

# LISTEN UP!

## Sheffield Diocese 2013-14

### Churches and community groups enabled to:

- Listen to those most affected by welfare reforms, public sector cuts and economic change.
- Build a picture of how their communities, may be affected by current and future changes.
- Share the lessons learned, making informed contributions to public debate, locally and nationally.
- Prompt action to address the issues identified.

People in Britain are experiencing the biggest changes to their welfare state for 60 years. Many agree that the welfare system needs changing, but there is less agreement on how. Further, the changes come in challenging times: a wider climate of economic uncertainty, austerity and cuts to public services.

Welfare reform will affect us all. For better or worse, it is important that the stories of what the changes mean for people in our communities are listened to and told. Churches are well placed to help gather the stories. In turn, 'listening where others have failed to' is a powerful means of demonstrating that the church recognises injustices and wants to respond.

Listen Up! was developed by Jane Perry, working with Sheffield Diocese and Church Action on Poverty. Between



2012 and 2014, five groups carried out around 35 semi-structured 1-1 conversations, alongside other listening activities. This showed local people were prepared to share stories and that, with appropriate safeguards, this could be a positive experience.

Community researchers reported that the process was harrowing, but also rewarding. Working in partnership with other local churches and community groups

strengthened relationships and allowed new links to be formed. Those who took part reported being better informed of issues and the likely impact of welfare reform in their area, more empowered to engage with those most need in their communities and better able to begin to explore appropriate ways of responding. Above all, powerful but often untold stories were heard.

## Common themes

### 1. Talking to real people was revealing:

- **Hope and resilience** of people was humbling, but also challenging. It was felt people should not have to tackle such difficulties without more support. Also the flipside of resilience was a pride which often keeps struggles hidden rather than reaching out for help.
- **Importance of avoiding superficial stereotypes** - we are all individuals with our own characteristics, by contrast, public debate can tend to put people into categories and make unfair generalisations

about them.

### 2. While there were local differences, the current climate also brought shared challenges:

- **Negative impact of welfare reform and austerity** creating a climate of fear, squeezing incomes and increasing vulnerability to high-cost lenders.
- **Prevalence of mental health issues** and apparent insufficiency of current provision.
- **Lack of 1-1 support from public bodies** - the struggles people encounter with 'faceless

bureaucracy' exacerbated by on-line applications or telephone helplines.

- **Importance of support groups** for those coping with family illness or disability and other community projects offering social support.
  - *Immense value, but also fragility, of nuclear and extended families.*
- ### 3. Particular contribution of Listen Up!
- **Privilege of hearing first-hand the reality of living with poverty:** 'the practical things that you only really see from close up'.

- **'Creating sparks with integrity':** how engaging in 'uncomfortable conversations' could give opportunity to build new relationships, bringing people together to take action.
- **Importance of listening:** The power of Listen Up! is not in a set of tools, but in the values of intentional listening; of sharing stories which respect the unique value of each individual and family; and of empowering people by focusing on their gifts.

# LISTEN UP LONGLEY!

St Leonards, Norwood, is a Church of England parish church located at the heart of the Longley Estate. The church serves the communities of Longley, Norwood and Shirecliffe, in the northern part of Sheffield. The Longley team were recruited by the church. The local volunteers included two church members, a representative from the local Tenants and Residents Association (TARA) and a community worker employed by the Methodist church. They were assisted by two local clergy, including the Parish vicar who acted as the team coordinator. The team spoke to six families with children, a mix of single parents and couples. One family had a parent in work and in another the mother had a job, but has been on sick-leave for over a year. The other four families had no paid workers. In three cases one or both parents were actively looking for work.

***"I might be little, but I'm mighty"***

*Longley participant*

*"I have met new strangers, who have shared so much of their circumstances with me, if I had any stereotypical ideas about them, they have been blown away. And if I had any fear about getting involved with those who are really struggling and who are embedded in the culture of their estates, it has paled into insignificance at the side of their courage and their acceptance of me, and my desire to pray for them and with them."*

*Participant researcher*

## Learning about the lives of local people

Local people in Longley have impressive human resilience. The local community flourishes most around people who have the drive to improve things for themselves and others and whose drive for this is not squashed by their difficult circumstances.

We felt that some of the people interviewed were extraordinary in this way. Strong women played a key role in many families, with either the mother or a strong female figure in the wider family taking an active responsibility for keeping things "on track".

Resilience was often underpinned by extremely good financial management skills. Some families were good at bargain hunting and finding creative ways of getting by financially. However for those who were struggling, loss of control of finances both indicated and contributed to their difficulties. Social assets

were another strong feature of the Longley interviews. Nuclear family provided personal strength and encouraged resourcefulness. All six families interviewed had wider family living close by. Some families were dependent on parental support. Some families were very supportive. Friends and wider social contact were mentioned as a source of support, but for those interviewed, family ties played a crucial role.

