

Research with children on their experiences of poverty to inform the Child Poverty Strategy

July 2025

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Introduction

The Office of the Children's Commissioner for England was commissioned by the Child Poverty Unit to conduct a piece of research exploring children's experiences of living in poverty, for the purpose of informing the government's upcoming Child Poverty Strategy.

The aims of this project were:

- To ensure the Child Poverty Taskforce hears the experiences and insights of children growing up in poverty.
- To demonstrate the impact of poverty on children and highlight how those impacts can be alleviated.
- To ensure recommendations made by the Taskforce were directly informed by children's views, voices and experiences

These slides summarise the views of the 128 children and young people in England who we spoke between January and March 2025. These slides should be viewed alongside the office's report 'Growing up in a low-income family – children's experiences'.

Note: We use the term 'poverty' for ease of communication. Whilst participants were selected based on their experiences of growing up in low-income households (see [methodology](#)), children rarely made explicit references to poverty. Instead, they talked about the material items they lack and how their lives could be improved, the activities and experiences they wish they could do, or how they *feel* about the social and emotional burden of their family's circumstances. Whilst some children were happy to discuss their personal experiences, others preferred to talk about these topics in the third-person – referring to, for example, 'people that might not be as well off', instead of themselves.

Executive Summary

RQ1: What is it like to be a child living in poverty? [1/2]

- Children and young people spoke to us about the **social and emotional impact** of living in poverty, including feelings of shame and stigma, missing out on social experiences and issues such as bullying, particularly due to clothing.
- There is evidence of the **worries and awareness** that children as young as 8 have about their family's financial struggles and the focus they have on saving for essentials and the future. Children and young people described the **adult-like roles and responsibilities** they take on, such as part-time work to help supplement their household's income, acting as emotional support for their parents, and household chores, particularly amongst young carers.
- There was evidence of children and young people accepting substandard, dangerous living conditions (such as rats, mould, and collapsing ceilings) as normal, or having **low expectations** of services and amenities.
- Children and young people spoke about their **aspirations** for the future and there was evidence of how living in poverty was shaping and limiting these ambitions.
- Children and young people recognised the importance of school for their future but discussed how their home life, including digital exclusion, had an **impact on their education**, with some withdrawing from school completely, particularly where there was a lack of understanding as to the root causes of their behaviour.

RQ1: What is it like to be a child living in poverty? [2/2]

- A recurrent theme across the sessions has been **feeling unsafe in the community**, due to issues including anti-social behaviour, knife crime and gang violence. This has an impact on children and young people's ability to take part in activities, such as attending clubs and playing outside. Children and young people discussed the heightened risk of child criminal exploitation if you are from a lower income family.
- Alongside this, there is evidence of the **importance of community** acting as a support and a buffer against the adverse effects of poverty and offering children opportunities to enjoy childhood.
- Data from [The Big Ambition Survey](#) further reflects these findings. Overall, children from lower-income backgrounds were less likely to;
 - Spend quality time with their family
 - Feel safe and protected in their local area, and have access to local, fun activities
 - Have access to good healthcare and a healthy diet
 - Enjoy school or have supportive teachers
 - Indicate an understanding of employment opportunities, or money and life skills

RQ2: What essential costs affect children experiencing poverty the most? How does it impact the way the children and their families are living? [1/2]

- An increase in the **cost of living** has meant that children and young people and their families are worrying more about money and are having to make choices about which essentials they can afford.
- **Housing** was cited as one of the key things that children and young people and their families would spend more money on if they had it. Not being able to afford alternative options meant that many are living in **over-crowded, poor-quality and poorly-furnished accommodation**, with issues including mould, a lack of privacy and a lack of hot water for bathing.
- Children and young people are aware of their families' struggles to pay for **food** and bills, particularly **energy bills**. They spoke about living in cold homes, relying on food banks and food boxes and being unable to afford healthy food.

RQ2: What essential costs affect children experiencing poverty the most? How does it impact the way the children and their families are living? [2/2]

- There was evidence that the increasing **cost of bus travel** (outside of London, where it is free) makes getting to school and to activities difficult for children and young people.
- Children and young people spoke about how their inability to pay for the additional **costs of the school day**, such as uniform, school supplies, trips and non-uniform days, puts them at a disadvantage to their peers.
- Participants also discussed how they are often excluded from **activities and clubs** because of the cost of attendance and equipment.

RQ3: How do children with experience of poverty think that services can be improved to reduce its impact on their lives? [1/3]

- Children and young people living in **social housing** spoke about their interactions with councils and housing associations, in particular there was a sense that their situations were not taken seriously, including when repairs were required. A lack of housing stability was a worry and children and young people with experience of **temporary accommodation** discussed its unsuitability, such as a lack of cooking facilities and space, and distance from support networks.
- **Food banks** and food parcels provide a vital role, but there was evidence of the limitations in the amount and quality of food received. While some children spoke favourably about **free school meals**, for many there were or had been issues with how the system operated, such as portion size, eligibility and stigma in how meals were served. Young people explained how free school meals alone are not sufficient to sustain students throughout the day, and experiences vary depending on what additional free food schools provide.
- **Schools** are a locus of practical and financial support for many of the young people we spoke to, with often little reported support coming from elsewhere, however the level and effectiveness of this support varies. Emotional support and understanding from staff is a key factor in ensuring students continue to attend school. Children and young people with **additional needs including learning needs** spoke about the inconsistencies in the support that was provided by schools, and the difference that properly funded support can make.

RQ3: How do children with experience of poverty think that services can be improved to reduce its impact on their lives? [2/3]

- Young people spoke about the difficulty of, and lack of support in, finding **employment**, particularly with fewer social connections and contacts. They also highlighted the impact of the level of the minimum wage for under 18s.
- Children and young people would like **more opportunities for fun** - more activities, more outside spaces, and better upkeep of the ones that are there. They spoke about the loss of community services due to funding cuts, particularly community centres and clubs, how distance is often a barrier to participation and how better advertising of opportunities is needed.
- The quality, safety and reliability of **travel**, particularly buses, was a key concern for the children and young people we spoke to. Students highlighted the difference in experience between those whose schools ran buses and those who had to use public transport, including cost and safety. The reliability and availability of transport was particularly an issue for young people in rural areas, where it had an impact on their ability to access various services.
- The children and young people we spoke to called for more money for families through the **social security** system, and shared experiences of difficulties their families have faced in accessing benefits and the stigma associated with it.

RQ3: How do children with experience of poverty think that services can be improved to reduce its impact on their lives? [3/3]

- Discussions around **health** focused on mental health provision, particularly waiting times and quality of care. Children and young people think more could be done to prevent physical health issues and improve the NHS, including better outreach and a recognition of the barriers service users on lower incomes face.
- Young people with experience of **social care** highlighted limitations in the support they received.
- There was evidence that more streetlights and a greater police presence would help address children and young people's concerns around **safety**. Some young people would be confident to go to the **police**, whereas others are unsure of how they would be treated if they did or have previously had negative experiences.

RQ3: What do children and young people think should be done?

- Improve the service provided by council and housing associations, particularly increasing responsiveness to requests for repairs.
- Address the unsuitability and poor quality of temporary accommodation – ensure adequate space, access to cooking facilities, and proximity to school and support networks.
- Improve the choice, availability, and quality of free food provision, such as food banks and food parcels. Ensure that children on Free School Meals are given sufficient money or food for a whole day, and that the system is not stigmatising.
- Foster understanding and support for children with challenging home lives among professionals, particularly in schools.

- Provide effective practical and financial support for students in all schools, not just some.
- Improve job opportunities and career guidance for children and young people.
- Increase levels of social security benefits.
- Create more opportunities for fun – such as clubs and activities - particularly for older teens. Improve the quality, upkeep, and sustained availability of public spaces, such as parks and community centres.
- Increase the quality of public transport and reduce the costs for children and young people, particularly in rural areas.
- Improve waiting times for, and the quality of, mental health services children and young people, such as providing support whilst waiting for interventions.
- Implement community safety strategies, such as more street lighting, Neighbourhood Watches, and improving resident-police relationships.

RQ4: How do the answers to these questions vary for different groups of children?

- Speaking to children and young people from diverse groups and locations in England has highlighted the **variability** in their experiences, often due to a "post-code lottery", including their access to support and services.
- For some groups of children and young people, the impact of poverty may be amplified by other **barriers and vulnerabilities** and vice versa, for example, those with additional learning needs not being able to afford equipment that would benefit them.
- There were differences in experience depending on children's characteristics. For example, **age group** – older children were more likely to be aware of their family's income and feel the impacts more keenly; **gender** – girls were slightly more likely to be taking on emotional burdens of their family's financial situation; and **ethnicity** – children spoke about differing cultural expectations, and discriminatory interactions with services based on their ethnicity.
- Whether the children and young people lived in an **urban or rural area** was particularly significant, with children in rural locations speaking about lack of local services and opportunities, and the barrier of affordable transport, and children in larger towns and cities were often most concerned about their personal safety in the local area.
- Children and young people that reported positive experiences often received **support from a single organisation or trusted adult**, who went above and beyond to remove barriers. Not all children have access to this support.

Methodology



Background: Previous research from the Children's Commissioner for England

- The Children's Commissioner for England has a statutory role to advise ministers on how to promote and protect children's rights. Enabled by unique data gathering powers as set out in the Children Act 2004, the office of the Children's Commissioner (CCo) routinely conducts and publishes research across seven key pillars, derived from children's priorities (as collected in landmark survey [The Big Ask](#) in 2021), and spanning the breadth of their experiences.
- The pillars are:
 - Better World
 - Community (Online and offline)
 - Children's Social Care
 - Education
 - Family
 - Health
 - Jobs and Skills
- The impact of poverty on children's lives is a theme that emerges across all pillars and has been detailed in several previous publications by the office.

Supplementary findings and references from reports previously published by the Children's Commissioner for England are presented in blue boxes throughout these slides.

All reports are available on the CCo website
[Resources Archive | Children's Commissioner for England](#)

Literature providing a background evidence base for the research

Source	Methodology	Findings
Bidmead, E., El Zerbi, C., Cheetham, M., & Frost, S. (2023). A rapid review of children and young people's views of poverty and welfare in the context of Universal Credit.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Narrative synthesis of 16 UK studies (published 2009-2022, with CYP aged 5-21-years)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Low-income CYP report bullying and social exclusion due to poverty. Interventions such as Free School Meals (FSMs) can be embarrassing or stigmatising.Low-income families struggle to cover the financial costs of school attendance, including paying for uniform, learning materials, and extra-curricular activities.Low-income CYP report experiencing poor housing conditions and degraded, unsafe neighbourhoods.Poverty can impact on CYP's physical and mental health.
Wagner, F., Bailey, N., Hill, M., Hamilton, D. and King, C. (2007). Serving children: the impact of poverty on children's experiences of services.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Three case study areas in Scotland. 49 CYP aged 10-14-years took part in initial focus groups and 46 in subsequent individual interviews.Relative affluence was determined primarily on the basis of free school meal (FSM) uptake	<ul style="list-style-type: none">CYP report that benefits of services include; providing a place to go for personal space and time, supporting and extending social networks, accessing opportunities beyond the local area, gaining help and support, and fostering learning and development.When asked to consider the quality of available services, CYP discussed themes of accessibility and affordability. Positive features of health services included proximity, responsiveness, collaboration, a welcoming and clean environment, and those which are free at point of access. Negative features included long waiting times, lack of specific provision for young people, and lack of local provision.

Literature providing a background evidence base for the research

Source	Methodology	Findings
Ridge. T. (2011). The Everyday Costs of Poverty in Childhood: A review of Qualitative Research Exploring the Lives and Experiences of Low-Income Children in the UK.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Research review which draws on the critical summary of qualitative UK evidence (with low-income children and parents between 1998 and 2008)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Poverty can act as a social barrier for children. Low-income CYP experience anxiety and unhappiness in relation to their friendships due to restricted participation in social activities.Negotiating poverty can create an additional burden for Young Carers who may come from families in receipt of long-term benefits due to sickness or disability.Some low-income CYP support their families by taking on domestic responsibilities or contributing to family income through employment.Some low-income CYP report a lack of essential everyday items, such as food or bedding.Poor housing experienced by low-income CYP can negatively affect their physical health, mental wellbeing, and social lives.Public spaces could compensate for restricted space in many low-income homes. However, low-income CYP report neighbourhoods to be unsafe and unwelcoming.Low-income CYP report a lack of accessible leisure opportunities and affordable public transport, particularly for those in rural areas.Being unable to afford expected school items, such as school uniform, can lead to conflict between low-income CYP and school staff. Some low-income CYP report discriminatory teacher attitudes and poor student-teacher relationships.

Methodology: Qualitative data

- *Sampling and recruitment:*
 - The Children's Commissioner's office spoke with 128 children and young people between January and March 2025.
 - Participants were aged between 6- and 18-years, and 57% of the sample identified as male. We spoke to children in each of the 9 regions of England.
 - In total, we conducted 18 focus groups and 9 interviews. These took place in educational settings, community centres, and venues arranged by charities and organisations. One focus group was conducted online via Zoom.
 - Focus groups and interviews were organised by reaching out to schools, charities, and youth organisations working in relevant areas, such as social justice, mental health, unsuitable housing, and exploitation.
 - When coordinating recruitment with gatekeepers, we asked to speak to "children from lower income families". Where relevant, we used eligibility for Free School Meals (FSM) as a proxy, an approach which has been widely used in [previous research](#). We spoke to 55% of the sample in educational settings, where all participants were confirmed by the school to be FSM-eligible. In addition, during focus groups in other settings, many children also discussed their experiences of free school meals
- *Focus groups and interviews:*
 - Focus groups included between 3 and 12 participants. Two members of CCo staff were present during each session.
 - Focus groups lasted for approximately one hour, and interviews lasted for approximately 30-minutes.

