

FROM POVERTY
TO PARTICIPATION

**LEEDS BY
EXAMPLE**

lptc.

LEEDS

GETTING
YOUR
VOICE
HEARD.

**POVERTY
TRUTH**

LEEDS

Learning from Leeds Poverty Truth

**POVERTY
TRUTH**

LEEDS



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

Leeds Poverty Truth Commission is an independent initiative to help address issues that contribute to poverty across Leeds. It does so by running 18 month-long Commissions that bring together 'poverty experts by experience' and civic and business decision makers in the city. These individuals meet together to build relationships, share experiences and think how might we respond to poverty more effectively. Modelled on the achievements of the national Scottish Poverty Truth Commission, Leeds Poverty Truth Commission was the first local initiative of its type and has already completed two Commission cycles: February 2014 to July 2015 and September 2016 to February 2018. The third Commission will start in 2019.

There is a great deal to be learnt from the achievements, outcomes and operation of Leeds Poverty Truth Commission, which other ventures and activities could benefit from. Leeds Poverty Truth Commission and the stakeholders involved in its facilitation offer substantial experience and knowledge that could support others to ensure the voices and interests of those living in poverty are better represented in the design, implementation and evaluation of public policy and services. Leeds Poverty Truth and the University of Leeds have come together on a project to distil some of the key lessons to take away from the model and encourage their take-up by others hoping to enhance the civic representation of marginalised citizens.

To support this, a half-day workshop was recently organised to bring together individuals affected by poverty who had taken part in one of the previous Leeds Poverty Truth Commissions. Working with researchers, participants were asked to share their thoughts on:

- the realities of living in poverty;
- becoming involved with Leeds Poverty Truth; and
- where they want to take it from here.

Whole and small group discussions took place with commissioners and researchers sat with different groups making notes about responses and conversations. The core themes raised by participants are summarised in this leaflet and visualised to reflect the experiences, concerns and achievements of commissioners.

What Unites Us? What Divides Us?

When asked about the lived realities of living in poverty, commissioners were keen to emphasise that poverty is not one fixed thing or experience and that there are 'different sorts of poverty'.

You don't understand it unless you've lived it - poverty is different for each person.

It's not always about money. We all have our own different poverties...

In groups of two and three, commissioners were asked what unites the experiences and situations of people living in poverty. The aim was to enable people to discuss how this affects opportunities to come together and engage with public institutions and services.

All commissioners identified poverty as an isolating experience that affected their relationship with others. Commissioners spoke about different issues that affect their everyday lives on a low income. Although there were differences in the challenges that each person faced, all agreed that being in poverty generated a feeling of alienation.

Poverty can be quite an isolating experience.



The everyday challenges that commissioners face include not being able to afford the costs of local travel, food for themselves and family, paying for heating and electricity at home and keeping up with bills and rent. Others experienced difficulties in buying essentials and worried about doing 'the basics' like washing clothes and still being able to have a cup of tea.

Travel is a massive part of poverty... so is food, mental health, giving people choice and power - keeping warm or food.

Special occasions were a particular source of stress and anxiety for commissioners as they often weren't able to afford a birthday or Christmas present to give to family members. This sometimes caused a strain on wider family relationships and increased a sense of loneliness and isolation.

