

Listen hear

The right to be heard

Report of the Commission on Poverty,
Participation and Power

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The UK Coalition against Poverty believes that poverty must be eradicated. Its key aims are to improve anti-poverty policies by linking policy makers with people who have direct experience of poverty, and to campaign for more systematic and holistic anti-poverty strategies and policies.

Please contact: UKCAP, 17 Grove Lane, London SE5 8RD

Internet: For up-to-date contact details for UKCAP, and to read the summary of **Listen hear**, please check the following website: www.church-poverty.org.uk

The Commission

This has not been a traditional Commission. It has been a unique experience. It came out of a two-year project – Voices for Change – which was developed by the UK Coalition Against Poverty to support people experiencing poverty in identifying the barriers to their involvement in decision-making processes (see Appendix 1 for more details).

Half the Commissioners are 'grassroots' activists and half are from 'public life' backgrounds. Grassroots Commissioners brought the expertise of current or recent experience of poverty. Public life Commissioners also brought a range of skills and perspectives. The Commission was an experiment in joint working.

The Commission was set up to:

- find out why people experiencing poverty feel shut out of political and economic processes and rarely get the opportunity to contribute to decision making
- identify barriers put up by professionals, bureaucrats, managers and politicians
- identify the social, psychological and institutional barriers faced by people experiencing poverty
- highlight the way local people's wisdom and worries are being heard and acted on in political debates and policy decisions at local, regional and national levels
- devise strategies for overcoming these barriers that both professionals and people experiencing poverty can sign up to.

It has been an extraordinary journey for Commissioners and for the staff supporting their work. Few of us could have guessed at the start that our meetings would provoke such passion and strength of feeling. This was no polite talking shop, but a robust forum, where people said what they thought and challenged ideas, language and behaviour they disagreed with. We were also acutely aware of the 'Voices for Change' in the background ('clouds of witnesses', as the Bible says) – voices that wouldn't be silenced, and people who had expectations about our responsibilities as a Commission and required a response. We knew we had the duty of double listening, both to one another and to these voices, and that we had to hear what they said.

We reached the conclusion that time is running out. We know there are now many initiatives aimed at promoting consultation, and even participation; and we saw, and heard about, examples of good and creative policy and practice. But the Commission was overwhelmed by the extent of scepticism, mistrust and eventual disillusionment reported by people experiencing poverty who feel their voices are being ignored. So we have tried to convey their frustration – and the size of the gap they feel exists between themselves and politicians and policy makers. Our report does not make for comfortable reading. But we believed we had a responsibility to convey the passion and the anger that we found.

We are very aware that, despite the commitment of Commissioners and the energy and insights created by our working together, our report is only the first step. A crucial first step, in our view, because we need to get the message across that, while better techniques for participation are useful, the real need is for changes in attitudes and behaviour. But now the work to build on this and take it forward must begin.

In particular, it should focus more on the final two aims above – highlighting good practice in participation, and devising strategies for overcoming barriers to participation. So, in our recommendations, we suggest that task forces – made up of people with direct experience of poverty, and people with experience of participatory ways of working – should be set up to investigate practical ways forward. This would be an innovative method of developing policy, which would build on the work of the Commission and, we believe, come up with exciting new ideas for tackling the obstacles to genuine participation experienced by people living in poverty.

Foreword: Key questions

Why don't more people experiencing poverty vote? Or take part in consultation exercises? Or attend meetings? Why don't more people experiencing poverty tell decision makers what they do and don't want?

In short, why don't more people experiencing poverty participate? Don't they want power? Don't they believe participation brings power?

And why do policy makers and service providers want people living in poverty to participate? Are they serious, or are they just paying lip-service? Are they really prepared to hand over power?

The Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power has been looking for answers.

This report draws on :

- the experience of *Voices for Change*, a two-year consultation with people experiencing poverty in local areas throughout the UK to identify the barriers which prevent them participating in decision making
- the *meetings of the Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power*, which was set up to consider the evidence from the Voices for Change process and elsewhere, and to recommend ways to tackle these barriers to participation
- the *varied expertise and experience of all the members of the Commission*, made up of half 'grassroots' activists and half 'public life' representatives
- the Commission's *visits to local areas* through the UK, to meet with Voices for Change area steering groups and to investigate good and bad practice in participation
- the Commission's *meetings with policy makers* to discover their views on the participation of people experiencing poverty in decision making and how it can be improved.

The report aims to:

- *be grounded* in the contributions made by people experiencing poverty to the Commission, reflecting their anger and concerns as well as their positive suggestions
- *be accessible* to as many people as possible, from people in poverty to policy makers – and help people living in poverty convey the urgency of its message to people in power
- *be useful* to people wanting to change the way they and others are working, to ensure that people experiencing poverty can participate effectively in decision-making processes.

“ I am telling you that I have a headache and you keep telling me that I have a foot-ache and you want to force me to take medicine for that. ”

Participant from Chad, at a World Bank planning meeting

“ Society needs to have trust in people experiencing poverty. They have skills, and abilities, and gifts, and a way of creating policies – if they are listened to. ”

Commissioner



What's it all about?

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1 Why link poverty, participation and power?

“ *I had two children and no maintenance from my ex-husband. I had no family to support me and was totally financially dependent on social security. When my giro didn't arrive I started to panic as we had no electricity left, no gas or coal for heating and very little food. I went to the local DSS office and was told my giro was in the post. When it didn't arrive the next day I went back – and this was repeated every day for a fortnight. I became increasingly desperate and angry and on one occasion clearly heard one of the staff say, 'Here comes that bloody woman again.' By the third week and two days before Christmas, I had to borrow money for food and gas stamps. I put a match to the oven and was met by a ball of flame which burnt my face and hair – I must have turned on the power earlier and forgot to light it. I could have been killed. I ended up in A and E suffering from burns and shock. This would not have happened had I not been out of my mind with worry. I told a friend and he took me down to the main DSS office, where I went in all guns blazing demanding to see the manager and refusing to leave until I had my giro. Ten minutes later I had my giro – it had been on someone's desk all the time!*

”

Commissioner

This is the kind of situation many people living in poverty face, or fear they will face, every time they deal with people in authority – people with power. This is the kind of experience that makes many people experiencing poverty distressed, frustrated and angry.

“ *She said people are not honest with the poor – they make empty promises, and this is why people in poverty don't trust them. It was shocking for me to hear this. It makes you think that if someone isn't poor and you make them a promise, you will probably keep it. But if they are poor, you just use nice phrases – because you won't go back, and you can think that no one will call you to account.* ”

Commissioner

Too often, people experiencing poverty are not treated with respect, either in general or by the people they come into contact with most. They are often seen as 'lazy or shiftless, or scroungers who won't get a job', as one of the Commissioners put it. The lack of respect for people living in poverty was one of the clearest and most heartfelt messages which came across to us as a Commission.

“ *Poor people are still marginalised and treated with disdain by civil servants and those in power... although less tangible than, say, income levels, the way people are treated was equally if not more important, and had a real impact on people's lives.* ”

Voices for Change, Northern Ireland

“ *We talked about ... how we defined poverty. We found it interesting that the words that did not relate to money, and a lack of it, related to labels we have had put on us – that to be poor is to be 'inferior' in some way. We are not inferior. We are not deficient. But we are made to feel that way.* ”

**Voices from Caia Park: Communities Against Poverty,
a Caia Park Partnership Initiative, Wales, 1999**

Adopting the language of the marketplace is not the solution, either. Changing the description of people claiming benefits to 'customers' instead of 'claimants', and referring to service users as 'consumers', is supposed to ensure people are treated with more respect and put at the centre of an organisation's 'business'. But people experiencing poverty have few choices, and little bargaining power. To treat them simply as consumers does not work.

“ We heard stories about power and control, and how they were used to demean people every day... The members of the residents' committee talked about how people on the estate 'think they are worthless and not entitled to an opinion.' ”

Commissioners, following visit to Hull

This kind of experience provokes some people to become activists. But fear of 'trouble-makers' can lead those in authority to suspect and mistrust the people who come forward to speak for marginalised communities, seeing them as 'the awkward squad'. That's not surprising – and it may be true – but it is not a reason to cut them out. Some community leaders may seem fuelled by anger. But ignoring them won't help. In fact, it may be one reason why they get so angry in the first place – how the vicious circle starts.

“ We don't like to get angry because it doesn't always achieve things... but it is forced on you by systems not doing the job they are meant to do. ”

Commissioner

Others, instead, may see little point in participation when they don't have the power to change things. Without much cash, they have less clout – and officials' decisions matter more; people in authority have great power over their lives. With repeated experiences of powerlessness and lack of respect, they have less confidence in any system, and less inclination to complain to the same people whose rules seem designed to cause problems. Long-term poverty can make people feel that it is impossible to change things.

“ How does poverty relate to participation? Well, you either fall into poverty. Or you are born into poverty – and you feel that is how it has always been. We must work on changing that outlook before we can think about participation. ”

Commissioner

“ The disillusionment with the representative system has been the cause of people's failure to participate in the political system – not because people don't wish to participate in society. ”

**Humaira Haider and Debby Wason,
Voices for Change: Background information, 2000**

And with a background like this, it is no wonder many people living in poverty look at the latest attempts to include them in decision making – despite the declared commitment of the UK government and the devolved administrations – with considerable scepticism.

“ *People with little or no power are made to believe that there is no point in raising their voices, as it will make no difference. That they will not be listened to by those who have power and control. This habit becomes so strong that some people almost forget that they have opinions of their own, and so they just endure the hardships they suffer...*

**Cathy McCormack, at the People's Parliament,
Voices for Change, Scotland Conference**

“ *The common theme underlying poor people's experience is one of powerlessness... What can be more important than listening to the poor and working with our partners all over the world to respond to their concerns?*”

**Clare Short MP, Secretary of State for International Development,
and James Wolfensohn, Foreword, in *Voices of the Poor: Crying out for change*,
D. Narayan et al, World Bank, 2000**

...too often, people experiencing poverty are not respected.

2 What does the Commission think?

“*The key is what locks people out of participation...
Well, the key should be handed over.*”

Exchange between two Commissioners at a Commission meeting

The experiment of the Commission itself, as well as our own and others' experience, convinced us that genuine participation in decision making by people experiencing poverty has great rewards – including 'setting the record straight, stopping cock-ups, empowering individuals, and creating communities', as one Commissioner said. We firmly believe that we all lose out if people experiencing poverty are not participating fully. Participation in decision-making processes by people experiencing poverty is:

- better for the quality of decision making;
- a means of empowering individuals and communities; and, more generally,
- a way to promote a healthier democracy, in which everyone feels involved.

We discovered ourselves that when different forms of expertise and experience are brought to bear to analyse problems and explore solutions, the insights and discoveries which emerge are of a different order. Participation by people with direct experience of poverty can work – and it *must* work, if we are to build vital communities from the energy that already exists, and to ensure that national anti-poverty strategies benefit from the authority of experience.

The government says it is interested in tackling the root causes of poverty, not just relieving the symptoms. But our work has shown us clearly that at the root of poverty is powerlessness. Voices for Change and the Commission have been about the shift in power that is needed if people experiencing poverty are to have a real voice in the decisions which affect their lives. And the way to do that is through participation – genuine participation. This means people experiencing poverty thinking together about the causes of their poverty, and what needs to change to tackle it, and taking action to bring about that change.

It is at the international level that the requirement for effective participation has been most strongly expressed.

At the World Summit for Social Development, held in Copenhagen in 1995, over 100 governments (including the UK's) agreed on action to address the structural causes of poverty and social exclusion, based on these principal commitments:

- people living in poverty and their organisations should be fully involved in the design, implementation, monitoring and assessment of local and national strategies and programmes for poverty eradication and ensuring that such programmes reflect their priorities;
- ensuring that policies and programmes affecting people living in poverty respect their dignity and culture and make full use of their knowledge, skills and resourcefulness;
- recognition that the eradication of poverty cannot be accomplished through anti-poverty programmes alone, but will require democratic participation and changes in economic structures to undertake policies geared to more equitable distribution of wealth and income.