	Group	Region	Key Stage
1	Social worker involvement	South East	3-5
2	Additional needs inc. learning needs and Free School Meals (FSM)	London	1-2
3	Minority ethnic group	London	4-5
4	No recourse to public funds	West Midlands	3-4
5	Young carers	Kent	1-2
6	Mental health support	East Midlands	2-5
7	FSM eligible	North East	2
8	Mental health & additional needs inc. learning	East Midlands	3-5
9	Additional needs inc. learning needs & FSM eligible	West Midlands	2
10	Young carer	London	2
11	Unsuitable housing	North West	2-4
12	Additional needs inc. learning needs	East of England	2-4
13	Minority ethnic and migrant	London	2
14	Additional needs inc. learning needs	London	1-2
15	Victims of criminal and sexual exploitation	London	5
16	FSM eligible	East Midlands	3-4
17	Mental health, LGBTQIA+ & care-experienced	Yorkshire & The Humber	4-5
18	FSM eligible	South West	5
19	Alternative Provision (AP) & rural	South West	4-5
20	FSM eligible & rural	Yorkshire & The Humber	3-4

NB: Region and Key Stage have been used as broad descriptors to maintain anonymity

We aimed to capture the experiences of a range of children, including those; from minority groups, with additional needs including learning needs, with experience of mental health support, at risk of exploitation, with caring responsibilities or care experience, receiving social work or early help input, or living in families with no recourse to public funds or in unsuitable housing.

Methodology: Qualitative data

- *Group dynamics:*
 - In some settings, such as youth groups run by charities, participants were very familiar with one another due to regular attendance at community-based meetings and activities. In contrast, in educational settings, children were selected for participation based on FSM-eligibility, so were often from different classes or year groups, and therefore did not necessarily know each other well.
 - We attempted to address this by encouraging each participant to introduce themselves at the beginning of the session – stating their name and age. We also included an icebreaker activity, such as describing an ideal day.
 - In some cases, a trusted adult such as a teacher, youth worker or learning support assistant was present for the discussion; this decision was left to the adult themselves, based on their existing understanding of the children's needs and comfort, and was more common in groups with younger children or those with additional needs. Some offered additional information or prompts for the group, or context and clarification to researchers. In other sessions, the researchers were left alone with the group.
- *Topic guide:*
 - For each session, we followed a semi-structured topic guide. We asked children about money and household income, local services, their community, education, and leisure. This aligned with topics covered in [previous research](#).
 - The topic guide used, and the information sheet provided to children, was agreed with the Child Poverty Unit.

Research Questions

Research aim: To understand how poverty affects the lives of the children who experience it and what they think can be done to reduce that impact.

- **RQ1:** What is it like to be a child living in poverty?
- **RQ2:** What essential costs affect children experiencing poverty the most? How does it impact the way the children and their families are living?
- **RQ3:** How do children with experience of poverty think that services can be improved to reduce the impact poverty has on their lives?
- **RQ4:** How do the answers to these questions vary for different groups of children?



Methodology: Qualitative data

- *Sensitivity:*

- Participants were informed about the aims of the research and its intended use by the Child Poverty Unit.
- Children could share as much or as little as they liked of their experiences. To ensure that participants felt comfortable, we did not use potentially stigmatising language such as “being poor” or “not having enough money”.
- Instead, we asked participants about what they need to be happy, healthy, safe, and learning, and what they wished they had/could do. As such, any use of the above terms, or more general self-identification with poverty, was a choice made by the individual child.

- *Ethics:*

- All participants gave informed consent. They were assured that their contributions would remain anonymous, unless there were any safeguarding concerns, and they were told that the session could be stopped at any time.
- Participants were reminded that there were no right or wrong answers, and they did not have to answer any questions if they did not want to. They were told who they should speak to if they changed their mind about being part of the research, so that the relevant gatekeeper could inform us before the end of March 2025.
- Participants were told that they could leave at any time, without giving a reason. If not directly involved in the session, gatekeepers were also on hand for if any children appeared distressed by the conversation. Where relevant, participants were also given a leaflet for the Office's [Help at Hand service](#) at the end of the session.

Methodology: Qualitative data

- *Analysis and transcription:*
 - Alongside handwritten notes, each session was audio recorded and transcribed using an online transcription tool.
 - A thematic framework was developed based on our research questions and familiarisation with data from the initial focus groups.
 - After each session, themes and sub-themes were identified. Quotes were corrected and extracted from the transcript. For this report, quotes were selected that were illustrative of the points being made and representative of the patterns in the data.
- **Positionality:** Our research team primarily consisted of white women from the South of England with higher education qualifications. We are aware that this may have influenced reception from certain groups, whereby different answers might have been elicited by a more diverse team.

Methodology: Existing Quantitative data

- *The Big Ambition Survey:*
 - Between September 2023 and January 2024, independent of the work commissioned by CPU, the Office conducted The Big Ambition survey.
 - All children in England aged 6 to 17-year-olds, as well as 18-year-olds in education, were invited to take part.
 - 253,000 responses were received, either directly from children, or from adults reporting on their behalf.
 - All respondents were presented with a series of Likert scale statements, to which they were invited to agree or disagree.
- *Poverty-related data:*
 - The survey did not explicitly ask children about poverty. Instead, we have made three comparisons to use as a proxy to identify children from lower-income backgrounds:
 - Respondents who disagreed that their family have everything they need to support them, compared to those who agreed.
 - Respondents who disagreed that they have the same opportunities as other children, compared to those who agreed.
 - Respondents from schools in the most deprived areas (defined as those where the income deprivation (IDACI) of the median pupil is in the 1st decile), compared to those in the least deprived areas (10th IDACI decile).

Research Findings

RQ1: What is it like to be a child living in poverty?

RQ1: What is it like to be a child living in poverty?

Social & emotional impact

Emotional impact

Children and young people reported that, although they may be dealing with financial difficulties at home, they often mask their struggles.

Girl, 13: In some homes it might be tough. They might have a smiley face but inside it's really, really tough.

One young person reflected that many others in her situation hide their struggles and find it difficult or feel too ashamed to talk about how they are feeling, to the point that they feel others don't or can't appreciate the extent to which they are suffering.

Girl, 15: I feel like it's a thing that a lot of people aren't very open to talk about it because [they] are just embarrassed about their home lives... [they] need to be told it's perfectly alright...and people that don't have problems...need an understanding of what it's like, because a lot of people know that people struggle, but they don't know what it's like.



Social impact

Older teenagers in particular spoke to us about the social impact of living in poverty. One young person described how feelings of shame and stigma can impact on the ability of young people from lower income families to have the same social experiences as their more well-off peers.

Girl, 16: I think that people that come from little money, they have a different social experience. They won't invite people to their house because they might be embarrassed of the way it looks, how big it is...I think they definitely have a different social experience than people that may come from money, who can have friends around for tea...

Where children and young people felt they might be treated differently because of how much money they had, this centred on bullying by peers, particularly in terms of 'looking poor' and differences in the type of clothes and shoes they could afford.

Boy, 15: Students who don't maybe have the designer clothes or the style that everyone is up to date with, they tend to get shamed or put down a lot because they're not fitting in.



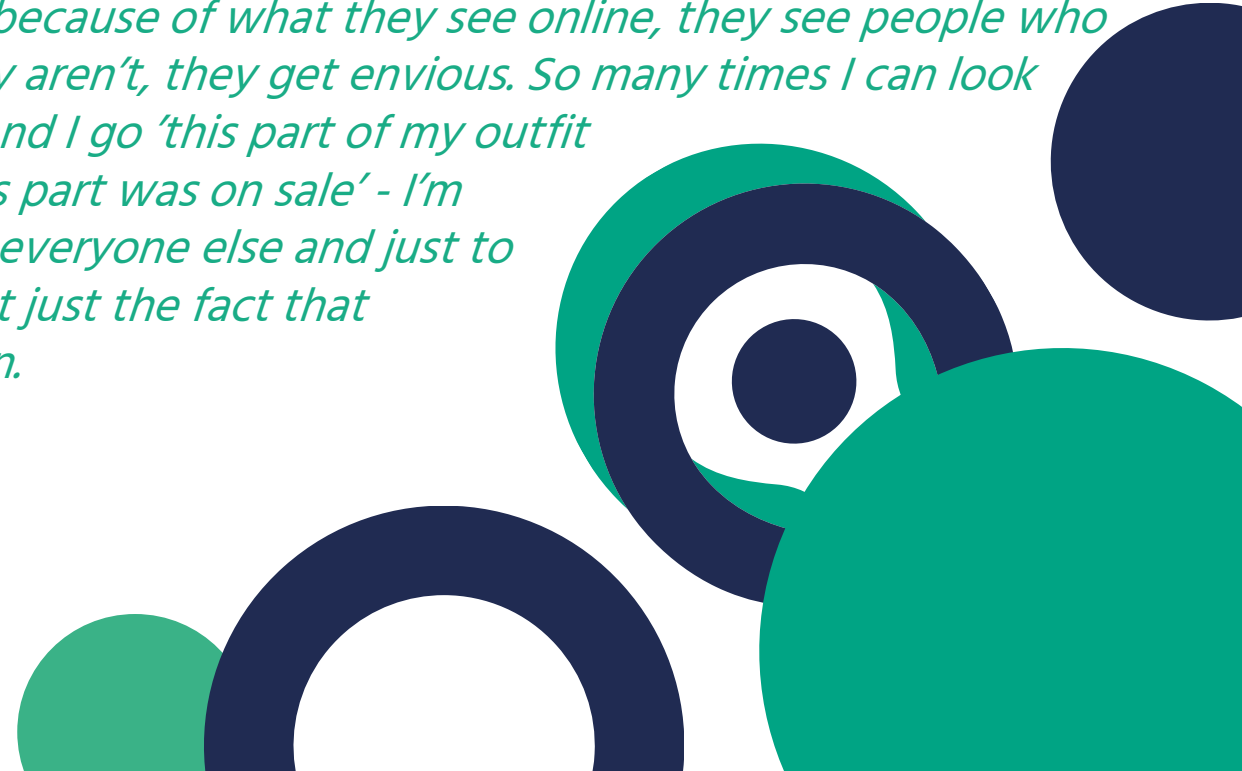
Social impact

There was evidence that young people were conscious that, in addition to allowing you to fit in with your peer group, clothes and appearance influenced the impression people formed of you more generally.

Boy, 17: Someone's first impression of someone is off what they see, so if they're wearing clothes that are slightly worn and aren't really in the best condition, you kind of already have a picture of the type of person they are in your head.

One young person talked about how social media contributes to the pressure to fit in and look as though you have money.

Girl, 17: Young people are really desperate to have money because of what they see online, they see people who really seem to be overachieving – whether they are or they aren't, they get envious. So many times I can look at a full outfit that I'm wearing where I think I'm fitting in and I go 'this part of my outfit was thrifted, this part was borrowed from somewhere, this part was on sale' - I'm spending so much less than everyone else just to look like everyone else and just to be like everyone else, even though that's not who I am. But just the fact that everyone else seems to have money, I want to try and fit in.



RQ1: What is it like to be a child living in poverty?

**Awareness, worry &
responsibility**

Awareness and worry

Most older participants shared an understanding of their household's finances. Several younger children also shared a developed awareness of their family's financial situation.

Boy, 8: [My Dad] doesn't like [his job], but he does it for my family because we don't have much money, he only does it so we can buy our weekly shopping.

When discussing whether children and young people worry about money, participants cited their families' struggles to pay for food and bills, and the impact this had on their parents as key concerns.

Boy 16: Sometimes we struggle to pay the bills. Right now it's OK... before mum would cry every time she was going to pay the bills.

Some felt they had a role in ensuring their family had enough food and did not overspend.

Girl, 14: [I worry about] what if we won't have enough to eat this month....We do try as much as possible to save up what we have.



Awareness and worry

Participants spoke about parents trying to shield their children from financial worries.

Girl, 16: I think it's quite difficult for a child to think that their parents are struggling with money, so quite often I'm pretty sure parents just keep that to themselves.

However, even when it wasn't overtly spoken about at home, there was evidence that children picked up on these financial struggles. One young person talked about her awareness of the fluctuations in her family's finances, noticing a change in her parents' behaviour and buying habits depending on how much money they had.

Girl, 14: When it's less you can hear [my parents] stressing, like "Don't waste!". When it's more you can see them buying more things, like bacon.

Children and young people were also aware that parents are not always able to access support.

Girl, 17: People need to know there is a space for them. Mothers...parents in general... there should be someone there to say 'What might be any issues?...Is there financial support?...How is your housing?'...If a mother knows that there's someone there for them, they're more likely to get support in the future if necessary and that will pass through onto the children. Just someone there...to say 'I've got you'.



Awareness of poverty across society

Several participants demonstrated a wider understanding that financial difficulties are a widespread social issue.

Boy, 15: I think to a point people are more conscious nowadays on how much they spend, even young people.

This was also shown through an awareness that services are stretched and struggling to meet demand.

Girl, 15: ... a lot of the time at food banks it's not even the stuff that you need there, because there's so many people in need of help with it.

Boy, 14: Even if you do get there [breakfast club] on time, there's not a 100% chance that you're going to be able to get something because other people go there and you can run out.

Despite this, children and young people rarely spoke about their peers having similar experiences to them and their family. This perhaps highlights a contributory factor to the social and emotional impacts of poverty, such as feelings of embarrassment or isolation – children might have a misconception that none of their peers are going through the same thing.



Responsibility

Children and young people spoke about the adult-like roles and responsibilities they take on in their households. There was evidence of young people seeking part-time work to help supplement their household's income.

Girl, 16: [My mum's] always encouraged me to reach out and try and find jobs or...some kind of income because we are quite low on the ground.

Older girls in particular spoke about the emotional support they provide for their parents.

Girl, 16: I worry about money quite a lot. I see myself as quite approachable to my mum, so my mum will tell me absolutely everything.

