



Cost of the School Day in West Lothian

September 2025

This briefing looks at the difference that local authority support and guidance can make to Cost of the School Day approaches in schools. Arlene Black, Pupil Equity Fund Officer with West Lothian Council and Cost of the School Day Lead for the local authority, describes the approach the council has taken to this work, and the impact it is having on children, families and schools.

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Why Cost of the School Day is a priority in West Lothian

Cost of the School Day in West Lothian is supporting schools to reduce costs, avoid additional financial burdens on families and ensure that financial barriers to learning and participation are removed for children on lower incomes. It is part of the Strategic Equity Fund and an improvement priority for all schools.

In West Lothian, around 24% of children are living in poverty. 9.7% of those in employment earn less than the real living wage and an increasing number of families are being impacted by the cost of living crisis. Hidden poverty is a significant issue, and the profile of families seeking support is changing.

“Given the current cost of living crisis, schools recognise the need to ensure that no part of a learner’s school experience is out of reach because of financial barriers, and every school is committed to including Cost of the School Day as integral to its improvement planning.”

Arlene Black

What Cost of the School Day in West Lothian set out to achieve

- Raise awareness of poverty across school communities
- Create poverty sensitive school cultures
- Support Cost of the School Day planning for improvement, including effective use of data
- Provide professional learning and support
- Explore links to learning
- Promote partnership working, including referral pathways
- Provide illustration of very good practice and tools to self-evaluate.

See Appendix 1 for success criteria and associated activities.

At a glance: the impact so far

Increased school staff awareness of the impact of poverty and the sensitivities that surround it

A culture and ethos are being developed where open communication about cost barriers is encouraged, helping to break down barriers and remove stigma from support offered.

“All staff understand the context of the school and the barriers to learning faced by children and families, including socio-economic disadvantage. Staff take effective action to address the cost of the school day. This ensures family circumstances are not a barrier to children’s access, participation and inclusion.”

HMIe inspection report

Increased equity of access to wider school experiences, and improved participation and engagement for children and young people

Over 85% of learners reported in a recent Primary pupil ethos survey that school costs do not prevent them from participating in outings, events and clubs. A Secondary health and wellbeing survey included a number of questions relating to cost of the school day. Evidence from the 2024/25 survey demonstrated a gradual improvement from the previous session.

- over 85% of pupils reported that there are no school costs that prevent them feeling included or that prevent them making progress in their learning.
- over 90% reported that they feel hungry, none of the time, rarely or just some of the time.
- over 90% reported that school costs prevent them attending school, none of the time or rarely.
- only 4% fewer pupils reported that they worry about costs associated with school.

Improved use of data is driving improvement

Cost of the School Day is intelligence led, with schools using a wide range of data to identify improvement priorities and measure their impact through a shared Pupil Equity Funding (PEF) tool. This process is quality assured by the local PEF team who support schools to identify ways to improve practice and learn from one another.

More authentic and informed involvement of school communities, leading to improvements targeted to need

Cost of the School Day evidence gathering includes an increasing range of voices, including families with experience of living on a low incomes. This is informing interventions which are right for individual school communities.

“Life is hard right now for everyone. I think the school helps with all that. There’s no pressure with uniform, food, experiences. There isn’t money pressure.”

Parent

Pupil voice and participation is core to developments

Pupil voice is critical to Cost of the School Day in West Lothian. Learners are increasingly informed about poverty and involved in leading improvements, benefiting from wider opportunities through the CPAG Cost of the School Day Voice Network.

Joined-up approaches and improved cross-service communication, with a range of partners across West Lothian supporting Cost of the School Day

Effective communication and partnership working means that Cost of the School Day doesn’t sit in an education silo but features in partner plans throughout the authority.

Improved partnership working is increasing the number of families benefiting from support

Examples include improved reach and financial gains for families from the Families and Young People’s Advice Service in secondary schools, and increasing numbers of referrals to the School Bank West Lothian for uniform items.

“It has taken the pressure off Mum, financially and emotionally, who had feelings of guilt at not being able to afford nice new things for her child.”

School Bank West Lothian

West Lothian's Cost of the School Day approach: 7 key steps

1. Leadership and involving the right people

Getting the right people on board and involved was important in laying the foundations for success in West Lothian.