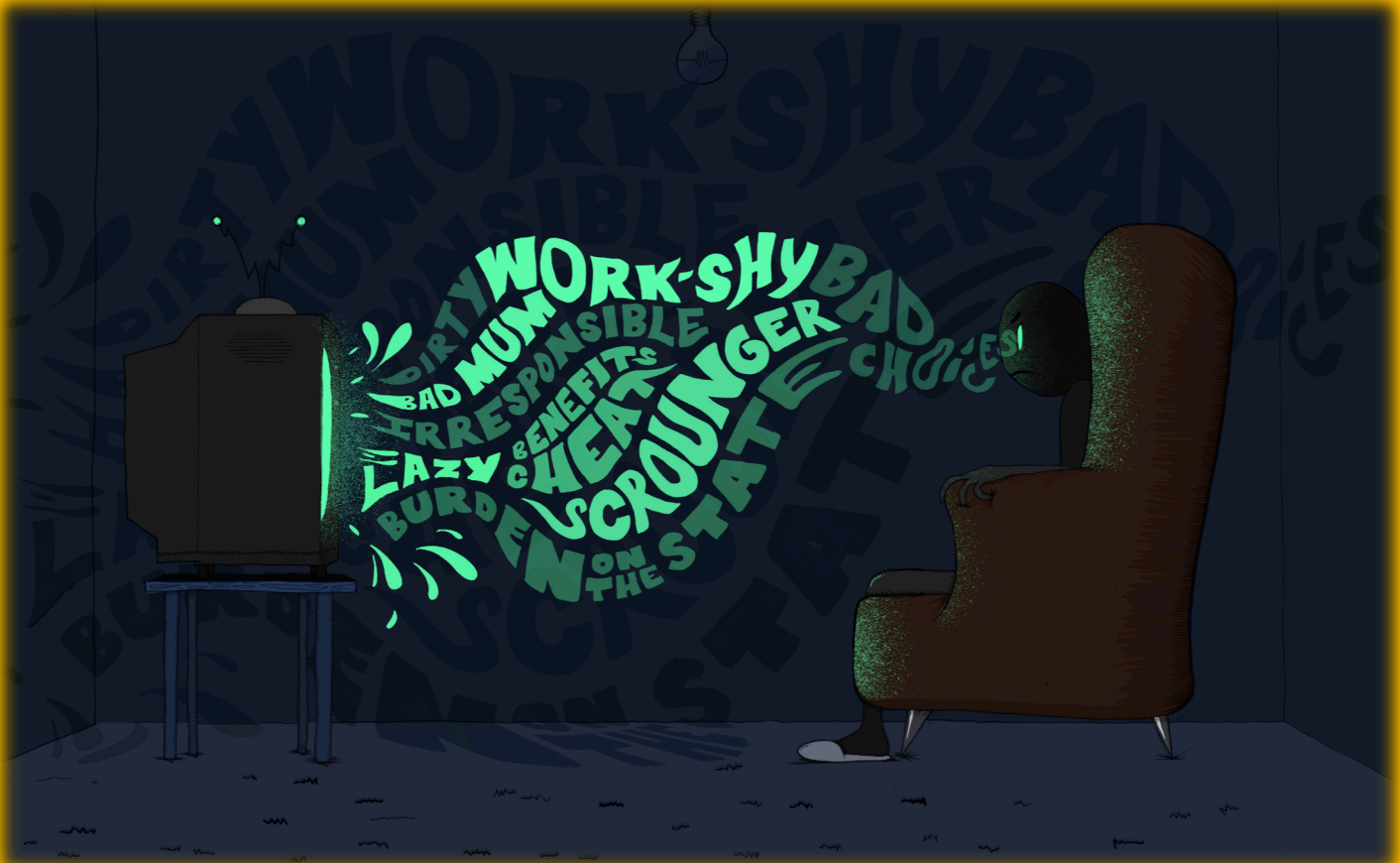
Commissioners also spoke about the feelings of shame attached to living in poverty. When asked about some of the biggest myths about poverty many felt that there were incorrect but widespread stereotypes surrounding low-income citizens. These included ideas that people living in poverty are 'lazy', 'good for nothing' and 'benefit scroungers'.

The most common myth surrounding poverty that commissioners noted was the idea that those experiencing financial hardship were in that situation because 'they made bad choices'.



Commissioners discussed how this created a great deal of stigma surrounding poverty and the challenges that come with it.

You're made to feel it is your fault but it's not your fault. It took me a long time to get there - to realise that I don't deserve to be punished.



The way poverty is portrayed and discussed in the media and politics was seen as a key factor contributing towards the stigma and shame of living in poverty. Negative and inaccurate portrayals in newspapers, television programmes and political speeches were all seen as creating a growing divide between 'us' and 'them'. For some commissioners, this took its toll on their mental health and contributed towards feelings of depression and anxiety.

