

Child Poverty in England & Wales: Survey Report

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Catholic Education
Service

The Catholic Bishops'
Conference of England
and Wales



Executive Summary



Child poverty is a pervasive issue affecting millions of families across the UK, with Catholic schools uniquely positioned at the intersection of education, faith, and community support. This report draws on insights from over 2,000 Catholic schools in England and Wales, presenting a comprehensive analysis of the challenges posed by poverty and the measures implemented to address them. It provides actionable recommendations for systemic change to better support vulnerable children and their families.

Key findings from our survey include:

- **Barriers to Learning:** Over 90% of our schools reported encountering families struggling with the cost of living, and 70% noted worsening conditions over the past year.
- **Mental Health Challenges:** 88% of schools observed a strong connection between poverty and poor mental health, with financial instability exacerbating stress, anxiety, and depression among pupils and their families.
- **School-Based Support:** Catholic schools are implementing a wide range of initiatives, including breakfast clubs, uniform support, food bank referrals, and the provision of essential supplies.

Catholic schools are uniquely well equipped to offer advice on and to comment on poverty in schools in England and Wales, because the schools have a diverse range of socio-economic backgrounds within their student body and significant experience working with faith leaders and community organisations. Based on this expertise and experience, we have provided five suggestions for helping schools tackle poverty.

1. Reform Free School Meal eligibility.
2. Work with the Catholic Community to Promote Free School Meal take-up.
3. Work with Faith Communities Already Supporting Families.
4. Remove the Two-Child Benefit Cap.
5. Implement Targeted Mental Health Interventions.



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Photo credit: St Thomas More Catholic Primary School,
Diocese of East Anglia

Introduction



The Catholic Church is the largest provider of secondary education and the second largest provider of primary education in England and Wales. According to the Catholic Education Service's 2024 census, there are 2,074 Catholic schools in England, comprising 10% of state-funded schools. These institutions educate 817,784 students, of whom 55% are Catholic.

Catholic schools are notably diverse, with nearly half of pupils coming from ethnic minorities (47%) and a quarter of staff, compared with national averages of 39% and 16%.

Approximately 21% of pupils in Catholic schools are eligible for Free School Meals (FSM), reflecting socioeconomic diversity. Historically influenced by waves of immigration, Catholic school communities are disproportionately located in urban areas, serving pupils from varied economic backgrounds, including a high proportion of English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners.

Just under a fifth of pupils in Catholic statutory education meet the highest national deprivation criteria, compared to a 12% England average. Similarly, a quarter fewer pupils from the most affluent areas attend Catholic schools, according to the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI).

While FSMs continue after household income rises above eligibility, many parents of pupils at Catholic schools cannot apply in the first place due to their immigration status or low-paid casual employment.

Beyond their educational mission, Catholic schools are often on the front lines of addressing child poverty, providing crucial support to families facing financial hardship.

With their strong ties to local parishes, diocesan Caritas organisations, and Catholic charities, these schools act as community anchors, offering not only education but also pastoral care, social services, and practical resources. Caritas Internationalis is a confederation of over 160 members, who operate at the grassroots all over the world, including in all of the dioceses in England and Wales.



Photo Credit: Mazur - CBCEW

Introduction



Surveying our schools

Child poverty continues to pose significant challenges within the Catholic school communities across the UK.

The Church's rich history of serving marginalised communities, coupled with its commitment to promoting human dignity, positions it as a vital partner in addressing child poverty and educational inequality. As institutions that educate a diverse pupil body—including significant numbers from ethnic minority backgrounds, families for whom English is not the first language, and economically disadvantaged households—Catholic schools offer first hand insight into the realities of child poverty.

In October 2024 we surveyed over 2,000 Catholic schools in England and Wales. This survey was conducted to assess the impact of child poverty on Catholic school communities and to evaluate the efficacy of current measures in supporting our affected families. Participants included 252 Catholic school leaders and staff members from dioceses across England and Wales, providing a comprehensive picture of how child poverty manifests itself within our schools.

