

**CHILD  
POVERTY  
ACTION  
GROUP**

# THE COST OF HAVING FUN AT SCHOOL

MARCH 2022

*"There is nothing for free. If  
you can't pay for special  
occasions, you can't go."  
(Pupil, age 6)*



Poverty Proofing

**THE COST OF  
THE SCHOOL DAY**



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# Overview

The quotes and experiences captured in this report are taken from our work with **32 schools across England, Scotland and Wales** through Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) and Children North East's UK Cost of the School Day project. It highlights what we've heard from focus groups with over **8,000 pupils** as well as the views of parents and carers.

The findings are supported by wider ongoing work being carried out by Children North East through their Poverty Proofing© the School Day project, which has worked with 390 schools in England reaching 170,890 pupils. The report also draws on insights from CPAG's Cost of the School Day project in Scotland.

Bringing together this research and expertise, CPAG and Children North East seek to shine an important spotlight on the often-hidden school costs that prevent children from poorer backgrounds being able to make the most of school life.

When speaking to children and young people across England, Scotland and Wales about the impact of poverty on the school day, **stories of children missing out on fun and special activities and events because of the associated costs and pressures are common.**

For many children, events, celebrations and special activities are some of the things they remember most about their time at school. We know that many pupils look forward to these activities and gain a lot from them, and that's why they are an important part of the school year. However, for some children, **these days and events draw attention to their families' financial circumstances**, and are a frequent and unwelcome reminder that, unlike their peers, they are not able to join in with all the opportunities school has to offer.

But it doesn't have to be this way. Through our research, we've gathered ideas and suggestions from pupils and families about how things can be done differently. We've also learned from good practice in schools, and this paper helps to highlight these insights and provide **practical recommendations for schools, parent bodies and charities to ensure all children can make the most of the school day.**

Of course, school communities alone cannot eradicate child poverty or prevent the impact poverty has on children. For more information about the causes of child poverty and the wider changes that are needed to end child poverty, see [cpag.org.uk/child-poverty](https://cpag.org.uk/child-poverty).

# Introduction

## Background on school-related costs

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Although education across the UK is seemingly ‘free’ to access, we know that 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.

Our research with whole-school communities across Britain shows that things like uniforms, trips, school lunches, P.E. kits, stationery, devices and subject costs can be difficult to afford for low-income families. However, in this report we look particularly at the **frequent and recurring costs and challenges associated with fun events at school**, as these have come up as a common theme in our research.

While school-related costs have always been a challenge for low-income families, the **rising cost of living and the recent £20 cut to universal credit are all contributing to family worries and hardship**. Families should not have to worry about the cost of fun events at school on top of everything else.

## Fun events in school

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Pupils and parents have shared the many ways in which school activities **like charity days, fundraising events, non-uniform days, school fayres, special occasions and leavers' celebrations** come with a range of **hidden costs and demands** on families that often can’t be met, leaving some children unable to participate and feeling noticeably different from their peers.

For low-income families, fun at school comes with requests for money, costumes and material donations, which can add up to significant amounts across the school year and contribute to the financial challenges many families are facing.

Importantly, we know schools are working hard to offer a wide range of fun and engaging opportunities for pupils to enhance their time at school. The exclusion experienced by pupils and families at school is almost always unintentional. Many children and families living in low-income households also go to great lengths to hide their financial disadvantage, and this can mean schools are unaware of the impact fun events are having on them. However, it’s clear from our research that even one-off small requests can pose difficulties for struggling families, and in many schools across Britain, these build up and are a common feature of school life.

Our research also highlights **ideas pupils and families have suggested that can help make fun events more inclusive**, as well as describing the approaches they have identified as working well for them in their school. **Many schools are finding creative and alternative ways to celebrate occasions and charity days** without burdening children and families with unnecessary costs. We’ve highlighted a number of these throughout the paper to help spark ideas and share good practice.

## Our aim

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CPAG and Children North East hope that this report will enable schools, educators, parent bodies and charities to better understand how certain events and activities at school can negatively impact some children. By working together and listening to children and their families, we can ensure that fun events at school can be enjoyed by everyone. As people working in schools and with schools, we have a responsibility to our children to **make sure that no part of schooling is out of reach because of family income**, and this crucially includes all the wonderful, fun activities that we know children love.

# Summary of key findings

This page sets out the key findings from Child Poverty Action Group and Children North East's research into fun events at school, drawing on work carried out with pupils and families in schools across England, Scotland and Wales.

## 1 School fundraising and charity days are adding to financial pressures on families.

Some pupils and families who are themselves struggling to get by are being asked to regularly donate to different charity and fundraising days at school, and this is contributing to financial worries.

"Sometimes it feels like quite a lot of money is being asked for. I can't do it if it's lots of times. We have to pay for more important things first." (Parent)

## 2 Not everyone is able to take part and enjoy dress up days and non-uniform days.

Children and young people reported being unable to take part in school dress up days and non-uniform days because of associated costs and social pressures. They told us this sometimes made them feel embarrassed and left out. In some cases, teachers reported that pupils were missing school on these days to avoid these pressures.

"They talk behind your back [about what you wear] and stand staring at you." (Pupil, age 12)

## 3 Activities like school fayres and book sales highlight differences between lower-income pupils and their peers.

Some children described being left behind and feeling different because, unlike their friends, they didn't have enough money to attend and enjoy activities like school fayres and book sales.

"It's a bit annoying because when you see your friends come out [of the fayre] it really teases you. It feels quite annoying." (Pupil, age 10)"

## 4 Expensive leavers' celebrations are putting parents in an impossible situation.

In some schools, leavers' celebrations such as residential trips and school proms are costing families over £200. This is posing a big challenge for lower income parents who don't want children to miss out but can't afford this significant cost.

