



Hardship on the ground

Insights from the Action for Children Family Fund and frontline services

Families across the UK are struggling to afford the basics and children are being exposed to severe hardship. This briefing presents analysis of the Action for Children Family Fund, which has supported thousands of families through crisis grants and enriching experiences since it launched in June 2024.¹ It also includes insights from frontline practitioners in Action for Children services on the financial pressures facing the families they support.

With winter approaching, these pressures are intensifying. The government's newly published Child Poverty Strategy sets out a plan to reduce the number of children growing up in poverty, a hugely significant and long-awaited step forward. As this briefing shows, the scale and urgency of hardship facing families means that much is resting on the strategy's ability to deliver meaningful change for families at pace. The strategy must succeed, and hardship data from frontline organisations that support families in crisis will provide an important means of tracking progress in the months and years to come.

About Action for Children

Action for Children is one of the largest and oldest children's charities in the UK. We protect and support children, young people and families through intervention, prevention and advocacy. In 2024/25, we helped 551,400 children, young people and families through our four core service areas of **family support**, **children in care**, **disabled children and their families** and **children's mental health and wellbeing**. We deliver 342 services in local communities across the UK, in schools and online.

Key findings:

- Between June 2024 and September 2025, approximately **4,400 families** and **15,000 parents, children and young people** in financial hardship received crisis grants from the Action for Children Family Fund. In 2025, we received **300 applications a month** for crisis support on average.
- In addition, **48,419 parents, children and young people** in financial hardship benefited from enriching activities and experiences under the Family Fund over the same period.
- The biggest driver of need for crisis support was for **help with food costs** (39%). Practitioners in our survey also highlighted food as the biggest cost pressure on their families right now.
- Half of applications for crisis support were triggered by families **struggling with the cost of basic essentials** (47%). One in twenty were **experiencing or at imminent risk of homelessness** (5%).

¹ The Action for Children Family Fund replaced and mainstreamed two previous funds that had existed in different forms since launching as part of our emergency response to the COVID-10 pandemic in 2020. This briefing is focused on the latest iteration of these funds, called the Family Fund, that has been funded by Nationwide Building Society since June 2024.

- At least 52% of applications for crisis support were for families **in receipt of Universal Credit**, highlighting the deep inadequacy of the social security system, with too many families unable to afford the essentials and forced to turn to charities and food banks.
- 71% of applications for crisis support were for families with only one or two children, meaning they will see **no benefit from the removal of the two-child limit policy**.
- A quarter of applications for crisis support were for **working families** and one in seven were for families **not claiming any means-tested benefits**. Practitioners in our survey also emphasised the pressures on these families as **a significant and growing problem within their services**. Beyond offering a one-off crisis grant, there is very little wider support that we can help these families to access.

Policy context

4.5 million children are now growing up in poverty, a record high and an increase of 900,000 since 2010. Despite inflation falling from its peak, the cost of living crisis is far from over. At 3.6%, inflation remains well above the Bank of England's 2% target.² Upwards pressure on food prices continues to be particularly challenging for families, with food inflation forecast to reach 5.7% this Christmas.³

The publication of the government's Child Poverty Strategy marks a serious step forward in tackling the UK's child poverty crisis. Evidence from Action for Children's Paying the Price report was clear that removing the two-child limit was the most cost-effective measure to get child poverty falling within this Parliament, and its abolition represents a turning point that will provide vital additional income to affected families when it comes into effect from April 2026.⁴ Other actions, such as the expansion of school breakfast clubs and free school meals will provide some much-needed relief to families. The government's investments in social housebuilding and early intervention services for families also have a key role to play in transforming child poverty levels over the long-term.

But to realise the strategy's ambition, the government will need to build on these foundations further in the years to come. As this briefing will show, families on low-to-middle incomes continue to shoulder the pain of cost of living increases, and the coming winter period will be challenging for many families of all sizes. This includes families that may be less visible to the government's child poverty policy interventions, such as those who are working and not claiming means-tested benefits but are nevertheless experiencing real hardship and presenting to charities and food banks for emergency help. The renewed focus on tackling child poverty must ensure that these less visible families do not fall through the gaps.



“Child poverty continues to have a profound effect on the young people and families we support. It's not just about the lack of money, it's about the daily stress, the missed opportunities and the emotional toll it takes on children who are trying to grow, learn, and thrive.”

- Action for Children practitioner

² ONS (November 2025) [Consumer price inflation, UK: October 2025](#).

³ Food and Drink Federation (September 2025) [UK Food and Drink Inflation 2025/26 Forecast](#).

⁴ Action for Children (March 2025) [Paying the price of child poverty](#).

