

Speak out for change

A Giving Poverty a Voice project report

Giving Poverty a Voice began two and a half years ago with the aim of enabling those with first-hand experience of poverty, inequality and social exclusion to **participate in the democratic process, meet decision makers and get involved in their local communities.**

Using a combination of discussion groups, workshops focused on training for public speaking and expert-led presentations, the project works to **identify the issues on which people would most like to see change** and explores ways to make their voices heard.

“It’s a chance to share my experience of some issues and hear what other people have to say. We often only know about things like this when a letter drops through the door but here it’s nice to be given information that otherwise we wouldn’t have had a clue about. We’ve learned about changes, laws and reforms that we had never heard about before.”

The project has **covered different topics** from housing and government reforms to the benefits system through to the relevance of voting in elections and human rights. Being given the platform to investigate an issue over a number of months allows participants' thinking to be challenged and to evolve.

Giving Poverty a Voice has also experimented with different ways of ensuring that those living in poverty embrace **the opportunity to get their message across**, including hosting a conference to publicly launch the *Housing and Home* report and debating with politicians from both the local and international stage.

“I learned that there’s a lot more to public speaking than just picking up a microphone and saying your piece. It’s important not to put people on the defensive. It has to be a healthy, constructive discussion and not a rant!”

Over the past two and a half years *Giving Poverty a Voice* has worked alongside and collaborated with, among others, Just Fair Consortium, Old Vic New Voices and the English-Speaking Union to **tap into broader campaigns** and avenues for activism.

The project has also sought to **strengthen the links between community groups and organisations across London** who are committed to making an impact on both policy and practice affecting those living in poverty.

In November 2014 *Giving Poverty a Voice* held a conference to **look back over the project so far, highlight its achievements and address its impact on participants' lives** with a view to guiding the future direction of the project. This report summarises the key findings of that event.

“Giving Poverty a Voice has given me the chance to be a part of something that puts in the public eye the voice of people who often can’t speak for themselves and make people aware that poverty exists and not to sweep it under the carpet.”

For **more information** about this project, contact Dann Kenningham of ATD Fourth World email givingpovertyavoice@atd-uk.org visit www.givingpovertyavoice.org.uk/ or www.atd-uk.org/



giving poverty a voice

Participating in the democratic process

Last June, I spoke about food poverty at a Just Fair event. What made it special was speaking at the Houses of Parliament in front of MPs and lords.

It was a big deal. I had never done something like that before. And it took a long time to get to that point.

Four years ago I saw James and Paul speak at the *Need Not Greed* campaign launch meeting at Parliament. I said then that it was something I wanted to do.

But I couldn't have stood up and done something straight away the next day. I wasn't confident enough to stand up and speak in front of a crowd. I didn't know how to speak in public.

Giving Poverty a Voice has helped me learn how to do that and be more confident. It has helped me express myself. People don't understand what life is like for someone living in poverty; speaking out is my chance to explain what life is like for me and for other people.

I am proud of myself for speaking at the Houses of Parliament. It had an impact. It was important. I think it made a difference.

It is something I would like to do again. Now I feel I can stand up and talk to people.

Angela, November 2014

"People don't understand what life is like for someone living in poverty; speaking out is my chance to explain what life is like for me and for other people."

I am Angela, a mother of seven. I live in Hackney with two of my grown-up daughters, a son with autism and two school-age daughters.

I get money in on Mondays and Fridays. When I cash my money on a Monday, we pay the rent and, with whatever is left, we go shopping. My daughter, who acts as my carer, comes shopping with me and helps me budget. If there are things we want but can't afford, we will literally put it back on the shelf.

We go to our local market for fresh fruit and vegetables because it is the cheapest place to get them. I've been going there since I was a child and it is so vibrant. People from all walks of life and even from other boroughs go there but they are planning to close it down now to build apartments. I know housing is important but where else can we go for our fresh produce? The nearest market after that is a bus ride away. What choice will that leave us? The supermarkets are too expensive for fruit and veg.

Under the new changes to benefits, I am not affected by the Bedroom Tax but we do have to pay Council Tax and this leaves me with less money to take care of everything else. So I understand how people can turn to food banks because there's just not enough money left.

If I ever had to go to a food bank, I'd feel humiliated and embarrassed. I feel people who do go get stigmatised. But if a food bank was the only way to provide for my family then I would have no choice.

