Evaluation of the Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power

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The Evaluation Trust

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1 Understanding the Commission's journey and its significance

Background to the evaluation

The Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power was set up by the UK Coalition Against Poverty (UKCAP).[1] in autumn 1999 to examine why people experiencing poverty do not influence decision-making and policy. Its 50/50 UK-wide membership consisted of six 'grassroots' people with direct experience of poverty, and six people in 'public life'(politics, the church, academia, public services and community development, and the media). People with different kinds of expertise and knowledge all sharing the same commitment and passion were thus brought together at the national level. The aim was to produce a 'different' kind of report, rooted in real experience and in 'street language', through a 'different' kind of commission process. The Commission published its report *Listen, Hear! The Right to be Heard*[2] in December 2000, with public launches in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. This evaluation examines the Commission's history and process.

The Commission held ten meetings from November 1999 to October 2000.

In preparing to produce its report, the Commission undertook:

- eight *Commission meetings* to consider evidence from the 'Voices for Change' project, their own experience, and other writing and data
- seven *visits* around the UK to hear from local projects and grassroots communities about their experiences
- seven meetings with national *policy makers* (civil servants, politicians and a policy adviser).

Each visit and meeting involved at least one grassroots and one public life commissioner. The visits proved immensely useful in progressing the work and raising the Commission's profile.

The Commission was established as the conclusion of a two-year area-based consultation and capacity building programme (1998–2000) 'Voices for Change'[3] also sponsored by UKCAP.[4] This programme, which aimed to identify the barriers to participation by people living in poverty, had been funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, Oxfam UK (now Oxfam GB), Save the Children (SCF) and Church Action on Poverty (CAP). Some of the resourcing, as for the Commission, was through help in kind, mainly staff time and accommodation from these organisations.[5]

The work of the Commission was mainly funded through a grant (£34K) from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation along with top-up funding from these three UKCAP members.[6] The Foundation funding included a requirement for the *process* of the Commission to be evaluated. This report is the result.

This is not a report which judges the 'success' of the Commission, particularly not in terms of what it has achieved (it is too early to assess this in any case). Rather, it aims to record and reflect on the process from a variety of perspectives, and identify lessons about how the Commission was set up and went about its work.

The aim of the evaluation is to identify, through listening to the people who were part of the experience, what is needed to make such a joint process work, and to avoid some of the pitfalls and traps experienced in even these committed and planned attempts at participation and involvement. The aim was to be both participatory and objective, so as to provide the broadest possible picture of how the Commission had developed, what happened during its lifetime, and the strengths and weaknesses of that process from a variety of perspectives.

The evaluation began in June 2000 and ended in March 2001, with a follow up workshop in January 2002. Four meetings of the Commission and the launch meeting for the report (December 2000) were observed. A group evaluation session was held with commissioners and staff after the final meeting in October 2000. Individual semi-structured interviews (phone and face to face) were held with 28 commissioners, staff and 'Voices for Change'/ UKCAP members. Minutes and many related Commission papers, together with reports from the 'Voices for Change' project,[7] were studied. The complete draft final evaluation report was circulated to all interviewees for comment.

A workshop to which all interviewees and some UKCAP members were invited was held in January 2002, with the participation of some JRF staff. This considered the key learning arising from the evaluation and from the Commission's own report, enabling joint reflection fifteen months after the end of the Commission.

At the workshop the learning was much clearer, and views about the commission process were a great deal more positive than they had been during the evaluation itself, or when this report was written. This more positive assessment of the process raises important issues about the timing of the evaluation, and is reflected both in the *JRF Findings* document and in this first chapter, which sets the scene for the report written shortly after the Commission had finished.

Why is the experience of the Commission important?

The Commission was a new experience. The 50/ 50 membership was a genuine attempt to develop a way of involving people with direct experience of poverty on an equal basis. The aim was to get out of the straitjacket of formal committee meetings and traditional commissions, to bring together the 'experts' in living in poverty together with 'experts' in public life, in policy and politics.

This evaluation examines how the Commission did its work. The learning from this is transferable, locally and nationally, to many other structured methods of participation, especially by excluded groups. Such lessons will be relevant and useful to future projects and processes where the involvement of 'grassroots' and 'public life' people is envisaged. These could be relatively formal national policy processes like the Commission, or they could be projects and processes of local ongoing involvement in groups, working groups and networks set up to achieve change on the ground, involving people with a direct experience of poverty.

Recruitment of the commissioners

Most commission members were recruited for their direct experience ('grassroots') or their practical, political and theoretical knowledge of *poverty* ('public life'). A few also had experience of participation. Only three grassroots commissioners had been directly involved in 'Voices for Change', although all of them were nominated by 'Voices for Change' area groups.

No formal lines of accountability existed. Most public life commissioners thought they had been appointed for their knowledge and expertise. The lack of strong 'Voices for Change' area groups meant that most grassroots commissioners did not have a reference group for consultation, support or accountability.

Costs and resources

The Commission's eventual financial budget, excluding inputs 'in kind', was £45,000. This was low compared with the up-front costs of many long-term participation exercises such as Citizens' Juries or area forums. Extra, unanticipated activities, such as visits to communities experiencing poverty added to overall costs. Costs were minimised for room hire and refreshments, but travel and accommodation were more problematic. Realistic budgeting, better anticipation of extra financial needs, and the ability to negotiate openly and flexibly with funders would have improved cost effectiveness.

Making it work

The commissioners were all giving up precious time to achieve something worthwhile, to which they were all deeply committed. They all expected to make a contribution in line with their experience. They wanted a report that 'would not sit on the shelf'. Yet the meetings could not be on traditional, formal lines. Everyone brought different kinds of 'baggage': expectations, preconceptions, different kinds of personal power, experience, anxieties and concerns. Ideally, these should have been consciously included and responded to at every meeting, so as to develop trust, mutual respect and knowledge. This would have enabled grassroots commissioners to play a full part and take the lead, and public life commissioners' contributions to be fully valued. For this to happen, appropriate chairing and adequate development time were needed.

Chairing

The UK Steering Group had considered rotating chairs, joint chairs, and the specific appointment of an individual, but left the decision to the Commission.

At the first meeting, no-one knew one another, and no decision was taken. At the second meeting, the commissioners decided that to appoint one of themselves as chair could give too much power to one commissioner and prevent that person from speaking in their own right. A member of the UK Steering Group was asked to act as 'meetings-only' chair – to act as 'umpire' or 'referee', but not to take decisions or be too directive. This gave responsibility without authority. No-one felt they had the authority to steer the process, to ensure that the Commission made clear decisions and produced results, that time was used effectively and that all commissioners could experience 'parity of

esteem'. But the need for strong leadership and authority coming from within the commission was clear.

Development and 'social time'
The Commission did achieve what it set out to do – *commitment was the glue – and it showed (commissioner).* However, some commissioners took a long time to feel 'safe' to contribute, especially in the early meetings. A lot of activity and learning took place from the start, but only at the sixth meeting did the Commission 'gel' into a working team. Commissioners had had no time to get to know one another or to develop groundrules. Tight agendas and long travelling distances meant that there was hardly any 'social time'. If this had been allowed for at the planning stage, some of the practical and emotional difficulties could have been thrashed out. Certain commissioners (grassroots and public life) might not then have felt 'silenced'.

All interviewees felt strongly that a 48-hour residential meeting before the official start of the Commission would have given the opportunity to develop mutual knowledge, understanding and respect. This would have almost certainly prevented the reported 'us and them' atmosphere in the first meetings of the Commission. At the same time, groundrules, a workplan, and key questions of chairing, staffing and report writing could have been discussed and agreed.

These findings have implications both for funding and timescales, both of which had been badly underestimated. It is impossible to anticipate everything in advance, but 'ballpark' figures discussed with funders need to reflect a realistic assessment of what will achieve 'success'.

What were commissioners 'signing up' to?

Terms of Reference
Commissioners felt that the original 'given' terms of reference were unclear and imprecise and that the original name of the Commission (an 'Inquiry on Poverty and Exclusion') inadequately reflected what they had been asked to do.

Debates in the first three meetings raised a recurrent tension between a focus on 'poverty' and a focus on 'participation', resulting in the Commission's title being changed, while a more user-friendly version of the terms of reference was written. The revised and expanded 'aims' focused more strongly on investigating and exploring solutions to the *barriers* faced by people experiencing poverty when participating in policy and decision-making processes

Participatory processes
Participatory processes can ensure that everyone, whatever their skills, knowledge and background, has enough confidence to contribute equally to discussion and decision-making, as was expected for this Commission. UKCAP and 'Voices for Change' required that the voice of people experiencing poverty should be at least equal with professionals, politicians and other decision-makers.

However, despite pre-planning and the use of a skilled facilitator at some Commission meetings, participatory processes were not intrinsic to the Commission's working methods. They had not been explicitly agreed with prospective commissioners. A commissioner who experienced Participatory Learning Appraisal through 'Voices for Change' thought that if this had been offered, it would have made all the difference to how the Commission worked.

At the first meeting, there was a clash of expectations. One commissioner objected to a group exercise, and others wanted to get on with the proceedings. None felt that the mutual trust needed for such exercises had been established and so in the early stages this led to most sessions being plenary.

All commissioners agreed they were not aiming for 'cosy consensus', but unmanaged tensions arose between individuals and between groups (grassroots and public life commissioners; commissioners and staff) which were harmful. The personal power of some individuals was divisive and sometimes destructive. Some people then 'held back' when they could have made useful contributions. The unresolved difficulties relating to the chairing role and a collective reluctance to intervene undoubtedly exacerbated this problem.

This experience suggests that if everyone is genuinely to be involved on equal terms, participatory processes must be negotiated and clarified with participants from the beginning. The alternative, suggested by some interviewees impatient with the process as experienced, is strong chairing and central control. This might have been more effective in controlling and encouraging different commissioners' inputs and completing the long agendas, but it would not have been consistent with the values underlying the '50/50' method.

Supporting the Commission and the commissioners

Supporting the Commission

UKCAP was responsible for administration and support. Oxfam GB provided both the facilitator and a minute-taker, who was also a policy adviser and, in the end, the author of the final draft of the report. Church Action on Poverty (CAP) provided support and advice, and the unforeseen chairing role at the meetings. Professional policy advisers/writers were also employed to assemble evidence and write the report.

Commissioners were unclear about the respective roles of the UKCAP, Oxfam and CAP workers, whose time working for the Commission was not agreed in advance. All these people were doing this as part of their wider jobs or in a self-employed capacity. This resulted in false expectations of who was responsible and available to do what. The layers of power were hidden and commissioners (and others) did not know how decisions were made. Ideally, staff support for a Commission of this kind needs to be thought through from the beginning, clarified and negotiated with the participants, with flexibility to meet new needs.

Supporting the commissioners

It was recognised from the start that grassroots commissioners would need local support to enable them to be effective in a process which was new to all of them and very different from working with their local communities. Area Steering Groups nominating grassroots commissioners were asked to ensure that they had local support, but only one commissioner actually received this throughout.

Systematic and efficient practical support from the centre was also vital. UKCAP's own fragility was a problem, since it had to depend on the bureaucratic procedures (e.g. about post and cash advances) on its host organisation, SCF. Commissioners reported receiving long papers too late for them to be read in advance.

Several commissioners needed up-front cash was to pay for travel and accommodation. Staff tried to fill the gap (sometimes from their own pockets), but the commissioners, who did not know what went on behind the scenes, perceived ad hoc responses to problems that had already arisen, rather than anticipation of their practical problems. This might have mattered less if everything else had been going smoothly. As it was, it took on disproportionate importance, symbolising to some commissioners that, despite the efforts of the highly committed staff, grassroots people were not being valued as they should.

So individual commissioners' need should be explicitly checked at the beginning and regularly reviewed and explicitly responded to. *All* commissioners would then feel confident that needs – their own and others' – were being recognised and responded to.

Reflections on the experience and learning fifteen months later

The preceding comments reflect many of the real difficulties faced by the Commission, which would need to be taken into account in similar participation processes. However, once the raw experience of being on the Commission had begun to fade, more positive feelings emerged. A few interviewees said that although it had been difficult, they saw these tensions as normal for this type of process. They had always valued the experience and been energised by it.

So the experiential nature of this *extraordinary process* (*commissioner*), the informality, laughter, passion, real honesty and energy were major features that distinguish this from other commissions. This was no ordinary set of meetings but a series of dynamic, unpredictable and often exhausting encounters, with a constant tension between seeking good processes and achieving intended outcomes. Most commissions gather people together, study 'evidence' and then issue a report. This Commission was about dealing with exchanges *between* commissioners and learning from that it was little to do with written papers. Personal experience and academic theory had the same status. Although several commissioners felt like withdrawing at different times, none did because of their commitment not to let down people experiencing poverty – they *showed and stayed.* (Many commissioners had experienced 'show and go' by politicians and officials). Most of them felt that it had been interesting, even exciting, were glad to have been involved and had made huge personal journeys.

The Commission itself became a process with its own unanticipated 'human dynamic'. Conflict and tensions were unavoidable, since they were based on *contested notions of truth, reality, method and language (staff member).* Such experiences involve exposure, vulnerability and threat. It became clear to the 'public life' commissioners that they could not simply stick to their professional role, as they would in other environments. If they were really going to tackle power relations, there was an unexpected personal aspect. They had to open themselves up and connect with feelings and emotions – their own and others'. They *all* learnt that people in poverty 'owned' and were affected by the process in a far more fundamental way than the public life commissioners.

Despite the traumas, almost all stakeholders felt that the report was worthwhile, and different from what would have been achieved without

grassroots involvement. At the review session in January 2002, grassroots commissioners reiterated that the report reflected first hand experience. The 'voices' were heard and not 'translated' by others. They had been accepted as professionals, not 'dabblers'. The commissioners and other stakeholders felt that this had been a genuinely *joint* process that had tried to live the principles of their own report: 'participation' had not been phoney.

> *In the Commission, we found the true guts of what equality, respect and participation is all about.*
> (Commissioner)

The report was generally seen as offering different insights in a different tone – it speaks from the heart and 'touches' people, avoids 'policy speak', and tries to overcome the deep mistrust felt by people on the receiving end of policies. The first draft was radically rewritten because it did not reflect the rich learning of the Commission in 'street language'; the second draft, written by a Commissioner in 'street language', was also reworked by a staff member to reflect the commissioners' inputs.

Commissioners were concerned about the lack of time to plan dissemination and follow-up. However, by early 2002, all commissioners were using the report as a tool for action – from meetings with ministers, to local workshops for elected members; from speeches and academic writing, to meetings with local groups on the ground.[8]

2 Why was the Commission set up? (History and objectives)

How the Commission came into being

The Commission was planned by the UK 'Voices for Change' steering group as the key conclusion of the work of 'Voices for Change', though funding for it was initially refused and only obtained during the second year of the project. The Commission was seen as receiving, through the 'Voices for Change' consultations, information and learning from communities experiencing poverty; 'drawing together practical local solutions'; and 'receiving direct evidence and submissions from other organisations'.[1] Out of this, a regional and national framework for action would be drawn up.

Originally, this framework was intended to contribute to a National Poverty Eradication plan with time-bound goals and targets[2] that could be used by UKCAP as a campaigning and lobbying tool to seize the opportunity of the new government. Later, it was refocused into developing a 'National Framework for Action against poverty and recommendations for change that will enable more effective participation of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion in the key decisions which affect their lives and communities'.[3] There was a perception amongst some of those involved in the 'Voices for Change' programme that this change was not negotiated with area groups: this created confusion.

'Voices for Change'

Building on an earlier UKCAP experience of bringing people experiencing poverty together,[4] both 'Voices for Change' and the Commission were planned to start at a very local level, involving people with a direct experience of poverty. It was recognised that there was a need to resource the people with the least power to take part fully, often involving capacity building/training as well as consultation; then building up to area meetings and a UK-wide meeting, and then a 'National Commission of Enquiry' – all linked through area and national steering groups. 'Voices for Change' explicitly drew on international development experience.

The 'Voices for Change' report[5] and some participants who were interviewed have identified the way in which this project moved from being a consultative to a participatory project,[6, 7] with the development of area and regional groups.

This movement was due partly to key assumptions in the funding application being challenged by experience, partly to the values, enthusiasm and commitment from partners on the ground and the UKCAP ethos, and partly to the investment by the 'Voices for Change' workers. It is clear from the report and our interviews that there was at times a divergence of opinion between the local and area groups and the UK steering group about the focus, timing and development of the 'Voices for Change' project, and the purpose, value and cost of the Commission at the end of a participatory process.

Key *assumptions* in the original 'Voices for Change' proposals were overturned during the two-year process. In particular:

- Most local UKCAP groups were not in a position to set up the local consultation work with people experiencing poverty

and had contact with these groups – there were not ready-made links in the main. Therefore 'Voices for Change' workers could not simply concentrate on developing area/regional groupings.

- Most UKCAP local members did not have staff time available for 'Voices for Change' project development – the exceptions were in Scotland (Oxfam), Plymouth (Communities against Poverty) and Wales (Church Action on Poverty).
- Regional – as opposed to area – identity was not strong in England (for example, the difficulty for groups in Cornwall of taking part in events in Bristol).

Key *learning* from the 'Voices for Change' process from the workers' reports and the interviews included the following.

Process

- The rich range and depth[8] of both the area and regional/national consultation events, with a wide range of participants with the direct experience of poverty attending, and the materials produced from these meetings.[9]
- The amount of work that grass roots people put into the process.
- The successful employment of participatory learning appraisal (PLA)[10] techniques and their use by groups in their wider work:

  Excellent – a big bonus.
  (Regional steering group member)

- The length of time to get the process off the ground and the amount of worker time needed to support the process to start and be sustained:

  The workers were excellent but spread thinly.
  (Regional steering group member)

- The difficulty of setting up the six area steering groups, and involving smaller organisations and community-based groups, especially covering wide geographical areas (e.g. rural and highland area groups in Scotland found it difficult to attend Edinburgh events).
- The significant lack of understanding on the ground of what a 'Commission' would be doing and how it connected to 'Voices for Change' – some people wanted to drop it.[11]
- The degree to which UKCAP members felt they had promised that 'Voices for Change' would have real outcomes – which *this time* would make a difference – and that what people with the direct experience of poverty had said, would be acted upon.

Results

- Both the commonalities and the differences in the experiences of poverty and the barriers to participation between people in different groups and in different geographical areas.
- The degree of anger and sense of being shut out and not listened to at grass roots level, by people with power or authority.

- Area, regional and national groups developed a life of their own, with their own identity and projects and plans.

This report is *not* an evaluation of the 'Voices for Change' project and, as we will see, the Commission struggled to connect with and draw on the learning of the project. But, in the evaluation interviews, it was difficult for participants or evaluators to separate 'Voices for Change' from the Commission, since the struggles that the Commission faced in doing *its* work lay in part in the history and learning of 'Voices for Change'.

Objectives, expectations and intended outputs/outcomes (and target audience) of the Commission's work

Thinking within UKCAP about the purpose and focus of the Commission changed over its preparation and history. The 'Commission' was originally envisaged as evolving directly from the 'Voices for Change' process and meeting only a couple of times at the end of the project to pull together the findings. As the 'Voices for Change' project developed, the idea of a more substantial Commission to take the learning forward emerged and funding was negotiated.

UKCAP 'Voices for Change' steering group notes record in May 1999 agreement that its purpose was to:

> *Recommend ways to secure the wider input of people with direct experience of poverty in decisions affecting their lives, and demonstrate whether active participation can strengthen the policy making process.*[12]

Early discussions (April 1999) with the funder, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, appeared to emphasise the continuity between the Commission and the 'Voices for Change' project (funded, by the separate Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust). It is clear from our interviews and documentation that views about funder's expectations had a strong influence on the proposal's shape. In particular that the Commission's task would not only be to bring together the findings from the regional 'Voices for Change' consultations so as to reflect the views, experiences and aspirations of marginalised communities; but to place them within a wider canvas of current public policy agendas, so as to provide a framework for action directly shaped by those in poverty. This was also the agenda for many organisations in the area groups.

By October 1999, when the writer/policy adviser post for the Commission was being recruited, there was a greater emphasis on identifying the barriers to participation by marginalised communities in decision-making structures and these groups actually making policy recommendations.

However, people involved in those funding negotiations acknowledged that the funding documents were:

> *Thin on content and left us wondering what … are we going to do. In the end we decided, let's get it going and see what happens – it's about participation so let's find out what their* [commissioners'] *views are on the obstacles and what can be discovered and learnt.*
> (Ex UK 'Voices for Change' steering group member)

While some commissioners were visited prior to the Commission by staff and steering group members, this internal lack of clarity was reflected in the discussions. In the document used in June 1999 to seek grass roots commissioner nominations, the purpose of the Commission or the target group for the report was not identified.[13]

Thus, the first three meetings of the Commission were dominated by intense discussions about its purpose and terms of reference, and the unclear remit was constantly mentioned throughout Commission meetings.

Revising its original terms of references, the Commission decided it was set up to.[14]

- 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 lcoal people's wisdom and worries are being heard and acted on in political debates and policy decisions at local, regional and national level
- Devise strategies for overcoming these barriers that both professionals and people experiencing poverty can sign up to.

Although a Plain English statement was eventually agreed, most commissioners felt that a clear focus and common purpose had not been hammered out:

> *We never got the terms of reference sorted out for ourselves and therefore we drifted.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

> *I felt pushed to rubber-stamp the terms of reference – we were all sort of swimming around.*
> (Public life commissioner)

> *The steering group should have set terms of reference instead of taking up Commission time.*
> (Public life commissioner)

> *The lack of clarity was a fundamental and the early flaw in the life of the Commission – it created confusion in terms of roles, remits and responsibilities throughout the life of the Commission.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

However, one staff member felt that the remit:

> *Was more contested than unclear – if you look at the materials sent out to all commissioners prior to their meetings … you could not have got the impression that it was meant to be about poverty in general, rather than participation … yet several commissioners obviously thought that it was.*
> (Staff)

The Commission renamed itself the 'Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power' to better reflect the focus on participation and as recognition that meaningful participation should change existing power relations and inequalities':[15]

> *There was a key tension – what are we here for? Poverty or participation? I thought it was the latter, but there was ambivalence.*
> (Public life commissioner)

Poverty and power were the bits that I went for, and I got what I wanted.
(Grass roots commissioner)

The aim was seen as to 'review and report on …' what? Poverty or participation? It became clear that it was the latter as it relates to poverty.
(UK 'Voices for Change' steering group member)

Participation is a process, not an end in itself – it just improves policy-making.
(Regional steering group member)

The lack of clarity around the remit was reflected in the UKCAP review[16] as being those tensions that UKCAP had struggled with since its inception.

These tensions (and probably unresolved and inevitable disagreements) were reflected in the continuing debates over almost the whole life of the Commission about the following:

1 Whether the *focus* was on:
- Poverty *or* participation?
- Policy *or* process? (People with the direct experience of poverty developing the policies themselves or how people can participate in policy development.)
- Identifying the devastating impact on individuals and communities of current policies; *or* changing how policy is made by putting participation on the agenda; *or* developing new strategies/policy around poverty and exclusion, or all of these?
- Examining the barriers to participation in life, such as professionals' attitudes and practices and organisational structures; *or* barriers to more participation in just the political process; *or* current examples of successful initiatives, or all of these?

2 Its *stance towards government and professionals*:
- Adopting an 'oppositional' or 'confrontational' stance to government, or one of 'critical solidarity' and 'challenging dialogue'?
- 'Blaming', 'shaming' and making the professions and politicians feel uncomfortable, or looking for alliances?
- Radical or incremental change?

3 The *nature of the report* (who the report was for, what impact it was meant to achieve):
- Producing a report aimed at high-level policy-makers *or* grass roots people, or both?

