What's our story?
In-work Poverty
Research Process and Reflections

Planning and setting up the project

The project was managed by a number of coordinators. In many ways this felt like a good way to share power and ensure different people could take the lead in different areas, including those without traditional 'academic' backgrounds. It enabled a rich and varied programme of work, encompassing training in research methods and a range of workshops on policy and critical thinking, as well as analysis and writing up findings as a group.

What did we learn?

The original funding bid and project development was largely undertaken by the organisation's founders, who had coordinated the previous pilot phase, in consultation with other group members. These ideas were discussed at length with one of the researchers from the pilot project and were shared in a concept document and through face-to-face meetings. On reflection, more time should have been taken for sharing and discussing the aims and objectives, particularly since the founders were not taking on lead coordination roles.

In hindsight we can see the importance of clearly agreeing at the start what is meant by participatory research and what the priorities of the project are.

We also needed to think through more thoroughly how this piece of research would build on the previous year's findings. Rather than conceiving of the project as a revised version of the previous one, we should have more actively used last year's conclusions to inform a fresh research and design process. Time and capacity constraints were partly to blame for not doing this.

We also struggled at times to balance a reflective, iterative process with our ambitious project timeframe. In the end, the project ran almost two months over schedule, and the requirements from group members expanded as the project grew. For example, we ended up extending the number of training and policy analysis sessions and asking group members to attend advisory group meetings. This, combined with added logistical burdens, like organising the picking up of interview packs and recorders, meant that researchers were sometimes given extra tasks, which could be at short notice.

The impacts of this were debated amongst different project coordinators and researchers. Some felt it was important to prevent the project becoming a burden. Others felt that researchers should be given the opportunity to engage with all the different materials, information and processes in order to honour our commitment to a cooperative, participatory approach. On reflection, we probably needed a balance between these. While there is an ethical imperative in cooperative participatory work to encourage and allow people to engage fully, even when it is challenging, overwhelming people with tasks and information is counterproductive.

Who were the researchers?

Twelve women in total participated. Of these, eight completed the training and undertook the research. All of the community researchers lived in Lambeth, but had diverse backgrounds. Five were born outside the UK and three had English as a second language, with only limited ability to read and write English. Some had little or no education. Two of the women had been researchers in our pilot project the year before, one of whom took on a coordinating role, providing important support for new joiners. All had previously participated in Skills Network activities and were therefore known to one another. (see Box on Power and Perspectives)

Flexible participation

Many of the women were themselves dealing with very challenging financial, housing and immigration situations and so we opted for a flexible 'dip in and out' approach to make sure people were not excluded. Anyone wanting to collect data was required to participate in researcher training as fully as possible, otherwise they were welcomed at policy briefings, language and power sessions, citizens' juries and analysis sessions. We also made clear that no one was obliged to take on a researcher role after participating in the training (four people opted not to), and were understanding when people missed training sessions, compensating with phone check-ins, additional written information and small group sessions. This approach enabled women who could not commit fully to enrich our research and analysis processes, however inconsistent attendance led to a number of difficulties which we were perhaps unprepared for.

> *"People's circumstances changed on a daily basis...so people cancelled cos they got called into work. Also this happened with me, so I couldn't commit, that's the downside of peer research..."*

From previous experience, we knew that a good support structure was integral to this work being done well and safely. From the beginning we put in place one to one check-ins for group members.

What did we learn?

We feel our flexible approach was a real strength of the project. However, we struggled to balance the need for flexibility with the need to make sure people were sufficiently informed to participate in a meaningful way.

More time should have been allocated to reviews with people who missed sessions, so that they were fully informed and could confidently question decisions made. The need to do this increased our workload in a way that had not been planned for.

We also felt that project participants would have benefited from more sustained support on issues preventing them from attending sessions. For example, one participant had been told her benefits were under threat of removal, which caused her significant distress. It took us several weeks to understand the situation and refer her for advice. Coordination was again an issue here – different people knew different parts of the story, but our official support coordinator was not fully aware of the facts.

