



# EMPTY PLATES AND COLD HOMES:

What it's like to grow up  
in poverty in 2024



Changing childhoods.  
Changing lives.

By Ali Cooper and Patrick McNulty  
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**More than  
1 in 4  
children in the UK  
live in poverty**

## Executive Summary

**More than 1 in 4 children in the UK live in poverty, whilst some one million are in destitution, with consequences for their education, health and happiness now and for years to come.<sup>1</sup>**

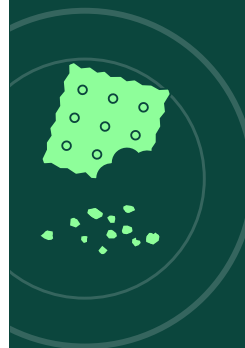
Poverty can be all-consuming and affects every part of a child's life.

This report focusses specifically on how poverty affects families' ability to afford **food and fuel**. We've chosen to highlight these aspects of poverty because for too many children life this autumn and winter will mean going to school hungry and returning to a cold home.<sup>2</sup> With energy bills set to rise by 10% in October 2024 and food prices now 27% higher than two years ago, the coming months are likely to be very challenging for many families.<sup>3</sup>

A warm home and food on the table are essential for a child's health, wellbeing and development, yet across the UK, many families cannot afford to heat their homes or provide nourishing meals.<sup>4</sup>

For this report YouGov conducted new polling that showed many parents are continuing to struggle with the persistently high cost of living<sup>5</sup>, **and more parents appear to be struggling compared with two years ago:**

Food and fuel poverty means:



**1 in 4  
parents (25%)**

**struggled to provide sufficient food** for their child in the last 12 months, up from 1 in 5 parents (20%) in October 2022. We estimate this is affecting **3.4 million children.**



**1 in 3  
parents  
(33%)**

**have cut back to save money on energy bills** (e.g. gas, water and electric), up 2% from February 2023.



**8% of  
parents**

**made use of a local food bank,** up 2% from February 2023. We estimate there are over **1 million children in families in this situation.**<sup>6</sup>





**Barnardo's has been working to support children in poverty for over 150 years. Each year we reach around 350,000 children, young people, parents and carers, many of whom struggle to afford the basics. In addition to our vital services, in 2023-24 we helped around 15,592 people with urgent access to food, clothing, warm spaces, access to safe and working kitchen appliances and other essentials.**

**This report draws on insight from 116 Barnardo's practitioners who delivered this critical work.**

They said:

- Many families frequently had to choose between heating their homes and feeding their children, a choice no parent should have to make.
- Parents were skipping meals to ensure their children could eat.
- Families were living in cold and damp homes with black mould, and families were unable to repair homes or replace furniture due to the cost of keeping warm and fed.
- Children experiencing hunger and cold homes were experiencing illnesses including respiratory conditions, poor mental health and feeling too hungry or tired to concentrate at school.

Urgent action is needed to address these deep-rooted issues. We warmly welcome the new UK Government's commitment to a Child Poverty Strategy, and the formation of a new Ministerial Taskforce. We recommend that this work includes **early action** to:

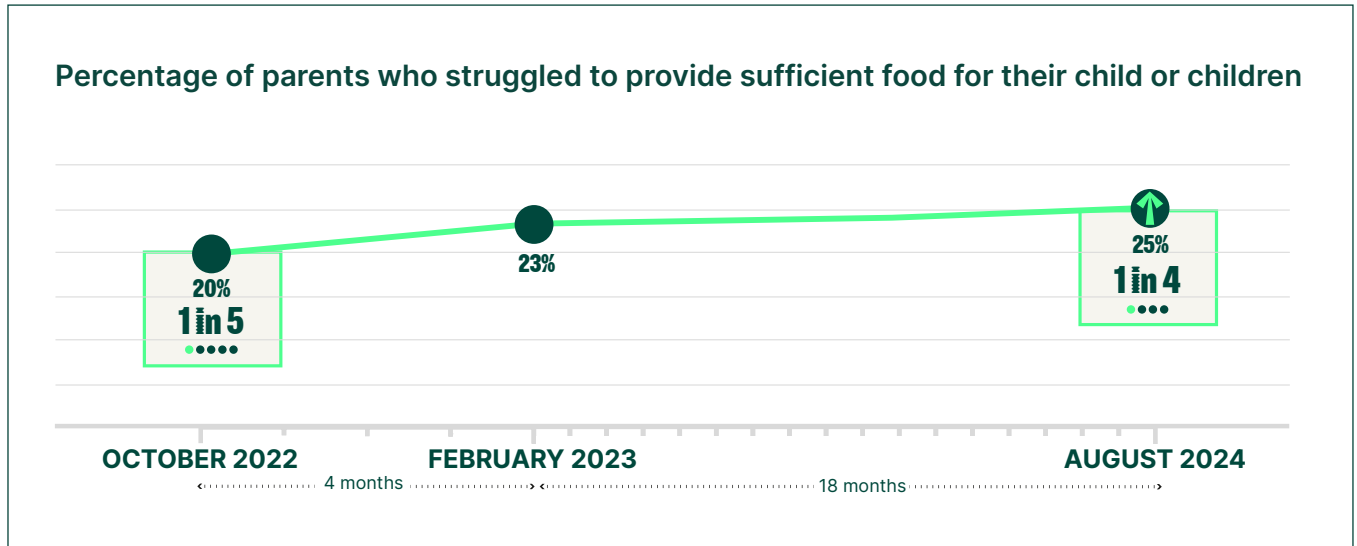
- 1. End the 'sibling penalty':** end the two-child limit in the social security system which affects children who have two or more brothers or sisters.
- 2. Save our local safety net:** develop a long-term scheme and funding settlement for local crisis support after the Household Support Fund ends in March 2025.
- 3. Implement an Essentials Guarantee:** implement an Essentials Guarantee that would introduce a protected minimum floor in Universal Credit to ensure families facing hardship do not go without essentials like food and fuel.
- 4. Extend free school meals:** extend free school meals to all primary school children in England.
- 5. Address holiday hunger:** set out plans to address holiday hunger after the Holiday Activities and Food Programme ends in March 2025, including efforts to increase uptake and extend eligibility.

