

Voices for a Change

a participatory peer
research project finding
solutions to the
experience of poverty
in London



ATD Fourth World



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Summary of findings and recommendations

Voices for a Change trained peer researchers to interview people living in poverty in London, with a view to finding out what support they needed to help them move out of poverty.

Resilience: how some people manage poverty

Some of those interviewed had acquired a resilience to help them get by. Others did more than that. Although they often had a difficult experience of the education system as children, a third of the participants had the strength and spirit to acquire new skills. Despite their low income, many participants built up strategies to get by on their money.

Good public services were important. A third of participants reported positive experiences from using health care services, especially their GP. There were also positive comments about Sure Start from all the parents who had used it.

Voluntary organisations and faith groups gave support to a third of participants. Above all, the support of friends, neighbours and family was vital for many people.

Key recommendations

- *Services need to build on the resilience and positive steps people make to move out of poverty.*
- *Policy-makers must recognise that most people want the means to support themselves; they do not want to depend on 'handouts'.*

Moving out of poverty: what help do people need?

Create a better understanding of poverty

From the responses there was a sense that those providing services to people living in poverty did not understand the problems they faced. To

meet the needs and expectations of people living in poverty, frontline service providers and practitioners, as well as policy-makers, need to understand how poverty affects their lives. The statutory and private sectors should learn from voluntary and community organisations how to view people as having a potential to be developed rather than as a problem to be solved.

When working with families, services should not mistake poverty for neglect or apathy. To help build trust with people living in poverty, they should use language that empowers rather than stigmatises.

Key recommendations

- *Provide poverty awareness training, delivered by people with experience of poverty.*
- *Promote opportunities for the participation of people living in poverty to influence policy and practice.*
- *Focus support on the whole family to reduce the risk of children from a poor background entering the care system because of poverty rather than any neglect or abuse.*

Improve access to services

Almost half of those interviewed reported feelings of depression, stress and anxiety that compromise their ability to move out of poverty. Whether these mental health issues are the result or the cause of individuals being in poverty, they act as a barrier to people moving out of poverty. More than half of those interviewed said that the services they used were unhelpful, unapproachable, complicated to use or even untrustworthy.

Key recommendations

- *Build on people's trust of their GPs by locating other services within surgeries (such as advice on benefits, finding work and family support services).*
- *Ensure easier and earlier access to treatment and counselling for mental health issues.*
- *Sustained financial support should be given to local community projects that build inclusion and social cohesion.*
- *Door-to-door outreach services are needed to support people on their terms and on their own territory.*

Introduction to Voices for a Change

- *Recognise that people living in poverty are more likely to be victims of crime and offer appropriate support and improve security in deprived areas to prevent crime.*

Ensure an adequate income for all

People living in poverty are not necessarily unemployed or unwilling to work. Many other factors can leave working people struggling financially: low rates of pay, employers who employ 'off the books' and avoid paying for entitlements.

Most of those receiving state benefits reported that these were insufficient to meet basic needs and that the complexity of the system created problems.

For some recent migrants, the financial problems are a result of not having the right to work. It is often very difficult for ex-offenders to find work; a number of participants cited having a criminal record, or a family member being released from prison, as creating an additional financial strain. Over a quarter of those interviewed said they found public transport too expensive.

Key recommendations

- *Strengthen enforcement of employment laws intended to prevent employers and agencies from avoiding payment of overtime, sick and holiday pay.*
- *Prosecute employers who employ 'off the books' to a degree that it acts as a deterrent.*
- *Review the rate at which benefits are up rated to ensure they keep pace with rising fuel and food costs and to reduce inequality.*
- *Increase benefit disregards so people can try out work without having to break the law.*
- *Cut the bureaucracy involved in obtaining a National Insurance number for recent arrivals.*
- *Allow asylum-seekers to work so they can contribute their skills to society and pay tax.*
- *Reduce the length of time before a conviction becomes spent for certain non-violent offences.*
- *Reinstate half-price bus travel in London and extend it to all those on low-income.*

We can never gain a real insight into the effect of poverty on people's lives unless we listen to what the most socially excluded people have to say about their experience. *Voices for a Change* was therefore created as a wholly participatory project.

