



3 months in and 6 meetings down. It has certainly been a learning curve for me and a very interesting journey so far.

The nerves have gone and now we stroll into the venue relaxed, smiling and happy to see each other. Cuppas are made and a natter is had as we all tuck into our Shildon Alive buffet. When the clock strikes 12:30, the nattering stops, and we get our PTC heads on as we take our seats in the circle.

The commissioners groan as the trusty stuffed rabbit who joined us in session 3 comes out again. We throw him to each other calling out the recipient's name. We roll our eyes and laugh when someone gets a name wrong, giving them clues and encouragement followed by a cheer and a round of applause when they finally get it right. The game gets us energized and focused and although they'd never admit it, I know the commissioners love the rabbit really!

Although we have never had all the commissioners in a room at the same time, by session 6 we agree that they have now finally all met each other, and the name game may not be required for much longer.

The name game is quickly followed by a check-in question such as , 'Who inspires you and why?' 'What perks you up when you're feeling down? What is your favourite sound and why?' The questions always provoke deep thinking and thoughtful answers which often lead to profound and sometimes challenging conversations. It is during these times that our commissioners have felt the most comfortable sharing their experiences and a little of their story.

The commissioners are a chatty bunch meaning Cathryn or I need to step in to refocus the conversation usually at least a couple of times each session and you can guarantee they'll start a heavy conversation just as the sessions are ending and taxis are arriving – we haven't come up with a solution to this one yet. Listening doesn't come easy for some of the commissioners but they are slowly beginning to learn the importance of waiting their turn and 'biting their tongue' although they do occasionally still need reminding with a good natured nudge or wave of the hand. Deep listening is a skill we will continue to practice throughout the commission.

After the check in, the rabbit (we must give him a name) is put to bed and we move on to an activity. So far, we have looked at definitions of poverty, which was an exciting and vibrant conversation with many different ideas and experiences coming to life. The one thing we all definitely agreed on is that poverty is not just about money! We have talked about deep listening and practiced our skills, began to gain an understanding of the relational model of working and why this is used by Poverty Truth Commissions and started looking at how poverty affects the lives of the commissioners.

It has not all been plain sailing, there has been frustration at the slowness of the process and the need to 'get things done and solve the problems, difficulties with confidence when speaking to a group and on one occasion a double booking which resulted in a very stressful last minute change of venue! We have discussed any challenges openly and honestly, revisited

the how and why of the PTC approach, reflected on our achievements so far and put steps in place to make sure commissioners feel comfortable and safe within the group. Our next meeting is our Christmas celebration and will take the form of ten pin bowling followed by burgers, fish finger butties and pizza. I wonder who will turn out to be competitive...?

From January, we will be extremely hard at work as our launch event is booked for March. The commissioners have been talking about how to share their stories and so far have come up with ideas such as film making, poetry, plays and art. Cathryn and I have discovered that creativity isn't exactly our forte so we will be seeking the skills of some local talented artists to help the commissioners develop their ideas.

2025 is going to be a big year for the first County Durham Poverty Truth Commission and I for one can't wait!

Merry Christmas everyone.