Defining our research

In the early stages, we were unsure about the appropriateness of the term 'peer' research to describe our project. It can be used glibly, and one of the coordinators and research group members questioned its application here, given the diverse and complex circumstances of both researchers and interviewees. Although most of the researchers had experience of low-paid and insecure work, many were not currently working (often because of childcare and other commitments). Some felt using the term 'peer' was dishonest, caused confusion about their role and risked creating a barrier between the researcher and respondent. During training on peer support and cooperative working at Skills Network, we regularly question the use of 'peer', sometimes preferring the word 'peerish' – having some shared experiences but also key differences in life circumstances and experiences. After these discussions, the research training facilitator suggested using the term 'community researcher' which she felt was more inclusive, and less rigid. The group preferred this term.

Defining the terms of the research

Setting up definitions is tricky – we know the terms we use can limit where we go with the research and prevent new kinds of insight. At the same time, there needs to be limits and structures to where we begin, for example setting criteria for people selected for interview.

We were hoping the question "how can you tell?" would inform our own definition of poverty, which would feed into the selection criteria for respondents. We presented how poverty is measured in a policy context, contrasting absolute and relative poverty, and how context impacts on the measurement of poverty. We looked at the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's 'basket of goods' concept to engage with the changing pressures on family's costs. We reviewed current statistics related to poverty and considered wider issues, in particular looking at how, in addition to income, assets, social networks, community, etc. impact on experiences of poverty. Following this session the group reflected on their own experiences of work and poverty.

> *"I have to go to work and I have to get someone to look after my daughter – but at the end of the month my child minder has more than me- I left my job in November because what is the point."*

Rather than finalising our own definition at this point, we wanted research participants to help us develop one. To this end, we asked the following interview questions:

1. We are describing in-work poverty as all or most of these factors:

- earning less than £360 per week (for couple with children) [Some researchers were not keen on defining poverty by income, so this part of the definition was removed in the second round of interviews].
- working in an insecure job or jobs with low status where you have little power or responsibility
- working in a job where you have a zero hours contract
- no opportunity for training
- little possibility for increasing money or position

2. We then asked interviewees:

- What does 'in-work poverty' mean to you?
- Do you think you are experiencing in-work poverty?

While this seemed the best approach at the time, several difficulties arose from predefining the definition to this extent. Although we had tried to leave things open, we perhaps left limited space for interviewees to self-define, or to help shape our definition of poverty. Often they just echoed what had already been said, which means we may have missed other ways in-work poverty might be experienced. Perhaps we should have started with the question 'what do you think in-work poverty means?' By the end of the research, we were talking differently about the meaning of work and the experience of poverty, which has brought us to a slightly different set of parameters within which to discuss in-work poverty. This in itself has been a really important outcome.

As noted above, the fact we did not really build on the ideas about work that came out of our previous research (where we ended up defining 'work' as something much more varied than just the formal paid work that the term is generally applied to) meant that to some extent we started again and at the end came back to similar conclusions. On reflection, the reasons for this were partly due to a lack of confidence in what we had done before, our default being to look for 'expert' definitions instead.

Research methods training

Twelve women participated in seven sessions of training, each lasting 3-4 hours. A Skills Network member who had been involved in the previous research project and an external facilitator planned, facilitated and evaluated the sessions. The training included modules on:

- The purpose of research
- Qualitative and quantitative research methods
- Community research – benefits and hazards
- How the subject of our research has evolved
- Research processes
- How 'poverty' is defined and measured
- Devising the research purpose and developing questions
- Case studies
- Research ethics
- Bias and reflexivity in research
- Interviewing: Theory and skills
- Introduction to political literacy
- Introduction to policy related to in-work poverty

From the first training session, we looked for ways to make the learning less daunting by pairing people up, interspersing talk with exercises, and building in question and answer sessions. Real efforts were made to allow for different types of communication and confidence levels and to make sure all participants had a voice. This was tricky, particularly given differing levels of English and the fact some people were long-term group members and others relatively new. However, most researchers reported feeling like they had the chance to input into discussion.