4 Whether its *approach to poverty* should be:
- Focused on issues (benefits, housing, etc.) *or* take a 'holistic' (cross-cutting) approach to groups experiencing poverty (i.e. older people, young people, refugees, travellers, etc.)?
- A 'human rights' approach, i.e. the rights as citizens to participation in, and access to information relating to, the decision-making processes that affect their lives',[17] thus the full involvement of people with the experience of poverty in all policy design and its monitoring as well as challenging existing power relations and inequalities; *or* one that emphasised an 'empowerment' perspective, linked with taking collective responsibility, i.e. helping people with the direct experience of poverty to take responsibility for their own solutions in their daily lives, through direct management of projects and programmes, or both?

5 Its relationship to the 'Voices for Change' process:
   - Directed by the 'Voices for Change' 'voices', or drawing on the 'voices' *and* commissioners' own experience prior to and during the Commission, or both?

I expected the Commission to act 'traditionally', gathering and sifting evidence and making up their own minds about it. It was not simply a regurgitation of what had gone before – it was to be on the basis of knowledge and understanding of 'Voices for Change', but not necessarily agreeing with what had come out of that.
(Staff – 'Voices for Change' steering group member)

Was the 'Voices for Change' process directing *the Commission, or was the Commission a* conduit *for 'Voices for Change'? This was never sorted out.*
(Staff)

I was drawing on my own experience, not the 'Voices for Change' process – I was speaking for me and sometimes I only had superficial experience.
(Grass roots commissioner)

However, though ambivalence, disagreement and uncertainty *did* exist, two basic aims and a growing ownership of the process did emerge from the Commission. These aims were that the 'Voices for Change' experience would be used as 'evidence' for the Commission; and that the range of different voices of people experiencing poverty would be directed at and communicated to policy-makers:

I assumed the Commission was coming out of two years' work on this, that it would be able to use stories and witness statements to get the message across. I joined the Commission because of this. I thought it would bring it together, distil and take it forward.
(Public life commissioner)

The aim was to pull all this together and to give a 'voice' and to demonstrate that people living in poverty – not *workers or staff – have views on different aspects of poverty and how it affects different groups, taking forward the 'Voices for Change' recommendations about participation and consultation in the development of policy: they're the experts.*
('Voices for Change' steering group member)

Putting this common agenda into practice proved difficult.

3 How the Commission was set up

Who was responsible

The UK 'Voices for Change' steering group (consisting initially of seven key UKCAP members[1] and including some people with the experience of poverty) was responsible for planning and managing the 'Voices for Change' project, including setting up the Commission and acquiring its funding.[2] The original members were joined in July 1999 by representatives from the 'Voices for Change' area groups, who had developed considerably through the process. In theory, it had a 50/50 membership but attendance fell off over time.

This group met monthly until after the Commission report launch but some key country and area steering groups did not attend once the Commission was set up, thus further disconnecting the Commission from the participatory process preceding it:

> *The importance of having regional steering group people at the UK 'Voices for Change' steering group became really clear – because of a lack of communication we lost the good will.*
> (Staff)

Thus, during much of the time the Commission was meeting, the steering group consisted of staff working with the Commission, from Oxfam, Save the Children and Church Action on Poverty.[3] It appears that, unlike the early days of the 'Voices for Change' project, during the life of the Commission, most steering group members did not in the main bring substantial practical experience of participatory ways of working to the group.[4]

The lack of clarity concerning the connection between the UK 'Voices for Change' steering group, the area and regional steering groups, and the Commission were major problems for commissioners. It was explicitly stated by one public life commissioner:

> *I was never really clear whose project this really was – it took me a long time to sort out* [the funders] *– UKCAP was a loose association which lacked a critical core – it was all quite opaque.*

The steering group decided the Commission nominations process and made the final decisions about its membership.

The structure of the Commission

The principle of 50/50 membership of the Commission[5] was rooted in the history of UKCAP, which had adopted this principle of inclusion in all its activities and all levels of the organisation, since its inception. The aim was to draw on the different kinds of expertise brought by Commission members from different backgrounds.

First, the 'grass roots' members were expected to be people who were experiencing or who had experienced poverty in their own lives and who had some involvement or connection with the 'Voices for Change' process. Second, 'public life' commissioners were expected to bring knowledge and experience of policies and practice concerning poverty and participation, knowledge of political decision-making and 'clout' to the Commission in the eyes of policy-makers.

The nominations process

As noted earlier, the 'Voices for Change' process had aimed to set up six 'area steering groups' covering all parts of the UK. In varying degrees,

this had occurred,[6] but they were generally more local than regional or national in practice.

Initially, all the canvassed names for 'public life' commissioners identified by the steering group had been chosen for their skills and experience, and all were based in England and were, with one exception, white.

When the process of establishing the Commission started in earnest, there was a strong desire from the active area groups to be involved in the appointment of *all* commissioners. The area steering groups were therefore asked by the UK 'Voices for Change' steering group to nominate one 'grass roots' person, while the Welsh, Scottish and Northern Ireland groups were also asked to nominate a 'public life' commissioner.[7] Four other 'public life' commissioners were approached through the UK steering group, whose notes clearly reflect the sense of responsibility that the Commission should be 'balanced'. In the end, the final Commission included eight women and four men, two of whom were from minority ethnic groups, but with no young people involved.

Public life commissioner nominations were received from the Scottish, Northern Irish and Welsh groups, and 'grass roots' commissioner nominations from all six regional groups. However, despite the criteria identified in the nominations document, the grass roots commissioners who were nominated had rarely been closely associated with the 'Voices for Change' process and in some cases knew very little about it. This had an important effect on the continuity of the Commission with the previous processes, and the extent to which it was able to take the learning and experience of the 'Voices for Change' on board as a central part of the proceedings.

One grass roots commissioner resented the fact that public life commissioners were just approached by steering group members but grass roots commissioners nominated locally had to be approved: 'it was unsavoury'.

The importance of commissioners attending at least one regional meeting and being invited to area steering groups as observers was emphasised by staff. However, not all commissioners did attend local groups and entry to steering groups had on occasion to be negotiated by commissioners. Whilst some groups ceased to meet after the Commission was set up, others continued to meet but their remit, purpose, accountability and role, and connection to the commissioners and Commission were unclear to participants.

An interviewee closely involved in 'Voices for Change' said that, although the area steering groups had wanted a part in the decisions about the Commission membership, it had been hard work to get them to nominate individuals. One reason given for the difficulty in getting grass roots commissioner nominations was the late inclusion of 'Voices for Change' regional/area steering group representatives in the 'Voices for Change' UK steering group, which led to resentment in the regions, fuelled by its constant meetings in London rather than moving around as requested.[8] The tension between the central steering group and the regions was strong – some groups had little contact, felt marginalised and found participation difficult.

Another reason for difficulty in obtaining grass roots nominations that was suggested was that those involved in 'Voices for Change' could not understand or see the point of the Commission – 'is the Commission idea rather dated now?' (regional steering group member) –

and did not feel that this was the right priority for how they should spend their time. It would not, they were reported to feel, go down well in their own communities, who might feel that the effort should be put into thinking about how to combat poverty, rather than discussing issues of participation. Certainly, it is clear from steering group notes that there was a real fear in the regions that the Commission would hijack the process and ignore the 'voices'.

However, during the life of the Commission, commissioners felt pressed by staff to take account of the process:

> *You cannot ignore two years of work.*
> (Staff)

This was initially a problem for some commissioners:

> *Why didn't the 'Voices for Change' groups elect people from there? The commissioners felt they were free-standing and had got grafted onto a previous process that they didn't know about.*
> (Public life commissioner)

> *Was it the Commission who failed to connect with 'Voices for Change' or was it 'Voices for Change' who failed to create a continuum and connection with the Commission … It was the experience of some commissioners that it often felt like it was the 'Voices for Change' process versus the Commission rather than being assisted by it.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

> *The first participatory exercise at the first meeting of the Commission was based on the assumption that the grass roots had come out of the experience – wrong!*
> (Staff)

For both sets of commissioners and the staff, the nominations process in practice appeared to be fairly ad hoc – 'everyone was floundering around the selection process' (staff) – and few of the Commissioners seemed to be aware of the process of their appointment.

During the evaluation, a staff member wondered:

> *How else can you deal with this process of getting commissioners? That is, how do you construct a Commission which is as balanced as you can make it, whilst at the same time trying to meet the areas' wish to nominate their own commissioners, when you don't know most of the people who are being put forward by the areas … in a process which is also struggling to deal seriously with the consequences of devolution …* [there was the] *central difficulty of having to invent a process for which there were no precedents.*
> (Staff)

Whatever the tensions between central and local processes, the evaluation shows that an explicit, planned nominations process, including a statement of expectations and criteria for membership and clear lines of accountability, would have created greater legitimacy within the nominations process.

Accountability

The original proposal envisaged that the grass roots members would represent member organisations; whether this simply meant being nominated by member organisations or representing their views was not clear.[9] However, at the nominations stage, UK 'Voices for Change' steering group members did not

expect Commission members to be either 'representative' or 'accountable'. Grass roots commissioners would, it was hoped, 'reflect' the voices of people experiencing poverty and (possibly) the area steering groups in particular. One grass roots commissioner felt they were 'mandated' to represent the actual 'Voices for Change' process, but, for others, this was not possible either because of the lack of previous involvement by the grass roots commissioners or the fading away of the area groups.

Some of the 'grass roots' commissioners *felt* accountable to their areas and local communities ('this part of the country needed a voice') or to particular groups in their areas (older people, for example). However, as noted above, they usually could not make this a reality because of the weakness of the area steering groups and the fact that, once the 'Voices for Change' workers left, there was no support for their continued existence. One commissioner felt sadly that the message was:

> *That bit* [area groups] *is finished and no one kept people in touch or was interested.*

The view from some of the steering group members in the regions was that:

> *The Commission got disconnected from the process – the steering group forgot the process … they said s.. off, the 'Voices for Change' way is not our vision.*
> (Area steering group member)

Others felt that, though they had been put forward by individuals or groups, they did not carry forward their remit and therefore there was no continuity of ideas:

> *We were not rooted in the 'Voices for Change' process … I was there as an individual.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

There was, then, no explicit intention that commissioners should 'represent' a region or a group. Commissioners from Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland did generally feel that one of their roles was to ensure that the Commission took account of what was happening in their respective countries. Only in one area was there regular contact for most of the life of the Commission, by both the public life and the grass roots commissioner. Even so, these commissioners felt this was unsatisfactory, believing that the work of the Commission was not a high priority for the steering group. However, usually, no formal lines of accountability were established. One commissioner noted that they had tried to have regular meetings with their 'Voices for Change' steering group but it did not happen because steering group members were too busy. Another noted: 'I felt on my own as the group was not successful'. Another regional steering group member felt that there was no contact with their commissioner, whose experience of poverty did not reflect the region's experiences.

In contrast with the grass roots commissioners, only one of the public life commissioners felt accountable in any way – mainly to local individuals and groups working on poverty issues. All the public life commissioners felt that they had been invited onto the Commission as individuals, for their personal expertise and experience, though it appears that they expected the grass roots commissioners to have been part of the 'Voices for Change' process.

The one group of people who felt very accountable and responsible in the process were those people in the regional steering groups who felt they had:

> *Enticed people with a current experience of poverty into the 'Voices for Change' process … we said there are some things we can do locally but some things can only be done nationally ... you need to talk to national policy-makers and we will help you do this.*
> (Regional steering group member)

The staff linked to the Commission knew this and also felt responsible to those people with the direct experience of poverty who had been part of the earlier process.

Support for grass roots commissioners

People living in poverty are already struggling with huge pressures and issues. Their ability to take part in consultations and commissions may be greatly limited by their circumstances, including their health, quite apart from the demands of the process itself. The 'Voices for Change' report clearly affirms this at a local level.[10]

Grass roots commissioners were therefore going to need support during the Commission process. This was clear at the beginning, and the document sent to regional steering groups asking for nominations also asked about what support would be provided. In one case, in Scotland, the idea of nominating a young person (young people had been a significant focus of the 'Voices for Change' process) was dropped because it was clear that the necessary support, which could include extra people attending Commission meetings, would not be available.

In practice, only two of the commissioners received formal support.[11] This was not through the 'Voices for Change' structures, but through local UKCAP projects or, in one situation, a local authority community development worker. This worker had worked for many years with the appointee in her role as a 'community activist'. His department agreed that support would be provided, as part of its local work on poverty. A formal 'service level agreement' identified what this would involve. It was correctly predicted that there would be a lot of paperwork, so one role was to work through this with the commissioner and discuss it with her. The worker also tried to maintain and systematise links with the area steering group. In addition, in the early days, practical support, such as suggestions for places and people the Commission should visit, came from one of the main area poverty organisations involved in 'Voices for Change', while another organisation provided a mobile phone for the commissioner's use during the life of the Commission (it was returned afterwards). This was important since she was not on the phone herself.

Several people interviewed, including the 'Voices for Change' worker while she was still in post, identified the need for practical and logistical support for attending the Commission meetings, as well as help with the papers that commissioners received. Two main aspects of this were:

- the recognition that people experiencing poverty do not have credit cards or ready cash for travel, especially when this involved long distances
- the fact that, although people can operate confidently within their own

> communities, they are not necessarily experienced in finding their way round large strange cities, especially London, where most of the meetings were held.[12]

This meant that some commissioners needed pre-booked tickets or upfront monies (to be sent by postal order in advance) to pay for the travel and accommodation, and that, where possible, people should be available to accompany and support commissioners arriving in London. UKCAP's ability to purchase bargain fares was compromised by lack of staff time as well as a lack of corporate credit cards.

At the planning stage, the use of alternate commissioners or 'supporters' was envisaged. This occurred once during the Commission, but was not used more widely because of the costs involved. 'Voices for Change' steering group members indicated in the interviews that 'supporters' had been really helpful for them in giving confidence in the meetings and with the opportunity to talk together on the train.

UKCAP was very aware of the need to meet all the costs of participation and to ensure accessibility of venues. The main problem here was that no one had formal responsibility for ensuring a smooth response to these logistical and financial obstacles – in the words of a grass roots commissioner: 'for those commissioners struggling with their own barriers and lack of resources'. The fact that they were not dealt with systematically left the commissioners feeling unsupported: they felt that their problems had not been anticipated or recognised. Commission notes and interviews constantly refer to expenses taking three months to be paid and staff using their own funds to reimburse commissioners.

We cannot be sure, but it seems likely that, if people arrived at the Commission meetings feeling anxious and stressed, this was likely to affect their concentration and confidence in contributing to the meetings themselves.

More fundamentally, the lack of strong local steering groups to which commissioners could be accountable also meant that commissioners did not have a reference group which they could consult with and gain support from. As we will see, this gap was explicitly recognised towards the end of the Commission process.

How the Commission would work

Our interviews with participants and analysis of 'Voices for Change' steering group notes and papers make it clear that an enormous amount of thought, energy and time was put into planning the Commission, though not until late in the 'Voices for Change' process. All the key issues were discussed – support to grass roots commissioners, ways of working, promotional strategy – but the notes and other materials present a picture of unfinished discussions, unclear decisions and immensely busy people doing this work alongside other commitments.

In the pre-Commission visits by staff, some prospective 'public life' commissioners identified key learning drawn from their own experience – in particular of the need for giving commissioners clear guidelines on what evidence they should be listening for; the need for strong chairing; and the need to maintain the involvement of regional steering groups as key stakeholders in the process.[13] Yet, in a move, as they saw it, not to be overly directive, the 'Voices for Change' steering group members did not act on this learning.

In particular, because of lack of time there were no initial briefing meetings with all commissioners. In retrospect, a staff member noted that not communicating the Commission brief and thoughts about the ways it would work directly was a mistake, especially for those commissioners who 'are not going to get their direction and understanding primarily from written materials but from face-to-face communication'.

In practice, throughout the Commission, the staff experienced a real and unresolved dilemma – should they go for central direction and clarity, or allow flexibility and commissioner self-determination and Commission ownership; or somehow seek both at once? Should Commission members define its agenda, ways of working, style, chairing etc., or should they be invited into a pre-set structure?

> *A lot of this revolves around the central issue of how much direction to give and how much to allow control to commissioners … we were (and are) constantly searching for the happy medium between these extremes, i.e. effectiveness and truth to our participatory principles … staff were strongly committed to the process of discovery leading to ownership.*
> (Staff)

But, one grass roots commissioner asked:

> *Why did they* [the staff] *not give the Commission a helpful steer where it was clearly and repeatedly needed?*

The answer lies in part in the issues around central control versus participation but also to the perception of two staff members (echoed by others) that:

> *The Commission would not have accepted advice.*
>
> *Staff felt they were being given a message that the Commission did not want to be directed by them, and therefore felt less able to insist on the* [clear] *remit.*

Negotiating with and clarifying with participants at the beginning the level of participatory involvement (and its limits) on offer would have been helpful but did not occur.

All commissioners were asked to commit eight to 11 days to the process. There was an expectation, at least among those who had been involved in UKCAP and the 'Voices for Change' process, that the overall style of the Commission would be 'participatory'. However, despite intense discussions at the UK Steering Group about chairing, responsibilities and the membership of the Commission, the way in which such a participatory style would work was not communicated to prospective commissioners except in the form of a three-page steering group briefing document sent out four days before the first meeting.[14] This document expressed three basic concerns:

- How to ensure that the voices of those experiencing poverty are those driving the Commission process.
- How to ensure that those who have participated in 'Voices for Change' do not feel the process has been taken from them and they still recognise it as theirs.
- How to make best use of limited time and build a good team.

Therefore the process and end product needed to be accessible, participatory,

innovative and provide an alternative model; and the product needed to be owned by those involved, able to have impact and influence, and promote action.

The paper identified two key areas which the Commission would need to decide quickly:

- How to manage themselves and their work, and operate as a team. Subgroups and the use of a facilitator were suggested.
- How to hear evidence – marketplace events, visits and participation in events like poverty audit or policy forums were suggested.

Issues were raised about the following:

- The report(s) – who it would be for and the language to be used. The ideas (probably unrealistic) of a video summary or interactive CD-ROM were also raised.
- How the process would be documented.

The paper also made useful comments about not having unrealistic expectations of a quite limited amount of time available – a caveat that was not taken on board by participants.

We have not found any evidence that this paper was ever discussed by the commissioners, and do not know if it influenced their thinking at any stage, though some of the issues were raised in staff correspondence with commissioners after the first meeting.

Commission chair

It had been decided by the 'Voices for Change' steering group not to appoint a chairperson (or persons) in advance, partly to avoid the trap of the Commission being known by the name of the chair, who also often has power to select commissioners.[15]

Early versions of the briefing note on working methods included a section on chairing but this was not the one sent out. The idea of joint or rotating chairing by a grass roots and public life commissioner respectively was raised in this early draft, along with sharing the different roles out amongst the commissioners and staff, and using an outside neutral person. However, in the end, the decision was left to the Commission.

At its second meeting, commissioners decided not to appoint a chairperson from among their ranks: it would be divisive and would stifle the voice of the person who became chair. As will be seen below, the decision was taken to ask one of the staff to act as a chair for the meetings only (the notes record this was only an interim measure, but no further changes were ever discussed). This chairperson, who was the existing chair of the UK 'Voices for Change' steering group and co-ordinator of Church Action on Poverty, would act as a facilitator and 'umpire'.

Staffing and resources

In terms of paid staff, little dedicated staff time was involved. The co-ordinator of UKCAP, whose role included work for the All-party Parliamentary Group on Poverty and the co-ordinating work of UKCAP itself, was on a very short-term contract. His predecessors had put enormous amounts of energy and time into the 'Voices for Change' process, to the detriment of the overall work of the organisation.[16] There had been a gap between co-ordinators during the crucial Commission setting-up period,

which had a significant effect on the briefing of commissioners and (presumably) the recruitment of the 'writers'.

The funding made only a nominal salary contribution and the new co-ordinator saw the role of supporting the Commission as a lower priority:

> *I'm working for UKCAP. The Commission is independent.*
> (UKCAP co-ordinator)

This gave rise to misunderstandings, since the commissioners assumed that this person was working full time for the Commission (and no clarification was ever given).

A grass roots commissioner noted (after having read the first draft of this report):

> *Such a decision about priorities was both crucial and reflected that which was unknown to the commissioners, namely the differences of opinion of the* 'Voices for Change' *as to the need for and purpose of the Commission. This was the poorest start that the Commission could have been given and was guaranteed to produce the problems of logistics and organisation which arose.*

The previous UKCAP co-ordinator and the Save the Children 'Voices for Change' seconded worker were no longer in post when the Commission started meeting, and the 'Voices for Change' development worker left to have a baby after the Commission's third meeting. This undermined continuity, especially for the area steering groups whose primary connection to 'Voices for Change' was through these workers.

The actual work to be carried out by the subsequent UKCAP staff and the specially contracted 'writers'[17] was not spelt out,[18] though the 'policy adviser/writer' post did have a job description. The writers presented a paper to the Commission on their envisaged role, but this was not discussed. Staff roles were never discussed by the Commission, leading to some commissioner expectations of their availability for the Commission's work which were not based on fact.

Two organisations, Oxfam UK (now Oxfam GB) and Church Action on Poverty (CAP), had been able to provide some monies and staff time to UKCAP and then to the Commission. For example, a part-time Oxfam policy adviser and, towards the end of the Commission's life, two media specialists[19] were hired in quick succession, to provide professional back-up.

As will be seen in the later analysis, the mismatch of expectations and confusion about management, roles and communication had a significant effect on the workings of the Commission.

In conclusion, key assumptions were made that turned out to be largely incorrect. These included the expectations that:

- grass roots Commission members would have been part of the 'Voices for Change' process
- all commissioners would be used to working in participatory ways
- grass roots commissioners would have support in undertaking the work
- grass roots commissioners would have regular contact with established and local and area groups which had longer-term sustainability
- commissioners would appoint one of their members as a chair.

4 How the Commission did its work

Commission meeting structure

The Commission met ten times between November 1999 and October 2000, nine times in London and once in Manchester (this was combined with a joint meeting with representatives from some of the area 'Voices for Change' groups). Each meeting was supported by between three and seven 'staff'. (See Chapter 5 below.)

There was considerable variation in attendance, with one person only able to attend four times and two coming five times. However, two (both grass roots commissioners) attended all the meetings and five others were able to get to between seven and nine meetings. One of these, a grass roots commissioner, joined only at the third meeting when a previously nominated commissioner dropped out, after which she had 100 per cent attendance. As mentioned earlier, one 'public life' commissioner did not attend any meetings and was subsequently deemed to have withdrawn.

Combined with the Commission's other activities – visits and meetings with policy-makers (see below) – it could be claimed that there was a reasonably consistent attendance. However, taking into account the particular mixture of grass roots and public life commissioners, the lack of contact between meetings and the intention to develop a participatory approach to the meetings themselves, the fact that several commissioners could not attend more meetings may have had an effect on the dynamics and tensions.

Participatory ways of working used

As we noted earlier, the 'Voices for Change' process moved from being a consultative to a participatory process. During the 'Voices for Change' process, participatory learning appraisal (PLA) was the main method of empowering local groups to consult with people experiencing poverty and exclusion, and of bringing grass roots and public, community and voluntary sector workers together. However, PLA was not used at any stage during the Commission process itself, perhaps because of the time involved.[1] Neither group of commissioners was 'time rich' and, knowing this, staff were inhibited about making demands beyond the agreed 'contract'.

As we have seen, the UKCAP 'Voices for Change' steering group did consider how to develop a participatory style within the Commission,[2] and an Oxfam specialist facilitator was brought in on four occasions in order to support this approach. However, though sharing 'a commitment to working in a participatory and inclusive manner'[3] had been one of the three criteria for selection of Commission members, most commissioners had no experience of this approach. Difficulties were experienced at the first meeting when some commissioners were unwilling to take part in a participatory 'getting to know each other' exercise:

> *X* [a public life commissioner] *did not like being 'bossed around' and resisted the ice-breaker.* (Staff)

There was a lot of impatience, especially from some public life commissioners, to get started and not 'time waste'. A letter from a

public life commissioner to a staff member, after the first meeting, and circulated to all commissioners, noted:

> *Let the commissioners decide how to tackle the agenda and workload and whether to use facilitators once we've agreed.*[4]

Paradoxically, as we shall see later, the lack of time in the first meeting for commissioners to share their own experiences had a profoundly destructive effect on the Commission and, though some grass roots commissioners knew this from their own experience, they did not feel able to speak until the third meeting.

