



**poverty proofing the voluntary
sector**



section 1

introduction

Many charities and voluntary and community organisations are set up with the aim of reducing the effects of poverty. For some, that comes from being located within their community and readily available to offer time and support to people who otherwise have little influence or material resources. At the opposite end of the scale, it can mean providing a whole set of professional and expert services commissioned by the public sector or funded by grant making trusts.

In both of these simple examples a form of support is being offered to people experiencing poverty and deprivation. The first example gives rise to the question of whether being readily available merely provides a sticking plaster, leaving unchallenged the reasons why some communities and some people seem to be unable to escape the confines of poverty and exclusion.

The second example meanwhile introduces the dilemma of professionalization, where the status of the organisation and the fulfilment of contractual obligations begins to become primary, and risks reducing beneficiaries to the status of customers or worse still, outputs.

Everyday life is of course much more complex. Few organisations are likely to be as blind to the larger picture and their responsibilities and opportunities

within it as the two previous examples suggest. However, within the everyday complexities of running and maintaining a voluntary sector organisation, whatever the size, the question remains; does it become all too easy to lose the focus and urgency of the original vision and aims of meeting the needs of people in poverty?

Poverty Proofing the Voluntary Sector (PPVS) has been created by Newcastle Council for Voluntary Service. PPVS borrows from the approach of Self Organised Learning Environments (SOLE), which by asking informally organised groups 'big questions' sparks their curiosity, reflection, critical thinking and insight. Using PPVS enables voluntary and community groups, charities and social enterprises to take a step back and consider their relationship with the people who are using their services, particularly those who are in poverty.

It asks whether you are doing all that you can to tackle the direct impact poverty has on individuals, families and communities as well as the wider causes and determinates of poverty. What PPVS asks ultimately is: are you a Poverty Proofed Voluntary Organisation?

So what is a Poverty Proofed Organisation? It is an organisation that puts people at the centre of everything it does. It listens to its staff and volunteers but above all to people who are poor and are using its services and activities. It takes serious steps to make sure that those services are effective and meeting the needs of the people using them; it delivers its services and activities in a form that enables people who are poor to retain their dignity and agency. It offers support and services on their own terms and not as a cheap copy of a more expensive option. It is informed by a culture that promotes reflection and challenge; it uses its direct experience of people and communities in poverty to understand the causes and effects of poverty and is active rather than passive in its responses; it seeks opportunities to engage other organisations across the voluntary, public and private sectors, using its knowledge, experience and expertise to contest assumptions about why people are poor and seeks to change

the conditions that reinforce poverty. It seeks to influence wider debates amongst policy and decision-makers in order to bring about change in how poverty is addressed and aims to challenge actions and ideas that ingrain poverty and exclusion in society.

PPVS is very straightforward to use. It poses a set of questions for trustees, staff and volunteers to consider. There is an accompanying set of questions for people who are using the organisation's services. The questions are designed to allow you to open out and explore the culture, activities and attitudes that exist within the organisation. They ask what relationships are like within the organisation and between the organisation and people, especially those in poverty, who are using it. It asks how the organisation exerts its influence on the wider stage and what it is like to use its services and activities for someone who is in poverty.

Because we recognise the diversity of the voluntary sector, how you go about organising colleagues and stakeholders to use PPVS and consider these questions, how long you give to each question, even whether you consider them all, is up to you.

What we set out in Section 2 is a recommendation for how to use PPVS to get the most out of it. PPVS assumes that your organisation is serious about addressing the impact of poverty, its causes and determinants, making changes and finding solutions. We know that one size does not fit all, and that for many organisations time is amongst their most precious assets, and therefore must be used wisely.

The power of PPVS lies in opening out your organisation to discussion and reflection about what it is doing to achieve its aim to reduce the impact of poverty, and what it is like to use the services and activities you offer and how they could be made better.

