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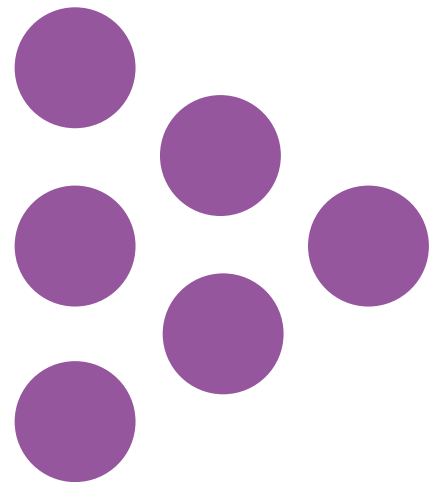
## Report

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# Cost-of-living crisis: Impact on schools

## Pupils and families

**National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER)**



## **Cost-of-living crisis: Impact on schools**

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## Glossary of terms

**Additional support:** This is defined as anything over and above the usual provision pupils might receive in relation to pupil premium and/or Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) support.

**Disadvantaged schools:** For the purposes of this report, disadvantaged schools are defined based on the share of pupils eligible for free school meals in the school. Schools in the most disadvantaged quartile of schools have the highest rate of pupils eligible for free school meals.

**Children and Young People’s Mental Health Services (CYPMHS):** Services that support young people experiencing poor mental health, or difficult feelings or experiences. These services were formerly known as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS).

**Education, health and care plan (EHCP):** This is a legal document for children and young people aged up to 25 who need more support than is available usually. An EHCP identifies the educational, health and social needs and sets out the additional support to meet those needs.

**Free school meals (FSM) eligible pupil:** A pupil who meets the eligibility criteria for free school meals and whose parent(s) or carer(s) makes a claim (eligibility is not determined automatically). The FSM rate refers to the share of FSM-eligible pupils in the pupil population.

**In-year deficit (surplus):** A school whose annual expenditure is larger (smaller) than their annual income by the end of the financial year.

**Overall deficit (surplus):** A school with negative (positive) overall revenue balance.

**Pupil premium (PP) pupil:** PP pupils are considered to be ‘disadvantaged’ and attract additional funding for their school to improve their educational outcomes. Any pupil who has been eligible for free school meals at any point in the last six years, has been in the care of the local authority at any point or is from a service family is PP.

**Special educational needs and disabilities (SEND):** A pupil with additional needs or disability which affects a child or young person’s ability to learn. This might include behaviour or ability to socialise, reading and writing (e.g., dyslexia), ability to understand things, concentration (e.g., attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) and physical abilities.

**Real household disposable income:** The amount of money that households have available for spending and saving after direct taxes, such as Income Tax, National Insurance and Council Tax, have been accounted for. Real household disposable income is adjusted for changes in prices over time.

## Executive Summary

The cost of living has been rising sharply across England since 2021, including unprecedented increases in energy costs, rapid increases in the costs of food and significant increases in the costs of housing via higher rents/mortgage costs (Harari *et al.*, 2023). The Office for Budget Responsibility is predicting that real household disposable incomes per person (a measure of living standards) will remain below pre-pandemic levels until at least 2027/28 (Office for Budget Responsibility, 2022).

Teachers and senior leaders in schools are on the front line. They see the immediate impacts of cost-of-living increases on pupils and their households. As well as impacting households, rising costs are also impacting mainstream and special school finances, in the form of higher energy and higher than expected staffing costs. While the Government has committed additional funding for schools in 2023/24 and 2024/25 (HM Treasury, 2022), there is still a question about whether this will be sufficient (Drayton *et al.*, 2022).

Alongside cost-of-living pressures, schools are also grappling with a myriad of other pressures, including post-pandemic recovery (Ofsted, 2022a, 2022b), additional financial pressures created by the current demographic decline in primary pupil numbers (DfE, 2023b) and teacher recruitment and retention challenges (McLean, Worth and Faulkner-Ellis, 2023).

Drawing on surveys of teachers and senior leaders in mainstream and special schools<sup>1</sup>, this report aims to explore how the cost of living is affecting schools by establishing:

1. What impact do teachers and senior leaders report cost-of-living pressures are having on pupils and their households?
2. How has provision in schools been affected by cost-of-living increases?
3. What impact have cost-of-living increases had on school staff?

NFER collected data via an online survey sent to all state-funded mainstream primary and secondary schools and all special schools in England in April and May 2023. We received responses from 1354 senior leaders and 1317 teachers in mainstream schools as well as 87 senior leaders and 41 teachers in special schools. It is important to note that the quantitative analysis presented throughout this report is largely descriptive in nature and is not intended to be used to make causal inferences.

A degree of caution is also needed when interpreting the analysis of the special schools' surveys due to the small sample sizes<sup>2</sup> (see Appendix for further details on the methodological approach). The key findings from our research are outlined below.

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<sup>1</sup> Mainstream surveys are weighted to be nationally representative of schools in England. Special school surveys are not weighted due to the small response rate achieved. Non-maintained special schools and special schools serving pupils with high levels of disadvantage are under-represented in our sample.

<sup>2</sup> Sub-sample analysis has not been done for special schools (i.e., by school disadvantage) as the achieved sample was not sufficiently large.

## Pupils and households

- **Most senior leaders (over 84 per cent across all settings) report that cost-of-living pressures have increased both the numbers of pupils requiring additional support and the level of need, particularly in the most disadvantaged schools.** Additional support was defined as anything over and above the usual provision pupils might receive in relation to pupil premium and/or Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) support.

Over the last 12-months, there have been significant increases in the numbers of pupils requiring additional welfare and financial support to access learning, social and extra-curricular activities<sup>3</sup>. Pressures are greatest in special schools and the most disadvantaged mainstream schools. Special school senior leaders report particularly high levels of and large increases in support for pupil welfare needs (from 28 per cent to 36 per cent) and financial support needs (33 per cent to 43 per cent) over the last year.

- **Recent cost-of-living pressures have exacerbated well-being and mental health needs among pupils.** Senior leaders report that over a quarter of pupils in mainstream schools currently<sup>4</sup> require additional support for mental health and well-being, which is significantly higher than last year<sup>5</sup>. This is even higher in special schools at over 40 per cent. This is in line with previous research which has highlighted that children in poverty are more likely to have lower well-being and experience mental health problems (Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, 2020; Barnardo's, 2022).
- **School leaders report that recent increases in the cost of living have led to an increase in safeguarding concerns, behaviour incidents and absenteeism, particularly in secondary and more disadvantaged schools.** For example, most senior leaders (over 80 per cent in all settings) agree or strongly agree that increases in the cost of living have increased safeguarding concerns and/or incidents in their school.
- **Schools have expanded the scale and range of support they have available for pupils over the last year in response to cost-of-living pressures.** Nearly all schools (at least 90 per cent) are subsidising extra-curricular activities for some pupils and providing uniforms and clothing to pupils (over 87 per cent across settings). Most settings (over 70 per cent across settings) are also providing food (through food parcels/food banks/food vouchers and subsidised breakfasts). As might be expected, disadvantaged schools and special schools are providing the most support for cost-of-living pressures to pupils.

Across most of these forms of additional support, the majority of senior leaders (at least 60 per cent) report an increase in school time and resources devoted to support their provision compared to last year.

<sup>3</sup> Percentages of pupils are estimated by averaging the mid-point values of pre-specified ranges which senior leaders were asked to select between.

<sup>4</sup> As of when the survey fieldwork took place in April and May 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Senior leaders were asked to recollect the number of pupils requiring additional support in the previous year and so estimates may be influenced by factors which have affected respondents' perceptions and recall of the previous year. Significant refers to statistical significance.



- **It is not just children eligible for pupil premium who are receiving support.** In over three-fifths of mainstream schools (68 per cent of primary and 63 per cent of secondary schools), leaders report that 50 per cent or more of the pupils receiving additional support were pupils *not* eligible for pupil premium. This was true in around 42 per cent of special schools. This suggests that the current eligibility criteria for free school meals may be too restrictive.
- **Teachers feel unable to access the support they need from external agencies, with many less satisfied with support compared to last year.** Less than one-fifth of mainstream teachers and just under one-quarter of special school teachers feel supported by child and young people mental health services. Around half of mainstream teachers and nearly two-fifths of special school teachers are less satisfied with this support compared to last year.

Additionally, only a quarter of teachers in mainstream schools feel supported by their local authority (LA) education services. Around 39 per cent of mainstream teachers and 47 per cent of special school teachers are less satisfied than last year.

## Recommendations

Our findings highlight that cost-of-living pressures, together with existing challenges, are having a profound impact on pupils and their schools.

**Without urgent action now, recent cost-of-living increases risk having far reaching and long-lasting impacts on pupils, particularly those who are most vulnerable, across both mainstream and special school settings.**

**Recommendation 1: The Government should extend the current eligibility for free school meals. At the absolute minimum, this should involve uprating the income threshold for eligibility to reflect inflationary pressures since 2018/19.**

**Recommendation 2a: In the short-term, schools need greater financial support to address pupils' pressing well-being and welfare needs, alongside meeting the additional direct costs (e.g., energy and school meal costs) associated with the increased cost of living.**

**Recommendation 2b: In the short-term, families should be provided with additional support, which might include revisiting current levels of welfare support for families and/or additional cost of living payments.**

**Recommendation 3: In the medium term, ensuring increased capacity and responsiveness of children and young people's mental health services (CYPMHS) and other services around families is needed to ensure that pupils can access the appropriate support and specialist services in a timely manner, rather than schools having to step in to fill those gaps in support.**

# 1 Introduction

The cost of living has been rising sharply across England since 2021, including unprecedented increases in energy costs, rapid increases in the costs of food and significant increases in the costs of housing via higher rents/mortgage costs (Harari *et al.*, 2023).

While inflation has fallen from its peak in October 2022, cost pressures are set to continue (Office for Budget Responsibility, 2023). Indeed, public debate has recently raised the possibility of introducing food price caps on basic necessities to support households (Jones and Walker, 2023). The Office for Budget Responsibility is predicting that real household disposable incomes per person (a measure of living standards) will remain below pre-pandemic levels until at least 2027/28 (Office for Budget Responsibility, 2022).

Cost-of-living pressures are having profound impacts on pupils and their families. Over a third of low-income parents are cutting back on food for their children (Earwaker, 2022). There has been an increase in the number of households who are unable to afford basic items for their children (The Sutton Trust, 2022). Pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of cost-of-living pressures, as they are more likely to be in lower income households and require additional care (Blackburn, Spencer and Read, 2010).

Teachers and senior leaders in schools are on the front line. They see the immediate impacts of cost-of-living pressures on pupils. Regardless of whether they have the staff or resources to do so, many may feel the need to provide urgent support to pupils and their families. While this may go beyond schools' statutory duties, the evidence suggests that pupils whose most basic needs are not being met – whether it is going to school hungry or being unable to afford the costs of transport – are less likely to attend school and successfully engage with learning (The Food Foundation, 2022).

As well as affecting households, rising costs are also impacting mainstream and special school finances, in the form of higher energy and higher than expected staffing costs. While the Government has committed additional funding for schools in 2023/24 and 2024/25 (HM Treasury, 2022), there is still a question about whether this will be sufficient (Drayton *et al.*, 2022). Some schools have raised concerns that recent cost-of-living increases are impacting on their teaching and learning provision (Martin, 2022).

Pressures on schools are likely to be exacerbated by the fact that local authority (LA) budgets are also under significant financial pressures (CCN, 2023). The effect is two-fold. Firstly, local authorities may reduce support or increase waiting/referral times for wider services that low-income families and vulnerable pupils are dependent on, which schools may then need to step in to provide. Secondly, local authorities are unlikely to be able to provide additional financial support to schools to cover additional costs.

Alongside cost-of-living pressures, schools are also grappling with a myriad of other pressures, including post-pandemic recovery (Ofsted, 2022a, 2022b), additional financial pressures created by the current demographic decline in primary pupil numbers (DfE, 2023b) and teacher recruitment and retention challenges (McLean, Worth and Faulkner-Ellis, 2023).

Despite these challenges, relatively little is known about the overarching scale of current cost-of-living pressures in schools, how these vary across settings and groups of pupils and what steps schools are taking to mitigate the impacts of cost-of-living pressures. Drawing on surveys of teachers and senior leaders in mainstream and special schools in England (as outlined in Box 1), this report aims to fill this critical evidence gap by establishing:

1. What impact do teachers and senior leaders report cost-of-living pressures are having on pupils and their households?
2. How has provision in schools been affected by cost-of-living increases?
3. What impact have cost-of-living increases had on school staff?

It is important to note that the quantitative analysis presented throughout this report is largely descriptive in nature and is not designed to make causal inferences. While teachers and senior leaders were asked to specifically consider how cost-of-living increases have impacted their pupils and their settings, there are many other pressures affecting schools that may be difficult to disentangle from cost-of-living pressures. Findings need to be interpreted in that wider context.

A degree of caution is also needed when interpreting the analysis of the special schools' survey responses due to the small sample sizes. Findings from the special schools surveys have not been weighted to be nationally representative due to these small sample sizes (see Box 1). Further detail about the methodology can be found in the Appendix.

## Box 1. NFER cost of living surveys

### Sample

From 21 April to 11 May\*, NFER collected data via an online survey sent to all 20,193 state-funded mainstream primary and secondary schools, and all 1756 special schools in England. We asked senior leaders (head teachers, principals, deputy head teachers and assistant head teachers) to complete the survey themselves and pass it on to one teacher from their school. We received responses from 1354 senior leaders and 1317 teachers in 1666 primary schools (including middle deemed primary) and 637 secondary schools (including middle deemed secondary and all-through schools), representing 9.9 per cent of the 16,784 primary schools and 18.7 per cent of the 3409 secondary schools in England. We also received responses from 87 senior leaders and 41 teachers from special schools, representing 6.3 per cent of the 1756 special schools\*\* (including non-maintained specials) in England.

We weighted the data for mainstream schools to ensure that our findings are representative of mainstream schools in England. Findings from the special school surveys' have not been weighted to be nationally representative due to the small sub-samples of non-maintained special schools and the most disadvantaged special schools in our sample.