1. The Action for Children Family Fund

Supported by Nationwide Building Society, the Family Fund consists of two funding streams. These are available to Action for Children practitioners working in frontline services to apply for on behalf of the children, families and young people they work with.

This includes:

- A **crisis support** funding stream that provides emergency grants to families in financial hardship to help with food, clothing, utilities, beds, white goods and other household essentials. Families receive a grant of up to £250, or more in exceptional circumstances.
- An **enriching activities** funding stream that provides disadvantaged children, young people and families opportunities to participate in fun and enriching experiences and days out.

This briefing presents data from applications between 1 June 2024 to 30 September 2025.

2. Family Fund: crisis support grants

Key stats at a glance

- Over a 16 month period between the start of June 2024 and the end of September 2025, Action for Children practitioners made **4,422** applications for crisis support, supporting **4,369** families and **14,847** parents, children and young people experiencing financial hardship.⁵
- **43%** of applications for crisis support were concentrated in a four month period over the winter, from November 2024 to February 2025.
- Since the start of 2025, practitioners in Action for Children services have made an average of **300 applications a month** for crisis help on behalf of their families.

14,847 parents, children and young people helped	300 applications a month on avg. in 2025	£182 average grant amount
4,422 applications for crisis support Jun 24 – Sept 25	£804,000 spent on crisis grants from June 24 – Sept 25	Spend in England: 42%, Scotland: 42%, Wales: 11%, NI: 6%

⁵ This figure includes direct beneficiaries (i.e. parents, children or young people who directly benefited from the grant) as well as indirect beneficiaries (such as siblings or other parents/carers). To calculate unique beneficiaries, a multiplier has been used based on the average family size supported. Families that received multiple grants have only been counted once.

Here are some examples of crisis support grants we've given

Example 1

- A single mum of one, no financial support from the father.
- Struggling to pay for food due to low-income and debt.
- Unable to work due to complex mental health challenges.
- **Grant:** £100 food voucher.
- **Outcome:** Mum's anxiety was eased, and the family were able to have a healthy, nutritional diet over the Christmas period.

Example 2

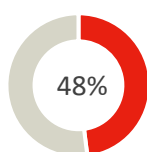
- A young person, 16, living with and caring full-time for elderly grandparents.
- Family in financial hardship and unable to afford adequate clothing and footwear. Young person often came to service in clothing too small for them and worn shoes.
- **Grant:** £250 clothing.
- **Outcome:** Young person was grateful to have a new outfit ready to start college.

Example 3

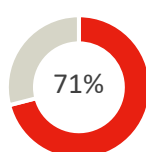
- A working family with five children.
- Affected by the two-child limit.
- Family struggling to make ends meet and found the summer holidays difficult.
- **Grant:** £150 food and £100 clothing.
- **Outcome:** Family felt the grant had taken the pressure off for a few weeks ahead of the children going back to school.

Family characteristics

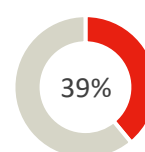
- Half of applications were for **single parent families** (48%).
- Most applications were for families with **one or two children** (71%). 42% were for families with one child, 28% for families with two children and 29% for those **with three or more children**.
- 47% of applications were for a family with a child **under the age of 5**.
- 82% of applications recorded a **White ethnic background**, and almost one in five were from a **Black or minority ethnic background** (18%).
- One in four applications were for families with **children receiving free school meals** (39%), 20% included a child with a **Child in Need status**, 15% of applications included a **looked-after child** and one in five included a **disabled adult or child** (20%).



for single
parent
families



for families
with 1 or 2
children



for families on
free school
meals

Work status

- A quarter of applications were for **working families** where at least one parent, carer or young person was in full-time or part-time work (25%).
- Over half of applications were for families where the parent/carers or young person was **not in work** or **unable to work** (56%).

In qualitative responses, a wide range of reasons were provided for why grant beneficiaries were not in work, including caring responsibilities for young children or sick or disabled family members, physical and mental health conditions acting as a barrier to work, students in full-time education and those unable to work due to their immigration status.

Previous Action for Children research has highlighted how barriers to the labour market drive and entrench child poverty. Almost two-thirds of the children in poverty live in families with at least one significant work barrier, including **almost 600,000 children in full-time working families that still live below the poverty line.**⁶

Employment status	%
Parent/carers/young person is not working or is unable to work	56%
Don't know	16%
At least one parent/carers/young person is working full-time	14%
Parent/carers/young person is working part-time	11%
None applicable	2%

Note: Data on employment status is drawn from a reduced sample of 4,033 applications.

