

## GMPA Special Interest Groups

### Background

GMPA is an action network of over 100 organisations plus a number of independent individuals working on tackling poverty across Greater Manchester. Designed to encourage collaborative behaviour and joint action, the network and public profile of anti-poverty activity is growing every week. But GMPA's Secretariat is few in number. We rely on the generosity, experience and enthusiasm of our colleagues. To enable an anti-poverty voice with more authority and effectiveness, we need to draw on the expertise of the community. We are therefore asking individuals from across the network to form Special Interest Groups that can work together on a topic in which they have expert knowledge.

There are many anti-poverty themes which could fall under Special Interest Groups: education, debt, access to public services, health and wellbeing, housing, homelessness, child poverty and more. But to start with we would like to establish Special Interest Groups across three specific topics:

- Food Poverty
- Work and Wages
- Fuel Poverty

If you would like to be involved in one of these three groups, or to register interest for another anti-poverty topic to be built into a Special Interest Group, please do let [Chris](#) or [Peter](#) know.

### What will the aims of the Special Interest Groups be?

To become a regional authority on their topic and a respected voice used for both impact and advocacy.

We ask that the Special Interest Groups:

- contribute to the content of the GMPA Newsletter, website and other platforms by writing topical articles;
- write press releases on topics of particular concern that can be distributed via GMPA's press contacts;
- write a 'state of the union' annual article examining the topic more broadly;
- profile the outstanding work of individuals with the group or within the UK;
- host one open event per year - this can be facilitated by the GMPA if required

Following an initial meeting, we would encourage the Special Interest Groups to meet once every 3 months – either via an online video chat service or in person.

We would envisage a core group of about 6/8 people taking the lead on each topic with a wider audience within GMPA to provide input, support and evidence as necessary.

### What will GMPA provide?

GMPA will facilitate the spread of information to the group members and to a wider public audience; arrange venues for open events; post articles, commentary etc on the GMPA platforms (website, newsletter, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube channel); and distribute press releases. Any other administrative support requirements can be discussed.

**To get involved:** please let [Peter](#) or [Chris](#) know which topics you are interested in.

## On the Spot: GM Poverty Action interviews Niall Cooper, CEO of Church Action on Poverty

**Q: What is tackling poverty really about?**

A: Partly about equalising life chances. We don't want a society that gives people massively different life chances depending on who you're born to or where you're born. People make decisions that may have negative impacts but the consequences are more profound when you are on a lower income. Poverty is also to do with the way society is structured and today's economic model. The gap between the rich and the poor has widened.

**Q: What would an alternative economic model look like?**

A: The most obvious one is an equalisation of pay and paying a real living wage. That would lift the bottom, which is very important when 60% of people in poverty are in in-work poverty. We need to ask broader questions about the nature and security of work and challenge the fact that people on low incomes pay more for essential goods and services.

**Q: What's the vision we should be working towards, a poverty-free society?**

A: Ultimately yes, but we're a long way from that. There's a view circulating today that poor people are somehow different from us - myths about them being lazy, ignorant and stupid. This just isn't true, those on low incomes are just like us and if we are talking about tackling poverty, the starting point is working with people in poverty. Let's start with their aspirations, hopes, fears, and their lived experience of what the challenges are. There's a tendency even in the anti-poverty sector, that people want to solve people's problems for them, or assume that we know better than they do but that is hopeless. Think about it, you wouldn't tackle disability without engaging with disabled people, and it would be hopeless to discuss equality without women or minority communities in the room but it's still perfectly acceptable to organise events *about* poverty with no people living in poverty in the room. That's part of the problem we need to address. Some of the issues we face are well meaning people who aren't poor, trying to come up with solutions, which don't help and in some cases make things worse.

**Q: Will there always be poor people?**

A: There will always be a degree of inequality but if you look across Europe or the UK's past 50 years, levels of poverty are not fixed. They have been significantly lower, so it is clearly possible to organise society and the economy in other ways. I don't see a trade-off between a strong economy and a society of shared wealth. That's the myth we've been sold, that to have a strong economy you have to incentivise the rich and penalise the poor.

