



Commission on Social Security

led by Experts by Experience

The Project Report

Preface

The Commission on Social Security would not have been possible without the involvement of a very large number of people. Some of those most closely involved in the project are mentioned in this report but it is not possible to list the thousands of others who have contributed through responding to consultations, hosting workshops, providing advice and lots more besides. Thanks are owed to every single one of them.

However, as this is a formal project report it is the responsibility of, and written by, the Commission Co-chair, Ellen Morrison, with secretariat members Rosa Morris and Michael Orton. Several of those involved in the Commission commented on a draft version and it is hoped the report reflects a shared understanding of the project. But responsibility for the published content, conclusions and any errors, rests solely with the authors.

A lot has already been written about the Commission on Social Security. To avoid duplication, this report contains links to other sources. In particular, the following can be found on the Commission's website – www.CommissionOnSocialSecurity.org:

- *The Plan* for a decent social security system which is in Easy Read format and contains the Commission's proposals on social security.
- A *Technical Note* which provides additional details about the Commission's proposals.
- A series of supporting papers considered by Commissioners in reaching their final decisions on proposals.

This report is published by the University of Warwick and produced by Easy-Read Online Limited, January 2022.

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Executive Summary

The Commission on Social Security is:

- A ground breaking project.
- Led by people with lived experience of the social security system.
- Solutions focused and consensus building.

The key project outcome is:

- *The Plan* - for a decent social security system.

***The Plan* would mean:**

- Everyone would be treated with dignity and respect.
- Nobody would ever have less than half the minimum wage – currently £163.50 a week - to live on.

***The Plan* provides:**

- A hugely simplified system fit for 21st century Britain.
- A new agenda on social security.

Background

- It is over 30 years since the UK had a poverty rate under 20 per cent.
- In twenty-first century Britain poverty has always been higher than it was in the 1960s and 1970s.
- Poverty in London is widespread, long-standing and deep.
- The current social security system is failing.
- People with lived experience of social security are invariably excluded from public debate, but when their voices are heard it leads to new insights and ideas.
- One demonstrably successful theory of change is that big change happens when lots of different organisations and individuals all start saying the same thing.
- But anti-poverty action currently lacks a plan for a better social security system.
- A way forward is being solutions focused, giving centrality to people with lived experience and building consensus.

The Commission on Social Security project

- The aim of the project was to make proposals for a better social security system.
- The project was funded by Trust for London.
- All the Commissioners were Experts by Experience, meaning they had lived experience of the social security system.
- The project was highly innovative and ground breaking.
- Accessibility was a key theme of the project.

***The Plan* – for a decent social security system**

- The Commission set out five principles to underpin social security, focusing on making sure everyone has enough money to live, supporting extra costs like with disability, and treating everyone with dignity, respect and trust.
- Equality is also key when looking at the Commission's proposals.
- Thousands of people contributed to the process of developing *The Plan*, through two large-scale public consultations, a legislative theatre initiative and workshops held across the UK
- There are five parts to *The Plan*: a Guaranteed Decent Income; increased Child Benefit; a new disability benefit based on the social model of disability; links with other areas; a completely new ethos.
- Statistical modelling shows the Guaranteed Decent Income and increased Child Benefit would make more than 30 million people better off - that's over half the UK population.
- A large and diverse network developed around the Commission's work.

Learning and conclusions

1. The Commission has successfully enacted a model that is solutions focused, consensus building and participatory.
2. The key project outcome – *The Plan* – for a decent social security system – is transformative and provides the basis for being proactive, offering a hopeful vision of the future and a way of setting the agenda on social security.
3. There is no simple template for participatory work. Learning from the Commission project includes the importance of being explicit about parameters, recognising Experts by Experience as having equal status, working in partnership, and with a starting point of listening being critical.
4. Challenges are raised for professionals, funders and Experts by Experience alike.

The final conclusion is posed as a question:

if the learning and messages in this report are not acted upon and the same anti-poverty approaches of the last 40 years continue to be used, is there any reason to believe the results will be different?

Chapter 1

Background to the Commission on Social Security: a solutions focused, participatory and consensus building approach

This chapter considers the background to the Commission on Social Security project. The starting point is poverty. This is followed by the need for new approaches to anti-poverty action including being solutions focused, giving centrality to people with lived experience of the current system and building consensus. Consideration is then given to how work around these themes led to development of the project idea.

Poverty

For almost one in every two children to be poor in twenty-first century Britain is not just a disgrace, but a social calamity and an economic disaster, all rolled into one.

This was the verdict of Philip Alston, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, in a report written after visiting the UK in 2018.¹ It is just one of many reports outlining the extent of poverty in Britain. Sources such as the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's annual report on the nature and scale of poverty make for grim reading, with more than 14 million people living in poverty and problems of homelessness and hunger all too evident.

¹ UN Human Rights Council – Office of the High Commissioner (2018) Statement on Visit to the United Kingdom by Professor Philip Alston United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights London 18 November.

To put this into a longer perspective, it is over 30 years since the UK had a poverty rate under 20 per cent; and in twenty-first century Britain poverty has always been higher than it was in the 1960s and 1970s.²

The Commission on Social Security project is funded by Trust for London, so poverty in the capital is of particular focus. Detailed evidence and insights are provided in Trust for London's *London Poverty Profile*, previously published biennially but now primarily an online resource with regular updating of data.³ The extensive analysis includes demography, living standards, housing, work and benefits. Key findings from the most recently available data are:

- 28% of Londoners (2.5 million people) are in poverty.
- 56,000 London households are in temporary accommodation, an increase of 30% compared with five years ago.
- 19,961 families in London were affected by the benefits cap in November 2019 – a 76% increase over the last five years.
- 76% of children in poverty in London (550,000) are in working families.

Also, poverty disproportionately affects some Londoners. For example, the poverty rate for racialised groups in London is nearly twice that of white groups and over a third of people living in a household that includes a disabled person are in poverty. It is clear that poverty in London is widespread, long-standing and deep.

² Sources: https://ifs.org.uk/tools_and_resources/incomes_in_uk;

<https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN07096/SN07096.pdf>.

³ *London Poverty Profile* is available at: https://trustforlondon.fra1.cdn.digitaloceanspaces.com/media/documents/Londons_Poverty_Profile_2020.pdf.

The need for new approaches to anti-poverty action⁴

Given the above, it is clear that current anti-poverty efforts are not working and new approaches are required. Three themes that informed the development of the Commission on Social Security project will now be discussed.

A solutions focus

Beresford⁵ argues that there is currently a ‘well-rehearsed conversation’ in which:

Researchers who produce ever more evidence about problems that are only too well known seem to think that by telling the government how much damage its policies are doing, it will magically stop imposing them. Or that if they show ‘the public’ how bad things are, then ‘something will have to change’.

Knight⁶ makes a similar point, arguing that in relation to poverty:

Nearly every week a new report appears, setting out some aspect of the problem and how it is getting worse. Reports describe rising debt, reduced benefits...the growing use of foodbanks, but despite this constant stream of commentary, little appears to change as a result.

⁴ Also see: Orton, M. (2019) ‘Challenges for anti-poverty action: developing approaches that are solutions focused, participative and collaborative’ *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice* 27(1): 131-136.

⁵ Beresford, P. (2017) ‘Endless reports on rising poverty do little to change government policy – there’s another way’ *The Conversation* 11 December.

⁶ Knight, B. (2013) ‘Reframing Poverty’ *Poverty* 146: 14-17.

Indeed, Beresford cites David Donnison as long ago as 1971 saying in relation to a publication about the state of UK housing and homelessness, that ‘no more reports’ should be commissioned until something was done with the evidence that was already there. Donnison’s point was that the problem was not a lack of evidence, but that little or nothing was being done about it.

With regard to contemporary reports on poverty, Beresford contends that: “there is only one thing to say with any confidence...they are very unlikely to bring about any significant change in the government’s policy”.

Having criticised ‘the constant stream of commentary from which little appears to change’ Knight’s conclusion is that a focus on solutions is required. As he puts it:

The current social science literature is almost wholly descriptive and analytical about social problems, rather than practical and inspiring about their solutions...[what is needed is] a solution focused literature.

Beresford’s similar contention is that: “merely focusing on the system’s failings [is] a very limited approach to achieving change”.

This is not to advocate an either/or between the identification of problems and solutions: both are needed. The point being made is that the latter is currently neglected compared with the former.

Participatory approaches

While there is a long history to what, in broad terms, can be described as participatory research or co-production, there has in recent years been renewed and growing interest in projects involving people with lived experience of issues. Involving people with lived experience of the issue under consideration provides insights and knowledge which

might otherwise be absent in social policy debate.⁷ Doing so creates scope to upset or challenge taken for granted narratives or characterisations.⁸

A misapprehension in some policy research is that experiential ways of knowing⁹ are only relevant to describing and understanding one's own biographical situation. Instead, and as will be demonstrated in this report, there are strands of the participatory methodology literature¹⁰ which argue that experiential knowledge can be applied to explicitly deliberate and consider how policies can be formed and changed.¹¹

Relating this specifically to poverty, Beresford argues that what is needed is to: “support people in poverty to develop their own ideas and solutions for change instead of asking them how awful things are”. What this means, suggests Beresford, is providing support for user-led organisations that can speak for people in poverty themselves, with such groups having shown their ability to achieve change with thought-through strategies and campaigning. They also provide legitimate ways of drawing on and making public their personal difficulties and

⁷ Summers, K. and Young, D. (2020) ‘Universal simplicity? The alleged simplicity of Universal Credit from administrative and claimant perspectives’ *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice* 28(2): 169-186.

