

Authorship and dissemination

This slide deck is an outline of the learning from Ilfracombe Poverty Truth Commission. It is one of three inter-related slide decks:

- Learning from Ilfracombe PTC 2024-2025
- Ilfracombe PTC Products and Impact 2024-2025
- Ilfracombe PTC Developing a Theory of Change 2024-2025

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'What if people who struggled against poverty were involved in making decisions about tackling poverty?'

Learning from Ilfracombe Poverty Truth Commission 2024-25

poverty truth Ilfracombe



Tree of Life: painting by artist Tom Osborne, Community Commissioner

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Overview and background



What is a Poverty Truth Commission?

Poverty Truth Commissions seek to discover the answer to the question:

‘What if people who struggled against poverty were involved in making decisions about tackling poverty?’

The Commissioners comprise two groups of people. Around half of the Commissioners are **people with a lived experience of the struggle against poverty**. The other half are **civic leaders**.

Collectively they work to **understand the nature of poverty**, consider what are some of the underlying issues that create poverty and explore creative ways of addressing them.

Poverty Truth Network



What is a Poverty Truth Commission?

Poverty Truth **starts with the direct experience of people** who know what it means to struggle against poverty. It is these experiences that initiate the conversation and concerns that set the agenda. Through this wisdom, the important issues are articulated. Crucially, these concerns, experiences and wisdom remain throughout all Poverty Truth work.

Poverty Truth **builds powerful relationships** between those who have experienced the struggle and decision-makers. Difficult conversations only happen when trust is built, and relationships are the soil in which trust grows. So, poverty truth insists that we take time to pay attention to one another. We listen deeply with our hearts and our heads rather than rushing to fix problems.

Poverty Truth **seeks to humanise people and systems.** We meet one another as human beings not merely professionals or service users. As we do this, we will see more clearly the causes of poverty recognising that whilst they are systemic, we can find long-term solutions where we all flourish.

Poverty Truth Network

<https://povertytruthnetwork.org/the-network/the-distinctives-of-our-work/>

Since 2009, Poverty Truth Commissions have been organised across the UK.

Poverty Truth Commissions work to the principle;

'Nothing about us, without us, is for us,'

Ifracombe PTC Background and Approach



Ilfracombe PTC Background

Devon Integrated Care Board (ICB) commissioned **One Northern Devon** to facilitate a Poverty Truth Commission, the first in Devon.

Devon ICB is interested in how this learning can impact on Ilfracombe as well as be transferred across other underserved communities, influencing policy across the region. Partners hope that the PTC will offer a more informed approach to address the needs of those living in poverty.

Ilfracombe Poverty Truth Commission (PTC) ran from **April 2024 to December 2025**. A Steering Group made up of representatives of local organisations helped to establish the PTC. Underspend from the PTC and in-kind support, through staff facilitation time, from Royal Devon University Healthcare NHS Trust (RDUHT), One Ilfracombe and Devon Mental Health Alliance enabled an embed phase post-commission, to work further on developing the ideas and actions from the work.



Ilfracombe PTC Background

The aim was to enable collaboration between **12-15 Community Commissioners and 12-15 Civic Commissioners**. Thirteen Community Commissioners were recruited. Four Community Commissioners left the Commission during the process: two left early on (during phase one) as they decided it was not for them; and two left due to housing relocation away from Ilfracombe.

Establishing the IPTC was supported by a **Steering Group** which was disbanded at the start of full Commission meetings.

The Commission was facilitated by **James Lander** (RDUHT) on behalf of One Northern Devon, supported by **Andrea Beacham** (RDUHT), **Mary Midson** (One Ilfracombe) and **Kirsty Smith** (RDUHT). A process to capture the learning through reflection, interviews, observation and participation was led by **Jennie Hayes** from the University of Exeter.

A specialist counsellor was available for support from **Devon Mental Health Alliance** throughout the PTC process.

Ilfracombe PTC vision

Enabling real change by listening, learning and designing together

Poverty leads to unjust and preventable differences in people's access to opportunities, resources, services, and outcomes.

The Ilfracombe Poverty Truth Commission aims to address these differences by creating a shared understanding and driving initiatives for lasting change, committing to tackling the root causes and effects of poverty.

We serve as a platform for individuals with lived experiences of poverty to work collaboratively with Civic leaders, drawing on experience, to create systemic change.

Our Commission will sow the seeds to enable the conditions for change that help people experiencing poverty to have the physical and emotional resources they need to thrive.

Purpose of the Ilfracombe PTC



To create a set of collaborative leaders who will have a shared understanding of :

- Poverty, including
 - the nature of poverty
 - the drivers of poverty
 - the effects of poverty
- The civic and business system we're working in, including:
 - opportunities
 - constraints
- What we can influence at a variety of levels, such as:
 - process and practices
 - policy
 - culture and mindset
- To create the conditions to take multi-level action to enhance quality of service delivery, reduce inequalities and improve the living conditions and health and wellbeing outcomes of people experiencing poverty in Ilfracombe

One Northern Devon

<https://onenortherndevon.co.uk>

Ilfracombe PTC Commission Timeline

Preparatory phase (Nine months)

9 months

- Identify, recruit & support people who experience poverty to participate (Community Commissioners)
- Build relationships and confidence in sharing experiences in different ways
- Identify civic leaders to participate in next phase
- Leads to **launch event (Sept)** where Community Commissioners present some of their experiences and wisdom

Phase one (exploratory)

12 months

- Build trust
- Develop shared understanding of the impact and root causes of poverty
- Develop shared understanding of the system
- Create opportunities for external organisations/people and the wider community to be involved
- Shared decision making, through inclusive and participatory processes
- **Discover & Define stages**

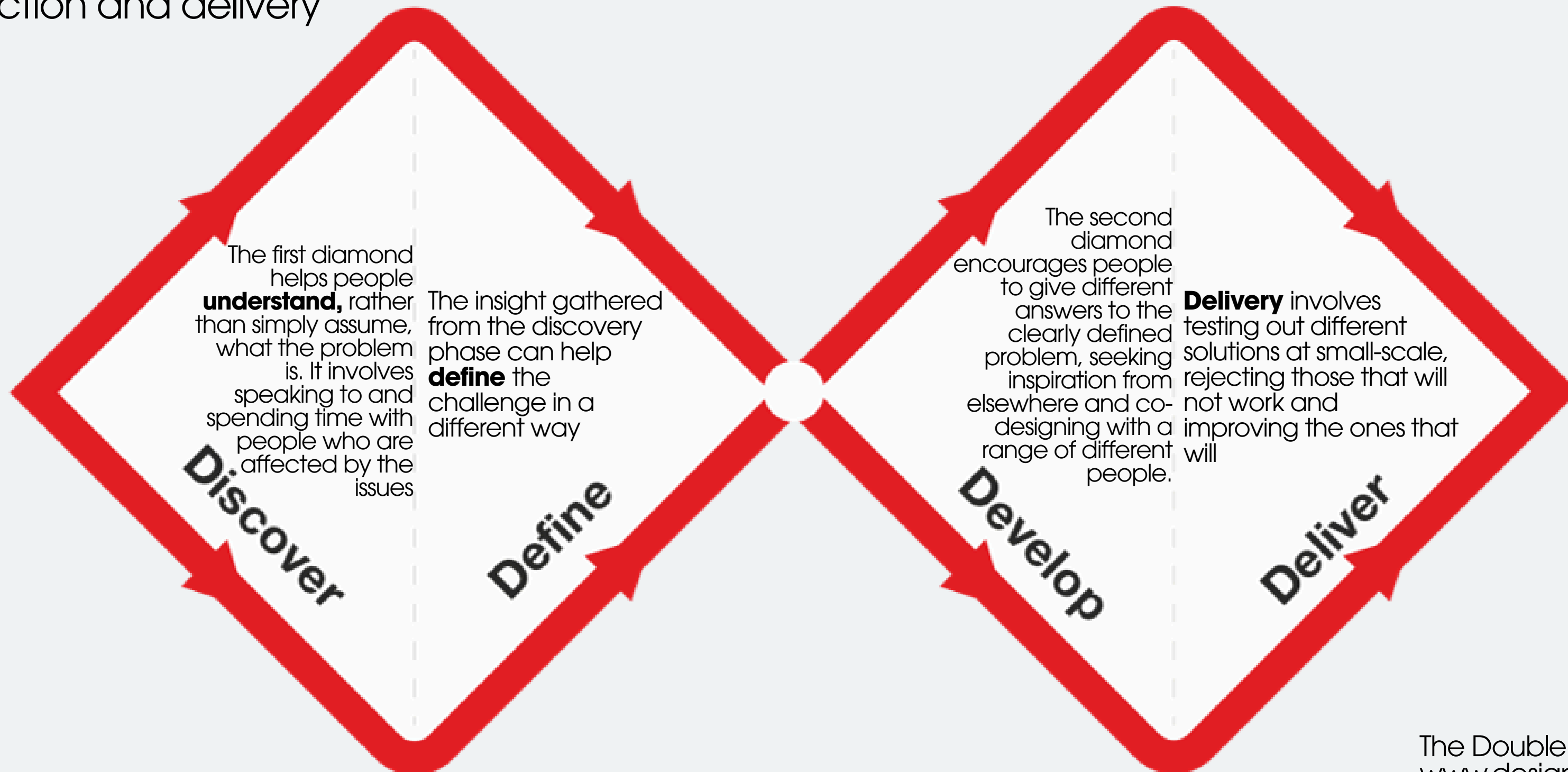
Phase two (action)