World Summit for Social Development, Programme of action, 1995

And it seems to be in international development in particular that participation is seen as a fundamental human right for people experiencing poverty. A consultation document on human rights from the Department for International Development (DFID), issued earlier this year, set out 'the human rights approach to development', and argued that:

“ *Participation in decision-making is central to enabling people to claim their rights. Effective participation requires that the voices and interests of the poor are taken into account when decisions are made and that poor people are empowered to hold policy makers accountable.* ”

Human Rights for Poor People, consultation document, DFID, February 2000

DFID argues that the targets for tackling poverty on an international level will not be achieved unless people living in poverty have the right to engage in the decisions and processes affecting their lives; everything else is secondary. As a Commission we have been inspired by this analysis of poverty and participation, and have tried to apply it to what is happening in the UK at the moment. Some of the work which DFID funds, and some of the participatory methods developed by people in the international development field, provided useful examples to us of different ways of working, which we have drawn on in the work of both Voices for Change and the Commission.

...participation by people experiencing poverty is a human right – and essential for better quality decision making.

3 Participation: what's going on?

“ Many people involved in *Voices for Change* said they did not know how to participate in civil society. They understood about voting – but that was about it. Few had knowledge of how to attend council meetings, how to influence their MPs or councillors, or who to go to on certain issues. ”

Humaira Haider and Debby Wason,
Voices for Change: Background information, 2000

There is a general trend of increasing mistrust of governments.

One report showed that between 1973 and 1996:

- the number of people saying 'the system of governing Britain works extremely well', or 'it could be improved in small ways, but mainly works well', fell from just under a half to just over a third
- the number saying 'it could be improved quite a lot', or 'a great deal', increased from 49% to 63%.

Reported in *British Social Attitudes: 14th report, Ashgate, 1997*

But it is particularly disturbing that:

- at the last general election, in 1997, the percentage of people voting was the lowest since 1945, and was particularly low in disadvantaged areas
- of the 10 poorest constituencies identified by researchers from the University of Bristol in the recent report *Poverty in Plenty*, published by Earthscan for UNED-UK, four of these constituencies also had the lowest voter turnout at the 1997 general election
- in June 2000, a new Labour MP was returned in Tottenham, London, on a turnout of just 25% – down from 57% in the general election, and the third lowest turnout ever recorded at a by-election (*The Economist*, 1 July 2000)

Ministers in the UK have publicly recognised the need to address the 'democratic deficit' – including the case for increased public participation in policy making:

“ *The democratic impulse needs to be strengthened by finding new ways to enable citizens to share in decision making that affects them. For too long a false antithesis has been claimed between 'representative' and 'direct' democracy. The truth is that in a mature society representatives will make better decisions if they take full account of popular opinion and encourage public debate on the big decisions affecting people's lives.* ”

Tony Blair MP, Prime Minister, *The Third Way*, Fabian Society pamphlet, 1998

“ A hundred years ago, socialists argued that the essential rights were the right to vote and rights to basic services such as health, education and social security. Now we see that for individuals truly to realise their potential, they must also have equal opportunity to enjoy the best – not just basic – services, and real opportunity to participate directly in the decisions that affect their lives. ”

**Gordon Brown MP, Chancellor of the Exchequer, ‘100 years of Labour’,
New Statesman, 28 February 2000**

When the devolved administrations were created, they committed themselves to experimenting with new methods of governing, and of relating to their populations:

“ If we can promote the concept of active citizens contributing to their local community as well as to the wider society, then we will secure better government policies and more responsive services because people will have had an active role in fashioning them. ”

**Jackie Baillie MP, Foreword to Supporting Active Communities in Scotland,
Scottish Office, 2000**

“ The National Assembly has to be about engaging with the people of Wales. We have to work with people, and not tell them what they want and need... One of our main objectives (in the Communities First initiative) is to create a new culture of community involvement. ”

**Edwina Hart AM, Secretary for Finance, National Assembly for Wales,
meeting with Commissioners, 31 August 2000**

There *has* been a shift in attitude – and in policies and practice – in recent years (see Appendix 2 for more detail). There is ample evidence that the UK government and the devolved administrations are committed to the principle that people should be more involved in influencing the decisions that affect their lives. But the legacy of ‘them and us’, and continuing experiences of flawed experiments, mean it is time for the rhetoric to be translated into reality – every time.

“ We definitely want to work this way in future, even if it is time-consuming... Residents should be key stakeholders in the regeneration process. But we don't always know how to do it.

**Moira Wallace, Social Exclusion Unit,
meeting with Commissioners, 14 July 2000**

Commissioner

These specific policies have got potential – but only if they're done in certain ways; and a mechanism is needed to watch how things like this evolve, and review them, and dialogue with policy makers about it.

”

The emphasis has often been on market research tools which target individuals, rather than on ways of helping people develop a strong collective voice. Consultations which do not give people the space to identify their own concerns are frequent – despite government guidance which warns against this. One-off exercises about individual policies are more common than ongoing exchange about priorities. And sometimes the government's attempts to engage directly with 'real people' seem rather random, and disconnected from the usual policy-making machinery, at least at Westminster level.

There is also too little awareness of the need to reach out specifically to people experiencing poverty – which means using different methods. Central government guidance on local authority consultations, for example, mentions the need to reach out to various groups, but not to people in poverty specifically. We are aware from our own experience as a Commission of how difficult this is. And governments want to avoid labelling people as poor; this may be one reason why policies are often targeted at 'disadvantaged areas' instead. But we believe the mistrust of politicians and policy makers is most deeply felt by people experiencing poverty; so the priority must be to engage them – at national as well as local level.

The evidence gathered by the Commission revealed 'the really stark division between government, the policy and decision makers and the people they claim to represent' (as the Foreword to the report of the People's Parliament, the Voices for Change Scotland Conference, put it). And we found that many of the people experiencing poverty we met were cynical about all the talk of social inclusion, and critical of the way participation has been tackled in the past – and that this coloured their views of the latest policy statements and initiatives.

The messages that came back to us loud and clear were that:

- too many people experiencing poverty are treated with a lack of respect
- too many participation initiatives are considered phoney
- in too many cases, power is not shifting
- in general, people experiencing poverty say the rhetoric is not being translated into reality.

“ People are consulted and send submissions in. These never appear in the final report. But they turn round and say 'we did consult'. So people's input doesn't go into the final thing. ”

Commissioner

“ You speak, and you will be heard.

I speak – but will I be heard?

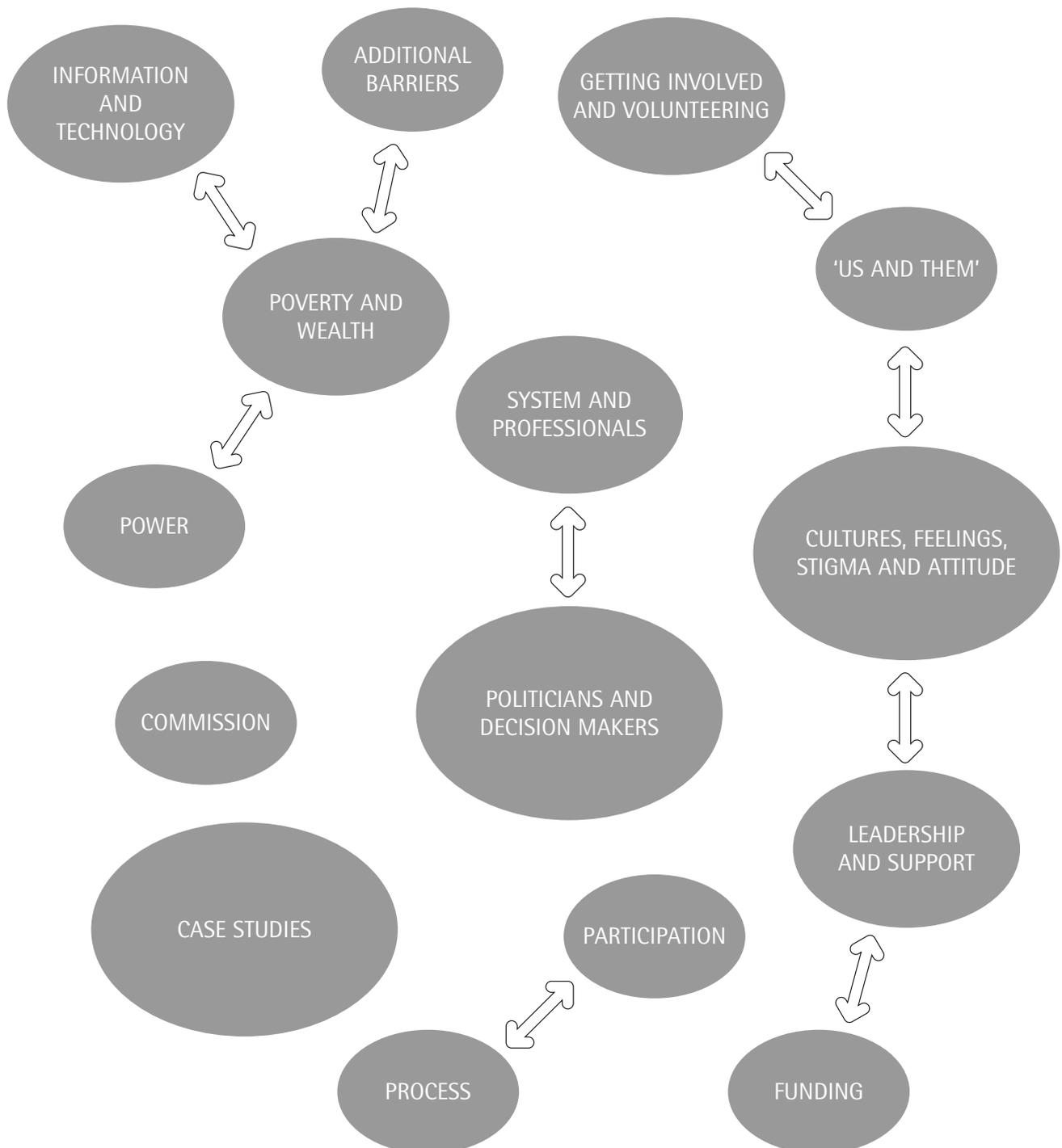
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Commissioner

People living in poverty learn not to bother if they keep being *consulted* and the findings are ignored. Real *participation* would demand a sea change in attitudes and behaviour. Otherwise, there will be no reason for people living in poverty to get their hopes up all over again. As one Commissioner said, 'the argument about participation has been won – but its implications have not been taken on board'. This report is about those implications.

...rhetoric must be
translated into reality.

Issues affecting the participation of people experiencing poverty – and how they connect





Barriers to participation

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4 Stalemate? Local and national level

“ First of all we considered the question: ‘Do people participate?’ and everybody said, ‘No!’ Then we started looking at ways in which people do participate in things like credit unions, schools, local community groups. And suddenly we felt yes, there were quite a lot of people who participated quite a lot in decisions. We came to the conclusion that this was a 90%: 10% load, in other words 90% of people participate 10% of the time and 10% of the people participate 90% of the time, and we wondered why. We came up with lots of reasons – but came to the conclusion that those in power seemed deliberately inaccessible to those without it, and that those without power, those at the bottom of the heap of advantage, lacked the self-esteem to do much about it. There is no incentive, no ambition to break through the ceiling or charge up the stairs and to get something done.

Voices for Change area meeting, Wales

In our experience there is often a sense of stalemate at local level. But who is at fault? Officials and policy makers despair. They can't understand why people 'can't be bothered' to fill in forms that they have made great efforts to produce in 'plain' English and minority languages. They can feel threatened and undermined when local people attack their record in office and demeanour at meetings.

“ What do you think the 'official' group were thinking and feeling? ”

'What the hell are youse wanting?'

...'Feeling superior – but afraid!'

...'Let's just ignore them – they might go away!'

Participants in the People's Parliament, Voices for Change, Scotland Conference

(This exercise involved looking at a human sculpture designed to explore inclusion and exclusion; participants were asked to say what this sculpture meant to them.)

