



**#NAMES
NOT
NUMBERS**

The Poverty Truth Commission

Report 2014-16



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An Incubator of Hope

What is the Poverty Truth Commission?

A collection of people, people with diverse life experiences, skills and interests but who share the same concern and accept a common commission: to explore, expose and confront the consequences of poverty in all its forms and to imagine and promote change. The PTC brings together some of Scotland's best known leaders (in politics, policy, public service and the arts) with people with lived experience of poverty - working together as equal commissioners.

But the PTC's approach requires more than just a collection of people. It requires those people to really meet and connect. So when we meet, as far as possible, we leave titles, positions and qualifications at the door and meet first and foremost as human beings, known by our first names. We meet to do two things: listen to one another's stories and share our own.

This sounds simple, but it can often be profound. It allows (and requires) the PTC to be a place of connection between people who may have led quite different lives but who also have a very great deal in common. Because we connect through our stories and learn to listen deeply and respectfully to one another, truths emerge. Since we are confronting difficult issues this is often a painful process, but we also laugh a lot and find inspiration together.

So the PTC also becomes an incubator for hope, and as St Augustine said, Hope has two daughters: Anger at the way things are and Courage to change them.

For the last 18 months, we (now the third round of commissioners) have met together as one group 12 times, formed three working groups and spoken publicly about the issues we have been exploring. This short report details our findings and final recommendations as a whole commission and also those of our groups on Dignity and the Power of Stories, Food Poverty and The Cost of School. We hope that as well as giving you an insight into what we have learned it will also challenge you to consider how to listen deeply and how to respond meaningfully.

For the commissioners the PTC has created new connections and new friendships and it has revealed new truths. It has also energised us and renewed our commitment to work for a more just society in which people living with poverty are central to work to overcome it.

Fergus McNeill
Commissioner 2014-16



A Story Worth Sharing

In 2008 when I was asked to be part of a new Commission being formed in Scotland looking at poverty, I was hesitant. Why were they not asking somebody important? I never realised at that time just how experienced I was.

My life hadn't been easy: I had had four children by the time I was 26, and it was a great struggle. Then in later years the drug and alcohol abuse in my family was an absolute nightmare, the pressure was financially and mentally horrendous. Now I was older and tired, but I still had dreams for my family and community.

So I agreed to be part of the Poverty Truth Commission. In March 2009 in the Glasgow City Chambers in front of an audience of 400 people I and other testifying commissioners told our story.

At the end of that event, 15 of Scotland's senior leaders said that they wanted to work with us and the first Poverty Truth Commission was born.

We met together for 2 years, focusing our work on Kinship Care, Challenging Stereotypes, and Overcoming Violence. We learnt how to work together - and how not to work together. Others began to take notice of us, change began to happen.

In April 2011 we spoke again in the City Chambers in front of 400 more people.

This time standing together as one Commission, talking about our findings and recommendations.

And we knew it couldn't stop there. From 2012-2014 a second round of commissioners met, this time focusing on Welfare Cuts, In-Work Poverty, The Cost of Being Poor, and Stigma. They reported on their findings in June 2014 to 500 people in Woodside Halls, Glasgow, asking everyone to '*Turn up the Volume on Poverty*'.

A third round of the Commission began that day and now they bring their findings, sharing as much how they have learned as what they have learned.

Being part of the PTC I learned a lot about myself and others which made me realise that I did have experience and expertise to share.

A lot has been achieved for the better, but a lot still has to be done. Through the Commission and the successes that have happened it can happen again. And I wish all the best to a fourth round of the Commission who will begin meeting later this year.

Jean Forrester
Commissioner 2009-2011



The Cost of School

Blazers, PE kits, school bags, shoes and winter coats all on top of the basic school uniform - it's easy to understand how parents on low incomes start the school year in debt. And with many children and young people still seeing school clothing as the main indicator of income, it's also easy to see how stigma, embarrassment and bullying follow. *"Wear a cheap pair of shoes to school and you're stuck with that name all the way through."*

We believe the current School Clothing Grant levels are not high enough. We welcome the recent Education (Scotland) Bill which as a result of our campaigning alongside Child Poverty Action Group and One Parent Families Scotland granted a new provision giving Scottish Ministers the power to set a minimum rate at which School Clothing Grants must be paid. We will seek to work with the Scottish Government to ensure that people with experience of poverty are involved in setting and monitoring that level.

Our Recommendations

- **While tackling the attainment gap, the Scottish Government must recognise and tackle the sometimes hidden costs of schooling.**
- **Schools and Local Authorities must look at school uniform policy in terms of affordability.**
- **The dignity of young people should be a focus within training on poverty for teaching staff.**
- **The Scottish Government must ensure people with experience of poverty are involved in setting new minimum levels of the school clothing grant.**



Even a school bag is scrutinised



The School Clothing Grant of £47.50 goes into your account and you start to panic. How am I going to buy a full uniform with that?

