

# THE COST OF LEARNING IN LOCKDOWN

March 2021 update



Because growing  
up can be hard

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# Introduction

## Aim of report

This report is based on surveys carried out with parents, carers, children and young people while schools were closed to most pupils during January and February 2021. **We asked families about their experiences of learning during lockdown**, with particular focus on families who are struggling with money.

We already know that many families find it challenging to manage the costs of education when schools are open to all learners. However, we wanted to know more about the resources low-income families may or may not have for learning at home, what schools have done that has helped during this period and what more families need now as we enter the recovery period.

## Methodology

**1,570 parents and carers and 785 children and young people responded to our surveys.** Over 30 per cent of the parents and carers were from low-income households and over 20 per cent of the children and young people who responded told us they were in receipt of free school meals. We also carried out in-depth interviews with 7 families.

The respondents are not a representative sample of families across Britain, as **we sought to engage with communities who are living on a low income** and risk being seldom heard in survey fieldwork. As the Cost of the School Day project is long established in Scotland, we have a larger sample from families living in Scotland than in Wales and England. However, themes were consistent across the nations. We thank everyone who responded to our surveys and helped to share them.

We hope that this report will enable educators, policymakers and other interested stakeholders to understand more about the impact the pandemic has had on families and children's experiences of education and how families can best be supported during the recovery period. While the report provides a snapshot of life in January and February 2021, insights from parents and children will remain critical in the months ahead.

This report builds on findings from [The Cost of Learning in Lockdown](#) research published by CPAG in June 2020. We have also drawn on our work with schools and local authorities from the UK Cost of the School Day project and Children North East's Poverty Proofing the School Day programme. Schools can also find more guidance on tackling child poverty and reducing school costs in our [England](#) and [Scotland](#) toolkits.

# Summary of findings

## Our findings

35% of low-income families responding to our survey are still missing essential resources for learning, with laptops and devices most commonly missing.

Children in receipt of free school meals are more likely than other pupils to report sharing devices at home and using mobile phones to complete schoolwork.

75% of families receiving cash payments to replace free school meals (FSM) say this works well or very well; satisfaction levels are far lower for other replacement methods.

Low-income families say they are more concerned about money than last spring and 90% report spending more on essential bills while children are at home.

Children and young people most want help with learning and finding a routine when they return to school.

## The impact

### Financial



Low-income parents are struggling with costs and face impossible decisions related to their children's learning, such as prioritising scarce resources and juggling schooling with their work.

### Learning



Children and young people are not able to learn and participate at school and in remote learning without the right resources.

### Wellbeing



Children and young people are missing their friends and are worried about their learning.

## Recommendations

It's clear from the findings that many families need greater financial security to help them support children's learning, stay afloat and recover from the impact of the pandemic. Within education, **there are clear steps that can be taken to help achieve this.**

- 1 Governments must prioritise **financial support**, through cash payments, to help low-income families through this crisis.
- 2 Governments must **urgently review the free school meals threshold** so that support reaches all families who need it.
- 3 **Schools and local authorities should implement poverty aware practices and policies.** This includes reducing school-related costs, maximising incomes and providing wraparound care.
- 4 Schools, local authorities and governments must continue to work together to make sure **all pupils have the tools they need at home to participate in learning outside the classroom.**

# Summary of recommendations

## What can schools and local authorities do?

### Home learning

- Ask families about their home learning resource needs.
- Continue to help bridge gaps in resources so children can participate in any home learning, including homework when back in school.
- Continue valued contact with families during any periods of home learning.

### Free school meals

- Provide cash payment replacements for FSMs during any periods of isolation or home schooling.
- Ensure free school meal support is reaching families if they are not in school.

### Wraparound care and the school holidays

- Consider how wraparound care and holiday programmes can play a role in helping families back to work, as well as supporting children with learning, physical and mental health and wellbeing.

### Reducing costs and maximising incomes

- Review school policies and practices, including Covid-related policies, to ensure they help to reduce financial pressures on families e.g. uniform policies.
- Provide clear, regular and universal information about financial support and entitlements to make sure families don't miss out.

### Social and emotional support

- Continue to be mindful of family financial circumstances and use sensitive and supportive communication with parents and carers.
- Support children to reconnect with their peers when they return to school, as well as helping them back into a routine and providing reassurances about schoolwork.



## What can governments do?

### Home learning

- Work with schools and councils to make sure all pupils have what they need at home to participate in future periods of home learning, including homework.

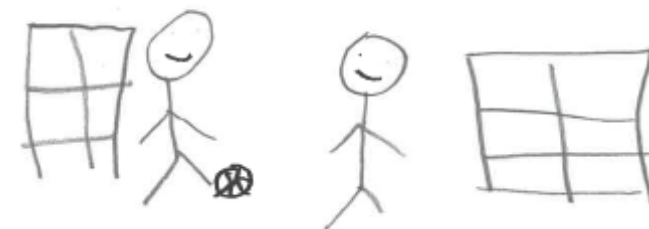
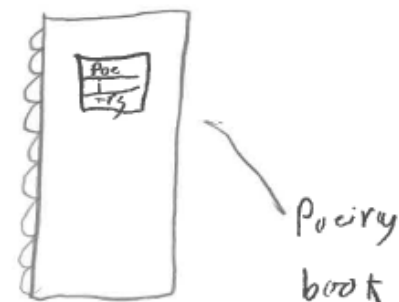
### Free school meals

- At a minimum, expand free school meals eligibility to working families who are struggling to get by.
- Prioritise a 'cash first' approach to FSMs during any future periods of isolation, remote learning or holiday support.
- Recognising recent progress made in Scotland, other governments must take action to expand universal school meals to more children.

