

RECLAIM

Missing experts.

Exploring why working class people are under-represented in UK anti-poverty charities and think tanks and how we can build a new era of charities of all the talents.

September 2022

Project team



This report, and the research it was based upon, were written and conducted by Roger Harding and Kirsten Graver.

In addition, Laura Townshend has been an integral part of the project team and especially the creation of the organisational action pledges.



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Respect. Support. Hope.

“The irony is that in charity and think tank world, we’re supposed to be helping people like me but we never talk to them - just about them and often with, at best, a limited understanding.”

About RECLAIM

We power young working class people to change the country today and lead it tomorrow.

We are creating a Britain where working class people are proud of – and not held back by – our backgrounds. We want working class people to be represented everywhere decisions are made about our lives and to be recognised for our talent, strength and diversity.



We are a working class-staffed Manchester-based charity and our work focuses on two main areas:

- We help young working class people to **change the country today** by giving them the campaigning, influencing and leadership skills and platforms to get their voices heard and win change.
- We help them **lead the country tomorrow** by creating the space in public life for them to step into. We use campaigns, research and hands-on support to help organisations and industries become more inclusive of the working class talent we see every day.

Conversations about class often conjure old, negative stereotypes and some try to divide working class people along lines of race, geography and more.

Our growing movement of young people, staff, volunteers, supporters and allies shows Britain's modern working class in all our brilliance and is uniting communities to win the change we all want to see.

To find more about our work, visit RECLAIM.org.uk - **Get involved, together we're changing the country.**

Foreword

The start of the by and for era?

Hard up people urgently need charities fighting their corner right now. Anti-poverty organisations and think tanks should at the forefront of our national response to the cost of living crisis but, as this report makes clear, the absence of working class representation in both sectors means they are unable to have the impact they desire and families need.

The class representation gap has long been an issue: if think tanks exist to strengthen our democracy and anti-poverty charities are in the business of ending poverty, neither sector can claim to be fulfilling their potential:

- **An enormous 4 in every 5 people (78%) think that politicians badly understand lives like theirs.** As anti-democratic forces are keen to exploit, 55% of people think democracy in Britain fails to properly serve the interests of people like them¹.
- **The proportion of people who are struggling financially has been rising for over a decade** and we now face a national emergency due to rising costs, with the biggest hits taken by those with the least. With its poor run of results, the anti-poverty sector can count itself lucky it doesn't join football teams in having to do its work in stadiums full of fans. We'd be long past the booing stage.

Bluntly: both sectors are failing. We think the class gap is a big part of the reason why.

We conducted this research for four main reasons. Firstly, think tanks need to be more class inclusive for the health of democracy. Secondly, anti-poverty organisations should be class inclusive, given their missions. Thirdly, we owe it to the awesome young working class people at RECLAIM to crack open powerful organisations so we can all benefit from their extraordinary talents.

However, if we are honest, this research was as much driven by wanting to amplify what the team at RECLAIM have heard in hundreds upon hundreds of private conversations as it was by any of these high-minded reasons. People from working class backgrounds told us again and again how they were sick of being overlooked, patronised or stereotyped by organisations that were supposed to serve us. We felt obliged to honour these stories by sharing them with a wider audience, so set out to capture more of the experiences and the frustrations people had.

Having completed the project, we still don't know the true scale of the class diversity problem in charities because there is so little data collected on it. Many corporates have a significantly better idea of how many working class people they employ and promote than most anti-poverty organisations and think tanks (and political parties for that matter). This work, therefore, is not the final word on this problem but rather the start of an overdue conversation. Nor is this report written in a spirit of self-righteousness. The co-authors are angry, but we also know that this is the work of a lifetime and we will all have to challenge and champion each other along the way, in a spirit of solidarity and curiosity about where our organisations and we ourselves are falling short.

As you read this report we would like you to be aware of two risks talking about class inclusion presents, that we have experienced as forms of pushback when raising these questions with organisations:

- **The first is indulging the idea that action on class runs counter to work on race and other areas of equality and diversity.** This is nonsense: work on class can and must go hand in hand with work on all the other ways that people can be marginalised, excluded or oppressed. The interviewees in this report and the young people at RECLAIM are testaments to the fact that working class Britain has more to gain from racial justice and disability, gender and LGBTQI+ inclusion than any other section of society.

- **The second risk is that you check out when this feels uncomfortable, telling yourself that ‘at our place we don’t recruit for characteristics, we recruit for talent’.** In nearly every workplace where this is said the opposite is true. If you believe, like me, that talent is evenly distributed throughout society then an un-diverse organisation is proof it recruits for background, not talent. I’d encourage anyone who thinks otherwise to confront the consequences of a view that says that talent isn’t evenly distributed or try making the case that working class people are somehow inherently less interested in shaping our politics and better supporting those struggling right now.

This report has been written to spur action. We share the view of many of the interviewees that change is needed and fast. And this is personal: anti-poverty charities helped secure the financial support, like Child Benefit, that got me, my mum and sister through difficult times growing up. It was a charity for ‘disadvantaged young people’ that took me on a residential course to coach me on how to become the first person in my family to go to university. We have thrown down this gauntlet to the think tank and anti-poverty sectors precisely because we think your work is so important – and that change is possible.

The transformation will, I believe, start with organisations asking themselves one question. I think every think tank and anti-poverty charity would say there is no shame whatsoever in growing up on a low income; in fact, many campaign to end that stigma. The question posed by this report is why that stigma is felt within these organisations to such an extent that their own staff hide their working class backgrounds.

If we are willing to ask and answer that question, we could be at the dawn of a whole new era.

The first phase of anti-poverty charity work was the Victoria era, marked by ‘poverty relief’ done to ‘the poor’ and ‘fallen women’ with a moralising air. The second era was the creation of the ‘new poverty lobby’ in the 1960s and 1970s, which saw CPAG, Shelter, Gingerbread, RADAR (now Disability Rights UK) and others founded in reaction to those excluded from both post-war prosperity and the Beveridge settlement.

Histories of those early decades note that new poverty lobby organisations were predominantly staffed by the middle classes using a strategy focused on releasing academic research reports charting ‘new poverty’ (meaning relative poverty) levels populated with case studies. These were used to generate newspaper coverage (sometimes combined with campaign stunts) which helped secure meetings with civil servants and others. Those organisations had vital successes (which, as I say, I’m personally grateful for) but also faced constant doubts from civil servants and politicians as to whether they truly spoke for those they represented or could marshal a sizeable public constituency.

It feels like we live in the tail-end of that ‘new poverty lobby’ phase, and the beginnings of something new. This new approach will still have a vital role for those not personally impacted by the issues charities work on, but in future it will seem very old-fashioned and odd for an organisation not to be primarily staffed by those with personal experience of the cause (if it’s not already).

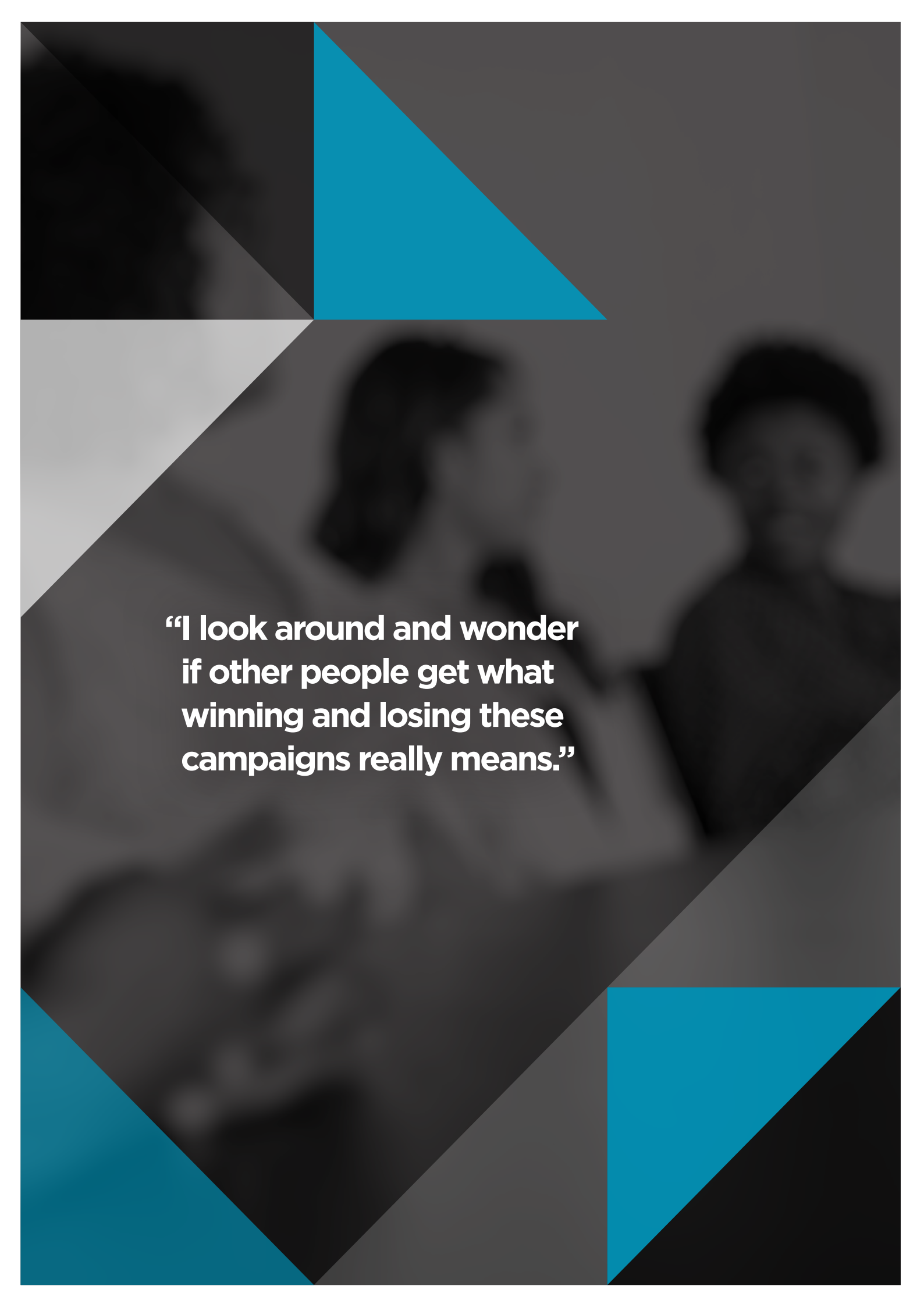
If the Victorian era was all about doing ‘to people’ and the new poverty lobby era was about sometimes doing things ‘with people’ (by having them as case studies or more recently by having ‘lived experience’ programmes and research), the future could be about things being done by working class people, for ourselves, without disproportionately middle class leadership getting in the way or us having to hide our identities to get on.

I think many of the changes called for by interviewees in this report are inevitable; the debate is more on how quickly they will happen. The question in front of senior leaders and boards in think tanks and anti-poverty charities today is, therefore, when someone writes the history of the next phase, will you be seen as players in the final chapter of an old era, or the first chapter in a new one?

The ‘by and for’ era is coming – it’s up to you whether it will leave you behind.

Roger Harding, September 2022

i Ipsos / YouGov (2021) survey results. Available here https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/9u8fkdfuy4/IPPR_DemocraticReform_211221_w_.pdf



**“I look around and wonder
if other people get what
winning and losing these
campaigns really means.”**

Executive Summary

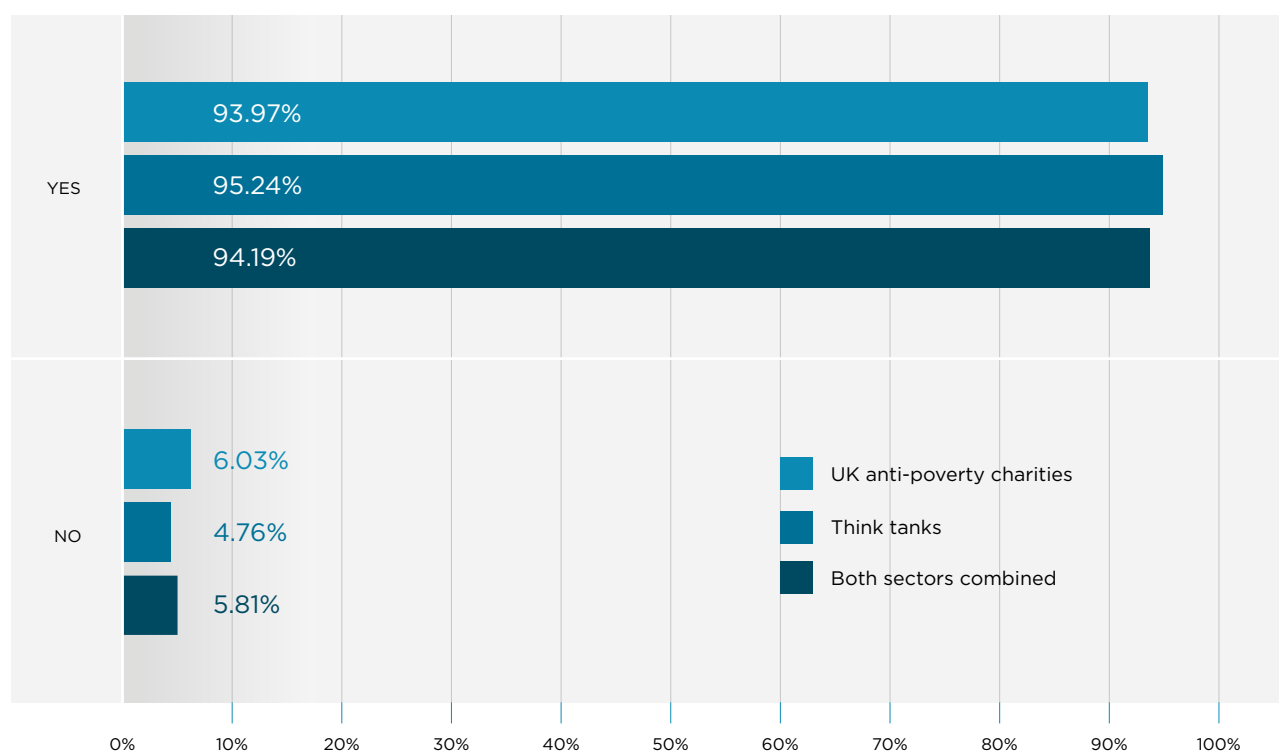
This research uses interviews, focus groups and surveys with over 300 people from working class backgrounds working in UK anti-poverty charities and think tanks to assess the scale and nature of the class diversity problem in these sectors and what we need to do to fix it. We focused on anti-poverty organisations because they should be excellent at class inclusion and think tanks because they need to be for the health of democracy.

