



**On a very wet Wednesday morning, two of us set off on our journey from Darlington to the Poverty Truth Network Commissioner Gathering in Derbyshire.**

Two were meant to be four but due to adverse weather, trains had been cancelled and despite Cathryn's best efforts, P and L had missed their connection at Darlington. All was not lost though, they were going to catch a later train.

Our journey went well, we chatted about the adversity A has faced and how she'd like to challenge systems to improve things for others, shared stories about our children, jobs, likes and dislikes.

We arrived at the stunning location of Hayes Conference Centre with minutes to spare before lunch. We put our bags in the store room, grabbed our name badges and were taken to the dining room by Diane from the PTN.

Following a lunch of jacket spuds and beans we joined the circle of almost 100 community and civic commissioners. This was a daunting task and I could see A's hands were shaking as she found a seat next to me.

We did some icebreakers, learned the agenda for the next 3 days and started to make connections with other commissions who had come from all over the country including Sheffield, Leeds, South Lakes, Ilfracombe, Swansea and many more. Everybody was very friendly and were happy to share stories about their PTC journeys so far.

Later in the afternoon and after a very stressful journey with a short stint on the wrong train, our colleagues L and P arrived. They were understandably tired, short tempered and stressed but joined in the afternoon activity of designing a t shirt to represent the County Durham PTC journey so far. This was expertly modelled by P who agreed to take one for the team and walk the catwalk for us!

After tea, we were given the option to watch a film. A and L opted for an early night whilst P and I grabbed a bag of popcorn and joined a small group to watch what we thought would be something lighthearted but it turned out to be a hard hitting Ken Loach film about Syrian refugees arriving in County Durham! Called The Old Oak, it's definitely worth a watch.

Thursday started with a hearty breakfast and lots of coffee, it was going to be a long day! We spent the morning doing group work looking at areas we want the Amplify groups to look at on a national rather than local level. Some of these included, PIP application process, access to Legal Aid, equal use of green space, education and families in poverty and the private landlord sector. We eventually voted for the one we were most focused on. I changed my vote after speaking to a man from Manchester who had come up against obstacle after obstacle when trying to claim PIP following a terminal cancer diagnosis, his story was heartbreaking. During the break both L and A described finding some of the topics discussed quite triggering and they both had a few tears as they shared a little of their stories. P and I listened and empathized as the four of us went for a walk around the lake to catch our breath and clear

our heads.

Over tea, we chatted with a Civic Commissioner from Bournemouth. He gave us some valuable advice on how to communicate and engage with business leaders by showing compassion and care rather than frustration and animosity. One of the themes running through the whole three days was to make the business and civic leaders our best friends and we came away keen to share this with our fellow County Durham Commissioners.

Throughout the second day, I observed A, L and P relax and start to fully embrace the experience. Although they found certain activities and conversations triggering, L acknowledged that it was a positive experience and for the first time ever she was speaking with people who had experienced similar traumas to herself and no longer felt alone. A had an early night again while the rest of us joined the evening activities. We were split into groups and asked to do various tasks set by the Taskmaster. This was an hilarious evening filled with laughter and fun, just what was needed after a heavy day. It showed how resilient Community Commissioners are, in that they have come through or are going through such adversity but are still able to have fun and enjoyment.

By the time Friday came around, we were exhausted but quite sad that the experience was coming to an end. A rushed around bubbling with ideas and getting the contact details of all 100 people that were there! In the check out, L bravely took to the microphone first and told the group how she now felt part of a community, valued and inspired to make change. P talked about how the event had helped her understand the whole PTC process and I reflected on what an empowering and powerful experience the Poverty Truth Commission is. We ended the three days by all saying what had become the event tagline, 'You are my People.'

Following a stressful journey home on a very overcrowded and delayed train, we all came down with various coughs, colds and covid so haven't yet fed back to the wider Commission. We are hoping to do this very soon although we're struggling as to how to bring to life the passion and positivity we felt over the three days and wish we could have taken the whole County Durham lot with us!

Feedback from Commissioners:

There were a couple of things that will stick out in my mind, and that was the energy, the passion and resilience in the room, the message was very clear; that it was very hard work, but to not give up - it will be worth it, and that people had made changes!

That everyone has a voice

That we can make a difference, working together.

Make friends with councillors and local MP's - don't have to like them!