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Evaluation of Poverty Proofing and Attainment Champions pilot programmes: Interim report

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Evaluation of Poverty Proofing and Attainment Champions pilot programmes: Interim report

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Views expressed in this report are those of the researcher and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

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Glossary

AI

Artificial Intelligence.

Attainment

Attainment (educational) refers to the level of education a learner has achieved, usually measured through formal qualifications and exam results such as GCSEs, A-levels, or equivalent credentials.

Attainment Gaps

Attainment gaps refer to measurable differences in educational outcomes, such as test scores or qualifications, between groups of learners.

CNE

Children North East.

DiD

Difference-in-difference analysis.

eFSM

Eligible for free school meals.

FMECA

Failure Mode, Effects and Criticality Analysis.

FSM

Free school meals.

GCSE

General Certificate of Secondary Education.

NAEL

National Academy for Educational Leadership.

PDG

Pupil Development Grant.

PISA

Programme for International Student Assessment.

PTA

Parent Teacher Association.

SLTs

School leadership teams.

ToC

Theory of Change.

VRAP

Vulnerability Responsive Action Planning.

WIMD

Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation.

1. Introduction and background

Educational attainment is a critical determinant of individual life chances, influencing employment prospects, earnings, and social mobility. In Wales, persistent child poverty and socio-economic inequalities continue to undermine educational outcomes for a significant proportion of learners. Approximately one in three children in Wales lives in a low-income household ([Welsh Government, 2025](#)). Socio-economic disadvantage, as recognised in the Child Poverty Strategy ([2024](#)) for Wales, is a key driver of lower academic attainment, higher absenteeism, and a heightened risk of school exclusion; in Wales, learners experiencing persistent disadvantage are, on average, up to 29 months behind their peers in learning by the end of secondary school ([EHRC, 2023](#)). Educational attainment is also associated with health and wellbeing outcomes across the life course. Research indicates that education can influence health through its effect on employment and income, the health behaviours and knowledge it shapes, and the social circumstances it enables ([Public Health Wales, 2023](#)).

Free school meal eligibility, which is based on parental income and receipt of certain benefits ([Welsh Government, 2025](#)), continues to be a strong indicator of socioeconomic disadvantage, reflected in higher exclusion and absenteeism rates, lower General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) results, and weaker outcomes in Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests and apprenticeships ([Welsh Government, 2023](#)). Around one in 5 learners is eligible for free school meals (eFSM) in Wales ([StatsWales, 2024](#)), and one in 4 in the UK as a whole ([Gov UK, 2024](#)). Although free school meals (FSM) are provided universally to all primary-aged learners in Wales regardless of income, eligibility criteria based on parental income and benefits remain the same across all phases and continue to serve as a primary measure of socioeconomic disadvantage.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, poverty-related educational attainment gaps in Wales have widened, with learners from low-income backgrounds falling further behind. PISA results in 2022 showed a sharper decline in reading, maths, and science in Wales since 2020 compared to most other countries, leaving Wales behind the rest of the UK ([IFS, 2024](#)).

However, these challenges are not evenly spread across Wales; some of the largest attainment gaps exist in the least deprived areas. For instance, Monmouthshire, one of the areas with the lowest concentration of deprivation, reported a Key Stage 4 attainment gap of 41% ([Senedd Research, 2018](#)).

Structural factors underpin these disparities. Learners experiencing poverty often encounter barriers, such as hidden educational costs (uniforms, trips, and extracurricular activities), and stigma around socio-economic disadvantages. Research also suggests that schools with higher concentrations of children living in poverty can sometimes offer narrower curricula, with a greater focus on basic literacy and numeracy at the expense of holistic learning ([ORCA, 2018](#)).

It is against this backdrop that the Welsh Government introduced 2 programmes specifically designed to address poverty-related barriers to educational attainment in schools. The [Attainment Champions](#) programme sought to reduce poverty-related attainment gaps through peer mentoring approaches led by experienced headteachers, working directly with

senior leaders in schools facing significant socioeconomic challenges. [Poverty Proofing the School Day](#) (hereafter, Poverty Proofing) is an audit-driven whole school programme aiming to capture the voices and lived experiences of learners and their families living in poverty, informing school policy and practice, reducing the costs of the school day for families, and cultivating a school ethos that views education through a poverty lens. In the sections that follow, we provide a detailed overview of each initiative before outlining the aims and structure of this report. This report examines how these programmes were implemented in practice and explores participants' perspectives on their early perceived effects.

1.1 Attainment Champions

The Welsh Government introduced the Attainment Champions pilot in 2023 as a leadership-focused initiative designed to address the impact of poverty on educational outcomes. The programme sought to reduce poverty-related attainment gaps by supporting peer mentoring approaches led by school leaders and staff. Facilitated by the National Academy for Educational Leadership (NAEL), the programme recruited experienced headteachers (known as 'Attainment Champions'), initially seven in its first pilot phase, to work directly with senior leaders in schools facing significant socio-economic challenges. These Attainment Champions were selected based on their demonstrable success in closing attainment gaps in their own contexts and were tasked with supporting other school leaders to do the same.

The programme was delivered in two phases. During Phase 1 (January–July 2023), each Champion partnered with a single school, co-developing bespoke work plans to address poverty barriers in educational settings ([Welsh Government, 2023](#)). Building on the early model, Phase 2 (2024–2025) expanded the programme's reach and structure. Champions operated in triads, each consisting of a partnership of up to 3 schools (5 triads in total), which aimed to enable collaborative learning and foster professional dialogue across contexts. Regular termly meetings were held to review progress, refine approaches, and share effective practice ([Welsh Government, 2024](#)).

The initiative was aligned with national education priorities, including Education in Wales: [Our National Mission](#) and the [Child Poverty Strategy](#) (2024). It was intended to reinforce the Welsh Government's whole-system emphasis on leadership as a lever for equity, while also operationalising the Education Minister's 2022 commitment of enabling peer-to-peer support for leaders in disadvantaged settings ([Welsh Government, 2023](#)). The programme was explicitly linked to the [School Improvement Partnership programme](#), building on peer networks to drive up standards ([Welsh Government, 2024](#)). By equipping senior staff with the tools and confidence to implement equity-focused interventions, the programme aimed to strengthen institutional capacity to overcome socio-economic barriers. It is linked to the National Mission's emphasis on leadership and a high-quality profession ([Welsh Government, 2023](#)) and to a whole-system approach that builds on the new Curriculum by ensuring every leader is equity-oriented ([Welsh Government, 2022](#)). The connections drawn above reflect the policy rationale underpinning these programmes. Evidence of their effectiveness is examined later in this report, within the bounds of what the available data allows.

The pilot concluded in July 2025, and a decision was reached by the Welsh Government not to extend the initiative.

1.2 Poverty Proofing

[Poverty Proofing the School Day](#) (hereafter, Poverty Proofing) is an approach developed to capture the voices and lived experiences of learners living in poverty, with the aim of informing school policy and practice, reducing the costs of the school day for families, and increasing engagement and participation. The approach centres on consultation with learners, parents/carers, staff, and governors, generating evidence-based findings that schools can act upon to remove financial barriers and stigmatising practices within educational settings.

The programme is delivered by [Children North East](#) (CNE) and originated in the North East of England in 2014 before being rolled out more widely across the UK. The Welsh Government commissioned a pilot of Poverty Proofing across 6 learning communities in Wales, delivered in 3 phases between September 2024 and May 2026. A total of 42 schools participated in the pilot: 6 secondary schools acting as cluster leads and 36 additional schools (primarily primaries) participating as cluster members.

The Welsh Government funded and monitored the pilot, while delivery responsibilities were shared between CNE and participating school partners. CNE led programme coordination, consultation, and support activities, while participating schools were responsible for engaging in professional learning, audit activities, and wider programme participation. The pilot aims to embed the approach within Welsh education as a mechanism for addressing poverty-related barriers to learning, in line with national priorities including the [Child Poverty Strategy](#) and the broader equity agenda set out in [Education in Wales: Our National Mission](#). The pilot was implemented across two phases. The first, which concluded in 2025, involved one-to-one partnerships between Champions and schools to co-develop targeted work plans addressing poverty-related barriers. The second phase, extended to 2026–2027, expanded the model to triads of schools, promoting collaborative learning and professional dialogue across a wider group. The ongoing phase involves 4 additional clusters joining the programme, including one cluster comprising one special school cluster and another incorporating a Pupil Referral Unit, while reflecting a broader geographical spread across Wales.

As the Welsh pilot is still at an early stage, no outcome evidence exists yet for its implementation in Wales. However, evidence from the implementation of the programme in other parts of the UK found improved attendance and attainment among learners eligible for FSM, increased access to enrichment activities, more strategic use of pupil premium funding, and a cultural shift in staff attitudes towards poverty ([Mazzoli and Todd, 2016](#)). Challenges included staff resistance to recognising unintentional stigma, reduced engagement from schools already serving high proportions of disadvantaged learners, and incomplete implementation where leadership support was lacking (ibid).

A difference-in-difference (DiD) analysis of North East England school data from 2015 to 2019 ([Beeson, Wildman, and Wildman, 2024](#)) also found significantly improved test scores and progress in mathematics and English reading for both disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged learners, with effects emerging after approximately 2 years, though no significant effects were identified for writing or grammar.

1.3 Original project objectives and amendments

Alma Economics was commissioned by the Welsh Government to conduct process and early impact evaluations of the Attainment Champions and Poverty Proofing pilot programmes. Both evaluations explored the experiences of school leadership teams (SLTs) and school staff to assess how each programme addresses poverty-related barriers to education in Wales.

The research originally aimed to apply a Realist Evaluation approach in the evaluation of each programme to identify what works, for whom, and in what contexts. During implementation, however, both the objectives and methodology were revised following 2 key developments, which were discussed and agreed with the Welsh Government:

- the cessation of its delivery partner (NAEL)
- fieldwork constraints around recruitment, timing, and school engagement for Poverty Proofing

These developments made a fully embedded realist evaluation approach, i.e., an evaluation that aims to explain not simply whether a programme works, but why it works, for whom, and under what conditions, no longer feasible. Given these constraints, the evaluation approach was adapted to prioritise feasibility and policy relevance. The analysis, therefore, centres on how the intervention was implemented, how it was experienced by participants, and what early changes were perceived, rather than offering definitive conclusions about causality or comparative impact. A detailed account of the initial objectives and research amendments is provided in Annex A: Detailed research objectives and methodology.

1.4 Objectives of Attainment Champions and Poverty Proofing evaluations

The evaluation had 3 overarching aims:

1. assess implementation experiences and the perceived feasibility of rolling out each model to additional schools and/or clusters
2. examine how each programme was delivered and identify perceived early outcomes and lessons, particularly in relation to school leadership, school practice, and equity-focused activity
 - assess how effectively the process of Attainment Champions project delivery has supported school leaders and their schools in developing and implementing equity-focused interventions
 - identify emergent outcomes, particularly changes in school culture, inclusivity practices, and staff attitudes
3. provide actionable policy insights, taking account of the limits of the available data
 - identify lessons learned and effective practices from each programme to inform operational adjustments and future programme designs
 - provide policy insights and recommendations aimed at reducing poverty-related educational barriers

1.5 Structure of the report

This report contains the following sections:

- Chapter 2 sets out the methodological approach
- Chapter 3 outlines the findings related to Attainment Champions
- Chapter 4 outlines the findings related to Poverty Proofing

The findings in Chapters 3 and 4:

- draw on the perspectives of SLT and school staff in participating schools, gathered through interviews (for both programmes), surveys, and focus groups (only for PP)
- begin with Attainment Champions and then move on to Poverty Proofing
- are presented thematically, rather than by research activity (survey and interviews)
- for Attainment Champions, the findings focus on school leaders' experiences and reflections on the programme, including perceived outcomes and recommendations for future initiatives
- for Poverty Proofing, the findings focus on school leaders' and staff experiences for implementing the programme, along with any early perceived outcomes associated with participation in Poverty Proofing
- Chapter 5 summarises the main conclusions emerging from the research, separated by programme
- Chapter 6 covers the next steps, reflecting ongoing work on the extension of the Poverty Proofing pilot to 4 additional clusters

2. Methodology

The evaluation followed a phased approach, initially examining both programmes jointly before separating into distinct strands focusing on Attainment Champions and Poverty Proofing. Research methods were tailored to each programme as appropriate. An outline of the research phases and associated activities is provided below. For a more detailed explanation of the methodology, please refer to Annex A: Detailed research objectives and methodology, which details each step of the research and the challenges encountered.

2.1 Phase 1: Initial data collection and analysis

This phase involved separate desk-based reviews of Attainment Champions and Poverty Proofing, the development of a Theory of Change (ToC) for Attainment Champions, and scoping interviews with 3 Welsh Government officials involved across both programmes, one NAEL representative for Attainment Champions, and 2 Children North East (CNE) representatives for Poverty Proofing.

2.2 Phase 2: Attainment champions evaluation activities

The research team attended an Attainment Champions event held in Cardiff in July 2025. The team facilitated a session including reflective exercises on successes, challenges, and learning, as well as a collaborative review of the Attainment Champions ToC.

The research team also conducted interviews with school leaders participating in the programme in September-October 2025. In total, 8 school leaders, 3 mentors, and 5 mentees across 5 partnerships were interviewed. Since data collection occurred after the programme had already ended, this component of the evaluation depended largely on school leaders' recollections of their involvement. While this offers a valuable window into how participants experienced the programme and what changes they felt it brought about, it did not allow for direct observation of delivery as it unfolded or for tracking developments over time.

Discussions with participants covered a range of topics, including participants' initial motivations for joining the programme, their early expectations regarding how Attainment Champions would drive change, the development of action plans, and perceived outcomes for learners, school staff, and school policies. Views on scalability and recommendations for future initiatives were also explored. In addition, insights from an unpublished NAEL report were used to supplement gaps in coverage in partnerships where no participants were interviewed.

Findings from these activities informed an interim report submitted to the Welsh Government in October 2025. The Attainment Champions evaluation was subsequently concluded, with the remainder of the project focused on the Poverty Proofing evaluation.

2.3 Phase 3: Poverty Proofing evaluation activities

The Poverty Proofing evaluation involved 2 main strands: (i) a survey targeting school personnel in Poverty Proofing and other schools, (ii) qualitative engagement through interviews and focus groups with SLT and school staff of Poverty Proofing participating schools. Overall, participation was more limited than anticipated. The following sections describe each strand in turn, before addressing the key limitations.

2.3.1 Survey administered in Poverty Proofing and control schools

The survey targeted school staff and senior leaders across both Poverty Proofing participating and non-participating schools. Within participating schools, it was directed at staff both directly involved in delivering the programme and those with no involvement. Non-participating schools were intended to serve as a comparison group and were asked only a subset of questions relating to their perceptions of how poverty influences educational attainment. The survey was designed to run in 2 waves (Autumn 2025 and Spring 2026) to assess changes over time.

The survey was distributed across all 42 schools participating in Poverty Proofing, alongside a set of 80 matched control schools selected on the basis of region, school size, and proportion of eFSM learners. By engaging with school staff both in Poverty Proofing participating and control schools, the aim was to shed light on the following topics:

- perceptions and awareness of poverty-related barriers to educational attainment: views and understanding of how poverty affects student learning and opportunities
- involvement in initiatives aimed at reducing the impact of poverty on education, including Poverty Proofing
- experiences with the implementation of Poverty Proofing
- perceived early outcomes of Poverty Proofing for learners, staff, parents/carers, and the school community since the introduction of the programme

The survey was designed to take no more than 15 minutes to complete and was hosted on Microsoft Forms, with responses collected between September and October 2025.

The survey was completed by 80 individuals from 23 schools, 22 of which were schools involved in Poverty Proofing (52% of Poverty Proofing participating schools), and only one response came from a control school (1.25% response rate), which was excluded from the sample, resulting in a total effective sample of n=79. These schools were located across 5 Local Authorities: Caerphilly, Cardiff, Carmarthenshire, Rhondda Cynon Taf, and Wrexham. Most were Nursery, Infant, and Junior schools (n = 14), followed by Secondary schools (ages 11–16) (n = 5) and combined Infant & Junior schools (n = 2). In terms of language medium, 11 schools were English-medium, 4 were Welsh-medium, 4 were Dual Stream, one was Bilingual (Type B), and one was English-medium with significant use of Welsh. The average proportion of eFSM pupils was 26%, with a range from 3% to 66%. The average school size was 393 pupils, with overall school size ranging from 21 to 1,543 learners.

Of the 79 final respondents, 36 (43%) identified as teachers, 25 (30%) as headteachers, heads of setting, or other members of the senior leadership team, and 14 (17%) as teaching

assistants, higher-level teaching assistants, or learning support assistants. Eight respondents (10%) reported other roles, including site manager, administrative staff, attendance officer, ALNCo, and safeguarding officer, while one respondent (1%) preferred not to say.

Although the survey was originally designed to enable longitudinal analysis and comparison with non-participating schools, neither of these elements was achieved in practice. The survey evidence presented in this report consequently draws on a single wave of responses from a self-selecting sample of participating schools. Findings should therefore be read as reflective of respondents' views and experiences, rather than as evidence of programme impact or change over time.

Prevalences in reporting survey results are reported using the following descriptive ranges:

- vast majority = more than 85% of respondents
- majority = 70% to 84%
- over half = 55 to 69%
- around half = 46 to 54%
- less than half/approximately a third = 30 to 45%
- minority = 15 to 29%
- small minority = below 15%

These ranges are used purely as a reporting convention and should not be taken to imply that findings are representative of any broader population beyond the respondents themselves

2.3.2 Qualitative Engagement with SLT and school staff participating in PP

Following the survey, qualitative engagement was undertaken with the aim of producing 6 case studies, one per learning community. Schools that served as the cluster leaders for each of the 6 Poverty Proofing clusters were selected to serve as the basis for each case study, with the intention of exploring how Poverty Proofing was being implemented in practice, staff experiences of putting the programme into action, and any early outcomes observed.

In practice, capacity constraints and competing priorities limited the extent to which schools could engage with the evaluation. In practice, school capacity constraints and competing priorities limited the extent of engagement with the evaluation. Data were collected from 3 schools in total, and participation fell short of what had been intended. As a result, no case studies were produced due to limited engagement and incomplete information. Qualitative findings are presented thematically across schools, and should be interpreted as illustrative of a small number of participants' experiences rather than as representative of all clusters and schools participating in the programme.

For a fuller breakdown of planned versus achieved engagement, please refer to Annex A: Detailed research objectives and methodology.

Table 1 Achieved Qualitative Engagement: Poverty Proofing Evaluation

Sample	Engagement
School 1	SLT interviews n=2 School staff focus group n=1
School 2	SLT interviews n=1 School staff focus group n=1 Follow-up SLT interviews n=1
School 3	SLT interviews n=1

2.4 Analysis

Analysis was conducted separately for each programme:

- **Attainment Champions:**
 - the analysis drew primarily on interview findings with school leaders, supplemented by evidence from the desk-based review and event discussions
 - all interviews with school leaders were analysed using thematic analysis, which involved identifying key themes within and across the information collated
 - given the diversity of programme activities arising from each school partnership's action plan, we also applied content analysis to document the activities, alongside drawing broader themes
 - the findings aim to shed light on the school leaders' perspectives on their motivation to participate, what worked well and the challenges encountered, the rationale behind choosing activities, and perceived impact on learners, school staff and the wider school
 - since it had been confirmed that the initiative would not continue, attention was paid to extracting lessons for future similar programmes.
- **Poverty Proofing:**
 - the analysis drew on survey data and qualitative engagement with SLTs and school staff
 - survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics, while data from interviews and focus groups were analysed thematically, identifying key themes within and across the material collected
 - both strands of analysis addressed similar topics, including feedback on Poverty Proofing activities and the overall experience of the programme, enablers and challenges, perceived usefulness of the approach, changes observed because of participation, and perceived impact on learners, parents/carers, and school staff

2.5 Limitations

A number of limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings from both evaluations, which are outlined below.

2.5.1 Attainment Champions evaluation limitations

The evaluation of Attainment Champions was commissioned late in the initiative, with fieldwork taking place after programme delivery had concluded.

As a result, it was not possible to capture participants' perspectives while they were actively developing and implementing action plans, while the timing of the evaluation also meant that it was not possible to assess 'before and after' changes or draw conclusions about longer-term impacts. Ultimately, these limitations indicate that findings from the Attainment Champions strand should be interpreted as retrospective accounts of participants' experiences, rather than as robust evidence of the programme's effects.

Additionally, the evaluation relied primarily on self-reported and retrospective accounts, which may have affected the accuracy or completeness of participants' reflections. Finally, stakeholder engagement was limited. Interviews were conducted only with school leaders responsible for implementing Attainment Champions, meaning that the perspectives of other school staff, parents/carers, and learners were not included in the evaluation.

2.5.2 Poverty Proofing evaluation limitations

The primary limitations of the Poverty Proofing evaluation relate to the volume and coverage of data collected. A key contextual factor was timing, as evaluation activities were introduced after programme delivery had already begun, which may have contributed to limited engagement by adding to the burden on participants.

Despite efforts by the Welsh Government and CNE to introduce the research team and emphasise the importance of the evaluation, and despite the research team's own efforts to maintain regular communication, issue reminders, and offer flexibility in how participation could take place, engagement remained low across all primary research activities. Participation was also self-selecting, relying on individuals and institutions having the time, interest, and capacity to engage. Taken together, the low response rates and self-selecting nature of participation mean that findings cannot be generalised across the programme.

Limited engagement resulted in the planned follow-up phase being unfeasible to carry out, which was intended to assess outcomes by comparing before-and-after data. The absence of responses from control schools, combined with the low response rate in the first survey wave, made a meaningful longitudinal comparison unfeasible and prevented a robust comparison between participating and control groups. As a result, changes in Poverty Proofing impacts over time, as well as differences in perceptions of poverty between participating and non-participating schools, could not be assessed. At the same time, insufficient uptake from schools in the qualitative strand made longitudinal follow-up engagement unviable.