Benefits receipt

- At least 52% of applications were for families in receipt of Universal Credit.⁷ Action for Children has long called for government action on the **inadequacy of the social security system**, with Universal Credit rates simply insufficient to meet many families' basic needs. The reliance of so many families on emergency help from charities like Action for Children offers clear evidence of the failure of the social security system to adequately protect children from hardship.

The majority of families who are coming to us for crisis support and are in receipt of Universal Credit will **see no benefit from the end of the two-child limit**, as they have less than three children.

- However, our data also suggests that it's not just families reliant on state support that are struggling with the cost of essentials. Around one in seven applications for crisis support were for families **not claiming any means-tested benefits** (15%).⁸

⁶ Action for Children (February 2024) [Child poverty and barriers to work](#).

⁷ It is likely the true figure is higher given the high proportion of "don't know" responses to this question.

⁸ Either not claiming any benefits (8%) or only claiming non-means tested disability benefits (PIP, DLA and Scottish equivalents). Note, the true figure may be higher or lower given the high number of don't knows.

Benefit type	%
Universal Credit	52%
Don't know	30%
Not claiming any means-tested benefits	15%
Other	11%
Child disability benefits (DLA or Scottish Child Disability Payment)	10%
Adult disability benefits (PIP or Scottish Adult Disability Payment)	7%
Housing Benefit	7%
Child or Working Tax Credits	6%
Carers Allowance	2%

Note: Data on benefits receipt is drawn from a reduced sample of 4,380 applications.

Case study: Sophie

28-year-old mum Sophie has three children under the age of four and is supported by Action for Children in the South West of England. She's a single parent and is currently unable to work due to caring responsibilities for her children, the cost of childcare and her own health issues. She receives Universal Credit and other benefits, but the high cost-of-living means it's still a struggle to make ends meet.

Sophie said, *"Once I've paid my rent and bills and bought food for the month, there isn't much left. There's no budget for emergencies, days out or treats for the children. I see other families doing fun activities every weekend and I can't do that for my kids – it makes me feel like a bad mum. The cost of living has just gone up so much."*

One of Sophie's children has food allergies, and one suffers badly with eczema, both of which increase the cost of her weekly shop. She said, *"The dairy free options are so much more expensive, four dairy free yogurts are £3.60 instead of about £1, and that isn't a choice. I have to spend more on branded wipes and nappies too as my son's eczema flares up badly when I use the cheaper versions. Bath and laundry soap for sensitive skin is also more expensive."*

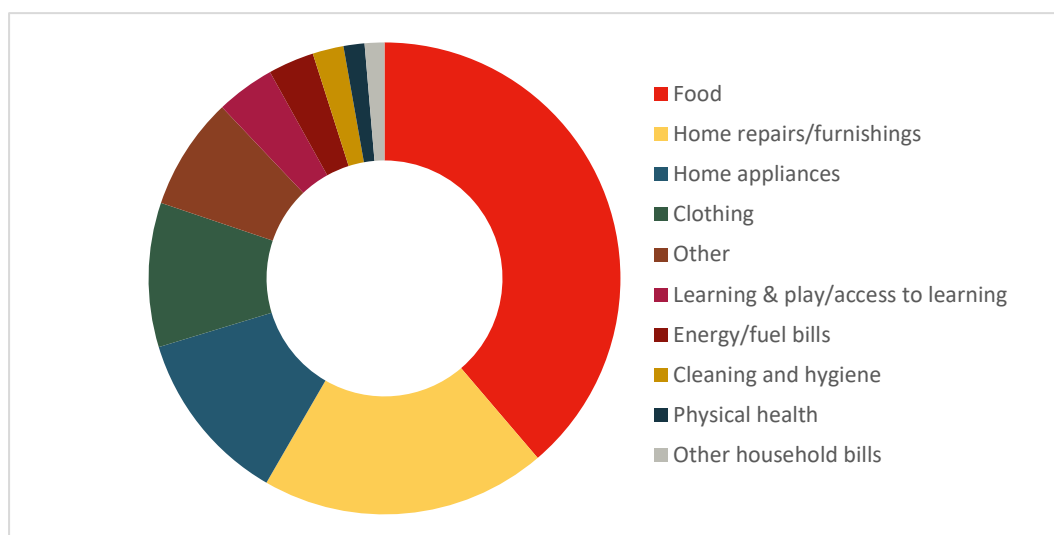
"I worry about the kids ruining their clothes because I know I'll have to buy new ones. I use hand-me-downs and buy second-hand as much as possible. The thought of having to buy school uniform on top of that for the first time this year was stressful, especially the branded items which aren't optional."

Through Action for Children's Family Fund, Sophie has had food vouchers to help towards the cost of dairy free food. The charity has also provided support to buy school uniform. She described the financial help as a "huge relief" that "took the pressure off."