Our recent reports on poverty have focused on 'bed poverty' and the impact of the cost-of-living crisis in our services. You can read these reports here:

- Barnardo's (2022), '[At What Cost?](#)'
- Barnardo's (2023), '[A Crisis On Our Doorstep](#)';
- Barnardo's (2023), '[No Crib for a bed: the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on bed poverty](#)'
- Barnardo's (2024), '[No crib for a bed: a closer look at bed poverty and the Household Support Fund crisis](#)'

# Families across the UK are living in food and fuel poverty

This is what they told us.



Polling of 2,063 parents, conducted on our behalf by YouGov, shows that **1 in 4 parents (25%)** struggled to provide sufficient food for their child in the last 12 months, up from 1 in 5 parents (20%) in October 2022.<sup>7</sup>

We estimate this means there are now

**3.4 million children**



in the UK with parents who are **struggling to provide sufficient food** for them.<sup>8</sup>

This is three times the population of Birmingham.<sup>9</sup>

In the last 12 months:



**33%** of parents

have cut back on energy bills (e.g. gas, water and electric) to save money, up 2% from February 2023. We estimate this affects **4.6 million children**, seven times the population of Glasgow.<sup>10</sup>



**47%** of parents


have cut back on food costs to save money, up 1% from February 2023. We estimate this affects **6.5 million children**, more than the population of Denmark.<sup>11</sup>



**8%** of parents

made use of a local food bank(s), up 2% from February 2023. We estimate this affects **over 1 million children**, twice the population of Liverpool.<sup>12</sup>

# Pressures beyond food and fuel

**Over half  
54%  
of parents**  
have cut back on leisure and social activities to save money, up 4% from February 2023. We estimate this affects **7.6 million children**.<sup>13</sup>




**Almost 1 in 4  
23%  
of parents**  
sold possessions to help supplement their income, up 2% from February 2023. We estimate this affects **3.2 million children**.<sup>14</sup>



**One in five  
20%  
of parents**  
have taken on new credit cards, extra debt or a payday loan, up 5% from February 2023. We estimate this affects **2.7 million children**.<sup>15</sup>



**16%  
of parents**  
asked friends or family to provide free childcare, up 4% from February 2023. We estimate this affects **2.2 million children**.<sup>16</sup>



**13%  
of parents**  
have fallen into arrears with payments or their bank overdraft, down 2% from February 2023. We estimate this affects **1.7 million children**.<sup>17</sup>



**3%  
of parents**  
visited a pawnbroker, the same as in February 2023. We estimate this affects **over 400,000 children**.<sup>18</sup>



# Barnardo's support for children experiencing food and fuel poverty

Helping families, children and young people in poverty has been a core part Barnardo's work for over 150 years.<sup>19</sup> In our response to the cost-of-living crisis we have been providing urgent crisis

support to families across over 800 services. This has included helping many families struggling to afford food or pay energy bills.

## How we distributed urgent crisis support?

**Between October 2022 and August 2024 when our crisis response began, we supported over 18,560 children, reaching over 31,751 people in over 9,875 families.**

### If the crisis support delivered so far to children, young people and families:<sup>20</sup>

We provided support to **prevent hunger**

that reached

**12,487**  
**children**



This included through providing vouchers to families to use at a local supermarket when they are at risk of going hungry. Help with food also enabled some families to buy food for Christmas, which they would otherwise not be able to afford.

We ensured access to **safe and warm spaces**

for

**5,195**  
**children**



We helped families top up their gas and electricity meters, including families that had fallen into debt. Many families told us they could not afford to turn their heating on until they received this support.

Our crisis response has also been used to support children with access to suitable clothing like getting warm hats and jumpers, safe and working appliances like cookers or microwaves and increasing home safety such as stair gates or cupboard latches.

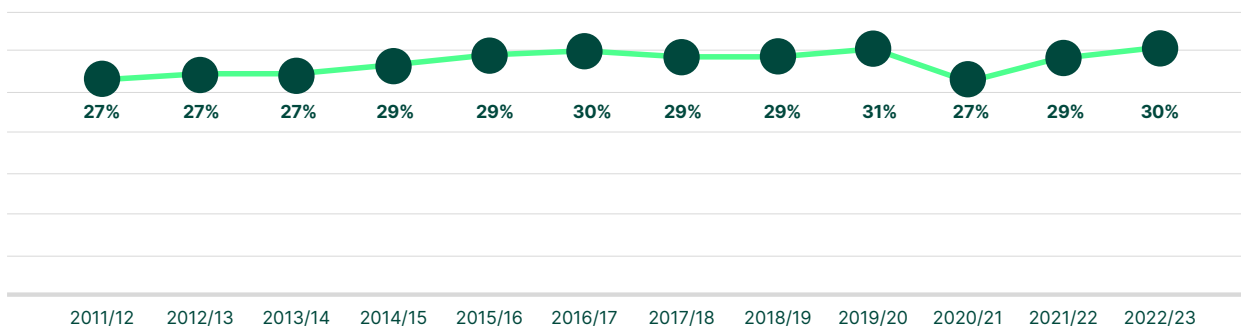
# What we know about food and fuel poverty?

This report focuses on how poverty affects families' ability to afford food and fuel, two aspects of poverty with huge consequences on the lives of children.

The research is clear; poverty affects children in multiple and lasting ways, impacting their physical and mental health and their chances later in life.

