

A photograph of a male teacher with a goatee, wearing a red polo shirt, sitting behind a young male student with curly red hair, wearing a white polo shirt. They are both looking at a laptop screen. The teacher is smiling slightly. The background is a bright, out-of-focus indoor setting with large windows.

*Action for
Children*

Above and beyond

How teachers fill gaps in the
system to keep children learning

Contents

Executive summary	<u>3</u>
Background	<u>5</u>
Methodology	<u>7</u>
Barriers to education	<u>8</u>
Interlinked issues at home	<u>10</u>
Schools doing what they can	<u>13</u>
Overall, support for children is limited	<u>16</u>
The impact felt by children	<u>18</u>
Conclusions	<u>21</u>
Recommendations	<u>22</u>

Safe and happy childhood



Action for Children protects and supports children and young people, providing practical and emotional care and support, ensuring their voices are heard, and campaigning to bring lasting improvements to their lives.



Executive summary

More and more children are struggling at school and the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers is widening.¹ While schools are doing what they can to support children with the limited resources they have, a lack of services outside school is preventing children from thriving.

We carried out a nationally representative **survey of over 7,000 teachers** to find out how many children are facing barriers to their education because of issues outside school, what the most common issues are and how they're impacting children's outcomes. We also conducted eight supplementary interviews to gather teacher's in-depth experiences.

Here's a summary of what we found.



There are a high number of children experiencing barriers to their education.

According to teachers, there could be **over 3.3 million children** experiencing barriers to their education because of issues outside school. **This is 37% of all pupils in England, or nine pupils in an average class of 25.** Teachers in the most deprived areas were nearly five times as likely to report that at least half of their students faced barriers to their education. All teachers interviewed felt the number of children experiencing challenges had increased over the past few years.



Many challenges children experience stem from issues at home and are interlinked.

The issues that children are experiencing are often at the family level including living in an unstable family environment or poverty. Those challenges are then often linked to mental health, behavioural and emotional challenges, but not in all cases. According to teachers, the top three most common issues faced by students are **living in an unstable family environment (reported by 66% of teachers), behavioural or emotional issues (64%) and mental health challenges (53%). Living in poverty was mentioned by two-thirds of teachers in schools in the most deprived areas.**



Schools are doing what they can to help children experiencing barriers.

They are providing a range of support with limited resources including learning interventions, basic essentials (such as food and clothing) and wellbeing support. To support children's development, teachers are also supporting families – including **being the first 'port of call' for parents** who don't know where else to get help. Intervening in often complex family situations goes beyond a teacher's remit, can be extremely challenging and risks compromising their role.



Overall, support for children is limited.

Teachers reported having **limited capacity, resources, and skillsets** to support students experiencing issues outside school. They also commented on a lack of support from external agencies which are also overburdened, have high thresholds and long waiting lists. Teachers felt the support on offer was insufficient to deal with the rising tide of need, although they did share some positive stories. Better relationships with external agencies to help support children was highlighted as an area where improvement is needed.



The impact of this is ultimately felt by children.

Just 2% of teachers felt that all their students experiencing barriers would reach their expected grades or level of achievement by the end of this academic year. The additional work required to support children experiencing challenges outside school hinders teachers' abilities to teach – and this has an impact on all children. Teachers discussed having to address children's basic needs before they can teach the curriculum, how supporting children often eats into their planning and break times, and how it can be emotionally taxing.

For too long, children's and education policy has been too narrowly focused on what is happening in schools. It has failed to address issues that lie beyond the school gates, which have a significant impact on children's ability to arrive at school happy, healthy, and ready to learn. Schools alone cannot support the range of needs that children have.

We recommend the government should:

- 1** Introduce a legal duty on local authorities to provide early help backed by significant funding.
- 2** That statutory duty should include the provision of multi-disciplinary family help teams.
- 3** Promote the use of family liaison officers in schools by creating best practice guidance for the role.
- 4** Commit to a timetable for making education a fourth statutory safeguarding partner in England.
- 5** Support all local authorities to integrate their early help, early intervention, and family services so there's 'one front door', building on the Family Hub model. This should include sufficient funding, a long-term vision and the sharing of best practice and learning.

Background

All children need their social, emotional, and physical needs met to be able to create a firm foundation on which to experience a happy childhood and achieve their full potential. But an increasing number of children are not having these needs met, which poses barriers to their education.

The challenges that make it more difficult for children to do well at school are well known and include:

Poverty

Nearly one in three children in England are now living in poverty.ⁱⁱ Families with children are more likely to be experiencing financial hardship because of the cost of living crisis, which can have a significant impact on children's health and educational outcomes.ⁱⁱⁱ Disadvantaged students are less likely than their peers to do well at school and this gap is widening.^{iv}

Mental health challenges

About one in five children aged 8-16 years old are now estimated to suffer from a 'probable mental health disorder'. These children are much less likely to enjoy learning at school than their peers who are unlikely to have a mental health disorder (35% compared with 71%) and more likely to miss more than 15 days of school (11% compared with 2%).^v As many as one in three children live with at least one parent reporting emotional distress, having risen from one in four children in 2014/15.^{vi} Parental mental health issues put children at an increased risk of developing behavioural and emotional issues, anxiety or depression in later childhood or adulthood.^{vii}

Behavioural challenges

The most common reason for being suspended or excluded from school is for persistent disruptive behaviour. Children on free school meals (FSM) or with special educational needs (SEN) are much more likely to be suspended than their peers not on FSM or without a SEN. The number of children suspended from school has risen by 39% since before the pandemic (autumn term 2019/20) and the number permanently excluded has now reached the pre-pandemic peak (autumn term 2017/18) of over 3,000 pupils.^{viii}

School absence

Over 1.5 million children missed 10% or more of school in the academic year 2022/23, representing 21% of students, and 150,000 children missed 50% or more of school – a figure that has more than doubled since before the pandemic.^x While school absence can be for many reasons, mental health issues and a lack SEN support are the most cited.^x

Services that support children and young people have not been able to keep pace with these rising needs and are overstretched. Waiting times for children's mental health services vary considerably across the country – with a high of over 11 weeks (80 days) in Sunderland, compared to around two weeks in Leicester City and West Leicestershire.^{xi} Services that support children are also patchy. By 2020, local authorities in London and Yorkshire and the Humber were spending almost double that of their West Midlands counterparts on early help services¹ – equivalent to an extra £90 per child.^{xii} And some services and programmes have been cut altogether. This includes the National Tutoring Programme, aimed at narrowing the attainment gap and improving the academic outcomes of disadvantaged pupils.

