

## **Participation in anti-poverty and regeneration work and research**

### **Overcoming barriers and creating opportunities**

*Peter Beresford and Martin Hoban*

This report brings together key experience and knowledge for improving the participation of residents and service users in anti-poverty and regeneration work and research.

There is a growing demand for participation in anti-poverty and regeneration activity by people who have experience of poverty and disadvantage. This report synthesizes experience from a range of key initiatives in this field. It examines the barriers to participation and the shortcomings of traditional approaches to participation. It brings together key lessons learned from a variety of initiatives and a series of principles and supports for improving practice and encouraging diverse involvement, including that of black and minority ethnic communities.



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**Peter Beresford and Martin Hoban**



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The **Joseph Rowntree Foundation** has supported this project as part of its programme of research and innovative development projects, which it hopes will be of value to policy makers, practitioners and service users. The facts presented and views expressed in this report are, however, those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation.

Joseph Rowntree Foundation, The Homestead, 40 Water End, York YO30 6WP  
Website: [www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk)

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First published 2005 by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation

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ISBN 1 85935 373 8 (pdf: available at [www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk))

A CIP catalogue record for this report is available from the British Library.

Prepared and printed by:

York Publishing Services Ltd

64 Hallfield Road

Layerthorpe

York YO31 7ZQ

Tel: 01904 430033; Fax: 01904 430868; Website: [www.yps-publishing.co.uk](http://www.yps-publishing.co.uk)

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# About the authors

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# Acknowledgements

We have to thank many people for their help in undertaking this project. First, we would like to thank members of our Electronic Advisory Group for their continuing help, skill and experience. These were Jill Owen, estate resident and activist; Katrina Taylor, resident, activist and Workers' Educational Association worker; Moraene Roberts, activist with the international human rights organisation ATD Fourth World; and Terry Burns, resident, activist and Workers' Educational Association organiser. We greatly value their help and involvement.

We would also like to thank all the people involved in undertaking the projects and studies that we have included in our project. Particular thanks to Ruth Lister for her help and Fran Bennett for her ongoing interest in these issues. We would also like to thank Anne Harrop, Director of Research at the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, for her interest in this work, as well as thanking the Foundation itself for its financial support. Finally, we would like to thank the many people whose wisdom and experience has informed this study as residents, workers and activists with experiential knowledge of issues of participation, poverty and 'place'.



# Summary

## Introduction

The aim of the study on which this report is based was to identify from existing experience what factors may help and what factors may hinder people's effective involvement in participatory schemes and initiatives relating to poverty/disadvantage and place/regeneration. The study drew on and explored a range of projects and initiatives that have developed different degrees and forms of involvement, and that have been concerned to include 'lived experience' and 'experiential knowledge' in both their process and outcomes.

## Supports for success

A wide range of helpful conditions can be identified from this knowledge base to support effective and diverse involvement in initiatives and projects concerned with poverty and place. These include the following.

- *Capacity building* to support people's empowerment. This is highlighted as a basis for challenging both people's history and sense of disempowerment, and is contrasted with skill development to equip them to work in the way that agencies traditionally work. It is particularly helpful in supporting diversity and ensuring the involvement of black and minority ethnic participants. It means supporting people to have new confidence, skills and understandings. It frequently involves helping people to learn to work together and with other groups.
- *Reaching out* to people and groups with lived experience rather than expecting them to 'come to you'.
- *Starting where people are* and giving value to their understandings and perspectives, rather than assuming (often wrongly) that they will be familiar with 'your ways' of doing things and thinking about them.
- *Establishing accessible and 'user-friendly' structures* and processes for participation. Organisations may be familiar with working in one way. Participatory schemes need to consider what will work for people who are used to doing things in a range of different ways.

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- *Ensuring access* (in all senses, including communication, physical and cultural access) to enable equal involvement for all individuals and groups.
- *Enabling involvement on both an individual and group/collective basis.* (Some of us are not ready 'joiners'; others gain empowerment and skills from doing things with other people with shared and related experience.)
- *Helping to establish a sense of ownership.* Involving people who have such lived experience directly in the formulation and development of such initiatives, both to 'get them right' and to encourage the trust and confidence of others.
- *Recognising and clarifying power relations* in such participatory projects and being clear about aims and possibilities.
- *Linking participation with change making.* People want to have a sense that their involvement can and will lead somewhere.
- *Enabling and working towards the independence of the participatory scheme,* so that it is not narrowly associated by potential participants with the initiating organisation's or agency's own particular agenda(s).
- *Understanding and working for change in the benefits system,* so that it does not unnecessarily and inappropriately restrict people's opportunities to get involved and make their contribution.
- *Supporting the development of independent groups* and organisations of people with direct experience and experiential knowledge to provide a continuing platform for the development of their own ideas, perspectives and activities.
- *Supporting the development of specific black and minority ethnic initiatives,* groupings and organisations as well as working towards equal involvement in all arrangements for participation.
- *Building monitoring, evaluation and follow-up* into participatory schemes, so that their lessons can routinely be learned.
- *Working to negotiate, not assuming agreement.* Providing opportunities for the exploration and negotiation of different views and interests. People with lived experience are not a homogeneous group. They may have competing concerns and goals. Participation provides a crucial opportunity to negotiate these – so long as the importance of this role for participatory schemes is recognised and addressed.

- *Improved access to existing experience.* While there is now a growing body of experience about enabling broad-based involvement in schemes and developments relating to poverty and place, it is still difficult to access it. A more concerted approach needs to be developed both to collate this experience and to make it available to those who wish to draw on it, whether as researchers, organisations or local people.

## **Barriers to involvement**

Existing experience identified barriers in the way of people's participation in initiatives relating to poverty and place at four levels. These were:

- personal
- institutional/political
- economic and cultural
- technical.

An underpinning obstacle, however, is uncertainty regarding whether getting involved will actually achieve anything. Whatever else, if people are to be involved, then it is crucial that they can have a strong sense that something tangible and worthwhile will come out of initiatives.