More than one in four children in the UK live in poverty, equivalent to nine in every classroom<sup>21</sup> and of these, one million are living in destitution, unable to afford to meet their basic needs.<sup>22</sup> We remain highly concerned about the extent and depth of child poverty in the UK.

Percentage of Children in Poverty 2011/12 to 2022/23



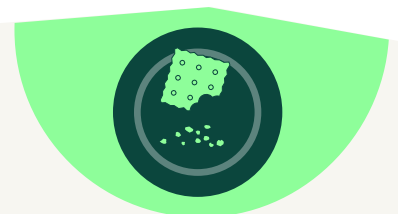
**Graph 1:** In the UK poverty is measured using relative income. A child is in poverty if they are growing up in a family with an income 60% below the average, after housing costs. Graph 1 above shows the latest official child poverty statistics. It shows that child poverty has remained persistently high over the last decade of available data. In 2020/21 data collection was affected by the pandemic and are therefore not comparable with previous years. Source: Department for Work and Pensions, Department for Work and Pensions (2024), 'Households Below Average Income, Summary Results – 1995 to 2023'

## Food poverty

### What is food poverty?

There is no formal definition of food poverty, however 'food insecurity' is a measure used widely in the UK and internationally. **A household is food insecure when members of the household reduce the quality, variety or desirability of their diets or where they disrupt their eating patterns to reduce their food intake due to lack of money.**<sup>23</sup>

The cost of food is closely linked to food poverty and rose rapidly in 2022 and 2023. Inflation in food and drink prices peaked in March 2023 at 19.2%.<sup>24</sup> Low-income households were most affected by price rises as these households spend more of their income on food and drink, and are often choosing the cheapest items, therefore limiting their options to save money by switching to less expensive alternatives.<sup>25</sup>





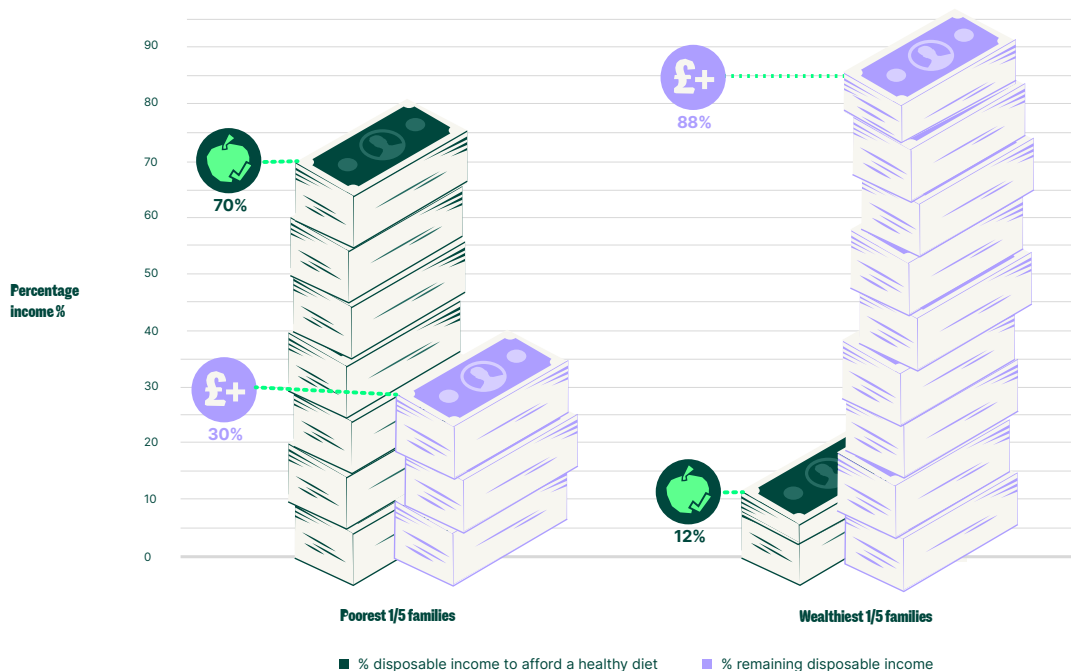
## Which families in the UK are affected by food poverty?

Evidence suggests:

- The number of households experiencing food insecurity is rising, particularly those with low incomes, which are more likely to include children.<sup>26</sup> The percentage of people in the UK in food insecure households went from 7% in 2021/22 to 11% in 2022/23.<sup>27</sup>
- Latest figures show **2.4 million children** or 17% of all children were living in food insecure homes. (Department of Work and Pensions, 2022-23). An additional 10% were living in homes with marginal food security, where food is sometimes unavailable but access to food is not substantially reduced.<sup>28</sup>
- Among the poorest fifth of the population, households with young people aged under 18 have to spend 70% of their disposable income on food to afford the NHS's recommended nutritious diet. (Food Foundation, 2024). In comparison, households in the most well off fifth with children under 18 need to spend 12% of their disposable income.<sup>29</sup>



### Percentage of family income needed for a healthy diet - Food Foundation (2024)



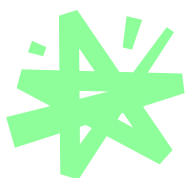
- The Trussell Trust, a food bank charity which is estimated to run around 60% of food banks in the UK, reported that between April and September 2023 it provided 1.5 million emergency food parcels, a record high for this period, and a 16% increase from the same period in 2022. 65% of these parcels were for families with children.<sup>30</sup>
- People in a household from a Black African, Black Caribbean and Black British ethnic group<sup>31</sup> are the most likely to experience food insecurity.<sup>32</sup> 21% of Black African, Black Caribbean and Black British households were food insecure, compared to 8% of white households.
- The Barnardo's SEEN programme works to improve outcomes for young people of African, Asian and Caribbean heritage and recently delivered a project to equip more young people and families with skills on preparing healthy food on a budget. Analysis of 4 roundtable discussions, 150 feedback forms and 54 video interviews for the project identified the cost of buying ingredients (72%), the time it takes to cook (37%) and knowing what food is healthy (34%) as key concerns amongst participants.<sup>33</sup>
- 18% of disabled people live in a food insecure household compared with 9% of people who are not disabled.<sup>34</sup>



