

MANCHESTER

POVERTY TRUTH COMMISSION



2019–21: KEY FINDINGS AND IMPACT REPORT

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About the partners

Manchester Poverty Truth Commission was funded by Manchester Health & Care Commissioning, Our Manchester Investment Fund, and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. It was supported by Cheetham Hill Advice Centre, Macc, and Church Action on Poverty.



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“The biggest impact on me as someone who leads an institution but also has a civic responsibility, is to think about what impact my decisions have on people’s life chances.”

*Dave Moutrey,
Director of
Culture for
Manchester,
Chief Executive
at HOME*

Poverty Truth Commissions seek to discover the answer to the question,

“What if people who struggled against poverty were involved in making decisions about tackling poverty?”

The commissioners for each Commission comprise two groups of people. Around half of the commissioners are people with a lived experience of the struggle against poverty. The other half are leaders within the city or region. Collectively they work to understand the nature of poverty and some of the underlying issues that create poverty, and explore creative ways of addressing them.

The four phases of a Commission

The process of holding a Commission normally lasts for two and a half years. Within that time there are four phases:

Phase 1: The setting up of a start-up group and recruitment of the facilitation team

Phase 2: Recruitment of grassroots and civic/business commissioners and launch

Phase 3: Full Commission meetings and task groups

Phase 4: Embedding the work of the Commission

Following the Salford Poverty Truth Commission’s final event in October 2017, appetite grew among both the voluntary and statutory sectors in Manchester to hold its own Commission. In September 2018, a start-up group was assembled.

Phase 1: Start-up

The start-up group in Manchester consisted of a number of key organisations from across the City and was chaired by Niall Cooper from Church Action on Poverty – the organisation that had run the Salford Commission. Other organisations in this start-up group were:

- Manchester City Council
- Cheetham Hill Advice Centre
- Citizens Advice Manchester
- Methodist Central Hall
- Citizens Advice Manchester
- Manchester Metropolitan University
- Macc
- Migrant Support
- Greater Manchester Poverty Action
- Young Manchester
- Manchester Health Care Commissioning (MHCC)
- Faith Network 4 Manchester
- Nazarene Theological College

Funding

The start-up group secured funding and in kind support of £82,700 for the Commission. It was decided that Church Action on Poverty would be the host organisation for this money and would oversee the project.

Funding was received from:

- Our Manchester (MCC)
- Manchester Health Care Commissioning (MHCC)
- Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF)
- Seedbed

Support was received from:

- Cheetham Hill Advice Centre (CHAC)
- Macc - Manchester Voluntary and Community Sector Support Organisation

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The facilitation team

In February 2019 the full facilitation team was formed.

- Nicci Ward – Coordination support: 17.5 hours a week.
- Lizzie Bassford – Facilitator: 7 hours a week.
- Sinéad O'Connor – Facilitator: 7 hours a week.

Phase 2: Recruitment and launch

Recruitment of grassroots commissioners

The Commission was to include up to 15 people who 'look and feel like Manchester'. A diverse group of people from across Manchester of all ages, faiths and cultures. These 15 were to have lived experience of poverty and have a desire to share their voice to affect change on behalf of others living in the city.

We contacted voluntary organisations from across Manchester and arranged visits and introductions so we could share in person what the Commission aimed to do. Overall we recruited around 25 commissioners, but lost a number of these due to changes in circumstances. We held a core group of 13. Unfortunately when the pandemic hit, four of our commissioners were unable to continue in the process due to their circumstances changing.

Our grassroots commissioners were:

- Ahmer Rizvi
- Tom Robertson
- Stef Benstead
- Gemma Ballingall
- Nadine Travers
- Marsha McAdam
- James Meehan
- Angelique Umugiraneza
- Cyril Wilding
- Humaira Beg
- Michael Ossai
- Bibaloki Yamonamo
- Maria Fesus



Charles Kwaku-Odoi, Faith Network 4 Manchester

Recruitment of civic / business commissioners

With the recommendations of the start-up group and with the written support of Councillor Sue Murphy, we approached a number of decision-makers in the city. We shared the vision and process of the PTC and invited civic and business leaders to join as commissioners. We recruited a total of 16 civic / business commissioners. Unfortunately one of these commissioners was made redundant during the process. Tragically our much loved Deputy Leader of the Council and civic commissioner Sue Murphy unexpectedly passed away in April 2020.

