



Supporting pupils affected by poverty

A toolkit for governing boards in schools and trusts

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NGA is the national membership association for governors, trustees and governance professionals in England's state schools and trusts.

We empower those in school and trust governance with valuable resources, expert support and e-learning. Together, we're raising standards and shaping stronger governance to ensure every pupil can thrive today – and tomorrow.

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NGA would like to thank Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) for providing their expertise and support in the production of this toolkit.

CPAG work on behalf of the more than one in four children in the UK growing up in poverty. They work to understand what causes poverty, the impact it has on children's lives, and how it can be prevented and solved – for good.

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Introduction

Financial hardship has long been known to impact children's experiences at school including their attainment, attendance and sense of wellbeing.

This toolkit is intended to support governing boards in understanding the relationship between poverty and educational disadvantage and their role in reducing the barriers faced by pupils experiencing poverty.

Supporting pupils experiencing poverty should not be an afterthought. Governing boards should apply a poverty lens to all aspects of school life, considering how any decisions, policies and practices affect pupils and families experiencing financial hardship. This means understanding where barriers may exist and ensuring that the school or trust's approach helps to reduce barriers to learning and opportunities.

The toolkit is organised around key areas of governance where a poverty lens can be applied, including:

- setting an inclusive culture
- attendance
- school admissions
- widening participation and enrichment
- stakeholder engagement

There is an Annex to the toolkit with example questions to ask when reviewing relevant policies.

Free school meals

The most widely used proxy for pupils experiencing socio-economic disadvantage in education is free school meals (FSM) eligibility. The measure is used to target interventions and resources, to allocate funding (eg the [pupil premium](#)) and to compare outcomes between individual children, schools and areas.

From September 2026, FSM eligibility will include all children in households receiving Universal Credit (known as 'expanded FSM'), regardless of earnings. However, it is important to note that pupil premium eligibility will remain linked to income-based FSM (known as 'targeted FSM') and not the broader Universal Credit group. Visit [NGA's school food guidance](#) for more information.

There are limitations to using FSM as a way of identifying children who are in families that are experiencing poverty. The recent [schools white paper](#) acknowledges that FSM eligibility fails to reflect the different lengths and depths of disadvantage children may experience and has committed to developing a more nuanced disadvantage funding model.

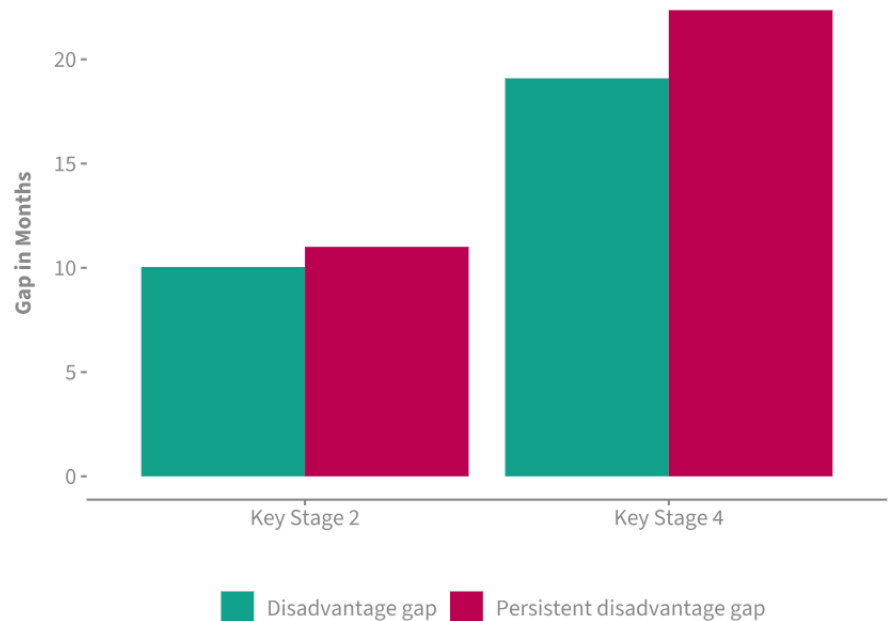
1. The link between poverty and outcomes

Poverty remains the most significant barrier to educational attainment facing schools and trusts, continuing to affect children and young people across England.

[EPI data](#) finds that disadvantage gaps almost double between primary and secondary school. By the time a child finishes their GCSEs, pupils eligible for FSM are 19.1 months behind their peers. This figure rises to 22.4 months for pupils who have been persistently disadvantaged (eligible for FSM for at least 80% of their school lives).

The attainment gap widens and inequalities deepen the longer children spend in school.

Children experiencing disadvantage are just as capable of thriving and achieving as their peers. The gap persists because poverty can create very real, practical barriers across all areas of school life, making it harder for some children to make the most of their time in education.



Regional gaps

Research shows that geography also shapes educational outcomes for children experiencing poverty. Evidence from the [Sutton Trust's Opportunity Index](#) highlights a 30 percentage-point gap in GCSE attainment between pupils on FSM in London boroughs and Newcastle, demonstrating that place-based differences in schools and local opportunity can lead to different outcomes for children facing similar levels of financial hardship. The government's White Paper seeks to respond to this through regional policy initiatives, such as [Mission Northeast and Mission Coastal](#), which will aim to target areas with persistent disadvantage.