⁸ Patrick, R. (2019) ‘Unsettling the Anti-Welfare Common-sense: The Potential in Participatory Research with People Living in Poverty’ *Journal of Social Policy* 49(2): 251-270.

⁹ McIntosh, I. and Wright, S. (2019) ‘Exploring what the notion of lived experience might offer for social policy analysis’ *Journal of Social Policy* 48(3): 449-467.

¹⁰ Bennett, F. with Roberts, M. (2004) *An overview of research approaches which give people with experience of poverty more involvement and influence* York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

¹¹ Also see: Orton, M., Summers, K. and Morris, R. (2021) ‘Guiding principles for social security policy: outcomes from a bottom-up approach’ *Social Policy & Administration*. <http://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12782>.

hardship, without reducing it to the level of ‘sad stories’ and statistics. Beresford’s conclusion is that:

user-led organisations point the way to real alternatives to welfare reform...This is more proactive than merely focusing on the system’s failings.

Knight takes a similar view and sees the Living Wage campaign as an example of people being involved:

through commitment to ideas that bring positive changes in their communities. Rather than being victims of change, such an approach puts people on the front foot, helping to create the changes they want to see.

This could be constructed as an either/or between user-led groups and professionals, but another approach is to see people with lived experience and people with learned experience (or expertise by experience and professional expertise) working together to achieve change.

Consensus building

The issue of building consensus relates to the fact that while anti-poverty campaigners have been strongly critical of changes to the benefits system e.g. the benefit cap, sanctions, the 2-child limit and so on, there is no agreement on what would be a better system. As Batty and Orton note,¹² on some policy issues such as housing, early childhood education and care, and minimum wage levels, there is considerable consensus (within civil society) as to what needs to be done and some detailed plans for how to implement change. However, on the issue of social security, consensus is lacking:

¹² Batty, S. and Orton, M. (2018) ‘An agenda for fixing the social security/welfare benefits system’ *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice* 26(2): 291-295.

There are strong advocates of an unconditional universal Basic or Citizen's Income while others express preference for contribution-based entitlements or universal but means-tested benefits. There are different views on the importance that should be given to public services versus individual income support measures or whether to prioritise immediate issues such as the bedroom tax or longer-term changes to Universal Credit and the tax system more generally.

The lack of consensus was further demonstrated by the plethora of competing policy proposals on social security that appeared in the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic.¹³ Examples included a Minimum Income Guarantee, a Minimum Income Standard, a Liveable Income Guarantee, different Universal Basic Income schemes, doubling the basic Universal Credit allowance, increasing it to £150 per week or, in another proposal, to £260 per week. These proposals are all aimed at reducing poverty and economic inequality, but they have fundamental differences. A Universal Basic Income would not be means tested whereas the Minimum/Guaranteed Income options would. Proposals for a Universal Basic Income suggest a variety of different models and the same applies to Minimum/Guaranteed Income ideas. Reforms to Universal Credit include suggestions for widely disparate benefit rates.

Raising and discussing different ideas is hugely important but a process that doesn't move beyond positing competing proposals is – and has been – unlikely to lead to policy change. Building consensus inherently means building support for a policy proposal and the greater the level of support the greater the likelihood of success compared with disparate ideas each with limited support.

In considering ways forward, Watson argues that:

The answer has to be collaboration. We need to work together, pool our resources and share learning, ideas, skills, expertise

¹³ See: Morris, R., Orton, M. and Summers, K. (2020) 'Social security responses to Covid19: the case for £50 Child Benefit' *Discover Society* 15 April.

*and funding...Real change will only come when collective impact is embraced – through our shared voice and actions.*¹⁴

This raises a general question as to how to encourage working together, but a key starting point is that joint working needs to be shown as having value. This ties in with thinking in the US around what is referred to as ‘systems entrepreneurship’.¹⁵ The systems entrepreneurship approach argues that it is time to focus on solving problems through creative collaboration and networks, rather than creating new institutions or undertaking habitual one-off projects.

Theories of change

A further link can be made with theories of change (something which is often not discussed in relation to anti-poverty work). Many theories of change exist, but one potentially successful approach to achieving change can be expressed in simple terms as being when lots of different organisations and individuals all start saying the same thing.¹⁶ The Living Wage campaign, mentioned above, can be cited as an example because while many factors contributed to its success, uniting people around a simple, transparent, clear ask was one of them. The argument is that when it comes to influencing, multiple voices and organisational efforts all pushing in the same direction provides a far greater likelihood of success than situations where efforts are silo’d and disparate.

A final point to make is about understandings of policy development. Anti-poverty funding is typically for individual organisations to deliver specific interventions with discrete impact pledged (habitual one-off

¹⁴ Watson, J. (2016) ‘Is the third sector failing?’ *New Statesman* Supplement 21 October p8.

¹⁵ Vexler, D. (2017) ‘What exactly do we mean by systems?’ *Stanford Social Innovation Review* 22 June.

¹⁶ For a helpful account of how change happens from a practical rather than theoretical perspective, see: Williams, Z. (2015) *Get it together* London: Hutchinson.

projects as referred to above). But real-world policy development is invariably found to be “complex and messy”¹⁷ rather than – certainly at the level of national government – a linear, one-dimensional process in which a single action leads to a specified change. The idea that (one way) change happens is when lots of different people start saying the same thing, appears better to reflect the complex and messy reality of policy development.

Having discussed being solutions focused, giving centrality to people with lived experience and building consensus, consideration now turns to how work and thinking around these themes developed into the idea of a project for what ultimately became the Commission on Social Security.

¹⁷ Institute for Government (2011) Policy making in the real world: evidence and analysis London: Institute for Government.

The development of the project idea

The genesis of the idea for a project around the themes discussed above, can be traced through a number of pieces of work beginning with concern about socio-economic insecurity.

Work on socio-economic insecurity

Close to a decade ago, the Webb Memorial Trust became interested in socio-economic insecurity as a research theme. Funding was given to the think tank Compass for a literature review to be undertaken on the topic. Michael Orton, co-author of this report, undertook the work as a result of contact with the then Compass Chair, Baroness Ruth Lister. The outcome was a report published in 2015 - *Something's Not Right: Insecurity and an anxious nation* – which highlighted the extent of insecurity and its negative consequences.

Given the extent of the problem of socio-economic insecurity that had been identified, Webb agreed to fund a follow-up piece of work to identify solutions. The work included another literature review but also interviews with civil society actors across a range of centre-right/centre-left organisations. The outcome was a 2016 report called *Secure & Free: 5+ solutions to socio-economic insecurity*. That report contained two key findings. First – across centre-left/centre-right groups – there was significant consensus on a range of topics such as increasing the minimum wage, building more homes and Early Childhood Education and Care, including detailed plans for policy implementation on these issues. Second, on the core issue of social security (welfare benefits) there was no consensus even among anti-poverty campaigners, never mind across the centre-left/centre-right spectrum, and nor were there any plans comparable to those on topics like house building.

2016-17 workshops

Michael Orton and Ruth Lister then obtained a grant from the UK Social Policy Association to run a series of workshops called 'How do we put

the security back into social security?', which ran from autumn 2016 into early 2017.¹⁸ Those workshops confirmed the lack of existing consensus on social security but they did identify a number of key issues, such as the need for core principles to underpin the social security system, the need for a new approach to disability benefits and addressing problems with Universal Credit, as potential starting points for solutions (see Batty and Orton, 2019). The workshops also sought to include people with lived experience, with sessions beginning with contributions from a number of participants including a benefit claimant. At one of the workshops a suggestion was made for producing a Green Paper on social security as a means of stimulating debate.

The Future of Social Security grouping

In a further attempt to develop work on social security, in July 2017 Ruth Lister and Michael Orton convened a meeting of Chief Executives of organisations concerned with anti-poverty action to discuss possible scope for a shared strategy. This became known as the Future of Social Security (FSS) grouping. The main outcome from the FSS was agreement on a number of shared asks for the November 2017 autumn budget.¹⁹

As part of the work around the FSS, in September 2017 Trust for London and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation provided funding to involve people with lived experience. Trust for London put Michael Orton in touch with Ellen Clifford (then at Inclusion London) and Nick Phillips (London Unemployed Strategies). In discussing work around social security, these three (Michael Orton, Ellen Clifford and Nick Phillips) began to consider the potential for a project specifically taking a solutions focused approach, with people with lived experience central

¹⁸ Batty, S. and Orton, M. (2018) 'An agenda for fixing the social security/welfare benefits system' *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice* 26(2): 291-295.

¹⁹ For further details see: Orton, M. (2019) 'Challenges for anti-poverty action: developing approaches that are solutions focused, participative and collaborative' *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice* 27(1): 131-136.

and based on consensus building. The suggestion of producing a Green Paper on social security was noted above and this developed into the broader idea of a civil society White Paper on social security.

The project proposal

The above culminated in February 2018 with Michal Orton, and Ellen Clifford and Nick Phillips as named partners, submitting an application to Trust for London for a project called 'A Londoner-led White Paper on social security/welfare benefits'.

