



Co-operative Councils

Innovation Network

POVERTY



Swansea Council

Our Truth about Poverty

A new approach has been launched in Swansea to help understand and address the causes and symptoms of poverty.

Swansea has become the first city in Wales to establish a Poverty Truth Commission.

Prior to the pandemic a cross-party group of councillors had been looking at poverty and the effectiveness of services provided by the council and its partners.

One of the overriding findings was the need to give those with a lived experience of poverty a greater voice to influence the changes needed.

The council got the ball rolling in helping to start-up the commission which is an independent body hosted by the third sector organisation Swansea Council for Voluntary Service (SCVS).

Between 2021 and 2022 a substantial amount of work took place to identify a core group of individuals from a wide range of backgrounds who would become the "Community Commissioners".

They gathered regularly and a number of common themes emerged:

- Barriers to seeking support ranging from attitudes of frontline workers to inaccessible and sometimes hostile and complex systems.
- The link between mental ill-health and poverty.
- Homelessness and insecure housing.
- Connections between being a domestic abuse survivor and poverty.
- The relationship between being a primary carer and poverty.
- The impact of poverty on life aspirations, career and education options.
- The intersectionality between poverty, race, gender and disabilities.

When the Poverty Truth Commission launched in October 2022 the ‘Community Commissioners’ were joined by 18 “Civic and Business Commissioners” drawn from a range of organisations including the council, police, health service, DVLA, third sector and businesses. They have been meeting monthly since then and the wisdom and experience of the community commissioners has had a real impact.

Perhaps the most significant benefit of the commission so far is that the learning from those living with poverty every day is starting to have an impact on service delivery by all partners involved. We have a clearer understanding of what we need to do.

One of the Civic Commissioners said: “I have learned that I probably did not really consider the end user for services I provide, and also how simple things can mean so much to someone living in poverty. I now always think about those living in poverty when making decisions about service delivery. I try to think of how the service offer would impact on the friends I have made through the commission.”

A Business Commissioner commented: “I’ve learned that it’s important to take time to build relationships, to listen to understand (not respond) and to appreciate the unique impacts poverty can have on every facet of life. Workwise, it has been affirmed that service provision needs to be designed around those who use the service, not those who provide it - or regulate it, or legislate it.

“It’s really brought home how many of the issues faced are due to inflexible or perhaps inhuman processes – so much is entirely the result of the system not being human focused.”

As well as helping to shape attitudes, locally commissioners have also been helping to influence policy nationally. This year the Welsh Government published its new Child Poverty Strategy and as part of this process invited Community Commissioners to speak at a committee hearing in the Senedd.

Their input is acknowledged in the final report particularly around the importance of people being aware of their benefit entitlements, and the need for automated and simplified processes, to help them receive what they are entitled to. The work of the Swansea Poverty Truth Commission was also picked up in the Audit Wales Report ‘Time for Change – Poverty in Wales’, where it was highlighted as good practice.

At the end of April this year the commission came to a close and a celebration event showcased a number of key recommendations:

- A charter for organisations to follow which commits them to working with a compassionate, sensitive, “human” approach.
- Improving access and signposting to valuable services people don’t know about, crucially as universal mental health provision.
- A shadowing/mentoring scheme where service users observe and advise service providers, to improve communication, experiences and outcomes, while gaining insight into a variety of employment roles.
- A local Lived Experience Advisory Panel/Forum to inform policy and practice

It was also announced at the celebration event that the work of the Commission has also led the Wales Centre for Public Policy to select Swansea Council to collaborate on a place-based project to tackle poverty stigma. Tackling stigma is a key priority for people with first-hand experience of poverty. This is because poverty stigma damages people's mental health and can keep them from getting support or playing a full part in their communities.



Swansea's Poverty Truth Commission has taken evidence for the past two years.

For further information contact:

Lee Wenham

Head of Communications - Swansea Council

Lee.wenham@swansea.gov.uk | www.Swansea.gov.uk