

Get Heard!

People living in poverty contribute to the National Action Plan on Social Inclusion 2006-2008

Part 1: Introduction

The introduction is not an executive summary. However, it highlights a number of key issues raised in the Get Heard submission. It gives an overview of the Get Heard project, and makes important observations relating to the views expressed in workshops and put forward here.

Part 2: Issues

This is divided into sections (see list below). Each section contains subheadings highlighting particular issues raised by workshop participants, e.g. section 2.9.1 covers issues relating to banking; and 'voices' subheadings highlighting the issues raised by particular groups of participants, e.g. section 2.3.12 covers benefits issues raised by disabled people. *Note: There is some overlap or repetition with issues covered in various subsections – this is an effort at transparency, to highlight who said what. This overlap will be removed in the shortened version for publication in the Annexe to the NAP.*

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- 2.2 Young People
- 2.3 Benefits & Into Work
- 2.4 Work & Skills
- 2.5 Health
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Part 3: Voices

These sections cover issues raised by these groups that are particular to their needs and experiences, e.g. section 3.5.1 covers older people's issues with pensions.

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- 3.2 Lone parents
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Part 4: Regional perspectives

This section gives an overview of the views expressed by participants in the three devolved regions of the UK: Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

Part 5: Participation and being heard

This section gives a summary of the views expressed by participants in Get Heard about their right to be heard by decision makers and to participate in policy design.

Part 1: Introduction

This submission to the National Action Plan on Social Inclusion 2006 (NAP) is a summary of the views raised by people living in poverty who took part in the Get Heard project. The submission is intended to enable the Department for Work and Pensions to incorporate the views of people participating in Get Heard into the content of the NAP. The views detailed in the document are not simply those of a majority of participants, but these headlines can be drawn from the voices speaking through this report:

Perceptions of people experiencing poverty must change:

- Poverty is stressful – it undermines health and wellbeing;
- The attitudes of society and Government towards people experiencing poverty must change and be supportive and positive as many feel stigmatised;

The benefits system must be reformed to really help people experiencing poverty:

- People on benefits want to work, but are afraid of losing their safety net, even though benefits are low, because employment is often unsustainable;
- The benefits system should be both ladder and safety net: it must be more efficient and flexible, and provide more transition support for people in precarious, low-paid work;
- The benefits system needs to be more secure, and social attitudes need to become more positive to those who cannot work;

Parents must be appreciated and better understood:

- Parents experiencing poverty need more recognition for the hard work that they do, and policies must support parents' efforts to provide the best for their children - many parents feel under pressure and are afraid that their children will be taken into care if they ask for help because they are poor;

Reform services so that they really work for people experiencing poverty:

- Policies and services need to be more effectively joined up;

Involve, listen to and talk with people experiencing poverty:

- People experiencing poverty believe they have a right to be involved in the design of policy, and that the Government must listen; there must be greater involvement of service users in policy design.

1.1 What is Get Heard?

Get Heard is one of the largest projects undertaken in the UK to involve people with first-hand experience of poverty to give their views on government policies designed to combat poverty – and in doing so to attempt to shape those policies which affect their lives. It was set up by the Social Policy Task Force, comprising the European Anti-Poverty Network, England; Poverty Alliance, Scotland; Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network; Anti-Poverty Network Cymru, Wales; Oxfam's UK Poverty Programme; the UK Coalition Against Poverty; and Age Concern. One of the aims of the SPTF was to raise awareness of the National Action Plan process among people living in poverty, and enable them to give their views and to inform the National Action Plan on Social Inclusion 2006. Grassroots community members gave their views through workshops, which they organised themselves, usually with the help of their regional anti-poverty network. They used the Get Heard Toolkit to hold structured and informed discussions on government policy, and answered three questions: "What's working?" "What's not working?" "How should things be done differently?"

1.2 Who took part?

A total of 146 workshops were held around the UK between December 2004 and December 2005: 81 in England; 45 in Scotland; 14 in Northern Ireland; and 6 in Wales. The membership of the groups was self-selecting, and was not selected to be representative of all people in poverty in the UK. Nevertheless, a large number of people took part, from a wide range of different geographical areas and communities of interest. Given this picture, and the fact that Get Heard was not designed as a piece of research but as a participatory project, this submission gives a well-rounded picture of the responses that people in poverty are making to government policy, and a lot of insight into the reality of life for people in poverty in the UK, and how lives are impacted by government policy. Groups that took part included lone parents in England and Scotland; community and neighbourhood groups in all four nations / regions of the UK; debt support groups in Wales; Travellers' groups in England; a number of disabled people's groups in Scotland and England – including groups of people with learning disabilities and groups of people with experience of mental ill-health; older people's groups in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland; men-only groups in England, Scotland and Wales; a number of groups of homeless people, including both men and women; groups of black and Asian women in England;

migrants' groups in England and Northern Ireland; and many others. There were, however, a few gaps in participation – only one group of black men took part, no Asian men's groups, no BME workshop groups took part in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland (although there were some BME individuals) and very few Travellers' groups took part (two in England, none in Wales or Scotland, and one Traveller support project in Northern Ireland). This underlines the lower participation of these groups in UK anti-poverty networks and their double exclusion. The other significant group who did not take part were low-paid workers, most likely because they are not involved in anti-poverty networks, lead busy lives and are less able to get involved in participatory projects, and do not see themselves as 'poor'. It may also reflect the low involvement of trades unions in Get Heard.

1.3 What did they talk about?

Get Heard workshop participants were asked to talk about government policies and initiatives, and to answer the questions: "What's working?" "What's not working?" "How should things be done differently?" In addition to identifying gaps in policy and provision, participants put forward a number of positive suggestions, many of which are summarised in this submission. The topics discussed in Get Heard workshops were selected by the participants themselves as those most important to them, or that impact most seriously on their lives, and were not prescribed (or proscribed) by the Get Heard project.

1.4 How was the submission compiled?

The Get Heard submission is a summary of the issues raised in Get Heard workshops. The issues detailed in Part 2 were not selected by volume or because they were the most often raised, and they do not reflect any weighting of the data. Instead, what is presented is a survey of the issues raised by people with different experiences of life and different experiences of exclusion. We have, however, where appropriate indicated those issues which were extremely widely discussed. Part 3 provides an opportunity to see what unique or particular issues were raised by groups of participants with experience of particular types of exclusion. We have left out some of the discussion of educational issues where these focused only on the curriculum and standards of teaching and had no bearing on poverty and social exclusion. We have also omitted racist and other discriminatory comments; there were very few of these and where they occurred in each case came from groups who felt that they had 'lost out' in a certain situation and illustrated competition for scarce resources. Case studies included are those put forward by participants and have not been selected from a list.

1.5 General observations

In addition to raising the issues detailed in parts 2 and 3 below, Get Heard participants made the following general observations about living in poverty:

- Things have improved over the long term: "Compared to how people used to live there aren't as many people living in poverty now. How many of us would say we are poor?"
- In the short term, things are getting worse: "The cost of living is increasing." "The situation for single, childless adults has worsened."
- There is too much inequality: "The divide between rich and poor is still growing." "The differences between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' is so huge now and increasing. You see wanton waste and total disregard for resources from the wealthy, while the poor are scrimping to get by."
- Poverty carries a stigma: "Poverty is a very negative description and many people are proud." "We need to remove the stigma of the 'poor' label."
- The government doesn't seem to care about poverty: "The government concentrates on poverty overseas rather than at home." There were many suggestions for overcoming the ignorance and lack of compassion of politicians.
- There is too much social pressure: "The world is too materialistic, [you] feel you have to keep up." "It's like you're up against a brick wall."
- Poverty is stressful: "There is too much blame if you can't cope." "It was said that life is a struggle, you had to fight to get anything, there was no respect, the system makes it hard for everybody."
- Poverty reduces self esteem: "So many people just don't have the *confidence*, they have no *self-worth*. Much of poverty has to do with finance, but there are routes out of poverty that come with confidence."

Part 2: Issues

2.1 Children & Families

“Life is difficult, having to scrimp the pennies and always saying no to your children.”

Overview

Parents experiencing poverty want to do the best for their children and they want support to be good parents, but they often feel under pressure from schools, social services and other authorities and feel that their job as parents is made harder by attitudes towards them. When help is available it often seems conditional, rather than offered in a genuine spirit of support. In general, those projects which are designed to support children and families are welcomed, with concerns expressed that these programmes might not continue. There was also a recognition of a need for specific programmes for Traveller children and children in care, and for children and young people’s services to be more joined up and better integrated.

2.1.1 Sure Start

Sure Start received universal praise for its aims and objectives from the participants in workshops where it was discussed. There was clear approval for the local flavour and focus of each Sure Start scheme. Parents liked the community aspect of Sure Start projects; the grants schemes for local projects; and the maternity grant. Parents would like Sure Start to be more widely available, so that everyone who needs to can access it. There were only two types of negative comments concerning Sure Start: in Northern Ireland participants expressed frustration at the lack of funding for adequate delivery, and in England parents expressed concerns that Sure Start will change when Children’s Centres come in and funding moves to Local Authorities, and that funding will be cut “when [Sure Start] goes out of vogue”.

2.1.2 Childcare

Overall parents want an increase in the availability of childcare. Both lone parents and those with partners see it as the key to enabling women to work. But participants also stressed that there is a need for more flexible provision than is currently available, for example, to fit around school holidays, and for parents who work shifts. Participants want to see an increase in Extended Schools provision, and want assurances that extended schools will provide non-curriculum activities rather than just more lessons; in Northern Ireland the Pre School Expansion Project is appreciated, but participants want it to provide more hours per child per week. Other suggestions included were: for more childcare provision to be linked directly to employment training schemes, and not only for those on New Deal for Lone Parents; for grandparents and other family members to be paid for providing childcare; and for increased subsidy for childcare places so that they do not take up the entire second wage.

2.1.3 Support for parents

Parents experiencing poverty frequently feel under pressure from authorities such as school and social services: “There’s a feeling that schools or adventure playgrounds single families out who are on benefits to see if they are looking scruffy [or have] bruises – you feel spied on.” They want more respect from the government shown towards parents, and appreciation of the hard work that they do. Parents also feel that they should not be forced into work while they have an important role to play in caring for children: “Time spent with children should be valued and appreciated as contributing to society; we are too focused on money, on people as economic assets, when what is really needed is investment in the whole person – in each child.” One suggestion is to “pay mothers to stay at home and look after their children”.

2.1.4 Greater emphasis on children’s play opportunities

“Children have a right to play.” Parents value affordable play opportunities for their children, such as Playbus and other activities. They clearly identified a need for more of these facilities, for the costs of children’s activities and travel to activities to be taken into account when setting benefit levels; and for activities and travel, especially in rural areas, to be free for families on income support. “Children should be able to access leisure, art and other beneficial activities and facilities without worrying about finances.”

2.1.5 More financial help for low income families

Parents are under pressure because of low incomes and would like increased, direct help with specific costs, including: an increase in child benefit; free school meals for all those receiving Child Tax Credits; nappy vouchers as well as milk vouchers; free transport for schoolchildren – the scheme that exists in London is very popular; help with the cost of school trips. “My daughter stayed at home and was very upset for a week when her classmates went on a trip. My heart was broken but there was nothing I could do, I simply did not have the money.” Parents would like benefit rates to take into account the costs of children’s food and clothing, school uniform, activities and other costs. This was a particular issues for lone parents.

2.1.6 More support for parents of disabled children

Parents of disabled children are appreciative of the help that they do receive, but want a consistently high level of support to be available across all areas of the UK and an end to the ‘postcode lottery’ of service provision. In addition they would like more information to be more widely available on the services provided locally.

2.1.7 Improvements to Tax Credits

Child Tax Credit and Working Tax Credit have been warmly welcomed as, when they work, they make a real difference to families’ incomes: “Working Tax Credit is very helpful for those on low wages and supportive of families.” Tax Credits were a particular issue for lone parents participating in Get Heard workshops, most of whom qualified for them. Many Get Heard workshop participants had experienced problems, and put forward the following recommendations:

- Simplify and improve information about Tax Credits – especially information about the amounts awarded or likely to be awarded;
- A redesign that does not include repayments as a basic part of the design – these are very hard for those on low incomes who do not have spare capacity in their cash flow;
- How much you will get and explanations of the amount awarded;
- Publicise Tax Credits to the self-employed;
- Make Tax Credits more flexible for those working through agencies on flexible contracts;
- Include older children;
- Take housing costs into account;
- Raise the childcare allowance for more children: “Why are you allowed £175 for one child and £300 for two, but no more if you have more children?”
- Allocate the baby element of Tax Credits per each child under one year, rather than once per household, or introduce an extra allowance for multiple births;
- Provide a more sympathetic, understanding service;
- Develop a quicker system for picking up mistakes.

2.1.8 Changes to the Child Support Agency

There were many requests for changes to the Child Support Agency, which many see as intrusive as well as inefficient. Parents would like the CSA to really work for parents who rely on the payments to make ends meet.

2.1.9 Changes to education

Parents talked a lot about the national curriculum and what children should learn in school, demonstrating that like all parents, those on low incomes are engaged with and interested in their children’s education. In addition to these issues, participants stressed the need for more local primary schools, especially in rural areas: “There is no primary school at all in our ward in Rhyl [North Wales].” Parents living in poverty also feel strongly that schools need to be “more aware of people’s living circumstances”, and that they must be safe, happy environments that promote inclusion, integration and diversity.

