



# Parents and carers' views on reform of the school day and year in Wales

March 2022



**Parentkind**  
Bringing together home & school

## 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. See more at [www.cpag.org.uk](http://www.cpag.org.uk)

## About Parentkind

As well as being the leading membership organisation for Parent Teacher Associations for over 60 years across England, Wales and Northern Ireland, we are advocates for parent voice. Our role is to ensure that all parents can participate in education and have their voices heard so that education across the nations can benefit all children in all schools and society as a whole. This means we have a wealth of experience with schools of all sizes and types and the communities they serve.

We are the bridge between homes and schools.

- We marry research with first-rate practice that has been proven to work.
- We make sure that the voice of parents is heard in education.
- We represent parent views and interests in discussions with education authorities, agencies, central government and all other interested parties and bodies.
- We work with partners and stakeholders, researchers, teachers, parents, administrators, community partners and others, on parental participation.
- We identify and promote examples of high quality parent-school partnerships and provide resources to support parent participation in education at school and at home.

See more at [www.parentkind.org.uk](http://www.parentkind.org.uk)

## Summary

Schools have a vital role to play in addressing child poverty and research shows that, done well, activities before and after school can have multiple benefits, with children in low-income households benefitting the most.<sup>1</sup> These activities can offer children opportunities that their families could otherwise struggle to afford,<sup>2</sup> contribute to children's social and educational development,<sup>3</sup> and support parents to enter and remain in work.

This paper details the findings of a survey by Child Poverty Action Group and Parentkind, which sought to better understand the views of parents and carers in Wales on breakfast clubs, after-school provision and extra-curricular opportunities. We also asked parents and carers for their views on the length of the school year. Our survey with nearly 7,000 parents and carers looked at what provision already exists outside core school hours, recognising that many schools in Wales already offer a broad range of activities, as well as what parents would like to see on offer in the future. As the Welsh Government is seeking to narrow educational inequalities, this report puts a particular focus on the views of families living on a lower income (defined as those claiming means-tested benefits), highlighting what school activities and provision would be most beneficial to them and their children.

### The key findings from the survey are:

- 4 in 5 parents in Wales would welcome the opportunity for their child to take part in a range of activities outside of core school hours, with physical activity and sport the most popular option (64%).
- Primary school parents were more likely to want children to have access to extra art and drama activities (53%) and music activities (52%), while secondary parents favoured activities that focused on additional opportunities for academic learning (39%) and access to homework clubs (41%).
- Over a third of primary parents living on a lower income (36%) reported that the option of after-school activities for their children would help them to work.
- Despite the Welsh Government's aim to ensure that all primary school children can access a free breakfast if they need one<sup>4</sup>, more than 1 in 7 primary school parents living on a lower income reported that they could not access a breakfast club, either because there wasn't enough space for their child (numbers were limited) or because their school didn't have any breakfast provision. Some schools also charge parents for breakfast provision which may act as a barrier for some families<sup>5</sup>.
- Families living on a lower income were almost twice as likely as the wider sample (23% compared to 13%) to say that using breakfast clubs helped to reduce the cost of living.
- The majority of all parents (56%) were supportive of a more evenly spread school year, but those living on a lower income expressed a greater interest in this option (59%).

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<sup>1</sup> [Can out of school activities close the education gap?](#), Newcastle University, 2016

<sup>2</sup> [Extended School Day, parent poll results](#), Child Poverty Action Group and Parentkind, July 2021

<sup>3</sup> [Extended schools](#), Child Poverty Action Group, April 2018

<sup>4</sup> [Free breakfast in primary schools: statutory guidance for local authorities and governing bodies](#), Welsh Government, June 2014

<sup>5</sup> Some schools either run their own breakfast club or add additional activities to their Local Authority funded provision. In these instances, families may be charged to attend breakfast club and this could be a reason that some do not attend. However, it is not clear from the survey data how many families see cost as a barrier.

- Families that reported struggling with costs and childcare over the summer holidays were much more likely (72%) to be in favour of a more even school year including a shorter summer holiday. This compared to just 29% of families being in favour if they did not face these challenges.

