



THE COST OF THE SCHOOL DAY

THE COST OF LEARNING IN LOCKDOWN FAMILY EXPERIENCES OF SCHOOL CLOSURES

June 2020

Executive summary

On 20 March 2020, the coronavirus pandemic forced schools across the UK to close their doors to the majority of pupils. Faced with a previously unimaginable crisis, schools have been going to extraordinary lengths to ensure children don't miss out during this period. At the same time, in millions of homes, parents and carers have been suddenly faced with the new challenge of helping to support their children's learning at home.

Our [UK Cost of the School Day](#) programme works across Scotland, England and Wales, in partnership with Children North East, to help schools identify and remove the financial barriers that prevent children in poverty from fully participating in school life. We know that, while school should be free, children's education comes with many hidden costs. Even prior to the pandemic, many children lacked the resources they needed to participate in all the opportunities education can offer.

Schools across the UK help reduce cost pressures on families in many ways. They enable digitally excluded pupils to get online and provide access to ICT and software. They provide free breakfasts and school dinners. They print off worksheets and they lend out books. Schools also provide pastoral care, ensuring that pupils are safe, happy and able to thrive. For many children, school is the only place they get to see friends, play outside, and participate in sports and the arts. Many families simply do not have sufficient incomes to provide access to these things at home.

Prior to the current pandemic, children growing up in homes below the poverty line were already at a greater risk of poorer educational outcomes and wellbeing, as well as having increased barriers to engagement and participation in school life. We know that certain groups of children face a much higher possibility of living in poverty than others, this includes children from black and minority ethnic communities, those in larger or lone parent families and children in families where someone is disabled. Our research shows that Covid-19 has served to magnify some of the factors that contribute to the negative outcomes associated with growing up in poverty.

We conducted a survey to gather the views of families in England, Scotland and Wales in order to understand their experiences of learning during lockdown. 3,600 parents and carers and 1,300 children and young people took part, enabling us to understand more about the support offered to families during the initial period of school closures, with a particular emphasis on the experiences of households living on a low income. We asked people what was going well, and what support they had needed but did not receive. Our survey looked at support

with learning materials and resources, the provision of replacement free school meals, plus pastoral support for family wellbeing, including advice and signposting for financial support. We also asked people what they felt schools need to do to support children as they begin to re-open to more pupils.

The parents and carers on low incomes that we heard from were just as likely to be concerned with helping their children to continue learning through lockdown. Nonetheless, they reported facing significantly more stress and worry around home learning and household finances than parents and carers in better-off homes. We found that the cost burdens of school closures have fallen most heavily on families already living on a low income.

In particular, we found that:

- Low-income families who responded were twice as likely to say that they lacked all the resources they needed to support learning at home, with 40 per cent saying they were missing at least one essential resource.
- Low-income families were more likely to tell us they have had to buy educational resources, compared to those in better-off homes. People who told us they were worried about their financial circumstances were also more likely to have bought educational resources for their children. A third of people most worried about money have had to purchase a laptop, tablet or other device during lockdown.
- Around a third of all families who responded said that they were enjoying learning at home, and these families were much less likely to report having money worries or lacking the resources they needed. Families who were worried about money were more likely to say they found it difficult to continue their children's education at home.
- Eligible parents valued receiving support towards the cost of replacing free school meals. Most families told us they preferred to receive support through direct payments to their bank accounts, as this method allowed flexibility, dignity, safety and convenience.
- Children and young people valued being able to communicate with their teachers online, but phone calls were also highly appreciated by those who had received them. Parents and carers valued schools that took the time to understand their particular circumstances and offer personalised support.
- Secondary school pupils were more likely to report that they had done a lot of schoolwork at home if they were regularly keeping in touch with their teachers. Pupils who said they were having infrequent or no contact with their schools reported doing much less work. Pupils who reported doing a lot of work at home were also more likely to report that their schools had provided them with the resources to help them work at home.
- Socioeconomic status did not hugely influence parental views about returning to school. Regardless of income, the most important factor for many parents and carers was their schools providing emotional support to help pupils settle back in and come to terms with the events of 2020. Many were supportive of a gradual, phased approach with a primary emphasis on social and emotional support.

The surveys found that the Covid-19 pandemic has been a hugely varied experience for families across the UK. Schools are likely to find that pupils are coming back to class having lived through very different lockdown experiences over the last few months. While learning loss and inequitable academic progress rightly concern educators and policymakers, parents and young people have told us they are equally concerned with

the longer-term effects of increased social isolation and household stress.

Families believe that schools have a vital role to play in helping children come to terms with the pandemic and the disruption it has caused to their childhoods. More than anything, children and young people told us they are desperate to reconnect with their friends. They view returning to school as their main opportunity to do this, and educators are now faced with the challenge of managing these expectations, while ensuring safety in their schools.

Public health experts suggest that there may be recurrent peaks of Covid-19, which may require further lockdowns at a national and local level.¹ It is therefore essential that governments, local authorities and schools review how well their support systems have worked during this first lockdown and make plans for how they will support families as some continue to learn at home now and in the event of future lockdowns.

Key recommendations

As education is a devolved policy area, governments across the UK have taken different approaches to school closures and have made different investments to support pupils. Although we recognise progress has already been made across some of these areas in parts of the UK, there is still more that can be done. These recommendations therefore apply to the UK government and devolved governments in Scotland and Wales, as well as local authorities and schools across Britain.

Support with costs and resources

- **Increase child benefit by £10 per child per week.** Many families have experienced and will continue to experience increased costs as a result of the pandemic, including costs related to home learning. A £10 uplift in child benefit is the most efficient and effective* way of getting money to families to reduce these cost burdens and tackle child poverty.

* Research² carried out by Professor Jonathan Bradshaw and Dr Antonia Keung found that an increase in child benefit of £10 per child per week would reduce child poverty by five percentage points.
- **Provide all children with the learning tools they need for the curriculum, at home or at school.** National government, local government and schools must work together to ensure every child has the equipment and resources they need to take part in the work set by their teachers. While pupils without resources have been acutely affected during the pandemic, we know that children struggle to complete their regular homework for the same reasons.
- **Schools should be properly funded to remove barriers to learning.** While local government and schools are best placed to assess resource needs and allocate what is needed to pupils, national government must ensure resources and plans are in place that leave no child without the tools to fully participate in school activities.

¹ UK Government (2020) Government launches test and trace service

² Bradshaw J and Keung A (2020) Poor children need a coronavirus bonus, York: Social Policy Research Unit

- **Information regarding financial support and entitlements must reach families.** Schools and local authorities should ensure that information about financial entitlements, that are available locally and within the school, are easily accessible to families and they are supported to apply.

Alternatives to free school meals

- **Cash payments should replace the value of free school meals.** Free school meal entitlements have been a lifeline for many families already facing financial pressures that have been exacerbated by the pandemic. Direct payments increase uptake and are preferred by families as they provide flexibility, dignity, safety and convenience, all of which are highly valued.
- **The earnings threshold for eligibility for free school meals should be urgently reviewed.** Many working families are living in poverty but are not eligible for free school meals. The eligibility threshold must be reviewed as a matter of priority to ensure all children in need of this vital support receive it. This would also increase funding for schools to support these pupils' needs.

Supporting pupil wellbeing

- **Maintain regular contact with pupils and families to support learning and wellbeing.** Schools must prioritise keeping in touch with pupils during periods where they may be at home as children and families say that this helps them to engage in learning and feel supported.
- **Schools should implement poverty aware approaches, policies and practices as pupils return.** Given recent events and the time spent out of school, families may not be able to afford or may not have access to certain items such as school uniforms or learning materials when it's time to return to school. Schools should take an understanding approach and recognise the struggles families may have faced during school closures.

Returning to school

- **Children and young people want to spend time with their friends and teachers and feel 'normal' again.** As they reopen, schools should prioritise safe opportunities for children to rebuild bonds with their classmates and teachers whom they have missed greatly during school closures.
- **Families must be involved in planning for the return to school.** Schools and local authorities should continue to consult with parents so they feel prepared and are able to plan work and childcare arrangements. Pupils should also be included to help reduce some of the worries and uncertainties they are feeling about returning to school life in changed circumstances.

Aim of this report

The Cost of the School Day project embarked on this research project in order to understand how families were adapting to learning at home during school closures. We already know that many families find it challenging to manage the costs of education when schools are open to all learners. We wanted to know more about the resources low-income families may or may not have to facilitate learning at home, what resources schools had started providing, and what people have to do without, or look to purchase themselves, because schools are no longer providing these items.

We were interested in children and young people's views of the support their schools were providing, as well as the support they say they wanted but weren't being offered. We also wanted to collect examples of good practice from different nations across Britain, particularly things schools have done to help families cope with the increased costs of children being at home.

The respondents to our survey 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. The Cost of the School Day project is also long established in Scotland and more developed than our work in schools in England and Wales, which has been delayed by the pandemic at an early stage. As such, a disproportionate number of responses came from Scotland. However, sub-group analysis shows there are no meaningful differences between Scottish respondents and respondents from elsewhere in Britain.

Substantial sections of our survey gathered rich qualitative data about people's personal experiences of the pandemic, giving us a powerful descriptive insight into the lived experience of thousands of parents, carers, children and young people during lockdown. We used content analysis to code these qualitative responses, uncovering significant patterns and common experiences among the people who completed our survey. We also collected data on the respondent's family type, gender, household income, free school meal eligibility, financial wellbeing, location and number of children, allowing us to carry out regression analysis across these variables.

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 as they adapt to learning at home. It provides a snapshot of life as it stood in May 2020, but much of the insight will remain valid over the coming months and years. For as long as social distancing, home learning and remote teaching continue, we will need to pay greater consideration than ever to the resources available in the home of every pupil.

Background and context

On Friday 20 March 2020, most of the UK's schools closed their doors. From now on, they would only be open to the most vulnerable pupils and the children of keyworkers. Approximately 98 per cent of school pupils immediately had to switch to learning at home. By the evening of Monday 23 March, every nation of the UK had entered lockdown. For most families, this meant staying at home all the time, unless they needed to go out for one of four very limited purposes.

The Cost of the School Day project was originally set up by Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland to help whole-school communities identify and overcome cost barriers and poverty-related stigma that shape and limit children's experiences of school. More recently, Child Poverty Action Group has joined forces with [Children North East](#) to expand this work to England and Wales and other parts of Scotland, to 'poverty proof' schools so all children can make the most of the school day. As schools closed their doors, together we have continued to look at how household income has affected children's experiences of education while they learn from home. Many of these challenges are not new, but are being felt more acutely as a result of the pandemic.

We already know that, in normal circumstances, household income and the home-learning environment act as major determinants of children's academic achievement. Emerging research into home learning during the pandemic indicated that families living on a low income were potentially facing additional barriers to supporting their children's ongoing education during lockdown.³

It quickly became apparent that the negative impacts of the lockdown were not weighing evenly across our society. Rather than being a 'great leveller', the public health measures put in place to control the coronavirus often acted to exacerbate existing inequalities.⁴ Millions of households have experienced significant drops in income, with low-income families with children facing greater financial losses than many other groups.⁵ For example, the earnings of single parents have fallen by more than double the amount experienced by couple-parent families.⁶ Despite increasing the standard allowance in universal credit, the UK Government has not introduced any specific social security measures to help families with children.

The Centre for Economic Policy Research carried out analysis on anonymised household spending data and found that the pandemic has exacerbated inequality in income and expenditure. While those with higher incomes have been able to save at a higher rate than normal, those with the lowest incomes, including people who have fallen into poverty during this crisis, are increasingly being pulled into debt.⁷

Even before the coronavirus crisis took hold, many families were living in financially precarious situations. The Office for National Statistics estimated that, pre-crisis, there were more than 4 million households in the UK who said they wouldn't be able to cope with their income dropping by 25 per cent in a month.⁸ Since then, one in five UK workers – 9.1 million people – have stopped work and are now living on 80 per cent of their usual wages via

³ Sutton Trust (2020) [COVID-19 and Social Mobility Impact Brief #1: School Shutdown](#)

⁴ Institute for Fiscal Studies (2020) [The idiosyncratic impact of an aggregate shock: the distributional consequences of COVID-19](#)

⁵ Child Poverty Action Group (2020) [Families Hit Harder Because Nothing for Children in Covid-19 Response](#)

⁶ ISER/University of Essex (2020) [Covid-19 Survey: Briefing Note: Wave 1 April 2020](#)

⁷ Centre for Economic Policy Research (2020) [Consumption in the Time of Covid-19: Evidence from UK Transaction Data](#)

⁸ ONS (2020) [Early indicator estimates from the Wealth and Assets Survey](#)

the Job Retention Scheme.⁹ Modelling from the Institute for Public Policy Research predicts that an additional 200,000 children in the UK are likely to fall into poverty as a result of the pandemic.¹⁰

Oxford University's Co-SPACE (Covid-19 Supporting Parents, Adolescents, and Children in Epidemics) survey attempts to gain deeper insight into what living through lockdown might mean in terms of family mental health and wellbeing.¹¹ Their survey of 5,000 families showed that nearly half the parents and carers thought that their child was concerned about family and friends catching the virus, and around a third of parents and carers reported that their child was worried about missing school. Work is the most frequent source of stress for parents, followed by their child's emotional wellbeing. Parental stress levels also varied depending on whether they were continuing to work inside or outside of the home, with parents working outside the home more likely to feel stressed because of their job.

