

The story of the Farepak savers

By Huw Williams, BBC Radio 4 *Today* programme

“Some people are poorer than others” is never going to be a news story. But “people from deprived areas die younger”, or “... carry more knives”, or “... drink more buckfast” or “... don’t do so well at school” or “... smoke more” are all the kinds of news stories that come up over and over again. And for a time, at the end of 2006, “people from deprived areas lose all their Christmas savings” hit the headlines.

BBC editors committed themselves to covering the collapse of the Farepak hampers and vouchers scheme, on radio, television and online. I reported on the issue for Radio Four’s *Today* programme. We needed “victims” (“case studies” or “real people”, if you prefer). That’s a feature of a lot of reporting. I think it’s partly because that’s the way you make a story live, and help people to engage with it. But the downside of having to have an example is that people’s real lives don’t fit neatly into compartmentalised boxes. Someone is never just an example of the aspect of poverty we’re trying to illustrate.

To really understand them, you have to understand the background ... the court case ... the illness ... the family history ... whatever it may be. Trouble is, in a short report I’m not likely to have enough time to tell the whole story, so there’s a risk a complicated person may come over as rather one dimensional. The case study may alienate the viewer, listener or reader, especially if they don’t match our preconceptions.

I remember hearing about a television crew doing a report from a scheme in the east end of Glasgow. Halfway through the reporter took the charity worker who was helping them find interviewees to one side and told him: “These people aren’t poor enough. They’ve got carpets”.

And we do often rely on charities, or campaign groups, to find us people to talk to. That means that, as journalists, we’re handing over a crucial part of the story to someone else, who’s got their own agenda. To cover the Farepak story, I needed help from the Unfarepak campaign website, local money advice centres and Citizens Advice Bureaux, and from credit unions.

The other feature of many of my reports was the use of pundits ... often from those same organisations. Of course, that helps to supply important context, and give the bigger picture. But do we always need experts to give credibility to what real people tell us? The experts on poverty, after all, are those who are experiencing it. And listening back to some of my reports now, they sound a bit like reports from an exotic foreign country.

Of course, for many listeners to Radio Four it would have been a journey into a world they probably didn’t know anything about. We really did have to explain who the Farepak savers were, and why the collapse of the firm mattered so much to them.