A country that works for all children and young people

An evidence-based plan for addressing poverty with and through education settings

Child of the North

N8 RESEARCH PARTNERSHIP

HEALTH EQUITY NORTH

CENTRE FOR YOUNG LIVES

Contents

Foreword by Anne Longfield and Camilla Kingdon

It is amazing how much time and political capital is spent dealing with marginal issues affecting very few people, while one of the biggest challenges facing our economic prosperity and social cohesion receives so little attention. Child poverty has become the elephant in the room in Westminster – a problem seemingly too big and scary for either of the two main parties to confront.

While there are many politicians on both sides of the political divide who care deeply about this issue, neither the Government nor the Opposition have yet put forward anything approaching a mission or strategy to eradicate - or even reduce - child poverty.

This report sets out the scale of the poverty problem facing both this Government and the next, whoever wins this year's General Election.

Over 4 million children in the UK are living in poverty – a number that has grown over the last decade. Over a quarter of children in the North of England are growing up in poverty – over a million children. Those children born into the poorest fifth of families in the UK are almost 13 times more likely to experience poor health and educational outcomes by the age of 17 years. Children from the lowest income households are five times more likely to experience poor academic achievement.

Children living in the most deprived areas have poorer access to good quality early childhood education and care settings, and children eligible for the two-year-old free childcare places have an attendance rate that is lower than their non-funded peers. Too many children growing up in poverty are entering the education system with speech and language problems and are less ready and able to learn, meaning they do not receive the full experience and preparation for future employment.

In England, 60% of pupils receiving free school meals reach expected levels of reading in Key Stage 1, compared to 74% of the general student population, and only 39% of England's most disadvantaged pupils are expected to reach the expected reading, writing, and maths standard in Key Stage 2 versus the national average of 54%. These differences continue into secondary education, as 41% of the most disadvantaged pupils will reach expected attainment compared to 50% of all pupils.

At least two in five school-age children - 1.3 million - who live below the UK's poverty line are missing out on free school meals, and almost half of children growing up in Black and minority ethnic families are living in poverty.

As this report highlights, a recent Child of the North study shows that children eligible for free school meals are over three times more likely to become persistently absent at some point over their school career. Many children are unable to benefit fully from their education because they face barriers created by poverty. The evidence shows that children who experience persistent disadvantage leave school on average 22 months behind their peers.

The overall cost of our country's high levels of child poverty is mind-boggling - estimated at £38bn per year due to loss of future earnings and taxes, benefit costs, and additional public spending.

These statistics have perhaps become so familiar that they fail to shock. We think they should continue to do so, particularly considering the UK is one of the richest countries in the world. Despite this, the educational prospects and future life chances of millions of our children are being held back by poverty - and the consequences of failing to tackle it are far-reaching for us all.

That is why this report – the latest in a series of reports published across 2024 by the Child of the North/N8 Research Partnership and the Centre for Young Lives – puts forward its own evidence-based plan.

Our starting point is to call for the next Government to commit to making the eradication of child poverty and reducing educational barriers, a cross-departmental, Prime Minister-led national priority.

"Child poverty has become the 'elephant in the room' in Westminster"

"The education prospects and future life chances of millions of our children are being held back by poverty"

This should include the re-establishment of a Poverty Unit in Downing Street, led by a Government Poverty Tsar alongside a Cabinet-level Minister for Children and Young People. We need leadership from within the heart of government, bringing departments together, driving reform, challenging policymaking and committed to reforming the benefits system – including scrapping the two-child limit - and other policies that currently work against families. A national Scientific Advisory Group for Children (SAGC) should be established to ensure evidence and evaluation lie at the heart of this programme.

We also need to reset how we can poverty-proof schools. At a time of greater financial pressure, we need to look at how our existing education infrastructure can be used to address childhood inequities and combat the consequences of poverty in a practical way. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the critical supporting role that nurseries and schools play in the lives of many families, and so our efforts to address child poverty must include strengthening the role of educational settings as part of a national plan. This can happen in different ways. Schools should be financially supported to monitor and report on the attainment, attendance, elective home education, and exclusion rates for children growing up in poverty, but also to provide the pastoral support, family workers, educational psychologists, and youth workers, breakfast and after school clubs, enrichment activities and holiday play schemes, which can make such a difference to breaking down barriers and inequalities.

As this report argues, we should frame child poverty as the public health problem it is and use targeted proportionate universalism to level up those communities with the most entrenched poverty. This can be done not only at a local authority level, but within individual schools and nurseries. The data already exist to allow councils to identify the schools serving those children in the greatest poverty.

Universal free school meals should be a long-term ambition for all schools, but we should start by initially targeting schools in local areas with the most disadvantaged children and young people. While these recommendations will not happen without extra investment, the amounts are not unfeasible, and the opportunities for decreasing the long-term costs associated with high levels of child poverty are obvious.

A sustained focus on eradicating poverty and poverty-proofing educational settings would not only be good for those individual children growing up in poverty, but for our economy and public services. There is no route to sustained and widespread economic prosperity if we hold back millions of children from entering the workforce with the education and skills required by employers and the economy.

As we look ahead to the election later this year, it is time to address the elephant in the room, and for our politicians to make the eradication of child poverty more than an abstract concept. Millions of children and families need practical action to help them – and us all - to succeed.

Anne Longfield CBE,
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the Centre for Young Lives

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A full list of authors and contributors can be found at the end of the report.

A note about language

"Families living on a low income" vs. "poor families"

Language matters. One of the insidious features of poverty is its ability to cause depression and anxiety in those it inflicts (see the End Word). The term "stigma" refers to negative beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours that can occur within society about an individual or group and their circumstances. Stigma can result in an individual or group experiencing prejudice and discrimination. It is therefore important that the topic of poverty in general, and child poverty in particular, is approached in a compassionate and non-judgemental way that does not create stigma or reinforce societal prejudices. This report is directed by the outcomes of a Children's Commissioner for Wales consultation where children and young people felt that the term "poverty" was sensitive and age appropriate. In addition to the considered use of the term poverty, the Children's Commissioner for Wales recommends using the sensitive and age-appropriate terms of "families living on a low income" and "families who do not have enough money for the things they need" when discussing issues related to poverty. Similar work by the Association for Young People's Health found that young people have a strong preference for their identity not to be defined by the single characteristic of "poor" or "deprived" [1]. We have followed these guidelines on the use of language in line with the central principles of community engagement and co-production that underpin the Child of the North initiative.

Schools, nurseries, and educational settings

Please note that this report often uses "schools" as shorthand for "schools, nurseries, and other educational settings such as pupil referral units and special schools". One central message of this report is the need for a "whole system" approach that includes all relevant stakeholders, and this includes all parts of the education system. We note that "special schools" have limited spaces, meaning children and young people (CYP) who require the support of special schools are often in mainstream education, where the current special educational needs support available cannot meet the growing demand. Importantly, when talking about poverty in relation to schools throughout this report, we are not limiting this definition to how the Department for Education (DfE) would describe "disadvantage". For example, we include free school meals and pupil premium eligibility (as used by the DfE), but also extend this to include families who are living close to, or below, the poverty line but who are not eligible for free school meals or people premium.

About Child of the North

Child of the North is a partnership between the N8 Research Partnership and Health Equity North which aims to build a fairer future for children across the North of England by building a platform for collaboration, high quality research, and policy engagement. @ChildoftheNort1

About the N8 Research Partnership

The N8 Research Partnership is a collaboration of the eight most research-intensive Universities in the North of England: Durham, Lancaster, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Sheffield, and York. Working with partner universities, industry, and society (N8+), the N8 aims to maximise the impact of this research base by promoting collaboration, establishing innovative research capabilities and programmes of national and international prominence, and driving economic growth. www.n8research.org.uk @N8research

About Health Equity North

Health Equity North is a virtual institute focused on place-based solutions to public health problems and health inequalities across the North of England. It brings together world-leading academic expertise, from the Northern Health Science Alliance's members of leading universities and hospitals, to fight health inequalities through research excellence and collaboration. www.healthequitynorth.co.uk @_HENorth

About the Centre for Young Lives

The Centre for Young Lives is a new, dynamic and highly experienced innovation organisation dedicated to improving the lives of children, young people, and families in the UK – particularly the most vulnerable. Led by former Children's Commissioner, Anne Longfield CBE, who has been at the forefront of children's issues for decades, the Centre's agile team is highly skilled, experienced, and regarded. It is already widely known and well respected across government departments, Parliament, local and regional government, academia, the voluntary sector, and national and local media. The Centre wants to see children and young people's futures placed at the heart of policy making, a high priority for Government and at the core of the drive for a future for our country which can be much stronger and more prosperous. www.centreforyounglives.org.uk

Key insights

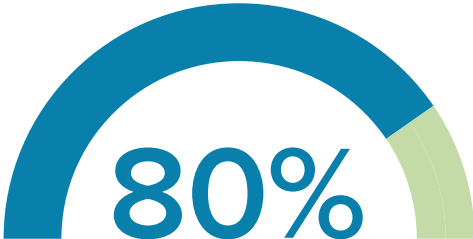**4.3 MILLION**

Children in the UK are living in poverty in 2019/20 (after accounting for housing costs) - up by 400,000 in the last decade.

80%
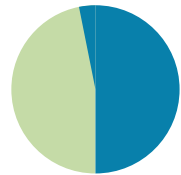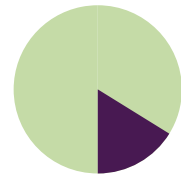
Mitigating inequality in early childhood (rather than a single focus on absolute poverty) would reduce the number of children experiencing multiple adversities by more than **80%**.

At least **two in five** school-age children - equal to 1.3 million - who lived below the UK's poverty line were not entitled to free school meals.
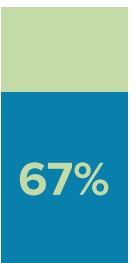
Around **one-third** of the increase in infant mortality in the UK between 2014 and 2017 can be attributed to rising child poverty.

North of England

58%

Rest of England

19%

58% of children in the North of England live in a local authority with above average levels of low-income families compared to **19%** of rest of England.

46%

Of children from Black and minority ethnic groups live in poverty compared to **26%** of white children.

67%

Of the 188,000 children in the North East living in poverty, **67% are living in working families.**

1.05 MILLION

Children are living in poverty in the North of England alone.

Defining poverty

A serious attempt to eradicate child poverty must begin with a definition that allows progress to be monitored against well-defined key performance indicators. It is notable, however, that any serious consideration of "poverty" immediately reveals the difficulties in capturing the complexities associated with this broad construct. Indeed, any satisfactory definition of poverty needs to consider the psychological impact on a family that is living in a society where a postcode impacts life chances.

One inherent difficulty in defining poverty in general, and child poverty in particular, relates to the problems in quantifying the various factors that contribute to disadvantages associated with families lacking access to the wider resources available to others within society. This can help explain why governments often rely only on measures of income when quantifying the proportion of a population living in poverty.

In the UK, measures of "absolute" and "relative" low-income poverty are commonly used and published annually by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). Household income below 60% of the national median is typically selected as a threshold, and the number of households falling below this level is reported. The relative measure describes households which fall below this threshold each year. The absolute measure describes households which fall below 60% of median income in 2010-11, adjusted for inflation.

These figures can be considered before and after the costs of housing are taken into account. These measures are useful as they can be calculated in a straightforward manner, help establish the serious repercussions of life in a low-income household and provide information on population trends over time.

The disadvantage of these measures is that they fail to capture the ability of family members to access societal resources (e.g., safe green spaces, museums and cultural spaces, supermarkets, healthcare services) and participate in events that are available to other families (e.g., after school coding clubs and walks in the countryside). The measures further fail to reflect the dynamics of poverty and the extent to which families and individuals move into, and out of, poverty. Finally, these measures don't reflect the influences of poverty on family and children's health and wellbeing, their ability to learn and benefit from being with others, and the subsequent repercussions on developmental pathways. Thus, a holistic definition of poverty that goes beyond household income is needed if we are to make progress in building a better UK for CYP.

The Welsh Government provides the following useful definition of poverty: A long-term state of not having sufficient resources to afford food, reasonable living conditions or amenities or to participate in activities (such as access to attractive neighbourhoods and open spaces) that are taken for granted by others in their society.

There are many other useful definitions that likewise emphasise the wider societal issues associated with poverty. The challenge for policymakers is how to quantify factors such as "reasonable living conditions" and "ability to participate in activities".

In 2021, a Work and Pensions Committee report recommended that DWP develop a comprehensive framework for measuring child poverty. The Social Metrics Commission (SMC) has developed such a framework, but adoption of the SMC index or other useful metrics has stalled.