Key Findings

Anti-poverty and think tank charities have a class diversity problem:

- This is a widespread problem that isn't much **discussed**. Nearly every person from a working class background we spoke to during the course of this research felt that their sector had a class diversity and inclusion problem.
- Many felt there was a **reluctance to discuss class diversity and inclusion**, which was seen as odd given the nature of anti-poverty work and the increased political interest in listening to working class voters.

Does the UK anti-poverty charity sector / think-tank sector have a class diversity problem?



- **Many people also haven't talked openly about their own background** or had only done so when they'd become more senior or as a negative reaction to working class people being discussed. Working class younger people and people of colour were slightly more likely to have spoken openly about it. While some people of colour were emboldened by wider conversations about diversity and inclusion others did so as they felt their class background would be assumed anyway.
- **Interviewees were keen to stress that they did not want action on class inclusion to be, or to be portrayed as, zero-sum with action on other forms of discrimination and exclusion.** There was widespread recognition that both sectors had a lot more work to do on race, gender, disability and other areas.
- **There is very little collection of class diversity data by anti-poverty organisations and think tanks,** despite this being regular practice for other organisations such as KPMG and the BBC.
- **Insecure contracts and (in some cases) low pay combine with cultural barriers to mean entry into both sectors is hard for people from working class backgrounds.** This is especially true for those without degrees and those based outside of London.
- **People felt the class diversity problem was most acute in policy, campaigns, communications, fundraising, senior management and board roles.**

The lack of class diversity and inclusion shows in organisational cultures.

- **Interpersonal class discrimination is rare, but not absent,** especially when it comes to accents. There were also several mentions of colleagues using poor proxies for class, such as accent, race and home region which misidentified people in both directions.
- **It is common for internal conversations to reveal that people assume that people from working class backgrounds are not in the room.**

- **Participants felt that a premium is placed on sounding rather than necessarily being clever.** This was especially true in think tanks and most keenly felt by working class women.
- **There is a keenly felt absence of senior role models** from working class backgrounds in both sectors.

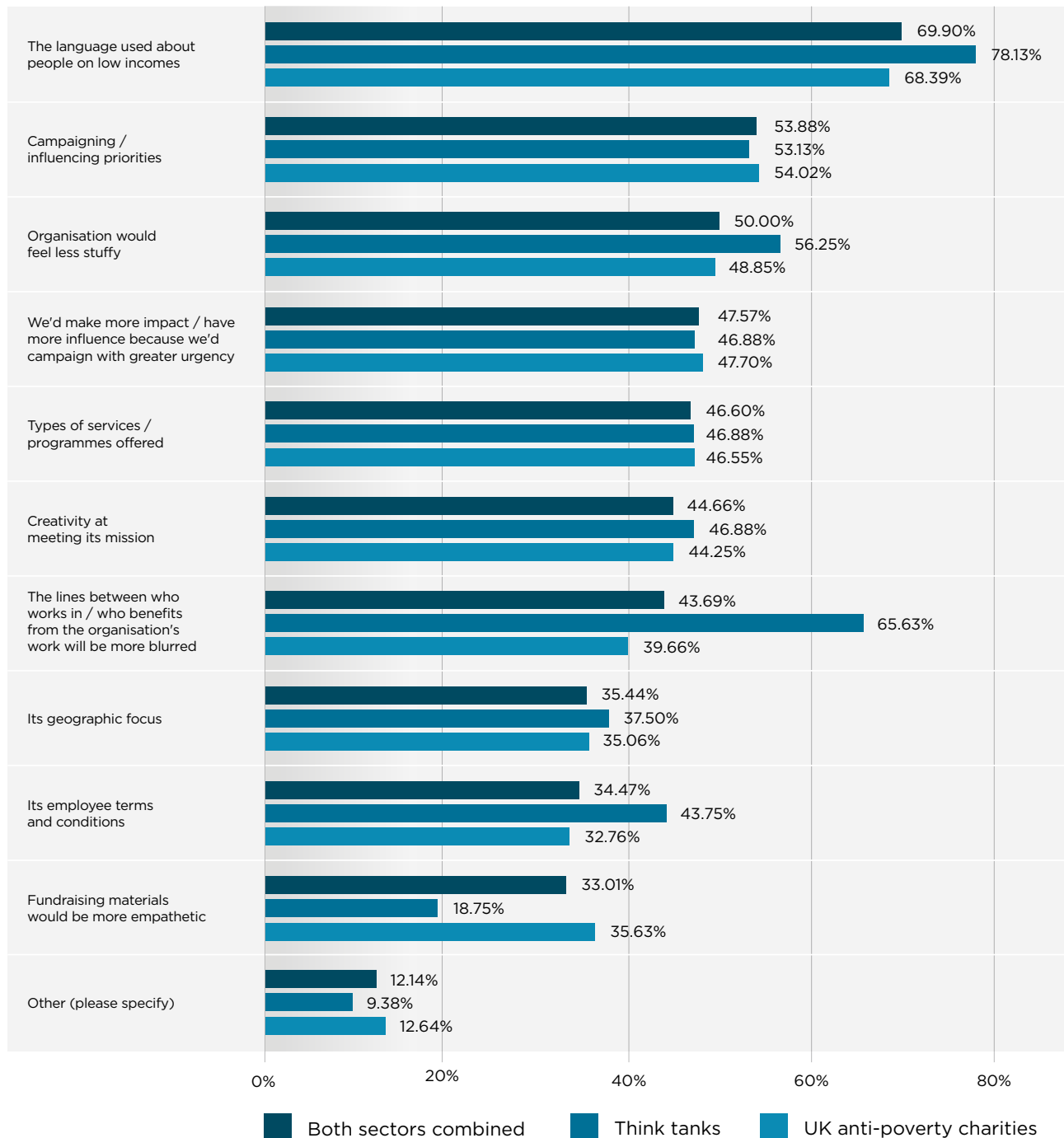
It shows in the work organisations do (and don't do)

- Many of those interviewed felt too **many policy and (to a lesser extent) service design discussions were 'other worldly'** because they lacked grounding in the issues being discussed.
- **Problems are too often assumed to be policy or innovation gaps,** rather than questions of power and politics.
- **Organisations reveal the absence of working class staff in how they speak.** A significant proportion of respondents were tired of the language used about working class people which we wouldn't use about ourselves. This included terms that were often abstract, needlessly complex or inadvertently patronising or insulting. People also felt there was distance implicit in many anti-poverty organisation's communications, which were often about 'they' and 'them', rather than 'we' and 'us'.
- **People on low incomes are often too narrowly viewed through an economic lens,** which for participants meant that connected but different questions of pride and dignity were too often overlooked when policy ideas, fundraising campaigns or services were conceived.
- **Some current ways of involving people with experience of being hard up are clumsy or arm's length.** The increased focus on lived experience was welcomed, but many people felt this missed the spot.
- **Participants felt anti-poverty and think tank charities' work would be urgent if there were more working class people in the room.** Some people felt some colleagues placed more weight on being seen to be good or radical than achieving transformative change for communities.

The opportunity if we fix this is massive

- Many of the people we spoke to during this research were optimistic that change was possible. For many people there was excitement that the conversation about diversity and inclusion was happening on several fronts at the same time with new urgency.
- People felt the work of think tanks and anti-poverty organisations would look very different if there were more working class people in the room:

Which aspects of your organisation's work would be different if there were more people from working class backgrounds in the organisation at all levels?

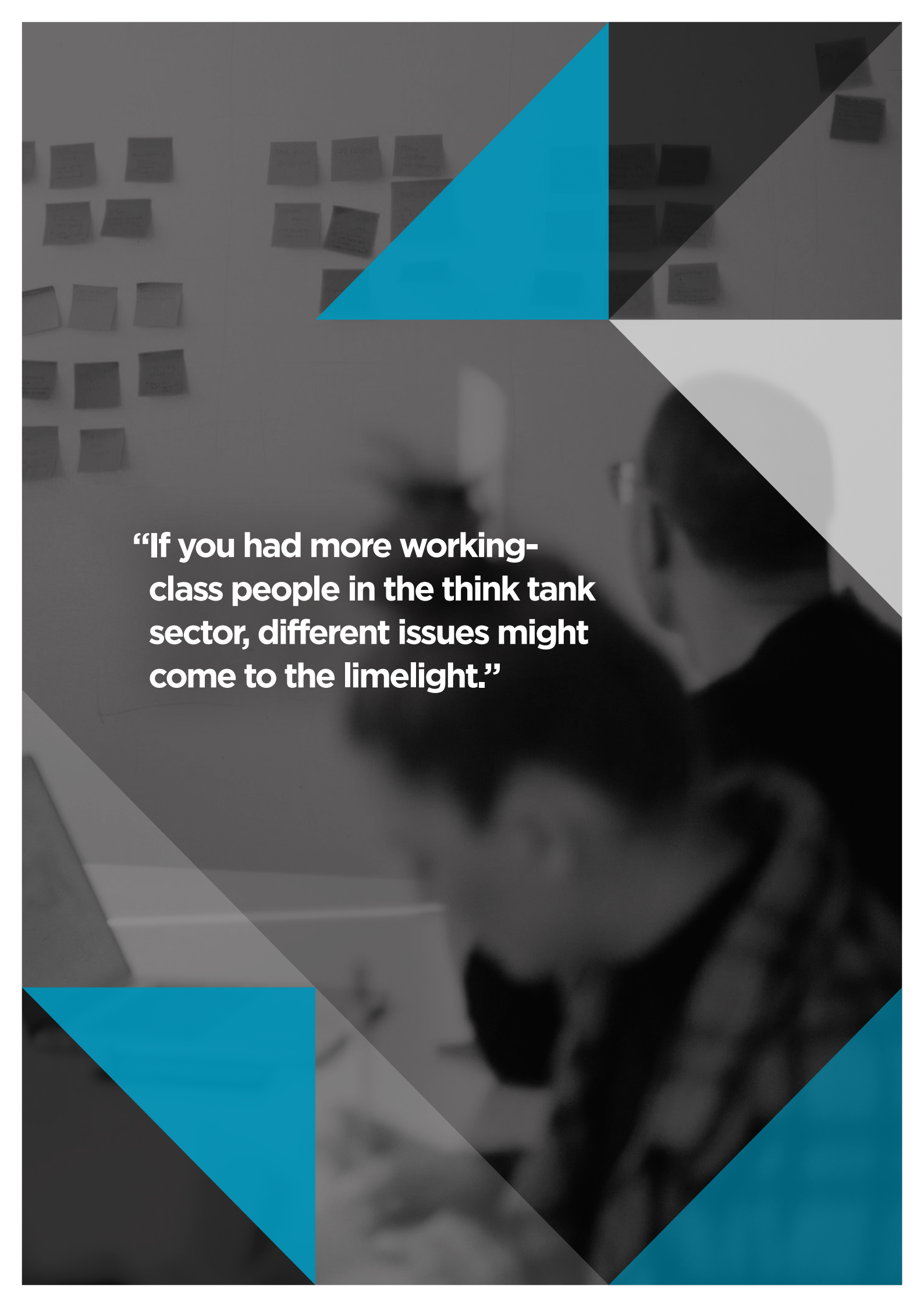


- **The number of people from working class backgrounds in both sectors feels lower than it is because there is an inclusion problem (meaning that people hide their backgrounds to get on or fit in).** If organisations can solve this they can quickly benefit from a lot of hidden expertise.
- There was a widespread feeling from participants that if their workplaces looked more like the country **there would be greater public trust in their organisations and their work would be more effective.**
- Tackling organisations' class diversity and inclusion problems are integral to **ending the shame associated with being hard up.**