Most families we interviewed had computers, internet access, TV and mobile phones. They used these assets as a way of coping with their situations.

Paid work was crucially important to participants, but their stories also revealed the extreme challenge presented when the opportunity to work is removed by redundancy or ill-health reasons. Even the family who were currently

doing well would be severely challenged if the father lost his job. Having few or no educational qualifications clearly presented challenges for getting a job. However, qualifications and work experience were no guarantee of financial security. Ill-health, caring responsibilities and difficulty finding work affected even participants with teaching or account management experience.

Benefits played a large part in family finances, for those in and out of work. However, benefits also posed a huge risk, with families facing immediate and serious consequences when benefits were late or delayed. Being 'benefit savvy' was recognized as a significant human asset, with ability to fight for their benefit entitlement playing a key role in one family's survival.

## And how the current climate affects their livelihoods

### Costs of childcare:

Several of the families we interviewed had young children, and although parents wanted to get back into work, they said it would not be worth their while because of the cost of childcare.

### Beyond family support:

Depending on parents, financially (loans and helping to manage money) and in other ways, is sometimes the thing that enables people to survive. Some people get no support of this kind from their parents / family, which can make their livelihoods unsustainable.

### Pressure to buy:

People are still strongly influenced by consumer culture, maybe partly because the TV is often the only affordable form of entertainment / relaxation.



A PERSONAL STORY: Before her car accident, Abby described herself as being on a “living wage” of around £150 to £200 per week. The sick pay she currently receives through being unable to work because of her injuries has halved that element of income to £85 per week, leaving her much more dependent on tax credits and benefits paid for her children. After bills are paid, she is left with £20 for other things. Abby’s accident compounded difficulties caused by estrangement from her family and the loss of her baby to cot death, leaving her with ‘re-occurring depression’. And yet she retains an impressive sense of personal resilience, saying “I might be little but I’m mighty”. She expressed a certain sense of inevitability about having to be, as she described herself, “like iron”, based on perception of having little choice but to cope alone. When asked who she turned to in a crisis, he responded “to the mirror”.



## Welcome to Longley

Longley is a residential neighbourhood in north Sheffield, part of the Firth Park electoral ward but with a strong distinct identity.

The ethnicity of the area is historically mainly white (95%), but is felt to be changing. Of the 6,000 residents, a sizeable proportion are young people (31% under 25 with 7% pre-school age) or older people aged 65+ (17%).

Both these figures are larger than the city wide averages. Made up mostly of housing built by Sheffield City Council in the late 1920's, the area is now a mix of mainly owner occupied (40%) and local authority rented (53%), the remainder being housing association or private rented.

The area is noted as having quite a high rating on the index of multiple deprivation

(a score of 50.6, almost twice the city average of 27.1).

Crime is an issue in the area, the recorded figures of 67.1 crimes per 1,000 population in 2010/11 is almost double the city average.

Educationally, pupils from the area do less well, with only 32% getting 5 A\*-C grades at GCSE including English and Maths against a city average of 49%.

*“Because I’ve always worked full time and my husband has worked full time before and we’ve never claimed for anything, we didn’t know what we were entitled to”*

*Longley participant*

*“We have done some amazing work together. I have sat with a guy from the local tenants’ association and local people, listening to them outline their honest struggle to survive on benefits amid the horrendous circumstances that life has brought to them, usually through little if any fault of their own. When I tell richer people some of the stories, sometimes they judge people for wasting money. But then I ask them whether they wouldn’t smoke, if they faced living in a 3 bed house with a spouse with serious mental health problems and three teenage children, one with a disease that means his skeleton is crumbling. And I ask them whether they would have the kindness and determination, while living with serious mental health problems themselves, to set up a local self-help group for themselves and others facing similar issues.”*

Longley is quite a ‘green’ estate with Longley Park nearby, the 4 Greens, other green spaces, generous gardens and lots of trees. Some felt the history of Longley Park is one of decline since the 1980s, with it now being kept to a very basic level. “When I was a lad, it had a lido, pitch and putt, tennis courts, bowling (which is still going) and we spent

hours in there. I still use it for a brief walk, but is mostly used by dog owners as a toilet and exercise space.”

Several families mentioned using local parks. Others travelled out of the area, sometimes some distance on foot, because the parks were better, felt safer and had more people with children using them.



## Personal context: life-shocks and difficult decisions

***“You will be challenged and changed through Listen Up. It may be hard to cope with the powerlessness, the anger it evokes in you, self-knowledge, discomfort about inequality that you are part of, feelings of guilt about what you have compared to others. But this is real and true about the society we are part of and it is important that this is revealed”***

*Participant researcher*

Many families had suffered from sudden job loss. This, along with difficulty finding another job, was felt to be linked to the current economic climate. Job loss prompted immediate financial crisis, particularly if it took some time for benefits to be set up and paid, as well as a longer term drop in income.

