

Do your duty for equality

Making the case for addressing rising levels of inequality in partnership with people with lived experiences of poverty

'We, people with lived experience of poverty, need to be involved because we know what it is like. People with lived experience are the ones going through it; they are the ones having to live it day in, day out. MPs don't realise what it is like, they have no clue at all. What we are trying to do is putting our point across in a way that people and MPs understand.'

(Patricia, ATD Fourth World)


This briefing sets out why Poverty2Solutions are calling on the UK government to 'do your duty for equality', that is: commit to working with people with direct lived experience of socio-economic disadvantage in policymaking processes and decision making, in order to ensure that policies that have a direct impact on those in or at risk of poverty make a positive and effective contribution to stemming the rising tide of poverty and inequality.

'It is important that people with lived experience are around the table when policies are made. They are the ones who know what impact policies have on them, as they are the ones bearing the brunt of it. If policy makers don't listen to people with lived experience of poverty, the policies that they bring out won't change anything, people in poverty will suffer and be worse off. Making a space at the table for people with lived experiences of poverty means that they can have a dialogue with policy makers and politicians to get their voices heard.'

(Amanda, ATD Fourth World)

What you need to know:

- Recent years have seen rapidly rising levels of inequality, with millions of households experiencing poverty and – all too often – destitution.
- The Conservative Government elected in 2019 committed to levelling up; and to addressing areas and people that have felt left behind.
- This pledge requires urgent action; primarily, the direct involvement of people with recent experiences of poverty and social security in decision making.
- Individuals, communities and organisations with direct lived experiences of poverty and social security contain a wealth of expertise: they are experts, and need to be included within policymaking processes as such.



Poverty2Solutions are a coalition of three groups rooted in their communities and led by people with direct experience of poverty. It is an award-winning coalition of three groups: ATD Fourth World, Dole Animators and Thrive Teesside, who have been working together since 2016 to generate solutions to poverty and inequality grounded in their own lived experiences of socio-economic disadvantage¹.

- Covid-19 has exposed and amplified the extent of socio-economic inequalities across the UK; it has also shown the shortcomings with an approach that does not engage with lived experiences.
- Experts with lived experiences of poverty quickly identified issues around digital exclusion; and around replacements for free school meals; but the Government did not listen to this expertise. This led to reactive and kneejerk policymaking, where instead it could have been proactive, planned and timely.
- As we work together as a country to build back better, we need to include all forms of expertise – drawing closely on and working with the expertise that comes with lived experiences.



At present, lived experiences are not effectively incorporated into policymaking processes. We live in a society where poverty rates are high, and with extreme levels of inequality.

- More than one in five of the UK population (14 million people) currently live in poverty². This includes 8 million working-age adults, 4 million children and 2 million pensioners. Research suggests that over 2 million households experienced destitution at some point in 2019. This is simply unacceptable.
- The UK features rising and persistent rates of inequality³; which persist despite successive government's commitments to 'level up' and address social mobility.
- Covid-19 has both exposed and hardened existing inequalities; with low-income households at greater risk from the virus, but also from income shocks related to the economic fallout.
- The Westminster Government and policymaking process remains far too removed from the experiences, needs and ideas for change that exist in areas, that are sometimes described as left behind.

'Too often people are portrayed as numbers on paper, or as stats and percentages. It is very easy for policy makers to dismiss who they represent when they aren't considered as individuals. Having someone describe their lived experience is not only brave but essential if we want positive and long-lasting change. They can show us our failings, our lack of compassion and humanity. If a policy affects someone why shouldn't they have the right to be involved in its making?'

Sue, Dole Animators

Worsening inequality in action

The personal and societal fallout from worsening inequality is all too apparent. Take just two examples: paid employment and the housing market.

An insecure and precarious labour market

Too many working-age adults still experience insecure and badly paid work; which does not provide enough to enable them to secure a decent standard of living. Of the four million children living in poverty, over two-thirds live in households where someone is in paid employment⁴. Levelling up must begin with action to address and improve labour market experiences and security at the bottom end of the income spectrum. This will not only improve the life chances of individuals and families across the country, but also ensure the labour market is more resilient to shocks like the Covid-19 pandemic.