One young person spoke about the responsibility she takes on to source her own food so that her mother can focus on feeding her younger siblings.

Girl, 17: ...trying to feed us all...that's also a struggle....some nights my mum's like, 'I genuinely cannot do anything with for you guys - I've got nothing for you older ones. I can only do pasta and sauce for the little ones' and [I'm] like, 'That's fine, mum. I will go and try and get myself a tenner from someone'.



Responsibility

One girl spoke about how she tries to lessen the pressure on her mother whilst also managing the expectations of younger siblings.

Girl, 11: There's only one thing that that I actually want but I don't think my mum can...get that. So, I've been holding it in...for 3 years...My little brother's always asking for [toys], but I just say let's just hide it until our mum gets money.

Young carers in particular spoke about taking on additional responsibilities due to their family's circumstances. Children as young as 7-years-old describe domestic chores that they completed to support their family.

Boy, 8: I help [my mum]...I cook and clean round the house.

Young carers were particularly vulnerable to experiencing an additional emotional burden, and they highlighted how this impacts their education.

Boy, 18: I grew up in a household where my mum has [severe illness] so I'm a young carer, I have been since I was 8...I still can't get carers allowance because I'm in full time education but the second I get in, I'm still doing all my jobs, still looking after them. What am I meant to do? Not go to college or uni? You have to give up your whole life just to care for your family, it's all good but...you need a future.



The Big Ambition Data: Family Life

- Children from lower-income backgrounds were **less likely to report getting to spend quality time with their family**, compared to those from higher-income backgrounds.

	Those who agreed that their family has everything needed to support them	Those who disagreed that their family has everything needed to support them
Your family gets to spend quality time together	89%	48%

- Children who disagreed that *they have the same opportunities as other children* were also less likely to report that their family gets to spend quality time together (69%), compared to those who felt that they did have the same opportunities (89%).
- Children from schools in the most deprived areas were also less likely to report that their family gets to spend quality time together (83%), compared to those in the least deprived areas (88%).

Attitudes to money

When asked what they spent, or would spend, their own money on, children and young people talked about contributing to their household income and saving up to buy essentials, such as school supplies, rather than buying things that they wanted.

Girl, 14: I don't get pocket money but if I did I would save it for things I need like school supplies.

Boy, 7: I get money every time I help my mum or dad do something. And I'm going to save it up so then I can buy stuff that I need, or I can get stuff for my mum and my dad just in case they don't have the money.

Older children and teens recognised the importance of saving for the future, including costs such as university and driving lessons.

Boy, 15: Maybe if I had a bit more money, I'd be thinking for the future, because not everything is about the time right now - splashing your money. Obviously, people want to enjoy our young age, but also you got to think about your future as well.

Girl, 16: I don't [spend the money I earn]. Most of my money goes to savings for when I turn 17 for my driving lessons...I need to work for a long time to save up for it.

Boy, 16: I'd save up for uni. But it's not enough.



RQ1: What is it like to be a child living in poverty?

Low expectations

Low expectations

As well as a recognition that some of the issues they were facing were difficult, there was also evidence of children and young people accepting inadequate living situations as normal and having low expectations for services and amenities. One girl spoke about having a warm home as though it was not an essential need.

Girl, 16: I know it's not an intense priority...like food and water [are] but just having the heating on [is important].

One boy reflected on how growing up with less at home had meant he expected less from local services.

Boy, 15: You look at the grass in [PLACE] Park - when it comes to summertime it's nearly up to my knees... It's not the best...but... as kids we adapt, we just made the most of what we had because it's not like we had the best of the best at home as it was, so it was almost normal to us. But now when you grow up, you tend to see things a bit differently and see how these certain parks surrounding us are just left to the side, are not really taken care of by the council or Government.



RQ1: What is it like to be a child living in poverty?

Impact on aspirations

Impact on aspirations

Children and young people told us about a range of jobs that they would like to do in the future, including becoming a social worker, doctor, footballer, YouTuber, beautician, police officer, computer technician, archaeologist, chef, and marine engineer.

One boy wanted to pursue sport to a professional level, but his family's financial difficulties were a barrier to this.

Boy, 16: I don't have money to pay the [sport club] registration every time. My mum said I can't pay for it every time. There's not enough income for my mum and my sister...I believe that if I do [sport], there could be an opportunity to get a contract and make my family happy, but I don't have access to a gym or training.

When discussing the future, children as young as 8-years-old focussed on the need to provide for their family, rather than their aspirations or career goals.

Boy, 8: I think we need to learn in school so that when we go to university...we're going to have a good job and then we can provide stuff for our family.

Another participant highlighted how poverty can prevent children and young people from even thinking about their aspirations for the future.

Boy, 15: maybe if I had a bit more money, I'd be thinking for the future.



RQ1: What is it like to be a child living in poverty?

Impact on education

Impact on education

The children and young people we spoke to recognised the importance of education for their future. One participant framed this in terms of being able to provide for his family when he was older.

Boy, 8: I think we need to learn in school so that when we go to university, we can have... a good job and then we can provide stuff for our family.

Some children explained that the situations that they are dealing with at home and the additional responsibilities they take on can have an impact on their behaviour and academic performance at school.

Boy, 17: It was a struggle...having to be the man of the house, I had so many responsibilities and still had to try and put my education first, so it was a struggle.

One young person discussed how this is made harder when teachers fail to understand the root cause of her behaviour and instead write her off as a “naughty” student.

Girl, 15: Some teachers in my school know that when I'm misbehaving, it's because I've got stuff going on...Whereas other teachers just think, 'oh, she's just being naughty because that's the type of kid she is'.



Digital exclusion

Difficulties with unreliable WIFI, limited access to technology, and a desire to spend money on upgrading devices, such as buying a new laptop or phone, were discussed by several participants. Some children and young people described how this negatively affected their school experience – resulting in an inability to complete homework, and subsequent lack of understanding at school.

Boy, 12: With homework, our internet went down, I couldn't do it – it's on an online homework for maths. Then I got a... break detention because I didn't do it. But I couldn't do it.

In contrast, some participants highlighted how their school (as well as other institutions such as religious organisations) provide support in this area. Issues with this provision were also identified.

Girl, 14: They [the school] have 6th period, for if certain children have not finished their coursework or if someone doesn't have a computer at home.

Boy, 18: My college does well... They gave me a computer – I can't take it home, but I don't need that.

Boy, 18: I've got a bursary but they only let me use it if I spend the money first and claim it back... they wanted me to buy a laptop which was £350. I don't have £350.



Impact on education: Children Missing from Education

Some of the children and young people engaged in this research shared that they had experienced periods of time out of education, or that they were in home education. A lack of understanding from school staff was cited as a key driver.

For some young people, missed education appeared to be an escalation of conflict with the school.

Girl, 17: I ended up taking myself out of school in year 10 and only going when it pleased me because they wouldn't listen to me, so I decided I wasn't going to listen to them either.

Girl, 15: I skipped half a year of school due to mental health because ...school just weren't understanding why I was acting the way I was.

In other cases, young people described specific issues in their home life that prevented them from attending school regularly.

Girl, 15: I didn't get along with the teachers and yeah, I was just about it...I didn't go either. They threatened to fine my parents because my attendance was really bad. But I couldn't go to school because my dad has [serious illness]. And it was like when we had COVID jabs and I couldn't bring that home to my dad.

Impact on education: Children Missing from Education

CCo analysis in 'Lost in Transition' showed that children from disadvantaged neighbourhoods were overrepresented in the cohort of children identified as missing from education (CME)

Further analysis of this cohort reveals just how disadvantaged these children are. Children who left state education and became CME were overwhelmingly from the lowest deciles of the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI). They were 1.5 times as likely as other children to be in the most deprived neighbourhoods: 20% of all children in the sample whose last-known destination was missing education came from the bottom decile of IDACI. This means these children lived in neighbourhoods more deprived than at least 90% of all other neighbourhoods.

[Children Missing Education - The Unrolled Story](#) (September, 2024)

CCo analysis of DfE attendance data showed that children who are eligible for free school meals have much higher rates of persistent absence, relative to their peers

In Autumn 2023, a third (33.0%) of children eligible for free school meals were persistently absent, compared to 15.7% of children who were not eligible.

[CCo Blog: New figures reveal drop in number of school absences](#) (September, 2024)

RQ1: What is it like to be a child living in poverty?

Safety

The Big Ambition Data: Safety

- Children from lower-income backgrounds were **less likely to feel safe and protected in their local area**, compared to those from higher-income backgrounds.

	Those who agreed that they have the same opportunities as other children	Those who disagreed that they have the same opportunities as other children
You feel safe and protected in your local area	79%	52%

- Children who disagreed that *their family have everything they need to support them* were less likely to report that they feel safe and protected in their local area (41%) than those who agreed that their family have everything they need (77%).
- Children from schools in the most deprived areas were also less likely to report that they feel safe and protected in their local area (67%), compared to those in the least deprived areas (86%).

Feeling unsafe

A recurrent theme, regardless of location, was children and young people feeling unsafe in their local area due to crime and anti-social behaviour. Two boys in a town reflected on incidents and behaviour in their neighbourhood which made them feel unsafe.

Boy, 10: There are a bunch of people who walk by going to a club – when they leave, they're always drunk and chucking glass around.

Boy, 8: There's an apartment and they started doing drugs next to my house. They blamed us but it was the people in the apartment. And people ride dirt bikes on the path and I don't know why... My mum... reported it to the police and they found the person.

Knife and gang crime was discussed most often in more urban locations, as in the quote below, with children as young as eight speaking about the issues in their neighbourhood with surprising levels of detail.

Boy, 10: I...live in a bit [of a] rough area...I don't like it there because there's always stabbings on my road...I just don't like it...I have gangs round near my house.



Feeling unsafe

This has an impact on children and young people's ability to take part in activities, such as attending clubs and playing outside, due to their own concerns and parental concerns for their safety. One girl in a city spoke about how she wasn't able to travel alone and how this limits her social life.

Girl, 14: I can't really go out much because [my parents] don't think it's safe...I try and ask them to join after school clubs but...they don't want me to come home on my own.



Exploitation and criminal activity

Children and young people discussed the heightened risk of criminal exploitation for children and young people from lower income families and the difficulty in preventing it.

Boy, 18: Being poor, you're so much more likely to get dragged into stuff, but there's not a lot to prevent it. Like say the whole drug thing, you're more likely to get into a gang because they can offer you something that you don't have, which is money. When you're poor and you see your mum struggling and your dad struggling you think 'oh I can get a little bit of money, what's the harm' but then you get dragged into this and you can watch kids running round scared and stabbing people.

One boy drew a direct link between a lack of support for lower income families and the pressure and appeal of joining gangs.

Boy, 18: There needs to be more support to stop you from wanting to [run drugs]. At the beginning it's like 'they're offering me money, I could use that to support my family' - if your family had support to begin with, you wouldn't do it.



Exploitation and criminal activity

In rural areas, there was evidence that young people committed minor crimes due to a lack of youth provision and boredom.

What do other young people do around here?

Boy, 18: Not a lot.

Boy, 15: Set fire to bins.

Research by CCo shows that children from low-income areas are overrepresented in youth offending institutes

Nearly four in ten (38%) of all children in secure settings were living in the top 10% most income deprived neighbourhoods in England when they were most recently in a state-funded school. When the top 50% most income deprived neighbourhoods are considered, this figure rises to 87%, meaning almost 9 out of every 10 children in secure settings grew up in areas with above-average levels of deprivation.

[The educational journeys of children in secure settings | Children's Commissioner for England](#) (February, 2025)



RQ1: What is it like to be a child living in poverty?

Community

Community: a support and a buffer

Children and young people had varying experiences depending on the community they lived in. A strong sense of community and bonds between neighbours could act as a support and a buffer against the adverse effects of poverty, for example, helping to counter children's feelings of being unsafe, as in the quote below from a girl in a town.

Girl, 10: I think the street's safe because we have [doorbell] cameras, and we all work together.

One young person reflected on how the bonds were particularly strong in his urban neighbourhood due to everyone coming from a similar, migrant, background and sharing experiences.

Boy, 15: [Our neighbourhood] is densely populated with migrants who obviously come over to this country for a better lifestyle and for work...you're literally like brothers and sisters just because you've come from the same place...over the years the bonds have become stronger and it's almost a massive community. I wouldn't be scared to knock on anyone's door any time of the day and maybe ask for help.

Another highlighted how there was a greater sense of community in his village, compared to his peers living in the town.

Boy, 12: Where I live, I know quite a lot of people...they're kind of scattered about where we're living in my village...wherever I am, I can always go to their house because I'm always near one of their houses.



Community: a support and a buffer

There was evidence of community playing a role in providing children and young people with opportunities to enjoy their childhood, despite other pressures and worries they might be experiencing.

