

PLANT YNG NGHYMURU
CHILDREN IN WALES

Report on the 7th Annual Child and Family Poverty Surveys 2023

Karen McFarlane | October 2023



In partnership with

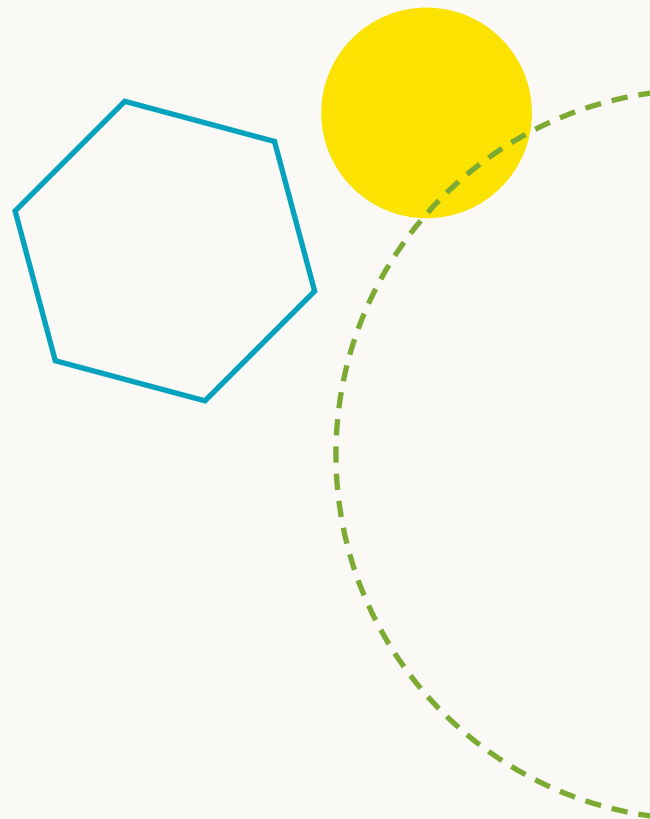
END CHILD POVERTY NETWORK CYMRU
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Acknowledgements

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

Children in Wales would like to sincerely thank all the practitioners, professionals, children and young people who participated in the survey. Your time and responses are greatly appreciated. The findings of the surveys will be shared with practitioners, professionals and policy makers, as well as Welsh Government.

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



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

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

This report is also available in Welsh on the [Children in Wales](#) website

About Children in Wales



Our Vision: Building a Wales where all children and young people have all their rights fulfilled.

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 others in Wales to ensure that children's rights are at the forefront of policy and decision making.

To do this we focus on ensuring that children and young people in Wales have a voice, we fight for sustainable and equitable services, advocate for policy changes in Wales and connect and represent the work being undertaken by our membership.

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 and have recently started a dedicated membership for our young audience.

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

About End Child Poverty Network Cymru



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

Its Steering Group includes representation from across the voluntary and statutory sectors, and the wider network has over 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

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 enshrined in Welsh law 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.

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 that meets and supports their needs (Article 27)
- Their rights to an education and on the basis of equal opportunity (Article 28)
- Their rights to play and leisure opportunities (Article 31)

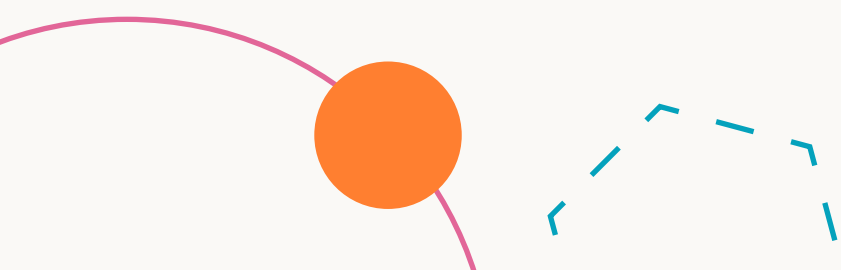
The **Social Services and Well-being Act 2014** places a similar due regard duty on named public bodies, including local authorities and health boards, to the UNCRC when discharging their functions regionally and locally.

In March 2021, the **Socio-economic Duty** came into force in Wales. This duty means that specific public bodies must consider how their strategic decisions can improve inequality of outcome for people who experience socio-economic disadvantage.

At the time of publication of this report (October 2023), Welsh Government has undertaken a public consultation for a Child Poverty Strategy and are expected to publish the final strategy at the end of 2023.

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Introduction

28% of children in Wales live in poverty

Poverty in Wales is widespread with all local authorities continuing to experience high rates of child poverty. Recently published [data](#) by Loughborough University, on behalf of the End Child Poverty Coalition, shows that 28% of children in Wales are living in poverty. Whilst still unacceptably high, this figure shows a marked reduction from 2022, which stated that 34% of children in Wales were living in poverty. However, given that the data do not cover the peak period of the cost of living crisis or inflation, it is not yet known how stable this reduction is or indeed, if it fully reflective of the current child poverty rates in Wales.

Now in its 7th 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. Crucially, 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.

Whilst the child poverty rate appears to have gone down in the 2023 reporting period, unfortunately there is very little 'good news' reflecting that in this report. Again, practitioners share a bleak picture of the impact poverty has on thousands of children and young people across Wales. It is wholly unacceptable that in 7 years since these annuals survey began, arguably **very little has changed for our children and young people.**



The practitioners and professionals who responded to this survey, work with a minimum of **110,000** families and their children. Overall, they see the rising cost of living, food insecurity and debt as factors that are having the greatest impact on families, with 95% stating that **the situation is worse this year** compared to last.

Respondents talked about **“drastic consequences”** of poverty, **“deteriorating mental health”** and **“increased anxiety”**, not just for parents, but for children too. This report looks at specific areas in more detail and also shares the views and experiences of children and young people around the impact of poverty.

Throughout the report, figures and percentages are used. As in previous reports, Children in Wales would again like to reiterate 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 the root causes of poverty and its effects; change policies, embed non-stigmatising 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.

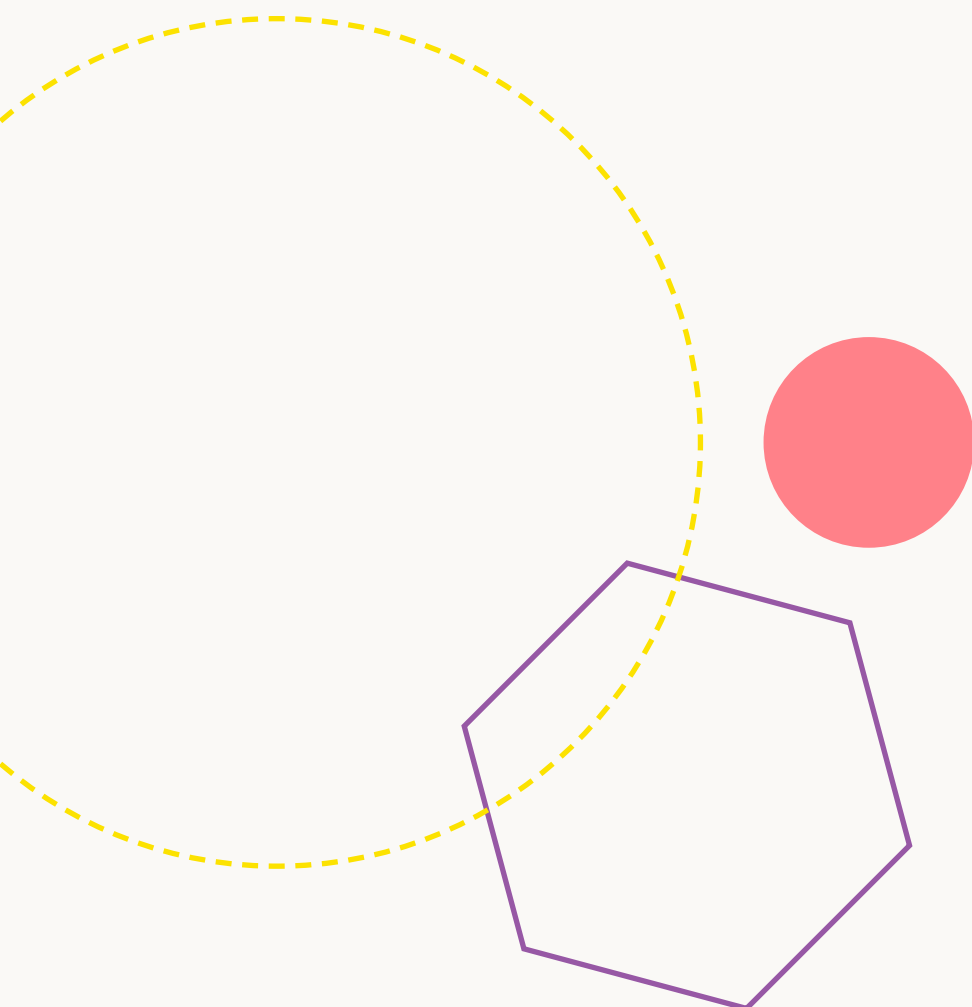


Background to the surveys

We began our surveys in 2014, with a focus on the experiences and views of practitioners. In 2016, 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. For example, this year, we have included a new set of questions around school uniforms and branding and universal free school meals.

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





Practitioners and professionals survey findings

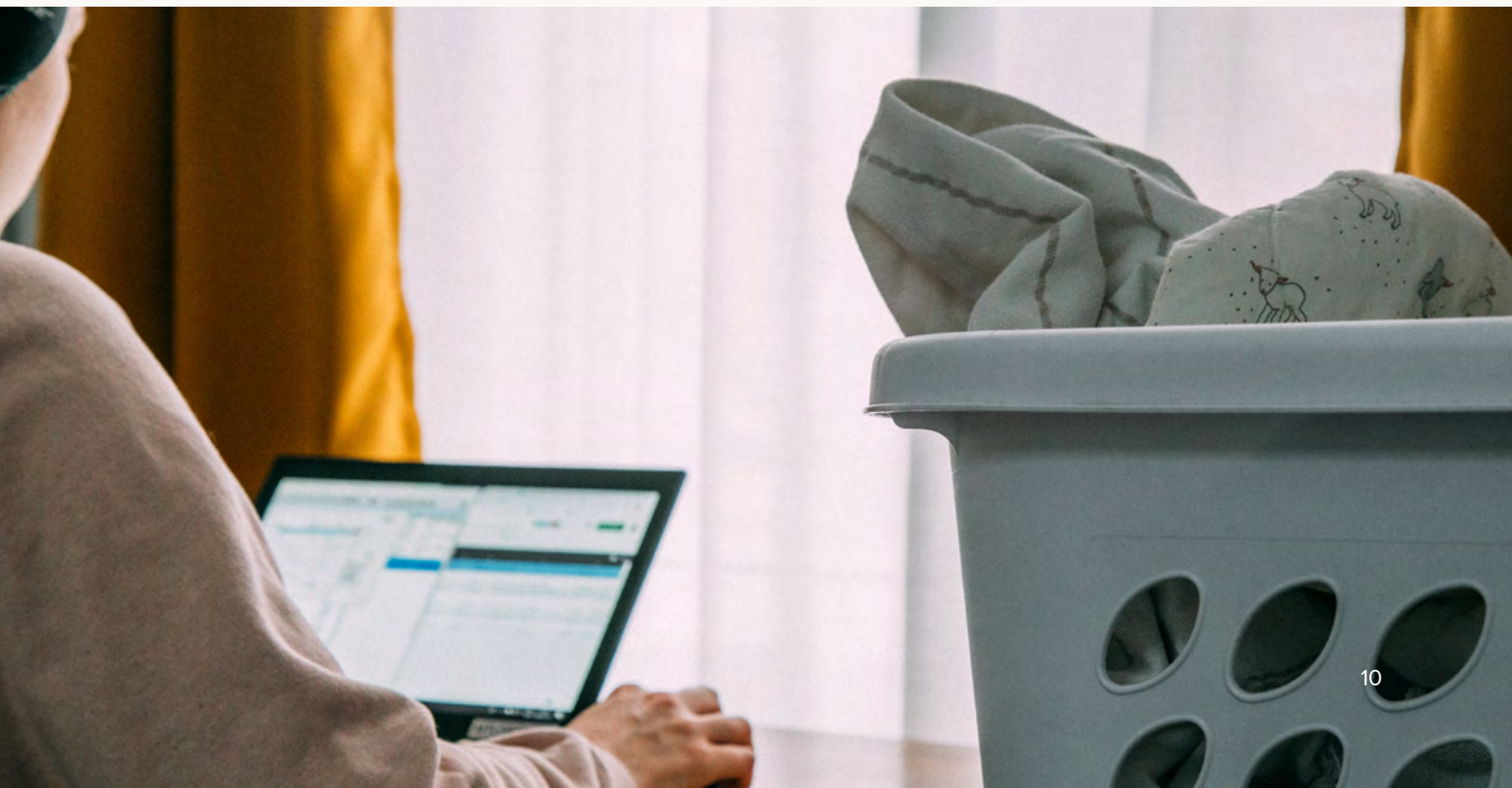
About the survey

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. The survey ran for a period of 7 weeks from 26 April – 16 June 2023 and was completed anonymously by respondents.

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

- Overarching poverty issues
- Budget spend
- Debt
- Financial support
- Free School Meals
- Education
- Mental and emotional health
- Safeguarding

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. These are presented at the end of their findings.

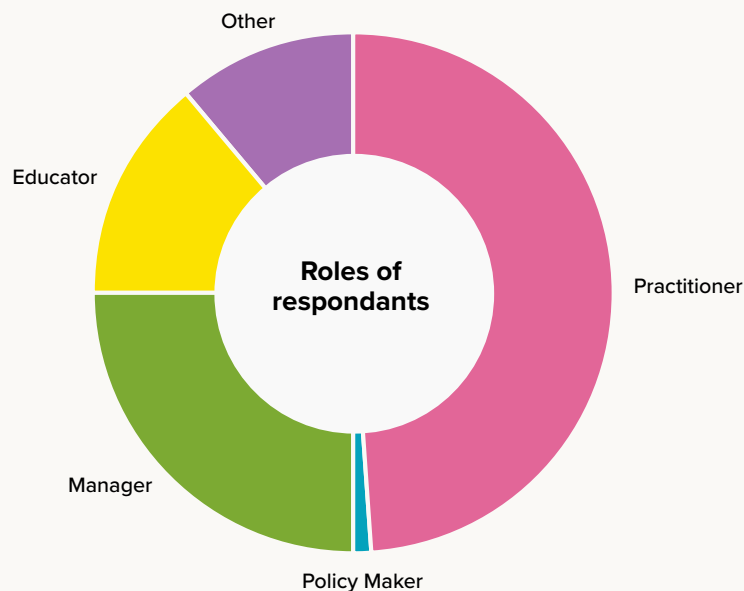


Who responded

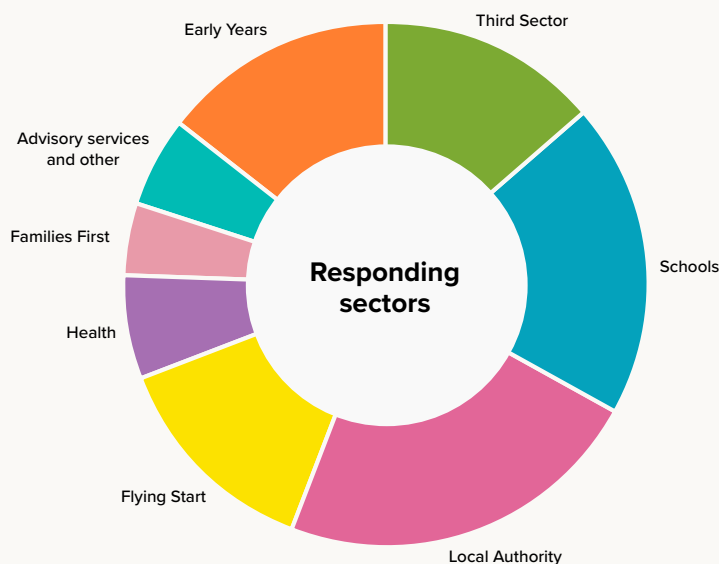
Practitioners and professionals responded from all 22 local authority areas across Wales. A total of 371 responses were received, with 84% of respondents working directly with children, young people and families.

All respondents had a remit for children, young people and/or families. Those directly involved with children and families, work with a **minimum of 110,000 families** each year. This figure is a cautious, adjusted estimate and care has been taken to exclude the possibility of 'double counting' across organisations and local authority areas. The original, unadjusted minimum figure is 207,500 families.

The remaining 16% of respondents worked indirectly with children and families in areas such as policy development, managerial roles and academia.

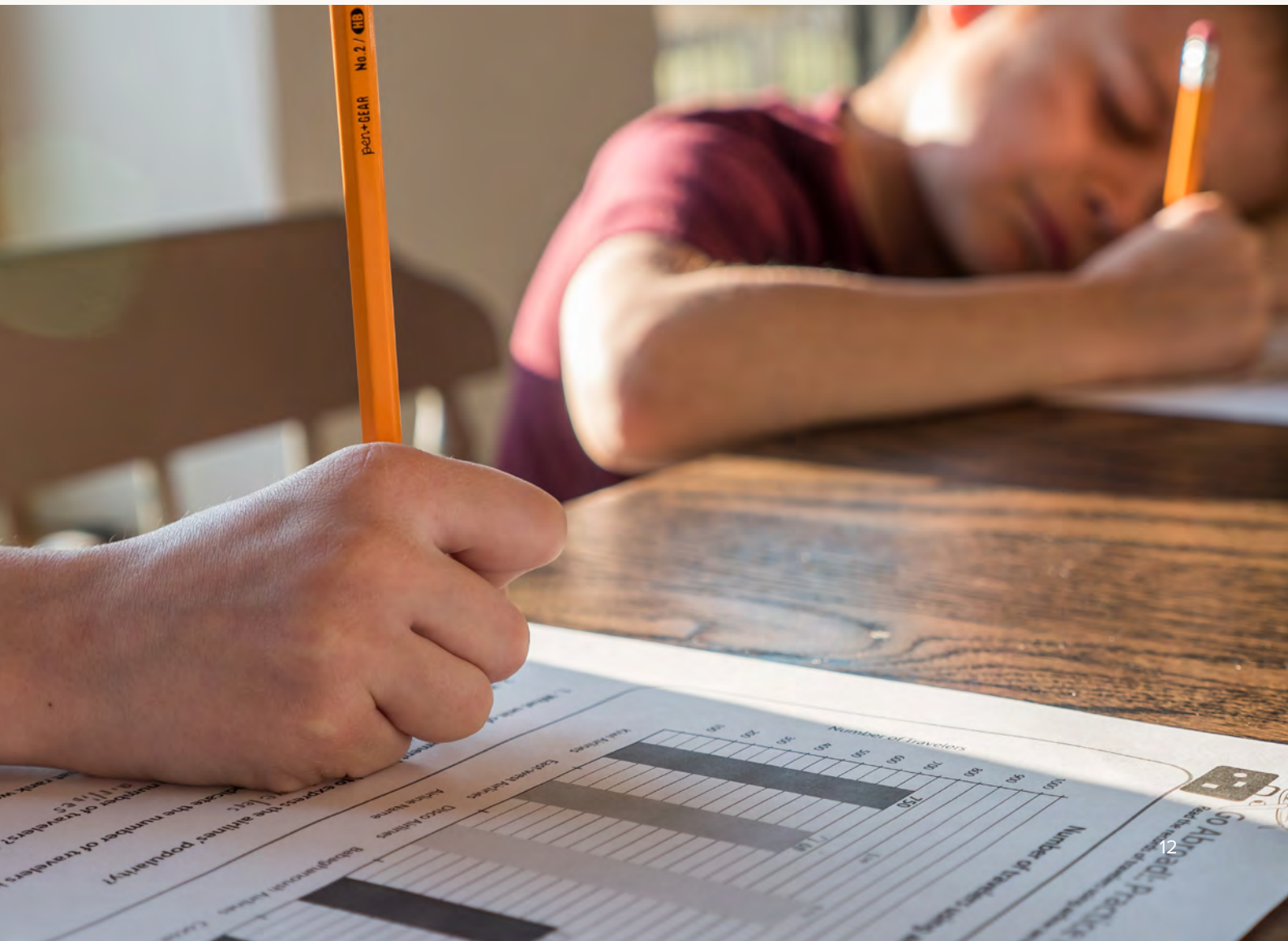
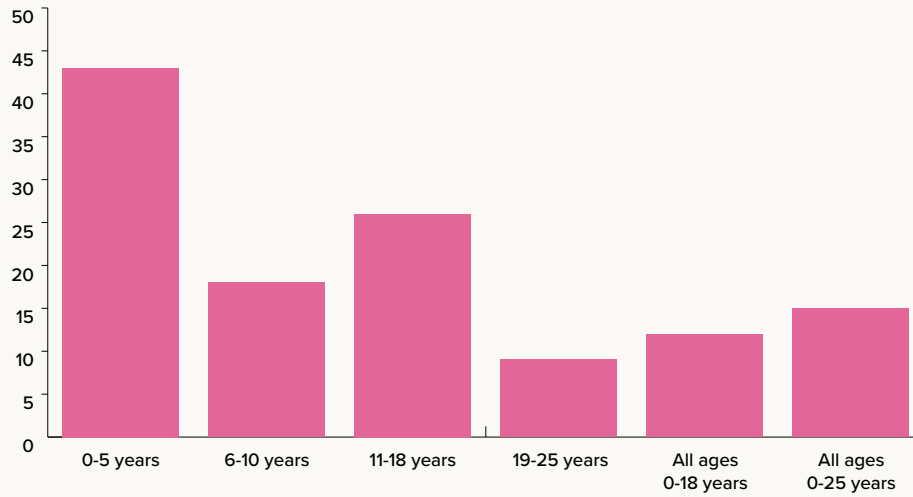


A wide range of sectors and services across Wales responded to the survey.



