

No crib for a bed: a closer look at bed poverty and the Household Support Fund crisis



By Ali Cooper & Ivy Mullen
Date February 2024

Summary

In October 2023 we published our first report on bed poverty: **No crib for a bed: the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on bed poverty¹**. We found that families across the UK are having to prioritise essentials like food, heating and electricity over things like replacing mouldy bedding or fixing a broken bed for their child.



'We can only afford
a food budget of

£50

a month –

and as the boys are sleeping
on the floor it's really hard for
them to get to sleep.'



*Danielle from Bradford,
mother to three sons aged six months, six and three*

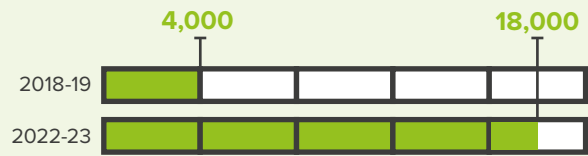
Bed poverty is only one aspect of child poverty and addressing this issue requires a deeper look at how our social security system supports families that are experiencing financial crisis. In this briefing we are publishing **new data**, gathered from local authorities in England, on

the extent of bed poverty in their crisis support services. Local crisis support is a vital part of our social security system, administered by local authorities and designed to provide rapid help to people experiencing financial crisis.

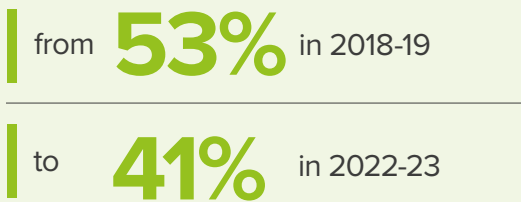
We found that:



Crisis requests for help with children’s beds and bedding **more than quadrupled** between 2018-19 and 2022-23, rising **from 4,000 to 18,000**.



Over the last five years the rate of **successful applications for beds or bedding for children fell** ↓

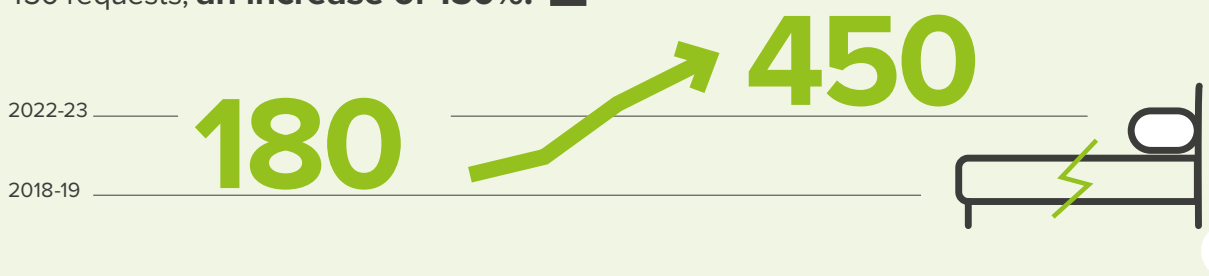


This means that in 2022-23,

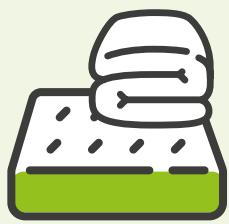
10,307 children and families were turned down with more than half of the requests for help with children’s beds and bedding unsuccessful.

On average, local authorities received

180 crisis requests for help with children’s beds and bedding in 2018-19. By 2022-23 this had risen to 450 requests, **an increase of 150%**. ▲



If local authorities had been able to keep up with growing need, the average local authority would have satisfied



365

requests for beds or bedding to children in 2022-23.



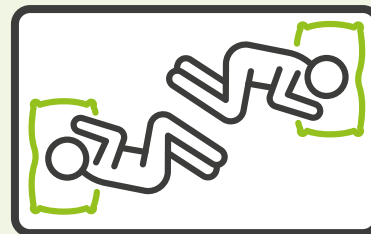
51%

Local authorities were only able to satisfy **half** of these requests.

These figures do not show the full picture. We estimate there would have been over

60,000+

crisis requests for children's beds or bedding if there was no postcode lottery in local crisis support in England.



