



The Cost of the School Day Big Question report

Children and young people's views on food, school trips and readiness to learn

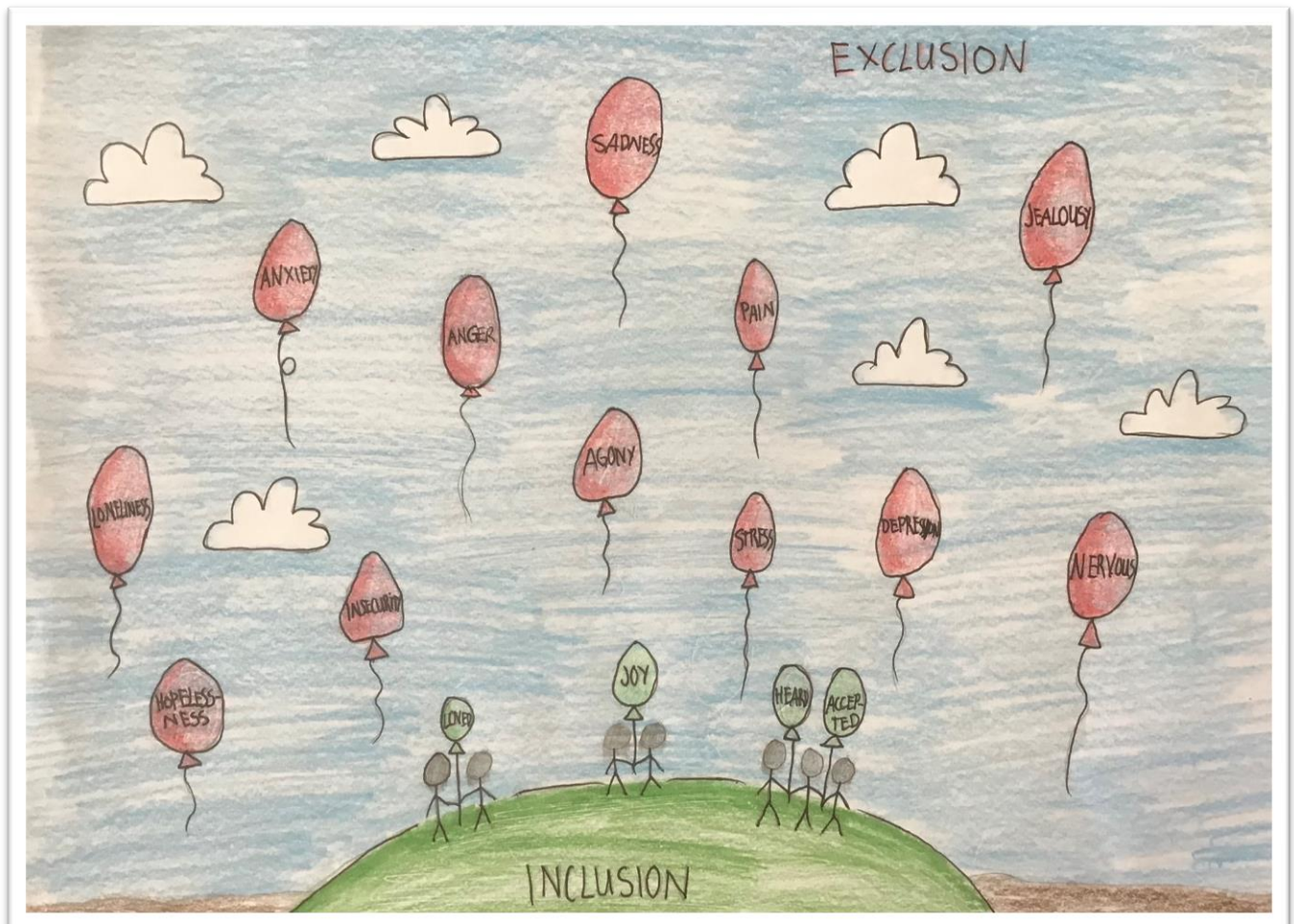
June 2024



Key points

- CPAG in Scotland's Cost of the School Day Big Question asked about food, trips and what is needed to feel ready to learn at school. 5394 children and young people from 83 schools across two thirds of Scotland's local authorities responded.
- A range of factors help children and young people feel ready to learn. Some are related to basic needs at home, and others are about school environment and culture, relationships, the structure of the school day, learning and teaching, opportunities to participate and access to resources and food.
- Many factors supporting readiness to learn- like sleep, warm homes, uniform, food, freedom from worry and stress, resources and participating in opportunities- are influenced by family income. This means that young people from low-income households are at risk of being less likely to experience or be equipped with what is needed to feel ready to learn.
- Young people say that food, uniform, travel, resources, devices and trips are the school costs that matter most to them when they are unaffordable.
- 97% of young people who responded say that food is very or quite important in feeling ready to learn at school. They say that hunger has a serious impact on learning and concentration, it makes them tired and unwell and leaves them feeling embarrassed and left out.
- Vital help with food is provided in many schools, but support is varied. Young people identified opportunities for consistent national support, such as increased school funding to help with food provision, more financial support for families, lower prices and better communication around free meals. They are strongly in favour of universal free school meals (UFSM). 89% of Primary children responding say that the government commitment to P1-P7 UFSM is very or quite important. Free school meals for all was the most common suggestion to government made by Secondary learners.
- School trips matter to young people. They offer valuable new experiences, fun and learning. They help young people fit in and feel included. For some, trips are opportunities not readily available at home.
- Being unable to go on trips leaves young people feeling left out and sad. They miss out on new experiences and learning. 48% of primary children responding say that they didn't think or weren't sure that everyone in their school would be able to attend a big trip like the P7 residential.
- Schools provide valuable help with access to trips, but, as with food, support is varied. Many young people responding said that they are unaware of what support is available in their schools.
- Young people's most common calls to government around support for trips were for funding to help schools run trips equitably and avoid embarrassment, worry and exclusion, and for more support directly to families to help them afford trips and other school costs.
- Young people have Big Ideas about what can make their schools more equitable and inclusive for everyone. Popular ideas are around UFSM, non-stigmatising approaches to support, more school funding to reduce costs, free or cheaper school trips and good communication around available support.

- Young people's insights have implications for a range of stakeholders working to reduce child poverty, narrow the attainment gap and improve outcomes for children and young people affected by poverty. Part 8 of the report sets out calls for the Scottish government to keep its commitments on universal free school meal provision, greater support with trips and device provision and, more widely, reducing child poverty. It also asks local authorities, schools and education bodies to listen to what children and young people are telling us and act on the findings in this report.



Picture by Lois Amusan, Holyrood Secondary School, Glasgow

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Picture from Linlithgow Primary School

1. Background

At Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) in Scotland, we believe that children and young people's voices should inform education and poverty policy for the better. Poverty has a detrimental impact on children's right to education and it is children who should be front and centre when it comes to decision making in these policy areas.

During Challenge Poverty Week 2023 we held the first ever Cost of the School Day Big Question with children and young people from our Cost of the School Day Voice network.¹

What we asked about

The Big Question asked young people about food, trips and what is needed to feel ready to learn at school.

We focused on food and trips as two areas of school life which are often named as problematic for young people on lower incomes. These are also policy areas which the Scottish government has previously committed to invest in during this parliamentary term. We asked about readiness to learn to understand more about the role which costs and incomes play in this for children and young people. We also asked young people for Big Cost of the School Day Ideas that would help ensure that their schools and others around Scotland are poverty aware places where everybody can take part, regardless of income.

How we asked the questions

The Big Question was hosted on Mentimeter in English and Gaelic. Children answered either Primary or Secondary level questions. Teachers were provided with supporting notes and asked to guide their groups through the Big Question with discussion at key points. Young people were asked to vote and answer questions on individual devices.

A character called Sammy was used in both versions of the Big Question. Sammy was described as attending participants' schools and being on a low income. Participants were asked to consider Sammy's perspective on key questions. This was intended to help young people on lower incomes answer questions without having to directly share their own experiences, and help others think from this perspective if they hadn't personally experienced it.

Who we heard from

- 5394 children and young people took part in the Cost of the School Day Big Question
- 83 schools took part - 52 Primary schools and 31 Secondary schools
- Schools in two thirds of Scotland's local authorities (21) responded to the Big Question. Five local authorities – Fife, West Lothian, West Dunbartonshire, East Lothian and Glasgow - provided over 500 responses each
- More Primary than Secondary schools took part but 87% (4667) of responses were from Secondary students. Secondary schools were more likely to ask large numbers of young people to take part during assemblies or tutor time. Primary schools were more likely to run the Big Question with smaller

¹ [Cost of the School Day Voice](#) is a national network of children and young people taking action on school costs and equity. 300 schools across Scotland have joined so far.

Cost of the School Day pupil groups or offer a single group response rather than asking children to answer individually.

Who we want to listen to these findings

We want children and young people's answers to help inform action at school, local and national levels.

We want practitioners to hear young people's views on what is needed to create schools and classrooms which support their readiness to learn, their ability to eat well at school and access enriching trips and experiences. What good practice is happening now and what more can be done?

For those working in local authorities, what action is required to ensure consistent good practice locally? How can schools be supported to remove financial barriers to education for their children and families?

We want the Scottish government to reflect on what young people say should happen to tackle existing cost barriers and consider how this aligns with current policy making and investment. Where are the gaps? What more can be done to ensure that children and young people are ready to learn and that all children across Scotland are able to equitably take part at school, regardless of family income? And where policy commitments have been made, how can these be progressed?

2. Which school costs matter most if you can't afford them?

Young people told us which school costs are most important when they are difficult to afford. Findings can help with prioritisation when planning how to reduce the cost of the school day.

