

HARTLEPOOL



POVERTY TRUTH COMMISSION

Thrive have a track record of working closely with and for people in deprived communities. Renowned for making a difference to not only individual people's lives, but also with those who hold power, ensuring they are provided with opportunities to see problems afresh from the eyes of the people they serve.

Thrive's work is grounded in people's lived realities of hardship and disadvantage. Working with our community, we have created positive change, adopting a bottom-up approach, harnessing the skills and insight held within our community.

Our community makes difficult decisions every day of their lives – 'can I afford to putting the heating on, where will I be able to buy cheap food so that I can feed myself and my family, how can I stay connected when I have no internet or data, will the job centre sanction me, how do I pay the rent/council tax arrears, how can I access my doctor when I can only make an appointment by phoning at 8.30 on a morning when I am on the school run, how can I afford to pay for my child's school uniform/trip, outside activity....' The list of barriers and issues are overwhelming.

Thrive advocate for the emergence of new ideas and do this by bringing the unique insight held within communities to inform debates that lead to more informed decisions. This insight and expertise add context to any given situation and makes visible the invisible untapped knowledge. This is transformative.

We value a broader debate which considers a wider range of factors and mitigates any unintended negative consequences. That is why we support the ethos of a Poverty Truth Commission and firmly believe that: Nothing About Us, Without Us is For Us



MY TRUTH - JOE

I face difficulties every day, I have a medical condition that limits me daily.

I have 4 children, 2 are home-schooled due to issues and stress.

I volunteer a lot of my time to help with my mental health.

I have a lot of arrears and debt due to not managing my money very well, I have no family support to help with my children or with any other problems I may face.

I have depended on groups like this to help me get some support on challenges I may face.

The advice I have received is helping a lot, but it mostly boils down to not being able to earn more money, which would solve a lot of my debt problems and reduce further hardship in the future.

Before I made the decision to home-school my 2 youngest children, my son came home from school asking if he was a "poverty child" This devastated me, so as a Mam, it was my job to change that, so now I am trying to correct my mistakes, Council tax debt to start - I got a bill and it scared me, so I reached out for help with this. Someone made the call for me on my behalf, to try and cover the arrears, but what I was offering wasn't good enough, what they want is not affordable for me, or again I would have to go without essentials, how am I meant to survive?

MY TRUTH- SAMMI

My name is Sammi and I am a mum of 2 lovely children. I have had many careers over my life, mainly due to having to change careers due to becoming disabled and never being able to find one that suits my needs until recently. I was assessed as having limited capability for work, due to being severe sight impaired, therefore I do not have to work, but I prefer to work. I have worked all of my life since the age of 16 except for the odd two years when I was significantly ill with my brain condition and it left me bed bound. I feel working improves my mental health and allows me to function on a daily basis and it is a part of who I am. I feel lost without a job. Whenever I have been out of work I have volunteered as I know I physically need something to get out of bed for. So now you know a little bit about me your probably wondering why I'm standing here today telling you all of this.

I'm here today to talk about universal credit. I'm on universal credit, as I only work part time hours. I have the perfect job for me right now, I absolutely love what I do. But why have I changed jobs so much? I did use to have a job that worked well for me, but the pay was 4 weekly, meaning every so often according to my pay cycle with universal credit, I would get paid twice in one month. My universal credit pay cycle goes from 17th of the month to the 16th of the month, so if I get paid on Thursday 18th of April 2024, and again 4 weeks later – that date would be the 16th of May. Between the 17th of April and the 16th of May I would technically be paid twice, therefore I am deemed to have earned two wages in one pay month yet it has only been two days short of a single month and my wages and universal credit are still all needed to survive. I am still expected to survive that month with £0 universal credit all because I am paid 4 weekly.

SAMMIS TRUTH CONTINUED

If you are paid 4 weekly, eventually you have a spare wage – for example, in November you get paid on the 1st of the month and again at the end of the month.

Your bills will come out on the 1st of December so one of these wages would be spare if Octobers pay counted towards November. However, when your wages are coming in the middle of the month, so back in April when I had two apparent wages in one universal credit pay cycle. All of these wages were needed and I had no spare wage, like I have in November to cover the loss. The spare wages in November would cover the loss of universal credit, but this never actually lines up with when your universal credit pay cycle so I am left out of pocket and no money to pay the bills., and the logic seems simple really doesn't it? Save the money from my extra pay, like November for when its needed? But now take the cost of living crisis, people living in poverty, food costs rising, debts, rising bills to pay, gas and electricity bills coming through the door. If you have any spare money that isn't needed at the time its going to end up spent, because that's the hard choices you face when you are living in poverty. In the end I made the decision to leave that 4 weekly job and find a different one, because I couldn't cope going through that twice a year. I decided I wanted a job that was monthly pay. Simple, no complications. No more messing on and stressing about loosing universal credit twice a year. But that was until December came. You see, I get paid on the 26th of each month in my new job, that is the date my employer set to pay our staff each month. But this is a bank holiday every year in December. So of course my employer wants to pay us early, most people want to get their wages early in December so they can get their Christmas shopping and everything sorted ready for the big man coming.

SAMMIS TRUTH CONTINUED

I must be the only person crazy enough to say please do not pay me early, because the first year it happened, I ended up losing my universal credit again, because it got counted into my previous months pay cycle on universal credit when I apparently earned two wages in one month again. Even though this was just my December payment early due to bank holidays, and it was exactly the same amount for the hours worked in December, not November. It had to last me all the way until the 26th of January, yet I had no universal credit to help me alongside it. Whether I received that payment on the 17th of December or the 26th of December, my wages would be the same for the year. I received no extra payment, it was for my salaried hours that I worked in December, my hours or income never changed.