2.1.10 Women’s voices

A number of women’s groups talked about the need for more recognition by government, employers and society in general of the effort involved in parenting. One group felt that “children need care and stability, that two working parents reduces family life, that children learn life skills from time with parents,

that paying for childcare when earning low wages results in no financial gain. There was a strong feeling of wanting to be with and be available to their children.” A number of participants wanted the government to support parents, and particularly mothers, to stay at home with their children: “The Jobcentre should not push women who look after children and family into work.” One suggestion was to “pay mothers to stay at home and look after their children”. Women also talked about the particular financial pressures on mothers in a society dominated by commercialism of desire and suggested that there be a “ban [on] TV adverts, especially those targeting children”.

Childcare was one of the most popular issues raised by groups consisting entirely or mostly of women. There need to be more subsidies for childcare, and increased pay for childminders – these two issues are deeply connected for women, many of whom are considering training and going back to work in social care. As one woman put it: “Childminding only pays £4.25 per hour. At the same time this is an unaffordable [cost] if you are on a low income.” Women’s groups also talked about the need for social support for young people, to prevent anti-social behaviour.

2.1.11 Lone parents’ voices

Sure Start was popular with lone parents in England; one participant heard about Sure Start at an antenatal class “they gave her support by offering a childcare place, and helped her to move on when her mum died”. Lone parents talked a lot about childcare, their main demands being to increase availability, flexibility and subsidy of good childcare; they also identified the need to ensure consistent high standards: “The cheaper childcare does not always offer the same opportunities or experience. This means that some services are not accessible to those on lower incomes.” Lone parents also stressed the need to support the costs of children’s activities, as did migrant parents (see 2.1.12 below).

2.1.12 Migrants’ voices

Migrants’ groups, particularly the group of women in London, talked a lot about children and the need to support families to look after children and provide them with opportunities to develop. The need for help with the financial cost of play and activities was raised by a number of migrant participants.

2.2 Young People

“Dr. Winston said the most important thing for kids to make friends is the way they look. When you are on benefits you can’t afford it, but you try because you don’t want your kids to get bullied.”

Overview

Young people who took part in Get Heard workshops talked mostly about work and social opportunities; they made it clear that they want more safe places to play and get support, and they want education that leads to jobs. Parents have a keen understanding of young people’s support needs and would like to be able to support their children, but they feel frustrated that poverty makes it difficult to do this. They also understand that young people need and more support and understanding from society, and can identify the areas where particular support is needed.

2.2.1 Support for young people in education

Educational Maintenance Allowance received positive feedback: “It’s a good incentive for children to stay on at school.” But parents say it needs to be better administrated and there needs to be clearer information as it is easily confused with Educational Maintenance Grant, which can affect the benefits of other family members. Parents also identified a need for other financial support to cover the costs of uniforms, books and school activities. Parents also pointed out the need for help with costs in school holidays which are met during term time: “Where does the government expect us to come up with the money for meals [during holidays] when they are covered at school?”

2.2.2 Support for young people to find sustainable work

Both young people and adults talked about the need for young people to be able to access practical, vocational training leading to guaranteed jobs, as a way to get a start in working life. Sustainable work

was also clearly identified as a way to keep young people away from criminal activity. Young people in particular identified a need for more vocational training leading to guaranteed jobs. One idea of a way to tackle this was to include employers in a panel to investigate the possibilities of bringing back real trades and crafts apprenticeships. Connexions received some good and some negative feedback – the message was that information and careers services for young people need to be of a consistently high minimum standard; they need to be more proactive; and there needs to be monitoring of schemes to ensure they really deliver.

2.2.3 Minimum Wage for young people

Young people proposed that the development rates of the National Minimum Wage should rise to match the main rate as the current situation discriminates against young workers who do not live at home or who have families of their own: “People under 21 get paid less, but they do the same job, the same amount of work.” “Young parents have the same family expenses as older parents.”

2.2.4 Support for unemployed teenagers

While both young people and parents talked about how young people would like to work, they also talked about the need for sufficient support for young people who are not in work. Experiences of the New Deal for Young People have been mixed – young people and their parents would like to see a high minimum standard for the scheme, consistently applied across the UK. This needs to be complemented by improved services for young people at job centres and improved training for job centre staff in supporting young people. In addition, benefits rates for young people need to rise.

2.2.5 Social support for teenagers

Both young people themselves and parents talked about the need for social support services for teenagers. In many poor communities there is a need for better youth facilities and support to deal with issues such as teenage pregnancy, violence prevention, domestic violence education, and other “worries”. “Respect, time and listening space are needed.” Two examples of good practice cited by young people were Royston Youth Action in Glasgow, and the Health Spot and Youth Stress Centre in the Youth Complex at Castlemilk in Glasgow. Workshop participants also identified a particular need for more support for children leaving care.

Workshop groups also raised the need for more after-school activities, leisure opportunities and play spaces for young people, and clearly identified these as a way to prevent anti-social behaviour. While anti-social behaviour was recognised as a problem, most groups that raised the issue saw it as preventable, with a need to “spend more on the prevention of anti-social behaviour, keep the youth occupied and focused on the future”. Generally participants felt “the police need to work *with* young people, not *against* them.”

Parents raised a number of concerns about anti-social behaviour policies and saw a need to de-emphasise anti-social behaviour legislation, as it criminalizes young people “and even normal behaviour is seen as anti-social”. Anti-social Behaviour Orders were reported to be useless as some young people see them as badges of honour, and they created difficulties in families. In Northern Ireland, positive support for young people was identified as a way to prevent ‘involvement’ (in criminal and / or paramilitary activity), which is higher in deprived areas because of the associated income and status. A BME women’s group identified a need for specific support for young people from Asian communities.

2.2.6 Support at school

As with parents of small children, the parents of older children raised a number of issues about access to education, including: a need for consistency in educational quality, more access to nearby schools to prevent children having to travel long distances. Participants clearly saw school as a place where young people should be able to access support. Both young people and parents want the curriculum to provide improved careers guidance; more vocational education opportunities – “non-academic [education] should be viewed in the same way as academic education”; more education about life skills, “where to get help, how to budget and look after yourself”; and more education and awareness raising about violence, domestic violence, teenage pregnancy and drugs. Outside of the curriculum schools need to be safe and happy places; provide more support for students in minority communities and raise awareness of BME, Traveller and lesbian and gay issues; and teach diversity issues.

2.2.7 Disabled People's voices

Disabled people in Get Heard workshops want increased support for young disabled people to enter higher and further education as a way to avoid poverty in the future. "Access to education for disabled people is very, very difficult. If you're struggling by in poverty it's even more difficult."

2.2.8 Migrants' voices

Two of the migrants' groups that met talked a lot about children, young people and family issues. It was clear that being able to support your family, and being able to offer your children the best opportunities available were extremely important. On the whole migrants were glad of the existence of the social welfare state – hospitals, schools, child benefit and other benefits, but as with all other Get Heard groups, expressed clear views about the need for improvements. On education migrants raised the issue of the need for education to be more inclusive, and asked for more help for children needing language support. One suggestion was to recruit more migrant teachers to help make schools more inclusive.

2.3 Benefits and into work

"Folk are desperate to sort out their lives and be independent but they hit these barriers all the time."

"The system makes you feel like you're in a washing machine"

"You feel blamed."

"Being in receipt of benefits or on a low wage breeds high interest debt, isolation, loneliness, low self esteem."

"We need to tell the story from the individual's point of view. What is needed is a holistic, community-developed, bottom-up system, not separate services. Most people want to support themselves. To do that they need: work at a decent rate of pay, training into work and at work, childcare that is affordable and near to home, benefits to help if a job ends, housing so they can move to get a job."

Overview

This was the biggest single topic of discussion for the Get Heard groups – and all groups raised issues about benefits and schemes for getting into work, either generally or with reference to particular benefits and back to work schemes. All the groups included people currently on benefits. Overall, people want the welfare system to be both a ladder to work and a safety net; they want it to be more efficient, more flexible, simplified, and for claimants to be treated with dignity and respect. People do not want to live on benefits, they want to be able to work, but they need benefits to be adequate to live on, as there will always be times when people are not in work. Claimants currently feel under pressure and threatened, and want the current approach to be replaced by one of support for those on the lowest incomes.

Participants like and want more of schemes that are flexible and tailored to the individual, where advice and information is meaningful and of practical use and is provided one-to-one by an advisor with a real understanding of a claimant's situation, circumstances, qualifications and needs. In addition, the most popular named benefits were those that provide specific support, such as Community Care Grants, and back to work bonus payments. People like the flexibility of being able to choose payment methods, and want to keep this flexibility; older people in particular do not want to lose the option of going to a post office to collect their benefits. Participants needed more information on benefits entitlements, particularly from independent sources. Their experience of independent advisors is good – see Unemployed Centres case study (below). Suggestions for improved information from the job centres and the DWP included "an automatic personalised update on entitlements".

Participants identified a need for more transition support. They clearly liked run-on schemes such as the Housing Benefit pilots – and would like to see them standardised and made available across the board. They want support while waiting for the first pay check, slower withdrawal of free school meals and council tax benefit, "a gradual transition to get you on your feet", or to be given "a tide-over amount",

and for thresholds and cut-off points to be replaced with tapers for all entitlements.

Claimants want the welfare system to be simplified and to be more integrated; it is currently too easy to fall between the gaps: “I went on sick pay, I had to live on £60 per week, I couldn’t get a maternity grant because I was on sick pay. They wouldn’t give me full housing benefit and council tax so I appealed. The council took me to court even though they know there was an appeal. They sent the bailiffs round. I won my appeal but I still had to pay £70 court costs from the council’s earlier action. These have now gone up to £180. I’m still in debt now from when I was on sick pay.”

Participants were overwhelmingly clear on the need to raise benefits levels: benefit rates “should reflect the cost of living”. One suggestion was for a London weighting to reflect the higher cost of living in the capital.

2.3.1 New Deal

What participants like about the New Deal are the real opportunities and support for getting into properly paid work – when these transpire. “Personal advisors are good when you can have the same one. You are able to build a personal relationship with them; you can trust and have confidence in them.” Claimants who had taken part in the New Deal also liked the extra financial and non-financial help, such as discounts on public transport and clothing vouchers – “It was the first time he has had a proper suit.” Participants liked the fact that the New Deal included training, but training needs to be improved in a number of ways: training needs to lead to sustainable jobs – “too many people have been on the scheme a number of times”, and there needs to be higher level training leading to better paid jobs. Training also needs to be of a higher standard and for minimum standards to be enforced: “I didn’t get enough help on the schemes; I would just be left to flip through the papers.” Participants also want claimants to be able to volunteer for the New Deal immediately they sign on, rather than having to wait six months, and for the six month cut-off to be removed: “I could have done with more. My confidence was really beginning to grow and then the support was just gone.” Claimants would also like New Deal advisors to provide mediation between different agencies such as Housing Benefit, the job centre, Housing Associations and others.

2.3.2 Training schemes

Workshop participants were generally in favour of back-to-work training schemes, especially those at adult learning centres where other facilities are available (such as childcare); specific schemes for people with particular needs such as Pathways to work, Progress2Work and e2e (Entry to Employment). Participants particularly valued training which is individualised in terms of both outcomes and pace of learning.

Participants identified a number of ways in which training could be changed. Claimants want equal access across the UK to training grants and training opportunities, rather than the current very varied provision, and the geographic limits: “In Knowsley the worklessness project is good, but it excludes parts of the community.” Participants want more drop-in study centres where individuals can learn at their own pace and fit study around other demands on their time, including work. People want training to a higher skill level: “the training courses are just enough to get you off the ground, not enough to make a real difference to getting properly paid work”, and “this programme only trains to NVQ Level II, but the real skills shortage in the construction industry in Northern Ireland is at NVQ Level III.” Claimants want more support with costs for older students seeking training in particular skills or with going to college, both when unemployed and when in low paid work: “I want to train as a plumber, but at the local college I had to pay and I can’t”; and they want more access to vocational and skills re-training for older unemployed people, not just re-training in IT, and training that is relevant to the needs of the local area: “there are fewer skills training opportunities, yet there are skills shortages”. Workshop participants want consistency in high minimum standards of training schemes across the UK. Claimants would also like voluntary work to be accredited as part of back-to-work training.

2.3.3 Intermediate Labour Market Schemes

Intermediate Labour Markets are popular where they exist, and participants would like to see more support for them, so that the schemes’ temporary jobs have a higher status, competitive entry and a proper wage – so that ILM jobs feel like real jobs.

2.3.4 Jobcentre and Jobcentre Plus

Participants had a lot to say about the quality of service they had received at job centres, and much of it was not good. But there were a number of positive comments, which helped to clarify what people want from improved job centre services.

Most of all people want job centre staff to have a higher level of training, to be able to provide both better information and more courteous service. They would like staff to be better informed, and able to help with complicated forms; for specialist advisors – for example homelessness advisors – to be employed; for the service to be more understanding and less rigid; for more effective communication with other organisations that support claimants; and for “more assistance to help people into jobs that match their qualifications”. They would like an end to the customer management system that requires people on low incomes to pay for expensive telephone calls or be left unable to get through and get the information they need. Participants value the role of job centre staff, and asked that staff be valued and for the cutbacks to stop as this “will make it harder for people to find work”. Participants also wanted more services from job centres, including better information and more support for starting a small business or becoming self employed.

