

TAMESIDE

POVERTY TRUTH COMMISSION (PTC)

OCTOBER 2021 – NOVEMBER 2022 | REPORT & RECOMMENDATIONS



“We may all be weathering the same storm, but we’re definitely in different boats.”

- Karen McBride, Tameside PTC Commissioner

The Commission ran from October 2021 to November 2022. It was run by Greater Manchester Poverty Action who, in partnership with Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council and with the support of funders, employed three facilitators to deliver the project.

GMIPA is a not-for-profit organisation that works to prevent and reduce poverty across Greater Manchester. We have developed extensive knowledge about poverty in the city region, identified a powerful network of stakeholders and organisations who share our values, aims and vision and we have influenced policy and practice in several ways since we were constituted in 2016.

Our vision is of a Greater Manchester free from poverty where all residents can realise their potential and access the benefits of living in a diverse and vibrant city region.

We believe that policy and practice seeking to address poverty is more effective if it is informed by the perspectives, opinions and experiences of people with lived experience of socio-economic disadvantage. One of our core strategic objectives is to embed the voices of people with lived experience in the decision-making structures and systems of Greater Manchester. We have been proud to run the Tameside Poverty Truth Commission as part of this process.

Published November 2022

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1. INTRODUCTION

Tameside Poverty Truth Commission (PTC) started with the question *“What if people who are living in poverty or have lived in poverty were involved in making decisions to tackle poverty?”*.

As participants in the Commission we believe that *“Nothing about us, without us, is for us”*. Our commissioners brought their experiences of poverty, whether lived experience or through their work with those living in poverty, to create positive change that will prevent and reduce poverty.

During the Commission we have come together, shared our stories and developed friendships. We have looked at what poverty means in Tameside and how it affects the lives of residents, and we have collectively created recommendations for positive change to tackle poverty.

This journey was about our voices being heard and using the collective power of our voices to prevent others from living in poverty. Our path has been long and difficult, with many challenges and tough conversations. In this report we reflect on our experiences and what we have learned.

We are also pleased to share our final recommendations for change in Tameside. We are publishing this report during a *Cost-of-living Crisis* nationally, with prices rising and many struggling to cope. We want to highlight that this is part of a longer-term crisis for those living in poverty. In this context, our recommendations can start to create positive change for the people of Tameside.

Thank you to everyone who has helped us to reach this stage. Now we ask all of you, whether you have been involved with the Commission or not, to work with us to make sure these recommendations are delivered for the benefit of Tameside residents.

It is only by working together that we will tackle poverty in Tameside. This is the start of our journey and we hope that you can join us. Thank you.

“I have been struggling with poverty for many years, the cause of which is rooted in my health issues... when you have to tell your story over and over again to prove your worth, it’s retraumatizing and dehumanising.”

- Antony, Tameside PTC Commissioner



Remembering Karen

We dedicate this report to the memory of our friend, Karen McBride.

Karen was a passionate member of the Tameside PTC, knowing from her own experience of poverty that things needed to change. She supported others to use their voice and would often challenge the Commission to listen more and to turn that listening into action, for the benefit of Tameside residents living in poverty. Karen’s passion for social justice shone through every conversation she was in, as she fought for systems to be more compassionate to people living in poverty.

We were devastated when Karen passed away in August 2022 after years of living in poverty. It reminded us once again that poverty kills, and we hope that this report and the legacy of the Tameside PTC will help those living in poverty to be seen, heard and dealt with compassionately, as Karen would have wanted.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

General

1. A Tameside Poverty Charter should be created, with a commitment to include involving people with lived experience of poverty in decision-making and providing poverty awareness training to frontline and other relevant staff. Organisations across Tameside should commit to this Charter.
2. Poverty awareness training should be developed in Tameside with lived experience input, and including real stories of poverty, for staff in support services and relevant organisations.
3. Organisations across Tameside should establish meaningful lived experience processes to influence decision making. A public directory should be maintained of these opportunities.
4. Tameside should follow the lead of other local authorities in declaring a poverty emergency and calling on the UK Government to provide more support for those living in poverty.
5. A new body should be established, or an existing body developed, to continue the legacy of the Tameside Poverty Truth Commission and to hold organisations in Tameside accountable for delivering the recommendations of the PTC.