What did we learn?

We had a diverse group of women participating in the training, both in ability and interest. It was difficult to pitch the training in a way that would suit all participants. In feedback, it was clear the majority enjoyed the practical work more than the 'lecture style' sessions.

> *"The training sessions were quite long, sometimes it was 3 hours. For me I couldn't remember most of it, I only remember when we actually did practical stuff. Doing the reading and writing, I'm lost then. She [facilitator] saw we are getting …bored, that's why we practiced doing the research on ourselves. Then we began to understand what it meant to interview someone. Using the recorder, how to breathe, relax, listening and allowing them to ask questions in order for the person to give more information. Using open questions, and follow up questions."*

> *"We did practical interviews on ourselves. That was really interesting. To hear my own voice and to listen to other peoples stories – that was a big motivation for me."*

During research methods training, we also established a 'word wall' for unfamiliar words, which we would define in the moment and build into a dictionary. This became a familiar part of the training and participants were encouraged to add words as they came across them. It gave people a legitimised space to say 'I don't understand that', knowing it would contribute to everyone's learning.

Language and power and policy briefings

Getting to grips with the policy material was particularly challenging, as much of it was completely new to some group members (including the meaning of the word policy). We tried to use a range of interactive exercises, and auditory and visual stimuli to convey information.

We wanted to make the literature review inclusive – rather than seeing it as something only certain members of the group would be able to do – and structured it to utilise the analysis skills of one group member who did not have much written research experience. On reflection, we could have made the process more inclusive, for example by asking group members to look at other types of media like video and audio. Relevant speeches by the prime minister and chancellor could easily have been found this way and researchers could have recorded their thoughts orally rather than writing them down.

The second stage was sharing information from the literature review with the rest of the research group and building on it/ challenging it based on their knowledge, experience and opinions. These sessions could feel quite intimidating at times, and were sometimes dominated by group members who were more politically engaged or had participated in previous research. To mitigate this we used mini debates, small group and pair work and some theatrical activities, such as acting out political speeches with masks, as well as a variety of interactive, tactile tools designed by Skills Network members to explore complex concepts without much reading. One of the facilitators worked with a 'political spectrum washing line', for example, to explore the difference between 'left wing' and 'right wing' positions. We also developed a 'capabilities and choice board' which we used to explore how certain policies affected people in different circumstances.

We also ran 'language and power sessions' near the beginning of the research training to help participants develop skills in critiquing language they hear in the media. These were structured around themes that participants themselves had raised (such as gender inequality and poverty) and then moved on to themes more relevant to the research, such as narratives around aspirations, fairness and choice. The sessions were designed, with the help of one of the community researchers, to be as unintimidating as possible. Language was explored through children's stories (most in the group were mothers and children's learning was something they had already engaged in at Skills Network), games and interactive exercises, such as sticking words under different categories on our 'sticky wall'. The sessions were very popular and got very good feedback.

Agreeing the purpose of the research

"It has to be exposed – the bigger picture."

An important and highly useful part of our training process was debating what we as a group hoped to achieve with the research and whom we aspired to reach with our findings. Participants were most interested in being heard by policy makers but also showed an interest in connecting with the wider community, with people who perhaps think the reality of in-work poverty has no relevance to their lives.

> *"Those people who are not in in-work poverty are part of the solution – because they are [the one] going to the hairdresser that is on £6 an hour… the one with a mother in a care home with staff on insecure contracts…[having their] house cleaned by someone who is earning well below minimum wage. So I think it's important to highlight that it's not the people in and of themselves who are being affected by this are not the solution alone, it's actually what we as a community choose – it's the structure…"*

The final purpose of the research was debated and voted on by the group. This is included below, in order from most to least important.

Purpose:

- To affect change: to be heard by policy makers and people implicated (people experiencing in-work poverty, employers, other campaigning groups).
- Value people's experience and engender empathy.
- Relate this to other people's day-to-day life: how we are all implicated. (Understand the broader implications of in-work poverty and how we are all implicated)
- Challenge the notion (existing narratives) of how people end up in in-work poverty.
- Expose the bigger picture. Show the structure and how things are interconnected.

