

"People don't understand"

The impact of the cost-of-living crisis on children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities.

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Introduction

The cost-of-living crisis continues to make life difficult for low-income families in the UK. Inflation has increased by 10.1% in the 12 months leading up to March 2023 [1]. As living costs rise and wages remain stagnant, many families are struggling to make ends meet.

These issues, however, are particularly acute for families with children who have Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). On average, a family with a disabled child has to pay £581 per month extra to have the same standard of living as a family with a non-SEND child [2].

Research shows that children with SEND are far more likely to come from low-income households [3] [4]. These families often face additional costs associated with caring for their children, including additional medical expenses, specialised diets and equipment, and therapies [5] [6]. Other issues include a higher likelihood of parental unemployment as a result of greater caregiving responsibilities, disadvantages in educational attainment, and social exclusion. These are some of the many cited reasons that explain further why such a connection between SEND and poverty exists [4] [7] [8].

Despite such connections and the enduring effects of the cost-of-living crisis, local authorities are wrestling with a £1.6bn shortfall between funding

allocated by the government, and the cost of meeting the needs of children with SEND [9]. This has led to inconsistent support across regions in the UK, on top of a lack of resources and staff, which has resulted in long waiting times and difficulties accessing appropriate provisions. Ofsted's annual report 2019/2020 stressed the need for a new child-centred system, yet evidence currently shows that a significant gap in service provision still exists [7] [8].

The cost-of-living crisis has only served to exacerbate these issues. For families with children who have SEND the impact is more severe, as they are already facing additional social and economic pressures despite greater levels of need. However, little research to date documents how these changes are disproportionately impacting the mental and physical health of children with SEND, their education, home environment, and access to support, and how this may contrast against children without SEND.

The Childhood Trust commissioned this research to document how the cost-of-living crisis is impacting children with SEND, utilising its network of over 400 charities supporting vulnerable and disadvantaged children and young people to provide greater insights into the challenges being experienced by children and young people with SEND and fill in the gaps in the existing research.



Key findings

- 71% of social workers and 83% of charities surveyed confirm that the cost-of-living crisis is having a disproportionate impact on children with SEND as compared to children without SEND.
- With decreased resources and rising demand, 96% of social workers reported that the cost-of-living crisis has negatively impacted their ability to support children with SEND.
- 75% of social workers believe that the problems faced by children with SEND are increasing in severity due to the cost-of-living crisis, identifying a time-critical issue that will only require more funding and resource in future if not addressed urgently. 94% described the impact of this increase as somewhat severe or very severe.
- With support measures sparsely distributed, many children with SEND are feeling increasingly alienated and disconnected from mainstream society as a result of the cost of living crisis. 60% of children with SEND said that they feel they are not seen as worthy of support.
- 87% of charities surveyed said that the cost-of-living crisis is negatively impacting the mental health of children with SEND. While 46% of social workers surveyed believed that access to such support has become more difficult, owing to longer waiting lists and more stringent diagnostic criteria.
- The rising cost of energy bills has left children with SEND without adequate heating and electricity with 58% of children with SEND stating that their family struggled to keep the heating on at home and 25% unable to keep the electricity on.
- 69% of charities reported an increase in the level of children with SEND not having access to sufficient and high-quality food.
- Over half (55%) of the children with SEND surveyed said that they experienced increased bullying or name-calling in the last month.
- 55% of children with SEND have missed school many times in the last 3 months due to the cost-of-living crisis.

Our methodology

This report uses 4 different quantitative and qualitative research methods to study the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on children with SEND. Due to the complex nature of the issues being studied, a more thorough and comprehensive approach is required to highlight the magnitude of the crisis and its impacts, as well as gain perspective into the ways children with SEND are being

disproportionately affected by the cost-of-living crisis. All fieldwork took place between February-May 2023. For the purpose of safeguarding, the names of all participants have been anonymised.

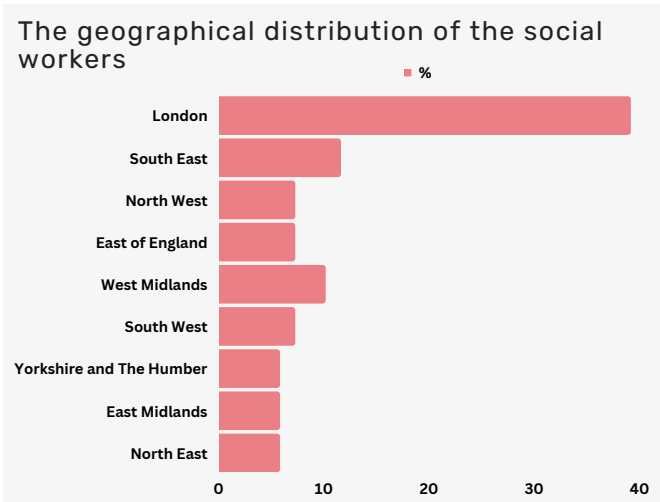
The rest of this chapter outlines in detail the specifics of each method used.

Social worker survey

The Childhood Trust, in partnership with Frontline, England’s largest social work charity, worked together to construct and disseminate a survey to a random panel of child and adolescent social workers. As trained professionals, they provide a unique first-hand insight into the challenges that affect the health and wellbeing of children with SEND. Their perspectives can identify gaps in service provision or areas where additional resources or support may be needed to address the current crisis.

Sixty-nine Social Workers took part in our survey. Of those, 4.4% have been qualified for less than a year, 43.5% between 1-3 years, and 52.2% for 3+ years. The total number of children with SEND supported by our sample of social workers amounts to 655 (ages 1-18).

The majority of social workers who took part in the survey operate in London (39.1%), with the remainder spread fairly evenly across England.