There is a pressing need to reignite the debate about how the UK Government and the devolved jurisdictions can more effectively quantify child poverty, so that we can better understand the phenomenon, undertake robust evaluation of the urgently needed policy changes, and support initiatives to eradicate this blight on our society.

There is an urgent obligation on government to pay greater attention to the psychological impacts of poverty and how this can further compound the challenges experienced by low-income families – the lived experiences of CYP provide meaningful evidence which must be used in policymaking.

We make the final observation that one of the greatest psychological stresses placed on adults living in poverty is the difficulty they face in providing the things their family needs. In this context, child poverty is something that not only impacts the child but is one of the most dispiriting aspects of life for adults who have children but cannot give them the advantages that other children in their society enjoy. Child poverty is a truly toxic phenomenon within any society and creates problems that reach across the generations.

"The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better", written by Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson, highlights the detrimental impacts of inequality on societies. **It shows how inequality contributes to a decline in trust, heightened levels of anxiety and illness, and fosters a culture of excessive consumption.** The authors present evidence indicating that outcomes are markedly worse in wealthier countries characterised by higher levels of inequality across eleven distinct health and social issues. **These issues include physical and mental health, drug abuse, imprisonment, obesity, social mobility, trust and community cohesion, violence, teenage pregnancies, and child wellbeing. Importantly, education outcomes are markedly worse when levels of inequality rise.** The focus of this report is on the intersection between poverty and education, given the central role of education in building better futures for individuals and countries.

Poverty policy recommendations

If the UK wishes to invest in its future, then the removal of barriers to education and learning as a result of poverty must be an absolute priority [2, 3, 4]. Time and time again, school leaders highlight the fact that one of the biggest challenges they face is not improving teaching but tackling the wider determinants of education and learning. The eradication of child poverty needs to move from an abstract concept to practical action. We make three core evidence-based recommendations.

1

Commit to a national priority of eradicating child poverty and removing the barriers to education it creates.

The evidence is clear – the UK is suffering through a double whammy of inequity and economic stagnation. Government must implement specific evidence-driven policies that shape initiatives targeted at optimising educational outcomes. The responsibility for ending child poverty must be led by the Prime Minister to ensure Government prioritises UK wide plans for poverty reduction. Many children are unable to benefit fully from their education because they face barriers created by poverty (e.g., an inability to learn because of hunger or increased school absence) [5]. Scotland has a Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan that includes the Scottish child payment of £25 per child, per week. It is estimated that 90,000 fewer children will live in relative and absolute poverty this year because of Scottish Government policies [6]. Wales has a number of strategies that contribute to addressing both child poverty and the barriers it creates for children's education and wellbeing. England does not have a commitment and strategy to eradicate child poverty. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF), the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) and the North East Child Poverty Commission (NECPC) have all called for a national multi-strand child poverty strategy. The strands include action on work, ensuring pay and conditions allow people to live outside poverty; and providing adequate financial support for families through our social security system. The NECPC calls for an expansion of Free School Meals to children in all families receiving Universal Credit or legacy benefits. The JRF calls for action on affordable housing. These voices must be heeded.

2

Commit to a national strategy that utilises the existing educational setting infrastructure to address child poverty.

A sustained focus on eradicating poverty with and through educational settings would not only decrease inequality, but it would also ensure the UK has the well-educated workforce it needs for sustainable economic growth. The downstream negative consequences of poverty play out across multiple public services (including the benefit system, health, the criminal justice system, the economic strain on services, etc.) [7]. Thus, the response from the Government must involve multiple departments working in a connected and coordinated manner.

Government should re-establish a cross-departmental No.10 Poverty Unit to address the problems in a coordinated manner. A Poverty Tsar and a cabinet-level Minister for Children and Young People must be appointed to drive reform, with the authority to challenge policymaking at all levels. Importantly, these roles need a voice direct from the "front-line" who has experience of working within education settings. Poverty reduction initiatives must include benefits reform (e.g., removing the two-child limit), removal of administrative processes that work against families, social housing improvements, help for parents to enter and extend employment, and health support for children in the early years and throughout school. Government must adopt a coordinated approach to funding that recognises the long-term economic benefits to multiple departments across Whitehall. A national Scientific Advisory Group for Children should be established to ensure evidence, evaluation, and data-sharing lie at the heart of this priority programme.

The evidence is clear – educational establishments have become anchor institutions within many disadvantaged areas throughout the UK. In the COVID-19 pandemic, schools and nurseries played a major role in supporting the needs of children, young people and families living in poverty (despite little to no dedicated resource for this purpose) [4]. But the need to address problems outside the gates makes it difficult to help children thrive educationally. Children who experience persistent disadvantage leave school on average 22 months behind their peers [8]. A child has an 80% chance of passing maths and English at GCSE if they neither live in poverty nor require the support of a social worker [9]. This figure drops to 65% where a child lives in poverty or needs a social worker. It plummets yet further to 13% where a child experiencing disadvantage also has Special Educational Needs. Thus, poverty directly impacts education and amplifies educational needs. This suggests that schools should be adequately supported to mitigate the problems of poverty within the classroom and beyond. In addition to focusing on reporting key educational outcomes, schools and colleges should measure success in this area by also reporting on attendance, elective home education rates, exclusion, and suspension for CYP growing up in poverty – and use these data more effectively.

Existing educational infrastructure should be used to close the gaps through which many families fall and allow the UK to address a tangible manifestation of poverty in a practical manner. This should include improved resource for more pastoral support, family workers, educational psychologists and youth workers, breakfast clubs, after-school clubs, extended school opening, enrichment activities (e.g., creative and cultural programmes, music, drama, dance), and holiday play schemes for all primary school age children that support learning and development whilst enabling parents to work. Whilst many schools are already providing some of these examples (see "Innovative approaches trialled in the real world"), they are doing so with limited capacity and resource.

3

Focus on "levelling up" within areas where education settings are serving the most disadvantaged communities.

The evidence is clear – reduction of health inequalities requires universal actions that are proportionately scaled in intensity to the level of disadvantage. This is known as proportionate universalism and provides a robust framework for public health initiatives that seek to improve the health of the whole population but with a focus on those with the greatest need [9]. There is good evidence supporting the effectiveness of proportionate universal policies in public health [10].The issue of child poverty is a public health problem and thus adopting a proportionate universalism approach to this problem makes good scientific sense. One difficulty inherent in proportionate universalism was expressed by a previous Prime Minister (Tony Blair) as: "The 'hardest to reach' are often the ones we need to reach most". This is why we recommend an approach that operates at the level of a school or nursery. Data are readily available that allow a local authority to identify the educational settings serving the quintile of children in greatest poverty. These educational establishments must be supported by the Government and the wider community (including businesses and universities) to ensure their children have equal opportunities to do well in exams as their peers in other schools and are helped to overcome the barriers to further education and employment.

The educational settings serving areas of highest disadvantage should be supported to address the manifestations of poverty (e.g., hunger and a lack of hygiene products) for all children within the school (rather than relying on families to access individualised support for their children). Universal free school meals should be a long-term ambition for all schools but can be initially targeted in boroughs and wards with the most disadvantaged populations. Automatic registration of eligible families for free school meals should be implemented immediately given that 11% of total eligible pupils are not registered for means tested FSM. As an example of the benefit this would bring, auto enrolment for means-tested FSM would bring around an additional £23M per annum to the North East of England [11].

These recommendations offer immense potential for decreasing the long-term costs associated with not acting early (i.e., the health, social care and criminal justice bill that results from not supporting children's needs) and they will help the UK benefit from the sustainable economic growth available if the talents of every child were able to be deployed within the workforce. Whilst there are resource implications, the recommendations do not require unfeasible levels of investment.

Principles

Overview

Child poverty continues to be a growing problem. For example, Yorkshire and the Humber are experiencing the highest child poverty rates seen since 2000/2001 [4]. Across the UK, the number of children living in poverty increased by 350,000 to 4.2 million between 2021 and 2022, highlighting the crucial need for urgent action [12]. Child poverty is a blight on the UK but is consistently neglected as an issue even though children in the UK are disproportionately impacted by poverty relative to working-age adults and pensioners [13]. Rates of poverty are indeed greatest for families where the youngest child is 0-4 years of age (31%), compared to when the youngest child is in the 5-10 (30%), 11-15 (25%), or 16-19 (24%) age groups.

The UK needs to address the child poverty crisis at pace. There are numerous reports that highlight the perilous state of the UK regarding child poverty and its long-term ramifications of economic stagnation and the societal costs of inequity [14]. These costs can be seen clearly in the budgets of local authorities who face ever-escalating funding challenges related to the provision of children's services. But the costs can also be seen in the financial pressures affecting the NHS. These pressures relate directly to paediatric services, but unhealthy children develop into unhealthy adults. The long-term problems seen across the NHS can be related directly to the inequities hardwired into society through child poverty [5]. In 2010, Marmot highlighted the social gradient in health, whereby our most disadvantaged communities are amongst our sickest [15]. Marmot reported that the annual cost of health inequalities was between £36 billion to £40 billion through lost taxes, welfare payments, and costs to the NHS. Unfortunately, the "Marmot Review 10 Years On" showed that the amount of time spent in poor health by individuals across England further increased between 2010 and 2020 – especially for our poorest communities [16]. The second Marmot review highlighted that life expectancy failed to increase across the country for the first time in a century and even declined for the poorest 10% of women. The COVID-19 pandemic amplified these disparities and further entrenched disadvantage within our society.

The critical issue for the UK is determining how we can address the epidemic of child poverty before it causes our public services (e.g., the NHS, social care, family, and criminal justice system etc.) to crumble. One major challenge is the sheer magnitude of the problem and the resulting paralysis caused when a problem appears intractable. However, research shows that problems can be solved through a systematic and principled approach. There is a need to move away from abstract concepts (encapsulated by well-meaning but vague and ill-defined calls to end child poverty) and avoid narrow measures of the impact of poverty (which sideline the complex psychological impacts of poverty in relation to educational engagement and outcomes). Instead, we need specific evidence-driven actions that provide tangible solutions. Poverty is a complex issue that impacts numerous aspects of a child's life in ways that can fall under the radar. This calls for evidence that is both based on observations of how children progress in education, but also evidence that puts children's lived experiences at the heart of policymaking. Successful solutions will need to involve multiple stakeholders working together and sharing information to help children growing up in families who do not have enough money for the things they need. There have been many and repeated calls for funding for breakfast clubs and after school clubs where extended school activities can take place (including calls from Church leaders in London). This would allow parents of school-age children to work full time without paying for childcare. Free nutritious school meals for every child in primary school would help to reduce the stigma attached to claiming for this entitlement. Central and local governments are crucial in this process, but government action alone is not enough. There must be an agreement, across organisations, communities, and geographical localities, to work together to address the child poverty crisis as a national priority.

Our recommendations emerge from considering the problem of child poverty through the lens of seven fundamental principles. These principles acknowledge that the UK is in a difficult financial position, and thus promote a pragmatic approach where the outstanding educational assets possessed within the UK are used as a platform for action.

Our seven principles

1   **Putting our children first** – The future of a country depends on a healthy workforce, equipped with the skills needed by the economy and society. Childhood determines long-term health and is the critically important period for developing the core skills needed to function and be economically productive within society. Poverty is known to create adverse childhood experiences and act as a barrier to education. Logic thus dictates that the UK must prioritise the eradication of child poverty if it wants to enjoy a healthy future. The UK must commit to putting children first, legislation that has already been established for Scotland (Getting it Right for Every Child) and Wales (Future Generations Act) [17]. A failure to address child poverty will place unsustainable pressures on the health, social care, and criminal justice system in the longer term.

2   **Addressing inequity** – A decrease in inequity will reduce the financial burden on public services created when young people from impoverished backgrounds experience barriers to education, leave school, and become NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) with all the well-documented long-term consequences (e.g., homelessness, involvement in the criminal justice system, mid-life multimorbidity). Concurrently, economic stagnation must be reversed to generate wealth and ensure the UK makes the best use of all its assets (i.e., the brilliant young minds located across all our communities) to create sustainable growth that concurrently addresses existential crises such as climate change. A failure to support CYP living in poverty will starve the UK of talented individuals within the future workforce and create further environmental pressures.

3   **Adopting place-based approaches** – Geography, culture, economic activity, and other factors vary between localities, changing the way that risks manifest. New approaches to reaching and helping families living in poverty must be planned and aligned to the needs of the locality and its communities. There are many cultural and environmental factors that impact disadvantage, and these local contexts must be addressed for efficient poverty reduction. Educational establishments offer a mechanism for operationalising a "place-based" approach and effectively engaging with communities so tailored approaches can be based on insights provided by people with lived experiences.

