

Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland (the ALLIANCE)

Submission to CPG Poverty Inquiry on Poverty-Related Stigma

11 March 2022



Introduction

The Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland (the ALLIANCE) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Poverty Cross Party Group’s inquiry into poverty-related stigma. Stigma has a clear and negative impact on people’s lives, and three of the ALLIANCE’s programmes – the Health and Social Care Academy (the Academy), Self-Management Team, and Scotland Reducing Gambling Harm – have recently been working together to explore the topic of stigma more generally.

All of these programmes have encountered the topic of stigma through their work, including in relation to mental health, weight, poverty, gambling harm, addiction, homelessness, suicide and physical health conditions. They have investigated stigma through the “Reducing Stigma, Emphasising Humanity” series of three events that explored the links between stigma, trauma and poverty through the lens of lived experience.¹

1. What is the scale and extent of poverty-related stigma in Scotland?

Poverty-related stigma is widespread and deeply embedded in Scotland, present across the media, politicians, organisations and individuals. People living in poverty are likely to experience stigma in their day-to-day interactions with others, through engagement with public services, and in the media. Through public discourse and sensationalist reporting, people experiencing poverty are often presented in an extremely negative light.

Although a final report is yet to be published from the “Reducing Stigma, Emphasising Humanity” series, discussions during the events indicated that stigma is also highly prevalent in the form of self-stigma, where people feel shame and guilt about being in poverty. The series also further highlighted that media, campaigns and public discourse are major components in embedding a variety of stigmas.²

2. What are the key impacts of poverty-related stigma on you and/or the people that your organisation works with?

The ALLIANCE works primarily with disabled people, people living with long term conditions, and unpaid carers, all of whom are substantially impacted by poverty-related stigma. A large part of the impact felt by these groups relates to social

security. The stigmatisation of poverty contributes in some circumstances to reluctance to claim social security payments individuals are entitled to, and in others may lead to people being unaware of their entitlements in the first place. The relationship between stigma and social security was touched upon in the Academy's recent "Emphasising humanity and transforming livelihoods: Basic Income" paper.³

3. How does poverty-related stigma impact on communities that are more likely to be affected by poverty?

Poverty and poverty-related stigma are self-reinforcing. If people are reluctant to seek out support, whether from social security, public services, or the third sector, they are likely to experience deeper and longer-lasting poverty. In addition, the association of poverty with particular groups, such as ethnic minorities or single parents, can result in complex intersections between different forms of stigma and discrimination, which can act to further deepen the impacts of poverty.

In their stigma work, the Academy also looked specifically at the clustering of environmental factors in areas of deprivation, and how those can impact on people's lives. There is a known relationship between poverty and gambling, for example, and poorer communities are deliberately targeted by a very powerful and wealthy industry.⁴ People who have experienced gambling harms via addiction can be doubly stigmatised both for being in poverty, and for the perception they are choosing to waste their money on gambling.

In a similar vein, deprived areas are known to be more likely to be food-poor as well, with often much more limited access to good quality, affordable, nutritious food.⁵ This can have implications in terms of weight for example, which again leads to compound stigmatisation, as discrimination based on weight is a long-standing issue both in society and in healthcare.⁶

4. Does poverty-related stigma impact on ways that public services are delivered? If yes, please give examples.

Yes, in particular the delivery of social security by the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP). Successive UK Governments have tightened eligibility criteria for entitlements, have not increased the level of payments to keep pace with the cost of living, and instituted harsher sanctions on recipients.⁷ This has been justified in part by claims that the system is intended to help people into work, without considering that some forms of social security are paid to people who are already in work, others to those who are unable to work, and some on behalf of children.

This forms part of an overarching narrative that people are in poverty as a result of their own decisions, rather than for structural reasons beyond their control. Stigmatisation therefore undermines the essential safety net provided by social security and helps to sustain an environment in which further shrinking social security provision is both possible and considered politically desirable.

5. Do particular groups of people living on low incomes (for example women, disabled people, Black and minority ethnic people, young people) experience stigma in different ways? If yes, please give examples.

Yes. For example, disabled people are much more likely to live in poverty than abled people, and the use of resources for social security and social care necessary to alleviate poverty amongst disabled people are too often viewed as a cost and drain on society. Social security and social care should instead be seen as investments in society, as means to ensure disabled people are equal, valued participants in society, able to fully realise their human right to independent living.

Similarly, unpaid carers who are not in paid employment are often further stigmatised by a social and economic model which doesn't adequately value care work, and social security support provided to them can again be presented as a cost rather than an investment. This has an additional gendered dimension, as the majority of unpaid care work is provided by women.

6. In your view, what is the primary cause of poverty-related stigma?

In recent years the construction of a “strivers versus skivers” narrative, echoing older concepts of the “deserving versus undeserving poor” has contributed enormously to the spread and persistence of poverty-related stigma. This narrative, which is prevalent across society, perpetuates harmful ideas about people experiencing poverty, including that they are lazy, deliberately refusing to work, choosing to have more children than they can afford, or making fraudulent claims, and are therefore undeserving of support.⁸

This narrative does at times allow that some people experiencing poverty will be “genuine”, within the narrow confines of the narrative itself. However, it nonetheless acts against providing support even in those cases, as the stigmatisation of poverty discourages affected individuals from seeking support. Those that do reach out often find the same stigma has led to substantial cutbacks to the level of support they are eligible for.

