Tackling poverty together

Creating compassionate services to support families in poverty at school

Contents

Tackling poverty together

This guide is a collaborative piece of work with sections written by education and poverty specialists from Child Poverty Action Group, the National Education Union Cymru and Children North East, drawing on learning and examples from their existing projects and research. The perspectives and experiences of children, young people and their families are included throughout. The guide also includes contributions from National Education Union (NEU) members across Wales, frontline researchers in schools, practice advisors, communication experts and policy specialists.

1. The UK Cost of the School Day project

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

2. Poverty Proofing© the School Day

'Poverty Proofing© the School Day', a project developed by Children North East following consultation across the North East of England in 2011, places the importance of the voice of children at the centre of decisions made by senior leaders. Poverty Proofing© is a process of speaking to every single child within a school to identify the barriers to engagement and unintentional stigma and discrimination faced by those suffering the effects of poverty. In addition to children, the process includes engaging with staff, governors and parents to truly understand the context in which children are living, and be able to provide meaningful and local recommendations. We recognise at Children North East that poverty impacts different communities differently. To date we have spoken with over 190,000 children and young people across the UK and Children North East are working with partners to ensure this voice has national impact. For more information or to discuss how you can 'Poverty Proof' your school then visit povertyproofing.co.uk or email info@povertyproofing.co.uk

NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

3. The National Education Union Cymru's asks on "Reducing the cost of going to school or college"

The National Education Union Cymru represents the majority of teachers and education professionals in Wales, and is committed to making the education sector a great place to work and learn. Our members know first-hand how poverty limits the life chances of children and significantly affects their educational experience and outcomes in school.

NEU Cymru members called on the Welsh Government to "Reduce the cost of going to school or college" ahead of the Senedd elections in 2021, with the following asks:

> Make sure everyone in school and college has access to the IT equipment and wi-fi they need to learn at home.

> Make sure free school meals are available through the holidays.

> Ensure everyone on Universal Credit has access to Free School Meals.

> Make school uniform affordable.

> Provide support for the extra costs of courses and training.

> Increase the Education Maintenance Allowance to £45 a week.

Every child deserves equitable access to education, but schools cannot 'fix' the problem of child poverty without support and system change.

Creating compassionate services to support families in poverty at school

Introduction

In this guide we set out some small steps schools can take to help make learning more accessible for children and families living in poverty in Wales. This resource isn't the start of a conversation, as we know schools are trying to support pupils every day. For that reason, NEU Cymru members can join with others and share good practice examples of the things that are working well in their school – see NEU Cymru's contact details at the end of the booklet.

In every school in Wales, an increasing number of families are struggling to get by on low incomes. Poverty rates were already very high before the arrival of Covid-19, and the economic impact of the pandemic and subsequent cost-of-living crisis has left many more families short of having everything they need.

88% 88% of NEU Cymru members say the child poverty experienced by their learners has got worse since the start of 2020

Poverty affects every aspect of a child's life. In school, it can lock children out of opportunities to participate, learn and thrive. But schools can also play a key role in reducing the impact of child poverty, ensuring children are protected from the worst effects of the

cost-of-living crisis. We have developed this guide to support teachers and school staff to understand how poverty affects children and young people in Wales, and equip them with tools, recommendations and solutions to deliver compassionate support to families by addressing school costs and poverty-related stigma in the school environment.

This resource is the result of a collaboration between NEU Cymru members, Child Poverty Action Group, and Children North East. It can be used by school leaders and staff in all schools and colleges, no matter where they are in their journey, to tackle poverty, reduce stigma and address costs. We recognise that each school operates in its own individual context, with unique opportunities and challenges. The knowledge, ideas and suggestions contained in this handbook come directly from NEU Cymru members, plus children, families and school staff in the Cost of the School Day network of schools in Wales.

Teachers and school staff can adapt these approaches in a way that works for their school community. Tackling poverty in school is not an easy or straightforward process, but it is crucial to ensuring a just and equitable experience of the school day for all pupils. Involving children and young people in this process is vital and valuable, as they bring much-needed insight of their own experiences and are often best placed to devise inclusive solutions. We hope this resource will help teachers and school staff drive forward the conversation on poverty in the school context and will enable them to recognise and respond to poverty where they can.

Taking a Children's Rights approach to tackling poverty in the classroom

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is a treaty that sets out the basic rights that all children everywhere are entitled to. Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that all children have a right to express their views and have them taken seriously – this includes at school.

Article 12: Every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously.

A children's rights approach to tackling poverty in the classroom

Taking a Children's Rights approach means using a principled and practical framework that places the UNCRC at the core of planning and delivery. It integrates children's rights into every aspect of decision-making, policy and practice.

Taking a Children's Rights approach ensures children and young people:

> Have equal opportunity to meaningfully participate

> Benefit from their involvement

> Feel valued, empowered and heard

> Are able to make a difference

> Improve their education and skills through participation opportunities.

For advice on speaking to learners about poverty and inequality, please see "How to talk about poverty" on page 15.

Why should we use a Children's Rights approach?

