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**OUR WORK**

**IN ENGLAND**



**Save the  
Children**



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**Lexie, 11, takes part in Wallsend Children's Community's Summer of Fun activities, which offered young people the chance to play with friends and prepare for the transition from primary to secondary school. (Photo: Kate Stanworth/Save the Children)**

# FOREWORD

**We want children in England to have the best possible start, without exception.**

Save the Children has been working in the UK for over 100 years, striving to make sure that children's rights remain a central priority for the country's decision-makers. Sadly, in 2023, child poverty is still a huge issue across England. The fall-out from the Covid-19 pandemic and the escalating cost-of-living crisis continue to bite deep for low-income families across the country.

Families with young children are more likely to live in poverty,<sup>1</sup> with severe consequences for children's early development and future prospects. Data released by the Department for Education in 2022 showed that just 49% of children eligible for free school meals – a sound indicator of poverty – achieved good levels of development when they started school.<sup>2</sup> Without early intervention and support, the gap between poorer children and their better-off classmates will only widen.

**Our mission is to secure a sustainable reduction in the number of children growing up in poverty and to narrow the early learning gap between children in poverty and their better-off peers.** There isn't one simple solution or single programme that will address this challenge. So, we are taking a different slant, looking to change policy and practice, being guided by our **listen, partner, evidence, influence** framework.

In England, we are taking a systems-change approach, working in and with communities across the country to understand the challenges they face and the opportunities for change. We're working together with children, families and professionals to test out new and innovative approaches to maximise local assets to support young children. This helps identify not just 'what works', but 'what works here'. It strengthens the links across a community, making it easier to embed changes. We can then use what we're learning with communities to influence national practice.

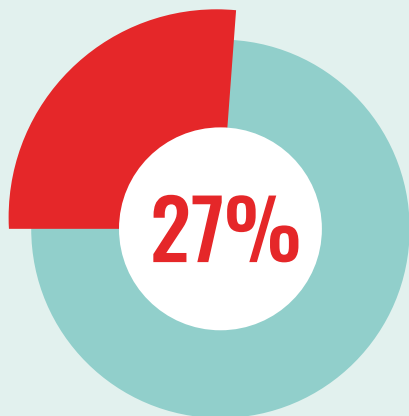
Our hope is that this empowering approach can support longer-term change. However, we are also aware of the acute financial hardship facing many families. That's why, since 2020, we've been getting supermarket and Argos vouchers to struggling families so they can buy the basics they need to support their growing children. We've also been providing early learning packs to stimulate growing minds, and giving parents techniques to help them play with their children in a way that accelerates their development.

The following pages provide an overview of what we're doing, what we're learning, and the changes we're seeing across England. We hope that the stories of the children, families, communities and partners that we are working with inspire you as much as they do us.

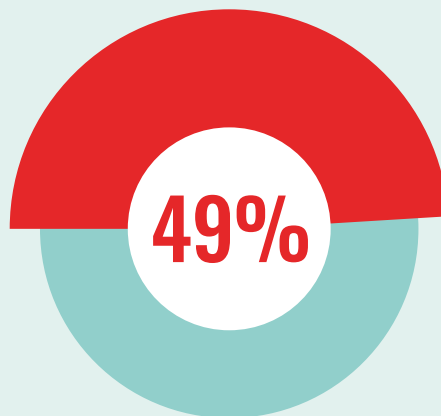
**Rachel Parkin**  
Head of North of England  
Save the Children UK

**Alice Faulkner**  
Head of South of England  
Save the Children UK

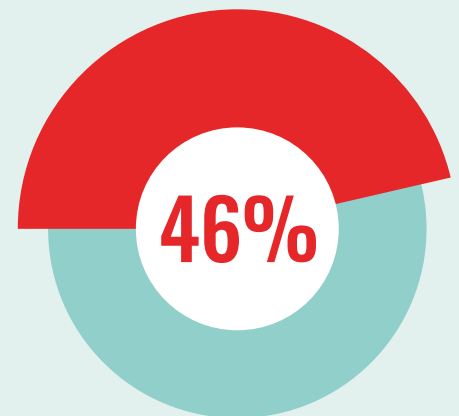
# THE NATIONAL CONTEXT<sup>3</sup>



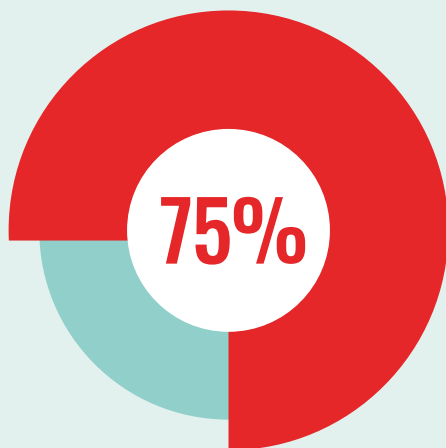
**There were 3.9 million children living in poverty in the UK in 2020-21.<sup>4</sup>**  
That's 27% of children, or eight in a classroom of 30.<sup>5</sup>