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.

Age range remit of respondents





Findings

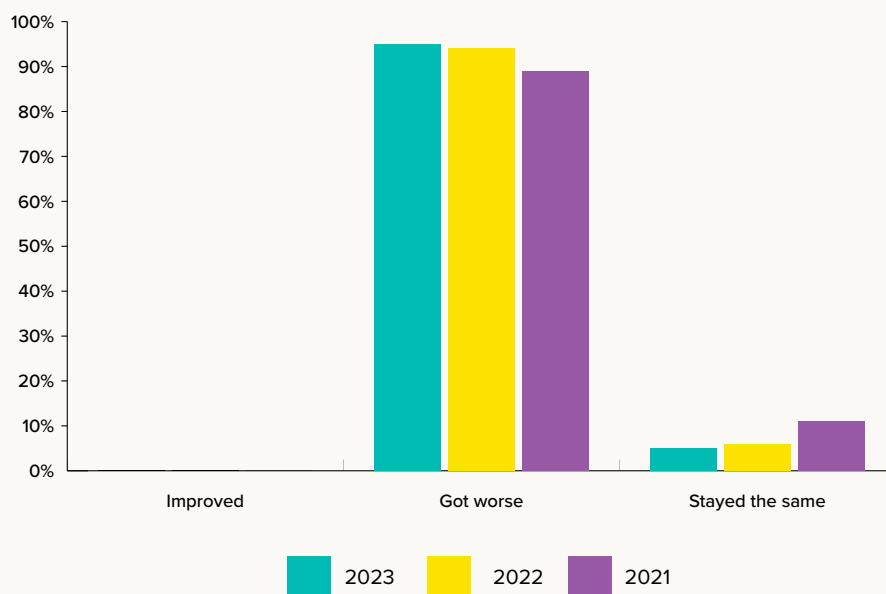
Overarching poverty issues: 3-year comparison (2021-2023)

“Many families have been struggling in poverty for years prior to the current cost of living crisis. Resources and services have seen cutbacks and pressure on essential services has grown significantly. We have reached the perfect storm.”

Over the 7 years since the surveys began, 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 poverty related issues. As the chart shows, almost all respondents (95%) 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.

Has the situation changed in the last year?

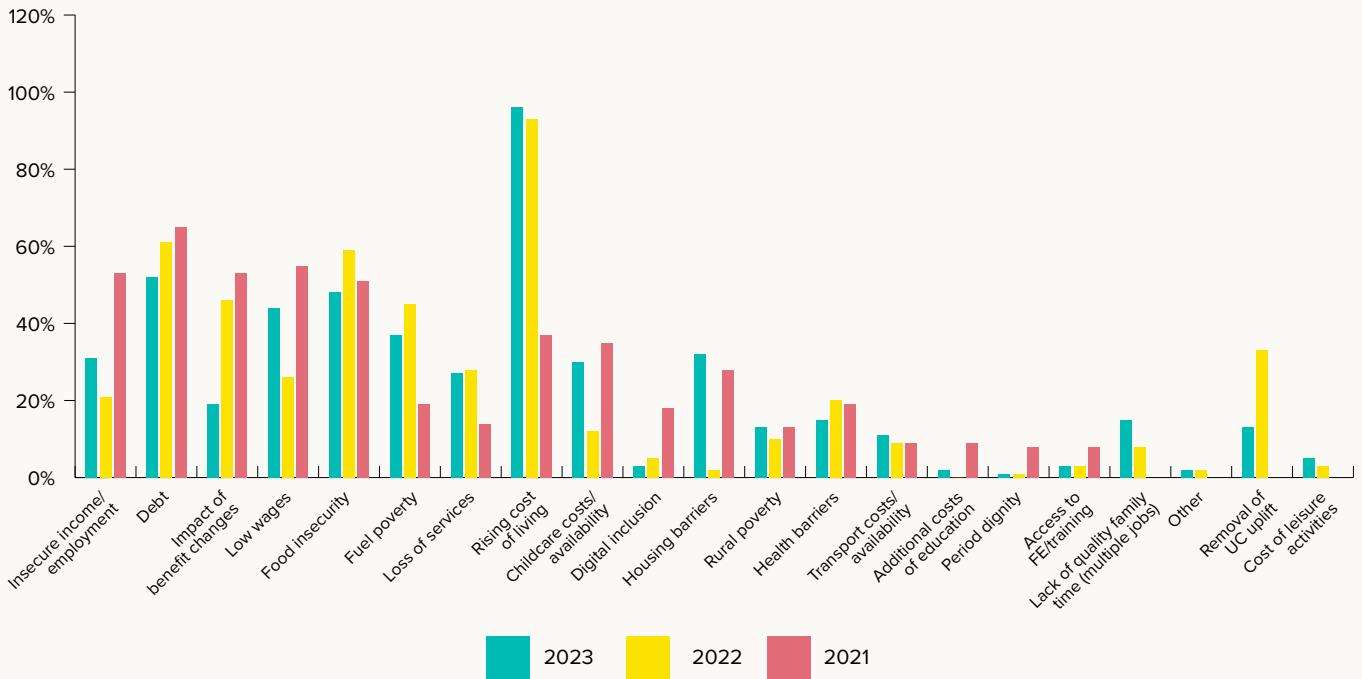


“They are struggling like I have never seen before in 30 years of working with families and children.”

In the 2nd of our core questions, respondents were presented with a wide range of poverty related issues. From these, 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 issues.

The final 3 issues shown on the chart were introduced in the 2022 survey and therefore, no comparable data is available for 2021.

Top 5 ranked poverty related issues - 3 year comparison



There are a number of fluctuations over this comparison period and given the impact of Covid, the rising cost of living, current economic situation and the changing needs of families within this landscape, this is perhaps not surprising. The rising cost of living certainly has an effect on almost every category shown.

The longer term impact of Covid may also now be emerging and reflected in responses. For example, *loss of services* is now seen as a bigger issue compared to 2021 and throughout the survey, respondents commented on the increasing numbers of families and children who need support, but due to availability or condensed locations, cannot access these services. This was particularly commented on in reference to mental health and food banks.

“I see it, I hear it everyday from families themselves. Since Covid times, many children and adults mental health has got worse and they need services like ourselves to know they are not alone.”

Given the limitations of this survey, it is unclear whether capacity in support services has been reduced, or the demand has increased following the pandemic. Comments would suggest both.

Over the 3-year period shown, the **rising cost of living** has seen a dramatic increase in the number of respondents choosing this as one of the top 5 poverty related issues. This year, 96% chose this as a top 5 issue. When asked to comment, they stated that food and energy costs are now, and have been since 2021, so high that families simply could no longer afford these essentials. This was further exacerbated by **low wages, insecure income and employment, rising childcare costs** and **housing barriers**. Budgeting for essential items was said to be an **“impossible task”**.

“Families are not in control, the rising costs are beyond their control. They cannot plan, cannot in particular anticipate costs of energy and food, both of which are essential spends with young children.”

Housing barriers show a stark increase this year. Comments provided indicate a number of reasons for this including; increasing numbers of families **“breaking down”** through parental separation and young people leaving the family home sooner. The increase in the breakdown of these relationships was cited by practitioners as being solely linked to poverty related issues, predominantly stress and anxiety caused by lack of income and affordability of essentials.

The rising **costs of rent** were also cited as a particular barrier this year, both for families accessing housing and for those having to leave their homes because of rent prices.

“The lack of housing and cost of living has increased. There are over 3,000 people waiting for a 1 bed property in [local authority]. Young people are leaving home at a younger age and the cost of renting privately has risen beyond the housing allowance.”



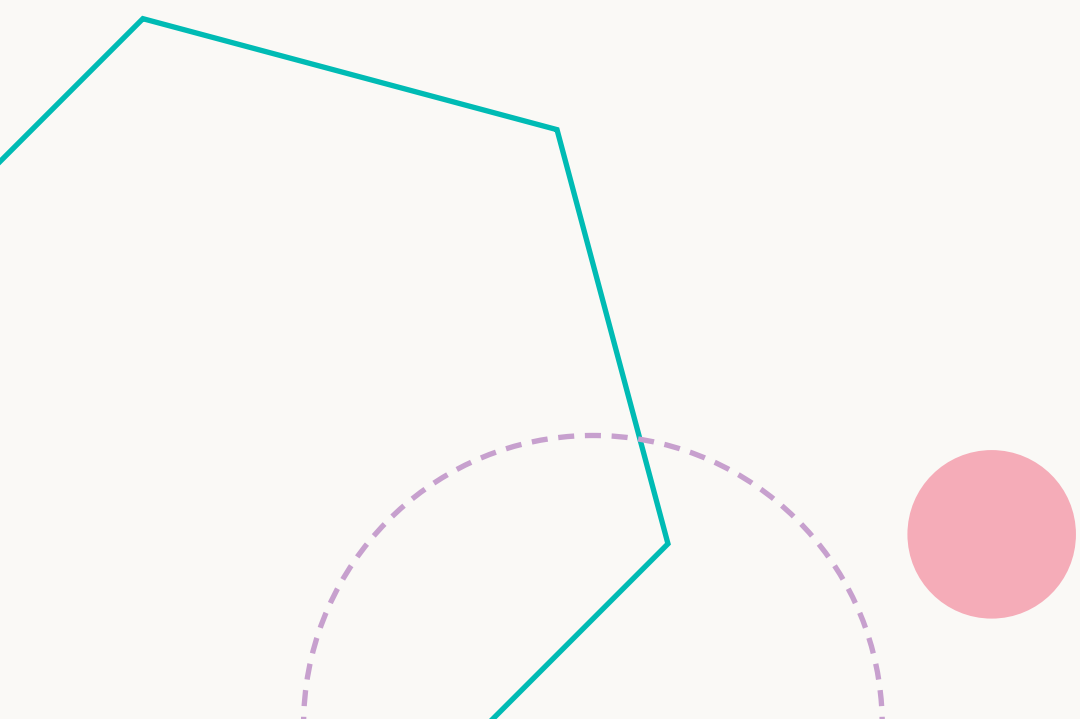
The number of respondents choosing **impact of benefit changes** and **removal of Universal Credit uplift** decreased over the comparison period. However, the impact on families was repeatedly remarked upon by practitioners. They referred to this loss of income as being a major factor on families' abilities to feed their children, heat their homes and meet their basic, essential needs.

Another decrease in this year's comparison is the number of people choosing **debt** as a top 5 issue. However, it still remains an area of much concern for respondents, with over half (52%) of all respondents choosing this and for 2023, was still cited as the 2nd most common issue affecting families. Debt is explored further within a separate section of this report.

Overall, respondents stated that the impact of poverty is affecting more children, young people and families than ever before and across more areas of their lives. **Poor mental health and deteriorating physical health** were frequently cited, as was the lack of **'family time'**, either because parents and carers are necessarily working multiple jobs to provide essentials, or are unable to engage within the family due to declining mental health.

“No end in sight. Parent’s and children’s health continues to decline and they can see no way out of this current situation.....parents feel useless and worthless.”

Respondents to this survey work with a minimum of 110,000 families and as stated by practitioners and professionals, the situation for the majority of their families is desperate. Children and young people are malnourished and hungry, homes are cold and damp, and debts are inevitably increasing. Faced with this, and many other poverty related issues, it is of little surprise that **“families are at breaking point”**, are **“despondent”** and **“have little hope for their futures”**.



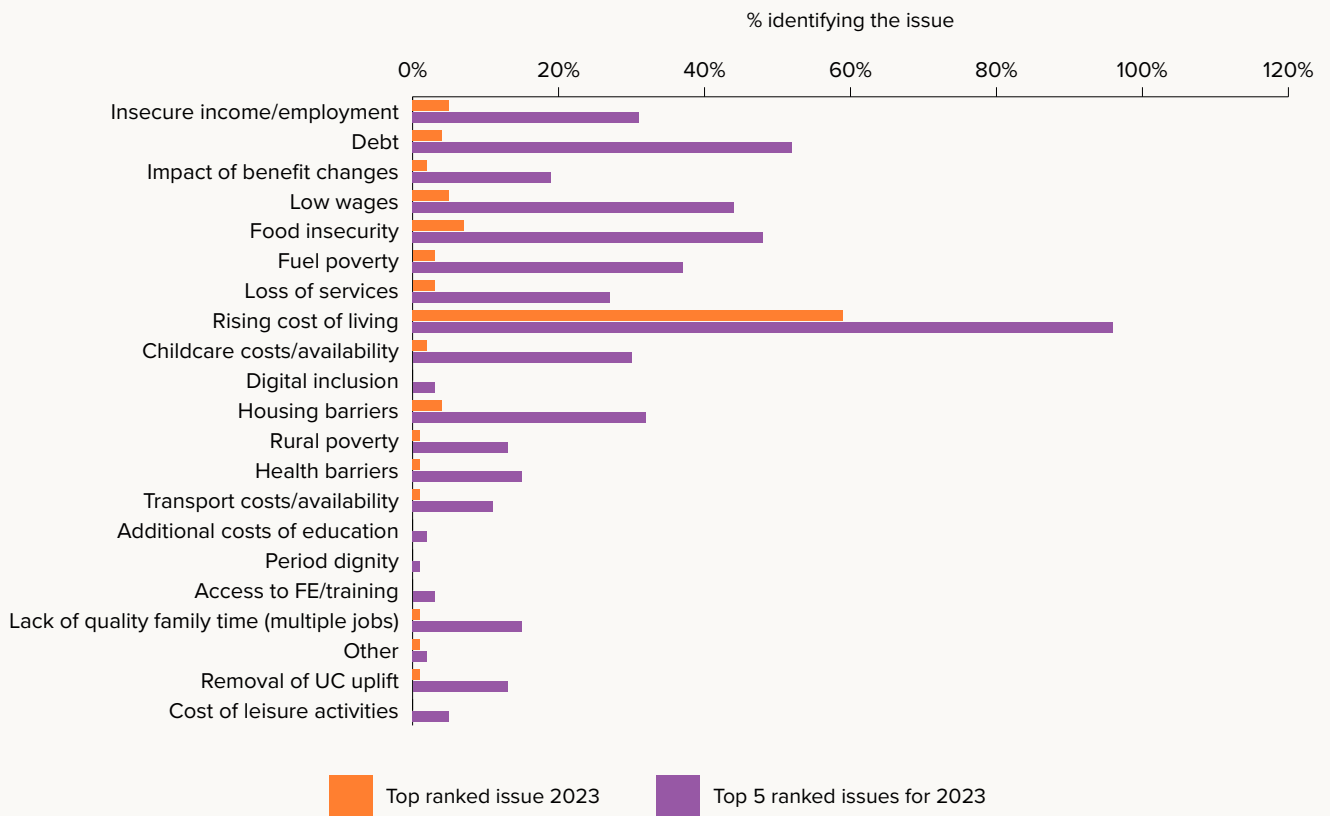
Overarching poverty issues: 2023

“The rising cost of living is not only impacting families financially, it is having a frightening impact on mental and physical health.”

The following section provides greater details of the overarching poverty related issues that were identified in this year’s findings and includes comments and observations from respondents. The overall picture is bleak.

From the list given, respondents chose and ranked the top 5 issues that they believe are currently having the greatest impact on children and families.

Top 5 identified poverty related issues



The rising cost of living was identified as a top 5 issue by 96% of respondents and chosen by 59% as the top issue (last year, these figures were 93% and 45% respectively).

“The pressure and stress that parents experience financially trickles down to their children. This impacts young people and can create problems with anxiety.”

Respondents recognised that all of the **issues correlated with each other**. For example, low wages and low income directly affected families' abilities to keep up with and afford the rising costs of living. This was generally associated with families incurring or increasing debts, leading to stress and deteriorating mental health. All of these factors were cited as **directly affecting children and young people** in all areas of their lives, including physical and emotional well-being; educational engagement and attainment; and social exclusion and isolation.

“Young people hold themselves to a lower standard than they should. When they see their parents struggling they assume they too will be in this situation. They learn to see their career as a means to an end, [not] something more.”

Comments on the **rising cost of living** were predominantly focused on food and energy prices. Almost every practitioner stated that families struggle with these costs and for many, they were witnessing an increasing number of families alternating days between food provision and electricity. They observed that many parents themselves were not eating regularly in an effort to provide for their children. This included a growing number of working parents.

Inevitably, the survey showed an **increase in foodbank referrals** and usage, however the rise in demand often resulted in foodbanks being unable to meet need and therefore having to set specific criteria for usage. This inevitably excluded some families or limited the number of times they could access the foodbank.

There was a significant escalation in the percentage of comments around **rural poverty** and the specific impact of the rising cost of living. Respondents particularly focused on a lack of access to **“cheaper shops”, transport links** and **transport affordability**. The little income families did have was further stretched as they needed to purchase items from smaller, local shops where the prices were usually greater. Access to support such as food banks, health and advice services were also often prohibitive for families due to transport issues.

“Pockets of deprivation are not considered for grant support...this is all population based and creates huge inequality for rural communities.”

Transport costs and availability were identified in the top 5 poverty related issues. This affected not just those in rural areas, as above, but also those in more populated locations. The most common areas of impact cited, related to **education, employment and childcare**. With families struggling financially to meet even their basic needs, increasingly, families were reducing the number of days that their children attend school, thus reducing their costs for both public and personal transport and therefore increasing their budget for other areas, such as food and energy.

“Sharp increase in families not being able to transport their children to school...families are unable to afford to take their children to school 5 days a week.”

The issues of transport costs and availability included barriers to **employment and childcare**. With public transport services being cut or reduced, access to employment was said to be increasingly difficult. This, coupled with the lack of available childcare, meant that sustaining employment was extremely difficult for many, particularly single parents. The survey also found that the increasing costs of transport and childcare meant that on a regular basis, families simply could not afford to work. Reliability of public transport was also cited as an ongoing issue, with parents regularly experiencing service delays and cancellations. As a result, some parents were leaving their employment, voluntarily or otherwise, or have had their childcare places cancelled because of *erratic 'pick-ups'*.

