

RSA INCLUSION ROADSHOW WORKSHOP

Inclusion in the Economy:

The personal views and experiences of ethnic minority citizens in Oldham, Greater Manchester.



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INTRODUCTION

Following the launch of the RSA Citizens' Economic Council in June 2016, the RSA partnered with Doing Social to organise and deliver an Inclusion Roadshow Workshop in Oldham in Greater Manchester and to engage 10-15 community members from ethnic minority backgrounds as participants.

Oldham is statistically the most deprived town in the country (Office of National Statistics, March 2016). Unemployment, poverty, and ethnic segregation – the same issues that led to race riots in the town a decade-and-a-half earlier, persist. In May 2016, Jim McMahan MP for Oldham West and Royton was quoted in the **Oldham Chronicle** saying:

It is fifteen years since the Oldham riots. Oldham is setting out a new vision where every community will benefit from a confident and vibrant town. But many of the deep-rooted problems are still here: low education and skills outcomes, low wages, poor quality housing and communities still living very separate lives.¹

The workshop was one of a series of half-day focus group sessions held across the country in 2016-2017 to engage people that have a higher likelihood of facing economic exclusion in their lives. The purpose of this workshop was to discuss and capture the personal experiences and views of ethnic minority citizens in relation to the economy and to explore with them how the economy could be improved. We also sought to identify where and how a lack of knowledge and understanding in relation to the economy affected them.

Working with a local partner

We identified and visited a community organisation in Oldham that could host the session and work with us to achieve the objectives of the workshop. The Coppice Neighbourhood Centre (CNC) in Oldham supports ethnic minority communities living in and around Coppice – an area within the Medlock Vale ward that has a relatively high ethnic population, of mainly Bangladeshi and Pakistani descent. This area was also affected by the race riots in 2001.

CNC worked in partnership with us to plan and deliver the event. CNC have a very good knowledge of and strong relationships in the communities they serve, so it was easy for them to identify and recruit the maximum number of participants (sixteen) for this workshop and to achieve the diversity we were looking for, in terms of age (from 18 to 60+), gender, and ethnic background (Bangladeshi, Indian and Pakistani). They also managed to recruit a majority of participants who are experiencing economic challenges and whose voices are seldom heard.

CNC informed participants about the purpose of the workshop, and were later sent an agenda.

Both the manager and her colleague agreed to provide an interpreting service so that the workshop would be accessible to people who could not speak English or lacked confidence in speaking English.

¹ <http://www.oldham-chronicle.co.uk/news-features/8/news-headlines/98318/lessons-of-race-riots-not-learned-ukwide>

Our work with CNC began with exploring the issues and challenges affecting community members in their daily lives and agreeing the themes to be explored in the workshop. We discussed the delivery approach that would work best in engaging participants in the discussions. Throughout the planning process, we also worked closely with the RSA and agreed the final plan with them.

The participants

The date agreed for the workshop was 8th November 2016. Two of the participants originally recruited were unable to attend on the day, but CNC had been able to quickly replace them with two new participants of similar ages and ethnicities. A board member of CNC, who wasn't one of original participants recruited, also joined the workshop on the day. We have included his comments and also the comments of the two CNC employees in this report, as all three shared their personal views and experiences as community members, during the discussions.

Therefore, the total number of participants on the day was nineteen. Two-thirds of that number were female (13:19) and four-fifths of participants were of Pakistani or Bangladeshi heritage, the remaining fifth were of Indian heritage. There was additional diversity in terms of socio-economic status. Some participants were unemployed, some were in receipt of benefits, several were on a low-income or in part-time jobs, two were self-employed, three were students, some were single parents and at least half of the total number of participants were housewives. Many participants were from Coppel, but some also came from other areas of Oldham.

The workshop

Doing Social's role on the day was to co-ordinate the session. Three colleagues from the RSA facilitated the three table discussions, each had either six or seven participants, organised according to language need. Two of the tables had interpreters translating Urdu (and Punjabi) or Bangla into English. Each facilitator was given a pack containing the running order, a breakdown of the four stages of the workshop, indicative timings and questions that could be used as prompts for the table discussions.

The four stages of the workshop are outlined in Figure 1 below.

STAGE	DETAILS
1 – Contemplation	Participants spend ten minutes contemplating the images and statements displayed on the walls.
2 – Table discussions: Personal challenges	Four themes: A. Inclusion, exclusion and access to opportunities. B. Work, generating an income. C. Money. D. Brexit.
3 – Table discussions: Change and the future	Explore the changes that participants think are needed to help improve life chances.
4 – Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Table discussion. • Interactive component.

Figure 1 – The four stages of the workshop

During the first stage of the workshop, the “Contemplation stage”, community members were invited to review five images and statements displayed on the walls (see Figure 2 below). The main purpose of this activity was to give community members space to reflect on the themes which would be discussed in the table discussions, and to help ease them into the process.



Figure 2 – Images and statements displayed during the Contemplation stage

The second stage of the workshop involved the facilitators using the images and prompts to trigger conversations with community members about their experiences and the challenges they faced, relevant to the four themes outlined in Figure 1. An hour and a half was allocated to these discussions.

During the third stage, community members were asked a series of questions about the changes they wanted to see which could help to improve their life chances. An hour was allocated to this discussion.

The final stage was an evaluation of the workshop and there were two components to this. In the first, we asked participants how we could improve their experience of the workshop and we also gave them a final opportunity to share ideas or thoughts related to the earlier discussions. The second component was an interactive activity where community members were invited to respond to four feedback questions displayed on the walls using sticky dots.

Overall, the community members were very positive about their engagement within this process, they appeared to enjoy the session and many commented on the high hopes they had in terms of the outcomes of the workshop.

About this report

There was a lot of rich data captured in this workshop. All three facilitators documented the detailed discussions that took place on their tables, much of which has been included in this paper to help illustrate how the economy and related systems and processes is affecting the lives, views and actions of ethnic minority citizens from deprived backgrounds in Oldham.

We have produced a paper that is more extensive than was required but we hope it will be more useful to the RSA's Citizens' Economic Council, as well as to the Coppice Neighbourhood Centre when discussing the findings with communities, funders, supporters and the Council. We also hope that Oldham Council will find this paper instructive and are encouraged to design more inclusive approaches that can tackle the needs and concerns of Oldham's citizens.