It became clear at this early stage that some commissioners did not wish to work in small groups. Partly because of a lack of trust, they all wanted to be able to hear everything that was said and to contribute accordingly. All meetings were therefore almost entirely in plenary style. This in turn limited the possibilities for using techniques such as small group work, role plays, timelines and visioning, and put a considerable onus on the chair to ensure that all commissioners had the chance to contribute equally. Commissioners noted that attempts to go round the room and give everyone a chance to speak often got thwarted and the circle was not completed. Some commissioners remained extremely quiet throughout the Commission meetings and were only sometimes explicitly brought in by the chair. Sometimes grass roots commissioners were ignored and were aware of this.

It was also reported that the commissioners preferred to sit formally around a table, rather than in a more informal 'horseshoe' layout. One grass roots commissioner had advocated the latter at the first meeting but, in the view of a staff member, was 'snubbed'. Low-cost/free venues were chosen for meetings but these were often very small for the numbers of people involved and limited the possible participatory techniques that might have been used in the meetings.

Three commissioners (one grass roots and two public life) brought extensive experience and skills around participatory approaches to the group but two of these were not present at the first meeting. Few others had much direct experience of participatory working, and a commitment to these ways of working. In the absence of strong inclusive leadership in that direction, it was very difficult for this to evolve, particularly in the early meetings.

The under-use of these skills was noted by a number of commissioners and the Commission's published report *(Listen, Hear!)* acknowledges these failures:

> *We did not always get it right either; our process reflected many of the flaws we have highlighted above. Operating on a low 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 spending time getting to know each other.*[5]

> *We made all the mistakes local groups do in the way we conducted the meetings – there was a real tension between process and product.* (Commissioner)

It is interesting to note that staff generally felt that some commissioners blocked the facilitator's attempts to be participatory, whilst commissioners played down or did not remember this occurring:

The facilitator encountered strong opposition from some commissioners. It was the commissioners' choice to drop such methods and at several points insisted on pursuing plenary discussions rather than break into any more participatory group work processes.
(Staff)

I do not recall resistance to working in small groups or to sitting in a horseshoe.
(Public life commissioner)

On the whole, then, meetings appear to have been conducted in a fairly traditional style, with some use of 'brainstorming', 'pairing' and charting and 'post-it' exercises – and these are often the parts of the Commission's meetings that participants mention as being most valuable. For example, at the third meeting (February 2000), an exercise was undertaken at the suggestion of a public life commissioner. This consisted of the commissioners working in pairs (one of the few occasions when this happened) in order to analyse the 'clues' and 'gaps' in the material they had received. The aim was to identify what the Commission itself needed to find out and what was already available in the form of 'evidence'. This exercise seems to have gone well, with a great many reflections and suggestions being brought forward over a wide range of topics:

We were working together on the floor and it was one of the best meetings.
(Public life commissioner)

However, generally, as a staff member noted:

They were talking about the need to do things in a participative way, but in fact it was fairly traditional.
(Staff)

The experiential nature of the process, the informality of the proceedings, the passion and energy present in the room, and the atmosphere were the major features that would distinguish this process from other commissions, rather than the extensive use of participatory processes.

Chairing the meetings

The decision by the commissioners not to appoint one of their number as chair was noted above:

Having a chair from among the commissioners would have been too divisive. It would have given power and control but reduced involvement. Not having a chair would also avoid the problem of a Commission being known by the name of the chair, which would be wrong, given the nature of the Commission.
(Public life commissioner)

Commissioners will decide at a later stage about a chair/co-chair from the Commission itself, and also about who deals with the media. We would like a staff person to chair.
(Public life commissioner)[6]

No one wanted to be silenced by being chair.
(Public life commissioner)

The staff don't want the Commission to feel 'sat on' by the staff.
(Staff)[7]

However, two public life commissioners felt that a chair should have been appointed in advance and that this was not done because the staff did not want to be seen as imposing one:

> [In relation to the chairing] *I think the staff abdicated responsibility.*
> (Public life commissioner)

> *They abdicated leadership and the Commission was unclear how to move forward.*
> (Public life commissioner)

> *I think we were lazy.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

The chair of the UK steering group chaired the first meeting. This was intended just to cover the 'getting to know you' session in the morning, after which it was hoped that the Commission would choose one or possibly two chairs, together with allocating other roles to other commissioners. This did not happen and, at the second meeting, the commissioners went into private session to consider the matter. As reported above, the decision was made to ask this person to carry on taking the chair at meetings for a while.

One commissioner felt that the decision was the best that could have been achieved at that time.

> *People wanted to get things done, it was early on, we only got to know each other by the fifth meeting or so.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

It was very clear that the commissioners' intention was to have someone who could manage the meetings and act as a contact person for the outside world if necessary. It was not to be a chairing role in the traditional sense, for example of taking responsibility between meetings or of leading or driving the process:

> *The Commission want a chair as a referee, to ensure everyone in the Commission participates, so the Commission can model what it is telling others, and to ensure there is no jargon. This is not like being a manager.*
> (Public life commissioner)[8]

> *The commissioners were in charge and this was clear.*
> (Staff)

> *A staff chair is better – we know whom to blame.*
> (Public life commissioner)[9]

The idea was to have an 'umpire' who would:

- ensure people could speak
- *not* 'crack a whip'
- was not empowered to make decisions.

One public life commissioner felt that a permanent chair – a commissioner – should have been established from the start. The staff were seen to be in a difficult position because of possible conflicts of interests, and there was a real need for an experienced, firm and impartial chair, who would ensure that all voices were heard.

Because the Commission had already decided that they would always work in the full group, there was a great need for clear and decisive chairing so as to get through the agenda and ensure that everyone felt equal. The consensus was that this did not happen:

> *To have that group of people, you would need an exceptional person … and some of the failings in this were from the best of motives, about participation and empowerment.*
> (Staff)

You needed a very strong commissioner as a chair – some people needed limiting – they were overwhelming.
(Grass roots commissioner)

The chair was not independent and had no status.
(Grass roots commissioner)

The absence of a commissioner chair also had major implications for the policy adviser/writer post (a job-share) as they were expected to work closely with the chair in two ways:

- in ensuring (through preparing for meetings) that the process of the meetings enabled full participation of grass roots commissioners
- working between meetings to help shape the discussions and ensure the limited time was well used.[10]

It is fair to note some quite strong criticisms of the chair's style of working especially from grass roots commissioners:

There needed to be stronger leadership – a willingness to say 'I think you are doing it wrong – you can't do that'.
(Grass roots commissioner)

A big problem was the share of time – the chair was really weak – he tried in the beginning but he would not confront the abusive Commission member. There was resentment of the chair as he was not neutral ... one commissioner should have been removed from the task.
(Grass roots commissioner)

He did need to raise his voice more.
(Grass roots commissioner)

Others recognised that he had not wanted the job and it had been dumped on him:

He's a great guy and knows a lot but he wasn't the right guy for the job.
(Grass roots commissioner)

The commissioners, particularly early on, were keen to communicate the message that 'staff' were in a subservient role to them as commissioners. This … contributed to the lack of authority of the chair to exert any kind of discipline or control over the noisier commissioners.
(Staff)

A public life commissioner suggested that what was really needed was an 'honest broker' – a role which one public life commissioner did perform from time to time, and this was perceived as important and constructive. But the question remains:

How do *you support a Commission like this?*
(Staff)

We shall explore how this affected the meeting dynamics later in the report.

Agendas, meeting notes and papers

Agendas, most background papers,[11] the final version of the report and meeting notes were all produced by officers from the three organisations primarily involved (UKCAP, Oxfam UK [now Oxfam GB] and Church Action on Poverty) and by the 'writers' specially recruited for the Commission.[12] Commissioners also contributed detailed responses to the terms of reference and final report redrafts as well as papers on 'What works?', a briefing paper from the Scottish

commissioners, and the radical rewrites of the report by one public life commissioner that formed the basis of the final report. A member of the Oxfam staff took on the role of notes secretary and policy adviser, while practical arrangements fell largely to the UKCAP staff. Officers formed agendas, with invitations to commissioners to add items if they wished. After the lunchtime Commission meeting without staff, commissioners did explicitly ask for an input into agendas in future and after that they were labelled draft agendas. Some agendas were renegotiated at the beginning of meetings.[13]

Summaries of the notes were produced, although one grass roots commissioner commented that she had not been able to correct the notes, which she felt had misrepresented her views on democracy and participation. Staff had kept almost verbatim notes (up to 16 typed pages) to aid the report writing and the evaluation (they were used in both processes). They offered to circulate only the summaries, but commissioners decided they wanted to see the full versions:

> *We were very aware throughout the process … that we were not going to work in the same way as a traditional Commission might in terms of providing a huge volume of written material, as we were likely to be dealing with some people whose primary preference would not be to peruse long written reports. Hence, the discussions with commissioners first about what sort of materials they thought useful (and the different views amongst them as to how much volume they did want of course).*
> (Staff)

One grass roots commissioner felt strongly that the agendas were too packed, the notes too long and the papers too full of jargon. The papers and notes provided for the meetings were often quite long and detailed. This was a problem for many commissioners:

> *Overwhelming, and ridiculous.*
> (Public life commissioner)

> *I'm good at talking, but it's difficult to read heavy reports.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

'Paper work' and 'draft reports' were identified as key negatives in the group review.

This problem was discussed at the Commission, and there was an agreement in principle to produce shorter and Plain English papers. However, although the writers tried to do this, it was difficult in practice, and 'didn't really happen' (staff).

The 'Voices for Change' steering group had considered a rough workplan for the duration of the Commission which was circulated just before the first meeting, but this does not appear to have been discussed in detail by the commissioners, some of whom felt that everything had already been decided and 'commissioners were not in charge of the Commission process' (grass roots commissioner).

The reports coming out of the 'Voices for Change' local, area and regional consultations were not available until the Commission's third meeting, and reading and digesting them was also a real difficulty for all commissioners. Producing these consultation reports in various forms – from two pages of notes, to full transcripts, to 40-page reports with flipcharts –

had been a great problem for the local and area groups, even with staff help. There had been a lack of resources to write up the experience, the key exception being Oxfam's funding of the visual and accessible report on the Scottish 'Voices for Change' People's Parliament.[14] Taping and videoing them as originally discussed had not occurred because of funding. The policy advisers/writers produced a summary of the main themes emerging from these reports that was circulated for the third Commission meeting, which was valued by commissioners.

One problem for those writing papers (especially the 'writers') was that papers they wrote in the early stages, aiming to check out the thinking of the Commission in response to issues brought forward (e.g. on participation), were inadequately discussed and had often not been read. This created problems later on at the report-drafting stage.

Regarding the management of the meetings themselves, one public life commissioner felt that more clearly thought-through agendas would have been helpful. This would have provided the basis for breaking the agenda down into specific items, allocating time and preventing 'irrelevant' discussions. However, there was a tension here, in that this approach could have been seen and resisted as 'over-structured', inhibiting more flexible discussion. Three grass roots commissioners felt that the agendas should have been created at the beginning of each meeting by commissioners, as often happens in participatory approaches.

Another grass roots commissioner, who also felt that the handling of the meetings had been 'disastrous', saw things in a different light:

> *I'm a 'virtual' person, I don't want structure, I want to be creative … It's something we* had *to do – a horrible process to go through, but it produced a good report.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

Practical arrangements

Travel and accommodation

The need for practical support was recognised in theory, but was variable in practice. Grass roots commissioners were particularly aware of this:

> *It was OK for visits, because tickets were bought beforehand, but they should have given money upfront to commissioners who needed it. It's no good reimbursing later. They* [the commissioners affected] *got really upset about that. They felt the grass roots didn't count and they weren't being listened to and had to go through all the hoops, just like the people the Commission was writing about. It could and should have been better.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

> *Travel was very stressful. There was a problem of upfront travel costs, last-minute information about hotels, travel and so on, and I was on my own – a female on my own, going to territory unknown.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

There were also issues like the choice of hotels for those who had to travel the night before. As noted in a second application to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, the Commission had tried to use hotels that were central and accessible, so as to ensure that commissioners felt safe. One of the grass roots commissioners found the payment for expensive meals and hotels upsetting in a Commission focusing on

poverty and somehow strange when the Commission was so short of funds. A public life commissioner reported the problem that such hotels often ask for credit cards in advance. This was embarrassing and difficult for commissioners who did not have one, and was also a cause of anger. (Ironically, UKCAP itself did not have a credit card and officers had on occasion to draw cash from cash machines on their personal cards so as to provide instant reimbursement to people arriving at meetings.)

It seems clear that the problem that people living in poverty do not have spare money was anticipated, but UKCAP's and SCF's organisational arrangements could not respond to the needs. While in theory they knew that people living in poverty do not have spare money, in practice they did not respond to the real needs of the commissioners, despite strenuous efforts by staff to cover with their own (sometimes not reimbursed) funds.

Communication

As a geographically dispersed group, there was also a problem of communication. Those with email access (mainly the public life commissioners) fared best, while access to fax machines was another method of getting papers to commissioners in time for meetings. However, one grass roots commissioner did comment that papers often did not arrive on time; it appears this was due to SCF's postal system delays.[15]

One commissioner was not on the phone at home, although she was accessible through the provision of a mobile phone by a local organisation for the life of the Commission.

Again, bearing in mind that some of these issues must have been present in the 'Voices for Change' process, some of them could have been anticipated. The provision or supplementing of basic communication might even have been built into the funding application.

The meetings

Finally, there is the question of the meetings themselves. As noted above, nine of them were held in London. A number of commissioners felt quite strongly that they could have moved round the regions, perhaps linked to visits:

> *We should have practised what we preached, but minimal effort was made.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

The UK 'Voices for Change' steering group thought that London was the most accessible for those coming from afar and was the cheapest option. The Manchester meeting was in fact less well attended than all the others except the final one, but this may well have been for other reasons.

In addition, it was difficult to keep everyone together for the whole of each day-long meeting. They tended to start late, involve longer breaks than planned for (though the times planned were unrealistic), and to finish early, because of travel and stamina issues:

> *Everyone is knackered.*
> (Grass roots commissioner from minutes)[16]

On some occasions, some commissioners travelled the day before. Staying together at the same hotel provided a useful opportunity to get to know each other and to have some 'social time' and fun together. However, this process added to the overall costs of the Commission, which had assumed same-day travel in the

original costings and had seriously underestimated the costs of travel and participation support (e.g. childcare and food) for the area visits as well as Commission meetings.

One London meeting venue was felt to be satisfactory, but the other was felt (and observed) to have been 'hot and cramped'. The food was generally thought to be 'lovely'. These social details are important because they set the environment for the meetings. They can enable people to feel valued and more comfortable, and can counter the difficulties for some participants to concentrate over long days in a large formal group. Time to just be together socially, relax or have a cigarette; or the availability of 'break-out' rooms can enable or limit the possibilities for more participatory ways of working.

Use of subgroups

The Commission generally worked in plenary mode at its meetings. Until the final drafting stage for the report, the only activities undertaken by commissioners outside the meetings were the visits and meetings with policy-makers (see below). Specific tasks were not identified as part of the workplan, and no subgroups were set up. Even during Commission meetings, working groups over lunch were resisted (e.g. on the terms of reference; key messages for the report; and a subgroup to work with writers). In practice, commissioners did not take on any specialist roles until very near the end and no decision was taken about how the Commission would work between meetings, thus leaving the role of co-ordination and support almost entirely to staff.

There was a huge amount of material coming to the Commission, through the writers' reports and summaries of existing material, and through the visits and meetings with policy-makers. Fundamental issues of 'poverty' and 'participation' needed basic discussion in order to arrive at working definitions. The report-drafting process itself also generated mounds of written material. The need for subgroups was clear to some commissioners:

> *We should have had homework.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

This comment surprised a staff member who did not expect work between Commission meetings and felt that, since it was difficult for staff to service Commission meetings adequately, it would have been impossible to support subgroups. However, it is rare for commissioners of any kind to simply take part in meetings and not undertake work between them.

In September 2000, one public life commissioner redrafted the report and another spent one day with the writers redrafting the report so as to take account of what had been said in follow-up written submissions and at the September meeting of the Commission; there was then a meeting of three commissioners with staff to review the draft.

In September 2000, a few commissioners and staff also formed a 'media subgroup', which was intended to steer the process of the report's launch and surrounding publicity. The subgroup met only once.

Three speculative points can be made about the lack of subgroups in the earlier stages, though their use was encouraged in the briefing paper sent out to commissioners before the first meeting:[17]

- The lack of an agreed work programme meant that there was no obvious need for the work to be divided between commissioners, as sometimes happens within other commissions of enquiry.[18]
- As the next section of this report shows, the commissioners did not come together ('gel') as a group until quite late in the process. The conscious decision not to work in subgroups *within* the Commission meetings was taken, according to some people interviewed, because the commissioners had not yet learnt to trust each other. This could also explain why no commissioners were delegated to undertake specific tasks *outside* the meetings.
- The lack of a facilitative and trusted commissioner chair made it difficult to ask commissioners to get involved outside meetings.

As evaluators, we can see that the pressure on *all* commissioners could have been reduced by dividing the tasks among commissioners and devising a reporting system to the full Commission, but trust would have had to be established before it could have occurred. The UK 'Voices for Change' steering group had envisaged such an approach, but this does not appear to have been discussed by the commissioners themselves after the second meeting.

Dynamics in Commission meetings

Expectations and expertise

The meetings of the Commission were central to the whole process. As already noted, apart from the visits and meetings with policy-makers (see below), they were the only opportunity for commissioners to communicate with each other, except by phone and during the occasional overnight visit. The success of the Commission therefore depended heavily on the success of the meetings.

It is clear from our interviews that the dynamics changed dramatically and became much more positive over the ten meetings.

The history of how the Commission evolved and was set up shows clearly that ideas about its purpose changed over time. However, commissioners felt uncertain about what their role was, what results they were expected to achieve and what the main focus of the Commission was. This uncertainty, which continued over many meetings, particularly affected the grass roots commissioners, all of whom had been brought into the process through the 'Voices for Change' area steering groups but most of whom had not been involved in that process. One grass roots commissioner had experience of experiential counselling training, so discovering that the task was not clear and that the Commission had to devise it for themselves was not a completely new experience, although in a new context.

The public life commissioners also had their uncertainties. However, in most cases, they were more used to the notion of a formal 'Commission process' (without defining that too closely), to the roles and behaviour that might be expected of them in such a context, and to 'performing' without structures. Additionally, because of the conflicts throughout the UKCAP and 'Voices for Change' processes about the main focus – poverty or participation – some of the commissioners also felt unclear about the

value of the exercise at the beginning:

> *I had a nagging doubt about who would benefit from the Commission's work – this was scary.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

> *How will we have shifted the landscape for poor people?*
> (Public life commissioner during a Commission meeting)

Each commissioner brought an area of expertise with them, drawn from their own experience of poverty and/or from their knowledge of policies on poverty, and/or from their knowledge of participation and how decisions are made. However, apart from a brief 'getting to know you' session at the beginning of the first meeting, few opportunities were built into the process when commissioners could systematically learn about each other. This created an extreme dependence on what was said (or not said) at the meetings themselves:

> *We needed more time to get to know each other – more social time, and more time to work out whose agenda we were working to and where was the power.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

> *We needed the chance to tell our story – to justify ourselves.*
> (Public life commissioner)

All the commissioners brought considerable expertise, knowledge and experience to the Commission. The absence of full pre-Commission briefings and the early meetings did not help the commissioners to recognise and operationalise how different this Commission needed to be in the way it worked. It took at least five meetings before commissioners really started to work well together.

Communicating with each other

In this context, language and body language became extremely important, defining who spoke, who did not speak; who was listened to, who did not feel listened to; who felt respected and who did not – and how each person reacted to this:

> *I felt like a fish out of water, and in that situation, I get angry.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

> *I was angry with the academics.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

> *I didn't really understand my role – they did not talk my language.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

> *I wondered should I be here – it was not quite overwhelming but it was dominated by individuals that did not help the meeting … had X* [a commissioner] *not been there, I would have died in a corner.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

> *On day one, A and B* [grass roots commissioners] *said to me 'you must be middle class' – the grass roots people were really conscious of language and labelling – things were raised from stereotypes rather than reality – and labelling went all ways.*
> (Public life commissioner)

> *There were contested notions of truth, reality, method and language.*
> (Two staff members in different words)

As the group evaluation exercise revealed, the grass roots people had to learn public life commissioners' 'language', and feared that they were losing touch with their roots in the process. No 'public life' commissioner made a similar comment.

It seems clear that at first it was the public life commissioners, with their greater experience of relatively formal settings such as this, who were more confident and comfortable in having their say. Among this group, some were undoubtedly more vocal and 'powerful' (listened to) than others.

Similarly, among the grass roots commissioners, some were more able to express their views and feelings than others. In a situation where the person chairing the meetings was not equally strong and confident in participatory ways of working, it was easy for some people to dominate at the expense of others:

> *The loudest people hogged the meetings.*
> (Public life commissioner)

> *Some people's contribution counted for more – the noisiest ... if you were not making a lot of noise you were overlooked.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

> *Some people gave up waiting.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

> *Sometimes commissioners were allowed to get away with long monologues.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

Some public life commissioners were aware of the need to be sensitive about their degree of input:

> *I do remember consciously not saying as much as I usually would in the early meetings for fear of silencing people less used to meetings (and this may seem odd) but I felt quite silenced by some of the more assertive 'grass roots' members, whose first-hand experience I did, in fact, respect very much. I remember … one or two of the staff saying that they felt that public life commissioners were holding back too much.*
> (Public life commissioner)

Our view is that the staff perception of contested notions of truth, reality, method and language is accurate, but that participation was not managed, so that some commissioners – not always those from the grass roots – were effectively silenced. As we shall see, the use of language and labelling within the group was seen as important learning.

Valuing each other's contributions

All those interviewed agreed that the first three meetings in particular were very fraught. A somewhat confrontational 'us and them' atmosphere emerged very rapidly. There was no time for commissioners to tell their stories. This affected both groups of commissioners. If this sharing had occurred, it would have challenged some of the 'them and us' stereotyping. For grass roots commissioners, who wanted to give their views on the issues they knew about through their own personal experiences that affect their lives, this lack of sharing was unacceptable.

> *By the third meeting, some grass roots commissioners were angry that the real problems were not being discussed, while at least two public life commissioners felt impatient both with the process and with the implication that they*

could offer little because they had not experienced poverty.
(Grass roots commissioner)

Following discussions between some grass roots commissioners after the second meeting, at the third meeting:

The grass roots commissioners went armed and a strong challenge was issued: 'What do you know?'
(Grass roots commissioner)

At this and later meetings, one or two of the grass roots commissioners expressed the view that you cannot talk about poverty unless you have experienced it, thus devaluing alternative expertise brought to the Commission by the public life commissioners. At the same time, the grass roots commissioners felt that they too were undervalued by some of the public life commissioners, who tended to talk in generalities, abstractions and policy context, while they talked graphically about practical examples:

There was a problem of language, jargon, the ability to listen, which was difficult for [X and Y, grass roots commissioners]. *I had to keep pointing this out.*
(Public life commissioner)

How to value different [professional/other] *skills alongside those of grass roots wisdom?*
(Staff)

A grass roots commissioner felt so strongly that the public life commissioners did not understand where she was coming from that she made a presentation about the situation in her area and her own experience. The energy and power of that presentation can be 'heard ' in the verbatim notes:

[People in my area] *have the lowest attainment levels in education; health problems* [mental and physical]*; a high number of dysfunctional families; learning difficulties; drugs, teenage pregnancies, benefit problems … So how do you get people affected by these to participate? For example, how do you get people with learning difficulties empowered and involved? The Commission needs to think about these groups. This is the common thread in Wales, Ireland, England – it's the people you're talking about. It is a big task for anyone to do. This is why ... we do need the professionals. But they've got to come to us with no agenda but a blank sheet of paper. You could teach me to do it, and I could pass it on …*

What are the solutions? You have to identify key people within the areas … They must be OK people to work with communities to empower them. Why should we be the people to do that? Because, if it's not grass roots people, it wouldn't work. You need the community people to do the job. The locals trust us; we live in the area we work in; there are no language barriers; we have honesty; we don't patronise; we always have a common bond. 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 … You can't expect the people in the street to understand. You fight against it, but you take on the 'professional speak' yourself – a language barrier between us. You've got to go back into the streets and start listening again ... If we let people down again ... How do we give these people a fighting chance of survival?[19]

Another commissioner responding to the earlier presentation noted:

> *I have no expectations that I could empower a poor person – activists must invite other people in on their terms. It would be good if commissioners could tell personal stories of what they had learned about what worked.*[20]

Although the value of this presentation was acknowledged, it was not repeated despite plans to have presentations at each meeting.