62% of all local welfare spending comes from the UK Government's Household Support Fund – a scheme set to end in March 2024.² We are deeply concerned about this approaching cliff edge and the impact it will have on families in crisis. Urgent action is needed to fix the Household Support fund. We are calling on the Government to:

- 1. Urgently extend the Household Support Fund** before the scheme ends in March 2024
- 2. Provide a sustainable three-year funding settlement** for local crisis support, increased by 16% to meet growing need (currently £842m)
- 3. End the postcode lottery of provision** by embedding a minimum standard for local crisis support across England
- 4. Establish a Local Crisis Support Commissioner** to provide oversight and improvement of local crisis support by coordinating best practice and overseeing the publication of basic monitoring information
- 5. Amplify, simplify and speed-up the application process** so families in crisis get help within 48 hours



Research context

Key evidence on child poverty

Although inflation fell to 4.2% in December 2023, down from 9.6% in October 2022,³ we remain concerned about the continuing impact of increased costs on children, young people and families. In our three reports about the cost-of-living crisis we identified child hunger, health and wellbeing, access to essentials and access to safe and warm housing as key concerns.⁴ These issues persist and point to an entrenched problem of child poverty in the UK:

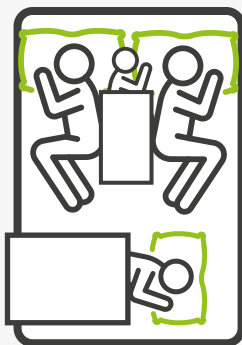
- In 2019 the United Nations reviewed poverty in the UK and found that: “Children are showing up at school with empty stomachs, and schools are collecting food and sending it home because teachers know their students will otherwise go hungry.”⁵

In 2023 the UN’s Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty reiterated these concerns and warned the UK was in violation of international law.⁶

- According to the latest official statistics, 4.2 million children in the UK – more than one in four – live in relative poverty (children in households 60% below the median income, after housing costs).⁷
- Between 2021 and 2022, the number of children in relative poverty rose by 350,000, more than the population of Newcastle.⁸
- 1 million children experienced destitution in 2022, an increase of 186% since 2017.⁹ This is when a child’s basic needs to stay warm, dry, clean and fed cannot be met.

Our previous research on bed poverty

In our October 2023 report on bed poverty we conducted polling of parents and children with YouGov. We estimate that there are:



681,000

families in the UK with children who have had to share a bed with their parent, their parent’s partner or a sibling, because their family cannot afford another bed.

1 million+

families in the UK where parents have given up their own bed so their child has somewhere to sleep.



187,000

families in the UK have not been able to change their children’s bedding in the last 12 months because they cannot afford to wash or dry it.

Bed poverty in our services

In our research we spoke to 100 Barnardo's colleagues who had helped children with beds and bedding.¹⁰ They told us:

*'One child had additional needs and had broken his bedframe. The parents could not afford to replace it meaning he was sleeping on the floor.'*¹¹

*'In a number of our cases, not having a bed has interfered with young people's attendance at school as they are not sleeping properly. I'm working with parents who are struggling with paying for gas, electric and food so although they know a bed is really important they have to prioritise needs.'*¹²

*'I helped one family get new bedding as mould had been growing all over one side of the house. This had ruined their bedding including duvets and duvet covers as well as pillows. Due to the cost of living these families were having to make some really hard choices and feeding and keeping their children warm was more of a priority than having decent beds and bedding.'*¹³



To address the cost-of-living crisis Barnardo's has been providing crisis support to families in our services who are struggling to afford essential items. Helping families with beds and bedding has been a key part of the help provided.

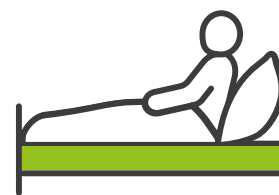
Between October 2022 and September 2023, our crisis support has helped more than 13,000 children and 7,200 families. This has included helping:



442

families with beds,
reaching

1016 children



133

families with
mattresses,
reaching

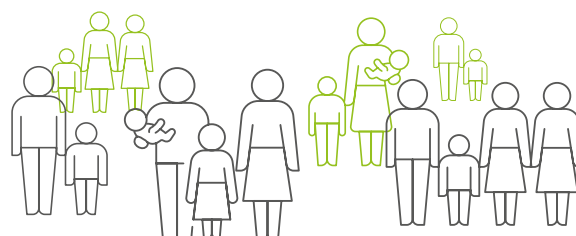
307 children



52

families with
duvets, reaching

110 children



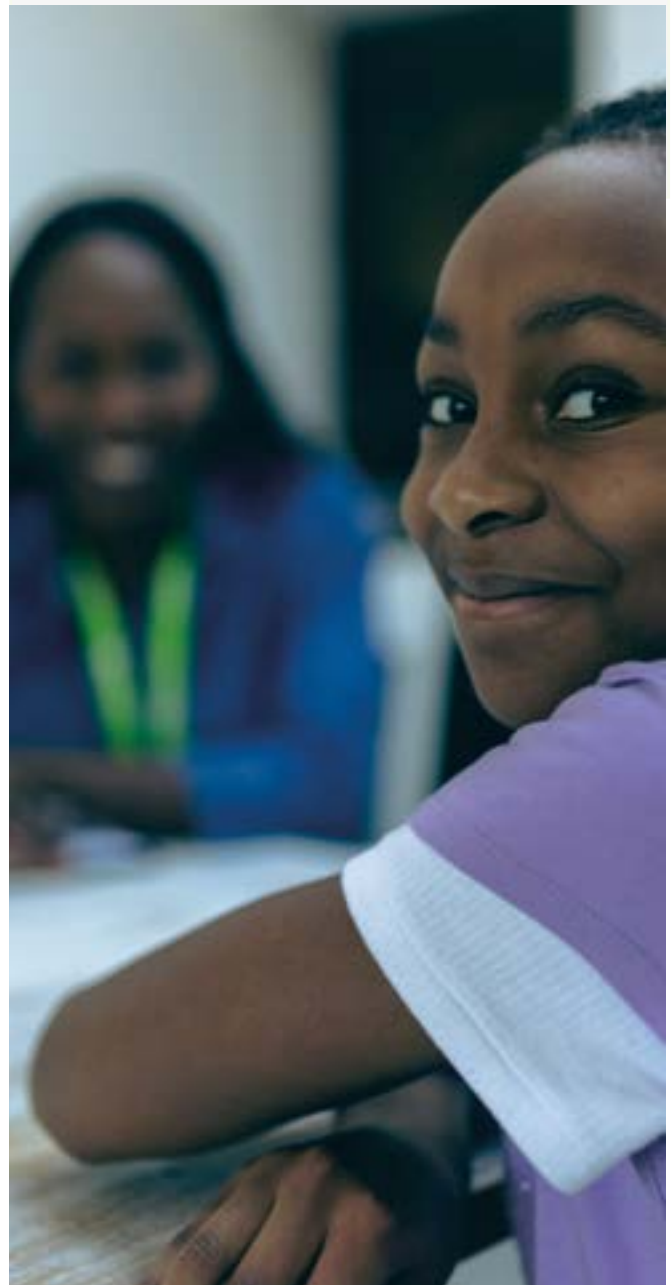
Since our report in October 2023, more Barnardo's colleagues have supported children and families with beds and bedding:

Rachel (name changed), works for Barnardo's and helped one family who had to share a bed due to rising costs: 'I helped a family get a single bed and mattress just before Christmas. The mother had three children - two with special educational needs - but only two beds, meaning that one of the children was sleeping with her. She is now getting the children's bedroom ready for Christmas where they'll have a bed of their own.'

David (name changed), works for Barnardo's and helped one family with housing problems due to damp and mould: 'I supported a family who were forced to move out of their home due to damp and mould posing a health and safety risk for the children. The family lost everything and the mother was very concerned about how she was going to replace things like mattresses and bedding so the children had something clean and safe to sleep on. Barnardo's were able to help with getting items from charity shops and donations to replace items. It was a great help to the family and much needed as the family had no one else to turn to for support.'

Kate (name changed) works for Barnardo's and highlights the importance of a good night's sleep on one child she worked with: 'I worked with one mother to get duvets, pillows and bedding for her daughter as the ones she had were old and sparse. She said to me her daughter went straight to her bedroom to put the new duvet, pillows and bedding on. Her daughter was thrilled with it! It's also going to help her daughter sleep better and stay more alert at school.'

Janet (name changed), supported one family before Christmas with broken bedding: 'I worked with one family right before Christmas who were homeless and in temporary accommodation. Their children's beds were old with springs showing and it was causing them to have poor sleep. I was able to get mattress toppers and it's meant the children are now getting a restful sleep. The mother told me the children are delighted and are now getting much more sleep.'



New evidence since our report in October 2023

Since October 2023 new evidence has emerged on child poverty and the cost-of-living crisis:

- On 10th November 2023 the Children's Society published new research which found that 82% of parents and carers in its annual household survey said they were 'very' or 'quite' concerned about the impact of the rising cost of living over the next 12 months.¹⁴
- On 6th December, UNICEF published its report on efforts by higher income countries to address child poverty. The UK was ranked last amongst the 39 countries with rates of child poverty increasing by 20% between 2014 and 2021.¹⁵
- On 10th December, the Centre for Social Justice published its report on the state of poverty in the UK. It found that "by 2030, if trends continue, over one in four (27.8%) of 5-15-year-olds will have a mental disorder. If the COVID-19 pandemic never happened, this figure would be less than two in ten (14.7%)".¹⁶
- On 11th December analysis by Action for Children found that 58% of children growing up in material deprivation are under 10.¹⁷
- On 11th December new research from the Mental Health Foundation found that more than half of parents with younger children had fallen into debt to pay essential bills.¹⁸
- On 18th December the Social Metrics Commission published its new report on measuring poverty. It found that poverty is highest amongst families with children: 26% compared to 11% for couples without children.

