

Our lived experience of poverty and the system: a photovoice exhibition

Photovoice is a powerful participatory action research method where individuals use photography and narrative to document their lived experiences, capture community concerns, build a shared understanding and advocate for social change.

People with lived experience of poverty (Community Commissioners) and senior civic leaders (Civic Commissioners) were given a disposable camera and asked to take photos of their lived experience of poverty and working in the system. Each Commissioner then chose up to three images to share as part of this exhibition.

Many thanks to all the Commissioners for their time and dedication to the Commission.



Topsham Rugby Club on a cold, rainy morning, with a blue tent and sleeping bag at the entrance, captures the contrast between attending a digital improvement meeting and the visible signs of someone struggling with basic needs such as safe accommodation. It highlights the tension between ambitions to enhance care and support through new technologies and the reality of digital poverty and limited access to essential services.



A local Co-Op in South Devon shows how supermarkets and volunteers work together to stock a 24/7 accessible community fridge and larder, ensuring support is available to anyone and no food is wasted. It highlights the value of strong community cohesion in supplementing statutory services and shows how active, engaged communities can make a real difference in addressing poverty.



Springfield Court in Barnstaple shows the base for teams supporting children, young people, and families across North Devon, including Ilfracombe, where early help is crucial. It highlights how services are often centralised due to limited resources and raises questions about balancing efficiency with the quality of people's experiences and the outcomes they need.



Table of self help/ referral leaflets, hand sanitiser and a box for feedback on service. I travelled an hour for 'help' and had been greeted at the door with self help leaflets.



The photo of the empty waiting room captures a sense of loneliness and anxiety, reflecting how clinical and daunting the experience felt. It highlights the imbalance between the long, difficult journey to the appointment and the brief time actually spent in the meeting. The image speaks to wider issues of poverty and the system, showing how the location of essential services—especially in relation to places like Ilfracombe—creates barriers and reinforces inaccessibility. It reveals how people are often forced to arrange their entire lives around appointments, making even simple interactions with services feel overwhelming and exhausting.



Customer Board Partnership meeting where executives, board members, and customers come together to review performance, demonstrating how lived experience is being brought directly into decision-making. It reflects an effort to elevate voices “from front room to board room,” showing a commitment to developing customer experience through this forum. The image suggests hope, highlighting that organisations are recognising the value of lived experience and actively working to harness it to improve services and respond more effectively to the realities of poverty and the system.



The Co-op deals freezer captures the conflict of cheap but unhealthy food that can sustain you but not truly nourish you. It reflects how poverty strips away the ability—and often the energy—to choose healthier options, turning meals into something you simply get through rather than enjoy. The image highlights how short-sighted the system is; no one can maintain a healthy lifestyle on £90 a week, and the long-term impact inevitably falls back on services like the NHS. It shows how hidden and normalised poverty can be—brightly packaged, easy to overlook, yet deeply sad when you understand the reality behind it.



This photo of the high-mounted fuse box captures a late-night moment of fear and forced resilience, when having no power and no money for an electrician meant you had to fix everything yourself in the dark. It reflects how poverty pushes people into unsafe situations and exposes the gaps in a system that promotes home ownership but offers little support during hardship. It raises a bigger question too—how many older women have been left to become “quasi-electricians” out of necessity, simply trying to cope with what the system overlooks?



This photo of Verity standing over the harbour, with Nicholas Chapel in the background, reflects strength, endurance, and the determination to rise above hardship. Verity symbolizes truth, justice, and the resolve to keep advancing, reminding you that difficulties can be faced and overcome. The chapel, once home to 14 children in harsh conditions, reinforces the message that survival is possible even in the coldest circumstances. Together, they show that poverty may be relentless and painful, but it does not define or defeat us. The image speaks to the need to fight for what is right, to challenge systems that limit or contain people, and to recognise the power individuals hold in the face of adversity.