However, not all grass roots commissioners shared this view about the need to have direct experience:

> *There was resentment of the paid well-off intellectuals but I thought it was great – we needed everybody. You don't have to be gay to believe in human rights.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

> *With poverty, some people were born into the fight, and some chose it; those in that fight really appreciate those who make that choice.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)[21]

> *I felt increasingly angry at having to justify my existence. I had thought people were here to bring their different forms of expertise, which was partly expertise from experiencing poverty, and that the point of the Commission was to marry this with more traditional forms of expertise. But I feel my contribution has been questioned. I hope we can now draw a line under this, recognising these different forms of expertise; I feel I do have something to contribute even though I have not had personal experience of poverty.*
> (Public life commissioner at a Commission meeting)[22]

In the following discussion the group identified a key role for 'allies with an affinity'. These exchanges and the learning processes involved affected almost everyone, although perhaps not as explicitly as expressed here.

There was a great deal of discussion in the Commission about 'parity of esteem' and the need for respect for the contributions of the people with the direct experience of poverty from power holders and professionals. On the Commission itself there was a variety of opinions from grass roots commissioners as to whether this had been achieved:

> *What I shared was not taken up with the seriousness compared to the professionals – it got dismissed – maybe it's my own misconceptions but it's how I feel – there was movement towards the end.*

> *It was really good because the grass roots commissioners challenged and said, 'No we're not having that'.*

> *It wasn't 'I am the big cheese' though some were naturally loud ... we were there as equals.*

> *Public life commissioners did have more sway at the beginning, but we ended up with what was right, but the grass roots commissioners weren't as respected as they should have been.*

> *The public life commissioners had 'respect' from the beginning, but the grass roots commissioners had to* earn *respect.*
> (All grass roots commissioners)

Some of the grass roots commissioners felt that their time, experience and skills should have been paid for to ensure equality.

Part of the gains of the Commission process was the discovery among the grass roots

commissioners that *their* problems were extraordinarily similar, despite the fact that they came from different geographical areas and different situations.[23]

> *I thought it was different, but had very similar issues to* [X]*. It was amazing. I thought, 'good, we're all talking the same language'.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

Some of this conflict was inevitable – whose definition of reality counted is a fundamental power struggle – and, as staff pointed out, could not be avoided. But it is sad that not all grass roots commissioners felt parity of esteem had been achieved and not all public life commissioners felt that what they *could* offer had been valued.

Understanding that the Commission was a 'new' process

It was at this point that one public life commissioner realised that this Commission was not like others, and that grass roots people were involved in a completely different way from the public life commissioners:

> *I became aware that these meetings couldn't be 'done' in the normal way. The use of a facilitator and the construction of the agenda had nominally taken this into account, but they didn't realise that people with things going on in their lives can't drop it all when they come to a meeting, so space is needed for this … I had to suppress my impatience at going off the point … and I realised that I had to put the whole of myself into the process and be willing to challenge others – not to be an unemotional academic or professional … At a later meeting, a grass roots commissioner said: 'Some of us have sold a lot of our souls to be around this table – it had better be worth it.' I realised that there was a big difference between myself as a public life commissioner and the grass roots: I can go back to a comfortable home and, if the Commission fails, it won't affect my life. This is totally different from* [the grass roots commissioner]*'s position.*
> (Public life commissioner)

There was recognition in the Commission's report that some painful learning had occurred for some public life commissioners:

> *How difficult it is to really hear another person when their experience is light years away from your own. We* [in the Commission] *too experienced similar problems ... a big torrent comes at you; you hear the words, but you don't quite get it because you are not into the experience – it is not the language or the accent, but the experience not being heard. You have to find a way of hearing it. Otherwise it's an interpretation of what the other person says – your own perceptions but not the storyteller's.*[24]

There was also a recognition that some people had got hurt:

> *People were shattered – people could have been kinder – we were all committed – some people wanted to score points.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

> *Some people turned up at the Commission looking for a fight – one commissioner was abusive – there should have been a different type of challenging.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

> *The whole group moved forward … people were quite battered in both groups and there was no need for that ... we were there to represent*

people but it got personal … should be able to criticise knowing it won't be taken personally ... really it was the lack of time.
(Grass roots commissioner)

Another grass roots commissioner, recognising the process as experiential, felt able despite the chaos 'to trust the process' – but also recognised that not everyone had previous experience to draw upon and that it required real skill to facilitate:

It's a very useful tool but it needs to be used carefully.
(Grass roots commissioner)

The Commission thus operated at two levels – as both formal and informal processes.

At the fourth meeting, there was a 'cathartic' confrontation between a grass roots and a public life commissioner. In retrospect, painful though it was at the time, the air was cleared. Grass roots commissioners became less 'careful' and more willing to speak their mind. The public life commissioners were perceived as changing, the power balanced moved and the group came together more:

The 'academics' handled criticism extraordinarily well. They shut up and their contributions became more 'commenting'.
(Public life commissioner)

It was inevitably fraught at the beginning because of the mix of cultures. It began to gel later, though there were still tensions. But power shifted in the life of the Commission … [The confrontation] *cleared the air and we now respect each other.*
(Grass roots commissioner)

There was honesty in dealing with one another and with issues.
(Grass roots commissioner 'post-it' at group evaluation session)

Somehow the open conflict had established that everyone on the Commission had a right to be there, with a 'voice' – but it had taken a long time to get there and not all commissioners felt their voice would count for much.

How issues were discussed

Reflecting on the meeting notes and the interviews it is clear that discussion was discontinuous in the early meetings, with people not really responding to what had been said and feeling the need to say the same thing many times across the meetings.

Active listening responses emerged towards the end of the process. One grass roots commissioner particularly identified that a key personal gain from the Commission was the increased capacity to listen 'rather than saying something smart'.

However, there was a general view that a lot of time was wasted in the early meetings.

There were a lot of people trying to get their own way and force things through – it was difficult to get consensus.
(Grass roots commissioner)

There is a difficulty in expecting grass roots people who have suffered discrimination, etc. to be able to contribute and participate constructively.
(Public life commissioner)

There was a clash of personality – my time is really valuable and I did not want to join in the roundabout and air my own grievances.
(Grass roots commissioner)

Staff were reported as trying their best to 'keep the peace', but for one public life commissioner this was at the expense of structure and progress with the substantive task:

> *Harmony took precedence over structure and direction … It was frustrating to be seen as 'Stalinist' because of my desire for properly organised meetings and discussions. We should have had a working practice where everyone felt equal and included. The process was wrong.*
> (Public life commissioner)

Ironically, other commissioners felt that too much had been 'fixed' beforehand:

> *There was a tension. UKCAP wanted to hit the ground running, but the Commission needed time to get to know each other and each other's skills and to create an agenda. We felt pushed to make rubber-stamping decisions that had been predetermined by staff.*
> (Public life commissioner)

> *It was unclear from the start who was deciding things – the steering group members, writers, staff, others.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

Again, a tension emerges between central control and letting participants have their heads. The reality of the collective inability to intervene is well summed up by a staff member:

> *Everyone thought the power lay with the others.*
> (Staff)

Some commissioners and others were aware that particular commissioners had played bridging and/or challenging roles:

> *I had to challenge – 'Are you listening?' – but it is a two-way door and you need to give people space to change … part of my role was to be in the middle at times.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

> *There were prejudices to be dropped on both sides.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

> *The Scottish commissioners were 'the challengers' – that was sometimes difficult but usually there was important learning.*
> (Public life commissioner)

The question arises of whether this process could have been 'managed' in a way that produced mutual respect while avoiding as much confrontation. Several people commented that the presence of a professional facilitator at some of the later meetings had been helpful:

> *I don't think that a residential would – or necessarily should – have avoided the confrontations that took place within the group. Although our failure to resolve some of the ambiguities about the purpose of the Commission, etc. didn't help, at the heart of the Commission was a contested notion of truth, reality, method and language between the two worlds of the grass roots and public life commissioners ... no amount of group process could have avoided the need for this to be worked through.*
> (Staff)

> *Later on it was more relaxed and participative, maybe because of* [the facilitator]*'s encouragement to look at evidence and see how we would and should respond to it – a practical approach.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

Again, while some of these conflicts were inevitable, a more explicit negotiation at the beginning between staff and commissioners on what was possible given the limitations of time and budget would have been helpful. On the other hand, some staff seemed concerned that certain commissioners might have withdrawn and that this would have been a great loss.

Learning to work as a group

The main conclusion drawn from the group evaluation exercise reflecting on the process was that more time should have been spent at the beginning on enabling people to get to know each other and what they were bringing to the Commission's work. The process was thus far more 'developmental' than had been negotiated with participants:

> *It took a long time but people did become more of a group – we just needed more time – it was no one's fault.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

This in fact paralleled the similar experience of the preceding 'Voices for Change' project, where again the need for development time was greatly underestimated.

However, some people interviewed felt that the tensions and conflicts were inevitable and had to be worked through. The Commission had hit the same barriers to people with the direct experience of poverty participating in decision-making and the same issues that made any kind of real communication and joint work difficult, as the 'Voices for Change' groups had identified:

> *This was not like a traditional Commission, because people* had *to have confidence in each other, and this was a huge hurdle for some … The pain was part of the process, you couldn't avoid it.*
> (UK steering group member)

> *We became another new process and, though we were shaped by the 'Voices for Change' interaction, we were not part of the broad experience.*
> (Public life commissioner)

Most people interviewed felt that a 48-hour residential would have provided time to clarify and agree language and ground rules (chairing, agenda formation and notes), and would have helped the commissioners to get to know each other. This would have been very helpful to the overall process:

> *We should have had a weekend away and got to know each other and got the 'crap' out of the way.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

One staff member thought that, if ground rules had been developed, they would not have been kept. However, this view could underestimate the degree to which commissioners would have challenged such behaviour and themselves managed the boundaries if they had felt empowered to do so.

It is clear that a number of commissioners were deeply unhappy about the dynamics at times and seriously thought about withdrawal:

> *At times I felt out on a limb.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

> *I got a phone call from a commissioner about the meeting – lobbying really – and I nearly did not come.*
> (Public life commissioner)

I didn't want to go back.
(Grass roots commissioner)

I felt on the verge of not coming back.
(Grass roots commissioner)

When one commissioner left a Commission meeting early and upset, another identified that this commissioner had felt excluded and ignored. This induced high levels of guilt amongst some commissioners, and it was clear to us, as observers, that it was psychologically (and practically) difficult to 'challenge' what grass roots people said.

It would be easy to characterise the Commission as divided simply between grass roots and public life commissioners. But the observation and interviews confirmed the existence of a number of other splits and alliances between:

- commissioners who felt that other commissioners were abusive and unwilling to give people the space to change
- commissioners who valued participatory approaches and those who did not
- commissioners with combative and challenging styles and those who were quieter and needed encouragement to participate
- commissioners who did and did not feel valued and listened to
- commissioners who sought to bridge the divides and those who emphasised the divisions
- commissioners as a whole and staff
- smokers and non-smokers, those who travelled and non-travellers.

What the initial interviews and the minutes do not fully reflect is the 'energy and dynamism of the meetings' (public life commissioner). They were interesting, often exciting, creative and visibly alive. One commissioner noted:

Some meetings were incredibly challenging. They were very difficult at times, but with very high levels of energy. When they gelled, it was very positive. I always came out feeling 'charged' rather than exhausted.
(Public life commissioner)

This was no ordinary set of meetings but dynamic, unpredictable and often exhausting encounters.

Visits by the Commission

The draft timetable drawn up by the 'Voices for Change' steering group originally envisaged that the Commission might use two of its meetings to 'take evidence'. This timetable was sent out to the commissioners four days before the Commission first met, along with the previously mentioned 'working methods' paper, which also suggested visits as a possible way of working. Discussions at the first two meetings led to the idea that the commissioners should be carrying out visits *in addition to* the planned ten meetings (one public life commissioner commented that 'this was not in the original "contract"').

One reason for this, recorded in the notes of the Commission, was the increasingly evident disconnection of the Commission from the 'Voices for Change' process, and the feeling among staff and most commissioners that they

should themselves be hearing and making sense of the 'voices'. Commissioners also wanted to re-engage with area steering groups and local people involved in the 'Voices for Change' process. One public life commissioner who had experience of listening to citizen hearings knew the value of commissioners gaining a common body of experience together. Such visits would also, it was thought, add to the credibility of the Commission's findings and recommendations. Their overall focus was to be the successes and problems encountered by communities on the ground in making participation work.

The UK steering group identified the purpose of the visits as filling in the gaps in the groups represented so far in 'Voices for Change' (e.g. travellers); meeting groups who have participated successfully; and making links and connections between areas (e.g. Cornwall and Northern Ireland over 'Objective 1'). At the Commission's second and third meetings, ideas were put forward about places to visit and issues to explore. It was also agreed that, if possible, visits should be undertaken by a combination of grass roots and public life commissioners, in some cases accompanied by one of the commissioned writers or staff. Reports of the visits would be written and fed back to the full Commission. The lack of allocated staff time to do this was an issue. However, no consistent set of issues and questions for the visits was agreed, though a useful brainstorming exercise did agree a potential list.

It was clear that far more ideas were being put forward than could in practice be accommodated, particularly since the original costings of the Commission had not made provision for any visits.[25] The UKCAP office, with the help of the 'Voices for Change' co-ordinator (still in post at that time) and some of the 'Voices for Change' area groups, used their local knowledge to arrange visits in most parts of the UK, taking into account specific suggestions by Commission members where possible. The constraints of resources, availability of commissioners and those to be visited, and the need for speed, led to seven visits being undertaken. These covered Cornwall, Plymouth, Hull, Northern Ireland, Glasgow, North Wales and London.

Most people interviewed, particularly the commissioners, felt that the visits had been well organised and informative. They provided a real chance to observe 'good practice', such as an estate where the tenants had formed an Estate Management Board and were 100 per cent in control, or where 'participatory appraisal' techniques had drawn people in the community into work both on poverty and on participation.

> *They were brilliant – a highlight of the Commission. We could choose where to go, and they made an important contribution to the Commission's thinking.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

> *They were inclusive of the 'Voices for Change' people and really useful and constructive.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

The visits also stimulated discussion about different aspects of poverty, for example income poverty, the difficulties arising from poor services, the particular problems faced by young people experiencing poverty, or housing-related issues. Within this variety, a public life commissioner felt that:

The key issue was how to make the links with participation.

However, not all commissioners found the visits as useful as they would have liked. In one visit, a local grass roots commissioner did all the talking, thus blocking the visiting commissioners' contact with local people. This was a frustrating experience.

Some commissioners felt that they were clear what they were looking for on the visits,[26] although 'uniform guidance on this would have helped' (public life commissioner). Others felt that some of the places chosen were not the most useful for their purpose, and that it was 'a bit haphazard' who went where and who would host the visit. It continued to be difficult to make the connection with the 'Voices for Change' project since only some of the places visited had been involved in this. One 'host' (a member of the UK 'Voices for Change' steering group) commented that, although he was happy that the Commission had visited his organisation, their lack of pre-visit briefing had possibly limited its usefulness.

The visits were discussed in some detail at the following Commission meetings (they were spread over three meetings). The excitement of the feedback discussions is evident: these visits had really moved some commissioners' understanding. Meeting the 'Voices for Change' participants led to a change of perspective for many commissioners. A staff member noted:

Another amazing development during the life of the Commission was that they … ended up being fiercely protective of the need to reflect 'Voices for Change' voices in what they said.
(Staff)

However, the notes of the meetings do not reveal how the issues discovered were to be drawn out for inclusion in the final report. This may explain why two public life commissioners felt that the visits had not been used enough in the final report.

One 'spin-off' from the visits was the opportunity for commissioners to get to know each other better. This was of course confined to the people going on each visit, but this was felt to have helped the rather slow 'gelling' process of the Commission as a whole.

Joint meeting with the area steering groups

Links between 'Voices for Change' area groups and the Commission were planned as part of the process and Commission minutes were sent to steering group contacts, but there were problems of time and resources. The national meeting of 'Voices for Change' area and national steering groups in Manchester in June 2000 was planned both as a review of 'Voices for Change' and as an opportunity for the area steering groups to feed into the Commission's work. It was hoped, despite the loss of the 'Voices for Change' workers and the dropping attendance at the UK 'Voices for Change' steering group, that it could be an iterative or new community development process, through which the area groups would comment on the report structure presented by the writers and then on drafts of the report. One public life commissioner in particular felt the need for accountability to the people on the ground through a consultative meeting about ideas for the report.

However, the attendance by area group people at the meeting in Manchester was poor,

with most participants not having been deeply involved in the 'Voices for Change' process and no representation from Scotland. One grass roots regional representative had found some of the commissioners 'snooty – not real' and had not felt comfortable. One of the grass roots commissioners felt that the joint meeting was a waste of time and that all it had done was to go over old ground, but others felt it had been useful. At a facilitated session, area group members commented on the initial outline of the draft report, challenging its language, but broadly accepted its contents, and they developed the project timeline which was used in the Commission report (an amended version of this is shown in Figure 1). The discussion at the joint meeting with commissioners included ideas about how to include more of a regional/country flavour in the final report.

In part, the poor meeting attendance reflects the collapse of some of the area groups without continuing support; in part, the continuing unhappiness about the Commission:

> *We felt abandoned when the 'Voices for Change' workers left.*
> (Regional steering group member)

Discussion at a later Commission meeting reflected a very clear understanding of what had occurred and a decision was made that the final report should acknowledge this failure. The Commission's report noted that it had 'got it wrong in thinking that area groups would stay involved without regular dialogue with us'.[27] They realised that by not linking the commissioners to the area groups they had lost a key element of legitimation for the Commission's work:

> *It will make our work difficult too.*[28]

For some commissioners, there were tensions between their roles as commissioners and grass roots people. This surfaced in the Commission meetings when concern was expressed that staff were not allowing grass roots people to attend a participatory appraisal training session in the North:

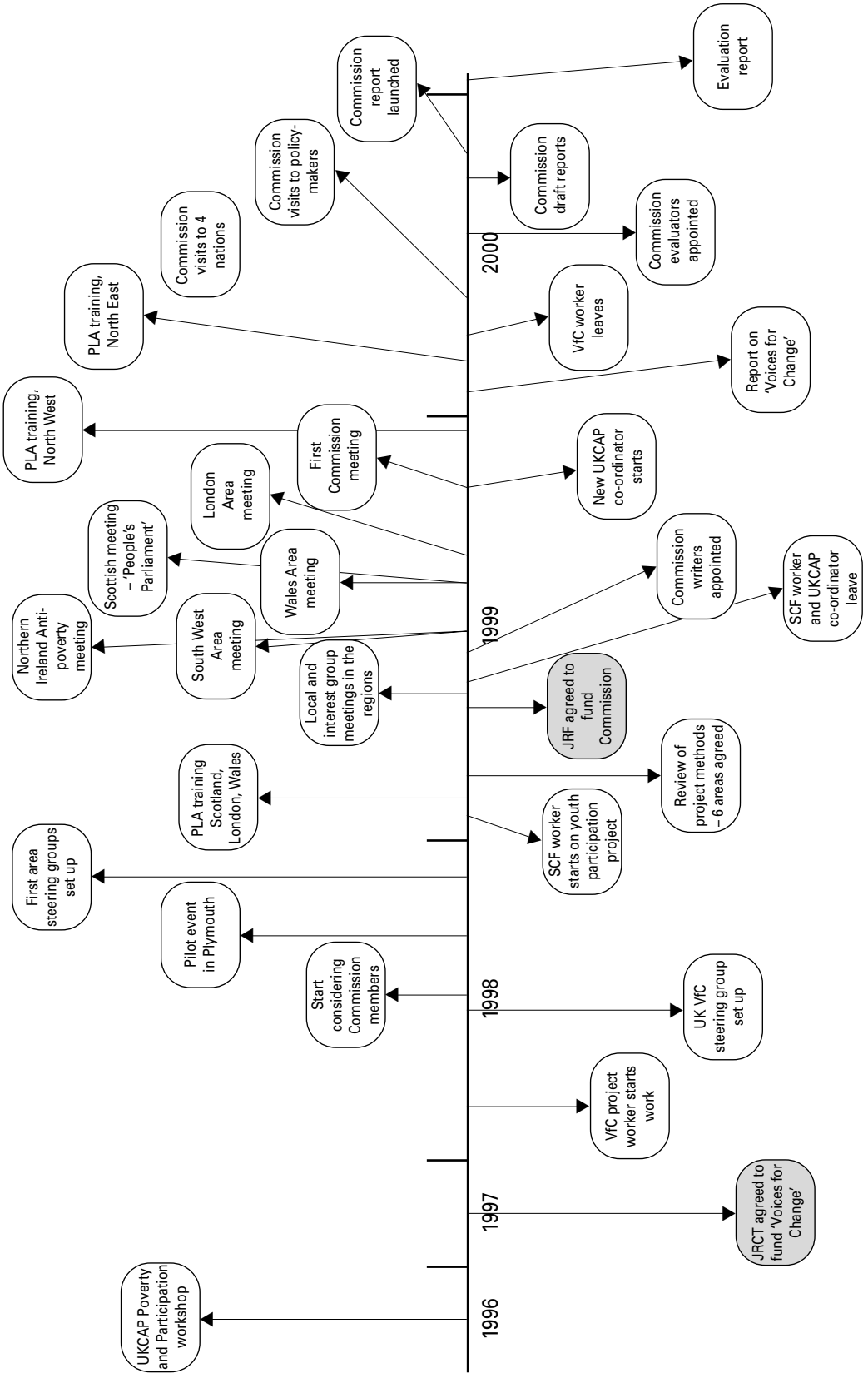
> *This Commission is laying on this facility; it should have been available to commissioners. Part of the Commission's responsibility is to arm you to be the best you can as a commissioner. And, when we talk about the report which will be written about how the Commission has been run, I want that to go in.*
> (Grass roots commissioner in the meeting notes)

The staff were concerned that commissioners attending local training might not give local people a chance to have their own event:

> *It was explained that these events had not really been set up to include commissioners at all and had a very specific focus with only local people attending ... We may have made a mistake; but we thought that commissioners would be imposing themselves on the groups who had made it clear they wanted to own their own process and might even mean people were less confident in participating in this initial training.*

However, this sense of being shut out of opportunities and divided from other grass roots people from their areas led one commissioner not to attend the joint meeting with area steering group people. Again, a more open sharing with commissioners of the need to balance representation from different areas, and the difficulties and the learning from the 'Voices

Figure 1 UKCAP 'Voices for Change'/Commission on Poverty Participation and Power timeline of key events, 1996–2001



for Change' project would have helped them to understand better (though not necessarily to agree with) the staff perspective.