I like the policy of a full uniform including blazer and black shoes, what I don't like is the price tag. The £30 blazer has to be paid for before the end of term - there was an option of buying from the internet, but that involved a £5 delivery charge.

With limited money and boys who want to look cool going back to school, buying cheap uniform out of a supermarket wasn't an option. All the children can tell the difference. The black doesn't look black under the school lights, the trousers are too baggy and 'no way am I going to get slagged for wearing shoes that aren't Nike or Adidas.' Shopping around trying to get the best value trousers, shirts and shoes, I saw all the other mothers looking as harassed and frustrated as I was.

I find the supermarket uniforms fade quicker than those bought from a high street store, they fall apart easily and the shirts lose their whiteness quicker. Children spend most of their day wearing school uniform. Just because they receive the school clothing grant, shouldn't mean you have to buy the cheapest clothes and in the long term it ends up costing you more because you have to replace them throughout the year.

There is a lot of pressure to fit in at school and to buy the brands that are popular. I borrowed £200 to buy uniforms and I still had to add to that. It's about not wanting your child to be picked on because of what they are wearing. They are defined by each other by what brand of clothing/shoes they have on. Even a school bag is scrutinised.



Food Poverty

Eating or heating, going hungry or going to a foodbank, buying healthy food or buying enough food to stop the hunger... politicians and journalists are right when they say people in food poverty have choices. But they are unfair choices. *“When the boys are at school I don’t eat through the day...make sure we’re gonna have a decent meal at night...so I’ll be without.”*

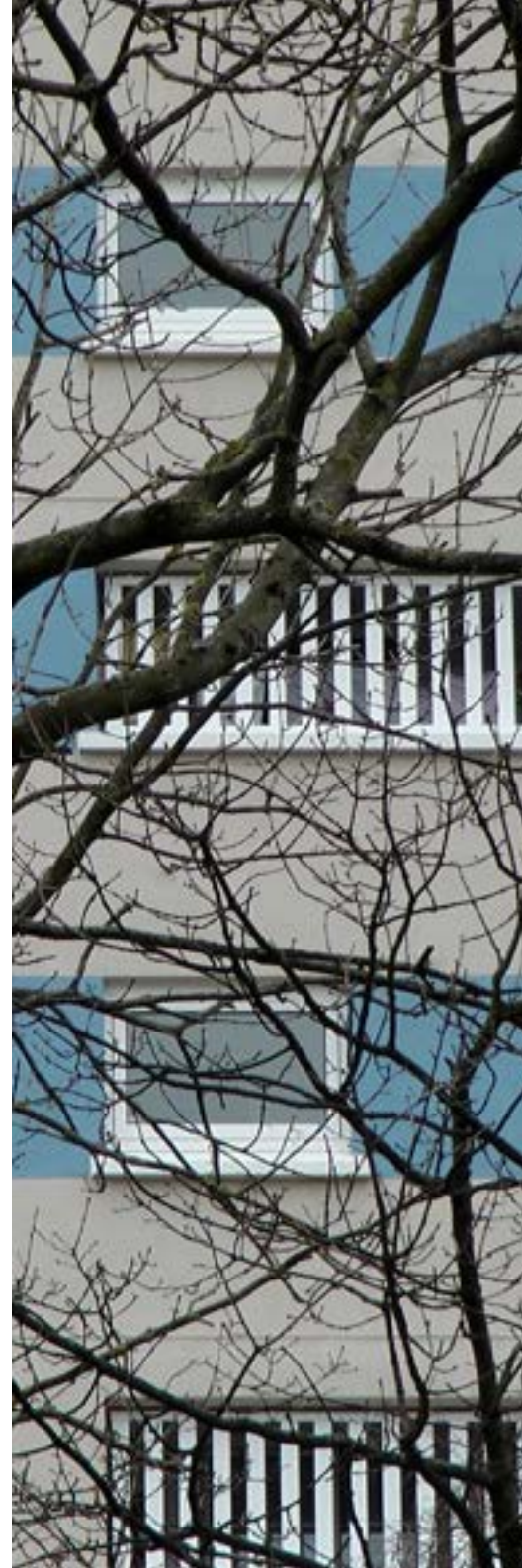
We believe it is a scandal that we need to have food banks and emergency food aid in modern, wealthy Scotland. On one level they are fantastic examples of communities supporting those in need. However, they are only a crisis response and we know that some people do not go to them due to stigma and transport costs. We have listened to many stories of life in food poverty, and we are firm in our belief that we will only find solutions by directly involving those with experience in the decision making.

We have written a full report on our response to food poverty, highlighting the stories and solutions from people living with these unfair choices. You can read it our website here.

