



West Cheshire

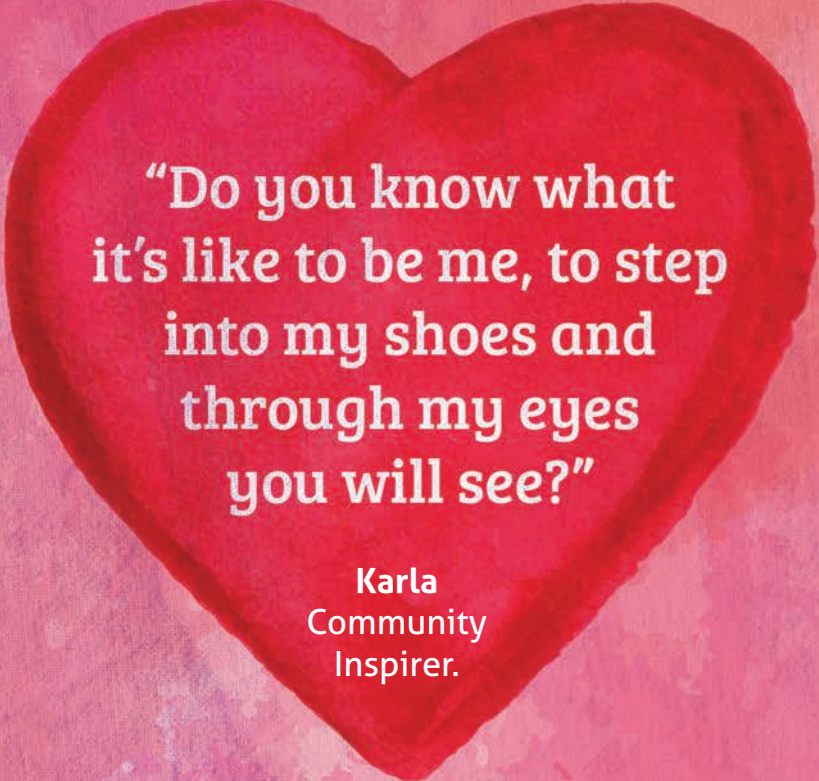
Poverty Truth

Our lives...
inspiring change



Foreword

This booklet is a celebration of the work that the Community Inspirers have contributed to the launch of the West Cheshire Poverty Truth Commission. It acknowledges their commitment and passion to make a difference by being at the heart of this new and exciting movement. As their journey continues it will provide them with a lasting memory of how their journey started and their crucial role within it.



**“Do you know what
it’s like to be me, to step
into my shoes and
through my eyes
you will see?”**

**Karla
Community
Inspirer.**

Swampy, Community Inspirer

I am delighted to introduce you to this booklet, a celebration of our journey as Community Inspirers.

In September 2016, we met as strangers from different areas of the borough, introduced to each other by the West Cheshire Poverty Truth Coordinator. At first we were all a bit apprehensive but, by the end of the first session, we'd already connected well as a group – we were the Community Inspirers and our journey had begun. We were asked to think about our own stories; of life, and how we came to be in poverty.

As we continued to get together as a group, we were asked to share our stories – provided we were ready. It was a compelling, powerful and emotive experience for all. Not just reading them out, but hearing each other speak as well. In addition to our stories, a few of the Community Inspirers, myself included, wrote a song for this event. We also had the opportunity to record it at a recording studio. The process was a fantastic experience, a great learning curve and we gained a lot more confidence as a result. **You can listen to the song on our West Cheshire Poverty Truth Commission YouTube channel.**

Before the launch we met regularly for six months, sharing stories, getting to know each other better, growing in confidence, and becoming more passionate about our cause, developing friendships and really developing as Community Inspirers. All of the ideas for the Poverty Truth Commission launch came from us; from the music, the performances, and the food served at lunch to becoming known as the Community Inspirers. In the same way this booklet has been developed by us - we hope you find it inspiring.



What is the West Cheshire Poverty Truth Commission?

The Poverty Truth Commission brings together some of Cheshire West and Chester's key decision makers with those living at the sharp end of poverty.

We work together towards overcoming poverty in Cheshire West and Chester ensuring that those affected by decisions are central to decision-making. The Commission believes poverty will only be truly addressed when those who experience it first-hand are at the heart of the process. Poverty Truth Commissions began in Scotland and have since been created in Leeds, Wolverhampton and Salford. West Cheshire is only the fourth to launch in the UK. All Poverty Truth Commissions, despite local variations in approach and practice, carry with them the theme taken from the South African post-apartheid process, "Nothing about – without us – is for us". Poverty Truth Commissions develop from the belief that real progress towards overcoming poverty will be made when those who hold experience of poverty are central to the development, delivery and analysis of solutions.