### Data collected

The survey focused on three main areas: how pupils and their families are being affected by recent cost-of-living increases, and how schools are supporting them; how provision in schools has been affected by recent cost-of-living pressures and what impact these pressures have had on school staff. The survey also asked respondents for some information about themselves, including their job role, gender and age.

### Analysis

The NFER team used DfE [administrative data](#) to identify the characteristics of each school, including phase, proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM), school type (local authority or academy), and region. Weighting used the distribution of the achieved sample of mainstream schools relative to the national population of school phase and FSM quintile.

The analysis used three main approaches: descriptive statistics for all of the survey questions; tests of statistical significance to identify associations between selected questions and school characteristics; and regression models. Results were considered statistically significant if the probability of a result occurring by chance was less than five per cent ( $p = < 0.05$ ).

*\*Note that teacher strikes in English schools took place on both 27 April and 2 May. This should be borne in mind when interpreting findings.*

*\*\* Includes all special schools with pupils between the ages of four and 16.*

## 2 Pupils and families

This chapter sets out the implications of the increased cost of living on the type and level of pupils' needs. It examines what support schools are providing and explores how confident teachers are in responding to pupils' needs.

### 2.1 Types and level of need

#### Key findings

- Senior leaders report that cost-of-living pressures have increased both the number of pupils requiring additional support and the level of need among these pupils.
- Pupil well-being and mental health is an increasing and pressing concern for schools, particularly in special schools and disadvantaged schools.
- There have been significant increases in the numbers of pupils requiring welfare and financial support due to cost-of-living pressures.
- Schools report an increase in safeguarding concerns, behaviour incidents and pupil absence because of the increased cost of living, particularly in secondary schools and more disadvantaged schools.
- Special schools are concerned that their pupils do not have all the specialist equipment they need to access and engage with learning (such as wheelchairs/mobility aids; supportive software).
- Staff in both mainstream and special schools are concerned about meeting the needs of pupils with SEND. Many teachers and senior leaders in mainstream schools flagged that the incidence of SEND and/or challenging behaviours among their pupils has been affected by the cost of living, increasing in recent years<sup>6</sup>.

**Most senior leaders report that recent increases in the cost of living have increased both the numbers of pupils requiring additional support and their level of need.**

As shown in Figure 1, most senior leaders (84 per cent or more across all settings) agree or strongly agree that increases in the cost of living have driven an increase in the number of pupils requiring additional support and the level of their needs. Additional support was defined as anything over and above the usual provision pupils might receive in relation to EHCP plans, pupil premium and/or SEND support.

Agreeing that there was an increase in the number and level of pupils' need was more common in disadvantaged mainstream schools (i.e. schools with the highest proportions of pupils who are in

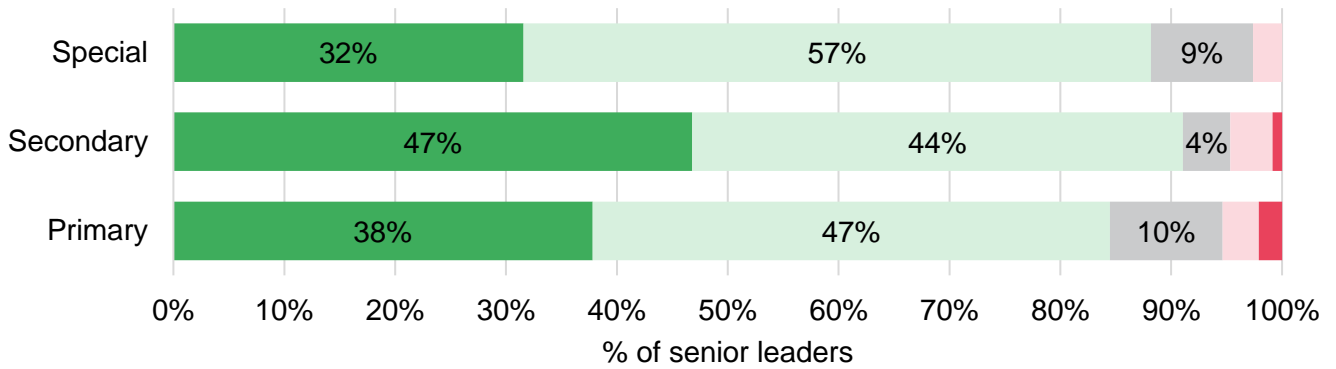
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<sup>6</sup> Based on teachers and senior leaders' responses to 'Is there anything else which you would like us to know about how the cost of living is affecting you, your pupils, your teaching or your school?'

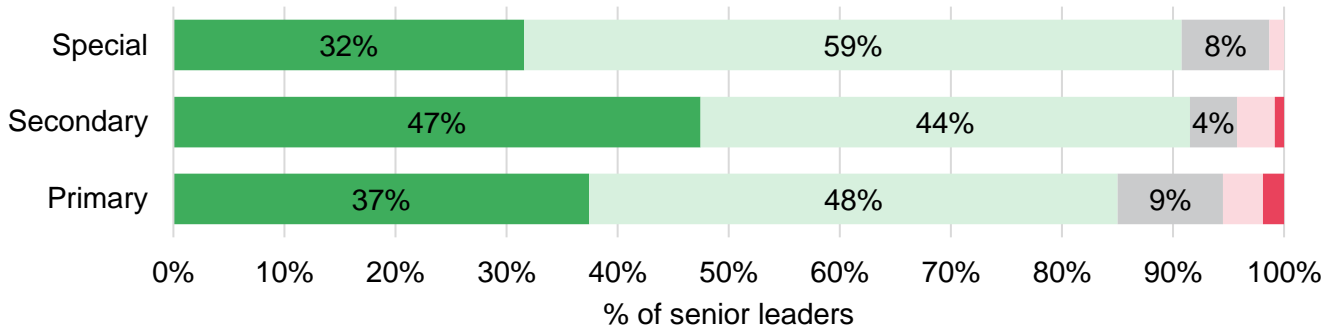
receipt of FSM pupils nationally), compared with the least disadvantaged<sup>7</sup>. Almost all (92 per cent) senior leaders in the most disadvantaged quartile of primary schools agree or strongly agree that the increased cost of living has driven an increase in the number of pupils requiring additional support, compared with 77 per cent in the least disadvantaged primary schools.

**Figure 1 The extent to which senior leaders agree that the cost-of-living increases have impacted the number of pupils requiring additional support and their level of need**

**Number of pupils**



**Level of need**



■ Strongly agree ■ Agree ■ Neither agree nor disagree ■ Disagree ■ Strongly disagree

Note: Additional support was defined as anything over and above the usual provision pupils might receive in relation to EHCP plans, pupil premium and/or SEND support. Due to rounding errors, figures may not match breakdowns presented elsewhere

Source: NFER survey of 1441 senior leaders: the minimum number of responses given to an individual item was 1311

<sup>7</sup> Sub-sample analysis was not possible for the special schools sample due to the sample size achieved. All analysis presented by school-level disadvantage is for mainstream schools only.

## 2.1.1 Well-being and mental health

### **Pupil well-being and mental health is an increasing and pressing concern for schools**

Figure 2 presents the percentages of pupils<sup>8</sup>, as reported by senior leaders, who require additional support across a range of areas both currently (i.e., in April 2023, when the survey was administered) and at the same point in the previous year<sup>9</sup>. It shows that over a quarter of pupils in mainstream schools currently require additional support for mental health (e.g., for anxiety and depression) and well-being (e.g., for difficult household circumstances or bereavement).

Mainstream senior leaders report significant increases in the proportion of pupils needing support between the two time points across both areas, suggesting that cost-of-living pressures have amplified levels of need. For example, the proportion of pupils in secondary schools requiring additional support for their general well-being increased the most, on average, with 31 per cent of pupils needing support this year compared to 21 per cent in the previous year. Previous research has shown that children living in poverty are more likely to have mental health problems and that the increased cost of living is causing stress among pupils as they worry about their care givers' ability to provide for them and withdraw from social activities in order to save money (Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, 2020; Barnardo's, 2022).

More disadvantaged mainstream schools had a higher proportion of pupils receiving additional well-being and mental health support compared with the least disadvantaged schools. This was particularly noticeable in relation to general well-being, where pupils from the most disadvantaged quartile of primary schools are over twice as likely to be receiving support than the least disadvantaged quartile of schools (41 per cent and 18 per cent of pupils respectively). This highlights that more disadvantaged schools are having to devote more resources and time than their least disadvantaged counterparts to supporting pupil well-being and mental health needs.

### **There is a particularly high level for well-being and mental health support among pupils in special schools**

Figure 2 also shows that around 40 per cent of pupils in special schools require additional support related to mental health and general well-being. While special school senior leaders did not report a significant increase in need for additional mental health support in the last year, there was an increase in need for pupil well-being support (from 32 per cent to 40 per cent).

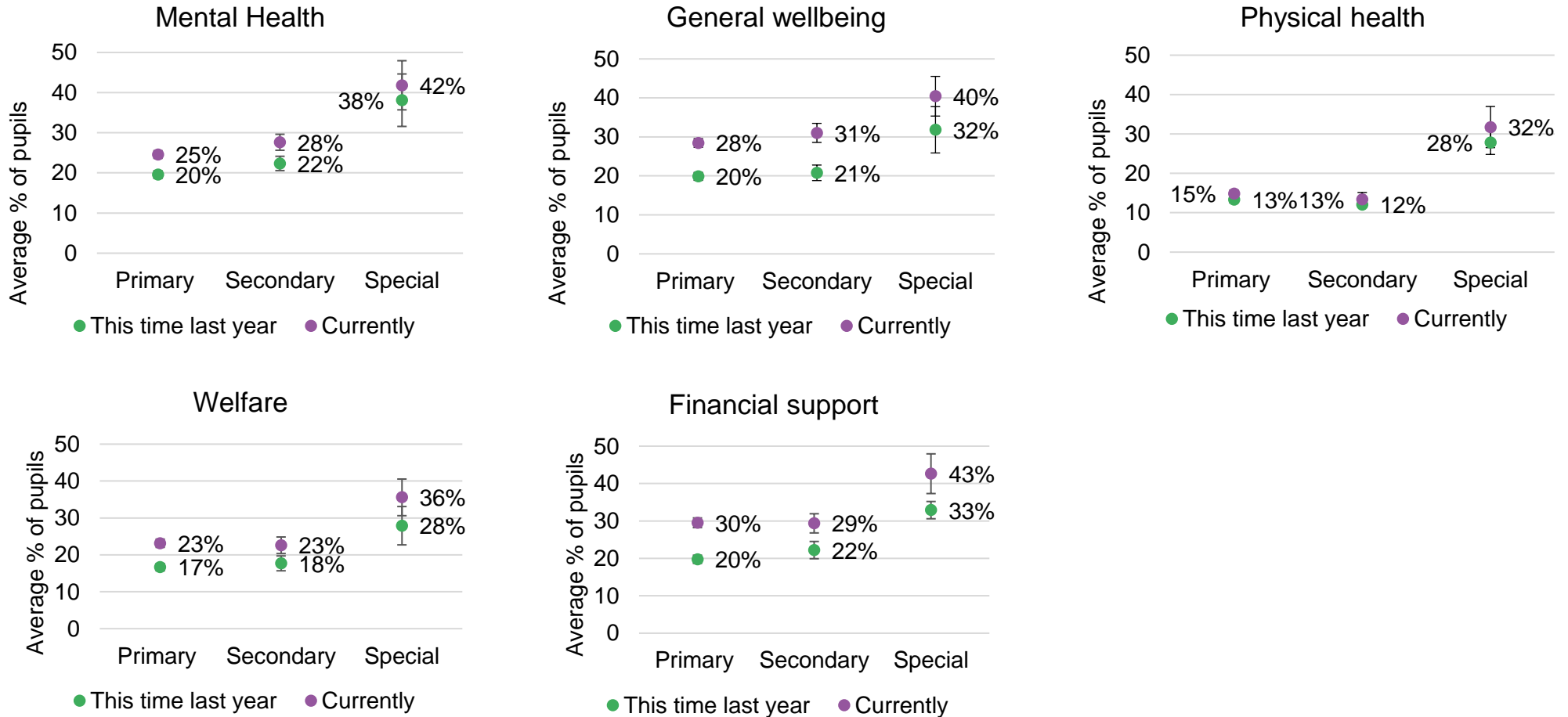
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<sup>8</sup> Senior leaders selected one of the following ranges: over 90 per cent of pupils, between 71 and 90 per cent, between 51 per cent and 70 per cent, between 31 per cent and 50 per cent, less than 10 per cent. Mid-points were used to estimate an average across all senior leaders (see the Appendix for more detail).

<sup>9</sup> It should be borne in mind that, as senior leaders were asked to recollect the number of pupils requiring additional support in the previous year, estimates may be higher than if they were gathered in April 2022. This is because the estimates may be influenced by factors which have affected respondents' perceptions and recall of the previous year.



**Figure 2 Average percentage of pupils requiring different types of additional support**



Note: Confidence intervals have been included on the charts. Where confidence intervals do not overlap, they indicate that differences in the average per cent of pupils over time can be considered significant.

Source: NFER survey of 1441 senior leaders: the minimum number of responses given to an individual item was 1310

While the sample size of special schools is comparatively small, this highlights the particularly challenging circumstances which special schools are currently facing in supporting pupil well-being and mental health – which have been amplified by cost-of-living pressures. Previous research has also identified that pupils with SEND in specialist settings had been greatly affected by the pandemic disruption, which appears to have impacted on their mental health and emotional well-being (Skipp *et al.*, 2021).

### 2.1.2 Welfare and financial support

#### **Senior leaders report significant increases in the numbers of pupils requiring additional welfare or financial support**

Figure 2 also shows that, over the last year, cost-of-living pressures have contributed to a significant increase in the number of pupils across mainstream and special settings requiring additional support related to welfare (e.g., provision of food, clothing and warm spaces) and financial support to access learning, social and extra-curricular activities (e.g., subsidies for trips or travel, IT access, transport costs and books). For example, leaders report that the percentage of pupils in primary schools who require additional financial support has increased from 20 per cent to 30 per cent in the last year.