## How does food poverty affect...

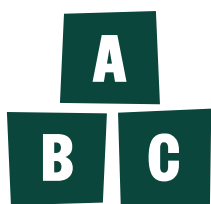
### Evidence suggests:

#### Mental health



- Food insecurity is directly linked to poor mental health in children and young people, as well as parents and carers. House of Commons Library (2024). The same report found that as food insecurity increased, young people's wellbeing worsened, and prevalence of mental health conditions including depression, anxiety, and sleep related issues increased, alongside a rise in reported behaviour problems.<sup>35</sup>
- Children in food insecure households are often aware of parents' stress around food, as parents may sacrifice their own diet to protect their children from hunger. Children who worry about food show higher rates of negative emotion and self-harm compared with their food-secure peers, even if they are not hungry themselves.<sup>36</sup>

#### Child development



- The height of five-year olds has been falling since 2013 with UK children up to 7cm shorter than their peers in other Western countries.<sup>37</sup> Factors affecting children's height include nutrition and access to essential nutrients, stress and infections.
- Children in the most deprived tenth of the population are on average over 1cm shorter than children in the least deprived tenth by year 6 (age 10-11).<sup>38</sup>
- In England, 1 in 3 (36.6%) children leave primary school overweight or obese,<sup>39</sup> with children in the most deprived regions at over twice the risk compared to those in the least deprived regions.<sup>40</sup> These children are at increased risk of long-term conditions including developing type 2 diabetes, incidence has increased threefold since the year 2000.<sup>41</sup>



#### Dental health



- Children from deprived backgrounds are more likely to have poor dental health. (Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, 2021). This is because consuming sugary foods and drinks, which are cheaper, is more common in food insecure households and can increase the risk of dental decay.<sup>42</sup>
- Dental decay frequently causes difficulties with eating, sleeping, playing and socialising, in addition to wellbeing and physical growth and in 2017 the World Health organisation found it further causes school absence, affecting educational attainment.<sup>43</sup>
- Dental decay and tooth extraction is the most common reason for hospital admission of children in England.<sup>44</sup>

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## Education



- Almost four in 10 (38%) teachers say their pupils are regularly too hungry to learn because they have not had enough food (School Food Matters, (2024)). Among, among schools in the most deprived areas this rose to 63% of teachers.<sup>45</sup>
- Children who do not eat breakfast experience a drop in school attainment with research suggesting that this translates to lower GCSE results than their peers who eat breakfast regularly.<sup>46</sup>
- Access to nutritious food improves academic performance and reduces school absence.<sup>47</sup>
- Children experiencing food poverty and arriving to school on an empty stomach are at a disadvantage in their learning and are less likely to achieve standard age 11 educational benchmarks.<sup>48</sup> These children are less likely to progress towards their educational goals and go onto further and higher education, impacting their educational attainment and employment options as adults.<sup>49</sup>
- Barnardo's is commissioned by the Department for Education to run an attendance pilot programme. Mentors work with children and families to overcome barriers to attendance at school. Between October 2023 and July 2024 we received 1177 requests for support for children. 69%% of these children were in receipt of free school meals.
- Analysis by the Education Policy Institute found that persistently disadvantaged pupils were almost two years behind their non-disadvantaged peers by the end of secondary school and almost one year behind by the end of primary school.<sup>50</sup>

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The breadth of research demonstrates how food and fuel poverty can affect a range of health and education outcomes, as well as different groups of children, young people and families. Food and fuel poverty are closely linked aspects of child poverty and both can have lifelong impacts on children and young people.



# Fuel poverty

## What is fuel poverty?

National Energy Action estimate that **5.6 million households** in the UK (20%) are in fuel poverty.<sup>51</sup>

Fuel poverty is when a household has to spend a high proportion of its income to keep their home at a reasonable temperature.<sup>52</sup> This will typically be driven by three factors: income, energy costs and energy consumption with the latter affected by energy efficiency of the home. Fuel poverty is measured differently across the UK:

- In England, the Government introduced a new measure of fuel poverty in 2021.<sup>53</sup> This includes households with an energy efficiency rating of band D – G and with an income below the poverty line (see explanation in Graph 1 above). According to the latest Government figures, **13%** of households (3.17 million) in England are in fuel poverty.<sup>54</sup>
- In Scotland, the measure includes households that must spend 10% of their income to maintain satisfactory heating and have a remaining income 90% or below the UK Minimum Income Standard.<sup>55</sup> **31%** of households met this definition in 2022.
- In Wales and Northern Ireland fuel poverty is measured in a similar way: a household is in fuel poverty if it has to spend more than 10% of its household income on fuel to maintain a satisfactory heating regime.<sup>56</sup> The percentage of households in fuel poverty in Wales was **14%** in 2021.<sup>57</sup> The most recent statistics in Northern Ireland were published in 2016 and showed that **22%** of households experienced fuel poverty.<sup>58</sup>

It is likely that the current measure in England underestimates the extent of fuel poverty.<sup>59</sup> Recent analysis found that as many as 8.9 million households in England could be in fuel poverty, more than double the number identified using current measures.<sup>60</sup>



## Which families in England are living in fuel poverty?

In 2023, analysis by the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero showed that households with children and young people are more at risk of fuel poverty.