There are a lot of health issues that have a significant impact on people's livelihoods. In particular there are a variety of mental health issues that affect both parents and children. For the four families interviewed who were affected, severe physical and mental health problems had a serious impact on their ability to secure a livelihood,

predominantly through inability to work. Children's disability or ill-health also played a significant part in the lives of several families, leading to increased caring responsibilities, costs and practical constraints.

Major bereavements were mentioned as a significant life event by several families, often playing a role in rapidly deteriorating mental health. The sudden expenditure needed when a large household appliance breaks down was mentioned as posing a particular financial challenge. If they were not able to borrow money from their wider families, some families chose to wait until they could afford a

replacement, others would use hire-purchase catalogues. One family had received substantial help in the form of grants from a charity supporting families with disabled children.

Families with young children faced difficult decisions about balancing work and childcare. For some the tension concerned earning enough to make work financially viable, others felt a strong desire to care for their children themselves.

*“I try not to think about it... I was talking to one of the mums yesterday and she's in exactly the same boat as me. She said it made her feel better knowing that I was...”*  
*Longley participant*

## Impact of welfare reform

*Difficulty accessing benefits system:* Some people did not know what they were entitled to and struggled to access overstretched advice services. This led to mistakes in the administration of their benefits, and long periods where they did not get what they were entitled to. When there are mistakes in the benefits system or delay in

payments, people really struggle to survive.

*Some features of Universal Credit were welcomed:* One participant welcomed the idea of transition support between signing off unemployment benefits and getting paid by an employer. Her story also highlighted the potential advantage of benefits being

able to be more immediately responsive to working hours.

*Anticipated struggle to adjust to monthly payment of Universal Credit:* The shift from weekly to monthly, which for people who manage their budgets weekly will bring about “turmoil”.

## Recommendations: Longley

*For church and local community:* A key initial recommendation from the Longley Listen Up Team was for a social group for families who have children with mental/physical disability – providing opportunities to meet, to have fun doing activities together and to support each other. St Leonard's Church and 'the Collaboration' (St. Bernard's & St. Cecelia, Parson Cross and St Paul's Wordsworth Avenue, Parson Cross) have agreed a Mission Action Plan, that includes supporting existing self-help groups, such as the one set up by an interviewee, for people with Mental Health issues. As well as helping to set up new self-help groups, such as families with children with mental &/or physical health issues. The team are also proposing to revisit participants to discuss the report and its conclusions with them. Current ideas for further actions include:

- gap in benefits;
- cost of childcare versus getting job;
- Not enough benefits advice/help;
- Parks unsafe.

*City-wide:* More provision of advice centres and/or trained advisors to help people work out what they are entitled to and how to get it. *Nationally:* Universal Credit being paid monthly and in arrears will probably be a massive issue for a lot of people. No one was preparing for it. There also needs to be a much more effective way of administering benefits and some flexibility in the system to help people when there is a delay in processing their claims.



# LISTEN UP SHEFFIELD MANOR!

Sheffield Manor is a large inner city parish on the eastern side of Sheffield. The Manor Listen Up Team included local volunteers (who were at the time churchwardens), the paid church administrator and the team rector who acted team co-ordinator. We interviewed seven people, three women and four men, aged between 25 and 50: two men, who didn't have children, lived alone; two female single parents had children living at home; the remaining two men and one woman had both partners and children living at home. All lived in rented accommodation on the Manor Estate. All had experienced considerable difficulties throughout their life and all came from socially deprived backgrounds.



***"Sheffield Manor Parish is a very special place to be. It is a single parish, with three church buildings"***

## Living on the Manor

The Ecumenical Parish of Sheffield Manor has a population of around 18,000 people. It forms part of the Manor & Castle electoral ward in south east Sheffield, close to the city centre.

Predominantly residential, the eastern part comprises a large, low-rise council estate, which has been the focus of major regeneration to provide good quality housing, both rented & owner-occupied. Large areas of the estate were demolished, and in some cases rebuilt with private funding, from the late 1990s on.

The western part has mainly owner-occupied or student-let properties, with some small areas of local authority and

housing association stock. The Manor & Castle Ward is in the top 1% of national areas of social deprivation with high crime rates, poor health, high unemployment (twice the Sheffield average) and 80% of residents classed as 'Hard Pressed'.

According to the Sheffield Child and Household Poverty Strategy 2012 -14, 45% of children in Manor/ Castle are living in poverty (making it the worst area in Sheffield for child poverty).

The social mix in the area includes large numbers of isolated older people (20% aged 65+) as well as a high proportion of single-parent families and many young

people (25% aged under 19). Ethnicity has historically been predominantly White British (92%), but most recent figures for the Parish show 25% of the population as being from other ethnic groups. The area is well served by schools, medical centres, dental surgeries, shopping areas, community resources (nursery, training centre, advice centres etc).