The Co-operation Agreement between Welsh Labour and Plaid Cymru sets out a commitment to explore wide-ranging reform to the way school holidays are distributed through the year. They will also look at the potential benefits of changing the timings of the school day to enable children and young people to access additional activities and opportunities.

*To narrow educational inequalities and support learner and staff well-being, we will look to radically reform school term dates to bring them more in line with contemporary patterns of family life and employment.*

*We share the priority to support physical and mental well-being as well as academic progression particularly for disadvantaged pupils. Running alongside the school year reforms, we will explore options around the rhythm of the school day, specifically to create space for additional sessions providing wide ranging, culturally accessible activities and opportunities.*

## The current context

Following this commitment, the Welsh Government recently announced that changes to the school day would be trialled in 13 schools in Wales and one college, with five hours of extra-curricular activity per week on offer for a 10-week period. Schools have the autonomy to decide how these hours are delivered and this can include working with external providers to deliver activities. This pilot is seen as an opportunity to gather more insight and evidence on the impact of extra-curricular activities on children's well-being, academic progress and social development – particularly for children facing disadvantage.<sup>6</sup>

## Recommendations to Welsh Government

Based on the findings of this survey, Child Poverty Action Group and Parentkind make the following recommendations to Welsh Government:

- 1. Welsh Government should work with primary schools and local authorities to ensure that free breakfasts are available to all primary children, regardless of which school they attend.** At present, the aim of the Welsh Government's free primary breakfast policy is not being met because schools are not obliged to offer learners a free breakfast and this means children who would benefit are missing out. The review of primary school catering infrastructure ahead of the rollout of universal free school lunches should also explore whether lack of space or food preparation/serving facilities are a barrier to schools providing a universal breakfast offer. Where this is the case, schools should be supported to overcome these barriers so every primary school child has access to a free breakfast at school.

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<sup>6</sup> [Trial begins on school day reforms in Wales](#), Welsh Government announcement, January 2022

2. **Welsh Government should fund schools that wish to expand their breakfast club into a wider wraparound offer, recognising the benefits of this provision and ensuring that parents and carers do not need to pay for a place.**
3. **Enriching after-school provision should be an integral part of the Welsh Government's community schools model.** Opportunities need be open to all children on a universal basis, with a range of activities that meet the diverse interests and needs of the school's community – including the use of external providers. Provision must be designed so it is accessible to all children, and adequate funding must be made available to ensure no family faces financial barriers to taking part.

## The findings explored

### a.) After-school activities

Our survey showed that more than 4 in 5 parents in Wales would welcome the opportunity for their child to take part in activities at school outside of core school hours. Parents expressed an interest in a range of extra-curricular activities, with the most popular across primary and secondary being physical activity and sports (65%) (Figure 1). Primary school parents also expressed great interest in extra art and drama activities (53%) and music (52%), while secondary school parents wanted a stronger focus on additional opportunities for academic learning (39%) and access to homework clubs (41%). Although the majority of parents wanted their children to have access to these opportunities, many parents commented that provision would work best if it was optional.

*"I would like after school clubs but not mandatory extra after school clubs."*

*"It would be good to have the option of after school activities eg sports or music clubs but I would like to be able to choose which I would send my children to and it would not be every night."*

Parents also identified a need for activities that supported their child's mental and emotional wellbeing, with more than 2 in 5 (45%) of all parents saying they would appreciate these activities being offered at their child's school. For families living on a lower income, this need was higher still with nearly half (49%) requesting this option. Families on a lower income were also more likely to want to take part in wellbeing and learning activities as a family at their school, suggesting they might not have as many opportunities to do this elsewhere.

*"Optional fun things for either child or family - physical, creative, wellbeing type things. But definitely not longer school days."*

More than 2 in 5 of the primary school parents we surveyed identified that, if available, these after-school activities would help them to work as they would not need to find childcare for their children during these hours. This included over a third (36%) of those parents living on a lower income. Supporting parents to work helps lift families out of poverty and in turn, children's educational outcomes are likely to be

improved as family income increases.<sup>7</sup> At present, finding work that fits neatly within school hours can be very challenging for parents, and particularly for women.<sup>8</sup>

Several parents and carers expressed concern that their children would not be able to access any provision due to the distance between home and school. Others mentioned that fixed journey times for school transport, plus a lack of other transport options, meant they were concerned their children could be excluded from the opportunities on offer.