As a result of these limitations, the report is unable to reliably assess how outcomes evolved over time, draw meaningful comparisons between schools, or establish which programme elements were most effective in different settings. In response, a decision was taken to extend the evaluation to cover the pilot's expansion, which encompasses 4 additional learning communities. Further detail is provided in the final chapter of this report, Next steps.

3. Attainment Champions findings

This chapter outlines the findings from the Attainment Champions evaluation. It draws on key insights from interviews with school leaders, supported by contextual information from the desk-based review and in-person discussions where relevant. The themes are presented in order of the depth in which they were discussed during interviews, with the most commonly reported findings discussed first.

The discussions covered a range of topics, including their initial motivation for joining the programme, participants' initial theory on how Attainment Champions would drive change, insights on how the action plans were shaped, and perceived outcomes for learners, school staff, and school policies. In addition, it outlines school leaders' views on scalability and summarises their recommendations for future similar initiatives by the Welsh Government.

3.1 Overview of partnership activities

The following section summarises the activities included in 5 partnerships' action plans. This information is primarily based on the NAEL report *Tackling the Impact of Poverty on Attainment: Attainment Champions Pilot Extension Impact Report* (unpublished), and supplemented by interview findings to explain in more depth the rationale behind the selection of activities.

3.1.1 Ysgol Penrhos, Maindee Primary, and Ysgol Gynradd Gymunedol Glenboi

In this triad, the schools followed a step-by-step process involving leadership collaboration, data modelling, and learners' voice. Leaders agreed on shared priorities, visited each other's schools to understand different contexts, and used a joint baseline survey to create a common starting point. The partner initially engaged as a mentor suggested using artificial intelligence (AI) to analyse [Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation](#) (WIMD) data, which the group refined together to plan next steps.

School leaders reported that learners' voice ran alongside the leadership and data work. Learners initially shared how poverty affected their daily lives and learning, then met in Cardiff to compare experiences and agree priorities through a learner forum. Each school's learners also carried out discussions, supported by simple language and visual prompts, that were perceived to help identify local issues to highlight contextual differences and informed later school decisions. To build their model, leaders combined WIMD domains (such as income, housing, health, access to services, and community cohesion) with a failure analysis method adapted from NASA's Failure Mode, Effects and Criticality Analysis (FMECA), to produce numerical risk ratings. Failure analysis was chosen as a structured way of examining possible points of failure in a plan or system, so risks can be anticipated and reduced. This tool estimated the likelihood of success or failure for different interventions, while identifying how issues like unreliable transport or unstable housing could stop learners from attending school regularly. They also developed C MAP, an AI-supported tool that analysed WIMD data to spot local vulnerabilities and link them to ranked priority areas.

AI-generated action plans gave each school tailored recommendations. School leaders informed that, while some confirmed existing issues, like service access gaps, in some cases they revealed new opportunities. For example, in one area with an unusually high rate of new small businesses, the findings suggested that developing entrepreneurial skills could be particularly relevant for students. This finding fed into the school's action plan, leading to outcomes, such as a school food shop and community pantry, integrated into curriculum themes, where students planned, produced, and sold goods. School leaders felt the project not only supported food access and reducing stigma but also generated some extra income for the school.

Implementation of the AI-generated action plans combined short and long-term actions. Some schools made immediate changes, such as improving food access, uniform rules, and expanding counselling and peer support. Others focused on environmental issues like litter reduction and cold housing. Schools also continued practical supports, such as food banks and uniform swaps, and used analytical tools to prioritise wider organisational and system needs. Participants also felt that these activities helped to reduce stigma, although this was self-reported and not supported by measurable evidence.

Activities were selected under the scope of addressing deeper, systemic challenges rather than short-term or isolated issues that schools cannot directly influence. The goal was to develop a practical, adaptable model for schools, focusing on problems that, if left unresolved, could have long-term consequences. The approach also emphasised tailoring interventions to local contexts, using resources efficiently, and tackling factors such as public health and environmental conditions that directly affect learners' daily lives and learning.

3.1.2 Islwyn High School and Cathays High School

This partnership concentrated on improving outcomes for disadvantaged learners by embedding equity into school quality assurance practices and by restructuring pastoral and targeted support so that eFSM learners received consistent attention and support.

Leaders carried out peer visits to identify transferable practices and then formalised 2 complementary approaches. At Cathays, learners experiencing poverty were included in all quality assurance processes, and a Vulnerability Responsive Action Planning (VRAP) cycle was used to collect wellbeing, attendance, and attainment data alongside learner conversations to determine the actions. At Islwyn, non-teaching school staff were appointed as eFSM Champions, and tasked with mentoring, coaching, and overseeing attendance and learning attitudes, while a Poverty Proofing audit identified hidden costs (e.g., uniform and transportation costs), and Pupil Development Grant (PDG) funding was prioritised toward a dedicated eFSM mentor for each group year and to provide private tutoring for KS4 learners. Additionally, the school restructured their Parent Teacher Association (PTA) to target fundraising and parental engagement towards supporting families facing financial hardship. Both schools explored targeted tutoring and created neutral support channels, such as a central email address to depersonalise requests for financial assistance, or through the dedicated eFSM champions, to reduce stigma.

At Cathays, learners' voice extended beyond consultation. Groups of targeted eFSM learners were actively involved in the Quality Assurance and VRAP processes mentioned above, to shape support plans and teacher feedback (e.g., work scrutiny, lesson observations, Estyn internal validation). At Islwyn, the Champions model was highlighted as a means to provide a stable point of contact for learners and families, with attendance and barriers reviewed regularly and escalating through a link between pastoral and curriculum teams.

The partnership described what they viewed as encouraging early signs. At Cathays, eFSM attendance rose by 2.2%, and quality assurance showed positive progress. VRAP meetings produced action plans, helping staff to see what worked and make quick adjustments. At Islwyn, more eFSM Champions were being introduced, with full rollout planned for the next term. Targeted tutoring began for some KS4 learners, and the Poverty Proofing audit helped reshape fundraising and reduce stigma around financial support. Both schools recognised the benefit of using PDG funding for lasting roles and embedding equity checks into regular quality assurance instead of short-term projects.

3.1.3 Cadoxton, Williamstown, and Bryn Celyn Primary Schools

This triad of primary schools aimed to reduce poverty-related barriers to learning through a research-informed and community-anchored approach. The approach the schools undertook combined evidence reviews, peer visits (including to Ireland and the USA) – which were funded separately and not enabled by this particular pilot – with feedback from learners, staff, governors, and partners to design context-appropriate strategies. They framed decisions through Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs ([Maslow, 1943](#)), prioritising food, safety, and belonging, and focused on strengthening teaching quality, relational attendance practices - promoting attendance through positive relationships, a supportive school culture - and coordinated multi-agency support.

Their initial work focused on clarifying shared definitions of key terms, such as poverty, equity, and 'closing the gap.' Each school reflected internally on what these concepts meant in its own context before coming together to compare perspectives. They also engaged learners in discussions about safety, wellbeing, and equity, using Estyn's framework on wellbeing and inclusion as a guide. From there, the schools began developing context-specific actions.

The main shared focus became examining the reimagination of the school day, i.e., exploring how start and finish times might better support learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. Drawing on observations from Ireland's [Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools](#) programme and existing research, such as Mick Waters' [Thinking Allowed on Schooling](#), they built a business case for adjusting the school day to better meet the needs of their communities. This was prioritised because, in all settings, there seemed to be a major difficulty for learners to come to school on time.

Another key area of focus was examining the cost of poverty to schools, exploring how funding structures across 3 local authorities affected budgets and capacity to meet learner needs. This analysis was reported to the Welsh Government in the hope of informing future

funding reviews. The group also investigated the [Community Partnership School](#) model, drawing on a colleague's visit to Florida to see how such models operated there, and tracking how these ideas were being developed within their own local authority.

School leaders engaged qualitatively reported early effects relevant to improved learner readiness to learn, fewer behaviour incidents, and stronger engagement as wellbeing supports were embedded. Reported impacts closely mirror the core aims of Community Focused Schools (CFS), pointing to a possible connection between the observed improvements and the approach followed by CFS. Even though the programme has concluded, the research team was informed about the partnership's next steps, which include deepening Maslow-informed routines, sustaining relational attendance systems, expanding community partnerships, and advocating for policy alignment through the Middle Tier Review to support multi-agency, place-based schooling at scale.

3.1.4 Whitmore High, Ysgol Bryn Alyn, and Milford Haven School

This triad of secondary schools focused on revising assessments to improve outcomes for disadvantaged learners across 3 different regional contexts. The project's initial aim was to introduce a whole-school assessment week model, inspired by assessment practices observed at a school in Barry, where every learner completes exams during a dedicated week before Christmas, with a revision lesson preceding each assessment. The idea was to provide equitable opportunities for learners to develop study skills and understand the value of assessments, within the school day. During the visits, the group also exchanged wider strategies on issues such as mobile phone bans and outdoor learning, recognising that academic improvement also depends on engagement and consistency.

The focus on assessment was driven by the observation that eFSM learners underperform in assessments due to issues like family responsibilities, part-time work, or inadequate study conditions (such as lack of space or quietness). As the attainment gap between eFSM and non-eFSM learners is most apparent in assessments, schools prioritised academic strategies over pastoral support, which they considered already strong. Observations at a school in Barry highlighted effective practices, including allocating lesson time for revision and explicitly teaching study strategies, with particular attention to eFSM learners who may not have these opportunities at home.

Leaders linked heads of Science, Mathematics, and English across schools to share subject pedagogy, curriculum design, resources, and monitoring routines. A shared assessment framework was co-designed and piloted at Ysgol Bryn Alyn through a joint assessment week, enabling moderation across schools. Disadvantaged cohorts were included within faculty monitoring so that equity considerations were embedded in routine QA rather than treated as a separate initiative.

3.1.5 Ysgol Coed-y-Gof, Ysgol y Bedol, and Ysgol Pencae

This triad examined how pedagogy could be adapted to better meet the needs of learners affected by poverty as an integral part of teaching and learning. Their joint enquiry, 'Our Habitat, Our Responsibility,' focused on outdoor, enquiry-based learning and on removing

cost-related barriers within school routines so that every learner could experience a stronger sense of belonging. Each school serves communities where disadvantage is a daily reality, and the group informed the research team that grounding their collaboration in a shared belief that rethinking teaching through an equity lens was an essential step for improving engagement, wellbeing, and learning.

The initial phase of the work involved surveys with both learners and staff. It was reported that learners highlighted that poverty influenced their school experience in several key areas, including the cost of trips, access to uniforms and essential equipment, availability of food, participation in extracurricular activities, access to facilities, and the need for consistent emotional support. There were cases where learners described embarrassment and feeling “left out” when they could not afford to take part in school activities. Staff responses echoed these concerns, noting that some learners arrived tired, hungry, or anxious, which affected concentration and participation. Teachers emphasised the need for classroom practices that protected learners’ dignity while helping them to be ready to learn.

In response to these insights, the triad co-constructed a Staff Agreement to support a consistent and ‘poverty-proof’ approach across schools. This included discreet access to food and uniform, welcoming late arrivals without judgment, and ensuring that every learner could participate in school activities. Pedagogical development centred on ‘Our Habitat, Our Responsibility,’ with teachers jointly designing bilingual, enquiry-driven outdoor learning sequences linked to the Curriculum for Wales. Professional learning drew on evidence around metacognition and self-regulated learning to strengthen learners’ autonomy and confidence, particularly for those managing disadvantage-related stress. Through shared planning, visits, and reflective practice, the triad has reported building a collective understanding of how real-world learning can motivate learners, nurture relationships, and embed equity within daily teaching.

School staff described perceived increases in engagement, such as improved concentration and reduced social withdrawal, particularly when learners were involved in hands-on, experiential activities. Enhanced emotional and social support was reported to help address anxiety, embarrassment, and self-consciousness associated with home circumstances. The work also encouraged teachers to reflect more deeply on their own pedagogy, for example, reconsidering how they respond to late arrivals and recognising the poverty-related factors that may shape learners’ daily experiences. The triad’s shared Staff Agreement provided a practical framework for responding to these needs and ensuring that inclusivity, access, and wellbeing are central to everyday practice.

3.2 Theory of Change

3.2.1 About the Theory of Change framework

A Theory of Change (ToC) framework demonstrates how a policy, intervention, or programme leads to change. It outlines how invested resources (inputs) and activities are intended to result in immediate products (outputs), which in turn are expected to contribute to broader policy objectives (outcomes and impacts). In this analysis, the ToC sets out how the goals of Attainment Champions might be achieved and how meaningful change could

be created. It also provides a theoretical foundation that underpins the evaluation methodology. Beyond its role as an evaluative tool, the ToC serves as a valuable resource for central policy leads and school leadership, guiding them in their efforts to reduce the negative effects of poverty on educational attainment.

The Attainment Champions ToC was developed collaboratively with Attainment Champions participants during an in-person facilitated session in July 2025. The ToC is presented in more detail in Annex B: Attainment Champions Theory of Change.

3.2.2 The Attainment Champions ToC

3.2.2.1 Inputs and activities

In the Attainment Champions ToC, the **inputs** represent the funds, resources, and guidance that underpin the programme. These are:

- funding: Funding to cover staff and leadership time to enable participation
- staffing: Time and expertise of participating headteachers
- NAEL coordination: Review, monitoring, and coordination from the National Academy for Educational Leadership
- guidance and training: Provided by NAEL (two-day induction programme)

The **activities** represent the actions and processes through which the programme is delivered and through which inputs are translated into outputs. These are:

- school recruitment and appointment: Selection of schools with dedicated leaders to participate in the programme
- partnership and triad formation: Creating small collaborative networks of up to 2 (in the initial pilot phase) or 3 (in the second pilot phase) schools
- peer-to-peer mentoring: Like-minded partners share expertise and collaborate on shared issues
- roundtable discussions (Phase 1 only): Headteachers attend roundtable discussions with the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Welsh language to inform on lessons learned

3.2.2.2 Outputs

The **outputs** represent the tangible products of each partnership's activities. These are:

- collaborative learning: Partnerships working together to develop awareness, skills, and confidence in addressing poverty-related barriers
- leaders trained: Participating headteachers trained through NAEL-led Professional Learning Experience sessions
- action plans: Partnerships develop context-specific strategies that address identified poverty-related barriers and build on demonstrated successful practices
- knowledge sharing within the programme: Shared learning and evidence within and between triads

3.2.2.3 Outcomes and impacts

The outcomes and impacts represent the shorter and longer-term changes that the programme seeks to achieve, respectively.

The intended **outcomes** of the programme are:

- initial behaviour and attitude changes: Changes in leadership behaviour and attitudes towards poverty and its impacts on education
- upskilled leadership: Through collaborative peer-to-peer learning
- reinforced sense of self-efficacy: In employing the right strategies to address the impact of poverty on attainment
- initial practice adjustments: Early changes in school approaches to supporting learners from lower-income households
- strengthened professional relationships: Development of peer support networks between school leaders and across Local Authorities

The intended longer-term **impacts** of the programme are:

- sustained behaviour and cultural shifts: Evidence of sustained changes in school culture and practices that are more inclusive and sensitive to poverty-related issues
- changes in educational leadership: culture of peer support and collaborative improvement in a selection of Welsh schools
- established best practice: Evidence-based approaches informing broader school improvement strategies
- system-wide learning: Sharing of innovative practices across the Welsh education system

3.3 Primary research findings

3.3.1 School contexts

3.3.1.1 Socioeconomic deprivation

When asked about their schools' distinctive characteristics, almost all participants reported that some form of socioeconomic deprivation affects their duties. High proportions of eFSM learners were cited as the main indicator of poverty within their communities. However, several headteachers also noted that the true extent of deprivation goes beyond these figures, as many families who fall just above the eligibility threshold still experience significant financial hardship.

“We’re over 1000 learners and our eFSM learners at the moment has just gone up, so we’re now at 24%. Last academic year we’re around 21.5%, so there is a rise. We also have around 32% transitional eFSM. And that’s always a struggle for us, because that means literally, if I’ve got 32% transitional and 21% eFSM, then actually I’ve got over 50% of children on that borderline poverty” (School leader)

Poverty affects learners in different ways. Some participants reported that it impacts readiness to learn, with some children arriving at school late, hungry, and struggling to concentrate in class or perform well in exams due to factors beyond the classroom. It was also linked to issues such as poor housing, food insecurity, and parental stress, which may also contribute to behavioural challenges within school. One participant also highlighted an intergenerational aspect of poverty, with their school serving learners from families that have experienced long-term economic decline. This has shaped learners' aspirations and overall expectations, with staff observing that deprivation can limit children's sense of what is achievable.

“Poverty has affected their mindset regarding what’s possible [...] If you give children praise, they don’t tend to take it very well. They sort of don’t believe you.” (School leader)

3.3.1.2 Additional barriers to learning

Beyond socioeconomic deprivation, participants reported that additional barriers also stem from learner transience and continuous movement. Schools are often not perceived as stable environments, and teachers have to educate children who might transfer between schools and areas within a single academic year, making their work more difficult.

“More newcomers have come in who come from completely different backgrounds from what’s traditional to the area.... 15% of the school are children weren’t with us at the start of the year.” (School leader)

Linguistic differences were reported as a further obstacle in both English and Welsh Medium schools. For example, a participant noted that the vast majority of their school students are multilingual and still developing their English language skills, while another

participant, the headteacher of a Welsh Medium school, mentioned that most of their learners are not Welsh speakers, posing an additional and unresolved challenge.

“The majority of learners in our school come from non-Welsh speaking homes. There’s a linguistic element comes with learning too. Targeting poverty when language at home is not the same as in school is a challenge in and of itself.” (School leader)

3.3.1.3 Additional programmes and priorities

In relation to other similar programmes they have been involved in, 2 participants noted that they are working on the Raising the Attainment of Disadvantaged Youngsters (RADY) programme, and one mentioned involvement in the Poverty Proofing initiative.

3.3.2 Setting up the partnership

3.3.2.1 Motivation for joining

When asked about their motivation for joining, participants reported 2 main reasons. The first, more common among those initially assigned the mentor role, was a sense of professional credibility. In these cases, participants felt that their experience positioned them well to participate and share their expertise with other schools, especially those outside their cluster. This sense of credibility stemmed either from their own professional reputation, previous initiatives they had led, or prior involvement in programmes of similar scope, such as RADY.

“The reason I wanted to get involved was because I wanted to share my practice. I’m unique as a headteacher and I wanted to share the practice with other people because there are lots of things I hear and read, and I think, they’re not right. They are assumptions and not based on evidence [...] I wanted to basically become a volunteer.” (School leader)

The second reason, more common among those participating in Attainment Champions as mentees, was related to the financial incentive. Headteachers viewed the programme as an opportunity to secure funding to support eFSM learners and help close the attainment gap. They also understood it as a complementary initiative that aligned with their professional interests and responsibilities, providing them with paid time to step back from day-to-day duties and strategise.

“There was definitely a financial incentive, because we could then use that funding to support those eFSM children. That was really key for me. By allowing me to have the focus, it also gave us the funding to enable us to do that. Those are the key drivers for us.” (School leader)

3.3.2.2 Initial theory

For the majority of participants, Attainment Champions was initially conceived as primarily involving a collaborative element. It was perceived as designed to create opportunities to meet, discuss, and work with like-minded professionals, sharing knowledge and learning

from the successes of others, something that was viewed as inherently good. Another element that was deemed particularly valuable from the outset was the opportunity to collaborate across Wales, extending engagement geographically beyond their immediate cluster or local authority. Some participants acknowledged that, while they are knowledgeable within their own school context, stepping outside of their cluster offered valuable opportunities to learn more.

“Collaboration with other schools is really important because obviously you can look at your own scenario and sometimes we [headteachers] are very much in a bubble. We know our schools inside out, but if we if we’re looking at lessening the attainment gap across Wales, you also need to look at what’s going on in other parts of the country.” (School leader)

“Attainment champions was something that I was really keen to be involved with because of the high level of deprivation that we have here and because I would have the chance to meet with like-minded headteachers and colleagues from across Wales. That was really important to me to be able to learn from. Also, I wanted to start thinking more deeply about how we can start to look at poverty proofing our schools, which is going to be a big challenge in the future.” (School leader)

Apart from the collaborative element, which was structurally embedded in the programme from the outset, most participants did not report any other initial theories about how the programme would work, nor which specific aspects of poverty they would aim to address. The majority maintained an agnostic stance. Two participants described this as a positive feature, suggesting that it reflected an acknowledgement of the fluid nature of poverty and a willingness to remain open to issues that might otherwise have been overlooked.

“When I started, we didn’t know what we were going to find out. I think that was why it was such a useful piece of work. Because I think sometimes, you know the answers to the issues, but it’s difficult to get anybody else, I guess, to listen to what needs to happen.” (School leader)

3.3.3 Shaping the action plan

Almost all participants reported that their action plans were shaped by some combination of local data, consultation, observation, and professional judgement, rather than by intuition alone. The process of shaping an action plan involved either consulting existing evidence or engaging directly with their school environment, or, in some cases, both.

3.3.3.1 Evidence-driven action plans

The process of shaping their action plan usually began with leaders visiting each other’s school settings and discussing how they would identify priorities. It also often involved baseline surveys with learners, staff, and sometimes parents/carers to capture the starting point for each school and examine priorities. Some schools complemented this with structured approaches to analysing and prioritising interventions. For example, the partnership that used AI to model WIMD data, and methods such as “failure critical analysis” to identify and assign risk ratings to potential actions. Similarly, tools like [Boxall Profile](#) were

used in one case to assess learner engagement and wellbeing, providing measurable evidence to guide decisions and allocate resources.