Meanwhile, many community representatives say there is no real intent to share information, let alone power. They say there is no level playing field – the power, reports, money, agenda and ground rules are all controlled by the people encouraging them to 'participate'. Participation in a meaningless forum is meaningless. Because people living in poverty have more than the usual struggle to survive, they quickly conclude there are better things to do with their time. Does anyone – let alone those living in poverty – really want to spend free time taking part in meetings with neighbours they hardly know and council officials they don't trust?

“*The refusal to participate is often an intelligent response. If it is a dead end, participation is a self-destructive thing to do.***”**

Commissioner

Commissioners visited *Easterhouse* – a housing estate of 35,000 people on the outskirts of Glasgow – where a meeting of one of the Social Inclusion Partnerships (established by the Scottish Parliament) had recently broken up when community reps left it for a range of reasons, including the attitude of the council and the local quango. At around the same time, a Scottish Executive questionnaire aimed at establishing a network of people prepared to participate in local decision making – a 'people's panel' – had to be circulated several times to get a response, and didn't succeed in getting any men to volunteer.

At local level, particularly when local authorities are feeling under pressure from all sides, questions often come up around representation and representativeness. Councillors may challenge community representatives about whether they really represent the whole community. Commissioners, and some of the people we met, also talked about local councillors feeling threatened by community leaders, and viewing steps to strengthen participation as a challenge to their own representative role:

“*The politicians see themselves as representatives of the community – so they don't need activists, because (they say) the political/democratic process already provides us with one; this means a head-on collision.***”**

Commissioner

It is difficult to know how this tension will be affected by the current local government reform agenda, which will mean the introduction of Cabinet-style working and some councillors becoming known as 'community councillors'. But these are the kinds of arguments which can lead to stalemate in terms of advancing participation at local level.

We know from our experience that there are many problems with community representation, and that there are cases where people don't represent the interests of their communities properly. But we don't believe the answer to these problems is just to elect political representatives in the usual way and let them get on with it, without other people having an input.

We must find ways of recognising the variety of views and conflicts of power in communities (and in other groups), of ensuring that all the voices are represented, and of providing proper support and training for community reps. And rather than dismiss community reps as 'unrepresentative', we found it helpful to think of them as 'connectors', connecting local people with their elected representatives and professionals, and vice versa.

“ *It is tempting to see the solution as just making sure that representation is more 'representative' of the population and leave it at that – and perhaps in some spheres there is no alternative. However, participation should not be confused with representation... [In Voices for Change] allowing everyone to have their 'say' was seen as important and making every individual feel valued. Several people also told us that they wanted to be involved, but not to be marked out or identified.* ”

**Humaira Haider and Debby Wason,
Voices for Change: Background information, 2000**

The quality of representation is a critical issue, both for elected politicians and for community representatives. Each may gain their legitimacy in different ways. It is important to improve accountability and feedback mechanisms for both. The Department for International Development (DFID), in its recent consultation document on human rights, made clear that people's participation is no substitute for good government at local and national level. In fact, DFID argued that participation is crucial to ensuring that local and central government are made more accountable and effective.

“ *We need both – good, responsive government, delivering good services, and participation and voice – which is not an excuse, or a replacement for the first being bad.* ”

Commissioner

It is at national level (UK/Westminster, or Scotland/Wales/Northern Ireland) where most of the decisions are made that have the greatest impact on the lives of people in poverty – such as how much benefit people get, and which local areas get extra money. It is also where the government's record on participation, at least at UK/Westminster level, is weakest (although in Scotland in particular there has been some progress towards greater involvement of voluntary organisations and community groups in influencing decisions – see Part Three).

The UK government published its first statement of its anti-poverty strategy – *Opportunity for All* – in 1999. The job of drawing up performance indicators for this strategy was an obvious way to include people experiencing poverty. But the 'opportunity for all' became an opportunity that was lost. So the strategy lacks the expertise borne of experience, and the deeper understanding that results.

Yet the Department for International Development argues that:

“ *A human rights perspective on participation means moving beyond and above local-level processes of consultation through to ensuring poor people's participation in broader formal and informal systems of decision making.* **”**

Human Rights for Poor People, consultation document, DFID, February 2000

One of the reasons given by government ministers for their poor track record is that they can't talk to all 14 million people claiming benefit – and they can't be sure that those they do speak to are representative of the rest.

“ *As a local MP, who is it that comes to see me? Overwhelmingly, it is poor people. Most MPs... are trying to overcome barriers and to assist in representing individuals' problems to councils, government or other authorities... The danger is that 'lone voices' are no more representative than one of my civil servants, or a professor of social policy.* **”**

**Hugh Bayley MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State,
Department of Social Security, meeting with Commissioners, 5 July 2000**

The Commission felt that legitimacy was a central issue, and one that must be handled carefully and creatively; it provides a mandate for some, but it can also be used as a weapon to disempower others. After all, most politicians are talking about the need to encourage other forms of participation, above and beyond voting; and the government calls on all kinds of other bodies to represent a 'view' that has status. The issue for the Commission – and for everyone – is how to ensure that this includes those with direct experience of poverty.

“ *We were asked: how did they know articulate grassroots people were representative? So we explained that they didn't have to be – that they were 'connectors' – and said elected representatives are not the only spokespersons.* **”**

Commissioner

“ *You can't be an elected representative without 'connectors'.* **”**

**Hugh Bayley MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State,
Department of Social Security, meeting with Commissioners, 5 July 2000**

...participation means sharing power.

5 Phoney participation - the biggest problem

A woman had attended a health conference at which professionals asked how they could make it look as if they had consulted, because – although it was a condition of funding – they didn't have enough time to do it. (Reported during Commissioners' visit to Hull)

If those responsible only carry out consultation because of the need to satisfy funding conditions, it will be poorly-executed and half-hearted. The clear message from the Commission is that people experiencing poverty see consultation without commitment, and phoney participation without the power to bring about change, as the ultimate disrespect.

“*Respect, for example – it depended where the ideas came from. The same idea coming from the community would be described as unworkable, but from a government focus group would be fantastic.*”

Commissioner

Sometimes, the scale seems wrong. People may be asked about such big issues, and in such a general way, that it is difficult to see the aim clearly – such as the exercise in which people in Scotland were asked by the Scottish Executive to list their top five priorities for the Scottish Parliament. At other times, the opposite is the case, and the issues seem too small and specific; the number one priority for consultation may be number five or six for the people being consulted. Big problems like debt, depression, drug misuse, or no money for food that night, may loom far larger than discussing the location of an after-school club. And that can mean people not turning up – or turning up, but then trying to turn the agenda round to their bigger problems because a professional is present who could help, or at least act as a focus to vent their frustration on.

“*The kind of decision people were talking about was... being asked what type of flower beds they wanted in the town centre, whereas they might rather have had a crèche.*”

Commissioner

When Commissioners visited Caia Park housing estate in Wrexham, Wales, they were shocked to discover that utilities debts remained with the property when the occupant left. New tenants inherited a debt as soon as they moved in. Despite finding an active community network, Commissioners reported how angry residents feel about this debt problem, and how it affects their feelings about participating in things organised by the authority.

People may be consulted when services are closing around them, or facing severe funding cuts. They are then implicated in a process in which the most important decisions have already been made, and they are simply being used to make unpalatable decisions more acceptable. Or they may be involved in a consultative exercise, but at the same time services are deteriorating; this is how some people felt about the UK government's recent 'better government for older people' project, which was carried out at the same time as concern was growing at national level about the amount of the basic retirement pension and at local level about social services provision. This can feel like having access without having influence.

“ It is important to say that passivity is the result of lack of participation – not a cause of lack of participation. ”

Commissioner

Some people experiencing poverty are over-consulted. Selected 'safe' community voices may be invited to a meeting in a posh hotel. Or the 'usual suspects' – generally those who have skills and experience in being consulted, and who are easy to contact – may be rounded up for participation events, where their brains are picked and they then go home without being paid for their time or expertise, and without feedback on whether their views have been taken on board.

“ People will engage if they think they can change things. ”

Commissioner

And if genuine participation in decision making results in people in poverty trying to change the agenda, will their opinions still be sought? Or heard? Or acted upon? People experiencing poverty face more barriers to participation because they have a very different and challenging agenda – more money, more investment in their community, and also perhaps the power to spend existing money differently – which could result in conflict with local councillors and professionals.

“ In Northern Ireland, they started looking at training community representatives on Partnership Boards. But to act just like the others is not the answer.. I'm all for training, but are people being conned – trained to be a statutory person, raising a point of order? ”

Commissioner

“ We are picking up the frustration that the contribution and potential of community activists [are] not being taken seriously enough. What we need to bring about is a change in the hearts and minds of the officials who actually have to deliver the policies. ”

Liz Walton, Social Exclusion Unit, meeting with Commissioners, 14 July 2000

...phoney participation exercises
are destined to fail.

6 Voices for all, voices for change

“*The community is like an elephant: if you touch one bit, you think it is all sorts of different things – but the pieces make up the whole.***”**

Commissioner

Poverty crosses the boundaries of area regeneration, and is not confined to recognised areas of 'deprivation'. Many people in poverty don't live in or feel part of 'communities' – the emphasis of many current policy initiatives. The evidence the Commission gathered was drawn not only from neighbourhood-based initiatives but also from 'community of interest' groups; they presented particular concerns about their access to decision making, including language barriers, specific cultural needs, fear and discrimination. Many other people simply do not feel – or are made not to feel – welcome in their neighbourhood.

FRACTURED COMMUNITIES

Commissioners pointed out that it could not be assumed that communities already existed; sometimes a lot of work has to be done to bring people together. And the Voices for Change Scottish steering group wanted to ensure that the report recorded the low starting point for many 'communities', which lack the basic infrastructure – community centres with free space, community development workers, funding for broad anti-poverty work – in fact, all the 'resources for hope' which are needed for the development of vibrant communities and strong 'voices'.

“*The first step is – people talk to one another at the grassroots stage. But because of housing changes, we have got a new social mix now... The community doesn't connect with the new people, because they are new. Even as an activist, I would find it difficult to go out on the streets and get the confidence of people now...***”**

Commissioner

ADDITIONAL BARRIERS

Young people said they weren't being taken seriously because of their age, and a feeling that they were all considered a potential threat to the rest of society.

“*Politicians don't give youth a role or a chance... The result is no trust in government or its schemes.***”**

Voices for Change, Northern Ireland

“The young people involved in the consultative process felt they were particularly disenfranchised. Youth workers were cited as being the only people who actually listen to them – but unfortunately they are a group of people who lack power and any influence over the decision-making process.”

Voices for Change area meeting, London

“ We want our voices heard...
We are more than just a postcode...
We are not aliens...
Listen to our views. ”

Young people involved in Save the Children in Scotland's Voices for Change project in Edinburgh and Glasgow, quoted in *Voices for Change: Young people's views on poverty and social exclusion in Scotland*, Save the Children, 2000

Older people and disabled people were also mentioned specifically as facing additional barriers in some Voices for Change area meetings. In one meeting in Northern Ireland, the group of disabled people said that they were often made to feel like 'second-class citizens'.

“Disabled people are allowed into the community now – but what words and action are necessary to make this a reality?”

Participant at meeting between Voices for Change area representatives and Commissioners, Manchester, June 2000

Women may be more involved in community groups – but this doesn't necessarily mean they will feel able to voice their concerns as women, rather than speaking for the group as a whole.

“There is research which indicates that women in the UK feel more disconnected from government than men, and are more likely to feel it has no relevance to their concerns or their ordinary daily lives. That must be an indicator that the institutions are not working effectively.”

Janet Veitch, Women's National Commission, Change Seminar, 4 July 2000

And women are more likely to be prevented by lack of childcare provision from attending meetings away from home. Childcare that was appropriate, and local, was particularly important for one group of Asian women in Voices for Change. One of the success factors identified by members of Voices for Change area groups looking back over the project was that children had always been made welcome in their gatherings.

People in rural areas may be quite isolated from other people in poverty and often don't feel included in, or members of, what may appear to be a vibrant country community.

