



Pathways out of poverty

FOR SANCTUARY-SEEKING CHILDREN





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Abstract

Every child should have the opportunity to learn, stay healthy and participate fully in community life. Yet some children face additional barriers that make these opportunities harder to access.

This report explores the experiences of sanctuary seeking families living in poverty in Cardiff and Swansea. Led by Welsh Refugee Council and delivered with Swansea Asylum Seeker Support, Mums and Toddler Foundation, Displaced People in Action and Glitter Cymru, the research was shaped by lived experience throughout.

Families described the daily pressures of managing on extremely low incomes while navigating housing instability, transport costs and complex systems. Many struggled to afford the essentials that support children's participation in everyday life, including school activities, internet

access and travel. These challenges were often greater for families caring for disabled children or managing long-term health conditions.

Alongside these pressures, families highlighted the importance of trusted relationships, community support and small practical interventions that helped create stability and opportunity.

The report calls for child poverty responses that better reach children facing the greatest barriers, with practical action to improve access to housing, education, transport, digital connectivity and support services. Ultimately, it argues that every child in Wales should have the opportunity to thrive, participate and build a positive future.

Introduction

Wales has made ambitious commitments to becoming both a **Nation of Sanctuary** and a country where **every child can thrive**. Yet some of the children facing the **greatest hardship** remain largely invisible within the evidence that shapes policy, services and public debate.

Sanctuary seeking children experience some of the **highest risks of poverty and exclusion** in Wales. However, their experiences are rarely captured in national data, child poverty analysis, or wider conversations about inequality.

This matters now. Recent analysis from the **Bevan Foundation** highlights that Wales is not currently on track to significantly reduce child poverty without **more targeted action**.¹ For many sanctuary-seeking families, poverty is not simply about income. It is shaped by **immigration status, restricted rights, insecure futures, and limited access to support**. Sanctuary seeking families receive just **£49.18 per person each week** through an ASPEN card and where accommodation includes meals, this falls to **£9.95 per week**.

Throughout this research, families described lives shaped by **difficult choices and constant uncertainty**. Parents spoke about skipping meals, avoiding school activities, and struggling to afford everyday essentials. What many families experienced was not occasional hardship. It was a **daily struggle to meet basic needs** while trying to create stability and opportunity for their children.

Children described feeling excluded from activities their peers took for granted. Parents spoke about the **emotional toll** of trying to provide a sense of normality while navigating poverty, uncertainty, and displacement.

This report brings those experiences into focus.

Drawing on **lived experience evidence**, frontline insight and engagement with families across Wales, we explore what poverty looks like for sanctuary seeking children and the barriers that keep many families trapped within it.

Alongside research, we aim to **strengthen practice, inform policy and identify practical pathways out of poverty**.

Our understanding of poverty extends **beyond income alone**. Poverty affects whether families can meet basic needs, participate in everyday life, and access the resources needed to live with dignity.

For sanctuary seeking families, **low income, immigration restrictions, discrimination and uncertainty** combine to create forms of disadvantage that cannot be understood through income measures alone.

This report helps address that gap. More importantly, it asks a simple question: what does it mean for a nation committed to sanctuary, children's rights and future wellbeing when some of its most vulnerable children remain largely invisible within the evidence used to shape decisions?

The families who contributed to this research provide a clear answer. Their experiences show both the **scale of the challenge** and the **urgent need for change** to ensure no child is left behind.

¹ A new approach to eradicating child poverty in Wales 2026-2030 - Bevan Foundation

Research aim and scope

This research set out to understand and evidence how No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) affects the experiences of sanctuary seeking families in Cardiff and Swansea, a group that remains largely invisible within official poverty statistics. It aimed to help fill critical evidence gaps, provide a stronger foundation for future policy and funding decisions, and support more effective responses to sanctuary seeking child poverty in Wales.

Who took part

To be eligible for participation in this study, families met the following criteria:

- Have children aged 0–18 years or currently be pregnant
- Have currently or have had in the past year, the No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) condition imposed on them
- Be on Home Office support (under section 98 or section 95) or have been on it in the past 12 months.