**Q: Is tackling poverty the responsibility of the state, businesses, or charities, or individuals?**

A: It's the responsibility of everybody. Nobody can duck out of their responsibility to their fellow citizens. Every part of society has a contribution to make, including people living in poverty, who need to be actively involved in the process, not just objects of other peoples' solutions. There's a role for government, but it can't tackle poverty alone. A lot of the levers are held by Government - a key aspect of that is welfare policy.

**Q: Do we need a new 'Apollo' vision for poverty, a new Beveridge report?**

A: No. We mustn't wait, that's a disservice to people struggling in poverty now. There's a huge amount that can be achieved without waiting for reports.

**Q: How much of poverty is the individual's responsibility?**

A: We all have responsibilities to each other as well as to ourselves but some people living in the benefits system have very difficult lives. A regime whose starting point is based on punishment is surely immoral and counterproductive, particularly if it leaves people with no means of income. It doesn't stack up with any concept of human rights. If individuals wilfully do not turn up at a job centre, yes there should be some form of sanction, but that shouldn't be to deprive someone of any income or means of feeding themselves whatsoever. The evidence shows that benefits sanctions make poverty worse, lead to large scale destitution, and are counter-productive even in relation to its own objectives of getting people into work.

Our objective has to be rethinking policy, engaging politicians and getting them to change their mind and attitudes. We should also talk about the responsibility of politicians who don't comprehend the consequences of their policies.



*Continued on the next page*

*Continued from previous page*

Politicians need to remember that this is about real peoples lives, rather than numbers and policy. They should meet – and really engage with - people from their own constituencies who can share their lived experiences and insights into the challenges of life on a low income.

**Q: What is your view on the way we measure poverty, and approach ‘tackling’ it overall?**

A: Questions about measurement are important but challenging. If the ways we measure poverty don’t translate into something meaningful, that is problematic. Recently, there was a discussion about child poverty on the Today programme, and it became an argument about numbers. Listening to that, you would have thought poverty was a branch of statistics. For people in poverty, what difference does it make if it was 3.6 or 3.8 million. Worse still, within 5 minutes most people listening will have forgotten all about it.

I understand the need for a poverty line. But statistics and abstract policy debates won’t make people care enough about poverty to want to do anything about it. To make change happen, we need measures and indicators that relate to people’s lived experience. And more importantly than that, we need to communicate that poverty is about real people, with real lives, real names, hopes, fears and aspirations – just like anyone else.

**Q: In your experience of tackling poverty, what interventions have worked?**

A: Work with households looking at mapping assets and strategies. To give an example, we set up a Women’s Group to work with women who had issues with mental health and isolation, and who had no social networks. Many were clinically depressed. For one woman, it took 18 months of gentle encouragement to get her to attend. But her coming to the group transformed her life, suddenly she wasn’t alone. She met with 8-10 other women, who had similar stories to her own. She had a social network that provided support, she became an active member of a group and then went on a training course that took her towards getting a job.

A lot of the anti-poverty interventions are based on silo thinking – ‘that we can fix this one aspect of people’s lives’ without understanding anything about the complexity of peoples lives – or their own agency in the situation. But if you can bring people together with their own lived experience, they are perfectly able to come up with their own imaginative solutions.

Participatory budgeting is a good example of this – giving local people the opportunity to directly decide how public money is spent in their communities. They know infinitely more about the needs and what is likely to work, and can often make much better decisions about how to spend money than the so-called experts. To my mind, the real experts in poverty – and those with the best idea about how to tackle it – are those who live with it on a daily basis.



**Q: If you were the Mayor of Greater Manchester, and had a kitty of £100m to spend only on this, what would you do?**

A: I would spend a couple of hundred thousand asking people in poverty how they want the money spent. Who am I to know how to spend people’s money for them? Do we trust the people to make the right choices? It might seem counter-cultural to ask people what they want, but surely that’s the essence of democracy?

