

Mutual Mentoring Scheme 2015

Evaluation

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[Group Feedback Session June 2015]

Summary of Key Findings

Value of Participation

- Opportunity of direct one-on-one connection between an individual in poverty and a key decision maker
- A chance to change the way decisions are made.

Individual learning

- Gained a deeper understanding of the lived experience of poverty
- Anyone can fall into poverty at any time
- Advice on a more inclusive approach to decision making
- A greater appreciation of the strains placed on decision makers
- A need for deeper and broader involvement of people in poverty

Challenges and Learning

- Organisation of meetings
- Stress and Time Management
- Meeting Content
- Telling your story is demanding and everyone needs support
- Being a mutual mentor is not always comfortable
- Opportunity and challenge of involving the wider staff team

Recommendations

- Meetings scheduled in advance
- Mid-term review to provide participants with group support
- Facilitator given prominent role to organise and ensure smooth running of partnerships
- Guidance given to new participants
- Serious thought and consideration given to selection of candidates
- Involvement of wider team in a thoughtful way.

Overview

Introduction

The Mutual Mentoring Scheme was a joint project led by the Poverty Leadership Panel of Glasgow City Council, and Faith in Community Scotland, of which the Poverty Truth Commission is a part. The project ran from January until June 2015 and matched eight individuals, who have direct experience of poverty, with eight people who are in important positions of power.

At an introductory group session in January, pairs were created and agreed to meet at least once a month for the subsequent months, until a final group review session in June brought the project to a close.

This report aims to evaluate the success of this scheme, highlighting key learning for any similar future projects. This evaluation draws together reflections from 15 of the 16 participants, gathered through a group feedback session, interviews and email correspondence.

Purpose

The work of both the Poverty Truth Commission and the Poverty Leadership Panel is grounded in the belief that, in order to tackle poverty seriously, individuals from low income communities must be involved in the decision making process. These individuals are experts on their situation and need to have their stories and opinions heard by decision makers.

The Mutual Mentoring Scheme (MMS) attempted to address this by seeking to narrow the gap between those who make decisions and individuals from communities most affected by those decisions. Relationship building is integral to the MMS process. It offers the opportunity for these two groups to meet one-on-one on a regular and informal basis to foster a better mutual understanding.

Participants

The eight participants with direct experience of poverty were identified and contacted by the Poverty Truth Commission and through the Wee Panel. These included commissioners, past and present, combined with members of the Wee Panel. The Commission periodically checked in with these eight to monitor progress and help address any barriers to participation.

The other eight participants were identified by Anne Marie Kite and Lorna Wilson of the Wheatley Group, with initial help from Louise Falconer of Glasgow City Council, and were drawn from Loretto Housing Association, Glasgow Housing Association, Glasgow City Council and the UK Department for Work and Pensions.

Meetings

From the beginning of the process participants were encouraged to think carefully about where best to meet. A variety of locations was encouraged, such as individual places of work and volunteering, community centres and their local neighbourhood. The rationale behind this was to help each pair gain a flavour of where decisions are made and general life in those communities most affected by them.

Based on the learning from a previous mentoring scheme it ran with the Scottish Government, the Poverty Truth Commission decided to keep the meeting content and purpose open to interpretation and, beyond the broad purpose of the programme, there were no stated specific topics for the discussions.

Findings

The following information was recorded at the group feedback session, combined with interviews or email correspondence with five of the six participants who were unable to attend.

Value to Participants

There was a universal response from both sets of participants that the Mutual Mentoring Scheme (MMS) was worthwhile. Specific reasons for certain individuals included the opportunity to meet someone they might not have met, it was of benefit to their personal development, and gave them renewed confidence to look for a job. In addition, several pairs developed strong connections with their partner and any disagreements which did present themselves were resolved through a respectful dialogue.

Further to this, several participants said this will change, or has already changed, the way they work. These individuals stated they were more inclined to broaden and deepen the level of coproduction with communities, and three pairs had indicated they would continue to meet and discuss poverty.

The overarching collective reason given, however, for the value of the MMS was the opportunity of a direct one-on-one connection between an individual with direct experience of poverty and a key decision maker. Participants not only viewed this as being the correct path forward for tackling poverty, but also personally learned a substantial amount from the process.

Individual Learning

As intended, many of those in important positions of power articulated that they had **gained a deeper knowledge of the lived experience of poverty** through this project. This understanding included issues such as whether to eat or not, to start saving for Christmas in January, whether to travel, as well as difficulties in finding employment.

Decision makers also learnt that **anyone can fall into poverty at any stage** of their lives and **received advice on a range of practical matters** such as community involvement and new service delivery proposals.

In addition, many participants with direct experience of poverty developed **a greater appreciation of the stresses and strains placed on individuals in central positions of power**. There was collective agreement that **closer communication with individuals and communities at various stages of the decision making process is required**.

Challenges and Collective Learning

Various challenges were identified by participants at different stages and, through their articulation, have generated pieces of collective learning as outlined below.

