

Disadvantage Strategy Early Engagement Co-production Report

The Trust for Developing Communities

In April 2022, the Trust for Developing Communities (TDC) undertook three workshops with 20 community members from Brighton & Hove, plus another piece of work gathering responses from 12 members of the TDC staff team. The responses were related to four questions that had been asked in order to support co-production of the forthcoming 'Brighton & Hove City Council (BHCC) Disadvantage Strategy'.

Co-production workshop participants included mostly women aged 20 to 45. Most were parents of younger children. Two groups were formed from those living or supporting family in Whitehawk. Another group was formed by members of the 'Noor-ul Huda' community group for Muslim women and children in Moulsecoomb.

The co-production workshop groups represented a broad range of ethnicities, including Pakistani, Black-British, Afghani, White-British, Indian, Eastern European and South American.

All of the resource given by BHCC to TDC to deliver the work was paid forwards to participants as vouchers to reward their expertise, time and interest in supporting the project.

Question 1: What does the term 'disadvantaged' mean to you? And, is there a better/nicer word or phrase to use when speaking about people who are disadvantaged?

Themes:

- 'Disadvantage(d)' holds negative connotations
- 'People facing additional barriers' may be a more comfortable term

When describing people's situations, the term '*disadvantage(d)*' seemed to be loaded with negative connotations for most of the focus groups. People did not like it, and associated it with negatively perceived terms such as 'lacking', 'restricted', 'poverty', and 'unable'. Most group members agreed that it is a "bad word; it's judgemental" and "there's a sort of shame attached, like a stigma".

Interestingly, the focus group comprised of people with English as an additional language were fine with the term 'disadvantaged', as they felt it accurately described the lack of something and couldn't think how else you would say this.

“there's a sort of shame attached, like a stigma”

It may be beneficial to include a specific description of what type of disadvantage is being referred to. E.g., Educational Disadvantage, Economic Disadvantage; is it simply a measure of poverty or other disadvantages?

Generally, it was felt that a focus on 'people facing barriers' or 'those who are marginalised' are less stigmatising terms.

TDC Staff responses

- It means not getting the services and opportunities that others get. 'Underserved' is a possible alternative.
- For me, the term 'disadvantage' reflects the reality that a number of individual and cumulative factors result in a different and disadvantageous starting position in life. It is important to recognise this is not a 'static' position. But, equally, it must be acknowledged that for many, there lies a complex and additionally challenging path to whatever their version of 'advantage' may be.
- People with additional barriers - particular around resources, housing and finances.
- Having to work harder to get the same chances as others.

Question 2: What do you think is currently helping families who are disadvantaged or struggling financially?

Themes:

- **People rely on community connections and activities to meet their needs**
- **Supportive projects where beneficiaries can feel involved in delivery and organisation reduce the stigma of receiving things for free**
- **When it works well, EMAS and schools are leveraged effectively to reduce barriers for those with English as an additional language.**

Groups made strong reference to the closeness of community being a positive factor in supporting those who experience more barriers. They mostly cited community and voluntary sector projects to alleviate the effects of poverty, e.g. foodbanks (or subsidised shops such as Bright Store), and uniform & clothing projects (like Pelican Parcels). Other community projects to improve health, e.g. 'Choose to Move', were also mentioned.

“A nice, close community”

What was valued about these was that by being community-based they reduced stigma and offered opportunity for peer support; groups referenced that they themselves could help at projects they benefit from. Whilst these community projects were all highly valued, it was felt inappropriate to rely on voluntary contributions with people expressing a strong stigma for freebies and handouts. Also, the nature of these projects being set up and delivered by different community groups meant there was a huge discrepancy and inconsistency across different areas, and people often relied on local networks to even know about them. Newer and isolated residents as well as those not accessing online information were recognised to be at significant disadvantage in terms of accessing support needs.

“Strong community spirit promotes safety”

They valued the breakfast club at the school, but felt it didn't align well with nursery times which was challenging if you had to walk any distance to get there. They felt this illustrated an issue with a service-led approach to offering something without discussing it with parents, and that often the actual service is good, but there are little issues with delivery like this preventing people using them.

Ethnic Minority Achievement Service (EMAS) support is valued and can be a useful bridge to understanding other aspects of school life and related services. It is a gateway that can shape the experience of families where English is an additional language. Other parents had found 'Family Learning' in school alongside their children had helped them understand school culture and support their child.

