



West Cheshire

Poverty Truth

Briefing paper:

Learning from developing the West Cheshire Poverty Truth Commission

Edge Hill
University

I4P

Institute for
Public Policy and
Professional Practice

This briefing paper has been created by the Institute for Public Policy and Professional Practice at Edge Hill University to consider and reflect on the key learning from the development stage of the West Cheshire Poverty Truth Commission.

We would like to thank the Community Inspirers and Civic and Business and faith Leaders for their contributions to this briefing paper. We would also like to thank the West Cheshire Poverty Truth Commission team; Sonia Bassey, Clare Roberts, Anne-Marie Scragg and Zillah Edwards for their contributions to this briefing paper. Furthermore we would like to thank Glasgow Poverty Truth Commission, Salford Poverty Truth Commission and Leeds Poverty Truth Commission for generously sharing their successes and learning with us.

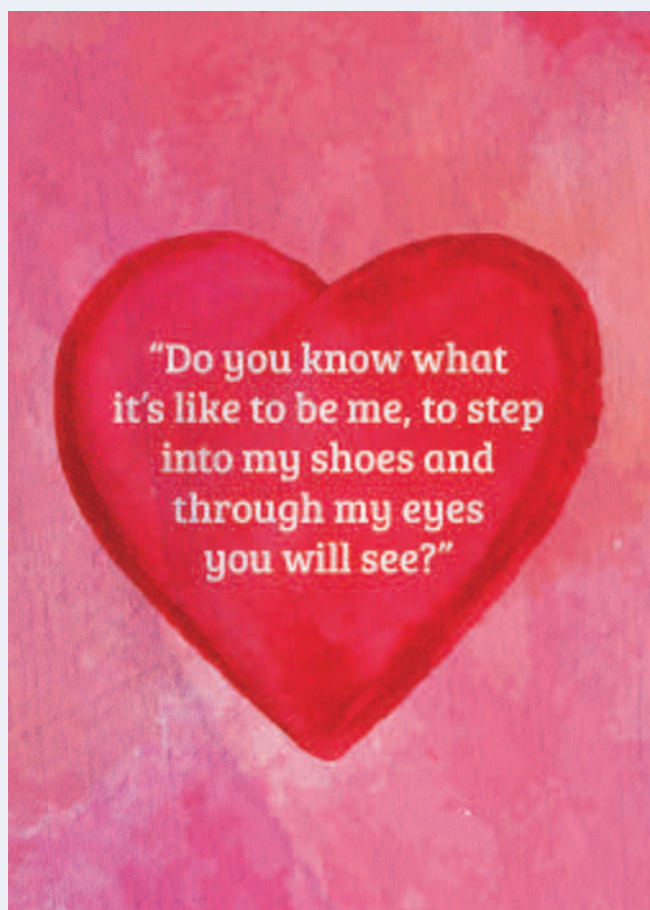
The purpose of this briefing paper is to reflect on the build up to the Poverty Truth Commission, the participatory work with the Community Inspirers and on what learning can be drawn from this process.

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The West Cheshire & Chester Poverty Truth Commission

The Poverty Truth Commission brings together some of Cheshire West and Chester's key decision makers with those living at the sharp end of poverty. The Commission works together towards overcoming poverty in the Borough, ensuring that those affected, are central to decision-making. The Commission believes poverty will only be truly addressed when those who experience it first-hand are at the heart of the process. Poverty Truth Commissions began in Scotland and have since been created in Leeds, Birmingham, Salford and other areas of the UK. West Cheshire is the fourth Poverty Truth Commission in the UK. All Poverty Truth Commissions, despite local variations in approach and practice, carry with them the theme taken from the South African post-apartheid process, "Nothing about us – without us – is for us." Poverty Truth Commissions developed from the belief that real progress towards overcoming poverty will be made when those who hold experience of poverty are central to the development, delivery and analysis of solutions.



The Institute for Public Policy and Professional Practice (I4P)

Edge Hill University's cross-disciplinary research and knowledge exchange initiative was established in 2013. The Institute is committed to exploring the opportunities for cross sector collaboration and co-operation and to draw on the experience of practitioners as well as academic researchers to inform new ways of working and learning. I4P were brought in to support the West Cheshire Poverty Truth Commission, who were seeking to develop a way of working which had an explicit commitment to supporting those whose lives had been directly affected by poverty and who were willing to talk about this (to testify), as a way of influencing key decision makers and so start to change practice and ways of working. I4P supported the preparations for the West Cheshire Poverty Truth Commission launch in February 2017.

Participatory approaches were used to work with people with experience of poverty, in preparation for the launch. In some Poverty Truth Commissions, those with experience of poverty are referred to as testifiers, the West Cheshire group decided to call themselves Community Inspirers. They felt that this was the best term as their role was about inspiring policy change and action via the sharing of their experiences. The Community Inspirers felt strongly that "you need to inspire to make change."

The participatory approach taken, starts from the premise that the individuals involved bring something very powerful to this process: themselves and their experiences. The participatory learning approach I4P work to, seeks to enable individuals to become more in charge of their learning and the decisions they make. As part of this process I4P supported West Cheshire Poverty Truth Commission's Community Inspirers, to engage in a variety of participatory activities and games aimed at building relationships and sharing knowledge of the area.

This briefing paper first considers the political context in which Poverty Truth Commission's sit, then summarises the work that I4P have done with the West Cheshire Poverty Truth Commission before drawing out key learning points.