1. Early help services are part of Local Authority children's services and are designed to support children and families experiencing challenges as soon as they arise. This may include parenting support, stay and play groups or disability support.

Children's rising needs and the demand for services has not escaped political focus. All political parties want to see a sustained increase in school outcomes and recognise education is a key driver of opportunity, social mobility, and long-term economic prosperity. In recent years there have been some welcome efforts by government to improve support for children outside the classroom, such as the expansion of mental health support services in schools^{xiii} and the roll out of Family Hubs.^{xiv}

Efforts to improve support for children outside the classroom has also included plans to tackle the rise of absenteeism. The Conservatives announced a wider roll out of their attendance hubs (to total 32 and cover 2,000 schools) which offer support to families and pupils (as well as increasing fines for unauthorised absences and making schools report their daily attendance registers). Labour state their plan starts with additional mental health counsellors in secondary schools, mental health hubs in every community and universal free breakfast clubs for every primary school pupil. These measures go some way to acknowledging the issues outside school that may be posing barriers to children's education, but fail to address the need for a system-wide solution.

While the government has committed to reforming various parts of the system in recent years – including special educational needs and disability (SEND) services and alternative provision,^{xv} schools^{xvi} and children's social care^{xvii} – actual reform has been slow and inconsistent. While awaiting reform, little has been done to shore up these pivotal systems and services that support children's development and outcomes such that demand continues to outstrip supply.

In this general election year, it's vital that all political parties focus on children. The system simply isn't working, and that's hurting children and families. Improving children's outcomes is the key to them fulfilling their potential, and this must include investment in the services that help children be ready to learn.

Methodology

Polling

Polling was carried out using Teacher Tapp, a daily survey app for teachers in England. We asked three questions that were live on the app for 24 hours on Tuesday 30 January 2024. These were:

1. *Think of the last class you taught - how many students face barriers to their education because of issues outside school?*
2. *Thinking of those students that face barriers to their education because of issues outside school, what are the most common issues? (pick three)*
3. *Thinking of those students that face barriers to their education because of issues experienced outside school, how many will reach their expected grade/level of achievement by the end of this academic year?*

We received over 7,000 responses to each question. The results were weighted by Teacher Tapp to provide a representative sample of national teacher and school demographics. The sample includes primary and secondary school teachers, teaching children from the age of four to 18 years old. Participants are cross-checked against government databases by Teacher Tapp to confirm they are a teacher; non-teacher responses are removed. Participants were not aware that the questions were commissioned by Action for Children.

Supplementary interviews

Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted between Monday 5 and Wednesday 14 February 2024. The selection criteria were current teaching staff (teachers or teaching assistants) working in primary or secondary education in mainstream or special schools in England. Participants included:

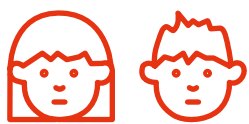
- Seven teachers and one teaching assistant with a range of teaching experience from two to over 30 years.
- Four working in secondary schools and four in primary schools – all were state-funded mixed schools.
- Five women and three men.
- Teachers from an equal mix of urban and rural communities with three based in the south-west of England, two in the east, one in the south-east, one in the north-east and one in Yorkshire and the Humber.

We asked the teaching staff about their experience working with children that face barriers to their education because of issues outside school, and what support their school offers, is available locally, is currently working well, and how this impacts their role and children's outcomes. Interview transcripts were analysed thematically.

The impact of poverty

There's abundant evidence that children growing up in poverty are more likely to have poorer developmental, educational, health and employment outcomes. Findings from this research show poverty is a common underlying factor for children experiencing barriers to their education. While we report on these findings and understand the substantial impact poverty has on children's outcomes, it is not a focus of this report.

At Action for Children, we're campaigning for an end to child poverty. We call on all political parties to commit to a bold strategy with two goals in mind: **immediate action to shore up the basic adequacy of the system, and a wider programme of reform aimed at tackling barriers to work and opportunity.** That means investing in Universal Credit so that families can at least meet their essential needs, and scrapping the Benefit Cap and Two-Child Limit policies that are driving high and deepening levels of child poverty. It also means better policies to support families to overcome the barriers they face, so that work offers a more reliable route out of hardship.^{xviii}