The main body of this report is divided into five main sections. Though we have used different headings, the first four of those sections correspond to the four themes outlined in Figure 1 (stage 2). The fifth section summarises shorter discussions on topics such as education and the NHS, which are relevant to this report.

In each of those five sections, we have summarised the various discussions that took place and included many of the comments made.

Please note that some of the comments *quoted* in the report have been translated from Urdu, Punjabi or Bangla and therefore some will not be verbatim comments.

The final chapter is a Summary of the Key Findings of the report, where we present the main problems identified and offer some reflections, recommendations and questions for discussion for the Citizens' Economic Council.



Participants reflecting on the images at the start of the workshop



A couple of the RSA colleagues

SECTION 1: FEELING INCLUDED, VALUED & REPRESENTED

Ethnic minority community members in Oldham do not feel their voices are being heard. This makes them feel frustrated, marginalised and unrepresented.

I feel I have no voice in society. I don't have a concept of my voice being heard [...].

We aren't listened to and it's isolating.

People fail to vote when they don't feel listened to.

The main issue is that people just don't feel included.

We explored with community members whether they feel their views are listened to and valued by those they consider to be the decision-makers – local councillors, other politicians and Oldham Council. The responses captured have been organised into four “strands of thought”.

Firstly, some people feel that their ethnic or faith identity influences how far, or even if they will have a voice.

I have worked in the community for 15 years. Last December I chose to wear a headscarf, and I felt a major difference in attitudes despite longstanding activity and work [...].

I do feel marginalised by my identity sometimes.

The second strand of thought, is that *being heard* has less to do with your race, faith or even your age; instead it is about whether you are part of the “system”. It was inferred that to have a voice and to be heard, you need to be part of the system. This sentiment was repeated variously throughout the workshop.

Most people aren't thought about, it's not racial prejudice.

The third viewpoint, which was again made very strongly in the workshop, is that there are barriers to communication, especially for people who feel they have had a limited education and/or who are unable to speak English.

Many people have no voice as a result of no education.

There are some side roads near my house with potholes. I have asked the councillors about it - they said it is not their job, it is the local authority's job to sort out. And I can't ask the local authority directly because of my language barriers - so my road has all these problems as a result. I haven't been heard because of my language difficulties. But also, I haven't

known who to talk to or how to get in touch with a department in the Council. For me, one of my biggest challenges is language.

The final strand of thought, builds on a point made in the comment above: people do not feel they can access the information and knowledge needed to be able to take part in discussions about issues that concern them, and/or to take action. For instance, regular updates about action being taken in their neighbourhoods to solve issues, which explain how and why those decisions were made. This issue was voiced many times throughout the workshop. Here are some of the other related concerns expressed by community members:

There used to be local papers, you know, that came through the door, and they'd say what was going on. But now we don't know.

They say it's all online but we don't all know how to use it or get access.

Refuse collection has now moved to every three weeks but local people want it to remain at every two weeks - this is an example of decision-making happening outside the local community.

Communication, it's really important. That's the only way that we know what is going on and what they're doing.

When community members are not notified about the outcomes of consultations they have participated in, it reduces their confidence in these processes.

Community members told us that when the Council and politicians had previously consulted them about relevant issues, they hadn't then kept community members updated on the outcomes of those discussions. This, coupled with the issue that community members cannot see the positive changes resulting from discussions, has left them feeling that these consultations are token gestures and their input is not really valued.

In the past, the local authority ran a consultation and we gave our responses [...] a year passed and they just reran their consultation again.

We are only consulted during election time when the politicians want to win voters, otherwise it's the same people involved in the decision-making processes and politicians only move in their own circles.

Currently any efforts that are made are just tick box.

At a national level policies are already in place and it often feels like a charade when we are consulted - our voices are only heard later on.

Some ethnic minority community members have lost confidence in their local councillors; many are not aware of who their councillors are, nor what they do.

We asked the community members about their experiences of local councillors. Only a handful of community members understand the role of councillors and many are not aware of who their local councillors and MPs are.

I don't understand who councillors are, or what they do.

I don't even know who my MP is.

For the community members that are familiar with their local councillors, there is some good practice, but it is not consistent across the board.

There are one or two [councillors] who give you the time and make an effort to listen, but the others are too busy making themselves seem important that they can't speak to you.

Some councillors engage with us - but most don't and you only really see them on voting day. That's the only time they take on board our views.

Some participants also gave examples of pledges and promises made by councillors that are unfulfilled.

One of the councillors said he would provide free internet when he wanted us to vote for him. But now he is elected nothing has happened.

Some of the female participants are not aware of the presence of female councillors in their ward. At the time of writing this report, there are eighteen female councillors in Oldham, one of which is an Asian female councillor who sits on the board of CNC and lives in the Coppice area.

Many of the female participants said they would prefer and feel more comfortable approaching a female councillor for advice and support.

It's difficult for women to approach these male councillors [...] some of these women have suffered domestic abuse.

Many participants feel that politicians are out of reach.

The trouble is the councillors are not influencing the MP. The MPs don't come down to the community level and we can't go up to them. You know if you want to go up a ladder, you don't go from the ground to the top rung, you have to climb it. But you can't do that when the bit in the middle is broken.

The qualities that community members value the most in councillors include: a passion to make a difference, going the extra mile, taking time to listen, and selflessness.

It would be really nice if the councillors sat with the community, like we're doing now, and listened to people's concerns.

Some community members also said they would like to see councillors that had been in post for a long time, being replaced by new councillors every couple of years.

We see the same old faces over and over again - mainly due to their family standing in their communities.

Oldham Council's funding cuts have affected the facilities and services available to people from ethnic minority communities in Oldham, including children and young people.

Community members were asked to share any thoughts they had on the Council's funding cuts.

While most community members are unfamiliar with the details of the cuts, they are aware that funding for the Coppice Centre has been cut as this has affected both them and their children directly; many are no longer able to access the same services and support that had been available to them previously.

The manager of the centre believes these services are vital for improving the life chances of people from deprived BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) communities in Oldham and thinks it was a mistake to cut the funding for BAME community services. She believes this has happened because the Council and politicians in Oldham do not fully understand the needs of BAME communities in Oldham and she is keen to help them improve their understanding.

We want the new MP [Jim McMahon MP] to know this part of the community and hear our voices.

Community members told us that there are very few facilities available for their children and young people in Oldham.

