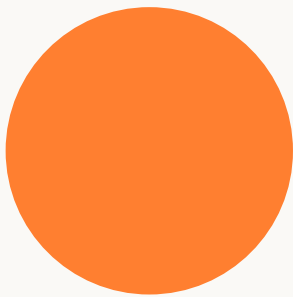


PLANT YNG NGHYMURU
CHILDREN IN WALES

Annual Child and Family Poverty Surveys 2024

Practitioners & Professionals: Findings Report

Karen McFarlane | October 2024



In partnership with



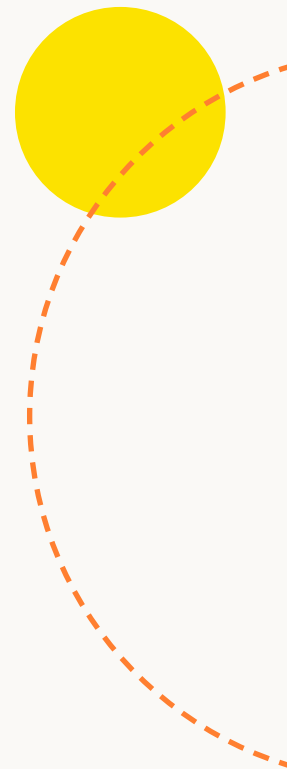
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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the ECPN steering group members and Parents Connect Wales for their collaboration and support.

Children in Wales would like to sincerely thank all of the parents, carers, children, young people, practitioners and professionals who participated in the survey. Without them our surveys and this report would not be possible. Thank you.

In memory of Karen McFarlane, who authored the reports from 2021-2024.



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 forms the main publication of the findings from the Children in Wales Annual Child & Family Poverty Surveys 2024. In addition, the findings have been published into separate, smaller reports and are all available on the [Children in Wales](#) website:

- Children and Young People: Findings report***
- Parents/ Carers: Findings Report***
- Practitioners and Professionals: Findings report***
- Infographic summaries***
- Children and Young People's Version of their findings***

Contact details: info@childreninwales.org.uk

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 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 Parents Connect Wales



Parents Connect Wales (PCW) is a project led by Children in Wales and funded by Welsh Government. It is aimed at empowering the voices of parents/ carers to promote children's rights.

Parents Connect Wales has established:-

- A professionals' forum with 110 members to date
- A parent advisory group with 6 parent representatives
- 22 local representatives, one in each of the local authorities in Wales
- An online platform called the 'Parents Connect Wales' Online Hub

To find out more about the Parents Connect Wales project, then please visit the [online hub](#) or contact parentsconnect@childreninwales.org.uk

NB When we refer to 'parents' we use this as an inclusive term that includes parents (both mothers and fathers), carers, grandparents, foster parents, adoptive parents or anyone with parental responsibility.

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 info@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.

In January 2024, Welsh Government published their updated [Child Poverty Strategy](#) to help prevent and mitigate child poverty.

Parents/ Carers and Children's Rights

The UNCRC mentions the words 'parents' and 'families' more than 'children' and recognises that children's rights are protected first within families.

The following articles recognise the crucial role of parents and families in protecting and caring for children:-

- Their right to have their best interests considered in all decisions that affect them (Article 3)
- Their right for the role of their parents/ carers to be recognised and respected so that children can access all their rights (Article 5)
- Their right to be brought up by both parents if possible (Article 18)

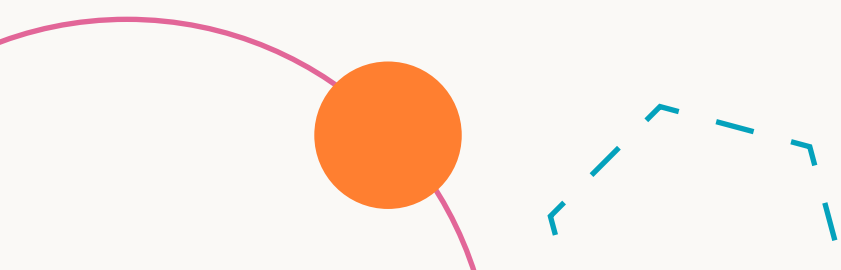
Poverty can deny parents/ carers' the ability to fulfil their children's rights and ensure that they are being met.

You can find out more about how parents can support children's rights here;- [UNCRC_Understanding_Childrens_Rights.pdf \(childreninwales.org.uk\)](https://www.childreninwales.org.uk/uncrc-understanding-childrens-rights.pdf)

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About the survey

Our survey sought to gain an insight into the experiences and observations of those working directly or indirectly with children, young people and their families. The survey ran for a period of 5 weeks (30 April – 7 June 2024) and was completed anonymously.

Respondents were asked to respond to poverty related questions across a number of areas and included a combination of multiple-choice and open questions, enabling them to share their views and experiences. This report is the 8th in the series, enabling us to track trends and developments annually across Wales.

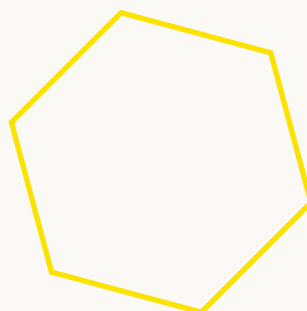
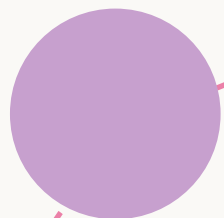
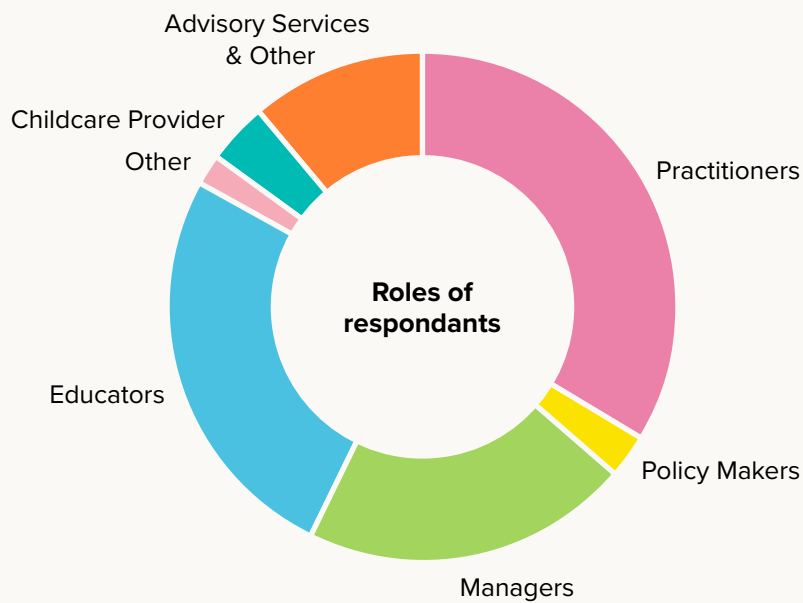


Who responded

Practitioners and professionals responded from 21 local authority areas across Wales. A total of 194 responses were received, with 82% of respondents working directly with children, young people and families.

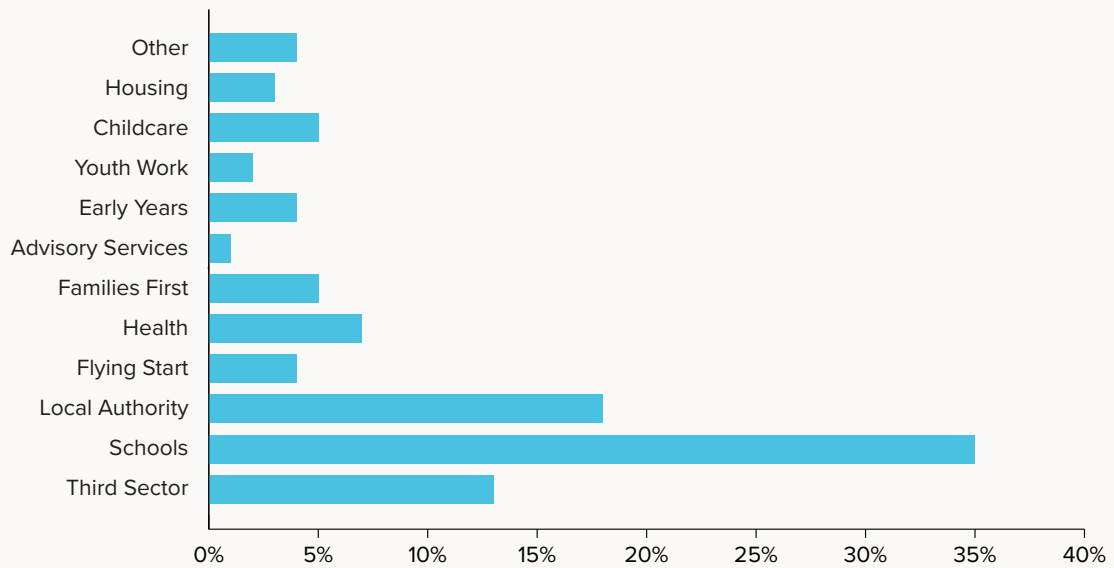
All respondents had a remit for children, young people and/or families. Those directly involved with children and families, work with a **minimum of 62,000 families** each year. This figure is a cautious, adjusted estimate and care has been taken to exclude the possibility of 'double counting' across organisations and local authority areas. The original, unadjusted minimum figure is 98,000 families.

