

Participation of people with experience of poverty in the Just Transition Plan for the Built Environment

December 2023

What we did

The Poverty Alliance were commissioned by the Just Transition team at the Scottish Government to support the engagement of people on low incomes in the development of Scottish Government's policies to support a just transition to net zero.

This is a report on Just Transition in the built environment sector based on an online deliberative discussion workshop with people living on a low income. Our workshop was split between people living in rural and urban groups to enable a greater understanding of the differing experiences of housing and the built environment in these geographies. Where they emerged, this report highlights the differences in experiences across rural and urban areas of Scotland.

The three-hour discussion involved a range of questions, developed by Scottish Government on the topics of:

- Reflections on current housing;
- Support that is needed to improve and upgrade housing;
- The impact of extreme weather; and
- The Scottish Government's key messages on climate change.

Who took part

14 participants were recruited and supported to engage with the discussion. These were seven women, and seven men. Six were Black and minority ethnic, eight were white. Five identified as having a disability. Nine lived in urban areas, five lived in rural areas. Participants came from Aberdeen, Dundee, Glasgow, Paisley, Edinburgh, Borders, Argyl & Bute, Inverness and Western Isles.

The majority of participants in the urban grouping lived in social housing (six of the eight participants) while in the rural grouping, the picture was more balanced amongst owner occupiers and social tenants.

Key Messages

Theme 1 – Reflections on current housing

Do you feel that your home is healthy, warm, energy efficient?

The majority of participants did not think their homes were healthy or warm, and there was consensus that their homes were not energy efficient. Though one participant reported that they felt fortunate because they had a home with a higher rating for energy

efficiency than average, they were also clear that this had taken work over a number of years. Equally, another participant – a housing association tenant – told us that they did not feel their property was “too bad” and they compared this to others who they perceived to be “worse off than me”, however they still reported that the property cost a lot to heat. Overall, participants expressed a degree of “shock” about the state of local authority housing, with one participant stating “someone would do well to shine a light on this. Even in this small group, people are living in truly appalling conditions”. There was consensus that housing associations and local authorities were disinterested and too slow in solving bigger issues within properties, particularly issues relating to mould and damp.

On private rented accommodation, participants noted that the quality and upkeep of housing was determined by the landlord and tenants were often powerless to make changes to the property. For participants who had recently left the asylum system, there were fears about navigating a complex housing system.

A key issue raised by a majority of participants, particularly those in social housing, were problems with damp, condensation and water ingress, particularly in kitchens and bathrooms. Key issues raised included:

- One participant reported water coming through their windows and walls and they often had to wake up in the middle of the night to soak up water during periods of heavy rain. While this participant has repeatedly been in touch with the contact centre for their housing association, nothing has been done to address this long-standing issue.
- Similarly, two participants with young children reported the presence of mould on the inside of their home, including in their children’s bedroom, due to damp. One participant said that the walls of the home feel wet, and there is a strong smell, and one of the participant’s children has developed allergies since they moved into this home. Due to being extremely close to the motorway, the participant is unable to open windows to attempt to alleviate issues of damp. This participant and their neighbours have complained to their housing association, but nothing has been done.
- Another participant reported that water is not drinkable in their flat, and while neighbours often purchase bottled water for drinking, this is unaffordable for their family.
- One participant reported that their home does not have a heating system, and they only have access to electric heating in their bedroom and their children’s bedroom. They have fears about the safety of these heaters, especially overnight, so they tend to minimise usage.
- Others reported needing to wear a coat or jacket when sitting in their house, and that their kitchen was so cold in the winter that they were unable to stay in there to wash the dishes.

Participants agreed that there were effects on their mood and mental health from struggling to heat their homes and that this was particularly compounded for those with health conditions.

Theme 2 – Support that is needed to improve housing

What support is needed to improve your home or homes in your area?

What are the challenges to improving homes and buildings in your area?

Whose responsibility should it be to make these changes?

Participants in the urban group discussed the appropriate balance between the building of new homes and upgrading and maintaining existing stock. It was concluded that there was need for investment in both spheres, to address the large housing waiting list while also improving conditions for existing tenants. Participants stated that they had not seen any evidence of the new social homes that have been promised by the Scottish Government. With one participant saying they regularly check websites for improved housing options, but they had never seen a newly built social home for rent being added to the site.

There was general agreement from the rural group that the Scottish Government should prioritise the insulation of homes. Other areas of focus included the idea of removing standing charges for electricity so that “if you can’t afford to switch something on at least you’re not accruing debt”. There was also support for the simple proposition that gas and electricity prices should be reduced; and one participant felt strongly that there should be a focus on mould in homes, arguing that – where mould is present in a home – it should be a priority to ensure it is removed for good.