It's a system fault that leaves kids wandering around as there is nothing for them to do. Instead they turn to technology and this has linked problems of obesity.

One of the community members also commented that there had been a lack of EIA (Economic Impact Analysis) on decisions made by Oldham Council in relation to the funding cuts and to examine the impact on jobs.

Community members believe that by working together, through strengthening the knowledge and capacity of communities, and working with councils and authorities to develop solutions which meet the needs of all community members, they will feel included and part of the system.

[...] The wider community needs to have meetings. If people are involved more then they will be willing to engage. It's all about voice, people, and power.

I used to work with the police service before. We had this initiative - 'Partners Doing it Together' - 'You Said, We Did'. Some issues that brought together different communities together were a part of this. But this programme finished because of austerity - despite being very effective and bringing together people from every walk of life. We need initiatives like this again...[...]

We need to promote and raise awareness of our community assets to get people to use them more.

[...] The community needs to be rejuvenated.

This sounds weird, but have you ever seen Gilmore Girls²? Well, you know their meetings - those town meetings with everyone? I want it to be like that.

Many participants spoke of their confusion about how policies and plans for the town can be developed without incorporating the needs of BAME communities through meaningful engagement.

If people came around here to see how people think and what they want to happen, then they would see how people are affected. Like we're doing now. This never happens. How can they be taking people's views into account without doing that?

Community members believe that local civil society organisations such as CNC should play a greater role in delivering community programmes and initiatives because these organisations are trusted by their communities and are therefore likely to have a strong impact.

There needs to be a new approach from the Council to include the community.

Community members have a connection with their neighbourhood but feel disconnected from Oldham.

Community members indicated a "sense of belonging" to their neighbourhoods and communities. It was evident from the discussions that most participants consider CNC (or their equivalent in other areas of Oldham), to be a vital anchor, connecting them to the community, providing a safe place, where they feel understood, valued, and cared for. However, the sentiment of *belonging* does not appear to extend to the town of Oldham for many of these community members. They feel disconnected from the town, largely because they do not feel valued or understood outside their communities, and can see a physical segregation of communities on racial lines in Oldham.

Efforts to upscale people needs to be available; mainstream messages say "we are all in it together" but we are not. Housing and schools are segregated.

² http://gilmoregirls.wikia.com/wiki/Town_Meetings

Housing estates are built in certain areas, which means only certain groups go to live in them. There needs to be a bigger effort to mix people and integrate the different groups. We need community leaders, active citizens to bring people together.

But the findings also point to a link between having a role in the town – being able to contribute and offer something of value to it, and achieving a connection with (or a sense of belonging to) the town. Moreover, there is some suggestion that community members' connection with the town would be stronger, and morale and well-being might improve if they had better opportunities to enjoy Oldham – such as through improved parks, leisure facilities etc.

At one time there were seven cinemas in Oldham, with lots of Asian films playing.

Community members have limited opportunities to progress in life and improve their life chances.

Many community members spoke to us about a lack of access to information about opportunities which could help them to progress in life or enable them to get a job that would pay a decent wage. Again, some said this was due to language and cultural barriers, others connected it with being poorly educated, and some linked the issues to their ethnicity, but there was a consensus that people will not feel sufficiently integrated until they have better access to good opportunities to progress.

In terms of English language classes (ESOL – English for Speakers of Other Languages), while ESOL classes are available in Oldham, one of the participants alluded to a possible issue in terms of the delivery approach, specifically when people with different mother tongues are placed in a single class to learn together.

[...] In a mixed group where not everyone is from the same background as me, I feel they sometimes struggle to understand.

Some discussions indicate that women face additional barriers in terms of accessing opportunities.

Even though I have more experience than some men I have found applying for a job much harder.

I suppose men are treated more preferentially than women. For instance, not being able to go out of the home.

When it comes to education, and specifically school education, having access to a “good school” for their children is very important to community members. But community members believe that the best schools in Oldham (we were told they are the Catholic schools), exclude children from Asian backgrounds.

Asian kids aren't allowed into the good schools.

However, the discussions also show that some community members don't understand that different schools have their own set of admissions criteria, and that faith schools can prioritise children of the same faith.

Research carried out in 2013 by the British Humanist Association which was discussed in an article³ by Professor Ted Cantle last year, revealed that one in eight Catholic state schools in Britain had no children from Asian backgrounds in them at all. But in the same article, Cantle also argues that this "discriminatory policy", is not just based on race, all faith schools are less accessible to children from poorer backgrounds.

Community members told us they would like to see more being done to standardise the level and quality of teaching across all schools in Oldham and would like to see initiatives that support and enable parents to be more active in their children's schools.

They also think that schools, colleges and universities need to play a more active role in preparing young people for work such as through offering decent work placements and internships that are accepted as suitable experience by future employers.

Higher education is unaffordable for many community members and their children.

The increase in tuition fees was mentioned on all tables. Community members do not feel that a university education is a viable option for them and their children because of the unaffordable cost and there is no guarantee of a job after graduation. But they said that if tuition fees were reduced or even scrapped, many of them would consider higher education for themselves or their children.



People don't want to go to university because of the large debts they will collect so this has become a deterrent. Many young people think it is better to go straight into work as there may not even be a job available for them when they graduate.

My daughter is a doctor, she has accumulated £80k of debt in studying.

If you want to study then you have to pay for everything. Young people don't want to burden their parents with that cost when they know they are struggling themselves.

[...] After tuition fee rises there has been a knock on confidence, instead of jobs being created there is growing unemployment. Communities that are the least empowered suffer the most.

³ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/2016/09/09/religious-selection-in-school-admissions-is-utterly-deleterious/>

One of the community members commented on the different arrangements in the charging of tuition fees by different nations of the UK.

We have to pay the higher rates in Wales and Scotland even though Welsh and Scottish students pay half that or get to study for free. It's just not fair and nothing will get done about it.

Some community members would like Oldham to have its own university or a campus that is linked to a credible university elsewhere, to incentivise young people to stay in the area.

The Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) was also mentioned a few times; it was a scheme which encouraged 16-19 year olds from low-income households to continue in education through providing grants. It was withdrawn in England in 2011. Community members said that the lack of grants made it much harder for them to pursue higher education. *There is a chance that participants may have actually been referring to the student grants scheme for higher education that was recently stopped.*

Some community members asserted that learning and development opportunities should be free to everyone. We were told that lifelong learning classes for adults and extra-curricular classes for children and young people are only free to people who are in receipt of benefits in Oldham. Participants said that the cost was unaffordable to low-income earners not in receipt of benefits, and also to those who are not earning but not claiming benefits either. One participant told us that while funding was available to help people to cover these costs, it was still difficult to access because of all the administration involved.