The remaining 18% of respondents worked indirectly with children and families in areas such as policy development, managerial roles and academia.



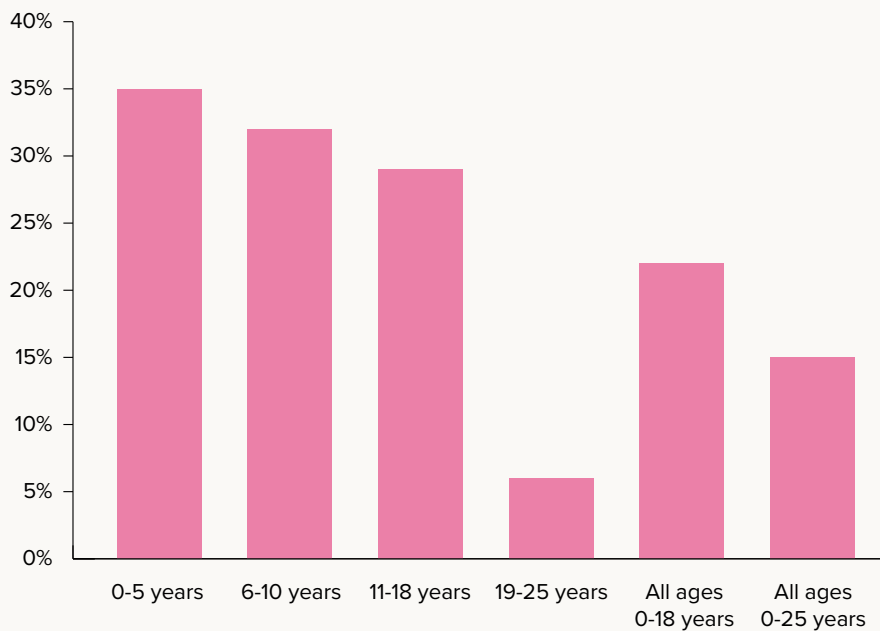
A wide range of sectors and services across Wales responded to the survey.

Responding Sectors



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





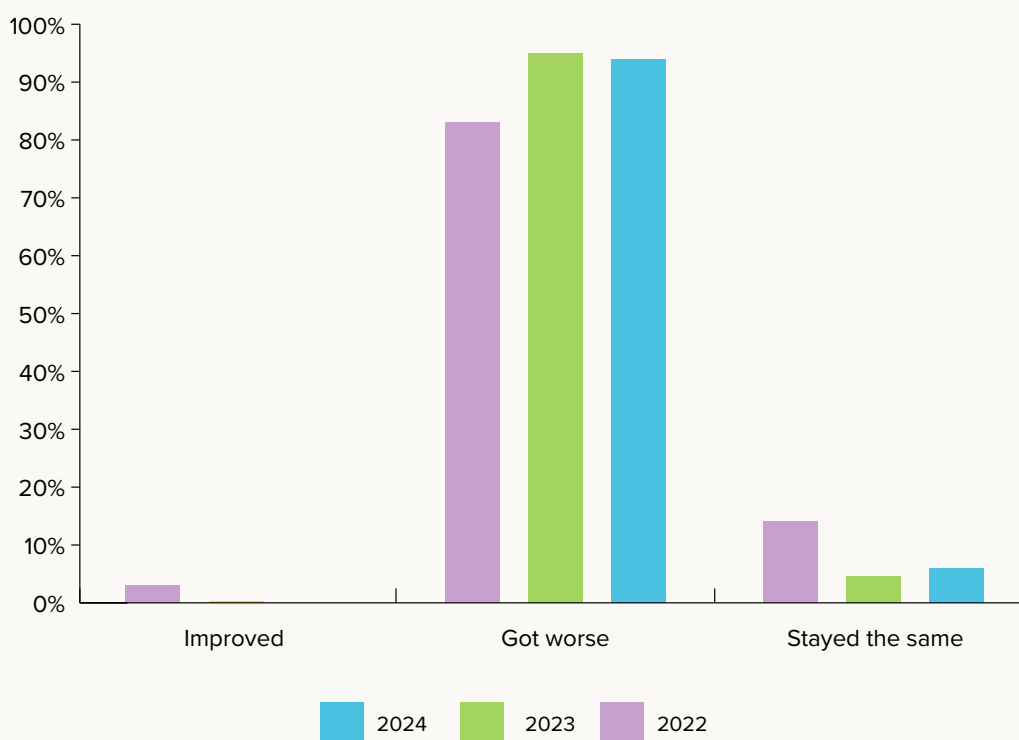
Findings

Overarching poverty issues: 3-year comparison (2022-2024)

“We are working with increasing numbers of children and young people who are homeless, vulnerably housed, utilising food banks,....disengaged from mainstream education and taking on caring responsibility for adults no longer able to work due to mental health issues”.

The questions asked in our surveys each year include both core questions (repeatedly annually) and new ones that help to further understand specific issues or emerging trends. Together these provide an overview of the poverty situation in Wales as observed and experienced by practitioners and professionals.

Has the situation changed in the last year?



The first of our core questions considers the overall situation in comparison to the previous year. When asked to comment on their answer, the majority focused on increasingly **poor mental health** of both children and adults; the **rising costs** of everyday living; **lack of food and poor nutrition**; and **loss of support due to cuts** in services.

“More children are coming in to school with severe health issues due to the lack of money the family is able to spend on feeding them properly. They come in [having] not eaten since lunch time the day before, in dirty clothes having not washed due to the costs of washing clothes and heating water.”

Those reporting that the situation had remained the same as last year, still described a bleak picture, again mainly focusing on the issues reported above.

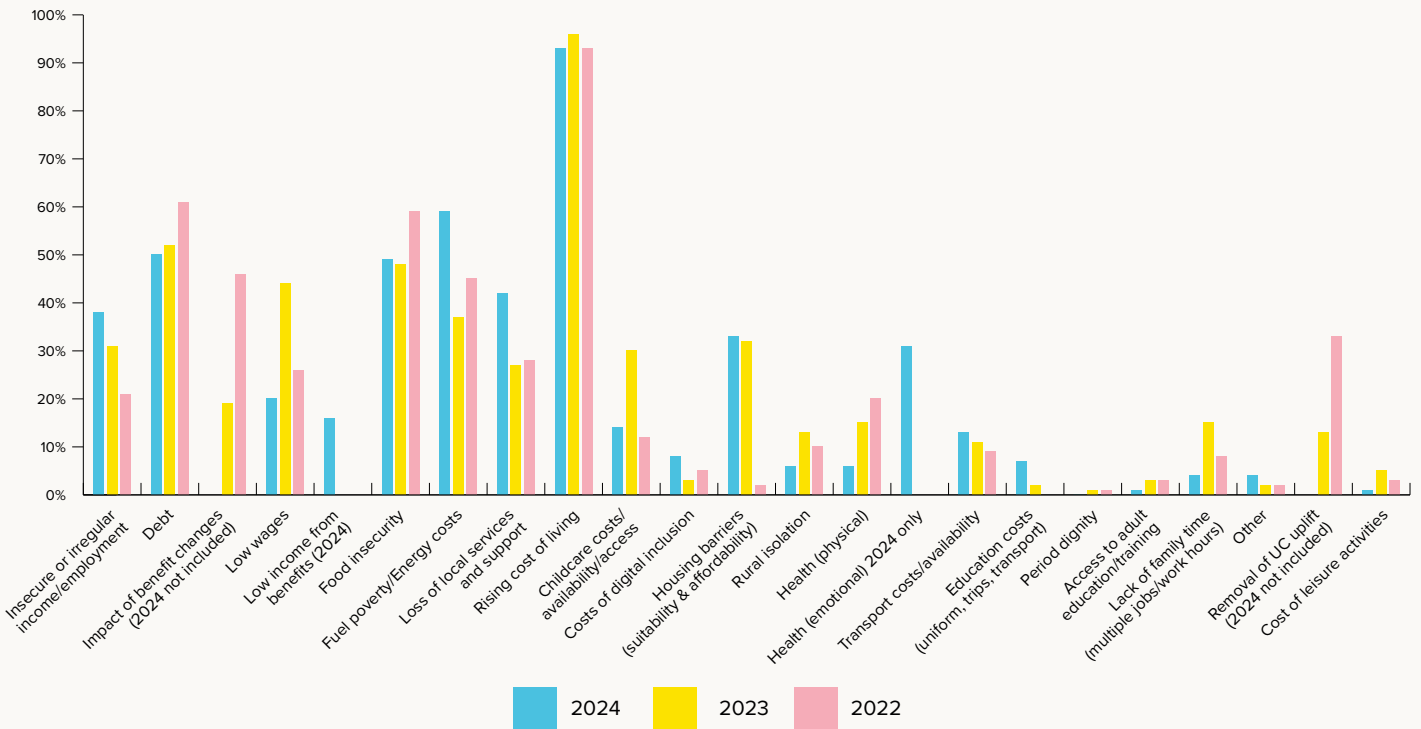
“Most families we encounter are still discussing their financial struggles and the worry is that it is getting worse and not better. Most still have no idea how they are going to manage in the future if the trajectory remains the same.”