Understanding the experience that children growing up in poverty have at school is at the centre of our efforts to ensure that all learners have a positive and fulfilling education – and developing an understanding of rights is embedded in the Curriculum for Wales through the learning descriptions for the Humanities and Health and Wellbeing Areas of Learning and Experience, and Relationships and Sexuality Education.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is enshrined in Welsh law under Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011.[1]

The Children's Commissioner for Wales has produced the Right Way guidance to support organisations with practical ways to prioritise children's rights through their work.[2]

What schools can do

Schools can help to address the impact of child poverty in 4 ways:

1. Taking active steps to prevent poverty-related stigma, treating all children and their families with compassion, dignity and respect.

2. Addressing the root causes of poverty, by helping families maximise their incomes, access all the support they are entitled to, and, if appropriate, supporting parents and carers to work.

3. Reducing the cost of the school day, recognising that every penny and pound matters to some families.

4. Providing relief for families suffering from a lack of resources like food, clothing or other material goods.

We have set out some practical ideas below:

Preparing for Curriculum for Wales

The new Curriculum for Wales has been designed with the ambition that all learners in Wales will be challenged, supported and given opportunities to realise their full potential. Welsh Government guidance states that learning experiences should be inclusive and accessible, and curriculum design and school support should actively seek to address gaps in attainment[1].

As schools have begun to develop their own curricula, many have welcomed the chance to offer more diverse and enriching learning experiences to children and young people, particularly for those learners who may struggle to access this type of learning outside school. However, these activities and experiences can come at additional cost, and when school budgets are not increased to fund the resources needed, schools may feel they have to pass the cost on to families. Fifty-two per cent of NEU Cymru members told us they believe the implementation of the new curriculum will lead to schools asking families for more financial contributions than they do now, with 20 per cent of members saying they are concerned families may be asked to contribute a lot more than they currently do.

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[1] https://hwb.gov.wales/curriculum-for-wales/curriculum-for-wales-implementation-plan

❝❞ *"The curriculum asks schools to give experiences, but many of them cost money that schools don't have to spend."*
(Teacher, primary school, Neath Port Talbot)

❝❞ *"More 'real' experiences will result in higher costs of transport, materials etc."*
(Teacher, secondary school, Caerphilly)

Some NEU members expressed concern that blending more creative subject areas into areas like English, Welsh and geography might create new costs for learning materials that do not currently get passed on to families.

❝❞ *"[There will be] greater requirement for resources e.g. arts and crafts for the creative curriculum, and for other experiences, but no extra funding provided to purchase/cover cost of additional resources needed. Experiences have to be provided but no funding to provide the resources so parents will have to be approached to cover additional costs."*
(Teacher, primary school, Wrexham)

❝❞ *"The cost of fuel alone has pushed up the cost of bus hire to take the children out into the community to gain the experiences expected in the new curriculum."*
(Teacher, primary school, NPT)

❝❞ *"In terms of my personal subject, to be able to afford to run the new curriculum in the proper and most effective way more parental contributions would be necessary."*
(Food Technology teacher, secondary school, Merthyr Tydfil)

❝❞ *"There are a lot of workshops and activities put on for the children which is brilliant and I'm always glad of the new ways to teach and stimulate my child but they can cost anywhere between £5 and £20 which is a lot if it's on a regular basis along with dressing up days etc."*
(Parent/carer, primary school, RCT)

Many schools are already thinking about how to reduce costs when designing their new curriculum. By putting cost considerations at the forefront of planning and design, it is sometimes possible to create economies of scale, particularly when thinking about how to pool resources and learning experiences with other year groups or even other schools

❝❞ *"I'm mindful of the new curriculum, making local links and trying to promote trips in the local area, learning about the local area. So I will try to do something in walking distance. If we all do the same topic across the school, I don't know how feasible it is, but say we do changes to the body and visit somewhere to help us understand that better. Year 1 and 2 are doing the same thing, so maybe we could do a joint trip and split the transport costs."*
(Teacher, primary school, Rhondda Cynon Taf)

For some schools, committing central budgets to ensure that classrooms are well stocked allows teaching staff to plan for the broadest range of learning opportunities without worrying about asking families for donations, or paying for things out of their own pockets.

“ **”**

"We've got stationery and resources here. They don't have to buy anything. Even down to school trips, we would never leave a child behind because a parent couldn't pay. We'd use our funds to pay for them"

(Teaching Assistant, primary school, Neath Port Talbot)

“ **”**

"In terms of resources I always try to keep everything within class or it's going to be recycled materials, I'm always thinking what will they have in the house? Not all pupils will be able to go to Poundland and buy simple things like glue, pens, pencils they don't have. We do have [a behaviour reward points system] where they can buy pens and pencils, but it's a vicious circle - if they've got things going on at home, they might act up at school so the teacher won't give them [behaviour reward] points, so they can't get the resources they need. There's kids who come in with no pencil, we're meant to give a negative if they don't bring a pen or pencil, but I don't do that."

(Art teacher, secondary school, Neath Port Talbot)

With rising fuel prices, providing transport is one of the biggest concerns NEU Cymru members shared with us. Some schools are capitalising on the online learning systems they developed during lockdown to bring in external guests online. In one school, children plan and carry out interviews with visitors via video link.

“ **”**

"Buses are expensive when we are able to travel. We have embraced online live interviews as part of our learning which costs nothing but people's time."