In May 2018 Trust for London awarded funding for the project, meaning work could begin on what has been seen to be the missing element in anti-poverty action - a plan for a better social security system. How this developed into the Commission on Social Security is the starting point for the next chapter.

Chapter 2

The Commission on Social Security: inception, model and ways of working

This chapter examines the inception of the Commission on Social Security. The model that was decided upon is discussed along with the Commissioners and secretariat. Consideration is then given to ways of working that developed, with particular focus on accessibility, the impact of Covid-19 and consensus decision making. However, the Commission project has gone through a number of stages so the chapter begins with a timeline.

Timeline

The project timeline can be summarised as follows.

May 2018	Funding awarded by Trust for London.
Oct-Nov 2018	Project inception group meetings.
Dec 2018	Monthly Commission meetings commenced.
May 2019	Launch of the Commission's Call for Solutions.
Oct 2019-Jan 2020	Analysis of responses to the Call for Solutions and consideration of proposals to be made.
Feb 2020	Headline proposals agreed and Phase 1 funding ended.

March 2020	Funding for Phase 2 awarded by Trust for London.
April-July 2020	Due to Covid-19, Phase 1 outcomes revisited and revised and new ways of working adopted.
Aug 2020	Launch of a public consultation on the Commission's draft proposals.
Dec 2020	Analysis of responses to the public consultation commenced.
Jan 2021	Independent evaluation of the Commission began.
July 2021	Independent evaluation concluded.
Aug-Sept 2021	Commissioners agreed final proposals.
Oct 2021	Event held to preview the proposals.
Nov-Dec 2021	<i>The Plan</i> for a decent social security system produced.
Jan 2022	Publication of <i>The Plan</i> and this project report.

Attention now turns to the substantive elements of this chapter, beginning with the inception of the Commission.

Inception

Chapter 1 concluded with the award by Trust for London in May 2018 of funding for a project that at that point had the title 'A Londoner-led White Paper on social security/welfare benefits'. The funding application had set out a fairly standard approach beginning with establishing a project steering group. But as the project partners - Michal Orton (University of Warwick), Ellen Clifford (then at Inclusion

London) and Nick Phillips (London Unemployed Strategies) – discussed this, a number of questions arose about the best approach to take. In particular, the funding application had envisaged the project steering group would consist of a mix of people with lived experience and professionals but in discussing membership of the group there was immediate concern about ensuring the voices of people with lived experience did not become lost.

In order to ensure people with lived experience were truly central to the work and, critically, decision making, it was agreed that the first step should be to form a project inception group consisting of people with lived experience and that group should determine how to operationalise the project. Trust for London kindly agreed to this revised approach.

The project inception group

A project inception group was therefore formed. Ellen Clifford and Nick Phillips each involved three people from their respective networks making (including Ellen and Nick) eight members in total. Michael Orton provided administrative support and Austin Taylor-Laybourn, Trust for London Grants Manager, attended as an observer.

The project inception group held two meetings, in October and November 2018. The project funding meant there were two non-negotiables: a White Paper style document on social security had to be produced and the project had to be led by people with lived experience. Beyond those two parameters, everything else was up for discussion.

The commission of inquiry model

The inception group made the following key decisions.

- *The project would use a commission of inquiry model.* Different options such as a citizens' jury or deliberative assembly were considered but the group decided that a commission of inquiry model was the most suitable approach given the aim of producing

a White Paper style document with concrete proposals on social security.

- *All Commissioners were to be people with lived experience.* The starting point for discussion was the idea of a mix of people with lived and professional experience, following on from the approach suggested in the funding application. But members of the inception group expressed a range of concerns about ensuring an environment in which people with lived experience felt comfortable and confident to contribute. Borrowing a phrase often used by disabled activists, there was a theme that professional experts should be ‘on tap not on top’ and how, despite the best of intentions, it can be the case in co-production that people with lived experience defer to professionals. The key argument was that people with lived experience had to be the decision makers in order to give substance to the aim of lived experience being central to the project. Thus, it was decided all Commissioners should be people with lived experience.
- *A secretariat to support the work of the Commission should be created.* Following the ‘on tap not on top’ theme, the inception group decided that the Commission should have a secretariat of professionals but working under the direction of Commissioners.
- *The preferred descriptor for people with lived experience was to be ‘Experts by Experience’.* A number of options were discussed such as service users, claimants and people with lived experience but members of the group decided ‘Experts by Experience’ best conveyed the expertise they brought with them, not simply the experience, and conveyed an equality of status with professional experts.
- *For the purposes of becoming a Commissioner, the definition of being an Expert by Experience was having lived experience of the social security system since 2010.* The inception group did not want to be overly prescriptive but 2010 was seen as the start of significant changes to social security and therefore a reasonable cut off point. Within this definition, however, it was decided lived experience would be self-identified.

- *It would be expected that Commissioners would consult within their individual organisations and networks.* This was an explicit requirement, but the inception group again sought to avoid being overly prescriptive and it was decided it would be left to individual Commissioners to decide how best to approach this. It meant that Commissioners were envisaged as having a representative role in a broad not literal sense, but without that being defined and no prescribed requirements on how to consult/feedback (this point will be returned to below).
- *Ellen Clifford and Nick Phillips would be Co-chairs.* This reflected Ellen and Nick's role in the funding application and bringing together the inception group.
- *All the Experts by Experience in the inception group would be Commissioners.*
- *A matrix would be drawn up to identify gaps in experience and equality and identity dimensions.* Additional Commissioners would then be needed to fill any such gaps.

Consideration will now be given to who became Commissioners.

The Commissioners

As noted above, all the Experts by Experience involved in the inception group agreed to become Commissioners and a matrix was created to identify gaps in experience and equality and identity dimensions. These gaps were filled via Commissioners' networks covering a variety of grassroots, claimant and user-led groups and Deaf and Disabled People's Organisations.

The outcome was a total of 16 Commissioners. For some Commissioners, anonymity was a major concern. This related both to sensitivities around sometimes very personal information but also concern about how DWP might consider involvement in the project. Consequently, Appendix 1 contains biographies for some Commissioners but not all.

As demonstrated by the matrix referred to above, Commissioners held themselves to an incredibly high standard in seeking diversity and inclusiveness. Commissioners' experience of social security covered Universal Credit, Income Support, Jobseeker's Allowance, Tax Credits, Employment and Support Allowance, Disability Living Allowance, Personal Independence Payment, Severe Disablement Allowance, plus Access to Work. Commissioners were primarily, though not exclusively, not in paid employment and were renters. They included single people, single parents and members of couples both with and without children. Diversity included ethnicity and gender and ages ranged from 20s to 60s. Commissioners included people with physical impairment, mental distress and neurodivergence.

Over time there were some changes, for example Nick Phillips stood down in 2020 and another Commissioner, Ellen Morrison, became Co-chair, but the structure of the Commission remained the same.

The Commission secretariat

The secretariat was formed, as follows.

- Observer - Austin Taylor-Laybourn (Trust for London).
- Evaluation and Learning - Kate Summers (London School of Economics).
- Commission Secretary - Michael Orton (University of Warwick).
- Disability Benefits Research – Rosa Morris (Independent Researcher and Welfare Rights Clinic Coordinator).

Further details about secretariat members are in Appendix 2.

The professional/lived experience distinction was not absolute. Some members of the secretariat also had lived experience of the social security system while some Commissioners had professional as well as experiential expertise. What is important to emphasise in relation to the model that was adopted was the inversion of standard power relations, with people with lived experience being the decision makers

and the (professional) members of the secretariat working as directed by the Expert by Experience Commissioners. On a spectrum of participatory approaches, the Commission project certainly sits at the upper end, adopting a highly innovative and even ground breaking approach. How decision making operated in practice will now be seen as consideration is given to the Commission's ways of working.

Ways of working

The Commission's ways of working were not pre-determined but developed organically. What also characterised the Commission's work was very much taking a one step at a time approach. That enabled ways of working to develop in a reflexive manner, allowing process and practice to develop at a pace with which Commissioners felt comfortable and allowing time for reflection and, if needed, reappraisal before considering the next step to be taken.

The way of working that developed prior to the onset of Covid-19 can be summarised as follows.

- Commission meetings were held monthly from December 2018 to February 2020.
- Commissioners discussed and decided strategy.
- The secretariat was tasked with providing briefing notes as requested by Commissioners.
- Briefing notes contained possible – but not exclusive – options.
- Commissioners considered and discussed options, added their own perspectives and ideas, and then decided how to proceed.

A good example of how this worked in practice was the 2019 Call for Solutions (the detail of which will be discussed in Chapter 3). In short, Commissioners tasked the secretariat with producing a form that could be used for the proposed Call for Solutions. The secretariat did so. Commissioners considered the draft form and decided it did not match up with their requirements. The secretariat was asked to completely revise the document taking account of Commissioners' views around priorities, accessibility and so on. The final outcome was far removed from, and far stronger than, the initial draft.

Another feature of the Commission's work was being outcome focused and keeping, at Commissioners' request, documentation to a minimum. Agendas were produced for meetings and action points

recorded but detailed minutes were not kept and in briefing papers the emphasis was strongly on brevity with Commissioners able to ask for further information and sources as they wished.