Other issues around **childcare** were also raised, both by practitioners and those working within childcare settings. There were many comments about the affordability of childcare, especially for those on lower incomes.

“If it was not for the offer of 12.5 hours funded childcare from Flying Start, most families would not consider paying for their child to attend as they cannot afford it.”



There was a particular focus on the qualifying criteria for 30 hours funded childcare. This was said to be **“so specific that parents that need it don’t qualify”**. Childcare settings themselves also provided insight into the difficulties they face and the impact the cost of living and price increases has on them.

They commented that their fees have necessarily risen in order to cover the living wage and associated cost of living increases. They are fully aware of, and frustrated by the impact this has on children and families but have little choice.

“As a childcare provider, we cannot afford to take on many children under the 20hrs funded scheme as we lose money. This impacts the families that are in need of this service as our priority goes towards children who are not on the scheme.

We are not currently making any profit each month due to [costs]. If the hourly rate was increased for the 20hrs funding, then we would be able to offer more places.”

Of particular concern in this year’s survey were the observations around increasing numbers of **children being taken into care**. Respondents directly linked this to poverty related issues, in particular: lack of money to feed, clothe and provide basic essentials for children; lack of suitable housing and overcrowding; and deteriorating mental health of parents. Practitioners also stated that due to **‘government cuts’**, early interventions were no longer possible, exacerbating this situation.

“Funding not available for services to continue, resulting in families desperate for support, being left to deal with situations alone, causing long-term trauma.”

In terms of identifying the issues that are impacting children and families, **housing** saw one of the largest percentage increases compared to last year, with 32% of respondents identifying it as a top 5 issue (just 2% in 2022). The **urgent need for affordable, rented housing** was highlighted. Respondents are experiencing a growth in the numbers of children living in temporary, wholly unsuitable accommodation for long periods of time. This was detrimental to family dynamics, child development and safety. For some families, this increased isolation and had a negative impact on the mental health of all family members.

“There are more families and children living in temporary accommodation which has a major impact on their social development.”

Practitioners were also experiencing a rise in the number of **young people becoming homeless**. This appeared to be a particular issue for those aged 16-21 who were either leaving care or could no longer live at home. Given the limitations of this survey, it is not clear why young people are unable to remain within the family home and the reasons are likely to be many and complex, however, from the information provided, poverty related pressures such as debt, finances, meeting basic needs and poor mental health were seen as significant factors.

“I see families who feel unable to support children post 16 years, leaving them homeless and in need of support and nurture.”

Respondents identified that these young people often need additional support as well as housing, both of which are scarce or have such long waiting lists that the young people have “*moved on*” by then. Practitioners warned of the vulnerabilities of many of these young people and were concerned about their future options and outcomes.

“Lack of housing ultimately leads to homelessness, seriously compromising health, well-being, life chances and exposure to criminality.”

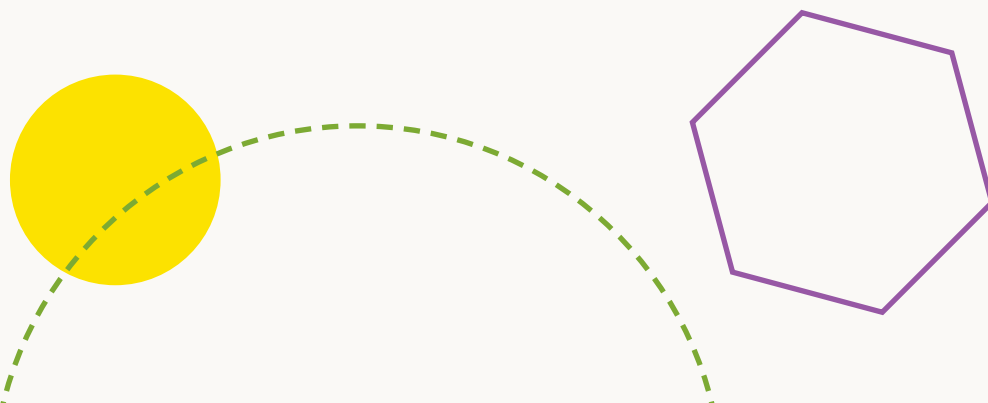
Several other areas were highlighted in the findings; including larger numbers of young children who were “**not school ready**” and had developmental delays. Practitioners linked this to poverty related issues, but primarily deteriorating parental mental health. This clearly was detrimental to the children, but also schools as their capacity was increasingly spent on supporting these children.

The **physical health** of children was also of concern. Children were missing hospital appointments either because parents could not afford to take time off work, particularly those on zero-hour contracts, or because of transport affordability. Alongside this, respondents stated that children were undernourished.

The survey asked specific questions around debt, mental health and education and these findings are presented separately within this report.

Overall, the findings show that thousands of children, young people and their families living in, or on the edge of poverty, are “**at breaking point**” both financially and mentally.

“We must do something this time....things are getting worse in Wales.”

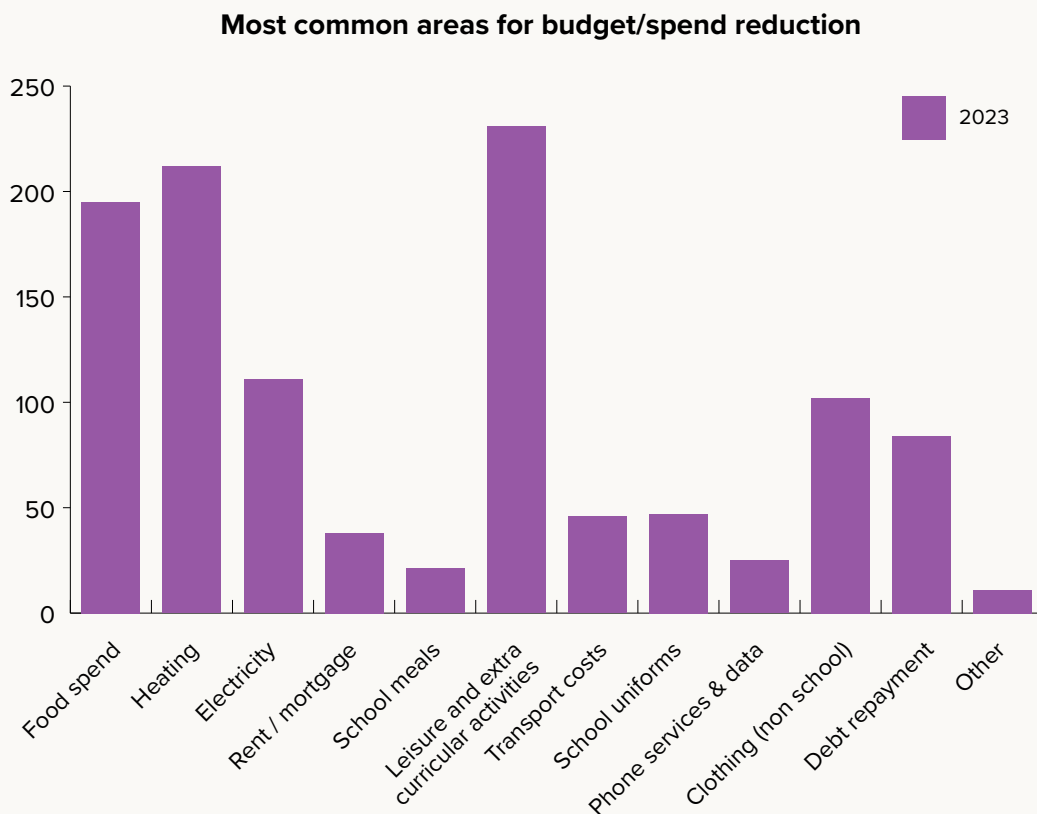


Budget spend

“If children are not able to attend extra curricular activities, they will not develop properly socially or educationally. There are lots of smart, intelligent children that do not have the opportunity to grow.”

The rising cost of living and low incomes has resulted in families having to make very difficult choices about their budgets. For example, our 2022 survey identified that some families had to reduce food spend in order to increase their budget for electricity or rent.

To explore this further and to understand the impact this has, this year’s survey introduced a new question about which budget or spend families are most likely to reduce. Respondents were asked to choose 3 from the given list.



The areas where spending has been reduced reflect practitioners’ comments throughout the survey and were perhaps expected. However, the impact of this is far ranging, touching almost every aspect of families’ lives and of deep concern to many of those responding.

A reduction of spend on **leisure and extra curricular activities** was cited as having a tangible impact on all members of the family. Children and young people were becoming more isolated and demotivated, parents were left *“feeling guilty”* for removing *“fun or educational activities”* and as a result, family relationships were more fractious.

Leisure activities, participation and engagement were seen to be a “*haven*” for families, acting as a small, but much needed “*escape*” from their circumstances. Practitioners noted that the loss of these significant opportunities negatively affected the mental health of all family members. For many families who previously could only afford to engage in free activities, they were now unable to do so as spend on transport costs necessarily needed to be reduced.

“Children are not receiving as much enrichment as they would have previously, not seeing extended family members due to travel costs. This is affecting the emotional and mental well-being of the whole family.”

Heating was the second area most likely to see a reduction in spend, followed very closely by **food**. A large number of respondents commented that their families were now living without heating, as they could not afford the costs, or were choosing to save money in this area, in order to increase the spend in others. Families were often cold and going to bed very early, just to stay warm.

“Families huddling in one room, heating that one room only, in order to cut heating bills and this should not be the case in 2023.”

A reduction in heating spend was said to be increasing physical illness, causing sleep deprivation and in turn, affecting children’s ability to focus and learn at school. Again, resulting in deteriorating emotional health, leaving “*a sense of hopelessness and negative mental well-being*”.

As identified in previous questions, **food and hunger** were significant issues, and as families reduced their spend on food, there were inevitably immediate consequences, however, practitioners also warned of longer-term issues. They commented that parents simply cannot afford to provide, healthy nutritious food. Their priority is to avoid hunger, therefore diets regularly consist of ‘*bulky*’, *carbohydrate-based* foods only. These are generally much cheaper to purchase and easier to access, do not require refrigeration and use less electricity to cook. As many are reducing their electricity use, means of storage and cooking are crucial areas that parents needed to consider.

Practitioners were aware that children are not receiving the nutrition they need and over time, this will have a detrimental impact on their development, education, mental health and long-term outcomes.

“I have seen families reduce the money they spend on food, for example eating cereal and toast.”

Respondents also noted a **significant decrease in clothing spend**, both for uniforms and non-school clothing. This, alongside a reduction of electricity spend and therefore washing facilities, was said to increase school absences or the numbers of children being sent home for uniform breaches. This had an impact on children, who in their own survey responses, commented on being “*sent home to change*”, but had nothing to change into. They frequently cited being disciplined as a result.

The lack of non-school clothing isolated children socially. They were less likely to go out for fear of being bullied because of their clothing, or simply did not have clothing that fitted or was suitable for the weather conditions. Unfortunately, practitioners stated that children’s appearance often led to them being “*judged*” or “*treated differently*” by professionals and services, again leading to low self-esteem and a lack of confidence.

“Families don’t have the money to pay off the debts that got them referred into Supported Living Services. This means they stay here until they have significantly reduced their debt and that means they stay much longer, impacting the service [we can provide to others].”

Many other examples of the impact of spend reductions were given, including decreasing spend on phone data and therefore being unable to engage with support or benefit services, including Universal Credit; increase in evictions; and spiralling interest repayment fees, leading to further and unmanageable debt accrual.



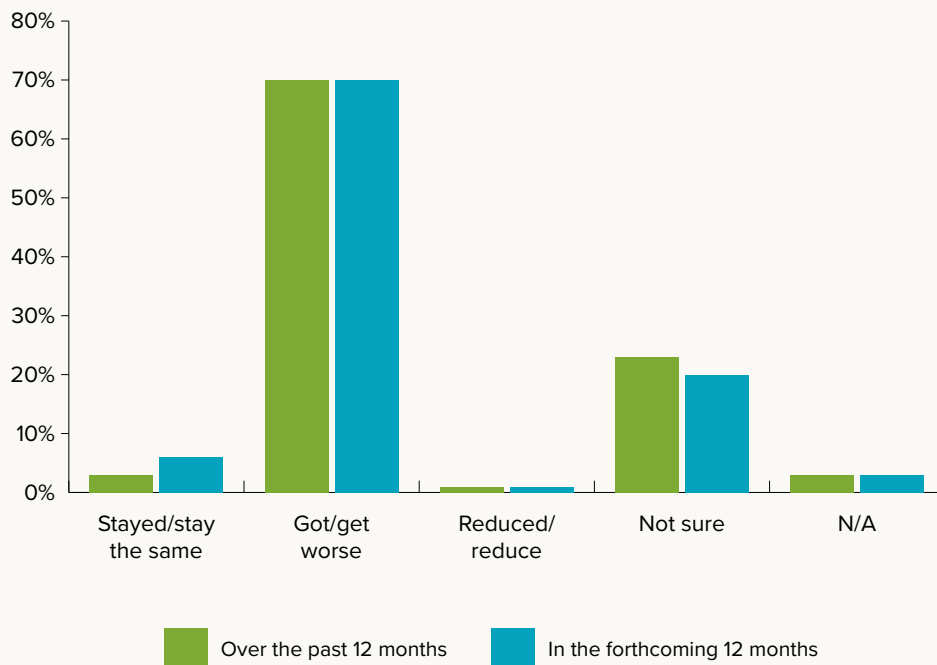
Debt

“Now debt is not a choice but a necessity to have their basic needs met.”

Debt was a dominant theme throughout all of the 2021 survey responses. Therefore, for our 2022 survey, we sought to understand more about this issue and included debt as a whole topic area. We have continued this for 2023.

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.

How and will debt levels change for families?



Respondents (70%) stated that over the last 12 months, **debt levels had ‘got worse’** for the majority of families they work with and 70% expect these debt levels to increase over the next 12 months. When adjusting these figures to exclude those who do not work directly with families, these figures both rise to 87%.

The cause of debt was overwhelmingly associated with the costs of living, high housing costs and low income. With expenditure necessarily increasing, but income remaining static or inconsistent, many families were said to have no other choice than to go into, or further increase their debt just to meet their daily, basic needs.

“How can any family survive and not go into debt.”

Respondents commented that there was often little capacity or opportunity for parents to increase their income in order to avoid or reduce debt. For example, benefit income and other government support was not enough to cover essential costs and for those who were able to work, they were generally in receipt of the minimum wage and this again, was not enough to cover essentials. Many parents were reported as taking on 2 or more jobs but given the low wages and lack of **“steady hours”**, they too were not able to provide the basic necessities without accruing debt.

Many of the respondent’s families have lived with debt for a long period of time, however, this year, they believe this is a worsening situation and that **“debt breeds debt”**. On a weekly basis, families’ debt was increasing. Those already in debt are unable to afford to make repayments and indeed, are having to increase their debt and those who have historically being able to manage debt free, are now in debt and struggling to make repayments.

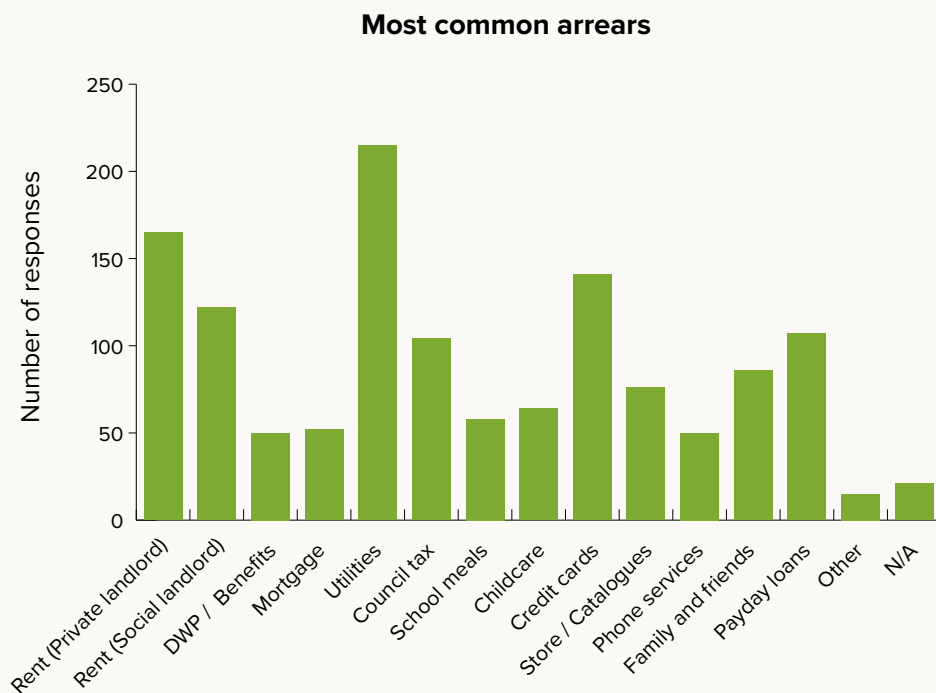
“Families can’t cope. Increased use of food banks, huge debts to borrow to stay warm, anxiety and stress levels through the roof. Families are buying cheap, basic non-nutritional food just to stop being hungry. Families using Flying Start hubs to stay warm as can’t afford to put the heating on.”

A very small number of practitioners (under 1%), stated that some families are unable or unwilling to manage a budget, make good spending choices and prioritise essentials and would benefit from support and advice for this. However, most respondents found that their families were faced with **“impossible choices”** and regardless of how good their choices were, there was simply not enough income to feed, house and clothe their children. Despite using food banks, reducing their electricity usage and cutting back on many essential items, families were still unable to manage without going into debt.

“I hear from families who want to give their children healthy food, they know how to cook, but they see the cheap ready meals as a cheaper option and everything is done on a basis of cost.”



The survey asked respondents to choose the 3 most common areas where they believe the debt is owed.



Given the known rising costs of energy and rent, the findings are not surprising. Increases in other areas such as credit card, catalogues and payday loans are also indicative that families are unable to manage on a daily and monthly basis and given their circumstances are unlikely to be able to repay these.

“One family that I saw yesterday was taking another credit card out to pay this month’s mortgage.”

The practice of **council tax debt management** in some local authority areas was cited as **“unhelpful”** and **“adding to the burden”** of those who were struggling. For example, where instalments have fallen behind, the right to pay by this method is removed and a demand for one full payment is issued. When payment is not made, enforcement agencies become involved, usually resulting in bailiff visits to homes. This practice was questioned by practitioners. Not only did it increase the stress and anxiety of all members of the family, but often resulted in the local authorities not receiving any payments at all. Practitioners were seeking a more empathetic approach in these circumstances.

“The whole thing becomes totally unmanageable and often leads to the person doing a Debt Relief Order so the whole debt gets written off and the council never sees any of the money (including the bailiff’s fees that were added).”

The **Universal Credit (UC) process** was also highlighted as another area that added to families' debt and placed additional anxieties onto parents. Concerns were made around the number of **"mistakes"** made by HMRC and DWP when processing claims or making payments. These mistakes often resulted in over payment; however families believe this payment to be correct and budgeted accordingly. When the mistakes are rectified, families' income is not only reduced, but a proportion of the over payment is also taken each month prior to the benefit reaching the family. This further reduces their income, resulting in families accruing debt elsewhere.

The percentage of practitioners choosing **childcare debt** as a common category for arrears has increased this year. Accessible, affordable childcare is one of the factors enabling parents to get into work or maintain their employment. Given the rising cost of living, childcare costs have inevitably had to increase in order to cover providers' costs. Practitioners commented that this is having an impact on parents and the numbers who are now in debt to providers.

They commented that to reduce or stabilise this debt, they are reducing their work hours and therefore their childcare costs; changing providers when debts become too great; or giving up employment completely. This debt is also having an impact on the settings themselves, with many having to make difficult decisions on their provision and viability as a whole.

"We are finding that an increasing amount of parents are falling behind in their childcare costs and this is having an impact on our business."