The Political Context to Poverty Truth Commissions

In the UK today there are 13.5 million people living in poverty, 3.9 million of which are children (Tinson et al, 2016:6). In the North West of England there are 1.5 million people living in poverty, 26% of these are disabled people, 31% are living in the private rented sector and 46% are working families (Tinson et al, 2016:6). There is considerable geographical variation to the projected changes in poverty (Hood and Waters, 2017) with poverty predicted to reduce in the South East yet increase in the north. In 2015, the Trussell Trust distributed over one million emergency three day food parcels, one third of their recipient were children (Garratt, et al, 2016).

The nature of poverty is changing, there are more people in working families in poverty compared to five or ten years ago (Tinson et al, 2016:6). Levels of pensioner and child poverty have not changed in five years (Tinson et al, 2016:6). Absolute child poverty is projected to rise by 4.1 percentage points, primarily due to planned changes in working age benefits (Hood and Waters, 2017). There is a growing number of children in the private rented sector, which is a tenure linked with higher costs and more frequent house moves (Tinson et al, 2016:6).

There is a thirteen year gap in life expectancy for men and a 14 year gap in life expectancy for women between West Cheshire's most affluent and poorest wards (Garratt et al, 2016). Food parcels were distributed by West Cheshire Food Bank to people living in all wards of Cheshire West and Chester (Garratt, et al, 2016). There has been a

13% rise in the number of people using a Foodbank in the Borough over the last 12 months. A staggering 23% of households in West Cheshire have an income below the living wage of £15,511 per year, which amounts to 32,286 households and that figure soars to 39% in the Grange Ward of Ellesmere Port (Garratt et al, 2016). There are clear age differences in people's experiences; younger adults and working age adults were most likely to be using a food bank due to benefits issues and older people were more likely to experience debt and low incomes and so seeking support from the food bank. One third of those receiving help from West Cheshire Food bank were children (Garratt, et al, 2016). Over one in five people affected by benefit sanctions was a child (Garratt, et al, 2016).

Examples from International Truth Commission Approaches

The Poverty Truth Commission's approach and framework rest on those of Truth Commissions internationally and other participatory UK based anti-poverty work. It is useful to consider the experiences and learning from other similar approaches before considering the experience of other Poverty Truth Commissions.

Nothing About Us Without Us: The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission

The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission was set up in the wake of Apartheid by domestic politicians. It was engaged in finding compromise between the international demand for prosecution of perpetrators of human rights



“A new approach to community involvement.”

Civic and Business Leader.

violations and managing the peaceful transition of reconciliation and justice. The notion of ‘nothing about us without us’ that has been taken on board by UK Poverty Truth Commissions, is linked to many liberation movements (Carlton, 1998) and to the inclusive intentions of the South African Truth Commission. It was coined initially in 1993 by the South African Disability Rights movement (Carlton, 1998) and intended to frame opposition to oppression in the context of control and voice.

The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission sought conditional amnesty on application and full disclosure of all acts committed during apartheid. The work of the Truth Commission was empowered by legislation (Ratke, 2000). The task of the commission was to gain a complete picture of past atrocities, facilitate the amnesty process and bring national reconciliation among the people of South Africa. The work was established through three committees; Human Rights Violations Committee, Reparation and Rehabilitation Committee and the Amnesty Committee. In 1998 the chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee, Arch Bishop Desmond Tutu submitted the final five volume report to president Nelson Mandela. Ratke states that ‘given the political constraints, the progress of the South

“Love those community inspirers!”

Civic and Business Leader.

African Truth and Reconciliation Commission is one of the success stories of domestic truth commissions to date’ (2000: 376). The report made many recommendations; most notably that political organisations implicated in gross violations of human rights apologise to the victims or the victim’s next of kin. The work of reconciliation was framed around forgiveness and the concept of ‘ubuntu’ which is a form of

restorative justice. The work of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission is relevant to UK Poverty Truth Commissions, as it set the ‘nothing about us, without us’ framework in which the UK Commissions are based.

A Right to Truth: Latin American Truth Commissions

The Latin American Truth Commissions were created in the highly politicised context of transitional justice. May (2013) considers the visions or typologies of truth used in the Argentinian, Chilean, Guatemalan and Colombian Truth Commissions, considering how they define the nature of truth. Truth Commissions engage with social and political projects and make explicit truth claims, they create ‘official truths.’ For example the Chilean Truth Commission was framed around reparation, recommending legal and institutionalism reform whilst included the recommendation that Human Rights be enshrined within the legal system. The UN sponsored Guatemalan Truth Commission however, recommended public memorials, reparation, state support for exhumation and reforms of the military and judiciary. The Guatemalan government whilst not rejecting the report chose to reject its policy recommendations (May 2013:505).

This leads May to consider the ‘right to truth’, reflecting that ‘despite the demands for epistemological certainty truth and memory are by their nature thorny subjects’ (2013:497). May defines three different types of truth; description (forensic), moral, normative (2013: 497) arguing that truth commissions function best when the norms of international rights are strengthened and when truth is connected to these norms and contributes to their elaboration and development. The Latin American Truth Commissions question the types of truth and how they are best negotiated, which is relevant to how the UK Poverty Truth Commissions use their power to negotiate outcomes.