“ *These women [from a rural area] thought it was other women who were 'well-to-do' – whose opinions mattered. Of the local development association, they said 'they are a group of themselves; it's all the big nobs who are listened to, not the ordinary people.'* ”

Voices for Change, Northern Ireland

“ *Exclusion from ordinary village life because of poverty was one of the main concerns... It is difficult for the rural poor to gather together – and they feel marked out if they do, as it is poverty rather than just geography... that often sets them apart.* ”

**Humaira Haider and Debby Wason,
Voices for Change: Background information, 2000**

Asylum-seekers question the relevance of a focus on participation, since they are denied many fundamental rights.

“ *Asylum-seekers have been cut off from taking part in the debates; participation is a luxury, because without entitlement to benefits the issues are about survival.* ”

**Voices for Change,
area meeting, London**

When Commissioners visited the Migrant Resource Centre in London, they were struck by the sense of cynicism as people talked to them. What was the point of talking about participation for asylum-seekers who have vouchers rather than money, and are subject to 'dispersal' without choice under a government programme? In a previous consultation exercise for a local health authority, the Centre took the time and effort to present their views – but then found that the final report didn't mention the needs of migrants at all.

People who are **displaced and marginalised** because they have no sense of belonging to a particular place often face discrimination, rejection, isolation and racism. For many – including homeless people and asylum-seekers – their mobility is also enforced, which prevents any sustained involvement in neighbourhood projects.

“ *Immigration legislation, public attitudes towards 'foreigners' and racism are major issues in creating poverty within migrant communities. By not dealing with these issues, there is a whole underclass of people below the unemployed for whom very few people speak.* ”

Voices for Change, London

“ *If we let the government treat asylum-seekers like this – if they get away with this – we don't know who will be next... People in Northern Ireland say 'the treatment of travellers is nothing to do with us' – but if we let them treat travellers like that... ”*

Commissioner

“ *Every which way you try there is just a block. ”*

Traveller, participating in Voices for Change meeting

Before participation for all can become a reality, isolation and discrimination must be tackled; and there must be better understanding of, and sensitivity to, people's different circumstances, culture and ways of doing things.

“ *One of the main problems for me coming from another country is understanding how 'the system' works. It was difficult for parents to understand how to go about choosing a school and also to find out what was going on. It was hard to know what was important to attend, or understand letters that came home in school bags. ”*

Voices for Change, London

People often find it is their own people, people who've faced the same barriers and hurdles, who can listen and understand best.

“ *Organisations like Dhek Bhal [an Asian women's group] are crucial, as they provide friendship and help people sort out problems, build their confidence and self-esteem. And to facilitate their participation, women said they needed English lessons and childcare, and that activities or meetings should be culturally appropriate in terms of: food; seating arrangements; providing door-to-door transport for meetings at night; and making sure publicity leaflets are in different languages, so families know it is a bona fide meeting.* ”

**Voices for Change,
South West England**

It is all about breaking down barriers – about actively reaching out to those who otherwise wouldn't get involved.

DIFFERENCE AND DIVISIONS

And it is also about acknowledging the differences of power and conflicts of interest within communities and local areas. Because of its experience, especially during visits to local communities, the Commission has not been tempted to pretend that all is sweetness and light within local communities. If the community is seen as homogeneous, then only the most powerful voices will tend to be heard.

“ *We discovered that although the 'community' had been given funds to build a centre, they were effectively excluding groups the majority didn't like. One group of lone parents were told there was no room to store their toys on the premises, which effectively stopped them having a crèche. It was very hard for them to tackle such indirect discrimination.* **”**

Commissioner

In the FARE project in *Easterhouse*, on the outskirts of Glasgow, which Commissioners visited, there was an emphasis on skills at an early age. This was to try to work against the violence – there were divisions within the area, and kids would not take the bus across another lot's territory; the level of threat within the community was shocking.

The troubles and the peace process in Northern Ireland lend a sharp edge to participation discussions and initiatives – the stakes are very high. Commissioners visited An Loiste Uir in *Belfast*, to hear about their Community Restorative Justice project. Ex-political prisoners have developed a mediation role, using non-violent methods to fill a gap in community policing which can't be met by military and paramilitary organisations. The project feels its success is something of a threat to 'the powers that be', because it uses empowerment to try to change structures and language.

We realise the Voices for Change process was not complete, and that lots of voices were not heard. But we believe Voices for Change is just the beginning of a process, rather than the end.

“ *When people group together, they have a louder voice...*

“ *Collectively you've got to have a voice...* **”**

“ *Voices for Change is exactly what it's all about. If one of us shouts, there's no change. If you get [more] of us, the thing gets bigger and bigger.* **”**

Participants in Voices for Change area meeting, South West England

...all the voices must be heard.

7 A professional approach to participation?

“ *People in poverty are not saying they don't want to participate; they are saying they will not engage in disrespectful meetings.* ”

Commissioner

We were overwhelmed with the strength of feeling against people with power or authority who neither 'talk the talk' nor 'walk the walk' on participation. Some do get the point – that participation can be useful and constructive, and can help them in their work. But too often, people we met reported being made to feel inferior, or being patronised, or being treated without respect.

“ *People in power aren't really aware of the other's reality...* ”

“ *People in power consult, get information – but it's not used in a meaningful way...* ”

“ *People in power hear, but don't listen.* ”

Participants in the People's Parliament, Voices for Change, Scotland Conference

“ *It's not just that these voices are harder to hear. Some people have their fingers in their ears. This is a voice with a clear song, which they have decided not to hear.* ”

Commissioner

Some of the Voices for Change area groups deliberately invited decision makers to their meetings, to ensure that they were getting the message. But often they didn't turn up. Or they delivered a speech and then left – guilty of insensitivity, and what Commissioners called 'show and go'.

Voices for Change, South West England

Where are the decision makers? We invited so many councillors and council officials and they are not here. The leader of the council and the MP made their speeches and then scarpered. One councillor said he had to go to another meeting in the council house. They were discussing 'citizenship and democracy'! They should have been discussing it with us, here.

”

One problem is the unequal nature of the relationship between the professionals and people experiencing poverty – and how high the stakes can be for people in poverty. So a lot depends on the motivation and attitudes of the professionals involved. Some may act as gatekeepers – pursuing their own agendas, and keeping others out. But some, instead, can be 'allies with affinity', as one Commissioner described them, working for the people. (Although even such 'allies' rarely live alongside people in disadvantaged areas, or choose to spend leisure time there.)

“ *The cabs are jammed in the evening with people who work there, but who don't live there, going home. We have lost confidence in people coming in and driving out again.* **”**

Commissioner

“ *The old adage 'the further away you are from the problem, the easier it seems to solve it' applies. Local people are the real stakeholders; they want to eradicate poverty – and they have the ideas to do it.* **”**

Voices for Change, Northern Ireland

The quality of listening by politicians and professionals also matters. On a Commission visit, one Commissioner was shocked by the attitudes of councillors and officials:

“ *They were all sitting doodling or doing their shopping lists. It was like a symphony – there was one main melody and an undercurrent. The guy who was running the meeting asked patsy questions; the officials gave patsy answers. Someone else would step up the emotional volume; they would be ignored. Then the meeting would go back to the same unhearing pattern.* **”**

Commissioner



But as a Commission we recognised how difficult it is to really hear another person when their experience is light years away from your own. We too experienced similar problems, on visits and at Commission meetings, ourselves – and we hope we learned from them.

“A big torrent comes at you; you hear the words, but you don't quite get it, because you are not into the experience... You have to find a way of hearing it. Otherwise it's an interpretation of what the other person's saying – your own perceptions, but not the storyteller's.”

Commissioner

We also recognised how difficult it is to ask professionals to 'be participatory' when dealing with people affected by poverty, when their own organisations and workplaces do not afford them the same opportunities, or they have been trained in more 'top-down' forms of working, or their own organisation does not recognise and reward their attempts to approach their work differently. New forms of training, rewards and organisational performance standards are needed to make participatory approaches stick.

ATD (All Together for Dignity) Fourth World has over 40 years' experience in gaining the trust of people in persistent poverty to support them in finding their voice. What they identified to visiting Commissioners as necessary elements in this task include:

- understanding – getting behind the words to understand the experiences and feelings
- listening – it is very important that people really listen
- honesty, and sticking to promises that are made – preferring people to be straight and say if they can't do something, rather than stringing you along
- sense of humour – helps to break down barriers and make people feel at ease
- time – establishing trust takes time and can't be hurried; one woman told Commissioners that it was three years before she trusted a support worker.

“It's not about one person moving on, but the whole community – if people get together, they can make a difference. Things need to be done with people in poverty, not for them; they need to have a say in what goes on. And if, in the schemes to deal with poverty and exclusion, the people who evaluate them are academics judging if they have worked or not, it's not people experiencing poverty themselves evaluating them.”

Commissioner, following visit to ATD Fourth World

...professionals need to change their mindset.

8 Message not received

“ *We need to emphasise the doorstep challenge – not just paper or phone consultation.* ”

Commissioner

How do people in poverty get to hear about participation initiatives? Is the message getting through to everyone it should? And is it coming across in a way people can relate to and respond to?

“ *An adult member of the workshop, looking at barriers to participation for a group of young carers, asked them: what help do you want? Their response was ‘we don’t know... it’s a question that’s never been put to us.’* ”

Participant in the People’s Parliament, Voices for Change, Scotland Conference

Words can act as a barrier. This was a clear message coming through to the Commission from the local Voices for Change groups. It has also been forcefully argued by the Plain English Society, and every government department has signed up to their campaign to convert gobbledegook into plain language.

But plain English doesn’t have to mean dull English. And jargon-free speech seems harder to achieve than jargon-free leaflets. Opening a meeting by welcoming ‘participants’ and outlining the ‘parameters of the night’s discussion’ in terms of ‘the objectives of the local neighbourhood social inclusion partnership’, without explanation, for instance, will turn most people off. Not because people are stupid – but because the words seem chosen to pacify, to impress and to indicate status.

“ *If you don’t use their jargon, you’re not heard.* ”

Participant in the People’s Parliament, Voices for Change, Scotland Conference

“ *Language – even official language – can do what everyday language does. It can include, amuse, describe. It can be rich and colourful. It can offer handholds to the listener – an easy way in to complex ideas. Professional language, by contrast, seems determined to create a daunting wall of speech – about as accessible as a cliff-face.* ”

Commissioner

Some of the terms often used – like social exclusion, partnership and stakeholders – may feel too clinical and inaccurate to be owned by the people they are supposed to describe.

“ *The words are now ‘empowered’, or ‘excluded’; before, people were ‘disadvantaged’ or ‘deprived’ (or even ‘depraved’!). Poverty goes under many names.* ”

Commissioner

Persistent use of language that doesn't connect can simply create another barrier.

“ *It isn't for people experiencing poverty to understand, but vice versa – things need to be put in words everyone can understand.* ”

Commissioner

“ *Communicating means speaking and listening – and it means speaking by both sides, and listening by both sides – and then if that happens, we might find more participation, better decisions and better results for all.* ”

Voices for Change area meeting, Wales

“ *If we present information in an accessible and appropriate form, and approach people in a listening and non-judgmental mode, we get some very constructive feedback.* ”

Liz Walton, Social Exclusion Unit, meeting with Commissioners, 14 July 2000

...the message must get through.

9 It takes time

Bransholme Motivation in *Hull* uses participatory appraisal – a set of visual and interactive exercises (also used by the Voices for Change project, and explained in more detail in Appendix 1) – to give people the time and space to take a snapshot photo of themselves, as if from above, so they can look at their situation in a different way. Commissioners were told how this can give you 'the courage to get out there and do things', boosting confidence and building skills at the same time.

People living in poverty are rarely members of other groups that can 'train' individuals for playing a greater part in civic society – such as trades unions, clubs, pre-school play groups, church groups and so on. Very often, the only group identity comes from a culture of passive criticism, or 'them and us' cynicism. But asking people to leave the protective mantle of low expectations and high levels of hostility is asking a lot. We heard reports of people attending meetings for months before feeling confident enough to say anything. Even an informal setting can be too intimidating:

“ I had no confidence. I'd go to a one-parent group and I wouldn't talk to anyone. I'd stand by the door of the crèche in the corridor so I wouldn't have to go in the café and talk to people. When I became a volunteer in the organisation, I changed from a person who life passed by. Now I represent them all over Europe. ”

Voices for Change area meeting, South West England

Participation takes time. Time to get to know one another, to go off the point and round about the houses – but then to get back to the point and agree a way forward. Time to gather and understand information that helps the decision-making process. Time for people to overcome the barriers we are identifying – not just for everyone involved to build their capacity through training and support, but also for professionals and officials to change their mindset, to learn not just to listen but also to understand and act on that understanding.