Young people were shown a set of school costs which can create financial pressure and stand in the way of participation. We asked them to think about what is needed at school and pick the five costs which would matter most if our character Sammy, a young person on a low income, couldn't afford them.

Table 1: Most important school costs if unable to afford them (4912 respondents: 631 Primary, 4281 Secondary)

Option	Primary	Option	Secondary
Uniform	91%	Food	93%
Food	89%	Uniform	87%
Travelling to school	68%	Travelling to school	75%
Resources	57%	Resources	74%
Trips	39%	Devices	47%
Charity days/fundraising	23%	Trips	29%
Discos and proms	17%	Extra subject charges	20%
Devices	13%	Dances and proms	18%
Clubs	13%	Clubs	12%
		Charity days/fundraising	10%

Primary and Secondary students agreed that Food and School Uniforms matter most. These are two of the largest ongoing costs faced by families. Not wearing correct uniform can potentially lead to stigma and sanctions. Feeling hungry at school has significant impact, explored in more detail in Part 4 of this report.

Food policy context: The Scottish Government extended universal free school meals (UFSM) to P1-P5 in 2021 with commitment to extend further to P6-7s in 2022. This is delayed with plans now to provide free meals to P6 and P7 children in families receiving Scottish Child Payment from February 2025. and universal provision for all primary pupils during 2026. There are currently no plans to extend provision to Secondary schools.

Free school meals (FSM) for P6-S6 are means tested by income.² Modelling from 2021 suggested that, under current eligibility criteria, 25,000 pupils (17%) of pupils in poverty in Scotland are not eligible for a free school meal.³ Families who are not eligible for FSM pay for school meals, costing between £380 and £598 per year for each child depending on local authority.⁴

² To be eligible for free school meals, the parent or carer of the school child must be receiving universal credit (earning no more than £726 in the monthly assessment period before they apply), Child Tax Credit only with an income under £18,725, Child Tax Credit/Working Tax Credit with income under £8,717, income support, income-based jobseeker's allowance, income-related employment and support allowance or asylum support from the Home Office.

³ [Fixing Lunch: The case for expanding free school meals](#), Child Poverty Action Group, 2021

⁴ Prices based on £2 per day in Glasgow and £3.15 per day in North Lanarkshire across 190 days in school per year.

Uniform policy context: The Scottish Government is due to publish national guidance on uniform policies in 2024 which, in part, focuses on affordability and reducing uniform costs for families. The school clothing grant currently provides a minimum of £120 per year for Primary and £150 for Secondary pupils. This support is means tested and administered by local authorities, usually with similar income eligibility criteria to FSM.

Travelling to school was voted third most important cost, despite free bus travel for all under 22s in Scotland.

Travel policy context: Since January 2022, all under 22s are eligible for free travel on any bus in any part of Scotland, a scheme developed in part to tackle cost barriers to travelling for education. Year one evaluation⁵ showed that bus travel to school increased slightly in 2022 compared with previous years. However, large variations in uptake were found between local authority areas. Barriers remain around application, in areas without suitable services and for Primary children when accompanying parents or carers must still pay.

Resources to support learning at school and home was the fourth most important cost for children and young people. Some schools provide everything needed and others stipulate resources required. For young people, the consequences of not having what is needed can vary depending on poverty awareness within their setting.

20% of young people selected 'extra charges for subjects' as an important cost. This is notable because of the removal of curriculum charges in Scotland. Devices matter especially for Secondary students: 47% selected this as a top 5 school cost.

Resources and devices policy context: Since 2021, Scottish government funding has meant that charges for music, arts and core curriculum should be removed in every school.

In 2021, the Scottish government committed that, by the end of this parliamentary session, all 700,000 school-aged pupils in Scotland would have access to an appropriate digital device, and where necessary an internet connection, to support learning.⁶ John Swinney said at the time: "These tools are no longer luxuries, they are the basic building blocks of a good education."⁷ Up to 280,000 devices have been distributed to learners across Scotland. The commitment to digital devices for all changed in December 2023, with plans now to provide digital access support at a household level, targeting investment at families with children experiencing digital exclusion. This approach aims to improve equity of access to devices for whole families rather than learners alone.

School trips were chosen as the fifth most important school cost. Trips vary in type and cost, but young people are clear that they matter to their learning, wellbeing and development. Trips are explored in Part 5 of this report.

Trips policy context: The SNP 2021 manifesto⁸ committed to supporting schools with inclusive trips and activities for all, ensuring that less-well off families do not face costs for curriculum related trips and activities, that all pupils attend 'rite of passage' trips such as P7 residential and that there is a minimum entitlement for all secondary pupils to attend at least one 'optional' trip during their time at school. The subsequent Programme for Government 2021-22 promised that across this Parliament they would ensure that every primary and secondary pupil can go on curriculum related trips and residential.⁹

⁵ Transport Scotland. [Year 1 evaluation - Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme | Transport Scotland](#) 2023

⁶ Scottish government, [Devices for 700,000 children 16 August 2021](#) 2021

⁷ Scottish National Party, [A laptop or tablet for every school child: John Swinney's pledge to #SNP21 28 March 2021](#) 2021

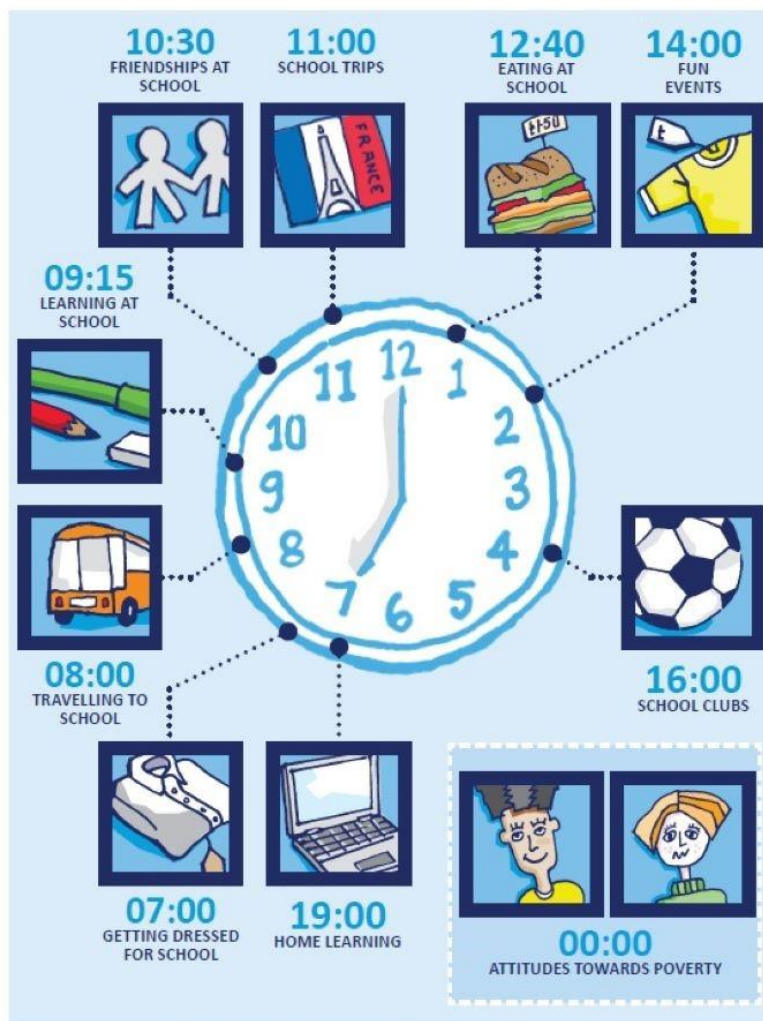
⁸ Scottish National Party, [SNP 2021 Manifesto: Scotland's Future, Scotland's Choice — Scottish National Party](#) 2021

⁹ Scottish government, [Programme for Government 2021 to 2022, 7 September 2021](#) 2021

Awareness of children and young people’s top five school costs is useful for schools looking to prioritise Cost of the School Day actions. However, other costs still matter - for example, almost a quarter of all Primary children (23%) said that Charity Days and Fundraising are one of their most important costs and 18% of Secondary pupils say that Dances and Proms are in their top five.

All costs are potentially difficult for families on low incomes and all parts of the school day matter. Thought should be given to every aspect of the school day which might be more difficult for a young person from a low-income household to engage with.

Figure 1: Cost of the School Day clock image taken from the Cost of the School Day Toolkit, a resource full of activities to help school communities tackle cost barriers. All Cost of the School Day resources: www.cpag.org.uk/cost-school-day.



3. What helps young people feel ready to learn at school?

We asked children and young people what helps them to feel ready to learn at school. Their answers offer valuable insights into the role that costs and income play in readiness to learn, and the approaches required both in and out of school to remove barriers.

Make sure everyone is comfortable in the school environment, make sure all supports for stationary, clothing etc is accessible for all year groups and just listen, assure them they have support. (Secondary)

Having food to eat, safe space to learn, kind pupils and teachers. (Primary)

Not being less advantaged than others based on what you can or can't access. Given equal opportunities and having all resources provided. (Secondary)

Young people chose from ten options that could potentially support engagement, attendance, confidence and wellbeing¹⁰ and help them feel ready to learn at school.¹¹ Their top choices were: not being tired and stressed, having the resources they need to learn, being able to take part in the same things as everyone else and having adults who listen to them and think that their opinions are important.

