



Grassroots workshops contribute to UK's fight against poverty



What do people in the UK who experience poverty or social exclusion think the government should do to improve their situation? The GET HEARD project, funded by the European Commission under the Action Programme to Combat Social Exclusion, invited people on low incomes to put their views forward to inform the 2006 National Action Plan on Social Inclusion. The government listened – and took action.

Every other year, EU Member States have to prepare a National Action Plan (NAP) on Social Inclusion following wide consultations with many different groups. "Unfortunately, the two UK Plans previous to 2006 did not seek the views of people living in poverty, which was obviously not ideal as those are the very people who are most directly affected by social inclusion policies," says Clare Cochrane, Project Officer of Public Understanding of Poverty at Oxfam in the UK. "The government wanted to rectify this oversight for the 2006 report."

The project, briskly named GET HEARD, was implemented by Oxfam together with the Social

Policy Task Force (SPTF), the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN), the UK Coalition Against Poverty (UKCAP) and ATD Fourth World UK. It received funding from the European Commission, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), Oxfam and the Church of Scotland. The anti-poverty networks that took part all donated time and resources to make the project successful.

The project took place between December 2004 and May 2006 and it was the largest such project undertaken in the UK. It involved people with first-hand experience of poverty and social exclusion and gave them the opportunity to speak out about government policy on the basis of three questions: What's working? What's not working? How could things be done differently?

The community groups involved in the project held workshops using a special GET HEARD toolkit, a guide comprising of exercises and feedback sheets developed by the voluntary sector workers from the SPTF, officials from the DWP, and people with experience of poverty or social exclusion. Workshop groups held in Northern Ireland, Scotland, England and Wales gathered a wide variety of participants, including people with experience of mental ill-health; Asian women; single mothers; parents of young children and parents of teenagers; unemployed men; travellers' groups; debt support groups; domestic violence survivors' groups; asylum seekers and migrants, and many others.

■ Listening and responding

The participants of these workshops made clear that they did not feel that their voice was being heard in the national debate. Nevertheless they expressed a strong belief that they have a right to be heard and to participate in decision-making. The government made good on its promise to listen and respond: the views of people who took part in the GET HEARD project are now referred to in a number of places in the National Action Plan





with quotes illustrating the points raised in workshops.

“The project was extremely successful for a number of reasons,” says Ms Cochrane. “But most importantly, people living in poverty now see that their views have been taken on board because their concerns, ideas and solutions feature prominently in the 2006 report.”

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The topics discussed in GET HEARD workshops were not prescribed or proscribed by the GET HEARD project managers; they were selected by the participants themselves and covered areas most seriously impacting their lives. In addition to identifying gaps in policy and provisions, participants put forward a number of positive suggestions, many of which were submitted to the government.

“Another knock-on effect of the project is that policy makers are now convinced that it is important to hear about poverty from those experiencing it,” adds Ms Cochrane. “People living with poverty and social exclusion have begun to engage in the political process and will hopefully continue to do so. Their views were taken seriously and that was very empowering for them.”



■ Building on Success

Although the workshops are now over, the grassroots action has not stopped. The input provided by the voices of people with first-hand experience is still being used in a range of ways:

- The Poverty Alliance in Scotland supported people from GET HEARD workshops to give evidence to the [Scottish Parliament's Communities Committee](#).
- [The Migrants Resource Centre](#) in London, which held a number of GET HEARD workshops for different groups of migrants, published a separate report of their workshop findings to be used in advocacy and campaigns on migrants' rights.
- The Department for Work and Pensions cited the GET HEARD report in their contribution to the Europe-wide Sure Start Peer Review.
- The Social Policy Task Force is using the recommendations of the GET HEARD workshops in its ongoing conversations and work with the Department for Work and Pensions.
- Groups in Merseyside, where several workshops were held, have together written a report, [Merseyside Gets Heard: A profile of social exclusion and poverty on Merseyside](#), which they can use in their lobbying and work with local and regional governments.
- The Department for Work and Pensions is working with the Social Policy Task Force to hold a UK conference of people with experience of poverty in July 2007.

The support from the Social Protection and Inclusion Process was crucial to the success of the project, says Ms Cochrane. “Funding can be very





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hard to find for this kind of multi-stakeholder, participatory process. The financial and moral support of the EU enabled the UK government to back GET HEARD with assurance, and made the full resourcing of the project possible."

What are people saying?

- "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 (and) how it might be resolved."
- "There is a problem of poverty in Europe and we have to look across Europe to solve it."
- "Poverty is a very negative description and many people are proud. We need to remove the stigma of the 'poor' label."
- "There is too much blame if you can't cope."
- "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."

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Project information

Name of the initiative: Raising awareness in the UK about the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion amongst a wide range of actors including people most affected by poverty and exclusion

Activity: Awareness-raising project

Lead organisation: OXFAM GB

Countries: UK

Scope: National

SPSI Priority theme:

Year: 2004 – 2006

EU funding: €86,000.00

Contact:

OXFAM GB

274 Banbury Road

UK - OXFORD OX2 7DZ

Tel: +44 1865 311 311

Fax: +44 1865 312 600

E-mail: enquiries@oxfam.org.uk

Website: <http://www.oxfam.org.uk>