4   **Working together effectively across our public services** – The needs of CYP and their families cannot be neatly divided into silos. We must recognise that our current organisational arrangements are not fit for purpose and find new ways of working so that the necessary holistic ("whole system") solutions to complex problems can be implemented. We recommend a new approach to child poverty that builds on educational establishments as anchor institutions and uses these settings as an effective vehicle for delivering cross-Whitehall government policies.

5   **Putting education at the heart of public service delivery** – Schools and nurseries need to be at the epicentre of child poverty eradication initiatives. For example, the UK Government's "Holiday Activities and Food" programme needs to be led by communities and their prioritised needs. This can be implemented through schools and nurseries in partnership with local authorities. Educational establishments have a statutory responsibility to help children and young people develop the skills required by society. It makes good sense for relevant support programmes initiated by the Government to be aligned with these responsibilities so that a holistic (and efficient) approach can be deployed.

6   **Establishing universities as the "Research and Development" departments for local public services** – Universities can bring together insights from across multiple disciplines, ensure initiatives to address classroom poverty are based on the best possible evidence, and oversee evaluation of service delivery. There is a wide scientific literature that captures international approaches to address child poverty through education, and universities must support policymakers to draw on this evidence base. Moreover, universities (and their research funders) must prioritise research that unveils the underlying causes of absolute and relative poverty and provide insights into effective evidence-based approaches to address these causes. Universities must also play their role in supporting schools in raising aspirations and attainment (e.g., the work led by the University of Durham described in the 'Innovative approaches trialled in the real world' section of this report).

7   **Using and sharing information across public service providers effectively** – Data could and should be shared between DWP, the NHS Business Services Authority and the Department of Health and Social Care, to the benefit of service users, so that eligible families can be auto-enrolled for the Healthy Start scheme and free school meals (rather than relying on families, schools, and local authorities to complete this step before a child can access support) [4]. Information must be better utilised by Government to create not only improved metrics of child poverty, but also a richer dataset of evidence that captures the multiple disadvantages (beyond a low-income) preventing families from participating in activities enjoyed by many others in our society. These efforts must be measured so that evidence drives improvements. Government will need to monitor child poverty levels while setting targets and implementing initiatives. For example, The Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 set a target of driving child poverty levels below 18% by 2023/24 and under 10% by 2030. Progression towards these targets needs to be used as a variable for evaluation of investment in a relentless push towards reducing child poverty.

> **"Everything was fine until the dreaded lunch bell sounded"**
>
> Look there's Hope,
> She's got holes in her shoes,
> Pays nothing for dinners,
> And holds up the queues,
> Going home with a face full of sorrow,
> But don't worry Hope,
> We'll get you tomorrow.
>
> Written by young people attending Children North East workshops exploring their shared experiences of growing up in poverty in the North East of England [18]

The evidence

The evidence is overwhelming and unequivocal: child poverty in the UK has reached rates that mean our education, health, social care, and policing systems are close to breaking point. Moreover, the evidence unambiguously shows that the long-term consequences of failing to address child poverty have far reaching ramifications in adulthood – putting yet further pressure on our public services [14]. The evidence has been laid bare in reports published over the last two years from authorities including the Children's Commissioner through the Association of Directors of Children's Services to the Academy of Medical Sciences. The Children's Society report a 107% increase in children receiving emergency food in 2020 and suggest that 3 in 10 children are living in poverty.

The inequities blighting the UK have been described in detail by the "Child of The North" consortium through the prism of the divide between the North and South of England (acting as a microcosm for the disparities existing between the wealthy and the poor in every corner of the UK) [3]. If the evidence is ignored and remedial action is not taken, then the future of the UK is at stake.

It is possible to illustrate the scale of the problem by focussing on just one region in the UK – the North East of England. The intensity of child poverty in the North East is getting worse – such that one in five (over 100,000) of all children in the region are now living below the "deep poverty" line [19]. This includes the more than one in ten (c.60,000) of all North East children that are living in "very deep poverty". Almost one in five (18%) North East children are living in households that are "food insecure", meaning they do not have access to sufficient food to facilitate an active and healthy lifestyle. Seven in ten (69%) children in the North East are living in families with zero or little savings to protect them from economic shocks or unexpected bills. The North East is the region that has experienced the steepest child poverty increases in the UK since 2014/15, with 35% of all babies and CYP living in poverty in 2021/22 [19].
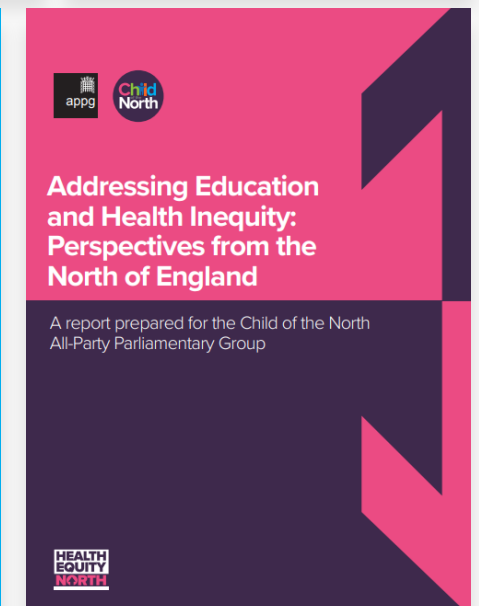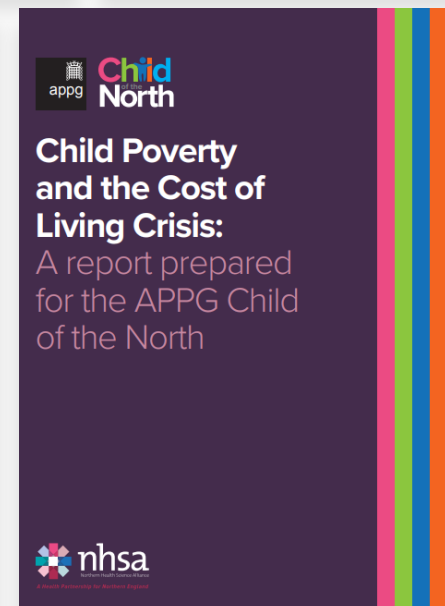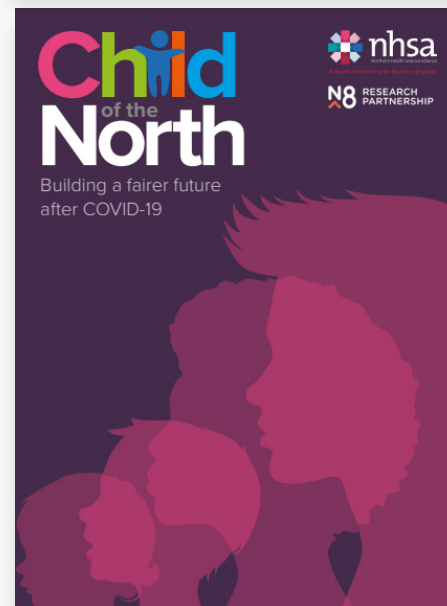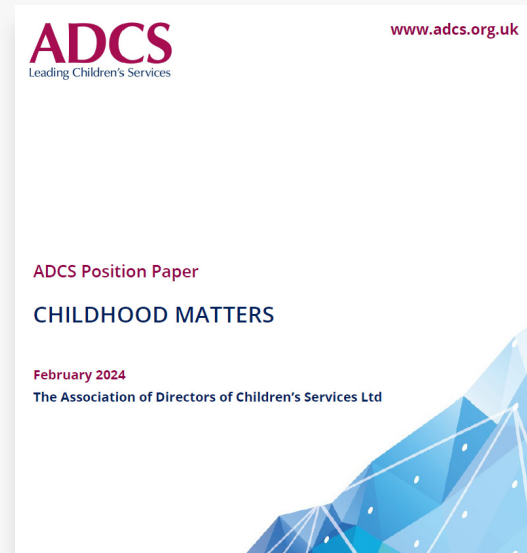
The impact of poverty on education

Education is the most powerful tool that society can deploy in efforts to build a better country. But child poverty undermines education and threatens the long-term wellbeing of any nation. In the UK, numerous organisations have raised concerns about the detrimental impact on education created by the ever-increasing levels of child poverty. The UK's school education system is "free" but consumption and material resources matter. Families with low income understand that their financial circumstances will most likely cause marginalisation for their children at schools (with all the psychological stress this brings into the family home, further impacting children). Free school meals put a spotlight on the issue of stigmatisation and the potential for the receivers of free school meals to be bullied. Parents who received free school meals as children are worried that their own children will be labelled as "poor" and have the same stigma attached that they experienced [18]. Children North East and the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) have shown that school days need to be poverty proofed through reducing cost of school uniforms, school trips, materials for homework, and transport (amongst the many other costs of going to school). Home-Start UK have highlighted the huge discrepancies in educational attainment between children growing up in poorer areas and their wealthier counterparts, with school closures in the pandemic likely to have widened this disadvantage gap yet further. The British Household Panel Youth Survey (BHPYS) have highlighted that children from families living on a low income are more likely to be truant, face suspension or expulsion from school, be worried about bullying or feel their teachers are "getting at" them [18].

Studies have shown that a lack of resources can affect children's participation and thus learning in schools [20]. Examples of these disadvantages include children missing out on school trips because they can't afford them,

concerns about non-uniform days, problems with affording the necessary equipment and materials to fully participate in some classes – especially when group work is required [20]. In England, 60% of pupils receiving free school meals reach expected levels of reading in KS1, compared to 74% of the general student population [3]. Only 39% of England's most disadvantaged pupils are expected to reach the expected reading, writing, and maths standard in KS2 versus the national average of 54%. These differences continue into secondary education, as 41% of the most disadvantaged pupils will reach expected attainment compared to 50% of all pupils. A failure to ensure children obtain these crucial academic skills will reduce future employability, preventing them from improving their financial situation and hindering growth of the UK's economy. The JRF have called for action in attracting and retaining high performing teachers within schools in disadvantaged areas given the current difficulties faced by the schools serving our most disadvantaged communities [21].

In summary, the evidence is clear that investment in the UK's education system is being squandered because the effects of poverty are not being addressed as an integral part of educational provision. Schools and Academy Trusts are currently bodging together their own sticking plaster solutions to poverty, but this largely involves the use of resources in a non-strategic manner. For example, one Multiple Academy Trust in Bradford invested approximately £1.5 million in 2023 to tackle poverty across 16 schools [3]. This investment was vital, but it was directed at urgent short term fixes; to issues such as hunger, uniform, or safeguarding, so was not optimally coordinated, or strategically deployed. It meant that the 16 schools had two fewer teachers than they would otherwise have had if they had not needed to redivert these funds. The current situation is not only ethically and morally indefensible, but it also makes no economic sense.

"The main impacts are education. No matter where you are, school is difficult... It isn't just hunger. The worry is still there. **That feeling of worry never leaves.** How your sister's trip to the zoo is going to be paid. How you've not seen your mam eat. All going through your head in a chemistry lesson."

– End Child Poverty Youth Ambassador

The cumulative impact of poverty on health and education

Previous research has consistently shown the link between early child poverty and adverse outcomes [2]. However, studies traditionally focus on individual outcomes rather than examining the impact at a group or cluster level [4]. More recent research has explored the association between household income in early childhood and adverse health and social outcomes known to limit life at age 17 years [22]. In this work, the focus was on adverse outcomes known to limit life chances: psychological distress, self-assessed ill health, smoking, obesity, and poor education achievement. It was found that:

- Children born into families with the lowest incomes in the UK are almost 13 times more likely to experience poor health and educational outcomes by the age of 17 years.

- Children from the lowest income households are five times more likely to experience poor academic achievement.

- Children from the lowest income households are four times more likely to be regular smokers by the age of 17 years.

> "You can teach children more effectively when **they come into school ready and able to learn,** and schools are able to do that when they **better understand home-school circumstances"**
>
> – Teacher

> "You **feel embarrassed** because you can't remember things because you have had a **lot of other things going on"**
>
> – Primary school pupil, Newcastle

We know that poverty impacts family functioning and parental health and behaviour, which, in turn, affect child health. A recent study [7], using data from a nationally representative sample of thousands of children born in 2000, assessed the impact on children's health of childhood adversities that cluster with poverty. The study shows that over 40% of children in the UK experience continuous exposure to either poverty and/or parental mental ill health. These harmful exposures are very common, and much more so in Northern regions (55% overall), compared to the Southern regions (32% overall). These common exposures lead to large negative impacts on child physical, mental, cognitive and behavioural outcomes, for example increasing the risk of children developing mental health problems six-fold when both exposures are present.