Local leadership

West Lothian's approach to Cost of the School Day is underpinned and driven by guidance, training, support and quality assurance from an officer within the Pupil Equity Funding Team. She is supported by colleagues in the Equity Team and the Cost of the School Day / Participatory Budgeting Working Group.

"It's important that our Cost of the School Day work is sustainable, so our leadership approach has been about providing, support, direction and resources to build capacity."

Arlene Black

Leadership in each school

Every West Lothian school has a Cost of the School Day lead member of staff with many having staff and pupil groups addressing this as part of their work.

Parent Councils

Schools are advised to include Cost of the School Day as a standing agenda item at parent council meetings, so that affordability and equity is core to planning fundraising and events.

Local partners

Cost of the School Day connects with relevant local policy and strategy, including Better Off West Lothian Tackling Poverty Strategy 2023-28, West Lothian Council (WLC) Child Poverty Action Plan 2023-25 and the West Lothian Council Raising Educational Attainment Strategy 2023-28.

Progress is shared with the local Scottish Attainment Challenge partnership so that members can identify ways to support this work in their service areas. Partners include the Anti-Poverty Service and other third sector organisations, West Lothian Community Choices Group, Community Learning and Development (CLD), Education Psychologists, Active Schools, Development of the Young Workforce (DYW), Mentors for Violence Prevention (MVP) and West Lothian's Education Scotland Attainment Advisor.

- Identify local authority lead officer(s) to take this work forward
- Identify a Cost of the School Day lead in each school
- Set up a Cost of the School Day working group to lead development work
- Work with identified partners, feeding into relevant plans and priorities for improvement

2. Ongoing support for schools

A menu of support for schools has raised awareness of Cost of the School Day and helped staff understand how they can contribute to change for children and families.

Recent survey evidence indicates that all schools have responded well to support as a catalyst for change in their own settings, saying that it has prompted professional dialogue, self-evaluation, learner involvement and more refined planning for improvement.

Professional learning for all

“We know that not everybody has that lived experience. It was important that school staff understood the context of poverty nationally, locally and at individual school level, and that awareness was raised about the impact of poverty on children, young people and families.”

Arlene Black

All school staff were required to complete the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) Cost of the School Day eLearning module by December 2024. This was a significant professional learning commitment which demonstrated that Cost of the School Day is a key priority for West Lothian.

“It made me think about children and parents at my school and the small things we can do to not just make school better but life easier too.”

Teacher

Family Link Workers (FLWs), who work with families experiencing the most disadvantage, took part in professional learning on poverty sensitive language supported by the local Anti-Poverty Service. This was very positively evaluated, and FLWs are beginning to share this more widely with colleagues.

Supporting resources and sharing examples of effective practice

The CoSD Lead created a Cost of the School Day Sway as a single point of reference for schools with all key information included and updated regularly. This includes the national and local context, advice, guidance, links to resources and documents and examples of good practice tailored to West Lothian schools.

Support visits

Local authority staff make individual PEF support visits to all schools, and Cost of the School Day has been central to these professional discussions. This has given staff the opportunity to discuss their individual school contexts, to share progress, explore issues and identify priorities.

Self-evaluation guidance for schools to evaluate and evidence impact

Self-evaluation guidance offers an illustration of good practice and a range of challenge questions. This is supporting a shared understanding of standards and expectations, and progress towards those standards.

- Professional learning, support and use of resources will have increased knowledge and understanding of poverty related issues, impacting positively on practice
- A values-based culture will be evident in schools, with poverty sensitive approaches ensuring that the dignity of all is respected and stigma removed.

3. Data driven improvements - embed in improvement planning

Cost of the School Day is included as a mandatory priority area in West Lothian PEF planning for all schools. While consistent aims and expectations across the local authority are key, every school approaches its Cost of the School Day work in a way that is right for their community.

PEF planning

A PEF tool supports schools through the planning process. It requires schools to record a wide range of data used to identify the poverty related gap, including data on:

- SIMD quintile one learners
- Free Meal Entitlement
- Attainment
- Attendance
- Health and wellbeing
- Priority groups at higher-than-average risk of poverty
- Poverty related barriers identified through consultation with the school community, including individuals or groups of learners most affected

This helps to build a profile of how and why learners may face barriers at school, where the school sits in terms of poverty levels, whether or how its context may be changing and what that could indicate in terms of the impact of poverty. As a result, schools are now better informed about poverty and its impact on their learners and families.

