

Poverty, inequality and a flourishing democracy

By Graham Whitham

As we discussed in the last newsletter, the Grenfell Tower disaster starkly illustrated the tragic consequences of people in power not listening or responding to the concerns of people living on low incomes. What created the conditions that allowed the voices of people with very serious concerns to be ignored and what does this mean for our democracy and the ability of policy to respond to high levels of poverty and inequality?

Notwithstanding the recent increase in turnout among certain groups at the recent General Election, in the UK there is a strong social and age related gradient to voting patterns. The better off someone is, the more likely they are to vote. The same goes when it comes to age, older people are more likely to put their cross in a box when polling day comes around. The consequence is disproportionate concern by political parties for the interests of particular groups of the population because those groups are more likely to vote, and limited concern for the interests of those groups that vote in smaller numbers.

This creates a vicious cycle whereby parts of society feel neglected by political parties and withdraw further from the voting booth, as parties increasingly hone their message to those groups that turnout. If political parties don't appear to be offering you anything or don't speak to your concerns, why bother voting?

The effect is to warp political debate so that the importance of issues that affect only a small proportion of the population, say for example taxes on high earners or high levels of wealth, have a heightened and exaggerated place within political debates. The consequence appears to be, in the UK at least, rising inequality as policy responds to the perceived needs of the better off (limiting tax rises, creating the conditions for greater concentration of wealth etc).

Discussed in detail in political theory is the idea that democracy should be self-correcting when it comes to economic inequality. Or put it another way, in a democracy public opinion should act as a break on ever increasing levels of inequality. Increases in inequality should coincide with increases in support for redistribution, as the public demand policies that ensure wealth is spread more evenly.

That isn't what has happened in the UK, or in a number of other liberal democracies in recent decades. Inequality has continued to rise and support for redistribution has declined. Whilst variations in turnout dependent on age and social class are central to this, there's more to it than political parties simply responding to the interests of groups more likely to vote.

How the public feel about poverty, inequality and social mobility is also part of the story. Whilst support for reducing certain types of poverty, such as pensioner poverty, may remain, entrenched high levels of economic inequality can become an accepted norm. Most people may agree that inequality is too high, but may not agree that policies that redistribute wealth are a 'price worth paying' or, perhaps more importantly, don't believe those benefitting from redistributive policies are 'deserving beneficiaries'. If you believe poverty is a result of personal rather than structural failures, and that all wealth held by the rich is deserved and hard earned, you're less likely to support redistributive policies that help drive down poverty and inequality.

Similarly, even if you're on a low or middle income, if you believe redistribution of wealth limits social mobility and may hinder your ability to increase your income in the future, you're less likely to support policies that drive down poverty and inequality than someone who recognises that high levels of inequality can bring social mobility to a grinding halt.

Democracy needs to be reinvigorated if we're to address these challenges. The voices of people in poverty must be heard and their concerns responded to. People on all incomes need to believe that the issues that matter to them are being addressed, and that political parties have something to offer them and are interested in meeting their needs. Public policy debates must be better informed so that people have the evidence and knowledge they need to understand how best policy can address major challenges, including poverty and inequality.

Greater Manchester Poverty Action – We Can Do This Together

Last week Greater Manchester Poverty had a meeting of around fifty individuals and organisations who are working to reduce poverty across the city region.



GMMPA's Tom Skinner provided an overview

We consulted everyone on our vision and objectives as part of our strategy for the coming year – we will display these in a future newsletter once we have taken the feedback on board. This was followed by presentations from each of the Special Interest Groups (SIGs) of their activities over the last year:



GMMPA's Graham Whitham introduced the first discussion

- Work & Wages, presented by Tom Skinner, GMMPA
- Fuel Poverty, presented by Jo Boswell, Citizens Advice
- Food Poverty, presented by Miranda Kaunang, Fareshare
- Early Years, presented by Graham Whitham, GMMPA

We then presented ideas for a range of projects that have come from the SIGs, and asked participants' ideas on how to proceed, and how they might be able to support the efforts.

