

POVERTY
TRUTH

GATESHEAD

Well Newcastle Gateshead



Gateshead Poverty Truth Commission
Presents:

Growing Change in Gateshead

Nothing about us, without us, is for us



Contents:

1. Front page
2. Contents
3. Poem: Power. Ged's story
4. What is Gateshead PTC?
5. Who took part?
8. Sharing stories
9. Poem: I am poverty
10. The issues we took on and the wisdom we have to share
12. Housing.
14. Gateshead Poverty Truth Charter
15. Caring and Disability
16. Lived experience at the centre. What we've learnt about coproduction
20. Going forwards: Growing change in Gateshead
21. Poem: Gateshead Poverty Truth, 1
22. Post-script: where it all began and thanks
25. Appendix 1: emerging themes
26. Appendix 2: golden threads



Poem: Power

The power is held by only a few
It's certainly not me and I know it's not you
Empty fridge, emergency gas
Gone are the days, gone are the laughs.

Dee

**Community Commissioner writing about his experiences of
powerlessness**

Jan 2020

Ged's story

My name's Ged.

Before I found the Poverty Truth Commission I had a lot of bad experiences. I know what it is to not be able to afford a fridge, a cooker or a washer.

A lack of money leads to poverty of community and lack of power.

I wouldn't open mail, I would just ignore envelopes. I wouldn't even answer the door to the post man when he called. Being isolated is a lack of connection. I wasn't sure of my value in society.

I initially went to the expert by experience meetings with Fulfilling Lives. I learnt so much there.

They were talking about people with multiple and complex needs. I turned to the guy next to me and asked him what they meant by that. He said 'that's us, mate!'

But I also learnt that I could make a difference to how systems worked. As I continued to go to the meetings I learnt about people and services and how I could make a contribution. I found out about the Poverty Truth Commission at one of these meetings.

When I first came to the PTC I was broken. But as I listened to others I realised I wasn't alone.

It's been a journey of being, belonging and becoming. The most powerful message we carry is the truth of our experience.



What is Gateshead Poverty Truth Commission?

This image shows the goals Gateshead Poverty Truth Commission as stated in our programme for our launch event in March 2020.

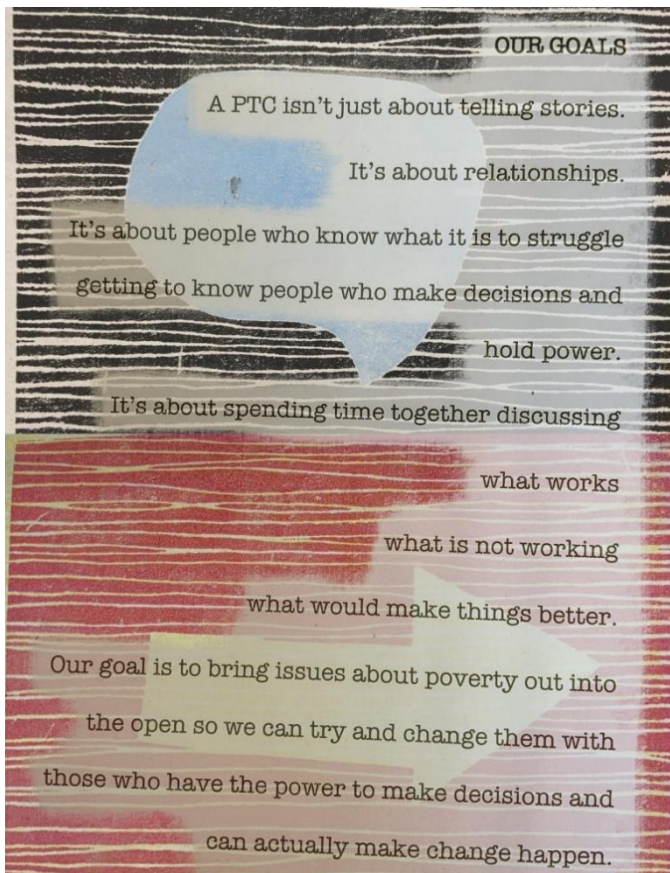


Figure 1: our goals as Gateshead PTC as stated at our 2020 launch event.

We did not know what lay ahead: the Covid-19 pandemic; years of Zooming rather than meeting in person; personal and national struggles.

We did know that we wanted to make change. That, as Dee's poem says, as people with lived experience of poverty, too often we felt powerless over the decisions made that affect our lives.

The principles of a PTC can be summed up in our catchphrase: 'nothing about us, without us, is for us' and this is what we've been working on for the last two years. We've been growing

change in Gateshead that starts with us, the people who know what it is to struggle against poverty.

This has involved meeting with an equal number of Civic and Business Commissioners. People who hold power in the system but who also want to see change. Together we have listened deeply and worked together to begin building a better system for everyone. This report outlines some of the ways we've been doing that. It hasn't always been easy or straightforward, and there is certainly lots more to be done, but we are proud of all we have achieved and learnt together. We hope this report will share some of that learning.

Gateshead Poverty Truth Commissioners, March 2022



Who took part?