This photograph captures the irony of a late-night rally for a distant cause while local poverty remains ignored. The gathering seemed more about appearance than action, with no effort to spread their message beyond the circle. For me, it highlighted the frustration of seeing energy directed toward issues far away, while the suffering on our own streets goes unnoticed. It underscores how poverty here is left unaddressed, lacking the same visibility or urgency, despite being a pressing and personal reality.



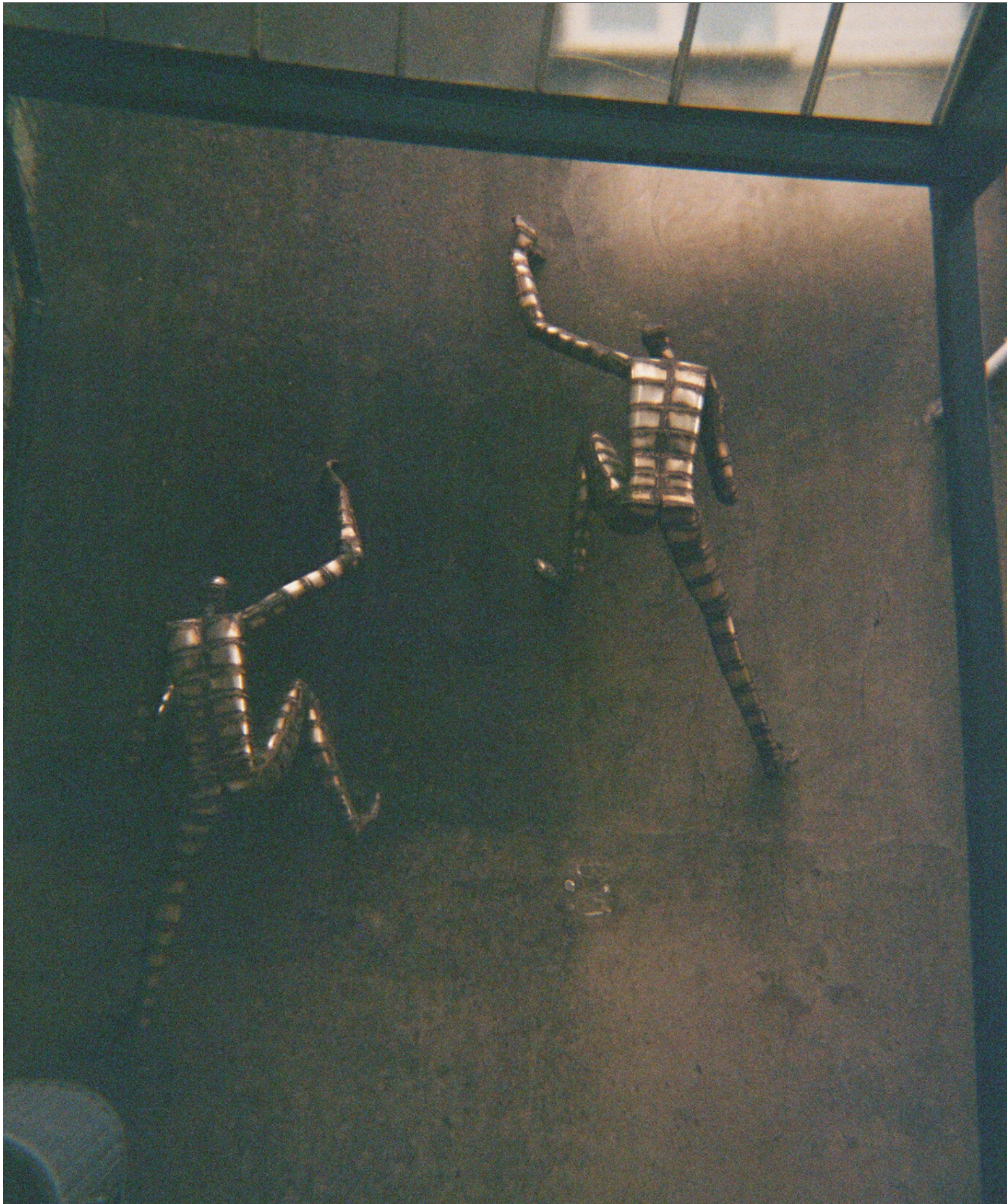
This photograph captures the raw reality of a homeless veteran in North Devon, a man who has endured years on the streets alongside his loyal dog. Taken after witnessing him being unfairly harassed by security, the image stands as a quiet act of justice and dignity. It reflects how fragile stability can be, showing that one misfortune could push any of us into the same vulnerable position. More than just a portrait, it is a stark reminder of the unforgivable failures of a system that allows people to suffer in plain sight, exposing poverty in its most undeniable and unfiltered form.



