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Paula Christie

I'm delighted to have Jackie Galbraith with me today to talk about the third in the pathways from poverty to needs, of course, published by CDN in this report entitled Leading with Empathy and Vision An Insight into West Lothian College is a detailed case study of the fantastic work being done at West Lothian College to combat and to address the challenges of poverty facing learners and their communities.

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Paula Christie

Thanks for joining us today, Jackie.

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Jackie Galbraith

Thanks, Paula. It's great to be here.

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Paula Christie

One of the most striking things and I suppose the key takeaway from the report is the whole college approach and the ethos at West Lothian College in terms of waiting with vision and empathy, that that comes across really, really clear way. I wonder if you could talk to us a little bit about that, Jackie, about how that's come about and the ways in which you have embedded this across the college, across the practice at West Lothian.

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Jackie Galbraith

Thanks, Paula. I think in a surprisingly early one, it's about our commitment to social justice and equality and access for all. That's a really strong commitment across the college as well as in other colleges across Scotland. But early on, we realized that we're not able to tackle this simply with the funding that we get from the funding council alone and with the people who attend posts to offer support alone.

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Jackie Galbraith

Because of the rising numbers of students that are declaring poverty challenges with mental health and so on. All these associated problems. It was really important for us to think about how can we

go out with the boundaries of those who were traditionally there to provide support. And that's the thing about the whole college report, about encouraging every lecturer, every instructor, every support member of staff, no matter what they're doing in the college, to always think about the student first and always try to think what's behind that student and how that student is presenting themselves in terms of poverty, in terms of behavior and so on.

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Jackie Galbraith

And it was really just to give in to just to make sure people didn't have to seek permission to actually do things that can make a difference. Small things, actually, that can make a really big difference. I mean, and a really good example of that was the lecturers, you know, who the lecturer who are who three years ago after we started this process of discussion across the college, came forward and wanted to set up a discussion support group specifically focused at male students who traditionally don't really engage with the formal support in the college when it comes to things like mental health and all the other things that are linked to that is that mental

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Jackie Galbraith

health challenge caused by poverty, by trauma, or whatever it happens to be. And he went away and just set that up, you know, alongside is lecturing is set that up. You've got support from other people in the college and it's been a great success.

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Paula Christie

And that's just one example of enabling staff and students to come up with their own ideas and initiatives. And the report highlights that the college actively works to offer a safe space for women to tackle the impacts of poverty. And the women experience is very much enhanced by this whole college approach and the practice of leading with the information that's embedded.

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Paula Christie

It works within college.

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Jackie Galbraith

I mean, a core value of always having the student at the center of everything that we do is really what drives us. And that and then how you do that, you lead with passion and empathy. So anything

that's getting in the way of that student, being able to engage fully in the learning, it's really important that we can find ways to deal with that and poverty really wreaks havoc in people's lives.

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Jackie Galbraith

Poverty means that you're diverted, your attention is diverted to worrying about are you able to pay your rent this week? Are you able to feed your family today? Are you able to get the bus home from college today? You know, if you happen to be over 22, you don't get a free bus pass. So those are the things that distract people from what we want to focus on in college, which is how they can how they can enjoy and succeed in the learning.

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Jackie Galbraith

So these things are really important. You know, and I'm delighted that so many colleges and universities I spoke to university recently who told us that it was I mean, it was after meeting with us a number of months ago that they actually had to just free breakfast for their students. So it's great to see universities following the lead from colleges on this one.

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Jackie Galbraith

And it's why it's so important. And the feedback that we get from students is the breakfast helps set them up for their morning lessons. The lunch means that they can stay on at college if there's not an afternoon class and they can go and study having had something to eat and at the very least they don't have to worry about hunger, whether they're in college that day and then all the other associated supports they get for your personal hygiene products.

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Jackie Galbraith

So if they are not able to afford to wash the clothes, they can access the machine, the washing machines on campus. These things just take a lot of stress away from students to allow them the space to focus on their studies.

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Paula Christie

The idea of partnership working is discussed in the report and from the case study. It's clear that West will then have forged some very strong, very positive, very successful relationships with external agencies and partners across the local community. And I wonder if you could talk to me a

little bit more about this partnership working and also whether working closely with other agencies is changing the understanding of college actually means and what that college can do for for both its learners and the local community.

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Jackie Galbraith

Partnership working is absolutely critical. And of course it's a phrase that everybody uses and Wrestling College has always had a really tight relationship with West Lothian Council and that's been fantastic. But in the past it was mainly focused on education, undertaking economic development. Over the last few years, we've developed relationships with all other parts of the councils that deals with employability, social work, youth justice, etc., etc. and that's because of a change in priorities and how we want to support our students.

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Jackie Galbraith

So right from the very beginning, from four years ago when we established partnerships with local lawyers and the local Adverse Childhood Experiences Hub that was set up in West London, we were working with the third sector organizations at that point that were really championing the the work on being trauma responsive and how that is connected to poverty and so on.

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Jackie Galbraith

And that that partnership approach is really reaped benefits for the college and for the partners. And so, for example, West Lothian Council gave the college £50,000 last year as an additional way to support students who were experiencing poverty, the course of Lothian places, and much more than the finances of no go are a partnership center of the compass point in the college, which is really you know, it's not just in space that partners on that space as they only do little pay for that space, but they come in and work with us and they give direct support to students who are referred to them, either by us or by other partners as well.

