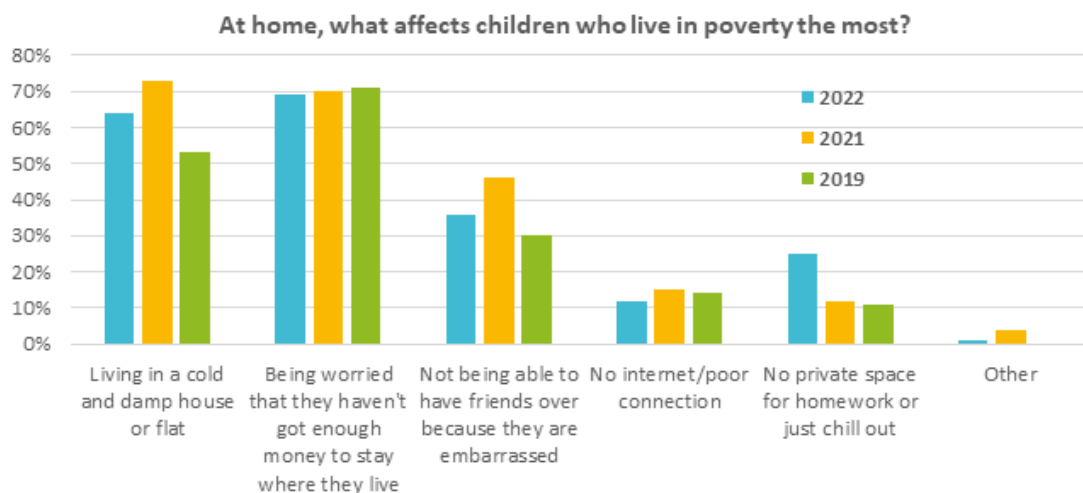
*“Lower self-esteem. Feeling severely left out, misunderstood as in school, you can be punished for being tired, however if you have to work or have inadequate food and housing, then sleep can be tough.”  
(14-16yrs)*

One young person provided an interesting comment on free school meals, stating that “you don’t know who else gets them” and this leads to further isolation and “feeling alone”.

## Poverty and home

*“Have to move, Mum can’t pay the bills. Not enough food. Alone a lot so Mum can work.”  
(10-13yrs)*

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 asked respondents to choose 2, from the list provided.



Children and young people commented on both the emotional and physical environment within the home. They stated that poverty affects **emotional wellbeing and mental health**, with children constantly worrying about “everything”. They recognised that ‘home’ should be a safe place for children and young people, however for those experiencing poverty, it was more likely to be a place of ‘constant worry’. They commented on worrying about paying rent, waiting to hear if they would be ‘kicked out’ of their home and also expressed concerns regarding the pressures that parents face and how this can lead to a “sad home”.

*“No child should have to worry about what the next pay-check is going towards, this takes a toll on mental health, it can be very harmful.”*  
(14-16 yrs)

There were frequent comments on feeling embarrassed about the home environment and not wanting, or able to invite friends round. One child shared that inviting friends round was “impossible, we’ve got no food”. Others commented on being isolated from their friends, physically and also digitally, due to a lack of internet, devices or data.

*“Not being able to turn on the heating to warm, or shower to be clean.”*  
(10-13yrs)

The **physical environment** was also a factor that had an impact. Most commonly mentioned issues included; lack of food; poor living conditions; sharing a bed and lack of sleep; no private space and not being able to afford, or have the equipment to wash clothes on a regular basis. Of these, the lack of a private, personal space within the home environment was cited most often.

It is evident from the comments, experiences and views provided by children and young people, that poverty impacts on every single aspect of their lives.

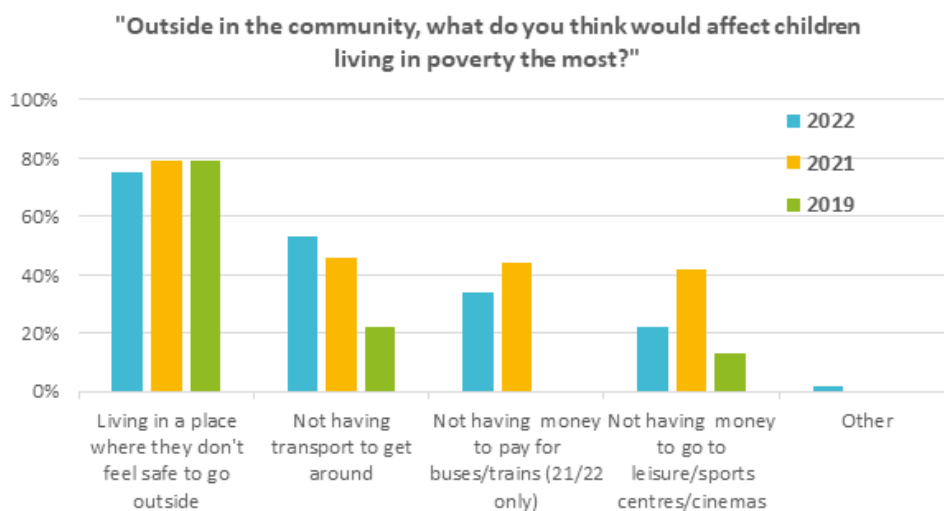
## Poverty in the community

*“Don’t have money to go anywhere or do anything. All I can do is hang around the park.”*

*(Under 10)*

This was the final question in our set on the impact of poverty across different environments and again, children and young people were asked to choose 2 of the options shown below.