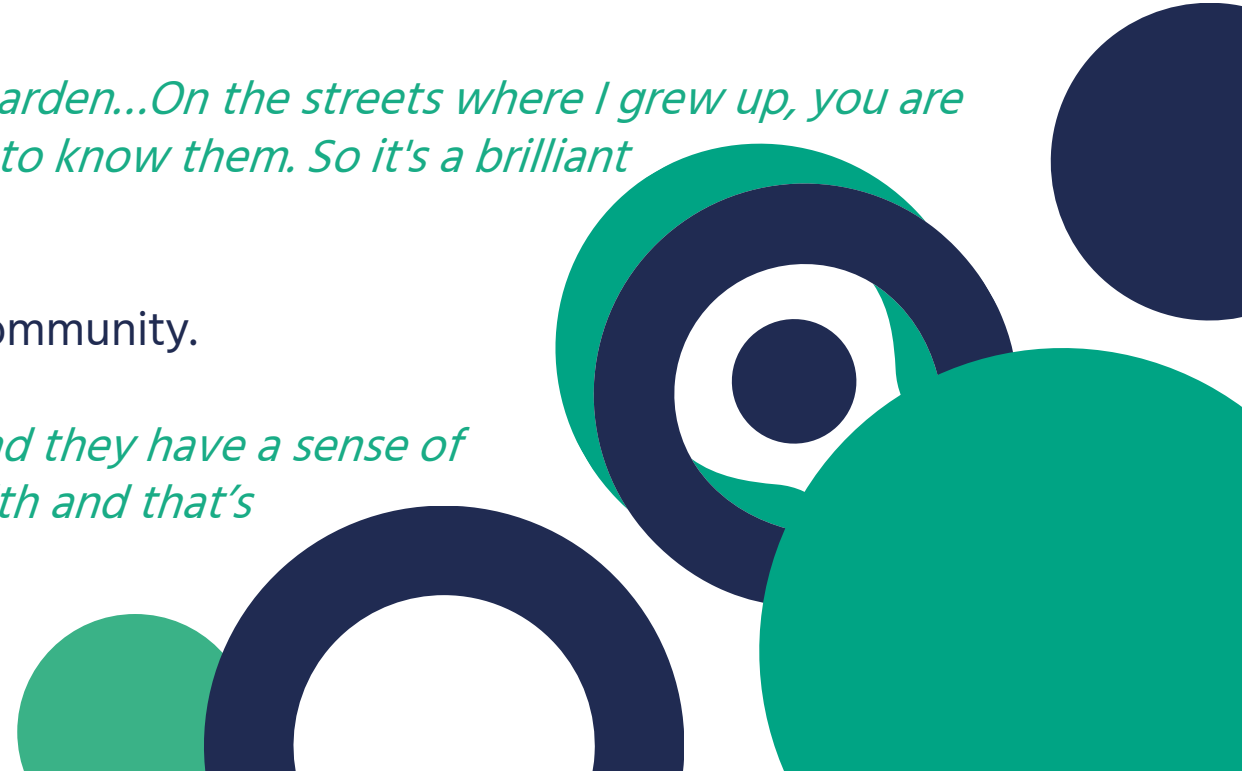
Girl 11: They...used to have parties [at a community centre]...it'd be the people from around the community and the person whose birthday it was they would...get a cake and they would sing happy birthday, and it was a really fun time because the children would be occupied playing games and then the adults would just be chatting, so it's like really good for the social impact and health and [those] kind of things.

One young person talked about the advantages of growing up as he did, in an urban area where there is less wealth and material possessions, but a strong sense of community.

Boy, 15: ... I wouldn't trade my childhood for having a big garden...On the streets where I grew up, you are playing with...different kids from different streets, getting to know them. So it's a brilliant experience.

Another young person also highlighted the wider benefits of community.

Girl, 16: if young people feel like they're in a community and they have a sense of belonging, then obviously that's also linked to mental health and that's really important.



RQ2: What essential costs affect children experiencing child poverty the most? How does it impact the way the children and their families are living?

RQ2: What essential costs affect children experiencing poverty the most? How does it impact the way the children and their families are living?

Changes over time

Cost of living

Children and young people spoke about the recent increase in the cost of living and how this had affected their families and exacerbated their worries about money.

Boy, 16: Everything is more expensive than it was two years ago, so you worry. Especially if your parents are struggling.

There was evidence that an increase in the cost of living has meant that families are finding it more difficult to pay for the essentials and there is little money left over for anything more than that.

Girl, 16: [If my family had more money we would spend it on] basic things... It wouldn't be exciting, but it'll just be like the little things that will make a big difference.

In some cases, families are having to choose between essentials, such as food and heating.

Girl, 16: ... But you can't keep the house warm...because there was six of us in the house at the time...you're trying to feed everyone, keep everyone warm and then pay for every expense around the house, so it's quite a lot.



Changes over time

Some children and young people highlighted how their families struggled more with the cost of bills or activities following a change in their personal circumstances.

Girl, 17: I actually stopped going there [club] when I was probably around 10. That's because my mum had an issue so she had to go [to] hospital...everything kept piling up

Girl, 16: [Referring to increased heating bills] I remember when my sister was just born...you have to keep the house warm.

Others talked about specific memories they had of their family's financial difficulties, demonstrating a greater burden at certain times of the year.

Girl, 10: I remember once, it was Christmas time, and we didn't have enough money, but then someone gave us £20 and then I got a little present for Christmas.

One participant suggested that her family was struggling more as a result of reductions in the financial support her mother received.

Girl, 11: ...because Universal Credit used to give like £1000 but now it's £920.



RQ2: What essential costs affect children experiencing poverty the most? How does it impact the way the children and their families are living?

Housing costs

Housing costs

The cost of housing was cited as a worry by several children and young people, and one of the things that their families would prioritise spending more on if they had the money.

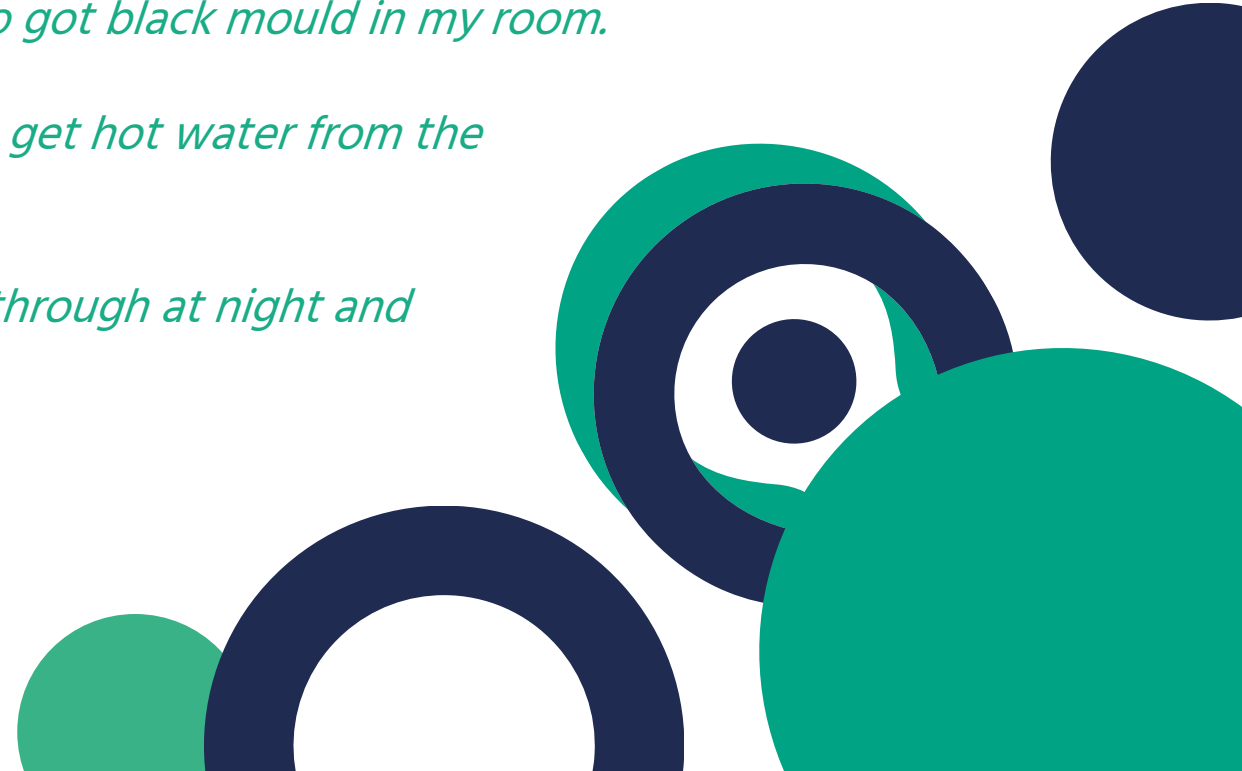
Girl, 10: If they don't have as much money and they have a council house, like me and my parents do, they worry about being put out on the street because they don't have the money to pay the council with.

The inability to afford alternative options means they are living in poor-quality housing, affected by issues such as mould, over-crowding and poor maintenance. These comments often referred to social housing.

Girl, 17: I've got a chest freezer in my bedroom, but I've also got black mould in my room.

Girl, 10: Sometimes our boiler stops working so we have to get hot water from the kettle to use it to bath or wash our hands.

Girl, 7: In our kitchen there's loads of holes that rats come through at night and sometimes they bite through our walls.



Housing costs

One child described the impact this has on her personal hygiene.

Girl, 10: Sometimes when I need to take a bath or have a shower, the water doesn't really work sometimes... so sometimes when [children] don't have enough water to take a shower, they always just have to go to school not clean and they didn't shower.

The impacts of poor-quality accommodation on health are explored in the [Housing Services](#) section.



Housing costs: space and privacy

Children and young people described space being a problem with their current living situation, particularly the number of bedrooms, with multiple family members sharing rooms and having to use living space for sleeping.

Girl, 15: I live in a one bed flat with my mum, so she has the lounge as her bedroom and then I've got an actual bedroom and it's OK but...we're all in each other's faces...We've tried private. We can't with our budget and then we can't get council [housing]. So if we had more money, the first thing we would do is just get a bigger house.

This left children and young people feeling as though they lacked privacy and personal space at home to do things such as homework.

Girl, 14: When I do try to do homework or revise, it's just really hard because I've got a little sister and another sibling. And if I go in my room...because I share a room, my other sister's in there on her phone. And if I go at the table, my little sister just comes in and thinks that we can do drawing...And it's just very difficult because...I've just got sisters everywhere.

Boy, 13: I just generally just go sit outside [to do homework] if it's sunny, or if it's not, I just go sit in the shed.

This also linked to children's access to [digital essentials](#).



Housing costs: furniture

As well as rent, other children spoke about their family's inability to buy suitable furniture for their homes and the effect this had on their day to day lives.

Girl, 10: I would say some people don't have a table...they can't afford it, they might have to use the floor and sometimes the floor can be cold because of the heating.

Boy, 8: I don't like that my bed's too small because I always have to crunch up into a ball when I'm sleeping, and I want a bigger bed.

RQ2: What essential costs affect children experiencing poverty the most? How does it impact the way the children and their families are living?

Energy bills

Energy bills

Children and young people were aware of their families' struggles to pay bills, particularly energy bills.

Girl, 14: My mum could top up [the heating] and she'll top up £5 or £10 and it would be gone in two days.

There was evidence that children are living in cold homes as they are unable to afford to heat them. One young person reflected on how her family could not afford to heat their home, nor to spend time outside of it.

Girl, 16: I think [if we had more money] that the heating will be on a lot more and we'll go out more to places, just have a better social experience, rather than being at home and cold.

One child spoke about how living in a poorly maintained house was increasing their energy bills.

Girl, 10: In my house, the heating doesn't work. Every time we [put the heating on] it'll take like £10 a day from our electricity. And sometimes the electricity just turns off.



RQ2: What essential costs affect children experiencing poverty the most? How does it impact the way the children and their families are living?

Food prices

Food prices

Food was another key cost for families. There was evidence that increases in food prices has meant that many rely on [food parcels from school and food banks](#) for a large proportion of their food, as shop prices are out of their budget.

Girl, 11: [School] gave us food boxes...every holiday. We'd always go around to the foodbank just to pick up some extra things because obviously the shop's too expensive.

One young person spoke about their family's reliance on supermarket loyalty schemes and other free food schemes, some of which they no longer had access to.

Boy, 17: If it wasn't for Nectar cards and Tesco Clubcards we'd really struggle. There used to be food for free, but I think they stopped it, or my mum unsubscribed or something.

Children and young people also reflected on how increased costs affected not only the amount, but the quality and kind of food their families were able to buy, with particular mentions of healthy food and protein, and the impact this has on their health.

YGirl, 17: Healthier food is more expensive because it's been grown differently. So with that...money, to be able to get more of that healthy food, which can lead to a healthier lifestyle for some people. You get better sources of protein and everything.



RQ2: What essential costs affect children experiencing poverty the most? How does it impact the way the children and their families are living?

Travel costs

Travel costs

Children and young people talked about the difficulty their families have covering their travel costs (discussions largely focused on bus travel) and frustrations with increasing prices.

Girl, 15: I walk everywhere because I despise getting on buses. Also, it's expensive...my mum doesn't have money lying around. It's so expensive to get on a bus now for no reason, even with my under 16 card.

