



CHURCH ACTION
ON POVERTY

Hints on holding
a
Poverty Hearing

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Organising an event involves moving through a series of practical tasks to ensure that it takes place and achieves what you want it to. It is important to identify what is involved in holding a Poverty Hearing and it is easier to do this if you break down the whole process into small manageable tasks.

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1. What is a Poverty Hearing?

The concept of a Poverty Hearing is as simple as it is challenging. The main purpose of a Poverty Hearing is to provide the opportunity for people with direct experience of poverty to speak out for themselves while encouraging those with power, authority and different experiences to listen.

Much of the local and national government plans to alleviate or eradicate poverty is done by people who know about deprivation by reading or hearing about it, but not necessarily feeling it. Part of the reason for injustices is that people with direct experience are deliberately excluded or not meaningfully involved in developing remedies. For poverty really to be tackled it has to be built on the expertise of those who know about it first hand.

A Poverty Hearing can take any number of dimensions. It can be a day long conference, a series of events, a less formal private forum, an evening event lasting no more than a couple of hours, or a round table discussion. However it is organised the most important aspect is that the process gives priority to listening to those who have direct experience of poverty. Hearings need careful preparation, taking care to ensure respect and dignity for people who may feel vulnerable. Developing a Hearing is primarily about working in partnership with people. If we are serious about listening to people then we have to develop a relationship with them. If your Hearing is to successfully involve those excluded and struggling against poverty then this type of approach is crucial.

We need to guard against our own willingness to speak on behalf of others as this often acts to silence rather than to support them. Those in poverty are the real experts. We need to listen to what they have to say. Sometimes they will both surprise and shock us.

A Cautionary Note:

- **Be Patient...** Planning a Poverty Hearing cannot and should not be rushed. Building trust and understanding takes time and must be led by the needs and interests of those who often feel rejected by the wider community. Initial reactions may be different from what you expect.
- **Be Careful...** As someone who is active in your church or community you may take for granted those things which remain for others, a daunting challenge: speaking in public, meeting deadlines, organising others to do things, or writing letters. Each step should be thought about carefully so that everyone is comfortable and clear about what is expected.
- **Be Sensitive...** Personal experience of poverty can leave people feeling extremely vulnerable, but also very proud. The aim of the Hearing is to empower - but an approach which does not take into account the extent to which people feel excluded and hurt simply makes things worse. You must expect to have to explain your motives and you may also have to accept that it is not possible to take things as far as you would like to go. Partnerships and friendships can only thrive in an atmosphere in which people feel valued and able to speak out on issues of most concern to them.

2. Establishing a Planning Group

The first question to ask is does a new group need to be established in order to do this work or is it possible to link with others who are already there? Groups may already exist which are well placed to help organise a Hearing. You could find out whether they are willing to invite you along to talk to them about what you are planning to do and how they might participate. Your Planning Group may involve a coalition of people from other organisations, agencies or groups or it may bring together a group of people for the very first time.

Your Planning Group may consist of a relatively small number of people taking responsibility for the overall planning of the hearing. Where possible the group should consist of both those affected by poverty and people with no direct experience of it. However, it is not always possible to achieve this blend. **Don't let that discourage you.**

Once a group of people committed to holding a Poverty Hearing has been established one of the most difficult hurdles has already been overcome.

The group then needs to decide on the following:

- How often it meets
- Identifying the tasks that have to be done and who will do what
- Communication between group members
- Who will chair and who will take the minutes of meetings.

The point to remember is that the group is setting in motion a process of listening to people who do not often get the chance to speak. It is important that the group begins by listening sensitively to each other so that everyone feels that they have an important contribution to make to the whole exercise. This will give people the chance to get to know each other. People should be given plenty of opportunity to get to know who is who.

Explain to the group the idea of holding a Poverty Hearing and what it will entail.

3. The Event

This can be broken down into seven main points that the group will need to bear in mind:

- a) Setting a date for the Hearing
- b) Research and presentation of issues
- c) The structure of the Hearing
- d) Speakers
- e) Chairperson
- f) Booking and registration
- g) Support

a) *Setting a date for the Hearing*

The date set for the Hearing should be no less than six months ahead if the group is to give itself a realistic chance of making the event a success and maintaining some focus.

b) *Research and presentation of issues*

This needs to be given careful thought and it is important that someone in the group takes some responsibility to find out about the poverty issues that will be raised. Church Action on Poverty can help with this.

How the issues identified are presented is up to the group. However, it is important that if, for example, unemployment and homelessness are identified then you must ensure that people affected by these issues are the key speakers.