These findings reflect those from teachers, where a substantial number report an increase in the proportions of pupils coming into school hungry and without adequate clothing or equipment (as shown by Figure 3). Teachers report that an average of 20 per cent of pupils in a special school class, 12 per cent of pupils in a primary school class and seven per cent in a secondary school year group or house are coming into school hungry<sup>10</sup>. Almost half of mainstream teachers state this represents an increase compared with last year (44 per cent of primary and secondary school teachers).

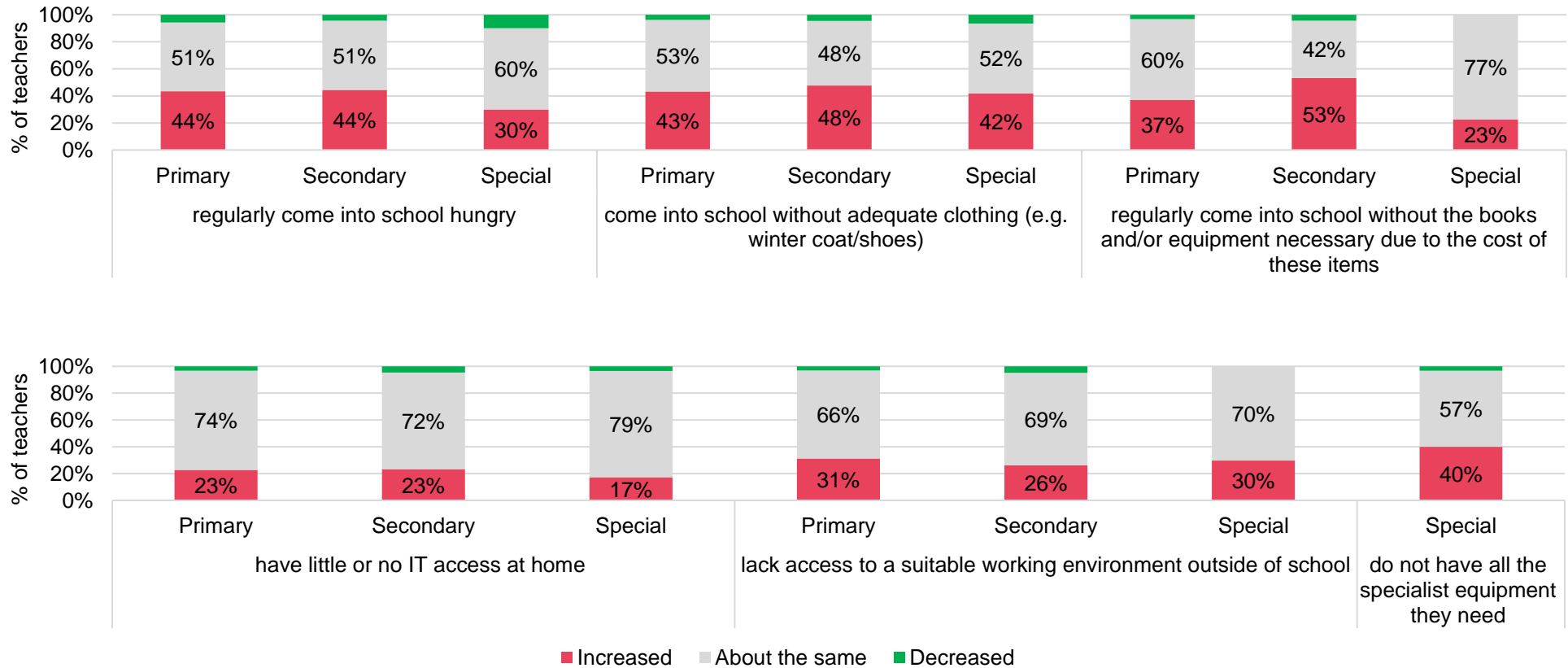
Recently on a school trip we thought pupils were presenting with behaviour issues when they didn't flush [the] toilet but it turned out they are not allowed to waste water and flush at home. The same went for brushing teeth and having showers. Hygiene is really poor and getting worse. –  
Special school teacher

Although my school is in a predominantly wealthy area, it has been worrying to see the increase in the number of children in other classes who were able to manage last year but are now turning up at school hungry. – Mainstream teacher

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<sup>10</sup> Teachers provided the number of pupils in their class (primary/special schools) or year group (secondary schools) who fit into these categories. The proportions of class/year groups were calculated using teachers' reported total number of pupils in their class/year group.

**Figure 3 Teachers' reports of changes, compared to last year, in the proportion of pupils coming into school hungry, without adequate clothing and without adequate materials**



Source: NFER survey of 1358 teachers: the minimum number of responses given to an individual item was 671. Apart from 'do not have all the specialist equipment they need to access and engage with learning' where 36 teachers from special schools gave a response

As with mental health and well-being support, the levels of welfare support needs in special settings was particularly high (at 36 per cent of pupils, up from 28 per cent). The same is true of financial support needs (43 per cent of pupils, up from 33 per cent). Research has identified that households of pupils with SEND face not only an income penalty (as parents and carers tend to have their ability to work restricted), but often have to meet extra costs associated with their child's SEND (Family Fund, 2022). A strong relationship has also been documented between SEND and poverty (Shaw *et al.*, 2016). This may explain why the rates of welfare and financial support appear to be greatest in the special sector, as these families are feeling the most pressure. This highlights that special schools are likely to face particular challenges in supporting financial and wellbeing needs in light of cost-of-living pressures.

### **Some pupils do not have access to a suitable working environment or IT at home**

Periods of school closures during the Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of a suitable working environment for pupils outside of the classroom. However, according to teachers, a substantial proportion of pupils do not have access to a suitable working environment (on average, 16 per cent of secondary school pupils, 22 per cent of primary school pupils and 31 per cent of pupils in special schools).

As shown in Figure 3, roughly a third of teachers report this has increased compared with last year (31 per cent of primary, 26 per cent of secondary and 30 per cent of special schools). One possible explanation for this increase is that pupils are avoiding working at home due to increased energy prices. Furthermore, increasing housing and rental costs may be resulting in families moving into smaller, lower quality housing and/or temporary accommodation. At the end of March 2023, 104,510 households were in temporary accommodation, representing an increase of ten per cent compared to March 2022 (GOV.UK, 2023). This suggests that cost-of-living pressures may be impacting pupils' ability to engage with learning at home, as well as at school.

Additionally, teachers report that around one in five pupils in primary and one in four pupils in secondary and special schools have little or no IT access at home. As shown in Figure 3, most teachers report this was about the same as last year. This suggests that, while inequalities in pupils' access to IT persist, cost-of-living pressures have not worsened the situation.

### **Pupils in the most disadvantaged schools are more likely to require additional support**

As might be expected, teachers in the most disadvantaged primary schools are more likely to report increases in pupils with little or no access to IT equipment, coming to school hungry, without adequate clothing and/or equipment than those in the least disadvantaged schools. For example, over half (56 per cent) of primary school teachers working in schools in the most disadvantaged quartile of schools report an increase in the proportion of pupils coming to school hungry, compared with 29 per cent in schools in the least disadvantage quartile. This highlights that the most disadvantaged schools have been disproportionately impacted by cost-of-living pressures, albeit the pattern in secondary schools by level of pupil disadvantage was more mixed across different types of need.

### **Lack of access to specialist equipment in special schools is a particular concern**

Teachers in special schools were also asked how many pupils in their class do not have all the specialist equipment they need to access and engage with learning (e.g., wheelchairs/mobility aids; supportive software; change of clothes). On average, teachers in special schools report that 24 per cent of pupils do not have all the specialist equipment that they need. As shown by Figure 3, around 40 per cent of special school teachers report this is an increase compared with the previous year, suggesting this has been exacerbated by recent cost-of-living increases.

In special schools, many pupils require access to specialist equipment in order to fully access their learning, school activities or social interactions. A lack of suitable specialist equipment is also likely to necessitate school staff providing more support to these pupils than should be needed if they had been provided with or able to afford this equipment. For example, a pupil whose wheelchair is broken or not correctly fitting will need more adult help; pupils without computer communication support will need staff to fulfil this role. Our findings indicate therefore that recent increases in the cost of living are impairing pupils’ ability to access and experience education. Additionally, it means an increased role for school staff at a time when schools’ budgets may be squeezed by other cost-of-living pressures.

#### **2.1.3 Special educational needs**

##### **Meeting the needs of pupils with SEND was also a key issue raised by mainstream settings**

In their open responses, many teachers and senior leaders in mainstream schools flagged that the incidence of SEND and/or challenging behaviours among their pupils has increased significantly in recent years and that this trend has been amplified by cost-of-living pressures.

SEND children are increasingly more complex, so need more support. Lack of school places in this sector impacts upon this. – Mainstream senior leader

We have seen a significant increase in the number of pupils entering Nursery and Reception with learning and behavioural needs. I have been in education 25 years... we have never experienced anything like what we are going through at present. Whether this is due to the cost of living, or as a result of lockdowns, or both, is hard to say, but our staff are facing challenges we have not faced on this scale. – Mainstream senior leader

My school does not have the budget to provide 1:1 support for children that have SEND thus we have to share responsibility between teacher and teaching assistant (TA). This means we can’t support the rest of the class adequately. – Mainstream teacher

#### **2.1.4 Safeguarding, behaviour and absenteeism**

##### **Safeguarding concerns, behavioural incidents and absenteeism have increased, particularly in secondary schools**

Figure 4 shows that most senior leaders (over 80 per cent in all settings) agree or strongly agree that increases in the cost of living have increased safeguarding concerns and/or incidents in the school. Senior leaders also agree there has been an increase in behaviour incidents (66 per cent

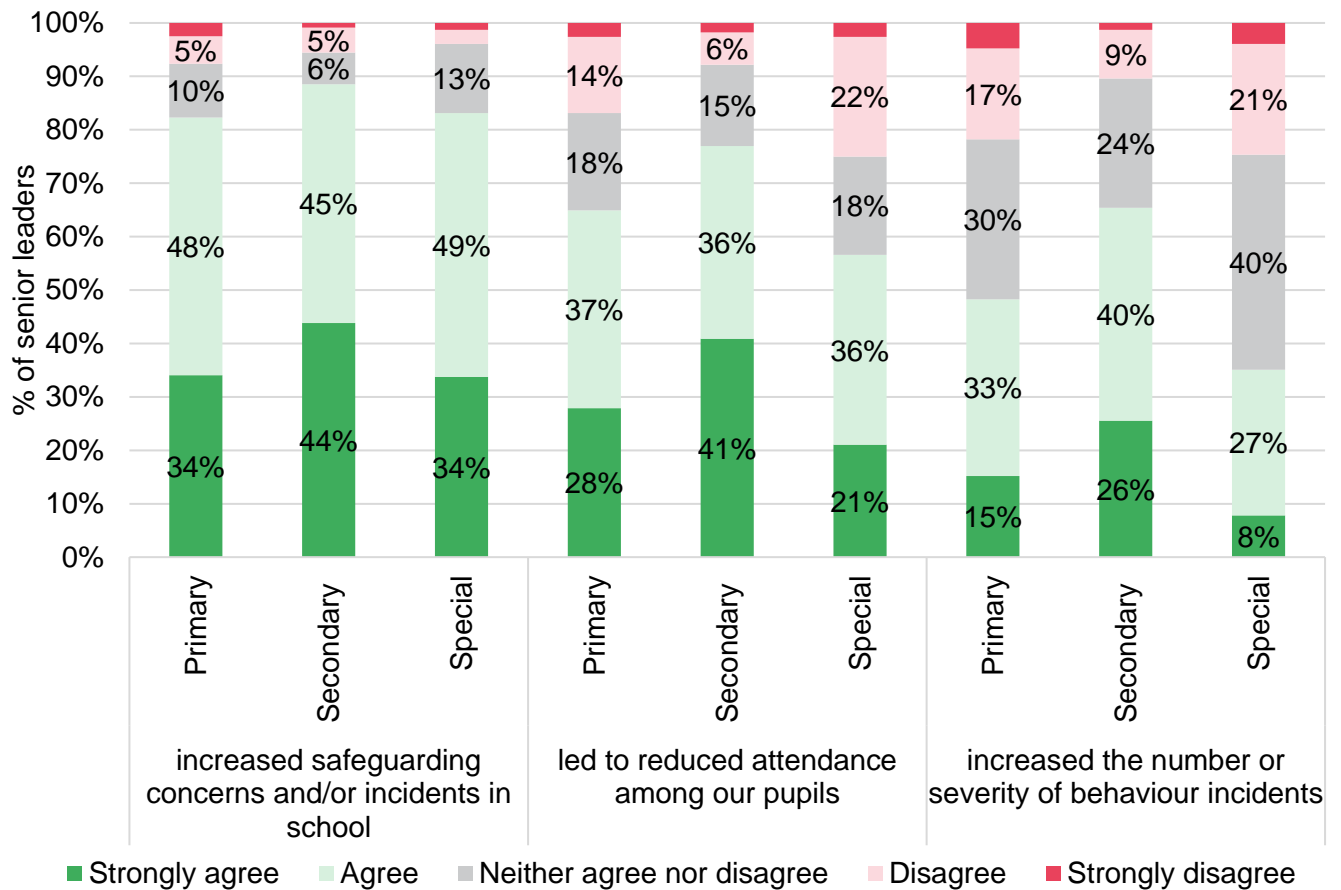
in secondary, 48 per cent in primary and 35 per cent in special schools) and a reduction in pupil attendance (77 per cent in secondary, 65 per cent in primary and 57 per cent in special schools) due to the increases in the cost of living.

Much more concerns logged regarding children's home life, lack of food or clothing, mental health problems and safeguarding generally. – Mainstream senior leader

The worst thing is the hidden poverty and the fact that we cannot support everyone. We are seeing an increase in safeguarding concerns as a result of strained parental relationships. – Mainstream senior leader

I would also say that pressure on households could be contributing to more adverse behaviour in school due to students having a less stable home life and picking up on the pressure adults in their lives are under. – Mainstream teacher

**Figure 4 The extent senior leaders agree or disagree that increases in the cost of living have impacted on pupils over and above other factors (e.g., Covid-19 recovery)**



Note: Due to rounding errors, figures may not match breakdowns presented elsewhere

Source: NFER survey of 1441 senior leaders: the minimum number of responses given to an individual item was 1290

Since the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been widespread concern about the level of persistent absence (where a pupil's attendance is lower than 90 per cent of possible sessions) in schools (Long and Danechi, 2023). Indeed, in autumn 2022/23, the persistent absence rate was 41 per cent in special schools (up from 28 per cent in 2018/19), 21 per cent in primary schools (up from nine per cent in 2018/19) and 27 per cent in secondary schools (up from 13 per cent in 2018/19) (DfE, 2023a).

