



2017-2020

MORECAMBE BAY POVERTY TRUTH COMMISSION

Reflections and Learning

Three chapters now describe in different ways what we discovered from our journey together as the first round of Poverty Truth Commission in Morecambe Bay. You may want to pick and choose between them as some of the content is quite similar.

Chapter 1 is “A Simple Guide.” It may be all you want to know: a short explanation of the issues we looked at.

Chapter 2 explains a bit more about how we began the journey and how we did the research. It includes some books and articles where you can follow up some of the deeper reasoning behind what we looked for, if you want to.

Chapter 3 is a longer, more complete story, so you may want to jump straight here, with a cup of tea to hand. It includes lots of what the Commissioners actually said. There is a more detailed description of some of the outcomes of the journey, and recommendations of what we might carry forward into Round 2.



CHAPTER ONE

A SIMPLE GUIDE TO THE METHODS AND KEY FINDINGS ABOUT MORECAMBE BAY POVERTY TRUTH COMMISSION, ROUND ONE.

During the lock down period of the Coronavirus pandemic, an evaluation of round 1 of the Morecambe Bay Poverty Truth Commission (MBPTC) was carried out using a research technique called Grounded Theory. This basically involved two sets of interviews with all the community and civic commissioners involved in round 1. Community commissioners are people with lived experience of poverty, civic commissioners are people who work for organisations in the public, private or voluntary sectors who make key decisions that affect people living in poverty.

The first set of interviews asked broad questions on how people had found the Poverty Truth process.

Reading through the answers to these questions, it became apparent that certain positive themes were emerging. These were around issues such as a change in perspective, an increased understanding of other people, a sense of community, support and belonging, an increase in confidence and self-esteem, a sense of having a voice for the first time and a feeling of empowerment or capability to bring about change for the better. Various people also talked about things they had found difficult during round 1 such as the sometimes intellectual nature of some of the meetings, and a disappointment in the way some relationships or projects had not turned out as they would have hoped.

Based on the themes that emerged from people's answers to the first set of questions, a second set of questions was then asked to look deeper into these issues.

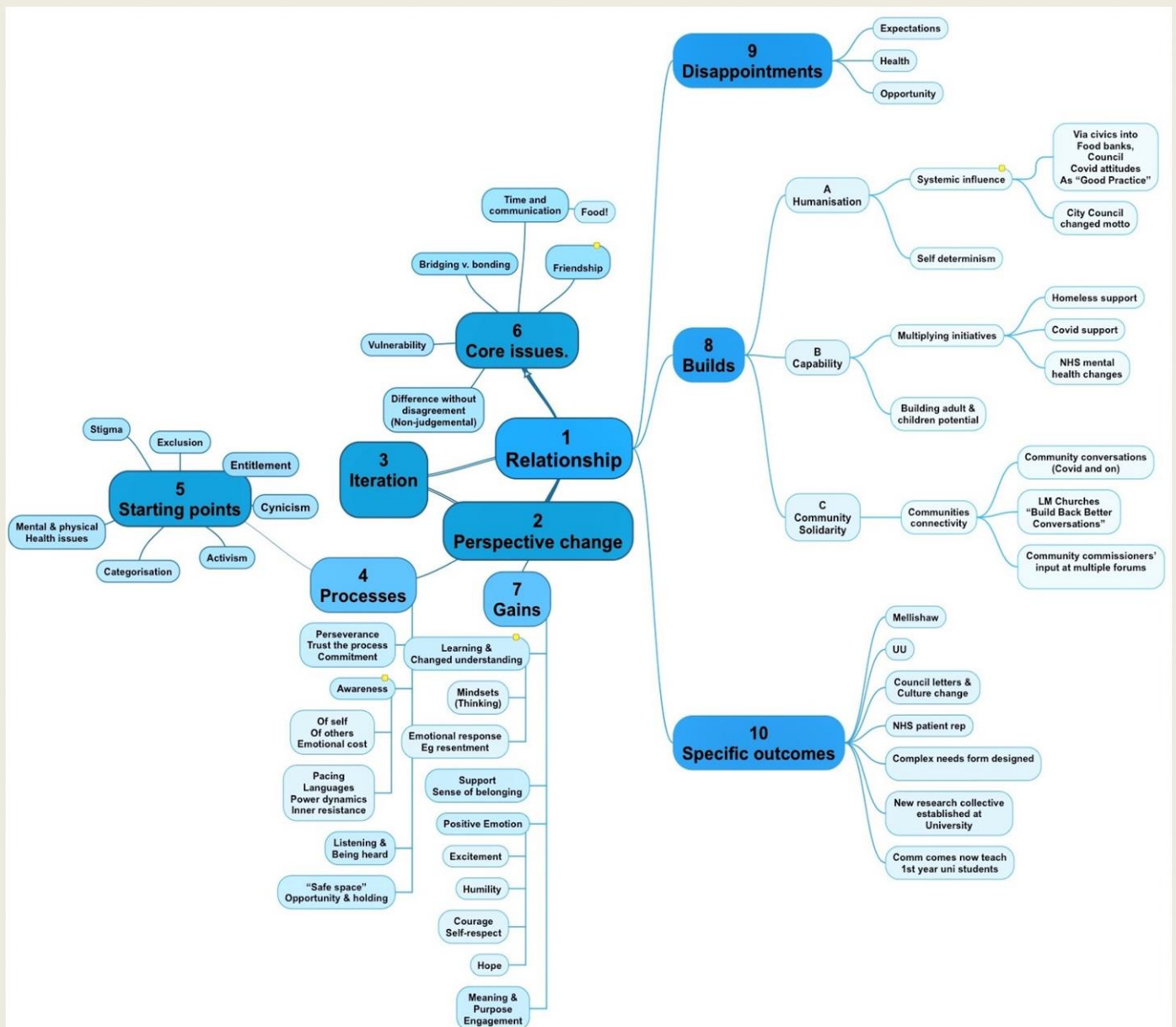
The mind map below is a diagram of all the themes and related issues that emerged from both sets of interviews. It represents the key findings from the research in the form of a diagram which will be explained below. In the longer (third) part of this report there is a selection of quotes, taken from the research interviews, which demonstrate the points being made in each section of the mind map.

An explanation of how to understand the mind map diagram

1. Relationship - At the centre of the diagram is the word relationship. All the key findings from the research and all the outcomes of the Poverty Truth process flow into and out from the relationships that were built between the community commissioners and the civic commissioners.

2. Perspective change - The relationships developed because of the changes in perspective that both sets of commissioners experienced as they learnt to listen to each other and understand how other people's lives were very different to their own. The focus of this understanding was on how people experience poverty differently.

3. Iteration - This means to go over something again and again, noticing and learning from the slight changes that happen each time. In the case of Poverty Truth, it was the process where commissioners carried on listening and talking again and again with each other, to understand how poverty affects people, whether it is people who are living through poverty or people who are working in organisations that are trying to support people struggling with poverty. The listening and talking was repeated in many different ways to help us all gradually learn to understand each other's perspectives clearly. We had to keep doing this till we stopped assuming we already knew everything!



4. Processes - There were several processes that helped people learn how to listen deeply. These were things like creating a safe space for people to share difficult stories, and learning how to talk in a language that other people could relate to, not to use jargon or complicated language. We all had to try and be aware of the unequal power dynamics that language can create if not everyone understands what is being said. It also involved starting to look at ourselves more deeply and become aware of how we reacted to others, becoming gradually more aware of ourselves as well as other people. We had to come to accept that learning how to really listen in order to understand other people's experience takes a lot of time and some hard work.

5. Starting points - People came to the commission from a range of different starting points, with different reasons why they wanted to engage with Poverty Truth. For some this was because they felt excluded from society as a result of their experience. Many had experienced the stigma of struggling with poverty and how this is portrayed in the media, and many felt categorised, like they were boxed off as not important, or completely unseen. Most people with experience of living in poverty had physical or mental health issues (or both) as a result. Some people had been activists, strongly campaigning for human rights on various issues for most of their lives and others were cynical, did not believe change was possible, but came along anyway. Some discovered they came with a strong sense of knowing how to fix things, and sometimes a sense of entitlement about being right. Some of us had a combination of all of the above, but the important thing was that, in order to build relationships, the places where people were starting from had to be discovered and understood.

6. Core issues – As people started to get to know each other better, some crucial common issues began to emerge that were key to being able to form healthy, strong relationships. These ranged from things that were quite practical like the best time of day the meetings were held, the venue and access issues and the importance of having suitable food for everyone. Then there were more sensitive issues such as how vulnerable people were when they were sharing their stories, and how they were cared for in this vulnerability. The ability to have difficult conversations when people strongly disagreed with each other had to be learnt, and an ability to hear different opinions without heated argument had to be developed. All of this was managed to a greater or lesser extent with varying degrees of success. It was definitely a steep learning curve for all! The importance of forming friendships over meeting up for coffee outside of the meetings was also a crucial factor in the strength of the relationships that were built. We discovered something about our various abilities to build either 'bonding' relationships when we found something in common between us, or 'bridging' relationships where we chose to reach across significant difference and how that could work well, or lead to disappointment.

7. Gains - This section of the map refers to the positive impacts that the commissioners shared from being part of PTC and having some perspectives changed. These included the following:

- As already mentioned, people had a greater understanding of others who are different to themselves;

- We began to think differently, sometimes changing the opinions of others we had carried with us for years, like thinking anyone who works for the council doesn't care about us, or people who are unemployed should just try harder;
- Some of the emotional (often unconscious) responses people had carried all their life began to change, like anger or resentment at people in authority, or fear of people struggling with substance misuse, or homeless people;
- Most of us began to feel a sense of community, support and belonging;
- There were a range of positive emotions listed like excitement, hope, humility, greater courage and self-respect, all of which are signs of greater mental health.
- Many of us reported feeling more confidence whether at work, or just in ourselves;
- People felt like they had meaning in their life and a sense of purpose, that they were part of something working for change for the better for many people not just themselves, which added to their sense of confidence.

8. Builds - This section is divided into 3, looking more deeply at some of the positive impacts. The relationships formed began to build a sense of:

A. Humanisation - a feeling of being treated like a human being, not just a statistic or a number. People began to feel like they are worth something, that their voices matter, and that they are being treated as equals in the room. But it also turned out that within large organisations such as the council or utility companies, it is possible for the systems to start to change as well, so people are treated in a more humane way; for the staff to see people as human beings, to listen and respond appropriately as opposed to dismissing or rejecting them. They were encouraged to write letters in a way that encourages people to reach out for support rather than to shrink back in fear. It also helped the staff in these huge systems to feel better about themselves and morale got much better. In addition, workers in one organisation were able to understand better the stress that workers in a different organisation face and to try and work together more co-operatively and helpfully as fellow humans working for the well-being of others, not just workers doing a job.

B. Capability - this section refers to a newly developed or discovered ability to do something better than before, to feel more confident about how to bring about change whether it is in your personal life, the community or the organisation you work for.

As a result of discovering a greater capability, community and civic commissioners went on to work together (beyond the life of round 1 of the commission) to set up various different projects to help many others, e.g.

- Secure funding for a project befriending recently rehoused long term homeless people during the Covid 19 pandemic, providing the support they need to remain in their tenancies;
- Council and foodbank support services during the pandemic were able to quickly and efficiently reach out to over 30,000 of the most vulnerable members of the community in a variety of

different ways resulting in a commissioner being nominated for a European award for excellence in Covid response.

- A research project looking into the health inequalities faced by the Gypsy/Traveller community was established, hopefully resulting in a job role within the community to improve health within the Gypsy /Traveller community across Lancaster and Morecambe;
- Someone who had received horrific treatment in relation to mental health in hospital in another area went on to work with senior directors to produce a training film for staff to try to ensure that the same mistakes were not repeated again.

C. Community solidarity - All the people involved in the commission said that they felt part of a community and had a sense of solidarity and belonging. And this reached further into an enormous networked connection since people had come together in PTC from many different and otherwise unconnected communities. People said they had much better connections now whether it was with other people who are struggling with poverty, with people they work with, with people in their local area or a mixture of all three. The knowledge that they can now connect more easily for help in many different fields was a great benefit to all the commissioners and the many people they themselves connect to, whether it was work related, a personal problem, or for someone else who didn't know where to turn. This was really evident particularly in regard to setting up community conversations and around supporting people in the most effective and thoughtful way across the region during Covid 19. Another example is the series of Build Back Better talks organised by Lancaster Methodist Church which involved several commissioners speaking.

9. Disappointments - There were inevitably some disappointments around things that did not work out as people had hoped they might. This was for a variety of reasons including the lack of opportunity to form lasting relationships with people working in some large institutions such as the DWP or the NHS. Time pressures on workers or high staff turnover within these organisations meant that commissioners did not have the time or opportunity to build meaningful relationships which in turn did not bring about the changes in the organisations people would have liked to have seen. It also led to some people feeling like a relationship had started and then was abandoned which resulted in a sense of feeling let down.

Some people felt a sense of isolation around the splitting into working groups, and many people felt a sense of disconnection and loss at the start of the Covid pandemic, just as we were about to hold our celebration of round 1 event. As a result of this some people were not clear about what happens next in terms of being involved beyond the end of round 1.

Some of us had ongoing health issues that meant we could not participate as fully as we would have liked in the process. And some who were having to work at several low paid jobs found those jobs and growing family needs just too demanding to be able to give sufficient time to the commission. We were really grateful for all they could contribute and will look for more flexible ways of engaging in round 2. All the disappointments have been noted and a list of ways to improve round 2 have been listed at the end of this report.

10. Specific outcomes - This final section of the mind map is a list of all the specific projects that came about directly as a result of the hard work of the commissioners during the course of the last 2 years. There were so many other benefits of the Poverty Truth process as listed in all the sections above, but this section is about what specific changes happened.