It's very selfless what we do...because we continually give a wee part of ourself

Many pairs believed the **organisation of meetings** to have been an issue. This was caused by several practical challenges, such as competing diary pressures and a reliance on email communication. At its worst, one partnership only managed to meet once throughout the time period. In another example, one individual felt the onus was upon them to be the one chasing up their partner to make sure meetings were arranged.

A related but separate issue to this is **stress and time management**. Working in a high profile and demanding job places many time pressures on individuals. People living in poverty, whilst in a very different situation, also

often live busy and stressful lives. As well as working, many have volunteer commitments and childcare issues, are involved in their local community, as well as actively seeking work and adhering to stringent claimant commitment processes. This is often played out against the backdrop of making tough budgetary choices with few options.

The actual **content of the meetings** was also an issue for individuals at various points. In a few pairs there was an initial uncertainty over what exactly was going to be discussed and what level of detail those conversations should reach. Several participants expressed a fear at the start of the process of not wishing to appear nose-y, with one regarding home visits as too intrusive. On the reverse side, one participant with experience of poverty felt the conversations were largely restricted to the sphere of work which their partner was engaged in, and would have preferred a wider discussion of poverty in order to generate a better understanding of it.

It was recognised across the board that asking individuals to **share their life story can be a demanding process**. It can take a lot out of the individual and even if you have shared it many times, can still affect you. As one participant said it is a selfless act and should never be taken for granted by organisations.

As the above point underlines, being a mutual mentor is **not always a comfortable** experience. The subject matter is very serious and there can at times be a collective sense of powerlessness. However, as one participant observed, the point of the Mutual Mentoring Scheme is not to make people feel comfortable. The point is to challenge people and question attitudes to poverty. Promoting long term cultural change to the approach of decision making on poverty requires individuals at times to question certain pre-existing ideas.

'It should make...you uncomfortable about the entire situation and should make you want to challenge your perceptions of what poverty is'

At least three individuals **met with colleagues of their partner** and this was beneficial for both participants. It was felt by participants with direct experience of poverty to reinforce their idea that their thoughts and ideas were being taken seriously by their partner and were contributing to organisational culture change. For their partners, this was a good opportunity to widen the learning from the project across their team. After one meeting with senior managers, for example, one participant said they were 'inundated' with emails of thanks and interest.

However, whilst the reaction was positive, this participant had a worrying sense that their partner was 'on display' for their wider team.

Recommendations

The above challenges were raised during feedback sessions. Participants also forwarded various solutions to these challenges, as well as recommendations for ways the project could be enhanced. For the purposes of this report these have been grouped into three categories: organisation, participant support and candidate selection

Organisation

To overcome issues of meetings not being arranged, and to take the pressure of individuals, one solution would be to **schedule all the meetings** at the start of the process. In addition, **a mid-term review** should be carried out. This would allow participants the chance to share any challenges they are facing and the opportunity to learn from other participants. This work would be **coordinated by a facilitator** who would ensure the overall smooth running of the project, acting as a point of mediation for any

challenges presented by the pairings. In addition, this individual could provide support to a participant who is having particular difficulty with the process.

Participant Support

Participants welcomed the fact the Mutual Mentoring Scheme was not too prescriptive as regards content. However, **participants should be given guidance** regarding what is fully expected of them. This could be in written form, or through conversations with previous participants. This could take the form of ground rules for each pairing, such as best methods of communication.

It should be clear to everyone from the outset that this is not about personal development of an individual living in poverty. They may well benefit from a wider understanding of decision making and any confidence gained from having their opinions heard is, of course, a much welcomed consequence. However, this is about their partner learning from their knowledge through a conversation between two equal experts on poverty, not helping them to overcome any immediate challenges.

Participant Selection

The process for selecting participants was highlighted as being of crucial importance by numerous individuals. This was a complex and interesting discussion during the group feedback session as participants identified that the futility of targeting individuals who are already fully on board, whilst also recognising the difficulty of pairing an individual with experience of poverty with someone with ingrained negative attitudes. Participants were aware that a range of attitudes to poverty existed within their organisations.

Several individuals also stated that it was also crucial to **choose the right enabler** within an organisation: those who in their position and remit have the ability to initiate a widespread cultural change. Participants who championed this stated that this not necessarily mean the highest position

hierarchically in an organisation. A process of careful selection, therefore, is required from organisations to choose the best person.