Direct research with children and young people has also found some worrying evidence that many are experiencing significantly reduced wellbeing during the lockdown. A Young Minds survey of young people with pre-existing mental health needs showed 83 per cent reported their mental health issues had worsened due to the pandemic.¹² A survey of 23,000 children and young people in Wales also found that 16 per cent of secondary school pupils reported feeling sad 'most of the time' during lockdown.¹³

The Institute for Fiscal Studies and the Institute of Education surveyed 4,000 parents in England, and found that children in more affluent families were spending 30 per cent more time on home learning each day, compared to children in less well-off homes. Higher-income parents were much more likely to report that their child's school was providing online classes and access to online video conferencing with teachers. The authors concluded that school closures are almost certain to increase educational inequalities, because pupils in more affluent homes were able to take advantage of these individualised resources, and could expect to receive more personalised input from adults to scaffold their home learning.¹⁴

A rapid evidence review by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) predicted that school closures are likely to reverse almost a decade's worth of progress in closing the attainment gap between children in poverty and their more affluent peers. The EEF reports that, even with well-designed distance learning programmes, many pupils will experience slower rates of learning at home, with the potential for significant learning loss in some pupils. They conclude that the negative impact of school closures is likely to be worse for pupils who are economically disadvantaged.¹⁵

The Sutton Trust surveyed teachers and parents in England in the early weeks of lockdown, and found large discrepancies between the amount of online learning being offered to pupils. Those attending more affluent schools were much more likely to have daily lessons online, while learners in the most deprived schools were much more likely to say they had received no online support at all. There was little evidence of substantial class or income differences in the level of supervision provided by parents, but pupils in more affluent homes reported doing more work set and supervised by their teachers. In the most deprived schools, 15 per cent of teachers

⁹ HMRC [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Statistics](#)

¹⁰ IPPR (2020) [1.1 million more people face poverty at end of 2020 as a result of coronavirus pandemic](#)

¹¹ Waite, P. et al (2020) [Report 02: Covid-19 worries, parent/carers stress and support needs, by child special educational needs and parent/carers work status](#) University of Oxford

¹² Young Minds (2020) [Coronavirus: Impact on Young People with Mental Health Needs](#)

¹³ Children's Commissioner for Wales (2020) [Coronavirus and me](#)

¹⁴ Institute for Fiscal Studies (2020) [Learning during the lockdown: Real-time data on children's experiences during home learning](#)

¹⁵ Education Endowment Foundation (2020) [Rapid evidence assessment Impact of school closures on the attainment gap](#)

report that more than a third of their students would not have adequate access to an electronic device for learning from home, compared to only two per cent in the most affluent state schools.¹⁶

Lacking a device or access to the internet will obviously hamper most children's ability to participate in education when it is predominantly delivered online.¹⁷ However, computers are just one item in a long inventory of resources that most children and young people need to be able to take part in learning. Millions of households have to survive on incomes that barely cover the cost of essentials. In these homes, books, craft materials and stationery can often be prohibitively expensive luxuries. Research by the National Literacy Trust reports nearly 400,000 children do not own a single book of their own.¹⁸ In ordinary times, schools would alleviate much of this burden by providing the necessary resources in the classroom.

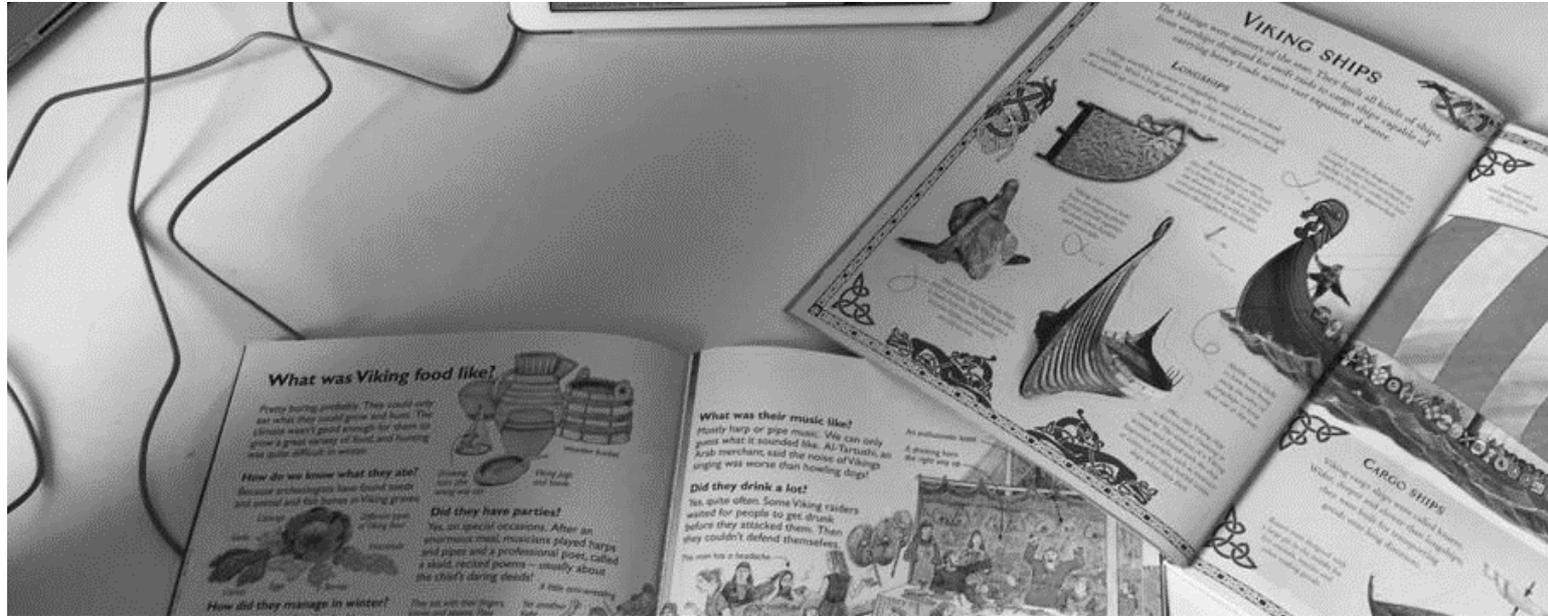
The lockdown has presented difficulties and disruptions for every section of society, but some households appear to have experienced greater stresses and financial pressure than others. We are yet to understand how the psychological and economic impacts of the pandemic might also disrupt children's ability to keep learning in these circumstances. Evidence from other prolonged school closures due to disasters or epidemics has shown mixed impacts, although children from lower-income homes seem to be more at risk of negative outcomes.¹⁹ It may be some time before schools can return to delivering education as we typically know it. Educators and policymakers now need to think about developing equitable home learning strategies that will sustain all children's right to education in the medium-to-long term.

¹⁶ The Sutton Trust (2020) [COVID-19 and Social Mobility Impact Brief #1: School Shutdown](#)

¹⁷ Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities (2020) [Briefing note: inequalities in resources in the home learning environment](#)

¹⁸ National Literacy Trust (2019) [Annual Literacy Survey](#)

¹⁹ Hattie, J (2020) [Visible Learning Effect Sizes When Schools Are Closed: What Matters and What Does Not](#)



HOME LEARNING

When schools closed abruptly in March 2020, teachers and schools were faced with the previously unimaginable challenge of continuing to educate pupils remotely. A wide range of approaches, platforms and types of support have been set up to support learning during this period. Our research outlines how well this is working for children and families, and brings to light some challenges that families, particularly those on low incomes, have faced while trying to adapt to learning at home. With home learning set to be a feature to some extent in children's lives for the foreseeable future, it is important that we understand these challenges and work to overcome them.

Overview

What support has worked well during school closures?

- Devices and resources provided by schools to pupils who need them helps children and young people access learning and support.
- Regular and personal contact from teachers checking to see how pupils are getting on.
- Regular setting of tasks.
- Regular marking and feedback on tasks completed.
- Opportunities for pupils to interact with their peers for learning and social purposes.
- Use of platforms like Google Classroom and Microsoft Teams where children can check in daily.

What were the main challenges around home learning?

- Missing resources which limited access to learning, most commonly ICT-related equipment.
- Families needing to spend money on resources for learning.
- Lack of appropriate space to study.
- Worries about not 'keeping up' affecting wellbeing.
- Parents not having the time, confidence or guidance to support children with learning.
- Distraction and noise from parents working and siblings.

What do people wish they had had that was not provided?

- More one-to-one support to help pupils understand better.
- Being able to quickly and easily ask questions of teachers.
- Greater guidance for parents around supporting home learning.
- More support for families with children with additional support needs, in particular specialist or differentiated learning resources.
- More personal and consistent communication from teachers.
- Live lessons so pupils can learn but also interact with their peers.

Background

Lockdown forced learning from schools into children and young people's homes. Although some families were well equipped for this transition with separate rooms and desks, adequate resources and parents on hand to help, this was not the case for all families responding to the surveys. We heard from parents, carers, children and young people from many types of households, with some saying they were really enjoying home learning and others describing challenges that made it more difficult. Some pupils talked about noisy family members, such as siblings and parents working from home, distracting them from their schoolwork, while others described working on bedroom floors or from their laps. Some children told us they struggled with balancing work and leisure time in the home and some felt unable to ask parents for help.

In this section, we focus on family experiences of home learning and the support provided by schools and local authorities. While these findings are relevant for all pupils, they are primarily intended to help reduce cost burdens and improve experiences for those living in low-income households.

Responses

Across England, Scotland and Wales, 3,209 parents and carers told us about their experiences around home learning during school closures. We also heard from 1,218 primary and secondary pupils about what home learning has been like for them.

Findings

Children and young people need adequate resources to learn at home

This section focuses on family experiences of home learning, what happens when resources to learn are not there and the difference that support with resources can make.

Digital learning

From Google Classroom, email and Microsoft Teams to Seesaw, Show my Homework and many more, online technology is helping children and young people learn and communicate with classmates, often on a daily basis. Many families find these methods helpful, and are grateful to teachers for continuing to provide tasks, ideas for learning and support.



“My teacher has sent messages every day to my class and set us weekly and daily tasks. When we submit work, [my teacher] always sends me a message to say how well I have done and ask me about how I am and how I am getting on working at home. We can also message other people in our class on Google classroom and comment on other people's posts.” (Boy aged 9, Dundee)

“Every week we get lots of activities sent to google classroom from the teacher! It's absolutely fantastic and so much work being put in by the class teacher!” (Mum of child aged 6, Angus)

“I like the idea of the Tutor Times Microsoft Teams because the teachers are very good at keeping a smile on our faces.” (Young woman aged 15, Perth and Kinross)

“My teachers are online every day supporting me.” (Girl aged 6, Dumfries and Galloway)

Although it is working well for many, this seismic shift to digital learning requires appropriate technology at home. In our survey, ICT-related items were the most commonly missing resource across secondary school respondents,

with pupils telling us they did not have personal devices or that they had to share them with siblings and parents who were also trying to work at home. Pupils in low-income households in particular were more likely to be missing these and other items, and were less likely to have good internet access.



“No computer access. Only phone internet access when accessible.” (Young man aged 16, Edinburgh)

“I need computer to do my assignment. Five of us share one computer in the family.” (Young woman aged 15, Dundee)

“We use my phone to do everything we do not have a computer/laptop and a lot of things are not compatible. A lot of things we have to write out as we do not have a printer and using a phone isn't ideal.” (Mum of child aged 10, Fife)

Although families were sometimes able to view work on mobile phones, they told us about the impact of having limited or no access to digital learning. Limited access meant difficulties submitting work for feedback, as well as additional pressure on parents: we heard from some parents who were copying out work in the mornings and evenings so children could complete schoolwork. Parents shared concerns that their children weren't able to access the same learning as others, that less learning was taking place and that children were feeling frustrated and cut off.



“We don't have a tablet or computer. Only mobile phone which is our only contact source too. laptop or tablet would have been very helpful.” (Mum of child aged 6, Renfrewshire)

“I have one laptop I share so we take it in turns to use it and we also do work at the weekend to keep on top of the work.” (Young woman aged 12, Angus)

“It is having a huge impact as my children can't concentrate properly to do their work as they are doing a lot of work from just my phone, so I need to try and space it out for them both to be able to use my phone and they get frustrated when they are wanting to work but the other is using my phone.” (Lone parent of two children, Scotland)

Families told us that missing resources also meant difficulties accessing support from teachers and continuing connections with their peers.



“We don't have a laptop or computer. All the work assigned is meant to be done online, which isn't an option for us. The support for parents who can access the online work seems great, according to other parents I've spoken to. Unfortunately my daughter can't access the same online lessons as the other children.” (Lone parent of two children, Coventry)

“We have no device that can allow my nine year old to participate in Teams online. It's not supported on her Amazon Fire and I can't afford to upgrade her. She is also missing out on the chat facility and has therefore lost the connection with her class. I'm heartbroken for her to be honest.” (Lone parent of three children, Dundee)

Many local authorities and schools are working hard to identify and support families cut off from digital learning. To ensure pupils can access all the digital learning on offer, some schools have provided Chromebooks, iPads and other devices. We heard that this support has made learning more accessible and straightforward.



“Felt left out and frustrated, a bit isolated. Frustration still there when wifi not great but much better now we have netbook.” (Mum of child aged 10, Dundee)

“I've been lent a chromebook which is easier as before there were 3 of us trying to share 1 laptop to get work done.” (Boy aged 13, Midlothian)

“[My teacher] helped support me though the hard days of this and given me school work she helped me with giving me a laptop to work with cause of my dyslexia.” (Boy aged 9, Moray)

“Daughter's school lent laptops out and they call every week to check on us.” (Mum of two children, Cheshire)

Non-digital resources

At school, children and young people are provided with a wide range of resources and materials to support learning. Many schools, aware that not every family will have these materials at home, are sending and delivering home learning packs, workbooks, stationery, craft materials and books.



“The pack the school gave us at the time of lockdown containing jotters, pencils, glue, ruler, counters, number sheet, ideas for numeracy and literacy, and their original numeracy books was brilliant... The school have offered stationery and if we need any help with devices etc to contact them.” (Mum of child aged 5, Perth and Kinross)

“My teacher phones me every week and they gave us learning packs to do at home every 2 weeks.” (Girl aged 11, Glasgow)

However, when basic resources are missing, families told us that either work can't be completed or it makes things considerably more difficult. This was a particular challenge for children eligible for free school meals, with one in three saying they didn't have what they needed to learn.



“They are not learning as don't have access to even library resources. We already had limited material due to lack of money to buy stuff.” (Lone parent of child aged 9, Kettering)

“If I don't have any of extra materials (glue, paper and so on) they are not able fully to do learning.” (Mum of three children, Coventry)

Printers and ink

Families appreciate schools understanding the difficulties associated with printing work at home. Providing printed resources or avoiding tasks that require printing was well received.