- More than four in 10 (42.3%) of fuel poor households had dependent children, amounting to 1.4 million households.<sup>61</sup>
- A quarter (25%) of households where the oldest member is aged between 16 and 24 - are living in fuel poverty, almost double the national rate in England.<sup>62</sup>
- 29% of single parent households experience fuel poverty. This group is consistently the most likely to be affected.<sup>63</sup>
- Fuel poverty is more likely to affect ethnic minority households.<sup>64</sup> 16.6% of ethnic minority households experience fuel poverty compared to 12.4% of white households.<sup>65</sup>

## How does fuel poverty affect...

### Evidence suggests:

### Respiratory health

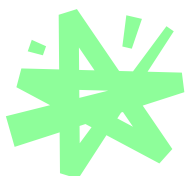
Research shows a strong link between fuel poverty and respiratory health in children.



- Fuel poverty particularly affects young children, whose lung development can be impaired by living in a cold home, with potential lifelong consequences for their health and life expectancy<sup>66</sup> (BMJ, 2022). Respiratory problems are twice as common in infants who have lived for at least 3 years in a cold home (15% versus 7%). (National Centre for Social Research, 2008)<sup>67</sup>
- Exposure to mold and damp are associated with increased asthma in children.<sup>68</sup> (Journal of Asthma and Allergy, 2022). Measures taken to improve heating efficiency and create warmer homes reduces the symptoms of asthma.<sup>69</sup>
- Children with asthma living in the most deprived areas are four times more likely to be admitted to hospital as an emergency than their peers in the least deprived areas. (Asthma and Lung UK, 2023).<sup>70</sup>

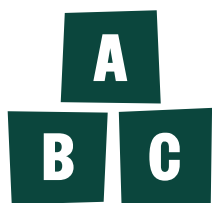
### Mental health

Cold, damp and mouldy conditions affect mental wellbeing for both children and adults.



- Children living in cold homes are seven times more likely to exhibit poor mental health.<sup>71</sup> (The Institute for Health Equity, 2022). Mothers of young children are up to to 64 per cent more likely to experience maternal depression if living in fuel-poor households, even after taking account of income, education and employment.<sup>72</sup> It is well-established that poor maternal mental health can negatively affect children's health and wellbeing.<sup>73</sup>
- Living in a cold home can increase stress due to the discomfort of feeling cold, concern for other family members and financial worry. Many families in fuel poverty also feel stigma about their circumstances, increasing the risk of loneliness and social isolation as children, parents and carers may not feel comfortable inviting others into their home.<sup>74</sup>
- Adolescents living in fuel poverty are at higher risk of mental ill health.<sup>75</sup> (University of Leicester and the energy industry, 2011)

### Child development



- Babies living in colder temperatures require more calories for growth.<sup>76</sup> (Institute for Health Equity, 2022) The same report pointed to research by the University of Ulster which found that infants living in low-income and food-insecure families who receive a winter fuel subsidy have statistically better carer-reported development, higher weight-for-age scores and are less likely to attend emergency paediatric services compared with those not receiving subsidies.<sup>77</sup>
- Interventions like retrofitting homes and providing new heating systems have been found to improve child development. Research in the United States found children in households receiving this assistance were 20% less likely to be underweight, and 30% less likely to require admission when visiting hospital.<sup>78</sup>

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## Education



- UK school children were more likely than those in any EU country to miss school days due to disease caused by damp housing, including asthma, atopic dermatitis, and respiratory infections.<sup>79</sup> (2021) UK school children missed over 80% more days at school for this reason than the EU average.
- There is a significant association between children living in an inadequately heated home and having no quiet place at home to do homework.<sup>80</sup> (Marmot Review, 2011) The researchers proposed that this may be because families can afford to only heat part of their home, heating the most used and therefore noisiest rooms.<sup>81</sup>
- Inefficient heating systems exacerbate this problem by driving up energy costs, forcing families to spend a disproportionate amount of their income on heating while still living in inadequately warm homes. In 2008, the British Medical Journal published a study of 409 children suffering from Asthma across New Zealand that looked at the effects of installing an efficient home heater before winter. The study showed that more effective heating significantly reduced symptoms of asthma, days off school, use of healthcare services, and visits to a pharmacist.<sup>82</sup>





# What does growing up cold and hungry mean for the children and young people we support?

**Barnardo's supports children and families across the country who are living in poverty.**

**Based on insight from 116 Barnardo's practitioners, we have identified some key themes that describe the experience of food and fuel poverty on the children, young people and families we support.**

## **Choice between warm homes and food:**

One of the most common challenges facing families is the choice between heating and eating, and practitioners said the problem is growing. These challenges are often interlinked, with fuel poverty leading to difficulties in cooking meals, and contributing to food insecurity. Practitioners described how family incomes are not keeping up with rises in food and energy bills, leading to rising numbers cutting back on energy use or skipping meals.

*'Fuel poverty was the major issue we encountered. This in turn led to food poverty. The phrase 'heating or eating' was so true. I believe people were going hungry to heat their homes.'*<sup>83</sup>

– Claire, Barnardo's Practitioner in Northern Ireland.

*'The option was food or heat the family home as benefits are not enough to meet their needs.'*

– Zara, Barnardo's Practitioner in Scotland.

*'[We received requests for] food and fuel vouchers as families seemed unable to manage both, having to choose to heat the home or buy food.'*

– Lucas, Barnardo's Practitioner in Scotland

*'[There was] no money, despite working, it didn't cover the bills, so it was heat or eat for them.'*

– Anna, Barnardo's Practitioner in Scotland

## **Growing up in a cold home:**

Many practitioners described how fuel poverty is affecting children, young people and families. For families unable to sufficiently heat their homes, practitioners said children are increasingly growing up in cold and damp homes, with growing incidence of mould:

*'[I] supported a family and during a home visit... the house was cold, and the family had been sleeping together in the living room to keep warm.'*

– Lucyna, Barnardo's Practitioner in the North West.