Gateshead PTC started with a group of Community Commissioners from across the borough. Because of Covid the people who have made up this



Figure 2: Community Commissioners in 2020

group has changed over time, but in total the following people have been Community Commissioners at various times over the last two years: Ged, PJ, Adam, Claire, Marie, Reza, Dee, Rose, Daniel, Diane, Emmeline, and David.

When we first got together we spent time learning about each other; what we had in common and the different stories of poverty we were bringing.

Here are some facts about the group:

- Around a third of us are carers;
- Over 50% of us have lived in temporary accommodation;
- 3 of us have a disability;
- 70% of us have experienced mental health problems;
- Over 50% of us have, or have a close family member with, a long-term health condition;
- Around a third of us have been homeless;
- 3 of us have been through or are going through the asylum system.



But we are not defined by these facts... here are some other facts about us. In the past two years we have:

- Spoken with the Cabinet Office about how Covid restrictions are affecting Gateshead residents;
- Helped to shape a university study about Universal Credit and mental health;
- Appeared in the Director of Public Health for Gateshead's report two years in a row;
- Two of us have become trustees of the national charity the Poverty Truth Network;



- Even in lockdown we have looked out for one another, forming close friendships and support networks. A few of us have even spent Christmas together.

There have also been a set of Business and Civic Commissioners for Gateshead who joined our ranks in November 2021:

Stu, Ceri, Neil, Sarah, Natalie, Helen, Greta, Catherine, Alison and John.

Last but not least, we have been facilitated by Tracey, Trevor, Roger and Lucy.

Our first few meetings as a full Commission involved getting to know each other, then we began working on specific areas where we wanted to make change. Here's what this has meant to a few of us:



Being a part of PTC has allowed me to work with a diverse group of people, who in my normal working life I would not have had an opportunity to collaborate with, it has been such a valuable experience, I will take the things I have learned in PTC into all of my future projects.

**Helen Cobain,
Local Partnership Manager for the DWP
Civic and Business Commissioner**



The PTC has been space to learn, build shared understanding and empathy. A space to build collective action on tackling very real issues. It's felt a hopeful space despite the very real challenges people face.

I've really enjoyed and valued my time listening and learning from others in this forum. It has deepened my understanding of the pervasive impact poverty has on every single aspect of people's lives, beyond just the basics of 'heating and eating'.

It has deepened my commitment to ensuring poverty and its impacts are not ignored in wider civic or sectoral conversations from art to public health.

**Sarah Munro,
Director of the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art
Civic and Business Commissioner**



”
“

The PTC has shown me that voices of those suffering poverty, can be heard by decision makers to make positive change. My changes are positivity, confidence, an artistic outlet and a feeling I have value in society.

**PJ
Community Commissioner**

”
“

The PTC has made me feel part of the local community.

**Reza
Community Commissioner**

”
“

The PTC has meant a chance for things to change and change for the better. It has given me life, life outside my flat, it's gave me the chance to move forward.

**Dee
Community Commissioner**

”
“

The PTC has meant gaining a deeper understanding of lived experiences, it has changed the way in which I conduct my research.

**Professor Greta Defeyter, Northumbria University
Civic and Business Commissioner**



Sharing stories

Our first few meetings were spent sharing the stories that our Community Commissioners had experienced and practising listening deeply to one another. In these meetings we weren't trying to 'fix' each other but to identify the structural issues at work that led to individual problems.

For a sample of some of the stories that were shared you can [visit our YouTube page](#): just search Gateshead Poverty Truth Commission on Google.

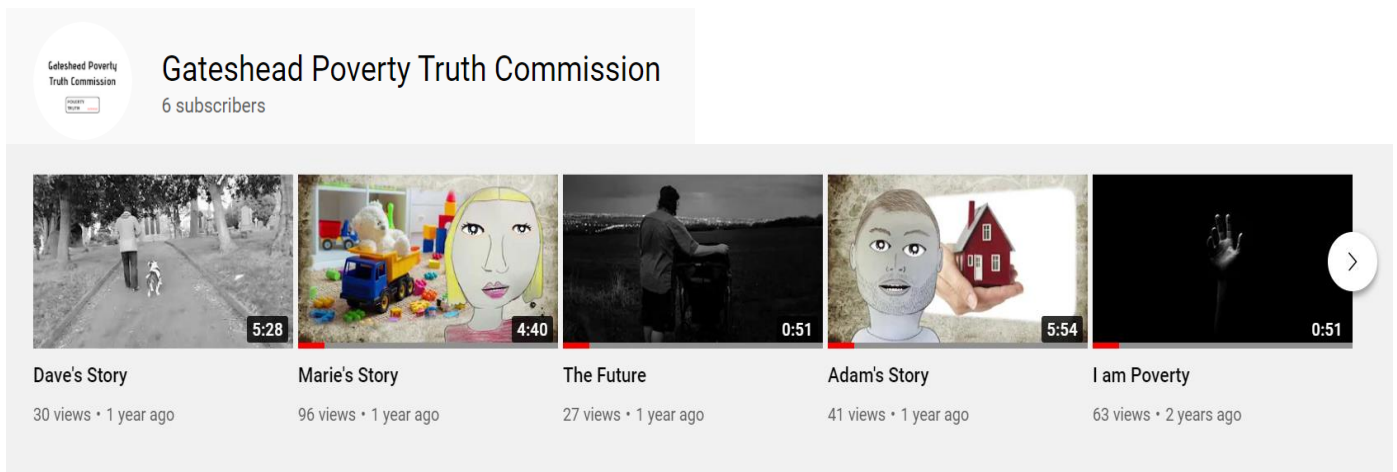


Figure 3: Our YouTube channel, telling some of our stories

These are stories that we showed at our launch event, but we also shared stories that came up in conversation; some of these also came from our Civic and Business Commissioners too. We learnt that some of them had lived experience of poverty too. This really helped our conversations and reminded us that the line between being in poverty and not being in poverty is a thin one.