## **Key lessons to be learned**

The report also brings together a series of 'key lessons' that the studies highlight from their learning. These include:

- the inhibiting effects of traditional participative processes
- the centrality of powerlessness in poverty and disadvantage
- the importance of starting with people's own understandings

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- the key role of autonomous grass-roots organisations that people themselves control at local level and beyond
- agreeing, not imposing, principles and practices for working together
- support for people's self-organisation
- workers with appropriate skills experience and human qualities for equal working
- the need for extra time, support and resources for real participation
- including all voices and perspectives
- extending the involvement of people with direct experience in research and evaluation
- building in follow-up work for change.

# 1 Introduction

The study on which this report is based had a two-fold aim. First, was to explore how to involve people systematically on the basis of poverty/disadvantage and place/regeneration. Second, it sought to identify key policy and practice themes that have already emerged from existing attempts to involve people in formulating their ideas and proposals on the basis of poverty/disadvantage and place.

This information is provided as a basis to help the Joseph Rowntree Foundation take forward its commitment to involve people generally within its priority areas of poverty and place, and also specific initiatives in these areas that are concerned with participation and inclusion.

There are now increasing requirements to involve people as patients, 'service users', members of the public and in local 'communities' in relation to policy, practice and knowledge generation. There is also now a growing awareness of some of the general implications this may have, for example, the need for training, specific funding support, additional time and provision for feedback. There is, however, still a need for more detailed and accessible information and guidance based on existing experience.

It is also important to be aware (and findings from this small project reflect this tension) that much of the work that has been done over the years to ameliorate the conditions of people living in poverty and disadvantaged areas has been based on a model of outsiders with different experience seeking to improve the formers' circumstances and lives. There has therefore been an important history (of which the Joseph Rowntree Foundation can claim to have played a significant part) of external charitable and statutory organisations being set up to improve the conditions of poor people and communities.

Thus work for change has frequently not been initiated by the people with direct experience themselves and often they have had limited involvement in such organisations and initiatives. This has been challenged in recent years as both government and disadvantaged groups (as well as some of these organisations themselves) have demanded that people on the receiving end of policy, provision and services should have an increasingly active role in shaping their lives, and policies and programmes affecting them. Participation and 'user involvement' have become key concerns.

Two other issues need to be addressed when considering participation relating to poverty and place. First, there is a strong body of evidence to suggest that many people do not want to associate themselves with the identity of being 'poor' (regardless of whether they are included within conventional definitions). Thus poverty and disadvantage often provide a less than helpful basis for identity for involving people. Second, while perhaps historically 'place' and disadvantaged geographic 'community' were straightforward bases for identifying particular and perhaps homogeneous groups, this is no longer true. Such areas are now likely to have complex (and sometimes contradictory) population mixes. Both of these issues raise complexities about how to and who to involve for participation based on poverty and place that may not crop up in other situations or with other groups.

## 2 Background

Historically, the focus of much discussion about participation has been on different approaches to and ways of involving people. Arnstein's frequently cited 'ladder of participation' reflects this concern (Arnstein, 1969).

More recently, questions have begun to be framed in terms of *who* to involve and who is involved. In part, this has reflected concerns about the limited and partial nature of involvement. It has frequently been related to a desire to reflect 'diversity' and to include the 'hard to reach' (those groups facing particular barriers). And it has often been framed in terms of how to ensure 'representative involvement' to afford all interests an opportunity to contribute and to avoid privileging 'professionalised' participants, a narrow range of 'activists' or people recruited solely on the basis of organisational affiliations (Beresford and Campbell, 1994).

Some insights into taking forward broad-based participation have been offered by the fields of disability and social care, where a strong tradition of 'user involvement' has developed (including work supported by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation). The reasons for this particular focus for development are not clear. They may be linked with:

- the emergence of confident movements of disabled people and other social care service users, based on assertive self-run organisations, pressing for involvement
- an appreciation that some groups would have to be supported to be able to participate (for example, people with learning difficulties, frail older people and mental health service users), so that support that everyone might need would be recognised as a specific requirement and be more likely to be provided
- the existence of clear and long-term identities as a basis for involvement (for example, through extended use of services or long-term conditions)
- the development of the social model of disability and its emphasis on participation, inclusion and securing people's citizenship rights.

While the social care and disability experience may be a valuable source of learning, it may have only partial relevance to other fields (including poverty and place). Poverty and place as bases for involvement raise additional issues and further complexities.

A lot of work has been done on participation in the field of place (and regeneration policies related to disadvantage and poverty). Community development is one area of professional practice with a long track record of work on participation. However, in the past particularly, the concept of 'community' that was used to provide the framework for such activity was often a traditional and exclusive one rather than an inclusive and anti-discriminatory one. This meant that such participatory initiatives often failed to address issues of gender, disability, distress, race equality, age and sexuality; did not include all groups on equal terms; and sometimes reinforced existing assumptions about women's primary role in the private domain, which limited their participation in the public sphere.

Other potential obstacles to people's diverse and equal involvement on the basis of poverty/disadvantage and place can also be identified. These relate to the issues of both identity and locality that have already been touched on. They include, for example, the following.

- Poverty is widely seen as a devalued and stigmatising identity, which people may not want to sign up to as the basis of a personal identity.
- Both poverty and place may be temporary/transitory experiences/identities that are not experienced as a basis for 'getting involved'.
- As a time-limited experience, (geographic) place may be ranked by some groups as a less significant basis for engagement than 'community' based on shared experience, identity or networks.
- Where place (and poverty) is rural, transport factors and social isolation may obstruct conventional approaches to involvement.
- Urban change and regeneration policies have encouraged population change in formerly disadvantaged urban areas, resulting in mixed populations including both low and higher income/powerless and more powerful groups. Processes for negotiating competing perspectives and interests to ensure broad-based and equal involvement are as yet undeveloped.
- Difference based on power inequalities has not always been explicit in self-organisation based on place.
- Tensions between 'top-down', managerialist regeneration policies and processes and 'bottom-up', citizen-led approaches and initiatives.



- The centrality attached to ideas of 'leadership' and (community) 'leaders'.
- The 'professionalisation' of involvement through intermediary organisations and workers.
- Black and minority ethnic citizens' and community organisations have tended to face additional problems of inadequate and insecure funding, which have created obstacles to their involvement.
- Both poverty and place have been associated with leadership from traditional voluntary and charitable organisations, without a strong and unambiguous tradition of (disadvantaged) grass-roots self-organisation.
- Participatory initiatives in international development work have also highlighted issues with application to domestic involvement based on poverty and place, particularly relating to problems of external control, incorporation and tokenism.