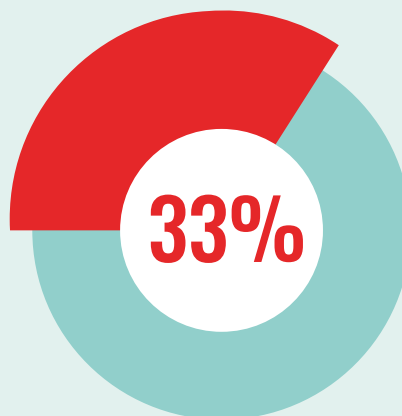
**49% of UK children living in lone-parent families are in poverty.<sup>6</sup>** Lone parents face a higher risk of poverty due to lower predicted household earnings and increased childcare costs.



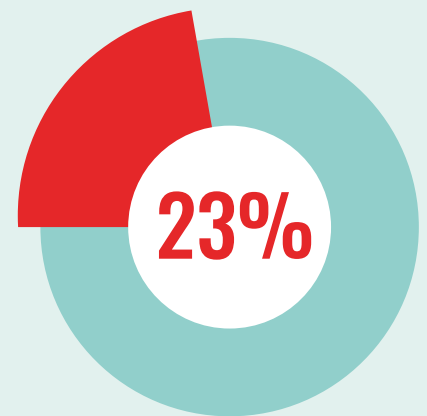
**Across the UK, children from black and minority ethnic (BAME) groups are more likely to live in poverty: 46% are now in poverty, compared with 26% of children in white British families.<sup>7</sup>**



**Work does not provide a guaranteed route out of poverty in the UK.**  
75% of children growing up in poverty live in a household where at least one person works.<sup>8</sup>



**33% of UK children living in poverty fall behind with their education.<sup>9</sup>**



**23% of children living in poverty in England miss expected levels of language development by age five.<sup>10</sup>**

# WHAT WE'RE DOING

**If it matters to children and families, it matters to us.** That's why we develop roots in local communities and seek to understand their needs. All our work rests on a commitment to empowering children and parents so they can confront the adversities they face.

Our approach is profoundly informed by those with the lived experience of deep-rooted, systemic challenges. Across England, we **listen** to what's happening in our communities, **partner** with key local institutions, gather **evidence** on what is and isn't working, and **influence** decision-makers by presenting our findings. We secure sustainable change not on behalf of, but rather alongside children and families.

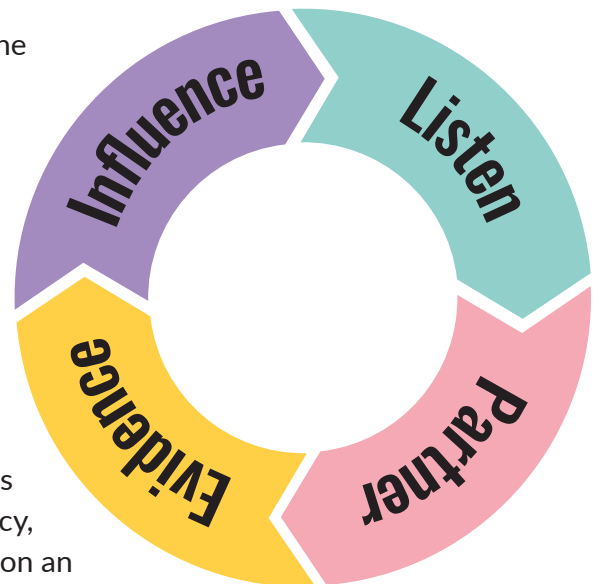
Crucially, we believe parents should be supported with services that enable their children to flourish. Such services should be designed to prevent problems at the earliest possible stage of childhood: in pregnancy, at birth, during the critical first 1,001 days of life and on an ongoing basis throughout childhood. The whole system, both locally and nationally, should be geared towards allowing children to thrive.

We provide families with vital, direct support, but our ultimate ambition is not just to improve the life chances of a handful of children in the places where we work.

We strive to **make every place in this country a truly great place to grow up** – a community with an effective, joined-up approach to enabling full and happy childhoods.

In England, our participatory principles allow us to test new approaches, discover solutions to longstanding problems, and bring people together to learn from each other. By acting as a **bridge between ideas and action**, we're able to help others make the intangibles tangible and identify the inherent roadblocks to a child reaching their full potential.

Stretching from North to South, our place-based approach emphasises the strength of our current and future partnerships, networks and connections. We are focused on developing evidence of our impact to co-create and push for change with and for families living in poverty across England.



## WHERE WE'RE WORKING IN ENGLAND





# LISTENING

**We believe a vital way to help children and families succeed** is by building **communities of supportive relationships**. That's why we actively seek out and facilitate open dialogue with children, families and local agencies so they can directly shape our priorities and tactics. By actively listening, we learn from parents' and partners' perspectives, and help them develop potential solutions in a process called **co-design**.