These findings illustrate the links between early life adversity, poor educational attainment, and unhealthy later life behaviours [5]. Importantly, the research showed that simply reducing income poverty would not eliminate the adverse outcomes associated with early disadvantage. Monocausal approaches to child poverty that focus solely on household income will not suffice (whilst being a crucial stand of a coherent poverty strategy) [22]. In addition to addressing low income, better connected public service support, and addressing wider environmental determinants of healthy childhood is necessary: removing health and education inequality in early childhood would reduce the number of children experiencing multiple adversity by more than 80% [3].

We need to ensure the next generation has access to a high-quality educational experience to maintain a functioning society, workforce, and economy [23]. But failing in education is the most likely and most costly outcome for the third of children in the UK who live in families where there is not enough money for the things they need. The evidence shows that children from the lowest income household are five times more likely to have poor academic achievement [3]. This is consistent with the findings of the BHPYS which found that children from low-income families are more likely to be absent from school, face suspension or expulsion from school, and be worried about bullying [18]. Further research shows that children from disadvantaged backgrounds who are not "school ready" but "catch up" during primary school have better health in adolescence than those who do not catch up [24]. This demonstrates the potential for schools to act as environments that can change lives [24]. Thus, the evidence shows that investing in education is an investment in health, for now and the future [25].

> "Now that everybody is going back to school after the summer holidays. I **couldn't get her ordinary shoes,** it had to be Nike Air Max but that's because she's going to big school" [45].

Funding allocation unfairly disadvantages schools serving low-income families

Secondary schools with the most disadvantaged pupils saw spending per pupil fall by 12% in real terms between 2010 and 2021, compared with 5% for schools in the most affluent areas [28].

Children living in the most deprived areas have poorer access to good quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings [3]. In addition, it has been found that children eligible for the two-year-old free childcare places have an attendance rate that is six percentage points lower than their non-funded peers (79% vs. 85%) [26]. Consequently, children growing up in poverty experience many factors that reduce their school readiness and ability to learn, meaning they do not receive the full experience and preparation for future employment available to their peers.

Concerningly, funding for schools in more deprived areas has been lowered over recent years relative to schools in more affluent areas, despite these schools needing to support the additional needs associated with children from families living on a low income. Children in the most affluent schools received larger funding increases from the National Funding Formula (8-9%) between 2017 and 2022 than schools in deprived areas (5%) [27]. These disparities can be seen clearly when comparing between the North and South of England, with pupils in London receiving 9.7% more funding than students in the North [3]. These funding differences link to disparities in educational attainment, as London students also achieve a third of a grade higher on average than those in the North. These inequalities demand a move towards funding

that levels up the education system. The 2023 report by the Institute of Fiscal Studies [28] on education spending showed that schools serving more disadvantaged students have seen bigger cuts over time. The report highlighted that Pupil Premium is about 14% lower in real terms in 2023–24 than it was in 2014–15. The introduction of statutory minimum funding levels in 2020 disproportionately benefited schools in more affluent areas and reduced the share of total funding provided to schools in more disadvantaged areas. Funding factors for deprivation in local authority formulae have reduced in real terms over time. This decline was particularly large after the National Funding Formula was introduced in 2018, which set deprivation funding at a lower level than the level that was previously used by local authorities. In summary, schools that need the most support have seen their funding reduced relative to schools in more affluent areas. This asymmetry is unjustifiable and needs to be reversed if we are to address the inequities blighting the UK and strangling economic growth.

There is an urgent need to reverse the current situation where children in disadvantaged areas are less likely to benefit from the education system.

"Central to unlocking potential and improving productivity is further reform of our education system. **Our biggest challenge remains the attainment gap between rich and poor.**"

— Michael Gove, MP, Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities of the United Kingdom

Geographical and demographic factors influence child poverty prevalence

There are clear geographical differences in poverty. Where in the country you grow up plays a role in how likely you are to experience poverty. A report on local child poverty after housing costs (Household Below Average Income) released by DWP suggests the regions in the North of England and the Midlands fare poorly compared to the south of the country. This can be seen in Figure 1 which shows overall rates of child poverty in the regions of the UK in 2021/22. In addition, some areas have shown increases in poverty rates, whilst others seem to be reducing. For example, the North East experienced a 31.3% increase in the number of children in poverty between 2015 and 2022, whilst in London, rates dropped by 11.8% in the same timeframe.

Such variations can also be seen at play with the rates of working families in poverty. Figure 2 shows that although the South East of England has the lowest BHC (Before Housing Costs) child poverty rates (16%), there is a pronounced problem of poverty for working families.

The data are produced by the End Child Poverty Coalition. The data are for the year ending March 2022, therefore do not cover the period during cost-of-living crisis nor the period of extremely high inflation in relation to food and fuel.

> "Remember these graphs are people. **I'm a number on these statistics.** Why does it feel like I don't matter... my sisters don't matter"
>
> — End Child Poverty Youth Ambassador

Figure 1: Percentage of children in poverty, after housing costs 2021/22, by country and region.

Region	Percentage
UK	29.2%
Northern Ireland	22.2%
East of England	23.6%
Scotland	24.5%
South East	25.2%
South West	26.9%
Wales	27.9%
Yorkshire and the Humber	31.3%
East Midlands	32.7%
London	32.9%
North West	34.3%
North East	35.2%
West Midlands	38.4%
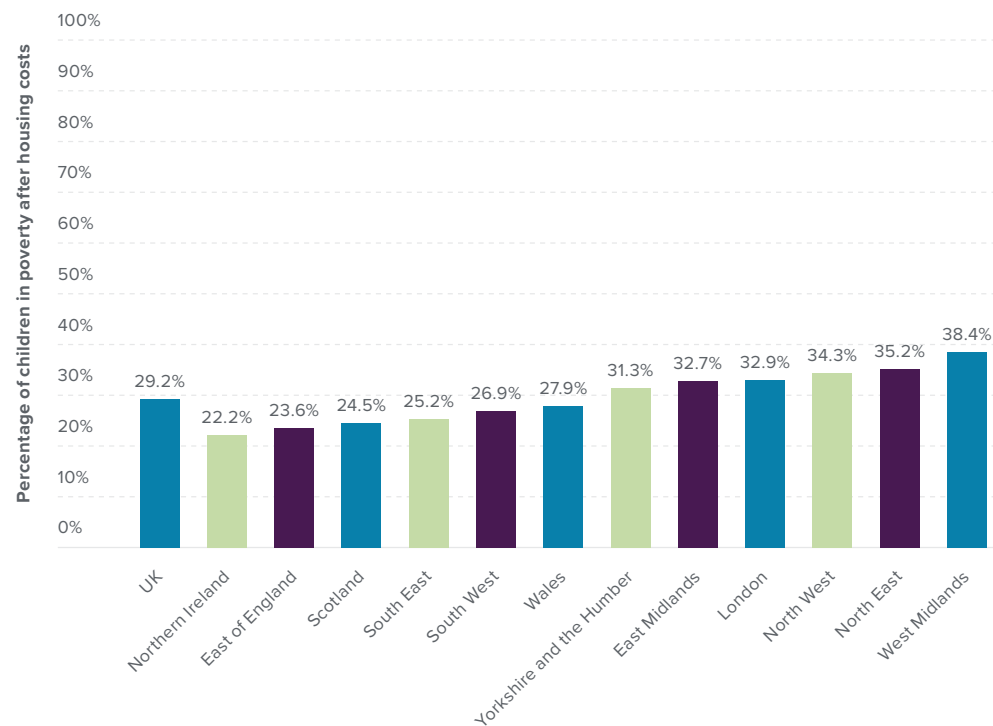
Source: HBAI 2019/20 to 2021/22 (DWP).
UK statistic is for 2021/22, regional statistics are 2-year averages

Indeed, the statistics highlight that 86% of children in BHC poverty in the South-East are in households where at least one adult is working. Thus, different approaches may be necessary for supporting families in poverty across different regions. In some regions, residential transience associated with families living in low-income areas causes children to experience education disruption due to moving schools. For example, about 15% of school children transfer between schools in Blackpool each year.

In addition to geography, demographic factors affect rates of child poverty. For example, disability is a key factor influencing the prevalence of poverty. Recent figures suggest that 36% of children living with a disabled family member are experiencing poverty in comparison to only 25% of children who do not live with a disabled family member [29].

Ethnic inequalities in child poverty are also present and can be seen clearly in the data for the UK over the period 2021/22. After Housing Costs (AHC) are taken into account, 47% of children from Asian or Asian British households and 53% from African households were in poverty compared to 25% of White households [29]. Figure 3 depicts that children from minority ethnic groups are at greater risk of being in poverty than those with White British ethnicity across every region in the UK. This is particularly pronounced in London where high ethnic diversity is present. Although the North East is one of the least ethnically diverse regions in England, almost two thirds (64%) of the children from minority ethnic groups in the region are estimated to be in poverty making it the highest rate in the country for non-White British heritage children [30].

Figure 2: Percentage of children in BHC poverty who are in a household with at least one adult in work, UK regions and countries, 2021/22
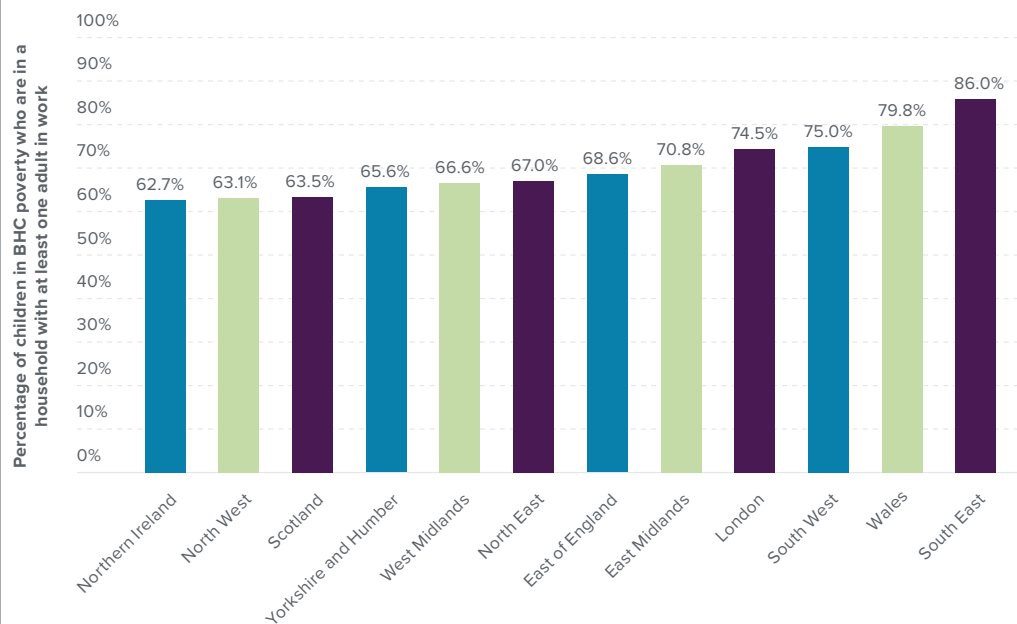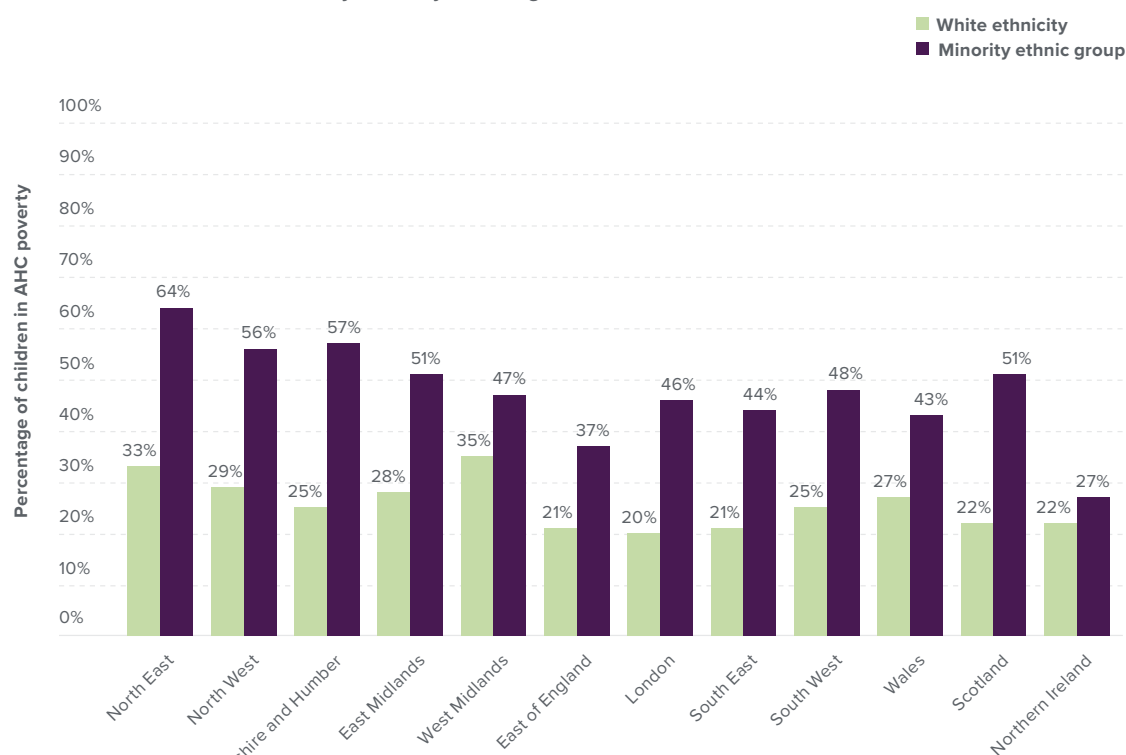
Source: Children in Low Income Families, 2021-2022 (DWP, 2023). UK regions and countries, 2021/22

> **"Disparities in education outcomes are a serious barrier to productivity and growth,** particularly in the North of England, and we need solutions now."
>
> — Lord Jim O'Neill, vice-chair of the Northern Powerhouse

Figure 3: Estimated after housing costs child poverty rate by ethnicity in UK regions and devolved nations.