And time for people to share their different perspectives, coming up with better-informed responses that reflect the collective wisdom of experience and knowledge gained from people living in poverty, as well as those researching and working in the field. Too often, organisations are working to a timetable that does not allow for this kind of meaningful participation. This is a common criticism of regeneration initiatives... and of ourselves!

We did not always get it right. Our process reflected many of the flaws we have highlighted. Operating on a limited budget with part-time staff meant corners were cut, leading at times to frustration and disillusionment. We also fell into the trap of thinking people could move straight into meeting mode without getting to know one another – and that area groups would stay involved without regular dialogue with us. We didn't include any 'free' time on the agenda – space in meetings when people could talk about the things they felt were most important. So we know it's not easy. But we also know how much we gained by sticking with it.

“ We have all made a journey from where we began... People have gone through painful experiences... and thought to themselves that maybe they would go; but they have stuck with it. ”

Commissioner

...participation is a process,
not a quick fix – give it time.

10 Personal and practical barriers

The Commission was also told about many personal and practical issues that act as barriers to people's participation:

LACK OF CONFIDENCE AND LOW SELF-ESTEEM

“ *It's not apathy, it's about lack of self-esteem; they don't expect things to be any better.* ”

Participant in Voices for Change meeting

NOT HAVING ENOUGH MONEY – ON BENEFIT OR IN LOW-PAID WORK

“ *Too much time needed to work out how to live on the income they have and worrying about what problems are just around the corner – participating in the decision-making process is low on their priority list.* ”

Participant in Voices for Change

FEAR THAT YOU WILL LOSE YOUR RIGHT TO BENEFIT IF YOU GET INVOLVED

“ *I don't like being inactive, and will help people out when and where I can. But in doing so I am always looking over my shoulder – in case it is seen as working, and I am reported.* ”

Message to Welsh Assembly from Voices for Change participant, Wales

HAVING LITERACY PROBLEMS; HAVING HAD LITTLE EDUCATION (OR INAPPROPRIATE EDUCATION)

DIFFICULTY IN KEEPING UP YOUR INVOLVEMENT, BECAUSE OF PHYSICAL OR MENTAL ILL-HEALTH

Some people involved in Voices for Change wanted to participate, and had a lot to say and offer; but their health meant that a sustained input with an expectation of taking on a lot of responsibility was difficult for them. Ways need to be found to enable people to participate without taxing their health too far, perhaps by having someone who can stand in for them.

FINDING, AND PAYING FOR, TRANSPORT TO GET TO MEETINGS (ESPECIALLY IN RURAL AREAS AND IN LONDON)

Some Voices for Change groups provided travelcards to participants, or hired a coach for people to travel together. It is rare for local councils to provide transport to consultative meetings.

FEELING YOU HAVEN'T GOT THE 'RIGHT' CLOTHES TO WEAR

FEAR OF 'THE AUTHORITIES' – ESPECIALLY BECAUSE THEY CAN TAKE YOUR CHILDREN AWAY

(LACK OF) TIME

“ *It is often assumed that people living in poverty are at least rich in time. However, exercises used in the project... showed how being poor is time-consuming.* ”

Humaira Haider and Debby Wason,
Voices for Change: Background Information, 2000

People living in poverty may also find it very difficult to pay for transport or accommodation up front, and then wait for their expenses to be refunded until they can provide receipts, because this is the proper financial procedure demanded by the organisation involved.

“ *We want to secure better rights for volunteers, and recognition. Organisations of all sorts shouldn't take volunteers without that. They should ask themselves questions like: does this person have the money to participate in my organisation? Have they got enough to eat to participate in my organisation? Do they get their expenses refunded on time?* ”

Voices for Change area meeting, Wales

Community groups told us they lacked the 'tools of the trade' taken for granted by professionals and decision makers: telephones, faxes, computers, Internet access, researchers and advisors.

“ *Councillors and politicians have advisors working to them and community activists should too. There should be an infrastructure of support; we don't expect others to function without that.* ”

Commissioner

“ *You have to educate, or train, community activists to be one step ahead and able to contribute. You wouldn't usually, as community rep, have a pre-agenda meeting (perhaps with a community worker), to work out what to do at the meeting. And there is usually no feedback mechanism for community reps to report back to their own areas.* ”

Commissioner

Often, groups simply don't have enough money to support participation properly, and may not be able to get funding because they don't know the conventions of funding applications. And they may find that funders, needing to account for the money they give out, are reluctant to take risks on 'unconventional' systems of monitoring and evaluation which fit the ways community groups actually work.

“*If targeting social need and social inclusion were real priorities, organic and generic community groups would not be facing a constant struggle for sustainability and their very existence.*”

Voices for Change, Northern Ireland

Money keeps getting pulled. If 'the poor are always with us', as the Bible says, why isn't the funding? We found some lifeline community groups spending much of their time filling in grant and Lottery applications. The time and energy used divert precious human resources. Long-term funding is needed – because participation is a long-term process. The 10-year funding now being given for the New Deal for Communities is one example of a more realistic timescale for community development and action.

“*Our application was knocked back because we didn't have proof our last grant had been spent on a helpline service. I gave him the phone number of the helpline and told him to phone it. He said that wasn't the point.*”

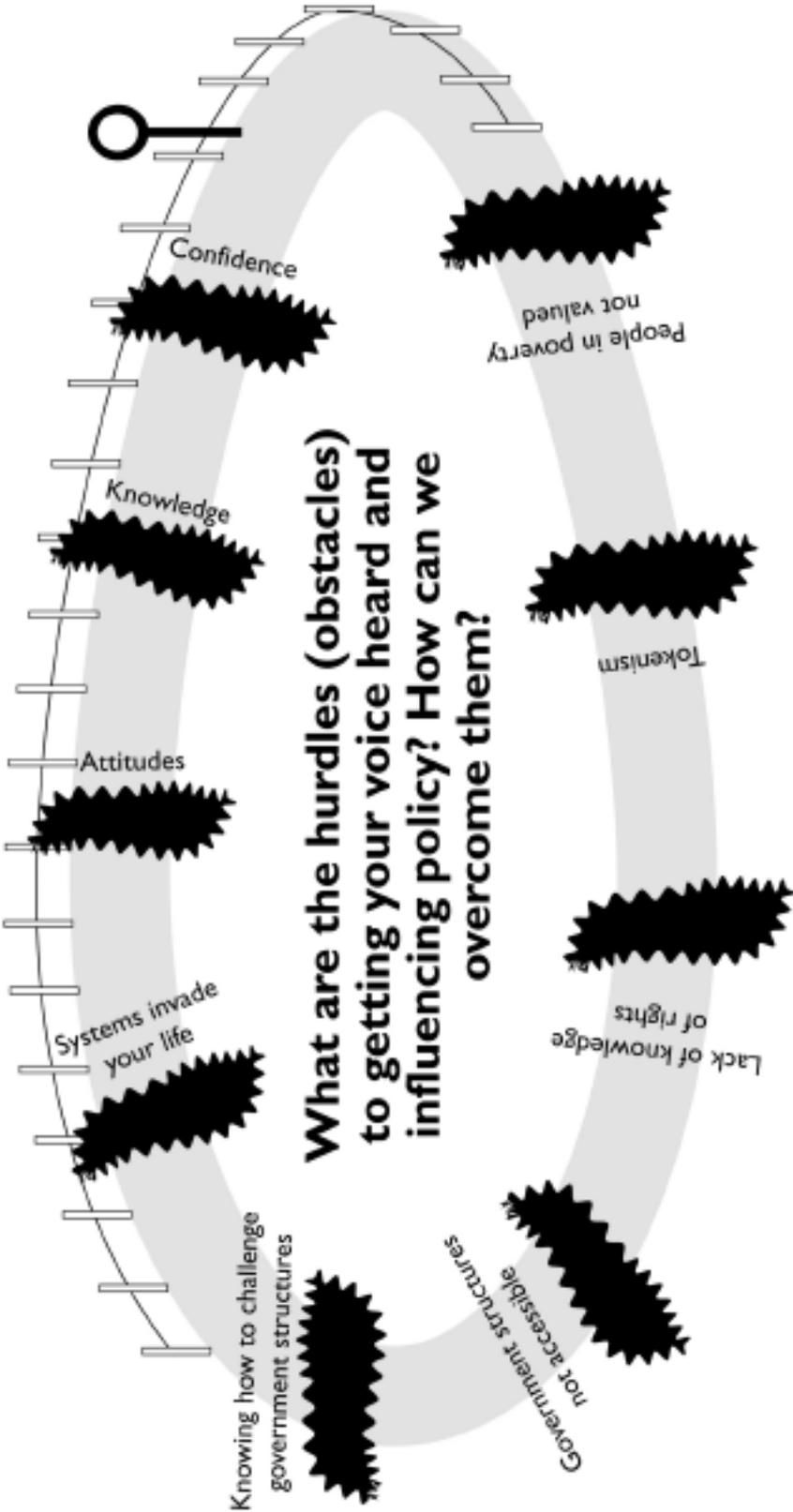
Commissioner

A number of groups also complained that money earmarked for community groups did not reach them. This could be because it gets stuck in the bureaucracy, or is given to larger voluntary sector groups who are not necessarily in touch with grassroots concerns. This raises the issue of the widening gulf between the voluntary 'third sector' and the community or 'fourth sector', what Commissioners called the 'grassroots grassroots'. (However, some more established organisations may play an 'intermediary' role, which may be needed in areas without community groups or when such groups do not have formal financial mechanisms.)

“*Where has all the money gone? Mechanisms must be put in place to ensure that money... earmarked for local communities is actually spent where it should be.*”

Voices for Change, Northern Ireland

...participation can't be done
on the cheap.



From an exercise used at a pilot Voices for Change meeting in Devonport

11 The work ethic?

“ *Communities organising themselves is also work – work should not just mean paid jobs. People who volunteer in unemployed groups and try to benefit the community are having their activity silenced.* ”

Commissioner

The operation of Department of Social Security (DSS) rules means claimants can actually lose benefit for helping their community, for not being technically available for work, while the government's Timebank project encourages those with jobs to do voluntary work. Do we only value community work when it is performed by those with jobs? Ironically, on the same day that Timebank was launched, new rules for jobseekers were also announced, docking benefit for claimants rejecting more than two job offers.

“ *If I was offered two cleaners' jobs 40 miles away, should I take one of them – and leave all the people I help day in and day out high and dry? Or perhaps I should just do all the voluntary work in my 'spare' time!?* ”

Commissioner

By contrast, despite the support of parts of government for volunteering and community involvement, other parts can give the impression of seeing voluntary and unpaid community work as a soft option, a way of 'letting' people avoid the search for 'proper' paid employment.

“ *I would encourage anyone to do voluntary work – but not see it as a proxy for paid work. I would want to avoid giving the message (that those on jobseekers allowance shouldn't do voluntary work)... but I would also want to avoid giving the message that someone on JSA can spend large amounts of time volunteering instead of being available for work.* ”

**Hugh Bayley MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State,
DSS, meeting with Commissioners, 5 July 2000**

“ *The underlying assumption is that the solution to poverty is jobs – this is part of it but not all, and you would be undermining participation if you took that as the solution.* ”

Commissioner

Some other countries are more receptive to new ways of working, and keener to challenge out-of-date approaches to welfare and work. The Commission heard of experiments in Australia and the Netherlands to enable people without paid jobs to fulfil the requirements of signing on for benefit by taking part in voluntary or community work instead. The UK government is currently reviewing how some benefit rules affect volunteering and community involvement:

“ We know that the requirement that jobseekers must be available for work within 48 hours can discourage people from making a commitment to voluntary work – hence the importance of flexibility. We are considering what can be done to ease that problem and our considerations form part of the work programme that has been taken forward by a small group ... which has been set up to look at the barriers to volunteering. ”

Paul Boateng MP, Home Office Minister, House of Commons Hansard, 15 June 2000, col 273WH

The government should study these examples from abroad.