- i. United Utilities (UU) introduced a 2 month payment deferral for customers having to sign up for UC, as well as support from UU for people **before** they go into debt rather than afterward. These changes will now be of benefit to a large number of people across the 8 million customers UU serve.
- ii. As a result of relationships built between two Irish Traveller commissioners and the City Council and other civic commissioners, the City Council purchased the Mellishaw site from County Council and promised a £1m refurbishment scheme to do long overdue improvements to the living conditions on the site.
- iii. The regional NHS has committed to pilot a new role of Patient representative to help people with complex long term health needs navigate the bewildering array of forms, appointments and assessments required to access various benefits and/or different healthcare provision.
- iv. A Complex Needs Alert form has also been designed and is in use by the local health care professionals, the regional CCG, the Citizens Advice Bureau, and Lancaster City Council to aid with recognition of the need for support at benefit appointments.
- v. A significant culture change across Lancaster City council has been achieved with a focus on treating people kindly and fairly as human beings as opposed to targets to be reached. There has been a deliberate change in the City Council motto from “a sharp and forward thinking council” to “a co-operative, kind and responsible council.”
- vi. The wording of council letters has been changed to make them less intimidating and to encourage people to phone in and access the support available. These re-worded letters have already been sent to 5,000 households. PTC’s widely networked relationships including with both the Council and the Foodbank meant that within 48 hours of the original Coronavirus lockdown, practical caring support had been offered to 30,000 homes in the area, which led to international recognition.
- vii. Some of the learning and stories from the commission have already been included in a key academic book, “Stigma”, by Imogen Tyler, which brings a radical change of perspective to future social workers’ training at Lancaster University.
- viii. The new Social Action Research Group has been set up in the Sociology department of Lancaster University in an ongoing partnership with PTC, to give further opportunities for research and teaching to be impacted by lived experience.
- ix. A book project including stories, experiences, art, poetry etc. by people with lived experience of poverty is already also being co-produced, facilitated by the same partnership.

- x. Community commissioners shared (and continue to share) their experience and expertise on the wide ranging impacts of poverty at a range of forums including:
- ✓ Immediately and intensely in Covid response forums
 - ✓ Food poverty forums
 - ✓ Head teachers' education forum looking at health inequalities for young people
 - ✓ Teaching sessions with over 80 second year medical students looking at the effect of poverty on health
 - ✓ Speaking at sociology lectures for second year students at Lancaster University.
 - ✓ Morecambe Bay Area Clinical Commissioning groups (CCGs)
 - ✓ Planning meetings both online and in person for the forthcoming Eden Project in Morecambe
 - ✓ The visit of 2 MPs touring the UK investigating the effects of poverty, filmed for national news channels and still ongoing connection with Channel 4 News
 - ✓ 100 council staff at Lancaster City Council
 - ✓ Online and in person meetings regarding setting up a poverty truth commission in other areas e.g. South Lakes, and Barrow

NOT INCLUDED ON THE MIND MAP BUT KEY LEARNING FROM THE RESEARCH SHOWS THAT AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT FOR ROUND 2 ARE:

- Remain focused on clear and simple language that everyone can understand;
- Pay attention to access issues/venue condition and location;
- Give a clear indication of time commitments involved before commissioners commit to being part of PTC;
- Work out some flexibility in how to include the 'working poor' who already have more than one job and family commitments.
- Be clearer about what can happen at the end of the round and how people can remain a part of the process moving forward;
- Work jointly with the national network of PTCs to try and improve communications and commitment from the DWP and other large organisations;
- Try to engage commissioners at a high level of authority from large organisations such as the DWP;
- Include careful attention to diversity and equality in the 'shared culture contract' we co-produce together early on to build a collectively safe space for the conversations, and revisit/redraw it at the beginning of the full commission;
- Work on diversity of community commissioners to include people from BAME communities and more people from estates;
- Spread the word of the work more widely on social media platforms so more people know about the work being done and how to be involved.



CHAPTER TWO

AN INTRODUCTORY SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH AND REPORT

A Brief Summary of the MBPTC Process

MBPTC emerged from several months of enquiry about what a Poverty Truth Commission (PTC) is, networking with local activists, a feasibility study, and local research conducted by students at Lancaster University. A 'Start Up Group' took responsibility to develop the project; by August 2017 a development worker and a shared co-ordination role were funded and a facilitation team of 6 was established.

The early work of discovering, listening to and building with people with lived experience of poverty led to a core group becoming 'Community Commissioners.' They then invited people involved in specific civic structures that were particularly relevant to their own experiences to the Commission Launch in July 2018. Here they shared their stories around four impacts of poverty that they experienced in common: dehumanisation, voicelessness/exclusion, the fact that devastating poverty can 'happen to anyone', and the hidden nature of poverty and traumatic experience it triggers. From the 150 invitees at the launch, some 20 answered a personal invitation to become a "Civic Commissioner" and the conversations began.

Over 14 months the Commission met monthly and developed key relationships and friendships. From that shared experience they imagined and designed together, in 3 working groups, some key projects which could make a significant difference to the impact of local poverty. Some of these have been fully implemented, others are still in process and are reported later in Specific Outcomes. The content and process of all the Commission meetings were captured in a beautiful infographic record.

The sudden shock of the Corona virus pandemic disrupted the final 'landing' of the Commission and its closing celebration planned for February this year. It was immensely sad for all involved, but the warm connectivity and ongoing support for all Commission members, their communities, and the ongoing project implementation continues wherever possible online and through personal initiatives. The widely networked connectivity both between commissioners and all the wider communities they reach into has also become a great source of strategic information and creative support for many during the pandemic. A series of interviews chronicling the Commissioners' experiences and a period of reflective learning was

undertaken in the lockdown. A final film and this report is offered as a further story of the Morecambe Bay Poverty Truth First Commission journey.

THE REFLECTIVE RESEARCH

A Brief Introduction to the Methodology

Our aim was to identify not just the practical outcomes (which are very significant), nor just the individual experiences of those involved (which are always at the heart of a PTC), but if possible also to draw lessons from the collective journey about the factors that either helped or hindered the transformative potential of this innovative approach to social change. We therefore based our approach on a Grounded Theory Methodology, with obvious limitations!

GROUNDING THEORY (GT)

GT is a research method which begins with experience and story, and these narratives are used to identify common themes or 'indicators'. These then are tested out in further interviews to clarify and converge the clearest shared experiences into the most obvious 'categories' of what has been achieved and why. In this way it makes the lived experience of the Commissioners central to our process ("nothing about us without us is for us") while enabling us to build towards a collective theory of what works and why.

The limitations! GT is an academic process which, fully applied, takes significant time and many interview cycles. We have used it here rather as a helpful template, since a) we are limited by time and context and b) MBPTC has not been primarily about theory but about a shared, storied journey. However, one of the specific outcomes of the MBPTC journey is the exciting partnership formed as the Lancaster University Social Action Research Group, where Community Commissioners have been included with academics as full honorary research fellows, to interrogate together what makes for robust, social transformation. We expect this initiative, based in Lancaster University's Sociology department, to follow up further with more detailed research since our own findings here, and those of other PTCs, do give significant evidence of this being a very fruitful field of research for our presently disrupted social world.

Within the above constraints though, we have tried to be as rigorous as possible. We have given more scope in our report than normal (in GT) to the 'indicators' so that the individual voices of the participants are heard, but we have equally tried to dig deeper to the potentially systemic issues that might be at play. Both researchers have worked together to their different strengths with openness and reflectivity, and we have been helpfully informed by the following literature.

- The radical research of Prof Imogen Tyler, who was a fully committed Civic Commissioner in this round of MBPTC. She includes some of the journey in her newly published book, "Stigma", and documents clearly how exclusion and voicelessness are deeply imprinted into the psyche of those suffering in Austerity Britain.
- An understanding of living systems theory robustly undergirds the PTC approach, e.g. Margaret Wheatley's work both in "Leadership and the New Science", and "Who do we Choose to Be? Facing

Reality, Claiming Leadership, Restoring Sanity”. She writes, *“New science revealed, through decades of experimentation and evidence, that living systems organise using ... relationships woven together in complex networks, an inherent order displayed in chaos and complexity (and) the role of shared meaning to create coherent yet non-policed actions among individuals.”*

- “Theory U”, by Otto Sharma, is also key to understanding the purpose of a PTC. To gain *new* perspectives for social change, we aim to create a space where people with different roles and expertise *about* poverty are in the room together with people with variously different experiences *of* poverty. In this fresh field of very complex, sometime ‘chaotic’ but non-judgemental, ‘relationships woven together’ to use Wheatley’s description, we can expect fresh ideas to *emerge*. “Theory U” was helpfully explained further by Mike Love in a visit with Community Commissioner Christine from Leeds PTC. It also explores what to expect in the transformational process of deep listening to one another and to the future.
- A research report from the National Lottery on co-production came out when we were already well into the shared process, but it helped us further hone our determination to develop this fully. <https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/insights/co-production>.
- A visit by Hilary Cottam and the storied research in her book, “Radical Help”. Her contribution particularly highlights how to recognise and engage the *capability* of the excluded.
- In “Doughnut Economics,” Kate Raworth gives a big picture overview of how relationships function in much needed social change.
- “Flourish” (Seligman) and “The Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology” (eds. Lopez & Snyder), are key academic texts in the science of wellbeing. This has been essential where experiences of poverty have increased trauma and mental ill-health, and defines some of the things to take notice of as mental health improves.

KEY FINDINGS

A Brief Summary of our Findings

In the mind map illustration in the “Simple Guide”, we included the fullest possible summary of the comments and impressions shared in the interviews. A deeper dive into the commission voices, with quotes from the interviews as examples of our findings, follows in the longer, more detailed “Story of the Journey”, of how the learning has been experienced. To see where they lead us in an overall picture, we have gathered them into key headings in ‘three learning loops’ summarised as: 1) the relationships formed at the heart of the journey; 2) the shared experience of perceptions being changed; 3) the outcomes of the journey.

1. RELATIONSHIPS FORMED

This is the clearest CATEGORY of experience which impacted all the participants. Not surprisingly, since this was the avowed intention of the Commission, it is now clear that it was achieved for most, and produced a deeply affective and effective engagement. Within this experience however there is specific learning to take further.

A. CORE ISSUES which contribute to or hinder relationships forming include

- i. Practicalities: time, communication, the crucial role of food!

- ii. Expectations: bridging or bonding relationships (referenced by Hilary Cottam), how we understand friendship, vulnerabilities, how to hold difference without disagreement;
 - iii. A progressive self-awareness.
- B. STARTING POINTS, often identified in hindsight, but which expose the deeply embedded responses to and/or the stigmatisation of living in a society divided by poverty.
- i. Exclusion and categorisation
 - ii. Entitlement and/or cynicism
 - iii. Mental and physical health issues
 - iv. Activism

2. CHANGING PERSPECTIVES

This was a very close second CATEGORY of experience for all, which worked in an iterative relationship with deepening relationships. Equally unsurprising, since the PTC journey's aim is to find shared space between us all, it was very rewarding to hear such enthusiasm around the changes of perspective and understanding that participants noted and appreciated, in themselves and each other. This is a rich loop to mine, since we discover different

- A. PROCESSES which were either put in place and, or were discovered reactively or on reflection, about which participants often commented. They also speak back into both the discovery and the necessary engagement with the 'starting points' (above).
- i. Safe space, opportunity and holding
 - ii. Listening and being heard
 - iii. Practicalities: pacing, language, power dynamics
 - iv. Self and Others awareness
 - v. The place of 'public' emotion, and emotional intelligence.
 - vi. Perseverance, trust and commitment.
- B. GAINS is our catch-all phrase for the different ways people described what happened for them as they underwent a change of perspective. Their different expressions drew very useful attention to both the difficulty and the need of multiple, varied approaches to conversations across significant educational, cultural and personality differences among others.
- i. Different understandings
 - ii. Mind-set change
 - iii. Changing emotions from negative to
 - iv. Positive Affect: excitement, humility, courage, self-respect, hope
 - v. Experiencing belonging & support
 - vi. Increased sense of meaning and purpose/engagement

3. OUTCOMES EXPERIENCED

Through risking this relational approach, we discover a third learning loop.

- A. Relationship BUILDS qualities which answer to the categories of experience that the Community Commissioners expressed in the Launch. We asked about the sense of dehumanisation, and what

‘humanisation’ might look/feel like; if no longer marginalised, what might capability look/feel like; if no longer isolated/traumatised, what is the now experience?

