

THE COST OF LEARNING IN LOCKDOWN

March 2021 update

Scotland findings



THE COST OF
THE SCHOOL DAY

Table of contents

<u>Introduction</u> -----	Page 3
<u>Summary of findings</u> -----	Page 4
<u>Summary of recommendations</u> -----	Page 5
<u>Background</u> -----	Page 6
<u>Learning in Lockdown: children and family experiences</u> -----	Page 9
<u>Back to school and looking forward: what do children and families need?</u> -----	Page 15
<u>Conclusion</u> -----	Page 24
<u>Thank you</u> -----	Page 25

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 across Scotland 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 remote learning, what has helped during this period and what more families need now as we enter the recovery period.

Methodology

We heard from 1,122 parents and carers and 649 children and young people in 30 of Scotland's local authorities. A third of parents responding to our surveys were from low-income households and over 20 per cent of the children and young people told us they received free school meals. We also interviewed parents whose stories are included here.

This is not a representative sample of families across Scotland. We **sought to engage with families living on a low income** to hear their experiences.

This report reports key Cost of Learning in Lockdown findings from Scotland. Thank you to everyone who responded to our surveys and helped promote 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. The report provides a snapshot of life in January and February 2021 but these insights from parents and children will remain critical in the months ahead.

This report builds on and updates findings from [The Cost of Learning in Lockdown](#) research published by CPAG in Scotland in June 2020. Surveys also ran in England and Wales as part of our UK Cost of the School Day project with partners Children North East.

Schools and local authorities can find guidance and resources on tackling child poverty and reducing school costs on our [website](#) and in the [Cost of the School Day Toolkit](#).

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 (FSM) 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 say this works well or very well; satisfaction levels are far lower for other methods.

Low-income families say they are more concerned about money than spring 2020 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 have been missing their friends and are worried about their learning.

Recommendations

Our findings show that many families need greater financial security to help 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** UK and Scottish governments should **prioritise financial support for low-income families**, building on the Scottish Government's Child Payment and Winter and Spring hardship payments welcomed by families in difficult times.
- 2** Scottish Government should build on its very welcome commitment to universal P1-P7 free school meals by **reviewing FSM eligibility thresholds** more widely so that support reaches those who need it across primary and secondary school. Cash first approaches are necessary for any FSM provision outwith school.
- 3** Schools and local authorities should implement **poverty aware practices and policies**, to support families in the recovery period and beyond. This includes reducing school-related costs, maximising incomes and access to out of school care and holiday provision.
- 4** Government, local authorities and schools should continue work to ensure all children and young people can access their [entitlement to appropriate physical resources](#) and **have what they need at home to learn** whether in or out of school in the coming months.

Summary of recommendations

What can schools and local authorities do?

Remote learning

- Ask all families about remote learning resource needs.
- Continue to bridge gaps in resources so children can fully participate in remote learning and in homework when back in school.
- Continue valued contact with families during any periods of remote learning.

Free school meals

- Provide cash payment replacements for FSMs during periods of isolation or remote learning.
- Ensure free school meal support is reaching families when not in school.

Out of school care and school holidays

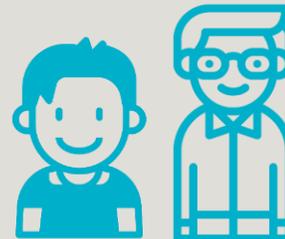
- Consider how breakfast clubs, out of school care and holiday programmes can play a role in helping families back to work, as well as supporting children with learning, physical and mental health and wellbeing.

Reducing costs and maximising incomes

- Review school policies and practices, including Covid-related policies, to ensure they help reduce financial pressures on families
- Provide clear, regular universal information about financial support, entitlements and hardship payments 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. They say they would like help with getting back into a routine and reassurances about schoolwork.



What can government do?

Remote learning

- Continue investment and work with schools and local authorities to ensure all pupils can access their entitlement to appropriate digital devices, connectivity and other materials they need to learn in or out of school in the coming months

Free school meals and financial support

- Build on the welcome commitment to universal free school meals for Primary aged children by reviewing wider FSM eligibility thresholds
- Prioritise financial support for low-income families, building on valuable Winter and Spring hardship payments
- Ensure a 'cash first' approach to FSMs and support during any future periods of isolation, remote learning or holiday support.

Out of school care and school holidays

- Ensure sufficient support for out of school care and holiday programmes to benefit children and families.

Background

Background

Context

In every school in Scotland, 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 supporting remote learning, 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 with one child, Shetland Islands)

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, Dundee)

- 2 Families whose younger children usually received non-means tested free school meals but were not receiving them while out of school.

