

PATHWAYS FROM POVERTY

LEADING WITH EMPATHY AND VISION: AN INSIGHT INTO WEST LOTHIAN COLLEGE

A RESEARCH REPORT PREPARED BY DR PAULA CHRISTIE
OF THE CDN RESEARCH AND ENHANCEMENT CENTRE

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FOREWORD

Tackling child poverty is the top priority of the Scottish Government. Two hundred and forty thousand children and young people in Scotland are brought up in poverty and the Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan calls on all parts of the system to work together for those who face the greatest disadvantage.

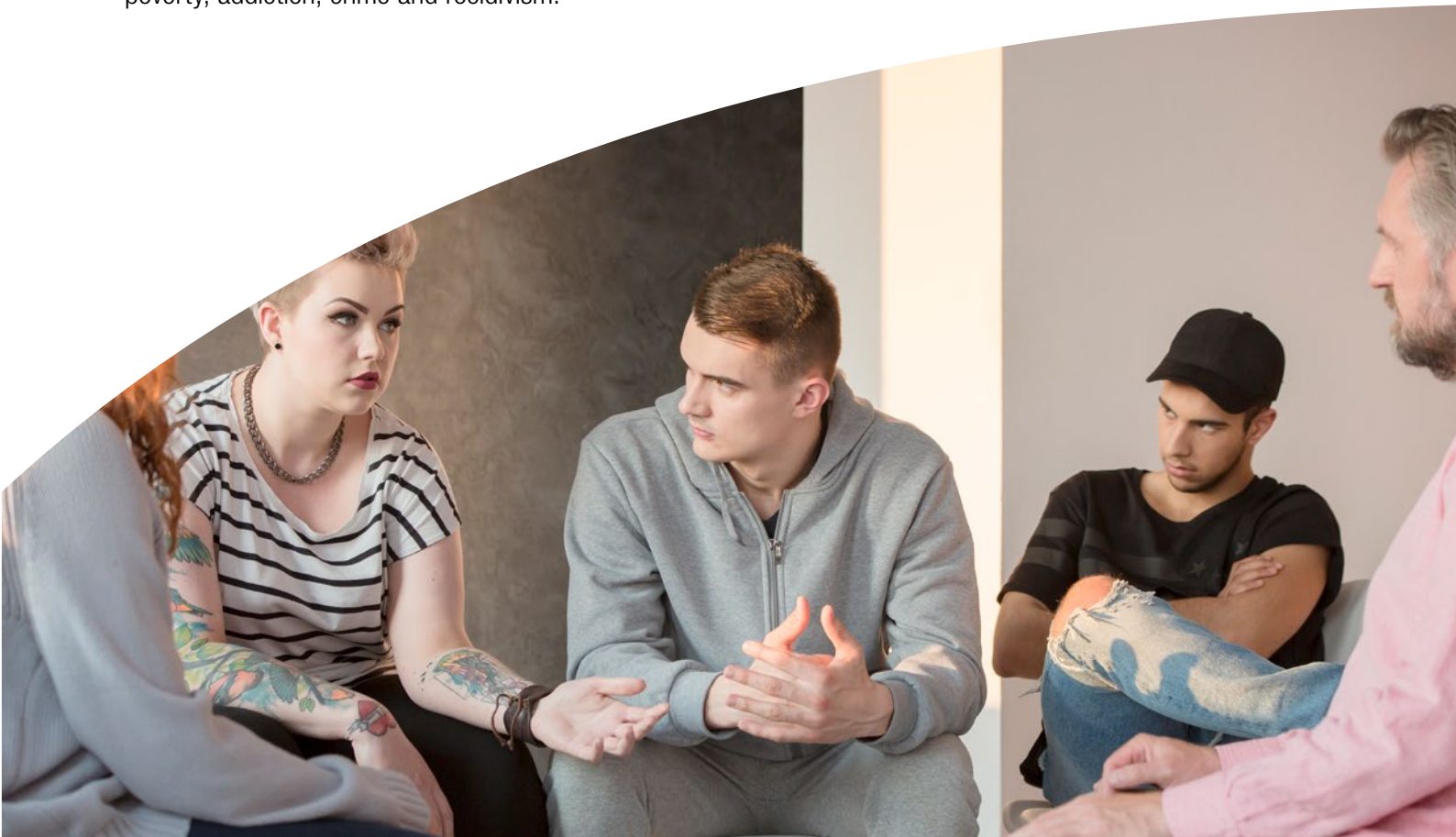


Four years ago, West Lothian College committed to being trauma-responsive, to tackling student poverty and to adopting a whole-college approach in response to the rise in students declaring a mental health issue.

People with experience of trauma are disproportionately impacted by poverty. For many, poverty has been the catalyst for the trauma in their lives. Aware of the interconnectedness of these and of the further disadvantages facing those who are care experienced or have one or more protected characteristics, we have embedded our whole-college approach to supporting our students.

In the throes of the pandemic in 2020, everyone at the college was involved in agreeing four new strategic goals, three of which focus on inspiring individuals, supporting economic renewal and strengthening communities. The other goal is to lead with vision and empathy which underpins our whole-college approach.

Strategic goals are simply words until people act to achieve them. Examples of how our staff are leading with vision and empathy are woven throughout this report, illustrated in particular by the TRUST Project, our alternative model to custodial sentences aims to break the cycle for young people experiencing poverty, addiction, crime and recidivism.



Shared commitment from our staff, our student association, community partners and activists is building a whole-system approach to creating hope and opportunity in West Lothian.

Through growing partnerships with local stakeholders, young people are being referred to the college as an alternative to custody. Some required to carry out work in the community are allowed to undertake a college course as an alternative. And, we are now working with prisons and residential services at the pre-release stage to facilitate a positive pathway out of custody for young people who are almost always impacted by poverty and trauma.

We could not do this on our own and I am grateful to the Health & Social Care Partnership's Youth Justice Team, West Lothian Council, Action for Children, Keegan Smith Lawyers and Children 1st for working collaboratively and proactively with us to support those who need it most.

Funding from the Scottish Funding Council in 2021-22 enabled us to establish the TRUST Project. A grant from the National Lottery for the next three years has allowed us to enhance our work through the recruitment of a peer navigator with lived experience of trauma and the criminal justice system.

Our challenge is to find a way of continuing to fund this work at a time of great financial constraint and uncertainty. That won't be easy, but we can't afford not to.

Jackie Galbraith
Principal and CEO
West Lothian College



CONTEXT

This is the third report in the CDN Research and Enhancement Centre's *Pathways from poverty* research series. As identified within the first two reports, *Current challenges and the role of colleges* (March 2022) and *Colleges for communities* (September 2022), colleges play a crucial role in tackling poverty and inequality and in driving a more inclusive economy.

A significant proportion of the college student population has traditionally come from the lowest socio-economic backgrounds. In 2022, 34% of college students were from the 20% most deprived postcodes in Scotland¹. Colleges offer a route to connect people to the skills and experience needed to take on new opportunities for study and work.

¹ <https://collegesscotland.ac.uk/key-college-facts>

This latest report picks up on the themes and challenges from the first two and provides a detailed case study of West Lothian College's trauma-informed approach. From new and in-depth interviews conducted as part of the research, college staff, learners and community partners detail the impactful ways in which a whole college approach to trauma has both influenced the College ethos and become embedded within wider partnership initiatives.

Drawing from this case study and from the previously published reports, CDN is also launching a *pathways from poverty programme* with the aim of supporting the significant and ongoing efforts of colleges across the sector in addressing socio-economic challenges and issues of inequality and disadvantage.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Through an in-depth study of the approach taken by West Lothian College to addressing the challenges faced by its learners, their families and their community, this report builds on previous *Pathways from Poverty* reports to examine the role and impact of a college in post-pandemic Scotland.

The report outlines how the College built its 'whole college' approach to trauma-informed practice as a strategic response to the challenges faced by learners and, importantly, by staff as well. An understanding of adverse childhood experiences and their impact, mental health training, and the use of resources such as NHS Scotland trauma training have been developed into a college wide trauma-informed approach which has been encapsulated in the institution's goal of 'leading with vision and empathy'.