For example, in the initial aftermath of the pandemic, families in Margate found it difficult to transition back to their normal, pre-Covid lives. On top of this, the services and support on offer to parents were often disjointed. So, through our **Early Learning Community (ELC)**, we engaged with families to understand and come up with responses to the problems they were facing, particularly around mental health and psychosocial needs.

The ELC focuses on supporting families with children up to five years old through projects that address needs around **early childhood mental health, access to support, promoting play, increasing parental knowledge and reducing stress**. Through co-design workshops, we create space for parents to share their experiences, discuss service delivery gaps and explore potential fixes that will benefit the wider community.

In our Sheffield ELC, parents described how they felt alienated by local services. They expressed a need for greater **consistency and continuity, jargon-free communication** and **peer-to-peer support**. Together we set up a breakfast club that created space for mutual support. It acted as a 'one-stop shop' for parents keen to learn about the services available. Those who participated reported increased confidence and improvements in their mental health and family life.

Relationship-building takes time and commitment. The nurturing of reciprocity, equity, trust and empathy is critical to the deep and plentiful connections that define our work. Our **Children's Communities**, in Smallshaw-Hurst and Wallsend, are propelled by local voices – harnessing the power of community insight is essential in our mission to tackle the causes and effects of child poverty across England. Projects such as a pantry



**Willow, 3, with her mum Syrenna, at the nursery she attends in Sheffield.**  
Photo: Juanan Eguiguren/  
Save the Children



store in Smallshaw-Hurst, which has helped over 1,000 parents and children access healthy and nutritious food, are a result of the attentive conversations that are integral to our strategy for change.

It is only by making sure our work is **inclusive** and considers families' **diverse needs** that we will win for children. From helping parents create quality home environments for learning, to community support that sets children up for life, **sustainable transformation** is driven by the voices that matter most.

## What is co-design?

Learning and networking aren't an add on to the day job, they are the day job. We continuously work with families to **navigate complexity** and **pinpoint root causes**.

Our impact shows that open collaboration can achieve more than any organisation on its own – diverse and open communities offer an abundance of creativity and productivity that siloed projects and walled institutions can't. Through **co-design** we develop and test promising, sustainable interventions in communities, which help to inform effective policy or practice change.

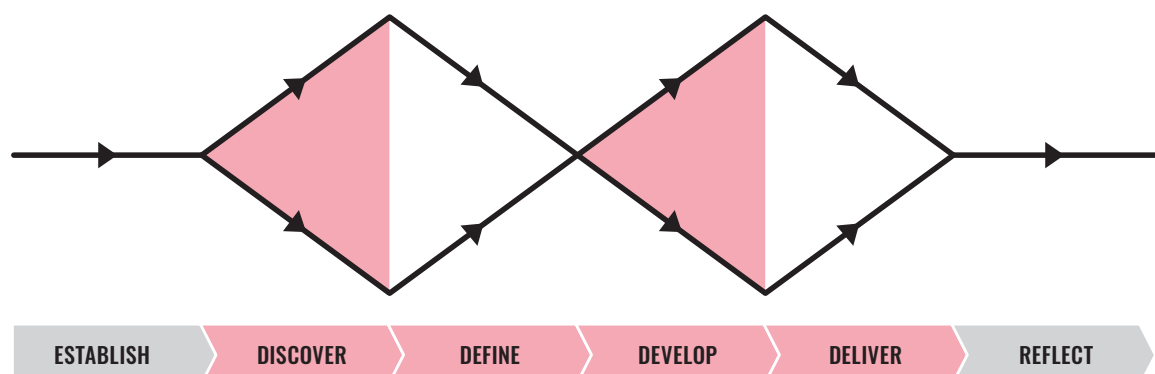
## How do we develop new ideas?

The **double diamond** model divides the project-design process into four distinct phases: **discover, define, develop and deliver**. The diamond shapes represent stages of divergent thinking (where many possible ideas are created) and convergent thinking (where concepts are refined and selected in order to choose the best ones).

The double diamond indicates that these processes happen at least twice: **once to identify the problem, and once to create the solution**. It's important to focus on the left diamond (discover, define) to identify the real problem that a project needs to solve.

The model represents a way of working where ideas are generated, selected, developed, tested and refined a number of times before formulating a solution.

### THE DOUBLE DIAMOND MODEL



# PARTNERING

**It's amazing what you can achieve when you don't care who gets the credit.**

We always aim to share our expertise and connections with others. We develop equitable relationships with allies and decision-makers, we cultivate **meaningful coalitions with partners**, and we help to ensure funding reaches the local projects that are making change happen.

Local partnerships have the potential to make a greater impact because they place resources closer to the children they aim to support. They also put more influence in the hands of those with a closer understanding of the experience of children in their communities.