Their insights highlight both the challenges Catholic schools face in addressing poverty and the opportunities for government intervention to alleviate these burdens. This lived experience, together with the Church's moral and ethical perspective, makes its voice indispensable in shaping policies that support vulnerable children.

The Impact of Poverty on Children in Catholic Schools



Extent of Poverty

Child poverty is a pervasive issue, with 99% of Catholic schools that responded to the survey encountering families struggling with poverty. Schools estimate that 39% of their pupils, on average, are experiencing poverty. This figure aligns with statistics from the Child Poverty Action Group, which estimates that 4.3 million children are growing up in poverty in the UK.¹ This widespread challenge places a significant burden on our schools, as (given the strength of our Catholic community) they are often the first point of support for struggling families.

Worsening Trends

The situation has worsened significantly within our schools over the past year, with 77% of schools observing an increase in child poverty. Of these, 39% described the situation as significantly worse. The trend in Catholic schools reflects national statistics indicating a sharp rise in the poverty rate, with 600,000 additional people entering poverty within the last year—marking the steepest increase in 30 years.^{2,3} Both within our schools and nationally, the rapid escalation in financial hardships has led to greater demand for school-based interventions, often stretching existing resources beyond capacity.

Barriers to Learning

The survey revealed that 98% of schools believe poverty creates significant barriers to learning. Common challenges our schools face include absenteeism, limited access to essential resources such as technology and uniforms, and the health-related consequences of poverty. Poor health in families, often exacerbated by inadequate living conditions, poses a serious barrier to consistent school attendance and academic performance.⁵ Addressing these barriers requires systemic interventions that go beyond the current capacity of our schools.

Mental Health Impact

A striking 88% of teachers identified a strong connection between poverty and poor mental health. Families have reported struggles with stress, anxiety, and depression to our school leaders, which are frequently exacerbated by financial instability. Our school leaders are aware that poverty is both a cause and a consequence of mental health challenges, shaped by the inequalities inherent in social, economic, and physical environments.⁶ The dual burden of poverty and mental health difficulties significantly impacts children's ability to thrive academically and socially.