The leadership approach has been to empower staff to develop and trial new ideas and ways of providing support, and senior managers have provided support and encouragement to colleagues to 'creatively shape practice' by building services around the learner. The report provides examples of this approach in terms of adjustments to IT systems, creative use of space linked to specific areas of need and the establishment of cross-college connections between different curriculum teams to address isolation and encourage students to work together in support of each other and the community.

The report illustrates this broad approach with a detailed study of The Trust Project, which has three main themes: helping young people back into education, tackling poverty for learners and their families and working with the justice system as a stepping stone onto education or employment.



The Trust Project team provide a safe space to allow learners who face a range of challenges to take their first steps into education, connect with course teams to provide support that enables the learners to maintain their studies and link to support agencies to ensure that the learners have all the advice, guidance and support they need within the safe space of the College.

The Trust Project has also extended into working with the justice system and has established routes into education as an alternative to a custodial sentence or for those approaching their liberation date.

Food poverty is a significant challenge across the college sector and has been increasingly identified as a barrier to learning, affecting the learner's ability to maintain wellbeing and sustain their studies. Within the College, a number of initiatives have been implemented to support those learners experiencing the very real threat of hunger.

As well as the provision of free breakfasts and lunches, the College collaborates with a local organisation, The Larder, to deliver a takeaway ready meal service which supports learners and their families to sustain their learning. Many of these initiatives are delivered in close collaboration with the student association, which also supports the provision of hygiene products and warm clothing in the winter. The College campus includes highly accessible facilities such as washing machines students may not have ready access to at home.

The report identifies the way in which the College has opened up to community groups, hosting events and encouraging the use of College space to benefit the community and to allow staff and the student association to take the opportunity to promote the opportunities provided by the College and to talk through the support that is on offer for anyone thinking about making the initial first steps back into learning or skills development.

The College not only provides space for communities to meet but can offer a safe and neutral environment to facilitate interactions between learners, social workers, support workers, rehabilitation workers, local authority teams, and external agencies and charities.

From the testimony provided in this and previous reports by college staff, learners and local community agency staff, we have seen that colleges go beyond well beyond simply providing qualifications, progression pathways and vocational skills for future employment and that the perception of what coming to college means is being reshaped by the development of a trauma-influenced approach.

In the next phase of our *Pathways from Poverty* work the CDN Research and Enhancement Centre will develop the common themes and practices identified in our case studies into a development programme that can be used by colleges to review their practice and identify possible new areas of delivery. The programme will also support connections between colleagues across the sector through CDN's Step Forward initiative, providing peer support, mentoring, and training and development where required, to spread good practice and cement the central role of colleges in delivering pathways from poverty.



PART 1: A WHOLE COLLEGE APPROACH TO LEADING WITH EMPATHY AND VISION

“ I think it comes down to our college values: welcoming to all, students at the centre of everything you do and always striving for better... we definitely do that.

Tom Thomson

Becoming trauma-informed

Trauma-informed practice is commonly defined as an approach grounded in the understanding that exposure to trauma can impact an individual's neurological, biological, psychological and social development².

Having joined West Lothian College as Principal in 2018, Jackie Galbraith is passionate about engaging young people and adults to reconnect with education and providing a safe, supportive and trauma-informed environment for learners to thrive.

West Lothian College's approach has developed from a keen interest in the 'ACEs' (Adverse Childhood Experiences³) movement, and has seen the College commit to become 'Adverse Childhood Experiences Aware' as part of their 2019-20 outcome agreement with the Scottish Funding Council⁴. As part of this process, the West Lothian ACEs Hub presented to all college staff in February 2019, and the College joined, hosted and played an active role in the hub.

As part of the strategy for building an increased level of awareness of ACEs, all childhood practice lecturers and managers took part in the inaugural *Making Scotland the world's first ACE-Aware nation*⁵ conference and have led dissemination sessions for curriculum and support teams across the College enabling staff to respond to students with a more informed perspective.

The trauma-informed approach further developed with the appointment of Sarah-Jane Linton as a Vice Principal in 2020, and the College has consistently striven to embed trauma-informed practice as a strategic response to the challenges faced by learners and by staff.

Many of the College staff have undertaken mental health training, and all staff were given the opportunity to undertake resilience training for themselves to see how it impacts students and to improve their ability to provide support. Some of the sessions have been provided by SMILE, a West Lothian based counselling service, through their mental wellbeing and health (MWAH⁶) training programme.

In addition to key staff cascading this trauma-informed practice to teams, many learners have also had the opportunity to undertake mental health training. To keep up to date with developments across the sector West Lothian College subscribes to weekly updates for trauma-informed approaches in Scotland via Knowledge Hub⁷ and employs

2 <https://www.gov.scot/publications/trauma-informed-practice-toolkit-scotland/pages/4/>

3 <https://www.gov.scot/publications/adverse-childhood-experiences-aces>

4 http://www.sfc.ac.uk/web/FILES/outcome-agreements-1920/West_Lothian_Outcome_Agreement_2019-20.pdf

5 <https://aceawarescotland.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/ACE-Aware-Media-Herald-31072018.pdf>

6 <https://smilecounselling.org.uk/training/#mwah>

7 About – Trauma-Informed Approaches in Scotland – Knowledge Hub (khub.net)

resources such as the NHS Scotland Trauma training programme⁸ and published government guidance⁹ as valuable starting points for establishing and embedding the development of a college wide trauma-informed practice.

College-wide adoption

“ Staff have brilliant ideas and I don’t want lack of money or organisational structures to be in the way.

Jackie Galbraith

The success of the trauma-informed approach being adopted college wide is evident and has evolved from the College goals developed and established during the Covid-19 pandemic. For Jackie Galbraith, these goals are about inspiring and enabling success for all, supporting economic recovery and growth, strengthening our communities and leading with vision and empathy, and it was important that all staff working across the College could identify with these.

“ At first, some people maybe thought that ‘leading with vision and empathy’ was just for the managers... but it’s not. When one of our estates team takes a person who was really nervous about coming into the College across to the building that they were going to... that was leading with vision and empathy. Showing someone that you care, and that you cared enough not just to point out the building, but actually to take them over while talking to them in a way that reduced their anxiety. And that could be the experience that keeps them at college because they really saw you as being someone who cared. I think it’s really important to get that across.

Jackie Galbraith, West Lothian College

From the interviews conducted, it is clear that staff from across the College are passionate about the ethos created and relate to the goal of ‘leading with vision and empathy’ within their reflective approach to challenges. From IT teams to lecturers, staff from across the College highlight the ways in which they have considered their own areas of expertise and reflected on how they can contribute.

Tom Thomson, IT Manager, has a background in support services in the public sector and says “I’ve always said my job is to support the rest of the College to do what we want to do, to make it happen and that’s exactly what I’m doing”. It’s important to Tom that academic staff and support staff work together creatively to shape practice within the guidelines and place the learner at the centre of any related practice.

“ Right away from the top down, there’s empathy, and vulnerability is shown. We need to be more aware of that and I think that the culture here leads to that and that fits really well with me. I think it comes down to our college values: welcoming to all, students at the centre of everything you do and always striving for better... we definitely do that. The goal is of leading with vision and empathy, so we look at something differently and think of how it might affect somebody. Be empathetic about it and for the situation and the standard situation doesn’t fit everybody... it doesn’t match quite often.

Tom Thomson, West Lothian College

For example, for an engineering lecturer who had expressed concern for some of his male students, the trauma-informed approach and leading with vision and empathy has led to a successful new initiative within the College. Aware of the high percentage of suicides in West Lothian, he was keen to support some of those he could see struggling, and in particular find a way of supporting those who didn’t want to directly access more formal support

⁸ <https://www.nes.scot.nhs.uk/our-work/trauma-national-trauma-training-programme>

⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-definition-of-trauma-informed-practice/working-definition-of-trauma-informed-practice>

services. From this, the Man Cave¹⁰ initiative was set up. The Man Cave provides a space for male students and male staff to get together informally and is open to any student or member of staff. The Man Cave meets twice a week for an hour, and it's a chance to just go along for a chat, maybe order in pizza and within this safe space there is also scope for those going along to open up to conversations around things often difficult to talk about.

The whole college approach to trauma-informed practice has been a key driver in various suggestions for new initiatives and is very much encouraged by the Principal.

“ That’s what I’m really keen in having in the College... it’s not corporate, it’s not me making this happen. The strategic underpinning is there, but actually I want lecturers and support staff, skills coaches... anybody, to grab it and just come up with the ideas and just start things themselves.