The project involved training people living in poverty as peer researchers among, and spokespeople on behalf of, those experiencing poverty. As peer researchers, they talked to people in London to ask them what support they need to help them move out of poverty.

ATD Fourth World ran *Voices for a Change* from March 2007 to June 2008, supported by Child Poverty Action Group; it was funded by the City Parochial Foundation and Oxfam GB.

Background to the project

In 1999, Tony Blair announced the historic aim to end child poverty in a generation. At that time, the UK had the worst child poverty rate in the European Union. It set ambitious targets to cut child poverty by a half by 2010 en route to eradicating it by 2020.

Poverty is certainly at the forefront of the socio-political agenda. This is highlighted by recent reports from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation¹ and the Fabian Society,² which sets out the investment and policies needed to fulfil the child poverty pledge. Other reports, such as that published by End Child Poverty,³ have gathered the voices of people experiencing poverty through workshops held across the UK. The setting up of a London Child Poverty Commission, under the auspices of the Greater London Authority, and the central Government Child Poverty Unit, are again an example of the commitment among policy makers to understand how to improve the lives of those experiencing poverty.

There is also recognition that not enough is being done to ensure all those affected by poverty are being reached, as well as the question of how to reach them. The first lessons from the National Evaluation of Sure Start showed that the Sure Start local programmes have struggled to reach the most excluded families in their area.⁴ The creation of a Social Exclusion Task Force has been accompanied by an acknowledgement that some families have failed to benefit from the investment ploughed into the most deprived communities.

Voices for a Change approach

The research field is full of studies outlining the causes of poverty in the UK and proposing recommendations for its eradication. Few, however, have taken a wholly participatory approach to undertake the research. This adds real value from allowing people with experience of poverty to be involved throughout the research project: both in the richness and relevance of the research itself, and in the gains it bring to the participants.⁵

Aims of the project

The four main aims of *Voices for a Change* were:

- 1 To gain an insight into how poverty affects the lives of London's poorest and most socially excluded people, who do not traditionally contribute to research, in order to ascertain what would support them to move out of poverty.**
- 2 To make policy recommendations informed by the knowledge of people with first-hand experience of poverty to local and central Government policy makers with a poverty and social exclusion remit.**
- 3 To give a voice to people with experience of poverty in London who have not previously had the opportunity to express their views on poverty.**
- 4 To train people with experience of poverty to become poverty researchers and spokespeople on behalf of those experiencing poverty.**

The peer researchers

Voices for a Change invited a group of 18 potential participants to become peer researchers. All were living in poverty but they had diverse experiences, owing to a broad spread of age, ethnicity, gender and disability. Most of them had previous experience of ATD Fourth World's participatory policy development work, but none of them had any experience of

research. After initial training sessions in confidence building, public speaking and interviewing skills, 12 members of the group decided to become involved as peer researchers. Over the 15-month project, only one participant dropped out; this was due to family circumstances.

The peer researchers faced many obstacles to participation, because of the complications of living in poverty themselves. Examples were having to deal with benefits being stopped, or having to lay out the fare money to get to meetings – even though all their travel costs would be refunded when they arrived. The project also faced a particular challenge in the need to ensure that all peer researchers were able to understand the proceedings and contribute to discussions.

The pace of the project was therefore adapted to allow all peer researchers to feel comfortable with their participation. The initial plan had been to meet monthly. It was found, however, that a greater degree of flexibility was needed as, in practice, more time was often needed in order for peer researchers to understand new concepts and approaches. A development worker carried out regular phone calls and home visits to go over the content of meetings and training sessions, and to make sure that people felt positive about their involvement.

What peer researchers gained from the project

The confidence and skills gained by peer researchers from the project has enabled the researchers themselves to move on. Of the eleven who completed the project, all of them stated that through their involvement in the project they have been inspired to embark on new steps in their own lives, such as greater involvement in their own community, finding work or entering training or further education. In the final evaluation carried out with the peer researchers, 5 had already begun part-time paid or voluntary work with other organisations, 3 had enrolled in college, and 3 had asked for support in finding voluntary work in their area or in finding courses at local colleges. One researcher, who now has a part-time job with a training organisation, said:

Do not underestimate the need for confidence building. I definitely feel able to take the skills gained [from the project], such as speaking, listening and team work, and to apply them in another setting.

