



*Why and how to involve people
with lived experience of poverty*

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank everyone who has taken part in our two Poverty Truth Commissions or who have joined us in other ways on our “participation journey” over the past few years. We are particularly grateful to our Community Commissioners, Foodbank clients and Pantry members with lived experience of poverty, who have been willing to share their stories and experiences in the hope of making a positive difference to others.

We have learnt so much from you - and it is changing the way that we work as a charity. We hope that this guide will inspire other organisations to start or progress on their own participation journey, because the social change that is needed to end the scandal of poverty in our community will only happen when we listen to the real experts.



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Introduction

This guide has been put together to help organisations who are keen to adopt and develop participatory approaches of working. Participation is key to challenging assumptions about poverty and helping to address its root causes. At Good Company, we know that many statutory agencies and charities in Surrey share our vision to create communities where everyone can afford essentials such as food, toiletries, clothing and heating. To achieve this vision, it's important that we work collaboratively with other organisations, but it's also vital that we work collaboratively with people with lived experience of financial hardship. As the African proverb says: 'If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far go together.'

Please use this guide to reflect on where you are on your participation journey. We've included case studies and links to resources at the end of this report, and our hope is that organisations across Surrey will grow in confidence in adopting participatory approaches and discovering for themselves how involving people with lived experience leads to more effective, sustainable outcomes.



What is it?

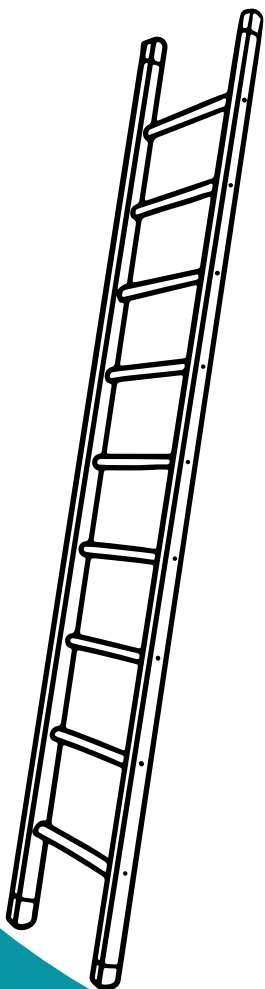
Participation is the active involvement of people who use your services in how these services are run. This guide focuses on how to involve people with lived experience of poverty, whose voices are often marginalised. It is based on the belief that those who have experienced financial hardship are experts on the causes and effects of poverty and should be central in decisions about how to tackle it.

Involving people with lived experience of poverty - or participation, for short - is like learning a new language. It takes time and the best way to make progress is to practise it, starting with simple interactions and then building on this as your confidence grows. At first, your efforts at participation may feel a bit forced and awkward, and you will make mistakes and be misunderstood. But over time it will feel more natural and fluent as you get more used to a different way of working and start to embed this across all parts of your organisation.



'Ladder' of Participation

Another way of thinking about this is a ladder, with different rungs or levels of participation that give people with lived experience progressively more say in how the services they use are run:



Co-producing

Participants have an equal relationship with decision makers in formulating an organisation's policies and practices. Service users and providers work together collaboratively, blurring the distinction between the two.

Engaging

Participants are actively involved in a dynamic process in helping to shape the design and running of services. The flow of information between user and provider is two-way