"School don't think...how much it costs. It [the cost of prom] could be what someone earns in a week." (Pupil, age 16)



# Key recommendations

## For schools

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1. Carry out an assessment of the school year and identify how many different charity, fundraising, non-uniform and dressing up days you currently run, and at what times of year. Consider whether these could be reduced or spaced out more, and whether families could be given more notice. Also consider how you can ensure all pupils can take part.
2. Consult with and involve your school community in planning your fun events calendar. Ask pupils and parents about current costs and affordability of fun events, and understand from them how you can plan activities that are right for the community and reflect the occasions and causes they care about.
3. Ensure that inclusion and affordability are key considerations when planning fun activities in school. Adopt whole-school approaches instead of targeted support to children from low-income families. For example, instead of offering spare Christmas jumpers or dressing up costumes to some children, consider how dressing up costs can be reduced for all families – some schools provide t-shirts for everyone to decorate.

More comprehensive guidance for schools, parent bodies and charities can be found on pages 31 to 36.

## For parent bodies

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1. Think about affordability when planning and delivering activities and events, and check whether costs can be reconsidered or reduced. You can make your parent body work for every family by adopting a whole-school community approach to fundraising and events. For example, make sure everyone can attend the school disco and ask parents for voluntary donations to tickets beforehand.
2. Be mindful of the timings of activities to avoid multiple costs occurring at once. When planning and scheduling events, ensure you are aware of other requests for financial contributions being made of parents, including trips and other events. Families also appreciate being given as much advance notice as possible for any planned activities.

## For charities

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1. Raise awareness within the organisation of the challenges fundraising in schools can present for pupils and families on a low income and ensure this informs and is an active part of considerations being made when planning fundraising activities in schools.
2. Consider how any materials, information and communications linked to fundraising in schools can demonstrate awareness and understanding of the financial pressures children and families might be facing. For example, focusing primarily on how pupils can engage and connect with the cause, and presenting a range of ways to support the cause with raising money just being one option.

# Fundraising at school

Charity and fundraising days at school can be an important way for children to learn about social causes and help raise money to tackle issues that affect people. Schools often fundraise for local charities, as well as taking part in well-known national fundraising days. These days can help to nurture compassion and raise awareness of the world around pupils – including their own communities. Fundraising days and events may also be organised by parent bodies (eg, PTAs and parent councils) to help raise important funds for the school and increase opportunities for pupils. Many children look forward to these days and enjoy the opportunity to take part.

"[Donating and bringing in food for Harvest] was a good way to help people." (Pupil, age 16)

## Requests for cash and donations

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However, pupils and families have told us that household income affects how lots of children experience these days, often with negative consequences for children in poorer families.



First, these days regularly involve direct requests for cash. While many schools use more discreet systems for parents to pay for things like lunches, trips and clubs, when charity events and fundraising activities occur, children and young people are often required to bring in physical money. Children reported that donations for charity and fundraising days are often collected in front of them in classrooms by teachers or other pupils, making it obvious which of their peers have made a donation.

"You would know if someone didn't have money. Everyone stands up and the teacher goes round for money and they sit down." (Pupil, age 10)

"I do notice sometimes there are the same people who don't pay each time." (Pupil, age 11)

"A record is kept of who has brought in money." (Pupil, age 13)



# Fundraising at school

## Buying items and merchandise

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As well as it being noticeable which pupils aren't able to donate, children have told us they are aware of their friends missing out on certain fundraising activities, such as bake sales and buying products like poppies and red noses, because money is required in order for them to take part.

"You don't have to buy one [a red nose], but I feel sad for the people who can't afford it." (Pupil, age 9)

"Some people cried because they didn't get one. They just sat there looking at the cakes. They looked sad." (Pupil, age 10)

"Some people can't get them [poppies] and some others can. Some people might feel left out." (Primary school pupil)

"Year 6 do cake day. Some children have lots of siblings and 50p for cake is a lot if there are lots of siblings." (Primary school pupil)

## Timing and notice periods

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Children and families have often commented on the frequency of fundraising days and activities. They have reported that sometimes these occasions are too close together, and they aren't given enough notice about what's coming up. This can be stressful for families who don't want their children to miss out but simply can't meet the continuous requests. Parents also noted that there are certain times of year that can be more difficult, like the lead-up to Christmas.

"Sometimes it feels like quite a lot of money is being asked for. I can't do it if it's lots of times. We have to pay for more important things first." (Parent)

"I don't want my child to feel like she's missing out on anything, but I know that a lot of the 'demands' are unnecessary." (Parent)

"I feel quite stressed and anxious with the constant letters we have from school in the build up to Christmas." (Parent)





# Fundraising at school

## Lack of understanding about family circumstances

What's more, some of the families who are being asked to donate and fundraise for charities and the school are themselves receiving charitable support, such as using school food and clothing banks. **Child poverty affects more than one in four children across the UK**, and many more families with children are struggling to get by due to the rising cost of living and recent cuts to the social security system.

While promoting charitable causes is important, **it's crucial that schools and charities are not burdening struggling families with fundraising requests** which may further contribute to their hardship. We know this can also lead to families feeling that their school lacks understanding about the challenges they face or the realities of living on a low income – and this can impact how families choose to engage with their school.

"There is little awareness of what it's like to live on a very tight income." (Parent)

"It felt like they weren't interested and that we were on our own. If it's smallish amounts of money I don't raise it as they don't seem to understand." (Parent)

"Despite raising awareness of the cost of the school day we are constantly being asked for money for photos, Christmas cards and gifts, charities etc. and many parents then feel compelled to give to ensure their child is not singled out." (Parent)

During the school year, there are often a variety of fundraising events for different purposes and with different aims. For example, some fundraising activities aim to support a charity while others aim to raise money for the school itself.

Some parents talked specifically about requests for money that come from the PTA, parent council, or other parent groups. These parent bodies commonly coordinate a range of activities and events with an aim to raise money so the school can offer pupils additional opportunities – for example, subsidising school trips, school clubs and putting on discos. However, parents told us they sometimes feel pressured to contribute to these events and, although they want to help, this can be a significant challenge. Parents also commented that although they are often being asked for voluntary donations, sometimes it does not feel voluntary because of the way the information is communicated.