In the 2nd of our core questions, respondents were presented with a wide range of poverty related issues (see chart below). 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.

“Families are trapped in a negative cycle of debt, poor housing and stress relating to very basic living needs; all of which contributes to a complete lack of control over their own life outcomes. We know that stress and poverty has a significant impact on children, their wellbeing and early childhood experiences and yet we become completely familiar with seeing this on a daily basis.”

To build upon the findings from our 2023 surveys, new issues have been introduced this year. Despite these changes, trends remain relatively similar over the past 3-year period. However, there are significant increases in ‘fuel/energy costs’ and ‘loss of support/services’ reported. These increases align with the comments provided by respondents.

Top 5 ranked poverty related issues - 3 year comparison

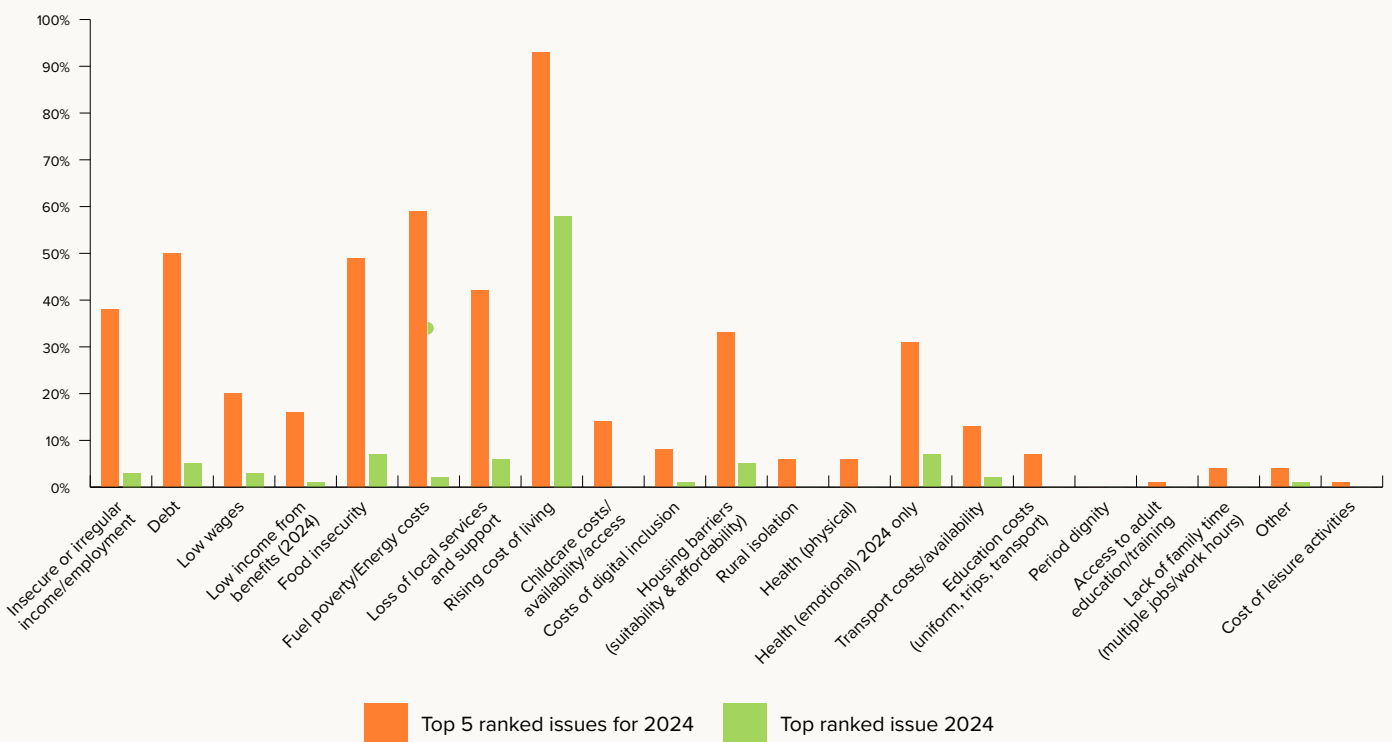


Overarching poverty issues: 2024

“The issue we are facing as practitioners is the support needed for these families is significant but also often without an end in sight. It has a huge impact on the emotional wellbeing and overall health of the family as a whole”.

The following section provides greater details of the overarching poverty related issues that were identified in this year’s findings. From the list given, respondents chose 5 issues, ranking these in the order of greatest impact on babies, children and young people and their families.

Top 5 identified poverty related issues



The **rising cost of living** was identified as a top 5 issue by 93% of respondents and chosen by 58% as the top issue (last year, these figures were 96% and 59% respectively).

“We are seeing first-hand the effects cost of living rises are having on children and families. We are noticing that a lot of young people are accessing drop in hungry and we see a more than 100% increase in demand for our hot healthy meal provision....We have also scrapped the 25p of the meal as many young people did not have the 25p.”

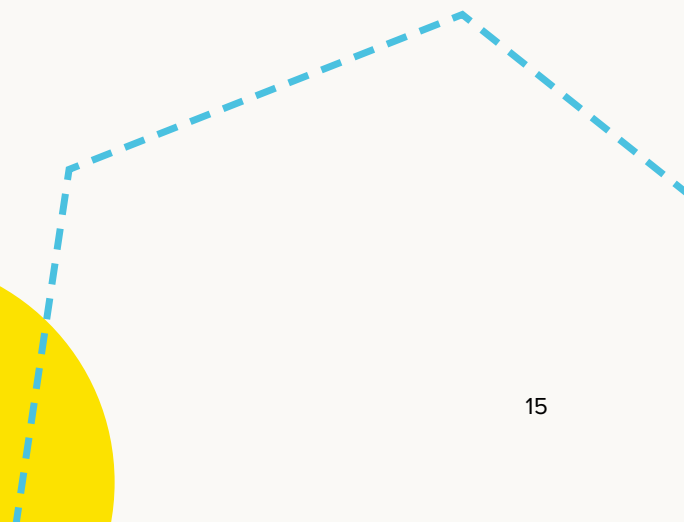
Respondents recognised that parents and carers are doing their best within the circumstances they face. Many are **going without food** in order to provide for their children; are facing **unrelenting financial pressures; significant debt**; and uncertainty for their family. The strains this places on parental mental health cannot be underestimated.

“Children regularly attend session hungry or parents [are] not eating. School feeding some parents a slice of toast at drop-off.”

All of this in turn, has a direct impact on babies, children and young people. For example, respondents repeatedly commented that children are hungry; unable to attend clinic appointments and school due to transport costs; are bullied because of their lack of school uniform; and are increasingly isolated from peer groups, opportunities for social interactions and services. Of particular concern for practitioners, is the number of children and young people **experiencing deteriorating mental health** who are at risk.

“Mental and physical health cannot be separated. The undoubted physical detriment of living in a household where there is not enough money for heating, food and clothing has a massive detrimental effect on mental health. The stigma and shame of always being the one who can’t afford [trips and clothes] and get teased for being poor, all load more strain on children.... on top of this, stressed parents with inevitable mental health issues in such circumstances [cannot] support the children and so the downward spiral continues. This is a broad brush sketch.....the true picture for individual children is so much more intense than this describes.”

Other common issues cited focused on the **lack of suitable, affordable social housing** and the loss of, or cuts to services. Respondents noted that temporary accommodation is all too frequently being used for long periods of time, some stating years. Families are unable to afford rents, and housing conditions were cited as poor, unsafe and unhealthy, particularly within the private rented sector. This was also true for young people leaving care.



“The rent for private properties is extortionate, upwards of £1000 per month for something of such a poor standard, often very cold and damp with inadequate heating such as electric heaters....The whole situation pushes families into debt.”

This year, there was a significant increase in comments around service provision, budget cuts, accessibility of services and waiting times. Practitioners within their own services were frustrated with the **budget cuts** that they were experiencing and the impact this was having on the support they were able to provide. They cited that **demand for services** was rapidly increasing, whilst **funding remained stagnant**, or in many cases reduced. This applied to a wide cross section of services and support provision and was directly impacting all age ranges of children and their parents. The most commonly stated areas of support needed included; CAMHS (Child & Adolescent Mental Health Services); Early intervention services; Advice Services; Community services; and School support staff, particularly for those with additional learning needs.

“Every single service and support available for families is stretched and offering limited services. As a result, when families are struggling, there is nowhere for them to turn or they have a long wait for support, or the support they receive is minimal. This can often mean that situations get worse. Problems could be sorted quickly if families got the support they need when they need it.”

Practitioners also cited the need for **more face-to-face support**, rather than remote support or ‘self-help’. With many struggling with the affordability and accessibility of transport, the need to return to delivering provision within communities, for example; baby clinics, was identified.