People are constantly told all the time that we must find jobs, we must work more hours, well I am disabled and I found a job, I work as many hours as I possibly can. I love to work and I try my hardest to stay employed despite my disabilities. Yet I still face challenges and difficulties with my universal credit. I have to fight to try and not get paid too early, because I know what will happen if they do. There are too many people being failed by the universal credit system because there are too many flaws. Whether that is sanctions to their benefits or giving them £0 amount due to earning two amounts that month. The system is designed with flaws and no matter how hard we try sometimes it feels like we are set up to fail. Is anyone willing to listen to help make a change?

MY TRUTH - IAIN

Just recently I am facing an issue with the DWP regarding my housing allowance. I have recently moved to a new home and because there is a slight handwritten date bracketed the DWP won't accept it and because I can't produce any bills at the moment I am forced to live on only half of what I was getting so I am limited to what I can do socially.

As much as I don't mind spending time with myself, I don't know how long I can get through it mentally not being able to socialise with friends on an evening etc.

Again, I am the lucky one as i am busy most evenings and i do have a good circle of friends some people are not that lucky especially in this age of cost of living, household bills increasing especially for those with families to support.

I have heard many horror stories from people who have either been sanctioned or punished sometimes from no fault of their own it is bad enough trying to survive alone on Universal credit etc without being penalised, it is bad enough people struggle financially a lot of the time affecting their mental health especially due to NHS cutbacks their isn't much support for mental health what are people supposed to do

MY TRUTH - GEORGINA

I left school at 15 with no qualifications due to my mental health. I then moved to Hartlepool at 18 and at 20 I decided to go to college & study towards becoming a psychologist, I paid my way through 2 years of college & 3 years of university while working 2 jobs, doing volunteer work & caring for my disabled sister while living in an abusive household. I graduated from university with a 2:1 in Counselling Psychology then managed to land my perfect job which would support me through my further training to gain my master's & my doctorate degree.

I worked every extra shift possible while still caring for my sister as my husband & I had managed to buy our first home but we still struggled working 3 jobs between us. I fell pregnant with our first son & was blessed to be able to take a full year of maternity leave due to scrimping & saving as much as we could because we didn't have family or friends we could leave our son with & we couldn't afford to put him into childcare as it would mean paying for him to be in care for 13/14hrs a day 4days a week, when I worked out the costs after working 4 12hr shifts, paying to travel to work, paying for childcare I would walk away each month with £40! I would be working purely to pay for my baby's childcare.

I then went back to work having to go to working permanent night shifts opposite to my husbands day shifts we would meet each other in the car park to pass the baby over & I lived on naps. After I had worked my 3 months return to work I had found out I was expecting our 2nd son & this forced me to give up work as I couldn't work nights any longer & we couldn't afford the childcare, when the 2nd baby came along we had no chance whatsoever of being able to afford 2 lots of childcare.

I was forced to give up my dreams because working full time with children without a support network of people around you to help out just wasn't possible. My husband earned more than I did & he was able to work more hours so we didn't have a choice he went to working 70hrs a week while I stayed home. My mental health has suffered a lot the last 12 years because of this & I'll never be able to start over especially after a big surprise of a 3rd son 3yrs ago.

MY TRUTH - SHANNON

My name is Shannon and I'm a mother to two children and unfortunately when my youngest was born I was in a relationship that was no longer safe for me and my children and our lives were in danger so we had to escape to Hartlepool to start a new life.

We found a home that was cheap enough to move in but unfortunately that meant no time to check out the area or anything about where we were about to move, now after a year of being there I realised this wasn't a good place for my children the things they were seeing and hearing even from the children that lived near I didn't want them being exposed to any of it!

It all began to affect my mental health so I knew we needed to move and that's when the real problem started no housing was available as we needed 3 bedrooms and that for me was so disheartening because already for the last near 2 years my children have cried about where we live and how they hate living there but I couldn't do anything to change it, I could have had us moved in no time if I had near £1500 spare but really in this day and age what single mother do you know who has that to just pull out of her pocket to pay for move in fees? and again the landlord I was already with was private and did no repairs that were asked for from the day I moved in so I wasn't very confident going through another private landlord.

It took nearly 2 years and only just 2 weeks ago I've finally been offered a house with the council but I want to help make a change by telling my truth so that hopefully we can start making the changes needed that no other person has to go through what I did just for my children to feel safe in their own home!

MY TRUTH - GARETH

With a successful 11-year career in charitable and private health and social care but still with no money in the bank due to the cost of living, and 2 young children, I needed to do something different and think creatively.

I started my own videography business despite the economic difficulties of this, I am determined to build my new business and lifestyle for myself and my family whilst distancing myself from poverty & supporting others with building communities.

With my background advocating for vulnerable people, I was determined to set up my freelance videography company to shine a beacon on community, social justice and to improve the lives of people in the town.

MY TRUTH - ROBB

Volunteer with The Community of Hope In Early 2019 both of my young children moved in with me due to a family tragedy forcing me to leave my full time employment to care for and look after them. Having no savings and living in a small flat, I had to make drastic changes to my life to enable me to accommodate my new living situation.

Due to the processes of child benefit and unemployment benefit I was left with no money for several weeks, also whilst trying to find alternative housing to fit my new family dynamic. During this period of waiting for benefits to be sorted and arranged I found myself having to borrow from friends, family and others to get by leaving myself in debt, in which I have recently cleared myself of.

Due to the lack of adequate support available in the town I found myself in a hole I thought I couldn't get out of and only through the help of small charitable organisations I have managed to regain a foothold.

It is because of this reason I joined the Hartlepool Poverty Truth Commission hoping to make a drastic and well needed change in the way help and services are provided to the communities of Hartlepool.