

Relaunch of Dundee Fairness Commission

August 2020

Covid-19 has shown us that while we are all in the same storm, we are not all in the same boat. People in poverty must be shown compassion and not be cast adrift.

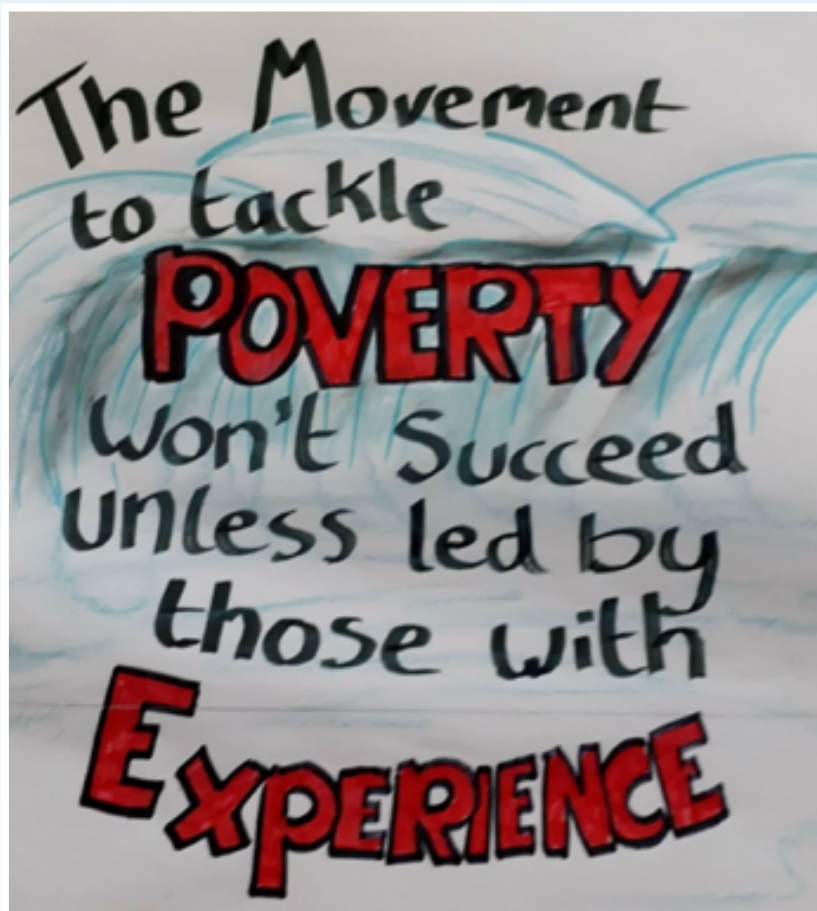
- Joseph Rowntree Foundation

This has shown the obvious wealth divide. This hasn't impacted the poor the same way it has the middle and upper classes. If you have a car and excess cash, this has been a totally different lockdown for you than it has for me.

- Dundee Commissioner

A Fairer Dundee after Lockdown - Relaunching the Dundee Fairness Commission, August 2020

Dundee Fairness Commission brings together 12 people with personal experience of poverty and inequality and 12 people with influence in our city, Community and Civic Commissioners working together as equals. Their desire is to search out the issues people are struggling with today, to hear their stories and find ways to make a difference. The key is the collaborative process. This is about the real experts in the room - the Community Commissioners representing local communities - being in a position to influence change through their experiences and ideas. This is about seeing each other, hearing each other and speaking out together. After a pause during lockdown, we have regrouped and relaunched and this report highlights the recent experiences of Commissioners and their thoughts as we move forward with the work of the Dundee Fairness Commission.



Foreword

Eddie, Community Commissioner

The Dundee Fighting for Fairness Commission launched in 2019 with another great selection of Civic and Community Commissioners. Things were going great; the various groups had been picked and themes identified to investigate. Commissioners were geared up to tackle the challenges ahead when suddenly the UK and wider world was hit with this Covid-19 pandemic, since then the country has seen a massive shift in society, a wave of lockdowns, closure of services and deserted streets. It was unprecedented and almost dystopian in effect. The fear of contagion and sickness has seen the population have to change how families operate, no schools no work and loads of panic and fear in the beginning.