Good public transport is provided by frequent bus services to all areas and the Supertram runs along City Road at Manor Top providing links to Crystal Peaks, Sheffield city centre and Meadowhall.

***"the government needs to be more realistic, they haven't got a clue"***

***"I stay positive and try not to let things get me down."***

## Key messages

We were surprised by the stories and the difficulties people were facing in their everyday lives.

We felt this was because they are not normally asked such specific questions and

people are generally very proud and wouldn't volunteer information.

There was a general feeling of personal resilience in the people we interviewed. People seem to try to sort out their

problems themselves before asking for help.

## Resilient and resourceful

Those interviewed were amazingly resilient and resourceful, given their circumstances: without exception family and friends provided vital support when needed.

Three people had exceptional budgeting skills and were able to survive by tracking income and expenditure almost to the penny. Several people expressed the view that using social venues, such as the pub,

acted as a lifeline rather than a luxury. Spaces such as pubs provided a warm alternative to a home which was expensive to heat, as well as a vital social life-line.

Strategies for coping (or surviving in some cases) included going without food. Skipping meals, so that children could be fed or adapting what they ate, was common to all.

Walking everywhere was a way to save money.

Having something to carry on for, be it children or a pet, was what kept most people going. In particular, those we interviewed who had children said they were a reason to keep going. However; school expenses were a big problem and peer pressure added to that.

***"I can't pay for school trips"***

***"I always find a way to laugh"***



***"Everything is against you"***

***"There is a very thin line between coping and going under"***

## Challenging times, challenging lives

1. When interviewed and asked to draw a timeline, all participants had experienced considerable difficulties throughout their life and all came from socially deprived backgrounds.
2. Most people we interviewed were surviving, a couple were coping. Nobody considered themselves to be adapting or doing fine.
3. Several participants mentioned an ongoing struggle with the cost of heating: "paying for gas and electricity is very difficult. Fuel poverty drives people into not being able to eat and live properly"
4. Unexpected expenditure is something that none of the people we interviewed would be able to cope with.
5. From the sample of people we interviewed it is clear that the current climate of welfare reform and public and voluntary sector cuts is having a massive impact on the lives of people living in this community. Here are some quotes from our interviewees:

***"If you look at the benefits system I feel like I want to cry,"***

***"the changes will cripple those who can't budget"***

## Impact of welfare reform

We found that most of those we interviewed didn't know much about coming reforms to their benefits.

One couple was quite scared about the impact it would have on them/their family, another mentioned that they thought there would be an increase in crime.

More than one person thought

the welfare reforms were needed, but just not like this: "if you look at the benefits system

I feel like I want to cry"

One person said that she didn't know how she would find £18 /week to pay her council tax where previously she had paid nothing.



## Recommendations: Manor

**Church and local community** - The research and its implications have been discussed at our PCC with a view to working with other churches and local groups to address some of the issues raised.

A Food Poverty Group will be set up in Sheffield 2 which will initially set up a Food Bank and also respond to the wider issues of budgeting and financial management advice, working with existing advice provision. (*This food bank has since been made operative.*)

**City-wide & nationally** - Link with the city-wide food bank network and also city-wide advice provision to ensure co-ordination and maximize resources.

Continue to work with the local MP and Councillors and relevant national bodies to ensure two-way information exchange, track the impact of welfare reform, inform campaigning for change and support co-ordinated local responses to emerging needs. Julie Upton, Sheffield Manor Team Rector.



# LISTEN UP! DINNINGTON

*"I'm angry about the bedroom tax. There are no one-bedroomed houses nearby, so I'm stuck paying over the odds in this house."*

*Unemployed man aged 60 living alone*

## Living in Dinnington Central

Dinnington suffered economic decline following the closure of the colliery in 1992. In 2003 it was declared a town as part of an attempt to attract more investment and improve the local economy. It is situated in the south east of Rotherham Metropolitan Borough and is part of the Rother Valley South Area Assembly. (Area Assemblies are 'mini strategic partnerships' of individuals,

agencies and organisations working together to listen to local people and tackle their issues.)

Dinnington Central Ward is close to the town centre at one end and stretches north to Dinnington Comprehensive School. The housing is mainly owner-occupied with some private rented terrace housing, former local authority homes

and 21% council rented housing.

A report of December 2012 states that 6% of houses in the area are empty. The population of the area is 1,400 and 96% White British.



## Local context: Dinnington Central

Dinnington Central is within the most deprived 4% of areas nationally, the highest level of deprivation being in the Education and Skills domain, particularly for children and young people, where the area is ranked in the worst 1% in England. Only 8% of students achieve 5 GCSEs including English and Maths (compared with an average of 51% in Rotherham Borough as a whole).