Table 2: What helps you feel ready to learn? (4522 respondents, 576 Primary, 3946 Secondary)

Option	Primary	Option	Secondary
Not being tired or stressed	81%	Not being tired or stressed	84%
Feeling that grown-ups are listening to you and that your opinions are important	71%	Having pens, pencils and other things you need for school	71%
Being able to take part in the same things as your friends and classmates	64%	Being able to take part in the same things at school as your friends and classmates	53%
Having pens, pencils and other things you need in class	61%	Feeling that adults are listening to you and that your opinions are important	48%
Having support from your parents, carers or family	58%	Access to devices at school, like tablets and laptops	46%
Having a grown up at school you can talk to	47%	Having support from your parents, carers or family	41%
Being able to take part in trips	31%	Being able to get to school on time	35%
Being able to get to school on time	28%	Being able to take part in trips	31%
Being able to take part in sports and clubs	25%	Having an adult at school you can talk to	29%
Access to devices at school, like tablets and laptops	21%	Being able to take part in sports and clubs	20%

Secondary learners voted access to devices at school into fifth place, underlining the importance of digital devices in Secondary schools. Support from family and having an adult at school to talk to were also popular choices for all age groups.

¹⁰ [Tackling the Poverty-Related Attainment Gap – Our Theory of Change](#) looks at readiness to learn in relation to children and young people’s engagement, attendance, confidence and wellbeing at school

¹¹ Scottish government, [Attainment Scotland Fund evaluation - readiness to learn: thematic evaluation report 27 March 2024](#) 2024, explores the topic in more detail

3350 children and young people (503 Primary, 2847 Secondary) wrote in more detail about what helps them to feel ready to learn. The most common responses are presented below.

At home

Children and young people say that readiness to learn has a lot to do with home lives and what happens outwith school. A range of before-school factors help them to start the day well. These include a good night's sleep, a warm safe home, having the correct uniform, feeling clean, feeling positive and free from worry or stress and being able to get to school on time. These aspects of readiness to learn are all potentially linked to and influenced by family income.

81% of Primary and 84% of Secondary participants say that 'not being tired and stressed' helps them feel ready to learn. 10% of young people's comments focused on sleep and rest.

A good night's sleep in a comfy warm bed. (Secondary)

Not being tired because when you are tired, you're really grumpy and just can't be bothered to do anything. (Secondary)

I feel ready to learn when I have a snack and have had a good sleep the previous night. (Primary)

Having a proper night's sleep in a home that you feel safe in. (Secondary)

Young people want to feel clean and have the right school uniform.

Being clean so you're not worried about being smelly. (Primary)

Having gotten up early and gotten showered and dressed and otherwise ready and fresh for school. (Secondary)

Being in my school uniform and feeling clean and presentable." (Secondary)

Young people need to feel full up and not hungry. Food was the topic written about most frequently in relation to readiness to learn with 12% of all comments focusing on food and feeling free from hunger. This includes breakfast at the start of the day.

Waking up to no worries in your life and having a nice breakfast without worrying about the cost. (Primary)

I think that other children should have breakfast before school because some kids even tell you they don't have breakfast and they mostly don't feel well or bothered. (Secondary)

28% of Primary and 35% of Secondary learners say being able to get to school on time is one of the most important things in feeling ready to learn. Young people say that having energy and feeling organised and positive helps them start the day well.

Feeling organised so that I don't need to stress and know that I've got everything I need to start the day! (Secondary)

Not getting angry or upset before school. (Primary)

Being ready early so I don't have to rush or miss the bus. (Secondary)

It helps when I get enough sleep at night, get food in the morning and get to school on time. (Secondary)

Many of these factors depend on resources and support available at home. 58% of Primary and 41% of Secondary learners said that support from your parents, carers or family was one of the most important things in helping them feel ready to learn.

I think getting ready to learn is having an adult to help you. (Primary)

Support from parents and breakfast club to feel ready and not tired. (Secondary)

Stress and worry were identified as barriers to feeling ready to learn. Worry and stress at home means less opportunity to focus on learning at school.

A good home environment, this will relief stress from school as we will have less things to worry about. Having a stressful home environment affects me. (Secondary)

Not being distracted by issues at home, being able to comfortably prioritise school. (Secondary)

Young people specifically named money worries as something affecting readiness to learn. Children in families experiencing financial stress can be acutely aware of worries around food, bills and money for school and everyday life.

Having the uniform on, not worrying if the heating is going to be on when you get home, hot food at home. (Secondary)

Not having to worry about money to pay for school and extra-curricular activities. (Secondary)

Being involved outside in the playground and not worrying about money. (Primary)

Having a good sleep without worrying about food or money. Feeling ready to learn without worrying. (Secondary)

At school

Physical environment

Young people want to learn in school buildings which are clean, comfortable and an appropriate temperature, with toilets that they can use when they need to.

Space to play or relax inside the school building and access to outdoor spaces are important. Some young people highlighted the importance of a calm environment and the availability of quiet study and social spaces that are not too crowded or overwhelming.

Getting into a calm environment, especially in the morning as many people have a hard time at home and need peace. (Secondary)

School culture

Young people want to experience a positive, friendly school environment where they feel included, welcomed, respected and listened to. Feeling safe is key, and pupils say that their schools should be free of bullying and harassment.

Being respected/treated equally/included and not bullied. (Secondary)

Being protected. (Primary)

Welcoming teachers (when teachers stand at the door to welcome all pupils). (Secondary)

47% of Primary and 29% of Secondary learners say that having a trusted adult to speak with at school is one of the most important things in feeling ready to learn. They want to feel confident that their school can offer the right support with learning and any other problem faced in school or at home.

Knowing that somebody can help you. Feeling like you belong there. (Primary)

Having a safe person at school who you can tell about anything. (Secondary)

The school day

Young people value time at the start of the day to 'warm up', see friends and settle in. Arriving late was cited by several young people as a worry which means they arrive less ready to learn. 'Soft start' options and time to settle and get organised for the day ahead is helpful.

Having a soft start in the morning, it makes me very ready to learn. (Primary)

In music, we get 5 minutes to just destress and play keyboards, I think something like that in every class would help a lot of people. (Secondary)

Young people mentioned regular breaks to get fresh air or move around and talk.

Yes, having been playing outside and having fun with friends [makes me feel ready to learn]. I also think that is important to not being stressed. (Primary)

We have brain breaks where we can take a minute to talk to our friends or draw. (Primary)

Some young people wished the school day was different with, for example, later starts to allow for more sleep and more time to settle in each class.

Longer intermission between classes. I used to skip tons because I would be slightly late and would be too scared to go in incase I got told off and didn't want to walk in late in front of everybody. (Secondary)

There should be a period at school where students can relax with their friends or revise for any tests for that day and destress. (Secondary)

[It would help me feel ready to learn] if the school day started later. I'm always tired on a school day and it doesn't help me concentrate. (Secondary)

Participation

Young people say they want to feel the same as their peers, have the same things as them and be able to take part in everything school has to offer, just like everyone else. 53% of Primary and 64% of Secondary young people picked 'being able to take part in the same things as others at school' as one of the most important factors in feeling ready to learn.

I think being the same as others helps me feel ready to learn. (Secondary)

Having the same stuff as the other kids. (Primary)

Being able to take part in the same things as your friends. (Secondary)

Being able to do and try everything in school. (Secondary)

Access to resources

Straightforward access to resources and equipment helps readiness to learn at school and at home. 61% of Primary and 71% of Secondary participants say that having the resources they need is key to helping them feel ready to learn. Young people mentioned access to devices, apps and Wi-Fi as well as pens, pencils and jotters. Devices are especially important for Secondary students with almost half (46%) specifically naming this their fifth most important factor in feeling ready to learn.

Having proper devices that the other kids have. (Secondary)

Pencils given out to people who don't have them. (Secondary)

Having access to your own device that has everything you need for learning. (Secondary)

Young people pointed out the need for sensitive approaches to young people who don't have resources required. Rather than being picked out or sanctioned, they want support to access essential items without fear or stigma.

Not getting shouted at if you don't bring supplies like pencils because some people don't mean to not bring them and they just can't afford them. (Secondary)

Food during the school day

When asked specifically about the role of food in readiness to learn, 97% of young people agreed that it was either very (70%) or quite (27%) important.



Figure 2: Young people's views on importance of food in feeling ready to learn (4630 respondents, 502 Primary, 4047 Secondary)

Young people say that they need lunches, snacks, freely available water and chances to hydrate throughout the day to help them concentrate and feel ready to learn. They also highlighted the consequences of not having enough food. This is explored in more detail in Part 4 of this report.

I think a hungry tummy is an angry tummy. (Primary)

If ur hungry or stressed you're not gonna concentrate. (Secondary)

When I don't feel hungry I can be ready to learn. (Secondary)

Learning and teaching

Kind teachers who encourage and motivate their classes help readiness to learn. Young people say that good and trusting relationships with their classroom teachers are crucial. Kindness and care were themes that children and young people frequently mentioned.

Be kind to pupils and make them excited to go to class. (Secondary)

I think just when people believe you can do it changes everything. (Secondary)

It helps to have a good teacher that isn't shouty. (Secondary)

Young people value teachers who treat them with respect. Being listened to and considered important is particularly important for Primary children, who voted it the second most important thing to help them learn.

Feeling like I am wanted and people will listen to me. (Primary)

When the teachers actually listen to your thoughts and opinions, usually there good at it but when there distant it really brings your confidence down. (Secondary)

Young people appreciate it when teachers clearly explain what is going to happen and check for questions before moving on. They want to know what to do, feel able to get things wrong and ask for help when they need it.