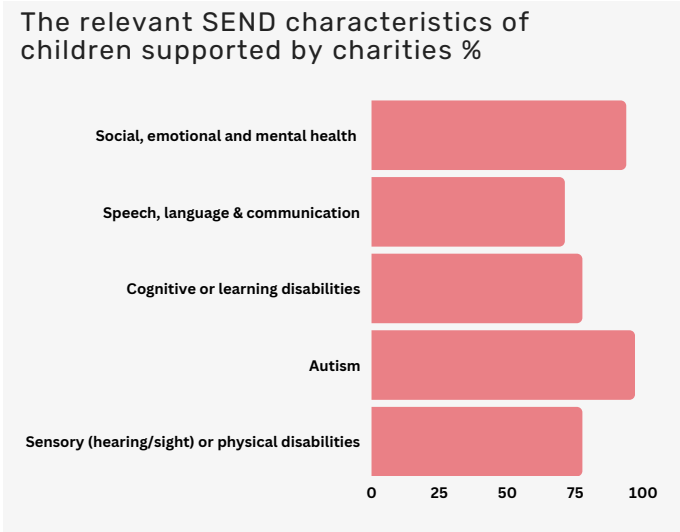
Charity survey

The Childhood Trust also used its network of charity partners who work directly with children with SEND to gather additional data. Charities that support children with SEND and their families often have a deep understanding of the issues experienced by these families. They can provide additional information and insight that may be difficult to provide through other means.

This level of understanding includes any financial pressures associated with living in poverty and how this intersects with SEND, engagement with social services and other support agencies, to other specific levels of need which these families may not be receiving any help with such as bullying, mental health and entitlement to benefits.

The survey reached a random sample of 51 charities. 337,000 children are supported annually by these charities, of which 39,000 have SEND (ages 1-18).

This is equivalent to approximately 19.3% of the total population of children with SEND living in London. The graph below shows the SEND characteristics of the children supported by our sample of charities.



Deep dive survey with children that have SEND

The third method utilised for this report is a 'deep dive' Children survey in which we sampled a representative group of children with SEND derived from the children supported by the charities participating in our charity survey. We engaged 12 respondents (ages 6-18) who completed a detailed qualitative survey that was designed by other children with SEND.

By using a peer-to-peer research methodology to conduct a series of workshops with children supported by three charity partners, we were able to ensure that children with SEND, and their experiences, remained at the heart of this research. Each workshop lasted 1-2 hours and supported debate, openness and reflection, facilitating children to create the questions that would be presented to other children with SEND.

Involving children with SEND directly helped to ensure the questions were meaningful, relevant and accessible. By drawing on their own experiences and perspectives, children with SEND are best placed to design questions that accurately reflect the challenges and experiences of their peers. This method has helped to ensure that children's voices are heard and their experiences are well communicated in a context of a population that is often overlooked or marginalised.



Interviews with parents of children with SEND

Six interviews were conducted face-to-face or over the phone with parents who are supported by the charities that hosted our workshops. Interviewing parents of children with SEND helped to provide valuable insight into the challenges and experiences that children themselves were otherwise unable to convey. Involving parents in the research also assisted in contextualising the data collected from the other methods.

Chapter 1: Insufficient Support

1.1 The cost-of-living crisis is negatively impacting support measures

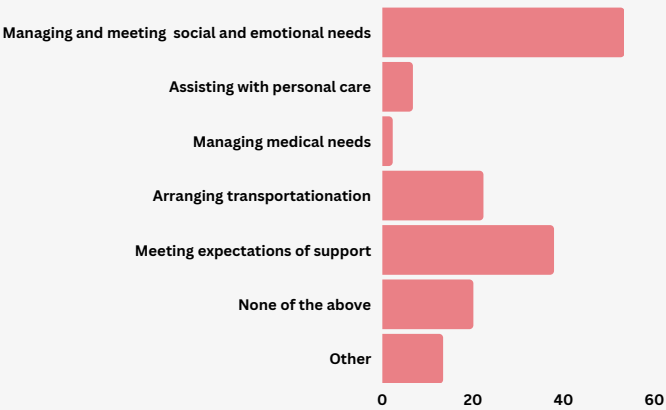
Support workers not only provide vital care for children with SEND but also offer parents and the wider family group invaluable support. The cost-of-living crisis has seriously impaired the ability of support workers to care for the children that they look after and has had a major impact on social workers' considerations of the quality of their service. Of those surveyed, 96% of social workers reported that the cost-of-living crisis has negatively impacted their ability to support children with SEND.

Almost 70% of social workers surveyed felt that they can no longer meet the expectations previously held by parents and caregivers before the cost-of-living crisis. This change is largely due to the way that the crisis has impacted services.

Over 50% of social workers reported that four key aspects of caregiving have been impaired by the cost-of-living crisis. Some of these - namely offering or helping with outings and day trips, and coordinating and providing transport - are invaluable services that cannot be sourced elsewhere.

When asked to answer whether the cost-of-living crisis has made their job harder on a scale of 0-10, with 0 being no change and 10 being impossible, the average rating was 8. This finding demonstrates how social workers view the impacts of the cost-of-living crisis on their work, and how these impacts carry over to the quality of the services they can provide to those in their care.

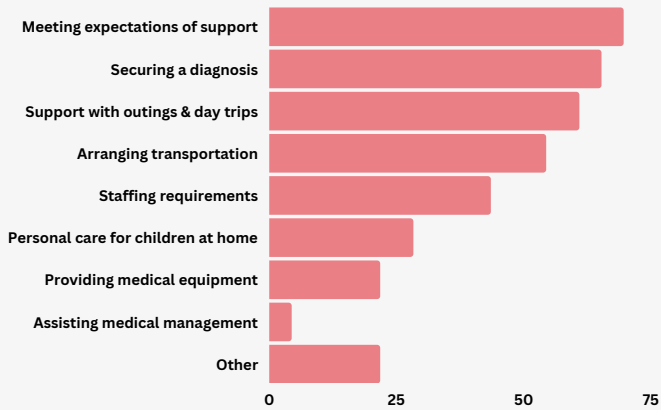
The areas of support for children with SEND that have been most challenging for your charity in the last 3 months %



Charities are also struggling to meet the needs of their children with SEND. When asked about some of the specific challenges they face, managing and meeting children's social and emotional needs was reported as the greatest challenge.

As the figure above shows, 53% of charities struggled to provide this support adequately. Meeting parents' expectations of support (37%) and coordinating and providing transportation for children (22%) follow.

The areas of support that have been more difficult for social workers to achieve in the last 3 months %



1.2 Increasingly stretched services

"Coming here helps people to just have a break, to let their hair down... do an activity they got in that week and just talk to a trusted person they feel comfortable with, and get help with any issues they need it with. Coming here supports people to get ready for life and the adult world by offering classes, learning about how to manage your money, social skills."