The area is rated as very vulnerable to crime and anti-social behaviour (domestic

burglary rate per 1,000 households is 13.9 compared with a Borough average of 9.3; anti-social behaviour rate 174 compared with a Borough average of 88). Health and disability, income and employment deprivation are high - within the most deprived 6%. Dinnington Community Primary School has 47% of pupils eligible for free school meals. Unemployment was 22% in 2008, but 26% in 2011. Of 298 children aged 0-15 living in the area in 2010, 169 were estimated to be in poverty.

## Impact of welfare reform

The government's flagship reform, Universal Credit, has not yet been implemented in this area, but many of the people we spoke to are worried about it, fearing that the transition could be chaotic, with people left without money for a considerable period, and predicting that many people will not have the patience and skill to budget with a monthly payment.



'There should be more discretion for individuals with the bedroom tax. I'm on the list for a bungalow, but I realise that means someone else has to die for one to become available. But I'll still have to pay bedroom tax, because sometimes my daughter has to stay the night when my mobility deteriorates.'

*Woman in her 50s with disability*



Human	The main positive human asset we found among the people we talked to was the willingness to make the best of the bad situation that most of them found themselves in and the determination if possible to overcome it. They used a whole range of strategies to get by, such as precise budgeting, setting up an autism self-help group, moving house, using a caravan, moving in with a mentally ill daughter to help her with her children, or enjoying the companionship of dogs. Negatively, the principal problem was ill health, both mental and physical, and in some cases lack of good work skills.
Social	Most of our interviewees were recruited through the Salvation Army Centre, and it was a repeated theme that this was a lifeline to them, not only the Saturday food distribution, but the other activities and supporting presence of Les and Joanne and other volunteers at the centre. One man, who does not go out a lot, said, 'When I'm at the Salvation Army, I feel safe.'
Physical	Most of the people we spoke to were in decent social housing, but one or two lived with old and poor quality furniture and equipment. In one house they could not watch TV after the aerial had been snapped off by a roofer who then denied responsibility. Heating was mainly paid for by cards and keys and, for many, had to be limited. One man said he often wrapped himself in a blanket in his armchair instead of putting the fire on.
Financial	All the people we spoke to are on a range of benefits, some of them living very 'close to the edge' and finding moments in the week or month when the money runs out. Most of them appeared to manage their budgets pretty successfully, with a little help from family and friends, with little sign of major debt (although three people were repaying small loans, one for a Social Fund loan, one to a friend and one to a doorstep lender). The main sources of anger were benefit sanctions and, even more, the bedroom tax, which caused problems for several of our interviewees.
Public	A range of town centre facilities are available to the people in Dinnington Central. Family Support were providing a week's holiday for one woman and her daughter and family. It was the first holiday she had had for 34 years.

## Personal contexts

The main events which impacted on people's lives were:

- Relationship breakdown
- Physical and mental illness
- Being made redundant
- 

These were all common among the people we spoke with.

For example:

A family in which the partner lost his job because of depression and now does not go out a lot; wife who suffers from a physical condition and mental ill health; four children (from the wife's previous husband), of whom one has the same physical condition

and all have some behavioural problems. They are now reasonably settled in a council house, but there has been a long process of upheaval after the wife left her previous husband, with the family living in several different houses and the children sometimes being split up.

A woman who was the manageress of a local shop, but who was made redundant when the shop recently closed, and at the same time her partner had a long period off work with hip problems. They came close to having their house reposessed.

A young man in his 20s who has had several jobs, but then lost them, has had one mental

breakdown, has lived in four different houses.

A woman in her 50s, with a husband and grown up children, several of whom have mental health issues; she is currently living with a husband that suffers agoraphobia.

*Disabled man:*

***'It's no good worrying. I just take it as it comes. They have to force me to get out of bed, otherwise I seize up.'***

*Unemployed man in his 20s:*

***'The Prime Minister should try living on my money to see what it's like.'***

## Recommendations: Dinnington

The impression we got in doing these interviews was both of the multiple blows that had rained down on the people we talked to – loss of work, major health disasters, relationship and family breakdown etc – but also of the incredible resilience they showed in the face of all that life could throw at them. Dinnington Central has a concentration of some of the poorest people in the country, and yet there is a hopefulness and determination to survive and achieve something well beyond what one might expect. If there were decently paid jobs and more generous benefits available to these people, they could achieve so much more.

