



Thursday 19th September, the big day had arrived, our first Poverty Truth Community Commissioners meeting.

All the tea drinking, food packing and conversations over previous months had come to fruition, a venue sourced and nibbles bought. Now was the time to move onto the next stage of our Poverty Truth Commission journey.

It had been a sleepless night filled with excitement and nerves. Would the venue be ok, would taxis turn up, would ANYONE turn up? My phone soon started ringing with calls from commissioners checking the venue postcode, taxi drivers asking about payment and the venue manager sharing the wifi password. I felt somewhat frazzled!

My frazzled feelings increased as the commissioners started to arrive. I was on meet and greet duty while Cathryn made drinks and Allison sorted out expenses. On seeing the friendly but anxious faces of the people I'd been talking to for months, it hit me how much effort it had taken many of them to leave their safe space and come and join a group where the only person some of them knew was me. Now was not the time for me to be nervous, I needed to step up and be the facilitator these individuals deserve.

It was reassuring and heartwarming to hear the friendly chatter as everyone tucked into lunch. Late arrivals were given a warm welcome and nobody was left out.

Following the Poverty Truth model, once lunch was over, we all sat in a circle and took part in an ice breaker – name an adjective beginning with the first letter of your name. I was Joyful Julie as I always try to be positive and smiley, other adjectives used were Anxious, Positive and Chatty. Throughout my working life, I have always dreaded doing ice breakers and felt almost apologetic when asking the group to do this, however, it definitely worked in breaking down any barriers, grounding everybody and allowing the opportunity for banter and laughter.

Cathryn, Allison and I spent some time explaining our roles within the Commission and Allison was quickly identified as the engine which keeps us all going. The Commissioners were then asked to work in pairs to jot down some notes about their role within the PTC. They did some great work and identified key aspects of their role such as giving a voice to those in poverty, identifying gaps in services, holding those in power accountable and making networks. The passion and motivation in the room was inspiring.

As the meeting progressed, it became clear who were the more confident members, who would need to practice listening, who would need support to come out of their shell and who would need prompting to stay on topic. It was quite exhausting trying to keep everyone focused as they were so enthusiastic and full of ideas.

As the group came to a close and we did a final check in, the feedback we got was amazing: 'I've never laughed so much', 'I feel like I'm part of something finally', 'I have hope for the first time', 'I now have a family.' 'It was such a warm and friendly welcome.'

When everybody left and the adrenalin had waned, my emotions got the better of me and I shed a few tears. I think partly due to relief that all had gone well but also due to the realization of what a positive impact the County Durham Poverty Truth Commission can have on both individuals and the community.