However, in a wave of tragedy comes opportunity for greatness. The way communities have reacted and sections of the government, along with local authorities, has been nothing but amazing. Workplaces have chosen to utilise the assets like vans and premises to help local charities and groups to tackle some of the key issues developing around poverty, hunger and mental health. However, we must now look to be cautious as where we celebrate all the positives, we must start to look deeper and see if all this has helped everyone. Are there pockets of forgotten or missed people? Or is more than is being provided needed? **The next step must be to start gathering and listening to those affected on the ground.** Food poverty has been tackled massively, but have we thought enough for fuel poverty? And what about disabled people whose services during this pandemic have disappeared? All these issues will need a more holistic support.

Trudy, Civic Commissioner

This pandemic has altered many things in life. For some it has brought greater challenge and for some opportunity. As a civic commissioner I feel we have been given an opportunity to refocus on areas which have impacted on our most vulnerable groups and we have renewed insight into what matters to people. **The gap between those who may be vulnerable and those who are not is even more evident and has demonstrated the inequalities experienced by many in many aspects of life as Dundonians.** Our fairness commission is back on track and I am pleased to be part of the group examining the effect on mental health as we have lived through this pandemic. **The voices of the people are even more important as we focus on our work in the fairness commission.** Engagement with those with lived experience informs our work and I look forward to building on the work previously carried out but with that altered focus on covid impact on our communities and on how we can make positive change happen.

Listening throughout lockdown: what have we heard?

This is actually what it's like for people in poverty all the time – we constantly have to go without and make sacrifices and stay in the house and be bored and have to go without nice food or going to the pub or going on holiday – this is what it's like for us all the time.

Sadly the main themes I have heard is that those on the lowest incomes have struggled to find support and this has affected their quality of life, their food and fuel priorities have changed massively and a lot of people have struggled to live during this pandemic. There has also been lots of cases where people who were working or were self-employed/temporary contracts etc have now lost their jobs and have been hit hard and have found themselves in poverty.

So many families found themselves suddenly thrust into a strange situation. I suddenly noticed my electric and food bills shot up as everyone was home an extra 8 hours and boredom eating. We tried to fill time but there's a limit with so many kids and one with autism who didn't understand the lockdown so would go out every ten minutes. My wife is a key worker, so she was still at work, however, no help was offered for our disabled son who was 17. So, I was doing work while watching him and rest of kids who were too old for hubs at schools. So many parents found a new love for teachers as none of us had a clue about homework and the new way to do maths, as I dig out the slide rule, and start long division!

I have essentially had my treatments and appointments put on hold due to COVID and have struggled to receive my medications despite being in the shielding category. Every time I speak to anyone working in these services, I feel a sense of blaming and shaming as they will say that these services are too busy due to service users.

Not knowing what support is available – whether it be financial help, mental/emotional support, entertainment, sourcing food, etc... it's hard to know where the help is because you've never gone through this before so you don't know where to even start.

I'm worried about what affects this will have on my community. All of the usual problems of life are still happening. And then you have the fear of this virus on top of things. It's a lot.

I am already “statistically” in an inequality group (disabled due to chronic illness and pensioned at age 30 due to my health, therefore I now rely on a small pension and disability benefit and am classed as being on a low income). During the COVID-19 pandemic I have witnessed public services intensifying their excuses for poor services. I was already seeing these “excuses” pre COVID-19 and the NHS was already at breaking point. Unfortunately, due to the strain that was already on public services, I feel that COVID-19 has pretty much broken the system and people in my situation will experience further suffering as COVID-19 will be used as the scapegoat sadly.

Drilling down deeper into Food & Fuel, Mental Health and Physical Disability

Earlier this year the Dundee Fairness Commission identified 3 priority areas, developing working groups with Community and Civic Commissioners to drill down deeper into the issues. They were keen to hear more about people's experiences and during August 2020 they conducted a survey, seeking people's experiences over the past few months and concerns as they look ahead. With over 400 responses so far, the Groups will analyse these and then deepen the conversation around Food & Fuel, Mental Health and Physical Disability before making recommendations to the Dundee Partnership and other bodies in Spring 2021.

So, what has it been like for people in Dundee over the past few months?