*“As my child gets school transport it would be impossible for him to attend as there's no transport home.”*

*“My son has council transport in a taxi so is unable to stay for after school activities.”*

*“As the school is 8 miles away and he/she travels on a bus, it is not convenient for my child to stay at school.”*

Some parents and carers of disabled children, and those with additional learning and support needs, expressed concern that the provision may not be accessible for their child.

*“Due to her special needs it is hard to get her to extra curricular activities.”*

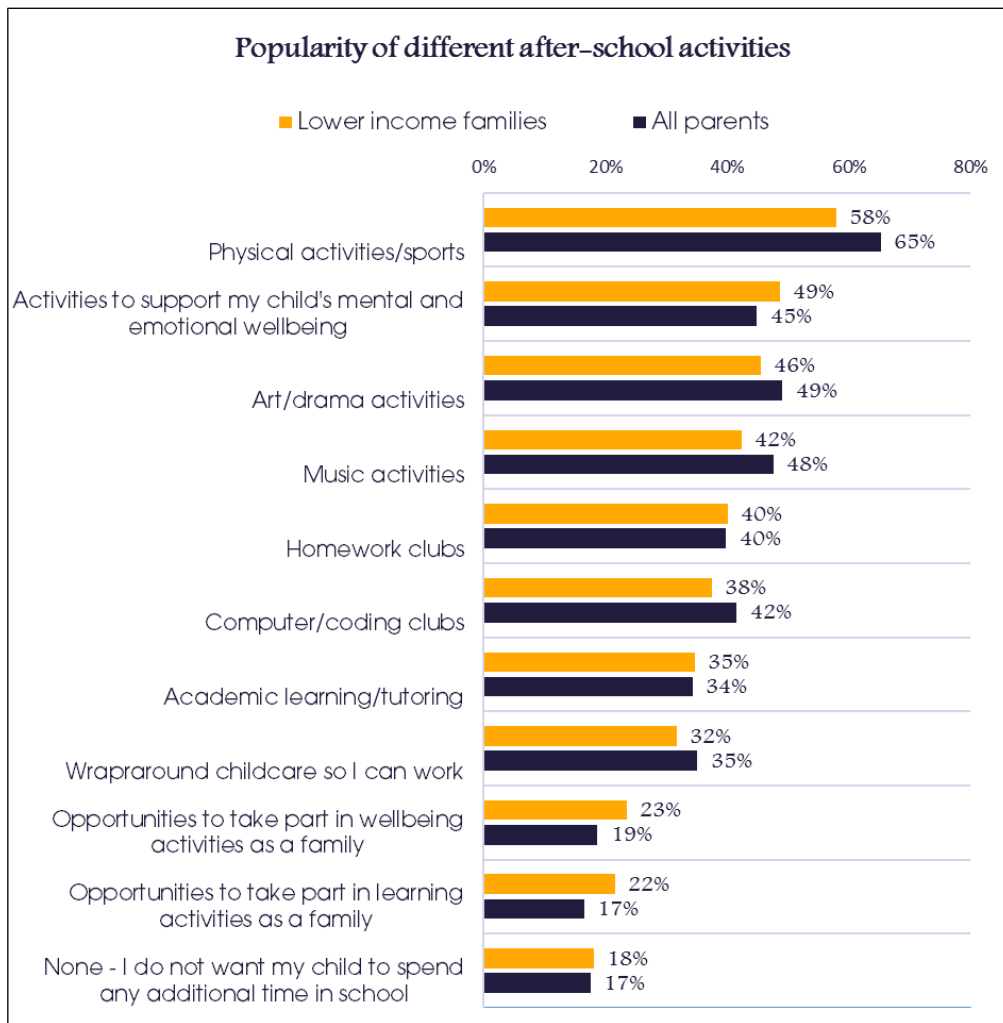
*“Although more after school activities would be lovely, often children with additional needs are told they cannot attend if they need extra support as it is not part of the school day- this needs to be addressed. The same applies for any care during holidays- we have been unable to access childcare which would enable me to work because there is a severe lack of childcare for those with additional needs.”*

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<sup>7</sup> [Does Money Affect Children's Outcomes? An Update](#), K Cooper and K Stewart, July 2017

<sup>8</sup> [Trapped: poverty amongst women in Wales today](#), The Bevan Foundation, December 2019

**Figure 1**



Although most parents were in support of additional activities being on offer at their school, a small number (17%) opposed the idea with some stating that they felt children were already in school long enough. Others reported that their children were already accessing these opportunities elsewhere, while some parents felt that these activities should be part of core school hours not as additional activities. Some parents commented that it was important not to put any additional pressure on schools and school staff.