As per the timetable at the start of this chapter, Phase 1 of the project ended in February 2020 and further funding was agreed in March 2020. It was planned that working arrangements would be reviewed at that point but with the advent of Covid-19 the situation changed dramatically. However, before discussing how arrangements were revised due to the pandemic, consideration will be given to a theme that Commissioners prioritised throughout the project - accessibility.

*Accessibility*²⁰

Accessibility was established as a key requirement at the very first meeting of the project inception group and continued to be regularly emphasised. Pre-pandemic Commission meetings were held monthly, in-person and with arrangements made to meet Commissioners' access needs. This included booking taxis for Commissioners who required them and having British Sign Language interpreters and Personal Assistants available. It was also possible for Commissioners who could not attend a meeting in person to join or contribute in whatever way worked best for them, with people joining meetings remotely by Zoom in 2019, well before the pandemic made Zoom use widespread. Supported pre-meeting preparation time was another approach that developed, enabling Commissioners who wished to do so to talk through the agenda and consider any points they would like to make in advance of the meeting.

A commitment to inclusion and accessibility extended to the Commission's outward facing work. Commissioners were consistent in wanting to ensure a wide range of voices were included in the

²⁰ Also see: Morris, R., Morrison, E., Orton, M. and Summers, K. (2022) 'The Commission on Social Security and participatory research during the pandemic: new context, abiding challenges' in K. Garthwaite et al. (eds.) *Covid-19 Collaborations: Researching Poverty and Low-Income Family Life During the Pandemic* Bristol: Policy Press.

Commission's work. Commissioners decided Easy Read should be the Commission's default, rather than an additional format offered, whenever funding allowed it. The 2019 Call for Solutions, referred to above, can again be used to illustrate points here. Commissioners made clear people should be able to access and respond to the Call for Solutions in a way that worked for them. The Call for Solutions used an online form in Easy Read, an accessible format characterised by simple words and short sentences alongside images. This makes the text more accessible to people with learning difficulties but also for other impairment groups, as well as people with English as a second or additional language. The online form also used British Sign Language videos with subtitles and audio so there were multiple ways to access the questions being posed. Commissioners tried to ensure there were as few barriers as possible to responding to the Call. Consideration was given to those who face digital exclusion and so the online form was not the sole way to respond. People were encouraged to feed in their thoughts through organisations they were part of, or complete a paper copy, and there was even a legislative theatre initiative and poetry day so thoughts and ideas could be expressed beyond standard written submissions.

Consideration now turns to the impact of Covid-19.

The impact of Covid-19

The advent of Covid-19 coincided with commencement of Phase 2 of the project. An initial Phase 2 meeting had been scheduled for March 2020 but was cancelled due to the pandemic and it was decided to put the project on hold. As the full impact of Covid-19 became apparent it was recognised that new ways of working were required. What also became apparent was the rapidly changing policy context with the economic impact of the pandemic meaning social security suddenly became the focus of considerable public attention, for example newspaper stories highlighting the inadequacy of Statutory Sick Pay which large numbers of people were having to rely on. In addition, as seen in Chapter 1, several organisations started publishing plans for improvements to the social security system. It was evident that there was an opportunity for the Commission to put forward its ideas, but to do so meant revisiting and revising the headline proposals agreed at the end of Phase 1, in the light of the dramatically changed situation.

This was a very challenging period for the Commission. While Zoom was already in use as part of Commission meetings not all Commissioners were familiar with the technology nor had suitable devices to use. Some Zoom meetings were held but not all Commissioners were able to join, so email and one to one telephone calls were used as required by individual Commissioners, on the basis of what worked best for them. It was to Commissioners' great credit that despite the difficulties faced, work continued with revised policy proposals agreed. These revised (draft) proposals were launched for public consultation in August 2020 in an online event in which Commissioners made contributions either live or through pre-recorded film and audio. The early months of 2021 continued to be difficult because of the pandemic and also work had to run in parallel with an external evaluation of the project, undertaken by Shaping Our Lives. The evaluation informed the final stages of the project and will be drawn on at different points in this report. It is available on the Shaping Our Lives website at www.shapingourlives.org.uk.

As 2021 progressed Zoom meetings became more standard and all Commissioners were again able to be involved in group meetings. In

autumn 2021 some hybrid sessions were held i.e. with some Commissioners meeting in person and others joining by Zoom - what was in fact a return to the Commission's pre-pandemic arrangement.

Although Covid had considerable impact on the project, the commitment to accessibility did not wane. The public consultation launch in summer 2020 was livestreamed, with BSL interpretation, to multiple social media platforms so people could watch and interact on a platform that best suited them. The access break and ability to play back the event on these platforms at any time, was also a deliberate choice, particularly for people with energy-limiting chronic illness or energy impairment. Commissioners received more one-to-one support than before the pandemic. BSL interpretation continued but on Zoom instead of face to face, and taxis were arranged for the meetings that were hybrid. There were also efforts, in times of relative low Covid case numbers and when it was legal to do so, to meet with Commissioners who needed extra support with using software and devices required to participate, to ensure they were connected and confident using them.

The next way of working to consider relates to decision making.

Consensus decision making

Reflecting the Commission's organic, step by step approach, no formal decision making process was established at the outset of the project. At meetings, there was open discussion and then an implicit process of compromise, with consensus being reached and a collective decision made. Voting was only used on one occasion, driven by funding coming to an end, and while it achieved the need for immediate decisions it ultimately created problems because, in accordance with the Commission's more usual way of working, as Commissioners reflected on outcomes some wished to reappraise them whereas others felt the votes were binding and issues determined by voting should not be revisited.

Ultimately, and informed by the external evaluation, the Commission formalised its position and adopted a consensus decision making

approach based on work by Seeds for Change.²¹ The approach adopted by the Commission is set out in Appendix 3. It should also be emphasised that at all times it was Commissioners who were the decision makers, with the secretariat working to Commissioners' direction.

Three final points can be noted regarding ways of working. First, the emphasis on accessibility meant people were able to engage and contribute as worked for them. Several Commissioners had periods of being unwell and/or conditions and impairments that meant their level of involvement varied. While standard working arrangements would not have been able to accommodate this, the Commission's approach meant people could continue to be involved and talent which is wasted in standard arrangements was utilised and added greatly to the strength of the Commission's work. Second, during the course of the project many opportunities arose to engage in more short-term issues around social security. The need for urgency versus a strategic, long-term view, was a dynamic that ran through the Commission's work. Commissioners did engage with opportunities such as speaking at events and providing evidence to parliamentary committee inquiries. However, it was recognised that many others already work on more immediate issues - the 2021 campaign to retain the £20 Universal Credit uplift being a good example. So the Commission did not duplicate what others were already doing and instead retained its focus on what was seen in Chapter 1 to be the missing element in anti-poverty action - a plan for a better social security system. This ties to a third point which was that rather than chasing publicity the project relied on the quality of its outputs to attract attention. The Commission never developed a formal comms strategy. Rather, efforts focused on ensuring activities such as the Call for Solutions were done to a very high standard and interest then developed.

It goes without saying that ways of working did not always run smoothly. It was noted above how an instance of voting on decisions led to problems. Part way through the project it was recognised that what had developed as an implicit ethos of co-working and respect needed to be recorded as an explicit written document. The external

²¹ www.seedsforchange.org.uk.

evaluation identified that most Commissioners were very positive about their involvement, but not all. The question of whether Commissioners had a broad representative role or should act as the mandated representative of a specified organisation was never fully resolved nor was the amount of reading material. The evaluation also identified different views regarding the respective roles of Commissioners, the secretariat and funder. Another issue was the realities of working within a specific funded project. The grant holder, with attendant project management and financial responsibilities and accountabilities, was Michael Orton. The Commission was a project not an organisation which could hold its own funds. The Experts by Experience were the decision makers on the outputs which will be discussed in the next chapter and determined the strategic direction of the project but there were points where the project budget, timelines, administrative requirements and so on meant there were parameters that had to be worked within and Commissioners did not have power over that. Challenges raised by the project will be returned to in Chapter 4. But the next matter to consider is outputs from the project and that is the subject of Chapter 3, which now follows.

Chapter 3

Outcomes: principles, plan and network

This chapter considers key outcomes from the Commission project. The chapter begins with principles to underpin social security which Commissioners set out plus the Commission's position on equality. Consideration is then given to the process behind the main project outcome i.e. the Commission's plan for a decent social security system including a Guaranteed Decent Income, increased Child Benefit, a completely new approach to disability benefits and links with other areas. Key elements of the process discussed are the 2019 Call for Solutions, revisions made in the light of Covid-19 and the 2020 public consultation. The chapter concludes by discussing another outcome from the project, namely the extensive and diverse network of individuals and organisations that has developed around the Commission's work.

Principles to underpin social security

The Commission's first output was a set of five concise principles to underpin social security. In Chapter 1 it was noted that one of the strands of work relevant to the development of the Commission was the Future of Social Security (FSS) grouping. In early 2018 the FSS created a sub-group to undertake a piece of work seeing if agreement could be found on principles relating to social security. Some of the Experts by Experience who became Commissioners were involved in the FSS sub-group. The FSS work on principles did not reach completion but upon commencement of the Commission project and discussion about how to approach the task of producing a White Paper style document, some Commissioners referred to their experience in the FSS sub-group. This generated discussion about the importance of principles and

Commissioners decided that their first action would be to agree a set of principles that should underpin social security.

