

# CPAG's Cost of the School Day project

**Every child should be able to make the most of their time at school, but we know that the cost of school can put pressure on low-income families and put some children at risk of missing out on opportunities and feeling different and stigmatised. CPAG's Cost of the School Day project in Scotland is working with schools and local authorities to understand the barriers that costs create for children from low-income families, and to support policy and practice change to reduce or remove them. With the project set to be introduced in England and Wales, and expanded in Scotland, Sara Spencer looks at what can be learned from the last six years.**

## **Cost of the School Day development in Scotland**

In 2014, inspired by Poverty Proofing the School Day at Children North East, we were asked by Glasgow's multi-agency child poverty group to host a research project in schools. Our *Cost of the School Day* report, published in 2015, described cost barriers at school from the perspectives of over 300 children and young people in the city, alongside recommendations for policy and practice.<sup>1</sup> Subsequent activities, led by the Health and Social Care Partnership-chaired steering group, have included professional learning for teachers, guidance for schools, school resources and annual awareness-raising with newly qualified teachers, as well as wider policy changes, such as automation of the school clothing grant for eligible families.

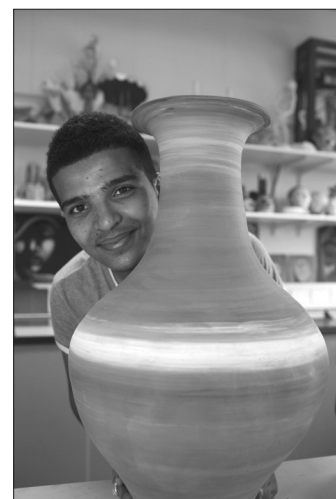
As the Glasgow project was getting underway, other local authorities began getting in touch for advice and resources to help start their own projects. In subsequent years, Cost of the School Day themed projects were established in, among others, South Lanarkshire, Fife, Dumfries and Galloway, Midlothian and Edinburgh. Most significant for CPAG in Scotland has been our three-year partnership with Dundee City Council, which involves all schools in the area. Following our *Cost of the School Day Dundee* report,<sup>2</sup> there has been: ongoing support for all schools to develop and implement action plans based on consultation with their school communities; whole school professional learning sessions;

benefits training for family school link workers; a local practice network for school staff to share effective approaches; and work with children on tackling poverty stigma in schools.

Responding to growing national interest, our focus has widened from direct work in schools to include training, advisory support and the development of resources, including the national Cost of the School Day Toolkit<sup>3</sup> and our good practice films,<sup>4</sup> featuring children talking about the difference a Cost of the School Day approach makes. National development is supported by NHS Health Scotland, which convenes the Facing Up to Child Poverty in Schools Practice Network, a thriving peer support and learning forum for local authority leads on child poverty and education. Local appetite and commitment has been further accelerated by the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 duty to develop, produce and deliver annual local child poverty action reports. These are expected to represent a 'step change' in action to address child poverty locally and, in 2019, the cost of the school day was mentioned as an active concern in almost every one. Since 2018, we have been supported by the Scottish government as part of the Scottish Attainment Challenge.

## **Missing out and feeling bad: common financial barriers at school**

It is useful here to remind ourselves of the problems the Cost of the School Day project is trying to address. There are a range of common



***'Children who are unable to participate in the same activities as their peers will very often not feel included and this can have a negative impact on health and wellbeing. The key is finding possible solutions to ensure all children have the same opportunities.'***

**Teacher**

school costs which, combined, are difficult for low-income families to afford. This has the potential to affect children's experiences at school: what they can do, what they can participate in, how they feel and how they learn.

### Reduced and unequal access to opportunities at school

- Difficulty paying travel costs can affect attendance. Accessing after-school activities and supported study is difficult in schools with school buses because staying behind might mean paying extra to get home later.
- Difficulties managing costs for subjects such as home economics, technical studies, drama and art and design limit access to the curriculum and can affect subject choices at certificate levels.

- School staff are aware of hungry children in their schools. Hunger affects children's concentration and learning.

*'We have families who cannot claim for free school meals and they are breadline families. The parents are so proud and they go off to work, but their children often come in hungry in morning.'* Teacher

- Lack of access to ICT and unsuitable home learning environments require additional resourcefulness and effort to complete homework.

*'I've got to go to the library because we don't have a computer at home and I've had to hand in homework late or rush it and it hasn't been the best because I've only been able to get there at lunch or break and sometimes I've got to skip lunch to make sure I get the work done.'* Pupil, S5

- Some children have no prospect of attending and benefiting from school trips. Effort is required from school staff to fund subsidies for parents who are less likely to be able to pay.
- Entry costs, equipment and travel can stop children participating in the full range of school clubs and wider achievement initiatives.
- Not bringing money for 'fun events' may mean not taking part.

