

Engaging people in policy discussions

HANNAH ALDRIDGE



Holding group sessions online can make it much easier for parents to attend, without having to think about childcare and travel arrangements.

Over the past three years, CPAG has convened a panel of lower-income parents from Black and minority ethnic communities in London to understand how policies affect their lives and what they want to see change. What approach did CPAG take to setting up the panel and why? What were some of the key learnings? And what should others planning a similar project consider?

One of our aims is to ground our policy and campaigning work in the priorities of people deeply affected by public policy but rarely engaged in discussions about it. To embed this in our work, for our London-based project London Calling we convened a group of parents to regularly meet online to discuss a range of topics and the impact they had on their everyday lives.

The London Calling panel

Our panel was made up of 32 parents from across London, all of whom were in paid work, from a Black and minority ethnic community and living on a lower income (in that they were receiving universal credit or child tax credit) (see Box).

We wanted to hear from this group for a range of reasons. Parents who have children in school, go to work, need childcare and receive means-tested benefits are deeply exposed to policy decisions and economic shifts. If we are to design policies that prevent child poverty and support income security, this group needs to benefit. Our panel also involved people rarely given the opportunity to participate in discussions about public policy, as people from Black and minority ethnic communities who face systemic discrimination, and as parents juggling work, childcare and day-to-day budgeting with little time to engage in consultations about policies that affect their everyday lives.

Set it up so the panel leads and you listen

It was crucial that the panel was arranged so that panel members held the power and led the discussion – our role was to listen. To guarantee this, we asked an external facilitator to moderate the sessions, removing our ability to direct the debate to suit our priorities. However, we exerted some control over the content of discussions, providing the facilitator with a topic guide for each session. We chose topics based on what the panel told us they wanted to talk about (eg, childcare), high-profile evolving policy areas (eg, the cost of living crisis) and the policy decisions that were directly affecting panel members’ lives at the time (eg, school closures during the pandemic).

Meeting regularly as a group allowed us to build trust with each member and allowed the panellists to develop a collective identity and a rapport with each other. Members came to the sessions to discuss their experiences and opinions with one another as well as sharing them with us.

Composition of the London Calling panel

The panel included parents from communities across the capital, with one participant from each of London’s 32 boroughs. At the time of recruitment:

- All panellists were in work (full or part time) and received either working tax credits or universal credit.
- All panellists had at least one child of primary school age.
- All panellists were from a Black and minority ethnic community. The participants’ self-defined ethnicities included: mixed ethnicity, Black Caribbean, Black African, Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Asian and Indian.
- Panellists lived in a variety of housing types: social housing, privately rented accommodation and accommodation owned with a mortgage.
- Panellists included single parents, married/cohabiting parents, and those in blended families and extended families.

Convening the panel during such a volatile time was invaluable. Throughout the pandemic and the cost of living crisis we were getting ongoing feedback from a range of parents about how their situations were changing, how policy changes affected their lives and what they thought local, regional and national governments should do to help. When we, as a campaigning and policy organisation, needed to understand what was happening and what could be done, the panel provided us with evidence about what mattered most and a sounding board for our recommendations.

Six tips for engaging parents in ongoing policy discussions

In the final session with the London Calling panellists, we asked them to reflect on the experience and provide feedback for how it could be improved. Based on that session and the

experience overall, here are six tips for engaging parents in ongoing policy discussions.

1. Start with a general check-in.

From the beginning of the cost of living crisis, we started each session with a check-in to find out how people were coping, inviting panellists to share anything that had changed in their lives or things they had noticed in the community. This put people at ease before the planned conversation took place and built rapport between panel members. By giving the panel the floor at the outset of the conversation, we were able to understand panellists’ priorities and make these a focus of future sessions.

‘I liked that you care about us as people, you didn’t jump straight into what was important to you but wanted to see how we were doing first.’ (panellist)

2. Be flexible with time slots.

As a group of 32 panel members, it was beneficial to split into two groups so we could offer everyone a chance to contribute without taking up too much of their time. Rather than set predefined groups, we arranged a morning slot and an evening slot, and panellists could attend the session that suited them best. Anyone who wanted to participate but was unavailable for the main sessions was offered a follow up phone call at a time they could do.