White ethnicity
Minority ethnic group

Region	White ethnicity	Minority ethnic group
North East	33%	64%
North West	29%	56%
Yorkshire and Humber	25%	57%
East Midlands	28%	51%
West Midlands	35%	47%
East of England	21%	37%
London	20%	46%
South East	21%	44%
South West	25%	48%
Wales	27%	43%
Scotland	22%	51%
Northern Ireland	22%	27%

Percentage of children in AHC poverty

Source: HBAI 2018-2022

The geographical and demographic influences on rates of child poverty provide a powerful rationale for the adoption of place-based approaches to addressing the problem. The 2017 social mobility commission report, chaired by Millburn, demonstrated the multi-layered impact of where children live on their educational outcomes [31].The influence of multiple factors on child poverty rates also illustrates the issue of intersectionality (the interconnected nature of factors such as race, socioeconomic position, and gender creating overlapping and interdependent systems of disadvantage). This reinforces the need to see poverty as an issue that goes beyond low income. Our previous report on addressing the autism assessment

and support crisis shone a spotlight on the structural inequalities affecting autism assessment. Girls, ethnic minority groups, and children born to mothers without educational qualifications are less likely to receive a timely autism assessment (and thus experience delays in obtaining educational support). These problems will not disappear through an uplift in household income per se [22]. The alleviation of relative income poverty is necessary but is unlikely to be sufficient in eradicating the pernicious effects of growing up in disadvantaged areas where the built environment and other factors hardwire structural inequalities into daily living.

"We are not case studies, but people with stories you would have nightmares about if it was your reality. Perhaps you don't see desperation unless you have lived it? **Well learn from us. Because we are living it.**"

— "Changing Realities" participant
(a participatory online project documenting life on a low income and pushing for change)

The impact of poverty and the pandemic in a digital age

The educational disparities and place-based discrepancies arising through unfair funding allocations were exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic, when low-income families were disproportionately affected by school closure. Schools in the most deprived areas were less likely to have the digital technologies required for remote teaching during the pandemic, limiting the children's ability to learn. This placed a further stress on families living with poverty, as one third of families most concerned by finances had to buy a laptop to ensure their child could engage with school [32]. In addition, teachers in more disadvantaged areas were less likely to have received training on delivering teaching online, due to the additional constraints faced by these schools.

Many schools in disadvantaged areas avoided online learning altogether because too large a proportion of their students did not have access to digital technology. Sixty percent of private schools in affluent areas already had online platforms when the pandemic hit compared to only 23% of schools in the most deprived areas [33]. In the schools serving the most disadvantaged communities, only 3% of teachers hosted online lessons and only 4% had audio/video calls with a student. These issues highlight the elevated educational loss experienced by children living in poverty during the pandemic. In summary, children from low-income families lost crucial years of educational development after being hit the hardest by pandemic school closures and disrupted education [32]. These children are now at a distinct disadvantage and this cohort will continue to lose key opportunities without appropriate funding support and interventions — further increasing the costs to schools and society.

> "[Lockdown] was quite hard because we **only had two laptops between the four of us**"
>
> — Primary school pupil, Lancashire

> "It's vital we **repair the damage done during the pandemic** to our young people's mental health, as well as to their learning. We also need to **make sure we're preparing them for the jobs of the future,** such as in digital or the net zero transition"
>
> — Anne Longfield CBE, Chair of the Centre for Young Lives and former Children's Commissioner for England

The association between poverty and school absence

Living with poverty also increases school absences which further limit the education of children growing up in low-income families and increases their likelihood of becoming NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) [3]. Even prior to statutory education, uptake and attendance of free pre-school education places are lowest for children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. School absence is one of the biggest challenges currently facing schools. A wealth of evidence suggests that increased school absence is associated with myriad adverse outcomes during the school years, such as reduced mental and physical health and poor academic performance [34, 35]. In the longer term, poor school attendance is associated with increased risk of being involved in the criminal justice system, unemployment, and having financial difficulties in adulthood [36]. This situation has become worse after the COVID-19 pandemic with more than a quarter of all secondary pupils are now defined as persistent absentees, missing at least 10 percent of school sessions. To begin to tackle this issue, it is crucial to understand which pupils are at greatest risk.

Recent analyses have explored the association between persistent school absence and disadvantage using data from over 60,000 pupils across the Bradford District (see Figure 4). Children were identified as a persistent absentee if attendance was below 90% (a threshold identified by the DfE) for any single school year. Eligibility for free school meals was used as a proxy for socioeconomic disadvantage. The "pre-pandemic" data were investigated to identify the associations between poverty and absenteeism before this was further complicated by factors attributable to the pandemic (e.g., school closures etc.). Over half (56.9%) of those identified as a persistent absentee were eligible for free school meals. In contrast, fewer than a quarter (24.7%) of children who were not persistently absent were eligible for free school meals. Further statistical analysis found that children eligible for free school meals had over three times increased odds of becoming persistently absent at some point over their school career. This grew to 4.5 times increased odds for those who were persistently absent for two or more years across their schooling. These quantitative insights suggest that children growing up in poverty are likely to be at increased risk of not attending school. One reason that poverty results in school absenteeism relates to many young people experiencing shame and anxiety about their financial situation, making concentration and participation in school difficult (see also the End Word) [4]. The JRF has suggested that a lack of funds to afford out of school activities, resources for learning in class and at home, food, transport, and school uniforms is a key reason for school absenteeism [21].

> ## "We can't tackle attendance if we don't **tackle poverty**"
>
> – Secondary school teacher

Figure 4: Percentage of children who are persistently absent (left graph) or not persistently absent (right graph) as a function of free school meals prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Legend:
- Eligible for free school meals
- Not eligible for free school meals
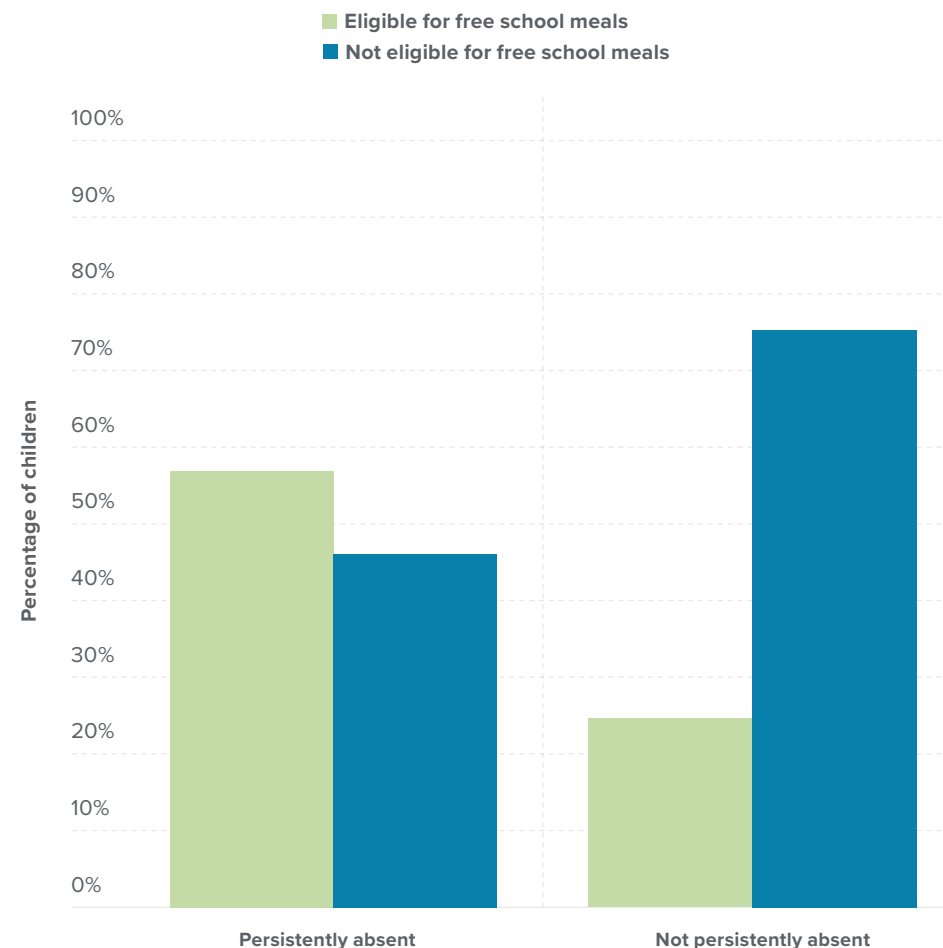
Data were collated from Connected Bradford; a linked database for over 800,000 citizens across the Bradford district, UK. The final sample contained 62,598 children.

Educational settings offer outstanding opportunities to address poverty and food insecurity

> "Schools and other educational settings need to be at the **epicentre of support.**"

In a time of financial pressure, there is a necessity to consider how existing infrastructure can be used to address childhood inequities. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the critical supporting role that nurseries and schools play in the lives of many families [30]. This strongly suggests that efforts to address child poverty could be usefully organised around educational settings. The impact of COVID-19 on education (such as worsening school attendance) also needs to be addressed through those same educational settings. The provision of additional support to schools serving the most disadvantaged areas can be seen as an expedient approach to address educational inequalities at source.

The use of educational settings to address poverty enables a multi-faceted approach that recognises the pivotal role that education plays in breaking the cycle of poverty. Schools and nurseries can serve as focal points for addressing poverty because they are typically located in physical locations at the heart of communities, making them accessible to a wide range of families. The fact that there are educational settings within areas of high poverty rates provides a major advantage in strategies that aim to ensure good support for children from families who do not have enough money for the things they need.

It is essential to ensure equitable access to help and support for all communities - including those in rural or marginalized areas - if poverty is to be addressed effectively. This involves physical access to support but also addressing barriers such as transportation and cultural relevance. Educational settings are well positioned to remove these barriers for many communities in underserved areas and can help bridge the access gap.

The use of educational settings to address poverty enables a **multi-faceted approach** that recognises the pivotal role that education plays in breaking the cycle of poverty.

Schools and nurseries already serve as hubs for engaging families and communities in efforts to reduce the impact of child poverty [37, 38]. Schools can foster collaboration between teachers, parents, and Local Authorities to address the diverse needs of children and families living in poverty through initiatives such as parent-teacher associations, family literacy programmes, or community outreach events, Additionally, schools can provide a premise for adult education classes, job training programmes, or access to charities and public services looking to support families in overcoming economic challenges.

The way educational settings are structured can significantly help in efforts to address poverty. This includes factors such as curriculum design, teaching methodologies, and support services. Implementing inclusive teaching practices that cater to diverse learning needs, offering nutrition programs, providing mental health support, and ensuring access to technology are examples of structural considerations that can enhance the educational experience for students from low-income backgrounds and level the playing field.

Whilst many schools take action to address these disadvantages, schools also need and value the support of audit processes that help develop awareness amongst school staff of the ways that their systems, processes, and structures are unwittingly stigmatising children and young people on the basis of low income or poverty [39]. Two well used national initiatives, Poverty proofing© (developed and rolled out by "Children North East") and the related Cost of the school day from the "Child Poverty Action Group" both support change in schools. These initiatives demonstrate that it is possible for schools to take action – there is much that schools can do and they value being able to address the needs of their students.

If our priority is to address child poverty, then we must give our schools and school leaders the tools they need to make a change. Placing interventions within the school gates can ensure that our most vulnerable young people are provided with the support they need and deserve. Communities can work with schools and nurseries towards breaking the cycle of poverty and fostering opportunities for economic growth.