Damien

Leisure and recreation are vital developmental requirements, providing children with the opportunity to play, explore and engage in the social interactions that build confidence and critical relational skills. Children with SEND require these opportunities to grow, learn and develop so they can achieve their potential.

One parent we interviewed stressed how important these opportunities are:

"I can't afford to take him out myself anymore... they do trips I can't afford so I'm grateful... he would not be the child he is without Ambition, Aspire, Achieve."
Alice

Parents recognise the importance of charitable support in filling in the gaps of need that they struggle to fulfil due to reasons beyond their control.

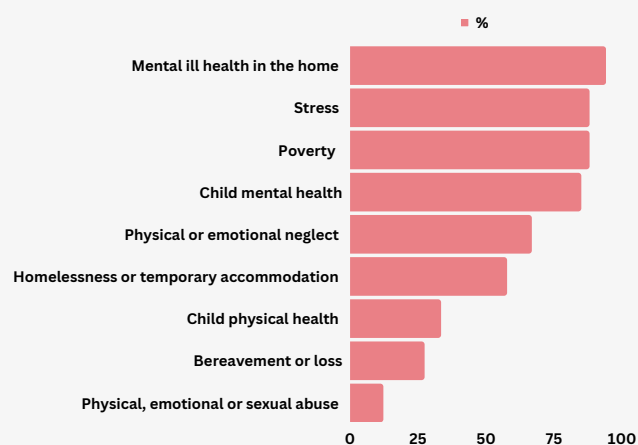
"Without the Salmon Youth Centre, my children could potentially be homeless or hungry."
Emma

Over 40% of social workers could point to one or more ways that these services have been reduced in the last three months.

Social workers stressed how the cost-of-living crisis has impacted access to after school and holiday clubs, many of which have shut down due to staffing and funding issues. The clubs that remain open are often overstretched and have to limit the number of places that they offer. In some cases, the problem is so acute that charities have been forced to redefine the threshold of who is eligible to use their services; as a result, children who could once rely on such services can no longer attend.

The increasingly limited access to holiday clubs and after-school facilities is having a direct impact on children with SEND. Ninety-four per cent of social workers observed a deterioration of the mental health of children with SEND, and 88% have seen stress levels rise. Furthermore, as a direct result of clubs and facilities closing, a third of social workers have noticed a detrimental effect on children's physical health, highlighting a connection between the two.

Problems experienced by children with SEND that the cost-of-living crisis has exacerbated



Sixty-four per cent of the charities surveyed agreed that the cost-of-living crisis has reduced their ability to deliver their charitable mission.

Some of the reasons cited include increased staffing costs, fewer funds for equipment and activities, increased demand for activities, difficulty in raising funds, greater financial sacrifices made and less engagement from children due to higher transport costs, which the charities increasingly struggle to provide.

In our survey with children, 100% of children with SEND said that politicians need to visit charities more often to understand what it's really like for children during the cost-of-living crisis.

All of the children we interviewed spoke of feeling alienated, disconnected and outside of mainstream society. They expressed a strong desire to be heard and understood by those in power who they feel are not aware of how bad things are for them.

A deeper understanding of the challenges and issues faced by children with SEND could act as a source of motivation for decision-makers to address the cost-of-living crisis and its impact on vulnerable families.



***"It may sound a bit wild but why don't they have someone who's with SEND in parliament."
Damien***

Chapter 2 Inequitable Impact: Child Poverty and SEND

2.1 The disproportionate impact of the cost-of-living crisis on children with SEND

Seventy-five per cent of social workers believed that the seriousness of cases of children with SEND is increasing due to the cost-of-living crisis. Nearly all social workers (94%) described the impact of this increase as somewhat severe or very severe.

Seventy-one per cent of the social workers agreed that the cost-of-living crisis was disproportionately impacting the children with SEND that they supported.

Furthermore, 53% of social workers believed that the cost-of-living crisis was disproportionately increasing the severity of the cases of children with SEND when compared to children without SEND.

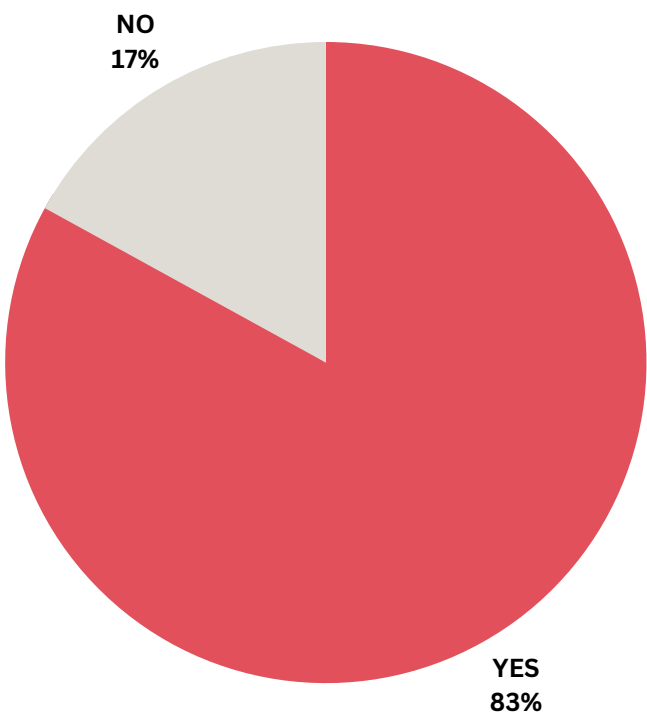
This disproportionate impact is also strongly highlighted by charities, where an overwhelming majority (83%) agreed that the cost-of-living crisis is disproportionately impacting children with SEND compared to children without SEND,

According to the charities surveyed, this disproportionate impact is marked by a lack of access to specialist equipment and greater resource needs, matched by an increased inability to afford such resources and equipment due to higher costs of care, higher fuel and food costs and fewer services that support children with SEND.

Our survey of children with SEND consolidates the evidence from social workers and charities. When asked how hard the cost-of-living crisis was affecting them personally on a scale of 1 to 10, with 0 being easy and 10 hard, the average rating of difficulty was 7.

