

FROM POVERTY TO PARTICIPATION



**Learning from
Leeds Poverty Truth
*Improving civic representation
of people affected by poverty***

**POVERTY
TRUTH**

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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 we might 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 now completed two Commission cycles: February 2014 to July 2015 and September 2016 to February 2018.

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 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 organised to discuss the obstacles that marginalised citizen's experience in their everyday interactions with public institutions and local services. Drawing on lessons learnt from the Leeds Poverty Truth initiative, this event identified some of the barriers that inhibit civic engagement of people affected by poverty and what can be done to overcome these across Leeds and West Yorkshire.

Whole and small group conversations took place with public sector and civic society stakeholders, to discuss strategies for improving civic participation through a change in organisational culture and professional practice. This booklet highlights some of the main themes that were suggested during the workshop, and the key recommendations for those working in the public and third sector, to improve civic representation and engagement, for people affected by poverty.

What Unites Us? What Divides Us?

The workshop opened with an introduction to the Leeds Poverty Truth Commission. Andrew Grinnell, facilitator of the initiative, discussed what can be achieved when foregrounding the experiences of people affected by poverty and supporting opportunities for their civic engagement with local decision makers. The benefits of the initiative underline the obstacles to civic participation and representation, affecting marginalised citizens. In the first part of the workshop, groups discussed barriers to civic engagement; these were divided into individual barriers facing people affected by poverty, and institutional barriers, observable within local services and public institutions.

Individual barriers

Time

Delegates described a lack of time that prevents people in poverty from taking part in civic engagement. Often people in poverty have to prioritise other things; they may be working long hours, juggling personal and logistical difficulties or unable to find the time to be involved with local initiatives, campaigns and services.

Previous negative experiences

A number of delegates talked about the negative experiences that people affected by poverty can often have with their local council, which can ‘put them off’ approaching local representatives and services. Attendees talked about other negative associations that people living in poverty may have had with the council, which means they feel uncomfortable engaging with them in the future.

“Fear of being judged and judgment of service providers.”

Underlying this, delegates hinted that the stigma associated with poverty might affect the confidence and inclination to reach out amongst those living in low-income households.

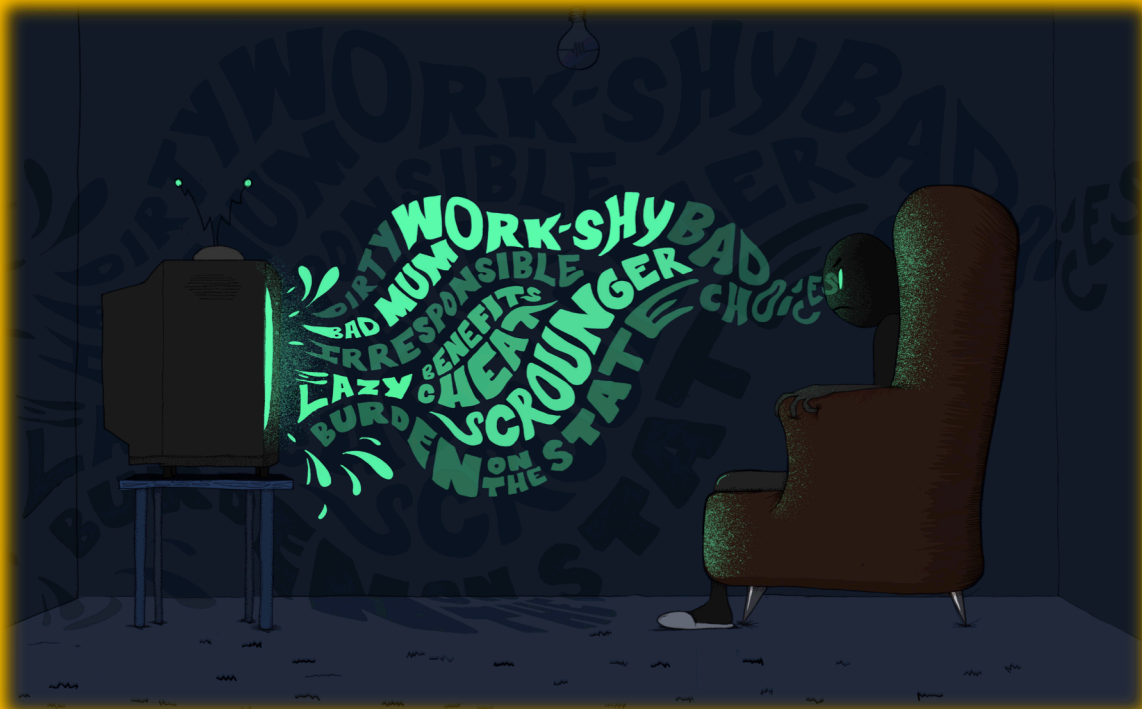
“What’s the point?”

