

Making change together

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“We’re asking for a fundamental change in the way we are seen and treated within the system.”

Catherine, Covid Realities participant.



Covid Realities participants created a zine (collection of words and images), exploring their experiences during the pandemic and considering what needs to change in the future. The above zine page was created by Caroline and Amelia.

The social security system has been a central feature of the pandemic response. As we move out of the emergency phase of the crisis, however, the future direction of social security policy has rarely seemed more uncertain. How can we ensure we are campaigning for ambitious change, and how can we ensure people with lived experience of the system can bring their expertise to that campaign?

In times of crisis, there is an understandable temptation to seek out stability by limiting prospects for change to what is regarded as politically feasible. This leads to the argument that proposals for reform should be tethered to the limits set by surveying public attitudes. At Covid Realities, while recognising the importance of public attitudes, we also believe that this moment calls for more imaginative, active

and participatory forms of research and policy activity. Such approaches can yield rich ideas that are ambitious yet grounded in everyday realities. Ideas and approaches that also have an important role to play in creating the coalitions, networks, advocates and activists needed to make future change happen.

Social security in uncertain times

As we continue, we hope, to descend from the peak of the COVID crisis, thoughts inevitably turn to the landscape that awaits. What remains unchanged, and what will be the new challenges, or the prospects for reform? At the time of writing, it looks likely that the government will press ahead

with the £20 cut to universal credit just as we enter what looks set to be a difficult winter for millions of families. Despite the wide and ever-growing range of voices calling for the government to think again, the cut will likely have been implemented by the time this article makes it to print.

Whatever the outcome, this moment holds important lessons about the new terrain. Looking beyond the campaign to stop the £20 cut, the future direction of social security policy more broadly seems uncertain. The economic outlook is unclear, and we do not know the effect ending the coronavirus job retention scheme (furlough) and Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS) will have. While some people have glimpsed in such interventions an end to neoliberal discipline and austerity,¹ others caution that this is far from certain.²



The Covid Realities research programme conducts participatory online research with parents and carers living on a low-income during the pandemic. People get involved in a range of ways: completing online diaries, responding to the ‘big question of the week’ video, and taking part in virtual discussion groups.

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One response to moments of uncertainty, crisis and change is a search for anchors. In the field of public policy, and particularly social security, such anchors are often sought in the measurement and analysis of 'public attitudes'. By determining what is considered permissible, such attitudes can inform the pathways of possible action.³ Such an approach clearly has its uses but also its limitations. Alongside a sometimes uncritical treatment of 'public attitudes' as natural, unconstructed facts,⁴ this approach can perhaps lead to an unduly unambitious agenda for change. Changing public attitudes and 'winning hearts and minds' is an important area of work, to which many have made excellent contributions. It is also an aim of the Covid Realities programme. However, it is also important to clearly articulate and advocate for the reforms that both research and practice tell us are needed. It is doubtful that 'public attitudes' have ever provided straightforwardly welcoming terrain for progressive reform. Yet, reforms have, at various times, been achieved.⁵

The Covid Realities research programme is arguing for, and trying to chart, a different approach. Rather than beginning with the analysis of public attitudes, the project is grounded in the lived experience of its participants. These are all parents and carers living on low incomes who bring important expertise from these experiences. This approach is more than simply an empirical exercise. It is an active attempt to create a space in which participants can contribute to debates and conversations with those holding different, complementary forms of expertise – researchers, policy makers, campaigners and politicians, for example. Rather than 'extract' data from participants, the Covid Realities research programme is a platform on and through which people can articulate their own knowledge, sharing it with others.

The participatory imagination

The Covid Realities research programme was funded as part of the Nuffield Foundation's rapid response to the COVID pandemic.⁶ A key aim of the programme, running from April 2020 to December 2021, is to ensure that the voices of parents and carers living on a low income are better included in the policy-making processes, and to explore how this inclusion might be achieved. At the centre of the Covid Realities programme is participatory research with parents and carers living on a low income through the pandemic. In online diary entries and written responses to 'big questions of the week', more than 100 parents and carers from across the UK have been sharing their experiences of everyday life in an extraordinary time.⁷ Monthly 'Big Ideas' virtual discussion groups bring parents together to discuss ideas for change, and to co-produce policy recommendations.