Another, after long-term unemployment, is undertaking retail work experience. A third has become very active in her community – volunteering in the local library and with an environmental group that campaign for sustainable energy, which involves giving presentations to people about energy-saving methods. One peer researcher said:

The project gives you the confidence to be able to do things for yourself ... When I get a chance I'm going to pay a visit to my local council, to see what they're doing about poverty in the area, and I'll show them our report.

Interviewing and recruiting respondents

To recruit interview respondents, peer researchers were asked to think about people within their own communities who they felt were struggling and marginalised. ATD Fourth World project workers also recommended names of people known to their projects who were experiencing deep poverty. The Migrants Resource Centre⁶ was able to refer migrant workers or asylum seekers living in long-term poverty.

Peer researchers met monthly to produce an Interview Guide (included as an appendix to this report). Questions were designed to be open and non-threatening, and to give respondents an opportunity to tell their story. Peer researchers felt strongly that it was necessary to steer clear of using the word 'poverty' lest it stigmatise respondents and cause them to be defensive. They were also wary of questions about income being too intrusive. However, they were able to come up with a phrasing they felt would put respondents at ease while enabling a picture to be built up of how people live their life on a low income.

Interviews were carried out by the peer researchers working in pairs. A leaflet presenting the project and a consent form for respondents was prepared by a small group of

Analysis – Sustainable Livelihoods Approach

peer researchers with the development worker. In addition, an information pack was put together that included information on support available from ATD Fourth World, and a short list of local service providers able to offer support with housing, debt, employment and children's services.

In total, 31 people were interviewed:

- **19 were from a black or minority ethnic background**
- **8 were male**
- **7 were in some form of employment**
- **3 were under 20**
- **2 were over 60**
- **8 were lone-parent households**

Working with Oxfam GB, the project used a Sustainable Livelihood Approach (SLA)⁷ to analyse people's existing assets and how they use them to build a sustainable livelihood. This approach is a useful way of looking at poverty in the UK.⁸ The approach puts people in the centre and looks at their assets, namely their strengths, capabilities and opportunities. It looks at how people create a livelihood around these assets. For example, assets can include people's friends and family, or if they own items such as a washing machine or car. It also takes into account outside influences that may affect these assets, such as job-loss or relationship breakdown. The approach is useful because it looks at how people define their problems and also how they cope with these problems and come up with solutions.

The approach identifies five types of assets:

- **Human assets:** education and skills, mental health, physical health
- **Public assets:** statutory services, public transport
- **Social assets:** family and friends, voluntary organisations and faith groups
- **Financial assets:** income from employment or state benefits
- **Physical assets:** housing, vehicle, white goods

These assets are then set within the framework and context of people's lives: their family and community, local services and local and national policy-making. They can be used to build a complete picture of an individual's life within their household and community, rather than simply focussing on one aspect, such as income. It also helps us look at how people cope with 'shocks', such as death in the family, having a new baby or breaking up with a partner. Interaction between assets is an important dimension of this approach. It allows the user to see how assets interrelate and affect one another. For example, falling ill affects human assets, but may also affect financial assets as the person may have to take time off work, and so on. This approach is useful as it recognises that people and

communities have strengths and strategies for getting by, and it aims to support people, and communities, to build on these strengths so as to improve their lives.

Peer researchers went through the interview transcripts to identify the assets people had accumulated to withstand or move out of poverty, as well as the circumstances or barriers that kept them in poverty. From this the peer researchers were able to obtain the following findings:

Human assets

Human assets represent the skills, knowledge, ability to labour and good health that together enable people to pursue different livelihood strategies and achieve their livelihood objectives.⁹

Education and skills: The research showed that people accumulate a strength and spirit to acquire new skills against the odds.

Because I'm jobless and nobody wants to employ me, I've got educated, self-educated, because I have a lot of free time to read...

I like learning and have just finished an A-level course on facilitation. I speak French and Portuguese. We should take advantage of education when it is free.