The introductory meetings were important so those joining the Commission had an understanding that this Commission would be an unusual and potentially uncomfortable process. A process that values relationships over and above anything else. It would require deep listening before any solutions were discussed. We required commissioners to commit to attend one meeting each month between 11am and 2pm which involved eating together. These meetings switched to Zoom due to lockdown requirements.

Our civic / business commissioners were:

- Councillor Sue Murphy – Manchester City Council
- Mike Wild – Macc
- Ruth Bromley – Chair of Manchester Health and Care Commissioning
- Dave Pester – Greater Manchester Police (GMP)
- Councillor Bev Craig – Manchester City Council
- Dave Moutrey – Director of Culture for Manchester and HOME
- Viv Slack – Street Support, GMHAN
- Charles Kwaku-Odoi – Faith Network 4 Manchester
- Julie Price – Manchester City Council
- Richard Forster – Lloyds Bank
- Patricia Cartney – Manchester University Head of Social Work
- Paul Martin – LGBT Foundation
- Anna Bishop – One Manchester
- Frances Hewison – Manchester Metropolitan University
- Claire Cottingham – Laing O'Rourke

“If you are used to going to those typical, organised meetings, it’s very quick to know who is who. Whereas the Poverty Truth meeting isn’t like that.”

*Nadine Travers,
grassroots
commissioner*

The launch event

In June 2019 we launched the Manchester Poverty Truth Commission at the Comedy Store on Deansgate. Over 200 people from organisations across Manchester attended the event, at which our grassroots commissioners presented their stories of struggle using video, poetry, monologue and other mediums.

Every conference delegate was handed three cards. A ‘statistic card’ with a fact about poverty in Manchester. A ‘chance’ card with a potential scenario someone could find themselves in, and finally an ‘action’ card – asking the question of every delegate; ‘what will you do about poverty in Manchester?’



Phase 3: Full Commission meetings

The full commission began to gather and build relationships from September 2019, meeting once per month to deeply listen to each other’s experience and begin to unpick the tangled web poverty creates.

At the first full meeting, Commissioners had great fun playing a ‘Poverty Truth’ edition of *Monopoly* developed especially for the launch. What card has life dealt you?

This enabled us to understand the roots that cause people to fall into the trap of poverty and the systemic reasons which make it impossible to climb out.

Each session was expertly facilitated in a way which enabled the barriers between grassroots and civic and business Commissioners to be gradually broken down. All the sessions were highly participatory,

Carmen Byrne’s visual representation of some of the key themes from the launch (<https://carmenbyrne.co.uk>)



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enabling Commissioners to share stories and reflect together on each person's own unique insights into the truth about poverty in Manchester and what needs to change.

In November, the Commission meeting focussed on the questions: What score would you give to the impact of poverty on quality of life? What about food? What about housing?

Commissioners also used creative methods to start experimenting with the systems they want to be different. The January 2020 session included talking about our contact with decision making structures and our spheres of influence to be able to bring about positive change.

The Commission also benefited from the behind the scenes support of the Poverty Truth Network, with several Commissioners attending a Network gathering in at Lancaster University in September 2019 to share experiences and reflections with other members of other Commissions from across the country.



“We have now included the word poverty in our LGBT two-year strategy ... I’m not sure I would have been doing this work so quickly if I hadn’t been exposed to the process.”

Paul Martin, Chief Executive at LGBT Foundation

The Commission and a Covid-19 campaign:

#ThisShouldAlwaysBeNormal

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown, the main work of the Commission had to be put on hold for a number of months, and all subsequent Commission meetings have had to take place via Zoom.