(Staff member, primary school, Neath Port Talbot)

Creating space for compassionate conversations

NEU Cymru members tell us that being able to build and maintain strong relationships with children and their families is the cornerstone of addressing poverty in their settings. Children tell us that when they feel school staff understand them and care about their overall wellbeing, they enjoy school more and feel able to do their best. Parents and carers tell us they really value it when schools talk to them with compassion and make efforts to treat requests for support with discretion.

“ **”**

"I pride myself on my ability to build rapport and relationships with people… I want the parents to know I'm not just here to teach their children, our first job is to make sure they're safe, happy and glad to be in school"

(Teacher, primary school, Rhondda Cynon Taf)

Talking about poverty isn't always easy. This section contains practical advice for talking about poverty with learners, with parents and carers, and with colleagues or your wider networks.

Talking about poverty with learners.

Why is it important to talk to learners about poverty?

> It helps you to understand children and young people's experiences of poverty.

> It helps raise the issue with other learners who may not have experienced it or know what it is. In turn, this can help to reduce stigma and negative attitudes.

> ❝❞

"[Schools should] talk about things such as poverty within the curriculum to build empathy amongst students."
(parent/carer, primary school,
Rhondda Cynon Taf

Key things to keep in mind when talking to learners about poverty:

> Create a safe space to talk. Ensure leaners have opportunities to approach you and talk about poverty privately.

> If talking about poverty in the classroom or with groups, be mindful not to expose learners who do not want to be identified as living in poverty. Make learners aware at the start of the conversation that you do not want any names.

> Avoid having these conversations at the end of the day. That way, learners can come back to you later in the day if they have concerns.

> Use clear and straightforward language. Try to have the conversations in bite sizes.

> Using art, drama and play can help learners express their feelings and personal experiences without feeling stigmatised or singled out by classmates.

> With younger children, you can start the conversation using a story, a character or a puppet.

> Address learners' feelings. Learning about poverty can make people feel sad and emotional. Let them know it is natural to feel this way. Try to end on a positive note (e.g. 'we're finding ways to help').

> Remodel any negative language people might use by rephrasing what they say. For example, if someone says "some people are in poverty because they don't know how to budget properly," you could say "people living on low incomes have to carefully manage every penny they spend – and

budgeting alone won't help if you simply don't have enough money to cover all your bills."

> Provide learners with different perspectives. Children often repeat everything they hear at home, including misconceptions about people in poverty. It can be a difficult topic to discuss, but it's important to recognise that we live in a world of great inequality, while still keeping the focus on hope.

> Talk about poverty in a UK and local context. Local statistics can be found on the End Child Poverty website (endchildpoverty.org.uk/).

■ **Conversation example: Rhys's story**

The fictional story below, about a boy called Rhys who lives in a one-parent family on a low income, can be used to broach the topic of poverty with children and young people. You can adapt the tone of the story and Rhys's age depending on the group. This exercise has been tried and tested in schools across the UK and has proven to be a helpful way to explore poverty in a non-stigmatising way with learners.

'Rhys is ten years old. He has just moved to this area with his mum and little sister Angharad, who is three. Rhys is about to start at your school. He's a bit nervous because he doesn't know what to expect. He wants to fit in and be happy. He hopes he makes friends and that the teachers are nice. He hopes he'll be able to do the work and that there's a computing club there like there was at his old school.

'Rhys gets on pretty well with his family – well, Angharad is a bit of a pain sometimes, but he likes her really. His mum used to work part-time in Tesco near where they used to live but since they moved here she's finding it difficult to find another job which will fit in with Angharad's nursery hours. This means that there isn't a lot of money at home and sometimes Rhys knows that his mum is a bit stressed about paying bills and things like that. She quite often tells Rhys that they can't afford

the things he wants, like new computer games and a phone.'

Discussion questions can be used to understand how Rhys, or any learner from a low-income family, would experience the school day. You could ask:

> What would Rhys need to pay for in your school?

> What sorts of things cost a lot? Is there anything you think Rhys would find it difficult to afford?

> Would Rhys ever feel different or left out because of not having much money? What would be a big deal for him? How would he feel and what would he do?

> What support do you know about at your school that you could direct Rhys to? How might you make sure Rhys feels welcome at your school?

Conversation example: Explaining poverty and remodelling negative language

Teacher: Poverty is when someone doesn't have enough money to do the same things as their friends. For example, a child might be poor if their parents don't have enough money to heat the house, to buy a computer to do homework, or to pay for school trips. Sadly, it is a common issue in our country.

Learner: Sometimes it's because their parents are lazy and don't have a job.

Teacher: Sadly, many people in our country live in poverty even if they do have a job, because they still don't earn enough money. Sometimes people aren't able to work, for example if they have to care for someone.

Learner: But there aren't any poor people in our school, right?

Teacher: I know it's sad to think about, but with costs rising faster than people's incomes, many families in our community can struggle to pay all their bills and afford all the things that

cost money. That's why we're trying really hard to help all families, for example by making sure that school events don't cost a lot of money.

What should I watch out for?

Even when you are not explicitly talking about poverty, it is important to make sure that you don't use language that inadvertently excludes children in poverty. Some class discussions may highlight financial inequalities between learners. For example, asking 'What did you do over the holidays?' can be distressing for learners whose families may have struggled to afford food, heating or outings. Instead, you could ask 'Who did you spend time with?'