"You need to inspire to make change."

West Cheshire Poverty Truth Commission Community Inspirers

Who are the Community Inspirers?

The following images throughout this booklet tell each Community Inspirer's story. They are real life stories that are emotive, challenging and inspirational.

The stories were gathered to share the diversity of experience of those who have lived in poverty but also to challenge people. Fifteen Community Inspirers have shared their stories in their own words which represent wider communities. Hearing their stories cannot fail to move you but we hope that they also challenge your perceptions of poverty and ignite a passion to stand up and shout that poverty is not ok. Poverty is everyone's responsibility; we can all contribute to a better world where the experiences shared here are not repeated in future generations. These stories and experiences are your challenge; stand up and help – join with the Poverty Truth Commissioners and help make change happen.

I am in poverty due to **low wages**, not enough jobs, untrustworthy transport and a **lack of academic skills**. Despite that, I don't consider myself a poor person:
I am rich in life but I have no money.



To question is to grow

Up until three years ago my husband had a full-time, secure job. We had our hobbies and had no worries financially. Some would say an ideal family life. Then...



choose to be different, choose to change.



I remember the sweet smell of mum's home baking,
The scent of fresh washing on a Sunday afternoon,
I remember the sound of music from the living room,
And my mum dancing happily to the beat.

I remember the smell of coffee and wine on a warm summer's night,
I remember when you used to hold me and life was grand,



I remember your sweet kiss when you tucked me in and kissed me goodnight,
You were my world
I never thought you would let me down,
I don't know what I did wrong,
Why did you turn your back on me?
Just 12 years old.
You threw me out,
On the streets I belonged, scared,
alone with nowhere to go,
Begging and stealing,
I had to survive,
Surrounded by closed eyes.
Sinking deep,
Now lost in a world of drink and drugs.
A childhood chained to uncertainty.

For years homeless, lost in the shadows,
Always reaching, but never succeeding.
A relationship,
A violent comfort that was my only escape
16, I became a child with a child,
Losing it all I lost control,

Blinded by pain and anger I drank it away,
Too scared to stand and fight,
Broken and full of shame.
I no longer feel the cuts I hide away,
Numb from the inside,
I feel the cracking whiplash of fate,
The smoky breath of death in every doorway.

Get up and stand your ground,
Buried under mountains of hardened s**t,
Sick of wandering city streets,
Sick of my own insanity,
I've done this for too long,
I stand my ground, Facing the storm,
There is more, I hold on,
reaching for the other side,

There comes a time,
When turning the page is the best decision,
Letting go of the life I had,
Accepting the one that was waiting,
Turning my life around,
Regaining what I had lost,
Climbing the ladder,
Almost tipping,
Finding myself slipping,
But holding tight,
I stepped into the light.

The Manic before and the me after

A lack of confidence;
Isolation being repressive
Just up the meds
For this manic depressive

Self-medicating with booze
My only friend
No real life lived
Wanting the lows to end

So many calls for help
A record gained
Imprisoned by noise
Feeling pained

The dark finally lifting
Freedom pouring in
Dance, music, family, support
No longer living only within

Helping others through sharing my story
That willingness to survive
Looking forward now, not back anymore
Happy to be here and alive!

The launch of the West Cheshire Poverty Truth Commission

The aim of the launch event was to raise awareness of the West Cheshire Poverty Truth Commission across the community and with key stakeholders. The event highlighted real life poverty stories that our residents are regularly faced with, aiming to find solutions and make changes within the borough.

The event included the sharing of Community Inspirers' stories through dance, poetry and a play by young people from the borough. It was held at Chester Racecourse who gifted the venue free of charge. The event generated over 240 tweets and trended on Twitter in Cheshire.

The very high profile event was attended by more than 200 civic, business and faith leaders, including the Leader and Deputy Leader of the Council, the Chief and Deputy Chief Executive of the Council, the MP for Ellesmere Port and Neston and representatives from Joseph Rowntree Foundation (an independent organisation looking at the underlying causes of poverty and finding solutions).