“Primary school have produced printed worksheets through parent Council and delivered them to households without printing facilities.” (Mum of three children, Highland)

“The workbooks put together by her class teacher have been really helpful as well as the online access to various websites. We don't have a printer at home so rather than use NHS resources to print out school work we contacted the class teacher directly and she arranged to meet and give us the workbook on paper.” (Mum of child aged 10, Angus)

However, families highlighted that lots of the work children and young people receive does require printing and this is causing frustration in some households. Parents spoke about needing access to printers or, if they had one, about the cost of printing accessories such as printer ink and paper. Secondary school pupils also raised the need for printers and said without them, and other items, it was more difficult to keep up with work.



“There are too many tasks that need a printer. I don't have a printer.” (Girl aged 9, Midlothian)

“Most things are online and require to be printed. Have spent £100 on ink just trying to keep up and to encourage them to do some worksheets as they can't always get on the laptop.” (Mum of five children, Dundee)

“Laptop doesn't work very well. Not got a printer to print things out.” (Boy aged 12, Angus)

“The children need to print work at home. Sadly I cannot afford the printer ink.” (Lone parent with two children, Hampshire)

Families on low incomes buying resources

Many families without resources for learning at home are having to buy them. In our survey, low-income families reported buying more educational resources than those in better-off homes. In particular, parents and carers in low-income households were more likely to have to spend money on internet access, printers and printing resources, stationery and craft materials. A third of families in our survey reporting extreme money worries have had to purchase a laptop or other device during lockdown.



“This has cost money I cannot afford financially but is an absolute necessity for my children's requirements.” (Mum of two children, Dundee)

“I've had to borrow money to buy a device we don't really need or can't afford so my child doesn't fall behind.” (Lone parent of two children, Dundee)

“We have no computer, we have no printer so we have to copy the work out onto paper in order to complete the tasks which takes twice as long. [She's] frustrated, bored waiting on me copying things out... Can't afford to buy a tablet or printer but can afford some craft stuff to keep her and nursery age sister entertained.” (Mum of child aged 7, Perth and Kinross)

What helps children and young people learn during school closures

Regular and personal contact

In a school environment, children and young people and school staff are in daily close contact. Children and young people can ask questions, check their learning, work with peers, and chat with teachers and be supported and encouraged by them. With the sudden move to remote learning, schools and teachers are working hard to continue providing this kind of support.

We heard from pupils across Britain about some of the actions teachers had taken with many saying that receiving personal check-ins by phone, video or other means had really helped them.



“My teacher has been sending lovely messages and videos on Teams and the school Facebook page that make me feel happy. The learning grid she has made has given me lots of ideas for my mum to help me with at home. I can ask questions on Teams or by emailing and my teacher will answer them.” (Girl aged 8, Dumfries and Galloway)

“My teacher had called me at home to speak to me and check how I am. She has given us activities to do at home as well. I like knowing that my teacher is safe and well.” (Girl aged 8, Angus)

“They give us some homework and advice. Other teachers check in on us. Our English teacher updates us on plays that are streaming online.” (Young woman aged 16, Edgware)

We heard that this contact helped children and young people feel more motivated and engaged in learning. We found that secondary school pupils in particular were more likely to report they had done a lot of schoolwork if they were in regular contact with their teachers. This type of contact also helped children to seek clarification about work and reassurances.



“My teacher has been so supportive and she is always so fast to reply if I need help.”
(Young woman aged 12, Midlothian)

“They send me private messages to talk and also if I need help with work. They do emotion check-ins with me.” (Girl aged 9, Midlothian)

“The school sends assembly and messages to mum to check we are OK. My teacher sends me learning and positive messages that cheer me up.” (Girl aged 7, Angus)

Parents also appreciated personal interactions with the school and teachers and they felt this helped them better support their children’s learning. By speaking to teachers through either emails, phone calls or texts, parents could check-in about schoolwork, discuss any concerns and generally receive help with coping with lockdown.



“Teachers have been online daily and contactable for both children. They have commented on work and shown genuine care and interest in how they are coping with lockdown. Answered questions re anything we’ve not been sure of in relation to tasks.”
(Lone parent of two children, Dundee)

“It’s not necessarily the resources, it’s been the phone calls and offer of any support that I have found the most helpful.” (Mum of three children, Neath Port Talbot)

There was recognition from families that teachers were under great pressure during this time. However, we heard from pupils who wanted more help with their learning, particularly one-to-one, so they could understand the work they were being set. Many miss being able to seek clarification on how to do tasks and ask questions of their teacher as they work. Primary pupils also told us that what they wanted most from schools was more contact with their teacher – even more so than contact with friends and classmates.



“I miss having little chats with my teacher especially if I have been crying or upset. I would like to see my teacher.” (Girl aged 7, Perth and Kinross)

“I wish there was a more direct way to contact my teachers. An email would be fine. Somewhere I could submit questions and get answers from the teachers who actually teach me.” (Young man aged 16, Wales)

We found that pupils who were in less frequent contact or not in contact with teachers also reported doing much less work. Although there may be a number of reasons why some pupils found it hard to concentrate and stay motivated during lockdown, some parents linked this to not having enough communication with class teachers and wished for more one-to-one support. Some parents also wanted more contact time with the school staff themselves and a more ‘personal touch’, while appreciating the strain teachers are under.



“1:2:1 check-ins with the class teacher would be great but appreciate that this is a huge drain on time.” (Dad of child aged 8, Midlothian)

“Miss one to one interaction and face to face expertise of teachers, youngest child has poor gross motor skills and gets very frustrated.” (Mum of two children, Dundee)

Regular feedback

Children and young people told us that feedback on work was important. Both primary and secondary pupils appreciate when work is marked and they receive personal comments back from teachers. Parents felt this contributed to keeping their children engaged and motivated.



“She has given us lots of learning materials and fun thing activities. I like it when she marks things and has a comment just for me.” (Boy aged 8, Midlothian)

“Lots of activities lots of feedback. Lots of posts that make us feel like we are together.” (Girl aged 6, Dundee)

Pupils also commented that this was something they wished they had more of during school closures. Some reported frustration with the length of time they had to wait for replies to their messages, or one-way communication from teachers that didn't allow them to ask questions or seek clarification about the work being assigned. Some parents also wanted clearer goals and success criteria for their children to help provide more structure to the day.



“I'd like some feedback on work handed in, it's very demoralising not to receive any.” (Young man aged 13, Perth and Kinross)

“I haven't heard from some teachers, although I've submitted work to them. Other teachers mark work and give feedback, check-in to see I'm ok, give support and encouragement.” (Young woman aged 14, Angus)

Interactive and cooperative learning

Our survey responses show many young people particularly value cooperative learning in groups. Around half of pupils say their schools have helped them to keep in touch with their class via an app or other virtual means and this has been beneficial for both learning and maintaining social connections with peers.



“Speaking to my teacher has been good and being able to see what my friends have been doing through teams has been good.” (Boy aged 9, Stranraer)

“We have been using Microsoft teams in groups of around 5 so we can speak to our teacher and friends.” (Boy aged 10, Angus)

In school, cooperative learning means that children and young people can support each other with tasks as well as getting help from teachers. Working remotely has made this a lot more difficult and, although attempts have been made to recreate this type of learning, not all children have been able to benefit from it. One in 10 children and young people went as far as telling us that not having friends around affected their ability to keep learning at home, and that they wished there were more opportunities to learn alongside peers. Many children and young people are appreciating the opportunity to keep in touch and learn with their peers virtually, but for lower-income pupils, who were more likely to be missing or having to share essential resources like laptops and devices, some of this learning is out of bounds.



“My friend has lots of brothers and sisters and he can't get on his computer as much as me. I like learning new stuff. So does he but he can't do it as much as me. After lockdown he can come to visit and we can do our maths together. I will help him.”
(Boy aged 11, Perth and Kinross)

“I think we should be doing actual video based classes because not only do I want some human contact outside of my family, but sending us worksheets and textbooks is not a particularly good way to learn.” (Young man aged 15, Moray)

Parental support

With the sudden closures of schools, parents and carers have been faced with the challenge of supporting their children's learning entirely at home.

Many parents responding to our survey told us they would benefit from more help and guidance on how to best help. Some were struggling either because they were working themselves or because they lacked confidence, but commented that clearer instructions on how to use resources posted online and guidance on how to structure and timetable the day would be a big help. This also included parents wanting consistency in terms of work being set and clear expectations about what should be achieved. Some parents also wanted specific support around how to teach certain concepts.



“More resources on paper or resources to help us know how to teach the subjects. E.g. Asking your child to do the 5 x tables is not as easy as a teacher asking them to do it. Especially if you don't know what is the best way to teach them.” (Mum of child aged 8, Dundee)

“I don't understand [maths and science] and I don't know how to get help as my mum doesn't know either.” (Young woman aged 14, East Dunbartonshire)

“It would be nice if the teacher could check in with us, a phone call from her teacher would really boost my daughter. Also I would benefit from a ten minute chat to discuss my worries about home learning.” (Mum of two children, Aylesbury)

As schools think about how they can support children at home with their learning, it is important to recognise that not all parents are able to provide the same level of support. Parents and carers responding to our survey said that structure and clear instructions would help them to support their child's learning.

Conclusion

Unequal access to resources for learning is a perennial issue for children and young people doing work at home but, often, schools were able to plug resource gaps by lending resources and providing ICT access during the school day. The shift to home learning due to the coronavirus outbreak has made this impossible, shining a light on the resources that are missing in homes across the country and the barriers to full participation. The recommendations here should therefore be considered as a response to immediate need, but also as a framework to ensure all pupils are set up to learn successfully from home whenever it is needed.

Things to consider

Schools

- Ask all children and families what resources they need in order to participate in learning at home, providing missing items wherever possible.
- Ensure every child has the equipment and resources they need to take part in the work set by their teachers.
- Ensure widespread awareness among school staff of the likelihood of increased numbers of children living in poverty as a result of the pandemic, and ensure that families are asked about resource needs so that no pupil misses out.
- Recognise how much children value personal check-ins and contact, and let this inform planning for blended learning, periods where children may continue to work from home and in the event of future lockdowns.
- Understand the challenges parents and carers are facing in supporting their children's learning and consider how they can be supported with check-ins, helpful instructions and clear expectations.

Local government

- Prioritise access to adequate ICT equipment and resources for home learning for children who need it in your local authority area.

National government

- Greater national investment and planning is required to ensure no child is without the tools that are needed to fully participate in school activities. Where plans are in place, we encourage a speedy roll-out.
- Understand the complex pressures that families are facing and prioritise pupil wellbeing in all strategies and plans.
- Recognise the impact that education costs have on children's ability to access learning, and continue to push for a free education system for families.
- Families require greater financial support with the increased costs they are facing as a result of the pandemic, including costs related to home learning. A £10 uplift in child benefit is the most efficient and effective way of getting money to families to reduce these cost burdens and tackle child poverty.

Parent case study – Hannah

Hannah lives with her three-year-old son and six-year-old daughter, who is in Primary 2.



Hannah is a single mum, and her children usually spend several days with their Dad every other week. Hannah usually works part time and is based in an office or out on the road, visiting community services. Because of the crisis, she is currently working from home.

Normally, Hannah's parents help with childcare, and she has a nursery place for her son. At the moment the children go to their Dad's house two days a week so that Hannah can work.

Lockdown had not altered the family's finances, and Hannah had been coping. But when her daughter's primary school changed how it was sending work home, she ran into problems: *"Initially the school issued packs of worksheets and bits and pieces for us to work through. But then everything went online, which is great, a much more efficient way of doing things. But in our house we don't have any devices. I have a work laptop and my phone, but other than that we didn't have anything. But then when the work started to come through online, and the apps she needed to do what was being asked, I couldn't access them. And although I've got enough money month to month to run the house and do everything that we need, I didn't have money just sitting that I would be able to buy technology."*

Hannah got in touch with the school to see whether she could apply for a grant to buy a digital device, but was told there are no schemes like that. In the end, her parents bought a device so that their granddaughter could do her work. Hannah felt she had no choice but to take up her parents' offer, as her daughter's work would suffer otherwise: *"There's quite a lot of pressure, although they're saying 'do as much as you can, or you don't have to do too much work'. But it's constantly coming through, so you're thinking well I don't want her to not be doing what she should be, and she suffers when she returns to school."*

Beyond the physical resources which would have helped the family cope, such as digital devices, jotters and art materials, there has also been little opportunity to interact with teachers. At one point Hannah's daughter had been struggling, so the school deputy head got in touch and talked to her about how she was feeling. This contact was clearly much appreciated by the family, but Hannah would like it to happen more regularly: *"So far there's been no opportunity to request the teacher to interact with anything, which I think would be really helpful. Just so that people could get a face to face check in."*

Better communication around what resources are needed could have made a huge difference to this family: *"At no point did anybody approach me to say have you got what you need, like can you get onto Google Classroom? It was just assumed that that would be something I had. I think people make an assumption because you're in work and whatever else that you would just have these things. That was actually not the case, but nobody asked. I'd imagine that some people wouldn't want to lose face by asking the question themselves. So if they asked everybody, you know what is it you need, that would open up a few more conversations."*

Being a single Mum during lockdown has been lonely, and Hannah's had ups and downs: *"It's stressful, because you know, I'm a single parent so I don't have another adult who comes home at the end of the day and you talk to. I can call people and whatever, but it's tough, that kind of mental load of being a mum and being on my own. It's been tough."*



FOOD PROVISION

Free school meal provision during school closures

Free school meals (FSM) are a lifeline for many families, helping when money is tight, and ensuring that children and young people get a daily meal. Since schools closed, families across the UK have received support for food costs in a variety of ways. This support will continue to be necessary as we ease lockdown and enter the summer holidays, and when children move into a new world of blended (school and home-based) learning. Given the variety of approaches nationally and locally, it is important we get alternative provision right for the children and families who need it.

We heard from **635** parents and carers about their different experiences of alternative free school meal provision during the coronavirus outbreak: difficulties faced, what works well when it comes to different methods and the value and impact of receiving the right support.

Overview

What support has worked well during school closures?

- Families have appreciated support with food costs from their schools and local authorities in alarming and difficult times.
- Families had positive experiences of all methods of FSM provision, but by far the highest levels of satisfaction were with direct payments to people's bank accounts. 81 per cent of families receiving payments say this works extremely or very well, and 90 per cent of these families say they would pick this method if they had the choice.
- Families value FSM provision that offers choice and accessibility. This means they can choose shops they are able to get to, that sell the food their children want, that provide best value, and where they feel safe. Online shopping is also particularly important at this time.
- Families value easy application or automated processes for FSM provision.
- Families appreciate communication and kindness from their schools and local authorities regarding the support available, and how to access it.
- Families commended schools and councils for quickly setting up food provision or stepping in if there were difficulties, particularly in relation to the Edenred scheme in England.

