

SOCIAL RENEWAL ADVISORY BOARD

SUMMARY OF FEEDBACK FROM POVERTY TRUTH COMMISSIONS

JULY 2020

Introduction

This short note summarises feedback from discussions with Poverty Truth Commissions across Scotland to inform the work of the Social Renewal Advisory Board.

Background

In the Fairer Scotland Action Plan we committed to supporting new Poverty Truth Commissions so that, across Scotland, people with experience of living in poverty could speak out, tackle stigma and push for change to public services. There are now Poverty Truth Commission (PTC) groups in Edinburgh, Glasgow, North Ayrshire, Dundee and Shetland.

The PTC model brings together those with lived experience of poverty and local decision makers, forging relationships and facilitating discussions around and solutions to local problems associated with poverty. We have worked with the Poverty Truth Commissions at various points, including during our response to COVID-19, to understand the broad issues affecting those experiencing poverty in a national context.

Engagement Process

We have committed to ensuring that the work of the Social Renewal Advisory Board is informed, as much as possible, by lived experience. We posed four questions to each of the Poverty Truth Commission groups, who undertook a range of individual and group sessions with Community Commissioners. Community commissioners are individuals involved in the work of the PTCs who have experience of poverty and inequality. We received feedback from Edinburgh, Dundee, Glasgow and North Ayrshire.

We posed open, non-prescriptive questions, allowing the conversations to be driven by the commissioners, and ensuring that we heard from them on the issues that are affecting them. The sessions were undertaken and the feedback collated by the facilitators who work with the commissioners and collated into this short summary by Scottish Government analysts.

Questions

1. What are the key issues we need to address to make sure that we recover from this pandemic in a way that tackles poverty and inequality?
2. How do these issues vary depending on people's equality characteristics (including age, disability, race, sex) or the part of Scotland they live in (e.g. urban vs rural areas)?
3. Do you have suggestions for actions the Scottish Government could take to address these issues?
4. What can we learn from the response so far to COVID-19? Is there anything that has been put in place that you would like to see continue as we recover from the pandemic?

What are the key issues we need to address to make sure that we recover from this pandemic in a way that tackles poverty and inequality?

A wide variety of issues were raised.

- Job losses
- Furlough – people losing 20% of an already low wage
- Those on low income are often not in jobs where they can work from home
- There are people who fall between the gaps, not eligible for furlough
- Competition for work will be tough
- Sanctions are not the way forward for dealing with all those seeking work
- Social security benefits are insufficient
- Delays in receiving Universal Credit payments
- The cost of living has risen significantly for those in poverty as they are unable to shop around for affordable food and they need heating on for longer
- Lack of affordable houses to rent
- Increased debt
- Increased use of food banks
- Need affordable and accessible public transport
- Potential for increased educational attainment gap
- Threats to the mental health and wellbeing of people of all ages, due to loneliness and isolation, loss of independence, impact of furlough, reduced hours and unemployment, the stigma of claiming benefits and using foodbanks and managing conflict in relationships
- Inequalities in who has access to outdoor space
- Organisations providing crisis support say that one of the biggest challenges has been around co-ordination of support, and making sure that everyone in need of support can access it
- Need for better signposting, people don't know where to go to for support – particularly those who have not claimed benefits previously, are not connected to local support organisations.

How do these issues vary depending on people's equality characteristics (including age, disability, race, sex) or the part of Scotland they live in (e.g. urban compared to rural areas)?

One respondent emphasised the importance of there not being a postcode lottery: "The broad level of support available in Scotland should not be dependent on the geography of where you live."

Another geographical issue that was raised is that concentrations of deprivation or affluence can mean there is little integration between people from different socio-economic backgrounds.

There was also a view that some issues can be even more acute for people living in rural areas: "Take the urban problems and multiply them by 10 for the rural areas! Food, fuel, transportation poverty, it all feels impossible (especially for the elderly)".

In relation to equality characteristics, it was stated that evidence gathered over the past few months shows there has been an increased need for support (with food costs and energy

bills, requests for grants for phones and laptops for home schooling and for connection to reduce social isolation) among BAME communities and households with disabled adults or children in particular, often due to their existing means of coping on a low income (family relationships, community based networks) having been removed or made more difficult to access by covid and lockdown.

One respondent suggested that people newly unemployed in their 40s or older may find it particularly difficult to secure employment, due to ageism.

Disabled people have a higher than average risk of poverty, which may have been “super charged” by the pandemic, and some disabled people may have found it challenging to access information, particularly if this is something that carers would normally support them with.

Some parents, particularly lone parents (the vast majority of whom are women) will have been without their usual childcare support provided by extended family members.

Women, particularly BME women and young women, are more likely to work in a sector that has been shut down. One-third of lone parents also work in shutdown sectors which is particularly concerning for child poverty rates, as lone parents are already more likely to be living in poverty.

Where emergency food is provided, this may not always be appropriate for people from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

Migrants with no recourse to public funds may feel they have to work even when sick, whereas people who do not have the right to work may feel hopeless and helpless.

One respondent described the impact the lockdown was having on people from the Gypsy/Traveller community in Scotland, including financial and food insecurity, fuel poverty, poorer mental health and wellbeing, digital exclusion, disruption to vital support services for individuals and racism experienced in recent months.

Do you have suggestions for actions the Scottish Government could take to address these issues?