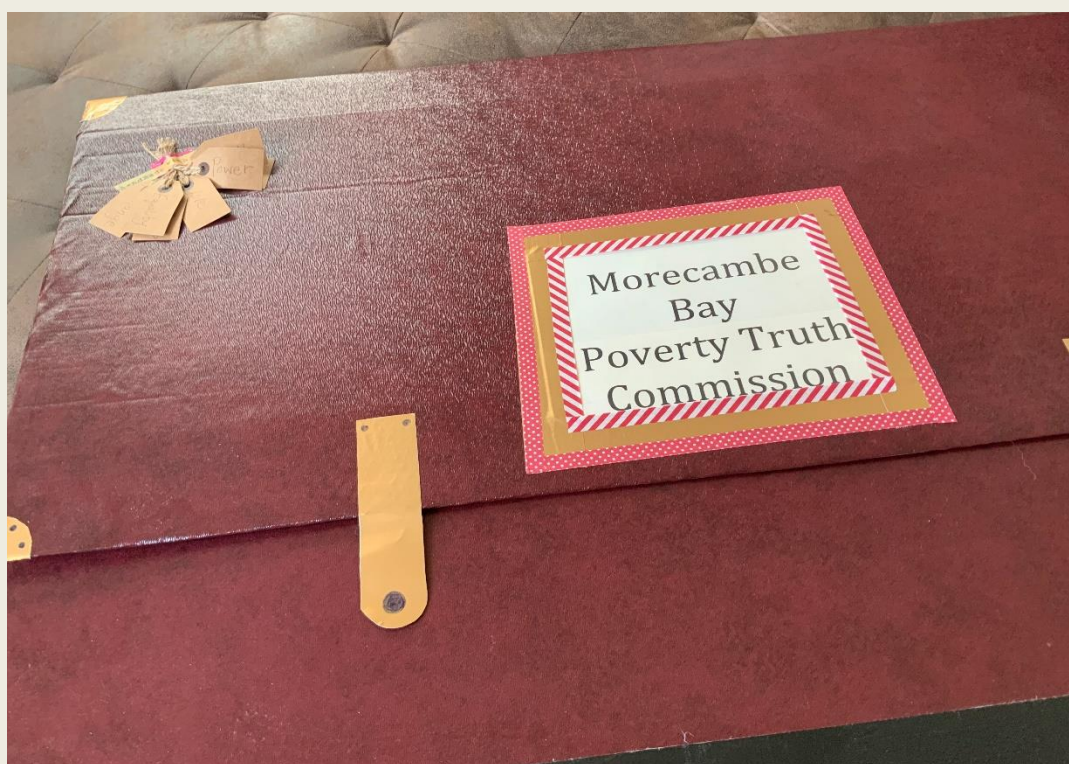
- i. Humanisation: this is described as
Self-determination, individuals feeling themselves more ‘human;’
Seeing other people from a more human, understanding perspective;
Definitive, ongoing systemic change in a more human approach to service delivery.
 - ii. Capability: this is experienced as
Individual increase in confidence and engagement across the board, both among Civic and Community Commissioners and beyond into their extended and extensive communities;
New initiatives springing up across the region, and projects with leadership bridging communities, statutory provision and individuals with lived experience now expected as most effective and appropriate;
Multiplying facilitative initiatives, conceived and led by previously marginalised people, e.g. the entrenched homelessness project.
 - iii. Solidarity: this outworks in
Facilitating further solidarities, and communities’ connectivity: especially during Covid, the PTC network was deeply embedded and called on to diagnose and resource the needed support at the margins of society.
- B. DISAPPOINTMENT is also noted as an outcome of investing in a relational model. The experience of disappointment can be mined to discover the following influences.
- i. Health:
An underlying factor in many instances of poverty relates to physical and mental health, and these precarious circumstances can deeply affect the process of relationship building.
 - ii. Expectations:
The different expectations between bridging and bonding types of relationships, and taught/ societal/ transactional/ conflictual responses are often hidden, only gradually exposed and take significant time to consider.
 - iii. Opportunity:
Working with compromise and various limitations needs best possible management. Where some large organisations/service providers failed to persevere, or indeed individuals sometimes lacked capacity, it caused potentially deep disappointment.
- C. SPECIFIC PROJECT OUTCOMES are to be noted and celebrated.
- i. Our Irish Traveller Community Commissioners shared their powerlessness in the real time threat of homelessness of their whole community, which caught the heart and attention of policy makers in the Commission and became one of the Working Groups’ projects. Advocacy in the local council, a re-humanised approach within that large system, and the eventual purchase and refurbishment of the Traveller site were achieved, together with their own respected re-positioning in the wider community.
 - ii. The Travellers’ further full engagement with the NHS and other statutory bodies in approaching the best service provision for this formerly significantly marginalised community.

- iii. The Commission engagement with Unities Utilities achieved a policy change in payment collection and early deferment in cases of difficulty, reducing significant stress and energy poverty for a potential 8 million customers.
- iv. A culture change in local council engagement with local people is evidenced in a significant change in tone and support in every communication from the council office to local homes;
- v. This culture change, facilitated by visits and deep sharing from the Community Commissioners, shows service delivery 'humanised' at many levels, and morale refreshed within the organisation. The council has since deliberately changed its motto and logo from "sharp and forward thinking" to "a co-operative, kind and responsible council."
- vi. The local NHS has agreed to fund a pilot scheme to place patient representatives alongside people with complex mental and health needs to mitigate the stress and confusion between different silos of medical provision, both for the patients and individual medics within the system.
- vii. A Complex Needs Alert form has been designed and is already in use. It brings the combined voices and influence of the local health providers, the CCG, the CAB and the District Council to alert the DWP to the need for extra flexibility and support of those with complex medical, social and welfare needs.

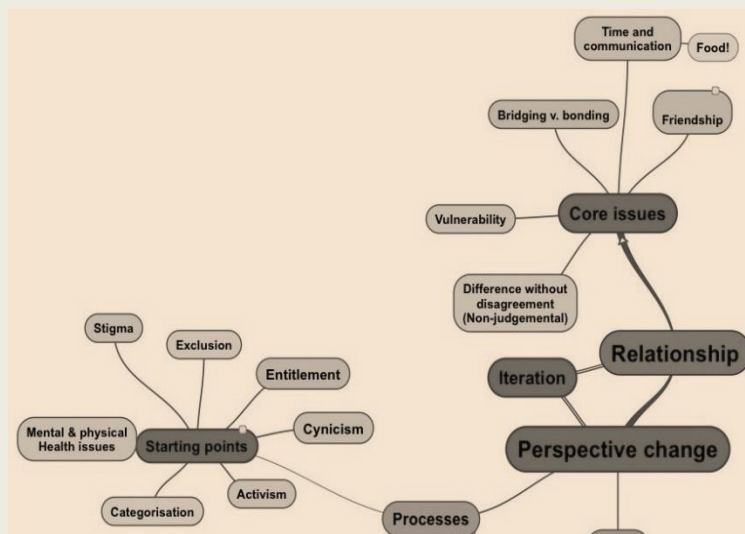
CHAPTER THREE

THE STORY OF THE JOURNEY

In this third chapter of our MBPTC journey, we now include quotes in some length as they highlight the importance of understanding others' experiences and how this is the crucial first step towards change. The words are of the commissioners, though their names have been changed, as they explain better than any words the report authors could write! So, sit back, read on and enjoy listening particularly to the voices of the commissioners about all we have learnt together!



LEARNING LOOP 1: BUILDING THOSE RELATIONSHIPS!



Everybody who joined the commission knew that it was going to be about listening - to the stories of being in poverty and its effects, yes, but really listening to the *people* who were willing to tell those stories. The second learning loop goes into quite a lot more detail about how we were all gradually changed by this listening and by meeting as real people with different experiences and responses, and by the fact that many of us became really close *friends* as a result.

This shorter first loop looks at the things we discovered we had brought to the process, and what helped us to go on this remarkable journey.

A. STARTING POINTS

People came to the commission from a range of different starting points, with different reasons or sometimes not even knowing exactly why they wanted to engage with Poverty Truth. But as we travelled together, some spoke up as they became more confident and discovered where they had begun by looking back. Many of the starting points of how they felt, or what they expected, were shared ones. Other starting points were more difficult to merge with the ongoing purpose of drawing out a collective, localised response, but all brought passion, learning and energy to the conversations.

- i. Most of the community commissioners had felt excluded from society as a result of their experience of poverty. Many had experienced it as stigma and others felt categorised, like Imogen Tyler explains in her book “Stigma”. Or as

ROSEMARY puts it, “PTC has given a face and a voice for people who are usually faceless and unheard, who normally wouldn’t get the chance, (who would be) a nameless case ...”

TERESA: “It’s the reality of all of us who have experienced unnecessary hardship, it’s very isolating, I don’t think people believe what’s happening. People have bought the propaganda that the BBC and the government have been saying, that if someone is on benefits or poor that it’s a choice, and being part of PTC has really explored that.”

MAGGIE: “It makes us feel more important, like we can actually go into a room and sit with these professional people without feeling we shouldn’t be there, that we had no right to be there, we (now) feel like we are humans, and should be there just like them.”

- ii. Often people living in poverty had physical or mental health issues (or both) as a result.

ROSEMARY: “I’m not working, and having mental health, it’s like shame, so it has empowered me to feel less shame and be part of a group that are active to change the way people feel about people who are in poverty or for people who are unable to work for whatever reason. It’s made a massive difference to me, I don’t feel (now) like a social pariah, I don’t feel like I’m doing invalid in my life, I feel like I’ve got something valid I am part of. It’s given me the ability to say that it’s not like that in real life, my mental health does give me barriers to working, and when you have to prove yourself at PIP assessments, because you’re part of a group, it gives you a voice you wouldn’t normally have.”

ARON: “In recovery we’re all good at acting out, on that first trip home with you after .., I was a nervous wreck. I was a nervous wreck with meeting anyone...”

- iii. Some people came as activists, who had strongly campaigned on various issues for most of their lives and sometimes there were, perhaps inevitably, conflicting motivations and expectations between an activist, issue-based approach and a relational, localised one.

MIRIAM: “Speaking truth to power is something that I’m quite practised in doing as a disabled campaigner and it felt as if my truth was being put on the back burner in order to establish relationships with civic commissioners including the DWP, to make it less damaging. But what’s happening is marginalising people’s disability and poverty all the time, by the state and by trying to speak the truth to the state.”

TERESA: “I’ve raised something so serious – suspension of human rights and I’m listened to and agreed with, but then no one does anything. And human rights is the whole problem with poverty; no-one cares about human rights ... I have a letter saying everyone’s human rights were suspended in March. We should have taken this on and been a huge force, and lobbied the government, but we didn’t and that felt like a complete mockery of the whole thing!”

- iv. Some discovered they came with a sense of knowing how to fix things, sometimes a sense of entitlement about being right, or just cynical.

JAMES: “There were some times I had to dig deep and probably quieten a sense of entitlement ... So it was about choosing to remain part of the process, it was my choice but it was a challenge at times. That’s just an honest reflection of how difficult it was at times.”

HANNAH: “When I first came, I was a cynic, thinking what’s all this about, we can’t change things, it’s too big. But when I came back from the first meeting I felt great, I felt like this is a way of making me think differently and although the wider community isn’t there yet, I am ...”

GAYLE: “Being really honest, I didn’t know I did have some in-built prejudices, I’m embarrassed to admit it ... about the homeless, ex-army thugs, drug users, gypsy/ travellers, the unemployed even... Not in nasty racist way, just in a ‘What’s so difficult? Why can’t you help yourself do what the rest of us do, and get out of it, get a bit of oomph going, get out of your situation ... As if it would be that easy! But I had those prejudgments...”

Some of us had a combination of all of the above, but the important thing was that, in order to build relationships, the places where people were starting from had to be discovered and understood.

B. CORE ISSUES

As people started to get to know each other better, some crucial common issues began to emerge that were key to being able to form healthy, strong relationships. These ranged from simple practicalities to conflict resolution/management. Some of the more sensitive issues are shared in more depth in the processes below that were developed to respond to them. How people were cared for in the vulnerability of sharing their stories is thought through in “Creating Safe Space”. The ability to have difficult conversations when people strongly disagreed with each other had to be developed and more of this is explored in “Other Key Dynamics”. Forming friendships over a coffee outside of ‘the programme’ was a crucial factor in the strength of the relationships that were built, but the self-managed arranging of those ‘dates’ was a serious challenge to all our maturity. Read on to see how all of this was managed to a greater or lesser extent with varying degrees of success; it was definitely a steep learning curve for all. But two particular issues around really practically prioritising a fully inclusive approach are included here.

- i. Very practical issues like the time of day the meetings were held, the venue and access demand very careful attention to embody inclusion. We discovered a particular issue for those suffering with light sensitivity, as public meeting spaces usually select LED lighting as more cost-effective and there is no statutory incentive to provide an alternative. But whether it was venue, time of day, or location it was not always possible to find a meeting time and place that was suitable for everyone and at times very difficult choices had to be made.
- ii. Food is a sort of cultural ritual which proved fundamental to building together well. Ours was northern and earthy for the most part with organic vegan for those who chose or needed it. Ongoingly sharing food still sustains relationships, when the pandemic has threatened them. Creative alternatives (or supplements) to Zoom which involve even 30 minutes with the ritual chips, sometimes in the rain and wind on the Prom, have been wonderful!

AMY: “Where else would the head of housing take mushy peas and chips to a previously homeless ex-alcoholic with PTSD...?”

REBECCA: “It’s just working together as a group to share the common good, to share ideas and to put into practice good practice shared by all. The common good is really important because it makes you feel as if you’re not alone. I have to say I haven’t enjoyed the Zoom online lockdown at all, so I haven’t been involved, and I really miss it, and I miss the company and the camaraderie, and the chips and things...”

THE AVERAGE OF THE SCALE OF IMPROVEMENTS REPORTED BY ALL COMMISSIONERS

95.5% improvement in a sense of support

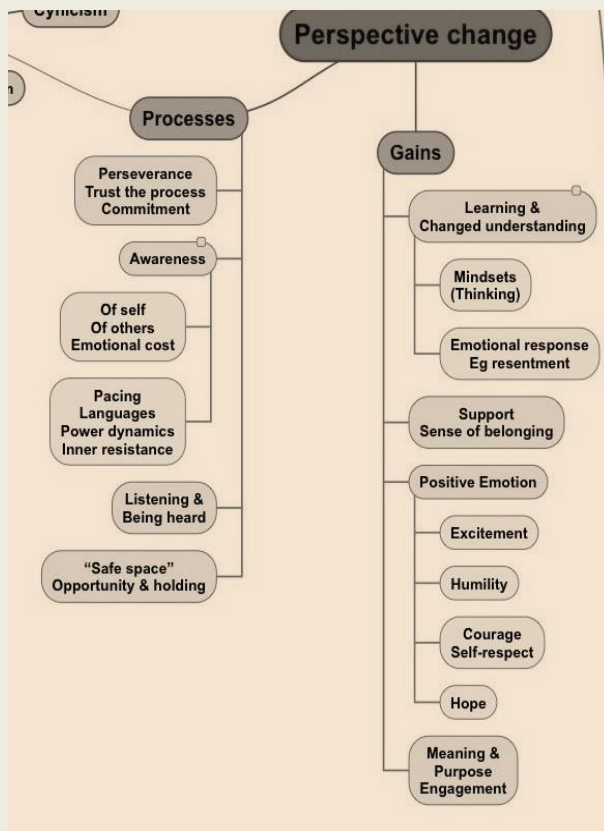
82.5% increase in new learning and understanding

71.5% was the average improvement in a sense of emotional wellbeing

91% was the average increase in a sense of engagement in important issues

90% was the average increased sense of purpose

LEARNING LOOP 2: THE SHARED EXPERIENCE OF PERSPECTIVES BEING CHANGED



Since the key finding from the research interviews was that strong, trusting relationships were the main building block for the “success outcomes” of PTC, this section now focuses on the changes in perspective that facilitated the relationships forming so deeply, as well as the subsequent benefits to people’s mental health and wellbeing as a result of those relationships. These changes in perspective are not only “success outcomes” equal to the practical results we go onto describe, but were the essential foundations for all the ground-level changes that happened, and without which no lasting difference would have been possible.