Jackie Galbraith, West Lothian College

As is currently the case in many colleges, there is often limited or no additional funding available for proposed new ideas, but Jackie has been keen to find alternative solutions to support new initiatives. For her “it’s about thinking differently and delivering some of core to make sure we embed it in”.

Over the summer months, the management team worked to identify a space within the campus which had sufficient space for the Man Cave to meet but which could also provide a degree of privacy for students. The space serves not only the Man Cave, but is regularly used by those from a range of different religions as somewhere to pray, and more recently by a group of older women who had been feeling nervous and didn’t always feel comfortable in larger spaces such as the café.

“ We identified a wee space that was big enough for the Man Cave to meet a couple of times a week, it also works as a space where anybody can go and it’s private... a headspace where you can get yourself out of the hubbub of the College, there’s soft furnishings, you can chill out, you can pray and if you’re neuro diverse it’s a calm space. So we all find ways to do things like that. Staff and students have brilliant ideas and I don’t want lack of money or organisational structures to be in the way.

Jackie Galbraith, West Lothian College

Positive developments such as the Man Cave have led to more ideas and proposals coming forward. Working to promote and sustain good mental health is a key driver across the College and, as highlighted by Jackie, is supported by fantastic advocates from within West Lothian College’s staff, who are empowered to develop their own initiatives in addition to embedding strategies for positive mental health into the curriculum.

Beyond the classroom experience

The computing team, along with the Man Cave and one of the IT technicians proposed using gaming as a vehicle to reach out to male students less likely to be engaged within the formal curriculum or perhaps socially isolated, and to support them to maintain their studies. Delighted to see these ideas come forward and with staff willing to work on this in their own time, the College management has invested in the idea and has worked to find additional resource to support it. The College has now established a ‘gaming cave’ complete with high-specification gaming stations where students can use their lunch time to take part in e-sport competitions.

“ This is not formal and it’s not built into the curriculum. At this stage it’s all about just trying to get the students connected.

Jackie Galbraith, West Lothian College

The College has also constructed new outdoor facilities including an outdoor gym. Lecturers, keen to harness the feel-good factor of being outdoors for both learners and members of staff, have been exploring ways of utilising this new resource. Classes are able to take part in competitions in the sports gym, and with the addition of the new campus park, now have the opportunity to play table tennis, football, table football and chess outdoors.

“ It’s just things that help them beyond the classroom experience that they’re actually thinking ‘I can take part in this and it can be fun and it makes me feel better’.

Jackie Galbraith, West Lothian College

The ethos of ‘leading with vision and empathy’ is not only adopted by staff, but also encourages and influences students as part of a whole college approach to tackling the effects of trauma.

Outdoor spaces have been utilised by health and social care students. Working with a charity which uses gardening for adults as a tool for mental health recovery, learners have been working together to make the area welcoming and usable for the group.

“ You see our students, often young woman with lovely nails out there in the winter, getting all mucky. They’re really proud of what they are doing and they are connecting with each other and the charities they work with.

Jackie Galbraith, West Lothian College

Learners from NQ Access to Teaching responded directly to the trauma of those fleeing the war in Ukraine by independently organising and hosting a Fun Day on campus for a number of orphaned children and their house mothers from Dnipro in June, 2022. The students managed to persuade local businesses to provide free bouncy castles and free food as well as involving musicians and a piper to lead the children off the bus¹¹. Another student

was aware of a Ukrainian family living on a caravan site and knew that they really needed help with their English. The supportive culture of the College led to the student putting forward an idea to help families in similar situations and a weekly English conversational class was set up, encouraging both English skills and helping newly arrived Ukrainians integrate and build networks within the College and local community.

“ The fact that our student had the confidence to ask the College if we could do something was great. Within a week we had set up a Friday conversational session... just come along, have coffee and cake and get the community together. That allowed us to get people in so that we could figure out their level of language and get them onto the right ESOL course from there. So, it’s just about that ethos across the whole college.

Jackie Galbraith, West Lothian College

The college also provided bespoke English language courses for fifty Ukrainians across the summer of 2022, running five days a week for five weeks. As many of this group had been living in temporary accommodation including caravans and hotels, and were spread across the local authority area, the College was keen that they were welcomed and that they could access a range of different resources and facilities.

A strong community has now been established and continues to grow, with group members accessing employability services and going on to full time ESOL courses. The goal and ethos of ‘leading with vision and empathy’ is empowering not only those directly impacted by trauma, but creating space and opportunities for learners at the College to reach out into their own families and communities and to build their own confidence and develop skills for future success.

11 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iU5otPpX4Zg>

PART 2: THE TRUST PROJECT

“ It really does work.

Steve Myer

Creating opportunities for vulnerable learners

The TRUST (Trauma Responsive Unique Support Tailor-made) Project is a wraparound service established to support students who have, or have had, experience of trauma in their lives.

The project has three core stands: helping young people back into education, tackling poverty for learners and their families, and working with the justice system as a stepping stone onto education or employment¹². The TRUST Project's trauma-informed underpinning is based in an understanding that lives are often disrupted as a result of experiencing trauma and that a bespoke and tailored approach is required to support learners to engage in education. Learning and Skills Manager Tracy Dalling explains:

“ The TRUST Project is all about removing a load of barriers so that they are able to come to education and then feel able that they can stay and succeed. That's where the training comes in too. The training we do at the start, the trauma training that the College are constantly doing to try to make people aware of not just what students experience but sometimes staff members too. We're trying to be mindful of what everybody is going through now. I think again that's where the college sees us... how can we help people to become more resilient.

Tracy Dalling, West Lothian College

The TRUST Project provides much needed scaffolding and creates opportunities for vulnerable learners to engage and re-engage with learning. Learners benefit from a personalised, bespoke and tailored approach to the individual and are welcomed into a dedicated safe space, known as The Den, where they work with trained specialist staff.

A tailor-made programme

Colleges have always aspired to be people-centric and tailored to the individual, however it has become clear that in spite of the range of courses available they don't always meet the needs or capacities of every learner. For young people and adults who are not yet students and struggle to see how they can engage with education, an intervention such as the TRUST Project may well be the catalyst for them considering taking on a short course or at least beginning to take positive steps along that journey. Replacing a formal learning environment with the more informal and relaxed setting of The Den allows staff to get to know the learners and over time establish a trusted connection.

“ Having that approach through a trauma lens really gets into your head what some of these students have been through and no wonder they behave the way they behave. So, it's just taking that into account: leaving it all at the door for them and it's a fresh start when they come in here. It's just making them really welcome and really get into... what is their need, not ours, not someone else's... but their needs. Then we really target every single student to make it work.

Joanna Henry, West Lothian College

Those coming into the TRUST Project have the opportunity to engage with learning at their own pace and project staff are passionate about building autonomy by involving students within the decision-making process.

As highlighted within the *Pathways From Poverty: Colleges for Communities* report (September 2022)¹³ it is not uncommon for young people to feel that they have little autonomy and a lack of voice, resulting in a cycle of ineffective engagements and interactions with institutions and external support. The TRUST Project fully appreciates that everyone is different and will have different and often complex needs. As one member of the team described it, “something that’s going to suit one person isn’t going to suit the next. You could bring the teaching theories down a lower level but that won’t suit them all nor might slowing down your delivery. You need a tailor-made programme for every single student”. The TRUST Project focuses on this and offers individual learning plans, with learners able to switch easily between units and courses.

¹³ <https://www.cdn.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Pathways-from-Poverty-Colleges-for-Communities.pdf>

A flexible approach

Work begins slowly to get new entrants to the College familiar and comfortable with their surroundings and link in with partner agencies working with young people who are looking to engage with education or employment opportunities.

“ The options are there and that’s where this differs from any other college. We, as support teams, can tailor a plan for the 1st day, the 2nd day, the 3rd day and so on. Our young people can come in and go for a coffee. They don’t even initially need to go to class. There’s no pressure here whatsoever. The flip side to that is that some of the young people will think they are doing 2 hours a day. So, it is about monitoring it and pushing the young people where and when it’s appropriate. If I have concerns about how things are going, I can contact the team and we can sit down and have a look and try to find another way or another path.