Community members also told us they need better access to information about existing opportunities which can improve their life chances, such as skills training and confidence building, as well as information about any grants and loans available which can help them to progress in education and in their careers.

They want to see central Government giving councils more money to spend on providing skills development opportunities but they also want to see local community organisations delivering these programmes.

Here are the improvements that the community members said they want to see in Oldham and would like the Council to prioritise.

- Recreational activities, events, youth centres and opportunities for young people – places for young people to go to.
- Activities and opportunities that can be enjoyed by adults in Oldham (ethnic minority community members do not think there is much available to them).
- Sports and leisure services that are culturally-sensitive.
- Support that is targeted to the most disadvantaged people in society, but also to people who are on low-incomes.
- Improved healthcare in the community – and improved cultural understanding.
- Free/affordable and accessible adult learning classes for women including parenting skills so they can teach their children about ethics, respect and human values.
- Skills and vocational training.
- Greater investment in education.

- Council officers that co-ordinate the needs and issues of different ethnic groups.
- Education on environmental issues, recycling workshops.
- A community champions scheme which provides support to people in the community who need it.
- Advocacy and support for people who can't articulate their needs effectively and who need looking after.
- Access to computers and printing facilities.
- Funding for BAME services and grassroots activities targeted at BAME individuals (mainly women) for whom culture and language are potential barriers to progression.
- Improve neighbourhoods, provide safe parks and open spaces
- Fine people for littering.
- Licensing and restrictions on shisha bars to help tackle issues of substance misuse.
- Improve public transportation in Oldham and make it more affordable for people to use.

SECTION 2: THE COST OF LIVING

Community members are struggling with the cost of living in Oldham and are having to make tough choices; this is impacting their mobility, their ability to save and the life chances of their children.

It's harder for people to make ends meet and to support themselves on their own - things don't go as far as they could either.

Benefits are not enough to maintain an acceptable standard of living. It's "heat or eat".

It's a struggle.

Community members told us they struggle to pay for the basics such as food and this has changed the way they shop. Although it wasn't discussed in the workshop, we are aware that some of the participants have been using local foodbanks.

Ten years ago, I used to fill the trolley up and bring it home. Now I need to buy things as and when I can so that I can save more and cut back. [...] I have become more selective when I am doing my shopping and I need to shop around.

May not have food at home at some points as prices have gone up so much, I feel like I'm living on the poverty line sometimes.

Community members told us that getting from place to place was becoming increasingly difficult because of the rising costs of public transport and fuel. They struggle with things like getting to work or going to job interviews, shopping, visiting family, taking the children out and accessing support if it involves them having to spend money on travel. The increase in fares and fuel has restricted the mobility of some community members.

Travel in general is too expensive.

I think I'm spending more on fuel for my car than I am on food.

If you don't know how to drive, lessons are expensive. It feels like everything is a struggle, with transport prices going up it's hard to move around.

Community members have also been affected by the increase in energy costs.

Bills have doubled. Wages have remained stagnant and people are eating into their savings while prices continue to rise.

Electricity charges always go up in the winter.

There are additional challenges, especially for people who can't read English as some will sign contracts without knowing exactly what the contract ties them to.

Charges on bills affect me, especially hidden charges on the fine or small print which I cannot challenge. Prices now are sky high and we get less for them than we used to.

There are all kinds of language problems - not understanding the full contract.

Community members are especially concerned about the impact this is having on their children. They told us that often, they are unable to pay for things that their children need, such as for school and some even struggle to cover the cost of school meals, but they are trying to do what they can to provide for and protect their children.

There are always things to pay for. Like today my son had superheroes day at school. So you have to get stuff for them [...] you don't want to disappoint them, you don't want them to be different to other kids.

When children are growing up they want help from their parents, and it's hard to do that when you are struggling.

[...] Even activities such as sports clubs are expensive and I can't afford it all.

It's important that our kids know that they can't always have everything they want. But you also don't want them to worry about money. Or know we worry about it.

When it comes to budgeting, community members recognise the importance of budgeting, as many have to manage a tight budget which can be difficult. It is the unexpected costs, costs that they haven't planned for, that they struggle with the most. Of the participants that were asked about this specifically, all said they are unable to save money and do not have reserves in place to cover emergency costs.

At the end of the month you are either in debt or having to make sacrifices to your spending.

You might plan to spend this much but then a school trip will come in and you need to find a way to pay for that too.

I am always constantly on the line with my savings - I am not able to save any money.

Community members made some suggestions for changes which they believe could make their lives more manageable.

- A wage that increases with price rises (a real living wage).
- Reduce the cost of fuel and food.
- Introduce a cap on the price of fuel.

- Reduce taxes (for people on low incomes especially).
- Provide support to help people to manage their money better.



SECTION 3: MAKING A LIVING

Unavailability of decent jobs, the difficulties of acquiring the skills and experience needed to get jobs, and the challenges of adapting to change, are some of the obstacles faced by jobseekers, trying to make a living in Oldham.

Community members told us they can often find themselves in a *catch-22* situation when searching for work: the skills they need can be costly to acquire and the type of work experience required is difficult to obtain unless someone “gives you a chance”. There are also barriers they face, that again, relate to language and a lack of access to the opportunities that are available.

To get a job you need experience in actual work. Voluntary work doesn't count. Applications ask for the last place you worked. There is no work experience provided through schools and not many organisations provide work experience so now there is a catch-22.

They all say you need experience to get the job, but if no one gives you a chance how can you get experience? We all manage households, that's not an easy job, its good experience.

You try to do courses to learn but that involves paying for fees.

No one tells us about how to get apprenticeships, and I am affected by the limited opportunities in Oldham.

There may be jobs in London but how do we compete for those?

Everyone is struggling with jobs. The language barrier is a problem for us.

We were told that for some people, there are also challenges with the job search process itself because they lack the computer skills needed to search for and apply for jobs online.

In relation to the jobs that are available, some community members described them as “unsuitable”, citing reasons which include: the salary offer makes taking the job unviable, or the jobs don't match their skillsets or they don't offer job security. Many people feel forced to apply for and take these jobs and some feel that their existing skills “are being wasted” (especially graduates).

