

# ‘Working-class voices’ in economic policy

**Report One**

## **Place Based Economic Recovery, Regeneration and Resilience Network**

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**PERN**

*“This business of petty inconvenience and indignity, of being kept waiting about, of having to do everything at other people’s convenience, is inherent in working-class life. A thousand influences constantly press a working man down into a passive role. He does not act, he is acted upon. He feels himself the slave of mysterious authority and has a firm conviction that ‘they’ will never allow him to do this, that, and the other. Once when I was hop-picking I asked the sweated pickers (they earn something under sixpence an hour) why they did not form a union. I was told immediately that ‘they’ would never allow it. Who were ‘they’? I asked. Nobody seemed to know, but evidently ‘they’ were omnipotent.”*

**George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier***

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# 1. Introduction

The purpose of this report is to look at working-class involvement in local government and regional decision making. It covers whether there is engagement, at what level, and in what depth. It further offers a brief outline of what it means to be defined as working class, given that there are distinctions that set the UK apart from other countries (LSE study, 2021). The report will also look at how policy is determined and how consultation and participation by various actors feed into that process. A short survey of those involved in policymaking feeds into this report as does previous research undertaken for Wakefield District Council around poverty (Jose 2019). A rich vein of local community engagement around existing projects, such as the implementation of local community food shops. Recently the term “community engagement” has come to the fore in local government circles and is driven by a framework of ideas, ideologies, strategies and methods.

This framework for engagement can end up being complex and unwieldy instead of practical and easy to engage with and it can also be based on several assumptions such as “this is the way it’s always been done”. There is a degree of commonality among these local government frameworks, often driven by statutory structures and regulatory practice but on the non-administrative side, there is a sense that local government struggles to engage at many levels, especially at a local community level.

There is evidence that the working-class tend to be those “left behind” and as such are often on the periphery of policymaking, creating a disconnect and a degree of exclusion around working-class issues. One of the assertions of this report is that historically, engagement at a community level has tended to be poor and this begs the question of whether the drive for more community engagement, especially working-class engagement, is tokenistic or even desirable by those driving it.

This report therefore also outlines recommendations regarding options for creating more democratic and inclusive engagement and encouraging a shift towards genuine participation by reassessing existing decision making policy frameworks. There is also a rich source of knowledge from working-class communities based on engaging with people at a hyper-local level. Often projects and policy ideas are placed before disparate groups of people who have varying levels of knowledge about what they are being asked to consult on. Having groups of people that are engaged on a regular, ongoing basis and not just when a specific project or issue needs addressing can create more worthwhile and deeper engagement.

## 2. The working class – a short definition

*“There is a big difference between being working class as defined by officials and social scientists in terms of occupation and being working class as defined by people themselves.”<sup>1</sup>*

There is a great deal of debate around what now constitutes the working class after historical and structural shifts around the traditional working class. This has been due to deindustrialisation, the blurring between blue and white-collar, shifts in housing tenure and a recent move away from manufacturing towards a service and retail sector.

Many people who define themselves as working-class paint a broader picture of their working-class identity and where it lies, where work is a part of but not the sole determinant. Many people who social scientists and demographers would key as middle-class identify as working-class. According to an LSE study in 2021, this makes the UK an outlier amongst Europeans who tend to predominantly define themselves as middle-class.

*“According to the British Social Attitudes Survey, 47% of Britons in middle-class professional and managerial jobs identify as working class. Even more curiously, a quarter of people in such jobs who come from middle-class backgrounds – in the sense that their parents did professional work – also identify as working class.”<sup>2</sup>*

*“It turns out that when polls offer “working class” as an option, just as many people self-identify as working-class as middle class.”<sup>3</sup>*

As so many people define themselves as working-class their exclusion from policy decisions, for whatever reason, is of concern.

There is a wider debate outside of the remit of this report, regarding the definition of the working-class but it is worth noting that this attachment to being working class and British is very strong and has not changed since the 1960s. The working class are also ethnically diverse with more in common with each other than not. This creates further challenges for policymakers in that some ethnic minority groups feel further excluded and disenfranchised from society because of their ethnicity. Also, the lack of engagement from working-class communities is reflected in the political make-up of parties, especially the Labour Party, originally founded to further working-class interests.

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<sup>1</sup> British Social Attitudes 33 [https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/39094/bsa33\\_social-class\\_v5.pdf](https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/39094/bsa33_social-class_v5.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.lse.ac.uk/News/Latest-news-from-LSE/2021/a-Jan-21/Why-do-so-many-middle-class-professionals-insist-they-are-working-class>

<sup>3</sup> April 2018 Understanding the Working Class | Demos

*“What has changed, and significantly, is working-class representation in politics. [Therefore there is] a disconnect and the lack of working-class voices in politics. When the Labour Party first achieved electoral success in the 1920s, more than 70% of its MPs were drawn from working-class backgrounds. This has declined drastically from the mid- 80s and today [2018] just 8% of Labour MPs are working-class.”<sup>4</sup>*

This disconnect has also been driven not only by the historical decline in trade union membership but also their position as an influencer, which has waned considerably. Post-WW2 the unions had a strong power base amongst manufacturing, mining and other industries but a combination of de-industrialisation, privatisation and globalisation has led to a decline in these industries in the UK, mirrored by many jobs going abroad. This has led to a significant reduction in the influence and reach of the trade union movement. This decline of traditional working-class jobs, exacerbated by Thatcherism in the late 1970s and 1980s, and later austerity post-2010, created a feeling of alienation amongst the working class who increasingly viewed society as elitist with a biased political system stacked against them.