Steve Myer, West Lothian Council



Learners work at their own pace and they only work on something which will benefit them and their future, and decide if it's something that they want to do. This combats any anxiety for the learner and also limits the potential for withdrawal due to a student enrolling on a course which doesn't meet their needs or which may be set at a level which is initially found to be too challenging.

“ I would have started at college but it would have been a harder start. You have to know what you want to do to be put in a class and if they just they told you quickly choose something... you choose something you don't want to do because you want to stay in college but not get kicked out. But you might not choose good enough stuff, so it's good that they have The Den and they give you time to think. I didn't really get anything done at school. I just had very low moods all day, low self-esteem and pretty much no confidence and I would get nothing done because of that... but I'm extremely more confident now. I'm more happy and more able to do things that I would never do if I was back in school. When you start to realize that everybody is just trying to get through the day or get along, then strangers aren't so scary anymore.

Learner B, Trust Project, West Lothian College

The importance of the flexible approach to course selection and completion was also praised by support workers and those working to secure education and employment opportunities for young people. Steve Myer of West Lothian Council's Aftercare Service explains:

“ Previously, a young person would come in the August, they would majorly struggle in class. They have the College support here, and it was the right kind of support, but they were swamped you know. They couldn't get that individual 1:1: 'what's happening for you today?'. The support didn't always tie in with our services either, so we would bring them into the College and we would introduce ourselves, but sometimes things can fall by the wayside and that's where the TRUST Project has come in.

Steve Myer, West Lothian Council

Learners also have flexibility in being able to suspend their learning and return to their studies if it transpires that further work or time is required to build the confidence and resilience required to enable the learner to sustain their studies. Traditionally, college courses begin in August, with a second intake for courses in January. The approach taken by the TRUST Project acknowledges that a week can be a long time in the life of vulnerable learners, and that for individuals disengaging with learning, perhaps due to personal circumstances, tenancy issues or an unsuitable course option, retaining an open-door policy is key. Whereby the normative approach would be to withdraw a student for non-attendance or low academic attainment, the risk of such a student viewing this as yet another negative educational experience and not engaging with any further form of education is high.

Steve Myer explains that for those in that situation, “they feel a bit let down. They want to do it but they just may not have the right tools at that time to go and tackle it”. It is therefore seen as vital to build in scope to allow the learner to re-engage as soon as they are ready to do so and thereby sustain any progress made to date.

“ Before we were probably losing 7 students from my caseload because if they were sent away it seemed as though the College wasn’t really interested in them. The ethos has changed. Before it was maybe ‘we’ll just send you home... come back tomorrow and we’ll hopefully we have a better day tomorrow’. That doesn’t happen anymore. We get to the bottom of any issue and deal with it together there and then. Instead, we’re now saying ‘let’s get it done and dusted today and then move on’. The turnaround for me is really quick and I can come in here and within half an hour, that young person is going back into the learning environment and that’s brilliant. It really does work.

Steve Myer, West Lothian Council

“ I think that’s key for our young people. They do push to see how much you actually care about what is going on and often we see not greatly managed behaviours. I think that if they are sent home then that’s what’s expected. They tell themselves that they are too much of a hassle, but now, they know that this support system is behind them and we can discuss that we want to get the best for them. That is a totally different perspective instead of them thinking that they will just be sent away.

Lorna Donnelly, West Lothian Council

Simple solutions

“ Whatever we do, we do the right thing for the student, not the right thing for our systems.

Tom Thomson, West Lothian College

Creating a bespoke programme of learning may seem daunting and the project staff are often questioned on the practicality and feasibility of managing a range of tailor-made options.

Learners on the TRUST Project are able to study units from across the College course catalogue, although this learning is often structured over a longer and more flexible period of time. Learners also engage in additional learning delivered within The Den which includes units incorporating employability skills such as customer care skills alongside transferable skills such as resilience and confidence building.

For the College’s IT manager, Tom Thomson, the ability of his team to be agile and work with that model has been crucial. Working together with TRUST Project staff, Tom has developed a new approach which allows for students to be transferred off full-time courses and onto customised courses. There is a need to make sure that the systems are in place and ensure that the College is both safeguarding the student and recording an attendance for that that student in line with official guidelines and reporting measures.

Tom explains there is now inbuilt provision within the system to keep TRUST Project learners on their standard course, but with additional information to identify them as students who are being supported by the TRUST Project. Noting that group registers doesn’t always work when you’ve got a student who just can’t come to that group all the time or who needs to be moved to another class, the solution was to create bespoke registers.

“ With this, it’s a really simple solution. You just set up a new course for a student and you don’t worry about the fact that there’s not another 20 people on that course. You don’t have in your head that you must have X number on that course to be able to make it make it worth running. It’s worth running if it helps the student and that’s the thing. It’s worth doing and it’s not taking an awful lot. What’s 10 minutes of your time to set up a course and transfer someone onto it, compared to the benefit that it has for the student? Our approach is that it’s very much making sure that whatever we do, we do the right thing for the student, not the right thing for our systems.

Tom Thomson, West Lothian College

This example of leading with vision and empathy and creating a safe and flexible learning environment helps reframe success for those most at risk of disengaging from learning and gives due credit in acknowledging the brave step of coming over the College door and exploring ways of developing skills.

Creating safe spaces for all

“ I think if college can feel like a safe environment: a really welcoming environment for them... they’re comfortable and chilled out and they’re not feeling like it’s a strict classroom, then that really does help them.

Joanna Henry, West Lothian College

The importance of creating a safe space for learners to develop is an ethos shared by many colleges and is a cornerstone of the initiatives and projects outlined within the *Pathways from Poverty: Colleges for Communities* report (September 2022)¹⁴. By establishing an environment in which vulnerable

learners can prosper, colleges are breaking down barriers to education and widening participation, often with the benefits extending beyond the learners and into the wider community.

For the TRUST Project staff, coordination and planning is a key factor in creating a successful safe space. In addition to the layout and soft furnishing of The Den, used as a ‘go to’ for learners who may find the College campus or more formal learning spaces such as classrooms and workrooms initially overwhelming, to the numbers of students in the same room, decisions are carefully thought through.

Support staff, working to re-establish links to education for their young people also value the space, as do the TRUST Project team. The Den is in regular use, with staff able to identify those learners who may need time and space to regroup and recalibrate before they head to class, or for anyone who needs more dedicated time to chat, relax or engage in a learning activity there. Interactions are paced to meet the needs of the learner and the team use The Den as an initial space to build trust and develop rapport before gently opening up the wider campus as a broader safe space.

“ I think baby steps is a massive thing that makes it work. You need to be really slow with them to begin with. The first couple of meetings is just sitting getting to know them, and them sitting and chatting to us... or maybe not. They might be sitting with their music and we end up talking about their music. We just take it really, really slow. We might go over for a hot chocolate and try to get them comfortable with their surroundings and make them feel safe. And of course, getting the freedom of the College. Letting them see that they have the freedom of all this flexibility. I think that’s a big key.

Joanna Henry, West Lothian College

¹⁴ <https://www.cdn.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Pathways-from-Poverty-Colleges-for-Communities.pdf>

“ If the student is having a hard time, why not give them that time to chill out for a bit and then put them back to class. Sometimes they may only need a wee cup of tea. It’s not like they are having troubles all the time. They maybe just need that wee half hour just to offload to someone about what has happened that night or the night before and they’re quite happy to go back to class.

Jeanette Dobson, West Lothian College

Taking the first steps into education is not only challenging for some learners but is also, at times, challenging for the agencies and teams supporting those learners back into education. It became clear through the research interviews that external support agencies and teams can often feel that they are firefighting, particularly around the issue of school non-attendance. The multi-agency approach to trauma adopted by the TRUST Project supports these challenges being addressed in a cohesive and beneficial way. The positive relationships established early on between TRUST Project staff, external support agencies and learners means that support workers feel they are in a position to better prepare for their young person going onto college.

The TRUST Project’s referral process is straightforward and for support workers always starts with an initial chat to make sure that the young person is a good fit. Often before formalising a referral, support staff from external agencies will arrange for their young person to come onto campus.

“ For me, I bring the young person in and let them have a look around. When you say to them about going to college, they often don’t know what that means. It’s like going to the moon for them and they don’t really have a clue. They are usually thinking that it must be like school and they think of all the negative things they know about school and they’re thinking that they don’t want to go there. So, we’ll say “let’s go and make that decision... let’s go and have a look and see what it’s about, see what it’s like. Let’s go and speak to that teacher standing at the front of the classroom”.