Poverty, Participation and Power: The UK Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power

The Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power was set up by the UK Coalition Against Poverty in 1999, to discover why people experiencing poverty feel excluded, to identify barriers to anticipation, to devise strategies to overcome these barriers and to highlight how local voices can inform policy. The Commission had 50-50 membership, made up of six people with experience of poverty and six people in

public life (politics, church, academia, public services, community development and the media). The commission held eight meetings, conducted seven visits around the UK to listen to local projects and grass roots experiences and also held seven meetings with national policy makers. Key learning from the commission, was the recognition of a need for good funding, so that travel and office expenses could be met upfront, and a recognition of the “baggage” expectations, preconceptions, different kinds of personal power, experiences, anxieties and concerns’ (del Tufo and Gaster, 2002:3). A recognition of the power issues within the room could have supported the development of trust, mutual respect and knowledge. Another key learning area was the leadership of the commission. The commission chose an external chair in an ‘umpire’ (del Tufo and Gaster, 2002:3) type role which gave responsibility without authority and led to no one within the commission feeling accountable for the outcomes.

The time needed to support the commission was a further key area of learning, with secretariat taking time as well as the pastoral support of the commissioners and the time required for the commission to get to know each other and to build trust.

‘...the commission itself became a process with its own human dynamic. Conflict and tensions were unavoidable, since they were based on contested notions of truth, reality, method and language.’
(del Tufo and Gaster, 2002:6)

The learning from the commission was that having a clear succession strategy was very important. The need to feed the Commission’s work into existing policy processes had not been sufficiently considered and it was important to plan follow up work and very important to plan how this follow up work would be funded. Alongside funding, and recognition that to do things well, then funding for group bonding, pastoral support of commissioners and up-front travel expenses were needed. The recognition that the process is time and commitment intensive and that the Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power was ‘a complex and ambitious project’ (del Tufo and Gaster, 2002:78), were important learning points for this project. Reflections on this project offers important learning for the UK Poverty Truth Commissions as the Commission has similarities in set up and faced similar challenges in how they effectively supported people with experience of poverty.

Summary of learning from other Truth and Poverty Commission Examples

The Poverty Truth Commission’s approach and framework rest on those of Truth Commissions internationally and other participatory UK based anti-poverty work. It is useful to consider the experiences and learning from other similar approaches before considering the experience of other Poverty Truth Commissions. Key learning from the examples above, centre around two key areas; pragmatic reflections and philosophical reflections.

“The need to ensure that business processes do not become an end in themselves and do not build barriers for those seeking assistance”

Civic and Business Leader.

Pragmatically; Truth and Poverty Commissions take time, it takes time to gather evidence, build bonds and respectfully engage with communities. Time also involves money; accessing funding to support the process is vital. Access and links to influence is also key; those commissions that had access, power and voice to access policy, influence legislation and practice, are those that had the most success.

Philosophically; Defining the nature of the truth sought is key. Truth can be political, experiential, epistemological and used by those with power for their own agenda. Defining whose truth counts, using the ‘nothing about us without us’ approach involves building capacity and understanding across Poverty Truth Commissioners. In-depth reflections around how the truths uncovered by the Commissions can be most effectively utilised to enact pre-poor policy and practice change are important.

Brief Review of UK Poverty Truth Commission approaches

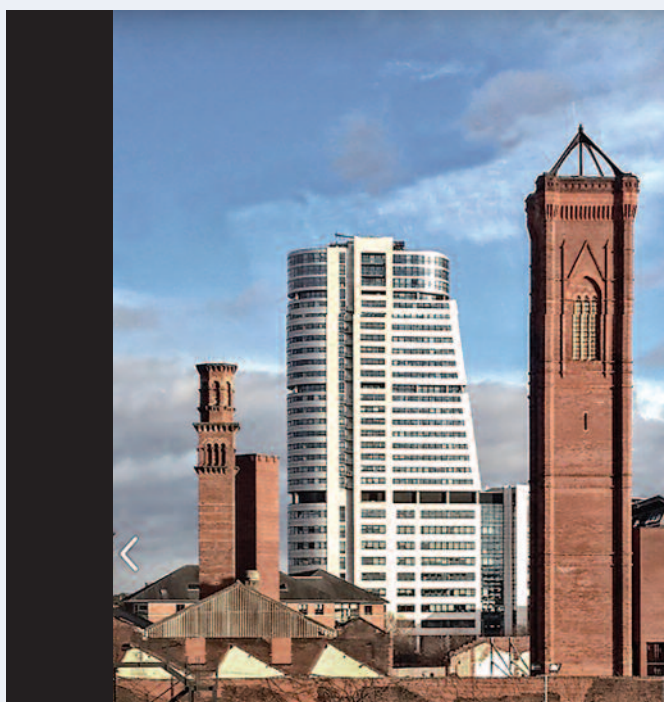
The value of the Poverty Truth Commission approach is in its participation focus. Participation is about belonging (Ferrangina, Tomlinson and Walker, 2013). Taking participatory approaches to inquiry, respects the knowledge of those with lived experiences, recognises the expertise of experience (Bennett and Roberts, 2004). This briefing paper seeks to draw out the learning from the eighteen months of West Cheshire's Poverty Truth Commission, unpacking the who, how and what of participatory processes involves engaging in multi-layered complexity. The challenge is how to move learning, conversation and commitment into policy and practice changes (Bennett and Roberts, 2004).

West Cheshire Poverty Truth Commission was the fourth Commission to launch, after Glasgow, Leeds and Salford. In gathering and sharing lived experiences the Poverty Truth Commissions build bridges, create safe spaces and offer an opportunity for practitioners and policy makers to engage in reflective learning (Poverty Truth Commission Leeds, 2015). The Poverty Truth Commission approach, is a marathon and not a sprint and change happens in small steps rather than giant leaps (Poverty Truth Commission Leeds, 2015). Change takes time, the Poverty Truth Commission approach is a process of facilitating voices, a cultural change and a growing movement.