Using art to tell our stories via photography, drawing, printmaking, film-making and poetry meant that many of us found new ways to talk about painful things. Some of the poetry we have written can be found throughout this report.



Poem: I am Poverty

I am fragile I am heavy I feel rough
I am worn out I am stale I smell rank
I am processed I am trapped I feel tired
I am vulture I am a dripping tap I taste bland
I am cold I am sleepless I feel old
I am poverty

**Adam,
Community Commissioner writing about how poverty can feel
January 2020**



The issues we took on and the wisdom we have to share

After a few sessions as a full commission, we began to focus in on some of the themes that emerged from our stories and conversations:

Kinship care

There is a lack of financial or practical support for people who have taken on the fulltime care of children who are in their family. We would like better all-round support for these carers who are usually doing a brilliant job.

Benefits and finance

The benefit system often serves to embed poverty rather than solve it. The poverty premium meaning that being poor often means life is more expensive. The way our economy works should be kinder to those at the economic margins.

Disabilities and caring for those with disabilities

Life with a disability can be more complex and more expensive. Sometimes it feels like people with disabilities and their carers have been forgotten about. People with disabilities and their carers should be given power over their lives and the decisions made that affect them.

Community resources

We have seen our communities being stripped of the places we used to gather and the services that used to be provided there. We think that resilient communities mean neighbours can help each other when times are tough.

Addiction

With crisis services at full stretch and recovery options being better if you have money, addiction and poverty are a combination that can lead to jail or to death. Support for those experiencing addiction must be improved.

Housing

Some of us live in council houses, some in private rentals, but all of us have struggled with housing that is unsuitable. A house that is safe, warm and feels like a home should be available to everyone.

To read the issues arising from each of these themes in full, see *appendix 1*.



We also noticed some golden threads that were running throughout all our stories of poverty, regardless of who we were. These were:

Communication

Our voices are often not heard, or ignored, and the services meant to help too often make us feel small and unwanted. We also think there is a lack of communication about what people are entitled to. Good communication can help people get out of poverty faster.

Managing transitions

Whether it is your stage of life changing, your benefits, your health or your income, too often people fall through the gaps between services.

Mental Health

Poverty and mental health are very closely related. One can lead to the other and create a downward spiral... if the double impact of poverty and mental health was taken seriously by services then the downward spiral could become an upward spiral.

Joining the dots

Organisations too often work in silos so that nobody knows the whole picture of our lives and we end up repeating our story over and over again. If agencies spoke to each other, it could change outcomes dramatically.

Lack of flexibility

We are all human and individual. 'One size fits all' might be efficient, but it often ends up being a straightjacket.

Poverty premium

Those least able to pay are often paying the most for fuel, digital technology, transport and school uniforms. Charities are great at helping but they shouldn't have to.

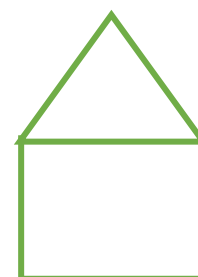
To read the issues arising from each of these golden threads in full, see *appendix 2*.

All the above is important to us, but we knew we had limited time and resources so we decided to divide into three task groups, which were broadly focused on the following actions:



Housing

Issues around Housing featured in most of our Community Commissioner stories. There were challenges getting a property, especially suitable adapted properties for children with disabilities. Frustrations with the state of accommodation and what basics are included in the Lettable standard, as well as issues with communication with Housing.



The Families and Caring task group discussed many of these issues.

Neil Bouch, Director of Gateshead Housing sat on this task group and was moved by the stories from our Community Commissioners. One story struck a chord. PJ shared how 6 years before he had moved into a Council studio flat following eviction from his previous property following a mental health crisis. When he looked around the property there were curtains and carpets in place and it had a homely feel. However, when he got the keys and moved in those things were missing. A Council policy of removing carpets and curtains between tenants had resulted in PJ moving into bare floorboards and nothing at the windows. This is how PJ described his situation:



When I viewed the council property there were carpets down at the time, it had a back garden which was in reasonable order. There was a bathroom, kitchen and a sleeping space

My support worker helped me to move in. My first response when I got the keys was, "Where are the carpets?" They had been taken out.

I had arranged a furniture package through the Council as I had little of my own furniture. This package included a bed and mattress, a fridge, a cooker, washing machine, 2-seater settee, a chest of drawers and a wardrobe. This package costs £80 a month from my Housing allocation and ran for the whole duration of my tenancy.