New data on bed poverty

Our Freedom of Information request to local authorities in England

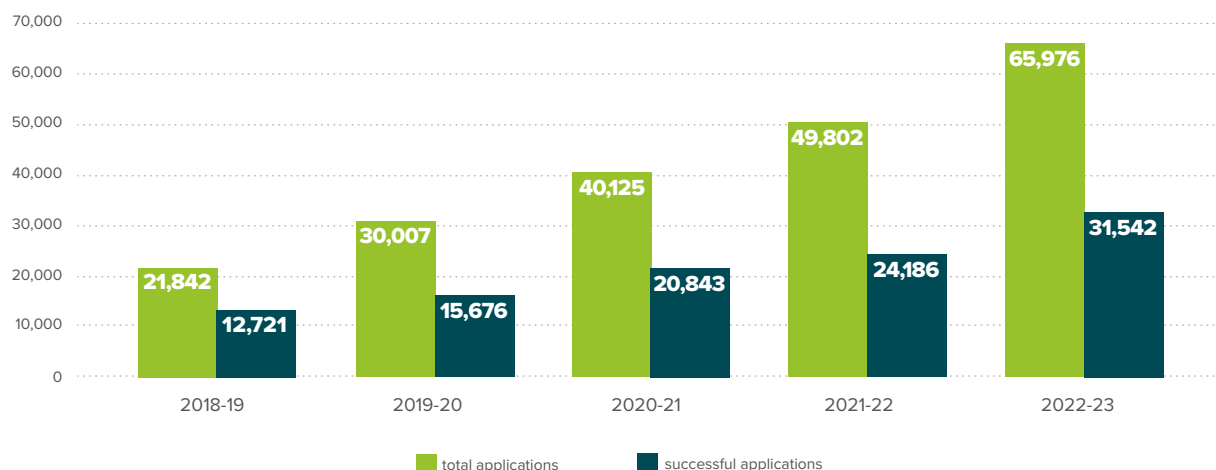
To understand how local crisis support was being used to address bed poverty we sent a Freedom of Information (FOI) request to all local authorities in England in August 2023. We asked them how many applications for beds and bedding they had received in total through their crisis support services across the last five financial years and how many applications

had been successful. We asked for the same information in relation to children's beds and bedding. The request and further analysis of the data is included in a technical report accompanying this briefing.²⁰

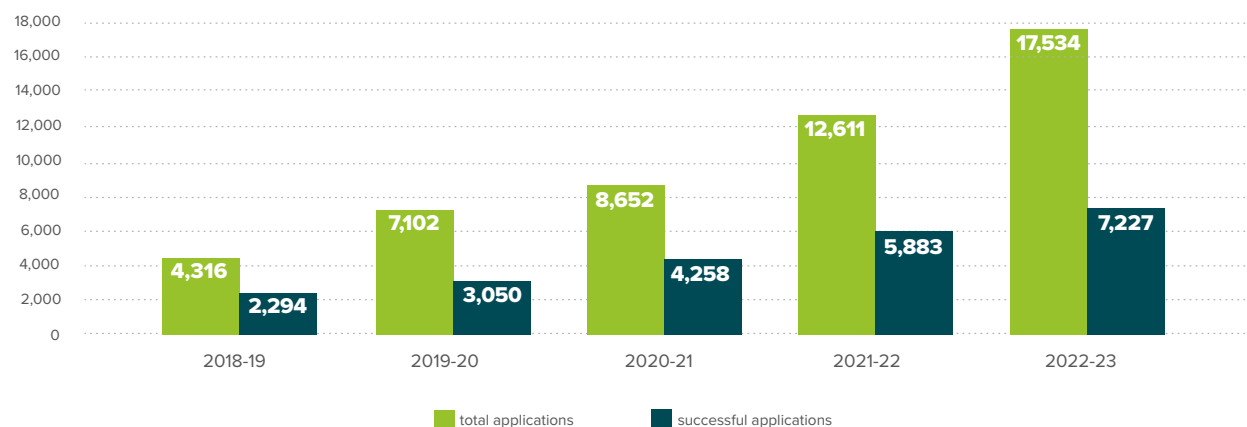
Of the 151 councils in scope,²¹ 131 responded to our request and of these, 81 were able to provide data. While our dataset was incomplete, 54% of local authorities provided us with data we could analyse to understand the growing pressures facing their crisis support services.



Graph 1: All applications to local authority crisis support services for beds and bedding



Graph 2: Applications to local authority crisis support services for beds and bedding for children only