...volunteering and unpaid community work by people in poverty must be recognised and respected.





Real participation

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12 Participation can work

We found clear examples of participation going wrong. But we also found that people living in poverty *do* participate, and that not everyone gives up. We were encouraged by the tenacity and resilience of many people – often women – who are making a difference, for example, in housing cooperatives and tenants' organisations, credit unions and community groups. On our visits we also came across thriving community projects (such as those in Caia Park, involved with recycling, and with supplying fruit and vegetables to people on low incomes at lower cost). These examples showed how people were prepared to put in energy and commitment where they had some control, and where the group's usefulness and relevance to daily life were crystal clear.

Commissioners heard on a visit to the FARE (Family Action in Rogerfield and Easterhouse) project, on the outskirts of *Glasgow*, how two young people in the project had organised an outing to Alton Towers. They had taken the full responsibility on themselves. And they said they were learning how to run meetings and do things like adults.

In some cases, residents take over the running of a service in partnership with, or separately from, the local authority (or other service provider). The most common example is tenant management organisations. They have to have majority support from those affected (not just those voting) in order to do this. Their control can extend to budgets and decision making, and they may employ local people directly to provide the service. Commissioners went to visit one.

Pembroke Street Estate Management Board (EMB) in *Plymouth* provided Commissioners with an example of what happens when tenacious local people get a taste for what they can achieve and just keep going (supported by the special government funding for tenant involvement in England – Section 16 payments). The EMB started as a residents' group in 1987, and is now running the estate in partnership with the local council. Some of the key motivators from the very beginning are still involved, and still listening to the residents to find out what people want and how they want it delivered.

During the visit, Commissioners asked members of the Board how community involvement could be sustained. This is what they said:

- to keep communities involved, you have to look at why they got involved in the first place. If they do it for the sake of their children, for example, they're likely to carry on until the children have grown up
- if people put in lots of time, they eventually need to be paid; for most people, it has to be a route through to something else. Paid people should be asking where unpaid people eventually want to get to

- but when people become paid workers they often can't switch off, and still do lots of unpaid work. People knock on the door in the evenings, for example, and it can make it difficult to go to a local pub
- a lot of the schemes on the estate came from what people wanted, and the way they wanted it done. The EMB is currently setting up a health and support scheme for older people who didn't want external agencies coming into their flats, preferring the initiative to be community-based and less threatening.

Some people would argue that tenants shouldn't have to take on this responsibility in order to get a good service. However, tenant management organisations do provide useful examples of local residents' ability to achieve positive change – and show the significant resources needed to support this level of participation. Even looking at more traditional measures of participation, we were told that turn-out in ballots on tenant management – and for positions on boards to oversee New Deal for Communities schemes – is often far higher than in local authority elections. And there is now a growing network of tenant organisations and individuals who can make themselves heard on housing issues in regular exchanges with policy makers at national level.

We were also encouraged by the potential of participatory ways of working, often similar to those used in the southern hemisphere, to make a difference to people's lives. Individuals grew in confidence, and communities had a stronger voice.

Preston Road Resident Committee in *Hull* was involved in putting together a bid for a New Deal for Communities scheme. They told visiting Commissioners that without the support of their local community development agency, they might not have been strong enough to push their views through. There had been no training offered as part of the invitation to sit on working groups with other local agencies and professionals to draw up the plan. The residents felt the first draft didn't reflect their views at all. But they persevered, and – despite reservations that the council still took the final decisions – they felt they were able to make a difference.

“*What struck me was that enough things were going on, and were being linked together, that a critical mass of community action was beginning to make a difference at the larger level... It was inspiring to see the ways participatory methods were being used for people's planning, for consultation, for strengthening voice. And most impressive were that these were being used by community residents themselves, who now teach others, generate income, and facilitate participatory processes... People are being incredibly creative and courageous in creating spaces for change.*”

Commissioner following visit to Hull

Another form of participation may be based on holding authorities to account, monitoring their performance, and negotiating directly with them. The Scottish 'Communities against Poverty' network provided many of the participants at the People's Parliament (organised by Voices for Change, Scotland, as their area event). The network was set up to provide a mechanism for dialogue between grassroots community groups and the Scottish Parliament and Executive, in order to influence the content and priorities of national anti-poverty strategies. It has negotiated regular meetings with the Social Inclusion Committee of the Scottish Parliament, and has also had an input to other Committees. After a recent meeting focusing on community participation and representation, ministers were reported to have delayed the production of a new document about the social justice strategy in Scotland in order to think further about these issues.

“ *When people experiencing poverty are included in the policy making from the very beginning, it's not poverty that is shameful – it's the existence of poverty that is shameful.*

**Participant in the People's Parliament,
Voices for Change, Scotland Conference**

13 Real participation – how to make it work

“*The way we and the government have got things wrong is the same... Things are on the right lines – but we made that mistake too; we know what they're saying, because we've done it too.*”

Commissioner

If national and local leaders are really serious about wanting people 'to participate directly in the decisions that affect their lives', as ministers have claimed, they must create, or strengthen, mechanisms to make that happen.

CAPACITY BUILDING

This is not a new idea. But a large-scale, independent and long-term commitment to community development and support for organisation building on a broader scale would be. In order to develop their skills and knowledge, any groups wanting to take part in decision-making processes – and to make a difference – must have:

- the ability to meet volunteers' costs (too often attempted on the cheap)
- more long-term funding, so groups can achieve sustainable development
- more secure funding: a guarantee that funding is not jeopardised if a group says something valid but uncomfortable to a funder
- independent support and advice, provided in a way that is agreed by the group asking for it – or, even better, designed and managed by them in order to build their capacity to participate
- enough time – the timescales for capacity-building are too often set to meet other agendas, which results in tokenism and disillusionment.

PROFESSIONAL TRAINING AND COMMITMENT

Just as important, the official agencies which are seeking to encourage participation must have:

- a skills audit, with no presumption that they innately possess the skills and understanding needed to undertake real participation
- training of professionals in participatory philosophy and methods
- a thorough consideration of what real participation will mean for every part of the agency
- commitment to support decision making and participation at a level that matches the process involved and answers the aspirations of the people involved
- no room for those initiating participation to back out because they have changed their mind, don't like how things are turning out, or decide there is not enough time to do things in a participatory way
- the ability to deliver when it comes to acting on the responses participation elicits.

RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

Some basic ground rules can help to smooth the way:

- those initiating participatory approaches must have the power to make things happen
- there must be transparency about the scale and scope of what can be achieved
- ways must be found of ensuring that the most marginalised groups are heard, and of dealing with conflicts of views and interests
- people in poverty should be involved in setting the agenda
- outcomes and measures of success should reflect that agenda
- goal-posts must not be moved after people have started to engage
- achieving better mutual understanding should be a central part of the process
- point-scoring, or establishing leverage or status, must be resisted
- mechanisms must exist to help representatives feed back information and ensure they get a mandate for their role.

'Participation' is not the new magic bullet. It is not enough by itself. It can just involve the same people all the time. And it can reinforce the status quo. It can operate as an echo, reflecting back the voices of the institutions organising the participation, even if they have learned how to use new techniques.

If it is not to work like this – if it is to be genuine – it must first of all be inclusive: it must ensure that all the voices are heard, not just the loudest. In particular, it must reach out to people experiencing poverty, and the most marginalised groups. And second, it must involve accountability – in other words, it must make a difference, and be seen to make a difference. Change must take place as a result. Power must be shifted.



Commissioner

People ask: 'How is it going to change my life?' – and if they can't see how, they won't go. Whatever is done, you need to ensure the change affects their lives. Poor people have not got a long timescale; so they have a desperate need to see change quickly.



PRINCIPLES FOR PARTICIPATION

- Participation in the decision-making process of people with experience of living in poverty must be recognised as a basic human right
- Not everyone will want to be involved; but louder voices must not be allowed to drown out the weaker or more marginalised ones
- We must all be prepared to change how we think and act to make participation genuine and effective
- People should grow up expecting effective political representation and good responsive government, and expecting to have a say to make this happen
- Participation should be a strategy, not a device, and should take place throughout the process – not just at the beginning, but also in implementation, and in evaluating the impact of policies and practices
- People who hold power must learn to listen properly to the voices of people living in poverty, to understand, to communicate in ways that everyone can understand, to respect people's contributions, and to act on their voices
- Participation needs resources on the ground, earmarked for and administered by grassroots, community-based groups (or intermediary organisations when necessary), and/or 'top-sliced' from mainstream budgets
- Unpaid voluntary and community work must be recognised and valued.

14 Recommendations

The Commission sees our report as the first, vital step, focusing on the voices which are calling for urgent change to ensure participation is genuine and makes a difference. We saw this as our priority. But in order to ensure that the work of the Commission leads to practical changes, and to take forward the recommendations we set out below, we start by proposing that:

The UK government and the devolved administrations should each set up a task force – made up of people with direct experience of poverty and people with experience of participatory ways of working here and abroad – to draw up recommendations on ways to ensure that people experiencing poverty can participate in the decision-making processes that affect their lives.

There have been task forces before. But these would be different. Task forces do not usually include people experiencing poverty; these would. We know from our experience that their input would ensure new ways of working, creative insights and radical ideas. **We urge the government to take up this challenge.**

We have 10 suggestions to guide the government and the task forces.

POVERTY AND BENEFITS

1 Looking at policies on poverty? Involve the real experts

The UK government, the devolved administrations, and regional and local authorities should set up a framework to ensure that people living in poverty and their organisations are fully involved in the design and implementation of anti-poverty programmes and strategies. (The previous UK government signed up to this at the World Summit for Social Development in 1995, and the current UK government endorsed it at the United Nations Special Session in 2000.)

2 How is it working? Ask the people who know

The UK government, the devolved administrations, and regional and local authorities should set up mechanisms to ensure that people living in poverty are involved in developing ways to monitor and assess the impact of anti-poverty programmes and strategies at local, regional and national level. The Department of Social Security should also encourage user involvement at local and national level.

3 Want people to participate? Stop punishing them!

In the short term:

- clear directions should be issued on the administration of current rules on availability for work and incapacity, so as to ensure they don't penalise those doing voluntary or community work
- the government is already reviewing the rule requiring unemployed people to be able to take a job within 48 hours; we recommend that it should be relaxed, perhaps to the seven days' notice suggested by the Social Exclusion Unit.

In the longer term:

- there should be an audit of barriers to participation which are created by the benefits system, involving people on benefits themselves, and
- a review of how the social security system could be adapted to value voluntary and community work.

DEVELOPING DEMOCRACY

4 All policies affect people in poverty – ask them how

People living in poverty should be involved in evaluating all policies – at national, regional and local level – which have an impact on their lives, not just anti-poverty strategies. This means 'poverty-proofing' policies, in a way which involves people experiencing poverty themselves. The UK government already engages regularly with minority ethnic groups and women; it should do so specifically with people experiencing poverty too.

5 Usual methods + the usual suspects = old answers – find new ways to work!

Strategies developed to improve democracy and consultation should be adapted to ensure the genuine participation of people experiencing poverty. In particular, central government should issue guidance to local authorities on better ways of reaching out to people experiencing poverty when consulting their communities about local strategies and priorities.

6 Ground rules for getting it right

People experiencing poverty should be involved in developing benchmarks to ensure the genuine participation of people in poverty in consultative and decision-making processes, and in monitoring performance against these benchmarks.

- 'Watchdog' groups involving people experiencing poverty should be set up to monitor the public authorities. Benchmarks for community participation, and 'audit tools' which groups can use themselves, have already begun to be developed.
- The Audit Commission could help monitor local authorities. The Cabinet Office could do the same for central government. Both have already issued guidance on effective consultation. But both would have to go beyond this, to champion genuinely participatory ways of working.

7 Raise expectation of rights

The introduction of citizenship education in schools, which is welcome, provides an opportunity to encourage young people to see themselves right from the start as participants in decision making, both through the curriculum and through involving them in how schools are run. It should involve the use of participatory methods, and raise awareness about how citizens can have a say. This approach should also be extended to lifelong learning for adults.