Sophie is worried about extra financial pressure in the run up to Christmas. She said, *"I try to avoid using the heating for as long as possible. I want to make sure my kids have special memories of Christmas, so I tell my family not to buy me any presents and to buy extra for the children instead, so I know they will have more under the tree than they otherwise would."*

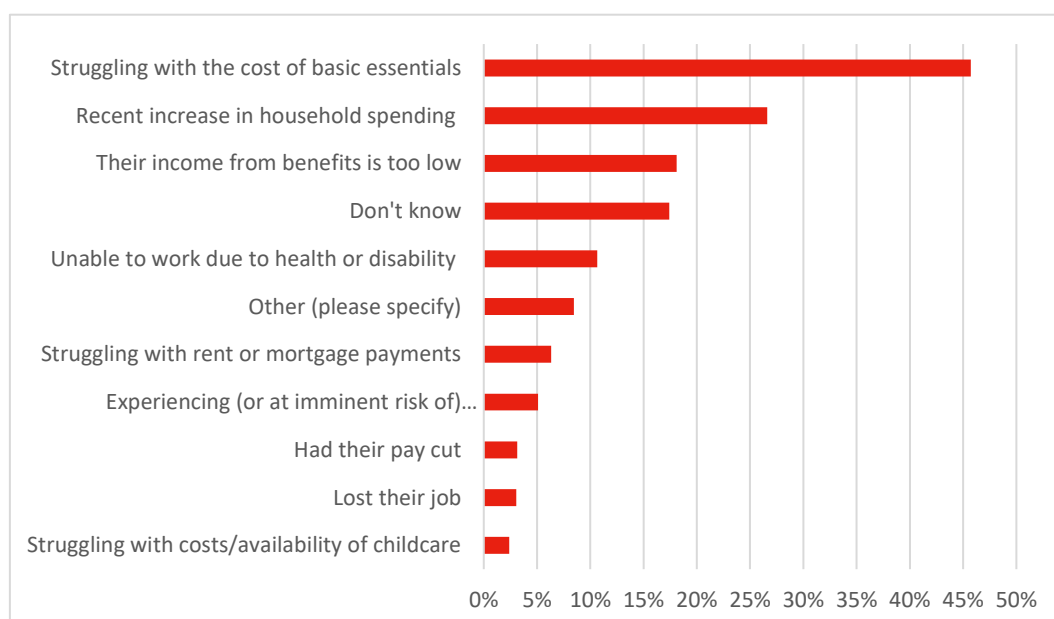
Spending categories

- The biggest driver of need for crisis support among families in Action for Children services was for **help with food costs**, which made up 39% of total spending. This was followed by **home repairs/furnishings** (20%), **home appliances** (12%) and **clothing** (10%).
- Together, these four categories of essential items made up 80% of spending for crisis support under the Family Fund between June 2024 and September 2025.



Triggers for crisis support

- Applications for crisis support can select one or more reasons that triggered the family's need for emergency help.
- Almost half of applications were for families in crisis due to **struggling with the cost of basic essentials** (47%). More than a quarter had experienced a **recent increase in household costs** (27%). One in twenty were **experiencing or at imminent risk of homelessness** (5%).



Impact of hardship on families

- Around one in five applications highlighted that the family or young person was **cutting back on food portion sizes** (18%) and that without the grant the parent/carer would **struggle to feed their children** (19%).
- A third of applications highlighted that the **benefits the family or young person receive are insufficient to meet their living costs** (32%) and at least one in twenty were **affected by the two-child limit and/or benefit cap** (5%).⁹
- 71% of applications indicated that the parent or young person was experiencing **anxiety, stress or other mental health concerns** linked to financial hardship. One in five highlighted these concerns were being experienced by children within the household (22%).

⁹ The true figure may be higher or lower due to the high proportion of don't knows.