Delegates described conversations they had had with people in poverty, who felt like there was no point being involved in civic participation, due to the perceived lack of respect given to them by

local authorities and based on past experiences, where they felt decisions were made without their consideration.

“If you perceive that you are ‘undeserving poor’, there’s stigma attached so you just think, what’s the point? You get to the point where you know society thinks your scum; you internalise that and then think, why would I engage with a society that doesn’t engage with me? What’s the point?”

Delegates suggested that individuals affected by poverty were less inclined to engage because local decision-making rarely reflected their interests or concerns. This contributed towards a feeling and belief that they had little influence – even when they did speak up, they were seldom heard.



Institutional barriers

Organisational culture

Another barrier identified was the way civic instruments are often portrayed and structured. The way staff are dressed and the language they use can often alienate people struggling against poverty. This can contribute towards a feeling of vulnerability when going into council buildings, confronted with people who do not necessarily look or talk like themselves.

Linked to this idea, was the notion of historically paternalistic relationships between people in poverty and those in positions of power. For those worst affected, it has always been a relationship on the institution's terms, where there is no parity or opportunity to reshape it.

“We’ll come in and help you with your problem, we might be your problem but that’s besides the point.”

If public institutions or services are not willing to recognise the role they play in affecting the circumstances of people affected by poverty, civic engagement is unlikely to affect meaningful change.

Digital exclusion

Digital exclusion was discussed as a barrier that prevents people in poverty from civic participation. Applications for Universal Credit must be made online, and many other local authority services can only be accessed through institutional websites. People in poverty can be excluded due to a lack of resources, access or ability to use equipment. This also limits opportunities for face-to-face interaction to support dialogue and understanding.

Cycle of Poverty

The cycle of poverty was also mentioned as an institutional barrier to participation. Also known as the poverty trap, children brought up in poorer households are more likely to end up in poverty when they become adults, leading to intergenerational disadvantages that increase feelings of social exclusion and disempowerment.



Recommendations for the public sector

'Proper' public consultation

To support the civic participation of people in poverty, councils need to ensure they conduct genuine public consultations, where they listen to suggestions, and afterwards, they show the public what they have achieved.

Attendees also discussed meaningful engagement, where residents can see their contribution as valid and valued. Giving people the right to decide how to set their own agenda, so they can change things that matter to them.

"Involving people should be the output, not just a means to an end."

Rather than consulting people on pre-determined problems and solutions, public institutions need to allow time and space for mutual dialogue and learning. This means allowing people struggling against poverty to communicate about the issues they face on their own terms and identify the public responses necessary to help overcome these.

Improving structures

Institutions need to be organized and presented in a way that ensures they are easier to understand, more welcoming and less intimidating.

"I think we need to change how we have engaged with our customers. We've always been very transactional - we need to flip that round and see how we can help people at the first point of contact. Instead of calling them 'customers', we could call them 'people'."

Better support networks and examples of success

Some people living in poverty lack support networks and positive examples of how to engage with public services, so suggestions were made to utilise the experience and wisdom of local people and 'champions'. There needs to be visible, authentic role models, and working with third sector groups may help to address this gap. Leeds Poverty Truth is a good example of how this can happen by bringing together 'poverty experts by experience' with civic decision-makers and leaders.