For example, our **Early Learning Community** in Feltham brings together key people and organisations interested in building a collective strategy for **tackling the early learning gap** in their area. These partners include a range of institutions such as local authorities, schools and Sure Start centres. By working towards a shared goal, they synthesise ideas and create sustainable solutions to problems including poor mental health, frayed relationships with professionals and a lack of access to support. This work is called **systems change**.

The best local systems are those developed together with children and families – where their needs, dreams and aspirations are listened to right from the start. In collaboration with our partners, we need to make this approach the norm rather than the exception across England.

Children and families are integral members of our partnership networks – it is together that we build on strengths and create the opportunity for change. Since 2018 in Tower Hamlets, our Parent Power Project has seen us bring disparate parts of the system together by **convening local organisations, services and families**, and establishing the Parent Power Project Advisory Group. It has become a strong networking force, working with members and devising promising solutions to locally defined issues.

Since 2019, think tank [New Philanthropy Capital \(NPC\)](#) and social consultancy [Collaborate](#), using their respective expertise in evaluation and systems change, have been helping us to understand the progress made through our ELCs. Together we developed a [Systems Change Maturity Model](#) which captures ten conditions for long-term sustainable change. While we can't yet know the impact of meeting these conditions for individual families, they act as a barometer we can use to measure the success of our place-based work in the future.



Emrys, 2, plays at a Toy Library in Tower Hamlets, East London.  
Photo: Dan Dennison/Save the Children





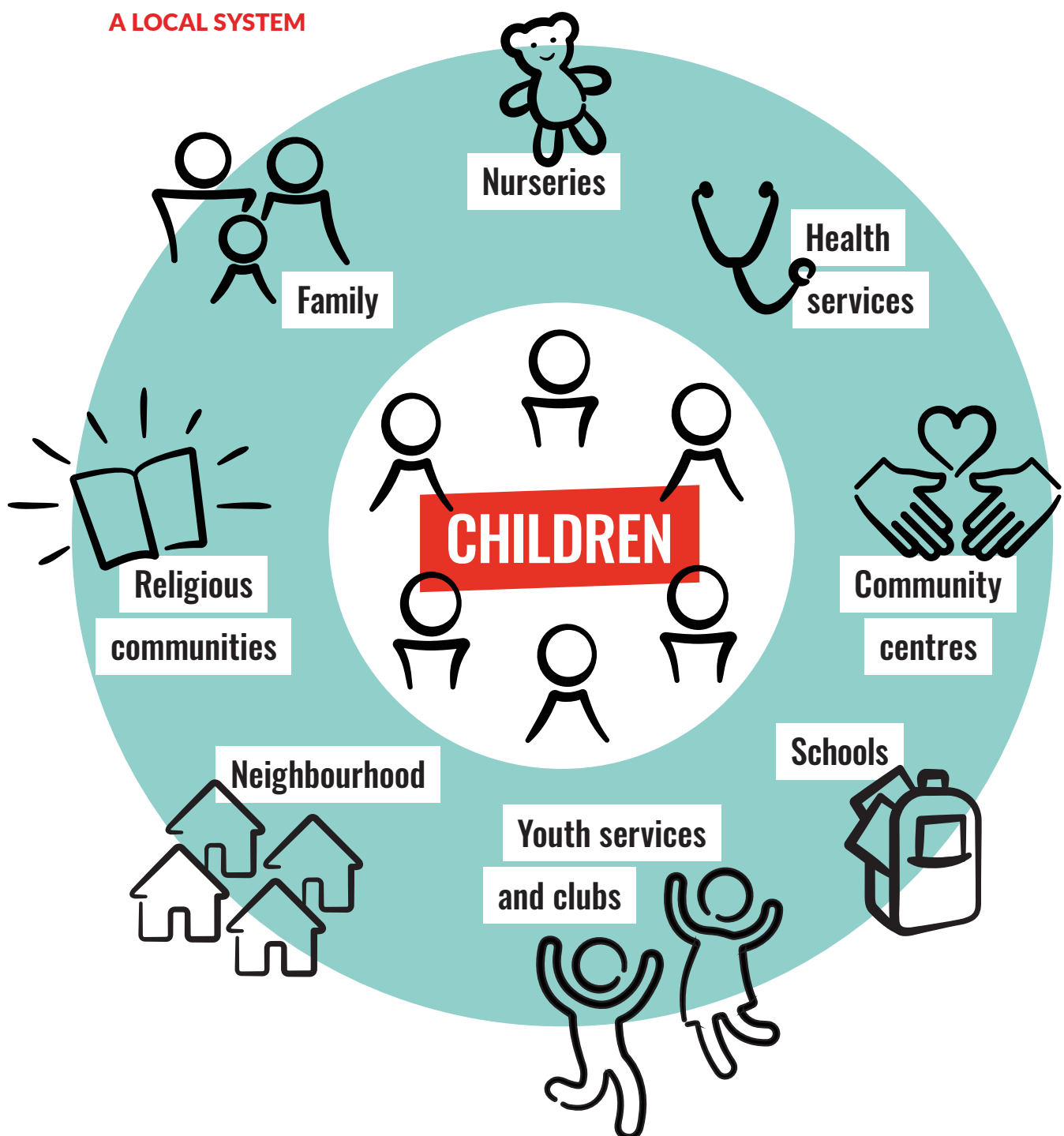
## What does a local system look like?