The power of stories is a very important aspect of Poverty Truth Commission approaches as Glasgow evidence 'we have learned what it means to listen deeply and the courage it takes to speak out' (The Poverty Truth Commission, 2016). As is the importance of the word 'truth,' in being truthful, sharing their lived experience of poverty, commissioners with experience of poverty require policy makers and practitioners to face up to the uncomfortable realities of an unequal society (The Poverty Truth Commission, 2016).

The Poverty Truth Commissions have revealed that the extent of change that they can enact depends on the depth of listening that occurs (Poverty Truth Commission Leeds, 2015). That in listening to the lived experiences of people in poverty, in self-knowledge the evidence in the room allows policy makers and practitioners to more fully understand how systems work and the effect that these systems have on people that move through them (Poverty Truth Commission Leeds, 2015).

Poverty Truth Commissions have shared some similarities but have also taken some different operational approaches. West Cheshire Poverty Truth Commission was chaired by Lord Lieutenant of Cheshire, David Briggs. Additionally there is significant support from Cheshire West and Chester Council, who have committed budget to fund a range of posts to support the process and time from senior officers and local members. The council have been able to use their role and status in the community to engage civic and business



Some Effects of the Challenge

Working with Church Action on Poverty in developing films for www.realbenefits-street.com as an alternative narrative to the TV series.

Commissioners presented at LCC Inner-East Community Committees, LCC Communities Board, Welfare Reform and Faith in Dark Places events.

A Challenge testifier appointed to the LCC Communities Board.

Leeds Mind and Leeds & York Partnership are developing 'Breathing Spaces' in cafés and public spaces for people experiencing stress.

Leeds Apprenticeship Training Agency found new ways to support young people without A-C grades in Maths and English at GCSE.

Leeds Library and Ilkley Literature Festival are developing a book celebrating the Leeds Poverty Truth Challenge.

Joseph Rowntree Foundation have committed funding to support and establish Poverty Truth Commissions across the UK.

leaders in the commission and to facilitate opportunities for voice for the commission's three sub- groups. Glasgow Poverty Truth Commission, the first Poverty Truth Commission, are currently on their fourth commission. The first commission had a joint chair, the other commissions have been co-operatively chaired, with facilitation from staff. The Glasgow Commissions have been hosted by Faith in the Community Scotland.

Leeds Poverty Truth Commission have been working with Church Action on Poverty to develop films for www.realbenefitsstreet.com which is an alternative narrative to the recent television series Benefits Street. A Challenge Testifier, the Leeds term for a Community Inspirer, has been appointed to the Leeds City Council Communities Board. Challenge Testifiers have also presented at various city council committees including the Welfare Reform Committee. Leeds Library and Illkley Literature Festival are creating a book about the Leeds Poverty Truth Commission. Below is an image from the report which details some of the effects of the Leeds Poverty Truth Commission.

Salford Poverty Truth Commission shared that they successfully met their intended outcomes. The Commission established three parallel task groups to explore in greater detail issues of; mental health, homelessness and education/learning. These task groups drew on the reflections of Commission members to generate new thinking and innovation around the key areas identified. The Poverty Truth Commission shared that they were able to successfully facilitate the empowerment within individuals and grassroots communities. This has been achieved by building the confidence and support of commissioners, and inviting them to share experiences which has led to a greater understanding of the issues surrounding poverty and has influenced/impacted policy makers and strategic processes.

At an individual level commissioners with lived experience of poverty have expressed how involvement in this process has changed their lives, and among many other positive effects they valued the sense that they feel they are being heard by decision makers and society. Public life and business commissioners shared how listening to and working closely with people who experience poverty, has provided a space for them to grapple with and re think some of their own

approaches to working with people and tackling poverty in Salford. They shared that the Poverty Truth Commission has brought power and strength to the arguments of policy and decision makers who are now able to evidence the injustices that people in poverty are vulnerable to. There have been great examples of co-production and partnership working coming out of the Salford Poverty Truth Commission process. Alongside broader policy changes and changes in organisational culture, Salford Poverty Truth Commission have also made specific changes. One example of many, is that the Local Authority has agreed to offer homeless people a free copy of their birth certificate.

“I was pleased to be given the opportunity to share my late husband’s story to highlight society’s ongoing injustice”

Community Inspirer

“Senior people who we wanted to listen to us DID listen to us”

Community Inspirer

In building a culture change and valuing the lived experiences of people, of listening, valuing and engaging with people who have experience of poverty, the Poverty Truth Commission approach is slowly but surely enacting cultural change. Poverty Truth Commissions have also been successful in creating specific changes within their localities, as described above.

www.leedspovertytruth.org.uk/

www.salfordpovertytruth.org.uk/the-story-so-far/

Working Together; I4P and West Cheshire Poverty Truth Commission

The West Cheshire Poverty Truth Commission began with a steering group, chaired by Councillor Reggie Jones and attended by key professionals such as the Lord Lieutenant of Cheshire, a key lead from Cheshire West and Chester Council, the trustee of West Cheshire Food Bank, cross party representation, registered social landlords, and representatives of those with experience of poverty. A Poverty Truth Commission coordinator was recruited and slightly later was joined by two Poverty Truth Commission facilitators. This team of three began to speak to people with experience of poverty who community contacts had signposted them to. After spending time visiting people individually and talking through the concept of poverty truth, people with experience of

poverty, were invited to a meeting in September 2016. The session was co-facilitated by a participatory researcher from I4P at Edge Hill University. This was the first time that everybody met and when the group decided together, to be called Community Inspirers.