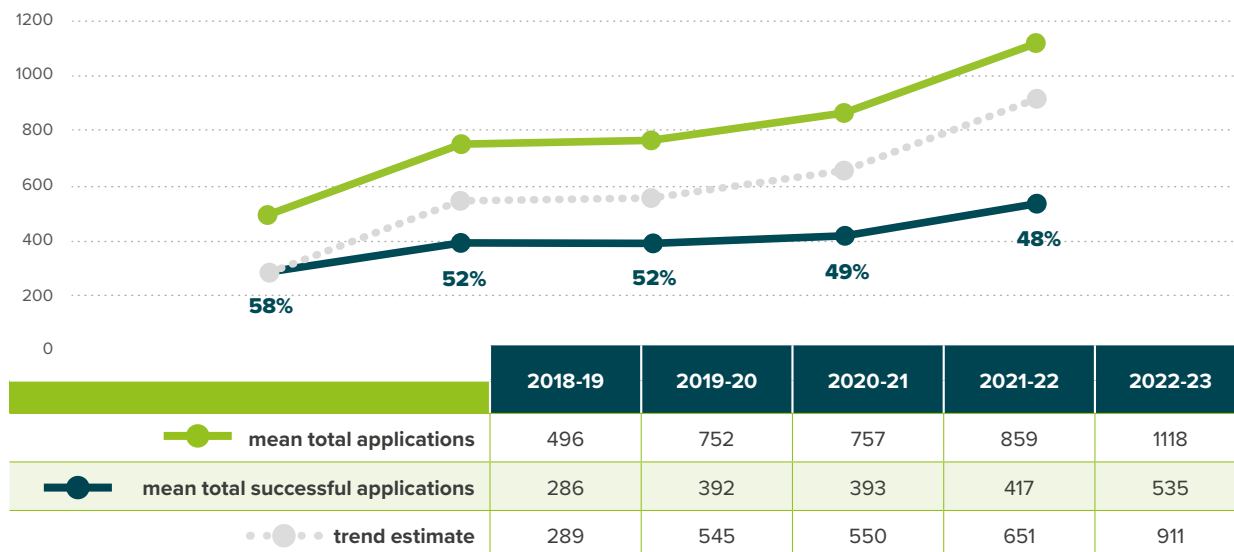


Graph 1 shows that requests to local authorities' crisis services for help with beds and bedding more than trebled between 2018-19 and 2022-23, increasing by more than 44,000. There was a similar story for children's beds and bedding where requests for help with children's beds and bedding more than quadrupled, rising from 4,316 requests in 2018-19 to 17,534 requests in 2022-23. In 2022-23, more than half of the requests for help with children's beds and bedding were unsuccessful. These figures are likely to represent an underestimate of the extent of need for local crisis support as many local authorities do not widely advertise their local crisis support services.

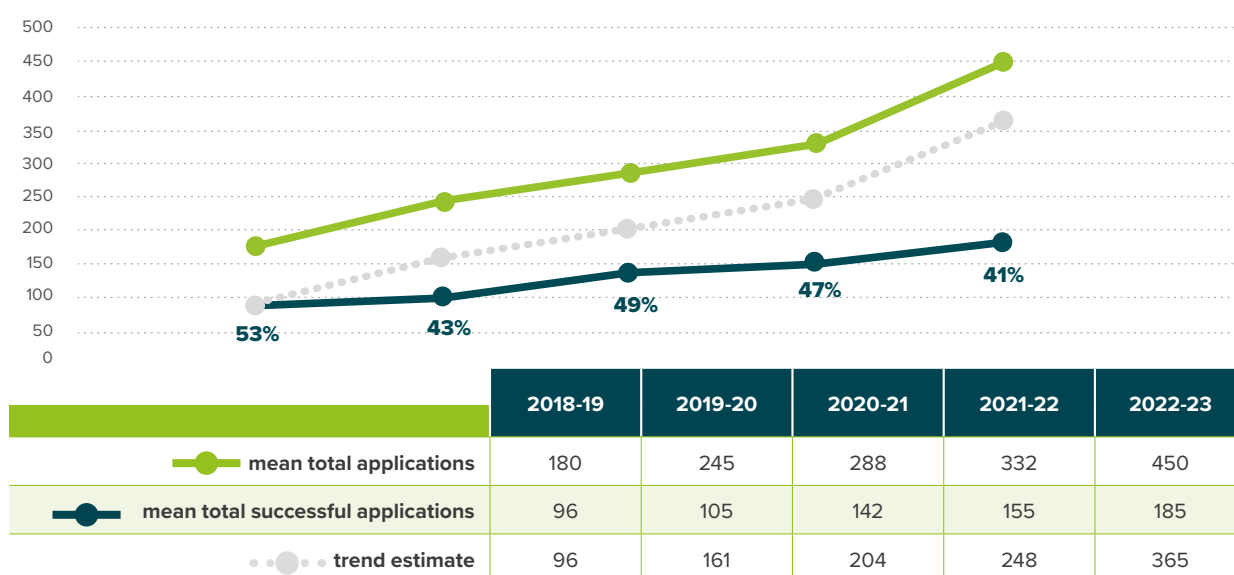
Growing demand for crisis help with beds and bedding

The graphs above show a significant growth in demand for crisis support with beds and bedding. This trend could be partially explained by improved local authority record keeping. 42% of local authorities were able to provide us with data related to the year 2018-19. This rose to 50% of local authorities who were able to provide data for 2022-23. However, when looking at the average number of requests which each local authority received, a similar rising trend emerged.