What were the main challenges around alternative FSM provision?

- Options which do not offer choice for families can be unhelpful. Examples include being unable to get to specific supermarkets to use vouchers and deliveries of food that children won't eat. There is the risk that if an option does not suit a family they will go without any support.
- In England, the national voucher scheme has created access difficulties for families.
- Although support with food costs is welcome, many budgets are under such pressure that families still struggle to afford what is needed.

What do people wish they had had that was not provided?

- Not all families who would benefit from FSM are eligible for them. Many families are sitting above the eligibility threshold but still struggling.
- Families used to receiving universal FSM but not entitled to alternative provision now noted the difference this makes to their costs.

Background

School closures have meant the loss of free lunches and breakfasts for children and young people from low-income households. Action to plug this gap has differed across Scotland, England and Wales, and locally within each country.

- Scottish government guidance has given local authorities flexibility to decide how to replace free school meals. This has led to local differences in the way FSM entitlements are fulfilled, the amount provided (between £2 and £4 a day) and how often families receive the entitlement. As of mid-May 2020, 10 local authorities were offering direct payments with the others offering supermarket cards or vouchers, PayPoint vouchers, deliveries and collections.²⁰ On 17 June, Glasgow City Council, the largest local authority in Scotland, announced that it would move from Farmfoods cards to cash payments for free meals over the summer break.²¹
- In England, the Department for Education announced on 31 March the launch of the national Edenred voucher scheme to allow eligible children to meet the costs of meals during school closures. Prior to this, some schools had already set up initiatives for families that they continued to use, while others transitioned to the Edenred scheme. Although the government's preferred option was for schools to work with their individual food suppliers, schools have since been encouraged to use whichever alternative provision best fits their needs.
- In Wales, many local authorities opted for food collections while waiting for government guidance. By the start of April, major problems were emerging with the Edenred voucher scheme in England, leaving hundreds of thousands of children without support. Wales steered away from commissioning a similar scheme and updated guidance to suggest providing food parcels or supermarket vouchers, with direct payments a third option on the list. As of the end of May, 20 out of 22 Welsh local authorities are offering families the option of receiving money to cover the costs of meals while their children are home from school.

In the context of these different national and local approaches, it is important that we understand families' experiences of different methods and highlight what they think is most important when it comes to alternative FSM provision.

Responses

Across Scotland, England and Wales, we heard from **1,121** parents and carers whose children receive FSM when schools are open. We focus here on the **635** families on low incomes who have received alternative FSM provision during school closures.²²

In Scotland, three quarters of respondents (438) live in local authority areas offering direct payments into bank accounts, whereas 137 respondents elsewhere receive voucher cards, online vouchers, food deliveries and food collections. In England, 84 per cent of the 43 who have received alternative provision had used the Edenred

²⁰ Treanor, M (2020) [COVID-19 crisis measures, poverty and free school meals](#), blog for Institute for Social Policy, Housing, Equalities Research, Heriot Watt University

²¹ <https://www.glasgowtimes.co.uk/news/18521376.parents-glasgow-get-cash-payment-school-meals-summer/>

²² The remaining families are not receiving alternative provision largely because they had been receiving universal FSM for primary aged children and are not eligible for means tested support.

national voucher scheme at some point during school closures. And in Wales, three quarters of eligible respondents (13 families) now receive direct payments, with others receiving food deliveries, food collections and money through ParentPay.

Additional costs and pressures for families

For the weeks families were locked down together at home, many were feeling the financial pressures of constant snacks and meals, and higher food bills.



“The kids are wanting to eat more with being at home more so I'm having to keep buying a lot more than normal.” (Mum of three children, Angus)

“I am struggling to provide all the children need. The cost of food has risen and the children seem to be hungrier than normal. I am dreading the school holidays.” (Lone parent of five children, Perth and Kinross)

“It's costing too much money paying for gas, electric and food.” (Lone parent of two children, Edinburgh)

Extra lockdown costs mean that alternative FSM provision is welcomed by families. We heard that support with food costs is helping stretched budgets and removing stress and pressure from families, both financially and emotionally. It has meant that families have the food they need when they may not otherwise.



“The extra money has really helped as I didn't have the budget for the extra food the kids need without the free school meal each day.” (Lone parent of two children, Angus)

“The cash payments have stopped us having to go to foodbank.” (Mum of two children, Angus)

“So very much appreciated to have that back up. One income or low-income families quite often don't or can't have a back-up plan when times are tough. For me it's peace of mind.” (Lone parent of two children, Glasgow)

What do families want most from alternative free school meal provision?

Different methods work for different family circumstances. We heard about deliveries working well for larger families, people self-isolating and young carers. We heard about voucher cards working well when supermarkets were near and offered what families wanted. Families had positive things to say about all of the different methods, and it was notable that families showed huge appreciation for the support they had received from their schools and local authorities in alarming and difficult times.

We looked more closely at satisfaction levels with the different ways FSM entitlements are being fulfilled, and found that families are most positive about direct payments.

81 per cent of families receiving direct payments said that it was working extremely or very well for them. This is compared with 60 per cent of families receiving vouchers that can be spent in more than one supermarket, 46 per cent of families having food delivered, 36 per cent of families collecting food and 35 per cent of families receiving vouchers cards usable in only one supermarket.

90 per cent of families currently receiving direct payments would choose to continue receiving support in this way. This was far higher than any of the other methods.

	Respondents currently receiving FSM alternatives		Respondents who would choose to continue receiving support in this way	
	Number		Number	%
Direct payments	423		380	90%
Voucher cards (Scotland only)	32		7	22%
Online vouchers	53		20	38%
Food delivery	28		9	32%
Food collection	22		4	18%
PayPoint voucher	4		0	0%

We looked across all of the different ways FSM alternatives are being delivered, and picked out common themes about what families appreciate and value most.

1. Families value choice

Families receiving direct payments appreciate being able to spend their entitlement in the shops and supermarkets that they choose. This means that they can choose the shops that provide best value for their budgets and buy food that their children enjoy eating and won't waste. This is particularly helpful for children who have dietary requirements and other needs around food.



"I can buy food from anywhere for them because I am not restricted in any way of how and where I spend the money. I can make a little go a long way." (Lone parent of three children, Dundee)

"It allows me to easily purchase foods that I know my child likes and will eat. The school lunch payments were sorted out very quickly which allowed me to get in a good shop of ingredients needed for the meals my child eats, also be able to purchase additional snacks and fruit that she enjoys. This has been a huge help and much appreciated." (Lone parent of child aged 5, Angus)

"They have just changed to cash payments which means we can buy suitable food for my son with allergies. My children didn't like most food in the parcel." (Mum of two children, Pembrokeshire)

"Money in the bank is much easier as I have 2 autistic children with restrictive diets. Collecting a packed lunch wouldn't work as they wouldn't eat the things provided. The money means I can get the foods they will eat from whichever shop sells it. The food bank deliveries, which come to my house, feed me and the 5 year old and they provide the staples for me to make healthy dinners. There are lots of things the older two will eat as well." (Lone parent of three children, Neath Port Talbot)

Some parents received vouchers that could only be used in one supermarket. They pointed out the difficulties of being restricted to this one shop if their children do not like the food it sells, or parents want to buy a wider range of fresh non-frozen foods.



“... limited to a shop I don't normally shop in and the shop has very little choice of things my children like.” (Lone parent of two children, Glasgow)

“It would be easier to receive money into bank account or generic vouchers that can be used in any store instead of one particular store.” (Parent of three children, Nottingham)

“No issues with receiving or the card being topped up. However, the card is only valid at Farmfoods which is obviously quite limiting, they don't sell fresh fruit or vegetables.” (Mum of three children, Glasgow)

Similarly food deliveries and collections, while much appreciated by many families, do not offer families choice in what they eat.



“[Food deliveries are a] brilliant idea but I have a fussy eater. I have registered for direct payment so we can get the things I know my son will eat.” (Mum of two children, Dumfries and Galloway)

2. Families value accessibility

Food shopping becomes more difficult when vouchers can only be spent in person, and only in particular supermarkets. Depending on where families live, whether they drive and how many children they need to take with them, shopping can be challenging or impossible. This is especially the case now when public transport is not recommended.



“I don't drive therefore have no way of getting to a Farmfoods. I rely on my mother to shop for us.” (Lone parent of child aged 11, Glasgow)

“It's difficult to go shopping with all three children but I can't leave them at home.” (Lone parent of three children, Glasgow)

“Due to me being Type 1 diabetic and needing to shield it's hard to be able to use the vouchers because you cannot use them online. Would have been a lot more helpful if they could have been used online. I am grateful for the help but unfortunately I have not been able to use mine yet.” (Lone parent of three children, Coventry)

“I cannot use the voucher online. Nearest store is 5 miles away and don't drive. So having to take my children on the bus and then getting taxi home.” (Lone parent of two children, Moray)

“The problem is that the vouchers have an expiry date and it's not everything that I need is in those specified supermarkets. So cash will be much better.” (Lone parent of child aged 6, Bexley)

People receiving direct payments appreciated being able to shop locally in the places that were convenient to them. They were also able to shop online and spend their money in supermarkets offering click and collect and deliveries.



“It's a lot easier to buy shopping online for the kids' lunches and have it delivered than taking them to the shop.” (Lone parent of two children, Clackmannanshire)

“This is working well as I am not limited to any particular shop, I don't need to worry about printing out vouchers. Collecting a meal wouldn't work well for us as it would mean travelling by public transport to collect it.” (Mum of two children, Perth and Kinross)

3. Families value discretion and kindness

Some families said that receiving direct payments takes any shame or embarrassment – real or anticipated – away from receiving free meal provision.



“Cash payments takes the embarrassing factor out of it, we don't need to queue for food bags or receive vouchers, we don't feel ashamed for needing help this way.” (Lone parent of two children, Dundee)

“No extra expense travelling to receive meal or [spend] voucher. Also stops others knowing and saves my child embarrassment.” (Mum of young man aged 16, Dundee)

“It's discrete, and I don't have the embarrassment of asking for help or using vouchers.” (Lone parent of child aged 6, Angus)

Alongside discreet processes, families appreciate kindness and concern when they do have contact with school or council staff.



“Before the online vouchers came out the local secondary school was providing lunches. These were brilliant. The contents were great and the staff serving were kind, patient and never made you feel nervous or uncomfortable about needing to collect these meals to help my family.” (Mum of four children, Moray)

“It's been an incredible additional support that we potentially would not have coped without. Staff members at the council were extremely helpful and caring.” (Lone parent of child aged 8, Western Isles)

4. Families value safety

Many parents told us that safety and choice in where to shop was crucial for them at the present time. Some were nervous about going out to collect food packages, having to travel or being restricted to supermarkets they felt were too busy.



“Our local authority pay money into our accounts fortnightly. It makes it accessible to me immediately without having to collect food or vouchers.” (Mum of two children, Angus)

“Not everyone can get out to collect packed lunches and if you are self isolating then you can do food shop online with it being in the bank if there are any deliveries available.” (Mum of two children, Dundee)

“This [direct payments] is much better than the weeks prior where we had to go to the school to collect a bag of lunch. When you're not even meant to be going out.” (Mum of two children, Clackmannanshire)

5. Families value efficient processes

Many families receiving direct payments commented on how easy the process was during a difficult time. In local authorities where this was automated, parents spoke about the “incredible relief” of not having to fill in forms. In other areas, simple online forms are appreciated alongside speedy local authority processes.



“No need to apply, they just did it, which was really helpful as it was one less task for me to try and sort out at stressful time. Aside from financial side, it was a good feeling that someone was looking out for us when things are difficult.” (Lone parent of child aged 9, Perth and Kinross)

“They have paid it straight into the bank account so there is no confusion or difficulties with vouchers and where they may or may not be used etc. The money is instantly available.” (Mum of child aged 5, Perth and Kinross)

Families using the Edenred voucher scheme in England have faced a range of technical problems with the system such as complications when downloading the codes. Families suggested that another option was needed due to some of the technical problems with the voucher scheme.



“a) Time waiting for WEBSITE before I can even start the process. b) Too many STEPS in the process.” (Dad of child aged 9, Walsall)

“It's complicated to download the voucher and there are no instructions on how to download it.” (Mum of two children, Ellesmere Port)

“Edenred vouchers have been difficult to redeem, school is helping to sort this out. In meantime school have been arranging food boxes for all the families which have been a life saver for us.” (Lone parent with two children, Battersea)

Families missing out and what more is needed

Although support with food costs is welcome, many budgets are under such pressure at the moment that families still struggle to afford what is needed.



“It’s great the week that you get it I can get them things but the second week we struggle again.” (Lone parent of five children, Angus)

In Scotland, local variations mean that daily amounts going to families differ according to where they live. These daily amounts – ranging from £2-£4 – are often linked to the cost of a meal provided by catering services buying in bulk, rather than the cost of living and the pounds and pence needed to feed hungry children at home.

It is crucial that alternative FSM provision works well for families’ needs as there is a real risk that if an option does not suit a family, the children will then go without the support they need.



“I don’t want to increase any risks of infection by visiting the local school every day to pick up lunch. I think it is demeaning as it will highlight which children are entitled to FSMs. And my daughter is quite a fussy eater so it would be highly likely that there wouldn’t be anything she would eat.” (Lone parent of child aged 7, Edinburgh)

“Food comes out of date and there's nothing in we eat.” (Mum of two children, Highland)

“Food is to be collected from the school and we live 6 miles from school so not worth making the round trip.” (Mum of child aged 5, Aberdeenshire)

We have focused here on the families with experience of alternative provision during lockdown, but there were others responding who are not receiving anything, despite having experienced a drop in income and worries about money. Families not yet claiming benefits, or those who sit above eligibility thresholds but are still short of money, are at risk of missing out on much needed support with food costs.



