



## **What if people who struggled against poverty were involved in making decisions about tackling poverty?**

This is a question we are in the process of answering at County Durham Poverty Truth Commission. The Commission brings together two groups of people – those with lived experience and civic and business leaders (the decision makers) to find creative ways to tackle the underlying issues of poverty.

We don't yet know what will change but, what we do know, is that good things will happen for individuals, organisations, at policy level and to the way people think about poverty. In the words of The Poverty Truth Network, *'Nothing about us without us is for us'*.

This blog will look at the process so far.....

I started as PTC Project Worker in May 2024. I was very excited to be part of a new project and felt honored to be in a position which could have such a positive impact on the South West Durham community. The team at Durham Community Action gave me a warm welcome as I spent my first few days learning more about the PTC process, getting to know Cathryn the project coordinator and learning the expectations of my role. I was very keen to get out and about to meet potential community commissioners and start to promote the PTC.

In my first few weeks, I was very lucky to have the opportunity to attend the Poverty Truth Network facilitators event in Cheshire. This gave Cathryn and I the opportunity to share ideas with others and learn from the experiences of more established commissions. It was an interesting couple of days which highlighted the impact PTC's can have on communities and I came away feeling positive, enthusiastic and raring to go!

I was both anxious and excited when I was told I could start visiting community groups and helping out at foodbanks. How would I start conversations about poverty? Would people want to talk to me? Cathryn and I identified some conversation starters such as, 'If you could speak to anyone in power who would it be and what would you say?' 'What would you like to change?'

To ease myself in gently, I visited a men's mental health group which I've worked with in a previous role. It was great to catch up with faces old and new and the guys gave me some very helpful feedback, such as, the use of the word poverty which they said can immediately put people off and prevent them from speaking up due to pride, shame and embarrassment.

We went on to have some great conversations about issues such as navigating the benefits system, poor social housing and the lack of resources in the local area. A few of the guys expressed an interest in becoming community commissioners and we agreed to continue our conversations over the next few weeks.

I have so far been lucky enough to not require the services of a foodbank. I was intrigued by how they worked and keen to chat with the volunteers and users. I visited several foodbanks over a few weeks. During my first visit, I met two young brothers. The older brother had recently become unemployed, and they were collecting food for themselves and their mum. The brothers were polite but reluctant to engage in conversation. They looked pale, tired and sad.

Another foodbank felt particularly welcoming. There was music playing, bowls of biscuits and snacks on the tables, volunteers chatting with users like they were old friends. Tea, coffee, hot chocolate and pot noodles are available for all. This felt more like a community hub as there were other services present such as community money advice, Harbour and Durham Works. Most of the foodbank users were comfortable to hang around and chat and over a few visits, I gathered interest from a couple of potential community commissioners.

One of the most challenging aspects of forming the PTC has been finding a diverse range of commissioners. Part of this process has been speaking with refugees and asylum seekers. Whilst helping volunteers at a local community project, I met a Nigerian gentleman, over time we got talking and he told me his wife had been part of the York PTC and would probably be interested in joining County Durham. I unexpectedly bumped into the couple at a drop-in centre and it was a heartwarming moment when the husband put a hand on my shoulder and said 'hello my friend.' At this point, I realised that the whole relationship building process was working! After several conversations with them, both husband and wife joined our other community commissioner.

Cathryn and I met with a class of English language students, they were celebrating the end of term by cooking and sharing food. We were invited to join and got to sample homemade food from places such as Iraq, Turkey and Kurdistan. This was a happy celebration, and we were made to feel very welcome.

We spoke to a couple from Iraq with the help of their daughter who had an amazing grasp of English after only one year in the country. It was tragic to learn that the couple both had good careers in their home country and had to leave so many friends and family behind.

Recently we offered our thoughts and support to both these couples due to unrest in the local area following the UK riots. Both couples responded with such gratitude and beautiful words, it brought tears to our eyes! There is negativity stemming from ignorance, spoken about refugees and asylum seekers – I cannot stress enough the need to give everyone a voice, empower and listen to people's real-life stories....

More recently, we have been making links with young people's services. Our invitation to meet with a local young person's group had to be postponed, but we're hoping this can be rearranged soon, so we can capture the voices of the younger generation

Over the last 3 months, I have met some amazing people, from the bright and bubbly volunteers to the lone parent at the end of their tether struggling to get through each day. I have witnessed incredible community spirit, selflessness and compassion. I have reflected on my own views and opinions and challenged those of others around me. I'm excited to continue the Poverty Truth journey and look forward to the weeks and months ahead.

Now to find a venue for our commissioner meetings...