Despite many shared experiences, commissioners felt that poverty was a deeply isolating experience: it united and divided those affected. It provided the conditions for a sense of shared or collective identity but restricted opportunities to come together to collectively recognise and organise around disadvantages faced.

From Poverty to Participation

During the workshop, commissioners were asked how they became involved with Leeds Poverty Truth Commission and about their experience of participating. All commissioners were positive about their involvement and felt that it had been transformative for them personally but also for the group as a whole.

For many, Leeds Poverty Truth was seen as a space and opportunity to 'explore the feelings we're having and then learn how to cope with those feelings.' Commissioners felt that they were able to talk about and share things with other commissioners that they might not necessarily feel comfortable doing in the outside world. During the commission, all individuals involved tell the group how they had come to experience poverty. This gives each commissioner an equal voice, and allows all commissioners to hear other people's experiences - some of which were different and some of which were similar to their own. This created a shared sense of experience and purpose amongst those affected by poverty.

I was allowed to speak - to be understood by everyone else in the room - to realise I wasn't the only one.

Participating in Poverty Truth gave me the realisation that I was in poverty because I would hear people describe an experience they had had and I thought to myself 'I can relate to that'.

For some, sharing their experiences with others in the group was a difficult but empowering process where they were able to identify injustices they faced and share this with others. This sometimes concerned the causes and effects of financial hardship but also criticisms of some of the solutions offered in response. One commissioner stated that they did not like to 'burden' other people with their problems, but within the commission they could share their ideas and thoughts.

It helps you to work through emotions around poverty. Remember that you are not the only one. You share your story and hear your story in others' stories.

It's been a real journey to face up to how I feel and cope with living in poverty... I've been able to work through my issues of shame, fear and guilt.

The latter commissioner went on to describe how it was been hard but Leeds Poverty Truth had helped her work through her problems and gain the confidence to say 'this is not my fault'.

Commissioners felt that being able to share their experience was important and the bonds that were formed with each other were seen as a positive. Commissioners liked the check-in and check out procedure at the beginning and end of a session which allowed people to share how they were feeling at that moment and to make sure they had had the closure that they needed. A number of commissioners commented that they felt the commission was like a family that they could turn to for mutual assistance and support.

We came together as a group of strangers but we're now a family. I feel like if any of us are ever in any need they could turn to one of us.

You know you can bring your kids, share your problems. Support each other.

At each round of the commission, those living in poverty came together with business and civic leaders from across the city. This made it possible to collectively organise and collaborate on poverty-related issues affecting communities and people across



STRUGGLING



LISTENING



COLLABORATING



ACTING

Leeds. So far, a range of initiatives have run to: respond to local issues affecting people dealing with poverty; improve public understandings of poverty; and enhance the civic representation and participation of marginalised citizens. For 'poverty experts by experience', these activities increased their sense of power and influence over decision-making across the city.

I think we are being heard... we are being heard.

One of the main themes to emerge from discussions with commissioners was the increased confidence that taking part in Leeds Poverty Truth generated. Commissioners also felt more involved with their local communities and able to 'speak up' if they wanted to effect change.

I can sit in a room with 'big wigs' and tell my story. I can make my views heard.

It definitely has brought us out of ourselves.

Being involved with Leeds Poverty Truth has provided commissioners with opportunities they might not otherwise have had, equipping them with new knowledge and skills. This includes being interviewed by national media outlets, engaging with senior public sector officials and campaigning on projects to tackle the stigma associated with financial hardship. A number of commissioners had taken part in filming a documentary about poverty and had attended media 'self care' training which helps to ensure people feel comfortable speaking about issues with the media. As a result of Leeds Poverty Truth, one commissioner had been inspired to set up her own charity to recycle school uniform for families struggling, so that 'hand-me-downs' were less shameful and damaging to children's mental health. These examples were typical of a broader trend towards increased civic participation amongst commissioners.

When asked about how participating in the commission had affected them, a number of people recounted examples of ways in which it had made them more pro-active in responding to changes affecting them and their local communities. Commissioners were much more likely to be involved in local activities and campaigns after participating in Leeds Poverty Truth. One commissioner stated that being able to speak to civic leaders and sharing their

experience of poverty allowed them to be ‘recognised as human’. Commissioners agreed that taking part in Leeds Poverty Truth also gave them a shared sense of value and purpose.