More joined up services

There needs to be more collaboration and co-ordination; local services and authorities need to work together, alongside the third sector, private sector and academic partners. Delegates suggested that there are a good number of partners offering provision across the region, so mapping out what is available, and keeping it updated, would be helpful. There is currently a fragmentation of services and more needs to be done to connect these up to provide person-centred assistance and support through a single point of contact.

“...putting people first, reformatting and changing the services to look at what they provide”.

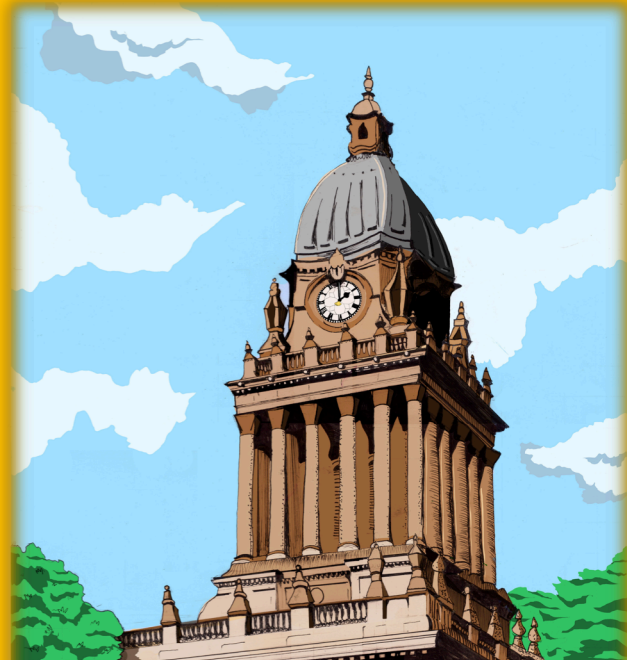
Support a shift from ‘services’ to ‘rights’

At the moment, public institutions are configured in a way that (ideally) responds to a problem as and when it arises. However, local councils should do more to offer preventative support that helps people identify and claim their rights on their own terms.

“At the moment, people come with a problem, we solve it and they come back again with the same problem. Perhaps there’s room to say we might engage with people differently so they are learning some skills and can take their rights and enforce them for themselves”.

To support increased civic engagement, one delegate suggested that we need to move away from the idea of empowerment and towards the principle of entitlement.

“Entitlement not empowerment, its ours to take not yours to give.”



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Recommendations for the third sector

More meaningful volunteering

Third sector delegates discussed how they felt that many volunteering schemes are not seen as meaningful, so it was suggested that volunteering opportunities are made to feel more purposeful so that the benefits of engagement are visible and felt.

Funding concerns

Organisations that are heavily reliant on public funding to operate, may be concerned to speak out about issues they have with the local authority. This may be because they are concerned about having their funding withdrawn, so it was suggested that there should be more openness, and that groups should be able to speak out without concerns over their funding. Here, advocacy was felt to be an opportunity for mutual learning rather than solely criticism.

“A major problem now is that those who do get funding from the government are so worried about getting their funding cut they wont criticize policy, but they should be allowed to criticize policy and not worry they will lose their funding”

Challenging stigma and respecting expertise

Some delegates were keen to emphasise the important role charities need to play in challenging the stigma surrounding poverty, and supporting individuals affected to overcome and challenge the internalised shame that often comes with this. Rather than providing services *for* people, more needs to be done to develop provision *with* people. Here, more should be done to work with people and communities to reframe the language around poverty and to improve the services that are provided.

**NOTHING
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WITHOUT
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IS FOR
US**

www.leedspovertytruth.org.uk

Special thanks to all attendees of the workshop and for The Carriageworks Theatre, Leeds, for hosting. If you have questions or would like to get in touch please email: d.edmiston@leeds.ac.uk or andrew@andrewgrinnell.com.