Our findings suggest that, as a result of cost-of-living pressures, the task of reducing persistent absence in schools may have become even more challenging. This is because increases in absence may be related to the rise in travel costs as well as illness due to poor home conditions (including pupils being hungry, cold or damp) or not having the specialist support and equipment needed to be in school.

The cost of living is causing increase in illness due to lack of heating in homes, lack of nutrition for students and therefore decreasing attendance. – Mainstream senior leader

Some students are missing out on their education due to parents not being able to afford transportation costs when they're not entitled to free school transport, so therefore those students aren't able to get into school. – Mainstream teacher

### **Increased safeguarding concerns, behavioural incidents and absenteeism have most affected disadvantaged schools**

For example, 56 per cent of secondary senior leaders from the least disadvantaged quartile of schools report that cost-of-living pressures have led to reduced attendance compared with 85 per cent in most disadvantaged quartile of schools. This highlights that cost-of-living pressures have disproportionately increased the challenges faced by the most disadvantaged schools.



## 2.2 How are schools responding to need?

### Key findings

- In response to cost-of-living pressures, schools are expanding the scale and range of support they have available in school to support *both* pupils and their households.
- The most disadvantaged schools are providing the most support to pupils and their households and report the highest rates of pupil take up.
- It is not just children eligible for pupil premium who are receiving support – in the majority of schools, most pupils taking up support are not eligible for pupil premium.
- Schools are subsidising the cost of providing free schools meals from other parts of their budget, particularly in the most disadvantaged schools.

### 2.2.1 Range of support being provided to pupils and their households

#### **Schools are providing a wide range of support to pupils and their households in response to cost-of-living pressures**

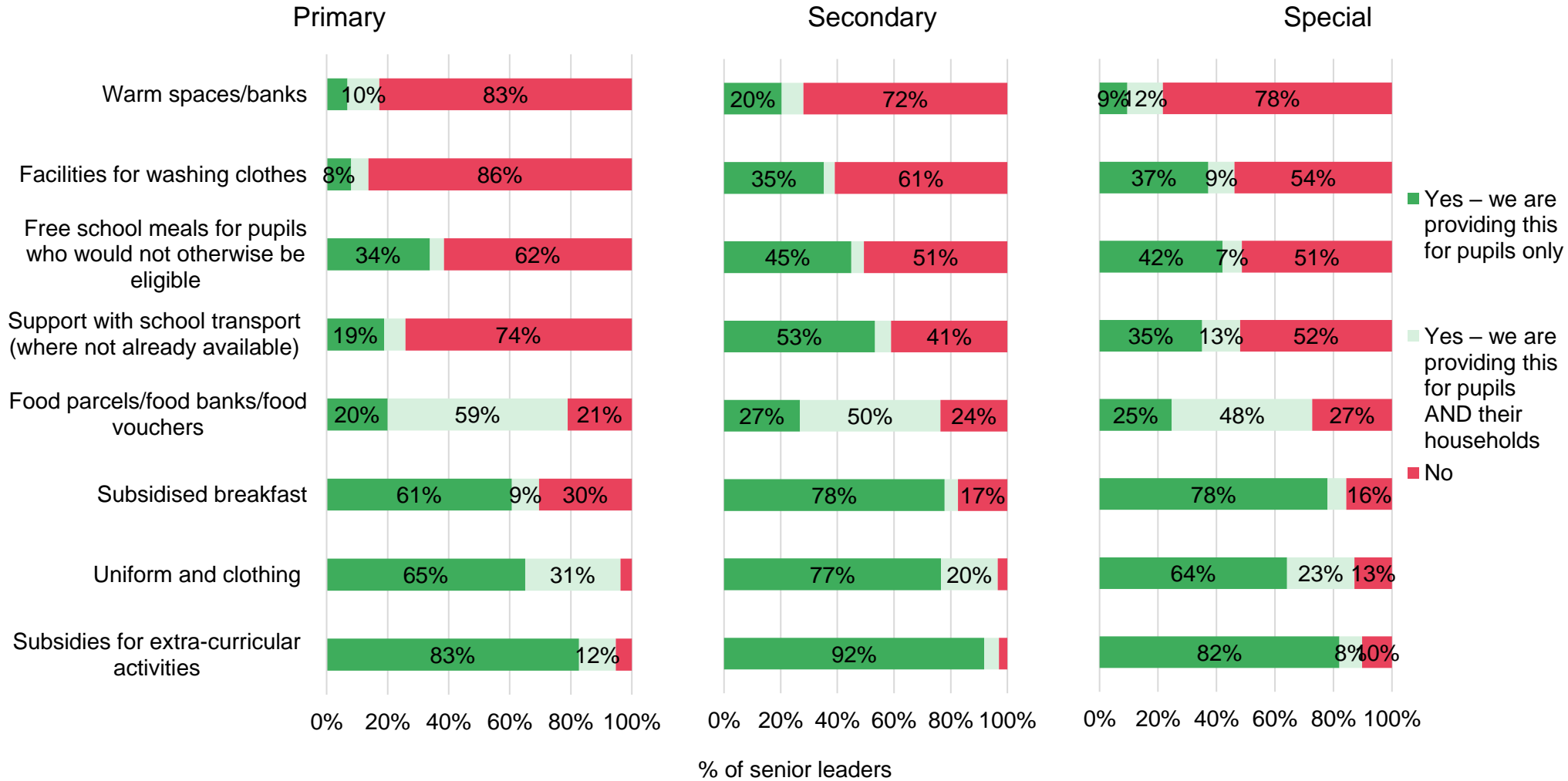
Figure 5 presents the different types of support/services that senior leaders report their schools are providing to pupils in order to meet their needs. The most common support activities reported by schools across all phases include: providing uniform and clothing to pupils (over 95 per cent of mainstream settings and 87 per cent in special schools), subsidising extra-curricular activities (at over 90 per cent across all types of settings), subsidising breakfast (around 70 per cent of primary schools and over 80 per cent in secondary and special schools) and providing food parcels/food banks/food vouchers (over 70 per cent across all types of settings).

Although less common than other types of support, 28 per cent of secondary schools and 21 per cent of special schools are providing warm spaces/banks (compared to 17 per cent of primaries) and 39 per cent of secondary schools and 46 per cent of special schools are providing facilities for washing clothes (compared to 14 per cent of primaries).

A substantial share of schools are also providing free school meals for pupils who would not otherwise be eligible: at 39 per cent of primary schools, 49 per cent of secondary and special schools.

Many schools are not only supporting pupils, but also providing support to pupils' households. For example, around half of secondary and special schools are providing food parcels/food banks to pupils' households (50 per cent and 48 per cent respectively) and this rises to 59 per cent of primary schools. This demonstrates that schools are providing unprecedented levels of support to both pupils and their households because of the cost-of-living increases. While this may go beyond schools' statutory responsibilities, pupils whose most basic needs are not being met are less likely to attend school and successfully engage with learning.

**Figure 5 Percentage of schools currently providing support/services to pupils and households**



Note: Due to rounding errors, figures may not match breakdowns presented elsewhere.

Source: NFER survey of 1441 senior leaders: the minimum number of responses given to an individual item was 1269

### **Disadvantaged schools and special schools are providing the most support for cost-of-living pressures to pupils and/or their households**

As might be expected, amongst mainstream schools, the most disadvantaged schools are offering a greater level of support to pupils compared to the least disadvantaged schools. For example, 47 per cent of the most disadvantaged quartile of primary schools report offering subsidised breakfast to pupils, compared with 90 per cent in the least disadvantaged quartile (see Figure 16 in the Appendix). Further, around one quarter of the most disadvantaged primary schools are offering warm spaces and facilities for washing clothes. These are much less common in the least disadvantaged schools (nine and six per cent respectively).

In line with other findings, the level of need in special schools appears greater than in mainstream. As shown below in Figure 7, over half of pupils, on average, in special schools are receiving subsidised breakfasts. This compares to around a quarter in mainstream schools. Additionally, just under a half (46 per cent) of pupils in special schools are receiving subsidies for extra-curricular activities, compared to 30 per cent of primary schools and 25 per cent of secondary schools. However, it is important to note that the special schools survey sample is comparatively small.

### **Most of the additional support schools are offering is not new, although there are exceptions**

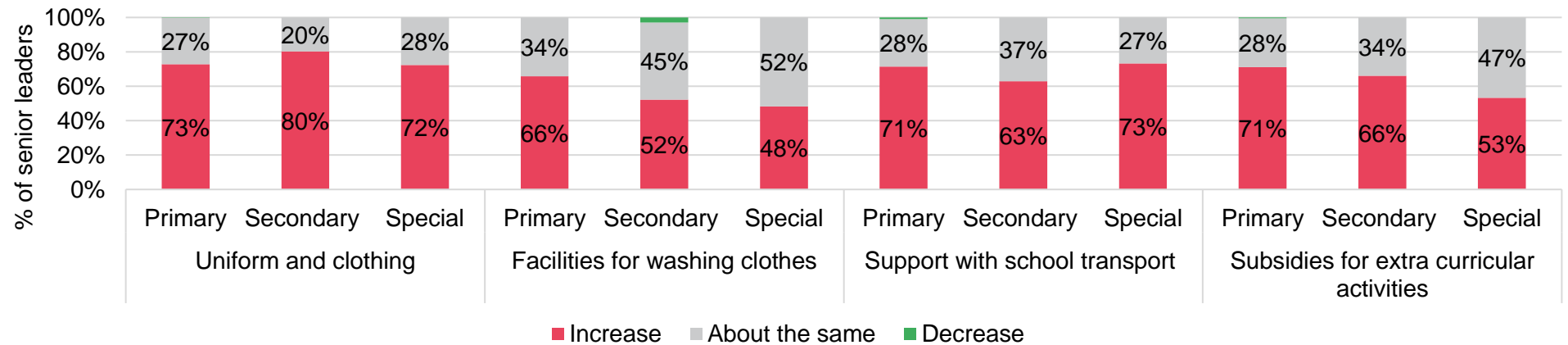
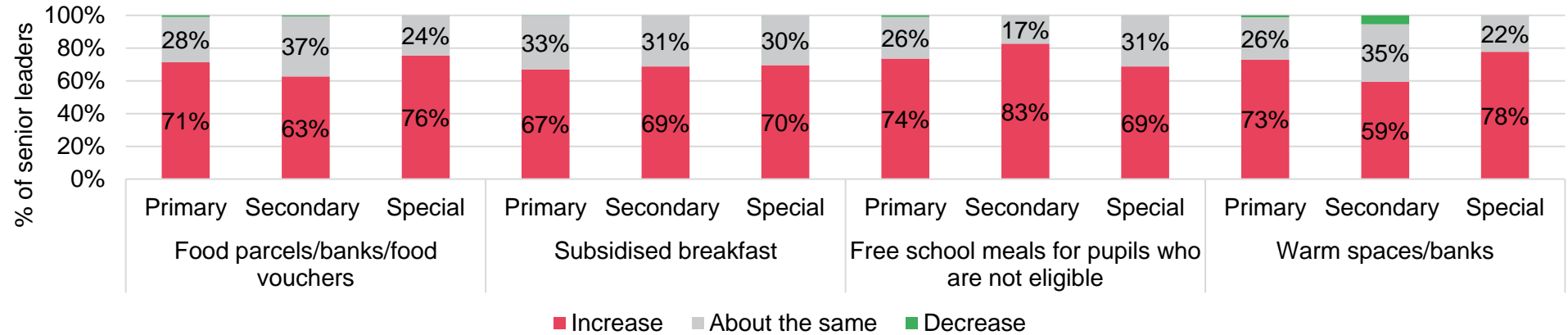
The support services most commonly reported as being newly introduced this academic year are warm spaces/banks and facilities for washing clothes. Of the schools providing warm spaces/banks for pupils, around 42 per cent only introduced them this academic year. Furthermore, 36 per cent of the primary schools offering facilities for washing clothes had started this year (albeit this was lower in secondary and special schools at 19 per cent and nine per cent respectively). These services have likely been newly introduced as a direct response to cost-of-living pressures.

### **Nevertheless, most senior leaders report an increase in the scale of provision across all forms of additional support**

Whilst schools may have already been offering provision for additional support prior to the 2022/23 academic year, senior leaders report an increase in the amount of school time and resource dedicated towards offering different types of support compared with last year. This shows that cost-of-living pressures have led to an increase in the scale of support provided by schools.

As shown in Figure 6, most mainstream senior leaders (around 60 per cent) report an increase in school time and resources devoted to support provision and this is true across most forms of additional support. This was similar in special schools, although only around half report an increase for facilities for washing clothes (48 per cent) and in subsidies for extra-curricular activities (53 per cent).

**Figure 6 Proportion of senior leaders who report an increase in the scale of provision**



Source: NFER survey of 1441 senior leaders: the minimum number of responses given to an individual item was 127

Our findings highlight that there has been an increase in the level of support offered by schools since last year because of cost-of-living increases. This support goes beyond schools' statutory responsibilities. Schools are having to provide welfare-related support to meet the fundamental needs of pupils (and households) such as ensuring that pupils have basic nutrition at home and at the school. This is key for enabling pupils to engage with learning. For example, there is a wealth of research on the importance of pupils' readiness to learn and international comparative studies have identified the associations between pupils regularly arriving at school hungry and having lower attainment (Mullis *et al.*, 2017, 2020).

Children need to be warm, fed and feel safe before they can learn. Fewer children are coming into school in that place so this impacts on learning. Staff spend the first part of every day checking on breakfast, suitable clothing etc before any learning can start. Whilst I would always want to be there for our families, this should not be our primary role. – Mainstream senior leader.

If you are cold or hungry, or parents are arguing about money worries, then school and learning isn't a priority. So many of our students are struggling with behaviour and mental health issues because life is harder outside school. – Mainstream teacher.