The place in which a child grows up is a **complex system**.

The system includes the individuals, opportunities, influences and challenges that a child encounters, all of which affect the outcome of a young person's life.

Systems change is about identifying the parts of the system that don't work, **developing solutions and hardwiring them into the local community**.

### A LOCAL SYSTEM



# EVIDENCING

**Across our work in England we gather and share evidence.** We bring together stories, statistics and strengths from across our communities – sharing what we learn to drive the change children and families need. We collect evidence directly from those with lived experience, local partners, organisations in our sector, and academia to help us understand the myriad ways **policy and practice shapes lives.**

By building strategic evidence we ensure that every innovation we pursue contributes to an outcome or change. For example, our Health Visiting Project in Tower Hamlets saw us work with an NHS partner to explore the impact of an additional health visit to address gaps in professional contact between a child's 12- and 24-month check. We collected data on the impact of the pilot and found that, in its initial phase, 11.4% of the children seen received onward referrals.<sup>14</sup> The findings not only shaped our discussions with local NHS officials but will inform broader research into early years health services across England.

Across 2022, we held a series of co-design sessions with families in Margate. Three key themes emerged: outdoor play, family wellbeing and access to support. Twelve projects – included play groups, arts projects, health-drop-ins and advice clinics – were subsequently commissioned to test new ideas. The data gleaned from these innovations will **help mould the approach of local services to meet the community's needs.** For example, over 90% of families who attended the art sessions said they'd helped them build their confidence, engage their child in creative activities, and connect more with local services and spaces.

In Manchester, we ran a [story-gathering project](#)<sup>16</sup> to create a picture of what it's like for families with children aged three and under – the challenges they face, and the gaps that need plugging. 'Our Story – Not Just a Mum' highlighted issues including isolation, low self-confidence, and a lack of summer activities and safe spaces to play. This way of working allows us to **expand our knowledge and understanding, help parents gain new skills and capabilities, and deepen our insight,** helping us develop evidence-based models.

**Robust evidence and learning drives change.** That's why, alongside our own evidence-gathering work, we also help partners improve their ability to collect robust data. Through better surveys and enhanced ways of seeking out family voices they can evolve their services in an informed and targeted way.



Brothers Harvey, 4, and Cooper, 5, look for bugs in the park after collecting a weekly activity pack provided by Smallshaw-Hurst Children's Community Summer of Fun 2021 programme. (Photo: Kate Stanworth/Save the Children)