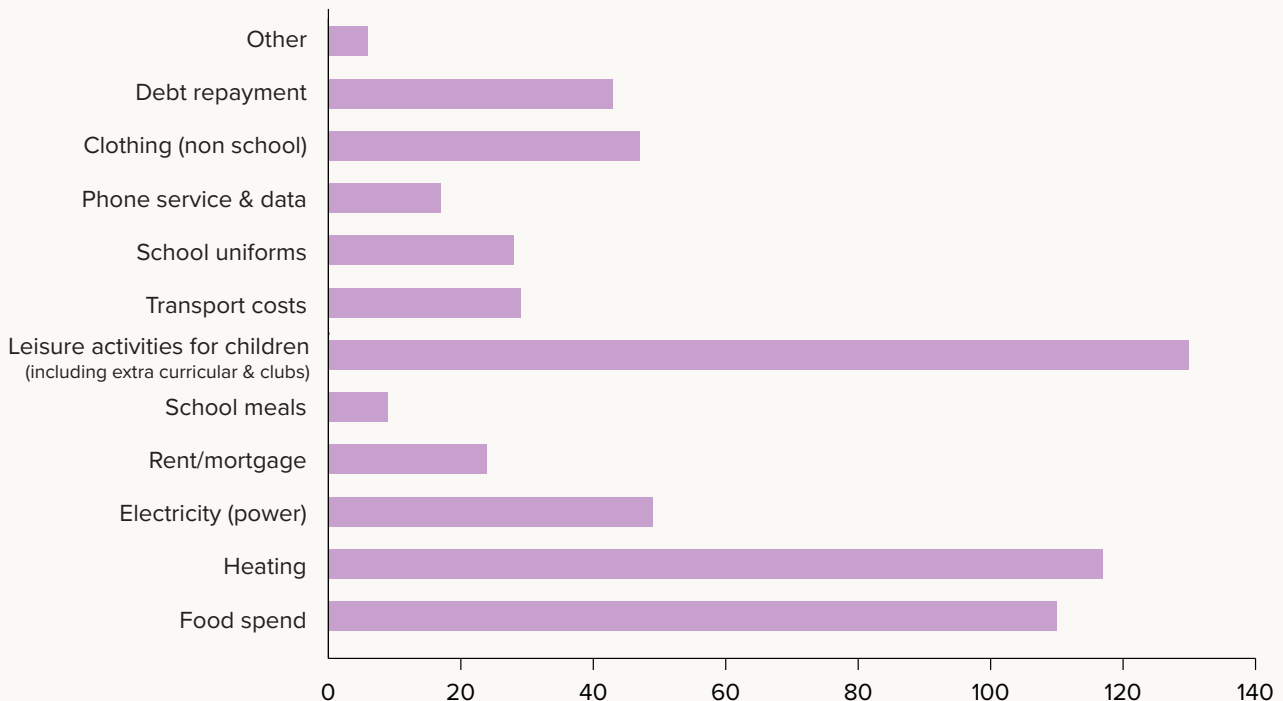


Budget spend

“Reducing leisure for children has an effect. This affects their social development as they do not have the opportunity to mix with peers as much. Affects physical development as many leisure activities have a physical element and children are missing out on this. Child health and fitness is noticeably decreased, as well as self confidence.”

Inevitably, the rising costs of living and low incomes means that families are having to make very difficult decisions on where their limited budgets are spent. To understand this further, respondents were asked which 3 areas families were currently reducing their spend.

Most common areas for budget/spend reduction



Echoing the findings from our 2023 survey, the greatest impact of spend reduction was on after school clubs and leisure activities for children, where parents were unable to afford the associated costs. Professionals expressed their concerns about reducing these activities for children and young people and the impact upon their social, emotional and physical health and wellbeing. **Social isolation** was cited as an issue for children and young people as they were unable to attend clubs or activities where they would have opportunities to socialise with their peers. In their survey, children and young people also expressed similar concerns.

“It is so challenging for families to try and prioritise what they spend their money on. Speaking to parents, many choose to not put the heating on due to the high costs, some have also said they are going without food to ensure their children eat. Parents have reported not being able to afford activities with the children, school trips etc.”

Professionals expressed concerns that **reducing spending** was impacting upon children and young people as their basic needs were not being met. They are seeing children who are reporting being hungry and parents stating that they are going without food to ensure their children are fed. Parents are also facing difficult choices between heating their homes and feeding their family. As such, the **conditions within homes have deteriorated**, with mould and damp increasingly present.

Some respite has become available through the **introduction of free school meals** in primary schools and practitioners noted that parents are voicing relief that their children get a hot meal whilst they are in school.

“We have had parents tell us that they can’t bathe their children as they can’t afford the gas/electric. Since the introduction of free school meal across primary age children, we haven’t had so many parents worrying about food.”

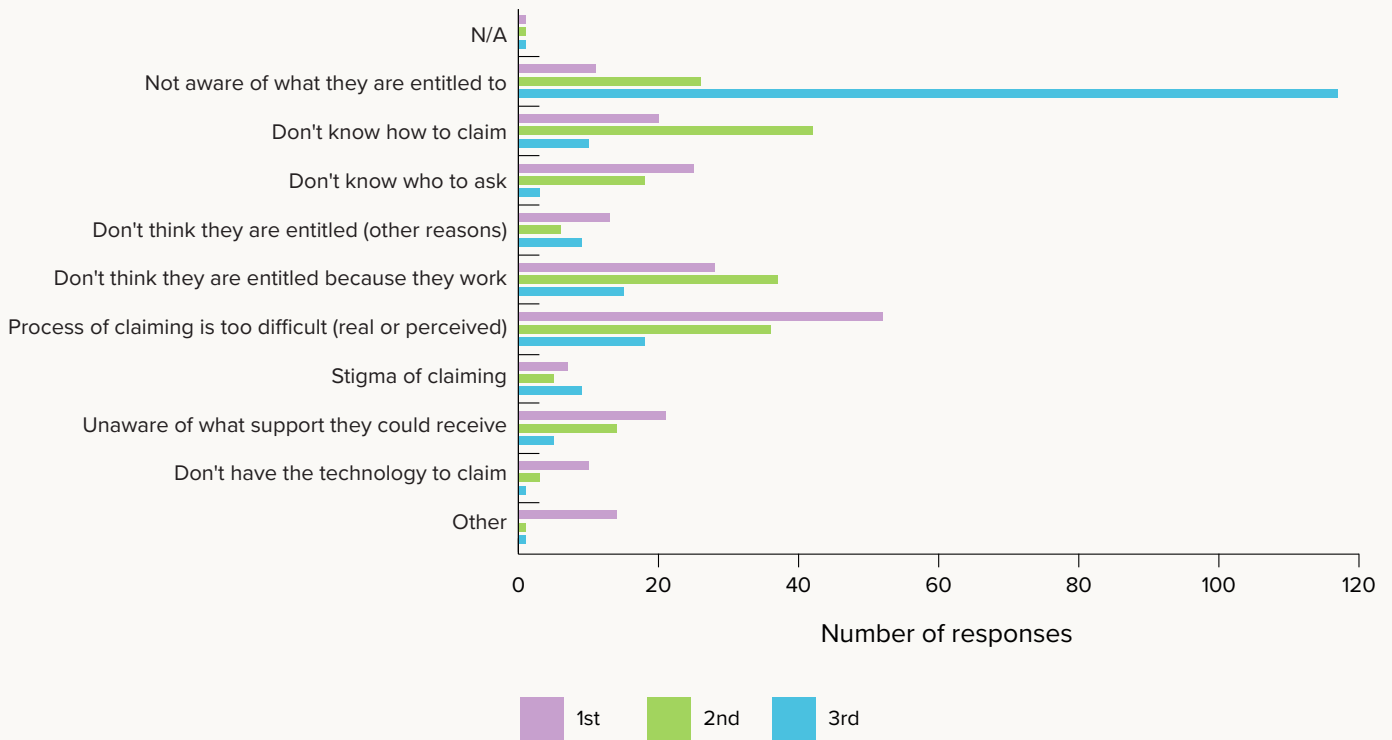
Debt repayments were identified as an area where some parents are reducing their spend. Many comments were made about the spiral of increased debt and arrears, and the impact this has. Concerns over mental and physical health were expressed by respondents, who noted the impact stress, anxiety, and unhealthy food choices were having on families. An increasing number of families were also reaching out for support around the cost of the school day, with more parents accessing help with uniforms and school trips, where support is available, including those provided by government and public bodies. Request for foodbank vouchers and referrals was also said to be increasing.

“Children are wearing clothing and shoes that are too small and worn. Parents and children are often ill prepared for the weather. We provide a lot of support with uniform, especially winter clothing and shoes. Many of our families do not undertake leisure activities, they rarely leave the estate that they live on.”

The **impact of ‘juggling’ budgets and reducing spend** in essential areas are clearly reflected in practitioners’ comments throughout the survey and they expressed deep concern of the consequences, both now and for the future.