3.3.3.2 Learners' voice

Most participants reported that learners were involved to varying degrees in the design and implementation of actions. In most cases, they contributed with their perspectives through surveys, discussions, and observations of other school environments. This was done to help partnerships shape their decision-making around interventions and upcoming actions.

Some participants noted that learners' voice had directly influenced their action plan, including informing the development of initiatives. For example, a participant reported that the decision to focus on outdoor learning stemmed directly from the year 6 learners' recommendations. Learner input sometimes highlighted issues that had not been anticipated, such as links between poverty and bullying, which informed adjustments to school routines, including the introduction of "softer starts" to the school day to support wellbeing and readiness to learn.

"We did a training day, sending all of our staff and learners from year three to year six to a school in North Wales. They all sort of learned together and came up with a series of learning experiences and lessons. They were keen on focusing on learning in the outdoors and every class did a different project about that." (School leader)

3.3.4 Perceived impact

When asked about the impact of Attainment Champions within their school environment, most participants (with a few exceptions) explained that direct and measurable outcomes were difficult to determine. This was either because the interventions implemented were not designed for quantitative measurement, were not suitable for such evaluation, or because it was simply too early to assess impact, given that the programme had only concluded a few months previously.

"I think the programme is more subtle than that, it's a bigger thing than feeding into a statistic, isn't it? It's more difficult than cause and effect, isn't it? We can't directly link children getting together with better attendance. We have other factors to do that for improved outcomes." (School leader)

Despite this challenge, school leaders were overall confident that the programme resulted in almost exclusively positive outcomes for learners, the school staff, and wider school policies.

3.3.4.1 Learner outcomes

The most frequently identified positive outcome for learners was their increased engagement in school initiatives. Participants noted that involving learners was valuable for 2 main reasons. Firstly, engagement itself proved inherently beneficial; when learners took part, whether through research or direct consultation, they developed a sense of ownership and helped shape strategies and priorities. Secondly, greater involvement deepened

learners' own understanding of poverty, its various forms, and the ways it affects their peers, fostering empathy and a stronger sense of social responsibility.

“The older children developed a better awareness of poverty [...] We worked across classes to understand the children's perspectives of what happens if families don't have enough money for basic things [...] we also tried to link that in with our food pantry around, you know, the food pantry is there to help if people need that help.”
(School leader)

Some participants also reported improved attendance, which they attributed to positive developments in learner wellbeing. One participant explained that, through work developed through Attainment Champions, learners are now demonstrating greater emotional stability and a more positive attitude towards learning, leading to stronger engagement in school life. This improvement was seen to be a result of ensuring equal access to activities, trips, and meals. Another participant highlighted that a mentoring approach had helped the school maintain strong relationships with students and boost their motivation to learn.

“We also got some interesting statistics to suggest that in the year group where we implemented our new model, the deterioration in attitude to learning is much slower and actually the attendance increased by on average 2.5%. That may sound like a relatively small number, but in attendance terms is quite significant.” (School leader)

Two participants linked reported measurable improvements to attainment, specifically to performance across key subjects, although in one case they would not make a direct link of cause and effect with the programme.

“We're still unpicking what we did last year, what we'll continue to do, what will change this year. It's not always easy to establish cause and effect, but I think the mentoring approaches that we've taken have raised the aspirations of those learners and have supported them in various ways.” (School leader)

There were no unintended consequences reported; however, some participants reported that they had not achieved the outcomes they set out to in relation to entrenched challenges. One noted that, despite starting the school day later and at a gentler pace, issues of habitual lateness persisted, with some learners continuing to arrive after classes had started.

3.3.4.2 School staff outcomes

Reflecting on Attainment Champions' impact on their school staff, most participants responded that the programme had influenced their awareness and stance towards poverty. In some partnerships, this shift of attitude led to more responsive pedagogical approaches, not only limited to teaching itself, but also to a deeper recognition of the daily challenges that learners may face due to poverty. In others, it helped teachers understand more about the connection between basic needs, emotional wellbeing, and readiness to learn. In one case, the headteacher reported that the school staff now feel more confident in providing support to learners as a result of the programme.

“We are now more responsive to listening to the children [...]. Thinking about the implications for them on a daily basis [...]. We, as teachers, need to think more deeply about the individual needs of the children in this school.” (School leader)

“It’s made me think more widely personally as a leader about the implications of society on school [...] it isn’t just about teaching maths and literacy, there is a huge, huge wider challenge here.” (School leader)

In some cases, participants reported no observable impact on their school staff, primarily because the principles of Attainment Champions were already embedded in their school. One participant, however, acknowledged that while they might like to believe they have made cultural progress in their profession, such changes are difficult to fully grasp and are often only apparent in the long term.

This participant described how many teachers come from backgrounds very different from those of their students, which can make it challenging to fully empathise with learners’ experiences if such progress has not been deeply internalised.

“Schools are very middle-class places. Teachers come from quite middle-class backgrounds, and that’s one of the biggest issues in all this to try and help your staff appreciate the sort of backgrounds with some of our children come from [...]. What the impact has been, that’s really hard thing to measure. Because most teachers will tell you that they care about learners, and most teachers probably do, but how much they necessarily commit to that is a really tricky thing to measure for me.” (School leader)

3.3.4.3 Wider school policies

An influence on wider school policies was also reported, with schools being encouraged to make practical adaptations to support learners and families. One partnership implemented initiatives such as engaging learners with healthcare professionals and cancer survivors to improve community health outcomes and providing information on grants and resources to address issues like cold housing. In one school, the activities from Attainment Champions resulted in the creation of a food shop and community pantry, which involved learners with planning, producing, and selling items, generating income for the school whilst avoiding traditional fundraising that might burden families. In another school, it prompted staff to consider children’s interests more actively in planning, aiming to increase engagement, and reinforced an equity-focused approach by targeting support to eFSM learners.

3.3.4.4 Parental engagement

No schools reported direct involvement of parents/carers in the actions of the partnerships. In one case, a participant highlighted the importance of increasing parental engagement as a future area for improvement for their school. Another participant noted some indirect impacts on parental engagement, with parents/carers in this partnership noting to headteachers that their children were talking about what they were learning, and in some cases, learners with lower attendance became more eager to attend school.

3.3.5 Reflections – Barriers and enablers to their work

3.3.5.1 Barriers

When asked whether their initial theories had shifted by the end of the programme, several participants responded that they now developed a deeper understanding of the weight of systemic barriers. One participant reflected that they had not anticipated the scale of challenges beyond their immediate control, such as limited access of some students to extracurricular activities and a lack of parental support, acknowledging that schools can only do so much.

Another described encountering new and previously unrecognised forms of poverty in rural settings, an unanticipated challenge for which they felt unprepared. Another participant observed that, with the programme now concluded, they faced the task of continuing their work without the benefit of additional funding.

“Yeah, I think it’s made me need more of it now that it came to an end. I felt like it takes time to build relationships and trusting relationships that you have with colleagues within this timeframe. It was a great experience for that year.” (School leader)

Additionally, a participant reflected that through Attainment Champions, they came to the realisation that projects developed by other partnerships were both interesting and relevant, though the ongoing challenge was turning what is initially unfamiliar into shared knowledge and making innovative practices more widely recognised. The calibre of headteachers involved was reported to be very high, which added to the strength of the programme.

“Some of the stuff that other team of champions are doing is really interesting and relevant, but not known. And that’s the thing. How do we get them? The not known to the known and they were very good headteachers, you know, they were really the top of their drawer and the top of their game.” (School leader)

There were some cases of barriers to collaboration and elements of disruption of partnership. For example, one participant noted that participating in Attainment Champions at times became a burden for them, due to geographical distance, which required travelling and overtime from their side, and limited the ability to work together as a team. There were also challenges raised for schools that joined an established partnership in the second year of the pilot, as this sometimes made it difficult for the newer school to feel fully part of the collaboration.

Participants also noted that a school decided to drop out of the pilot due to Estyn inspection pressures. Some felt that this situation highlighted a tension between the Welsh Government’s emphasis on encouraging innovative, long-term initiatives and Estyn’s focus on more immediate priorities.

Some participants also expressed a wish for the Welsh Government to be more involved in the programme; there was some frustration that some planned activities, like policy roundtables, did not go ahead as intended in the second year of the pilot, and they felt their

opportunities for sharing learning at a policy level were more limited than they had hoped. A few suggested this may be down to shifting priorities at the government level and changes in key personnel.

3.3.5.2 Enablers

What was strongly reinforced throughout was the value of networked learning. Through Attainment Champions, participants came to appreciate the power of building trusting relationships with colleagues. Notably, participants emphasised that while the initiative was originally envisaged as a mentor-mentee relationship, the triads ultimately worked as equal partnerships, with sharing and learning in all directions.

The dedicated time, space, and financial support provided by the programme allowed them to reflect on their practice and to explore new ideas collaboratively. A participant remarked that it gave schools the freedom to focus on what mattered most to them, described as “letting the fleas out of the jar.” The perceived high calibre of the leaders involved was seen to contribute to the strength of the network, creating, though only for a short period, a community of professionals operating at the top of their field.

“Having the opportunity to work with different teachers across different phases, and across secondary and primary education is also really important. It was interesting to see how you’re given the freedom to do the work that you feel is important in your schools. It’s kind like you’re letting the fleas out of the jar.” (School leader)

3.3.6 Continuation of changes

More participants were very confident that the results of their work through Attainment Champions would extend beyond the programme’s lifecycle. As noted earlier, this confidence was not based on measurable improvements in metrics such as attendance, but rather on changes in how they operate. Nevertheless, 2 participants identified the potential discontinuation of the programme as a barrier to sustaining these efforts in the long term.

“I think it’s a such a shame, really. I think that this project was merely starting, as with any research project and implementation. You’re not going to see the results immediately. And I just think that if there is any way that this can be continued, that would be great [...] We’ve done what we can, and we’ve learned. I think we’ve learned. In the year, what do we need to do next as well, we’ve done some quick fixes, but we need to see, where can we take this now? And there’s further research to do.” (School leader)

More specifically, there was high diversity in terms of perceived long-lasting outcomes. One participant reported that the Attainment Champions made their school more “responsive” to learners’ needs and encouraged them to think more widely about the implications of society on school life. Another participant noted that the initiatives around outdoor and experiential learning will continue, as staff have become more confident in observing and assessing learners’ progress beyond traditional written work.

A further participant highlighted that caring for eFSM learners has become an embedded responsibility in their school, with a deputy head formally appointed as the eFSM Champion. In addition, a new Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) has been established with clear governance and a focus on the targeted use of funds.

Finally, one participant reported that the AI tool developed by their triad as part of Attainment Champions will continue to be refined and enhanced, with the aim of making it available to other schools as a free resource tool. One school also plans to collaborate with the local health board to deliver low-level health initiatives through the school, supporting families and improving community health.

“I would say that we are now more responsive to listening to the children talk about their needs. It’s not always about focusing on learning and teaching, but also thinking about what the implications are for them on a daily basis. Through the conversations we had when we went to each of the different schools, we were able to talk to the children and listen to them [...] I think we as teachers, we just go into teaching maths and literacy while what we need to do is to think more deeply about the individual needs of the children in this school.” (School leader)

3.3.7 Recommendations for scalability

Reflecting on their work through Attainment Champions, headteachers also identified potential for their work to be scaled to schools across Wales, although they recognised that approaches and enabling conditions could differ across schools. For instance, a participant recommended that their targeted use of PDG, combined with structured PTA involvement, could be scaled up through clear frameworks and accountability measures. Another expressed confidence that their AI tool could be adapted for broader use by schools in Wales. A different participant proposed developing a national toolkit of proven strategies, including their approach to teaching revision and assessment skills to eFSM learners. Additionally, another suggested mainstreaming collaboration among school leaders to support the dissemination of practices, while streamlining it through online networks to overcome logistical constraints.

“I think the work that we’ve done on the structure and allocating using PDG money, a dedicated free school meals mentor to every year group in a comprehensive school is something that could definitely be scaled. I don’t think there’s anything that we’ve done that’s necessarily specific to us.” (School leader)

Participants also pointed out the role of simpler and low-cost strategies that could support scalability. Straightforward practices and understanding issues, such as actively trying to reduce the stigma that poor learners might face and promoting accessibility in daily routines and school practices, can also be adopted widely.

“What could be easily implemented across Wales is to treat children all the same, especially primary school children, by removing any sort of stigma. I know it sounds obvious, ok, but it needs to be said. It needs to be. Every child must not feel shame if they’re late, but they actually do. Some haven’t got the uniform. Some haven’t got any food, or they haven’t had a wash, whatever. It’s never going to be that child’s

fault. And it's also not their [family's] fault. A lot of people's circumstances just aren't there. So, I think across Wales, removing the stigma from the child is key in improving the well-being of the child.” (School leader)

On limits, participants emphasised that every pilot's success depends on wider contextual factors, stressing broader systemic support as essential for change. Otherwise, learning and teaching interventions will not be successful on their own. One participant highlighted broader support around the family and community as an essential success factor, including services such as after-school programmes, housing, parenting support, and social care. Engaging learners, parents/carers, and community members sensitively was also highlighted as an important factor in understanding poverty and co-developing appropriate responses. One example mentioned was keeping the school open during the summer holidays to provide a 'Food and Fun' club – a school-based programme previously funded by the Welsh Government that provided disadvantaged children with healthy meals, nutrition education, physical activity, and enrichment activities during school holidays – and support for disabled children.

“In order to tackle the effects of poverty, two things must be done. The first element is what we've done in the project, which is affecting learning and teaching – teachers knowing who the children are who are being affected, the interventions that have an impact. The second part is that there must be broader support around the family, the community side etc. I think in schools across Wales it would be quite easy to develop the first one. The other element is not as easy because often schools think it's not their job to support broader things [...] In order for learning and teaching to be successful, the second one must be successful too, but this depends on the school's mindset. If you just develop learning and teaching to tackle poverty, it won't be successful unless you do additional things to support families.” (School leader)

4. Poverty Proofing findings

This chapter presents findings from the Poverty Proofing evaluation. It draws on interviews with school leaders and staff involved in the operational delivery of the programme, focus groups with school staff not directly involved in PP, and survey data collected from participating schools. Survey results are reported in total only, as the sample size is too small to conduct any segment analysis.

Given the low levels of engagement with interviews and focus groups, it is not possible to present findings in order of frequency. Where a finding is presented without a counterargument, this should not be taken to indicate universal agreement among respondents, but rather an absence of disagreement. Where conflicting views were expressed, both perspectives are presented. Overall, findings should be interpreted as illustrative of respondents' experiences and are not intended to be representative of all participating schools.

4.1 Implementation of Poverty Proofing

4.1.1 School contexts

The first area of exploration examined the context of each school, seeking to understand what drove the adoption of PP. School leadership and staff were asked about the poverty-related challenges present in their school and the measures already in place to address them. School leaders were also asked about their motivations for participating in the programme.

4.1.1.1 Perspectives on poverty-related challenges

School leaders interviewed touched on a range of poverty-related challenges that learners and their families were facing. Discussions typically began with socioeconomic disadvantage in broad terms, with FSM eligibility rates cited as the primary indicator across schools. Beyond eFSM learners, school leaders also consistently identified the “working poor” as a significant underserved group, defined as households in employment who experience financial hardship but fall outside formal eligibility criteria and are less likely to seek support.

“We are in a demographic that has high poverty, I would even say high working poor. A lot of conversation focuses on Free School Meals, but our concern is often with the people just above that threshold: those who are working, but who we call the working poor, because they find it difficult to access some of the things we can offer.” (School leader)

Both school leaders and staff identified several barriers to participation in school life. Transport emerged as a particularly significant barrier, especially in rural settings where learners are spread across a wide geographic area and rely on transport to reach school. In one school, changes to local authority transport policy were noted as having reduced free travel for a substantial number of learners. Geographic dispersion was also identified as a

factor that raises the cost of organising trips, with greater distances pushing transport expenses higher than in more urban settings. Beyond transport, staff cited the cost of uniforms, school trips, and ingredients for food technology lessons as further barriers.

“Probably the biggest thing all schools in South Wales are dealing with at the moment is the changes to transport. It used to be that you were entitled to transport to school if you lived 2½ miles away, but that threshold has now been increased to 3 miles. We have around 60 to 70 pupils who fall into that category and are no longer entitled to transport. We’ve been monitoring this from an attendance point of view to see whether it has made a difference this year.” (School leader)

School leaders also touched on a range of indirect effects of poverty on learners and their families. Stigma was mentioned, with a leader noting that families may avoid claiming FSM, particularly in schools where uptake is low and being identified feels more conspicuous. Staff also pointed to effects on pupil confidence, resilience, and aspiration, noting a post-COVID dip among disadvantaged learners.

“There’s still a bit of stigma around coming in to take pre-loved clothing. Some parents are happy to come and rummage. We’ve put things on rails and made them available at fundraising activities, but we still have a mountain of pre-loved clothes sitting here. And yet, when we survey parents, they tell us school uniform is expensive. We need to work on finding a better way to get them to the families who need them.” (School leader)

4.1.1.2 School involvement in poverty-reduction programmes

School staff described a range of measures that were introduced to address these challenges, prior to joining Poverty Proofing. The most commonly referenced were systems for using FSM status operationally: informing seating plans, triggering same-day attendance follow-up for absent learners, and disaggregating data by FSM status to guide teaching, behaviour management, and leadership decisions. Practical provisions included low-cost bus schemes for after-school activities, uniform donation schemes coordinated with feeder primary schools, earlier or more flexible trip payments, provision of ingredients for cooking lessons, free breakfast provision, and funding for trips for eFSM learners. Some schools also adapted classroom practices through adjusted resources, strategic seating, and targeted questioning, and employed dedicated staff such as family engagement officers to help families access entitlements.

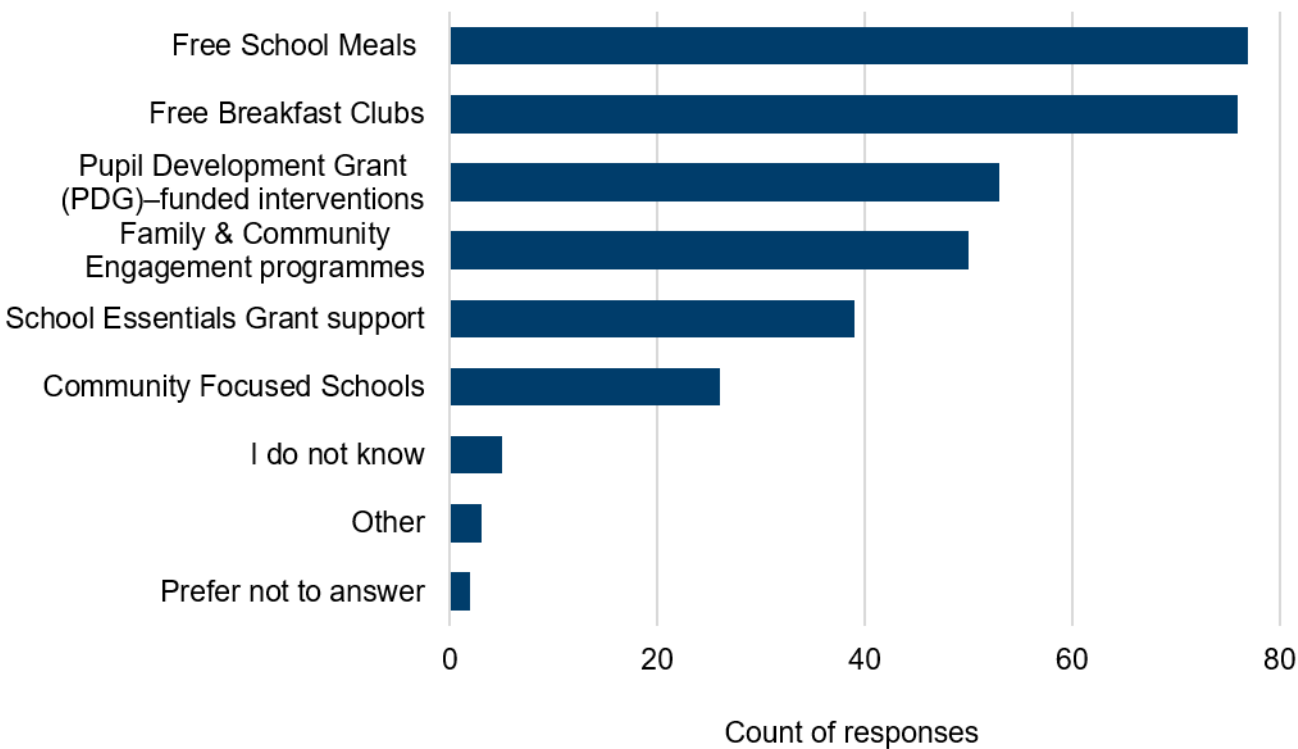
“In my English lessons, the impact and progress I’ve seen has come from really sitting down and thinking carefully about my seating plans for eFSM learners. For those who may struggle with behavioural issues, I’ve ensured they’re at the front of the class; for those who are less confident, I’ve placed them accordingly as well.” (School leader)

Survey respondents from participating schools reported that, alongside their engagement with Poverty Proofing, their schools were also engaged in a range of programmes aimed at reducing poverty’s impact on attainment (Figure 1, below). The vast majority of respondents indicated that their school provide FSM (n=77; 97%) and free breakfast clubs (n=76; 96%).

Over half reported involvement in PDG-funded interventions (n=53; 67%) and Family & Community Engagement programmes (n=50; 63%), while around half indicated participation in School Essentials Grant support (n=39; 49%). One third reported involvement in Community Focused Schools (n=26; 33%).

Figure 1: Involvement in Programmes Reducing Poverty’s Impact on Education n=79 (all)

Question: Which of the following programmes aimed at reducing the impact of poverty on educational attainment are currently active in your school? Select all that apply.

