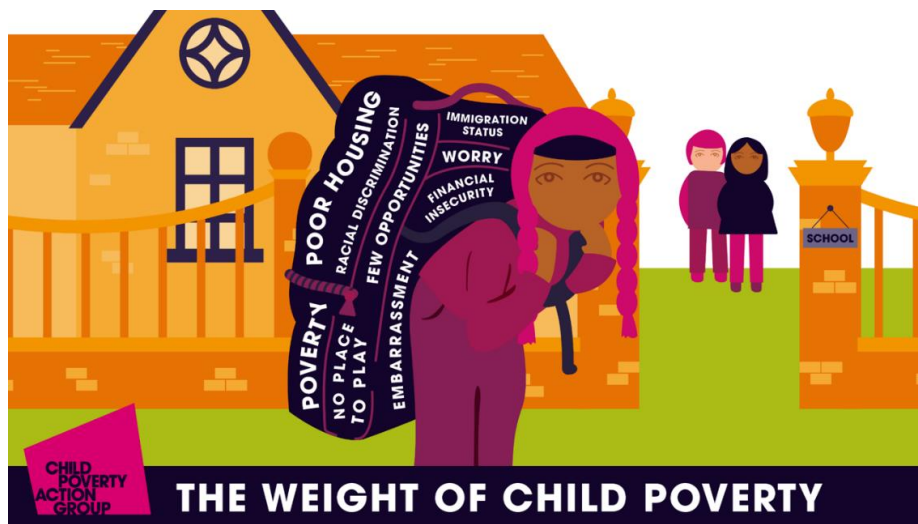


# REDUCING THE COST OF THE SCHOOL DAY IN WALES

February 2022



*“Education is supposed to be free, but a lot of things at school are not”*  
(Member of the youth parliament)

## Background to the issue

The pandemic has illuminated the vast gaps in resources that exist between households in Wales. Even prior to the pandemic, we know that around 195,000 children were living in households below the poverty line.<sup>1</sup> Child poverty exists in every part of Wales, from the Valleys to the coast, from our inner cities to the rural midlands. There isn't a single council ward anywhere in Wales with a child poverty rate below 12%.<sup>2</sup>

Child poverty exists because families with children do not have sufficient income to have a reasonable standard of living. Child poverty causes deep and lifelong harm to the outcomes of children, and these impacts are more profound the longer a child remains in poverty. As well as the risk of material deprivation, poverty also exposes

<sup>1</sup> Department for Work and Pensions, *Households Below Average Income Statistics*, 2021

<sup>2</sup> End Child Poverty, *Child Poverty in Your Area*

children to stigma and shame when they are unable to participate in the activities and opportunities that better-off families take for granted.

Work alone is not a route out of poverty. Three-quarters of children in poverty already live in a household where someone is in work. But it doesn't have to be this way. Child poverty can be solved through concerted action to raise family incomes and reduce living costs, and by the redesign of services and systems that reinforce stigma and treat people in poverty in less favourable ways.



Through our Cost of the School Day project, children in poverty tell us they often find it harder to take part and be happy at school. Although education is supposed to be free, many things at school are not. Families are routinely asked to contribute towards the cost of school uniform, trips, charity fundraising, school meals and snacks, and to provide equipment and resources for different subjects. Many families in poverty simply have no disposable income once they have paid for housing and essential bills, which exposes children to the risk of stigma and shame when they are unable to afford even small charges for participation.

Having fewer resources at home can also make it more difficult to participate in home learning. The pandemic has shown how important decent IT and connectivity is for 21<sup>st</sup> century learners – but many children are trying to study without access to a table and chair, let alone a laptop and broadband. Our research into family experiences of school closures during the pandemic found that many children in low-income homes faced significant material barriers to joining in with learning outside of school.<sup>3,4</sup>

*“It’s making it difficult to access videos just using my mobile. It’s hard to put any other interactive things on as my mobile is cracked and starts hurting your fingers after a while. It just makes me feel we can’t access what others are” (Mother of one primary aged child, Rhondda Cynon Taf)*

*“We only have one laptop at home which is difficult as mummy needs it for her studying and work, but we are managing” (10-year-old boy, Bridgend)*

<sup>3</sup> Child Poverty Action Group, *The Cost of Learning in Lockdown*, 2020

<sup>4</sup> Child Poverty Action Group, *The Cost of Learning in Lockdown 2: March 2021 Update*, 2021

Our Cost of the School Day practitioners speak to hundreds of children about their experiences of the school day. Using sensitive and age-appropriate methods, they develop a clear sense of the policies and practices that can create unintentional barriers to participation for children from low-income homes. We also speak to parents and carers and everyone who works in a school, to develop a holistic view of the challenges poverty can create, and to understand where change needs to occur.