Poverty Proofing the Voluntary Sector has been developed with support from Millfield

House Foundation, taking as its starting point Children North East's Poverty Proofing the School Day toolkit. During 2014, Newcastle Council for Voluntary Sector carried out a series of interviews with staff, volunteers and trustees from six Newcastle based charities. Interviews were also carried out with people who were using the services and activities offered by the charities. The results of all the interviews were subsequently used to inform the questions used in Poverty Proofing the Voluntary Sector.

section 2

using poverty proofing the voluntary sector

First and foremost PPVS is about getting together the relevant people and thinking honestly about the questions PPVS asks. Some of the questions are more deliberately provocative than others. The aim is to understand what your organisation is like when someone in poverty or exclusion comes to use your services and activities.

The resulting discussions may challenge the perceptions of staff, volunteers and trustees about how effective the organisation is and how effectively it is meeting the needs of people living in poverty and exclusion. In this exercise, the views, responses and expectations of the people who are using your services will prove crucial to your understanding of your organisation.

To begin with, you must decide who is going to be part of the discussions; ideally the invitation to participate should be to everybody involved in the organisation though obviously, depending on the size of the organisation, this may not be possible.

As a minimum the people taking part should be representative of each part of your organisation, in order to create as rounded an account as possible.

You should give yourself a minimum of an hour for the session, though longer is better. It is unlikely you will get through all the questions in a single session and you will need to programme in a series of sessions. The actual length of time needed will depend on the depth and honesty of your conversations.

Staff, volunteers and trustees should work through the questions in Section 3.

People who are using your services and activities should work through the questions in Section 4.

We suggest that for the session someone is nominated to be responsible for asking the questions, keeping people to time and keeping the conversation going. Someone should also be nominated to keep a record of the session. Again, how detailed the record is is up to you. After each question you should seek to come to a common agreement about where your organisation sits on a scale of 0-10, where 0 is poor and 10 is excellent (or Poverty Proofed). This will provide a quick visual tally of how well your organisation is doing or how far it needs to travel to become Poverty Proofed.

Section 4 questions have been designed for people who are using your services and activities. Ideally these should be answered without anyone from your organisation being present. The format for these sessions is the same as those for staff. There are fewer questions in this section. This is deliberate and acknowledges the different relationship and commitments people have to your organisation. PPVS recognises that just because someone is materially poor, their time is no less valuable than anybody else's.

Once both sections are completed you should have a patch-worked account of the organisation with views, opinions and experiences from different levels and from a variety of relationships to the organisation.

Some of what you find out from these sessions you might be able to change quickly. You might find there is not much to change. Some of what you find out may require further analysis to arrive at more substantial change. PPVS is not prescriptive about what to do next; it will depend on the individual organisation, its particular circumstances and its resources.

PPVS is a way to step back and reflect on how your organisation is doing, including where there's good practice and where things could be improved. Once you have that picture it is up to each organisation to respond as best it can. PPVS is a link in a longer chain to an efficient, effective,

influential voluntary sector.

A Worked Example:

Charity A offers outdoor activities, some of which require specialist equipment to be worn by participants. The Charity is well established and has a good reputation within the voluntary sector as well as amongst the public sector and local businesses. In recent years more people with experience outside the voluntary sector have joined the trustee board.

The charity is based in an economically deprived area but offers its services across the town. With the aid of grant funding the charity offers free places to young people from low income families. Through its structured outdoor programme it aims to improve young people's self-confidence, personal and social skills. Places are also available at full cost to young people who want to take part in the outdoor activities. Although the programme was created to help young people from poor families, it has had benefits for young people across the social spectrum. The charity provides young people with specialist equipment for its activities, which is clearly marked with the charity's name. However, young people who pay full price often bring and use their own equipment.