Except in a few cases, participants did not distinguish clearly between Jobcentre and Jobcentre Plus – it seemed that people were more interested in the quality and standard of services delivered, rather than in the name given to the scheme. Where participants did distinguish, they liked the convenience of accessing a number of services in one place, and liked the renovation to job centres. But there were also a number of problems with the new design: they wanted more privacy and a higher guarantee of confidentiality; they did not like the ‘floor-walkers’ who they felt were intrusive; and they asked for the closure of Jobcentres to end as it increases isolation and social exclusion by making it harder to access job centre services.

2.3.5 Voluntary Sector Initiatives

Get Heard workshop participants were enthusiastic about the voluntary sector-run training and back to work initiatives that they had experienced. However, they expressed concerns about the sustainability of funding for these projects. One example given was of the Unemployed Workers’ Centres, which have a long experience of offering training and education to some of the most hard to reach groups. Learning and education delivered by the Unemployed Centres is not backed up by a sanctions regime and individuals are not compelled to go on the courses; the courses are set in a friendly atmosphere where people are encouraged to learn. However, as with many voluntary organisation acquiring funding is a constant battle. Another positive example of training provision was 3D Drumchapel, which provides and brokers training for individuals. One participant gave an example of a three-year nursery course training that would need two years of relationship building and one year of actual training, “but because funders aren’t prepared to wait it’s really difficult to convince them that something without immediate results is worthwhile”.

2.3.6 Improve Housing Benefit

Housing Benefit was generally thought to need much improvement by Get Heard participants. Their requests were clear:

- Improve efficiency, delays cause arrears, debt and homelessness through eviction due to non-payment: “before you know it you’re up to your eyeballs in rent arrears, and being evicted”;
- Simplify applications procedures;
- Provide help with rent when moving into work: “make the Housing Benefit taper less tight”;
- Increase the maximum savings limit for those applying for Housing Benefit;
- Make interim payments a basic entitlements for new claimants;
- Make better information more widely available and accessible;
- Improve the communication with Jobcentre Plus and introduce a more integrated service;
- Improve rent assessments, currently they often do not reflect market rents;
- Raise Housing Benefit levels to match rising market rents;
- Improve the training of Housing Benefit staff and provide a more sympathetic service.

2.3.7 Council Tax benefit

Council Tax benefit did not attract any criticism, but participants wanted to see more and better information about the availability of Council Tax benefit provided more widely.

2.3.8 Budgeting Loans and Crisis Loans

Participants referred to budgeting Loans and Crisis Loans both separately and together. The fact that loans are interest-free was appreciated. However, participants want grants to be more available, especially for essential furniture items, and they pointed out that any kind of loan to those on low-incomes could be difficult to impossible to pay back. Where people do get loans they want to be able to pay them back at a lower rate over a longer period, as the current repayments are too high: "People end up using door to door lenders who lend at a lower repayment per week" – albeit the total repaid is higher over time. The Social Fund needs to be better publicised and there needs to be understanding of the fact that claimants may have multiple crises, and may need greater access to grants and loans than is possible at present. In addition, participants want a more sympathetic service and more support from staff to make applications.

2.3.9 Women's voices

Women's groups welcomed Tax Credits, but, as outlined in section 2.1, want the Tax Credit system to be more efficient, more responsive to changes that occur, redesigned "to avoid severe annual fluctuations", and able to deal with increases in fixed charges such as Council Tax. Women were also clear that Tax Credits need to take into account additional costs: "Doesn't cover school meals and housing costs, with knock on effects on child poverty." Women's workshop groups talked of the need for benefits levels to rise, and want wider publicity of the Social Fund's Sure Start Maternity Grant – and for the grant to increase from £500 to £1000.

2.3.10 Lone Parents' voices

Lone parents' groups talked a lot about the benefits system and back to work programmes – and particularly about Housing Benefit, training schemes and the New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP). Lone parents stressed the need for more support for transition onto and off benefits and want to see cut-offs replaced with tapers. In general lone parents want to see benefits levels raised, and more money available to parents to help them give children a good start in life: "£60 per week is not enough to keep me, my bairn and the house." Suggestions included "more 'passported' benefits for families – nappies, books, fruit and vegetable tokens". Lone parents would also like to see information about benefits and eligibility improved and made more widely available, and for a "one-stop-shop where single parents can get the right information on benefits, college or study, and jobs. This would ensure people are getting the right information rather than going to seven different people. It is embarrassing and degrading having to talk about sensitive issues to lots of different people." The New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) was generally popular – because it offers access to training courses; back to work bonuses; help with transport, childcare and clothing costs; and one to one support from a personal advisor: "They understand your individual situation;" "they are really supportive". Lone parents would also like the NDLP advisors to "mediate between different agencies, such as Housing Benefit and Inland Revenue, to make the transition to work easier". However, it should be borne in mind that at this time NDLP was purely voluntary, and it may be less popular if lone parents are obliged to join the scheme when they do not feel it is appropriate to do so. With regard to Housing Benefit, lone parents would like better information, faster processing of claims, more transparent and accountable procedures, mandatory interim payments for new claimants and improved training for staff. The same goes for job centre staff: "Claimants should be treated with respect and not like children. It's a service and customers should be treated with respect. Workers may have to deal with abuse, but we're not all the same and should be given a chance."

2.3.11 Carers' voices

Carers who took part in Get Heard want benefit levels to take account of the cost and value of caring; they want the full cost of caring to be appreciated: "I lost a high-paid job because of caring, so I lost my pension rights"; the value of caring to be appreciated: "because of the good quality care I give my husband, he now gets the middle rate of DLA instead of the higher"; and for carers to be properly compensated for the work they do: "Carer's Allowance should be non-taxable pay, not a benefit – it's demeaning considering the hard work we do." Most carers are women, and workshop participants want eligibility for benefits and access to benefits to be based the carer's need, not the household income, especially where the household income is a pension: "For married women who paid the Married Women's NI contribution, if the person they care for gets the household money and they decide to be difficult about it, [the] carer potentially gets nothing."

With regard to Carer's Allowance specifically, carers want the age-60 cut-off to end, "the circumstances and needs of both carer and cared-for do not necessarily change", and "it's unfair that it stops when the pension starts – many carers have been unable to go out to work". They also want the Carer's Allowance to really pay: "I get £44 per week with one hand, they take £44 off me for national insurance – what's the point?" and "if you care for two people that's twice as much work, you should get two lots of Carer's Allowance".

Carers want benefits for those caring for disabled family members to be made easier to access and more widely available, through better information; GPs should signpost people to appropriate benefits – "many carers are 'hidden' from the system, if they don't realise they are carers they are unlikely to even consider applying for Carer's Allowance". Parents of disabled children want the benefits and services for which they are eligible to be more widely publicised, and to be consistently available across the UK: "There is so little for the parents of disabled children and often the amount you receive is completely different from another parent because of your geographical area." Finally, carers want job centre staff to have specific training in dealing with carers: "The attitudes of staff can be nasty, they just make assumptions that carers don't want to work."

2.3.12 Disabled people's voices

Disabled people access a variety of benefits, and have access to a number of new training and skills projects. Get Heard workshop participants in disabled people's groups talked about Incapacity Benefit, Disability Living Allowance, Direct Payments, Attendance Allowance, the New Deal for Disabled People, training schemes, and other issues. Participants with fluctuating levels of capability who are on incapacity benefit want the earnings disregard lifted as £20 is too low: "I have ME and am recovering from cancer, working full or part time is impossible because each day is unpredictable. To get off benefits I would have to work full time. I'm trapped with a £20 earned income limit, in constant debt, and worry about the debt."

With regard to Disability Living Allowance, disabled people participating in Get Heard would like to see:

- Simplified application procedures, and respectful assessments;
- Widen eligibility to include those diagnosed with Personality Disorder;
- More subtle assessments for people with learning disabilities to accurately capture the level of need;
- Improve access to DLA for those who have been on it before and come off it due to fluctuating need;
- Raise the levels of DLA to cover the costs that disabled people incur: "one individual can only communicate through texting on his mobile phone, but that is so expensive";
- People receiving DLA should also receive the Winter Fuel Allowance given to older people.

Direct Payments were welcomed but participants want simpler and more efficient application procedures, sympathy towards applications from Local Authorities, and more support for Direct Payments recipients as employers including specific and appropriate insurance cover available to those employing carers. Participants want a higher level of Attendance Allowance for more severe levels of disability and greater needs.

New Deal for Disabled People, which is voluntary, was welcomed as an idea, but disabled claimants want it to offer more jobs and a more varied range of opportunities – as well as job opportunities for more severely disabled people. Access to work and training was a major feature of disabled people's Get Heard discussions, and government training schemes and voluntary sector schemes were welcomed, such as Pathways to work – the STEPS project in Knowsley was cited as a good example; Progress2Work which was popular in Scotland, Jobskills in Northern Ireland – although participants felt it was under funded by comparison to schemes in England. Participants also identified a need more support from government and employers for people with a history of illness to get into work, as the case study below illustrates.

In addition, disabled people's groups wanted better information about benefits and eligibility made more widely available, and independent advice more widely available – for example there is a need for increased awareness of the help available to pay for travel costs to medical appointments; payment of benefits to be consistent and efficient; job centre staff to be available to help claimants with learning difficulties to get information and make applications.

People with mental health problems who took part in Get Heard made a particular point that resumption of benefits after a stay in hospital needs to be immediate and problem-free, especially bearing in mind the likely state of health of those undergoing psychiatric treatment.

One woman's story of barriers to work

“One participant to the event detailed her own experience of having to fight the barriers in the benefit system and people's perception of her due to illness. A 43 year-old woman, she had been in receipt of benefit for 26 years and is also a registered diabetic. In 1999 she decided that she wanted to do something more than just survive on benefit and decided to undertake some voluntary work at the local CAB. She also undertook to study for an LLB in law, from which she graduated with honours. After continued voluntary work for a number of organisations she started to apply for legal jobs and over an 18-month period wrote off for over 300 jobs and had 40 interviews. However, because of her illness she was always met with questions, which ranged from how often she had to go to hospital to whether her doctor thought she was fit enough for work. Here she was desperately trying to get off benefits and constantly finding barriers put up to her - mostly other people's perceptions of her ability. She was often referred to the New Deal programmes within her area, but she did not fit any because she had a degree or was overqualified in some other respect. In May 2004 she finally secured employment with the People's centre and described the feeling of euphoria when she was able to sign off benefits. She will never forget the frustration she felt at trying to find work and confront people's prejudices about claimants - especially those who have a long term illness or disability.”

2.3.13 Older People's voices

Older people's discussions about benefits focused mainly on the specific benefits available to people of pension age. Participants in these workshops welcomed benefits such as the Winter Fuel Allowance, the free TV licence for those over 75, the Christmas bonus and free prescriptions. They would like the free TV licence to be extended to those aged 60 and over, and for the cut-offs for means tested benefits to be replaced with tapers to ensure that those who have worked but are at the threshold for means tested benefits do not miss out on help that would make a substantial difference to their income. Participants welcome the fact that Attendance Allowance is related to needs and not means, but would like the higher rate increased for those with more severe disabilities. They also pointed out that the success rate for appeals is quite high, so would like the application process to be easier. Older disabled people would also like the Motability allowance to be extended past the age of 65 – at the moment it stops at age 65, as it is part of DLA.

2.3.14 Migrants' voices

Migrants who took part in Get Heard workshops generally expressed appreciation for the benefits system, especially Housing Benefit and Child Benefit - and for the welfare state as a whole. But they were clear that benefits levels are not sufficient to take care of family and individual needs. Asylum seekers and refugees in the groups stressed that asylum seekers must be able to sustain themselves: “You get no benefits but you have to pay your own rent and electricity.” And they pointed out that refugees need extra, specific support when their asylum applications are approved: “Once you get refugee status you have to move from NASS accommodation to other housing [yet] you do not qualify for help with moving through either Community Care Grants or Budgeting Loans through the Social Fund as you need to have been in receipt of qualifying benefits [for six months].”

2.4 Work and Skills

“When you get it, employment can be good. If you have a job you can have status and confidence, sometimes more finances, more self respect, more positive feelings, and more chances for more education.”

Overview

People in poverty want to work – but they want and need sustainable jobs, that pay sufficient wages to enable people to come off benefits and stay off benefits, to take care of their families, and to have a decent quality of life.

2.4.1 More sustainable work

Participants in Get Heard workshops had a wide range of experiences of being in and out of work and of trying to find work that would enable them to get off benefits, support themselves and their families, and stay off benefits in jobs and careers that would be satisfying. They had first hand knowledge of how difficult this work is to find. People clearly stated what they wanted:

- More full-time, long-term work – “job insecurity leads to stress and anxiety”;
- More work available locally – “many work opportunities were far away and travelling was not possible” (an Asian women’s group in the north west of England);
- Work of a higher quality – “need something better than cleaning jobs”;
- More support for part-time work to make it financially viable, for lone parents, for both men and women re-entering work, and for disabled people – for example, “if a woman works less than 16 hours per week she does not qualify for childcare”.