Increasing debt had an impact on other services too. Third sector services were particularly cited as being affected. **Debt increased the demand for support** in a number of areas, such as food banks, helplines, financial and advice services. The latter were now dealing with, and supporting more complex cases, such as debt relief orders. More time was therefore needed with individuals, contributing to a reduction in capacity and extensive waiting times.

Practitioners recognised that many parents often only seek support when they are facing immediate and urgent crisis points. For these families, waiting periods can be devastating.

"This is putting more pressure on all support services, cases are more time intensive and complicated. It is taking longer to get advice appointments, so in the meantime, bailiffs have often already visited."

Of course, the above figures do not show the whole impact of debt. There is also the **personal and emotional cost of debt** to both parents and children. A significant stigma is associated with debt and many highlighted the impact of this stigma. They found that parents often feel **“ashamed”** or **“embarrassed”** and believe that services, particularly statutory services, view them as **“bad, neglectful parents”** because they are in debt. This frequently leads to families hiding their debt or understating it, which in turn reduces the ability of services to support or give advice.

Practitioners associated debt with deteriorating mental health. The fear, anxiety and stress of living in debt was said to be all encompassing for parents and further exacerbated as they saw little choice but to fall further into debt in order to feed their families and pay their rent. Families are despondent and **“can see no way out”**.

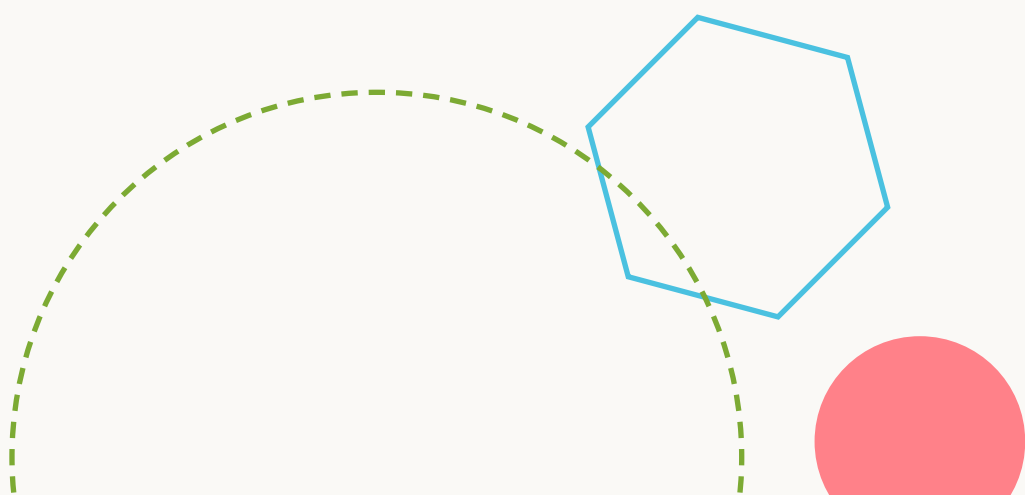
“Adults who should be emotionally available are not because of the stress and strain they are under.”

Parents are genuinely concerned that their children will be ‘taken away’ and as circumstances and debts worsen, this fear grows. According to responses, this fear is warranted as practitioners reported an increasing number of children being taken into care. Interestingly, others reported that foster carers are also struggling to provide essentials, and some have had to go into debt themselves. This was particularly true when they did not have children placed with them and their income was reduced.

Parental stress and anxiety was affecting children and young people. They are frequently concerned about their parents and how they are coping. They are especially worried about their actions or expressed needs making this worse. For example, not telling parents they are being bullied because of their school uniform would make their parents **“feel bad”** or **“buy stuff they can’t afford to stop it happening”**. They were also worried about being sent home for non-compliance to school uniform policies as this too would increase parental anxiety.

“It is hard to be materially poor, to be cold, hungry, not have access to decent healthcare, but to live with stressed parents is damaging.”

The impact of poverty and deprivation on mental health and emotional well-being is explored further in a separate section of this report.

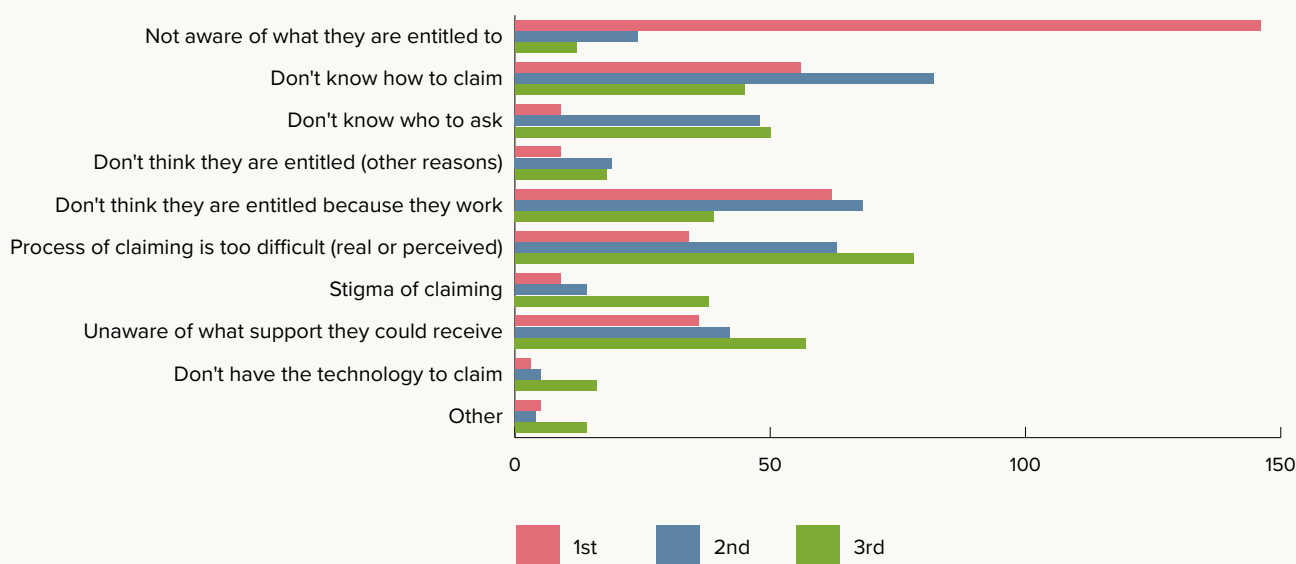


Financial support

“Better access to benefits and shared knowledge from DWP – stop making it difficult to access what is available.”

In Wales, many families do not claim all of the benefits and support they are entitled to. This includes both UK benefits and those specific to Wales. The survey sought to understand a little more about the barriers to claiming. Based on their experience and understanding of the families they work with, respondents were asked to identify the 3 most common reasons for this.

Most common reasons for unclaimed benefits



Over the last 12 months, there has been no change in the top 3 reasons identified. Our 2022 survey also found that parents were unaware of what they are entitled to as the main reason for not claiming. Again, as with last year’s findings, ‘*Don’t know how to claim*’ (2nd) and ‘*the process of claiming being too difficult*’ (3rd) remain the same. There were also no significant fluctuations across all of the other reasons when compared to last year.

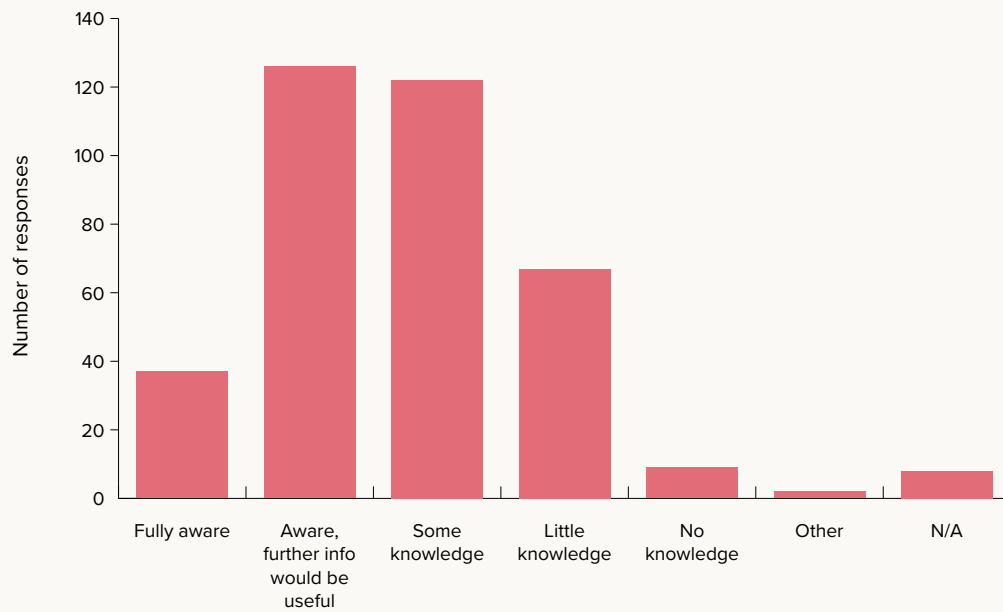
Throughout this report, the findings show that the current situation for thousands of children and their families is dire. Many of these will already be claiming and receiving all the financial support that they are entitled to, but still remain in desperate situations. However, there is still clearly a need to ensure that families are fully aware of and understand their entitlements and that barriers to claiming are removed. This is particularly important to the increasing numbers of families who are new to the systems and are now eligible for support. With income so low and expenditure so high, even the smallest financial increase may help to support families.

“We have noticed a significant increase in the number of enquiries this year, especially for those who have never come through our services before.”

The survey asked practitioners about their own awareness and knowledge of the financial support available for families. Whilst traditionally, many of their roles do not include a remit for this, increasingly practitioners are stating that they are having to provide information, signpost or make referrals to other agencies, often to the detriment of their original purpose with the family.

“While we were previously working with families on [other] matters, we now also cover fuel debt, benefits, food banks and difficulties with clothing.”

Practitioner awareness and knowledge of available financial support



Free school meals

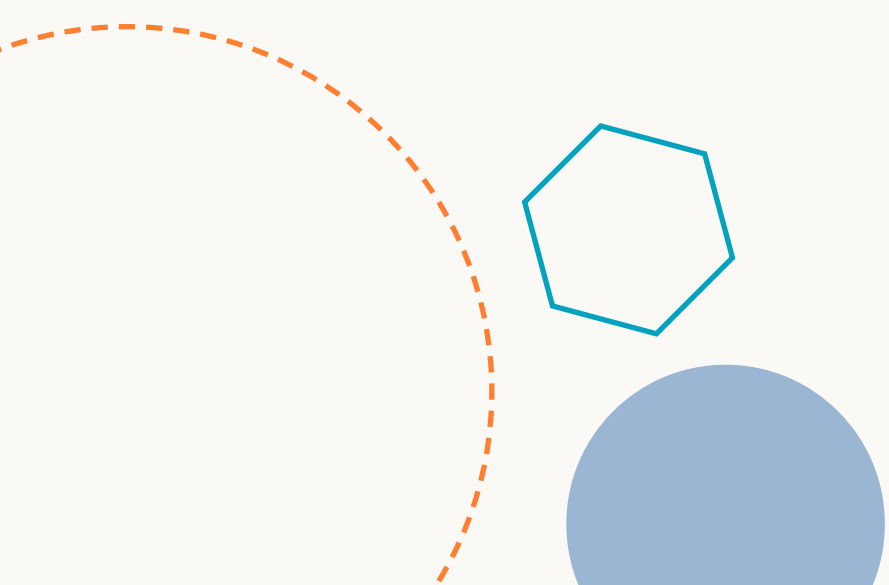
“It gives reassurance to families that they know their children are having at least one main meal in the daytime. It also evens out the social balance, making all children equal in school at lunchtime.”

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. The 3-year, phased roll-out of this universal programme began in September 2022, starting with the youngest primary school pupils.

Over 66% of respondents worked with families where at least one child was receiving universal free school meals (UFSM) through the first phase of this programme. There was **overwhelming praise** for this provision with the focus of the comments being **“children were not as hungry”** throughout the day; children were eating at least **“one nutritional meal a day”**; a significant **“reduction of stigma”** both for children themselves and their parents; and **“children feel more included and have better self-esteem”**.

The provision of UFSM also had a **positive impact on family budgets**. Practitioners were seeing an increase in spend in other areas such as family food and other essential items. This was particularly relevant to working families who were not eligible for free school meals but were still unable to afford essentials for their families. There was also a positive impact on siblings within the family. Whilst some were not eligible for universal provision under the programme, practitioners reported an increase in the numbers of older children who were now able to access school meals because budgets had effectively increased.

“A great many of the families are using this benefit. The impact on esteem and mental health is marked. They have their pride.”



Another significant outcome frequently reported by respondents was the **positive impact on parental mental health**. Parents no longer felt guilty about being unable to provide a school meal, they were less worried about how their children would feel during lunchtimes and the financial burden and fear of school meal debt was reduced. However, practitioners were clear that parental concerns and anxiety remained for their older children.

As previously stated, the introduction of this programme was very much welcomed, but practitioners stated that it was not without issues. Some commented that the food was insufficient and lacking in nutrition. They believed that standards were too low and had further declined following the introduction of the programme. They expressed concern that these **“business practices”** would become the norm during the next phase of roll-out.

“Better in theory, but the quality and quantity of food the children receive is extremely poor, some children won’t eat it and have to take a packed lunch.”

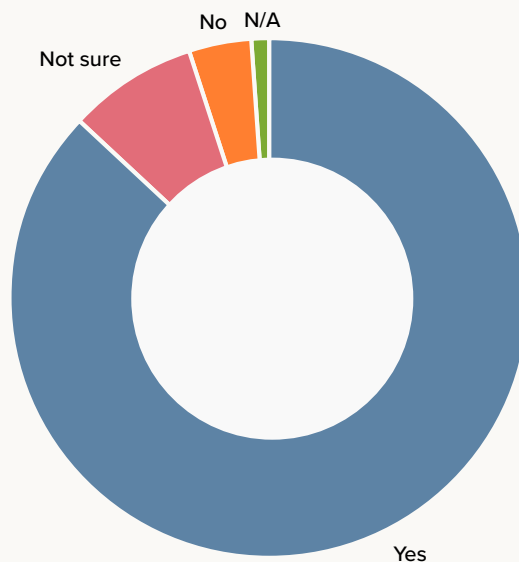
They also highlighted that not all children are receiving their universal free school meals. This was not due to the programme, but rather the practices of some schools, particularly in relation to reduced timetables and exclusions. Whilst this affected all learners, additional learning needs pupils were more likely to experience a shorter school day on a regular basis. Whether this is planned through a reduced timetable or an immediate action via temporary exclusion, the result was that children were often not around to access their free school meal provision.

“We have seen an increase recently in exclusions and use of reduced timetables.”



The final question on free school meal provision asked if more children in secondary education should receive them. The majority (87%) of respondents said 'yes' with just 4% saying 'no'.

Should more children in secondary education receive free school meals?



Respondents choosing 'no' commented that those *“parents who could afford to pay, should do”*. They believed that this financial saving could then be spent on increasing the eligibility threshold for free school meals, enabling more children to receive them.

“A child from a family where both parents are working does not have the same level of need for FSM, money devoted to this could be better utilised to support those in need elsewhere.”

Others stated that the financial commitment needed for a universal programme should instead, be directed to improving the quality of school meals and keeping the cost of meals affordable.

Most respondents were however, in favour of universal provision in secondary education. They cited many benefits to a universal programme, predominantly focusing on reducing hunger and therefore increasing educational engagement and attainment.

“Brains can only pay attention and learn when bodies are fed. Healthy food will have big positive impacts on future health and impact on health services.”

Practitioners identified a link between **“full bellies” and learning**, understanding that children needed adequate nutrition in order to concentrate, engage and thrive. They recognised that many children attend school without having had breakfast and regularly go without lunch. The provision of a meal at lunchtime was therefore crucial to their physical health.

The **positive effects on learners emotional and mental well-being** was frequently commented on. Universal provision reduced inequality and stigma associated with free school meals. Rather than young people removing or isolating themselves from the social aspect of eating together, they would feel and be more included. The anxiety felt by many children, leading up to and including lunchtimes, would be relieved. They would no longer have to make daily excuses or be questioned by peers and staff about why they were not eating. In their survey responses, children and young people stated that free school meals should be provided to all children and young people.

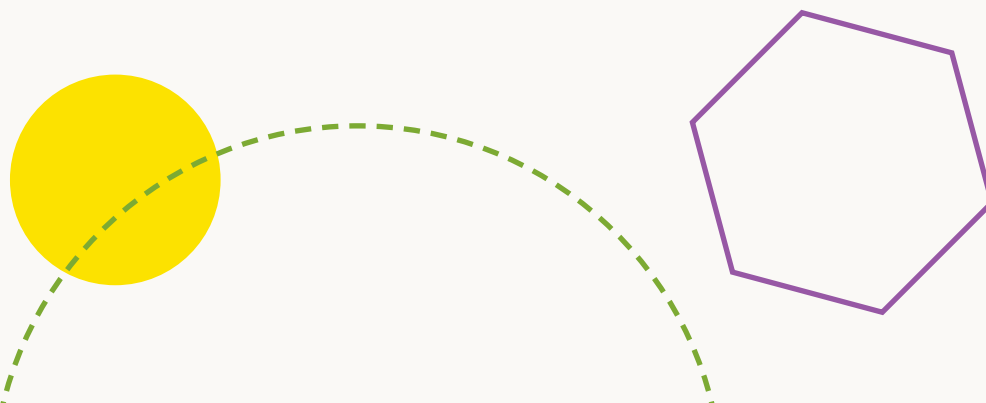
“Children say they are not hungry and don’t bring food in. This is because they have none. This inequality and stigma must stop.”

Whilst the focus of comments was firmly on the positive impact to children and young people, practitioners also expressed the wider, family benefits of a universal free school meals programme for all children and young people. For example, it would alleviate the emotional stress and anxiety that parents face as they struggle with the finances to provide food. Practitioners were already seeing the positive mental health impact that UFSM provision was having on parents with younger children and as older children **“eat more and therefore cost more”**, then an even greater burden would be lifted. **“Parents would no longer feel guilty about not being able to afford school meals”**.

As seen with the outcomes of primary UFSM, respondents felt families would use their secondary school meal budgets in other areas, such as; provision of more household food, electricity and other basic essentials, which again would benefit the whole family.

Whilst a proportion of children and young people are eligible for and do currently receive free school meals, respondents noted that many more are in need, but do not meet the criteria for provision. This was seen to be particularly relevant to children of working, low-income families.

“Students cannot function or learn without a good source of fuel. If parents cannot afford to feed their child, it is detrimental to their education through no fault of their own and may potentially lead to more inconsistent learning compared to those peers who are able to afford meals.”

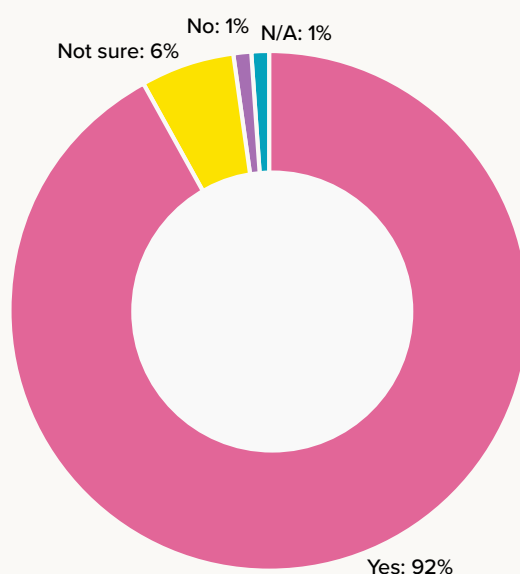


Education and poverty

“They can’t concentrate, they are in fight or flight mode and on the edge. They are expected to follow superficial rules like wearing a specific jumper, when inside they have more important things to worry about, such as their Mum who cries all the time due to money pressures”.

Based on their experiences and observations, the survey asked if poverty affects children and young people’s experience of school and learning.