- Come together to influence the system:
- Work in partnership to bring about positive change
- Produce recommendations
- Embed learning within PTC partner organisations
- **Develop & Deliver stages**



Systemic design framework approach

Facilitators used a '**double diamond**' design approach, which was referred to throughout the process, as a 'map' to understanding where the PTC was in relation to learning, understanding, action and delivery



PTC Set up and Participants

Civic Commissioners came from the following organisations:

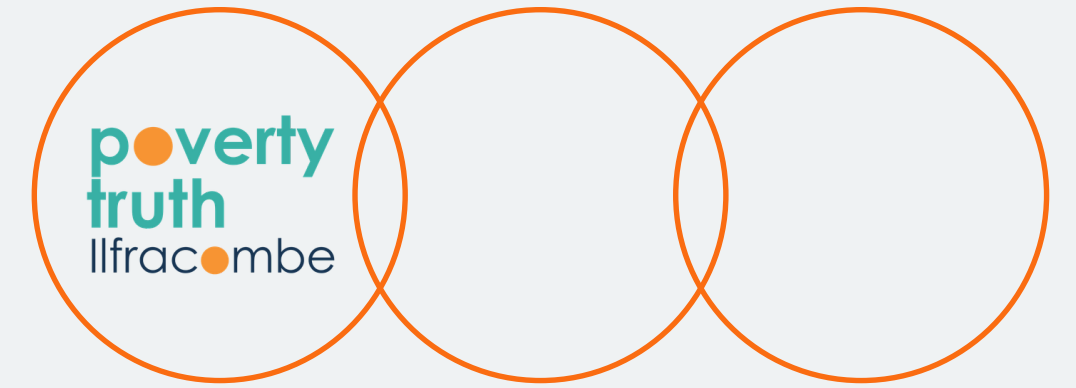
Devon County Council (Communities) • Department of Work and Pensions/Jobcentre • Devon Integrated Care Board • Ilfracombe Junior school • Ilfracombe Academy • North Devon District Council • North Devon Homes • One Ilfracombe/Ilfracombe Town Council • Devon and Cornwall Police • Royal Devon University Healthcare NHS Trust (RDUHT) • Public Health Devon • Devon Partnership NHS Trust •

Community Commissioners were: Casey, Emma, Ian, Karen, Mel, Sally, Shiv, Stuart, Paula, Tom (first names only for anonymity)

Commission guests were invited to sub-groups to work on themes in their areas of expertise: North Devon District Council (housing) • Petroc College of Further and Higher Education • Learn Devon • 361 Energy • DCC Adult Social Care • Encompass • Devon Mental Health Alliance • Ilfracombe Community Land Trust • Salvation Army (Family Space) • North Devon Voluntary Services • One Ilfracombe (Work and Skills) • RDUHT (Trauma informed practitioner) • Devon Home Choice • Combe Coastal GP Practice • Turners Property Centre (estate agents)

Why Ilfracombe?

- Most attempts to change system behaviour start with a pre-determined problem
- Usually this is a problem defined by the statistics for the area rather than a deep understanding of what it is like to live in that place
- Community Commissioners told us they are tired of hearing the same story of their home that focuses only on problems
- Addressing these challenges requires new ways of thinking, working and behaving
- We wanted to find a different way of describing a place that has entrenched challenges but also has a community with a drive for change. We asked Community Commissioners what they'd like to see happen.



Why Ilfracombe?



People with lived experience
of poverty told us...



Why Ilfracombe?

'I think it's like any seaside town. The lack of funding, lack of attention, lack of planning, lack of care. It makes Ilfracombe a more **downtrodden community**, whereas it could be really a very vibrant seaside town...I think this could be a very vibrant, diverse community, and joyful, whereas it's not. **People do love living here**, but it's **without investment and care and respect from bodies that could do something**... When we first moved here, it's like you've said something terrible, if you say you're moving to Ilfracombe. So **the reputation of Ilfracombe isn't good**'.

'I would like the people of Ilfracombe to know they're valued and their lives and their communities are invested in. **To be treated with more respect and understanding**, and to generally just feel more joy for living here and not have the **restrictions and difficulties** that coastal communities have'.

'I'm growing **increasingly frustrated** with how our town is spoken about. The constant sharing of damning statistics constantly **shifts the focus to deprivation and other issues**. Of course, these are important but Ilfracombe is so much more than that. **We should be celebrating all that is good here!**'

'The hotels down on the seafront, all the old buildings that need renovation... Is there not scope to be able to have these bought by government and then turned into social homes for people?... If the government could give the housing associations grants to turn a percentage of the two-bed pre-existing houses into three-beds. Then **we wouldn't need to move anywhere**, we could just operate around Ilfracombe'.

From one-to-one interviews

Why Ilfracombe?

'I think the commission can help this town by getting the **information** out there, getting people the help they need, **giving them the advice** they're looking for, and being more transparent... more forthcoming with more information, 'did you know this is available?' or 'did you know that's available?' ... I want people to get the information they're looking for, **the help they need**. We haven't got a magic wand to make it better, we can't fix everyone's problems, I know that, but it would be nice to give them the information when they need it'.

'The High Street...is starting to become quite **bleak**... just to see the High Street come alive again, that brings **community**. Also, what are we going to do about the people... that have the problem with the **alcohol, possibly drugs?** They congregate under the arches and further up and down the streets, sometimes it's okay and sometimes it isn't'.

'Ilfracombe is becoming a ghost town, **there is no money here, there is no wealth, no prosperity, no job prospects, people are struggling**. There's high unemployment and increasing issue of homelessness as a result of the **cost of living** having spiralled. I would like to see for Ilfracombe to become what it was... it was a thriving community. We had shops, we had banks, we had building societies'.

'I would like to see some **more mental health support for teenagers**. I think there's there's a little bit for adults, but not a lot. I feel like all of our, especially like mental health things, you have to **travel to Barnstaple** for and like loads of people in Ilfracombe just can't, don't drive, can't afford to drive. I remember as a teenager ... I'd have time off school to get counselling, but I'd have to get 2 buses in the middle of a school day... '.

Why Ilfracombe?

'I'd like to rekindle some **civic pride**. I mean, **I do love Ilfracombe**. I've lived here all my life, and I love it, I love Ilfracombe... It's a beautiful place. It was regarded, for donkeys' years, from about 1801 until at least the late '70s, as the jewel in the crown of North Devon. And it really was a jewel... all I've seen is **funds withdrawn from Ilfracombe**, and spent in Barnstaple.... However bad your accommodation is, you're still fortunate to live in a very beautiful part of the country. But **beautiful doesn't fix the holes in the walls**, or the windows falling out'.

'Plenty of school kids... then they've got nothing to do and they're **causing trouble** and getting arrested around outside here... hanging around just causing trouble, nearly every other night there's a police car down there, there was three the other night. I have sympathy for them, they have **nothing to do**, nowhere to go around here, and they're all Ilfracombe residents'.

'We definitely need **more police** on the streets... the Link Centre has gone.... so just **more investment**, I think. And the shops are going, the banks gone, it seems to be... dying on its arse, and it's such a shame because I've been here for 30 years I think and I've seen it **change so much and not for the better**. The hotels that we had are sold off, the **multi-occupancy, they are not kept up nice**... there's nowhere for them to go, there's **no rehabilitation**... if they've got any addictions... So there needs to be lots of things in place to **help those who can't help themselves** no matter what addiction or what reason you are in that predicament. So I think, yes, we just need a bit more investment to kind of bring it back up to what it used to be'.