Paul Hawkins, a neighbour for a brief but intense period, captures the human cost of grinding, unrelenting poverty. Despite working exhausting hours as an industrial cleaner, his low wages left him with almost nothing after rent, leading to a decline in his mental health and eventually his eviction. You witnessed his struggles daily, including a severe breakdown on Christmas Day, while the mental health services offered little support despite repeated calls. His situation shows how poverty, poor wages, and inadequate services can unravel a life, leaving someone hardworking and kind homeless and unemployed, while those around them feel powerless to stop it.



This photograph of the bench behind the Sandpiper pub, with the sea in view, reflects the harsh reality of sleeping rough without shelter. For me and my partner, it was the only place we could rest, and it shows just how difficult life becomes when you have no tent or protection. The image speaks to the struggle of enduring nights in the open, highlighting the vulnerability and exhaustion that come with homelessness. It is a stark reminder of how poverty strips away basic security, leaving people exposed and unsupported by the very systems meant to help them.



This photograph of Bob Water's sculptures outside the Lantern, depicting two figures climbing a wall together, symbolizes the shared struggle of overcoming challenges. It reflects how life can feel like an uphill climb, but with support, the burden becomes lighter. At the same time, the sculptures' stillness highlights the slow, often stagnant pace of progress when confronting poverty, showing both the resilience of collective effort and the frustration of systemic barriers that remain unmoved.