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



The information provided by respondents for this section was extensive and often stark. They very clearly identified the daily impact poverty has on children and young people and how this directly relates to their educational experiences. The areas most frequently commented on include **hunger; bullying; stigmatisation; isolation; home environment; tiredness; and inequity of opportunity**. However, linking these together was the overarching theme of **“poverty leading to poor mental and emotional health”**.

Hunger was seen to significantly affect the ability to concentrate on and engage with learning. Practitioners stated that many are so hungry that their only focus is food and when, or if they will next eat. Respondents commented that an increasing number of children were hungry, *“often coming to school without having had breakfast”*, or even a meal the previous night. Free school meals were regularly the only meals that children were receiving.

“The amount of pupils we see coming through school with an issue with getting and being provided with food is becoming an increasing worry. Many pupils now don’t have access to a sufficient amount of food at home.”

It was not just the limited amount of food that children had access to, but also the quality that was concerning to practitioners. They cited that more children were eating **“cheap, snacks and junk food”** as this was less expensive for families to buy and as the nutritional value of these foods was poor, it was having a detrimental effect on learners’ ability to concentrate. Hunger and poor diet were also cited as impacting on behaviour within the classroom. Some schools are now providing children with breakfasts and supplementing lunches. The costs for this are often taken from department budgets, which in turn reduces educational spend in other areas.

One of the very common areas practitioners reported on was poverty related **bullying and stigmatisation**. This was repeatedly linked to disengagement, absenteeism, anxiety and poor mental health. Practitioners stated that the most frequent causes of bullying included not having the correct uniform or equipment; not being able to afford school trips and activities; having free school meals; and being unkempt.

“This leads to low self-esteem and withdrawing from education as they don’t see that they are worthy and don’t see the point of it.”

Whilst the majority of comments related to peer-to-peer bullying and stigmatisation, there were a number that highlighted poor adult practices. For example, children being reprimanded for unwashed clothes or incorrect uniforms in front of their peers, inevitably led to further bullying from their peers.

“Lack of understanding of the overarching impacts can cause children to be penalised by teachers when uniform is missing or homework uncompleted.”



There were examples of even the youngest children being stigmatised, such as not receiving a break time piece of fruit along with the other children as their parents *'hadn't paid for it that week'*.

It was recognised that for many children and young people living in poverty, their **home environment** can be difficult, both physically and emotionally. These circumstances do have a direct impact on education. Many are living in temporary, unsuitable accommodation where completion of homework is challenging. Many more live in cold, damp houses without electricity and access to the internet. However, the overriding concern expressed by practitioners regarding the home environment, was stress and anxiety.

With parents increasingly anxious about debt, provision of food and basic essentials, as well as affording the rent, tensions were high for everyone within the family, often leading to poor parental mental health. Children carried these concerns with them to school and had limited capacity to concentrate or engage. Inevitably, they were falling further and further behind, increasing their anxiety.

“Children are too busy worrying about home life. They are unable to concentrate.”



All of these comments directly reflect those given by the children and young people themselves in their survey. These findings are shown in the latter sections of this report.

Given the comments, it is not surprising that respondents identified that **poverty has a significant impact on mental health** and the associated detrimental effect on educational engagement and learning.

“Getting to school is an effort for many and then it is essential that the welcome they receive in school is warm and not judging.”

Respondents noted that there was a tangible **inequity of opportunity** for children and young people living in poverty. For many, even **getting to school was difficult** as not all children are entitled to free school transport and practitioners stated a “*sharp increase*” in the number of parents unable to afford transport costs. This directly corresponds to the **rise in flexible schooling** requests, or in some cases, home schooling. With families increasingly unable to afford lunches or school uniforms, more children were absent. This “avoidance” was said to reduce access to educational opportunities.

“Families are requesting a flexible schooling plan (a mixture of mainstream school and home schooling) in order to try to overcome this.”

The cost of getting to school for disabled and additional learning needs children, was also cited as difficult or prohibitive. Whilst some are able to access funded, individual transport, others do not meet the current criteria and this cost is borne by their families.

Once in school, there was **inequitable access** to some lessons that needed equipment, such as cooking and woodwork. Despite their interest, and for some, potential vocational opportunities, they could not take part because of costs and children from lower income families would be more likely to be absent on these days. Inequitable access to music lessons was also cited. Whilst some schools had a ‘loan’ scheme for instruments, those cited all required payment for the music lesson itself.

“You can only learn music if you pay. How is that fair for a talented musician who lives in poverty not to have the opportunity to be taught?”

Other lessons also required 'equipment' or the creation of a project at home. This too was financially prohibitive for families, again resulting in children being absent or disengaging in the classroom. Practitioners recognised that these circumstances were highly likely to increase bullying, stigmatisation and isolation and be detrimental to mental health.

Other aspects of the school day that were seen as stressful and not fully inclusive for children living in poverty or in low-income families were **events**. "*School plans throughout the year can be expensive*", events such as St David's Day, World Book Day and numerous others, require or encourage learners to dress up in specific outfits or costumes. Even a positive event that they may have been able to take part in, such as a school play or Christmas concert, was likely to need a costume or indeed the purchase of tickets to watch the performance. These are unaffordable for many families and again lead to increased absences, leaving children feeling removed with little or no sense of belonging.

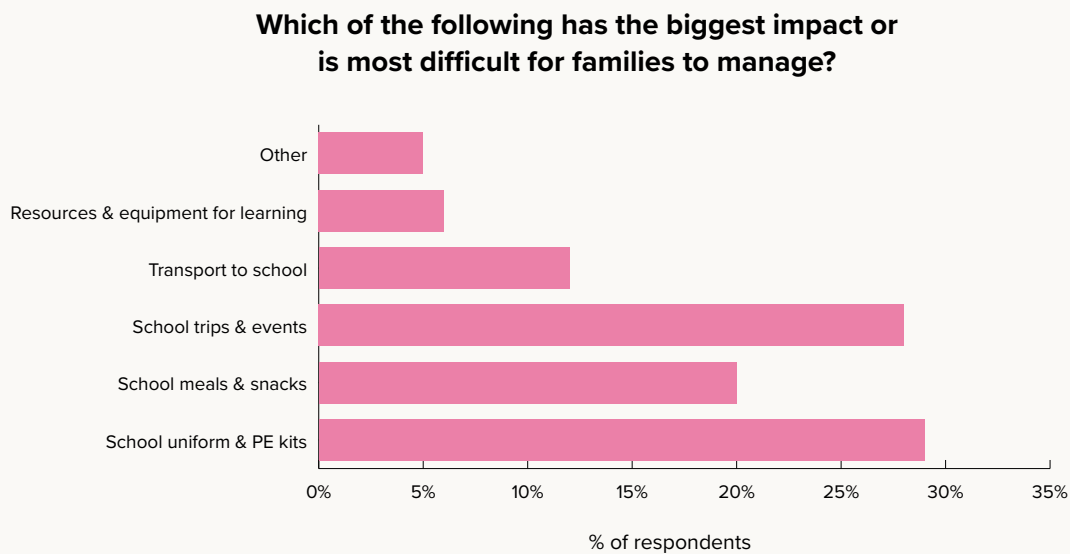
The final 2 areas that respondents most frequently commented on in relation to inequitable opportunities were **school trips and extra curricular activities**. They strongly believed that children who cannot access these are '*missing out*', not only on the cultural and historical educational aspect of the trips, but also the engagement with and enthusiasm for the topics. Trips are regularly referred to during lessons, further isolating those who could not attend, often serving to widen the gap. This was also true of extra curricular activities and children were again unable to participate in the wider social and health benefits of activities, such as sports, team building, learning new skills and friendships. Families facing the desperate choice between food, heating and electricity certainly cannot afford to pay for equipment, kit, transport, subscriptions or even a drink during the activity. Practitioners noted that "**Children are afraid to ask when they need money for things**" because they are aware how much stress their parents are under and do not want to further burden them.

The following quote provides an excellent summary to respondents' answers to the question "*If and how poverty affects children's experience of school and learning*".

"If you are hungry, you can't learn. If you are worried about your parents as they are so stressed, you can't learn. If you feel embarrassed by your clothes or know you can't afford what others can, you can't learn. We have children not going to the park – free- as they can't afford the can of drink others buy. All impacts on their mental health."

The findings also highlighted that **young people are working after school** in order to provide additional family income for essential items such as food. This need to earn money has an impact on concentration, attendance and *'motivation to be in school'*. This, in part, was linked to low aspirations or a feeling that *"nothing will change, why bother"* with education.

The final question in relation to poverty and education asked **which aspect of education had the greatest financial impact on families**. Respondents were asked to choose one area from the list provided.



The topics given are areas that are known to have a financial impact on families and have been highlighted in previous surveys and 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.

When comparing these findings to 2022, there are 2 significant changes. There has been a reduction in the percentage of respondents choosing **school meals** (27% in 2022 to 20% in 2023). Whilst the survey is limited in being able to understand this reduction, it does coincide with the roll-out of the first phase of universal free school meals. The other area of note is the increased percentage of those choosing **transport to school**. This has risen from just 5% in 2022, to 12% for this year. Again, reasons for this increase are not known, but it is not unreasonable to assume that this is linked to the rising cost of living and therefore smaller budgets, as reflected in previous sections of this report.

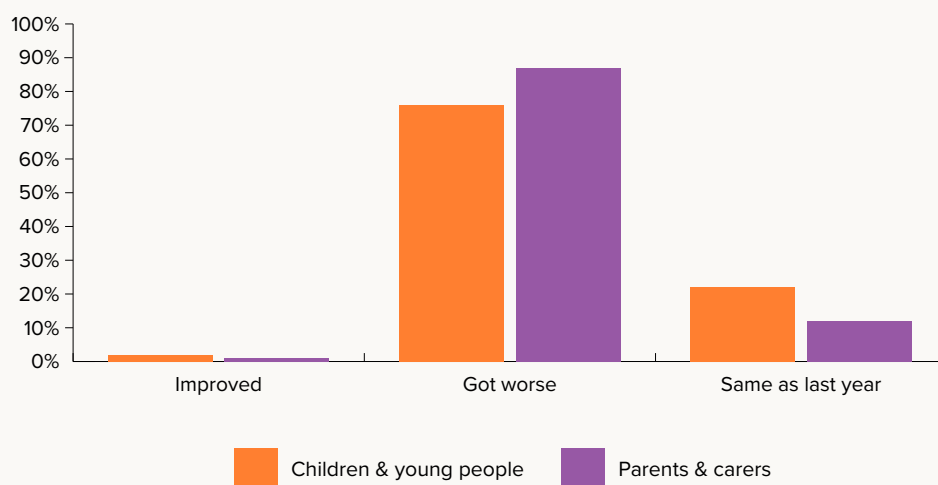
Mental and emotional health

“Most of our parents have been prescribed antidepressants due to poor mental health, but there is no solution. They continue to worry about meeting basic care needs of their children due to lack of finances, which is out of their control.”

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 covered within this report, the circumstances of poverty are shown to directly impact on mental and emotional health.

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.

Changes in emotional health 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.

As in our previous 2 surveys, the impact of the pandemic was seen as to have an impact on mental health. For children and young people, practitioners noted that interaction with peers had changed, especially for those in early years, who due to restrictions had not been able to socialise and were still learning these skills. Some older children had *‘become used to being on their own and not seeing friends’* and this *‘isolation’* was now their norm. However, other factors were more frequently cited as causing isolation, this included lack of finances; school exclusion; financial inability to attend school; anxiety and poor mental health; and fear of being bullied. Practitioners commented that where children and young people had to, or were expected to socialise, this frequently increased their anxiety levels.

Regardless of the reason for isolation, all practitioners recognised that it was harmful to mental health, reduced levels of resilience and abilities to self-regulate behaviour.

The majority of practitioners and professionals however, identified that the issues, barriers and challenges experienced by those living in, or facing poverty was, in their experience, the main reason for the increasing decline of mental health with the children, young people and families they work with.

“Many of our families live a hand to mouth existence. The stress is passed onto the children who are then not experiencing a secure and stable upbringing. This in turn, is leading to behavioural issues and low academic achievement and will perpetuate the problems.”

Many respondents observed a rise in the numbers of children and young people displaying “*behavioural issues*”, which in turn, often led to reduced timetables, school exclusions or refusals and had an impact on parental stress levels within the home. In other areas of this report, practitioners stated this also affected parents’ abilities to maintain employment or provide a consistent income as parents needed to take time out of work.

There were a number of reasons given for this, but in some cases, what were initially considered to be ‘behavioural issues’ and treated as such, were in fact undiagnosed additional learning needs or neurodiversity. The long waiting times for assessment and diagnosis was seen as detrimental to both the child’s mental health and that of their parents, regularly causing stress and anxiety.

Regardless of the cause, the urgent need for emotional and mental health support for all members of the family was acknowledged. Sadly, as the demand grows, waiting lists extend and practitioners reported a rising number of children, young people and their parents who were in severe and immediate risk, some as young as 11 years old.

Practitioners referred to many poverty related factors, all of which were said to have a cumulative impact on and exacerbated children and young people’s mental health. For example, poverty related issues such as hunger and lack of nutritious food; lack of warm, suitable and secure housing; school engagement; and living within a tense, often fractious family environment as their financial pressures increase.

“We have a number of children who regularly say they are “sad” in nursery. When we ask why, they are not always able to tell us. A number of parents have split and children have moved home as a result of this [poverty].”

Practitioners remarked that children were regularly concerned about their parents' stress levels and mental health and '*consistently carried this with them*' to school, which in turn affected their focus. Others were living with parents whose "*cups were so full of stress*", that they were displaying abnormal behaviours and "*unhealthy coping mechanisms*". Some practitioners reported an increase in domestic abuse, substance misuse and gambling, all of which had a negative effect on children's emotional health. They were witnessing rising numbers of children and young people isolating themselves, become increasingly withdrawn, upset and unable to cope in many circumstances.

“The additional financial pressures are leading to depression, low self-esteem and a weakening in family bonds.”

Children and young people appeared to be very aware of the pressures faced by their parents, especially financially. They understood what this meant for them and experienced the impact it had on their parents' well-being. Throughout their survey, children and young people also described feeling "*sad*", "*depressed*" and "*isolated*", echoing the comments provided by practitioners. They were "*worried*" about their parents' mental health and "*if they were coping*". Children had stopped asking parents for money, food or even replacement shoes, as they believed this would increase their parents' anxiety. Children within the early years were also reported to be anxious about how their parents would pay for food.

“Children have shared that they have lied to parents about enjoying hobbies, due to the guilt of the cost.”

Those working directly with families frequently commented that **parents have less capacity for their children's emotional needs**. This was either due to the own ability to cope with the pressures and anxieties of providing basic needs for their family, or because they now have to work many more hours or take on multiple jobs. Practitioners stated that they are hearing more children and young people voicing their lack of positive family experiences.

“The stress on parents around poverty is having a knock-on effect in the homes. Parents are taking on more jobs, so spending less time together.”



It was also noted that young people are very anxious and concerned about their own future, believing that if their parents are unable to provide food and “*pay the bills*”, then how will they. Many young people were said to be **despondent about their future and felt hopeless and inadequate.**

This despondency was also very present in parents and carers, especially for those who have been living in, or on the edge of poverty for several years. Practitioners noted that parents “**cannot see a way out of their situation**” and have reached “*breaking point*”.

“Parents are demoralised as they don’t feel they can provide their children with a roof over their heads, or food to eat, or put the heating on.”

Those seeking support for their deteriorating mental health were repeatedly “*unable to get a GP appointment, therefore they are trying to battle on*”, often leading to further decline and reduced ability to ‘manage’ all aspects of their lives. Parents were also very concerned about their children’s mental health and again, this added to their pressures.

Practitioners reported an increase in the numbers of fathers with poor mental health; an increase in family breakdowns; and an increase in the numbers of children “*coming into care*”. Practitioners were in no doubt that the decline in mental and emotional health and the many outcomes associated with this, were foundationally caused by poverty related factors.

“Worrying about paying the bills, losing their homes, feeding their children are making parents and carers dangerously anxious. They are being told they need to provide a healthy balanced diet for their children but that’s not possible, so they are consumed with guilt all the time. This makes them snappy and irritable towards their kids because they are living in a constant state of worry all the time. People cannot see any way out of this situation.”

Through the responses provided in this survey, it is evident that some practitioners themselves are on low incomes and on a daily basis, face many personal poverty related challenges. We would like to recognise and thank those who set aside their own stress and anxiety in order to continue to support, often in very difficult circumstances, children, young people and their families.

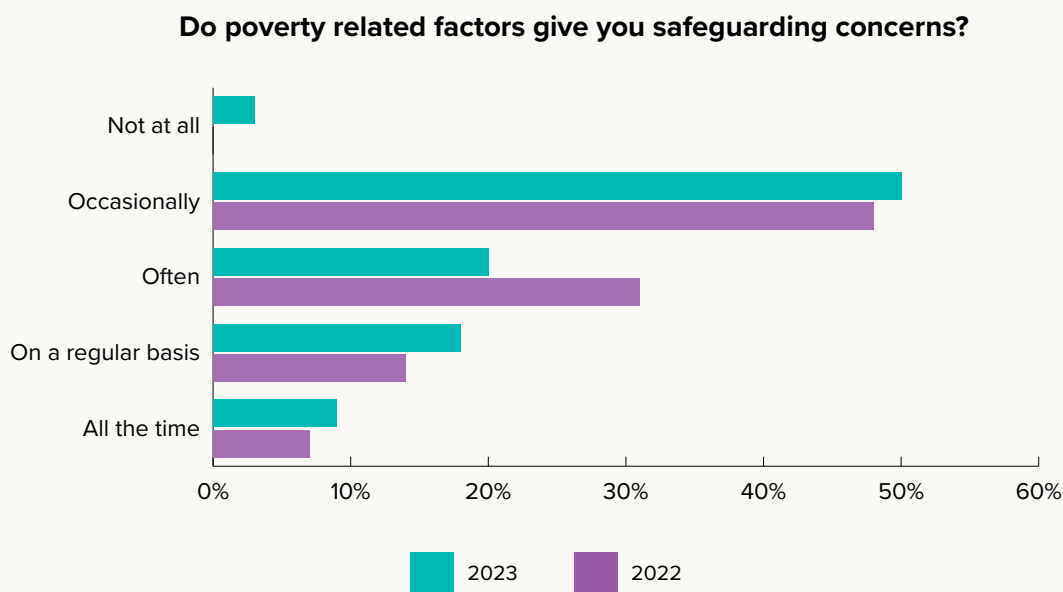


Poverty and safeguarding

“A few years ago, kids who were cold and hungry were the exception and you would have concerns, however now it’s normal..... A child who is cold and hungry because their family cannot afford heating and eating properly is not uncommon anymore. This is now our reality.”

All respondents were very clear in expressing that **poverty, in itself, is not a safeguarding issue** and recognised that parents are doing their utmost to protect and look after their children. However, as a result of poverty, parents are increasingly unable to provide food, warmth, clothing and secure housing and are more likely to experience stress, anxiety and poor mental health caused by their financial circumstances. These cumulative issues are leading to safeguarding concerns for a rising number of practitioners.

Based on their experience, the survey asked respondents if, and how often poverty related factors gave them safeguarding concerns.



There were no significant differences between the age ranges, geographical locations, sectors and frequency of concerns.

“Being in poverty itself, doesn’t make people bad parents.”

Respondents recognised that many safeguarding concerns were borne out of the impact of poverty and the financial and emotional pressures this brings. They understood that **parents are facing extremely difficult circumstances** and consequently must make impossible decisions.

With an ever-increasing number of families unable to afford food, suitable and adequate clothing, electricity and washing facilities, practitioners are inevitably concerned for children's welfare. Historically, these factors would have "*raised red flags*", however practitioners are stating that this is so normal now, they often struggle to find a balance, noting that **decisions around safeguarding are becoming more difficult**. This was voiced across all sectors and roles.

“Increasingly having conversations about what constitutes neglect in these times.”