From April 2020, a group of grassroots commissioners continued to meet via Zoom to share their reflections and experiences of poverty in the light of the first lockdown.

This generated a number of key messages based on the insights of ‘experts by experience’. The FrameWorks Institute helped to shape these insights to improve messaging. The campaign was shared widely on social media, both locally and nationally, using the hashtags #ThisShouldNeverBeNormal and #ThisShouldAlwaysBeNormal:

“We are checking in with our neighbours. Asking how they are and helping where we can.”

“We are recognising that people in poverty have always been in need.”

“Local decision making has allowed for better solutions.”

“Using tech to free us has been fantastic. Everyone should have this.”

“Getting food to the people who need it makes perfect sense.”

“Allowing people to work from home can be a way to help people manage their health. Disabled people have been asking for this for a long time and it’s great that the benefits are now recognised.”

“I am helping my neighbours so much. I could have always been doing this and I am definitely going to continue. It’s just the right thing to do.”

@TruthPoverty
#ExpertsByExperience
#ThisShouldAlwaysBeNormal



WHAT IS A POVERTY TRUTH COMMISSION?

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Poverty Truth Network gathering, Lancaster University, September 2019

Task groups

In March 2020 three specific themes had been decided upon by the Commissioners as a whole to investigate further.

- Child and Family Poverty
- Exploitation
- Council Tax and Benefits

After a delay of several months due to lockdown, task groups were formed in September 2020, made up of commissioners – both experts by experience and key decision-makers. Together they came up with recommendations for the city and created change where they could. The recommendations and impact of these task groups are outlined in the report below.

Phase 4: Embedding the work

The responsibility for embedding the important work of the Poverty Truth Commission lies with all of us. We

each have a part to play, whether a statutory, voluntary, faith or business organisation or a community member.

The recommendations set out in this report are practical and achievable. Every organisation should consider how they can play their part in alleviating poverty in our city. We must not pass the buck.

One of the key learnings from the Poverty Truth Commission is the value in developing relationships with people who share different life experiences and deeply listening to the impact of those experiences. Every commissioner involved in the PTC has communicated the immense worth in approaching solutions to day to day struggles of poverty. Great value has been placed on not rushing to answers but taking time through discussion to consider options that will work better for everyone, ensuring greater impact.

“I’m aware that housing associations make well-intentioned decisions for people that they think are solving the problems, but actually haven’t really listened or heard. The things that will make a difference aren’t necessarily the things that we think.”

*Anna Bishop,
Chief Operating
Officer at One
Manchester*

**“It’s all
about
chance...
where you
were born...
was your
mum an
alcoholic?
Did your dad
beat you?
It feels so
random and
(down to)
chance.”**

*Anna Bishop,
Chief Operating
Officer at One
Manchester*

This task group discussed the day-to-day challenges and exclusion that children and families in poverty face. Key statements that came out of this discussion were:

- Low-cost school uniform should be accessible to all
- Essential clothing items (winter coats and shoes) should be accessible to all
- The culture offer of the city should be accessible and affordable to all
- Information on services in the city should be more easily accessible to all
- Broadband should be regarded as a utility and available to all regardless of ability to pay

Recommendations to the city

1. All schools should make their uniforms as low-cost as possible
2. All uniforms should be able to be bought in supermarkets
3. If schools want a logo on their uniform, have an ‘iron on’ or ‘sew on’ option
4. All schools should make their branded pieces as low-cost as possible
5. The city needs to find a way for schemes like Junior Working Wardrobe to be universally accessible
6. The culture sector should be supported to keep finding creative ways to make their work available, accessible and affordable to those from the most disadvantaged communities across the city
7. The cultural sector must find more ways of taking their work into our most disadvantaged communities
8. The cultural sector must be supported to build an effective partnership with transport to enable affordable access to cultural events and institutions
9. As part of Covid recovery, make sure the city centre offer is aimed at all
10. The local authority should invite a range of citizens with a wide range of communication needs to try out the website and give feedback on accessibility and ease of navigation
11. The Council and all public services should publicise telephone numbers in a prominent place – more human contact!
12. The Council should build universal, affordable broadband access into their digital strategy