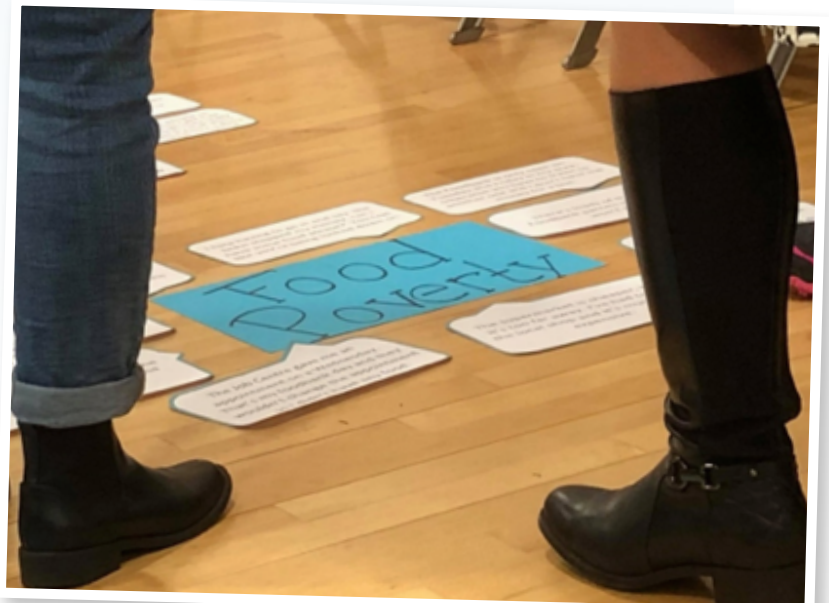
Food & Fuel Working Group

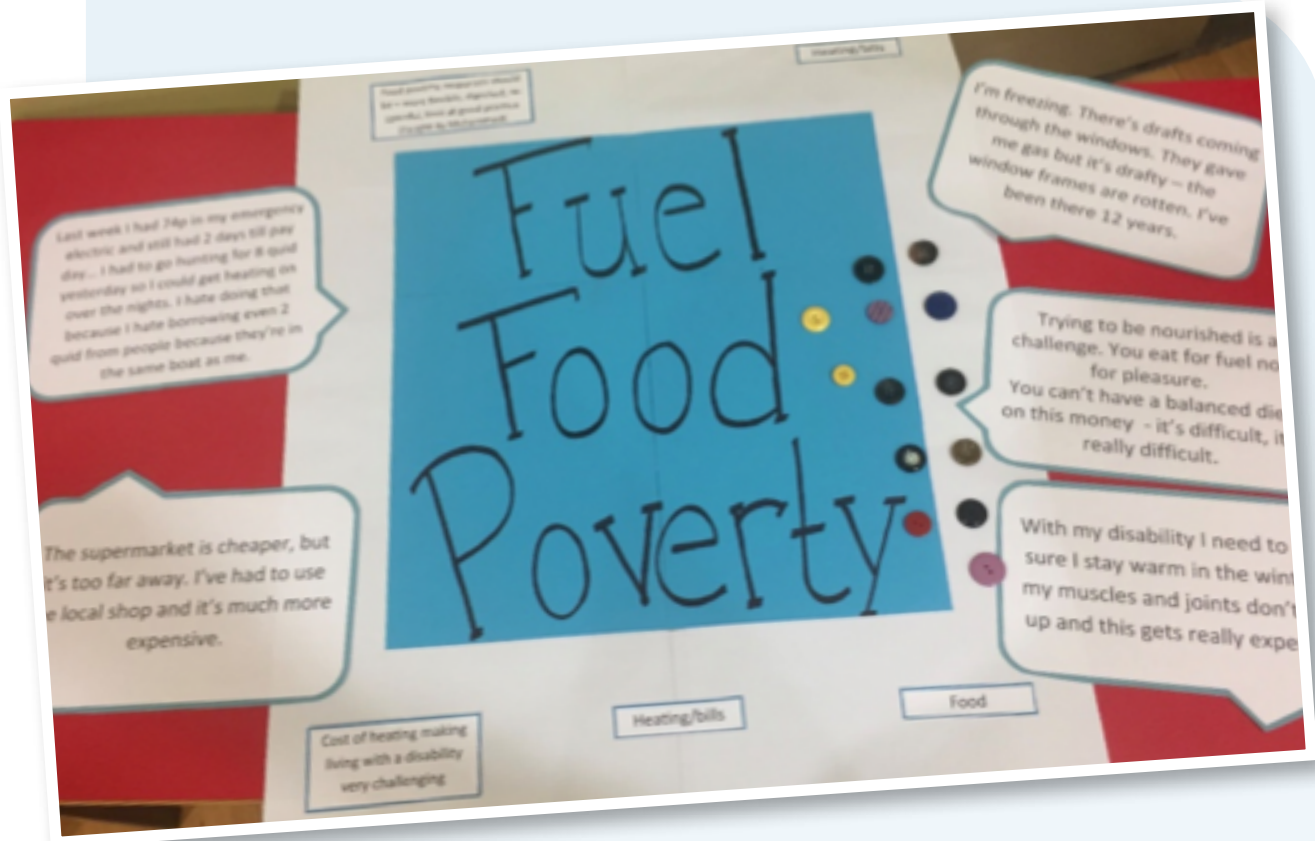
Many of us talk about an increase in our home energy bills, however Citizens Advice are predicting approx. 7million people in the UK will fall behind on electricity bills. – 'Near the cliff-edge: how to protect households facing debt during COVID-19' - Citizens Advice.