Access to Services

1. Support services in Tameside should co-operate and better share information, to ensure there is “no wrong door” for accessing support.
2. Support services in Tameside should provide skilled single points of contact to support people with complex needs, through effective referrals, not signposting. People living in poverty should not need to repeat their story.
3. Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council should continue to widen the range of services available in Tameside One and to ensure clear, effective communication of these.

Mental Health

1. A clear pathway for Tameside mental health and therapy services should be established and communicated, with all support services and staff able to appropriately refer people.
2. Mental health services in Tameside should be regularly reviewed. Reviews should be informed by people with lived experience of poverty and mental health challenges, while also adopting a multi-agency approach.
3. Opportunities should be created for children and young people with lived experience of mental health and poverty to be involved in reviewing and improving services.
4. The process of creating individual care plans should be reviewed and improved with lived experience input, including to add aspects around financial capability and debt.

Housing

(Delivery of recommendations via Tameside Council’s Housing Strategy 2021-2026)

1. The Collaborative Partnership of Tameside Registered Providers (of Social Housing) should have direct representation of lived experience of poverty within its membership.
2. Tameside should introduce and maintain a single point of access for all social housing and Registered Providers (of Social Housing) services, to simplify application, allocation and nomination processes.
3. Registered Providers (of Social Housing) in Tameside should review and improve their processes for engaging with customers, for example about rent arrears, with lived experience input and with a focus on delivering a person-centred, compassionate service for those living in poverty.
4. Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council should review and updates its private sector housing strategy, with input from people with lived experience of poverty.

3. TIMELINE & JOURNEY

Poverty Truth Commissions bring people with lived experience of poverty together with civic and business leaders in a community, to identify what poverty looks like in their area and what the root causes of it are. The Commissions are designed to build relationships and for commissioners to co-produce recommendations on how to prevent and reduce poverty in their community in future. Including real stories of poverty, for staff in support services and relevant organisations.

Phase 1 - Setting Up

A Tameside PTC was suggested in 2019 by resident Beatrice Smith, after the success of another local Commission. An initial start-up group was founded, bringing together local partners including Tameside Council, housing associations, voluntary sector organisations, the NHS and more. This group arranged a public gathering at Ashton Old Baths to explore the option of a Tameside PTC.

After different factors affecting the progress of a Tameside PTC, including the Covid-19 pandemic, Greater Manchester Poverty Action was asked to facilitate the programme.

The facilitation team began by recruiting community commissioners, who were people in Tameside with lived experience of poverty. The group started to meet to get to know each other and to prepare for the public launch event in October 2021, where civic and business leaders from across the borough were invited to join as commissioners.



“I know first-hand what it is like to live in poverty and I want to use my voice to make a positive change in our community. Poverty has been with me for most of my life.”

- Fran, Tameside PTC Commissioner

Phase 2 - Launch

At this event, community commissioners shared their powerful and emotional stories of living in poverty in Tameside. Each of these stories gave a stark picture of poverty: of Diana living in poor quality housing not fit for her and her children; of Ed growing up in poverty while his mum struggled with significant mental health problems and suicide attempts; of Fran wanting to provide a better life for her daughter than she had herself. The themes from these stories were clear: people were not getting the right support and at the right time and were instead being passed between organisations or were falling between the cracks.

Councillor Brenda Warrington, the then Leader of Tameside Council, spoke at the launch event. She emphasised the need for the stories of poverty to be heard, listened to and acted upon, and that Tameside was facing a poverty crisis.

“Poverty is one dark cloud that doesn’t go away and if left unaddressed can become the nightmare that doesn’t go away.”

- Ed, Community Commissioner

“Poverty has affected me for the last 10 years after I lost my job... I have to claim for food parcels, these are things I never thought I would have to claim”

- Christopher, Tameside PTC Commissioner



Phase 3 - Exploring Poverty

In January 2022 we started to meet as a full group, bringing together Tameside residents with lived experience of poverty with local civic and business leaders. Our initial meetings focused on building relationships and getting to know each other, including a group walk along one of Tameside's Canal Heritage Trails.