Findings

Families spoke about more than financial hardship. **They spoke about wanting fairness, stability, and opportunity for their children.** They wanted safe homes, access to support, the ability to participate in community life, and the chance for their children to experience an ordinary childhood. Where these conditions existed, families were better able to thrive.

Research design

We used a qualitative, mixed-methods approach to explore the lived experiences of families affected by No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF). **Parents were invited to share their experiences in their preferred language**, with conversations supported by a trained translator who had been volunteering with the project and was already a trusted, familiar presence to many participants.

Methods of data collection

Semi-structured interviews

One-to-one conversations lasting around one hour. These follow a structured guide but allow the data collection officer to explore deeper insights and capture the individual's unique story.

Focus groups

Facilitated discussions lasting about 90 minutes with multiple participants. Guided by a semi-structured format for consistency, these groups encourage open dialogue and interaction between participants.

What families told us...

"The biggest problem... when your child asks for something and you cannot afford it."

"I don't buy things for myself in order to provide healthy food for my children."

"If the children need something, I cut back in other areas to afford it."

"I had to do that with the pram... that was very difficult for us."

"It's nice to be in a space where 'asylum seeker' is not a dirty word."

"We don't have WiFi at home... it's difficult to do the homework online."

"It cost me about £12 to get to the city centre... and I cannot leave my children alone at home."

"They lost their confidence, as they couldn't understand why they kept moving schools and leaving friends."



Families told us:

Poverty makes everyday parenting harder

Families wanted the same things as any parent: **fairness, stability and the opportunity to provide** for their children. Many felt current systems made this harder to achieve. They described systems and financial pressures that made ordinary parenting feel constantly out of reach.

"The biggest problem... when your child asks for something and you cannot afford it."



85% of parents described shielding their children from the realities of poverty, often skipping meals themselves or sacrificing their own needs so their children could eat, attend school and participate in daily life. Parents wanted their children to have the same opportunities as their peers - to join activities, build friendships, and **felt** the pain of not always being able to provide what other families could.

Others described the emotional toll of carrying this pressure every day. "I lose my appetite because I feel stressed and under pressure to provide for my children."

For many families, poverty was the daily effort of protecting children from instability while carrying that burden on themselves.

Parents were clear that children are not shielded from poverty. They experience it directly. **80% of families described at least one way in which poverty had directly affected their children's education, friendships, or participation in everyday activities.**

Children experienced poverty through disrupted education, unstable housing, limited opportunities to play and barriers to forming friendships. Children were not simply witnessing poverty around them. They were living it themselves.

Several women sought repeated medical advice after believing they were pregnant but felt **dismissed or disbelieved**. Some were told to buy pregnancy tests themselves before receiving further support, creating impossible choices for families living on asylum support.

Sanctuary seekers receive just £49.18 per person, per week through an ASPEN card to cover essentials including food, clothing, toiletries, transport and other daily costs and where accommodation is provided this falls to £9.95 per week.

Mothers explained that repeatedly buying pregnancy tests meant sacrificing other essentials, including food, toiletries, or transport. What may appear to be a small expense can have significant consequences for families living on extremely limited incomes.

Families told us:

Survival depends on constant trade-offs and hidden sacrifice

Nine in ten parents reported regularly making trade-offs between essential needs, including food, transport, clothing, internet access and school-related costs. Food competes with transport. School costs compete with toiletries. Internet access competes with clothing.

Families became highly skilled at managing scarcity, tracking prices, shopping around, and delaying purchases.

"If the children need something, I cut back in other areas to afford it."



"I know which shops each have the cheapest ingredients, so I go to lots of shops. One week I get rice, the next I get tomatoes, the next oil. So, after few weeks I can make the meal."

"The children eat first. I always make sure my son is fed and has everything he needs. I put myself last, buying less food and eating very little so there is enough for him."

Many parents, particularly mothers, absorbed the impact of poverty themselves.

Families told us:

Poverty is exclusion from ordinary life

Families wanted their children to participate fully in school, friendships and community life, but financial pressures often limited these opportunities.

"It's nice to be in a space where 'asylum seeker' is not a dirty word."