Given that so many families are in crisis, unable to feed and clothe their children, practitioners are finding it **“hard to know when it tips over into concerns”**. Whilst referral and reporting numbers have increased, there was concern that as hunger and lack of essentials was so commonplace, it was impossible to report all incidents and there were warnings this would lead to other safeguarding issues being *‘hidden or missed’*.

“Missed meals, cold home, poor or inadequate homes and clothing. Neglect, but often unintentional.”

Parental stress and deteriorating mental health were highlighted in most responses. Whilst they recognised and appreciated the causes of this, they were very aware of the potential consequences for children and young people. They commented that stress, anxiety and poor mental health can all lead to a reduction in parents' abilities to *“cope”* with both the physical and emotional needs of children.

“Stress and desperation can lead to poor choices” and practitioners noted that as a means of ‘coping’, some parents are turning to substance misuse. They also commented that domestic abuse had increased too, however families often remained living with perpetrators as financially, they felt unable to leave.

“The impact of poverty is massive. People’s health and well-being begins to decline and can lead to them turning to unhealthy habits such as substance misuse to help them cope. As they begin struggling to manage and care for themselves, it then impacts on the care they give to their children.”

Housing was also an area of concern. Respondents stated that eviction rates were increasing, leaving some families homeless, or in very poor and unsuitable accommodation. Families are being moved into 1 room hostels or hotels, with no cooking, food storage or laundry facilities, this “*presents safeguarding concerns*”.

In order to **increase income**, more children and young people are being **left alone** or cared for by siblings, neighbours, friends and family members as parents are reducing childcare fees, working longer hours or in multiple jobs. Numerous concerns were raised about the impact this may have, including suitability of carers; appropriateness of activities whilst left alone; increased family relationship breakdown; vulnerability of children and young people (grooming, gangs, criminality); and whether their basic needs were able to be met during this time.

Practitioners have stated that more children are “*going into care*” with many expecting this increase to continue. Overall, **parents are doing their utmost** to look after their children and provide them with everything they need. However, with 28% of children living in poverty across Wales, thousands of families are struggling to do this. Respondents recognised that their roles have changed, and services reduced, resulting in less preventative work and support services being available.

“Safeguarding approaches need to be proactive from a prevention measure, instead of being reactive when harm occurs.”



Tackling poverty: A Child Poverty Strategy for Wales

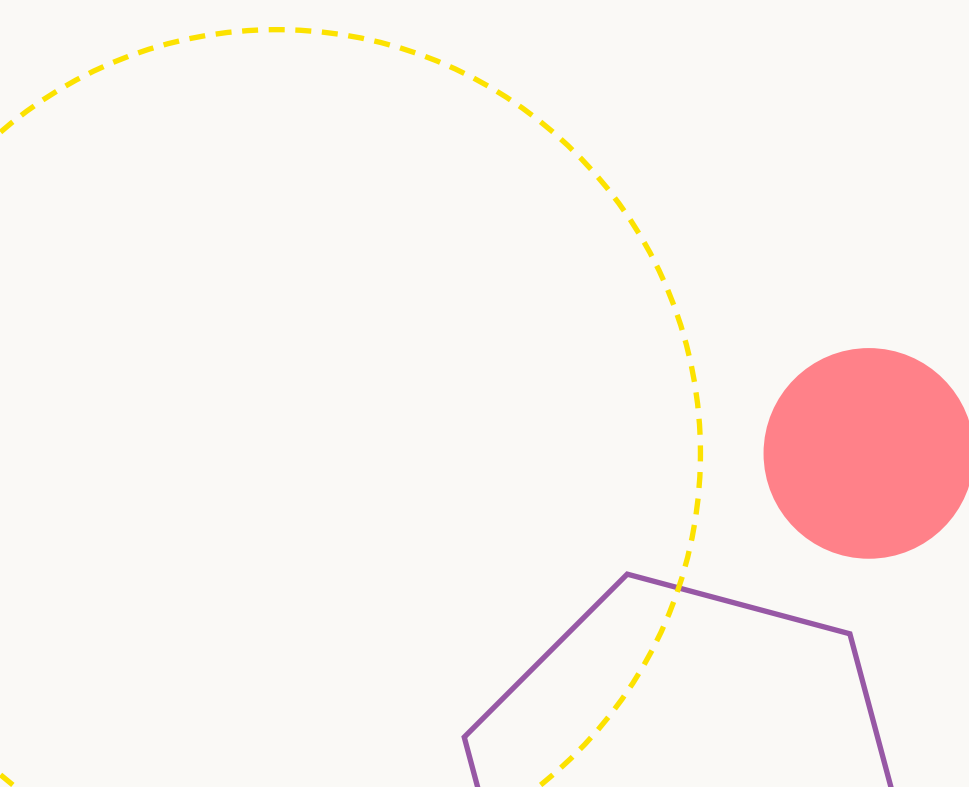
At the end of 2022, Welsh Government committed to refresh their 2015 Child Poverty Strategy. To help inform this process, the survey asked practitioners and professionals what should be included in a revised child poverty strategy.

In June 2023, Welsh Government launched their Draft Child Poverty Strategy. This document was available for public consultation between the end of June and mid-September 2023. The timelines of our survey (26 April – 16 June), did not allow practitioners and professionals sight of the draft strategy prior to responding to this question. As this was anticipated we therefore asked, “*what action should be prioritised and included in a child poverty strategy for Wales*”.

The comments provided by practitioners and professionals, both within this section and throughout the survey have been used to inform a formal response to the Welsh Government’s consultation.

The practitioners’ and professionals’ responses can be categorised into 4 main areas, **schools; income; services and support; access and participation**. These priorities are listed below and directly relate to the number of comments and suggestions received on each topic, with 1 receiving the most comments within a category, and so on.

Outwith these categories, respondents also prioritised one overarching action for inclusion in a child poverty strategy: **the need for specific targets, an action plan and accountability**.



Schools

- 1. Free school meals:** Provision of universal free school meals to be extended to other age groups. Review and increase the existing eligibility criteria for free school meals.
- 2. School uniforms:** Reduce the costs by ensuring that schools do not use logos and branding on uniforms. Schools to fully implement all aspects of the statutory policy guidance. Families should be able to purchase all school uniform items from less expensive stockists, such as supermarkets. Free school uniforms for those on low incomes.
- 3. Additional school costs:** The cost of school trips should be reduced and for those on low incomes, all school trips should be free. Other additional school costs, such as activities and equipment should be cost free for families on low incomes.
- 4. Extra curricular activities:** Free provision and easy access for children living in poverty, increasing opportunities for engagement, enrichment and equity.
- 5. Free school breakfasts:** Provision of universal free school breakfasts
- 6. School experience:** Improve the school experience for children and young people living in poverty and address attendance rates for disadvantaged learners.
- 7. Quality of school meals:** Provide better quality, more nutritious school meals. Increase the portion size of universal free school meals and the allowance (therefore the quantity) of free school meals.
- 8. Early years education:** Increase funding for early years education.
- 9. Other priorities:** Improve access to school family engagement officers; increase the use of school as a community asset; increase level of Pupil Development Grant for schools; increase the length of the school day, enabling parents to work a full day.

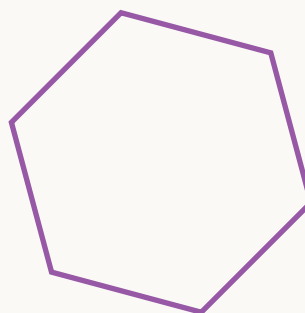
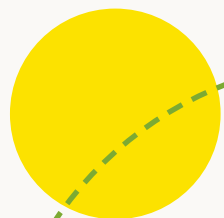
Income

- 1. Financial help and support:** Increase family finances, particularly for those who are just below the benefit threshold by providing support with essentials during the cost of living crisis.
- 2. Benefits:** Reform the welfare system, including revision of eligibility criteria for some benefits. Abolish the 2-child limit and benefit cap. Increase existing benefits and simplify the system. Increase awareness of entitlements and introduce automatic enrolment. Introduce Universal Basic Income. Increase carers' pay and reduce associated benefit penalties.
- 3. Energy and food:** Introduce grants to help with energy costs. Reduce energy costs for both mains and 'off grid' homes. Tackle food prices and the costs of other essential items.
- 4. Employment:** Address salaries and low paid employment, particularly for those roles and services that are drivers to reducing poverty, such as childcare provision. Increase access to better paid employment. Increase the minimum wage.
- 5. Education and training:** Improve access to adult education and training opportunities, providing support to attend (transport costs, childcare etc.)
- 6. Emergency support:** Increase the financial provision of emergency support packages. Increase access to and availability of these packages.
- 7. Business and the economy:** Support business and growth, particularly community business opportunities. Seek and support employment creation. Tackle industry profits and windfall taxes.



Services and support

- 1. Targeted services:** Increase funding, availability of and accessibility to targeted services to support all families, not just those living in poverty. Services to prioritise are third sector; emotional and mental health; parenting programmes; debt and money advice; training and employment. Stop short term funding of services to ensure stability of provision.
- 2. Childcare:** Extend free childcare to other age groups. Improve wrap around childcare support. Provide more childcare for additional learning needs and disabled children. Address childcare costs and local availability.
- 3. Statutory services:** Strengthen and increase funding within universal services such as health, education and children's services.
- 4. Well-being hubs:** Expand and fund hubs for families that provide 'one stop shops' and include services and support that offer well-being activities, advice, peer support opportunities and access to wi-fi and IT.
- 5. Housing:** Provision of affordable, quality social housing. Increasing availability of social housing. Introduce rent caps.
- 6. Early intervention and prevention:** Increase funding and commitment to services that identify and prevent poverty related risks escalating.
- 7. Relationships:** Improve multi-agency working. Increase and improve engagement and relationships with parents. Listen and hear the voices of children and young people.
- 8. Disabled children:** Greater focus on and commitment to the needs of disabled children and neurodiversity.
- 9. Safeguarding:** Review and revise safeguarding thresholds.



Access and participation

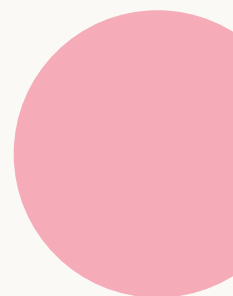
- 1. Transport:** Increase access to public transport, particularly in rural and deprived areas. Reduce costs of transport. Address availability and costs of school transport.
- 2. Sports and leisure:** Provide free and better access to sports, clubs and leisure activities, including during school holidays. Consider the barriers to access, including transport.
- 3. Engagement:** Involve communities, including children in local and national decision making. Actively hearing and supporting their needs.

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





Children & Young People's Survey Findings



About the survey

The Children and Young People's survey forms a crucial part of this 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 and supporters of children and young people, it is our duty to listen to their voices and take steps to ensure that every child and young person 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 live for a period of 7 weeks from 26 April – 16 June 2023. It was open to all children and young people in Wales and was completed anonymously by respondents.

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

- Poverty issues
- Poverty and school
- Poverty and home
- Poverty in the community
- Poverty related bullying
- Poverty solutions

Each category 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 is meant by the terms 'poverty' and 'debt'.

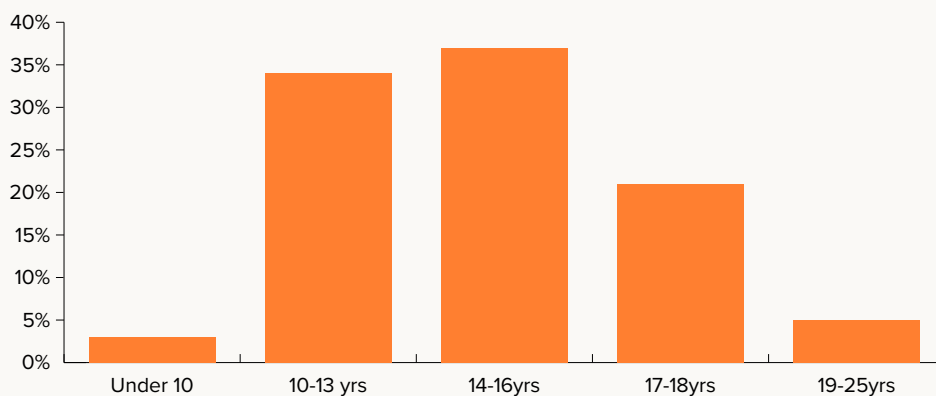
Who responded

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. It should also be noted that completion rates for individual questions sometimes varied and therefore percentage calculations are based on the number answering each question, rather than the overall number of respondents.

A total of 270 children and young people responded from 20 Local Authority areas across Wales. Their ages ranged from under 10 years up to 25 years.

Age range of respondents



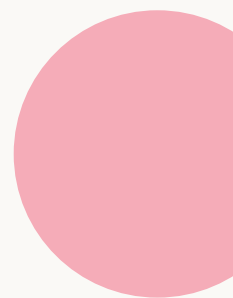
Of the respondents, 7% stated they did have a disability, 2% preferred not to say, 12% were unsure and 79% described themselves as not having a disability.

Children and young people were also asked about their ethnicity and whilst some did not complete this question, those who did identified as: Asian from another country (1); Asian Welsh or British (11); Black from another country (2); Mixed Heritage (12); White from another country (9); White Welsh or British (215); Any other ethnic group (2); Not sure (15); and Preferred not to say (2).

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.



Findings



Introduction

The impact poverty has on the lives of children and young people was carefully considered and expressed by those responding. They were concerned about the effect of poverty, both emotionally and physically, not just for children and young people themselves, but also their parents and carers.

Regardless of the questions, children and young people commented on and felt very strongly about the inequity of poverty. This was most evident in relation to education, food and bullying. Sadly, **they also felt that little would change for their futures**. Some were already anxious about how they would feed and house themselves in the future or be able to find employment that would provide enough income to do this.

Whilst the survey did not ask children and young people if they themselves had lived experience of poverty, it was frequently apparent from their comments. Many of these children face daily struggles and challenges and for some older, young people, it appears that they have done so for a number of years. It is therefore understandable that in these circumstances, there were **feelings of despondency, demotivation, low aspirations and of 'being let down' and 'ignored'**. This was also observed by practitioners and professionals and their findings too reflect these thoughts and feelings.

Each year, we ask children and young people about the poverty issues that affect them and each year, they kindly give their time to consider these and tell us what needs to change and how. **Each year, nothing changes. This is not acceptable.**



Poverty issues

“We feel cold, hungry and unhappy.” (under 10yrs)

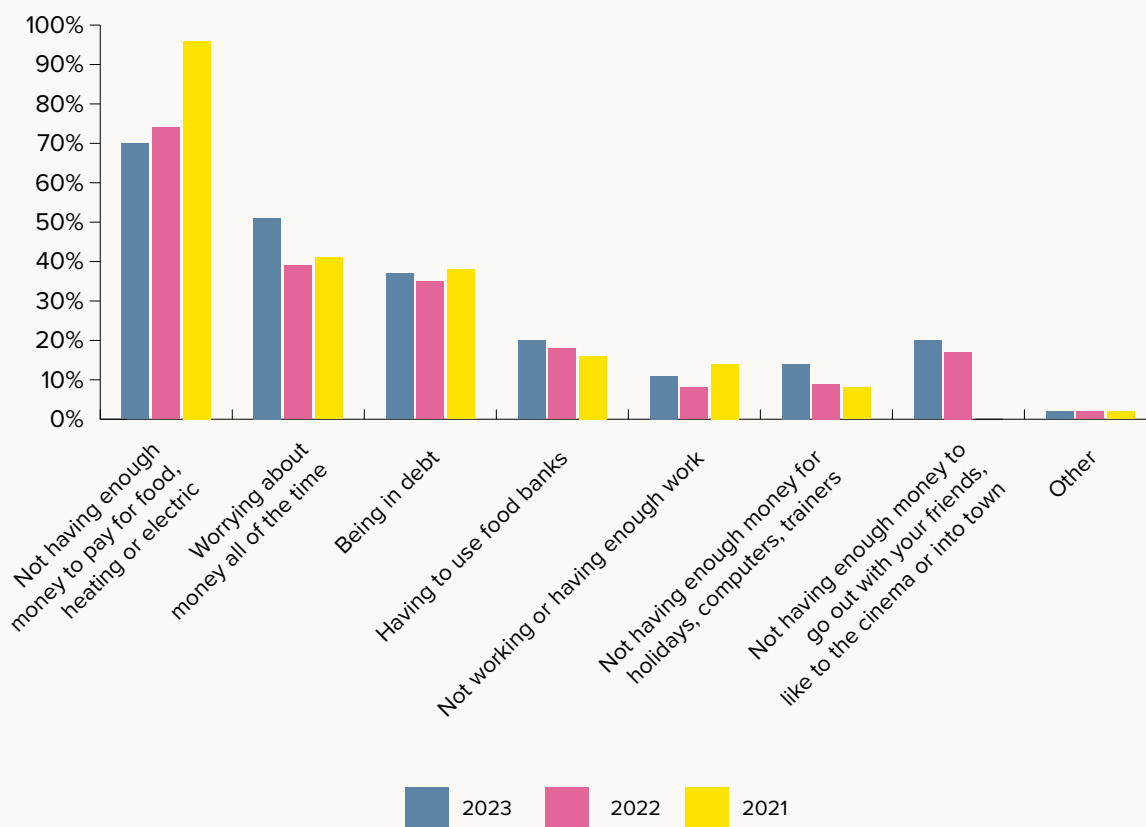
The survey asked children and young people what they thought affected children living in poverty the most. In this question, poverty and debt were described in the following ways:

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.

They were asked to choose 2 options from the list provided. These options are based on issues identified by children and young people in previous surveys. The chart below provides a 3 year comparison.

"What do you think affects children who live in poverty the most?"



The survey also asked how poverty might affect children and young people. Given the intentional lack of topic parameters for this question, the comments provided were wide ranging, from being unable to afford transport and ‘get around’ to poor health and the affordability of college and university educations. However, the majority of the comments focused on 2 areas; the **mental and emotional impact of living in poverty**; and the **personal, physical impact**, with both being linked to each other.

Regardless of age, children and young people believed that poverty 'caused' anxiety, worry and stress, adding an **"enormous pressure"** on children's lives which in turn, led to poor mental health, **"depression"**, **"sadness"**, **isolation** and an **"unhappy childhood"**.

"My Mum cries all the time because she has no money. I feel really bad and don't know what to do. I can't tell her I'm hungry because she will cry more." (10-13yrs)

Children and young people repeatedly commented on emotional and mental health. They recognised that it was difficult to focus or concentrate in school because they were consistently worried about food and money. They were also thinking about their parents who were very **"stressed"**. This left some children feeling guilty, so they rarely asked for anything in order to avoid **"more stress"**.

Some older, young people recognised that this 'stress' has an impact on their attainment and they would **"never go to university"** as they were unlikely to achieve the grades necessary. Many saw the circumstances around poverty to be permanent, with the cycle of **"generational poverty being repeated"**.

"These problems need to be resolved as soon as possible, for the sake of the next generation of adults. For the record, I should not be having to say this in the first place." (14-16 yrs)

These comments aligned with a significant and deeply concerning increase in the percentage of **negative remarks about the future** for children and young people. As with the findings from the practitioners' survey, there was despondency, frustration and sometimes anger about poverty in Wales.

They commented that **education was "pointless"** as young people needed to get a job immediately so that they could **"help out their families"**. Other young people believed that their futures would echo those of their parents, who **"work very hard"**, but still can't afford food or basic essentials. They expressed anger at this situation, much of which was directed towards schools for having **"expensive uniforms"** and what was seen as inaction on poverty related bullying.

"This simply isn't fair and the Welsh Government doesn't seem to care about doing anything about it." (17-18 yrs)

Others were angry at Welsh Government for “*not doing enough to help children*” and not caring about those living in poverty. A few were also angry at their parents for not being able to feed or clothe them.