We’ve been able to see the best in one another. To want the best for each other.

Overall, commissioners were positive about their involvement in and contribution towards Leeds Poverty Truth. Some expressed frustration that public institutions were not responding as quickly as they would like. However, the majority also recognised Leeds Poverty Truth as the first step in a longer process, bringing together people affected by poverty so that they can work to influence decision-makers through collective organisation and action. A number of commissioners saw each round of the commission as setting the stage for further action and change. Future commissioners will be building on the achievements already secured.

Getting the foot in the door, because we’ve already unlocked it.



Barriers to collective organisation and engagement

Commissioners were also asked to share their views on barriers to coming together and engaging with public institutions. Reflecting on their experience, commissioners raised a number of issues related to their own time and capacity, but also the sustained involvement of civic and business leaders. Overall, commissioners expressed a concern that people are not always equipped with the skills necessary to really engage with and understand one another.

People listen but they don't hear, people hear but they don't listen.

Some commissioners felt that despite initially positive feedback regarding the involvement of business and civic leaders this had now waned. This had disappointed those who were keen to continue working with the local authority and other agencies but were somewhat frustrated by the lack of progress. It was perceived by commissioners that as civic and business leaders are employed as such, there is not the same level of priority for effecting change related to poverty.

Unless they're getting something out of it - they're just not interested.

Commissioners explained that a lack of time from civic and business leaders could be perceived by some as disinterest in the commission, however this issue might be helped if communication was more effective. One commissioner suggested that returning to core principles of empathy, compassion and care would help to bring people together around the table. It was acknowledged that civic and business leaders often have competing priorities and that some good relationships had been built during the commissions. It was also noted that more time and support would help build upon and sustain these relationships and follow through on commitments made.

Commissioners commented on the power gained from telling their stories to the wider civic and business community. They felt that this helped business and civic leaders to understand poverty issues. However some commissioners discussed their disappointment at the lack of sustained involvement from business

and civic leaders during the second commission, which left them feeling vulnerable.

We stood and told our stories to civic leaders and this was powerful and raw... Some civic leaders did not attend the next meeting and we wondered if we had done it right because they did not attend.

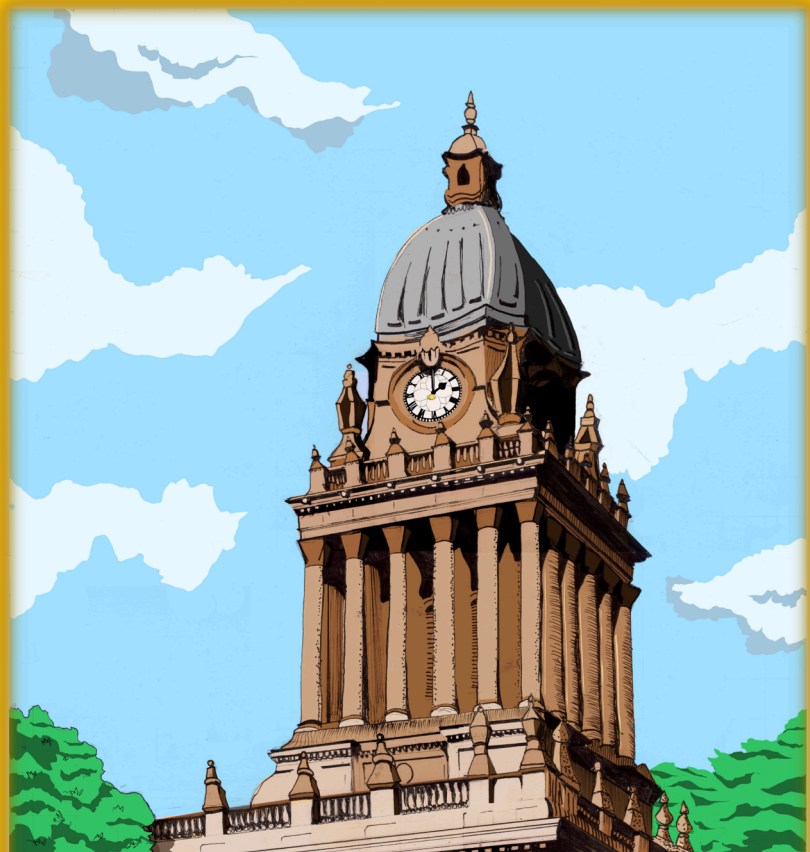
In terms of barriers experienced by commissioners, it was explained that attending events could be difficult due to transport costs and caring responsibilities. In addition, the social and mental health needs of some commissioners involved were a barrier and one commissioner commented that they needed to be in the 'right' place emotionally in order to take part. One commissioner was reluctant to get involved due to their perceptions of politics. This was mainly because it was felt that politicians do not appreciate or understand the 'real person' and they stated 'I want solutions not arguments'.