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



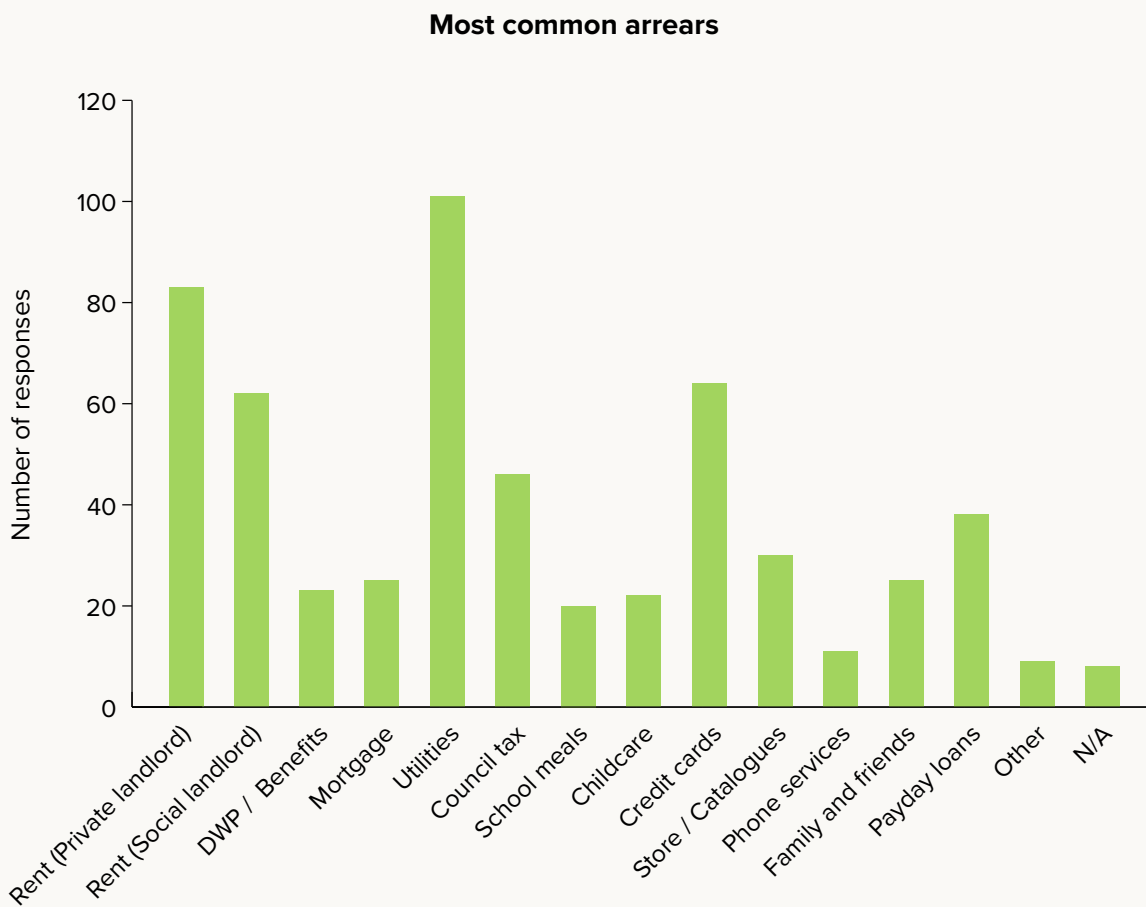
A reduction in support services and consequently capacity and reduced access, along with complex forms, *'fear of statutory services'* and previous experiences of being ineligible for support were common factors related by practitioners and professionals.



Debt

“Some children are refused food in school because of debts with the local authorities.”

Respondents again noted that debt, the impact of it and its subsequent outcomes, remains of particular concern. Given low incomes and high living and housing costs, practitioners noted that some families simply can't meet their basic essential needs without incurring debts on a daily basis.



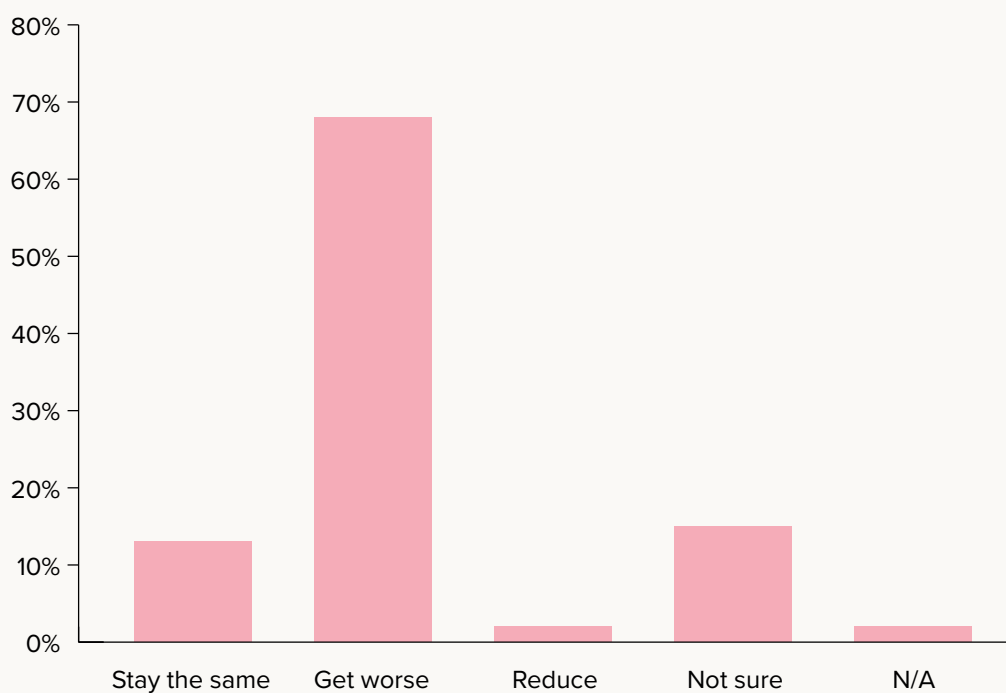
Debt was seen to be one of the most **significant factors in relation to increased stress**, worry and anxiety and the decline in parental mental health. Respondents noted a reduction of parental family engagement due to debt related stress and increased isolation of the whole family. They also cited the **emotional impact** this continued to have on children and young people. Many said children were highly aware of the financial situation and were worrying about their parents.

“We have an increase of families we support at crisis point and in debt and unable to meet children’s basic needs.”

Often children and young people were not asking for food because this caused further anxiety within the home and relationships became further strained. There were also comments relating to children being scared when debtors come to the house or worried about becoming homeless. Some young people were also said to be *'turning to risky behaviour'* in order to try to better the financial situation for their whole family

“Feeling effects of their parents’ mental health issues and stress exacerbated by worry of their debts. Going without new clothes and shoes. Being at risk of eviction.”

Will debt levels change for families over the next 12 months?



As in our previous years, debt was seen as a significant risk factor with parents having little or no choice but to **continue ‘sinking’ further into debt.**

The **cost of basic and necessary essentials far exceeds incomes.** In most circumstances, parents and carers are unable to increase their income. Reasons for this varied, but many focused on mental health; limited capacity as already working multiple jobs; transport and childcare. This was for both those in receipt of benefits and those in low-income employment.

“Unfortunately we have to suspend the child’s place at the setting until the debt is cleared. This could mean parents aren’t able to go to work as they to look after their child, then they are unable to pay the debt.”

‘In-work’ poverty was again said to be increasing. Respondents believed that the current overall poverty situation and its impact will continue to worsen over the next 12 months.

Barriers to accessing services

“Exhaustion – many people in poverty feel they are on a treadmill, so can lose motivation. Bureaucracy is a nightmare. It’s hard to get help from a real person, passed from pillar to post. People give up.”

It is known that many families living in poverty and on lower incomes do not access the support they need or are entitled to. This can be both for financial and emotional support. In this year’s survey, we wanted to explore this a little further. Practitioners and professionals were asked to share their experiences on the types of barriers, if any, that those living in poverty face. Many barriers were cited.

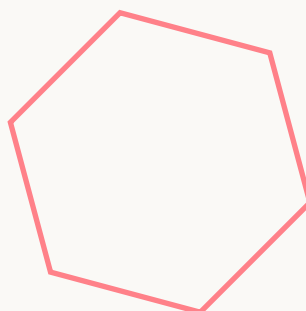
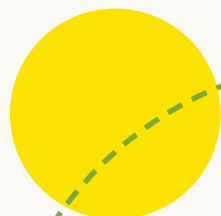
“There are a number of barriers, many people don’t know what support is out there or how to access it. A lot of services have extremely long waiting lists and people can be waiting years to access support. Many people feel there is a stigma around accessing services and this can prevent them from reaching out.”

Most commonly noted barriers were **lack of knowledge of services** and access to them, **funding cuts; depletion of staff and services; centralisation of support;** and reduced face to face contact. When parents are reaching out, they are often **‘turned away’** or can only access the services on a very limited basis, such as food banks (3 times in any 12 month period). Some services were only available on-line, for example, mental health and financial advice, and this was a definite barrier for a number of parents.

“There are also limits in place with ‘council’ services, for example how many times a family can access a food bank, DAF or energy vouchers, which create a barrier for families asking for help.”

Respondents noted that service budgets are so stretched, the **eligibility criteria** to access services are ever changing. This often results in children, young people and their parents without access to early intervention and in absolute crisis at the point of accessing the service. Practitioners also noted that this necessarily increases the provision needed for each individual or family, thereby reducing capacity to support others.

“We have a limited staff capacity and to accept a referral it has to fit certain criteria so that we can keep our waiting lists manageable.”



Inevitably, given the above comments, long waiting lists and times was regularly referred to across a wide breadth of service and support provision, including mental health for children and adults; housing provision; advice services; additional learning needs support and diagnosis; health services; and family support. There was concern that the true picture of the challenges are not reflected in the statistics.

“Stressed services, eg early intervention and preventative services are under pressure and very often the advice from managers is to submit a ‘multi-agency’ referral form with a view to social services assessment about concerns. This moves them from the books as a successful intervention, but leaves little room for much work to be done to help the family improve matters. It also leaves the families feeling betrayed. They asked for a little help and find themselves dumped into the sphere of statutory services which they feared.”