While ultimate responsibility for changes was viewed as lying with the Scottish Government, there was consensus that there is also a role for local government and housing associations, too. Participants believed that social landlords should be accountable to their tenants. There was consensus that social houses have been here for a long period of time, with people paying large amounts of rent, but that money had not been adequately reinvested in the housing stock. Most participants felt that the Government should consider energy saving measures that are free of charge, with grants for people on the lowest incomes. Some participants felt that our governments should utilize profit made by utility companies to fund the investment in energy efficiency measures, with a focus on those on the lowest incomes.

Support is needed from local authorities to ensure that people have a higher standard of living. In line with the agreed legal standards for fire doors and escapes, there should be standards for health and humidity. However, there was also discussion about the potentially counterproductive nature of higher standards, with one participant sharing a local example whereby imposed standards led to social housing being sold due to the inability of the housing association to meet that standard.

Only one-quarter of participants in the urban group were aware of schemes to support changes to their home (e.g. for replacing doors/windows, upgrading heating systems, or installation of heat pumps). There was consensus among participants that local authorities and the Scottish Government are not doing enough to tell people about the schemes that could help them. People were in agreement that the Government should be proactive in promoting grants for improving homes including leaflets in GP surgeries and schools, alongside advertising support on television and radio.

Rural participants identified a range of barriers to and frustrations with access to support and improvement schemes. Where they had engaged with schemes, many had experienced long delays in receiving actual support and the need to advocate strongly for themselves in order to ensure work happened. A number of participants told us that they often found it difficult to engage contractors, and this could result in problems such as leaky roofs getting worse. We were told this is particularly challenging in rural and island areas and made much harder if there were multiple contractors involved. For rural homeowners this made the process of getting support stressful and time consuming, but also potentially more expensive, as it was difficult to get multiple quotes.

One participant did report very positively on a local intervention which had monitored her home energy performance, educated her children on home energy use and advising and providing small adaptations such as draft excluders. More remote rural and island participants also spoke about the loss of expertise, experience and skills required to service schemes such as insulation and retrofit. This was connected to broader challenges with the inaccessibility of learning and training for communities in more remote and island communities. One participant spoke about an insulation company local to the island where they reside which had to close, creating multiple job losses, because the training to upskill staff to meet new standards could only be delivered in person in the central belt which came with a prohibitive cost. Without such access to training, the barriers to accessing energy efficiency upgrades in rural communities may be exacerbated in the longer-term.

Theme 3 – The impact of extreme weather

Do you feel your home and other buildings in your area are well protected from extreme weather?

What changes might be needed to defend where you live from flooding, storms, heatwaves?

What would be the cost of not improving our homes and buildings?

Attendees noted that recent storms had impacted their home and their neighborhood in an adverse way, leading the majority of participants to conclude that their home was not well-protected from adverse weather. Issues included water coming through windows and walls; front porches flooding; windows and doors not being secure in high winds; local foot paths and bridges flooding creating issues in accessing essential services and

transport; and drain blockages on streets. Attendees highlighted that, looking at adverse weather through a poverty lens, it is those who are least able to afford it, who are more likely to be disrupted and displaced. There is also likely to be increased home insurance costs as a result of these issues, which people on low incomes are unable to afford.

One participant reported positively on work by local third sector organisations in supporting with resilience efforts. However, overall, it was viewed as critical that all levels of Government are proactive in their attempts to make the necessary changes to minimise the impact of extreme weather. Participants felt that when work is done, it is too often reactive. For example, work may respond to an incident after it has happened, but is not proactive in looking at future risks, or dealing with broader issues such as the need for insulation or damp proofing. The distinct lack of environmental maintenance by local authorities due to funding constraints was raised as a “real issue.” Regular maintenance of drains, gutters and gullies was viewed as paramount to mitigating the impact on low-income households.

There was also a sense that even where there may be, somewhat limited, progress on measures to protect homes from storms, flooding and events associated with colder weather – there is increasingly a need to consider the impact of warmer summers and that this doesn’t appear to be happening.

Recent storms, including Storm Babet, had flooded local streets and shops. People urged local authorities to undertake regular maintenance work to prevent this in future. Extreme weather should also be a key factor in the design and building of new social housing, preventing the rise of issues that many of the participants were currently experiencing. A number of participants expressed concern that local housing developments were not sufficiently taking into account their impact on the local environment, for example, in increasing flood risk. The role of utility companies was again raised in the context of prevention. One participant suggested that the law should be strengthened to ensure our utility companies, which make a large amount of profit, are responsible for adequate maintenance and improvement of this vital infrastructure. This should include consideration of how utility companies invest in deprived areas.