“My child in P2 who would get free meals at school I am now having to buy extra food at home.” (Lone parent with two children, South Ayrshire)

Background

Context

Families told us about some of the challenges they faced prior to lockdown during the autumn term and holidays.

Back-to-school costs

Low-income families were more likely to report an increase in back-to-school costs compared with previous 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, Aberdeenshire)

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.

Breakfast clubs and after school

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

"Breakfast clubs have stopped therefore you are late for work and have to pay the time back." (Mum of two children, Angus)

Additional costs over school holidays

During October break and Christmas holidays, some families received free meal replacements and hardship payments to help with costs of 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, Shetland Islands)

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.

"Earning a lot less than we did pre pandemic and still have same outgoings so finding it very difficult but don't qualify for support." (Mum of one child, Inverclyde)

Many **families were struggling financially going into this lockdown** and have 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 in Scotland

2021 update

Learning in Lockdown

Remote 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 all 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.**

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

“Struggling to get connected online due to using mobile phones with small screens.” (Mum with two children, Aberdeenshire)



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

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.

“Missing out on zoom chats as they clash and only have one tablet between the 3 children. Getting stressed and angry as they can't do their work when they want to. Everything taking so much longer as having to write/draw out work rather than print it off.” (Mum with three children, Renfrewshire)

The home learning environment

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

How schools are helping

Schools have often gone above and beyond to bridge resource gaps where they can. This includes lending out devices, delivering printing, supplying stationery and adjusting teaching to help all learners join in. Local councils have also played an important role in supplying devices 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, North Lanarkshire)

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. They help to maximise incomes both when children are attending school and through replacements when school buildings are closed. Families 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.

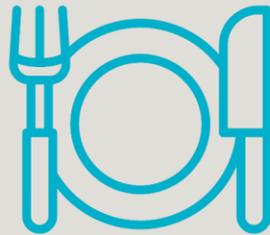
75% of families receiving cash payments say this works well or very well for them.

"You can shop at any supermarket instead of a designated one." (Mum of three children, Dundee)

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'



"The payments were made automatically and without questioning. They were gratefully received and of course, helpful." (Mum with one child, East Dunbartonshire)

"I can choose what to buy for the kids instead of receiving a meal parcel that some of the kids won't eat." (Mum of three children, Inverclyde)

"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 child, Shetland Islands)

"My daughter has food aversions so only eats certain things and I like shopping at Aldi to get more for my money." (Mum of three, Angus)

"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, Renfrewshire)

Families missing out

Pre-pandemic, at least 45,000 children in Scotland were living below the poverty line but not entitled to FSM. We heard from some of these parents with incomes just above eligibility thresholds. The recent budget commitment to universal FSM for Primary children will go a long way to ensuring support for these families.

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, we heard about one school supporting younger children 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, Dundee)

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.

"The school have gave great support, teachers message daily, they have a call meeting once a week. The school are leaving resources out that we can pick up with no contact if we need them." (Mum of 2 children, Dundee)

Parents described how teachers had kept in touch and 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.

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.

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 have been 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..."

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 remote 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 her 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:
what do children and
families need?**

Back to school and looking forward

Remote 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, East Ayrshire)

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.

"We didn't have a laptop so school issued one for my son... Before we had the laptop it was extremely hard going as we only had my phone to use to look up Teams." (Mum with two children, Aberdeenshire)

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** to ensure that no family misses out on the help they need
- 3 If children are learning at 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 work and progress.

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 almost all local authorities in Scotland.

Families on low incomes told us that they are missing out on crucial support through FSMs. The recent commitment to universal FSM for primary children will help thousands of families.

Alongside this, we urge action from government on eligibility thresholds and local authorities and schools on 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, Glasgow)



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

Recommendations

- 1 Scottish Government and local authorities should prioritise a 'cash first' approach to FSMs during any future periods of isolation, remote learning or holiday support.
- 2 We welcome the recent budget commitment to provide all primary school children with FSMs and hope this can be built on in future with a wider review of FSM eligibility thresholds to ensure all low-income families receive the support they need.
- 3 Schools and local authorities should **provide the clear, regular and universal information and support on accessing entitlements** which families say helps them 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 mental health and wellbeing and many reported they were 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." (15 year old girl, Fife)

As well as reconnecting with friends, young people valued the return to routine and some sense of normality. 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.

"Even the routine of waking up at 7 to make my way to school for 8:30am instead of waking up at 11am. Going to the shops at break, doing proper PE and having a chit chat with pals." (13 year old boy, Glasgow)

Children and young people 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 say they wanted help with confidence.

Parents want mental health and wellbeing to be a priority as children return. They also want time for children to reconnect with friends.