Dignity and resilience: People want to have the means to support themselves and do not want to survive on handouts. Some people also acquire a resilience that helps them get by.

Best thing is having guts, the strength to get up every day.

Mental health: Almost half of those interviewed reported feelings of depression, stress and anxiety that compromise their ability to move out of poverty.

...I'm so ill, my head is getting worse and my body is getting worse, and if I sit down and think about money it's the same problems, the same routine, the same every day, nothing changes...

...I didn't explain to my children that I was on the streets, I didn't explain that I can't find work ... They don't understand my battle, why I

feel ridiculous and ashamed for the first time in 44 years of my life. I feel ridiculous, humble, I feel nobody ...

Physical health Nearly a quarter of participants reported physical health problems that had a negative impact on other assets and hindered them from moving out of poverty.

I just suddenly drifted ... sometimes making about £100 a week. But about a year and a bit ago I became ill with heart failure and I get so out of breath these days, I can't even walk a mile so I can't even go and do the shopping properly.

The money I get is very low, and I can't go to work because I'm sick.

My health is not very good, I had an operation for my leg. If I go to hospital, I have one day off for hospital but they take the money, I don't get paid.

Public assets

By public assets we mean public services or statutory services provided by local or central Government, such as health care services, Jobcentre Plus or libraries. Both positive and negative experiences of public services were reported.

Positive experiences A third of participants reported positive experiences from using healthcare services, especially their GP. There were also positive comments about Sure Start from all the parents who had used it.

I have been to Sure Start before, I love Sure Start ... just the sense that they kind of provide services for the children. I haven't been to Sure Start for about a month but I think I should start using Sure Start again.

Negative experiences More than half of those interviewed said that the public services they used were unhelpful, unapproachable, complicated to use or even untrustworthy. In the case of public transport, over a quarter said they found it too expensive.

I need to take a bus and with the Oyster card, £3 for one day, I couldn't do it more than around 2 or 3 times a week, knowing that it would take so much out of the money I've got, that you'd be short for everything else.

Worst is Social Services, due to me being under their care when I was younger and not helping me when they should have done.

I used to be in touch with the Social Services but ... it's like they wouldn't listen to me. I tried to explain to them something and they weren't even listening.

They don't even help you get a job in the job centre. They just tell you to 'sign here, and see you next week'. Some of them are like: 'Have you been looking for a job?' But even me, I'll make up imaginary jobs that I went to and go there and say: 'I've been here, here and here, and I haven't got any reply'.

In reality, the services did not help me. In reality, people who are from the street give you information, where you can go and how you can survive. But when you want the information from there [Jobcentre Plus]... they don't know anything.

The police can see it [the drug dealing], but do nothing. They do nothing. And that's what I find unbelievable.

Social assets

Social assets are the social resources upon which people draw in pursuit of their livelihood objectives. These are acquired through:

- **Networks and connectedness, either vertical (patron/client) or horizontal (between individuals with shared interests) that increase people's trust and ability to work together and expand their access to wider institutions, such as political or civic bodies**
- **Membership of more formalised groups, such as voluntary or faith groups**
- **Relationships of trust, reciprocity and exchanges, between family and friends, that facilitate co-operation, reduce transaction costs and may provide the basis for informal safety nets amongst people living in poverty.¹⁰**

These were the strongest assets acquired among those interviewed.

Informal support: The support provided by friends, neighbours and family compensated for the lack of assets in the public domain.

I obviously received much help and support from the members of the Bengali community in the area. The 'English' people are also very helpful. They are always willing to help if you can communicate with them and make them understand what sort of help it is that you require.

I try and do things myself but when I get stuck or get letters that I don't understand then I ask Jane, who's my landlady because she's better at working things out than I am, otherwise I don't like asking people.

It's not always easy, but friends help me more than all the Social Services and all the products that you could get really.

At the moment, the best thing is that I've got are my three children, they keep me going, make me laugh, make me smile sometimes when I'm having a bad day and things.

Voluntary organisations and faith groups were mentioned by a third of participants as a means of support.

Going to church, meeting people, I feel better because I feel happy. When I stay indoors I feel a bit frustrated and a bit lonely, but when I go to church I socialise.