39%

of pupils at Catholic schools are experiencing poverty

77%

of Catholic schools are seeing an increase in poverty

88%

of teachers in Catholic schools connect poverty and poor mental health

Support Provided by Catholic Schools

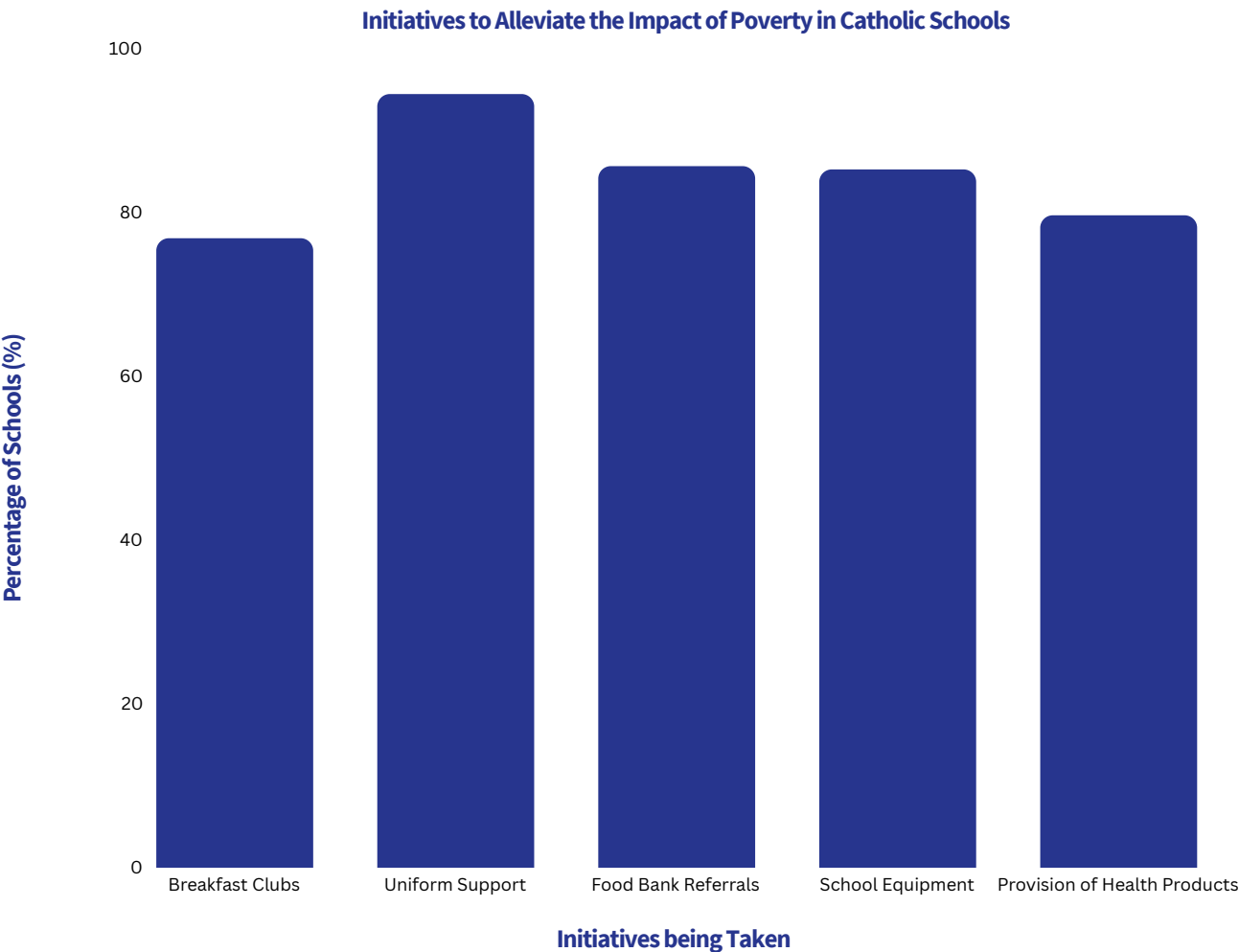


Alleviating the Effects of Poverty

Catholic schools have implemented a range of measures to alleviate the impact of poverty on our pupils and their families. Among the most common initiatives are breakfast clubs, which provide vital nutritional support while reducing food insecurity. Uniform support, provided schools ensures that pupils can attend school without the stigma of inadequate clothing. Additionally, our schools reported making referrals to food banks, while many also provide essential supplies such as laptops, sports kits, and health products.

As a result of these efforts, 90% of Catholic schools reported financial strain in delivering these services. The economic pressures faced by our schools reflect broader trends and highlights the urgent need for increased funding to support school-based poverty alleviation measures.

Catholic schools have stepped in as a critical line of defence against the impact of poverty on children and their families. The survey highlights the extensive range of measures our schools are implementing, despite the financial and operational challenges they face. These initiatives go beyond traditional educational roles, reflecting the growing need for Catholic schools to act as a safety net for their communities.



Support Provided by Catholic Schools



Breakfast Clubs

Breakfast clubs are a cornerstone of school-led poverty alleviation efforts, with 77% of Catholic schools reporting their provision. These clubs ensure that children start their day with a nutritious meal, which is vital for concentration and learning.

Research shows that children who receive a healthy breakfast perform better academically and socially. Additionally, breakfast clubs alleviate pressure on families in our communities struggling to afford food, particularly during the cost-of-living crisis.

“We target these children to make sure they have something to eat in the morning – we feel strongly that all children should have the same start, regardless of their family background or financial situation.”

*St Bernadette’s Catholic
Primary School*

These studies also suggest that for every £1 invested in providing free school meals, including breakfasts, £1.38 is returned to the economy through improved outcomes and reduced healthcare costs.⁸ Breakfast clubs also provide a social environment that fosters a sense of belonging and routine. Catholic schools have been providing breakfast clubs for pupils for many years and will continue to do so as part of their mission to support the most disadvantaged in society.

