



Poverty Proofing® Case Study with Stephen Brice

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Introduction

For Co-op Academies Trust, Poverty Proofing the School Day has become far more than a series of audits. What began as a pilot in a single academy has evolved into a trust-wide commitment to fairness, belonging and inclusion, shaping how leaders think about disadvantage across more than 40 schools.

The work emerged from a wider journey the trust was already on. With pupil premium and social inclusion becoming strategic priorities, trust leaders had introduced pupil premium reviews and developed tools to help schools evaluate their own practice. While these approaches were helping schools identify and respond to disadvantage, there was a growing sense that more could be done.

As Strategic Lead for Pupil Premium and Disadvantage, Steve Brice wanted the trust to move beyond responding to issues once they appeared.

"We were already identifying some of the challenges that were easy to spot, but we wanted to be a bit more strategic and a bit more ahead of the curve."

Context and Rationale

When the trust learned about Children North East's Poverty Proofing programme, leaders saw an opportunity to better understand the lived experiences of pupils and families.

A pilot audit was commissioned in one academy, gathering feedback directly from children, families and staff. The findings proved powerful.

While leaders often knew where to look for obvious signs of financial hardship, the audit revealed less visible barriers affecting participation, belonging and access to opportunities. It also highlighted how school policies and communications could sometimes be experienced differently by families than intended.

Reflecting on the first audit, Steve recalls being struck by the level of detail contained within the feedback.

"I remember sitting in on the verbal feedback for that first audit and being quite surprised, in a good way, at the granular level of detail."

The experience reinforced an important lesson for the trust.

"You don't know what you don't know. The audits helped us look in places we hadn't previously thought to look."

Understanding the Challenge

Encouraged by the value of the pilot, additional academies volunteered to take part. As more audits were completed, common themes began to emerge across schools.

Alongside detailed reports for individual academies, Children North East produced a trust-wide common themes report, helping leaders understand where the strongest messages were coming from. The combination of strategic themes and school-level insight provided a powerful picture of the barriers affecting pupils and families.

One of the most significant findings was that positive intentions alone were not always enough.

Many schools already had supportive policies in place, but the audits highlighted how implementation, communication and everyday interactions often had the greatest impact on whether pupils felt included and able to participate fully in school life.

"We can have all the best-intentioned policies in the world. But it's how those policies are implemented and communicated that affects belonging, inclusion and participation."

The findings also aligned closely with the trust's wider focus on belonging and social inclusion, highlighting how easily unintended barriers could be created if schools were not actively considering the experiences of disadvantaged pupils and families.

Insight into Action

As the audits continued, leaders began asking a bigger question. Rather than waiting for future audits to identify issues, how could the trust use everything it had

learned to proactively prevent barriers from emerging in the first place? The answer became the Fair Deal.

Initially developed as a set of Poverty Proofing "non-negotiables", the framework evolved through discussions with headteachers, trust leaders, community teams and the trust board. It drew on Poverty Proofing findings, pupil premium reviews, examples of effective practice already taking place within academies and wider expertise around disadvantage and inclusion. At its heart was a commitment to consistency.

The trust recognised that pupils and families should experience the same commitment to fairness regardless of which Co-op academy they attended.

"We didn't want ourselves to be part of conversations where families were worrying whether they could afford to participate fully in school."

The result was a trust-wide framework setting clear expectations while still allowing schools flexibility in how they delivered them.

A Fair Deal for Every Pupil

The Fair Deal addresses many of the barriers identified through Poverty Proofing, with a particular focus on reducing stigma, increasing participation and improving equity.

Uniform

Uniform emerged as a significant theme across the audits. The trust recognised that affordability was only part of the challenge. Accessibility also mattered, with some families finding it difficult to access specialist suppliers or travel to purchase required items.

In response, the Fair Deal includes reductions in branded uniform requirements, expanded support through uniform exchanges and commitments to ensure non-branded items can be purchased through widely available retailers and supermarkets.

The trust is also moving towards a single uniform supplier across all academies, using its scale to reduce costs for families.

Several secondary academies had already been providing the first set of branded uniform items for new pupils. This practice is now being embedded more consistently, alongside support for in-year admissions and managed moves.

The audits also prompted reflection on how schools respond when uniform expectations are not met.

"It's not about lowering expectations. It's about understanding the root causes and supporting rather than punishing."

Food and Drink

Student experiences of food provision emerged as one of the strongest themes across the audits.

Pupils spoke not only about affordability but also about queues, food availability, dining environments and whether accessing food felt worthwhile and dignified.

Rather than treating these as isolated issues, the trust has embedded Poverty Proofing principles into a major trust-wide catering procurement process, ensuring suppliers demonstrate a commitment to supporting families experiencing financial hardship and improving the overall dining experience for students.

Access to Opportunities

The audits also revealed hidden barriers affecting participation in school life.

In some cases, pupils were ruling themselves out of option subjects because they assumed courses such as art or technology would create additional costs for their families. Others were missing out on trips, extracurricular activities or enrichment opportunities because of concerns about affordability.

In response, the Fair Deal includes a commitment to removing hidden curriculum costs and ensuring financial circumstances do not prevent pupils from accessing subjects, experiences and opportunities.

Schools are also exploring alternative approaches to funding enrichment activities, including partnerships with local businesses and whole-school fundraising initiatives that help separate affordability from eligibility to participate.

Building Belonging Across the Trust

The Fair Deal is about more than individual initiatives. It represents a broader shift towards tackling disadvantage collectively across the trust.

Community teams have aligned their own work with the framework, helping provide practical support for families through grants, vouchers, clothing and wider community partnerships.

Trust leaders have also used procurement, partnerships and shared systems to create change at scale, recognising that improving equity should not be left solely to individual schools.

This collective approach reflects the trust's belief that belonging is everyone's responsibility.

By reducing barriers and creating more consistent experiences across academies, leaders hope every pupil feels valued, included and able to participate fully in school life.

Looking Ahead

Although the Fair Deal is still being embedded, leaders are already seeing changes in thinking, culture and practice.

Schools are increasingly considering decisions through the lens of dignity, accessibility and belonging, while the trust continues to monitor participation in enrichment activities, attendance and wider indicators of inclusion.

Ultimately, the ambition is to see improvements not only in participation and attendance but also in outcomes and life chances for disadvantaged pupils.

"We'd hope to see students feel like they belong more to the school and the school belongs to them."

Conclusion

Looking back, Steve believes the most valuable aspect of Poverty Proofing was the opportunity to hear directly from pupils and families.

The process challenged assumptions, uncovered previously unseen barriers and helped leaders understand where meaningful changes could be made.

For trusts considering a similar approach, his advice is to start by listening and then use those insights to build a proactive strategy for change.

"I'd recommend the audit work as a really good starting point because it helps you look where you didn't think to look and see things you might not otherwise have seen."

For Co-op Academies Trust, Poverty Proofing has become a catalyst for wider organisational change. What started as a way of understanding disadvantage more deeply has evolved into a trust-wide commitment to fairness, dignity, belonging and inclusion, helping to ensure every pupil has the opportunity to thrive.

References

[Co-op Academies Trust - The Fair Deal](#)