Many respondents referred to some families feeling ‘*hopeless*’ about accessing support and that it was ‘*pointless*’ trying to contact services as nothing would change. This was for both emotional and financial support, even when they were at risk.

Other barriers highlighted were a lack of local service and transport costs; **administrative processes, complex application forms and ‘too much’ repeated paperwork**. There were also many comments about **short-term support** programmes and projects. Whilst additional support was welcomed, they were often only funded for a very short time period. The ad hoc, sporadic nature of this meant that families were left without continuing support and left feeling hopeless and devalued. Some practitioners stated that families were then frequently reluctant to engage with other programmes, even if they were more extensive.

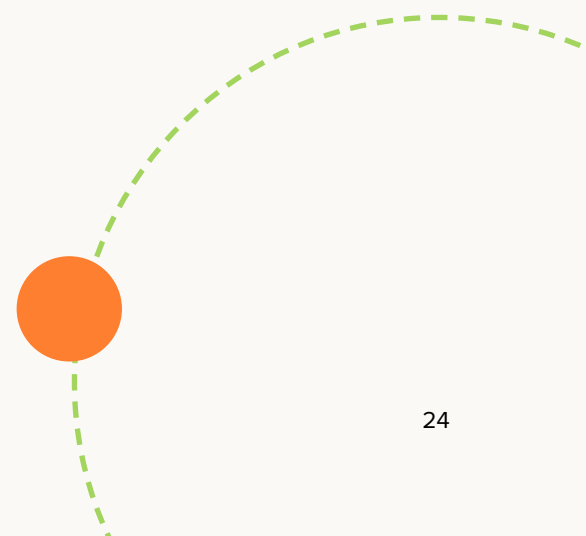
“It increases the stigma and places blame on families, when in most cases the issue is the cost of rent rather than an issue with the way in which families are able to manage.”



Comments also focused on the **stigma, worry and anxiety** that parents face when asking for support. Parents are concerned about how they are viewed by services, if their children will be 'removed' or if they will be referred to social services. Previously perceptions of being treated with little dignity and respect also had an impact on their willingness to engage with services or seek help.

To remove or reduce barriers, respondents advised:

- Increased service in the local community and in families' homes
- Better promotion of current services
- Increased funding periods for services. Annual funding does not allow for strategic service planning and provision
- Reduce bureaucracy. Create simpler processes that are easier to navigate and understand.
- No wrong door approach. Families should not be moved from pillar to post in order to access support.
- Increased early intervention support. This would be more effective, both financially for services and emotionally for babies, children and young people
- Transportation costs to be considered in service budgets
- Respect and discretion. Everyone accessing services should always be treated well, by caring and approachable providers who "*properly listen*" to the issues and needs of families. This should be across all sectors, including statutory.
- Increased face to face provision.
- A fully holistic approach to poverty. This should be at national and local levels and include how services are funded and how they should work collaboratively. Removing funding and practice silos is necessary.

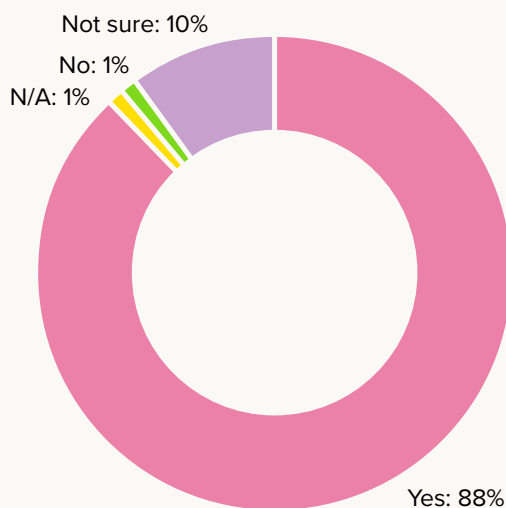


Education and poverty

“[Poverty] affects everything – concentration, ability to come to school ready to learn, difficulties with peer/friendship groups, self esteem, confidence, aspirations, not wanting to ask for anything extra related to school; eg trips, equipment”.

Practitioners and professionals believed that poverty negatively affects children and young people’s experience of school and learning, as well as their educational outcomes.

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



As with the findings from our 2023 poverty report, the issues most frequently cited were **hunger; bullying; stigmatisation; social isolation; school costs (uniform and transport); tiredness** and **inequity of opportunity**. Linking these together was the overarching theme of **“poverty leading to poor mental and emotional health”** and the impact this has on pupils ability and capacity to learn.

This year saw an increasing number of comments relating to ‘poor’ behaviour within the school environment. Respondents identified that behavioural issues were generally a result of the above poverty related factors and for many children and young people, this can be a **perpetual cycle** if they remain in poverty.

“Hungry children equals tired children, equals lack of concentration, equals lack of retention, equals lack of inclusion, leads to failing, leads to loss of confidence, leads to anger, leads to exclusion, leads to isolation. Poverty and social isolation is, in my experience, the root cause.”

Respondents also highlighted an **increase in absenteeism**, directly relating this to poverty. They noted that children are **“missing school due to the cost of getting there”**; that rather than receiving punishment for wearing incorrect uniform, they are not attending; and children and young people take days off to **“avoid the activity or event as parents can’t afford it”**.

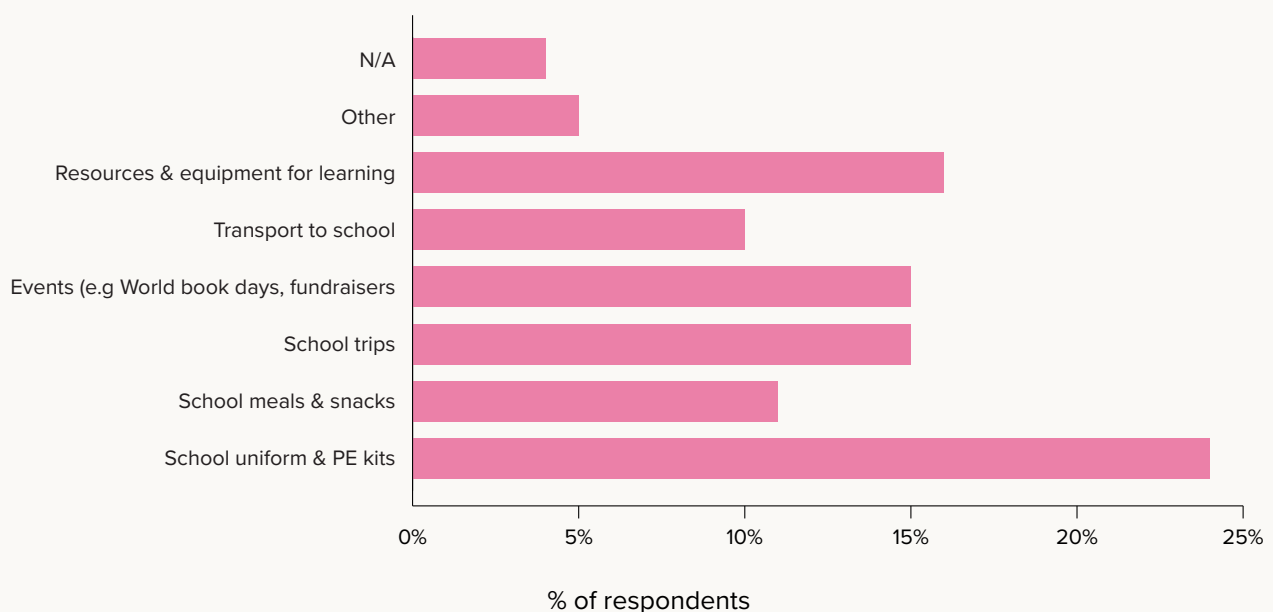
“School staff spend so much time dealing with young people’s mental health concerns and safeguarding, that it eats away at learning time.”

There were also concerns about the growing demands being placed on schools and their staff, particularly in relation to **mental health and challenging behaviour**. Some described their schools as being unable to meet the demand because of the **“amount of children that are currently in need”**.

“If they are hungry then they are not concentrating. If they cannot afford the correct uniform, they are not allowed in class so they are not learning properly.”

The survey asked **which aspect of education had the greatest financial impact on families**. Respondents were asked to choose one area from the list provided.

Which of the following has the biggest impact or is most difficult for families to manage?



As in previous years, **school uniform** was identified as being the most difficult cost to manage. As shown in the children and young people’s responses in this report, the impact of incorrect uniform usually resulted in **bullying from their peers** and various forms of punishment from the school, including **detention and/or isolation**. Children and young people felt this to be **unfair** as they were not in control of family budgets or spend. The section on school uniform looks at this in more detail.

Free school meals

“This has been a huge positive for families. They feel less pressure to provide healthy and nutritious packed lunches during the day. Children enjoy eating together and are prepared to learn.”

In September 2022, through the Co-operation Agreement, Welsh Government began a 3 year phased roll-out of free school meals to all children in primary schools across Wales.

Over 72% of respondents worked with families where at least one child was receiving this benefit, and their responses were **overwhelming positive** to this initiative. They report seeing a **significant, tangible difference** in both children and their parents, not just through nutritional value, but in helping to reduce the financial burden on parents’ mental health; better engagement from children; greater equity and socialisation during mealtimes and a reduction of poverty related stigma for the whole family.