### 3. The Ideology and Framework of Policy

Policy is often driven by a mixture of physical projects alongside more ambiguous ambitions. Ambition is often defined by local government as visions or strategies, such as tackling childhood obesity, reducing inequality or driving inward investment; or attached to slogans such as inclusive growth or levelling up, placing an overarching sense of civic good over both policy and projects.

These ambitions outlined in strategy documents and, as such, individual projects tend to be part of a wider remit, for example, a new hotel or student accommodation may not be viewed as a building development but as an enabler of jobs and growth. This has a direct influence on the framework of ideas and principles that guide policy in that people are being asked to consult not just on a project but on the outcomes of that project. This then begs a very basic question; what is the purpose of engagement, if there is an overarching ideological vision? Is it always right that that prevails over individual or micro-community issues, and what are these issues? Thus, those people affected by the physicality of new building developments, such as a supermarket, on their doorstep have their views subsumed by more ambiguous ideas.

Politicians, with the acquiescence of the media, have become astute at populist and bellicose statements designed to appeal to our baser instincts, A Strong Economy, Levelling Up, Hardworking

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<sup>4</sup> Careerists Versus Coal-Miners: Welfare Reforms and the Substantive Representation of Social Groups in the British Labour Party, Tom O’Grady, Comparative Political Studies, July 2018

Families that Play By the Rules, Take Back Control and Northern Powerhouse all play to the gallery. However, by addressing the needs of the working class ultra-local issues, which can be defined as aspects of their life that affect them on a daily basis, could potentially have a greater impact on combating poverty and inequality. One could take any social ill and find an example at a local level that needs addressing but these micro-issues tend not to be as emotive and ‘sellable’ as populist slogans. Instead of looking up, it is worth looking to the grass-roots.

Policymakers often see these local issues and problems as “the small stuff” with residents often seeing them as major issues. Therefore, tackling these “small” issues would go some way to improving policy decisions and cultivating wider social improvement ambitions, as the words of this local resident illustrate.

*“One of the problems on this estate is that we have drug dealers operating from a house and that attracts criminals and people we don’t want around our children”<sup>5</sup>*

The “small” problems are often seen by policymakers as someone else’s responsibility, the police, housing associations or even the local community themselves. One comment from our questionnaire (see section 10. Questionnaire) reflects this as the *“apparent lack of appreciation from policymakers of the issues they [working class communities] face”* appears to be a common theme.

If, at the embryonic stage of any engagement if there is an immediate and identifiable conflict between desires and ambitions at one end and community issues at the other this begs the question as to whether the existing framework around engagement is fit for purpose. It also infects the process all the way down the line.

### 3.1 Issues in policymaking

Policy at a local government level usually involves two distinct groups: first, the local government part, usually split between political (councillors) and operational (officers), and second, non-local government actors, which can then be split into professionals and non-professionals. (For the purpose of this report, professionals mean those hired specifically to input into policymaking either via expert opinion, reports, guidance or any other input that is seen as an accepted and embraced part of the framework. For non-professionals we mean people outside of this framework. So it could be a member of the public that has professional knowledge of say housing but is not part of the invited inner circle). How these groups interact, not just between each other but internally, can create a complex structure or model around policymaking.

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<sup>5</sup> Jose S (2019), Poverty in Wakefield: A qualitative exploration of poverty on the frontline



It is clear, that some people and organisations are more embedded in the process than others. Certainly, those people who make up local government, both politicians and officers, tend to be extensively involved from the outset. Each councillor will not be equally involved in all policy decisions but certainly councillors, especially portfolio holders, will be involved in their respective areas as part of their remit. Officers tend to place documents, evidence, ideas and in front of councillors for them to make a decision. For example, guidance on legalities and statutory duties often come from officers to help guide councillors to a decision.

By default, those directly engaged with local government are on the inside with other actors invited in. Those on the outside tend to be so for two reasons; one is that they are not part, by design or accidental exclusion, of the inner circle, the clique, the trusted actors; and second, because they do not have the tools to engage. These elements either exclude or dissuade people from participating. When they do, it is in such a way that their contribution is less effective than those on the inside.

This means that the ideas that generate feedback around policy have an easier passage if you are a private sector lobby group, part of the inner circle, or both, which is often the case. There is almost an institutional 'deafness' to those outside this inner circle. Again whether the actions are deliberate or simply the path of least resistance is partially irrelevant as the existence of preferential treatment for one group and not another means the working class, and many other groups, are more likely to be disadvantaged.

This may explain why people, even when it is made relatively easy to engage, still choose not to. Even if given a place at the table you may still be reticent to speak, as the people that already have a place at the table also engage in a process that is familiar to them.

Familiarity with local government processes also give experts the upper hand when discussing policy in that jargon and this, along with knowledge of other actors and their roles, processes and so on, all create an environment that can appear intimidating to non-experts. As Hillary Shulman, assistant professor of communication at The Ohio State University and lead author of a 2020 study on jargon notes, *"The use of difficult, specialised words are a signal that tells people that they don't belong"*.

## 3.2 Procedures and the policy framework

### 3.2.1 Professional and non-professionals

From the embryonic emergence of a policy to implementation, those within the inner circle, who tend to be professionals, invariably begin their engagement long before those non-professionals become involved. It is common for think tanks, consultants and advisors, mostly cherry-picked, to be involved at the ideas stage. This gives this group of actors a distinct advantage but it also shifts policy in a specific direction. When the local community, or for that matter any external non-

professional group, get involved, policy can be almost fully formed. Consultation and participation then become cosmetic exercises.