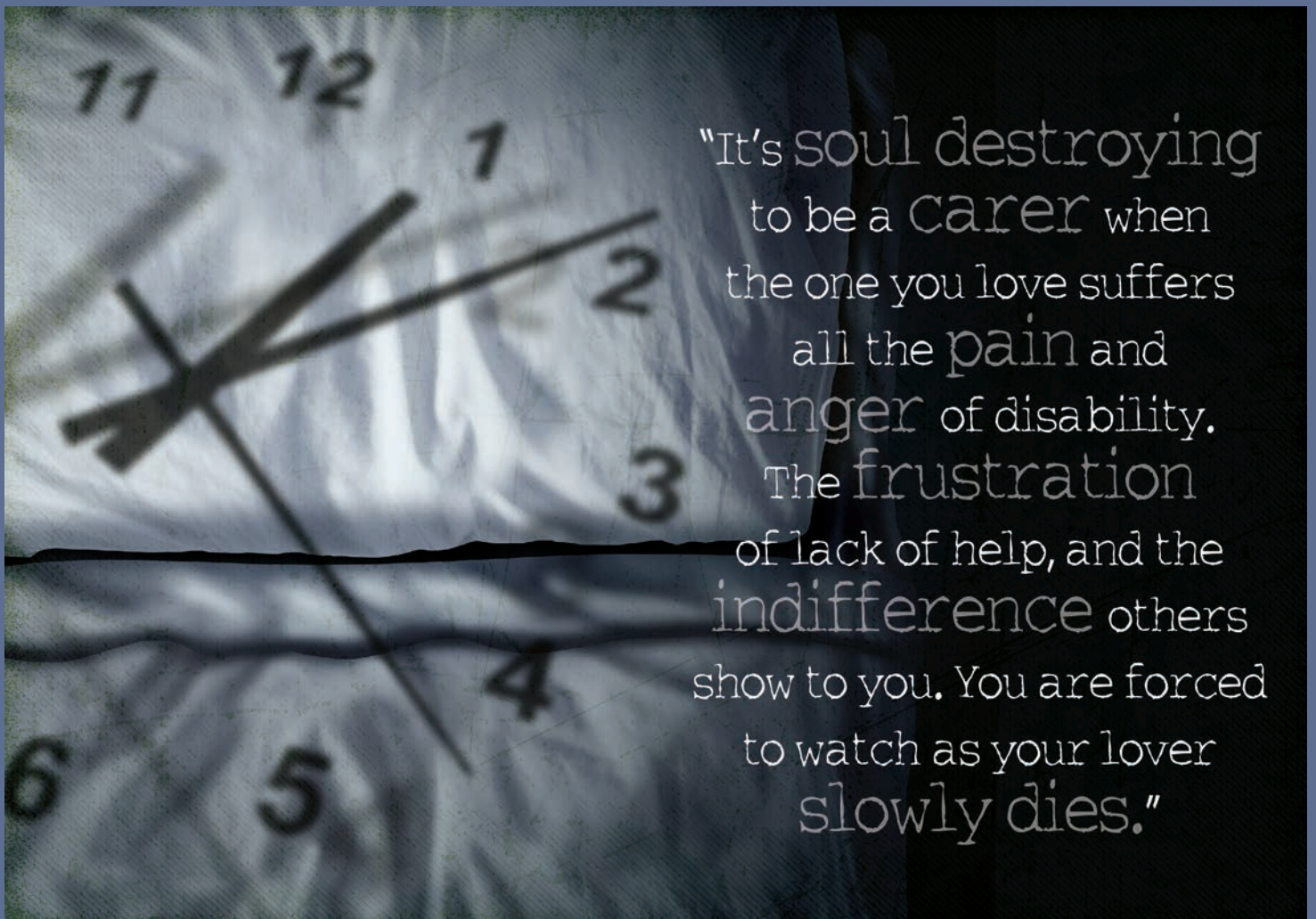
It was important to Community Inspirers that, despite the high profile venue, guests of the launch understood a little of what it feels like to be in poverty. The Community Inspirers partnered with West Cheshire Foodbank to produce mock foodbank vouchers for every guest to complete before being allowed to have their lunch...

“The idea behind your lunch today is quite symbolic. Most of you are aware of the foodbank and the amazing service they provide to help those in poverty. But the truth is they shouldn’t need to exist. Nobody should be going hungry.”

“Your lunch today will be a basic meal made only from ingredients you may find in a foodbank parcel. You will notice there are no extras such as fresh vegetables or bread.”

