



Tackling the cost of the school day

KATE ANSTEY

Many children and families find it challenging to manage the many costs associated with going to school. This can have a knock-on effect on children's experiences of school life and their outcomes. The Cost of the School Day project, inspired by Children North East's Poverty Proofing© work, was started by CPAG in Scotland in 2014 with the aim of reducing the financial barriers that prevent pupils from fully participating in the school day. In 2019 it expanded to more areas in Scotland, and launched in Wales and England, in partnership with Children North East. As the expanded project draws to a close, what changes has it achieved for children? What has been learned about this type of work? And what would CPAG do differently next time?

Children eager to share their ideas and answers in a primary school class.

Listening to children and being guided by their views is at the heart of the Cost of the School Day approach. Over the past three years, we have spoken directly to over 12,000 children and young people in 55 schools. They have told us about which aspects of the school day cost money in their school or make someone feel different because of their household income. Children and young people have also come up with ideas and solutions to remove these financial barriers in school life so that all children can enjoy an equitable education without money being an issue.

Change in schools

In every school we have partnered with, our Cost of the School Day practitioners have developed a very rich and contextualised understanding of the cost barriers to education in that school. This means that the solutions we come up with, alongside the children and young people we talk to, fit the needs of that school community. Schools have made many changes as a result of our feedback and these greatly vary. Some directly target costs, reducing the cost of school for families. Others are changes in practice that lead to reduced stigma for children and reduced stress for families.

The Cost of the School Day approach involves working with whole-school communities (pupils, parents, teachers and school staff) to identify and reduce cost barriers faced by pupils from low-income backgrounds.

Poverty Proofing© is a process of speaking to every single child within a school to identify the barriers to engagement and unintentional stigma and discrimination faced by those suffering the effects of poverty.

One pupil told us, 'The school can help families by charging less for school uniform.' We have seen changes to uniform policies like schools reducing or eliminating the requirement for clothing with the school logo. In some schools, uniform banks have been set up so that families can buy second-hand clothing for rapidly-growing children. Changes like this have saved families in some schools around £60.

When it comes to school trips, one pupil suggested schools could 'maybe have more trips to local places'. Some schools now focus on low-cost and free activities that are available locally. Others have provided families with an events calendar so that they know when trips are scheduled and can budget for any associated costs, allowing families to pay for visits in instalments across the year. We know from speaking to parents that this is vital: they need plenty of notice of costs, rather than costs being sprung on them with little thought as to what requests are coming when. Schools we have worked with have responded well to this feedback, with communications with families greatly improved.

We have drawn particular attention to the impact that fun events in school can have on children from low-income families. Fundraising days, for example, can lead to children feeling excluded, or even opting not to attend on the day to avoid the stigma of not being able to take part. One pupil mentioned that 'some people might be embarrassed by their costume or might not have enough money'. Schools have made changes like having a discreet bucket for anonymous donations rather than asking each child individually to give money they may not have, in front of their peers. Other schools have changed the focus of days like World Book Day and Christmas Jumper Day away from wearing certain outfits and dressing up, so as not to exclude those who can't afford to take part.

Alongside specific policy and practice changes, schools' cultures are often changed. We have delivered training to thousands of teachers and other school staff about the importance of being poverty aware when they're making plans, and

helped students share their views within and beyond the school gates.

In some schools, we have supported pupils to lead on investigating school costs in their school community. They have gained useful research and analysis skills, and helped to bring important issues to the attention of school staff. This peer researcher approach, designed by Children North East, has been hugely valuable to both the pupils involved and their schools.



We have supported pupils to lead on investigating school costs in their school community. They have gained useful research and analysis skills, and helped to bring important issues to the attention of school staff.

Learners from Cwm Brombil school in Port Talbot share their views on education with the minister and members of the Senedd at the launch of CPAG, NEU Cymru and Children North East's Tackling poverty together resource.



Over the past three years, we have spoken directly to over 12,000 children and young people in 55 schools.



Wider impact

We have partnered with schools that wanted to work with us. They were therefore perhaps more willing and open to make changes based on feedback from their pupils than other schools may have been. However, we have also seen a ripple effect to other schools that have engaged with our resources and training and made changes to support lower-income pupils and families.

Beyond individual school action, we wanted the project to lead to change on a bigger scale too: locally and nationally.

In each of the four areas where the project research has been carried out, we have established partnerships with local councils and regularly shared insights on the local picture in schools. As a result, many changes have been made at council level to meet the needs of lower-income pupils and their families. These include initiatives such as city-wide pre-loved uniform provision benefitting more schools than just those we have visited. Furthermore, strategically, some of the local authorities we have worked with have shown a real commitment to supporting their schools to change. There are now council staff with responsibility for tackling the cost of the school day across all the schools in the community, and long-term commitments to reduce school costs in council plans. Some councils are using the findings from the project to support and influence their poverty strategies, with Moray Council reporting that 'Moray regards poverty as its highest priority and Cost of the School Day is a big part of that'.