"Not everyone doesn't mind how much things cost just cos it's for the kid's school." (Parent)



# Fundraising at school



## Being poverty aware

Conversely, our research shows that families really notice when schools do things to take the pressure off and show an understanding of the challenges families face. Parents appreciate schools being poverty aware and told us that this is often demonstrated through the schools' communications, policies and practices.

"Haven't needed to yet [help paying for school costs] as school very aware of hardship in community and does all it can to make easier for those less fortunate without it being obvious to others. As teachers/head teacher themselves very approachable, if I get to dire straits (and hope not), I wouldn't have problems going to them for help for my child." (Parent)

"Getting children involved in the work of charities at an early age is a great way of showing them how these organisations make a difference in the world, and how they can be a part of it. With school-age children, it's about trying to involve every child in some way and look at the opportunities to create new and fun ways to make giving and fundraising more inclusive. It's worth taking time to research the school and speak to the teachers about their students to help identify the kinds of activities that would work best to show them how they can be involved in non-financial ways."

Charlotte Sherman, Chartered Institute of Fundraising



## Ideas and reflections from pupils and parents

Some pupils talked positively about donation systems where you can throw money in a bucket, and also felt more things should be free at school.

"It's pretty anonymous [at my school]. Nobody needs to know if you have or you haven't [donated]." (Pupil, age 12)

"It didn't matter if you didn't bring money because we took a bucket to collect money." (Pupil, age 10)

"I think they should do things for free." (Primary school pupil)

"There's no pressure to donate. They're sending e-newsletters now with just giving link. I think they should keep that going after covid." (Parent)

# Fundraising at school

## What works well

### An alternative way to mark Remembrance Day: one school's new approach

One school recently changed their approach to charity days and fundraising. This year, there was no expectation to buy poppies and instead pupils told us they wrote poems and made crosses with poppies, and that everything was provided by the school. When collecting donations for charity days pupils and staff described how money was handed in discreetly in envelopes:

"We tweaked it a little bit, put their donation into an envelope, we are not stating it has to be a pound, just a donation, you don't even need to bring a donation, everyone is going to join in regardless." (Teacher)

Although this change started as a Covid-related measure, one of the unintended yet positive consequences of this is that "nobody knows how much you are taking in." (Pupil, age 10)

"I think that helped a lot because then there is not that pressure around how much people are bringing in." (Teacher)



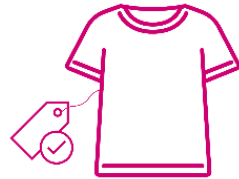
# Dressing up days and non-uniform days

Dressing up for different themed days can be a fun way to celebrate learning and add variety to the school calendar. Along with non-uniform days, we know many children look forward to dressing up days and enjoy planning outfits.

## Having the right outfit

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However, as well as the direct requests for money on these days, there are also a number of financial implications associated with taking part. Commonly, dressing up days and non-uniform days can create increased anxieties and cost pressures for some pupils and their parents. On dressing up days, pupils told us that they are often asked to wear specific items for different occasions, e.g. polka dots for Children in Need, red clothes for Red Nose Day, literary outfits for World Book Day and a festive jumper for Christmas Jumper Day.



Pupils noted that it can be difficult to find clothes for the occasion and some had to buy outfits especially for the day. Pupils were also aware of other children who were unable to take part in these occasions. They noticed that they stood out, and were often left out, for this reason. Parents also shared examples of schools that were hosting multiple different dress up days in one half term and have spoken about the minimal notice that is given to prepare outfits, which can be stressful for all parents but particularly those without much money.

"Yes [I have struggled with costs], there have been dress up days where having to buy different items has been an unnecessary expense, especially when you have more than 1 child." (Parent)

"If you don't pay on muffi, you have to change into spare uniform." (Pupil, age 11)

"I didn't have a costume, so didn't get to take part but could go with the class." (Pupil, age 9)



# Dressing up days and non-uniform days

## Embarrassment and shame

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Children also suggested that dressing up days and non-uniform days can lead to pupils being picked on and feeling embarrassed because they can't afford the right clothes. Some pupils highlighted that non-uniform days can sometimes be an opportunity for children to show off the clothes they have and this highlights inequalities between pupils.

"They talk behind your back [about what you wear] and stand staring at you." (Pupil, age 12)

"[Your friends might say] you should have dressed up as something else." (Pupil, age 8)

"Some people might be embarrassed by their costume or might not have enough money." (Pupil, age 9)

"They feel frustrated and don't want to talk the rest of the day... they feel uncomfortable." (Pupil, age 10)

"Some people ask why you don't have a Christmas jumper." (Pupil, age 10)

## Impact on attendance

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Worryingly, our evidence shows that in some schools attendance dips on non-uniform days and dressing up days, and this is supported by evidence elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> This highlights the significance of the cost and social pressures on children. While most would imagine these days to be a source of enjoyment, in some cases they are in fact harming the education of pupils through increased absences.

"Children will take the day off on days where St David's Day costumes need to be worn or other days when uniform isn't required." (Staff member)

<sup>1</sup> [Open data project for schools Christmas jumper day attendance](#), ASCL, 2018

# Dressing up days and non-uniform days



## Ideas and reflections from pupils

"I would change like all the non-uniform days because people get asked if that's the only clothes they have....It makes them feel upset and disappointed." (Pupil, age 10)

"We used to stand up and show our costumes [for World Book Day]... now [we decorate potatoes instead] it's better, cos we're not using plastic which is destroying our world." (Pupil, age 8)

"Could design a t-shirt or jumper in school instead [of dress up days]?" (Primary school pupil)

"Maybe [instead of buying Christmas jumpers] if you had a normal plain jumper, a white one, you could do crafty things, you can decorate your own jumper, an old t-shirt you don't use anymore." (Primary school pupil)

"Could have a stall and people can bring in old Christmas jumpers. They'd be big and small so people could come up and say they need one. I think we've done that before." (Primary school pupil)

"Instead of everyone buying a jumper to wear, we could make Christmas cards instead." (Primary school pupil)

### School insight: monitoring non-uniform days

One school informally monitored attendance during non-uniform days and identified several pupils, mainly pupils with English as an additional language, who were not attending school on these days. They have since changed these days to 'dress as you please'. Pupils said this was good as they could **"wear school trousers and any home top they liked."** (Pupil, age 9). Senior management noted that since introducing this, attendance has improved.