The general skintness has been hard and been exacerbated by changes to how we shop – we are having to get more things from the corner shop, which is more expensive than the supermarkets. And because we're both home all the time, we're spending more money on food and fuel.

Using a lot more fuel because I'm home all the time, and also, I'm cleaning everything more and using more hot water, so boiling the kettle more, washing hands more.

I don't have the internet to know which numbers to call (for help with fuel costs), so this is all very stressful for me.





The virus has made us aware of just how much food and fuel poverty there is all across Dundee. In fact, it's made it worse. I take referrals for a Dundee foodbank, and people are saying that once they've paid all their bills, they can't afford food. People shouldn't have to choose between heating and eating especially at a time like this.

I think the cost of living will rise when all this is finished - gas, electric, council tax... they've all been okay with delaying payments just now, but when all this ends they'll all want their money back at the same time. It's going to be really hard to manage. I've noticed the price of food stuffs and things at the chemist have gone up in price since the lockdown. More things will get dearer.

My electric was cut off last during lockdown. I'm with U**** - so the government saying that no one will get cut off is confusing. I had to make a payment and then go get a code to put into my metre, and it was really confusing and didn't understand half the words and symbols on the metre

Disability Working Group

The Office for National Statistics found that a higher proportion of disabled people than non-disabled people were worried about the effect of the coronavirus pandemic on:

- **their well-being** (62.4% for disabled people compared with 49.6% of non-disabled people);
- **their access to groceries, medication and essentials** (44.9% compared with 21.9%);
- **their access to health care and treatment for non-coronavirus-related issues** (40.6% compared with 21.2%); and
- **their health** (20.2% compared with 7.3%)

Dundee Commissioners told us:

I'm not physically able to clean my flat properly, so I usually have a cleaner that comes once a fortnight that helps me. Since the lockdown, she hasn't been able to come, and my flat is now making me feel anxious because it's not been cleaned.

Disability needs addressing. Where did services go when lockdown hit? Can they learn from this? Are they going to return to normal? What will normal look like? Are the needs of the patient being seriously looked at over the need to stay Covid safe?



A lot of shops and services don't know how to support people with disabilities at this time. There could have been ways around this that wouldn't have left people in the lurch.

Not being able to see a GP and worrying about when/if appointments will be rescheduled

I was also supposed to see a specialist in Perth a few weeks ago, but because of the lockdown, I don't know when this will get rescheduled for and this is causing me a lot of anxiety. I also am supposed to get my feet looked at every 3 months and it's getting to that point where they need looked at and fixed again, but I don't know when this will happen.

The shielding pack doesn't cover everything people need, so they're having to use a foodbank as well – what you get in the shielding boxes aren't enough. the assumption was that the shielding boxes would cover you for 7 days and it definitely doesn't. Also, when you have a disability you're often told that you need to eat a special diet or are encouraged to eat fresh and healthy foods – and the shielding boxes are full of biscuits and things with high sodium and sugar and preservatives, etc. What if you're diabetic or celiac? Some tins I got were out of date.