A future built by all our talents: areas for action

- **Organisations need to hold themselves accountable for action on this problem.** A good start is joining the others pledging to take important first steps in the coming year.
- **Charities should not consider class in isolation from other areas of diversity and inclusion.** Class diversity and inclusion is not more or less important than making a workplace welcoming to disabled people, people of colour, women, LGBTQI+ people and many other groups, and of course many of these issues intersect.
- **Organisations will not be alone in working on this:** a growing number of charities are committed to action and learning from one another.
- **Charities need to start collecting class data.**
- **Outreach work needs resourcing and service delivery organisations need to track how many people go from service to staff/board.**
- **Think tanks and anti-poverty charities need to offer longer contracts and/or collectively challenge funders** who, with tightly restricted funds and/or short-term grants, effectively force them not to. They also need to trial recruitment approaches and swap notes on what works (and what doesn't).
- **Changing organisations requires active succession planning by boards and senior managers.** Boards and senior managers aren't necessarily responsible for the organisations they inherit, but they are responsible for the organisations they leave behind and who replaces them.
- **Organisations need to do the hard yards on culture change, but they don't need to do it alone** as there are a growing number of organisations and initiatives that can help.
- **We need to create the conditions for there to be more senior role models and provide more visibility for those who already exist.**
- **Those of us who know what it's like to be hard up deserve the right to set the terms.** From the survey responses and interviews, it is clear that think tanks and, in particular, anti-poverty charities need to change how they talk about people on low incomes.
- **Working class people should be treated with dignity and respect.** Anti-poverty organisations and think tanks need to be in habit of asking themselves when designing everything from funding bids to service interventions to campaigns and communications activities, does this enhance or diminish the dignity of those of us it is meant to benefit?
- **Funders have an outsized role to play** in making this happen and supporting sector-wide initiatives that help small employers in both sectors.
- **Sector networks will be there to challenge and support anti-poverty organisations and think tanks.** We are working with some of the research participants to help create working class sector networks and hope they become an ongoing source of support, mentors and pressure on organisations to live up to their pledges to improve.

These are incredibly difficult times but if this research is acted upon we are on the verge of a new era of anti-poverty and think tank charity work that reflects and uses the talents of all of the country and becomes more effective and legitimate as a result.



“If you had more working-class people in the think tank sector, different issues might come to the limelight.”

Acknowledgements

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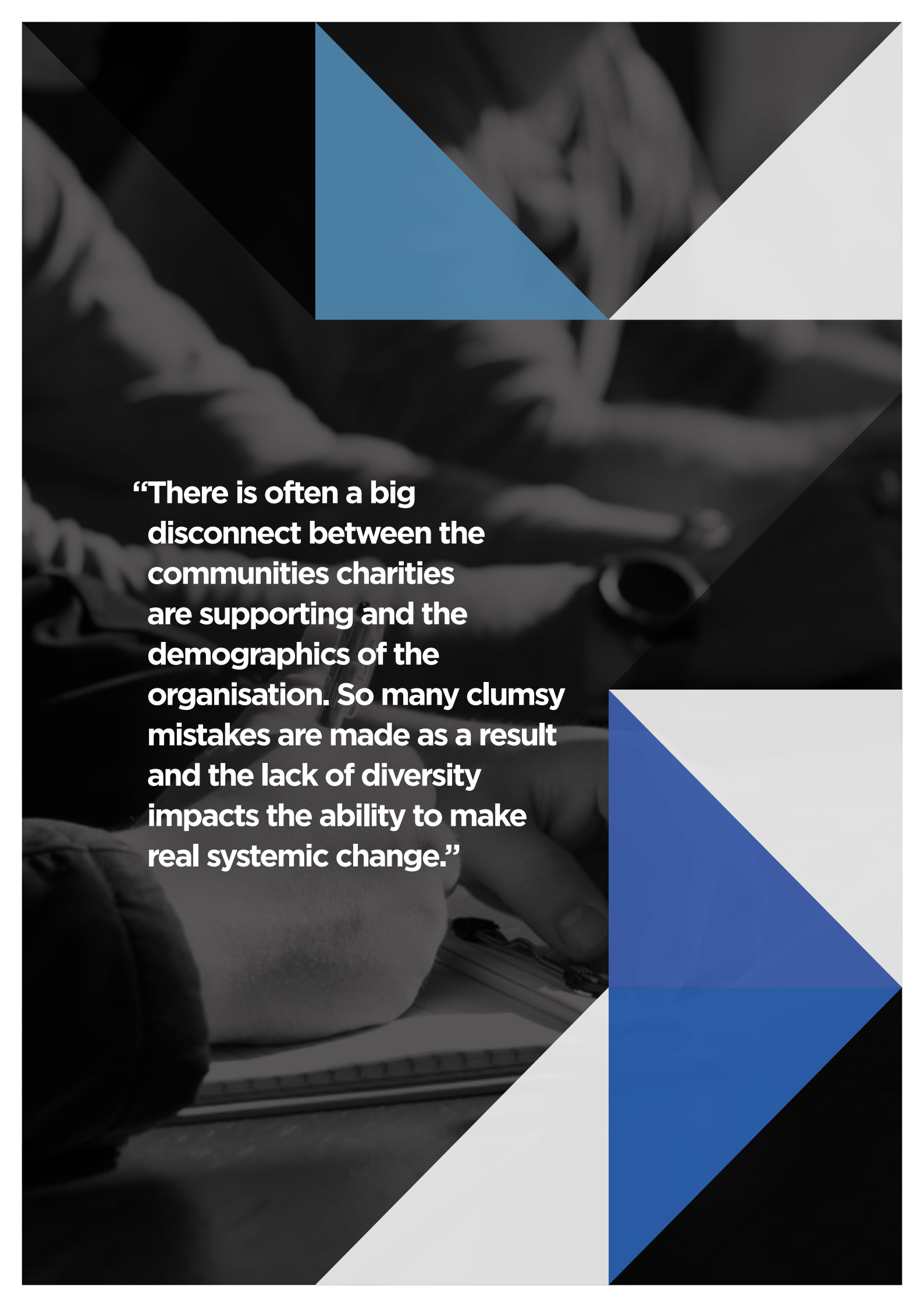
We're grateful to the think tank leaders who took the time to explore the issues raised in this report and think about how their organisations could respond to them across two virtual round table sessions. Likewise, thank you to the Think Tank Ops Network for inviting us to discuss this work and your important outreach activities.

We are also grateful to all the people and organisations championing greater diversity and

inclusion in the charity sector in recent years whose work has informed this project which we hope in turn complements their work.

Thanks to Chris Clarke for securing the funding for this important work in the first place and Becky Bainbridge for her vital input and support and to them both for helping to create RECLAIM's new class inclusion work.

Finally, thanks to the wider RECLAIM team and, above all, the young people involved in our programmes for your constant help, support and inspiration.



“There is often a big disconnect between the communities charities are supporting and the demographics of the organisation. So many clumsy mistakes are made as a result and the lack of diversity impacts the ability to make real systemic change.”

Our approach

Methodology and how we think about class

Research approach

Working class people's involvement in the modern charity sector is an under-studied area. There is, therefore, only a modest amount of wider research to draw on. Further, as noted later in the report, most organisations working in the anti-poverty and think tank parts of the charity sector do not currently collect or pool social class diversity data. The latter makes it incredibly difficult to calculate accurately the size and the scale of the problem.

Our research primarily relies on people self-selecting into interviews, focus groups and surveys. This inevitably creates risks about the representativeness of our sample and some limitations about our conclusions. However, due to the lack of organisational data this is the only available route into this important issue given our project's resources and budget. If readers are concerned about how these risks shape the conclusions, we, politely, challenge them to work with us to generate the charity buy-in and research budget to build on this work with even more robust data.

Our research draws on:

- Interviews and small focus groups with 30 people from working class backgrounds who currently, or in the last 3 years, have worked in the anti-poverty or think tank parts of the charity sector. Those consulted ranged from chief executives of high-profile charities to colleagues who had only recently started in entry-level roles. In recognition of how class intersects with other forms of marginalisation, we ensured as much as possible that participants reflected the diversity of working class Britain. Furthermore, participants were drawn from across the UK.

Participants were recruited through all-staff emails in a selection of organisations and people who have informally 'outed' themselves as being from working class backgrounds to RECLAIM during the course of our work.

- Interviews with a small number of young people at RECLAIM about their knowledge and experiences of these parts of the charity sector.
- Opt-in surveys where participants were recruited through social media and internal organisational emails. We had 277 respondents from working class backgrounds, of which 220 worked (or had worked) in anti-poverty charities and 57 worked (or had worked) in think tanks (See Appendix 1 for further demographic breakdowns of respondents).
- A rapid literature review of existing research in this area.
- Two round tables with chief executives (from a range of class backgrounds) of think tanks from across the political spectrum, exploring their current practices and barriers to change. Unfortunately, time did not allow us to do a similar exercise in the anti-poverty sector, but in interviews we did speak to several current and former chief executives from working class backgrounds from this part of the sector.

Quotes from participants are used throughout the report and have been anonymised to protect people and give them the chance to speak freely. These are drawn as much from the survey as from the interviews and focus groups. All the quotes are from people from working class backgrounds working in the anti-poverty or think tank sectors unless stated otherwise.

How we define working class

There are many ways of defining social class and at RECLAIM we are here for anyone who wants to debate their respective merits. However, at RECLAIM, this is how we define it for young people on our programmes and the phrasing we used to invite participants to get involved in this research:

How RECLAIM thinks about class:

Not familiar with the term working class? No problem, lots of people aren't. It means different things to different people, but for us at RECLAIM being working class is characterised by a few key factors:

1. You're on, or grew up on, a low income with very limited access to wealth.
2. You don't have many family connections to people with well paid, professional or powerful jobs.
3. You find it harder to 'fit in' in middle-class spaces, interests and conversations.
4. You're proud of your background and want people to see it as a strength, not a weakness.

While working-class people have many of these things in common, we're a diverse bunch too. Working class people are white, black and brown, LGBTQ+, disabled, recent migrants or refugees or from families who can trace their roots in the UK back generations and of various religions and none. At RECLAIM, we don't mind if you publicly identify as working class or not, that's completely up to you.

Economic, social and cultural capital

As the definition above alludes to, at RECLAIM we think about class in terms of three forms of capitalⁱ. Discussions of class sometimes focus solely on economic factors (job types, income and wealth), which fail to capture the full experience of being in different classes.

For example, we intuitively understand that a young person from a wealthy background who is doing some bar work is not instantly working class, and that likewise a newly-signed Premier League footballer doesn't automatically become upper class.

Economic factors are vitally important, but so is social capital (your social and family connections to people in positions of power or status) and cultural capital (your ability comfortably to 'fit in' with more middle class spaces by, for example, sharing similar hobbies, holidays and ways of talking about issues).

Discussion about class tends to over-focus on economic factors because they are easier to measure quantitatively, but considerations about social and cultural capital are often as (or more) important when thinking about why working class people are underrepresented in some spaces and the three forms of capital are intimately intertwinedⁱⁱ. We have, therefore, tried to reflect this in the research we have conducted here.

It is important to note that there is not a perfect overlap between working class people (at least in how we define class) and those covered by the purely monetary measure of 'relative poverty' typically used by anti-poverty organisations.

Why we focused on people's background

For this report we wanted to speak both to people who are currently working class and those whose background is working class even if their current job or self-identity is not. Some may question the relevance of considering the diversity of people by aspects of their background that may no longer apply (e.g. they now have a good income and relatively high social capital). We consider it vitally important for three reasons:

1. **If talent is evenly distributed by class (and other equalities concerns), which we believe it is, then any organisation not representative of the country is likely to be recruiting for background not for talent. It is only by measuring people's background that we can work out whether this is the case.**
2. **Growing up working class, even if many of the markers of this no longer apply, provides someone with experiences and insights that it is difficult for someone not from that background truly to appreciate.**
3. **A person's class background continues, on average, to shape their life long after the common markers of it have changed. Someone from a working class background is, for example and on average, likely to earn less through their career compared with middle class background peers (even if they gain the same qualifications), suffer poorer health and be less likely access elite jobs. These issues are more than compounded when someone working class is further marginalised by race, disability, gender and other factorsⁱⁱⁱ. For example, working class women face a pay greater than simply totalling the class and gender pay gaps, and this is greater still for working class Black women^{iv}. These lifelong effects of a working class upbringing are one of the reasons we consider it vital to think of class in terms of social and cultural capital as well as economic capital.**

As noted above, being working class and experiencing what is commonly defined as poverty in the UK are not synonymous. However, a significant proportion of the people we spoke to for this research from working class backgrounds also had experience of growing up in relative poverty.

Why focus on the anti-poverty sector and think tanks?

Put simply, anti-poverty organisations should be excellent at class inclusion if they truly believe in ending the shame and stigma of poverty and making sure people have equal life chances. What's more, if we believe (as we do at RECLAIM) that involving people with experiences of issues tends to be vital to designing good solutions to these issues, then anti-poverty organisations should be disproportionately staffed by those with experience of poverty.