# Dressing up days and non-uniform days

## What works well



### World Book Day without the cost pressures on families: Downfield Primary School's creative approach

Downfield Primary School in Dundee set up two bell-style reading tents during the week leading up to World Book Day, stocked with lots of exciting titles for children to dip into during break time and lunch hour. Inside the tents there was plenty of room to get comfy on cushions and hang out with friends while a roster of specially-invited guests (parents!) hosted special reading sessions. At the end of the week, the school organised a book swap, open to everyone. Pupils didn't have to bring a book to swap – it was open to all to come along and find something new to enjoy.



# Special occasions and celebrations

The school year is filled with a range of community activities, faith celebrations and special occasions which are often memorable, positive experiences for pupils, allowing them to spend time with friends, learn about new things and take part in fun activities.

"It's really good [the Halloween disco], you get food and a drink and it's really fun."  
(Pupil, age 9)

However, many of these occasions and celebrations put demands on families to supply food, materials and spend money for their children to fully take part.

## **Seasonal events and cultural activities**

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Children have told us about being asked to bring in costumes for Christmas nativity plays and traditional outfits for Diwali; materials for Easter egg and Easter bonnet decorating; pumpkins to carve for Halloween; and food for occasions such as Eid and Christmas parties; as well as food for end-of-year celebrations. While celebrating and learning about different cultures and religions is an important part of education, these activities can come with many hidden costs and can be particularly difficult if they occur close together.

"If you don't have the stuff [Easter bonnet materials] at home, you can't do it."  
(Pupil, age 10)

"There is nothing for free. If you can't pay for special occasions, you can't go."  
(Pupil, age 6)

"It's the Christmas party, Christmas concert costumes, tickets for Christmas concerts, Christmas fete, raffles, teachers' presents, donations to hampers, Christmas jumper day... the list goes on!" (Parent)

"Christmas performances outside of school time mean I need to think about transport, time off work. I have always been frustrated at the expected ability to afford things." (Parent)

"They put up a message on Facebook page suggesting kids wear Christmas clothes for the play and although they stated we shouldn't go out and buy how can I tell my children I can't afford it?" (Parent)



# Special occasions and celebrations

## Fayres and discos

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Pupils have also shared their experiences of school fayres, with some saying that they have not been able to attend because of the multiple costs. These include buying refreshments, taking part in games or fundraising activities, and purchasing toys and items from different stalls. Children spoke about how it made them feel different and left out when they weren't able to attend these events, often comparing their experiences to their better-off peers.

"It's a bit annoying because when you see your friends come out it really teases you. It feels quite annoying." (Pupil, age 10)

"I don't think they have any money [so they don't go to the fayre]." (Pupil, age 9)

"It was so unfair. My mum wouldn't let me pick what I wanted cos she didn't have enough money in her pocket." (Pupil, age 7)

School discos were also found to be a source of worry with children describing that on top of the entry ticket, they also needed money to buy sweets and drinks, and have a costume or something suitable to wear.

These quotes are taken from a group discussion between pupils:

"We were saying about £3 wasn't that bad for the disco" (Secondary school pupil);  
"But for [pupil's name] Mam it would be £9 because he's got two younger brothers."  
(Secondary school pupil)



# Special occasions and celebrations

## Buying books and toys

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Book and toy fayres were also raised as being increasingly expensive. In one school, pupils told us that, although everyone attends the book fayre, those without money are only able to borrow a book to look through before returning it, while everyone else gets to take home what they have bought.

"Some people are buying accessories, rubbers, posters, bookmarks, rulers... and some people can't buy anything. They can read a book but they can't keep it." (Pupil, age 11)

"You borrow a book and sit and read it in the corner and return it at the end. It would definitely be sad for me because I love books." (Pupil, age 8)



## Ideas and reflections from pupils

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"I think instead of paying for things at the fair, we could pay something before and then not pay when we're there." (Pupil, age 10)

"It doesn't cost anything to get in [to the school disco]. The parent council makes sure it's free." (Pupil, age 10)

"We said we should have a family discount [for parties and discos]." (Secondary school pupil).

"We were talking about the Halloween disco and about how maybe if we had a little sister or brother or cousin, you could donate the costumes to the school. The little ones who might be left out could have spare ones just in case." (Secondary school pupil)

"Someone's dad does the music and brings a smoke machine." (Pupil, age 11)

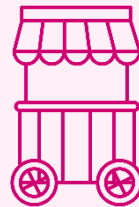
# Special occasions and celebrations

## What works well

### Removing entrance costs and providing free sport for all: a school's take on school fayres

The school hosts an annual spring fayre to raise funds for the school. It has no entrance fee for pupils and families to attend, and a variety of activities including "stalls for 10p, free football and sports at the event." (Senior school manager)

The school is aware of the pressure that charity events can represent for families so aims to keep track of how many are organised at school: "**We are very aware and discourage anyone from organising anything expensive, and we limit donations and we limit how many dress theme days there are or go for something simple so people don't feel pressurised to buy special costumes etc.**" (Staff member)



# Special occasions and celebrations

## **Birthdays and Christmas activities**

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Celebrating Christmas and birthdays can be an exciting time for children in schools. We know many pupils enjoy the festivities, and the chance to share treats and gifts with their teachers and peers.

"It's nice bringing cake in for your friends [on your birthday]." (Pupil, age 10)

However, although these occasions are often a source of fun for many, we found that children living in low-income households were sometimes left feeling distinguishable from their peers due to the cost pressures and ways in which these occasions were celebrated. For example, children talked about the pressure to bring in sweets or a cake for birthdays and share with the class what presents they had received. At Christmas time and the end of the school year, although many teachers do not expect gifts, pupils and families said they felt under pressure or guilty when seeing others bring in presents – especially when the gifts were given publicly to the teacher.