- An employment charter for Greater Manchester – Alec Spencer, GM Living Wage Campaign
- Foodbank Plus – Tom Skinner, GMMPA
- Mapping support services – Chris Bagley, GMMPA
- Living costs project – Graham Whitham, GMMPA
- Raising the voices of people experiencing poverty – Jez Green Manchester Homelessness Partnership



I-r Catherine Conners, Salford City Council and Miranda Kaunang, FareShare



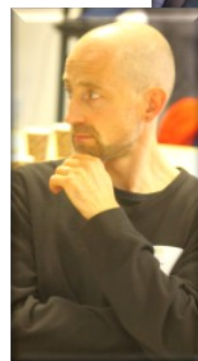
This was invaluable as it applied a wider range of voices, experience and expertise to the plans, and many of the ideas that were put forward will be put into action in the coming year. We also plan to bring some of the people together again in more focused groups to join forces and bring in resources that will make the projects possible.



We were struck by the energy in the room, and the enthusiasm for collaborative action on poverty, and want to thank everyone who took part for making it such a successful morning, as well as Church House for hosting the event.



Top: John Nicholson, Kenworthy's Chambers
above: Roz Burgin, GM Law Centre and left: Nancy Brown, Oxfam



I-r Jo Boswell, Citizens Advice Bureau
Jez Green, Mustard Tree & Mcr Homelessness Partnership and Kathy New, NEA

Local people providing for local people

by Lynda Batterbee, NW Area Manager Trussell Trust



The Trussell Trust runs more than 400 foodbanks across the UK, 17 of which operate out of 49 locations across Greater Manchester. Each foodbank without exception is only possible because of the dedication, determination and persistence of the many countless volunteers and donors who work extremely hard to ensure that no-one, whatever their circumstances, goes hungry. I am privileged to represent The Trussell Trust in the North West and have the advantage of seeing patterns and trends emerge across, what is, (in terms of Trussell Trust data alone), a region providing more emergency food parcels through foodbanks than any other area of the country. Between April 2016 and March 2017, 174, 489 three-day emergency food parcels were provided to people in poverty across the North West, almost 60,000 of which were provided in Greater Manchester.



Almost all of the food provided by foodbanks is supplied by kind and generous organisations, businesses, supermarket shoppers and individuals and I never cease to be inspired and humbled by the efforts of the public to ensure that foodbanks receive the food and toiletries which enable them to meet local need. However, as with all charities, giving goes in peaks and troughs.

Foodbanks typically experience a huge surge in donations between Harvest and Christmas and this is much appreciated - it is the busiest time of year as people in poverty battle with additional costs associated with the winter months. This time of year is quieter in terms of donations and many foodbanks have to use vital funds to purchase much-needed items to ensure that food parcels remain nutritionally-balanced and robust.

Giving to foodbanks couldn't be easier. Many supermarkets, shops and community buildings have permanent collection points in place and, if bigger collections are organised (at a school or business) foodbanks are delighted to arrange a pick up. The 'what to give' is an important question. The Trussell Trust provides lists to all foodbanks so that volunteers know what to put into a parcel to ensure consistency and nutritional balance. Extra items are also suggested so that toiletries and treats can be added to parcels when available. The general shopping list is available [here](#). Beans, pasta and tea are generally in abundant supply at foodbanks so instead of donating these items, you could perhaps consider buying one of the following: Long-life milk or juice; Tinned meat, fruit or veg (especially potatoes); Cereal; Instant coffee; Sponge puddings/Rice pudding and custard.



Collecting at a supermarket

Food is given out in supermarket carrier bags and now that they are no longer free, some foodbanks have found it hard to get the bags they need. If you are buying a food donation and can afford to add a bag or two, that would be much appreciated. Your local foodbank could also have very specific needs so it's worth checking with them. To find your nearest foodbank, simply visit [our map](#). In some areas, the local foodbank is not part of The Trussell Trust network and may therefore give out different items - to find out more visit [GMPA's map of emergency food providers](#).