There are a high number of children experiencing barriers to their education

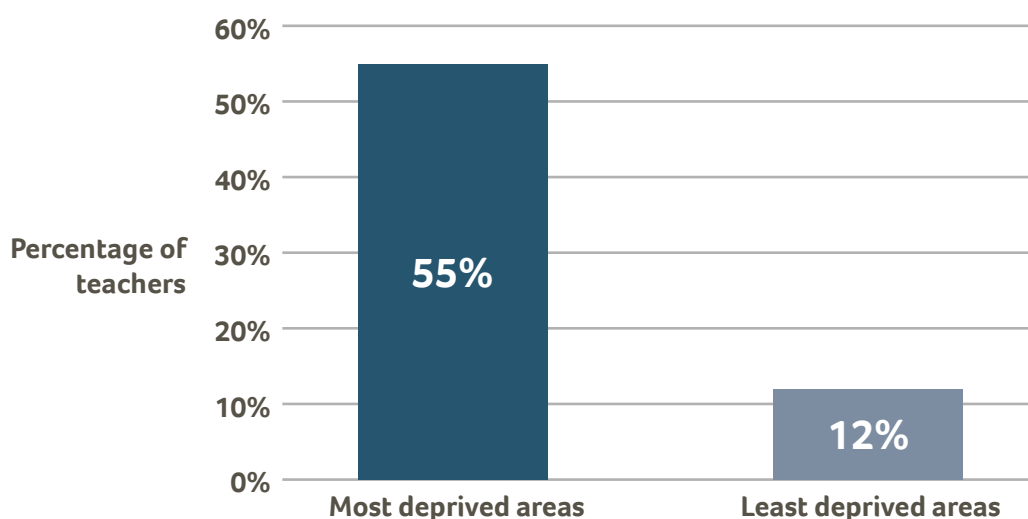
From the survey findings, we estimate just over 3.3 million children could be facing barriers to their education because of issues outside school.² That's over nine children in an average class of 25.

Table 1: The proportion of pupils who, in the last class teachers taught, face barriers to their education because of issues outside school.

	% of teacher respondents	Estimated number of pupils
None	5%	0
Around 10%	32%	379,375
Around a quarter	28%	831,422
Around half	14%	849,312
Around three-quarters	8%	748,588
All of them	4%	500,350
I don't know	6%	N/A
Not relevant / cannot answer	3%	N/A
Total	100%	3,309,067

Teachers in schools in more deprived areas³ were nearly five times more likely to report that at least half of their students face barriers because of issues outside school, compared with teachers in schools in the least deprived areas (55% vs 12%). This deprivation gradient, of children in more deprived areas being more likely to be experiencing challenges, was also seen in the geographical split of the data.

Figure 1: Percentage of teachers reporting over half their students face barriers to their education.

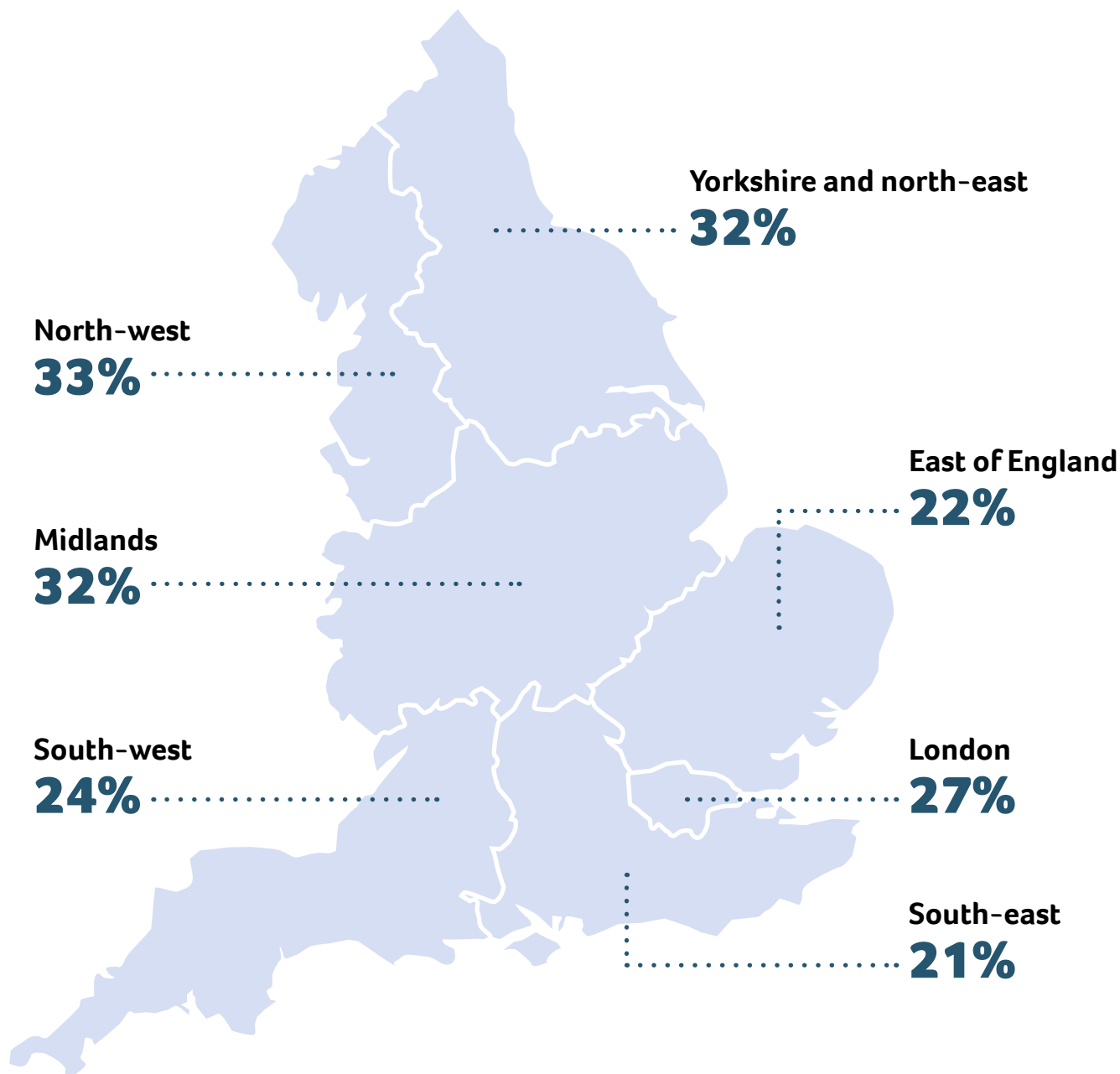


2. Calculated using the latest number of full-time equivalent teachers (source data: [School workforce in England](#)), number of pupils in England and based on an average class of 25.4 pupils (source data: [Schools, pupils and their characteristics](#)).