[More information about Church Action on Poverty](#)

## Community Voices

This week we hear from [Robert](#) who lives in the north of Greater Manchester.

Robert is a carer for his wife and talks about his life and the challenges of living on Carer’s Allowance benefits. He remarks about the severity of the benefit system, noting: “people I’ve seen on Facebook, they’ve been sent to work, they’ve been declared fit for work, and they’ve died the week later”

[If you haven’t watched last week’s Community Voices, you can catch up with Rachel here.](#)



YouTube

## In the Guardian this week:

Cuts to benefit entitlements make it less likely unemployed people will find a job, a government-backed employment project has found, undermining politicians' claims that docking welfare payments acts as an incentive to work. [Read the article](#)

Lady Phillipa Stroud has assembled an independent, cross-party group of academics and campaigners, who will be given 18 months to agree new poverty metrics. [Read the article](#)

Labour is considering backing the idea of a universal basic income, as a report from campaign group Compass say such a system would cut child poverty by 45%. [Read the article](#)

## Forthcoming Events:

### Crash course on devolution

Tuesday June 14th, 2016 in central Manchester

This CLES event will comprise of a facilitated discussion on all things devolution. Cost £40 for CVS organisations.

[More information and to book](#)

### Where does volunteering go from here?

Thursday June 23rd 2016, at St Thomas Centre, Ardwick Green North, Manchester M12 6FZ

You are invited to this event to give your views on the future of volunteering in our region and to have your say on the development of the Volunteering Greater Manchester network. With attendance from Tony Lloyd (Interim Mayor), Carolyn Wilkins (Chief Executive, Oldham Council) and Dr Julian Skyrme (Director of Social Responsibility, University of Manchester) already confirmed, this should be an exciting and interactive event. Event Fee £10 [More information and booking](#)

### How has Manchester welcomed refugees?

Thursday June 30th, 2016 from 6 - 8pm at the Portico Library & Gallery, 57 Mosley Street, Manchester M2 3HY

Do you have a burning question about the role we've played in supporting refugees? Are you interested in learning how to make Greater Manchester a more welcoming place? Expert speakers from refugee support organisations, the refugee community and academia will be joined by public figures to discuss how our city has provided a place of safety for people fleeing persecution over the decades.

[More information and to book](#)

### Introduction to asset based community development

Thursday July 28th, 2016 10am—4pm at the Manchester Conference Centre, 78 Sackville Street, Manchester M1 3NJ

Orange Club UK offer a practical one day workshop about challenging assumptions and working from the ground up to focus on the capacities of individuals and neighbourhoods and building communities from the inside out. To consider resources, strengths, skills, abilities and assets people and communities can draw upon. Facilitated by Gary Loftus.

Cost £102 [More information and to book](#)

## Why GM Poverty Action?

In the Recommendations Report of the GM Poverty Commission, 2.4 *Maintaining Momentum on Poverty* called for the formation of a Poverty Action Group to help take forward the work of the Commission.

A small number of public, private and civic sector individuals came together to form GMPA - a 'coalition of the willing'. This group has since grown to over 100 organisations plus many independent individuals.

GMPA is based upon principles of cooperation between organisations.

## For more information about Greater Manchester Poverty Action

please visit our [website](#), follow us on [Twitter](#) or visit our [Facebook](#) page.

All these platforms are there to share news and opinion from our readers, from GM Poverty Action and from our community.

We want to celebrate our successes, find new ways of working together and provide a voice for the people living in poverty in our region. But we can only do this with your help and support.

For more information or to share your news please contact [Chris](#) or [Peter](#).

Copies of previous newsletters are available on our [website](#)

If you would like to contact us or submit an article for inclusion in a newsletter please get in touch in one of the following ways:

Post: c/o 5th Floor Church House,  
90 Deansgate, Manchester M3 2GH

Or contact our Communications Manager:  
Chris Bagley T: 07419 774537 [Email](#)  
and we will reply as soon as possible.

**NB** GMPA does not have full-time dedicated administrative support so please do not expect an immediate response.