Feeling like I am able to talk to someone and be able to get stuff wrong and fix it and not get embarrassed. (Primary)

Our school is a terrible place to learn and I find that most teachers laugh at you when you ask for help and they don't like to help you. This makes me feel stupid. (Secondary)

It is important to have teachers who teach in fun and interactive ways, making young people look forward to going to class.

Feeling excited to go to my class [helps me feel ready to learn] (Secondary)

If the teacher does fun starters while everyone is coming in. (Secondary)

Using lots of resources to make learning fun. Bubble writing and fun maths. (Primary)

Having different teaching methods, lots of interactive activities, working with friends, having discussions instead of just listening every period. (Secondary)

Some pupils mentioned missing out on fun learning experiences due to Covid-19. The benefits of trips and excursions is explored further in Part 5 of this report.

Hope that people actually don't forget that S4's missed out too we need to experience fun like the other year groups to learn. (Secondary)

Young people say that it is important to recognise and support individual needs. They mentioned tools like headphones and fidget toys and the need to go at their own speed and have help from Pupil Support Assistants.

As a neurodivergent student I also need things like my noise cancelling headphones to concentrate and be ready to learn, something that not all students have access to. (Secondary)

Being able to get the right coloured paper and getting teacher to actually listen to me about my dyslexia. (Secondary)

When i am calmed down it helps me to focus on my work better, same with movement breaks if i was really really angry before movement breaks help me calm down. (Primary)

A calm, relaxed, and safe classroom is important to concentrate and feel ready to learn.

I think having a relaxed classroom can help you learn. (Secondary)

Calm classroom, having friends, encouragement, having fun. (Primary)

Having a safe class knowing you can share your opinions freely without worrying about others. (Secondary)

Some young people spoke about the need to be free of distraction from noise in the classroom and being seated appropriately for their needs.

Not having annoying people that don't want to learn that distract others that want to learn. (Secondary)

I don't like loud noises I can't focus when loud noises are going on. I worry when I don't get work finished. (Primary)

Friendships

Young people say that school is better when they have friends to have fun with, talk to and spend time with. Time and space to gather with friends at break and lunch is important for feelings of belonging and wellbeing. Friends provide support and help to relieve stresses and worries.

Friendships are important they help with your mood. (Primary)

If a child too stressed a friend can take away from the problem. (Primary)

Having friends that don't make fun of you for not having lunch, instead they share or buy you lunch. (Secondary)

As well as making school more enjoyable, young people say that having friends nearby in the classroom actively supports learning.

Being near my friends because they help me and I help them. (Primary)

Learning is boring makes me feel stressed because I'm not with my friends to help me understand stuff. (Secondary)

4. What do young people say about food at school?

One day I didn't have enough money and they wouldn't let me have anything to eat so I had to go the rest of the day hungry. (Secondary)

Free food for everyone, small, medium and large. (Primary)

Free school meals - poverty doesn't stop when children go from P7 to S1. (Secondary)

89% of Primary and 93% of Secondary participants chose food at school as one of the school costs that matter most. As mentioned already, almost every young person taking part in the Big Question said that food is important when it comes to feeling ready to learn.

Food is one of the largest school costs facing families. All P1-5 pupils attending school are entitled to universal free school meals (UFSM). The Scottish government extended UFSM from P1-P3 to P1-P5 in 2021, committing to extend this to P6 and P7 the following year and pilot UFSM in Secondary schools. This commitment is delayed, with plans now to provide free meals to P6 and P7 children in families receiving Scottish Child Payment from February 2025 and universal provision for all primary pupils during 2026. There are currently no plans to pilot or extend provision to Secondary schools.

Currently, free school meals (FSM) for P6-S6 are means tested by income.¹² Recent modelling suggested that current eligibility criteria means that 25,000 pupils (17%) of pupils living in poverty in Scotland are not eligible for a free school meal.¹³ Pupils not eligible for free meals are required to pay for school meals, costing between £380 and £598 per year for each child depending on local authority.¹⁴

The consequences of not eating enough at school are well known. Children and young people report feeling tired and unable to concentrate in lessons. Children who are hungry at school perform less well and can experience anxiety and stress related to food insecurity at home.¹⁵

We asked young people their thoughts about food at school and free school meals, what helps when it comes to support at school and what more they think is needed to ensure that every child is full and ready to learn.

What kind of lunches do young people normally have?

Primary children were split between eating school lunches (44%) and taking packed lunches from home (55%). Almost all children said they ate at school, with only a handful going home for lunch.

At Secondary, just over one third of young people responding (36%) are eating school lunches. Roughly another third of young people are taking packed lunches from home (31%) and another third are buying lunch from local shops or takeaways (31%). Again, very few young people go home for lunch.

¹² See footnote 2

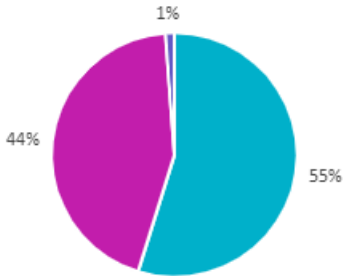
¹³ See footnote 3

¹⁴ See footnote 4

¹⁵ The Educational Institute of Scotland, [EIS Briefing on Hunger and Food Insecurity February 2022](#), 2022

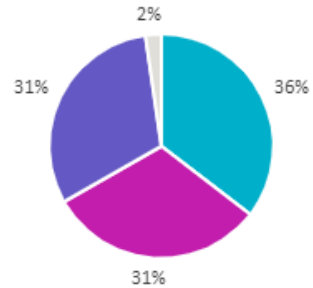
Figure 3: Lunch types (4772 respondents, 604 Primary 4168 Secondary)

Types of lunch taken at Primary school



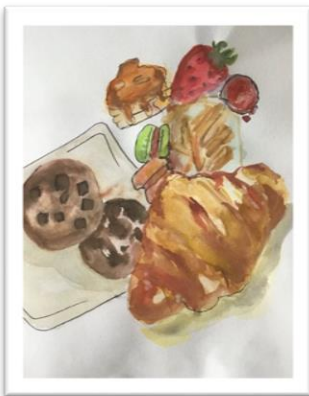
■ I have a packed lunch ■ I have school dinners ■ I go home for lunch

Types of lunch taken at Secondary school



■ I get food from the canteen ■ I have a packed lunch
■ I buy lunch at a shop or take-away ■ I go home for lunch

Children and young people’s favourite school lunches included pizza, fish and chips, hot dogs, pizzini, paninis, chicken, pasta, curries and burgers.



Pictures by Umme Ruman, Daisa Akhtar, Umaema Khan, Ava McElwaine and Nieve Ross from Holyrood Secondary School, Glasgow

How does it feel if you're hungry at school?

Over two thirds of children and young people say that feeling hungry at school would leave them feeling unable to concentrate, feeling tired or unwell or would make it more difficult to learn.

They said that feeling embarrassed and feeling worried about telling an adult at school would be the next most likely consequence, with feeling left out and cross and annoyed coming close after.

Over half of young people responding said that every one of the options presented in the table below would be a consequence of feeling hungry at school. Children and young people are clear that hunger has a serious impact on their learning and concentration, their physical health and their wellbeing and feelings of inclusion at school.

Table 3: Impacts of hunger at school (4818 respondents, 608 Primary, 4210 Secondary)

If someone was hungry at school, how do you think this would make them feel?			
Options	Primary	Secondary	All participants
Not able to concentrate	75%	78%	77%
Tired	74%	76%	75%
Unwell	76%	73%	74%
Find it more difficult to learn	74%	65%	66%
Embarrassed	74%	60%	62%
Worried about telling an adult at school	65%	50%	52%
Left out	71%	50%	50%
Cross or annoyed	50%	47%	50%

We included the [CPAG UK Imagine film](#) in the Big Question to prompt discussions about food at school. It shows a boy in a canteen, surrounded by happy children eating extravagant, fanciful foods to the soundtrack Food Glorious Food. The boy then opens his lunchbox and mimes eating a banana, having to imagine food because he hasn't brought any of his own.

Primary children showed compassion and insight into what children would be feeling in situations like these.

Scared, tired, and hungry.

He was imagining food because he does not have food. I would feel a bit lonely and embarrassed and all the other kids might think I am a bit weird.

He was alone because many people or some people consider poor people "uncool" and he was lonely.

How do schools help with food?

Many schools are keenly aware that some of their young people come to school hungry and unable to pay for the food needed to feel full throughout the school day. Young people told us about what is done to help make access to food easier in their schools.

Secondary

Young people say that breakfast clubs are the most common form of support in Secondary schools. Clubs operate in different ways depending on school and local authority with some charging for all, some subsidised or free for those receiving free school meals, some free for certain years or targeted groups and some free for all. Breakfast club cost may determine how helpful a means of support it is for families on lower incomes.

The next most common support is letting young people and/or their families know about how to access free school meals. Although it is positive that 36% of young people are aware of this in their schools, it means that, for just under two thirds of young people responding to this question, this either hasn't happened or information hasn't reached them. Similarly, while 20% of young people say that their schools tell them who to approach for support if they are hungry, this leaves the majority of young people unaware of what to do.

Importantly, 19% of young people said that they were not sure what their school does to help. Although some respondents may have no need for support so have never thought about it, this may mean that there is scope to improve information sharing about available support with young people and their families. Only 8% of young people said that their schools have none of the supports listed.

Table 4: Help with food at school (4159 Secondary respondents)

What does your school do to make sure you have enough food, and nobody goes hungry?	
Options	Responses
Breakfast club	58%
Let us know about how we can get free school meals	36%
Free snacks	32%
Tell us who to talk to about it in school	20%
Not sure	19%
Let you spend your free meal allowance at any point in the day	18%
Snacks at supported study	12%
Other things	12%
Food before exams	9%
None of these	8%

Primary

572 Primary children told us about how their schools support them with food. The most common responses are presented below.