“We’re struggling as husband is a key worker and I have been made furloughed on only 80 per cent this has took a massive hit on us as kids are eating more with being at home. Struggling to pay all credit card bills etc with zero support as not entitled to it.” (Mum of two children, Dundee)

“As my child is not entitled to the clothing grant as I get too much UC (universal credit) we aren't entitled to any form of help for lunches.” (Lone parent of child aged 6, Edinburgh)

“All p1-p3 were previously eligible for free meals, which has now stopped and is really difficult now providing 2 extra meals per day.” (Parent with two children, South Lanarkshire)

With even more families pushed into poverty by the coronavirus outbreak, it will be critical now and as schools return that all families are made aware of what they are entitled to and how they can access it.



“Because my child only received meals due to their age I am unaware of any help available. We have gone from a very good income to nothing overnight so help with meals would be very beneficial.” (Mum, Angus)

Things to consider across the UK

Schools

- Ensure staff are aware of the potentially larger pool of families in the school community in need of FSM support due to the coronavirus.
- Effectively promote FSM provision to all families to ensure awareness of eligibility and application processes, and uptake from families who need it.
- Families appreciate kindness, good communication and support when it comes to FSMs.

Local government

- Design alternative FSM provision to ensure that approaches are straightforward, accessible and offer families choice, safety and discretion. Families value direct payments, which offer all of these advantages.
- Monitor and evaluate local approaches with children and families to ensure that provision meets their needs and that problems can be identified and overcome.
- Strategically promote FSM provision in schools across the authority to ensure widespread awareness of eligibility and application processes for increased uptake.
- Understand the ongoing and critical financial pressure faced by families and ensure that FSM provision continues into the summer holidays.
- Where local authorities and schools have flexibility, ensure that the value of FSM provision provided locally is enough to support families with food costs in difficult times.
- Provide the simple, straightforward application and delivery processes that families value.

National government

- Ensure that national schemes and local approaches are straightforward, accessible and offer families choice, safety and discretion. Families particularly value direct payments, which offer all of these advantages.
- Many families are struggling on low incomes but are not eligible for free meals. The eligibility threshold must be reviewed as a matter of priority to ensure all children in need of this vital support receive it.
- There is inconsistency around the value of FSM replacements, with the level of support determined by where families live. Agree a minimum value families should be receiving with flexibility for schools or local authorities to provide more.
- Family finances are likely to worsen in the coming months. It is critical that FSM provision carries on in school holidays for the duration of the coronavirus pandemic.
- Many families receiving free meals are still struggling financially. Families with children need a wider package of financial support to support them at this time – increasing child benefit remains the best way of getting money to families to reduce cost burdens and tackle child poverty.

Parent case study – Anna

Anna lives with her three children in the suburbs of a fairly large town.

Her children are aged 9, 10 and 12. The younger two attend the local primary school, and Anna's eldest daughter is in the first year (7) of secondary school.



Anna had been looking for work before the pandemic: *I am currently unemployed. I had been looking for work that fits around the children, obviously in lockdown that's been put on hold because I've got no childcare. Looking to go back into the workplace has stalled, as has my learning – I was going to do some courses with the local community college, but everything has stopped.*

Anna's primary concern during the period of school closures has been her children's mental health: *At first the kids thought it was great – no school – for the first couple of weeks. But as it's progressed, their mental health and wellbeing has changed. They don't want to do as much as they wanted to do before, their interest is going down. My eldest has gone into a sort of social isolation, where she is really unsociable with us all. My main concern about the impact of school closure is their own mental health, their own anxiety. They are banned from watching the news because it would drive them crazy.*

Anna is concerned that her children have not had sufficient personal contact with school. She felt her children had, to some extent, been overlooked: *The primary children have had two phone calls in the 10 weeks. All the children would like more communication from the school. The secondary school that the eldest daughter goes to sent me a message, saying that they are pleased that they've been able to speak to the majority of the Y7 students, but they've not rung us. She's not spoken to one member of staff for 10 weeks.*

Anna has faced additional expenses while her children are at home: *Our financial situation has changed totally, with them being at home all the time. I've had to buy a lot more learning aids for the children, because whereas at school they would be doing arts and crafts and PE, and had to provide all that. I've had to buy all the stuff to enable them to get on with online learning. In school, they would have all these things at their fingertips.*

The primary school provided the children with an A4 exercise book, but I've had to buy more. I've had to buy stationery and the educational books for KS2 for the children to work from – English and maths, French. I need to give them something to do and learn from if I have internet issues. School has been guiding us to websites. They used to put on daily activities for the children to do, but now they've gone to doing weekly activities. They have to access it online and print it out. I'm in the process of purchasing a printer, which we didn't need before, because we would use the local library.

Alongside the stress and expense of buying additional learning resources, there has been tension created by all the children having to share a computer: *We have a laptop that all three of them share, so they have to take it in turns. My eldest has to log on to google classroom to see her tutors, so they all have to go on the computer at different times. The older one has stuff on google classroom but it's not put on there all the time. She is struggling.*

Anna's youngest child struggled to work online: *My daughter doesn't like working on a computer. She needs to have the work in front of her. It's all online. Nothing is given to them in handouts. I have*

enquired at the schools to see if they could print out the weekly tasks on paper and send it to the children, but I've not heard back. I believe that school could have done more to help. I've asked for the work to be printed out. Why can't they print it for her? The school could have provided them with stationery and pencil cases. They each have a pencil case at school, they could have sent the pencil cases home with the children, but I've had to go out and buy everything that they need for them.

Anna explained her worries about money and the effect of the benefit cap on her finances. She described her efforts to access funds from her local council: *I'm worried sick about money. I was trying to better myself before all this started, so I could get something for the children, and also get myself a work life. Thank god the government raised UC. On one hand we got the raises, but I'm subject to the benefit cap. But I can't get off the benefit cap, because I can't find a job, I can't work with the children at the moment, and I can't move into cheaper accommodation because there isn't any available. So the cap makes a huge difference. Financially I am struggling but it's another thing I just hide from the children.*

The government free school meal voucher scheme has generally worked well for Anna and her family, though the administration was problematic at times: *The school has put the children on the Edenred voucher scheme, which we get fortnightly. That's fine. We're restricted as to where we can shop because I don't drive and I can't get to the larger supermarket. The vouchers are easy to use, but when you get them you have to go onto a website, and sometimes there's a 30 minute wait to get to the screen, so it's a matter of finding the best time of day to use it. The vouchers from the secondary school was delayed by about four weeks but I think that's because everyone was using the site. They were backdated. I can't fault the system. It's been really helpful. £15 a week for a child isn't a lot, particularly because I go to the local Tesco's – since lockdown, the prices have been creeping up each day. It's been helpful. It has helped me provide them with the stuff they need.*

Anna worries about the expense of sending the children back to school: *If they went back I'd have to buy new school uniform, because they've grown. They'd need a whole new wardrobe – new school uniform, new shoes – because they've grown. If they go back to school, it'll be like starting a new year and buying them all new clothes. So, I'd have to buy everything.*

The family are also nervous about how schools are going to have to change: *When they go back to school, there are all these new measures, how are they going to react to it? They understand that they won't be sat like they were, with four on a table. I showed them a picture of how school will look, and they were horrified. 'That's not a class', they said. All the things about alternate days and staggered start and finishing times sound like a nightmare.*



FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Financial worry and its impact on learning from home

Job losses, school closures and a lack of available childcare means families are facing multiple challenges to staying afloat in the face of rising costs and income loss. The survey sought to understand how schools and local authorities are supporting parents and carers to get the additional financial support they need. Families told us how this support was working for them, the impact this was having on learning during the school closures, and to what extent they were experiencing financial worries. Financially supporting families will continue to be important during school closures, and for the duration of the pandemic as schools gradually return to opening full time to all learners.

We heard from **3,188** parents and carers who identified a level of financial concern, many of whom commented on the type of support they are receiving and how it has supported their family. Parents and carers told us about information and support they receive including free school meals, other grants and additional financial help.

Overview

What support has worked well during school closures?

Over half of the parents and carers who responded to the survey indicated that they have had a change in financial circumstances as a result of the coronavirus. Our research has shown that families have been accessing support through their local council, and through their school community. There have been multiple examples of the types of support that have worked well. Parents and carers told us that:

- They appreciated where schools have taken the time to understand whether a family's financial circumstances had been affected, and what support would therefore be necessary.
- Receiving regular communications through multiple mediums (e.g. letters, emails or apps) was especially useful when they contained links to specific sites where support could be accessed.
- Receiving information about available grants helped with the additional costs of the closures.
- Clear and consistent information on how to access the changes to the free school meal entitlement has been helpful.

What were the main challenges around accessing financial support for supporting home learning?

Over forty per cent of families who have experienced a change in their financial circumstances had not looked for or received financial support during school closures. Parents and carers highlighted a number of challenges in accessing financial support. These included:

- 1 in 3 parents and carers who tried to access support told us that they found identifying and accessing support 'difficult' or 'very difficult'.
- Available support often did not address a family's lack of resources for learning at home. Not all families were able to purchase essential digital devices leaving some excluded from digital and online activities.
- There was a high level of frustration from families who did not qualify for help but were really struggling because of considerable changes to their household income.

What do people wish they had had that was not provided?

Parent and carers told us that they would have liked:

- More financial support e.g. extra money or information about entitlements and grants, to help with the additional costs of having children at home including food, electricity, gas, and learning resources.
- More information and clarity about which benefits and grants families are entitled to and how they could access them.

Background

The pandemic has meant that many households have been facing the school closures with a significant change in their income. Low-income families with children have been especially affected compared to many other groups.²³ For many families, the first point of call for support has been their children's school.

The school closures have completely transformed the role of schools and teachers. Not only have schools and local councils worked extremely hard to make sure their pupils have food and are educated, but in many cases they have actively been there with financial advice too.

The UK government has primary responsibility for providing social security support to families with children. However, other forms of financial support are available in various forms across England, Wales and Scotland, and also from different local councils in each country. In response to the pandemic, the UK Government has implemented an increase of £20 a week to the universal credit standard allowance for 12 months, but there has been no increase to children's benefits, and the Scottish Government has not yet used its powers to provide additional financial support directly to families. The Welsh Government has applied greater flexibility to the Discretionary Assistance Fund (DAF), meaning families facing increasing costs due to children being at home can now use this as a reason to apply for an emergency assistance payment.

Local councils have different provisions available for their residents, with local welfare assistance schemes providing different types of support, and some councils making grants available for families to purchase household items. In England, a £500 million hardship fund was made available for councils to provide relief for vulnerable households.²⁴ This fund was earmarked for those in receipt of council tax support and has been predominantly used to reduce council tax bills for residents. More recently, in England an additional £63 million has been given to councils to help them provide much needed crisis support to struggling households.²⁵ In Scotland an additional £45 million has been allocated to the Scottish Welfare Fund.²⁶ The Welsh Government has added an additional £11 million to the budget for the Discretionary Assistance Fund, and introduced new flexibilities so families facing hardship caused by the additional costs of schools closures can apply for emergency support with food costs, bills and other essentials.²⁷

Across the UK, there is a significant variation in the amount of spending by each country per capita on local welfare assistance during the Covid-19 crisis. Wales is expected to spend £6.88 per capita, Scotland £14.76 per capita and Northern Ireland £9.97 per capita. Even with the increased funding, England is only expected to spend £1.85 per capita.

²³ Child Poverty Action Group (2020) [Families Hit Harder Because Nothing for Children in Covid-19 Response](#)

²⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-confirms-500-million-hardship-fund-will-provide-council-tax-relief-for-vulnerable-households>

²⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/63-million-for-local-authorities-to-assist-those-struggling-to-afford-food-and-other-essentials>

²⁶ <https://www.gov.scot/news/emergency-help-for-those-worse-affected-by-coronavirus/>

²⁷ <https://gov.wales/discretionary-assistance-fund-receives-11m-boost-wales>

Responses

In this section, we are focusing on the experiences of **3,188** parents and carers who indicated that they had a degree of financial concern, ranging from 1 (no concern at all) to 10 (extremely concerned). Respondents were most likely to place themselves right in the middle, which was described as being moderately concerned.

Additional costs and pressures for families

Lockdown has financially affected families in a number of ways. For some parents and carers, the impact has been felt because of a change in their income. Over half of parents and carers said that they have experienced a change in their financial circumstances during this period. The proportion of families affected is even higher for those who already had social security support or are newly claiming means-tested benefits, further suggesting the pandemic is not weighing evenly across society.



“Losing 20 per cent of income has hit hard.” (Mum of 13 year old, Neath Port Talbot)

Many families are also dealing with increased financial pressures as a result of having their children at home. Parents and carers told us that their food and energy bills have increased and they have spent money on learning resources.



“Money’s tighter as I am spending more on gas, electricity, food than I usually would. I have had to borrow money from family, so it’s a never-ending cycle.” (Mum of four children, Angus)

It has often fallen on schools to help families navigate the reductions in income and increases in spending that are being faced during the school closures. The support provided and actions taken by many schools, with the support of their councils, has gone a long way to making sure parents and carers have the right information to access the different types of support available to them.

Families value receiving regular information through a variety of channels

Families told us that they had received information and referrals from schools and councils about different types of financial support and grants. It was common for families to report that they had received information about free school meals, which meant that families felt like they were kept up to date and aware of any changes that might have taken place.



“The emails about free school meals were helpful and kept me up to date on any change.” (Mum of two children, Angus)

Parents were particularly appreciative of schools that had been in regular contact to share updates and information. This type of communication helped to build trust between families and their schools.



“The school has been fantastic at providing all the websites, numbers etc for charities and support systems. With constant reassurance if we need any help then to just get in contact with themselves and they will do the best they can to help.” (Mum of child aged 8, Edinburgh)

Parents’ and carers’ responses highlighted the different ways in which schools were effectively communicating with them about additional financial support. Information was provided in a range of ways from emails and letters to social media updates, text messages and via apps including Dojo. Families found it particularly helpful when links to specific sites were included.



“Schools have texted about loaning IT equipment and also about accessing free school meals... Council has been using social media to get the message out.” (Mum of two children, Neath Port Talbot)

Where schools have been able to effectively share information, parents and carers told us that they felt supported by the school and felt a sense of community and togetherness.



“Primary school's family support worker set up a family support page on Facebook to share information, and check in, it's been great to see that we are not alone.” (Mum of three children, Dundee)

Parents and carers have found the communications from schools about additional financial support useful and effective, meaning that they feel informed, supported and part of a community. For some families, where this combination of good practice isn't happening, they have struggled to access the right financial support.