There is also the question of depth. There are many instances where non-experts are included in the process from the beginning but at a less granular and less involved level, with consultation requesting low-level input, opinion or comment. The flip side of this is that experts are usually involved from early on in the process as well as that involvement being more in-depth.

Public consultations tend to be online and are sometimes quite complex with multiple questions forms and documents to view. This assumes broadband access, again an income determined asset. The more traditional style of consultation, a drop-in/exhibition style engagement, also requires significant time, where there is the risk that your voice is not heard and standing up in front of a crowd can be daunting for many people. Both of these forms of engagement, digital and non-digital, require time that many working-class people simply don't have.

### 3.2.2 Time and complexity

The complexity, diversity and size of local government organisations mean that they have ingrained processes and a distinct way of doing things. Papers, reports, panels, committees, the influence of regulatory bodies and statutory duties are an integral part of the model but can be overwhelming for the layperson. Explaining how the process works could go some way to demystifying it.

Many of these processes are decades old and were designed for a slower non-digital age. With multiple influences and with the constant shift and change in modern society, flexibility built into the policy decision-making process can only be beneficial.

Even when understanding the processes and frameworks non-experts often struggle in terms of time as any individual, or group, would have to dedicate serious time and effort to compete on a level playing field with paid consultants. With many consultation processes inclusive and participatory for experts and restrictive and selective for non-experts the default setting ends up being an undemocratic and elitist form of policy-making.

### 3.2.3 Different doors to engagement

Existing paths to engagement also raise issues. Most councillors conduct surgeries where people can come and speak to them about problems. This process, although an integral part of the democratic contract, can be random. Councillors are often seen as "the council" and this ignores the complexity of local government and falsely leads people to believe that lobbying a councillor is either the only option, as it is a simple one to one interaction, or that the councillor has an influence where one does not exist. Therefore, a more structured link between councillors, the electorate,

especially but not exclusively, working-class communities and officers would benefit all three groups.

The level at which individuals are affected by a specific policy tends to play little part in the consultation process and hence those residents affected by (for instance) a new supermarket build, may feel their views are subsumed. Living in a street adjacent to a new building development will impact significantly more than someone living miles away. But there appears to be little in terms of a weighting system to take this into account

As such the who of policy-making becomes complex and is not just as simple as being invited or not invited into the process. There are many different strands, confident, not confident, familiar, unfamiliar and so on, with many of those on the working-class side of the fence excluded for these reasons.

## 4. Improving engagement

Inclusion at the beginning of the policy process rather than halfway through, more information relating to the process itself and a structure built from the grassroots, such as a series of established feedback groups would allow more voices to be heard. Participation in policy must be more democratically woven in than is presently the case. Working-class voices should not be seen as something to manage but rather something to integrate so those voices become an integral part of the framework. Existing structures...

Existing structures are top-heavy and are often designed to deliver not what is needed by local communities but what those in charge think is needed.

*“Most of all, there needs to be transparency over the timelines and what kind of engagement can be done when and what will be influenced at each stage. At its heart all engagement must be a two-way discussion and as much as possible avoid yes/no consultation. It is also important it is clear what impact engagement and the resulting intervention will have on individuals' lives and when they can expect that to be realised.”* (KM, Policy Manager, LA)

As if waiting for a train, those that decide policy put the consultation further down the line at specific points. Part of tackling this requires a longer-term strategy of having people from working-class backgrounds actively involved as politicians and workers in local government, at a senior level.

*“[We need] public sector organisations using their recruitment and commissioning powers to recruit from working-class communities.”* (RK, Executive, Think Tank)

There is also the issue of how and when people want to engage

*“Some people wish to be engaged from the start when there is a blank sheet, while others want to be able to 'see' what is being proposed and suggest ways in which the proposal could be tweaked to better meet their needs” (KM, Policy Manager, LA)*

*Engage people in discussing the problem, not on the potential solution. Really understand the challenges, listen, consider, replay and co-produce solutions. Make it easy and convenient for people to get involved - look beyond the usual suspects. Attend schools, workplaces, leisure centres, talk to people on the bus etc... - places where people dwell and may have some free time. [...]*” (KJ, Comms Officer, LA)

The length of the arm in any arm's length approach varies with each local authority but where this practice exists often reflects a rather paternalistic approach reflected in Foucault's analysis of pastoral power, where people are seen as sheep. Fundamentally, those in local government are both “looking out for” and “looking after” people and society; the sheep as individuals and the flock as a whole. There is nothing inherently sinister about this approach as many in local government and beyond genuinely believe they are helping. However, a philanthropic, benevolent or helping-hand culture can have the opposite effect and end up alienating and disenfranchising people

*“Power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society.”<sup>6</sup>*

Although there are many theories of power there is a great deal of synergy between Foucault's analysis of governmental power, in that it is not as simple as linking it all back to some centralised state body, but is layered and complex, reflecting the way local government functions.

*“Rather, governmentality is a form of power ‘without a centre, or rather with multiple centres, power that [is] productive of meanings, of interventions, of entities, of processes, of objects, of written traces and of lives”<sup>7</sup>*

## 5. Methodology

Research around poverty in Wakefield (Jose, 2019) and other research, such as that around food poverty, Food Support for Wakefield Residents, (Jose, 2021) was undertaken by using existing community links, such as community centres and third sector organisations, to gain access to

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<sup>6</sup> Foucault, Michel (1977), Discipline and Punish, Allen Lane.