We all deserve the human right to food; it will be solved by justice, not charity

Our Recommendations

- **We need empowering and sustainable answers to food poverty, emergency food aid is not the answer.**
- **We need a food justice movement led by people with direct experience of poverty.**
- **We need to recognise the social value of food: to rebuild communities and combat isolation and malnutrition.**



Almost like my 'foodbank'



Avoiding debt is very important to me but it has become increasingly difficult as my finances are stretched. I have had to find flexibility within my weekly budget and learned that the best way to do that is to save on food costs.

I can't afford to buy meat at full price, it would put too much of a dent in my weekly budget, so I buy whatever's in the supermarket's reduced to clear cabinet. I know which supermarkets put their reduced stock out at what time and travel round them all. I've developed an essential skill of being able to seek out the bargains. It can dominate my day somewhat, I go round all the different supermarkets to make sure we have enough. It's very time consuming, and my kids are a bit embarrassed. I always feel like I'm foraging, I think they do too, and I feel guilty that this is time I could have spent having quality interactions with them.

Sometimes I end up with too much that all has to be used that day, but I bought it because it was a bargain. The first one or two days are OK, but then three or four days past the sell by date I have to decide - is this stuff still safe to eat? And so another skill I've learned is knowing what can 'stretch' past these dates, and what would be unsafe. I would never feed the children that, but would sometimes eat it myself.

Sometimes the shops get a better manager in, they're tighter on surplus and the bargains aren't there. I panic then when there isn't enough to make a meal, even if I shop around. I've realised these places are almost like my 'foodbank'. On occasion after coming away empty handed I feel bereft and I panic. This is the only way I can save money for the kids' other needs. Every pound is accounted for.



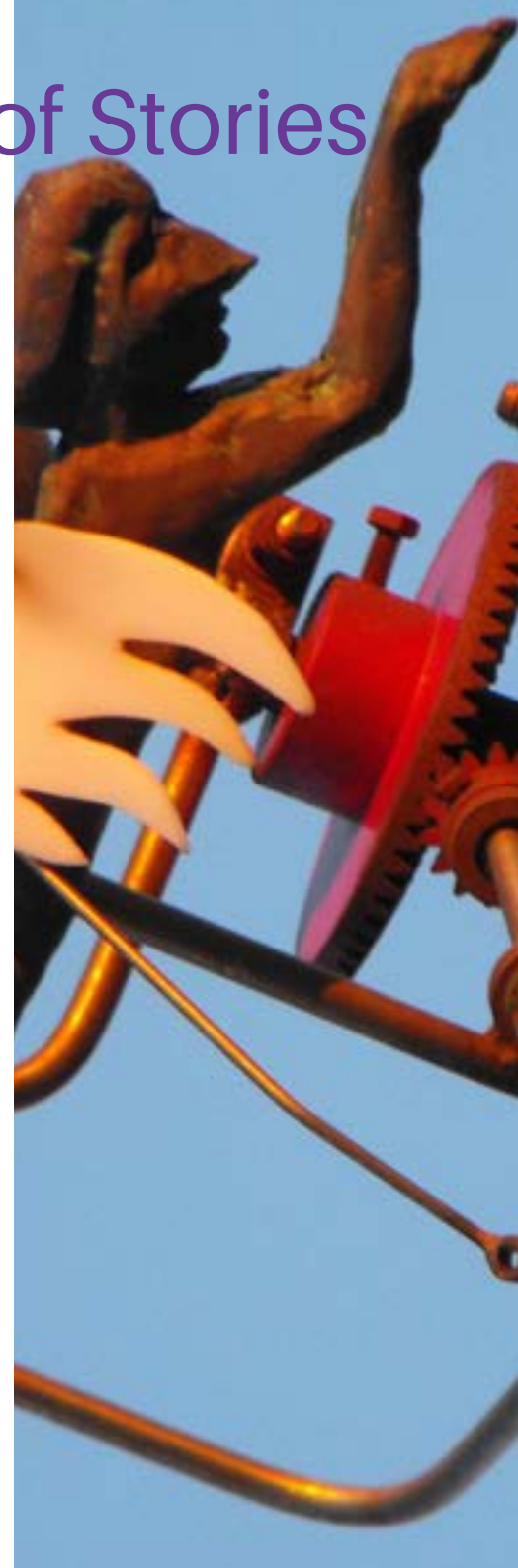
Dignity and the Power of Stories

Experiences at the Job Centre, Borders Agency and other public services are too often exhausting, distressing and completely lacking in dignity. Targets-driven and disbelieving cultures of enforcement and punishment lead to many people feeling they have been stripped of their dignity and left with nothing. *"And then what do you do when you feel that low? You don't eat, you don't shower, you feel the whole world is against you."*

We believe in the need to change cultures, changing from enforcement, punishment and suspicion to assistance, support and belief. We also believe in the power of stories and creativity. We will hold a conversation event bringing together people with experience of these issues with others in positions of authority to explore common themes and differences. Key messages and recommendations will be recorded and disseminated in order to promote respect for human dignity. Find out more about this event on our website.