For think tanks, it is important for their democratic legitimacy that they broadly reflect the society they are trying to understand and shape. Think tanks have a huge impact on working class people's lives due to their political influence; it is, therefore, vital to focus on including us and our perspectives.

It would be fascinating to extend this work to the whole charity sector, but time and resources made this impossible for this particular report. Furthermore, there are unresolved questions over the helpfulness of a study tying together the experiences of people in organisations ranging from volunteer-led food banks to complex multinational charities to medical research labs to centuries-old exclusive private schools; such is the diversity of organisations operating as charities.

Through our research we have spoken to people who work, or have worked, for a significant number of organisations in both the anti-poverty and think tank fields. This includes anti-poverty organisations who are large household name charities, small local organisations and those dotted across the UK. Similarly, we have spoken to think tank colleagues across the political spectrum and those based in each of the home nations and most English regions beyond London.

A small number of these organisations are not technically charities but other forms of not-for-profits. As with anti-poverty organisations, there was significant diversity in the scale and nature of the think tanks. They ranged from small exclusively national party politics-focused organisations living project-to-project to large endowed or otherwise securely funded organisations with a wider set of influencing objectives.

Work on class should not be seen in isolation to, or in competition with, action on other areas of diversity, inclusion and equity.

In common with participants in this research, we do not want work on class inclusion to be pitted against work on other forms of inclusion. This is especially true on race and LGBTQ+ inclusion given we operate in a climate where high profile figures on left and right have suggested that there is a zero-sum fight or trade-off between so-called 'identity politics' and class.

Anyone who spends more than a minute with the young working class people at RECLAIM – drawn as much from Greater Manchester's inner city neighbourhoods as its 'red wall' towns – knows that work on class inclusion must go hand in hand with work on race, LGBTQ+, disability and other forms of inclusion. We are in the debt of those campaigners whose progress on those justice questions have created more space for discussions on class too.





“I have never in my entire experience being in the think tank, the political world actually, had a proper conversation with someone about that [the lack of class diversity].”

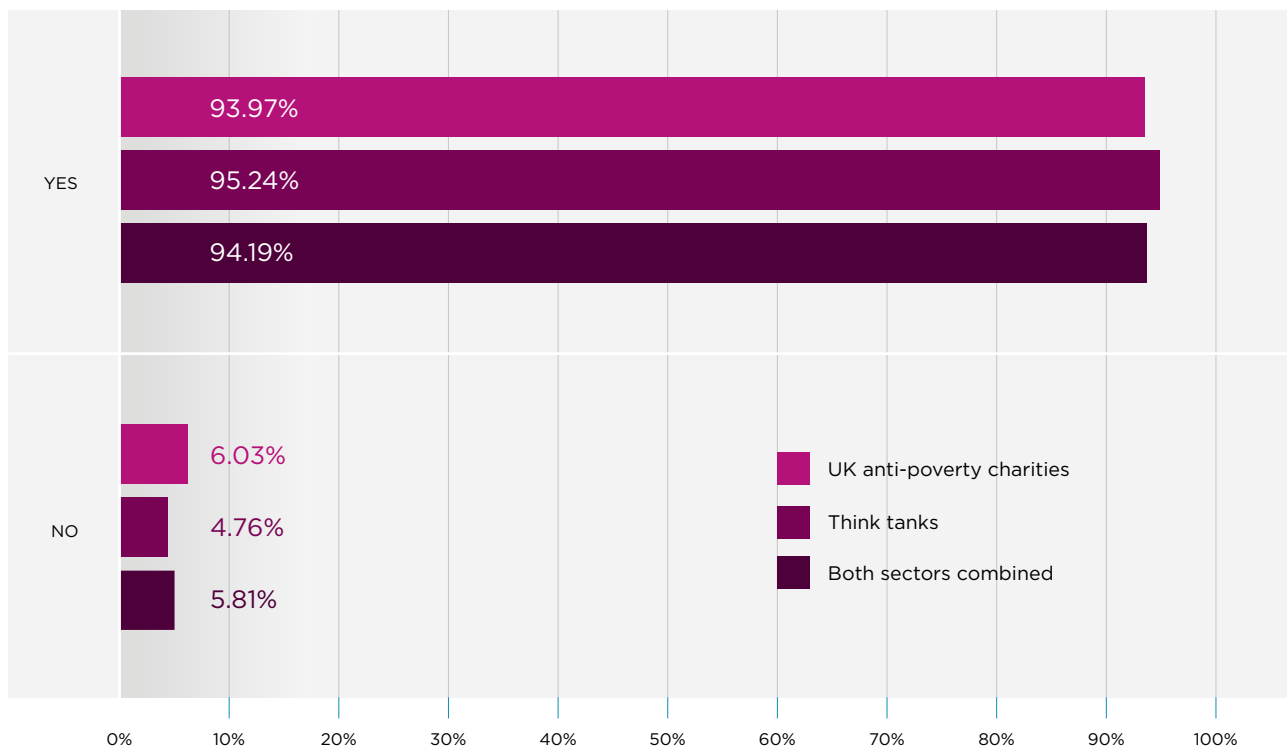
Findings

We do not intend this to be the final word on class diversity and inclusion in think tanks and the anti-poverty sector. Instead, our intention is that this is just one contribution to this important debate. We hope its limitations are jumping-off points for further work and discussion. This report is a summation of the views we heard and therefore, inevitably, is not the view of every person from a working class background in these sectors. We have tried throughout the report to make clear where opinions and experiences are widely shared, and where they are those of a smaller group. Finally, we want this work to result in action so the findings are followed by a note on what organisations can do to start to respond to them.

A widespread problem that isn't much discussed.

Nearly everyone thinks this a problem

Does the UK anti-poverty charity sector / think-tank sector have a class diversity problem?



Nearly every person from a working class background we spoke to during the course of this research felt that their sector had a class diversity and inclusion problem. This feeling amongst people from working class backgrounds working in the sector was mirrored by the working class young people at RECLAIM on the outside looking in.

“[Asked who they’d expect to meet if they walked through the doors of an anti-poverty charity] If I’m being honest, I think a small portion will be people that have been through it and have experienced how tough it is to live pay cheque to pay cheque and not have enough food. But I think there is a lot that haven’t struggled at all in any way. Maybe people that can empathise but don’t know exactly how it feels.”

Young working class person at RECLAIM

“I think charities on a larger scale, people in authority and in power are more likely to come from a middle class background.”

Young working class person at RECLAIM

Many people felt there was a reluctance to discuss class diversity and inclusion

Many participants working in think tanks and anti-poverty charities felt both sectors were uneasy talking about the topic. They felt this was especially odd given the nature of anti-poverty work and the increased political interest in listening to working class voters

“Everyone seems to feel a bit icky talking about class.”

Think Tank person

“I think this might be the first conversation I’ve had about this, which says a lot.”

Anti-poverty sector person

“I do find it quite puzzling that people don’t talk about it. [...] There does seem to be a lot of squeamishness about it as well as it not coming up in conversation.”

Think Tank person

“I have never in my entire experience being in the think tank, the political world actually, had a proper conversation with someone about that [the lack of class diversity].”

Think tank person

Many people haven’t talked openly about their own background or had only done so when they’d become more senior or as a negative reaction to working class people being discussed

There were relatively few examples among the people we interviewed of people who had felt comfortable talking about their background in either sector. Many had never discussed it with colleagues or had only done so with a small subset of close colleagues they suspected were from similar backgrounds to their own. Of those who had talked about their background, many had waited until they were senior and well established in their sector before doing so and/or had ‘outed’ themselves out of frustration at how working class people were being discussed internally.

“I don’t want people to feel sorry for me or feel awkward about being from the middle class.”

Anti-poverty sector person

“I have worked in the charity sector for 10 years and have only been open about my working class identity in the last year.”

Anti-poverty sector person

“[Asked why they had not spoken about their background] Because colleagues have pre-conceived ideas about working class people, i.e. being under-educated and non-intellectual.”

Think tank person

“Some charity sector organisations are so overwhelmingly middle class that it felt awkward, embarrassing and potentially career limiting to disclose my background. It was easier to hide my working class background than face subtle put downs or even accusations of having a chip on my shoulder. It was exhausting. Now I’m in a senior role I’m considerably more confident and open about my background to the point I often lead with it - but it’s taken years to get the confidence to do this.”

Anti-poverty sector person

“I answered yes [to speaking openly about their working class background] - but it’s taken me literally years to get to this point. I realised my ‘weakness’ was actually a strength.”

Anti-poverty sector person

“I don’t want to be pigeonholed.”

Anti-poverty sector person

“Sometimes I have had to complain about lower income people being othered. Despite working for an [anti-poverty] organisation I am still in receipt of social security as I’m a low income single parent household. I feel sometimes I am surrounded by people who do not understand what I continue to go through.”

Anti-poverty sector person

“It got a bit wearing hearing people talk really patronisingly about families like mine.”

Anti-poverty sector person

“[Explaining they felt they had no choice but to speak about their background] Generally when I am asked which university I went to. I didn’t go to one.”

Think tank person

People of colour and some younger people were more likely to have spoken about it

While there was a trend toward people waiting until they were older and/or more senior to speak openly about their background, there seemed to be a growing number of younger people in both sectors who felt able to do so at earlier stages of their careers. Of this group, many spoke about feeling empowered by the growing conversations in both sectors about the lack of diversity in general and specifically in terms of race.

In our interviews, working class people of colour were also more likely to have spoken openly about their backgrounds (though far from all had). Of those that had, many noted that as their race and ethnicity were impossible to hide or conceal it either emboldened them to talk about their class background or that they felt they might as well as it would be assumed anyway.

“The overwhelming majority of my colleagues are white and middle class, I do not feel as though they would relate.”

Anti-poverty sector person

“I work for a progressive organisation that continues to struggle to recruit people from diverse backgrounds (ethnicity and class). I talk openly about growing up working class because it is important lived experience. It regularly comes up in conversations about privilege.”

Think tank person

“To be honest, I’ve been open about my background from day one, but then I didn’t have much choice about being open or not about being a person of colour and Muslim so it all sort of came as a package.”

Think tank person

Some of the working class people of colour also expressed frustration that political discussion about class tended to see race and class as two separate rather than often overlapping and intersecting ways that people are marginalised.

Action on class shouldn't be pitched as in competition with action on race and other forms of discrimination

Many interviewees were keen to stress that they did not want action on class inclusion to be, or to be portrayed as, zero-sum with action on other forms of discrimination and exclusion. There was widespread recognition that both sectors had a lot more work to do on race, gender, disability and other areas.

Many people of colour interviewed were pleased to see the increased attention racial injustice was getting in both sectors in the last two years and felt work on class would complement this if done well.

Several people noted that some political figures on right and left had been keen to promote the idea that there is a trade-off between class and 'identity politics'. They did not want this work to be incorrectly used to prop up this idea. The diversity of the working class people we spoke to during the course of this work was a good demonstration of the falsehood that working class people aren't also profoundly and personally interested in race, disability, LGBTQ+ and other forms of inclusion^v.



There is little class data collection by anti-poverty organisations and think tanks

Throughout the course of this work we encountered few organisations that collected socio-economic class diversity data, and even fewer that were currently prepared to publish or pool it across their sector. This contrasts with practice in the public and private sectors. Several government departments have committed to the collection of class data, as has the GLA, and this is becoming increasingly common amongst large private sector employers.

Some organisations, such as KPMG and the BBC, have taken the step of publishing their class diversity data to hold themselves publicly accountable for delivering on commitments to significant improvements^{vi}.

"I think charities like to think they're better than corporates and others when it comes to diversity, but the reality is they're often lagging behind."

Anti-poverty sector person

Despite the lack of data there has been some helpful wider research on or related to this topic. A survey commissioned by the EY Foundation found that 55% of 16-24-year-olds from low income families would consider a career in the charity sector. However, the same survey found that respondents identified a number of barriers, such as a lack of knowledge of what roles are available to them and poor pay and progression opportunities^{vii}.

Research by the Young Foundation and the Social Research Association found that the UK social research profession has a lot more work to do to look like the country. It found that ethnic minority groups are under-represented and, despite the profession being predominantly female, there was an under-representation of women at senior levels. A lack of class diversity emerged as a strong theme in open-ended survey questions, but a lack of widely collected data made this difficult to assess more fully^{viii}.

Entering and staying in the sector can be hard

Participants in the interviews, groups and surveys felt that entering and staying in both sectors was a challenge.

Many felt they had become aware of the possibility of working in anti-poverty and think tank organisations later than better-off peers whose families had strong social ties to professional jobs.

For some, this disadvantage was mitigated to some extent by getting to know more socially connected peers at Russell Group universities. This therefore made this problem more acute for people in both sectors who had not gone to university or not attended a Russell Group one.

“Knowing that the think tank sector exists, as a working class person, I didn’t know until like 3 months towards the end of my masters, whereas if you’re running in those kinds of circles, you might have heard of things or people or interesting places to work.”

