

Lived Experience Involvement in Economic Modelling Process.

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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.

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Disclaimer

The views in this report are those of the researchers and opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the Poverty Alliance, our collaborative partnership or our members.

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Overview:

Poverty Alliance have supported the lived experience involvement in the micro and macroeconomic modelling as part of a collaborative project undertaken with the Policy Evaluation Research Unit at Manchester Metropolitan University and the Fraser of Allander Institute at The University of Strathclyde.

This project has provided a unique opportunity to build new understandings of the issues of poverty and the policies required to tackle and alleviate poverty. This small-scale exploration with families provided rich insights and data for exploring and contributing to the macro (large societal scale) and micro modelling (household level). This work builds on other work within Scotland recognizing and embedding the insights and realities of people living in poverty into evidence and policy processes.

Methodology:

This approach applied a methodology of postal questionnaires and focus groups discussion with families from across Scotland to explore and understand different perceptions, experiences, and behavioral responses to different social security and labour market interventions.

To facilitate the incorporation of 'lived experience' within this project, research tools of questionnaires and an extended online focus group were used to draw out and understand the perceptions and potential behavioural responses to different modelling areas such as social security and labour market interventions. Alongside this, these tools also gathered wider data on the experiences of child poverty and the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic in Scotland. An approach of 'vignettes' of family situations were used to explore participants views and reflections within both survey and focus

group. Vignettes are hypothetical short stories which can be useful for exploring sensitive and complex areas and prompt wider reflection. These explored issues such as

- Appropriate working hours in differing household, circumstances.
- Potential interventions such as incentives to work / changes to household circumstances.
- Wider micro and macro impacts on households and
- Recent pandemic impacts on households.

Of 130 surveys distributed we received 35 returns. The breakdown of the demographic information from households indicated were 15 lone parent households of which 3 of those households indicated they had three or more children and 3 households also indicated they were mothers under 25. 5 households indicated that they were minority ethnic household. 7 households indicated that either a parent or child was disabled in the household. One household indicated that they were a household providing kinship care and a second household indicated they had a child under one., 1 household, described them self as a household with 3 or more children. Other demographic responses were not given.

This was then followed by a semi- structured online focus discussion in which survey participants and others identified through promotion were brought together to have for a discussion on the vignettes and related policy choices and issues. Within the 8 focus group participants , there was 7 lone parent households of which 4 also identified as having a parent or child with a disability and one coupled household and 4 black and minority ethnic minorities households .



COVID 19 Pandemic

The experience of poverty had intensified since the COVID 19 pandemic. Households within this study reported that there were increasing pressure of families in terms of income adequacy and increasing precariousness in daily life. Pressures included the loss of income due to the withdrawal of the Universal Credit Uplift, rising fuel prices as well as hidden costs for families with disabilities.

“My husband lost his job , before pandemic he had only small job when the pandemic started he was asked to leave, we lost all of our income have 3 kids...At the moment the main problem of employability is the pandemic which doesn't help people to find a job” .

Coupled Household with three children

Evidence within both the focus group and the survey indicated increasing precarity in families' lives, for both households in employment and those who were not in paid work. Fluctuations in income was discussed consistently across the study as bringing stress and anxiety to households and creating pressure points within managing expected and unexpected household costs.

The role of social security within society was recognized as being more even critical to families during this time of crisis. Several research participants had been affected directly by job losses or reductions in hours during the pandemic which had pulled them deeper into poverty.

Social Security

The importance of adequate social security was emphasized consistently by lived experience participants and the need for a social security system that recognized household needs and circumstances for

those not able to access employment. Households with long term conditions or disabilities raised many hidden costs and barriers for example supporting children with engagement with schooling due to complexities of behavioral conditions.

Alongside this was discussion on the role and value attributed to caring more generally. There was perception there was a lack of recognition within society and in the implementation of social security of the value of the caring responsibilities many households were doing and the inadequate levels of income within the household as result of this.

Work

Broadly across the lived experience components of this study, there was a recognition of the importance of employment as an exit route from poverty. Participants discussed that paid employment provided benefits to households in terms of positive impacts on household wellbeing as well as potential financial advantages such as greater income coming into the household.

These advantages were recognised to be only present when other structural challenges and barriers to sustainable employment had been removed. Households reflected the need to tackle barriers such as support to access the labour market ,precarious work, job availability and the wider economic impacts of the pandemic in terms of job loss across many sectors.

“As a single father under 35, who has my two children on weekends, I was not given a full housing allowance, on universal credit – I was expected to share a property which is not feasible when looking after young children overnight, therefore I had to make the difference in rent myself. Working overtime meant a significant increase in council tax which uses more than the income earned. No

pro rate payment of child benefit if not primary carer”.

Single Parent with three children

Childcare

For all household types, availability of accessible and affordable childcare was central to sustaining employment, education, or training. Experiences of provision included issues around access to places in preferred childcare providers as well as the high costs many experienced in practice. Greater investment in this area was central for families to achieve outcomes within the household such as engaging in training.

Recognising the caring requirements faced, households raised that sustained employment required flexibility to meet their needs. Barriers were discussed around the availability of employment within localities that offered hours that could accommodate caring responsibilities. Unseen challenges whilst in employment which impacted the sustainability of employment i.e. emergency caring due to childhood illness, attitudes of employers and, working conditions in practice. These added to other structural issues such as the availability of childcare.

Transition points

Transition points were perceived by lived experience participants to be challenging, for example moving into employment presented additional costs and, in some cases, drops in incomes due to loss of entitlements. Costs such as transportation, council tax, and childcare costs posed risks to transition becoming a sustained and viable outcome.

“That’s what’s putting a lot of people off going back to work because you have to pay the childcare first, before they’ve even got any wages or anything”

Focus group respondent single parent and volunteer and carer for children

More broadly the relationship between social security and employment was highlighted for families that had undergone a separation. For example, the duality of costs due to separate housing costs. Experiences of obtaining child maintenance and adequacy of income from social security were thought to be insufficiently considered within the social security system.

About the Project

This briefing outlines findings from the lived experience component of a collaborative modelling project between Poverty Alliance, the Policy Evaluation Research Unit at Manchester Metropolitan University and the Fraser of Allander Institute at The University of Strathclyde.