The only people that have been supportive is a local charity. They've been with me throughout.

Shocks and changes in circumstances: Due to the fragility of people's lives when living in poverty, social assets were sometimes compromised by drastic events, or shocks, such as separation from a partner, having to become a carer, or having children removed into care.

With four children in this country, it is very difficult for me, on my own. How do I get some help? He brought me here, to this country. I didn't know that I would face such grave problems.

Not seeing my children at the moment you know ... At times it makes you want to cry ...

Isolation was a consequence of a lack of social assets, deepening people's sense of exclusion.

Well I wouldn't say there's a best thing about my life at the moment. The thing about my life at the moment is loneliness.

Up until I met Yvette I didn't really have anyone to talk to and was just trying to work things out and get on with things that were happening.

Fear of crime: Almost a third of those interviewed reported that they feared becoming a victim of crime in their area, which compromised the social assets they had built up.

There's vandalism; a lot of people are poor; there are problems with drugs on our estate that the Social Services don't seem to be able to get sorted out.

There are people who look for little kids to help peddle the drugs and stuff like this. It's a bit sticky, with people getting shot and stuff, it's kind of crazy...

Financial assets

Financial assets are all the financial resources that people use to achieve their livelihoods objective. Regular inflows of money can include earned income, pensions and state welfare benefits.¹¹

Low income: Financial assets were one of the weakest areas of people's lives, making them susceptible to poverty. Despite their low income, many participants had built up strategies to make the most of the financial assets they had acquired.

I have to look after my pension money – that's why I do the market on Sundays – which boosts up my income, so I can survive on my benefit.

What ways do I make money go further? Sometimes by sacrificing one of the bills till another week, so the money can go that little bit further on something else.

I try to budget, I put the kids' needs before bills.

We have to choose the things we buy, balance to be able to fit in what we want to eat in the house. We look for bargains. Buy one get one free, or things that are about to expire.

We've got a Christmas saving scheme that we save with. We put a little bit in each time.

Impact of structural causes on financial assets: People's vulnerability to poverty is compounded by structural factors such as low rates of pay and employers only paying cash-in-hand, inadequacy of benefits, and the complexity of the benefits system.

What could make life easier financially? Well, get another job I think, double the money. That's the only thing I can say about it. But I work hard enough as it is, I shouldn't need to get a second job.

Life would be better if authorities actually allow me to work, not failing me ...

I can count out 200 agencies which give jobs cash-in-hand to people, but to people who do not speak English because they won't mix up their business.

I work in a primary school as a kitchen assistant... Every day I work four hours, but am only paid for three and a half hours.

I make it stretch yes, make it last the week for the children and myself but I can't afford luxuries, the little luxuries, and I can't even afford to take the 4 children out together.

You know, young people, they grow up, they want nice clothes, they want this, and I can't even afford to buy them sometimes. It's very hard.

I go through periods, especially towards the end of the second week, before I will get money again, sometimes by not doing anything at all, sometimes by not even eating. Maybe I get a pint of milk or so, and a bit of porridge.

My 13 year old, he doesn't have a jacket. At the moment he's just wearing a blazer to go to school, I have to find him a jacket.

Debt compounds the position of people living on a low income to move out of poverty and can impact on other assets, particularly physical assets such as housing. Ways in which debt can be acquired include inadequacy of income, lack

of access to affordable credit or, in some cases, maladministration of state benefits.

I'm still trying to get rid of my rent arrears at the moment, that's why I'm living in a one-bedroom flat with three children.

With low income jobs, right, you ain't got no chance: you work as hard as the next person but you're receiving a bare pittance of money, and so often you end up financially in debt.

Physical assets

Physical assets cover the tools and equipment people need to be productive along with the basic infrastructure needed to function productively, such as decent housing.¹²

These were the weakest of the assets built up by those interviewed. The item most mentioned was housing, although only one person owned their own home. However, the quality of the housing or environment often compromises this. Only two people spoke about owning a car or motorbike, which they used as an asset for finding employment.

When I visit friends or people that I know, I see people suffering from overcrowding. They have problems. I see that the people that should be living in a three-bedroom house are cramped up in a one-bedroom house.

