



## Thrive Action Meeting

7.00pm 24 June 2009, Thornaby Methodist Church

**T**hrive is a local organisation working to get the voices of people in poverty directly to key decision makers and make important changes in our communities.

The initiative has been working hard on issues which have a severe impact on some of the most vulnerable people in Stockton, including debt, unemployment and anti-social behaviour. Thrive is not a talking shop – it is a power organisation with marginalised people at the heart of its actions, supported by people in faith and community organisations and the values they bring to this important work.

There are two distinct areas to Thrive's work:

- **community organising**
- **on the ground action-research and mentoring.**

**Community organising** is about giving local people power to voice their concerns and to take action to make changes in their community. It is also the same approach as Barack Obama used in his early years as a Community organiser in Chicago!

In March, Thrive was fortunate enough to run a three-day training for its grassroots leaders in partnership with Barack Obama's mentor in community organising, Greg Galluzzo of the Gamaliel Foundation from Chicago. Participants included people with direct experience of poverty, partners from Durham University, local CAP members and representatives from local faith and community groups.

The leadership training was energising for everyone who attended, and led on to the action meeting detailed later in this leaflet.



Complementing community organising is a programme of **action-research**, in which trained volunteers work with households on low incomes to get a detailed understanding of their livelihoods. Using a new framework called Sustainable Livelihoods, Thrive gets a clear idea of issues affecting considerable numbers of people in the borough, and can then take action to bring about positive change.



***"I was very impressed at the professionalism of this organisation Thrive. All the speakers who experience such difficulties in their lives were incredibly eloquent and it is obvious that Thrive are empowering them"** - meeting attendee*



The benefits of this process are two-fold. Firstly, important information about subjects which are not always out in the open, like debt, are explored appropriately and in great detail. For example, Thrive was the only organisation to gather detailed research on the company 'Buy As You View' which charges low-income households thousands in interest payments. Secondly, by engaging closely with people through the mentorship programme, relationships of trust and support help participants to take ownership of issues which are important to them.

The unique selling point of the initiative is that it really gets alongside people to find out which issues are affecting their lives. It isn't a tickbox exercise; it's a framework for understanding the disadvantages which affect people in poverty and providing the opportunity for people who don't usually get involved in decision-making processes to do so. The stories are individual and powerful, but the themes are representative, recurring and immediate to the people in our communities who we work with: health inequalities, financial exclusion, caring responsibilities and employment issues.

*"I think the way the interviews are designed and the questions asked really focus on the people so they don't feel as if you're going down a list of questions or ticking boxes... it's really asking them about their situation - how they feel - and I think that helps them open up and they're really talking about their issues, rather than the general problems in the area. I think that's been beneficial for both them and us" - Andrea Edwards, Volunteer Researcher, Thrive Project*



***"It's only through the training with Thrive that I have been given the confidence to challenge the medical authorities and get the patients further care. I did it – I had to fight to get the doctors in, So I can understand how anybody...it's that easy to slip through the net"***  
– meeting participant

***"Felt a bit more open ...it gave me a chance for my opinion, you know what I mean?"***  
– meeting participant

***"I've never ever done anything like that. It's pushed me. Well I've done it so I'd be able to do it again"***  
– meeting participant

## Other messages recorded at the meeting:

*“Very good awareness raising meeting. Great to see so many people here. Very powerful messages”*

*“Excellent meeting. Powerful to have people raising personal issues in a way that made police/job centre/councilors take notice. Thank you”*

*“A model of how to run a meeting - brilliant! I am appalled at what unscrupulous money-lenders can get away with – at a time when we hear about the continuing obscene pay levels of top bankers and executives”*

*“Excellent attendance with a lot of thought and planning gone into preparing for the event. A variety of response came*

*from the guest speakers but some positive results for those who spoke out and voiced their concerns”*

*“In their particular circumstances, I thought it was incredible. I just really wanted to let you know”*

*“Very excited by debriefing meeting and idea of training and being part of a body that is going to be a major instrument of change”*

*“When you go along you realise it informs you a bit more about the society in which you live...people tend to think they’re scroungers and they’re not, they just live in very poor circumstances” - meeting attendee*



**O**n June 24, over 100 people turned out to support a panel of 15 participants in Thrive’s livelihoods programme who held powerful decision-makers to account on important issues. These key players acknowledged publicly the work of the grassroots members of Thrive and agreed to make changes to their services as a direct result of their work and testimony.

The agenda covered three main issues:

- Job Centre Plus
- Buy As You View
- Community Safety

### Issue 1: Job Centre Plus

Local residents - Maurice, Tanya, Patrick and Carol - shared their powerful stories of the unacceptable and demeaning treatment they had experienced at Job Centres. Maurice also told us about the results of research that he and others had conducted around wider customer service issues at Job centres.



## Action:

Job Centre Plus in Stockton has agreed to work with Thrive and Annette Harrison accepted terms of reference for a new customer involvement group. The group, headed up by two Thrive community organisers – Robert Moss and Maurice Clarkson - is working to improve the service delivery of Job Centres in Stockton and will meet for the first time on Wednesday 15 July with senior figures from Job Centre Plus Tees Valley.

## Issue 2: Buy As You View

Thrive has found hire-purchase company, 'Buy As You View', to be taking large amounts of money in interest and service charges from low-income households in Stockton-on-Tees. We heard first-hand from customers of this company and their experience of how this affected them.

## Action:

Thrive is working with other providers of sustainable financial products to raise awareness about the hidden costs of using

home credit hire-purchase companies and promote alternatives, such as members of the Stockton Financial Inclusion Forum. We believe that through the work of Thrive and other similar organisations 'Buy As You View' have already become more transparent in their marketing about final costs. The project will launch a leaflet campaign to tackle this problem, showing better alternatives to acquiring affordable credit.

## Issue 3: Community safety

Residents in the Wrensfield area of Stockton have been suffering reduced mental wellbeing as a result of anti-social behaviour. Margaret spoke powerfully about the effect this was having on her family. She was able to speak publicly to a senior police figure, who then listened to her concerns afterwards.

## Action:

The project is working with key stakeholders to explore the options for improving the situation in the area which is currently unacceptable for several people who live there.

**Do you want to buy a washer?**

**Pay while you Watch**  
£1128 total  
£7.29 weekly

**Tees Credit Union**  
your community bank  
£653.48 total  
£4.19 weekly

Price comparison based on Hotpoint WDL540 washing machine bought from a hire-purchase company operating in Stockton-on-Tees, with 3-year warranty and delivery and the same product, with 3-year store warranty and delivery charge included, bought from an electrical retailer with an instant loan from Tees Credit Union.

**These are certainly exciting times at Thrive - the initiative is making a real difference to the lives people experiencing poverty and exclusion in our area, and gathering a growing number of people to make change. However, this isn't easy work and the issues the initiative is leading on need intensive research and support.**

**A strategy team, made up of community representatives and people with direct experience of issues like the ones above, is conducting this vital work. The actions will continue in the autumn and we will be in touch soon for how you can play your part...**

**In the meantime, if you would like further information, contact the Thrive office on:**

**mail@thrive-stockton.org.uk  
01642 769570 / 07792 785 777**

**Thornaby Methodist Church, Stanstead Way, Thornaby, TS17 9DZ**