

This was Action Week

Thank you for making Action Week 2008 a huge success



Between 27 January and 3 February, our supporters put on over 120 local events, from full-scale poverty and homelessness hearings down to simple church services and group meetings. Every event communicated the reality of poverty and homelessness today, changing people's assumptions and challenging them to act. We would like to thank all of you who organised events, spoke at hearings, or just attended a local event.

We gathered together all the feedback received by 1 April and read the reports and stories, watched the videos and looked at the photos. This report is a first attempt to distil all of this evidence and draw out the top issues that emerged from the various events and hearings around the country. (We have not tried to weight the outcome to allow for different sizes of events, or for clusters of events in some parts of the country (well done Sheffield!), so this comes with a health warning that a more rigorous analysis later in the year may come to different conclusions.) So read on to see how the issues raised at your event compare with the national picture.

The top three

Unsurprisingly for an activity called Poverty and Homelessness Action Week, the top issue by far was **housing**. Within this general heading there were four issues that really stood out: the problem of unaffordability; an enormous lack of social housing; the need for more hostel or night shelter (emergency) accommodation; and the predicament of the hidden homeless. Other issues raised included gaps or imbalances in the housing market which affected particular groups such as families and the elderly, failures of choice-based letting schemes, and the need for new initiatives such as Community Land Trusts.

The second most common issue formed a cluster around the need to change **public perceptions** of poverty and homelessness in Britain today. There was a need to challenge people to face the facts about deprivation in their town, city or village; to bring hidden rural poverty out into the open; and to seek

consensus about definitions and causes of poverty on our doorsteps.

The third most common issue was the **lack of services and facilities** to tackle poverty and homelessness. A wide range of needs was identified, from poor public transport and unsafe streets in areas of deprivation, to services open at the weekend, and spiritual and social support requirements.

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Other issues

Close behind this in frequency came three further issues which deserve to be mentioned. The first of these is closely linked with the third issue above. Not only have participants in Poverty and Homelessness Action Week noted a lack of services, they have also been drawing attention to a **lack of information** about the services which are available. Services and entitlements are not adequately publicised to the very people who need to use them and know about them. Nor are they made known to people who may wish to help by signposting others to the services they need or benefits to which they are entitled. This situation is made worse in some places by the variability of services between different Local Authorities, and lack of cooperation between agencies providing services.

The next is the **actuality of poverty**.

People have raised the issue that there are folk in our country who do not have sufficient money to pay for fuel to keep them warm or to keep their homes in good repair. It was also noted that these are not necessarily people living on benefits – there are hard-working families and single people whose wages do not cover reasonable living costs.

Thirdly, there is a cluster of issues that might be labelled **social deprivation**. This includes the results of family and relationship breakdown, but also the loneliness and loss of self-worth that accompany poverty and homelessness.

Finally come issues to do with the plight of asylum-seekers and migrant workers; problems associated with the benefit system; debt and money problems; and the difficulty of coping with disability, poor mental health or addictions.

Signs of hope

Two signs of hope have emerged alongside this focus on the experience of poverty and homelessness in Britain. The first is that for many of the issues raised there are already solutions – for example, the Get Fair campaign to be launched later this year will directly address the need to change public perceptions of poverty in our country. The second is that it was clear from the feedback forms that not only had people been moved by hearing first-hand accounts of the experience of poverty and homelessness, in most places they were also inspired to take action – new collaborations are beginning, volunteers are coming forward, services have been publicised. Together we will bring an end to poverty and homelessness in our neighbourhoods.

Opening doors and opening hearts throughout the UK

We've been following up with everyone who organised an event for Action Week, finding out how it went and what concerns they want to raise. Here are details of some of the successful and innovative events that took place. They show just what things can be achieved through real local engagement. And if you're planning to take part in a future Action Week by organising your own event – these are examples of “what worked”.

