

County Durham Poverty Truth Commission:

Review of year 1



Introduction

The County Durham Poverty Truth Commission facilitators have put together a review of the first year of the Commission looking at lessons learned, what went well and why and the next steps for the PTC as it moves into phase 2 of the process.

Context and Activities

The County Durham Poverty Truth Commission started with the appointment of a project Co-Ordinator in March 2024. The project is funded for 3 years with the expectation that 2 Commissions will be completed within this time. The first Commission is focused on the left behind neighbourhoods of South West Durham – Newton Aycliffe, Shildon, Bishop Auckland and Ferryhill.

A Poverty Truth Commission takes on a relational approach and its first stage is to recruit community commissioners by building relationships and developing trust. Community Commissioners are those individuals with lived experience of poverty, a willingness to share their stories and a determination to make positive change. In County Durham, the PTC facilitators spent time identifying local community groups where they could go along, help out and start having conversations. This process was aided by the host organisation Durham Community Action whose staff have vast knowledge of and connections with the voluntary and charitable sectors of the County. Weeks were spent at foodbanks, support groups and drop-ins helping pack bags, making cups of tea and chatting to attendees. Gradually, trust started to form, and conversations moved on to poverty and its impact. The Poverty Truth Commission was explained, and people were invited to come along.

15 Community Commissioners were recruited during this process. They had experience of issues such as homelessness, addictions, the care system and immigration/asylum seeking among many more. The Commissioners were an even split of male to female, none were in work due to retirement, ill health, caring responsibilities or asylum seeker legislation and most resided in Shildon. When asked, the Community Commissioners said they had joined the PTC for a number of reasons including, to make a difference, to combat loneliness, to give a voice to others, to identify gaps in services and to make the community better for the next generation.

The Commission began meeting fortnightly in September 2024 and averaged 10-12 commissioners at each session. Initial meetings focused on building relationships with each other, and this was achieved in a number of ways including check-in questions such as 'What is your favourite sound?' 'What makes you smile?', playing human bingo and small group work looking at various issues around poverty. The check-in question was followed by a check out at the end of each session which usually asked the group how they were feeling. The group were very supportive of each other from the beginning and over time, they began to share their stories and experiences of poverty. The relationship process was aided by a buffet lunch prior to each meeting and a Christmas bowling day out!

Sadly, we did have some people drop out of the Commission due to various reasons including deteriorating mental health, attending college, needing to look for a job and becoming homeless following a flood.

From January 2025, the Commission met weekly in preparation for the launch event in March. We had support from local creatives who helped with storytelling techniques, writing poetry and completing life maps. Some of the Commissioners struggled initially to formulate their stories with many holding back on the finer details. It was a long process and required a significant amount of 1:1 work to get the Commissioners prepared and confident for the launch. During this time, we were supported by a third year Sociology student from Durham University who was with us on work placement. She became a valued member of the team and was a great support to the Community Commissioners.

During preparations for the launch, the Commission Co-Ordinator was also meeting with local decision makers from significant organisations in the County and inviting them to become Civic Commissioners to work alongside the Community Commissioners. Civic Commissioners need to be at the top level of their organisation and able to make decisions and change policies.

We had a successful launch event in March 2025 which was attended by over 100 people from organisations such as the NHS, Durham County Council, Public Health, local charities and other Poverty Truth Commissions from across the country. The launch has received very positive feedback and stimulated conversations around listening deeply, making systemic changes and the importance of giving a voice to those with lived experience. The Community Commissioners described feeling hopeful and positive after the event and are looking forward to moving onto the next stage of the Commission.

What went well and why?

The network of individuals and organisations who are aware of and have supported the PTC is wide and varied. This includes:

- Project Board who was responsible for developing the initial proposal and securing funding. These organisations – Durham Community Action, Pioneering Care Partnership, Durham County Council, Investing in Children, Point North and Durham University – are well connected across relevant institutions which has opened doors, and provided valuable input.
- Durham Community Action as the host organisation provides a wealth of connections and back-room support. The reputation and reach of colleagues has eased the process of engaging with the most appropriate individuals and community organisations.
- The Sounding Board has been another layer of supporters who could be called on for advice and input at a more practical level, for example when someone was needed to read out the stories of Community Commissioners who were unable to attend the launch event at the last minute.
- The national Poverty Truth Network has been a rich source of advice, resources and good practice. In addition to the regular meetings, the monthly mentor input has helped us through particular challenges. The opportunities to come together with other PTC participants nationally has been valuable.

The PTC team have worked well together, bringing complementary skills and experiences to the project. Both the Co-ordinator and Project Worker can focus on the PTC without distraction, and in total provide 1.8 fte staffing.

Many people from the statutory and voluntary sector have been very generous with their time and contacts, helping us to recruit Community Commissioners by inviting us to sessions and suggesting names of potential volunteers. Their local knowledge and desire for change provides fertile ground for the success of the PTC.

The Community Commissioners have come together well as a group, being supportive and encouraging each other. It has not always been smooth, but individual commitment has held the collective together.

The Poverty Truth process is tried and tested. The national network has provided a clear template to follow, with potential timescales and examples to draw on. This provides a high level of confidence for those establishing a PTC that there will be positive outcomes.

Lessons Learned

Although the PTC process is well described and there is lots of advice to draw on, each PTC is unique. The individuals, the particular context, the level of resource, the expectation of funders all bring their own strengths and challenges. We have learned who to ask for advice, and where to go for support. Ultimately it is down to the team, but we have been able to make better decisions as a result of the conversations we have had.

Advice from the PTN about timescales and processes has been key in communicating and managing expectations. The more people who are involved in the PTC at Project Board level or as Commissioners with that solid understanding makes that job easier.

In particular being able to check in within the team that everything is on course has allowed time for planning as well as doing.

Developing stories to share is a tricky process. The stories are always personal and often involve trauma. Helping commissioners decide what to share and how, takes time and requires trust.

Developing a monitoring and evaluation plan early on, which takes into account the requirements of external organisations will enable more valuable learning to take place. This is more likely to happen when partners have a shared understanding of the aims and objectives.

A well-resourced project gives a solid basis for success.

Next Steps

Our first full commission meeting will be held on 3 April. As with the Community Commissioners, the initial meetings will be focused on building relationships, learning to listen deeply and getting to know each other. Following this, the Commission will identify issues on which to focus and will split into working groups to come up with solutions. This stage will take approximately 12-18 months and will end with a celebration event where work is shared with the community and the embedding process begins.

It will be a priority to build on the momentum of the launch event, moving into the full commission meetings. Creating a cohesive group which includes the Community and Civic Commissioners will be key to this. The facilitation team will focus on relationship management and managing expectations.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank all those who have supported us on the County Durham Poverty Truth Commission journey so far and look forward to your continued input over the next few months.