An engaged and regular group of fifteen Inspirers met monthly from the first September 2016 meeting onwards, spending time engaging in participatory exercises, getting to know each other and considering how they would share their experiences of poverty at the Poverty Truth Commission launch in February 2017. The Inspirers were drawn from across the borough and from a range of experience, race, disability and gender backgrounds that were broadly representative of the demographics of West Cheshire. Examples of Participatory exercises were:

1. CREATING A MAP OF HOW THEY FELT ABOUT THE AREA

The Community Inspirers were asked how they felt when they thought about the area that they lived in. Community Inspirers wrote these thoughts onto post it notes and marked them onto a map. This map was developed into a graphic. The map shares our Community Inspirers' experiences of the area that they live in.

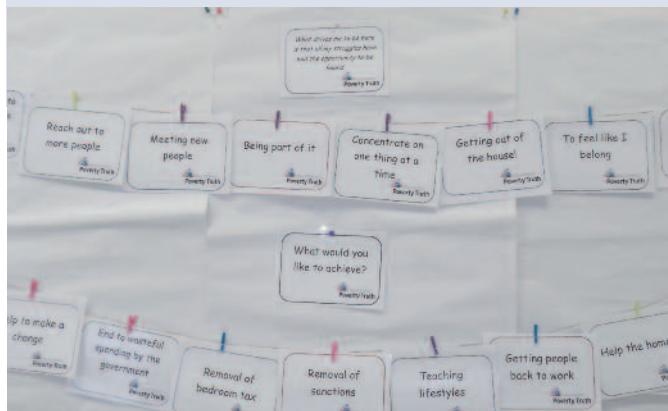


2. WEB OF WOOL

A web of wool was created between Inspirers linking their similarities, this was a visual representation of interconnections as group members and also a good way to get to know a little about each other.

4. MIND MAPPING

The Inspirers spent time mind mapping what people felt were the key issues for people with experience of poverty and how these might be shared.



3. GROUND RULES

The group designed and created ground rules and considered ways that Community Inspirers would work together.



It soon became apparent that the Community Inspirers had a huge range of experiences of poverty and talents that would enable a deeply moving and highly creative sharing of their experiences. Poetry was a regular feature of the meeting, as was song and performance. As the group began to get to know each other their creativity blossomed and the song below was developed collaboratively. The Community Inspirers worked with a song writer to develop the musical score and the song was recorded at Edge Hill University's recording studio and collaboratively produced supported by the University's creative media staff.

As trust was built within the group, people began to share their experiences of poverty. The participatory activities and supportive work of the Poverty Truth Commission co-ordinator and facilitators created a safe space where Community Inspirers could develop their confidence. Sharing their stories first within small groups, created a safe space and mutual support could be nurtured within the group. These stories were real life stories. They were emotive, challenging and inspirational. Some of these stories can be read in the Community Inspirers Celebration Booklet, which is available from the West Cheshire Poverty Truth Commission. As the confidence of Community Inspirers grew in a supportive setting, the group began to feel ready and confident to articulate their stories. This process took time and courage, the Inspirers spent time considering how their story might best be shared for the launch of the Poverty Truth Commission in February 2017. Soon a performance that integrated poetry, dance and story evolved from Community Inspirer's discussions.

The song can be heard here https://www.edgehill.ac.uk/i4p/files/2017/03/ThePoor_01.mp3.

The Launch of the Poverty Truth Commission

The Cheshire West Poverty Truth Commission was launched on 16th February 2017. It was co-hosted by Community Inspirer, Swampy and the Lord Lieutenant of Cheshire, David Briggs. It was attended by over two hundred civic, business and faith leaders. A young people's theatre group joined the Community Inspirers as did a representative from Cheshire Agricultural Chaplaincy to speak on behalf of those experiencing rural poverty.

The launch was a creative success, showcasing poverty, song, a play and a dance detailing and explaining the experience of poverty. A representative from Cheshire Agricultural Chaplaincy spoke on behalf of those experiencing rural poverty. Several Community Inspirers told their stories, detailing their particular experience of poverty, showing great courage to stand up and share their personal experience in front of such a large group of people.

The Community Inspirers had volunteered their time over six months to prepare for the launch. The presentation of poetry, dance and stories took many rehearsals and significant confidence. This confidence was built from the support from facilitators and fellow Community Inspirers, a small community of brave and powerful people who have experience of poverty and that had only

"I've had a really enjoyable time with the different experiences I've had and the people I've met"

Community Inspirer

met, just six months before. It was important to the Community Inspirers that despite the high profile launch, that guests understood a little of what it meant to experience poverty.

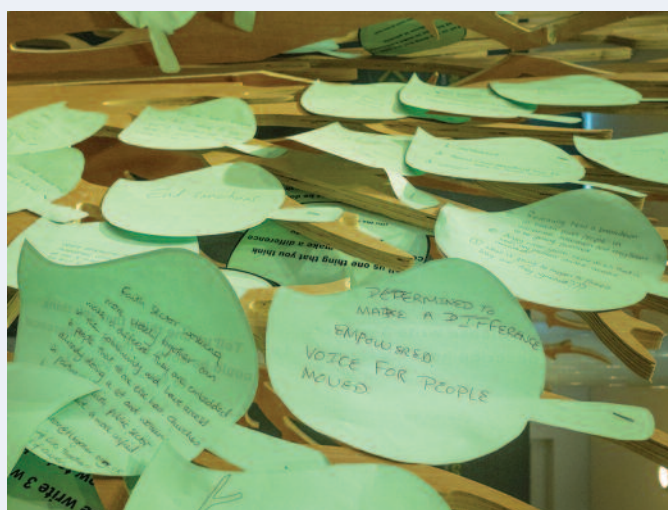


Short clips of the launch can be seen here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=71waEFmrReg>