'**Nobody cares about Ilfracombe**... there is a lot more **people in poverty**... the places we go to speak to you like rubbish... it's important that we need to have **people to listen to us** about stuff going, you know, because they tick the boxes and they don't listen to you'.

Why Ilfracombe?

'So I think the changes I'd like to see would be a **fuller, livelier Ilfracombe**, with the buildings filled with people who live round here. I'd like to see **shops being able to stay open** with the business, I suppose that's linked to other things as well. But around Ilfracombe it's got to be the desolation of it I think, it's happened to a lot of towns round here. But Ilfracombe now in particular has the **reputation** of being like this for quite a while, for a long time, and I think there's no need for it. A beautiful town... I've loved every year I've been here, although there has been struggles obviously here and there... I think the main subject would have to be **housing** round here'.

'Because I am just used to **poverty**, I didn't realise, I just got used to this kind of label'

'Stop passing planning for turning shabby old hotels into cheap accommodation. **Stop the planning** for that. Stop it... We don't need any more... we've got loads of crap accommodation. It's coming out of our ears... Because it's a **downward spiral**. You provide **crappy accommodation**; people aren't interested in looking after it. They start getting depressed. They start turning to substances. And then you go down the wormhole. And it has **a lot to do with where you live**, how you feel about where you live'.

'I feel like since the **Link Centre has closed**, I feel like we should have worked on putting something similar in place because I feel like that is causing a lot of **mental poverty** within the area... We have teenagers in the High Street starting fights with each other now... if they have **somewhere safe** where they can go, they're not going to be in the streets causing issues...If we tackle certain areas of poverty, I feel like it's going to be like a domino effect. Other areas of poverty will then take lead from that and in theory should help everyone'.

Why Ilfracombe?

In summary, people said Ilfracombe needed:

Affordable, quality **housing** where tenants can feel secure & safe & families can thrive

Easily accessible **information** & signposting about support and services

More local essential **health & care services** to avoid costly and time-consuming travel

Support for those struggling with **physical & mental health conditions including addiction**

Support & provision for **young people**

Better **understanding, respect & compassion** for their situation from services

Regular **employment** & accessible **further education** opportunities

Investment in the **built environment** so the High Street & wider town can feel vibrant & cared for

A focus on **strengths and community** to foster a sense of local pride

Why Ilfracombe?



Civic leaders told us...



Why Ilfracombe?

'We have to be honest about our state of **deprivation**... how desperate some people's lives are. It is a hard battle because they assume, 'Oh well, you're near Woolacombe, you're near Croyde, it must be nice to live there' And it is nice to live here if you can access those things. But there's that challenge, of **recognising and having the right response to deprivation**. But then there's also the challenge of not getting known as a crap town and just a dustbin town'.

'There's a lot of **ignorance** out there, I think, really around poverty. And also I've seen, I would say, probably a rise in **addiction**. and a huge massive rise in **mental health** issues'.

'I think we need **more things in Ilfracombe** so that people haven't got to go online. They haven't got to get on a bus and go to Barnstaple. ... So they they **closed down the job centre** in the town. They've **closed down the Link Centre** for people with mental health. It needs to be in Ilfracombe, because not everybody can get to Barnstaple'.

'Over the period of austerity, the Council just taken the decision to **shut loads of things** in various communities and Ilfracombe has not been immune from that... There are lots of agencies trying to do good things in Ilfracombe and I guess we all compete with each other and don't always make the most of each other's contribution... on a human level, **we're all really busy** and on a personal level, prioritising.. particular meetings in Ilfracombe is a challenge... the **geography**... I live in the middle of Devon and it's an hour and a half to get there and it's that makes it feel even more isolated from lots of services' decision making'.

Why Ilfracombe?

'When you look at it in terms of the levels of deprivation and the **entrenched individuals** that we're working with in our communities, it's really challenging to show the **level of deprivation** and the number that we've got within such a small town. And also what's quite evident is the **access to services**, which seems which seems to be only 11 miles down the road in Barnstaple, primarily which is where, which has **sucked a lot of the daytime support** for those individuals'.

'Ilfracombe has the highest inequality gaps in the whole of Devon... Devon County Council now recognise it as its **most vulnerable coastal and market town**. That's across a range of measures'.

'Like there are, there are organisations out there supporting people who are living in poverty, so it'd be nice, I think, to **see places supported more**. So Belle's Place, for instance, do an incredible amount of work with people who are homeless on the edge of homelessness, addiction issues. But they **they struggle financially**'.

'I think there's (lack of) **access to services**. I think there's issues that I hadn't really appreciated. Around community and what actually community means, because I think a lot of a lot of the work we do around inequalities is about developing **community infrastructure** and a lot of the conversations that I've been involved in so far is that it doesn't feel necessarily like there is that community there...a place to plug into in the way that I was expecting. So I think that's that's a challenge. I think the issues around **seasonality** obviously and we know from all the work that we do that that kind of **coastal poverty** is is much more of an impact than poverty elsewhere'.

Why Ilfracombe?

'All the late 70s, when there was a **huge relocation of social housing** down here. And as I understand it, it changed the community overnight. You know, and I'm not saying that that's a bad thing, because those people had an opportunity of having a different life here, which I think was and was done for all the right reasons. But it did **change the community** and it probably potentially put it in a position where where families that were already in a cycle of poverty... it was easy to become more ingrained within that within within Ilfracombe'.

'We've got a history of a lot of **private rental accommodation, low social housing** and the private rental accommodation is of a poor quality.... above shops, etcetera or big old hotels turned into flats and families living in very poor, small flats'.

'Currently we have other district councils using Ilfracombe accommodation as **temporary accommodation** for people with very high levels of health and physical needs. And they have quite challenging lives, but **we haven't got any services to support those people**, so it places undue pressure on the very few services we've got and it also means those people are not being cared and supported for'.

'I've seen the **impact of trauma or adverse childhood experiences** being passed down from generation to generation... there's an opportunity to be really creative across the town and how we can develop a **shared understanding of some of the traumatic experiences** that many people have faced and how we can, in a very specific way, try to address that altogether'.

Why Ilfracombe?

In summary, civic leaders said Ilfracombe:

Has high levels of **deprivation** and the highest **inequality** gaps in Devon

Has a history of **poor quality accommodation** exacerbated by other district councils using Ilfracombe for temporary accommodation for people with high levels of health and physical needs, putting pressure on services

Has seen a **rise in health needs**, including mental health and addiction, with generations impacted by trauma or adverse childhood experiences

Has seen **closure of local services** meaning individuals don't get the local support they need

Suffers from both the impact of **austerity** and its **remote coastal location** including seasonality

Suffers from a **lack of community infrastructure**

Has a **strong VCSE sector** who require **more support** to do their work with those most in need

Research and evaluation approach



Research and evaluation approach

Research to capture the learning from the Ilfracombe PTC was funded by One Northern Devon, Devon County Council and Exeter University ESRC Accelerator Award Impact Fund.

The research is a partnership between Devon Community Foundation, PenARC and the School for Public Health Research.

A reflective group of health and community partners led by Devon Community Foundation met to reflect on the learning and its relevance to regional policy and other change initiatives.

Learning was shared as the Commission developed with regular reflection sessions in the Commission gatherings, discussion of learning in planning sessions and facilitator reflection sessions after each gathering.