*'I supported a family whose mother was terminally ill and was given support over the winter for fuel. The house was cold and damp and was taking a lot to heat.'*

– Mary, Barnardo's Practitioner in Northern Ireland

*'I supported a child with the fund for the carer to heat up their house because on every visit the house was so cold, and the child was in bed wrapped up.'*

– John, Barnardo's Practitioner in the South-East

*'Young people are therefore living in extremely cold houses, often wearing multiple layers of clothes, able to see their breath, unable to dry clothing, or have warm showers'*

– Ellie, Barnardo's Practitioner in Wales.

*'[The family] moved into social housing which immediately had a problem with a roof leakage, and, due to a lack of suitable alternative accommodation,, they had to remain in that house for over 4 months. Cold, mouldy, clothes, bedding and furniture affected, as well as respiratory health of the whole family.'*

– Tia, Barnardo's Practitioner in Northern Ireland.



## Impact on health:

Many Barnardo's practitioners commented on the emotional strain that food and fuel poverty places on families, and the resulting impact on children and young people's mental health and wellbeing.

*'When families come to the [Barnardo's] centre and are hungry and cold, this impacts the mum's mental health where she feels she is a bad mum as she can't provide for her children. We help as much as we can but sometimes it's not enough.'*

– Carla, Barnardo's Practitioner in Scotland

*'Keeping warm is a basic given. If this is removed it has knock on effects on overall physical and mental health... flats can get damp very quickly.'*

– Clare, Barnardo's Practitioner in the South West.

*'Money is always tight and the impact of this is debt, lack of activities for the children, lack of nutritious meals, being cold during the winter months leading to mental health issues with all family members.'*

– Isaac, Barnardo's Practitioner in the North West.

## Impact on education:

Many practitioners highlighted that growing up hungry and in a cold home has knock-on effects on children's educational outcomes. Cold and hungry children are less likely to attend school, more likely to be tired and struggle to concentrate when they do. These children also have a higher incidence of behavioral problems or bullying.

Practitioners described how Barnardo's support for families experiencing food and fuel poverty often frees up family budgets to address other financial concerns.

One Barnardo's Practitioner described how providing families with food vouchers allowed them to spend additional funds on heating.

*'The impact was that the children in the home were sleeping better, eating better and attending school.'*

– Ayesha, Barnardo's Practitioner in the North East

Ayesha also told us that families struggling to heat their homes or provide food have no resources to carry out home repairs or replace broken furniture or appliances, leading to increasing stress and impacts on children's education.

*'The family home was in such a state of disrepair that they were unable to get the house back to a reasonable standard - they were overcrowded. This was affecting school attendance, the mental health of the older children and specifically mum - she was working hard to try and manage but there were many challenges.'*

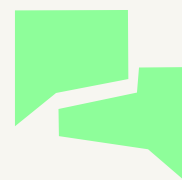
Some practitioners described the benefits to children's attendance and attainment once they have been supported with access to food or heating homes.

*'Children were happier, they were able to function better in school, due to having a better sleep (and) not going to bed hungry.'*

– Leah, Barnardo's Practitioner in the East Midlands

## Susan's experience:

a Barnardo's practitioner in Fife, shared her reflections on supporting children so they could thrive at school



*'[I] supported children with heating during the winter in the East of Scotland, they're now warm and dry going to and from school and taking part within school as they no longer have wet socks or feet.'*

*'Providing money for heating and hot water means they can now have hot meals after school, hot showers, clean bedding and clothes, watch TV and join in with basic peer conversations, it stops them being excluded from this because they don't have electricity.'*

*'It also allowed children to attend school more easily and attain as they were comfortable, getting enough sleep as they were warm at night, clean and dressed to be accepted by their peers and they weren't hungry anymore, so their brains were being fuelled to be able to learn and take in information.'*

# Recommendations

## 1. End the 'sibling penalty'

The Government should end the two-child limit in the social security system which affects children who have two or more brothers or sisters.

**What is the 'sibling penalty'?** Families in receipt of Universal Credit receive an additional amount for each child in the household. This is designed to support families with extra costs and to reduce child poverty.<sup>84</sup> In April 2017 a 'two-child limit' was imposed on these allowances. With some exceptions, households with a third or subsequent child born after April 2017 do not receive an additional amount for these children. The two-child limit also applies to Child Tax Credit.

**What is the impact?** Families affected by the two-child limit will miss out on up to £3,455 per child in 2024/25.<sup>85</sup> We know from our frontline work that the policy penalises children who happen to have more than two brothers or sisters. It means some families cannot put food on the table or the heating on when it is cold in winter. Larger families are already more likely to experience food insecurity and fuel poverty yet unless the policy is ended, 51% of larger families will be in poverty by 2028-29.<sup>86</sup>

**Why do we need action?** Ending the 'sibling penalty' is one of the most cost-effective means of lifting children out of poverty. It would lift 490,000 children out of poverty at a cost of £1.7bn.<sup>87</sup>

## 2. Save our local safety net

The Government should develop a long-term scheme and funding settlement for local crisis support after the Household Support Fund ends in March 2024.

**What is local crisis support?** Local crisis support is help provided by local authorities to individuals experiencing financial crisis. It includes a wide range of support, tailored to local need, from helping families with fuel vouchers to providing advice and support to individuals who have fallen into arrears. Its role is distinct from wider social security; local crisis support should provide rapid crisis support whilst the wider social security system should address underlying drivers of people's hardship.