Impact as a direct result of the Commission

1. HOME have made their £1 theatre tickets available to all care leavers
2. HOME are looking to invite people with lived experience of poverty to join the board of trustees to ensure poverty remains a priority on their agenda
3. HOME are working with the Parks Department of the Council to plan cultural activities in local parks and communities so that those in deprived communities have opportunity to access cultural experience and activity
4. One Manchester are extending their working wardrobe project to add a junior working wardrobe where children and young people referred can access school shoes, trainers and coats
5. Pop-up uniform shops will be piloted in Wythenshawe and Openshaw, where people can donate uniform in new or good condition that has been grown out of so that others can benefit
6. Understanding everyday experience and impact of digital exclusion has been raised in the City's digital exclusion strategy

“40% of the children who live in Manchester are growing up in poverty ... It's not about dealing with another disadvantaged group, but in many areas of the city, it's the majority. An outcome of the PTC is about how this can be embedded into everyone's thinking.”

*Councillor Bev Craig,
Deputy Leader of
Manchester City
Council*

Commissioners and facilitators filming for celebration event



“When I shared my experience of dealing with the police as a young person, (Superintendent)

Dave was horrified and apologised on behalf of the police force. You see, from the community I come from we are taught to see the police as the enemy. The Poverty Truth Commission gave me the opportunity to see the police as a person and that has been really powerful for me.”

*Nadine Travers,
grassroots
commissioner*

Exploitation is a huge subject, but for the purposes of this report, the task group specifically discussed the impact of poverty on:

- Gangs and grooming for criminal exploitation
- Childhood trauma and trauma informed responses
- Sexual exploitation (including survival sex work)
- Work exploitation

Regarding exploitation, the task group agreed on these statements:

1. As a Commission we state that everyone is deserving of love and that love is an important factor in us being safe.
2. As a Commission we state that everyone should have what they need to be safe.
3. As a Commission we state that some of the systems that should protect people from exploitation and abuse may actually make people more vulnerable (e.g. police, criminal justice system, Home Office, social services). This is due to the known and feared negative consequences that could happen to the exploited person (or their abuser).
4. We believe that many systems leave some people more at risk of exploitation. The intersectional areas of identity and experience impacted include the LGBTQ+ community, Black people and those who are from racialised communities, women, sex workers and people who have uncertain immigration status or who have no recourse to public funds.
5. We can amplify each other's work and bring more attention to anything that is working.
6. Be an ally. There is great power in this.

James Meehan, grassroots commissioner



Recommendations to the City

1. Helping people with trauma

Identifying when adults have had trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and providing meaningful therapies that will help spot ACEs in children earlier and help them immediately. Use resources to prevent compounding trauma and a cycle of abuse.

2. Sexual exploitation

Sexual exploitation causes physical harm, emotional distress and long term trauma. We want you to intervene in any part of the system that makes people vulnerable to sexual exploitation. This includes poverty, housing provision, immigration status, safe working environments and previous sexual exploitation or other adverse childhood experiences.

The huge wave of poverty that is coming will mean that more people will need to do sex work as way to feed themselves and their children. We are so worried about the people who will go into sex work and how we can keep these people safe. This will affect people from all areas of life. We all need to be planning for this now.

3. Intersectional issues

We believe in commissioning for inclusion and that all services should be designed and commissioned for those who will have the most difficulty accessing them and for those who are most likely to need them.

4. Online grooming and increased risk factors

Be aware that online processes like social media and internet banking make children and young people and adults more at risk of exploitation. This risk has increased during the pandemic.