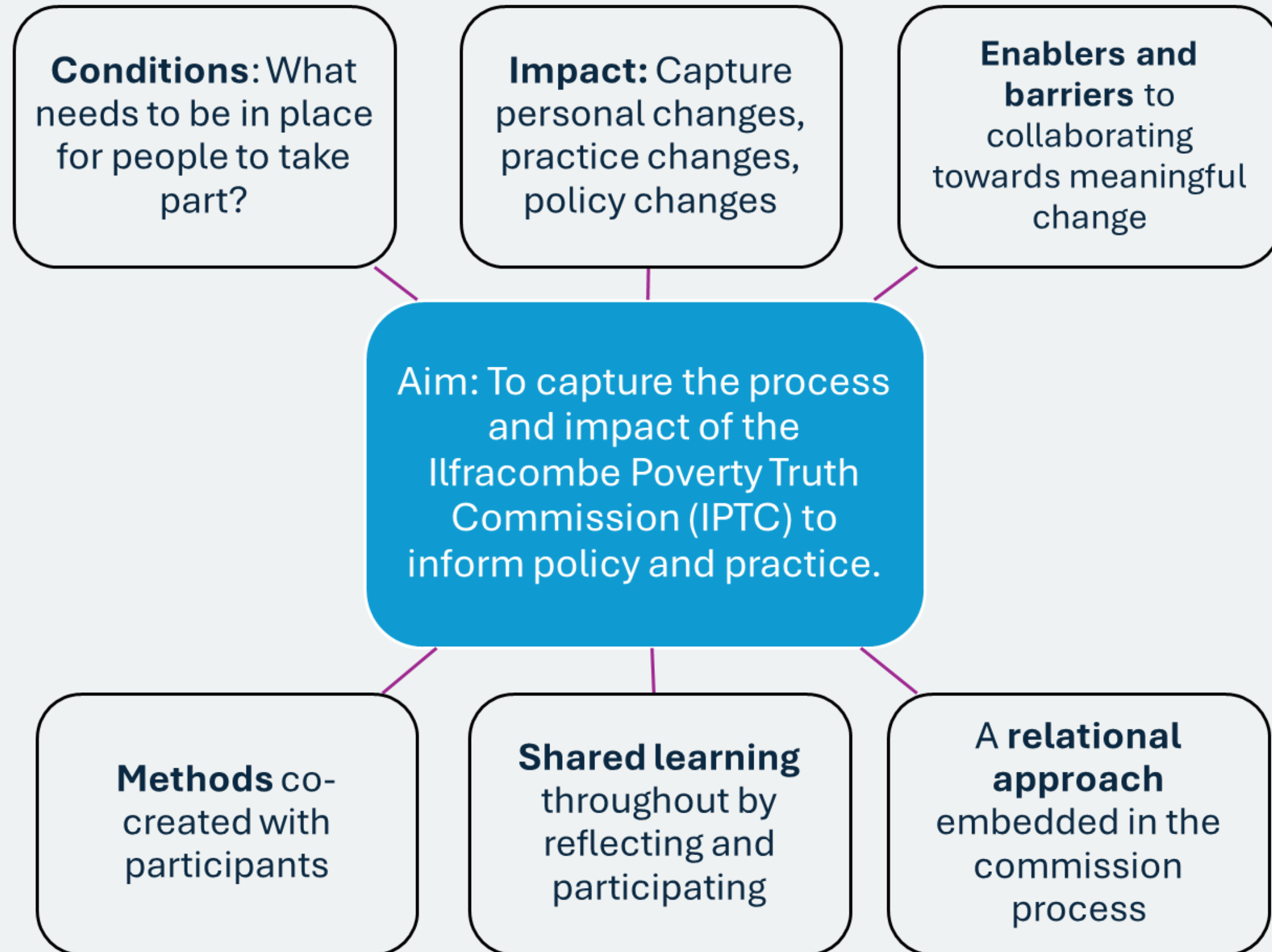
Research and evaluation approach

The approach to capturing the learning was **relational and participatory**, with a researcher in residence taking part in Commission gatherings, planning and reflections

Methods for the research were co-devised by the Researcher in Residence with Community Commissioners and facilitators

‘People have the right to participate, to analyse and create their own knowledge’

Research and evaluation approach



Research and evaluation methods

One to one interviews with all Commissioners at beginning and end of Commission

- Tracking individual journeys
- Informing theory of change

Regular facilitated reflection sessions in Commission gatherings

- Notes shared and fed back to next Commission session
- Informing theory of change

Regular post-gathering reflection sessions with facilitators

- Insight into facilitation process
- Documentation of challenges & achievements in real time

Observation of Commission gatherings with shared field notes

- Real time log of what happens in sessions
- Log of attendance and activity for each session

Participation in planning and review of Commission documents

- Insight into planning and work behind the scenes of Commission

Photovoice

- Access to photos and captions facilitated by Commission
- Understanding of Community Commissioners experience

Ripple mapping and survey form to capture impact

- Ripple mapping done in two gatherings
- Online form for Civic Commissioners and Guests

'Collaboration is the bridge between innovation and impact. When universities join forces with health, care, and community partners, we unlock a unique synergy where knowledge meets lived experience. Together, we amplify resources, uncover creative solutions, and address challenges with a shared vision. The value of these partnerships isn't just in what we accomplish but in how we do it: inclusively, equitably, and sustainably'.

James Lander

Programme Support Officer RDUHT, PTC facilitator & Project Lead

What we learned
about...
building relationships



What we learned... about building relationships

Developing and maintaining relationships throughout the process was key to its success. This included relationships between Community and Civic Commissioners, but also between Civic Commissioner and Community Commissioner groups, and with Facilitators.

Participants started off feeling nervous about the different groups of people they would meet, and had some preconceptions about how they would be and act. Quickly, **people saw each other as 'human'** and were able to create bonds that helped the process through challenging times, **supported by the facilitation process.**

Deeper relationships can change perspectives, create different understandings and challenge usual thinking.

What we learned... about building relationships

Maintaining and developing trust was important. But **trust is fragile** and could fluctuate depending on the task or the perception of how much things were moving forward, or what people were (and weren't) doing behind the scenes.

Although the Commission never explicitly talked about **'power'**, it became clear that, for change to happen, the Civic Commissioners were the ones who had the responsibility to make change happen, and although everyone worked together, **people's roles were different** because of this.

During the poverty truth commission process, the potential for change happened when the voices of people with lived experience of poverty were listened to and, through deepening relationships, **those narratives were placed at the centre of reimagining what services might look like.**

'A sense of being listened to was very important and I feel that we have been listened to. I think that our Civic Commissioners have had the willingness to sit down and take criticism...'

'I feel that I can voice my opinion and I'm heard, which is something that... takes me back to school, I was never heard, I was just invisible... but within the group I've learned to listen and actively listen, not just listen and doing a scroll or thinking about the shopping list. And that's something that I'm trying to carry on outside of the commission as well'.

What did people with lived experience of poverty (Community Commissioners) say about being listened to by civic leaders?...

'Being involved in this Commission, I feel I have a voice for the first time, its energising me to help create change'

'I feel unheard at the best of times, but looking back... I realise that actually no, everyone was listening, even if I didn't understand what was being said, there were multiple people ready to explain whatever was said afterwards'

'You never see that kind of personal detail of understanding...its kind of revolutionary...its amazing'

'I knew some of this stuff but it feels different when I hear you tell me that story human to human'

'It weighs heavily on you emotionally' .. You can't unhear what you've heard'

What did civic leaders (Civic Commissioners) say about listening to the voices of those with lived experience of poverty?...

'They are the kind of stories you don't forget'

'It keeps you awake to how it feels to be on the service recipient side of the service that you're designing and responsible for'

'When you're sat in front of people who are telling you their stories and being completely open and honest about how shocking it is, you can't help but be affected'

Reflection (Gatherings 1 - 4)

Reflection sessions in the first few gatherings explored how participants felt about how their relationships were developing. From the start, participants felt connected, and described how there was already mutual respect and a non-judgemental approach in the room.

Over just a few sessions, people felt there was better understanding growing, and more of a sense that people were working together - a sense of shared purpose.

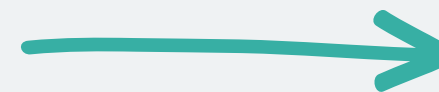
Connected, human to human, seeing each other as people

Relationships forming quickly but only scratching the surface

Mutual respect

No preconceived ideas or opinions, a privilege to listen

Non-judgemental



Acting as a team, where everyone has a role

Better understanding as people's stories unfold

Feeling more safe and comfortable

Building a common purpose

Working towards one end goal, together

Gathering 3

How are we working together?

(from Session 3 reflection, Jan 2025)

- 'I feel like we're starting to get to a stage where its not two different kinds of commissioners: it's a **group of people working towards an end goal**. It's 'us' rather than 'them' and 'us'.
- We've got **good relationships** and quite good understanding (we could spend more time on this)
- We're building more **respect** for each other, we're listening and appreciate each other's journeys
- There's more **joined up thinking**
- I feel **safe and comfortable** with everybody (more than when we started)
- We're getting to know each other as people, **developing real friendships**
- Watching the launch video, so much more has unfolded about people's experiences since then, **we understand better**
- We are starting to **act as a team**, where everyone has a role to play, and **building a common purpose**
- We need to **learn how to pass the ball**
- We are **bonding as a group** and able to be **more open**. The topic is not as daunting.
- We have a **better understanding** of our conjoined purpose
- A more **relaxed atmosphere**

Hope

Many Commissioners (Community and Civic) spoke of **apathy and a lack of hope in the town**. People have been let down for many years, for generations, and local Civic Commissioners spoke of initiatives falling on stony ground (lack of attendance at support events, for example) and ideas and funding coming from outside the town which results in little or no change.