This briefing highlights several areas where the cost of the school day causes issues for learners from low-income families. We have chosen to focus on the areas that have the greatest impact at this current time – either because of the size of the cost, or because being unable to take part has a particularly profound effect on children’s wellbeing. Some may only have a nominal charge, or require families to send in materials and resources rather than cash, but all lead to children feeling different, excluded and unhappy if they are unable to participate alongside their peers.

## 1. Uniform

Parents and carers tell us that school uniform is one of their most significant school-related costs. Although uniform can help to minimise visible differences, children and young people say it is still the main indicator of family income, and the first thing to be picked on when it’s ‘wrong’. Strict dress code enforcement embarrasses young people, and quickly replacing items of uniform can be difficult if parents don’t have immediate access to funds.

*“I know we wear uniform, so some people don’t wear uniform or they wear uniform that isn’t as expensive as other people so they get made fun of.” (KS2 pupil)*

Uniform policies vary from school to school and this has implications for affordability. Many schools across Wales specify an exclusive supplier for school uniform, which restricts choice and adds expense. Despite the introduction of statutory guidance on uniform affordability in 2018, it is clear that affordability is still not paramount in many school’s uniform policies.

*“As it is a requirement to wear logo on school uniform e.g. school hoodies and t-shirts, PE kits with school logo - they should be more affordable; £16 per hoodie is expensive. It all adds up, especially if you have two or more children and require 2 sets of uniform each; and that is also without the added costs of weatherproof clothing, trainers, wellies etc. for various other school activities.” (Parent)*

While the PDG-A grant\* is a welcome help for families, barriers remain to uptake in local authorities where families must apply to receive this support rather than receiving it automatically. In addition, around 55,000 children in poverty live in homes that earn just above the eligibility threshold for free school meals, meaning they are unable to access PDG-A as well. These families can still find it difficult to make ends meet and pay for uniform along with all of their other household outgoings.

*“I’m a single parent and I’m on a TA salary. I’ve just forked out £300 in uniform for my child to go to comp with no help. How can it be that there’s no help for working families?” (Staff member)*

*“It’s not that parents don’t want to buy, it’s the reality that some parents might be breaking their heart that they can’t afford a jumper; you put yourself in those shoes, how would you feel if your child went to school and didn’t have the same as everyone else, you’d break your heart wouldn’t you?” (Primary school teacher)*

Welsh Government can take action on affordability and provide further support for families struggling to pay for uniform in the following ways:

- Increase the £125 Pupil Development Grant to more closely reflect actual costs
- Review the eligibility criteria for PDG-A to ensure that more families on low incomes are supported
- Review the effectiveness of statutory guidance on school uniform policies to ensure consistent affordability across Wales
- Support automation of PDG-A in every local authority to remove barriers to application and boost uptake

#### \*Pupil Development Grant - Access (PDG-A)

PDG-A is a means-tested support fund for low-income families, which can be used to buy school uniform and sports kit, equipment for out-of-hours school trips (including outdoor learning), laptops/tablets, and equipment for activities within the curriculum. It is worth £125 per year for each learner, although learners entering year 7 can receive £200, in recognition of the higher costs associated with starting secondary school.

Children are eligible for PDG-A if they receive free school meals, or are Looked After by their local authority. This means many children in poverty cannot access the fund, because their household income exceeds the £7,400 a year earned income threshold needed to be eligible for FSM.

CPAG estimate that 55,000 children in poverty in Wales are currently unable to benefit from PDG-A funds, mainly because their parents/carers are in low paid work.<sup>5</sup>

*“I think some families who are just above the threshold and do not receive grants or free meals, also need help. There seems to be more parents having to work long hours to pay for basic provisions for their family, using food banks etc. I feel these are the children which miss out even more, as their trips are not subsidised, they cannot access free meals, grants etc. Also, I feel these families struggle because of the stigma and shame, the children live with the effect of toxic stress, of tired parents, which has a profound impact on the behaviour of the child”*  
(Primary school teacher)

## 2. School trips

Children and young people from low-income households are often unable to benefit from school trips. Inability to participate in the same activities as their friends can leave children feeling different and excluded.

