



**After months of hard work and preparation, the launch day finally arrived.**

Following a night of broken sleep, our tummy's filled with butterflies and cars piled high with handmade flowers, Cathryn and I arrived early at Newton Aycliffe Youth and Community Centre to set up for the day.

A couple of Community Commissioners arrived shortly after us and their gasps could be heard when they saw the room set up for the first time.....it was all becoming real!

The morning passed by in a blur and soon guests were arriving, and the buffet was delivered. The Community Commissioners proudly changed into their County Durham Poverty Truth Commission t shirts and remained remarkably calm as they took to their seats or ventured off to chat with the crowd.

The buffet looked amazing, but I couldn't eat a thing as nerves took over. I networked a little but mostly made sure the commissioners were as calm and composed as they could be – they were clearly doing a better job of it than I was!!

Soon it was time, Kate welcomed our guests and away we began.

As I took my turn on the stage, my mouth immediately went dry, and my hands began to shake – I am definitely not one of life's natural public speakers! However, I had worked so closely with the Commissioners over the months and was determined to be the one to introduce them....'the stars of the show.....' so I squashed my nerves and hopefully (all be it shakily) gave them the introduction they deserved.

The Commissioners took it in their stride as they walked on stage one by one and drew the audience in with a 'hook' from their story..... 'at 15 I was living on the streets,' 'my name is tainted,' 'I am exhausted but hopeful,.....'

I envied Cathryn's calm composure as she later chatted through housekeeping, the expectations of the day, the meaning behind the table decorations and our hope for pledges.

As the first group of Commissioners shared their stories one by one, I observed the impact they were having on the audience. It was clear that everybody was listening intently, there was no fidgeting or sounds, only that of the commissioner's voice – the commissioners were achieving what they so desperately wanted – to have their voices heard.

There were poems, time to chat and activities to complete. Students from Ferryhill School did themselves proud sharing their views of poverty and opening our eyes as to the amount of support their school gives the local community.

It was then time for the final group of commissioners to speak. Again, the audience listened deeply as they heard the truth and trauma of the immigration and asylum seeker process, the stigma of being a care leaver and the consequences of generational poverty.

As the event ended, the Commissioners were genuinely shocked when people were coming up to them with tons of positive feedback and admiration. I don't think they realised the

extent of what they had just achieved.

As we shared hugs and accepted congratulations, it was hard to believe that it was over. We tidied up, the commissioners drifted away and it was soon as if nothing had ever happened. However, what we all heard over the afternoon of 11 March 2025 will stay with us for a very long time.

The Commissioners have all said that they now feel hopeful and positive with one commissioner telling me, 'Julie I loved it, for the first time in 20 years I feel listened to.'

Since the event, we have received some fantastic feedback, and this will be getting shared with the community commissioners at the earliest possible opportunity. Whilst the feedback is amazing, that is not what the event was about. The event was to start conversations and spark inspiration to change the way decisions are made. Now is the time for collaboration and action.

Moving forward, we will be meeting early April with the Civic Commissioners and introducing them to the Poverty Truth style of meeting! The infamous talking rabbit will be coming out of retirement while we all learn names again!

Each and every Community Commissioner including those who couldn't be at the launch are an absolute pleasure to know, have taught me so much and are the most incredibly brave and inspiring people. We all look forward to meeting with our civic commissioners and moving onto the next stage of our poverty truth journey.