**Secondary senior leaders from the most disadvantaged schools are more likely to report an increase in the scale of additional support since last year**

The greatest difference is in facilities for washing clothes, where 63 per cent of senior leaders in the most disadvantaged secondary schools report an increase, compared with 30 per cent of the least disadvantaged. For primary schools, the picture is more mixed. Senior leaders in the least disadvantaged schools are more likely to report an increase for some services, such as support with school transport (79 per cent of those in the least disadvantaged quartile compared with 70 per cent in the most disadvantaged quartile) and facilities for washing clothes (100 per cent of those in the least disadvantaged quartile compared with 66 per cent in the most disadvantaged quartile)<sup>11</sup>.

**2.2.2 How many pupils are benefiting from the different types of additional support?**

**Subsidised breakfast and subsidies for extra-curricular activities have the highest pupil take up in schools**

In the previous sub-chapter (2.2.1), we showed that cost-of-living increases have led to most senior leaders increasing the scale of their additional support provision over the last year.

Figure 7 provides more detail by presenting the proportion of pupils, as reported by senior leaders, that are currently taking up support among the schools offering that type of support. The most common types of additional support (as shown in Figure 5) are those being offered to the greatest proportions of pupils. For example, in primary schools, 30 per cent of pupils are accessing

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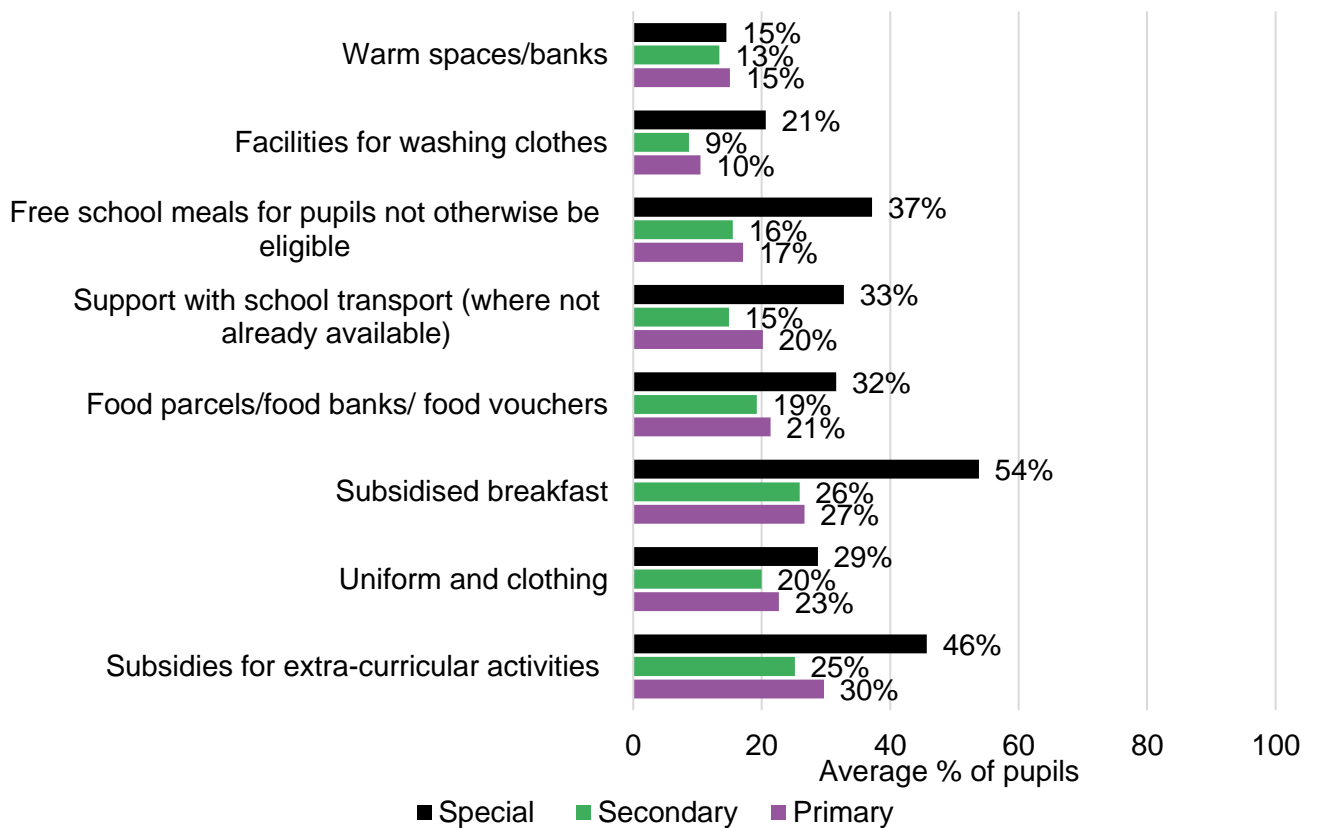
<sup>11</sup> Note, only 81 schools are providing this support to pupils.

subsidies for extra-curricular activities, 27 per cent are accessing subsidised breakfasts and 23 per cent are accessing uniform and clothing provision<sup>12</sup>.

As might be expected, pupils in more disadvantaged schools are more likely to be taking up the support offered by schools across all settings. This was most noticeable with regards to subsidies for extra-curricular activities and subsidised breakfasts. Nearly half of pupils (48 per cent) in primary schools from the most disadvantaged quartile of schools are receiving subsidises for extra-curricular activities, compared to 17 per cent of pupils in the least disadvantaged quartile of schools.

This highlights that schools are not only providing a wide range of additional support to pupils, but that a substantial proportion of pupils are benefiting from this support. As outlined above, cost-of-living pressures have amplified the extent to which pupils are benefitting from this support.

**Figure 7 Average percentage of pupils currently taking up the support that schools are offering**



Source: NFER survey of 1441 senior leaders: the minimum number of responses given to an individual item was 216

<sup>12</sup> Senior leaders selected one of the following ranges: over 90 per cent of pupils, between 71 and 90 per cent, between 51 per cent and 70 per cent, between 31 per cent and 50 per cent, less than 10 per cent. Mid-points were used to estimate an average across senior leaders (see the Appendix for more detail).

**There was variation in the take up of support across different regions, particularly in primary schools**

In general, the proportion of pupils taking up support offered by schools is similar across regions. However, there are some exceptions to this where pupils in the North are more likely to be benefitting from support and/or have seen an increase in support compared to pupils in the South and the Midlands (as shown in Figure 15 in the Appendix A). For example, primary senior leaders in the North compared with those in the South and Midlands are more likely to report increases in the scale of support provided, including support with transport, subsidised breakfast, uniform and clothing and free school meals for pupils who would not otherwise be eligible. This is consistent with the fact that children in the North are more likely to live in poverty compared to the rest of England (NHSA, 2023). In turn, it is not surprising that cost-of-living increases may have disproportionately impacted children in these areas, leading to greater increases in the additional support required from schools.

**2.2.3 Free school meals**

*Costs of provision*

**More than half of the most disadvantaged schools are subsidising the cost of free school meals from other parts of their budget**

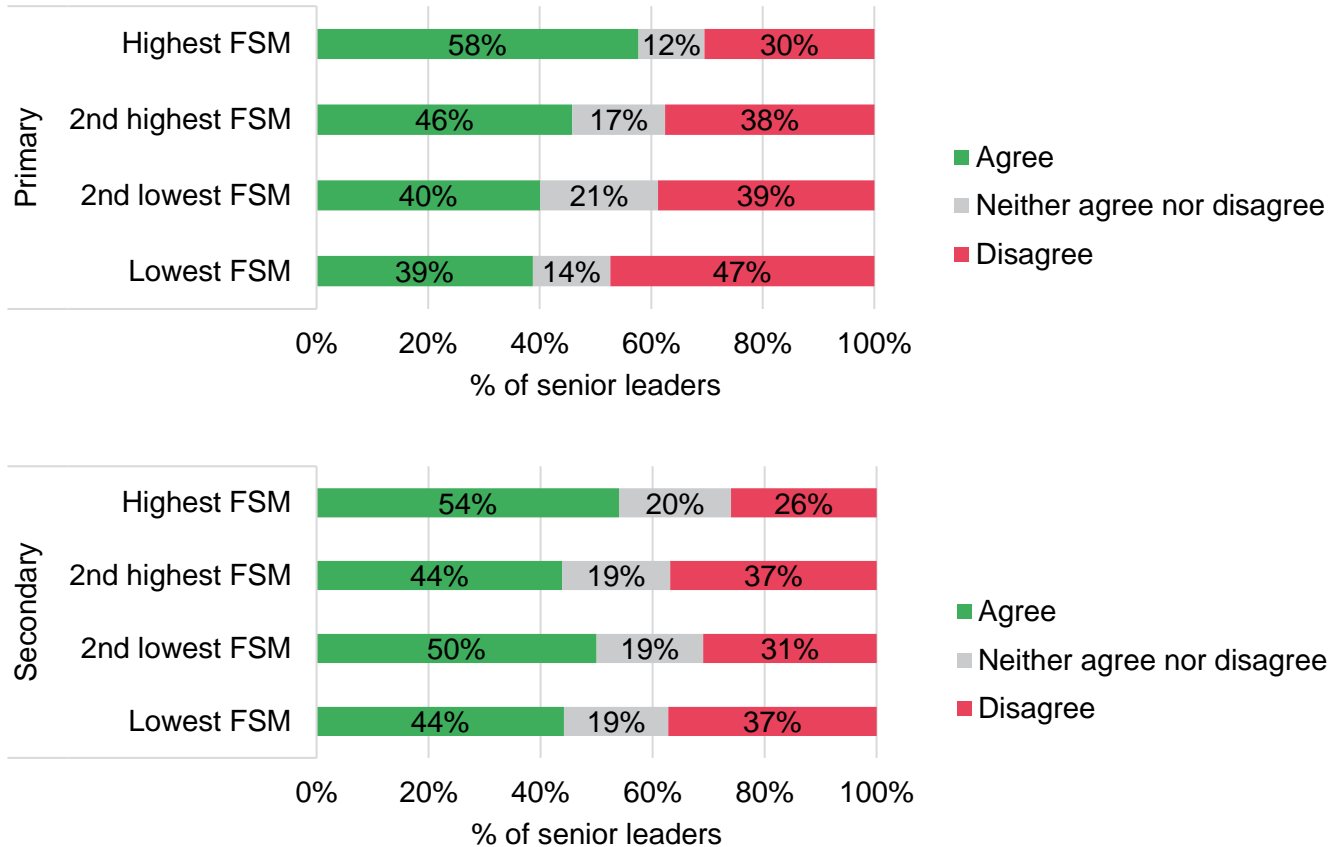
FSM help to reduce food insecurity, improve children’s nutrition and alleviate some of the financial pressures experienced by families (Cribb *et al.*, 2023). Earlier in this chapter, we showed that around half of all secondary schools and special schools and 39 per cent of primary schools report providing FSM to pupils who are not otherwise eligible (Figure 5).

Since cost-of-living pressures have disproportionately impacted food costs (Scott, 2023), senior leaders were asked whether they were subsidising the cost of FSM from other parts of the school budget. Forty-six per cent of primary and 47 per cent of secondary senior leaders agreed with this statement, as did over two-thirds of special school senior leaders (69 per cent).

The proportion agreeing with this statement increases notably as schools become increasingly disadvantaged, particularly in primary. As shown in Figure 8, 39 per cent of the least disadvantaged schools are taking this step compared to 58 per cent of the most disadvantaged schools.

Our findings highlight that funding for free school meals in mainstream schools has not kept pace with recent increases in food prices. Similarly, while special schools do not receive any separate funding for providing free school meals, our findings show that funding increases have not been commensurate with the cost pressures they are facing. This is likely to be contributing to schools’ budget pressures, which are discussed further in Chapter 3 of the full report. It also suggests that, if the costs of providing free school meals are not updated in-line with inflation, schools may need to compromise on the quality of school meals.

**Figure 8 The extent to which schools are using other parts of the school budget to fund free school meal provisions for pupils otherwise not eligible**



Source: NFER survey of 1441 senior leaders: 1058 gave a response

### Eligibility

#### It is not just pupil premium children receiving support related to the increased cost of living

Any pupil who has been eligible for FSM at any point in the last six years is also a pupil premium (PP) pupil. This means that they attract additional funding for their school (in 2022/23, schools received £1385 for every primary age pupil and £985 for every secondary age pupil<sup>13</sup>) and will be counted as disadvantaged in measures of pupil attainment outcomes.