Suggestions in relation to income and poverty

- Eradication of poverty by using money we have more wisely i.e. tax, Trident, tourism
- Increasing benefits, including disability benefits
- People on Universal Credit shouldn't be penalised for carers allowance
- Reduce social security payment delays (from local authority or DWP)
- Universal Basic Income
- Leadership and commitment from employers to make sure no one is paid below the living wage or in conditions that do not provide security of income

Suggestions in relation to schools:

- School staff calling families rather than sending emails to pupils – this would allow them to better identify needs.
- Giving secondary school pupils the opportunity to pick up paper copies of learning materials, rather than everything being done digitally

- Including self-reliance and sustainability as a large part of education in schools
- Providing extra support to 'kinship kids' and young people who have fallen behind – in the form of extra 1:1 and the provision of homework clubs.
- Allowing children to repeat the school year
- Raising the school leaving age to 17, as there is concern that some young people will not go back to school because they have fallen so far behind.

Suggestions in relation to equality:

- tougher equality legislation
- encouraging discussion and debate (online and by community groups)
- ending the age restrictions on benefits and apprenticeships needs to end
- providing reduced cost activities for children, especially indoor activities in the winter, as when parents can't afford activities it isolates the children
- building a labour market that works for women.”
- monitor the statistics on poverty and its drivers among the BAME community
- grant asylum seekers the right to work – many of them wish to work as carers

Suggested actions on food and fuel include:

- Putting pressure on UK Government to increase welfare payments, so people have the power and resources to purchase food and choose what they eat.
- Increase opportunity for families to learn how to cook from scratch and how to grow own food.
- Increase use of public spaces for growing for those who have not access to gardens
- Put limits on excessive profits of energy companies.
- Pass legislation to protect the vulnerable from fuel debt e.g. preventing young families from having their energy switched off at source.
- Re-instating the 'warm home discount' for people in poverty

Suggested actions on health and social care:

- Increase the social care budget so that carers get a decent wage and the people they are caring for can have more time and contact with them
- Free access to gyms
- Increased access to reduced-rate health schemes (e.g. Active for Life)
- Online well-being training
- Using shop front in local supermarket for mental health and wellbeing support
- Increased mental health support in the community, without the need for referrals e.g. peer support, support from mental health nurses, wellbeing groups, with links between GP and community support. It is proposed that we need to invest in infrastructure to build volunteers and hubs.
- Improve mental wellbeing by building values of community and connectedness rather than materialism, from school age – with young people going into community situations where they volunteer and gain the sense of wider community (e.g. care homes, work with the community cafés and foodbanks, etc)
- Educate young people on mental health and wellbeing, giving them skills to manage their own mental health and wellbeing and support others

Suggested actions on housing

- Support housing associations to deliver 'good houses' to people experiencing poverty and also to develop well-being activities for their tenants.
- Increase social rented housing that is good quality, introducing minimum standards of fixtures and fittings and regulators that do regular inspections of properties, with powers to remove properties from the market if they do not meet good quality
- Make property ownership accessible to everyone
- Introduce rent control/caps across the board (both private and public sector)
- More rights for tenants, especially with bad neighbours

Suggested actions on transport

- Include transport costs in Universal Credit so that bus fare is covered

Suggested ways of working

- Ensure people in all neighbourhoods and localities have local, safe, welcoming community spaces where they can access the right support for them and make progress at the right pace.
- Give permission to staff at the frontline to make meaningful connections and support them to enable relational approaches, removing over-reliance on procedural and rule bound approaches.
- Enable staff from a range of services to work together to support people with all the issues that are relevant to them, removing the need to negotiate numerous and complex referral systems.
- Ensure support enables people to take control of their lives.

What can we learn from the response so far to COVID-19? Is there anything that has been put in place that you would like to see continue as we recover from the pandemic?

Respondents placed considerable value on the response that has been provided by local community groups, who "know their community better than others". They emphasised the need to build on and support this community strength, "as was part of the intention of the Democracy Matters consultation of last year". The fact that resources were provided to these groups without all of the usual "red tape" was appreciated, but concerns were raised that this may not last beyond the pandemic.

"The government either needs to step up or pay up for volunteers that they rely on to deliver services"

"Stop punishing and restricting volunteers – if you volunteer full time that's just as good as working full time"

Another prominent feature of service provision during the pandemic is the use of alternatives to face-to-face interaction – online or by telephone. Respondents highlighted both benefits and disadvantages of this. They felt that it can be helpful for people to have the choice to interact with services online, but it should not become the only option, even if this would help to reduce costs. They also highlighted that not everyone has the appropriate

skills or access to the technology, and welcomed government funding for IT training programme in communities.

Finally, the following set of core policy changes and investments were identified as being important to continue / not be lifted prematurely:

- Responses from Governments at all levels to increase the value and availability of key social security benefits – including uplifts to the adult element of Universal Credit, the Local Housing Allowance, and the expansion of funding for Scottish Welfare Fund and Council Tax Reduction Scheme.
- Measures to reassure tenants that no evictions can take place during this emergency, and responses to house rough sleepers, and ensure safe places are available for homeless households.
- The huge efforts and commitment from public, third sector and voluntary groups across all areas of the city to not only change their ways of working, but also to create new services and new partnerships to make sure food, financial help, medicines or other supports are delivered where they are needed.
- Responses from Government and Local Authorities to ensure free school meal payments can be made direct to families and continued throughout school holidays.

SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT COMMUNITIES ANALYSIS