By March 2022, our commissioners had started to discuss issues around poverty in Tameside in more detail, including the frustrations of some in wanting to enact change sooner. The Commission met on 30th March 2022 to discuss areas of importance, for example stigma and education, and we agreed on three priorities for action and vision statements for each of these: Access to Services, Housing and Mental Health.



Between March and July 2022, our full Commission continued to meet, yet most of the in-depth discussions happened in working groups themed along the priority areas, with commissioners deciding which priority or priorities they wanted to focus on. These working groups looked at specific issues relating to poverty and the root causes of poverty, and to create recommendations for change. Later in this report there are summaries of the discussions in the working groups.

The Commission agreed to continue to meet in themed working groups during August 2022, however these plans changed with the tragic death of our friend and fellow commissioner Karen McBride. Instead we took a break until September 2022, while some continued to gather informally, including meeting with Karen's family.



When we regrouped we took time to reflect on Karen's life and to remember her contributions to the PTC. Our commissioners recognised that it would not be the same without Karen in the PTC, but that the process should be completed in her memory. The working groups met again to consider their recommendations and to complete this report.

My life could have been so different had I received the right help from the very beginning... no one chooses poverty, it is not a choice."

- Helen, Tameside PTC Commissioner

"Never before has it been more imperative to question how well our systems are working to assist those who need them the most."

- Beatrice, Tameside PTC Facilitator

Phase 4 - Legacy

We now have this report with our recommendations for positive change in Tameside. We hope these will form part of the legacy of the Tameside PTC and that we can start to embed these across the borough.

Our plan is to continue meeting with those who are interested in tackling poverty in Tameside, to ensure that our recommendations are delivered. Most importantly, we want to see all services and organisations in Tameside recognising the value of lived experience input in decision-making.

This includes our commissioners with lived experience getting involved in reviewing and redesigning local children and family services, and mental health support. We want to continue this by bringing more people with lived experience into these discussions, and by ensuring that our recommendations are the collective responsibility of everyone in Tameside, not just our commissioners.

We look forward to engaging with more senior leaders and others across Tameside, in supporting them to accept and enact these positive changes.



"Everyone needs to know that this is the reality of living in poverty... with your help we can really identify ways of improving things."

- Ivan, Tameside PTC Commissioner

4. WORKING GROUPS

Access to Services Working Group

Our Access to Services Working Group created this vision statement:

“Any resident in Tameside, who needs support knows where to go and can access the help they need at the first point of contact. The level of support should be flexible, appropriate and empathetic to their lived experience. Any resident accessing multiple services will be given a single point of contact with services working in partnerships together for the benefit of all residents.”

In our meetings we discussed the need for skilled single points of contact within support services, who can effectively work with people with complex needs. We talked about how services need to move away from signposting and more towards referrals, using a compassionate approach to ensure there is no wrong door for support in Tameside.



As a group we also discussed the need for frontline staff, and those involved in designing services, to have poverty awareness training. This will ensure that staff are more empathetic and that systems are designed with people living in poverty in mind.

We have worked with Tameside Council to improve support for people living in poverty in Tameside, including by influencing the Helping Hands campaign. We shared our feedback to change how the campaign intended to communicate key messages around support services for people struggling with the cost of living. We also visited Tameside One, a flagship Council building, to share feedback during their review of how the Council was used. Since our visit and based on our feedback, the space now has different support services co-located and available to help people, as well as drop-in support for Council customer services and improved signage of key facilities.

Mental Health Working Group

Our Mental Health Working Group created this vision statement:

“Tameside has a mental health system that is proactive and preventative so that we are empowered to believe in ourselves. Where all Tameside residents needing mental health support at any level will receive coordinated and co-produced care that is timely, appropriate, respectful and compassionate for as long as they need it, adapting to lived experience. Where we all work together to reduce the impact of mental health and poverty.”

In our meetings we discussed the need for a clear pathway of mental health support in Tameside, as those needing mental health support either do not always know where to go or they are turned away based on criteria. We talked about how staff in different services can be unaware of what support is available, meaning no referrals or the wrong referrals are made.