A number of parents told us that they were already able to access many types of after-school provision through their children's school. Some were concerned that longer formal school hours could displace the existing after-school clubs run by external providers, which they valued and wished to retain.

### **b.) Breakfast provision**

In 2004, the Welsh Government introduced a free breakfast policy for primary school children. The aim was to ensure that children of primary school age in maintained schools could have access to a free breakfast if they needed one. However, because of the way the policy is implemented, with local authorities only being obliged to provide breakfasts to a school if the school requests them and with no obligation on schools to run a free breakfast club, the policy objective is not currently being met. This means many primary children in Wales are missing out on a free breakfast.

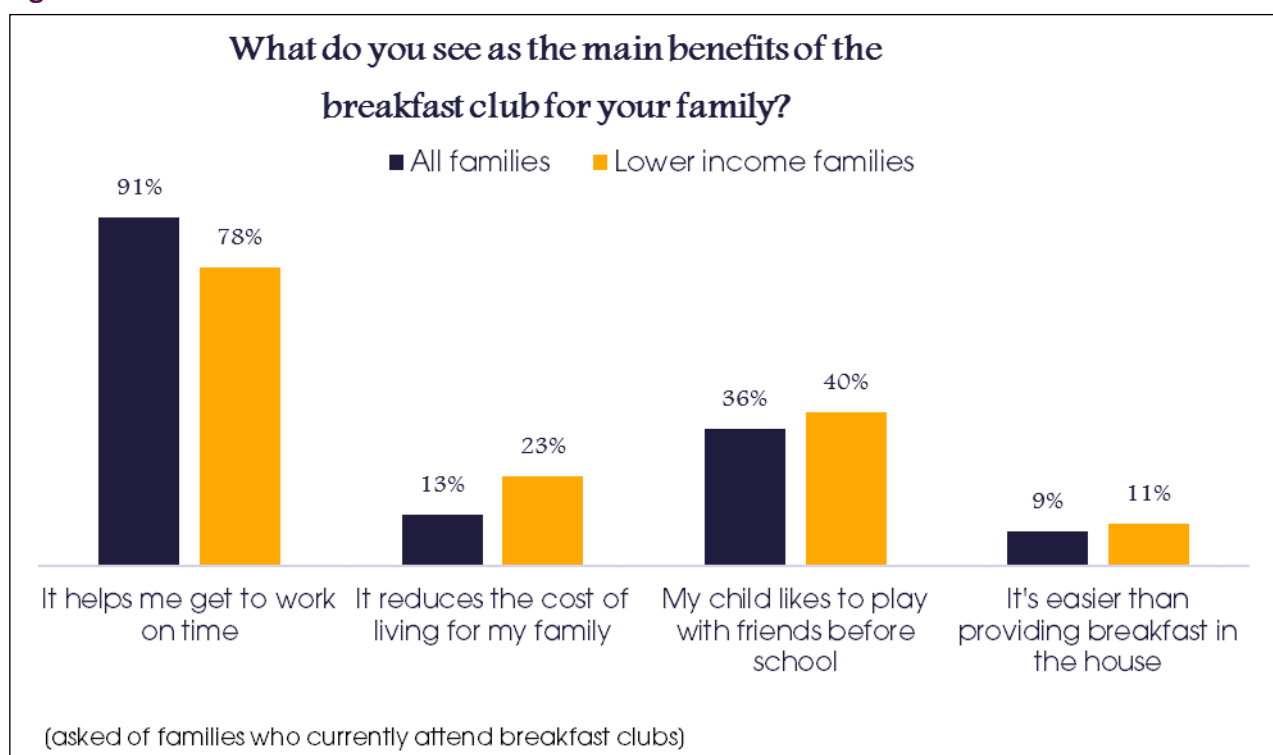
We asked primary school parents about access to breakfast clubs and while nearly 2 in 5 said their child attended a club, more than 1 in 10 said they would like to use a breakfast club but could not access one, either because there wasn't enough space for their child (numbers were limited) or because their school didn't have any breakfast provision. Worryingly, this increased to just a little more than 1 in 7 families living on a low income who could not access a breakfast club. Although it's not clear from the findings, the fact that some schools charge for breakfast clubs could be an additional barrier for some lower-income families.