### 3 Planning the project

This small-scale project sought to identify an initial foundation for the effective and broad-based involvement of people on the basis of poverty/disadvantage and place, which addressed:

- conceptual issues
- theoretical issues
- philosophical issues
- ethical issues
- value-based issues.

The project aimed to identify and pull together practical ways of enabling involvement in poverty/disadvantage and place activities (including people with and without organisational affiliations), on an initial 'good enough'/'best possible' basis, for further subsequent development. This involved the following.

- Drawing on the proposers' networks, knowledge (of) and experience in participatory initiatives relating to poverty and place. The project tried to connect this with information about approaches to involvement in social care, disability and other fields.
- Making a focused trawl of a limited but varied range of participatory initiatives in this field.
- Seeking specifically to address issues of race equality and difference.
- Drawing on the knowledge and ideas of a small group of people (acting as an electronic advisory group) with experience of user involvement based on poverty/disadvantage and place. This included people with direct experience relating to poverty and place as activists and grass-roots workers.

## The participatory initiatives

Examination of the participatory initiatives made up the heart of this study. These initiatives were explored using a set of criteria, which were first drafted and then agreed as a basis for doing this (see Appendix 1).

## The e-group

We were able to recruit a group of four people. Because our resources were limited and we wanted to pay for the group's expertise, their role was essentially a two-stage one. First, to help us identify relevant projects and initiatives at the beginning of the study, and to agree key criteria that we would use to explore these initiatives. Second, to read a draft of our report to add, change and correct as they wished. In this way, we hoped that a wider range of perspectives and experience than we could expect to bring on our own would help to inform the project.

## Aims of the project

The project sought to identify:

- means of and criteria for developing effective and inclusive involvement on an ongoing and systematic basis
- a basis for rapid, one-off involvement in relation to specific activities/initiatives/events, where there might be constraints of time and resources.

It also attempted to explore significant themes, issues and approaches emerging from a small range of key participatory studies/projects based on issues related to poverty and place, including:

- anti-poverty policy and practice
- welfare reform and philosophy
- regeneration and area-based policies.

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It sought to identify:

- what if anything might distinguish approaches and proposals of people with experiential knowledge
- how these might contribute to both the wider understanding of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in relation to poverty and place, and broader policy and practice development.

## 4 Exploring participation in poverty and place

As we have said, the aim of this report is to identify key policy and practice themes that have already emerged from existing attempts to involve people in formulating their ideas and proposals on the basis of poverty/disadvantage and place/regeneration. In doing so, we draw on a small number of participatory initiatives/studies in Britain, the Republic of Ireland and overseas; the authors' own experiences of working with poor people and service users; and some key publications from writers concerned with participation in these areas.

We are concerned in this report with both poverty (which addresses poverty/deprivation/low income/social exclusion) and place (which addresses locality, community, social exclusion and regeneration).

First, we will briefly identify key policy and practice themes under the following headings:

- the origins of these initiatives/studies
- their purpose
- the nature of involvement of participants in these initiatives
- the opportunities offered to participants for learning and skill development
- the support offered to enable people to participate.

We will then consider some of the problems and barriers that emerge from participatory initiatives and studies. Finally, we will identify the key lessons learned.

### **The core initiatives**

Our study draws on a series of recent projects and initiatives in this field, all of which in their different ways have sought to address issues of participation in 'poverty' and 'place'. These are:

- Bennett, F. with Roberts, M. (2004) *From Input to Influence: Participatory Approaches to Research and Inquiry into Poverty*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation
- Beresford, P. and Turner, M. (1997) *It's Our Welfare: Report of the Citizens Commission on the Future of the Welfare State*. London: National Institute for Social Work
- CWC (Community Workers Co-operative) (2000) *Partnership, Participation and Power: The Contribution of the Integrated Local Development Programme to the Development of Structures for Local Participation in Decision Making*. Galway: CWC
- Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power (2000) *Listen Hear: The Right to be Heard, Report of the Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power*. Bristol: UK Coalition Against Poverty, The Policy Press
- Dargan, L. (2004a) 'Resident participation in the New Deal for Communities', Planning and Development Research Conference, King's College, University of Aberdeen, 31 March–2 April
- Hoban, M. (2004) 'Let's trust the people: exploring a new approach to the "regeneration and development" of poor areas', unpublished PhD thesis, Brunel University
- Roulston, C. (1998) *Making a Difference? The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition in the Peace Process*. Belfast: University of Ulster.

A number of other sources that either reported participatory arrangements in this field or offered insights into their operation and development (see References) were also studied.

This study is not meant to be a comprehensive evaluation of these initiatives. We have also found it quite difficult to access some of the original studies in the short time we have had available to us. While a number of important studies have been conducted in recent times in different contexts, many are not easily accessible. So, while we have drawn from some of the original studies, we have also had to rely on web-based summaries. We are also not saying that our choice of studies would necessarily have been the only choice to be made. Also, with more time and resources, we could have conducted a more thorough investigation. This remains an important task for the future.

Thus it should be said that this is seen very much as a small-scale pilot project and the authors are not suggesting that this source list is definitive or encompasses all relevant work. However, it does include a wide range of approaches, which we hope reflects the overall range that exists and brings their insights together in this way for the first time.

## **The origins of initiatives**

The participatory initiatives discussed originated from a number of sources. In the main, they were initiated by:

- an independent user-controlled project
- a grass-roots worker/researcher
- a national poverty agency
- an academic and an individual with experience of poverty
- a community workers' organisation
- an anti-poverty coalition of large voluntary organisations
- an international development agency.

These origins largely reflect the fact that initiatives that focus on participation, poverty and place have originated mainly from anti-poverty agencies and development, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and grass-roots organisations of committed workers and activists.

## **The purpose of initiatives**

While all of these initiatives were concerned with participation, their purpose reflected slightly different priorities. Some emphasised the importance of the process of participation and the need to inform participatory methodologies. Others stressed social change and the identification of mechanisms and barriers to promote inclusion. In their own words, some of the aims were as follows.