Gender analysis and asset interaction

In terms of **physical assets** such as housing, there were no significant differences in the responses between the women and men interviewed.

There were more differences, however, in the levels of **human assets** related to health and education. Significantly more women than men reported poor physical health as a barrier to accumulating assets in other areas. In the area of mental health, the differences between men and women were even more marked. Half of the women interviewed reported having a difficulty linked to mental health, compared to only one fifth of the men.

Two of the women interviewed identified themselves as homeless. This affected their human assets as they both reported problems related to mental health such as stress or depression, and had to rely on their resilience to get by. In addition, both of these women had weak financial assets, since neither had a job or was receiving benefits. For one of the women, this was because of her immigration status, which prohibited her from accessing employment and benefits. Both of them, however, had accumulated social assets in order to compensate for a lack of assets in other areas. This involved support from a network of friends, and both had positive experiences of voluntary sector services such as the Citizens' Advice Bureau.

Twice as many men as women reported having acquired education and skills, and nearly three times more of the men interviewed were in work than the women.

Financial assets also showed gender differences. Nearly twice as many men than women were claiming benefits although a slightly lower proportion of women were in debt. Half of all women and men interviewed did not consider their financial situation to be adequate.

In relation to **social assets**, women had less links to neighbours, the community and friends, or

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other social networks, than men, but received more than twice as much support from their families. Women were the only interviewees to report any links with churches or mosques, and nearly three times as many men as women described feelings of isolation.

Four of the men interviewed had built up their financial assets by getting jobs. However, three of them considered their income inadequate because their jobs were so poorly paid. As a result, two of these were in debt and two still received benefits. Of the four, only two had accumulated significant human assets, especially education and skills, which would improve their employability. The working men who did not report such assets, however, both had the important physical asset of housing, which would increase their security and ability to build up financial assets through employment. One of them also had a car or motorbike, which could be used to access employment. All four of the men responded positively to having the social assets of links with neighbours and the community, which could suggest a link between being in work and being well regarded or active in the community.

In the analysis of **public assets**, men had overwhelmingly more negative experiences of public services such as Jobcentre Plus, housing services and public transport than women. Only health services – GP services in particular – generated generally positive experiences for both men and women. Finally, only women spoke about positive experiences in relation to children's services such as schools and Sure Start programmes.

After analysing the findings from the interview transcripts using the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach, the peer researchers drew up the following recommendations based on the experience of the interviewees and their own lived experience.

Human assets

Mental and physical health

- *Ensure easier and earlier access to treatment and counselling for mental health issues.*
- *Professionals must be realistic – their advice and solutions must match people's situations. 'It's no use recommending someone in poverty to take a holiday if they're stressed out!'*
- *Self-help groups must be adequately supported and funded – but should not become 'professionalized'.*
- *Encourage access to cheap, healthy foods by supporting food co-ops.*

Education and skills

- *Increase the use of mentors as well as support and advice from young people who have experience of the issues, such as gangs, drugs or teenage pregnancy.*
- *Free access to English classes in schools and colleges for all young people and adults who need it.*

Social assets

Voluntary organisations

- *Voluntary organisations engender trust. Statutory agencies (such as Social Services) can learn from this in viewing people as having a potential to develop, rather than as problems to be solved.*
- *Ensure the voluntary sector has the sustained funding and support to thrive, not just to provide a service to support people, but also to campaign and lobby for change for and with them.*

Neighbourhoods and community

- *Neighbourhood community centres need to invest in outreach work to ensure they encourage social inclusion and cohesion.*
- *The media must take more responsibility for giving an area a bad reputation and creating fear, which youngsters may then try to live up to.*
- *Bullies at school are bullies in the community. If you reduce bullying at school, you'll reduce it in the community.*
- *Recognise that people living in poverty are more likely to be victims of crime, and offer appropriate support and improve security in deprived areas to prevent crime.*

