

East Midlands' voices on poverty ... activity to mark 2010 as the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion

All over Europe activities have been going on to mark 2010 as the Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion. As the economic crisis hits it is a good time to take a hard look at these issues. In the East Midlands a project called **All in One**, developed by our region's innovative Social Inclusion Policy Forum, which involves people from grassroots, practitioners and decision makers, did just that.

In October, the **Poverty Convention** was held in the evocative historic setting of The Workhouse. 180 people got together to share their experience of, and views on, poverty and social exclusion in the East Midlands.



The Workhouse at Southwell

All in One participants contributed with passion and knowledge to achieving the aims of the year:

- to raise awareness of poverty,
- increase grassroots participation,
- and leave a lasting legacy.

In this region we also set out to:

- challenge damaging myths and stereotypes,
- inform policy makers,
- and highlight community activity.

Central to the project was promoting the voice of experience of people from poor communities.

Poverty Convention

Local Voices on Poverty

Nine geographical areas, hotspots for financial and social exclusion, were the focus for local activities; **Rural and coastal Lincolnshire, Lincoln, The Peak District, Bolsover, Chesterfield, Mansfield, North Northamptonshire, Leicester, and Nottingham.**

People in these areas met to discuss aspects of poverty in their community, their own experience, what was helping, and what needed changing.

Listening events, held with Community Links, looked at Working Age poverty issues in Bolsover, High Peak and Chesterfield.

From these activities, people brought powerful contributions to the Poverty Convention about critical problems with recent changes to disability benefits' assessments, hundreds of families relying on charities for food parcels, in-work poverty, no adequate local training or employment, local organising to counter loan sharks, rural isolation and deprivation and what's needed to support communities to help themselves.

Raising Awareness using film

At the Poverty Convention, groups involved in the project showed films they'd made. In **Stand Up, Speak Out**, Leicester children explored hopes for their future in a workshop filmed by the team at the Wave young person's newspaper. Experiences of hardship and the lifeline of local community action are portrayed in Elmtown and Cresswell's **No Place for Poverty**, and in High Peak's **Great Goal, Tackling Rural Poverty** and **Teenage Kicks**. Lincoln residents talk of their despair and frustration with lives limited by poverty and lack of opportunity in **Life on St. Giles**. From Nottingham, we learnt from the experience of the most vulnerable via the Arimathea Trust's film made with asylum seekers and Inspire's film involving their members with learning disabilities. Detail of local activities, people's views, research, campaigning and lobbying is posted on the project blog

People with first hand experience of living on very low incomes and tackling complex barriers to inclusion in our society contributed their perspectives throughout the project. The Convention, held in the historic setting of Southwell Workhouse, was an opportunity for a wider audience to hear their experience and discuss actions for the way forward in tackling social exclusion and poverty.

Jean Lambert MEP opened the event, with speakers from the Equality Trust, East Midlands Advice, the Social Inclusion Policy Forum, European Anti Poverty Network - England, Community Alliance and REDP, performances from Inspire Nottingham and the Workhouse story-tellers, and information about activities to increase Financial and Digital Inclusion.

Main messages from the Convention next page....

V. spoke of having his benefits stopped without warning or consultation and the difficulty of being unable to speak to staff about his problems. The knock on affect of having benefits stopped affected the whole family badly and caused serious hardship and stress. Chesterfield

Poverty Convention – main messages

What is 21st century poverty, how can we measure it and what works in trying to alleviate it?

- Inequality and Isolation are the main new aspects, cutting people off, destroying community co-operation and confidence a vicious circle of despair
- Employment can help but it is the *result* of a process of overcoming all barriers, not a magic bullet. While there are few jobs it can be a false hope.
- Empowerment is the key to lifting people out of poverty and you can't deliver empowerment you have to assist people to develop it themselves

What are the myths and stereotypes that surround people experiencing poverty and exclusion and how can they be challenged?

