



Church Action
on Poverty
North East

Let's end poverty in the North East



Annual Report

September 2022 – March 2024

Chair's introduction

The cost-of-living crisis has hit people in the North East very hard. Inflation remains stubbornly high (though falling) so the costs of food and staples remain a constant anxiety for low income families. It seems that there will only be a very slight improvement in the coming year and that living standards will remain 7–20% below those of 2019.

We can find signs of hope and optimism as Christians and churches continue to respond, taking action to support people in need (some of the ways that CAPNE and its members are responding are described later in this Report). We have been listening to the stories of struggling people and asking, "How is this possible today in

our country?", responding with prophetic anger that vulnerable people are in this unfair and unjust situation. Remembering the Jarrow March, we ask "Why do people appear so accepting of this reduction in the standard of living? Why are they not angry?"

With the upcoming Mayoral and General Elections we have opportunities to join together through networks such as Challenging Poverty Together in the North East and Lets End Poverty, to raise concerns, ask questions and challenge the candidates (see Chris's report below about the Citizen's Assembly on 22 April).

Bernadette Askins

Our main focus this year has been to collaborate with national initiatives aimed at delivering a more just and equitable society, as we emerge from the cost-of-living crisis, and to embed those initiatives in our particular context in the North East; mindful always to take our lead from those who have first-hand experience of the injustice in our society.



Challenging Poverty in the North East

In November 2023 an in-person roundtable was arranged by national Church Action on Poverty, CAPNE and Thrive Teesside. The event aimed to build lasting partnerships to identify and bring about solutions to poverty in the North East more quickly, recognising we can all do more collectively than on our own. We wanted to enable people with experience of poverty to speak directly to North East church and community leaders.

We were very pleased to see so many denominations participating in the event, and we were encouraged by the sensitive and purposeful discussions that took place on the day and by the widespread desire of attendees to continue working together. Bishop Paul Butler said:

“To be able to have a significant number of church leaders listening in to the stories, and hearing from others working alongside those facing the challenges of the social security system, the inadequacies of provision for those with significant mental health issues, and the lack of support for carers, raises many questions that we need to face as a society.”

A full report of the November meeting with accounts from six people with direct experience of poverty, quotes and photos can be found at www.church-poverty.org.uk/neroundtable

A follow-up Zoom meeting in February 2024 focused on the upcoming Mayoral and General Elections, and actions that churches and church members can take to raise poverty issues and propose practical actions. We agreed that everyone would support the Tyne & Wear Citizens Mayoral Assembly hustings on 22 April at 6pm at the Tyne Theatre, Newcastle. We also agreed to encourage our regional churches to involve people with direct experience of poverty in the development of their social justice and anti-poverty strategies.

Church Action on Poverty North East is keen to support discussions between church leaders and community groups with experience of poverty. We are also hoping to work with North East Churches Acting Together to enable continuing collaborations.

Bernadette Askins



Let's End Poverty

This movement was launched in October 2023 with Church Action on Poverty as one of the founding members. It is bringing together faith groups and churches, food banks and debt advisers, national charities and community organising groups, to name but a few of the 50 organisations and groups signed up, with the aim of making sure ending poverty is a priority at the coming election.

Several members of Church Action on Poverty North East have been attending the online Action Gatherings. The first mass action of the campaign is to send postcards to our MPs. These will be available at the AGM for you to take to your churches and communities because this will only be effective if it is a mass action.

One of Church Action on Poverty's particular contributions to the campaign is the Dreams and Realities touring exhibition. The exhibition consists of 12 portraits and stories of members of the Sheffield Community choir, portraying different aspects of the UK experience of poverty.

Church Action on Poverty North East will be joining with the Local Pantry network (see below) to host this exhibition at Brunswick Methodist Church in Newcastle in May/June this year – don't miss it!

At the same time, we continued with our regular annual events as follows:

LET'S END POVERTY 



Church Action on Poverty Sundays

Sunday 19 February 2023 at St Cuthbert's North Shields

The aim of the event was to explore the themes of Dignity, Agency and Power through the issue of child poverty.

There were over 80 people present. There was a range of speakers who all spoke powerfully on the impact the cost of living is having on the poorest and most vulnerable in our communities. The work of the Baby Bank in Percy Main, North Shields was particularly moving.

Austin Oshegbu, a Migrant Justice worker for Citizens UK, stated that many refugees do not have access to public funds and so are getting no help with the energy crisis.

Victoria Palev, a pupil at St Thomas More High School, North Shields, spoke eloquently about the motivation to campaign against the injustice of having to pay adult bus fares from the age of 16.

Mary Glendon MP highlighted the causes of the crisis which she argued go back to the austerity budgets of 2010 onwards and she drew our attention to the newly launched report 'Child of the North'. There was also an opportunity for a great deal of networking, which was valued by participants.