3. Level of depravity is measured here by the proportion of students eligible to receive FSMs. The most deprived areas are defined as being in the top quartile for FSMs, and the least deprived areas the bottom quartile.

Teachers in the midlands and the north were more likely than teachers in the south and the east to report that at least half of their pupils were experiencing barriers.

Figure 2: The percentage of teachers that reported at least half their students in the last class they taught face barriers to their education because of issues outside school by region.



Increasing levels of need

All teachers interviewed felt the number of students experiencing barriers had increased, with one teacher commenting that it had “absolutely skyrocketed”. Teachers felt that the pandemic has had an adverse effect on students’ attendance, behaviour, and wellbeing, and how the impact of lost learning is still being felt in the classroom. Primary school teachers commented that they are seeing a larger number of children with lower than expected social, emotional, and physical development. This includes a higher number of children still in nappies – with one teacher sharing they were still changing the nappies of children in a year two class (of six and seven-year-olds). The cost of living crisis was also mentioned as putting additional pressure on families.



Many challenges children experience stem from issues at home and are interlinked

Teachers spoke about the broad range of issues a child might be facing and how they can overlap and intersect. Teachers described some issues as causes of children’s barriers to education, while others were described as symptoms. Causes of barriers included living in an unstable family environment and poverty, while mental health challenges and behavioural and emotional issues were often described as expressions of a child or young person dealing with challenges outside school, but this was not the case for all children.

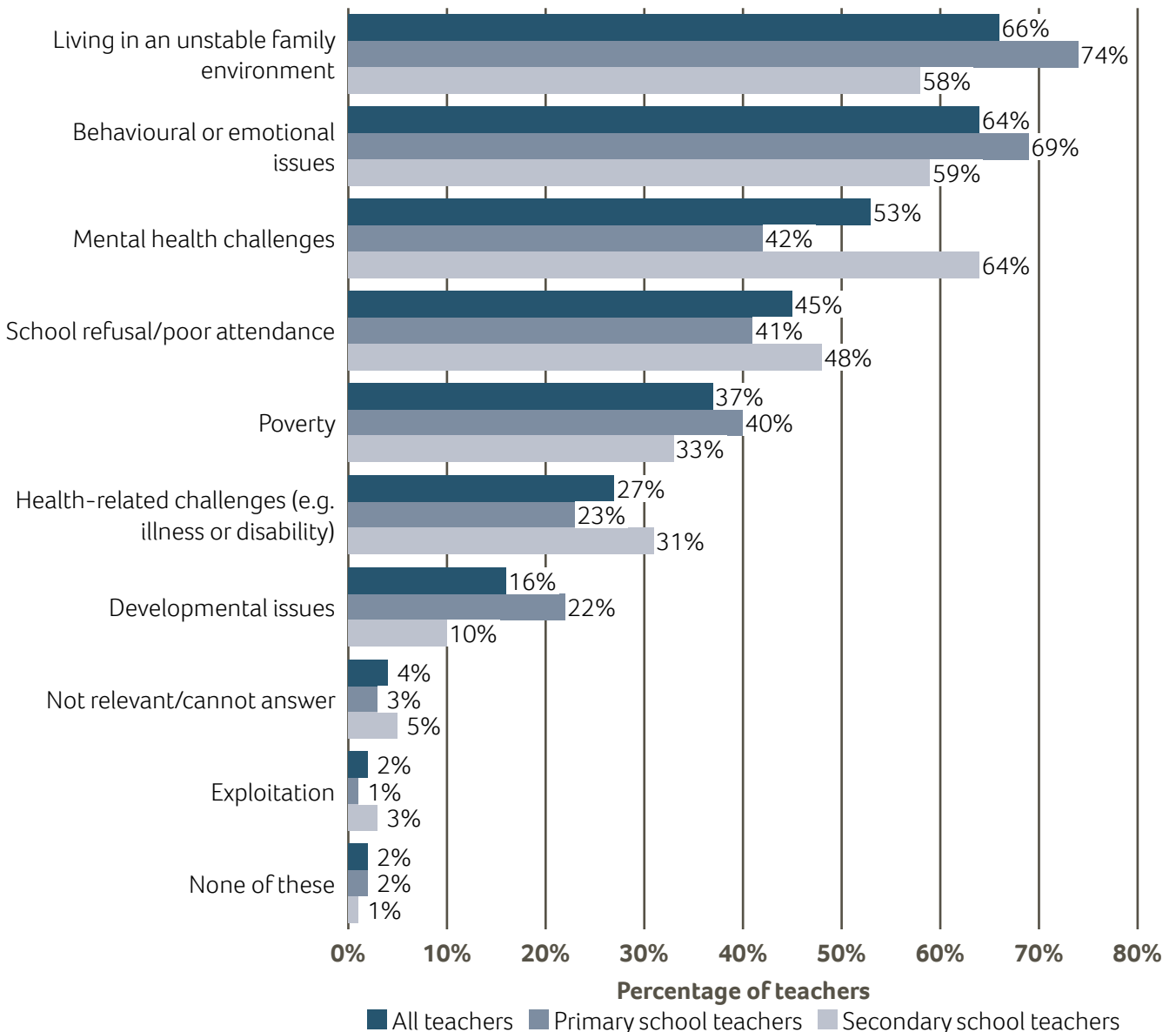
.....

“ *In year seven, [a student] really took a dip and hasn’t really recovered from that... my knowledge of what’s going on at home is limited, but Dad left the family home and mum’s brought in a new partner. [Student] doesn’t like stepdad and she’s just very angry as a result... She’s struggling to deal with that sort of social stuff at home... she was placed into internal suspension at school because of her behaviour.*

Secondary school teacher

.....