Just under half of the families who responded (49 per cent) said that they hadn't received any information about extra financial support. This left some uncertain about whether they would qualify and others commented that school should be doing more to help families.



“I don't know how to ask the right questions for help.” (Dad of four children, Glasgow)

Families in this situation could potentially be supported through regular communications through multiple channels to reach all families. The information should also be easy to find on the relevant website and any application process should be straightforward.

Parents and carers appreciate individual support

Families have told us about the specific types of support that were available for their individual circumstances. These included schools or councils providing information on additional grants such as clothing grants, young carers grants, welfare fund and business grants.



“I was sent a text to say that we would receive clothing grants this year if we had received them last year, that was helpful but that’s it really.” (Mum of two children, Dundee)

Families valued when schools took the time to understand their individual financial circumstances, which has allowed tailored support for families.



“The school are aware of my financial situation and they have sent me links to see if I qualify for free school meals, EMA [education maintenance allowance]”. (Mum of child aged 16, Neath Port Talbot)

Some families found accessing support difficult, particularly those who had experienced a change in their financial circumstances. However, in cases where schools were able to give tailored and individual guidance, parents and carers said they felt very supported and had been linked to services that they may not have been able to find otherwise.



“School help with advice as much as they can and have put me in touch with other services to help me.” (Mum of two children, Wandsworth)

The more parents and carers are concerned about their finances the more likely they are to have spent money on learning resources

We found that families who are worried about money are more likely to have purchased learning resources than those who don’t have money concerns. From what parents have told us, we are able to see that:

- Regardless of high levels of financial concern, many families have made the decision to spend money on resourcing their home for learning.
- Before the school closures, a resource and digital gap already existed between households. The current crisis has shone a spotlight on this gap because of the move to home learning.



“Spending money we can’t afford to get the supplies or having to use scrap [paper] so work looks scruffy.” (Mum with three children, Plymouth)

The most common learning resources being purchased were ‘stationery’ and ‘arts and crafts materials’. Over 60 per cent of households with extreme money concerns bought these items during the school closure period, compared to 40 per cent of households who were not concerned at all about money. Although these are arguably the cheapest and most easily accessible resources for families, spending £1 or £2 begins to add up over months of school closures. Any plan for blended learning needs to take in to account the growing costs for low-income families over a longer period of time.

Less financially-secure households are twice as likely to have had to purchase printers or digital devices, and over four times as likely to have invested in internet access. This has been a direct response from families as schools

have moved learning online. Households often need access to websites or apps to do schoolwork and are sometimes required to download or print off worksheets.



“Less need to print materials. Some staff great at this, but others... seem to assume we have unlimited printing resources.” (Mum of child aged 15, North Somerset)

This appears to highlight a pre-existing resource and digital divide that was present before the pandemic and school closures, calling into question how these children were doing homework that required a high level of digital access.

Parents and carers are choosing to invest in their children’s learning and their home learning environment despite the fact that they have high levels of financial concern. Families are prioritising spending on learning resources to prevent children from missing out.

What other support do families need?

Schools and councils have supported families in a wide variety of ways depending on the family’s circumstances. This has meant respondents have often felt supported and have been able to access additional financial support that has helped them alleviate some of the financial impact of the lockdown. Schools have played an important role beyond facilitating home learning, by providing crucial family support as part of their pastoral practices. Although this has helped many families, there were some families who told us there was not currently enough support available.

There was a lot of frustration from families who had experienced a significant fall in their household income, but still did not qualify for any additional financial support. The increased costs of having more children at home had not been factored in to their financial planning and, as a result, many were struggling to stay afloat. Parents and carers suggested additional financial support to purchase learning resources and reassessing the eligibility criteria for FSMs could be two ways to ease their financial worries during the school closures.



“We are not entitled to any additional help but I do think the lower income threshold for free school meals at this time should be looked at as the cost of living has raised significantly at this time.” (Mum of three children, Midlothian)

Things to consider across the UK

Schools

- Schools and local authorities should ensure that information about financial entitlements that are available locally and within the school are easily accessible to families, and that families are supported to apply and benefit from them e.g. FSM entitlements, local welfare assistance and school clothing grants.

On pupils returning to the classroom:

- Recognising the struggles families may have faced during school closures, schools should implement poverty aware approaches to policies and practices as pupils return e.g. reviewing policies around uniform, extra-curricular activities and learning materials.
- Make sure any 'catch-up' learning or homework is equally accessible to all pupils, and consider setting work that does not require resources families must source themselves.

Local government

- Local councils should make sure that information about local welfare and other financial support is easily accessible on their websites, and directly linked to their Covid-19 response pages.
- Local councils should continue to work closely with schools to disseminate information about local support services. Schools are uniquely placed to provide this information universally to all families.

National government

- A £10 uplift in child benefit is the most efficient and effective way of getting money to families to reduce cost burdens and tackle child poverty.
- Devolved governments should use all of their powers to make emergency financial payments to low-income families.
- Governments must recognise the impact that education costs have on children's ability to access learning, and they must continue to push for a free education system for families.
- Invest in the placement of welfare rights advisers in schools to increase opportunities for families to access support and information regarding their entitlements.²⁸

²⁸ CPAG (2019) Tackling Poverty in Schools: Final Project Report

https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/files/policypost/Tackling_poverty_in_schools_final_project_report.pdf

Parent case study – Emma

Emma is a student who lives with her three children: Jack who is 13, William, 11, and Ava, 5.



Emma shares responsibility for Ava with Ava's Dad Michael, who is very involved. Although Emma and Michael are no longer together he's moved in temporarily to help during the crisis. Ava has ADHD, and without Michael being there to spend time with his daughter, Emma would not have been able to work to support the family. In addition to working full time, Emma's course is still running, so she has also had to continue to write essays. The family live in a three bedroom council house in a city.

The closure of her children's school has affected Emma: *In so many ways. Immediately financially. Don't ask me why but my grocery bill has been ridiculous. My electricity has gone up. I knew the electricity would go up, but the eating is just something else. And then, because they're not attending their football clubs and things like that, there's also this sort of extra pressure still to maintain entertainment, but in new ways.*

Beyond the changes to family finances, there's the pressure to juggle everything: *Mentally it's had quite a huge strain on all of us actually. Just trying to physically organise life to all be together to meet everybody's needs, and incorporate three different stages of education from one individual. It's brought a lot of pressure, in a lot of different ways. It's an awful lot to expect one person to work, be a childminder, be a teacher for three, be a therapist... I mean I know that's what we signed up for when we became parents but... to this extent, and this extreme?*

Emma worries a lot about how she's managing: *You feel like you're failing, like you're not getting this right though. Because I'm supposed to be keeping them in line and keeping on top of their work. But actually I feel like I'm protecting their emotional wellbeing.*

At the beginning of lockdown the children were all offered school meals, to be picked up. However they didn't take this up as the children attend three different schools, so this would have meant a daily round trip to each school and wasn't practical. They 'made do' until the local authority started providing direct cash payments to parents to replace free school meals.

Ava has additional support needs, but so far the family hasn't been offered any extra resources to support her learning, She is on an enable plan and Emma tries to follow that: *But realistically she behaves differently for me than what she would in an educational setting.*

William's school had been uploading learning activities onto Twitter, which initially Emma had no access to, despite her request to the school. A month after lockdown they gained access. She also requested Glow information, and that took ages to come, but is now William's main source of information. William should also have been going through transition from P7 to first year. At this stage the family haven't heard anything from the schools about this and aren't sure what's happening. Emma feels that the P7s have been a bit forgotten about during the crisis.

Jack's school has been 'phenomenal'. They already used Show my Homework, and this turned into a direct source for weekly and daily homework. They were able to pick up extra packs for Maths and English, and there has been a good level of communication with Jack's teachers. They've also had a

couple of emails from Jack's school, and a phone call from his guidance teacher checking in to see how he is getting on, both in an educational and well-being sense.

Emma thinks that over the next few months it's important for schools to work out communication: *I'd like them to put a good communication system in between parents and teachers, one where teachers aren't left feeling overwhelmed because parents can just constantly contact them, or be at them. But contact them enough to share information and get support, but I don't know if that's realistic with one teacher to 30 parents potentially. I don't know what that looks like but there needs to be something that is, that has a quick turnaround if I'm honest.*

Emma's life is all about planning and working out how she can juggle everything: *We need to know what the plan is. We need to be involved in the plan, so that we know what's expected of us on the other side. I feel like some things are being made very clear, so we know it's blended learning but nobody's said what that blended learning looks like. They talk about lived experience a lot, well I'd like to see some lived experience in the planning.*



FAMILY WELLBEING

As well as educating our children, schools provide children and families with important pastoral care ensuring pupils are safe, happy and able to thrive. School is also a place where children can spend time with friends, play and enjoy extra-curricular activities. With the sudden shift to being at home all day, alongside other changes that families might have faced during this time, schools have continued to play an important role in supporting families with their wellbeing. Parents and children talked positively about a number of practices that had really helped them to cope, as well as making suggestions about what more could have been done. They also shared valuable insight about household worries and the impact this was having on their experience of school closures.

Overview

What support has worked well during school closures?

- Using digital platforms to enable pupils to interact in 'real time' online and socialise.
- Keeping in touch by phone to see how pupils and parents are coping.
- Schools being easily contactable and responding to queries quickly.
- Use of social media to keep in touch with families.
- Facilitating peer-to-peer conversations.
- Schools taking time to understand personal circumstances and carrying out small acts of kindness.
- Health and wellbeing support such as resources, referrals and signposting.
- Support with extra-curricular activities e.g. outdoor learning and family activities.

What were the main challenges that have affected family wellbeing?

- Stress associated with online learning platforms.
- Missing learning resources contributing to stress and worry about getting work completed.
- Pupils and parents feeling overwhelmed by the amount of work being set by schools.
- Pupils in low-income households being less able to access some of the most enriching school activities.
- Parents being unable to support home learning due to work commitments or lack of confidence.

What do people wish they had had but was not provided?

- More emotional and pastoral support to help young people cope.
- Regular and consistent communication from teachers to help with learning and keep children feeling connected.
- More reassurance and check-ins with parents and carers.
- Being able to learn with friends in some way.
- Being able to feel part of the school community.
- More open conversations about mental health and wellbeing.

Background

For families across the UK the pandemic has led to considerable changes in homes with many facing increasing worries and concerns. Notably, families are encountering challenges around home learning, isolation, household finances, work commitments and childcare, which can all contribute to stress and anxiety. However, at a time where families are facing these difficulties and uncertainties, many of the activities, services and provision that might help to alleviate these pressures are inaccessible due to the restrictions put in place as a result of Covid-19.

In lots of cases schools and teachers have been the 'go to' service for advice and support with family wellbeing during school closures. Due to its personal nature, provision that supports wellbeing often varies from family to family and school to school. In this section we look at some of the types of support that families have benefitted from since schools have been closed to most pupils.

Responses

3,197 parents and carers told us about their general wellbeing across a range of measures, as well as the support they received to help them cope with learning in lockdown. We also heard from **378** secondary school pupils, and **797** primary school pupils, who told us all the things their teachers had done to support their wellbeing while they were away from school.

Pupil and family wellbeing, what worked well

During lockdown, despite the enormous task faced by teachers and schools, many were still able to provide highly valued wellbeing support. Children and parents described the ways in which schools had gone above and beyond their usual work to make sure pupils were managing.



"I'm really not sure that anything more can be done at the moment, all teachers are working extremely hard in a situation that we have never been in before and I commend them all." (Mum of two children, Angus)

One in three families told us that they were enjoying the home learning experience and benefiting from time spent as a family. For some pupils learning at home was less stressful than being at school with fewer disruptions and distractions.



"My son loves being at home so he is actually enjoying lockdown. I'm worried he'll be overwhelmed so I hope there will be more one to one/support for the quieter pupils and calls home." (Mum of a child aged 6, Rhondda Cynon Taf)

Although families talked about a number of actions schools had taken to support their wellbeing, we have focused on the key areas that respondents told us were helpful.

Contact and check-ins

Families viewed contact and communication between themselves and the school as an important way to support pupil and family wellbeing. Parents commended the efforts school staff had made to keep in touch by phone and other methods, with some schools regularly calling pupils and parents to see how they were coping. Families appreciated this method as it allowed them to speak to staff about concerns, and it made the school feel more approachable. Primary pupils, in particular, told us that personal contact from teachers had really helped their experience of lockdown and that they liked hearing from the school.



“My teacher had called me at home to speak to me and check how I am. She has given us activities to do at home as well. I like knowing that my teacher is safe and well.” (Girl aged 8, Angus)

“Headteacher has made it clear from the start of lockdown that she and other staff are always available via phone or email to answer any queries or to support/offer advice with issues out with home learning.” (Mum of two children, Angus)

“Teachers are always there if I have a question and give me new ideas on how to teach something if my son is struggling. Giving links to other resources have helped and links to community projects they both can get involved in is great.” (Mum of three children, Angus)

“Teacher has filmed herself reading a book and this helps my son as he is very attached to her.” (Mum of child aged 12, South Lanarkshire)

As well as emails and phone calls, parents commented on the use of social media as a way to keep families notified and informed. Several schools have set up new Twitter feeds and others are using YouTube to share videos of their teachers. Families appreciated being able to liaise with schools easily and receive regular updates in this way, although some recognised that this was not possible for all families.



“Putting a singing assembly video on YouTube so children can sing at home.” (Mum of a child aged 9, Mansfield)

“They have uploaded and sent information and videos on health and wellbeing, discussing the zones of regulation weekly. Teachers are checking in on mental state of children and families as well.” (Mum of two children, Moray)

“Fife council are communicating well via social media. But a lot of people don’t have social media (particularly elderly).” (Mum of child aged 6, Fife)

Families also told us that they had received specific resources and lessons around health and wellbeing, and these included things like tips, videos and group discussions. Some families received referrals and signposting – they considered all of this to be helpful.



“They give support for kids to be mentally healthy as well. Lots of resources for children how to be feeling happy and cope during this crisis.” (Parent of two children, Angus)

During this volatile period, by taking time to contact families directly and ask them how they are coping, schools helped to alleviate some of the stress and worries that some families have been experiencing.