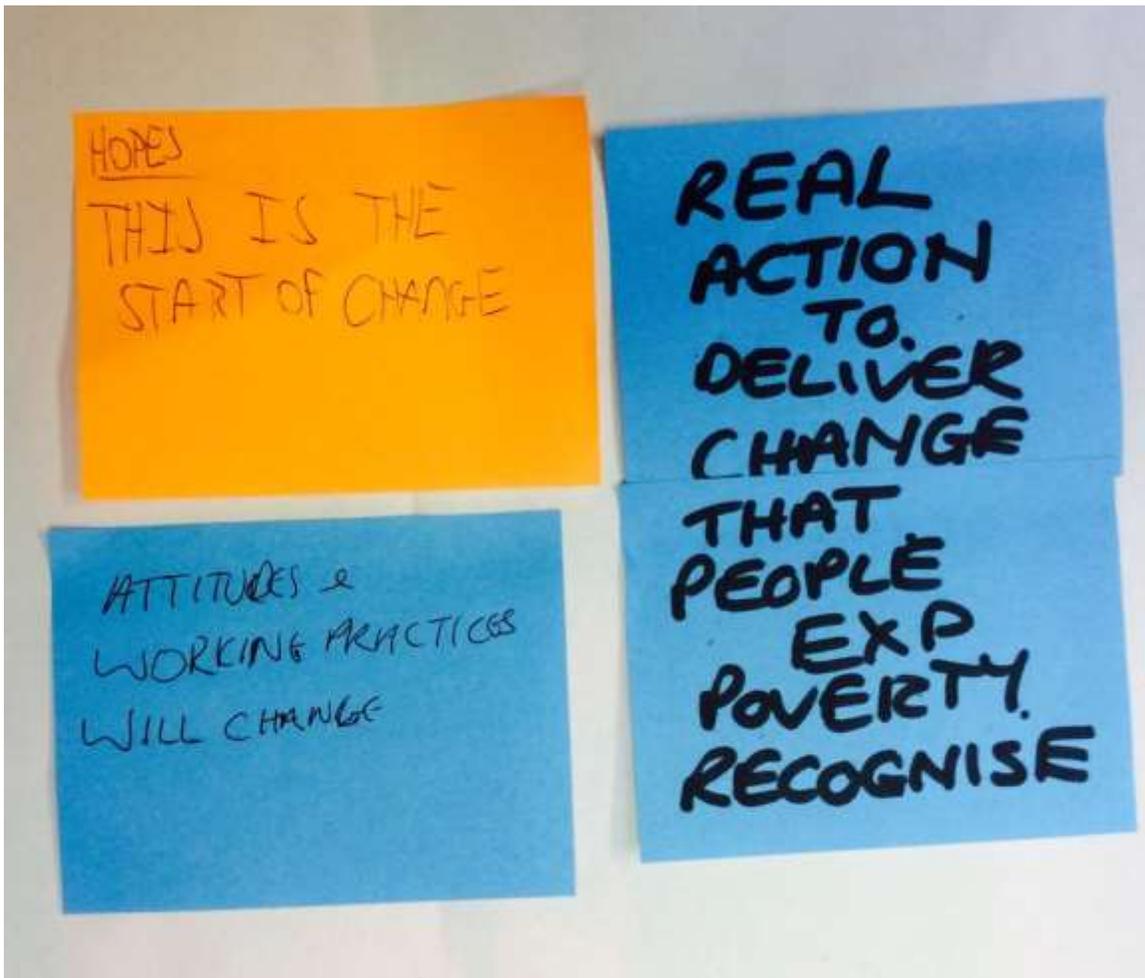
In addition, one participant questioned the selection of those with direct experience of poverty. The eight who participated in this scheme were, after all, already heavily involved in anti-poverty work through either the Poverty Truth Commission or the Poverty Leadership Panel. It was felt, at least for that person's pair, that the learning they gained was more due to having been partnered with an experienced activist, rather than with someone with direct experience of poverty.

However, it was also recognised that telling an experience of poverty can be a draining process, and individuals must have a full understanding beforehand of all this entails. As such, the onus is on whichever organisation is selecting individuals with experience of poverty, to ensure the person is confident and capable enough of telling their story and ensure this is the central focus of the conversations.

Finally, the involvement of an individual's colleagues in order to share learning was recommended. However, as stated above, telling your story can be a straining process and as such concern for their welfare must be paramount.

Concluding Remarks

Overall, participants were very keen to see the Mutual Mentoring Scheme rolled out further across the Poverty Leadership Panel and its supporting organisations. Although challenges do exist at various levels, there is clear learning from this pilot as to how to overcome, or at least mitigate, these. The opportunity of developing a better mutual understanding of life in poverty and how decisions are made was seen as of being of critical importance within the wider strategy of greater participation to reduce poverty within Glasgow.



[Hopes for the Mutual Mentoring Scheme expressed at initial group meeting]

Participant Organisations

Poverty Truth Commission

The Poverty Truth Commission brings together some of Scotland's key decision makers with those living at the sharp end of poverty. The Commission works collectively towards overcoming poverty in Scotland; ensuring that those affected by decisions are central to decision-making. The Commission believes poverty will only be truly addressed when those who experience it first-hand are at the heart of the process.

Poverty Leadership Panel

The Poverty Leadership Panel's vision is that poverty is made a thing of the past. The Panel is made up of [public, private and third sector organisations](#), as well as representatives from communities living in poverty, and wants everyone across Glasgow to contribute to significantly reducing poverty and exclusion over the next decade, by acting now.

The Wheatley Group

Wheatley Group is Scotland's leading housing, care and community regeneration group. The Group comprises five social landlords, a care organisation and two commercial subsidiaries. It spans 15 local authority areas across Central Scotland, providing homes and services to over 120,000 people. Wheatley Group is committed to helping people improve their lives. It invests in its homes and neighbourhoods, some of which are the most deprived in the UK. The Group works hard to create as many opportunities as possible for people in its communities to reach their full potential