Think tank person

The people we spoke to noted that they were aware that anti-poverty charities and think tanks are not necessarily the start of the causal chain, e.g. some university departments were not recruiting as many working class people for some subjects.

However, those making this point were quick to note that they felt it was a poor excuse simply to wait passively for these trends to improve. Many felt that organisations that recruited specific skill sets (e.g. economists) had a duty either to campaign for universities to be more inclusive or to over-compensate for their failure to recruit on talent rather than background.

Too many jobs are concentrated in London

Many people acknowledged that there had been significant improvements in recent years to entry routes with, for example, unpaid internships becoming much rarer. Several people also noted that remote working during the COVID-19 lockdowns had now made it much easier to enter or stay in the sectors while working outside of London (and to a lesser extent, outside the capitals of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland).

“It feels odd to say, but without the lockdowns and home working I’m not sure I’d be working in a think tank. There’s no way I could afford to move to London for a one year contract”

Think tank person

However, many people still felt significant improvement was needed to improve the diversity and inclusion of both sectors. A common theme was the high concentration of think tank and anti-poverty sector jobs (at least in terms of policy, campaigns, communications, fundraising and senior management roles) in London. Some also felt that roles in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were concentrated too heavily in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast.

“Policy and research jobs in the sector are really rare outside of London”

Anti-poverty sector person

Many participants recognised the justification for some roles being located where political power is concentrated but struggled to understand why this applied to many public-facing campaigns, communications, fundraising and research roles. Several participants speculated that the concentration of think tank and anti-poverty influencing roles in London, and a feeling that there were few non-graduates in senior roles, contributed to the sense that politics was too distant from significant parts of the country.

While some people were now, with remote working, able to work elsewhere, those in the earlier stages of their career were concerned that they would struggle to catch up with the social networks of better-off peers and those living in the capital cities.

Starting pay and conditions needs to be improved

Many people, particularly those at the start of their careers, felt that the pay and conditions of entry level roles were a major barrier to more working class people being in both sectors.

In addition to some examples of low pay, many people noted the preponderance of short-term, project-based contracts. Respondents from small organisations were sympathetic to the difficulty their employers had in offering more secure roles when funding was too often small, short term and restricted.

Some people felt there was a need for organisations to address this issue collectively with funders who were often unaware of the cumulative impact of their individual funding decisions. For some there was also a need for better trade union activity to establish sector minimum conditions.

Participants, particularly those early on in their careers, often summed up this issue by noting that their position in the think tank or anti-poverty sector felt very precarious and that their working class background felt very close.

“If I lost my job I would have to then be reliant on my mum who is very much working class and wouldn’t be able to support me so it’s like the link to that fragility with which I have my place in this world right now. I feel it very strongly all the time.”

Think tank person

“I think that low wages, lack of permanent positions are likely to deter many applicants from any class background from applying to work in or staying in the sector.”

Anti-poverty sector person

“Being working-class is understanding that everything you have achieved is fragile; everything can be taken from you.”

Think tank person

This is more of a problem in policy, campaigns, communications, fundraising, senior management and board roles

A consistent feeling amongst those in the focus groups and interviews was that the lack of class diversity was chiefly an issue in the policy, research, campaigns, communications, fundraising, senior management and board roles in both anti-poverty and think tank roles.

Few people we spoke to felt this was as pronounced an issue in support functions (such as HR and finance) or, where relevant, service delivery teams. It should be noted therefore that many findings in this report relate specifically to those functions where the problem is most pronounced rather than necessarily to organisations as a whole.

This mirrors experiences in broadcasting and accountancy where, respectively, commissioning teams and partners were much less class diverse than the finance, HR, IT and other support divisions^{ix}.



The lack of class diversity shows in organisational cultures

The relative absence of working class people in both sectors was felt by many participants to show up in organisational cultures.

Interpersonal class discrimination is rare, but not absent, especially when it comes to accents

While they were rare, people did report some instances of interpersonal class discrimination. Most people who had experienced instances reported colleagues mocking their accent and/or suggesting they change it to get on. More commonly people with accents that would not be considered “posh” were acutely aware that their accent was rare and impacted how welcome and confident they felt in their organisations.

“I have experienced negative comments about my accent and work history previously, so now I mask my accent to prevent this from happening again.”

Anti-poverty sector person

“Accents are really relevant to this - I’ve struggled at times to be taken seriously because of my accent, and I also worry that assumptions are being made about me but never discussed.”

Anti-poverty sector person

“I feel a lot more confident going into a meeting with 10-15 people working at [location] Council or a Local Authority and tend to hear accents much more like my accent and tend to just have a feeling of something in common, some common ground and I can feel much more confident and hold myself differently [as opposed to team meetings].”

Think tank person

In focus groups and interviews, some participants also discussed how accents were a poor proxy for class. They suspected some middle class colleagues with under-represented accents (particularly some northern ones) were treated like they were working class because of some colleagues' poor understanding of how class diverse parts of the UK or other countries are. By contrast, and as noted above, some people of colour felt their class background was assumed due to colleagues falsely assuming that all people of colour were from working class backgrounds.

Participants also reported some instances of colleagues downplaying or dismissing concerns. Some had been told, with no evidence, that there wasn't a class problem in the organisation and a handful of people had had someone tell them words to the effect of 'you're not working class' because they didn't conform to an overly narrow, sometimes stereotype-laden view of what it is to be from a working class background (e.g. exclusively urban, northern, white and from a family of ex-industrial workers).

"I was told there wasn't a class issue at [the think tank they work in]."

Think tank person

It is commonly assumed that people from working class backgrounds are not in the room

A common way participants reported being made to feel uneasy and/or alone in organisations was colleagues indirectly revealing that they suspected everyone in the room came from similar, non-working class backgrounds.

This sometimes came in the form of colleagues speaking about people on low incomes in othering or distant terms that assumed no one in the room would be related to or be close friends with them, or hard up themselves. It also showed in some colleagues assuming everyone would feel able to participate in a conversation about middle class experiences growing up, or about attending university.

"I feel like an alien working in a policy environment. People making recommendations about people like me, talking about working class people like we're an abstract concept. We walk among you guys!"

Anti-poverty sector person

"Sounds flippant but an example is that it took me quite a while to feel strong enough to admit I hadn't heard of the shops, clothes, holiday destinations of my peers, which was a mixture of inbred self-shame and a lack of awareness or interest by peers."

Think-tank person

"The topic of conversations with peers tends to be reflective of more middle class upbringing – travel, holidays."

Anti-poverty sector person

A premium is placed on sounding rather than necessarily being clever

This was a strong theme of conversations with people from working class backgrounds in the think tank sector, but not entirely absent from the anti-poverty sector.

Many participants felt that while the think tank sector had a strong internal narrative that what matters is strong data and good ideas, the reality was often that confidence, debating style and networks were valued more highly in who was hired, promoted and given a platform.

“There are people who are clever but aren’t good at sounding clever and that’s where the class thing comes in, in quite a big way.”

Think tank person

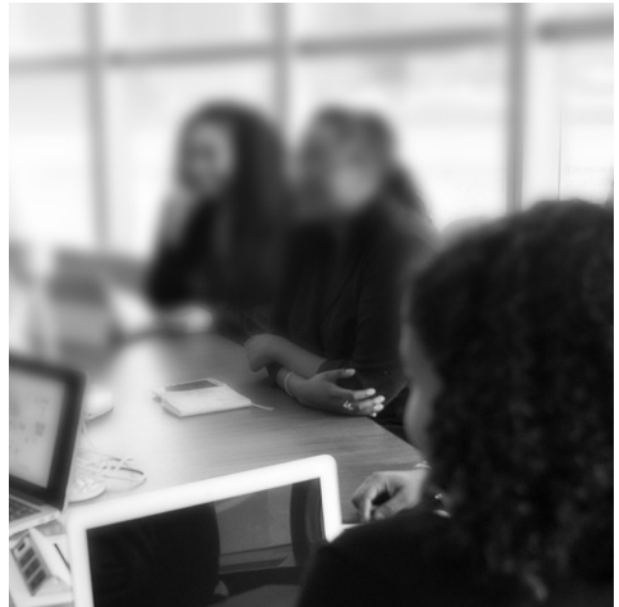
“In my experience people have a very fixed view of what someone ‘clever’ sounds like.”

Anti-poverty sector person

This issue was especially acute for the working class women we spoke to. Many talked about their difficulties overcoming the implicit assumptions that clever equals a well-off man, and how this can be internalised by women, reducing their confidence. Some women mentioned instances where their work or ideas had been better received when repeated or delivered by middle or upper-class men in their organisation.

“[talking about the premium placed on confidence] This could be another reason why working class women in particular are not a bigger part of our space.”

Think tank person



There is an absence of senior role models in both sectors

While respondents reported a growing number of instances of people in senior roles speaking about their working class background, people in more junior roles or early on in their careers still felt there was an absence of role models they could look up to and/or approach for advice.

Early career participants were often unsure whether the absence of senior role models was a reflection of the absence of people at that level from working class backgrounds or a reflection that to ‘get on’ you had to hide your background.

It shows in the work organisations do (and don't do).

Policy conversations can be 'other worldly' and 'impractical'

Many of those interviewed who were regularly part of conversations about policy ideas (and to a lesser extent service design) felt these discussions often revealed a lack of grounding in the issues being discussed.

Participants described these conversations as 'other-worldly', 'unreal', 'impractical' and 'abstract'. Some noted that in these moments they were often trying to weigh up whether to intervene and 'out' their personal experiences or let it pass because they were worrying about getting angry or upset if they did.

"I'm often working alongside colleagues who have very limited experienced of educational or financial hardship, meaning an inability to empathise with people in those situations. Their worldviews and reality are far removed from my Southeast London upbringing and being the first member of my family to access higher education."

Think tank person

Problems are too often assumed to be policy or innovation gaps

Several people working in both think tanks and the anti-poverty charities commented that they felt that issues related to people being on low incomes were often primarily or even solely treated as problems that were missing a policy innovation rather than also being questions of power and politics.

"I feel if there were more working class people in think tanks we'd be having more conversations about power relations. We're more comfortable with new ideas not analysing why some people don't have more political sway and what we do about that. Often we've known for years what the policy answer is."

Think tank person

In a related way, some participants felt that there was a tendency in parts of both sectors to over-assume that problems facing those on low incomes were due to there being a lack of middle class people thinking smart things about them.

"I might be oversensitive to this, but it does sometimes feel like it's much easier for someone to get major funding for some experimental new conceptual thinking or service design wheeze – which 90% of the time are old ideas rehashed – than it is to get people on low incomes some money to get cracking securing the change they know they need."

Anti-poverty sector person

Organisations reveal the absence of working class staff in how they speak

The odd and needlessly complex use of language was a recurring theme for the people from working class backgrounds we spoke to.

Those people from working class backgrounds in anti-poverty charities were often uncomfortable with how the language used by people on low incomes to talk about themselves and their situation was often discarded and replaced with needlessly academic or inadvertently patronising or insulting terms.

This was also an issue for the young working class people we spoke to in this study (and young people at RECLAIM we have spoken to previously, when analysing the problem of ‘poshsplaining’ in the charity sector^x).

“When the word ‘poverty’ is used, you normally think of your own community as not that bad as you try to sugar-coat the situation a bit [...] it has such negative connotations.”

Young working class person at RECLAIM

Several people spoke about how they would never have described themselves using the language their organisation uses about families like theirs (such as ‘destitute’, ‘dispossessed’, ‘voiceless’, ‘the most vulnerable’ or in ‘poverty’). Participants felt the words lacked dignity and could serve to individualise what are typically structural problems.

Others were annoyed that plain English terms like ‘hard up’, ‘skint right now’ and ‘struggling to make ends meet’, that are widely used and understood, were swapped for terms that didn’t resonate as much with the public or ended up being subject to endless debate (such as whether ‘poverty’ exists in the UK).

“I feel like I only hear ‘poverty’ conversations as outside of the UK”

Young working class person at RECLAIM

“Having the charity full of middle class people gives it more of an air of pity.”

Anti-poverty sector person

Long-standing research supports these concerns. Research by the JRF in 2007 noted that: “‘Poverty’ was something that described ‘other people’.... the word ‘poverty’ is unhelpful. No one near to or below the poverty line described themselves as ‘poor’ or ‘living in poverty’.

In fact, they seemed to want to avoid the tag.”^{xi}. Suggested alternatives were ‘have-nots’, ‘struggling’, ‘scraping by’ and ‘going without’. Further research in 2009 concluded that “using the term ‘poverty’ is not very successful in getting people to engage with the issue”^{xii}.

Similarly, research conducted by Kantar for Shelter in 2017^{xiii} found that people facing homelessness and other housing difficulties disliked some of language used by anti-poverty charities about them. The researchers noted that participants found terms like ‘poor’, ‘destitute’ or ‘vulnerable’ were passive and “attached a level of blame to an individual”. They preferred terms like ‘hidden’ and ‘struggling’.

In the discussions that follow this research report, it would be interesting to examine why there has been implicit resistance within the anti-poverty sector to adopting the conclusions from earlier pieces of research.