If our priority is to address child poverty, then we must give our schools and school leaders the **tools they need to make a change.**

"Huge numbers of us are now almost completely unable to support ourselves or our families. Nothing is affordable. **Our children are hungry.** Schools report 'short concentration' and 'unmanageable moods'. **They have lost their childhood."**

— "Changing Realities" participant (a participatory online project documenting life on a low income and pushing for change)

Innovative approaches trialled in the real world

The recommendations made within this report are informed by innovative ways of working that have been trialled in real-world settings. It is not the case that a poor educational experience must be endured by children growing up in families where there is not enough money for the things they need [40, 41]. For example, free school breakfast clubs were established for all children in schools that had at least 35% of pupils eligible for Pupil Premium through the Bradford Opportunity Area initiative. Following this initiative, schools reported that pupils' academic progress increased by an average of two months across reading, writing, and maths. This is a simple demonstration of how helping schools to provide nutritious food to all children, regardless of their circumstances, can improve their ability to learn and, ultimately, enhance a child's life chances. Additionally, the Mayor of London is funding universal free school meal provision for the 2023-24 and 2024-25 academic years. However, these approaches need to be made available to all children throughout the UK. We highlight eight evidence-based approaches – new ways of working – that show what good could look like if the principles set out in this report were implemented across the UK.

First, we showcase a national approach that has been operating for the last decade to address the impact of poverty in schools - Poverty Proofing© - from Children North East and a related initiative from the Child Poverty Action group that addresses the 'Cost of the School Day'. We then show how central government can address the consequences of child poverty by supporting schools and nurseries to take a whole system approach to education (the Department for Education's 'Opportunity Areas' scheme). We use initiatives led by the Welsh Government and the North of Tyne Combined Authority to highlight the usefulness of different UK jurisdictions, regions, and countries having the devolved authority to address child poverty through the education settings in their localities. A description of work done in Blackpool then demonstrates how work across a city can be coordinated to support educational establishments in addressing poverty. We demonstrate the role that universities could play by describing how Durham University have begun to explore how they can play a role in raising the attainment of children in their area.

We then zoom into the level of a Multiple Academy Trust and look at a real-life example of schools directly addressing poverty as part of their everyday business. Finally, we showcase outstanding an example of a community-based intervention that works with and through schools to offer broad educational opportunities in an area of multiple deprivation. These examples give great hope to the UK and show that passionate people can create real change in adverse circumstances. However, these efforts are not the norm and government must help ensure that every area of the UK is supported to create similar initiatives (where the communities decide on the delivery models and priorities that best fit the context of their locality).

The use of educational settings to address deep societal issues that impact across public services must be supported by all our national organisations. We recommend that Integrated Care Boards (the commissioning bodies for health and social care) involve education leaders in their plans and prioritise education as a major lever for improving population health. The framing of child poverty as a public health problem suggests that ICBs should work together to create a single regional "point of truth" where families, expectant families, practitioners, and educational providers can obtain evidence-based advice on the help available to low-income families. The advice can be hosted on NHS webpages and capture core principles whilst ensuring the messages are tailored for the region. The Healthier Together programme shows the effectiveness of such an approach.

"If you're not healthy it limits the amount you can learn"

— Secondary school pupil, South Yorkshire

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Poverty Proofing© the school day

Context

Poverty Proofing© the School Day is a tool developed by the charity Children North East with initial support from the North East Child Poverty Commission, with the aim of identifying the barriers children living in poverty face to engaging fully with school life and its opportunities. Poverty Proofing© the School Day is a national programme which aims to ensure that "no activity or planned activity in school should identify, exclude, treat differently or make assumptions about those with less financial resource". This work began in 2014 with a regional consultation across the North East where 'Children North East' sought to understand the challenges experienced by children who were living in poverty. The results of that consultation were clear; "if there's one place it's miserable to be poor it's school". The Child Poverty Action Group subsequently worked with Children North East to develop a 'Cost of the School Day' initiative that addresses the impact of poverty in schools. Children North East is now taking the Poverty Proofing© approach to other areas such as health settings and cultural organisations (theatres and museums).

Since 2014, CNE have worked with 580 schools across 30 local authorities, consulting with over 217,500 children, staff and parents and have worked with 22 delivery partners.

Poverty Proofing© the school day leads to:

- Minimised costs for schools and families
- Equal access to opportunities, regardless of income
- Greater poverty awareness in the school community
- Poverty sensitive policies and practices

From beginnings to 2024

The Poverty Proofing© the School Day process consists of listening to the voices and experiences of young people. These insights are central and incorporated with the views of staff, parents and governors. An audit is then carried out and a written report is produced. The report identifies institutional inequalities in provision and provides an action plan to address the identified issues. Following a pilot in four North East schools in 2013-14, thirteen North East schools participated in the audit process in 2014-15, at which point a first evaluation was conducted. This evaluation demonstrated that generic instances of stigmatisation were occurring in the participating schools, ranging from issues to do with affordability and access of uniform, administration and stigmatisation around free school meals, access to resources and activities, behaviour and setting, transport to school, accessing trips and extra-curricular provision,

and support for parents and families. The striking finding was that these instances of stigmatisation would often be occurring multiple times during the school day but were largely invisible because of the ways in which institutional practices had developed. A key finding was that poverty barriers to learning could be both invisible and unintended, but also that schools could take action to remove these once they had come to light. The importance of attending to the lived experiences of pupils was critical to the success of Poverty Proofing©.

The expertise developed in the Children North East team by 2020 enabled them to work with 72 schools across the country, reaching 3112 pupils. Changes made in schools as a result of the audit process led to significant changes to practices around and administration of free school meals, school trips, extra-curricular activities and homework, fundraising, and uniforms.

The process also includes dedicated training for staff and governors on the causes and consequences of poverty on children and their families and, as a result, schools then spoke about changes to school cultures such that all provision was considered through 'the poverty proofing lens.' Ongoing support is provided to schools by Children North East through a range of offers that include workshops for pupils, ongoing training for staff, and support on how to implement changes to combat the barriers to education. These insights and the additional training about poverty (that many teachers had never specifically been offered in any other context), has enabled schools to act with greater awareness and given them the agency to act on behalf of their pupils.

74% of staff from one local authority reported that their classroom practice had changed as a result of Poverty Proofing©.

"It really did **deliver new understanding** of how we can help our pupils and families"

Impact

Schools have reported improved attendance and attainment because of the actions taken [39]. There is strong evidence of greater take-up of free school meals and extra-curricular trips and activities, more effective use of hypothecated funding, and a less costly school-day. The shift in school cultures and the impact of the Poverty Proofing© process described by school leaders demonstrates the longer term and sustainable impacts that go beyond the lives of individual pupils. Poverty Proofing© also demonstrates that cultural norms and social processes are critical to mediating the impacts of poverty on children's educational experiences. A second report looking at case studies of good practice resulting from Poverty Proofing© work describes the actions that schools find are making a profound difference to families living in poverty [42], but also highlights that these outcomes must be understood in a wider societal context in terms of both cause but also the ongoing challenges that mediate school practices in relation to poverty.

The impacts of the Poverty Proofing© initiative have been multiple, in terms of in-school impacts as described above, but also in terms of a wider understanding of the impacts of poverty. First, the many instances of generic stigmatisation challenge society to ask how discrimination can so readily go unnoticed and how we can ensure these hidden experiences come to light [39]. Second, the initiative stresses the fact that metric-driven evidence of poverty alone cannot reveal the widespread ramifications of stigmatisation for children in their educational lives. The effectiveness of Poverty Proofing brings to the fore the importance of what is designated as meaningful evidence, and how engaging with lived experience insight can be a critical aspect in leveraging significant improvements.

Findings from the Poverty Proofing© audit process

Policies that can cause unintentional discrimination include:

- Issuing a gold card as an access pass to school lunches, or distributing packed lunches in brown paper bags on school trips for students who receive free school meals

- Making children bring in ingredients for home economics classes where children who bring "value" brands or supermarket own brands are at risk of being bullied or teased

- Providing stationery in pencil cases that signal the student was unable to purchase their own

- Issuing easily identifiable debt letters

- Sending out school trip letters that put further pressure on finances and cause anxiety for families

Policies that can help mitigate the impact of child poverty in schools

- Use cashless systems to ensure free school meals are distributed anonymously

- Swap brown paper bags for Free School Meal packed lunches with a variety of packed lunch boxes, or issue brown paper bags to all pupils

- Replace the requirement for expensive uniforms (such as branded tracksuit bottoms), replace dry-clean-only blazers or branded t-shirts with plain and affordable ones

- Ask parents about what systems would work best for them

- Assign a member of staff to deal with any concerns relating to financial circumstances

- Appoint governors with responsibility for the appropriate use and monitoring of pupil premium spending

While these changes are a good starting point, the priority should be to eradicate child poverty, not enable children to live with it more successfully.

"**Free exchanges for uniforms,** coats, wellies and school shoes."

— Staff member

"**The training for staff really hits home and engages you in the challenges faced by pupils living in poverty and their families.** This sets up discussion between different members of the team and we saw them sharing case studies of their own experience with pupils that would otherwise never have been highlighted."

2

Department for Education Opportunity Areas

"The Opportunity Area programme – one of the only attempts to deal with this issue – was **partially effective because it offered bespoke, locally-led solutions in areas facing the biggest challenges**".

– Lord Jim O'Neill, vice-chair of the Northern Powerhouse Partnership

Opportunity Areas (OA) were established by the Department for Education as a place-based programme to support social mobility in areas facing entrenched deprivation between 2016 and 2022. The long-term objective was to transform the life chances of children and young people in 12 areas across the country with low social mobility (Northern England having six of the 12 areas including Bradford, Blackpool, Derby, Doncaster, North Yorkshire Coast, and Oldham). The programme aimed to learn more about what works in improving education outcomes in coastal, rural, and urban areas. It tackled regional inequalities by convening resources, using evidence-based approaches, and testing new approaches to unlock barriers that hold young people back in geographic areas where educational challenges are greatest.

Schools have long recognised the impact of health, care, and other non-educational factors on children's behaviour and readiness to learn, and the potential to use their unique access to children and families to link them to essential services. OAs provided the necessary connections, permissions, and resources to allow schools to take a leadership role, without imposing unrealistic burdens or distractions from their core business.

Many programme insights were gathered and shared through DfE "Insight Guides" over the six years of delivery.

These showed the importance of:

- Place-based working in a holistic, bespoke approach that is tailored to each community's specific needs.

- Targeted funding for designated areas and building on local knowledge to enable deployment of the expertise needed to enact change.

- Evidence-based strategic thinking and championing local leaders.

- Building relationships and creating diverse partnership boards that engage with local stakeholders.

- Independent chairs and external "disruptors" to encourage change.

OAs have had a major impact in areas such as Bradford. They provided much-needed investment into education that enabled bespoke place-based support. For example, the Blackpool OA supported approximately 200 secondary school pupils in the area who were at risk of being excluded, while the North Yorkshire Coast OA filled over 100 teaching posts across 28 schools, including attracting 24 teachers from outside the area. In addition, over the course of the programme, the quality of education improved, with 39 schools improving at least one Ofsted grade in the Bradford OA. There were two core success factors that drove improved outcomes and lasting place-based change. These were effective leadership and discretionary funding made available from central Government.

Effective leadership of the OA's formal partnership boards was fundamental in bridging divides between local authorities, health partners, and schools, to change practice and culture, and tackle underperformance. This leadership also oversaw how Government funding was being utilised locally and ensured accountability. Particularly important was a discretionary budget, helping to bring additional capacity when schools and other providers needed to release staff – for example, in peer-led school improvement programmes. These funds also allowed investment in additional packages of support for professionals, children, and families.

The challenge faced by disadvantaged areas is the limited ability of local and regional partners to draw from their core funding when services are already overstretched, and resources must be committed to respond to new and emerging needs (i.e., Ofsted inspections). Even through the COVID-19 pandemic, OAs had the agility to respond to changing needs and helped contribute to educational recovery aided by both strong leadership as well as discretionary funding. Since the OA programme ceased, many areas have continued to deliver evidence-based interventions, support networks, and formal partnership arrangements to continue tackling the issues that still see poorer child health and educational outcomes in areas of deprivation. These efforts are at risk, however, without support from central Government to build on the OA's successes and further develop this programme with a proven track record in addressing child poverty with and through education settings.

"I think really the most important thing that the Opportunity Area did was to say **'we need to bridge that divide between health and education'**".

– Education practitioner

3

Removing poverty barriers to education in Wales

Welsh legislation puts Wales in a unique position to address child poverty and put young people at the centre of community planning. For example, the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act in Wales and the creation of policies relating to play (e.g., Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010, and the Play Sufficiency Duty) have created greater awareness around the needs of young people's health and wellbeing and the desirability of communities working together to support these needs.