An absence of decent and affordable housing

Too many households live in inadequate housing or are homeless. Shelter estimates that one in two hundred people in England are without a home⁵. This persists at a time of rising house prices; increasing the gap between those whose wealth is held in their home; and those who do not have a place of their own to call home. Welfare reforms have reduced financial support for housing and left too many families struggling with their housing costs. This has had an uneven geographical impact, extending and entrenching geographical inequalities.

What is the solution? DO your duty for equality and involve people with lived experiences in policy making and decisions.

There is an urgent and pressing need to 'do your duty for equality'; and tackle persistent inequality head on. A just and compassionate society demands this and it is the only way to ensure that no one is left behind.

To do this, politicians and the policy community across the political spectrum need to directly engage with and involve people with lived experiences in policy making and decisions. Importantly, all experiences are equal, but the current political systems privilege only the experiences of those with power, as recently argued by Anne McElvoy⁶.

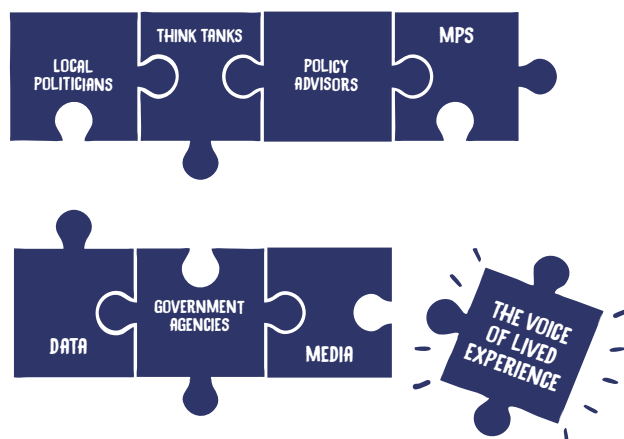
What are lived experiences, why do they matter & what difference would it make if they were incorporated into policymaking?

'Lived experiences provides a holistic approach when addressing a problem. We are also bigger than our lived experiences. We bring additional expertise; insight and knowledge. So why are we ignored? Our expertise should be valued. It is this expertise that could make the change that we all need'

Kathleen, Thrive Teesside

Lived experiences is one of the buzzwords of recent years. But what are they, and why do they matter? Having lived experiences of an issue – in this case poverty and social security – means having direct and recent experiences of it, which is best conceptualised as a form of expertise. The expertise that comes with experience can be harnessed to develop solutions for social change, which are grounded in how the issue in question is commonly experienced on the ground and so are better targeted at the needs of those affected by socio-economic disadvantage.

While there is a growing recognition of the importance of listening to people's experiences, we need to go further. It is vital that people with direct experience are involved in policymaking discussions and decision-making; and contribute their ideas and solutions to the key questions of the day. This has never been more important given the current governments committed to 'levelling up'; and at a time of very real and likely long-lasting economic uncertainty.



'What has been shown during covid is the amount of people who don't have access to the internet. Places have had to close, and when you have to fill in an application, print something, log in to an account, etc. there is nowhere you can go. If people who make policies had had that knowledge, they would have provided something to remedy the situation. Not everybody has a smartphone.'

Lareine, ATD Fourth World

*'[Because of Covid] lots of people are losing out. They [the Government] didn't put *enough support* into place at the beginning of the pandemic because they don't realise this reality. We need our voices to be heard.'*

Seamus, ATD Fourth World

If the UK Government had engaged with people with lived experiences in their response to the pandemic; the response would have been a better one; and one with much better scope to stem rather than increase inequality at this difficult and unprecedented time.