Graph 3: Average number of requests for help with beds and bedding by each local authority



Graph 4: Average number of requests for help with children’s beds and bedding by each local authority



Graphs 3 and 4 show that local authorities are under increasing pressure to provide help with beds and bedding in their crisis support services, yet are struggling to keep up with demand.

Graph 3 shows that in 2018-19, on average, local authorities received 496 applications for help with beds and bedding in their crisis services. By 2022-23, the average number of requests received had more than doubled to 1,118. Over that period the success rate of applications fell by 10% so that by 2022-23 only 48% of requests for help were successful.

Graph 4 illustrates an even starker change for children’s beds and bedding. On average, local authorities received 180 requests in 2018-19 with an average success rate of 96 applications. By 2022-23, the success rate had fallen 12% to 41% with only 185 of the 450 requests being successful.

On both Graph 3 and 4 we have plotted a trend line, which illustrates how many successful applications there would have been if the gap between successful applications and total applications in 2018-19 had remained the same. In Graph 4 this shows that, on average, if councils had been able to keep up with demand, 365 requests for children’s beds and bedding would have been provided by the average council in England. In reality councils were only able to respond to 185 requests on average.

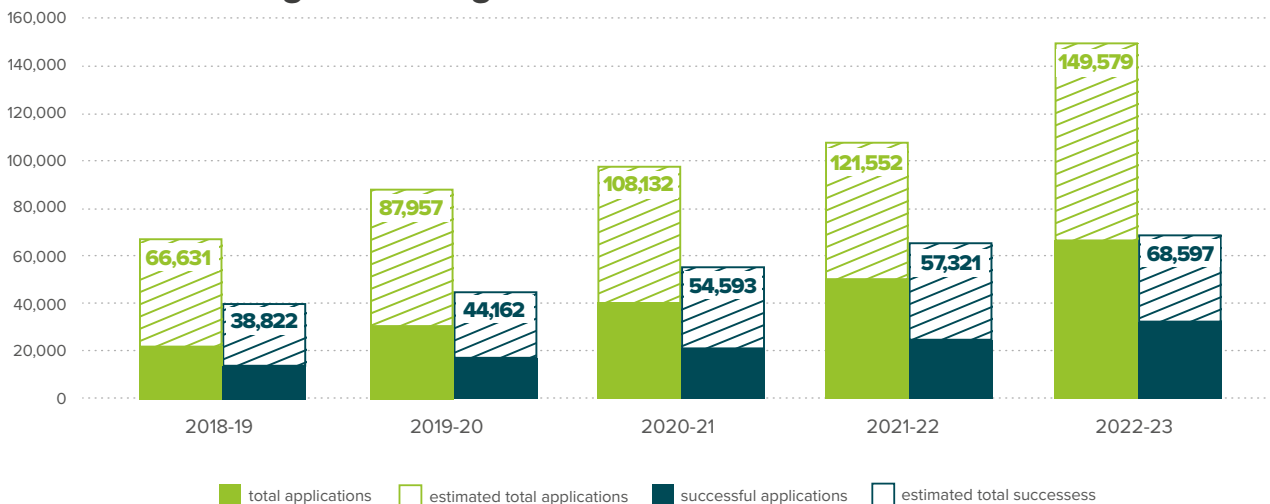
The picture across England

In some regions, more local authorities provided us with data than others. This may have been because:

- the local authority did not run a crisis support service,
- they only stored successful requests,
- their data storage systems changed making data from previous years inaccessible, or
- the cost of responding to the FOI would exceed the threshold.