Listening

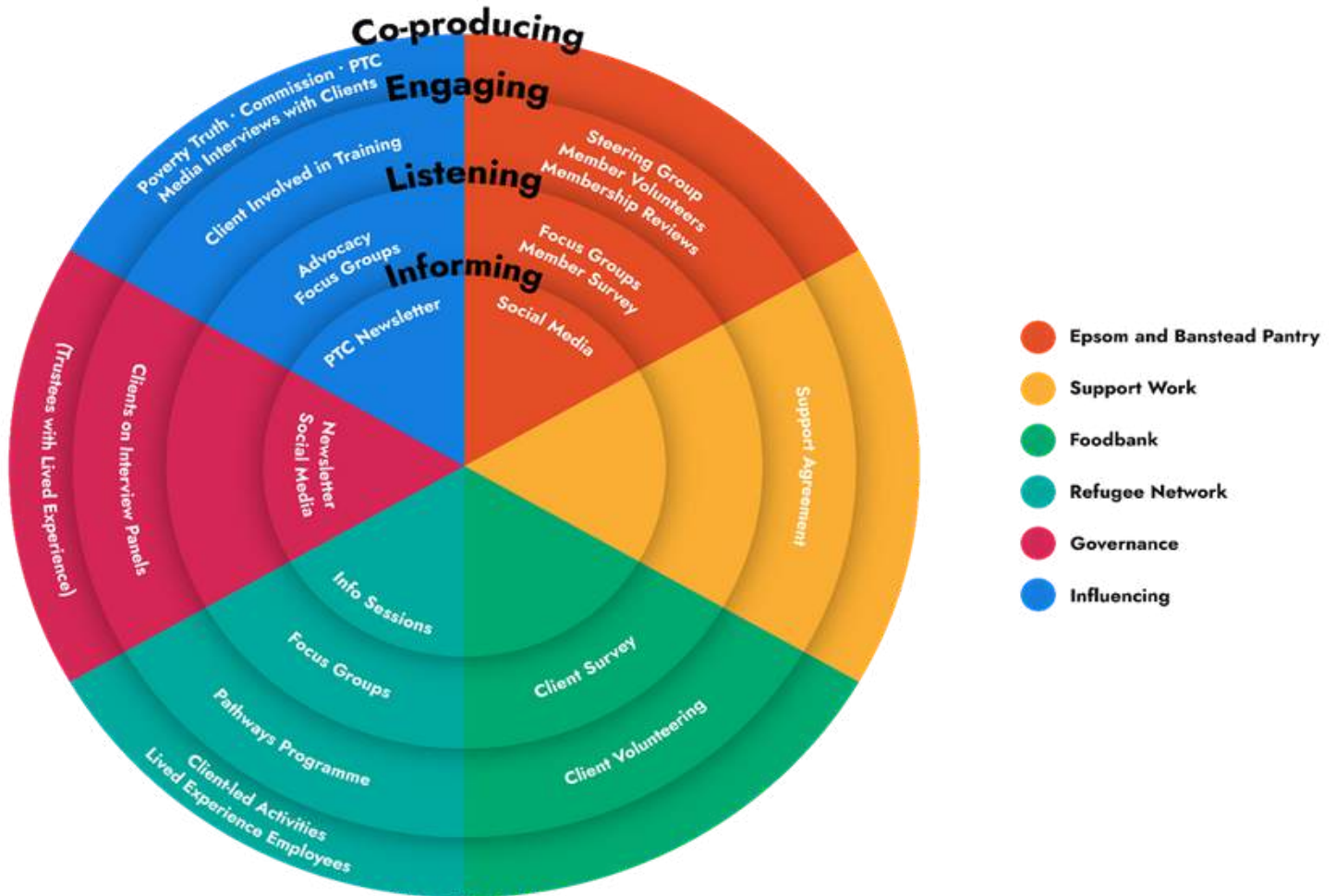
Participants are invited to express their views on a particular service or proposal, which is then adapted or revised, based on the feedback received from current or potential service users. Again, this is a one-way flow of information, but in the opposite direction from service users to providers.

Informing

The lowest rung on the ladder, where people are informed of their rights, responsibilities and options. The flow of information is primarily one-way from the service provider to the people they are seeking to support.

For organisations that provide a wide range of services or work with different client groups, it may be more helpful to think in terms of a wheel of participation, rather than a ladder – where the spokes of the wheel are used to represent the level of participation across different areas of your work. Here is Good Company’s wheel of participation.