My nephew is a graduate and not had a proper job for five years, he has been to the Jobcentre and offered low paid jobs but he's done all that - worked in McDonald's and cafes, and has had enough. [...] So he's dependent on his parents and benefits.

Working as a young person means the hourly wage is so low that just getting to and from work eats up everything I earn.

Taxes are really hard, they take a big part of our income. Especially when people are trying to pay off a student loan.

Many participants, predominantly those who are housewives find the process of moving into work daunting and challenging because of the difficulties of balancing a job with the responsibilities of family and managing a household. Some of these women may have never had a job (or may have never worked full-time, or stopped working after having children) and are now being forced to find a job and adapt quickly to that change.

Previous laws allowed a family member to stay at home to look after children under 16, now the terms have changed and people are expected to find work.

I'd like to work but I don't know how I'd fit it around my kids. I've never worked and am a housewife.

It would be good to have a job where I could work from home. Not necessarily self-employed, just at home. Then I could be there for the kids and the veil wouldn't matter.

White people will put themselves first and take better care of themselves. But culturally we don't do that and think only about our family. So we don't look after ourselves [...].

During the workshop, some of the community members talked about the cotton mills and factories that they said many ethnic minority people had worked in some 30-40 years ago, where they had not been required to speak English. When the mills and factories closed, they found it difficult to find work because they lacked the experience and skills needed for the jobs that were available and many still had poor English-speaking abilities.

One community member commented on this saying that "skill levels haven't adapted to the workplace requirements in Oldham" and went on to suggest that more support and education was needed to help people develop knowledge and skills, especially related to Information Communication Technology (ICT).

A suggestion was made to develop a new scheme which could give working people with poor English skills, time off from work every week to attend English classes. We were told a similar scheme had been in place in the 1990s.

Another community member, a previous employee of the Jobcentre criticised the Work Programme, saying that it did not meet the needs of local people.

[...] It is not benefitting people - the same people have been looking for work for years. The young people get jobs further away and leave the local area so it's the same people left behind looking for low-paid work [...] We need work programmes that actually pay.

Many community members we spoke to believe that investment in skills development is very important for meeting the current and future requirements of employers and for job

growth. Some community members can also see how this could help to attract new businesses and employers to Oldham and create new jobs.

Community members are willing to retrain and want this to lead to a job with a decent salary and job security.

Most of the jobseekers we spoke to, seem to have a preference for finding work in Oldham. This may be because they want to stay close to their families, homes and support networks.

Moving on to the experiences of ethnic minority jobseekers at the Jobcentre.

Community members feel forced and under pressure to achieve the Jobcentre's requirements; during assessments, their individual circumstances might not be considered.

My husband lost his job 2 years ago - he's still seeking employment and work. But he's 68 years old - we're struggling because they won't help if we are not entitled to benefits.

I know a single mum who is really worried that she won't be able to pay her rent because she'll have less money [because of the benefit cap]. She went to ask about it [at the Jobcentre] but all they say is 'you need to get a job', how can she get a job with four kids to look after? They just don't listen. You can appeal but they just stick to the rules and don't take circumstances into account.

Many ethnic minority community members we spoke to mentioned that assessors do not give enough consideration to people's individual circumstances and the problems they might be having. They are concerned that assessors do not have the expertise to understand specific health challenges and other complex issues.

I had to go and be assessed but the person assessing me can't understand the nuances within physical and mental health disabilities, so even though I have a doctor's certificate they don't believe me. I have worked all my life but now am given no support. It's unfair.

Fifteen years ago I arrived in the UK. I am here on indefinite leave to remain. I cannot claim anything even though I am the mother of three children because I am not a British citizen. My three kids are though, but they are not eligible for benefits either. There is nothing available here for me because I don't have citizenship.

[...] The Jobcentre doesn't realise every circumstance is different, they don't undertake it like that, they treat everything the same.

A participant offered an explanation to others on their table, saying that genuine cases can get muddled with those that are not genuine, because assessors approach the process thinking that "they're all the same".

On another table, a participant cautioned that if people who are genuinely ill are forced to work, it could lead to additional problems for both them and their families.

[...] All of these things effect you mentally, emotionally, they make people more ill and unhappy. Then it's harder for your children.

Again, there are also challenges for people who can't communicate well in English. One of the participants told us that the Jobcentre's interpreting service is now only available to them as a telephone service and they feel uncomfortable with this method because they feel can't build the same level of trust with people over the phone as they can through face to face interaction.

Other challenges relating to language barriers that were mentioned include difficulties with accessing support available at the Jobcentre and not having the ability to make informed decisions.

How can one person help fifteen people who don't speak English well when you go to a class at the Jobcentre?

[...] People need support to use the new IT systems and there are inexperienced interpreters to help them, so the environment is not conducive to helping people find work.

I know someone who went through the WCA [Work Capability Assessment] - people signed contracts with the Jobcentre agreeing to do activities without knowing what was on the paper because they didn't understand it.

Participants told us that the administrative systems and processes can make it harder for them to apply for support.

Sometimes it's not worth claiming things you're entitled to because the forms are so huge and complicated to fill in.

The experiences of community members when visiting the Jobcentre are not positive.

Sometimes the way they [Jobcentre Plus/DWP] talk to you can be very dismissive or degrading.

When you walk in, the atmosphere just destroys any confidence you have.

[...] The environment is not conducive to helping people find work. There are even cameras now creating a completely different environment.

Community members offered additional suggestions for improving their job-seeking experience:

- Friendly and approachable advisers at the Jobcentre.

- Financial support to cover costs of getting to work.
- Help with CVs.
- Better skills development opportunities – especially relating to new ICT systems and technology.
- Go back to more individualised support, having personal contacts.
- Support to be provided in communities, by organisations such as the Coppice Centre.
- Policies that are based on local needs and contexts as opposed to generic national policies.

For community members that are trying to do other things to make a living, for instance starting a business, there have been some positive outcomes. In contrast to their experiences of looking for work, they told us they feel more in control of their lives, their confidence has increased and they even feel happier.

It's really difficult finding work. I decided to become self-employed because I didn't want to get bothered by the Jobcentre and I can have more control. It's hard though and I don't earn very much. But when it works it's better because you feel more confident.