"I'd feel bad if I didn't bring cake in on my birthday, because, I dunno, it makes me feel rich! Because people would like me. They like me anyway but you know what I mean." (Secondary school pupil)

"Everyone crowds round the teacher with their gifts. The ones at the back are the ones with no gift." (Pupil, age 6)

"Our school now do a shop where you pay to allow your children to buy a present for you. It's a lovely idea, but racks up a fortune! Especially when you have more than one." (Parent)

"The biggest thing that you could say is like an unwritten cost, is end of academic year and Christmas presents for teachers and [teaching assistants]. Although schools would say they don't ask for presents, there is a huge pressure socially for kids to bring in gifts. No one would want to send their kid in on the last day with nothing when all the kids are carrying in a gift on the way to school. I think the school could do more to prevent this. It's hard enough buying Christmas gifts for my own family." (Parent)



# Special occasions and celebrations

## **Birthdays and Christmas activities**

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Pupils also told us teachers often ask them questions about their home experience when they return to school after the Christmas break or around their birthdays. For example, asking 'what did you receive over Christmas?' or 'what are you going to do for your birthday?' These types of questions draw attention to children's financial circumstances sometimes making them feel embarrassed.

"Teacher asks 'What have you had for your birthday/ What you've done that morning/ What cake you've got/What are you going to do for your birthday?'" (Pupil)



## **Ideas and reflections from pupils and parents**

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"There's no pressure to buy gifts. They [the staff] don't mention it, only to say 'Please don't send your child in with presents, we don't want any'. And they also quite cleverly hide behind [school] policy [by saying] 'We're not allowed to receive presents from you'." (Parent)

"[School] could give us a red hat. And you could make your own Christmas hat; a Santa hat with pompoms and stuff using stuff that would be in school...you could personalise it and wear it all day." (Secondary school pupil)

"Last year we had Christmas decorations we made out of clay and I remember making a reindeer, snowballs to take home." (Secondary school pupil)

"The school is usually very supportive and they have things like a free Christmas dinner." (Parent).

# Special occasions and celebrations

## What works well

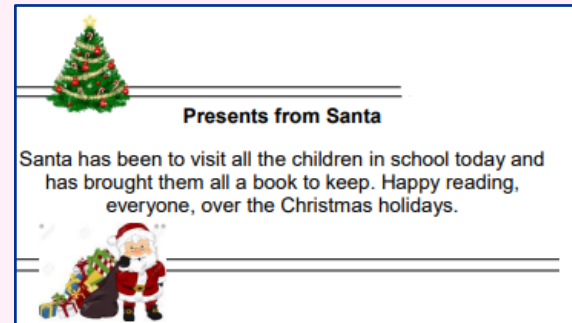
### Inclusive Christmas practices: Peel Park Primary's approach to Christmas celebrations

Pupils enjoy the various ways Christmas is celebrated at school, including the visit from Santa who distributes a book to everyone at no cost to pupils, courtesy of the PTA. "Santa gives you a book – everyone gets one and it's nice to have a present." (Pupil)

Pupils also discussed how they made Christmas cards in their lessons and that "school provided everything" (Pupil). This school practice ensures everyone receives a card, at no cost to families.



Photo courtesy of the school



# Special occasions and celebrations

## What works well

### Inclusive Christmas practices: Pollokshields Primary's letter to parents

#### *A message from staff*

*The staff at Pollokshields Primary School have decided to send this letter to you all with what we feel is an important message this year. Every year we are overwhelmed by the kindness of the school community who send in gifts at Christmas. However, this year we would like to ask you to consider not doing this.*

*We are very aware that many families will find themselves in difficult situations financially due to Covid-19 and we do not want our school to be an additional burden. We also do not want families to be making extra visits to shops to purchase gifts; we would rather you all stayed safe.*

*We do understand the need some of you feel to send in gifts but we ask that you also take note of the impact on the children who see their friends giving gifts to staff, when they themselves are unable to.*

*If you do wish to thank teachers and staff for their hard work undertaken this year, we will still welcome cards, tweets and emails. These small words of kindness have a huge impact and are greatly appreciated. Thank you.*

# Leavers' celebrations and transition points

"The last day's really special because we watch a film and they give us popcorn and squash." (Pupil, age 9)

Some of the most significant and often elaborate school celebrations take place at transition points, as children move to a new phase of education or leave school altogether.

Schools traditionally mark these occasions in a variety of ways, like holding discos or a party, taking students away on a residential trip, providing mementoes or holding a leavers' assembly or a formal prom.

While we know from speaking to young people that many value the opportunity to celebrate transitions because they mark a significant change in their life, pupils in low-income families can often find themselves having to make difficult choices and are often at risk of missing out on these important experiences.



## Residential trips

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Some schools mark transition points with a residential trip (this is a key part of finishing primary school in Scotland). There is often a lot of excitement in the run-up to these trips as children see them as an opportunity to have new experiences, build relationships and make memories with their friends.

"The [residential] trip is like the biggest deal. So many memories." (Secondary school pupil)

However, these trips can be very expensive for families who have to pay not only for the cost of the trip, but also for additional items like outdoor clothing, equipment and sleeping bags, as well as providing spending money.

"You could feel left out if you can't go. Not all families earn that much." (Pupil, age 9)



# Leavers' celebrations and transition points

These trips can put parents in an impossible situation, knowing how important they are for their children but often not being able to afford them. In one school, pupils shared that the residential trip cost £200 and a number of students could not attend for this reason. Some pupils and families were also not aware if there was financial help on offer from the school.

"Some people have no spending money. They try to keep it secret." (Pupil, age 10)

"If you can't pay you go to a different class [during the residential week]." (Pupil, age 11)

"It's not their [our parents] fault that they can't afford to go." (Pupil, age 10)

## **School proms**

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Proms are commonly highlighted as being costly for families, who are often required to pay for tickets, outfits, hair and make-up, and sometimes transport, in order for children to participate. Even with these costs, some pupils we spoke to told us that they still wanted the experience of attending a prom or party, as a way of marking the occasion.