The relationships were built over many months as a result of the greater understanding that people developed from meeting and deeply listening to other people living in very different circumstances to their own.

A. CHANGES IN PERSPECTIVE AND UNDERSTANDING

- i. This change in perspective applied equally to community commissioners and civic commissioners in relation to each other.

ARON says, “PTC completely turned my life around. When I first volunteered I was simply terrified or angry of anyone in any position of authority ... One of the most terrifying things you’ve got to do in recovery is

learning how to live in society on society's terms, around people that you would really be uneasy with, and Poverty Truth helped me do that."

DAVID found, "I believe them people who came, came first with such a blind eye, the civics now have a more broader understanding of how poverty affects people, and the way the council have reacted to it ... and the way they've looked at the issues of poverty, how it affects life, they've listened, they've mourned, they've cried, they've stepped into our mess, where usually they would just tick a list, now I feel they are more empathetic they have more empathy towards other people, just the empathy has changed it massively.

"It's made me look at them as human beings, not the people in power or as the people that don't give a crap and they're just ticking a list. It's made me see they're not, they're just human beings and they have other people higher than them so they're just puppets in a way. It's made me look different, before I would just be mad at them, but now I know they're just doing their job, and they are not the people making all the crap decisions quite often, their jobs are so hard, and the people they have to talk to are really hard too.... and I was one of those people. I was hard faced, it's made me respect them so much more, everyone, the doctors, the whole lot of them. It's changed my life."

TIMOTHY adds, ""It made me understand the real difference between the real lived experience of poverty and the professional concern for people who are living in poverty. It taught me a lot about that really big difference between having a professional concern for the issues as opposed to really hearing how it affects people's lives. It was really humbling at times – I was sitting there listening to people's experience thinking, 'this has never happened to me, it is totally outside my experience, I really need to listen and understand what happens to people'".

MAGGIE: "I didn't think that professional people would have the time of day for you, but especially us, being travellers, but now we was proven wrong, the people couldn't be any more helpful to us and helped us with our situation in any way they could."

KATEY: "It's the same for me, you don't feel prejudiced against in those meetings; you feel like your voice is same as the others."

JAMES: "They have helped me realised the vital importance of humility and listening to others' perspectives, and I have been really surprised by how often that has happened, e.g. having a coffee with B. has really helped me understand the issues of mental ill health in young people, or chatting with M. and realising issues around disability, or meeting with C. and understanding the complexities of navigating public service systems or T. and alternative health issues ... Just listening deeply to people's experiences, like A. and hearing his perspective on power and self- esteem ... All those conversations have changed and me and challenged the perspectives I held and taught me the importance of humility and not making assumptions that I think I know how people are going to respond to certain situations."

- ii. It also involved civic commissioners understanding the job roles and stresses of other civic commissioners, and community commissioners understanding other people's different experiences of struggling with poverty, and how broadly poverty can affect everyone.

REBECCA: “I think that we’ve got to know each other much better and we’ve come to understand each other’s poverty which might not be financial, it might be social or a different type of poverty ... The relationship with the community commissioners has changed my attitude to poverty and disability because I got to know them well and feel I can now understand disability and the disability needs of people ... This has changed my previous understanding. I’d never been with people who had blue badges or needed PIP (Personal Independence Payments). I’ve got to know people in really difficult situations.”

IRIS: “I think that it’s been effective in bringing together completely different groups of people who don’t normally meet in same space, a mix of people with lived experience of poverty and public facing jobs, like the Fire Service, the Council, DWP, university, schools etc., bringing together these different people in the same space has allowed us all to see poverty and understand poverty differently in the local place where we live ... It’s made me question some pre-set attitudes or beliefs about types of people more on the professional side of things, like hearing the Police, or Fire Service or DWP talk about their jobs and roles has made me understand the perspective of people who work in those roles. It’s made me a more careful listener and more tolerant. I see things in a less black and white way.”

JOE: “It’s also given me an understanding of the complexities of those in positions of leadership and authority when addressing poverty issues; they also have their own burdens to bear. I think it has strengthened my commitment to those who are marginalized and it has changed my attitude to those in positions of leadership such as the local authority workers, police, firemen etc. I have a greater understanding of their experience of relating to people with a lived experience of poverty now.”

Basically people coming out of their own smaller spheres of experience to find a different understanding of a much bigger picture was a factor for everyone.



Some of the Community Commissioners with some of the Facilitation Team after the Launch at the Town Hall.

PROCESSES THAT ENABLED PERSPECTIVE CHANGE

The changes in perspective illustrated above could only happen through a very slow process of building trust between people and those whom they had spent most of their life seeing either as “the enemy” or as people whose lives were so different to their own they could not ever imagine sharing vulnerable, traumatic and personal life stories with. To even imagine that friendships might develop with people so different to yourself was out of the question at the start of the journey, and sometimes admittedly it was 2 steps forward, 1 step back! There were several major hurdles to get over at different points, but at each setback there was a commitment to hear and capture all the learning and understanding necessary to move forward again. Giving the process enough time is absolutely crucial; it is a journey of both personal and collective transformation and it absolutely will not be rushed.

Eve: “After the first few meetings I really wasn’t sure what I was co-opted into. Over time, someone, I can’t remember who said it, said ‘Stick with this, it’s all about relationships, it’s a slow burner’. So when my boss said, ‘What did you do tonight?’ and I would say ‘I’m not really sure’, but over time you become aware of how important those relationships are and the trust it’s building and without that people don’t open up about their life experiences. You can’t just put people in a room and say ‘Tell us about your life’, they just won’t do it, but over time it feels like a safe space, and that’s what’s worked.”

We were guided by a set of tools and processes, sometimes collectively agreed and sometimes discovered with hindsight and again, drawn out of the commissioners’ reflections, we share them here.

i. NEW SKILLS TRAINING

It has to be applicable to such a relational, community building journey, to emergence, and to the issues that a commitment to co-production demands, as is outlined in the Nat Lottery report.

“Recognise that there’s a role for everyone and develop a culture where it’s ok for everyone to challenge, ask (difficult) questions, and discuss contrasting views and experiences. Be open and honest about expectations and realities. Get buy-in from top to bottom, and set out with the right mind-set and behaviours. Sharing power and ownership of your project, and viewing lived experience as an asset, are fundamental to making co-production meaningful”. A key tool to enable everyone’s role and contribution was training in “The Art of Hosting and Harvesting Meaningful Conversations” (www.artofhosting.org). It had been made available earlier for many in the locality and members of the Facilitation team were all equipped in these dialogic and conversational techniques, as well as some commissioners who joined the training.

TERESA: “The art of hosting training was so excellent – we can be trained, and we can increase our capability in that way, so going on the courses gave me actual tools, learning how to manage in specific situations, and that was critical, it was the most important part of it.”

JOE: “I think it’s given me a greater awareness of the complexities of those with a lived experience of poverty. I think the style of engagement has enabled me to grow in my understanding of community building and group facilitation.”

ii. CREATING SAFE SPACE

- a. Of paramount importance was the building and maintaining of a safe space which gave the opportunity for people to talk, share their often traumatic life experience, and feel held and heard in their vulnerability. This was achieved to varying degrees at different times. It is not something to be taken lightly or thought to be easy, nor assumed that it will follow a predictable format which can be repeated like a recipe. There are certain requirements that are a must, such as the establishment of 'ground rules' co-created and agreed by the participants (e. g. not interrupting, respecting different opinions etc.) Then there are variables for each meeting depending on the mix of people present in the room, the location (e. g. one commissioner could not travel to Morecambe due to traumatic history with the place), the venue, the access, the time of day/evening and the changing life circumstances of people living in very difficult situations. All of these factors need to be taken into account and assessed at every meeting, and undoubtedly we were more successful at some times than others.

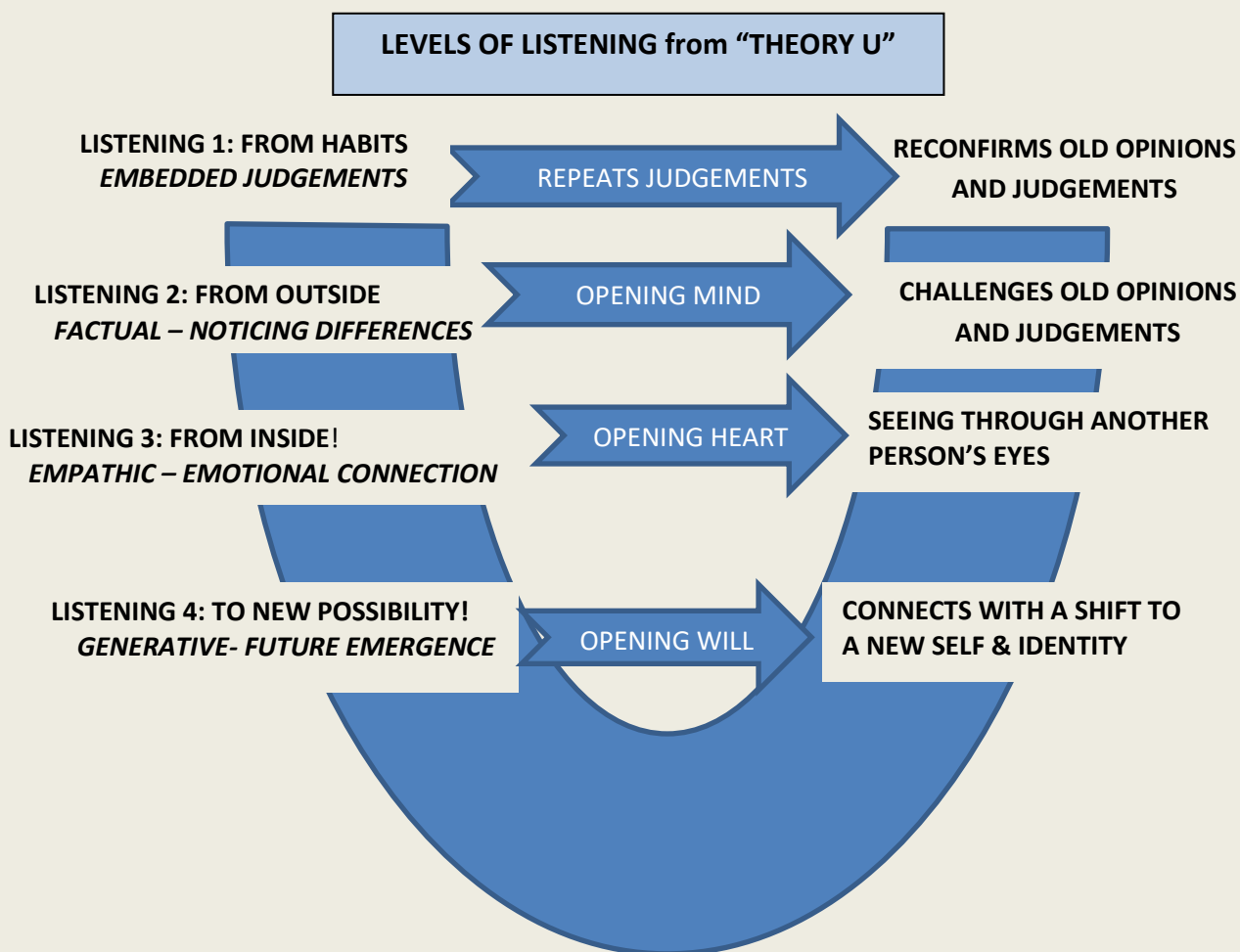
CHARLOTTE: "I think PTC is a very safe process, it's had its ups and downs but it has been very safe. It's one of the reasons why it's been a success as it's always felt like a safe space ... One of the reasons why it's been successful is that attention to the safety of those who are involved, the attention to the personal, mental welfare of those involved."

- b. Having several team members is essential to holding a safe space, both on arrival and throughout any meeting. So, someone available to listen to people arriving in any distress, to be aware of any specific requirements that may be needed to feel safe in the meeting; another to meet and greet others, another concerned with practicalities; tea, coffee and food.

TERESA: "The PTC approach through being present, in the room together, understanding others' views, listening to each other, reassuring people that this will work ... this was hugely helpful to help people trust what's happening ... It is absolutely the right way to do things, the process was the best way to understand other perspectives and I've tried a lot of things, so yes, that was all very effective."

iii. DEEP LISTENING

A safe space will never be created if people do not feel listened to and really deeply heard within that space. Deep, or active, listening is the basic building block of any PTC and a visit from Mike and Christine from Leeds PTC helped us think about it together at our first full Commission meeting, using the diagram below. Many people with lived experience of poverty arrive with deeply hurtful experiences of not being listened to within every level of the systems designed to "help" them. Not being listened to results in not feeling cared about, feeling dehumanised, so the whole point of a PTC is to listen really deeply to what people are saying. Starting with the community commissioners between themselves, over time it gradually broadens out people's ability to hear the struggles faced by civic commissioners as well in these times of austerity measures.



DAVID: “ I think us communicating with one another, as one unit where we do have disagreements and different views, but being able to be empathetic on other people’s views and having a level of empathy to see what someone else’s view means has empowered me as a person to see we’re all communicating together to try and bring change and bring a better life and less poverty to areas that are in such poverty, and the empowerment to have my voice heard and my opinions listened to in a way that they never have been listened to before.”

IAN: “The way it worked building the relationships up, that has made things far, far easier to get changes and have proper adult conversations rather than slanging matches with people. Definitely had an effect that way and made me more inclined to listen – improved my deep listening even though I roll my eyes at it, it’s improved my ability to hear what the other side is saying and what they can or can’t do and meeting in the middle so we can come to a good compromise that still benefits people as a whole.”