Within that sample, 58% of children with SEND said that the cost-of-living crisis is worse for them because they have SEND. 83% additionally feel that the cost-of-living crisis is affecting them more than children without SEND.

Do children with SEND think that the cost-of-living crisis is affecting them more than non-SEND children?



"I am stressed being a single mum. I get £645 a month from Universal Credit and £520 goes on rent. I never have anything to live on. I can barely pay bills, anything else for the kids is a bonus."
Emma

2.2 Policy support

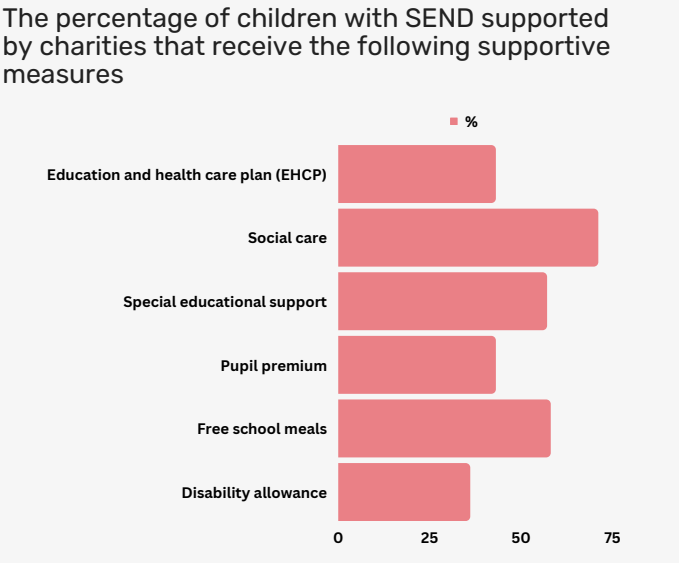
“So many people say different things about my condition, and they can’t diagnose me because I show signs of everything.”
Oliver

The responses from the social workers point to a failure of policy in supporting children with SEND. This issue is reflected by the extremely long waiting times for diagnoses that children can experience resulting in many children not receiving the support they urgently need. Parents told us they have had to wait many years for a statutory diagnosis or somehow find the thousands of pounds it can cost to obtain a diagnosis privately. The resulting lack of support can lead to a deterioration of the children's conditions, often harming their mental health and wellbeing as a consequence.

On average, 43% of children with SEND supported by the social workers surveyed, have an Education and Health Care Plan (EHCP), a legal document that gives parents more choice regarding which school or setting their child can attend. EHC plans are also essential to obtain the additional educational support that their child needs to flourish.

Social workers reported that 36% of children with SEND that they care for receive the disability living allowance (DLA). DLA is designed to help meet costs for children whose disability means they require a much greater level of care than for a child the same age without a disability. Not all children with SEND are eligible for DLA and many parents whose children are in receipt of DLA are still struggling to make ends meet. The rest of the data shows that 43% receive pupil premium, 57% special educational support, 58% free school meals and 71% social care.

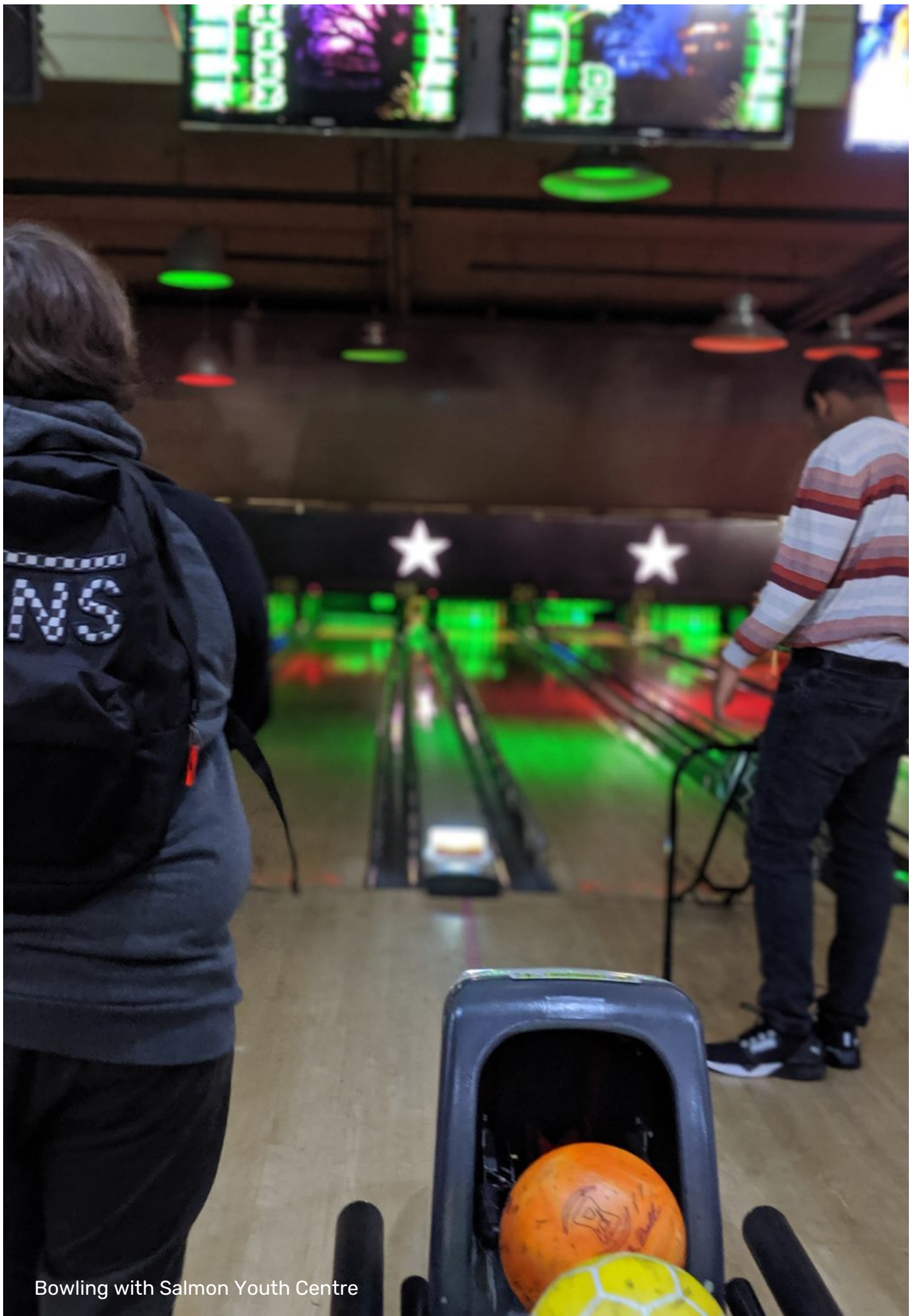
Our survey of charities shows a similar pattern. On average our charities reported that: 22% of children with SEND do not have an EHC plan, 34% do not receive Special Educational Need (SEN) support, 38% do not receive free school meals, 24% no social care and 19% no pupil premium.



