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## **DIGNITY AND RESPECT IN PUBLIC SERVICES THE VIEW OF PEOPLE WITH DIRECT LIVED EXPERIENCE OF POVERTY**

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### **Introduction**

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At the start of the summer, the non-statutory Poverty and Inequality Commission recruited an intern, Mary Njoki, to go out and speak to people with direct lived experience of poverty about dignity and respect in public services. In 2016, the First Minister's Independent Advisor on Poverty and Inequality recommended that the Scottish Government should make sure that public services should be delivered in a way that treated people with dignity and respect. The non-statutory Poverty and Inequality Commission wanted to understand whether Scottish Government actions on this recommendation were having an impact. In particular it wanted to involve people with lived experience in understanding the impact on them.

In total, they spoke to 81 people. They wanted to speak to as many different people as possible and also wanted to hear the views of some people who might not often be heard. This included speaking to carers, those with learning disabilities, veterans, younger people, older people, single parents and migrants (not a comprehensive list). Most discussions were conducted in small groups (4-10 people), but they spoke to some people individually if that better met their needs.

This short report outlines what the non-statutory Commission heard.

### **Experiences of dignity and respect in public services**

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We set out to speak to people about being treated with dignity and respect in public services.<sup>1</sup> However, we heard about so much more than this. People shared the many issues and difficulties that they face in their lives. Some of these were related to poverty, some were caused by poverty and others were the cause of poverty. Being treated with dignity and respect is often the bare minimum that is left for people.

“People do not realise how difficult it is at the very bottom. It's horrific.”

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<sup>1</sup> We allowed the people we were speaking to to define what “public services” meant to them. This resulted in a fairly general definition including services such as schools, housing services, police, libraries, job centres, social work, etc. We are aware that there is currently a lot of work being conducted around Scotland's new social security agency to ensure it is based on dignity and respect. Our work looks broader than this and, in fact, experiences of Scotland's Social Security Agency did not receive much mention, probably reflecting the early days of this agency.

When specifically asked to describe experiences of interacting with public services, people recounted a variety of experiences. We heard of a system which is often trying its best to support people at their time of need. At the core of people's experiences were individuals who worked in public services. Many stories told of individual GPs, nurses, social workers etc. who showed kindness and compassion. We heard of individuals working within public services who will go the extra mile to help people. Others who by doing their job effectively with kindness and compassion had made a considerable difference to people's lives.

"It is people who make services good by going beyond their call of duty, by going the extra mile"

When asked about what specifically made a service "good", on the surface it did not appear to take much. While some positive aspects such as being listened to and understood were mentioned, people often described "good" services as the absence of discrimination and being marginalised.

"Fire services, police, education, libraries are all good. You get no feeling of being marginalised or being treated differently. It's great."

On the other hand, we also heard of times where people had felt that they were not understood, not acknowledged or just ignored. People described feeling frustrated that they could not get the service they required to meet their basic needs. Some felt they were discriminated against; because they had particular needs, because of their ethnicity, because of their age or simply because they were poor.

"I have been working for 30 odd years and to go to the job centre and be treated the way I was treated, it was awful. They need to treat people in a dignified way."

"The problem is not that public services are bad, it is the specific individuals. Some are nice and some are not. Sometimes you get a lot of help and other times you are not treated well."

"The report said I looked like an alcoholic, how does an alcoholic look like?"

Negative experiences of interactions with public services can have consequences for those living in poverty. Some people described to us how they felt disempowered or unwanted and others felt so hopeless that they simply "opted-out" of receiving the service to which they were entitled.

"I did not have the confidence when I was trying to access services. You can feel really disempowered if you are lacking in confidence"

"It is the impact this has on the people living in poverty, for example, leaving people feeling small. Once you are stigmatised you feel unwanted."

“I did not apply for benefits because when you do, after a year they tell you they have overpaid you and you need to pay them back the whole amount. So I decided I will use my strength and I did not apply.”

“This lady put me right off now I do not even want to consider college, I just want to get a job. The way they have treated me was horrible. It put me off and I missed a great opportunity.”

“They still send everything in a print form but because of my visual impairment I can’t read them. I have made numerous requests ... but not even once have they responded positively... Now if I get anything I just bin it. I am in rent arrears because I never know what correspondence they have sent and I am not able to respond.”

### **Involving people with direct lived experience in public services**

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Being treated with dignity and respect is not just about basic interactions with public service staff. We were also interested in whether people had been involved in public services in any way, for example through consultations, workshops, or co-production in service design and delivery.

Some people described having given feedback through surveys or feedback. Of the 81 people we spoke to, no one had been involved in any sort of co-production or more involved way of giving feedback such as a workshop.

Many expressed a desire to have their voices heard – and not just at the level of assessing their needs but at a decision making level. Not only was there felt to be a lack of opportunities to be involved in service design, delivery and improvement, but on the occasions where they have been involved, most felt that no action was taken as a consequence. There was a strong view that it is often other people, particularly at managerial level who are making decisions on their behalf. The people we spoke to felt they had a lot to offer from their own experiences.

“Consultation can feel like a waste of time for the people with lived experiences. You feel like ... a decision has already been made and you are there to tick a box.”

“Give us the mike. Do not talk on our behalf, we can do it ourselves.”

“We want to be involved in the decision making process. We want to sit at the heart of that table to express our feelings. We do not want someone reading forms on our behalf.”