What kind of future do Covid Realities participants want to see? In March 2021, to mark a year of lockdown life, Covid Realities facilitated a meeting, on Zoom, between parents and carers living on a low income and parliamentarians. At the meeting, parents shared their experiences of lockdown life and set out what they believe needs to change if the future is to be a better one for all of us. One of the parents, Catherine, explained what she and the other parents working on Covid Realities are calling for:

'We're asking for a fundamental change in the way we are seen and treated within the system. We want to be respected enough to not have to prove ourselves at every single turn. We want enough money to live on so we can concentrate on improving our lot. We want the common courtesy of advanced notice, clear explanations, appointments on time, and reciprocal understanding when things don't happen as planned. We want work coaches to actually support us, encourage us, and believe in us. We want to be met with dignity and respect, as equals. If society sees the government viewing us differently, supporting us properly, treating us well, caring about us, then slowly it will, too. Remove the stereotypes and talk to us as equals. Not scroungers. Not layabouts. Not uneducated. But as human beings, just like you, trying to do the best for our families, just like you.' (Catherine, Covid Realities participant, extract from speech at parliamentary event, March 2021)

Catherine's vision is wide-ranging yet specific and concrete. Her vision is grounded by an appreciation of the real problems she faces but also by a clear demand for justice and just treatment. Drawing on their individual experiences, Covid Realities participants have worked together with members of the research team and staff from Child Poverty Action Group to produce a shared vision for the future of social security in the UK.⁸ Their vision is underpinned by a set of co-produced principles, set out below:

Our collective vision is for a social security system that is understanding and compassionate, treats people with dignity and respect, and offers meaningful opportunities and support.

Our key principles are:

Security – social security should provide security and stability

Adequacy – the amount provided should be enough to live decently

Rights and respect – social security should promote dignity not stigma

Transparency and accountability – the system should be easy to understand, use and challenge

Empowerment and opportunity – social security should offer people real and meaningful choices and support, giving people control over their money and choices

Inclusive and user-led – social security should reflect and be rooted in local communities, and developed in collaboration with the people who use it

Compassionate – social security should be flexible and person-centred, adapting to individual needs and circumstances



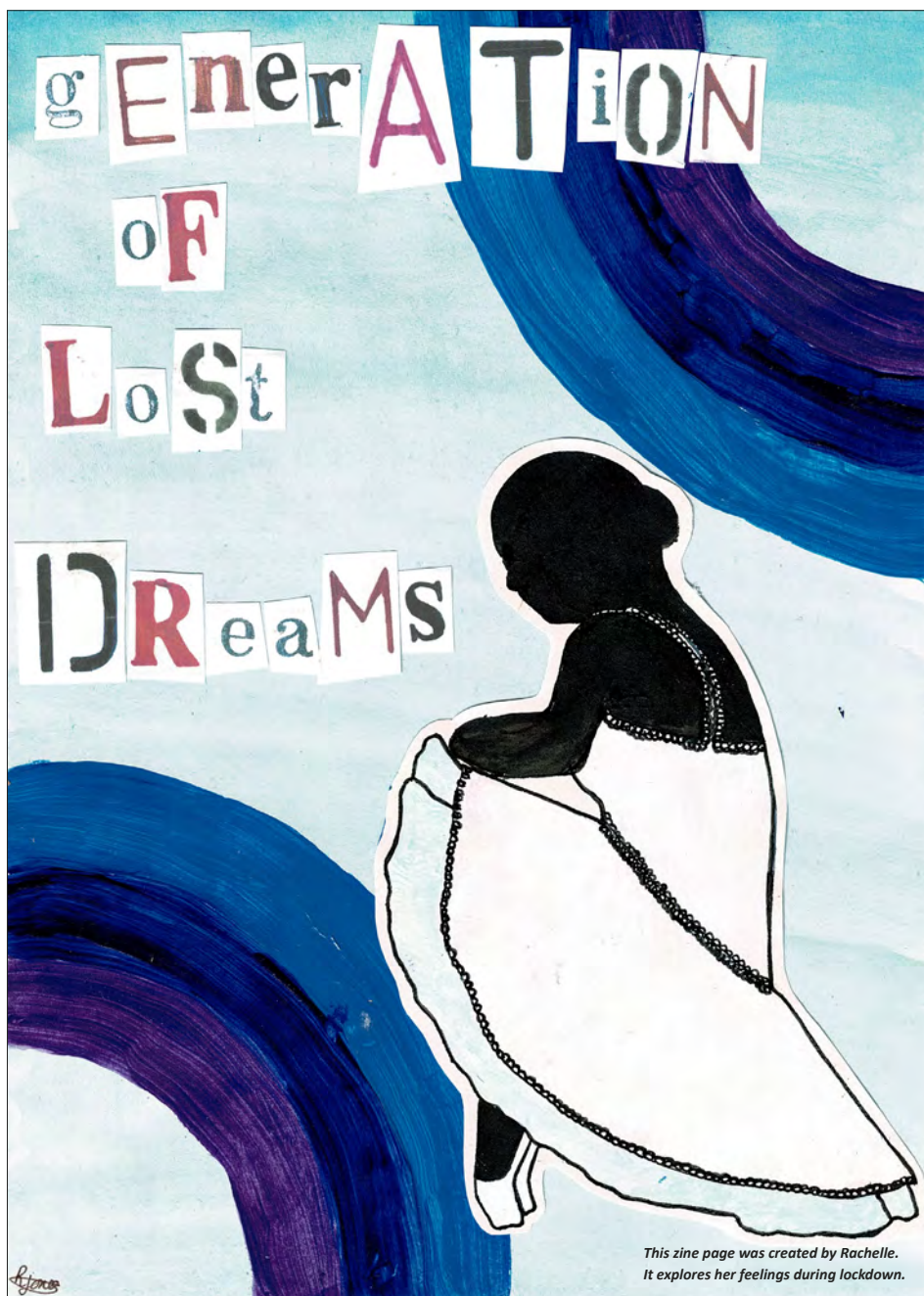
Lockdown has been a very difficult time. My low wage has meant that I'm struggling most weeks to feed the girls. Three girls at home for the last six months and needing feeding every day three times a day is totally taking its toll. I'm still struggling to get my divorce, and we still have no financial help from their absent father. The children have been around each other for so long that instead of getting along they are at each others throat! My eldest has become even more clingy to me, and at 15 years old I was hoping to be well passed that stage.