<sup>7</sup> (Rose & Miller, 2008, p. 9) Realising governmentality: Pastoral power, governmental discourse and the (re)constitution of subjectivities; Graham P. Martin, Justin Waring

working-class communities. This was undertaken in conjunction with Wakefield District Council and work with local government officers, directors and councillors.

In terms of collecting data relevant to this report there is a significant amount of quantitative data around working-class issues however there is a scarcity of qualitative local data and, as touched on earlier, any that might exist is often subsumed by what is seen as grander ideas and ambitions. Even basing data on postcode can be misleading so there needs to be a research starting point that looks at ward or estate level data.

There is a more detailed breakdown of the methods and methodology utilised in collecting data for (Jose, 2019) (see 5. Methodology) with an ambition to create a useable research model for future use. There were also four pillars which were utilised, these being, independence on the part of the researcher, anonymity for the people involved in the research, ensuring agency by giving people the room to speak about what they wanted and ongoing and continuous engagement.

One major step was to look at collecting data and information where there may be gaps. However, this also had the added problem of sometimes not knowing where those gaps were, in effect issues and ideas that may just simply not be forthcoming. Getting this “blind” information may not be simple as looking for knowledge gaps from the point of local government, as opposed to those that were being questioned, but around issues that were not even on the radar of those in local government. One could say it is could be a case of “we don’t know what we don’t know”. For example, a council may improve the nature of a local park, better paths, more plants and improved play areas but use and access may be determined by whether people feel safe or not. This was a specific problem in that one local council were simply unaware of, and, as such, improvements in the lived environment can be wasted if other issues are not addressed.

To explore these issues there needs to be space to do so and this can be as simple as “do you have any other issues” or “do you feel we have covered all the relevant issues”. That blank space for people to fill in needs to be integral to any future research as it was for much of the research that guides this report.

The evidence then collected is much more valuable and not part of a restrictive framework. Adding “is there anything else?” to all questionnaires, focus groups and discussions generates more depth to the research and that element often created a richer vein of qualitative data than a set of specific, restricted questions may have given rise to.

## 6. Key Recommendations

It is not enough to engage intermittently and project by project but by maintaining a continuous and in-depth approach. Adapting existing processes and frameworks may not be enough and by engaging with working-class communities new frameworks and models should emerge. From the Wakefield Poverty Report 2019, the Q&A outlined in this report and academic evidence there needs to be a two-way process rather than the existing one-way process, such as inbuilt shifts in discourse so people can respond not just by stating yes or no but having other options.

Many organisations have their part to play in engaging more with working-class communities however it is central to any success that an emphasis is placed on participation, especially from local and combined authorities.

It is probably worth defining regional macro (jobs, regeneration, infrastructure) and local micro (local parks, access to food, anti-social behaviour) issues, as well as factors to do with specific barriers, are they organisational, such as complexity of the process, or from individuals, such as lack of time? Breaking the barriers to engagement and participation down into specific areas such as these would help make any new model or process more manageable. The responses below shown in the Questionnaire and responses (see Appendix) highlight a problem on both sides of the fence with both the policymakers and those trying to engage. There appears to be a consensus, even in this small sample, that the problem is multifaceted, with the lack of participation a significant barrier.

### 6.1 Working-class issues and ideas

#### 6.1.1 Stimulate policy ideas instead of placing policy ideas in front of people.

There is an opportunity to begin with a clean slate in many areas of policy. Most recently there has been an increase in living costs, especially the basics such as housing, energy and food costs, significantly impacting people on low incomes. More discussion linking policy to real lives could go some way to making policy more relevant to many people.

*“Ensure you act on their ideas. And give them a real voice within their community. This has been done several times over the years and people never liked their ideas.” (PO, Charity Director)*

#### 6.1.2 Involve and listen.

Involve and listen as many working-class people spend the majority of their time where they live. This micro-locality of life for many means that their local park and play areas, shops, access to leisure, cleanliness of streets, traffic and safety at night increase in importance. Putting this into practice would mean shifting from a centralised position to a local one at ward or micro-level.

*“Those who take decisions need to engage more; meet those affected by their decisions. Just doing a “Consultation online” really isn’t representative and isn’t accurate in its results.” (AK, Solicitor. LA)*

## 6.2 Improving the framework

### 6.2.1 Allow for a more flexible engagement environment.

Allow for a more flexible engagement environment as some people will not want to engage from the start of consultation but that also does not mean that the point of engagement should be pre-determined by policymakers. To ensure this works would require a practical and easy to comprehend breakdown of the stages of participation in the process. Participatory democracy can be daunting for a lot of people so examples and “how-to” guides would also help.

*“Carry out consultations on weekends etc. Perhaps engagement sessions could be run in conjunction by local employers and the council.” (RS, Manager, LA)*

*“Major engagements, therefore, need to be multifaceted with a mix of open and targeted engagement with online and offline approaches. Most of all, there needs to be transparency over the timelines and what kind of engagement can be done when and what will be influenced at each stage. At its heart, all engagement must be a two-way discussion and as much as possible avoid yes/no consultation.” (KM, Policy Manager, LA)*

### 6.2.2 Clarity is key.

Always use plain English (and translated where relevant) about what is being discussed and why; what relates directly to the policy, project or development. For example, does the project being discussed have a budget or is that open for discussion? If we take children’s play areas in parks as an example, the budget has a huge impact on what can or cannot be provided. Clarity is a key concept when engaging with people. This again helps the policymakers as they are not spending engagement time explaining what the rules or regulations are.