As the chart shows, 75% 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 experiencing poverty.



Over half of the respondents commented that children and young people experiencing poverty would not feel safe to go outside in their community. They stated that bullying would be an issue, leaving children feeling vulnerable and scared to go out. They also commented about being judged and looked down on by those in their communities, including adults.

They commented on feelings of embarrassment and shame of either where they lived, or the clothes they wear and again, noted the impact this had on mental health and self-esteem. However, as the following quote shows, this did not affect all children and young people living in poverty

*“We are all poor, so it don’t affect us.”*

*(10-13 yrs)*

Children and young people reported that a lack of money had a significant impact on the ability to socialise and engage within their community and many related this to being bullied and “too scared to go out”.

*“Have to walk everywhere, can’t go to places that cost money. Can’t join in with friends who have money.”*

*(10-13 yrs)*

Travel costs were likely to be prohibitive, as well as the availability of public transport in many areas. Children and young people noted that it wouldn't be possible to meet up with friends and again commented on feelings of isolation. They also highlighted that even if they could get to their destination, they would not be able to afford do anything with their friends, such as going to the cinema, buying a drink, or playing sports. Playing sport and being involved in other activities was important to a number of respondents. However being unable to afford even the most basic equipment needed, such as trainers or clothing, excluded them from participating.

*“Buses and trains are expensive and being connected is so important for work and a social life.”*  
(14-16yrs)

Some comments clearly identified the situation for children experiencing poverty, advising that many cannot afford to buy food or pay for transport costs to visit the doctor, therefore taking part in social activities, was not a possibility.

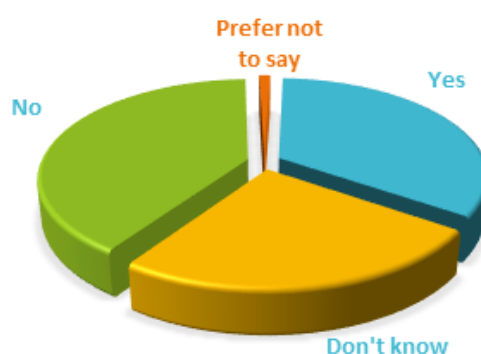
*“They will miss out on time with friends, making memories and having fun.”*  
(14-16 yrs)

## **Bullying and poverty**

*“I think children should be educated about this and the impact that poverty can have from a young age. I think that this will lead to them being more open minded in the future which can stop or limit bullying.”*  
(14-16 yrs)

In last year's survey, we did not specifically ask about poverty related bullying, however, it was so frequently commented on by children and young people that this year, we have include questions on this issue.

**Do you see children and young people being bullied because they don't have as much money or the same things as others?**





The children and young people noted the need to **raise awareness and build compassion** through lessons. They were very clear that this needed to be engaging, “not just an assembly or posters”. They expressed the need to include both the emotional and financial consequences of poverty and how it affects children and young people in all areas of their life. Comments were also made about raising awareness with teachers to increase their understanding and empathy.

*“My worst experiences were teachers forcing me to explain to them, in front of my classes, why I couldn’t afford proper uniform.”*  
(17-18 yrs)

Many children and young people stated that the provision of **free school uniforms** and equipment for those who needed it, would reduce bullying. However, this needed to be “discreet” and done with “respect”. They believed that schools should “make all children wear exactly the same uniform” and that this should be “cheap”. They suggested uniforms should only be bought from the supermarket, rather than the ‘uniform’ shop. This would ensure that all pupils wore the same clothing, regardless of their financial situation. There was also a suggestion to provide “shoe tokens”, as explained in the following quote:

*“Like food tokens but shoe tokens, so that everyone can have new shoes that fit every year when they move up a class. Then everyone would have shiny shoes and no one would be different.”*  
(under 10 yrs)

It is clear from their responses in this section, and throughout this report that poverty related bullying does impact on the emotional health of children and young people and affects their educational and social experiences. Without exception, children and young people responding to this survey agreed that poverty was “not fair” and that “things” need to change so that everyone is treated equally, has adequate, nutritious food, a safe and warm home and importantly, the opportunity to participate, engage and learn.

*“Maybe we could all learn about poverty and the effects of it”*  
(10-13 yrs)

## Final thoughts on poverty from children and young people

*“Something needs to be done.”*  
(10-13 yrs)

Towards the end of our surveys, we offer children and young people the opportunity to say anything they wish about how poverty affects children and young people and a number of them chose to do so.