"Coronavirus is deadly and I worry about passing it onto my family. My self esteem is quite low and school closures has made that hard to deal with being alone most of the time." (15 year old girl, Fife)

"I personally have been struggling with mental health (having no motivation to get up out of bed) making me slowly get more and more behind on work making it harder and harder for me to start work as I get stressed on the amount of work I have to do." (16 year old girl, Shetland Islands)

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 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 autumn term 2020, 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, Inverclyde)

"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, Edinburgh)

Lots of schools 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, Aberdeenshire)

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.

"We bought full school uniform, shoes, trainers and boots. He is not wearing any of these and this is hugely frustrating as I can't afford to waste this money. I know this isn't anyone's fault but it's 100 pounds that could have been used elsewhere." (Mum of two children, North Lanarkshire)

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
- 3 Schools should regularly promote any grants or entitlements that may help families with school costs e.g. free meals, school clothing grants and EMA

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, Glasgow)

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. Parents we heard from 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, Shetland Islands)

It is vital that all families receive this information 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 issues like finances, mental health and benefits.

Parents say they like regular communication from schools about their children. In particular, they want to know how children were progressing with schoolwork. As we 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 remote 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.” (Mum of one child, North Lanarkshire)

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 by 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, Glasgow)

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.

"The cash sum for winter clothing [Winter hardship payment] was great because I could buy my son a heavy jacket with it and new shoes." (Mum with one child, Renfrewshire)

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 of having children at home, and often difficult to access and insecure financial support is taking its toll.

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, Glasgow)

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 remote learning with work. This caused stress and guilt for parents and often left less time to focus on learning.

We heard from many working families who are struggling but do not qualify for support.

"I've fallen through the gaps as I'm excluded from all the grants etc. announced so far." (Lone parent with one child, Highland)

"Help for all families. Lives have been changed. People are really struggling.." (Lone parent with two children, Dundee)

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 entitlement.

Back to school and looking forward

Holidays and out of school 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



"There's been no holiday childcare available at all, making working more difficult due to lack of childcare. Usually I've had holiday clubs but we don't have that option." (Mum of two primary aged children, Falkirk)

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.

"Some help with the heating and electricity cost would be amazing... it's much higher and for a single parent that's hard." (Single mum of three children, Aberdeenshire)

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 focused on learning or catch-up. Families also wanted fun holiday activities that would help their children's mental health and wellbeing.

"As a lone child my daughter has missed the contact with her peers. Her usual activities have not been running and this has affected her happiness and desire to engage." (Parent of one child, Aberdeenshire)

Back to school and looking forward

Holidays and out of school care

During autumn term 2020, many schools understandably had to stop or limit attendance to activities such as breakfast clubs, out of school care and after-school activities.

Although some were unsure, a third of young people **told us their breakfast club had stopped** and two fifths said that **there were no after school activities**.

We heard from parents and carers about how this was impacting their access to work and impacting on their financial circumstances.

“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, Dundee)

Why do parents and carers value breakfast clubs, out of school care and after school activities?

These activities:

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



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, schools and partners must work together to **offer sufficient out of school care and holiday provision** to benefit both children and parents.
- 3 **Out of school care and holiday provision should 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.

Children and young people say that being unable to complete work and learn adds to their 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, North Lanarkshire)

Many **school staff have worked tirelessly** to deliver the best possible learning experience to their children and young people

under the circumstances, plugging gaps in resources, making remote learning work and helping learners 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, Dundee)

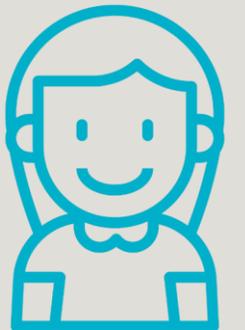
While many families have faced difficulties during this period, there are actions that can be taken by schools, local authorities and government that will help children and families in the coming months.

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.

However, we must also step up support to make sure that no child is excluded from remote learning in the future because of family income. We have heard from many families in our research for whom this is not happening. **Government, local authorities and schools must keep working together to ensure that every child has what they need to learn from home.**

Free meal replacements during holidays, hardship payments and the recent commitment to universal FSM in Primary schools offer vital support. Building on this with further **cash support for low-income families** will be essential to keep families afloat in this crisis and eligibility must be extended to working families who are struggling financially.

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

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to everyone 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.

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

About CPAG in Scotland

We work for the one in four children in Scotland growing up in poverty. We collect evidence from families living in poverty and campaign for solutions to bring about a society where children have a fair chance in life free from hardship. We provide training, advice and information on social security to frontline workers to make sure families get the financial support they need.

Unit 9, Ladywell Business Centre
94 Duke Street
Glasgow G4 0UW

Child Poverty Action Group is a charity registered in England and Wales (registration number 294841) and in Scotland (registration number SC039339)

Published March 2021