“For a lot of people, having to resort to charity to feed themselves and their family has been their lowest point, with the red voucher being an obvious display of their poverty.”

West Cheshire Poverty Truth Commission Community Inspirers



What was it like to share your story?

“Emotion in the room – people in tears.” Kelly

“Better than any drink, drug or gambling high I’ve ever had.” Swampy

“Having a VOICE.” Chris

“Deafening sound of applause.” Michael

“Giving back

Lots of empathy in the room. Level of shock and surprise. Confidence levels increasing.” Alison

“People telling me my poem had made them cry!” Karla

“People saying, I inspired them.” Karla

Community Inspirers as Commissioners

Since the launch, Community Inspirers have joined with a group of civic and business leaders from across the borough – they are all now Commissioners working together to make change happen and tackle the root causes of poverty. Here are just some of their hopes for the future.

“To make positive change - continue to grow and learn.”

“Creative means of poverty reduction. I see the West Cheshire Poverty Truth Commission becoming a lobby. The West Cheshire Poverty Truth Commission on everybody’s lips. Change to benefit advisers. Change to views on poverty, inspire others to make better community support groups.”

“To make a difference. Investigate positive change.”

“To make real changes for others.”

“To succeed in achieving the aims of the West Cheshire Poverty Truth Commission ... spread the concept. To be heard, driving change, being actively involved in the change and the process being truly collaborative. Develop, making housing more fair. To create strong networks. Facilitate empowerment.”

“Hopes for the future; to make things easier and better for the disabled. Make it easier for people in need, making it fair and easier for people to get what they are entitled to and get the right help that they need.”

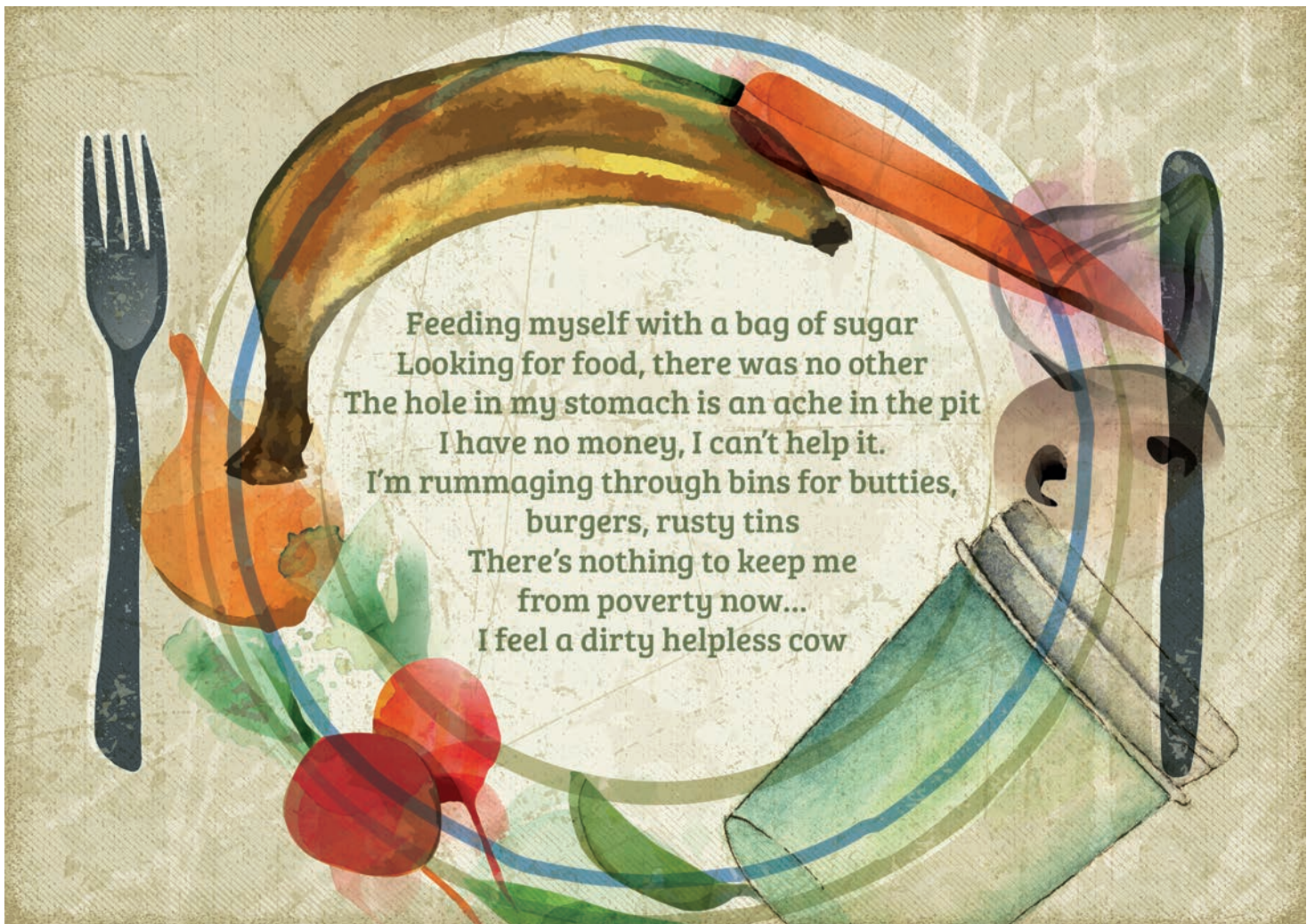
“Help to get a job, training, education, a chance of a better life.”