Talking to parents and carers about poverty, costs and money

Attending school comes with a lot of costs, and many families find it hard to afford everything their children need for school, even if they qualify for grants to help cover part of the cost. We also know that a lot of families miss out on claiming the help they are entitled to because they don't know it is available them – for example, there's a common misconception that children cannot get FSM or Pupil Development Grant if their parents or carers do any form of paid work. The steps below allow you to create a school culture which maximises the chances that everyone gets the help they need, without embarrassment or additional barriers.

1. Be poverty aware

Even small costs can be really significant for families getting by on low incomes, which is why poverty awareness and understanding are so important. Awareness that every penny and pound counts to some families ensures that staff are mindful of costs across the school day and take affordability into account when planning learning and events. Understanding the challenges facing families on lower

incomes supports greater empathy and engagement and ultimately, a better response.

It is important that everyone recognises that people in poverty are not a static group in the population. Different families move in and out of poverty all the time. It just takes an unfortunate life event – like an unexpected illness, losing a job, or anything else that triggers a rise in costs or drop in income – and a family that was previously managing can be pulled below the poverty line.

It is also important to understand that poverty is very stigmatised, and many families will not want others to know they are experiencing hard times. Some families may also have had negative experiences when they have reached out for help in the past. Understanding why it is hard for many parents and carers to let the school know they are having money worries is the first step towards creating a trusting environment that allows families to approach you for support.

2. Leadership and visibility

Strong and visible leadership on equity and on tackling the cost of the school day is crucial. Parents say that it makes a real difference when they know everyone at school is on the same page about why this is important for lower income families, and for the school community as a whole.

Parents and carers appreciate:

> An open and proactive approach that's led from the top of the school: Families won't automatically be queuing up to disclose their financial circumstances to their schools, but a proactive approach will signal that these conversations are possible and welcomed.

> A simple and matter of fact style in communication to parents and carers, which acknowledges that any family could fall into financial hardship at any time.

> This needs to be matched with discretion, confidentiality, kindness and non-judgement when families do come forward. It's important to understand how difficult families might find discussions about costs and money.

When schools visibly demonstrate how they are tackling costs and are talking openly about them, it can help to overcome feelings of shame and encourage families to raise cost concerns.

3. Make no assumptions and let everyone know

Don't assume families are ok financially. Instead, show everyone that you are aware of hidden poverty and explain the support that's out there, so nobody gets missed.

"

"It's really hard to identify [those families who are struggling], I've thought about it long and hard; how do you when people aren't going to put their hands up and say? It's about thinking about who needs it, little signs in the kids. Our kids have really strong relationships with the teachers, some have said that perhaps they're hungry. I think it's great that they have the relationship where they can say that. But it's so hard, other than looking at uniform coming in or little signs, it's so hard. You've got your starting points, so those children on certain registers or have free school meals but recently, Christmas time we worked with a few agencies [to issue hampers and presents] and we had to sit and think, where do I start to think who needs it. When you think of the working poor, some families, you can't just blanket say those children [who don't qualify for FSM] are OK."

(School Clerk, primary school, Neath Port Talbot)

It's really easy to make assumptions about family incomes. But you can't tell who is in poverty just by looking at them. Maybe your school is in a well-off area and there are few families living in areas of high deprivation. Perhaps there aren't many children and young people entitled to free school meals in your school. Maybe people don't complain about costs – or you haven't heard them complaining, and people generally seem to manage them. Parents tell us that it doesn't matter where their children's schools are, or how affluent the community appears, it doesn't mean there aren't families who are really struggling within these schools.

❝❞

"My school is not in a socially deprived area so there is no extra funding, but we have children on roll whose families are struggling to make ends meet despite working all hours."

(Teacher, primary school, Wrexham)

Parents and carers say that:

> Schools should share financial information with all families, not just those who they think might need it.

> Universal promotion means parents don't have to ask for help or signposting. Communicating universally helps to ensure information reaches the right people – even if you don't always know who that is.

> Visible and open communication opens the door to conversations and encourages any parents to come forward if they need to.

❝❞

"It would be brilliant to have signposting, as there's also a stigma attached to asking for help. Lots of people are apprehensive and putting things like that in the newsletter would break down those barriers, help people feel that there wasn't anything wrong in getting support and that they weren't the only ones who needed help."

(Parent/carer, Rhondda Cynon Taf)

4. Tackling the Cost of the School Day

When schools aren't mindful of financial pressures, parents on lower incomes can feel frustrated and unseen, or that schools don't appreciate how challenging life can be for them. They may have to cut corners on other essentials to meet school-related costs. But it doesn't have to be like this.

Cost of the School Day is all about understanding financial barriers, reducing costs and boosting incomes. By visibly taking action on the cost of your school day, children and young people are more likely to feel included and to be able to take part in everything the school day offers. It also means fewer financial worries for their parents.

❝❞

"Because of Covid we had to buy quite a lot of things to get ready for school, but in this school you don't need to spend a lot of money."

(KS2 Learner, Rhondda Cynon Taf)

You can download all the Cost of the School Day guides and toolkits from the CPAG website cpag.org.uk/cosd

5. Making space for conversations

Poverty aware approaches which reduce costs and maximise incomes make it less likely that parents will have to contact you and ask for help with unaffordable costs. But, when parents do need to get in touch, knowing what support is available, knowing who to contact and feeling confident of an understanding response are all things that help. When conversations about costs and money happen, parents say that the following points are important to bear in mind: Remember how difficult this can be for families.