Nationally, there have also been significant changes driven by our insights from children and families. We have worked closely with other organisations, sharing our evidence to inform their thinking on child poverty more broadly, and on specific issues like free school meals, school trips and uniform costs. Our resources, often co-produced with organisations like the National Education Union, are informing curriculums, school practices and teacher training across Britain.



When it comes to the big-ticket policy changes, these have been sizeable. The project has contributed substantially to the following positive changes for children and families:

- All primary school children in Wales and Scotland will receive free school meals in the next few years. In England, children with no recourse to public funds (subject to an income threshold) have become permanently eligible for free school meals, and these families also now receive discretionary support with free school meals through their local authorities in Scotland and Wales.
- During the pandemic we successfully pushed for cash-based replacements for free school meals, with almost all local authorities in Scotland and Wales moving to this approach including in the school holidays. Devices for home learning were widely distributed.
- New guidance has been published in England, meaning that schools have to ensure their uniforms are affordable for families. In Scotland, the school uniform grant available to eligible families has been increased to a minimum of £120 for primary and £150 for secondary school and national statutory uniform policy guidance is being introduced this year. In Wales, the PDG-Access grant, which helps eligible families with school costs like uniform, learning materials and laptops, has also increased in value and been extended to more year groups.
- The Scottish government has provided funding so that core curriculum costs can be waived: this means costs such as materials for home economics, musical tuition and drama qualifications do not land on families. The Scottish government has also committed to additional support for school trip costs.



Our resources, often co-produced with organisations like the National Education Union, are informing curriculums, school practices and teacher training across Britain.



Children and young people in Moray talk about the importance of listening to them, available to view on YouTube at: youtu.be/Tmdb60Pc5Q8

What we have learned

In three years, in quite challenging conditions given the pandemic's restrictions, the project has achieved a huge amount. But we have also learned how we could have done things differently. Three key reflections, supported by our independent evaluation of the project, are:

1. While there are clear advantages to using an intensive model with schools and the in-person approach was preferred, a less intensive model still produced significant change. The method has been to speak to as many of the school community as possible, but there are obvious resource implications of doing that. Changes made to the model as a result of the pandemic showed that working with schools online, or speaking to fewer children, still led to meaningful change and was highly impactful for children and families.
2. As a result of external factors (eg, challenges arising from the pandemic), engagement from partner local authorities was understandably affected and varied across areas. This had a knock-on effect on the project outcomes at local level. However, despite these challenges, we still saw a demonstrable impact on policy and practices across our local authority partners.
3. Through the project design, we were able to work with a large number of schools. However, more time was needed to provide ongoing support to schools to help embed some of the longer-term recommendations. Given the enormous value in co-producing change, more time could also have

been spent working alongside young people as peer researchers and leaders for change in their own schools.

The project has had an impact on CPAG that will endure after it ends. We now have a stronger commitment to the voices and experiences of children and young people in our work. We have been able to develop relationships in Wales such that we are now seen as a leading voice on child poverty and education in the nation. In England, we are now well-established in the education sector, with important ongoing strategic relationships and networks established. In Scotland, the Scottish government have awarded a further four years' funding to continue national Cost of the School Day work, which demonstrates the ongoing importance of this work.

Beyond the UK Cost of the School Day project

We are now developing the next phase of our work in education. This will involve working alongside children and young people to support them to take the lead in their schools, and have their voices heard at different levels on issues that matter to them when it comes to poverty and school life. We will be helping more school staff become poverty aware and learn about the relationship between poverty and the school day. And we will continue to engage with governments, encouraging them to do more to support lower-income pupils, as well as ensuring they meet their existing commitments to reduce the cost of the school day.

Education in the UK is supposed to be free to access and a great leveller. We all want every child to have a great education.

The Cost of the School Day project is all about identifying the aspects of school life that currently get in the way of that reality for those with less money, and supporting schools, local authorities and national governments to make changes. The project has had huge successes, with very tangible positive impacts for children. School is such an important part of children and young people's lives. Alongside CPAG's wider work of campaigning on family incomes, this vital project has helped address the many costs children and families face at school, working towards the point where school can truly be free for everyone.

Kate Anstey is UK Cost of the School Day project lead at CPAG.

The UK Cost of the School Day project was funded by the National Lottery Community Fund, Pears Foundation, Orbit Housing Association, Coventry City Council and the Royal Borough of Greenwich, who we thank for their support.

You can find more information about the Cost of the School Day project and a range of free resources at cpag.org.uk/cost-of-the-school-day

You can support the next phase of CPAG's work in schools by making a donation to our winter appeal at cpag.org.uk/donatewinter