“[There are] patronising ways of talking about individuals used by fundraisers ‘to pull heart strings’”

Anti-poverty sector person

There is a distance and pity implicit in some anti-poverty organisations' communications

Several participants in our interviews and focus groups discussed but found hard to describe a general sense that some anti-poverty organisations or colleagues have an air of pity about how they view people on low incomes.

Others talked about their unease at seeing colleagues being noticeably more interested in or energised by cases of drama-full poverty (e.g. cases of families or individuals affected by addiction and violence) rather than more typical cases of stress-full slow, dull grinding slog. This is, perhaps, a class equivalent of the 'male gaze' in feminist thinking^{xiv}, namely a 'middle class gaze' on working class people.

"It's about attitude and approach [...] I think that people romanticise working-class people in this country [...] a bit of a fascination [...] it's very subtle, minor codes."

Think tank person

Some working class people of colour in the anti-poverty sector interviewed also felt there was an element of 'white saviourism' in UK anti-poverty work, drawing parallels with debates in the international development sector.

"[Speaking about their experience of working in an organisation that does anti-poverty work internationally and domestically] If you come from wealth there is often a white saviourism that draws people to international work. It is hard to relate to domestic programmes if you don't understand or have compassion for it."

Anti-poverty sector person

Several people talked about a revealed distance in how organisations and colleagues talked. Several participants noted that in influencing, fundraising and senior management roles it was still rare to hear people in broadcast interviews talk in 'us' and 'we' terms, such as about 'those of us', 'our communities', 'my friends and family' when discussing those who were having a tough time.

Think tanks talk in needless 'word salads'

Several participants, especially in think tanks, said they felt the sector often used needless 'word salads' of complex or abstract jargon which risked making their reports impenetrable to people looking to engage with their work for the first time (such as people exploring a career in the sector).

"[Asked what would be different if the sector was more representative] I think language would be more direct."

Think tank person

"Last year I began working for a large INGO. Even though I had worked in other charities for years, the language used at an INGO was a big barrier to integration. I would love organisations to scale back on the academic language and jargon - it isn't inclusive or an effective means of communicating / engaging people."

Anti-poverty sector person

People on low incomes are often too narrowly viewed through an economic lens

Many of those from working class backgrounds in the policy, research and campaigning functions in think tanks and anti-poverty organisations felt that their departments analysed the problems facing those on low incomes too narrowly through a lens of pounds and pence.

People cited instances where key components of the problems people were facing were missed (e.g. a service or benefit may deliver good income results but be humiliating to use, or the barriers faced by some with low social capital in the job market went unconsidered).

They also noted instances where insufficient thought had been given to people's pride and dignity in how a service or policy was designed. Some noted that this was compounded by a lack of race, gender and disability diversity in some workplaces.

One person reflected on why the debate about the positives of cash transfers used by humanitarian organisations abroad (both in terms of value for money and people's dignity) was largely missing in discussions about food banks and equivalents.

"We'd talk less in terms of economic impacts and more about the daily reality of living on a low income - making our policy recommendations relevant/understandable to the people they aim to benefit. The organisation I work for is great at getting column inches/press coverage - it is a shame that the people who take this space come from similarly wealthy backgrounds."

Think tank person

Some current ways of involving people with experience of being hard up are clumsy or arm's length

Many people welcomed the increased focus in both sectors on the value of 'lived experience' in recent years. However, some also had concerns about how experience of living on a low income was still often not highly valued, held at arm's length and/or considered as something for case studies or 'lived experience groups' rather than a vital skill set needed around every senior management and board table.

"The only time working-class people can get involved in things is when the sector talks about 'lived experience' - yuk - which is just another form of tokenism in my honest opinion. Or 'co-production', or any of these weird terms."

Anti-poverty sector person

"The organisation I was working for began to place great emphasis on lived experience... at no time did anyone seek to understand what lived experience already existed in the organisation."

Anti-poverty sector person

The work feels like it lacks urgency

Many of the people we spoke to in the research, across both sectors, felt their organisation's work sometimes lacked the urgency that comes from a more direct experience of living on a low income.

"I look around and wonder if other people get what winning and losing these campaigns really means."

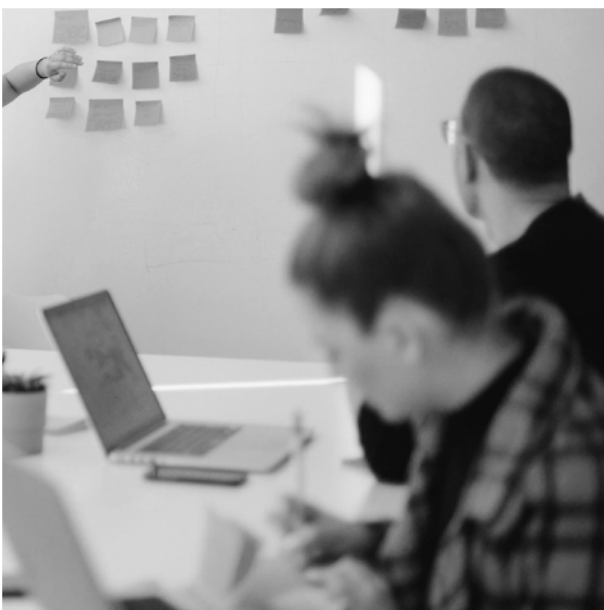
Anti-poverty sector person

"I feel a really strong sense of accountability to the people I grew up with. If my work doesn't deliver, I know it matters."

Think tank person

"I genuinely think that this sector doesn't want to 'win' – its leaders are much happier to keep getting big funding pots, saying platitudes, and doing anything to not engage with root causes. There's no urgency."

Anti-poverty sector person



Feeling radical sometimes seems more important than winning change

Some participants felt that, for some of their colleagues feeling radical or moral or having a radical or 'provocative' personal brand was more important than securing transformative change. They remarked that a notable minority of colleagues from middle class backgrounds weighted being seen to be a good person more highly than actually achieving change.

The young people on RECLAIM programmes we spoke to had a similar feeling that, if they were to work in charities, they would encounter many well-meaning but not necessarily effective "do-gooders". When pushed, the young people felt this stemmed from there being people in these charities who didn't have a good sense of the reality of being on a low income so would struggle to come up with good solutions.

The anti-poverty sector is under-connected to the labour market

A small number of people mentioned a feeling that the anti-poverty sector had a tendency to under-analyse what has and has not worked in the past to win changes for people on low incomes. Some participants noted that this had the result of under-playing the historic and current role the labour movement played. For others this was linked to a sense that analysis of the labour market and the management of macro-economy was oddly missing in discussions which had a tendency to focus too exclusively on the welfare system.

The opportunity if we fix this is massive

Pleasingly, a great many of the people we spoke to during this research were optimistic that change was possible. For some this was because they had seen progress, albeit faltering, on improving diversity in other areas. Others, especially those in focus groups, saw potential simply in this being the first time they had discussed the issue with sector colleagues.

For many people there was excitement that the conversation about diversity and inclusion was happening on several fronts at the same time with new urgency.

“It’s great you’re doing this project and it’s much appreciated.”

Think tank person

“Thanks for looking into this issue. The think tank and charity sector all face the same challenges in providing accessible routes into permanent, well-paid employment for people from low income backgrounds. My life was transformed by a paid internship programme that just about covered rent and travel costs without needing to work a second job - I feel very fortunate to have had that opportunity.”

Think tank person

People felt the work of think tanks and anti-poverty organisations would look very different if there were more working class people in the room

There was a long list of ways in which people felt that the work of think tanks and anti-poverty organisations would be different if organisations were more inclusive of working class people (see graph on page 36).

What is striking from these survey results is that improvements in pay and conditions, as vitally

important as they are (especially at the moment), are not top. Instead, the core business of the organisations and the language used to describe people on low incomes come out top, speaking to the centrality of participants’ feelings around dignity, priorities and urgency.

Towards the end of our interviews and focus groups we asked participants what they felt would be different if the two sectors had a similar class make up to the country at large. We asked them to picture their organisations, sectors and the wider ecosystems they worked in to draw out a number of common themes.

“There is often a big disconnect between the communities charities are supporting and the demographics of the organisation. So many clumsy mistakes are made as a result and the lack of diversity impacts the ability to make real systemic change.”

Anti-poverty sector person

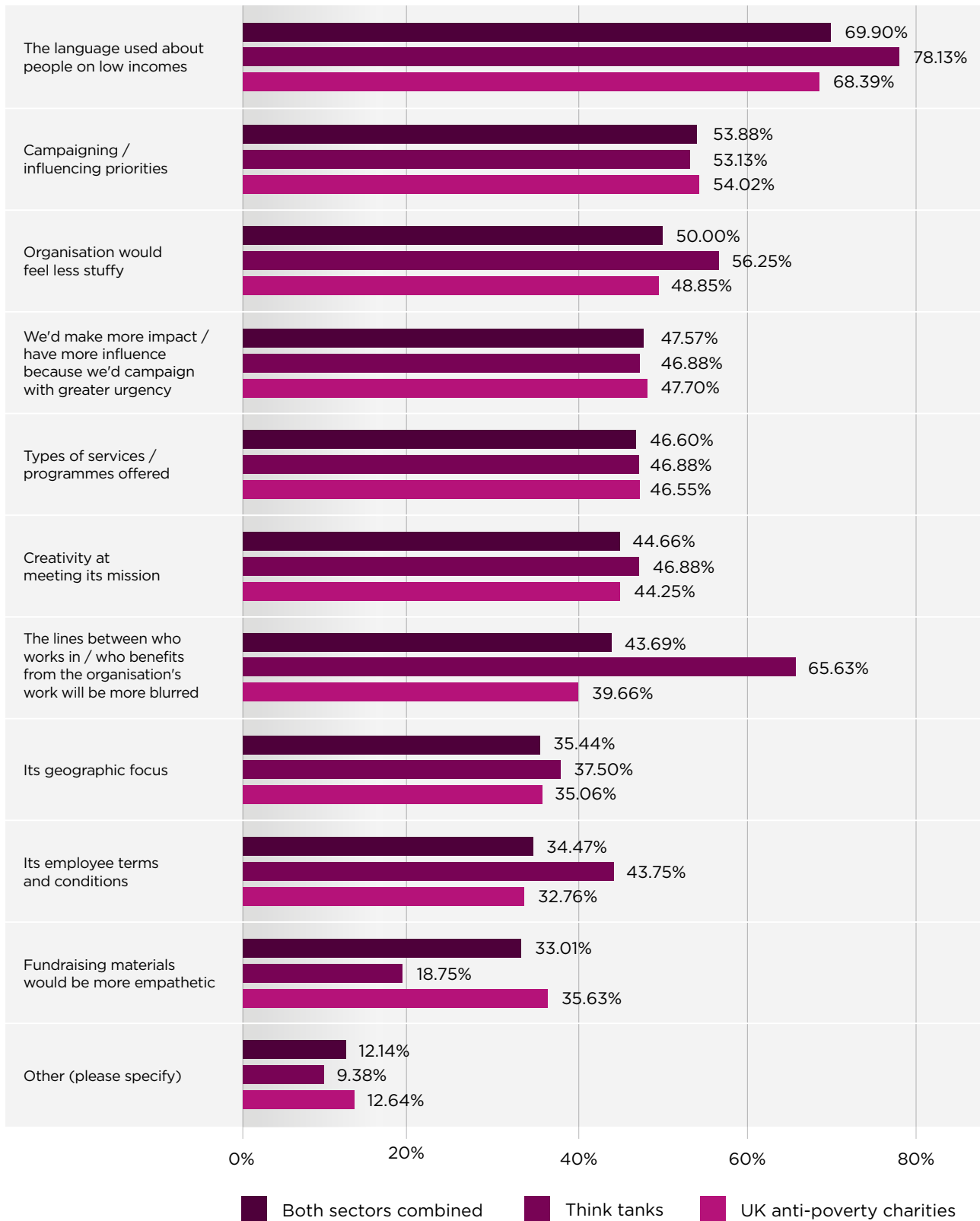
The diversity problem feels even bigger than it is because there is an inclusion problem

A great many people we spoke to aren’t open about their backgrounds within their organisations. This leaves a lot of valuable experience and insight hidden from internal conversations and external work. If organisations can develop more of an inclusive culture there are rapid gains to be made in their work and how some staff feel about it.

“I only really talk about my background with colleagues when we’re outside of work e.g. in a cafe or pub, but never really feel like I can bring that part of myself into the office or during a work-based conversation (even if what I have to say is relevant and would help the conversation).”

Anti-poverty sector person

Which aspects of your organisation's work would be different if there were more people from working class backgrounds in the organisation at all levels?



“People don’t believe / are surprised that I lived in social housing, got free school meals and uniform and that we were poor. Some of this is based on people’s own way of perceiving and labelling people. Some of this is because I have worked hard to ‘fit in’ - sadly a necessity in progressing in the sector.”