Good Company’s Wheel of Participation



Helpful Tip

A good exercise to do as a management team is to look at each area of your organisation’s work identify different ways in which you may already be informing, listening to, and engaging or co-producing with people who use your services. For example, you may produce a regular newsletter telling people about the services you offer (informing); you may have run a survey or consultation event to gather people’s views on a new initiative (listening); you may have set up a user panel or steering group to provide advice and feedback on your services (engaging); or you may have invited some of your users to become trustees or board members in your organisation (co-production).

Why do it?

I don't want anyone else to feel like I have been made to feel - stupid, worthless, downgraded - all because those who were supposed to be supporting me didn't understand what I was actually going through. Through sharing our stories, we can shape this support to make sure people get the help they actually need. How are these organisations meant to understand if we are not brave enough to talk about the hard stuff? (Community Commissioner, East Surrey Poverty Truth Commission)

By listening to and involving people with lived experience of poverty, you are showing that their opinions matter and giving them respect and dignity. You are also helping to redress the imbalance of power that exists in the relationship between service providers and users and between those who make decisions and those who are at the receiving end of those decisions. This imbalance of power is particularly acute when the people you are working with are struggling against poverty and lack the economic clout of consumers or the soft power of confident citizens.



People who are experiencing financial hardship are more likely to have poor mental health and low self-esteem as a result of traumatic life events that have pushed them into poverty. It is important, therefore, that the way you treat them does not serve to reinforce these feelings and make people feel any worse about themselves and their situation than they already do. Stigma – and the perception of stigma - can be a major barrier to people getting the advice and support they need.

Participation builds trust and understanding with your service users and empowers them to take an active role in decisions affecting their lives. It is beneficial for those taking part, helping to build their confidence and self-esteem, learn and practise new skills, and connect with others who have faced similar barriers and challenges in their lives.

"I have learnt so much about how people living without enough money face so many other obstacles, how they often are not listened to, suffer the judgement of others and how easy it is for any of us to slip from being okay to being in poverty.... I am interested in how we can work together to reduce or remove barriers that are experienced every day in every direction you turn and take change across all council services."
(Rod, Head of Housing & Community Development, Epsom and Ewell Borough Council)

Harnessing the wisdom of people with lived experience of poverty, alongside the professional knowledge and skills of service providers (e.g. medical practitioners, housing providers, welfare rights advisers) also leads to better services and outcomes. For example, it can give you an insight into why what you're doing might not be working as intended and what could change this.

How to do it?

“It quickly became apparent in the first initial meetings that I was surrounded by like-minded people who were experiencing the same hardship with different paths but the same outcome - POVERTY. I had become so immersed in my own problems that I had forgotten my empathy towards others... Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to flourish, come out of my shell of low self-esteem and be the new me.” (Community Commissioner, East Surrey Poverty Truth Commission)

Participation is centered around relationships and journeying with people – doing ‘with’ rather than doing ‘to’. It takes time and patience, but this investment leads to more effective, sustainable solutions in the longer-term. Doing participation well is like cooking a meal in a slow cooker. The ingredients – relationships, trust, kindness, vulnerability, courage, and commitment – need to be prepared, mixed together and given time to work over an extended period of time. There are no quick fixes or instant microwave solutions, but the results are much more satisfying in the end.

Principles of Participation

To be effective, participation should be rooted in five core principles:

Equity: striving for fairness and providing for different needs

Diversity: encompassing different experiences and circumstances

Trust: open communication and mutual respect

Accessibility: removing financial and other barriers to participation

Reciprocity: getting something back for putting something in.



In practical terms, this means that participants need to:

- Understand the activity and why and how they are being asked to participate.
- Be equipped and prepared in advance to make a positive contribution.
- Feel safe and supported throughout the participatory activities.
- Feel valued and listened to – that their experiences and opinions count.
- Be compensated for any travel expenses and other costs involved in taking part.
- Be able to share their experiences and ideas directly with decision-makers.
- Receive feedback on the outcome of the process, if they wish to.