Steve Myer, West Lothian Council



The flexibility in arranging visits has also been of benefit where a young person has been identified as having anxiety. Visits are pre-planned and arranged for quieter times such as the October holiday or the Christmas break. Potential learners have a degree of autonomy and can advocate for themselves and their own needs.

“ I think sometimes as support workers we can do too much beforehand and actually you’re not allowing the young person to advocate for their own needs. So, we try to encourage them to do that. Anything we have missed out or anything they might wish to disclose themselves can be mopped up and then it is about that forward planning and what comes next after the referral. The team and the young person might meet a couple of times for a coffee, in a café or here, and we’ve done that. Or maybe they come in and go to some prep courses. It is about identifying what is right for them. They might not be able to stay in college for the full day, but because the TRUST Project has met them and has had that really good conversation with them, the young person knows that it is a really massive thing for them to achieve, even a half day.

Lorna Donnelly, West Lothian Council

Initial contact with both support agencies and the young people referred to the TRUST Project is kept relaxed and informal, creating a safe environment for all leading to positive results. As described by Joanna Henry from the Trust Project, the project team work hard to create and expand their networks, aiming to meet as many organisations in West Lothian as possible so that they all know about the work and services available. The next step is trying to build the relationship with these contacts, with agencies and support teams members invited into the College to see The Den and see the project work in action.

“ Right from the word go, the message we got was keep it informal. Although we do initially go out and we also cascade information, when people are coming in, generally it’s “sit down... have a cup of coffee”. They don’t have to wait for the monthly meeting and they can just tell us what they need us to do. It’s “just give us a call anytime and come and speak to us”. When they’re bringing in clients, it’s about 10 minutes of us chatting and them saying “oh... talking to you there’s actually something else which could work for us”.

Tracy Dalling, West Lothian College

Support services accessing the TRUST Project also see it as a safe space for them for open discussion and are actively encouraged to be confident in expressing what is working within the partnership and where improvements or changes could be made. By keeping communication informal and taking on board constructive feedback, practice has been adapted and the project has further developed new ideas and approaches from suggestions made by partner organisations.

“ Once things go into emails, things become quite formal and people don’t always want to put things in writing. It is about that “can I get 5 minutes with you here because that didn’t work” and we wanted to be upfront and say from the word go “let’s be honest here every step of the way”. That’s what I mean by people and partnership working: with the student being at the heart of it. That is what is so welcome here at the College and with the partners who we work.

Tracy Dalling, West Lothian College

It was also highlighted within the interviews that external agencies highly value the 'one point of contact' approach taken by the TRUST Project. For agencies and contacts looking to get in touch with the team, there is no need to search for individual email addresses with communication made via the central Trust Project email address (thetrustproject@west-lothian.ac.uk).

“ It’s taken away so much stress and hassle and from the feedback from all the agencies we work with, they’ve told us that the difference is so really brilliant.

Joanna Henry, West Lothian College

“ I think having that one person you can go to within the Trust Project makes things really easy as well. It stops things becoming too confusing and the way it works, is that if I am working with someone, I know exactly who I can link into within the College. I know, for that young person, this is exactly who I need to speak to. We’ve all been there with those multiple emails and what is great is that there’s that clear communication through that key relationship... and the young person sees that relationship too. They often consistently say that they want to go to college because they know that it will provide the structure that they need in their life.

Lorna Donnelly, West Lothian Council

Linking to the classroom

“ I didn’t need to know what they did... I just know it worked.

Melissa, West Lothian College

Teaching staff from within the College also related their positive experiences of collaborating with the TRUST Project to deliver positive outcomes for learners already enrolled on a college course.

One lecturer, with experience of a student with significant gaps in their attendance and who could present as confrontational within the classroom setting, made contact with the TRUST Project team to try to establish a positive way forward. She was encouraged and relieved to hear from the team and from her perspective what stood out from the initial contact was the way in which the team communicated: “the first thing I’m going to tell you is we’re going to help the student”. This was the start of removing any barrier to learning and from this initial referral, communication with the project team was consistent to give updates on progress, whilst protecting the confidentiality of the learner concerned.

“ The team are really good around the idea of boundaries and confidentiality. Although we might have sent a student to the Trust Project, if I was to ask them... “are you getting on ok with that student”, then I might just get “yes, fine”. I know that there will be loads more going on there, but it’s right that I don’t get more than that for the student’s own confidentiality and development. I like that... and that’s a trust thing too which cuts both ways.

Melissa, West Lothian College

After engaging with the Trust Project, the learner was able to return to the classroom setting and on the other side of the Project, Melissa, as a lecturer, was also able to reach out to somebody and diffuse any potential for the learner to be withdrawn from their course on the grounds of non-attendance and non-completion.

“ I could see the work the team had all put in. The learner’s communication style started to change: it was being more responsive with things like “thanks for your help”, “thanks for letting me know”, and they were re-engaging with classes. The learner gave a professional delivery on a collaborative working unit and I was actually blown away. In short, the student completed their hours and had an observation completed with the SVQ assessor. They finished their HNC in Social Services and I didn’t tell the student this, but they got the best mark in the class for the whole module. I still, to this day, don’t really know what the Trust Project did, but I trusted them and that they would do their job. I didn’t need to know what they did... I just know it worked. I had that trust too.

Melissa, West Lothian College

The trusted relationships developed within the TRUST Project extend to meet the needs of learners, teaching teams and external agencies. Across the partnership, each service looks for different things and project staff work with each individual partner, service and agency to see how best to meet their specific needs. A horizontal grass roots approach differs from many vertical and top-down initiatives, with agencies now thinking about what needs to be done and setting up their own services to fit around that.

“ It is very much about the service user and building things around what they need, from their position. Because we have these links, we all work together to make sure that the support is there for the young person and we bring them into it to make sure that they feel they can choose their own pathway.

Lorna Donnelly, West Lothian Council

TRUST and the justice system

The TRUST Project has also extended into working with the justice system and has established routes into education as an alternative to a custodial sentence or for those approaching their liberation date.

Highlighted by Vice Principal Sarah-Jane Linton, the opportunity to undertake a part-time college course upon release or as an alternative to prison aims to break the cycle for young people experiencing poverty, addiction, crime and recidivism. Exposing people to college in different ways, for example via payback orders, allows offenders to complete their payback hours on campus.

The adoption of a whole systems approach through partnership working means that the College also creates a safe and neutral space to allow input from Youth and Criminal Justice Services, Housing Services and homelessness charities where needed. Steve Myer reflects on one young learner placed on a legal order, and the ways in which a joined-up strategy was of benefit in helping him to both fulfil the related conditions of the offer and meet with his addiction counsellor. Another learner, who had joined the College via the TRUST Project following time spent in a secure unit was able to sustain his studies and reframe his relationship with the criminal justice system.

“ Because he trusted these guys here in the project, he let the police come in and interview him here about another incident and he had a really good experience with that. That was the first time that he had had a good experience with the police. At the end of the day, he was pleased that he went through that experience. He could have run and not sorted things out or let things escalate. But he was saying afterwards... “that was ok” and that could potentially make him look at the police in a different manner. He actually got a qualification and is on a full-time course and he was a high-risk person at risk of reoffending.

Tracy Dalling, West Lothian College

For those approaching their liberation day, they might have a job interview, and could find that there's a gap in the services available, meaning that they then have to go to that job by themselves. The TRUST Project can again step in through this partnership and help arrange for them to go their job interview, or alternatively provide an introduction to the College to help inform any decision on re-engaging with education.

A welcome for all

Beyond the TRUST Project, West Lothian College extend a safe and welcoming space to all new learners. In line with the goal of 'leading with vision and empathy' senior management ensure that they are visible to new college applicants and purposefully make time to be in the College foyer, meeting and chatting informally with groups of new students during induction at the beginning of each new session. Typically, each senior manager will free up space of up to an hour to be available and approachable.

The trauma-informed approach takes into account the huge step being made by many approaching the College for the first time or by those returning to education after a prolonged gap. For Jackie

Galbraith, sending signals which present the College as a friendly and accommodating space which caters to individuals is vital.