- a. The team first spent 8 months just with the community commissioners, enabling safe spaces for their painful stories to be heard. This required gently but firmly holding to the shared safe space ‘ground rules’. One of the most successful techniques used was deep listening space for not more than 2 people per meeting. These people were given 10 minutes to share as much or as little of their experience as they wanted/felt able to, whilst the others sat in a circle and really listened – noting down 3 points that struck them forcibly. At the end of the 10 minutes there was 5 minutes’

silence in which the listeners could reflect on what they had heard, and the person who had been speaking could be settled in whatever way felt appropriate – with a warm smile, a hug, a cup of tea, going out for a fag with someone, etc. After this, the rest of the group fed back the main point that had struck them the most to the speaker, so they knew they had really been heard. This process was an essential part of building trust and bonding between community commissioners, and understanding that the practical aspects of poverty affect everyone differently though the underlying shame and trauma feels the same, no matter the circumstance.

ARON: “Safe, it feels much safer.... It’s like when things are clearer, you feel more a part of the community around you; that gives you a massive boost in self-esteem, self- belief, and just a general feeling of more comfortableness. It’s very difficult to explain ... But it’s is so empowering to have a voice in the world – it’s made such a massive difference.”

REBECCA: “I have made some good friends with whom I can share my difficulties. It’s very difficult in my position to share stories of poverty as most of my friends and family are very wealthy so it’s nice to get together with people to share stories and lifestyles. It’s really beneficial to get to know people who are poor and struggling as they could see together as a group combining our different experiences, are much more likely to share my difficulties.”

- b. After the launch event, the community commissioners started to meet with the civic commissioners and the process of deep, *collective* listening began again with a different process, namely “I see, you see, we see.” Walkabouts in the local area were held in mixed groups of commissioners where, initially, the focus was on what each individual was primarily familiar with in a shared, public area. Then the deep listening was to what was the main automatic focus for another person. The differences between how we ‘see’ essentially the ‘same, common space’ were extraordinary. Finally, a more mutual understanding emerged of what we could see together as a group combining our different experiences, “which opened our eyes.”

TIMOTHY: “The walk around the city centre where people were pointing out things I not seen before – the revelation of that was a way of making it all very human in a real context for me, so on the walk, people were pointing to the doorway where someone sleeps, or the barbed wire on walls of empty buildings, or the homeless building, I never knew what it was ... that’s all very eye-opening.”

REBECCA: “Walking round Lancaster, he saw a person sleeping rough and learnt his name, and he’d never realised there were so many people there, and what a big homeless shelter there was, I think it’s opened all our eyes to poverty.”

JAMES: “You can’t continue to hold particular views or prejudices you may not even realise you have, as a lot of those views are unconscious, but

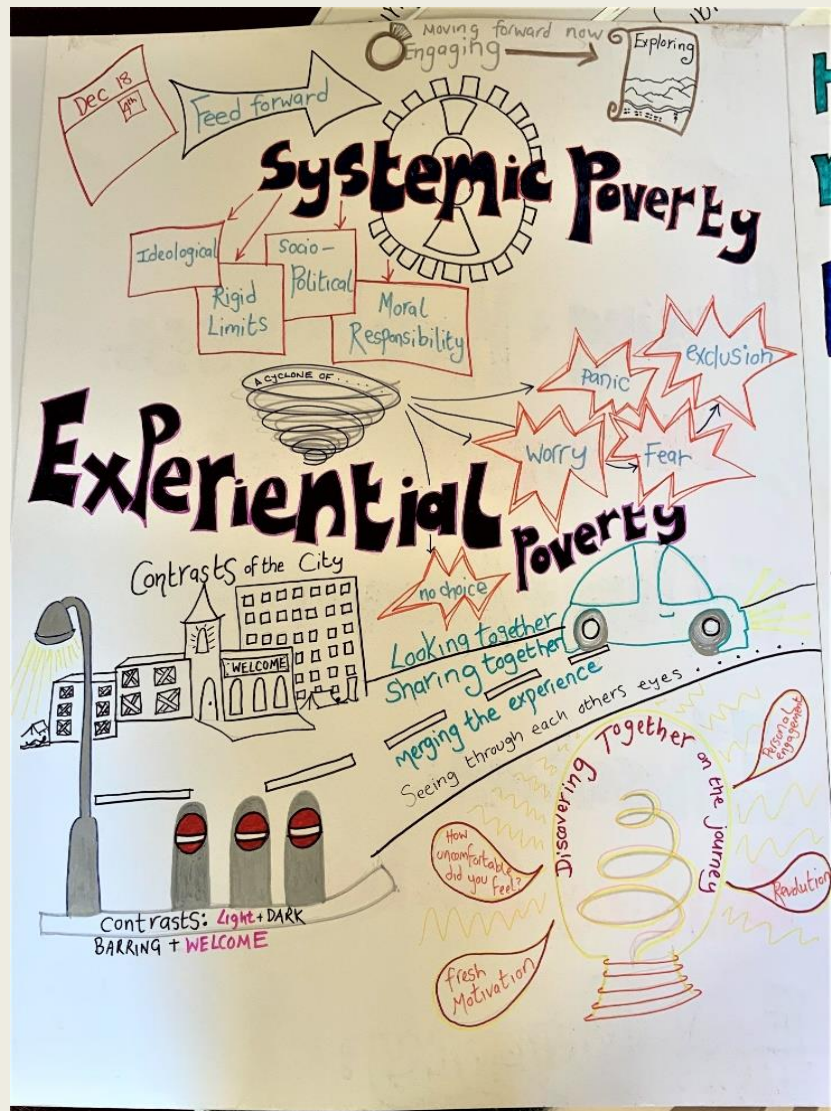
coming into relationship

and deeply listening

and putting aside your assumptions about the other

begins to change you.

To break down the complexity of society we need to suspend our judgement ‘cos only then can you deeply listen and change understanding and really learn, and PTC provides a framework within which that begins to become possible.”



iv. AWARENESS OF SELF AND OTHER

Creating safe space and deep listening opportunities facilitated the personal internal process of developing an awareness of self and other. All members of a PTC journey need to engage to some degree in this process of becoming more aware as this is what enables transformational change to start to occur (see “Theory U”.) This awareness is essential for members of the facilitation team as a starting point, then needs to be nurtured and developed in the participants of the meetings over time. There are many factors that facilitators initially (and commissioners over time) need to be, including

- a. SELF-AWARE: What state have you arrived in to the meeting? What baggage are you bringing that can be let go of, or what needs quietening or sharing before you can feel safe and able to participate? The process of having an open and honest ‘check-in’ at the start of each meeting is essential here to help people reflect on how they are arriving, and over time becomes part of the whole process of getting to know others and developing an understanding of those different to yourself.

- b. OTHERS-AWARE: again before the meeting even starts, the facilitation team need to be aware of anyone arriving in a particular state of anxiety or stress, and try and offer some time to listen. The 'check-in' again allows everyone to have an awareness of where others may be at.

It takes time for people to feel comfortable with what they share in the check in; everyone moves at a different pace, and being allowed to share as little or as much as you feel able within a given time frame is important. Civic commissioners would arrive with a sense of wanting to get on in a "business-like manner" and not have to open up anything personal; community commissioners often arrived in a state of angst due to a life event that was having a negative impact on their quality of life. Over time, people grew to see the importance and value of the check- in time, but it did take time and perseverance.

- c. The emotional cost to everyone of this level of trust is demanding. It is much more so for the people with lived experience of poverty who willingly share their stories repeatedly, but thus relive their traumatic life experience. But it is challenging for all to risk trusting that they may be heard and change may be possible. Many times the time frame of the meetings had to be adjusted to accommodate the level of emotion that needed to be held within the room.

TIMOTHY: "There were times I'd come back from meetings and what had been said would last with me for days, I would be very struck by what I heard and what it was doing to me, how it was changing me. I felt genuinely cared for by several members of the commission on a number of occasions."

AMY: "The opening check in questions, the time of reflection at the beginning and end, it just makes you think, and now I've done that in other meetings or when I meet people now ... Then also people suddenly understanding me, seeing me for who I really was. People had preconceived ideas about me, but I didn't have to pretend anymore, so I can sit at the back of room and cry. I didn't have to hide my emotions; I didn't have to hide my physical illness or any of my inabilities. It's just so lovely to be somewhere and not be judged, to feel relaxed to say something without being judged."

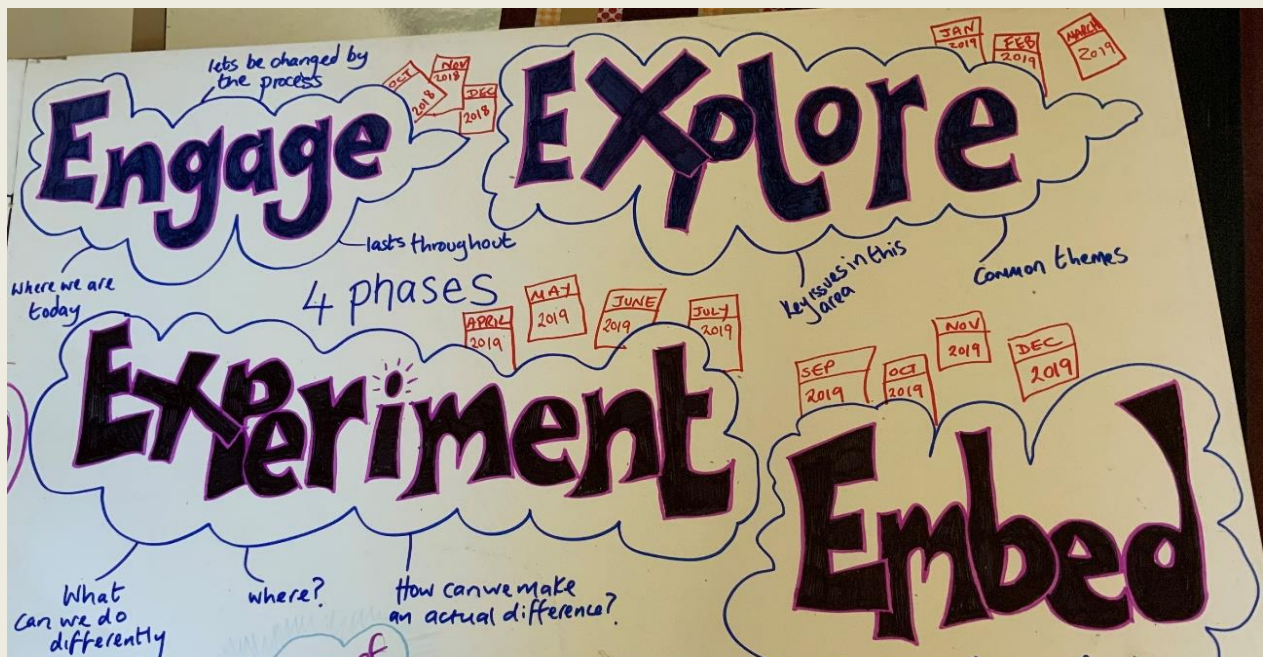
v. OTHER KEY DYNAMICS

Most of the preceding factors were considered and approached thoughtfully before or early in the journey, but another bunch of other experiences that people had felt and/or reacted to and processed through the reflection period were very salutary and have been gained through this thoughtful and interactive learning.

- a. PACING: point iii above links to the pacing of the meetings. Flexibility is paramount for deep connectivity, and we can't over-emphasise the need to slow most behaviours down. Yet the need to continue to move along with the process also has to be taken into account. Finding the balance is intuitive and often ill-judged. A frequent framing of the whole journey (and infographics is a key tool – see below) is helpful, though it can tend to repetition.

CHARLOTTE: "Sometimes with the meetings late at night I was tired, and it was hard to adjust to the way things were done, and I think a lot of people felt confused 'cos it felt like we went over and over things we've done before, or we couldn't see how it fitted together. Lots of the Art of Hosting is very good, but we did it to death to put it politely."

EVE: “I had to reign myself back at first, I did find it frustrating at the start, the first few weeks felt like we were treading water, but looking back you realise why that was needed. In my day job, things happen, you have to move fast to change them, to then come to meetings where you feel like not a lot is happening. Looking back it’s all part of the process, and you have to trust it, so I wouldn’t change it now I can see the usefulness of it.”



- b. **LANGUAGES:** In a very broad range of people in a new configuration of being together, the broad spread of the linguistic ability of participants who range from people who cannot read or write through to university professors and executives of regional health services poses a challenge especially where complex issues need to be considered. Learning is different for different people; some talk of ‘mind-sets,’ understanding and explanation, others of sensing or feeling. ‘Both/And’ is probably important and causes everyone to feel relatively both uncomfortable and comfortable at different points, but it is a big issue and the balance must prioritise the grass-roots communities. The language used to enable everyone to understand what was being said and discussed in our PTC was a frequent hurdle to negotiate whether it was between commissioners or even within the facilitation team!

HANNAH: “There’s a lot of intellectuals in the group and I find that very challenging. I’m not an intellectual. I don’t know when people are quoting writers and all that, so there have been times I’ve felt uncomfortable, but that’s not a bad thing.”

DAVID: “What I’ve found hard is the length of the talks, I’m being honest, and the talks are so long there should be more interactive times at these meetings. They’re too long, definitely too long, especially for younger people, maybe older people have a bit more patience, and just vocabulary they use, some people don’t have such an understanding of these words so they need to help people, help people understand instead of using such big words”.

IRIS: “So it’s been effective in allowing us to understand that complexity in a place. The understanding part is effective in changing attitudes ... and this changes practice around poverty whether it’s specific issues of housing or how we train social workers.”

- c. **POWER DIFFERENTIALS:** Evidently, those with more ‘power’, as in access to different languages / opportunities / education / leadership roles etc. are asked and expected not to insist on such privilege, and facilitating and participating on as level as possible a playing field has thrown up significant difficulties at various times. Such painful encounters can probably not be avoided, but have been and must be voiced, processed and mitigated as far as in us lies, as means of growing self-awareness, friendship and collectivism.

JOE: “I have been concerned at times that someone has come across as an intellectual (which in and of itself is not a problem) but this at times has excluded and undermined others’ contributions ... I feel it disempowers and disables people ... and everyone involved in Poverty Truth needs to come with humility and a willingness to be vulnerable ... not to disrupt the community building and openness at the heart of poverty truth.”

- d. **PRACTICAL EMBODIMENT:** Access issues, dietary needs, trying to enable everyone to participate fully, regardless of differing physical and mental conditions / needs was another issue to be aware of and better understood so practical solutions could be found, and again on many occasions the facilitation team failed to meet everyone’s needs.