3. Family Fund: enrichment grants

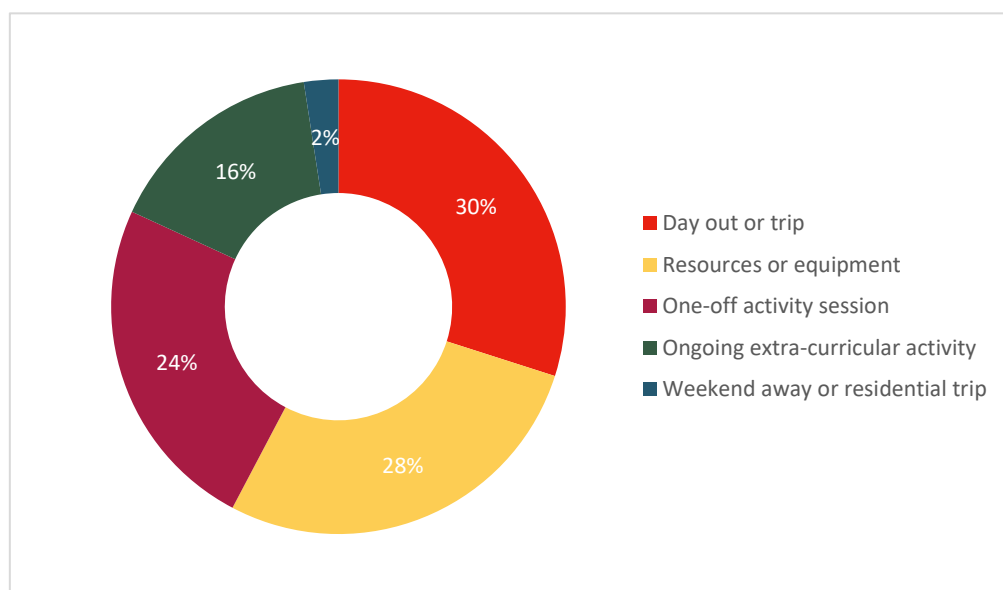
Key stats at a glance

- Between June 2024 and September 2025, Action for Children practitioners made **3,077 applications** for enrichment grants from the Family Fund.
- In total, **48,419 parents, children and young people** in financial hardship benefited from enriching activities and experiences under the Family Fund over this period.¹⁰
- Families receiving enrichment grants were more likely to have older children: only 10% of applications had a child under 5, while 38% had a child aged 5 to 11 and 66% had a child aged 12 to 17.

48,419 parents, children and young people helped	£675,485 spent on enriching experiences	£220 average grant amount
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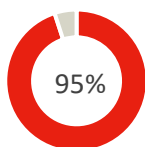
Types of enrichment activities

- The most common type of activity was for **days out or trips** (30%), closely followed by **resources or equipment** (28%) and **one-off activity sessions** such as crafting, sports, youth clubs and outdoor fun (24%). A further 16% were for **ongoing extra-curricular activities**, such as music, dance or swimming lessons.
- 57% of grants were for individual young people or families, and 43% were for groups of families or young people in an Action or Children service.

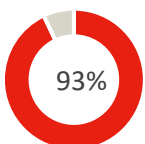


¹⁰ This figure includes direct beneficiaries (children and young people who directly benefited from the grant) as well as indirect beneficiaries (parents, guardians and siblings who have benefited indirectly as a result).

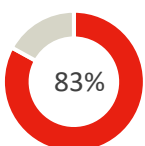
Outcomes from the enrichment grants



Of parents¹¹ agreed or strongly agreed that they were able to give their child an experience they would not have otherwise had due to the grant.



Of children and young people¹² agreed or strongly agreed that they had the opportunity to do something new due to the grant.



Of children and young people agreed or strongly agreed that they felt positive about the future due to the grant.

Case study: Tom and Kerry

Parents Tom and Kerry were referred to Action for Children by their health visitor after an operation left Kerry with disabilities, and they fell into financial crisis. After Kerry gave birth to Benji via caesarean she was left in chronic pain and unable to walk properly. Shortly afterwards she began to have seizures.

Kerry's disabilities and the demands of having young children meant Tom had no choice but to give up work to help care for the family. With neither of them working, the couple had to leave their privately rented house and move into social housing. They also lost their car as they were unable to meet repayments.

Action for Children supported the family with supermarket vouchers and gaining access to a local foodbank, as well as £250 towards a new washing machine. Support workers also helped them to apply for fuel and energy vouchers they were eligible for. During the summer holidays, their support worker applied for an enrichment grant to help them access a family day at Cadbury World and a trip to the local swimming pool, which their children loved.

"What has happened to Tom and myself can happen to anybody. I was no better or no worse than anyone else before this happened. I'm just an average person, who was working, my partner was working, and we fell onto hard times."

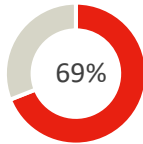
"Action for Children's support has been life-changing. We cannot put into words what your help has meant to us and the children."

¹¹ Parents of children under the age of 10, who completed the outcome questions on their child's behalf.

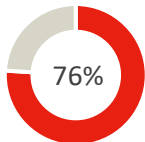
¹² Children and young people over the age of 10, who completed the outcome questions themselves.

4. View from the ground: what our services are seeing

To support and supplement our analysis of the Family Fund grants, we carried out a survey of 173 Action for Children staff working in direct practice across our services in September/October 2025.



Of practitioners surveyed were currently supporting a child, young person, or family **experiencing poverty or extreme financial hardship**.