The PEF planning tool also asks for information on identified learners (including targeted groups), stakeholders consulted, planned outcomes, baseline data and measures, detail of interventions (including staff involved), resource and projected spend, key findings and next steps.

Schools measure progress and impact of Cost of the School Day initiatives through survey evidence from their school communities and data generated using the PEF planning tool, with a final evidence summary providing details on impact against the planned outcomes.

Use of the tool in all schools means that data can be interrogated and quality assured at local authority level. This means that common challenges and interventions can be identified across schools, providing opportunity for collaborative working across schools and with partners, and helping to shape the strategic direction of the Cost of the School Day project.

- Identified and planned action for improvement, using a range of relevant measures to evaluate and demonstrate evidence of impact
- A Cost of the School Day priority or priorities to be identified and acted upon as part of Pupil Equity Fund (PEF) planning

4. Involving school communities

Poverty stigma can mean the challenges facing families remain hidden. Wider cultural efforts in school to communicate on costs and money and encourage discussion around Cost of the School Day has enabled children, young people and families to share views and to recognise the strength and benefits of doing so.

Involving school communities has ensured that Cost of the School Day action in West Lothian schools is focused on identified needs and lived experience, rather than assumptions.

Identifying financial barriers with children and their families

“Giving people what they need by asking and not assuming.”

Primary pupil

Young people and families were asked about financial barriers through surveys and focus groups to gain insights into the lived experiences of families. Workshops and further discussions allowed stakeholders to explore potential solutions together. Data was analysed in each school, and authority wide, to identify patterns, priorities and inform changes.

Learner voice and participation is at the heart of this. The Lundy Model of Child Participation and Forth Valley and West Lothian (FVWL) Youth Voice Guidance Framework support meaningful learner involvement where views are valued and acted upon.

Annual pupil ethos surveys and secondary health and wellbeing surveys now include questions relating to the impact of school costs so that progress can be tracked.

- Explored and identified financial barriers, through improved methods of communication and consultation with their school communities
- Captured an increasing range of voices, including those with lived experience

Learners leading on Cost of the School Day

Empowering young people with the knowledge and skills to lead meaningfully and authentically is an ongoing priority for West Lothian schools.

Pupil groups have been supporting wider engagement in Cost of the School Day through shaping survey content, creating videos, leading assemblies, consulting with parents/carers and generating ideas for improvement. Schools are increasingly working with partner organisations like The Larder, West Lothian Food Bank and River Kids to support learners. The School Bank West Lothian is keen to actively involve learners in decision making and recently invited some secondary pupils to review the uniform items they offer to ensure that they are "on trend."

65 West Lothian schools are part of the CPAG national Cost of the School Day Voice Network, a network of pupil groups across Scotland leading on equity in their schools and speaking out nationally on poverty and education.

West Lothian pupils have shared their work at online network meetings, engaged in the Big Question survey, featured in CPAG films and have met directly with the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills to present Big Question findings and question her on Scottish Government support for equity in education.

Pupil involvement in Participatory Budgeting

The PEF team with a Cost of the School Day remit is part of West Lothian Community Choices Group, the group with strategic responsibility for promoting PB across all service areas.

3% of PEF in each school is allocated to Participatory Budgeting (PB), a process through which school communities, led by learners, can engage in democratic decision making related to equity and Cost of the School Day. Priorities are decided by the school community with the aim of improving outcomes and reducing inequalities.

PB budgets have been allocated to a wide range of interventions, including removing or reducing costs for wider experiences like clubs, fun events and educational outings and subsidising universal snack provision. These

are all examples of activities which meet the expressed needs of school communities and support families on lower incomes.

Links to the curriculum

Schools have been making curricular links with Cost of the School Day. This focus aligns with the UNCRC, with the Global Goals, sits naturally within health and wellbeing and is of relevance across the curriculum. Schools are being encouraged to review their curriculum rationale through this lens to ensure that issues related to poverty are an integral part of learning and not seen as an 'add on'.

- Learner voice and lived experience to be central to Cost of the School Day development work
- More meaningfully involved and empowered learners
- Begin to explore CoSD links to learning across the curriculum

5. Communicate widely and effectively

Communication with families - Cost of the School Day Action Statements

Cost of the School Day in West Lothian aims to support school cultures where open communication about costs and support encourages young people and families to come forward and seek support without embarrassment or shame.