Due to my health conditions, everyday living has become more stressful and put a strain on family life. Everything is so expensive; rent, food, bills and the cost of living all go up but our benefits never do.
Angela, excerpt from Just Fair Food Poverty speech, June 2013



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Meeting decision makers

Darren Johnson of the Greater London Authority came and spoke about housing, housing lists and the lack of social housing in London.

Jean Lambert MEP came in the week of the European and local elections. She explained how she works in the European Parliament and the issues facing them. It gave me a new-found respect for MEPs and for her that she came to visit us at what must have been a busy time and still gave us free rein to ask any question we wanted.

When we released our report on housing, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing Raquel Rolnik came and she couldn't eulogise enough about the work we had done.

I have met politicians before at different events but had never really had a proper conversation with one before. It always felt like they were there to give their presentation, make their case and then leave. This felt different. Listening to them talk has given me an insight into how they make decisions and allowed me to change my arguments to fit the questions they want to ask.

The impact of meeting politicians and being able to discuss things properly with them means they get to see our point of view and what is really important to us. A real discussion and a genuine exchange of views, like the ones we have had through *Giving Poverty a Voice*, are constructive steps forward that make real change possible.

I am often the first to complain that politicians just do not understand what life is like for the rest of us but this experience has left me a lot happier to speak to politicians and to do it again.

James, November 2014

"The impact of meeting politicians and being able to discuss things properly with them means they get to see our point of view and what is really important to us."

For me, it is important that we can meet politicians and talk to them so that we can air our voices and help them change policies.

It is important for us to establish ourselves, for them to get to know us and who we are. That way, they can understand more about the meetings we have and understand what we're all about and our place in the local community.

And it is important because it helps us to get to know their roles.

Thank you to Darren Johnson for coming and talking about housing in London. Thank you to Jean Lambert for coming and talking about voting and the European elections. It helps us see that politicians are not all the same and that they work in different areas.

And thank you to the English-Speaking Union for coming and helping us to prepare to meet the politicians and speak out in public. They showed us ways to conduct ourselves, taught us to be more comfortable in speaking up and be more confident in ourselves. It all helped.

Seamus, November 2014



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Getting involved in the local community

In November last year the Old Vic New Voices theatre company came to *Giving Poverty a Voice* and ran a workshop looking at housing issues. At the workshop here, they talked about a new play they wanted to stage, called *Housed*, and said they were holding auditions for it.

I asked if I could work backstage but I never thought I would hear back from them. I was shocked when I got a phone call to go to a backstage audition a month later.

At the backstage auditions we all got to know each other and did different exercises. After it finished, we were told that we'd get a phone call if we were going to work on the show. That evening I got a phone call at home asking me to go back to the Old Vic the next day. I was shaking. I felt like I was dreaming and couldn't believe it was happening.

We did the play in July. My job was to make sure the cast all had water all the way through the play. I also had the job of keeping people quiet backstage so the audience didn't hear us all chatting. That was hard because we were all talking because we were all so excited.

It was a fantastic experience and the best thing I've ever done. We all pulled together and we all got on. I want to do it again.

What did I get out of being involved in *Housed* with Old Vic New Voices? It felt like being part of a big family and something I'm really proud of. I met a lot of great people. I enjoyed it so much that, at the next set of auditions, I will be there and going for it. It was great.

Patricia, November 2014

Long-term unemployment is not fun; I just wanted to do something and working on the Old Vic New Voices production of *Housed* was an opportunity to do something.

I had never done theatre before apart from school plays. I had never been interested and it was not something I was ever into. Then Old Vic New Voices came here to *Giving Poverty a Voice* and I saw an opportunity. I was looking for a new experience and so I signed up straight away.

I wanted to work backstage on the technical side of it all, in sound or lighting. The process was hands on and very interesting. Not only did I get a great experience out of it, I also got a new circle of peers and friends. I want to do it again.

Going through the whole process and getting so much out of it has made it easier for me to get out into my community. Before, I was pent up in my flat most of the time but this has got me going out more.

After weeks of preparation, seeing the final production from behind the spotlight was fantastic. All the crowds seemed to enjoy it; sometimes I wish they knew what a big deal it was for me and all of us who were involved in it.

Paul, November 2014

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