For those families whose children were attending a breakfast club, parents and carers overwhelmingly told us that the main benefit was that it helped them to get to work on time (91%) (Figure 2).

*"It's my life line to get to work and provides structure for my children."*

*"Parents are unable to work at 9am without a breakfast club. It is an essential means of family support."*

**Figure 2**



Families living on a lower income were almost twice as likely to say that using breakfast clubs helped to reduce the cost of living (23%), compared to the wider sample of parents (13%). Those in lower income households were also more likely to say that accessing breakfast club provision provided an opportunity for their child to play, and was easier than providing breakfast in the house.

*"My child is more likely to eat breakfast in school with friends than in the house."*

*"[With a breakfast club] Child is mentally ready for school and not using the first lesson to fully arise."*



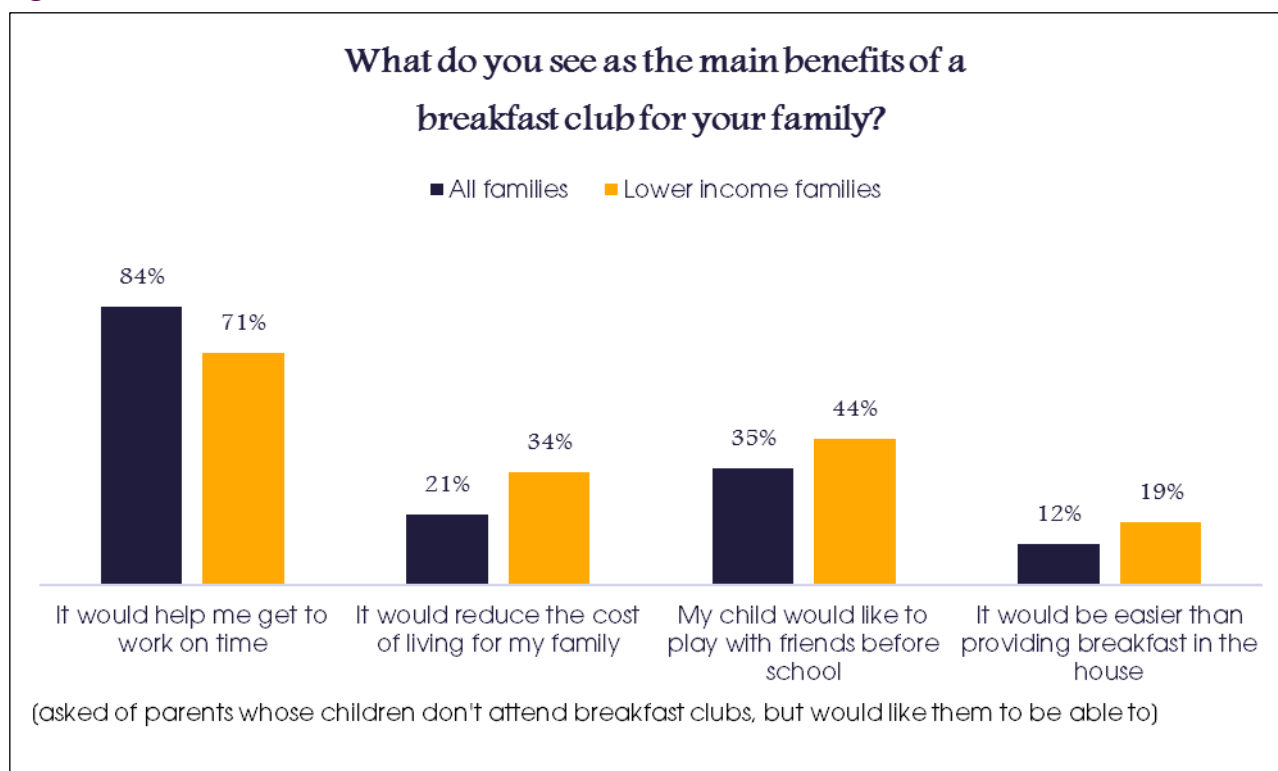
Over two-thirds (71%) of lower income families who wanted to access a breakfast club but could not agreed that the main advantage would be that it would help them to get to work on time (Figure 3). Just over a third (34%) of these families also felt it would help to reduce the cost of living. Crucially, as families in Wales face the cost of living going up at double the rate of benefits, ensuring children are able to access a free breakfast would be an important way for the Welsh Government to help families offset some of these costs.