Universal free school meals were the most common form of food support named by Primary children. Many responding will be receiving them or will have been eligible in recent years.

Free lunches for P5 and under and a big school lunch incase it's the only meal some children have.

... Our school dinners are free until P6 but they are trying to change that so it is free for everyone.

Another common type of food support was breakfast clubs. Breakfast provision operates in different ways, from traditional clubs to toast being sent around classes in the mornings.

My school has a breakfast club if you didn't have breakfast like if you did not have time or if you can't afford it

We have breakfast club which is all free we have toast, cereal, apples, fruit, milk and water.

Snacks are provided in fruit bowls around the school, baskets in the classroom, in the main office and in individual teacher 'stashes'. Children also spoke about sharing with their friends.

... If you don't bring anything in for snack you can go down and have a bite to eat and people are willing to share their food

Teachers offer food if we're hungry. Teachers offer snacks if you've forgotten yours.

Snack is provided for you. We used to have to pay but now it's free.

Schools provide leftovers and extra portions if children don't have any lunch or are especially hungry. Some schools provide dinner bags where children and their families can take food home after school and some have food banks.

Children described flexible and sensitive approaches, with food provided even when someone is unable to pay.

They never say to a kid you're not to have that because your parents haven't paid for that everyone gets a lunch

If you don't have money in your parent pay are school will still give you food

And children pointed out helpful interventions from school and catering staff which aim to ensure that no child goes hungry. Some also say that friends would help.

The teachers come and talk to us and make sure we are ok and ask what we have for lunch also the dinner ladies make sure all the portions are equal and share the leftover food.

If they notice they aren't eating the teachers will ask if their ok and if they want anything else.

I think the dinner ladies work hard and make food for all the children

Importantly, most young people named more than one support – for example, ‘Breakfast club, a bowl of fruit if you have no snack, free lunch until P5, dinner ladies give extra if you want and snacks in office’ - suggesting that many schools are considering multiple ways they can support their children with food throughout the school day.

What the Scottish government can do to help with food at school

Free food... I hope that you can do it, it will help all of us. (Secondary)

It's not our fault if our grown ups can't afford a lunch. (Primary)

Clearly, support with food is provided in many schools out of necessity. However, support available can depend on awareness, funding, location, availability of donations, staff capacity and other factors outwith the control of children and their families.

We asked young people about what should happen at a national level to support all schools across Scotland with food.

Universal Free School Meals (UFSM) in Primary Schools

Nobody should be hungry sitting alongside another child who is eating.

... We can't help what age or class we're in just because were in primary 6 or 7 does not mean that we have money it should be equal.

Primary school children are strongly in favour of extending UFSM in Primary schools. 89% of Primary children said that the Scottish government's promise to make sure all primary school children receive free school meals was very important (71%) or quite important (18%).

Children's views on universal free school meals

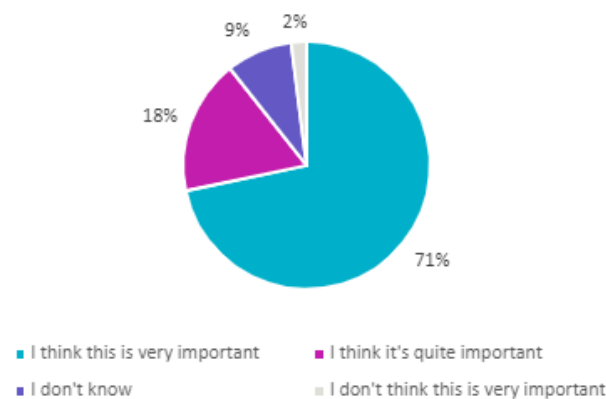


Figure 4: Primary views on universal free school meal extension (593 respondents)

A large proportion (41%) of the 564 children offering reasons for why UFSM extension is important said that it would help with the financial pressures facing families.

Because some families can't pay for it and are already having trouble paying bills, tax and mortgage.

This is very important considering the prices have went up in almost everything and this could make a lot of difference.

They are concerned that, without enough food, children will feel hungry and ill and their learning and concentration at school will be affected.

I think that it is VERY important for a child to have food because the child would not be able to focus or concentrate and feel super unwell.

Because a lot of people can't afford school food and it's very important to have food since they can struggle a lot with work or feel sick if their tummy is empty.

It's important because the students could get grumpy and cause commotion in the class.

Many children felt that it is unfair that P6 and P7 children arbitrarily miss out on support that they might need, just because of their age.

Why do we have to pay and they don't we might now [not] have the money for it either.

... It is important for 1-5s but p6 and 7 need food as well as there can be family struggling with any child from p1 to 7 so it is important for everyone to get free food.

Some people might be tight with money in p6-7 and maybe even high school

Some children pointed out that UFSM means that support reaches everybody with nobody missing out due to hidden poverty.

You don't know who is living in poverty, it's important everyone is fed so they can concentrate in class.

I think that primary school children school lunches should be free so that people get food during the day and some people may be in poverty but we might not realise.

I think this is important because anyone can be living in poverty and it would help them.

I feel that you will never know how much people are struggling with money.

Children say that UFSM can reduce worry and stress and that money saved can be spent on other essentials.

My mum and dad can then buy essential things like food, clothes, fuel, Wi Fi.

Parents have less stress, children can get food and not go hungry.

I think it is important because some of the people that can't afford lunches won't have to worry about the cost and might make them feel less left out.

Secondary views

3724 Secondary participants shared their thoughts on what more the Scottish government can do to help with food at school. They demonstrated clear understanding of the direct responsibilities of government when responding to the question.

Young people mainly focused on school lunches. Their suggestions were split between providing free food or food at a reduced cost, and whether to introduce universal provisions or to target interventions at pupils from families who found it more difficult to pay.

The most common suggestion from young people was for the Scottish government to provide free school meals for all in Secondary schools. Many reasons were the same as those given by Primary pupils, but older children were more aware of eligibility criteria for means tested free school meals. Some pointed out that not every young person on a low income is supported under current criteria.

Ensure every student gets free meals as even some households earn enough but have a large sum of debt and cannot afford lunch.

Every child should have free school meals as even tho you might be earning too much a year to get free school meals you can still struggle financially so every child in the uk should have free lunches.

I feel as though all young people should be entitled to free school meals, this would support many families whether or not they are in low income or working.

Young people say that meals for everyone would reduce embarrassment, worry or stigma around applying for or receiving means tested FSM.

Supply the school with enough money to give out free lunches to everyone. Not individually asking so that it's confidential information and no one gets afraid of what others may think of them or judge.

Everyone get free meals so no one feels embarrassed to say they can't afford it.

Give out free school meals and not ask the kids why, some people might be embarrassed by their living situation.

Other young people thought that the Scottish government or local councils should bring down prices to make school lunches more affordable for everyone and attract more learners into the canteen.

I firmly believe the Scottish government need to lower the cost of school meals, this will surely help more people eat. Aside from school meals inflation has gone too far.

Make school lunches cheaper, our food prices went up recently (I understand this may be difficult to implement but this would help a lot of people)

Make school lunches cheaper as they are very costly so that is why I go out of school for lunch.

They thought that food should be there for young people who need it, whether through some form of free meal or alternatives such as snack provision.

Ensure free food is readily available to children and possibly anonymous so people aren't embarrassed

Ensure all children with a parent who has low income gets free school meals!

I think people would feel awkward or embarrassed to tell somebody they don't have enough food. So I think free filling and healthy snacks should be provided free.

Young people thought that the Scottish government should increase funding for schools to consistently help with food provision.

Invest more money in free school meals so fewer people need to spend money and make it easier to access free food.

Increase spending on snacks available throughout the school day and increase spending on free school meals.

Many comments were about the food served with young people asking for more variation, better quality, more sustainability and more choice about where and when it can be eaten. Other suggestions included pre-ordering, making sure that there is enough food to meet demand as it often runs out and making lunch queues and the canteen less 'scary' to make it more likely people will go.

Make it easier to get food throughout the day, rather than just at break or lunch since it can get busy then, food can run out and people may not like crowded spaces...

School lunches should be free, if not cheaper, they could also widen the variety of food that may appeal to more people and dietary requirements - also make more as it goes fast.

Young people requested wider action on the cost of the school day alongside action on food. This included requests for help with devices, uniform, resources and trips, consistent with the priority costs identified by young people in part 1 of this report. Others wanted governments to take action on the economy and provide support directly to families on low incomes.

... Improve welfare system to allow families to afford sufficient food.

Help people have enough money to live.

Ensure individuals get a universal basic income so everyone can afford the basics.

Contribute more money to the benefits fund, that way people in poverty will be able to afford the school day more.

Tax the rich! Introduce FSM for secondary pupils as well as primary schools

As well as these common responses, young people had a wide range of suggestions of alternative ways in which food should be provided at school, including before and after-school provision, at supported study sessions and before exams.

Some young people returned to school level action, such as the need for good communication around FSM in the school community and improved ways for schools to understand who needs support with food. These are actions which could potentially be supported or made more consistent by local authorities or Scottish government.

Ensure people who need free school meals are accessing them, make free school meals known about more and make sure people know if they are eligible.

Letting all kids know that they can have access to food if they are struggling and not just for the kids who tell the teachers they are struggling, because some kids feel embarrassed.

Make lunches cheaper. Send out emails at the start of the term to see how homes are doing and if they need any support.

5. What do young people say about school trips?

39% of Primary and 29% of Secondary participants say that trips are one of the school costs that matter most to them. However, we know that school trips which cost money can be out of reach for children and young people from low-income households.