“Each individual gains strength, others to gain help from our actions and achieve goals.”

“Inspiring change. Listening to people - making change - getting others involved. Take the message to other groups and connect with other organisations.”

“You need to inspire to make change.”

The West Cheshire Poverty Truth Commission’s full report and recommendations will be presented at its celebratory event in February 2018.



Feeding myself with a bag of sugar
Looking for food, there was no other
The hole in my stomach is an ache in the pit
I have no money, I can't help it.
I'm rummaging through bins for butties,
burgers, rusty tins
There's nothing to keep me
from poverty now...
I feel a dirty helpless cow

FEELINGS

Today I feel so miserable, so silent inside,
I just want to run from the world and hide,
My heart like the Titanic, it's about to subside,
And by the end of the day guaranteed I'll of cried.

You all think I'm happy, feeling strong - I lied,
Another piece of my heart just died,
To let anyone in again, it's access denied,
Sorry I just need to hang on to the last little bit of pride,
Oh and that I have to abide,
Otherwise I'll end up fried,
Then chucked out into the tide,
At this moment, I don't care about my guide,
As my guide wouldn't hack my version of a scary ride,
I don't have organised, I have confusing strides,
Yup that alone will stop me being a bride,
My heart will always be open wide,
Come on let's end it, give me a cup of peroxide.
Honestly, what's the point in anything?

I forget what it's like to have a genuine grin,
I'm just the one that was saved when beyond repair,
never the same should of been chucked in the bin,
My mum wanted me, she was my next of kin,
I say, come on pray for forgiveness you committed a sin,
You should of buried me in a small size coffin tin,
Got yourself drunk on a bottle of gin,
To be accepted for me would just be a win.

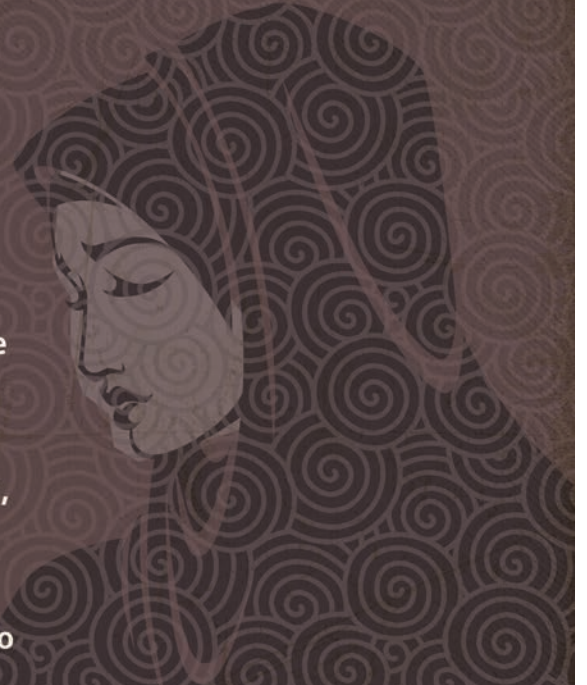
I've been punished to earth to be the emotional slave,
I must of been had in my last life, punished to this
and an early grave,
Whoever is persistent with me must be brave,
I'll be happy to start again in a new life I'd give a wave.