The outcome was that Commissioners set out the following five principles.

1. Make sure everyone has enough money to live – and support extra costs e.g. to do with disability and children.
2. Treat everyone with dignity, respect and trust, and the belief that people should be able to choose for themselves.
3. Be a public service with rights and entitlements.
4. Be clear, simple, user friendly and accessible to all, involving people who have actual experience of the issues, including from all impairment groups, in creating and running the system as a whole.
5. Include access to free advice and support. Make sure people can access support to speak up, be heard or make a complaint.

The principles provide a guide to policy development on social security. The core elements of making sure everyone has enough money to live, supporting extra costs and treating everyone with dignity, respect and trust, provided a basis for the rest of the Commission's work.²²

²² For discussion of the principles from a more theoretical viewpoint see: Orton, M., Summers, K. and Morris, R. (2021) 'Guiding principles for social security policy: outcomes from a bottom-up approach' *Social Policy & Administration*. <http://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12782>.

Equality, the Commission, and the social security system

In addition to the five principles, Commissioners wanted to emphasise strongly and in more detail the importance of equality to their work.

This led to agreement of the following statement.

- Our view is that some people are treated unfairly by the current benefits system.
- Women have been unfairly affected by cuts to social security because of lower incomes and caring responsibilities.
- Racialised groups suffer discrimination and inequality.
- Some groups are more likely to be on low incomes so can be unfairly affected by changes to the system, for example single parents.
- Disabled people and those with long-term health issues have been badly affected by recent changes.
- The D/deaf community should be recognised as its own group.
- There needs to be awareness of different types of impairments.
- Carers save society billions of pounds a year, while many struggle financially.
- The Commission also wants to highlight other groups who can face unfair treatment in the social security system and may need specific support. These include members of the LGBT+ community, Gypsies and travellers, and prisoners and their families.
- The Commission has worked hard to include people and put accessibility at the heart of the project. Commissioners insist that this is vital for creating a social security system for all.

- Equality is key when looking at the proposals we are making.

The final point – that proposals must be viewed through the lens of equality – is critical in examining the ideas which Commissioners decided upon and are now discussed.

The Commission's plan for a decent social security system

The Commission's plan for a decent social system is published separately in a document simply called *The Plan*. Further information is included in a *Technical Note*. Both documents are available on the Commission's website. *The Plan* has five parts: a Guaranteed Decent Income, increased Child Benefit, a new disability benefit based on the social model of disability, links with other areas and a new ethos. To avoid duplication, the proposals are not copied here and instead consideration is given to the process by which they were developed.

Process

Thousands of people contributed to the process of developing the Commission's plan. From the outset Commissioners were clear they did not wish to work in isolation and produce ideas only from their own perspective. As noted in Chapter 2, Commissioners came from a variety of user-led and claimant groups and Deaf and Disabled People's Organisations, and all had their own networks with which they engaged. But Commissioners wanted to go well beyond their own communities. Two key activities were the Commission's 2019 Call for Solutions and 2020 public consultation on its draft proposals. These will now be discussed in turn.

The 2019 Call for Solutions

The Commission's Call for Solutions was mentioned in Chapter 2 in relation to ways of working but it is notable for a number of further reasons. First, it emphasised the solutions focus. A briefing note produced by the secretariat for Commissioners, mentioned that a standard approach for a commission of inquiry would be to issue a call for evidence. But Commissioners were keen to emphasise their focus as being on seeking solutions not asking for evidence of the problems as can be typical in work around social security. This was not to disregard

the lived and professional experience of potential respondents, but to focus the work in the direction of a route out of widely found and well evidenced problems. Hence, Commissioners decided to name the process a 'Call for Solutions'. Second, the Call for Solutions was an expression of the framework adopted for the Commission's work. Commissioners noted how other work tends to focus on one particular demographic or one aspect of the benefits system. Instead, the Call for Solutions demonstrated a holistic approach, asking questions about the benefits system as a whole and not an approach based on different groups. Third, the Call for Solutions embodied consensus building, drawing as many people as possible into the process. Fourth, as detailed in Chapter 2, Commissioners gave careful consideration to inclusivity and accessibility. This was not just about involving as many people as possible but doing everything possible to include the voices of those invariably excluded in public debate.

The Call for Solutions contained eight very straightforward questions like 'Do you think the Government should get rid of Universal Credit? If so, what could they replace it with?' and 'How can the welfare benefits system better support people who are sick or disabled?'

It also asked whether people agreed with the Commission's 5 principles (the answer to that was overwhelmingly 'yes').

The Call for Solutions form was created in Easy Read and can be seen at https://warwick.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_0BNZ7EnuWbbhsBn

Support from the UK Social Policy Association enabled 17 workshops to be held across the UK and these were attended by almost 300 people. Attendees at these workshops could talk through the questions in the Call for Solutions, often in familiar environments such as their grassroots activist groups, claimant advocacy groups or their trades unions. It gave the chance to ask questions and work through ideas that otherwise might not have come through a solely written or online submission. As noted in Chapter 2 there was other activity such as a legislative theatre initiative and poetry.

The Commission received 906 online submissions in response to the Call for Solutions. More than 100 paper/email responses were received.

This was in addition to inputs from the legislative theatre, workshops and other activities.

Commissioners devised a coding frame to analyse the responses to the Call for Solutions. Using the coding frame, the secretariat then produced a series of briefing papers highlighting key issues raised in the Call. Commissioners discussed the briefing papers and then reached decisions with, as seen in Chapter 2, headline proposals agreed in February 2020. These were as follows.

- A guaranteed decent income level.
- Distinct schemes for unemployed people, disabled people, Housing Benefit etc.
- Child Benefit to be increased to a realistic rate for all children and restore universality.
- Payments to be on an individual not household basis.
- Disability benefits to be co-produced by people with lived experience and assessments in line with the social model of disability.

Commissioners also agreed on a lengthy list of more detailed points alongside the headline proposals.

Covid-19 and revising the proposals

The intention was that the above points would form the basis for further work in Phase 2 of the project but, as seen in Chapter 2, Covid-19 dramatically changed the policy landscape. Social security suddenly attracted considerable attention and many organisations began publishing suggestions for immediate action. It was clear that there were ideas circulating that could be drawn upon and there was opportunity to capitalise on renewed interest in social security.

The initial proposals were therefore revisited. The outcome was a total of 42 ideas agreed upon by Commissioners. The only point on which

consensus was not reached related to Carer's Allowance but even on that, compromise wording was arrived at.

Two points on which particularly important detail was added related to a guaranteed decent income level and Child Benefit. Taking these in turn, in February 2020 Commissioners had decided upon the idea of a guaranteed decent income. Proposals from other organisations in the early months of the pandemic suggested a number of options around such an approach. Of particular relevance was an idea published by the New Economics Foundation (NEF) for a minimum income tied to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's (JRF) Minimum Income Standards. The latter is an exercise commissioned by JRF to ascertain from the public what amount of money is seen as necessary for an acceptable standard of living. NEF's minimum income idea, essentially an adaptation of Universal Credit with a higher rate of payment, formed the basis for further reflection by Commissioners which then developed into the Guaranteed Decent Income proposal. With Child Benefit, the start of the pandemic saw some discussion about increasing the level of payment as an administratively easy way of providing families with additional income. It became clear that there was no particular formula for establishing how much Child Benefit should be, but Commissioners noted suggestions that Child Benefit of £50 per child per week was justifiable and that was adopted as a proposal. Further details are in *The Plan* and *Technical Note* available on the Commission's website.

The 2020 public consultation

Having developed the ideas identified through the Call for Solutions into a set of draft proposals, Commissioners put them out for scrutiny and comment in the form of a public consultation. In this exercise, the draft proposals were grouped under eight themes: Important Points; Child Benefit; Disability Benefit; Guaranteed Decent Income; Carer's Allowance; Refugees, asylum seekers and other migrants; Investing in Social Security; Links with other areas.

The consultation form consisted of 29 Agree/Disagree questions (with the options being: Agree strongly - Agree - Disagree - Disagree strongly)

- Don't know) and space for people to add comments on each of the eight themes.

The consultation was launched in August 2020 and ran through to the autumn with activity supported by the London School of Economics Knowledge Exchange and Impact fund and the University of Warwick Impact Accelerator Account.

In addition to the launch event 18 other sessions were held attended by over 300 people. There was a mix of attendees who had taken part in the Call for Solutions, either through the online form or other types of sessions, and people new to the process. Covid-19 limited in-person activity so funding was provided to a small number of groups for targeted work to engage their communities as appropriate to local circumstances. This included an area of multiple deprivation by Thrive Teesside and the Bangladeshi community in East London by Toynbee Hall.

Despite the difficulties posed by the pandemic the response was again excellent, with just short of a thousand submissions received via an online consultation form. Just over a hundred paper and email submissions were received along with feedback from the workshops plus reports on the targeted work with local communities. The public consultation raised a number of questions requiring further consideration so four follow-up workshops were held in April 2021 to explore the relevant points in more detail.