A new curriculum for Wales was rolled out in 2022 which has given schools greater autonomy over what they teach. The curriculum seeks to embed health and wellbeing into the core of the new curriculum by making it one of the Six Areas of Learning Experience for Welsh schools. The impact of the new curriculum has yet to be evaluated but the emphasis on schools prioritising health and addressing health inequalities in young people is to be welcomed.

Several strategies and initiatives across Wales have been developed to further address poverty barriers to education with and through school settings. Examples of important work being implemented include:

HAPPEN-WALES

HAPPEN works with over 600 primary schools across Wales to address inequalities by bringing together education, health, and research stakeholders. Schools can take part in the HAPPEN Survey throughout the academic year to create an individual school report showing the overall picture of health and wellbeing in the school, including physical activity, diet, dental health, sleep, mental health,and wellbeing. Teachers and pupils are empowered to make meaningful changes through taking part in the survey as it provides schools with a better understanding of their pupils' physical, psychological, emotional, and social health. This information also allows schools to track change overtime and evaluate practice within the school.

Non-Means Test Free School Meals (FSM) Provision

From September 2022, non-means tested FSM have been provided for all primary school children across Wales. The plan is for non-means tested FSM to be provided for all CYP across all school years in Wales by 2025. This work will allow an evaluation of the effects of FSM for all children in terms of health, education, and wellbeing. An initial analysis of the data from the winter period of 2022 suggests that receiving FSM is associated with fewer visits to the GP or hospital for respiratory conditions. Evaluation is ongoing to better understand the barriers and facilitators in rolling out universal free school meals across an entire nation. These findings could and should inform work throughout the UK.

CARELINK

Children who are placed in care are increasing in number and are among the most vulnerable in society, with poorer educational, employment, and health outcomes. The number of children in care in the UK has increased every year since 2010. There are numerous reasons why a child might enter care, but recent evidence suggests certain children could remain with their family if well-targeted, effective support were provided. CARELINK works with parents and children who have experience of the social care system to produce robust evidence to inform future service planning and policy in caring for vulnerable children. Using routinely collected data, the team examine how known risk factors for being placed in care (e.g., living in a very deprived area, child has a disability) cluster together and relate to children living in Wales to assess their chance of being taken into care.

The main objective of the CARELINK work is to investigate the risk factors and outcomes for vulnerable children by using connected routine datasets from Wales. The evidence will then be able to inform policy and practices and identify problems linked to entering care and protective factors that enable staying within the family environment. CARELINK will bridge a significant knowledge gap by scrutinising factors that predict entry into care and evaluating the probabilities of children in Wales entering care as a function of factors such as deprivation, disability, and parental substance misuse. The work aims to pinpoint how these factors aggregate (using resources such as GP records) and contrast the health and educational outcomes of children who share similar risk factors but have different care experiences.

The work is being collaboratively developed with input from charities, parents, and children with firsthand experience of the social care system. This inclusive approach ensures that the research reflects diverse viewpoints and addresses the needs of vulnerable children and families effectively. Adopting similar approaches across the whole UK may help Local Authorities provide the additional support CYP in poverty need and deserve before it is too late and the risks accumulate for entry into the care system.

4

North of Tyne Combined Authority's (NTCA) approach to building an inclusive space for CYP to thrive

North of Tyne Combined Authority (NTCA) has been working since 2022 with its constituent local authorities (Newcastle, Northumberland and North Tyneside), schools, and other stakeholders to develop and pilot two programmes of work tackling entrenched regional and local inequalities, directly supporting children, families and schools. NTCA's Education Improvement programme is focussed on direct support for schools and their workforce, responding to local need and innovating to improve educational attainment, whilst the Child Poverty Prevention programme seeks to improve social and economic resilience within areas, working with both schools and employers.

Since 2022 the Child Poverty Prevention programme has funded multiple strands of action:

1. A suite of poverty interventions in over 100 schools, across all phases of the intervention. Schools are able to opt for an intervention to suit the needs of their community, ranging from poverty proofing© the school day audits, to afterschool clubs, to family learning sessions or bespoke grant funded projects in schools. Schools can access professional learning and school improvement support focussed on ensuring inclusion and maximising attainment for their most disadvantaged pupils.

2. Welfare and benefits advice at the school gates in 45 schools, across all phases, achieving over £1.2M in benefit gains for residents to date.

3. Confidential all-staff 'making ends meet' surveys with 35 employers (covering over 18,000 staff), to tailor the supported development of workplace anti-poverty strategies.

4. A focus on the critical first 1001 days of a child's life. For example - 750 Baby Boxes have been delivered through The Children's Foundation's Baby Box campaign, taking a uniquely developmental approach to ensuring that vulnerable babies have the very best start in life.

CHILD POVERTY PREVENTION PROGRAMME

ONE	TWO	THREE	FOUR
POVERTY INTERVENTIONS IN SCHOOLS	WELFARE SUPORT THROUGH THE SCHOOL GATE	WORKING WITH EMPLOYERS TO TACKLE CHILD POVERTY	THE CRITICAL 1,001 DAYS

Preliminary evaluation of the pilot phase to July 2023 provided clear evidence of the impact of the programme, notably the strengths of its iterative adaptable approach meaning that support for families through the programme could be tailored based on the knowledge and experience of school staff and providers. This programme demonstrates the strength of educational establishments as a mechanism for operationalising a "place-based" approach, and effectively engaging with communities.

In strand 1, Poverty Proofing© audits have helped schools to understand the unique barriers for their pupils and families. This process can serve as a catalyst to make a change, like the rural and isolated school who have secured an NTCA grant to prioritise a "cycling curriculum" so that their students - many of whom receive FSMs - can get to school and explore their local environment, promoting improved attendance, wellbeing, and opportunity in the face of transport disadvantage. School leaders have reported that relationships are difficult post-pandemic so many schools have also taken up the opportunity of family learning courses through the programme. These "light-touch" courses bring together pupils, parents, and their peers in school around fun and positive activities – developing parent-child, parent-school and peer-peer relationships as well as skills.

A recent report from the North East Child Poverty Commission "No time to wait: An ambitious blueprint for tackling child poverty in the North East" – references the NTCA programme and recommends expansion of such approaches across the region.

"I really appreciate the help and can see the difference it makes having input from someone who knows what type of questions to ask."

– Parent, Newcastle

"Having a third party available to talk to all the children in school, staff, governors and parents was invaluable. **It was useful to identify areas where we as a school could work to improve our children's experiences in school.**"

– Headteacher

"We love how relaxed the atmosphere is. I like the parents' hour before the children join us and **we enjoyed doing lots of the crafts** over the Christmas holidays after the sessions."

– Parent

"Poverty is all-consuming and unless there is someone [to help] there in front of you, at the right time, in the right place, there just isn't the space to pursue it."

– Executive lead of local children's community centre

5

Blackpool's approach to improving life chances for young people

The educational landscape in Blackpool reflects the fact that 30.7% of children reside in income-deprived families, a figure considerably higher than the national average of 17.1%. In 2016, GCSE results in Blackpool's schools were among the lowest in England. Furthermore, 51.1% of students in Blackpool achieved grades 9 to 4 in English and math GCSE in 2021/22 compared to 68.8% nationally. Blackpool has acknowledged the challenges as a city and is responding by through several projects and initiatives incorporated within a "Making Blackpool Better" vision. These projects include:

HeadStart

Blackpool secured funding from The National Lottery Fund's HeadStart programme between 2016-2022. The project focused on multiple stakeholders working alongside schools to promote more inclusive learning environments. This included supporting all 44 Blackpool schools to have resilient therapy, supporting young people transitioning from primary into secondary school through a resilience coach on an individual or group basis. The project also ensured that young people with emotional and communication needs within Blackpool's Pupil Referral Unit and at primary school were supported by a combination of resilient therapy, informed equine care, and art therapy.

Right2Succeed

Right2Succeed and Educational Diversity introduced 'Blackpool Pathways for All' in 2020. Blackpool Pathways for All builds on the success of the Blackpool Literacy Project in 2019 which saw a 27% increase in pupils with the highest reading ability. The programme provides advice and support for young people identified as being at risk of NEET, and tries to ensure that every young person leaves school with the skills and support needed to engage with post-16 education, employment or training. The programme has seen year on year improvements, with 65% of young people leaving Blackpool's Pupil Referral Unit supported into Education, Employment or Training by March 2022, compared to 60% in the previous year.

The Platform

In 2022, Blackpool Council set up a youth employment hub called The Platform. The aim of this service is to provide people aged 16 to 24 years with free one-to-one support to help them find a job, access training, or enter further education. The platform provides support with writing CVs and cover letters, improving maths and English proficiency, and access to job specific training. In December 2023, the service celebrated supporting 1000 young people.

65% of young people leaving Blackpool's Pupil Referral Unit were supported into Education, Employment or Training by March 2022, compared to 60% in the previous year.

6

Raising primary school attainment in schools within disadvantaged areas

Primary schools in the North East region of England have one of the highest proportion of students with long term disadvantage [43]. This is linked to a lower average attainment at each Key Stage, and therefore represents a serious poverty attainment gap. Schools North East, a charity with universal membership of schools across the North East region, reported that many teachers in schools would appreciate advice from education specialists to help identify and implement high quality, evidenced-based interventions that show promise of raising attainment overall, and especially for disadvantaged pupils. They also reported that teachers are confused about the strength of evidence for, and the impact of, any activity. Therefore, schools might unwittingly and in good faith choose inappropriate interventions that will not suit their pupil's needs.

In order to address these issues as part of a community effort, the Vice-Chancellor of Durham University is sponsoring a scheme to provide local schools around Durham with evidence-based programmes that have been robustly tested to show promise with disadvantaged pupils. The primary aim of the School Membership Scheme is to raise the attainment of disadvantaged children in the North East and so close the attainment gap. Staff from the Evidence Centre for Education (DECE) will help teaching staff in local primary schools to identify, implement and assess interventions for raising attainment. Schools will be offered a menu from a toolkit of most promising approaches (or "best bets") that have been robustly tested. The interventions or programmes are identified by staff at DECE and based on their own evaluations, extensive structured reviews of evidence, and work done by/with the Campbell Collaboration, Education Endowment Foundation, and the US Institute of Education Science. Schools will select programmes that most need the requirements and contexts of their school and pupils.

The interventions will cover early years to Year 6, literacy, numeracy, science, more general cognitive development, and some wider outcomes (e.g., self-esteem). The interventions include whole class approaches as well as activities for individuals/small groups. Examples include the Nuffield Early Literacy Foundation, Abracadabra, Response to Intervention. DECE staff will hold workshops with schools, explaining the rationale for the choices, and helping schools match their, and individual pupil, needs with robustly evidenced programmes. There will be a related website with resources, and DECE staff will operate an advice "hotline" during the year.

Schools are identified with the assistance of Schools North East, Durham County Council and the Durham University Access and Engagement Group. Schools have prioritised two year groups (Year 4 and Year 5) and two interventions for a pilot phase. Pupils in each year group will be allocated to a randomised group (half receiving the intervention now and half later in a waiting-list design) so the approach can be robustly evaluated.

In addition, Year 5 pupils will receive small group English tuition by volunteer undergraduates from the University of Durham. Tutors will work with three students each for one hour weekly over eight weeks. Tutors receive training on pedagogical techniques, strategies to build rapport with pupils, and use of appropriate resources. Year 4 pupils will be offered a free online learning programme known as Learning by Questions (LbQ).

7

Tackling poverty and disadvantage through a Multi-Academy Trust

TVEd is a multi-academy Trust (MAT) situated in the Tees Valley. The MAT provides a mixture of primary, secondary and special education provision. TVEd have social justice and equity as one of four core specialisms which form part of a MAT wide response to tackling educational disadvantage and the hyperlocal effects of poverty.

TVEd has a proven-track record of securing positive outcomes for pupils, particularly for students from low-income families. This includes achieving good attendance outcomes for vulnerable students and those from disadvantaged backgrounds. TVEd have implemented a range of approaches to better understanding and tackling poverty-related barriers to learning.

Prominent examples include:

- Developing a social justice and equity in education charter. This supports leaders and teachers to form a shared definition and language of poverty across the MAT.

- Ensuring that leaders take a broader view of disadvantage than that suggested by the pupil premium policy and eligibility for free school meals (FSM).

- Appointing system-leaders with a specific responsibility for researching hyperlocal poverty and supporting the schools to develop strategies to improve outcomes for children from families who do not have enough money for the things they need.

- Designing and delivering a poverty-informed teacher educator programme, supporting teachers to understand trauma-informed approaches to classroom practice and understanding the impact of poverty on child development.