"They lost their confidence, as they couldn't understand why they kept moving schools and leaving friends."

Community organisations and trusted local spaces were often the places where children and families felt welcomed and included.

Families were not asking for luxuries.

They wanted the **same things** most parents want for their children: stability, dignity and the chance to experience an ordinary childhood. Families described exclusion as more than going without. It meant being unable to take part in community life, access opportunities, and build the sense of belonging that helps families thrive.

Families told us:

Housing problems make everything worse

Families described overcrowding, damp, mould, repeated moves and unsuitable accommodation as some of the most destabilising aspects of poverty.

"When we report problems to the housing manager, he tells us it's not his problem to help us."

Families described feeling trapped between poor housing conditions and unresolved complaints.

"In three months, we were moved to eight different addresses. I have two children and we were all sleeping in one room, sharing one bed. My son developed rashes from crawling on the dirty carpet, but I was too scared to complain because we had been told that speaking up could put our asylum application at risk."

Case study

When support falls short

A young sanctuary seeking family in Cardiff are living in temporary accommodation with their three-year-old daughter. While they are grateful to have somewhere to stay, the condition of the flat is causing constant stress and anxiety.

The family describe repeated problems inside the home, including dirty carpets, broken appliances and unresolved repairs. The father explained that despite reporting issues, little changes.

"When we report problems to the housing manager, he tells us it's not his problem to help us."

One of the most distressing issues is a leaking shower that has damaged the flat below. The neighbour regularly bangs on their door late at night because of the leak.

"He gets angry and knocks loudly, no matter what time it is. He wakes up our daughter when she's sleeping."

Inside the flat, the family also worry about their daughter's safety. Furniture provided in the accommodation is unsuitable for a young child, and there is no safe outdoor space for her to play. The mother described feeling constantly on edge.

"The table is low enough for my daughter to climb on. I worry she will fall."

Safe and stable housing is a foundation for family wellbeing. When housing was insecure or unsuitable, families found it harder to maintain routines, access services, and support their children's development.

Families told us:

Transport is a hidden barrier to opportunity

Parents repeatedly described support, services and activities existing in theory but being out of reach in practice because travel costs were too high.

Families described walking long distances to schools, hospitals and supermarkets because buses were unaffordable.

More than 85% of families described experiencing food insecurity, with parents frequently reducing the quality, quantity, or cultural appropriateness of meals to ensure their children can eat.

"I had to do that with the pram... that was very difficult for us."

"We are eating now rice, pasta... carbs."

Parents wanted to provide healthy food for their children but often struggled to sustain it financially.

"I spend £20-£25 on fruit, just so they can take it to school."

Case study

The daily struggle of accessing food

Fatima* is a single mother seeking sanctuary in Swansea. Living outside the city centre, she faces ongoing challenges accessing halal food because she cannot afford the cost of transport.

"It cost me about £12 to get to the city centre... and I cannot leave my children alone at home."

Without the right to work and surviving on a minimal asylum support allowance, she often has to choose between paying for travel and buying food. Unable to travel regularly, she relies on food banks, vouchers and charity support, particularly during school holidays when free school meals are unavailable.

**pseudonym used to protect privacy.*

"I don't buy things for myself in order to provide healthy food for my children."

Fatima's experience highlights how transport costs can make it harder for sanctuary-seeking families to access food, support and other essentials.

Parents linked transport costs to missed opportunities, delayed healthcare, and isolation from support networks. Affordable transport helps families access healthcare, education, community activities and support networks - creating the conditions for participation and wellbeing.

Case study

Navigating gaps in disability support

A sanctuary seeking mother in Cardiff is raising a young daughter with additional health and developmental needs. Frequent hospital appointments, care costs and the limitations of asylum support place significant pressure on the family.

"We are always travelling to appointments, sometimes three times a week."

Despite providing evidence of disability-related costs, the family received only limited support for travel. Unable to access benefits such as Disability Living Allowance, they struggled to meet essential expenses, including specialist sensory equipment recommended by the child's school.

"For other families, this support would come through Disability Living Allowance. We cannot access that."