*“It would mean not having to pay for childcare before school.”*

*“I can't currently work because of the lack of before school childcare in my area.”*

*“It would support our family so both parents can work.”*

**Figure 3**



These findings suggest that families who can access a breakfast club benefit greatly from the provision. It helps the morning to run smoothly, ensures children get to school on time and are in the right mind-set for learning. The provision also allows parents to get to work, as well as supporting lower-income families with the cost of living. However, this provision is not being made available to all families, despite a universal free primary breakfast offer. When lower-income families cannot access breakfast club provision, it means their children are unable to benefit from the many positives that the clubs can provide.

*“My child would be able to spend time with children from her class and from other classes in a relaxed atmosphere. This would help her to develop wider social skills.”*

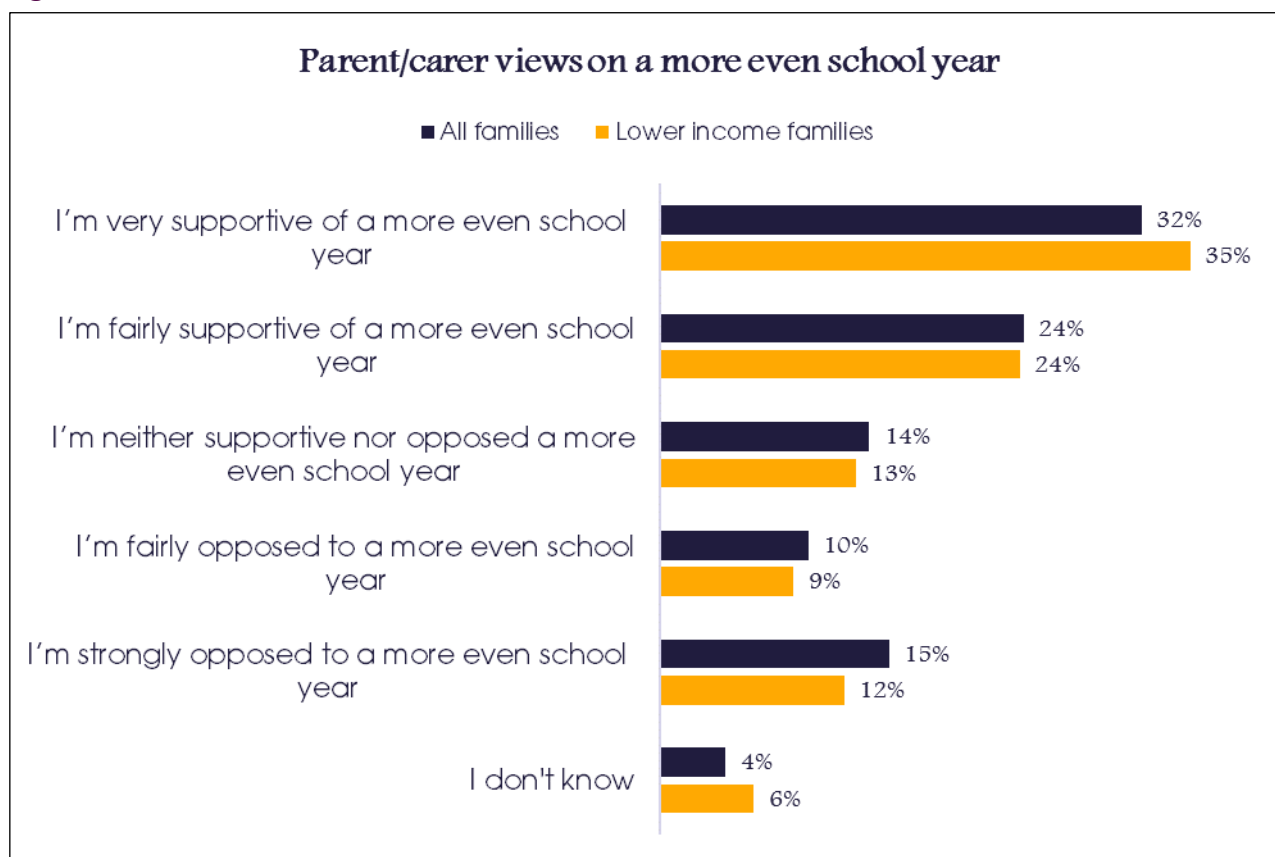
A handful of parents reported that they had to pay for their onsite breakfast club, so while it was valuable to their children and helped them to work, the cost could be prohibitive for some families. The Welsh Government policy states that if a school receives support from the local authority to provide breakfasts then it must not charge for this as funding from Welsh Government includes the cost of food, supervisors