“It has made a big difference in terms of anxiety. It has also ensure children are getting at least one good meal a day.”

Practitioners commented that parents are using this **financial saving** to buy other essentials and in many cases it appears to support better attendance at school as parents know that their children will be fed.

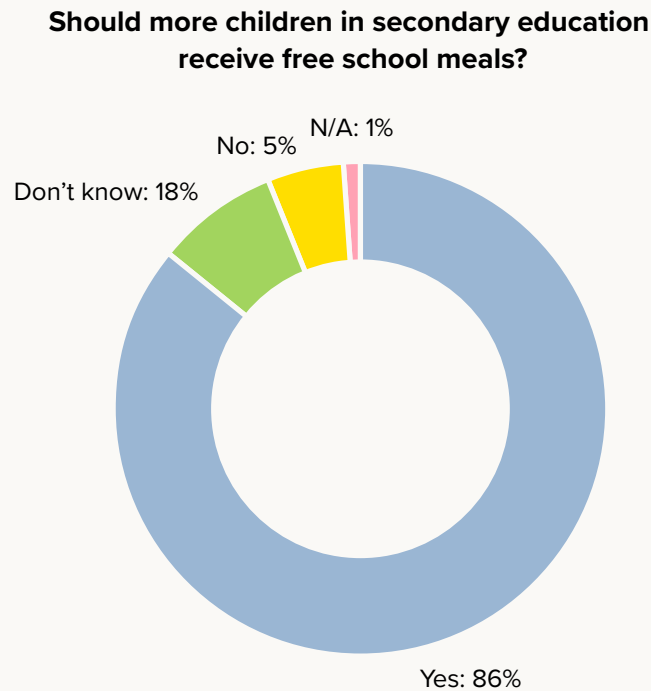
Whilst universal free school meals within primary school is a much needed and welcomed initiative, it was noted that families are still having to pay school meal debts incurred prior to this programme starting.

An issue raised by respondents was that some families are now **missing out on other benefits, grants and support**. Prior to the programme, families in low income needed to register in order to receive free school meals. If eligible, this then enabled them to access other means of support and assistance, such as the Schools Essential Grant (SEG). It was noted that parents remain confused about whether or not, and indeed how, to apply for other financial support.

“Due to the FSM being rolled out to all, the families that are in need are not clear that they need to apply for other supportive funds to assist with uniforms etc. It has caused confusion for many.”

Whilst many schools are regularly promoting the continued need for applications, others are not and some families have therefore seen a reduction in the amount of financial support they are receiving.

The final question on free school meal provision asked if more children in secondary education should receive them. The majority (86%) of respondents said 'yes' with just 5% saying 'no'.



“A child doesn’t stop being in poverty when they go to secondary school. They need energy to learn and become the best they can be.”

There was very strong opinion around the need for **free school meals in secondary schools**. Those who stated yes described secondary school meals as being expensive and reported that costs were continuing to rise. They also noted that the current eligibility threshold was too low and that there are ever greater numbers who are in need, but remain ineligible. This was also commented on by those who thought universal free school meals should not be provided.

“Why is age a factor in the argument of poverty?”

In their own survey findings, children and young people gave identical comments and also agreed with practitioners that a **universal offer** would remove **stigma, anxiety and worry**. When asked what they would do if they were First Minister, they included the provision of free school meals for all children and young people as a key priority.

“All school meals should be funded without children having to be finger printed to get a school meal or have a card payment system. I find it abhorrent that a child whose parents has either forgotten or cannot afford to top up a card, is refused food in the school canteen. All school children should have a healthy meal irrespective of their situation.”

A few comments highlighted the need for children who are on a reduced timetable to be considered, either under the current system, or for any future provision. It was reported that those on a **reduced timetable often went without food** at school, even if they were eligible for free school meals.

“Teens are already experiencing stigma and struggling to fit in, which can be so isolating and detrimental. Free school meals for everyone will mean children are not further isolated from others..”

Of the 5% stating that free school meals should not be universal for all in secondary schools, the majority felt that with funding cuts and tight budgets within local authorities, families who can afford to pay for free school meals, should.

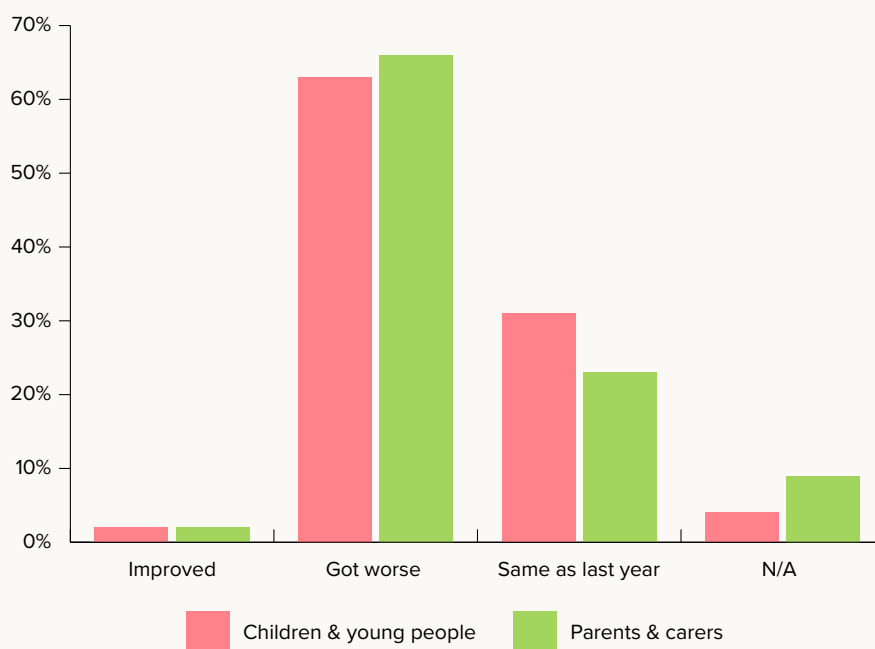


Mental and emotional health

“The persistent challenges associated with poverty...can contribute to feelings of hopelessness, helplessness and depression.”

The impact poverty has on mental and emotional health cannot be underestimated. For so many living with these circumstances, stress, anxiety and worry are a constant, inevitably affecting the whole family. Without exception, all respondents noted that **poverty has an enormous impact** on the mental health of babies, children, young people and their parents. It was recognised that even the youngest babies were affected, as parents are increasingly unable to emotionally and mentally engage with, or fully meet the developmental and emotional needs of their children.

Changes in emotional health over the last 12 months



Throughout all of the findings, regardless of the questions, the issue of **poor mental health has dominated**, with respondents directly relating this to poverty. They noted the impact in all areas of children’s lives, from engagement with nursery, through to school and within family and peer relationships.

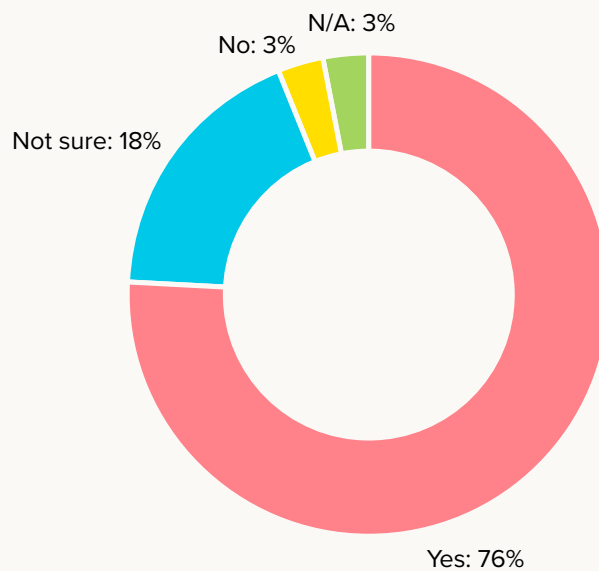
“Huge [impact] as despite families trying to hide their issues from their children, children know what is going on and this means that they are insecure and this negatively impacts on their wellbeing on a daily basis.”

A significant number of comments included marked differences this year in relation to poor behaviour, fractured family and peer relationships, isolation and self-risk. Practitioners described this as a trajectory that is continuing to spiral.

In their survey, children and young people related their own stress and anxiety, along with concerns about their parents. Some felt angry, upset and ashamed, sometimes blaming parents for their situation, but equally worried about their mental health because of the stress.

These findings have been consistent over the last few years and therefore in our 2024 survey, we asked practitioners and professionals about the impact of poverty on family relationships.

Do poverty related factors negatively impact relationships between parents/carers and their babies, children and young people?



Practitioners reported that they are seeing **an increase in family conflict** at home due to stress and anxiety caused by poverty, with children and young people feeling angry and resentful towards their parents and carers, with an increasing number of parents who are emotionally unavailable.

“When the parents are stressed, they are less likely to manage challenging situations. This has an impact on how they parent, the relationship becomes un-attuned and breakdown in relationships occur.”

They also noted that some parents are finding it harder to bond with babies because of their declining mental health. Again, respondents were very clear that **parents were trying their utmost** to be supportive and engage with their children, but that this was all too often difficult in the circumstances and regularly led to parents feeling even more guilty which had a negative impact on children.