Forming links, hearing stories

Reading, 31 January: event organised by Churches in Reading Drop-In Centre, in partnership with FAITH and REAP

An informal lunch meeting about homelessness brought together over 50 people from around Reading at a drop-in centre run by the churches. Guests included the Bishop of Reading Stephen Cottrell, Martin Salter MP, and several people who have received help from three local projects working with the homeless, all sitting round the same tables eating, chatting, and listening. The forum enabled the homeless to share their experiences with people who have never been touched by the problem. It was also a chance for the three projects to form links, and to identify steps forward in dealing with the causes and problems of homelessness in Reading, such as the urgent need for a night shelter and the lack of drug and alcohol support services.

Peter Sweet told his story of a sudden descent into homelessness after a break-up:

“I was dirty and smelly. I was embarrassed to look at people walking through the town. I was so ashamed. People would try to avoid me. They

pretended I wasn't there. I don't blame them, but you do become invisible.”

The Bishop of Reading said, “It's so easy for people to judge homeless people... so it's a very good thing to meet people and hear their story.”

Children reflect on poverty and injustice

Isle of Colonsay, 1 February: event organised by Katherine Rennie and the pupils of Kilchatten School

Over four weeks, the pupils of Kilchatten School looked at different aspects of poverty and injustice in the world, and what Jesus has to say about how we treat other people using some resources from the *Just Church* course (produced by Church Action on Poverty: www.justchurch.info).

The children made works of art about the parable of the Great Banquet: “some of the well off people who had been invited to the feast did not attend because they were too busy, and the host invited the poor and homeless who did respond to his invitation.” In another session, the children wrote short prayers for those in need, those caught up in wars, and those without enough to eat.

The four weeks ended in a school Open Day so the parents and other residents of the Island could view what the children had been doing.

Katherine Rennie said, “I found the experience very rewarding and inspiring because I found a group of youngsters who wanted to listen, learn, question and respond to the issues we were looking at. If only adults responded in the same way!”

Being Poor in Gloucester: Hearing the Stories

Gloucester, 1 February: event organised by Gloucester Diocese Social Responsibility and Gloucestershire Churches Together, with many other organisations.

“Being Poor in Gloucester” explored six strands of poverty and exclusion in Gloucestershire: urban and countryside, young and old, in health, and among foreigners (refugees, asylum-seekers, migrants). Presentations from service users, or from practitioners who worked hard to reflect the views of users, gave real voices of experience. Over 70 people came in afternoon and evening sessions, including the Bishop of Tewkesbury Steven Walker, Parmjit Dhanda MP, and several county and city councillors.

The six strands wove together to reveal common threads in diverse experiences. The overwhelming message of the event was that poverty exists even in the “cosy Cotswolds”, with pockets even in the most affluent villages. It affects all ages and all areas, and can hit anybody at any time. Poverty is not only financial. In rural areas especially, isolation and inadequate transport compounded the problems of low income for the elderly and disabled. Free bus passes are no use if there are no buses! Isolation was also a severe difficulty for asylum seekers.

The event made clear that churches and faith groups are most responsive to the needs of communities and marginalised people, often as the only provider of services in the city, and reaching groups and areas ignored by government services.



Colonsay children made works of art about the parable of the Great Banquet



And many, many more...

Action Week saw over 120 events happen throughout the UK, so the profiles opposite are only the tip of the iceberg! The map on this page shows the full extent of Action Week. Here are some other highlights from across the country...

- At **Portsmouth** RC Cathedral, 110 residents and many organisations announced “Charter Challenges” on a range of poverty and homelessness issues.
- At **Bideford**, Dorset, the event led to founding a Community Action Group.
- In **Bradford**, politicians shared a meal with the homeless from the City Lights bus.
- A poverty hearing in South **Tyneside** recorded stories of hardship on a DVD.
- There were dozens of sleep-outs across England and Scotland: in **Chatham** more than 150 people slept rough to raise money for a homelessness project, and around **Salisbury** there were eight sleep-outs throughout February.
- A youth group in **Pontefract** produced a newsletter about poverty.
- **Glasgow** saw a full day of workshops about the destitution of asylum-seekers.
- **Edinburgh** held a poverty-themed Burns’ Night Supper and meetings at the Scottish Parliament to discuss poverty and housing.
- Hundreds of churches held **services** for Homelessness Sunday and Poverty Action Sunday.