> "Every time we are notified of a trip/money event they always end the message with 'if you need help or support, please get in touch', which is so caring. The staff are all so approachable so if I was to be in a position where I needed to ask for help, I know I will be in good hands"
>
> (Parent/carer, Neath Port Talbot)

Being understanding, having an approachable nature and 'making it easy' helps to remove embarrassment and makes parents feel able to talk. It's important to make clear to parents that they will be met with an understanding response - no matter how good you know your response will be, parents don't know until you tell them and may still fear judgement or negative impact on their children.

> "It's hard for parents to ask for help with money as they feel they will be judged."
>
> (Parent/carer, primary school, Rhondda Cynon Taf)

When it comes to general information about financial support, universal, open and visible approaches are key to ensuring that nobody misses out. However, when it comes to having conversations about costs and money, parents tell us they like to know that

these conversations will be discreet and in confidence. Parents appreciate having these conversations on a one-to-one basis and in private. It's helpful to offer different ways for these conversations to take place – for example, face to face, phone, online or by email.

> "I think we are known by the parents as 'discretion on legs'. They know they can come to us and it wouldn't go any further. It's like a big family here."
>
> (School Clerk, primary school, Rhondda Cynon Taf)

Parents told us that it is useful to know who they will be speaking with. The named person to contact with cost concerns or questions about financial support may vary from school to school – Family Engagement Officers, Cost of the School Day leads, someone in the school leadership, or maybe the headteacher. What is important is that families are aware of their name, how they can help, how to contact them and the type of response they are likely to get. All of this increases parents' confidence in talking about costs and money.

> "I put a message out if anyone was in need of a helping hand we'd had these donations in, and I put my email address on the post so they can privately message then without there being a fuss; do you know within about 30 seconds we had emails coming in, lovely, there's no embarrassment there. When I ring them or see them now, there is absolutely no embarrassment, if you need it, that's something we can do [to help], use the facility that we've got."
>
> (School Clerk, primary school, Neath Port Talbot)

You may also encounter discriminatory or negative views towards poverty being expressed by parents or carers. We have included a conversation example showing how you might address some of these views.

Conversation example: Dealing with negative views towards poverty from parents

Parent: Not putting on the school trip to France this year isn't fair. Just because some people have spent all their money on flat-screen TVs instead of saving up.

Teacher: It's easy to generalise, but the sad reality is that many families in our community don't have enough money to participate in society in the same way as everyone else. Unfortunately, it often isn't about saving up. People can find themselves locked in poverty due to factors that are outside of their control, such as low-paid and insecure work, unaffordable housing costs, and a rising cost of living.

Parent: But why should my child miss out?

Teacher: Learners can get much more out of school activities if all their peers are included. Equity is a really important part of our school mission. We want all children and young people in this school to have a full and enriching experience. That is why we are coming up with alternatives that are inclusive of all learners, from all backgrounds.

Talking about poverty with colleagues and your wider networks

Speaking about poverty can be challenging, especially when well-meaning people offer unhelpful views and misconceptions. For example, many people see poverty as a thing of the past; believe people in poverty need to work more or harder; or hold the fatalistic view that things will never change.

We might think that sharing statistics about poverty or heart-breaking stories will work to challenge people's beliefs, but it often isn't enough: it's important to show the bigger picture if we want others to really understand poverty.

Below, we've included some recommendations for talking about poverty in a way that ensures you're heard and understood (adapted from JRF's research, How to build lasting support to solve UK poverty and Equally Ours' Talking About Equality guide).

> Show why poverty matters, by appealing to shared values of justice and compassion.

Example: As a society, we believe in justice and compassion. But, right now, millions of people in our country are living in poverty. We share a moral responsibility to make sure that everyone in our country has a decent standard of living and the same chances in life, no matter who they are or where they come from.

> Address poverty directly and present it as a pressing problem. Avoid starting with benefits or the welfare system, as these must be part of the solution, not the problem.

■ **Example:** Poverty in the UK is increasing. More and more people are struggling to get by. We need to put this right so that everyone can have a decent life.

> Steer clear of overly politicised language.

> Use metaphors to explain how the economy locks people in poverty. Words like 'locks', 'restricts' and 'restrains' help create a mental picture and help people understand poverty better. It is also helpful to use phrases that illustrate how poverty reduces choices and makes it hard for people to change their situations. For example, talking about 'being pulled under by poverty' or 'powerful currents' that are working against families, such as low wages.

■ **Example:** Poverty restricts the choices people can make, leaving them in impossible situations like choosing either to heat their home or pay their rent. With rising living costs and unstable work, our economy is holding people down and locking them in a daily struggle to make ends meet.

> When talking about solutions (in the wider sense), you can present benefits as helping to loosen poverty's grip, and explain that the economy we have was designed, and so can also be 'redesigned'.

■ **Example:** The economy we have today was designed – it is the result of a set of decisions that were made about our society's priorities and resources. Just as it was designed, we can redesign it so that it works for everyone.

> Use stories and statistics to complement these recommendations: link them to values of justice and compassion, and to the way the economy restrains people.