- Contributing regularly to national and regional research into poverty-informed practice. This includes supporting leaders to pursue MA and PhD levels of study into educational disadvantage rather than relying on orthodox teacher and leadership programmes of study.

- Working in partnership with the Chartered College of Teaching (CCoT) to design resources for producing an inclusive curriculum in schools that consider the impact of poverty on learning. This has included teachers gaining accredited status with the CCoT to further engage with research and thinking related to educational disadvantage.

- Working in partnership with 'Children North East' and Poverty Proofing the School Day to ensure schools better understand local need and the impact of poverty on pupils.
- Securing funding and partnership with the charity SHINE to

pilot a region-wide research project to support teachers in developing poverty-informed curriculum design. This is being used to support teachers in using curriculum to tackle poverty-related barriers to learning. The project is being implemented in partnership with Evidence Based Education and the Chartered College of Teaching. It featured in a recent report by the Centre for Social Justice (Suspending Reality, January 2024)

- Developing a range of traded-support for schools, MATs, and other settings to help influence sector-wide thinking and best-practice on forming place-based solutions to educational disadvantage.

- Establishing a Virtual Learning Community (VLC) in which all staff can access research, thinking and training resources linked to tackling poverty-related barriers to learning. This includes a weekly research roundup of best practice and research that is sent externally to over 8,000 organisations across the UK and internationally to help disseminate best practice and current thinking with regards to tackling educational disadvantage at scale.

- Designing a business, industry and enterprise curriculum to help provide pupils and families with meaningful encounters with local businesses and industry. This helps to inform hyperlocal communities about pathways to employment and enterprise.

- TVEd have formed deliberate partnerships with a range of national organisations to help influence sector-wide thinking and develop further expertise on tackling educational disadvantage. Examples include the Fair Education Alliance, Big Education, Rethinking Leadership, Forum Strategy and the Education Endowment Foundation.

As a Trust, we recognise that our **communities have faced unprecedented challenges** in recent years and many of the communities that we work alongside continue to face the most serious cost-of-living crisis that they have faced in decades.

As school leaders, teachers and support staff we need to continuously think about how to better understand our communities and the poverty-related barriers to learning that impact the children that we serve. This cannot simply be about addressing the symptoms of hardship, **we need to tackle the root causes.**

8

The OnTrak Community Initiative

"It's safer than school"

— OnTrak student

The OnTrak Community Initiative is a children's charity founded in 2012, with a mission to improve the quality of life for children and young people in Bradford. OnTrak collaborates closely with schools, local authorities, and over 100 other organisations to support students who may not thrive in mainstream education, including those with SEND and other additional education needs. The organisation offers alternative education provision for students referred by the local authority or schools, who have struggled to reach their potential in school-based environments. OnTrak provides these young people with life skills and bike repair training tailored to individual needs. Their curriculum includes 1-2-1 tuition in English and maths using dyslexia-friendly equipment, small group work in mechanics, PSHE workshops, and other work-related qualifications (e.g., health and safety diploma). OnTrak values collaborative team working, and encourages CYP to 'have a go', with the reassurance that mistakes are part of the process. This safe and accepting environment at OnTrak has had wide-scale positive impacts on CYP, as good behaviour at school (on the days CYP are not attending OnTrak) is a requirement. Whereas some of these CYP have attendance rates as low as 10% in main-stream education, OnTrak has a 98% attendance rate.

Unfortunately, many CYP attending OnTrak do not have access to adequate nutrition. On-Trak therefore provides free breakfast, snacks, and drinks and offers a daily £3 lunch. However, the cost-of-living crisis has put growing pressure on OnTrak's resources, with OnTrak's outgoing food costs increasing by over 370% since before the pandemic. Providing food is an essential part of ensuring CYP can engage with their work effectively, and it is important to acknowledge the pressure which these growing costs have on community initiatives such as OnTrak.

"My lot **can do anything** just like anybody else"

— Adrian, Operations Manager, OnTrak

OnTrak recognises that there are several different reasons that alternative provision (AP) might be advantageous for students. These reasons include the fact that AP:

- Recognises that students have different strengths and weaknesses, and that mainstream education is not suitable for some. The emphasis on vocational education that some alternative provision offers may be more attractive and suitable to some students.

- Provides a desirable alternative to permanent exclusion, for those students who have had one or more fixed term exclusions and are at risk of permanent exclusion, and to encourage their continued inclusion in education.

- Offers a different setting with a broader choice of subjects for students which may encourage attendance. In turn, this leads to a greater likelihood of achieving GCSEs, and a greater opportunity for a student to progress to a suitable post-16 pathway and eventual career.

The OnTrak curriculum aims to deliver engaging and challenging learning experiences, promoting confidence, responsibility, and real-world skills. Students receive personalised support, such as career progression workshops, and have access to a range of educational opportunities, including vocational and first aid training, and exam preparation up to GCSE level. OnTrak also serves as an external exam venue, reducing anxiety and ensuring the best outcomes for students. As a result of this success, approximately 90% of CYP who attend OnTrak go onto future employment. Community initiatives such as OnTrak have drastically reduced the pressure on community youth services.

The organisation collaborates with primary and secondary schools, colleges, youth clubs, West Yorkshire Police, and voluntary organisations. It offers a range of activities including bicycle construction, go-kart maintenance, woodwork, mechanical skills, and environmental initiatives (e.g., fruit tree planting), and provides motor vehicle training to young people aged 13 to 19 years (including those who are NEET).

OnTrak runs a bicycle project in local schools, where it promotes road safety and bike maintenance. The organisation focuses on early intervention and diversionary workshops in partnership with West Yorkshire Police, addressing issues like gun and knife crime, organised crime, and substance use. OnTrak conducts bike giveaways, provides fixed bikes to frontline organisations, and thereby assists those in need.

They also distribute clothes, beds, furniture, laptops, prams, and other domestic items to community organisations for individuals in need.

OnTrak now utilises the racetrack at Wetherby Tockwith Motor Sports to operate as a social enterprise. It serves as a venue for young people to practise their driving skills as part of the education programme and generates income through public booking. The organisation also operates a small bike shop, from which the public can purchase bikes for a heavily reduced fee, and a garage offering car servicing, repairs, and MOT testing. To expand and develop the work at On-Trak, more space is needed to facilitate the support of more CYP. As a self-funded social enterprise, OnTrak requires a site to build a garage and community centre, prioritising its long-term sustainability to ensure that the changing needs of the community can be effectively met. The interest in OnTrak is growing at an exponential rate, and their expansion has the potential to benefit additional community groups and other organisations. OnTrak has been successfully supporting the community for over 13 years, and with support

from local government, OnTrak's endeavour to upscale will enable many more vulnerable CYP to be supported in their community.

Overall, OnTrak's holistic approach to education and community engagement demonstrates a commitment to empowering young people and promoting positive outcomes through practical skills development and tailored support. OnTrak provides a powerful model that could and should be properly supported by government and offered as a model to disadvantaged communities throughout the UK.

> ## "Everything is about **making them employable**"
> — Adrian, Operations Manager, OnTrak

> ## "We're not just saying it, **we're doing it**"
> — Adrian, Operations Manager, OnTrak

Paiton joined a six-week programme at OnTrak in September 2023 after having been suspended from her mainstream school. Paiton has since continued to work with the OnTrak initiative and has been attending for the past six months (for five days a week over the past two months).

Paiton's involvement began with repairing and restoring broken bicycles which had been donated by organisations and the local community. Paiton has excelled in this work and has since taken a lead voluntary role in facilitating OnTrak's weekly evening club. During these sessions, Paiton teaches others how to repair the bicycles and co-ordinates with members of West Yorkshire Police to ensure that the children who are most in need are well supported.

Paiton's favourite part of OnTrak is go-karting, an activity which takes place every other Friday. Paiton strips and paints the go-karts and has demonstrated her expertise by building and repairing the axels of the go-karts, a skill which she regularly teaches to her peers. Not only does Paiton build, repair, and ride these go-karts, she also marshals the pit lanes and clears away tires when attending the racetrack.

Paiton gains a wide range of skills from OnTrak, as she also prepares and serves the lunches provided during the day and is responsible for maintaining a clean and hygienic working environment in accordance with health and safety guidelines. Paiton finds it easier to engage with Maths and English at OnTrack, during her 1-1 teaching, and has since completed mock examinations for her GCSE's, with her reporting that she "smashed them".

Paiton reports feeling safer at OnTrak than in school, as there is a stronger ethos of acceptance and she is encouraged to "try again and have another go". This approach makes Paiton feel more comfortable, and she reports feeling more able to talk to people. Paiton is now wanting to pursue a career in mechanics and would like to continue working with OnTrak in the future.

End word

Sophie
Balmer

I am sharing my experience as a young person from the North of England who has lived in poverty because I want every child to have a good education. I urge the next government to put a greater emphasis on the health and wellbeing of children in the UK. I am grateful to my school for helping me get to university and I am delighted that this report is promoting evidence-based principles that show how schools and nurseries can improve life chances for the next generation of children and young people.

I am 20-years-old and grew up on an estate called Walker, one of the poorest areas in Newcastle and a place known for all the worst reasons, even appearing in case studies of poverty within textbooks. I grew up in a single-parent household with my older brother and two little sisters. I am a part of the statistics highlighted in this report - I have lived the harsh realities of growing up with a family that is struggling.

Every individual, despite background or profession, can recognise the groggy, slumped, irritable feeling you get when dinner is late or when you've had to skip breakfast. Imagine that feeling all day, most days of the week while you sit in a classroom and are expected to work hard, make friends, pay attention, copy the board, remember your homework, attend extracurricular activities, and plan for your future, while all the time this horrible physical feeling takes over.

Life while you're hungry feels impossible. The physical feeling combined with the constant anxiety of whether you're going to see your Mam eat a meal this week is suffocating.

The physical impact of poverty is so important to discuss. We cannot skip over the obvious facts of how detrimental a diet lacking nutrients and quality substances can be on a child's health. The fatigue, the weakened immune system, and the never-ending, scary list of potential long-term impacts. I remember so vividly the times in school where I was eating less and the impact that had on me. There were two versions of Sophie: the nourished, excited, and passionate Sophie with aspirations to change the world, and then there was fatigued, uninterested, drained Sophie. A young person who feels like they do not deserve a hot meal or school

shoes without holes in them, or a bedroom without mould up the walls. In what world would this person feel worthy enough to have these aspirations to aim for goals like university? And I can say from experience this is not a feeling that leaves you.

This feeling of "not deserving" does not disappear when you get that pass in your GCSEs, or when you've left the family home to get a job or go to university. It's a feeling that stays with you, festering, while everyone questions why people don't just "work harder" and break these cycles of poverty. It creates adults who may struggle to look after themselves. Tasks involving finances, budgeting and cooking can be extremely difficult for those from these backgrounds. All these factors contribute to future physical and mental health issues.

I think of younger me sitting in lessons, anxious about money and bills and food, at a time I should have been worried about homework or sports day - conventional things a child would be anxious about. I reflect on vivid memories of me and my friends in the school lunch queue with our fingers crossed that our free school meals allowance was enough for a drink as well as a meal. I reflect on my brother and sisters counting packets of crisps out to make sure we had enough for the week as there was no spare money for any more. I reflect on my hard-working Mam who would go days on end without eating. I reflect on younger me always pretending I was full and leaving food on my plate so my Mam would eat something without any guilt.

This all goes a lot deeper than a stomach rumble in a lesson. It is an extremely complex issue.

Poverty cycles trap generations of bright, hard-working individuals who are instead left stigmatised and stereotyped. Those from my background

are separated into two groups: those who are trapped in the cycle and the "lucky ones" who manage to escape. Those who escape are still left with physical and mental burdens as well as an indescribable guilt and pressure for getting "lucky".

I was extremely fortunate that I had amazing teachers who went above and beyond to find accessible entries and opportunities into higher education, while also pushing me to break through the barriers despite how uncomfortable that was. The constant reminder that it was possible for someone like me to go to university, even if I did need that extra support and foundation year, was crucial in my journey. This, combined with my access to local youth services, enabled me to be one of the "lucky" individuals and the first member in my family to go to university. But the memories of sitting in the classroom hungry still haunt me and I suspect will never leave me.

Stereotypes and stigmas perpetuate the existing barriers and embarrassment of poverty. However, poverty isn't defined by one image or description; it comes in so many different forms. The individuals affected are those you walk past in the street, those you sit next to on the bus, and even those you eat around a table with. It is easy to get caught up in different statistics and colourful graphs when discussing poverty. But it is vital we do not lose sight of the bigger picture, which is real people with real stories and experiences, all with equal validity. We cannot give up hope on solutions either, so future generations can thrive.

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and author list

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