

Social Justice Pulse Review

Poverty and Cost of Living

Paying Our Way: Research Participation and Fair Pay

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Project Summary

Newcastle University lists social justice among its 'core values'. Research projects from many disciplines pursue this theme. But what does this mean for the community researchers and partners upon whom this social justice research depends? How are those community researchers reimbursed for giving their time? And how might research findings centre their perspectives?



The Challenge

In May 2024, Live Theatre brought their production *Fed Up!* to Newcastle Cathedral. The production used oral history interviews to explore how food poverty affects young people in the North East. At the final curtain call, volunteers collected donations for Newcastle Foodbank. It later came to those volunteers' attention that one of the project interviewees – a single mother of two young children, whose recording featured in the production – did not have enough money for her electricity meter. It was a familiar situation: a social justice research project had documented economic disadvantage but failed to transform it.

Following this uncomfortable recognition, *Paying Our Way: Research Participation and Fair Pay* aimed to extend the benefits for community researchers and research participants with first-hand experience of the social justice issues we address. We set out with two connected objectives:

- To empower community researchers, in shared authority, to reinterpret the projects in which they had participated; and
- To investigate remuneration for research policies on social research projects, with a view to recommending best practice.

Findings

The Newcastle University Oral History Unit and Collective have conducted 88 oral history interviews with mutual aid activists, and with volunteers and service users at Newcastle Foodbank. These interviews formed two projects: Foodbank Histories, and An Oral History of Mutual Aid. In 2024, Paying Our Way invited interviewees and four community researchers with experience of economic disadvantage to reassess these interviews and choose material for a new Oral History Collective website. They also organised an engagement event in the east end of Newcastle to stimulate discussions about how social justice projects are conducted and communicated to wider publics. The event included peer-to-peer translation and interpretation by and for members of different ethnic communities. It also explored community researchers' experiences of remuneration and participating in projects with 'shared authority'.

Paying Our Way identified several problems in the practice of collaborative social justice research, and remuneration policy:

1. Remuneration policies are inconsistent within and across Higher Education Institutions. Payment-for-involvement in research is often convoluted and protracted. These practical difficulties inhibit research and have particularly negative effects for welfare claimants.
2. Complications in payment-for-involvement policies adversely affect community researchers and project leads, jeopardising the principled aspiration to 'shared authority' in social justice research.
3. There are mutual benefits in inviting community researchers to revisit past social justice research projects to which they have contributed. This process maximises re-use of project materials and allows research partners to reinterpret previous projects on their own terms.

Recommendations

1. *Social justice projects involving community researchers need greater consistency in operation – with a Living Wage always paid for participants' time – and greater flexibility in mechanisms. We need payment-for-involvement methods which can vary by method and timing of payment.*
2. *Universities must lobby for payment-for-involvement not to be classed as income. This compromises claimants' welfare entitlement and thereby disincentivises research participation. Until then, payment-for-involvement requires greater university resource, with dedicated staff handling processes and training for researchers working on projects with community participation.*
3. *Social justice researchers collaborating with community partners must prioritise sharing authority throughout and beyond the project. Engagement events **after** completing a phase of the project provide valuable opportunities for community researchers to review findings, offer feedback, and independently curate project outputs.*

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