Some examples of resilience:

- A unmarried man in his 50s who has been in a wheelchair for almost 20 years, but who describes himself as content with his life: the house in which he has lived for over 50 years is organised around his needs; his family and their children are often in and out; a sister and nephew look after him; he goes shopping on his scooter most days; and he loves to go Rotherham Hospital where he and his condition are objects of interest to medical students and he answers their questions.
- A young single man in his 20s living on his own who has been in and out of employment, has suffered depression and survives on JSA (but is paying back a Social Loan and has a sanction in place), yet keeps in touch with his family locally, helps out at the Salvation Army and acts as a volunteer 'warden' on the street where he lives, and describes his life as 'accumulating' in every aspect except financial.
- A grandmother with a husband and grown-up children willing to leave her family home for a period and live with a daughter suffering mental health issues and look after her and the daughter's two children, doing most of the cooking, cleaning and washing and taking the children to school; she herself is on anti-depressants.
- A divorced man of 60 living alone with little more than JSA (£116 once a fortnight) coming in and unable to afford to heat and equip his house well, and yet a man who has come to terms with his past mistakes, who can actually appreciate being on his own and makes the most of the library, CDs, radio, TV etc to follow his interests in philosophy, physics, astronomy, classical music.



# LISTEN UP BROOMHALL!

***'It is really hard the changes they have put on people. Why don't they leave their comfy homes and try living in my flat? Why don't they take from the rich rather than the poor?'***

*Comment of a Broomhall resident in an interview*

## Living in Broomhall

Broomhall is a relatively small area to the west of Sheffield city centre. The ring road divides the area into two parts.

The population in 2012 was around 6,800, of whom 54% were men and 46% women. Many students live in the area, so that, in 2012, 39% of the

population was aged 15-34. There is a large ethnic minority population and in local schools 85% of children are BME.

The Somalis are the biggest BME group. Ideally, we would have involved Somalis in these interviews, but we did not achieve this. Levels of

deprivation in Broomhall are above the Sheffield average.

The local health profile records significantly higher than average levels of attendance at A and E and of admissions to hospital for alcohol related conditions and for mental health problems.



## Personal contexts

These varied considerably, and some decisions appear to have led 'from the frying pan into the fire'. One immigrant had left his country after a harsh judgement resulted in cruel punishment. Failure of his asylum application led to 6 years living on the streets, and risky secondary choices, resulting in prolonged and complex depression. Another immigrant, living a secluded life as an oppressed wife, actually felt that she found 'freedom' when she left her husband and moved to a

life of poverty in Sheffield. One man suffered severe spinal injury in Afghanistan. He felt abandoned after discharge from hospital (and the army), and suffered depression, post-traumatic stress, with secondary alcohol dependency.

Breakdown of relationships was another cause of disruption, especially when this involved custody or access to children. In one case it might have exacerbated mental instability.

Bereavement has left several people lonely, and reliant on centres like the Jesus Centre and Archer Centre and e.g, St Andrews and other church breakfasts where they can find company among their peers and encouragement from the staff.

Moving from JSA to low paid and part time work has sometimes exacerbated money worries, uncertainty and changes in amount and regularity of benefit payment is a real problem.

## Impact of welfare reform

The main impact of welfare reform on our group of participants so far was that they were very short of money. The removal of inflation proofing and the imposition of Council Tax combined with an increase in energy and food costs had squeezed their income, pushed some into debt and made them look for other sources of help such as the food bank.

None had been directly affected by the Bedroom Tax and no one mentioned ATOS tests for disability benefits. This was fortuitous. No doubt if we interviewed another 12 struggling local people these issues might have loomed large.

Moreover, the process of welfare reform is far from complete. The biggest change will be the introduction of Universal Credit. It will be important to carry out interviews like ours after that has come in.





## Key messages

Our group of participants suffered from a real **shortage of money**, caused by a combination of social security changes and price increases; policy makers may not realise how serious the consequences are for people with no savings and no resources to fall back on;

People find the welfare system and related Governmental and

local authority systems **difficult to understand and penetrate**; increased reliance on technology and websites is unhelpful to people unused to technology and in some cases with specific problems with using it (eg dyslexia).

**Mental health problems** were widespread among our participants; it is important that GPs diagnose these problems

and that those suffering in this way receive appropriate treatment; and

**Voluntary sector/church facilities** like the Jesus Centre, the Archer Centre and the Breakfast at St Andrew's are extremely valuable in providing food and helping to combat loneliness and isolation for people living on their own with few resources.

***'I would rather fall off a cliff than borrow money'***

*Another said of going to the Food Bank:*

***'I have never felt so degraded. People in the streets will know I have been there and despise me'.***

## Local context: Broomhall and inner city Sheffield

In 2012 local churches held a community consultation in Broomhall and Broomhill. Among the points concerning Broomhall which emerged were:

- The BME population had increased very rapidly between 2001 and 2006, creating a major challenge of holding together diverse communities;
- There had been traumatic incidents in the area, like the murder of James Kamara in 2009;
- Community projects were somewhat fragile owing to reductions in funding. The role of Broomhall's Forum has diminished, The Broomhall Centre continues to be widely used. A range of services is provided by local churches, including the relatively new Jesus Centre, and by the also new Islamic Centre of the Somali Al-Huda group and other Islamic Centres fairly nearby;
- There are problems of traffic and air quality.
- There can be tensions between settled residents and students.

