

Jubilee+ Voices Bristol Short Report

Jubilee+ Voices, an advisory group made up of people living on the lowest incomes, held its fifth session in Bristol in late November 2023. The purpose of the group was to hear about people's experiences of church-based social action and regular church activities, so that we can listen, learn and share lessons with churches across the UK.

Nine people from Bristol and Bath joined us for the session, describing some of their experiences with church and social action projects. They gave suggestions for improvements and ideas of opportunities for the future. Thank you to all who took part.

What the participants taught us

They showed us that inclusion and long term exclusion of people can have a material effect on their wellbeing, mental health, and family life. They want to be active in taking responsibility for their own lives and improving things for others e.g. children, families, young people, those seeking asylum.

1. Participants want to work and develop new skills

The opportunity to work, re-train, and access continuing education courses were flagged as important ways for people to improve their situation. But challenges such as a criminal record, being trafficked, uncertain asylum status and lack of permission to work, stop people making positive changes in their lives.

Insights: Find out what people want to do to take positive action, and help them to challenge barriers for themselves and others in similar situations.

Insight for Jubilee+: Develop or share some ideas for how church can help with this e.g. if someone does not have the right to work, what can they do in the meantime with accessing training, volunteering, skills and developing community?

2. The shock of low income and poverty

People find themselves in harrowing situations often due to events beyond their control - war, change of government, being trafficked, grappling with grief, loss of community and family. Extreme isolation weakens bonds that are important for withstanding the shocks of a cost of living crisis, but the church and social action groups - especially those that are open 'out of hours' - can make a big difference.

Insights: Consider opening the church for a regular community session for voices or men's and women's groups, perhaps in the evening. Replicating Voices could be key in helping with this.

3. Walk in our shoes

One person commented: 'Leaders can only guess what it's like [to live on a low income] so they should be able to live at least a week with a low income person.' Others said 'don't judge us' and 'get therapy yourself before you judge me'. People told us that they want others to understand the reality of their lives. They loved the sense of belonging in a church where they were welcomed with warmth.

Insight: Could you spend a week with someone, to get a better understanding of the reality of living with poverty? Could you do a Lent challenge, living on a weekly amount equivalent to income support, donating the rest of your income to a local project or church hardship fund?

Answering our questions

a) Understanding the reality of living on a low income

'Live our life' one person said. People told us they didn't ask for the situation where they are currently, so empathy, compassion and lack of judgement are vital. 'We are all human beings', homelessness is not a choice, some people are 'actually stuck'. People also have aspirations 'my dream is to be a tailor' and want to work. Others wanted churches to be more proactive 'keep your doors open more often'.

b) What can happen in churches / social action projects

Courses for men, women, events and groups for families, and 'talks to teenagers on knife crime'. People want churches and projects to engage more with the harsh reality of living on low income and the impact that has on communities. 'One to one talks with pastor' also would help.

c) What are churches not making the most of / room for?

Coaching, youth groups, clubs, wellbeing classes - finding ways to bring people together and making churches more diverse. Think about those who can read or write only a little, or who don't speak English as their first language.

d) Snakes and ladders

We also asked people to describe what factors pull people down into poverty (snakes), and what factors help to lift people out of poverty (ladders). This is what participants told us.

Snakes - Being traumatised by having to report regularly to the police station if you are an asylum seeker. Facing bias and prejudice in the services, having children taken into care. Fleeing war, not having the correct documents can make it harder to

navigate access to help. Vulnerable young people needed 'early education about drugs, grooming and weapons, crime'.

Ladders - 'A home helps people out of poverty', and giving opportunities for everyone to work were important, especially those while awaiting a decision from the Home Office. Financial competence skills, and helping people understand benefits around rent and getting back into work. Access to a bank account and getting photo ID were also important.

Thank you to all of the participants who made this report possible. A more detailed report will be available in 2024. To find out more about upcoming Jubilee+ Voices sessions, please email Rosie.Hopley@jubilee-plus.org. Thank you.