

# LISTENING COMMISSIONS REPORT FOR PARENTS



The document is a report on the listening commissions conducted with parents across Blaenau Gwent to understand how the costs of living crisis is affecting families and what actions have been taken by the local authority to address the issues raised.

The report identifies six common themes that emerged from the consultations with 50 parents: housing, school, food and nutrition, benefit and debt issues, impact on mental health, and employment. For each theme, the report summarizes what the parents said and what the local authority did in response, highlighting the various initiatives, grants, schemes, and support services that were implemented or improved.

The report also outlines the future plans to improve service access and delivery in Blaenau Gwent, such as the Family Support Hub, the antenatal support, and the additional cost-of-living events.

Based on a suggestion from the Cost of Living strategic group, we have conducted listening sessions with parents in Blaenau Gwent to learn how the costs of living crisis is impacting families. This involved talking to groups of parents who are experiencing poverty firsthand. To bring about lasting social change, we need the people who are directly affected to lead the way. Every statistic reflects the lives of real people. In Blaenau Gwent, we wanted to put a face to the facts and help create change in our communities. Changes to policies and processes help to reduce inequality in our communities and offer the best opportunities for children living in low-income families.



We have learned about the problems in each area, how they impact families and how to build trust and empathy between families and Commissioners.

This has shown what happens when we combine resources, stories and experiences, and how vital it is to listen to families. We are now working on common themes that Commissioners and families can tackle together.

The information provided by parents has been compiled into common themes and shows what you told us and how the local authority has responded.

50 parents have been consulted with to date, with more listening commissions planned throughout the year.



# COMMON THEMES

AFTER CONSULTING 50 PARENTS TO DATE ON THE THEMES BELOW  
WE HAVE FOUND OUT 'WHAT YOU SAID' AND 'WHAT WE DID'

HOUSING



SCHOOL



FOOD & NUTRITION



BENEFIT & DEBT  
ISSUES



IMPACT ON  
MENTAL HEALTH



FUEL



EMPLOYMENT



COST OF LIVING



# HOUSING

## WHAT YOU SAID

Reports of poor housing conditions i.e. repairs, damp and mould in properties.  
Rent increases – particularly from private landlords.  
Antisocial behaviour.

Parents reported poor and unsafe living conditions, holes in floorboards, leaks in the properties etc.

## WHAT WE DID

A QR code was devised by Supporting People to directly report housing issues and access support.  
Prompt responses from housing organisations to support with repairs, damp, and mould elimination.

Housing officers attended the listening commissions with parents to directly offer support.  
Private landlords contacted directly and challenged on delayed housing repairs.

Referrals sent directly to Environmental Health reporting the poor living conditions.



# SCHOOL

## WHAT YOU SAID

Uniform costs and the increased cost of requiring uniform with school logos.  
Costs for children's activities, craft, school fetes, tickets for plays, themed sessions i.e. Book Week.

The free childcare eligibility is an unfair process, with only parents living in specific postcodes able to access this provision.

## WHAT WE DID

Direct liaison with the Chief Education Officer about increased school costs and information relayed to all Headteachers to request that additional school costs are reduced. This included reviewing the mandatory uniform logo scheme adopted in all schools.

Uniform recycling schemes were made available in the schools.

Families First implemented a free costume loan scheme, directly targeted at supporting families for national book week.

Wales will implement free childcare for all children aged 2-3 years. Date to be confirmed by Welsh Government.

Flying Start have an outreach scheme for parents needing support. They have also recently implemented a childcare only element of outreach; however, places are limited.



# FOOD AND NUTRITION

## WHAT YOU SAID

High costs of food shopping and having to eliminate expensive foods from the family diet such as meat, dairy products and fresh fruit and vegetables. Families report eating mainly pasta as it was cheaper alternative.

Parents reported that they were weaning their babies much early than advised to save money on expensive infant formula. Families report purchasing expensive food pouches for babies.

Parents told us they were concerned that they were unable to provide nutritional meals for the family on such a low budget and often going without food to provide for their children.

Parents reported worries about the cost of feeding the children during school holidays.

Parents were unaware where they could access free food in their community.

Some parents were not accessing their healthy start vouchers or were not eligible to receive support.

## WHAT WE DID

Additional grant funding was sourced to provide emergency food parcels, available in all Flying Start hubs, local churches, and food poverty organisations.

An infant feeding crisis grant made available to support parents of babies and young children to ensure adequate, healthy nutrition is available, including infant formula and fresh weaning foods, suitable for freezing.

Cooking on a budget sessions are delivered in the Flying Start hubs, supported by Tai Calon grant funding. This includes giving parents slow cookers and ingredients which is a cheaper alternative than using ovens and microwaves.

Fit and Fed, Food and Fun and Play work Holiday sessions for children were delivered throughout the authority by various organisations during the school holidays as part of the holiday hunger plan.

A map of all free food provision made available via the Sustainable Food Coordinator. Developments are underway to design an interactive map for the community to see what is available.