The group of Community Commissioners involved in the PTC all **talked about feeling hopeful throughout the process**. Maintaining hope was really important: it kept people coming back, and enabled them to get through the tougher times.

The ongoing commitment by Commissioners, Community and Civic, to turn up month after month, helped to nurture **hope and belief that change is possible**. Towards the end of the Commission, one Community Commissioner said that 'hope' had now turned into 'belief'. Conversely, one felt that expectations had not been met.

*'I don't feel **hope** anymore as such because I feel **confident** there will be change... somewhere in the process that started changing, I became confident ... that we would come up with something and put something in place... It's not just a big hope that things can be different, but you can see a **pathway**'.*

Community Commissioner

*'Hope. **Hope that we can move forward**. Hope that we can make a difference, hope that we can have a **positive impact** on our community. Hope that we can make Ilfracombe a better place to live and visit. Hope that we can **change hearts and minds** of not just our civic leaders but of our wider community. Hope that we can **come together**'.*

Community Commissioner

Trust

Building trust between commissioners was important for working together. **Trusting relationships** were built but trust between different groups of people, with different lifestyles and responsibilities, can be hard to maintain over a long period time.

The Commission process is **deliberately slow** - this helped to create fruitful relationships and to build trust. But in a system that is hard to change, **tangible change takes time and trust can be eroded.**

A lack of clear actions or change on the ground can break down trust. Trust can be endangered when Commissioners fall back on non-Commission behaviours (for example, appear to be withholding information; or appear to be doing other work); if they don't do what they say they will do; or if individuals are still treated badly by services.

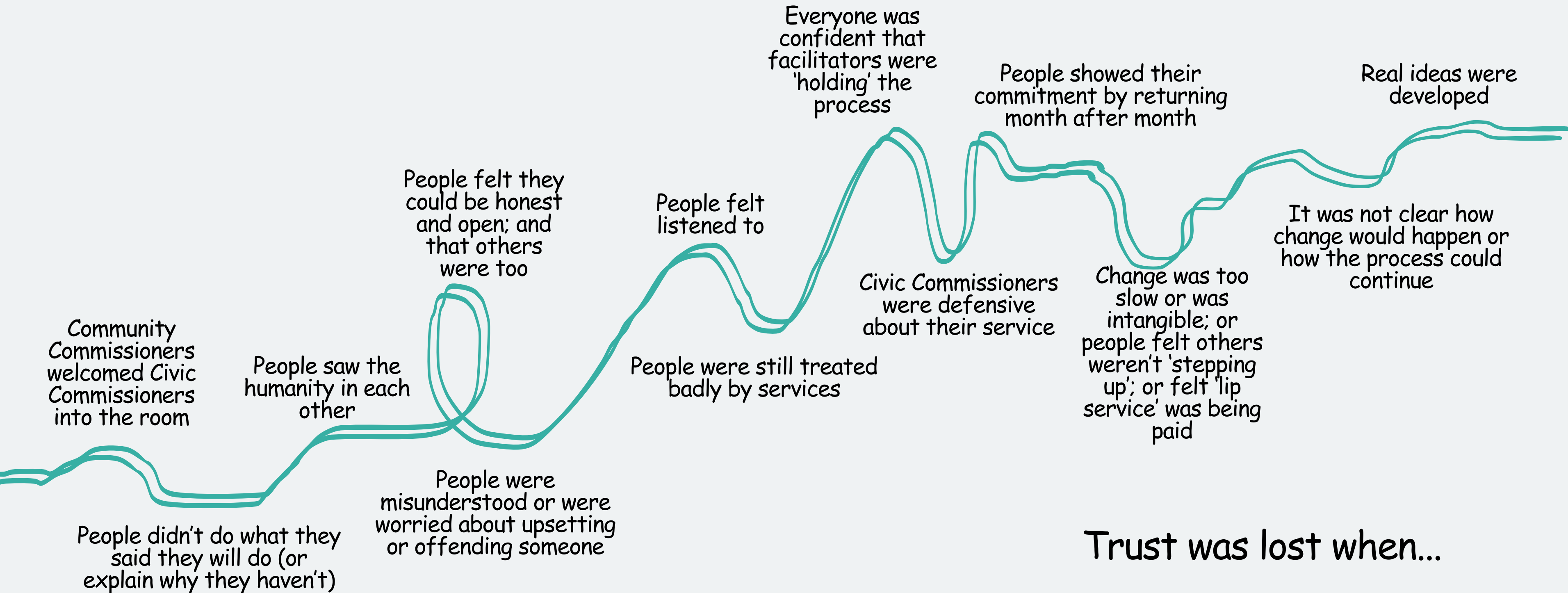
We created a **'timeline of trust'....**



*'When you bring together organisations with people that might be not trusting of that organisation, you have to build trust and that relationship first'.
Civic Commissioner*

Timeline of trust

Trust was maintained or increased when....



Reflection (Gathering 20)

A reflection session facilitated by Community Commissioner, Emma, in the last full Commission gathering, asked people '**how has the Commission changed you?**'

Participants felt that they had greater understanding of poverty, of services and of each other. And that they had appreciated connecting together in a human way. As this was nearing the end of the Commission, participants also expressed a strong desire to find ways to carry on work into the future.

We've come to appreciate and understand each other better.

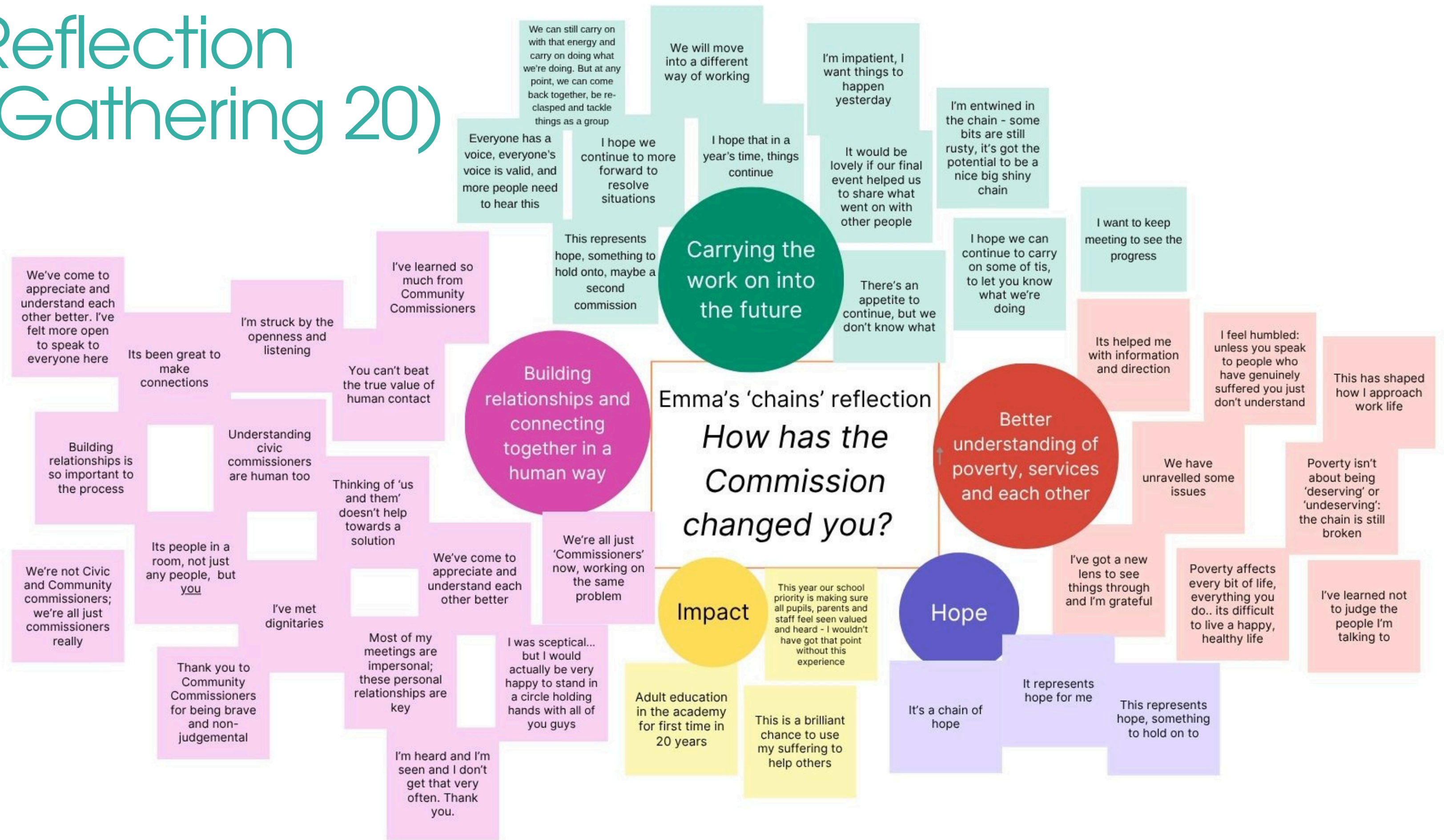
Everyone has a voice, everyone's voice is valid, and more people need to hear this.