2.4.2 Improvement of wages

Low wages were an overwhelmingly popular topic of discussion in Get Heard workshops, regardless of the background, ethnic make-up and specific issues faced by group members. People talked about the need for wages to more than replace all lost benefits – not just Housing Benefit and Council Tax benefit, but also free prescriptions and free school dinners; this would also end exploitation in the informal sector: “black market employers pay really low wages because they know you need the extra money”. There needs to be more transport to and from low-paid work, such as buses run by employers on trading estates. One suggestion was to raise the tax threshold, as “tax on low paid jobs often makes salaries worthless; when you are trying to get back into work this is a barrier”.

These are some of the things people had to say about low pay:

- “Too much of working life is spent on the poverty line.”
- “You end up working on the same poverty line that you are trying to move on from.”
- “Many people have to have more than one job to make ends meet.”
- “There is nothing to look forward to. Can’t afford to socialise, can’t afford to buy new clothes or go on holiday. Always having to buy cheaper food. Always waiting and wishing for the next pay day.”
- “The biggest thing is fear. You can’t win for losing. You take a foot forwards and two back.”
- “Not feeling safe juggling all the balls ... if you lose just one of them it’s a lot more stress trying to put it all back together again.”
- “I’m just going from one temping job to another, whilst Dad pays the rent ... I feel totally demoralised.”
- “The [financial] benefits [of work] are minimal [and] you have less quality time with your children. It’s difficult to run a home *and* work *and* give your children the time that they need.” (Single parent)
- “People who have low skills and working long hours for a low income are struggling to survive. We feel left out. We work very hard, but we still cannot afford to buy new clothes or go to the cinema or even go on holiday to visit our families. Our children stay at home during school holidays and school trips. Working people should be supported, their children should not suffer.”

2.4.3 The National Minimum Wage

There was general agreement that the National Minimum Wage needs to be raised to meet the cost of living, and that a panel to define this level and work out the cost of living should include those with experience of living on the minimum wage. Both younger and older people raised the need to equalise the rate for all workers regardless of age (see also section 2.2.3).

2.4.4 More support for self-employment

Many participants in different workshop groups wanted to see more support for those considering self employment and those already self employed, in the form of better information about eligibility for Tax Credits; more information from Jobcentre Plus about rights, entitlements and registering as self employed; more support for BME entrepreneurs; and support for migrant entrepreneurs who cannot find work that matches their qualifications.

2.4.5 Employment protection and employer engagement

Get Heard workshop discussions clearly identified the roles and responsibilities of employers as key to helping people get into, retain and progress in work. Specifically, workshop participants want to see:

- Wider application and better enforcement of employment regulations for those in low paid and part time work;
- More support to sustain work – currently the emphasis seems to be only on getting people into work;
- Better understanding by employers and enforcement by government of equal opportunities policies and practices;
- Wider application of work-life balance initiatives, for example “only a few companies give flex-time” and “employers can stigmatise parents [mums and dads]” - in many low-paid workplaces requests are routinely turned down;
- Investigation of higher rates of unemployment among BME communities;
- The extension of anti-discrimination legislation to faith-based employers;
- An end to agency work that evades employment protection: “I am a graduate with debts from being a student. Last year, working full time as a professional civil servant at the Welsh Assembly and getting excellent appraisals, but as an agency employee I was paid only £8000 a year ... every week my debts increased. There are lots of people trying to manage in jobs like this, and it can't be done. I am sure these strains contributed to me having a mental breakdown.”
- More paid work experience placements, as “employers ask for more experience but they aren't willing to give you that experience” – one idea was for “quotas for trainees [of any age] to get work experience”;
- More support from employers when employees are ill or needing help;
- More on-the-job training;
- An end to discrimination against those who have experienced mental ill health, homelessness, long-term unemployment, or who live in certain areas;
- Work support schemes for homeless and formerly homeless workers.

2.4.6 Adult and Further Education

Get Heard participants were positive about education that is accessible, friendly, local and relevant. They like community and adult education colleges, and want an increase in drop-in study centres that can be used flexibly. They also identified a need for more college places for adult education; more help with the costs of attending college, including transport and other associated costs, and particularly help with the costs of skills training at local colleges; more flexible learning and college places that fit around childcare and other demands on adults' time; more higher-level jobs that match the increasing number of qualified jobseekers who have attended college; more support for disabled people to attend university and access further education to enable access to better paid work; more information about further education to be available from Jobcentre and Jobcentre Plus.

2.4.7 Women's voices

Get Heard groups that consisted mostly or entirely of women raised a number of specific issues around work and employment. They pointed out the need to improve women's employment opportunities when pregnant, and the need to oblige employers to be sympathetic to requests for flexible working (see 2.4.5): “Women spoke about not being able to take time off to look after sick children. Their employers were very unsympathetic and this created more stress. For some the option of self employment appeared to offer more flexibility.” The issue of low wages and the need to raise the minimum wage was important to women, who have various responsibilities: “There aren't enough jobs out there that pay enough to be able to pay bills, rent, childcare – and still have enough money to treat the kids.” In Northern Ireland one group of young women said, “no matter how much you train you still face low wages at the end”. One solution identified was to start their own businesses to meet their needs for flexible working hours, and women want more help to do this.

2.4.8 Lone Parents' voices

Work was a big issue for lone parents' groups, who identified a number of needs and came up with some innovative solutions. A number of lone parents see self employment as a way to meet their needs for flexible working, and identified need to provide in-work benefits for self-employed people such as discounts for training – and comprehensive information on these benefits. Lone parents keenly see the need to support temporary and part-time work properly, for example, enabling lone parents to do

temporary work during term time and claim benefits in the school holidays; one idea was for a job sharing scheme with students “where single parents can work during the term time and students can do the same job during the holidays. To ensure that single parents are secure financially and can claim Working Family Tax Credit, an average weekly wage could be calculated based on the [single parent’s] total annual earnings. This would mean that single parents can work flexible hours, have financial security, and students could work when it suits them.” The ability to work flexibly is key to lone parents, who want more understanding from employers, and also more sustainable jobs.

Many lone parents also did not think it was good to force single mothers into work: “A lone parent could be barely £1 better off by working, spend less time with her children *and* have the major headache of childcare during school holiday childcare, days off school due to illness and around school hours which are shorter than working hours.”

Lone parents who took part in Get Heard welcomed opportunities for training and further study, but need courses to “meet the specific needs of single parents: childcare, accessibility, increasing confidence levels, breaking down isolation”. They also want it to be possible for individuals to be able to take funding with them to the most appropriate course, regardless of geographic location.

2.4.9 Disabled people’s voices

Disabled people who held Get Heard workshops were also very concerned about work and the difficulty of accessing properly paid, appropriately supported, interesting and worthwhile work opportunities if you are disabled. Disabled people’s demands are clear:

- Develop more work opportunities for disabled people, as many “need more flexibility, but really do want to work;
- Enforce equal opportunities policies, and ensure both employers and employees know about the law and are aware that employers can make adjustments;
- More understanding and support for people with learning disabilities to get into work;
- More training for disabled people to improve job opportunities – “we only get boring and mind numbing tasks”;
- Remove the stigma surrounding mental ill health – “there is a fear of returning to work and not being treated as a person because they know you have a mental illness”;
- Require employers to change their stance and do more to encourage disabled people to take up work and stay in work: “employers only want you if you bring in money – the moment you start needing help they don’t want you”.

2.4.10 Older people’s voices

Not all the older people who took part in Get Heard were of pension age; many were in their 50s and keen to get back into work. These participants were able to clearly identify the barriers to their getting back to work and, therefore, the help they needed to do so. With regard to work itself, older people want an end to age discrimination, and enforcement of the new legislation (pending at the time of submitting this report); increased availability of better paid jobs for older workers, to reduce poverty at pension age; and more support for part-time work, as a way to retain connections to the community, break the isolation experienced by many older people, and combat poverty. In order to get back to work, older people want more appropriate support and a less exclusively IT-focused approach to training.

2.4.11 BME voices

People from BME communities related numerous experiences of racism and discrimination in all aspects of their lives. When it came to work BME participants identified a clear need for better enforcement of anti-racism legislation in employment: “Discrimination prevents employment – discrimination against our names, religion, accent, appearance; change all this and we will get a job today.” BME participants also want more support for BME self-employment, and more pre-employment support for BME jobseekers. Some of this would come from job centres, where BME communities want to see staff better trained and anti-racism policies enforced.

2.4.12 Migrants’ voices

Like others from BME communities, migrants want more support for self-employment and stronger enforcement of anti-discrimination policies. The need to match jobs to skills was a big issue for

migrants' groups, who want more recognition of qualifications gained overseas, and help to 'transport' those qualifications into the UK professional sector. Migrants also want more support for refugees to be able to study to improve their job prospects, and especially help to study to improve their language skills while working in order to be able to move on to better jobs: "People need a break from employment to improve their skills and move to better jobs but they cannot get this opportunity as if they stop working they cannot get support." Migrants' groups also call on the government to allow refugees and asylum seekers to work, as "this would prepare them for other work and help their integration later on".

2.4.13 Homeless people's voices

Homeless people who took part in Get Heard felt that there needs to be more understanding that work is not a first step out of poverty for homeless people: "Many felt that they had other issues to sort out before being able to job hunt." They also want to see legislation to end discrimination by employers against people who have been homeless.

2.5 Health

"Being poor means you are sick all the time."

"You're not healthy if you don't have the money to be."

"Improve understanding at policy-making level of substance addiction, mental health and other issues with proven links to social exclusion and poverty."

Overview

Participants value the National Health Service and are concerned that there needs to be a continued commitment to free healthcare. Generally people are positive about recent innovations and new ideas, from increased screening and new emphasis on preventative medicine, to being treated at home by emergency services. Participants were positive about the increased availability of health information and health service information.

But there were clear concerns about health inequalities and about the unequal provision of healthcare services. There were a number of demands to 'end the postcode lottery' and a clear desire for consistency of service and prescription across the UK. Participants also want an end to the inequality that comes from people with money being able to 'jump the queue'.

There were requests for more help with the cost of transport to medical services; more sympathetic treatment and greater understanding of the needs of minority communities such as BME communities and lesbian and gay service users; an increased availability of a wider range of health services outside urban areas; more support for self help groups; more consultation with and involvement of local people when planning expansion or closure of health services.

2.5.1 Primary Care

With regard to GP services, participants clearly identified a need for more GPs, better training for GPs and practice staff in how to deal with drug users and homeless people, improved out-of-hours availability including a request for weekend opening, and for doctors to change their approach to patients; there is a feeling that people are blamed for poor health, ignored when they make repeat visits, and "just given medication as though that would solve all your problems". There were many positive comments about flexible, local services, providing both treatment and prevention support, such as drop-in services, healthy living services, stop smoking clinics and general health information and awareness points. Young people requested more youth-specific services, like the Health Spot and Youth Stress Centre in Castlemilk, Glasgow (see section 2.2.5).

2.5.2 Hospital services

People were generally appreciative of the improvements made in the health service in recent years, such as the improvements in waiting times for specialist appointments, but they were also clear on the changes that they feel still need to be made in order for the health service to meet the needs of excluded people. In terms of service efficiency participants want further improvements in waiting times and an end to the 'postcode lottery' of different waiting times in different areas. One suggestion was to

“bring back cottage hospitals” as a way to offer friendly, localised care within communities. As with primary care services, the manner in which hospitals treat poor patients was raised by many groups. They would like to see more support for and understanding of drug users, and care with Acceptable Behaviour Contracts as they can stigmatise individuals, more support for and understanding of those with mental health problems, and a more courteous approach by staff.

2.5.3 Mental Health

A number of Get Heard workshop groups included people with experience of using mental health services. Their demands for improvements in mental health treatment were clear:

- Increase the availability of mental health treatment and shorten waiting times;
- Increase the availability of counselling;
- Ensure mental health treatment, and clinic and hospital staff, provide a sympathetic and understanding service – there were many complaints of harsh treatment;
- Improve the training and monitoring of support workers;
- Provide more flexible treatment options, and provide financial support for complementary therapies, therapeutic creative options and self-help;
- Increase education for young people about mental illness to change social attitudes and to support those young people who may be experiencing mental ill health.

Two ideas to improve the manner in which mental health service users are treated were to involve service users in monitoring service provision, and to develop advocacy services for service users.

2.5.4 Drug and alcohol treatment

Participants expressed a range of views on drug treatment, often reflecting their different personal experiences of drug use (for more on drugs, see section 2.8.4, below). Those who had experienced drug treatment services particularly liked well-structured outreach services that provided choices and an exit strategy, so that clients could see their way out of addiction. They also liked services that treated clients with respect. Participants with a range of experiences – from using drug services, to living in communities where drug use is widespread – talked about the need for improved availability of drug treatment services in order to enhance individuals’ and communities’ opportunities. These included making drug treatment available immediately on release from prison, making methadone treatment more widely available, increasing the number of residential treatment centres around the country, and making support and treatment available without the condition of stopping using first. Communities on the south coast of England also asked for treatment centres to be dispersed around the UK as they felt their communities were under pressure from large numbers of drug users moving into the area for treatment.

2.5.5 Young people’s health

Young people and their parents want to see more support for young people’s health and social issues to help them make the transition into adulthood. Those who participated in Get Heard want better education about mental health issues, more preventative drug education, and more diverse and sympathetic routes for teenagers to access contraception and sexual health advice: “staff should accept the need rather than question the deed”.