“ The message that I'm sending is that “we're really excited to have you here and it's a great place... some of you may be quite nervous... take advantage of everything” and we talk about the free food so it's not something that they feel embarrassed about. We say “take part in all these activities... this is your College it belongs to you, so don't worry about wandering around and just trying something out and if you need help there are loads of people to help you... you ask any of us, we're here to help” ... so that's the kind of message that we're putting out from day one, before they even start the course.

Jackie Galbraith, West Lothian College

New students, perhaps unsure of using the facilities, or who had been made to feel less than welcome within earlier experiences of education are encouraged to explore and utilise all that the College campus has to offer. Meeting learners at induction removes the anxiety of engaging with college staff and the messages that “these are your facilities... go grab a booth, a pod... sit in the pod all day if you like, plug in your phone and it's yours... you don't have to book it. Just you go in there and use those spaces because this campus is yours and we're here to serve you” are emphasised by all staff including the senior managers.

The TRUST Project has been delighted to receive positive feedback on the sense of welcome and safety which has led to many learners at risk of disengaging sustaining their learning.

For the TRUST Project team and the wider college staff, the trauma-informed approach adopted at West Lothian College is needed more than ever with the range and volume of mental health and related issues continuing to increase following the Covid 19 pandemic.

PART 3: DIRECT ACTION ON POVERTY

“ It’s eliminating absolutely everything that’s in the way.

Jeanette Dobson

A whole system approach

Partnership working provides scope for a whole system approach and the opportunity to access a broader range of resources as new connections are forged. As highlighted in earlier *Pathways From Poverty* reports, understanding the context and availability of local and national support extends the ability of colleges to offer targeted support and also creates sustainable links.

The benefits of partnership working have not only been instrumental in developing additional support channels for vulnerable learners, but have also facilitated opportunities to tap into financial resources to support initiatives aimed at directly combating poverty.

Food poverty is a significant challenge across the college sector and has been increasingly identified as a barrier to learning, affecting the learner’s ability to maintain wellbeing and sustain their studies. Within the College, a number of initiatives have been implemented to support those learners experiencing the very real threat of hunger.

“There’s soup and a roll for everyone”

Engaging closely with the local authority anti-poverty team, the College have been able to secure support and funding which has had immediate impact in supporting learners struggling with the cost of living. The College has since 2018 provided a free lunchtime meal of soup and roll for all students, and this has subsequently been extended to include a free breakfast for learners.

“ It was clear that students were suffering and struggling with hunger in the afternoons and some students just couldn’t afford to eat. So right from that stage we introduced the free lunch every day for every student... no means testing or whatever.

Jackie Galbraith, West Lothian College

“ I think that’s really great that you have that idea of “here’s what soup is on today” and all the students go for that... so it’s not about putting a ticket on things or them and everyone is the same. There’s soup and a roll for everyone.

Lorna Donnelly, West Lothian Council

Successful partnerships between the College and the local community have also worked to positively impact food poverty more widely. In conjunction with The Larder, a local charity who have delivered over 150,000 ready meals to those facing food insecurity across West Lothian, a takeaway ready meal service is also available which supports learners and their families to sustain their learning¹⁵.

15 <https://www.thelarder.org/our-story>



“ We also provide meals. I don’t know if you know that. There’s The Larder and eliminating the poverty side it for the families is important. They can come in, whoever needs it is entitled to free meals... and a meal for their family members. If we can eliminate poverty that way and give them food as well for at night for their dining room table and we’re doing that as well. It’s pre-made meals which are ready for them.

Jeanette Dobson, West Lothian College

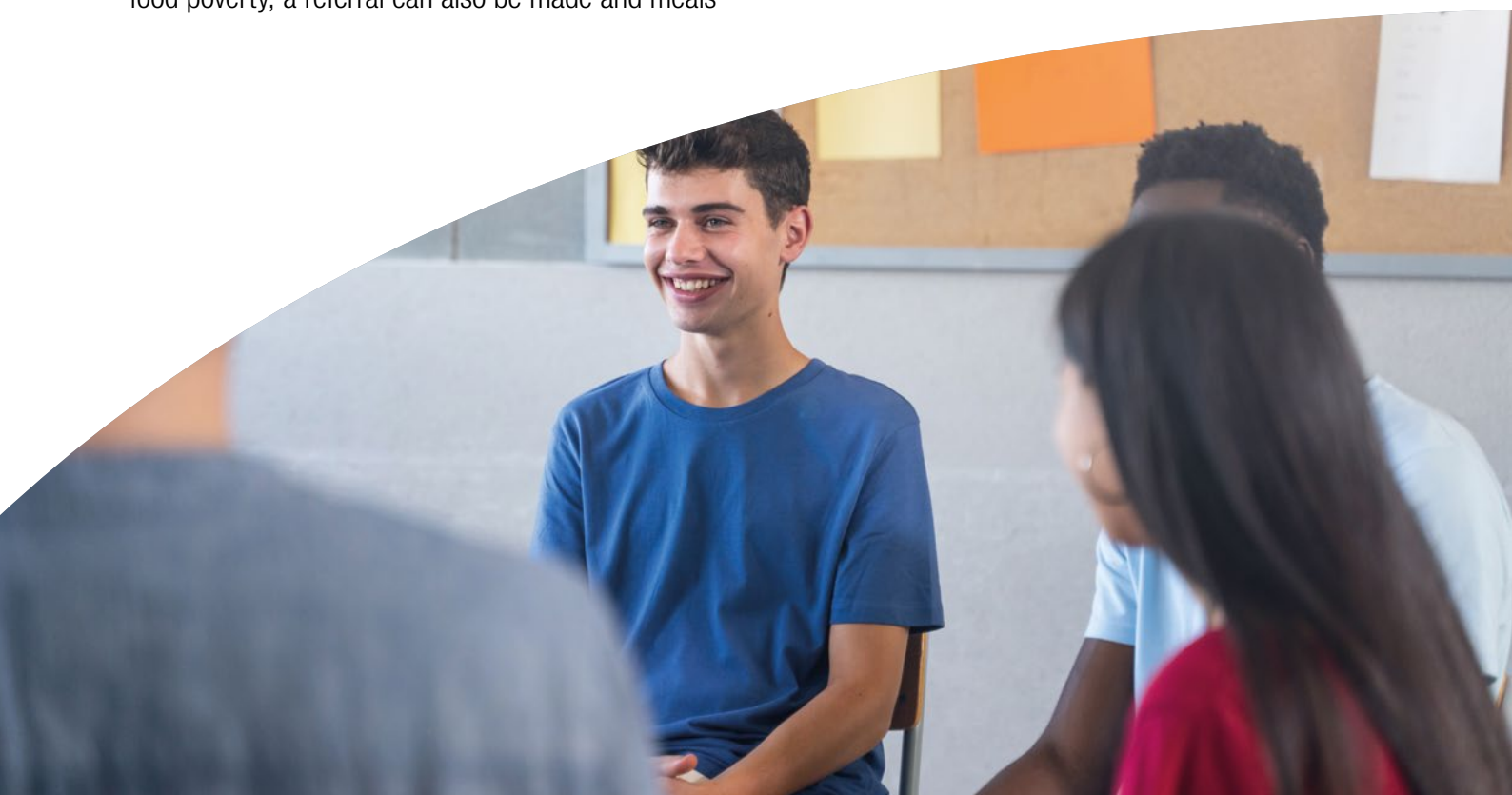
The excellent working relationship between the student association and the College facilitates and sustains initiatives, with senior management meeting with representatives on a formal monthly and a more regular informal ad hoc basis to work together on issues identified, such as food poverty.

The student association bring in fifty meals a week from The Larder and support learners who are no longer in supported accommodation or who may be homeless by offering access to a microwave. Meals are available on campus for those most in need and learners can access food via the student association on a ‘walk in’ basis. Equally, where there is a learner with a large family who is struggling with food poverty, a referral can also be made and meals

provided for the family unit as a whole. Learners in this instance approach the student association and request a meal and a referral for a food delivery from The Larder is then made. The College also supports learners and their families by providing both practical space and advice on food preparation.