Social interactions

Pupils told us that being able to see peers and interact with them online in 'real time' had meant a lot to them. Children were able to use digital platforms and online tools to socialise, maintain friendships and feel part of the school community. Children and families emphasised the importance of being able to see friends' faces and have social contact, and that this had made pupils feel less isolated. Many were complimentary about the way lots of schools have taken to using Microsoft Teams, Google Classroom, Hwb and Seesaw to create virtual spaces where staff and pupils can communicate and work together. Parents had identified some of these activities as being virtual playgrounds, circle time and group chats.



"All of the above. We have daily contact. They couldn't be more caring and helpful. Lots of ideas for learning - practicing writing, maths and french, fun games and art ideas etc. They also make sure we keep connected with school friends." (Girl aged 6, Angus)

Pupils reported that these interactions with peers were some of the experiences they had enjoyed most during lockdown. However, among families with lower incomes who said they were missing resources, around one in three said they did not have appropriate IT equipment for home learning, meaning that these pupils were more likely to be missing out on the experiences that peers were finding most enriching.

Whole-school activities

We also heard about lots of creative whole-school or class activities that helped pupils feel connected to their school community. These included things like tying ribbons to the school fences, videos from all the staff, virtual sports days, weekly headteacher challenges, making rainbows for their windows and writing messages to be shared with their classmates. Where staff had carried out small acts of kindness or taken time to understand personal circumstances, this was also greatly appreciated.



"Our headteacher is one of the best and really cares about the children. She collected Easter eggs to deliver. She and the other teachers organised a virtual Easter service. We are doing sports day next week. This Friday we are putting on our uniforms." (Mum of two children, Edinburgh)

"I got a nice card from my teacher and a rainbow to colour in. The school have phoned and checked on me and my mum and dad. I can ask questions on glow and the work is set out good and easy to understand." (Boy aged 7, Midlothian)

Parents spoke highly of the use of online assemblies that ensured the whole school could meet regularly. Often these were used for school celebrations or to discuss school wellbeing. Virtual assemblies were delivered through YouTube or via videos and sometimes involved singing and messages from the headteacher.



"Virtual assemblies started this week and focused on wellbeing this is a nice touch." (Mum of child aged 15, Dundee)

"Good communication from teachers via Google classroom and weekly assemblies, remembering to celebrate each child's birthdays etc." (Mum of two children, Midlothian)

Support and ideas for extra-curricular activities were also welcomed to help break up the day and add variety, these included activities like singing, staying active and gardening ideas. Families commented that these had also helped with family relationships.



“Encouraging all areas of play, outdoor, messy play, investigation, singing and staying active.” (Mum of child aged 4, Dundee)

Families missing out, and what more is needed

Although it's important to note that a number of families living in lower-income households reported positive experiences of lockdown, when looking across a range of questions we found that family wellbeing tended to be lower for those respondents living on lower incomes. In these households, children were more likely to be finding being at home difficult, and were more likely to report that they were struggling with learning and finding it harder to stay in touch with friends.

More communication

Many families would have welcomed more wellbeing support in a range of ways. In particular, parents identified a need for more communication from their children's schools or from local authorities. Some would have been reassured by having more regular contact, and felt this would have benefited their children both academically and emotionally.



“I would really like my children to have more interaction with their teacher and friends. I have to work as well support my children so it is really hard.”
(Mum of two children, Moray)

More information

Parents also identified a need for increased information from schools and councils so they could feel better prepared and informed. In particular, parents wanted further information on children transitioning to different year groups or schools, as well as wanting to be updated on health and safety regulations for when children and young people return to school. At a time when there is so much uncertainty, having information and updates proved to be important to families that took part in our survey.



“One child should be transitioning to HS the one with ASN, this of course is not happening, perhaps some more information and support with regards to this. Maybe a video walk through of the school, virtual tour, my child has high anxieties with moving up, any support that is possible or with the move would be fantastic to ease the transition.” (Mum of two children, Moray)

“Would really like a plan of action about what happens getting them back to school. We know there can't be an accurate timetable, but an idea of what will happen will be useful to relieve anxiety. For example, is my year 6 daughter going to end up going straight to comprehensive school? (She's incredibly anxious about this) Or will the school year be extended? It's everyone going back at once? Will there be full school days? School for half a week etc.” (Mum of two children, Ceredigion)

More emotional support

Young people told us they would have liked more emotional support from schools to help them cope with mental health concerns. Parents also wanted increased pastoral care support for them and their children, particularly as they tried to navigate digital platforms and home learning. Many would like to see schools offer more open communication around mental health.



“Wish they had a network or place for someone to talk to as isolation has been putting many teens including myself into a tough mental place and have been struggling with their mental health.” (Young woman aged 16, Dumfries and Galloway)

Learning and wellbeing

We saw from the survey responses that there was a link between family wellbeing and being able to access and engage in learning. Overall, those living in low-income households were facing significantly more stress and worry around home learning than those in better-off homes.

Learning resources

Young people told us that sometimes not having resources contributed to their worries as they felt they were ‘falling behind’ classmates. Some mentioned that they would like to have been supplied with equipment and resources to help them to continue learning. Those without laptops and printers found keeping up with peers particularly difficult, and these children were more likely to be from low-income homes. Some also reported feelings of stress and a sense of being overwhelmed with the amount of learning they were expected to undertake.



“Give me a better tablet or iPad. I would like my work shown on videos like a class lesson to help me understand my work better.” (Girl aged 10, Angus)

“I have asked for help as I am finding home learning really tough (I am trying to keep working from home and to keep up with schoolwork being set each week, and doing both badly). So far, I have had no help from anyone at all.” (Lone parent of child aged 8, Rhondda Cynon Taf)

“Individual tablets / laptops for each child would also be helpful in order for them to undertake more tasks electronically. This would not only increase their technology skills and provide a bit of learning variety but would also significantly save on stationery costs e.g. paper and printer ink etc.” (Mum of two children, Angus)

“It would be fantastic if the school could loan laptops to the children. I feel that my daughter is missing out on her education, because I’m not financially able to get her a computer. She shouldn’t have to fall so far behind due to our financial situation.” (Mum of two children, Coventry)



“We are being given too much work. It's stressful. Work is coming in from different platforms e.g. Email and teams - work on teams is coming from different places - posts, files, assignments, class note book. Makes you anxious. Also, teachers aren't getting enough support from management. People do appreciate work the teachers do! Extra stress because of exam estimation. And they have to work in hub agents what they wanted.” (Young woman aged 14, Fife)

Digital platforms

There was also stress associated with having too many online learning platforms, and this was a common theme in parental responses. Respondents described having to navigate a variety of platforms, a high volume of work being set and a degree of inconsistency across teachers and schools in relation to which platforms they use with their pupils. This was sometimes seen as adding an unnecessary burden on families during an already stressful period.



“More than half of the stress is finding out what different teachers want and where they have put information.” (Mum of two children, Moray)

While primary school pupils told us that they were generally enjoying the work and activities being set by their teachers, secondary school pupils were more likely to tell us they were struggling with too much work and different platforms and expectations.

Support for parents and carers

When it came to parents and carers supporting learning at home, some felt unable, particularly with their older children. Others told us they were conflicted by the demands of working from home, and did not have time to help their children with schoolwork as well. Parental fears about not being ‘good enough’ in relation to home schooling and comparison with other families have been a significant worry for many.



“I limit my social media too as it's filled full of people having the best time educating their kids having the best experience ever whilst my 2 don't get that as I view our family priorities as keeping our house being more important.” (Mum of two children, Moray)

It is well established that single parent households are more likely to be living in poverty than families where there is more than one parent.²⁹ Quite strikingly, but perhaps not surprisingly, single parents were twice as likely to strongly agree that they were struggling with their children's learning than families with two parents, which suggests school closures take an additional toll on those raising a child alone.



“Time! Being a single parent still working from home it has not been possible to home school as I would wish. This has put a lot of pressure on myself and I feel incredibly guilty.” (Mum of two children, Perth and Kinross)

²⁹ Gingerbread (2019) [One in four: A profile of single parents in the UK](#)

Parents of children with additional support needs, and in particular parents from low-income families, reported concerns about their children's wellbeing during school closures. Across the board, parents highlighted lack of additional support for their children, which has caused a huge strain during lockdown.



“Kids with disabilities seem to have been forgotten.” (Single parent of three children, Moray)

“I share the desk top with my brother for his homework too. He is in primary school. I miss my laptop from school because I am dyslexic and it helps me more. I miss my teachers because they can help me better, especially when I'm not confident in what I'm doing. I miss my friends a lot.” (Girl aged 12, Moray)

The barriers families face that have either hindered or prevented home learning have also contributed to wellbeing concerns. While one third of families who responded are enjoying learning at home, the other two thirds did not feel this way and may need greater support while at home and when they return to school.

Things to consider across the UK:

Schools

- Ensure staff are aware of the potentially larger pool of families in the school community who might have been pulled into poverty as a result of the pandemic and may require greater wellbeing support.
- Consider how best to support parents and carers with their children's learning while they are at home, recognising the additional pressures they might be facing.

Children and families told us:

- When pupils are working from home, they and their families value regular personal check-ins and contact with staff and peers, as well as ways of keeping connected with the school through whole-school activities.
- Children and young people say they have missed their friends greatly during this period. It is important that schools prioritise opportunities for them to reconnect with peers as they ease back into school life.
- Families say that not having resources causes stress and barriers to accessing learning. They asked that schools focus on resource provision so that they feel equipped for future home learning.
- Families want schools to be consistent with the use of digital platforms and the amount of work being set; this would alleviate pressures in the home.
- Parents want more communication and information to help them plan and structure home learning activities; this would help them feel better equipped and reduce children's anxieties.

Local government

- Ensure that schools are fully supported in helping children and families deal with the wellbeing impact of the pandemic.
- Ensure families with children who have additional support needs receive the resources and help they need to learn from home.
- Prioritise supporting pupils to access learning resources and in particular ICT equipment, recognising the additional stress pupils experience when they don't have them.
- Ensure that information about financial entitlements is easily accessible to families and they are supported to apply, helping to reduce financial pressures on households.

National government

- Support local authorities and schools to focus on mental health and wellbeing as pupils return to school.
- Ensure inspection frameworks recognise and value school action that focuses on wellbeing, recovery and equity.
- Longer term consider the important role of breakfast clubs and after school activities as a way to facilitate additional learning and help families return to work.

Parent case study – Claire

Claire is a single parent to three children. Two children are in secondary school and one child is in junior school. She works full time as a support worker in south Wales, and lives in a rural area. Before the pandemic, Claire relied on after school clubs and wraparound provision to ensure she could work. Since lockdown, however, she is working from home and educating her three children.

The family's home education schedule is informal, and is a combination of forest school, practical life skills and study time. The children *"are lucky enough"* to have lots of space to run around and play outdoors in the garden or nearby forest. The children can work in their bedrooms or in the home office. Study time is carried out in two-hour stints as the family only have one home computer. *"It is difficult as I have to set times."* Claire's eldest children can work unsupervised, so they tend to use the computer during the day while Claire works on her laptop. Her 8-year-old son needs guidance, so tends to use the computer once Claire has finished work at around 6pm. By this time, Claire says *"he is exhausted, easily distracted and can't focus. Then it's fitting in tea time, bath time, bedtime!"*

Claire has purchased additional resources to support her children to learn from home. She cannot afford to buy a new computer or laptop, and because she has three children using one computer: *"I have asked the school if they could provide me with some help however due to not being entitled to free school meals, this is not a priority for parents who work."* She feels that many families' circumstances will be overlooked with this blanket approach. The lack of computer equipment is causing the children to argue.

Her eldest daughter has just started studying for her GCSEs. She is *"very competitive"* by nature, and wants to learn at the same level she would in school. Claire is concerned that home learning does not provide enough opportunity for her, and that certain subjects are taught using different approaches to problem solving from when Claire was in school; *"I can get the same answer, but in a different way, it's a long time since I was at school. I'm learning with her."* Claire says the secondary school has been very supportive and provides online classes, regular phone calls and numerous resources. Emotionally, her daughters are *"stuck in their shell"*, and take a lot of encouragement to leave their rooms.

Claire's youngest son has work to complete on the digital learning platform Hwb, but she finds content is very limited, and usually consists of links to resources with little guidance. She would prefer to be posted resource packs for him to work through on paper, reducing the demand for the family computer, and potentially resulting in a little *"more independence"* in his learning.

In comparison with the family's experience with secondary school resources, Claire thinks the support provided from primary school has been *"very poor, they don't ring, not even a courtesy call"*. She thinks that her son is *"falling behind but will be able to catch-up"* on his education. Claire's main concern is around social contact, and she believes that he needs regular time to engage with his teacher and peers to maintain relationships and friendships. The news has made him *"petrified"* of the virus killing people, and he often refuses to leave the house.

Claire is very nervous about her children returning to school, and thinks the staggered approach would mean the first pupils to return would be ahead of their peers. She believes all pupils should start back at the same time. Claire feels that because the family are not entitled to free school meals they miss out on a lot of support, despite the fact that she is on a low income and classed as a key worker, so has to work: *"it seems the parents in that category are not entitled to much at all, but having three children at home and having to work is causing a lot of additional pressure on working single-parent families"*. She feels a huge amount of 'Mum Guilt'; *"I wish I was on furlough but instead I'm juggling it all, work, childcare, teaching, on top of day to day family life."*



BACK TO SCHOOL

Returning to school

Governments in Scotland, England and Wales are in the process of implementing different approaches and timescales for reopening schools. We asked parents, carers, children and young people to tell us what was important to them as and when reopening happens. Parents and carers reflected on what they thought priorities should be to ensure children can settle back in and pupils told us what they were most looking forward to when schools go back. Clear priorities emerged from both parents and children regardless of socio-economic background.

Overview

What are children and young people most looking forward when they return to school?

1. Friends and play.
2. Seeing teachers and learning in a classroom environment.
3. Going back to 'normal life' and having routines restored.
4. Wider achievement and extra-curricular opportunities.

What do parents and carers think is most important as their children return to school?

1. Social and emotional support, with a focus on children and young people's wellbeing.
2. Safety to reduce risk of the virus spreading.
3. Gradual phased approaches to support settling back in.
4. Good information sharing and communication prior to and on reopening .
5. Support with catching up on learning.