*“They said if parents didn’t pay, they’re afraid they can’t come [on the school trip] so they go into another classroom and stay there until the others arrive.”* (KS2 pupil)

*“It seems between charities and trips along with functions in school, we pay out lots of money every term so the children don’t miss out.”* (Parent)

*“The people who ain’t going will go to a different class and stay there a whole week.”*  
(KS2 pupil)

<sup>5</sup> CPAG and Covid Realities, [Fixing Lunch: The Case for Expanding Free School Meals](#), 2021

Inability to pay for the trips their children want to go on can leave parents and carers feeling embarrassed and guilty. Sometimes young people tell us they know their family cannot afford to pay for trips, and will not even take home the letters.

*“School don’t think how much it costs...it could be what someone earns in a week”*  
(Year 11 pupil)

Many schools are working hard to offer trips that are affordable for their school communities and to subsidise or cover costs for families who cannot meet the charges. However, support via the Pupil Development Grant (PDG) or other means varies from school to school, and many schools still arrange unsubsidised trips that do not relate to the core curriculum. When families cannot afford to pay for trips, their children risk missing out on vital experiences which could support their wellbeing, and denies them the opportunity to build rich social and cultural knowledge. Crucially, it is those children least likely to experience diverse and enriching experiences outside of school who are also the least able to access them in school.

*“With trips we try and do so much but it comes to a point where it’s life, and if you can’t afford it you don’t go... We hate asking for money but when they go to Comp they’ll have to get used to it. They go skiing, New York, city breaks.”* (Member of SLT, primary school)

*“We go on a residential and it is expensive and not all the children can come on that trip... Some of our year 6 parents just said ‘we can’t afford it’.”* (Staff member)

Welsh Government should provide further support schools to provide inclusive trips and activities for all and ensure consistent practice across Wales. Funding, guidance and accountability mechanisms should be put in place - and enforced - to ensure:

- Costs are not attached to curriculum-related trips and activities
- All pupils are able to attend ‘rite of passage’ trips like residential
- All secondary pupils are guaranteed a minimum entitlement to attend at least one ‘optional’ trip during their time at school

### 3. Fundraising and non-curricular events

For many children, events, celebrations and extraordinary activities provide long lasting and cherished memories of their time in school. We know that many pupils look forward to these activities and gain a lot from them, and that is why they are an important part of the school year. However, for some children, these days and events draw attention to their families’ financial circumstances, and are a common and unwelcome reminder that, unlike their peers, they are not able to join in with all the opportunities school has to offer.

*“Christmas jumpers, every year, it’s a real balance. Children should do it, they enjoy it, it’s a festivity isn’t it. But those jumpers, they grow out of them so quickly, parents have to go and buy a jumper and then we’re asking for a donation for [them to dress up]... You see children not coming to school, because what does the parent do?”*  
(Primary school teacher)

*“Not everyone [dressed up for World Book Day], some people didn’t really have costumes so they wore their normal clothes”* (KS2 Pupil)

Some pupils and families who are themselves struggling to get by are being asked to regularly donate to different charity and fundraising days at school, and this is contributing to their financial worries.

*“The costs are usually when the school does a charity day, sometimes back to back. The most expensive activity is world book day when we have to have costumes. We usually have one available but have occasionally had to buy. The school does say there are options but children of course want to wear fancy dress.”* (Parent)

Children and young people have told us about the impact of being unable to take part in school dress up days and non-uniform days because of associated costs and social pressures. They told us this sometimes made them feel embarrassed and left out – in some cases teachers reported that pupils were missing school on these days to avoid the shame of being able to join in.

*“Children will take the day off on days where St David’s Day costumes need to be worn, or other days when uniform isn’t required”* (Staff member)

*“It can be very hurtful for children to see 90% of the class dressed up and some have not been able to.”* (Parent)

*“We normally have this thing where you bring £1 in for Children in Need, but say someone was really poor and didn’t have money, they’d say ‘ah I forgot’ and it would be really easy to tell [they were in poverty] then.”* (KS2 pupil)

#### Recommendation

- Welsh Government should continue to invest in poverty-awareness training for schools. It is important that school staff are equipped with a clear understanding of the causes and consequences of child poverty in their area so they can implement policies and practices that are inclusive for all, including their approach to fundraising and fun events.

#### 4. Uptake of entitlements

Proving help to maximise family incomes is an important way to tackle financial barriers at school and to help reduce child poverty. This is an area where Welsh Government could take significant action.