Here are just some of their thoughts:

*“It should be analysed and thought through and backed with the best solutions. It’s not their fault!”*

*(14-16 yrs)*

*“It’s really bad. Leave school early to get a job to help. Worried because mum cries.”*

*(10-13 yrs)*

*“Poverty affects all kinds of people, in all kinds of ways, for all kinds of reasons.”*

*(14-16 yrs)*

*“They don’t get to do the same thing as anyone else.”*

*(10-13 yrs)*

*“I think there needs to be harsher regulations and implementation on work for young people especially under 16. Working long hours will impact their education and potentially their future work opportunities.” (14-16 yrs)*

*“Have to grow up quickly. Look after their siblings if parents/ carers work late. Feel isolated from other kids because they don’t face the same issues.”*

*(17-18 yrs)*

*“They need to talk more about in this in school, so that kids will know more.”*

*(14-16 yrs)*

*“We should all be treated the same”*

*(10-13 yrs)*

*“Poverty can mean different things to different people. ABSOLUTE poverty is very different to RELATIVE poverty and I believe it is the former that requires the most attention, as people living within this type of poverty are genuinely struggling to afford the basic needs to survive, like food and housing. Children and young people within this bracket of poverty are at the most risk for failure in education, no ambitions to attend higher education, and most likely to be involved in petty crimes. It is these children and young people who are most vulnerable.”*

*(19-25 yrs)*

We also asked them for examples of something good that happens locally to help families who live in poverty. Their overwhelming response to this was “food banks”. A number of children and young people also cited family and friends as “helping” and being “supportive”. When describing their ‘good example’, one young person just simply said:

*“Nana”*

*(10-13 yrs)*

## If I was the First Minister.....

We described the First Minister as “the person in charge of the whole of Wales” and asked children and young people; “If you were the First Minister, what would you do to stop poverty happening?” Areas covered included; food banks; school uniforms; employment and wages; housing; bullying; mental health; services; and raising awareness of poverty. Below are just a few examples of the many changes that children and young people would make.

### ..... I would

#### Overarching

*“Make sure that banks don’t need a home address, because no bank account, no job, no job, no money”*

*(10-13 yrs)*

*“Look into funding which everyone has access to. Work with charities and organisations in stopping poverty. Make people aware and supply the young people with opportunities. I would personally make it my duty to prioritise this issue as it is massive!”*

*(14-16 yrs)*

*“Show people how to access help”*

*(10-13 yrs)*

*“Help the people who are being judged, then make posters telling people to stop”*

*(10-13 yrs)*

#### Education

*“I would make school meals and uniform free”*

*(10-13 yrs)*

*“I would make sure that the Minister for Education includes teaching about poverty in the curriculum from an early age. I would ensure that a large sum of money is dedicated to tackling poverty.”*

*(14-16 yrs)*

*“Push for complete overhaul of schooling systems. Impoverished student are more likely to struggle in school and then remain in poverty due to lack of qualifications”.*

*(17-18 yrs)*



*“This is a difficult question, as there are so many causes of poverty that it is impossible to tackle all issues at once to completely eradicate poverty. I would target children and young people within educational settings; provide them with opportunities to succeed, opportunities for higher education etc. Just to inform them that the cycle of poverty doesn’t have to be continued with them, they have a choice.”*

*(19-25 yrs)*

*“Poverty has very complex roots. Without a doubt, raising the standards of education is a major factor. Wales does not score well in PISA rankings. To raise standards requires investment in training teachers and to fund interventions. More investment in things like ‘Flying Start’ Centres. Supporting businesses to develop and innovate so they can pay higher wages.”*

*(14-16 yrs)*

*“Ensure free school meals/ uniform is provided to all people who need it”*

*(10-13 yrs)*

## **Employment and wages**

*“Try and create better pathways into work for children facing poverty” (14-16 yrs)*

*“Give some more money to people like my mum who works hard but doesn’t get paid enough.”*

*(10-13 yrs)*

*“Ensure a higher minimum wage and aim for support in getting jobs. Also focus on the rising cost of housing and ways to ensure children can have easier access to food and education.”*

*(17-18 yrs)*

*“Pay people properly for their jobs.”*

*(10-13 yrs)*

*“Decrease public transportation costs, improve education on poverty, improve on living wages. Why are under 16 wages almost half 21+ for fulfilling the same role. 16 year olds can live alone or need to provide for their family as well”*

*(14-16 yrs)*

*“Children in work who rely on their wages should either be paid the same as 18-19 minimum wage or should have cheaper forms of transport etc, until they are 18.”*

*(17-18 yrs)*

*“Make it known that poverty is not to be ashamed of as many people end up in poverty with no fault of their own. I would then look into affordable housing in towns and cities which have access to services, not huge cities like Cardiff, but places like Pembrokeshire. An employment scheme in which a business over a certain amount of area or employees have to employ so many people who live in poverty. This will not only give the people a better quality of life but also boost the local economy.”*

*(14-16yrs)*

*“More support to help adults get a stable job”*

*(14-16yrs)*

Children in Wales would like to thank all of the children and young people who took part in this survey. You shared your thoughts and views and have given us lots of information.

**What you have to say is very important to us.**

We will share this report with people in charge, so that your voices and comments are heard across Wales.

**You are amazing.**



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