About us

The Poverty Alliance is Scotland's anti-poverty network. Together with our members, we influence policy and practice, support communities to challenge poverty, provide evidence through research and build public support for the solutions to tackle poverty. Our members include grassroots community groups, academics, large national NGOs, voluntary organisations, statutory organisations, trade unions, and faith groups.

Introduction

At The Poverty Alliance, we believe that people with experience of living on a low income should help shape the solutions to poverty. Over the last decade there has been a significant increase in public bodies and third sector organisations collaborating with people with experience of living on a low income to shape policy and practice. In Edinburgh, on 18th February 2025 we brought together 19 people who had been involved in participatory processes and citizens' panels to discuss participation within anti-poverty efforts, with the aim of surfacing knowledge that can help us maximise and improve opportunities for lived experience participation, and improve practice. 18 different participatory processes with 15 organisations were represented on the day. The processes that people were involved in were varied and included long term citizen's panels working with local authorities as part of their anti-poverty strategy, like End Poverty Edinburgh, panels convened to work on specific third sector projects, groups convened of service users who work with organisatiosn to improve organisational processes and inform local advocacy, and panels feeding into national policy making processes. Participants came from across Scotland, including Glasgow, Fife, Dundee, Aberdeenshire and the Isle of Bute.

This event was organised in collaboration with Scottish Government. This briefing summarises key points from the discussions on the day. The views in this briefing are those of attendees and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Poverty Alliance or our members.

After introductions, the day opened with a short input from End Poverty Edinburgh. Fred and Caroline shared their experience of working alongside City of Edinburgh Council, and their role in holding them accountable to their anti-poverty aspirations. We moved into discussion groups exploring the impact of people's participation, what we could learn from their experiences and what learning we can take forward for the role of lived experience participation in Scotland's anti-poverty plans.

What has been the impact of your participation?

"You feel valued when you see change and you have been part of it."

Many people had been involved in processes that had led to tangible change, and this was a source of pride. One participant expressed pride in their role in the development of Social Security Scotland, citing its improvements over the DWP system - but acknowledging the need for further change. Others spoke about their involvement in advocating for the age extension of the Scottish Child Payment, about having impacts on inclusive volunteering practices, and pride of being involved in other national campaigns. People spoke about feeling proud of shaping the organisations from which they access services and of sharing their experiences to enhance the representation of their minoritised community in decision making. One attendee stated that they now provide training not just for volunteers, but also for the community, on how to support their fellow community members where they have identified that someone might be struggling. Several attendees stated that their group/organisation has been identified as having expertise and were invited to be involved in council and Scottish Government level consultations.

"We need to continue to push for change."

However, there were reflections from some group members around the frustrations of being involved in lived experience processes that feed into policy making but not seeing this translate into policy commitments or actions without transparency around what factors are considered in decision making. In spite of these frustrations, many people spoke of their involvement in lived experience processes increasing their self-esteem. Some participants also reflected a sense of pride in the missions of the organisations they were involved with and were passionate about the causes these organisations were advancing.

What can we learn from this, for all of Scotland?

"It's being part of the plan"

People felt that participatory processes in Scotland are most effective when they embrace diversity, and work to ensure inclusivity from the outset. It was strongly felt by attendees that engagement must start right at the beginning of development and be present throughout the delivery of a service or implementation of a policy (for however long that is) as well as at the evaluation stage. People strongly felt the importance of being updated about what happens as a result of their participation. Attendees understood that not everything could be implemented at once but wanted to understand how the information they had provided was used, how decisions were made and what the timelines were for change.

"The more knowledge the better."

Attendees shared how bringing local decision-makers together with those with lived experience has proven impactful at the local level, as seen with Dundee Fighting For Fairness' successful lobbying

for in-person support services. However, others expressed sometimes feeling shut down by decision makers, feeling like they are listening to see how people's experiences fit into existing agendas, instead of being open.

"The council don't listen, but [organisation] do, they aren't scared to challenge the council."

Many people who were part of third sector participatory processes spoke about how much they valued these organisations taking forward the issues surfaced by lived experience participation with local and national decision makers. People really valued being supported to use the media – with training, practice and preparation – and emphasised the importance of holding decision makers accountable. Different strategies for doing so were discussed, including legislative theatre, ensuring that commitments are communicated in writing/ on the record, and working collaboratively with other organisations.

From a practical perspective, people really valued actions taken by the organisations who supported them to remove barriers to participation. These include expenses policies that ensure people do not incur costs for their participation; support with accessing technology needed to participate online; and payment for participation where possible. People also really valued being signposted to other support services, training opportunities and opportunities to network with others, and organisations ensuring they had support in place prior to participation.

"We understand that change takes time, but we need a timeline of that change and what actions are being taken to make that change happen along the way"

In terms of what doesn't work, attendees agreed on the need to avoid being consulted without clarity on how what you are saying will be taken into account. People highlighted the need to avoid tokenistic engagement. Attendees also expressed a deep frustration about Scottish Government engagement with people with lived experience, and then 'backtracking' on policy promises. Examples participants gave of this was the promise to provide concessionary bus travel to asylum seekers, which has now been recommitted to. Attendees also spoke about charities closing down due to a lack of funding and the profound impacts of this.

What does this mean for Scotland's anti-poverty plans?

In our final discussion, we explored how participants learning could be taken forward to shape how people with experience of poverty could be involved in developing and implementing Scotland's anti-poverty plans.

Reflecting on how those with experience of poverty can be involved in policy making, many attendees were clear that co-production should be present from the beginning. Many participants felt that mechanisms for lived experience panels to hold decision makers to account should be present at every stage of service design and delivery or policy - in its planning, design, delivery and evaluation. People felt that adequate resourcing should be allocated to this in budgets to ensure that:

- People can be compensated for their time;
- Further accessibility needs are adequately considered such as covering care and travel costs; and
- Support from organisations or individuals to facilitate the lived experience processes is possible.

Many attendees reflected that transparency in decision-making is vital. For example, providing timelines of when change can be expected, managing expectations about what is possible and ensuring that actions agreed upon are taken.

Some attendees reflected that we need a clear, long-term vision of a Scotland free from poverty and achieving that will take cross-party working. There was a strong sense that there must be meaningful working relationships between lived experience participants and decision makers, both political and across the public and private sectors. This is not only to highlight realities of poverty - and the impact of policies and processes that they create and implement - but also to hold them accountable.

These working relationships were identified as being particularly important in relation to engaging with the UK Government and Parliament, as a key challenge for those living in poverty is the inadequacy of reserved social security and specifically Universal Credit. Some attendees reflected that MPs from other regions of the UK do not want to engage with the experiences of Scottish people, even when the issues being presented are felt across the nation. Some participants reflected that this has, up to now, made having meaningful connections at a UK level difficult.

There was also recognition that the growth of the far right is having a visible impact on the language being used by the media and politicians. Some participants expressed that as the 2026 Scottish Parliament election approaches, there is a need for a coordinated approach to create a narrative on poverty that is framed around compassion, dignity and justice.

To take this coordinated approach, attendees agreed that networking is key and space needs to be carved out to bring different groups together from across Scotland to create a strong voice for change. Attendees were clear on the necessity of supporting each other, particularly through information sharing between participation processes, practices and organisations. There was an acknowledgment that the intersection of experiencing poverty and slow changing processes can be draining and disempowering. Being able to foster community resilience is therefore vital to enable one another to keep hope and engage in community together. Attendees reflected on the importance of organisations who support participation being able to offer practical and emotional support, information sharing and solidarity.

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