Parents also told us that support to help children and young people change schools or year group was an important priority for them.

Parents hope that return to school plans will take into account sibling groups, work commitments and childcare arrangements.

Responses

849 primary school children and **366** young people at secondary school told us about the things they are most looking forward to and what is most important to them when schools reopen.

Top priorities for children and young people

1. Friends and play

The overwhelming majority of children and young people told us they are most looking forward to seeing their friends when they return to school. This was the case for four out of five primary school pupils and three out of five secondary school pupils. Children and young people want to play, have fun and reconnect with friends they have missed.



“I just want to go to school to see everyone, that’s what will make me happy.” (Young man aged 12, Midlothian)

“I can't wait to play with my friends and I hope we get lots of time to catch up and play because I have missed them so much.” (Girl aged 8, Dumfries and Galloway)

“I know this sounds childish but playing hide and seek with a few mates. Getting stuck behind and under tables. Running round the school like idiots... I will also enjoy the actual learning as it’s the first time in like ever I can say that I want to be back at school.” (Young man aged 15, Angus)

2. Teachers and support for learning

For primary school pupils, the next most important thing was seeing their teachers. Over a quarter told us that they were looking forward to being reunited with them.



“Seeing my friends and my teacher because I love her.” (Girl aged 6, Perth and Kinross)

“Seeing my teacher and friends. Getting help with my work how only my teacher knows how.” (Boy aged 10, Angus)

Pupils in secondary schools told us they were looking forward to getting back to learning in the school environment, especially having face-to-face teaching, and support with work that has been challenging to complete at home.



“I'm looking forward to seeing everyone, teachers and friends and I'm looking forward to being able to learn properly again.” (Young woman aged 13, Glasgow)

“Being able to have things explained in person, since it’s difficult to understand classes such as maths over email/teams.” (Young woman aged 15, Dundee)

“I want to learn all what I have missed this term.” (Young woman aged 13, Edinburgh)

3. Routine

Children and young people are looking forward to having routines restart, and some sense of normality restored. For many children and young people, home learning has brought a number of challenges that have made things difficult. They welcome the chance to get back to their usual everyday activities.



“I will never say I don't like school again.” (Girl aged 9, East Ayrshire)

“Have the course taught properly and feeling comfortable with my knowledge...and getting back into a proper schedule.” (Young woman aged 15, East Dunbartonshire)

4. Wider achievement and extra-curricular opportunities

Both primary and secondary aged children and young people highlighted that they were looking forward to the wide variety of extra opportunities and extra-curricular activities that school provides.



“Seeing my friends and teachers being able to talk to everyone and play go to clubs and activities and take part in lots of things again.” (Boy aged 9, Angus)

“Friends, drama club, school choir, Hockey training and matches. Change of scenery. Real live lessons.” (Young woman aged 13, East Renfrewshire)

Top priorities for parents and carers

Parents and carers told us what that they think will help their children settle back in to school, be safe, feel happy and learn.

1. Social and emotional support

By far the most common thing that parents asked for was social and emotional support for their children. This includes being ‘understanding’ and ‘patient’ to help children rebuild bonds and adjust to new routines and changes in their school.



“[I want to see] relationship building and not firing in to the curriculum and assessments.” (Mum of two children, Angus)

“Very low academic expectations... focus on the social emotional experiences of returning to large groups after many months of only being with family, and managing anxiety.” (Parent of two children, The Vale of Glamorgan)

Parents would like to see reassuring environments where children and young people’s wellbeing is paramount. They want schools to help children feel safe and confident about being able to ‘catch up’ on learning.



“[Just be kind and patient, and meet them where they are with no judgement.” (Mum of two children, East Renfrewshire)

“Ensure each child's emotional wellbeing is prioritised over the curriculum. Support our child with potential anxiety about going back to school/social distancing in school etc.” (Dad of child aged 5, Neath Port Talbot)

“Talk and explore what Covid-19 means for children. Fear is a big issue and before they start trying to teach children other maths and English this needs to be addressed otherwise children will be psychologically affected.” (Mum of three children, Stockport)

2. Safety

Safety is a key priority for parents who want to feel confident that the right plans and measures are in place to protect their children from the virus. Families want schools to strictly follow government guidance and carry out risk assessments. This also applies to any transport that children are using to travel to and from school.



“Tell us what social distancing measures will be in place. Perhaps even posting videos in advance of how the school will be set up. Info in advance on school transport.” (Mum of two children, Coventry)

3. A gradual phased approach

Many parents talked about the need for schools to take a phased approach to help children settle back in. They wanted children to be able to ease into learning and have time to adjust to changes. They also wanted individual needs to be considered, and for schools to generally take a slow pace so pupils don't feel overwhelmed.



“Give the children time to settle back in. I would like my children to feel safe to be back. They will have to adjust to new routines as everything won't be normal. I don't want the pressure of catching up and making up for lost time to overwhelm them. I would like the system of assessments and exams to reflect the time we are in and take account of it.” (Mum of two children, Angus)

“Gradual return and no great expectations that they have completed all tasks set during lockdown. I'd like the school to meet them where they're at, not where they are expected to be academically. Gentle return with no pressure. Recognition that reintegrating with others may be overwhelming for some time and require an adjustment period.” (Mum of two children, Moray)

“Focus on play, physical activity and emotional well-being first. Gradually work towards full academic timetable. Ensure teachers and staff are ok, safe, supported etc as children will pick up on their anxiety and fears.” (Mum of child aged 10, Manchester)

4. Information sharing and good communication

Parents and carers want to see good information sharing and communication from schools over the next few months. They want transparency and clarity around plans and measures to feel confident that their schools are well prepared and organised. This includes giving families as much notice as possible so they can speak to their children about changes.



“Give plenty of notice of anything that will be different (class times, sizes, things they can’t do anymore) and guidance on how to communicate this clearly to our child.”
(Mum of child aged 5, Fife)

Parents would also like to see regular feedback and consultation on whether the return to school is going well, or if further changes need to be made. They want to be kept in the loop as things progress.



“Explain well what school will look like on return. Set expectations well. Give confidence that children will be safe but the experience won't be so different that it becomes unpleasant.” (Mum of two children, Swansea)

5. Support with learning and catching up

Parents and carers also talked about the importance of academic support. They wanted to see many opportunities to recap on home learning, and targeted work to ensure children could catch-up.



“They will need to be able to revisit the work they are completing at home as some parents are able to support children and some are having to work.” (Mum of two children, Wirral)

“Allow time to cover or recap on new topics or concepts they have been expected to learn during lockdown. For example, my daughter (12) has been trying to learn aspects of maths that she is completely unfamiliar with. She struggles with learning from videos and feels like she hasn't really 'learned' the stuff properly.” (Mum of two children, Angus)

Parents and carers also highlighted the importance of transition support to help children and young people change schools or year groups. Many also expressed a hope that schedules be coordinated with sibling groups, work commitments and childcare arrangements in mind.

Things to consider across the UK

Schools

- Continue to engage with and consult the whole-school community as we move into a new phase of schooling.

Families want:

- Schools to prioritise emotional support for children, including reassurances, patience, and a chance to reconnect with peers.
- Good information sharing and communication about returning to school to help children feel prepared and ease them back in.

Local government

- Ensure all schools have the resources and support needed to ensure all children from low-income families can fully engage in the next phase of learning

National government

- Ensure national guidance helps schools and local authorities in providing support for wellbeing, learning and good communication.
- Ensure that local authorities and schools have sufficient funding to provide the emotional support that families want to see.
- Ensure schools are properly funded so they can provide families with the resources they need for the next phase of learning and remove barriers to education.

Conclusion

It is likely that all schools will be delivering a blend of in-school and at-home learning for the immediate future. Planning a curriculum for this 'new normal' will require a detailed audit of the resources available to pupils when they are studying at home. It is clear many children do not have the space, the equipment and the support they need to fully participate in learning from home. It is critical that governments take action to get these much-needed resources out to families as soon as possible.

Likewise, the new contact tracing strategies mean many children will have to undertake fortnight-long periods of self-isolation if anyone in their household tests positive for coronavirus. The Welsh Government acknowledges that certain occupations and individuals are more likely to be repeatedly contact-traced and asked to self-isolate.³⁰ Children living with parents who work in high-risk occupations, which are often customer-facing and low paid,³¹ are more likely to face repeated and unplanned periods of isolation away from school. Schools must be ready to continue supporting these learners, even if their peers have resumed full-time learning in the classroom.

Support needs to be tailored to suit the specific circumstances of each family. This will depend on the number and ages of the children, the existing resources available, the parents' occupations and whether an adult is available to support learning in the home. One thing is clear from the hundreds of families who told us about their experiences of receiving free school meal replacements during the lockdown – making payments directly to families is the easiest and most effective way of ensuring parents and carers can meet the specific needs of their children. It allows them to make best use of the assets they already have, while acquiring the things they need most, in a way that is most convenient for them. Our research shows that low-income families already have to buy more resources than better-off families in order to continue educating their children at home. This additional financial burden needs to be recognised and reimbursed by the state.

Our research shows that worrying about money makes it increasingly difficult for parents and carers to enjoy teaching their children at home. The families who were most concerned about money were also the families most likely to say they found it challenging to support their children's learning during lockdown. In our survey, families who are already at the greatest risk of poverty – particularly lone parents and families with three or more children – were more likely to tell us they had significant concerns about their finances. 11 per cent of lone parents told us they were extremely concerned about money, compared to five per cent of couple-parent households. 22 per cent of single parents also strongly agreed with the statement "I'm finding it difficult to support my child(ren) learning from home". This is double the number in couple-parent families.

Supporting low-income families over the duration of the pandemic will require concerted action from every aspect of the education system. There are big gaps in the provision of information, advice and signposting to support for families who are in need. Schools could play a pivotal role in connecting families to sources of support and income maximisation, which would help to lessen financial pressures, and make it easier for parents and carers to focus on supporting their children's learning.

The UK Government must also recognise the unique and extreme financial pressures that the Covid-19 pandemic is placing on families with children. Many of the obstacles that hold back children in poverty stem from growing up in homes that have to manage on insufficient incomes. The additional cost burden of learning at home needs to be recognised and supported through the social security system. Increasing child benefit by £10 per child per week would be a welcome start. Uplifts to the child element in universal credit and child tax credits would further help support families struggling to make ends meet. For families who face the greatest costs – those with three or more children, or whose support needs are significant enough for their awards to hit the benefit cap – the two-child limit and the benefit cap should be removed. Only by doing so can the Government ensure that every family receives the support they need and every child has the best possible chance to continuing learning through this pandemic.

³⁰ Welsh Government (2020) [Test, Trace, Protect](#)

³¹ Office for National Statistics (2020). [Which occupations have the highest potential exposure to the coronavirus \(COVID-19\)?](#)

Acknowledgments

Children and families

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

Project partners

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Appendix: methodology

All fieldwork for this report took place in May 2020. Primary data collection was carried out via a pair of open surveys that collected responses between 1-25 May 2020. The aim was not to produce a representative sample of all UK households with children, but rather to gather rich insight from households who were going through lockdown in a wide variety of social circumstances. We deliberately sought to gather experiences from households in receipt of means-tested benefits (as a proxy for low income) and from children and young people who usually receive free school meals. We distributed the surveys through various partner organisations, including local authority education departments and schools, and promoted them to the public on social media.

Our first survey gathered responses from parents and carers of school-aged children (3-18) who attended school in Great Britain. We used quota sampling to ensure that we heard from sufficient households living on a low income (assessed as being in receipt of, or in the process of claiming, income-related benefits such as universal credit, income support or tax credits). We also collected demographic data about the respondents - their gender, whether they were a lone parent, whether their children received free school meals, and the number and ages of their child/ren.

Parent and carer respondent profile:

Gender

Female	3,342
Male	199
Prefer not to say	32
Prefer to self-describe	6

How many children do you have in school?

1	1,544
2	1,556
3	371
4	82
5	33
More than 5	6

Are you a single parent?

No	2,791
Yes	792

Are you claiming any benefits at the moment? (e.g. universal credit, tax credits, income support, income-based jobseeker's allowance, income-related employment and support allowance, council tax support)

Don't know	18
In the process of applying	42
No	2,407
Yes	1,122

Are any of your children usually entitled to free school meals?

No	2,233
Yes	1,152

We collected the first half of respondents' postcodes in order to determine which local authority area they lived in. Due to the sampling and participant recruitment methods used, we collected more responses from families in Scotland than in England and Wales. Although 90 per cent of respondents in the parent and carers survey are from Scotland, sub-group analysis shows there are no meaningful differences between Scottish respondents and respondents from elsewhere in Great Britain. Where there were notable differences between the nations, this is discussed in the analysis.

In our second survey, we sought the views of children and young people who usually attend school. Respondents were routed to different questions depending on whether they attended primary or secondary school. Young people were also able to take part via WhatsApp, although none used this method.

Profile of children and young people:

Are you in primary school or secondary school?

Primary school	883
Secondary school	436

Gender of respondents (primary pupils)

Female	474
Male	399
Prefer not to say	8
Prefer to self-describe	2

Gender of respondents (secondary pupils)

Female	263
Male	162
Prefer not to say	7
Prefer to self-describe	4

Do you usually receive free school meals? (Primary pupils)

Don't know	23
No	591
Yes	272

Do you usually receive free school meals? (Secondary pupils)

Don't know	11
No	324
Yes	39

Much of the data collected in the survey was qualitative in nature. We used content analysis to code these responses, drawing out trends and then carrying out regression analysis against the profile data we held. We paid particular attention to those receiving free school meals, households living on a low income (in receipt of means-tested/income-related benefits), lone parents, and families with three or more children, as these groups are all at a significantly higher risk of poverty than the general population.

In order to improve accessibility, we also made several other mediums available for people to submit responses, including email, WhatsApp and telephone. No participants chose to use these methods to respond to the main surveys.

We also carried out in-depth qualitative interviews with 11 participants. All the participants in the interviews also completed the online surveys, where they gave consent to follow up contact. The interviews were conducted over video call or telephone between 15-27 May 2020. All participants have consented to have their interview data published, and their names and identifying details have been changed.

About CPAG

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.