Beth J, Covid Realities participant



In the food parcel also came the dreaded bread, three loafs. One was stale and solid (I let the kids have fun carving it like a pumpkin – least it eased my conscience some that it wasn't entirely wasted), the other was of course mouldy, so common these days I barely bother to get excited now. But one loaf was actually edible, it was lovely for toasting. So yesterday I was able to cheer up some beans with meatballs by putting it on toast. I cried because it was the first time where my kiddies had eaten their full meals in weeks with gusto. And now for two days in a row. Tuesday with sandwiches and yesterday with toast and beans.

Victoria B, Covid Realities participant



Building on these principles, the current work of Covid Realities focuses on producing policy recommendations around three key areas of importance to its participants:

- the disrespect and mistreatment of claimants by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and other agencies;
- ways to improve support for children and families; and
- ways to increase the input of expertise by experience into the policy process.

For a participatory future

The participatory research process adopted by Covid Realities actively creates opportunities for involvement and intervention. This approach is both

about trying to influence 'hearts and minds', but also about trying to find ways of giving otherwise marginalised forms of knowledge and expertise greater influence and air time. This space is highly valued by the participants, who are motivated by what they see as an urgent need for policy action, as well as by the sense of strength and solidarity they gain from coming together:

'Having struggled on a very low income throughout the pandemic and with our particular circumstances, I'd wanted to voice my opinion of what life was really like for people like me, who'd found themselves in a predicament where ends did not meet. Covid Realities has given us a platform to express and air our concerns, where otherwise I felt we'd been ignored, especially by the government. It has helped with feeling like a participating member of society, where we do matter.' (Aurora, mother of two, London)

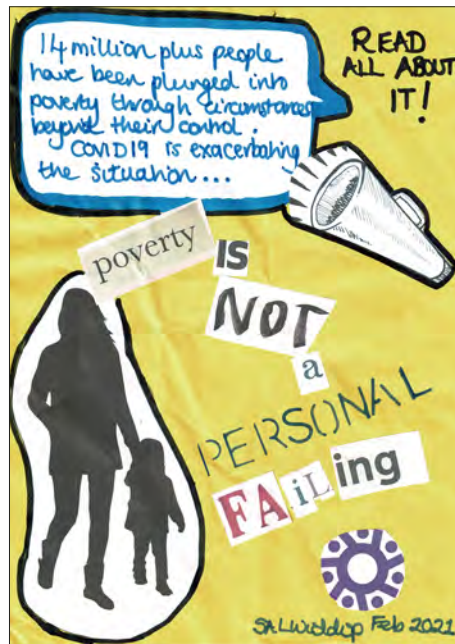
'It has been good to feel like I have a voice and my opinion is heard. Over the last year, I've enjoyed being part of Covid Realities. It feels like a community. Hearing other people's life experiences and thoughts and opinions is helpful. Knowing other people are going through similar to you makes you feel like you are not alone. Knowing we're trying to make a difference between us to everyone's lives is also empowering! Together we are making a difference'. (Isla, mother of two, South West England)

One of the most striking things to emerge from the programme so far is the strength of participants' appetite for this form of 'getting organised'.⁹ Participants have enthusiastically used the project to exercise their individual and collective agency. In addition to documenting in detail their experiences, problems and concerns, the project has sought to enable participants to intervene directly in public debate. This has included participating in evidence submissions and media appearances, as well as directly addressing politicians and policy makers. Here, the role of the research has been to facilitate and support participants to articulate their own knowledge, expertise and perspectives in various contexts.