The flat seemed dingy and dark. I was given a £60 B&Q voucher from the Council, in order to buy paint etc so I could decorate but because my mental health was not stable, I was not in a position to do this at that time and the voucher ran out after 6 months.



‘Because there were no carpets, I could hear absolutely everything from neighbours. The floorboards were just 5mm thick so was keeping no sound out.

I tried to figure out what to do to try and reduce the noise. I wasn’t getting much money so certainly could not afford carpets. I struggled to make decisions. I found 3 raffia-type rugs from B&Q which cost me around £20. I could not afford transport so I carried them all the way home. They made virtually no difference to the sound.

After listening to this story, we heard that several other Community Commissioners were living with no carpets or flooring either. This wasn’t a problem confined to one individual.

Neil decided that this experience should be shared with others in his department with a view to reviewing this policy. A meeting was arranged which was attended by Community Commissioners and representatives from Neil’s team. From this meeting it was decided to pilot offering tenants a choice about keeping the curtains and carpets.

It was encouraging to see how hearing from voices of lived experience led to constructive change which could lead to a significant improvement in quality of experience for new Council tenants, especially those on very low incomes.

This work around housing has also led to Gateshead Poverty Truth Commission being part of another change. We are running design sprints with Gateshead Housing, Public Health and our Commission Greta Defeyter at the Healthy Living Lab, Northumbria University.

These design sprints are a way to redesign the lettable standards that Gateshead Housing has. When they finish in April 2022, we will have coproduced lettable standards – the condition a property must be in before a tenant moves in – with the housing team and residents. We are pleased that telling stories of housing is leading to policy change that will help everyone who moves into a Gateshead Housing property in the future.



The Poverty Truth Charter

In the benefits and finance task group we spent a lot of time thinking about how everyone has a role in **making sure that our society, our economy and our systems work for people who experience poverty** as well as the rich. We came to the conclusion that we wanted to spread PTC principles across the Gateshead system. That is why we're launching Gateshead Poverty Truth Charter. This is what it involves:

We will work with Gateshead organisations around three categories. They will have to meet at least one commitment in each category. These are:

Acknowledging poverty exists in Gateshead

- a) Offer free or reduced rate services/ products to those in poverty.
- b) Pay all staff members the Real Living Wage.
- c) Provide information and support to clients/ customers about what's on offer to help people in poverty in Gateshead.

Engaging with people with lived experience of poverty in your decision making

- a) People with lived experience are represented on your board or on a decision-making body.
- b) You conduct meaningful consultation with people with lived experience of poverty to actively engage to learn, understand and change.
- c) Engage with, or actively support, research on how poverty is affecting people in Gateshead.

Countering stigma and offering dignity and power

- a) Offer safe spaces for people to talk about their situation without stigma.
- b) Awareness training is in place for front-line staff on how to support those experiencing poverty. This training involves people with lived experience.
- c) Support community groups/charities that are providing help for those in poverty.

Organisations that can commit to something in each category can sign the charter and we will work with them at regular business breakfasts to speak more about the importance about these important issues.

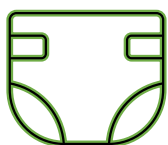
To view the latest signatories and the charter head to our website:

<https://www.gatesheadptc.com/>



Caring and Disability

One of the challenges faced by community commissioners in our Caring and Families task group was around incontinence provision for children with disabilities. Claire and Adam shared their experience and the experiences of many of their friends who also had children with disabilities.



The situation which was causing financial and logistical challenges for these families related to the process of obtaining pads, nappies and pull-ups for their children which were on prescription. Guidance changed some time ago which meant that the prescription was based on an arbitrary quota of 4 pads/nappies/pads per person per day. The quality and make of these products was very limited and difficult to get changed if inappropriate. The items they did receive often leaked, were ill-fitting or caused skin irritation. The number they received often resulted in them having to buy more products as they were insufficient for the continence needs of their child(ren). Once children are out of baby nappies/pull ups, the cost increases dramatically.

Some families were having to decide between buying more nappies or buying food for the family. The processes for changing size of incontinence provision as a child grows or their needs change, is complicated and requires parents to provide evidence including how much urine a child is producing daily. This is not easy when it is soaked into a pad or nappy and the parent is overwhelmed with all the other caring responsibilities which come with having a child with complex needs.

After sharing these concerns and frustrations to the Task Group, a meeting was set up between a representative from Public Health Gateshead, Claire, and representatives from Gateshead NHS Foundation Trust. At this meeting Claire shared her lived experience which was well received. The Foundation Trust Were keen to learn from Claire's experiences and those of others especially around how to collect appropriate information to help decide on appropriate incontinence provision. Claire was invited to work with other families of disabled children across Gateshead to devise a suggested form of data collection which worked for them. She was also invited to attend a BeHealthy forum to discuss the issues they have experienced. Claire was also encouraged to help them to review the website where the information for parents and carers about incontinence provision is shared.

To hear a little of Claire and Adam's experiences of being parents of two children with disabilities, you can watch Adam's story: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hrbgwCBzeQ0>



Lived experience at the centre: what we've learnt about coproduction.

We know from what our Civic and Business Commissioners tell us that building relationships with people with lived experience of poverty and listening to the realities of life on the breadlines means that you can't just keep going on as usual with the way you work. This is something we'd like to encourage in every aspect of decision-making in Gateshead that affects people in poverty; that those people are sitting around the table.