They are fun and make u feel excited about learning. (Secondary)

I like adventures but they're too expensive for me. (Primary)

[On trips, you] try new experiences, learn new skills, make friends and take part in what everyone else is doing so you don't feel left out. (Secondary)

[It's important] that we all can get the opportunity to go to new places for the first time. (Secondary)

The Scottish government has, in the recent past, committed to supporting schools and families with trip costs. The SNP 2021 manifesto¹⁶ committed to supporting schools to provide inclusive trips and activities for all, ensuring that less-well off families do not face costs for curriculum related trips and activities, that all pupils are able to attend 'rite of passage' trips, such as P7 residential and that there is a minimum entitlement for all secondary pupils to attend at least one 'optional' trip during their time at school. Their subsequent Programme for Government 2021-22 promised that across this Parliament they would ensure that every primary and secondary pupil can go on curriculum related trips and residential.¹⁷

In this part of the Big Question, we asked young people their thoughts about school trips, barriers to accessing them, what helps remove barriers and what more they think is needed to ensure equal access to school trips for all young people.

How important are school trips?

82% of young people say that it is either very important or quite important to be able to go on school trips.

Table 5: Young people's views on importance of attending trips (4350 respondents, 593 Primary, 3757 Secondary)

Not important at all	2	3	4	Very important
5%	2%	11%	21%	61%

Primary and Secondary learners broadly agree on why trips are so important. They voted new experiences and fun as the most important things about school trips. Help with learning is also high on the list, coming in third place for Primary children and fourth for Secondary. This is followed by going places or trying things they wouldn't usually get to do. Being with friends and making new friends is especially important for Secondary young people.

¹⁶ See footnote 7

¹⁷ See footnote 8

Table 6: Young people's views on importance of attending trips (4350 respondents, 593 Primary, 3757 Secondary)

What's important about school trips?			
Primary	%	Secondary	%
Getting to have new experiences	86	Getting to have new experiences	75
Having fun	78	Having fun	73
Helping us learn	76	Being with friends or making new friends	53
Learning new skills	64	Helping us learn	52
Going places or trying things they wouldn't usually get to do	54	Going places or trying things they wouldn't usually get to do	50
Being with friends or making new friends	50	Learning new skills	43
Greater confidence	42	Greater confidence	27
Helping us decide on future career	29	Helping us decide on future career	24

2429 Secondary young people provided more detail about why school trips are important to them. The most common responses are presented below.

Young people say that trips let them try new things, hear different perspectives and see places they would never otherwise see.

It lets you experience things you didn't think you'd get to experience

They help us learn more things and also boosts our confidence talking about things

It's engaging and allows for you to enjoy and learn more about something you might not have tried.

I love going to different places with school!!!

School trips offer a break from routine. Some young people said they were happy to be out of school having a break from normal learning and, sometimes, the boredom or stress of being in school.

Gives you a break from school. Although you are still learning you are not constantly writing and your brain is not going a hundred miles an hour. Also it will give you other memories of school.

School is so difficult and draining, getting a day out to be with friends and doing some active learning is so rewarding.

School trips are important because I get very overwhelmed with studying so I love going to trips to refresh myself.

Many welcomed the chance to see outside of the classroom, to learn differently and in more fun and active ways.

It lets you get out of school to learn in more new and unusual learning spots to learn in. This opposes the typical learning environments which sometimes are not good for engaging our brains

They are important because instead of sitting at a desk and listening you go out and participate in what you are learning about.

Its good because you're not actually in school but your still learning, showing education isn't just sitting down in a classroom.

Young people say that trips help with subject knowledge and their future study and career plans.

It allowed you to embrace what you are learning in a specific subject and personally it helps me understand way more than just taking down notes.

So you can get a rough idea of what u want to do when your older and know what you need for it.

Trips support both learning and motivation when back at school.

They can quite easily inspire you.

They make you feel more open to learn because you are having fun and experiencing new things while you learn.

A break from learning at the school and a fun trip makes me more motivated to work hard in that subject.

As well as spending time with friends, trips help young people make connections with new people and build bonds and trust with their teachers. These relationships were highlighted by young people as important in feeling ready to learn at school.

It's the most amazing thing you can experience because you're with friends.

Brings students and teachers closer, improving their relationships. Makes you feel more comfortable talking to teachers

Gives us a chance to bond with classmates we don't usually talk to, this helps us feel better in class

Having the chance to go on school trips helps young people fit in and feel included.

Not feeling left out when everyone else comes back and talks about it.

I don't want to feel left out.

They let me blend in and not stick out.

School trips are important as they make you feel a part of your year group and really included in the school.

Young people pointed out that school trips, especially those abroad, are particularly valuable for young people whose families are unable to take them otherwise.

To give us chances that maybe we wouldn't do with our family.

Because some people can't afford to go with family and its cheaper to go by themselves [on a school trip]

People that would not be able to go these places with their family, school should be able to let that pupil have a chance to leave the country and explore.

Young people reflected on how valuable it can be when they are supported to go on school trips they couldn't otherwise afford.

They let you have the chance to explore outside of the house and let you actually go somewhere instead of worrying how much it costs

Get to do things you might not be able to afford in your daily life outside school.

So that you can see new things (and if someone can't afford to go on holiday and then the school pays for their trip it is an amazing opportunity).

What kinds of trips are young people going on?

Day trips nearby and visits to museums or galleries are the most common kind of Primary trips. Trips abroad were not common. Only a handful of Primary children, 2%, said that no trips happen.

Trips are less common in Secondary schools. Visits to cinemas and theatres, to sports events or competitions and to museums and galleries were mentioned most often. Trips abroad were more common in Secondary schools with 45% of young people indicating that these trips took place. Interestingly, 20% of young people said 'none of these' trips took place in their schools.

Table 6: Types of trips taking place at school (4415 respondents: 584 Primary, 3831 Secondary)

What type of trips happen in your school? Pick as many as you like.			
Primary	%	Secondary	%
Day trips to places nearby	79	Trips to the cinema or theatres	51
Trips to museums or galleries	70	Trips to sport events or competitions	50
Overnight or residential trips	65	Trips to museums or galleries	46
Trips to sport events or competitions	64	Trips abroad	45
Other kinds of trips	60	Overnight or residential trips	32
Trips to the cinema or theatres	57	Other kinds of trips	31
Trips abroad	12	Not sure	23
None of these	2	None of these	20
Not sure	0	Day trips to places nearby	10

If you could go anywhere, where would you go?

Children and young people have big dreams when it comes to school trips. 3166 of them (509 Primary, 2657 Secondary) told us their dream school trips.

The most popular Primary destination is France, followed by 'anywhere' abroad and a mix of UK and foreign destinations, including Edinburgh, Spain, Japan, Glasgow and Blackpool. Secondary dream locations are similar: abroad anywhere, followed by Paris, Spain, New York, France, Italy, Alton Towers, USA, London and Blackpool.

Primary children would most like to visit theme parks, Legoland and Alton Towers, the zoo and a wide range of museums, local and international. The next most popular options are cinema trips, swimming, football matches, trampoline parks, camping and the beach. Secondary young people named football matches or trips to stadiums as the most popular type of trip, as well as theme parks, museums, skiing and the cinema.

While some options are out of bounds for a school trip - *I would like to go on a safari in Africa and a jungle trip to the amazon!* - many were UK or European with children at pains to describe what they would get out of the experience. Young people keen to go abroad are interested in seeing new places, meeting new people and experiencing other cultures and languages.

France to see how Europeans live, walk about Paris and see the fashion. (Primary)

Go to an art museum and learn to paint and draw like famous artists or go to Paris and learn about their language and history about places and wars they fought and maybe go to a museum in Paris. (Secondary)

I would go to Amsterdam to see the Anne frank house and museum and learn more about Anne Frank I love her. (Secondary)

Many Secondary suggestions were subject related or linked to plans for future study or work.

I would like to go abroad to a Spanish speaking country so I can practice speaking.

Auschwitz for history, i heard that it was considered but it didn't go ahead. it would be a great chance to really understand the history that we learn in school.

I would like to go to a place with programming because I'm really into computing coding gaming and digital skills because when I grow up I would love to make video games

Many young people were interested in trips in their local community or nearby. Notably, some of the most popular Primary options were what might be considered 'typical' family day outs like going swimming, to the cinema or to the beach.

I would like to go swimming or something you don't really get to do often daily.

The cinema to see a good film like the Lion King

Some Secondary responses reflected on the value of cheaper trips and trips which are heavily subsidised.

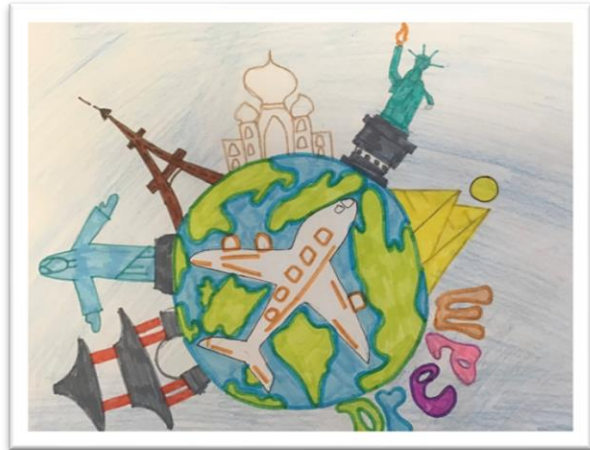
I'm going to see Wicked in December. We had to pay 30 pound but the original ticket would probably cost more. I think we are getting free icecream on the school as well

A caravan holiday nearby for people scared of flights or long travels. For going up to a week you could learn and try new things while having fun. It is also a cheaper option as well.