A recording of the event can be found at www.facebook.com/798826703506481/videos/1210656789587521

Sunday 11 February 2024 in Walker

Taking the national theme 'Dreamers Who Do', and responding to the 2023 report *Child of the North*, CAPNE worked in partnership with youth work organisations in Walker, Newcastle, to give voice to local children and young people. Telling their stories through dance, drama, video and art, we heard how they're making a difference in their communities, as well as learning about their hopes for the future.

We also heard from the adults who work with them – some for more than 40 years – helping them realise their dreams. The event was split over two locations – we began in Walker Parish Church and then moved over to Kids Kabin for some excellent cake baked by the children and volunteers, giving time for everyone to share their stories on the way. Mary Hughes from the Catholic diocese brought things to a close, describing the young people's dance as a burst of life coming into the church before lighting a candle to encourage us all to let our light shine. It was an excellent event, both well attended and inspiring – as one of the participants said, "It made me feel inspired because I feel like even I can make a difference in my community – that every little can make a difference." Many thanks to the organisations who made it happen: Walker Parish Church, Kids Kabin, Monkchester Community Centre, The Bostey and Dunn Terrace Residents. In Walker at least, there is reason for hope!

Jeremy Cain



Advent reflections

December 2022: Integrity and Truth

In December 2022 we gathered at the home of Bridgett Hewitt who every year hosts Quiet Garden Days in her home and garden in Hexham, when she helps people to touch base with their spiritual roots aided by the cycles of creation all around them.

Conscious of the lack of integrity and truth in contemporary political life, we asked her to help us explore the meaning of these values in our own lives and communities. Using the writings of the prophets and other spiritual writers, she helped us to gently peel back the layers of our many selves to reach the essence of what we each bring to Church Action on Poverty, culminating in a very rich sharing.

Bridgett Hewitt is a member of Hexham Abbey congregation. She has a masters degree in Christian Spirituality and is a regional leader in the Christian Meditation movement.

Pat Devlin

December 2023: Redemption – Stories and myths which make it real to us

This annual gathering of CAPNE regulars was held at the St Hilda's Centre, Newcastle. Seven of us gathered to share the stories and myths which made the idea of redemption real for us.

In a previously circulated paper, "redemption" had been described as being "liberation at a price", while "myth" was thought of as being about human experience, telling of events which, in some sense had happened once, but which also happened all the time. But as Karen Armstrong has written, "There is never a single, orthodox version of a myth. As our circumstances change, we need to tell our stories differently in order to bring out their timeless truth."

This day's event provided the opportunity to step back from day-to-day matters and to reflect on some of the themes of the faith which underlie CAPNE members' attempts to oppose poverty.

David Peel



National programmes and Council of Management

We remain connected to Church Action on Poverty's national programmes and Council of Management through Helen Goodman's membership of the national Council of Management, and she writes:

Since our last AGM, we have five new members of Council: Rich Jones, Amanda Mallen, Ashleigh May, Tracy Porter and Martin Stringer all committing to give their time and experience to the great work Church Action on Poverty does.

She goes on to report on current national programmes:

Local Pantries

This year the 100th Local Pantry has opened with Church Action on Poverty and Co-op support. As well as affordable food, members tell us that Pantries are improving family finances, health and wellbeing, preventing food waste and providing a meeting place for people to meet friends, strengthening communities.

Let's End Poverty

This is a joint pre-election campaign run in partnership with other organisations including

the Joint Public Issues Team, Christian Aid and the Trussell Trust. The aim of the campaign is to make tackling poverty a priority and to challenge politicians on what steps they will take if elected. Church Action on Poverty's specific contributions include the Lent course *Act on Poverty* for which 1,000 churches have signed up and the Artists for Change programme, in particular the Dreams & Realities Exhibition (see above).

Speaking Truth to Power

Supporting those with lived experience of poverty to participate in and lead campaigning

Church at the Margins

Roundtable events, bringing grassroots participants into dialogue with church leaders, are used to encourage Churches to co-design mission strategies with those with lived experience of poverty.

Communications

Amplifying the real voices and stories of people with lived experience of poverty.

Members' activities

Most of our members get involved with Church Action on Poverty because it provides a vehicle to raise awareness, particularly among the churches, about the issues they encounter in disadvantaged communities, through their work and voluntary activities and provides opportunities to join with others to work for change – to build a society where everyone can live with dignity, agency and power. So here is a taste of some of our members' activities.



Tyne and Wear Citizens – Chris Hughes

The main focus of last year was a listening campaign with thousands of conversations taking place through 2023. This culminated with the Delegates Assembly in November of last year. The campaigns that were chosen were the cost of living, housing and racial justice in education. There are now three campaign groups working on the specific asks for the Mayoral Assembly on 22 April and the General Assembly.