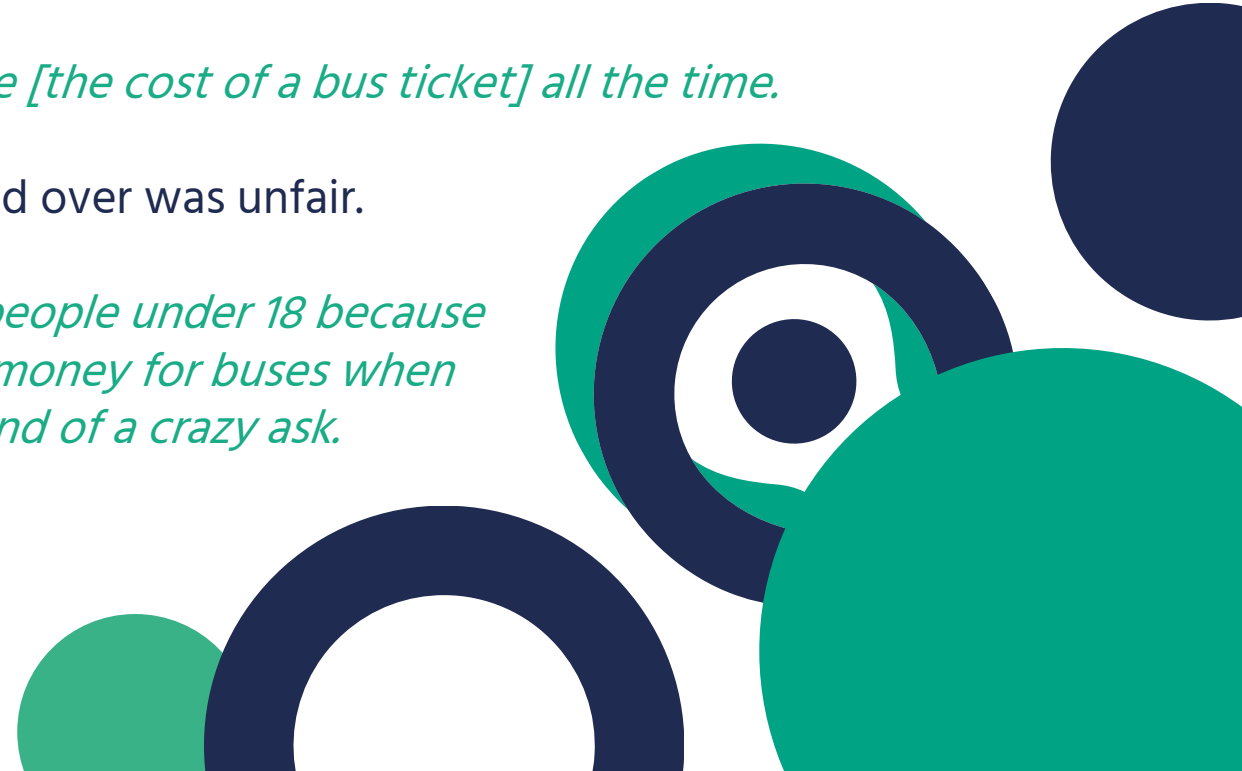
Boy, 18: They...keep moving the cap up, which surely defeats the point of having [it]....it got capped at £2, now it's £3.

This included travel to and from school, which meant many relied on their school to cover their travel costs.

Girl, 14: The school helped me get a bus pass...they increase [the cost of a bus ticket] all the time.

Older teens felt the increase in bus fares for children aged 16 and over was unfair.

Boy, 17: [We need] some form of free public transport for people under 18 because expecting people to be able to pay ridiculous amounts of money for buses when you're spending most of your time in school anyway, it's kind of a crazy ask.



Travel costs

One girl spoke about how she can't always get a bus when she would like to, leaving her feeling unsafe in her town.

Girl, 14: Sometimes if I have the money, I catch the bus, but sometimes I have to walk and I just feel very uncomfortable... at night time.

Another child contrasted the restrictions she feels in her day-to-day life in one of England's smaller cities with the freedom she felt using free transport in London.

Girl, 13: In London the buses are free [unlike PLACE], so you could practically go anywhere, anytime you like.

RQ2: What essential costs affect children experiencing poverty the most? How does it impact the way the children and their families are living?

Cost of the school day

Cost of the school day

Along with struggles to afford the travel to get to school, and to get enough food when they were there, children and young people discussed other costs associated with their education.

They highlighted the cost of uniform and school supplies, including textbooks and revision guides, and how an inability to afford these affected their experience of school.

Girl, 15: School resources, like pens and books because some kids can't afford it...it can motivate them to do better because they've got the material to do it.

Boy, 15: And it's not just free school meals that kids should be entitled to, I think uniform is really expensive now. Prices are going up and most kids... they don't want hand-me-downs.

Children and young people also spoke about how a lack of money affected their ability to partake in different aspects of school life, such as non-uniform days.

Boy, 14: In primary school there was literally a dress up day every week. One day we had to wear red clothing [for Comic Relief], so I had to go and buy red clothes.

Cost of the school day

There was evidence that an inability to pay for certain resources meant children and young people were excluded from learning experiences and opportunities.

Boy, 18: When I first started primary school, there was a lot of negativity towards learning because like they'd make you pay for books for reading time. So, if you didn't have money, they'd give you a piece of paper and you'd have to write instead.

Young people recognised how not being able to pay for additional school costs puts you at a disadvantage compared with peers from more affluent families.

Boy, 15: With opportunities nowadays, it's not all about...how well educated [you] are, it's also about experience... And children who are misfortunate obviously don't have that that much money [to go on school trips]...they miss out on a great thing to put down...on your CV.

Girl, 15: Revision guides...they're really expensive, so some kids can't afford them. So, it's fairer to...give them to you.



RQ2: What essential costs affect children experiencing poverty the most? How does it impact the way the children and their families are living?

Cost of activities and clubs

Cost of activities and clubs

There was evidence that transport costs prohibited some children and young people from taking part in activities and clubs, but also that the cost of the activities and clubs themselves were a barrier to participation.

Boy, 15: Membership to leisure centres are too expensive. It would be nice if they were cheaper. They've started to rise to about £50 a month. I would go if it was cheaper.

Boy, 17: The gym [in] the area I'm from – I don't know why the prices are so high.

Another barrier discussed was how the pricing for activities was often structured, with up-front costs at the start of each term, rather than weekly or monthly subscriptions.

Boy, 13: Sometimes you've got to pay for the term, say you want to do rugby or something...It could be monthly.

There was evidence that the expense of equipment – both purchasing it and maintaining it – could also prevent children from participating in activities.

Girl, 14: I used to play the violin until it broke.



RQ3: How do children with experience of child poverty think that services can be improved to reduce the impact poverty has on their lives?

RQ3: How do children with experience of poverty think that services can be improved to reduce its impact on their lives?

Housing Services

Housing

Children and young people living in social housing spoke about their interactions with the council and housing associations, in particular a sense that their families were often ignored or their situations not taken seriously.

Girl, 15: We wrote to the council...we were wondering if we could get bumped up because [my mum's] really ill... the environment doesn't help. And they...said to us go private. And we haven't got the money for that, obviously, because she can't work...It's like, what do you want us to do?

Along with not being able to access suitable housing, young people spoke about difficulties in getting councils and housing associations to do the necessary repairs on their homes to an adequate standard, and the implications for their health.

Boy, 18: The ceiling collapsed in and they fixed it, but they didn't deal with upstairs, so it'll happen again. The gutters are broken. They don't fix anything in the flat so you're more likely to get sick, you're at risk for a lot more.

Girl, 17: It took [the council] three months to move us out, which was...so much stress ...and the mould was making me so ill...We got home and there was a hole in our floor and the mould wasn't done properly...It feels like you're fighting a one-way battle because they they're not actually doing what they can do to support us.



Housing

There was a sense that these situations have eroded children and young people's trust in councils and housing associations to act in their best interests, and that they feel disempowered in their own homes given the lack of control that their families have to improve their situation.

Girl, 11: We went to a temporary house so [the housing association] can fix our house, but when we came back we could still smell the mould and we could see some. I don't like the fact that they lied to us, and they didn't unveil the truth.

Boy, 8: My mum and me are trying to move houses, but she can't because the housing aren't really helping that much...we're going to have to wait until housing probably helps us.

Member of staff: You're trying to find some housing that makes you feel more safe, aren't you?

Boy, 17: It's like [the Council] gave up on every single tenant.



Housing

Some children spoke about the lack of stability they have experienced in their housing situation and the worry this causes them.

Girl, 10: I've moved houses 7 times, and the current house I'm in, I've been in it for two years.

Girl, 10: So I'm actually really worried because...I moved houses and the house I moved into...I've only been in for one year, and then some people come to my house and they said you have three weeks to move and we hadn't even found a house because we'd just settled in. So now my mum had to find a house so now we're just looking.



Housing: temporary accommodation

Those children with experience of temporary accommodation spoke about its unsuitability. A key issue was the lack of cooking facilities, meaning they were rarely able to eat home-cooked food.

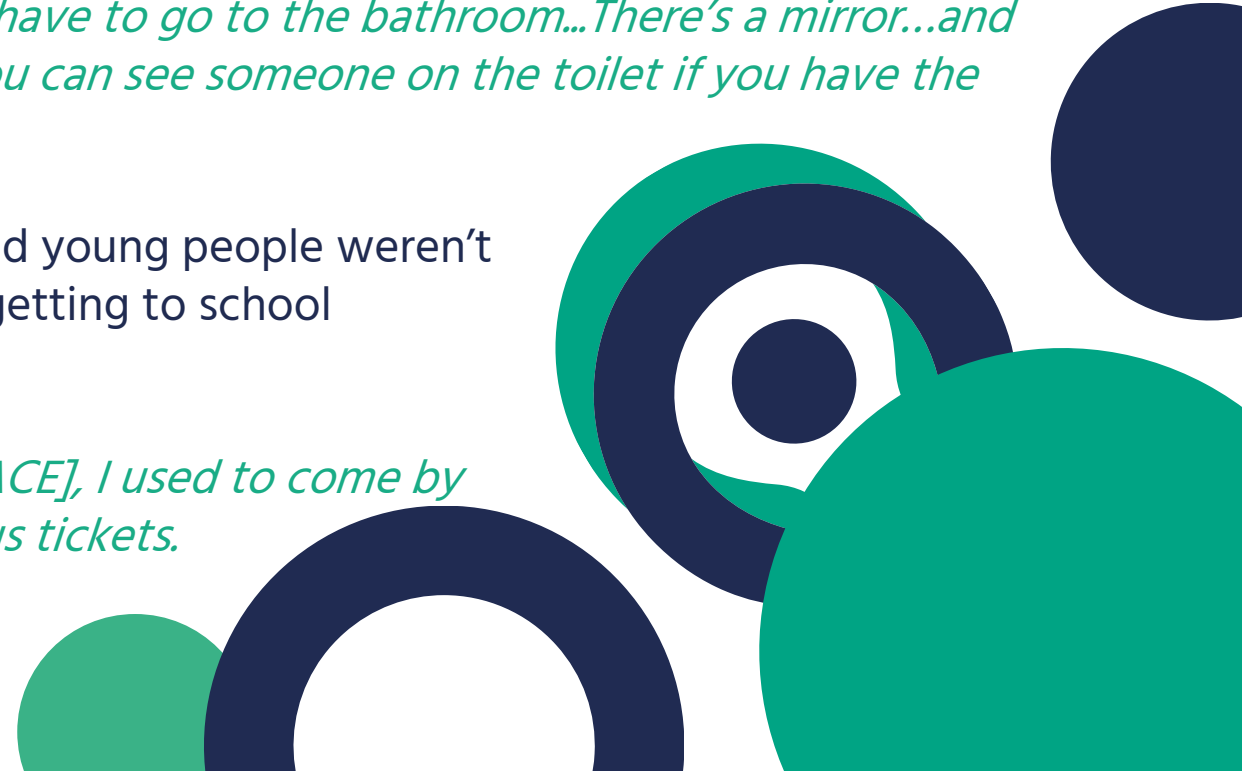
Boy, 13: Sometimes when we go to my auntie's house, she gives us food to take because she cooks out of home...that's the only time I eat normal food and not take out.

One child reflected on the reality of living in one room in a hotel with her mum and baby sibling, and how it makes even basic tasks such as getting dressed and going to the toilet difficult.

Girl, 9: I need more space. And then when I get changed, I have to go to the bathroom...There's a mirror...and then the bathroom door's there, so if you're on the bed, you can see someone on the toilet if you have the door open a little bit.

Being placed away from their previous home meant children and young people weren't able to see family and friends as much as they had before and getting to school was more difficult.

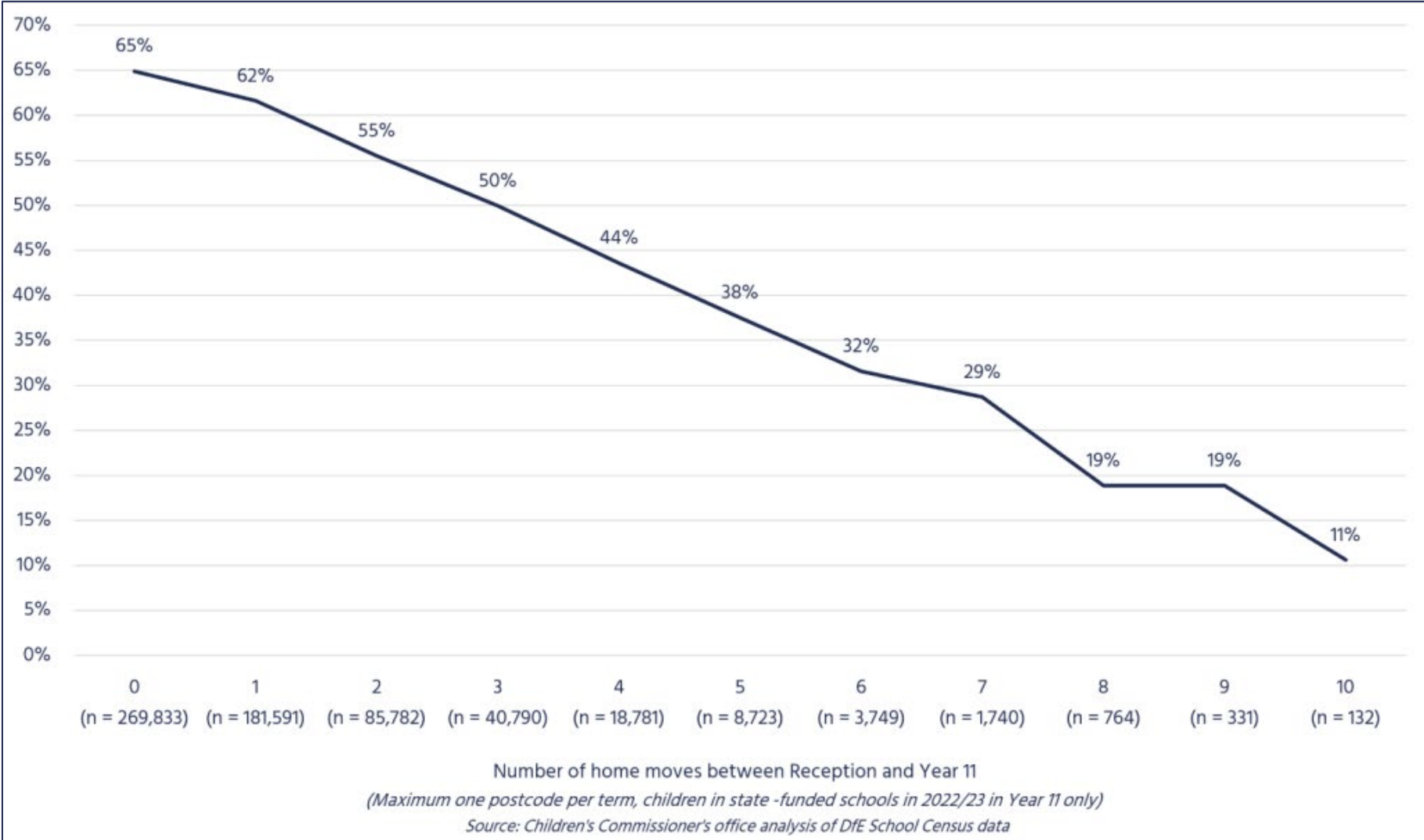
Boy, 13: When I had to go to a hotel in [another part of PLACE], I used to come by two buses, [school] said they would give money for the bus tickets.