Director Ken Loach presented a film evening in London



Worthing churches held a sleep-out



Shelter ran a hearing with young people in Liverpool



Poet John Hegley performed for **Housing Justice**

In Tyneside they had a poverty hearing and produced a report

GET FAIR

Key campaign dates

- Apr 08** Get Fair campaign website goes live – local groups start to sign up
- May 08** Parliamentary briefing
- Sep 08** Public launch of campaign
- Oct 08** End Child Poverty rally in Westminster
- Jan/Feb 09** Action Week: local events across UK
- Mar 09** Mass constituency-based lobby of MPs
- Spring 09** Main campaign rally in Westminster

Action Week was just the start...

Action Week has highlighted many aspects of the poverty, homelessness and exclusion which still blight our society. But if we are to make real progress towards eradicating these evils, we need much wider public and political support. Please join the **Get Fair** campaign and help us to make UK poverty history.

Get Fair will mobilise public opinion and ensure that UK poverty is an important issue for politicians in the run-up to the next General Election. We want all major political parties to pledge that they'll deliver on their commitment to end child poverty by 2020 – and to extend this goal to ending poverty across all the generations in the UK.

Get Fair is an umbrella mobilisation, including the organisers of Action Week and over 40 other organisations, including Oxfam, Shelter, Save the Children, Help the Aged and the Refugee Council, as well as many faith groups. Others are joining all the time.

The stories and messages we've gathered from Action Week will inform the direction of Get Fair over the coming months.

We need your help and support. Whether you can set up a local group, run an event, become a campaigner, or just spread the word to others, please join in!

- Sign up for monthly **email campaign briefings**.
- **Publicise Get Fair** in your own networks or newsletters.
- **Organise a local event** to coincide with the public launch in September.
- **Take part in the End Child Poverty rally** in London in October – and bring your friends with you.
- Host a performance of **Poverty Monologues** during Action Week 2009 (see below).

Visit www.getfair.org.uk now!

... Could you help us to do it again in 2009?

We're so pleased with the impact of this year's events that we've already started planning Action Week 2009. We're aiming to have at least 100 events again, this time with an exciting new focus!

In 2009, Poverty and Homelessness Action Week will run from 31 January to 8 February. Homelessness Sunday will be 1 February and Poverty Action Sunday will be 8 February.

We're working together with **Actors for Human Rights** to produce a dramatic script which will be the focus for the Action Week resources.

You may have seen *Asylum Monologues*, the previous production from Actors for Human Rights. In a similar vein, our script will be based on interviews with real people, telling their stories of poverty, exclusion and homelessness. It will produce a powerful and emotionally charged drama, that can be performed easily with a minimum of props. And the stories will be the basis for challenging discussion and worship materials on a resource website.

We're looking for people to get involved in making Action Week a big success again:

- Do you know of people who would be willing to share their **stories** for use in the script?
- Could you organise a **performance** of the script, either at a theatre using professional actors, or in a local church or other venue using amateurs?
- Could you use our resources to organise a **hearing, service or other event** at your church or centre?



The *Asylum Monologues* have been performed in front of over 3,000 people. We want our new script to have the same impact.

Contact us to get involved

Church Action on Poverty: 0161 236 9321 or liamp@church-poverty.org.uk

Housing Justice: 020 7723 7273 or info@housingjustice.org.uk

Scottish Churches Housing Action: 0131 477 4500

26 January – 3 February 2008

31 January – 8 February 2009

Poverty and Homelessness Action Week

organised by the Homelessness Sunday Partnership (Housing Justice and Scottish Churches Housing Action), Church Action on Poverty and Church Urban Fund.