Figure 3: Most common issues children are experiencing outside school



Unstable family environment

Living in an unstable family environment was the most commonly occurring issue teachers reported children were experiencing. Primary school teachers (74%) were more likely than secondary school teachers (58%) to report living in an unstable family environment as one of the top three issues. When talking about issues relating to living in an unstable family environment, the teachers interviewed mentioned parental conflict and separation, trauma, bereavement, moving around a lot, a lack of parental support or engagement with school and parental mental health issues. As one teacher shared:

.....

“ *This child was coming to school in uniform that hadn't been washed in a while... there was lots of conversations with home. I think one of the things that happened was that parent had a child around this time, so a newborn... this child is finding that quite challenging to deal with... They never had their homework done. I think it's because parent wasn't checking at home, they had a lot on their plate with a newborn and being the only adult.*

Secondary school teacher

.....

Behavioural and emotional issues

Behavioural and emotional issues were reported by 64% of teachers as being one of the most common challenges posing barriers to children's education. Teachers explained how behavioural or emotional issues among children often seemed to stem from issues experienced at the family level.

.....

“ *Where something's happened, you know, the previous night, it might have been that the social services have had to come over. They've not slept well, they don't get breakfast... They switch off because they don't really fancy doing maths today. They'd come to the lesson, they would draw on the table, they would spin around on a spinny chair in the corner of the room rather than sit in their seat and then they'd wander out 15 minutes in.*

Secondary school teacher

.....

Mental health problems

Mental health challenges were raised by over half of teachers (53%). They were raised by more secondary teachers than primary teachers, although 42% of primary teachers still raised this as a concern, compared to 64% of secondary teachers. The mental health and wellbeing of students was mentioned by all the teachers we interviewed – particularly, increased feelings of anxiousness among students.

Teachers commented that feelings of anxiousness seemed to have got worse since the pandemic but felt that it was on the rise before. Factors like social media use, online bullying, and the pressure to do well at school were mentioned as possible contributing factors. Teachers commented how exams are very high stakes and schools themselves are under a lot of pressure for students to do well. They also shared how they felt the pandemic and changes to learning had resulted in low mental resilience amongst students, with some finding it difficult to engage in class or extracurricular activities.

.....

“ *Some students are really scared of being kind of othered or picked out as failing.*

Secondary school teacher

.....

“ *I am organising a trip... [one student] has since been worried about it every night, she's feeling sick every time she thinks about it, she doesn't want to be away from home because she's just anxious all the time.*

Secondary school teacher

.....

Feelings of anxiety were noted in some cases, but not all, as stemming from parent’s feelings of anxiousness. Anxiousness in parents was attributed by teachers to the rise in cost of living.

.....
“ I feel like everyone is struggling... and I’ve noticed that the parents that have got anxiety, their children have anxiety. They almost mirror their parents’ mood.
Primary school teacher

School refusal and absence

Mental health issues were also mentioned by teachers in relation to school refusal and poor attendance. School refusal is often because the child is feeling anxious about some aspect of school life. Other reasons reported by teachers included behavioural or emotional issues, parental attitudes to school and youth violence. Nearly half of teachers (45%) in our survey said school refusal was one of the three most common barriers to education. Slightly more secondary school teachers (48%) reported this than primary school teachers (41%). Teachers felt that children who were unable to participate in lessons, found it increasingly difficult to catch-up and that this perpetuated their disengagement.

.....
“ They’ve missed a few weeks here or a few weeks there for various reasons within their families, and then you notice that they’ve got those gaps.
Primary school teacher

Poverty

Poverty was mentioned by 37% of teachers that responded to our survey. Nearly three times more teachers (66%) in schools in the most deprived areas said poverty was a barrier for their students, compared to teachers in the least deprived areas (23%). Teachers in the north-west (44%), Yorkshire and the north-east (42%), midlands (40%), and London (39%) were more likely to report poverty as a barrier to education, compared to the south-west (35%), east (33%) and south-east (30%) of England.

In our interviews, the theme of poverty often intersected with other issues like parental mental health, violence in the home, poor and unstable accommodation, and substance misuse. These contributing factors make it more difficult for children to engage in learning including attending school, arriving on time, or doing their homework. As one teacher shared:

.....
“ She is like a little waif and stray, really. Her mum was showing signs of not eating, a lot of mental health, had her hood up all the time, a mask on and was just, you could just see her going more into it like a depressed state. Her little girl was coming in with shoes that had holes in, and she didn’t have her PE kit, and she’d never have her breakfast, attendance was bad. She’d do her hair by herself and had to wake herself up in the morning... it escalated that the partner was shouting at mum. So there’s a bit of domestic violence going on and [mum] was saying that she can’t do anything right. They did both work, but I don’t think they’re necessarily on that sort of line where they’re referred to the foodbank, but they’re just scraping by, which all seems so unfair because they do work, but they’re just scraping by and they couldn’t afford shoes, couldn’t afford anything.
Primary school teacher



Schools are doing what they can to help children experiencing barriers

Support in schools

Teachers mentioned a wide range of support and initiatives available for children experiencing barriers to their education because of issues outside school. That included:

- Providing food including free breakfasts, healthy snacks, and food bank parcels for families.
- Providing clothing for children where their current clothes had worn out, weren't appropriate or didn't fit them anymore.
- Completing welfare checks and home visits when they had concerns about a child.
- Behavioural interventions such as alternative provision within schools, detentions, and isolations.
- Mental health and wellbeing support including pastoral teams, safe spaces, 'feeling sticks' and good personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education.
- Educational interventions including after school study, learning support and one-to-one sessions.