All the above required many conversations outside of the meetings to talk through, understand and embrace issues around full inclusion. Often separate, specifically focused meetings were held to listen to these struggles more deeply to try to find relational resolution. Usually involving tears, empathy, apology and forgiveness, these encounters may prove to have been some of the most significant events of the journey.

- e. Many of us encountered an **INTERNAL RESISTANCE**, a previously unconscious reluctance towards some of the processes being suggested, discovered mostly with hindsight. But the discovery that such deeply embedded patterning *can* be altered, and can dramatically affect the whole of life, work and society has been deeply impactful.

CHARLOTTE: “It’s maybe changed my sense of what you can achieve in a relationship if you work at it. I think I’m very easily deterred if someone doesn’t seem friendly; I won’t be unfriendly but I wouldn’t persevere and try and get friendly. I’ve never persevered, ever since childhood. I think there’s been a real change and PTC has given me the space to do that. It’s changed my attitude to relationship to persevere with them! So, is that what PTC is all about? Helping you believe you can work at relationships? It’s affected my professional life. In politics people present themselves very badly, especially if they are not in the same political group as me. Now I’ve made friendships with people across very different political spectrum to me.”

This inner resistance required much repetition of the importance of the last process, namely

- vi. **PERSEVERANCE, COMMITMENT AND TRUSTING THE PROCESS**

- a. “Please trust the process” was a much repeated phrase by the facilitation team when tensions ran high with a sense from both civic and community commissioners that things were not happening quickly enough, and not enough action was being taken. The facilitation team had to hold fast and not give in to the desire to “do stuff” before “hearing stories about what is really going on here” had really had enough time to be fully appreciated. Art of Hosting techniques such as world café and triads, and a “Problem- Based Learning” model (PBL) were used to look at issues from many different standpoints to ensure that the core of the experience had really been revealed, in order to enable a new path to effective change to emerge. Over time, and when results began to be seen, commissioners reflected back on the truly essential importance of taking the time initially and trusting the process.

TERESA: “They said “trust the process” all the time. This was hugely helpful to help people trust what’s happening and it’s proven to work elsewhere and to keep reminding us what the goals are and we would get to where we needed to eventually. Every step of the process enabled civic commissioners to engage with who they’re serving and prove they’re interested, so it’s been an incredibly successful process.”

TIMOTHY: “The process you used was really effective, so allowing people to get to know each other, before identifying projects for improvement... that was a big success because you had an understanding of why you were in the room instead of just trying to solve issues. You have a broader sense of people’s lives and society. It’s so important to get that understanding when you have no awareness of it other than your job context. There was a lot of care over choosing project areas – and it really was co-production; we really gave it enough time for people to come up with priorities, and it was very much the community commissioners who decided those priorities, not professionals or bureaucratic priorities, or organisational priorities. It was the people with the lived experience, and that’s how it should be.”

GAYLE: Speaking with someone who “is meeting with Aron during Covid and the online rehousing the homeless forum meetings a lot – she was saying to me she ‘just wants to get on and do something’... She’s getting frustrated with talking! So I had to explain to her that I was just the same at first, and it was a long way in till I realised how important the talking and relationship building is, and now I wouldn’t change the way it was done, I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

- b. Again with hindsight, the LEVEL OF COMMITMENT AND PERSEVERANCE required by both sets of commissioners was undoubtedly underestimated at the beginning. It also potentially puts pressure on relationships when it’s thought that others are giving less effort, another area of self-awareness and growth! It is something that should be stated clearly to prospective commissioners at the start of round 2.

JAMES: “...After a long difficult day, to drive and find ... few community commissioners, that felt hard and I tried to feel empathy for people not being able to make meetings for various reasons, but sometimes it irked me and I had to dig deep to not show that. To not have that sense of commitment back felt hard; I had to deal with my own frustration about that.”

GAYLE: What's really key with civics is that they are local and committed. You need people to build those relationships so they've got to get to nearly every meeting. It's not easy if you're not local, not getting home till 8.30 or 9pm after meetings. The people who struggled to get there regularly... the Police, the college, United Utilities, DWP, all that change (of staff) from the DWP, you need consistency and commitment and in the subgroups too and it's hard.

IAN: "It's my *raison d'être* – it has become all time consuming. Future people should be made aware how time consuming it is, especially keeping the relationships alive and the subgroups and the speaking at events and full commission meetings. There's a lot more to it than you are originally led to believe. But as changes start to happen it is really fulfilling and makes you feel like you do matter, and people want to listen and act on what you say, it becomes very rewarding and fulfilling."

B. PERSONAL GAINS FROM PERSPECTIVE CHANGE

To draw this longer, key learning loop to a close, we comment here on some of the outcomes which particularly mark the impacts on individuals and communities, and more will be added in the next section. But these highlight increases in wellbeing. Positive emotion, engagement, positive relationships, shared meaning and achievement of meaningful goals are identified scientifically as hallmarks of mental wellbeing (See "Flourish") and these experiences have been frequently expressed in the interviews.

- i. Positive emotion has begun to replace some of the emotional (often unconscious) responses people had carried all their life began to change, like anger or resentment at people in authority, or fear of people struggling with substance misuse, or homeless people. Significantly the impact of positive emotion also increases engagement and achievement motivation.

ARON: "Poverty Truth helped me with that.... It took away a lot of my fear and resentment and anger at society in general that I was left with after years of addiction. It can take years to get rid of that! ... It was life-changing for me, going to PTC was life-changing at a time I really needed it. ... It's given me the ability to give people a different outlook for when they (residents in recovery he supports) approach job coach interviews and telephone calls and meetings in general. Rather than picking up the phone with resentment before you start, they have more understanding of what that person on the end of the phone has got to put in place Residents go in with a calmer state of mind. You can't believe what damage it does to ... go to those meetings with the level of resentment residents have, and lack of understanding of what that other person is going through. So PTC is helping drop all that..."

TERESA: "It's shown me what's possible ... It's such a powerful thing to have felt isolated and now feel supported with others, and I didn't know that was possible and now I do and I expect it in all kinds of situations now."

There were a range of positive emotions listed like excitement, hope, humility, greater courage and self-respect, and many of us reported feeling more confidence whether at work, or just in ourselves, all of which are signs of greater mental health.

IRIS: “It’s connected what I do in work to really rooting it in place in the wider community, so I am now more confident that I’ve got something to contribute locally. I feel braver to cross the line, and about where I can cross line and give a public contribution with my work”

AMY: “I think it’s confidence in my own ability, security in myself, my values and my views, to be able to stand up for others and not be ashamed or scared to have a point of view – and to use all that to make change.”

MIRIAM: “I feel like a voice for a huge minority, and a legitimate voice as I have lived experience of the threat of poverty and for several years I was actually poor not knowing how to cope with it all.”

- ii. As already mentioned, people discovered a greater understanding of others who are different from themselves. Shared meaning has been expressed in different languages; if not in emotion as such, it’s in these changed attitudes, or mind-sets, into now shared understanding.

HANNAH: “At first I thought, ‘How on earth can we transform from how things are into people saying they have faith in their community?’ but now I feel that’s exactly what’s happening. People are standing up and feeling more confident. It’s given me a real respect for how people cope in the most difficult of times, and that’s all I can say. I’m not very good at talking about feelings and emotions.”

IAN: “It has made big achievements locally, in terms of changing the mindset of so many people working for different organisations and services, e.g. the Council, so many mindsets have changed there, which is changing the way they work.

- iii. Most of us began to feel the positive relationships in a sense of community, support and belonging.

JAMES: “So it’s made me feel a much deeper sense of belonging, and a much wider sense of community than the narrower bunch of people I would have been with previously.”

JOE: “So I think for me, it is summed up in the South African concept of Ubuntu: I am more who I am meant to be, because I am seeing other people become who they are meant to be.”

- iv. People felt like they had meaning in their life and a sense of purpose, that they were part of something working for change for the better for many people not just themselves, which added to their sense of confidence.

IAN: “This pandemic shows how we have enabled people to work together so well with the right frame of mind to set up systems that work well to support people. Lancaster was ahead of the game nationally in setting up support and relationships and I may have been an essential link here ... The feeling of empowerment because of PTC is what you end up with – feeling you can affect society and you can affect change. It’s not just self-confidence; you can actually effect change.”

Among the

COMMUNITY COMMISSIONERS

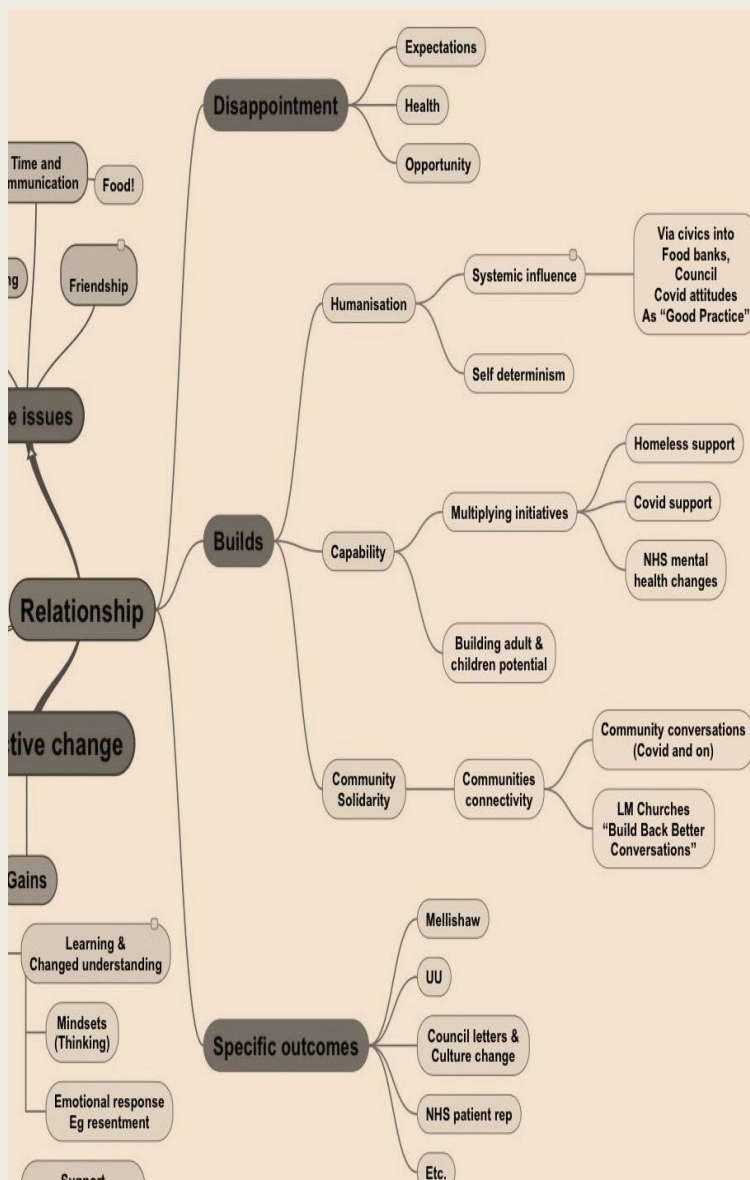
We recorded a 68% improved feeling of community belonging compared to the earlier sense of exclusion.

Interestingly, among the

CIVIC COMMISSIONERS

We recorded a very similar 65% improvement in feeling part of a supportive community.

LEARNING LOOP 3: OTHER CLEAR OUTCOMES AND RESULTS OF THE RELATIONSHIPS FORMED



This third learning loop looks at the specific outcomes of the relationships built over the long process of changing perspectives and building trust. A self-selecting process between all the commissioners determined where their individual experience, preference and engagement would be most suited, and smaller working groups, all with a clear balance of community and civic commissioners, emerged organically. These in turn considered projects and initiatives that would impact poverty and its terrible effects on local communities. They regularly reported back to the whole commission to cross-fertilise and to integrate further their stories of personal and community development.

So we begin with the actual impacts that are still growing and developing as a result of the co-production in and through the Working Groups, and then onto the assessments from the commissioners themselves.

A. RELATIONSHIPS PRODUCE SPECIFIC, INNOVATIVE PROJECT OUTCOMES

This section is a list of all the specific projects that came about directly as a result of the hard work of the commissioners during the course of the last two years. There were so many other benefits of the Poverty Truth process as listed in all the sections above and some final reflections which follow, but this section is about what specific projects were co-produced (*with a little story comment or reaction from someone involved.*)

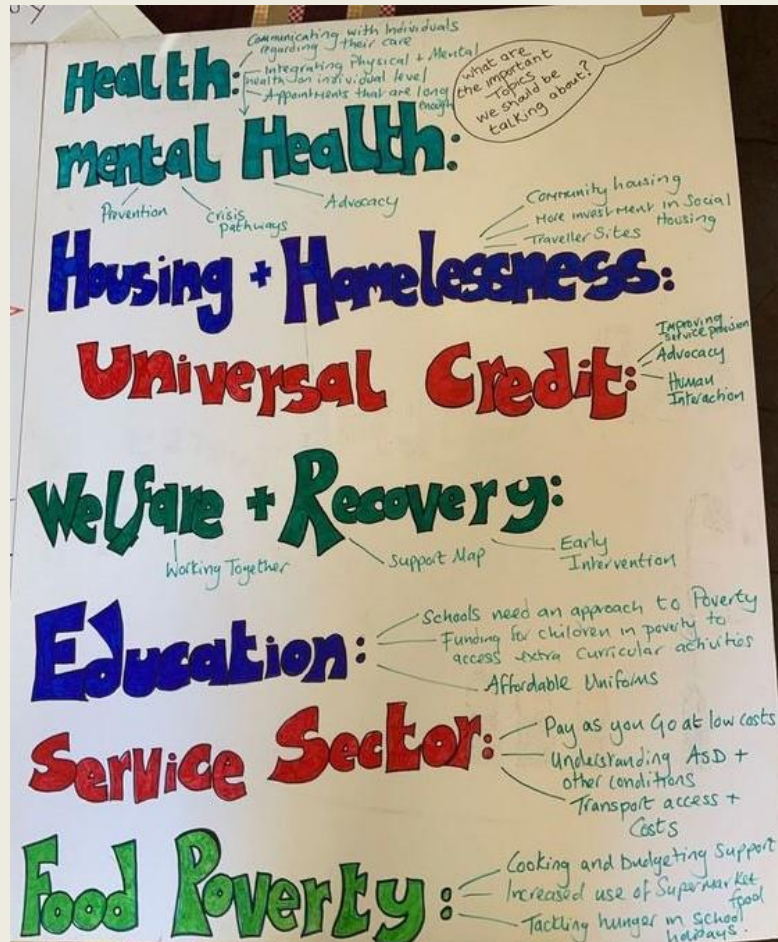
“The feeling of
Empowerment

Because of PTC is what
you end up with

Feeling you can affect
society and you can
affect change ...