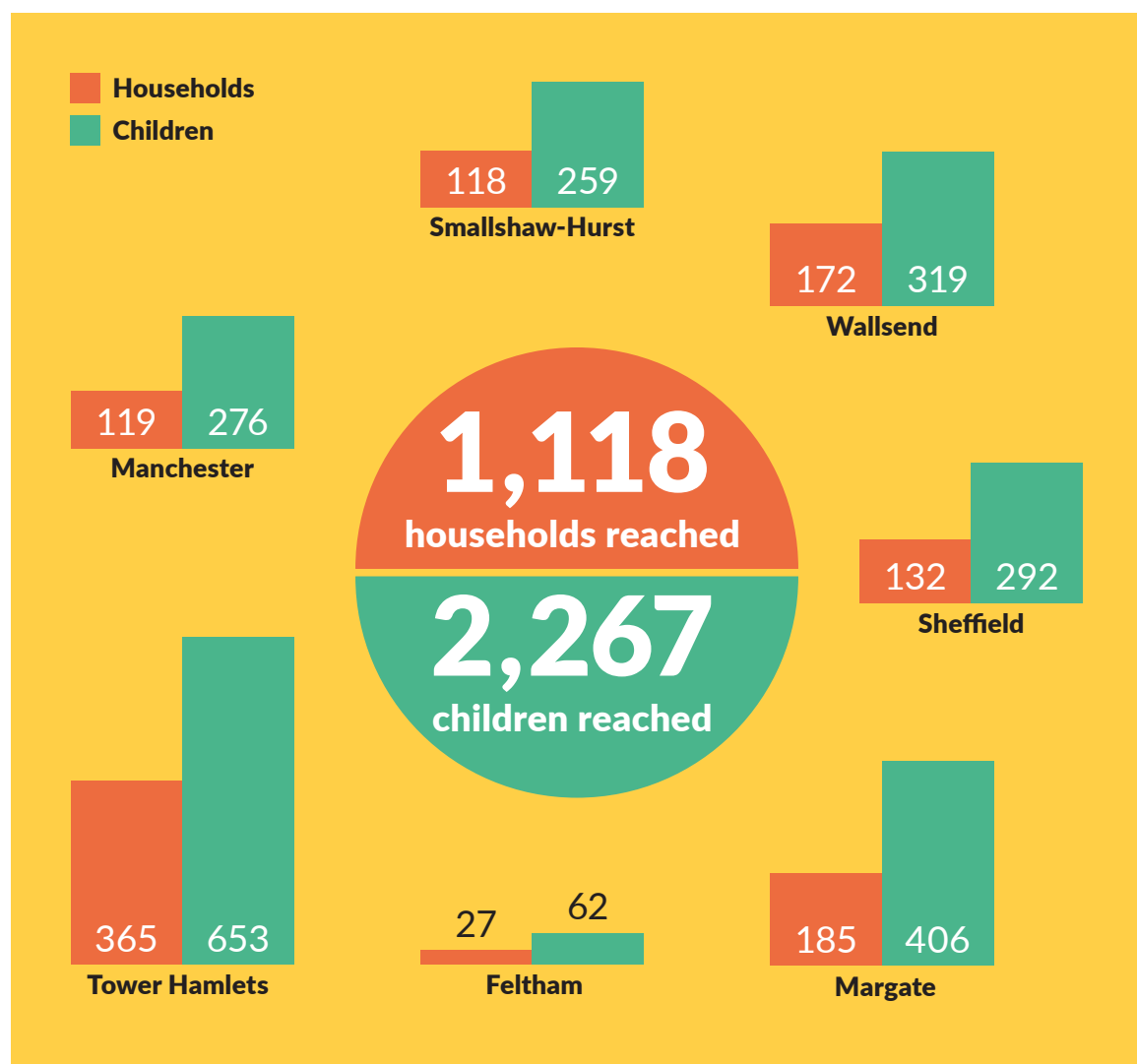
## Early Years Grants

Our Early Years Grants help families buy day-to-day essentials so they can meet their immediate needs. Amid the cost-of-living crisis, this support is more vital than ever and helps relieve the pressure on parents, so they're more able to engage in their children's early learning.

**The challenge each family faces will be different, which is why we have made our response flexible to meet their varying needs.** Families can choose the combination of products – from educational learning resources to food vouchers or household products – that are most useful for them.

We collect data on the characteristics of the families we've reached with an Early Years Grant. That way we can continuously adapt the programme to meet **immediate needs** and achieve the **greatest impact for children**.