In some cases you will have to network with other groups and organisations that will be able to put you in contact with the kind of people you need to be involved.

c) *Structure of the Hearing*

The structure of your Hearing will largely be dependent upon whether the event is to cover a whole day, an afternoon or evening. The following is an example from the Manchester Poverty Hearing.

- Registration
- Introduction by the Chairperson
- Opening address – Bishop of Manchester
- Keynote speakers – unemployment and low pay
- Overview - Greater Manchester Low Pay Unit
- Group discussion
- Keynote speakers – homelessness and plight of pensioners
- Overview - National Association of Citizens Advice Bureau
- Tea/Coffee break
- Keynote speakers – Lone parents and disability
- Overview – The Roby (local church project)
- Group discussion
- Feedback session
- Summing up – The Way Forward (CAP)
- Closing prayer

The aim of the Hearing is to present the issues in a clear and direct manner. Using the experiences of those affected by poverty and supporting these with statistical information is the most effective way of achieving this.

If there are any group work sessions during the event these should provide further opportunity for people affected by poverty to tell their story and feed these back to the wider audience.

By the end of the event you will want to have some recommendations for future action. A good thing to bear in mind is that the staging of a Poverty Hearing is not the end of the process. It should actually be the beginning of an ongoing attempt to keep poverty high on the social, political and economic agenda locally and nationally.

Having got these suggestions for action the group can decide how it will tackle them by drawing up a plan of action based on the ideas.

d) *Speakers*

As mentioned previously these should be drawn from those with direct experience of poverty and the group needs to work into its event planning a process and time-scale for engaging with these people. Time to consult with people, build friendships and trust needs to be taken into consideration. You may need to map out areas of poverty in your town or city.

If you want support or overview or support speakers you will need to identify them and book them as soon as is possible.

People who are seeking asylum or who have had their application refused may well be understandably reticent about speaking out in public. Their statement and even their presence in the room may put their liberty at risk. To get around this their experience/story could be prepared in advance and be read out by someone whose status is secure.

e) *Who will Chair the Hearing?*

The role of the chairperson is crucial in ensuring that the proceedings of the Hearing go according to plan and that the event is kept moving. It is important to have a chairperson who is sensitive to the issue of poverty and has a degree of empathy with those who will be speaking from their own experiences. The chairperson must be clearly briefed and familiarised with the process you are using. You do not necessarily need a 'big name' to draw people to the event.

f) *Booking and registration procedure*

This needs to be worked out well before the event so that attendees know what they need to do in order to book a place at the Hearing and where and when registration will take place. Such a procedure is important, as it will give an advance indication of how many people are likely to attend the Hearing. A registration procedure will also give you a record of attendees that will be useful for post Hearing follow up.

g) *Support*

Because the issues are very sensitive it may be necessary to have one or two people on hand to help anyone who becomes distressed as a result of sharing their experiences or of listening to others with whom they readily identify with.

4. The Venue

As soon as you decide the date and time of the event you then need to consider where to hold the Hearing. The following are some points to consider:

- Availability – is the venue available when you want it?
- Facilities – are there tea/coffee making, catering facilities?
- Is there a public address and hearing loop system?
- Will the venue be big enough for the event?
- Are there other rooms? eg. For a crèche or group work etc
- Accessibility – can people get to the venue easily, is there wheelchair access?

- Is the venue well known and familiar? Will the people feel comfortable coming to the building and find it easily?
- What will the cost of hire be? Is there anyone who can help front this?
- How will you support people's childcare needs?

There are many places that may be suitable to hold your Poverty Hearing such as a church or school hall, community centre, civic centre, college or university.

5. Publicity

Once you have identified a venue and date for your event it is essential to begin to publicise it as widely as possible. You will want to do this through the following channels:

- Local radio and television
- Newsletters of voluntary organisations
- Local and regional press
- Community networks
- Churches and church based groups and organisations
- Local politicians
- Business sector
- Friends, neighbours and word-of-mouth

You should send a press release to your local/regional news media about a week before the event. If you do not know who this is CAP can help identify them.

It is a good idea to produce a leaflet complete with a booking form. Items you need to place on the leaflet are:

- What your event is about
- When and where it will take place
- Who will be speaking/listening
- Booking form with space for name, address and telephone number
- If booking a crèche you need to know ages of children
- Does anyone have any special needs?
- Address to which the booking forms can be returned and
- A deadline for the return of the forms.

It is worth thinking about how people who are unfamiliar with reading English will be able to find out about the event, and feel that they would be welcome at the event.

One thing to remember is that you can't have enough publicity and therefore you should circulate information about your event as widely as possible.