“ Another thing we’re doing is that we’re speaking to students who are already on full time courses throughout the College. Anyone who has any needs, we’re putting on events to try and really help them with that. Speaking to a lot of students... some of them had maybe just moved into accommodation and don’t know where to start with cooking. So, what we did was to put on a family event. The student and their family could come along, learn how to batch cook on a budget. We opened the kitchens and we try not to let anything get in the way of them completing their college course. We don’t want them under pressure for food. Some of the students have a young family and are struggling to feed their kids nourishment and they didn’t know how to do that, so they got ideas there.

Joanna Henry, West Lothian College



Again, relating to the issue of food tackling food poverty, the TRUST Project partnership established within the College has helped to provide a stream of funding to enable the installation of new kitchen facilities that not only benefit learners currently supported by the TRUST Project, but students across the College.

“ The TRUST Project put in a kitchen for students to use as well and that’s absolutely amazing. So, even if they bring like stuff in, they could put a tag on it put it in the cupboard and nobody will touch it because that’s an open area. The presidents can see now who’s coming in, who’s going out, who’s using cupboard space, who’s using fridge space and it’s just amazing. It’s just made such a difference. And the whole point is they don’t need to pay for a cup of tea. We’ve eliminated that as well, so it just gets better and better. I think that as the TRUST Project is growing it’s more generally going to have a great effect in college as well.

Jeanette Dobson, West Lothian College

For external support agencies working with the TRUST Project, direct action to tackle food poverty is invaluable and forms part of the wider preparations and scaffolded support for learners returning to education.

“ We have young people struggling to manage their bursary and manage a tenancy on £57 a week. It’s about helping them plan. They might be thinking about having to make breakfast before they go in and not sure they will get breakfast in College and if they need to pay for that. All of these questions are answered in the first session and it means they know there is a free breakfast and the same at lunchtime... and that there’s no need for a special card or anything.

Steve Myer, West Lothian Council

Similarly, direct action on food poverty supports the ongoing work within the criminal justice system and for those who are facing their liberation date, the College is switched on to the financial obstacles which can be a barrier to learning and to rehabilitation.

“ That’s actually really important for somebody coming out of the Prison Service as well because when you leave after a sentence, you’re getting your £74 or whatever it is you leave with. You don’t get another penny for another five weeks. Nobody will touch you. So, you’ve got to wait for that, then wait for that wait and then wait for that again. If you’re living a life of crime and you’re living in poverty then you’re going to do what you have to do to make ends meet. Whereas if they’ve got that contact with us, it’s like weaning them away from crime. We can provide them with food, we can help by providing them with shelter during the day, we can feed them at lunchtime and give them breakfast. They just need to get here and we can even supply bus passes so it’s eliminating absolutely everything that’s in the way and which might make them go back to that situation.

Jeanette Dobson, West Lothian College

Concerns around poverty extend beyond the student



body and Jackie Galbraith is acutely aware of the impact of increasing cost of food bills as well as increasing energy costs can affect staff too. She identifies the destabilising impact of poverty upon levels of confidence and stress and is keen to apply a whole college approach to these issues.

“ Who knows what we’re going to have to deal with over the next few months: not just for students but for staff as well. That’s really troubling me at the moment. I’m confident we will get there for our students because our student funding team are brilliant at using all available resources, partners and local charities give us resources, foodstuffs, some partners deliver pre-cooked meals that students can take home at night if they can’t afford to buy a meal and that’s done by a charitable larder and this is disseminated via our student association. So there are all sorts of things that go on for students. However, I am also worried about staff and how we support them through these difficult times.

Jackie Galbraith, West Lothian College

Broader initiatives, influenced by the whole college approach to trauma and disadvantage, have seen the installation of washing machines and with vouchers offered to learners for washing and drying on campus. As highlighted by the *Colleges for Communities* report (September 2022)¹⁶, these direct interventions challenge the perception of ‘coming into college’ as an activity solely related to learning and training. The empathetic and trauma-informed ethos of West Lothian College is just one example of the varied and innovative ways in which colleges can have a real and direct impact on the lives of learners, their families and their communities.

¹⁶ <https://www.cdn.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Pathways-from-Poverty-Colleges-for-Communities.pdf>



PART 4: SUSTAINABILITY THROUGH ANCHORING WITHIN THE COMMUNITY

“ Whatever partner we are working with... everyone is invested in the person.

Tracy Dalling

The College and the community

Working in partnership with a trauma-informed whole college approach has seen West Lothian College frame itself less as an ‘anchor institution’ and more as being anchored within the community of West Lothian.

Although the College is relatively small in size with a single campus, the geographical area it serves is large and encompasses a complex demographic. The College doesn’t have the resources to sustain formal learning environments in all the local towns, but does work to pull people into the campus and has seen a lot of take up from that.

“ It’s about how the College can connect across all our communities. Most important to me are the people who come here and the people who could potentially come here. That’s why it’s really important to get community organisations into the College to use our facilities. They bring in people who might never have stepped through the door.

Jackie Galbraith, West Lothian College

For Tracy Dalling, the sustainability of initiatives comes from the buy-in not only from College staff, but from partners from across the local community.

“ We are always seeking out partners. Even today, we were just talking about “how do we help this person who is in a secure unit?” or the parents or whoever? How is that person getting to College on time? It seems to be part of the West Lothian culture. Whatever partner we are working with... everyone is invested in the person. Egos are put aside and it is about “how do we make this all work?”.

Tracy Dalling, West Lothian College

One way of encouraging people to engage with the College is to reach out to community groups and give these groups access to College facilities. Community organisations are free to use the College facilities at no charge, with the only stipulation being that any let to external groups does not impact on the students or the teaching.

“ We don’t charge for the use of our facilities, we allow community organisations to use the facilities as long as it’s at times that don’t impact on our students. That’s brilliant because it’s bringing people into the College who wouldn’t normally be here.

Jackie Galbraith, West Lothian College

The Scheme

One example of promoting the College as a shared community space has close links to its trauma-informed approach. Former student Aidan Martin is currently involved in trauma-related work, delivering training following his own well documented struggles with addiction as a young person. Citing his return to college aged 25 and the support he received from West Lothian College as life changing, he has since gone on to university, built a family and is now a leading figure in drugs recovery. In addition to publishing his book *Euphoric Recall*¹⁷, he has also set up a charity, The Scheme¹⁸, was a speaker at the College's online graduations in 2020, speaks regularly to groups of students and is now a lifetime college ambassador.

Aidan is also actively involved with the TRUST Project, relating and empathising with where some of those young people have been and regularly speaks with students, both online and on campus. Aware that he was looking for a venue to host workshops and set up a community café, Principal Jackie Galbraith was keen to offer the College as a facility.

17 <https://aidanmartinauthor.co.uk/>

18 <https://aidanmartinauthor.co.uk/the-scheme/>

“ He set up a charity called ‘The Scheme’¹⁹ and they’d like to have their own premises at some point, and that may come. He had a chat with me about it, and I said “you know you can use this campus Tuesday and Thursday nights”... because it’s an evening and anytime that we don’t have to evict students from the rooms, because we don’t have enough space, so that’s perfect for him because he has writer’s workshops, art workshops, film making workshops for people struggling or recovering from addiction or for families recovering from addiction. He had his first one here last week and it was brilliant... he had 30 or 40 people at it... and these were people who haven’t been to the College, and they benefit from that because they see it’s not such a scary place and they see the resources... so they’re coming back.

Jackie Galbraith, West Lothian College

19 <https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/local-news/west-lothian-author-musician-duo-27658855>



As part of the College values of 'welcoming all' strategy, Jackie takes time to pop into community sessions on an informal basis and sees this an ideal opportunity for the College to reach out into the community. It's about keeping contact relaxed and building the relationships to allow those, less familiar with college or those unsure or anxious to see that there is a welcome for all.

“ I don't go handing out promotional leaflets or anything like that. I make a point of going along and saying “Hi... I'm Jackie, the Principal, I'm delighted you're here and if you're interested in the College at any time please come and speak to me or to any one of us”.

Jackie Galbraith, West Lothian College

Through this open and welcoming approach, the dots between the College and the community are joined up. By being visible at community events herself, Jackie repositions the role of College Principal as a visible, approachable and supportive presence and ensures that the College is seen as a comfortable and safe space.

Welcoming to all

Having recently attended one of the workshops run by Aidan Martin, Jackie and the College were able to connect with and support a mother and daughter who were living with the impact of trauma within their family life.