The analysis of results from the public consultation involved Agree/ Disagree questions being collated and additional comments analysed to identify key points raised. These were combined for each of the eight themes under which the draft proposals were grouped. The following can be noted:

- There was a high level of agreement across the proposals, with some receiving close to 100 per cent support and even the lowest levels being over 60 per cent.
- No suggestions were received for better proposals.

- No unintended consequences were identified.
- Some people disagreed on principle with some elements of the proposals, illustrating challenges ahead on influencing.
- Some queries were raised, relating mainly to the Guaranteed Decent Income, which required further consideration by Commissioners.

Full details of responses are available in the supporting papers section of the Commission website.

During what was described in Chapter 2 as a challenging period for the project due to the impact of Covid 19 and needing to work in parallel with an external evaluation of the Commission, a small group of Commissioners gave further consideration to disability benefits. This included two evidence sessions with people with expertise as academics and policy analysts in disability benefits and assessments. This group made no decisions but prepared reports for the Commission as a whole to consider, building more detail into ideas that had emerged through the work so far. These are available in the supporting papers section of the Commission website.

In addition, statistical modelling was undertaken by the Fraser of Allender Institute at the University of Strathclyde to ensure the proposals had no unforeseen negative impacts. The modelling found that the Guaranteed Decent Income and increased Child Benefit would make more than 30 million people better off - that's over half the UK population. The modelling did find there are (in relative terms) a small number of households with particular individual circumstances who would receive less with Guaranteed Decent Income and increased Child Benefit than at present so transitional protection could be used to ensure they were not worse off. Details of the modelling and a number of issues raised, are in the *Technical Note* on the Commission's website.

In summer 2021 Commissioners considered all the information and reports on results from the public consultation, the statistical modelling and the further work on disability benefits. This was done over the course of three meetings and in September 2021 Commissioners

agreed the proposals they wished to make. In October 2021 an event previewing the proposals was held as a part of London Challenge Poverty Week. Feedback from the event led to some final revisions being made to aid clarity. In January 2022 the final version of the Commission's proposals was published as *The Plan* for a decent social security system.

One additional outcome from the project merits attention and that is the network that has developed around the Commission's work.

Network

Network theory was mentioned in Chapter 1. In short, the approach argues that problems are best solved through creative collaboration and networks rather than silo'd and individual efforts. The Commission actively pursued this approach as reflected in it being outward looking, inclusive and seeking to work with others not in competition.

Levels of responses to the Commission's Call for Solutions and public consultation have been noted. The Commission's mailing list reached well over one thousand people with a rich diversity of individual Experts by Experience, user-led, claimant, grassroots and community groups, third sector organisations, advice workers, trades unions, policy experts, academics and more.

To provide a flavour of the network that has developed around the Commission's work, organisations that hosted workshops are listed in Appendix 4. It must be stressed there is no suggestion organisations that are named endorse the Commission's conclusions, but the list illustrates the breadth of involvement in the process through which the Commission's proposals were developed.

So far this report has considered the background to the Commission on Social Security, its inception, ways of working and project outcomes. There is also much learning from the Commission and this is discussed in the next, concluding, chapter.

Chapter 4

Learning and conclusions

This chapter draws out themes discussed in preceding chapters which merit particular attention, doing so within a framework of learning and conclusions. The themes are as follows.

- *Process*: the operationalisation of a solutions focused, consensus building project led by people with lived experience.
- *Participatory projects*: the role of Experts by Experience.
- *Outcomes*: the significance of *The Plan* for a decent social security system.
- *Challenges*: for professionals, funders and for Experts by Experience.
- *Conclusions*: 4 messages.

These themes will now be considered in turn.

Process: enacting a solutions focused, consensus building project led by people with lived experience

Chapter 1 set out the need for new approaches to anti-poverty action based around having a solutions focus, consensus building and being led by people with lived experience. It was these three elements that informed the thinking which ultimately led to the creation of the Commission on Social Security. As has been seen, development of the Commission was organic and incremental and there was always a significant element of experiment around the entire effort.

The first key point to make is that the Commission demonstrated the successful operationalisation of the above elements. The aim of producing a White Paper style document remained constant during the project. *The Plan* for a decent social security system is the outcome, evidencing how Commissioners kept their focus on solutions and making concrete proposals for a better system.

Consensus building was operationalised through the Commission being outward looking, drawing in as many people as possible and building strong relationships with a wide range of groups and individuals. The 2019 Call for Solutions and 2020 public consultation were major exercises and both proved critical in identifying areas of potential agreement. The fact the Commission's draft proposals received high levels of support in the 2020 public consultation reflects the success of the approach. The draft proposals were not the product of the Commissioners working in isolation but were based on the extensive efforts made to involve others in the process and prioritising points where there was evident consensus. Commissioners' use of a consensus decision making model for reaching final decisions on proposals to be included in *The Plan*, meant the Commissioners themselves adhered to consensus building principles and arrived at collective agreement.

That the project was successful in being led by people with lived experience is also clear and is the next key theme to consider.

Participatory projects: the role of Experts by Experience

Chapter 1 noted Peter Beresford's argument that instead of, often repeated, requests on people to detail how awful things are, what is needed is space and support for people with lived experience to develop their own ideas and solutions for change. The Commission project demonstrated how such an approach can be successfully operationalised. The Commission accorded strongly with Beresford's call for providing legitimate ways of drawing on and making public the personal difficulties and hardship faced by people living in poverty, without reducing them to the level of sad stories and statistics. In terms of a spectrum of participatory approaches, the Commission certainly sits at the upper end.

A key learning point relates to (mis)understanding participatory work. The Commission received many queries from researchers and organisations asking for advice and guidance on how to 'do' participatory work. This is a very large topic to unpack, but the starting point from learning from the Commission is that participatory work is not something that professionals 'do' – it is not another method within the research toolbox to be picked up instead of (say) a large-scale survey, focus groups or qualitative interviews. Participatory work requires a completely different approach.

Participatory work demands the involvement of Experts by Experience from the very inception of a project or piece of research. Instead of bringing people in at the methods stage, they need to be there at the outset. At the very beginning of the Commission's work Experts by Experience were involved in deciding what the project would be and were then the decision makers at each stage of the project direction.

Working in partnership with Experts by Experience requires addressing potential barriers to such partnership. This means not just access requirements, but also unequal status and the unequal power relationships which can result. Experts by Experience are often treated differently from the professionals who are seeking to work with them. For example, the only information required of a 'Commission of the

usual suspects', would be publishing the names, professional experience and positions held. They would not be expected to provide information on gender, ethnicity, age, disability or impairment, employment status, relationship status, household tenure and composition. But such questions were regularly asked about Commissioners. This suggests a continuing perception of Experts by Experience as being research subjects about whom data would be compiled to demonstrate methodological robustness. A fundamental change is required to such a perception and Experts by Experience must be recognised as partners of equal status.

Also, it was noted in Chapter 1 that there is a misapprehension in some policy research that experiential ways of knowing are relevant only to describing and understanding one's own biographical situation. The Commission on Social Security unequivocally debunks that view. What the project demonstrates is that when the voices of those who are usually excluded from debate are heard, it leads to new insights, ideas and solutions. The project outcomes far exceeded expectations and it was the participatory approach that produced end results more ambitious and impressive than was ever anticipated. This leads into the significance of the Commission's plan for a decent social security system.

Outcomes: the significance of The Plan for a decent social security system

The significance of the Commission's plan for a decent social security system cannot be underestimated. *The Plan* is for transformational change.

- Everyone would be treated with dignity and respect.
- Nobody would ever have less than half the minimum wage – currently £163.50 a week – to live on, because of the Guaranteed Decent Income.
- The Joseph Rowntree Foundation Minimum Income Standards for what amount of money is needed for an acceptable standard of living would be ensured.
- The importance of other factors in providing social security – good jobs, housing, childcare and so on – would be recognised and acted on.

This is a plan which is holistic, based on principles, and avoids organisational silos and narrow group interest. It was a notable feature of the project that Commissioners avoided such hazards and considered issues in the round. This perhaps reflects how organisations may be based around single issues such as housing, children, and so on, but as individuals – including the Commissioners – we do not see ourselves in such segmented terms but as having identities and interests that cut across and intersect those organisational concerns. A further strength of Commissioners was their ability as a group to discuss detail but retain a strength of focus which meant getting to the heart of matters and making decisions, not getting bogged down in abstract debate or minutiae.

On the theme of significance, Commissioners regularly asked for others to submit their plans for a better social security system. Suffice to say none were forthcoming, reflecting points made in Chapter 1 of this

report about the lack of a plan for social security from an anti-poverty perspective. While *The Plan* has emerged from this project, it is a plan for us all. It is not in the name of an individual or group, nor could it possibly be. It was shaped from thousands of contributions and primarily from people with lived experience of the current system.

Change cannot happen without a plan. In the absence of a plan, campaigning is limited to being reactive – protesting against proposed changes by government and operating within an agenda set by government. The Commission’s plan provides a basis for being proactive, offering a hopeful vision of the future and a way of setting the agenda on social security.

Challenges: for professionals, funders and Experts by Experience

The Commission project has been challenging for all involved and presents challenges for others. For professionals wanting to pursue participatory approaches the above theme on process means, as was described in Chapter 1, breaking out of a well-rehearsed conversation and moving beyond the production of ever more evidence about problems that are only too well known. It also means recognising equality of status with Experts by Experience and actively creating partnerships. It means giving attention to the practicalities of accessibility and working through issues around power relations.