After brief support from social care ended, no replacement was provided. The mother now relies largely on charities and small reimbursements while navigating complex systems alone.

While additional financial support may be available in some circumstances through the asylum support system for people with specific care or health-related needs, families were generally unaware of this provision. Parents described a lack of clear information about eligibility and how to apply, reflecting wider concerns about the accessibility and transparency of support. Families wanted support systems that recognised additional needs and enabled disabled children to participate fully in family and community life.

Families told us:

Some families face deeper hardship

For families caring for disabled children or managing long-term health conditions, poverty was compounded by additional costs, responsibilities and barriers.

Many described navigating fragmented systems that failed to recognise or adequately support the realities of their daily lives.

Families told us:

Communities play a vital role in family wellbeing

More than 90% of participants highlighted community organisations, schools, or charities as essential sources of practical and emotional support. In the face of significant hardship, practical and compassionate support often made a meaningful difference to daily life.

Small interventions frequently prevent deeper crises. Bus tickets enable families to attend appointments. SIM cards allow children to complete their homework. Play groups reduces isolation. Donations of nappies, clothes and food created breathing space within already stretched budgets.

One parent reflected:

"I rely on a local charity for nappies, milk and anything else we need. They have played a big role in our wellbeing. It's not just support - it's also the only space we have to play and spend time together."

Families valued support that was flexible, relational and rooted in trust.

Being listened to, understood and treated with dignity mattered as much as the practical help itself.

Many described these acts of support as having an impact far beyond their financial value. They created moments of relief, strengthened family wellbeing, and helped families stay connected to their communities during periods of intense pressure.



Recommendations

Families were not asking for special treatment. They were asking for the same things every parent wants for their children: stability, opportunity, good health, strong friendships and the chance to take part in everyday life. **Small changes can make a significant difference.**

The actions below focus on creating the conditions that enable children to face additional barriers to learn, stay healthy, and participate fully in their communities.

Many of the barriers described throughout this research are preventable.

Our 9 actions

1. Ensure child poverty plans include sanctuary seeking children and families

Children cannot benefit from support if their experiences are not reflected in national and local planning. Child poverty strategies should recognise the additional barriers some families face and ensure support reaches children experiencing the greatest hardship.

This includes:

- Embedding the experiences of sanctuary seeking children and families within national and local child poverty strategies.
- Improving data on poverty, housing instability, disability, and ethnicity.
- Involving sanctuary seeking families in local anti-poverty partnerships and decision-making.
- Reporting on outcomes for sanctuary seeking children.

In practice this could mean:

- Including sanctuary seeking families within local child poverty action plans.
- Tracking school attendance, housing moves, and participation in enrichment activities.
- Inviting families and community organisations to help shape local priorities.
- Assessing whether existing child poverty programmes are reaching families in asylum accommodation.

2. Improve understanding of housing instability, transport barriers and hidden poverty

Families often experience pressures that remain largely unseen until they reach crisis points.

In practice this could mean:

- Recording when children experience multiple school moves.
- Monitoring missed appointments linked to transport costs.
- Identifying areas where families travel long distances for healthcare or legal appointments.
- Using local poverty assessments to better understand the experiences of sanctuary seeking families.

3. Ensure families only need to tell their story once

Language barriers can make it difficult for parents to access healthcare, understand school information, find support, and engage with their communities. Flexible ESOL classes and clear, multilingual information can improve access to services, reduce reliance on others, and support greater confidence and independence.

In practice this could mean:

- Ensuring a named lead professional coordinating support for families with complex needs.
- Regular multi-agency meetings between schools, health services, housing providers and community organisations.
- Shared referral pathways that reduce duplication and delays.
- Clear routes into specialist support when concerns are identified.

4. Make support easier to understand and accessible

Families are better able to access support when information is clear, accessible, and available in the right language.

In practice this could mean:

- Translated school letters and appointment information. Interpreter provision at healthcare appointments and parents' evenings.
- Multilingual information packs for newly arrived families.
- Digital resources available in multiple languages

5. Reduce unnecessary disruption to children's education

Stable education helps children build friendships, maintain routines, and achieve their potential.