5. Gangs and grooming for criminal exploitation

- Recognise the impact of poverty and do something about this.
- Help young people identify that they are being groomed before they are involved in serious crime.
- Prevent young people going on to groom other young people into criminality.
- We recommend there be a pathway for exiting involvement in gangs and this be co-designed with (or by) people with lived experience.
- As a Commission we strongly support the payment of people with lived experience of

gang involvement. We feel that to not do so borders on exploitation of knowledge and community resources that generates funds for charities and services while trading on the free labour of people who have been exploited. While there is a role for volunteering it should not be assumed that mentors can and will work for free – especially when other people are being paid for their work.

- As a Commission we would like to stress the necessity of involving people with lived experience of gang involvement in supporting and mentoring those affected by this now. To achieve this the following would be helpful:

- Have clear guidance on DBS checks and the fact that there are not blanket bans. That there be guidance that explains examples of where people with prior criminal convictions who are still able to work within a safeguarding environment.
- Help to be provided to people with lived experience of involvement in gangs to set up community groups or community interest companies. This would enable people to provide help in a way that they know will be effective.
- Advocate for lived experience work to be commissioned, funded or paid for

6. Providing education in exploitation, trauma and trauma-informed responses

People need trauma-informed responses. This is critical to keep people safe.

There should be training specifically on the link between poverty and exploitation. This can happen in Manchester's universities and medical school. It can also be delivered in every sector as valuable understanding. There is free training available for this and we ask that all services and systems train their staff and volunteers in this important approach.

7. Work exploitation

Understand that there is discrimination in what people are paid and who can do which work. This impacts on money and also on safety in the work place. There are structures in place that mean some people have few safe work options and many work for wages that are not enough to live on.

“I would definitely recommend the Poverty Truth Commission to other cities and I hope that this is not the end for Manchester.”

Paul Martin, Chief Executive at LGBT Foundation

Impact as a direct result of the Commission

1. The Social Work department at Manchester University and Manchester Medical School have designed a stand-alone session on exploitation and poverty. This covers ACEs and trauma within the framework of poverty. Both institutions currently cover most of the topic in the context of other subjects but believe a standalone session delivered as part of the curriculum will help embed this knowledge and practice on all students being educated in health and social care. The first session has been delivered with more planned for the future. The commissioner who works at Manchester University will lobby the other universities to do the same.
2. Manchester Health and Care Commissioning re-states its commitment to Commissioning for Inclusion
3. Manchester Health and Care Commissioning (MHCC) will advocate for lived experience to be part of planning and commissioning in whichever body supersedes it with the next restructure of the NHS
4. Poverty is now on the agenda for the LGBT Foundation's two-year strategy
5. A new Trauma Responsive Community Hub is being set up in North Manchester. Cheetham Hill Advice Centre will work in the setting up of this hub to include responses to poverty and its impact.

A message from the task group: use your influence

We ask that you use any power, influence or resources you have to combat exploitation and to reduce the factors that place people at risk.

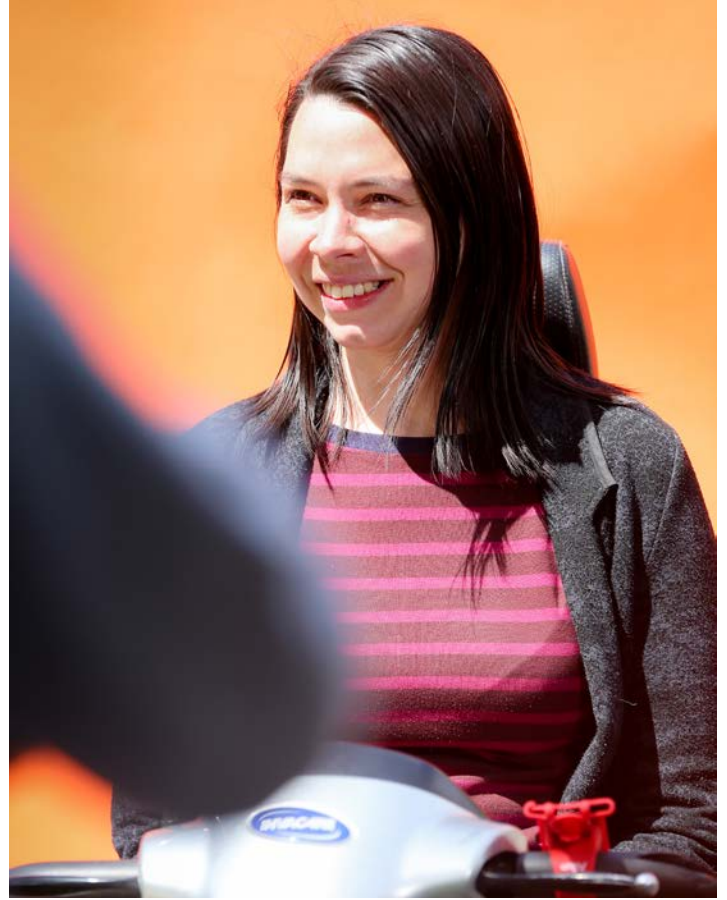
“Everything is closed down but sex workers still need to go to work. They are at increased risk and more isolated than ever.”