Practical Considerations

When working with people with lived experience of poverty, there are a number of specific considerations that ought to be reflected in everything you do. Firstly, your interactions with users should be guided by trauma-informed practice, particularly when participants are being asked to share their experiences of poverty and related issues, such as domestic abuse and homelessness.

This in turn means:

- Being aware of how trauma can negatively impact on individuals and their ability to develop trusting relationships, especially with people in authority
- Acknowledging the need to look beyond an individual's presenting behaviour and to ask 'why is this person acting this way?', rather than 'what is wrong with this person?'
- Avoiding re-traumatisation by creating a safe space and supporting people to appropriately share as much of their story as they want to, and when they want to.

Secondly, it is important that every effort is made to ensure that participants themselves benefit from their involvement in the participatory process. At the very least, this means ensuring that people are not made financially worse off, by covering any travel expenses or childcare costs. But, it is also about acknowledging and fairly and appropriately rewarding people's time and effort, financially and in other ways. Gift vouchers are one way to value people's time and contributions without potentially interfering with their benefit entitlement.



Other ways to value people and show your appreciation include:

- Providing food and refreshments at meetings.
- Organising occasional social events.
- Checking in with people regularly, to see how they are getting on.
- Offering training and other opportunities to learn and develop new skills.

Helpful Tip



Our experience of involving clients in the running of the charity is that people enjoy and benefit from taking part, because they want to give something back and make things better for other people who are struggling with similar issues. Becoming part of the solution to the problems they have faced, with others who have been there too, can help take people's focus away from their immediate worries, by fostering solidarity and enabling them to join in with something bigger than themselves.

The journey

The involvement with the Poverty Truth Commission has given me a purpose. Personally, I am trying to generate something positive by being on the PTC, by sharing my journey and knowledge. Being a commissioner gives me something to do and not be cast aside as a “useless old lady” (Community Commissioner, East Surrey Poverty Truth Commission

Starting out

If your organisation has not previously done much participatory work, then it is best to start small and build up from there. You could begin by discussing and adopting a set of values or principles that you want to instil across the different parts of your organisation, based on a commitment to listening and working with clients/patients/tenants/customers in designing and running your services. You could then help to embed these values across your organisation by running a poverty awareness training workshop with staff and/or volunteers, to encourage them to reflect on their interactions with service users, especially those who may be experiencing financial hardship.

Getting going

Having set your values, try to identify a particular project or area of work which would benefit from more input from service users. Think about the best way to gather their views and ideas, whilst ensuring that you hear from a broad cross-section of people who use your services. You could, for example, run a client survey, and use this to identify people who may be willing to be involved in a more in-depth discussion or focus group about a specific issue. Try to publicise these opportunities as widely as possible, so that as many people as possible are given the opportunity to participate, if they wish to.



Whenever you can, create opportunities for face-to-face meetings with service users, to build relationships and trust. This is likely to be far more effective in embedding truly participatory ways of working in the longer-term, and well worth the extra time and expense compared with digital communications.

Once you have run several participatory activities to listen to service users and build these relationships, you could look to involve them in a more interactive, two-way, discussion about the services you deliver - for example by setting up a steering group to give users a greater say in how your services are run.



You could also broaden your participatory work, by inviting service users to be involved in other aspects of the organisation – for example, by including one or two service users on the interview panel for new staff, asking them to write a blog for your website, or inviting them to share their experiences at AGMs, staff meetings, and training workshops on behalf of your organisation.

Gaining confidence

Over time, as your confidence and capacity to do participation grows, you can experiment with genuine co-production, giving people with lived experience an equal say in designing your services. To avoid unrealistic expectations, it would be wise to focus initially on a specific activity or project with defined boundaries. You can always expand the scope of this work at a later stage, but it's harder to narrow it.

The gold standard, and ultimate goal, of participation would be to have people with lived experience on your trustees'/ management board, with an active voice within the governance of your organisation, bringing together experts by experience alongside people with relevant professional expertise.