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- Welfare recipients to have a say: 'The idea at the heart ... was involvement' (Beresford and Turner, 1997, p. 10).
- Social change: 'To enable residents to improve their own lives' (Hoban, 2004).
- To provide information and inform new methodologies (Bennett with Roberts, 2004).
- To identify mechanisms for more 'meaningful and equal participation in local planning development' (CWC, 2000).
- '... investigating and exploring solutions to the *barriers* faced by people experiencing poverty when participating in policy and decision-making processes' (del Tufo and Gaster, 2002, p. 4).
- To identify: 'the common patterns that emerged from poor people's experiences in many different contexts' (Narayan *et al.*, 2000, p. 3).

## The ownership of the initiatives

In these initiatives, the level of people's ownership and control varied from a great deal to very little. This again tended to reflect the priorities and emphasis of the projects. For some, it was important that poor people/service users were central and had as much control as possible from agenda setting to analysis and the writing of the final report. For others, researchers and professional staff retained the overall control while at the same time seeking to collaborate and facilitate as much participation as possible. Several were presented as partnerships, but the nature of those partnerships and the distribution of power that was involved varied and was not always transparent.

## The involvement of people with experience of poverty in the initiatives

Poor people were involved in initiatives in different ways and at different levels and stages. In some cases, they were involved in the planning and co-ordination of the studies/projects. In addition, various methods were used to inform, recruit and obtain evidence from participants. The main methods can be categorised under the different stages of:



- 1 information, recruitment and design
- 2 collecting evidence
- 3 collating, analysing and writing up.

### **Information, recruitment and design**

This included:

- providing accessible leaflets and information for different constituents
- setting up a planning group to recruit service users
- the use of existing networks to identify and recruit individual participants
- 50/50 representation on a commission comprised of people with experience of poverty together with professionals/academics/public officials who had knowledge and experience of policies and practice concerning poverty and participation.

### **Collecting evidence**

This included:

- surveys
- going to 'them' rather than expecting them to come to 'us'
- encouraging individual people to send evidence
- interviews with key informants such as grass-roots activists and workers
- consultation meetings with groups of poor people/service users
- half-day discussion workshops in poor areas
- focus groups.

### Collating, analysing and writing up

This included:

- using preliminary issues and themes from findings as a basis for discussion and dialogue
- drawing on social analysis tools, particularly from development work in the southern hemisphere
- reflecting the issues and priorities raised by people themselves rather than imposing the researcher's own categories on what was said – for example, an approach that: 'builds on participants' own analysis and ideas rather than fitting them into some pattern preset by the analyst or researcher' (Beresford and Turner, 1997, p. 34)
- draft reports for dissemination and amendment.

## 5 Positives: emerging themes

A number of themes emerged from the projects and studies. While these were not necessarily raised by all of them, they were evident in a variety of initiatives and they were either explicitly referred to or implicit in reporting.

### Group working and discussion

A common element to emerge from the initiatives was the importance of *group working and discussion*. As one report states:

We placed a particular emphasis on trying to work together in an effective, positive and supportive way ... First, we thought the better we could work together the more we were likely to achieve. Second, welfare state service users, particularly people with low income and with restricted choices, are likely to have a difficult and stressful life and it is important that any activities in which they are involved do not add to their difficulties, but instead represent something positive in their lives.  
(Beresford and Turner, 1997, pp. 18–19)

Similarly, another report stresses the importance of creating a relaxed, enjoyable experience to facilitate discussion and provide practical support:

One of my primary concerns was to create a relaxing and enjoyable environment where people could meet, talk and discuss the issues in a relaxed setting. I was aware that while some participants knew each other, others did not ... My main role at the seminar was to present some of the findings/themes back to participants and to facilitate the discussion. Two colleagues helped with registration, note taking of the discussion and provided general support.  
(Hoban, 2004, p. 220)

### Opportunities for learning and skill development

Some initiatives provided opportunities for mainly experiential forms of learning and skill development. As such, they were concerned more with 'learning by doing',

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rather than with a formal process of 'training'. Learning and skill development occurred mainly through:

- sharing personal and group experiences and concerns
- personal reflection and analysis
- group working and discussion
- learning about non-traditional forms of research
- participatory exercises
- a facilitative process rather than a directive process (having a facilitator rather than a chairperson)
- people learning to work with others from different backgrounds (e.g. academic, professional, service user and welfare recipients)
- emotional learning as an important element of the process.

Individual and group learning was seen to be an important part of the process. Participation could trigger personal change within and between people. As one report emphasises:

... people living in poverty have been taught to believe their opinions don't count, they may need to go through a long process before feeling confident in articulating their views.  
(Bennett with Roberts, 2004, p. 49)

As they become part of a group and as their opinions are respected in discussions, they gain in confidence and they are increasingly interested in wider issues. Ruth Lister (2002) states that this experience of participation can lead to new forms of awareness and towards a new politics of 'redistribution and recognition' (Lister, 2002, p. 40). This raises the question of the importance of participation as an educational and empowering process for individuals and groups.

## Offering support

Support to enable people's involvement emerged as important. The support offered to (potential) participants was mainly seen in terms of personal/practical and general support. The main forms of support provided can be listed as follows.

- *Personal and practical support:* travel expenses, food, accommodation, childcare, personal assistance, resources for specific skill training.
- *General support:* support staff, administration, co-ordination and facilitation, writers, and access to computers and email.

## 6 Problems and barriers to participation, poverty and place

Participation in a meaningless forum is meaningless.  
(Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power, 2000, p. 15)

The response of welfare state users and their organisations also seemed to be shaped by what they thought could be achieved.  
(Beresford and Turner, 1997, p. 30)

There was noticeable discussion in different sources about the problems and barriers involved in seeking to introduce participatory initiatives with poor people and service users. A key message to emerge was that the non-participation of people and the difficulties encountered in seeking to involve them related very much to what they thought could be achieved. In other words, people's non-participation is a powerful message in itself. They will only participate when they believe there may be a positive experience and outcome for them around the issues they are most concerned about.

Ruth Lister (2002, p. 44) also raises an important question about barriers and whether power holders really place any importance on the experiences and understandings of poor people. She asks the crucial question as to what *value* we give to people's own understandings and expressions of their needs. For example, to what extent are agencies prepared to examine their own policies, practices and attitudes, and allow for the necessary resources and time to enable people to participate in a meaningful way.