Thirty-six per cent of children with SEND from our deep dive survey have had or are having trouble securing a diagnosis for their SEND too. One child explained that they have had to attend many hospital consultations with medical professionals who continue to struggle to reach a consensus over the child’s condition(s). They stated that, due to cuts to the health sector and increased waiting lists, they have been made to wait for two years for a genetic test that would help with their diagnosis.

Sixty per cent of children with SEND said they feel that they are not seen as worthy of support, with the government being unable to understand the needs of children with SEND.

“I’m worried about the other children because they might not be getting enough of the support and care that they actually need. Some people are older now and haven’t been diagnosed. I was only partially diagnosed in year 3 but I was [most likely] diagnosed in year 4. I only learned a bit ago.”
Aurora



Bowling with Salmon Youth Centre

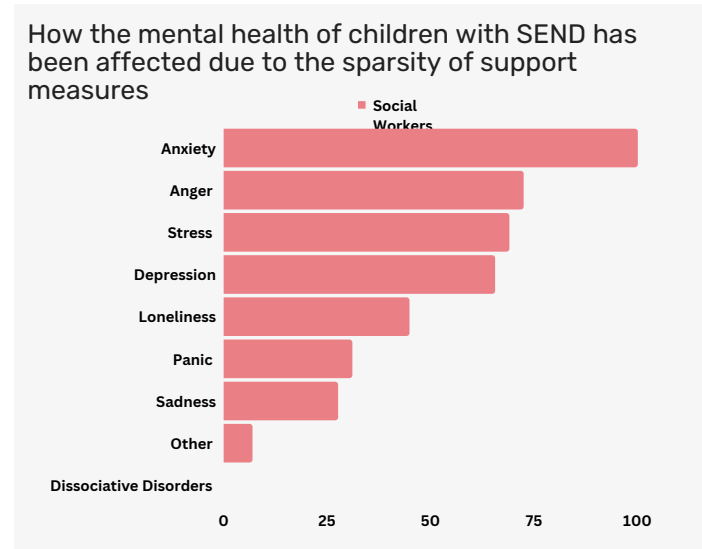
Chapter 3: Mental Health and wellbeing

3.1 Impact on mental health

A key finding from the social workers we interviewed was their experiences of how difficult it is for children with SEND to access mental health support. Forty-six per cent believed that access to support has become more complicated due to longer waiting lists and stricter diagnostic criteria. This was particularly prevalent with CAHMS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services) which is unable to meet the needs of increasing numbers of children with SEND awaiting diagnosis and treatment.

The impact can be devastating. One social worker reported observing an increasing number of children with SEND conditions being hospitalised or sectioned due to the lack of mental health support. Another noted how they have recently had to remove three children from their homes as they were not receiving necessary treatment.

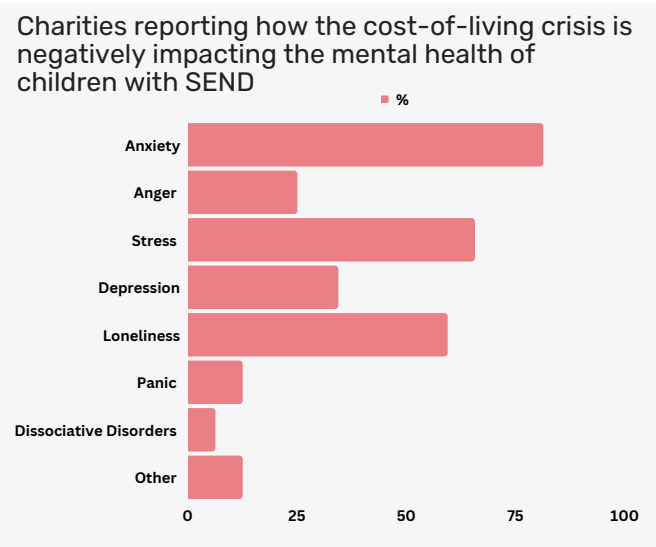
The difficulty in accessing support is taking a toll on the mental health of children with SEND. Sixty-four per cent of the social workers that we surveyed reported that there was an observable deterioration in the mental health of the children that they support. Within that group, all the social workers (100%) reported an increase in anxiety, along with a number of other conditions: anger (72%), stress (69%), depression (66%) and loneliness (45%).



“It feels depressing. We need to be asked questions about our mental health more often, even more basic ones like if it’s changed or not. We have stress at home because our parents do not have stuff and can’t afford it. Places like Ambition, Aspire, Achieve help us to manage it.”
Thomas

This deterioration is also reported by charities. When asked if the cost-of-living crisis is negatively impacting the mental health of children with SEND, 87% of charities reported 'yes', with only 13% reporting 'no'.

As the figure below shows, for those that said yes, anxiety (81%), stress (66%) and loneliness (59%) were the most reported conditions that applied, followed by depression (34%), anger (25%), panic disorder (13%), dissociative disorders (6%) and bipolar disorder (3%).



In addition to the worsening of children’s mental health, charity capacity to help is being degraded too with 35% of charities in our survey reporting that the cost-of-living crisis is reducing their ability to support the mental health of children with SEND. Fourteen per cent said this ability has been significantly reduced. This finding correlates with the previous figure, as a

decreased ability to support mental health can directly translate to worse mental health outcomes.