## Financial issues

### In work.

One mother had just started a job and was waiting for her first wage, while benefit had stopped. Another had started part time work which is in evening, so that she was obliged to pay for child care, and to 'give back' much of her wages. A third was in paid work after 2 years unemployment, and was coping well.

### Pension.

A pensioner spoke of deductions which reduced her pension by >50%, and admitted she might even have accidentally paid bills of a previous occupant.

### On benefit.

Three were on ESA. A mother on part time work did not seem to know about free school meals, or child support (from ex-husband).

### Financial Strategies.

One person had destroyed bankcards 'to avoid overspending'. Two people spoke of wrapping up to keep warm rather than spending on heating. Careful shopping, or stocking food in freezer, were among food economy strategies. Finally, given shortage of money, accessing free food at the food bank or breakfast were conscious strategies for some.



"We are grateful to those whom we interviewed for sharing something of their lives with us. Some were in despair, but we were surprised by the optimism displayed by others, given the problems they faced. Maybe it was a triumph of the human spirit over adversity. We felt humbled by the pain which many had suffered and the courage with which they had coped."

## Recommendations: Broomhall

- **Shortage of money.** Welfare reform and austerity were squeezing people's incomes. The capping at 1% a year for three years of the increase in working age benefits, the imposition of Council Tax on this group and the increased readiness of DWP to resort to severe sanctions are all highly damaging. So far no one in our group had been affected by the bedroom tax or by disputes over eligibility for ESA, but these are affecting others in similar situations. We call on central Government to review the impact of welfare reform on vulnerable people;
- **Finding your way through welfare bureaucracy.** Staff cuts are leading public authorities to rely on call centres and websites, in place of face to face individual advice. But finding your way through public welfare systems is daunting for those with mental health problems, reading difficulties, dyslexia or just lack of computer literacy. Public bodies have an obligation to help people as they are and not to marginalise the less technically competent;
- **Mental health:** We were struck the extent to which mental health problems came up at our interviews; the work of the Hanover Medical Centre is evidently much appreciated, but we suspect that not all the mental health problems have been identified; we recognise the sensitivity of the role of project staff and volunteers who are in contact with vulnerable people but even so we would hope that they could encourage those who need medical attention to visit their GPs;
- **Homelessness.** One in three of our participants had been homeless. This is something that can happen to many people in our society, if enough things go wrong in their lives. Sheffield lacks sufficient hostel places for the homeless. We strongly support the initiative to set up a new residential hostel in Queen's Road linked to St Wilfrid's project.
- **Social support.** We commend the warm hospitality of the Jesus Centre, the Friday Breakfast and other projects in Broomhall. We urge that this support should be sustained and developed further, with co-operation between agencies.









## About Share

Parson Cross Initiative operates the independent food-sharing scheme 'SHARE' to help families and individuals in times of crisis. As well as operating a food bank on Friday afternoons at Mount Tabor Methodist Church in Sheffield, we run a social café where people are welcome to drop in and have a chat over a hot drink. We also organise and host a community meal once a month.

"What we try to do in Share is, yes, try to respond to need (through the food bank, Acts 435 and the Credit Union etc.) but we also, importantly, try to utilise people's skills, passions and gifts to spur us on to what we're doing next. So we meet people who want

to do gardening, so we set up a community garden...we meet people who want to do cooking, so we set up a community meal so people cook and eat together...so all the time we're using the strengths of people rather than concentrating on what it is which makes life difficult here." Nick, Share co-ordinator

Since we opened in 2012, we have seen an increase in the numbers of people being referred to us for food aid. The total number of adults and children we have helped has rose from 95 in our first year to 694 in 2013. This trend has continued, we helped 651 people in the first 6 months of 2014 alone. Most people are referred because of issues to do with benefits (74.5%), others because of debt (9.2%)

or illness (6.9%).

We run the food-sharing scheme out of a desire to show Christian love for our neighbours, but at the same time we are actively looking to raise awareness about the hardship that current policy is causing to local families. In June 2014, we produced a report on our food bank for the All Party Parliamentary Group Inquiry into Hunger and Food Poverty. Listening activities inspired by our involvement in Listen Up! made a significant contribution to this report, putting people's real life stories alongside the facts and figures from the food bank. Much of the information reproduced here is adapted from that report, which can be found at <https://pxichaplaincy.wordpress.com/>.

## About Southey Ward

Mount Tabor Methodist Church is situated on Wordsworth Avenue within the Southey Ward of Sheffield. The ward includes the geographical areas of Foxhill, New Parson Cross and Southey Green.