### Wraparound care and the school holidays

- Provide sufficient, long term funding for wraparound care and holiday programmes as these benefit children and families.
- Provide cash support during the school holidays as this works best for families.

# Background



I wish that we could do more of learning about money

# Background

## Context

In every school in the UK, an increasing number of families are struggling on low incomes. This was the case even prior to Covid-19, but the economic effects of the pandemic have caused further reductions to household finances and families with children have been hit hardest.

When schools closed their doors once more to most pupils in January 2021, families were not only faced with the prospect of homeschooling children, but also with the challenges this presented for their finances. Although some families have received financial support, this has not reached all families in need and many parents responding to our survey reported money worries.

Low-income families are more concerned about money than they were during the first lockdown.

We heard during the first lockdown about the additional costs of having children at home including food, electricity, gas and learning resources, but financial pressures on families have increased.



90% of low-income families said they **were spending more on bills than usual while children were at home.**

**“It's not just about free school meals replacement. It's about heating the house all day whilst my child is at home.” (Lone parent of one child, Scotland)**

Some families were noticeably missing out and struggling more than others financially:

- 1 Working families who did not qualify for any extra financial support but were in need of help.

**“[I receive] nothing whatsoever because I earn more than the UC monthly allowed amount of £610 because I am on more than minimum wage on an 18 hours a week contract.” (Lone parent with one child, Scotland)**

- 2 Families who were usually eligible for non-means tested free school meals in England and Scotland but were not receiving them during lockdown.

**“My child who would get free meals at school I am now having to buy extra food at home.” (Lone parent with two children, Scotland)**

# Background

## Context

Families also told us about some of the challenges they faced prior to lockdown, during the autumn term and holidays. These included:

### Back-to-school costs

Low-income families noticed an increase in school-related costs e.g. uniform and stationery, in comparison to other years.

“Had to buy heavier jumpers/fleeces to be worn indoors in the classrooms as windows needed to be open meaning classroom was cold. We were told a lot of time would be spent outdoors so money was spent on thicker outdoor jackets and footwear etc when this was wasted as outdoor learning rarely took place.” (Mum of one child, Scotland)

### Trouble accessing FSMs

Nearly half of families who responded who were eligible for FSMs did not receive them while their children were isolating from school.

### Limited wraparound care

Many breakfast clubs and after-school activities were cancelled resulting in additional challenges for some families.

“Wasn't entitled to anything but struggling as I'm working shorter hours due to no wrap around care at school” (Lone parent with two children, England)

### Additional costs over the school holidays

During the October half term and Christmas holidays some families received additional support to help with the costs associated with having children at home over the holidays. Where support reached families, it was hugely valued.

“It was £12.50 per week and an additional £100 I think so it was very helpful at a stressful financial time.” (Lone parent with one child, Scotland)

Unfortunately, many of the low-income families we heard from hadn't been able to access support over holidays and this was contributing to frustrations and worries.

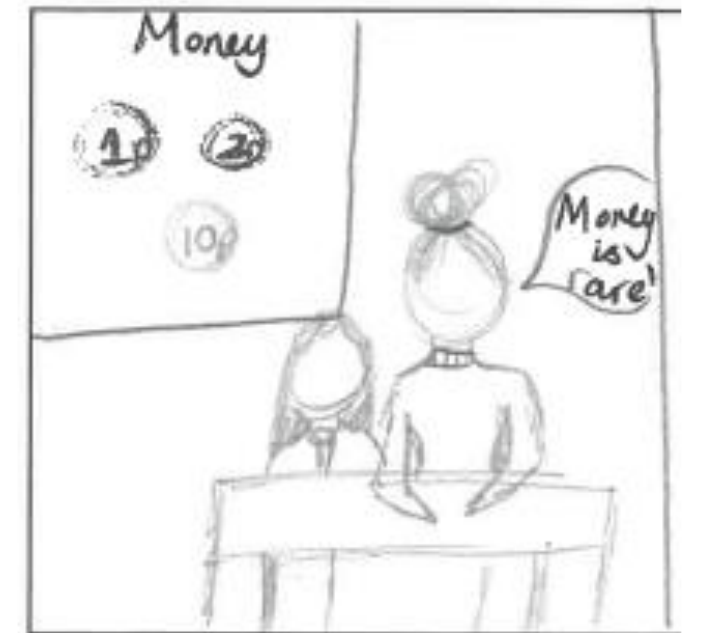
“We would have valued it as a shielding family with 2 asd kids. Husband on furlough.” (Mum of two children, Wales)

**Many families were struggling financially going into this lockdown** and subsequently faced increasing costs and pressures which, despite parents' best efforts, have affected their children's experiences of learning during lockdown.