We are going to continue to deepening relationships that we've been building between our Community Commissioners and Civic and Business Commissioners by running a 'reverse mentoring' scheme. Commissioners will continue to meet in pairs every month. We do this because we're committed to *ongoing* inclusion of people with lived experience of poverty; this isn't something you can complete!

We've learnt a lot about what coproduction looks like when it's done well. Here are some of our learnings that we'd like to share:

*When services are having meetings about change its important to have people with **lived experience involved from the very beginning.***

***Make sure you aren't using jargon** or high faluting language. Start by understanding the level of comprehension that the people you wish to communicate, engage and learn from.*

*If you want to hear people's human experiences about poverty then you are going to have to share some of your humanity too; **this requires vulnerability and bravery from both sides.***

*Remember to **cover people's travel costs** if you're inviting them to in person meetings – getting around is expensive and can be a barrier.*

*We are about people not business. **We value your expert knowledge and ideas but leave your management hat at home.***

*When we come together as a PTC **we are equals no matter your job title or situation.***

*A good way to create equality in a room is to **spend time together learning about each other over cups of tea and food** (as Gateshead PTC we particularly love eating cheese!).*

Here are a few 'friends of Gateshead PTC' explaining how we've impacted their thinking around coproduction:





For many years, as Director of Public Health for Gateshead, I have been concerned about tackling the unacceptable inequalities that we have both within the borough and between Gateshead and other parts of the Country.

It is unacceptable that two babies, born today in Gateshead, can have as much as a ten year difference in life expectancy due almost entirely to the circumstances into which they are born. The fact that poor health is concentrated in our most deprived communities is indefensible and these patterns of ill-health shows us that our current systems are set up to benefit, to a greater extent, those in more affluent positions.

Despite plenty of amazing work over recent decades, inequalities in entirely preventable health, remain stubbornly persistent. While there have been many improvements those improvements haven't always benefited those who needed them most. The methods I have used to hear from residents in Gateshead hasn't always meant that I hear from everyone equally and consequently decisions don't always reflect the needs of the whole community. As I reflect I recognise that there are times I have imposed well intentioned interventions into communities without considering the wider context for families living there – for example, healthy eating advice for families struggling to put food on the table.

The PTC has helped break that down and, as a public health team, we started to hear the voices of people we might not have previously heard. In our health and well-being strategy a priority objective is to 'enable all children, young people and adults to maximise their capabilities and have control over their lives' – this is actually a health outcome in itself. The only way we can seriously to do this is to co-create the solutions with communities instead of consulting on the solutions we think people need. To do this well we understand that listening to voices of lived experience and working with them is not a quick fix, it takes time to build a relationship so people trust and feel empowered to say what they need. It's a different way of working, and it challenges our old approach, as we accept that the solution for communities may be different to the perceptions of what we think they need.

Alice Wiseman, Director of Public Health for Gateshead





A partnership with Gateshead Poverty Truth Commission to study the health effects of Universal Credit

In a packed Council Chambers in 2020 at the launch of GPTC, I listened to the powerful narratives of GPT Commissioners, including people claiming Universal Credit. I liked the approach of building connections between people with lived experience and those in positions of power to affect change. At the time, I was working as an embedded researcher in Gateshead. In response to the rising concerns expressed by community members, council and voluntary sector staff and elected members, the Public Health team had asked me to carry out research to understand people's experiences of Universal Credit and its consequences for citizens and services. A team led by Glasgow and Newcastle University, then successfully secured National Institute of Health Research funding for a 4 year study of the health effects of Universal Credit.

Given our shared interests, I got in touch. After introductory meetings, and despite the challenges of COVID, we have never looked back. Members of GPTC, and PJ in particular, have worked closely with the research team to provide advice about ethics, consent, and suggested ways to reach claimants. PJ was involved in the recruitment panel for the researcher working on the study alongside the researchers, as Suzanne reflects:

Working with PJ to appoint a project researcher really directed us towards assessing the candidate's values and interpersonal skills as well as their academic skills. By drawing on his own lived experience, and in a positive and constructive manner, PJ thoroughly tested candidates' abilities during the interview.

Our conversations have shaped the questions we ask in participant interviews and how we ask them. PJ often reminds us to stop using jargon and academic language because it puts people off. Together we have worked on a paper about co-production, in which we included one of PJ's poems. He has been invited to talk about his experiences of GPTC as part of a panel at the Fuse Knowledge Exchange in Public Health Conference alongside Directors of Public Health and Chief Executives. Concerned about putting PJ under pressure, I said he could take his time and think about it before agreeing. Can I just say yes, he laughed.





The research team are privileged to have PJ's input alongside other experts by experience and we value his continuing involvement. We also really appreciate the support which I know Lucy has provided behind the scenes, and her practical, thoughtful acts of kindness. We often forget the invisible wrap round support provided by organisations like GPTC. Without them, our paths would not have crossed with PJ and the study would not have benefitted from his wisdom and insight, as Marcia notes:

Demonstrating that research will engage with, and be informed by, the public and particularly those directly affected by the research topic has become an increasingly important requirement of research funders. However, it is still the case that public engagement can be something of a tick box exercise. It is so refreshing to work on a project where all are committed to meaningful public engagement which never feels tokenistic. This is exemplified by the project's collaboration with PJ, whose input at every stage has helped ensure that lived experience is always firmly to the fore of project development and fieldwork.