Of practitioners surveyed said the financial pressures on the families or young people they support was **worse than last year** - including 34% who said it is **much worse**.

Needs of families

- In line with applications for crisis support from the Family Fund, practitioners identified **food costs (40%) as the biggest financial concern among the families and young people they support**.
- This was followed by **energy bills (17%)**, **Other (15%)** and **getting into debt or deeper into debt (13%)**.

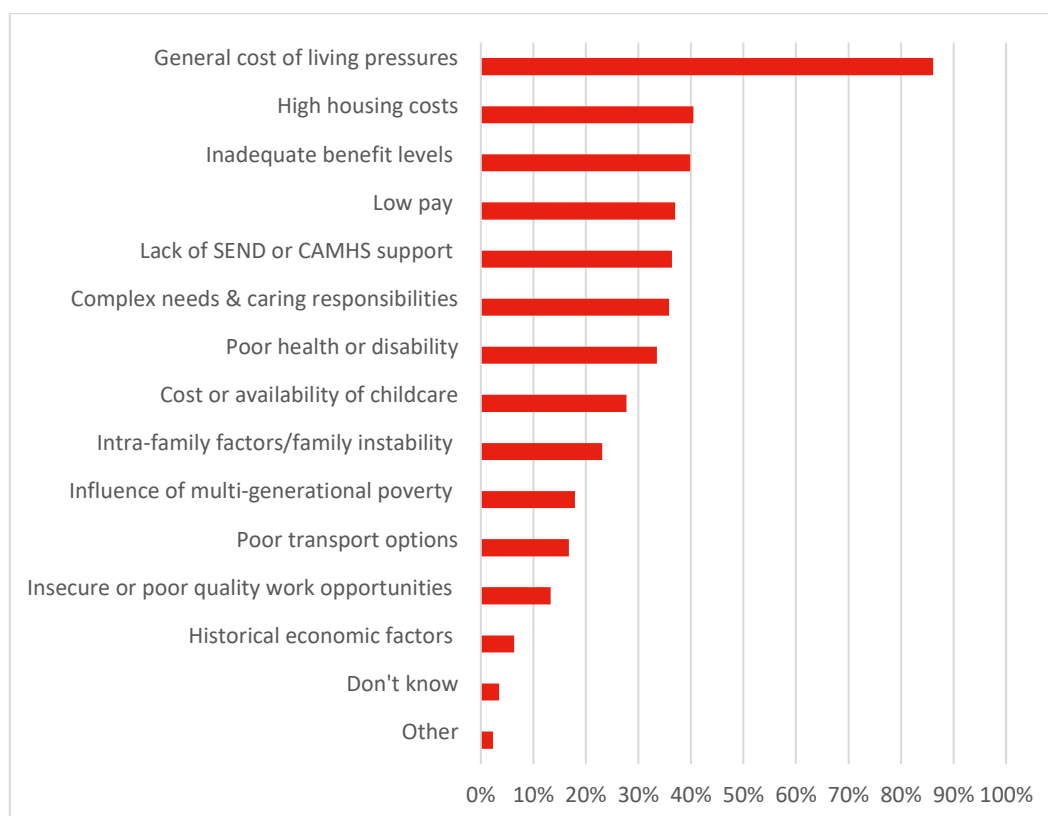
In qualitative responses, practitioners shared a number of specific examples of how they had supported families in poverty in recent weeks. This included:

- Children sleeping on the floor or in broken, unsuitable beds, including a 9-year-old still using a toddler bed because the family couldn't afford a replacement.
- A household without a working fridge freezer and no means to replace it, where the lack of fresh food was impacting their mood and the children's ability to concentrate at school.
- A young mother trapped in a domestic abuse situation, unable to leave due to her financial situation.
- A working family with both parents in employment but still unable to cover essential bills, who was supported with food parcels and help with school uniform costs.
- A single mother caring for two young boys after the death of their father, forced to give up work to support her children's additional needs and trauma, which deepened their financial hardship.

Drivers of poverty

Practitioners who took part in the survey were asked to identify the biggest underlying drivers and causes of poverty among the families they support.

- By far the most commonly identified root cause of poverty was **general cost of living pressures** (86%). This was followed by **high housing costs** (40%), **inadequate benefit levels** (40%) and **low pay** (37%).



- An emerging concern increasingly raised by practitioners in Action for Children services is the negative impact that limited early help and specialist provision is having on family incomes. Practitioners report that parents are being forced to reduce their work hours or leave employment altogether to meet their child's unmet needs.
- In our survey, more than a third of practitioners highlighted **caring responsibilities for complex needs** (36%) as a major driver of poverty in their areas. The same proportion of respondents specifically identified the impact of insufficient services **for Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and child and adolescent mental health (CAMHS)** on parental employment (36%) as a key underlying driver of poverty and hardship.