# Learning in Lockdown: Children and family experiences

2021 update



# Learning in Lockdown

## Home learning

Parents and carers are going to extraordinary lengths to help their children continue learning, but **many low-income families face impossible choices** in prioritising who gets access to scarce resources like laptops, bandwidth and one-to-one supervision.

Three quarters of parents in our survey say they have everything they need to learn from home. However, **35% of families living on a low income still don't have everything they need for their children to take part in learning during school closures.**

"It's making it difficult to access videos just using my mobile...My mobile is cracked and starts hurting your fingers after a while. It just makes me feel we can't access what others are" (Mum of one child, Wales)

Personal computers or laptops remain the most common missing resources, affecting half of households who say they don't have everything they need to learn from home.



A quarter of learners on free school meals told us they still had to share a device with other people.

"[We haven't got] enough technology – the children are sharing devices. They are under additional stress that their work is late as they are having to share devices, and are working during evenings and weekends." (Mum of three children, Wales)

Many families also lack printing facilities, with parents and carers resorting to copying worksheets by hand so their children can still join in with learning at home.

**The home learning environment**  
Low-income families were more likely to tell us that their children's learning was also affected by their home environment, particularly insufficient space and a lack of suitable furniture.

**How schools are helping:**  
Schools have gone above and beyond to try and bridge the gaps in resources where they can. This includes lending out laptops, delivering printing, supplying stationery and adjusting teaching to help all learners join in. Local councils have also played an important role in getting support to families.

"My daughter who's at high school only has a phone to access her work. She suffers from migraine so this has a big impact in her learning. I was contacted by her school last week and they are trying to get her a laptop." (Mum of two children, Scotland)

**Worryingly, half of the families struggling with missing resources say no one had asked if they had everything they needed to learn from home.**

# Learning in Lockdown

## Free school meals

Free school meals are hugely valued by families who receive them. They help to maximise incomes when children are attending school and through replacements while schools are closed. Families in Scotland and England used to receiving non-means-tested FSM for younger children noted the financial impact of paying for extra meals at home while schools are closed.

**Families favour cash payments when it comes to FSM replacements.**

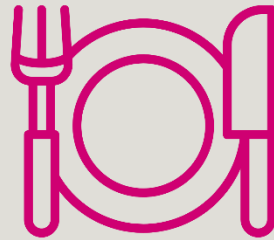
**75% of families receiving cash payments say this works well or very well for them.**

“You can shop at any supermarket instead of a designated one.” (Mum of three children, Scotland)

Satisfaction with other methods like vouchers or food deliveries was much lower - only 40% said these other methods were working well.

### Why do families favour cash payments?

- Choice in where to shop
- Being able to buy food they know their children will eat
- Being able to get best value
- Being able to shop online and stay safe
- Removes stigma and embarrassment - as one parent said, 'it makes me feel normal'



“It can take quite a while to add separate vouchers in the supermarket and it’s quite embarrassing.” (Mum of two children, England)

“It’s easier to do the shopping of things I know they’ll like and enjoy... they have very different tastes and can be picky, it’s easier for me this way.” (Mum of two children, Wales)

“Need to use public transport exposing myself to the virus and I’m high risk. [Cash] means I can order shopping locally and have it delivered.” (Mum of one, Scotland)

“I have more choice of shops so can get cheaper food.” (Mum of two children, Wales)

“It saves any embarrassment for me or my son... I don’t want to look underprivileged going to the counter with vouchers etc. I’m too proud for that.” (Mum of one child, Scotland)

### Families missing out

We heard from families struggling financially but not entitled to FSM replacements because of incomes lying just above FSM eligibility thresholds.

Recent CPAG analysis tells us that pre-pandemic, at least two in five school-age children – 1.3million – who are living below the poverty line are not entitled to FSM.

## Catrin's story



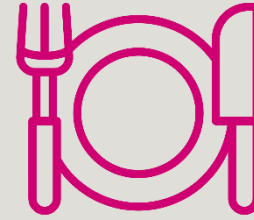
Catrin has three daughters and lives in North Wales.

She is a lone parent, and solely responsible for parenting her two youngest children who are in primary school. Her oldest daughter attends secondary school.

Catrin is self-employed, and her paid work has reduced significantly during the pandemic as many of her client's businesses are closed. While she would normally work full time, she is only working about 20 hours a week now.

"As my income has gone down, we've been entitled to a bit from universal credit. It's not the same, don't get me wrong, but it obviously stops us from being completely broke."

The children are entitled to free school meals, which have been replaced by cash payments during lockdown. Catrin is full of praise for this replacement method and the flexibility it offers.



"We get cash payments into the bank account. It's about £58 a week for the three of them. Honestly, it's absolutely fantastic [...]. It's helped us out massively. [...] Cash is way better than any other options like random food being delivered or vouchers or anything like that – it gives us complete autonomy and freedom of choice on how best that money is spent to suit our family. I've got a meat eater, a pescatarian and a vegetarian to cater for – if we were sent specific foods, that wouldn't work well for everyone's dietary requirements."



The free school meal payments helped Catrin cope with the drop in income and increased costs caused by lockdown.

Catrin's daughters have struggled with accessing home learning due to old, broken and incompatible devices. Her oldest daughter, who is expected to attend live lessons all day, has to borrow a laptop from a friend. The two youngest children had basic Kindle tablets, which aren't compatible with Google Classroom.