In our survey with children, 17% of children with SEND felt more stressed and anxious due to the cost-of-living crisis. What is perhaps more striking, however, is that 75% noticed their parents and caregivers feeling even more stressed and anxious.

This finding was mirrored in an interview with Alice, a mother who felt that the cost-of-living crisis was impacting her capacity to stay mentally well and positive.

Alice was working multiple jobs to try and maintain her children's quality of life but was still struggling to provide for her child. This was severely impacting her

mental health. This level of stress can directly affect children, impacting their wellbeing. Since parents are often the primary source of support, guidance and protection, children will likely internalise their parents' feelings of stress, leading to their own feelings of anxiety, worry and insecurity.

"I am on antidepressants, I get very down and feel like a failure to my children. Children should enjoy life. I work many jobs but it is still not enough. I feel like I'm living in poverty even though I'm working and trying to do my best."
Alice



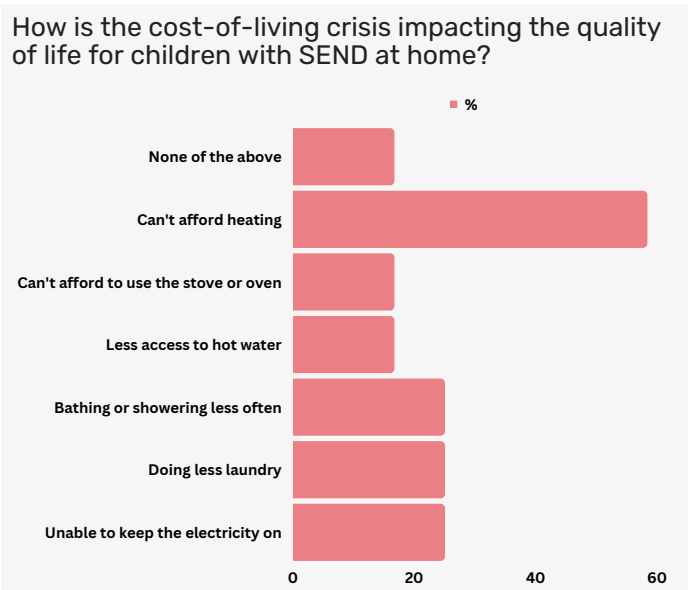
3.2 The link between home environment and wellbeing

As prices increase the home environment can become more stressful and tense, further worsening mental health and wellbeing. Sixty per cent of social workers believed that the cost of living crisis was directly affecting the safety and stability of the home environment for children with SEND and their parents.

For parents, increased stress can make it even more difficult to care for their children. As several social workers described, when parents are worried, tension increases within the household. Patience and tolerance become strained. In one case, a carer said how these changes have led to physical and emotional abuse. This change has had a knock on effect for the children, whose externalising behaviours are escalating as they struggle to cope.

The financial burden of caring for a child with SEND can be overwhelming and the cost-of-living crisis is only increasing this pressure. The increased levels of mental health difficulties can impact the quality of care that parents and caregivers are able to provide for their children.

Our survey with children paints a similar picture of worsening home environments; 58% of children said they struggled to keep the heating on at home; 25% reported being unable to keep the electricity on; 25% had less baths/showers and less laundry cleaned; followed by 17% being unable to afford to use the gas stove and oven, and having less access to hot water.



For children with SEND, changes in the home environment can often cause stress, anxiety and discomfort. Those that have physical disabilities and sensory processing disorders are more likely to struggle with temperature changes, likely exacerbating these difficulties further. A lack of hygiene, including less access to hot water, can further heighten the risk of infections and other health complications, particularly for children with weakened immune systems.

The effects of poor housing affect the mental well-being of the parents of children with SEND, severely restricting their quality of life:

"I can't afford to keep the heating on anymore so we have to dress with more layers at home... and this is with the top-up from the government... we just go home and get into bed."
Alice

Parents stressed the impact of poor housing conditions and how it affects their health and their children's health:

"I have 6 children and we live in very small conditions. One of the bedrooms has a gas boiler inside it and this caused my daughter a lot of stress, and it also caused me a lot of stress. The stress caused me to be diagnosed with breast cancer. But the council didn't and doesn't care, even when the hospital contacted my local council to solve this housing issue... we still have mould growing in the bedroom... I'm always fighting the fungus, the blackness in the walls... the back stuff growing in the bathroom. I've been on medication for 10 years now."

Charlotte

"We also have 'iron stairs' in my house. My son's occupational therapist says it's not good for him. And one day my son fell down and hurt his ankle. How is this possible? Those stairs are not fit for habitation for my son. I experienced a lot of stress, our home is full of ratholes... scanty... but the worst part of it, they WANT US to live there."

Isabelle

"We live in overcrowded conditions and it's difficult to move on from there. For my children who are disabled, they are squeezed, and they haven't got their space. They feel trapped in a small place."

Henry

3.3 Bullying and prejudice

"I think children with SEND are not heard because we sound different. I think people are judging us. I think people can be less judgmental about us."

Carter

"They think people with special needs don't understand the prejudice they receive, but we see it. They take advantage of your SEND and show prejudice."

Ethan

"When we were making soup in school, some of the assistant teachers were like 'no you can't, you can't let her chop this because she might hurt herself', but I really wanted to do it. So when everyone else was getting the ingredients and cooking everything, I was just trying to watch. They said 'try not to get too close to me'... even though I couldn't see because everyone was in the way in front of me."

Aurora

"It can be quite tricky because they all try to bully you and they try to make you feel like you're not worth anything. They use that as a joke. When I was younger, I got bullied, so I was black and blue all over."

Damien

We found from the interviews with children and in working with children to design the research, a high incidence of reports of bullying and prejudice. Children repeatedly described being bullied at school by their peers with name-calling, humiliation and physical assaults all being frequently experienced.

Worryingly, several children reported feeling victimised by their teachers who they felt did not understand their needs.

Bullying and prejudice can have a devastating impact on all children, but they can be particularly harmful to children with SEND. Children with SEND may already be struggling with the challenges associated with their condition, and bullying and prejudice can make their lives even more difficult [17] [18].