For example, individuals with direct experiences of poverty very quickly flagged issues tied to digital exclusion as the country went into lockdown. How would families relying on libraries for internet access get by when they closed? And how would families without laptops or broadband connections support their children with home learning? These questions were being asked by groups of people with direct experiences (such as the APLE Collective) right at the start of the pandemic. Had the Government engaged with such groups – and listened to and learned from them – they could have developed a decent and robust response. This did not happen; and, no doubt partly as a result, there has been a widening of socio-economic inequality in educational attainment.

Another example, this one very high-profile, has been the replacements of Free School Meals with vouchers, which are provided by private contractors. Engagement with lived experiences could have informed the Government's response here, and would have flagged both the urgent need to fund replacements over school holidays (as footballer Marcus Rashford later successfully highlighted), and the need for replacements to be provided as cash transfers, rather than as vouchers, which are all too often inaccessible, impractical and stigmatising⁷.

What can we learn from examples of good practice?

'Politicians can sometimes be a bit scared of people from grassroots, they think we might shout and be angry. We can show them that we can also be calm and collected. We want them to really listen and to treat us with respect and dignity and we will do the same with them. Its good they also come to our side, come to us too where we live in our local area not just us always going to see them in parliament. We know they are busy people, but we are busy people too.'

Seamus, ATD Fourth World

In committing to 'do your duty for equality' and work in partnership with people with lived experiences, there are examples of good practice, from which the Government can learn. These include:

1. Experience Panels, Scotland

The Scottish Government has done ground-breaking work through their experience panels, which have seen social security claimants help shape Scottish social security policymaking, implementation and monitoring⁸. As part of new devolved powers on social security, the Scottish Government committed to developing an approach to social security, which is underpinned by principles of dignity and respect. They also committed to working directly with people with experiences of social security to develop their new devolved powers; and to monitor their implementation.

Through the Experience Panels, established in 2017, more than 2,400 people with experiences of the social security system have been involved in developing plans for how the Scottish Government utilises its new powers on social security. This has included the establishment of a new agency; Social Security Scotland, and the introduction of new benefit payments – such as the Scottish Child payment. It has further led to strategic decisions and choices about the design of social security offices in Scotland, minimising the scope for interactions between officials and claimants to be experienced in negative and counter-productive ways. Experience panel members were also centrally involved in the Social Security Charter, which explains the principles which underpin the Social Security Act 2018; and what people can reasonably expect from the Government in this policy area.

The charter was developed through a partnership between people with lived experience of social security; organisations that help or represent people who may use the new system; and Scottish Government and Social Security Scotland staff. This partnership is an example of best practice, drawing as it did on a diverse range of expertise and experience.

The following is taken from the Scottish Government website which describes the Social Security Charter:

'Who is the 'our' in Our Charter?

Every person in Scotland. Social security is a human right - an investment in ourselves and each other. It is a public service that any of us could need at any time. So Our Charter belongs to all of us.'

2. Socio-economic duty piloted in Newcastle

As part of efforts to level up, it would make good sense to bring into force the socio-economic duty (section 1 of the 2010 Equality Act); whereby policymakers have to consider the socio-economic impact of their policymaking decisions and processes.

Enforcing this simple provision would be a powerful and effective first step in addressing the issues of inequality which have dogged the north and put flesh on the bones of our commitment to level up. Taking this step would ensure that discrimination of those who have least is treated as seriously in law as discrimination on the grounds of sex, race, and ethnicity.

Christian Wakeford, Conservative MP for Bury South⁹

In 2018, Newcastle City Council made a strategic decision to treat the socio-economic duty as if it is in force¹⁰. As a result, the council's budget proposals are assessed in terms of their potential impact on those experiencing socio-economic disadvantage in order to minimise detrimental impacts wherever possible¹¹.

This has led to a range of initiatives including the development of a successful pilot homelessness prevention project¹², a requirement that major housebuilding contracts include an element for apprenticeships and training opportunities (which is monitored as part of the overall contractual obligations), as well as adherence to the Equality Framework for Local Government and Fairness Commission principles.