My husband is self-employed and he likes it. There is risk both ways: if you are self-employed then you might not make money, and sometimes you have to pay for things yourself, sometimes you need money to get started out. But if you are employed you might have a bad job and be unhappy.

Notwithstanding the positive points mentioned, participants also shared some of the challenges they face when starting a business, which include finding the money to pay for necessary qualifications, skills development and equipment they need. They said that they still struggled to make ends meet, but for them this was better than going back to their old lives. They told us they would like to have more help with the initial costs of starting a business.



SECTION 4: THE EU REFERENDUM AND BREXIT

We asked community members about their views on “Brexit”. Over half of the community members were unfamiliar with the term (including those that had voted at the EU Referendum in June 2016). Interestingly, the participants on the two tables that had interpreters, had the least understanding about the Referendum and the processes.

Of those that said they had voted at the Referendum (we estimate about half of the participants), few were confident they understood what they had voted for. Significantly, it appears that of those that voted, all voted to remain in Europe. This is noteworthy because Oldham voted to leave the EU (61%). Some of these participants told us they wanted a second Referendum, because they felt that the public had been misled.

[...] If everyone had actually voted, we would still be in Europe.

I think there should be another vote because when people realise what is actually going to happen they might change their minds.

If the vote was taken again people would stay. The decisions are made by the elite and community involvement is a token effort.

The same feeling of being disconnected from decision-makers was expressed again during this discussion. One of the participants also commented that many young people may have failed to vote because they could not relate to the politicians. (We believe the participant was referring to the politicians leading the Remain and Leave campaigns).

From the discussions, we can see that the voting decisions of community members had either been influenced by Labour’s position on the Referendum, or a fear of what would happen if Britain left the EU and the effect it would have on their lives, or both of these. The sorts of things that community members said they had feared included: a rise in the cost of living; greater controls on immigration and a negative impact on business which would affect the opportunities available to young people. They had also been concerned about the fall in the value of the pound because some of them send money to their families who live abroad.

[...] I voted the Labour line, rather than thinking about the impact it would have on the country.

People’s understanding of politics is very minimal around here because everyone votes Labour. Means that they are not very critical of actual policies and the need for change.

There are three potential barriers to inclusion in the Referendum (also relevant to democratic decision-making processes generally), which were highlighted in this discussion: language, access to information and relatable leaders.

SECTION 5: OTHER COMMENTS

Education

Community members believe school education plays a vital role in improving the life chances of their children. However, some of them told us they are concerned that their children are being “pushed to the limits”, and not having enough time for play. A few participants told us that the educational content can be very challenging, and with the constant changes to the curriculum and the move towards academies, children feel strained and confused especially when they are not given enough time to adapt to the changes.

Schools are changing now though, they are taking peoples' childhoods away by placing too much pressure on them.

My son was doing well and was on track to get A's as demonstrated by his mock exams. Before his final exam the system changed and he went from A's to C's. This was because teachers were not listened to and they had no time to prepare the children.

[...] The move towards academies is an experiment, and what happens if it goes wrong - that's a whole generation affected.

The NHS

There were several comments from community members about the NHS, which all related to waiting times and delays.

I remember having to wait for a porter to come and wheelchair my family member to get an x-ray, we had to wait half an hour for them to come even though I could have easily moved them myself. The rigid systems in place are ineffective.

There are more managers than doctors.

I used to work for mental health services - sometimes it used to take 2 weeks for really ill people to be seen. We need more responsiveness and understanding.

You have to call local surgeries to try and get an appointment between 8-9am in the morning if you want an appointment that day. If booking for another day you could end up waiting weeks. What's the point of local surgeries?

The improvements community members want to see in the NHS include less red tape, reduced inefficiencies, better access to GPs – greater flexibility of GPs – more GP availability/more doctors, a better appointment system, and shorter waiting times.

Housing

Community members want to see a growth of affordable but good quality housing for people on low-incomes in Oldham. They want to see energy-efficient housing, to help reduce the costs of energy.

Our homes need to be made from better materials, the cost of the materials affects the quality of the homes, and then affects our bills as well.

If someone is earning a minimum wage they should still be able to get a home and afford to live in a home. And poor energy efficiency is affecting our heating costs.

Safety and security

Concerns about feeling unsafe were expressed strongly on all tables. Participants spoke about slow police responses to local incidents, high rates of local crime and bullying in schools. They would like to see improvements in all these areas, more police, and also safe outdoor spaces for families.

A few participants also shared their concerns and fears about new divisions in society caused by poor integration of new migrant communities.

The problem is that the new migrants are not trying to adapt to the local community and that's causing friction.

Immigration is also a worry for me with immigrants such as Romanians and Bulgarians coming into the UK and new divisions between communities.

There are underlying issues and concerns about the cohesion challenges locally and about communities living parallel lives which community members have linked to issues around integration and safety. However, there also appears to be a strong desire to address these issues through collective community-led approaches.

Housing estates are built in certain areas, which means only certain groups go to live in them. There needs to be a bigger effort to mix people and integrate the different groups. We need community leaders, active citizens to bring people together.

There may also be some hope through multi-faith groups.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

In November 2016, we engaged a group of nineteen Oldham residents from ethnic minority backgrounds in a focus group workshop to hear their experiences and views on the economy and how it could be improved.

The majority of participants were Asian women in their 40s and 50s – housewives, mainly of Pakistani or Bangladeshi descent, from low-income and workless backgrounds, who would not normally have the chance to share their views and experiences with external agencies in this way. The workshop was delivered in three languages simultaneously.

During the workshop, we learnt about the day to day challenges faced by community members struggling to progress in life because of the high cost of living, the difficulties in trying to make a living and the barriers to accessing the opportunities that could help them improve their lives; who feel excluded and disconnected from the *mainstream*. Community members shared their thoughts and ideas with us for addressing some of the challenges and issues they face, which are detailed in the main body of this report.

The findings of this workshop give us clear indications and instructions about the changes that are needed to create the right conditions and opportunities so community members feel more included and have better chances to progress in life.

We have organised these into three key challenges:

1. Community members do not feel their voices are being heard and understood: *A better approach to listening is needed as well as greater empathy and understanding which can be achieved through decision-makers spending more time with communities.*
2. Community members face issues in accessing the things they need to progress in life: *Communities need access to the right skills and training, there must be greater sharing of knowledge and information, and improved communication.*
3. Community members want to be more involved: *The solutions should be created with communities. Local democratic structures also need to be reviewed.*

We expand on these three challenges further below.