Meetings with policy-makers

Like the regional visits by commissioners, meetings with 'policy-makers' had not been envisaged in the original 'Voices for Change' steering group plan of work. However, it was always clear in the minds of some of the people driving the work of the Commission (especially those from the large voluntary organisations and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation funders) that the Commission's main 'product' should be recommendations for policy-makers.

A study of the notes of the Commission's meetings does not clearly identify how the idea of actually meeting with policy-makers crystallised. It appears that it was one of the commissioners who had been involved in the Lawrence Inquiry who brought their approach to this Commission. Inquiry members had gone to see policy people before they wrote their report, so that they could talk to them about their initial findings and get their reactions to these on the record, and then put them in the report. This Commission then took the same approach.

There was some discussion at the fourth meeting about the utility, timing and targeting of such action. Some ambitious ideas about whom to try to meet (e.g. the Chancellor of the Exchequer) were canvassed, and at one stage the Commission brainstormed the issue in some detail.

Constraints of resources, time and the availability and willingness of 'policy-makers' to discuss the main issues with the Commission meant that decisions could not be taken at the Commission meeting about whom to meet or who should represent the Commission. These decisions were taken by the UK steering group, taking into account the Commission's discussions and the decision in principle that each visit should include at least one grass roots and one public life commissioner. With limited staff, it was a huge task to set up and co-ordinate this process. One commissioner found out that a visit would be to officials rather than to ministers and thought it was not worth pursuing the idea of the visit at all. Some grass roots commissioners felt they were overlooked in the selection processes and that staff when challenged had given unsatisfactory answers.

The meetings took place in July and August 2000.[29] For each meeting, a member of the 'staff' group prepared very detailed guidelines covering questions, note-taking and briefing about the department and policy-maker, which were found to be very helpful by the commissioners involved.

There had been some debate about whether it was right to try to arrange these meetings when the Commission had not yet reached the stage of making recommendations. However, the consensus was that it would be sensible to have a realistic idea of the policy context at an earlier stage, in the hope that recommendations would fall on fertile and pre-prepared ground, and that they would be seen to be realistic.

The meetings therefore aimed to raise the key issues from the Commission and 'Voices for Change' process relevant to that policy-maker; to ask what had been done in response to these issues; and to check their receptivity to the question of participation by people experiencing poverty in policy development and decision-making.

All the visits were reported to have been interesting, constructive and informative, and many commissioners were surprised at the policy-makers' openness and the positive nature of the experience:

> *X* [policy-maker] *was quite direct and receptive and positive.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

> *There was a genuine dialogue. They* [the policy-makers] *were interested in the Commission, and it was useful to find out how policy-makers work.*
> (Public life commissioner)

> *It was one of the successes of the Commission. There was good discussion of important issues, and they were willing to listen and take the Commission seriously.*
> (Staff)

For one staff member, the meetings also underlined the need for 'political nous' in relation to the Commission's work. Some valuable commitments were made, and the commissioners gained insight into current positions, and the government's much greater interest in meeting people with the direct experience of poverty rather than public life commissioners or representatives of large poverty-related voluntary organisations. However, there were also classic challenges to grass roots commissioners around participatory democracy – whom do you represent? This was countered by a useful distinction made by a grass roots commissioner at a Commission meeting and incorporated into the report, about being a 'connector' rather than a 'representative'.

Each meeting was written up by the staff member who was present. The notes were then checked with the policy-makers in order to ensure accuracy and quotability. The meetings that had taken place by then were discussed at the Commission's meeting in July 2000.

Points from some of the meetings were incorporated in the final report. However, one commissioner felt that less use had been made of them than might have been hoped.

It is clear that, along with the visits, the meetings with policy-makers were one of the most successful parts of the Commission's work.

Writing and agreeing the report

The background

The report was to be the main and only output from the Commission. This was clear from the start and did not change throughout the process.[30] 'Writers' were hired specifically for the purpose of writing the report. They were present at all the Commission's meetings and at some of the visits too. However, although they were brought up in discussion from time to time, four key tensions (and probably disagreements) were never really resolved despite quite a number of Commission discussions.[31] These were as follows:

- What was the main purpose of the report?
- How was it linked to the 'Voices for Change' Project?
- Who was/were the main audience(s)?
- What would be the most appropriate style and language?

Other questions, such as structure, length, title and content, were all intimately linked with these issues. Because the basic conflicts about

the Commission's purpose remained contested, these secondary but vital questions were also never resolved.

The audience for the report could therefore be identified as, on the one hand, the 'community' of policy-makers (at different levels, although this was not clarified then), and, on the other, the member organisations of UKCAP, who were perceived as representing communities and voluntary organisations of people experiencing poverty. This would pose a problem for the report writers, since it could be expected that a policy-driven style would not necessarily appeal to very local organisations and a plain, punchy, user-friendly style could alienate policy-makers.

Inevitably, the task of negotiating the Commission's funding had fallen on a few shoulders, mainly of those from the larger voluntary organisations involved in UKCAP. The key ideas about the intended nature of the report were therefore in these people's heads. Changes in personnel, and the withdrawal of certain key people from an active role in the UK 'Voices for Change' steering group, meant that the staff who were in practice responsible for the running of the Commission (see Chapter 6) either did not know the 'institutional history' or had not 'bought into' it fully – and so neither did the commissioners. This, the separation from the 'Voices for Change' process, and the lack of direct quotable voices in much of the 'Voices for Change' materials, did not help discussions with the Commission about what was expected.

It appears that the way the proposal had been discussed across time meant that no single document was available that incorporated the purpose and focus of the Commission's report. Debating the nature of the report – which came late in the Commission process – brought up all the unresolved conflicts about the purpose of the Commission. The Commission therefore had no clear point of reference when considering the nature of the report.

Reflecting their original agendas, different commissioners had different expectations and different loyalties. Some leant heavily towards the need to influence the policy-makers and the media, and others felt that the prime role of the Commission was to report the voices of the communities of people experiencing poverty to policy-makers in ways they would recognise. The latter view was reinforced after the Commission's seven visits, which some commissioners felt had raised the expectations of people in local areas of what the Commission would be producing and achieving.

These two aims were not mutually exclusive – and had indeed been part of the original vision – but it was in reality very difficult for the Commission, and in particular for the writers, to accommodate them in a single document in the time available.

The writing process

During the early Commission meetings, the writers were collecting material and listening to the Commission's deliberations. However, they received no guidance on how they were to tackle the task of writing the report. At the first Commission meeting a participatory exercise was undertaken to think about what the main messages should be when the Commission's report was produced next year, with two groups looking at newspapers (the *Daily Glitter* and the *Daily Intellectual*) and one doing a radio interview. The meeting notes record:

An emphasis was on something different, that has impact, that is practical, that poses a challenge … the message should not reinforce stereotypes such as 'the poor need help'.

At the end of June, when time was getting short, the writers presented an outline report. This was considered by a meeting of people connected in some way with the 'Voices for Change' area steering groups,[32] then through feedback from that group to the Commission and then by the Commission itself. At this stage, some issues of content, style, audience and possible recommendations were discussed for the first time. Some detailed comments were made, but the overall tone was one of satisfaction with the proposed report.

The plan was for a first draft to be prepared for the July meeting. A second draft, taking into account commissioners' (and 'Voices for Change' area steering groups') comments, would be finalised at the September meeting, in preparation for the proposed launch on 17 October. (The area groups did not see the final report before publication because of time pressures but had seen earlier drafts.) The report was to be drafted by the writers, with no direct input from commissioners at this stage.

The first draft was then presented to the July meeting of the Commission, which ten of the 12 commissioners attended. Prior to the meeting, a short paper had also been prepared by the commissioners from Scotland, one of whom was a journalist. This suggested a much tougher, challenging, punchy and user-friendly style, which would grab the attention of the reader. Some commissioners felt that these messages had been given at earlier meetings and ignored.[33]

At the meeting there was a real feeling that the draft report did not reflect what was said at the first meeting about how *this* Commission and report would be different from others. It was at this stage that the Commission began to see that they faced some real alternatives in how to present the report and what it should include.

Many points were made, both about the style of the draft report and about its content. It was felt that there was not enough 'live' material, for example from the 'Voices for Change' process and from the Commission's own work, and that case studies should be used to make a point, not simply to prove that the Commission had visited. Recommendations were also discussed, in more detail than at the previous meeting, but still at a very general level.[34] However, as with all previous meetings, no 'action points' or 'agreements' were recorded.

Commissioners were asked to submit detailed written comments after the meeting. The writers were then asked to take all this into account when writing the second draft. As several people interviewed said, this was 'an almost impossible task'.

The difficulties continued in the period leading up to the Commission's ninth meeting, which had been planned to be the last before the launch in October. The next draft of the report was sent out, but, in an email to commissioners and staff before the meeting, the Scottish commissioners expressed major concerns with the draft report because in their view it did not:

- reflect the voices of people experiencing poverty and the original steering groups
- reflect the vitality of commissioners' debates at meetings
- use plain enough language

- provide a clear analysis or an easy-to-follow structure
- provide any media/press angle
- integrate the visits into the body of the report
- reflect the bold and challenging observations made during the course of the year.

The commissioners from Scotland felt they had to try and 'interrupt the proceedings' at this final stage. They saw the need as obvious, but believed no one was willing to say that everything had to be stopped in its tracks. One problem they felt was that people were not reading the draft – they were put off by the first few pages and the writers' email feedback template was not suitable for suggestions for major changes.

The public life commissioner from Scotland tried to get in touch with commissioners the weekend before the meeting, though she was highly conscious of the work put in by the writers and that there was no more money. As she saw it the problem with the writers' draft was that it was trying to please everyone and in fact pleased no one. It was not 'academic', and the grass roots felt unable to associate themselves with it. However, they had given up: 'what can we do?' She felt it was necessary to check out everyone else's reactions before she could raise the question of rewriting the report:

> *I wouldn't have gone ahead if others hadn't agreed. The Scottish commissioners couldn't be a minority report … I tried to be constructive – I was not just knocking the previous draft.*
> (Public life commissioner)

She felt she was sufficiently mandated to start writing an alternative report.

Thus, at the September meeting, the Commission was required to discuss four documents:

- the second draft of the final report (prepared by the 'writers')
- an alternative (unfinished) report (prepared by the public life commissioner)
- a draft executive summary (prepared by a media consultant)
- draft recommendations (prepared by the Oxfam policy adviser).

This was a complex task within a very tight timetable. The facilitator who had been brought into some of the earlier meetings was present. She devised an exercise for commissioners to work in pairs to draw out the key messages that commissioners would not want to be 'lost' in the report. This was a useful and constructive session, underlined by the anxiety most commissioners felt about making sure the report had the *right* impact on the *right* people. A number of commissioners felt that doing this exercise earlier and making connections with an exercise at the Commission's first meeting on expectations and media communication would have been very helpful for the writers.

The staff were not expecting a 'minority' report and, for a while, despite bridging roles played by some commissioners during the meeting, and active negotiations during the breaks, it looked as if the whole process might break down:

I think it is quite difficult to convey the fact that many people were torn … they agreed with some of the criticisms of the draft report but disagreed very much with the way and the tone in which this was put forward, and also had reservations about the alternative suggestions.
(Staff)

Finally it was agreed the key messages the report needed to include were:

- respect
- phoney participation
- anger about 'failed' participation
- passivity is the result of a lack of participation, not the cause
- the need to shift power – rhetoric to reality
- the need to consider how to do it: capacity building for people experiencing poverty and professionals
- 'this is what people are saying to us' (i.e. direct messages about 'good' and 'bad' practice).

The key issues that needed to be changed were said to be about the report's style and language rather than its content:

Policy speak was not acceptable.
(Staff)

One public life commissioner was seen as turning powerful negative messages in the alternative draft into positive ones that were still faithful to the strong views being expressed. Short, snappy recommendations were produced by the policy adviser, to the surprise of at least one commissioner, and accepted by the commissioners.

The result of the discussion of the documents was that a further (third) draft would be needed. It was agreed that the public life commissioner from Scotland would redraft the report (her employers giving her a day off to do so), and then a small group of commissioners (in the end it was just one) would spend a day with the writers,[35] aiming for a report which would be acceptable to the whole Commission.

After the redraft of the report and another commissioner getting together with the writers, the Oxfam policy adviser had a meeting with three commissioners. She felt it was a good meeting with grass roots and public life commissioners and staff working well together:

It was incredibly useful to me in revising the draft afterwards … much easier to understand one another's points of view and communicate because we were fewer people.
(Staff)

It soon became clear that a final report could not be agreed in time for the original timetable to be met. In mid-September, when this third draft of the report was being sent to commissioners for comment, the UKCAP 'Voices for Change' steering group[36] took the decision to postpone the launch. This was done on the advice of the media consultant and the Scottish 'Voices for Change' steering group which had commented in detail on the second draft. The publishing timetable was by this time impossible and it was argued that a better event would take place if it was properly planned. The commissioners appear to have accepted this as an inevitable result of the report process being so tortuous.

In October 2000, on the date of the original launch, the Commission met for its final meeting. Only four commissioners attended, all 'grass roots'. However, there had been a good set of written responses from commissioners to the third draft. This enabled those commissioners present, in a very equal process with the staff, to consider how to proceed and, in particular, to finalise the key recommendations.

Finally, the fourth and final draft of the report was written by the Oxfam staff member who had been present throughout the process and who had acted as notes secretary and policy adviser. This was seen as a positive move by all of the people interviewed. It was generally felt that she had managed to combine all the previous versions and comments in an admirable way:

> *A marvellous job.*
> (A number of commissioners)

> *It was a compromise as she had the mandate.*
> (Staff)

However, one grass roots commissioner, commenting on the draft of this report, later felt:

> *With the lack of opportunity to endorse rewrites some commissioners felt that the final report was a minority report.*

It is clear from the interviews and documentation that the staff time involved in working with the printers and publishers was considerable. Staff had a real struggle to get the printers/designers/publishers to publish the report in the way the Commission wanted it to look – grass roots accessible, punchy, full of voices.

> *The first designs were completely dire; this is important as it shows some of the practical obstacles in getting messages across differently.*
> (Staff)

The intervention by the commissioners from Scotland had a significant effect on the report's style, language and content. It is not clear whether other commissioners would have challenged the early drafts without this intervention, followed by time being made available by two public life commissioners to redraft the report:

> *The report-writing was a disaster. It was the wrong way round, driven by staff and writers, not commissioners. It had to be 'handed back' at the last minute. The writers only did what they were asked (it wasn't their fault), but no one had the authority to say 'this isn't working'. X* [a public life commissioner] *was the only person to do this.*
> (Staff)

Commissioners reflected on the gap between the verbal passion experienced at the meetings and what gets written down:

> *Things had been feisty in the meetings and then they looked like consensus in the notes.*
> (Public life commissioner)

Interviewees felt that the Commission itself had experienced exactly the same issues in its report-writing as it was raising as a key message to go out in the report, namely, that it was very hard to achieve a process of real communication and joint and equal work between people with the direct experience of poverty and professionals. Getting the style right was seen as crucial.

How people felt about the report

Generally, commissioners felt positive about the report: it was 'different' and did represent the commissioners' views:

> *It's not bad … it was not a waste of time.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

> *I felt quite pleased with the report – it was as good as it could have been – X* [a policy-maker] *told me that it was very different and very good.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

> *We got the balance right between poverty and power and participation – it was quite a strategic move – it was a warning.*
> (Public life commissioner)

> *It was good in the end, neither 'academic' nor 'street talk'. It was not watered down as a result of consensus – most commissioners felt that it does encapsulate theirs and the people's views.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

> *I felt hugely for* [the writers], *whose professionalism was being rubbished, and for* [the staff] *who had to handle it.* [The alternative draft] *was compelling reading but very divisive in style … The final result was a 'different' report – good, but limited in how far it takes the debate forward.*
> (Public life commissioner)

> *The emotions, anger, insights and stories are powerful.*
> (UK 'Voices for Change' steering group member)

> *It's a message about feelings, not policies.*
> (Staff)

> *It was really difficult to be faithful to the 'Voices for Change' process, to put it as it is, in raw words and be readable – it was a genuine attempt to speak to a wide audience.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

> *The report is a by-product of a process of listening and learning.*
> (Public life commissioner)

> *It's quite good – not confusing – I can read it.*
> (Grass roots 'Voices for Change' steering group member)

The visual style and layout of the report were generally valued. It included many direct quotations, cartoons drawn by the son of one commissioner using the ideas that had arisen out of the Commission,[37] timelines, and the results of a 'Voices for Change' barriers to participation exercise.

There was a general view that, despite useful meetings with policy-makers, the report failed to produce really good policy recommendations. However, they were probably the best that could be achieved in the timescale.

Participants identified some themes that were strongly debated in the 'Voices for Change' process and again in the Commission that did not feature strongly in the report:

- the lack of focus on older people:

> *But there were only two mentions of older people in the whole report. I was there as a commissioner for ten meetings, and older people are 40 per cent of the population, and I had specifically asked to keep them in.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

- specific policy targets other than the '48-hour rule'

- the value of employing local people and others as community development workers.

In the course of this evaluation, we visited and spoke to members of only two of the six regional/area groups, and one set of these interviews took place just before the report was published. We therefore have very limited evidence about the reactions to the report from the 200+ 'Voices for Change' participants, and how far it represents an acceptable response to the issues and learning identified in the earlier project and currently experienced by local groups.

The launch(es)

The intended date for publication and the launch of the Commission's report was set at the beginning of the process. The idea of parallel launches in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland also took root. In practice, because of the difficulties of agreeing the report, the date was changed from 17 October[38] to 7 December 2000.

From the very beginning, there was great concern that the report should not 'sit on a shelf', and that it would have an impact. Soon after the Commission began to meet, a staff paper[39] considered an 'information strategy'. This would have included making contact with the media, possibly linking with one newspaper throughout the process; and work with decision-makers and influential people in government, the voluntary sector and 'think tanks'. This paper was sent out to the commissioners before the third meeting[40] but was not discussed. The need for a media strategy was regularly raised in Commission meetings, and staff took advice from Oxfam's media department. The launch/dissemination discussions at the end of the Commission agendas kept being curtailed because of lack of time.

The specific question of how the launch of the final report should be handled was discussed briefly at the seventh meeting (July 2000). It was then that a 'media subgroup' (which all commissioners were invited to join) was set up. This met once in early September, less than six weeks before the planned launch date.

The need for a media professional to help with the launch was recognised by the staff working with the Commission, who did not have these skills. The appointment was made in August 2000,[41] and advice was given on the presentation of the executive summary, press releases, radio interviews, etc.

In mid-November, the Scottish commissioners decided that a separate launch was needed in Scotland, since the Scottish media would be unlikely to cover an England-based launch. The evaluation found that the idea of a launch in Scotland had in fact been discussed earlier by the 'Voices for Change' steering group in Scotland, which was still functioning. At that stage, the group was concerned that the Commission had taken on a separate and independent identity, and there was at that time no contact with commissioners from Scotland. The steering group in Scotland decided not to suggest a separate launch, since this might cut across current work by the Scottish Poverty Alliance and Communities Against Poverty (CAP). However, this decision was not communicated either to UKCAP or to the Commission.[42] This in retrospect was seen as a mistake.

When the commissioners from Scotland decided to go ahead with a launch, they were not supported by these organisations, although Oxfam (Scotland) provided a small grant for the practical arrangements. In the event, these organisations were generally present at the launch, but the desired co-operation and co-ordination were clearly missing. Some 20+ community organisations were reported to have attended, but no media. A working group was set up which, at the time of the evaluation, was due to meet the relevant minister from Scotland to discuss the 'revamping' of Scottish Inclusion Partnership (SIP) Boards, an issue that had come up during the Commission's visit to Scotland.

There was not in the end a separate launch in Wales, but a meeting in October 2000 (on the original launch date) provided the opportunity to revitalise the Welsh anti-poverty network.

In Northern Ireland, the grass roots commissioner felt that the report had put poverty back on the agenda. The Commission report launch followed a night when there were two fatal shootings near the launch venue – this commissioner's neighbourhood centre – and key government agencies did not come. But two ministers were due to visit the centre in March 2001 and would be presented with the report.

Meanwhile, in London, preparations were being made for the UK launch. There was some anxiety when it was realised that, partly because of the other launches on the same day, only two of the grass roots commissioners and none of the public life commissioners were going to be available. Pressure was put on two of the latter to attend. One of them (John Sentamu, the Bishop of Stepney) fronted the media coverage, including a radio interview on the *Today* programme. The other, Professor Ruth Lister, chaired the launch itself.

The launch was held in the Methodist Central Hall, Westminster. It had been preceded by an Extraordinary General Meeting of UKCAP, which was being held to consider its future, taking into account the findings of a review carried out earlier in the year.[43] This meant that many members of UKCAP were present and there was a good attendance by groups active in combating poverty. However, of the media, only BBC Radio 4's *PM* programme was represented, and only the Rt Hon. Mo Mowlam was (briefly) present of the ministers and other policy-makers who had been invited.[44]

After the chair had briefly introduced the report, three Commission members (two grass roots and one public life) gave five-minute speeches. Another speaker came from the South West 'Voices for Change' steering group, and one presented a Scottish (Communities Against Poverty) perspective. Two other grass roots commissioners were present, but did not speak at this stage. Paul Goggins, MP (an ex Church Action on Poverty worker), who has had a long-term involvement in the All-party Parliamentary Group on Poverty,[45] was present through the presentations and responded on a personal level.

After this, there was a general discussion, responding to questions from the floor, in which the whole panel joined. It was striking that at no point did any of the commissioners mention the Commission's recommendations.[46] In the interviews, it emerged that the speakers had not discussed or been briefed about what it would be useful for them to say.

It might have been expected that such briefing would form part of the media

consultant's role, and indeed ideas about key messages had been discussed with the Bishop in relation to the radio interviews. Some of the commissioners realised afterwards that this had indeed been a missed opportunity to communicate with poverty organisations, even though in the event no member of the media was present.

The media consultant checked press coverage afterwards. Apart from the two Radio 4 interviews (which triggered both No. 10 Downing Street and the Chancellor of the Exchequer's office to ask for copies of the full report), and a couple of other local radio features, there was none. However, copies of the report and/or the summary were sent to a wide range of policy-makers, and all of the policy-makers who were met by commissioners were asked if a follow-up meeting could take place. Some have agreed. It was hoped the report would have an impact where it mattered. There were no further resources to support the process and all staff except for a part-time UKCAP administrator had left the work for other areas.

'Voices for Change' regional group members and some commissioners were deeply disappointed that the launch and report did not get to MPs or attract a strong press presence:

> *The Westminster launch was not what I expected – a great shame really ... hoped it would be part of an ongoing dialogue between people who were part of the process and the decision-maker about how to dismantle the barriers.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

> *I thought there would be lots of people there – politicians and people with the direct experience of poverty.*
> ('Voices for Change' area steering group member)

There was a (possibly unrealistic) feeling that the launch event would be a national version of the regional meetings, bringing together policy-makers and people with the experience of poverty.

5 Supporting the Commission: the role of staff

The 'secretariat'

One of the lessons from the 'Voices for Change' project was that, while officials make assumptions that poor and unemployed people are 'rich' in time, this is not in fact the case. People experiencing poverty, including the grass roots commissioners, have to spend a great deal of time on activities – shopping, negotiating (struggling/fighting) with the benefits system and the utilities, dealing with housing problems and so on – which other people take for granted and get without the same struggle. Equally, the public life commissioners all led busy lives. In some cases, their employers had to agree to give them the necessary time for the Commission; in others, it was their own decision. Either way, none of the commissioners had much time to spare.

The funding for the Commission did not allow for any 'buying out' of people's time, as has happened in other 'official' commissions. *All* the commissioners were volunteers. This needs to be borne in mind when setting up an enterprise like this Commission. It means that the commissioners need support, to help them operate effectively as individuals within a very different environment from what they are used to – this applies both to the public life commissioners and, in particular, to grass roots commissioners. They all had to learn to work in different ways and to be able to overcome practical problems. In addition, the process as a whole needs administrative and other support.