Trustees, staff and volunteers spend two sessions working through PPVS questions. Marking each question on a 0-10 scale, they find that in answer to many of the questions they are scoring between 5 and 8; a good score. However, when talking through question 12 they agree that trustees do not see much of the day-to-day activities of the charity and have a limited understanding of the experience of people on low incomes. As part of a plan to make the charity more financially sustainable, trustees have been pursuing a strategy of attracting more people paying full price for its activities. Because of its reputation and a number of news stories featured in the local media about the charity, there has been an increase in young people from better off families using its activities.

The charity follows these two PPVS sessions with

one for young people who are using its services for free. The session finds that young people enjoy the activities and enjoy being with staff and volunteers who lead the sessions. However, they don't know who the trustees are and rarely see any senior managers. Some of the young people say that recently they have begun to feel self-conscious wearing the charity's specialist safety equipment as more young people who are paying for sessions are bringing their own equipment. They feel conspicuous when wearing the charity's equipment and don't speak much to the other young people, because they worry about talking about their home life or the reasons why they don't have their own equipment.

Comparing the answers recorded from both sets of PPVS sessions, managers and trustees can see that in trying to generate income they are in danger of undermining the charity's aim of providing opportunities for poor young people. They make a decision to continue with the charity's income generation plans but introduce a policy of making all young people use the specialist equipment supplied by the charity. Additionally trustees agree that they will spend time attending the charities activities and will set up a panel for young people receiving the organisation's free services to find out regularly their experiences and ideas for the charity.

Finally, the charity agrees to have another set of PPVS sessions in twelve months time.

section 3

staff, volunteers and trustees

Why would people in poverty come specifically to your organisation for support or advice?

Can you describe what it is like for someone experiencing poverty and exclusion to walk into your organisation for the first time?

When someone in poverty comes to you for support how important is it that staff or volunteers take time to understand the whole person as well as the described or immediately apparent need?

What do you do to let people in poverty know about the support and services you can offer?

What are the barriers (physical, financial, geographical) that people in poverty might experience to using your services?

How well do trustees and managers, staff and volunteers understand the day-to-day experience of people in poverty and how is this understanding shared within your organisation?

What do you do to make sure that you are providing the services and activities that people experiencing poverty and deprivation require?

Does the way you provide some services indicate to others that someone using them is poor and couldn't afford to pay for the service?

Describe how you involve the people using your services in reviewing and developing your services and activities.

Do your internal policies and procedures sometimes get in the way of effectively meeting the needs of the poorest people using your services and activities?

Which of the following statements best describes your organisation?

- We enable individuals to manage the impact of poverty.
- We provide support to individuals but also aim to challenge the wider causes of poverty by campaigning and/or influencing public policy and services.

Can you map the networks and partnerships (both voluntary sector and other sectors) where your organisation is active and can exercise influence?

List the organisations and networks (both voluntary sector and other sectors) where your connections and influence are weak; how can these links be strengthened and made more productive?

As an organisation you are likely to have a deeper understanding about why people are poor and factors that commonly keep them in poverty, but what do you do to challenge stereotypes and speak out on behalf of people in poverty?

Which has the most influence on the services and activities you offer?

- The direct evidence of what you see and hear from people in poverty who are currently using your services.
- The outcomes required by the funders and/or commissioners of the services and activities you provide.

section 4

beneficiaries and service users

How much did you know about this organisation before you started to use its services or activities?

Can you describe what a day spent in the organisation is like, who you spend time with, what you do, what you can't do?

Who in the organisation do you have the strongest relationships with: staff, volunteers, managers or trustees?

Has the organisation offered you all of the help, support or opportunities that you were expecting?

Can you describe how you would be able make suggestions for improving the organisation?

Is this an organisation that respects the boundaries of your privacy?

Can you describe any time spent here when you felt uncomfortable or awkward, and why?

Can you describe what it was like and how you felt the first time you used the organisation?

Does using this organisation cost you money, for example, travel costs, paying for lunch or snacks, child care?

After a session at the organisation which do you feel: better able to take on other challenges or that you've simply been filling in time?