The Southey Ward is the 5th most deprived ward in Sheffield. A significant proportion of the ward falls within the top 10% of the most deprived area in England - 68% of those living within the ward are amongst the 10% most deprived in England. This has consequences for living standards, health and well-being as the following statistics from the 2013 Southey Ward Health and

Wellbeing Profile describe:

- 36.7% of children within the ward are at risk of living in poverty compared with the city average of 24.2%
- The median household income is £20,443, below the citywide average of £24,297. 48.6% of households earn below £20k per annum; 14.3% have an income of less than £10k a year.
- Life expectancy at birth is lower than city average. Compared with the Fulwood ward, an affluent area with highest life expectancy, the life expectancy in Southey is 5.4 years less for men and

5.5 years for women.

- Compared with other wards, there are significantly higher rates of A&E admission, and emergency admissions for chronic diseases, stroke

and diabetes; there are also significantly higher rates of referral to and assessment in social care and mental health for adults.

*Advice for others: "Do it, don't just think about it - do it! It is valuable. Don't worry about the absolute format of how you're going to do it, worry about principles behind what you are going to do, so that you get the values of it right. The values of Listen Up! are incredibly important. Use the tools where you can, but adapt them for the context you are in. Don't get hung up about how you are going to do it, do get hung up about the values behind it - the fact that doing it, listening, valuing those stories and then using the skills you've uncovered to help people to contribute to their local community is a massively valuable thing to do."*

## Next steps

Listen Up!, as part of our wider work at Share, is about saying "what are the things that work? What are the things we struggle on? And how do we play to the strengths of the place and the people, and how do we therefore build up the place up on that basis?"

Share will continue to gather stories. That is now hardwired into the DNA of what we are about, we're about gathering stories, sharing stories and forming a local gospel - seeing God in people's lives. We're looking at a specific piece of work, working with local people to create pieces of film and art which reflect people's stories, so they can be told to more and more people, an open and honest way of being who they are.

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OF SHEFFIELD



Church Action  
on Poverty

**Listen Up** encourages and enables churches and community groups to work together to systematically gather evidence about the livelihoods of people in their community, to listen to the challenges they face and to develop an appropriate response.

Three facilitated preparation sessions are provided to support groups to use structured conversations, based on a Sustainable Livelihoods Approach, to find out about the lives and livelihoods of members of their community and to analyse and respond to the information they gather.

**Gather evidence/Raise awareness:** As people are invited to share the stories of their lives through group discussions and individual/household interviews, churches become more aware of issues and likely impacts of welfare reform and other economic changes in their area.

**Strengthen relationships:** Through working in partnership with others to carry out an SLA project and by getting to know people through the project, churches build/develop relationships to help them to make a difference.

**Develop local responses:** As problems are shared and solutions developed, churches are enabled to work with their community to begin to develop appropriate practical actions to respond to the issues raised.

**Inform policymaking:** As common themes and interconnections are systematically identified, churches are enabled to use stories to inform policymaking at a national, regional and local level.

## About Listen Up...

**Listen Up** involves systematic, structured conversations with people living on low incomes. Topics include how the household 'gets by', what role benefits and tax credits currently play in their lives, and how they are likely to be affected by current and future changes to welfare.

These interactive discussions are usually a positive experience for people involved. Information is pooled together, so the findings can be discussed without being too revealing about any family or individual. The group gathers, if possible with participants, to discuss together what they have learnt, what findings are emerging and what should happen next.

Throughout the process, teams were supported by

a central hub, including research and community development expertise. This group provided the necessary training and was available to help with developing community organising skills, using the research approach and project administration.

Between 2012 and 2014, 5 groups from Sheffield Diocese took part in Listen Up! More details can be found at <http://www.church-poverty.org.uk/listenup>. During 2013/14 Listen Up! was also trialled by Hodge Hill Church in Birmingham. Their experiences are recorded at [www.cuf.org.uk/research/listen](http://www.cuf.org.uk/research/listen).

### How was it funded?

Listen Up Sheffield! was only possible because of the time given by

volunteers and those already committed to working in their community. A number of local small grant schemes were accessed to cover the running costs of the central hub.

### What will happen next?

Listen Up aimed to ensure the impacts of welfare reform are recorded by those who know communities best, the people who live and work there. It provided an opportunity for increased engagement with the problems faced in our communities and to make the link between those stories and local and national policy making.

Unfortunately Sheffield Diocese was unable to resource the support needed for the intended

third round of **Listen Up!** 2014, and the central project has now come to a close. However work continues in the groups and communities, building on relationships which have started to grow, learning from the conversations which have been taken place and exploring how to develop this into action.

Early details of emerging actions and outcomes in each area can be found in the individual reports. Collectively the findings will be launched at a Sheffield-wide conference in November 2014. It is hoped this conference would provide the springboard to further discussion, action and ultimately change.