### THE REACH OF OUR EARLY YEARS GRANT PROGRAMME<sup>17</sup>

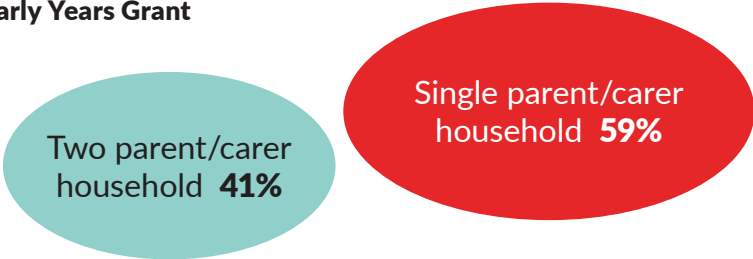




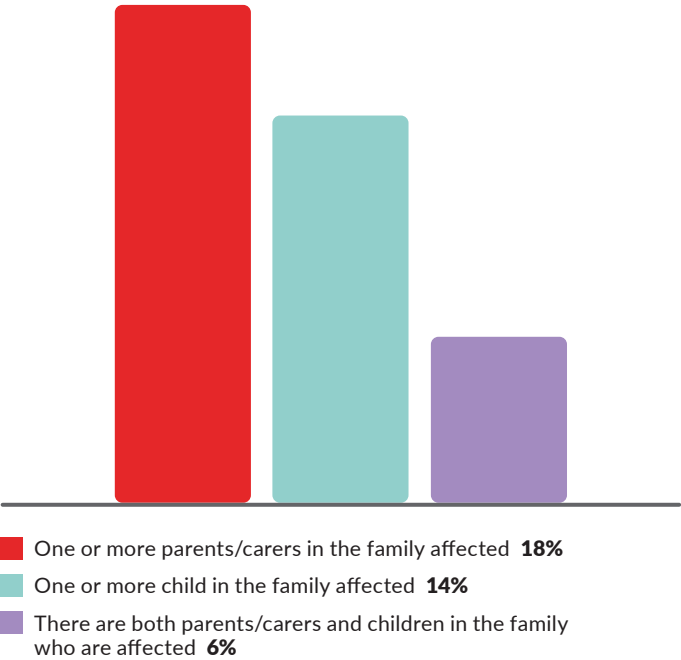


CHARACTERISTICS OF HOUSEHOLDS REACHED BY OUR EARLY YEARS GRANT PROGRAMME

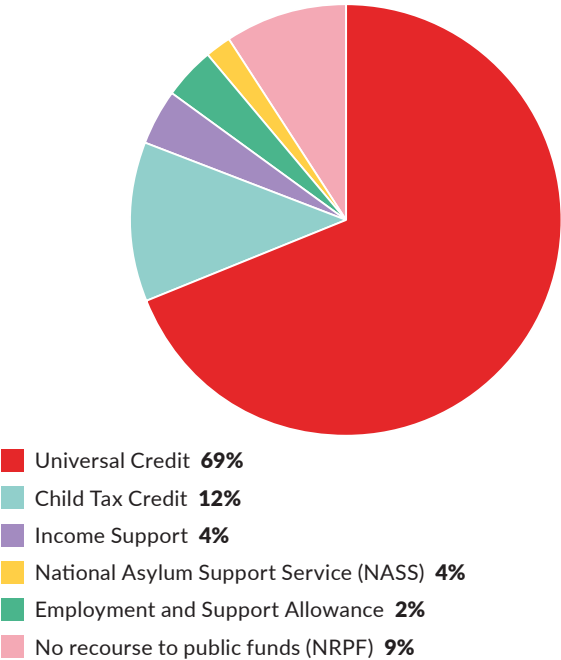
Households who received an Early Years Grant by family type



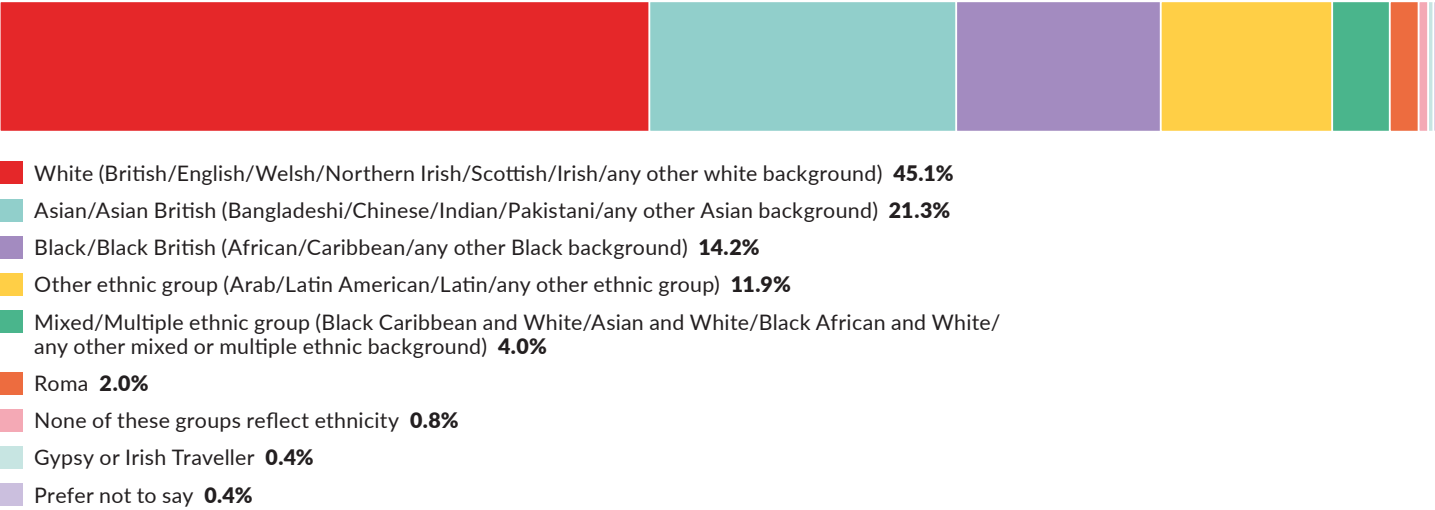
38% of households who received an Early Years Grant reported health problems or disabilities



Benefits received by/benefits status of households who received an Early Years Grant



Ethnicity of main applicant for households who received an Early Years Grant





**Campaigning is a big part of what we do** to achieve sustainable change. **We provide opportunities for children and their families to tell their stories to decision makers.** We help make sure governments support and invest in policies that help parents give their children the best start in life.

As part of our 2019 [Make Childcare Work](#)<sup>18</sup> campaign, we took a group of **parent campaigners** to Parliament to call for change to upfront childcare costs under Universal Credit. The 11 mums gave evidence to the Work and Pensions Committee on how the social security system doesn't always work for low-income families. They met ministers and MPs and handed a signed petition in at Downing Street.

**Some of our advocacy and influencing work is informed by evidence generated by our programmes.** For example, during the pandemic, we published a briefing that drew on the evidence collated through our Emergency Response Grant – the forerunner to our Early Years Grant programme. The briefing built on our key policy asks, including retaining the £20 Universal Credit uplift.