- Poverty ≠ Unemployment, most of the poor are working
- The undeserving poor: very few (less than 10%?) of those thought undeserving really are, they are just *un-served* by mainstream routes out of poverty.
- It's all the fault of the poor!

What are the risks and threats currently facing people already experiencing poverty and exclusion?

- Further exclusion and isolation, increased risk of homelessness and alienation,
- We will become Scapegoats as causes of the problems we are victims of
- Deepening inequality and creation of an under-class

What changes would we like to see happen and what role can the East Midlands play in influencing the future?

- Need a campaign to raise awareness and develop a clear demand
- Support communities to develop and deliver their own voice in saying what the reality is and what works in countering poverty
- Build a channel for those at the very bottom to shape policy and programmes defined at the very top

The system demotivates people: all we want is a genuine opportunity to get a job. We want to work, but the system treats us as work-shy criminals, puts us into meaningless schemes and just adds to our frustration of not being able to get a job. Bolsover

The minimum wage is too low, you cannot live off it. My son is working 20 hours a week. He would love to have a fulltime job but he has to be constantly available and they call him at the most ridiculous hours, so he can't find another part time job. Mansfield

Inequality & Isolation

A significant number of those participating thought the key component of modern Poverty was inequality. This embraced both the ideas of the size of the gap between the richest and the poorest, and inequality of access that derives from that gap. Some commentators have argued that high levels of inequality make no material difference to the problems of the poorest. However many feel that that the size of the gap "stretches" social norms further away from poorer people, including service design. This leads to problems of access to services by those-that-need-them-most and isolation of the poorest from wider society. This applies to all sorts of "normal" facilities, for example financial and health services. It also militates to a poverty of opportunity and the driving down of ambition, the "poverty of ideas" that many spoke about.

Centrality of Employment

Whilst all shared the view that reasonably paid employment would mark a move beyond poverty, it is never the whole story. Usually there are several obstacles that need overcoming even before access to employment is possible. In most cases there are serious issues other than skills and suitability for employment. Furthermore employment is not always a solution, most of the poor are working and a poor job brings a further set of problems.

Finally, in a period when unemployment seems set to rise and new jobs created at a slower rate than expected, there are not enough jobs to support a work solution. Financial incentives to move towards work without compromising benefit are welcomed, filling in the poverty trap, providing the overall level of benefit isn't driven down.



Members of Inspire Nottingham (below) gave a striking performance at the **Poverty Convention** to highlight poverty of finance, opportunity, aspiration, & autonomy experienced by people with a learning disability.

Empowerment

"You can't lift people out of poverty but you can help them climb out of it by collective involvement...".
"It's supporting people to do what they think they need – not doing things to them...".
Poverty Convention

This is the most significant issue for All-In-One participants. Help the excluded to do things, not do things **to** them! In other words: supporting poor or excluded communities to themselves address their problems is much more effective than introducing schemes (or compulsions) run by external agencies. The efficacy of Empowerment work is its capacity to:

- engage those (rightly?) sceptical of external agencies' understanding of their condition;
- provide direct address to their perceived *community* problems of exclusion, not just as a means to *individual* "employment" ends;
- place design, control and planning within the community itself and build co-operation, informal organising skills and confidence (together sometimes called *Local Social Capital*) the lack of which is often a fundamental obstacle to inclusion and block any progress towards employment.

Damaging Myths

The Undeserving Poor

This is a key issue, especially for those that met in the Poverty Convention at the Southwell Workhouse where over 60% made the comment. The idea that poverty was a choice or the fault of those in Poverty was held as ridiculous, as untenable by anyone with even passing experience of the problems. In particular, that there was a vast cohort of unemployed people that were voluntarily so, and that they could be coerced into employment, was factually unfounded.

Poverty ≠ Unemployed

Nearly every comment linked to the undeserving poor made this point: the majority of the poor are in work! Employment may be (a) key, but it is not central. Adequate minimum income for those who work and who cannot is needed.