2.5.6 Older people’s voices

Older people participating in Get Heard workshops also identified the need for more primary care and frontline staff – GPs, occupational therapists, and dentists. They also raised issues regarding difficulties of accessing health services, and wanted the new appointments system to be reassessed from the perspective of elderly people, as many find it difficult to use. One group suggested that GPs hold ‘spare’ medication to prevent patients running out while waiting for repeat prescriptions to be filled.

2.5.7 Migrants’ voices

Migrants’ groups expressed appreciation for the National Health Service, but pointed up the need for health professionals to have more training to improve their approach “to end discrimination, increase courtesy and improve attitudes”. One suggestion to help improvement was to increase recruitment of migrant healthcare professionals, by making it easier for qualifications gained overseas to be recognised.

2.5.8 Homeless people's voices

Issues to do with health and healthcare services were raised by all the homeless people's groups that took part in Get Heard. There was enthusiasm for specialist healthcare services for homeless people, such as surgeries run through day centres, and dressing clinics. Homeless participants recommended that there be a two-way referral system for healthcare and homelessness services; this would both improve homeless people's access to health services and support homeless people to move on. A big problem for homeless people using general health services such as hospitals is discrimination, and homeless Get Heard participants want to see more training for GPs and healthcare workers in how to deal sympathetically with homeless people – one suggestion was to legislate to outlaw discrimination against drug users and homeless people. Homeless people's groups also suggested better diagnosis and care for mental health conditions, and better guidance and referral to detox for drug and alcohol users.

2.6 Housing

“When you're on income support you go down the ladder and you're put where people tell you to live. You have no choice.”

“Having a flat so I have my own personal space – I can't tell you how very important this is.”

“In my area many properties used to be small hotels or bed and breakfasts. They are now converted to bedsits, and you get mums with two children living in one room. It's all in private landlords' hands. They are unscrupulous. There are terrible conditions, there is no support and it's frustrating because no one's in charge.”

Overview

Housing is key to people's perceptions of themselves as able to go out to work, parent well, and do other things to participate meaningfully in society. Get Heard workshop participants in a number of different groups made clear the link between housing and other issues such as health, employment and family happiness: “Where you live definitely affects mental health and how you can recover;” “poorer housing means other things, illnesses like chest trouble [from] bad insulation.” Groups also made clear the need for housing policy to take into account the different and particular needs of minority communities such as BME communities and lesbian and gay residents.

There was a range of particular requests and suggestions for specific policies: pursue the ‘problem tenants’ rather than making neighbours move; develop a national rent deposit scheme; provide financial help to poor homeowners to maintain properties; provide more help to single parents, part-time workers and temporary workers to get on the property ladder.

2.6.1 Increased availability of affordable housing

The need for more affordable housing to be made more widely available was raised repeatedly in many Get Heard workshop discussions. Ideas for increasing availability and access to affordable housing included extending the keyworker scheme to include groups of low paid workers, bringing back the fair rents system and other types of rent control, making empty properties available to house homeless people, committing private developers to providing a high percentage of public housing, and ending the right to buy council housing.

2.6.2 Temporary accommodation

Temporary accommodation was an issue raised particularly by women's groups, lone parents and homeless people; these groups underlined the need to appreciate the links between temporary accommodation and ill health, educational problems and family breakdown. The main issue was the need to reduce the time spent in temporary accommodation – this was linked to the need to increase the availability of affordable housing (see section 2.6.1). Participants also want to see the standard of temporary accommodation raised; as one woman explained, “I stayed in squats and on people's floors to get out of a bad situation” – rather than stay in bad temporary accommodation.

2.6.3 Make housing allocations fair and transparent

The allocation of the diminishing stock of social housing is not easily or clearly understood, and this leads to confusion and a feeling that there may be unfairness operating in the way allocations are made. There is a need to make allocations procedures open, transparent and clearly fair. Allocations also need to be appropriate; one group asked, “why people with young children were living on the top floors of high rise blocks”, another pointed out that, “if you have a mental health problem and you move to an area that has a lot of drug problems you’re just going to get worse”. Other groups asked why allocations procedures did not deal more effectively with overcrowding. Suggestions for improvements include making bidding systems simpler and more useable, ensuring that different groups with priority needs are not competing for the same housing on the same lists – and making that clear to housing applicants, and to empower tenants to decide what is appropriate to their needs and support them to get involved in choice and allocation processes.

2.6.4 Improvements to social housing

Get Heard participants talked about the need to improve social housing both in the context of improving neighbourhoods (see section 2.7 below), and with specific reference to problems with social housing stock. Where new housing has been built, tenants like the new flats: “they are warmer and cosier and have more bathrooms”, and tenants are appreciative of refurbishments and the installation of new safety measures such as intercoms, new doors and lighting. Where housing is degraded tenants identified a number of measures needed to get action on maintenance, including making council housing departments more directly accountable to their clients, i.e. tenants themselves; and introducing a legal obligation for Housing Associations to work closely with tenants’ groups. Ideas for refurbishing stock include linking rebuilding, new building and maintenance to local skills and crafts training courses for apprenticeships and local employment initiatives; building a wider range of types of housing in a range of locations, so that, for example, older people can live with their families or nearby; including plans to improve or build new local infrastructure, such as play areas and shops, when refurbishing or building new housing.

2.6.5 Travellers’ sites

Only one group of Travellers took part in Get Heard, and their discussion was dominated by issues relating to the management of Travellers’ sites, including:

- The need to improve facilities and services in accordance with site users’ needs – and to listen to site users to determine what improvements they need;
- The need for everyone living on the site to have a list of key contacts in the Local Authority;
- The need to reassess the necessity and appropriate nature of eviction criteria;
- The possible need for separate sites for different groups of Travellers, as they may not want to live together.

2.6.6 Regulation of the private rental market

With the pressure on social housing, people on low incomes are increasingly turning to private rented accommodation, but many Get Heard participants felt the private rental market did not provide safe, secure housing. They want to see a return to longer-term secure tenancies – “so people don’t have to go from AST (Assured Shorthold Tenancy) to AST”; for more inspection and monitoring of private landlords to deal with overcrowding and unscrupulous practices; and for more private landlords to accept tenants on Housing Benefit.

2.6.7 Council Tax

Council Tax is seen as a burden by many people on low incomes, as there is no discount available and those who are not on benefits face increasing fixed charges. One suggestion made was to reform Council Tax to reflect people’s ability to pay – but ensure that people’s savings are not taken into account in means testing. Residents also want to see council services improved in line with increases in Council Tax, and for Local Authorities to explain the expenditure of increased Council Tax revenues. There was also a request for Local Authorities to improve their efficiency as it can take a while for bills to be sent out, resulting in substantial lump sums that have to be paid quickly.

2.6.8 Lone parents' voices

Housing was a major topic of conversation for lone parents, and dominated the discussion of one group in the south west of England. The main issues as they see them are:

- The need to increase the number of affordable properties;
- The need to reduce the time spent in temporary accommodation – through providing more social housing and ending the right to buy;
- The need to introduce rent controls in the private sector;
- The need for allocation procedures to be open, fair and appropriate – i.e. to take into account the particular needs of housing applicants, for example “single mums given accommodation not in their own area, so they lose their social support network”.

2.6.9 Disabled people's voices

Disabled people pointed out the importance of taking account of disabled people's needs when designing and building housing, for example the need to store wheelchairs, and to store and charge mobility scooters.

2.6.10 Older people's voices

Older people involved in Get Heard had a lot to say about housing, and put forward a large number of suggestions. They want:

- More sheltered housing to be provided by Housing Associations;
- More sheltered accommodation for couples;
- More consideration of the sheltered housing needs of particular groups, including BME elders and older lesbian and gay people;
- More efficient provision of aids and adaptations to housing, as waiting lists are currently too long;
- More financial support for homeowners on low incomes to pay for maintenance of properties;
- More storage space in sheltered housing for mobility scooters, and recharging facilities;
- More involvement of older people in the design and planning of housing;
- More handyman schemes such as TASK (see case study below) to be incorporated into housing schemes;
- Increased availability of bigger accommodation for older people, so that they have spare rooms for family to come and visit.

Older people would also like to be exempted from paying Council Tax as the rising charges are increasingly out of proportion to their ability to pay; one couple said that their annual Council Tax charge was now higher than the original price of their house.

Case study

Task is a partnership between Knowsley Pensioners Advocacy, Trading Standards, Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council, Age Concern, Knowsley Consumer Network, Community Support Network and the Community Older Persons Team. It exists to provide a service to older and vulnerable people who may need electricians, plumbers, builders etc. The traders all have to abide by a code of conduct and they are closely monitored by the partner agencies to ensure they adhere to this. The customer can have the confidence that the traders are approved by trading standards, that they will provide relevant quotes for the work and an efficient & reliable service. A customer satisfaction form is sent to every person who uses the TASK in order to constantly evaluate the service and ensure it is responding to the needs of the customer. In the rare event of any complaints, Knowsley Trading Standards operates a conciliation service to resolve any issues that may arise between the customer and the trader. Other local authorities are now showing an interest in the work of the TASK.

2.6.11 Homeless people's voices

The majority of the ideas and demands to bring empty homes back into use came from homeless people's groups, and included a great deal of resourcefulness, for example, charging higher Council Tax on empty properties and ringfencing the money.

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2.7 Neighbourhoods and communities

“Poverty is also about being socially excluded due to a lack of local amenities such as shops and it’s also about poor transport provision.”

Overview

People living on low incomes in poor neighbourhoods are proud of the places they live in and want to see them improved. They see it as a right to live in clean, safe environments, and want their children to grow up both healthy, and proud of the area they come from. They are keenly aware of the way that their communities are held in low esteem by society at large - “there’s very little positive press on Drumchapel (an area in Glasgow), even though there are good things happening” - and of the knock-on effects in the form of discrimination against the people who live there – “there are stereotypes that you can’t have certain aspirations if you’re from certain areas”. This loyalty survives despite the recognition that communities are under stress, with workshop participants calling for a return of community spirit, more respect from community members for each other, and more education to support awareness of others perspectives on community issues.

Residents lower-income neighbourhoods show their loyalty in part through their continuing readiness to get involved in initiatives to rebuild their communities, despite previous experiences of consultation leaving them disappointed (for more on participation and experiences of involvement see section 4 below). Through the Get Heard workshop discussions groups talked repeatedly about the need for regeneration and renewal schemes to properly involve local people in the creative, planning and implementation stages of neighbourhood renewal. In addition, when local residents get involved in planning, the inclusion of minority groups with particular needs and experiences such as BME community members and disabled people must be ensured. They want more support from the Government for communities who are affected suddenly by, for example, serious job losses, and residents of poor neighbourhoods are calling for more investment in their communities.

2.7.1 Clean, safe environments

Many people from many different groups talked about the need to provide clean, safe environments so children, women, disabled and older people can participate easily in their communities. People want safer neighbourhoods – some expressed a wish for more CCTV, or more specific CCTV, many wanted to see more community police (see 2.8.1 below); and for Community Wardens and Neighbourhood Wardens need to be better trained, better connected with the community, and to communicate regularly with people “on the street, where they are” – “Community Wardens, if they are part of the community, are working”.

People also want their neighbourhoods to be kept clean and tidy, they want:

- “More respect for the environment” from local residents and for landlords – both private and social – to be obliged to keep areas clean;
- Better recycling services and to oblige householders to recycle;
- Better upkeep of the neighbourhood, such as mending damaged pavements and snow clearing;
- Funding to maintain and develop green spaces in local areas.

2.7.2 Local services and community facilities

Participants in Get Heard workshops saw their local services and community facilities as essential to supporting vibrant neighbourhoods, and identified a number of solutions to current problems. They want local services to be more carefully tailored to fit local needs, more flexible and better and more effectively publicised in the local area; and they would like more and clearer information made available when services expand or close, and for local people to be involved in making these decisions. They also want services to be more flexible, and more integrated and joined up. Participants also talked about needing to ensure consistency across the UK in the provision of local facilities, especially with regard to ensuring high minimum standards of service provision, and continuing pilot schemes that work rather than closing them down regardless of the success of the service. Residents want facilities to be subsidised for those on low incomes – especially sports facilities and others used by young people.

Workshop participants also identified a number of services that they want to see developed – more social facilities and drop-in services; more youth facilities; more community furniture and computer recycling schemes – and for these to be mainstreamed so that “they lose their poor image”.

2.7.3 Thriving neighbourhoods

Part of successful neighbourhood renewal is investing in the vibrancy of a neighbourhood and supporting community engagement through enabling residents to live and shop in their local area. "There are many areas throughout Britain with rows of shops that are boarded up, and the life taken away from communities." This has affected many Get Heard participants, particularly those living in housing schemes in Scotland's urban areas. They want to see post offices staying open and re-opening in their local areas; they also want more and better shops locally – "at one time there were three banks and a building society, a chemist, a hairdresser, a restaurant, a theatre, now there are just lots of bookies"- and for shops to be locally owned. Residents also want to see limits on the opening hours of off-licences and betting shops.

2.7.4 Public transport

By far the most popular issue with regard public transport is the availability of free schemes that operate around the UK for elderly and disabled travellers, and sometimes school children. The most important changes needed are:

- Improved public transport connections between urban centres and housing schemes – these would make a great difference to residents who have to travel to medical appointments, work and school;
- More and better bus services, especially in the evenings;
- More accessible transport options for elderly and disabled residents.