■ **Example:** Marcus Rashford wrote an open letter to MPs in England in June 2020 to urge them to extend the Free School Meal provision to the summer holidays (his call was successful). He linked his own story, as well as stories and statistics that were shared with him, to the wider structure and systems

restricting people's choices and locking them in poverty. Excerpt:

"

"My story to get here is all-too-familiar for families in England: my mum worked full-time, earning minimum wage to make sure we always had a good evening meal on the table. But it was not enough. The system was not built for families like mine to succeed, regardless of how hard my mum worked."

> Talk about a better world. Remind the person you're speaking to of the better world you're striving for and be clear that it is achievable.

■ **Example:** If we work together as a school community, we can create an environment that is truly inclusive of all learners and allows all children to fully participate in school. Other schools have made a lot of progress in that respect, and we can too.

Reducing stigma in your poverty relief services

It is increasingly common for schools in Wales to provide a range of poverty relief services, especially since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. Welsh Government funds initiatives like the provision of free period products in all schools and provides funding for some schools to get involved in community pantry schemes like Big Bocs Bwyd.

Fifty-nine per cent of NEU Cymru members we surveyed said their school provided at least one type of additional poverty relief service to families in their community. The most common types of service were:

> a clothing bank/free uniform shop (40 per cent)

> a low-cost food club or pantry (15 per cent)

> a free food bank (12.5 per cent)

> lending clothes for prom (12.5 per cent), and

> laundering clothes on school premises (12.5 per cent).

In a minority of schools, members also said their school offered support with income maximisation/welfare rights advice (7.5 per cent). Other less common services included lending money to families in financial difficulty, providing clothes for work experience and issuing fuel vouchers.

Children and families tell us that they value being able to access support from schools when times are tough, but many are embarrassed or ashamed of asking for help or feel reluctant to make use of schemes in case other people are made aware of their financial circumstances.

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"I think some parents, if they're not used to living in poverty, if their situation has changed suddenly, they may be like 'I don't want to look like I can't cope'. So things like accessing the food bank, we do things discreetly, they can just pop in confidentially."
(School Wellbeing Officer, all-through school, Neath Port Talbot)

When schools make an effort to maintain people's dignity, through discretion and confidentiality, there is less risk that people will self-exclude from the help that's available. While it can be tempting to incorporate access to school food banks and pantries with a requirement to take part in other initiatives like parenting classes or budgeting lessons, families tell us that this can make them feel embarrassed and ashamed, and even put them off accessing the support they and their children really need. Consider whether you are able to design systems for accessing your poverty relief services that prioritise confidentiality for the children and families accessing them.

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"A lot of help is carried out discretely without being made public, to ensure that there is no embarrassment to the pupil."
(Teacher, secondary school, Ceredigion)

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"There's a cupboard in the corner and I pass [donated school uniform] on. I know it's a bit under the counter, but parents don't want to go to a table out in the yard where other parents can see them. With the outside agencies linking in, I'm quite aware of the families [that might need help]."
(Family Liaison Officer, Neath Port Talbot)

Schools tell us that take-up of services is often better if they prioritise making the donated items less like charity. This could involve offering food or other goods available to the whole school community on an anonymous 'pay as you feel' basis. Whether putting money in a donation tin or making an anonymous donation online, everyone is free to contribute what they can, and faces less shame if they are not in a position to pay.

Some schools also choose to highlight the environmental benefits of choosing pre-loved clothes and reducing food waste, taking the focus away from poverty and normalising the re-distribution of resources within the whole school community.

Some schools have also seen a significant increase in take-up of their recycled uniform when they took steps to clean and prepare the donated clothing before offering it to new owners.

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"With the uniform recycling service, we make sure that all donations are laundered, ironed and presented 'like new'. We want people to feel they are receiving a gift, to see that that we care about them and their children. Everyone wants the best for their children, whether they have money or not."

(School uniform bank co-ordinator, Rhondda Cynon Taf)

Taking an all-school or universal approach may not, at first, appear to be related to tackling poverty (e.g., because the activities serve all children), but research shows that they can have a particularly positive impact for children in poverty, if designed appropriately. In fact, the more inclusive an approach, the more likely it is to benefit children and families in poverty, as it is less likely to be stigmatising. Children tell us that experiences like school trips, residentials and after school clubs are all more enjoyable when all their friends can take part.

Inclusive practice may not cost much or require huge changes to how you do things – it is more about considering whether children from lower-income families are able to participate in the same things as their peers without any hidden barriers.

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"We were talking about maybe doing a movie day in the last week and we will provide popcorn and a drink. We don't often ask them to bring anything in. It's provided for them because we have quite a few children who wouldn't be able to bring things in. So rather than highlight it we just provide it for everybody."

(School leader, primary school, Rhondda Cynon Taf)

The pay-as-you-feel approach works well if schools want to carry out inclusive fundraising activities too. Families on low incomes tell us they can find school fundraising and charity days very stressful. They want their children to be able to have fun and enjoy the experience alongside their friends, but worry they'll stand out and be made to feel ashamed that they cannot make a donation or purchase the things being sold. One school allows everyone to make a contribution by simply requesting every child brings a coin to place in a donation bucket, with the teacher providing pennies to those children who were not able to bring one from home.