*'There's nothing to do at the summer fair if you don't have money. Even throwing a sponge at the teacher costs about £1. Sometimes you just have to sit in class if you*

*don't have any money, that's happened to me. You get made fun of.'* Pupil, P5

### Poverty shame and stigma affecting wellbeing

Inability to participate in the same activities as their peers can leave children feeling different and embarrassed. Children are keenly aware of income differences and speak about feeling left out or deliberately self-excluding themselves from opportunities.

*'Well, I think if all of your friends or people you know go to the after-school clubs, school trips, that kind of isolates you from them. You're singled out, you're not with them, just a spare person.'* Pupil, S5

- Insufficient, unkempt or unfashionable uniform can be picked on by other children and young people. Non-uniform days can place pressure on children to buy new outfits and noticeably affect attendance.
- Children can be sanctioned (for example, detention or loss of 'golden time') for having an incorrect uniform or not having resources in the classroom.
- Children can feel embarrassed about asking for financial help for trips and other activities, and may not ask at all.

### What difference is the Cost of the School Day project making?

The diagram on the next page shows the process we recommend. At its core is the involvement of the whole school community in understanding cost barriers, and in identifying and implementing solutions. This approach helps to gather the views of children and parents who may be unlikely to speak up about difficult school costs because of shame and embarrassment. The involvement of children, families and staff also means that changes to school policy and practice will be grounded in real experience and be more likely to make a difference.

Schools and local authorities across Scotland taking a Cost of the School Day approach have listened to the experiences of their children and families and made changes aiming for greater equity and reduced poverty stigma. The types of changes made are wide ranging and often specific to the local challenges faced in individual schools. Examples include: revised uniform policies; new homework clubs; sensitive fundraising; improved free meal and clothing

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***'Children have the embarrassment of us saying "do you have your money? You can't cook today". If you're collecting money there are other things you're not doing. Course fees are just really unfair. It's not a free curriculum.'*** Teacher  
 .....

grant promotion; pupil anti-poverty groups; universal breakfast clubs; ready-to-learn packs; ICT lending; trip subsidies; and creative alternatives to proms and World Book Days.

A recent independent evaluation found evidence that the delivery of the Cost of the School Day programme contributes to the following outcomes:<sup>5</sup>

- Changes in the understanding of the drivers and consequences of child poverty and school costs among school staff and some parent councils.
- New school policies and practices that are more poverty sensitive.
- Reduced or removed cost barriers to participation in school and after-school activities.
- School and parent councils supported to secure and use available funding to lessen child poverty within their setting.
- Increased participation in school and after-school activities.
- Reduced school-related financial pressures for families.
- Promotion of entitlements and financial support available to parents.
- Increased take-up of entitlements.

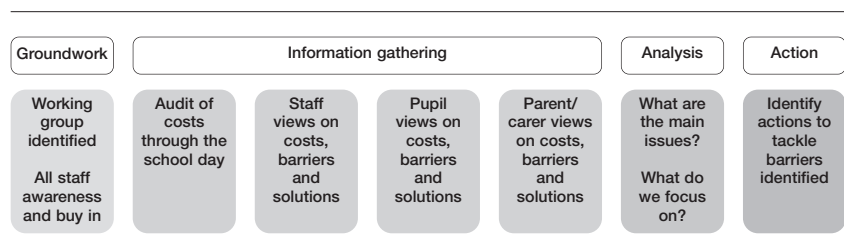
The evaluation found evidence of practice changes at school level that resulted in reduced costs and barriers related to uniforms, clubs, fun events, trips, learning costs, food and transport costs. There was also evidence that a Cost of the School Day approach had contributed to positive changes in awareness, understanding and attitudes towards poverty at a school level.

The evaluation also found evidence of policy changes at a local authority level, including the use of local authority budgets to cover curriculum-related costs, committing all schools to embedding the Cost of the School Day approach in their action plans, sourcing affordable school uniforms through securing cheaper suppliers and committing to provide breakfasts throughout the local authority area.

## Looking ahead: what works to sustain and develop a Cost of the School Day approach?

It is important to understand the barriers to

Figure 1: **Cost of the School Day process**



## Case study: local authority leadership in Dundee City

*'Dundee City Council is a Cost of the School Day authority. Financial barriers to learning have a significant negative impact on a child's ability to learn and we are committed to addressing these as consistently as any other barrier to learning.'* Executive Director of Children and Families Service, Dundee City Council

CPAG has been working in partnership with Dundee City Council since 2017. A key part of the approach in Dundee is the involvement of all schools in the area and the positioning of a Cost of the School Day approach as a strategic priority, core to the Scottish Attainment Challenge rather than dependent on capacity or good will from individual schools with many competing priorities.