The Government's Household Support Fund provides critical funding to councils to deliver their schemes: 65% of local welfare spending was financed by the HSF in 2023/24.<sup>88</sup> The HSF is principally designed to support households facing hardship due to costs associated with energy and water bills as well as food and wider essentials.<sup>89</sup>

**What is the impact?** On 2nd September 2024 the Government extended the Household Support Fund for a further six months until March 2025. This will be a welcome reprieve for families facing hardship; research by the Local Government Association found that 60% of councils would not have been able to provide any additional funding for local welfare assistance if the HSF was not renewed beyond September 2024.<sup>90</sup> Despite this, 84% of councils expect demand to increase over the colder winter months.

**Why do we need action?** Local crisis support is a lifeline for many families who face hardship due to energy debts or food costs. Extensions of the HSF have provided much needed funding but have been announced at short notice with some local authorities closing schemes due to the uncertainty. A sustainable approach and funding model is needed. The Government should use the six months to March 2025 to develop a long-term scheme and funding settlement for local crisis support, in line with recommendations put forward by Barnardo's and others.

Any scheme beyond March 2025 must provide adequate funding to address high levels of need for local crisis support. Investing in such services relieves pressure across other public services. In a study cited by the National Audit Office, an investment of £0.5million by one local authority into its local welfare assistance scheme generated £9.7million in savings to other public services.<sup>91</sup>

## 3. Implement an Essentials Guarantee

The Government should implement an Essentials Guarantee that would introduce a protected minimum floor in Universal Credit to ensure families facing hardship do not go without essentials like food and fuel.

**What is the Essentials Guarantee?** The Essentials Guarantee is a proposal by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Trussell Trust.<sup>92</sup> It would establish an independent process to regularly determine the Essentials Guarantee level, similar to how the Low Pay Commission advises on the minimum wage. The Essentials Guarantee level would be based on what is needed to afford essential items including food, electricity and gas. Under the proposal, legislation would ensure that Universal Credit's standard allowance must at least meet the Essentials Guarantee level and never pull support below this threshold, such as with deductions or because of the benefit cap.

**What is the impact?** Around 5 in 6 low-income households on Universal Credit are currently going without essentials like food and fuel.<sup>93</sup> Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Trussell Trust estimate that Universal Credit currently falls £29 per week below their indicative Essentials Guarantee level.<sup>94</sup> It falls £48 short per week for under 25s who receive a reduced rate of Universal Credit. For many families this shortfall means they must choose between heating and eating and for under 25s the situation is even more difficult.

**Why do we need action?** 72% of the public support the Essentials Guarantee.<sup>95</sup> 3.9 million families with children would benefit from the policy, providing vital support to many experiencing food and fuel poverty.

The cost of fully implementing the Essentials Guarantee is £19 billion a year.<sup>96</sup> While this is not insignificant, the lasting impact and costs of child poverty – as illustrated above in relation to food and fuel poverty – are extensive and this figure does not account for longer-term savings to public services.

## 4. Extend free school meals

The Government should extend free school meals ('FSMs') to all primary school children in England.

**What is free school meal provision?** All children in England up to Year 3 receive a FSM. Beyond Year 3, children in England are only eligible for FSMs if their families have net earnings below £7,400 per year.<sup>97</sup>

**What is the impact?** The low earnings threshold means there are 900,000 children living in poverty who are not eligible for FSMs.<sup>98</sup>

**Why we need action?** Ensuring that every child at primary school gets at least one, nutritious, healthy and

filling meal a day, would directly address food poverty while removing financial pressure for parents. 76% of parents polled by YouGov for Barnardo's in March 2023 agreed that all primary school children should be eligible for free school meals.<sup>99</sup> Research into the impact of universal infant FSMs has found that it improves absence rates and analysis of universal primary FSM provision in London found it improved children's engagement at school.<sup>100</sup>

- In 2021 Child Poverty Action Group estimated extending free school meals to primary school children would cost £0.7bn.<sup>101</sup> Research by PwC has found that for every £1 spent on universal free school meal provision, £1.71 was saved in core benefits.<sup>102</sup>

## 5. Address holiday hunger

The Government should set out plans to address holiday after the Holiday Activities and Food Programme ('HAF') ends in March 2025, including efforts to increase uptake and extend eligibility.

**What is the HAF Programme?** The HAF programme provides eligible children with activity sessions and food during some parts of the Summer, Christmas, and Easter holidays. The scheme is available to children in receipt of free school meals from reception to year 11, covering age ranges between 4 and up to 16.

**What is the impact?** An estimated 3 million children are at risk of hunger during the school holidays when they do not have access to school meals. The HAF programme has been a lifeline for many; 600,000 children benefited from the scheme over summer 2022.<sup>103</sup> The programme also has benefits beyond addressing hunger; research amongst parents in Birmingham with children attending the programme reported reduced stress and 73% said their children were less likely to engage in anti-social behaviour.<sup>104</sup>

**Why we need action?** The existing HAF Programme is due to end in March 2025. The Government should provide clarity on its plans to address holiday hunger beyond 2025 as schools and providers need certainty to ensure they can deliver schemes effectively. Provision is linked to free school meal entitlement meaning that the 900,000 children living in poverty but who are not eligible for free school meals cannot access the scheme. Eligibility should be extended to all children in households in receipt of Universal Credit. The cost of the existing scheme is around £200 million per year delivered over a three year cycle.<sup>105</sup>

# Annex

## YouGov survey of parents for Barnardo's

All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Polling in this report covers England, Wales and Scotland and therefore assume similar response rates for Northern Ireland when estimates and population extrapolations are presented for the UK.

August 2024: Total sample size was 2,063 parents of children aged 18 and under. Fieldwork was undertaken between 1st - 8th August 2024. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+)

February 2023: Total sample size was 1,010 GB parents of children aged 0-18. Fieldwork was undertaken between 3rd and 7th February 2023. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB parents of children aged 18 or under.