Support from external agencies

Teachers discussed the support they can access from agencies outside school. This included alternative provision, special educational needs assessments, counsellors, community groups and speech and language therapists. But generally, teachers found getting this support for children difficult, particularly from child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS).

.....

“ *It's hard to know what to do without huge changes to adolescent mental health services. CAMHS and things are just so overwhelmed, it's something which comes up again and again, you put a CAMHS referral in, but it's gonna be two years [until they are assessed].*

Secondary school teacher

.....

In some areas, teachers were feeling the strain of the loss of external services for children. This included services for toddlers, up to early adulthood.

.....

“ *Mother and toddler groups have stopped since COVID... Some parents don't realise when they should be potty training or not having a dummy to help [children] with their speech or eating certain foods or using a knife and fork.*

Primary school teacher

.....

.....

“ *Services that would have been there or just places for young people have gone.*

Secondary school teacher

.....

Teachers commented how their schools are trying to make up for the loss of services for children and families. This included running parenting support groups on top of their usual teaching roles.

.....

“ *I do family Friday sessions [after school]. The parents come in with the child and we do the activity and it’s just me modelling to the parents how to interact with their child... the children love it and it’s very informal. I’m not dictating anything. It’s just, you know, a fun session for them to spend time with their child.*

Primary school teacher

.....

Variation in support

What support was on offer varied between schools and was dependent on funding and capacity within the school and local area services. This meant that some schools were reliant on volunteers to support children experiencing barriers to their education.

.....

“ *We’re relying on the goodness of people that have retired from their jobs to help some children who really need it.*

Primary school teacher

.....

It also varied between primary and secondary schools. Teachers at secondary schools talked about referring children onto different teams, such as pastoral support, and overall felt less involved in providing support to children experiencing barriers. Secondary school teachers commented that, because of the referral process, they sometimes didn’t know whether support had been put in place for a child. Whereas teachers at primary schools were more likely to be involved in delivering support. This is likely due to primary schools generally being smaller than secondary schools and primary school teachers spending more time with a smaller number of pupils.

Working with families

Primary school teachers were more likely to be offering support to family members, in addition to their students. All teachers talked about the efforts they make to engage parents with school, develop good relationships with them and how these are key to supporting students academically.

.....

“ *I just want a happy home because a happy home is a happy child and then they will flourish.*

Primary school teacher

.....

One teacher reflected how these good relationships, combined with a lack of alternative services, often meant school was the “first port of call” for parents, if they needed help.

.....

“ *People just don’t know where to go... [we’re that] first port of call for parents because they’ve got a good relationship with us.*

Primary school teacher

.....



Working with families can be challenging for teachers. The sentiment of “we can only do so much” came up a lot when discussing the work teachers do with families. This was partly due to schools having limited power to engage with families who choose not to accept support or move schools. This was also due to their limited skillsets when dealing with complex family matters. In one case a teacher was providing marriage counselling and mental health support to a family, despite only receiving a small amount of training, because there was nowhere else for a family to get help.

.....

“ *I’ve ended up doing like marriage counselling and mental health things on suicidal thoughts... I’m really not qualified for this, but I’m just sitting and talking and I’m listening and trying to signpost them to certain places.*

Primary school teacher

.....

Delving into family matters can also put teachers in a compromising position and risks potentially undermining their role as a teacher.

.....

“ *We want to help you, and we’re getting really involved in your home life and you’re finding that quite sort of abrasive.*

Primary school teacher

.....



Overall, support for children is limited

Teachers felt the support on offer to address the challenges children are experiencing outside school was insufficient, despite sharing some positive stories. They were frustrated and unhappy with the limited resources – especially as the need to intervene is often time sensitive.

.....
“ I remember thinking, why aren't they doing something with him like now is a critical moment. If you can catch him now, you can keep him in. But once those students have that block of lost time, even if they can access the same support later, they can't make up for the lost time, so it's very hard to then bring them back in. Secondary school teacher

High thresholds and long waiting lists

Due to a lack of services around schools and an increasing level of need, teachers felt that thresholds for accessing support or getting assessed are very high. That means lots of children are missing out. Teachers described there being a 'void' in support and that opportunities to provide support are 'rare'.

Long waiting lists for diagnoses and assessments were described as frustrating, as they often act as a key to unlock additional funding or support for a child.

.....
“ They might not be making the progress or getting achievements that they could with that additional support because we don't, you know, without that diagnosis there are limitations. Secondary school teacher

.....
“ Children clearly have additional needs, but we can't get an assessment because it's virtually impossible to get an assessment and a diagnosis through school. It baffles me that anybody actually manages to ever achieve it because it's impossible. Primary school teacher

School's ability to respond to children's additional needs

A school's ability to respond to children's needs varied considerably and depended on the accessibility of external agencies and available funding. One teacher commented that their school was able to fund additional support for one student, while they were waiting for a referral to come through. While another shared a story of a boy diagnosed with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) that was unable to have a teaching assistant (TA) in lessons due to none being available, despite this being outlined in their plan.

.....
“ He's supposed to have a TA with him in every single lesson. But actually, we are really struggling to hire enough TAs to resource the need. Secondary school teacher

Teachers also reflected on the demographic of teaching staff (being, in their view, predominantly white middle class) and pastoral teams (being predominantly women) limiting students' ability to relate to them and offer

effective support. This particularly came up in relation to supporting children from less affluent or Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds. Teachers want stronger relationships with external agencies, including access to more early intervention services to help address student's needs before they escalate, and for there to be more capacity within external services for them to lean on to support children.

Some positive outcomes

Some teachers feel the support offered to children is making a difference, and school felt like the right place to offer some interventions for children, in a safe and familiar setting. As teachers spend the most time with children than any other professional, they can notice when issues start to arise and triage children to get the right support they need.

.....