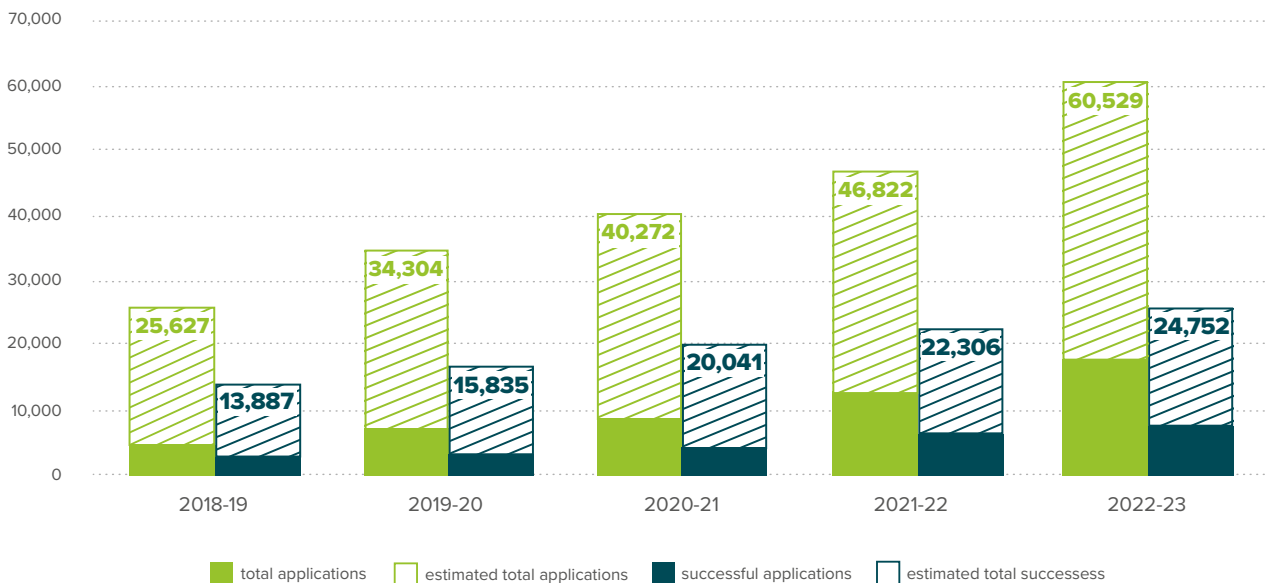
In order to minimise regional bias and build a picture of the likely demand for beds and bedding across England we weighted our sample. We estimated the likely figures for local authorities who were missing from our dataset, based on how other local authorities in their region had responded.

Graph 5: Estimated applications to local authority crisis support services for beds and bedding across England



In 2022-23, we estimate there would have been almost 150,000 requests for help with beds and bedding to local authorities and 69,000 would have been successful if there was a minimum standard level of crisis support across England.

Graph 6: Estimated applications to local authority crisis support services for beds and bedding for children across England



While fewer local authorities were able to provide us with data specifically for children’s beds and bedding, we estimate there would have been 26,000 applications across England in 2018-19 and 14,000 applications would be accepted. By 2022-23, we know that numbers of applications were increasing significantly. We estimate there would have been 61,000 applications for children’s beds and bedding to local authority crisis support services in 2022-23 if there was a minimum standard level of crisis support across England but only 25,000 applications (41%) would have been successful.



The Household Support Fund

What is local crisis support?

Local crisis support includes a range of publicly administered schemes designed to help people experiencing financial crisis.²² Its role is distinct from wider social security; local crisis support should provide rapid crisis support whilst the wider social security system should address underlying drivers of people's hardship. Since 2012 local crisis support has been devolved to local authorities and is principally delivered through Local Welfare Assistance (LWA) schemes. 36% of LWA is used on provision of furniture or white goods.²³

The role of the Household Support Fund

During the pandemic and cost-of-living crisis the UK Government and local authorities recognised the need to provide short-term support to individuals. In recent years the Department for Work and Pensions have funded local authorities to deliver six successive schemes, most recently the Household Support Fund.²⁴ These have often been announced at short notice, causing difficulties for local authorities in delivering schemes - 37 English local authorities no longer operate a LWA at all.²⁵

The Household Support Fund has increasingly become a vital part of funding for local crisis support. Analysis by End Furniture Poverty found that in 2021-22, **45% of spending on Local Welfare Assistance schemes came from the Household Support Fund.**²⁶ **By 2022-23 this had risen to 62%.**²⁷

The March 2024 cliff edge

The Household Support Fund will end in March 2024 creating a major gap in provision of local crisis support across England which neither local government, nor the voluntary sector, will be able to fill. At the same time, the Government's Cost of Living Payments scheme will finish with final payments of £299 to families on benefits due in February 2024.²⁸ The cliff-edge facing local crisis support is therefore likely to hit low-income families at a critical time, limiting their ability to seek crisis support from their local authority.

In October 2023, Barnardo's, alongside other charities, wrote to the Chancellor to highlight our concern regarding the collapse of local crisis support services, driven by uncertainty over the future of the Household Support Fund.²⁹ Since then we are aware of local authorities that have begun 'switching off' their crisis support schemes with potentially serious consequences for families and children.³⁰



Fixing the Household Support Fund

The Government needs to urgently fix the Household Support Fund so that families in crisis can get help with essentials like beds and bedding for their children when they are in most need. The Government should:

1. Urgently extend the Household Support Fund in the Spring Statement 2024

before the scheme ends in March 2024. Local authorities need time to deliver the programme and the clock is ticking with potentially devastating consequences for families and children.

2. Embed efficiency into the HSF by committing to a three-year funding programme in the Spring Statement, with an increase to the funding pot of 16% (currently £842m) to address the rising demand for local crisis support.

3. End the postcode lottery of local crisis support by reforming the Household Support Fund to require all local authorities to provide a minimum level of crisis support. The HSF guidance should be updated to encourage councils to use funds to support families with access to white goods and essential items of furniture, like beds and bedding. This will ensure every child in every family can get the help they need, regardless of where they live.