Analysis by CCo has shown that housing instability is associated with poor educational outcomes for children. Pupils whose home postcode never changed between Reception and Year 11 were most likely to get five GCSEs passes, including English and maths (65%) whilst just half (50%) of those with three home moves over their school career achieved this; and just over one-in-ten (11%) of those with ten moves.

[No child should be homeless: how housing instability affects a child’s GCSE grades | Children's Commissioner for England](#) (March, 2025)

Figure 1: Proportion of children who passed 5 or more GCSEs, including English and maths, in Year 11 by the number of home moves across their school career



RQ3: How do children with experience of poverty think that services can be improved to reduce its impact on their lives?

Food

Food: food banks and food parcels

Children and young people spoke about the vital role that food banks and food parcels play in ensuring their families had enough to eat, however, they also highlighted the limitations of the food and service they received.

One young person reflected on the pressure these services are under and what that means in terms of how much is available.

Girl, 15: A lot of the time at food banks it's not even the stuff that you need there, because there's so many people in need of help with it.

Others spoke about the lack of choice and poor quality of the food provided.

Boy, 15: It's only canned food and no chicken or meat. And just other processed food like noodles and all that. Like canned corn and peas and carrots and potatoes.

Boy, 11: Every time I got [food packages] the food was always out of date and mouldy ...I know I'm poor but I'm not going to eat mouldy food.



Food: food banks and food parcels

Some young people had faced difficulties accessing food banks as there were none local to them.

Boy, 18: We tried going to the food bank but because there wasn't one near us, they said oh no you can't. So, we didn't have food

Boy, 15: Obviously I live in the middle of nowhere and the closest [food bank] is 8 miles away

One young person reflected that systems for distributing food parcels were not always fully thought out or child-friendly.

Boy, 15: You used to get big bags of shopping before school holidays. They gave loads of primary school kids jars of Bolognese. It was a good idea, but there were smashed glasses everywhere...just don't give children under 10 bags of shopping.

Another spoke about how his family were dissuaded from asking for the food they needed.

Boy, 18: My mum tried to get food parcels and they asked 'do you really need it', and my mum's severely anxious so when they said that she refused. Whatever you do they make you feel greedy even though...it's our rights.



Food: Free School Meals and provision in school

While some children spoke favourably about free school meals, for many participants there were issues with how the system operated. Children and young people spoke about not receiving enough food, either because the portion sizes were too small or because the money provided to students wasn't sufficient.

Girl, 18: the portion sizes were quite small to be honest, so by second break, you were hungry again, but you couldn't get anything.

One young person spoke about how the money that gets put onto their account for free school meals doesn't cover both a meal and a drink.

Boy, 15: They put in £2.50 [to the account] and the food's costing a bit more than they expect... I normally have to choose if I want a drink or a sandwich...today I was like, I'll get a drink because I've been having bad migraines, so I...need to take some paracetamol.

There was evidence that the quality of the food provided wasn't always adequate. For one young person, this meant he chose to buy food elsewhere.

Boy, 17: I still have free school meals, but they changed the food supplier [it's bad], so I go out and get a meal deal or something.



Food: Free School Meals and provision in school

One young person appreciated how the free school meals system in his school meant students were not aware of who received them.

Boy, 18: They wanted it to be discreet, so the staff would know. They'd have the list of people who were on it, so they'd know who to charge and who not to, which I think was a very good system because then it saves people the embarrassment of them just going 'oh no, I'm getting it for free'.

Older teens spoke about previous stigmatising experiences they had had of how free school meals were served and the difference in what they received compared to peers who paid for their meals. No children or young people spoke to us during our research about this being a current issue.

Girl, 18: When I was at school, we used to have to have stickers...to say that we were on free school meals....a lot of us who were on free school meals used to get bullied for it.

Boy, 18: They'd make you walk in the cafeteria with everyone there, so everyone knows you're poor because you have to wear a lanyard or a band on your wrist... Everyone had regular water bottles, but they had different ones for free school meals that were smaller than everyone else's.



Food: Free School Meals and provision in school

Young people also discussed issues of limited eligibility for free school meals and struggles to access them at different points in their schooling and as a child in care.

Girl, 18: Young people who are in care...they should be entitled to free school meals as well, but there's not always that thought in school.

Girl, 15: I also don't know how like many people they offer free school meals to because it was a struggle getting free school meals...in primary school...which is such a strange thing because...you're a primary school kid, you're not in control over...having money.

Boy, 18: I was eligible in primary school, but by the time I got to secondary school, because there's so many people...they can't just offer it to a thousand of them. So, it was very much exceptional circumstances...it's kind of leaving a lot of people by the wayside because they're not above that threshold.



Food: Free School Meals and provision in school

There were clear differences in children's experience depending on whether their school supplemented free school meals with additional provision, such as breakfast clubs or 'toast club' at breaktimes. Without anything extra, children are faced with a choice between eating at breaktime or lunchtime.

Girl, 14: We haven't had breakfast in the morning and...we were rushing. We were really hungry, so we'd have to get something at break. And then it comes to [lunch] time where we're really hungry again, but we can't afford that actual meal.

Where breakfast clubs did exist, the supply and choice can be limited.

Girl, 18: They give out free bagels, but...I really don't like eating bagels... I only eat them if I have to.

Boy, 14: Even if you do get [to breakfast club] on time, there's not a 100% chance that you're going to be able to get something because other people go there and [they] can run out.

RQ3: How do children with experience of poverty think that services can be improved to reduce its impact on their lives?

School & Education

The Big Ambition Data: School Experience

There is mixed quantitative evidence about the school experiences of children living in poverty. Some data from The Big Ambition survey suggests that those from lower-income backgrounds were **less likely to report enjoying school or having supportive teachers**, compared to those from higher-income backgrounds.

	Those who agreed that their family has everything needed to support them	Those who disagreed that their family has everything needed to support them
You have great teachers who support you	77%	53%
You enjoy school or college	63%	41%

In contrast, previous analysis of this data has shown that children in schools where the majority of pupils are eligible for free school meals feel more positively about school than their peers

Children in schools where the majority of pupils are eligible for free school meals were more likely to agree that they had great teachers that support them (85%) and that they enjoy school (75%) than children in schools where the minority of pupils had FSM (79% and 69%).

[The Big Ambition | Children's Commissioner for England](#) (March, 2024)

School and education: emotional support and understanding

Children and young people discussed the need for consistent understanding and support for students with more challenging home lives and the importance of having trusted adults in school that they could talk to.

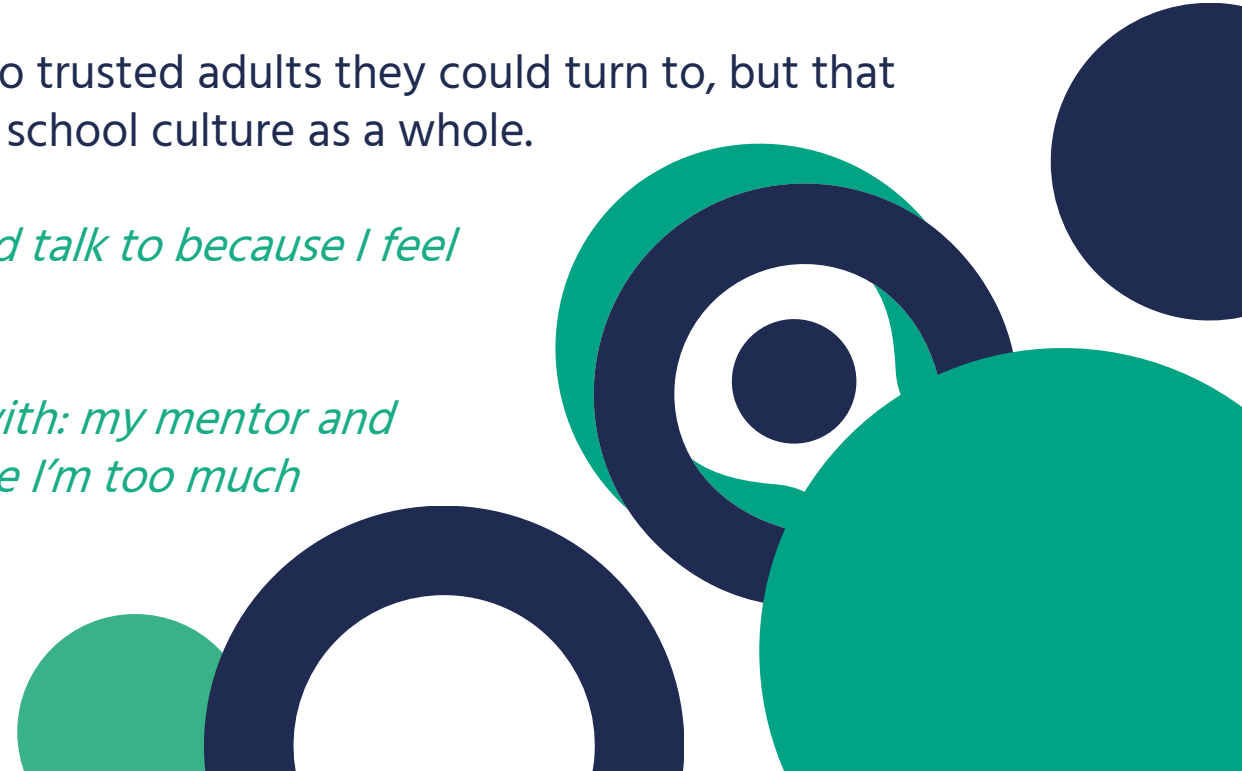
Boy, 16: They should have more situational awareness. Everyone's living situation is different, some teachers aren't very understanding of that, or they don't know how to understand it or approach it.

Girl, 17: I think that all teachers need to acknowledge that not everyone has a good home learning environment ...there's people that want to do their homework and can't...but there's a reason behind that. There's a reason behind everything. You need to build that system, you need to try the hardest for them.

There was a sense that for many children, there were one or two trusted adults they could turn to, but that these individuals were the exception and not representative of school culture as a whole.

Girl, 14: There's one person in like school that I could go and talk to because I feel much safer. Her name is Miss [X] and I trust her so much.

Boy, 17: There's only two people I've truly felt connected with: my mentor and counsellor, and that's it. People tend to dismiss me because I'm too much for them.



School and education: financial and other support

Schools are a locus of support for many of the children and young people we spoke to, providing them with food, uniform, travel passes, bursaries and signposting to other services, with often little reported support coming from elsewhere.

Girl, 13: [The school] supports the families that are in need. It does a good job. Food, supplies, clothes.

Girl, 13: For Christmas they gave us a hamper. They are really lovely. They are very very supportive, sometimes I think 'Don't they have their own families to look after?'

However, as with food provision, the level of support provided varies greatly between schools. The quotes below show the contrasting experience of two different young people when faced with financial barriers to studying certain subjects and what support the school provided to remove these.

Boy, 18: If you need extra materials [and] you're on learning support fund, college can order that stuff for you because for textbooks, you're forking out £40-50, which is obviously, a big chunk of money...they know there's quite a lot of people who just won't come because they can't afford to.

Girl, 17: In my secondary school, if you wanted to do PE as a subject for GCSE, you needed to do at least three different clubs outside of school. But obviously, people who can't afford that won't go into that GCSE.



School and education: financial and other support

Even where support schemes exist, these are not always fit for purpose.

Boy, 15: You can give your old school uniform in and they sell it for a bit of a lower price. But not many kids would want that. Obviously kids want their own fresh uniform to start Year 7 with.

One young person spoke about how the spending restrictions on his bursary meant he wasn't able to use it fully.

Boy, 18: I've got a bursary, but they only let me use it if I spend the money first and claim it back... they wanted me to buy a laptop which was £350. I don't have £350. And even with my DBS, getting the certificate [for course placements], they said I have to pay.



School and education: support for additional learning needs

Children and young people with additional needs including learning needs spoke about the inconsistencies in the support that was provided by schools, and the difference that properly funded support can make.

Boy, 16: Tutoring should be cheaper or free because more children...aren't comfortable learning in school most of the time because of the environment. But when they're at home they're able to learn because it's a relaxed space. The government should put it on. I've seen it – some people in my school have had tutors and that wasn't available to everybody.

Boy, 17: I didn't know I was dyslexic until Year 9...in Year 9, I really got the support I needed, the school actually got professional for once, they paid for things, I didn't get charged.

One young person spoke about how a lack of support to pay for school resources exacerbated the struggles he was already facing due to his dyslexia.

Boy, 18: We had maths books that we used in class and you'd have to pay for that but I didn't get one so I'd have to...go to the teacher and they'd have to tell me each individual question, but because I'm dyslexic I'd get it wrong.