It might be expected that most of the additional support related to the increased cost of living is targeted towards PP pupils. However, senior leaders indicated that many of those receiving support are not eligible for pupil premium (see Figure 9). In only a minority of schools do senior leaders report that the vast majority (i.e., more than 90 per cent) of pupils receiving the additional support are eligible for pupil premium (in six per cent of primary schools, four per cent of secondary

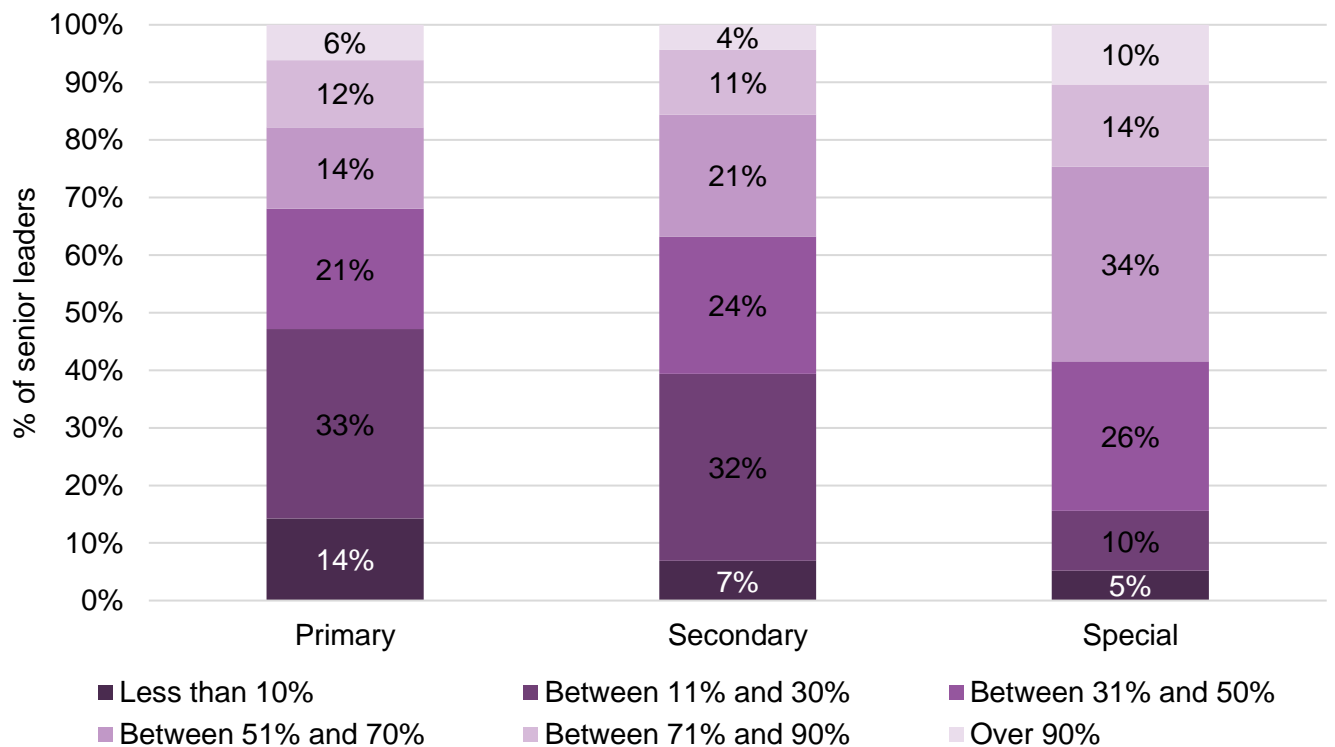
<sup>13</sup> From September 2023, schools will receive £1455 for every primary age pupil and £1035 for every secondary age pupil.



schools and ten per cent of special schools). In over three-fifths of mainstream schools (68 per cent of primary and 63 per cent of secondary schools), senior leaders report 50 per cent or more of the pupils receiving additional support were pupils *not* eligible for pupil premium. By comparison, this was true in around 42 per cent of special schools.

This suggests that the current eligibility criteria for free school meals may be too restrictive. Currently, a family who receives Universal Credit must have a net income of £7,400 or less per year to be newly eligible for FSM. This income threshold has not changed since 2018/19, even though prices have increased significantly since then. If the threshold had kept pace with inflation, it would now be around £8,700 (Cribb *et al.*, 2023). In light of the additional numbers of pupils who are not eligible for PP which schools are having to support and the extent to which cost-of-living pressures have amplified pupil needs, there is a compelling case for revisiting the current eligibility criteria.

**Figure 9 The extent to which pupils receiving support related to the increased cost of living are eligible for pupil premium funding**



Note: Due to rounding errors, figures may not match breakdowns presented elsewhere  
Source: NFER survey of 1441 senior leaders: 1301 gave a response

## 2.3 Teacher confidence in supporting pupils' needs

### Key findings

- Most teachers feel confident in meeting pupils' well-being needs but do not feel confident meeting pupils' financial support needs. This is concerning, given the increase in pupils' need and that teachers are having to deal with these issues more often because of cost-of-living pressure.
- Mainstream teachers do not feel confident meeting the needs of pupils with SEND and feel they would benefit from more internal SEND support.
- Teachers feel unable to access the support they need from external agencies.

### 2.3.1 Teacher confidence

#### Teachers are confident in meeting pupils' well-being needs but less so in meeting financial support needs

Teachers were asked to report the extent to which they feel confident meeting the needs of pupils requiring support in mental health, physical health, general well-being, welfare, financial support to access learning, social and extra-curricular activities or for special educational needs and disabilities. This is crucial given the level of need that schools, and therefore teachers, are contending with in light of cost-of-living pressures (as shown in sub-chapter 2.1).

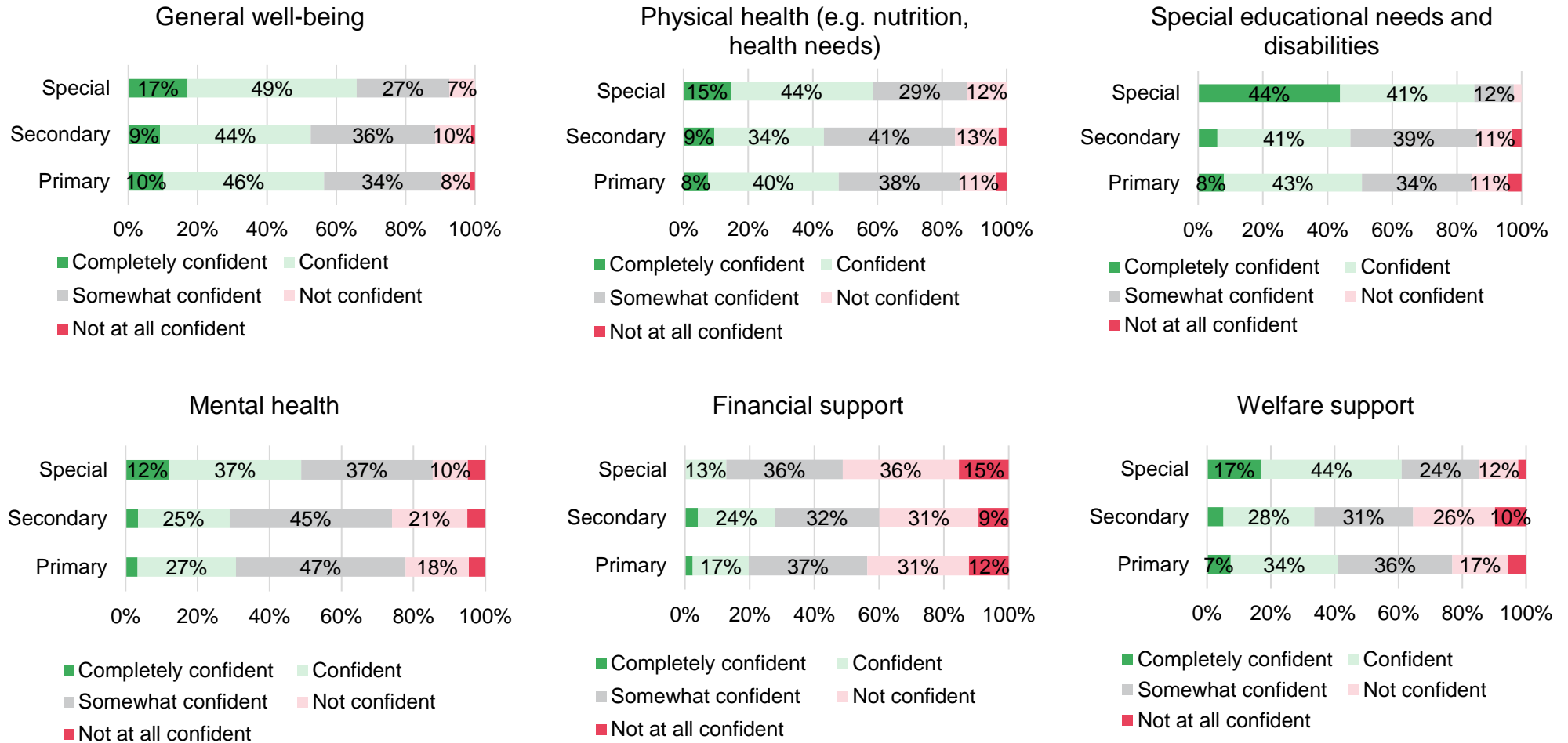
Figure 10 shows that teachers are generally confident in meeting the needs of pupils requiring support related to their general well-being (e.g., safeguarding, difficult household circumstances, bereavement). Over half of mainstream teachers (56 per cent of primary teachers and 53 per cent of secondary school teachers) and two-thirds of special school teachers (66 per cent) report they are confident with this.

Teachers appear to be less confident in supporting pupils' mental health needs (e.g., anxiety, depression), particularly in mainstream schools. Only around three-tenths of mainstream teachers are completely confident or confident about meeting pupils' mental health needs, while around one-quarter are not confident or not confident at all. Teachers in special schools, however, appear to be more confident, with nearly half confident or completely confident.

Additionally, teachers are less confident in meeting pupils' specific needs with regards to financial support to access learning social and extra-curricular activities (e.g., subsidies for trips or travel, IT access). At least two-fifths of teachers across settings are not confident or not confident at all in meeting pupils' needs in this area (40 per cent in secondary, 43 per cent in primary and 51 per cent in special schools).

In the context of the increased levels of pupil need resulting from cost-of-living pressures, it is clear that teachers require more training and/or specialist external support in order to confidently support pupils with their additional support needs.

**Figure 10 The extent that teachers feel confident meeting the needs of pupils requiring support**



Note: Due to rounding errors, figures may not match breakdowns presented elsewhere. All percentages are presented as a percentage of teachers who provided a response  
Source: NFER survey of 1358 teachers: the minimum number of responses given to an individual item was 1281

### **Half of mainstream teachers do not feel confident in meeting the needs of pupils with SEND**

As would be expected given their role, teachers from special schools are generally confident in supporting pupils with special education needs and disabilities (85 per cent of teachers are confident or completely confident in doing so). However, mainstream teachers are much less confident (only 51 and 47 per cent of primary and secondary school teachers said they are confident or completely confident).

Together with the fact that the qualitative evidence suggests that SEND needs in mainstream schools may have increased with cost-of-living pressures (see sub-chapter 2.1), this suggests mainstream teachers need more training, resource and support in this area.

### **Teachers from more disadvantaged secondary schools report greater confidence in meeting pupils' well-being and welfare needs.**

Figure 11 presents teacher confidence in supporting pupils' general well-being and welfare by the disadvantage level within mainstream schools. It shows that the proportion of teachers who are confident or completely confident in meeting pupils' needs across general well-being and welfare increases with the level of disadvantage in schools. One possible reason for this is that teachers in more disadvantaged schools have more experience of supporting pupils facing these challenges. This shows that, while more disadvantaged schools may be facing the greatest levels of additional support needs in light of cost-of-living pressures, their teachers may be best placed to meet those needs.

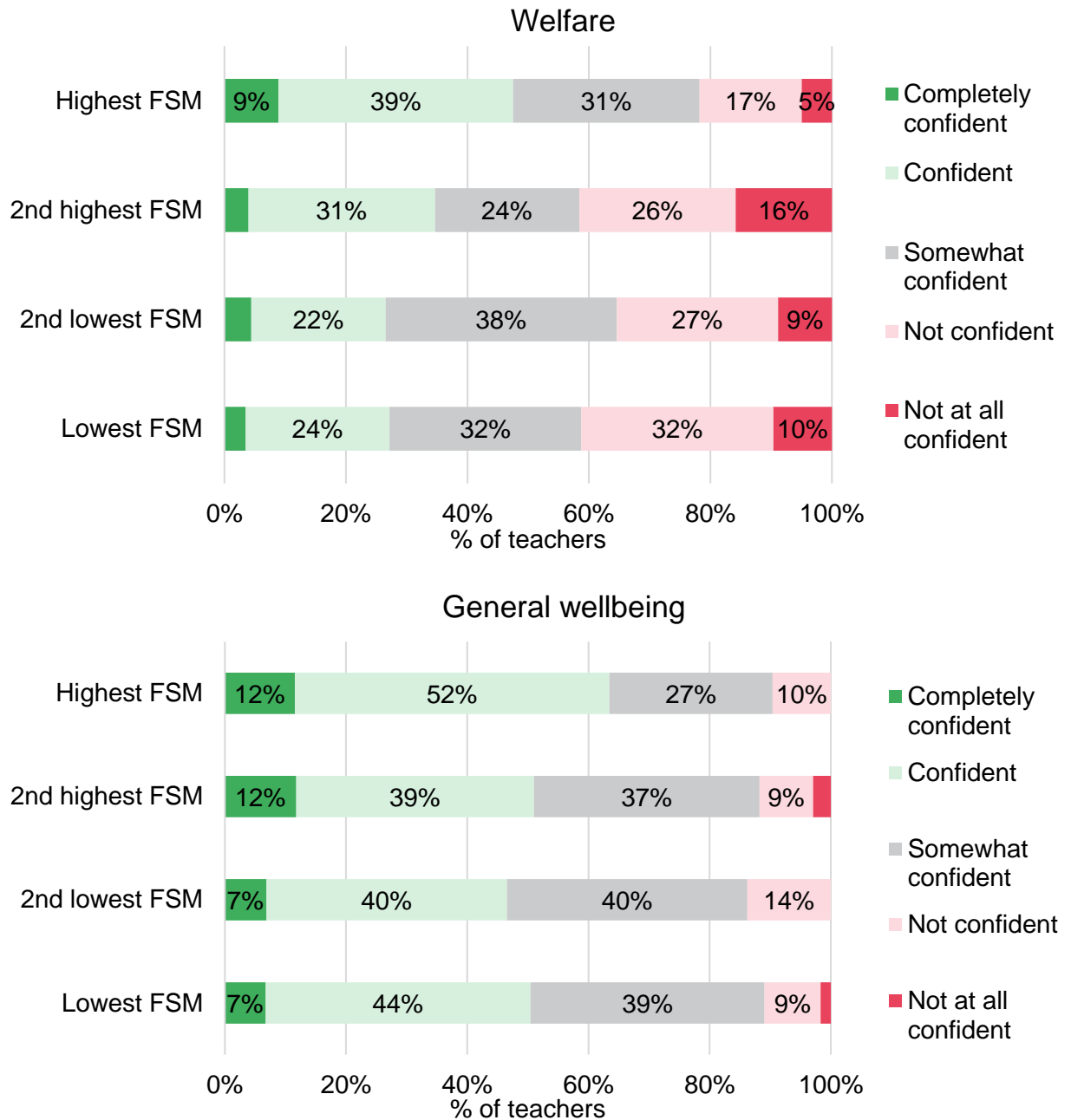
There are no clear patterns in teacher confidence in supporting mental health, financial support and SEND across schools facing different levels of disadvantage.

### **Teachers' confidence in signposting pupils and families to the right support was mixed**

Over half of secondary school teachers (51 per cent) and just under half of primary and special school leaders (at 48 per cent and 44 per cent) said they did not feel confident in signposting pupils and families facing difficulties due to the increased cost of living to the right support.