"I'd just really enjoy the chance to get dressed up y'know, put on nice clothes and make it a special occasion." (Pupil, age 15)

However, many pupils who had attended proms told us it wasn't worth the cost and suggested they would have preferred celebrating in other ways. Some pupils also talked about the high costs and social pressures to wear certain clothes, but felt they had to attend otherwise they wouldn't get the chance to celebrate at all.

"Not enough people paid [had enough money] to go [to prom]. I think it was about £30-£35." (Pupil, age 17)

"School don't think... how much it [prom] costs. It could be what someone earns in a week." (Pupil, age 16)

"It's like a competition... who can spend the most on hair, eyelashes, fake tan and stuff." (Pupil, age 17)

"I maybe spent about £200 on stuff for prom. It wasn't worth it for the event because it wasn't that great." (Pupil, age 16)

"How about putting on a show, concert or performance for the school." (Secondary school pupil)

In discussions, pupils explored a range of alternatives to proms including watching films together, going on walks and doing karaoke in school. They also discussed ideas about how to make proms less expensive by subsidising parts of the event or hiring out outfits to pupils.



# Leavers' celebrations and transition points



## School insight: prom cost comparison

In one school, the leavers' celebration cost some pupils around £245. This comprised £200 for prom outfits, £25 for tickets and £20 for the leavers' hoody. Whereas in a school nearby, the head teacher capped spending on the prom at £20 and developed a well-stocked prom bank in the months leading up to the event to ensure pupils did not have to buy costly outfits.

## Leavers' mementoes

Transitions are also a time within the school year when there are often items available to purchase such as leavers' books and leavers' hoodies. Some children we spoke to did not get these mementoes to keep because they were an additional cost within already-stretched family budgets.

"Year book and jumpers I think are really expensive. I'm only allowed one." (Pupil, age 15)

"I had a leavers hoody. I really like it – I ordered it a bit big cause I thought I'd still wear it. But to be honest, they just end up in a drawer don't they?" (Pupil, age 14)

## Ideas and reflections from pupils

"I think the best thing would probably be have all the students from other years in the hall and then bring up year 11 and the headteacher praises them for everything they've done and gives an award or something like that." (Pupil, age 15)

"Watching a film together - having a movie screening in the hall or in class."  
(Secondary school pupil)

"We could have a school sleepover - either on the field or sleeping in the hall."  
(Secondary school pupil)

# Leavers' celebrations and transition points

## What works well

### Project Prom: Archbishop Holgate's School's inclusive prom celebration

The school understands that the costs associated with the prom could be a potential barrier for poorer students. Staff are trying to address this by offering support for all students through 'Project Prom'. Staff have asked sixth form students to donate their dresses and suits to be reused by younger students. A large number of outfits have been collected, and during the week we visited the school, staff were preparing to put on an event where students could come and choose an outfit, with posters displayed around school to advertise this.



Photos courtesy of the school



# Schools taking action on fun events

Here are a few examples of great initiatives taken by schools to reduce the cost and stress of some fun events during the school year.

Keith Rondeau  
@HT\_SMCoe

Today, the whole-school made their Christmas tee-shirts in readiness for parties next week. Not only is this great in terms of poverty proofing the school, but the kids bloody \*love\* it, even the big uns. School was absolutely buzzing!



4:25 PM · Dec 10, 2021 · Twitter for Android

2 Retweets 3 Quote Tweets 38 Likes

Sir Hoed  
@MrHoedMaths

95% of Christmas clothing contains unrecyclable plastics...

Attendance on Christmas Jumper days has been shown to drop around 4% (particularly impactful amongst disadvantaged groups)

There is another way of looking at it...

**Walton**  

## Reverse Christmas Jumper Day

**Friday 10<sup>th</sup> December**

Please donate any jumpers which are no longer wanted or needed



Jumpers will then be available to students on a *donate as much as you can* basis during the final week of term before our own Christmas Jumper Day on Friday 17<sup>th</sup> December. All cash donations will be passed to **Save the Children**. Any remaining items will then be donated to local clothing banks and charity shops.

6:41 PM · Dec 9, 2021 · Twitter for Android

Knowetop Primary  
@KnowetopPrimary

Some of our fabulous Cost of the School Day committee working on our pupil surveys and creating posters to raise awareness that we don't need to spend extra to celebrate Children in Need in school.

[#CostoftheSchoolDay](#)  
[#Article28](#) [#Article29](#)





# Schools taking action on fun events


 **Branston C of E Infant Academy**   
@BranstonInfant1

Very excited about our [#PopUpLibrary](#) bags this week! [#WorldBookDay](#) themed with a book for every child PLUS a voucher for another £1 book and extra treats to snuggle up with on [#WBD](#) for our live story! [@povertyproofcne](#) [@WSHEnglishHub](#) [@TomFletcher](#) [@JosephACoelho](#) [@JonnyDuddleDum](#)




9:53 AM · Mar 1, 2021 · Twitter for iPhone

1 Retweet 3 Quote Tweets 17 Likes

 **Keith Rondeau**  
@HT\_SMCoe

We work really hard to Poverty Proof the school day. We have had no Christmas jumpers, but every child has designed their own Christmas tee-shirt; they absolutely loved it! A [@SMCoE\\_Pensnett](#) Christmas incurs no cost to our fab school community! [@povertyproofcne](#) @Georgina\_NE



4:32 PM · Dec 16, 2020 · Twitter for Android

4 Quote Tweets 29 Likes

 **Sarah Glover**  
@gloverino

[@povertyproofcne](#) All children able to take part as resources provided and time given in tutor time to complete!