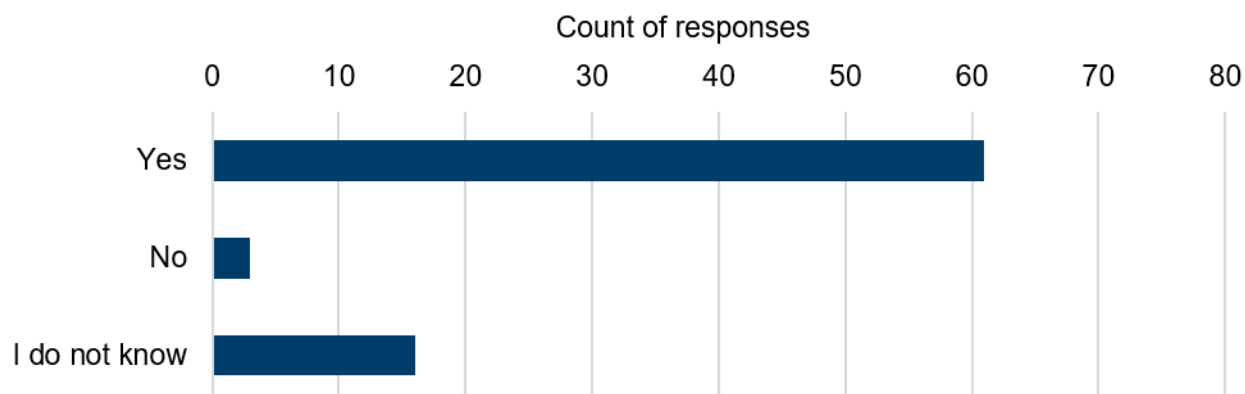


Description of Figure 1: Bar chart showing responses from the Poverty Proofing survey (n=79) on schools’ involvement in programmes addressing poverty’s impact on educational attainment. The vast majority of respondents reported FSM and Free Breakfast Clubs being currently active in their school. This was followed by PDG-funded interventions, Family and Community Engagement programmes, Schools Essentials Grant support, and Community-Focused Schools.

Regarding involvement in Poverty Proofing (Figure 2, below), while the majority of respondents (n=61; 76%) reported that their school is involved in the programme, a considerable minority (n=16; 20%) reported that they did not know. It is worth noting that Teaching Assistants accounted for the largest share of “I do not know” responses (n=9), which may suggest that awareness of whole-school programme involvement is not always consistently communicated across staff roles. Notably, 2 respondents incorrectly reported that their school was not involved in Poverty Proofing, while being employed by a participating school.

Figure 2: Involvement in Poverty Proofing n=79 (all)

Question: Has your school taken part in this Poverty-Proofing programme?



Description of Figure 2: Bar chart showing responses from the Poverty Proofing survey (n=79) on school participation in the Poverty-Proofing programme. The majority of respondents reported that their school had taken part, with a minority indicating they did not know, and a small minority reporting that their school had not participated.

Across discussions with STLs, the programme was initially understood as fitting with existing priorities rather than representing a new focus for the school. School leaders gave several reasons for taking part. One leader wanted to review and strengthen existing school practices. Another described a long-standing awareness of high deprivation in their community and a desire to take a more structured, evidence-based approach to issues such as trip costs, uniform, homework, and after-school provision. A third school joined as part of a cluster initiative led by its secondary school, which sought to better understand the socioeconomic backgrounds of learners arriving from different feeder primaries.

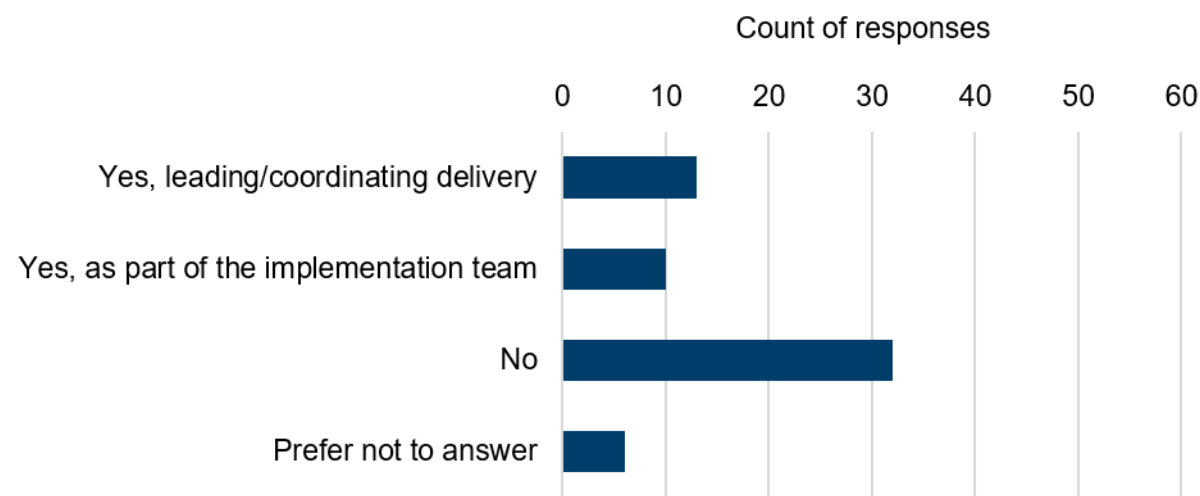
“Really just to check that what we are doing is of value to our students, but also to see if there are any suggestions or ideas we could use to improve the school day for our families and pupils. One of our main improvement priorities is looking at how we can help our students feel a greater sense of belonging, which has a positive impact on many things, attendance in particular.” (School leader)

“Within the school we were always good in terms of how we dealt with free school meals and poverty, but if I’m being honest, it was about making it more official – getting it onto the school improvement plan, onto departmental agendas, and building in accountability with middle leaders and teachers to say, ‘can you tell us what you’re doing?’.” (School leader)

The survey (Figure 3, below) reached mainly staff not directly involved in delivering the programme. Around half of respondents (n=32; 52%) from schools participating in Poverty Proofing reported having no involvement in the operational delivery of the programme. A minority of respondents indicated some level of involvement, either in a leading role (n=13; 21%) or as part of the team (n=10; 16%).

Figure 3: Involvement in the operational delivery of Poverty Proofing (n=61 – respondents from schools involved in Poverty Proofing)

Question: Are you involved in the operational delivery of the Poverty Proofing programme at your school?



Description of Figure 3: Bar chart showing responses from the Poverty Proofing survey (n=61) on involvement in the operational delivery of the programme. Around half of the respondents reported not being involved. Smaller proportions indicated involvement, either leading or coordinating delivery or as part of the implementation team, with a few choosing not to answer the question.

4.1.2. Implementation of Poverty Proofing

A further area of exploration covered the experience of those involved in the operational delivery of Poverty Proofing. Survey responses on this theme came from a subset of respondents directly involved in delivery (n=23), while qualitative insights reflect the perspectives of senior leaders and those leading implementation in their schools. Given the low count of respondents, findings in this section should be interpreted with caution.

4.1.2.1 Preparation and pre-audit phase

School leaders’ accounts of how Poverty Proofing was introduced in their school were mixed. Some school leaders interviewed reported a strong initial understanding of its purpose and process, which was attributed to direct participation in early meetings with Welsh Government representatives and upfront communication with CNE. For these schools, roles, responsibilities, and expectations were perceived as clear from the start.

“We were the lead school in our cluster, which helped us a great deal. [...] That meant the information we received was very clear. I attended the training sessions with representatives from the cluster, and from day one it was evident both why we were doing this work and what we needed to do.” (School leader)

Others, particularly leaders of schools that joined at a later stage, reported initial uncertainty around the requirements, specifically about the level of commitment and the workload

associated with the programme. In 2 cases, school leaders described cluster communication as limited in the early stages. Those same leaders noted, however, that familiarity with the programme's requirements grew over time, and that the process became increasingly manageable as they gained experience with the programme.

"The timeframe was very quick. That's nobody's fault, it just moved fast. Suddenly we were having the audit, and from a secondary school point of view, there's a lot of information to pull together. [...] There was a bit of pressure around the time frame, but we managed it. I'm aware there's a deadline from Welsh Government to have all cluster poverty proofing audits completed by Christmas, so we were a little late to the party." (School leader)

Views on the pre-audit phase were broadly positive. This phase involves schools gathering data about their operations, such as the costs associated with participating in school life, alongside information about their learners. The data collection process was generally seen as manageable, despite being time-consuming, and the exercise was considered useful in its own right, helping schools build a clearer picture of their school environment. One leader noted, for example, that gathering the requested information brought to light connections not previously looked at closely, such as the relationship between additional learning needs and FSM eligibility.

"They had asked for certain things, and I did my utmost to make sure they had everything. Because, at the end of the day, if you're going to have an audit, you need all that pre-information to give a flavour of the school, so that what follows is actually effective and helpful. There's no point just filling in the first worksheet." (School leader)

Core pupil data, such as eFSM percentages and attainment measures, were perceived as more straightforward to provide, drawing directly from existing school information systems. More detailed requests, such as participation in specific events broken down by FSM status, or information relating to curriculum activities not previously recorded, were perceived as more challenging, requiring input from multiple staff, and, in some cases, could not be completed where the data did not exist in the requested form. One leader also questioned the value of providing such granular information, feeling that it did not always feed meaningfully into any subsequent step of the process.

4.1.2.2 Train the trainer workshop

In qualitative discussions, views on the training provided by Children North East were generally positive. This phase involves training school staff to act as auditors in the next step of the process. Leaders found the Train the Trainer workshops a useful way to build staff understanding of what Poverty Proofing involves in practice. Specific activities were highlighted as strengths. One school leader, for example, noted that exercises simulating the financial pressures faced by families in poverty were effective in making the realities of poverty more tangible for staff.

"I went into it as someone who had already done quite a bit of work around poverty in my previous school and had tried to implement strategies to address it.

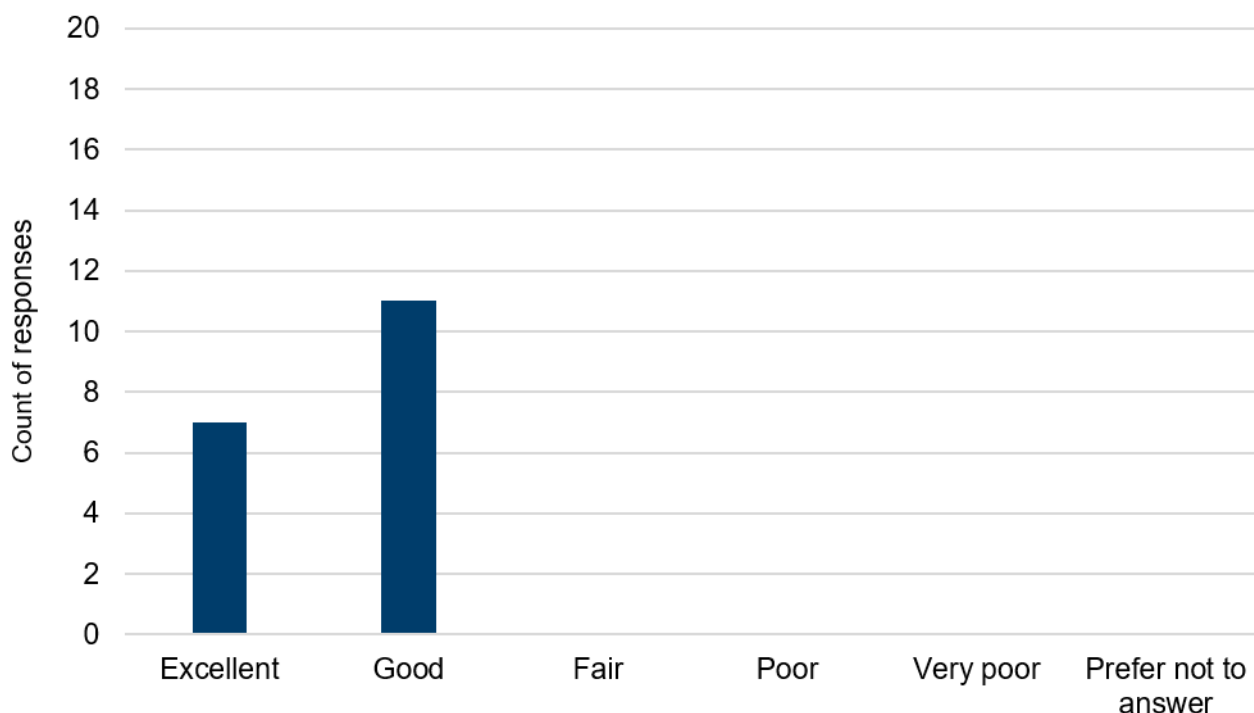
What I found when I arrived here was a staff body that didn't yet have that depth of knowledge and understanding. The training, and the workshop activities in particular, were really tangible in helping people understand what life in poverty actually looks like and how it impacts on learning. So although I perhaps already knew much of what was being covered, it gave me really good quality resources.” (School leader)

“The training, the budgeting activity and the workshop, were really tangible in helping people understand what life in poverty is like and how it impacts on learning.” (School leader)

Survey responses from personnel trained as auditors reflected these positive views. Among survey respondents who had undertaken the training (n=18), all rated it positively in terms of how well it prepared them for subsequent programme activities. Specifically, respondents rated the training as either “excellent” (n=7; 39%) or “good” (n=11; 61%) in preparing them to support Poverty Proofing activities (Figure 4, below). The majority also reported feeling confident in their auditor role as a result of the training (n=13; 72%), including 2 who felt “very confident” and 11 who felt “somewhat confident” (Figure 5).

**Figure 4: Perceived usefulness of the Train the Trainer workshop
(n= 18 – respondents trained as a Poverty Proofing auditor)**

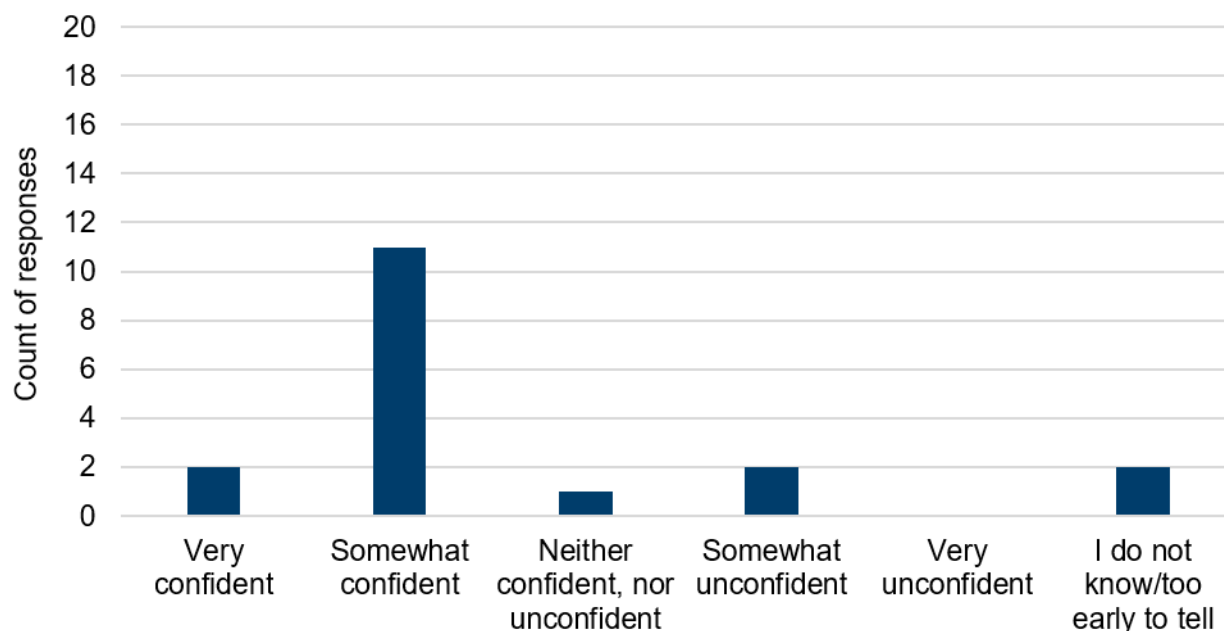
Question: How effective was the Train the Trainer workshop in preparing you to support Poverty Proofing activities?



Description of Figure 4: Column chart showing responses from the Poverty Proofing survey (n=18) on the perceived usefulness of the Train the Trainer workshop. All respondents rated the workshop positively, with the majority ‘good’ and the remainder ‘excellent.’ No respondents reported ‘fair,’ ‘poor,’ or ‘very poor.’

Figure 5: Confidence in the auditor role (n=18 – respondents trained as a Poverty Proofing auditor)

Question: How confident did you feel in your role as an auditor?



Description of Figure 5: Column chart showing responses from the Poverty Proofing survey (n=18) on confidence in the auditor role. Over half of the respondents reported feeling somewhat confident. Small minorities indicated being very confident, somewhat unconfident, neither confident nor unconfident, or unsure.

Alongside these positive views, some practical limitations were identified in qualitative discussions. One leader reported that attendance was not always consistent due to time pressures and competing school commitments, and that missing in-person sessions was a disadvantage, as these were considered more effective preparation than online alternatives. Another felt that the training did not sufficiently address the practicalities of conducting school-based audits, with much of the practical learning instead coming through direct experience and peer learning within the cluster. Several suggestions were made for strengthening the training, including organising participants into cluster groups from the outset, encouraging wider staff participation within schools, and extending experiential activities to more staff to build broader awareness.

“It was very clear from CNE what they needed, and I made sure the timetable reflected that, so the clarity around that was good. It was very difficult for the primary staff to be present throughout the training sessions. Some came in for a little while, but there wasn’t necessarily consistency for them, and it was simply impossible to get them out of their schools for the whole time.” (School leader)

“Having an experienced person there to observe was really helpful — they sat in on the focus groups, which I think stood them in good stead when it came to conducting their own. But I’ll be honest, I learned more from going in and doing the audit myself than from anything else.” (School leader)

4.1.2.3 Audit

Feedback on the audit process was mixed, with school personnel reflecting both the value schools drew from it and the practical demands it placed on them.

Discussions with school leaders revealed several facilitating factors that supported effective delivery. The structure and support provided by CNE were appreciated, with clear timetables and well-defined expectations helping schools navigate the process with confidence. The in-person presence of CNE staff was also seen as important, both for their expertise and for the credibility it lent to the process. One school leader, for example, explained that CNE's role made it easier to frame subsequent changes as responses to external evidence rather than internal school preference.

“Having somebody external coming in is beneficial in terms of raising the profile — it's something we were looking to do anyway, but having an external pair of eyes when you're looking to move things forward means you can say you're responding to external feedback, and I think that's been beneficial in many ways. It was also a rigorous process – a significant number of staff and students were involved, and it didn't feel like a tokenistic exercise where somebody comes in and speaks for half an hour.” (School leader)

School leaders also reflected on the wider value of the audit beyond its operational function. For learners, the process was seen as fostering a sense of belonging and feeling heard. For staff, it provided an opportunity for reflection. One leader noted, for example, that external questioning prompted a closer look at practices such as trip costs that might otherwise go unexamined.

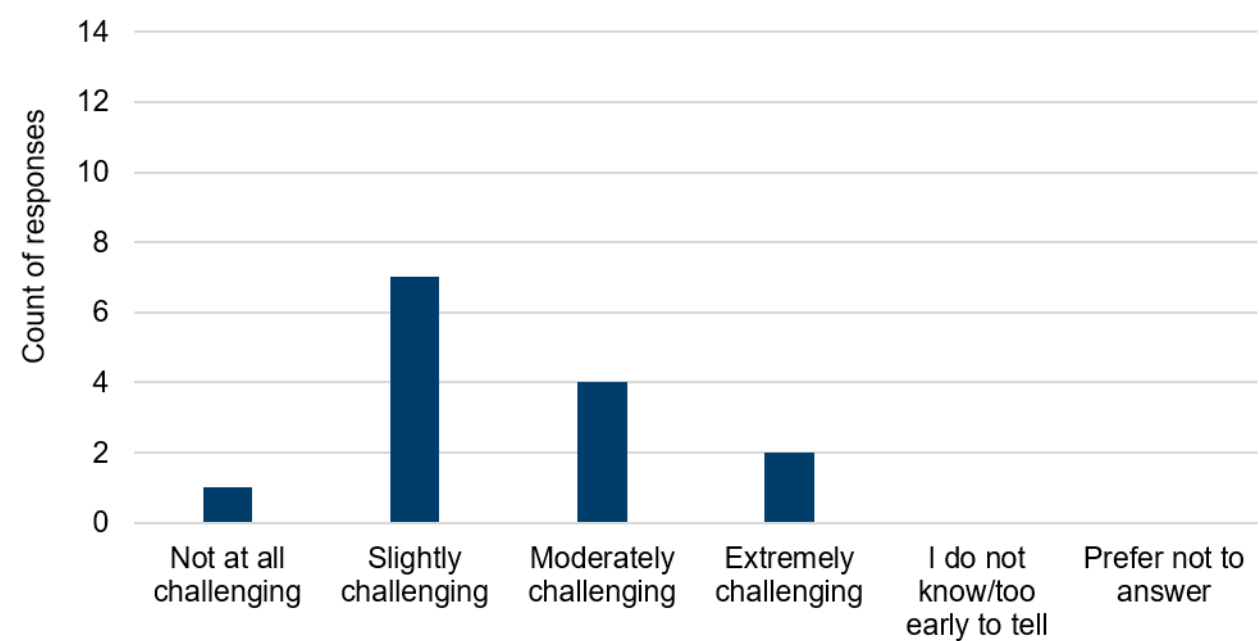
At the same time, the audits were described as demanding in practice. Coordinating across departments and releasing staff and learners from lessons created workload pressures. Some leaders questioned whether the same outcomes could have been achieved through a lighter-touch approach, and the timeframe for completion was considered tight given competing school priorities.