Lynda Batterbee

The Trussell Trust is working hard to advocate at a national level about the challenges faced by people attending foodbanks in order to affect policy change. At the same time, foodbanks continue to ensure that local need is met and that those facing a crisis have access to good quality, emergency food aid. Without vital food donations foodbanks simply couldn't continue to offer a service to the community and so I thank all those, whether you donate food every week or once a year - you really do make a difference and your donations are so very much appreciated.

More information about the Trussell Trust is available on their [website](#) or follow them on Twitter @TrussellTrust

Create a Levy for Free Access to Justice: An Open Letter to Andy Burnham

The Greater Manchester Law Centre (GMLC) has delivered an open letter to the Mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham. They propose a levy on Manchester's corporate sector to fund free legal services for people in poverty and vulnerability.

The 2016 Bach Commission Report shows that the number of law centres halved between 2005 and 2015, and legal aid no longer covers most cases involving housing, welfare, debt, or immigration. GMLC's letter asks the Mayor to tackle these barriers to justice with new ideas:

"We share your belief that radical forward thinking is needed to build a new future for Greater Manchester... To survive, we need to be creative. Let's fund our free, face-to-face, high quality legal advice and professional legal representation by imposing a levy on commercial law firms."

GMLC opened in August 2016 with premises in Moss Side. They currently specialise in welfare benefit claims. Due to law centre closures and cuts to legal services, their community-led model relies on innovative funding methods, and they campaign alongside other organisations for free access to justice.

Andy Burnham's manifesto outlines his ambition for Greater Manchester to become "a beacon of social justice to the country" and when he visited GMLC in March, he said: "I fully support the idea of the Greater Manchester Law Centre and congratulate all those involved in getting it off the ground... Face to face advice cannot be replaced."

GMLC are inviting members of the public to sign their open letter, which is available [here](#)



SMARTERBUYS

Social housing tenants are steering clear of payday loan companies and unlicensed lenders, thanks to an affordable credit scheme. Residents can buy their household goods and furniture from the Greater Manchester Smarterbuys Store, which also allows them to build a credit history and develop a personal savings account.

A report on the social impact and value of the scheme has found that using this type of loan can lead to improved safety, health, well-being and financial confidence - problems associated with high levels of debt. The average loan is £759 but, based on recognised data analysis, it has been estimated that the overall social value of these loans to the people concerned is £5,990 per household.

Welfare reforms mean increasing numbers of registered providers' tenants are likely to struggle when equipping and furnishing their homes. Now, other GM housing providers are being encouraged to join the scheme to help their tenants buy white goods and furniture with affordable credit.

Tracy Langton, principal rent and welfare reform team leader at Northwards Housing, one of the partners in the scheme, said: "If we can help people make their money go further, then we have made a difference. This is just one of a number of initiatives that can do just that. It's important if we have identified a problem that we have an alternative people can use. Smarterbuys offers tenants from the participating housing providers the option of an affordable weekly payment plan for goods."

Smarterbuys Store is a local investment model where a social landlord (or consortium of social landlords) creates a 'loan fund'. This is then used to provide two-year Hire Purchase agreements that enable tenants to buy goods through the Smarterbuys Store with a weekly payment plan. Prices are much lower than options like high interest stores, payday loans or loan sharks, and there are discounts on some household items. Between January 2014 and November 2016, a total of 328 loans were granted with a total value of £249,055.

Angie used the scheme after hearing about Smarterbuys via her landlord when she moved into her new home. She purchased what she needed for her new home and the affordable credit means she has been able to manage a great re-payment record. Over time, she has added further items and has consistently paid off multiple accounts, which means she has also qualified for several 'cash back' savings through the scheme.

