**Children & young people’s thoughts on rising poverty levels – Essex 2024**

**Introduction**

Throughout February 2024 the Multi-Schools Council (MSC) team spoke with young people in 10 different areas across Essex from both primary and secondary schools. This included 325 young people with and without SEND between the ages of 7 & 18. They key question was ***what more could be done in schools to support young people facing poverty?***

**Background**

These conversations started because of two key reasons:

1. When visiting schools across Essex young people were telling us they were seeing more of their friends struggling with money & how this was impacting on family life.
2. Locally there is still a gap in performance of young people coming from low-income families and we wanted to better understand young people’s thoughts on this.

In May 2023 Action for Children stated that there were more than 4.2 million young people in poverty in the UK, with these numbers expected to grow due to growing economical pressures. There are many different consequences sighted on the impact of poverty on young people, namely educational performance. As The Children Society states, children who access free school meals are less likely to achieve their GSCE grade. In addition, there is also evidence to show the negative impacts this can have on young people’s mental health and vulnerability.

**What do young people think should be happening?**

* **Free school meals** should be extended to all young people accessing primary education.
* There is still a lot of frustration about **uniform costs** even though there has been some work done on this. Uniform, from what young people told us, is still too expensive for many and brings into the question again how important is school uniform? This was debated as part of our 2022 school attendance report.
* More places should be available to **donate clothing** for others. Young people felt schools could be an important place for this.
* We need to raise more awareness of **foodbanks** in schools. Some of the older young people we spoke to also felt there was some work to in terms of challenging the negative stigma associated with foodbanks and that there should be more lessons about this in school.
* As with donating clothing could we have more places to **donate toys.** Again, young people felt schools could be used better for this.
* More **community hubs** for young people to come together, keep warm and feel connected to others.
* **Books** should not cost as much. This can have an impact on young people who want to read more but can’t afford it.
* **Breakfast clubs** should be more widely implemented across all schools, again allowing more young people to access them.
* **Snacks** available in schools to again support with hunger which young people felt was a common consequence of living in poverty.

**Conclusion**

This is a brief snapshot of what young people across Essex are feeling but from our research is echoed by young people within different areas of the UK. There are some common themes coming up that should be prioritised in our opinion:

1. Support for food is crucial and we should be supporting schools to enable them to support more young people. If we refer to Maslow’s Hierarchy of needs, young people are not going to feel safe, loved, or good about themselves if they are facing high levels of hunger. We know this will then impact on their performance while at school and potentially have a knock-on effect to their mental health or how they communicate challenges within school.
2. The costs associated with schools are having a negative impact. We know everyone should have a right to a suitable education, but poverty levels can take away that right and that’s not acceptable. We know some schools have a rigid view on things such as uniform or equipment for school and with the stigma attached to low-income families this can be a barrier for asking for help. We continue to focus on school attendance within the Multi-School Council and we will be looking at if there is a link between non-attendance and higher poverty levels.
3. Use schools more as community hubs. The way schools operate and are seen has is changing but one thing that is consistent is that they are always are. The question the MSC would like to ask is are we using them enough out of school hours? The young people have been clear about how they could be used for more of a donation process, and we would encourage people to think with more of an open mind about how these settings can be used.
4. Work needs to be done on the stigma associated with those living in poverty or coming from low-income families. Is there enough learning/awareness out there so that young people and their families feel like they can ask for help without being judged?

We are in full support of all children and young people facing charities trying to raise awareness of this issue and will be sharing this report publicly on our website while also continuing to connect with partners.

**The Multi-Schools Council, April 2024**

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