Our Recommendations

- **It should be standard practice for organisations developing services to listen to and include the experiences of people living with poverty.**
- **Using exit interviews, Public Service Agencies should seek feedback from those using their service - specifically asking questions around dignity. They should publish annual reports showing how this feedback, or other engagement with people in poverty, has informed their services.**
- **We challenge all of us to reflect on our values and approaches, to challenge negative culture and promote dignity wherever we are.**



Dignity, Singing and the DWP



I always get a crumbling feeling when I go into the Job Centre. It feels as if someone is sitting in there waiting for me to come in and make a mistake, waiting to tell me I haven't been trying hard enough. They treat me like a number not a person. I can feel my dignity crumbling away.

Some advisors are good but others don't seem to listen and are at you all the time. Even though I've got my book filled in to show how I've been looking for work, they still look at me and say it's not enough. Do they know how hard I worked to fill that in? I get the crumbling feeling again. I know that if I answer back I will get accused of threatening behaviour and will either get my money cut or be escorted out by the Police.

A couple of years ago I got involved with the Lodging House Mission and ended up in their choir. Scottish Opera ran a project with them and I got a lead role. We performed it at the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden and got a standing ovation at the end of our piece. I'll never forget that. It was a beautiful experience. People dream about that sort of thing!

I used to be a timid wee person with a lot of hurt through homelessness and poverty. The choir gave me a group of people who believed in me, even when I didn't believe in myself - and encouraged me to believe in them. I felt full of dignity working with them. Working together.

What is dignity? It's being allowed to be who you are. It's being a person, not a number.



The Commission of 2014-16

Commissioners have come with a wealth of experience from all walks of life. Among others these include the Scottish Government, refugees, academics, school leavers, politicians, carers, faith communities, community activists, Glasgow City Council, volunteers and the Scottish Prison Service.



Our Recommendations

- **The Commission must raise its voice, helping others to adopt its decision making model.**
- **Involvement of people with direct experience of poverty should be embedded across all local and national government strategies and working groups.**
- **Local and national authorities should evidence in their annual anti-poverty strategies how they have listened to the views of those in poverty and how this has shaped their decisions.**
- **There should be a duty on all decision makers to 'poverty-proof' policies, in line with other protected groups under equalities legislation.**

#NamesnotNumbers



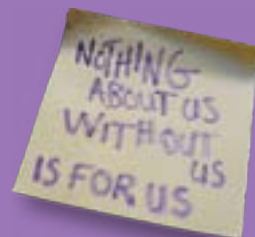
Bearing witness to the harsh reality and violence of poverty, we recognise that many untruths are told in its name. Poverty is not about laziness and bad decisions, nor is it just about money. It is about unfair choices or no choice at all. It is about poorer health, lower life expectancy, the threat of sanctions, choosing between heating or eating and children missing out on school because of increasing costs. It is about the slow stripping away of dignity and humanity.

As a Commission of people living with poverty and others within positions of influence we have met together over the last 18 months. We have learned what it means to listen deeply and the courage it takes to speak out. The stories we have heard and shared are powerful - they have changed us. They challenge perspectives and give an insight into what life for many is currently like in Scotland. They are not anecdotes - they can and do create change. We have also learned what it means to be heard and what it means to be believed.

We have come to recognise the importance of the word 'truth' in our commission's title and to face up to the uncomfortable realities of our unequal society, not make excuses for living with them. Many discussions about poverty and inequality are taking place in Scotland, but unless they involve people experiencing poverty important truths will not be told. It has been important to spend time and get to know each other by first names as we work together. Names; not titles nor labels. There is a story and a person behind each first impression; behind every subconscious judgement, whether it be a politician or someone who has been sanctioned. Creativity and the power of laughter have been central to our meetings. Relationships really matter. Time is crucial. This would not have worked if it had been a one-off consultation.

We have learnt that this way of working is not a quick fix, nor easy, but it works and is the only way to change things. Those in authority must confront and experience the humanity of those whose lives their decisions affect. Those living with poverty must do the same, raise their voice and believe in change.

For nothing about us, without us, is for us.





supported by



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More information and resources about the findings of the Commission can be found on our website

Many thanks are due to all those who contributed to this report. Particular thanks to Ayshea Khan for many of the images, Fergus McNeill, Jean Forrester and each of those who told their story.

Thanks are also due to all those who work hard to make the Poverty Truth Commission the creative movement for change it has become: commissioners past and present, volunteers and staff, Faith in Community Scotland, our funders and to all those who walk alongside us.

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