In 2018, Dundee City Council launched four Cost of the School Day statements of intent for its schools:

- No child or young person in Dundee will start school without a breakfast.
- No child in Dundee will miss out on their Primary 7 residential trip.
- All children and young people in Dundee will have access to an affordable uniform.
- All schools will develop a Cost of the School Day action plan.

Local authority-wide approaches provide the opportunity to look for solutions which will benefit children and families in every school: How sensitively is lunch debt approached with parents? Are there ways to simplify or automate applications for school-based financial entitlements? Could a uniform supplier for all local authority schools be sourced and discounts negotiated? It also provides the opportunity to embed the Cost of the School Day approach into local audit and review processes, so that it remains high on the agenda. Thousands of pockets of good practice already exist in individual schools; a strategic local approach can gather and amplify these, while seeking local authority-wide ideas to benefit every school in the area.

implementing Cost of the School Day approaches at school and at local authority level. In schools, we know that limited time, capacity and poverty awareness can stop things getting underway. Some schools experience challenges in implementing solutions in a non-stigmatising way, which means that children and parents must be willing to seek and accept support. Others experience negative reactions from parents or staff who do not fully accept the rationale behind cost-reducing

measures, such as rethinking expensive trips and fundraising. These challenges, along with updated toolkit resources, are priority areas for CPAG in Scotland to support schools with further in the coming year.

And for local authorities, different areas in Scotland are at very different stages in terms of the strategic priority given to the work, and their awareness and capacity to deliver it effectively. The evaluation helped us to identify factors that sustain a Cost of the School Day approach and ensure they become embedded in a local area:

- Whole school approaches, championed by school leadership, which engage staff, parents and pupils in understanding the need, which address attitudes to poverty and which are built into the school planning cycle.
- Visible and bold Cost of the School Day leadership, both at school and local authority level, to keep the issues at the forefront of everyone's minds.
- Widespread understanding of the links between school costs and the national Scottish policy mechanisms to tackle poverty, and the related issues of equity, inclusion and attainment in education.
- Robust local governance and accountability structures which monitor progress and impact to ensure that the Cost of the School Day approach is seen as an ongoing process, rather than as a one-off event or 'done'.
- Local authority-wide approaches which support the work taking place in schools and

which avoid strategic opportunities being missed.

- Use and further development of Cost of the School Day resources and learning materials to support consultation and action in schools.

These pointers are critical for us going forward in Scotland and will also be useful learning for the project in new areas in England and Wales.

### Conclusion

Put simply, children cannot learn when they cannot participate or when they are unhappy. Unequal access to learning and opportunities at school can mean unequal outcomes for children, but we have seen that action in schools and local authorities to address school costs can, and does, help to clear away the daily financial hurdles faced by some children. Furthermore, a Cost of the School Day approach does not just help remove barriers at school for low-income families, it helps raise awareness and understanding of the impact inadequate income has on children's lives, providing a powerful evidence base to support CPAG's wider work to end child poverty. It has proven to be an effective lens through which to engage the public and policy makers alike in tackling the inadequacies in our social security system and labour market that leave so many children in poverty in the first place.

The last six years has seen the welcome expansion of Cost of the School Day approaches across Scotland. Our focus now will be on working with school communities and policy makers across the UK to embed these approaches even more deeply into the fabric of our education systems. We want a time when mindfulness of school costs is second nature in every school, when all education policy is poverty aware and when every child or young person, regardless of their income, has genuinely equal access to all that school has to offer. ■

**Sara Spencer** is Cost of the School Day Manager at CPAG in Scotland

[cpag.org.uk/scotland/CoSD](http://cpag.org.uk/scotland/CoSD) contains a wide range of information and supporting resources for schools and local authorities. Get in touch with the project: [costoftheschoolday@cpagscotland.org.uk](mailto:costoftheschoolday@cpagscotland.org.uk)

- 1 Available at [cpag.org.uk](http://cpag.org.uk)
- 2 Available at [cpag.org.uk](http://cpag.org.uk)
- 3 The Cost of the School Day Toolkit, available at [cpag.org.uk/scotland/CoSD/toolkit](http://cpag.org.uk/scotland/CoSD/toolkit), is full of tried and tested discussion prompts, images, audit tools, surveys, session plans and case studies for school communities to identify and tackle financial barriers together.
- 4 See [cpag.org.uk/scotland/CoSD/resources](http://cpag.org.uk/scotland/CoSD/resources)
- 5 Cost of the School Day evaluation, available at <https://cpag.org.uk/scotland/CoSD/evaluation>

***'It does take time to change attitudes, so this needs to be on the agenda and spoken about constantly... it's not a fad.'** Teacher*

Figure 2: **Factors that sustain Cost of the School Day approaches**