and other setting up costs. However, some schools may charge families because they offer longer childcare hours than is expected or because they are providing something additional.<sup>9</sup> Alternatively, schools may run their own breakfast club which they can charge for. These inconsistencies in provision are contributing to an unequal and patchy school breakfast system for primary school parents in Wales – with many children missing out on a free breakfast.

### c.) School term dates

We also asked parents in Wales about their views on the length of school terms and holidays, noting that the current year is uneven with some holidays being 6 weeks long, some 2 weeks and others a week. Although we believe this topic needs further research and exploration, we did draw out some initial reactions from parents.

**Figure 4**



As Figure 4 shows, while the majority of all parents (56%) were supportive of a more evenly spread school year, those living on a lower income expressed a greater interest in this option (59%). A quarter of all parents opposed this idea but this went down to 1 in 5 of those we surveyed on a lower income.

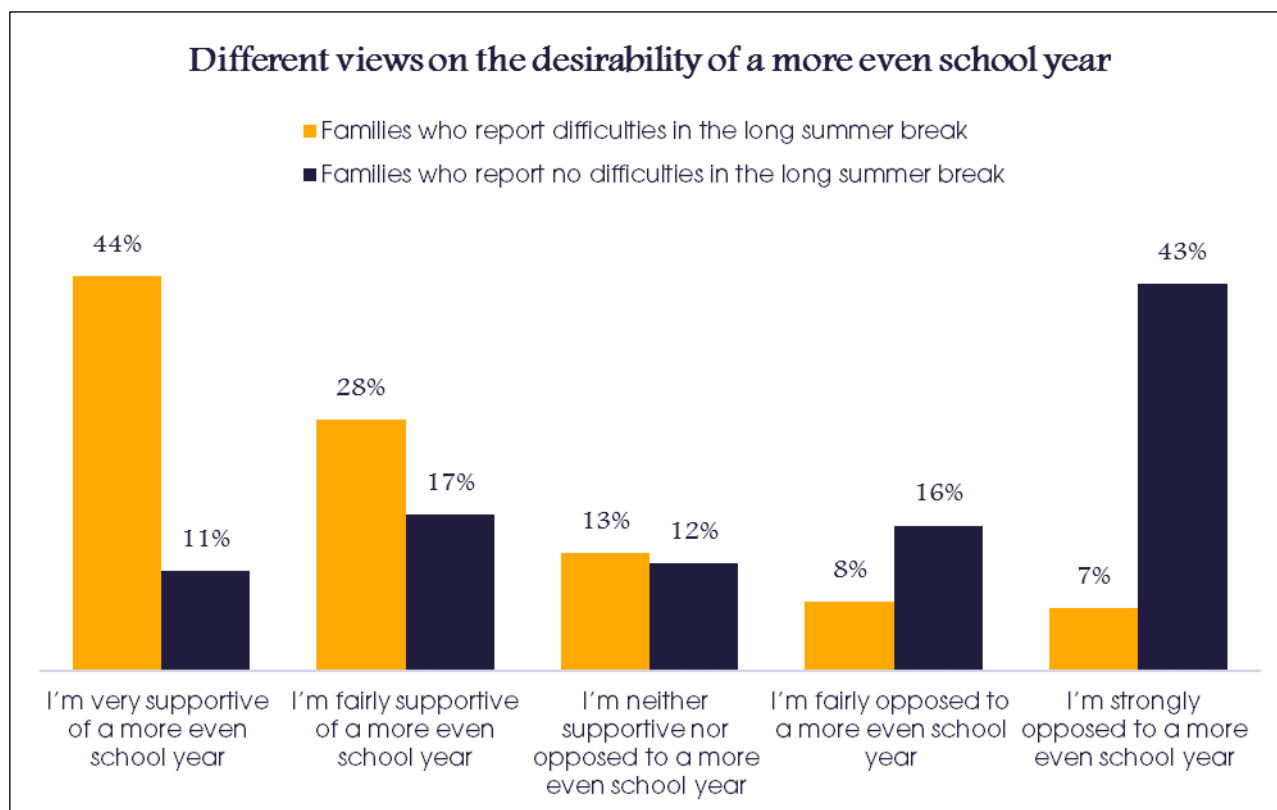
Looking more closely at the data, we found that lower income families who reported facing a number of financial difficulties over the summer (including having to spend more on childcare and reporting they were unable to meet their child's needs during the holiday) were much more likely to be in favour of a more even school year (72%) (Figure 5). This suggests that they feel the 6-week summer holiday break