RQ3: How do children with experience of poverty think that services can be improved to reduce its impact on their lives?

**Employment support &
career guidance**

The Big Ambition Data: Employment

- A smaller proportion of children from lower-income backgrounds indicated an **understanding of money and life skills and employment opportunities**, compared to those from higher-income backgrounds.

	Those who agreed that they have the same opportunities as other children	Those who disagreed that they have the same opportunities as other children
You know about good jobs for when you are older	73%	47%
You know about money and life skills	69%	43%

- Children who disagreed that *their family have everything they need to support them* were less likely to report that they know about good jobs for when they are older (36%), and about money and life skills (38%) than those who agreed that their family have everything they need (71% and 67% respectively).
- Whilst many of the participants in our research showed a detailed awareness of their own families' financial situation, this data highlights a contrasting lack of broader knowledge or skills about finances and career paths.

Employment opportunities and support

There was evidence that children and young people felt that in their area there were a lack of job opportunities regardless of age.

Girl, 16: And because of the area we live in...[my mum's] been out of work for quite some time, so it's a struggle for her to try and find a job, so I don't suspect it would be easier for me to try and find a job as an under 18.

Boy, 15: there are jobs, but most are minimum wage. Or it's cash in hand.

Young people also talked about the particular difficulties in finding work as a young person, and how a lack of experience and a lack of social connections act as a barrier.

Boy, 16: A lot of places expect you to have experience, but you can't get experience without experience so it's just like an endless cycle of not being able to find a way in. For me, I got work experience through school... a lot of people are working for their parents' company, but it's hard to find places without connections.



Pay

Those young people that did have a job found the lack of pay parity for under 18s unfair.

Girl, 15: [If I could change one thing it would be] pay. I get £5 an hour...because I'm 15...even though I'm doing the exact same stuff, if not more, than my colleagues.

One child reflected on the experience of her older siblings and how these feelings of unfairness were exacerbated when young people in lower income families are often only working to contribute to their household income.

Girl, 11: We should get paid the same because some people start working to help with family members. Or just to get extra cash for their mum or dad or for their carers.



Guidance

There was a sense that there was not sufficient guidance in place for young people planning for their future careers, including knowledge of existing opportunities.

Boy, 16: If it was easier for young people to know how to get into certain job roles and how to apply for them...some people they finish all their education and they're thrown into like an adult's world, and they don't actually know how to apply for jobs, like how to network.

Boy, 16: Teach young people about the opportunities they actually have, most of the time they don't even know they have access to something until it is too late. I didn't know that universities and apprenticeships prefer A-levels over B-Techs, if I knew that before it would have changed my mind.



RQ3: How do children with experience of poverty think that services can be improved to reduce its impact on their lives?

Social Security

Social security

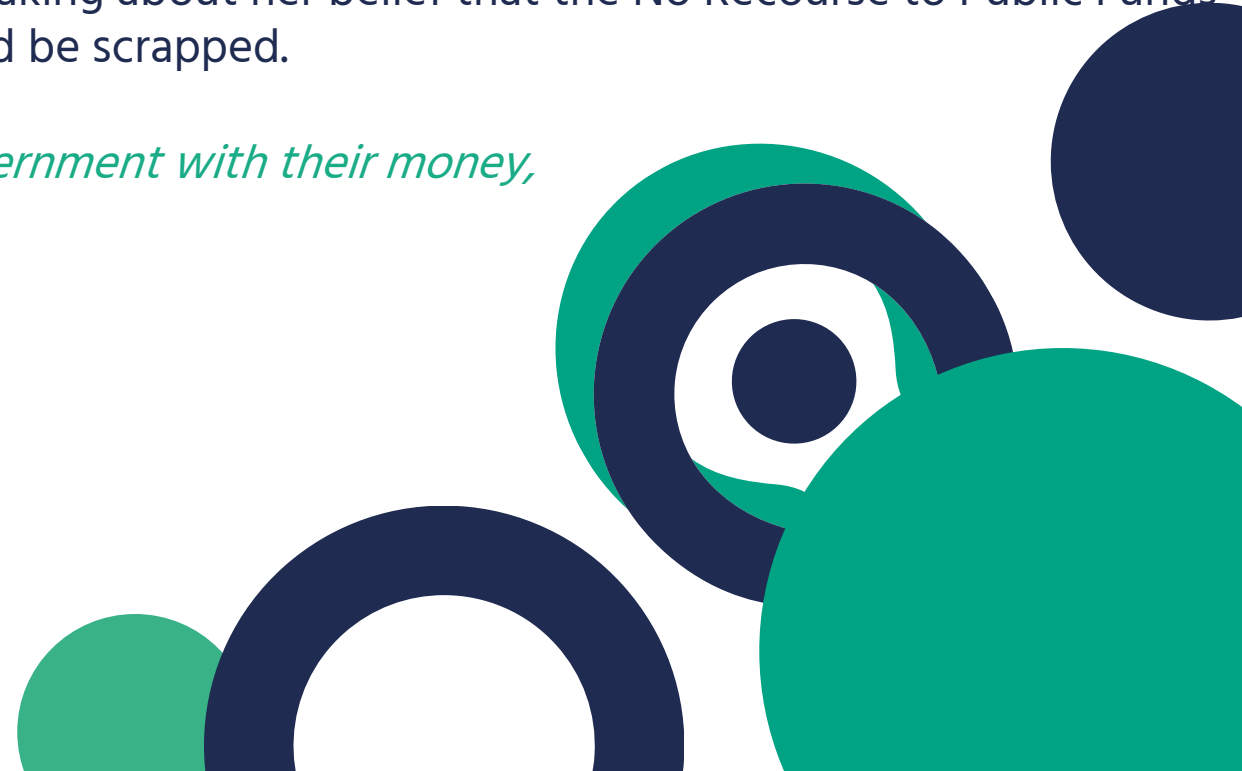
Children and young people believed that social security levels need to be increased.

Girl, 15: ...there should be more money for families. Some parents have very little income, or they have disabilities that mean they can't work. The government should give them more money so they can give their children the things they need.

YGirl, 11: I would...change the amount of money people get from Universal Credit...because £920, is that enough for one month?

Access to social security was also discussed, with one child speaking about her belief that the No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) rule for individuals subject to immigration control should be scrapped.

Girl, 11: I would cancel NRPF because it might help the government with their money, but it wouldn't help the people who are going to the UK.



Social security

Young people felt there was a lack of, and even misleading, guidance about social security entitlement, both for them and their families.

Girl, 17: More support with...benefits – the youth should know what they have access to.

Boy, 18: When my mum got diagnosed, I was the one that...told her about carers allowance [for a disabled sibling] – they originally told her she couldn't claim anything, but I searched online... and it genuinely helped my mum...I had to do a lot of research.

There was evidence of the stigma some of the young people's families had experienced due to claiming social security and young people's awareness of this.

Boy, 18: The system's so muddled up that they make you feel greedy for even wanting it it's our rights. We didn't choose to be poor.

Girl, 17: People who get Universal Credit are really demonised, there's no reason as to why you should be if you know that everyone is struggling in some way.



Social security

Young people suggested other ways the social security system could be improved, including better eligibility checks, monitoring and advising on what child benefit is spent on, and making the service more welcoming and supportive.

Boy, 17: I've seen like 5 people arrested for claiming too much Universal Credit when they didn't even need it. I feel like there should be like more background checks.

Girl 17: There are people out there that don't use it on things that they're supposed to...it's important that there's a way to see how much of child tax credit is being spent on the children themselves and the children's needs, like uniform. There needs to be someone calling a parent [to say] 'you can actually be spending your money on this part of your child's life'...just to help out that that little bit.

Girl, 17: I think that government services need to be more welcoming...whether it's benefits or mental health services, they need to be more welcoming, not a lot of people would attend them if they don't think that this is a space where that I can flourish. People need to know there is a space for them



RQ3: How do children with experience of poverty think that services can be improved to reduce its impact on their lives?

Sports, Leisure, & Community Services

The Big Ambition Data: Opportunities for Fun

- Children from lower-income backgrounds were **less likely to indicate that they have access to local, fun activities**, compared to those from higher-income backgrounds.

	Those who agreed that their family has everything needed to support them	Those who disagreed that their family has everything needed to support them
You have fun activities to do near where you live	75%	40%

- Children who disagreed that *they have the same opportunities as other children* were also less likely to report that there are fun activities to do near where they live (52%), compared to those who felt that they did have the same opportunities as others (77%).
- Children from schools in the most deprived areas were also less likely to report that there are fun activities to do near where they live (68%), compared to those in the least deprived areas (84%).

Sports, leisure and community services

Children and young people spoke about their desire for more opportunities to have fun – more clubs, parks and activities.

There was evidence that provision, and the quality of provision, depends on the area you live in, and that distance is often a barrier for children and young people to partake in leisure activities, particularly for those in rural communities.

Boy, 15: There's no basketball courts...a decent one is 10 miles away...There's no sports centres near - or there is one, but it's really small.

Where there are facilities, children spoke about how these aren't always sufficiently funded or well-kept.

Boy, 15: The grass [of the football pitch] is overgrown and then the keeper bit is muddy and the floor is uneven.

Boy, 15: There is the Hub – but they need to update it. It's not great, it's fine... Everything falls apart after 2 weeks. They have an air hockey table that kinds of works, but it's falling to bits.



Sports, leisure and community services

Quality was also an issue with some of the activities that children and young people had attended.

Boy, 17: Everyone was saying 'bring back the youth clubs' but now that there's more...the quality is bad.

Young people spoke about it being difficult to know what is on in the local area and the need for services to use social media to better target young people.

Girl, 16: Sometimes you really have to look for things...I personally don't have Facebook, but I know my mum does so she always just sends me things...I would say open it out to different social media platforms.

Older teenagers felt that as a group, there was little provision for people their age that wasn't prohibitively expensive.

Girl, 16: There's a community centre in my area but... it's mainly for kids or old people.

Girl, 15: It's kind of like you've got two options [in terms of finding things to do] - be an adult or have money.



Sports, leisure and community services

Children and young people shared the positive impact community services had on their lives and the wider community.

Girl, 16: [Mental health support organisation] that's what sort of got me out...because it's always so close as well to my own local area so I can always just walk and somewhere something [run by the organisation] will be on.

Boy, 17: I feel like youth centres could connect [areas with rival gangs]...when you're there, it's like you don't care about anything else, like you're just there to meet people, make friends and get along.

Religious organisations were often mentioned as a key source of support.

Girl, 14: I have a computer at home from our Pastor, because he gave us one.

Boy, 15: The gurdwaras around here, they provide food...I'm pretty sure it is daily... Literally anyone is open to go there and have food.

Girl, 10: My church does a food bank...where they give food to people who can't really afford that much food. People say there's different like varieties of food, drinks, other cooked food that you can take home with you.



Sports, leisure and community services

As well as discussing existing provision or what they would like to have, children and young people spoke about the loss of community services they previously used due to funding cuts.

Girl, 15: We used to go to this...food club thing ...it got shut down for some reason...Maybe because it didn't have funding... They used to basically invite people in and all the kids could come and it was kind of a...community centre. And they'd have food...and little activities all around, all the kids would go play and there was an outside bit. It was pretty nice. And then it just stopped.

One young person reflected on the impact the potential closure of his local adventure playground would have had on children in his community.

Boy, 15: The adventure playground...was really close to getting shut down...our local MP, he kept that going. Obviously with the help of the community as well, but that is one of the key things we have in [PLACE] and a lot of kids go to that, so if that was to be shut down, I think it would destroy the young and upcoming generation.



RQ3: How do children with experience of poverty think that services can be improved to reduce its impact on their lives?

Travel

Travel

As well as the cost of transport (as set out in the [previous section](#)) the quality, safety and reliability of public buses was a concern for children and young people, particularly when this was their only mode of transport.

Girl, 16: It's not too bad, but sometimes it's late or it doesn't actually end up turning up at all, or the buses are too packed and you've got to wait for another one.

Young person, 15: To feel safe on my bus, sometimes I've had to call some of my friends, so it looks like I'm doing something so people won't talk to me.

Boy, 13: I don't really like them [buses]... some I've been on before go really close to a red light and they just slam the brakes, and you just fly forward and there's not very much you can do about it...



Travel: school transport

The difference in experience for those students who could get a school bus versus those who had to take public buses was also discussed. For participants, the benefits of school transport included lower costs, greater safety and not being penalised if the bus was running late.

Boy, 18: I was bullied a lot in school, and it continued on the bus, but because it was a public bus, there was nothing I could do about it. Whereas on the school buses...there can be behaviour control because it's a school bus.

Boy, 12: I had to wait for another bus to come since our first bus was late, so I got to school at...ten to, when you're supposed to be here at twenty to. So, I got a late. That happened twice in a row...they're not reliable.

Girl, 14: The fact we don't have a school bus is...costing a lot more for some people than it would be to just have a school bus to...an area near your house. Instead, we're getting public transport, which is cancelled and delayed and stops you from getting to school on snow days.

Travel: rural transport

In rural areas, children and young people spoke about a lack of reliable transport options.

Boy 15: Public transport is awful... Inconsistent... We've got one bus that comes through.

This meant they faced barriers in accessing health services, leisure activities and education.

Boy, 15: But the hospital is now in [PLACE]. It can take an hour and 15 minutes on a bus if you needed to go to A&E.

Boy, 15: I want to go to college in [PLACE] – you have to get up really early at 6am, and you get back late at 7pm. The bus takes forever.

Boy 18: But [five-a-side football] is all the way in [PLACE], that means you have to get a lift.

With limited public transport and their reliance on lifts from parents and others, young people in rural areas spoke about their desire to learn to drive, but also the cost barrier to doing so.

Boy 18: It's just so expensive to get a driving licence. Like 6 months of lessons.