As a group we focused on how services needed a preventative rather than reactive approach, ensuring that people receive mental health support at an early enough stage to prevent further issues later in life. A better understanding of the links between poverty and mental health is needed in services to reduce the chances of people being missed like this in future, and having experiences similar to our commissioners.

“It’s the ripple effects of poverty: not just the necessities like food and heat. It’s not being able to meet people and the dehumanisation”

- Ed, Community Commissioner

Housing Working Group

Our Housing Working Group created this vision statement:

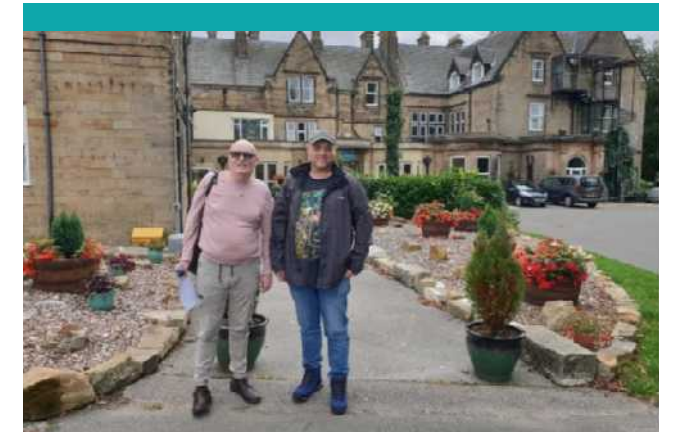
“To increase the number of available, appropriate and accessible homes that are maintained and providers are held to account and a charter of standards adhered to with compassion, dignity and respect from providers. Ensuring a prompt response and a safe space so people can stay in their homes.”

Having a positive experience of the housing process and influenced and evaluated by the voices of lived experience. That homes are safe spaces in which people are able to stay, even in times of adversity and that all tenants have a positive experience of the housing process, influenced and evaluated by the voices of lived experience.”



In our meetings we reviewed and discussed the Decent Home Standards and the national Charter for Social Housing Residents. We collated a list of the sixteen social housing providers in Tameside and discussed the issues in having so many, with each using their own bidding system for properties.

We also discussed how housing providers deal with rent arrears. This led to housing associations represented in the Tameside PTC comparing their approaches and reviewing how they can best support residents. The automated process and wording of rent arrears communications can often make a situation worse for those living in poverty and need to be more compassionate.



“The only things I have ever wanted for my children are safety and a clean home for them... the reality of poverty is that I have ended up where I never wanted to be, insecure housing for me and my two girls, the opposite of what I dreamt”

- Diana, Tameside PTC Commissioner

5. ACHIEVEMENTS & IMPACT

At our full Commission meeting in July 2022 we reflected on the impact of the PTC so far, both on ourselves individually but also on the organisations involved and the wider culture in Tameside. We have since updated these based on our reflections of the whole process as a PTC.

Individual Impacts

- “It opened my eyes to issues I hadn’t considered before” - Civic Commissioner
- “It is reigniting my passion and motivation to make change” - Civic Commissioner
- Our commissioners gained in confidence through ‘Chair training’.
- One of our commissioners has gained employment through their links with the PTC.
- Not all of the impacts were positive. Some commissioners spoke about the difficulties in sharing their stories, especially around struggling to access support.
- “It is frustrating with the slow progress and not being able to solve issues I care about” - Community Commissioner
- “It is thought-provoking and shocking how something can suddenly put you into poverty” - Civic Commissioner
- “I feel like we’re still hitting a brick wall but part of it has come down” - Community Commissioner

Individual Impacts

- “We now work far more in partnership and have linked up with a community commissioner to get lived experience input” - Civic Commissioner
- “We have moved away from signposting for support and instead to face-to-face support” - Civic Commissioner
- “The Council are treating poverty as more of a priority now. This time is different and feels like a change is going to happen. Information is being shared between organisations” - Civic Commissioner
- “Our health and wellbeing board has poverty within its priorities now” - Civic Commissioner

Cultural Impacts

- Our commissioners raised their concerns on a national level via the Centre for Social Justice.
- Tameside Council’s Helping Hands campaign, focused on raising awareness of key support services for people in crisis, introduced face-to-face sessions based on our feedback.
- Tameside One is now being used as more of a hub, with different support services having an active presence there for people to access.
- Our commissioners are involved in designing poverty awareness training for Tameside organisations and support services.
- Our commissioners are involved with reviewing and designing services in Tameside, including Family Hubs within Children’s Services, and the Living Well project.