The Care Budget needs to be increased so that Carers get a decent wage and they are able to go into people's houses and have more time and contact with vulnerable people. People receiving that care wouldn't then be as isolated, and issues wouldn't have to escalate to dangerous levels because they can be addressed sooner. People would be able to benefit from that social aspect.

Projects that aren't funded, that are volunteer or stand-alone places, they have all been closed. People with illnesses and disabilities rely on these places and that support was just cut off.



Mental Health Working Group

The Mental Health Foundation stated - The distribution of infections and deaths during the COVID-19 pandemic, the lockdown and associated measures, and the longer-term socioeconomic impact are likely to reproduce and intensify the financial inequalities that contribute towards the increased prevalence and unequal distribution of mental ill-health.

– *‘The COVID-19 Pandemic, Financial Inequality and Mental Health Briefing’*

Dundee Commissioners told us:

To me, this has kind of felt like an abusive relationship. I haven't felt like I've had loads of control over my life for the past few years, and this has just completely taken all control away. You're treated like a child and given no choice in anything.

A lot of folks won't want to go out or be too afraid to go out. They'll be afraid to relax outside of their homes. There will still be a fear in folk that it'll happen again. If someone sneezes they'll be shunned. People will be more isolated.

My son, who has social anxiety and autism, will really struggle going out again and getting a routine back in place. I'm worried that he won't want to go out. I'm worried about his isolation as well as my own. I want him to be able to get out and connect with people. I used to see such a change in him when he went out to his group, but now he doesn't have that and I'm really worried about him. I worry about him all the time and then that gets me down and then I start thinking about how stuck I am, and I start to spiral and get anxious.

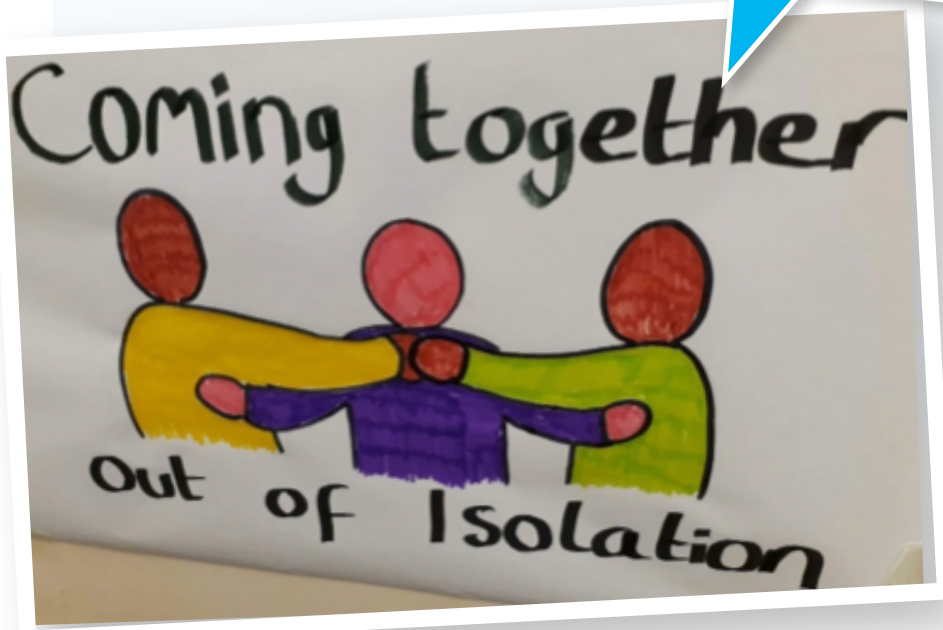
People with mental health problems will have the most challenging time coming out of this because they'll struggle with anxiety and panic attacks when the world goes back to "normal."

Mental Health will always be a huge topic. However, the stress from all the trauma this lockdown has brought about will emerge at some point. When you take away people's freedoms and restrict their behaviour, it only takes 12-16 weeks for someone to become institutionalised. This can be difficult to break from when life returns to "normal". Anxiety and stress can become normal factors and especially in younger people who may not understand why they are suddenly treated like prisoners.



During this pandemic, more and more people are beginning to understand what it's like to have anxiety. There's also been a lot of people that have exploited and fuelled people's fears and anxieties

Working in the field of health inequalities, I know that the Covid 19 pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on people living in poverty; in health and wellbeing terms, the consequences of lockdown measures, and in uncertainty about the future. Being involved in the Fairness Commission gives me the chance to work alongside those who can reflect and describe the real challenges they and many others face and identify solutions that hopefully I can help to implement. This was important before the pandemic and feels even more important now, particularly in relation to mental health.