"We basically couldn't get the school stuff to work on their tablets [...]. So initially we were trying to do bits on my work laptop, but of course I'm supposed to be working on it myself. [...] So in the end [...] the school got Chromebooks for us to borrow."

Catrin is very clear that she does not want to see her children pressured into 'catching up' with expected educational milestones when they first go back to school.

"The focus should be on wellbeing, on making sure they're alright and on settling them back into routines. And obviously keeping them safe."

# Learning in Lockdown

## Keeping in touch with friends, classmates and teachers

Beyond remote learning, young people talked enthusiastically about how their teachers had found creative ways to help them stay in touch with their friends and classmates. Often using online platforms such as Microsoft Teams or Zoom, pupils told us about **allocated time for online socialising** separate from their learning, such as online quizzes or games, or **messaging functions** to speak regularly with their friends and classmates.

Teachers used innovative approaches to make sure that there were age appropriate ways for pupils to stay connected.



For example, one school in Scotland supported younger pupils to share voice notes with their classmates, which meant they could talk to one another and connect easily.

“She made a chat in teams called chat to your friends so we could talk to each other” (Boy aged 12, Scotland)

Lots of pupils told us that teachers were doing everything they could to help keep up their friendships and continue learning.

This was a feeling echoed by parents and carers who were generally satisfied with the communication they were receiving from schools and had lots of praise for their ongoing support.

“School have been fantastic. Calls each week to check in. Realised during a period of isolation printing off work was not possible for all parents so have used google classroom better” (Mum of one child, England)

Parents described how teachers had kept in touch but had also helped to provide a range of helpful resources like learning packs and craft materials.

Some children expressed frustration that they could not properly communicate with friends or classmates through online classes or that this was not happening enough.

“We are not allowed to chat on google classroom ” (Girl aged 12, Scotland)

A small number of pupils told us they felt they had not been supported at all to stay in touch with their classmates. When pupils were asked what more teachers could do, they asked for more time to see their friends and classmates, either through dedicated sessions or in live lessons.

Supporting children and young people to reconnect with each other is an important priority as schools return.

# Back to school and looking forward: What do children and families need?



Football



Netball



# Back to school and looking forward

## Home learning



**Lack of devices** is only part of the picture when it comes to the digital divide. Some parents are handwriting work because they don't have a **printer** or cannot afford **printer ink**. Even when a family has a laptop or device, they may be **older models** running out-of-date technology that **isn't compatible with school systems**. Often this tech won't support the applications and software that children need to use.

**Broadband connectivity** and **data allowances** are often inadequate to support multiple family members going online at the same time.

"No laptop and no printer. Broadband speed is terrible." (Young man aged 15, Scotland)

Local lockdowns, contact tracing and household isolation means some pupils will inevitably have to learn from home during the next school year. **It is important we understand the challenges some children and families face** and work together to **effectively include and support learners on low incomes**. This requires consultation, collaboration and a continued push at all levels to ensure that every child has what they need to learn.

"I have had to spend extra on stationery, crafting equipment, learning books etc. We have been using my phone as a means of online learning which isn't ideal...[we're] unable to join in with interactive activities" (Mum of one child, England)

## Recommendations

- 1 Governments, local authorities and schools must work together to make sure **all pupils have the tools they need at home to participate in learning outside the classroom**.
- 2 Covid-19 has had a damaging effect on family finances. **Schools should ask all families about their resource needs in case circumstances have changed**
- 3 If children are learning from home, families tell us that they really appreciate **schools keeping in touch**. As well as wellbeing support, parents and carers most value communication about their children's schoolwork and progress.

## Emily's story



Emily lives in London with her partner and their two daughters.

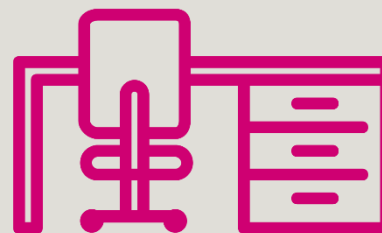
One of her daughters is in secondary school, and the other attends university. The pandemic has led to a significant drop in income for the family. Emily's partner has been furloughed and Emily, who was not eligible for furlough, is currently claiming universal credit.

Food and heating costs have gone up during this period.



"It's those sort of little things that add up... Thankfully we had a little bit of savings we could fall back on... it's dwindled down to virtually nothing now... There have been things that have knocked our budget out the park... my daughter needed glasses and that was like £200..."

Learning at home has been logistically difficult due to lack of space.



"The main challenge is that space is at a premium... there's one reception room... Right now my youngest is using it [...] That means that my older child can't really use that space to access her university lectures, she just stays in her room. We can't always use that space to eat in, sometimes we'll be on our beds, eating our dinner on our laps."

With the higher bills and lower income, Emily has had to cut back on the food budget. She doesn't want her children to feel responsible for this, but she knows they have picked up on some of the anxiety related to money.

"We don't discuss it in front of them, it's not their problem to worry about but they are aware and they can sense it, they say things like 'Oh well you know when rugby starts back up again I don't have to go back... subs are really expensive aren't they' They say little things like that, it breaks your heart."

Emily feels that her daughter's school does not always have an awareness of the reality of living on a low income, or how difficult it can be to meet some costs.