“Feel like life is always downhill. Get depressed and poor mental health. Feel like there is no safe haven to talk about anything as your life is always chaotic.” (14-16yrs)

The second overarching area that they focused on was the **personal and physical impact** of poverty. They noted that children living in poverty were more likely to be ill compared to their peers and more frequently, homes were cold and damp with “*no private space or anywhere to do homework*”. Some mentioned not having their own bed and 2 of those responding did not have a toilet at home. There were many comments about personal presentation, with clothing being too small or inadequate and the high cost of electricity meant that clothes were washed infrequently and there was no hot water for showers. They stated that this caused bullying, which made them “*feel bad*”, resulting in poor mental health.

“Children don’t deserve to worry, they deserve a childhood that they can thrive in.” (19-25yrs)

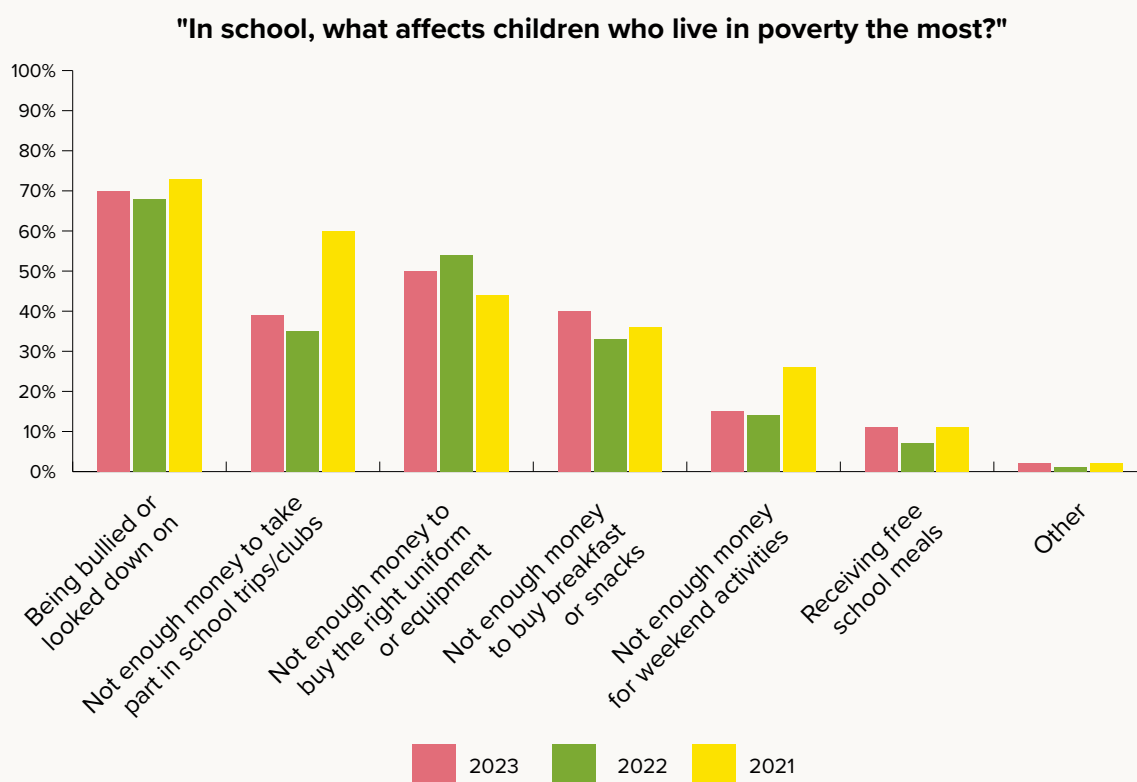
Many of the issues raised are explored in more detail throughout the following sections of this report.



Poverty and school

“Bullied and shamed for not having enough money, cannot afford to have food in school, go on school trips and cannot afford to get the correct uniform and equipment.” (14-16yrs)

The survey asked, in relation to school, what is most likely to affect those living in poverty. Multiple choice options were given, and the children and young people were asked to choose just 2. These options were again based on issues raised by respondents in previous annual surveys. The table below provides a 3-year comparison.



As in previous years, **‘being bullied or looked down on’** remains the option most commonly chosen. The findings for 2022 and 2023 are relatively similar, although there are significant fluctuations when compared to 2021. 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.

The differences between the years, however, do follow the cost of living increases and therefore may reflect changes in family circumstances and priorities of this period. For example, in 2021, *not being able to afford school trips* was important to children and young people and whilst this clearly remains an issue for them, adequate and correct clothing, along with food is now of greater importance to them.

“Being bullied a lot for being poor. Not having things that others have and that makes you feel left out. Feel lonely and your life is empty.” (14-16yrs)

Throughout their responses, a significant number of references were made to poverty and poor emotional health. For example, being unable to afford the correct school uniform or being in receipt of free school meals, led to bullying, which in turn led to feeling isolated, resulting in poor emotional health. Given the significant issues raised by children and young people around school uniform and bullying, these topics are explored in more detail in the following sections of this report.

“Looked down upon and not able to be the same as others, therefore getting bullied, then getting really sad, leading to depression and to many other things.” (14-16yrs)

Food and hunger were frequently commented on. Children were likely to attend school hungry, affecting their ability to concentrate and engage fully. Some noted that this affected their education as a lack of concentration would lead to poor grades, ending up in a **“cycle of poverty”**.

Many remarked that children and young people often could not afford lunch. It is not clear from their comments, if these children were eligible for free school meals, however, given that they were not eating at lunchtime, it is reasonable to assume that either they had no entitlement to free school meals, or the stigma of receiving free meals was too great. The findings from the practitioners’ survey indicate that an increasing number of children and young people cannot afford food at lunchtime, yet they do not meet the criteria for free school meals.

“Young people are concerned about having free school meals due to the stigma and bullying that surrounds it.” (14-16yrs)

A few remarked that the **portion size of free school meals** was *“smaller than other people’s”* and that their choice was also limited within the allowance. They also described the stigma of free school meals and *“how obvious it is”* which pupils receive them during lunchtime. These comments are perhaps better understood through the practitioners’ survey, in which they stated that the ‘allowance’ for free school meals was too low, and learners regularly have to ask the price of each item or are refused an item because they *‘can’t afford’* it. Inevitably, comments on free school meals generally included bullying, stigma and isolation.

“Can’t concentrate due to worrying about my parents, not able to go to school as parents unable to put credit on the electricity and gas meters, being cold and not able to have hot meals or even food as it’s too expensive.” (under 10)

School trips also raised concerns and chosen by 39% of children and young people as one of the issues most likely to affect those living in poverty. Those who could not afford to go on trips felt excluded, isolated and were reported as being more likely to be bullied for “*not attending*”. This was echoed in the practitioners’ findings, and they noted that children who could not participate in school trips tended to be absent on the day of the trip, rather than ‘*face their peers*’ or appear ‘left out’.

“Sometimes school trips are important for your education purpose and to see that would be nice.” (10-13yrs)

Children also reported feeling stressed and more anxious both before and after school trips. For example, the pre-trip letter with information and costings, could lead to additional pressures on parents, which children stated they were avoiding. Following the trip, teacher led discussions were normal within class and this further increased feelings of isolation and exclusion.

Children and young people recognised that poverty does have an impact in school and can affect their educational outcomes, personal experiences and mental health.

“No money to afford basic needs for school such as uniform or stationery which creates a massive disadvantage and increases the chance of dropping out of school or failing exams.” (17-18yrs)

Overwhelmingly, children and young people strongly believed that the inequity of poverty, particularly within education and schools, needs to change.

“Unfortunately, we live in a world that thinks the rich are more deserving and forget that the next generation are our future and right now, we are not doing enough, or giving enough.” (19-25yrs)



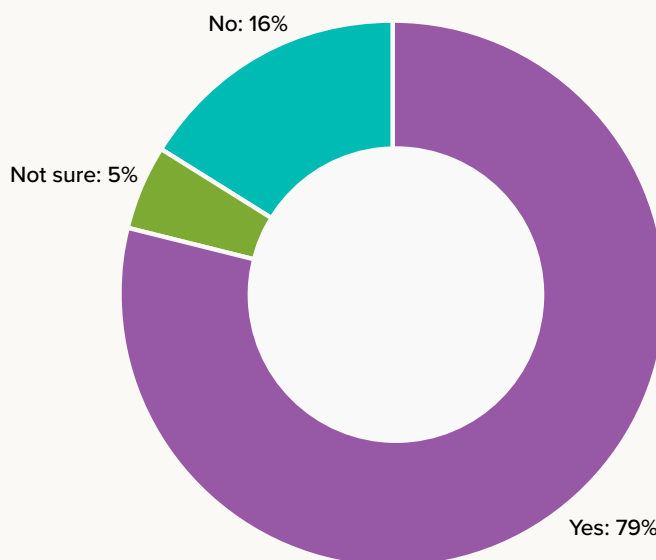
School Uniform

“It’s ridiculous that parents have to spend so much on uniforms. It’s exploitative and controlling. Why make them pay so much for a grey jumper?” (14-16yrs)

In our previous annual surveys, the costs of school uniforms, particularly those where a school badge or logo is required, has consistently been raised as an area of concern for lower income families and those living in poverty. To explore this further, this year, the survey asked children and young people about the uniform they have to wear and which types of shops this can be purchased from.

In the previous section ‘*Poverty and School*’, 50% of children and young people said that not having enough money to buy uniform has a significant impact on those living in poverty. They stated that those who could not afford the full, or correct uniform were more likely to be bullied and isolated as well as being more likely to be punished or sent home. They believed this is grossly unfair and recognised that uniforms do not have to be as expensive as they are. This was also remarked on by practitioners and their findings show that in relation to education, **school uniform costs had the biggest impact** and were the most difficult for families to manage.

Do you have to wear a school badge or school logo on your uniform?



It is perhaps surprising that despite Welsh Government’s statutory school uniform policy guidance, 79% of those responding to the survey stated that they do have to wear a school badge or logo.

The policy guidance recognises that uniforms are a financial burden, particularly for lower income families. It asks schools to consider the cost of their uniforms, avoiding high-cost items such as blazers and the sole use of specialised uniform shops. The use of school branded clothing is discouraged and where it is used, branding should not be compulsory. One young person commented that this was the case in their school, however, wearing a non-branded blazer was seen to *“make you stand out”* and more likely to be bullied.

It is these very issues, that children and young people highlighted as; barriers to attending school because of uniform affordability; increasing bullying for those with non-compliant uniform; and instigating punishment that they believed was unfair for those not able to afford the costs.

“If you do not have the correct uniform, you are given a uniform slip to take home and if the uniform is not corrected, you get a negative behaviour point which can escalate to detention.” (14-16yrs)

Uniform was seen as an essential item, otherwise *“you can’t attend school”*. One 14-16 year old was *“disgusted that they charge VAT on uniform”* and noted how much cheaper it would be if this was not the case.

The majority of those responding believed that families who could not afford the cost of the uniform, should receive them free of charge, commenting that this would reduce bullying and have a positive impact on mental health. A lack of the correct uniform, along with items that were worn and ill-fitting was seen as the main cause of poverty related bullying in school and one of the main circumstances for children and young people not attending school.

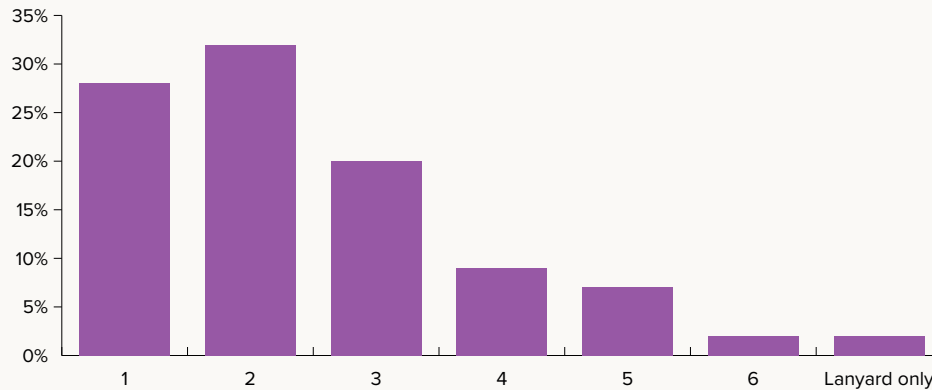
The survey asked how many and which items of their school uniform required a school badge or logo. These items varied but included branded blazers (31%) and PE kits (60%). Children and young people were not asked how many items within their PE kits required branding, however, from their comments, it is clear that often schools require the logo on between 2 and 4 items (e.g. hoody, sports top, shorts/skirts and long training trousers). It is therefore likely that some schools require up to 9 branded items.

“Uniform is still very expensive for parents to buy especially every year when children are growing up.....they end up having to wear uniform that’s too small for them.” (17-18yrs)



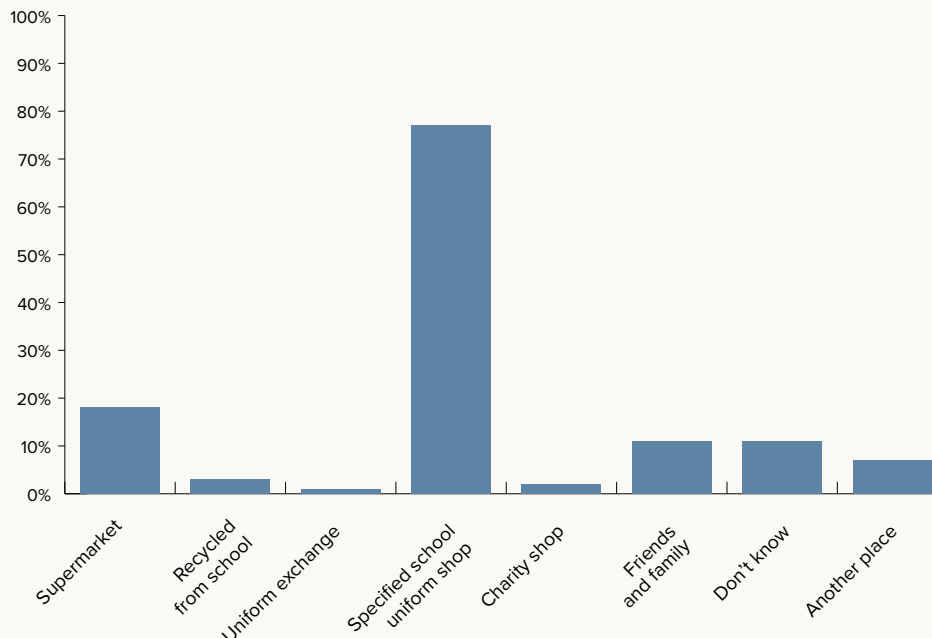
As the chart below shows, the majority of those responding are required to wear 2 items of branded school uniform.

Number of uniform items requiring a school badge or logo



“If uniforms had no badges and was plain, it would be cheaper and more accessible to more people. The school could even sell iron on badges so it would be cheaper because having to buy from a uniform shop is very expensive.” (10-13yrs)

"Where do you get your uniform from?"



For families living in poverty or on low incomes, the costs of school uniform represent a significant proportion of their budget and clearly more so, when they cannot buy the majority, or all of the substantive items from less expensive retailers.

Children and young people recognised the cost issues, with some being *“angry”* that families had to choose between buying school uniforms or buying food. Others focused on the impact non-compliance had on mental health and bullying, again believing this to be *“unfair”*.

In a separate question, they were asked about what would help to stop poverty related bullying in school. Their comments predominantly focused on school uniform, and they suggested solutions such as; removing all branding; “*uniform swap shops*”, free uniforms for everyone to reduce difference, and a change in school uniform policies and discipline.

To provide further understanding of uniform costs, the following table has been included. This provides an example of uniform costs from 2 secondary schools in Wales. These were calculated in August 2023, just ahead of the new school term. Where items do not need to be branded, costings are based on prices from a leading supermarket.

Also included in the table are the percentage of learners who are known by the school to be eligible for free school meals.

School year 23/24	School A Costs	School B Costs	Supermarket costs with no logos
% of learners eFSM *	19%	38%	
Blazer	£30.00**	£30.00 **	£14.00
Skirt/trousers x 2	£8.00	£8.00	£8.00
Shirt x 5	£7.50	£7.50	£7.50
Tie	£7.00 **	£6.00 **	£4.00
Jumper x 2	£34.00 **	£32.00 **	£5.00
Socks/tights x 5	£5.00	£5.00	£5.00
Shoes	£14.00	£14.00	£14.00
PE top x 2	£44.00 **	£37.00 **	£3.00
PE shorts x 2	£24.00 **	£5.00	£5.00
Trainers	£10.00	£10.00	£10.00
Total	£183.50	£154.50	£75.50
* Eligible for free school meals			
** Compulsory with logo and only available from specified shop			

As the table shows, uniform is expensive and more so where branded items are expected. These costings do not include items that need replacing throughout the school terms and importantly, only show the costs for one child.

A few children and young people remarked that their schools were proactive in helping families who could not afford uniforms. They noted “*uniform recycling*”, donated by other learners and given to families. These were seen as very positive steps in helping children living in poverty.

“Our school really works to make sure children in poverty don’t obviously stand out. There is free uniform for children who need it and it’s been donated by other children.” (10-13yrs)

Where this was happening, some children and young people were extremely proud of their school, their own actions and how children were treated within the setting. When analysing the findings, it was very interesting to discover that those who commented on positive, mitigating actions taken within the school, did not comment about bullying, unfairness or isolation. This was unusual compared to other respondents. The limitations, numbers and anonymity of the survey do not allow for further analysis or investigation of this; however, it does remain noteworthy.

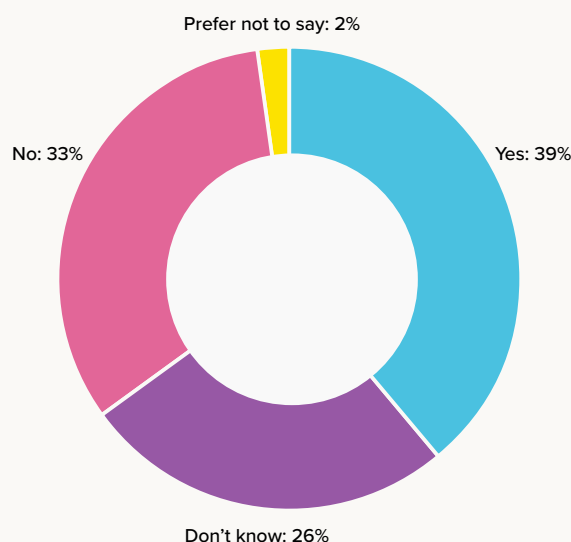


Bullying and poverty

“Bullying in schools due to wealth is horrible. As a person who experienced it severely, it destroys you and kills any self-confidence or self-worth you have about yourself. It makes you extremely pessimistic for years after.” (17-18yrs)

Questions about bullying were first included in our 2022 survey. Prior to this, we did not specifically ask about poverty related bullying, yet so many children and young people included this in their responses, regardless of the question. As a result, poverty related bullying is now included as a core part of our survey.

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



In our 2022 survey, the majority (40%) of children and young people stated that they did not see poverty related bullying. However, this year, the majority (39%) stated that yes, they do.

Where poverty related bullying was witnessed or experienced, children and young people's comments largely centred around the consequences of poverty, such as worn, unkempt and ill-fitting uniform; lack of correct uniform; receiving free school meals; not participating in school trips and events; and clothing worn on non-school uniform days.

“I was bullied, however I was better off than one of my friends, he received free school meals (he couldn't afford uniform and free school meals were often his only meal of the day). Most days the other kids would tip up his food tray and try and tear apart his already worn uniform.” (14-16yrs)

Over a quarter (26%) of children and young people 'did not know' if poverty related bullying was taking place. However, from many of their comments, it is evident that bullying is taking place, but it may be for other reasons. A very small number stated that "*children were just being teased*" about living in poverty, rather than bullied. This perspective is perhaps determined by experience or understanding.

For those who answered 'no' to this question, many of them had "*heard that it happens*", but had not directly experienced or witnessed it, whilst others commented that "*nobody in school is in poverty*". Of course, this may be the case, but given the numbers of children living in poverty or from low-income families in Wales, this would be unusual.