 **David Lovell** @davelovell5 · Dec 16, 2020  
Year 7 and 8 have taken the "deck the doors" competition to the next level on Dove campus @deferrers. Very proud of them all! #workhard



PIC-COLLAGE

# Schools taking action on fun events



Haimo Primary School  
@HaimoSchool



Y2 Raheem Sterling Class have been making their own Christmas jumpers ahead of #ChristmasJumperDay this Friday! Loving the sustainable action being taken @povertyproofcne #TeachSDGs #ResponsibleConsumption #ReduceReuseRecycle 🌳 @sterling7



InspiringLesmahagow  
@LHS\_EQUITY



Some great new additions of winter jackets (and some beautiful prom dresses 👗) to our pre-loved hub this week! If you would like to know more about what's available, please speak to Miss Fletcher, Mrs Smith, or your Pupil Support teacher. @SLCEquity



1:52 PM · Oct 22, 2021 · Twitter for iPhone



# Guidance

Based on the findings from this research, CPAG and Children North East have developed guidance on approaches that schools, parent bodies and charities can take to ensure having fun at school is inclusive of all pupils and can be enjoyed by everyone. We have also highlighted some practical top tips that we know can make a positive difference to pupil and family experiences of these activities.

We'd love to hear from pupils, schools, parent bodies and charities who have ideas, suggestions or examples of how to ensure fundraising in schools is inclusive for all. We will continue to share good practice examples and ideas to support those thinking about this issue. Contact [UKcosd@cpag.org.uk](mailto:UKcosd@cpag.org.uk) to share your ideas and examples.

# Guidance for schools

What is the current cost of having fun in your school? We encourage schools to explore and investigate the likely costs for families associated with fun at your school. This can help to provide a baseline measure against which progress can be made. Schools should:

- 1** Carry out an assessment of the school year and identify how many different charity, fundraising, non-uniform and dressing up days you currently run, and at what times of year. Consider whether these could be reduced or spaced out more, and whether families could be given more notice. Also consider how you can ensure all pupils can take part.
- 2** Carry out an assessment of how much your regular celebrations cost families e.g. Christmas parties, Halloween pumpkin carving and birthdays, and include any hidden costs that may occur such as outfits for discos and spending money for snacks. Consider how these could be delivered without costs or with lower costs to families.

When it comes to planning fun activities throughout the school year, there are a number of ways schools can help to ensure these activities are right for pupils and families and don't create unnecessary pressures. Schools should:

- 3** Consult with and involve your school community in planning your fun events calendar. Ask pupils and parents about current costs and affordability of fun events, and understand from them how you can plan activities that are right

for the community and reflect the occasions and causes they care about.

- 4** Ensure that inclusion and affordability are key considerations when planning fun activities in school. Adopt whole-school approaches instead of targeted support to children from low-income families. For example, instead of offering spare Christmas jumpers or dressing up costumes to some children, consider how dressing up costs can be reduced for all families – some schools provide t-shirts for everyone to decorate.
- 5** Develop opportunities for parental input into the school calendar, planned events and their costs. Establishing a PTA or parent group may be one way of supporting this.
- 6** Ensure that affordability and inclusion are at the heart of leavers' celebrations. How can your school ensure every young person is included in the celebration?

**Top tip:** Consider producing a cost calendar for the year, setting out planned fundraising, seasonal and celebratory events with likely costs attached to avoid short notice requests to families that are difficult to meet.

**Top tip:** Monitor the attendance of pupils on non-uniform and dressing up days to understand if these act as a barrier to education.

# Guidance for schools

We know charity fundraising days and activities are a common part of the school calendar, but it's important for schools to consider how all pupils can be involved and enjoy the benefits of these activities. Schools should:

- 7 Engage with charities and work with them to raise awareness of their cause and their campaigning activities with pupils, rather than just focusing on fundraising activities.
- 8 Consult with pupils and ask for suggestions about the types of charities and causes they would like to focus on, ensuring these are right for the school community.
- 9 Consider ways to **engage with the work of charities and their causes that are cost-neutral for families and children**, both in terms of donations and resources. For example, pupils could write a letter to their MP, make a poster or postcard, run an assembly or sign a petition. See our [Cost of the School Day Calendar](#) for more ideas about how to approach charity fundraising days.

**Top tip:** Where charity donations are being collected in school on these days (either monetary or resources), ensure this is not the primary focus of the activity, make it clear that this is optional, and make sure any donations can be made discreetly.

More broadly, we know talking about costs and money with families can be hard for lots of reasons. But not approaching the topic can mean that families miss out on financial help, or feel unable to talk to anyone if they are struggling to meet school costs, including fun events. Schools should:

- 10 **Consider how you communicate with families about costs and money** because, done well, this can help to break down financial barriers to education and ensure pupils and parents get the support they need. CPAG's [Talking about Costs and Money at School](#) resources are freely available to help with this.

**Resources:** CPAG and Children North East have developed a [range of resources](#) to help schools start thinking about alternative ways to celebrate fun events in school. Our Cost of the School Day calendar and our toolkits are freely available to all schools.

**Training for schools:** It is important that school staff are equipped with a clear understanding of the causes and consequences of child poverty so they can implement policies and practices that are inclusive for all, including approaches to fun events. For more information about child poverty training:

- In Scotland, contact [CostOfTheSchoolDay@cpagscotland.org.uk](mailto:CostOfTheSchoolDay@cpagscotland.org.uk)
- In Wales or England, contact [UKcosd@cpag.org.uk](mailto:UKcosd@cpag.org.uk) or [info@povertyproofing.co.uk](mailto:info@povertyproofing.co.uk)

# Guidance for parent bodies

Child Poverty Action Group and Children North East believe that schools should be adequately funded by governments across the UK to ensure that all children and families can access a truly free and inclusive education system. However, we know that this is not the case for schools across the nations.

Parent bodies (eg, PTAs and parent councils) therefore play an important role in raising money for schools and **help make them a better place for pupils to learn and have fun**. They often raise funds to subsidise activities such as school trips, discos and after-school clubs. These activities are valued and enjoyed by the school community, and they help to widen pupils' opportunities.

Parent bodies can also provide a **useful link and line of communication between the school and parents**. They can help identify some of the challenges parents are facing, including financial barriers, and work with the school to overcome them.

However, our research shows that parent body activities do sometimes place **additional financial pressures on families due to direct demands for money**. Here, we outline some approaches PTAs and parent councils can take, to help ensure their important work supports the school community without unintentionally adding financial stress to struggling families.