Across the UK, workshop participants also want more sympathy and understanding shown by bus drivers towards elderly passengers and those with children.

2.7.5 Community support and the voluntary sector

Community members were enthusiastic about the voluntary sector and community-organised activities and facilities available in their neighbourhoods, such as the Somali Group in Riverside, Cardiff, which has set up an association and a youth group. As one participant put it: "they provide much needed services to excluded people; because they operate at a grassroots level, they can offer real support and be flexible enough." Most of all they want to see more sustainable support for these organisations - there is concern that they are too vulnerable to changes in levels of funding and the requirements of funders, and that they are fragile and unable to offer consistent services as a result. A particular request was for funding for projects to continue, rather than for funding to only go to new projects: "If a project has made a difference to the community, then why are we looking for 'new' projects to fund? Let's use that project as a model to roll out across the country!"

2.7.6 Communities First, Wales

Get Heard participants in Wales illustrated the dedication of communities to remain involved in regeneration initiatives despite negative experiences of these processes. While there were good practice examples cited, participants identified many changes that need to be made:

- Partnership boards need to be more diverse – "in this area there are few community representatives who aren't there to represent a particular organisation and ensure that organisation gets maximum resources";
- Partnership boards need to be truly community-led and have "less Local Authority influence and control" – a good practice example cited was of an area where "councillors are on the board, they provide advice and support, but they do not vote";
- Co-ordinators need to have more support, consistent priorities, and longer contracts to prevent the high turnover of staff;
- The funding needs to come through on time, as community members who have put in a lot of work to encourage local involvement are having their efforts undermined – "we tried to get the trust of the people but this has been really damaged by a six to eight month delay in funding", "people say 'Oh yeah? I'll believe it when I see it'", "people slam doors in our faces as the money is not being shelled out and people are fed up with waiting";
- More of the funding needs to be disbursed directly to the grassroots and less spent on administration and management;
- Young people should be included and involved more in Communities First planning.

2.7.7 Communities Scotland

In Scotland neighbourhood groups talked less about particular, named regeneration projects, and more about regeneration and renewal in general. The participants in these workshops talked about the need to make projects more sustainable over the longer term so that more people can access them; the need to improve partnership working between stakeholder groups; the need to share information about projects more widely within the community; and the need to involve people rather than simply imposing projects. An example given of a community project that worked thanks to involvement of local people is the skate park in Drumchapel “that has been incredibly successful because the youth were actually involved right from the beginning in planning what they wanted”.

2.7.8 Neighbourhood Renewal, England

As in Scotland, not all discussions about regeneration referred to named Neighbourhood Renewal projects, but covered both New Deal for Communities and other projects. Participants were concerned that some popular and creative projects were not appropriately supported, and would like to see more resources for thematic local area initiatives as well as geographically identified areas; for projects and project funding to take a longer-term and more strategic view; for good support to set up community businesses; for more funding to be given direct to local people at the grassroots; for the learning from good projects to be shared more widely; for regeneration projects to create more skilled jobs; and for more improvement grants for run down areas. A particular plea from Merseyside was to consider refurbishment instead of knocking down houses, which is “a false economy and takes away from the community a feeling of stability and security”.

A big plea from communities affected by regeneration schemes was for local communities to be involved properly – “when there is consultation there is usually a feeling that local people are not listened to and that the decision has already been made”.

2.7.9 Neighbourhood Renewal, Northern Ireland

Participants in Northern Ireland who discussed Neighbourhood Renewal in the region, made a number of positive comments, as well as pointing out problems with the strategy. Overall, participants appreciated the opportunity that Neighbourhood Renewal offers to build partnerships with statutory agencies and government departments, and acknowledged a “willingness to change within some government departments”. Workshop participants felt that Neighbourhood Renewal in Northern Ireland needs:

- Improved funding, especially a commitment to ‘local funding for local need’ and more efficient funding structures – many groups have “gone to the wall” waiting for promised funding;
- Protected budgets for new projects and allocation of budgets for anti-poverty work;
- Clear allocation of budgets for anti-poverty work;
- A commitment from government departments to continue funding successful projects begun under European anti-poverty funding.
- Different agencies to be more joined up;
- Government to reassess pre-defined geographic boundaries;
- More communication between Neighbourhood Renewal areas and projects;
- Renewed commitment by statutory agencies to senior-level participation in partnerships – otherwise they risk being weakened.

2.7.10 Women’s voices

Women’s groups in particular talked about the need for more investment in vibrant local shopping areas, this was especially an issue for women in Scottish community groups: “there are no clothing or shoe stores”, “there are no furniture stores”, “there are no nice places to spend time inside or outdoors”, but “there are too many bookies” and “there are 20 places to buy alcohol!” Women’s groups also strongly expressed a need for more community spirit and for all community members to take more responsibility for their neighbourhoods. And community safety is important to women too: “the general feeling is that children are not safe to be alone, especially not at night. At night and especially on Saturday mornings the streets and the closes (entrances to flats) are littered with rubbish, broken glass and needles – it looks like a tornado hit.”

2.7.11 Older people's voices

Older people's groups talked about wanting safer, more vibrant communities with strong community spirit. Older participants liked day centres for the activities and support they get there, such as the Pensioner's Action Centre in Castlemilk, Glasgow, which is "a one-stop-shop" with dancing, indoor bowls, history, art, computer and keep fit classes. It has support groups for the housebound, does visits to ill members, provides accompaniment to hospital and doctors' appointments, benefits advice and advocacy, and outside activities. They want more social activities to be available to older people and for better public transport and transport support to be able to access these activities. Older participants also want an end to post office closures; for communities to be planned and maintained with their needs in mind –for example, an end to cars parking on pavements and limiting access for physically frail; and they want to see more mixed communities and share social facilities for all age groups.

2.7.12 BME voices

BME participants want housing allocation policies to take account of the specific needs of BME elders: "Many BME elders are sharing houses with younger generations and both sides need a break from time to time. Living close but not sharing is better." They want housing officials to have a greater racial awareness and to beware of stereotypes: "Whilst bearing in mind the history of cultures with strong family networks, there cannot be a presumption that this is the case."

2.8 Crime and policing

Overview

Like people in all communities, the participants in the Get Heard project expressed a range of different views on issues relating to crime and policing. This was particularly true in relation to drugs, and often reflected the different ways that participants' communities had been affected by drug use and drug crime. There were also a number of areas where very varied groups expressed very similar views and ideas on how to resolve particular issues.

As well as the broader issues detailed below, participants noted concerns about ID cards concerns – in particular about data privacy and the cost of cards to those on low incomes; the need for more support for those being released from prison and the need for reform of the prison service – in particular to crack down on drugs; the need for prison to focus on rehabilitating offenders in order to prevent crime in the future. Community groups also talked about the need to install CCTV and direct CCTV to tackle crime in neighbourhoods – where this has been done "the hot spots aren't hot spots any more!"

2.8.1 Policing

There was a lot of consensus on policing issues among different workshops and workshop participants. Community policing is generally popular, both in concept and in reality, with people keen to see more police on the ground and greater police presence at night. Communities would also like to see a greater police presence in schools and at bus stops to prevent bullying. However, participants also identified a number of changes and improvements that need to be made to the way that the police deal with poor communities. One community made a plea for more appropriate policing: "We've had riots here and you won't see a copper for weeks. But they check the tax on cars – they say it's for revenue." Much of the focus was on the need to improve police approaches to poor communities – Get Heard workshops felt the police need to be more flexible and understanding; they need to be more culturally aware and more approachable for ethnic minority communities; and police attitudes towards prostitutes and homeless people need to improve. However, lesbian and gay participants felt that attitudes towards their community had improved in recent years.

2.8.2 Domestic violence

The police approach to domestic violence has been seen to change in recent years and this improvement is appreciated, but Get Heard participants would like more training for officers on the beat, for services to be more joined up, and for the service for women experiencing domestic violence to be consistent within regions and across the UK. Domestic violence survivors suggested that there should be a more specialist legal structure for domestic violence, and that legal aid should be denied to men convicted of assault who are pursuing custody cases against their former partners in court. They also

called for more investigation by the government into the effects of domestic violence on society as a whole. In addition to policing, women's groups talked about other issues relating to domestic violence – see section 3.1.1 below.

2.8.3 Anti-social behaviour

Many issues relating to anti-social behaviour concerned young people, and a number of parents' and community groups reiterated the need to support young people early on to prevent anti-social behaviour from occurring (see section 2.2.5) and "so there is less need for punitive policies like ASBOs"; parents also want more support that they can access early on – "when parents are aware of problems there is no one they can turn to". Suggestions included both introducing community work for young people, and increase the minimum age for alcohol sales to 21.

Other suggestions to deal with anti-social behaviour were not so focused on young people. They included refurbishing and re-letting empty homes more quickly to prevent their use as drug and alcohol dens; and extending the current anti-social behaviour legislation – although this was very much a minority view. A number of participants identified the need for more support for those experiencing anti-social behaviour, including improving the Local Authority response to anti-social behaviour to match the police response, and enabling witnesses in court to testify anonymously – the facility to report anti-social behaviour anonymously is much appreciated.

2.8.4 Drugs

Participants from different groups had a range of views on drugs and what should be done to resolve drug problems in communities – this reflects both the debate in the wider community, and also the fact that participants have had different experiences of drug use and the problems caused by drug abuse. While some participants see legalising drugs as a solution, others focused more on preventing drugs arriving on the streets – by recruiting more customs officers – and introducing tougher sentences for drug dealers and smugglers, "as drugs are lethal to those who use them", clearly reflecting a negative personal experience of the problems caused by drug use. There was recognition that the big dealers are the criminals to target, with ideas such as shifting the burden of proof when attempting to convict dealers to them "to show how they maintain their lifestyles".

There was broad agreement between different groups on the need to provide young people with opportunities to broaden their horizons, increased employment opportunities and higher wages to prevent them turning to involvement in drug crime to make a living. BME participants want specific support for youngsters in their communities to steer them away from involvement in drugs.

2.8.5 Women's voices

In addition to issues relating to the policing of domestic violence (see section 2.8.2), Get Heard groups consisting mostly or entirely of women talked positively about community policing. They want more police to be visible on the streets in order to make communities safer; more Community Support Officers; and for the police to take account of BME women's safety fears, including fear of "reprisals [for] talking to the police".

2.8.6 BME voices

BME groups that took part in the Get Heard process want the police to be more culturally aware, and have more respect for BME community members. One participant related how she "witnessed a car being vandalised by young people; I reported this to the police who took no action and made it clear they were not interested. But once I asked the police officer's name I saw a complete change in her attitude as I had challenged her authority. The next day I saw the car being removed." And many other participants related stories of discriminatory treatment by the police. BME participants also want police to be aware of the safety fears that are often the reasons that BME witnesses do not come forward.

2.8.7 Homeless people's voices

Homeless people from different groups put forward a request to repeal the Vagrancy Act; they feel it is used simply to criminalize homelessness without providing any solutions, and creates barriers to moving on.

2.9 Finance and debt

“The media tells us our kids need certain things, so at Christmas many people go into debt and stay that way until next Christmas ... People spend all year trying to ‘catch up’ with debts.”

“The media encourages the view that living and spending on credit cards can be continuous and a ‘normal’ way to live.”

“Debt creates worry, need, illness, stress – that’s what poverty’s about.”

Overview

Access to regular financial services and support to stay out of debt are big issues for people on low incomes. Very little seems to have changed since these issues were raised by participants in the 2003 NAP. Now, as then, people want “to combat the risk of social exclusion, people need increased access to financial services, for example, banking, insurance and affordable credit, to help manage their money”.

2.9.1 Banks

Basic bank accounts for people on low incomes have not been the huge success that was hoped – Get Heard participants talked of the need to improve access to basic bank accounts, through educating and raising awareness amongst bank staff. Banks also need to improve access to money held in basic bank accounts. Opening bank accounts remains a problem for people on low incomes who have few regular bills and proofs of identity such as a passport or driving licence. Meanwhile, people on low incomes want the charges reduced on ordinary current accounts, as they often hit those on low incomes the hardest, and want more banks opened in poor areas to make access to regular banking services easier. They also want banks to be more ethical in their engagement with poor communities: “the only way forward is through mainstreaming access to credit. Banks have an obligation to the community and can afford to support this, they need to be obliged to do it.” One suggestion was to introduce a ‘community reinvestment act’ as in the USA, which would encourage banks to invest in the most deprived areas through taxation.

2.9.2 Credit Unions

Many participants in Get Heard saw credit unions as a positive option, but they were aware of how little they were used by people in poverty and want credit unions to get more support and be publicised more widely. They also want credit unions to be able to give greater benefits and offer a wider range of financial products.

2.9.3 Savings

Get Heard workshops recognised that saving on a low income is hard, and suggested introducing tax-efficient financial products designed for people on low incomes to enable and encourage saving, and better regulation of pensions schemes so that those who do save for old age do not risk losing everything.