It is probably more likely that their school is working to mitigate the impact of poverty and therefore, reducing poverty related bullying. There were several positive examples given by these children and young people. They stated that every learner within their school is treated equally, "*no exceptions*"; they learn and understand about what poverty means and how it might make children and young people feel; and the school "*recycles*" the uniforms, so "*we all swap uniforms*".

"My school has tried to combat this." (14-16yrs)

Some schools have clearly taken steps or are in the process of implementing a 'whole school approach' to poverty and from these findings, it appears to be having a positive impact. Where children and young people gave examples of positive practice to address poverty related bullying, none had witnessed or experienced this type of bullying within schools. Given the frequency of comments around poverty related bullying, this finding is significant.

The measures these schools appear to be implementing are aligned to those recommended in some programmes, such as [The Price of Pupil Poverty](#), funded by Welsh Government and facilitated by Children in Wales. Information and resources for this programme are freely available on the Welsh Government's website, Hwb.

"Giving them information to uplift them, making people aware of their feelings, free school uniform for free." (10-13yrs)

The final question on poverty related bullying asked children and young people '*what can be done to stop this happening*'. The most common response given was around the need to raise awareness and increase understanding of poverty related bullying. They believed that this, alongside other measures would reduce poverty related bullying.

"We should teach young people about the realities of poverty. The younger they are when they learn about poverty and bullying, the more likely they are to be more accepting." (14-16yrs)

However, a number of children and young people remarked on the need for teachers to have more understanding of “*how it feels to live in poverty*”, as this would reduce discipline that was seen as unfair, such as “*negative behaviour points*” for not having the correct uniform.

“Don’t point out individuals.” (17-18yrs)

Other **measures to stop bullying** included free school uniforms for those who need it; removal of uniform logos and expensive items such as blazers; universal free school meals; uniform recycling; ‘swap shops’; banning non-uniform days; free school transport; and free school trips.

“Kids get picked on and made fun of because their parents don’t have enough money. Also it affects their grades and won’t be able to get good jobs and so the cycle continues.” (14-16yrs)

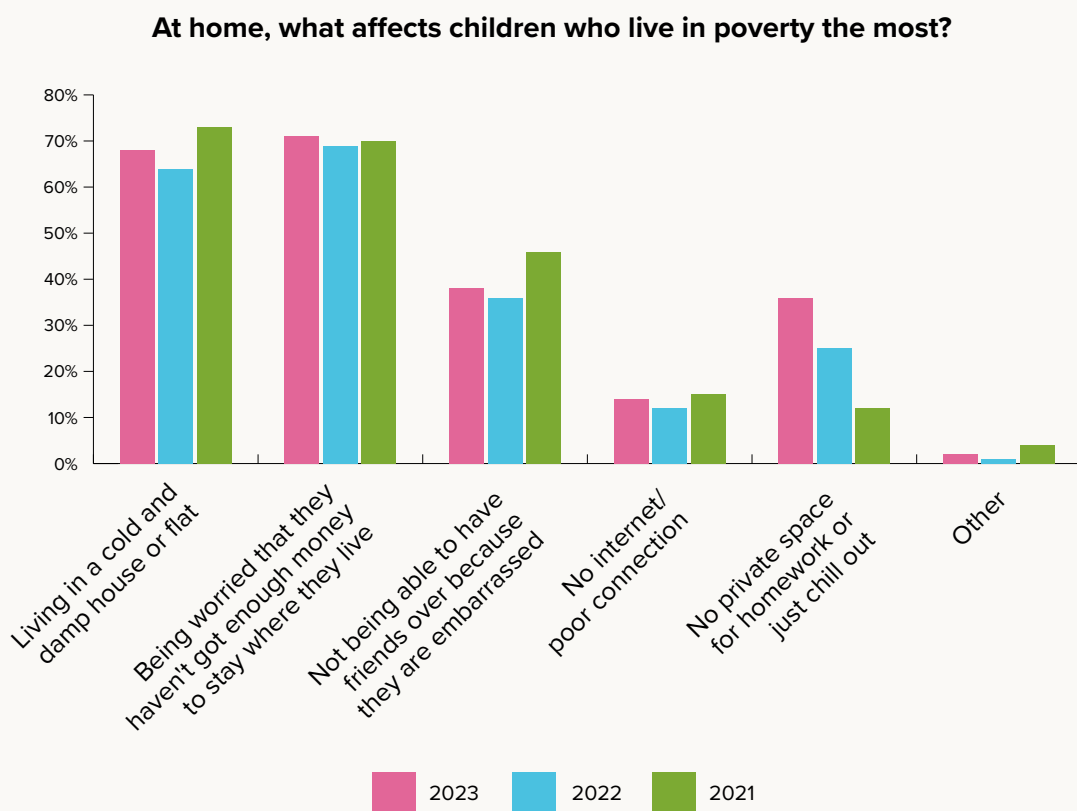
These measures not only directly relate to their identified causes of poverty related bullying, but those identified by practitioners and professionals. The overarching theme from children and young people is that **everyone deserves equity** and that educational experiences should not be dependent on income or circumstances.



Poverty and home

“You just don’t want to go home. There’s nothing to eat, it’s cold and damp and smells. We can’t afford nice things or to have it warm.” (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.



The findings remain relatively consistent across the 3-year comparison period, however, there has been a sharp increase in the number of children and young people choosing ‘no private space’. The reason for this is unclear, but respondents choosing this answer, were more likely to mention poverty related stress, “family arguments”, tension within the household and “cramped” living spaces. Some cited “being unable to afford food”, rent and other essentials as a cause of arguments at home.

“I think it causes a lot of arguments or disagreements over what is essential and what isn’t.” (14-16yrs)

Practitioners stated in their survey, that family relationships were increasingly fraught, and this is echoed by the children and young people’s responses. There were more comments this year about arguments within the home than in previous years.

“Listen to parents arguing more at home.” (10-13yrs)

As with many of the answers provided throughout the survey, **emotional wellbeing and mental health** dominated their comments. They noted feelings of “*anxiety*” and “*worry*”, “*having to watch meters to see if we will be in the dark*”, concerned if they could afford a shower or have their clothes washed.

“Worrying about if the house is going to be permanent – worrying about food and drinks – worrying about clothing – worrying about ways of getting places.” (14-16yrs)

Others remarked on being too embarrassed to have friends over, not only because of the “*state of their home*”, but also because their parents couldn’t afford snacks or drinks for them; there “*wasn’t enough furniture*”; they didn’t have electricity; and it may lead to further family arguments. Across all age ranges, this increased feelings of isolation, loneliness and “*not being good enough*”.

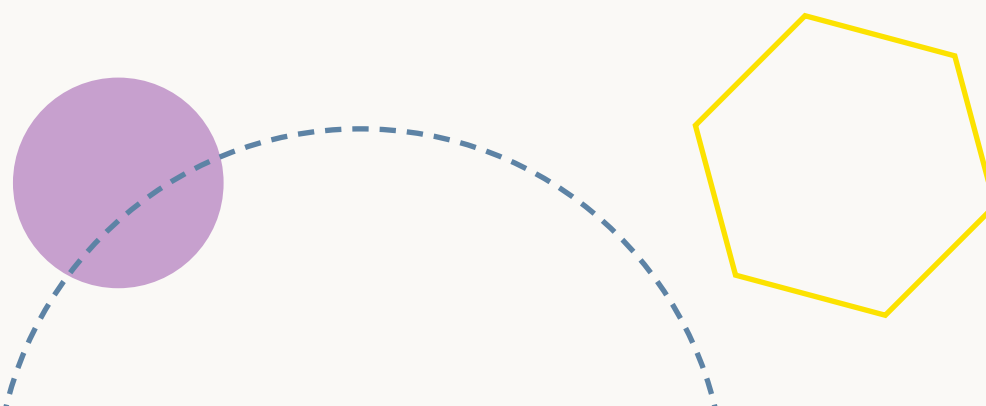
Food and hunger within the home were also mentioned. Some raised issues of having no food, or very little food at home, this was said to be “*especially true during the school holidays*”. Several children and young people also found it difficult to see their parents not eating, this generated guilt and for one 10-13 year old, made them “*feel down and sad*”.

“The food often goes to the most needy person in the family and it can be difficult to see parents going without meals.” (14-16yrs)

Concerns were raised about being able to stay in their home and there being “*a constant fear of being kicked out by landlords*”. The external environment around the home was frequently described as “*unsafe*” and isolating and social housing as being “*rare*”.

Children and young people remarked on the practical challenges at home, such as not being able to afford electricity, wi-fi or internet access. Again, they noted the isolation this brings, but were also worried about their homework. With “*more schoolwork being done over the internet*”, they were anxious that they could not complete this and “*would get into trouble the next day*”. It was also difficult for children to find a quiet, private space in which to complete their homework and again, this troubled them as they felt they would “*get it wrong*” and either fall further behind in their schoolwork or be “*embarrassed*” by teachers in front of their classmates.

“If you worry too much it can be bad for your health to worry.” (10-13yrs)

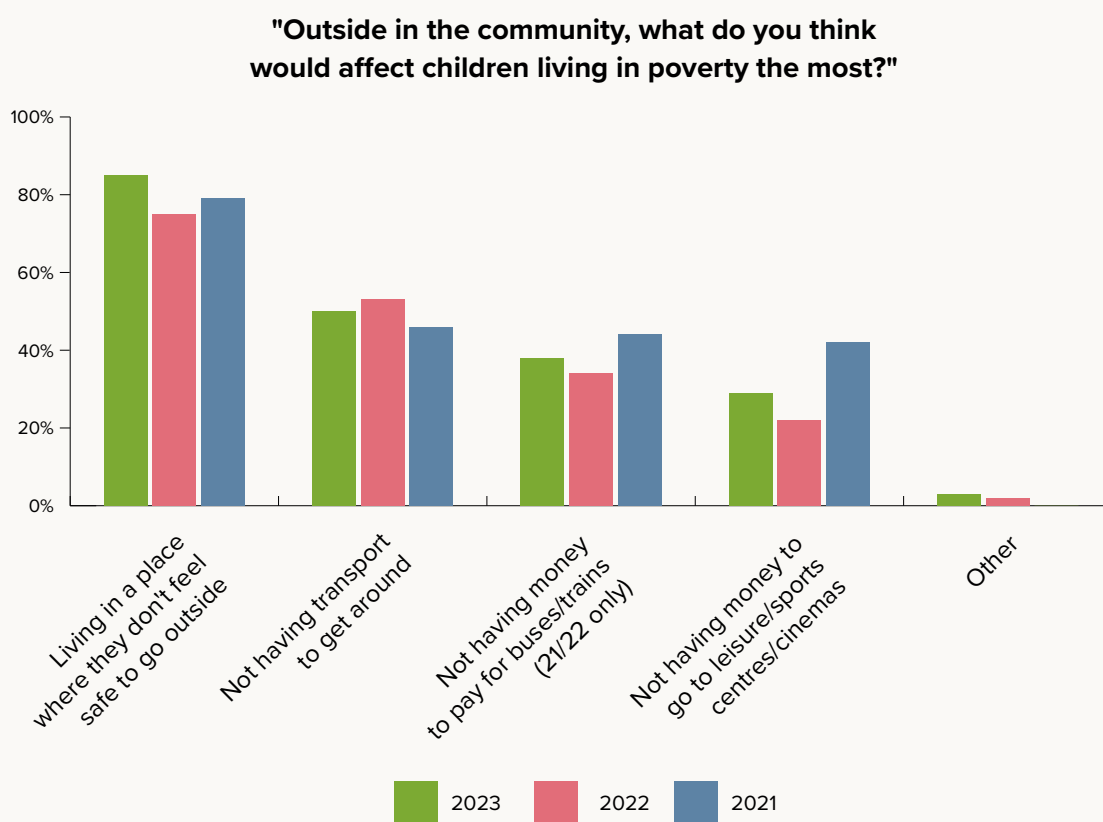


Poverty in the community

“There are no places left where young people can just exist without spending money. Youth centres, libraries etc have been shut down and teenagers are vilified for loitering in public spaces.” (19-25yrs)

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, 85% 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.



Children and young people were concerned about being **“bullied”** and **“judged”** by their peers within the community. They noted feelings of shame and embarrassment about their clothes and where they live. This was exacerbated by feelings of isolation within their community and not being accepted or *“ignored for being poor”*. This increased their anxiety and therefore, they would be less likely to ‘go out’.

“Being picked on for the way they look and clothes they are wearing – just being judged.” (14-16yrs)

There was also a perception that their communities were **“dangerous”**, with a few referring to *“gangs”* and *“drug use”*. They expressed concern about getting *“involved with the wrong crowd”* and ending up in prison. These comments were also echoed in the practitioners’ findings.

“Need safer play space.” (14-16yrs)

Lack of and affordability of public transport was seen as a compounding issue for children and young people living in poverty. Access to public transport was extremely limited, but even where this was available, the cost was usually prohibitive. Again, this was said to further isolate young people from their friends, activities and school and was identified as having a detrimental impact on their mental well-being. One young person stated that they were unable to attend health and doctors’ appointments due to the lack of transport.

“How can you get anywhere with no money? If you’re family has just enough to buy food, you aren’t able to catch a bus/train. You become very isolated.” (19-25yrs)

Many comments remarked on access to *“places to go and hang out”* within the community, noting that there were not enough youth clubs or community centres. Where they did exist, money was usually needed to pay for a *“club”* or activity and even ‘free to attend’ events needed spending money for a drink or snack. Being able to buy a drink was important to children and young people as this would make them the *‘same as everyone else’* and therefore included.

“Don’t have enough money to do anything nice for yourself and make you happy. Feel upset as you can’t do the things other people can do.” (14-16yrs)

There were also barriers for those meeting friends on the streets, benches or parks within their local community. They were seen by adults to be *“loitering”* and repeatedly told to *‘move on’*. This had an impact on their sense of belonging within their community and affected their self-esteem and confidence.

For some, there were more practical reasons for not being able to physically participate within their community. These included not having a warm coat for when it was cold or raining and only having one pairs of shoes, which were to be *“kept as school shoes”*.

“Just want to live a simple life without being worried or living in fear.” (14-16yrs)



If I was the First Minister.....

“I would make sure all kids have their human rights by being able to go to school, having food and drinks to live, and a decent house for them to stay in if their home isn’t safe.” (10-13yrs)

For our final question, we described the First Minister as the ‘*person who is in charge of the whole of Wales*’ and asked children and young people what they would do to stop poverty happening if they had this role.

Over half (52%) of the children and young people who participated in the survey answered this question. They recognised the pressures and responsibilities of being the First Minister, stating that it is a ‘*difficult the job*’ and that ‘*there’s a lot to do*’.

Most commonly, they sought to address issues that affect children and young people in school. These included school meals; uniforms; school trips; bullying; and inequality.

As First Minister they would ensure that all children and young people received **free school meals**, with some also stating they would provide **free breakfasts** for everyone who wanted it. Addressing food provision in school was important to them, not only to ensure children living in poverty were “*not hungry*”, but to **create equality and inclusion** amongst peers. They also saw this provision as a positive solution in addressing bullying in school.

“Make breakfast free for all ages in school, so nobody needs to go to school hungry or be ashamed to have to ask for a free meal, because they could have it with friends.” (10-13yrs)

Given the numerous issues they raised around school uniform, it is not surprising that as ‘First Minister’, children and young people would alter the current situation. Some identified that the current ‘*uniform grant*’ was not enough and should be available all year round. The most common solutions given however, were to provide **free school uniforms** to all children, regardless of their background; ‘**ban**’ **school branded uniforms** which were expensive, and this ‘ban’ would make it cheaper for schools to provide the uniform; and lastly, that all schools should facilitate a ‘**uniform swap shop**’. Again, children and young people saw this as a measure to reduce inequality and bullying and with the savings made, families could increase their budgets in other areas and be able to pay for ‘*rent*’ and ‘*food*’ at home.

“Provide the items [equipment for school] and free school meals and as mentioned earlier, also free uniforms to all pupils no matter their background or circumstances, so all children are equal and no pupil is judged on what they have or have not got. All children can concentrate on what they are in school for, which is to be educated.” (14-16yrs)

As First Minister, some children and young people commented that they would make **school trips freely available** to everyone, not just those who could afford it. This was again to ensure equality, a reduction of bullying and the *“same learning experiences as everyone else.”*

One young person remarked that if school trips are there to enhance learning, then why exclude some pupils. Another described school trips as effectively *‘highlighting’* children who live in poverty as *‘they always get left behind’*. Whilst the majority of those who commented on school trips wanted them to be free to every learner, others noted that they would *“make schools set up a school trip fund”*, which would provide the trips free of charge to those whose families could not afford to pay.

Whilst many of their above ‘implementations’ included positive outcomes for poverty related bullying, some children and young people wanted to specifically address bullying in schools. To do this, they would train all teachers, giving them an understanding of *“what it’s like to live in poverty”*; how they can support pupils living in poverty; inclusion and equality; and how to reduce bullying.

“Spend more money on teachers to train them to support pupils and educate more on bullying and equality.” (10-13yrs)

With this training, all teachers would then have to raise awareness of and educate learners about the impact of poverty. Given this knowledge and understanding, children and young people believed that everyone would be treated equally, with respect and as a result, children would not be bullied because they live in poverty.

Other areas they would address as First Minister included **increasing the minimum wage and income**; and the provision of **better and affordable public transport**.

Improved availability of public transport and a reduction of travel cost was a priority for some, believing that transport is *“the backbone for people”*, without which, they cannot find employment or access services.

“I would set up some sort of travel pass that can aid people in poverty with travel on buses and trains. [These] can be really expensive.” (19-25yrs)



Increasing the minimum wage would ensure that people are fairly paid for what they do, that they would not have to work so many hours or take on multiple jobs. This would result in parents being able to spend more time with their families, particularly single parents and able to afford to feed, clothe and house them.

“Pay parents more money so they can support their family without working too many hours and weekends.” (14-16yrs)

Children and young people were also keen to increase benefits and change the current systems. If they were *‘in charge of Wales’*, they would work to **increase Universal Credit and decrease the waiting time; change young carers benefits**; and introduce a basic income for all adults. They believed this basic income would provide people with the essentials they need and then, if they do work, this would be a *“bonus”* and they would be able to *“improve their lives”*.

“Make certain benefits, like young carers benefits, less intrusive and less detrimental to the carer’s parent’s benefit. For every £1 of young carer benefit, 60p is taken away from their parent’s benefits. [This] would incentivise young carers to go on these benefits and not through unofficial channels or to not apply for help at all.” (14-16yrs)

Benefits were not seen to provide the *“basic things to keep people healthy”* and young people want to change this. They believed that benefits should, at the very least, provide enough income to buy food and pay housing costs for those that need it.

“Yes, people get benefits, but clearly if people are living where they can’t afford a warm meal and a warm house, it’s not enough.” (19-25yrs)

Children and young people are amazing. Not only did they kindly take the time to consider and answer this question, but in doing so, they showed insight, understanding of the challenges poverty brings and empathy for those dealing with this.

“I would conduct a survey as has been done here and cooperate with researchers and other specialists on the subject. I feel that investing in schools, programmes and public transport, especially in areas where people are statistically poorer, would alleviate poverty and provide opportunities for both young people and adults to receive an education that can empower them to achieve better jobs. If people are given this opportunity, it will motivate them to persevere.” (17-18yrs)

They clearly want to make a difference and increase opportunities for everyone living in poverty or with low incomes. The theme throughout all their comments was not accepting inequality and *“unfairness”*. If they were the First Minister, this is what they would want to change.

Children in Wales would like to sincerely thank all the children and young people who took part in this survey. Listening to and actively hearing their voices is at the core of our work.

We will ensure their voices are heard by sharing their comments and findings from this survey with practitioners, professionals and policy makers, both locally and nationally, as well as Ministers, Welsh Government officials and of course, the First Minister.