In practice this could mean:

- Considering school placement before accommodation moves are approved.
- Minimising mid-year school transfers where possible.
- Providing transport support where a move would otherwise force a school change.
- Ensuring educational records move quickly between schools.

6. Improving digital access for sanctuary seeking children

Digital access helps children engage in education, stay connected, build essential skills, and achieve their potential.

In practice this could mean:

- Extending social tariff broadband eligibility to people seeking asylum.
- Connecting families to digital skills and inclusion programmes.
- Providing laptops or tablets to families without devices.

7. Reduce unnecessary disruption to children's education

For families living on very low incomes, relatively small costs can become significant barriers.

In practice this could mean:

- Emergency grants for school uniforms, shoes, or winter coats.
- Phone data and SIM card support for parents to help with homework
- Transport vouchers for healthcare, legal and education appointments.
- Small discretionary funds administered through schools or trusted community organisations.

8. Invest in the places and activities that help children belong

Community spaces play an important role in children's wellbeing. Investing in trusted community hubs can help families access practical support, build connections and participate in community life in ways that feel welcoming, accessible and free from stigma.

In practice this could mean:

- Funding community play sessions and family activities.
- Providing transport to after-school activities.
- Supporting access to sports clubs, youth groups, and arts programmes.

9. Make additional needs support clearer and easier to access

Families caring for disabled children or children with additional needs should receive clear information about available support throughout the asylum process. The Home Office must be **more transparent in additional needs payments**, and this is advised to the family at screening interview.

In practice this could mean:

- Providing written guidance in accessible languages.
- Ensuring families know who to contact if circumstances change.
- Introducing simple referral pathways for families requiring specialist equipment or support.

Conclusion

This research tells a clear and urgent story. Poverty for sanctuary seeking families is not a single issue. It is a set of overlapping pressures shaping everyday life.

Parents are not simply managing low income. They are trying to hold together the foundations of family life: food, school, appointments, routines and belonging. These are not abstract pressures. They are **daily negotiations**, often carried out with too little. As one mother shared, **"when your child asks for something and you cannot afford it."**

Parents spoke about the everyday challenge of making ends meet, something familiar to many families. For refugee parents, these moments often sit alongside memories of displacement, uncertainty, and long periods of going without. When financial pressures echo those earlier experiences, they can reopen feelings of insecurity and leave a lasting emotional impact. As one mother shared, **"when your child asks for something and you cannot afford it"**, it is about far more than the moment itself. It is a reminder of everything the family has already lived through.

Much of this hardship remains hidden. **Parents absorb it quietly**, often through sustained sacrifice. Many, especially mothers, go without so their children can have more. **"I prefer not to eat my full meal and give it to the children"** reflects a pattern, not an exception. **This buffering protects children in the short term, but it places ongoing strain on parents and obscures the true depth of poverty.**

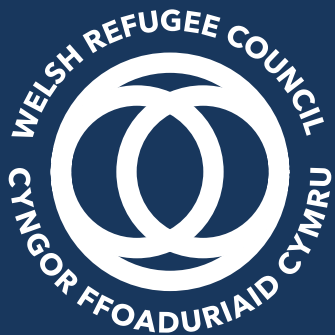
These pressures are not experienced equally. Families with disabled or neurodivergent children face higher costs, more complex systems and gaps in support. Inequality is intensified, not evenly distributed.

Children feel the weight of this. It shapes their confidence, their education and their sense of belonging. Poverty here is not only financial. It carries long-term consequences for development and wellbeing.

Yet the evidence also shows what helps. **Small, timely interventions can have significant impact.** A bus fare, a SIM card, access to play, trusted advice. These supports create stability in otherwise fragile situations. They show where prevention is possible.

At its core, **this report demonstrates that poverty is interconnected.** Low income sits at the centre, but it is the interaction with wider barriers that deepens hardship. A single disruption, a missed payment, an extra journey, a broken phone, can tip the balance. Families described lives shaped by constant calculation, with little margin for error.

Responding to this requires more than isolated interventions. It demands joined-up action that reflects how poverty is lived. Without this, families will continue to carry the burden of navigating complex systems alone.



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