“There's a lot within the audit that we already knew, and I think the process could definitely be condensed. Whilst it is very valuable, the amount of time it has taken for primary staff to come out, for our staff to go into primaries, and to complete the audit itself, is too much in such a busy environment.” (School leader)

Survey responses from schools that had at least partially completed the audit (n=14) support these reflections. As shown in Figure 6 below, around half (n=6) found it “extremely” (n=2) or “moderately” (n=4) challenging, with the other half (n=7) stating they found it “slightly challenging,” and only one respondent indicating “not challenging at all.”

Figure 6: Perceived difficulty of completing the audits (n=14 – respondents from schools where the audits were completed)

Question: How challenging did you find the audit process overall?

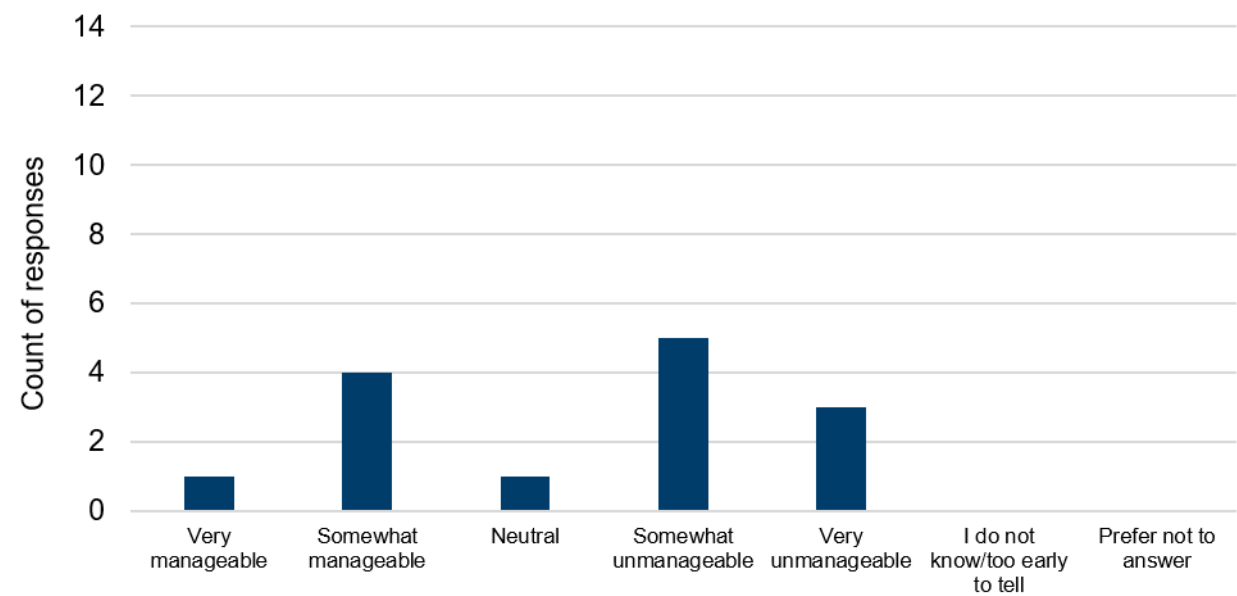


Description of Figure 6: Column chart showing responses from the Poverty Proofing survey (n=14) on the perceived difficulty of completing the audits. Around half of the respondents reported the process as slightly challenging, followed by moderately and then extremely challenging. A small minority found it not at all challenging, and none selected ‘I don’t know’ or ‘prefer not to answer.’

Regarding the time required to complete the audit (Figure 7, below), over half of the respondents (n=8) claimed it was a “somewhat unmanageable” (n=5) or “very unmanageable” (n=3) process. When asked about the ease of engaging different stakeholders (Figure 8, below), parents emerged as the most difficult group, with around a third (n=6) of respondents indicating moderate or significant difficulty. Learners, by contrast, were considered the easiest to engage, with over half of respondents (n=9) reporting no difficulty at all.

Figure 7: Perceived suitability of audit duration (n=14 – respondents from schools where the audits were completed)

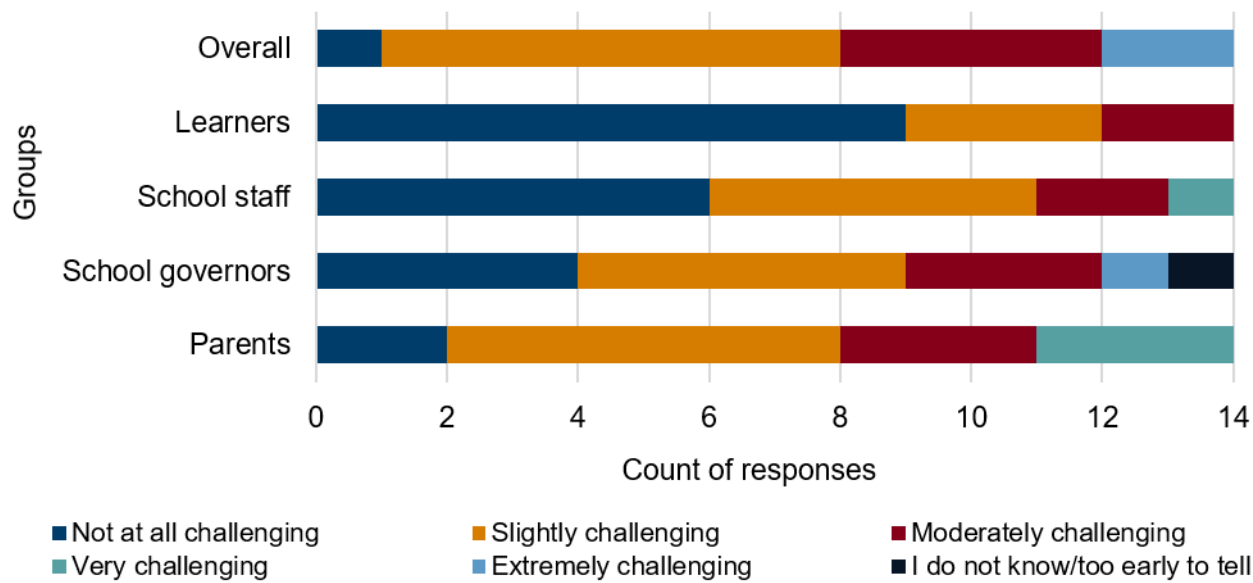
Question: How manageable did you find the time commitment required for the audit?



Description of Figure 7: Column chart showing responses from the Poverty Proofing survey (n=14) on the perceived suitability of the audit duration. Over half of the respondents found the time commitment somewhat unmanageable, closely followed by somewhat manageable. Smaller numbers reported it as very unmanageable, with equal numbers indicating neutral and very manageable. No respondents selected ‘I don’t know’ or ‘prefer not to answer.’

Figure 8: Perceived challenges in delivering the audits (n=14 – respondents from schools where the audits were completed)

Question: More specifically, how challenging did you find collecting feedback from the following groups as part of the audit?



Description of Figure 8: Stacked bar chart showing responses from the Poverty Proofing survey (n=14) on perceived challenges in collecting feedback during the audit. Collecting feedback from learners, school staff, and school governors was most commonly reported as not at all or slightly challenging. In contrast, collecting feedback from parents/carers was most often reported as slightly challenging, followed by moderately and very challenging, with fewer indicating it was not at all challenging.

4.1.2.4 Overall reflections on implementation

Beyond feedback on specific elements of the programme, discussions with school personnel touched on broader experiences of implementing the Poverty Proofing process.

Overall, school leaders noted that Poverty Proofing created time for reflection on their professional practice, which was expected to gradually translate into practical changes. School leaders described the process as enabling schools to work more closely together and collaborate. Additionally, school leaders spoke positively about the support provided by CNE, describing the team as approachable, knowledgeable, and responsive, while also noting that CNE's visibility across many schools puts them in a useful position to raise common issues at the local authority or national level, and that the Wales-wide network they helped establish has given schools the opportunity to share ideas and learn from each other.

However, school leaders also highlighted that the programme placed significant demands on schools' capacity, given the already high levels of workload and limited financial and staffing resources within schools. Concerns were also raised about the reporting requirements associated with Poverty Proofing. Staff found that information gathered during the audit did not always map onto the final report template requirements, creating some duplication of effort and uncertainty about where material should be placed. At the cluster level, coordinating participation across schools was also identified as a pressure point, with some leaders finding it difficult to sustain involvement alongside existing responsibilities.

“At the beginning, I'm not sure we could have invested more than we did, we invested where we could. But I wasn't totally clear initially on the level of commitment required: the extent of the peer review process, the length of the reports, and everything that needed to happen. That said, it was tweaked and improved as we went, and I think whoever completed the final [audit] probably found it a much easier task. It was more of a communication issue within the cluster that fell down a little at the start.” (School leader)

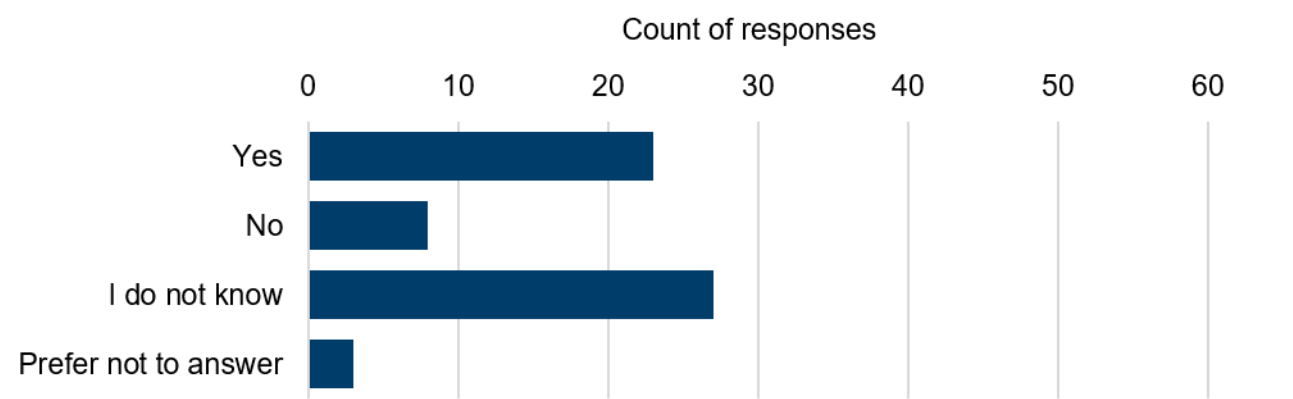
4.1.2.5 Recommendations from CNE

Following the capture of their experiences across the programme activities, the next area explored was the recommendations received from CNE. School personnel reflected on whether they had received recommendations, how useful they found them, and the specific areas these covered.

Among the school staff surveyed, the survey provided limited insight into progress on receiving recommendations. This likely reflects the timing of data collection, as the survey was administered in October 2025, at which point many schools may not yet have reached this stage of the process. When asked whether they had received recommendations from CNE (Figure 9, below), less than half of respondents (n=23; 38%) reported they had done so, while around half (n=27; 44%) indicated that they did not know.

Figure 9: Provision of recommendations from Children North East (n=61 - respondents from schools involved in Poverty Proofing)

Question: Has your school received a set of recommendations from Children North East?

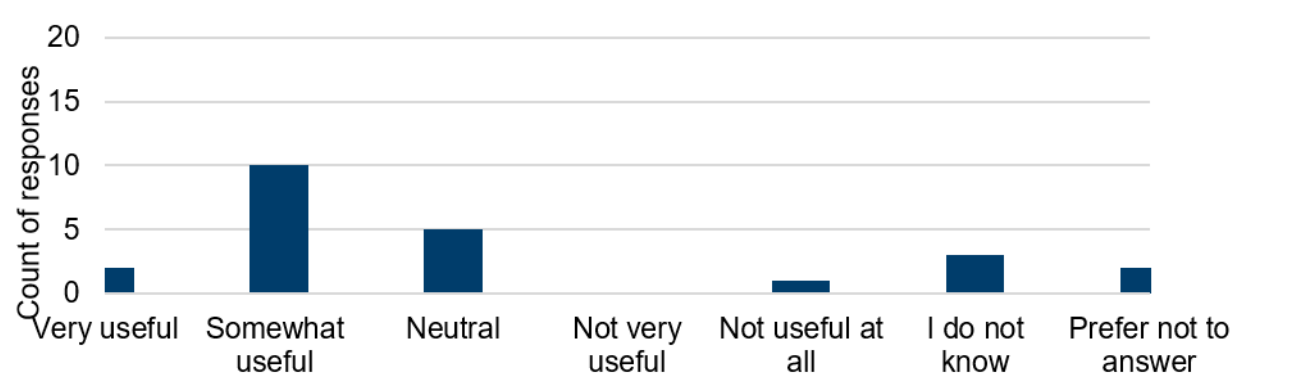


Description of Figure 9: Bar chart showing responses from the Poverty Proofing survey (n=61) on whether schools received recommendations from Children North East. The most common response was ‘I do not know,’ followed by ‘yes,’ ‘no,’ and ‘prefer not to answer.’

Among those who reported receiving recommendations (Figure 10, below), around half (n=12) found them useful, while others (n=5) expressed a neutral view, with only one respondent providing negative feedback. The same proportion (n=5) reported that they do not know or they would prefer not to answer this question.

Figure 10: Perceived usefulness of recommendations from Children North East (n=23 – respondents who reported receiving recommendations)

Question: How useful did you find the recommendations?

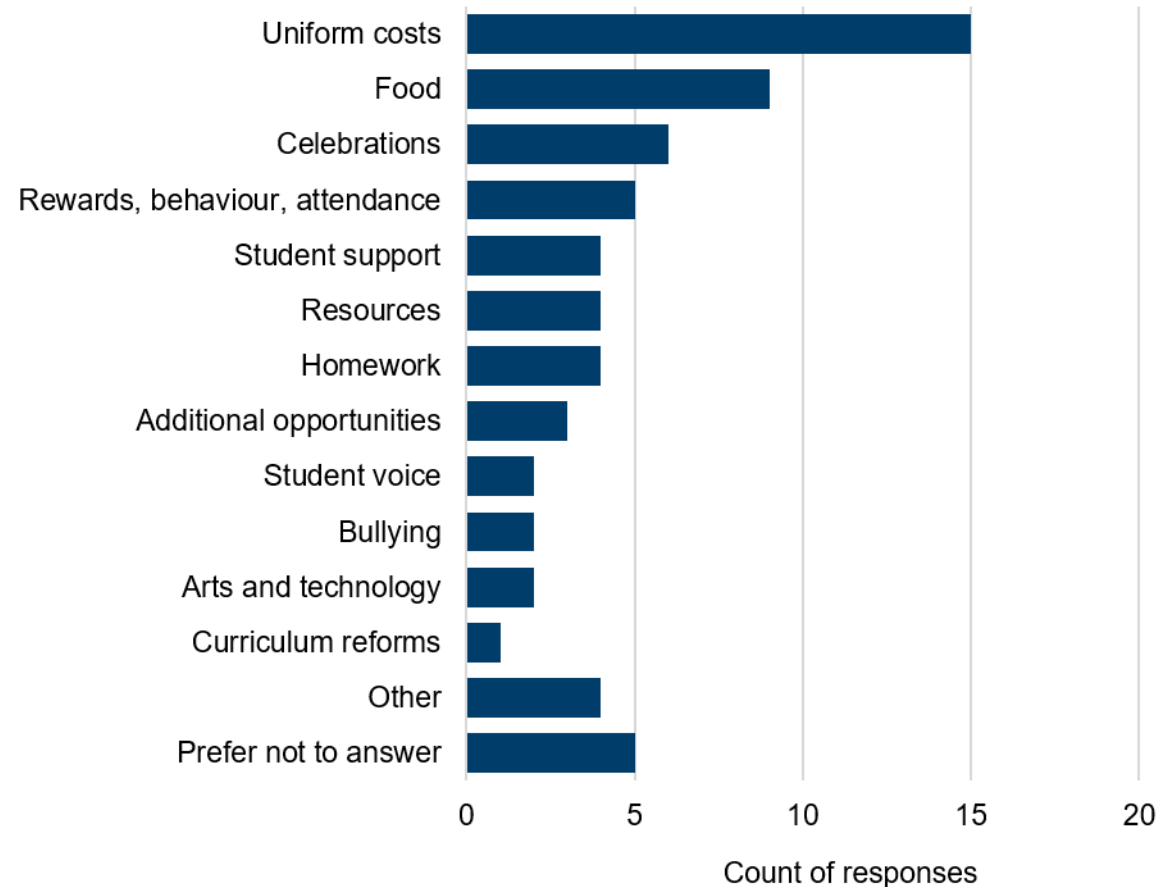


Description of Figure 10: Bar chart showing responses from the Poverty Proofing survey (n=23) on the perceived usefulness of recommendations from Children North East. The most common response was ‘somewhat useful,’ followed by ‘neutral,’ ‘I do not know,’ and ‘prefer not to answer.’ Fewer respondents reported ‘very useful’ or ‘not useful at all,’ and none selected ‘not very useful.’

Regarding the content of these recommendations (Figure 11, below), the most frequently cited recommendation related to changes in uniform costs, reported by over half of respondents (n=15), followed by food-related recommendations (n=9). A smaller share of respondents reported recommendations concerning student support, resources, and homework, while only a few mentioned recommendations aimed at addressing bullying, arts and technology, or curriculum reform.

Figure 11: Areas covered by Children North East recommendations (n=23 – respondents that reported receiving recommendations)

Question: What specific areas did the recommendations address? Select all that apply.



Description of Figure 11: Bar chart showing responses from the Poverty Proofing survey (n=23) on the areas covered by recommendations from Children North East. The most commonly reported areas were uniform costs, followed by food, celebrations, rewards,

behaviour, and attendance. The least commonly selected areas were curriculum reforms, arts and technology, bullying, and student voice.

Qualitative discussions with school personnel shed further light on how recommendations were received. Staff generally found them useful and relevant, describing them as aligning with existing priorities rather than pointing to entirely new directions. They noted that the value lay less in surfacing entirely new information and more in providing an opportunity to review policies and day-to-day practices under a poverty lens, and to validate and further professionalise work already underway.

“There was nothing in the recommendations that we didn't already know about. That said, it allowed us to formalise things, bringing issues to all staff in a way that perhaps wouldn't have happened otherwise. [...] But some of the key issues, like food and trips, were things we were already aware of.” (School leader)

Staff most commonly reflected on recommendations in three areas: (i) trips, (ii) uniform costs, and (iii) food provision. For trips, the audit was said to have encouraged closer scrutiny of costs through a stronger poverty lens. On uniform, schools described building on existing work to reduce costs and address stigma, for example, by removing expensive branded PE kits and reviewing uniform requirements with governors. Food was identified as the most challenging area, largely due to local authority control over catering, which limits what schools can directly change. However, the findings were still seen as useful in strengthening discussions with the local authority and refining targeted support such as breakfast clubs and food grants.

“The three key areas that came back in the feedback were additional opportunities in terms of trips, food, and uniform. [...] We had already identified trips as an area where, as a school, we simply weren't viewing things through a poverty lens. The suggestions that came from the audit have been really beneficial in helping us change our whole approach to extracurricular activities. [...] Having that as a formal recommendation in the report was really valuable, because it was something we already felt we needed to work on.” (School leader)

“We've started doing work around the stigma attached to borrowing uniform or having hand-me-down uniform. We've also made changes. Our PE kit, for example, no longer has to be branded, making it less expensive. And we're having ongoing conversations about other parts of the uniform: what needs to be branded and what doesn't.” (School leader)

While recommendations were broadly welcomed, some limitations were noted. Certain suggestions were seen as sensible in principle but were sometimes outside schools' direct control, with the example of school meals, governed by the local authority as noted above, being a case in point. One school leader also raised the importance of considering unintended consequences. Referring to a recommendation suggesting sew-on badges as a lower-cost alternative to embroidered uniforms, they felt this could have the opposite effect in practice, as it might visibly distinguish learners from lower-income families and draw attention to their circumstances rather than reduce stigma.

“Some recommendations were quite interesting. The way they talked about promoting pre-loved uniform, for example. But there were others where I could see problems. Offering sew-on badges, for instance, wouldn't work with our uniform, it would actually highlight poverty rather than reduce it. You have to unpick these things, because what works in some schools won't work in others.” (School leader)

“On the whole the report felt very relevant, but there were some areas, the uniform recycling, for example, we've actually worked really hard and the work is already happening. You wouldn't read the report in a frustrated way, but you might think that some things aren't as easily done as they appear on paper, because it's about changing culture and ethos. It's not a lack of effort, it's a historical barrier that we keep chipping away at, and I'm not sure that was fully reflected in the report. But then, that's for us to reflect on and find our own way forward with.” (School leader)

4.1.2.6 School action plans

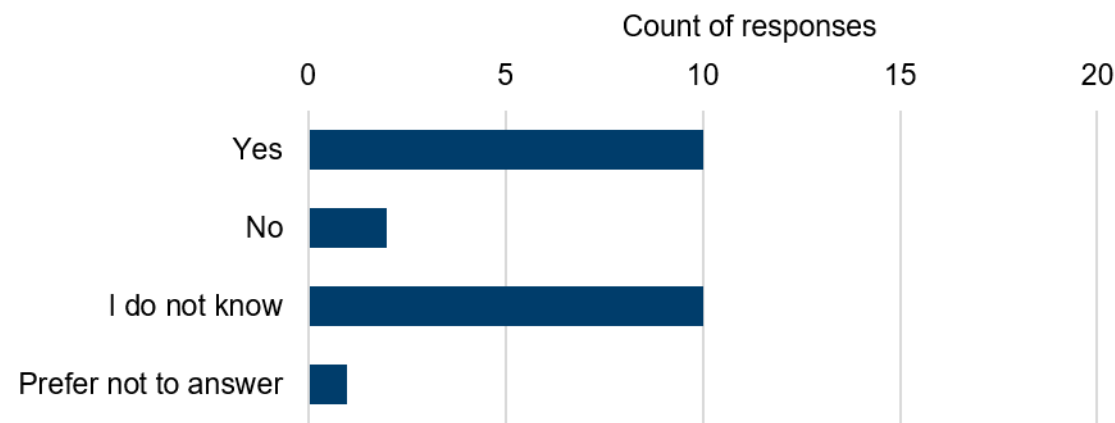
School personnel were asked whether they had developed an action plan based on the recommendations received, and if they had, what that plan involved.