Anti-poverty sector person

Welcoming a wealth of talent into our public life

Anti-poverty organisations have often led work precisely charting the proportion of children in relative poverty over the last 40+ years. At any one time this has been between a fifth to a third of children. A perverse upside of this tragedy is that there is an enormous talent pool from which think tanks and anti-poverty charities can recruit researchers, policy wonks, comms people, fundraisers, senior managers and campaigners who know about low incomes and the practical reality of policy intimately.

Creating greater legitimacy for organisations’ work

There was a widespread feeling from participants that if their teams looked more like the country there would be greater public trust in their organisations. Both politics and charities have faced crises of trust in recent years and there is a growing proportion of the public who feel let down or ignored by institutions and leaders.

For example, in 2021 IPPR found that 63% of the public believe that politicians are merely ‘out for themselves’^{xv}. In 2014, this figure was 48%. In 1944 it was just 35%^{xvi}. People interviewed in this research felt that think tank and anti-poverty charities looking more like the country would make an important contribution to turning these statistics around.

“If you see someone like you, presenting something, you feel like it’s more genuine. When people saw Marcus Rashford, people can empathise with him because it’s coming from his lived experience and his heart. When the government did it [reinstated food support during school holidays], they did it because they received loads of backlash and they wanted the publicity to cool down.”

Young working class person at RECLAIM

“If you had more working-class people in the think tank sector, [...] different issues might come to the limelight.”

Think tank person

Generating more effective work

The vast majority of respondents also felt that the work of think tanks and anti-poverty organisations would be more effective if more inclusive of people from working class backgrounds.

A regular response from those working in think tanks was that work and the solutions it promoted would be more ‘real world’. This stemmed from a feeling that many colleagues hadn’t had to regularly use or receive many state services and/or benefits and therefore had a less effective eye for how policy announcements and acts of parliament played out in practice.

“I think policy making would be so much better if people weren’t so disconnected.”

Think tank person

“If your experience set is narrow then the micro implications of the macro that you’re talking about then doesn’t seem to be that much of an issue, it’s more of a theoretical, abstract thing.”

Think tank person

“It can help to have a bit of a grounding in certain areas... generally speaking when people talk of the state being the solution to many things, if you’re from a working class background you often have a bad experience with the state whether that’s in schools, whether that’s hospital, whether that’s job centres, all those things look very different when you’re from a working class background... you often have a very different experience.”

Think tank person

“There are some great frontline services which are rooted in their communities and recruit staff from them, so it’s not all negative.”

Anti-poverty sector person

Several people also felt that their organisations would be better communicators. In particular those in anti-poverty charities felt their organisations would make much greater headway in generating the public and political will for the improvements they seek.

“Campaigns wise - we would actually reach working class communities, without reductive stereotypes and labelling them ‘hard to reach’.”

Anti-poverty sector person

“We need to just say it in plain English. If I can’t understand it, then the general public aren’t going to understand it.”

Think tank person

Helping to end the shame associated with being hard up

It was not lost on many participants that some of their organisations spoke about the importance of ending the stigma and shame associated with being on a low income but were places that either didn’t employ many people with that experience or left those with it feeling unable to talk about it openly.

People therefore felt there is, conversely, a great opportunity for organisations in both sectors, especially anti-poverty charities, to model what a workplace looks like where there isn’t shame and stigma associated with knowing what it’s like to struggle.

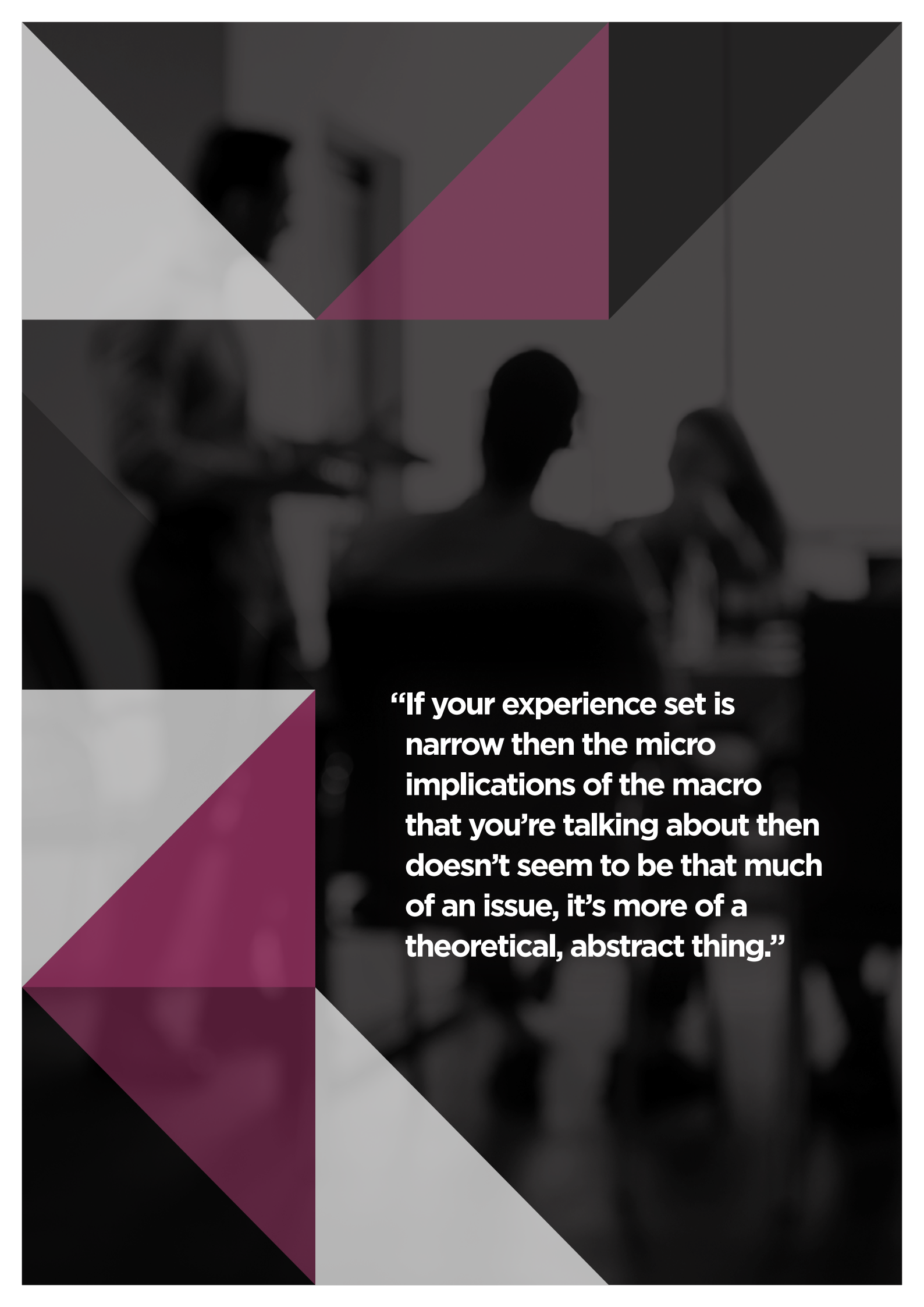
Several people spoke about how organisations that looked more like the country would communicate more in first person ‘us’ and ‘we’ rather than third person ‘they’ and ‘them’. They also noted that media work and campaigns would speak to the great pride and dignity people show in trying times rather than use terms that (if people realised were about them) would make them feel worse.

“I don’t think there’s any organisation or aspect of an organisation’s work that can’t be improved by having a more representative workforce. The irony being in charity and think tank world we’re supposed to be helping people like me, but we never to talk them, just about them and often with, at best, a limited understanding.”

Think tank person

“There is a bit of a weird othering in charities in that the framing of their missions is like saviour syndrome e.g. ‘we need to help these poor people’. But, I think if there were more people from working class backgrounds creating the communications and in the conversations around how to best achieve their mission, the framing would be much more inspiring and uplifting.”

Anti-poverty sector person



“If your experience set is narrow then the micro implications of the macro that you’re talking about then doesn’t seem to be that much of an issue, it’s more of a theoretical, abstract thing.”

A future built by all our talents

There has been undoubted value in this project creating the space for people from working class backgrounds in think tanks and anti-poverty charities to talk about and share their experiences, frustrations and hopes for the future. However, we want to go further and ensure this work creates lasting, systemic change. At RECLAIM we owe it to the working class young people on our programmes to do everything we can to create the jobs and positions of power they can step into. They should see themselves and their future selves reflected in every layer of our most influential charities and be under no illusion that if people like them are missing from organisations it is a reflection of the charity, not them.



“[Charity teams] You can be part of it even though you might not have experienced something because people who come from a point of privilege also have a platform that they give marginalised groups to speak on so they can definitely be allies and help but when it comes to making, figuring it out and campaigns, making manifestos, stuff like that I think it should be done by the people with experience.”

Young working class person at RECLAIM

What follows isn't a complete or set list of actions required of organisations, leaders, boards, funders and others. We know there is a great diversity of organisations in these two sectors. Some are large, securely-funded institutions, while others are small and constantly battling to keep the lights on.

Likewise, there is a great diversity in the scale and nature of the class diversity and inclusion problems within and between organisations. We therefore won't pretend there is a one size fits all solution. Instead, what follows are suggestions from the people we interviewed in this project.

We recognise that work on equality and diversity is both vital and can feel intimidating. It is also work that's never done, or that has one successful path to be followed. We are not writing this from some high horse: RECLAIM, like many organisations, has a lot more work to do.

We simply want to see openness to change, the willingness to give some things a go and a level of commitment demonstrated by setting challenging goals and working through what has and hasn't worked.

Pledging action

Organisations need to hold themselves accountable for action on this problem

Participants were keen for us to use this report to ask charities in both sectors to pledge to take the time to reflect on this report and act on what it means for their work.

We are therefore asking think tanks and anti-poverty charities to sign up to a simple pledge to demonstrate their commitment to becoming places which make the most of working class talent and experience.

The three actions that form the collective commitment are:

1. By the end of 2022, set out your ambitions and initial priorities for class diversity and inclusion in your organisation and how this links to wider work you're doing on diversity and inclusion and make this publicly available^{xvii}.

2. Collect data on your organisation's class diversity by June 2023^{xviii}.

3. Collaborate with each other organisations to share knowledge and best practice at least once a year

We are pleased to launch this report with several organisations already signed up to this commitment.

We recognise that the current, increasingly widespread, ways of measuring class diversity are imperfect; however, they are nonetheless a significant improvement on having no data and are easy to compare. (Incidentally, it would be a good think tank project to consider how these might be improved.)

"Lived experience is SO helpful for charities! We need to embrace a richer, more diverse workforce. We'd be so much stronger with a more reflective workforce."

Anti-poverty sector person

Do not consider class in isolation from other areas of diversity and inclusion

Class diversity and inclusion is not more or less important than making a workplace welcoming to disabled people, people of colour, women, LGBTQI+ people and many other groups. As has been well charted, forms of marginalisation intersect, creating not just compound problems but new ones for people affected both by, say, class and race or class and gender discrimination^{xix}. This makes it important for work on class to be integrated with work on inclusion in general.

You're not alone in working on this

A large and growing number of organisations are committed to assessing and improving their class diversity and inclusion. What's more, in addition to RECLAIM, there are several organisations who work with them to help make it happen. For anti-poverty and think tank charities we are also planning to host a conference and regular events to help people share and discuss good practices.

"I think it's important to think about the think tank sector as a sector, and the accountability and change that could come from pushing for sharing of information and collation of that information, e.g. recruitment strategies, diversity - following the (albeit imperfect) example of larger sectors like law/accounting etc."

Think tank person

Areas to focus on

Any list of issues to look at won't do justice to the full range of ideas people suggested to us. Further, those ideas ranged from modest tweaks to those wanting to unpick the foundations of charities in general. This debate benefits from the range, but here time and resources limit us to mentioning the most commonly suggested thoughts.

1. Organisations need to start collecting class data

As addressed in the pledge, organisations need to start collecting data on class alongside their wider equalities-related data collection. This is the first step in organisations understanding the scale of the problem and which management layers and teams it concentrates in.

"If that was built into the think tank and charity sector by some sort of data collection on progression and how many people from various backgrounds you have got working there and that's all collated, I think, for people working there and for people trying to progress it makes it easier to have those conversations and it will hopefully become a thing the way that it is in the more corporate world. It challenges that assumption that just because the sector does certain work outwardly it doesn't need to do it inwardly."

Think tank person

2. Outreach work needs resourcing and service delivery organisations need to track how many people go from service to staff/board

Increasing the diversity of both sectors relies on more people knowing that these roles exist and that organisations welcome people from working class and other unrepresented backgrounds.

This is especially the case for people who either haven't attended university or haven't attended Russell Group ones.

Effective outreach programmes can be expensive and have long lead times. This is clearly beyond the reach of smaller think tanks, for example, and is therefore ripe for sector-wide collaboration. The Think Tank Ops Network is quietly trialling some important work in this area that can be built on.

Anti-poverty organisations that deliver services, are community-based or have 'lived-experienced' groups have clear routes to outreach. They need to collect data on and hold themselves accountable for how many people from their services (or the services of similar organisations) transition to staff and trustee roles.