Principles of work going forward:

'There is a big assumption that because someone is in a position of power, is educated and has a degree that they are somehow an expert on life. This can be the case, but sadly, does not guarantee it. For example, the best people to know how a factory works are the people on the shop floor and not the managers. Lived experience is essential, they know what is wrong and what needs to [change]'

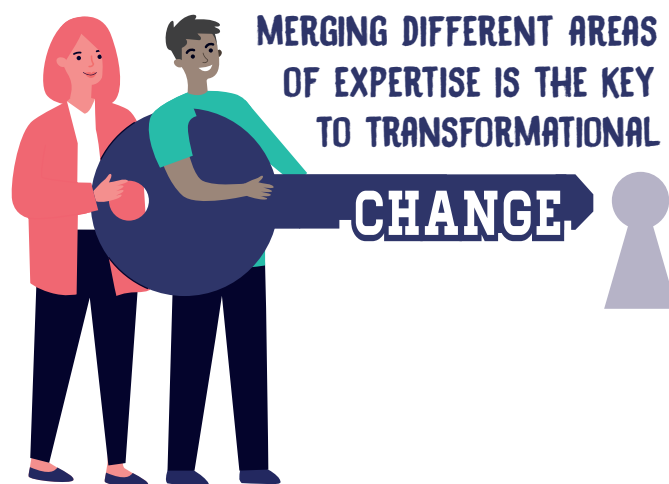
Mark, Thrive Teesside

We call on policymakers and politicians to work with us to draw upon and learn from the expertise and experience that comes with lived experiences. This is a vital first step in efforts to level up and stem the rising tide of poverty and inequality.

In working with people with direct experiences of poverty, we recommend the following as key principles, which should inform this approach:

- *Recognising* that key knowledge about poverty, social security and the negative impact of inequality is held by those in communities who have lived experience of socio-economic disadvantage. This is a critical starting point, which is too often absent from policymaking processes. We saw, for example, how the introduction of Universal Credit was governed by a 'test and learn' approach, when what would have been much more effective, and would have caused significantly less unnecessary hardship, would have been to 'listen and learn'.
- *Understanding* that meaningful involvement is not about gathering a thousand stories, but about understanding the collective experience, truthfully represented. People with power need to be prepared to sit around the table with diverse forms of expertise, and be ready to engage in processes of engagement that disrupt and challenge traditional power differentials, and enable a meaningful and effective sharing of expertise to take place. Best practice here includes committing to processes of engagement

(rather than single events), committing to benchmarking and exploring how diverse forms of expertise are incorporated and drawn upon in policy making; and making sure that lived experiences is incorporated into discussions at the earliest point possible.



- *Accepting* that real success comes when there is a bringing together of different types of expertise (lived experience and other expertise such as e.g. statistical analysis or policy knowledge) through collaboration and co-production. This is a radical process or reimagining expertise, and recalibrating working processes, and one that has been piloted with really effective results by Poverty2Solutions. For example, in developing our campaign for the enactment of a socio-economic duty we draw upon and worked with a range of expertise from a diverse number of organisations and sectors. We spent time establishing effective working relationships, building trust and rooting subsequent work in collaborative partnership.

What Poverty2Solutions seek is to drive forward and be part of a cultural shift so that policy is not done to, but rather with communities who have lived experience. This is part of our wider ambition to build a more equal and better society.

'Our voice means something, and we have the knowledge, skills and abilities that should inform the debates, that lead to policies that have had a major impact on our lives.'

Kathleen, Thrive Teesside

What's next?

Across 2020 and 2021, Poverty2Solutions are working hard to foreground the value of incorporating lived experiences into policymaking. This includes a discrete programme of work looking at how policy making on debt deductions from benefit payments could be improved if the Government were to utilise the expertise and policy solutions proposed by individuals and organisations with lived experiences. The coalition are meeting with parliamentarians and officials; and would welcome opportunities and invitations to discuss their work; objectives and ideas for change.

Poverty2Solutions are working tirelessly to campaign for the inclusion of people with lived experiences in policy making, and to support the process of transformative change that this would represent.

Find out more

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