“I’ve appreciated being able to give a voice for people that have a disability”

Community Inspirer

Lunch was themed around an experience of using the Foodbank. Those who attended the event were asked to complete a Foodbank voucher before exchanging it for a simple meal; the sort that could be prepared using food bank produce. After lunch the Civic and Business and faith Leaders were invited to respond to the creative presentations before the event drew to a close. Those who attended the launch were asked to feedback on how it made them feel, and note one thing they thought could be done to make a difference to those in poverty. This feedback was written on the



The Launch of the Poverty Truth Commission was very high profile, trending on twitter in Cheshire with over 240 Tweets. The inspiring, challenging and increasingly emotive stories shared by Inspirer's clearly made a big impact on those that attended the launch. Some quotes from the Twitter hashtag #westcheshireptc on the day included;

Very humbling day at the launch of West Cheshire Poverty Truth Commission, very powerful messages

Thought provoking day poverty in our communities a complex issue

Inspiring and moving day at #westcheshireptc Now the work begins, to make a difference

And they fully deserved that standing ovation #westcheshireptc #communityinspirers doing exactly that. We ALL need to listen and understand

The courage of the #communityinspirers was amazing today ,next step learn together to make a difference #westcheshireptc

Amazing, powerful stuff at the #westcheshireptc launch. 'Time to stop talking, start listening and making change' @WestCheshireFB @PlusDane

back of a leaf and then participants were asked to add this leaf to a tree of inspiration. Feedback shared, included that those attending the launch of the Commission now had a greater understanding of the causes of poverty and the picture for the local area. People wanted to offer support and be involved in the work of the West Cheshire Poverty Truth Commission as recognition that things need to change. Feedback was shared praising the courage and bravery of the Community Inspirers for sharing their stories. Many shared that they left the launch feeling inspired to do something to help make change.

The song can be heard here https://www.edgehill.ac.uk/i4p/files/2017/03/ThePoor_01.mp3.

After the Launch

The Community Inspirers were further supported by I4P for a short while after the launch. The first informal meeting of the Community Inspirers and Civil and Business Leaders was at a showing of the Ken Loach film, *I Daniel Blake*. The event was hosted at a local community centre and after the film a discussion was facilitated by I4P asking the group to consider what a Good Society might look like as an introduction to working together.



The first meeting of the Poverty Truth Commission was held in March 2017 and by May, sub-groups had agreed to focus on three priority areas; Mental Health and Well-being, Person Centred Approaches and the Benefits System. These three priority areas were agreed by a democratic voting process. Sub-groups were formed to focus on each of the three priority areas. Each sub-group was co-chaired by a Community Inspirer and a Civic and Business Leader.

“We come together as different people to create a better life for all people”

Civic and Business Leader

The Journey to the Launch What have we learned?



For the Community Inspirers the journey to becoming a Commissioner involved many meetings, reflections and support from facilitators and fellow Inspirers. In May the Community Inspirers met to share what they had learned and how they felt about the experience of being a Community Inspirer. At the beginning of the meeting Inspirers shared in a participatory game of 'word popcorn' what they felt about the experience of being a Community Inspirer. 'Word popcorn' involves trying to summarise an experience in one word. The words shared were; enthusiastic, growth, inspired, information, altruism, involved, positive, confident, inspired, proud, empowerment.

The session then continued with a participatory dream catcher exercise. The group engaged in a participatory creative arts activity themed around the notion of a Native American Dream Catcher. The group used arts and crafts to create images and comment around key themes that they wrote on the indices that emerged from the circle. The activity shared the themes and experiences that the Community Inspirers had developed through their journey. There was great positivity from the Community Inspirers, the journey had been a huge challenge, had involved frustration and required much courage but overall Community Inspirers shared how empowering their journey had been. The Community Inspirers very much valued the



sharing of knowledge and experience, the process of a shared journey of change towards tackling poverty, of having a voice and being listened to. The overall feeling from the Inspirers, was how proud the group were of their journey to stand up and be counted.

"It's been empowering"

Community Inspirer

The group shared that when they first met they were struggling and felt that they were the only ones struggling either to find work or meet people. They were really pleased to join the group of Community Inspirers to share experiences and to discover that others too were in the same situation. The Community Inspirers felt welcomed and found commonality from sharing experiences. The group shared how proud they were to become Community Inspirers and to see how far they had each come, it was nice to see the hard work and dedication from everybody. It was good to become more informed as a Community Inspirer through shared experiences and letting people know they could get help. They shared that knowledge is power and as the Community Inspirers have become more aware and able to share their knowledge. The Community Inspirers shared how their relationships had grown and shared the compassion present within their group. The group shared how interesting they had found hearing the life stories and experiences of others. They had also very much valued the opportunity to meet people locally and travel within and outside of Cheshire West.

The group recognised too the frustrations of the process, as it could feel slow. Humiliation, depression, stress and isolation were all experiences of poverty that the group shared and brought to the group. It was hard trying to make change and being involved in the process was hard but empowering. With these experiences came the frustration of the lack of being heard. The role of Inspirer was valued and the opportunity to be influential and to make a difference was very powerful. The creative means used to inspire change was valued; the music, listening and sharing of stories. The group had found the experience very interesting to be part of and felt that they had learnt a lot. Through becoming Community Inspirers, the group felt more empowered, active and had grown in confidence and felt accepted.