The Mayoral Assembly will be at the Tyne Theatre and Opera House Newcastle. All the candidates officially standing have been asked to attend and they say they will. You register at: <https://actionnetwork.org/events/tyne-wear-citizens-north-east-devolution-mayoral-assembly>

Citizens UK launched its national agenda in preparation for the General Election for this

year: https://citizensuk.contentfiles.net/media/documents/23_09_21_CitizensUKCitizensAgenda.pdf

Although the focus was on listening this year there was one major campaign victory. The pupils at St Thomas More were campaigning not to have to pay adult bus fares from the age of 16. Following an action by the students in July 2022, with subsequent discussions with the North East Mayor Jaimie Driscoll, all bus companies in

the North East and the department of Levelling Up, the 'Get Round for a Pound' scheme was announced, which enables all under the age of 22 to travel anywhere on a single fare for £1. It has been estimated that this will benefit over 22,000 young people and their families. It was a great success and there is much respect and admiration of the great work that the students and staff of St Thomas More did to enable this victory to be achieved.

Churches Together South Tyneside – Bernadette Askins

Poverty alleviation

Key 2 Life foodbank has had a 33% drop in demand this year, possibly due to increased financial support from government such as cost-of-living payments. People have found it harder to donate and we have had to purchase food, which is unsustainable in the long term. We are very concerned about a decision by the Council to reduce the proportion of the children's holiday support grant so that only 15% is spent on food – the rest is for activities. We have supported 120 families with Household Support Grants providing fuel costs, working with the Council and with Money Advice South Tyneside (a project run by Anglican parishes in Jarrow). Key 2 Life is involved with the South Tyneside Sustainable Food Strategy which looks at the production and manufacturing of food rather than foodbank activity.

Nurturing Dementia

This is a small project to help people understand dementia and make life better in practical ways for people with dementia. Members of local churches have set up an action group and following an audit of the premises, changes have been introduced to make the church more welcoming and accessible. Three very successful and enjoyable Christmas carol events involved local care homes and school children.

Hexham Living Wage Group – Pat Devlin

Following the success of their petition in Oct 2021, the group have continued to monitor pay for carers in Northumberland and were delighted that the offer of a higher rate to care providers dependent on the payment of the Real Living Wage to care staff as a minimum was continued into 2023–24. In addition the hourly rate and mileage allowance was increased for carers.

The group also focused on schools as other major employers in the town. The Trust which manages the Catholic schools is a Real Living Wage employer. The other schools are covered by NJC scales and were awaiting a new announcement.



Happy At Home

70 housebound people get a weekly visit by a volunteer. 150 more mobile people come to our weekly Hubs (pictured), where they chat, have lunch and take part in activities such as trips along the coast, parties, theatre trips and visits to local garden centres. The Men's Group enjoyed riverside walks, beach trips, eating out in restaurants, cinema trip and games afternoons.

Reflecting Together research project

With our partner, Regent's Park (Baptist) College Oxford, we were successful in securing a grant from William Leech Foundation and have started a one-year participatory action research project to understand better the experiences of loneliness and isolation of older people and suggest actions to improve things.

In 2023, following a proposal from West Northumberland Foodbank, the group agreed to focus on the effect of changes to Universal Credit on the low-paid. An awareness-raising leaflet was produced and distributed at a stall in the farmers' market in September. Leaflets were also later delivered door to door on Hexham East with the help of volunteers from No 28 (a community project based on the estate).

A public meeting was organised with speakers from the TUC and Tyne and Wear Citizens.

West Northumberland Foodbank – Rosemary Theobalds

The foodbank now operates primarily as a telephone and delivery service, but the volunteers staffing the telephones also help callers access other services – particularly benefits, debt and energy advice – ensuring callers were receiving the Government Cost of Living Support payments and helping callers access mental health services

and local community-based projects. As well as food parcels, the foodbank have also been able to supply food vouchers and energy vouchers where appropriate. Although started by the local churches, the foodbank is now a fully independent charity.

Northumberland Inequalities Plan – Jim Robertson

Northumberland County Council and Health Organisations have recently agreed and aim to enact a Plan which is forward thinking and includes an advisory role for Sir Michael Marmot. A task group meets regularly to review progress and CAPNE has representation at this group.

Both Northumberland Inequalities task group and Church Action on Poverty NE recognise the interrelationship of child poverty, the isolation of poverty and inequality, the stigma of poverty and inequality, gender inequality and poverty and environmental justice and more. Why are we engaged in this? People in our most deprived North East communities have shorter healthy lives than those in our least deprived communities. By reducing societal inequalities people will be able to live a healthy and happy

live for longer. We state that this should be a profound orientation of the church communities encouraged and required by the respective denominations. What does this mean in practice?

- Improving our understanding of inequalities at a local community level.
- Changing the way we work as organisations, how we work together and how we work *with* communities.
- Building on the strengths of communities and supporting them to take meaningful local action.
- Planning to measure progress, to know we are making a difference.

Our Christian faith requires that we pursue such pathways.



**Church Action
on Poverty
North East**

Published by Church Action on
Poverty North East, March 2024

Church Action on Poverty NE
meets on the last Friday of the
month. To find out more or get
involved, contact the group on
07881 891 142 or
capnortheast@gmail.com