The main problems and barriers identified are listed under the following headings:

- personal
- institutional/political
- economic and cultural
- technical.

## Personal barriers

These barriers included the following.

- A sense of personal powerlessness that stems from long-term dependency on others.
- The costs of involvement – people who live in poverty are usually more concerned with their own survival (most are on benefit or in low-paid employment) rather than in participating in *other* people's forums that have no definite outcomes for them.
- The time, effort and determination that may be involved – it 'felt like swimming against the tide' (Hoban, 2004).
- Literacy problems and having had little or inappropriate formal education.
- The difficulties of sustaining involvement because of physical and/or mental distress.

## Institutional and political barriers

These barriers included the following.

- The domination of participation/partnership structures by local authority officers, councillors and professionals.
- Community development being seen by government agencies: 'as a relatively short-term training measure rather than a broader human development and equalising strategy, designed to draw those on the periphery closer to the core' (CWC, 2000, p. 10).
- Intervening agencies wanting to create one 'community perspective' whereas, in reality, there is a diversity of views and experiences (JRF, 2000a). Moreover, some groups have little attachment to locality. Lorna Dargan (2004a), from her research on participation in the New Deal for Communities programme in Newcastle upon Tyne argues, 'Simply sharing an artificially created space is not enough to foster a sense of sharedness of community amongst those residents living within its borders' (Dargan, 2004a, p. 18).

## Participation in anti-poverty and regeneration work and research

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- Local leaders and gatekeepers acting as a professional elite.
- Cultural and institutional barriers to a more participatory philosophy and approach.
- The complex array of 'regeneration'/funding programmes and structures in poor areas are confusing and complex.
- Problems with 'representative' forms of participation – 'community representation has been problematic' (JRF, 2000b).
- Participation as an 'add on' to an organisational and policy-making culture rather than as a central or 'mainstreaming' idea.
- Forums set up for specific groups such as young people not being seen as accountable or democratic but more as token groups used to legitimise adult decisions (JRF, 1998).
- A formal meetings culture and the use of language that is often not very conducive to dialogue and especially to groups such as young people.
- The benefits system discouraging voluntary activism.

## Economic and cultural barriers

This is where the broader structural context of participation can impose both objective and subjective constraints and obstacles. For example, the following.

- There are clear difficulties in seeking to promote participation in areas undergoing serious decline and fragmentation.
- Lack of trust and a legacy of 'them and us', which is deeply ingrained on both sides.
- Communities experiencing consultation fatigue from initiatives that offer no clear visible outcomes.
- Lack of autonomous 'voices', organisation and infrastructure.



- When professionals and people with experience of poverty work together without adequate preparation and common understanding, the dynamic created can lead to difficulties.

### Technical barriers

This is where practical constraints operate. However, it is important to recognise that, while these may be practical or technical in expression, there may also sometimes be underlying problems relating to existing priorities and values. For example, the following.

- Problems of reaching and accessing certain groups of users.
- Roles of workers not clear.
- Difficulties in getting small amounts of funding for support costs.
- Shortage of qualified community and youth workers with the particular skills, knowledge and qualities for participatory work (i.e. to help groups to work together, identify their own priorities, develop action plans and establish participatory processes).
- Pressures on community organisations to respond to official agendas rather than their own.
- Lack of accessible formats and technological support for groups such as disabled people to enable them to participate effectively.

### Issues of place

There is one more issue that we touched on earlier that might need to be addressed under the heading of barriers. This is the issue of enabling involvement on the basis of 'place', given the complexity and subtlety of locality and neighbourhood in many modern western societies like the UK.

There is a strong tradition of *place* in UK approaches to both poverty and disadvantage, and regeneration and community development. The activities and priorities of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation itself reflect this history. It can be argued that this grew from a time when localities were more homogeneous,

'community' could more reliably and clearly be defined in geographic terms, and social and demographic change was less rapid and dramatic. But we have moved to a situation where localities are more complex, more liable to change, often with significant movement, and groups that are very different in terms of income, power and status may live close together. What implications may this have for participation on the basis of 'place'? Does it have implications for who is involved and how? We might expect these issues would be significant.

We found very little discussion of this question in many of the studies concerned with regeneration/anti-poverty. While issues of gender, race and so on were touched on, we did not come across any in-depth discussion of it. Lorna Dargan (2004b) makes an important point in relation to the area-based approach to regeneration. She argues that, in the Government's programme for neighbourhood regeneration, communities are defined as predominantly spatial, consensual and united (Dargan, 2004b, p. 4). Therefore, the aim is to create a consensus among community members. Dargan says that, from this perspective, while there is an acceptance that there may be some divergent views within the designated 'community', the major assumption is that 'there remains an underlying sense of sharedness that can be uncovered through dialogue between local people'. Thus, 'community participation' in Britain may be founded on the belief that people within the area will pull together to raise their 'community' out of poverty (Dargan, 2004b, p. 5).

This raises a number of questions in relation to who is currently involved.

- How are local people selected to participate in partnership forums? They are not elected.
- If community is seen in this way then it is likely the most powerful will dominate this form of participation.
- Questions have consistently been raised in a number of studies about the representativeness of resident participants, as few residents are drawn from the young, older, disabled, and black and minority ethnic communities (Dargan, 2004b). As a result, some important issues are not addressed. For example:

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

(Voices for Change, London, cited in Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power, 2000)

- The most powerful continue to benefit disproportionately from new schemes.

If we are to move beyond this, we need to acknowledge a number of issues/questions.

- A shared geographical space may not be enough to engender a sense of one 'community' that can be regenerated. The reality is the existence of a number of small communities who may be in conflict with each other over a wide range of issues. This is the evidence from Newcastle (Dargan, 2004b) and South Wales (Hoban, 2004).
- How can these 'smaller communities' be heard?
- Can we create a wider unity based on the common issues within this diversity?
- How can we create models based around 'smaller communities' that can engage with wider policy agendas?

## 7 Key lessons

Most initiatives seemed to pay considerable attention to the lessons to be learned from their experience, and identified important lessons and offered recommendations for making progress on participation. They highlighted both problems arising from traditional ways of doing things and approaches to involvement that seem to work.

### **People are often stifled and frustrated within existing participative processes**

It was like a symphony – there was one main melody and an undercurrent. The guy who was running the meeting asked patsy questions: the officials gave patsy answers. Someone else would step up the emotional volume; they would be ignored. Then the meeting would go back to the same unhearing pattern.