Uniform Support

Uniform support is one of the most common forms of assistance that Catholic schools provide, with 94% of schools doing so. Ensuring children have access to appropriate school uniforms reduces stigma and bullying, promoting a sense of equality among pupils. Many of the families in our communities have multiple children, and uniform support is especially critical for them, as the cost of uniforms can quickly become a financial burden.

Many Catholic schools operate uniform exchanges or second-hand sales to reduce waste and make uniforms more affordable.

Food Bank Referrals

Over 85% of our schools report referring families to food banks, highlighting the prevalence of food insecurity among their pupils. These referrals are often accompanied by pastoral care from our priests and teachers, as schools work to reduce the stigma associated with accessing food banks.

Catholic schools have developed partnerships with local charities and food distribution networks, often run by other Church organisations, to ensure families in need receive timely support.

Caritas Westminster, a social action agency, supports schools and families struggling with the cost-of-living crisis. They regularly help schools and parishes set up social action initiatives, helping schools run volunteer projects that assist community members most in need.

Support Provided by Catholic Schools



Provision of Essential Supplies

Catholic schools are increasingly providing essential supplies beyond food and clothing. Around 85% of respondents noted that they supply pupils with items such as pens, pencils, laptops, and sports kits. These measures help bridge the resource gap that often exists between low-income and more affluent families.

The pandemic highlighted the critical need for digital resources, as many children lacked devices or internet access for remote learning. Our schools continue to provide laptops and tablets to ensure pupils can participate fully in their education.

Our schools also supply health products, including period products, which are essential for maintaining dignity and attendance among girls.

Innovative Approaches to Supporting Families

Some Catholic schools have implemented creative strategies to support their communities. For example:

- **Parent Classes:** Some schools (37%) offer workshops for parents on topics such as financial literacy, nutrition, or accessing government benefits. These classes empower families to manage their circumstances more effectively.
- **Housing Assistance:** Approximately 35% of our schools provide some form of housing support, including connecting families with local authorities or charities to address homelessness and unstable living conditions.
- **Furniture Provision:** Schools also assist families in need by sourcing furniture, such as beds, to ensure children have a safe and comfortable place to sleep.

Catholic Schools as Community Anchors

Catholic schools increasingly function as community hubs, addressing not only educational but also social and economic challenges. This dual role highlights the need for additional resources and systemic support to ensure our schools can continue to meet these growing demands.

Catholic schools maintain strong connections with their local parishes, fostering a supportive community environment. Parishes collaborate with schools to organise liturgical events and provide spiritual guidance. Diocesan Caritas organisations and Catholic charities, such as St Vincent de Paul, play crucial roles in supporting schools. They provide resources, counselling services, and financial assistance to struggling families. These relationships enable Catholic schools to integrate faith-based values into their education and community outreach efforts, creating a robust network of support for vulnerable pupils and their families.

Financial Strain on Schools

The level of additional social provision provided by Catholic schools in response to the needs of their pupils, places an increasing demand on limited budgets. Therefore, schools often rely on external funding or donations to maintain these programmes. Teachers, priests, and administrative staff frequently act as informal social workers, coordinating with charities, managing food parcels, or addressing family crises.

While our schools are stepping up to fill the gaps left by broader systemic failings, their capacity to do so is finite. The critical role our schools play in mitigating the effects of child poverty underscores the importance of sustained investment and support from both government and the local community.

Breakfast Clubs: A Case Study in Support



For 13 years a free breakfast club in a Merseyside Catholic school has been helping tackle child poverty, improve concentration and – since the pandemic – boost attendance.

Two thirds of pupils at Our Lady Star of the Sea Catholic Primary School, in Seaforth, Archdiocese of Liverpool, are eligible for Free School Meals and the Pupil Premium, more than double the national average.

Each day every pupil from Reception to Year 6 are offered fruit, cereal, toast, baked beans and a bagel from 8am, as well as occasional porridge, and hot chocolate milk on cold days. This is supported through local partnerships with Magic Breakfast and Tesco arranged by Deanne Arden, the school's Business Manager.

