

# housing and home

## A *Giving Poverty a Voice* project report

### Whose voice?

There are many efforts being made by local authorities and community engagement teams across London to involve local residents in decision-making structures at different levels. *Giving Poverty a Voice* aims to enhance these efforts by **creating the conditions for more marginalised individuals and groups to be heard**, from those who have never been asked for their opinion, feel frustrated that they are not listened to and are suspicious of politicians and decision makers through to those who lack the confidence to leave the house, let alone attend a public meeting. Participation is open to all.

### Project Overview

*Giving Poverty a Voice* has been run by ATD Fourth World since September 2012 and exists to support people experiencing poverty and inequality in London to **engage with and participate in their communities** and have their say on the decisions that affect their lives. Using issue-based discussion forums, capacity-building workshops and examinations of the different opportunities and avenues to participate in the democratic process, our aim is to empower and encourage people to stand up and be heard.

Over the past year, fifty-five grassroots participants have taken part in project activities focusing on **Housing and Home**. Discussion groups placed people's individual concerns about their housing situation into a broader context and also provided information from experts on government reforms, such as the 'bedroom tax'. In addition, two workshops examining strategies for connecting with and influencing decision makers were facilitated by a trainer on local democracy and exercising citizenship.

As a result, participants were supported to **give input to consultation processes** locally, contributing to the Southwark Council Community Conversation on the future of housing in the borough, speaking about the experience of poverty before MPs and Lords at the Houses of Parliament and presenting evidence to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing during her study visit to the UK.

Meetings and workshops were held at various local venues, including a children's centre, community centre, church hall and cinema, to **encourage diversity amongst participants and create links** between people from different community groups. A project outreach team also sought input from people outside of meetings by asking for their thoughts and experiences during home visits, a stand at a community Fun Day event and on the streets of Southwark.

### Initial Recommendations

A participatory process has led to three initial recommendations being made by the participants of *Giving Poverty a Voice*:

- **More good quality social housing should be available for people on state benefits and low wages in London**
- **There should be good advice, information and support to navigate changes in the system and prevent people falling into crisis**
- **Everyone should be treated with dignity and respect by service providers**

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## More good quality social housing should be available for people on benefits in London

It is a well-documented fact that **the stock of affordable social housing in London has been in decline** over the past two decades for a variety of reasons. Every local authority now has to cope with oversubscribed waiting lists and has to determine criteria for the priority allocation of what has become a scarce resource. This is a challenging environment in which the long-term good that comes from **providing secure, adequate and affordable homes for everyone**, including those who rely on state benefits or who earn a low income, can get forgotten along the way.

*Angela's experience: "It was the Friday of a bank holiday weekend and I was at home with my daughters, young granddaughter and autistic son. A group of youths that hung around on the estate smashed our front door in and started threatening us. We were so scared but there was nothing that we could do. Eventually they went away and we called the police and the housing association. However they told us that they wouldn't be able to fix the door until the following week. We had to stay there with the door broken and we didn't know if the youths would come back. We had to wait for days like that. It really affected my son's confidence. He was scared to go out for a long time afterwards. We were just left and it was so unsafe and insecure."*

**The Giving Poverty a Voice discussion groups provided a forum for people to examine the effect of this housing shortage on their daily lives.**

Parents worry that living in overcrowded or poorly maintained housing will impact upon **their children's well-being**. In the words of one mother, *"Living in cramped conditions really affects children... and it really does make a difference because I have lived in cramped conditions and I know how unhealthy it is."*

**Safety and security** were also problems that many parents were concerned about. Many participants spoke about delays in getting vital work done after property had been damaged by vandals or had fallen into disrepair. One woman was visited at home so that photographs could be taken of dangerous wiring to try and get the repairs that were desperately needed done before one of her children got injured.

Poor housing not only affects people's **physical health** but their mental health too. Living in inadequate housing also has negative consequences for family life. As another participant said, *"Families that live in cramped conditions are more likely to get social services involved in their lives."*

At a time when many private landlords are reluctant or refuse to accept tenants receiving Housing Benefit, it is vital that local authorities **build and maintain enough good quality social housing** that is available to people on low incomes. This must include people on benefits as well as those in work, as insecurity and moving around will affect their children's health, education and life chances.

*"There are long-term benefits to the community of good quality housing because children can study better, qualify and get decent jobs. They are less likely to be anti-social if there is contentment where they live."*



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## There should be good advice, information and support to navigate changes in the system and prevent people falling into crisis

The whole social security system in the UK has undergone a radical overhaul in recent years. So many **changes to benefit levels and entitlement criteria** have been introduced that even those who give advice and support have had difficulty in keeping up. These reforms have wreaked havoc with the coping strategies employed by many people living in poverty and have left an ever increasing number more vulnerable to shocks and falling into crisis. Over the same period, **local support and advice services have also found themselves under threat** from funding cuts and many now fear that evictions due to rent arrears are set to increase.