As Steph comments:

Working with PJ since I started on the study a few months ago has been incredibly useful but also a pleasure. In our discussions PJ challenges me, inspires me, helps me think differently and has fantastic novel ideas. We worked together to completely redraft our recruitment flyer, information sheet and interview guide. I think we make a great team! I'm certain that the success of our recruitment and our interviews so far has been because of PJ'S contributions and our links with Lucy and the Poverty Truth Commission.

We wish you all the very best for the future and hope to stay in touch.

Mandy

Mandy Cheetham, Research Fellow, Northumbria University

Suzanne Moffatt, Professor of Social Gerontology, Newcastle University

Steph Morris, Research Associate, Newcastle University

Marcia Gibson, Research Associate, Glasgow University



Going forwards: Growing change in Gateshead

This report has shared some of what we've done and learnt as Gateshead Poverty Truth Commission.

But the work is not done.

We want to see an end to poverty in Gateshead and everywhere.

We believe that the best way to do this is to include the people that experience poverty in the rooms where decisions are made.

We hope that this report has demonstrated that when this happens meaningfully, change begins to grow.

We have planted the seeds of change in Gateshead. We are:

- **running design sprints to change the lettable standards of council housing;**
- **including the experience of families who need incontinence care in shaping their provision;**
- **running a reverse mentoring scheme where those with lived experience mentor people with power and influence in Gateshead;**
- **partnering with others to share the best ways to include people with lived experience of poverty in shaping their work;**
- **launching a charter to bring a diverse range of organisations along with us.**

but this is just the beginning. We hope that our work will continue by a changing culture and attitude towards people who experience poverty.

Will you join in help us grow change in Gateshead by nurturing the seeds of change?



Poem: Gateshead Poverty Truth Commission, 1

Individual hardship, simultaneously isolated, silent suffering,
services available, understanding insufficient, outcomes unhelpful,
benefits sanctioned.

Join Commission, hard listening, shared learning, different
situations, similar struggles, forming friendship, creating bonds,
building confidence, memorable launch event.

Lockdown restrictions, continued zooming, additions: civic and
business, stories told, listening hard, messages heard, stronger
together, themes explored, decisions made, actions started, time
constrained, we disband.

Good news.

Work continues, results assured, pledge releasing, lived experience
embedding, ambition strong, legacy: Gateshead Poverty Truth
Commission, 1.

PJ the Poet

**Community Commissioner writing a poem for the end of
Gateshead PTC**

March 2022



Post-script: Where it all began and thanks

This report has set out some of what the PTC has achieved. But so much happened in the run up to our full Commission meetings.

The story began in 2017. A small team of us began to dream about a process which might amplify the often-unheard voices of lived experience of poverty in Gateshead. Poverty Truth Commissions (PTCs) had been around for some time with about a dozen at different stages throughout the UK at that stage. We wanted Gateshead to a part of this movement.

When we began to share the vision of PTCs, we found that the idea was welcomed, and many were willing to partner with us in some way.

The Start-up and Steering Group began and together we visited other Poverty Truth Commissions to learn from their journey and we joined the National Poverty Truth Network. In October 2018 I was joined by Lucy Zwolinska and Trevor Peacock and our facilitation team was formed. Roger Gordon would join us later, after the launch event.

Through relationships forged in our working lives, Lucy, Alison Dare and I began to identify some of the people we felt had stories which needed to be heard. From August 2019 we began to gather to get to know each other and hear each other's stories. We started with a picnic in Saltwell Park to begin to build our community, then each month we gathered at St Chad's Community Centre to share tea and coffee, lunch and copious amounts of cheese.

During these sessions we had a lot of fun and learnt a great deal about each other. We experimented with poetry with the help of Fiona Ritchie-Walker. We worked with Digital Voice to use animated avatars to tell stories anonymously. We used art as a way of sharing the common themes coming from our stories. We used photography to share experiences and challenges. Theresa Easton helped us create a Zine for our launch event which was both great fun and helped us to create a sense of identity.

We held our launch event in March 2020. Community Commissioners invited Gateshead Council department heads; representatives from the DWP; Housing departments; Citizen's Advice Centre; charities supporting people in Gateshead; local MPs and many more. On the day of the launch, over 150 people sat in the packed-out Council Chamber of Gateshead Civic Centre to hear Community Commissioners share their stories.

This space where decisions are usually made about them, without them, was transformed into a place where Commissioners' voices were heard. We were delighted on the day to be joined by Debbie Honeywood who had starred in the Ken Loach film set in Newcastle, called "Sorry we missed you". She welcomed our guests and shared a little about her passion for having the voices of people with lived experience heard.



The event was incredibly emotional. Each story revealed new truths about what it is like to live with issues of poverty in Gateshead. This was not an occasion for guests to comment on what they heard or defend themselves; it was simply an invitation to listen. At the end of the event, in what can only be described as (tearful) stunned silence, our Commissioners invited people to consider partnering with them on the next step of the journey, to learn from each other and work together for change.