We're all Commissioners now, working on the same problem.

I've learned so much from Community Commissioners'

Building relationships is so important to the process.

Reflection (Gathering 20)



Challenges with relationship building

There was a tension between taking time to build relationships and 'cracking down' on agreeing areas of work and action. In [Gathering 3 \(January 2025\)](#), this tension was voiced in a reflection session.

'There are people I still haven't met or spoken to yet... I think there is still a little bit more work to do in terms of developing relationships'.

Civic Commissioner

'Part of me wants to spend more time... to hear experiences and impact. Part of me says that we need identify solutions and move forward. There are competing tensions'.

Civic Commissioner

'We soon need to start cracking down on the causes of poverty to give us some objectives to work towards'.

Community Commissioner

Challenges with relationship building

Many Commissioners were **surprised with the slow pace** and had to hold faith with the process, even when they found it uncomfortable. This was particularly the case for those used to working to deadlines. But everyone saw the value of the relationship building process, even when they didn't feel in tune with it themselves.

'I was expecting it to be more fierce and fast!... I think because the pace, the slowness of it has given more depth, I've come to see going through that it is the depth that's needed rather than the faster, more shallow solutions'.

Community Commissioner

'I can't say I particularly enjoyed that but I can see the need to do so... I totally accept that it's something you've got to go through'.

Civic Commissioner

'Flipping the tables' with relationship building

Importantly, while the narratives of people with lived experience were at the core of discussion throughout, there was a regular call for hearing about **Civic Commissioners experience of struggle**. In **Gathering 7 (April 2025)**, Civic Commissioners were challenged to 'flip the tables' and share personal experiences.

Crossing those boundaries challenges usual working protocols for most Civic Commissioners. One Civic Commissioner talked about feeling uncomfortable (at least in part because of feeling their story paled in comparison to Community Commissioners stories) but decided **'not to play it safe'** and instead **stepped beyond a professional 'boundaried' role**. Another said this was only possible because of the time spent building relationships.

*'I'd like to hear Civic Commissioners' personal experiences of struggle. I have bonded more with those I have some personal understanding of'.
Community Commissioner*

'Flipping the tables' with relationship building

This session become a 'transition' or 'threshold' session, both in terms of how **relationships deepened** and boundaries were crossed, as well as marking the beginning of moving from **'problems to possibilities'**.

The process of 'flipping the tables' helped to **cement relationships** and shifted perceptions.

'I was shocked and overwhelmed to the extent that ... I didn't handle it as well as I wanted to... it wasn't in my thought process or protocol... I couldn't process quickly enough to keep up with the difference'.

Civic Commissioner on being offered a hug by a Community Commissioner

Vulnerability
Others' honesty
Unprepared
Commonality
Respectful
Cared for
Challenging
Giving back

Words used by Civic Commissioners when describing the experience of sharing their personal experiences

Why is relationship building important?

Civic Commissioners feel **increased responsibility and accountability** because they have built relationships with the people they serve, but are most under-served

Civic Commissioners understand the situation with their **hearts, not just their heads.**

Civic Commissioners better understand the **lived experiences of poverty** and of **people's experience of the system.** This includes the understanding of how easily things can spiral into a worse situation; and how services can make a situation worse.

*'The privilege to be invited... to spend time with people, to understand their experiences, their journey, listen to them and share your own... changes the way, when you're in decision-making fora or a boardroom or in any other partnerships or collaborations, you know you take that with you. It's not the same as when you read a report... **you can't unhear what you've heard, and you can't unfeel what you feel...** and therefore you, with confidence, can **challenge some of the assumptions** that are being made, some of the reports that you read, because you can say it just doesn't mirror or it omits very important information that I've seen, heard and felt'.
Civic Commissioner, in interview*

Why is relationship building important?

Community Commissioners feel **heard, respected and their experiences are validated** through the relationships built. This enables them to build confidence and maintain hope that change can happen.

The shared understanding and possibilities for action come from understanding the experiences of Community Commissioners, rather than working with a pre-set agenda or request to respond to a particular problem. Relationships and working partnerships are therefore created differently because **the group is defining the problem based on the lived experience of those in the room.**

'I felt heard, finally. It was almost like a eureka moment, finally someone has listened to me'

Community Commissioner

'It has far exceeded my expectations on a personal level in terms of the learning, the shared understanding and the relationships that have been formed locally... you can definitely see that journey we've been on in the maturity of the conversation, how we tackle things'.

Civic Commissioner

How our relationships have developed

We show how relationships were key to the success of the Commission, and the different aspects of relationship-building, in our **Theory of Change**.

by **hearing** our Community Commissioners, we understood better how poverty affects every aspect of someone's life; and learned about the social barriers to getting out of poverty (*everyone is heard*)

by **sharing our experiences** of services and poverty, we created a new kind of knowledge not possible otherwise (*a collective understanding*)

by **respecting** everyone as equal, we created a space where human relationships deepen and we felt an increased responsibility to make change happen (*a transformative space*)

by **listening deeply** to the voices of people with lived experience of poverty, **we put those narratives at the centre** of reimagining what services might look like (*a different set of relationships*)

by **working together**, we felt empowered to speak up, because more people are talking about poverty (*a change in the conversation*)

by **putting aside our preconception of each other** we grew a new shared set of values and principles (ways of working together) based on the relationships we formed (*a set of values and principles*)