We know that money has a causal effect on children’s outcomes, and that increased family income means better outcomes, particularly when it comes to cognitive development and school achievement.<sup>6</sup>

Targeted entitlements to meet the educational costs of children and young people - like free school meals, PDG-A grants, and Education Maintenance Allowance - increase family incomes and allow for more flexibility to pay for uniform, transport, lunch and other occasional school costs, as-and-when they arise. However, we know that not every eligible family receives what they are entitled to, sometimes because they are unaware of their entitlements and sometimes because of barriers to applying. There is a common misconception among families and school staff that children are automatically ineligible for FSM and PDG-A if their parents/carers are in any form of paid employment.

*“I don’t think many people know exactly what support there is for pupils and parents”* (Parent)

<sup>6</sup> K Cooper and K Stewart, [Does Household Income Affect children’s Outcomes? A Systematic Review of the Evidence](#), 2020



*“I wish that there was a handout listing the places that we could get help but I feel that because we both work we wouldn’t qualify for the help anyway.” (Parent)*

More broadly, it is crucial that all families are receiving all of the benefits to which they are entitled, especially given the economic impact of Covid and the rising cost of living. Schools are a trusted space for many parents and carers and the ideal location to hear about financial support. Some schools proactively signpost or refer to welfare rights services and provide basic advice. We have found schools that employ family engagement workers are particularly well placed to offer this type of support.

In Scotland and London, initiatives locating advice workers in schools have led to demonstrable financial gains for families. An evaluation of a project, which co-located welfare rights advice in schools in Edinburgh, found return on investment of approximately £24 value for each £1 invested. The accessible and non-stigmatising approach of the Maximise! Project also led to significant positive outcomes for families, particularly around attendance and wellbeing.<sup>7</sup>

Welsh Government could support income maximisation and entitlements uptake in schools in the following ways:

- Work toward automatic registration (i.e. use existing data to avoid need for application) of all entitlements to remove barriers to application and boost uptake
- Lead a joined-up national campaign between government, local authorities and schools focusing on awareness and uptake of entitlements
- Support investment in advice workers as a key part of the community schools offer across Wales, drawing on successes and financial gains of work in other parts of the UK
- Build on the commitment to universal FSM in primary by extending FSM to all secondary school pupils, at a minimum where families are in receipt of universal credit or equivalent benefits

## Conclusion

Schools across Wales are working hard to ensure the inclusion and participation of children from low-income families. However, the areas highlighted in this paper are repeatedly brought up by children, their families and by school staff as barriers that prevent learners from taking part, feeling happy and being able to make the most of the school day. We believe that action from Welsh Government to break down these barriers will make a real difference to children and families living on low incomes.

*“Schools should be a place of education, a safe warm environment for children to grow, nurture and reach their full potential, not for parents to compete or go to the brink of poverty so their children can fit in and not get bullied or feel different.” (Parent)*

For further information, or to discuss the issues raised in this briefing, please contact Ellie Harwood, Wales Development Manager at [eharwood@cpag.org.uk](mailto:eharwood@cpag.org.uk).

---

<sup>7</sup> See S Baikie, [Maximise! Project](#)

## 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 work to understand what causes poverty, the impact it has on children's lives, and how it can be prevented and solved – 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.

## The UK Cost of the School Day project

Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) in Scotland started the Cost of the School Day project in 2014. The project aims to reduce the financial barriers that prevent learners from fully participating in the school day. The Cost of the School Day approach involves working with whole-school communities to identify and reduce cost barriers faced by learners from low-income backgrounds, including eating at school, uniform costs and school trips. Following the success of this project in Scotland, CPAG has joined forces with Children North East to expand the project to local authorities in England, Wales and new parts of Scotland. In Wales, we carry out poverty proofing in schools across Rhondda Cynon Taf and Neath Port Talbot. Beyond school-level action, we also work with local and national governments to bring about system and policy change. This work is funded by the National Lottery Community Fund. Find out more at: [www.cpag.org.uk/cosd](http://www.cpag.org.uk/cosd)

## Poverty Proofing the School Day

'Poverty Proofing the School Day', a project developed by Children North East following consultation across the North East of England in 2011, places the importance of the voice of children at the centre of decisions made by senior leaders. Poverty Proofing is a process of speaking to every single child within a school to identify the barriers to engagement and unintentional stigma and discrimination faced by those suffering the effects of poverty. In addition to children, the process includes engaging with staff, Governors and parents to truly understand the context in which children are living, and be able to provide meaningful and local recommendations. For more information visit [www.povertyproofing.co.uk](http://www.povertyproofing.co.uk)