‘I so appreciated being able to work around what I was doing that day like either after I’d dropped the kids off or after work.’ (panellist)

‘Being able to set up an interview if the main sessions didn’t work was really important to me because a few times I really wanted to share my thoughts but I was working so that let me contribute.’ (panellist)

3. Hold the sessions online.

While online meetings have many drawbacks and aren’t accessible to all, the travel and childcare required for in-person meetings were major barriers for parents. Holding our sessions online made it much easier for our panellists to attend and contribute from the comfort/chaos of their own homes.

‘At some point we’ve all had stray kids, dogs or husbands in the background or a baby settling to sleep – that’s what’s needed in order for us to contribute. So many consultations are set up so you can’t take your kid.’ (panellist)

4. Compensate people for their time.

Time is money. When you are asking busy people to give you 90 minutes of their time, and their lived experience expertise, that should always be financially remunerated.

5. Provide feedback.

Telling people why you are bringing them together helps focus the discussion. For us it meant that panellists would share relevant experience that we hadn't expected or accounted for in our topic guides. It's just as important to then provide feedback to the people you are working with about how that evidence has been used. When a project goes on for a prolonged period, committing to provide that feedback makes you accountable for using the evidence you have collected and helps maintain the motivation of people providing it.

6. Invite stakeholders in.

We held two panels where stakeholders set the discussion guide and joined the session – one with the Greater London Authority and one with Transport for London. These were opportunities for the panellists to speak directly to people who shape the services they use, and for stakeholders to understand the impact their policies and decisions have.

There were two prerequisites for the success of those sessions. First, they happened once the panel had become well established: the panellists were comfortable with one another and trusted us as conveners. Had we invited stakeholders to an earlier session when panellists were less sure of the process, the discussion may not have been as fruitful. Second, we made sure the stakeholders understood that their role was not to justify or defend policies but to listen and understand the panellists' perspectives.

'I started off just really going for it and I expected Transport for London to be all defensive and not get it, but that lady just listened and seemed to really care.' (panellist)

How involving people makes a difference

CPAG gained a huge amount from working with the panel throughout the project, but one thing we did not appreciate until the end was how meaningful the experience was for the panellists. One of the things panel members said they valued most was learning about, and discussing, policy changes affecting them and their communities. This was particularly important for the very many panellists who did not trust politicians and disliked mainstream news sources so felt disengaged from current affairs.

'Sometimes, it's only when I heard things in this discussion that I knew they were happening, I was like, "What? How have I not realised?"' (panellist)

'I can't stand the news. You have to listen to so much and it's either depressing or it's lies. I learnt so much from these conversations and it was all stuff that was relevant to me.' (panellist)



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The panellists' enthusiasm to learn and to share should act as a reminder to us all that people who cannot find the time to respond to consultations, and are deeply sceptical about politics, still want to engage and to be heard. In the context of political scepticism, we need to find better ways for these things to happen. Even taking that first step of inviting people to take part in a conversation makes a big difference.

'Thank you for caring enough about what we're going through and what our lives are like to ask us.' (panellist)

You can read more contributions from the London Calling panel in *Inequalities amplified*, a report from CPAG, Runnymede Trust and the Women's Budget Group available at cpag.org.uk/news/inequalities-amplified

Hannah Aldridge is senior policy and research officer at CPAG.



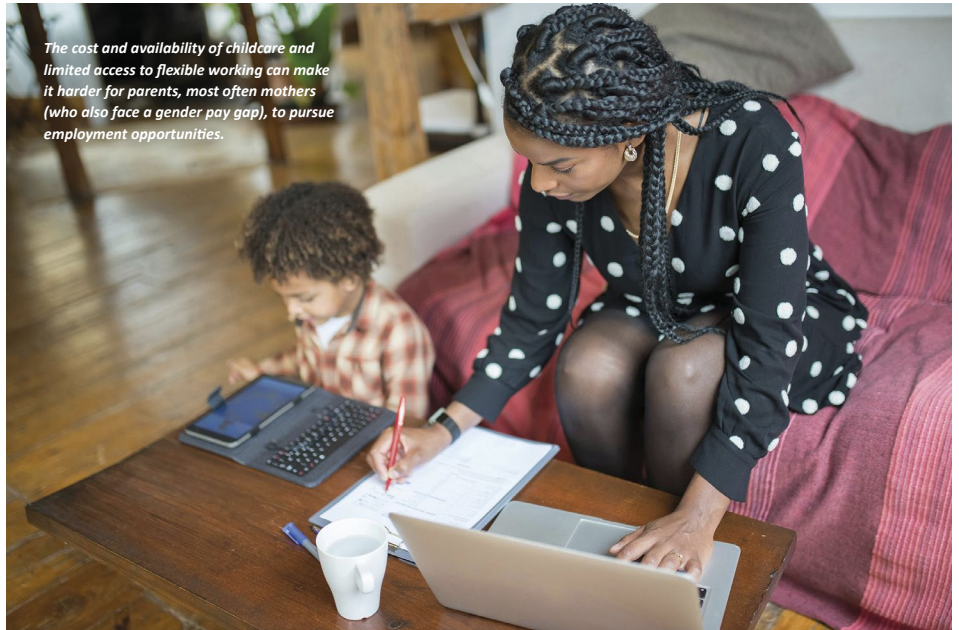
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All of the London Calling panellists from across London were parents in paid work, from a Black and minority ethnic community and living on a lower income (in that they were receiving universal credit or child tax credit).