2.9.4 Debt and doorstep lending

Participants in a number of different Get Heard workshops were clear about what they feel is needed to deal with doorstep lending and the high levels of debt that ensue:

- Stop the aggressive marketing of credit schemes – they target poor areas and poor individuals;
- Reform the Consumer Credit Act and regulate credit companies;
- Close down illegal and irresponsible lenders;
- Make cheap, secure borrowing more widely and easily available so that people don’t turn to the high-interest credit companies;
- Raise benefit levels to adequately cover family expenses, so that people only borrow for extras and in crises;
- Make free, independent debt advice more easily and widely available, especially in rural areas, and encourage and support people to access this advice.

In addition, workshop groups pointed out the need to spread Crisis Loan repayments over a longer period so that people don’t turn to high-interest lenders instead (see section 2.3.8).

2.9.5 Financial education

Participants clearly recommended that government improve financial education, including budgeting skills, for all ages, starting in school but continuing to be available to adults, as a way to combat debt and financial exclusion. “It took one participant a long time to realise that being in debt was not entirely her fault – she had been handed a bad set of tools. Living off income support is simply not enough to [be able to] pay back.” Participants also want more numeric and literacy education to prevent debt, specialist support for the elderly, and to ban TV adverts aimed at children.

2.9.6 Women’s voices

Women in a group of survivors of domestic violence raised the need for the criteria for Social Fund grants to be flexible for those in complex situations, such as parents and women fleeing domestic violence. “I didn’t get a social grant; I was moving away from a violent partner, I had waited for months in secret for it to come through. I left with nothing and so had nothing when I moved in – I was just told repeatedly I didn’t qualify [for a grant], but that I could have a loan. But the payments were so high I ended up getting the money elsewhere. It will end up costing me a lot more.”

2.9.10 Men’s voices

One of the few men-only groups to take part in the Get Heard process was a men’s debt support group. This group talked about the embarrassment that men in debt suffer, often compounded by problems with numeracy and literacy. They also expressed a lack of trust in the agencies set up to help people in debt; they fear that information will be shared with other agencies and they fear being judged by the authorities. These men’s suggestions covered both debt prevention: “educate on the dangers of borrowing, from a young age”, and dealing with debt problems: “encourage and support people to access advice and information”.

Part 3: Voices

3.1 Gendered voices

Overview

All the issues raised in Get Heard were ‘women’s issues’. Most Get Heard groups that entirely or predominantly comprised women participants raised issues that were not necessarily specific to women, but of course, participants’ views will have been informed by their experience of life as women. Issues that predominated in women-only groups included: the quality and environment of neighbourhoods (this was particularly the case in Scotland, and in England for BME women’s groups); community spirit; carer’s issues; issues relating to children and young people; the cost of household expenses; and issues relating to domestic violence.

There were only 12 groups that were men only or mostly men, seven of which were groups of homeless men; the rest were a lesbian & gay support group (included one woman), a debt support group in Wales, a BME group in the south west of England, a group of young men in the south west of England, and a fathers’ group in Scotland.

In addition to issues relating to work and training and the benefits system, the main issues raised by these groups included: aspects of homelessness; housing; the need for apprenticeships and vocational training for young people; the stress of poverty; debt; and health and disability issues.

Some things that women said:

“There is still an expectation that women will be compliant, work more and longer for less pay and do most of the domestic stuff but not take charge. Also, that they will be there to support their children irrespective of what the father does.”

“Successful women are seen as too bossy, but men are praised and given better jobs.”

“Women get into debt to give their children a better life.”

“If you work you’re back in society again, you’re meeting people and your child sees that you really are more alive – and so an even better mother to the children.”

“I see the children don’t go short but it’s all a bit basic. There’s nothing spare for luxuries. I shouldn’t complain because we aren’t terrorised here, we have a roof over our heads and we aren’t hungry or cold – most of the time.”

“Being poor and not being able to provide for the child you love can cause depression.”

“There needs to be improved recognition in the wider community (and within the LGB community itself) that not all LGB people are white, male, middle class and able bodied, i.e. they are often at risk of being excluded on multiple levels.”

Some things that men said:

“Volunteering here [at the homelessness service they use] is our chance to make things better for ourselves.”

“When someone is born into a socially deprived and excluded background, it is very difficult to escape it, especially with the lack of help from state sources.”

“The government talks about ‘education, education, education’, but young people are not being readied for life. They need some life education.”

“The ‘pink pound’ may be a reality for some sections of the LGB community, mostly men, but is largely a myth.”

“Disempowerment can lead to rage.”

“Discrimination had been experienced by most of the participants. With a history of homelessness, mental health issues, or substance addiction, employers did not make offers.”

“The men felt the world was against them, that all policies that were helpful did not go far enough.”

“There is no chance [for] people like us to make an improvement in our lives.”

“Social exclusion isn’t just about economics and work.”

“Need more flexible working for men – part time jobs are more readily available for women.”

3.1 Women’s voices

3.1.1 Domestic violence

Women’s groups raised a number of issues in addition to issues specifically relating to the policing of domestic violence and police services for women experiencing domestic violence (see section 2.8.2). Domestic violence survivors want refuge places to be free to women who are working as “often women are still paying a mortgage”; they also suggested that abusive partners who are working should pay for the cost of refuge places. Stays in refuges and temporary accommodation should be shorter: these women “have already lost everything, their lives are shattered, they are traumatised, they suffer while waiting too long to be re-housed”. Survivors also want more financial support for women who have fled abuse and more understanding of the often complex financial situations that they find themselves in: one woman living in a refuge “couldn’t get any financial support because she technically owned half a house from her relationship [which she could not access] – but according to the Jobcentre she still had that money”. Groups also appealed for more support for migrant women “who come to the UK through marriage and then experience domestic violence [but] are prevented from accessing support if their violent partner refuses to assist with their Home Office documents. These women need to be given the same rights as their partners the day they get married.” Prevention of domestic violence was also identified as important, and women’s groups want children and young people to be educated about the issues at school (see also section 2.2.6).

3.1.2 Joined up policy and planning

Although the need for joined up policy is not exclusive to women, women's groups pointed out that many women juggle a range of roles and responsibilities, for example working mothers, and that there is a desperate need to join up policies such as those on childcare, work and training to enable women to fulfil their many responsibilities. One woman had "trained as a nurse and was in debt the entire time – she is still paying this off and still not having enough to give her family. As she hasn't been in work for a while due to the inflexibility of childcare provision, she has been told she now needs retraining, which is too expensive and also too rigid to organise childcare."

3.1.3 BME women's voices

Only a few BME groups took part in Get Heard, and all were dominated or attended exclusively by women – very few men from BME communities took part, other than those in migrants' workshops. The women from black and Asian communities in Get Heard identified a number of issues where changes need to be made:

- The need to improve specific support for BME women in poverty: "No one really knows how little I live on. My neighbours are quite well off and I try to maintain standards. They don't know how mean my ex-husband is. He's a pillar of our community and no one would believe how he treats me. I cannot remember when I could last afford to buy a pair of shoes."
- The need to make clearer information on benefits entitlements more widely available and accessible;
- The need to enforce anti-discrimination laws – there is an "ethnic penalty, a recognition of a foreign accent, we see it as a fact of life when the children ring up for jobs and are discriminated against because of their accent";
- More work is needed to end discrimination and the racism that BME communities face in daily life, for example from estate agents when trying to buy a house, to police officers dismissive of complaints until their authority is challenged.

3.1.4 Older women's voices

In addition to the issues raised by older people's groups more generally (see section 3.5 below and throughout Part 2), older women raised a number of issues specific to their own experiences and circumstances. In Northern Ireland older women would like to see the free transport card made available to women at the state retirement age of 60, rather than at 65 as now. Older women want a fairer deal for women who have reduced pensions as a result of working less, and who do not have a second or private pension of their own. And older women also want to see more thoughtful support for widows: one participant had lost her husband and received a widow's pension, but "after only one year her income radically dropped" – "because she had not worked she had no other income. The only thing she could think of was to apply for JSA, but that's partially means tested and she would gain peanuts."

3.2 Lone parents' voices

"Feels as though you are penalised for being a single parent rather than being supported when you need it."

"Need to break the assumption that single parents are 'bad' parents."

"No social life makes you depressed."

"You feel like you're in a vicious circle that you cannot get out of."

"Everything becomes so difficult when you have other obligations as well, such as needing to care for elderly relatives, finding quality time to spend with the kids, etc."

"It is really difficult to be able to plan ahead – and others still expect you to do that."

Overview

Lone parents are hard working and feel under pressure. While many want to work and welcome opportunities and support to get back into training and work, others want to be supported to stay at home with their children until they are older and are feeling under pressure from the government and

unsupported and unappreciated. Lone parents are also under severe financial pressure. Many talked about the high cost of basic household expenses, such as rent, utilities, opticians and dentists, Council Tax, clothing and food: “you can’t afford fruit and vegetables”, “always have to buy white label food”. And lone parents contributed significantly to the discussions about childcare, children and families (see section 2.1,) and housing (see section 2.7).

3.2.1 Neighbourhoods and communities

Lone parents want allocations policies to be fair and transparent, and for it to be possible to force an explanation on unsuitable allocations.

3.2.2 Young people

Lone parents have a lot to say about the issues facing young people, and the challenges faced by parents on low incomes in supporting young people. Suggestions to make their job as parents easier included having a dress code for school – “ban brand name trainers to stop bullying” and to provide more support for home education. Lone parents also want more services inside and outside school to support young people with bullying, violence prevention, and education about teenage pregnancy for both boys and girls.

3.2.3 Support for parents

A recurrent theme in discussions among all parents, but raised particularly by lone parents, was the need they feel for more understanding, and particularly the hard work done made by lone parents. They were also keen on voluntary sector schemes that support families; a good practice example cited was the Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities course, run in partnership by SPAN and REU.

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3.3 Carers’ voices

“Everything becomes difficult when you have other obligations as well, such as needing to care for elderly relatives, finding time to spend with the kids, etc.”

Overview

Although carers mostly talked about the benefits that they want to be able to access more easily or at a higher rate (see section 2.3.11), all of these comments were related to the value of the work that carers do, and their feeling that this work is both economically undervalued by the government and generally unappreciated by society. Most of the carers who took part were women, reflecting the profile of carers nationally.

3.3.1 Need to take account of the cost and value of caring

Many carers leave or forego the possibility of full-time work, guaranteeing them a life of poverty and stress: “Being a carer precludes many women from having a career. Being a carer means a woman is stuck in low paid, low skilled work, often on a minimum wage that won’t make ends meet.” This also has knock-on effects for the pensions that carers can claim, with negative effects on the families of carers. Carers participating in Get Heard want carers’ to be compensated appropriately for this. One suggestion was to pay carers. They also want more respect shown to carers by officials, including Jobcentre staff.

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3.4 Disabled people's voices

“We get brushed aside and pushed into the gutter.”

“We are fed up with the ‘sit in the corner and be quiet’ syndrome.”

“People with mental illnesses are very likely to feel inadequate and worthless – because you are just not as valued in society if you have no apparent economic output.”

“Disability should be part of every decision that a statutory body makes.”

Overview

A large number of people with disabilities took part in Get Heard workshops, including groups of people with learning disabilities. In addition to discussion of benefits (see section 2.3.12) and housing (see section 2.6.9), disabled people's groups focused on issues related to inclusion and choice. Disabled people want to have the same choices available to them as others, and see this as an issue of civil rights. The observation was made that a lack of options is often the cause of disabled people's higher rates of poverty, as when disabled people cannot access education and therefore cannot seek higher paid work.

3.4.1 Physical Access

Disabled people's groups want better enforcement of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) by the authorities; one suggestion was for statutory bodies such as Local Authorities to employ Disability Officers tasked with enforcing the DDA. Workshops also feel that disabled people should be involved in the planning and design of new housing, refurbishments, and neighbourhood renewal, to ensure that there are enough dropped kerbs and other facilities and that they are appropriately sited.

3.4.2 Transport

The accessibility and availability of public transport was an important issue for disabled people's Get Heard groups. Participants liked free transport schemes, such as the Transport for London Freedom Pass, and want to see similar schemes across the UK. They also raised the need for Dial-A-Ride schemes to be more flexible and more widely available: “you have to call the day before and even then there's only one bus to take you where you need to go”. Public transport services outside urban areas clearly need to improve; although many people can access taxi voucher schemes these are often insufficient for the number of journeys needed and the distance that must be travelled. An additional suggestion was to increase the Motability allowance for those in rural areas: “medical appointments often involve travel outside the area and people in rural areas often exceed their annual mileage and have to pay a surcharge”.

3.4.3 Discrimination

Groups of people with learning disabilities want more understanding of the agency of people with learning disabilities. More generally, people with disabilities want non-disabled people to treat them as individuals, to “look past the disability”, and they want an end to discrimination in society, not just in law.

3.4.4 Home care

Disabled people who use homecare services want the quality and status of homecare work to rise, so that staff will be better trained and can expect better pay. They need homecare services to be consistent, for example with guarantees that carers will turn up at the same time each day, to enable clients to plan their lives.

3.4.5 Other services

Other service-related issues raised by disabled participants included:

- The need to shorten the wait for occupational therapy home assessments for adaptations;
- The need to include garden care and domestic help in the home help packages, as these services are expensive but necessary;
- The need to consult with and properly involve disabled people when planning changes to services, whether expansion or closure.

3.5. Older people's voices

“It's like a jigsaw puzzle – there are so many things you need to stay on top of.”

“Once you're over 50 no one wants to know. People just listen but don't do anything about it.”