MEANS AND MECHANISMS

8 Give us the money!

The UK government, devolved administrations and local authorities should ensure adequate funding for participation in decision-making processes by people experiencing poverty.

- More sustained and larger-scale funding should be provided for grassroots organisations, to enable them to build up their own capacity and to improve their ability to participate.
- Funding for participation could be provided by top-slicing existing budgets (as is done already with 10% of the Single Regeneration Budget in England).

9 Carrots and sticks for people with power

Benchmarks can be developed for participatory ways of working with people experiencing poverty (see point 6 above). But unless the government acts as a catalyst for changing the culture of organisations, and the mindset of individuals working in them, to promote this approach, it will not work. This must be a cross-departmental commitment for central and local government – and other public (and private/voluntary) services as well.

- Politicians, professionals and practitioners need training and capacity-building too.
- Targets and performance measurement should be used to promote participatory ways of working.
- Appraisal for staff should include their commitment to participatory ways of working.

10 Share what works

Lessons about participatory methods and ways of working should be shared more widely. There could be more systematic exchanges about policies and practices in the north and south of the world between the Department for International Development and other departments, and by fostering exchanges of experiences between the countries of the UK and other parts of the world that are grappling with these issues. The UK has something to contribute and something to gain.

15 Conclusion

In this report, we have described how participation by people experiencing poverty is a human right, and essential for better quality decision making. Yet we found that too often:

- people in poverty are not respected
- rhetoric is not being translated into reality
- power is not being shared
- too many participation exercises are phoney, and therefore destined to fail
- not all the voices are heard
- professional attitudes and behaviour undermine participation
- messages aren't getting through
- the value of volunteering and unpaid community work is not recognised or respected
- not enough time is allowed for effective participation
- nor enough resources to support it.

In the light of widespread experiences like these, it is surprising that anyone living in poverty – who must spend so much more time getting the basics of life sorted out – spends any time giving information or opinions to anyone outside their household. The enemies of participation are cynicism and anger, an outlook learned by many people as a defence mechanism to protect them against the disappointment that follows phoney participation.

It is possible to write a tick list of the things that should be put in place to allow for participation – the luxury of time, independent resources, training for everyone involved, and goodwill and honesty on the part of those seeking to encourage participation.

But without the changes in attitude and behaviour that we have identified as essential, this will not work. In particular, we need to change the assumption that people living in poverty are only people with problems, and that they cannot contribute creatively to solutions. And there needs to be a willingness on the part of power holders to let go of some of that power.

If people experiencing poverty were fully involved in decision making and policy processes, as we propose, we believe we would succeed in creating a new form of knowledge and a different kind of democracy. We would see:

- not just individuals contacting their MPs about individual problems, but groups of people who experience poverty discussing solutions to problems with policy makers;
- not just consultation, but also genuine participation, where people feel they can make a real difference...
- ...not just to the delivery of programmes and projects, but also to their design and standards of performance;
- not just consultation with 'local communities', or 'the public' in general, but also reaching out to marginalised individuals and communities of interest;

- not just input by people experiencing poverty into policies and decisions at local level, but also input at national level;
- not just influence on individual policies, but also on priorities between them;
- not just involvement on one-off occasions, but as an ongoing dialogue, with the real resources that process requires.

If we don't get it right, we may lose a generation's confidence.
The stakes are too high to get it wrong.

“ *You should keep on being a thorn in our flesh, to keep reminding us that poor people have voices and should be listened to. The whole of civil society, including the political parties, must be open to poor people's ideas.* **”**

**Hugh Bayley MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State,
Department of Social Security, meeting with Commissioners, 5 July 2000**

“ *This report has to be for the benefit of the people who need it most...* **”**

“ *Reports don't change policies. But it is important to take reports and wave them at policy makers; it is people who will bring about change...* **”**

Commissioners

“ *People will need to ask questions, and not let this report die.* **”**

“ *People in places like South Africa gave their life blood to put a 'great wrong right'. We hope that politicians, the decision makers and policy makers who read this report and the other evidence gathered during the Voices for Change process, will find both the inspiration and the courage to start participating in that much-needed process here in Britain to put our 'great wrong right!'* **”**

**Foreword, Voices for Change: Scottish Conference Report
of the People's Parliament, 3 November 1999, 2000**

*Those who cannot spend freely
Cannot choose freely;
Those who cannot choose freely
Cannot participate freely;
Those who cannot participate freely
Will not be represented adequately;
And those who are not represented adequately
Will always have a lower quality of life.*

Commissioner

*All things have a root and a top,
All events have an end and a beginning.
Whoever understands correctly
What comes first and what follows
Draws nearer to tomorrow.*

Maria Jones, ATD Fourth World



Appendices

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Appendix 1: Voices for Change and the Commission

The UK Coalition Against Poverty (UKCAP), which developed the Voices for Change project and the Commission, was set up in 1996 around the International Year for the Eradication of Poverty. UKCAP now has some 160 member organisations, and campaigns for a comprehensive national anti-poverty programme developed with the participation of people experiencing poverty – the major commitment which the previous UK government signed up to at Copenhagen. It maintains the principle of a balance in its committees and subgroups between people with direct experience of poverty and others.

Poverty's low profile in the wider public arena, and the desire to include the views and experiences of excluded people in policy debates, led UKCAP to seek support from MPs to set up an all-party group on poverty. The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Poverty (APPGP) was established in October 1996 as a way in which people experiencing poverty, and people working alongside them, could have a forum to speak to MPs at a national level.

One of UKCAP's earliest events, to explore poverty and participation, was held in September 1996, and brought together 30 people living in poverty to share their experiences and provide a forum to influence anti-poverty organisations. There was a very strong sense among those who attended that the meeting should be the start of a more sustained effort and that the momentum generated by the meeting should not be lost. Thus began the Voices for Change project, which became a reality in June 1998 when the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust agreed to fund the project.

The aims of Voices for Change were:

- to find out how communities experiencing poverty and exclusion are involved in decisions which affect their lives;
- to use a variety of participatory techniques to encourage the involvement of communities in the process;
- to encourage communities to enter into dialogue with decision makers to ensure greater participation in decision making; and
- to set up a Commission comprising people from local communities and public life.

The project began with area steering groups in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, the South West of England and London, with a looser group in the North of England, and with individuals, organisations and grassroots groups elsewhere. Participatory workshops/training sessions were held in different areas for 20 or so local people each time, using the technique of 'participatory appraisal' – approaches and methods that enable local people to share, develop and analyse their own knowledge of life and conditions.

The sorts of tools used are highly visual and include brainstorms, spider diagrams, timelines, mapping, ranking and diagramming. The method was developed in the southern hemisphere by development agencies working with communities in poverty and has travelled northwards, to be used as an additional tool for community development in the UK and elsewhere.

In the 18 months preceding the start of the Commission, around forty events were held as part of the Voices for Change process. Some were training and feedback sessions, or consultations involving local communities or communities of interest (such as groups of young or older people, homeless people, disabled people, asylum-seekers and minority ethnic groups). But others were regional and national events – including meetings in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland – arranged in order for people involved to meet with one another and/or engage with policy makers. The list below gives a flavour of these meetings, but is not exhaustive. In particular, it does not include all the preparation meetings and discussions preceding some of the later events (or linked work such as the consultations carried out by the European Anti-Poverty Network England).

VOICES FOR CHANGE MEETINGS

South West of England

Pilot consultation – Communities Against Poverty, Plymouth
 Two-day training in participatory methods, Bristol
 Feedback session, Plymouth
 Consultation, Cornwall
 Asian women's group, Bristol
 Consultation, South Wiltshire
 Consultation with organisation working with homeless families, Bristol
 Estate meeting, Cornwall
 South West of England area meeting, held on 22 September 1999

London

Two-day training in participatory methods
 Consultation, resource centre for migrants
 Consultation, association of community organisations
 Consultation, children's charity
 Consultation, arts organisation
 Consultation, organisation working with older people
 Consultation, association for women refugees
 Consultation, organisation working with families in poverty
 Consultation, voluntary organisation
 London area meeting, held on 1 October 1999

Scotland

Two-day training in participatory methods
 Consultation project with young people, Save the Children in Scotland
 Scotland area meeting, held on 3 November 1999

Wales

Two-day training in participatory methods
Feedback session
Local area meeting
Consultations, local young people's groups
Wales area meeting, held on 22 October 1999
Meeting with Welsh Assembly

North of England

Consultation meeting, community group
Two-day participation workshop
Meetings with young people, May 2000

Northern Ireland

Consultation meeting, held on 7-8 October, 1999
Consultation events with young people, disabled people, rural residents etc.

UK-wide meeting

of representatives from areas to consider outline of Commission report and to meet with Commissioners: 22-23 June 2000, held in Manchester

By the time the Commission began meeting, a wealth of evidence had been collected. The link between Voices for Change and the Commission was maintained by the contribution of members of area steering groups on the UK-wide steering group for the Commission. The area steering groups also nominated individuals from their areas to sit on the Commission.

The Commission was set up to identify barriers to the participation of marginalised communities and individuals in decision-making structures; to formulate policy recommendations and highlight effective practice for overcoming such obstacles; and to suggest ways of articulating and acting on local people's concerns in decisions at local, regional and national level.

Originally, the Commission was to be called the Commission on Poverty and Social Exclusion. But early in its life, Commissioners decided to rename it the Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power, to reflect its remit more accurately. They also decided to write their terms of reference in plain English.

The Commission held 10 full meetings between 26 November 1999 and 17 October 2000. These provided the Commissioners with the opportunity to share their experiences and expertise, gained both before and during the life of the Commission. The staff team provided additional policy and research information and summarised findings from Voices for Change regional and national events. In addition, the Commissioners visited a number of groups in areas throughout the UK and held a series of on the record meetings with policy makers in the latter stages of the process, to share preliminary findings, fine-tune recommendations, and put on record the responses of ministers and civil servants to the issues to be raised in the Commission's report.

THE COMMISSIONERS

- Wayne David** works for the Wales Youth Agency and was a Member of the European Parliament for 10 years.
- Jim Deery** has a long history of community activism in North Belfast. He currently chairs the local Community Forum and coordinates the Star Neighbourhood Centre.
- Sylvia Francis** set up the Third Age Foundation concerned with issues affecting older people.
- John Gaventa** is a Fellow at the Institute of Development Studies and has a long history of international work on poverty and participation issues.
- Gina Holdsworth** is unpaid coordinator of Bransholme Motivation in Hull, a council estate community group set up to support and encourage motivation. She is also a trainer on participative methods.
- Ruth Lister** is Professor of Social Policy at Loughborough University and a former Director of the Child Poverty Action Group. She writes and researches on poverty, social security and citizenship issues.
- Lesley Riddoch** is a radio broadcaster for the BBC in Scotland, editor of the women's web paper 'Worldwoman' and a trustee of the community land buy-out on Eigg.
- John Sentamu** is the Bishop for Stepney and was a member of the Inquiry into the matters arising from the death of Stephen Lawrence.
- Anne Souter** has been an unpaid community activist in Easterhouse, Glasgow for 15 years.
- Moiria Stanley** was caught in the poverty trap for over 20 years. She spoke at the first Voices for Change area poverty hearing held in Wales, and subsequently at the Welsh National Assembly.
- Nilaben Tailor** has been involved with community groups for some 10 years and currently works for the Bristol Regional Workshop for the Blind.
- Tricia Zipfel** is director of PEP (Priority Estates Project) and has a 30-year history of involvement in community development.