Sampling – deciding who we should interview

We struggled to agree on who we wanted to hear from. Some in the group wanted specifically to hear the perspectives of single women without children – considering that they are not able to access the same level of benefits and might feel more alone ("nobody to help you"). Others were interested in the perspectives of men, similarly thought to be more alone and without the same access to benefits or other services. Some wanted to speak with women with children who might not have the right to work and were therefore very vulnerable, though in the end decided that the risks for these women would be too high.

In the end we decided that, because of the nature of Skills Network and demographic of the group (all mothers), we wanted to speak with women with children, considering what they were required to juggle within a budget that was not meeting their basic needs. In the first round of interviews we spoke to one woman without children as an alternative perspective on in-work poverty.

Deciding on how we would collect the data

We covered a range of ways to gather information: interviews (structured to unstructured), focus groups, observation, case studies, using images and keeping diaries. . Some of the participants had already taken part in sessions using photography and capturing audio for a radio show. They had a sense that there were different approaches but were not sufficiently confident to use alternative methods to capture information.

A couple of researchers in the post-process evaluations mentioned they felt like they didn't have the experience to be able to make an informed choice during the research, so would go with what the facilitator recommended or what others in the group supported. **One participant suggested that it would have been valuable to have different researchers in to talk about different methods.** We would encourage it for future projects.

The group were interested in people's granular experiences. One participant mentioned an acquaintance she has noticed rarely has the heating on, whose fridge is mostly empty and who seems *"vigilant"* about ensuring everything is switched off at the wall. She was interested in capturing these sorts of details. Another was interested in interviewing participants over time; ideally a year, including interviews with other family members and asking participants to keep a video diary. This was outside the scope of the research project and some felt it would be too much of an expectation for respondents.

With this in mind we had a session on case studies. Using case studies left open the opportunity to reflect the depth we as community researchers had access to. Life histories could have been another option to consider: one of the interviews read like a life history and gave particularly useful insights into the longer-term effects of in-work poverty. Ultimately researchers felt most confident with a structured interview process. This should be seen in light of the very small introduction they had had to different methods. We agreed to use a case study approach, in which a smaller number of women were interviewed three times over three months.

Developing the questions - what do we want to know?

To develop the questions we worked in pairs and stuck questions on the wall to help group and order them, with facilitators standing back. After the first round of interviews and the first analysis session, we adjusted the topic guide (see analysis and reflection below) and five researchers re-interviewed the women they had spoken to. Unfortunately, because of time and capacity constraints, we were unable to do a third round of interviews.

Confidentiality and anonymity

The conversation about women without the right to work led to a very useful debate about confidentiality and anonymity. We discussed and practiced offering respondents the option to use pseudonyms, and discussed how and where to keep audio, paper files and transcriptions. Researchers were sensitive to protecting the respondents and considered this a priority. We had a visceral sense of the insecurity experienced by women in this situation and purposefully set out not to compromise it.

We had to think carefully when it came to sharing transcripts in the group analysis process, and ensured that all details that could possibly be identified were removed before research group members read them. Because only one set of transcripts were available, only the lead facilitator had read them all in the first group analysis phase. In the paired analysis, more copies had to be made, but only after all identifiable information was removed. Recordings were deleted from recorders and copies of transcripts destroyed.

A potential conflict around confidentiality and anonymity occurred due to the fact that one of the research group members was also an interviewee.

Doing the interviews

In the second to last training session each of the participants conducted an interview that brought together the practical skills of handling information and consent procedures, using the recorders and testing out the questions. We listened in detail to these interviews and gave participants one to one and written feedback. **While most reported feeling confident before conducting their interviews, in hindsight it would have been useful to have repeated this exercise a number of times.**

Before starting the interviews, the researchers discussed at length how our own bias might leak into interviews and shape our findings and how to maintain a balance of sharing our own experiences to establish trust and build on empathy while being aware of how this could be experienced as duplicitous or judgemental. We felt it very important to be clear from the very first interaction with potential respondents of what we could actually promise.