There is no simple template for participatory work. Lessons from the Commission include being explicit and open about parameters, for example in relation to responsibilities on grant holding and what is pre-determined and what is open for decision-making. It requires professionals to take something of a back seat, accepting that no single person or organisation has all the answers and nor can a holistic system be designed by one interest/demographic group. Working in partnership is critical as is a starting point of listening.

The Commission's key outcome – *The Plan* – offers both a challenge and an invitation to professionals and organisations. The challenge is, if you don't have a better plan why not support the Commission's? The invitation, is to engage with the theme of partnership, avoiding duplication of effort and reinventing the wheel, and joining with the Commission on the further work that is still required.

There are also challenges for funders. Trust for London has been extraordinary in its support for the Commission project. From the outset this was, from a funder perspective, a risky proposal and without Trust for London's willingness to be involved nothing would have happened. The relationship with Trust for London was not a standard funder-grantee contractual arrangement but more of a supportive partnership in a new endeavour. The project has involved trusting to a process rather than rigid adherence to fixed milestones and outputs. Commitment to accessibility can be viewed as expensive compared

with standard approaches, if the value of lived experience is reduced to the cost of British Sign Language interpreters, Easy Read translations and so on - but without such provision many people involved in the Commission would have been excluded from it. The independent evaluation, referred to at different points in this report (and which is available on the Shaping Our Lives website - www.shapingourlives.org.uk), recommended having a dedicated project worker to support Experts by Experience and also highlighted how work with Experts by Experience requires time so project funding is needed over a longer period than is standard. The evaluation was critical of the Commission's organic way of developing practices and recommended time be invested early in projects to agree processes and ways of working. All of this increases budgets with no immediate output or impact.

The mention of impact links to a point in Chapter 1 about the complexity and messiness of policy development and how a neat linear model of impact is misplaced. The Commission project demonstrates the reality of how big change, for example the Living Wage or Equal Marriage, is a long-term undertaking. Issues around short-term funding models, project evaluation and measuring impact are consequently raised.

The Commission project also highlighted challenges for Experts by Experience in being involved in participatory work. Many of these challenges stem from issues around unequal power relationships. While a principle of equal status may be professed, in most research and policy development Experts by Experience are coming to the situation with less power and are dependent on the organisation or researchers that seek to work with them being willing to give up power. This can make it a lot harder to create a true partnership and for people to feel able to request access requirements or to be fully listened to.

Within these dynamics Experts by Experience have to consider if their aims are being met and possibly reconsider their involvement. They can be committed to a project and hopeful of the outcomes, but the experience of being involved can become a challenge in itself. They may feel that they need to put up with things not being ideal, such as not having barriers totally met or being fully listened to, because it is

better to be involved in trying to make positive change than not. There can also be concerns around being incorporated and losing independence, perhaps considered by peers to be 'selling out'. All of these issues arose during the course of the Commission project and as seen in Chapter 2, while Commissioners overall found involvement in the project to be a positive experience this was not the case for them all.

In Chapter 2 it was noted there were different perspectives regarding roles within the Commission. In addition, the realities of grant holding responsibilities, the project budget and timeline, meant there were parameters around decision making. This created challenges for everyone involved in the Commission and others attempting similar work will no doubt also face such issues.

Conclusions: 4 messages

This report began with the following quotation from Philip Alston, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights:

For almost one in every two children to be poor in twenty-first century Britain is not just a disgrace, but a social calamity and an economic disaster, all rolled into one.

It was also noted that in twenty-first century Britain, poverty has always been higher than it was in the 1960s and 1970s. That means anti-poverty efforts since the 1980s have failed to return Britain even to the poverty levels that preceded that decade. New approaches are needed.

There are four overarching messages from this project.

1. The Commission has successfully operationalised a model that is solutions focused, consensus building and participatory.
2. The key project outcome – *The Plan* for a decent social security system – is transformative and provides the basis for being proactive and positive, offering a hopeful vision of the future and a way of setting the agenda on social security.
3. There is no simple template for participatory work. Learning from the Commission project includes the importance of being explicit about parameters, recognising Experts by Experience as having equal status and working in partnership, with a starting point of listening also being critical.
4. Challenges are raised for professionals, funders and Experts by Experience alike.

The final conclusion is posed as a question:

if the learning and messages in this report are not acted upon and the same anti-poverty approaches of the last 40 years

continue to be used, is there any reason to believe the results will be different?

Appendix 1: The Commissioners



Barry McDonald joined the Commission to make social security for himself and other people better and fairer than the current harsh approach.



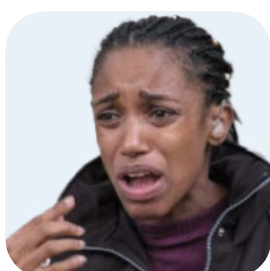
Catherine Hale is the Founder and Director of Chronic Illness Inclusion. She has lived with ME/CFS since 1988 and draws on her lived experience of the benefit system in her work as a disability researcher and activist.



Ellen Clifford is a disabled activist who has worked in the disability sector for over 20 years. She is on the National Steering Group for Disabled People Against Cuts (DPAC).



Ellen Morrison is a disabled person and social security claimant. She has been proud to campaign with Disabled People Against Cuts and in her trade union, Unite.



La Toya Grant is a Deaf activist. She has spent her life challenging the many everyday barriers to participation faced by D/deaf people and is proud to be involved in the Commission and DPAC.



Mike Tighe worked for twenty years in Local Government. He had a mental health crisis and has experienced Incapacity Benefit, Employment Support Allowance and Universal Credit. He volunteers with several mental health and claimants' support groups.



Nigel Barber represents Waltham Forest Stand Up For Your Rights. He brings experience of being on benefits since 2008 following an industrial accident. Nigel is also an active member of East London Unite Community.



Osmond James is an Expert by Experience. He has been involved in a number of claimant and community groups including Cardboard Citizens.



Sarifa Patel is a mother, carer and grassroots campaigner for disabled people's rights. She is vice-chair of the Alliance for Inclusive Education and co-chair of the Newham Disability Rep Forum.

Thanks for their involvement at previous stages of the project go to:

Damien Burke (Kilburn Unemployed Workers Group), Sorena Francis (More Than 1 Forum), Claire Glasman (WinVisible), Nick Phillips (London Unemployed Strategies) and Peter Rogers (DPAC).

Appendix 2: The secretariat

Austin Taylor-Laybourn (Observer): Austin is a Trust for London Grants Manager. Before joining the Trust he worked as a Research Associate on a number of social research projects and studied for an MSC in Social Science Research Methods at City University. His research background also led him to specialise in evaluation. In his 25 years employment in the funding sector, he has worked for a number of bodies including Comic Relief, the Diana Memorial Fund and the National Lottery. He now leads on a number of funding priorities for the Trust including: involving people with first-hand experience as agents of social change, in-work (career) progression for low paid workers and LGBT+ issues.

Kate Summers (Evaluation and Learning): Kate is a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Methodology at the London School of Economics. Her research centres on experiences and perceptions of poverty, economic inequality, and related social policies with a particular focus on social security policy. She uses (and is interested in the potential and power of) qualitative methods including participatory approaches, in-depth interviews and focus groups.

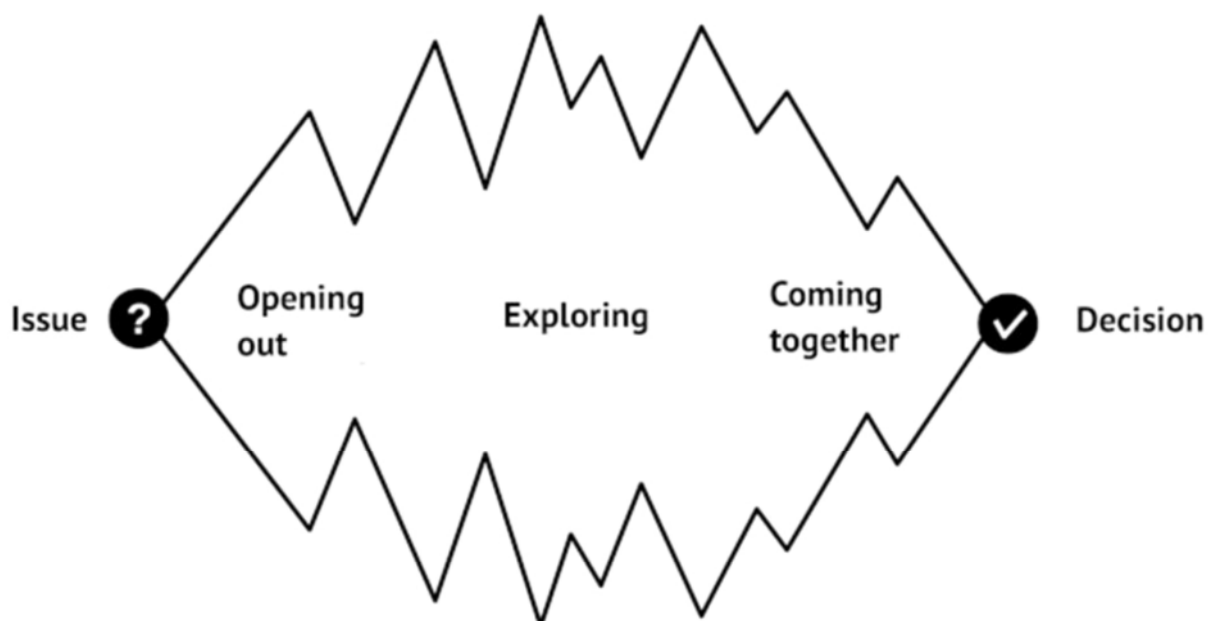
Michael Orton (Commission Secretary): Michael is a researcher at Warwick University. Before becoming a researcher he worked for over 15 years in the third sector and local government. Michael has a life-long mental illness, most recently not working from 2011 to 2015. He has experience as a claimant from Supplementary Benefit to Working Tax Credits.