"There were schools that were doing loads, but they were doing it discreetly. I'm not saying you shouldn't be supporting individuals in a discreet manner, but to remove stigma and to try and remove the barriers and to encourage people to come to the school as a source of support you want it to be part of a conversation, a mainstream conversation."

Arlene Black

Cost of the School Day Action Statements are now produced by all schools, based on the needs of their school communities. Statements, based around the CPAG Cost of the School Day Toolkit "clock" themes, contain information about how each school is addressing identified barriers and the support available. Statements are shared widely and updated annually to reflect changing priorities.

Ongoing communication with schools and partners

"It shouldn't be overwhelming, you know, it's just drip, drip, drip feeding. Using all your avenues, whether it's headteacher's meetings, cluster meetings, PEF support meetings, all your networks."

Arlene Black

Regular communication with schools from the Equity Team helps to reinforce shared expectations and support progress. Members of the Quality Improvement Team also check in regularly on progress with their link schools.

The team regularly shares progress with partners, emphasising how they can support efforts in schools. Examples include SAC partnership, CLD networks including adult learning, culture and sport, instrumental service and youth services, health and wellbeing (HWB) staff and family representatives from schools, equity networks, family link worker networks, PEF Sharing Events and head teacher meetings.

Specific Cost of the School Day focus to underpin programmes of network meetings including equity and family link worker networks.

6. Boosting family incomes through partnership working

Referral pathways to support children and families

Partnership working to increase family incomes is a key feature of Cost of the School Day in West Lothian. Campaign Development Officers from the Families and Young People's Advice Service work closely with all secondary schools, as well as identified primaries. A number of advisors support schools to mitigate poverty through a named advisor and co-location of advice approach. The team works with school staff to identify families experiencing financial difficulty and offer advice and support at a time and place that is right for them. In the 2024/25 reporting period, the team has supported over 450 families across West Lothian and have helped families to access additional income totalling more than £1.1 million.

All schools are signed up to FORT (Fast Online Referral and Tracking System) which allows schools to refer directly to the West Lothian Advice Shop. Sign up to this has been actively promoted from a baseline of 29% in August 2023 to 100% in June 2024.

Promotion of financial entitlements and other sources of support

Financial entitlements and third sector sources of support are highlighted with schools in a variety of ways, including a 'Spotlight On' section of the Cost of the School Day school newsletter. A PEF Sharing Event included a market place of local support organisations, offering an opportunity for school staff to meet and engage directly.

Schools are now more actively promoting, signposting and referring families to organisations. For example, the School Bank West Lothian reported 341 more referrals from schools, from the period May 2023 to May 2024 and continues to share referral data with the aim of widening its reach.

- Schools and staff at local authority level will have worked effectively with partners to provide support and guidance to address CoSD issues.
- Identify and promote financial entitlements, external sources of support and encourage referrals.

7. Practical action to remove or reduce costs

Work in schools to identify cost barriers has led to practical changes that reduce household costs and remove barriers for children and young people on lower incomes.

Uniform and clothing

Support includes the provision of new and pre-loved uniform, including wider items such as underwear, toiletries and items for special events such as Proms, Hallowe'en and Christmas. Sustainability is a key theme to support uptake of pre-loved items, as has care taken to launder and present garments in an attractive way. Creative names

for school “shops” include Boutiques, Pop Ups, a High Street and a “Minted” to encourage children and families to explore.

Clubs and events

Schools are reconsidering expectations around dress up/down days and school events and clubs, moving from set payments to donations and “pay what you can” or removing costs altogether. In some schools, school photos are free for families who would struggle to pay.

In the wider community, targeted support is provided to attend holiday clubs, youth clubs and transition clubs and family cards help with entrance to local attractions.

Widening access to trips

Wider school experiences including trips are vital, particularly for children and young people impacted by poverty. Creative approaches are adopted to ensure that these remain part of the holistic school experience for all learners. Targeted use of PEF is ensuring increased equity of access to such experiences, including provision of outdoor clothing and equipment. Schools are planning and communicating with parents well in advance and are developing Cost of the School Day calendars which set out school events across the school year. Many schools are now planning residential trips outwith peak times, reducing the cost while ensuring that learners still have access to a memorable and valuable residential experience.