6. LEARNINGS & EVALUATION

Our Commission has faced mainly challenges. We know how important it is to reflect on our progress and we want to share the following learnings from our experience as a PTC.

- The voices of lived experience are vital to decision making. We have influenced decisions through stories of living in poverty, and we know that more decisions would be influenced if lived experience engagement was adopted on a wider basis.
- Relationships are crucial. If we were to do another Tameside PTC we would focus more on relationships in the early stages, especially between community commissioners and civic commissioners. These relationships would have placed us in a better position ready for challenging discussions further on in the Commission.
- Food is an enabler for conversation. One of our Commission’s favourite sayings became that there “was no meeting without eating”, to enable a safe space for conversation.
- Arrange structured training support for commissioners from the start. One of our most fun sessions was ‘Chair training’ with many laughs had about how to hold a space and facilitate discussion. We did this halfway through our PTC and would have benefited from more opportunities like this earlier in the work.
- Face-to-face engagement wins every time. We had our initial sessions on Zoom due to Covid-19 restrictions but these limited our engagement with each other.
- We need the right voices in the room. We struggled to recruit community commissioners for this PTC and it had negative impacts further down the line, when sessions were unbalanced in terms of there being more civic commissioners than community commissioners. We also had some civic commissioners leave the process, meaning they had to be replaced and these new commissioners did not have the same relationships with others.
- Managing expectations is crucial, and the pace of change can be slow. We had many challenging and frustrating conversations as a Commission about how things were not changing fast enough, and that the expectation was that the PTC would change things during its duration. If we did this again, we would be clear about the quick wins we could achieve and the longer-term change that was needed via the recommendations.
- Structured support pathways need to be available for commissioners along the way as we had times when commissioners were in crisis. Informal support was available but this should be structured and clear from the beginning and delivered by appropriate agencies.
- Listening needs to lead to action. We have focused on sharing stories and listening to each other, but we also challenged each other on the need to act based on these and to look at how these actions should take place.
- A Commission Chair needs to be identified and introduced earlier in the process. We had Sharman Birtles, Vice Lord-Lieutenant of Greater Manchester, join us as Chair midway through our Commission; it would have been more effective to have this role filled from the start, to support with ensuring all voices are heard in the Commission.



An evaluation of the Tameside PTC, via interviews with all commissioners is ongoing. The findings of this, with additional reflections and insights from facilitators and commissioners, will be collated in a separate Tameside PTC Learning and Evaluation report.

7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As commissioners we have made friendships and bonds that will last beyond the Commission. While the Tameside PTC is coming to an end, we know that this important work will carry on and we are looking forward to our recommendations being delivered in Tameside.

We will continue to call for more opportunities for people with lived experience to be involved in decision-making, both in Tameside and beyond through our links with the Poverty Truth Network.

We would like to thank all our commissioners who have been involved along the way, for their passion and determination in sharing the truth about poverty in Tameside. We know this has not been easy and we appreciate your time and your contributions.



We would like to thank the facilitation team of Beatrice, Carol and Hannah and other members of the Greater Manchester Poverty Action team, as well as the funders who made this possible, including Kenton:



Commissioners

- | | | |
|------------------------|----------------|-----------------------|
| Alison Stathers-Tracey | Helen Lomas | Patrick Nolan |
| Antony Robinson | Ivan Wright | Paula Sumner |
| Ceris Esplen | Janine Yates | Roseanna Wain-Basaran |
| Christopher Parkinson | John Gregory | Sarah Threlfall |
| Claire Galt | Julie Wilson | Sharman Birtles |
| Dawn Acton | Karen McBride | Susan Riley |
| Diana Mbithe | Kas Harwood | Tracy Temple |
| Ed Seager | Kat Evans | Vanessa Rothwell |
| Fran Beeston | Leanne Feeley | |
| Heather Etheridge | Lynzi Shepherd | |

Note

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