Travel: rural transport

Cycling was not seen as a feasible alternative due to the risk posed by speeding cars and drink drivers on rural roads.

Boy 15: Up [PLACE] speed limits along is like 70 and there are no streetlights at all... if you're going to cycle along that, you're probably going to end up in a ditch.

Boy 18: And yeah, it's quite often we get drink drivers around here.

There was also evidence that children and young people in rural areas saw a direct link between the lack of public transport provision and their inability to access better education and employment opportunities.

Boy, 17: Especially in [PLACE], jobs are few and far between. And when you don't have regular transport, you can't get a job anywhere else.

Boy, 14: If you want to get a good job, you have to go to [PLACE] college. But not everyone has access to that. My friend doesn't have a car.

RQ3: How do children with experience of poverty think that services can be improved to reduce its impact on their lives?

Health

The Big Ambition Data: Physical Health

- A smaller proportion of children from lower-income backgrounds reported **access to good healthcare and a healthy diet**, compared to those from higher-income backgrounds.

	Those who agreed that their family has everything needed to support them	Those who disagreed that their family has everything needed to support them
You can access good healthcare when you need it	86%	46%
You have a healthy diet	77%	51%

- Children from schools in the most deprived areas were also less likely to report having good access to healthcare (77%), and having a healthy diet (69%), than those in the least deprived schools (84% and 83% respectively).

Mental health

Children's experience and discussion of health services was more focused on mental than physical health. The waiting times and quality of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) were of particular concern.

Girl, 18: When I was a kid, I was put on a waiting list...you know CAMHS? And I turned 18, and I was still on that waiting list, then I went to the GP, and now I'm on another waiting list for three years...or more...It's just waiting list after waiting list after waiting list.

Boy, 17: Even with...my first assessment [with CAMHS], I felt like she was following lines or something, I just told her I'm going to stop talking because you're not even listening, you invited me here to talk about my issues and you're not even trying to hear me.

Young people reflected on the two-tier system, depending on whether you could afford private treatment, and the severity of symptoms required before you qualify for free support.

Girl, 16: I think a lot of people slip through the cracks...when it comes to mental health because...you're not quite ill enough to get the free mental health support.

Girl, 16: If you do want that immediate help with your mental health, you have to pay for it, which I think is quite a big investment. It's a lot of money to go and pay for that.



Physical health

Children suggested improvements for the health service more generally which included making it easier to get appointments, to process prescriptions quicker and to recognise the barriers service users on lower incomes face.

Boy, 15: You struggle to get appointments [at the GP surgery], and then if you do get an appointment, they'll refer you to...another branch...families that don't have a car, it's hard for them to get transport...wasting a couple of pounds on the buses is not the best thing when you're thinking about heat or eat.

Boy, 6: It's tricky to go to the dentist...for my family [with 5 children]. If it's tricky then the dentists can come to our house with the special machines and stuff.

Children and young people recognised the importance of health more broadly and thought more could be done to prevent health issues through engagement with young people.

Girl, 17: There should be more access to GPs...if a doctor went into a school ...and spoke to them about health...that would support a lot of children to take healthier options in life.

As set out in earlier slides, participants discussed [the health impacts of poor-quality homes \(particularly mould\)](#) and the [inability to afford balanced and nutritious food](#).



Accessing health services

One young person spoke about how a youth charity was the main factor in him seeking help with and dealing with his health issues.

Boy, 18: [Youth charity] was the one that gave me the motivation to actually speak to my parents about [my health issues] and then subsequently speak to my doctors about this stuff.

Some children felt that there should be more systems in place to ensure they are receiving the healthcare they are entitled to.

Boy, 6: I think that they should go in every club, at school or at home, they should go to everyone, have a list down of who they go to... like dentists and stuff to make sure that happens.

To note, accessing affordable dentist care was not an issue that was brought up in this research, a reflection perhaps of this being more of an adult concern and less directly relevant to children and young people.

CCo has found socioeconomic inequalities in accessing assessments and diagnosis for autism, ADHD and other neurodevelopmental conditions.

Children and their families told the office about a system that disadvantages those unable to pay for private care, and the detrimental effects of years-long waiting lists

“Particularly in [local area], our parents cannot afford to pay for private therapy, and so we are stuck on waiting lists that are several years long. It took me two years to be seen by CAMHS, and a further two years to receive my autism diagnosis.” –

Child, 17, interviewed by CCo

[Waiting times for assessment and support for autism, ADHD and other neurodevelopmental conditions | Children's Commissioner for England](#) (October, 2024)

RQ3: How do children with experience of poverty think that services can be improved to reduce its impact on their lives?

Social Care

Social Care

A small number of children and young people with experience of children's social care chose to speak about it. One young person detailed the help that their social worker was able to provide, but highlighted issues with the short-term nature of this support

Girl, 18: I had a job a year ago, but my social worker got that for me because of people she knew... after I finished working at that place, I was stuck. I didn't know what to do. I had no support that I could turn to because I didn't have a social worker anymore.

There was evidence of a lack of broader support for children in care.

Girl, 18: There's nothing for young people that are in care...there's no support groups...nothing like people said here [about youth provision].

Others felt that children's situations need to be investigated more thoroughly by social services.

Boy, 17: It sounds sad, but I feel like there should be home checks because there could be so much going on, there might be signs, but they never really check, and children might not want to keep talking about an issue. Even check ups in school – ask how's stuff at home, stuff like that. Something that always gets talked about is feeling like you matter, and some young children never feel like that.

Social Care

Research by CCo has found that area income deprivation may influence which type of social care intervention a child receives.

The balance between child protection and child in need work is notably different in richer and poorer areas. In the least deprived quarter of neighbourhoods, there were 3.6 times as many children on child in need plans as children on child protection plans, compared to 1.9 times as many in the most deprived quarter. Suggesting that social care thresholds differ, with richer areas supporting a broader group of children with (relatively) lower need.

"I find that poverty, the level of poverty that I've seen - [including] housing issues - is such a limiting, frustrating, horrific barrier to achieving the transformative change that I've come into social work to try to achieve alongside families. It's such a constraining factor because despite the best will in the world to do this work with families. I see how limited they are and the cyclical effect" – Social worker, interviewed by CCo

Part 1: [Huge regional variation in support from children's social services for some of England's most vulnerable children](#) | [Children's Commissioner for England](#) (March 2024)

Part 2: [What is this plan for? The purpose and content of children in need plans](#) | [Children's Commissioner for England](#) (November 2024)

RQ3: How do children with experience of poverty think that services can be improved to reduce its impact on their lives?

Safety & Policing

Safety and policing

Children and young people spoke about how more street lighting and an increase in Neighbourhood Watch-type initiatives would make them feel safer.

Boy, 17: If there's more neighbourhood watch groups ordinary people could look out for each other, and you build those connections, and it also keeps children safe at the same time.

Girl, 12: There are random sketchy alleyways...Add some streetlights to [make it feel safer]. There's nothing there.

Some children would be confident to go to the police, whereas others are unsure of how they would be treated if they did and don't have confidence in their response times.

*Boy, 9: If kids call 999, police probably don't think it's true...they should make...
Childline for police.*



Safety and policing

Overall, children and young people spoke about how they felt a greater police presence is needed in their communities.

Boy, 16: I wish the police were more on a day-to-day basis actually circling. I know they do it, but you don't really feel their presence.

Girl, 17: A lot of people don't feel safe going to school so there does need to be community support officers to just be there, someone you can see to know...any concerns I have, I can go straight to them and they will be able to do something about it.

However, some children and young people talked about negative experiences and perceptions of the police.

Boy, 18: There's people on my block that sell [drugs] and the council know but they don't do anything, and there's no police near, I could walk round with weed in my hand and wouldn't get stopped...the way the police run already is terrible, when we were younger there was a raid on my block, they smashed our door down...



RQ3: How do children with experience of poverty think that services can be improved to reduce its impact on their lives?

Solutions Summary

What do children and young people think should be done?

- Improve the service provided by council and housing associations, particularly increasing responsiveness to requests for repairs.
- Address the unsuitability and poor quality of temporary accommodation – ensure adequate space, access to cooking facilities, and proximity to school and support networks.
- Improve the choice, availability, and quality of free food provision, such as food banks and food parcels. Ensure that children on Free School Meals are given sufficient money or food for a whole day, and that the system is not stigmatising.
- Foster understanding and support for children with challenging home lives among professionals, particularly in schools.

- Provide effective practical and financial support for students in all schools, not just some.
- Improve job opportunities and career guidance for children and young people.
- Increase levels of social security benefits.
- Create more opportunities for fun – such as clubs and activities - particularly for older teens. Improve the quality, upkeep, and sustained availability of public spaces, such as parks and community centres.
- Increase the quality of public transport and reduce the costs for children and young people, particularly in rural areas.
- Improve waiting times for, and the quality of, mental health services children and young people, such as providing support whilst waiting for interventions.
- Implement community safety strategies, such as more street lighting, Neighbourhood Watches, and improving resident-police relationships.

RQ4: How do the answers to these questions vary for different groups of children?

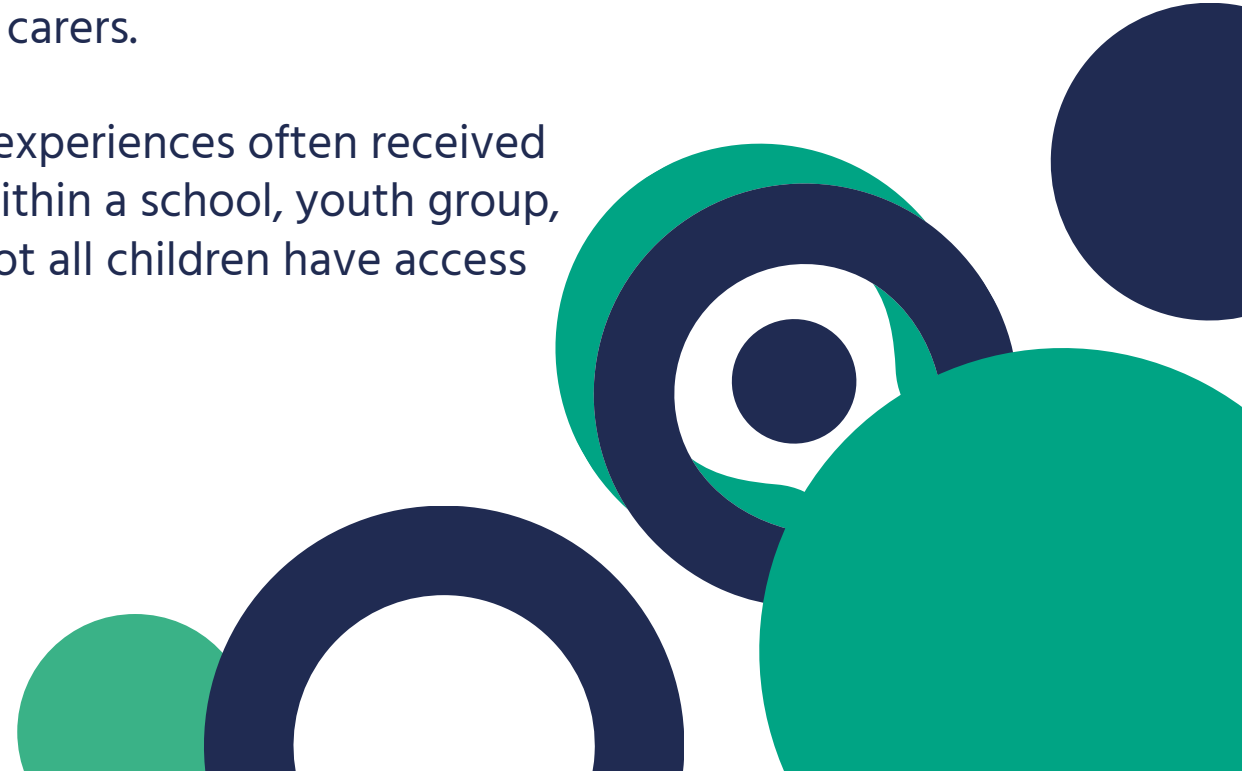
Group Variations

Speaking to children and young people from diverse groups and locations has highlighted the **variability** in their experiences.

Variations are sometimes due to a **“post-code lottery”**, such as the level of financial aid and free food provided by different schools or the free bus travel available to children in London.

For some groups of children and young people, the impact of poverty may be amplified by other **barriers and vulnerabilities** and vice versa, such as those with additional learning needs not being able to afford equipment that would benefit them, the limited access to financial support of those from immigrant families or the emotional burden, responsibilities and subsequent impact on education for young carers.

Importantly, children and young people that reported positive experiences often received **support from a single organisation or trusted adult** – from within a school, youth group, or charity – who went above and beyond to remove barriers. Not all children have access to this support.



Group Variations

Differences in experience between **age groups** include older teenagers feeling that they are often over-looked in terms of youth provision and activities. They have a greater awareness of and take on more responsibility to help with their families' financial situation and spoke more about the social impact of having less money than peers. In terms of travel, 16-18-year-olds are subject to more expensive bus travel.

Variations between those children and young people living in **rural vs. urban areas** included the barrier that inadequate transport links poses for accessing health services, leisure activities, education and employment opportunities for those in rural areas. Although safety was a concern across the board, children and young people in more urban areas spoke more about more serious crime, including gang and knife crime.

In terms of **gender**, it was older teenage girls who spoke about providing emotional support for their mothers and assuming parent-like roles in their households. Boys and girls expressed different concerns about safety: whereas boys discussed the prevalence and risks of becoming involved with gangs, girls focused more on feeling unsafe walking alone and highlighted the lack of street lighting.

Differences depending on the **ethnicity** included some poor perceptions of and experiences with the police for children and young people from a minority ethnic group and a recognition of the strong bonds formed in neighbourhoods of residents from a similar migrant background.