"The way the school phrases things it's not like there's an awareness of the fact that not everyone is in a position to pay for things. [...] It makes you feel some level of failure that you couldn't provide for your child, when it's a basic thing like reading books or writing books. [...] My daughter goes to school in quite an affluent area and I think they assume that the children on the whole, they can afford these things..."

Emily is very positive about the pastoral team who checks in and offers support.



"They were really approachable and friendly... it was really lovely that they took that time, and said how is your child coping, not just academically, but how are they really doing. It makes a difference for the kids..."



# Back to school and looking forward

## Free school meals

### Free school meal replacements

Families on low incomes have made clear that FSM replacements offer vital help to family budgets and that cash paid directly to families is the only option when it comes to choice, value and dignity. We welcome progress made towards a 'cash first' approach by local authorities in Scotland and Wales.

Looking ahead, many families on low incomes are still missing out on crucial support through FSMs. We urge action from governments, local authorities and schools on eligibility criteria, universal provision and uptake.

"It's a dignity thing for me as well. Just because I'm entitled to a little extra help doesn't mean I should be shamed which is what vouchers etc do as families are embarrassed to use them... I really hope the ones who are shaming families for needing extra support don't need it themselves one day!" (Mum of four children, Scotland)



"I'm skint because of work issues. Not stupid. Not a waster. Well able to choose food." (Mum of one child, Scotland)

## Recommendations

- 1 Governments and local authorities must prioritise a **'cash first' approach to FSMs** during any future periods of isolation, remote learning or holiday support.
- 2 Governments should urgently **review the earnings threshold for free school meals eligibility** to ensure that all low-income families receive the support they need.
- 3 We welcome the recent commitment in Scotland to provide all primary schoolchildren with a free meal each day. **Other governments must take action to expand free school meals to more children.**
- 4 Schools should **provide the clear, regular and universal information and support on accessing entitlements** which families say helps so much.

# Back to school and looking forward

## Children at the heart

Two thirds of young people told us that spending time with friends was what they most enjoyed when they returned to school last year. Spending time with friends boosted young people's mental health and wellbeing and many reported being able to learn better when with their peers. Where schools had helped pupils to stay connected during lockdown, children had benefitted.

*"Seeing friends made life a lot easier, because there was someone to talk to during lessons or ask simple questions without involving the teacher." (Young woman aged 15, Scotland)*

As well as reconnecting with friends, young people valued the return to routine and some sense of normality in their lives. This helped them improve their mental health, regain their motivation, escape the boredom of being confined at home, and feel more optimistic about their futures.

*"Having a routine and being in the presence of others really helped with my mental health and wellbeing." (Young woman aged 17, England)*

**Pupils want help with learning and getting back to a routine when they return to school.**



For both primary and secondary school pupils, help to adjust and return to a routine alongside help with learning and catching up was a priority. Secondary school children eligible for free school meals were also more likely than their better off peers to want help with confidence.

**Parents and carers want mental health and wellbeing prioritised as children return. They also want time for children to socialise with peers.**

*"It's the interaction with their friends that is missing. Yes having interaction on line twice a week with the teacher is fine but it's the friends that is what is missing most and that is really starting to have an impact on my daughter." (Mum of one child, Wales)*

*"Some lessons around emotional and mental wellbeing would be useful for all children, a way to talk and express how they are all feeling and to know they aren't alone in their fears and anxieties through all of this. I think children are going to suffer having no form of outlet for so long." (Mum of two children, England)*

## Recommendation

1

Governments, local authorities and schools must work together to take a child and family-centred approach to the recovery period. This includes involving them in decisions, supporting their mental health and wellbeing and removing barriers to learning associated with income.

# Back to school and looking forward

## Reducing school costs

We know school-related costs such as uniforms, resources for learning and food can increase financial pressures on families, with many finding them difficult or impossible to afford.



During the autumn term, many schools worked hard to relieve cost pressures on families. For example, families told us that relaxed uniform policies had helped ease pressure on household budgets, allowing greater flexibility on where items could be purchased.

Families appreciate schools taking action to reduce school costs and ease pressures .

“We were able to use things from previous year and with it being a relaxed uniform the cost of this was less.” (Mum of two children, Scotland)

“School asked children to come back wearing comfy clothes suitable for indoor and outdoor learning. This meant a lot of things could be bought from the supermarket, rather than specialist more expensive school uniform suppliers.” (Mum of two children, Scotland)

Lots of schools had helped to provide additional items, such as extra stationery, face masks and pencil cases, that were required to help keep people safe from the spread of Covid-19. However, the majority of families told us that they hadn't been supported in this way and many said that **school costs had risen compared to previous years.**

“[There were] Extra costs for face masks, hand gel and anti bac wipes.” (Lone parent of two children, Scotland)

Some families were required to buy additional clothing and where there was not clear and timely communication about expectations, this led to unnecessary additional costs.