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Jackie Galbraith

And it's great to see that that sense of developing is really porous. We would be bleeds into each other's boundaries. It's that, you know, it's not the college, it's not the council, it's not the the local. It's a charity. It's a collective and a shared partnership approach to to deal with that. So that's been a major step forward and I think blurring those boundaries.

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Jackie Galbraith

So it's not seen as, you know, we're not just seen as each other's own organizations.

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Paula Christie

All of this work. It's a very positive outcome in terms of building scaffolded support and learners. And the agencies that support those learners openly discuss the value of having that really welcoming and nurturing environment that's provided at works will be in college.

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Jackie Galbraith

Absolutely. And I think that's really important. It's really important for all students to feel welcome to the college. But some students have got more barriers in the way than others. And and families are affected deeply by poverty or by trauma or by it or by by other things like severe mental health problems. It's really hard for them to advise each other themselves of children and understand how they can engage with education, how to what does a college mean to me?

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Jackie Galbraith

And there's so many of these young people and older people, not just young people, but particularly young people who have no idea what are colleges who are intimidated by the even the thought of walking through the door wouldn't even have thought about making an application because it just didn't feel it was for them. And really, what what we do in the college through the Trust project is to have lots of personalized support and engagement months before sometimes they even decide to take a college course, getting them confident with the college, a place where they can actually meet their social worker if they would prefer not to go to council buildings and all that kind of

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Jackie Galbraith

thing. And that makes a huge difference because young people are young people and the young people, some young people have got a really, really clear vision of what they want to do in the least many young people doing, and not just young people who are affected by poverty. Many young people don't. And it's really important that they get the opportunities that everyone else gets sometimes, often takes a bit longer to get there.

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Jackie Galbraith

And that's what the Trust project does through partners like Action for Children, you know, Youth Justice and so on. We work with them to make sure that we help that young person see the college differently. You're coming in, you're getting that personalized support. You're going for courses with people that are helping you. You're getting a chance to see around the college and feel things before you even think about having to choose a course.

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Jackie Galbraith

And then when you do choose a short course to start with, you're getting really good support to get you through that so that you actually succeed and you feel that you, you know, that you've succeeded. And that really helps you move on and be confident about a full time course further down the line.

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Paula Christie

We know that there is great work, really fantastic work being done across the sector. And you've mentioned already that you've been approached by others who are working to either establish or even enhance their own ideas through in practice and their own initiative. And I suppose it's important to share this knowledge. It's important to export good practice to be able to help combat the impact of poverty and trauma.

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Jackie Galbraith

And we would absolutely be happy to collaborate with other colleges. In fact, we're already doing that and off the back of other work in Keen and other organizations have facilitated. We've had colleges out to visit us and also we need to visit colleges to learn from them. So there's those things that go on in other colleges we would learn from.

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Jackie Galbraith

I think the biggest challenge in facing colleges is we we really have to think differently about how we do this and how we offer this support. We talk about personalized, individualized support, but that's expensive. It takes it takes resource, it takes time. And, you know, we're facing up to really challenging financial times as we move forward. And that's really going to be hard for colleges like Whistling College and others.

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Jackie Galbraith

But my my problem is we can't afford not to do this because if we don't do this, if we don't find a way with whatever resources we have to support people who have been disadvantaged for all sorts of reasons and who really deserve an opportunity to move forward in their lives and also to contribute to of society, then we create problems for the ways of society.

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Jackie Galbraith

But for me, most importantly, you write off a generation of people who who deserve a chance and actually more than one chance because of the situation that they face. So for me, it's about it's a really challenging financial situation. It does cost money to resources. We have had some funding to support this through the young person's guarantee that going forward we have to look at how we fund that with the limited resources behalf and my my commitment and my challenges, how I find a way of doing that.

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Jackie Galbraith

Because as I said, we can't afford not to do that.

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Paula Christie

There is really fantastic and inspirational work being done across the college sector and this work of colleges, as we've seen across a series of published reports, very much feeds into the government's strategy for creating a fair and equal society. And colleges are evolving and embedding great practice to help deliver this.

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Jackie Galbraith

So the government strategy for economic transformation in it and has a number of themes and a really important theme is a fairer and more equal society. And that builds upon the government's commitment to tackling child poverty. And really what that strategy is trying to do is make sure that economic development policy and what we do to support economic renewal and economic recovery to create a wellbeing economy actually supports people all across Scotland.

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Jackie Galbraith

And to be fair and to be honest, actually, economic policies in the decades that we've had have never really stop. And if we're going to tackle the structural issues around child poverty and poverty across the communities, then this strategy is so important and colleges play a critical role in that, not just to the delivery of skills, but and all this other work we've just been talking about in terms of in terms of how you support people.

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Jackie Galbraith

So for me, I think that's the most fundamental, important aspect of the national economic strategy, because that's what it's all about. A more fair and equal society with every member of society has the opportunity to get a decent job and to get that decent job has the opportunity to be able to go to college or university or whatever else, to develop the skills that make sure that they get a decent job and that they are supported through the least with a friendly face to face problems.

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Jackie Galbraith

So it's a challenge for everybody across the country to do that. But again, there's great opportunities for colleges here because I think colleges are best placed to deliver that particular theme. And the National Economic Strategy.

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Paula Christie

Absolutely. And I'd really like to thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. Jackie, that's been very insightful and also inspirational. It's been a real privilege to chat with you about the fantastic work that's been done at West Lothian College and indeed across the broader college sector. Thanks, Jacki.

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Jackie Galbraith

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to.