Public assets

Public service delivery

- *Provide poverty awareness training, delivered by people with experience of poverty to practitioners and frontline to understand the impact it has on people's lives and the powerlessness and lack of control that it creates, so as not to mistake poverty for neglect or apathy.*
- *Training on the impact of poverty should be given to all private company or voluntary organisations that obtain Government contracts to run public services.*
- *Cut the bureaucracy involved in obtaining a national insurance number for recent arrivals.*
- *Service-user groups and forums should be empowered to work in partnership with public service deliverers and should include a broad spectrum of people with experience of poverty.*
- *Policy makers and practitioners should use language that empowers rather than stigmatises.*

Facilities for young people

- *The media should offer a more balanced and responsible view in their portrayal of young people.*
- *Money for youth facilities must be made secure by local authorities, rather than being among the first services to be cut, and include a greater provision of free activities.*

Police

- *Neighbourhood police should be based within the community, on estates, rather than in large police stations.*

Transport

- *Reinstate half-price travel in London and extend it to all those on low-income.*

Social Services

- *Focus support on the whole family to reduce the risk of children from a poor background from entering the care system because of poverty rather than any neglect or abuse.*
- *The threshold for help is too high. It should be more accessible to allow for help to arrive earlier – not just when there is a crisis.*

Regeneration

- *More effort is needed to get people engaged who don't traditionally take part in their community, focusing attention on outreach work, which takes the time to go door-to-door to meet people on their terms. People need to see that what they say matters and will make a difference.*

GPs

- *Build on people's trust of their GPs by locating other services within surgeries (such as advice on benefits, finding work, family support services).*

Outreach services

- *Door-to-door outreach services are needed to support people on their terms and on their own territory.*

Asylum system

- *The asylum system must be made more transparent and efficient for asylum seekers – leaving them in the dark for months and years about their status seriously affects their mental health.*

Financial assets

Benefits

- *Review the rate at which benefits are uprated to ensure they keep pace with rising fuel and food costs and to reduce inequality.*
- *Increase benefit disregards so people can try out work without having to break the law.*

Conclusion

Work

- *Prosecute employers who employ 'off the books' to a degree that it acts as a deterrent.*
- *Strengthen enforcement of employment laws intended to prevent employers and agencies from avoiding payment of overtime, sick and holiday pay.*
- *Allow asylum seekers to work so they can contribute their skills to society and pay tax.*
- *Reduce the length of time before a conviction becomes spent for certain non-violent offences.*

Physical assets

Housing

- *Improve the quality of people's physical environment and you will improve their physical and mental health.*
- *Improve safety in housing estates by ensuring security doors are fitted and maintained.*

There is a wealth of research into poverty in the UK. This report's contribution is to add value to that research through the participatory methodology adopted. By training peer researchers with first hand experience of poverty, it has brought a fresh view of the lives of people living in poverty in London.

The project has given the peer researchers themselves the confidence and skills to effect change in their own lives: by moving into employment; taking up training opportunities; and volunteering in projects within their own community.

By using the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach to analyse the findings, the project has been able to identify the positive achievements of people living in poverty that provide the foundations for them to overcome it. It has also allowed the identification of weak areas which prevent people from moving out of poverty. By accentuating people's strong assets and providing solutions to resolve the barriers which keep people within poverty, the report offers those within the poverty lobby further insight into what can make a positive difference to the lives of London's poorest people and families.

Appendix: Voices for a Change Interview Guide

Introduction

- Could you begin by telling me a little bit about yourself?
- What is the best thing about your life at the moment?
- What struggles do you face at the moment? (e.g. health, income, services)
- Who or what makes life better or worse?

Community/neighbourhood

- How do you feel about living round here?
- What do you particularly like or dislike about living here?
- Who do you turn to for help and support? It could be individuals, groups ...

Living on a low income

- Would you say you have enough to: a) survive on; b) live on; or c) be comfortable on?
- What does that mean for you, or your family, on a daily basis?
- What things do you find particularly difficult?
- What ways do you have to make your money go a little further?
- What do you think could be done to make life easier for you financially?

Services

- Which services (such as Jobcentre, Sure Start, GP, Citizens Advice Bureau, Social Services ...) do you get support from or use?
- How have the services you've mentioned helped, or not helped you to get where you are today?

End

Is there anything else that you would like to talk about that we haven't already discussed and that you would like to mention but haven't had the chance?

Thank you!

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