The *Giving Poverty a Voice* participants have reported ‘going round and round in circles’ trying to get accurate information about how they will be affected by the various changes.

Even if information has been sent to people, this does not necessarily mean that they fully understand the implications or that they have **the means to take action** accordingly. Others are ignoring information because they are wary of seeking advice or support for different reasons. “*You don't want to complain or disturb because they can take more away from you.*”

The **worry and stress** caused by cuts in benefits and the threat of homelessness is also having knock-on effects on people's health and well-being. One mother heard on the news that benefits for families with a lot of children were being cut and she was distraught because she understood that all of her money would stop from one day to the next and that she would not be able to feed her children or celebrate Christmas.

The **right support and advice** at the right time can

reassure people and enable them to make their own choices and avoid crisis. One participant gave an account of how knowing in advance how changes to Housing Benefit were going to affect her had enabled her to take proactive steps. “*The Housing Association were really good and went through the whole process with me step by step... Thank God I moved when I did because otherwise I would have had to pay for the four rooms. I know I'm better off.*” She felt that the quality of information and support were key to making this experience a positive one.

*Anne-Marie's experience: “Me, my partner and young daughter were evicted from my dad's flat because of rent arrears and we got put on an emergency housing list. This meant ringing a telephone number every day and being told where we could sleep that night. And the place to sleep was always for one night only. I'd call at 9am and they wouldn't get back to me until 9 or 10pm. Then we were placed in a hostel where we stayed for the next seven months. We had lost our flat in August, just before my daughter was about to start school. So when we moved to the hostel I tried to enrol her in schools in the area. The hostel told me that I shouldn't put their address on the application forms and told me that schools would not accept her if her family was in hostel accommodation. But I had no choice, I had to use it. It took six months to get my daughter enrolled in a school so from August, when we lost our flat, to March, she lost six months of her first year of school.”*

In boroughs such as Southwark, advice agencies have worked in link with the local authority and have proactive programmes in place to reach people with the right information and advice about changes to their benefits. There is good support like this available but it needs to be **widespread and adequately resourced** so that the people who are hardest to reach can benefit.



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## Everyone should be treated with dignity and respect by service providers

In this time of recession and cuts, so we are told, the whole country has had to tighten its belt. This refrain is reinforced when politicians and the media label people as ‘strivers or skivers’ and **question the motivation and entitlement of those relying on income solely from state benefits**. Add to this the stress, worry and confusion of people who fear for their safety or that they will be made homeless and it is no wonder that **the standard of service people receive from front-line staff who deliver services for local authorities and housing associations becomes crucial**.

*“Sometimes they treat you like you are nothing because you don't have anything or you are worthless.”*

**The Giving Poverty a Voice participants insisted upon the importance of treating people with dignity and respect, no matter what their circumstances or demeanour.**

*“It's expressions you hear, though... They'll say, ‘Oh, they are only benefit people, they should be grateful the government is paying for them.’ The expression I've heard a lot over the years is, ‘It's good enough for the likes of them.’ It's an attitude that prevails a lot in housing.”*

Participants shared their hope that front-line staff, themselves under pressure from increased workloads and stagnating pay, would make an effort to **better understand people's feelings and situations in order to ‘put themselves in our shoes’**. When someone in desperate need of a service feels that the people they have to deal with do not care or *“treat you like a number, a piece of cattle”* it can leave people feeling humiliated and angry. One mother said, *“You go into the office and they make you feel like you're dirt on*

*the floor.”* In the words of another participant, *“They make you feel bad, unworthy and ashamed just for living.”*

There are some situations in which the way people are treated is completely unacceptable and tantamount to discrimination. In these instances, **recourse to a service standards charter**, similar to the patient's charter used in the NHS, would be a useful tool to remind all parties of expectations on how services should be delivered and received. Such a charter should be developed together with both staff and service users, with a particular effort to ensure the input of people who feel they have been mistreated.

*Moraene's experience: “But if somebody straight away says, ‘Sit down. How can I help? What can we do?’ and at the end of it says, ‘I don't think we can do anything but I will look into it, get back to you and I'm sorry if we can't do anything,’ then you walk away feeling like they have listened. That's when you feel it has been worth your while and they haven't assumed that you are not worth listening to.”*

Participants also shared their reflections on how small changes, such as being polite and writing down what people say, could make a big difference. *“There was real listening and you knew the points you made were taken on board... I felt a level of value and respect for that and it affected how I dealt with her.”* *“Being treated with respect means talking properly to you, and making sure you understand”* Front-line staff could easily be **supported through training** to be much more effective in their roles in this way.



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