4. Establish a Local Crisis Support Commissioner to provide independent oversight of schemes and the publication of basic monitoring information. This role should focus on promoting best practice, promoting awareness of schemes and supporting local authorities to deliver their

schemes effectively. The requirement to produce monitoring information should be developed with local authorities to ensure it is not overly burdensome but allows for effective comparison between different delivery models to ensure opportunities for improvement can be easily identified.

5. Amplify, simplify and speed-up the application process. Robust guidance should be issued to local authorities to ensure they do enough to build awareness of their schemes, keep applications simple and process applications for crisis support within 48 hours.

Footnotes

- ¹ Barnardo's (2023), ['No crib for a bed: the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on bed poverty'](#)
- ² End Furniture Poverty (2023), ['On the Cliff Edge: Crisis Support 2022/23'](#)
- ³ Office for National Statistics (2024), ['Consumer price inflation, UK: December 2023'](#)
- ⁴ Barnardo's (2022), ['At what cost? The impact of the cost-of-living crisis on children and young people'](#); Barnardo's (2023), ['A crisis on our doorstep: The deepening impact of the cost-of-living crisis on young people in the UK'](#); Barnardo's (2023), ['No crib for a bed: the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on bed poverty'](#)
- ⁵ United Nations General Assembly Human Rights Council (2019), ['Visit to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland Report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights'](#)
- ⁶ The Guardian (2023), ['Interview with Special rapporteur Olivier De Schutter: UK 'in violation of international law' over poverty levels, says UN envoy'](#)
- ⁷ Department for Work and Pensions (2023), ['Households below average income: for financial years ending 1995 to 2022'](#)
- ⁸ Ibid. See also: Barnardo's (2023), ['Barnardo's reacts to latest statistics on child poverty from the Department for Work and Pensions'](#)
- ⁹ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2023), ['Destitution in the UK 2023'](#), page 2
- ¹⁰ Barnardo's (2023), ['No crib for a bed: the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on bed poverty'](#)
- ¹¹ Ibid., page 16
- ¹² Ibid., page 17
- ¹³ Ibid., page 22
- ¹⁴ The Children's Society (2023), ['Feeling the Strain'](#)
- ¹⁵ UNICEF (2023), ['Child Poverty in the Midst of Wealth'](#)
- ¹⁶ The Centre for Social Justice (2023), ['Two Nations: The State of Poverty in the UK'](#)
- ¹⁷ Action for Children (2023), ['Going without: Almost one in five children growing up deprived of the basics'](#)
- ¹⁸ Mental Health Foundation (2023), ['More than half of parents with children aged 10 and under fell into debt to pay essential bills'](#)
- ¹⁹ Social Metrics Commission (2023), ['Measuring Poverty 2023'](#)
- ²⁰ Barnardo's (2024), ['Technical Report: Analysis of Freedom of Information Request Data from Local Authorities on Crisis Support for Beds and Bedding'](#)
- ²¹ All councils in England were initially sent requests, but the 164 district councils were removed from the analysis. We removed them from the analysis because most of these local authorities informed us crisis support in their area was administered by the area's Upper Tier local authority.
- ²² See the definition provided in Children's Society and others (2023), ['The Future of Local Welfare – Discretionary Support for Individuals and Families Facing Crisis'](#)
- ²³ End Furniture Poverty (2023), ['On the Cliff Edge: Crisis Support 2022/23'](#), page 4.
- ²⁴ For further analysis on the history of local crisis support and the Household Support Fund see: Barnardo's (2023), ['No crib or a bed: the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on bed poverty'](#), pages 34 – 37.
- ²⁵ End Furniture Poverty (2023), ['On the Cliff Edge: Crisis Support 2022/23'](#), page 3.
- ²⁶ End Furniture Poverty (2022), ['Resetting Crisis Support 2022'](#)
- ²⁷ End Furniture Poverty (2023), ['On the Cliff Edge: Crisis Support 2022/23'](#)
- ²⁸ UK Government (2024), ['Cost of Living Payments'](#)
- ²⁹ Barnardo's (2023), ['Our open letter to the Chancellor on the Household Support Fund'](#)
- ³⁰ North East Child Poverty Commission (2023), 'Future of Household Support Fund Briefing'. See also, 'Local Government Chronicle (2023), 'Redundancy risk due to end of household support fund'

About Barnardo's

At Barnardo's, our purpose is clear – **changing childhoods and changing lives**, so that children, young people, and families are safe, happy, healthy, and hopeful. Last year, we provided essential support to 373,200 children, young people, parents and carers through more than 800 services and partnerships across the UK.

For over 150 years, we've been here for the children and young people who need us most – bringing **love, care and hope** into their lives and giving them a place where they feel they belong.

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**Believe in
children**



Barnardo's

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