She said: "We are in an area of high deprivation. They might arrive in school hungry, but they're not hungry for the rest of the morning, having health food at the start of the day. It helps them concentrate, but it also helps to get the children in school."

This has helped improve attendance since the pandemic, particularly from pupils with anxiety or emotional school avoidance behaviour, who appreciate the calming, social environment before classes and schoolwork begin.

Parents are grateful to drop off their child early so they can then make sure their older children get to secondary school on time. After hours Our Lady Star of the Sea also offers wraparound childcare to support parents.

Headteacher Claire Roberts said: "With the cost of living crisis, we know how hard it is for our working families, so the free breakfast club gives our parents the flexibility to go to work and to not worry about the costs of child care."

Further initiatives to relieve child poverty include a second-hand uniform service, while parents donate non-uniform clothes their children have outgrown which are then made available to others in need.

Pupils also receive vouchers from the parish branch of the St Vincent de Paul charity, with donations providing vouchers, toys and pyjamas for pupils, in addition to Free School Meal vouchers designed to provide food during school holidays.

Our Lady Star of the Sea has also received the national School of Sanctuary award for welcoming refugee and asylum seeker children.

Miss Arden said: "When we've had new people start and new arrivals new to the country, we've given them the uniform that we have here. If children come in not wearing a coat, we will give them a coat that's been donated to us."



Photo credit: Our Lady Star of the Sea Catholic Primary School, Archdiocese of Liverpool

Caritas Salford: A Case Study in Support



Supporting Children & Families in Poverty

Caritas Salford works in a range of ways to support children and families experiencing poverty across the Diocese of Salford. We know that experiences of poverty amongst children and families are prevalent across the diocese. We recently completed a survey of senior leaders of Catholic schools in the diocese, with a report due for publication in 2025, and the overwhelming majority of respondents said that the extent of poverty in their communities has increased in recent years, and highlighted how much it affects the educational outcomes of their students.

Work in Catholic Schools

Our School Service team work in schools across the diocese on a daily basis providing social work, counselling and therapy. We provide bespoke packages of support, including crisis interventions, safeguarding, emotional wellbeing and family support sessions. In 2023/24, we supported 1,463 children and young people through this service.

Our teams are increasingly connecting families with resources and support services, such as food banks, as teachers and parents report that many families are struggling to afford sufficient nutritious food. This shortage significantly impacts children's health and development, often leading to fatigue and poor growth, which in turn affects their educational performance.

The strain of navigating challenging personal and financial circumstances also takes a toll on parents, negatively influencing the mental health of children. Teachers and counsellors are increasingly addressing issues such as depression and low self-esteem, as children are not immune to the anxiety, pressures, and trauma caused by poverty.

Additionally, we have seen first-hand the profound impact of homelessness and the lack of suitable, affordable housing. A growing number of children are living in temporary accommodation, leading to frequent disruptions in their lives. This instability often means losing a consistent routine, having to change schools when housing is far from their current one or travel great distances, further affecting their education and their ability to form and maintain friendships.

Schools and families across the Diocese have access to our Bishop's Fund, which provides immediate crisis grants. Applications to the fund reveal that many children and families are struggling to meet basic living costs.

Requests for food vouchers are rising, along with support for essential items like white goods. One of the most alarming trends is the increasing number of social workers and teachers seeking help to secure beds or mattresses for children. Many children are growing up without a proper place to sleep, a basic necessity. This lack of adequate sleeping arrangements—whether it's sharing a bed, sleeping in cold homes, or using makeshift surfaces—puts children at significant risk, as proper sleep is vital for their well-being and development.

Work in Communities: The Lalley Centre

We also support children and families in poverty through the Caritas Lalley Centre, which offers a community pantry, allotment, and wrap-around services. Between September 2023 and August 2024, 199 families with children accessed the centre for help with food, financial hardship, and energy costs. Demand remains high, and many families face growing debt, sometimes falling prey to unregulated lenders, highlighting the urgent need for continued support.