The issue of *personal* support, particularly for grass roots members, was discussed as part of a previous chapter, which looked at how the Commission worked. This chapter discusses the issue of *general* support, that is, the infrastructure of the Commission. This could in theory involve:

- arranging meetings, visits and discussions with policy-makers
- ensuring that practical arrangements, including the payment of expenses, meet participants' needs
- minuting meetings and taking follow-up action
- facilitating meetings
- collecting material for the report
- drafting sections of the report
- providing policy advice
- detailed work on the printing and publishing process.

In practice, as noted earlier, with this Commission it also involved:

- chairing meetings
- agreeing agendas
- developing and implementing a strategy for the London launch and surrounding publicity.

Chapter 2 shows that the objectives and intended nature of the Commission changed over time. This reflected partially the way the 'Voices for Change' project differed from its original conception and partially the changing policy context, including a new government. Changes in the personnel involved with the project also brought different agendas into play.

One consequence was that the nature of desirable support was never fully spelt out or agreed between the key organisations (UKCAP, Oxfam, Church Action on Poverty and Save the Children) and the relationships between them were not always easy:

> *There were tensions between the key organisations.*
> (Staff)

> *Some groups resent the big players but expect them to fund the work.*[1]
> ('Voices for Change' steering group member)

> *The work was very dependent on individuals and their interests, with the changing priorities of the funders dependent on them.*
> ('Voices for Change' steering group member)

The lack of clarity about 'Voices for Change' project staff roles in relation to the Commission was raised prior to and during the Commission in the UK steering group.

The 1999 funding from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation did include an allowance for staff time (see Chapter 3 above). There was to be an 'administrator' (75 per cent of a worker's time), policy advisers/writers (80 days) and the cost of the evaluation (15–20 days). The cost of time spent by members of the UK 'Voices for Change' steering group, which was overseeing the project, was not included. The participating organisations were apparently expected to absorb this as part of their contribution to the Commission process (as they had for 'Voices for Change').

The administration and co-ordination of the Commission was fairly clearly located within UKCAP. The UKCAP co-ordinator was employed by Save the Children (SCF)[2] on a short-term contract (originally due to end in June 2000, well before the Commission would have finished its work). A part-time, short-term contract administrative assistant was also employed to work for the Commission. Their exact roles in relation to the Commission, particularly the role of the co-ordinator, were never clear.

In practice, there was a gap between UKCAP co-ordinators at a crucial time in the Commission's development, when the commissioners were being recruited. After a considerable period when no one was in post, the new co-ordinator started work on the day before the Commission's first meeting.[3] As noted earlier, supporting the Commission was part of his job description, but was not seen as the major or main activity.[4] Administrative assistance, as at least one commissioner noted, had also involved two different people during the life of the Commission, leading to a lack of continuity at the day-to-day level too.[5]

At the time when the Commission started its work, the 'Voices for Change' project worker was still in post. Staff raised the question in the UK 'Voices for Change' steering group of whether the project worker was going to be supporting local groups to give evidence, or helping to plan the Commission's work, ensuring that it was participatory and in line with overall values of 'Voices for Change'. No decision was formally made but in practice they concentrated on writing up the earlier process prior to leaving in spring 2000.[6]

As their report on the 'Voices for Change' spells out,[7] the project worker had more than enough to do within the 'Voices for Change' project, which was also underfunded and had a significantly underestimated workload.

Although she was available to advise the UK steering group on developments within the 'Voices for Change' process, and played an active part in trying to encourage people involved in that process to become grass roots commissioners, neither she nor her manager (a Save the Children officer, not the UKCAP co-ordinator) viewed her as being available to support the Commission directly.

In practice, the 'Voices for Change' project worker and then the UKCAP administrative assistant gave what practical support they could to grass roots members arriving in London (phoning them, meeting them, taking them to their hotels, etc.). They were thanked for this at one of the Commission's early meetings, three of which were attended by the 'Voices for Change' project worker. After the first Commission meeting, the Oxfam policy adviser asked in a follow-up note whose job it was to take things forward and allocate key responsibilities. No decision was made.

It appears that no one had the primary responsibility for administrative, practical and co-ordination support. From the point of view of commissioners, there was no single dedicated member of staff to whom they could turn if they had questions, problems or suggestions.

> *The one central person, the linking role, was missing.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

This lack of clarity was possibly compounded by the very active role taken by two other people, both 'seconded' for the purpose from their own organisations, Oxfam UK (now Oxfam GB) and Church Action on Poverty.

Oxfam UK, as a major member of UKCAP, had been a driving force in getting the 'Voices for Change' and the Commission set up, with at least two members of the Oxford office involved, as well as one member of staff at the Glasgow office (but only in connection with the 'Voices for Change' steering group in Scotland). As secretary to UKCAP, a senior member of the Oxford-based staff had developed and negotiated the bids for funding, and set up the UK 'Voices for Change' steering group,[8] but withdrew from active involvement during the 'Voices for Change' process.

She had been replaced by another worker from Oxfam (a part-time policy officer with many other duties) as a member of the UK steering group. The policy officer was deeply committed to the whole Commission process and took on a leading role in driving it forward. She took on the formal role of 'notes secretary and policy adviser' for the Commission and undertook vital work, including the drafting of the final version of the report. She was central in recruiting the policy advisers/writers, the media adviser and the evaluators, supporting many of the visits to policy-makers, writing papers and action checklists for the UK 'Voices for Change' steering group, dealing with the publisher, working with the media advisers and playing the main role of keeping the staff communications going. This 'shaping' role was not defined or negotiated and was almost invisible to Commission members until near the end of the process when she started to intervene to clarify issues and took on the work of writing the final draft. She estimated that the time involved, in what was only a part-time Oxfam job, amounted to a third of a full-time job over a year. Some commissioners had concerns about the lack of clarity in this role, because they felt that they had not been given any choice about it.

Church Action on Poverty, based in Manchester, was also a high-profile member of UKCAP and the 'Voices for Change' steering group with strong links on the ground. The co-ordinator was brought into the process just after his appointment in 1997, when he was asked to join a presentation of the Rowntree Charitable Trust bid for funding for 'Voices for Change' (in which he had not been involved).[9] Thereafter, he became increasingly involved, eventually becoming chair of the UKCAP 'Voices for Change' steering group. From there, he was asked to chair the first part of the Commission's first meeting, until it had appointed its own chair. As we know, this did not happen and he was in effect the chair of nearly all of the Commission's meetings (when absent, the UKCAP co-ordinator took the role). The chair had certainly had no intention of acting as meetings chair for the Commission, or of being so deeply drawn into the process.

The whole process was described by a key staff member as 'evolutionary' and echoes the 'see what happens model' described earlier. This makes it very difficult to distinguish between intended action and unintended action:

> *None of us knew how it would work out, or could predict the kind of issues and dynamics which would arise during the process.*
> (Staff)

In practice, the UKCAP, Oxfam and Church Action on Poverty officers formed a 'secretariat' for the Commission. The formal division of roles and lines of accountability were not clear. For these officers, this created a problem of how much they should or should not intervene in the Commission's proceedings.

At the same time, commissioners had little idea of what each of them did, whether they were being paid to do it, or even where they were based:

> *Some commissioners thought we* [Oxfam and Church Action on Poverty staff] *were full-time staff and worked in London. This created false expectations of what we were there to do.*
> (Staff members)

The writers

In addition to the 'secretariat', two writers were appointed on a job-share consultancy basis. The appointments were made through competitive tender and the decision was made by members of the UK 'Voices for Change' steering group. A job description was drawn up, but this had limited connection with what actually happened.

Most commissioners felt that the writers had an impossible task.

> *I felt sorry for the writers – everyone wanted a different document.*
> (A number of commissioners)

> *The two writers had a difficult job and it got harder and harder – there were no clear ideas of expectations – but it was not what we wanted in style or tone … I felt very sorry for the writers.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

> *They were good at what they did, but, at the end of the day, they didn't know who they were working to.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

Most, but not all those interviewed, felt that the commissioners themselves would never

have written the report without support and that professional help was essential. However, the form that this took was questioned, by commissioners, staff and the writers themselves.

> *If commissioners had written the report, they would have had the same problems as the writers!*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

> *There was a problem about having 'writers' writing about other people's work. It was not a 'live' document, as the Scottish People's Parliament report was. The* Commission *should have written the report between them.*
> (Member of 'Voices for Change' area steering group)

> *The Commission should have put together the report themselves and then got someone to tidy it up.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

> *It's a very responsible position, to try to get a sense of what the Commission was saying. Writers were needed, but with different skills. These are:*
>
> - *the ability to make sense of a disparate process*
> - *to reflect discussions by the Commission in an illuminating way*
> - *to be able to integrate and give priority to different ideas*
> - *to have a more punchy writing style.*
>
> (Public life commissioner)

One grass roots commissioner felt that the report-writing process had been a 'waste of time'. Nevertheless, she acknowledged that the writers did keep trying to clarify their role and they wanted to work with the commissioners.

One of the regional steering group members felt that these groups themselves could have been supported to write the report and there was no need to have had a Commission at all.

The writers' style of working was a problem, as some staff acknowledged. Some felt that their role had not been thought through, and formed part of a 'traditional' approach that was not well suited to this Commission. The model of presenting papers to the Commission did not work: some commissioners did not read the papers and some ideas were introduced too early, so people could not engage with them. The first draft of the report, though the contents had been discussed with commissioners and area group members, 'came out of thin air' as far as the commissioners were concerned:

> *It was difficult to reach the point of writing the report. We had discussion, flipcharts, 'post-its', etc., but that's not a report. The writers had an impossible task.*
> (Staff)

The writers confirmed how difficult the process had been:

> *There was pressure to get going – we needed to complete by October 2000 – but they* [the commissioners] *weren't really ready, and nor were we. We could have done with more preparation time in autumn 1999, to think strategically about what we were meant to do … I found it almost impossible – we were trying to write for 12 people, with constant demands and varied expectations – and strong emotions and a lack of consensus. We needed a* very *strong chair.*
> (Writer)

The facilitator

We now have a picture of three secretariat members, two writers and, for a short period, one 'Voices for Change' worker, all attending and to some extent taking part in the meetings. In addition, for five meetings, a professional facilitator (provided by Oxfam UK [now Oxfam GB]) was also present. She had no negotiated role, but the idea was to act as a 'resource' if needed, using participatory methods. The facilitator worked with the 'secretariat' and the UK steering group to help prepare a number of the meetings in relation to the agenda and to decide when to introduce participatory techniques:

> *The aim was to ensure that everyone was heard and that no one felt intimidated.*
> (Facilitator)

It was unfortunate that the first attempt to use participatory ways of working in an introductory 'getting to know you' exercise at the first meeting was somewhat unsuccessful, in part because of the refusal of one commissioner to take part. This set a tone which, as described earlier, made the commissioners reluctant to work in a non-traditional way, or to use small groups. In spite of these difficulties, some commissioners saw the facilitator's role as having been helpful in generating a more participatory approach:

> *The facilitator really helped.*
> (Public life commissioner)

The need for effective Commission support

Ultimately, however, the question of how the Commission should and could have been effectively supported, and by whom, was never resolved. 'Fiercely efficient' (grass roots commissioner) administration was needed, but, at the same time, people felt that the process had been 'top-heavy':

> *I was not clear who was facilitating the meetings. It felt top-heavy – and I felt staff were trying to control the meetings. I would have wanted an independent chair because of this.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

> *There was less attention paid to chairing and dynamics than required.*
> (Public life commissioner)

Some commissioners felt that, because the staff roles were unclear and not negotiated, the staff–commissioner power relationships were not dealt with; but others, including some staff, felt that it was too easy to blame the staff:

> *I felt overwhelmed by staff at times – not sure if they were there to have an input or make up the numbers – we were not consulted about who the staff were nor clear about their roles.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

> *The power relations were more introduced by the staff than the commissioners – it was more about* their *insecurity and lack of clarity about their roles.*
> (Public life commissioner)

> *The commissioners' collective decision not to take responsibility for the conduct of the meetings was something of an abrogation of responsibility.*
> (Staff)

> *I trusted the staff to do their stuff – it happens a lot being suspicious of paid workers and it's unfair.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

While it was correct that the commissioners did abdicate responsibility for taking the chair, the staff, who had all had a longer time to consider and plan for the work, did not intervene: it could be said that they allowed them to get away with it.

What is also clear, from the interviews, email and other documentation, is that the staff played an essential, if often invisible, role. Without the time and commitment of the staff team, the Commission would not have got off the ground.

6 After the Commission had finished: what next?

A major but not insuperable problem exists and that is the follow-up to the Commission's work.

The Commission was appointed, as commissions are generally appointed, to produce a report on a specified topic. Usually the life of the Commission lasts for the time it takes to produce that report. It has no existence after that, though the chair (and some participants) often carry on raising its findings and recommendations long after the end of the Commission.

In this case, part of the Commission's work was to build on and draw out the messages from the preceding two-year process of 'Voices for Change', which itself emerged from previous work by UKCAP in relation to the development of national anti-poverty strategies.

There was a strong commitment from the very first meeting of the Commission that *this report would be different. It would not sit on a shelf but make a real difference*.

So, if the Commission is seen as part of a long-term process, what happens next?

Three problems can be identified from our evaluation.

1 Because of a lack of time, little thought was given to follow-up by the Commission itself though it was raised regularly by one public life commissioner.[1] There was no 'succession strategy':

> *What was to be done with the report? There was really no idea and no one had the time to think this through in the staff team.*
> (Ex UK 'Voices for Change' steering group member)

> *Was there too much focus on immediate media reaction as against long-term follow-up? Did this distort how the report was launched and the final phase of the Commission?*
> (Public life commissioner)

> *There's been no continuity after the report.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

2 The Commission's recommendations could be viewed as not a strong enough platform for action. The recommendations were not directed towards particular audiences (community, local, regional and national) in a way that these audiences could identify their own responsibility for action. Some commissioners had wanted this to happen and some work was done but not completed because of the radical rewrite of the report.

3 The disappearance not only of the Commission but also of the UKCAP co-ordinator, whose contract ended in December 2000, leaves a major gap in terms of who might carry the work forward. Without funding, UKCAP's work focus in the period after the Commission has been on tackling the questions raised by its review, including the question as to whether it should close down or carry on, and what its focus should be if it continued. Business planning, funding and premises issues have been the focus, not follow-up action to the report.

Many of the commissioners regretted that the Commission had not devoted time or thought to the follow-up process, for example through seminars with central and local government, and detailed work with policy-makers:

It [the report] *was good in the end – by accident rather than design … but was seen as an end in itself. How was it to be used? More thinking was needed about the target audiences, such as local groups, the media, and central and local government.*
(Public life commissioner)

It will be a real shame if there are no mechanisms for follow-up.
(Public life commissioner)

Reports don't change policies … it's people who will bring about change.[2]
(Public life commissioner)

One grass roots commissioner had seen the level of follow-up, including posters, reminders and helpful information that had come after another report.

Some people interviewed went back to the question of accountability to people experiencing poverty, and how the report might be used even now with them:

There is no clear communicating back to the grass roots taking place.
(Public life commissioner)

We have to take the report out and use it – it has to be an alive document.
(Grass roots commissioner)

I really thought it was going to happen this time.
(Regional steering group member)

If you start a process you need to carry on – otherwise you reinforce other experiences – people worked hard and really there was nothing to show outside the Manchester meeting.
(Regional steering group member)

Most commissioners and regional steering group members would like further copies of the reports and the summaries to use in their work,[3] for example in 'vertical slice' training with local government staff:

What's the point of copies sitting in a London office not sold when we could use them?
(Grass roots commissioner but asked in different ways by a number of commissioners)

All commissioners would welcome the resources to feed back on the ground or in their employment about the work of the Commission and how it is being picked up nationally, if only to satisfy the need to say: 'You *were* listened to – something did happen'.

It would be important to act as 'connectors' (a Commission word), making the links between people and communities experiencing poverty and the politicians and policy-makers. Most people interviewed thought they would continue to be personally involved in their own parts of the UK.

Despite the difficulties at the time of the evaluation (early 2001), follow-up was beginning to take shape in different ways. Both the launch events in Scotland and Wales produced working groups or, in the case of Wales, a relaunched anti-poverty network, which the people interviewed saw as a method of keeping the issues on the agenda. In Northern Ireland, the re-funded Anti Poverty Network is actively using the report. In Wales, the Welsh Assembly had a newly established All-party Group on Poverty, while, in the UK as a whole, the Social Exclusion Unit, Hilary Armstrong (then Minister of State for Local Government and the Regions at the Department for the Environment, Transport and the

Regions) and the Chancellor of the Exchequer's office had expressed interest. In Scotland, discussions have been held with UKCAP about follow-up to the report. In Hull, the report is thought to have had some influence on entrenched local authority elected members who are beginning to hear the messages about poverty and participation, and the value of participatory appraisal. The House of Commons and the All-party Parliamentary Group were seen as important links for the future and commissioners have been involved in meeting senior members of the government. One public life commissioner has been appointed a senior government adviser in the new Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions.

Meanwhile, the two remaining members of the UKCAP secretariat, together with one or two of the commissioners, were giving some thought about what needed to be done in the immediate future. Several people who were interviewed raised the question as to whether the evaluation itself could be a way in which key participants in the process could be brought together by the funder to reflect on the learning and identify a way forward.[4] Commissioners could be used in future work as an advisory board to develop an action plan based on the learning, with staff facilitating a decentralised process (but this again raises the question as to whose project it is). In the Commission's notes, some commissioners are recorded as suggesting meeting again in a year's time to find out about progress.[5]

Clearly, the main issues are the resources and capacity with which to do the follow-up. All the commissioners are busy people, and the need for leadership and co-ordination would be vital. The potential role of UKCAP, if it can find funding, commitment and administrative capacity, is vital here:

> *The Commission fits well with current policy, but UKCAP is too chaotic and 'airy-fairy', it's not 'together'. It needs to be flexible and professional, 'heart and head'. The head is missing.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

This view from a grass roots commissioner was echoed by other participants. The lessons of the recent past do need to be learnt, and there will be need for a clear strategy, clear and agreed leadership, and clear responsibility and accountability, for those doing the work.

7 Reflections

The evaluation process gave the people interviewed a chance to reflect on the Commission. Most interviews took place fairly soon after the Commission had finished its work. This slight remove from what was both an exciting and bruising experience enabled interviewees to consider both the positives and the negatives. We have tried to record these faithfully.[1]

We were particularly interested in participants' views on the following:

- composition of the Commission
- costs/resources
- links with policy
- the four nations dimension
- learning gains
- suggested improvements (mainly relating in practice to the process, role of staff and links with 'Voices for Change').

Our findings are summarised in this chapter.

Composition of the Commission

The '50/50' principle was incorporated into UKCAP from the beginning. People who had been previously involved with that process therefore saw it as a natural step that the Commission should be composed in the same way.

Most people directly involved in the Commission itself felt that, though the process had been painful in the early stages, having 50/50 membership had been the best combination: combining different knowledge and expertise would produce a 'better' outcome.

However, some commissioners and others felt that the Commission either could have been composed entirely of grass roots participants, or could have contained a higher proportion of grass roots people. If the commissioners had consisted entirely of grass roots people, it was suggested that the 'academics' could have been observers there to learn, give feedback and advice on the report without taking part, or used as 'witnesses'. A public life commissioner also felt that this support role was one option that could have been considered, to force a dialogue and a challenge with the policy-makers. One grass roots commissioner felt that all the commissioners should have come out of the 'Voices for Change' process so that they could reflect the learning of that process, starting from the same place.[2] This was echoed by a public life commissioner, who felt the two almost separate processes should have been a single process.

But most people felt that the 50/50 principle had worked reasonably well and had added enormously to the whole process:

> *It wouldn't have been nearly as good if it had been public life only or vice versa … It underlines the importance of different perspectives on policy … The mixture of contributions was very important. I can't yet say whether it was 'successful' in terms of impact.*
> (Public life commissioner)

> *The grass roots saw themselves as the experts and the public life people as 'indirect' experts. The idea of having grass roots members was that they would drive the Commission and give it credibility. It* did *make a difference having grass roots people. It was 'us and them' at the beginning, but by June they had gelled as a team.*
> (Staff)

> *If the grass roots hadn't been as vociferous as they were, it might not have been so good. It shouldn't be all grass roots, but maybe there should have been more?*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

> *It's not enough just to ask the grass roots to come up with ideas. They'll have some good ones, but won't know the policy environment and so on. So bringing these two perspectives together, you get a very sharp set of ideas and proposals, grounded in the reality of experience and the aspirations of people experiencing poverty, tempered by hard-nosed knowledge of what works and what would get accepted. So it becomes not a 'wish-list', but a carefully argued case.*
> (Staff)

> [Some] *commissioners in regions worked together both closely and constructively. This was particularly the case with Scotland commissioners who worked jointly throughout.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

Others were not so happy with the process. One public life commissioner felt that the 'polarisation' between grass roots and public life commissioners had been:

> *Detrimental, negative, and created unnecessary tensions and sometimes a bad atmosphere.*

Another public life commissioner felt that, while the 50/50 principle was right and acceptable as an option, the way the commissioners (all of them) were picked was important. It was not a matter of 'cosy consensus', but had there been too much personality and ideology? One public life commissioner was concerned about where the grass roots commissioners had come from: how had they been chosen and to whom were they accountable? This concern was echoed by a 'Voices for Change' participant.

Finally, the question of what groups in society were 'represented' on the Commission was raised:

> *We wanted a real cross-section … There was no older or younger person, but we did achieve a diversity, which was not 'representative' or formally accountable.*
> (Staff)

Costs/resources

Very few people commented on the cost of the Commission. It seems probable that the commissioners were not aware of the size of the budget or how it was made up.

The total financial cost identified by UKCAP was £45,500, including the cost of publication and the launch. The initial Joseph Rowntree Foundation grant was £34,000, plus £5,000 for publicity. Oxfam contributed a grant of £2,000 for the joint meeting in Manchester with people from the 'Voices for Change' groups, the costs of the visits and the cost of employing a media consultant. Oxfam in Scotland put funding into the writing and publication of the 'Voices for Change' in Scotland report and the cost of the launch there.[3]

There were also contributions in kind from the Oxfam and Church Action on Poverty staff (the co-ordinator became the de facto chair of the Commission), and the office accommodation costs of UKCAP, partly subsidised by SCF, were not included in the budget.

Each meeting was calculated to cost about £1,200, covering travel, food and, where

necessary, accommodation for commissioners. The venues were free.

The main comment was that the process was badly underfunded:

> *There was really no infrastructure support to the Commission and no one wrote another funding application.*
> (Ex UKCAP steering group member)

> *Arguably, we should have put more time into raising sufficient funds before setting up the Commission, but the dilemma we faced was that we were already behind schedule and overstretched with attempting to manage the 'Voices for Change' process.*
> (Staff)

> *Participatory research processes are time consuming and costly.*
> (Public life commissioner)

The amount of staff time to keep the process going was significantly underestimated. The Commission's regional visits had not been costed in, nor had the meetings with policy-makers. After initial discussions, there was a failure to engage with or renegotiate with the funders. Key staff believed there was 'a pre-determined amount of money from Joseph Rowntree Foundation':

> *Rather than being able to put together a budget for what we thought we would need for the Commission, we were told that Joseph Rowntee Foundation would put in a maximum of £30,000 and had to work backwards from this to put together a budget. So … there was no latitude to include any number of desirable activities into the funding application. As it transpired, this sum was wholly inadequate, despite a further top-up from Joseph Rowntree Foundation, which meant that we were constantly hampered by a lack of funds – as well as a lack of staff time.*
> (Staff)

It is significant that this work was not treated by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation as a 'research contract', but as a grant. Therefore there was no advisory group and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation was not so 'hands-on' as normal – 'We stood back' – and therefore did not pick up problems at an early stage. There may be some important lessons for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation here. In these ground-breaking pieces of work, an advisory group and more active involvement would have encouraged dialogue as the steering group and the Commission developed practical ideas about what it wanted to do, so as to consider the funding implications sooner rather than later.