As I've been punished enough, I've learnt my lesson
I've had it rough,
And my soul is weak, no longer tough,
Come on pick on someone else now, I've had enough.

My creator replies, that's your tough luck,
Turn to a new page and start a new book,
As what's written so far, no one gives a f**k.

Invisible

I have been a daughter, a wife, a mother.
I left my country and life at thirteen, I knew no other.
Forced into a marriage in a place alien to me.
Treated like a slave by people supposed to care for me
I stayed for so long for the honour of my family
Wishing with all my heart for my own identity
I couldn't choose what I wanted to wear, where I went,
what I wanted to eat.
I had no social life, no hobbies, no friends to meet.
I could not decide the paths I wish to take, there are no
choices I could make
Are there other girls out there like me?
Stuck in a marriage and just want to be free.



Recipe for a respectful Society

1oz of patience
500g of justice
A large cup of peace
A tablespoon of dignity
A dash of hope

Blend together with love,
leave to set and sprinkle
all over with kindness.



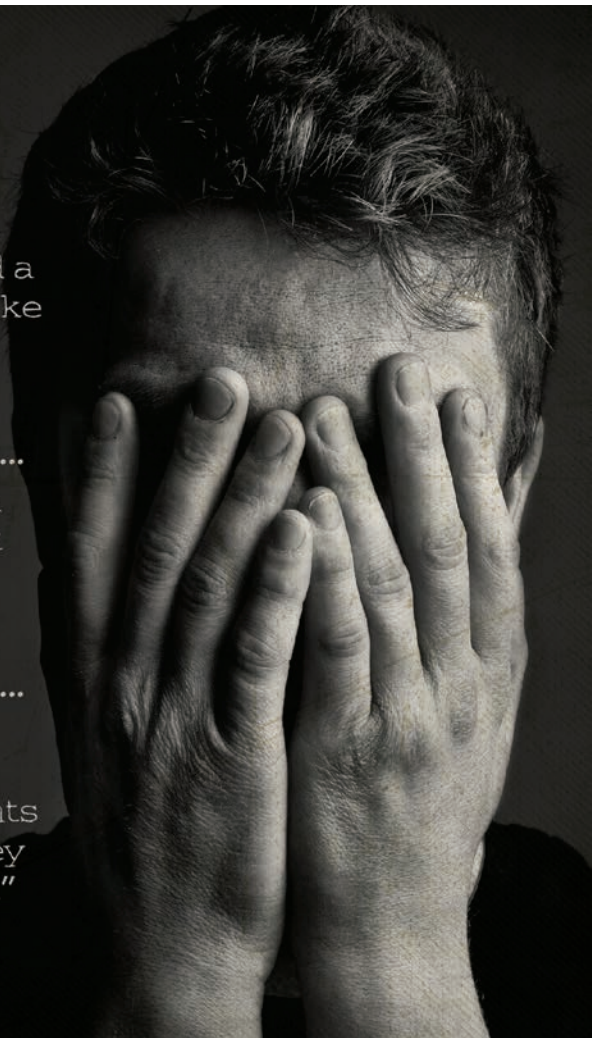
"Why are the disabled unemployed, moved from Work Choice onto the Work Programme after six months? If they have failed to find a job in six months, with support, it doesn't make sense to give them even less support and start sanctions for none compliance. They are no less disabled!"

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"I feel like I always did the right thing, as a citizen, I studied hard, worked hard, bought property, paid taxes, followed the rules. However when I needed help after a breakdown I felt forgotten."

.....

"It feels like the job centre is not there to help you, the staff are there to meet their targets and get you off their books. If clients were treated with humanity and respect they would find their journey a lot less difficult."



My husband, Bill was the first and last man I loved. When he was 47 he suffered a heart attack and was deemed not fit to work.

The then DSS went against the medical decision and Bill's claim was revoked after he was sent before a panel. Bill went through this demoralising and intimidating process a further three times and after three years of stress and worry he suffered a heart attack and died. I got a letter from the DSS on the day of his funeral saying he had been accepted for sickness benefit.

Bill and many other people have died due to the benefits system and what makes me sad is that twenty years after he died there is still no improvement in the way the system works or the attitude of those enforcing it.

We live in a society that puts cost cutting above people's lives and welfare.

confident
empowerment
enthusiastic
growth involved
inspired
proud altruism
positive
information

Nothing about us without us is for us

For further information visit:

www.cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk/povertytruth
or email: WestCheshire.PovertyTruth@cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk

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