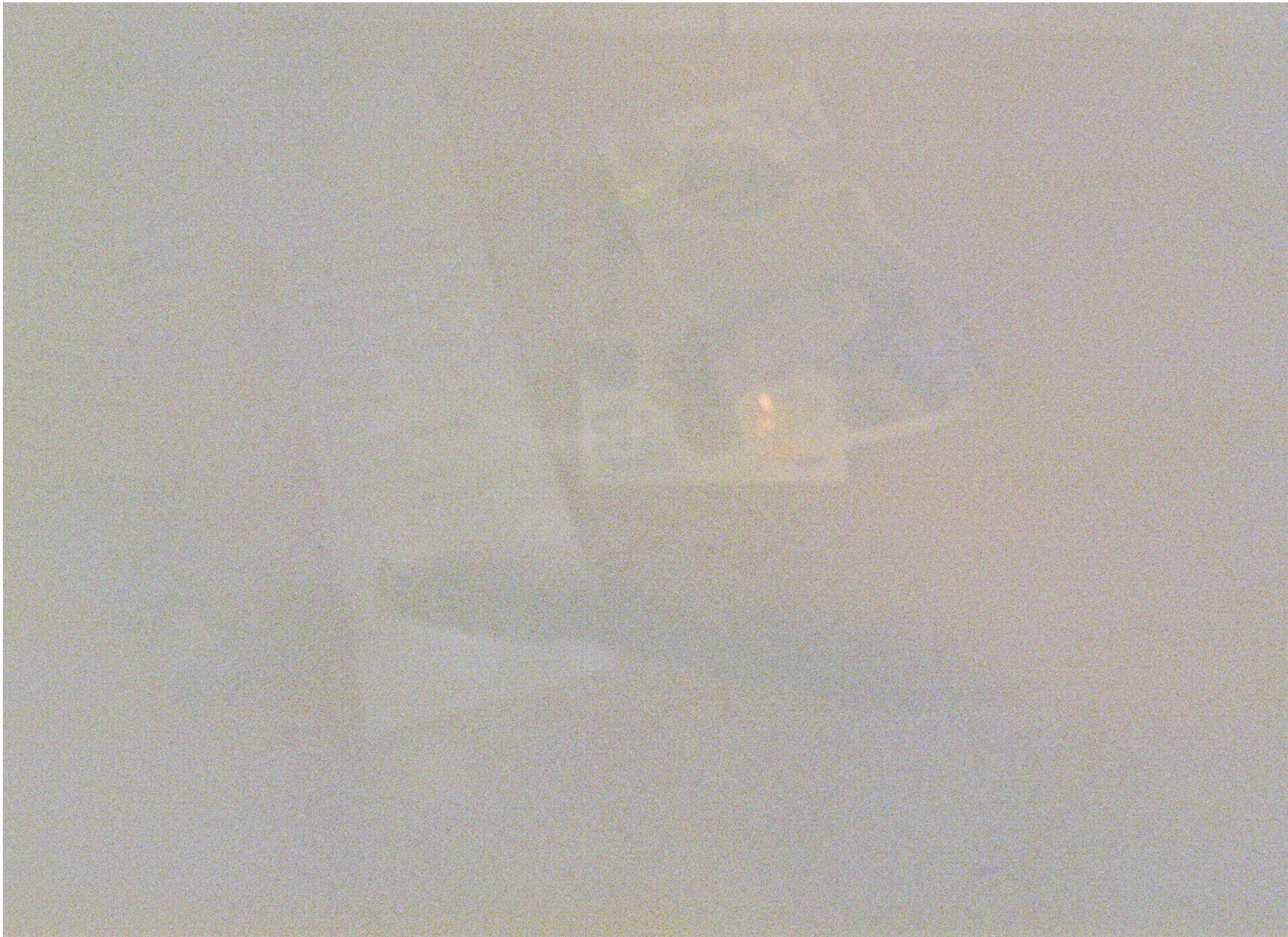
This photograph is a mirror ball plant pot, intended to capture fragmented reflections, instead resulted in a flat grey image. That failure mirrors the reality of growing up in a low-income family and struggling with debt well into adulthood—where effort and energy don't always lead to success. The image symbolises how poverty can make progress feel futile, yet also suggests that even small sparks, like light concentrated through a mirror, can ignite change when it's most needed.



This photograph of the information board filled with posters reflects both the abundance of services and the difficulty of accessing them. While it shows that support and opportunities exist, it also highlights how overwhelming and confusing the process can be, especially for those already struggling. For me, it represents the challenge of constantly finding out about resources but not always knowing how best to share them, and more broadly, it illustrates how poverty turns the search for help into a complicated maze with no straightforward path.



This photograph represents the reality of living in poverty through sub-standard housing, where low wages and outdated benefit caps force people into unhealthy and unsafe conditions. It reflects how the rising cost of rent leaves tenants topping up beyond what support covers, often resulting in squalor that impacts both physical and mental health. The image underscores the urgent need for accountability from landlords who profit from poor housing, and for government action to raise benefit caps and provide fairer support, not only for those out of work but also for people who are working and still struggling to afford a decent home.



This photograph of a shopping list, money, and an electric key captures the harsh reality of poverty through the difficult choices it forces. It shows the constant struggle of deciding between essentials—whether to put money on the electric or buy food—and the compromises that often lead to cheap, unhealthy meals with long-term consequences. The image reflects how poverty is not just about scarcity but about the exhausting weight of decisions that shape daily survival and future wellbeing.



This photograph of final demand letters conveys the relentless stress and anxiety that poverty brings. Each brown envelope represents fear of bad news, the possibility of benefits being stopped, or unexpected repayments demanded. It reflects the exhausting cycle of dealing with bureaucracy, retelling the same story to different departments, and struggling with barriers like not having access to a printer. The image captures how poverty is not only financial hardship but also the constant emotional toll of living in dread of what might come next.