Participants felt that extreme weather would have financial consequences for people living on low incomes, as well as Government spending. One participant stated that “the cost of not doing it out-weighs the cost of doing it, not just in terms of Government spending, but on all of us, on our economy as a whole”. Financial costs at the household level were expected to include an increase in bills and poor-quality housing ultimately becoming worse, with consequences for people’s health and wellbeing.

Theme 4 – Participation

How should Scottish Government and others make sure people living on low incomes are having their voices heard as their plans move forward?

The group highlighted that older people; disabled people; and those with health conditions are more likely to be impacted by our changing climate. This is particularly true as these groups may be unable to leave the house and be stuck in inadequate accommodation. There were also concerns around the potential mental health implications of living in poor housing.

One participant emphasised the need to ensure people on low incomes are *being listened to*, rather than simply their voices being heard. They told us that there is a sense of dispiritedness and deep skepticism about whether there is genuine will for real change which would support those on low incomes. The Scottish Government and Local Authorities getting out to meet with people living in poverty to discuss plans for the just transition was viewed as vital. This should include using community engagement and community groups, and considering how we are engaging with different groups (e.g. Black and minority ethnic people, or disabled people) and not subscribing to a one size fits all approach. Within this, the return to face-to-face engagement was viewed as important by some participants, particularly for those with language barriers or without digital access.

All participants agreed that the impact of stress on people living with low incomes should not be underestimated and that this severely limits their ability to engage in or even know about opportunities to input. Some argued that systems would be better served if more decisions were devolved locally, but others were more cynical, acknowledging that local consultations were often dominated by the same voices. It was pointed out that parents on low incomes are particularly poorly represented in engagement structures, due to limitations on their time. There was interest from one participant in what the government could do to think more creatively about engagement methods e.g. how to use digital technologies, even including games consoles or artificial intelligence as tools to better engage the public.

Some participants felt that an increased focus on the role of the community in making decisions about land use and development (including through community land use) could be an important part of making good decisions, but that they felt currently there was a lack of local accountability. There was also a sense of frustration generally, that often the solutions to problems are known but that there isn't the political will to implement them. Participants felt that the needs and priorities of people on low incomes are not always well-balanced against the priorities of business interests.

Theme 5 – The Scottish Government's messages on climate change

How can Scottish Government get messages out to the public about what needs to change, and what help is available?

One participant stated that “climate change is not a priority for me, I have bigger problems and priorities in my life, such as my health, employment and having my own place to live”. The majority of the participants agreed with this statement, saying that climate change was not their priority, and instead they were focused on poverty;

housing; and the cost of living crisis. A minority of participants noted that climate change was a priority for them, because it would impact their children's lives and future.

Events like COP26 were not viewed as connecting with people's everyday lives, with participants only hearing about these events on the news and being unclear about how the views of people on low incomes would have been considered or embedded. Beyond this Get Heard Scotland session, only one participant had been invited to discuss climate change in another process or at another point in time.

Participants questioned whether people on low incomes had benefited from Scottish Government policies on the climate crisis and how the Government would demonstrate positive impacts for local people. One participant stated that "If the Government proves to me that making changes will benefit me and my family, I will take more notice, but they haven't shown me anything to date that I should make it a higher priority". The group focused on the need for messages from government which are simple, clear, easy to understand and free from jargon. Some participants indicated they were worried and confused about possible plans in the future, particularly around phasing out of gas boilers.

The Government's messaging, and how they make this relevant to the lives of people on low incomes and their local area, was therefore viewed as critical. Currently, people may think climate change is happening elsewhere, such as the fires in Greece which they will have seen on the news. Other key messaging priorities included translating materials into multiple languages; delivering messages in an accessible manner; and linking the climate crisis to experiences of fuel poverty to secure more buy-in from people living on low incomes.

One participant suggested that the government could learn from other areas where public messaging had worked, including health and safety in the workplace. Participants agreed that approaches would need to diversify from measures such as "newsletters that get put through the letterbox" as they did not feel these would be read or engaged with. They reported that word of mouth was often the way they found out about local support but that this was not sustainable or equitable.

For more information, please contact:

Ruth Boyle, Policy and Campaigns Manager
ruth.boyle@povertyalliance.org

Ralph Hartley, Policy Officer (Rural Poverty)
Ralph.hartley@povertyalliance.org