Bullying can take many forms, from physical violence to verbal abuse, social exclusion, and



cyberbullying. Children with SEND are at greater risk of being bullied than their peers without disabilities, and this can have serious consequences for their mental health and well-being. Research has shown that children with SEND who are bullied are more likely to experience anxiety, depression, low self-esteem and social isolation. They may also be more likely to miss school and experience academic difficulties [17] [18] [19] [20].

Prejudice, or negative attitudes towards individuals with disabilities, can also be harmful to children with SEND. Negative attitudes can manifest in many ways, from discriminatory language to assumptions about a person's abilities or limitations. These attitudes can lead to exclusion, bullying, and a lack of access to opportunities and resources [17] [18] [19] [20]. 00

It is important to ensure that children with SEND have access to support services and resources that can help them cope with the challenges they may face. This can include counselling, therapy, and support groups, as well as accommodations and modifications in the

classroom to support their learning and development.

Fifty-five per cent of children with SEND from our survey said that they experienced increased bullying or name-calling in the last month. When asked if they experienced prejudice due to having SEND, 27% said yes.

One child said that although he is supposed to get additional support in his class, his teachers complained about having to help him. In one instance, he was banned from going on a school trip because the teachers did not want to use school funding to give him the support he needed to be able to go on the trip.

Another child explained that local authorities make up situations about their family to not provide them with any support.

"We've tried moving one of my children's schools but we're finding it very difficult because the report the school creates for my child acts as a barrier. My child is painted as a health and safety risk because of his disability... We had the charity help us to create a more accurate picture of my child."

-Henry

"My daughter has tantrums that affect classmates in school. These tantrums are also due to what happens in school... she experiences bullying because of this."

-James

One set of parents described witnessing their children with SEND experience bullying, yet received no proper support by the school to address this. Children with SEND can be triggered by what happens in school, indicating legitimate challenges created within the school environment itself. Schools need to provide the required support systems that address the underlying causes of such bullying.

“You’ve got parents who are having to take time off work. They have got so much to do.

***It affects their mental health, practically, emotionally.”
-Damien***



Skylarks Charity

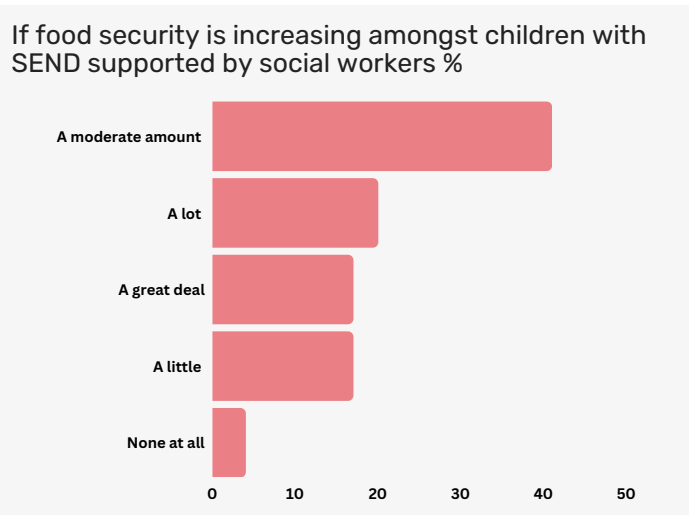
Chapter 4: Food Insecurity

4.1 The impact of food insecurity

"It's hard. Sometimes there's not enough food, it means that you're starving".
-Carter

As prices go up, even the most basic necessities become a challenge. Food insecurity – the condition of not having access to sufficient food, or food of adequate quality, to meet one’s needs – is increasing amongst children with SEND and their families.

The social workers surveyed said they saw the incidence of food insecurity rise; by a little (17%), by a moderate amount (41%), by a lot (20%), or by a great deal (17%).



50% of children said the gas/electric cooker is being used less. One-third said they are missing meals, 25% not getting enough of the food they want, 25% not getting enough fruit and vegetables, 17% simply not getting enough food, and 17% have access to poor-quality food.

The parents surveyed have had to make increasingly difficult decisions when buying food with many unable to afford the most nutritious choices. Parents stated their concern about the effect poorer nutrition will have on the health of their children with SEND.

"My son loves hot meals, especially a roast, I haven't been able to do this for ages as I can only afford quick meals."
- Eleanor

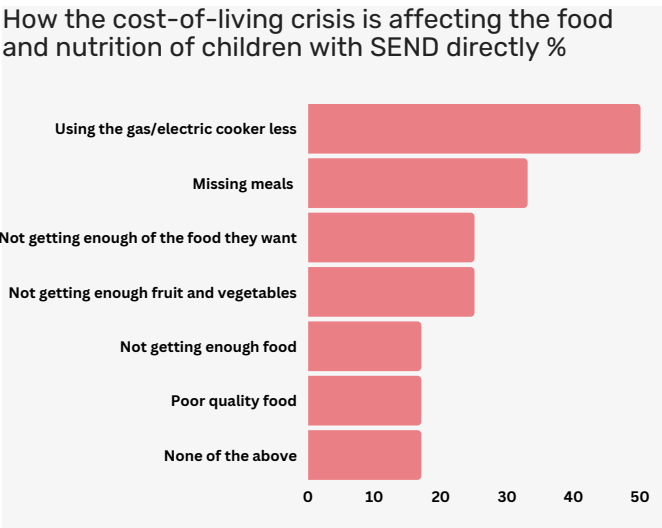
"I have no money for fish but I buy chicken in the halal shops because it's cheaper... plus all this stuff is going up every time."
- Charlotte

"I buy less fish than chicken...and supermarket shopping once in a blue moon, so I always look around for discounts."
- Isabelle

Food insecurity is an injustice. Children with SEND who have greater levels of need are more vulnerable to the impact of food insecurity, being susceptible to worsening health conditions with their growth and development likely to be impaired by a lack of, and inadequate access to, healthy and nutritious food [22]. Not least, food insecurity can degrade children’s ability to learn, concentrate and participate in school activities.

Policymakers need to address this disparity to ensure that the most vulnerable children have access to the nutritious food they need to thrive.

The figures below provide further insight of how the cost-of-living crisis is affecting the food and nutrition of children with SEND from our survey with children.