(Commissioner describing the attitudes of councillors and officials on a Commission visit, Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power, 2000, p. 26)

They talked about partnerships and whatever. There was never a partnership. The community was used for consultation purposes. You just had to stay in there and try and fight your corner.

(Estate activist cited in Hoban, 2004, p. 292)

While there are many positive examples to be found of ‘good participation’ (although finding them can be difficult), we also encountered major criticisms of existing approaches. For instance, it was generally felt that participation was more often used as a tool to achieve largely pre-decided outcomes. Thus, ‘community participation’ has tended to be interpreted and used in this way. From this perspective, participation is seen to be concerned primarily with *building, bridging, cementing, repairing* and *strengthening* existing frameworks and processes (Hoban, 2004). One of the consequences of this approach is that resident participants often do not feel equal partners in the process. So, rather than creating more constructive forms of dialogue and sharing between different experiences and expertise, it leads to conflicts and tensions. Lorna Dargan (2004a) reported how residents involved in community regeneration in Newcastle on Tyne viewed participation as ‘a battle, a struggle against authority’. Activists described themselves as ‘fighting the partnership’.

board, fighting for their rights, and fighting to be heard. They perceived themselves going to meetings as ‘lambs to the slaughter’, of having to speak out and get angry, otherwise ‘we’re just colluding with our own oppression’ (p. 13).

This reflects a theme running through a number of studies surveyed, that people’s experience of participation within structures such as ‘partnership boards’ and various formal forums has not been particularly enjoyable or empowering. Residents and activists often either feel controlled by the process or see it as a struggle with those in authority. Many existing mechanisms for community involvement appear inadequate, with little time for consultation and inadequate resources to support and sustain meaningful participation.

## **Powerlessness as the root of poverty and disadvantage**

... our work has shown us clearly that at the root of poverty is powerlessness. [It is about the] shift in power that is needed if people experiencing poverty are to have a real voice in the decisions which affect their lives. And the way to do that is through participation – genuine participation. This means people experiencing poverty thinking together about the causes of their poverty, and what needs to change to tackle it, and taking action to bring about that change.

(Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power, 2000, p. 6)

A key message running through a number of initiatives was that powerlessness is at the root of poverty and disadvantage. It was felt important to identify challenges and possibilities for participation in each context. In other words, any attempt to initiate a participatory process needs to acknowledge the current realities, the existing power relations and the nature of current forms of representative participation. It was also seen as important to have some understanding of poverty in its local economic, social and political context. As one report stated:

... any attempts to initiate change need to address the nature of these power relations between the key players, often exercised through traditional forms of leadership and professional practices.

(Hoban, 2004, p. 332)

Such an analysis would be helpful, as there can be real fears and resistance to new forms of participatory organisation from representative forms of leadership, such as councillors, other politicians and specific interest groups, particularly at times when new programmes and resources are being introduced.

There was also some discussion of the relationships between convenors/workers and participants. It was mentioned that power differences are often not openly acknowledged between participants in joint structures such as working partnerships. This was seen as important, as power relations often determine access to resources and decision making.

### **Start with people's perceptions and experiences**

The challenge for outsiders is to look at the world through the eyes and spirit of the poor, to start with poor people's realities and then trace upwards and outwards to identify, and then make, the changes needed to impact poor people's lives.

(Narayan *et al.*, 2000, p. 274)

Another important lesson identified is that it is necessary to start the process by listening to (local) poor people and by engaging directly with the issues of specific concern to *them* in their own lives and localities. People's direct personal and collective experiences, life situations, achievements, understandings, analyses, aspirations (their existing knowledge) are the starting point for discovery, investigation and improvements in their lives and living environments.

### **The need for autonomous grass-roots organisations and networks of poor people at local, national and wider levels**

I don't think pouring money at things is the answer. Yes, you need money to do buildings up and things like that; I'm not saying that. But you've got to work with the people because at the end of the day the people are the future. If we can instil hope that things can be different, things can change, you can take charge of your destiny and your future, then [the Valleys] has a future.

(Valleys grass-roots worker, cited in Hoban, 2004, p. 306)

A key objective identified is to encourage and support autonomous organisations and movements – an agency of poor people – within and across poor areas. Ruth Lister (2002) identifies what is needed in terms of a form of ‘self-actualisation’ linked with a process of ‘collective empowerment’ (Lister, 2002, p. 42). In other words, the creation of self and collective forms of autonomy are essential to overcome feelings of powerlessness to challenge and change existing power structures. Thus, ‘participation’ is seen as both a personal and a collective process that enables poor and excluded people to collectively organise and engage in action and negotiation (with power holders) for the purpose of improving their own lives and living environments. New forms of representation and leadership may also be needed that are accountable, democratic and retain contact with the ‘grass roots’. It was also felt that wider networks are needed across local communities, as there is little ‘horizontal’ organisation to argue for and access resources at area or regional levels.

## **Agree a number of key principles and practices for working together**

[The project] offered a safe opportunity for people to express their views, talk about their experience and offer their hopes and ideas, where they could know that they would not be patronised, ridiculed or looked at askance.

(Beresford and Turner, 1997, p. 140)

A number of studies stressed the importance of being able to work together. They also made it clear that it could not be assumed that this would happen automatically. A range of suggestions was offered to help this process develop. This included:

- a clear purpose and task agreed between people
- to clarify the nature and level of involvement on offer
- to agree ground rules
- to develop an equal opportunities statement
- the use of participatory techniques to promote confidence, discussion and dialogue
- agreeing acceptable forms of facilitation/chairing/leadership

- the development of a negotiated and owned workplan
- keeping all stakeholders informed throughout the process.

### **Direct assistance to support people's (self-) organisation**

The core message from poor people is a plea for direct assistance to them, for support to their organisations so they can negotiate directly with governments, NGOs, and traders without exploitative and corrupt 'middlemen'.

(Narayan *et al.*, 2000, p. 265)

As noted above, a key message is that people's capacity is the primary element of effective participation. It was argued that poor and excluded people will need access to political power, resources and the skills to participate in a process of change. This also needs to be part of a long-term strategy. Specifically, the forms of assistance required are listed under the following headings:

- workers with the necessary skills, knowledge and personal qualities
- extra resources, support and time.