“I've had to spend £100s on new shoes for my older boys for a secondary school with strict uniform policy. They have not been able to wear them. What a waste of money I do not have spare.” (Lone parent of three children, England)

## Recommendations

- 1 Schools should consider how their policies and practices can help reduce financial pressures on families e.g. affordable uniform policies
- 2 Schools should use a 'poverty lens' to ensure any Covid-related policies don't further disadvantage families on a low-income e.g. help to provide additional items such as face masks
- 3 Schools should regularly promote any grants or entitlements that may help families with school costs e.g. FSMs and uniform grants

“When school reopens I have to get new uniform [...]This wouldn't be a problem but for the fact last terms uniform is still as new.” (Lone parent of one child, Scotland)

## Eleri's story



Eleri is a single parent of two teenage children, living in a large city in south Wales.

She supports her family by working full time, and their income is topped up by some disability benefits she receives for her son. Both of Eleri's children have additional support needs. Her daughter is experiencing severe mental health issues, which prevent her from participating in learning at home. Her son has Autism Spectrum Disorder and requires one-to-one support throughout the day. He spends the day homeschooling at his father's house while Eleri is in work.

Eleri is very complimentary of the support her children have received from their schools this lockdown.



"School support wise – they've been brilliant, second to none. Particularly for my daughter. I get a fortnightly call to check up, and her school contacts calls or texts every so often just to see how she is. [...] There's quite a lot of contact from school, it's been very good. [...] In the previous lockdown there were fewer calls, I think because everyone thought it was temporary, but this time round it has been much better"

Eleri has found that her day-to-day living costs have gone up a lot since the children have been unable to go to school.



"The costs have definitely gone up with eating at home. Utilities, definitely – heating, cooking, food in general. Internet - I've had to get better internet because we're all online at the same time, so that's gone up. I've spent a huge amount more on stuff like books, stuff to keep them occupied, a computer, and iPad [...]."

Back to school costs were a particular financial pressure point at the end of the summer.



"I had to buy all new everything – God that was a challenge. So they grew out of everything and because everyone was shopping at the same time I had to take a day off work to go do it, and then I had to stand in line, and then they didn't have the stuff so I had to order it, then take more time off to go and get it. And then of course it has not been used, after all that."

Eleri has seen first-hand how the pandemic has affected her daughter's mental health.

"What I miss for my kids, for school, especially for my daughter, is the social element. Because it is all very well having the academia there, and she is normally very self-motivated, model pupil in school – but they are all missing the social side and I think that's the biggest tragedy of this"

# Back to school and looking forward

## Communicating with families

Family finances are likely to continue to change over the coming months as government support schemes come to an end and the full economic effects of the pandemic are felt. Families we spoke to weren't always aware of what financial support was on offer and what they were entitled to.

Where schools have provided regular, universal communication about support and financial entitlements, families have benefitted greatly.



“FSM information is sent out regularly about how to apply, also the fact that period products are being sent home for children. Excellent service.” (Mum of two children, Scotland)

It is vital that families continue to receive information from schools so they don't miss out on support for them and their children.

Families appreciate schools being mindful of household finances.

When communicating with families, using language that is supportive and non-stigmatising can help families feel comfortable seeking help. One family described an “open door policy from the school for support” and others talked about contact from pastoral care teams offering support with a range of issues such as finances, mental health and benefits.

Parents tell us they would like to receive regular communication from schools about their children. In particular, they wanted to know how children were progressing with schoolwork. As pupils return to school it will be important for schools to keep parents informed about their children's learning, mental health and wellbeing. This will help to alleviate concerns that families have, as well as helping them to understand what actions are being taken and how children are readjusting to school life.

Families value being asked about their needs, rather than assumptions being made.

Most families told us that schools had been in touch prior to lockdown to assess their home learning needs but this wasn't the case for all respondents. Where schools hadn't assessed the needs of families, pupils were sometimes left without resources for learning.

“How does the school or LA know what we need or want? No one has asked me this question directly at a local level.” (Mum of one child, Scotland)

## Recommendation

- 1 Schools can help to boost household finances and reduce pressures by: providing regular communication about entitlements and grants, using supportive and sensitive language and asking families about their needs.

“The head of year called to check we were all okay which felt really personal and supportive.” (Mum of one child, Scotland)

## Lydia's story



Lydia is a mum with four children in primary school and one in secondary school.

The family lives in Aberdeen. Lydia is self-employed but has had to give up her work since Christmas in order to stay home and support her children with online learning. Lydia says the family is now reliant on her husband's wage so is missing out on the chunk of income she usually takes in. Lydia is very involved in day-to-day home learning and feels her children are doing well with their online assignments.

The family was supported by school with the loan of an iPad in the first lockdown, they received a Chromebook after Christmas and also use Lydia's phone to access work.



"It's me that struggles because it's five different kids across five different ages. I can't do the school work all at once, I've got to do one at a time so it's taking up the whole day."

Lydia says the primary school has been good at communicating with them. She understands that there is a focus on learning and making sure pupils don't fall behind, but she also worries about their mental wellbeing.

"The school has been pretty good to be honest... At one point every one of the teachers was phoning once a week to check on them. [...] It's hardest on the kids, they are used to seeing their friends..."

Lydia feels there is a lot more pressure placed on secondary school children this time round. Her eldest son, who is in secondary school, is struggling and feels anxious about his workload.

"He feels awkward getting in touch with the teachers [via Microsoft Teams] to ask for help... If there was more of an instant chat thing, or more online live lessons, it would be better..."

Lydia says they are not lacking resources for home learning, but they are definitely spending more money on household bills.