What we learned about facilitating a PTC



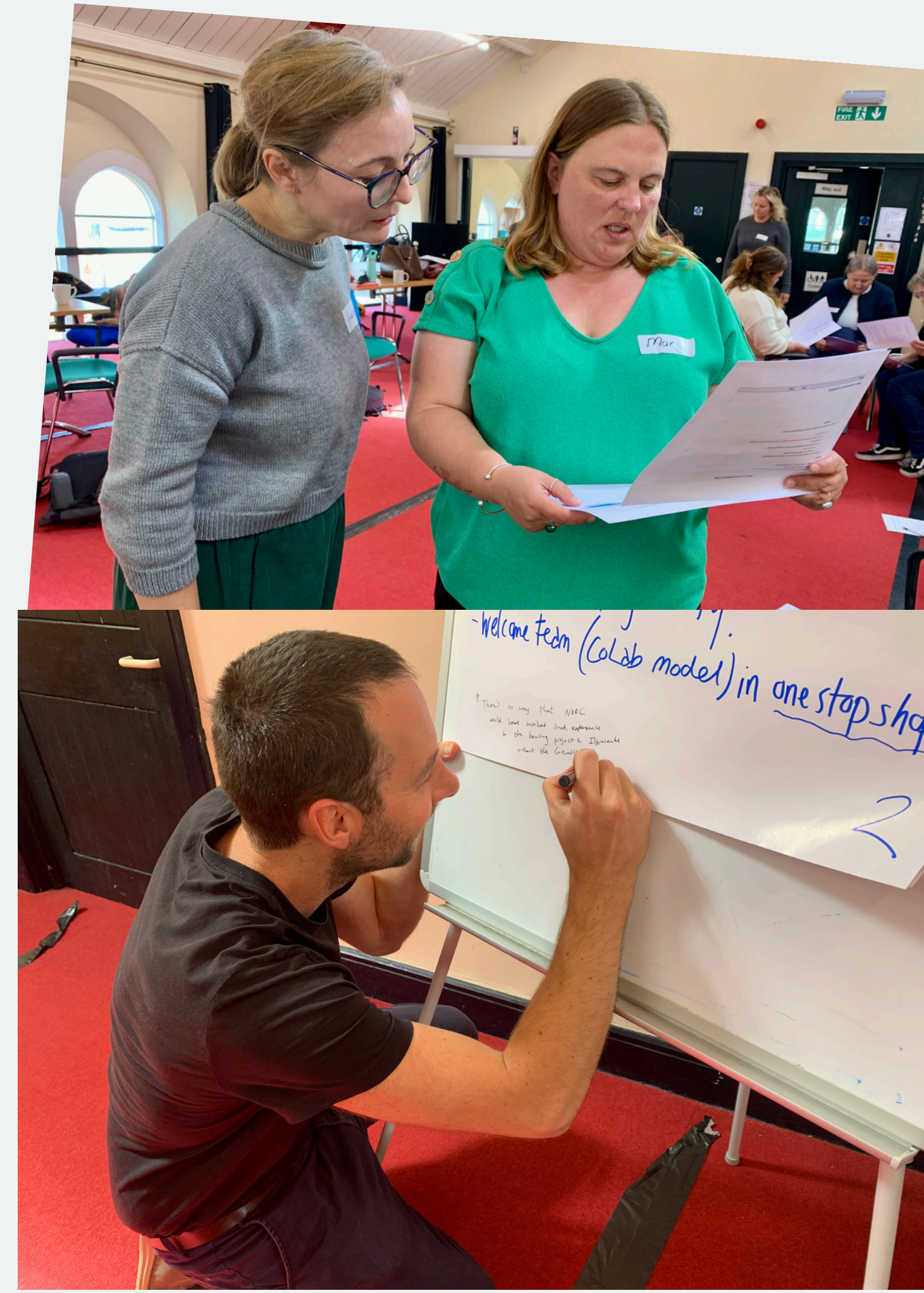
Facilitating a Poverty Truth Commission

Facilitating a PTC is a highly skilled process.

The facilitation team demonstrated that, for an effective PTC, there are a number of skills and attributes required.

These include:

- being flexible, responsive and reflective
- being inclusive in behaviours, activities and practical arrangements (e.g. venue, scheduling, food)
- balancing the need to grow relationships and trust with supporting the delivery of meaningful outcomes
- embedding support for community commissioners both inside and outside commission gatherings
- taking a creative approach and utilising a range of conversational and creative practices to support dialogue



Facilitating a Poverty Truth Commission

Skills and attributes required include:

- evolving different roles so responsibility isn't held by one person alone. In the Ilfracombe team, having a facilitator in sessions who could focus primarily on facilitation, and another on supporting Commissioners, was essential. Different facilitators took responsibility for recruiting Community and Civic Commissioners
- developing a clear and transparent process for progress, without being too 'technical', so participants feel 'held'
- ability to manage conflict, confusion, trauma, discomfort or distress
- developing a process with 'integrity' so that Commissioners trust the process even when there is uncertainty about where its going and especially when the process becomes challenging (e.g. choosing priorities) or feels too slow or fast

*'I know you are doing a lot more (behind the scenes) than we will see'.
Community Commissioner*



Facilitating a Poverty Truth Commission

Whilst facilitating the process is rewarding, especially as relationships develop and ideas start to form, it is also time-consuming and can be exhausting.

Facilitators all understood the value of involving people with lived experience of poverty and felt, by the end of the 18 month process, that the central place of those voices had shaped a programme of work that had meaning and value.

'It's intense. But it's also really rewarding. You know, it's been a really rewarding couple of years'.

Quotes from facilitators focus group discussion



'This process gives you that validation that we can't have all developed this together to come up with something that's wrong. You know, it's got to be righter than most things that we do'.

Facilitating a Poverty Truth Commission

'I was really impressed with how well the facilitation had occurred around that equal level of power.. no one was seen as being more important than anyone else.. that was really exciting'.

Civic Commissioner



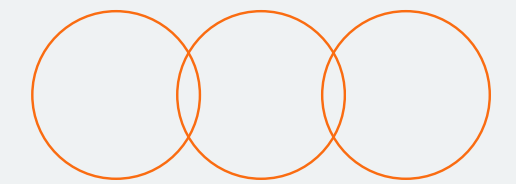
'It was quite a surprise how slow it was, and it was almost like a directionless slow with just trusting (the facilitator) that he understood the direction. He obviously, each time, showed us the overall plan, the 'onsite egg timer'... Just trusting the facilitators knew, and I think they were having to trust the process as well, that something was going to come out of it'.

Community Commissioner

'I thought it (facilitation) was absolutely fantastic, really sensitive, really generous... to all parties, but particularly to Community Commissioners and it felt like the relationship and the bond that the facilitators have had with the Community Commissioners... really came out... it's a really good reminder that doing stuff like this authentically is really difficult... It's such a gift and such a such an investment to do it well and I think I think collectively it was done really well'.

Civic Commissioner

What are some of the facilitation challenges?



Time

Whilst the time invested is great, the length of time it takes to create meaningful change is greater. This is a tension for facilitators, who both want to honour the process (slow) but have a deadline within the time of the Commission to produce 'outcomes'.

Managing expectations

Commissioners may come with expectations that tangible change can happen during the course of the Commission. Whilst this may happen, real change takes longer, and facilitators may have to manage disappointment, loss of hope or anger.

Life challenges

The Commission has to be able to manage the process, respecting that people with lived experience of poverty face challenges every day that will impact on their involvement. There can be a risk of dropout if life gets too much, and a high level of support can be required to keep people coming along.

Life challenges affect Facilitators and Civic Commissioners too.

Emotional labour

It is exhausting running a Commission well. Facilitators need support and to support each other. There can be a risk of burnout if the team is unable to fulfil the many roles required.

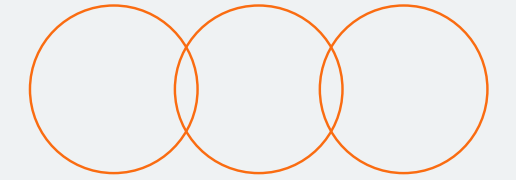
Keeping people engaged

Facilitators are responsible for devising the PTC programme from scratch, keeping the pace going and keeping people engaged, even when the task becomes complex. There can be a risk of drop out if Commissioners feel the pace is too fast or too slow, or disengage when the going gets tough or language becomes technical or corporate.

What we learned about Commissioner participation



What qualities do Commissioners need for the PTC to work?



Commissioners who are willing to:

- listen deeply
- put aside preconceptions of the 'other' and be human with each other
- work with the intention of equality, valuing everyone's experience and knowledge
- put aside shame, blame and judgment
- learn from each other
- embrace a new way of being and behaving
- be open to help develop creative solutions
- move from individual to collective thinking
- give time for gatherings as well as at other times to develop ideas

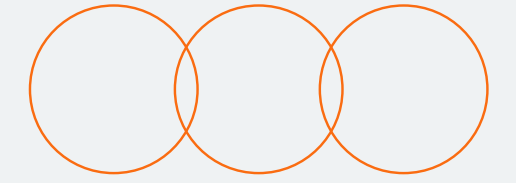
Civic Commissioners who are also willing to:

- put aside defensiveness about their service and listen to criticism
- put aside a purely 'transactional' mindset (*as in, 'I've got something I want to achieve and you can help me do it'*) as this can block genuine listening and undermine trust
- be open to new ideas and not judge or block them based on system limitations or previous experience
- recognise the experiences of Community Commissioners and their struggles, reflecting on what they heard and understood *before* referencing good practice or attempts to improve their service

Community Commissioners who are also willing to:

- share their life experiences to help change the ways things work
- put aside (at times) their anger and frustration at the system to work with others to create change

What qualities do Commissioners need for the PTC to work?



Hope and belief that change is possible

Hope was needed before the Commissioners started working together. This includes hope that change could happen and that they could contribute to it. As time developed Commissioners **demonstrated their continued belief in the process** by continuing to work together and remain trusting of each other.

Motivation and commitment

Highly motivated Commissioners and facilitators were willing to have a sustained commitment to the process, even when the outcomes were uncertain. This included **demonstrating a commitment** by turning up to meetings and being present in the room despite life challenges or other work commitments.

Imagining a different future

It can be hard to engage in **creative thinking and imagining a different future** when you have had many challenges in life (Community Commissioners) or work within a system that can feel immovable (Civic Commissioners). Together Commissioners find a way to put aside those barriers and consider different ways of being, including being open to hearing things that challenge their way of thinking.