Learning was taking place all the way through the Commission's history (and the earlier 'Voices for Change' process) about what was working and what needed to be changed or developed. There was a real need to keep in contact with the funders and 'educate' them as to the new needs. There is no guarantee that they would have given additional funding or been more flexible but not keeping them in touch with the process until the Commission was close to the end of its life gave no opportunity for this to happen.

It was also pointed out to us that UKCAP is itself a very small and fragile organisation, which does not have access to a credit card, and which could not take advantage of cheap fares or special arrangements as larger voluntary organisations could (some bookings were done through Save the Children, the 'host'

organisation at that time). As was found in the review of UKCAP, this was very much a 'hand-to-mouth' operation. Other recent public commissions in the social policy area had budgets of between £0.25 and £0.5 million.[4] They did not involve commissioners with the direct experience of poverty.

Links with policy

The tension between whether the Commission should focus on 'poverty' or 'participation' was clear from the beginning. This tension ran through the whole UKCAP and the 'Voices for Change' experience. One problem was that UKCAP itself is, as its name says, a 'coalition'. For some of the members, to develop specific UKCAP 'policy' on poverty would have made their membership of UKCAP difficult, in that such policy might not be acceptable to their own organisation. They had therefore seen it more as an awareness-raising and lobbying body, with a particular remit to bring people experiencing poverty into the policy process.

UKCAP was set up at a time when poverty was not on government agendas and its existence denied. The UKCAP review noted the oppositional stances endemic in the anti-poverty movement and the difficulties in adapting to a change of government. 'Voices for Change' was about moving from a confrontational stance, to one of 'participation' and then 'ongoing participation':

> *It's important to get policy-makers to realise they can't go on making policy without involving people experiencing poverty.*
> ('Voices for Change' and UKCAP member)

> *The All-party Parliamentary Group on Poverty* [APPGOP] *now has a life of its own – getting people experiencing poverty asking questions of ministers in the House of Commons.*
> (UKCAP and former steering group member)

The amount of time for commissioners to write a joint report with a focus on policy was clearly underestimated. This is an issue staff were particularly aware of:

> *The need for a process for the commissioners to work through their suspicion of policy and policy-makers.*
> (Staff)

> *The Commission failed to move from an analysis of general problems and solutions to what actually needed to be done.*
> (Staff)

> *There was a need to recognise that realities are different in different places, so there were lots of stories to be told.*
> (Staff)

> *It was a disparate collection of people and it was difficult to get detailed policy decisions – we were not going to get the bones of an anti-poverty strategy from this group in the time … they did an analysis but did not do much policy work.*
> (Staff)

The need to feed the Commission's work into existing policy processes was not considered by the Commission, though some of the staff were clearly concerned to do so.[5] A member of staff, reflecting on why a staff paper on influencing the policy process was not discussed, noted:

> *The problem being (as I see it) that the Commission did not really engage with that paper … as, for most commissioners, it was not about things they were most familiar with. I am not sure how much style and language, etc. may also have been issues.*
> (Staff)

However, one grass roots commissioner felt that:

> *The staff failed to attempt to introduce a policy element, it was not rejected.*

Although another UKCAP member felt that the Commission was never intended to relate to the All-party Group, the lack of connection was regretted by others.[6] However, as time went on, some of the grass roots commissioners became involved in the APPGOP as individuals, and found it very useful. It was exciting to attend a meeting in January 2001 when the Chancellor of the Exchequer attended and had the Commission's report in his hand.

Connections with the policy *process* were therefore possible, but were not built into the Commission's process, except through the meetings with a few policy-makers at a fairly late stage (summer 2000).

Connections with *policy* were less clear. Human rights, benefits policy, Objective 1 funding, social exclusion and neighbourhood renewal kept coming up in the Commission's discussions. However, except for the Benefits Agency's 48-hour rule, they rarely crystallised into something the Commission decided to pursue through the visits, the meetings with policy-makers or in the report itself. Some commissioners were very concerned about this. They felt that the Commission should have thought systematically in policy terms, for example in planning the visits and considering what aspects of policy the Commission might target. It was also felt that connections needed to be made at all levels of policy-making and to be clear about which aspects of policy to target:

> *We should have connected with local government. It's OK to get agreement at* [government/Assembly] *level, but, if attitudes don't change at the lower levels, it won't be implemented.*
> (Public life commissioner)

> *There was a need to identify, say, five key policy areas and develop a sharper understanding of the policy process in each area and where to intervene.*
> (Public life commissioner)

But a staff member responding to the report draft noted:

> *The remit did not include detailed work on policy issues, and* [the] *final recommendations represent* [the] *kind of thing that could have been envisaged from that remit – the hole in them in my view is more about* [a] *lack of practicality and remaining at* [the] *level of principles. Recommendations were not really an area of work that inspired/fired commissioners up most; and we could not offer UKCAP as the basis for a participatory infrastructure that we were suggesting to government.*
> (Staff)

An interesting and significant link with policy identified by staff and some commissioners was the influence on the thinking of the Commission of international development perspectives. However, there was a lack of shared knowledge

about history of participation and community development policy and practice in the UK. This limited the Commission's ability to produce recommendations.

The recommendations in the final report focus primarily on a framework for future participation by people with the direct experience of poverty in the design, implementation and monitoring of all policy, together with the removal of the barriers that would get in the way of this happening.

The 'four nations' dimension

The UKCAP review records that it has struggled, as with all UK-wide voluntary organisations, to respond to devolution. In Wales and Scotland, energy has been focused on the new bodies rather than UK-wide work, though the Department of Social Security remains in Whitehall. For Scotland and Wales, the 'Voices for Change' process and the Commission report are the start of a longer and wider process of gaining power and control. Many people who have been activists are now in the Assembly or Parliament.

The practical realisation that a UK-wide process needed to incorporate the four member nations came late in the day for the Commission:

> *Wales is not a separate country like Scotland but we are a nation and this was not really recognised.*
> (Commissioner)

The original proposals for the Commission gave England a huge dominance in Commission membership, until this was challenged by the country groups.

Only at the stage of the first draft of the report did the need become clear to ensure that all parts of the UK were reflected in the report in a balanced way and the result was not seen as fully successful. However, the challenge was made – 'This won't do' – and some changes were made. At least one staff member felt that this had been important learning from the process.

Some commissioners were not sure how important this was within the context of the total debate; others felt that the Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland dimensions should have been systematically considered from the beginning; and still others noted the large geographical distances and contrasting experiences within the nations which worked against national teams.

The weak links with the 'Voices for Change' groups were seen yet again as an obstacle to taking these messages on board, although the visits had specifically covered all four countries and different regions within England for that reason.

There was a tension between not wanting to lose, say, the 'Scottish dimension' in a UK debate and the advantages of being a UK-wide body. Some commissioners felt it had been helpful to see how the different nations had tackled the issue – 'Scotland is way ahead in terms of literature and action' (staff) – and to make the links at this national level. Commissioners wanted to be involved in any follow-up at the UK level as well as locally.

> *It's important to fit it all together, at the community and grass roots, with the local council, with the Scottish Parliament and at Westminster.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

It is clear that in Northern Ireland the preconditions for the ownership and use of the report are present. The Northern Ireland Anti-poverty Network (the group that acted as a key part of the 'Voices for Change' national group):

- was active in the 'Voices for Change' process which was part of a longer regional history
- chose its grass roots commissioner as an activist in the 'Voices for Change' process; and the commissioner felt responsible to the local group and kept them in touch with the Commission process
- has continuing resources through recent re-funding of the network.

However, from the interviews and the UKCAP review,[7] it is clear that any such UK-wide co-operation in the future around taking the Commission's recommendations forward[8] will be dependent on:

- real engagement with the regions *before* funding proposals are written
- devolving parts of budgets to the regional networks to support UKCAP objectives and build up the membership base.

The Commission *did* struggle to learn to take the 'four nations' dimension on board – but many London-based national initiatives do not even try to do so.

Learning gains

Both in the group evaluation session and in the interviews, most commissioners said that they had learnt a lot themselves, in terms of both personal growth, and new knowledge and experience. Despite the difficulties, the experience was mainly seen as worthwhile and positive, particularly when reflecting back on it afterwards:

> *As an activist, I felt things were worse than they are. It was good to look at how new policies affect people experiencing poverty (falling into or born into poverty) – it was a chance to widen my thinking.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

> *Though it was 'trouble and strife on top of ordinary life', it was a fantastic and worthwhile experience and an invaluable way of working ... we learnt that everyone had something to contribute.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

> *There were positives, it was worthwhile. I learnt a lot, personally, from others' experiences and from the visits, otherwise I would have resigned. But I do have a sense of frustration. It was worthwhile, but it could have been so much better.*
> (Public life commissioner)

> *I grew, definitely – it's made a personal difference, and I'll use it as a model for a future project. I'm pleased to have taken part and will continue to be a thorn in their flesh.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

> *There was a lot for the professionals to learn – bigger changes for them than us – they were really committed but struggling – they bent over backwards but still were not learning ... some felt threatened ... they needed people's help ... we needed to do it together.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

It was a fascinating experience – I learnt a lot – it was an eye-opener – I learnt the power of language and labelling and how trapped we were.
(Public life commissioner)

I have relearnt that you have to take down the barriers and trust the process – it works in the end.
(Grass roots commissioner)

It was a steep learning curve – I met a lot of people.
(Grass roots commissioner)

We learnt about people with the experience of poverty participating in decision-making, but not using participatory ways of working.
(Staff)

I learnt the difficulty in incorporating all points of view without 'watering down'.
(Grass roots commissioner on a 'post-it' at the group evaluation session)

I learnt the importance of training in building up confidence.
(Grass roots commissioner)

It's been exciting – it's changed us all.
(Staff member 'post-it' at the group evaluation exercise)

Getting people in poverty involved, helping them to develop self-confidence and to speak out takes ages.
(UK steering group member)

There were some important individual benefits for participants:

I've been able to use the experience in X [a grant-making body]. *For example, I've learnt some quite practical things like drawing a table map so you can use people's names. I'm not being listened to yet but I will get there.*
(Grass roots commissioner)

I learnt the value of humour and patience.
(A public life commissioner and two grass roots commissioners)

The group exercise for this evaluation involving staff and four grass roots commissioners identified in a visual way the following learning for participants:

- participatory appraisal
- the nature of poverty in the UK
- participation
- different points of view – and learning to compromise
- 'there's more to learn about how to work in different ways'
- similarities between different areas
- working in a long-distance group (new to most people).

It was a loss to the evaluation that all commissioners were not part of this exercise.

Tensions and differences in emphasis and personal agendas had made the Commission a difficult experience. Nevertheless, the warmth of greeting between grass roots commissioners before meetings was very evident, while the 'smoking group' had a life of its own. In the group review exercise, the key feelings about the experience included:

- hearing the voices from 'Voices for Change'

- meeting different people and making friends
- jokes
- strong statements of beliefs and experiences
- sharing friendship.

Three commissioners concluded:

I got on well with the other commissioners. They seem to be friends.
(Grass roots commissioner)

I go away from here feeling you're OK.
(Grass roots commissioner)

We have all made a journey from where we began … People have gone through painful experiences.
(Public life commissioner quoted in the report)[9]

One of the unexpected results was the realisation that these meetings were different from standard meetings, and that it was necessary to use and show one's emotions. The commissioner who was clearest about this also felt that she had not before understood the degree of anger that people feel when they are treated with disrespect through 'phoney participation'. She also had a new understanding of why participation means so much more for people experiencing poverty and why they might not wish to participate:

Why should the poor have to participate so as to get services everyone else gets anyway?
(Public life commissioner, reporting the words of a grass roots commissioner)

This was an important issue for another public life commissioner, who was afraid that the Commission would end up seeming hostile and negative, and was constantly emphasising the need to include examples of 'good practice'. The problem for her was that the examples she knew about were precisely about the failure of public services, and this was where local people had then taken responsibility for running them. This was, she felt, a different ethos from many on the Commission, who were perhaps less concerned about practical involvement on the ground than changing policy at a higher level. What is also clear is that some commissioners doubted the existence of 'success stories'.

We discovered during the evaluation that at least three sets of grass root and public life commissioners had started working together, the partnerships being instigated by the public life commissioner. This was valued and one grass roots commissioner had now decided that there was real value in working with groups involving professionals.

Participants' suggestions for improvements

Many suggestions for how the Commission could have worked better were made by participants. Many of these focused on what happened right at the beginning and even before the beginning of the process.

Key proposals were that there needed to be:

- Better pre-planning. Key good practice was known:[10]

Brilliant idea but things were not thought through – there were potholes.
(Grass roots commissioner)

What could have been better? Better planning.
(Staff member 'post-it' at the group evaluation exercise)

- Early appointment of commissioners, 'within the organic process of the "Voices for Change"' (staff, echoed by a number of commissioners).
- An independent non-staff chair. They should either have been chosen in advance through some kind of consultation process, or, if the appointment was left until the Commission had met, the staff should have insisted handing the role back after the first meeting.
- Clarification with commissioners at the beginning about what level of involvement (and its limits) was on offer – were they able to set the agenda and decide how to use the resources or not, because of insufficient time?
- Better information to the commissioners about how all the structures and processes linked together, and what the terms of reference meant (and how they had evolved). The layers of power were hidden: commissioners (and others) did not know about how decisions were made and what were 'the rules of the game':

This [the linked structures and processes] *must be in place at the beginning, otherwise it's a disaster!*
(Grass roots commissioner)

- Clarity about staff roles and an opportunity for commissioners to be involved in negotiating the support they wanted. This includes appointing the evaluators.[11]
- Time for development and team building – a two-day residential session was frequently suggested. This would have benefited grass roots *and* public life commissioners and created a more equal environment for later discussions:

You need time to build trust – it is not instant ... we didn't give ourselves time … you've got to build in the time ... we did not know their backgrounds and we put ourselves on the line ... we needed to know – we needed real connections.
(Grass roots commissioner)

If we'd had the weekend we would have been more open and listening to others – when the barriers come down the fear goes out.
(Grass roots commissioner)

The public life people needed to be trained that they had come to learn too – some of them weren't prepared by the staff.
(Grass roots commissioner and echoed by two others)

- Consistent built-in support for grass roots commissioners, including payment so as to value their time, skills and contribution; and resources to perhaps undertake a project so that they would be equipped to speak for their community.
- Agreement about how the Commission would work, involving an equal and inclusive process, using the learning about participatory approaches from 'Voices for Change' and the existing skills of commissioners; agreed ground rules for how to communicate and the avoidance of jargon and labelling language.

- A clear agenda – the need for the commissioners to own the concept and question all the existing paperwork:

The Commission should have started with a big meeting with nothing *on the agenda. This would have encouraged everyone to speak their minds right from the start. So many problems arose from this failure, existing divisions and bonds tended to be reinforced … But you need to have been a genius to realise how much the human dynamic would play in all this.*
(Public life commissioner)

- Time for the commissioners to write the report, built in from the start with sufficient resources for such collaborative writing. Writing the report 'as you go along', rather than leaving it all to the end.

- Better reflection of the learning from the 'Voices for Change' process, and recognition of the need for a long-term involvement, support and training of all those involved, if you want to build substantial and sustained organisations able to engage with the Commission and policy-makers. A grass roots commissioner noted at a Commission meeting:[12]

The X [region] *Voices for Change process ... relied very much on individuals and collapsed when they were not involved.*

- Appropriate organisational infrastructure to support the Commission involving more resources and staff time:

Nothing is as simple or cheap as we think.
(Grass roots commissioner)

Further down the line, other suggestions reflect comments recorded earlier in this report. These include the following:

- The need for more 'social time' and realistic breaks.

- Sticking to the terms of reference and, within meetings, to an agenda agreed by the group; useful and used meeting notes.

- More/different methods of working (including 'home working', subgroups, and more thinking about follow-up (e.g. seminars). An agreed process for visits, which should have included feedback and discussion with those visited. A couple of public life commissioners questioned the Commission model and wondered if the select committee or citizen jury models would have been more useful.

- More time to think about recommendations.

- Attention to administrative detail at every stage, for example the travel arrangements and upfront payment of expenses, hotels, meeting rooms and 'managing' the communications and paperwork more effectively.

- Possibly the use of a 50/50 model in the choice of evaluators – this was mentioned at a Commission meeting[13] and reflects the concern to involve people with the direct experience of poverty to lead and evaluate the whole process.

8 Conclusions, lessons and implications

Conclusions

> *For me personally, for all the very real problems, it was in many ways successful in terms of process.*
> (Public life commissioner)

> *It was a hard task – we just needed more time.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

> *The idea was an excellent one and it had the potential to work but something went astray.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

> *A flawed, difficult but valuable initiative. One that was not perfect but then, given its resources, it could never have been.*
> (UKCAP review)

> [The Commission] *achieved powerful statements* – beyond *expectations.*
> (Staff member 'post-it' at the group evaluation exercise)

> *The experiential nature of the process distinguishes this from other commissions – it was empowering.*
> (Grass roots commissioner)

> *There were no baselines – most people had no experience of this kind of thing – it's easy to be wise in hindsight – we were too hard on ourselves.*
> (Grass roots commissioner in response to the draft report)

> *Twelve fantastic people.*
> (Staff)

This Commission was undoubtedly trying to do something that had not been done before, in consciously combining 'grass roots' and 'public life' people in equal numbers; in the subject it was tackling – the vital question of how people experiencing poverty can 'participate'; and in its attempt to build on an earlier participatory process. It was a complex and ambitious project, which was difficult to participate in or support. It was almost inevitable, as many of our interviewees said, that neither the process nor the results would be perfect. However, we disagree with the (lone) reader who felt that this evaluation report indicates that 'nothing good happened; nothing worked'. This *was* a learning process and despite the difficulties much *was* achieved.

Nevertheless, whilst it was a new experience and it would have been difficult to anticipate *all* the problems and issues that arose over the Commission's year of life, a stronger foundation and more effective planning would have helped enormously. The crucial gap was between the Commission's notional origins in the 'Voices for Change' project and its actual disconnection from its process. The main reason for this, as far as we can tell, is that the 'Voices for Change' project was very different in practice from what had been conceived, but the lessons from this were not taken on board by those making the decisions about the Commission – the UK 'Voices for Change' steering group. This led to the Commission being set up as a significantly underfunded project, and facing many unresolved issues, conflicts and pitfalls experienced in the earlier process.

We can see that there was a real tension between 'wanting to get on with it', and waiting to learn the lessons of the 'Voices for Change' *process* and to hear the actual '*voices*' emerging from that process, as originally intended. Gestures were belatedly made towards involving the 'Voices for Change' steering

groups in the selection of commissioners, but it seems clear that they did not feel consulted about the nature, task or the intended results of the Commission. Nor were they given any options about whether this was the best way of 'completing' the 'Voices for Change' process in a way that would have maximum impact. There was little real effort to develop ownership of and involvement in the Commission from the extremely fragile area steering groups.

This was therefore still a distinctly top-down process, contradicting the underlying values being pursued by both 'projects', namely the real involvement of people experiencing poverty. Maybe clarification with area groups, as well as commissioners, at the beginning about what level of involvement (and its limits) was feasible, realistic and on offer would have given participants evidence on which to make choices about involvement. The 'try it and see' approach mentioned earlier could be interpreted as quite patronising and manipulative of those whom it was deliberately involving in this 'experimental' process. However, we found no evidence of this approach amongst those who actually participated in the Commission.

Given the weaknesses of the setting-up process, it is hardly surprising that we found so much ambivalence and uncertainty about the Commission itself: why were its members there, what were they going to do, how were they going to do it and what might the Commission expect to achieve?

Again, there is a tension inherent in a process such as this. On the one hand, some clarity and certainty is needed about the reason for setting up the Commission in the first place. A clear sense of direction is certainly required. On the other hand, the Commission was made up of independent thinkers who between them had an enormous amount of hugely relevant experience. Within a broad framework, it seems to us to have been right to give the Commission its independence in terms of *how* it would carry out its task.

A particular type of leadership is needed for this 'tight–loose' approach, and this is not easy to find. Keeping an eye on the ball while ensuring that everyone has their say, and that everyone's experience and knowledge are used to the full, is very difficult. This is why the failure to use participatory techniques or to divide the work between the commissioners, for example through the use of subgroups, was such a loss. Part of the 'tightness' of ensuring that the Commission did what was needed would have been to set out some ground rules right at the beginning, as part of the 'contract' these volunteer commissioners were entering into. In that way, the 'opting out' and the confrontational challenges could have been minimised, and the tensions and conflicts that were inevitable could have been more creative and less destructive. The role of chair should have been built into the structure from the start, with the authority and power to do more than be an umpire at the meetings, and with sufficient status, trust and respect to be able to challenge commissioners and take responsibility for progressing work between meetings.

We do not believe that a Commission like this should be looking for cosy consensus. If that were the case, there would be no point in appointing grass roots people, who were bound to have a different view of the world and to be more impatient with the world of policy. They were the people who were experiencing policies

that were *not* working for them and their communities. However, it is also clear that the grass roots commissioners needed a great deal more support than they received and that, crucially, they did not feel fully respected and valued, though this did begin to change towards the end of the process

Similarly, because of the divisive nature of some of the discussions, several of the public life commissioners also felt that their experience was devalued and that they were not being heard.

We also recognise that the Commission itself became an experiential process with its own unanticipated 'human dynamic'. Conflict and tensions were unavoidable, since they were based on 'contested notions of truth, reality, method and language' (as two staff members commented). Such experiences involve exposure, vulnerability and threat. This needs to be taken into account and makes the need for leadership and authority *from within the group* even clearer.

It seems clear that, although in the end a great deal was achieved, and the Commission did more or less 'gel' as a team, this could have been much more efficient and effective if development and support – including a 48-hour residential – had been built in from the beginning. (We recognise that support was planned as far as the grass roots commissioners were concerned, but we also know that only one commissioner in fact received such support.) It is clear that one reason for the lack of support, both at the level of day-to-day support for individual commissioners, and at the level of logistical and strategic support for the Commission's work, was the staffing question.

First, it is clear that the organisational infrastructure and the amount of paid staff support, even in theory, were totally inadequate. This truly was a Commission on a shoestring.

Second, the Commission needed dedicated support, and this it did not have. Some excellent people supported it, but their roles were never clarified, either between themselves or with the commissioners. This was a bad mistake, from which all the ambivalence and hesitations around the management of the process arose.

Different roles were needed, and it is probable that one person could not do them all. However, the first point would be to discuss with the Commission members beforehand what would be required – facilitation, writing, research, policy advice, work planning and so on – and then how best it should be provided. All staff responsibilities for actioning and progressing work needed to be clarified. This points to the need both for clearer planning and for more development time at the beginning, when these issues could have been more clearly thought through. The tension between a participatory self-directed commission process and the need for a product within time and budget needed to be spelt out so that commissioners understood the issues. In addition, although the *contents* of the final report would not of course have been clear until much later on, some of the difficulties arising at the report-writing period might have been avoided if the *process* of getting the report together had been decided in advance, learning where relevant from the earlier 'Voices for Change' process.

Similarly, the process through which the Commission took evidence needed not only thought (which was duly given) but also *decisions* about what to do – either beforehand or thrashed out with commissioners. Again, if

what actually happened was the result of unresolved disagreements, rather than 'simply' confusion, then this too needed to be dealt with. What information was needed, from whom, when and in what form? Clarity about this would have improved still further the planning and briefing for the locality visits and meetings with policy-makers, both of which were such a success within the Commission's work. It would also have ensured that the evidence from those processes could have been more systematically used within the report itself.

A concern about the report was the lack of clear and targeted recommendations, and indeed a lack of clarity about who were to be the audiences and beneficiaries: policy-makers at different levels, and/or people and communities experiencing poverty? It seems clear from this Commission's experience that recommendations could have started to be formed at a much earlier stage, so that, by the time the report was being written, the writers (whether specially commissioned, or members of the Commission, or both) would have been clear about what aspects of policy and evidence to include and which recommendations would have priority and realism.

