

County Durham Poverty Truth Commission Launch Event

Tuesday 11 March 2025, Newton Aycliffe Youth and Community Centre



Introduction and planning

The first County Durham Poverty Truth Commission (CDPTC) is based in the South West of County Durham, focussed on Ferryhill, Bishop Auckland, Shildon and Newton Aycliffe. During the summer of 2024, 16 Community Commissioners were recruited from these areas with the support of community organisations. We started meeting regularly as a group in September 2024, initially spending time getting to know each other, but from January 2025, the focus shifted to planning the launch event. The launch event was an opportunity for the Community Commissioners to share stories of struggling with poverty to a wider audience, including key decision makers. It marks the transition from the initial stages of the CDPTC to the full commission, when the Community Commissioners are joined by Civic Commissioners (senior local leaders).

In the lead up to the launch, the Community Commissioners spent time deciding what to share, and how to share it. For many it was their first experience of public speaking, and it took a lot of courage to stand up and speak their truth. In the run through the week before the event, Commissioners were encouraging each other *'This is the only time we are going to get the chance to share our story, so we have to get it right'*. There was lot of expectation riding on the event, and the Commissioners wanted to make the most of it.

As part of the preparation, it was decided to decorate the tables with flowers which held meaning. The flowers chosen are usually seen as weeds, but each has value and significance, as shown in the explanation:

- **THISTLES** – represent bravery, strength, determination, and pride.
- **FORGET-ME-NOTS** – represent remembrance, don't forget those we've lost and those in need.
- **DANDELIONS** – a humble plant representing hope, perseverance, resilience, and transformation.
- **POPPIES** – representing hope for a peaceful future.

On the day

The two project workers were supported by colleagues from Durham Community Action, the Project Board, and the Sounding Board many of whom played a role in facilitating conversations and collecting feedback. In addition, there was a videographer, and sound support. In total 105 people attended the event. They were mostly people who lived and worked in County Durham, joined by delegations from Leeds, Morecombe Bay and South Tyneside poverty truth commissions.

As people arrived, we asked them to say what they hoped to get out of the day. Responses included finding out more about experiences of poverty and finding ways of working with others.

Out of the 16 commissioners originally recruited, 12 contributed on the day. Some were not able to attend due to personal situations, and so others stepped in to read their words. They ranged in age from 20's to 70's, 7 females and 5 males, mostly born and bred in the area, but all willing to speak out and hoping for change for County Durham.

We knew the Community Commissioners stories had to be the focus of the day, and the event was planned around giving them a platform. As one said *'I have been waiting to tell my story for years'*.

After a rescued food buffet lunch from Shildon Alive, the event opened. Community Commissioners shared their hook – the main message of their story: *'My name is tainted'; 'My life is not worth living'; 'I'm exhausted but hopeful'; 'My story is not my own and I am not in control'; 'At 15 years old I was living on the streets'; 'I have had a privileged life but I still have a story to share'; 'At the age of 34, I became a widow'; 'My poem is a journey of poverty'; 'When growing up I didn't have a voice'*.

This gave a flavour of what was to come, which we knew was going to be emotional and hard hitting. It was important the audience had space to reflect and take stock of what they were hearing, so the stories were in two blocks. In between people were asked to share their thoughts with others on their tables about what poverty means to them. Three students from Ferryhill School talked about poverty locally, how it affects students and some of the measures taken by the school to mitigate the worst impacts. They explained how the school provides every pupil with equipment to make sure all can participate, how they have provided food parcels, and have a washing machine for families to use. The school has provided bursaries for local and international travel to make sure students don't miss out. The student leadership group have supported local food banks as a way of supporting the community. Their contribution shows that the cycle of poverty continues, with many children, families and communities affected by poverty today.

After the final commissioner had shared their story – a powerful illustration of intergenerational trauma – it seemed as though there was a collective sigh in the room. The audience were invited to take some time to consider what they had heard, and it was obvious from the atmosphere in the room, the snippets of conversations and people milling around that we had all been on an emotional journey. When we came back together it was to look ahead and think about what next.

Some of the key organisations who had supported the PTC had been invited to send in requests for support which were read out. These were also shared in a follow up email to attendees with links to make it as easy as possible to act on. This idea came from the Community Commissioners who wanted people to feel inspired and supported to do something positive.

By way of feedback, participants were asked to respond to the following questions:

- What has been memorable about today?
- What will you do differently?
- What have you gained from today?
- How do you feel now?

The responses showed the wide impact the event had on individuals, challenging their view of poverty, applauding the bravery of the commissioners, nurturing collective engagement, and invoking a need for change.

The final word had to go to the Community Commissioners. They were asked to say what they hoped would change because of the PTC:

- ✓ *People have a voice.*
- ✓ *The changes I would like to see are that children's voices are heard. There are 100000 children in the care system. Their voices are not being listened to. County Durham is the second highest with domestic abuse in the north east and that needs to change.*
- ✓ *I'd like to see kids have better perspectives for their future. That way they don't end up growing up with no clear goals or idea of what to do.*
- ✓ *As a veteran of 9 years, I would like to see our brave lads looked after better and not just thrown on the streets like a lump of garbage.*
- ✓ *I urge people to give a good listening ear to people living with poverty and act accordingly.*
- ✓ *I wish that immigrants can settle down and fully integrate into the system without discrimination. Together we can all kick out poverty and uphold the truth. Thank you.*
- ✓ *I'd like to think that communities can be what they used to be years and years ago. Obviously around here there were a lot of pit villages and people had a community where now I think community spirit is so fractured and split up. I'd like to see everyone go in the right direction for a better and happier future.*
- ✓ *I am part of the cycle of generational trauma and I'm about to break that cycle of generational trauma. So, intervention is the key to prevention.*

After thoughts

Ten days later the Community Commissioners gathered again. It was an opportunity to share how they were feeling and reflect on how the launch had gone. *'Relieved', 'Proud', 'Surprised at the reaction of people who had listened – who came and shook hands and said congratulations', 'It was the first time I felt listened to in 20 years'.*

After a celebratory afternoon tea, we watched the video of the launch. Those whose stories had been read out by others were pleased with how they had been represented. All felt positive about the young people's input. One comment on the WhatsApp group afterwards summed it up *'It was really quite emotional today really listening to all of our lived experiences, not what I was expecting'.*