This photograph of the Salvation Army reflects the vital role community support plays in the face of poverty. By running foodbanks, offering free meals, and providing groups for families, they ease the burden of food anxiety and help people who are forced to choose between paying bills and eating.



My cat Trixie because I love her, she helps with my mental health and I can talk to her. It helps with my anxiety.



The image of Belle's place represents another source of comfort and support, showing how local spaces and individuals can make a profound difference. Together, these photos highlight how essential supportive networks are for survival and wellbeing when the system falls short.



An overgrown space marked by fly tipping, highlights how neglected areas can quickly become sites of antisocial behaviour. It reflects the struggles faced by people living in poverty, who may lack the means to properly dispose of unwanted items and instead resort to leaving them in shared spaces. The image also reveals how shame and isolation can prevent individuals from seeking help, leading to environments where community spaces lose their value and fall into disrepair. It underscores the need for stronger local support and accountability to ensure that public areas remain safe, welcoming, and accessible for everyone.



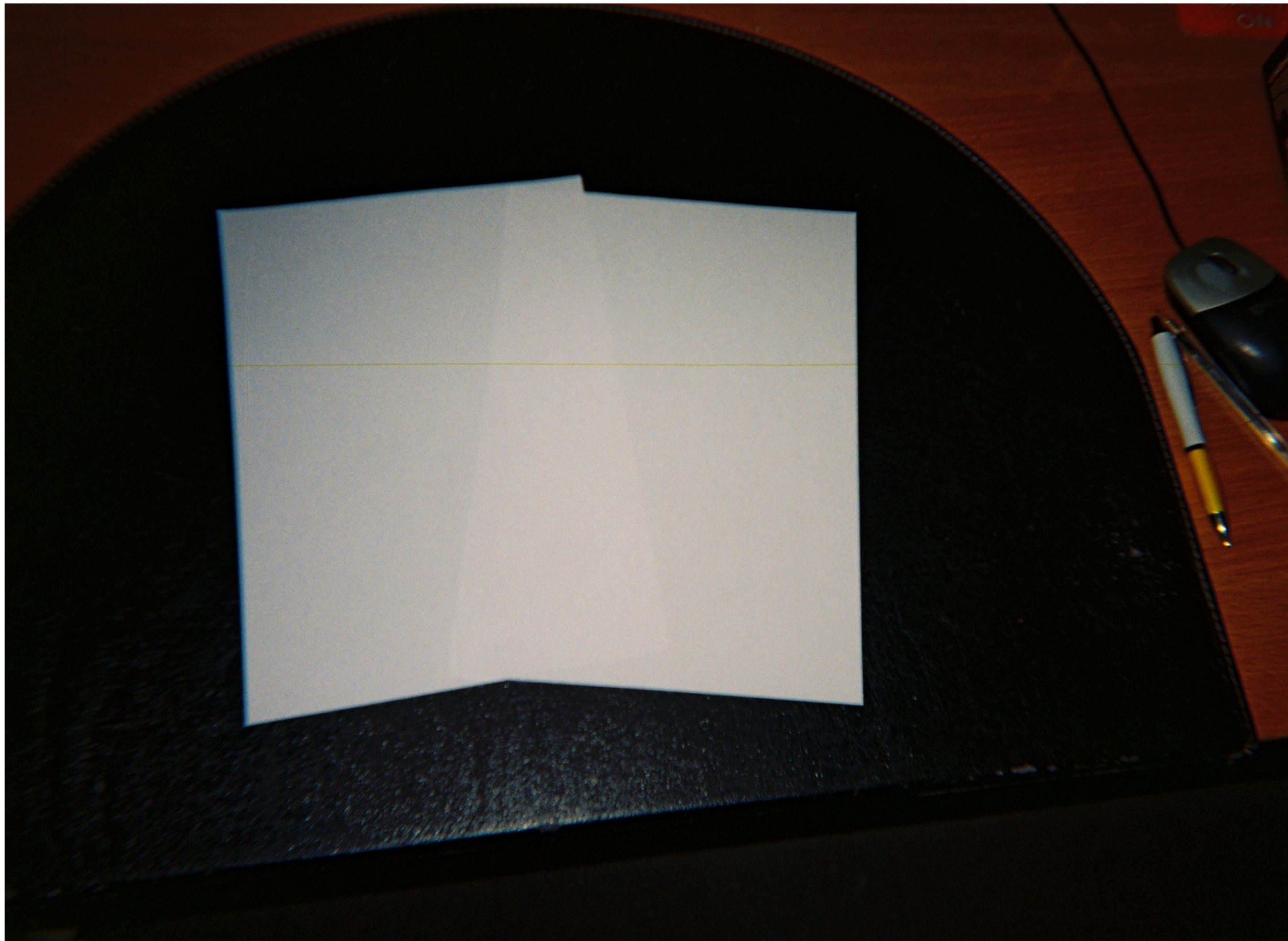
This photograph of a shop in Ilfracombe, open only from 10am to 4pm, reflects the limited working hours and economic constraints faced by the community. It highlights how local jobs often fall short of standard full-time hours, leaving people on low wages or needing multiple jobs to survive. For shop owners, family responsibilities such as childcare or caring duties further restrict income opportunities. The short opening times also reveal the lack of disposable income in the town, showing how poverty shapes both employment patterns and the sustainability of local businesses.