"It's the poor wot takes the blame..."

Closely linked to the idea of "undeserving" is the idea of typifying the poor as "wasters and scroungers". Every false Incapacity claim gets headlines in certain Newspapers. *Hundreds* of wrongly denied Incapacity claims receive none!

It's going to get worse...

Everyone felt the main risk was that Poverty was likely to get worse, both in material and cultural terms. Provision that worked to counter exclusion and isolation was diminishing just as it was needed more in the current financial situation. Accompanying this was likely to be an offensive blaming the poor and isolating them even more from the rest of society.

What to do??.....

Campaign to raise awareness

The Convention widely thought that there should an initiative to carry on the work started in EY2010 to raise awareness of the realities of Poverty and counter dangerous stereotypes. Influencing media and involving wider groups in society could – even without any material impact – lessen the effects of isolation and demoralisation of Poverty. In addition a clear message and a clear set of proposals should be developed around the notions of minimum income, the ability to reform benefits to avoid the poverty trap, and closing inequality... However...

...Support for Community Initiatives...

...was thought (almost unanimously) to be the key. "The excluded are experts on their own condition" and should be supported to shape, design or deliver their own solutions. Re-orienting support services to community control while at the same time developing communities to have their voice heard. This will involve two things, developing belief and systems in excluded communities and at the same time putting in place highly visible mechanisms that show policy does change in response to what people at the bottom say.

The Poverty Convention recognised that the Big Society notion was relevant here but (to put it politely) many remained to be convinced that any real activity or real positive change would accompany the discussion of the term.





As a result of All in One....

Increased networking and organising within and between communities involved in the project has brought about campaigning and lobbying:

Locally – becoming involved with local authority planning of cuts to services, building relationships with MPs and councillors, promoting community activity

Nationally – organising to improve work capability assessments, contributing to the UK government’s Social Inclusion Advisory Group work on Welfare Reform, the Poverty Review, the Work Programme, and pushing for meaningful targets to decrease poverty

In Europe – connecting with MEPs and the European Anti Poverty Network for work on the EU2020 Strategy, adequate minimum income standards, and resources for inclusion work

Through talking about the reality of poverty, using film, social media, local TV, radio and the press, local groups are raising awareness and understanding of the reality of 21st century poverty to counter negative stereotyping of the poor.

There is more sharing of successful ideas to combat the problems of poverty, support people through difficult times to improve their lives and their neighbourhood. Going forward, the project has started an East Midlands Anti Poverty Network and an online platform for continuing to share ideas to combat poverty at www.allinone-em.org.uk

The situation of asylum seekers whose first application has been rejected is inhumane. They are isolated from society, not entitled to anything and have nowhere to live until the launch of the appeal application. Nottingham

We can't talk about the poor without talking about the rich! We should shrink the gap between rich and poor - and stop making the poor and vulnerable pay for the crisis! Poverty Convention

Using social media to spread awareness

Aware that there was little EY2010 content across social media, the All in One project decided in August to start using digital media to raise the profile of the Poverty Convention, as a focus for live debate. Using Twitter before and during the Convention and to lead people to the project blog, we were helped by some well respected digital commentators. We even had one retweet from the US and, perhaps most satisfyingly, one of the young people involved in creating a video for us was able to follow events on the day from her 6th Form College.

A week after the convention, the blog site we'd created to record events leading up to and at the Poverty Convention had received some 10,000 site visits and by the end of November that number had increased to 12,750. The blog is now being re-vamped by Emma of ZeroCredit to hold a record of the project and create a new Community platform enabling continued sharing of news, views and ideas on combating poverty. Emma reports "the Community blog is attracting traffic like crazy already with more than 2,000 visits in the last few days!!"

To connect with All in One contact Clare Caves at CEFET O115 9110455 clare@cefet.org.uk or visit the blog at www.allinone-em.org.uk

Partners and funders

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