7. What role do you believe the media, including social media, play in causing poverty-related stigma?

The media plays a significant role in causing and perpetuating poverty-related stigma, in a number of different ways. Stigmatising statements by politicians, in line with the narratives described previously, can be reported uncritically, without challenging the assertions made. Instances of benefit fraud are similarly reported widely, and often without the context that fraud is rare and is equivalent to a fraction of the money that goes unclaimed by people who would be entitled to it.

Outside of the news media, so-called “poverty porn” television programmes also act as a significant contributor to stigma. These programmes pick out the most

sensationalist aspects of the lives of a small number of individuals for entertainment purposes. This gives a distorted view of the lives of people experiencing poverty, rather than an authentic representation, and encourages further stigmatisation.

The sensationalist nature of media coverage of people experiencing poverty was explicitly mentioned both during the stigma event series, and at a session on Basic Income⁹, with specific reference to “poverty porn.”

8. What role do you believe public figures (politicians, business leaders, celebrities, and others) play in creating and/or perpetuating poverty-related stigma?

Public figures, in particular politicians, also play a substantial role in creating and perpetuating poverty-related stigma. As highlighted in previous questions, politicians have had a central role in advancing the “strivers versus skivers” narrative in public, and in using that narrative as justification for policy decisions that have led to cuts in both social security and wider public services. Politicians often set the tone for wider public discussion of issues, so that making statements and taking positions that stigmatise poverty lead to those attitudes become normal in wider society.

9. How do public bodies and public services contribute to poverty-related stigma? Please provide examples if possible.

Part of the contribution to poverty-related stigma in public services is institutional and can be perpetuated by staff either deliberately or as a result of unconscious bias. Particularly where the culture of an organisation is stigmatising, for example in the case of the DWP, as outlined in our response to question 4, that can lead to staff treating people accessing services poorly, failing to take their issues seriously, or even refusing to offer the correct support.

11. What is the key change that can be taken that would help tackle poverty-related stigma?

As highlighted previously, politicians play an enormous role in setting the tone of public debate. A strong message from political leaders that social security is an essential public good and a fundamental human right would be an important step towards eliminating poverty-related stigma. Politicians at all levels should be clear that social security and other public services are investments in our society which we all collectively benefit from. They should also emphasise that poverty is a structural issue and not a personal one, that nobody living in poverty should feel ashamed, but instead they should seek out support that is available and which is there specifically to help them.

It is important to acknowledge that Scotland is making significant progress in this area. Social Security Scotland has explicit commitments to treating people with

dignity and respect, to uphold their human rights, and to maximise uptake of devolved payments. Ben Macpherson, the Minister for Social Security, has publicly stated the Scottish Government's view that "accessing social security is a human right"¹⁰, which is enshrined in legislation in the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018¹¹. However, the UK Government has yet to adopt a similar shift in tone and focus for the DWP.

The voice of lived experience should also be heard throughout the policymaking process, via genuine co-design and co-production processes. It's important that this is coupled with an understanding of the responsibility to safeguard people providing their experience, with for example training and wellbeing support.

12. What changes can the media make to help end poverty-related stigma?

The most important change the media could make would be to give genuine voice to people living with poverty. The voice of lived experience is not just an essential component of service design, but also in creating public understanding and empathy. Hearing the stories of real people, presented with sensitivity and compassion, can help break down misconceptions created by stigma. As noted in the previous answer, it is important when hearing from the voice of lived experience that they are able to do so safely, given adequate preparation in the form of media training, and continued to be supported afterwards.

There should also be an end to all "poverty porn" programmes, which only value people experiencing poverty as caricatures for entertainment purposes, rather than as equal human beings with the right to a home, food, and dignity. One participant at an ALLIANCE event on the idea of a Basic Income suggested specific redress for past programmes such as 'The Scheme', which had been filmed in Kilmarnock, by going back to the people and communities portrayed and giving them an opportunity to tell their own stories.

In addition, the news media could take a more robust approach to challenging stigmatising statements when they are made by politicians or other public figures. This is entirely in line with the fundamental principles of objectivity and impartiality, and can be achieved both by pointing out specific inaccuracies or where there is lack of context, and by providing greater platform for experts, including through experience, to push back on claims.

13. What role can public figures play to help end poverty-related stigma? Please give examples of existing good practice where possible.

Similar to the previous two answers, public figures can tackle poverty-related stigma by speaking out against negative narratives. This can be through proactive alternative messaging, as has been the case with the Scottish Government's approach to devolved social security. It can also be through reactively speaking out against negative narratives when they arise, whether that is through politicians

challenging one another, or journalists and the media holding politicians and each other to account for stigmatising statements.

14. What changes can public services and public bodies make to help end poverty-related stigma? Please give examples of existing good practice where possible.