“ I remember one girl had written like a note in her book saying something about like not wanting to be here anymore, something like that. And so we took her aside, she ended up like having a big cry, she was really struggling. We got her someone to speak to [at school]. She was like a different child after that.
Secondary school teacher

.....

Action for Children's Blues Programme

The **Blues Programme** is an internationally acclaimed wellbeing programme for young people aged 13-19 years old. It's designed to help young people who are showing early signs of needing help with their mental health. Over six weeks, it teaches emotional resilience, and reduces low mood and anxious thoughts. Crucially, it gets teenagers talking.

So far, we've delivered The Blues Programme in over 350 schools, to more than 13,100 young people. Outcomes include:



77%

of students say it improved their confidence.



68%

of students say it improved their relationships with family and friends.



69%

of students say it improved their relationships in school.



73%

of students say it improved their self-esteem.



72%

of students say it improved their involvement in learning.



78%

feel comfortable talking about their mental health.

.....

“ *The knowledge that there is a service that will come into school and support students is invaluable. I know that we would be lost without it.*
Teacher at a school taking part in the Blues Programme

.....



The impact of this is ultimately felt by children

Impact on children’s attainment

Teachers aren’t confident that children facing barriers will achieve their best outcomes. According to our survey, just 2% of teachers believe all their students facing barriers to education outside school will reach their expected grade by the end of this academic year. Around a third (36%) felt that less than half of their students facing barriers would reach their expected grade.

Table 2: Proportion of children facing barriers to their education that teachers think will reach their expected grade/level of achievement.

Proportion of children facing barriers	% of teacher respondents
None	8%
Around 10%	13%
Around a quarter	15%
Around half	25%
Around three-quarters	14%
All of them	2%
I don't know	16%
Not relevant / cannot answer	6%
Total	100%

Teachers commented that for children facing barriers to their education because of issues outside school, their education can take a back seat.

.....

“ *I had a young man who was in for a month really good, really engaged, hasn’t come in since and he knows wherever he is that if he comes in now, he’s just going to feel awful. So he doesn’t come in and yeah, he won’t get any GCSEs and that would be a crying shame because he was very bright, very capable.*

Secondary school teacher

.....

Impact on teaching

Teachers discussed how helping children facing barriers to their education to be ready to learn, hindered their ability to teach. This has an impact on all children. Teaching staff are being diverted from their teaching roles as they seek to address the social, emotional, and physical needs of their students.

.....

“ *You fight a moral battle of do I spend some time and energy and patience trying to address this one individual or have I got to focus on the other 29 in the class?*

Secondary school teacher

.....



.....

“ *A lot of our children are very tactile, a lot of them either hold your hand, like a comfort thing... I sometimes feel like I spend more time filling that gap, that need of that contact and cuddles, than actually teaching phonics, letters and maths.*

Primary school teacher

.....

The above example is from an infant setting where certain physical contact, such as cuddles, is often permitted between students and teachers.

Limited capacity of teachers

A recurring theme throughout the interviews was the time it takes to support children facing challenges outside school, on top of teacher's other responsibilities. While teachers play an important role in protecting and promoting the welfare of children, the increased level of need and lack of external support means it's taking up more of their time. Teachers talked about the planning required to cater for children's additional needs in the classroom. While also sharing how supporting children facing barriers outside school often eats into their planning, preparation and assessment (PPA) and break times. Responding to children's needs in and out of lessons was described as intense. Reflecting on their experience supporting a student that was struggling to attend school, one teacher shared:

.....

“ *If I had to estimate the amount of time it took me to support him, it would obviously vary, but it would be hours every week to phone home, collect the work, bring it to him, then cajoling him to do some of it.*

Secondary school teacher

.....

Teachers commented on how they care for their pupils and want them to do well. They spoke about the importance of building trusted relationships with students and parents, and how having an adult children can trust in school helps keep them safe and promote their welfare. However, they expressed the need for more staff to create capacity and take the pressure off teaching staff.

Navigating the system

Teachers found navigating the system to get the right support for children time consuming. This included completing paperwork, trying to find the right service or person to speak to, chasing that service up and arranging meetings to get support put in place. The bureaucracy of accessing support was frustrating for teachers that had to watch children struggle, without the support they need.

.....

“ *I'll check in with [a parent] six weeks later for a review and I'll say, oh, have you had that form back yet and they'll go, oh, no, we haven't. And you've got to make a joke of it and be like, oh, well, you know, they are really slow. They're trying their hardest. They're just not very fast. And it's like deep down, come on, come help us. We're trying our hardest. This is school, but there's only so much we can do before it kind of goes out of our hands.*

Secondary school teacher

.....

Emotionally taxing

Supporting children that are experiencing barriers because of issues outside school is also taking an emotional toll on teachers. Teachers reported feeling worried, exhausted, upset, helpless and frustrated having to support children with limited resources, and little external help.

.....

“ *When you're not with them you're worrying about them thinking, even though I feel like I'm at capacity, if I did this extra thing that could really make a difference.*

Secondary school teacher

.....

One teacher also shared concerns about their own safety when out in the local community because the support they were providing at school involved intervening in family matters.

.....

“ *You don't know what [this parent] is going to do... that can be quite scary because we didn't sign up to that to work in education, but [parents] just don't have that support outside school, so they come to us.*

Primary school teacher

.....