Beyond attainment

As well as lower academic outcomes, pupils eligible for FSM are at greater risk of:

- permanent exclusion (at five times the rate of their non-FSM peers)
- absence from school
- poor mental health
- becoming a young person not in education, employment or training (NEET)

2. Understanding poverty in your context

The challenge for governing boards is to understand how poverty affects their local community and which pupils are at increased risk of experiencing it. This is particularly important given that the main proxies used in education, such as FSM eligibility and pupil premium, do not capture all children living in low-income households.

As shown in the research on regional differences, poverty often overlaps with other forms of inequality. Pupils experiencing poverty are more likely to belong to certain groups and/or have specific characteristics including:

- special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)
- being from certain ethnic groups
- those known to social services
- English as an additional language
- newly arrived children to the country
- young carers
- children from single-parent households
- children from larger families

It is also important to note that the [majority of children](#) growing up in poverty are in working households. Therefore, efforts to address child poverty must include consideration of children whose parents or carers are in employment and those whose aren't.

Questions to ask

- Which pupils in our school community are at risk of experiencing poverty, and what evidence do we use to identify them?
- How well do our current measures (eg FSM eligibility and pupil premium) reflect the full range of pupils experiencing low income in our school?
- Where do we see overlap between poverty and other pupil characteristics (eg ethnicity, SEND, social care involvement) in our context?
- Which groups of pupils are most likely to be experiencing multiple disadvantages?
- What do we know about the lived experiences of families on low incomes in our community, and where are the gaps in our understanding?
- What services and support do we currently offer for pupils experiencing poverty, and are these reaching the right pupils?
- How do we know whether our current approach is reducing barriers and improving outcomes over time?

3. Setting an inclusive culture

An inclusive culture begins with the governing board setting a clear vision, values and strategic direction. These areas establish the expectations for how the school supports pupils and families experiencing poverty, which means it should reflect an ambition for every pupil to participate, achieve and thrive, regardless of family income. The school improvement plan, inclusion strategy and pupil premium strategy should align with these priorities, demonstrating how barriers to learning and participation are being reduced.

Policies are one of the most direct ways that the vision and values are translated into practice. When approving and reviewing policies, governors should consider whether they create unnecessary financial barriers or promote equitable access to education and wider opportunities. Use the questions in [Annex A](#) to support policy review through a poverty lens.

4. Attendance

Poor attendance is one of the biggest challenges affecting the educational outcomes of disadvantaged pupils. Research has shown that, since 2019, the increased disadvantage gap at KS4 can be entirely attributed to higher levels of absence among disadvantaged pupils ([Education Policy Institute, 2025](#)). Governing boards have a key role in identifying and addressing the barriers that prevent pupils from low-income families from attending school regularly.

For pupils from low-income backgrounds, absence is often linked to wider barriers such as:

- [cost pressures of the school day](#)
- transport
- housing instability
- hunger
- unmet health or wellbeing needs

Boards should consider how their schools actively identify and reduce these barriers and ensure that attendance systems respond to the root causes of absence, not just the behaviour itself. Board review of attendance data should include focus on disadvantaged pupils, comparing patterns with local and national benchmarks.

Use NGA's [guide on improving school attendance](#) to further support your conversations.

5. School admissions

[The Sutton Trust](#) found that more affluent pupils are 50% more likely to access top performing non-selective schools than those eligible for FSM even if they live in the catchment area.

Barriers to access in admissions arrangements include:

- prioritising proximity in the oversubscription criteria – schools can drive up local house prices which can subsequently disadvantage lower-income families
- failing to promote financial support to prospective families – a lack of clear information about help with school costs can discourage low-income families from applying

Governing boards should consider whether their admissions arrangements promote equitable access and whether prospective families have clear information about the support available, including financial assistance and the school's approach to reducing the cost of the school day.

Boards who are their school's admissions authority may want to use the Sutton Trust's [free hub](#) of resources to review their admissions policies to promote greater inclusivity.

6. Enrichment and participation

Schools play an important role in ensuring that children are prepared to become well-rounded adults and citizens, equipped for further study and employment. Pupils experiencing disadvantage face greater barriers to accessing opportunities that help them get on in life and achieve. For poorer pupils, schools may be the primary source of opportunities to explore new interests and access experiences that would otherwise be unavailable.

The DfE's [enrichment benchmarks](#) recognise enrichment as a core part of a school's strategic offer. They encourage schools to provide a broad range of opportunities across:

- civic engagement
- arts and culture
- nature and adventure
- sport and physical activity
- future skills

As well as the opportunities available through a broad and balanced curriculum, enrichment can also be achieved through school trips, clubs and other personal development opportunities.