Our campaigning work also includes pushing for parents who can work to have decent, family-friendly, reliable jobs, so they can provide what their children need to grow up happy and healthy. At the end of 2022, working with the think tank IPPR, we published [Delivering a Childcare Guarantee](#).<sup>19</sup> The report set out how pledging free childcare for all families until their children reach the end of primary school would allow more women to get back into work and reduce the attainment gap between rich and poor children in their early years. **We found that free preschool childcare, teamed with more funding for after-school clubs, could increase government tax revenues and save a family with young children between £620 and £6,175 a year.** We directly briefed decision-makers on our recommendations and secured endorsement from the shadow frontbench.

It is clear to us that there is no route to sustainable change without the involvement of people who experience the realities of poverty and inequality every day. The strength of their stories, the depth of their insight, and the ingenuity of their ideas is such that **our commitment to providing children and families with a platform to use their voice on issues that matter to them most is fundamental to our work in England.**



Rhianna holds her six-month-old daughter Kya during a parent workshop in Sheffield. (Photo: Juanan Eguiguren/Save the Children)



Taz and Andi with their children Angel, 7 and James, 3 – who we helped to support following the first Covid lockdowns in 2020 – at their home in Margate. (Photo: Jonathan Hyams/Save the Children)



Sehr, 2, takes part in creative activities at a family fun-day organised by the Sheffield Early Learning Community. (Photo: Jonathan Hyams/Save the Children)



Salma, 9, and her mum, Wafa, live on an estate in Tower Hamlets, East London. They posed for photographs taken by Henry J Kamara as part of a workshop designed to give children the opportunity to express themselves through an image and explore identity, heritage, representation, family and poverty. (Photo: Henry J Kamara/Save the Children)



- 1 <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/uk-poverty-2022> 31% of families with children 0-4 are in poverty. See page 16 of the full report.
- 2 <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/early-years-foundation-stage-profile-results/2021-22>
- 3 Please note, the majority of data available on child poverty is UK-wide rather than England-specific. Due to data collection being affected by the pandemic, this information is from the year 2019/20 unless otherwise stated. When newer data is released, this information will be updated.
- 4 Households Below Average Income, Statistics on the number and percentage of people living in low-income households for financial years 1994/95 to 2020/21, Table 1.4b. Department for Work and Pensions, 2022
- 5 Households Below Average Income, Statistics on the number and percentage of people living in low-income households for financial years 1994/95 to 2019/20, Table 4\_5db. Department for Work and Pensions, 2021
- 6 Households Below Average Income, Statistics on the number and percentage of people living in low-income households for financial years 1994/95 to 2020/21, Table 1.4a. Department for Work and Pensions, 2022
- 7 Author's calculations from Households Below Average Income, Statistics on the number and percentage of people living in low-income households for financial years 1994/95 to 2019/20, Tables 4\_3db & 4\_5db. Department for Work and Pensions, 2021
- 8 Households Below Average Income, Statistics on the number and percentage of people living in low-income households for financial years 1994/95 to 2019/20, Table 4.3db. Department for Work and Pensions, 2021
- 9 <https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/what-we-do/child-poverty/uk-child-poverty>
- 10 <https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/what-we-do/child-poverty/uk-child-poverty>
- 11 <https://www.thinknpc.org/>
- 12 <https://collaboratecic.com/>
- 13 <https://collaboratecic.com/insights-and-resources/evaluating-systems-change-developing-a-maturity-model-for-save-the-childrens-early-learning-communities/>
- 14 Tower Hamlets Health Visiting Project 2022 (Save the Children UK)
- 15 Margate Early Learning Community Innovation Projects 2022-23 (Save the Children UK)
- 16 <https://www.helixarts.com/work/our-story/>
- 17 Early Years Grants applications, 04/01/21-01/06/23 (Save the Children UK)
- 18 <https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/blogs/2019/makechildcarework-aneitas-story>
- 19 <https://www.ippr.org/research/publications/delivering-a-childcare-guarantee>

## Systems Change Maturity Model

<https://collaboratecic.com/insights-and-resources/evaluating-systems-change-developing-a-maturity-model-for-save-the-childrens-early-learning-communities/>



## Manchester story-gathering project

<https://www.helixarts.com/work/our-story/>



## Make Childcare Work


<https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/blogs/2019/makechildcarework-aneitas-story>



## Delivering a Childcare Guarantee

<https://www.ippr.org/research/publications/delivering-a-childcare-guarantee>





Zayd, 3, crawls through a rainbow tunnel at a Toy Library in Tower Hamlets. The project aims to gather evidence on how to best support children's early learning and development. (Photo: Dan Dennison/Save the Children)

**Every child deserves the best start in life. But here in the UK, as the soaring cost of living and the fall-out from Covid push more and more families beyond their financial limits, children's futures hang in the balance.**

**Working with partners, Save the Children helps families make it through the toughest times in their lives, so children get the most out of childhood. Alongside this direct support, we're striving to make every place across the country a truly great place to grow up – and in doing so give every child the chance of the future they deserve.**

Cover photo: Harper-Lee (4) in front of a community mural, painted inside a local building used to run children's activities. (Photo: Percy Dean/Save the Children)

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