@TruthPoverty
#ExpertsByExperience
#ThisShouldNeverBeNormal



Opposite – Commissioners filming for the celebration event:
Ruth Bromley (Manchester Health and Care Commissioning); Stef Benstead (grassroots commissioner);
Ahmer Rizvi (grassroots commissioner); Paul Martin (LGBT Foundation)

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“When I told my story, which really started with the Covid pandemic and my husband losing his job, the members of the task group were very understanding. They said, ‘You are not alone in this.’”

Angelique Umugiraneza, grassroots commissioner

This task group discussed the impact of debt and arrears in keeping people in poverty. Though many people would willingly do all they can to get out of debt, it can be an impossible mountain to climb, not only having a financial impact but also a negative impact on health and well-being. This task group worked on ideas for reducing council tax arrears and any other kind of debt for people facing hardship.

Recommendations to the city

1. Design and run community-based workshop / pilots

One of the major issues that was identified was that residents in debt with council tax and other bills often don't engage until it is too late. There is a perception that the Council can't / won't help and that people are worried about making contact.

We suggest considering and piloting a new approach with a different dialogue to find a way that supports early contact and a more supportive and responsive relationship that builds on existing trust, relationships, networks and expertise in our communities.

The Council could take a more holistic approach to council tax debt support by encouraging contact with residents. Too often residents have multiple arrears covered by different years and there is no way of dealing with the whole position that stops further costs and court action. Even when they want to resolve the issues, residents can feel that there is no way out, trapped by debt that continues to build year on year.

Based on circumstances, there are some options councils could use to reduce debt at this stage during the pilot, such as applying discounts and exemptions, and writing off costs.

The phrase 'amnesty' was suggested to describe a potential non-threatening, less bureaucratic approach that encourages an equal and honest

dialogue, in which residents choose to come forward and find out what can be done. Where necessary, residents could be supported by trusted community representatives who form part of the sessions.

These workshops could be in community settings where the discussion is more informal and collaborative, whereby the Council works with the resident to:

- Ensure that the amount being paid is correct
- Ensure that there is a health-check on the account, checking that all discounts and exemptions are being claimed and paid
- Provide specific support to people who could be exempt from council tax due to meeting the specific definition of 'severely mentally impaired'
- Examine whether household income is being maximized and if other benefits should be in payment
- Based on current income details, discuss the best way to maintain council tax payments and clear any arrears
- Council staff should consider, where appropriate, discretionary support and withdrawal of some costs if this means that repayment plans can be maintained
- Agree next steps and build on this with regular contact



and links that initially can be set up in the community setting

It is proposed that the multi-disciplinary workshops could be set up in areas where there are significant arrears. We would invite residents to attend to get help with their council tax as well as other issues. Professional attendees could include council tax and Benefit Staff, Money Advice experts and Mental Health experts. People from the community who attend could get holistic, joined up support to help them deal with all their issues, including the possibility that some of their arrears are reduced.