Gaps and Challenges to Addressing Poverty



Free School Meal Eligibility and Access

One of the most pressing gaps facing children at Catholic schools is ineligibility for Free School Meals (FSM). Over 80% of respondents noted that pupils in poverty were unable to access FSM due to factors such as immigration status, temporary or low-paid work, and socio-cultural barriers. In many cases, our families on temporary visas or with no recourse to public funds are excluded from support, leaving children without critical assistance^{9,10}. Research from a 2017 study conducted by St. Mary's University demonstrates that eligibility for Free School Meals is a poor indicator of need.

The research underscores that many families just above the FSM eligibility threshold are still struggling financially. These “hidden poor” often fall through the cracks of welfare systems, unable to access critical support despite their evident need. Factors such as temporary immigration status, fluctuating income from low-paid or insecure jobs, and administrative complexities contribute to their exclusion. Even where pupils are eligible for Free School Meals, take-up has been a long-standing challenge.

Further research from St Mary's University identifies cultural and administrative barriers as significant obstacles to FSM uptake. Many immigrant families view welfare as stigmatising, while others face language barriers or lack awareness of their entitlement and as noted, Catholic schools educate a large number of children from immigrant families. As a result, FSM uptake and eligibility often underestimates true poverty levels. Although 20% of Catholic school pupils are recorded as eligible for FSM, evidence suggests many more are in need but are not eligible and, of those who are eligible, many do not claim this support.



Gaps and Challenges to Addressing Poverty



The Two-Child Benefit Cap

Systemic limitations, such as the two-child benefit cap on Universal Credit, disproportionately affect larger families which are more common in Catholic communities. Many low-income households, including self-employed families with fluctuating incomes, remain ineligible for means-tested benefits despite evident need. Research conducted by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that 70% of households in the bottom income quintile go without at least one essential, with over half reporting arrears on household bills, which aligns with the survey of our schools. These challenges underscore the inadequacy of existing systems in addressing the needs of vulnerable families.

The two-child benefit cap on Universal Credit disproportionately affects families in Catholic communities, where larger families are more common. Our research emphasises the policy's detrimental impact on family stability and child well-being. Families with three or more children are increasingly at risk of poverty, with 43% of such children living below the poverty line in 2021–2022. Many of these families are employed but rely on fluctuating incomes, rendering them ineligible for consistent government support.

The cap exacerbates financial strain, forcing families to make difficult decisions about future pregnancies and undermining the Church's teaching on the sanctity of life. The bishops have called for its abolition, highlighting the moral imperative of valuing all children equally. Removing the cap would alleviate systemic poverty and safeguard family dignity.



Photo Credit: Mazur - CBCEW

Our Five Recommendations



“For there will never cease to be poor in the Land. Therefore I command you: ‘You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land’.”

— Deuteronomy 15:11

Our recommendations are based on what is working on the ground in a diverse set of schools across England and Wales. We work with schools, families, communities and charities to ensure that children are receiving the best education possible, regardless of their financial situation. The five recommendations below will continue to make a difference in the lives of not just our students, but students across England and Wales.

1. Reform Eligibility Criteria for Free School Meals

One of the most significant gaps identified is the exclusion of vulnerable children from Free School Meals (FSM) due to the eligibility criteria. Although recent policy changes in England have extended FSM access to children from families with no recourse to public funds (NRPF), this extension remains limited and overly complex. Families must navigate a cumbersome application process that requires proof of NRPF status, income thresholds, and visa¹² documentation, which many find prohibitive. Eligibility for Free School Meals should be reformed to ensure that families in need are not excluded.

2. Work with the Catholic Community to Promote FSM Take-Up

To improve accessibility, the application procedures need to be simplified. Streamlining the application process for FSM would remove administrative and socio-cultural barriers especially for those with English as an additional language.

Many families have a distrust of disclosing personal details to the state. Conducting awareness campaigns in multiple languages and through trusted community partners including Catholic schools, charities and ethnic chaplaincies to reach eligible families who may not apply due to a lack of awareness or cultural stigma.