This photograph of potholes on a main route into Exeter from St David's station highlights the financial struggles faced by local authorities in maintaining infrastructure. For me, as someone who cycles this route, it reflects the increased risks and reduced appeal of road travel, while also showing how neglected roads can impact wider community productivity and economic output. More broadly, it illustrates that poverty is not only experienced by individuals and families but can also exist within organisations, where limited resources lead to visible decline and hardship in public services.



The Vulnerable Customer Network meeting reflects the importance of collaboration and communication in addressing poverty. As the only district currently hosting such a network, it highlights the proactive effort to build stronger relationships with local stakeholders and promote opportunities for those in need. It represents the role of engagement—to improve dialogue, foster trust, and create lasting connections that can support vulnerable customers. The image underscores how tackling poverty requires not just individual support but collective action, where networks like VCN become vital in bridging gaps and ensuring communities are better served.



This photograph of a plain white piece of paper symbolises the weight of government white papers, documents that outline policy intentions and decisions often made without the direct involvement of those most affected. For me, it reflects the lack of control individuals can feel when choices are imposed from above, standing in contrast to the collaborative spirit of the PTC. It also highlights how poverty is shaped not only by personal circumstances but by systemic changes, reminding us of the importance of staying aware, understanding potential impacts, and preparing for shifts that can deeply affect everyday life.



Sometimes my hands are tied

This photograph of tied hands symbolises the restrictions and limitations that exist beyond personal control, reflecting how legislation, government policy, and regulations can constrain what individuals or professionals are able to achieve. It highlights the frustration of wanting to make change but being bound by external rules. In the context of poverty, the image emphasises the importance of understanding how benefits work, the expectations placed on individuals, and the barriers they face in accessing opportunities. It shows that poverty is not only about financial hardship but also about navigating systems.



This photograph of an electric storage heater highlights the hidden costs of living in older, converted housing where heating systems are inefficient and expensive to run. It reflects the struggle of trying to keep a home warm when the design of the building makes affordable heating almost impossible, forcing tenants to spend more for less comfort. The image shows how poverty is not just about income but also about the quality of housing, where outdated systems lead to higher bills and difficult choices. It underscores the importance of considering whether heating is both effective and affordable when addressing the wider impacts of poverty.