It is proposed that this could be piloted and the learning could be used to agree some further principles and proposals for the Council and others to consider.

2. Pilot paying off arrears through external funding

Many people who have experienced difficulties in life find that, even after they have turned their lives around, they are still followed by debt which can take years to clear and hampers their efforts to access decent, affordable housing. We wish to pilot a debt-support programme in which participants receive support for managing money, bills and debt; support towards retraining, volunteering or upskilling; the opportunity to volunteer in the local community; and a monetary gift towards writing off their debt. This is a separate scheme from the proposed council tax activity covered separately within this report, but if set up at a similar time then people in debt could be referred to the scheme by the Council when they attend a workshop for Council debt assistance. This would make it another tool that the Council has access to in helping people with council tax and other debt.

3. Consistent approach across Greater Manchester

Based on the ideas outlined above, Manchester City Council could engage with other Greater Manchester Authorities to explore the adoption of a consistent approach across the region.

This would mean all authorities would consider:

- Writing off summons costs where someone is engaging with a council to repay money owed and this could be where they are in receipt of maximum benefit and an

attachment of benefit from the DWP is in place and this would make the difference in terms of stopping arrears increasing

- Agreeing not to send cases where the resident is in receipt of maximum benefit and an attachment of benefits in place on part of the debt, to Enforcement Agents (Bailiffs) to collect other years except in exceptional circumstances
- Agreeing a consistent vulnerability criteria and the characteristics of residents where it is not appropriate to use enforcement agents to collect debt owed
- Learning from the multidisciplinary workshop run by Manchester and adopt a similar approach, running workshops right across the region

4. Lobby Central Government

There are three areas where simple changes in legislation and guidance would make a significant difference to people on low incomes with Council Tax debt. Some of these changes would require changes to legislation and we ask you to lobby for these changes as a way to support Manchester Poverty Truth Commission.

- Removing the need to obtain a Liability Order from the Magistrates Court before the DWP will make an attachment of benefits to reduce Council Tax arrears (providing the resident agrees). This would both accelerate the process, meaning the arrears can be addressed sooner, and avoid the addition of summons costs to any debt (currently £79.50 in Manchester). Primary legislation would be required for this as the Council doesn't have the power to do this.
- Make it a requirement for Councils to consider remitting (cancelling) costs where someone is on full benefit and an attachment of benefit has been put in place.
- Make it a requirement that residents on maximum benefit, where an attachment of benefit is in place, are not referred to Enforcement Agents for recovery on other accounts with the additional costs that this referral incurs.

Taken together, these three steps have the potential to reduce costs to residents by nearly £400, accelerate the recovery process and stop Magistrates Courts being clogged up with thousands of Council Tax Liability Order cases.

**“Because
of my
experiences
and where I
come from,
I never felt
valid. Now
I feel like I
have a right
to be here
and take my
seat at the
table.”**

*Nadine Travers,
grassroots
commissioner*

Impact as a direct result of the Commission

**Pilot Project between
Manchester City Council
and the Oasis Centre Gorton
underway.**

Council staff and the management team at the Oasis Centre Gorton have agreed an approach that gives Oasis staff direct access to the council tax back office. On a weekly basis they will be able to discuss whatever casework has been brought to their attention to try and resolve issues faced by their service users. As well as checking that liabilities are correct and appropriate discounts and exemptions are in place, as part of the trial council tax staff will have wider powers to remove summons costs, award discretionary payments, make longer arrangements and raise issues relating to Council Tax Support with Benefit colleagues. In short, everything possible will be done to help people to meet their council tax responsibilities in a sustainable manner.

Other than the lobbying of central government, all the proposed actions are within the Council's power to adopt immediately or at short notice and have the potential to make a significant impact on the experience of those on the lowest incomes, struggling with council tax debt.

Council tax is a complex system. This complexity can make it hard to make general statements about this process and we have given simple suggestions for how this process could improve for everyone.



A task group at work



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Manchester's local
voluntary & community
sector support organisation



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