The power of involving people with lived experience of poverty in decision making

A perspective rooted in experience

Most, if not all, Civic Commissioners had not spent a significant amount of time with the people they serve, especially in listening (rather than serving) mode. Many with a county-wide remit had spent little time in Ilfracombe. The **different and expansive understanding of poverty, of people's lives** and the particular **challenges** in a remote coastal community is a powerful **motivator for change.**

Listening and being listened to

Listening to the experiences of those most under-served in our communities changed the way Civic leaders looked at their area of responsibility. It changed people's mindsets. **Being listened to** helped Community Commissioners to feel validated in their experiences and to gain confidence in their power to help change things for themselves and others, becoming **active agents of change.**

Flipping the agenda

Starting with, and continuing to **root discussion in the narratives of people with lived experience** of poverty, changes the conversation (see Theory of Change). Community Commissioners form their bonds and prioritise their areas of concern **before** Civic leaders are invited in the room. This flips the agenda from usual types of resident consultation and allows ideas to develop, through new relationships, over time.

The challenge of involving people with lived experience of poverty in the PTC

Recruitment

Despite over 30 interviews, numerous informal conversations and approaches to local organisations, it was challenging to recruit Community Commissioners. Most people said they could not make the **time commitment**. Other barriers may have been **disempowerment, apathy or cynicism** about (another) new initiative; **scheduling** (afternoons) being a barrier to those working, young people or those with young families; and **stigma** about being involved in a 'poverty' project. Local agencies supporting those experiencing poverty were initially **cautious**, leading to lost connections. A **local GP** and a **faith-based community group**, however, actively supported recruitment.

Ongoing support to help sustain commitment

Those who did take part had complex lives and **daily challenges** with services, health, housing, caring for others, finding work and making ends meet. Despite this, they kept involved with **support from facilitators**. This included ongoing support between gatherings when challenges arose, regular phone calls and texts to remind them of gatherings and meetings, managing safeguarding concerns, occasionally managing tensions between individual commissioners and sensitive, responsive, boundaried connections during gatherings, sometimes necessitating one-to-one support.

Learning about involving people with lived experience of poverty in the PTC

Keeping people safe

The PTC genuinely sought to start 'where people are', valuing their experiences and inviting people to share stories about their lives, including their negative experiences of services and poverty. This asks a lot from Community Commissioners. It can make them feel vulnerable, or trigger trauma, when they may already be feeling disempowered. Having an effective support system in place is vital. Facilitators need to develop resilience and skills in supporting people.

Working to strengths in a 'poverty-focussed' model

The PTC focusses on the challenges of poverty for good reason. But people are so much more than their experiences of poverty. Telling and retelling a story of negative experiences or traumatic events, if not handled well, can serve to reduce people to their negative experiences. Shifting from problems and the 'deficits' of a poor system, to possibilities of change and people's strengths, has to be carefully managed.

*'In terms of looking after the Community Commissioners, being caring and trying to listen to what they say, because you've got to look after them as you take them along the journey'.
Facilitator*

Challenges of the PTC Process



What are the challenges?

Timescale and ending

Due to the short-term nature of the PTC process there can be a pressure for facilitators to deliver outcomes towards the middle and end of the process, which risks prioritising action over relationships (a challenge to 'trust the process').

Lack of resources to support a longer 'embedding' process beyond the Commission can create a sense of panic or disappointment in achievement towards the end of 18 months, especially if participants see the PTC as an end in itself. There is a balance between having a defined timescale, which can be positive for targets and commitment, and recognising there will be work to do after this period of time.

Embedding and local relationships

Given the high workload of running a PTC, it is a challenge to develop wider community links (beyond Civic Commissioners) from the start to support embedding. Local voluntary organisations are often key to recruitment, current support and future provision: investing in relationships beyond the life of the PTC to include these voluntary organisations is necessary for ongoing sustainable change. Overlooking this expertise may challenge the credibility of the PTC locally.

Equality and power

The PTC strives for equality, with the voices of those with lived experience at the centre of all discussions. However, there is an inbuilt inequality in the room. For example, Civic Commissioners are paid as part of their jobs: Community Commissioners are not. Civic leaders are, ultimately, the people with the most power to create change. Facilitators also have great power to shape the direction and outcomes. This means that, despite equality in the room, roles remain different. An acknowledgement of this may help to alleviate frustration.

'... people with in poverty, people with mental health issues, trying to get proper support for them is so incredibly difficult, it just it doesn't change and people seem somewhat oblivious to it. We are struggling to continue to keep supporting people ... if it wasn't for ... the voluntary sector within Ilfracombe things would be a lot worse than they are'.

Steering Group member

'I think it is... an exemplar of giving, hopefully giving decision making power and control to ordinary people with lived experience of poverty. That in of itself, is a benefit to the town and a contradiction to the narrative they're used to, if it's followed through on... The problem then is that the follow on from it when you've got a community that begins to lift its head and want to make decisions, but there's no longer a facility for that... Where do they take that?'

Steering Group member

'I would hope that more people would be willing to get involved. I think very much that a lot of people at the beginning were apathetic and thought well what's the point, it will just be a load of talking heads and 'there there', pat on the head, placating... But I would hope now that seeing changes... that through that they might be more encouraged to join and to raise the voice, you know?'

Community Commissioner

What are the challenges?

Fragility of personal relationships

Relationships built during the PTC are personal and powerful. However, they are fragile: people's life situations change, people leave jobs or change roles. Whilst individual Civic Commissioners are impacted by the experiences of Community Commissioners, a change in a Civic Commissioner, particularly if a Civic Commissioner has been unable to bring the learning back into their organisation, can jeopardise the potential for organisational buy-in.

Developing a working framework

Although the PTN offers principles and a four-phased approach to **what** a PTC is, there is little that helps facilitators plan **how** a Commission might work in detail.

IPTC facilitators chose to use the Design Council's Systemic Design Framework - the 'double diamond' - which expanded on these phases, but nested the work in a design approach. 'Art of Hosting' training helped with facilitation tools. Initially, the lack of an operational framework was daunting: without extensive experience of group work and project management, the IPTC might have floundered.

Prioritising themes

Areas of interest to work on were developed through Phase One and the Launch, based on the experiences of Community Commissioners. However, in Phase Two, decisions were made to focus on certain areas rather than others. This was a time-consuming challenge given the breadth of experiences in the room, and the sense of urgency across a range of issues. Some found the process onerous and challenging. Facilitators juggled competing priorities, had to be imaginative and undertake significant work outside the gatherings to facilitate this complex process.

'All (The Poverty Truth Network) said was 'trust the process' without giving us a process. So, we had to find a process that we thought we'd be able to work through, didn't we? It was just like, we can't possibly do this without some process, so let's just pick a tool'.

Facilitator

'We spent a little bit too much time, in my opinion, on capturing all the views about what the priorities were and then trying to narrow them down. And there was an awful lot of tables of narrative of stuff and I disengaged with that. And I'm guessing if I did, other people did as well'.

Civic Commissioner

'The Art of Hosting training I went on was really useful - Bournemouth PTC had used it... before that I felt completely lost. Then I went to that and I was like, okay, there's something to hang this off now...And then we drew on the 'Double Diamond', which is what we're used to working with in our team. So we had a framework. I think for me, I felt like I had an approach so I was more confident'.

Facilitator

(see <https://povertytruthbcp.org/art-of-hosting/>)

Distinctive features of the PTC

what makes it different?

- The **intentional focus on relationships** before trying to solve a 'problem' or considering actions and outcomes, means that **deeper relationships** are formed and people find ways to be more honest alongside...
- The **length of time given to relationship building** supports **deep engagement** and **personal connection** rarely seen through other initiatives. There is...
- Time given to Community Commissioners to **build understanding and confidence before inviting Civic Commissioners into the room**. At its best, this gives **ownership of the process** to those with lived experience of poverty, reversing usual practices of seeking consultation or feedback from the public on a particular problem to solve. It helps place...
- The **voices of Community Commissioners at the centre of the process**. This brings their experiences into sharp focus and informs all discussion and action. This is in **contradiction to their daily lives** where they often feel unheard and unseen. Alongside this...
- The range and seniority of **Civic Commissioners present from across sectors** offers the possibility for a **holistic and collaborative approach** towards system change

*'I am more convinced than ever that **people with lived experience should be involved in stuff...** if we could hand over some sort of learning of when we brought people with lived experience into a space with civic leaders, this is what happened for good or for better or for worse... This is what we've learned from hanging out with people with lived experience and senior leaders.*

***Go and add on to that. Don't not listen to it. Take it into account and then build on it.** So whether you're building on the project or building on the people and the experience, you've got something to build on. And that also means it's not relying on more Poverty Truth Commissions'.*

Facilitator



Acknowledgements

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To learn more about the Ilfracombe Poverty Truth Commission and to view films about the work see <https://onenortherndevon.co.uk/our-work/reducing-health-inequalities/health-inequalities/work-in-northern-devon/poverty-truth-commission/>

poverty truth Ilfracombe