'It feels that women have to make that sacrifice, to make that choice between a really high up position or being there for their child. It feels that women end up making that ultimate sacrifice.'
(London Calling panellist)



The cost and availability of childcare and limited access to flexible working can make it harder for parents, most often mothers (who also face a gender pay gap), to pursue employment opportunities.

The London Calling panel discussed how the cost of living crisis has affected their lives, as well as other pressing issues and what they would like to see changed.

Making ends meet

Despite being in work, the cost of living in London has made budgeting a day-to-day struggle for many of the panellists.

'As a grown woman, a working parent, I should not have to rely on my parents, but I do not have a choice. It's that or we lose the roof over our heads... I feel like a failure, but my kids need a home.'

'60 per cent to 70 per cent of my income goes on rent and then I have to think about my children's food, my children's clothing.'

'I can make do with [putting on] an extra jumper but my kids can't live in an unheated house. My girl is two years old, she needs a home that is healthy, that means not so cold she'll get ill or our flat will get covered in mould.'

'What am I meant to say to my teenagers? That they can't eat? They need to eat. So then I have to spend money because everything has gone up. I can skip a meal here or there, but they can't because they are growing.'

'I remember feeling angry and a bit scared when we first spoke about the cost of living but now, I just think there's absolutely nothing I can do and we don't know what will happen when. It's like living with this doubt and uncertainty all the time. You get used to it I guess but it doesn't mean it's okay.'

Inadequate support

Panellists felt that the financial supports available were inadequate for a family's basic needs, leaving them in a precarious state.

'If you're trying to raise a family on universal credit then you can barely afford to pay your bills. You certainly can't build up savings to dip into if you need to. I would love to start saving but it's physically impossible for me so what would I do if I had a sudden expense?'

'I have to borrow money regularly but it's not really borrowing because I won't be able to pay it back until I can get more hours at work which will be who knows when.'

'It's meant to be a payment that covers all of their rent, gas, electricity and so forth but you are not left with anything and most people I know have to go into debt which makes it harder to get out.'

'I want to work but I can't. UC is not paying enough to cover childcare and without that, I simply can't work until my children are much older. I actually find it really upsetting. A bit more help now would mean I could get back on my feet so I would need less from DWP overall but they want to squeeze you to the bare minimum.'

'Working families. We have been overlooked through Covid and the supposed recovery and now we are being overlooked again. We are trying hard to support our families but we're being punished for our effort.'

The need for childcare

An ongoing theme of the panellists' discussions was how the cost and availability of childcare and limited access to flexible working made it harder for them to pursue employment opportunities.

'£200 for childcare a week – I had to cut down my hours because I couldn't afford it... so my income dropped by £500 a month.'

'My background is in finance, but I've chosen not to follow it because then I'd need childcare and... childcare is ridiculously expensive.'

'You've heard me say this so many times now but childcare. Childcare is the reason I've lost jobs, not applied for jobs, can only work part-time hours, you name it, it comes down to childcare. I want to work, I can't work.'

'I don't see how my life will change without decent childcare. It costs so much and only runs for such a little time in the day that either my husband or I would have to not work until this is sorted out.'

'The single biggest thing you can do for working families is sort out childcare. We want safe childcare that we can pay for and still clear enough money that we can support our families.'