Conclusions

This research shows how schools are stepping in where other services and systems are failing and demonstrates the impact this is having on both pupils and teachers. We estimate there could be over 3.3 million children facing barriers to their education because of issues outside school. This is around 37% of all pupils suggesting more children may be struggling than would have previously been eligible for support through government programmes such as Supporting Families.⁴

The research also shows that many of the issues that children are experiencing exist at the family level. It is beyond a teacher's remit to get involved in matters relating to parental conflict, for example, but there is a lack of services for schools to lean on to help provide this support for children. Our previous research shows that the provision of early help is inconsistent and, too often, not a priority.^{xi} Local authorities are increasingly struggling to fund early help services and spending on early help has reduced by 45% over the last 12 years.^{xii} Most significantly, that means children and families aren't offered the early help that they need, and this is impacting children's ability to do well at school. Schools are doing what they can to make up for the gaps in provision, including running their own family support services, promoting the welfare of children, and trying to make sure they get the most out of their education. But this is constrained by the limited resources within schools and capacity and skillsets of teaching staff.

A lack of services for children is preventing them from getting the most out of school. Most teachers surveyed felt unconfident their students facing barriers would achieve their expected grades, highlighting the need for a different approach to effectively alleviate barriers for children and support them to do well. It's also putting strain on teachers. The work put into supporting children's emotional and social needs takes away from the time and energy they have to fulfil their role as teachers – and this affects all children.

There is an increased rate of teachers quitting the profession. This includes across all levels of experience – teachers with over ten years' experience now have the lowest retention rates since 2010.^{xi} A high workload is the top reason teachers give for leaving the profession^{xii} and increased support from other agencies has been identified as a key enabler to helping reduce the workload of teachers.^{xiii}

It's right that the government and opposition are both focused on making sure more children do well at school. Doing well at school means children can get higher paying jobs, have higher standards of living, and become happier and healthier adults. But we can't ignore the vital role other services play in allowing children to arrive at school happy, healthy, and ready to learn. A system-wide solution is needed to build vital services around children, so they have the skills and capacity to meet children's needs and create closer working relationships with schools.

4. Read more about Supporting Families [here](#).

Recommendations

The early help system simply isn't working and that's hurting children and families. There needs to be a clear legal duty to provide early help, backed by sufficient funding, so more children reach their potential at school and become thriving adults.

The government should:

- 1** Introduce a legal duty on local authorities to provide early help, backed by significant funding, to ensure there is sufficient provision of early help services to meet local need. This assessment of need could be based on the findings of a Joint Strategic Needs Assessment or other form of demand-scoping exercise.
- 2** That statutory duty should include the provision of multi-disciplinary family help teams designed to support families and offer targeted early help. These teams should include family liaison officers that are based in schools.
- 3** Promote the use of family liaison officers in schools by creating best practice guidance on the key skills and responsibilities required for the role, how schools can recruit for it and how it could be funded. Family liaison officers should have the skills and capacity to work with whole families and foster partnerships between families, schools, and communities to help children access the right support at the right time.
- 4** Commit to a timetable for making education a fourth statutory safeguarding partner in England to strengthen the working relationship between the other statutory safeguarding partners (health, local authorities and police) and schools. In doing this, schools should be provided with sufficient funding, support and accountability to make this effective, as indicated in Working Together 2023.
- 5** Support all local authorities to integrate their early help, early intervention, and family services so there's 'one front door', building on the Family Hub model, such that all families know where to go to access help, should they need it. This should include sufficient funding, a long-term vision and the sharing of best practice and learning.

References

- i Education Policy Institute 2023 [Annual Report 2023](#)
- ii HM Government 2024 [Households Below Average Income: an analysis of the UK income distribution: FYE 1995 to FYE 2023](#) Department for Work & Pensions
- iii Action for Children 2023 [A cost of children crisis?](#)
- iv Education Policy Institute 2023 [Annual Report 2023](#)
- v NHS Digital 2023 [Mental Health of Children and Young People 2023](#)
- vi Office for Health Improvement and Disparities 2024 [Statistical commentary: children living with parents in emotional distress, March 2022 update](#)
- vii Kamis C 2021 [The long-term impact of parental mental health on children's distress trajectories in adulthood](#) *Society and Mental Health* 11(1) 54-68
- viii Department for Education 2023 [Suspensions and permanent exclusions in England](#)
- ix Department for Education 2023 [Pupil absence in schools in England](#)
- x Children's Commissioner for England 2023 [Missing children, missing grades](#)
- xi McCurdy C and Murphy L 2024 [We've only just begun: action to improve young people's mental health, education and employment](#) The Health Foundation & Resolution Foundation
- xii Action for Children 2022 [Too little, too late: early help and early intervention spending in England](#)
- xiii HM Government 2018 [Government response to the consultation on transforming children and young people's mental health provision: a green paper and next steps](#) Department for Education and Department for Health and Social Care
- xiv HM Government 2022 [Family Hubs and Start for Life programme guide](#) Department for Education and Department for Health and Social Care
- xv HM Government 2023 [Special Educational Needs and Disabilities \(SEND\) and Alternative Provision \(AP\) Improvement Plan Right Support, Right Place, Right Time](#)
- xvi HM Government 2022 [Opportunity for all: strong schools with great teachers for your child](#)
- xvii Department for Education 2023 [Stable Homes, Built on Love: Implementation Strategy](#)
- xviii Action for Children 2024 [Child poverty and barriers to work](#)
- xix Action for Children 2022 [Too little, too late: early help and early intervention spending in England](#)
- xx Franklin J, Larkham J and Mansoor M (2023) [The well-worn path: children's services spending 2010-11 to 2021-22](#) Pro Bono Economics
- xxi Department for Education 2023 [School workforce in England](#)
- xxii Adams L et al. 2023 [Working lives of teachers and leaders – wave 1](#)
- xxiii Martin K et al. 2023 [Supporting the recruitment and retention of teachers in schools with high proportions of disadvantaged pupils: understanding current practice around managing teacher workload](#) Education Endowment Foundation & National Foundation for Educational



Action for Children

3 The Boulevard
Ascot Road
Watford
WD18 8AG

[actionforchildren.org.uk](https://www.actionforchildren.org.uk)

 /actionforchildren

 @actnforchildren

 @actionforchildrenuk