Some responses focused on cost and ability to go rather than being about a specific location or trip type.

Anything if I can take part.

I don't really mind where I go as long as it isn't expensive.



Pictures by Martyna Marszalek, Aadrika Risal, Liliana Zamyslowska, Ese Otadua and Eva Kelly from Holyrood High School, Glasgow

What if you can't go on trips?

I think they should be free - why, it's because everyone gets to take part. (Primary)

Primary and Secondary learners agree on the most important impacts of not being able to afford trips. They say that feeling left out and sad is most important. This is followed by missing out on trying new things, feeling embarrassed, not having as much fun and not learning as much as the people who go on trips.

Table 7: Impacts of being unable to attend trips due to cost (4286 respondents: 591 Primary, 3695 Secondary)

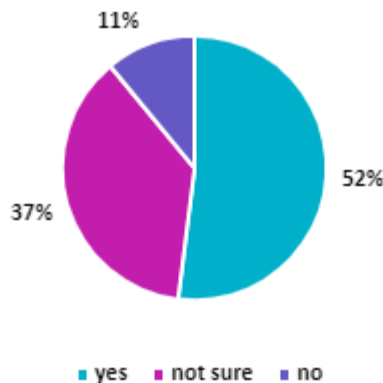
A trip is coming up, but Sammy is worried she can't afford it. What would it mean if she couldn't go? Pick the 3 most important options.		
Options	Primary	Secondary
She feels left out and sad	91%	85%
She misses out on trying new things	84%	51%
She feels embarrassed	74%	51%
She doesn't have as much fun as the people who go	77%	37%
She doesn't learn as much as the people who go	57%	34%

We asked Primary children whether, if they wanted to, everyone at their school could go on a big trip like the residential that traditionally takes place in P7.

Just over half of the children responding said that yes, everyone could go on a big trip like this. 11% of children said no, not everyone could go. Interestingly, over a third of children, 37%, said they weren't sure whether everybody would be able to go.

Figure 5: Views on likelihood of everyone being able to attend P7 residential (578 Primary respondents)

Could everyone at your school go on a big trip like the P7 residential if they wanted to?



It is positive that over half of children thought a big trip would be possible for everyone, suggesting confidence in their parents or schools helping to make this happen. For the children who weren't sure, there may be a lack of awareness around help available in school for costs like these. Although information is likely to go directly to parents in Primary school, it may be also helpful to make children aware of efforts to include everyone in school trips. Many children and young people are aware of financial stresses at home from an early age, with the risk that they start to self-exclude from costly events and activities.

Secondary learners reflected on the expense of foreign trips in their schools.

I really want to go on the history trip but it's not going to be less then 550 pounds so I'm trying to save up as much as possible so I can go.

I would really like to go to Paris, Italy or Spain. I would also like to go on the America trip that the school is running but it is extremely expensive.

I feel like the abroad trips should be less.

Some young people were definite that they couldn't go on these kinds of trips.

I'd like to go to another country but it's too expensive.

I'd like to go abroad - to Europe. We can't though because we don't have enough money.



Pictures from Linlithgow Primary School

No trips – the right solution for equity?

Secondary learners were most likely to mention they had never been on trips before or that their schools didn't do them, particularly trips abroad.

Any Trip abroad please!! I'm desperate to go on a residential trip and one of the only downsides to our school is that we don't do many. I would love to experience a trip abroad! I'll take any!

All school trips abroad have either been cancelled or extremely expensive due to covid so I think we should get a chance to do that now.

Some young people say this is because their schools or local authorities have decided that it is unfair to run them if everybody can't be included. These decisions have been taken with equity and inclusion in mind, but a handful of young people expressed their frustrations.

No we just don't go on them because it's not "equal"

I'd like to go abroad. We used to have trips to Amsterdam, Paris, South of France and New York but the council won't let us anymore.

France /Italy the school used to go there but now we don't even talk about it because they say if someone can't afford it then no one can go.

Not running trips means that nobody is left out because of their family income. It also means that everybody misses out on valuable experiences, including children and young people on low incomes. The benefits of school trips should be open to all with funding solutions that ensure access is widened, rather than closed off to all young people.

How do schools help with trips?

Many schools work hard to reduce or remove income barriers to valuable school trip experiences. 2672 (531 Primary, 2141 Secondary) participants told us what their schools do to help with access to school trips.

42% of Secondary young people responding to this question reported that they didn't know any helpful things their school does to help with trips. Another 21% reported 'no' or that there was 'nothing' available. This could mean either that nothing is in place, or that young people responding are unaware of available support. This underlines the need for good communication about support available if we want children to benefit from it.

Similar supports exist in Primary and Secondary schools, largely designed to cover or reduce the cost of trips and support young people to attend.

Young people told us about free trips in their schools, either for everyone or for some.

They pay for it to give a hand for everybody. (Primary)

People entitled to free meals also are entitled to free trips. (Secondary)

Our school ensures that every child can take part in school trips no matter what their circumstances are. (Secondary)

Some schools organise cheaper or subsidised trips.

They make it free or for lower money so they can have enough money [or no money] to go on the trip so they can also join in all the fun activities with their school friends. (Primary)

Try to get fully funded trips to somewhere local or to have very cheap. (Secondary)

If on free school meals we get help towards costs. (Secondary)

Fundraising in the community and donations from local businesses are sometimes used to reduce costs.

We raise money to go towards trips and other fun stuff that children don't want to miss out on. (Primary)

Some schools arrange instalments and payment plans to make costs more manageable for families, and some offer help with additional items needed to go on trips like suitcases, clothes and toiletries.

Secondary young people mentioned help from identified staff.

They let you know that you can talk to them about your financial problems at home, they help you.

They don't make it obvious if you need help and try to help you pay for it.

Primary children mentioned Parent Council support for trips and voting to use their Participatory Budget funds to pay for trips.

The Parent Council paid for part of our trips. Parents didn't pay anything last year.

As well as support to afford trips, young people named alternatives to trips like activities weeks and workshops in school.

What the Scottish government can do to ensure equal access to school trips

There is clearly lots of effort at school level to support young people with trips. Pupil Equity Funding (PEF) is often used for this. However, support will vary depending on funding, school location in Scotland and the kinds of trips available in each school.

2164 Secondary participants told us what they thought could be done at a national level to make sure that household income doesn't stop young people going on trips. Most suggestions were related to government funding. Young people said strongly that there should be more funding for trips. Answers were split between funding trips for all, so that nobody misses out on support, or more funding so that young people unable to afford them can have straightforward and equal access. Some young people suggested a specific school trip grant or fund.

Introduce a new policy where the government covers the cost of school trips

Get the trips free for everyone so nobody can be left out and they can all go and you don't Miss Education for whatever it is your learning about

I think that the government should pay for people without so much moneys trips - it is totally unfair to leave people out just because their poor.

Have a funding scheme for those who will miss out, it's not the child's fault they can't afford and it's an inevitable issue so they have to handle it better

Young people said that this would help avoid embarrassment, worry and being left out of valuable opportunities.

Make trips government funded so no one has to pay or be embarrassed if they can't

Help the schools pay for trips so the kids don't have to worry about paying as much

Pay for at least some school trips to ensure that everyone has a chance to be included on a school trip and not left behind

They say that additional funding would solve the problem of cancelling trips for equity purposes.

Provide more funding to allow more educational and fun trips without the school thinking they can't run trips as their too expensive for families.

A popular alternative suggestion was for Scottish government to provide more money directly to families to help them afford trips and other school costs. Some young people made specific suggestions around social security payments and specific payments to cover school costs for families on low incomes.

Offer free money for people who don't have much for a school trip so every child gets the same opportunity no matter what's going on at home

Expand the Scottish child payment and EMA

Give money to people who need it especially if they have kids

Some young people want Scottish Government to help lower the costs associated with trips.

Make them cheaper and understand people's problems

Give school grants and increase school budgets, get transport to be free and trips to museum free so everyone should be able to feel they can learn.

Provide better transport links to museums etc that are free/provide lunches at these places

Some thought that Scottish government should encourage schools to use their funding to support young people with access to trips.

Make it more common for schools to help pay for trips and free trips

Tell schools to help some of the students

Some young people had strong opinions on how Scottish and UK governments should raise money and support families. Suggestions included increasing taxes for higher earners, increasing wages and reducing the cost of living.

Stop putting the shopping prices up and put wages up because the average person can't afford anything.

They could maybe make more jobs so more parents have jobs and can pay for trips.

Create a less confusing and over-bureaucratic benefits system to all those who are struggling to have a better quality of life, for starters.

And while the most common responses focused on funding solutions, others made practical and school level suggestions that would help to reduce the cost and increase the number of trips happening in their schools, like using museums that have free entry and schemes where organisations can sign up to offer free trips to schools. Practical suggestions included the need for easy access to support if help is to reach young people and families.

Make sure that both the pupil and the parents know how to get help with affording stuff or getting free trips, make sure they have ways available to access these easily

Ask people and make sure they feel they can say! They might be embarrassed but if they don't say, they might regret it.



Picture from Linlithgow Primary

6. Our Big Cost of the School Day Ideas

Everyone should have access to the school day. (Primary)

Cost of the School Day Big Ideas are actions to remove cost barriers and help all children and young people to participate and learn equally at school, regardless of income. We heard 364 Primary Big Ideas and 1589 Secondary Big Ideas.

In Primary, free food at lunch and breaktime was the most common Big Idea.