The proposals made by Covid Realities participants should not be dismissed as utopian or out of step with political realities. Participants are politically aware and, to increase political buy-in and in pursuit of longer-term aims, are willing to temper their immediate ambitions. Participants are keen to learn from and engage with different forms of expertise – the sorts of expertise held by policy makers, campaigners and researchers. The opportunities for this kind of exchange stand to benefit all groups involved. We see immense and untapped potential for people with more traditional forms of policy expertise (and authority) to work with those with expertise from experience, as trialled in the work of Poverty2Solutions¹⁰ and the Commission on Social Security.¹¹

Conclusion

In this time of crisis, the future shape of the social security system seems uncertain. Although there will be entitlements and rights that need defending, as shown by the campaign to keep the £20 increase, this does not mean we need to retreat to defensive positions. As others have observed,¹² one of the few hopeful features of the crisis is that it has demonstrated the potential, and necessity, of large-scale policy intervention and coordinated state action. In participatory work with parents and carers on low incomes, we have found a great deal of enthusiasm for engagement with policy makers, politicians, the media and campaigners. We are hopeful that the future will see an increase in these forms of exchange and dialogue, and more activity to integrate participatory approaches into existing organisations and future projects. Drawing on wider forms of expertise has the potential to strengthen the work of these organisations and projects,¹³ but also to play a part in developing the networks and capabilities required to make change happen. Change that the pandemic has reminded us is so urgently required.



This zine page was created by Shirley. It voices her frustration with poverty and its accompanying narratives.



This zine page was created by Ruth, who co-authored this article.

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Footnotes

1. For example see L Cooper, 'The end of neoliberalism? Why the current crisis is different to 1989, 2001 and 2008', LSE Covid-19 Blog, June 24, 2020; G Eaton, 'Is the neoliberal era finally over?', *New Statesman*, 16 June 2021
2. 'Britain "Heading for New Era of Austerity", Thinktank Warns', *The Guardian*, 18 March 2021, theguardian.com/politics/2021/mar/18/britain-heading-for-new-era-of-austerity-thinktank-warns
3. J Abey and A Harrop, *Going with the Grain: How to Increase Social Security with Public Support*, Fabian Society, 2021
4. P Bourdieu, 'Public opinion does not exist', *Communication and Class Struggle*, 1, pp124–30, 1979
5. J Hudson, N Lunt and C Hamilton, 'Nostalgia narratives? Pejorative attitudes to welfare in historical perspective: survey evidence from Beveridge to the British Social Attitudes Survey', *Journal of Poverty*, 2016
6. Covid Realities, *COVID Realities: Families on Low Incomes during the Pandemic*, The Nuffield Foundation, 2021, nuffieldfoundation.org/project/covid-realities-families-low-income-pandemic
7. See covidrealities.org
8. R Patrick, J Kaufman and M Power, *Post Pandemic Futures: Social Security Reimagined*, Covid Realities, 2021, covidrealities.org/learnings/write-ups/post-pandemic-futures
9. R Lister, *Poverty* (2nd edn), Polity, 2021
10. See poverty2solutions.org
11. K Summers, 'The Commission on Social Security and participatory research during the pandemic: new context, abiding challenge', in K Garthwaite, R Patrick, M Power and A Tarrant (eds), *Covid Realities: documenting the experiences of low-income families during COVID-19*, Policy Press, forthcoming
12. M Brewer, K Handscomb and K Shah, *In Need of Support? Lessons from the Covid-19 Crisis for Our Social Security System*, Resolution Foundation, 2021, resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2021/04/in-need-of-support.pdf
13. ATD Fourth World UK, *Understanding Poverty in All Its Forms*, 2019, atd-uk.org/projects-campaigns/understanding-poverty

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2020 has been similar to last few years for my daughter and myself. Isolated, lonely, not priority when it comes to housing, income and care. No garden to sit out on sunny days. No support to get shopping. Only people who asked how we were feeling were paid to do so over the phone.

Alex J, Covid Realities participant