We believe there is a lot to be learnt from this. We are fully aware that the method we used to involve people in this work, i.e. through organisations, may have resulted in us hearing the views of people who are more likely to be engaged with services.

“You are really talking to the lucky ones here. They have learnt how to navigate the system, others out there haven’t got a clue how to navigate the system. Not a clue at all.”

Therefore, it is particularly significant that we found so many people who did not believe they have been involved, or indeed are likely to be involved, in service design, delivery or improvement in a meaningful way. The few people who had reported that they felt their views had been taken on board in a consultation, clearly saw this as a positive step that they would like to see more of.

### **Impact of recommendation 14 – training for public service staff**

The main aim of this work was to understand whether there had been any impact of the actions taken in response to the recommendation from *Shifting the Curve*. In particular we were interested in whether the effects of this were filtering through to the people who use the services. This is difficult to measure so we have looked at it in two different ways.

First, we looked at an example of training which has been carried out and evaluated in response to this recommendation. The National Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) were asked by Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) to design and deliver training specifically about dignity and respect for people living in poverty. As part of the development of the training, a number of focus groups were held with both parents with experience of living in poverty and professionals working with children and families. A number of themes that came up during these discussions were then used to inform the content of the course. For example, the focus groups raised messages about how poverty can act as a significant barrier to families engaging with society in general and accessing supportive services. The training responded by including discussion of the barriers that organisational processes can pose.

This training has been delivered to frontline practitioners (193 in total) from agencies including both statutory and third sector in Glasgow. The evaluation of this training focused on how it has changed the views and practices of the frontline practitioners who received the training. Results are very positive. For examples, practitioners felt more aware of poverty and the problems it caused for families and were more likely to be confident in engaging in conversations about it with families they worked with.

Second, we also asked our groups whether they had felt the impact of any training and whether they felt things had improved over recent years.

Some people could point to particular services which they felt had improved in recent years and that they felt more efforts were being made to be kinder to people. There was also felt to be less overt discrimination and prejudices against certain groups.

Others felt that budget cuts meant that resources were squeezed over recent years and this had impacted on services and, in turn, on the attitudes of the staff.

The groups were not able to directly attribute any perceived improvements to training. Even those who had noted improvements, agreed that more training would be helpful.

“Yes most places are fine and I have noticed improvement but I do not know if it is to do with any training.”

There was a feeling that while people might not need training on how to do their job efficiently, there was a strong need for training on how to treat people with respect and dignity. Those who worked in public services needed to better understand people who are living in poverty.

“It’s a real shame that people have to be trained to treat others with respect and dignity, it should just be natural and innate.”

“We need to change how it is viewed ... it’s a national insurance system, everyone pays into it and if you are unfortunate and need to use it, you need to be treated with dignity and respect.”

It was emphasised that any training around dignity, respect and poverty should involve people with experience of living in poverty. There was a prevalent view that “professionals in suits telling other professionals in suits” would not be effective. Options of how to involve people with lived experience of poverty ranged from them fully designing and delivering training to being included in delivering the training.

“You see, the language they speak, they do not speak plain language.”

“If it has been delivered from a professional to professional, it comes from a different perspective”

However, there was also a view that “you cannot teach new tricks to old dogs” and a more effective long term approach would be to ensure that these values of dignity and respect are introduced at an early age. It was also felt to be important to tackle the stigma of poverty more directly, e.g. through a campaign.

“We need more than training, it needs backed up by introducing it in school and incorporating social justice and inequalities.”

“We need to campaign against this kind of behaviour because we are all citizens. We need to find a way in which we challenge these negative attitudes. So we need to challenge stigma, stereotypes and attitudes towards people living in poverty – the lesser beings.”

## Conclusion

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We set out to understand more about how people with direct lived experience of poverty feel about dignity and respect in public services. The stories we heard highlighted how important being treated with dignity and respect is to people and how those instances where this is lacking have a lasting impact.

We also wanted to understand the impact of the actions taken in response to the recommendation around providing more training around dignity and respect in public services. As expected it was difficult to disentangle the effects of any training with other factors. However, what is clear is that those people who use the services cannot point to a significant change in how they feel they are treated by different public services. It is early days but we wanted to make the point that this is the crucial test of impact. Nevertheless, it is an extremely positive first step that there are examples of training, such as the NSPCC training, where there has been a very positive impact on the staff who have completed the training. We look forward to this filtering through services and the impact being felt by the people who receive the services.

We have identified a few areas of action on the back of this work:

1. Ensure that involving people with direct lived experience in the design and delivery of public services is done meaningfully. We spoke with a lot of people who were eager to be involved and this is a resource that should be tapped into more.
2. Training around the delivery of dignity and respect in public services should be, at the very least, co-designed and co-delivered by people with direct experience of poverty.
3. Measuring impact of actions is not always an easy thing to do. However, it is important to consider the impact of actions on people.

The Commission also notes that Scotland's National Performance Framework includes the indicator:

Public services treat people with dignity and respect

How this indicator is measured is currently under development. However, a look at the other indicators shows a prevalence of quantitative information. We hope that our work in speaking to people with direct lived experience of poverty about dignity and respect may provide some useful food for thought on how people's thoughts, views and experiences can be effectively used when developing an approach to measure success on this indicator.