“More children are coming to school with severe digestive issues caused by malnutrition and more and more are on medication for anxiety and depression.”

There were significant numbers citing the **urgent need for improved access to early intervention support**, alongside more timely and increased mental health support for all members of the family. Many concerns were raised that the **current CAMHS provision was inadequate** to meet the demand and that this demand, would inevitably increase at pace. The situation was described as **‘chronic’**.

“I see pupils every day who have worries at home. As they approach exams, I see behaviour which directly corresponds with the stress they feel at not having the ability, environment or resources to do well. Anxiety in children has increased, aggression in pupils is increasing, self esteem is low.”

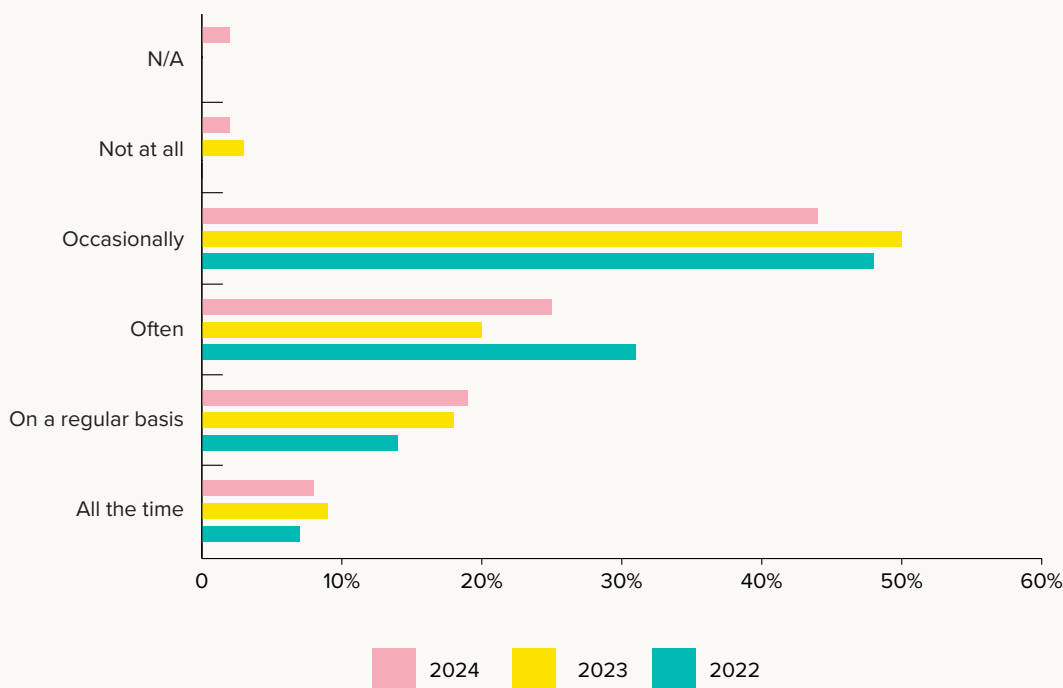
Poor mental health was heavily interlinked with poverty. Practitioners stated that routes out of poverty were usually ‘blocked’ by poor mental health. For example, parents were often unable to work, engage with or seek support because of their mental health; children and young people regularly had poor attendance at school, because of the stress of school costs and bullying, frequently leading to low educational attainment.



Poverty and safeguarding

“Children presenting as unkempt, saying that there is no food in their house, parents have poor mental health, children saying that they share beds or sleep on inappropriate furniture (mats, chairs etc), housing in disrepair (mould, damp) and never get taken out anywhere.”

Do poverty related factors give you safeguarding concerns?



By far the most common area of concern was the lack of money to be able to **afford essentials**, such as food, heating, clothing, sanitary products and transport. There were concerns that **children’s basic needs were not being met** and that they are going without food, appropriate clothing and adequate conditions at home. This leads to concerns over neglect as children appear undernourished and in clothing that is often dirty or too small.

“Children need food, heat, a stable environment, appropriate clothes and hygiene products. If these needs are not being met, it’s concerning. It’s definitely not the families’ fault and more support is needed.”

Professionals felt that poverty and concerns about finances and the ability to afford essentials impacted upon parental mental health, which in turn impacts upon children's wellbeing.

“That children from families struggling with debt are living with parents who are stressed. Children are disadvantaged from the start and don't have full access to all the positive experiences of other children. This can impact on their mental health and cause behavioural problems.”

Housing was highlighted as an area of concern for babies, children, young people and their families living in poverty. The concerns went beyond the living conditions within the home, where there was not enough money to buy basics such as beds and mattresses, with homes being unkempt because of a lack of money to buy essential cleaning products. Professionals felt that housing issues, such as **high rent, poor and unsafe housing standards**, insecure tenures and rent/mortgage arrears negatively impacted families living in poverty.

“Have to deprioritise basic essentials like food and clothes and this being long term in response to the rental costs, rather than an acute, short term issue relating to employment or lack of benefits.”

Some professionals mentioned the **vulnerability of children and young people** living in poverty and their susceptibility to partake in risk taking behaviour, leaving them open to exploitation. They also cited that the issues that arise through poverty, and the struggles that parents face, can lead to a breakdown in family relationships and raise tensions within households.

“Increased family pressures due to increasing costs results in more potential friction within the family home and increased risk of domestic violence.”



Mitigating the impact of poverty: What do practitioners need?

“More opportunities to hear what families want from services, what they need help with. We would also like to be able to evidence that their opinions are listened to at the highest government levels and are part of the change.”

Through our surveys over the years, it is clearly evident that practitioners and professionals want to do more to address the impact of poverty and provide better support and understanding to babies, children, young people and their families they work for. They understand that they have a vital role to play but are unsure what more they can do.

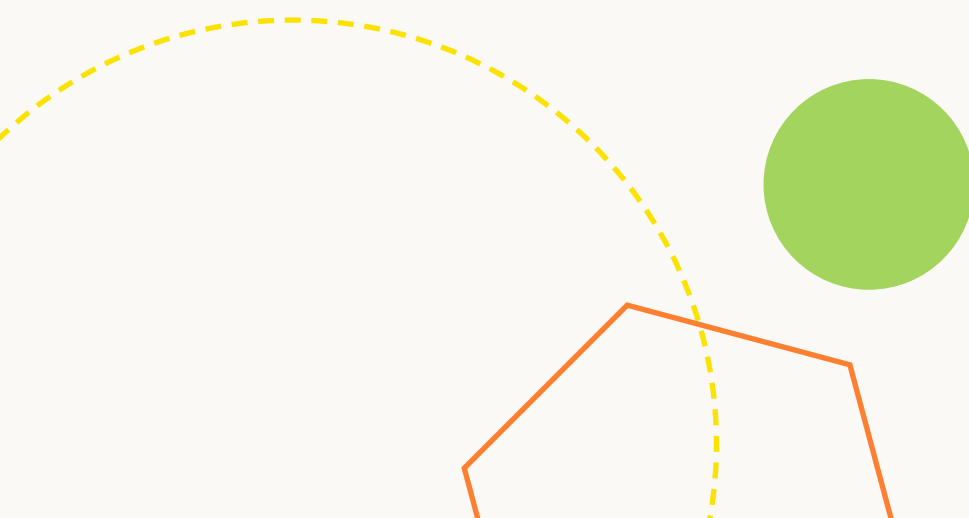
The survey this year asked them specifically what information, knowledge, skills or training would help them to further their understanding and strengthen the support they provide to families to help mitigate the impact of poverty as part of their roles.

“Many courses are about what to look for and how to report issues, but don’t spend much time on what we can do to help.”

The overwhelming majority of respondents, regardless of their role, wanted to know **how to approach poverty related issues** with children and parents, **how to listen to them and engage** with them in a supportive way. Poverty conversations felt *‘off limits’* for some, but there was recognition that in order to support a family’s needs, these were necessary.

“As Family Engagement Officer, there is no training. Training around how to engage with families from a variety of backgrounds would be good.”

Whilst most cited the need for training, others commented on the need for further information relating to service provision. They would specifically like both **national and local information** about where to signpost to and what is available to support families and importantly, how this can be accessed. Many comments were made around overarching welfare benefits knowledge as well as the need for detailed training on this topic.



Respondents stated there was a **need for guidance and information directly from Welsh Government**. In particular, the need for Welsh Government to provide guidance in support of their Child Poverty Strategy (2024), around what works and how to implement it. These comments referred not just to national or local programmes, but to a wide variety of roles and practice. The recent establishment of a ‘Community of Practice’ approach to better connect services is a positive step towards helping connect services and become better aware of existing provision and where gaps exist.

Important to a number of respondents was the need to evidence that **children, young people and parents are being listened to at the highest level**, whether this is in national policy and practice, or at a more local level. It was reported that families often ‘feed-in’ to services and policies, but rarely are outcomes ‘fed-back’ to them. Lived experiences need to be heard, respected and used to inform outcomes.

It is worth noting that those responding to this survey also requested feedback directly from Welsh Government. They too expressed the need to know that their experiences have been heard at the highest level and what, if any impact this has had.

Engagement should be two-way and always including feedback to those who took part.

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Children in Wales would like to thank everyone who took part in this survey. We appreciate the time you have taken to complete it, but more than that, your considered and thoughtful responses.

Once again, through the responses provided in this year’s 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 they work with. Thank you.