Covid-related lockdowns hit a week later, and we lost some of our momentum. We waited a few months to see if Covid might blow over quickly. It didn't. We turned to Zoom. Our Commissioners identified people they wanted to approach to work with them who represented departments and organisations which linked to common themes in their stories and also organisations who could support the work in different ways.

In November 2020 we gathered on Zoom for the first time as a full Commission: both civic and business leaders and our Community Commissioners. We met once a month and spent the first 5-6 months developing relationships. We re-told some of the stories and we did some deep listening, reflecting on what we were hearing, exploring the emotions they brought out in us and the emerging themes.

In August 2021 we managed to gather face to face for a PTC picnic at the Comfrey Project where one of our Community Commissioners volunteers. This was such a good chance to see each other and share food together in the sunshine in the heart of Gateshead.

This report has set out some of what we did next. What was so important in this process was the building of relationships. No longer was there a sense of "Them" and "Us", instead it was just "Us", united with a common goal to try and make small changes which made big difference to people in Gateshead facing hardship.

The voices of Lived Experience were at the heart of our process and this, as you have read throughout this report, left a lasting impact on every single one of our Commissioners: Community and Civic. A new way of working has emerged.

We are grateful to everyone mentioned above, and would particularly like to mention the following:

Our funders: South West Tyneside Methodist Circuit, the Newcastle Upon Tyne Methodist District, The Ballinger Trust, Gateshead Council, The Methodist Church of Great Britain, the National Lottery, Well Newcastle Gateshead

Our Start-up and Steering Group: Michael Walker from Gateshead Council, David Smith from Oasis Community Housing, Alison Dare from The Salvation Army and Annie Bedford from the Baltic.



To **Southwest Tyneside Methodist Circuit** for hosting the PTC.

St Chad's for hosting us so well in the pre-Zoom days.

Trevor Peacock for his capacity to be both capable and kind.

Roger Gorgon for joining us later on and hitting the ground running.

Our **Civic and Business Commissioners** for their leap of faith in joining the PTC without really knowing what they were signing up for! And, of course, for staying and committing to working for change.

And of course, our **Community Commissioners**. There are no words to describe your brilliance.

Deacon Tracey Hume,

April 2022



Appendix 1: Emerging Themes

EMERGING THEMES	BENEFITS / FINANCE	CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES	ADDICTION
<p>KINSHIP CARE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * NO FUNCTIONAL SUPPORT • NO PAYMENTS (FOSTER CARERS COULD GET £500 PER CHILD) EXPECTED TO MANAGE • IMPACT OF ILLNESS ESPECIALLY ON GRANDPARENT CARERS • STIGMA OF SOCIAL SERVICES • AGENCIES NOT WORKING TOGETHER / LOSING PAPERWORK • PHYSICAL PROVISION AT EXPENSE OF EMOTIONAL • KINSHIP CARE CHANGES RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN FAMILIES • KINSHIP CARERS OFTEN ALSO CARING FOR OTHER FAMILY MEMBERS TOO 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EFFECT OF SANCTIONS, ESPECIALLY ON ABILITY TO COPE / MENTAL HEALTH • LITTLE OR NO PERCEIVED FLEXIBILITY IN THE SYSTEM • POOR COMMUNICATION (LETTERS CAN BE CONFUSING / THREATENING) • CLIENTS FEEL THEY ARE HAVING TO CONSTANTLY JUSTIFY THEIR NEEDS / DEFEND THEMSELVES • NOT PEOPLE-CENTRED • SINGLE CLAIMANTS ARE OFTEN ISOLATED • SINGLE CLAIMANTS OFTEN HAVE LITTLE OR NOT FAMILY / EXTENDED FAMILY SUPPORT FOR PRACTICALITIES / SAFETY NET • U.C INCREASE MARCH 2020 HAS MADE A DIFFERENCE (INC MENTAL HEALTH) • DIFFICULT TO MANAGE FINANCES WHEN <u>INA CRISIS</u>, CAN LEAD TO DEBT, EVICTION • BENEFIT ASSESSMENTS CAN BE DE-HUMANISING • PEOPLE FEEL JUDGED WITHIN THE SYSTEM • SINGLE CLAIMANTS OFTEN ON LOWEST INCOME WITH NO SAFETY NET • IMPACT OF ADVANCES ON U.C (ACCURE ON-CHARGES, MORE DEBT) • RELIANCE ON FOODBANKS 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LACK OF SUITABLE ADAPATED HOUSING STOCK • EMPLOYMENT OPTIONS FOR CARERS, NOT BEING ABLE TO WORK = POVERTY • INFLEXIBILITY AROUND EQUIPMENT, NEED CHANGES • FEAR OVER ILLNESS OF PARENTS & IMPACT • FEEL PUNISHED FOR SOMETHING NOT THEIR FAULT • IMPACT OF CARER MENTAL HEALTH • ISOLATION • POWERLESSNESS • WAY TREATED AT AGENCIES • LACK OF CONSISTENCY IN SUPPORT STAFF WORKING WITH THE FAMILY 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ADDICTION POVERTY CAN LEAD TO JAIL OR DEATH • ACCESS TO RECOVERY OPTIONS BETTER IF YOU HAVE MONEY TO PAY • CRISIS SERVICES AT FULL STRETCH • INCREASE IN ADDICTIONS DUE TO LOCKDOWN • AGENCIES OFTEN MAKE ADDICTS FEEL LIKE THEIR ADDICTION DEFINES THEM • BEING MADE TO FEEL THEY HAVE NOTHING TO CONTRIBUTE TO SOCIETY
<p>Is there anything I think is missing?</p>		<p>COMMUNITY RESOURCES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LACK OF COMMUNITY BUILDINGS • CUTS HAVE LED TO LACK OF SUPPORT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE / CHILDREN IN COMMUNITIES INC. CLOSURE OF SURESTART 	<p>HOUSING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LACK OF SUITABLE HOUSING STOCK (ESPECIALLY ADAPTED) • STATE OF SOME OF THE PROPERTIES (EG. MOULD ON WALLS) • WASTEFUL – REMOVAL OF CARPETS AND CURTAINS EVEN IF THEY ARE GOOD, RESIDENTS CANNOT AFFORD TO REPLACE THEM (MAKES DIFFERENCE TO HEAT ETC)