*“More targeted intervention, a better understanding of our working-class voices and much more straightforward processes and language.” (MG, Policy Officer, LA)*

### 6.2.3 Explain the framework with “How to” instructions.

These types of instructions exist for almost every aspect of modern life but not for how policy is designed and made. It would not take a great leap of imagination or require many resources to explain how decisions are made at a local authority level and to make that information freely available. This would help all actors involved in policymaking.

## 6.3 Move from consultation to participation

### 6.3.1 Use ongoing feedback groups not one-off focus groups.

A one-off engagement where everyone is invited with the agenda and the timing laid out tends to exclude many people. Hiring a large hall and passing a microphone around so people can comment is a rather archaic way of engaging with people; not only does it exclude people who have certain work patterns but it also excludes people who do not like talking at public events.

### 6.3.2 Playgrounds and housing and other specific areas of engagement are key to enabling working-class communities.

It would be relatively simple for local authorities to set up micro-focus groups at a ward level relating to a specific subject or issue. For example, successful work done around Portobello in Wakefield (Poverty Wakefield 2019) where a small focus group looked at the poverty premium, built environment, housing and access to food could be extended to permanently establish similar-sized groups to look at housing and included local housing officers and representatives from relevant housing associations, as an example.

### 6.3.3 Establish a participation model not a consultation model.

To an extent participation begets consultation, however, as outlined earlier, consultation tends to be more arms-length than inclusive. True participation means involvement from the early stages of policy and decision making and a much more level playing field for non-actors and those outside the inner circle.

*“Engage people in discussing the problem, not on the potential solution. Really understand the challenges, listen, consider, replay and co-produce solutions. Make it easy and convenient for people to get involved - look beyond the usual suspects. Attend schools, workplaces, leisure centres, talk to people on the bus etc... - places where people dwell and may have some free time. Big commitments of time in fixed locations limit those who will engage. Increased neurodiversity.”* (KJ, Comms Officer, LA)

*“Send people to communities to develop rapport and channels, one channel may not be enough. Engagement should also include surveys but also be deeper and broader.”* (PJ, Policy Manager, LA)

So where and how becomes important; the where could include local community centres, online forums (and giving easy access to public buildings for people without broadband), ensuring accessibility for people with disabilities, but also less-visited or obvious places such as where people work, as well as cafes, hairdressers, shopping precincts and buses.



## 6.4 Future research

### 6.4.1 Improving and checking methodologies.

There is always space to create better methods of collecting data, especially concerning communities that have felt, in the past, excluded or not listened to. It is important to ensure any information gleaned from interviews, focus groups, observations and case studies reflects the community as a whole and not just polarised views. Rather than one-off or issue-based data collection these valuable sources of information should be fed back into communities to ensure greater understanding and improve the quality of the data. Action research, where needs, issues and concerns, are addressed by continuous consultation as projects develop, can also become part of the policy framework.

### 6.4.2 Policy and framework.

Two distinct areas have the potential to significantly improve participation and engagement in working-class communities. Firstly, looking at the policies that affect those communities be they projects or ambitions or both. Recent research shows that those issues that affect working-class communities sit significantly down the ladder of priority. Secondly, is a more detailed and methodical look at the framework in which consultation and participation take place. Both these issues are not mutually exclusive and should be viewed on a holistic level. It is worth looking at both these issues in a more detail.

### 6.4.3 A levelling of the playing field

In terms of policies all too often major consultancy firms and think tanks either have a political ideology to push or represent vested interests, via their clients. Many people, including the working class, are not aware of the influence of major accountants such as PwC and Deloitte in designing policy objectives. And again there is a default setting from the government that view these as the “go-to” organisations. The problem can be that these consultations tend to follow a neo-liberal agenda and as such, this is what drives their advice, rather than community and local issues. Again back to what is needed at a community level and not what fits a specific model or agenda.

#### **How would you improve engagement from working-class people?**

*“First of all we must acknowledge they exist. Then we must engage to understand the problems and circumstances they experience. This must be done genuinely by people who truly empathise.”* (KL, Manager, Charity)

### 6.4.4 A better, more informed way of collective data.

There is a rich vein of information and data to justify a much more detailed exploration of a participatory model of local democracy based on improving the inclusion of working-class voices. This framework

analysis should cover the recommendation listed but also a more detailed look at the how of generating qualitative data, as opposed to merely collecting quantitative data.

To enable this there would need to be a two-way flow of research, discussion and analysis where working-class communities and individuals can talk openly about the issues that affect them. A concrete proposal would be that for any further research, interviewing and running focus groups is undertaken by “*people who truly empathise*” (Q&A, KL, Manager, Charity). Some of the recommendations only work if we remove the many assumptions, stigmas and myths that have developed around and in working-class communities. Working-class communities can be their own engagement engine.

#### 6.4.5 Establish hyper-local models of participation - test and re-test effectiveness.

In making the framework more effective and democratic it would be worth exploring the best way to establish a permanent way of embedding continuous participation and not ‘stop-start’ or project led consultation.

As well as collecting data around specific subjects such as housing, health issues, work, and finances, a more organic and unrestricted conversation needs to take place as well as addressing where there are gaps in provision, who needs help, which issues affect which different communities, how to address these issues, what works, and what does not.

It would be pertinent to expand on existing research outlined in this report and certainly the Q&A from policy offers, will probably reap some informative and helpful information.