6. Expenses/Fundraising

All events involve some degree of expense. Therefore, it is important that one or two members of the group agree to take responsibility for doing some work on this. The main expenses of the event are likely to include:

- Cost of venue
- Speakers expenses (travel, childcare, preparation costs)
- Refreshments
- Crèche facilities
- Publicity
- Postage
- Report of the event and its circulation.

There are many local charitable bodies that will help to fund certain community-based events. These are often contained in a funding body directory. Most public libraries and some community centres will have access to these. Also some church based organisations may be able to offer some limited help. Your local council will also be able to offer help and advice on this.

7. Budget

It is important to draw up a budget for the event that covers the projected costs involved in staging the Hearing. Some of these are mentioned above. The advantage of drawing up a budget will help in persuading funding bodies to give some financial help. Your budget may look like this:

- Venue £250
- Travel expenses £00
- Publicity £200
- Administration £400
- Catering £200
- Event report £1000
- Post event admin £250

The above is purely an example. The cost of your event will depend largely on how you want to run it.

8. Getting people to the Hearing

This is probably more difficult than drawing up a budget or doing a fundraising exercise.

- As a rule it is best to send general invitations along with a covering letter no later than six weeks before the Hearing is due to take place.
- MP's, church leaders, councillors, business people, trade union reps, academics, civil servants, and other local government departments should have specific invitations sent to them as soon as possible after the date and venue for the Hearing has been decided. Sometimes offering to make a personal visit to an MP's or councillor's surgery by one or two members of the planning group may help to persuade that particular person to attend. It may also be worth visiting others you regard as key participants.
- When distributing leaflets a short covering letter should accompany these. It is worth considering how many people you hope will attend. It is best to work on the premise that if you want 100 people present then you really need to canvass around 1000 individuals and organisations. It is often easier to do this through the networks of other local/regional organisations some of which

will be only too happy to enclose information about your event in their monthly or quarterly mailings. Others may let you have names and addresses of their contacts so that you can go directly to them.

- You have to distinguish between who are to be the speakers and who the listeners.
- It is important to identify possible allies or those groups and organisations that can offer practical assistance.
- Keep a record of all the individuals, groups and organisations to whom you have sent an invitation. This will help you in the event of having to follow up your invitation.

The key to the success of the whole exercise is to network with as many individuals, groups and organisations as possible.

9. Recording the event

If you are to take anything from the event and develop it at a future date then recording what happened is essential. It is polite to ask for people's permission before recording them. You can:

- Audio record what the speakers have said
- Take photographs during the event
- Take minutes or notes of what has been said
- Record discussion points on a flip-chart
- Video the proceedings

10. Post Event

Too often we can put a lot of work into holding a conference or other event and after it has taken place we slip back into doing what we were before. However, if the event is to have any impact at all it needs to be taken further. Use the material recorded at the Hearing.

The first step is to reconvene the Planning Group to work on producing a report of the Poverty Hearing that can be circulated to those who attended. You may choose to send a copy to those in positions of authority that you would have liked to attend but did not for some reason.

You can develop a plan of action based on recommendations made during the Hearing.

The report can be used as a tool for continuing to raise awareness about poverty in your area. You may even decide to hold a follow-up event in the future.

Church Action on Poverty would also like to hear about your event and what it achieved. Some of the details can be put on our website to reach a wider audience.

11. Contingency Plans

In most cases the planning and holding of the Poverty Hearing will run smoothly. However, from time to time, difficulties will arise. Here are some of the problems you might come up against:

- Few of the Planning Group turn up for the meeting: Do not let this put you off. Those who are present can still discuss the stage that plans are at and what actions are necessary to move things on to the next stage. The other point to stress is that of keeping channels of communication open at all times to all members of the Planning Group even if some have missed a number of meetings.
- Speaker pulls out: it can sometimes happen that one or two people who said that they would be prepared to speak for one reason or another, decide they no longer feel able to speak at the Hearing. This decision needs to be respected. What the Planning Group should do is try to make sure that there are two or three people who would be prepared to stand in and speak on the same issues if possible.
- Bookings are not running at expected rate: You may find that with two or three weeks to go that relatively few people have returned booking forms. Don't worry about this! If you have a record of the people who received invitations now is the time for some of the members of the Planning Group to begin to follow up some of the invitations with a telephone call and make a personal invitation. Sometimes this can make all the difference. Another point is that people often leave it to the last minute

End Note

The aim of this booklet has been to give you some insight into the various tasks to be worked through or considered when deciding to plan for a Poverty Hearing. The main point to remember is that your group can successfully plan and hold a Poverty Hearing. You do not need to be experts in staging events. All you need is some enthusiasm.

Church Action on Poverty can provide you with help and support throughout the whole process. Contact: CAP, Central Buildings, Oldham Street, Manchester M1 1JQ. Tel: 0161 236 9321.