While this may go above and beyond a teacher's responsibilities, in the context of schools already providing extensive support in response to increased levels of pupil need resulting from cost-of-living pressures, this may be an area where schools would benefit from additional support.

**Figure 11 The extent that teachers feel confident meeting the needs of pupils requiring support by school disadvantage**



Note: Due to rounding errors, figures may not match breakdowns presented elsewhere

Source: NFER survey of 1358 teachers: the minimum number of responses given to an individual item was 1281

### 2.3.2 Support available to teachers

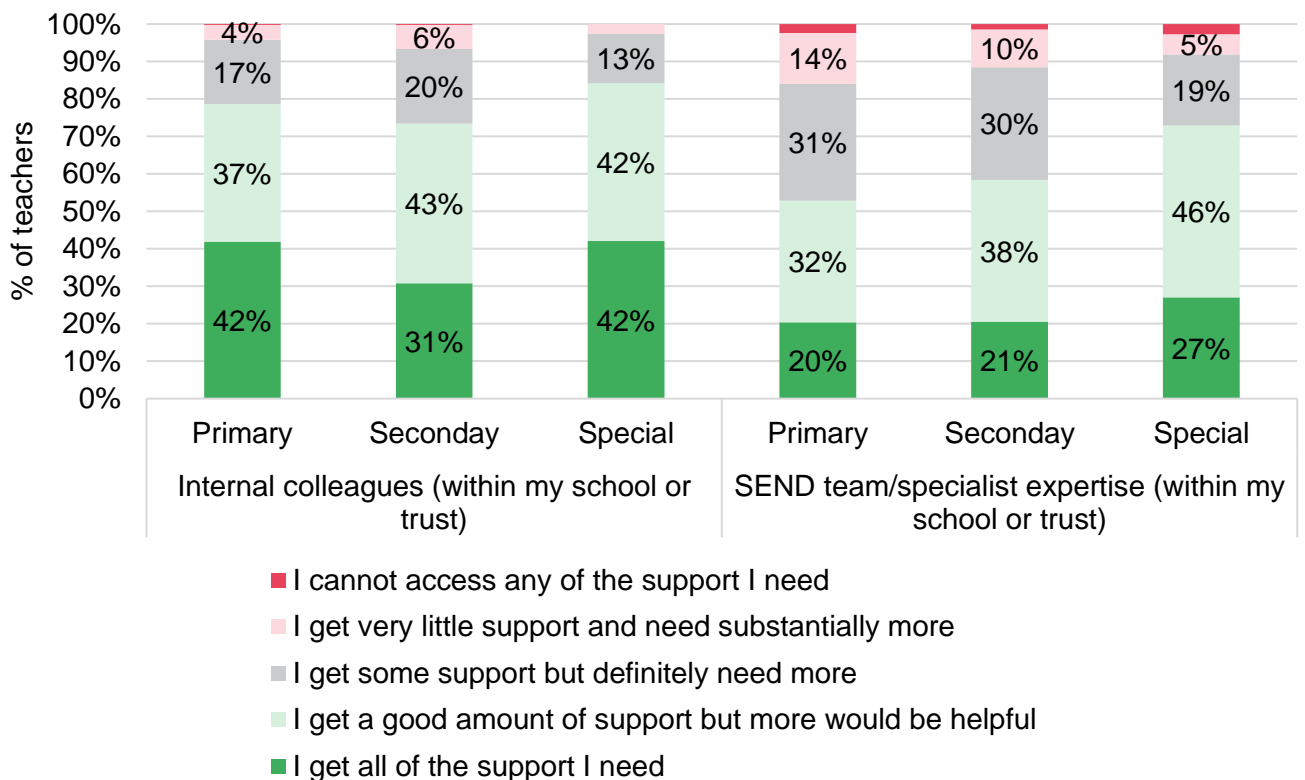
#### Teachers generally feel supported by internal colleagues, although mainstream teachers may benefit from more internal SEND support

Teachers were asked to describe the level of support they are able to access from a variety of sources and how this has changed over the last year. Given the added pressure which teachers and schools are experiencing because of cost-of-living increases, it is crucial that schools feel supported to meet pupils' needs.

Figure 12 shows that, generally, teachers feel supported by internal colleagues, with over 70 per cent of teachers reporting they get all or a good amount of support from their internal colleagues. Most teachers (over 70 per cent across all settings) report being about as satisfied with the level of internal support as last year.

There is little difference in how supported teachers felt by school type. Teachers in academies feel as supported by internal colleagues as those from local authority (LA) maintained schools.

**Figure 12 The level of support felt by teachers from internal colleagues and teams**



Note: Due to rounding errors, figures may not match breakdowns presented elsewhere

Source: NFER survey of 1358 teachers: the minimum number of responses given to an individual item was 1252

However, teachers felt less well supported internally when asked to consider the support they receive from the SEND team/specialist expertise within their school or trust. Only 52 per cent of primary teachers and 59 per cent of secondary teachers report getting a good amount of support from their internal SEND specialist colleagues. This compares to 73 per cent of special school teachers. However, this has not changed as a result of recent cost-of-living increases: most teachers (again at around 70 per cent across all school settings) said this was about the same as last year.

In light of the reported increases in the incidence of SEND and/or challenging behaviours among pupils resulting from cost-of-living pressures (as noted in sub-chapter 2.1.3), this suggests, while this maybe not a new issue, teachers would benefit from more internal SEND support (coming in the form of expertise, such as a SEN coordinator (SENCO), or help from the likes of a TA).

### **However, teachers are unable to access the support they need from external agencies**

As shown by Figure 13, teachers feel less supported by external services. This includes CYPMHS (Children and Young People’s Mental Health Services)<sup>14</sup> and other mental health services, LA services, social and welfare services, external SEND teams/specialist expertise and physical health services.

For CYPMHS and mental health services, less than one-fifth of mainstream teachers and just under one-quarter of special school teachers feel supported. Furthermore, around half of mainstream teachers (50 per cent in primary and 54 per cent in secondary) report being less satisfied with CYPMHS and mental health services compared to last year. This is slightly lower in special schools at 39 per cent.

Only around one-quarter of teachers in mainstream schools feel supported by LA education services. Further, 39 per cent of mainstream teachers are less satisfied with the support compared to last year. Teachers in special schools appear to feel more supported by LA education services with 47 per cent responding that they get all or a good amount of support. However, once again, nearly half (47 per cent) were less satisfied with this support than last year.

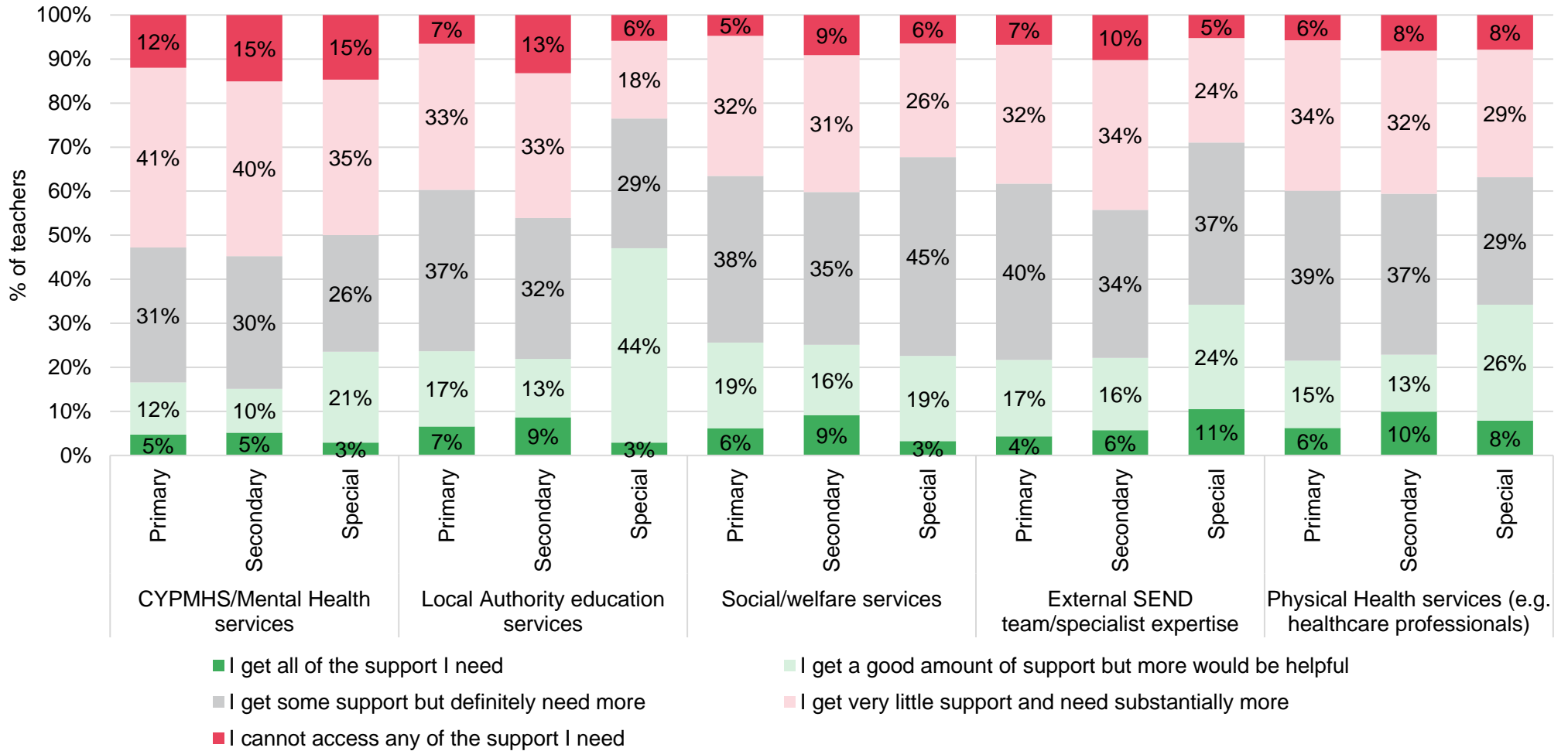
This highlights that, at a time when schools are contending with greater levels of pupil need as a result of cost-of-living pressures, they are being less well supported by external services. This is likely to reflect both a higher demand for those services, and that they services are themselves being impacted by cost-of-living increases.

Together with our findings from sub-chapter 2.2, this demonstrates that, as a result of cost-of-living pressures, schools are being forced to increasingly plug gaps left by other services in order to ensure pupils can continue to engage in education. For example, in their open responses, teachers and leaders report having to support more pupils and/or support pupils to a greater extent with their mental health needs due to the gaps in external mental health services.

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<sup>14</sup> Previously referred to as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS).

**Figure 13 The level of support felt by teachers from external agencies**



Note: Due to rounding errors, figures may not match breakdowns presented elsewhere

Source: NFER survey of 1358 teachers: the minimum number of responses given to an individual item was 866



The impact of cuts to other services such as Social Care and CAMHS is having a massive impact on us all, as we have to pick up this work, and keep referring and supporting families with greater intensity than before. – Special school senior leader

We have to take on the burden of completing lengthy forms with families in order for them to access children's services family support. We are not trained social workers yet we are being asked to do this work. – Mainstream teacher

[We need] better services in place for families to access without it coming from school resources especially social care, mental health services as family breakdown, DV [domestic violence] and substance abuse is now far more common due to pressures they are facing. – Special school senior leader

### **Teachers in secondary academies feel less supported by external agencies than those in LA maintained schools**

There are significant differences across different types of secondary school in the proportion of teachers responding that they get very little support and they cannot access any of the support they need, as shown in Figure 14.

In general, teachers working in secondary school academies feel less supported by external agencies than those in LA maintained schools. There are notable differences in relation to social/welfare services, where 45 per cent of academy teachers did not feel supported, compared with 31 per cent of teachers in LA maintained schools, as shown in Figure 14 .

Additionally, over half (52 per cent) of secondary school teachers in academies did not feel supported by LA education services compared with 33 per cent of LA maintained schools. It is not unexpected that academies would get less support from their LAs (as key services that LA schools receive, academies would have to pay for separately). However, the figure suggests a greater misalignment among teachers in academies in the support they are expecting compared to what they are receiving.

Our findings suggest there may be a need for greater stronger collaboration and alignment between external agencies and academies in order to meet increased levels of pupil resulting from cost-of-living increases. However, the same pattern was not observed by school type for primary schools.

**Figure 14 The level of support felt by secondary school teachers from external agencies, by school type**



Note: Due to rounding errors, figures may not match breakdowns presented elsewhere

Source: NFER survey of 1358 teachers: the minimum number of responses given to an individual item was 835

## 2.4 Discussion

Pupil well-being and welfare continues to be an increasing and pressing concern for schools. Many mainstream and special schools are providing unprecedented urgent support to pupils and their families. While this may go beyond schools' statutory responsibilities, pupils whose most basic needs are not being met – whether it is going to school hungry, being unable to afford the costs of uniform or transport costs – are less likely to attend school and successfully engage with learning. Schools are being faced with little choice but to provide additional support to pupils and families to ensure their pupils can continue to attend school and engage in their learning.

Our findings also highlight that many of the pupils who are in need of additional support do not currently attract any additional funding such as PP for their schools. This suggests that the criteria for being eligible for the free school meals need to be reviewed.

Looking to the future, these challenges cannot be met by schools working in isolation. A lack of suitable wider support services and social support is leading to schools needing to step in to fill this void. With living standards set to remain lower for years to come, a system-wide solution which goes beyond schools is clearly needed to address these challenges.

In the short term, pupils and their families are still likely to require urgent support as cost-of-living pressures continue. Unless other support is provided, schools will face little choice but to continue to step in to ensure their pupils can engage with learning. Action is also needed to look at how families can be better supported (e.g., via the benefits system) through the current circumstances.