The enrichment benchmarks emphasise that schools should understand who is participating in activities, identify which pupils are missing out and adapt their offer to meet the needs of their community. Removing barriers to pupils affected by poverty may include doing the following:

- **Using data** to identify whether pupils eligible for pupil premium (or other disadvantaged groups) are underrepresented in clubs, trips, work experience or accredited programmes.
- **Listening to pupils and families** to understand the financial, practical or cultural barriers that prevent participation, rather than making assumptions about families.
- **Reducing financial barriers** by subsidising or removing the cost of trips, residential, clubs, equipment or instruments where appropriate.
- **Making the most of partnerships** by working with local schools, employers and community groups to share specialist staff and facilities, helping to broaden provision while reducing cost.
- **Removing practical barriers** by considering transport, timings, caring responsibilities or the need to provide meals/snacks during after-school activities.
- **Actively encouraging participation** by inviting pupils who may lack confidence or whose families face the greatest barriers to participation, instead of relying on voluntary sign-up.
- **Promoting opportunities** through a range of platforms to ensure it reaches families.
- **Developing a locally responsive offer** that reflects pupils' interests and community cultures, recognising that meaningful enrichment will look different in different school contexts.
- **Working with employers, charities and community organisations** to expand opportunities and provide experiences that pupils may otherwise be unable to access.

7. Stakeholder engagement

Families experiencing poverty may face practical and structural barriers that affect how they engage with school. These can include:

- working multiple jobs or irregular hours
- caring responsibilities
- digital exclusion
- transport costs
- health and wellbeing challenges
- previous negative experiences of education
- concerns about stigma
- being unaware of what support is available

For governing boards, a key question is whether the school is an accessible and trusted environment that hears from the full range of its community, particularly those from marginalised communities and those least likely to be heard.

Questions to ask

- Whose voices are most represented in our engagement activity, and whose are missing?
- How do we know we are hearing from families experiencing the greatest barriers?
- What assumptions are we making about what “good engagement” looks like?
- Are our methods flexible enough to reflect different working patterns, caring responsibilities and communication preferences?
- Is support being communicated universally through a range of platforms?
- Do families trust that their views are listened to and acted upon?
- How effectively are we using intermediaries to reach under-represented families?
- Do we offer low-barrier (including non-digital) routes for participation?
- How do we close the feedback loop in ways that are clear and proportionate?
- Are staff trained in how to engage effectively with families experiencing poverty? Can they confidently signpost or refer parents to support when needed?

Annex A

Governing boards have an important role in [overseeing and approving policies](#). Consider the following example questions to ask when reviewing relevant policies to ensure school/trust policy and practices effectively support pupils affected by poverty.

Policy	Examples of questions to ask
Attendance (see section 3)	• Are there financial barriers that may contribute to absence such as transport, uniform, equipment or food, and how are these addressed? • Are early intervention systems in place so that emerging attendance concerns are addressed before absence becomes persistent? • How do we respond to attendance concerns in a supportive and non-stigmatising way that seeks to understand underlying causes? • Are families aware of the support available to help overcome practical barriers to attendance?
Admissions (see section 4)	• How do we ensure that children from disadvantaged backgrounds have equal access to our school? • How does the percentage of pupils who are eligible for FSM in our school compare to national and local levels? • How do our admissions processes and policies promote social diversity? • How did we decide on our over-subscription criteria? Do they promote our school values?
Careers (see NGA guidance on good careers)	• To what extent are students exposed to and informed about the wide range of careers and professions available to them? • Do you have a nominated individual on your board who takes a strategic interest in careers education and guidance and encourages employer engagement? • Does your board gather pupils' views on the current careers education provision? • Are pupils given the opportunity to explore possible careers linked to subjects they are interested in? • Are pupils shown a range of education pathways for different careers?
Charging and remissions	• Does our charging policy minimise costs to families wherever possible? • Are remissions applied fairly and consistently, and are parents aware of the financial support available?

	- Do we regularly review the impact of charges on participation in school activities? - How are debt resolution processes enacted in school if families fall behind with payment for trips, clubs and lunches?
Curriculum (see section 5)	- Does every pupil have equitable access to the full curriculum, regardless of family income? - Are there hidden costs associated with curriculum activities, resources or homework? - How do we ensure financial circumstances do not limit participation or achievement? - Are we aware of how subject-related costs may influence pupils' subject choices in KS4?
School uniform (see NGA guidance on affordable school uniform)	- How are we using good procurement practice and developing relationships with uniform suppliers to ensure costs are kept low? - How do we positively promote our second-hand uniform provision and remove any stigma parents may attach to it? - Do any additional uniform requirements prevent pupils from taking part in non-classroom activities eg sport, music or drama? - How do we respond to uniform issues in line with our behaviour policy whilst accounting for financial hardship being a factor?
School food (see NGA guidance on school food)	- How effectively do we identify and support eligible families to access free school meals, and do families know what support is available? - Does our approach to school food ensure every pupil can access healthy and nutritious meals without stigma or separation? - Do we support those pupils and families who are not eligible for free school meals by signposting or connecting them to local support such as food banks, community fridges and social supermarkets? - Do we offer food-related support for off-site activities to ensure cost is not a barrier to participation? - Is the governing board aware of how dinner money debt is managed in a way that does not stigmatise children?