> *"The first interview I did, I woke up I was pumped ... I was ready and I was a bit nervous because I didn't know what to expect – this is someone's personal life I'm going to be asking questions I didn't know how she would feel at the time – because maybe- because you know those days or them weeks and months when things are really not going your way and you really don't know what to expect –*

asking people their personal stuff – you know so I was a bit nervous but it turned out really well."

What did we learn?

Doing the interviews affected some of the community researchers in profound ways. A number were themselves facing unstable financial and work situations, or trying to look for some form of income. **Hearing and relating to the stories of others could be very upsetting.** One coordinator was concerned about the potentially distressing effects on researchers of the interview process, and we made particular efforts towards the end of the process to ensure people had the chance to debrief, enlisting the Skills Network Support and Solidarity Coordinator to help. Some researchers found that familiarity with the respondent also made them less confident, and made it uncomfortable to probe with follow up questions.

Researchers' commitments also made arranging and attending interviews difficult. Even if we were able to arrange childcare at interview times, this wasn't always an ideal situation for researchers.

Citizens' Juries

Finding out what is happening in policy is an important part of this process, but reading policy reports is not always the best way for people to get their heads around it. Instead we used the citizens' jury model to explore current policy: 'expert witnesses' provided information about the issues we were investigating and responded to questions from a 'jury' consisting of women who had experience of working in low-paid insecure work. The process was tightly facilitated: after a short presentation from the witness, the jury broke into groups, discussed what they had heard, including (importantly) their emotional response to it, and formulated questions together. We then all came back together and each group asked their questions in turn. The jury members were not allowed to ask follow up questions or interrupt the process. This was to ensure that everyone got an equal chance to speak and that discussions did not become diverted into particular issues that affected one or a few people.

The first round of interviews revealed a numbers of issues that became the focus of jury sessions. Most notably we felt we needed more information on the pressures of debt, in particular when making the transition from being on benefits to working; rights in the work place; current policy changes around in-work benefits; and framing ideologies and narratives around austerity (and neoliberalism). These sessions helped participants to engage in a different way with the wider issues related to in-work poverty and in a format that encouraged both debate and an exchange of information.

"For me, the citizens' juries, that was the best part. Because we had people who understood policy and could relate it back to us, and explain why these things were going on, the whole agenda, bigger picture."

Collaborative Analysis and write up

One of the most ambitious and we believe innovative aspects of the project was our attempts to bring multiple perspectives to the analysis and write up process. The role of peer or community researchers is often limited to data collection, with interpretation of data and analysis being led by 'professional' researchers, trained in that field. We believed that we would lose important insights if we did not involve all the researchers in the analysis and write up process. Doing so in a meaningful way is challenging however – particularly as many of the researchers were hesitant about reading and writing. Building on our pilot process, we did the analysis in several phases.

Phase 1: Group Analysis and Reflection Sessions

Following each round of interviews, researchers participated in reflection and analysis sessions in which we considered the practicalities of undertaking the research and made changes to address issues that arose, reflect on how their own experiences came into the interviews and whether they would approach the next one differently. This was an opportunity for researchers to talk through the written transcriptions about how they had experienced the respondent, adding dimensionality to the flat script.

> *"Also when she talked about her children her voice is quite different. It's the sense that this isn't right ... 'I'm happy that I'm working but that I am earning less money [than] on benefits - this is wrong'. You can hear it in her voice, different eye contact, different gestures..."*

We used these sessions to consider what would be interesting to explore in the next rounds of interviews. Each researcher discussed themes and ideas they felt were particularly important in the interview they had conducted. These ideas were stuck up on to flip chart and clustered thematically under four broad headings: day to day experiences of in-work poverty; processes that keep people in poverty; social and emotional costs of in-work poverty and; wider narratives that shape our understanding of in-work poverty.

The lead facilitator typed up these notes from the wall, coding them by interview so that we had a collection of quotes linked to key points to draw from in the next phases. Researchers then selected themes they wanted to explore further in paired analysis.