Our findings also tell us that building and re-building **trust**, strengthening **confidence** as well as giving people back **control** of their lives, are significant to inclusion.

Some councils have already started to tackle some of these issues so it's important to recognise progress made and take an approach that can build on and help to strengthen existing efforts.

Issues specific to BAME communities

We have identified a number of issues specific to the experiences of ethnic minority community members, which could affect their inclusion in the economy and progress in life.

- By far the biggest issue faced by ethnic minority community members we spoke to is the language barrier. These communication difficulties would of course make it harder for them to access opportunities and improve their livelihoods. There are also issues relating to

translation and interpreting which can limit the inclusion of people in the opportunities available. *What are the issues preventing people from either accessing English language classes or improving their English abilities? For instance, are there issues with the way they are promoted, or delivered which impacts take-up or their effectiveness?* There is also a chance that language barriers may have affected people's ability to access information that would have helped them to participate fully in the Referendum and make informed voting choices.

- A belief that Asian children cannot access the "good schools" in Oldham.
- The perceptions of women who wear a hijab (headscarf) or a veil.
- If cultural understanding / sensitivity is lacking in the support and services that BAME communities need to access, then arguably those services are not fit for purpose and will lead to further problems.
- Complex immigration rules – which for instance do not give a single-parent mother born in another country, full citizenship, even when her children are UK citizens and she has been living in the UK for much of her life.
- Cuts to funding for BAME community organisations such as CNC that provide access to information and opportunities in different languages to BAME communities and make people feel connected, safe and valued.
- Physical segregation of communities on racial lines, as appears to be the case in Oldham.

These issues would need to be tackled so people from BAME groups have equal and fair access to opportunities to progress and to feel included in the economy.

It is also important to mention that in our discussions with these community members, we didn't find any strong evidence that ethnic or faith-based discrimination is creating obstacles to progression or inclusion in the economy for these community members.

However, it's important to recognise that there are challenges, barriers and obstacles that are more particular to certain ethnic groups which need to be addressed. A better approach is clearly needed for listening to and understanding the needs of BAME groups, there needs to be better programmes of enablement and better ways of involving BAME groups in developing the solutions to the issues they face.

Issues faced by women and young people

Community members also spoke about the additional challenges faced by women and young people from low-income or workless households.

In relation to the issues faced by women:

- Some women face challenges in trying to balance the responsibilities of family and managing a home, with generating an income; this is especially difficult when they are required to make that adjustment instantly. Better understanding and support for women making those life changes is needed. For instance, help to balance both work and the responsibilities of family; support with the transition process (change is difficult for most people) and being able to access the right skills training, for jobs that offers them the flexibility they need. They also need to be assured and feel confident that this can benefit them and/or the family.
- Getting help and support with domestic violence issues.
- Difficulties accessing jobs even when more qualified and experienced than their male counterparts.

In relation to the issues faced by young people:

- There appear to be few safe places and facilities such as youth centres and forums which can give young people a voice, raise their aspirations and develop their skills and abilities. If they do exist in Oldham, then lack of awareness and/or access could be issues.
- Being unable to access higher education as well as other learning and development opportunities because they are unaffordable.
- Being unable to access the types of work experiences that are required by employers.
- Being unable to relate to politicians.
- The impact of the challenges and struggles of parents on their children's development and wellbeing.

The right conditions and opportunities

We end this section of the report by breaking down the three main challenges we identified earlier and offering some reflections and questions for discussion, based on our conversations with community members about the changes they would like to see which could help to improve their life chances.

1. Community members do not feel that their voices are being heard and understood.

- The structures and systems for engaging and listening to people's voices are not working for many community members.
- Past consultations with BAME communities in Oldham, are viewed as token gestures. They want decision-makers to show greater empathy and understanding.
- Some councillors may not hear about the specific issues and challenges of community members because many people do not even know who their local councillors are, what they do, how they can help and represent them and how they access these councillors.
- Community members do not feel their individual circumstances are taken into account during the assessment process at the Jobcentre which may result in people being forced to work when they are unable to. Cases can be complex and need to be considered carefully by experts rather than generic assessors who may not have the knowledge and expertise to make decisions on these complex cases. The wrong decision could have a detrimental impact on well-being. There are also issues for some people in articulating their challenges. *What is the impact on well-being for individuals and their families when the assessment process concludes the individual must work even when they are physically or mentally unable to at that time? What are the implications for their future healthcare needs, and what impact could this have on employers – what support do employers need? What help can individuals access so they can manage their health issues whilst working?*

2. Community members face issues in accessing what they need so they can progress in life.

2A. Information, knowledge and opportunities.

- Community members are unable to participate fully in society because they cannot access the information and knowledge they need to make informed decisions, articulate relevant opinions, and take action.
- Unless they have better opportunities to understand how decisions are made and how to participate in those processes, communities will continue to feel isolated and excluded.

- Community members also want to be kept updated on the actions taken to deal with the issues they have raised during discussions and on how those actions will result in positive change and improvements.
- People are not aware of the opportunities, grants and support that they may be able to access which could help them, such as to pay bills, or access skills development and other capacity building opportunities which could help them improve their job prospects. They need better access to information about opportunities available.
- We also need to solve the problem faced by people who need skills, qualifications and experience to access decent jobs or start a business to progress in life, but are unable to access funding or afford the cost of training courses, higher education and lifelong learning.
- Community members would also like their existing experiences and skills such as of managing a home and of volunteering to be recognised as valid experience by employers.

2B. Communication methods.