<sup>9</sup> [Free Breakfast in Primary Schools](#), Welsh Government, April 2015

exacerbates their financial hardship. These families would also welcome the opportunity to access free childcare over the summer.

Conversely, more affluent families not claiming benefits, who reported that they could easily meet summer holiday costs and their children’s needs and didn’t need access to free childcare, were much more likely to oppose changing the holiday dates and term times (only 29% in favour and 59% opposing the idea). These findings could indicate that the current schedule works better for families without financial worries.

**Figure 5**



However, income might not be the only driver of these differences in opinion. For example, parents may have access to different levels of free childcare from family members and this may affect how they feel about the summer holiday. Families with differing incomes may also have adults in the household who don’t work so this could also reduce childcare costs and needs over the summer. Broadly speaking, we did find that the parents who reported they would use free childcare if it was on offer in the summer were more likely to be in favour of a more even school year, including a shorter summer holiday.

Some parents and carers also raised other factors that made them more inclined to support a more even school year. These included reducing the need for respite care, ensuring that ongoing support needs were met, and maintaining children’s routines.

*“[I have a] child with severe autism in special school. Consider shortening summer break now that respite provision is so scarce. Summer causes tremendous problems for children who rely on the routine and support of schools.”*

## Conclusion

This survey shows that a large majority of parents in Wales are in favour of schools offering before and after school activities and this is because they believe these activities can, and do, benefit their family in a range of different ways. From helping children to be ready for school and learning in the morning, supporting parents to get to work on time and save on costs, to helping children to access extra-curricular activities and wellbeing support after school – many parents want these advantages.

However, families have varying needs, and not all parents want their children to attend these activities, so making these opportunities flexible and optional is important to parents and carers. Crucially, and particularly as more and more families struggle with living costs, children must be able to access the free primary breakfast offer when needed, as missing out on this offer is making matters worse for lower-income families.

When looking at the length of school terms and the summer holiday, more exploration is needed to better understand what factors influence parents' views on this topic. However, the survey suggests that families who are struggling with additional costs associated with the summer holiday, e.g. childcare and meeting their children's needs, are more likely to be in favour of a more balanced school year, while those who can more easily meet these costs want the term times to stay as they are.

## Methodology

Parents and carers across Wales were invited to take part in an online survey during January 2022. The survey was available in English and Welsh. In total, we heard from 6,843 parents and carers. 5,350 had a youngest child in primary school, and 1,493 had their youngest child in secondary school. 1,676 were either in receipt of, or in the process of applying for, means-tested benefits. This represents 25% of the entire sample; we refer to these respondents as 'lower income families' in our analysis.

## Thank you

Child Poverty Action Group and Parentkind would like to thank all participants who gave up their time to take part in this poll. Your views are important to us and we will do our best to advocate for change based on what you've shared.