"You'd think being at home you would spend less but I think it's because we're all at home all the time, shopping bill has gone absolutely through the roof [...] and we are constantly heating the house."

Lydia thinks it's good that there is help for lower-income families with free school meal replacements, but she also feels that some working families, especially larger families, are often forgotten about.

"We are not eligible for that, and I understand because my husband works [...] We do get some tax credits, we still struggle, we're kind of the lost section of people. [...] Although my husband earns an ok wage, when you take into account I've got eight people to feed, eight people to clothe, a house to heat for eight people... it cancels itself out."

# Back to school and looking forward

## Supporting family finances

Lots of parents and carers told us about money worries and financial pressures. Some had received extra financial support. Free school meal replacements, grants and direct payments were highlighted as solutions that really helped.

“Free school meals vouchers and money towards our council tax bill have been really helpful.” (Mum of two children, England)

Families found cash payments to help with winter costs the most helpful form of support.



Although extra financial support has reached some families, a perfect storm of reduced incomes, extra costs from having children at home, and often difficult to access and insecure financial support is taking its toll on many families.

**Low-income families are more concerned about money than they were last Spring.**

Worryingly, 90% of low-income families said they were spending ‘more’ or ‘lots more’ on bills during this period, but many weren’t eligible for financial support.

“As I work and not in receipt of benefits I am entitled to nothing, my fuel bills are through the roof as well as other additional costs.” (Lone parent with one child, Scotland)

**Families told us that not having enough money was affecting their children’s learning.**

Families described facing impossible choices around home learning because of scarce resources, inadequate space and juggling schooling with their work. This ‘permanent battle’ caused stress and guilt for parents and often left less time to focus on learning.

There were groups noticeably missing out on financial support. In particular, working families, who are struggling but do not qualify for support, and families in Scotland and England used to receiving non-means tested school meals for their younger children.

“I’ve fallen through the gaps as I’m excluded from all the grants etc. announced so far.” (Lone parent with one child, Scotland)

## Recommendations

- 1 Governments must **provide secure household incomes** to help families recover from the devastating effect of the pandemic and help them prepare for any future periods of home learning.
- 2 **Cash payments to families** are the best way to help them address the multiple needs of their children.
- 3 **Support must be expanded to working families** who are struggling but do not currently qualify for help through, for example, free school meals entitlements.

# Naomi's story



Naomi is a single parent with two children in primary school and two in secondary school.

The family lives in Glasgow. Naomi feels that this period of home learning has been harder than in the first lockdown. She says her children's schools were good at keeping in contact with them and she appreciates all of the support made available to her family.

"School has been a great support, phoning asking if there is anything they can do to help you support the kids and speak to the kids. We got offered help with devices. The primary school, I think they applied for extra iPads and the school were able to shortfall anybody that was struggling."



Digital learning has been easier for Naomi's older children. Her youngest found it more difficult engaging with learning on a screen

"I feel like it's longer, this time round it has been harder on the kids, it was just new last time and it was a novelty thing....now they just want to go back to school"

Naomi's food, gas and electricity bills are all higher than before. She is receiving direct payments to replace free school meals and finds this works well for her and her family.



"Obviously you are spending more on food cause they are home all the time, it's constant.....Then there was that help from the extra money coming in [from the council] which was a great help for myself and I was able to budget."

Naomi was working before the first lockdown, but she was not entitled to financial support as her contract was temporary.

"I've been unable to get anything since then. It's been a long year, and I've never been unemployed that long in my life ever."

Naomi feels that the impact of Covid on the job market and the lack of appropriate childcare options are all significant barriers to getting back into the workforce.



"What would help me is getting back out to work so I have a wage coming in again, so I know I can afford what I am spending weekly. Because of the lockdown measures there's very little jobs and there's loads of people applying for the same jobs. Because I have the children at home, I am very limited. My big issue is childcare because [my youngest son] is only in school until 3pm..."



# Back to school and looking forward

## School holidays and wraparound care

School holidays are an expensive time for families with the cost of additional food, heating, childcare and leisure activities putting a strain on budgets. During the October half term and Christmas holidays some families we spoke to had been able to access additional support such as free school meal replacements and grants. However, this was not the case for everyone.

**Many low-income families told us they hadn't received support during the holidays, including some families eligible for free school meals.**

For some, this was because they did not qualify for help but for others there may have been additional barriers such as not being aware of what was on offer or not being able to access it.

### What support do families want during the holidays?

- Greater provision of holiday clubs and activities
- Additional financial support to help with extra costs



**"I work full time and have to spend a lot of money buying childcare over the holidays. It isn't always easy to get a place in a suitable setting either, or that offers the hours I need to cover with my work. I'd like to see a lot more free or affordable play schemes that actually last longer than a couple of hours a day. If they helped kids recover their mental health and wellbeing after Covid, so much the better." (Lone parent with one child, Wales)**

Parents told us the provision of additional financial support would help to cover higher bills such as heating. They also talked about the need for greater financial help for working families.

**"Financial support for energy bills for working people earning under the tax threshold." (Mum of one child, Wales)**

Families felt it was important for children to be able to play and connect with friends over the holidays, and that holiday provision shouldn't be solely focused on learning or catch-up. Families also wanted holiday activities that would help their children's mental health and wellbeing.