Doing co-production doesn't mean that you should abandon other forms of participation, as these are still valuable in their own right, and help to draw in a flow of new participants. One of the temptations to avoid is to become overly dependent on a small number of reliable contributors for all your participatory work, as it is important to keep listening to fresh perspectives and a range of different voices.

Last but not least, it is important to make sure that - alongside developing your organisation's capacity to do participation - you continue to offer the necessary support to those taking part, so they are able to contribute effectively and personally benefit from the process.

On the pages that follow, we have provided some case studies as examples from our work. We would love to hear about and share examples of participatory working from other Surrey-based organisations. Please get in touch with us at: poverty@goodcompany.org.uk.



Case Study 1:

↓ Informing: Worrying About Money Leaflets

“ I lost my job, I was running short of food, everything was down on me - and I didn't know I had someone who could really help (former Foodbank client, and now a Community Commissioner on the East Surrey Poverty Truth Commission) ”

Why did you do it?

Feedback from many of our clients is that people often don't know where to go for help, other than the Foodbank. Producing a 'Worrying about Money' leaflet was seen to be part of the solution to this problem, by informing people about where they can get support with a wide range of needs. By directing people to other local providers, where appropriate, the long-term aim is to tackle the root causes of poverty and reduce the need for food banks.

How did you do it?

We partnered with IFAN, the Independent Food Aid Network), who had already developed a template leaflet, providing clear and accessible information for people experiencing a financial crisis and anyone supporting them, helping to direct them to financial and other forms of support. We provided information on the names and contact details of local schemes and services, and IFAN helped with the design and production of the leaflets. At the time of writing, 'Worrying About Money' leaflets are available for around 127 local authority areas across the UK, including the three we put together for Epsom & Ewell, Mole Valley and Reigate & Banstead.



What difference did it make?

We are currently on our third version of the leaflets, which we update every year. To date, we have distributed over 10,000 copies of these leaflets at our foodbank centres and via our network of referral agencies. Although it is difficult to monitor the impact of these leaflets locally, a national evaluation of the programme by IFAN showed these leaflets are an effective way of disseminating information on crisis support in a wide range of local contexts.

Case Study 2:

↑ Listening: 'Choose Own Your Food' Focus Groups



"Picking and choosing is better, we know our families better than anyone." (Focus Group Participant)



Why did you do it?

Good Company was considering moving to a new model of distributing food and toiletries at our foodbank centres, and wanted feedback from clients on whether this was a good idea. Under the 'old' system, clients would choose food from a packing list and have it packed for them by volunteers. Under the new system, the food and other supplies are laid out in crates in a large open space and people invited to select their own items from the packing list. We believed this would give clients more freedom and dignity, but we wanted to find out what they felt about this change.

How did you do it?

We invited a small group of our more regular clients to attend a 'special' foodbank session at our foodbank centre in Epsom. We set up and ran the foodbank session differently and invited our clients to experience it for themselves. We then ran a short focus group discussion with two groups of clients to get their feedback on the new model. Participants were allowed to keep the food and toiletries and were given a £20 thank you voucher for taking part in the focus group.



What difference did it make?

Clients have been very positive about the new arrangements, and appreciated being able to select the items they or their children preferred, rather than having them picked for them. Furthermore, they liked the fact that they could take only what they needed, reducing food waste and leaving more for others – something that we hadn't considered ourselves. The experiment was deemed a success and has now been introduced permanently at one of our foodbank centres, with plans to roll it out to other venues.

Case Study 3:

↑↓ Engaging: Epsom Pantry Steering Group

“I’ve been part of the steering group for around a year now. I enjoy getting together with other members and love seeing our ideas coming to life in the Pantry.”
(Steering Group member)

Why did you do it?

Established by Good Company in May 2022, Epsom Pantry is a welcoming community hub built around food, offering affordable and healthy food to its members, as well as access to advice/support and community activities. The Steering Group was established to involve members and volunteers in the development and delivery of Epsom Pantry at every level. The group does not have the final say on operational matters, but is a key part of the decision-making process.

