

Report of Assistant Chief Executive (Citizens and Communities)

Report to Citizens & Communities Scrutiny Board

Date: 12th October 2015

Subject: Poverty Truth Commission Leeds

Are specific electoral Wards affected? If relevant, name(s) of Ward(s):	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Are there implications for equality and diversity and cohesion and integration?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Is the decision eligible for Call-In?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Does the report contain confidential or exempt information? If relevant, Access to Information Procedure Rule number: Appendix number:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No

Summary of main issues

1. The Poverty Truth Commission was launched in February 2014 with the aim of involving people who directly faced poverty in decisions about poverty. This was done by bringing together civic and business leaders with residents who were experiencing poverty and were prepared to support the Commission.
2. The Commission, which ran for 16 months from February 2014 to June 2015, focused in 3 key areas: stigma, achieving potential and mental health and poverty. At the closure event in June 2015, the Commission produced an innovative report in the form of a pack of postcards that set out key messages and conclusions arising from the process.
3. The Commission has been influential in the approach taken by the Citizens & Communities Directorate in delivering the Citizens@Leeds propositions around helping people into work, providing integrated and accessible services, tackling financial hardship and engaging with local residents.

Recommendations:

4. That the information supplied in this report is noted.

1 Purpose of this report

- 1.1 The report provides information on the Poverty Truth Commission run by Together for Peace and supported by the Council.

2 Key messages

- 2.1 The Poverty Truth Commission was independently led by Together For Peace (T4P) and supported by a number of organisations including the City Council. The outcomes from the Commission include a more sympathetic reporting of poverty in the local media, greater levels of understanding and awareness of the causes and impacts of poverty by businesses and civic leaders and an influence on the on-going delivery of the Citizens@Leeds proposition
- 2.2 JRF, which supported the Commission in Leeds, has agreed to commit to fund more Poverty Truth Commissions across the UK.

3 Background information

- 3.1 The Poverty Truth Commission in Leeds was launched in February 2014 with the aim of addressing the question: What if people who directly faced poverty were involved in decisions about poverty? The overall approach was modelled on the Poverty Truth Commission in Scotland which adopted an approach of '*Nothing about us, without us, is for us.*' This approach ensured that those with experience of poverty were involved in exploring and designing solutions to address poverty in the city.
- 3.2 An initial launch event took place in February 2014 in the Banqueting Suite at Civic. The launch event brought together civic and business leaders with those experiencing poverty with the intention of providing a platform for participants to tell, in different and imaginative ways, their experiences and feelings of being in poverty. These 'testimonies' of the impacts and causes of poverty were 'witnessed' by civic and business leaders. The launch event can be found on Youtube at the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I0I0IDdWURA>
- 3.3 The launch event was not intended to deliver solutions but to encourage civic and business leaders to engage in the process and commit to working with 'testifiers' i.e. those experiencing poverty, to explore the issues more deeply. A list of those involved in the Poverty Truth Challenge is attached at Appendix 1.
- 3.4 The issues and causes of poverty are varied and the Poverty Truth Commission agreed to focus on 3 main areas:
 1. *Stigma and perception*: this group explored the issue of why public attitudes have hardened towards people in poverty. The group met with Jobcentre Plus and had input from the Council's Benefits Service in looking at this issue.
 2. *Young people achieving potential*: this group looked at what support was available to young people and met with a number of organisations, including the Chamber of Commerce, Leeds Apprenticeship Training Agency, Leeds Community Foundation etc. to look at the barriers for young people.

3. *Relationship between mental health and poverty*: this group focused on local support and local services for people experiencing mental health problems. The group met with Workplace Leeds, Volition, Leeds Mind and Adults Social Care to discuss these issues

4 Main issues

- 4.1 The 3 groups continued to meet over the course of 18 months and the Commission concluded with a closing event again held at the Civic Hall. At this event, both testifiers and civic and business leaders set out some of the conclusions that had been reached. The closing event was accompanied by a report on the activity and conclusions of the Commission – this report was in the form of a pack of postcards containing relevant messages, statements and conclusions. Copies of the postcard packs will be distributed to Board members at today's meeting.
- 4.2 The Poverty Truth Commission in Leeds has been successful in raising the issue of poverty and gaining sympathetic coverage from the media. There have been articles on the Commission in the Yorkshire Evening Post and Huffington Post and the work of the Commission has been covered twice on BBC Radio Leeds Breakfast Show and also on BBC Radio Leeds Drivetime show.
- 4.3 The work of the Stigma group has also provided content for the Real Benefits Street, a YouTube channel from Church Action on Poverty which aims to show a different reality of being on benefits to that shown by Channel 4's 'Benefits Street' series. The Real Benefits Street channel features contributions, both poignant and inspiring, from Leeds residents involved in the Poverty Truth Commission.
- 4.4 Joseph Rowntree Foundation has supported the Commission in Leeds and has agreed to commit funding to support further Poverty Truth Commissions across the UK
- 4.5 Among the conclusions from the Commission are:
 - *The importance of being local*: there are real benefits from people living and working in communities delivering services in those communities, whether 3rd sector or public sector
 - *The need for benefit systems to be more human*: this means seeing a claimant as a person and providing the support they need when they need it
 - *The importance of volunteering*: this is relevant in terms of building skills, getting to know communities and becoming more work ready
 - *The need for 'breathing spaces' in localities*: this recognises the pressures that can be experienced by people with mental health problems when out and about and identifies supportive places that can help alleviate some of the pressures, whether this be a local café or a public sector service.