3. Work with Faith Communities Already Supporting Families

We have found that collaboration between schools, local organisations, and the broader community can play a pivotal role in mitigating the effects of child poverty. Successful examples include partnerships with universities, charities, and faith-based organisations.¹³

For instance, Durham University’s small group tutoring programme for Year 5 pupils has demonstrated measurable academic benefits.¹⁴

Building on the existing strengths of faith-based schools to mobilise community support for disadvantaged families is crucial. Catholic schools and parishes are already at the heart of their communities and engaging with hard-to-reach families already.

Our Five Recommendations



4. Remove the Two-Child Benefit Cap

Long-term solutions must address the root causes of poverty to prevent its perpetuation. Review and revise the two-child limit on Universal Credit, which disproportionately affects larger families. This policy alone has contributed to 43% of children in families with three or more children living in poverty.²

5. Implement Targeted Mental Health Interventions

The psychological stress of financial instability has far-reaching impacts on both children and their families. Parents claiming Universal Credit report high levels of anxiety and guilt, which often have a knock-on effect on children's emotional well-being.¹⁵

Schools and families need support in this particular area. Teachers and school staff need to be provided with the training and support to recognise and respond to mental health issues early.

Our schools already provide parental support programmes, but this has to be done in addition to their existing workload. The provision of workshops or resources for parents to help them manage stress, improve communication with their children, and access available mental health services is essential, and schools should be supported in their delivery.

Catholic schools benefit greatly from their school chaplains. These roles need greater recognition for the impact they have in pupil and staff mental help and bridging the gap between local communities, families and schools.



Conclusions



The findings of this survey underscore the critical need for systemic change to address child poverty. Catholic schools play a vital role in mitigating its impact, but they cannot bear the burden alone. A coordinated effort between the government, local authorities, and communities is essential to ensure that every child has the opportunity to succeed.

This report has highlighted the profound impact of poverty on children within Catholic schools and the remarkable efforts made by these schools to mitigate its effects. With their socio-economic diversity, strong community ties, and a long-standing mission to serve marginalised families, Catholic schools are uniquely positioned to provide valuable insights and recommendations for addressing child poverty.

The results underscore the urgent need for systemic changes, including reforms to Free School Meal eligibility, the removal of the two-child benefit cap, and the provision of targeted mental health support. By addressing these gaps, policymakers can better support schools in their mission to alleviate poverty and ensure equal opportunities for all children.

We offer actionable recommendations rooted in the lived experiences of Catholic school communities. These insights not only inform strategies for tackling child poverty but also highlight the importance of continued investment in school-based and community-led initiatives. Further research should explore innovative partnerships and long-term policy interventions to sustain and expand the vital role of Catholic schools.

The work presented here contributes to a broader understanding of the intersection between education, faith, and poverty, advocating for a collaborative approach to ensure every child has the opportunity to thrive. The Catholic community are committed to working with government to eradicate child poverty and will continue to support families through our schools, parishes and Catholic charities as part on our ongoing commitment to the common good.

References

Documents, websites, and other sources of information referenced in this publication.



- 1 See Child Poverty Action Group, [Poverty Facts and Figures](#)
- 2 See Joseph Rowntree Foundation [UK Poverty Report 2024](#)
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- 4 See [Economics Letters](#)
- 5 See SecEd Best Practice Report, [Tackling the links between attendance and poverty](#)
- 6 See Mental Health Foundation, [Poverty and Mental Health Report](#)
- 7 See London Councils, [Managing Falling School Rolls in London](#)
- 8 See The Food Foundation: [Expanding Free School Meals](#)
- 9 See GOV.UK [Free School Meals Application](#)
- 10 See City of Westminster, [Free School Lunch Offer](#)
- 11 See Joseph Rowntree Foundation, [On a Low Income, but not Claiming Means-Tested Benefits](#)
- 12 See GOV.UK [Free School Meal Guidance](#)
- 13 See University of Leeds report: [Placing Schools at Forefront of Child Poverty Work](#)
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- 15 See Centre for Mental Health, [Call for Reforming Benefits System](#)



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