This photograph of the immersion heater cupboard highlights the hidden costs and health risks that tenants can face when landlords fail to take responsibility. The leaking heater not only caused mould and damage to cleaning products but also led to higher water bills, creating unexpected financial strain. Even after repairs, the attempt to charge for a basic fix shows how tenants can be burdened with costs they shouldn't have to cover. The image illustrates how poverty is compounded by poor housing conditions, where essential maintenance becomes a source of stress, expense, and potential harm to wellbeing.



This photograph of the broken buzzer highlights how something seemingly small can have a big impact on daily life and safety. Without a working intercom, there is constant uncertainty about who is entering the building, and the need to rush downstairs creates risks of injury. It reflects how poverty often means living with unresolved issues in housing, where repairs are neglected and tenants are left vulnerable. The image shows that safety features like a buzzer are not luxuries but essentials, and their absence underscores how inadequate housing conditions can compound the challenges of living in poverty.



This is the first place I slept rough in Ilfracombe captures the deep vulnerability and isolation that comes with homelessness. It represents a moment of desperation, where the absence of safe spaces left you exposed not only physically but also emotionally and psychologically, highlighting how poverty can strip away stability and dignity. The image tells of a time when support systems felt distant or absent, reinforcing the sense of being passed by. It shows how homelessness is not just about lacking shelter but about the profound loss of security, access to facilities, and connection to society, making visible the hidden realities of poverty.



This photograph of a public toilet as a place to sleep conveys the deep humiliation and despair that homelessness can bring. It represents a moment of hitting rock bottom, where dignity and safety are stripped away, and survival becomes the only focus. For you, it marks one of the lowest points in life, a stark reminder of how poverty affects not just the individual but also those closest to them. More broadly, it helps us understand that poverty is not only about financial hardship but also about the emotional and relational toll it takes, exposing the vulnerability and isolation that come with having nowhere safe to turn.



his photograph of Exmoor House represents a turning point—a place that offered you and your partner a step away from the instability of homelessness and toward a measure of stability. It tells the story of resilience, showing how even small changes can mark the beginning of a new chapter, though the challenges of navigating complex systems and overcoming poverty remained. The image helps us understand poverty not only as hardship but also as a journey of persistence, where determination and resourcefulness are essential to finding safety, dignity, and hope for a better future.



This photograph of the office data dashboard highlights how reporting is centred on emergency departments and ambulances, focusing on immediate consequences rather than underlying causes. For me, it reflects the pressure to monitor outcomes every few hours instead of addressing root issues that drive demand. In the context of poverty, the image underscores the need to shift attention toward prevention—tackling social and economic factors that lead to poor health—rather than only treating crises after they occur. It points to the importance of long-term strategies, such as the NHS 10-year plan, to create sustainable and equitable support.



This photograph of an Executive Director working in his office reflects how professional environments can sometimes operate in silos, with individuals focused on their own priorities rather than connecting across teams. For me, it highlights the challenge of fragmented approaches, where collaboration is limited and the bigger picture can be missed. In the context of poverty, the image underscores the importance of breaking down these barriers—finding better ways to connect, share knowledge, and work together—so that the full complexity of people’s experiences can be understood and addressed more effectively



This photograph of the ICB HQ office in Exeter highlights the environment where crucial decisions about healthcare spending are made. It reflects how much of this work happens behind desks rather than within communities, creating a sense of distance from the realities people face. The image underscores the need for better ways of listening to and understanding what individuals truly need to live their lives, reminding us that poverty and health are deeply connected and that policies must be shaped by the lived experiences of those affected.



The statue "Verity" in Ilfracombe explores its symbolism of truth and justice, embodied by a pregnant woman holding a sword and scales while standing on law books. The sculpture's anatomical openness and controversial arrival sparked local debate, yet it became a landmark that boosted tourism. For the writer, Verity represents hope and a call to acknowledge uncomfortable truths—particularly the persistence of child poverty in a developed nation. It emphasizes the need to confront inequality and recognize how health outcomes are shaped by social conditions, urging collective action to reduce disparities and improve lives.