Rosa Morris (Disability research): Rosa is an independent researcher having previously completed a PhD which looked at the history of out of work disability benefits and the development of the Work Capability Assessment and its impact on people. She has a long-term mental illness which has meant long periods where she was unable to work and has personal experience as a claimant for both Incapacity Benefit and Employment and Support Allowance. Rosa currently also works as a coordinator and advisor at a welfare benefits clinic focused on disability benefits.

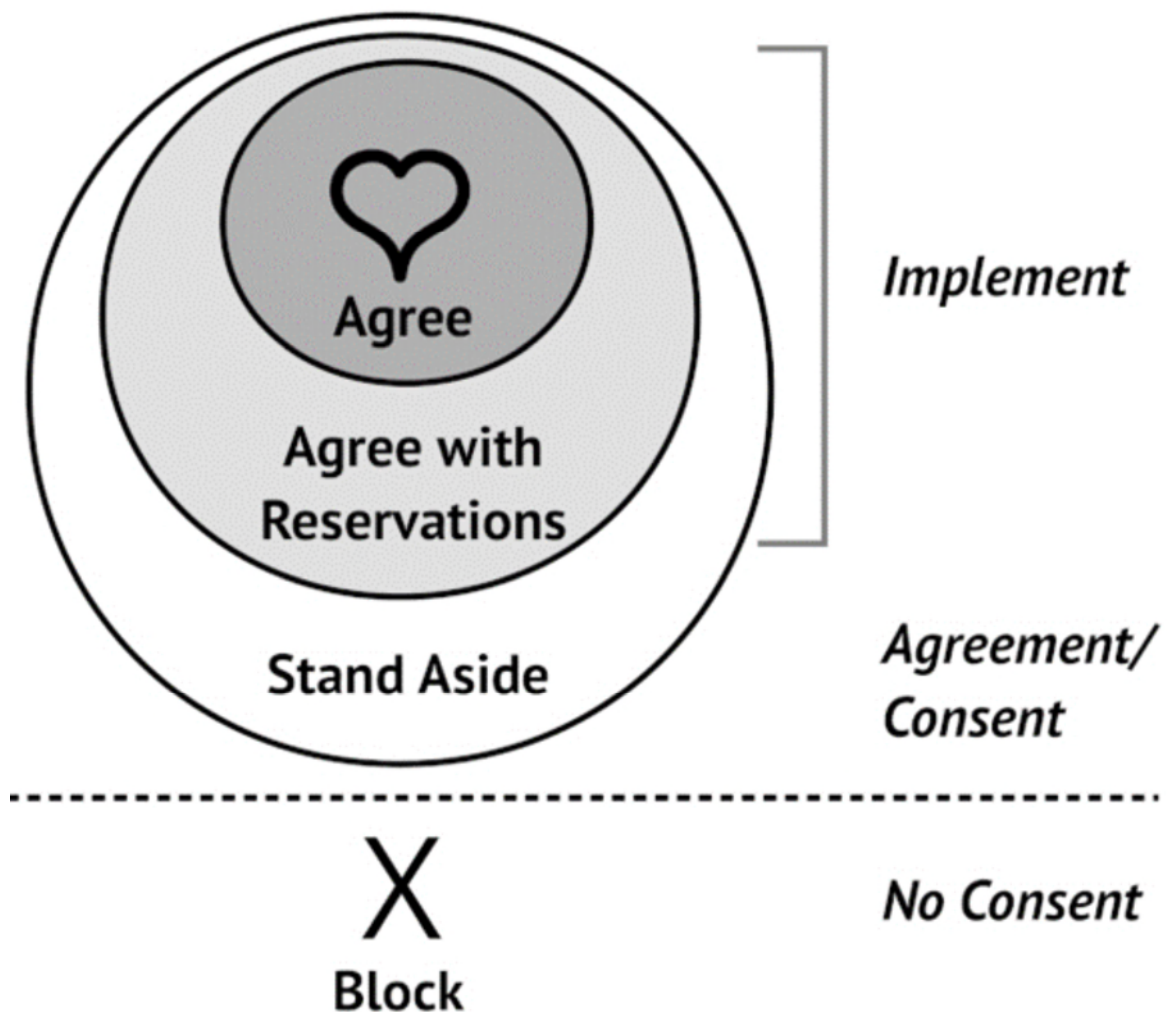
Appendix 3: The Commission's approach to consensus decision making

The Commission adopted the following consensus decision making approach, based on work by Seeds for Change - www.seedsforchange.org.uk.

- Consensus decision making is a way for a group to try to reach an agreement that all members of the group can at least live with, instead of voting and majority rule.
- At its heart consensus is a respectful dialogue between equals, working with each other rather than for or against each other.
- The key ingredient for consensus decision making is all members of the group are committed to making the approach work. The approach doesn't work if even one person in a group is not committed to it.
- This diagram shows the consensus decision making process.



- This diagram shows how consensus decision making works.



- When an idea is discussed consensus decision making means you say:

“I support the idea” – that is AGREEMENT.

“I still have some problems with the idea, but I’ll go along with it” – that is called AGREE WITH RESERVATIONS.

“I can’t support this idea but I don’t want to stop the group, so I won’t object but I won’t be involved in making it happen” – this is called STANDING ASIDE.

“I have a fundamental disagreement with the idea and cannot live with it” – this is called a BLOCK.

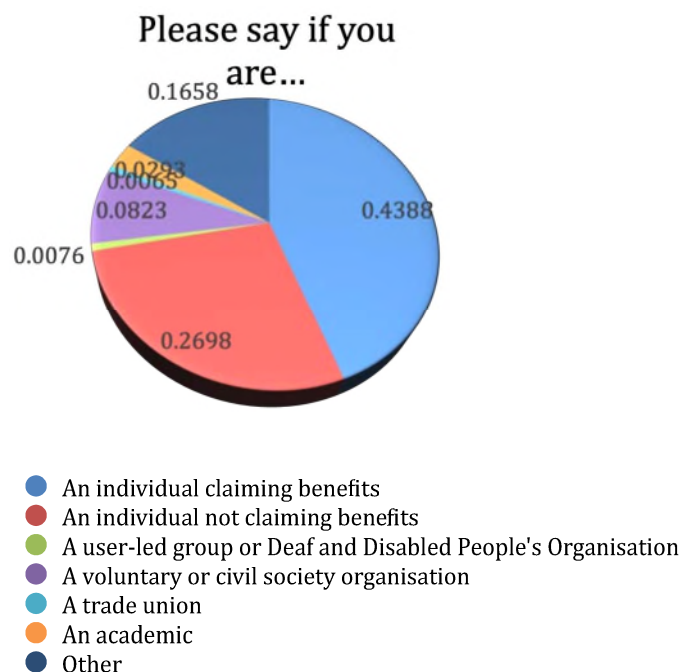
Commissioners decided three additional points.

- A block can only be used if an idea goes against the core aims and principles of the group, rather than an individual doesn't agree with it.
- Anyone blocking also has to identify a way of reaching resolution or else the block is not allowed.
- Each person can only use one block per meeting.

Appendix 4: Network

Through the Commission project a broad and diverse network has developed, including people with lived experience, claimant, user-led and grassroots groups, Deaf and Disabled People's Organisations, third sector organisations, advice workers, unions, academics and so on.

This chart shows a breakdown of people who completed the online form for the 2020 public consultation. The largest group were individual benefit claimants (44%) meaning the project was successful in keeping the consultation focused on people with lived experience, while also engaging a wide range of groups and organisations.



The breadth and diversity of the network that has developed is illustrated by those who generously hosted Commission workshops, and are listed below. Thanks are owed to each of them but it must be emphasised this should not be taken in any way as suggesting agreement with the outcomes of the Commission project.

Commission workshop hosts

Central England Law Centre

Centre for Welfare Reform

Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland

Chronic Illness Inclusion Project

Disabled People Against Cuts

Greater Manchester Poverty Alliance

Institute for Policy Research - University of Bath

Law Centre NI

Leeds Poverty Truth Commission & University of Leeds

London School of Economics

MIND

National Association of Welfare Rights Advisers

Norfolk DPAC and Norfolk against UC

Northumbria University

Oxfam Cymru & University of Cardiff

Participation and the Practice of Rights – Northern Ireland

People First (Self Advocacy)

Poverty Alliance (Scotland)

Thrive Teesside

Together Creating Communities (Wales)

Unite Community & Unemployed Workers Centres

Unite Community North East, Yorkshire & the Humber

Welfare Reform Working Together Group, Coventry

Women's Budget Group.