Phase 2: Paired Analysis and Write Up

We next paired community researchers with others who had more professional experience in either writing or research (including three from our advisory group) to read through transcripts and note key ideas and quotes that they felt illustrated their themes of interest. These notes formed the basis for the chapters in the 'insights from interviewees' section. Five sets of paired analyses were completed and one pair worked together to create collages illustrating different themes we had explored, which are represented in the report.

We feel quite happy overall with this section of the work. We were concerned in our pilot project that, due to time pressures towards the end, a lot of write up and editing was done by two people with experience in that area and not in enough consultation with the rest of the group and with little checking back. This time we believe we got much further with a collaborative writing up process, although there is still room to develop this further.

Phase 3: 'What Could be Different?' Sessions

At the end of the project four sessions were held to explore what we felt we could say about in-work poverty, and to agree on the key points for our final 'different point of view' section. These focused on: 'different framing assumptions and stories', 'different models and approaches', 'practical steps that could help in the immediate' and finally 'what can we say about in-work poverty now?' We used audio and visual clips to stimulate discussion, and conducted a structured debate around different scenarios of people who may or may not be in in-work poverty.

Phase 4: Final Putting Together of the Report

The final putting together of the report was largely taken on by two of the project coordinators who are also co-founders of Skills Network, along with an external editor. We also gathered substantial feedback from a diverse range of external readers. Unfortunately, for practical (lack of space) reasons and shortage of time, the final ordering of chapters, and final sections of text were not done very collaboratively. Researchers did comment on design, and were also taken through outlines of the different sections to check it reflected what they said and to add any additional thoughts. Significant time was put into checking back the final section of the report, to ensure that it properly reflected discussions and to amending the report in line with comments from external commentators. There is a risk that as the final putting together (as well as the final editing of this process section) was done by the two co-founders who have very strong socio-political views, that the final content was skewed in this way. Having an external editor to point out obvious bias was extremely useful in this regard.

What did we learn?

As is so often the case, we had underestimated how much time and energy the anaylsis and write up process would take. We were only able to conduct 3 group analysis sessions, and were not able to come together as a group to decide on which themes individuals were particularly interested in exploring further. Instead this was done in one to one meetings with project coordinators.

Balancing an inclusive group analysis process with confidentiality was challenging and needs careful thought.

Paired analysis is a good way to bring the skills and perspectives of professional and community researchers together to produce a rich variety of analysis.

Pulling different sections together was challenging. Because of multiple writers, they had different styles and emphases, which is unusual for a report. Some sections almost entirely consisted of quotes, others brought in more reflection and theory. Some were written from a more personal perspective, others were more distant. We decided that we were okey with this variety, and that it better reflected the multiple voices in the group.

There were three aspects of analysis and write-up that we regret not being able to complete this time. Firstly, we had hoped to bring together a focus group of people with very different perspectives to ours to read and respond to some of our findings and arguments. Secondly, we wanted to get first-hand responses from interviewees to some of our findings, and include their reflections in the final write-up. Finally, towards the end of the writing process we had thought about structuring some of our report sections as multiple responses, to try and reflect some of the fruitful and interesting disagreements and debates that had occurred within research group discussions, for example with different boxes representing different points of view. We decided against trying to re-write so near the end of the project – but that is something that might be useful for others wishing to design collaborative write-up processes to consider.

Reflection on process

We aspired for all the researchers to maintain a journal throughout and while one did maintain a journal and a number of others took some notes after interviews, this didn't happen consistently. Some researchers were less confident or interested in writing than others. While we encouraged researchers to record their reflections none took it up. Reflection sessions provided a forum for this (discussed below), which enabled us to collect the researcher's broader impressions of respondents. However, it was not as structured or in-depth as if we were able to make immediate notes.

This was a big loss. One of the key pieces of feedback from the pilot research was that putting more time and energy into ongoing reflection is crucial to the process, and researchers then said they wished they'd been pushed more to do reflection diaries and that we should offer alternative means for people to do them if they didn't want to write (such as recording them orally).