**We encourage parent bodies to plan any activity with the whole school in mind and consider these approaches. Parent bodies should:**

- 1 Think about affordability when planning and delivering activities and events**, and check whether costs can be reconsidered or reduced. You can make your parent body work for every family by adopting a whole-school community approach to fundraising and events. For example, make sure everyone can attend the school disco and ask parents for voluntary donations to tickets beforehand.
- 2 Be mindful of the timings of activities to avoid multiple costs occurring at once**. When planning and scheduling events, ensure you are aware of other requests for financial contributions being made of parents, including trips and other events. Families also appreciate being given as much advance notice as possible for any planned activities.
- 3 When assessing the success of an event, consider how inclusive it was and what the participation and engagement levels were**, not just how much money was raised.
- 4 Try to fundraise from sources other than children and families in your school**. Are there local businesses who could help through sponsorship or donations? Could you fundraise outside of school, perhaps by bag packing at your local supermarket? Some parent bodies use online fundraising portals which allow families to donate through online shopping with no extra cost. An example of this is [easyfundraising](#).

# Guidance for parent bodies

**Top tip:** Seek to move away from collecting cash on the day of an event or activity. Look for other options instead, such as online tools that allow parents to pay discreetly.

**Top tip:** Include a range of free activities in any large event you are planning to make it accessible to all. For example, if you're organising a fayre, make sure all pupils have free turns or tokens for activities, so they don't miss out.

**Top tip:** Use clear wording in your communications to families so they know that monetary asks are optional. For instance, if you are organising a non-uniform day, you can include messaging such as: "We are pleased to be raising funds for [the school/a charity] through this activity, and we welcome voluntary donations from families who can afford it. All donations are anonymous, and there is no need to donate if you are unable to."

Ensuring parent voices and experiences from across the school are heard can also help to make sure your PTA or Parent Council activities work for the school community.

- 5 Ensure your parent body is made up of a representative range of parents from the community. This can help ensure that the cost pressures experienced by some families are carefully considered and understood. Where this is more difficult to achieve, it's important that existing members find out about the needs of families in their schools.



# Guidance for charities

Charities can play an important role in making sure that fundraising activities in schools are enjoyed by everyone and don't unintentionally exclude or further disadvantage pupils and families that might be struggling. We encourage charities to consider these approaches and use them to help guide future work in this area.

- 1** Raise awareness within your organisation of the challenges fundraising in schools can present for pupils and families on a low income and ensure this informs and is an active part of considerations being made when planning fundraising activities in schools.
- 2** Consider how any materials, information and communications linked to fundraising in schools can **demonstrate awareness and understanding of the financial pressures children and families might be facing**. For example, focusing primarily on how pupils can engage and connect with the cause, and presenting a range of ways to support the cause with raising money just being one option.
- 3** Design and promote activities for schools that every pupil can take part in and **make that a key focus**, with any ask for donations as secondary and discreet. For example, pupils could write a letter to their MP, make a poster or postcard, run an assembly or sign a petition.

- 4** Certain times of year can be particularly expensive for families, such as the end of term, the back-to-school period and the lead-up to Christmas. How can you make sure your charity isn't asking families to fundraise around these periods?

**Top tip:** Provide schools with a range of options and activities about how to engage pupils with your charity's work, allowing schools to make decisions about what will work best for their school community.

**Top tip:** Through your communications and interactions with pupils, **be sure to thank them for their time, ideas and enthusiasm**, rather than championing those who made donations or raised money.

**Top tip:** Encourage schools through your materials and messaging to give families plenty of notice about any forthcoming activities to avoid putting unnecessary pressures on pupils and parents.

Charities can also work with Children North East's *Poverty Proofing@ Charities* service. Poverty Proofing@ Charities engages and consults with charity staff, senior leaders, and communities about their purpose, aims, and the systems they work in, in an effort to alleviate poverty. Poverty Proofing@ Charities encourages charities to reflect on their impact as an organisation, with a focus on eliminating inequalities of accessibility for those experiencing poverty. Contact [info@povertyproofing.co.uk](mailto:info@povertyproofing.co.uk) for more information.

# About us

## About Child Poverty Action Group

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Child Poverty Action Group works on behalf of the more than one in four children in the UK growing up in poverty. It doesn't have to be like this. We use our understanding of what causes poverty and the impact it has on children's lives to campaign for policies that will prevent and solve poverty – for good. We provide training, advice and information to make sure hard-up families get the financial support they need. We also carry out high-profile legal work to establish and protect families' rights. Registered charity numbers: 294841 and SC039339

30 Micawber Street  
London N1 7TB

[cpag.org.uk](http://cpag.org.uk)

## About Children North East

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Children North East exists because growing up can be hard. We create life-changing differences for babies, Children and young people in their families, schools and communities. We offer support at those times when a little help can make a big difference for a child and their future. Ultimately, our purpose is that all North East babies, children and young people grow up to be healthy and happy, regardless of background or family circumstance. Whether it is in their family, at school or in their local community, we are here to support children, young people and their parents in the North East and beyond. Charity number: 222041

89 Denhill Park  
Newcastle upon Tyne, NE15 6QE  
[children-ne.org.uk](http://children-ne.org.uk)

## About UK Cost of the School Day

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The Cost of the School Day project 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. 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. Following the success of this project in Glasgow and Dundee, CPAG has partnered with Children North East and expanded the project to local authorities in England, Wales and new parts of Scotland. This project is 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 ongoing support. [cpag.org.uk/CoSD](http://cpag.org.uk/CoSD)

## About Poverty Proofing© the School Day

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Poverty Proofing© the School Day is a project developed by Children North East. The project provides a toolkit to poverty proof the school day, to reduce stigma and remove barriers to learning and to assist schools in exploring the most effective way to spend school funding provided for those eligible for Free School Meals. Poverty Proofing © the School Day consists of an audit for each individual school, questioning pupils, staff, parents and governors. The result is an action plan tailored to each individual school to address any stigmatising policies or practices. There is then the opportunity to be awarded an accreditation following a review visit. We also offer training to staff and governors on poverty and its impact on education.