Appendix 2: Golden Threads

GOLDEN THREADS

MANAGING TRANSITIONS

- TRANSITIONAL SUPPORT NEEDED BETWEEN STAGES OF LIFE
- TRANSITIONAL SUPPORT NEEDED BETWEEN CHANGES TO SUPPORT / BENEFITS (EG. CHANGES TO MANAGING FORTNIGHTLY AND MONTHLY) OR EMPLOYMENT TO UNEMPLOYMENT
- TRANSITIONAL SUPPORT BETWEEN ILLNESS AND WELL-NESS
- PEOPLE LEFT TO FEND FOR THEMSELVES, ADAPT WITHOUT HELP

JOINING THE DOTS

- ORGANISATIONS WORKING AS SILOS
- INFORMATION NOT BEING SHARED WHICH ADDS TO STRESS WHEN PEOPLE HAVE TO KEEP REPEATING THEMSELVES
- WHEN INFORMATION IS NOT SHARED PEOPLE AND SITUATIONS FALL THROUGH THE CRACKS
- OVERALL PICTURE OF A CLIENT'S SITUATION IS VITAL
- WHOLISTIC APPROACH OFTEN MISSING
- TRUST AND BOUNDARIES BETWEEN CLIENTS AND ORGANISATIONS
- IF ONE AGENCY KNEW WHAT ANOTHER DID IT COULD CHANGE OUTCOME FOR THE CLIENT.

MENTAL HEALTH

- IMPACT OF POLICIES, DECISIONS, PROCESSES ON MENTAL HEALTH
- HOW THINGS ARE COMMUNICATED IMPACTS ON MENTAL HEALTH
- CONSTANT STRAIN OF POVERTY / MANAGING AFFECTS MENTAL HEALTH
- ABILITY TO COPE WITH SITUATION CAN WORSEN THE LONGER IT GOES ON.
- LOSE HOPE EASILY / FEEL TRAPPED
- SUPPORT SERVICES AT FULL STRETCH, SUPPORT NOT OFFERED

POVERTY PREMIUM

- THOSE LEAST ABLE TO PAY ARE OFTEN PAYING THE MOST (ESPECIALLY FOR FUEL)
- INTERNET POVERTY
- SECONDARY SCHOOL UNIFORMS ARE OFTEN INAFFORDABLE (NO CHEAP OPTIONS)
- CANNOT AFFORD PUBLIC TRANSPORT FOR INTERVIEWS/HELP/COURSES
- PEOPLE HAVING TO RELY ON CHARITABLE ORGANISATIONS FOR BASICS INCLUDING FOOD (ESPECIALLY SCHOOL HOLIDAYS)

COMMUNICATION

- HOW PEOPLE ARE SPOKEN TO; TONE, ATTITUDE, LANGUAGE, FACIAL EXPRESSIONS ETC
- LETTERS NOT ALWAYS CLEAR AND OFTEN ADD TO STRESS.
- ATTENDING MEETINGS CAN BE STRESSFUL, ESPECIALLY WHEN MENTAL HEALTH AFFECTED. CAN FEEL INTIMIDATED.
- LACK OF COMMUNICATION ABOUT WHAT PEOPLE ARE ENTITLED TO
- LACK OF COMMUNICATION BETWEEN AGENCIES AND DEPARTMENTS (CLIENTS HAVE TO REPEAT THEMSELVES, ADDS TO STRESS)
- VOICES NOT BEING HEARD
- EVEN IF DECISIONS ARE TOUGH, HOW? THEY ARE COMMUNICATED MAKES A DIFFERENCE

LACK OF FLEXIBILITY

- LACK OF COMPASSION IN THE SYSTEMS
- POLICIES NEED FLEXIBILITY
- RULES MAKING PEOPLE FEEL LESS HUMAN
- COMMON SENSE OFTEN MISSING
- NOT BEING ABLE TO OFFER PRACTICAL HELP WITH BUS PASSES ETC TO HELP GETTING WORK