In the survey (Figure 12, below), when asked about developing an action plan based on these recommendations, less than half (n=10) of respondents reported having developed one. A notable proportion (n=10) stated, “I do not know.” These findings are likely to reflect the timing of the survey, which was conducted before many schools had reached the action planning stage of the process.

In an open-ended question about the content of the action plan, respondents (n= 7) reported reforms related to uniform costs, such as establishing uniform hubs and making uniforms more affordable. Additionally, a few respondents mentioned planned changes regarding food, trips, and celebration days.

Figure 12: Development of a school action plan (n=23 – respondents who reported receiving recommendations)

Question: Has your school developed an action plan based on the recommendations?



Description of Figure 12: Bar chart showing responses from the Poverty Proofing survey (n=23) on whether schools developed an action plan based on recommendations from CNE. The most common responses were 'yes' and 'I do not know,' reported in equal numbers. Fewer respondents selected 'no,' and the least selected response was 'prefer not to answer.'

Qualitative discussions with school personnel provided further detail on the content of action plans, which centred on three main areas: uniform, trips, and broader support for disadvantaged learners. It was acknowledged that action plans were still relatively new at the time of engagement and that not all schools had fully worked through all recommended actions. On uniform, key actions included establishing a uniform hub providing items at no cost and moving the PE kit to non-branded alternatives, as discussed earlier. On trips, school staff from a participating school informed the research team about introducing stricter oversight of costs, earlier communication of prices to help families plan, and more explicit messaging around financial support for eFSM learners, following recognition that not all families had been aware that such options existed. Some schools also embedded the recommendations more broadly, applying a poverty lens across improvement planning and line management meetings, and drawing on external grants to broaden provision for disadvantaged learners.

4.2 Outcomes of Poverty Proofing

The survey examined perceived outcomes across different groups within school communities, including learners, parents/carers, school staff, and the school as a whole. Specifically, it looked at the following outcomes for each group:

- learners: changes in attendance rates, engagement with school activities, behaviour, and wellbeing
- parents/carers: changes in engagement with the school, trust in the school, and parental wellbeing
- school staff: quality of relationships with parents/carers, understanding of poverty and its impact on learning, ability to identify and address poverty-related barriers, and leadership culture
- school (overall): school culture, inclusivity of policies, and the establishment and sharing of best practice

Interviews and focus groups covered the same themes, while giving participants the flexibility to discuss these issues in their own words, with specific examples used as prompts where needed. Across all engagement, a recurring view was that it was too soon to assess the outcomes of the programme. This was evident in the survey, where "too soon to say" responses to outcome-related questions ranged from 35 out of 61 respondents (57%) to 23 out of 51 respondents (38%). The findings are presented below, ordered from the groups where perceived impact was most consistently reported (school staff and wider school policy) to those where it was less certain (parents/carers and learners).

4.2.1 School staff outcomes

School personnel engaged qualitatively spoke positively about the impact of engagement with the Poverty Proofing programme on staff across their schools. One outcome mentioned was that staff developed a shared understanding of poverty, giving them a common language and a clearer sense of what it involves in practice. The CNE framework provided a consistent reference point, which some schools felt had helped make poverty a more regular consideration in discussions and school processes. Another school leader described a shift in "school ethos," explaining how a "poverty lens" had become embedded in staff meetings, prompting staff to question hidden costs and the impact of policies and activities on disadvantaged learners.

"The impact is definitely visible now. When we meet with our middle leaders, free school meal learners are always on the agenda, they have a high profile in the school, and that filters down to faculty areas. In data meetings, we talk specifically about free school meal learners with both middle leaders and classroom teachers." (School leader)

For school leadership, the programme was seen as providing useful time and space to reflect on practice, something they noted that the pace of school life can make hard to find. Poverty Proofing was also linked to strengthening relationships across school clusters. One leader also noted that, working within their cluster, collaboration with primaries had improved, supporting better understanding across phases and more connected thinking around transition.

"One of the personal positives that came out of it for me was visiting primary schools. It was honestly some of the best professional development I've done in years. Despite everything we say about not having time, having that time set aside to go into a primary and really live and breathe it for a couple of days was genuinely valuable. [...] I got to speak properly with the pupils and hear their voice, which was wonderful. And as was said, it has brought our cluster closer together. I now work much more closely with a primary colleague, and we ended up having some really rich professional discussions." (School leader)

It should be acknowledged, however, that school leaders and staff noted their schools were already relatively aware of and sensitive to issues of poverty prior to engaging with the programme. In these contexts, the above outcomes were described more as elements reinforcing and deepening existing efforts than as bringing about a fundamental shift in attitudes.

"We were pretty aware of that already, if I'm honest. Working in the school we work in, our staff are too. We've done a lot of work in that area, so I wouldn't say it raised anything we didn't already know." (School leader)

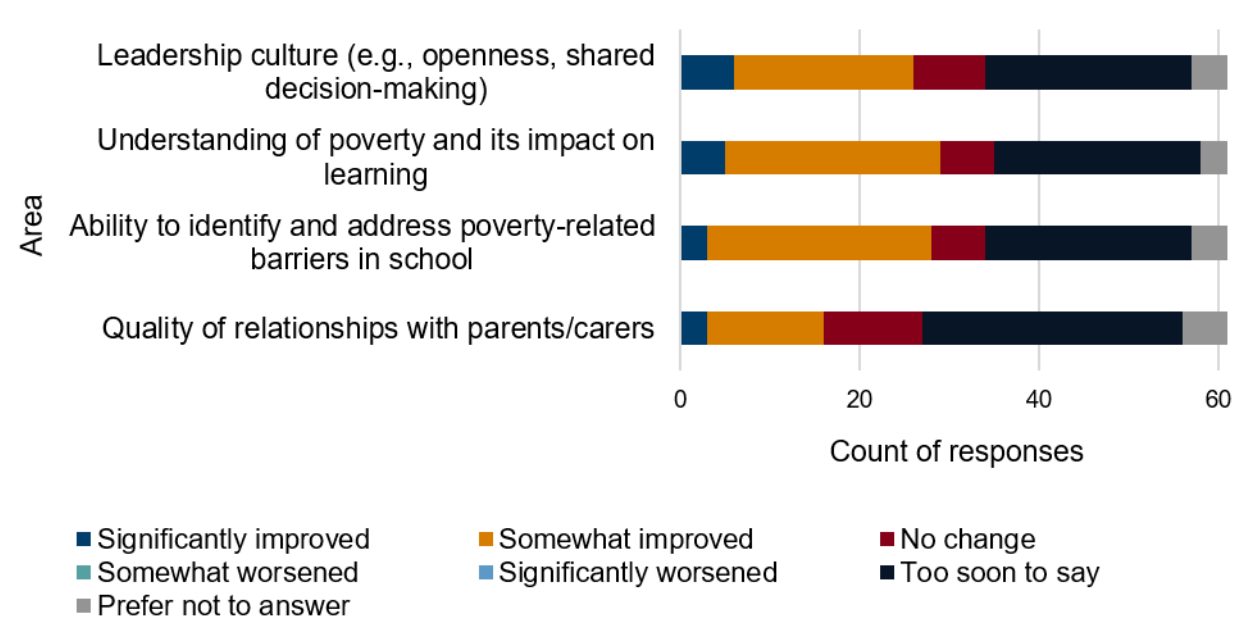
Survey findings support the qualitative themes outlined above. On the questions related to the programme's outcomes for school staff (Figure 13, below) the most commonly reported outcome was an increase in poverty awareness, with around half of school personnel (n=29; 48%) reporting that involvement in the programme had significantly (5; 8%) or

somewhat (n=24; 39%) improved their understanding of poverty and its impact on learning. A similar proportion (n=28; 46%) also reported significantly (n=3; 5%) or somewhat (n=25; 41%) improved ability to identify and address poverty-related barriers in their school settings.

Changes in leadership culture were also mentioned by less than half of the respondents (n=26; 43%). Better engagement with parents/carers emerged as the least evidenced area, with only a minority (n=16; 26%) reporting improvement, and around half (n=29; 48%) that it is too soon to tell.

Figure 13: Poverty Proofing – School Staff Outcomes (n=61 - respondents from schools involved in Poverty Proofing)

Question: For each of the following areas, please indicate how things have changed among the school staff since the programme began.



Description of Figure 13: Stacked bar chart showing responses from the Poverty Proofing survey (n=61) on perceived changes in school staff outcomes. Across all areas (leadership culture, understanding of poverty and its impact on learning, ability to identify and address poverty-related barriers, and relationships with parents/carers), the most common response was ‘too soon to say,’ followed by ‘somewhat improved.’ Smaller proportions reported ‘significantly improved,’ ‘no change,’ or ‘prefer not to say.’

4.2.2 Wider school policy outcomes

Qualitative evidence points to some schools introducing organisational or procedural changes that participants linked to their involvement in Poverty Proofing. The programme's early stage of implementation and the concurrent presence of broader school improvement initiatives make it difficult to attribute these changes directly to Poverty Proofing.

In terms of the inclusivity of school practices, staff from one school reflected, for example, that they had begun questioning whether sanctioning learners for failing to bring a PE kit

was appropriate where the cause was financial rather than a matter of attitude or effort. Staff from the same school also noted that their school had made changes to how trips and other activities were communicated and funded, introducing earlier publication of costs, clearer financial messaging, and more flexible payment plans to reduce pressure on families.

“Should a child really be sanctioned for something that is out of their hands, if their parents simply cannot afford the PE kit? It's made me think more carefully about that. And with trips, I try to be more mindful of the opportunity those experiences provide, and how we can help out a little more though transport costs and similar factors are largely out of my hands. I do look at what funding pots we can pull together to support more families. But overall, what it does is divert your attention in a positive way.” (School staff)

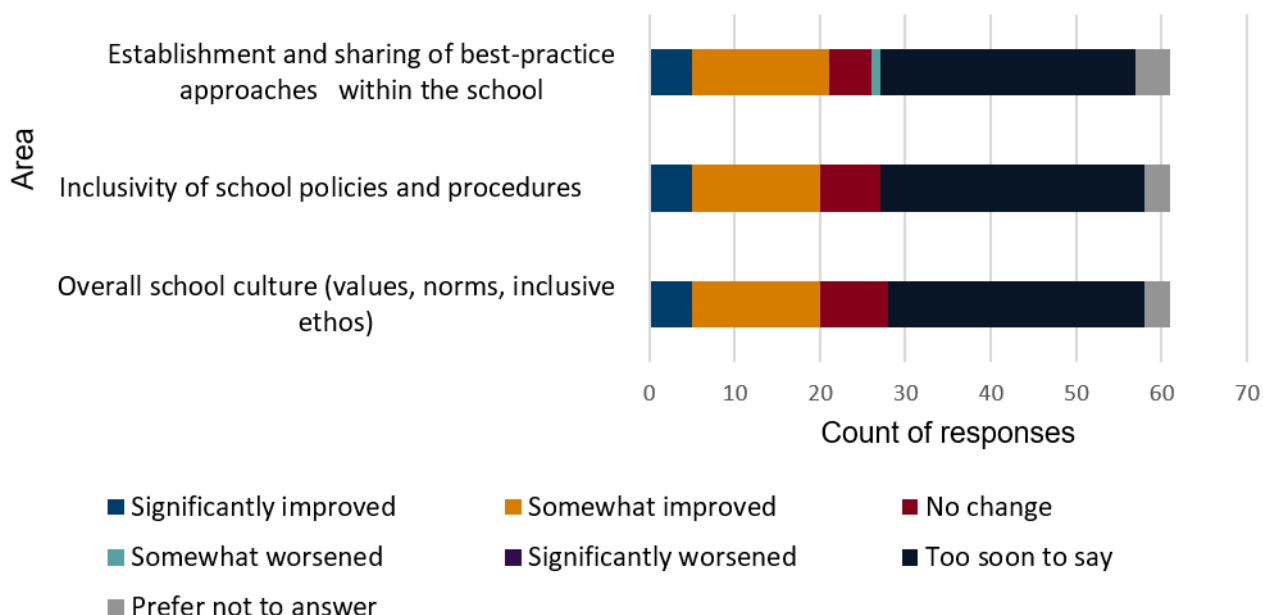
Engagement with the programme also appeared to prompt broader strategic and operational changes. For one school, this included the strengthening of support infrastructure such as uniform hubs and financial assistance processes, alongside the introduction of a pilot transport initiative to address barriers to participation in after-school activities. The leader from this school also reported a tangible shift in LA engagement, with the LA increasingly aligning itself with the school's poverty proofing work and adopting a broader poverty proofing approach to its own provision. In another school, a leader noted that heightened staff awareness had resulted in more consistent recording of welfare concerns, with an increase in safeguarding logs relating to learners' appearance, clothing, and instances where a learner had mentioned being hungry.

“We wanted to get more of our students staying after school, and over the last four months we've been working closely with the LA to increase the opportunities being offered by external providers after school. [...] The local authority responded by putting on a late bus as a pilot, running at 4:30 every evening, Monday to Thursday, and I do think that's a direct result of the work we've been doing. I haven't been told that explicitly, but I also feel there has been a much more poverty-proofing approach from the local authority more broadly. They're interested in how things are working, and they've very much aligned themselves with us given the work we've been doing.” (School leader)

Evidence from the survey suggests that the impact on school structures is still emerging. On the questions related to the programme's outcomes for the school more broadly (Figure 14, below), around one third of the respondents reported improvement in overall school culture (n=20; 33%), inclusivity of school policies and procedures (n=20; 33%), and establishment and sharing of best-practice approaches within the school (n=21; 34%). At the same time, around half of the respondents across cases reported that this is “too soon to tell.”

Figure 14: Poverty Proofing – School Outcomes: (n=61 - respondents from schools involved in Poverty Proofing)

Question: For each of the following areas, please indicate how things have changed for your school in general since it began implementing the programme.



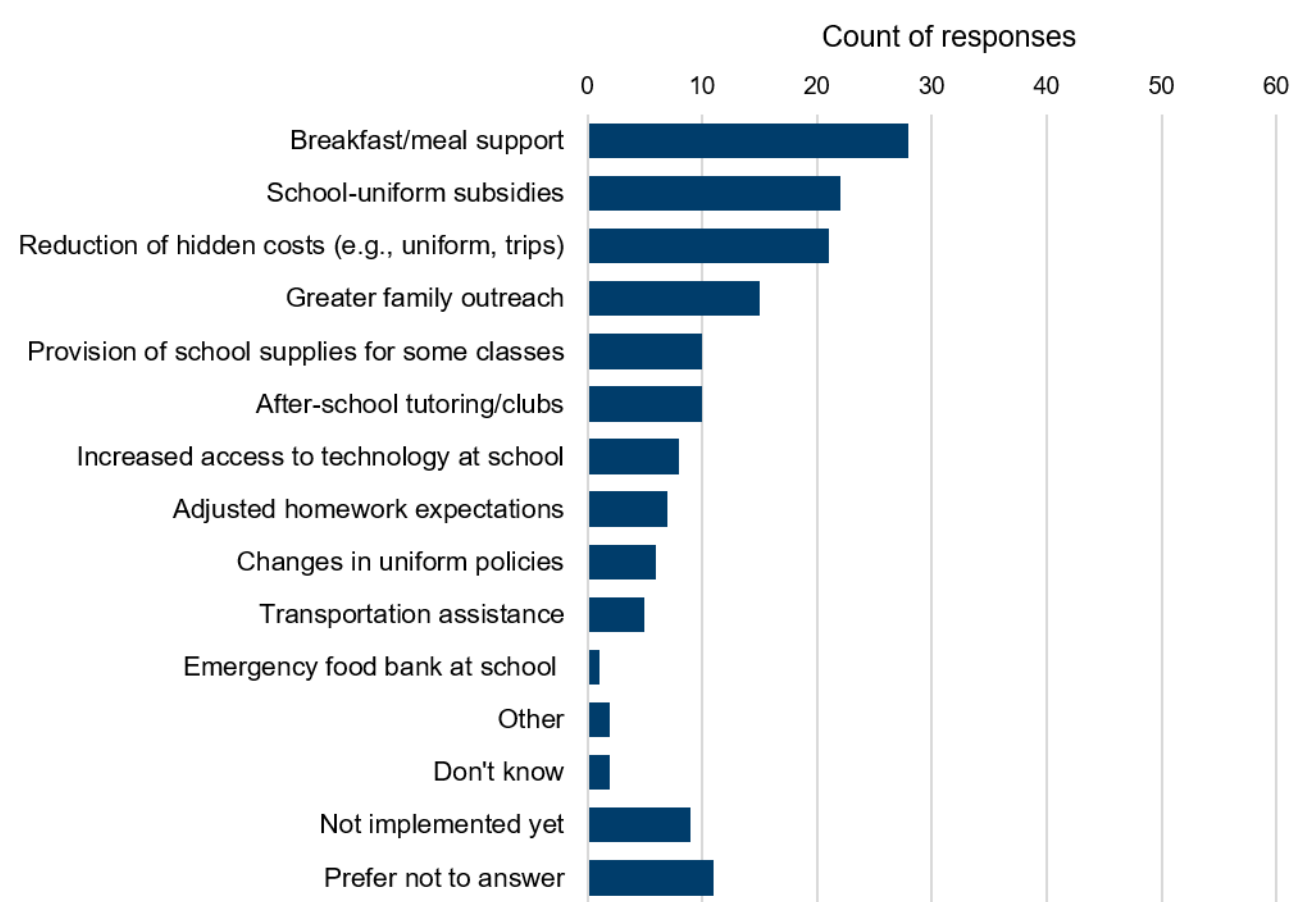
Description of Figure 14: Stacked bar chart showing responses from the Poverty Proofing survey (n=61) on perceived changes in overall school outcomes. Across all areas (establishment and sharing of best practice, inclusivity of school policies and procedures, and overall school culture), the most common response was ‘too soon to say,’ followed by ‘somewhat improved,’ ‘no change,’ and ‘significantly improved.’

Turning to specific changes in practice reported by schools (Figure 15, below), around half of the personnel surveyed reported breakfast meal support (n=28; 46%), while around a third (n=22; 36%) reported school uniform subsidies and reduction of hidden costs (n=21; 34%). A minority reported greater family outreach (n=15; 25%), provision of school supplies (n=10; 16%), after-school tutoring/clubs (n=10; 16%), increased access to technology at school (n=8; 13%), adjusted homework expectations outreach (n=7; 11%), and changes in uniform policies (6; 10%).

In response to the open-ended survey question about the policy change with the greatest impact, survey respondents most commonly highlighted changes related to uniform provision (school-distributed, recoloured, or free uniforms), breakfast clubs and food access for learners showing signs of hunger, and the removal of activity costs for eFSM learners, including waiving participation fees and discontinuing requests for voluntary contributions.

Figure 15: School changes as a result of Poverty Proofing (n=61 - respondents from schools involved in Poverty Proofing)

Question: Which of the following practice changes have occurred in your school? Select all that apply.



Description of Figure 15: Bar chart showing responses from the Poverty Proofing survey (n=61) on practice changes implemented by schools. The most commonly reported changes were breakfast or meal support, school-uniform subsidies, reduction of hidden costs, and greater family reach. The least commonly selected responses were ‘don’t know,’ ‘other approaches,’ and establishing an emergency food bank at school.

4.2.3 Parent/carers outcomes

School personnel interviewed pointed to several changes intended to improve engagement with parents/carers, though it should be noted that evidence of impact in this area remains largely anecdotal and, in many cases, schools acknowledged that multiple changes were happening simultaneously, making it difficult to attribute outcomes to the programme specifically.

School leaders touched on examples of improvements to financial communication. One described the introduction of cost calendars shared at the start of the year to give families advance notice of upcoming expenses, alongside dedicated financial email addresses to direct queries to the right person and clearer messaging around trips and non-uniform days.