“Several families have been significantly impacted by having to reduce hours or give up working to support their child when they are not in school due to needs not being met in school. This impacts financially due to reduced income.”

“Families I work with all have children with additional needs. Most of the families are single parent families. Most of the parents find it impossible to work as the needs of their child require a high level of support, school placements are not reliable. This leaves families reliant on benefits and in financial hardship.”

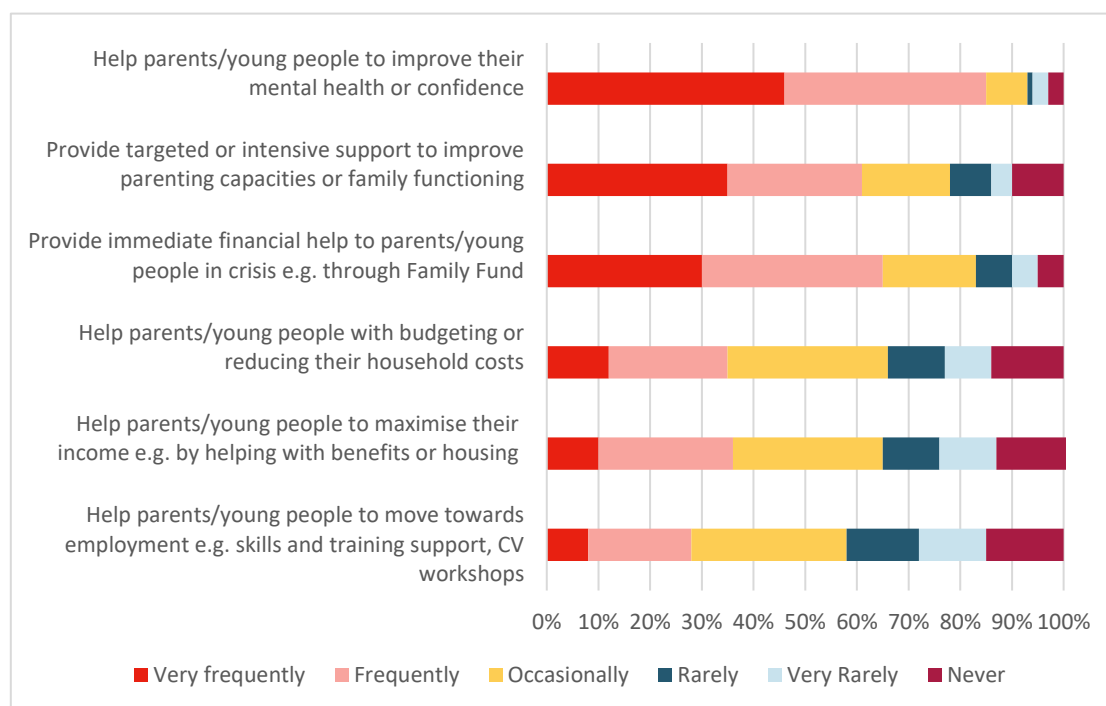
How Action for Children services support families in poverty

- Most practitioners surveyed had applied for crisis support (63%) and enrichment grants (60%) from the Family Fund on behalf of their families in the previous three months.
- A third had worked **longer than usual hours** to support families (34%).
- Around one in six had **donated their own household items or clothing** (16%) and 7% had provided food or topped up energy meters **at their own cost**.

In a previous briefing, we explored the wide range of ways in which practitioners in Action for Children’s services support poverty relief.¹³ In our most recent survey, we asked practitioners how often they provide certain types of support to families and young people experiencing poverty.

We found:

- 85% frequently help with improving mental health or confidence;
- 65% frequently provide immediate financial help to those in crisis;
- 61% frequently provide help to improve parenting capacities or family functioning;
- 36% frequently help with income maximisation;
- 35% frequently help with budgeting or reducing household costs;
- 28% frequently provide support to help move towards employment.



¹³ Action for Children (January 2025) [Family support and child poverty](#).

Family support services can therefore provide both direct relief to families to mitigate the immediate impacts of poverty and reduce financial stress, as well as more targeted and intensive interventions that help to build family resilience and break through barriers that can drive poverty.

The salience of, and relationship between, different factors that drive poverty and their corresponding solutions can be complex and is unique to every family. However, practitioners in our survey frequently emphasised the critical importance of addressing financial instability first, in order to successfully engage families in wider support and interventions. A strong social security system is therefore critical to both reducing child poverty and enhancing parents' capacities to engage with services that can support better child and family outcomes.