**"Somewhere for the kids to be able to go play and let some steam off again. Somewhere safe where they can just remember to have fun and be children again but also speak to someone in confidence if something is bothering them." (Mum of one child, Wales)**

# Back to school and looking forward

## School holidays and wraparound care

In addition to core teaching hours, many schools normally offer pupils a range of before- and after- school activities, as well as providing additional pastoral support to pupils and families.

During the autumn term, many schools understandably had to stop or limit attendance to activities such as breakfast clubs and after-school clubs. **1 in 3 pupils we spoke to told us their breakfast club had stopped running altogether.** We heard from parents and carers about how this was impacting their access to work and impacting on their financial circumstances.

“Wasn't entitled to anything but struggling as I'm working shorter hours due to no wrap around care at school.” (Lone parent with two children, England)

### Why do parents and carers value wrap around care such as breakfast clubs and after-schools clubs?

These activities:

- provide childcare which helps parents to work
- support children's physical health and well-being
- help children to learn, socialise and get help with homeworks.



“Try to keep the after school clubs running, I have found it very difficult without this essential service, as a key worker I have had to reduce my hours to school hours.” (Mum of one child, Scotland)

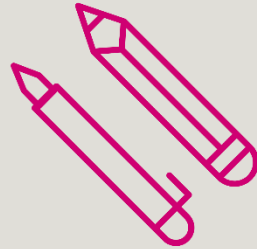
## Recommendations

- 1** **Securing incomes through cash payments** is the most effective way to support families with the range of additional costs they face over the holidays e.g. £100 winter and spring cash payments made to families eligible for FSMs in Scotland.
- 2** Governments, local authorities and schools must work together to **offer sufficient wraparound care and holiday activities** as there are many proven benefits for both children and families.
- 3** **Wraparound provision and holiday activities must be designed with families** to ensure they meet their needs. Considerations should also be made to ensure activities are non-stigmatising for low-income families.

# Conclusion

Our research shows that money worries make it increasingly difficult for families to provide the right home learning environment and support children's needs, **despite parents and pupils trying their hardest**. We heard of mums waking up early to write out worksheets by hand, parents walking to school every day to pick up work packs and pupils waiting in line to use the one laptop in the house or doing school work on their mobile phones.

**Being unable to complete work and learn adds to children and young people's stress and anxieties.**



**"I feel like I'm falling behind and get really stressed out by online schooling so it affects my mental health"** (Young woman aged 14, Scotland)

However, many **school staff have worked tirelessly** to deliver the best possible education

to pupils under the circumstances by plugging gaps in resources, making remote learning work for children and young people and helping them stay connected with school and friends.

**Many parents and pupils praised school staff for their dedication and kindness.**



**"They are doing perfectly"** (Young man aged 12, Scotland)

While many families have faced difficulties during this period, there are actions that can be taken by schools, local authorities and governments that will help pupils and families in the coming months.

Through being poverty-aware and considering how policies and practices may impact households on a low income, **schools and local authorities can continue to play an important role** in relieving pressures on families, removing stigma and helping to ensure children have everything they need to take part in education whether at school or at home.

However, governments must also step up their support to make sure that no child is excluded from remote learning because of family income. **Governments must ensure that every child has what they need to learn from home.**

Governments also cannot continue to stand by while many working families in great need of support miss out. **Extending free school meals to more families will help them stay afloat and support children's learning.**

When governments and councils do provide additional support, **it's clear that cash payments work best** because they provide flexibility, dignity and families can get better value for money than other options.

Children and families have told us what they need to help them out in this crisis – **we simply can't afford to let them down.**



# Thank you

Child Poverty Action Group and Children North East would like to express our sincere gratitude to all the participants who gave up their time to be part of this research. We would like to thank the children and young people who took part in our survey for their contributions, giving us a chance to understand their experiences during this period. We would also like to say a big thank you to the parents and carers who responded and shared their stories with us, enabling us to learn more about the impact of school closures on family life. A special thanks to those who agreed to take part in interviews for our case studies and blogs.

**We have listened and you have been heard, and we will do our best to advocate for change.**

## **About Child Poverty Action Group**

Child Poverty Action Group works on behalf of the more than one in four children in the UK growing up in poverty. It doesn't have to be like this. We use our understanding of what causes poverty and the impact it has on children's lives to campaign for policies that will prevent and solve poverty – for good. We provide training, advice and information to make sure hard-up families get the financial support they need. We also carry out high profile legal work to establish and protect families' rights. [www.cpag.org.uk](http://www.cpag.org.uk)

## **About Children North East**

Children North East is a registered charity that works with children and young people in their families, schools and communities to ensure they grow up to be healthy and happy. In 2019/20 Children North East provided direct support to 3,921 children, young people and parents from across the North East. This included: 323 babies, 277 pre-school children, 416 primary school children, 1,222 secondary school children and 673 young people between 18 and 25 years. A total of 28 different services - including psychotherapeutic work with parents of babies and toddlers, family crisis intervention and mental health counselling for teens and young adults were delivered across the region. In addition, our unique Poverty Proofing the School Day initiative worked with 15,501 primary and secondary pupils in schools around the North East and another 15,623 pupils in other areas of the country. [www.children-ne.org.uk](http://www.children-ne.org.uk)

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