“ I actually stayed for one of the workshops last week... just to make sure they were comfortable and one woman came out of it and said hello. I remembered that she came to another event we ran in March for Scottish Families Affected by Alcohol and Drug Addiction. We connected with her daughter, who was experiencing terrible trauma after the death of her brother, and she's now part of the TRUST Project. The point is, her mother came over to me that night and she was pulled in through this charity. This wouldn't have happened without that event and she now has a way for her daughter to hopefully start to make sense of a really horrific and traumatic experience. These things just connect together.

Jackie Galbraith, West Lothian College



Facilitating meeting space for groups such as Scottish Families affected by Drugs and Alcohol gives College staff and the student association the opportunity to promote the opportunities provided by the College and to talk through the support that is on offer for anyone thinking about making the initial first steps back into learning or skills development.

At one such session, a young woman with two young children spoke about being in recovery and disclosed that her partner had died in prison. After speaking with staff and the student association and being made to feel more reassured and confident and she signed up for a course.

“ We told her that she was really brave to have spoken as she did and to say why don't you come into the College anytime for a coffee and speak to us. She came in, spoke with Jinty from the student association and she signed up for a course at an open day. She was really fired up about coming to College and she was really taken aback that people were actually going to give her all this support and help her through it.

Jackie Galbraith, West Lothian College

The College not only provide space for communities to meet but can offer a safe and neutral environment to facilitate interactions between learners, social workers, support workers, rehabilitation workers, local authority teams, and external agencies and charities.

“ The agencies can come to us. One of the students works with an addictions coordinator and they meet here. It saves them having to go to meetings which might never happen. If it's during his College time, there's a nice private space and they can sit and have their meetings there.

Joanna Henry, West Lothian College

Where a relationship between a learner and a support team or judiciary service is being challenged by external factors or is under strain, having the neutral college space available and the TRUST team on hand, if needed, can ease tensions allowing for both learning and relationships of support to be sustained. Learners and community agencies value the facility and this form of partnership again reframes what coming into College means for learners and external agencies.

“ I can definitely agree with that one. For that student, I was mentoring him, he and his social worker didn't have a great relationship or rapport. He wasn't attending social work appointments which was looking bad for him. He was on a tag and had to be in at home from 7pm to 7am. He only had a free couple of hours after College, and meetings with social work were eating into that... so it just wasn't working. We decided to get the social worker to speak to him while he was in College and we also brought in the drug and alcohol counsellor in to see him through College time. We brought other services in to see him they all made appointments for him in the College... we just had to provide the room.

Jeanette Dobson, West Lothian College



Always striving for better

These trauma-informed approaches are making a difference to learners and their communities and are driven by the core strategic goals of the College. Jackie Galbraith believes that at West Lothian College, their values are core to what they do on all levels. The College values are really well understood by the staff and by students and are continually reaffirmed by the management team. The whole college approach is both trauma-informed and learner-centric and staff have the confidence and flexibility to input new ideas.

“ What you want for your staff is for them to say... “why don’t we do this?”... and “I’ll give it a go”. Then they give it a go and if starts to look as though they need a bit of resource, I’ll then try to find that resource.

Jackie Galbraith, West Lothian College

The work being done as part of the TRUST Project is now being embedded into other aspects of College life and the goal of leading with vision and empathy is viewed as a sustainable way forward for learners and staff. There is broad buy-in to the concept of flexibility and evaluation and from this, the College continues to strive to evolve and develop.

“ There no rigidity at all within the College. What makes it sustainable is everyone has bought into it. It seems to be part of the West Lothian culture. Whatever partner we are working with... everyone is invested in the person. Egos are put aside and it is about “how do we make this all work?”.

Tracy Dalling, West Lothian College

Students at the centre of everything we do

Karen Irvine of the TRUST Project team sees the project getting bigger and bigger with the amount of interest, and the difference in the students involved has been evident, both within the College and the wider community. For Jackie Galbraith, the whole college approach will be continually reinforced in staff sessions. The College achieved a Gold Award in Investors in People in 2022 that illustrates how well it is doing as an employer in looking after its staff.

In conclusion, the trauma-informed practice adopted by West Lothian College supports Jackie, college teams and partners in striving to be a really good college for learners and for staff to be the best they can be for the people of West Lothian.



CONCLUSION: COLLEGES CONNECT

“ It’s all about how the College connects with our communities to inspire and enable success for all.

Jackie Galbraith

This report builds on *Current challenges and the role of colleges* (March 2022) and *Colleges for communities* (September 2022). In undertaking these studies, the CDN Research and Enhancement Centre has aimed to give a sense of the work being carried out, not only in the colleges featured, but across the sector as a whole. Scotland’s colleges remain committed to maximizing the potential of learners from across the community, supporting skills development and driving economic change. They do this by recognising the barriers learners from the most deprived communities face and tackling them head on to reduce the significant impact of poverty upon them and their families.

From the testimony provided by college staff, learners and local community agency staff, we have seen that colleges go beyond well beyond simply providing qualifications, progression pathways and vocational skills for future employment and that the perception of what coming to college means is being reshaped by the development of a trauma-influenced approach.

Recurring themes

In our first report, *Current challenges and the role of colleges*, we proposed two broad enhancement themes:

- Preventing poverty through access to college; and
- Preventing poverty post-qualification.

Expanding on these broad themes in our second report, *Colleges for communities*, we identified five key areas for the development of future practice:

- Creating safe spaces;
- Working in partnership;
- Direct action on poverty;
- Supporting transitions; and
- Sustainability.

These areas were explored in that report through case studies of projects at Ayrshire College, Borders College, Forth Valley College, and Glasgow Kelvin College (with a related study of Glasgow Kelvin’s partnership with The Marie Trust).

This third report, *Leading with empathy and vision*, has examined how West Lothian College has formed its own approach to the key areas we have identified, with an underlying trauma-informed approach that has linked the whole College community to the wider local community and enabled connections to be made that establish the College as a safe, welcoming environment that treats each learner and their needs as unique.

Connections

Through all three reports we have returned to the theme of **connection**. Colleges connect people to learning, to support, to funding, to employers, and to each other. Colleges also connect with their communities, providing space and support to community groups, enabling support agencies to reach the people who need them, and providing a safe and non-judgmental space for learners to build their skills and connect with new opportunities.

Our first report also highlighted the importance of connecting with the key transitions facing our society:

- Automation and technological change;
- Brexit;
- Climate emergency and just transition;
- Demographic change and ageing;
- Economic inequalities widening.

Colleges continue to build capacity through delivering skills for future employment and economic recovery whilst simultaneously delivering crucial resources and facilitating the support mechanisms required to sustain learning in challenging economic times.

They have become a lifeline for learners and a focal point for external support agencies and are striving to become more embedded within their local areas through the forging of successful partnerships and initiatives.

By working together, colleges and support agencies are providing learners with the 'essentials of life', within a safe, warm and welcoming space. Many of the initiatives we highlight mediate barriers to healthy and sustainable living, and individuals are being encouraged and supported to build healthy and sustainable futures. The critical support being provided is increasingly being underpinned by informed approaches to poverty and trauma, which recognise the devastating and debilitating impact such experiences can have.

Supporting the whole college approach

A whole college and trauma-informed approach, as adopted by West Lothian College, has had a real and positive impact for learners, as well as staff and external support services, and has created new opportunities for those who may have otherwise be estranged from education and from access to further skills and self-development. A trauma-informed approach has also created new pathways for those within the criminal justice system and has forged strong and effective partnerships across the local community.

Colleges, in taking on a central role in developing a skilled and resilient workforce for sustainable economic growth, understand the importance of incorporating the lived realities of learners and their communities to sustain learning. Where colleges such as West Lothian lead with vision and empathy as part of their core principles they actively encourage a whole system approach to tackling socio-economic issues.

Next steps

As we have demonstrated in our three Pathways from Poverty reports, there are common themes to the ways in which colleges can and are tackling poverty and these are evidenced in the case studies we have carried out. Through this work we have aimed to shine a light on the value and impact of our colleges. In the next phase of this work we will develop these common themes and practices into a programme that can be used by colleges to review their practice and identify possible new areas of delivery. The programme will also support connections between colleagues across the sector through CDN's Step Forward initiative, providing peer support, mentoring, and training and development where required, to spread good practice and cement the central role of colleges in delivering pathways from poverty.



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