4.6 Ultimately, the success of the Poverty Truth Commission is dependent on what the contributors, and particularly the civic and business leaders, take from the conversations and look to address in their areas. For some, this has been about gaining a greater understanding of the barriers and impacts of the way services are delivered; for others it's been about the need to provide opportunity by looking beyond a stereotype.

Implications for the Council

4.7 The Council has supported the Poverty Truth Commission through the provision of facilities and some limited funding and in its role as a civic leader. This has seen involvement from the then Leader of the Council, the Chief Executive, individual elected members and officers. Involvement in the Commission has been helpful in the approach to implementing the Citizens@Leeds propositions. Evidence of the influence is shown below:

1. *Helping people into work:* many of the design features of the Council's Council Tax Support scheme for 15/16 reflect our involvement in the Commission. The scheme focuses on providing work-related support based around the needs of an individual, delivered face to face in local venues.
2. *Integrated and accessible services:* the Community Hub approach continues to grow and deliver greater partnership working with locally based 3rd sector organisations and employers. This approach supports more joined up working around the needs of users and can help to deliver better outcomes for individuals
3. *Tackling financial hardship:* Leeds is leading from the front in tackling financial hardship and high cost lending. A new initiative launched by Leeds City Credit Union provides affordable access to household goods and is a direct and considerably cheaper alternative to the rent-to-buy options on the high street. This initiative recognises a comment from one of the testifiers who used a well-known rent-to-buy shop in Leeds City Centre to buy a washing machine. She knew she would pay a lot more for the product but the most important factor in her decision was that she could afford the weekly payments.
4. *Engaging with local people:* members of the Poverty Truth Commission have attended Community Committees on issues relating to their locality and have found the process inclusive and engaging.

4.8 The overall approach of listening to service users and working locally is reflected in the values of the council across services. There is, however, more to do and more to learn from getting closer to the customers who need and use our services. It is important that key frontline services get to know their service users and continue to reflect on how they can best help.

5 Corporate Considerations

5.1 Consultation and Engagement

5.1.3 The report provides an update on an externally run commission and does not require consultation.

5.2 Equality and Diversity / Cohesion and Integration

5.2.1 The Poverty Truth Commission involved residents and contributors from all walks of life with the aim of improving understanding and cohesion. Aspects of the work of the Commission focused on those issues that can be divisive of cause inequalities.

5.3 Council policies and Best Council Plan

5.3.1 A key priority for the council is addressing poverty and deprivation. The work of the Poverty Truth Commission supports this activity and provides further opportunities to look at how best to progress this priority.

5.4 Resources and value for money

5.4.1 There are no resource implications for the Council arising from this report or the work of the Poverty Truth Commission.

5.5 Legal Implications, Access to Information and Call In

5.5.1 There are no legal implications arising from this report

5.6 Risk Management

5.6.1 There is a risk that the work of the Poverty Truth Commission may not lead to lasting changes in approach across public, private and 3rd sectors. The establishment of the Citizens & Communities Directorate, with a clear focus on poverty, helps to ensure that this important work is taken forward in a strategic and meaningful way.

6 Conclusions

6.1 The Poverty Truth Commission set out to see what could be achieved by involving those experiencing poverty in the decisions about potential solutions to poverty. The outcomes from this have seen much greater levels of understanding and awareness of the causes and implications of poverty across the civic and business leadership. The challenge for civic and business leaders is to take this greater level of understanding and let it influence the way organisations work.

6.2 The Citizens and Communities Directorate through the Citizens@Leeds propositions is well-placed to take this work forward.

7 Recommendations

7.1 That the information supplied in this report is noted.

8 Background documents¹

None

¹ The background documents listed in this section are available to download from the Council's website, unless they contain confidential or exempt information. The list of background documents does not include published works.

Alastair Da Costa, Chief Executive, Prince's Trust International

Amina Weston, Healer & Doula

Anna Travers, original co-chair

Barry Anderson, Councillor, Adel Ward

Ben Harrison, Farsley Born & Bred

Chris Butler, Chief Executive, Leeds & York Partnership, NHS Foundation Trust

Darren Head, Hip Hop artist

Edric James, Singer/songwriter & advice worker

Emma Stone, Director of Policy and Research, Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Gary Hetherington, Chief Executive, Leeds Rhinos

Gerald Jennings, President, Leeds Chamber of Commerce

Hawa Bah, student

Hilary Benn, MP, Leeds Central

Joy Pocock, Craftswoman & student

Kalhan Barath, Poet & writer

Keith Wakefield, Council Leader to April 2015

Mabs Hussein, Superintendent, West Yorkshire Police

Mary Brennan, Community entrepreneur, Crossgreen

Nicola Swann, Former Chief Executive, Leeds Mind

Paul Money, Commander of Leeds District, West Yorkshire Police

Peter Connolly, Owner, Yorkshire Design Group

Qari Asim, MBE, Imam and solicitor

Richard Bennett, Fitness instructor

Steve Carey, Chief Officer, Welfare & Benefits

Steve Tremble, Chef and story teller

Susan Kennedy, Governor, HMP Leeds Prison

Tom Riordan, Chief Executive, Leeds City Council

Yvonne Crowther, Social entrepreneur and Community activist

Zewdu Mengiste, Director of Lucy Radio and Ethiopian Community Chairman