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"When we do things like fundraising we no longer ask for a pound or anything, it's just bring a coin. Bring a coin, I say, and it could be a penny, but nobody knows because it's posted in the collection box, and nobody is aware."
(Teacher, secondary school, Merthyr Tydfil)

Similarly, some teachers try to ensure that resources needed for lessons are paid for using a collective pot that doesn't highlight the financial differences between children. For example, teachers at a school in Caerphilly provide cookery ingredients to all learners to participate in Home Economics. There is a donation bucket that learners can discreetly pay at the start or the end of the session, but this is not monitored. The school has found that "the easiest solution was to give to all".

The role of schools in addressing poverty

In Wales, as in other UK nations, there is a strong association between the wealth of a child's family and their educational attainment[2]. Research shows that as a family's income rises, the educational attainment of their children also goes up. In fact, increasing family incomes is the single most effective thing that a government can do to increase educational attainment[3].

It is difficult to measure household poverty and link it with the attainment and outcomes of individual learners. In most studies, eligibility for Free School Meals (e-FSM) is used as a proxy for poverty at home. In Wales, universal primary free school meals are being rolled out. However, it is important to note that many children in poverty are not currently eligible for FSM, usually because their parents or carers are in low-paid work, which puts them just above the income threshold. If a family has a total earned income above £7,400 a year, the children will not usually be entitled to FSM, even if they are living well below the poverty line.

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"It's hand to mouth [for some families] every week, they can't get FSM because they work and are over the threshold. They are our worst concern really, they are above the threshold for any help but still on a very, very low income."
(Teacher, secondary school, Neath Port Talbot)

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[2] Sizmur, J. et al. (2019), Achievement of 15-year-olds in Wales: PISA 2018 national report. National Foundation for Educational Research

[3] Cooper, K and Stewart, K (2013) Does Money Affect Children's Outcomes? A Systematic Review. Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Lots of data exists to explore the outcomes of children who are eligible for FSM, compared to peers who are not. Because these data divide all children into one of two categories, the difference between the two groups is usually described as 'a gap'. However, many children in poverty do not qualify for free school meals, and poverty hampers their attainment too. In fact, it is more helpful to think about the relationship between family income and attainment as a gradient, with educational attainment steadily increasing as a child's family gets wealthier.[4]

Family income has more of an impact on a child's educational attainment than any other factor.[5] In turn, educational attainment is the most important identified predictor of the likelihood that someone will be in poverty or severe material deprivation in adulthood.

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[4] Education inequalities, The IFS Deaton Review (Aug 2022)

[5] Exley, S. Improving Life Chances, Child Poverty Action Group

Defining poverty

Poverty is about more than just money, but a lack of money is the defining feature of being poor. Today, poverty is a very real issue in every part of Wales.

The sociologist Peter Townsend, who was a founding member of Child Poverty Action Group, defined poverty in 1979:

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"Individuals, families and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty when they lack resources to obtain the type of diet, participate in the activities and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or at least widely encouraged and approved, in the societies in which they belong."

This shows how important it is to understand that poverty is relative – you are poor if you are unable to live at the standard that most other people would expect. A child can have three meals a day, warm clothes and go to school, but still be poor because her parents don't have enough money to ensure she can live in a warm home, have access to a computer to do her homework, or go on the same school trips as her classmates.

Governments measure poverty by calculating the median income for households in the UK. If a family has an income that is 60 per cent or less compared to this median, they are said to be living in poverty. Currently, around 700,000 people – 23 per cent of the entire population of Wales – are living on incomes below the poverty line. Children are more likely to be living in poverty than adults – in Wales, the poverty rate for children is almost double the rate for pensioners.

UK median
weekly income 2021
(after housing costs)

£472

60% of UK median
weekly income 2021
(after housing costs)

£283

The extent of child poverty in Wales

One in three Welsh children live below the poverty line – that's ten children in a class of 30. In some areas the rate is even higher – reaching 40 per cent in many communities[6].

Child poverty exists in every corner of Wales. Even in more prosperous local authorities, at least a quarter of children are currently living below the poverty line.

Wales has a higher child poverty rate than other UK nations. The primary reason for this is households in Wales have lower than average wages, and more people doing jobs that offer insecure hours or are only available at certain times of year. Three quarters of children in poverty live in a working household, but their parents and carers often have jobs that don't pay enough to escape poverty. Fewer opportunities to find good quality, family-friendly work means Wales also has more children trapped in long term, persistent poverty than other parts of the UK.

In many areas, the cost of housing also exceeds what families on average wages can afford. Social security often doesn't provide enough help to bridge the shortfall. This pushes up the child poverty rate, especially in cities like Cardiff, Newport and Swansea. Over half of children in rented homes live below the poverty line in Wales.

Some families face a much higher risk of poverty. Almost half of families headed by a lone parent are in poverty in Wales. Children who live with a disabled family member are also much more likely to be living below the poverty line than those in homes where no-one is disabled. The UK poverty rate for children in Black[7] families is 46 per cent, compared to 26 per cent for children in white British households.

A change in the UK Government's social security policy means families who have more than two children, are no longer entitled to help with the costs of raising any further children born since April 2017. This has considerably increased the poverty rate in families where there are three or more children, with just under half of all children in these families living in poverty in Wales, compared to 24 per cent of children in smaller households. This policy disproportionately affects Black families.