Friendships have been built and the group have developed trust in each other. The opportunity to make a difference was also valued by the group.

"I've had a really enjoyable time with the different experiences I've had and the people I've met"

"The opportunity to have voice, to be listened to was an important element of this positive feeling about the Poverty Truth Commission"

"I've appreciated being able to give a voice for people that have a disability"

"I was pleased to be given the opportunity to share my late husband's story to highlight society's ongoing injustice"

"Senior people who we wanted to listen to us DID listen to us"

"Inspirers have found the experience empowering"

"It's been empowering"

The group was supportive and the support of the facilitators and coordinators was a valued part of the process. The group felt that they had created a sense of family and that they had felt happy within the group, happy to be engaged in a genuinely positive community activity; a process that they could believe in. The group very much valued being able to contribute to their community and promote a sense of belonging. The group were very candid, sharing how far they had come from places of humiliation, deep dark places that they had been to. They shared butterflies, and trees as a symbol of change and growth in their creative imagery. Through the dream catcher they wanted to share how far they had come from the bottom and how they now felt accepted and confident enough to make a difference. They feel that going forward they are all excited and it has been good to 'get things out and look at them' – to share experiences and reflect upon them and share how they felt. One group created an image of a rainbow of hope over their dream catcher to symbolise the hope that they had for the process.

At the start of the process the Community Inspirers had mixed feelings about the Poverty Truth Commission, some sharing that they felt sceptical and nervous, while others felt neutral or positive. By the end of the first year however all Inspirers interviewed shared that they felt positive or very positive about their experiences as a Community Inspirer. The opportunity to work with others was valued.

Indeed several Community Inspirers shared the confidence that they have drawn from their involvement in the Commission. One Inspirer, a poet and mother had felt very nervous at the first session and had shared her nervousness with the group about speaking to fellow Inspirers. Her confidence had grown to such an extent by the end of the year, she successfully contributed to an article about the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) State of the Nation report on both the BBC News at Six and the BBC Radio Two Jeremy Vine Show. West Cheshire Poverty Truth Commission were contacted by JRF who wanted Community Inspirers to work with the media, in order to highlight the real life stories behind their latest State of the Nation report (published early Dec 2017). The report highlighted the struggle for working families and the Community Inspirer was able to share her experience of a zero hour contract, low pay, the impact of unreliable hours and how she tried to negotiate these unreliable hours with the high cost of childcare. JRF shared with West Cheshire Poverty Truth Commission that it was the best coverage they had ever had.

The experiences of Civic, Business and Faith Leaders

Civic, Business and Faith Leaders were invited to join the Poverty Truth Commission and participated in the launch event in February 2017. These Civic, Business and Faith Leaders were made up of civil society, business and public sector professionals. The Civic, Business and Faith Leaders were then teamed with the Community Inspirers, working together on the three working groups of the Commission. Civic, Business and Faith Leaders were sent a survey electronically asking them questions to help the Poverty Truth Commission reflect on their experiences.

At the beginning of the process, Civic and Business leaders 82% rated their experience as positive or very positive with 12% rating their experience as neutral and 6% rating their experience as sceptical. By the end of the process 78% described their experience as very positive with 22% describing their experience as positive. Civic, Business and Faith Leaders shared what went well about their experience with West Cheshire Poverty Truth Commission;

.....
Good engagement
.....

.....
Gaining an insight into the challenges faced by local citizens from their perspective and a sense of teamwork in responding to the challenges
.....

.....
I was able to share my knowledge and expertise of the social welfare sector with key stakeholders in the group
.....

.....
Being Involved within Mental Health Well Being Sub Group and helping to empower Community Inspirers to shape change for barriers to service provision
.....

.....
My views were heard and valued, and we seem to have made some productive difference
.....

.....
I realised that access to support by those who needed it was not always as smooth as it should be
.....

.....
Working together with one aim
.....

.....
Enjoyed the new approach to involve community inspirers
.....

.....
Ability to integrate skills of being a business leader with a different set of problems brought by the community inspirers
.....

Reflecting on their experiences with the Poverty Truth Commission the Civic, Business and Faith Leaders felt that the process could have been improved in these ways:

.....
Managing expectation and input (very hard as people are so passionate and action-centred so it can be difficult to encourage people to stop and listen and reflect first)
.....

.....
More equal input from community inspirers and Civic and Business Leaders.
.....

.....
I think in some ways there were too many of us - fewer would have meant our input more valued. But on the other hand, that might have been too big a burden/workload
.....

.....
This was a learning curve for me so I do not think things could have gone better - we were all learning together from a cold start
.....

.....
Probably more workshop setting in a tighter timescales in the first two months to set the scene and hone down on the key things to go after rather than spending most of the time on researching what the issues were
.....

“A humbling, thought provoking and very rewarding experience.”

Civic and Business Leader.

In terms of outcomes from working with the Poverty Truth Commission, several organisations now operate differently as a result of their connection and experience with the Commission. Civic and Business Leaders shared examples of this below;

.....
Better engagement
.....

Absolutely! We have built into the design of any programmes the need to immerse ourselves into the local community to truly understand the nuances of local need
.....

No, we have been able to increase local awareness of our services
.....

My approach to people living in poverty is less 'doing to them' more about allowing them to set the agenda
.....

I am now more understanding of the trials and tribulations of those seeking help
.....

More awareness of other groups and community inspirers
.....

Spend more time listening to Inspirers
.....

My organisation isn't directly involved in this area but it has given me a renewed purpose of getting the customer/end user more involved in the conceptual stage and then the planning stage. Too many initiatives were too far down the line before the customer was brought in for a view (if at all)

"A new approach to community involvement."

