

Considering socio-economic disadvantage when assessing the community response to COVID-19

April 2020. Contact: Graham Whitham, Director - Greater Manchester Poverty Action.
graham@gmpovertyaction.org, 07917644435

Background

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in an urgent need to support people in the community who are shielding or isolating themselves from the disease because they are medically vulnerable due to age or an underlying health condition. Central to this has been ensuring that people who are medically vulnerable, and therefore isolating, are able to access food, prescriptions and other types of support.

Local authorities across GM have been working with partners to support this group through 'community response models'. As in other parts of the country, these models involve a central community support line that acts as a first point of contact for people in need of support, and local hubs who are able to support people by delivering food to people's homes and meeting other needs.

With strategic decision making or service design it is important (and in some instances a legal requirement) to undertake an equality impact assessment to understand the impact and reach of decisions or services on groups of the population with protected characteristics. GMPA believes that with any service delivery, whilst the socio-economic duty is not currently a legal requirement, it is a valuable tool for ensuring decisions positively address the inequalities people in poverty face. Consideration of socio-economic status should therefore form part of equality impact assessments of community responses in each part of the city region.

This paper considers the steps that can be taken to assess the impact of the community response in GM's ten boroughs on people who are socio-economically disadvantaged. We know that some public bodies in GM already consider socio-economic status when making strategic and policy decisions and would therefore welcome additional input into this paper from those and other stakeholders.

Poverty and the pandemic

The pandemic is having a disproportionate impact on people on low incomes. That is why it is particularly important that socio-economic status forms part of an assessment of the community response.

Data from the ONS has shown a link between deaths from COVID-19 and deprivationⁱ. The economic effects of the pandemic are also more likely to impact negatively on people already experiencing poverty. People experiencing poverty are more likely to have longstanding health conditions and therefore be shielding themselves from the disease. People in severe poverty are often 'hard to reach' and 'distant' from services and support. People in poverty who are shielding themselves from the disease are likely to face multiple barriers to accessing goods, services and support (e.g. not being able to afford food as well as not being able to access it), and may be less likely to have strong social networks to support them during this time. People on low incomes are more likely to have longstanding mental health conditions which may be exacerbated by the lockdown and anxiety caused by the pandemic.

Key questions that public bodies should ask to ensure socio-economic status is fully considered when making strategic decisions and designing services

- What are the potential impacts of the proposal/decision as we currently understand them?
- Are there any unintended consequences of the proposal/decision on people experiencing poverty?
- How could the proposal/decision be improved so it reduces or further reduces inequalities of outcome, with a particular focus on socio-economic disadvantage?
- How will this policy or service assist you to reduce inequality in outcomes overall?
- How can we ensure the views and experiences of people in poverty inform decisions and service design?
- If you are now planning to adjust the proposal/decision, could it be adjusted still further to benefit particular communities of interest or of place who are more at risk of socio-economic disadvantage?

What does this mean in practical terms for the community response during the pandemic?

Local authorities (and their partners) should undertake the following steps to ensure socio-economic status is fully considered when designing, delivering and assessing the community response:

- Include a socio-economic assessment as part of a community response equality impact assessment tool.
- Identify opportunities to engage people on low incomes in conversations about the design and delivery of the community response, and consider the intersections between poverty and other characteristics (e.g. disability and race) to ensure often marginalised groups of the population are engaged in these conversations.
- Consider how information about the community response has been available to people on low incomes: *Are there any barriers to people who are socio-economically disadvantaged accessing information (ie. inability to access information online)?*
- Assess the overlap between those who are medically vulnerable and socio-economically disadvantaged in your area: *Are people who are socio-economically disadvantaged at greater risk of COVID-19 (and therefore more likely to be isolating), in what ways and to what extent?*
- Assess take-up of support in deprived communities to understand the extent to which support is reaching low income areas.
- Publish a written assessment showing how the above practical steps have been undertaken.
- Ask what, if any, changes should be made to decisions taken or the way in which services have been designed as a result of the socio-economic assessment.

More broadly, those involved in the community response should work with colleagues and partners in their local authority area to:

- Actively consider, at an appropriate level, what more can be done to reduce the inequalities of outcome, caused by socio-economic disadvantage, in any strategic decision-making or policy development context as part of a local area's broader response to the pandemic.

About the socio-economic duty

The Equality Act 2010 contains a valuable tool to ensure poverty is given due consideration by public bodies when making strategic decisions and designing services: the socio-economic duty.

This duty contained in Section 1 of the Act would require public authorities to actively consider the way in which their decisions increase or decrease inequalities that result from socio-economic disadvantage. Sadly, the UK government has not commenced the duty, and socio-economic disadvantage is often missing from equality impact assessments that include consideration of other protected characteristics. However, the duty is now in force in Scotland ('Fairer Scotland Duty') (and is also being taken forward in Wales), and some local authorities in England are voluntarily implementing it (e.g. Newcastle City Council).

Applying the socio-economic duty means paying 'due regard' to the desirability of reducing the inequalities caused by socio-economic disadvantage and poverty, reducing inequalities of outcome caused by socio-economic disadvantage, and actively considering how to reduce inequalities of outcome when taking decisions and designing services.

ⁱ See: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/releases/spatialanalysisondeathsregisteredinvolvingcovid19>