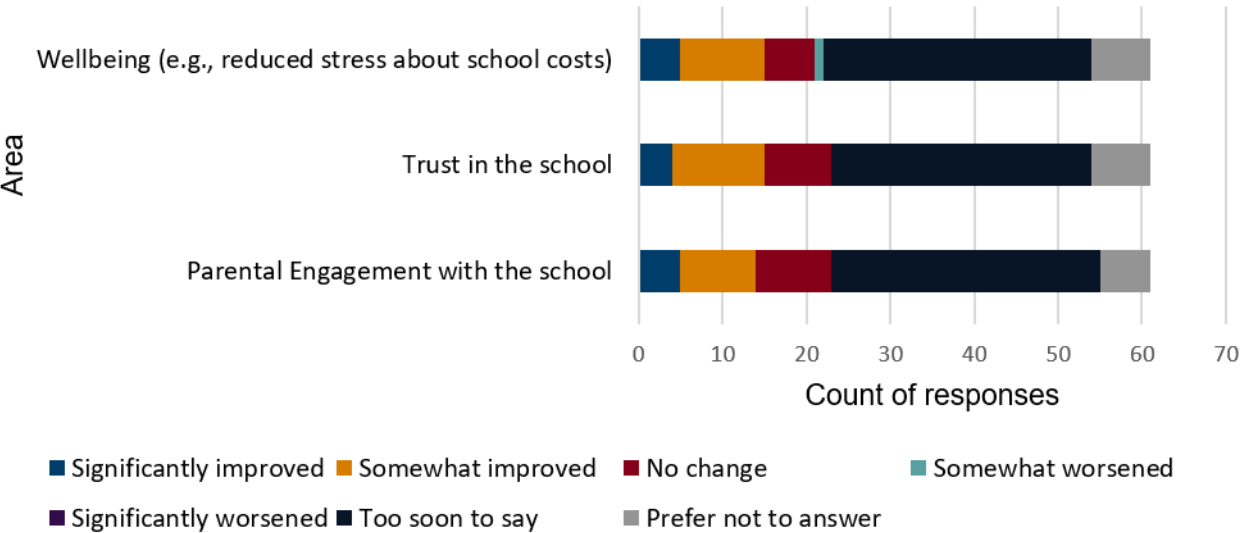
Another leader reported a gradual increase in parents/carers coming forward to seek support for trips, uniforms, or grants, with staff, in some cases, helping families to navigate paperwork. They shared the example of a family whose church had contacted the school directly to ask about additional support, which was described as an indication of the kind of community-level trust and engagement that had developed. In another school, parents/carers were reported to have responded positively to practical changes such as improved transport provision, and individual feedback had been received expressing appreciation for the increased opportunities available to their children.

“We've introduced a cost calendar this year so that parents can see from the start of the year when things like charity days are. [...] We also set up a dedicated financial email address, which was an idea I picked up from speaking to someone at CNE and implemented straight away. Rather than financial queries landing in a general mailbox, they go directly to our finance officer [...] These are subtle changes, but they enhance what we already do.” (school leader)

Evidence from the survey reinforces the above. On the questions related to the programme's outcomes for parents/carers (Figure 16, below), only a minority reported improvements in wellbeing of parents/carers (n=15; 25%), trust in the school (n=15; 25%), and parental engagement in school (n=14; 23%). Across these statements, around half of the school personnel surveyed indicated it was "too soon to tell."

Figure 16: Poverty Proofing – Parental Outcomes: (n=61 - respondents from schools involved in Poverty Proofing)

Question: For each of the following areas, please indicate how things have changed for learners since the programme began.



Description of Figure 16: Stacked bar chart showing responses from the Poverty Proofing survey (n=61) on perceived parental outcomes. Across all areas (wellbeing, trust in the school, and parental engagement), the most common response was ‘too soon to say,’ followed by ‘somewhat improved’ and ‘no change.’ Smaller proportions selected ‘prefer not to answer’ and ‘significantly improved.’

4.2.4 Learner outcomes

Qualitative engagement with school personnel indicates that, at the time of engagement in October 2025, it was too soon to draw conclusions on learner outcomes as a direct result of the programme. In most cases, staff and leaders tended to reflect on changes made to classroom practice and wider school policy as laying the groundwork for improved outcomes, with the expectation that benefits for learners would become more visible over time.

Two schools, however, were able to point to some examples of early outcomes. In one school where a follow-up interview took place in May 2026, a leader described the introduction of a Poverty Proofing Ambassador programme, in which 4 learners were trained through a structured 6-week programme with CNE, covering practical skills such as planning, meeting organisation, and developing pupil-led initiatives. The learners have since taken on initiatives independently, including setting up a community cupboard, fundraising, and approaching external organisations for support.

“They [Poverty Proofing Ambassadors] minuted their own meetings and have only involved me in the strategic decisions around what they'd like to do and how we move forward. [...] They're also in the process of presenting a plan to the local authority to bid for funding for the community cupboard. The involvement of the poverty proofing ambassadors has really elevated pupil participation, and the impact has been genuine.” (School leader)

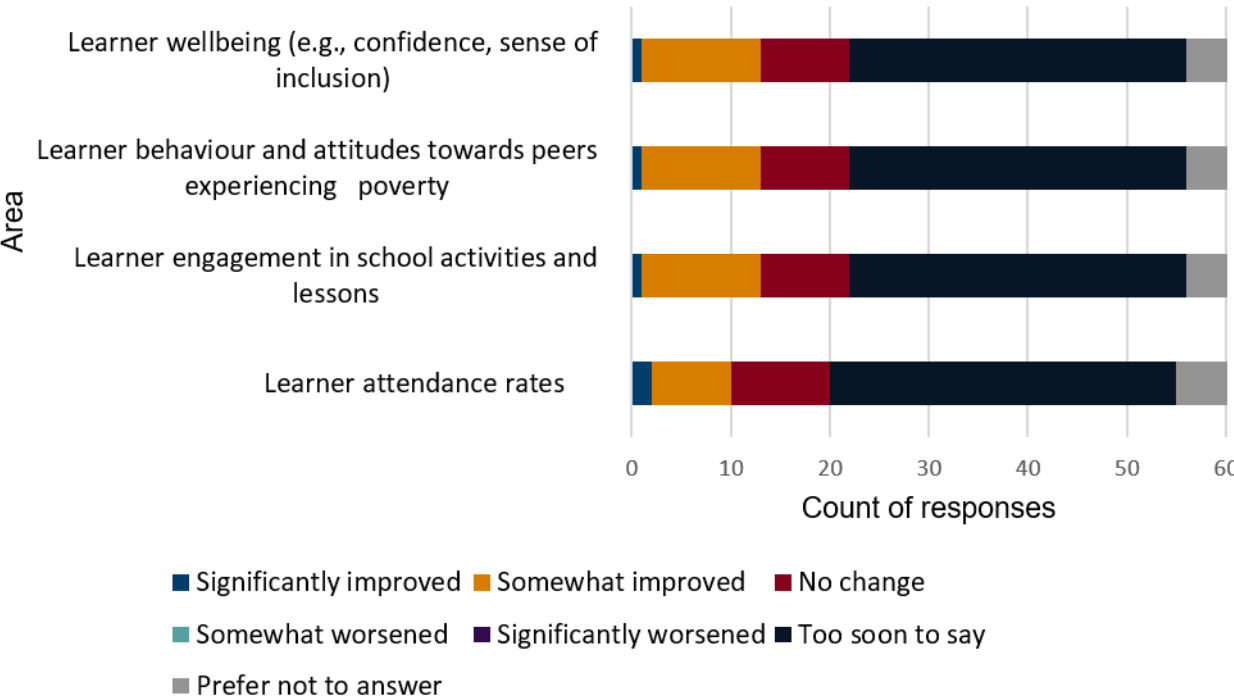
In another school, early trends in attendance and attainment were highlighted as encouraging. Overall attendance had improved, with eFSM learners improving at a greater rate, narrowing the gap between eFSM and non-eFSM learners. While the leader of this school noted that a direct causal link to the programme could not yet be established, these were described as promising early signs consistent with the broader shift in school strategy.

“What we have seen this year - and I'm not sure we can directly attribute it to the poverty proofing work - is a significant improvement in attendance for eFSM learners. Our whole-school attendance improved by 2.8%, but our free school meal attendance improved by over 5%, which did narrow the gap. There is still a gap, but it is closing. And despite being the most deprived school in terms of eFSM, our attendance is now above the local authority average.” (School leader)

Evidence from the survey suggests that the impact on learners is still emerging. On the questions related to the programme's outcomes for learners (Figure 17, below), only a minority reported improvements in wellbeing (n=13; 22%), behaviour and attitude (n=13; 22%), engagement in school activities and lessons (n=13; 22%), and attendance rates (n=10; 16%). Across these statements, more than half of the school personnel surveyed indicated it was “too soon to tell.”

Figure 17: Poverty Proofing – Learner Outcomes: (n=61 - respondents from schools involved in Poverty Proofing)

Question: For each of the following areas, please indicate how things have changed for learners since the programme began.



Description of Figure 17: Stacked bar chart showing responses from the Poverty Proofing survey (n=61) on perceived learner outcomes. Across all areas (learner wellbeing, behaviour, and attitudes towards peers experiencing poverty, engagement in school activities and lessons, and attendance rates), the most common response was ‘too soon to say,’ followed by ‘somewhat improved’ and ‘no change.’ Smaller proportions selected ‘prefer not to answer’ and ‘significantly improved.’

4.2.5 Unintended consequences and moderating factors

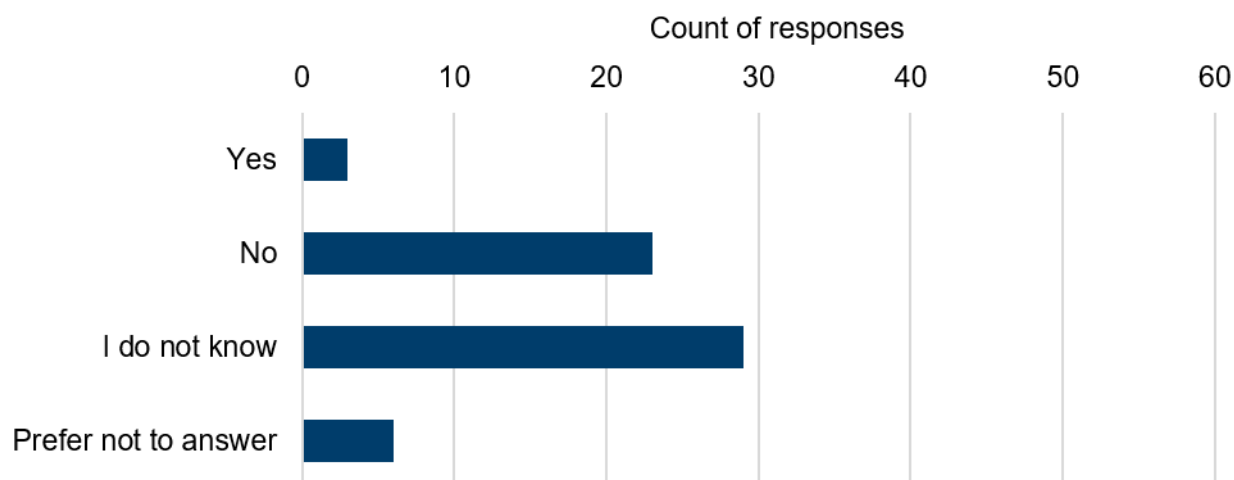
Unintended consequences were not a prominent theme in either the qualitative engagement or the survey. It is worth noting, however, that a significant proportion of survey respondents were unable to say whether any unintended consequences had taken place.

In the survey question asking about any unintended consequences of Poverty Proofing (

Figure 18, below), around half of respondents reported not knowing (n=23; 48%), while approximately a third indicated that there were none (n=23; 38%). Among the small minority who did report unintended consequences (n=3; 4%), the issues raised related to external trips where some costs still had to be met, a perception that school activities had become more limited in order to avoid placing financial pressure on families, and that those living just above the FSM criteria will get less support because they are difficult to identify.

Figure 18: Unintended consequences of Poverty Proofing
(n=61 - respondents from schools involved in Poverty Proofing)

Question: Have you noticed any unintended consequences of Poverty Proofing (e.g., students feeling singled out, or certain support programs unintentionally creating barriers to participation)?



Description of Figure 18: Bar chart showing responses from the Poverty Proofing survey (n=61) on unintended consequences of the programme. The most common response was 'I don't know,' followed by 'no.' A small minority reported 'prefer not to answer' and 'yes.'

School personnel surveyed identified a range of factors that act as barriers to the impact of Poverty Proofing within school settings. When asked about challenges that remain unaddressed, respondents highlighted several concerns in open text responses.

The most commonly noted challenge is related to budgetary constraints. Respondents observed that schools operate within strict financial limits, making certain changes difficult to implement. Some expressed concern about deficits and the potential impact on staffing if costs previously covered by parents/carers were no longer expected.

Respondents also highlighted challenges around engaging different groups, noting that securing the buy-in of all staff and maintaining consistent parental engagement remained difficult. The need to support parents/carers with household budgeting, alongside changes to school practice, was also mentioned.

Finally, the broader cost of living was identified as a constraint that schools can only partially address, with expenses related to uniforms and food in particular remaining difficult to reduce regardless of school-level efforts.

4.2.6 Additional support needed

Lastly, school personnel engaged qualitatively pointed to a number of areas where additional support would help sustain the impact of Poverty Proofing.

Funding emerged as a key concern. School leaders noted that ongoing financial resources are essential to maintain Poverty Proofing practices, with schools actively seeking external grants to cover enrichment activities and ensure eFSM learners can access the same opportunities as their peers.

Continued engagement with the CNE network was also seen as important for maintaining long-term consistency and improvement. A school leader, for example, emphasised that poverty cannot be addressed by schools alone, and that genuine and sustained change requires collaboration across clusters, multiple agencies, and alignment at a national level.

Finally, school staff identified a need for clearer access to information, guidance, and practical examples to support staff in developing their practice. This included clearer action plans and policies, learning from case studies in areas such as uniform provision, and greater sharing of locally rooted examples from schools operating in similar socio-economic contexts.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

5.1 Conclusions

5.1.1 Attainment Champions evaluation conclusions

Findings from the Attainment Champions strand provide insight into how participating school leaders experienced the programme and what they felt it had made possible in their schools. However, given that the evidence draws largely on participants' own reflections gathered after the programme had concluded, the findings are best understood as accounts of implementation and perceived outcomes rather than definitive proof of impact.

Participating schools operated in highly varied contexts, with differences in size, demographics, and levels of socioeconomic deprivation shaping their priorities and approaches. Most serve communities experiencing high levels of socioeconomic deprivation, reflected in above-average eFSM and additional barriers to learning like learner transience and continuous movement or linguistic differences.

Participants joined the programme for 2 main reasons. Mentors were primarily motivated by professional credibility and the opportunity to share their experience and expertise with other schools. Mentees were more often influenced by financial support, which allowed them to fund initiatives for eFSM learners and create time to focus on strategic planning.

Initially, most participants saw the programme as an opportunity for collaboration, enabling them to connect with colleagues across Wales and learn from different contexts. Beyond this, very few had specific expectations about how the programme would work or which aspects of poverty-related barriers it would address, with many taking an agnostic stance to learning from the experience.

By the end of the programme, most of the participants reported developing a deeper understanding of systemic barriers and challenges beyond their control (e.g., shared living spaces, lack of parental support). They also noted the difficulty of sustaining initiatives without the funding and of making innovative practices from other partnerships more widely known.

Networked learning was highly valued, with relationships evolving from a mentor-mentee model to more equal partnerships, allowing collaborative reflection and knowledge sharing. The dedicated time and support were perceived as highly beneficial, providing space for schools to focus on priorities and explore new ideas, and were highlighted to be strengthened by participants' belief in the high calibre and professionalism of the leaders involved. However, some challenges were noted, such as travel demands, challenges in communication, and disruptions due to external pressures such as school inspections.

Action plans were developed primarily through evidence and analysis. This involved consulting existing data, engaging with their school community, or both. Plans often began with school visits and baseline surveys of learners, staff, and sometimes parents/carers. Some partnerships used structured tools, such as AI modelling of deprivation data or risk

analysis methods, to guide decisions and allocate resources. Learners were also described as being involved to a considerable degree, providing input through surveys, discussions, and observations. School leaders informed the research team that learner perspectives sometimes influenced key decisions, such as introducing outdoor learning or adjusting routines to better support wellbeing and disadvantaged learners.

A challenge emerged in determining direct and measurable outcomes of the pilot. This was attributed either to the fact that the interventions were not designed for quantitative measurement or because it was too early to assess their full impact. As a result, the evidence gathered is strongest at the level of activities and immediate perceptions of change, for example, in relation to collaboration, reflection, and early changes to school practice, but considerably weaker at the level of intermediate and longer-term outcomes set out in the ToC. Despite this, participants expressed confidence that the programme had produced positive effects on learners, staff, and wider school policies.

For learners, the most frequently noted perceived impact was increased engagement. Involvement in initiatives gave learners a sense of ownership and a deeper understanding of poverty and its effects. Some participants also observed improved attendance, wellbeing, and motivation, with a few linking mentoring approaches to gains in attainment. No unintended consequences were reported, though in one case, entrenched challenges persisted.

Among staff, participants felt that the pilot raised awareness of poverty and its effects, sometimes leading to more responsive teaching and greater confidence in supporting learners. In schools where these principles were already established, limited change was observed. At a school level, the pilot was seen to have influenced policies and practices, including initiatives to support health, create community resources like food pantries, and target support to disadvantaged learners. Parental involvement was minimal and recognised by the participants as an area for future work.

Most participants were confident that the impacts of the pilot would extend beyond its lifecycle, with a few reporting that its discontinuation could limit the sustainability of these efforts. Perceived long-lasting outcomes varied. Some reported that schools had become more responsive to learners' needs and more aware of broader social influences on education. Initiatives such as outdoor and experiential learning were expected to continue, supported by staff confidence in assessing learner progress beyond traditional methods. In other settings, care for eFSM learners became a formalised responsibility, supported by designated staff and structured governance through a new Parent-Teacher Association. Some participants expected to continue using tools and approaches developed through the pilot and to maintain collaborations with local health services to support families and community wellbeing.

Participants saw potential for scaling Attainment Champions approaches across Wales, while recognising that strategies may need to adapt to local contexts. Suggested approaches included formal frameworks for PDG use, structured PTA involvement, developed tools, national toolkits of proven strategies, and online networks to support collaboration among school leaders.

Simple, low-cost practices, such as reducing stigma for learners experiencing poverty and promoting accessibility, were also considered widely adoptable. Participants mentioned that broader systemic support, including family, community, and social services, is essential for interventions to succeed, and that engaging learners, parents/carers, and communities is important for developing effective responses to poverty.

5.1.2 Poverty Proofing evaluation conclusions

Findings from the Poverty Proofing strand provide insight into how the programme was received and implemented across participating schools, and participants' early perceptions of its effects. Schools serving high-poverty communities joined the programme to strengthen existing practice, and while implementation experiences varied across phases.

Recommendations were broadly welcomed as reinforcing known priorities, though early-stage action plans meant it was too soon to assess impact. Across both survey and qualitative evidence, a consistent finding was that it remained too early to assess outcomes with confidence. Where early effects were noted, these related mainly to staff awareness, school processes, and the introduction or refinement of practical support measures, with evidence of change for learners and families more limited at this stage.

Participating schools served communities with significant poverty-related challenges, with FSM eligibility rates used as the primary indicator. Common barriers to participation in school life included transport costs, uniform expenses, and the costs of trips and curriculum activities, with geographic dispersion amplifying these challenges in rural settings. Stigma associated with poverty, and its effects on pupil confidence, resilience, and aspiration were also noted concerns.

Schools joined the programme primarily because it aligned with existing priorities and things they were trying to fix. Motivations included a desire to review and strengthen current practices, aiming to build a more structured approach to known challenges.

Implementation experiences were mixed across programme phases:

- pre-audit: schools with early access to the programme reported clear expectations from the outset, while those joining later described initial uncertainty about requirements and workload
 - the pre-audit data collection phase was broadly seen as manageable, helping schools build a clearer picture of their environment, though more granular requests proved challenging where data did not exist in the required form.
- training: training delivered through the Train the Trainer workshops was positively received, with exercises helping staff engage more actively with the financial realities of poverty
- audit: the audit phase received mixed feedback
 - while it was valued for the structured reflection it enabled for staff and learners, it was also described as demanding, with time requirements, coordination burden, and tight timelines posing practical difficulties
 - some school leaders noted that a lighter touch approach would be more preferable

- engaging parents/carers emerged as the most challenging element, while learners were considered the most accessible group.
- recommendations: recommendations from CNE were broadly welcomed and seen as reinforcing existing priorities rather than introducing entirely new directions
 - the most commonly cited areas were uniform costs, food provision, and trip planning
 - some recommendations were acknowledged as sensible in principle but difficult to act on where decisions were governed by external bodies, such as local authorities controlling school catering
 - action plans were still at an early stage of implementation at the time of engagement

A recurring view across qualitative and survey engagement was that it was too soon to assess the outcomes of the programme with confidence. Where perceived impacts were reported, these were most consistently directed to school staff and at the level of wider school policy impact.

- staff impact: the evaluation team was informed that staff developed a shared understanding and common language around poverty proofing, and some leaders reported a cultural shift and a sense of accountability, in which poverty considerations became a more regular feature of staff discussions and decision-making
- whole school impact: structural changes included the introduction of uniform hubs, revised trip communication practices, more flexible payment arrangements, and, in some cases, increased safeguarding awareness
- parental/learner impact: impacts on parents/carers and learners were less evidenced at this stage, with the majority of respondents indicating it was too early to draw conclusions

Sustaining the outcomes associated with Poverty Proofing was seen as contingent on continued funding, ongoing engagement with the CNE network, and access to practical tools. Regarding moderating factors, school personnel emphasised that poverty cannot be addressed by schools alone, and that genuine and lasting change requires collaboration across clusters, agencies, and national systems.

The findings also raise a question worth exploring as the programme scales up: whether it delivers the greatest added value in schools where awareness of poverty-related issues is less developed. Some school leaders described Poverty Proofing as reinforcing existing knowledge rather than introducing new perspectives, suggesting that its impact may differ depending on how advanced a school's current practice already is. Further evidence would be needed to examine this more rigorously.

Finally, an internal lesson learned from the first phase is that the pace and progress of programme delivery can influence evaluation activities, particularly in school settings where time is limited, and research fatigue is a real concern. We have factored this learning directly into the design of our evaluation approach for Phase 2, ensuring that data collection activities are aligned with planned programme activities to reduce burden on participants and facilitate greater engagement.

5.1.3 Unmet objectives

Several objectives were not fully met within this evaluation due to the evolving scope and challenges of the research, relating mainly to the overall level of engagement achieved across the 2 programmes. The objective to examine contexts and mechanisms shaping programme implementation was not fully achieved because the Attainment Champions strand operated as a retrospective evaluation, limiting opportunities to explore implementation processes and mechanisms in real time, while the Poverty Proofing strand involved very limited engagement during the evaluation period. As a result, the evaluation was unable to comprehensively assess how contextual factors shaped implementation and outcomes across settings.