**Recommendation 1: The Government should extend the current eligibility for free school meals. At the absolute minimum, this should involve uprating the income threshold for eligibility to reflect inflationary pressures since 2018/19.**

**Recommendation 2a: In the short-term, schools need greater financial support to address pupils' pressing well-being and welfare needs, alongside meeting the additional direct costs (e.g., energy and school meal costs) associated with the increased cost of living.**

**Recommendation 2b: In the short-term, families should be provided with additional support, which might include revisiting current levels of welfare support for families and/or additional cost of living payments.**

**Recommendation 3: In the medium term, ensuring increased capacity and responsiveness of children and young people's mental health services (CYPMHS) and other services around families is needed to ensure that pupils can access the appropriate support and specialist services in a timely manner, rather than schools having to step in to fill those gaps in support.**

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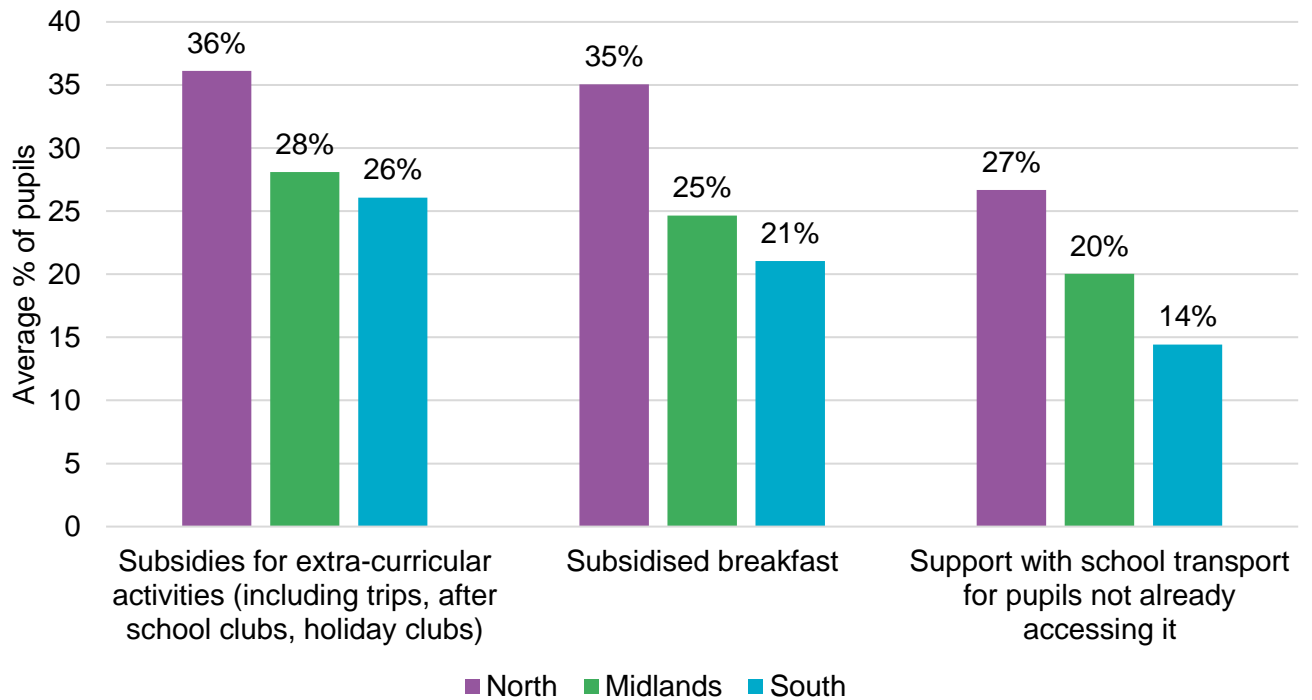
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## Appendix A: Additional figures

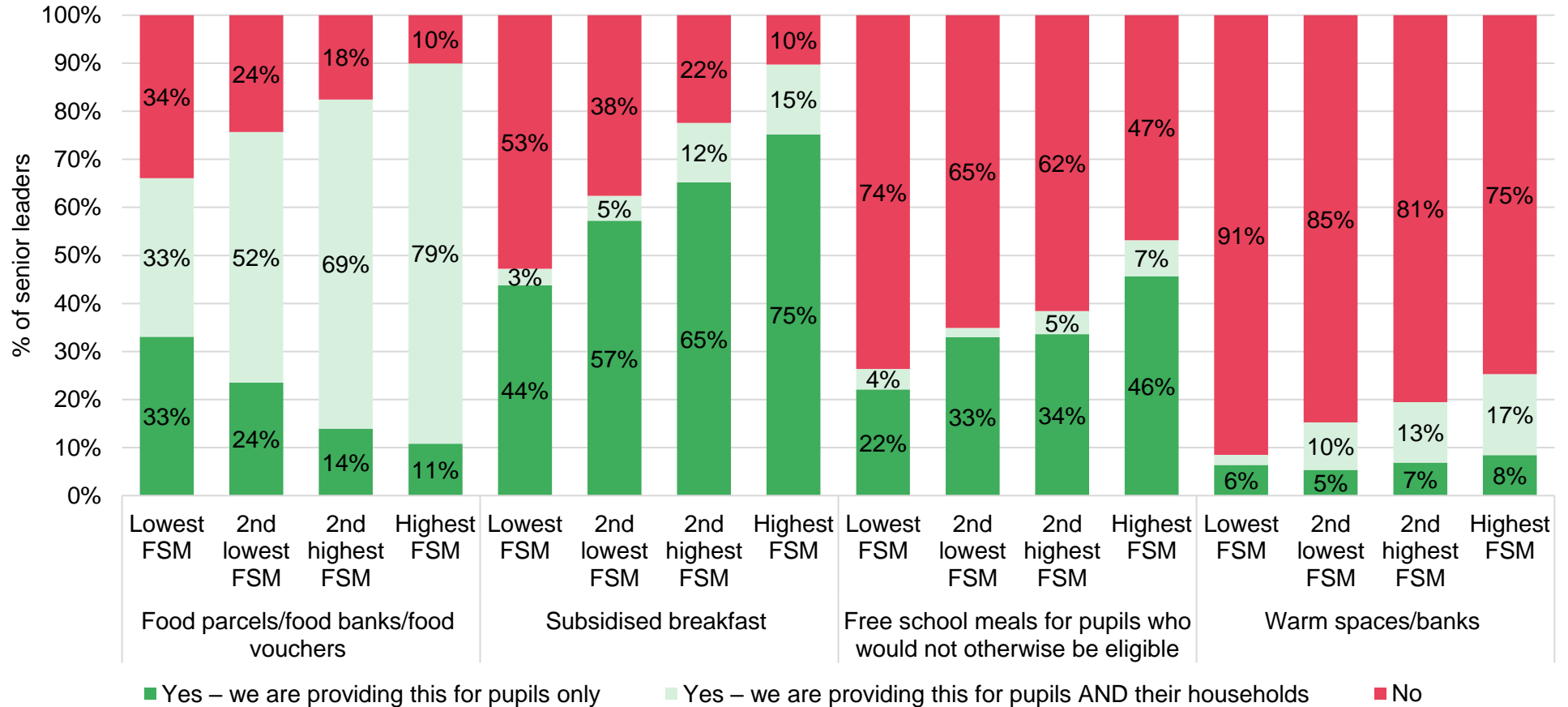
**Figure 15 Average percentage of pupils currently taking up support by region**



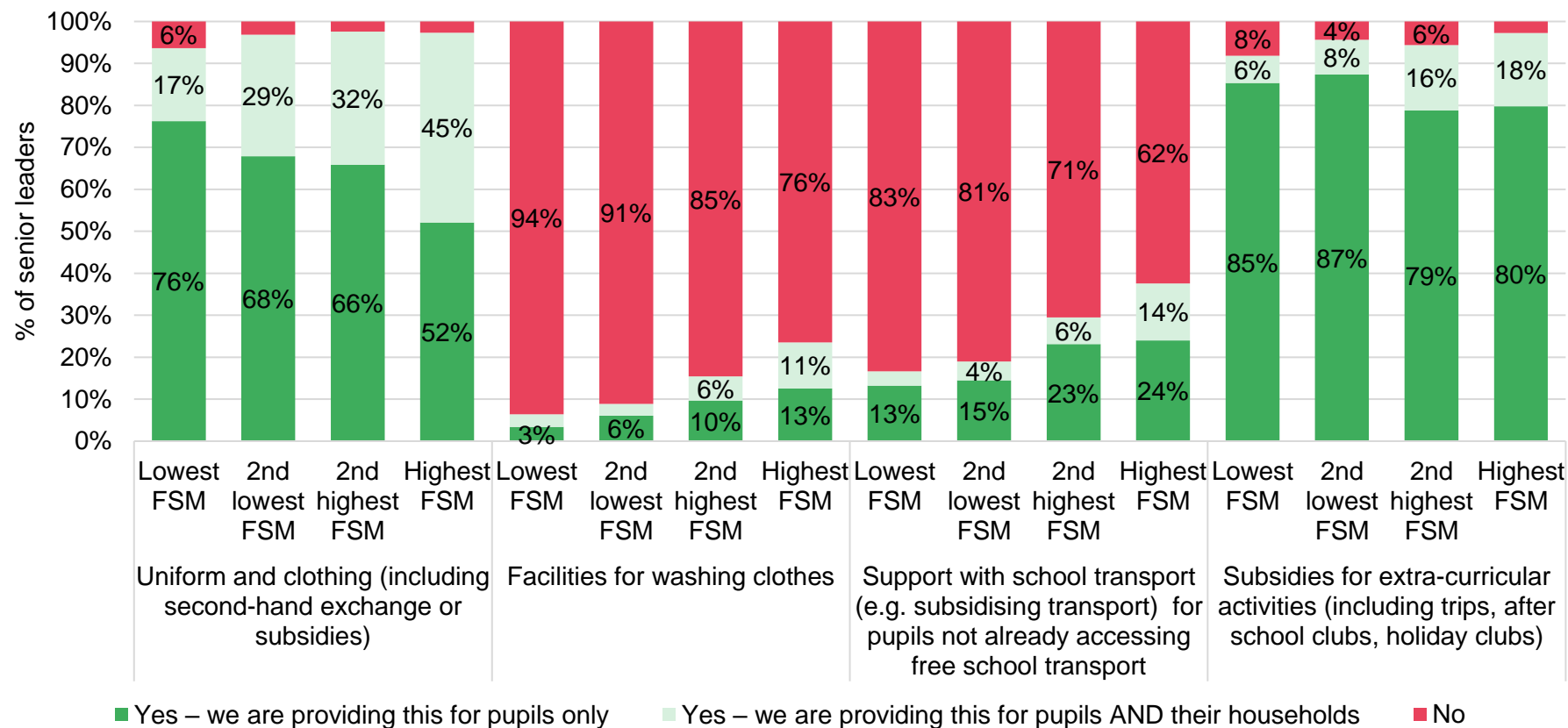
Note: 'North' includes North West, North East and Yorkshire; 'Midlands' includes West Midlands, East Midlands and East of England; and 'South' includes London, South West and South East.

Source: NFER survey of 1441 senior leaders: the minimum number of responses given was 404

**Figure 16 Percentage of primary schools currently supporting or providing services to pupils and households by school disadvantage**







Note: Due to rounding errors, figures may not match breakdowns presented elsewhere

Source: NFER survey of 1441 senior leaders: the minimum number of responses given was 1269

## Appendix B: Methodological approach for descriptive analysis

### Linking to administrative data sources

Our survey data was linked to a range of administrative data sources. The Department for Education's (DfE's) [Get Information About Schools](#) (GIAS) data was used to identify school-level characteristics such as type of school, geographical information. Historical school finance information was drawn from the School Benchmarking Service data (Schools financial benchmarking, 2023) and local authority (LA) high needs funding information was drawn from the planned school and LA funding publication (DfE, 2022).

### A note on derived variables

We created free school meals (FSM) quartiles by identifying the proportion of pupils eligible for FSM in the population of mainstream and special schools respectively, split by phase (primary and secondary, with all-through schools treated as secondary). Based on this, we then split schools into four evenly sized groups known as quartiles by phase and school type.

Quartiles are used in presenting descriptive analysis, rather than quintiles for ease of presentation. Quintiles are used in the regression modelling.

We created the overall region variable by grouping Government Office Regions as follows: North (North West, North East and Yorkshire), Midlands (West Midlands, East Midlands and East of England) and South (London, South West and South East).

In order to estimate the number of pupils in need of additional support across different areas, senior leaders were asked selected one of the following ranges: 'over 90 per cent of pupils', 'between 71 and 90 per cent', 'between 51 per cent and 70 per cent', 'between 31 per cent and 50 per cent' and 'less than 10 per cent'. Mid-points were used to estimate an average across senior leaders currently (as of April 2023) and compared to the same point last year.

In order to estimate the proportion of pupils coming into school hungry, without adequate clothing and without adequate materials, teachers were asked to provide the number of pupils in their class (primary/special schools) or year group/house<sup>15</sup> (secondary schools) who fit into these categories. The proportions of class/year/house groups were calculated using teachers' reported total number of pupils in their class/year/house group.

### A note on sample weighting for mainstream schools

For mainstream schools, we created a variable that identifies whether a school is a primary or secondary school (with all-through schools treated as secondary) and its quintile level of FSM eligibility. This created a 12-category variable of phase and quintile, including two missing categories. We compared the distribution of the responding schools to the population distribution and used a chi square test for independence to determine if weighting was required. Weights were

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<sup>15</sup> Secondary teachers were only asked to provide a response to this question where they were either a head of year or a head of house.

then constructed to ensure that the sample was representative across both phase and free school meal quintiles.

### Representativeness of the special school sample

The special schools sample was not weighted due to the small response rate achieved. Special school responses will best reflect the experiences of a maintained special school with an average level of pupil disadvantage: non-maintained special schools, schools in the North and the most disadvantaged special schools are all under-represented in the data as shown by Table 1 below. Special schools included in the data covered a wide range of SEND specialisms.

**Table 1 Characteristics of the special school survey**

Category	Population (%)	Sample (%)
<b>Type</b>		
Non-maintained	41	17
Maintained	59	83
<b>Region</b>		
South	40	45
Midlands	31	35
North	28	20
<b>Disadvantaged</b>		
Lowest FSM quintile	20	21
2 <sup>nd</sup> lowest FSM quintile	20	20
Middle FSM quintile	20	23
2 <sup>nd</sup> highest FSM quintile	20	22
Highest FSM quintile	20	15

Source: Based on pooled responses from 87 senior leaders and 41 teachers from special schools. Population proportions are based on data from 1756 special schools

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