It's not just self-
confidence ...

You can actually
effect change!”



- i. United Utilities (UU) introduced a 2 month payment deferral for customers having to sign up for UC, as well as support from UU for people **before** they go into debt rather than afterward. These changes will now be of benefit to a large number of people across the 8 million customers UU serve, a significantly large number of whom will now need to access UC for the first time as a result of Coronavirus! The changes already in place by UU as a result of being part of MBPTC will continue to have a growing knock-on effect.

*“When the representative from UU was told by his boss he had to be part of PTC he was not best pleased, and was of the opinion that people should stop moaning and try and help themselves a bit more! After the first few meetings and listening to people’s stories of how they struggle with the requirement to be in debt before any support is given, he had a new level of understanding and helped to bring about many helpful changes within the system, including the support being available **before** going into debt, so as to prevent that downward spiral becoming worse. UU also introduced a*

two-month payment break for any customer switching to Universal Credit. These changes potentially reach very large numbers of people among their 8 million customers across the North West."

- ii. As a result of relationships built between two Irish Traveller commissioners and the City Council and other civic commissioners, 100 people from the Traveller community on the Mellishaw Estate, including many elderly people and children, were saved from potential homelessness. After Commissioners supported them to explain their stories and the implications for so many, the City Council purchased their site from County Council and promised a £1m refurbishment scheme to do long overdue improvements to the living conditions on the site.
"There are meaningful changes you can make in a place even within the social and economic restraints, and that has to do with the powerful impact of the attitudinal change that comes from the relational way of working. The next stage of that attitudinal change then starts to impact on political decision-making and that's one of the things we've seen locally, and the saving of the Traveller site was the key thing that shows how local political decision-making begins to be affected. The ripple effects aren't just sideways, they have to ripple upwards; you have to see political decision-making change from the ripple effects from below."
- iii. The regional NHS has committed to pilot a new role of Patient representative. This role will be directly to support and coordinate a team of volunteers able to help people with complex long term health needs navigate the bewildering array of forms, appointments and assessments required to access various benefits and/or different healthcare provision. There are currently **2838** people who are officially titled destitute across the Lancaster District who will potentially benefit from this service. Very significantly, the medical practitioners involved in this project also strongly feel the need of such help in 'joined-up writing.' The need for this role will also be exponentially greater as a result of Coronavirus, and the pilot, if successful, will be rolled out at scale across the district.
"The national recognition (in the NHS) that is coming around just what a difference a PTC can make, although it's unlikely to be mandated, it may be a recommendation to every integrated care system across England! So it's a potential outcome, not a definite, but I am hopeful this could happen through the work with the Kings Fund. ... I have been more vociferous and challenging of fellow leaders when I feel the voice of the poor, or Travellers, or people with disabilities is not being heard. They've definitely strengthened my resolve and commitment to social justice. If anything they have made me even more passionate about issues of social justice, equality and health inequality."
- iv. A significant culture change across Lancaster City council has been achieved with a focus on treating people kindly and fairly as human beings as opposed to targets to be reached. The Council motto was deliberately changed from "a sharp and forward thinking council" to "a co-operative, kind and responsible council."
"I suppose the tangible achievement would be the change in how the Council officers deal with people and interact with people and have got much more awareness of treating people as humans and individuals and relate to people on a human level, and that in doing that they don't have to be robots, and its ok to show your vulnerabilities. I remember I was in a meeting not long after starting

PTC, and there were loads of senior staff there, the chief exec of the council and all the senior managers, 24 senior managers and more in the room, and we went round room saying what we wanted to achieve. And everyone was saying things like, 'I want to get the performance management system up and running', 'I want to get the data protection sorted', etc., and I said, 'It would be great if we could implement a culture of kindness in this council'. And everyone looked at me blankly, and there was this silence like people were not sure what to do with that; it clearly sounded just a bit weird, so 'let's just move on' ... And now at the last meeting 6 months ago, the change is noticeable! Over that time, it's been picked up, and taken on board. People are now talking about a culture of kindness, talking about wellbeing, talking about the same themes like empathy with people, looking after people, support for people we work with and staff. So how to direct staff to sources of support. So it's not an alien term now, and the chief exec has now even said it's really important. So the change in the last 18 months from it being something that was frowned upon to it now being every-day language, that's massive".

- v. The wording of council letters, already sent to 5,000 tenants, has been changed to make them less intimidating and to encourage people to phone in and access the support available.
- "A group of community commissioners went into the council and together with a civic commissioner, (head of customer services) read through a sample of letters written to residents relating to various debts, from council tax to rent arrears. The reaction of the community commissioners was similar to so many others: that the letters are so intimidating, that whatever they are about, they go straight in the bin, or a drawer, never to be seen again, along with a pile of other letters relating to increasing debt! The community commissioners suggested a solution to this problem: to begin each letter with a paragraph acknowledging that the letters can be difficult to understand and that if people were struggling, then a phone call or a face to face meeting to explain what help and support was available could be arranged."*

"You don't have to aim too high to achieve a lot – getting people in to talk to the council officers – it's not a big thing to get done. It was daring but it's not expensive, and it's been so influential and had such a big effect. It's the same with the letters – it's not a big expensive thing but it's had a massive effect – and I think more so on the officers working than even the people who get the letters! The officers were so negative and suspicious about what we were doing at first, changing the tone of the letters, they were so against it, and now they've just accepted that's how it is and it's seen as positive. It really is a real changing of a mindset, and it wasn't an expensive thing. It required effort when people were not positive about it at the start, so it's not how big it seems but what effect it has on a culture that's important. That's the legacy. It's not a huge change in action, but it creates a huge mindset/ cultural change."

A council officer commented, "When you guys came into council to work on rewording the letters, it was a real eye opener for me. We may not have changed them in a way that would have been useful, and you guys really helped me see that. It's opened my eyes to change things in terms of how will it

make things better for people, not just what's best for us." Anecdotally, already the council team has noticed an increase in calls asking about support, probably as a result of this fresh approach.



Community Commissioners meet with senior staff in the Local Council Offices

- vi. A Complex Needs Alert form has been designed and is in use by local health care professionals, the regional CCG, the Citizens Advice Bureau, and Lancaster City Council to aid with recognition of the need for support at benefit appointments.
- "It took a lot of work to get the buy-in of these different organisations, but we've built the relationships now; and lots of us are hearing the stories of people who have so many different needs, who have to explain again and again, to different people in different departments ... So here the CAB and the Council and the Health service all put their weight and involvement and information into an appeal to the Benefits office to show a little trust of these organisations, and a bit of flexibility when someone can't, for obvious health reasons say, get to an appointment, well it's got to help!"*
- vii. Community commissioners shared (and continue to share) their experience and expertise on the wide ranging impacts of poverty at a range of forums including:
- ✓ Immediately and intensely in Covid response forums
 - ✓ Food poverty forums
 - ✓ Head teachers' education forum looking at health inequalities for young people
 - ✓ Teaching sessions with over 80 second year medical students looking at the effect of poverty on health, now for third year running.
 - ✓ Morecambe Bay Area Clinical Commissioning groups (CCGs)
 - ✓ Lancaster and Bay Integrated Care Communities' monthly meetings.
 - ✓ Planning meetings both online and in person for the forthcoming Eden Project in Morecambe

- ✓ The visit of 2 MPs touring the UK investigating the effects of poverty, filmed for national news channels and still ongoing connection with Channel 4 News
 - ✓ 100 council staff at Lancaster City Council
 - ✓ Online and in person meetings regarding setting up a poverty truth commission in other areas e.g. South Lakes, and Barrow
- viii. Some of the learning and stories from the commission have already been included in a key academic book, “Stigma”, by Imogen Tyler, which brings a radical change of perspective and lived experience to future social workers’ training at Lancaster University.
- “It’s made me more confident that my more academic research can be relevant to more people. I feel that that my work has more purpose and made me feel more capable of translating my work, for example my book. The idea that I can take a very academic work to a broader audience and it’s meaningful for them and that then impacts on me and my job. It makes me feel more capable as a communicator and a leader. ...And it’s still moving now, like you and Alex are coming into the Uni and forming this group (LUSARG). It feels like a legacy where I can break down the inside/outside between scholarly forms of production and community activism. We can take that learning back into Uni and outside again - so that’s carrying on - taking it in the direction of, ‘how do we produce knowledge together?’ as well as, ‘how do we do action together?’ It feels like a next stage; ‘how do we create a record or document of all this so we can create better practice?’”*
- ix. Community Commissioners are now included in teaching at sociology lectures for second year students at Lancaster University.
- x. An ongoing partnership between PTC and the Sociology Department has created the new Social Action Research Group ([Social Action Research Group - Research Portal | Lancaster University \(lancs.ac.uk\)](https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/social-action-research-group/)) to bring more grass-roots experience to training and teaching about poverty, and give further opportunities for research and teaching to be impacted by lived experience. In a radically inclusive step, two new honorary research fellows are people with non-academic but deeply significant lived expertise of poverty.
- xi. A publication project to bring stories, experiences, art, poetry, film etc. by people with lived experience of poverty is already also being developed by the same the partnership. An editorial collective is being established to continue the now deeply embedded commitment to co-production.
- “The project is to co-produce a book about the lives of people in our communities and the triumphs and struggles they experience, aimed at academics, policy makers and practitioners in social services of various kinds. We already have an ‘in principle’ contract for the book, so now we just need to write it together! The vision is that we get together, form an editorial collective and think about who from our community would benefit from being involved in having this kind of platform to speak to policy makers and practitioners. These contributions can be short stories about their experiences; poems; interviews; pieces of art; song lyrics (with links to performance); or anything they wish to do to*

express themselves in a way that is meaningful to them. We have even had a suggestion of an interpretive dance – the sky is the limit!”

From the self-reporting of ALL THE COMMISSIONERS we calculated an overall 65% rise in a sense of empowerment in place of earlier powerlessness.

**And was most of that felt among the Community Commissioners?
They felt a 70% improvement.**

The Civic Commissioners, situated in systems, businesses and ‘places of power’, reported 60% improvement in feeling empowered by being in authentic relationships with the wider community!

B. RELATIONSHIPS CREATE HEALTHY CHANGE IN PEOPLE AND CULTURES

When we looked back to the Commission launch, we remembered what the community commissioners told us about the shared impacts that different forms of poverty had caused for them all. They defined them as a feeling of being dehumanised, treated as a number instead of as a person; voicelessness or exclusion; the fact that poverty can happen to anyone; and the hidden traumatic effects on the mental health of someone falling into the powerlessness of poverty. Recognising that the PTC journey could/should or might have had an effect on this, we looked for signs of change in these areas. Most significantly, we discovered that the civic commissioners had gone on a similar journey of personal development in these areas, and were able to report in some instances as well that the organisations they were part of had accepted a culture change from the ‘dehumanisation’ of numbers and targets, and it helped the staff in these huge systems to feel better about themselves and morale got much better. In addition, workers in one organisation were able to understand better the stress that workers in a different organisation face and to try and work together more co-operatively and helpfully as fellow humans working for the well-being of others, not just workers doing a job.

Solidarity, kind listening and relationship building seems to have increased a sense of ‘humanisation’ and a greater flow of ‘capability’ right across the board.

- i. **HUMANISATION.** People shared that the opposite of feeling ‘dehumanised’ was a feeling of being treated like a human being, not just a statistic or a number. People were beginning to feel like they are worth something, that their voices matter, and that they are being treated as equals in the room.

MAGGIE: “To be in a group and have educated professional people listen to you and make you feel comfortable, to make you feel you matter, that makes you feel human. I was very nervous and panicky at those first meetings; I didn’t feel comfortable at all, but now I feel like I am the same. They treat you the same. It feels like we’re worth something, like we matter.”

KATEY: "I'd say the same. Before we went to Poverty Truth we thought nobody cared about us. Now we know different."

MAGGIE: "It makes us feel more important, like we can actually go into a room and sit with these professional people without feeling we shouldn't be there, that we had no right to be there; we feel like we are humans and should be there just like them."

AMY: "I started off having just gone onto UC and felt really dehumanised cos of all the logistics, proving my ID, just everything made me feel like I wasn't a human being.... I really did feel like a number not a person. During PTC I realised that I wasn't the only one in this situation; it was actually everyone's experience of UC. Everyone felt really dehumanised, we all felt it - like the music when you rang up, the machines to talk to, and I slowly realised that my experience was worth sharing, and it was the sharing of that experience that was very powerful. ... And gradually I began to feel more and more humanised through PTC and feeling listened to."

GAYLE: "Getting that change in Council staff from only thinking about systems and processes to seeing people as individuals and as humans to be treated with kindness, that really has dramatically changed. It's not perfect, there's still more to do, but I have seen a massive change in how staff deal with people as a human being, and not just a case ... the changes have been dramatic. We're just not geared up in public services to do the human thing. We're set up to do the system thing, the procedure thing. Sweeping all that away with "do the human thing" was mind- blowing for me. If we can do, if our staff can do that, where can we go wrong? Surely we can get somewhere if everyone lived their lives by that mantra, what sort of cities or world would we have??"

CARLA: "In particular with things like the Council or United Utilities it has been a journey from being a number or a problem to a person that's important enough for them to take notice of and take advice from. And now it feels like if they're seeing you as a human, they're also going to be able to see others as human beings too – you need to feel some form of connection with people to feel human and we didn't have any connection with any of them at the start, whereas now we do."