They valued extracurricular and sports clubs greatly as places offering children a chance to learn social and behavioural skills as well as the activity itself. They felt that whilst they generally found the money for these activities, more families would access extracurricular activities like sports clubs if they were free and nearby to avoid transport costs.

TDC Staff responses

- Person centered and asset based approaches, supporting families to build on their own strengths and find their own solutions.
- Peer advocacy and support, self-advocacy, groups and organisations who give choice or options that wouldn't otherwise exist e.g. affordable food schemes, holiday schemes, youth sessions, 'Chomp' (Food project). Community connections and sharing localised/relevant information.
- Financial support, peer support, accessible childcare, training and employability support, local and free neighbourhood based activity that supports emotional wellbeing and provides opportunity for families to come together in a fun and enjoyable way.

Question 3: What more could be done to help these families?

Themes:

- **Access to provision across all sectors could be developed through improved, co-ordinated promotion and by enhanced cultural understanding**
- **There is an acute awareness that services for support with disability and mental health are overwhelmed**
- **There are still many barriers that need to be removed to improve access and early intervention**

There seems to be a lack of clarity about what services are available, how to access them and when it was appropriate to do so. Anxiety and confusion around this was leading to a lack of approaching services until desperate. An example given was that because they felt "interrogated" when seeking support funds through the Council, they were anxious that other services would also be seeking evidence of their needs in this way and that put them off. This was obviously reducing early intervention and improved outcomes associated with that. It was felt that improved information and triage through a single point of contact at community level would help this.

"Teenagers need mental health workers. The waits for anything to be done are way too long and there aren't many spaces available"

Areas of concern for services also included the lack of capacity in CAMHS and SEND support in schools leading to lack of assessments and support for children in need of help. They also felt that offers were inconsistent across different schools and there was a lack of transparency

about what was available at different schools or what training teachers were given around supporting children with additional needs.

There was also a sense that Early Years' health and education provision has significantly diminished over the past decade. With an awareness of how stretched services were, leading them to become 'needs led' meant there was a shame or guilt about accessing them. They were struggling to get Dentist and GP appointments, especially if they wanted a consistent GP, which was preferred around mental health and other issues that needed greater explanation/ understanding.

It was expressed that some public services seem to make people feel increasingly separated out around their needs. There was some perception that the Council "doesn't want everyone to know [about their services] because they can't face the costs [of more service users]".

They felt some services were not culturally or ethnically inclusive. They cited examples in primary health services and schools where they felt a lack of understanding and information. They also felt it was hard to raise concerns around this to all-white staff teams and they felt that projects like 'Kicks' (Albion in the Community) were appealing to their families because the coaches were of diverse ethnicities. They talked about the need to "see yourself" to feel fully welcome.

Lack of familiarity or knowing what to expect was a recurring issue for not accessing services, e.g., people were unclear if they were being asked about domestic violence because it was standard question, or was it a prejudiced assumption because she was not white British? It was generally felt that cultural understanding and use of interpreters across educational and primary care settings was very inconsistent. Specific issues included lack of interpreter support causing reluctance to attend appointments with children, and another felt a lack of induction support for her child led to him being badly bullied at school. It was suggested that having a clearer plan around supporting recent migrants to adjust to school norms would be helpful and prevent more serious issues arising. They also felt this could be an opportunity for other children to be given a supportive role.

They felt that amongst their communities, people don't tend to have awareness or understanding around educational or behavioural needs and so can exacerbate issues by blaming the child for being 'naughty'. It would be useful if schools offered opportunities for parents to learn about the British beliefs and processes around educational support needs.

They felt that they were more (commonly) able to be economic with food and clothing due to cooking and sewing skills being more common amongst their communities, but they thought larger families would find this harder and thought size of family should be taken into consideration when prioritising support.

They felt that they generally found money for extracurricular activities like sports lessons, and these offered valuable opportunities in social development as well as the sport itself. They felt this was something families unable to afford these activities lost out on and if free versions could be available it could have positive impact on children's behaviour in other settings like school classes.

“The cost of housing is a massive problem, and a lot of it is inappropriate or unsuitable.”