How did you do it?

We advertised this opportunity to all Pantry members and held an information event for anyone interested. To ensure a representative mix of the membership, we then selectively invited people who we thought would like to be involved. A role description outlines the commitment and what to expect, and we also have an application form to help identify any training requests and personal goals. The group consists of 4-6 members and one volunteer, and is chaired by the Pantry Manager/Coordinator. It meets every six weeks to consider issues such as stock, fundraising, what community activities to run, and whether and how to implement new initiatives. Participants can also put items on the agenda for discussion.



What difference did it make?

The Steering Group has met ten times since April 2023. At its second meeting, they came up with the idea of the Donate a Diamond scheme, whereby Pantry members who don't need their full allocation of items can donate them to another member. More recently, the group created a Membership Pack and now publishes a regular newsletter to raise awareness of all that goes on at the Pantry. It also organised a Christmas Party with kids entertainment and refreshments. In addition, members of the group have taken part in media opportunities and helped shape the roll out of new initiatives, like the Christmas Savings Scheme.

Case Study 4:



Co-producing: 'Cost of the School Day' project



"I was inspired by the students - their courage in presenting was incredible, and I can't thank them for sharing their personal feelings and experiences with us – not easy, but done so brilliantly. I have no doubt that the school will do all they can to help resolve the issues raised." (School Governor)



Why did you do it?

In recent years, Good Company has become increasingly aware of the financial pressures that school life places on low-income families, including the cost of uniform and school activities.

Our Cost of the School Day project was set up in response to seeing this need. Working together with students, staff and governors, our aim is to support schools to become an inclusive community for all students, whatever their family's income or circumstances.

How did you do it?

Each academic year since 2021/22, two members of staff from Good Company have been visiting local secondary schools, meeting fortnightly with a small group of young people in years 10-13 to hear about the issues affecting students in receipt of free school meals. We encouraged students to share their experiences of school life with each other, and then facilitated meetings with senior staff and governors for them hear these stories first hand and discuss the key findings and recommendations with the students.



What difference did it make?

We heard stories about the disappointment of missing out on school trips, the financial impact of complying with school uniform policies, and the embarrassment of being told in front of peers that they were not allowed certain items of food in the school canteen. Thanks to the wisdom and creativity of the students and staff involved, these schools came up lots of good ideas to address these issues, such as offering FSM students a clear meal deal option, minimising the number of compulsory and logo-ed items of uniform, and finding new ways to communicate to parents and students about the financial support available and how to access it.


Useful contacts



Good Company's mission is to lead our community towards a poverty-free future, while supporting those who need our help. We run five foodbank centres, Epsom Pantry and Banstead Pantry, Epsom Refugee Network, the East Surrey Poverty Truth Commission and Support Work to help people out of financial hardship. We also work with our referral partners to facilitate a network of Advice Cafes.

 www.goodcompany.org.uk


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To find out more about what we do and to read stories shared by people with lived experience of poverty, go to our website or look at our socials or email us poverty@goodcompany.org.uk



Good Company is working with Surrey's Health and Wellbeing Board to promote participatory ways of working across Surrey. The Health and Wellbeing Board is a group of NHS commissioners, public health, social care, local councillors, Surrey Police, borough and district council and public representatives that work together to improve the health and wellbeing of people in Surrey, to reduce health inequalities so no-one left behind.

 www.healthysurrey.org.uk

In Surrey's Health and Wellbeing Strategy there is a commitment to the following principles for working with communities and an acknowledgement that applying these will be crucial to success:

- Community capacity building: building trust and relationships
- Co-designing: deciding together
- Co-producing: delivering together
- Community led action: communities leading, with support when they need it.



Surrey's Changing Futures programme supports people in Surrey that are facing multiple disadvantage such as homelessness, substance use, domestic abuse, criminal justice involvement and mental health challenges. Find out more about them [here](#) and watch their short film on the power of co-production.



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