Despite these barriers, the power of being involved in one of the commissions was felt by all.

We've been able to change mind-sets.

People can be more vocal and not disheartened if things don't go our way.

It was suggested that being realistic and having trust is key to the whole Poverty Truth process. One commissioner stated that the expectations of the whole group might need to be



LEEDS
TIME TO ACT

raised now that more commissions have taken place. The sharing of experiences relating to poverty was particularly important, and commissioners felt that this was why the commissions had been so successful. However, they discussed the idea that there is much more to be done in order to change people's perception of those who experience poverty.

People don't see how we have to choose between a cup of coffee or a bath...they don't understand this.

On an individual level, commissioners identified their participation in Leeds Poverty Truth as transformational. They had acquired new skills, greater confidence in both themselves and the process of representing their views and interests in a public forum. However, commissioners also identified a number of psychological barriers that made it difficult to recount their experience and advocate for change. Commissioners who were worried about maintaining progress and momentum felt these barriers particularly strongly. Here, the role of civic and business leaders was seen as crucial in following through on 'pledges' made and sustaining faith in the process and principles of the commission.

We worked hard on the Humanifesto but we haven't seen anything yet.

In this regard, some commissioners felt it was particularly important to hold civic and business leaders to account, to encourage them to, 'do something and not just pay lip service'. Beyond amplifying the collective voice of marginalised citizens, this highlights the importance of institutions listening, but also responding to the needs and interests of people affected by poverty.

Increasing Civic Participation and Representation

Commissioners were asked whether and how Leeds Poverty Truth could increase the capacity of people affected by poverty to continue civic engagement and advocacy outside of the commission. This session was carried out as a whole group discussion and began by recognising the achievements to date. Commissioners had varied ideas about what they wanted to do individually and as a collective but all wished to capitalise on their experience of participation to pursue their passions and interests.

One commissioner was keen to organise a workshop on humanity and what it means, whilst another wanted to teach others how to self-publish pieces of writing. In terms of how commissioners wished to move the Leeds Poverty Truth Commission forward, there was a clear desire to encourage stronger business and civic leader involvement. One commissioner explained that they are going to be a part of a community neighbourhood group, and some are part of a new steering group for Leeds Poverty Truth. Collectively, there was a strong sense that commissioners were better equipped to influence decision-making in the city and despite differences in their future work, this would amount to something that was more than the sum of its parts.

We can be together as a movement.

A discussion ensued regarding the best way to ‘devolve the process’ of increasing civic engagement and representation of people living in poverty. Here, commissioners were happy to pursue their own endeavours but expressed a desire to receive support through offering links, contacts or partnering to help people do the things that they want to do. Many underlined the value of follow-on guidance and support, beyond the term of an individual commission.

Commissioners discussed whether Leeds Poverty truth is about more than ‘just’ poverty. Some suggested it is about planting ideas whilst others stressed the need for action. Overall, commissioners felt it was important to capitalise on the ‘hidden potential in people’ to ensure decisions affecting people in poverty are made and influenced by people living in poverty.

**NOTHING
ABOUT
US
WITHOUT
US
IS FOR
US**

www.leedspovertytruth.org.uk

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