Resources and learning

Take what you need trollies provide universal access to items such as snacks and stationery. Targeted provision includes homework clubs and study support sessions, including free transport, payment of University and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) application fees and devices and internet access for children and young people unable to access this at home.

Travelling to school

Walking buses and Bikeability training, including targeted provision of bikes and helmets, is prioritised in some schools.

Non-stigmatising support

Schools are working to ensure that access to support is free from stigma. Examples include the introduction of ‘pay it forward’ schemes, giving families the opportunity to partially or fully cover the costs of events or trips for other young people. Several schools are adding QR codes into newsletters and other school communications, so that parents and carers can receive support without having to approach staff in person. Some school run food banks offer families the option to order online.

“See the Boutique and free fruit, it helps me so much. All kids see it as a help and not cause you’re struggling. It helps me and my kids not be embarrassed.”

Parent

Evidence will indicate that CoSD action has reduced costs, addressed barriers to participation and improved equity of access for all learners to school experiences.

What next for Cost of the School Day in West Lothian?

“We have tried to ensure the cost of the school day just becomes part of the core business of schools. It's just what they do.”

Arlene Black

West Lothian anticipates that future data relating to attainment, achievement, attendance, ethos and health and wellbeing will demonstrate that removing cost barriers is also removing barriers to learning and improving outcomes for children and young people.

The wide range of activities described here has been designed to build capacity and systems across schools, making Cost of the School Day self-sustaining and part of core business for schools, rather than a ‘one off’ or an ‘add on’:

- Mitigating the Cost of the School Day is now part of school improvement planning in West Lothian and will be reviewed as part of continuous school improvement. Schools will be supported to refresh their Cost of the School Day Action Statements annually.
- Investment in professional learning and the development of local resources has been intended to build capacity in and across schools and ensure that this work is sustainable without significant additional resource in the future. Empowered staff and learners will enable schools to keep Cost of the School Day high on their agenda, supported by effective processes for improvement. Arrangements for continued practice sharing will help schools to support one another whilst promoting creativity and innovation.
- Partnership working will continue to be integral to addressing child poverty in West Lothian schools. Built in referral pathways, the Families and Young People’s Advice Service in Secondary schools with plans to expand into Primaries and established links with support organisations will enable schools to access a wide range of support, including opportunities for maximising income.
- Cost of the School Day in West Lothian is part of the Strategic Equity Fund, with associated monitoring of action, progress and impact. Information will be used by the PEF team and SAC partners to identify future strategic direction.

Appendix 1

Success criteria and associated activities

Local authority success criteria

- Schools and staff at local authority level will have worked effectively with partners to provide support and guidance to address CoSD issues
- Evidence will indicate that CoSD action has reduced costs, addressed barriers to participation and improved equity of access for all learners to school experiences
- Professional learning, support and use of resources will have increased knowledge and understanding of poverty related issues, impacting positively on practice
- A values-based culture will be evident in schools, with poverty sensitive approaches ensuring that the dignity of all is respected and stigma removed.

Activities

- Produce self-evaluation guidance
- Support resources to be developed for staff, children, young people and parents/carers
- Specific Cost of the School Day focus to underpin programmes of network meetings including equity and family link worker networks
- Work with identified partners, feeding into relevant plans and priorities for improvement
- Identify and promote financial entitlements, external sources of support and encourage referrals
- Share examples of effective practice

Schools success criteria

- Explored and identified financial barriers, through improved methods of communication and consultation with their school communities
- Captured an increasing range of voices, including those with lived experience
- More meaningfully involved and empowered learners
- Produced a CoSD Action Statement, based on the needs of the school community
- Identified and planned action for improvement, using a range of relevant measures to evaluate and demonstrate evidence of impact
- Shared progress and next steps with the school community
- Begun to explore CoSD links to learning across the curriculum
- More actively promoted financial entitlements and other sources of support
- Increasingly used referral pathways to access individual support for children, young people and families

Activities

- Produce a Cost of the School Day Action Statement after wide consultation with school community
- Identify a Cost of the School Day lead
- Set up a Cost of the School Day working group to lead development work
- A Cost of the School Day priority or priorities to be identified and acted upon as part of Pupil Equity Fund (PEF) planning
- All school staff to engage with the Child Poverty Action Group Cost of the School Day eLearning module to further professional learning
- Learner voice and lived experience to be central to Cost of the School Day development work
- Use self-evaluation guidance to evaluate and evidence impact