Smarterbuys is a franchise which includes One Manchester, New Charter Homes, Northwards Housing and Salix Homes with their tenants benefiting from the scheme. Other housing providers are able to join and promote the benefits to their tenants. Contact Tracy Langton at Northwards on 0161 720 5886 for more information. [View the store](#)



Forthcoming Events:

Voluntary Sector Assembly - State of the Sector

On Tuesday July 18th, 2017 from 1- 4.30pm at Halle St Peters, 40 Blossom St, Manchester M4 6BF

The current picture of the Manchester VCSE sector – and what this means for your organisation. The social and political landscape has changed significantly since the publication of the first State of the Sector report in 2013. The launch of the latest report took place on 1 June and the next Voluntary Sector Assembly will give everyone an opportunity to study the findings and discuss the current strength of the Manchester voluntary, community and social enterprise sector. How has the number of voluntary sector organisations changed and how healthy are their finances currently? How many people are volunteering in Manchester compared to four years ago?

Mike Wild, Macc Chief Executive, will be presenting facts and figures from the report and explaining what this means for VCSE organisations in the city

You will also have an opportunity to choose from three practical workshops which will discuss the implications of Brexit for the VCSE, take a look at the future of volunteering and give the opportunity to ask those all important social media questions in an interactive Q&A session.

[Book your place at this free event.](#)

Greater Manchester Social Value Network Conference

On Thursday July 20th, 2017 from 9.30am - 12.45pm at Bolton Town Hall, Victoria Square, Bolton BL1 1RU

A free event providing an overview of development in strategy, policy and practice in 'Social Value' in GM; showcasing examples of good practice, plus discussion, learning, networking and three workshops. [More information and to book.](#)



The Clatter of Clogs

On Wednesday September 6th, 2017 starting at Salford Museum and Art Gallery, The Crescent, Peel Park, Salford M5 4WU followed by a walking tour and visiting Wood Street Mission

Meandering tales of Salford slums, literary genius, temperance, gangland violence, and a fight for human rights. A look at the museum archives followed by a walking tour concluding at Wood Street where the mission, moved to this site in 1873, is still based. A tour of the mission and refreshments complete the event. [More information and to book.](#)



On Friday 10th November the Manchester Sleepout will return, and they'd love you to join in.

They're asking you to take on the challenge of sleeping out, for one night only, to highlight the hardships faced by homeless people every night. By taking part you'll help raise vital funds to support homeless people in our community.

[Register now](#) to receive an Early Bird discount, places are limited!

Any events you'd like GMPA to publicise? [Email us with the details](#)

Why GM Poverty Action?

In the Recommendations Report of the Greater Manchester Poverty Commission, 2.4 *Maintaining Momentum on Poverty* called for the formation of a Poverty Action Group to help take forward the work of the Commission.

A small number of public, private and civic sector individuals came together to form GMPA. This group has since grown to over 700 individuals from more than 200 organisations plus Local Authorities and MPs and an increasing number of members of the public.

GMPA is based upon principles of cooperation between organisations.

For more information about Greater Manchester Poverty Action

please visit our [website](#), follow us on [Twitter](#) or visit our [Facebook](#) page. You can also visit our YouTube channel [Community Voices](#)

All these platforms are there to share news and opinion from our readers, from GM Poverty Action and from the community.

We want to celebrate our successes, find new ways of working together and provide a voice for the people living in poverty in our region. But we can only do this with your help and support.

For more information or to share your news please contact [Chris](#)

Copies of previous newsletters are available on our [website](#)

If you would like to contact us or submit an article for inclusion in a newsletter please get in touch in one of the following ways:

Post: c/o 5th Floor Church House, 90 Deansgate, Manchester M3 2GH

Or contact our Communications Manager: Chris Bagley
T: 07419 774537 [Email](#)
and we will reply as soon as possible.

NB GMPA does not have full-time dedicated administrative support so please do not expect an immediate response.