### **Workers with the necessary skills, knowledge and personal qualities**

One of the themes that emerged was that there needed to be improved, more equal and open relationships between people and workers. The need for 'community development' and 'capacity building' was identified in a number of studies. One report describes the nature of the 'capacity building' required:

... development work which strengthens the ability of community-based organisations and groups to build their structures, systems and skills ... It includes aspects of training, consultancy, organisational and personal development, mentoring and peer group support.

(JRF, 2000b, p. 2)



Another study suggested that, if people are to take more control, the nature of the support required is crucial. It argued that residents wanted community workers who were more 'enablers' than 'doers'. In other words, workers who would 'help' but who would not 'interfere'. They can be sources of information but must work to an agenda set by residents as opposed to a preconceived agenda that is set outside the area. Crucially, they should be able to identify what is important for residents and to start their work from this point:

... the attitude of the people coming in has got to be that we are not coming in to change [your] world. We are coming in to help YOU to change your area ... You want help but you don't want interference.  
(Village activist, cited in Hoban, 2004, p. 317)

A number of studies argued for a *team of workers* who could provide information, technical assistance and operational support (CWC, 2000; Narayan *et al.*, 2000). An important element of this support is group work skills. In addition, the importance of building trust was mentioned. Workers should be able to build trust with residents and to be as honest as possible about their own personal or agency agendas. This was felt to be particularly important, as otherwise the important issues would not be revealed. It was argued that the required levels of trust were unlikely to be achieved using traditional approaches that involved short visits/time spent in communities.

As one report states:

The less time spent in communities, the less likely it is that tacit issues are noticed ... The trust required for subjects to be broached openly cannot be built in a matter of days.  
(Narayan *et al.*, 2000, p. 22)

Similarly, Lorna Dargan (2004a) has highlighted the importance of establishing a level of trust between workers and residents in poor areas:

The reality of working in deprived urban areas is that the sense of abandonment and exclusion felt by local residents has understandably fostered a sense of suspicion and mistrust of those outside of their community, and of those people in authority.  
(Dargan, 2004a, p. 18)

### **Acknowledge and meet the need for extra resources, support and time**

Most projects and studies placed an emphasis on acknowledging that efforts to initiate meaningful participation take time and patience, and can put great demands on all those who are involved. A number of additional forms of support were identified for this purpose and felt to be important (in addition to personal and general support detailed earlier). These included:

- paying residents for their time and work in shaping and improving policies
- resources for participation to be included in initial funding bids
- access to information technology
- new funding sources required to promote and support new participatory approaches to research/development work/regeneration
- more resources for training for workers/service users
- resources for networking and sharing experiences of participatory research at national and international levels.

### **Hearing all voices within and across communities**

If the community is seen as homogeneous then only the most powerful voice will tend to be heard.

(JRF, 2000a, p. 1)

... all voices to be heard and for all to be facilitated to speak.

(Roulston, 1998, p. 12)

Some projects sought to address issues of diversity and to include a wide variety of voices within the planning and implementation process. For example, one study of youth participation identified the use of youth surveys, youth conferences, focus groups and youth delegates (JRF, 1998). At the same time, significant limitations were identified with these methods for involving young people.

In relation to women's participation, Carmel Roulston referred to the Opsahl Commission in 1992, which highlighted the importance of the role of women's activism in community groups and community regeneration in Northern Ireland. This form of activism was important in achieving some concrete gains for some of the poorest and socially excluded areas of Northern Ireland. Crucially, Roulston has argued that community work and community activism has been a positive experience for women in poorer areas of Northern Ireland. It has enabled women's needs and interests to be articulated, and allowed community groups to engage with the political process in Northern Ireland, which has traditionally been a male preserve. In fact, there may be some important new learning in relation to working with diversity and difference arising from the talks and Peace Process in Northern Ireland. For example, the following.

- The importance of dialogue and respectful listening in building enough trust to move forward.
- Recognition that core values and principles must be agreed on and respected (in this case, justice, equity and inclusive dialogue).
- Voluntary and community groups devising participatory and consensual decision-making processes that are very different from traditional mechanisms.
- A desire by some community groups to seek to move beyond deeply ingrained and opposing traditional perspectives and identities ('them and us') and existing exclusive structures to create more inclusive and participatory processes.

Two other groups also need to be included in this discussion, because they have also frequently been marginalised in developments relating to poverty and place. These are black and minority ethnic people and disabled people.

Much has been done more recently to explore the involvement of black and minority ethnic communities. At least three strands to making progress are highlighted. First, the importance of reaching out to black and minority ethnic communities and involving them centrally in such initiatives. Second, the need to resource specific black and minority ethnic self-organisation, participatory initiatives and groups. Finally, making increased efforts to involve black and minority ethnic people in *all* community and citizens' groups and organisations. Additional resources, race equality training and other anti-discriminatory input will help bring about the cultural change needed.

While disabled people (and we are using an inclusive definition here to encompass people with physical and sensory impairments, older disabled people, mental health service users/survivors, people with learning difficulties and so on) have been at the forefront of developing effective schemes for user involvement, particularly in health and social care, they have traditionally commonly been marginalised in both discussions and developments relating to participation in poverty and place. Discriminatory attitudes and lack of adequate awareness of and commitment to broadly defined access policies and practices seem to lie at the heart of such exclusions.

### **People with direct experience of poverty having more influence in research on poverty and social exclusion**

... participants were able to identify (personally and collectively) their own problems, analyse the causes of these problems and offer their own insights into potential solutions.  
(Hoban, 2004, p. 342)

The projects under consideration expressed a clear call for people with experience of poverty to have more influence and impact on policy and practice. It was argued that local people with direct experience, grass-roots activists and workers are the *primary experts* and could usefully critique and shape the philosophy, policy and practice of 'regeneration' and anti-poverty programmes. These critical voices could emerge when participants are given the time and space to speak about their concerns and 'their' view of the world, and offer ideas for new ways forward.