Commissioners thoughts as we move forward:

I am so glad I joined this Commission and met the people I have. I have finally been given a voice and made to feel like an important member of society rather than a "bottom feeder" or an "NHS drain" on disability benefits. The positives from Dundee Fighting for Fairness have been that they have kept us informed, encouraged us to use other methods to have our meetings, still contribute to society by providing information on our unique experiences and the most important – they have listened to us during difficult times and made me feel supported. I have had hand delivered care packages from the commission members and have felt so privileged to receive this during a time of shielding and not seeing anyone, it really cheered me up and made me feel cared about. In general, I have found voluntary services in society to be the most important during all of this.

As a commissioner the support has been fantastic it has been a shame not being able to physically meet up and stay in touch however the team have been amazing turning up with goodie bags every now and then which seems silly maybe but the effort and thought going into doing this and delivering them made me aware folk cared and, soppy as it sounds, it did cheer me up no end.

It's hard to think about my expectations right now. It kinda feels like the Wizard of Oz behind the curtain... will anyone listen? Trying to figure out how much of that is down to my poor mental health just now or feeling like they just won't listen.

How do we overcome the barriers to speaking up?

One of the Dundee Partnership's key objectives is inclusive economic growth, and the Fairness Commission is a key part of this work. I am particularly interested in how we support people with mental health issues into the workplace. Too little work has been done in this field across the country despite the large numbers of people who have mental health challenges preventing them working. Employment can provide financial dignity and social benefits, and I have challenged the Discover Work Partnership with improving our support for clients with mental health issues.



Going forward the issues surrounding food, fuel, the cost of the day increases upon households and how the whole digitisation and blended learning is going to affect attainment gap and student life. The myth Scottish education is free needs to be looked at, why put yourself into debt with student loans to do an open university degree? How does it affect wages if kids are part time schooled, are employers going to be sympathetic or replace working parents? There's loads of directions we could take, the absolute definite going forward is we as a Commission will need the business community to help us to allow access to gather data and tell the great stories we learn or help us to highlight areas people need improvement and help in.

A new Fairness Plan for Dundee

*I hope we get the same opportunities that the first Commission did – go and see all the bigwigs and such. I hope we're able to take part in those meetings and get our point of view forward. **I hope we can help get the voice of the people of Dundee to the people who can change things.***

The work of the Dundee Fairness Commission is at the heart of the reshaping of Dundee's Fairness Strategy and Action Plan that is due to be completed by November of this year. The new strategy will clearly set out the role of the Commission and the importance that will be placed on its recommendations. Although we may have to find new ways to reach all of our stakeholders, the Dundee Partnership will support the Fairness Commissioners to take their experience and recommendations to the most influential local bodies and request an opportunity to share them with Scottish Government ministers.

The revised Fairness Strategy will build on the work done to improve established outcomes set out in our original framework and expand to reflect the new, severe challenges caused by COVID including digital inequalities, access to emergency food and medicine and escalating household debt.

- Peter Allan, Community Planning Manager

I was always invested in the work we were undertaking as a subgroup around food and fuel poverty. My experiences through Lockdown have cemented that determination to do all that I can to support communities to change the narrative we have in the city of poverty in these areas.

The Menu for Change ethos of benefits, cash, food is encouraging and the right direction but there is still a need to go beyond and explore how more support can be given for these most basic of rights for any individual of food and heat.

I look forward to working with fellow commissioners to take what we have learned and will continue to learn and feed into the wider narrative for long lasting change.

- Cllr Lynne Short

We want to thank all Commissioners involved in Dundee Fairness Commission, and all friends of the Commission who took part in and shared the survey.

We also want to thank Commissioners from Dundee Fighting for Fairness (www.dundeefightingforfairness.co.uk) who have generously given their time to support the work of the current Commission.

We want to dedicate this report and the work of the Commission to Jackie Smith, one of our Community Commissioners, who passed away unexpectedly in March this year.

Jackie – your story continues to drive us forward to fight the inequalities that you faced every day.

www.dundeefightingforfairness.co.uk

