



Poverty Proofing® Case Study: Laura Brewis, 'We Make Culture'

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Laura Brewis, the Executive Director of We Make Culture, has spent most of her career working in the creative industry. Since founding We Make Culture in 2017, she has focused on creating low-cost and free opportunities within Sunderland's music scene. While inclusivity has always been central to their mission, Laura and the team remain highly aware of the inequalities that exist across the city and strive to ensure their work responds to these challenges.

We Make Culture is a delivery partner of the Culture Start programme and learned about Poverty Proofing® through this involvement. Laura explained that the team valued the opportunity to take part in an audit process, as it provided a fresh, external perspective on their work and helped them explore how they could further strengthen their efforts to be welcoming and inclusive.

Before engaging with Poverty Proofing, Laura and the team at We Make Culture made every effort to ensure that steps were taken to reduce barriers and targeted areas of deprivation to ensure those people could access opportunity.

“We’ve always thought about that and take active steps with projects to make sure we’re reducing the barriers down. We’re also definitely aware of the way we target some of our programmes for example working with Wearside Women in Need, and More Than Grandparents and other partners and targeting some of our groups in areas of higher deprivation. It’s all thinking about things like rather than making people come to us we go to them, limiting transport costs, trying to be really aware of the barriers that might be in place.”

After engaging with Poverty Proofing and completing a full audit, Laura explained that the process helped We Make Culture gain a deeper understanding of the young people's experience when accessing their programmes and services, as well as the organisations broader operating model. Recent work has highlighted how young people often begin participating in one group before progressing to others, which has always been We Make Culture's plan, and it prompted the team to consider how this journey can present practical challenges that may limit participation.

“...actually that's even harder than it appears. If you start at a youth club at the end of your street then all of a sudden, you're told you could go to another one and they really want to but it's half an hour away so you have to walk, or you don't have time to get food on the

way, that can be difficult. We've really thought about that journey and that there's still a lot of things that are a challenge to that."

At the time of this conversation with Laura, We Make Culture were planning a residential trip to Edinburgh with three young people to perform in a show. Laura explained that the organisation has been particularly mindful about communicating clearly with parents and ensuring that every cost is fully accounted for, so young people and their families feel supported and reassured throughout the process.

"...we've had 3 people from Lambton Street [Youth and Community Hub] now at our central Young Musicians Project groups. They're actually coming to Edinburgh with us to play a show at the weekend; 3 kids who have never left Sunderland and never been anywhere overnight, so we're taking them."

They have now completed that trip, with all expenses covered. Laura further explained at a later date how the trip went:

"We've now done the residential in Edinburgh and it blew the young people's minds! They described it as "life changing", and to watch them experience it was such a privilege. Thanks for all your help in shaping our thinking and helping us make it a reality!"

As a result of engaging with Poverty Proofing, Laura and the team have become increasingly aware that the barriers young people face are not solely financial. In response, they have introduced several new measures to reduce barriers to participation. These include, but are not limited to, providing pre-paid taxis for young people without alternative transport options and offering food or snacks at all sessions, which have been very well received. Laura also noted that they have made a conscious effort to clearly state that sessions are free, recognising that unclear communication can create uncertainty and discourage attendance.

"So just having the word 'Free' quite big on everything made a huge difference. It's acknowledging that if there's uncertainty around it, people just won't do it because they might be worried that maybe someone's going to ask them for money at some point, but if it's really clear that it's free, they're more willing to take the risk."

Thinking ahead, We Make Culture aims to continue providing opportunities for young people from childhood through to their twenties, working closely with hyperlocal community partners to ensure that those unable to attend more central groups can still access support. The organisation is also exploring new locations where its programmes could have the greatest impact.

“...for example, we know the North of the river doesn’t have much music provision at all but also has those high deprivation areas like Castletown, Southwick; we’re thinking about what it looks like there. We need to think of where the right place is to put it, who we need to link up with. It’s more of the same but keep the long-term, person-centred bit of it going.”

Poverty Proofing has been a valuable process for We Make Culture, affirming that the organisation was already taking a poverty informed approach, which has been strengthened with insights from their work with Children North East. Laura noted that having an external perspective - alongside feedback from the wider community, including those less familiar with We Make Culture - was particularly beneficial.

As a result of the audit, We Make Culture has created a new role for an under employed or unemployed individual to support the implementation of identified improvements. This position will strengthen areas such as youth voice and feedback, which were previously challenging to prioritise alongside existing responsibilities.

“The work we did with Children North East has helped us shaped what this role will look like; youth voice, feedback and all of that. We already knew it was important but when it’s a tiny bit of all the other jobs you have to do it’s hard. I think it’ll be really interesting to see how that changes what we do.”