#### 6.4.6 Variations and similarities across policy-making bodies.

It is also worth looking at the actual process and whether there are differences in engagement across the various bodies, such as combined authorities and municipal authorities, and also the different levels of engagement around service areas, such as housing, parks, children’s services, adult social care and so on. With the work around poverty (Jose, 2019) there were initial discussions with officers at Wakefield to explain what the aims and objectives of the projects were and, by engaging with those internal actors that guide policy, the idea was to show that the process was as inclusive as possible.

This final point is important in that there needs to be as much information flowing towards those who need to buy into any new framework or it will simply not work.

## 7. Conclusion

Often the discussion around engagement and participation in public policy has been how to modify existing frameworks, how to reach more people, and looking at the tools to engage, rather than how that engagement process works in the first place. More flexible and democratic frameworks

that are less unwieldy and more transparent would generate better results than looking at developing or paying for complex digital applications.

There are a wide variety of factors, from both sides of the policy fence - the makers and the influencers - that have created a less than favourable environment for working-class voices, not only to be heard but to be acted upon. Various conflicts, where experts versus non-experts vie for influence over policy, a lack of knowledge of “how things work” and a paternalistic pastoral structure that is embedded albeit with the best of intentions, means that engagement is designed in such a way that working-class communities gain low levels of agency in relation to their own communities.

Much of our thinking as a society has been pulled and pushed towards a “them and us” culture and, to a large extent, this dictates policy.

Policy also tends to be the servant of economic policy, growth and jobs. “Small” problems then become subservient to wider political desires and, again, pastoral power, with “we know best” being the default setting. This lack of linked up thinking, where local knowledge, excluded voices, alongside unscalable barriers, means local government becomes less connected with and less answerable to, local communities.

In answer to “what are the barriers to engagement?”, one of the comments, from a senior academic specialising in government policy, was;

*“Deep, structural and long-standing. Policymaking has become an elite and centralised activity.” (MV, Academic)*

*“It’s a cyclical issue [barriers to engagement] - those who take decisions are not interested in their opinions, so people disengage as their voices are not heard.” (AK, Solicitor, LA)*

One comment from an individual running a social project in a deprived area of West Yorkshire stated that the idea of consultation simply pays “lip service” to those whose opinion they seek out. The consultation process can often end up just being an attempt to confirm a singular direction of travel guiding people down an agreed route. That then treats democracy and engagement as a procedural hoop that serves a predetermined end game. This report has shown, through a series of recommendations that it doesn’t have to be like that and genuine participatory engagement is not only desirable, but achievable.

Addressing parts of the policymaking framework can have a positive effect but to enable real change, to democratise and shift from engagement to participation, requires a holistic approach.

By looking at all the various elements of the framework, such as ideas, ideologies, strategies and methods, and enabling working-class voices to be both listened to and acted upon, will local government be able to claim genuine participation in policy decisions.

## 8. References

Food Support for Wakefield Residents (Jose, 2021)

Poverty in Wakefield: A qualitative exploration of poverty on the frontline (Jose, 2019)

## 9. Glossary of terms used

**Local government:** This covers the various types of local councils. Parish and town councils, county, district, unitary, metropolitan and regional authorities. It is also shorthand for the collective that makes up local government which, unless stated, includes both layers of local government. Political, made up of councillors, both ruling and opposition, and operational, made up of employed, officers. A third layer tends to be employed consultants or experts, which are defined below.

**Expert:** This covers, unless stated, professionals within and outside of local government, think tanks, consultants and any other paid advisors. There are a wide range of people and organisations and the word is used specifically, in this context, to describe those that work closely with local government.

**Non-experts:** Simply people not covered in the above description. However, for the purposes of this report there may be people who are working-class, or any class, that are experts in a specific field. What differentiates them is they are not tasked or attached experts with regard to policy decisions.

## Appendix: Questionnaire and responses

Overall 18 responses to four questions in December 2021/

- **Q1: Do working-class people contribute to policy making decisions?**
- **Q2: How do they contribute - i.e. through which channels?**
- **Q3: What do you feel are the barriers to engagement?**
- **Q4: How would you improve engagement from working class people?**

LA - Local Authority; CG - Central Government.

Each entry has been anonymised and job titles simplified.

**Q1: Do working-class people contribute to policy making decisions?**

*Not a lot; mainly lip service. (PO, Charity Director)*

*When they get time, yes (RS, Manager, LA)*

*Not much, only if they are motivated to do so. (AK, Solicitor. LA)*

*Yes. (CJ, Business Advisor)*

*Yes..but limited. (LG, Trustee, Charity)*

*To a degree at a local level - nationally, far less so. (KJ, Comms Officer, LA)*

*Not a lot. (PJ, Policy Manager, LA)*

*Yes - but less than and in different ways to more affluent groups. (KM, Policy Manager, LA)*

*Depends on which part of the country you are in e.g. on Clydeside it is great; in the Thames valley it is poor. (TF)*

*Yes. (RG, Inclusion Officer, LA)*

*The brief answer would be, not as well as other groups who have vastly more ways to contribute to policy decisions. But at a basic level of citizenship and voting rights, all groups have equal rights - but there are vast differences in resources. (MV, Academic)*

*I work in an internally facing job in central government, so not so much. But my last job was local government and the answer there would have been yes. (RO, Director, CG)*

*Rarely in my experience. Consultation and engagement can be focused to include this group but I'm not sure we're very successful at it. (MG, Policy Officer, LA)*

*Rarely, since they are not given genuine opportunities to do so. (KL, Manager, Charity)*