CHARLOTTE: "I think that in the Council the principal of treating each other in a humane and kind way is becoming firmly embedded and that it's very much easier to talk about the business of the Council in the context of us being thoughtful about people's vulnerabilities and feelings. ... People told me they wouldn't dare to write (letters) in a friendly way before, formal and distant was how it had to be before, so we are really beginning to change all that, we have made good headway into changing the mindset of all that across not just the Council but other organisations too."

AMY: "Amongst the civics I think it's about improved communication, there's been.... a re-humanisation there. Before it was always roles, whereas now it's people, so instead of saying, 'I need to get hold of one of the team leaders at the Council,' it's, 'Oh, I'll give E. a ring'. I think there's a more relaxed communication and also everyone seems more co-operative and less protected and willing to do that little bit more than the role is, so that's all great."

- ii. **CAPABILITY.** This section refers to a newly developed, or newly discovered ability to do something better than before, to feel more confident about how to bring about change whether it is in your personal life, the community or the organisation you work for. As a result of moving into this greater capability, community and civic commissioners went on to work together, beyond the life of round 1 of the commission) to set up various different projects to help many others. These include
 - a. Securing funding for a project befriending recently rehoused long term homeless people during the Covid 19 pandemic, providing the support they need to remain in their tenancies. Two community commissioners and two civic commissioners teamed up with other organisations to discuss what could be done about the issue of entrenched homelessness. Together, but led by the community commissioners with lived experience of homelessness, they have now secured funding for a befriending service aimed particularly at the entrenched homeless who have been re-housed during the coronavirus pandemic, and anybody who will be/has been made homeless during the lockdown either through debt or relationship breakdown. These are people who have severe and complex needs, who would struggle in their current situation without support, friendship and connections. The support will range from simply meeting and talking to more substantial support, i.e. helping pay bills, maintaining tenancies, managing daily living, support around addiction, connection and safety, foodbank referrals or signposting to partner organisations. The project will be filling a gap where help is currently unavailable due to the lack of any substantive floating support. The funded worker, herself with lived experience of homelessness, has now been appointed to manage volunteer befrienders who will preferably, but not exclusively, also have experienced homelessness.

CHARLOTTE: “I suppose in my own particular niche, especially with the entrenched homelessness, I feel hugely more able to bring about change because of the respect that’s afforded to the lived experience group. The respect they’re accorded means we can change things that before would have simply been a matter of “this is the way we do it”, and in my position I’m just supposed to do what officers wanted me to; I have no choice. So now I feel a lot more power to change things, but it’s not my power it’s the power of the lived experience group.”

ARON: “....Like ringing up managers from all the different services to set up the entrenched homelessness befriending project, one time I wouldn’t have rung anyone at all ever, I was scared of using the phone, let alone phoning managers from all the different services and the council. Make no mistake, the PTC has made me able to do that. This lived experienced befrienders for the homeless thing is a PTC thing; none of it would have happened without PTC. I want that in writing! People with lived experience talking with managers and bringing them together to create greater good rather than looking at their own agendas. Every single manager has a skill to bring and we will bring that out. I know what it’s like to be a service user and feel worthless, and now I’m working ... and if this befriending the entrenched homeless comes off – it will save lives.”

- b. Because of the newly embedded and connected PTC relationships across communities, during the pandemic the Council and foodbank support services were able to reach out quickly and efficiently

to over 30,000 of the most vulnerable members of the community in a variety of different ways within 48 hours! This resulted in a commissioner being nominated for a European award for Excellence in Covid response. A Community Commissioner has also become a trustee of the foodbank.

AMY: "If you look at Covid and our response, it has been significantly different to other areas in Lancashire and across country. People say to me, 'how come you've reached so many people?' Well, it's because we're approachable. It's about respecting each other's knowledge without questioning it; trust breaks through all the red tape. And through our experience of knowing what vulnerable people would need, the letters were a key thing. G (CVC housing officer) said, "We need to write letters to as many people as possible!" And no one asked her to justify this, so she could get on and do it, and now nearly 30,000 people have had letters! This was how we reached beyond, and the follow up visits as well! This was all because E. and G. are part of PTC. It wouldn't have happened otherwise. Likewise the homeless project. The whole response has been so co-ordinated and so effective at keeping people off the streets cos of PTC. Other districts are now looking at us as models for good practice."

GAYLE: "The experience I had and the relationships in PTC was fundamental in me leading the work on Covid: that sense of caring for people and looking after people as individuals, staff ringing people up knowing it's OK to chat about how people are feeling, and try and keep their spirits up. So not a typical council call, just a friendly conversation, 'how are you doing? Have you managed to get out today? I've been out with my dog', etc., etc. It changed it from a transactional 'we are the council with a food bank to help you' to 'we are just dealing with people who are struggling here and how we would like people to treat us, or our mum or grandma'. It just kind of happened and the way I encouraged the team and instilled what we're trying to do was "it's OK to spend 20 mins on the phone with someone occasionally who is in a really bad way – then just do it", rather than "here's a list of numbers or targets and you'll get told off if you don't meet it!" Obviously staff still had a list of people to get through but it was more about trying to be there for people, saying things like, 'if you're worried, we'll do a home visit'. And it wasn't just the residents on the end of the calls that appreciated it, a lot of the staff doing the calls really loved it too. So it wasn't just the people receiving the calls who benefit, but also the people making the calls. Then again there were some staff who just couldn't handle it, too emotionally upsetting, so there is a flip side, but also they felt able to say they were not coping cos of this and this in their personal life etc. And not long ago staff would not have wanted to speak up about that. So it's great that the culture has changed so people are now able to say 'this is triggering for me and I can't do that' and we are able to find something else for them to do. So the culture change has a big effect for everyone and it doesn't cost a thing."

- iii. A research project looking into the health inequalities faced by the Gypsy/Traveller community was established, hopefully resulting in a job role within the community to improve health within the Gypsy /Traveller community across Lancaster and Morecambe;

- iv. Someone who had received horrific treatment in relation to mental health in hospital in another area went on to work with senior directors to produce a training film for staff to try to ensure that the same mistakes were not repeated again.

“Making the film about what happened in hospital was very empowering, I went from having absolutely no power whatsoever in hospital to lots of power, by explaining a lot of what happened to me to a lot of people with that film. It was a training film for staff. So to have a voice and to be listened to, gives an ability to bring about change for common good.”

- c. **COMMUNITY SOLIDARITY.** As you will have reached lots of times now, all the people involved in the commission said that they felt part of a community and had a sense of solidarity and belonging which had dispelled their earlier experience of voicelessness and exclusion. And this solidarity reached further into an enormous networked connection since people had come together in PTC from many different and otherwise unconnected communities. The knowledge that they can now connect more easily for, and to help in many different fields was a great benefit to all the commissioners and the many people they themselves connect to, whether it was work related, a personal problem, or for someone else who didn’t know where to turn. This was really evident particularly in setting up community conversations and supporting people in the most effective and thoughtful way across the region during Covid 19. Another example is the series of Build Back Better talks organised by Lancaster Methodist Church which involved several commissioners speaking.

JAMES: “Even when you are in a position of power, because of the mechanisms/systems that exist, or how public sector organisations function you can still feel quite powerless to change things, but when you build relationships with people who your organisation is supposed to serve, and those relationships become stories of why we need to do things differently and how we can be in relationship with the people we serve, that becomes a really powerful lever for change.”

CHARLOTTE: “There’s also a wider level of feeling more capable too , so I’ve now been asked to be a food bank trustee, so maybe that’s how this all spreads, one thing leads on to another.”

C. TRYING TO BUILD TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS CAN ALSO DISAPPOINT

There were inevitably some disappointments around things that did not work out as people had hoped.

- a. The first reasons were to do with a significant failure in building a lasting relationship with people working in some of the larger institutions. In particular, though we began with a clear invitation from many community commissioners to engage with DWP and some hopeful connections, our early, excellent civic commissioner from the DWP was soon replaced by a temporary (though equally positive) colleague. The third appointee arrived very late to the process and without any of the understanding and journey development that the rest of the commission had by then experienced. He did not stay the course, and caused significant disappointment.

JAMES: “The other thing I found slightly tricky was the addition of certain civics late on in the process ... I think those in from the start tended to understand the process from the start and be more committed. The later ones were more disruptive and less helpful. There has to be some thought around how this works in the future, especially if we still want their organisation represented. How do we make them feel initiated and included in the process?”

CARLA: “As for the DWP, we didn’t even get close! Nothing has changed there. Perhaps in round 2 the focus should be really local and perhaps as a national organisation, things should be targeted higher up. You can’t drill through the NHS or DWP at a higher level just a few people locally, it won’t work; like us not getting through to DWP. If anything is to be done with organisations like that and you can’t do that locally, I think the national network could have more of a role here. You need more influence and more lobbying around issues that come from national policy, and that applies to the NHS too.”

- b. Though we had significant and very impressive participation from commissioners from the NHS, there were, as mentioned above, others from that organisation who were also unable to continue at times. Time pressures on workers or high staff turnover within these large national systems sometimes led to one or two people feeling like a relationship had started and then was abandoned and in feeling let down. This at times threatened to create a downward spiral as morale and shared hope was diminished, and increased flexibility, understanding and common purpose needed to be revived.

CARLA: “Perhaps it was naive ... changing local things is one thing, changing things backed by government is very different. Also our view of the NHS was not clear. I didn’t realise at the start, but now I know it’s actually a whole group of disparate organisations that loosely call itself the NHS, and you can work with one, but that doesn’t mean they all agree...”

ARON: “We need to explain what a commitment it is to people from the start, and also explain you can’t go in with your own agenda exclusively, yes everyone has their own thing, like me with recovery, but you can’t be so hell bent on your own stuff to the exclusion of the greater good. Everyone needs to help each other, and most of us did that, but not all of us and everyone needs an interest in all of it to a degree.”

- c. Some people felt a sense of loss when we split into working groups (though others found that the relationships went even deeper in those groups) and then inevitably many people felt an even greater sense of disconnection at the start of the Covid pandemic, just as we were about to hold our celebration of round 1 event. It also involved a significant threat to some of our projects, and caused a lot of emotional upheaval.

JAMES: “I don’t think there’s anything the commission could have done differently – the experience in the health group was one of hopeful, then extreme disappointment, then hopeful again, but that’s nothing to do with the commission, that’s just the reality of being in the middle of a pandemic and recession. Things are taken away from you and it’s a hopeless and despairing experience, but because

there are enough of us in positions of influence involved in the process, we have helped turn a despairing narrative into one of hope.”

TERESA: “Splitting into subgroups made me lose connection with everyone and that was a real loss. The sub groups has been a big disconnect. The bigger group was very connecting, but the sub groups felt very isolating and quite often there was only 1 other community commissioner there.”

IRIS: “The biggest disappointment is the circumstances of the pandemic and the ways in which it has made us remote from each other. How do we do the relational work we do that has these ripple effects beyond the group, and can build waves of momentum, how do we do that remotely? How do we build momentum; who is excluded – digital access, mental health etc.? All the accompanying things, crushing mental health, poverty, collapsing economic climate etc. My worry is around how to do the relational practice. It feels a real challenge, and I fear we’ve grown more remote because of it. Professionals are drawn into constant crisis mode so have no time, and community commissioners are struggling with lockdown, with hopelessness of future. How do we keep seeing each other in person?

- d. Some had ongoing health issues that meant they could not participate as fully as hoped in the whole process. And some who were having to work at several low paid jobs found those jobs and growing family needs just too demanding to be able to give sufficient time to the commission. So there were points at which, particularly among community commissioners, the burden fell on fewer of them than was ideal. We were really grateful for all they could contribute and will look for more flexible ways of engaging in round 2.

DAVID: “Like not just be such a small group , we’re just a section of people in poverty we need more of a broader understanding; we need to involve a bigger community –include Ryelands, Ridge, Skerton, Vale, Marsh, all those areas seriously hit by poverty on a massive scale where we only had our involvement. Maybe a questionnaire ... They might not be able to commit to PTC cos it’s a big commitment, but they could commit to a questionnaire, they would bring a broader understanding of it all to it, they could feel part of it if they weren’t able to commit. I wanted to see more people involved.”

All the disappointments have been noted and a list of ways to improve round 2 are been listed here.

KEY LEARNING FROM THE INTERVIEWS ON AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT FOR ROUND 2

- a. Try to engage commissioners at a high level of authority from large organisations such as the DWP with a clear commitment to staying the course. PTC has built significant credibility with other high level officers during round 1, and we are hopeful that their advocacy and involvement will help achieve this.
- b. Work jointly with the national network of PTCs to try and improve communications and commitment from the DWP and other large organisations.

- c. Give as clear an indication of time commitments involved as possible before commissioners commit to being part of PTC, while emphasising that the credibility of the results achieved shows that this commitment is valuable in itself.
- d. Give further consideration to what flexible approach might increase the involvement of the 'working poor' who already have more than one job and family commitments.
- e. Give more time to seek out, inform and prepare a wider cohort of potential community commissioners. We expect that our deeply embedded community connectivity will facilitate this.
- f. Work on the diversity of community commissioners to include people from BAME communities and more people from estates.
- g. Include careful attention to diversity and equality in the 'shared culture contract' we co-produce together with the community commissioners to build a collectively safe space for the conversations. Follow this up by re-visiting/redrawing it at the beginning of the full commission and again at the creation of the working groups.
- h. Remain focused on clear and simple languages and different conversation styles so that everyone can understand and participate fully.
- i. Pay continual attention to access issues/venue condition and location;
- j. Involve the wisdom and experience of round 1 commissioners in a strong volunteer support to the people and process of round 2.
- k. Although the cataclysmic impact of the pandemic was responsible for a clumsy ending of round 1 with its inevitable sense of loss, we will aim to be clearer, earlier, about what might happen at the end of the round and how people can remain engaged in the process moving forward.
- l. Make information about PTC round 2 and its developments more widely available on social media platforms so more people know about the work being done and how to be involved. We will aim to include this communication and collation skill in the job spec for a new worker for the next round.

MBPTC

"Nothing about us, without us, is for us."

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