- There are issues around how information is organised and disseminated – the channels and modes of communication are not working for everyone.
- Complex contracts and agreements are difficult for people to understand and overly-complicated paperwork makes it harder for people to access opportunities and the support they need.
- The one-size-fits-all approach to communication can be isolating.
- *How is the communication with communities managed by Councils? How far are communities involved in its design? Is the effectiveness of this communication measured? Can communities be more involved in co-creation of communication (inclusive design)?*

3. Community members want to be more involved:

- There appears to be a disconnect between people and local democratic structures – community members feel isolated from the very processes, structures and systems that determine the life chances they can and cannot have. They recognise that to be heard, you need to be part of the system. But there are also difficulties for community members in engaging with the system, partly because they cannot relate to the people representing them, and partly because they do not feel they are sufficiently included in decision-making about the things which affect them. Crucially, they want the community to have greater involvement and control. They want to have better chances and opportunities to get involved in the creation of policies and programmes to help meet the needs of communities; they want greater transparency from decision-makers, and to have meaningful dialogue with decision-makers.
- They also want to see decision-makers working more closely with civil society organisations that have strong connections in the community that can help co-ordinate ongoing dialogue.
- However, community members also need the right sorts of opportunities to participate in decision-making on matters that affect their lives. They want to be more involved in defining the activities and opportunities which can help them to progress and improve their quality of life.
- The findings indicate that the council and councillor-led model of local democracy might not be enough. Community members want to see structures and systems that enable local people and civil society not only to be more involved in decision-making, but also in implementation – leading the delivery of solutions to the problems they face. Their preference is for a system that is community-led – a collective arrangement which engages, supports and co-ordinates communities so that they can participate effectively in decision-making and can lead change.

- However, community members also recognise that many do not have the capacity to participate meaningfully and to be taken seriously, so capacity development and empowerment (but see note below), which enables them to engage fully in decision-making in areas relating to their lives and life chances, is important.
- But this can't be an add-on – another box ticking exercise. An inclusive, participatory approach should be integral to decision-making, which means creating environments that respect, encourage and genuinely value grassroots input. And that is likely to require capacity building of current decision-makers too.

A note on empowerment

Many of the community members that we spoke to, have for some time, been making various efforts to secure a decent living and become self-sufficient – many want to contribute usefully to society. But as we've seen, they continue to encounter stumbling blocks when trying to progress, because the right conditions and opportunities for them to take action, either do not exist or are not accessible to them. Consequently, they feel stuck, unable to progress, and have lost faith in the system.

Community empowerment, is a tool that is often used to tackle problems faced by people in deprived and marginalised communities, which relate to their lack of power, or capacity to use power, and sometimes their reluctance to take action to solve those problems. The purpose of the tool is usually to improve self-esteem, awareness and to enable people to improve their lives and communities.

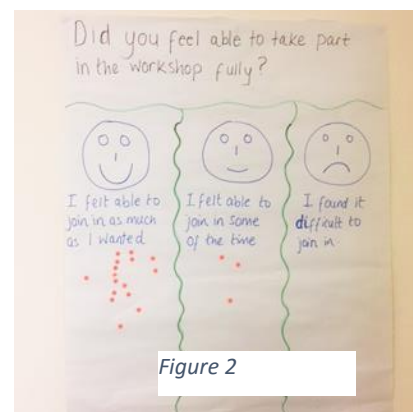
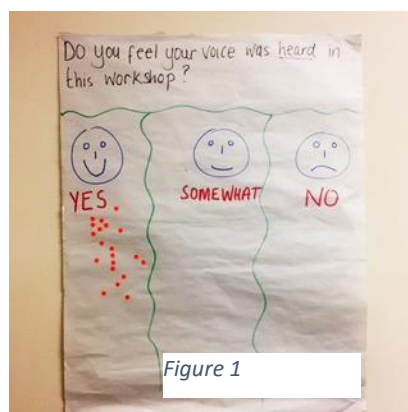
While we don't doubt that this tool is useful, empowerment is not the immediate problem that needs fixing and we should think carefully about why and when it is used. It may lead to some positive outcomes in the short-term but it is unlikely to lead to significant sustainable change. A premature focus on empowerment also risks masking or negating the effect that structural issues can have on people's life chances, and marginalising them further.

What is needed instead, as we heard in Oldham, are better pathways through which people can access or create their own opportunities to progress. In other words, the core structural problems need to be dealt with first. That will require communities to be meaningfully involved in co-creating the right conditions and opportunities for taking action which can improve their life chances.

EVALUATION FINDINGS

The feedback we received both formally at the end and informally throughout the day, indicates that participants' experiences of the workshop were positive and they felt valued.

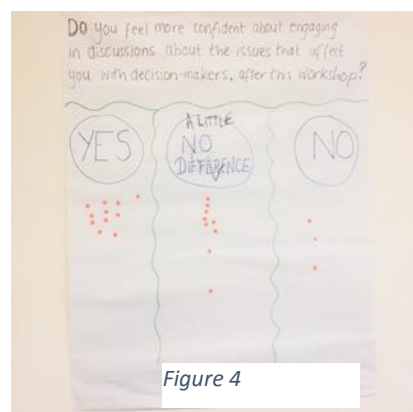
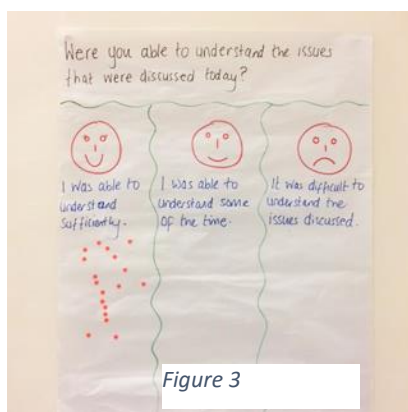
Everyone felt their voice was heard in the workshop (Fig.1) and most participants felt able to join in fully, though a few people felt they were only able to join in some of the time (Fig. 2). It would be useful to discuss this with CNC.



Participants also expressed disappointment that this was a one-off event and were frustrated that these discussions had not happened sooner in Oldham. They would like to continue to participate in similar workshops and to be engaged in the same way.

I felt like everybody here was valued as a citizen, this is what's missing and exactly what we need more of.

All participants felt they understood the issues that were discussed which tells us that the facilitation and content were appropriate (Fig. 3).



Whilst there are 23 dots in Figure 4, (more than the number of participants), the responses still indicate that most people feel better able to engage in discussions about the issues that affect them with decision-makers. But the mixed response could also suggest that more work is needed to develop people's confidence to engage. Decision-makers will need to consider a wide range of engagement methods when consulting with communities.

The length of the workshop was half a day as planned, approximately 4.5 hours, yet the general consensus was that it would have been useful to have had more time. There was more that participants had wanted to share with us. Clearly this was also a rare opportunity for them to share their thoughts and experiences and "to be heard".

What you've done is bang on.

In the future, community members would like to see more people participating and to have greater diversity in the room – people from different communities and ethnicities represented – discussing issues together in one space, offering different perspectives to the discussions. People want to use these workshops to connect with and hear what other communities think, and have the opportunity to both learn from them and share their own perspectives too.