Civic and Business Leader.

Gathering the experiences of Community Inspirers and Civic and Business Leaders has been an important way of listening and learning throughout the process. The next section of this briefing paper will consider the questions which have been developed through this reflective learning.

Over half of Civic, Business and Faith Leaders feel that a second Poverty Truth Commission would be valuable. Reasons why this is important were;

.....
We have started a number of streams which need to be continued. For this reason a second Commission is essential
.....

Good way to harness collaboration
.....

Yes it takes time to establish relationships and processes which can delay the action needed to achieve success. There is still much to be done and the model can be rolled out to other areas
.....

Yes, to ensure that everything is embedded by those agencies who've said they would and to pick one or two more things to continue the journey



Reflections on our Learning

It takes time: The Community Inspirers as a group of people needed a lot of pastoral care and support. This was very time and emotionally intensive for the PTC coordinator and facilitators yet essential for the successful development of the project.

Who comes first: Bringing together a group that might become the Community Inspirers or developing trust and confidence in the process by political and civic leaders or creating a steering group that could act as a broker of relationships to start the process.

Defining those agencies who have 'authority': The PTC model – to be successful – needs private, public and not for profit organisations to work together. Local Government is the sole agency who can get decision makers in the room.

Working across boundaries: The public/private/not for profit collaboration needs individuals who can work across the different organisational and institutional boundaries to secure the active support of Business, Civic and Faith Leaders and, at the same time, support the Inspirers. This requires a Team with a range of skills and capacities.

Establishing shared understandings is key: Steering Group, Civic Leaders and Faith leaders and Community Inspirers didn't always have the same shared understandings of what the PTC was about. Establishing these shared understandings from the outset is essential.

Sustaining and managing expectations: Each of the constituent groups involved in the PTC – the Community Inspirers, local politicians and Civic Leaders, the Steering Group and those supporting and facilitating the process in West Cheshire had different expectations and assumptions about what could happen. How these were supported and/or managed was often un-resolved.

Managing tensions between wanting people to be real and not exposing themselves to risk: As the group got to know each other there was a sense of trust and empowerment which led Community Inspirers to feel safe sharing their stories. Balancing the wish of the Inspirers to share the very real and distressing details of their experience and the duty of care towards them in terms of protecting their confidentiality and vulnerability at the launch, was a challenge.

Enlarging the group supporting the Inspirers: As the group became settled and focussed on the launch it was necessary – at different times – to draw in individuals and members of the local authority's services and this required a revisiting of the values and PTC model.

Linking the individual experience to the broader community experience of poverty: The sharing of stories is an incredibly emotive means of explaining the experience of poverty. The risk is that it places the experience of poverty with the individuals when often it is a broader structural issue that needs to be addressed.

Balancing empathy & practicality: The launch was an incredibly powerful event but it was perhaps so emotive that the response of the Civic and Business Leaders was that they were overwhelmed. Perhaps they should have met community Inspirers in advance, attended the dress rehearsal and pre-prepared their response.

The power of stories: The personal experiences and the different ways in which they were presented meant that the Inspirers were able to be direct and connect with the audience; simple, direct and personal accounts are more powerful than anything.

Thinking about those who are present as well as absent: The challenges and impact of poverty on individuals and families reminds us that we need to be mindful of reflecting different and diverse voices and experiences from young people to BME communities.

Sharing the journey side by side is as important as the destination: Once the Commission is launched, it is natural to immediately want to make changes and take action, but taking time to build relationships and to gather the understanding and support of the whole team - Civic, Business and Faith Leaders and Community Inspirers, is important.

What happened next: The power of the stories, the connections made on the day of the launch and the commitment from the Civic, Business and Faith Leaders made possible a sense of movement and change. Communicating what has happened since the launch is key to understanding what happened and why.

Ambassadors or Patrons for the PTC: Thinking about the different roles that are needed to initiate change, support the Inspirers and facilitate networks and collaborative conversations, suggests that no one individual should be asked to take on the roles. Creating a network of Patrons or PTC Ambassadors might help sustain and shape the next phase of the PTC.

Learning the lessons across the UK – connecting internationally and making an impact: The potential of the UK based PTC initiatives to share experiences, inform practice and build up an evidence base of insights and understandings is huge.

Conclusion

The West Cheshire Poverty Truth Commission has been a process of culture change. The process has been about empowering voice within policy, aiming to change the way that policy operates. The focus of Poverty Truth Commissions, on the right to truth, the right of those with experience of poverty to a voice, is a slow but successful means of re-enacting democracy. The West Cheshire Poverty Truth Commission will hold a celebration event in February 2018, twelve months after the Commission's launch to share its success.

The impact of the West Cheshire Poverty Truth Commission has been broader than its outcomes.

The process of giving voice to people with experience of poverty leads to better decision making, at local and national levels. Taking the learning from the experience of West Cheshire Poverty Truth Commission from the local policy arena to the national policy arena is the next step. A second Poverty Truth Commission in West Cheshire will continue the successes of the first, and build momentum. As the national Poverty Truth Commission movement develops, they can work together to gather momentum and represent the diverse voices of people who are so often silenced in their experiences of poverty.

The process of giving voice to those with experience of poverty is complex, emotional and fragile. It is a process which takes time, pastoral, financial and political support, but it is a process which is framed in the most basic principles of democracy; voice. The right to truth for all citizens is one that is fundamental to British values.



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confident
empowerment
enthusiastic
growthinvolved
inspired
proudaltruism
positive
information

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