Housing was a key factor in the disadvantage that some people experience; it is too expensive in the city for people to feel as though they have any control over where they live. Examples were given of people getting housed too far from their families, making childcare harder

logistically. The unexpected consequence to this was cited as being that people are moving into Whitehawk as the housing is more affordable, and starting to see that it's a good place to live.

TDC Staff responses

- Support with energy bills, increase in benefits, better access to services, better transport, free school transport
- Worker time and flexible funding to develop strategies with the families to access services, set priorities and overcome challenges. Workers need to be culturally competent and ideally with lived experience of the situations of the families being supported.
- Services need to listen and understand what the challenges are for families, and work collaboratively to make their services more welcoming and accessible.
- More pay as you feel/scaled price opportunities - so not just for one demographic or another. Free school meals criteria helps some but misses so many working but struggling families. Rent regulation on private landlords, including city rent cap and more protections for tenants - so many families are trapped in poverty because of high rents and lack of other options. More real affordable housing. More youth sessions in more areas. More funded in-school services. Support for carers and for child carers.
- Affordable transport - e.g. subsidised bus travel for those on universal credit/ low income and free travel for under 18s. Support for those for whom the school system doesn't work, neurodiverse kids and teenagers. Flexible work opportunities for parents and support for transition to work. Real living wage work. Intergenerational/mixed age events and opportunities.
- Funding being more concentrated on building assets and using positive language rather than having a deficit approach.

Question 4: Are there other projects/initiatives you think also effect these families? *e.g. Early Years & Childcare, Health & Wellbeing, open spaces (parks), economic (e.g. benefits), anti racist, SEND, ...*

Themes:

- **Parks and open spaces should be linked. They are seen as a way to bring communities together and create pride of place**
- **Youth services are recognised as a way to support communities to manage negative (youth) behaviour through provision of new opportunities**
- **Childcare needs radical consideration. Are there ways to innovate around childcare within a Disadvantage Strategy?**

A disadvantage cited was access to free healthy activity. They valued the 'Choose to Move' project, a free walking group for mums, which positively impacted their physical and mental health. In contrast they felt there was a lack of good and inclusive play equipment for their children, and they couldn't afford to get them to Queens Park and Preston Park (better equipped parks). It was felt unfair that areas of greater affluence and car ownership also had

“Good facilities reduce disadvantage”

the best local parks. It was acknowledged the Whitehawk Primary (City Academy Whitehawk) had a good assault course, but this was not accessible to children attending other primaries.

Having a nice park with a playground, toilets and a nice coffee shop would make local parks places for parents to meet. A good park will bring in people from outside for things like sports and other usage. This would require investment from across environmental and other related strategies.

With potential investment in community spaces came the worry of increased anti-social behaviour (ASB), particularly from young people. Currently some “wouldn’t feel safe going into middle shops [Whitehawk Way] after 7pm”. Participants recognised that ASB by young people would be reduced with more youth provision. There are links to be explored between youth services and the Disadvantage Strategy.

Childcare was another strong theme, with a lot of discussion about the logistics of getting support. Younger families can mean that grandparents (who might otherwise be on hand to help with childcare) are having to work themselves. One participant asked if grandparents be paid to do childcare and kill two birds with one stone.

“Tax credits for nurseries aren’t available until they’re 2 years old. We can’t afford childcare until after they’re 2. So there’s no incentive for me to go back to work... As much as I’d like to”

Others talked about the lack of ability to re-join the workforce because it is not economically viable or because they cannot find shift work to fit around nursery opening times. Targeting training and support at new parents to help them to start flexible businesses from home could be a way to help.

TDC Staff response

- SEND (absolutely), health and wellbeing, parks and open spaces, employability and adult learning, children, families and schools, early years and childcare, of course diversity and inclusion, housing, neighbourhood action plans ... it should link to all strategies and plans that impact on families experiencing 'disadvantage'.
- Diversity and inclusion
- Ensure arts and culture and learning/upskilling are included.
- Health and wellbeing board
- Community Development
- Transport
- Communities and culture
- Housing and education

The Trust for Developing Communities
Community Base 113 Queens Road Brighton BN1 3XG
Company Registration Number: 3939332
Registered Charity Number: 1106623
Email: info@trustdevcom.org.uk Website: www.trustdevcom.org.uk