### **Making long-term change/follow-up**

Reports don't change policies ... it's people who will bring about change.  
(Public life commissioner cited in del Tufo and Gaster, 2002, p. 65)

Most of the studies stated that opportunities for follow-up were limited because of lack of funding and capacity. Most studies felt their reports could be used as a support to local and national campaigning groups, development and educational initiatives. Some of the studies were published in book/report form, disseminated to participants or made available on the internet. In addition, some studies identified issues and questions for further work such as the following.

- Resources and capacity are needed for follow-up.
- Recommendations should be directed towards particular audiences at local, regional and national levels.
- Seminars with central and local government, and work with policy makers.
- Exchange of experience of good practice.
- What can be learned from the formation of grass-roots organisation in poor areas in other countries?
- What can be learned from the formation of the disability and user movements?
- A long-term strategy of dissemination focused on grass-roots organisations.

One thing this project has highlighted, however, is that existing experience is frequently not readily accessible. It is probably best to regard the initiatives and studies that we have drawn up as the tip of an iceberg of experience in this field, over a number of years. But little of it is readily available – even where people, like the present authors, are used to negotiating libraries, web sites and so on. Local studies and user-led initiatives often have limited circulation and a restricted shelf life. So it is not just the valuable experience that has been gained that is often not followed up – the information it offers and the lessons to be learned from it also cannot readily be found. This situation needs to be addressed urgently if participation in poverty and place is to be taken forward cost-effectively without constantly ‘reinventing the wheel’. Knowledge that is inaccessible is effectively knowledge that is lost. This is not only costly financially, but also likely to lead to much disillusion and many lost opportunities to engage people successfully in shaping their own and their neighbourhoods’ futures.

## 8 Supports for success

If we take together the practices and principles emerging from the themes and key lessons contained in the projects and studies that we explored, a number of supports for success in working to involve people with direct experience in poverty and place are highlighted. We are not suggesting that addressing these will necessarily guarantee 'success'. These are not mechanistic techniques that can be used in this way. But, if they are seen as making up a value base and a series of components towards good practice, then they are likely to be helpful.

A wide range of useful conditions can be identified from this knowledge base to support effective and diverse involvement in initiatives and projects concerned with poverty and place. These include the following.

- *Capacity building to support people's empowerment.* This is highlighted as a basis for challenging both people's history and their sense of disempowerment, and is contrasted with skill development to equip them to work in the way that agencies traditionally work. It is particularly helpful in supporting diversity and ensuring the involvement of black and minority ethnic participants. It means supporting people to have new confidence, skills and understandings. It frequently involves helping them to learn to work together and with other groups.
- *Reaching out* to people and groups with lived experience rather than expecting them to 'come to you'.
- *Starting where people are* and giving value to their understandings and perspectives, rather than assuming (often wrongly) that they will be familiar with 'your ways' of doing things and thinking about them.
- *Establishing accessible and 'user friendly' structures* and processes for participation. Organisations may be familiar with working in one way. Participatory schemes need to consider what will work for people who are used to doing things in a range of different ways.
- *Ensuring access* (in all senses, including communication, physical and cultural access) to enable equal involvement for all individuals and groups.
- *Enabling involvement on both an individual and group/collective basis.* (Some of us are not ready 'joiners'; others gain empowerment and skills from doing things with other people with shared and related experience.)

- *Helping to establish a sense of ownership.* Involving people who have such lived experience directly in the formulation and development of such initiatives, both to 'get them right' and to encourage the trust and confidence of others.
- *Recognising and clarifying power relations* in such participatory projects, and being clear about aims and possibilities.
- *Linking participation with change making.* People want to have a sense that their involvement can and will lead somewhere.
- *Enabling and working towards the independence of the participatory scheme,* so that it is not narrowly associated by potential participants with the initiating organisation's or agency's own particular agenda(s).
- *Understanding and working for change in the benefits system* so that it does not unnecessarily and inappropriately restrict people's opportunities to get involved and make their contribution.
- *Supporting the development of independent groups* and organisations of people with direct experience and experiential knowledge to provide a continuing platform for the development of their own ideas, perspectives and activities.
- *Supporting the development of specific black and minority ethnic initiatives,* groupings and organisations, as well as working towards equal involvement in all arrangements for participation.
- *Building monitoring, evaluation and follow-up* into participatory schemes, so that their lessons can routinely be learned.
- *Working to negotiate, not assuming agreement.* Providing opportunities for the exploration and negotiation of different views and interests. People with lived experience are not a homogeneous group. They may have competing concerns and goals. Participation provides a crucial opportunity to negotiate these – so long as the importance of this role for participatory schemes is recognised and addressed.
- *Improved access to existing experience.* While there is now a growing body of experience about enabling broad-based involvement in schemes and developments relating to poverty and place, it is still difficult to access it. A more concerted approach needs to be developed both to collate this experience and to make it available to those who wish to draw on it, whether as researchers, organisations or local people.

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# Appendix 1: Draft criteria for exploring projects

- 1 Where did the initiative come from (i.e. people identifying with lived experience or others)?
- 2 What was the purpose of the initiative (briefly), i.e. making change; providing information?
- 3 Who controlled the initiative (people with lived experience, or others or both)?
- 4 What degree of say/control did participants have, e.g. from none to total?
- 5 How clearly is the process of involvement spelled out (i.e. is it recognised as something needing discussion/development)?
- 6 How did the initiative involve people/what was the nature of involvement offered to people with lived experience? (What forms of involvement? When provided?, etc.)
- 7 Does this involvement appear to have been positive or negative for people?
- 8 In what were participants involved (i.e. what aspects of the initiative)?
  - Does the initiative address diversity regarding involvement?
  - Are there opportunities for capacity building/skill development (of participants)?
  - Did the initiative ensure access (to be able to be involved on equal terms: physical, cultural and communication access)?
  - What, if any, support did the initiative offer people to be involved?
  - Did any barriers to people's involvement emerge? Were they discussed? Can others be identified?
- 9 What, if any, problems regarding involvement did the initiative experience/report?
- 10 What key lessons did the initiative learn and can be learnt regarding participation in poverty and place?
- 11 What, if anything, did the initiative offer in terms of achieving change (as a result of people getting involved)?

12 Do issues of power difference emerge (between people with and without lived experience)? If yes:

- what form do they take?
- are they discussed?

13 Was the initiative evaluated? If so, how?

14 Was the initiative followed up (i.e. did it lead to further things)?

## Appendix 2: Related publications by the authors

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