Everybody should have free food in school

Fruit in the classroom in case anyone doesn't have enough money to afford more food

Fundraising to reduce costs was frequently mentioned. Children had lots of ideas, including sponsored runs, cake sales, welly walks, carol singing and community fundraising to avoid asking families in the school for money they may not have to spare.

Children had Big Ideas to help with uniform costs. They thought it would be a good idea to make uniform free or at least cheaper and more affordable.

Once a year give free school uniform and free school water bottles and everything we need

Children were keen on pre-loved clothing solutions, suggesting swap shops, clothing rails and clothes for seasonal events.

Our school has a clothing rack and for Xmas and Halloween we are asking people to hand in their old costumes and old Christmas jumpers.

Make families aware of our swap shop which you can get food and clothes for free.

Primary children had ideas to make school trips more accessible to everyone. The most common idea was to make trips free or at least make sure that *“Every class has a free school trip!”* More specific ideas around how to achieve this ranged from increased government funding to compromises like cheaper or shorter local trips.

Looking more widely at school costs, Primary children thought that costs should be removed or reduced to support children, like our character Sammy, who are unable to afford them.

Lower costs for him, try to make him feel included and on the same level with everyone!

Some children were specific about the need for the Scottish government to provide funding to schools to help them reduce costs and also provide support to families on low incomes.

For the government to take the cost of school lunches and school equipment

Government give family that need money some money

Although these were the most common Primary Big Ideas, there were many other valuable suggestions that could be considered in any school or local authority, including constructive ideas about how to use funding, community donations and free opportunities to help cover costs.

Our "big idea" is a welcome pack with school uniform and information on the local area.

All schools should have emergency funds and people not getting picked on for being in financial poverty

Provide all stationery, free trips, second hand uniforms, water bottles, free lunches and snacks, free after school clubs

At Secondary, making lunch free for all was the most common Big Idea.

Free meals for every pupil because they might not say about their money so you won't know.

Make school meals free for everyone, don't make students worry about cost of school day or stuff going on in school.

Some young people suggested that if lunch wasn't free for everyone it should be cheaper or the free meal allowance should be increased.

To make food free or cheaper because one day I didn't have lunch because I had to buy water so I couldn't get food.

Reduce school meal cost so people who receive free school meals can afford more or increase the amount of money given to people for free school meals who receive so they can afford at break and lunch.

Young people had the idea that free school meals and other food provision should be provided in non-stigmatising ways.

Make it less embarrassing if u run out of money for lunch.

Destigmatise free meals and support and make it easier for everyone to access help/aid.

After lunch, the next most common Secondary Big Idea was fundraising to cover costs for families unable to afford them. Ideas were similar to those from Primary children, including bake sales, games and fun days.

Free, or cheaper, school trips were the next most popular Big Ideas. Secondary young people were keen to see greater awareness of support available and specific funding to help with the cost of trips.

Our big idea - make the trips more affordable and it easier to talk to teachers about it.

Sammy would be helped by the government if they would be able to give the school a fund for trips.

Young people were, in general, keen to see a focus on reducing or removing all school costs in their Big Ideas. They said that more funding for schools would help them cover costs and support learners.

Reduce the general cost of the school day.

Government gives school a bit more money for people that can't afford to buy things at school

Just generally more money put into schools, even if it means raising taxes for people with more money

The government should set aside money to help families with school money worries, that could help pay for trips, school lunches and things like that.

Some Big Ideas highlighted the importance of making young people feel included, happy and part of school life.

Put systems in place so that everyone is included no matter how much money they have

Let everyone get a chance to do the same things

Young people say that good communication and trusted adults in every school are important to achieve this, as is awareness throughout the school community of poverty and support available.

Talk about poverty more and how it effects people

Communicate with students and tell them that if there is a problem then the school will always be there to support them.

Advertise the support systems in place as many people may not know about these support systems as they are not publicised as much as it should.

Finally, young people had the Big Idea of providing more money for families who need it.

Make sure that no family is left embarrassed by not being able to buy things - give the families money for school.

Support families who are having financial problems.

7. Conclusions

In their answers to the Big Question, children and young people have identified what supports readiness to learn and access to food and trips at school, and what is needed both in school and from the Scottish government to make this a reality.

To be ready to learn, children and young people say they need sleep, warmth, clothing, food, support and the avoidance of worry and stress at home. At school, they want to be in safe and inclusive environments full of kindness, respect and positive relationships, where they have enough to eat and are able to participate equally with all required resources. They want engaging teaching that meets their needs and calm safe spaces in which to learn with trusted adults around them and friends to have fun and learn with.

Children and young people have told us how critical food is to their learning, participation and wellbeing at school. They say that hunger negatively impacts on concentration and learning. It affects their physical and emotional health and their wellbeing and feelings of inclusion and belonging at school.

Children and young people have also told us that school trips matter, and why. They say trips offer chances to have new experiences, learn more and in different ways, have fun, feel included and to go places and try things they normally couldn't. Not being able to go on trips leaves them feeling left out and sad, unable to try new things, embarrassed and not able to have as much fun and learning as the people who go on trips.

Access to food, trips and many of the things young people say helps with readiness to learn are strongly influenced by family income. This means that young people from lower income households are at risk of being less likely to experience or be equipped with everything they need to feel ready to learn, participate and feel happy at school.

Many schools are keenly aware of the barriers children on low incomes face, and work to remove them wherever possible. Children and young people identified a wide range of helpful actions to ensure equity in their schools that can be shared and learnt from. However, the support available varies from school to school, is dependent on a range of factors and some young people say they aren't always sure of what's available.

Action on equity at school level is making a difference to children and young people each and every day. However, children and young people have opinions and ideas about what more is needed at a national level from the Scottish government for consistent support that reaches more children and young people.

Wider and stronger action is needed at all levels to reduce child poverty and remove financial barriers to learning if we want to improve outcomes for children and young people affected by poverty.

8. What now? Next steps

Over 5000 children and young people from across Scotland took part in the first Cost of the School Day Big Question. Their insights have implications for school leaders, classroom teachers, local authorities, education bodies, and for politicians and policymakers working to reduce child poverty, narrow the attainment gap and improve outcomes for children and young people affected by poverty.

Throughout the Big Question report, it is clear how poverty and low income can affect children and young people's lives, both in and out of school. 240 000 children (24% of all children) remain locked in poverty in Scotland.¹⁸ Children and young people's insights and creative solutions to common cost barriers to learning must be listened to and acted upon.

Listed below are some calls, based on what children and young people have told us, organised into school, local and national levels.

Children and young people have told us what helps them to feel ready to learn and what is needed to support access to food and trips at school – what more can we do to respond in our own spheres of influence?

At Scottish government level

- Take action to reduce child poverty. Ensure that children's needs can be met at home, and they can come to school ready to learn and more able to engage, participate and feel included
- Provide more direct support for families on low incomes to help with school costs
- Provide more support for schools and local authorities to help families with school costs
- Take action on school meals. Children and young people want to see progress towards universal free school meal provision at all stages, both Primary and Secondary
- Take action on school trips. Listen to how important young people say school trips are to their learning and wellbeing and keep the commitment to more support for schools to help with access to them
- Take action on devices. Ensure that children and young people across Scotland have the devices and connectivity they need to learn
- Provide support and drive for local authorities and schools to act on suggestions made by young people in the Big Question and on all other ways to reduce the cost of the school day and support low income families
- Respond to young people who have taken part in the Big Question and ensure that children and young people's voices are key to poverty and education policy development.

At local authority level

- Audit approaches within the authority and schools when it comes to reducing the cost of the school day - what is consistently in place and where are the gaps?
- Support all families with effective, family friendly communication around financial entitlements, including free school meals

¹⁸ Scottish government [Poverty and Income Inequality in Scotland 2020-23, 21 March 2024](#), 2024

- Consider local action when it comes to key points highlighted by children and young people:
 - physical spaces in schools and the structure of the school day
 - access to trips in the local area
 - difficulties surrounding food at school and suggestions around reducing prices and increasing free meal allowances
- Support schools to implement ideas made by children and young people in the Big Question
- Ensure partnership working across the local authority to ensure schools are supported in tackling poverty related challenges.

At school level

- Audit existing approaches to reducing the cost of the school day and supporting readiness to learn- what is consistently in place, where are the gaps and what support is needed?
- Consider action in school when it comes to key points highlighted by children and young people:
 - Provision of resources and support when young people don't have what's needed
 - Positive and safe school cultures, where young people feel included, welcomed, respected and listened to and have kind adults to approach for support
 - Ensuring family uptake of support like free school meals, school clothing grants and Education Maintenance Allowance
 - Effective, universal, family friendly communication around financial entitlements, including free school meals
 - Support and subsidies to take part in school trips and other opportunities, provided with dignity
 - Access to food throughout the school day, provided with dignity
 - A good school day, from its start to breaks and transition points throughout
 - Quiet, calm spaces throughout the school and support for individual needs in the classroom
 - Awareness amongst families and young people of who to approach about money worries or concerns about costs, and effective awareness raising in the school community about support available
 - Poverty and equity awareness in the school community

At Education Scotland level

- Support schools and practitioners to engage with Cost of the School Day research, resources and examples of effective practice
- New Inspectorate to capture and share effective practice in schools which is reducing costs and supporting children and families on low incomes

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About CPAG in Scotland

Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) in Scotland works for the one in four children in Scotland growing up in poverty. It doesn't have to be like this. We use our understanding of what causes poverty and the impact it has on children's lives to campaign for policies that will prevent and solve poverty – for good. We provide training, advice and information to make sure hard-up families get the financial support they need.



**THE COST OF
THE SCHOOL DAY**