And this in turn would have helped the launch and subsequent follow-up to the report. In this case, the UK launch itself, although the date was known from the beginning, had a sense of being hastily planned by people who were not particularly experienced in this activity. (We cannot comment on this aspect of the Welsh, Northern Irish and Scottish launches, except to note that political networks had not been built in Scotland, and losing touch with the 'Voices for Change' steering group there – through no one's fault – meant that it was not as well supported as it might have been.)

Nevertheless, some important media coverage was achieved and the fact that some national politicians took an interest was encouraging. The important question, as yet unanswered, is how will that interest be capitalised on.

In case this seems to be a somewhat negative set of conclusions, we must emphasise that, although there are many lessons to be learnt, *a great deal was achieved*. There were few doubts that the 50/50 composition of the Commission had made a great difference, not only in terms of personal learning for the commissioners (and this was considerable) but also in the way the report was finally shaped and written. We are in no doubt that the presence, expertise and very active participation of the grass roots commissioners, combined with the other forms of expertise brought by the public life commissioners, made a real difference. Better communications back to the 'Voices for Change' groups, and more thinking about the policy context, might have broadened it out still further, but the coming together for a whole year of '12 fantastic people' was 'added value' of a kind not seen before in the UK.

Lessons and implications for the future

The main lessons that this evaluation has identified are as follows:

- A clear and agreed mandate is essential.
- The stakeholders, who need to be involved in developing the mandate, are those who will be most affected by the outcome, as well as the commissioners themselves.

- Ground rules for how the Commission will work, in particular the use of participatory techniques and the role of the chair, must be set out from the beginning, possibly as a condition for becoming a member of the Commission.
- An independent chair, or a commissioner who can command the respect of all the commissioners, should be appointed from the start.
- Commissioners should be appointed on the grounds of their expertise and at least half of the Commission, probably more, should consist of people with direct experience (past or present) of the issue being examined – in this case poverty.
- An open and accountable process of recruitment is needed to legitimate their contributions.
- All commissioners must be enabled and supported to use their 'voice', in an equal and respected way. Parity of esteem needs to be established from the start.
- Methods should be found for grass roots commissioners to maintain contact with the grass roots, however defined, and this should be supported at a practical level (e.g. travel to meet and report back to particular groups and so on).
- Commissioners should be effectively supported at a personal and practical level.
- Grass roots commissioners should be enabled to meet together outside Commission meetings, and resources should be allocated for their continuing skill development and empowerment.
- Attention should be paid to the process of the Commission, in particular in anticipating and planning for action that will empower, not disempower, the least powerful, and recognising the contribution of different commissioners in different ways (including the payment of expenses and/or honoraria).
- The Commission as a whole should have skilled and dedicated support for administration, research, planning and, where necessary (i.e. if the commissioners are not doing it themselves), drawing directly from the experience of the Commission to undertake the report-writing roles. Staff and responsibilities should be negotiated with commissioners.
- There should be a clear negotiated and owned workplan for the whole period of the Commission, and the commissioners should be required to do their best to ensure that it works, or explicitly to revise it if it does not.
- Decisions and those responsible for actioning them from each Commission meeting should be recorded.
- Stakeholders should be kept in the picture throughout the process, and should have the chance to comment and make suggestions about the final report,[1] while recognising the independence of a 'commission' process.

- The way the Commission's report (or other outputs) is to be launched should be considered at an early stage, in terms of target audience, location, method of launch and publicity.
- Dissemination and follow-up should be built into the Commission's deliberations, thinking in particular about the links that need to be made during the Commission's life so that its work can be carried on afterwards.
- A realistic budget should be determined as far as possible in advance, with the funders kept actively engaged with the learning and issues. In order to ensure the Commission's independence, a range of funders is advisable, if it is feasible.
- The quality of the advance planning will set the tone for the entire project, and must be as good and credible as possible.
- A clear purpose and task must be negotiated and agreed, accompanied by an appropriate, relevant and workable process which can deliver that purpose with those participants. In other words:

There should be clarity of purpose and the process should be fit for the purpose.

Notes

Chapter 1

1 UKCAP was formed in 1996 by 131 large and small UK-based voluntary, community and statutory organisations as part of the work of the International Decade for the Eradication of Poverty. Its aim is to promote the participation of people with direct experience of poverty in the development of partnerships between local, national and international organisations to work towards the reduction and eradication of poverty. Source: UKCAP *'Voices for Change' promotional material* n.d.

2 Published by The Policy Press (Bristol) and the UK Coalition Against Poverty (UKCAP), and supported by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation

3 The aims of the 'Voices for Change' process (see Appendix 1 of the '*Listen, Hear*' report) 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.

4 In practice, as described later in this report, the commissioners found ambivalence and uncertainty about the objectives of the Commission and the intended connection between the Commission and the 'Voices for Change' process. However, there was a clear intention at the time of the initial funding application that the Commission would incorporate, build on and make public the key messages arising from the widespread consultation that was at the heart of the 'Voices for Change' process. The emphasis was on issues surrounding the participation of people experiencing poverty in the decisions and policies affecting their lives. It was not about the issues of 'poverty' and 'exclusion' themselves, although the original title for the Commission did imply this focus. By the third meeting of the Commission, revised terms of reference and a new title had been agreed. This explicitly identified the issues of 'participation' and 'power', as they are connected with 'poverty'.

5 SCF provided accommodation and some administrative support, employed and managed the staff, and seconded a worker to involve young people in the 'Voices for Change' project, though she also worked with wider groupings in Wales and the South West because of the pressures on the project worker; Church Action on Poverty provided staff time through the involvement of their co-ordinator; Oxfam provided top up funding and during the preparation for the commission a part time policy advisor; all were represented on the steering group.

6 Within the funding granted by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (£34K), some monies were allocated to 'staff' costs (£638 for general management costs and 9 months of an administrative assistant's time), £5,000 for publication and dissemination and £12,000 to research and policy consultant/editor costs, as well as to the evaluation reported here. Travel, subsistence accommodation, carer costs and venue hire constituted the additional £6,000+.

7 See ''*Voices for Change' Draft report: Background Information'*, section 7.2, Humaira Haider and Debbie Wason, December 1999, UKCAP (unpublished) *A report on the 'Voices for Change' Project*. Debbie Wason. No date (unpublished).

8 For further information about UKCAP and/or the Commission and 'Voices for Change', please contact: UKCAP, c/o OBAC Gloucester House 8 Camberwell New Road London SE5 0RZ (telephone 020 7735 3400).

Chapter 2

1 Source: UKCAP 'Voices for Change' funding proposal, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1998.

2 As part of the programme of action arising out of the UN International Year for the Eradication of Poverty.

3 'Voices for Change' planning meeting notes, 13 October 1998.

4 'Poverty and participation: learnings from a September 1996 workshop bringing together people living in poverty throughout the UK', UK Coalition Against Poverty (UKCAP), 1996.

5 See '"Voices for Change" draft report: background information', section 7.2, Humaira Haider and Debbie Wason, December 1999, UKCAP (unpublished).

6 At least one staff member involved in the Commission felt that 'Voices for Change' was never envisaged as a developmental programme, in the way in which the project workers developed it – and in their view it was a mistake of the UK steering group to agree to it turning into such a programme without the resources to carry it through.

7 The following distinction was made by an interviewee: consultative approaches are designed to effectively engage people with a pre-set agenda. They are intended to elicit something fairly specific from participants – an answer, a view, a perception – in response to a fairly specific question or set of questions. 'Participatory' approaches engage participants in a process of *defining their agenda* of issues and *then* gaining their views.

8 Thirty-three different events over 18 months involving around 90 organisations and groups, and 200+ participants.

9 The materials were not available to commissioners in the form of written reports until their third meeting.

10 PLA uses methods such as 'mapping' and 'matrices', and has been very effective in involving people who would not normally speak in public, and who find non-verbal and visual methods more empowering. It is said that the major advantage of PLA is to put people on an equal footing (i.e. rather than trying to give special treatment to those who find visual methods easier because of lack of literacy, etc.) – that is, it is primarily about trying to disturb the usual power relationships. This approach was reported to have been particularly successful when working with young people in Scotland, in the South West and Cornish 'Voices for Change' groups, and in Hull DoC. In the 'Voices for Change' project, two-day training sessions were held with 50/50 'grass roots' and local workers, involving some 80 people, run by Hull DoC and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS). A World Wildlife Fund (WWF) video *Passing the Stick* was thought to have been useful in 'whetting people's appetites'. The aim of using this technique was to involve grass roots individuals and groups so that they could hold their own consultations and involve their own communities in the process. There was concern that UKCAP consisted mainly of larger voluntary organisations and that community organisations had been relatively untouched. This was a way of drawing them in and training seven to 80 people on the ground so that they could in turn use the technique themselves as well as feeling able to take part in the area consultations envisaged in the proposal. However, it took a long time and more resources than had been anticipated. (Source: 'Voices for Change' worker; '"Voices for Change" draft report' by Humaira Haider and Debbie Wason, December 1999, UKCAP, unpublished.)

11 This was not true of all area groups – so, for example at the Wales meeting, there was the handing over of written evidence to 'the people's commissioner' (staff communication).

12 'Voices for Change' Commission planning meeting notes, 27 May 1999.

13 UKCAP 'Voices for Change' promotional material, 1998.

14 Source: *Listen, Hear!*, p.v.

15 Commission notes.

16 *It's Roots that Make us Strong? A Review of the UK Coalition Against Poverty*, Angus McCabe, June 2000 (commissioned by UKCAP, with financial assistance from Oxfam UK).

17 Department for International Development (DfID), *Human Rights for Poor People*, February 2000, Executive summary.

Chapter 3

1 The three funders, the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) and occasionally ATD 4th World and two South West region group members.

2 The need for a steering group separate from the UKCAP co-ordinating committee to 'plan and manage the "Voices for Change" process' was identified by one of the group applying for funding as essential, following

the experience of earlier UKCAP projects (UK 'Voices for Change' steering group member).

3 A grass roots commissioner reporting on a contact with a steering group noted: 'They were angry about the lack of clarity or communication with UKCAP' and felt 'almost outside the process'; a grass roots steering group member from a regional group found the meetings 'stressful, a waste of time and not geared to taking reports from the ground'. The lack of childcare was an issue.

4 Interview with steering committee and Commission staff member.

5 One of the seven public life commissioners did not attend; there were six grass roots commissioners.

6 See '"Voices for Change" draft report: background information', section 7.6, Humaira Haider and Debbie Wason, December 1999, UKCAP (unpublished); 'A report on the "Voices for Change" project', Debbie Wason, no date (unpublished).

7 The person nominated by the Northern Ireland steering group did not attend any meetings and in the end withdrew.

8 The requests were resisted because staff felt that London was the generally most accessible location and because of costs, but did not articulate the reasons clearly.

9 Source: UKCAP 'Voices for Change' funding proposal, Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, 1998.

10 See '"Voices for Change" draft report: background information', section 7.6, Humaira Haider and Debbie Wason, December 1999, UKCAP (unpublished).

11 Though there was considerable support for a grass roots steering group member from their local project and another had strong links with their regional group.

12 Whilst commissioners asked for meetings to move around, staff felt it was going to be far harder for most commissioners to get to and that the costs would have been very difficult to meet. This view was not communicated, leaving commissioners feeling that they had not been heard.

13 Notes on meetings with potential commissioners taken by staff members, 1999.

14 Charlotte Flower and Fran Bennett, steering group briefing document (1999, no date).

15 However, this position was not adopted by the steering group until early 1999, after the chair who was initially suggested, and might have been acceptable to both commissioner groups, became very ill.

16 Interview with 'Voices for Change' steering group member.

17 Eighty days' work during the life of the Commission.

18 Staff planned to circulate a list of staff roles but it does not appear to have happened. (Source: Staff member letter to a commissioner, December 1999.)

19 Funded by Oxfam UK (now Oxfam GB).

Chapter 4

1 Staff knew of the work of ATD 4th World, which undertook a project introducing the knowledge of people living in poverty into an academic environment, 1996–98, where it was only at the end of a much longer process involving only people with the direct experience of poverty as the researchers that the 'memoirs' were produced in thematic groups involving academics and activists working together for a day every two months for ten months. This involved a different kind of collaborative writing and the development of new kinds of knowledge. Source: *Introducing the Knowledge of People Living in Poverty into an Academic Environment*, ATD 4th World, no date, translation from the French.

2 Charlotte Flower and Fran Bennett, steering group briefing document (1999, no date).

3 Source: 'Profile of members for the UK Commission of Inquiry on Poverty and Social Exclusion', 1999.

4 Commissioner's letter, 8 December 1999.

5 Source: *Listen, Hear!*, p. 31.

6 Commission verbatim notes, second meeting, January 2000.

7 Commission verbatim notes, second meeting, January 2000.

8 Commission verbatim notes, second meeting, January 2000.

9 Commission verbatim notes, second meeting, January 2000.

10 Job description, policy adviser/writer, October 1999.

11 For example, on participation: 'Influencing the policy process'.

12 This was a job-share, so there were two people involved.

13 After one meeting, there was a brainstorm to identify the next agenda but this was not repeated; at the difficult September meeting, the agenda was negotiated at the start of the meeting.

14 The main event of the Scottish 'Voices for Change' process held on 3 November 1999 to which people from a wide range of community-based organisations were invited. Paid staff from some of these organisations also attended. Politicians were also invited but could not attend. Both the Scottish commissioners were present and spoke at the event, which was highly participative. A well-produced and vivid report was in draft in early 2000. It contained many direct statements of what is wrong and what should be done, both by government and by communities. However, it seems that the Commission as a whole was not familiar with this report, except in very general terms, until its distribution at the July 2000 meeting.

15 We were told by others that staff eventually used to buy stamps every time and post the letters themselves.

16 Commission verbatim notes, eighth meeting, July 2000.

17 Charlotte Flower and Fran Bennett, steering group briefing document (1999, no date).

18 For example, the Commission on the Future of the Voluntary Sector, 1996.

19 Commission verbatim notes, 18 February 2000.

20 Commission verbatim notes, 18 February 2000.

21 Commission verbatim notes, 15 May 2000.

22 Commission verbatim notes, 7 April 2000.

23 An experience that echoed that in the 'Voices for Change' process.

24 Source: *Listen, Hear!*, p. 27.

25 Local costs of Commission visits to areas were paid for by Oxfam.

26 A brainstorm was undertaken on this at a Commission meeting but no list of common questions to be answered was agreed.

27 *Listen Hear!*, p. 31.

28 Commissioner at meeting.

29 The six meetings are listed in the Commission's report (Appendix 1). Those participating were: Hugh Bayley, MP, Parliamentary Undersecretary of State, Department of Social Security; Edwina Hart, Secretary for Finance, National Assembly for Wales; Janet Veitch, Women's National Commission (a meeting requested by the adviser); Moira Wallace and Liz Walton, Social Exclusion Unit; Charles Woodd, Active Communities Unit, Home Office. There was also one 'off-the-record' meeting with a policy adviser, and a grass roots Scottish member of the Commission was part of a delegation who met key Scottish Assembly ministers.

30 However, one grass roots commissioner felt that the Commission, though a good idea, was not primarily there to produce a report because they should have been there at the start of the 'Voices for Change' process to be in a position to do this.

31 Especially from the sixth meeting onwards, June 2000.

32 The June 2000 meeting was the only opportunity for the Commission to meet the regional 'Voices for Change' steering groups. In the event, no one could attend from Scotland, the people coming from Northern Ireland had not been actively involved in 'Voices for Change', and it was only the London and South West Groups who could in practice connect back to the 'Voices for Change' experience (a 'northern' steering group had never got off the ground). This was disappointing for the commissioners, who had seen this as an important opportunity to connect with the previous work.

33 At the first meeting, there had been discussions about the need for a poster campaign and possibly turning some of the materials into plays involving Rory Bremner and John Cleese, but no action was taken, possibly because these ideas were seen as unrealistic. At the last moment, the idea of hiring a mobile billboard to go around Westminster and the placing of flowers on a pauper's grave were considered with the media adviser, but this did not happen in the end.

34 The 'Voices for Change' area meetings had not been in a position to come up with recommendations, because of the difficulty for most people of connecting their local experience with national policy (note prepared by the staff).

35 The commissioned writers had used all (and more than) their allocated time and would not in any case be available for further work after that meeting.

36 This had for some time consisted only of the representatives of the two main organisations involved in UKCAP – Oxfam and Church Action on Poverty – and the UKCAP co-ordinator.

37 The pattern of politicians 'showing and going' at meetings with people with the direct experience of poverty; and the invitation to an expensive poverty conference at 'Hotel Posh' which no one takes up.

38 This date was chosen because it is the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty. In Wales, the original date of 17 October was adhered to. Of course, the report was not available by that time, but the meeting was used to relaunch the Welsh Anti-poverty Network.

39 Undated but c. January 2000.

40 Mentioned in Appendix 1 of verbatim notes of fifth Commission meeting, May 2000, when discussing organisations written to about the Commission.

41 In October 2000, the person appointed took on a full-time job and another appointee took the process up to the revised date of the launch.

42 The Scottish commissioners were reported to have been informed of this decision.

43 *It's Roots that Make us Strong? A Review of the UK Coalition Against Poverty*, Angus McCabe, June 2000 (commissioned by UKCAP, with financial assistance from Oxfam UK).

44 The Rt Hon. Mo Mowlam, MP, Minister for the Cabinet Office and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, was invited in August to be the main speaker at this event. It was only when she briefly attended the launch, having heard about it the previous day, that it was realised that the invitation had not reached her.

45 This is the other main activity supported by UKCAP.

46 This event was observed as part of the evaluation.

Chapter 5

1 This was also noted in the UKCAP review in relation to UKCAP.

2 UKCAP was not a fully constituted body and could not hold employment contracts. Thus, for example, when the UKCAP co-ordinator post became vacant because SCF was making staff redundant, the post had to be offered internally first rather than advertised nationally.

3 Our interviews and steering group notes indicate some unhappiness from 'Voices for Change' area steering groups about SCF management of 'Voices for Change' and Commission staff, in the areas of recruitment of the co-ordinator, staff turnover, stress and internal communication difficulties.

4 This was supporting the All-party Parliamentary Group on Poverty, as already mentioned.

5 This was noted in UKCAP's own review of its work, where the weakness of the management and financial systems, the high turnover of staff, the informal patterns of decision-making and the 'shoestring' budgets were noted. These were seen to be a major weakness in UKCAP's ability to develop a sense of strategic direction, while the lack of strategic direction made it difficult to attract funding – catch-22, as Angus McCabe's report points out (*It's Roots that Make us Strong? A Review of the UK Coalition Against Poverty*, Angus McCabe, June 2000 (commissioned by UKCAP, with financial assistance from Oxfam UK).

6 Steering group notes, 15 June 1999.

7 '"Voices for Change" draft report' by Humaira Haider and Debbie Wason, December 1999, UKCAP, unpublished.

8 Setting up a steering group separate from the wider UKCAP was to ensure strong project and financial management for 'Voices for Change' and the Commission.

9 This was partly because Church Action on Poverty was also receiving Charitable Trust funds.

Chapter 6

1 And also by the area groups at the June meeting.

2 Commission notes, sixth meeting, June 2000.

3 Most copies in fact are owned by the publisher and not UKCAP.

4 At the time of writing the final draft of this report, there was funder interest in taking this suggestion forward.

5 The Joseph Rowntree Foundation funded a review workshop in January 2002 bringing together all the stateholders who identified further action.

Chapter 7

1 The responses to the first draft of our report were divided. Some commissioners and some staff felt that the report was too negative and critical; most grass roots commissioners and at least one public life commissioner felt that the report, though unstinting, reflected their views and maybe was too positive in places.

2 This commissioner would like to see a major government commission set up involving all grass roots commissioners working with two ministers.

3 The Scottish launch was also supported by the Paisley Partnership (£100) and the Scottish TUC (£210).

4 The 1996 Commission on the Future of the Voluntary Sector is one example of this (personal communication).

5 A staff member prepared a paper on 'Influencing the policy process', which was circulated to the Commission members for its third meeting. This looked at how the report could be used, describing different policy initiatives and processes it could fit into including regional ones. The first draft of the Commission's own report by the writers also covered this area.

6 For example, the former co-ordinator of 'Voices for Change'.

7 *It's Roots that Make us Strong? A Review of the UK Coalition Against Poverty*, Angus McCabe, June 2000 (commissioned by UKCAP, with financial assistance from Oxfam UK).

8 This appears to be a key part of UKCAP's strategic funding proposals

9 *Listen, Hear!*, p. 31.

10 For example, *Participation Works – Involving People in Poverty in Policy Making*, ATD 4th World, 2000; *Developing Effective Community Involvement Strategies, Guidance for Single Regeneration Budget Bids,* Joseph Rowntree Foundation, March 2000, Ref. 169; *Neighbourhood Regeneration: Resourcing Community Involvement*, Pete Duncan and Sally Thomas, Joseph Rowntree Foundation/ Policy Press, 2000; *Poverty Reduction Strategies: A Part for the Poor?,* Institute of Development Studies Policy Briefing, Issue 13, April 2000.

11 Though two commissioners were involved in looking at the bids.

12 Commission meeting verbatim notes, tenth meeting, October 2000.

13 Commission meeting verbatim notes, eighth meeting, July 2000.

Chapter 8

1 While this happened in relation to the final report, most area groups already felt disconnected from the process.

Appendix

People interviewed for the evaluation of the Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power

Allen, Grace	South West 'Voices for Change' Steering Group; UK 'Voices for Change' Steering Group
Ballard, Barbara	Joseph Rowntree Foundation
Bennett, Fran	'Staff' (Policy Adviser, UK Poverty Programme, Oxfam)
Brighouse, Susan	CPAG (Child Poverty Action Group); former chair, UK 'Voices for Change' Steering Group
Bronstein, Audrey	UK Poverty Programme Director, Oxfam; former UKCAP 'Voices for Change' UK Steering Group; Director UK Poverty Programme
Carter, Mary	Writer/adviser
Cooper, Niall	'Staff'/Commission Chair; Church Action on Poverty Co-ordinator
David, Wayne	Public Life Commissioner; former MEP; Wales Youth Agency
Deery, Jim	Grass Roots Commissioner; Star Neighbourhood Centre, North Belfast
Dugdale, Karen	South West Steering Group; UKCAP 'Voices for Change' UK Steering Group
Flower, Charlotte	Facilitator (Oxfam)
Francis, Sylvia	Grass Roots Commissioner; Project Manager, Third Age Foundation
Gaventa, John	Public Life Commissioner; Institute of Development Studies, Brighton
Haider, Humaira	'Voices for Change' worker
Holdsworth, Gina	Grass Roots Commissioner; activist Bransholme Motivation, Hull.
Lister, Ruth	Public Life Commissioner; Professor of Social Policy, Loughborough University
McCabe, Angus	Consultant, UKCAP Review
McGlinchey, Stephen	Scottish 'Voices for Change' Steering Group; Save the Children, Scotland
Penet, John	ATD 4th World; UKCAP member
Pratt, Andrew	'Staff', UKCAP Co-ordinator
Riddoch, Lesley	Public Life Commissioner; BBC broadcaster, Scotland
Robertson, Judith	Oxfam Scotland; Scottish 'Voices for Change' Steering Group
Robinson, Dafton	Chair, UKCAP Co-ordinating Committee
Souter, Anne	Grass Roots Commissioner; community activist, Anti-poverty Community Group, Easterhouse, Glasgow
Stanley, Moira	Grass Roots Commissioner; activist in anti-poverty activity, Wales
Tailor, Nilaben	Grass Roots Commissioner; South West 'Voices for Change' Steering Group; Bristol Regional Workshop for the Blind
Wilson, Ruth	South West 'Voices for Change' Steering Group; Communities against Poverty, Plymouth.
Zipfel, Tricia	Public Life Commissioner; Director, PEP Ltd (Priority Estates Project)