VISITS MADE BY COMMISSIONERS

- Cornwall** A Commissioner visited the area, attending an informal meeting to discuss European Union Objective 1 funding issues and a larger meeting of 30 people representing individuals and groups at the Redruth Community Centre.
- Plymouth** Commissioners met 12 individuals and representatives of local groups in the flat converted for use by Communities Against Poverty on the Granby Island estate. They also visited the Pembroke Street Estate Management Board, which was set up in 1994 from a resident group formed seven years earlier.
- North Wales** Commissioners visited Caia Park in Wrexham, one of the largest housing estates in Wales with almost 14,000 residents. Commissioners visited the Caia Park Partnership community development organisation which encompasses a range of projects and initiatives.
- Hull** In a visit organised by the 'Developing our Communities' (DoC) community development agency, Commissioners visited: Preston Road Regeneration Centre (with members of local groups involved in putting together a bid for a New Deal for Communities scheme); a discussion session at Hull DoC with local groups, including young people from the Warren Centre; and a meeting with trained community activists at Bransholme Motivation, a centre on the Bransholme estate which is the biggest of its kind in Europe.
- Northern Ireland** This two-day visit covered 10 projects in formal and informal meetings – Belfast Regeneration Office (formerly Making Belfast Work), the government-funded regeneration agency; the Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network; the Ashton Centre community business centre; An Loiste Uir ex-prisoner project; Star Neighbourhood Centre; Disability Action; Rural Community Network; Rural Development Council; Broughshane Community Association and Coleraine Rural Housing Estates Project.
- Glasgow** Commissioners visited Family Action in Rogerfield and Easterhouse (FARE), a 15-year-old neighbourhood project; had a meeting with local community activists involved in Social Inclusion Partnerships (SIPs); and ended with a formal meeting with the SIP Board for Greater Easterhouse.
- London** Two projects were visited in London: ATD Fourth World (All Together for Dignity), a worldwide human rights organisation operating in 27 countries to empower people in poverty; and the Migrants Resource Centre, supporting refugees and asylum seekers.

POLITICIANS AND POLICY MAKERS WHO MET WITH COMMISSIONERS

Hugh Bayley MP	Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department of Social Security
Edwina Hart AM	Secretary for Finance, National Assembly for Wales
Janet Veitch	Women's National Commission (informal meeting)
Moira Wallace	Social Exclusion Unit
Liz Walton	Social Exclusion Unit
Charles Woodd	Active Community Unit, Home Office

Another policy maker also met Commissioners, for an 'off-the-record' discussion.

SUPPORT STAFF

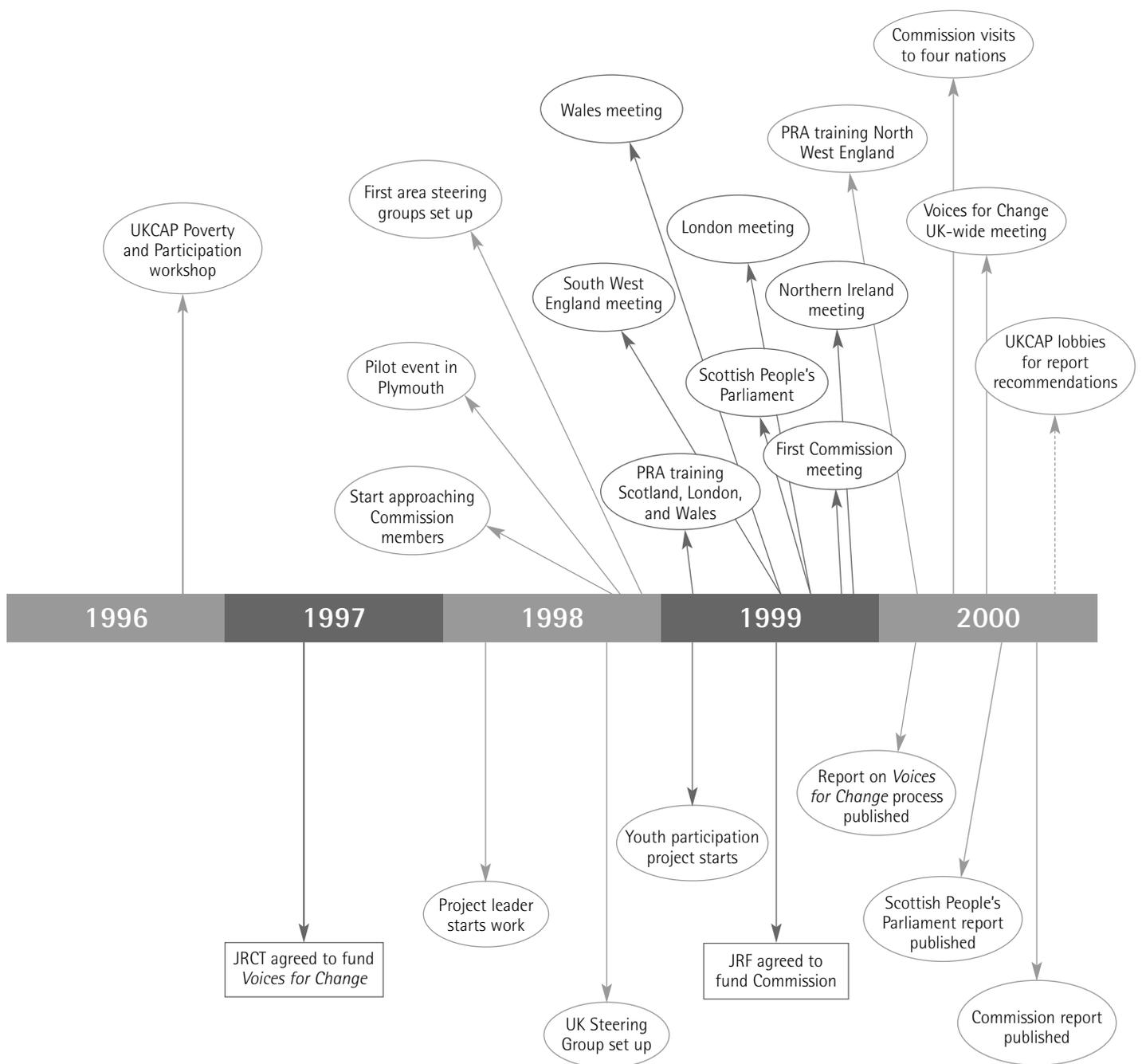
The Commission has been supported by various members of staff, mainly from the organisations involved in the UK Coalition Against Poverty: Fran Bennett (Oxfam GB), Mary Carter (policy advisor/writer), Niall Cooper (Church Action on Poverty), Charlotte Flower (Oxfam GB), Humaira Haider (Voices for Change), Eunice Lewis (UKCAP), Heather Petch (policy advisor/writer), Juliette Plumpton (UKCAP) and Andrew Pratt (UKCAP). The Voices for Change process was also supported by, among others, Evan Metz and Debby Wason.

FUNDING ORGANISATIONS

The major funder of the Commission itself has been the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. The funding has included resources for an evaluation, which will be completed early in 2001. Other organisations which have contributed financially and/or through support in kind to the Commission and to Voices for Change include Save the Children, Church Action on Poverty and Oxfam GB. Voices for Change was supported financially by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust.

UK Coalition Against Poverty *Voices for Change*

TIMELINE OF KEY EVENTS, 1996-2000



Appendix 2: Examples of relevant recent policy initiatives

The government has stated its commitment to stimulating active citizenship (making people more aware of their rights and their responsibilities); building active communities; promoting an inclusive society; and creating a revitalised, responsive democracy.

“ *The Sixth Report of Lord Neill's Committee on Standards in Public Life... made clear that the principle of openness, and in particular the citizen's right of participation in the policy-making process, were fundamental to the proper conduct of public life. We agree wholeheartedly.* ”

Tony Blair MP, Prime Minister, Foreword, Code of Practice on Written Consultation (draft), Cabinet Office, April 2000

The Cabinet Office issued an updated version of a **code of practice on (written) consultation** for government departments, outlining principles of good practice, including the importance of making clear what is open to consultation:

“ *Consultation should never be undertaken about aspects of an issue about which the decision is inevitable, for whatever reason. The pretence of consultation simply causes cynicism and mistrust.* ”

Cabinet Office, Code of Practice on Written Consultation (draft), April 2000

There are also plans for an Internet-based 'one stop shop' of best practice on consultation.

Following on from the 'compact' drawn up between the government and community/voluntary organisations, the Home Office has issued a similar code for departments' consultations with community and voluntary organisations. Both the Home Office and other departments have also developed new programmes giving **small grants to support community involvement**, mentoring, and exchange of information between community leaders and groups.

“ *We have agreed to fund community consultations. This will mean local activists... being able to provide advice on community plans, educational programmes, and direct hands on help, to other communities around the country.* ”

David Blunkett MP, Secretary of State for Education and Employment, Department for Education and Employment press release, 9 May 2000

Under the **local government reform** agenda, principal local authorities must consult their communities in order to draw up plans for local priorities ('community strategies' and 'community planning'). Both the government and the Audit Commission have issued guidance on how councils should carry this out.

“ *It is not sufficient simply to consult communities on a range of options determined by the authority and its partner organisations.* ”

Preparing community strategies: Draft Guidance to Local Authorities from the DETR, Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, June 2000

The emphasis on people's participation at **community/neighbourhood level** has been developed most, with ministers arguing that 'top-down, imposed' policies won't work, and that local communities need to 'own' strategies for development and regeneration.

“ *Unless the community is fully engaged in shaping and delivering regeneration, even the best plans on paper will fail to deliver in practice... This means developing ways to put deprived communities in the driving seat.* ”

Tony Blair MP, Prime Minister, Foreword to Social Exclusion Unit's draft framework for a National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal, Cabinet Office, April 2000

The focus on **social inclusion and area regeneration** has resulted in many policy initiatives designed to tackle poverty at neighbourhood level and requiring local participation – for example, the Single Regeneration Budgets and the New Deal for Communities (NDCs) schemes in England. NDC initiatives *must* involve local people at the initial stage, in drawing up plans and priorities for action (although this emphasis is not maintained throughout the process). The National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal, due to be published shortly, is likely to include proposals for **local strategic partnerships** in England, which would involve all the major service providers in an area producing a strategy for improvement; it would be compulsory for these partnerships to consult with local people.

In **Scotland**, the Scottish Executive chose to emphasise the promotion of social inclusion rather than the prevention of social exclusion, and produced a Social Justice Report for Scotland. Social Inclusion Partnerships (SIPs) were created in some of the poorest areas, guidance on community participation was produced, and people's juries are being piloted. The Listening to Communities programme was set up in response to community representatives feeling they were not being included as equal partners. The Social Inclusion Network has reported on barriers to joint working.

In **Wales**, People in Communities was the forerunner of Communities First, and had its second round of area projects selected in May 2000. It uses a partnership board model to oversee area regeneration. Communities First aims to establish a model of partnership working in the most deprived areas of Wales, based on a three-way split of representatives from the voluntary, private and public sectors. The National Assembly is proving to be open and accessible but has been criticised for setting up barriers to participation in its consultation processes. It is currently preparing the brief with the voluntary sector partnership council to commission research on participatory consultation methods.

In **Northern Ireland**, the major policy to promote social inclusion is the new Targeting Social Need (TSN) programme, which includes strategies for making services more accessible to groups at risk of social exclusion. Working groups on promoting social inclusion will report by the end of 2000.

The **Social Exclusion Unit** itself, in England, and its equivalents in the smaller nations, have experimented with new ways of working, such as trying out more open consultation processes and working through policy action teams involving sustained work with people outside government. But the review of the Social Exclusion Unit concluded that 'there should be more direct participation in the processes of issue definition and policy formulation by those most directly affected'.

The Cabinet Office set up a 'people's panel' of over 5,000 people to provide feedback on what people think about public services and the government's attempts to improve them. The need to consult people about **local services** is written into new legislation; an increasing number of public services now carry a requirement to consult their users under, for example, the Children Act (1989) and the Children (Scotland) Act, 1996. Under the 'best value' initiative, local authorities must also consult communities about their services, from setting corporate objectives through to monitoring performance and progress. In the health service, more developed arrangements have been put forward recently for user involvement. In housing – where participation and involvement have arguably made most progress – the recent Green Paper on housing in England, published in April 2000, continues the emphasis on tenant involvement, with arrangements for participation 'compacts' between tenants and landlords. 'Section 16' grants have been a significant resource supporting tenant management in England. Until recently, tenants could only get funding if they wanted to develop a tenant management organisation. But Section 16 has now been expanded to fund a wider range of activity around tenant participation, including studies enabling tenants to explore their needs in relation to problems (not just housing) on the estate. Other government departments, and the devolved administrations, have carried out many consultation exercises with specific groups and/or on specific issues.