*Yes. (PH, Social Worker, LA)*

*Only partly and sporadically. (CV, Executive, LA)*

*Rarely, to be honest. (LK, Executive, Charity)*

*Yes to some extent although it depends on how we understand the policy making process. (RK, Executive, Think Tank)*

**Q2: How do they contribute - i.e. through which channels?**

*Senior workers counsellors. (PO, Charity Director)*

*Through Doncaster Talks and surveys. (RS, Manager, LA)*

*Personal representations, social media, membership of a union (AK, Solicitor. LA) Business activities, social media, traditional media, politics. (CJ Business Advisor)*

*Local Authority and VCSE Sector community engagement exercises; local ward councillors; (LG, Trustee, Charity)*

*In my experience, the point at which consultation and engagement is undertaken is usually when an agreed view has already been reached, therefore the scope for people to influence is limited. A limited number of people, who are very vocal and active, tend to be the voices that are heard and influence decision-making, however, it's not necessarily linked to policy, in fact on many occasions it's at odds with policy. (KJ, Comms Officer, LA)*

*They are invited but not proactively sought into the process enough, even with participatory democracy type interventions. (PJ, Policy Manager, LA)*

*Individuals we would classify as working class are in my view less likely to participate directly in many policy-making contexts than other groups. They are however engaged in some exercises that are intentionally targeted to reach them. In Kirklees I think co-production of the Adult Social Care Vision was able to achieve this at least to some extent. (KM, Policy Manager, LA)*

*Local politics and civil society organisations, and the culture (TF) Through place-based engagement activity. (RG, Inclusion Officer, LA)*

*The minimum as part of citizenship is through voting. The question though is also around weaknesses in representation - comparatively few working-class people are elected members, especially of parliament. (MV, Academic)*

*See above. In local government, they contributed through the same mechanisms as everyone else. Local forums, online participation. We didn't seek them out as a discrete group. (RO, Director, CG)*

*In the current COVID climate, it's digital...which can be restrictive. (MG, Policy Officer, LA)*

*Our Senior Leadership Team is comprised of people from a working-class background. Also influences wider council policies. Links to regional and national networks e.g. PSW networks and ADASS. (PH, Social Worker, LA)*

*Consultation responses; social media; public meetings. (CV, Executive, LA)*

*Where it happens too often through "controlled"/"top-down" consultation rather than genuine engagement. (LK, Executive, Charity)*

*At a basic level - through representative democracy, through membership of political parties and through membership of organisations with influence, e.g. unions/civil society organisations. Electoral geography also plays a role - e.g. the views of working/middle-class voters in 'red wall' seats is arguably taken more seriously than, for example, electoral wards in London. In the absence of direct working-class participation - Newspaper patronage and social media is used as a proxy to understand working-class views. (RK, Executive, Think Tank)*

### **Q3: What do you feel are the barriers to engagement?**

*Understanding local people understanding their needs and issues as they usually is a common theme. (PO, Charity Director)*

*Time, lack of understanding of the subject matter, perhaps lack of confidence that local gov will deliver. (RS, Manager, LA)*

*It's a cyclical issue - those who take decisions are not interested in their opinions, so people disengage as their voices are not heard. (AK, Solicitor. LA)*

*Elitism and entitlement of upper classes exacerbated by meritocracy having been superseded by successive right-wing governments. (CJ, Business Advisor)*

*Apathy, education, aspiration, cynicism, a remaining degree of statutory sector paternalism (particularly in the NHS), opportunity, evidence of change/notice being taken. (LG, Trustee, Charity)*

*Trust that the feedback will actually be used to inform decision-making/policy. Approaches to engagement are too limited to traditional channels and approaches. Opportunities to give views are too often inconvenient for the majority - e.g. during the day, fixed locations etc... (KJ, Comms Officer, LA)*

*The complexity of local government. People of any class don't really understand local government. Resources. Ambition. Feeling of letting go. (PJ, Policy Manager, LA)*

*Barriers include lack of time, times that are incompatible with other commitments (work, caring, etc); meeting formats that are intimidating or incomprehensible; needing to hunt out issues that are of relevance (thus favouring those keen to engage); challenges in using digital tools to access information or respond. (KM, Policy Manager, LA)*

*Two big barriers - are the very centralised form of government in the UK (ie. structural) in all nations; and through the consultative rather than participatory nature of engagement (i.e. the processes) that are used to engage with people. (TF)*

*Lack of available spare time, perception that it's 'not for them', negative connotations around political activity. (RG, Inclusion Officer, LA)*

*Deep, structural and long-standing. Policymaking has become an elite and centralised activity. (MV, Academic)*

*Same as anyone else. Getting messages out in language folk understand the difficulty of engaging large groups in meaningful ways. (RO, Director, CG)*

*Understanding from policymakers about what impacts working-class voices and how they could and should contribute. Processes are often off-putting too. The language we as policymakers use. (MG, Policy Officer, LA)*

*An apparent lack of appreciation from policymakers of the issues they face. (KL, Manager, Charity)*

*Not knowing the 'rules of engagement' - how to effectively engage both in terms of routes and communication. (PH, Social Worker, LA)*

*The sense that views will not be entertained/issues not directly relevant. (CV, Executive, LA)*

*The Us and Them culture which hoards power rather than distributing it; a lack of civic/community institutions to bring together and represent local people, particularly in peripheral estates/communities where civic life has been allowed to decline. (LK, Executive, Charity)*