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[6] End Child Poverty Coalition (2022) Local Indicators of Child Poverty, After Housing Costs 2020-21.

[7] Black is the term NEU members use to mean all Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic people. The NEU's work on race is informed on an ongoing basis by Black members via democratic structures and forums which in turn draw from the wider membership.

What causes poverty?

Poverty rarely has a single cause. A range of factors including rising living costs, low pay, lack of work, and inadequate social security benefits means some people do not have enough money to enjoy an acceptable standard of living.

Although we sometimes think that people in poverty are the same group of families over time, in reality, poverty in Wales is fairly dynamic. Different people move in and out of poverty all the time, as their lives and financial circumstances change. This means it is important not to make assumptions about who is or isn't in poverty in your school. Around half of Welsh children will spend time living in poverty at some point in their childhood, but most will exit poverty when their family's financial circumstances improve.

*change in household type refers to a change in the number of pensioners, working age adults and children in the household. This could mean that some people in the family have entered retirement, or the children have reached adulthood.[8]

As the table above shows, the main way people escape poverty is by maximising their income through claiming all the social security benefits they are entitled to, followed by entering work or taking on more hours. That is why anti-poverty specialists encourage schools to consider offering income maximisation services and wraparound childcare to families, as these are often the most helpful ways of assisting families out of poverty.

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"The school offers free breakfast at breakfast club, free milk and free afterschool clubs which I think will help those that struggle with childcare before 5pm. This combined with the school's staggered start/end times allows parents greater flexibility and provides an opportunity to increase their hours at work."

(Parent/carer, primary school, Rhondda Cynon Taf)

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[8] DWP (2022) Income Dynamics: income movements and the persistence of low income, 2010 to 2020.

How poverty affects children's lives

Even a short spell in poverty has long term effects on a child's development. Any experience of income poverty in childhood is associated with higher infant mortality, mental health problems, obesity, chronic illness, poorer educational outcomes, and a much higher risk of death in early adulthood[9]. The harm of poverty is cumulative – meaning the longer a child lives below the poverty line, the greater the risk they will experience adverse effects in the years that follow. Helping families to exit poverty really does make a big difference to the life chances of their children.

Poverty harms children in many ways, and while most people understand why a lack of material resources like food and clothing causes disadvantage, the socio-relational aspects of poverty are not always so immediately obvious. Having less money at home can lead to children being excluded from many of the social and educational experiences that school offers. From fun events and fundraising to trips and celebrations, a lack of money often prevents children from being able to take part. This can lead children and young people to feel different, unhappy and excluded.

Research from the Schools Health Research Network at Cardiff University shows that children and young people from less affluent homes are more likely to report higher levels of loneliness, lower life satisfaction, and to say that they do not enjoy going to school. Worryingly, the social exclusion felt by low-income learners is often compounded by other forms of inequality, with lower-income children from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller, and Black groups more likely to say they are lonely and unhappy at school, compared to white Welsh/British children of a similar socio-economic status[10].

NEU Cymru members we surveyed report that they notice the effects of poverty among their students on a regular basis, including:

> showing signs of tiredness (92 per cent)

> struggling to concentrate (86 per cent)

> showing signs of hunger during the school day (71 per cent)

> showing signs of ill health (31 per cent), and

> experiencing bullying because their family is in poverty (23%).

Members told us that other difficulties caused by poverty included deep anxiety and stress, being unable to participate in school life, feelings of embarrassment and shame, and poor attendance.

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[9] Lai ETC, Wickham S, Law C, et al. Poverty dynamics and health in late childhood in the UK: evidence from the Millennium Cohort Study. Archives of Disease in Childhood 2019;104:1049-1055.

[10] School Health Research Network (2021) Student Health and Wellbeing In Wales: Report of the 2019/20 School Health Research Network Student Health and Wellbeing Survey. Cardiff University.

Other Children's Rights that schools should be aware of

As well as Article 12, there are a number of additional key Children's Rights that we need to consider when tackling poverty in schools.

Article 2 (non-discrimination): The Convention applies to every child without discrimination, whatever their ethnicity, gender, religion, language, abilities or any other status, whatever they think or say, whatever their family background.

Article 26 (social security): Every child has the right to benefit from social security. Governments must provide social security, including financial support and other benefits, to families in need of assistance.

Article 27 (adequate standard of living): Every child has the right to a standard of living that is good enough to meet their physical and social needs and support their development. Governments must help families who cannot afford to provide this.

Article 29 (goals of education): Education must develop every child's personality, talents and abilities to the full. It must encourage the child's respect for human rights, as well as respect for their parents, their own and other cultures, and the environment.

Article 31 (leisure, play and culture): Every child has the right to relax, play and take part in a wide range of cultural and artistic activities.

Top five reasons a family enters poverty »»»»»

- Fall in household earnings (21 per cent)
- Change to a lone parent household (14 per cent)
- Fall in benefit income (12 per cent)
- Fall in the number of workers in a household - same household size (12 per cent)
- Change in household type* (ten per cent)

Top five reasons a family exits poverty «««««

- Rise in benefit income (29 per cent)
- Rise in household earnings (22 per cent)
- Change in household type* (16 per cent)
- Rise in the number of workers in the household - same household size (12 per cent)
- Rise in the number of full time workers in a household - same household size (11 per cent)

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