Similarly, the objective to examine the impact of Poverty Proofing's model in reducing cost-related, structural, institutional, cultural, and attitudinal barriers to education for learners from low-income households was not fully met. The timing and depth of engagement constrained the ability to assess longer-term changes in practice or learner experience. Given the relatively early stage of engagement with participating schools, it was too soon for meaningful or measurable impacts to have emerged.

Finally, the objective to produce an overarching comparative analysis of the 2 models and their contribution to educational equity was not fully realised. This was largely due to the differences in programme stage, available evidence, and levels of engagement described above, which limited the extent to which robust cross-programme comparisons and strategic conclusions could be drawn.

5.2 Attainment Champions recommendations

The following recommendations are based exclusively on the findings from the evaluation of the Attainment Champions Programme. Due to insufficient data, it was not possible to provide robust recommendations drawn from Poverty Proofing at this stage.

Recommendations pertaining to it will therefore be formulated in the evaluation of the extension of the Poverty Proofing, discussed more thoroughly in the next chapter.

Recommendation 1:

Embed monitoring and evaluation structures from programme outset.

Future Welsh Government pilots and programmes should include in-built monitoring and evaluation frameworks from the outset. These should clearly define intended outcomes, success indicators, and timelines for assessing progress.

The pilot demonstrated valuable learning; however, the absence of systematic monitoring limited the ability to track implementation and evidence impact. Establishing a consistent approach would support both accountability and learning across participating schools and more widely.

Such systems should also ensure that good practice and emerging insights are captured and shared more widely, enabling continuous improvement throughout the programme's lifecycle and enabling opportunities for wider learning, input, and adoption of effective innovations.

At the same time, schools and local partners should retain the freedom to implement approaches that reflect their specific contexts and priorities. Innovation and adaptation should be encouraged and welcomed, provided they are guided by a clear plan that sets out the evidence and rationale for proposed activities, and how they are expected to contribute to meaningful change.

Recommendation 2:

Continue to encourage collaboration opportunities across schools.

Future initiatives should explore further opportunities for collaboration between schools with differing characteristics, such as those in different local authorities, school types, or levels of challenge.

The collaborative, triad-based model worked effectively, and the Wales-wide component was especially beneficial, allowing school leaders to learn from others and to gain a broader understanding of how poverty affects learners across diverse contexts. However, the time required to travel between different parts of the country must be considered in relation to resourcing for participating schools.

Building on this success, the Welsh Government could strengthen collaboration by facilitating national or regional networks, promoting joint professional learning, and creating mechanisms for ongoing dissemination of effective practice.

Recommendation 3:

Apply lessons to improve programme design and sustainability.

Attainment Champions' combination of autonomy and collaboration appeared to be valuable to participants. Leaders appreciated the flexibility and resources (time and budget) to allow them to select activities independently. All schools incorporated learner voice in their work and reported positive effects on learners and school practice. These elements should be emphasised in future initiatives.

It is also important to ensure sufficient time for schools to engage, implement, and reflect on learning. Attainment Champions was a short pilot, especially for schools joining only in its second year, and there was limited time to embed practices or observe outcomes. Clear planning for each stage of the programme, from recruitment and delivery through to review, would help maximise its long-term value.

The Welsh Government could play a stronger coordinating role in maintaining continuity, for instance by ensuring planned policy roundtables take place and that key stakeholders remain engaged despite changes in personnel or priorities.

Recommendation 4:**Promote inclusion and support for all schools and leaders to participate in Welsh Government initiatives.**

While participating leaders were highly motivated to tackle poverty-related issues, school capacity and workload pressures remain significant barriers. Initiatives that depend on the commitment of a single individual are less sustainable than those designed to embed a whole-school approach.

Future initiatives should take account of workload and resource constraints, ensuring sufficient funding to enable staff participation and leadership cover, and promote distributed leadership models to share responsibility and build resilience.

Additionally, consideration should be given to ensuring schools facing additional challenges are not excluded. In this pilot, one school withdrew after entering special measures. Future programmes should explore ways to offer enhanced support to schools in difficulty, working alongside Estyn and local authorities so that innovation and improvement efforts are recognised and reinforced.

Recommendation 5:**Develop connections between wider Welsh Government initiatives.**

Finally, this model of collaboration could be linked with other national programmes, such as Poverty Proofing or Community Focused Schools. While autonomy and innovation were valued elements of this pilot, aligning efforts and creating opportunities for shared learning and support can help maximise impact and reduce duplication. Cross-initiative networks could allow school leaders to access tested ideas and adapt them to their own contexts, if capacity is limited to designing and evaluating new and innovative projects.

6. Next steps

The Poverty Proofing pilot has been granted an extension through the 2026–2027 academic year, expanding the programme to four additional clusters across Wales. Alma Economics has been commissioned to evaluate this extension phase. The evaluation will build on the research questions established during the first phase, covering both process and impacts. This approach aims to address some of the limitations encountered in the first phase of the evaluation, including the need for earlier engagement with schools, more structured participation expectations, and fuller inclusion of learner and parental voice. The expanded scope will also reflect the broader range of school contexts involved, including special schools, and will also incorporate learner and parental voice.

Alma Economics will shadow Children North East throughout delivery across all 4 clusters, combining observation of planned activities with a range of primary research methods, including a short feedback survey, interviews, and focus groups with school staff, parents, and learners, as well as follow-up engagement to track implementation over time. A key feature of this phase is the formal requirement for schools to participate in the evaluation as a condition of engagement, which is expected to support more consistent data collection across clusters. Engagement with the pilot's extension to date has been positive, with schools showing willingness to participate. We look forward to producing evidence that can inform understanding of how poverty affects education in Wales and support ongoing work to address its impacts.

Annex A: Detailed research objectives and methodology

Research objectives

The section below presents the original research objectives for both evaluations, the amendments made during implementation, and the rationale behind them.

Original project aims and objectives

Alma Economics was commissioned by the Welsh Government to conduct process and early impact evaluations of the Attainment Champions and Poverty Proofing pilot programmes. Both evaluations explored the experiences of school leadership teams (SLTs) and school staff to assess how each programme addresses poverty-related barriers to education in Wales.

More specifically, the research aimed to:

- evaluate the effectiveness of the attainment champion and poverty proofing pilot programmes in addressing poverty-related barriers to education and understanding the distinct contributions of each programme
- evaluate how practical, adaptable, and scalable each model is, with particular attention to how well they align with the broader policy goals and commitments of the Welsh government
- applying a realist evaluation approach to explore what works, for whom, in what contexts, and why
- identifying the contexts in which each intervention proves most effective
- deliver an overarching analysis of both models to highlight their key strengths, limitations, and the insights gained, offering evidence-based guidance for shaping future policy development

Amendments to the research design and scope

During implementation, however, both the objectives described above, and the methodology underwent significant revision, which was discussed and agreed with the Welsh Government. These changes were driven primarily by 2 factors.

- the first involved material changes to programme delivery, including adjustments to the design and roll-out of both programmes
 - this was particularly significant in the case of Attainment Champions, where the programme concluded earlier than planned, and the delivery partner (NAEL) ceased operations
 - as a result, the Attainment Champions evaluation shifted from its original design towards a retrospective evaluation, focusing primarily on perceived impacts and participant reflections

- the second concerned fieldwork constraints that emerged during the research process, including challenges related to recruitment, timing, and school engagement, which limited the feasibility of certain planned activities
 - these constraints had significant implications for the Poverty Proofing evaluation, necessitating the evaluation to accommodate revised fieldwork activities and ensure sufficient coverage of participating schools
 - engagement limitations for both programmes are discussed in more detail in the methodology section

As a result of these developments, certain elements of the original evaluation design, particularly those associated with a fully embedded realist evaluation approach, were no longer feasible to implement as initially intended. In particular, outcomes data were not available, and realist evaluation relies on such data to examine what works, for whom, and in what contexts. The methodological approach was therefore adapted to prioritise feasibility while maintaining robustness and ensuring the findings remain policy-relevant. The following 2 subsections outline the amended research objectives of each evaluation.

Methodology

A detailed description of each phase and its associated activities is provided below.

Phase 1: Initial data collection and analysis

Desk-based review

The project started by reviewing the available evidence around both programmes to enhance the research team's understanding of the policy context, ground the development of research materials, and identify additional topics to address through this research.

- for Attainment Champions, the desk-based review examined NAEL's Phase 1 and 2 evaluations of the programme, along with feedback collated from Attainment Champions events, to provide an overview of the programme's objectives, partnership dynamics, implementation, and perceived impact
 - this informed the drafting of a Theory of Change (ToC) for the Attainment Champions programme, discussed briefly in the Attainment Champions finding section and provided in greater detail in Annex B: Attainment Champions Theory of Change
- for Poverty Proofing, the review drew on a range of programme documentation, including the Poverty Proofing Award criteria, partnership agreements, school requirements, and audit questionnaires, alongside relevant literature on the implementation of the approach across the UK
 - the review continued throughout the evaluation, incorporating the thematic reports produced by Children North East as the pilot progressed.

While conducting the desk-based review, a stakeholder mapping exercise was conducted in parallel, where key stakeholders were identified to engage within the project.

Scoping interviews

To provide further context on both programmes, refine the research approach, and finalise the fieldwork tools, 4 scoping interviews were conducted with a total of 6 stakeholders. These included 3 Welsh Government officials involved across both programmes, one representative from NAEL for Attainment Champions, and 2 representatives from Children North East for Poverty Proofing.

Phase 2: Attainment champions evaluation activities

The research team attended an Attainment Champions event held in Cardiff in July 2025. The team facilitated a session including reflective exercises on successes, challenges, and learning, as well as a collaborative review of the Attainment Champions ToC.

The research team also conducted interviews with school leaders participating in the programme in September-October 2025. In total, 8 school leaders, 3 mentors, and 5 mentees across 5 partnerships were interviewed. Fieldwork took place in September 2025. Contact details were supplied by NAEL, and participants were approached by the research team from July 2025 onwards and informed about the research.

Discussions with participants covered a range of topics, including participants' initial motivations for joining the programme, their early expectations regarding how Attainment Champions would drive change, the development of action plans, and perceived outcomes for learners, school staff, and school policies. Views on scalability and recommendations for future initiatives were also explored. In addition, insights from an unpublished NAEL report were used to supplement gaps in coverage in partnerships where no participants were interviewed.

Findings from these activities informed an interim report submitted to the Welsh Government in October 2025. The Attainment Champions evaluation was subsequently concluded, with the remainder of the project focused on the Poverty Proofing evaluation.

Phase 3: Poverty Proofing evaluation activities

The Poverty Proofing evaluation involved 2 main strands: (i) a survey targeting school personnel in Poverty Proofing and other schools, and (ii) qualitative engagement through interviews and focus groups with SLT and school staff of Poverty Proofing-participating schools.

Survey administered in Poverty Proofing and control schools

The survey targeted school staff and senior leaders across both Poverty Proofing-participating and non-participating schools. Within participating schools, it was directed at staff both directly involved in delivering the programme and those with no involvement. Non-participating schools were intended to serve as a comparison group and were asked only a subset of questions relating to their perceptions of how poverty influences educational attainment.

The survey was distributed across all 42 schools participating in Poverty Proofing, alongside a set of 80 matched control schools selected on the basis of region, school size, and proportion of eFSM learners. The survey was distributed through 2 channels. For participating schools, it was sent by the research team to the cluster school lead contacts provided by CNE, who were asked to redistribute it within their clusters. For non-participating schools, the research team identified central school email addresses and distributed the survey directly, inviting headteachers and school staff to respond. By engaging with school staff both in Poverty Proofing-participating and control schools, the aim was to shed light on the following topics:

- perceptions and awareness of poverty-related barriers to educational attainment: views and understanding of how poverty affects student learning and opportunities
- involvement in initiatives aimed at reducing the impact of poverty on education, including Poverty Proofing
- experiences with the implementation of Poverty Proofing
- perceived early outcomes of Poverty Proofing for learners, staff, parents/carers, and the school community since the introduction of the programme

The survey was designed to take no more than 15 minutes to complete and was hosted on Microsoft Forms, with responses collected between September and October 2025. The survey was originally intended to be longitudinal, with a second wave planned for April to May 2026 to capture any changes in attitudes towards poverty over time and to assess differences between participating and control schools. However, low response rates overall and the absence of responses from control schools in particular meant a second wave was deemed unnecessary.

The survey was completed by 80 individuals from 23 schools, 22 of which were schools involved in Poverty Proofing (52% of Poverty Proofing participating schools), and only one response came from a control school (1.25% response rate), which was excluded from the sample, resulting in a total effective sample of $n=79$. These 21 schools were located across five Local Authorities: Caerphilly, Cardiff, Carmarthenshire, Rhondda Cynon Taf, and Wrexham. Most were Nursery, Infant, and Junior schools ($n = 14$), followed by Secondary schools (ages 11–16) ($n = 5$) and combined Infant & Junior schools ($n = 2$). In terms of language medium, 11 schools were English-medium, 4 were Welsh-medium, 4 were Dual Stream, one was Bilingual (Type B), and one was English-medium with significant use of Welsh. The average proportion of eFSM learners was 26%, with a range from 3% to 66%. The average school size was 393 pupils, with overall school size ranging from 21 to 1,543 learners.

Of the 79 respondents, 36 (43%) identified as teachers, 25 (30%) as headteachers, heads of setting, or other members of the senior leadership team, and 14 (17%) as teaching assistants, higher-level teaching assistants, or learning support assistants. Eight respondents (10%) reported other roles, including site manager, administrative staff, attendance officer, ALNCo, and safeguarding officer, while one respondent (1%) preferred not to say.

Using Pupil Level Annual School Census ([PLASC](#)) data, the research team was able to identify 21 of these schools' characteristics, including region, school type, language medium, percentage of eFSM learners, and total pupil numbers.

Prevalences in reporting survey results are reported using the following descriptive ranges:

- vast majority = more than 85% of respondents
- majority = 70% to 84%
- over half = 55 to 69%
- around half = 46 to 54%
- less than half/approximately a third = 30 to 45%
- minority = 15 to 29%
- small minority = below 15%

Qualitative Engagement with SLT and school staff participating in Poverty Proofing

Following the survey, qualitative engagement was undertaken with the aim of producing 6 case studies, one per learning community. Schools that served as the cluster leaders for each of the 6 Poverty Proofing clusters were selected to serve as the basis for each case study, with the intention to explore how Poverty Proofing was being implemented in practice, staff experiences of putting the programme into action, and any early outcomes observed.

Participants were recruited through an initial outreach by CNE, followed by direct engagement from the research team. Interviews with senior leadership were designed to last up to 45 minutes, and focus groups with school staff up to 60 minutes. All engagement was conducted online via Microsoft Teams.

In practice, capacity constraints and competing priorities limited the extent to which schools could engage with the evaluation. Data were therefore collected from only 2 of the 6 selected schools, and not all intended activities were completed in either case. In an attempt to maximise engagement, recruitment was expanded to include other schools participating in Poverty Proofing, which resulted in one additional SLT interview. Table 2, below, presents the expected versus actual engagement achieved across the case study schools.

As a result of this limited coverage, and following discussion with the Welsh Government, the case study approach was discontinued in January 2026. The data available was insufficient to support school-level case studies for any of the selected schools. Qualitative data collected through this strand of activity were therefore analysed thematically across all participating schools and are presented alongside survey findings as aggregated findings on implementation experiences and early outcomes.

Table 2 Planned versus actual engagement across case study schools

Sample	Planned engagement	Actual engagement
Case study 1	SLT interviews n<=3 School staff focus group n=1 Review of action plans n=1 Follow-up SLT interviews n=1 Follow-up school staff focus groups n=1	SLT interviews n=2 School staff focus group n=1
Case study 2-6	SLT interviews n<=3 School staff focus group n=1 Review of action plans n=1 Follow-up SLT interviews n=1 Follow-up school staff focus groups n=1	SLT interviews n=1 School staff focus group n=1 Follow-up SLT interviews n=1
Additional engagement	-	SLT interviews n=1

Analysis

Analysis was conducted separately for each programme.

- **Attainment Champions:** the analysis drew primarily on interview findings with school leaders, supplemented by evidence from the desk-based review and event discussions
 - all interviews with school leaders were analysed using thematic analysis, which involved identifying key themes within and across the information collated
 - given the diversity of programme activities arising from each school partnership's action plan, we also applied content analysis to document the activities, alongside drawing broader themes
 - the findings aim to shed light on the school leaders' perspectives on their motivation to participate, what worked well, and challenges encountered, the rationale behind choosing activities, and perceived impact on learners, school staff and the wider school
 - since it had been confirmed that the initiative would not continue, attention was paid to extracting lessons for future similar programmes
- **Poverty Proofing:** the analysis drew on survey data and qualitative engagement with SLTs and school staff
 - survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics, while data from interviews and focus groups were analysed thematically, identifying key themes within and across the material collected
 - both strands of analysis addressed similar topics, including feedback on Poverty Proofing activities and the overall experience of the programme, enablers and challenges, perceived usefulness of the approach, changes observed because of participation, and perceived impact on learners, parents/carers, and school staff

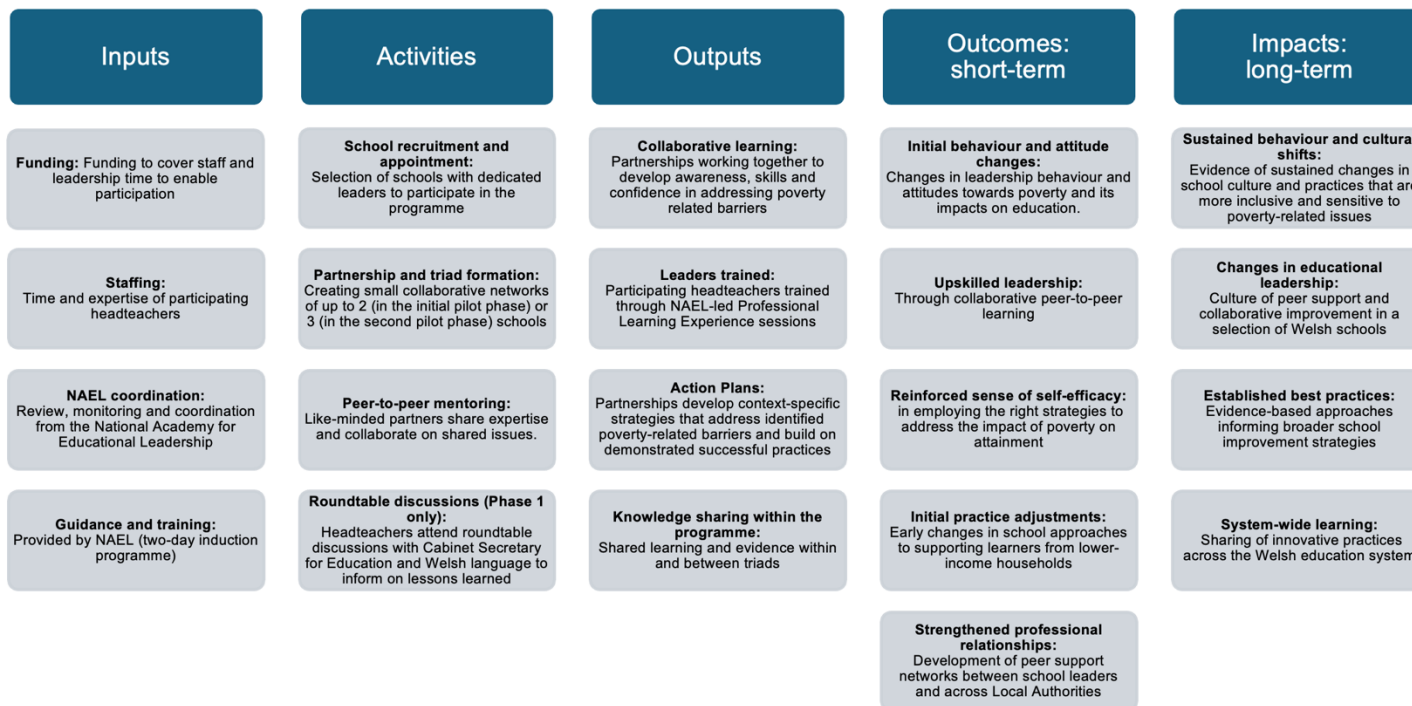
Annex B: Attainment Champions Theory of Change

Situation

- Persistent **attainment gap** between eFSM and non-eFSM learners
- Disproportionate eFSM representation in **attendance, behaviour, exclusions** data.
- Prevalence of **hidden disadvantage** also affecting many non-eFSM learners
- **Unequal access** to education due to cost, stigma.
- Variable/flawed **understanding in schools** of poverty-related barriers.
- Decline in **parent / learner engagement** with schools' post-COVID-19.
- **Opportunities** for shared learning between school leaders

Assumptions

- Peer-to-peer **relationships are positive**, and facilitate trust, openness, and critical reflection
- Partners have the **time and capacity** to fulfil their expected time commitment, and there is scope for this to be flexible
- Partners remain **motivated and committed** to the programme throughout the pilot period
- **Adequate funding** is provided to cover staff and leadership time to allow meetings to take place
- School leaders have the **autonomy to implement changes** in their school context, and support from other stakeholders to do so
- Peer-to-peer mentoring and partnership is an **effective method** to reduce unconscious teacher bias and stigmatising practices
- In the longer term, changes in leadership awareness and practice will translate into **improved experiences and outcomes** for disadvantaged learners



A Welsh education system where socio-economic background no longer predicts attainment, sustained by peer-led leadership networks that embed evidence-based, equity-focused practices across schools