*Income, property rights (which give people much greater influence in the UK). Economic security (e.g. housing tenure, working conditions) prevent people from having a voice. Caring responsibilities (particularly for working-class women). Shaming/blaming culture within UK politics which marginalises communities (e.g. those claiming social security). Economic barriers to education (e.g. in FE/HE). Extractive economics. (RK, Executive, Think Tank)*

#### **Q4: How would you improve engagement from working-class people?**

*Ensure you act on their ideas. And give them a real voice within their community. This has been done several times over the years and people never liked their ideas. (PO, Charity Director)*

*Carry out consultations on weekends etc. Perhaps engagement sessions could be run in conjunction by local employers and the council. (RS, Manager, LA)*



*Those who take decisions need to engage more (ie MEET) those affected by their decisions. Just doing a "Consultation online" really isn't representative and isn't accurate in its results. Once in Manchester in the early 2000s, they knocked on doors in Beswick, a very tough area to see what people thought of the Council and its services. They discovered a lot of need, as people didn't know/were afraid of coming forward to access services and were utterly unused to having their voices heard -often the first time in their lives they had been asked. It taught those doing the door knocking not to presume to know what the answers would be. A life lesson for all involved. Westminster is particularly bad at engaging with working-class people and is more the "do to them" than "do with them" model of behaviour. The central flaw is that Whitehall cannot possibly know local conditions and needs. (AK, Solicitor. LA)*

*Investment in education - it's a long term strategy but worthwhile. (CJ Business Advisor)*

*Empowerment of the VCSE Sector, energising community development initiatives, involving young people in developing civic awareness and opportunities to be involved in local (and national) democracy, promotion of neighbourhood/community forums and asset/place-based service delivery, including training/skills development for local people, improved communications re opportunities and to engage within communities (including participation in the local planning process). (LG, Trustee, Charity)*

*Engage people in discussing the problem, not on the potential solution. Really understand the challenges, listen, consider, replay and co-produce solutions. Make it easy and convenient for people to get involved - look beyond the usual suspects. Attend schools, workplaces, leisure centres, talk to people on the bus etc... - places where people dwell and may have some free time. Big commitments of time in fixed locations limit those who will engage. Increased neurodiversity. (KJ, Comms Officer, LA)*

*Send people to communities to develop rapport and channels, one channel may not be enough. Engagement should also include surveys but also be deeper and broader. (PJ, Policy Manager, LA)*

*Effective engagement is genuinely challenging. My comments here probably draw significantly on Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed and to some extent on Amartya Sen's Development as Freedom.*

*Some people wish to be engaged from the start when there is a blank sheet, while others want to be able to 'see' what is being proposed and suggest ways in which the proposal could be tweaked to better meet their needs. The level of technicality different individuals are able or wish to engage with also varies. This often results in processes that are frustrating and/or exclusionary, an issue that is exacerbated by a lack of trust in public figures.*

*Major engagements, therefore, need to be multifaceted with a mix of open and targeted engagement with online and offline approaches. Most of all, there needs to be transparency over the timelines and what kind of engagement can be done when and what will be influenced at each stage. At its heart, all engagement must be a two-way discussion and as much as possible avoid yes/no consultation.*

*It is also important it is clear what impact engagement and the resulting intervention will have on individuals' lives and when they can expect that to be realised.*

*A final point is that while unrealistic for all exercises, engagement should seek to upskill participants enabling them to play more significant roles in the future. (KM, Policy Manager, LA)*

*It needs new institutional arrangement (citizens assemblies etc), decentralisation and devolvement of power, and a change of culture to re-empower participatory democracy (see ECTP-CEU Charter); renewal of confidence in representative democratic processes. (TF)*

*Pay people, go out into workplaces, teach more political education in schools. (RG, Inclusion Officer, LA)*

*Decentralisation of policymaking would open up enormous potential for greater locally-based approaches to engagement in meaningful policy discussion. Participatory approaches rather than confrontational debates would also help. (MV, Academic)*

*Go where they are and start from the issues that affect them. (RO, Director, CG)*

*More targeted intervention, a better understanding of our working-class voices and much more straightforward processes and language. (MG, Policy Officer, LA)*

*First of all we must acknowledge they exist. Then we must engage to understand the problems and circumstances they experience. This must be done genuinely by people who truly empathise. (KL, Manager, Charity)*

*Improve networking opportunities before entering the world of work (will also build confidence to speak and be listened to) more down to earth communication - language/subject can be a barrier and often hear staff say what I believe are basic/fundamental issues go over their head, understanding of intersectionality - w/class not a homogenous group, understanding the issues that affect w/class people and also w/class people seeing that change can happen & they can influence this not just the elites. Education around politics (small p) and humanities in schools, debating opportunities.*

*Reduction of inequality - the more unequal society becomes, the more difficult engagement is a people will become disillusioned but also 'distracted' ensuring basic needs are met - or engage in more destructive or radical ways? Use of (responsible) social media platforms. (PH, Social Worker, LA)*

*Widen access to and powers of governance at local levels; consider making voting compulsory. (CV, Executive, LA)*

*Invest in rebuilding local social infrastructure and civic institutions, particularly in areas where it has fallen into decline. Prioritising neighbourhoods that are most "left behind" (LK, Executive, Charity)*

*Tackle extraction within the economy - e.g. democratise ownership, create decent pay/work/working conditions. Political parties consciously working with and recruiting from working-class communities. Public sector organisations using their recruitment and commissioning powers to recruit from working-class communities. (RK, Executive, Think Tank)*