"I have found a huge amount of families aren't able to be fully present and contained with their children as they are constantly worrying about how they are going to live day by day with bills rocketing."

"If a young person doesn't know where their dinner is coming from tonight, they're not going to be in the head space to be able to learn the life skills we are trying to teach them."

"We have had a family who we have accessed financial support for who were so concerned by their debt and money worries that they could not focus on any parenting aspect of the plan. The plan had to close because Mum did not have capacity to engage."

Forgotten families?

A frequent theme raised by practitioners in our survey concerned rising hardship among working families, including those whose earnings mean they are not entitled to social security support. These families were repeatedly highlighted as a particularly difficult group to support, as beyond one-off crisis grants, there is often little wider help that these families can access.

Entitlement to means-tested benefits, like Universal Credit, acts as a gateway to a much wider range of financial support. For example, being in receipt of Universal Credit can mean getting access to free school meals, reduced council tax, help with energy bills through the Warm Homes Discount, free prescriptions and tests and access to the Holiday Food and Activities Programme during school holidays. In many cases, local authority crisis support through the Household Support Fund is restricted to residents in receipt of means-tested benefits.



"Child poverty is also becoming more apparent within the working family dynamic also. The increases in cost of living and the wage rise not matching up will see more families that have one or more working parents having to use food banks..."

"...we are seeing families where both parents are working who are also struggling to make ends meet...This is affecting working parents more so as they are not entitled to any further help from government."

“The families who are struggling the most are those not entitled to any Universal Credit or very little - they are just on the line. They do not get free school meals...they are on minimum wage jobs working all hours just to pay bills. It is always this group of families that get missed”

Around 750,000 households with children in poverty are not claiming means-tested benefits, more than a third of all those in poverty (36%). There are multiple reasons why a family on a low-income may not be claiming means-tested benefits, for example:

- They may fall just outside of a means-test threshold but still be experiencing significant hardship.
- They may be entitled to support but are not taking it up for a range of reasons, including stigma, a lack of awareness and the complexity of the system.

Modelling by Public First for Action for Children found that achieving 100% take-up of the benefits that low-income families with children are entitled to could lift **390,000 children out of poverty by 2030**.¹⁴

¹⁴ Action for Children (March 2025) [Paying the price of child poverty](#).

Appendix: Crisis support grants, by UK nation

1 June 2024 to 30 September 2025

	UK	England	Scotland	Wales	Northern Ireland
Number of applications	4,442	2,070	1,720	441	191
Number of families	4,369	2,099	1,704	387	178
Number of unique beneficiaries	14,847	7,157	5,762	1,325	604
Total spend	£804,211	£336,605	£338,551	£84,477	£44,578
Average grant amount	£182	£163	£196	£192	£233
Number of children: 1	42%	43%	45%	30%	38%
Number of children: 2	28%	28%	28%	30%	33%
Number of children: 3+	29%	30%	27%	39%	29%
A couple	25%	28%	20%	33%	27%
A single parent	48%	45%	50%	49%	54%
Young person living independently	13%	10%	17%	7%	15%
Young parent(s) (one or both >25)	4%	4%	3%	5%	5%
Foster carer	4%	7%	1%	5%	0%
Kinship carer	3%	2%	4%	3%	1%
At least one adult working full-time	11%	10%	9%	15%	12%
At least one adult working part-time	14%	13%	14%	14%	17%
At least one adult working	25%	24%	31%	31%	32%
Child(ren) on free school meals	39%	38%	40%	43%	27%
Child(ren) is Looked After	15%	14%	16%	18%	5%
Child(ren) on Child in Need Plan	22%	17%	30%	13%	25%
Disabled adult or child in family	20%	21%	20%	23%	9%
In receipt of Universal Credit	52%	54%	49%	47%	65%
Not claiming means-tested benefits	14%	10%	17%	15%	15%
Adult experiencing anxiety, stress or mental health concern	71%	66%	76%	74%	84%
Child experiencing anxiety, stress or mental health concern	22%	18%	26%	29%	9%
Spending category: Food	39%	38%	40%	33%	42%
Spending category: Cleaning/Hygiene	2%	2%	2%	2%	0%
Spending category: Clothing	10%	8%	13%	12%	0%
Spending category: Energy/fuel bills	3%	1%	2%	1%	34%
Spending category: Other bills	1%	1%	0%	1%	14%
Spending category: Home appliances	12%	13%	11%	16%	5%
Spending category: Repairs/furniture	20%	20%	22%	15%	4%
Spending category: Physical health	1%	1%	1%	5%	0%
Spending category: Learning & play	3%	2%	3%	5%	0%
Spending category: Learning access	2%	2%	1%	4%	0%
Other	8%	13%	4%	6%	1%