A social media campaign was implemented to ensure parents eligible applied for their vouchers. This helped to increase the uptake. Information provided to the Sustainable Food Coordinator relaying concerns from parents who were not eligible to apply. A parliamentary debate is planned after the elections to recognise the problems maximising the potential of the Healthy Start Scheme and increase the benefit threshold.

All Flying Start staff are registered to allocate Foodbank vouchers to families in need.



# BENEFITS & DEBT ISSUES

## WHAT YOU SAID

Parents report having unmanageable debt, CCJ's, poor credit rating, credit card and catalogue debts, fuel debts and rent arrears, universal credit sanctions.

In one specific area, the community reported that there was illegal money lending activity. Several individuals stated that they were borrowing from some members of the community and having to pay double the amount back.

Parents told us that they struggled to purchase essential items for their family home, such as white goods, adequate beds for their children, clothing etc.

Parents report that there are no financial incentives to get back into employment. Parents fear losing their benefits and entitlements, which would leave them financially no better off.

Concerns with DWP staff and them not being particularly helpful and making families feel worthless.

Universal credit sanctions leaving families for weeks without any money.

Delays in benefits, universal credit sanctions and lengthy appeal process.

## WHAT WE DID

Support hubs and crisis support in place in local venues i.e. libraries with information and support on housing, benefits, help with energy costs, fuel bank vouchers, cost of living support payments, access to food and any other support needs. This helped to maximise people's income and help them meet essential living costs.

A cost-of-living financial support and advice booklet was devised and disseminated via the support hubs, community venues and on social media.

Citizen's Advice – better off calculations

Directly targeting issues that affect communities – Making Money Count event in Cefn Golau Council tax reduction scheme

The Flying Start team liaised with Loan Shark Wales who attended the area and completed a door knocking activity to speak to the community, giving out leaflets and information of the dangers of borrowing from illegal money lenders and providing safer lending options via Smart Money Cymru. A family event was organised, directly targeting the specific community, with support organisations available to speak to those directly affected. This included Citizens Advice, Smart Money Cymru, Loan Shark Wales, and housing support. Free lunch was also provided for the children funded by Loan Shark Wales via the proceeds of crime funding.

All staff are trained and applied for grants for families including Discretionary Assistance Fund, Child in Need grants etc. to ensure the children and families had their basic needs met.

Direct referrals to Citizens Advice to check benefit entitlement and to complete better off calculations.

Direct liaison with DWP staff to report issues that families are reporting.





# IMPACT ON MENTAL HEALTH

## WHAT YOU SAID

Increased worry, anxiety and depression fuelled by the worry and guilt of not being able to provide the basic needs for their children. This was also exacerbated by the guilt and embarrassment of having to borrow money from friends and family, sometimes using unsafe money lending avenues.

Long delays in accessing mental health support services.

Prescribed antidepressant medication due to their circumstances.

## WHAT WE DID

Support to access services such as Parent Infant Mental Health Services via Flying Start.

Parents were accompanied to GP appointments by support workers to access mental health support.

Online helplines disseminated via social media.



# FUEL

## WHAT YOU SAID

The increased cost of gas and electric left families not putting their heating on and spending more time out of the home to reduce costs.

Arrears building up as families were unable to manage the increase in costs.

Families reported spending more time out of the family home as not to increase their fuel use.

## WHAT WE DID

Fuel poverty vouchers made available in the support hubs in every community. The support hubs also gave advice and information on fuel debt.

The 'Warm Hub' scheme was implemented throughout the authority, with 18 in situ to provide families with a place to access warmth, food, and support. This was essential during the cold winter period.



# EMPLOYMENT

## WHAT YOU SAID

Families reported the pitfall of zero-hour contracts, and the difficulties in trying to manage the change and lengthy delays in the Universal Credit adjustments, and process.

Individuals not financially motivated to find employment as they would lose their benefits and expensive childcare costs meant that families couldn't afford to go back to work as they would not be in a better financial situation.

## WHAT WE DID

The Business and Innovation team are encouraging both new and existing businesses to eliminate zero-hour contracts and make them aware of the challenges and poverty individuals face when they are dropping in and out of the benefit system.

Individuals referred to Citizens Advice and the expertise of the support hubs to complete better off calculations with support to access training and employment.



# FUTURE PLANS TO IMPROVE SERVICE ACCESS AND DELIVERY IN BLAENAU GWENT

Family Support Hub – allowing families access to a ‘one front door’ service to ensure families can access any type of support where and when they need it as opposed to navigating a complicated referral and eligibility system.

All expectant parents are offered antenatal support via a Family Support Worker. This support also includes an invitation to an antenatal event, which incorporates cost of living and anti-poverty partners who are available to give advice and guidance – helping families to save money.

Listening commissions to be completed with older members of the community.

Additional cost-of-living events to be delivered in more rural areas of Blaenau Gwent to ensure all communities have access to support.