October 2022: Total sample size 1,053 GB parents of children aged 0-18. Fieldwork was undertaken between 4th and 6th October 2022. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted

and are representative of all GB parents of children aged 18 or under.

For the polling in October 2022 and August 2024 respondents were asked about their experience over the preceding 12 months. For the polling in February 2023 respondents were asked about their experience over the preceding 4 months (i.e. after October 2022).

## Population extrapolations

All population extrapolations are estimated for the UK population and therefore assume results in Northern Ireland would be similar to those in the rest of the UK. The figures presented from the online surveys have been analysed independently by Barnardos. The views expressed here are not the views of YouGov.

To estimate the number of children affected we used the latest publication on families and households from the Office for National Statistic: ONS (8th May 2024), 'Dataset: Families and households'. We estimated there are 14,059,000 children aged under 18 living in families in the UK using the following method:

	A	B	Column A x Column B
	Number of families with dependent children under 18 (thousands) in 2023	Number of children per family	
<b>One child</b>	3,732	1	3,732
<b>Two children</b>	3,383	2	6,766
<b>Three or more children</b>	1,187	3*	3,561
<b>Total</b>	<b>8,302</b>		<b>14,059</b>

\* This method underestimates the total number of children as children with 3 or more siblings will not be counted.

We then multiplied 14,059,000 with the percentage of parents for our YouGov questions to estimate the number of children who are likely to have been affected.

# Endnotes

1. Government statistics show that more than 1 in 4 children live in poverty: Department for Work and Pensions (2024), **'Households Below Average Income, Summary Results – 1995 to 2023'**
2. See analysis from Barnardo's previous reports: Barnardo's (2023), **'A Crisis On Our Doorstep'**
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4. Department for Energy, Security & Net Zero (2024), **'Annual Fuel Poverty Statistics in England, 2024 (2023 data)'**
5. Representative YouGov poll of 2,063 parents of children aged 18 and under conducted in August 2024. Some questions are repeated from previous polling conducted in October 2022, allowing us to infer change over time. See Annex for more information on YouGov polling.
6. This estimate is consistent with analysis conducted by the Trussell Trust, the UK's largest network of foodbanks. Between April 2023 and March 2024 the Trussell Trust distributed 1.1 million emergency food parcels to children: Trussell Trust (2024), **'End of Year Stats'**
7. For more information on Barnardo's YouGov polling please see Annex below.
8. 24.70% of parents in Barnardo's YouGov poll in August 2024 agreed that they had struggled to provide sufficient food their child or children due to the current cost of living. This was used to estimate the number of children affected as set out in the Annex.
9. Population of Birmingham is 1.14 million: Office for National Statistics (2024), **'How the population changed in Birmingham: Census 2021'**
10. 32.77% of parents in Barnardo's YouGov poll in August 2024 said they had reduced spending on household energy bills (e.g. gas, water and electric) in order to save money. This was used to estimate the number of children affected as set out in the Annex. Population of Glasgow is 635,130: Glasgow City Council (2024), **'Population and Projections'**
11. 46.51% of parents in Barnardo's YouGov poll in August 2024 said they had reduced spending on food costs in order to save money. This was used to estimate the number of children affected as set out in the Annex. Denmark population is 5.9 million: European Union (2024), **'Facts and figures on life in the European Union'**
12. 7.74% of parents in Barnardo's YouGov poll in August 2024 said they had made use of a local food bank(s) in the previous 12 months as a direct result of the current cost of living situation. This was used to estimate the number of children affected as set out in the Annex. Population of Liverpool is 486,100: Office for National Statistics (2022), **'How the population changed in Liverpool: Census 2021'**
13. 54.26% of parents in Barnardo's YouGov poll in August 2024 said they had reduced spending on leisure and social activities in the previous 12 months in order to save money. This was used to estimate the number of children affected as set out in the Annex.
14. 22.82% of parents in Barnardo's YouGov poll in August 2024 said they had sold possessions to help supplement their income in the past 12 months as a direct result of the current cost of living situation. This was used to estimate the number of children affected as set out in the Annex.
15. 19.65% of parents in Barnardo's YouGov poll in August 2024 said they had taken on new credit cards, extra debt or a payday loan in the past 12 months as a direct result of the current cost of living situation. This was used to estimate the number of children affected as set out in the Annex.
16. 16.28% of parents in Barnardo's YouGov poll in August 2024 said they had asked friends or family to provide free childcare in the past 12 months as a direct result of the current cost of living situation. This was used to estimate the number of children affected as set out in the Annex.
17. 12.75% of parents in Barnardo's YouGov poll in August 2024 said they had fallen into arrears with payments or their bank overdraft in the past 12 months as a direct result of the current cost of living situation. This was used to estimate the number of children affected as set out in the Annex.
18. 3.18% of parents in Barnardo's YouGov poll in August 2024 said they had visited a pawnbrokers in the past 12 months as a direct result of the current cost of living situation. This was used to estimate the number of children affected as set out in the Annex.
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**For more  
information contact**

**Ali Cooper,**  
*Senior Policy Adviser –  
Child Poverty, Barnardo's*

**E: [public.affairs@barnardos.org.uk](mailto:public.affairs@barnardos.org.uk)  
T: 07858 678589**

## **About Barnardo's**

At Barnardo's, our purpose is clear – changing childhoods and changing lives, so that children, young people, and families are safe, happy, healthy, and hopeful. Last year, we provided essential support to 373,200 children, young people, parents and carers through more than 800 services and partnerships across the UK. For over 150 years, we've been here for the children and young people who need us most – bringing love, care and hope into their lives and giving them a place where they feel they belong.

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Barnardo House, Tanners Lane, Barkingside,  
Ilford, Essex IG6 1QG | Tel: 020 8550 8822

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