“It feels a bit like pain when I’m hungry, I’m starving.”
- Jackson

Chapter 5: Education

5.1 Children with SEND feeling hopeless amidst cost-of-living crisis

"It's quite stressful when some teachers say you need to focus. That will make me really stressed out because I don't know why I'm doing it wrong, I'm confused. I'm trying my best but it doesn't seem to be enough."
- Aurora

"I have bad legs and I've missed a lot of school because of it. The school expects me to get high grades, but my legs have been bad for a while, and I sometimes miss school. Only recently has the school done something about it by giving me some work to do at home. But they'll still send my mum emails about bad attendance, forgetting that I have knee problems."
- James

"There is a lack of care, they don't give a crap and it's so annoying because I see people who are perfectly fine, but are naughty and get all the help, but when there's someone who has a problem, they don't get the same help."
- Jack

Children who participated in our workshops stressed a lack of proper treatment in schools, emphasising a lack of compassion for their additional needs.

Over half (51%) of the social workers in our survey reported that the cost-of-living crisis was negatively impacting children with SEND's experience of education. Many social workers observed that, as conditions at home become more difficult, there is a knock-on effect at school through poor concentration and an increase in behavioural issues. Consequently, children with SEND experience a decline in their academic potential. Indeed, some social workers told of how some of the children with SEND that they care for miss school altogether, either due to the reasons

above or because their parents cannot afford the travel costs.

The negative impact on education that children with SEND are experiencing is affecting children's levels of hopefulness for their futures. Half (50%) of the social workers we surveyed reported that the children they care for are feeling moderately hopeless about the future, with a further 17% of social workers reporting that children are feeling very hopeless (17%).

Against this data, we can see that, according to our deep dive survey, 55% of children with SEND have missed school many times in the last 3 months due to the cost-of-living crisis.

27% reported missing school 1 or 2 times and only 18% never. The result of this lack of school attendance has meant that, for those that have missed school, 67% have had reduced performance in school, 67% have spent less time with friends, 33% less opportunity to participate in class, and 11% less opportunity to speak with teachers.

Missing school is detrimental to the well-being of children. Children with SEND generally require greater levels of support and services to succeed in school and manage their SEND. Regular attendance is essential since fewer opportunities in education can lead to increased levels of stress, anxiety and isolation, further preventing children with SEND from thriving in life and impacting their mental health and wellbeing.

Eleanor said that their child with SEND offered to take time off school to get a part-time job to support them better:

“My son can see how stressed I am so has offered to take time off school to get a part-time job to support me better.”
Eleanor

Whilst it can be admirable for children with SEND to support their parents who are on low income, such measures can have a significant impact on their academic and social development.

The extra measures and support needed for children with SEND to succeed in school can be compromised if they have to reduce their time in education to help make ends meet. Important learning opportunities and extracurricular activities should not be sacrificed for issues beyond the control of children with SEND.



Conclusion

The cost-of-living crisis is having a detrimental and disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable children in society, those from the lowest-income households who also have special educational needs and disabilities.

The evidence documented in this research highlights the harmful impact of the crisis on children with SEND. Children with SEND face multifaceted and complex challenges that are being made worse by the cost-of-living crisis and insufficient support from statutory services.

Social workers and charities, despite being the last line of support, are struggling to meet the needs of children as the cost-of-living crisis continues to exacerbate these issues. Increasingly children with SEND and their parents are being left to cope on their own with devastating consequences for their mental health, physical well-being, educational prospects and life chances.

In March 2022, the government released its SEND and Alternative Provision (AP) green paper that aimed to respond to the needs of children with SEND. The paper set out several proposed reforms, some including [10] [11] [12]:

- Encouraging earlier identification of children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities and providing targeted support at an earlier stage. This delivery model includes a reformed and integrated role for alternative provision;
- Simplifying the EHC process and ensuring children with SEND have better access to support throughout the process, including giving parents and caregivers a stronger voice in decision-making about their child's education;
- Improving the quality and availability of alternative provision and improving its integration with the education system;
- Encouraging synchronisation between health, social care and educational services to maximise support services.

In March 2023, the government published its additional paper in response to the green paper which set out further actions on [13]:

- Fulfilling children's potential to ensure they achieve good outcomes, enjoy their childhood and are prepared for adulthood and employment;
- Local leaders making the best use of record investment in the high needs budgets to meet children's needs and improve outcomes, whilst placing authorities on a stable financial footing;
- Building parents' trust further by restoring their confidence that their children will get the right support.

The papers make an effort to address some of the harmful impacts of the crisis on children with SEND documented in this report. Some of the points addressed conform to several policy proposals suggested by multiple organisations to ensure children with SEND and their families are better supported [9] [14] [15] [16].

However, there are still several concerns. The reforms will take years to implement and don't address the cost and demand issues driving more councils into deficit [13]. Additionally, giving additional powers to councils that can enable them to lead SEND systems effectively [13]. Moreover, there is no plan to restore the £20 cut from Universal Credit to support low-income families with access to nutritious food and heating.

As the cost-of-living continues to worsen, the failure of the government to adequately address these issues in good time will impose generational consequences, and it is up to policymakers to safeguard the futures of children, especially those children with greater levels of need. The proposals discussed signal hope over potentially impending policy decisions. However, the time frame at which they actualise poses a significant tipping point at which the health and well-being of children and young people with SEND could worsen drastically.

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Appendix

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Lastly, and most importantly, we acknowledge and thank all of the children and young people with SEND and the parents of children with SEND who shared their experiences with us to contribute to this research.

Definition of SEND

The research describes SEND as defined by Section 20 of the Children and Families Act of 2014.

This act defines a child as having Special Educational Needs (SEN) if they have:

- A learning difficulty or disability which calls for special educational provision to be made for him or her.

A learning difficulty or disability is determined by:

- Significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of others of the same age.
- A disability which prevents or hinders them from making use of facilities of a kind generally provided for others of the same age in mainstream schools or mainstream post-16 institutions.

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities:

- If they also have a physical and mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on their ability to carry out day-to-day activities.

Note on equivalence

The equivalences made to make comparisons between the survey sample of 39,000 children with SEND and the general population draw on data from the Office of National Statistics (ONS) Census 2021 results. This figure includes children and young people up to the age of 25 who are in education or training. The equivalences are not a direct measure but are intended to be an approximate estimate of the equivalence ratio.



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