A major change that could be made by all public services and bodies would be to take a consistent approach to signposting as a default. Rather than waiting for individuals to raise any difficulties they may be having themselves, which they may be reluctant to do as a result of stigma, it should always be clear what help is available and from what sources. The easier it becomes to access support to alleviate and eliminate poverty, the less stigmatising poverty will be.

As one possible example, information about social security payments for children should be given as default to all parents and guardians, including expectant parents, in education, childcare and healthcare settings. Similarly, information and support to maximise uptake of social security should be available to disabled people and unpaid carers via the other services they are most likely to interact with. Direction to third sector organisations with relevant expertise should also be provided where possible, to maximise the support on offer. Ensuring that everyday essentials, such as period products, or stationary for schoolchildren, are available freely in appropriate settings can also reduce stigma by eliminating the need to ask.

In addition, the existence of independent advocacy services should be clearly signposted to everyone, not just those who most obviously appear to need them. The Scottish Government's commitment to ensuring that independent advocacy for disabled people is available through Social Security Scotland's application and review processes is a welcome example of this.¹²

Many aspects of this kind of signposting work can be covered in a healthcare setting through Community Links Workers. The ALLIANCE now has over 50 links workers across Glasgow and West Dunbartonshire, embedded in GP practices in some of the most deprived areas, offering people support and direction for a range of issues. Continuing to roll this model out across the country, offering more people the opportunity to discuss the difficulties of poverty in a non-judgemental setting, would certainly help to reduce stigma.

A shift towards preventative spending is another avenue for improvement. By investing in early interventions and preventing people from falling into poverty in the first place, the impact of poverty-related stigma can be reduced.

15. What other bodies or organisations do you believe have a responsibility for helping to end poverty-related stigma, and what particular changes can they make?

In general, it should be understood that there is a broad societal obligation to address poverty-related stigma, as part of addressing poverty itself. Whether as organisations or individuals, people should be ready to challenge stigmatising statements whenever they have the ability to do so. Although this doesn't require detailed policy knowledge or expertise, those organisations and individuals that have that expertise can make sure that relevant evidence is provided in easy to understand and access forms.

About the ALLIANCE

The Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland (the ALLIANCE) is the national third sector intermediary for a range of health and social care organisations. We have a growing membership of over 3,000 national and local third sector organisations, associates in the statutory and private sectors, disabled people, people living with long term conditions and unpaid carers. Many NHS Boards, Health and Social Care Partnerships, Medical Practices, Third Sector Interfaces, Libraries and Access Panels are also members.

Our vision is for a Scotland where people of all ages who are disabled or living with long term conditions, and unpaid carers, have a strong voice and enjoy their right to live well, as equal and active citizens, free from discrimination, with support and services that put them at the centre.

The ALLIANCE has three core aims; we seek to:

- Ensure people are at the centre, that their voices, expertise and rights drive policy and sit at the heart of design, delivery and improvement of support and services.
- Support transformational change, towards approaches that work with individual and community assets, helping people to stay well, supporting human rights, self management, co-production and independent living.
- Champion and support the third sector as a vital strategic and delivery partner and foster better cross-sector understanding and partnership.

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¹ The ALLIANCE, “Reducing Stigma, Emphasising Humanity” (2022), available at: <https://www.alliance-scotland.org.uk/reducing-stigma-emphasising-humanity/>

² As above.

³ The ALLIANCE, “Emphasising humanity and transforming livelihoods: Basic Income” (December 2021), available at: <https://www.alliance-scotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Emphasising-humanity-and-transforming-livelihoods-Basic-Income.pdf>

⁴ Hannah Gunn, The ALLIANCE, “Key messages from the Glasgow Gambling Summit” (September 2021), available at: <https://www.alliance-scotland.org.uk/blog/opinion/key-messages-from-the-glasgow-gambling-summit/>

⁵ Glasgow City Council, “Tackling Food Inequality in Glasgow” (January 2019), available at: <https://www.glasgow.gov.uk/councillorsandcommittees/viewSelectedDocument.asp?c=P62AFQDN2UUTUTDXDX>

⁶ Ly Kerr for The ALLIANCE, “When weight stigma is life threatening” (October 2019), available at: <https://www.alliance-scotland.org.uk/blog/opinion/when-weight-stigma-is-life-threatening/>

⁷ Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) in Scotland, “What is welfare reform and how is it affecting families?” (May 2016), available at: <https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/CPAG-Scot-EWS-Welfare-Reform%28May16%29.pdf>

⁸ Elena Blackmore for OpenDemocracy, “Strivers and skivers? We’re all in this together” (April 2015), available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/transformation/strivers-and-skivers-were-all-in-this-together/>

⁹ The ALLIANCE, ‘Making Basic Income transformational for everyone’ event report (October 2021), available at: <https://www.alliance-scotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/BIEN-Academy-Event-Report-2021.pdf>

¹⁰ Scottish Government, “New Independent Advocacy Service opens” (January 2022), available at: <https://www.gov.scot/news/new-independent-advocacy-service-opens-1/>

¹¹ Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018, available at: - <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2018/9/section/1/enacted>

¹² Scottish Government, “New Independent Advocacy Service opens” (January 2022), available at: <https://www.gov.scot/news/new-independent-advocacy-service-opens-1/>

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