Overview

The level of income available to pensioners is a worry for many and the issue that most exercised older people in Get Heard workshops, in addition to housing (see section 2.6.10), was the subject of pensions. Older people are also concerned about isolation – hence the importance of transport and communities and neighbourhoods. They also talked about the availability of advice and support to older people, and particularly like to be able to access information from voluntary sector agencies, which they want to see get consistent funding. They also want a 'one-stop-shop' for advice and information for older people's support, currently, “if something goes wrong people have to run around from place to place trying to get help, which can be very hard on older people”. Older people also reported experiences of discrimination and want the government to run an awareness campaign to tackle age discrimination in wider society.

3.5.1 Pensions

This was the biggest single topic of discussion amongst older people. The discussions threw up a number of requests:

- Increase the state pension in line with the increases in cost of living;
- Improve regulation of private pensions – many see these as unsafe and do not trust them;
- Remove tax from private pensions – or raise the tax allowance to encourage saving;
- Replace the pension and means tested pension credit with a single living pension for all;
- Remove the discrimination against women who have paid less through disrupted working lives;
- Make company pension schemes compulsory – and regulate these appropriately.

Pensioners also want to keep the current range of choices of payment methods, and particularly like to be able to use Post Offices; many do not want to have to use cash points.

3.5.2 Pension credit

Participants in workshops put forward a number of ways to improve Pension Credits: more information about Pension Credits and eligibility needs to be made more widely available; the application forms and application process generally need to be simplified, and people want help from job centre staff with filling out the forms; they want more flexibility around the qualifying income, or a taper, as people who 'miss out' by just £1 can be much worse off as they consequently do not qualify for other help such as Council Tax Benefit. Older Get Heard participants also want the government to work to reduce the stigma surrounding means tested benefits.

3.5.3 Council Tax

Older people participating in Get Heard want help with Council Tax to be provided to older people.

3.5.4 Support for BME elders

Older BME participants raised the need for both statutory and voluntary sector agencies to ensure services are appropriate to minority communities, for example, by providing an Asian meals on wheels service. One suggestion to support this was for agencies to employ more BME workers.

3.6 BME Voices

“Discrimination prevents employment – discrimination against our names, religion, accent, appearance; change all this and we will get a job today.”

“Integration should not necessarily mean assimilation and diversity should be celebrated. Cultural and other differences should be embraced and catered for in the new British society if we are all to be an integral part of it.”

Overview

The majority of BME participants in Get Heard were women, of working age and older. Very few men from BME communities participated, other than migrants. This serves as a reminder that many from BME communities experience severe social exclusion, as a result of the combination of multiple factors, especially poverty and race. The non-BME-specific issue raised by BME participants in Get Heard were the behaviour of young people (see section 2.2), benefits (see section 2.3), employment support (see section 2.4, especially 2.4.11), housing (see section 2.7) and the quality of neighbourhoods and planning issues, including the provision of transport and local services (see section 2.8). Only one comment was made about “what’s working” for BME communities, and that was in regard to the requirement by Age Concern England that they have two BME trustees from the Age Concern Black and Ethnic Minority Elders Forum on their board.

3.6.1 Racism, inclusion and diversity

Racism is a regular feature of daily life for many BME participants in Get Heard workshops: “We encounter prejudice in most aspects of our daily life, from a minority of teachers to a minority of bus drivers.” “Estate agents tried to find out what our income was, and made value judgements on what could be afforded by us.” “Shop assistants are not prepared to be friendly and [are] often unhelpful. Since the July bombings [there have been] more incidents of racist behaviour, such as bus drivers not prepared to stop at bus stops if Muslim people are waiting.” They want to see strong enforcement of anti-discrimination policies and legislation, and greater awareness on the part of the general public. BME communities in areas where they do not form a majority want better access to a good range of cheaper “ethnic shops selling our food”. One suggestion to increase both employment and inclusiveness was for tourist boards in the UK to target BME groups in recruitment.

3.6.2 Service provision and policymaking

BME participants want the government and service providers to ensure that policies and services target BME communities and adequately meet their needs, and to ensure the use of a meaningful equal opportunities framework in all policymaking. One suggestion was that “relevant policies should be reviewed by ethnic minorities before being introduced or implemented”. Participants raised the need for better training of staff, for example at housing offices and in job centres, and improved enforcement of equal opportunities policies. In health services they pointed out the need for longer appointment times for those who need interpreters, and in education requested suggested more BME teachers would make a difference. Participants also want more support provided for BME communities to access services – one suggestion was to employ BME outreach workers specifically to work with communities; this would be more cost-effective than allowing expensive problems to arise through lack of access to services. One group said, “having an effective BME development worker was the most important thing in improving links with public services and involvement in the wider community”. BME groups also want more resources for areas where there are large BME communities: “Twenty years after the Bristol riots nothing has happened, only an adult learning centre and plans for a sports centre.”

3.6.3 Immigration

BME groups participating in Get Heard were clear in their demand for the rhetoric around immigration to change; there was a belief that the government felt that tougher immigration policies had helped it to win the election, but that this had only served to support the racist tone of the immigration debate. There was a specific request to change immigration law so that babies born here are automatically British citizens regardless of their parents’ nationality.

3.7 Migrants’ Voices

“Refugees do not come here to be housed or fed, they come because their life is in great danger. All they need is some support and understanding, to help them rebuild their lives. The hostility and difficulty that face them in this country make them hurt, sad and suicidal. Refugees are grateful for the help and are keen to work and contribute to the society that offered them safety.”

“Need to consider the rules and regulations with extra care and sensitivity because the trauma of changing your life and migrating to another country is traumatising enough.”

Overview

The three groups of migrants, including refugees, who took part in Get Heard were based in London and Belfast. The groups talked mostly about work; support for women, children and families; and discrimination, which was a routine experience for most of them. The groups also talked about children and young people's needs (see sections 2.1 and 2.2), health (see section 2.6) and housing (see section 2.7). The group in Belfast also talked about the problems associated with the high cost of living in Northern Ireland.

3.7.1 Discrimination

Participants identified an urgent need for an end to discrimination in all parts of life: "I dread the moment I go to the post office to collect my benefit. Some people there treat me like dirt and I was verbally assaulted more than once." They feel the media is partly to blame and want to see an end to incitement to discrimination by the media. Like members of British BME communities, migrants want to see improved enforcement of anti-discrimination and equal opportunities policies, and better enforcement of equal opportunities in service provision.

3.7.2 Immigration

The migrants' groups want to see major improvements to the immigration system. They want the system to be more efficient; "the time period is disgraceful – it should not take over four years to come to a decision". This is crucial as applicants cannot work during the waiting period, and so live in extreme poverty. They also want information about citizenship to be more accessible and more widely available.

3.7.3 Migrant women

Women in Get Heard migrants' groups want more training specifically designed to empower and skill up migrant women, and more support for migrant women experiencing domestic violence, who end up trapped as they cannot access support if their violent partner refuses to help with their applications to the Home Office.

3.7.4 Work

Work was one of the most widely discussed topics in migrants' Get Heard workshops (the other was children). Discussions were very focused on the desire to work and the need to be able to work to support their families, rather than exist on benefits (see quote above). A particular issue raised was the need to recognise qualifications gained overseas, and to get financial support to transfer these qualifications or get updated skills training in the UK. "I am a civil engineer working as a carpenter." "I am a fully qualified solicitor but I am working as a cashier at a supermarket." One suggestion was to support people to take time off to learn the language. (For more about migrants' groups' views on work see section 2.4.12.)

3.8 Homeless people's voices

"Although the statistics show homelessness is dropping, it is still there, only more hidden."

Overview

Homeless people talked most about services, specialist service provision, and their feelings of stress, vulnerability and exclusion. They made it clear that they want government and society to "value homeless people's strengths and listen to homeless people". One idea was for a politician to swap places with a homeless person for a week "to experience the reality". They also talked a lot about the Vagrancy Act, and clearly felt that homeless people are specific for criminal sanctions. Whether or not this is true, it shows a perception of a punitive attitude by society towards homeless people. Two other specific requests were for a stop to credit companies targeting hostels and other temporary accommodation; and for a reduction in the amount of different proofs of identity needed, for example to open a bank account.

3.8.1 Emergency support

Emergency support was popular with homeless participants in Get Heard, such as food handouts “for people who are outside in all weather”, and night shelters.

3.8.2 Specialist support

Homeless Get Heard participants also talked a lot about specialist support. There were positive comments for a number of initiatives, most of which were run by or with local voluntary sector organisations, including day centres, outreach support, surgeries at homelessness centres, dressing clinics. “Agencies have been a lifesaver – get food, somewhere to get washed and cleaned up, get a ‘care of’ address, feel safe, get respect.” Participants want to see more of these services, and for more outreach and key workers to be available in hostels. There were requests for improvements to hostel services, including introducing a higher minimum standard of cleanliness; a stop to drinking in hostels; an end to curfews “where you are treated like a child”; and an obligation on hostel management to listen to hostel residents. Homeless women want to see more women-only hostels. Participants also talked about housing issues that related to homeless people, and want to see more supported tenancy projects around the UK; more sheltered housing options; increased flexibility in housing and move-on accommodation schemes; and for more empty properties to be brought back into use to house homeless people. Two ideas to support people moving on into permanent housing were for a national rent deposit scheme for formerly homeless people, and a ‘flat-to-go’ pack including vouchers for furniture projects and other resources.

Part 4: Regional perspectives

The issues raised at workshops in Scotland and Wales are covered in the issues sections above, but in Northern Ireland, in addition to discussions reported above, participants also raised a number of issues specific to living in poverty in Northern Ireland.

4.1 Northern Ireland

A number of issues specific to Northern Ireland were raised in the 14 workshops held there. The higher cost of living and lower level of income – due to both lower average wages and a higher dependence on benefits - was of particular concern. (See note 4.1a below). A number of other issues particular to Northern Ireland were also raised, many in reference to the history of societal conflict, multiple disadvantage and lack of economic investment in long standing areas of deprivation. Workshop participants want government to be more joined up and for government departments to work more closely together. Sure Start is welcomed in principle but needs to be based on real need, to be properly resourced as in England and to target greater numbers of children. Participants also felt other public services were underfunded in Northern Ireland; and expressed concern that the welfare state is being undermined. Finally, interface areas - boundaries between mainly disadvantaged Catholic and Protestant communities – were also mentioned as areas needing extra, specific support, especially in the context of their impact on the Neighbourhood Renewal process

Note 4.1a Northern Ireland cost of living

Households in Northern Ireland on average earn 20% less than those in the rest of the UK; although households may pay less in rates we pay significantly more for fuel, gas, electricity, clothes, groceries, transport and many other basic necessities. (Bare Necessities OFMDFM NI 2003) For example, the 2004 Household Spending Survey found fuel costs for households in NI are 143% of the average in the rest of the UK.

Part 5: Participation and Getting Heard

Overview

The people who took part in Get Heard workshops expressed a strong belief in their right to participate in decision-making, and their right to be heard – and the government’s concomitant duty to listen to them. Participants expressed an appreciation for the increasing community involvement initiatives that have been developed in recent years. A lot of this has been in the field of Neighbourhood Renewal, but participants want support for grassroots input into policy to extend into other policy areas.

Participants also made it clear that they see a difference between superficial consultation of the variety usually used to gather views or survey opinions, and real participation that involves dialogue with decision makers. They saw participatory democracy as complementing other democratic processes, as it is an additional way of holding elected governments to account: "People are not involved in decisions that affect them and so are made to feel powerless. There is little feedback from decision makers except at election time."

"Listen to the people closest to the problem. They are the ones who know the problem intimately, how it might be resolved."

"The government needs to understand the barriers of shame, stigma, poverty, fear, depression and stress that keep people from accessing services and find solutions to overcoming these barriers."

"The government should ask the public their opinions so that they know what needs to be done differently and what is working."

How participants would like participation made more meaningful

1. Increase the depth of consultation
2. Follow up with action: show that people consulted were heard by following up consultations with action: "It's really important to *deliver* when you collect people's thoughts and experiences."
3. Make participation and consultation meaningful: end 'tokenistic' participation, where "they hold consultations, but the decisions are already made", resulting in the "time and work invested by people [being] wasted"; consultation needs to be a "two-way process". Apply the same approach to pilots – a comment was made that "pilots seem doomed to succeed".
4. Mainstream participation in decision-making: extend processes such as those used in Neighbourhood Renewal to other policy making.
5. Widen participation: involve a wider range of grassroots community members – think about when and how consultations are held and stakeholder involvement is invited, and how to enable more marginalized community members to participate.
6. Increase high-level support for participation and dialogue: MPs should give more support to the All Party Parliamentary Group on Poverty, and Local Authorities should give "more acknowledgement ... that they 'work for us'".
7. Increase awareness: raise awareness amongst grassroots and community groups as to how they can influence decision-making locally, and support them to do so.

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For more information on the Get Heard project, contact these regional anti-poverty organisations:

Poverty Alliance, Scotland: 0141 353 0440

Northern Ireland Anti Poverty Network: 0845 120 3771

UK Coalition Against Poverty: 0151 709 3008

CEFET (for EAPN, England and Social Policy Task Force): 0115 911 0419

Anti Poverty Network Cymru: 01685 383 929

Oxfam UK Poverty Programme: 01865 472415



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