3. Organisations need to offer longer contracts and/or collectively challenge funders who in effect force them not to

For organisations dependent on short-term project funding, it can be incredibly difficult to offer longer-term staff contracts. However, this can't become an argument for passivity. Organisations need either to take on the increased risk of longer-term contracts (rather than expecting individual staff members to) and/or lobby funders to change how they fund to stop the churn of short-term contracts that make jobs inaccessible to working class people.

A couple of people we spoke to during this research hoped that funders would keep some of the flexibility of approach they adopted during the COVID lockdowns. One example was maintaining or creating tight grant objectives but removing needless restricted funding conditions that made it difficult for managers to fund secure roles across multiple funding pots.

4. Organisations need to trial recruitment approaches and swap notes on what works (and what doesn't)

As is increasingly standard in equality, diversity and inclusion work, organisations need to ensure the data collected allows them to track where in recruitment processes they are failing to attract or filter-in talent from unrepresented groups. Again this is easier to do and analyse for bigger organisations, but smaller ones are still able to make use of an increasing number of useful online tools to make this easier.

There isn't one recommended approach that can cover the diversity of organisations and roles covered by this report. During the course of this research, several organisations mentioned trials of different approaches with highly varying results. This is a critical area for organisations to track data, experiment and share results with one another.

Given how often it came up in discussions with research participants, it is especially important for organisations in both sectors (particularly think tanks) to assess whether they have processes that currently result in confidence being valued far more highly than skill, experience and knowledge.

"A fair interview process is really important. [...] Not necessarily rewarding confidence. [...] confidence tends to get you really far in an interview."

Think tank person

People were also keen for organisations, again especially think tanks, to assess whether their processes for appointing more ad-hoc or advisory roles, such as 'associate', 'fellow' and consultants, are open to circles of talent and experience beyond close contacts of senior staff.

5. Changing organisations requires active succession planning by boards and senior managers

Participants spoke regularly about how they felt that a lack of class diversity and inclusion within their organisation was more acute the higher up they looked, culminating in their senior management and boards (which have outsized influence on organisational cultures). A further strong theme was that participants didn't want their organisation to be passive and simply wait to see who applied for roles and promotions.

Boards and senior managers aren't necessarily responsible for the organisations they inherit, but they are responsible for the organisations they leave behind and who replaces them.

"More working class people need to be welcomed into the boards / governing bodies. [The] criteria too often excludes."

Anti-poverty sector person

If organisations are committed to looking like the country, boards and senior managers need to develop succession plans that will make this happen. Senior leaders, especially of larger organisations, should be confident that when they leave their role there will be a wealth of diverse talent applying to replace them and with a fair shot at being successful.

Looking at succession planning at all levels will prevent an over-focus on entry-level only solutions. Instead, organisations should consider a wide range of solutions such as support for board recruitment, mentoring schemes, efforts to help working class colleagues build up their social capital and much more.

"Knowing who people are [...] at the time I was like 'God, everybody knows who everybody is' and I feel like I have to do extra work to make myself a directory so that if names get thrown around you're not then the idiot that doesn't know."

Think tank person

“The premium placed on confidence - interpersonal or in presentations - for both recruitment and promotion, is often a critical factor. It can often colour all the other attributes people have. It is the thing which many working class people lack.”

Think tank person

6. Organisations need to do the hard yards on culture change, but they don't need to do it alone

Changing a culture is hard, imprecise, and unending work. It is also clear from this research that it is vital. Think tanks and anti-poverty charities need to find ways to make a wider range of people feel welcome working for them and allow them to bring the full weight of experience and talent to their work.

Organisations need to do the hard yards on culture change, but they don't need to do it alone. Think tanks and anti-poverty organisations need to create spaces to share what has and hasn't been working with one another and where needed should seek external support to do this. There is now a wealth of talented people and organisations that are supporting charities to create cultures that welcome talent from all of society.

An important part of this culture change will be countering any idea that there is a trade-off between improving diversity and recruiting for talent. As noted earlier, if we believe that talent is evenly distributed in this country then organisations recruiting for talent will look like the country.

If people in either sector think they recruit for talent but sit atop organisations dominated by a narrow section of society, they should be encouraged to explain why they believe this narrow group is more naturally talented or why other groups - like working class people - are somehow less interested in shaping the future of the country.

7. We need more senior role models

People in the earlier stages of their careers want and need to see more visible senior role models in their sectors. There is, however, no duty on those in senior leadership or board positions from working class backgrounds to fill this gap. As we have seen, there are plenty of reasons why some people have declined to talk publicly about their upbringing and their relevant personal experiences. However, for those tempted to do so, be assured that there is an audience eager to hear from you and, where possible, benefit from your guidance and mentorship.

“We need more working class role models, so we feel more comfortable and can see that we can progress, at the moment in my organisation it's all middle class people in senior management.”

Anti-poverty sector person

Where organisations find, via their data collection, they have senior colleagues from working class backgrounds but no senior public role models they need to reflect on why that is for their wider culture change work.

8. Those of us who know what it's like to be hard up deserve the right to set the terms

From the survey data and interviews, it is clear that think tanks and, in particular, anti-poverty charities need to change how they talk about people on low incomes. This does not need extensive new research, but the use of existing insight work and, more importantly, greater efforts to listen to and reflect in communications how people talk about their own experiences of being hard-up.

It will be tempting to stick to terms commonly understood in each sector (but not necessarily much beyond it). However, there needs to be a very high burden of proof to use language that both alienates and, in some cases, insults the group of people it is referring to (which often includes colleagues).

The best arbiters of that decision will likely be people with experience of being on a low-income themselves and those with the most to gain or lose if campaigns or policies work or don't.

This important change doesn't need extensive resources or needless rigid language policing. Instead, it will be symbolic of a wider cultural change. A similar sign will be a greater proportion of spokespeople able and happy to use more 'us' and 'we' in the media, than theys and thems.

9. Working class people should be treated with dignity and respect

Many of those behind the creation of the welfare state were fixated with the idea that its services and protections shouldn't have the air of charity. Charity was, for them, demeaning and stripped proud people of their dignity^{xx}.

This needn't be true of modern charities, especially those engaged in campaigning and policy influencing like the anti-poverty sector and think tanks. However, as we have heard, for many people from working class backgrounds this is currently a very real risk.

Staff from middle and upper class backgrounds could deal with this by asking themselves one simple question when designing everything from funding bids to service interventions to campaigns and communications activities that feature working class people: would I like to be represented or helped in this way in front of my friends and neighbours?

If the answer to that question is no, it is probably because the product or proposal violates your sense of dignity in some way. If it triggers a sense of distance, discomfort or even shame in you, there is a fair chance it is profoundly alienating for and disrespectful of working class audiences. Don't talk about us in a way you wouldn't like us to talk about you is a good rule of thumb.

10. Funders have an outsized role to play

"Working in grant making, I think that having more people in working class backgrounds would definitively influence the types of grants and how they are distributed and assessed."

Anti-poverty sector person

Funders have outsized influence in the charity sector because relationships with trusts, foundations and philanthropists are often existential for think tanks and anti-poverty organisations. It follows, therefore, that a lack of class inclusion in funders has distortionary effects on the sector as a whole.

Funders would exponentially increase the impact of their grants if the expertise of working class people genuinely shaped funding allocation, restrictions and grant lengths. This could, of course, take the form of more 'lived experience' groups, committees and panels and that is definitely better than nothing.

Best of all, however, would be much stronger working class representation in the senior management teams and boards of funders, with all of the fresh perspective and urgency that such a change would bring.

11. Listen to and work with sector networks

An uplifting aspect of many of the interviews was letting people who felt alone know that their frustrations were shared by others in their sector. There may not be enough people from working class backgrounds in the anti-poverty and think tank sectors, but at RECLAIM we are keen to better network the ones that are.

We are working with some of the interviewees to help create sector networks where possible and hope they become an ongoing source of support, mentors and pressure on organisations to live up to their pledges to improve.

Appendix

Respondent demographic data

Anti-poverty charities

There were 226 respondents to the opt-in survey asking for the views of people from working-class backgrounds who currently (or in the recent past) had worked in the UK anti-poverty sector. 220 self-identified as working class. The remaining 6 respondents' answers were filtered out of the results here and above.

What is your age?

Answer Choices	Responses	
16-24	7.24%	16
25-34	37.56%	83
35-44	28.96%	64
45-54	15.84%	35
55-64	9.05%	20
65+	1.36%	3
Answered - 221		Skipped - 0

How many years have you worked in this part of the sector cumulatively?

Answer	Choices	Responses
Under 1 year	10.61%	21
1-5 years	37.37%	74
6-10 years	21.72%	43
11-20 years	21.72%	43
21-30 years	4.55%	9
Over 30 years	4.04%	8
Answered - 198		Skipped - 23

Think tanks

There were 58 respondents to the opt-in survey asking for the views of people from working-class backgrounds who currently (or in the recent past) had worked in the UK think tank sector. 57 self-identified as working class. The remaining respondent's answers were filtered out of the results here and above.

What is your age?

Answer	Choices	Responses
16-24	1.75%	1
25-34	47.37%	27
35-44	24.56%	14
45-54	10.53%	6
55-64	14.04%	8
65+	1.75%	1
Answered - 57		Skipped - 0

How many years have you worked in this part of the sector cumulatively?

Answer Choices	Responses	
Under 1 year	18.60%	8
1-5 years	34.88%	15
6-10 years	16.28%	7
11-20 years	25.58%	11
21-30 years	2.33%	1
Over 30 years	2.33%	1
Answered - 43		Skipped - 14

Anti-poverty charities

I would describe my ethnicity as:

Answer	Choices	Responses
Arab	0.45%	1
Asian or Asian British: Indian	4.52%	10
Asian or Asian British: Pakistan	0.90%	2
Asian or Asian British: Bangladeshi	1.36%	3
Asian or Asian British: Chinese	0.00%	0
Asian or Asian British: Other	1.36%	3
Black or Black British: African	1.81%	4
Black or Black British: Caribbean	2.26%	5
Black or Black British: Other	0.00%	0
Mixed: White and Black Caribbean	1.81%	4
Mixed: White and Black African	0.45%	1
Mixed: White and Asian	2.71%	6
Mixed: Other	2.71%	6
White: British	69.68%	154
White: Irish	4.07%	9
White: Gypsy or Traveller	0.00%	0
Romany Gypsy	0.00%	0
White: Other	2.71%	6
Other ethnic group	0.45%	1
Other (please specify)	2.71%	6
Answered - 221	Skipped - 0	

Think tanks

I would describe my ethnicity as:

Answer	Choices	Responses
Arab	0.00%	0
Asian or Asian British: Indian	1.75%	1
Asian or Asian British: Pakistan	3.51%	2
Asian or Asian British: Bangladeshi	1.75%	1
Asian or Asian British: Chinese	0.00%	0
Asian or Asian British: Other	0.00%	0
Black or Black British: African	0.00%	0
Black or Black British: Caribbean	0.00%	0
Black or Black British: Other	3.51%	2
Mixed: White and Black Caribbean	1.75%	1
Mixed: White and Black African	0.00%	0
Mixed: White and Asian	0.00%	0
Mixed: Other	0.00%	0
White: British	82.46%	47
White: Irish	1.75%	1
White: Gypsy or Traveller	0.00%	0
Romany Gypsy	0.00%	0
White: Other	1.75%	1
Other ethnic group	0.00%	0
Other (please specify)	1.75%	1
Answered - 57	Skipped - 0	

Anti-poverty charities

Do you currently work in the charity sector for an organisation supporting people in the UK on low incomes?

Answer	Choices	Responses
Yes	64.68%	130
No	35.32%	71
Answered - 201		Skipped - 20

Do you consider yourself to have a disability?

Answer	Choices	Responses
Yes	18.64%	41
No	74.55%	164
Prefer not to say	6.82%	15
Answered - 220		Skipped - 1

What gender do you identify as?

Answer	Choices	Responses
Female	67.27%	148
Male	30.00%	66
Prefer not to say	0.91%	2
Other (if you are comfortable, please specify)	1.82%	4
Answered - 220		Skipped - 1

Think tanks

Do you currently work in the think tank sector for an organisation supporting people in the UK on low incomes?

Answer	Choices	Responses
Yes	54.35%	25
No	45.65%	21
Answered - 46		Skipped - 11

Do you consider yourself to have a disability?

Answer	Choices	Responses
Yes	14.29%	8
No	83.93%	47
Prefer not to say	1.79%	1
Answered - 56		Skipped - 1

What gender do you identify as?

Answer	Choices	Responses
Female	59.65%	34
Male	38.60%	22
Prefer not to say	0.00%	0
Other (if you are comfortable, please specify)	1.75%	1
Answered - 57		Skipped - 0

Anti-poverty charities

What departments/functions have you worked in?

Answer	Choices	Responses
HR	2.51%	5
Service/ programme delivery	39.70%	79
Fundraising	16.08%	32
Communications	28.14%	56
Policy, Research and Campaigns	49.75%	99
Senior Management	29.15%	58
Finance	3.02%	6
Public affairs	15.58%	31
Other (please specify)	13.57%	27
Answered - 199	Skipped - 22	

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